

A BAD BOY
BACHELORS
NOVEL

Bad Boy
BACHELOR
Thanksgiving

WESTON PARKER
USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
ALI PARKER

BAD BOY BACHELOR
THANKSGIVING



ALI PARKER
WESTON PARKER

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DESCRIPTION



There's only one thing I want spread out on my Thanksgiving table this year, and it's not a turkey. It's my new hire.

My assistants keep quitting, and apparently I'm the problem. Surely not.

I just haven't found the right one. Until her.

And of all places to find her—a pumpkin farm.

There's no way she's cut out to work in my world, but I find myself offering her the job anyway.

Maybe it's because she's desperate to save her family farm.

No, it's because I want her in my bed.

Mixing business and pleasure is a terrible idea, but this woman seems to be worth my downfall.

She's ballsy, beautiful, and gets sh*t done.

Unfortunately for me, she's also great at resisting what I know we both want.

It's all business with her until I can't think straight.

There's only one thing on my mind, and it isn't the holidays.

This woman is putting the bad in my big bad Thanksgiving Day parade.

She just doesn't know how good it's about to get.

Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

I'd hate to part ways once you're done though. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insiders

Newsletter Group that you just can't miss out on.

We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining,
you'll receive a free book on me!

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Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

[Get it HERE](#)

CHAPTER 1



TREYTON

A girl with short auburn hair in a miniskirt looked over her shoulder at me as she waited in line for her coffee. She had legs for days—the sort of legs that made a man wonder if they ever ended at all—and long dark lashes that a younger, much more naïve version of myself might have believed were real. She batted them slowly at me.

I looked down at my watch.

Why is it so fucking hard to find punctual staff these days?

I had too much on my plate. Long legs and pretty eyes would have to wait until December. Everyone else always found the Christmas season chaotic, but for me, it was a reprieve from the busiest season of my career. As the Executive Director of the New York Thanksgiving Day Parade, most of October and November were write-offs for me, and I was incredibly dependent on my employees to pull their weight and do what they were told.

Which was why on this crisp, sunny October morning, I found myself irritated.

My assistant should have been here twenty-five minutes ago. No text. No phone call. No explanation as to why she was running late.

Long Legs shot me one last imploring look as she strutted past my table by the window. Her perfume engulfed my senses seconds after she walked by, and I stared longingly after her as she moved down the sidewalk, her faux-fur cropped jacket

pulled tight under her chin. Miniskirts were a bold move at this time of year in New York.

Subconsciously, I began tapping my heel on the café floor.

Thirty minutes late.

Where the hell is she?

With the parade less than six weeks away, I didn't have the time to retrain another assistant in order to replace the shitty one I had. *Fuck*. It might have been easier to just fire her and do it myself. Sure, it would mean a hell of a lot of late nights in the office, plenty of insomnia, and probably a huge decline in job satisfaction, but the hustle would be temporary.

I could manage it.

Theoretically.

The café bell chimed above the door.

Carla, my assistant, hurried in with loose papers sticking out of the binder in her arms. She was the definition of disarrayed. Her hair, uncombed and mousy, stuck out every which way, and her glasses had slid halfway down her nose, presumably from her running from the subway four blocks away.

Carla collapsed into the vacant chair across from me, then deposited all her books and papers on the table, nearly knocking over my coffee, and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose with an apologetic glance in my direction. "I'm sorry, Mr. Corral. I didn't mean to be late. I overslept and the subway was so busy." Her gaze wandered to the menu boards and her thoughts scattered as she considered what to order. My temper pulsed. "I had to wait for three trains. What did you order? Are their white mochas any good here?"

"I don't drink that shit. Order what you want and get back here. We've lost half an hour already and we need to review —" I paused, looking down at her mess of paperwork. I sighed. "We have to review whatever that is."

"It's what you asked for." She perked up proudly, flipped open the binders, and revealed printed photos of dozens of

floats that were participating in the Thanksgiving Day Parade. Attached to the images were pages and pages of typed notes. Some of them were graffitied with Carla's slanted, tidy printing. If only she was as organized as her writing. "These are all the confirmed floats in the parade so far."

I felt one of my eyebrows arch toward my hairline. "So far?"

"I'm still getting in touch with the others." She pushed out of her chair and fished her wallet out of her jacket pocket.

I slid her my Amex.

"Thanks, boss," she chimed before hurrying over to the line to order her coffee. If you could even call a white mocha a coffee.

I flipped through the pages she'd provided. There were eleven.

Eleven.

Out of thirty-four.

Last year, we'd managed to arrange twenty-eight impressive floats, and this year I wanted to up the ante by adding at least five more. However, adding new businesses and participants meant adding a bigger margin for error. Working with new people created a higher risk factor, and an assistant like Carla didn't help matters.

I needed this information days ago, and she didn't even have fifty percent of it.

What does the girl do with her time?

I eyed her as she ordered her mocha and hemmed and hawed over what food she wanted. The barista made some suggestions, all of which Carla seemed unenthused by, until she eventually settled on a pumpkin scone. She returned to the table a few minutes later with her goodies in hand.

We were officially forty minutes behind schedule.

"How much contact have you had this week with the other float owners?" I asked.

Carla sipped her white mocha. Whipped cream clung to her upper lip. “Um, we haven’t touched base since the beginning of last week.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve had me running around like a chicken with my head cut off,” she said flatly. “I’m doing my best, but I think you might need two assistants, Mr. Corral.”

“Or,” I said, fighting the urge to lose my cool, “I just need one assistant who is capable enough to handle the workload of her position, and who understands the importance of frequent communication with parade participants this close to the event. Do you know how easy it is for people to withdraw their float when they feel like they’re being hung out to dry? We lost three floats last year in the final two-week stretch. I don’t want to scramble to fill holes this year, especially not because someone on my end is dropping the ball. Do you understand?”

Carla took a bite of her scone and blinked her big, doe eyes at me. “I said I was going to get in touch with them soon.”

It was like talking to a brick wall.

I got to my feet. “Listen, Carla. You’ve given this a good run. But after four months, I expect you to be able to prioritize your time better than this. You need to make a decision. Either step up and take your career seriously, or hand in your resignation letter. I’ve been paying you a generous salary so you can twiddle your thumbs and I’m not interested in waiting on you for forty minutes because you were ‘surprised’ that the subway in New York City was busy on a Friday morning. Take some accountability, or I’m going to replace you.” I grabbed my jacket from the back of my chair and shrugged into it. “Oh, and consider this the last coffee on me until you start treating this like a job you care about.”

Carla blinked slowly at me before looking down at the papers in front of her. “Aren’t you going to take these with you? I spent a long time on them.”

“And you wasted a lot of ink. What am I supposed to do with loose papers like this, Carla? I’ve told you countless

times that I only want digital copies. Besides, this is half-assed work. Send me a link to a finished file when you're done, if you choose to stay at the company. I want it by the end of the day."

"You want every float confirmation and status image by the end of the day?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. You have eight hours. It's more than enough time."

Her mouth worked, but no words came out. "I don't think ___"

"If you can't handle it, *quit.*"



A few blocks from the coffee shop and eighty stories above street level, I sank into my office chair and exhaled slowly. I already had a pressure headache and the day wasn't even half over. Carla was supposed to make my job easier, but somehow, she managed to pile on stress with every passing week and create more messes for me to fix.

I should have fired her three months ago.

Good help was hard to find these days. People see the flashy salary I'm willing to pay and the luxurious office and hear the word "parade" and immediately assume the gig is easy. They have no idea the demands that will be put on them to make that salary worth it. I'd gone through six assistants in the last two years, no one better than the other, and had to let them all go after too many mistakes and not enough personal investment in the work.

It wasn't like I was a merciless overlord, either. Sure, around Thanksgiving I could get a bit tense but the other ten months out of the year were much more relaxed. I needed someone who would hustle, test their limits, and thrive under pressure. Someone who didn't take criticism personally. Someone who'd been built tough and wasn't looking for a boss to hold their hand and constantly offer them recognition when they were mediocre at best.

I was beginning to doubt that person existed.

My office phone rang.

The Mayor's office lit up the caller ID. I scooped the phone up. "Hello, Mayor Hopkins. This is Treyton."

"Treyton Corral! Just the man I wanted to talk to this morning. How are things, son? Moving along? I've been getting calls left, right, and center about the parade. There's a real buzz about it this year. Are you feeling the heat?"

I chuckled. "I feel the heat every year, sir."

"How are things looking?"

"The bare bones are coming together. We still have a month and a half to go, but I'm confident we'll be off to the races soon." I forced a smile into my voice. Mayor Hopkins was an easy man to appease, but he had an annoying way of wasting my time.

Sometimes I wondered if he was lonely. Rumor had it, he called plenty of wealthy men in the city to make small talk during business hours. Sometimes he'd fish for invitations to lavish parties and talk about how he needed to meet a woman. His wife had left him six years ago for a younger, more attractive man. Single male voters who'd been wronged by their ex-partners turned up in droves to vote for him. Personally, I'd never been able to find much common ground with the guy.

"I have complete and total faith in you, son. I'm excited to see what you and your team pull off. I bet it'll be the best parade yet. And you'll have me on the most impressive float, won't you?"

"Of course, sir. Right at the front."

"Thatta boy. Listen, you got time for a beer later this week?"

There it is.

"Sorry, sir, my free time is pretty much nonexistent leading up to the parade. But thank you for the invitation."

“Ah yes, I understand. I understand. You’re a hard worker, Treyton. A very hard worker. Good for you. I won’t keep you. Don’t be a stranger, you hear?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, sir. Have a good one.” I hung up even as Mayor Hopkins’s voice continued to fill the line. If I didn’t, he’d find a hundred different ways to say goodbye, and I’d waste another several minutes of a day already half wasted.

My computer chimed. The telltale notification sound of an email coming through.

I opened my inbox. At the top was a new email from Carla. It could be one of two things: her resignation or the digital file I’d requested.

There’s no way she got all that done so quickly.

Her email consisted of four words.

Fuck you. I quit.

I leaned back in my chair and chuckled. Something was finally going right today.

CHAPTER 2



MACY

I didn't belong here.

Everyone else in the bank wore pressed suits, high heels, or trendy outfits that matched those in the boutique windows I'd passed when I walked up the block from the closest parking lot I'd been able to find. The woman in front of me had a gorgeous pair of diamond earrings glittering in her earlobes. A flashy watch on her left wrist matched, and her red pantsuit looked like it had been plucked straight out of a Charlie's Angels movie.

I bit my bottom lip and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

You're not here to impress anyone. Nobody is thinking about what you're wearing.

The woman with the pretty earrings was called to the next available employee, and I moved to the front of the line. I waited with my arms wrapped around my father's folder of financial documents related to the farm. I'd gone over them a dozen times looking for opportunities to make cuts or changes to increase profit but came up empty. We were going to lose everything if something didn't change soon.

Our last resort was to ask for another loan.

So here I was.

It had been a hard year at Mallory Farm. Harder than the last five that came before. Dad couldn't keep the farm hands on payroll, so he and I were the only ones working the fields

and tending to the animals, and four hands weren't enough. Sure, we had the occasional help from some friends, but Dad didn't like letting people work out of the goodness of their hearts. He had to pay it forward somehow. More often than not, that came in the form of preparing a traditional farmhouse meal with ingredients we shouldn't have spent money on.

He kept saying the same thing over and over again.

Don't you sweat your brow off, Macy Mae. Good things come to good people, and this farm still has some life in her yet.

If there was life left in the crops and fields of Mallory Farm, I hadn't seen it in a long time.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. "Miss? It's your turn."

I thanked the gentleman behind me for nudging me to move ahead. Then I crossed the polished marble floors and sat down at the desk of one of the loan officers at the bank. He looked like the city type through and through with his trendy glasses, groomed facial hair, and slick navy blue suit. He had a friendly smile but calculating eyes. His stare slid up and down the length of me as I put the portfolio of my father's financial records on his desk.

"I'm a farmer," I said lamely and gestured down at my overalls. "They're the most practical thing to wear and I didn't have time to change before coming out to the city."

His name tag said Keith. Keith smiled. "They suit you, Miss...?"

"Wright."

"Miss Wright." He sat up a little straighter, adjusting himself like a man who was used to spending a lot of time with his ass on a cushion. Then he pulled the folder closer and began flipping through it. "So, you're here for a loan today? For your family farm?"

"That's right. As you can see there, our farm is closing in on its most profitable season yet. Our pumpkin patch is scheduled to open to the public day after tomorrow. October

first. We bring in thousands of customers every season with our traditional pumpkin picking, petting zoo, corn maze, and ___”

“Are these last year’s profits from October?” He held up a piece of paper.

I squinted at it and nodded. “Yes.”

“With your operating costs, you barely broke even. Breaking even isn’t what we here consider a ‘profitable season,’ Miss Wright.”

“We just need a bit to hold us over so we can figure out some strategies in the interim,” I said, trying to force my voice to remain controlled. *Don’t panic. This meeting has only just started. He has to hear you out.* “My father has run Mallory Farm since 1982, and before that his father owned it, and his father before him built it. It’s a heritage farm. The state should *want* to protect it. And I’m fresh blood. I want to bring it into the modern age.”

“Generational farmers and terms like ‘modern age’ don’t usually go hand in hand.”

How right you are, Keith. “My father is progressive,” I lied.

Keith sighed and flipped through the pages. Silence stretched between us as he considered my ask—a whopping hundred-thousand-dollar loan to cover operating costs and make some upgrades to the place, as well as invest in some marketing strategies to create growth and more opportunities in the future. Christmas was coming up, for example, and I refused to sit back and let the farm get covered in beautiful snow and not be profitable. We had options at our disposal. We just needed someone to make them happen.

I’d realized two years ago that *someone* wasn’t going to come along. *I* had to do it. I was the daughter that came along.

Keith shook his head and my heart sank. “I just don’t think this is a viable investment for the bank, Miss Wright. I see your passion and love for your family farm, but sometimes that just isn’t enough. After the last... four loans,” he said with

a note of surprise, “I think it’s time you and your father considering selling.”

“Not an option.”

“You can subdivide and sell parts of your land. Keep the old farmhouse. Keep the pumpkin patch if you want to give it another year. You might be able to stretch it. But you won’t last until Christmas if you don’t make some changes. Real estate is booming. You could turn a huge profit if you sold a few acres to some developers.”

I pushed up from my chair. “I appreciate your time.”

Keith sighed and massaged his temples. “It might be worth your while to try a smaller bank. Sometimes they’re willing to take a bigger risk if they see potential value on return. You’ve paid all your loans back. You’re low risk in that regard. But the bigger banks like us? It’s just not worth it. I’m sorry. Quite sorry.”

I gathered the paperwork as my cheeks burned with embarrassment. I’d been turned down enough times in the last few weeks I thought I wouldn’t feel the heat of shame so intensely, but there it was, burning wildly. “It’s okay. I understand. I’ll try somewhere else. Thanks for your time.”

“Good luck.”

I appreciated his kindness but hated the pity in his eyes. It was the way everyone looked at me. Like I was this naïve farmgirl without a hope and a prayer who was about to lose everything she cherished on this green earth.

Over my dead body.

I stormed out of the bank and marched down the sidewalk, hellbent on making my day in the city worth my time. I preferred the rolling fields and vine-filled terrain of our farm. I’d take it over the concrete and exhaust fumes any day.

While I made my way to the next bank, I pulled out my phone to check in on my father.

It rang and rang until he finally answered on the last ring. “Wayne Wright.”

“Daddy, it’s me.”

“You coming home yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Any bites?”

“Not yet,” I said again.

“I told you as much, Macy Mae. Don’t waste your time on those suits. They aren’t gonna help us. Besides, we’ve got cash coming in from the float people. What’s his name again? Doesn’t matter,” he mumbled. “Just come on home. I’ll put on another pot of coffee. We can play cards before the horses need feeding.”

Although his offer chased away the burning shame still lingering on my cheeks, I turned him down. “I’m going to try a couple more places. I’ll be home before feeding time. No need to drag your ass out of your recliner again,” I teased lightly.

“Don’t pound the pavement too hard. You don’t want the wrong person to answer your call. I’ve seen my fair share of greedy businessmen, Macy Mae. My daddy almost lost the farm to one.”

“I know, I know. Jedd Hopkins. I remember the story.” I stopped in front of a small bank that oozed loan-shark vibes and cringed. Was I really this desperate? *Yes*. “I have to go, Daddy. I’ll be home in a few hours. Cross your fingers for me.”

“And toes.”

I hung up, strolled into the bank, slapped on my best smile, and prayed like hell they saw potential in Mallory Farm.

Twenty minutes later, I walked back out onto the sidewalk after being turned down yet again.

It was hopeless. Nobody was going to risk their dime on a small generational farm like ours. If we were going to dig ourselves out of this hole, we’d have to do it ourselves. Daddy was too arthritic and old for the job. I had to think of a way to bring us back to the world of the living.

I had time to visit one of the other pumpkin farms on my drive back. Maybe I'd get a glimpse of what they were doing differently from us. There had to be something we were missing.

My old Ford pickup guzzled fuel in the start and stop New York traffic. I grumbled about the waste of money and the mileage until I left the city limits and the roads became more tolerable. I drove forty miles to Hope, where I stopped at a farm and orchard. Their parking was organized. The gravel lot was manicured with flower planters and white painted lines that probably had to be reapplied after every rain.

I got out of my truck. My Blundstones crunched on the gravel as I walked up to the entrance and passed under a giant gate made of timber with a sign hanging from it that read *Red Moon Farm and Orchard*. I slid my hands into my overall pockets and soaked in the sight of the big red barn, sprawling pumpkin patch beyond, and the ripe apple orchard to my left.

All guests had to pass through the red barn to enter. I paid my ten-dollar admittance fee—double the amount of what we charged at Mallory Farm—and stepped into the barn. It wasn't much of a barn at all. It was clean and modern with smooth concrete floors. It smelled mildly of hay and cider.

I was stunned to see a café in one corner with several tables and an open garage door leading out to a nicely furnished patio with eclectic furniture. Couples sipped hard cider and families ate ice cream out of tiny hollowed-out pumpkins. Almost everyone had their phone out to snap pictures.

“Daddy would blow a gasket,” I breathed.

An employee dressed in a plaid shirt and black jeans greeted me with a charming smile. She handed me a brochure with a map of the grounds. On the back, she pointed out all of their social media accounts. “We have a contest running right now for the best fall-inspired picture at the farm. You can enter as many times as you like and each entry counts as a ballot. You just have to use the hashtag *autumndaysatRedMoon*.”

I stared blankly at the brochure. “Thanks.”

She wandered off to hand out more brochures to newcomers, and I reviewed the line-up of entertainers scheduled for weekends. The list included local singers, an act for children, a comedian, and a swing-dance night with a one-hour free class before the night began. A ticket came with two free hard ciders per person and a slice of homemade pumpkin pie.

I groaned. “No wonder we’re going broke.”

CHAPTER 3



TREYTON

The rain made the dock slick. I took care placing my feet, minding the planks that were on the verge of rotting, and made my way down the numerous pathways over the water to the roughest looking houseboat in the marina. On the back of the square, somewhat lopsided eyesore, was the name *Destiny* written in cursive in red paint. Weather and time had chipped away at it, and Blane kept saying how he wanted to repaint it.

I didn't see the point. He'd be better off scrapping the whole damn thing.

I stood on the edge of the dock with my hands in my pockets as the rain soaked the shoulders of my jacket. "Blane? You here?" I called across the small dock to the interior door.

The small porthole window filled with my brother's grinning face. He shouldered the door open. It creaked and groaned, in need of a good WD40 treatment. He had grease on his hands, which he wiped onto a tattered rag. He tossed the rag over his shoulder and left it there. "My brother the city slicker. Shouldn't you be out herding turkeys for your parade or something?"

Chuckling, I stepped down into the boat. "I'd rather be chasing turkeys than trying to make this old hunk of junk run."

"Don't speak ill of *Destiny*." Blane put his hand on the interior door and gave it an affectionate pat. "She's seen better days, but there's still life in her yet. I think I'm getting closer to getting the motor to turn over. Just a couple more parts to replace, some things to tighten..." He trailed off and let his

hand fall from the door. “Sooner or later she has to run because I don’t want to stay in this marina forever.”

The marina in Queens had a steep dock fee which attracted a certain kind of boat owner. My brother’s houseboat was surrounded by yachts, sailboats, and the occasional party boat. He stuck out like a sore thumb. Even in the dreary rain the other boats sparkled.

Blane looked me up and down. “You look like you could use a beer.”

“I could.”

He ducked inside and returned seconds later with two chilled bottles. We cracked them open, tipped our heads back, and guzzled half of them back under the canopy, tucked out of the rain. He invited me to sit up top where the wheel was. We settled into surprisingly comfortable chairs he’d reupholstered himself last summer.

I kicked my heels up onto the railing along the edges. “I can put you up in that apartment anytime you want, Blane. You just have to say the word. I’ll give the current tenant the boot.”

He snorted. “Why would I want to live in an apartment when I can have all this?”

I looked around at the city shoreline. Overhead, gulls screeched. It smelled like salt and fish. “I can’t imagine.”

“You don’t understand. The ocean is in my blood, Trey. I’m not made for land. Once this winter passes and the good weather starts, she’ll be up and running and we’ll set off down the coast for sandy beaches and women in bikinis.”

He and I had very different dreams. Although admittedly, the bikini part sounded good.

“How’s the rat race?” he mused.

He knew how stressful this time of year got for me.

I shrugged a shoulder. “My assistant quit today.”

“Another one?”

“She was useless. Had her head in the clouds half the time.”

“Do you have time to hire another one before the parade? You can’t do it all yourself, man. Six weeks of that would be hell.”

I sighed, kicked my feet down from the railing, and leaned forward to rest my elbows on my knees. “I may not have a choice. The mayor is up my ass with his expectations. The company is putting out a significantly higher amount of money this year. We have new floats in the works. I can’t fuck it up. And that’s exactly what Carla was doing. Fucking it up. Although after losing her, I now realize I have a lot of bullshit tasks to weed through.”

“Such as?”

I gave my brother a dry, exasperated look.

Blane threw his head back and laughed, revealing the small scar under his chin where his dark beard didn’t grow. It was my fault he had it. When we were kids, I’d lured him out into the greenbelt behind the house where we grew up with the promise of playing hide and seek. The kid had been a sucker for the game when he was seven—just brave enough to choose good hiding places, but not quite brave enough to come looking for me in the darker corners of the woods. One evening, while the smells of Mom’s shepherd’s pie and the wood-burning fire wafted down from the house into the leafless trees, I hunkered down to hide near the creek bed. An old beaver dam butted up against a sewer. The echo of water run-off was eerie, but I was eleven and old enough to talk myself out of the feelings of fear that threatened to take over.

Blane wasn’t as lucky.

When he came down into the creek looking for me, I’d leapt out of the brush and scared the living shit out of him. Literally. He screamed like a baby and lost his footing on the slippery rocks. He fell in the shallow water and landed right on his chin, cracking several teeth and skewering his chin on a sharp rock.

It was the first time I'd ever felt true fear. I hurried to bring my baby brother back up to the house. He wailed the whole time. He was soaking wet, and by the time we both burst through the back door into the kitchen, we were both shivering. Mom was there, standing over the stove humming an Elvis Presley song.

We were off to the hospital in less than three minutes.

He'd been so swollen for days that when Halloween came around, he didn't dress up. He just went out as himself with his swollen chin, busted lip, and cracked teeth. It took a week to get him into the dentist.

Blane nudged my foot with his. "Earth to Trey. Such as what?"

I shifted in my seat. "I'm... I'm going to a farm in the middle of nowhere to fulfill an order tomorrow."

"What sort of order?"

"Pumpkins."

Blane arched an eyebrow. "Pumpkins?"

"We need an absurd amount for the parade, and this farm offered the lowest quote, so I took them up on the sale. They have a float, too. At least that's what Carla's notes said."

Blane chuckled. "So you're not herding turkeys, you're herding pumpkins. Tough gig for a rich guy like you. I wouldn't wear those, if I were you." He nodded down at my shoes.

I looked down at my Italian leather Oxfords. "What's wrong with them?"

"They're no good for a farm."

"What should I wear?" I looked down at his oil-stained sneakers.

He wiggled his toes in the mesh. "You'd be better off. I know you're not a sneaker or boots guy, but trust me, if you're going to be on a pumpkin farm, you're going to need comfortable footwear."

Comfortable footwear. Blasphemy.

“I’ll pay you to go in my place,” I said.

Blane laughed and shook his head. “You’re shit out of luck, bro. I’m not going shopping for pumpkins for you. I’m going to be here with my head up Destiny’s ass.”

“Don’t get it stuck up there. None of your rich neighbors will set foot on this hunk of junk to help you.”

“Pompous bastards,” Blane muttered. “The new guy with the black yacht across the marina there,” he nodded toward the nicest boat docked, “is an absolute prick. But you should see the girls he brings on that boat. Supermodel chicks, man. It’s unreal. Let me tell you, he did *not* like it when I hit on one of them and she got a little flirty back with me. Some girls dig the old fisherman’s sweater and three-day beard. What can I say?”

I laughed. “Or she thought you were boat staff and was being polite.”

“Shit. Didn’t think about that.”

“I’m just messing with you. I’m sure she was charmed by the sweater.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m serious,” I said, even though I couldn’t keep the sarcastic grin off my face. “Super-hot chicks really love dudes in damp wool sweaters who smell like sardines and man musk.”

Blane chuckled. “Another beer?”

I got to my feet and picked my way down the stairs to the main deck. “No, I’m good, thanks though. I have a lot of running around to do tonight to make up for the work Carla would have done today. I was in the area and thought I’d say hi. Let’s go for food and drinks soon. You can tell me all about these supermodels hanging around.”

“Sounds good. Bring me some pumpkins, will you?”

I stepped off the boat and onto the slippery dock. “What? Why?”

Blane grinned down at me. “They might not like the sweater, but all girls love carving pumpkins, and on a boat like this you don’t have to worry about getting guts and seeds all over the place. I’m going to poach one of his models, bro. Just wait and see. Destiny and I, we’ve still got game.”

I laughed as I made my way down the dock. “How we share DNA, I’ll never know.”

CHAPTER 4



MACY

My overalls were covered in mud, so I wiggled out of them and hung them on the hook by the back door before moving into the old farmhouse. Floorboards creaked under my feet, announcing my arrival to my father, who stood at the kitchen sink gazing out the window at the pumpkin fields beyond.

“How are things going out there?” he asked.

I raked my fingers through my hair. My scalp itched with sweat even though the morning was chilly. “Three different school buses full of kids and about twelve sets of parental chaperones,” I said. “That and some younger tykes with their families. We’ve got maybe a hundred people wandering around out there.”

He nodded and I knew he was doing the calculations in his head.

In order for our farm to make more money than last year, each person needed to buy a pumpkin and pay the entrance fee. Pumpkins ranged from four to twelve dollars, depending on size, and the entrance fee was five dollars for adults and three dollars for kids.

I wanted to change that, but in order to charge more, we had to have more to offer like the Red Moon property did. I hadn’t mentioned any of that to my father. He wouldn’t understand. Part of him still believed that our town should show up for our pumpkin patch because they wanted to keep

us in business. Unfortunately, that wasn't how things worked in this day and age.

Yes, shopping local was important to a lot of people, but our town had shifted in the last two decades. Our population was older. There were less little kids, which meant less pumpkins to carve, which meant less sales. It was a vicious cycle.

I opened the fridge and grabbed the ingredients to throw together a sandwich. I had about fifteen minutes before I had to get back out there and help load wagons for the large pumpkin order we had going out today. That, at least, would be a *big* order. A thousand pumpkins. Sold.

“What’s the name of that guy who’s coming to pick up the pumpkin order this afternoon?” I slathered one side of my bread with mustard and doused the lettuce and sprouts with pepper. “Ray? Jay? Something like that, isn’t it?”

“Treyton Corral.” My father turned from the window and watched me whip up my sandwich on the kitchen island. As a girl, I’d hovered over the edge while my mother did this very thing, and I’d always felt the tinge of nostalgia whenever I prepared food in here. My father must have as well because a whiskery smile lit up his face. “What’re you making, Macy Mae?”

I pointed a mustard-covered knife at him. “Do you want one?”

“What sort of question is that?” He pushed away from the sink and hovered around me as I took more bread out of the bag for his sandwich. “Just not so much mustard.”

I began making his sandwich. “Treyton Corral. Never heard of him.”

“He’s a big shot in New York. He’s put on the Thanksgiving Day parade for the last six years. He and Mayor Hopkins have been partnered up since Hopkins took office.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “And you’re letting him buy our pumpkins? I thought you swore Hopkins would never come close to Mallory Farm.”

My father sighed wearily. “It’s good press. When I wrote the sale order, I requested that Corral make it known where his pumpkins came from. We need all the press we can get, Macy Mae.”

Maybe my father was more progressive than I realized. He *loathed* Mayor Hopkins. After all, Jedd Hopkins, the mayor’s father, had almost buried this farm when it was run by my grandfather. Grudges ran thick in a farmer’s blood, but at least my father could see how big of a deal an order like this was to Mallory Farm.

“The wagons are almost fully loaded,” I said. I’d been working at it for the last two days. A thousand pumpkins was no easy feat for one girl to do alone, but I’d managed. With our reputation on the line I had to inspect every pumpkin for rot before placing it in one of the wagons. Three trucks were arriving to tow them, and before they got here, I had to pack the wagons down to secure the load. My hands were torn up from the sharp stems and vines, and dirt was wedged so deep under my fingernails, I doubted I’d get them clean by Christmas, and we were long past the days of being able to splurge on a seasonal manicure.

Unfortunately.

I slid my father’s sandwich to him. He took a large bite out of one corner and nodded appreciatively.

I wrapped mine in a napkin and headed to the back door to pull my overalls back on. “I’m going to head back out there and relieve Peach. She’s been working ticket sales without a break for three hours.”

“Send her in. I’ll whip up some tea and another sandwich for her.”

“You’re the best, Daddy.”

The cool air hit me when I stepped onto the back deck. I breathed in the smell of soil tinged with the sweeter scent of rotting leaves. My boots squished in the mud as I crossed our farmhouse yard, passed through the gate, and strode around to the barn. We used to keep it open during pumpkin patch days

so people could pet and feed the animals, but we didn't have enough staff to keep a watchful eye in there anymore, so for safety reasons, we'd closed that section down.

We had a lot of disappointed parents last year when they discovered our rates had stayed the same but they couldn't see the animals.

Oops.

At the front of the farm we'd set up three large white tents with space heaters. Peach, my long-standing best friend who grew up a few doors down from the farm, sat bundled up in one of my father's Mac jackets and a fleece blanket across her lap. A coffee thermos sat beside her on the table where she had a cash box and a measuring tape for measuring pumpkins to know what to charge people. As I approached, no new cars pulled into the lot.

We might not get another rush for the day, and it wasn't even eleven o'clock yet.

She heard my boots squelching in the mud and twisted in her seat. Rosy cheeks stretched in a grin. "Thank God you're here, Macy. I have had to pee for the better part of an hour." She untangled herself from the blanket across her lap and handed it to me.

"Go ahead, Daddy is making you a sandwich and a cup of tea."

She scooped her thermos off the table and drained the contents in three steady gulps. "You're the best. I'll be right back. I know you have a lot to do today."

I settled down into her chair and draped her blanket over my lap. It was nice and warm from her body heat and smelled like her body spray—cotton candy and vanilla. She'd always liked smelling like dessert.

It felt good to get off my feet for a bit, but within a few minutes, I'd already grown restless. There were still fifty pumpkins to load and I needed to tie the tarps down over the wagons.

While I waited impatiently for my friend's return, one of the bus loads of kids left the patch, so I had to frantically collect cash. We didn't charge by size for school field trips. Instead it was a flat rate of three dollars per pumpkin. Another lost opportunity. Some parents picked out pumpkins as well, and by the time the group had piled back onto their bus, Peach had returned with her sandwich in hand and her thermos refilled with piping hot tea.

"Your dad is such a gem," she said before taking a bite of her sandwich. "He knows how to throw together a good turkey sandwich, too."

"As he should. He's been eating them for lunch for like, six decades."

Peach laughed. The sound was musical and soft. I'd always marvelled at how effortlessly her femininity came to her. She had pouty pink lips, long golden eyelashes, beautiful freckles across her cheeks, and the most adorable upturned nose ever. Her hair, naturally ginger, had been lightened in salons over the years and tinged pink, so it looked almost peachy, like her nickname. Her real name was Pattie, but she despised it and claimed the name belonged to her grandmother, not her.

"Six decades?" Peach eyed me with a sideways glance. "Sometimes I forget he's not fifty anymore."

I sighed. "Tell me about it."

Not only was I acutely aware of my withering family farm, but I was also aware of my withering father. Not that I would *ever* say that to him. He was still strong of mind and just as witty as ever. He told his stories with the same gusto and impressive memory. But his body was full of aches and pains that had been tolerable five years ago but were now excruciating. He tried to hide it, but his arthritis was worsening, and his pride stopped him from getting the injections his doctor wanted to put him on. There were side effects, but my father was an otherwise healthy man. I wished he would try it to relieve some of his pain, but he was stubborn as a mule.

“How’s he been doing with everything?” Peach asked.

I shrugged. “He’s tired and won’t admit it. His back is killing him. His knuckles are so arthritic he can’t close his fist anymore, let alone hold a shovel.” I stared out at the nearly empty parking lot. “I think we both thought we’d have more time before he became an old man, but it crept up on us. Just like that.”

“There is still hope,” Peach said confidently.

“Every bank I went to on Monday turned me down. No more loans. No more aid. It’s just us, Peach. I... I don’t know if it’s going to be enough.”

Peach twisted in her seat and her perfectly plucked ginger brows drew together. “Macy Mae Wright. You can stick that defeated attitude right back up your butt and forget all about it. You are stronger than doubt ever will be, and so is your father. You guys are having a thin season, don’t get me wrong, but that doesn’t mean it’s time to go belly up.” She leaned forward and grabbed both of my hands in her gloved ones. “You are the baddest bitch I know. Act like it.”

I smiled through blurred vision and managed a laugh even though I felt like I wanted to cry. “Thanks, Peach. I needed that.”

She gave me a confident nod. “Go put those muscles of yours to good use and finish loading that last wagon. Sexy City Boy is going to be here any minute and we want to impress him, don’t we?”

I rose from the rickety collapsible chair. “Sexy City Boy?”

“Girl, have you not even bothered to Google Treyton Corral? I know you’re a farmer, but you’re not a total hermit. He is *fine*. Like, six foot three with the greenest eyes you’ve ever seen *fine*. A tall drink of water. A—”

“I get it.” I held up a hand. “You’re into him.”

“Everyone into dudes with a pulse is into him, Macy.”

I laughed. “You know my preferences have always leaned more toward the Clint Eastwood type.”

She rolled her eyes. “There are hotter modern cowboys worth salivating over.”

I shrugged. I’d grown up watching Clint Eastwood movies on the old tube TV in my family living room. Mom had *adored* Eastwood, and Dad had loved the gunslinger action flicks, so it had been a perfect combination really. When I was eleven years old, I remembered staring at that sharp jaw and watching the sway of his hips when he rode his horse and feeling something different. Something new. Most girls my age had their sexual awakenings from Hercules the cartoon or Jack Sparrow. Not me. Give me spurs and a cowboy hat any day.

Back at the wagon, not too far from where Peach sat, I pulled on a pair of work gloves and went back to work moving the selected pumpkins in the patch from their wheelbarrows to the wagon. It was strenuous work, but I lifted with my legs and kept my back straight. Some of the pumpkins—the really hefty, generous, gut-filled ones—weighed upwards of thirty-five pounds. Not much when you only had to lift a few, but after two days of this, I could feel the strain in my shoulders and biceps.

Peach liked to joke that I was more ripped than most of the men in town, and she was right. Growing up on a farm meant developing brute strength. I had a strong grip and stronger legs. My father used to challenge other local farmer boys to race me at Harvest events or try to lift more than me, and I always won.

Maybe that’s why none of them ever wanted to date me when we got older, I thought as I paused to wipe sweat from my brow.

Just then, Peach whistled and stood from her chair. I looked up as she pointed to the road, and a shiny, dark gray car that looked like a bullet or a sex toy of some sort pulled into the gravel lot. It was so sleek and modern. I’d never seen anything like it.

It came to a slow rolling stop right in front of Peach’s table. Seconds later, the engine died and the driver’s side door

lifted open like a bird's wing. One long leg emerged, followed by a tall, lean, dashing man in a dark green suit—the same shade of an evergreen at dusk with gray undertones.

He looked great.

He also looked stupid.

His polished shoes crunched on the gravel as he hit his key fob to activate the car's alarm. The headlights flashed orange, and he pulled down a pair of what I assumed were designer sunglasses to look at Peach over the rim of them. He said something to her that made her giggle, and she turned and pointed at me.

His gaze fell in my direction.

With a thirty-five-pound pumpkin balanced on my hip, I raised a hand and waved him over. He began walking my way, and I noticed that he had a bit of a swagger to his walk that kind of reminded me of the sway of Eastwood's hips when he rode horses.

Maybe there is some cowboy in the City Slicker, after all.

He stopped walking abruptly as mud enclosed his shiny brown shoes. His lips twisted in disgust, and he swore loudly.

I snickered.

Okay, maybe not.

CHAPTER 5



TREYTON

Mud. There was so much God damn mud.

I grimaced as my shoes literally suctioned into the ground with every step deeper onto the property. The girl with peach-colored hair giggled behind me and promptly clamped her hand over her mouth when I looked over my shoulder at her. She spun back around and planted her rear end back in her chair.

Blane had been right, after all. Oxfords were a bad idea to wear to a farm. But I was a man of dignity and status. What did these people expect? For me to show up in Levi's and boots?

A tall blonde hefted a large pumpkin into the back of a wagon, wiped dirt on her coveralls, and strode forward to greet me. She extended one hand, and I noticed straight away that her fingernails were horribly dirty, and she had dried cuts on her knuckles and palm.

She looked down at her hand before thinking better of shaking mine. She let it fall to her side and cleared her throat. "You must be Mr. Corral. I'm Macy. My father owns the property, but I'll be handling your order pick up today."

Macy.

The girl looked like she'd walked off the cover of a western romance novel. Her long blonde hair was drawn back from her face in two long braids. Dirt—at least what I *hoped* was dirt—stained her jaw and chin. Her eyes were blue but somehow dark, perhaps due to the stormy clouds overhead.

She wore a long-sleeved gray shirt under her coveralls that hugged her arms, and I noticed she had some muscle under there.

“It’s nice to meet you, Macy. You can call me Trey.” I looked around at the farm. Kids struggled to lift pumpkins in the field beyond, and the red barn was in need of a fresh paint job. “This, uh, this isn’t exactly what I expected when I looked at your website.”

“The farm looks nicer in the summertime,” she said sweetly. “That’s when the photos were taken.”

“Right.”

I had an uncanny knack for sniffing out bullshit, and from where I was standing, her words reeked of it.

Macy began hefting more pumpkins up into the truck.

I eyed her. “Don’t you have any help?”

She shook her head. “Nope, it’s a family farm, and things are a bit lean these days. You know how it is.”

No, I didn’t.

She gave me a charming smile as she loaded two pumpkins at once into the wagon. How much did those things weigh?

“I’m stronger than most of the boys we used to have working the farm anyway,” Macy said. “You’re more than welcome to help, if you like. We only have a couple dozen left to load, and hey, your shoes are already ruined.”

We both looked down at my shoes.

“Yeah, I guess I’m the ass who wore his good shoes to a pumpkin farm.”

She gave me a light-hearted giggle. “It happens more often than you’d think.”

“Are you just saying that to spare my feelings?”

Her dark blue eyes sparkled. “Maybe.”

I moved to the wheelbarrow. The whole thing was coated in dried mud, and the tires were sunken down in the wet earth. I lifted a pumpkin, held it at arm's length, and placed it in the wagon. This went on for five minutes or so before we emptied the last wheelbarrow, and I stood there like an idiot with my hands away from my slacks, not wanting to stain my clothes.

If Macy noticed, she didn't say anything.

I checked the time on my watch. "Those trucks were supposed to be here before me. I wonder what has them delayed. If you have other work to do, don't worry about entertaining me."

Macy nodded toward the barn. "I have to muck stalls and feed the horses. You're welcome to join me. We have the beginnings of our float for the parade coming together in the barn. We had to keep all the little kiddies away from it. They see something like that, and all they're going to want to do is crawl all over it."

"Lead the way."

I followed Macy through the muck and mess. She spoke over her shoulder as we walked and told me about how much she and her father appreciated my pumpkin order. I supposed it was a pretty good sale if they were having a leaner season. She unlatched the barn doors and pushed them open. I couldn't help but notice the way her shoulder blades flexed against the fabric of her shirt. We stepped inside, and I was greeted with the smell of hay, horse hair, and shit.

I scrunched up my nose.

Macy giggled. "Fresh, right?"

The barn was huge. In front of me, it stretched about a hundred feet long, give or take, and each side was lined in stalls. A few horses poked their heads over the doors and whinnied at Macy in greeting, who made sure to greet each horse with equal affection, patting their cheeks, rubbing their noses, and kissing their foreheads. Pleased with her attention, the horses went back to their business as I wandered deeper into the place and looked around in amazement.

To my right, another section of the barn broke off into a smaller wing that housed copious amounts of hay and a section of smaller stalls for livestock like goats, donkeys, sheep, pigs, chickens, and rabbits. I only knew that because there were silver plaques on each gate, but no animals. I wondered why.

To my left was a wide expansive area where, much to my delight, the beginnings of a float were beginning to take form. They had the base put together, and it was just as wide as the barn doors, so when it was done, they would just tow it outside. I could tell they'd opted for one they could tow, rather than a self-propelled chassis. That would save them money, as they wouldn't have to invest in all the extra parts of a motorized float like a radiator or gearboxes.

Macy opened one of the stall doors, guided a brown horse out, gave the animal a pat on the rump, and began shovelling the stall. The horse stood calmly by, waiting.

"Not too shabby, huh?" Macy called while she worked. "We've never made a float before, so this has been a bit of a learning experience, but we've got a lot of volunteers lending a hand and sharing expertise. The whole town wants a part of it. My father thinks they're leeches."

"Leeches?"

"For hitching their wagon to ours, literally." She straightened and leaned on the shovel. The brown horse tried to get back in the stall, but Macy caught her snout and braced her shoulder against the horse's chest—a silent request to wait. "Our farm isn't the only place in town having a hard year. Everyone sees this as a great chance to get some publicity and big-city attention on their small business."

"What's the theme?"

"Good question. I couldn't tell you."

"You've been working on it and you don't know what you're building toward?" That wasn't reassuring.

She shook her head and went back to stall mucking. "No, I haven't had much of a hand in working on it or the design

plans. I spend my time working the property. Besides, I don't like busy work."

I arched an eyebrow. "Busy work?"

"Mhm. You know, work that keeps a person busy but isn't actually valuable?" She shrugged. "Busy work."

"Mucking stalls is valuable?"

She smirked. "To the horses, yes."

A low rumble alerted us to the arrival of the trucks. Macy finished her stall, led the horse back in, and told me she would oversee the transfer of goods—also known as pumpkins—before returning to her tasks. We left the barn and headed out to the lot, where her peach-haired friend had guided the three trucks over to the wagons.

Three men got out from behind the wheels and came over to me. I gave them instructions, and while they started hooking things up, Macy grabbed tarps and tie-downs and began securing the load. I felt like an ass standing there watching, but I wouldn't be much help.

When we ensured the loads were secure and we weren't going to lose any pumpkins on the freeway, I pulled Macy aside.

"Did my assistant already pay you for the order?"

She shook her head. "She gave us a deposit four weeks ago."

I sighed. Of course Carla hadn't bothered to follow up and pay the remainder in full. "How much was the deposit?"

"Two hundred."

I blinked at her. "That's it?"

Macy nodded. "Yes. Why?"

"You're running a business here. That's a small price to pay if someone is going to bail on you, and then you'd be left high and dry with a thousand pumpkins with only two hundred dollars to show for it."

Macy's posture straightened and she lifted her chin. "You worry about your parade, and I'll worry about my pumpkins."

Fair enough.

I pulled out my check book and wrote her a check under my business name. For tax purposes, of course. I handed it to her.

She stared down at the dollar amount. "Five thousand dollars? We agreed on three." She tried to hand the check back.

"Consider it a bonus for loading the wagons and being prepared. I appreciate that when I do business, and these days, people always want to jerk me around."

She smiled and slid the check into the front pocket of her overalls. "Thank you."

I began walking backward to my car in the lot. "I'll see you around, Macy. Probably sooner rather than later so I can check in on the progress of that float in your barn."

She rocked back on her heels. "Works for me. Oh, Trey, watch out!"

Too late.

I stepped back and felt the squish.

It was so much thicker and softer than the mud I'd been walking through all afternoon. I didn't want to look down, but I forced myself to, and I groaned at the deep mountain of shit I'd just stepped in. It was so deep, in fact, that it stained the hem of my pant leg.

Macy bit her bottom lip. "Do you want that two grand back?"

I was having the shittiest couple of days. Literally.

Forcing myself to smile as I extracted my foot from the enormous pile of excrement, I shook my head. "What's a bit of dog shit to keep a man honest? What size dogs do you have here, by the way? This thing must be the size of a bear."

She laughed. “Or the size of a horse, because, well, that isn’t dog shit.”

“Ah.”

“You’re going to stink up your fancy car if you drive home like that. We probably have a change of clothes you could take. They won’t be nearly as nice as your suit, but they might save your interior.”

Ten minutes later, I pulled out of the lot in a pair of torn up dusty old Levi’s and my shit-stained clothes hosed off and tied off in a grocery bag.

Just a day at the farm, Macy had told me.

CHAPTER 6



MACY

The sun had gone down over half an hour ago, but there were still chores to be done on the farm, so I was still out in the chilly air with one of Dad's Mac jackets on and thick wool socks inside my barn boots. I hadn't finished mucking out the stalls while Trey was here, so I'd gone back to it after seeing to dinner and making sure my father wasn't tempted to go down to the local grocer and pick up something that broke the budget.

I'd heated up leftover chili from the freezer and called it a night. By the time the dishes were washed and the kitchen was closed for the night, Dad had fallen asleep in his arm chair by the fire. He'd been doing that more often than not lately, waking around midnight, and dragging his feet down the hall to his bedroom at the very back of the house. Sometimes I'd wake up when I heard his door close. Other times, he'd wake from his slumber in the early morning hours while I was brewing coffee.

As a young girl, I'd always known this place would become mine one day.

I used to love helping Dad around the barn. I'd struggle to rise as early as he did, and I'd meet him down in the kitchen just like we did now. Instead of coffee I'd have tea, and we'd be out in the fields at five in the morning, ready to break our backs and, as Dad always said, sweat off our brows. He'd hold my hand on the walk down to the barn. It was always dark, and the early morning noises of the surrounding trees and the creatures that lived in them spooked me easily. He'd tell me all

about the animals being more afraid of us than we were of them, and how they were tucking themselves in, just like we had last night. Then he'd squeeze my hand, and I'd always marvel at how big his hand was—how strong and callused his grip was. How steady he was.

Every morning was the same, and I liked it that way.

Now things were different.

Now I went out in the mornings alone. I didn't mind. Deep down I knew this was how it would play out, but sometimes, especially on the quiet lonely evenings or mornings, I'd ache for his hand to hold and the nostalgia of my childhood that I could never get back.

My horse, the brown mare named Topsy, gave her head a little shake and whinnied like she was clearing her throat.

I smiled and gave her some loving scratches on her big round cheek. "Do you miss the old days too, girl?"

Back in the prime of Mallory Farm, Dad had bought Topsy from a neighbor down the road whose horse had a foal he didn't want to take care of. He brought her home to me one night when I was nine years old, and I'd bawled my eyes out into her mane. Mom had passed away a couple of months prior, and Topsy helped me fill a void I'd believed would just continue to get deeper and deeper until it swallowed me whole. I felt like it filled a void in Dad, too.

Topsy's ears turned to listen, pointing in the direction of the barn doors. I leaned sideways and peered past her. With the lights on in the barn, I couldn't see out into the night beyond.

"You hear something, girl?"

She bobbed her head as if nodding yes.

Unease seeped into my bones.

We'd had problems with coyotes before but not recently. After getting rid of most of our livestock over the previous two years, the mangy mutts had moved on to greener pastures where they had more viable prey like chickens and rabbits. But

every now and then I'd hear them crying out after a kill, and it would send a chill through me.

I didn't miss finding the bodies of our farm animals on early mornings. Not even the barn could stop them some nights.

"They won't bother an old girl like you, Topsy," I assured my horse. "Stupid coyotes."

I led Topsy back into her stall and moved down the line of our two other horses to muck their stalls. Back in the day, the whole barn had been full of horses. We'd had seven of our own and boarded ten others. It paid well even though it was back-breaking work to tend to so many animals and to tend to them properly. Dad had been a horse man since he came out of the womb, and his pride and joy had been events at the farm when I was little. We'd host riding competitions and bring our horses to special events in town. One time he even got one of his horses cast for a local television show. His pride had been insurmountable that month.

I reminisced while I shoveled hay and shit, and right when I was beginning to think my back couldn't take any more physical labor that day, I heard a sound.

Rustling hay.

None of the horses alerted, so I didn't panic, but I spun around quickly with my shit-stained shovel raised, only to point it right into Peach's freckled face.

She let out a startled yelp and stumbled back, landing on her ass in the hay.

She pouted her already perfect and pouty lips. "Hey. You scared me."

"Scared *you*?" I asked incredulously, bending down to offer her a hand and pull her to her feet. I dusted hay off her rear end. "You were the one sneaking up on me. What are you still doing here? I thought you went home."

"I did, but I had to run out to buy milk for tomorrow morning and I saw the barn light on when I passed. Thought you might want a hand?"

“Peach, you glorious woman, what did I do to deserve a friend like you?”

She helped herself to another shovel leaning against the wall a few feet away from the saddles and reins and other equipment for horse care. “Well, you beat up Jeremy Tucker for me in sixth grade, and then again in senior year when he pantsed me in the hallway while we were all signing yearbooks.”

“I didn’t beat him up,” I said.

“He had a black eye the next day.”

“Because his backpack hit him in the face.”

Peach snorted. “Yeah, precisely, his backpack which *you* hurled at him. Not that he didn’t deserve it. I so did not appreciate him yelling ‘let’s see Peach’s Peach’ before yanking my track pants down. Such a turd.”

“*Such* a turd,” I agreed.

She began mucking out stalls alongside me, and we worked in comfortable quiet together as the night continued to grow colder. The labor kept us warm. Steam rose from the horses’ noses as we began brushing them and cleaning their horseshoes so I didn’t have to do it at the crack of dawn tomorrow. We fed them, gave them some love, and made our way out of the barn into the kitchen to wash up.

I opened the fridge and peered around, already hungry again. Dinner felt like it hadn’t even happened after all the night work I’d done.

I closed the fridge. Nothing good in there.

“You can come over,” Peach offered. “I have some banana bread from the farmer’s market and could make us tea.”

I appreciated her offer, but a girl could only take so many handouts before her pride started to hurt. So, I changed the subject. “That guy Trey was a piece of work, wasn’t he?”

“You mean a piece of meat?”

I snickered. “He’s handsome, I’ll admit it.”

“Handsome?” Peach asked incredulously. “That’s the understatement of the century. The things I would let that man do to me...” She trailed off as her eyelids hooded and gave a little shudder before coming back to her senses. “Yikes, I haven’t been touched by a man in...” She trailed off once more to count on her fingers. She bashfully hid them behind her back when she surpassed four. “A long time.”

“Four months is a long time?” I mused.

She nodded. “For Peach Baker? Yes, yes it is. How long has it been for you?”

“I don’t really pay attention to that kind of thing.”

“That long, huh?”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “Nice, Peach. Real nice.”

“Six months? Longer?”

I gave her a deadpan stare.

She gasped dramatically. “A whole *year*?”

“Can you blame me? I have my hands full at the farm, and I’m dead tired on my feet by the end of the day. How am I supposed to muster the energy for a date, let alone sex? The thought makes me want to pass out standing up.”

“You just need a target of convenience.”

“Come again?”

“You need a good lay who isn’t hard to find and who you see often but not often enough that it would be weird.” Her eyes twinkled deviously. “Someone like Treyton Corral.”

I busted out laughing and clutched at my sides. “What on earth makes you think he’d want anything to do with this?” I gestured down at myself, pigtails, overalls, mud stains, and all. “I bet he has his pick of any girl in the city he could ever want, and she probably gets waxed every week and has a vagina that smells like—like—” I threw my arms in the air. “I don’t know! Roses or something.”

“I’m sure your vagina smells just fine, baby.”

I glared at her. “That wasn’t the point I was making. The point I was making is I’m not the kind of girl that a man like Treyton would want anything to do with in the bedroom department. I sold him pumpkins and he stepped in horse shit. He probably has sexier interactions with his cleaning lady.”

“Probably.”

We giggled. Leave it to Peach to brighten my mood after a long day.

“He was nicer than I expected though, don’t you think?” Peach asked after a beat.

“Sure, he was nice, if nice is what you like in a guy.”

She stuck her tongue out at me. “One day a man is going to sweep you off your feet, Macy. And I’m going to be there to say *I told you so, you stubborn farmgirl.*”

“Uh huh. We’ll see about that.”

CHAPTER 7



TREYTON

My inbox couldn't be contained. Every time I managed to get through five or so emails labeled *important*, another ten would roll in. One step forward, two steps back. Not only that, but the mayor had been blowing up my phone with special requests for his float. He wanted to make sure his was front and center and commanded the most attention.

Elections were around the corner, he claimed—still nine months away and totally *not* my problem—and he wanted to make sure his debut at the parade was memorable. Apparently, Hopkins's definition of memorable was a float that had the most pumpkins, the loudest music, and the most eye-catching display of them all.

I told him I'd do the best I could.

Under no circumstance was I going to contact all my other float participants and tell them they had to tone their work down to accommodate Mayor Hopkins.

Hell no. Not happening.

I could ask for forgiveness later.

Or more likely, I would avoid him like the plague until the new year, as I'd done the previous three years. That little trick seemed to work best.

With a tired sigh I leaned back in my office chair and watched as more emails continued to roll in. My secretary patched a call through to me with a parade vendor who had a long list of important questions. They had every right to ask

them, but I wasn't supposed to be the guy taking these calls. Relaying this kind of information had been very clearly within Carla's job description. I needed someone to fill her shoes and to do it quickly because it turned out that I could not, in fact, run this ship on my own.

I hung up the phone and tried sifting once more through the two dozen new emails that had rolled in, starting with the top priority ones.

My cell phone buzzed.

Grumbling, I fished it out of my pocket. My brother's name flashed across the screen. I lifted the phone to my ear. "Not a good time, Blane."

"I'm in the lobby of your office building. Want to grab lunch?"

I should have said no.

I closed my email. "Be right down."

Twenty minutes later, we sat at the bar of the closest restaurant down the block from the office tower. Specialty pumpkin cocktails, primarily martinis with pumpkin foam and cinnamon on top, floated past us on trays and were consistently delivered to tables of women who snapped photos for their socials before indulging in their first sips.

Blane had his eye on a dark-haired woman with pumpkin foam on her upper lip as we nursed our beers. "There's something about the simplicity of pumpkin season and how it lights some women up, you know? What's the deal with that?"

I shrugged. "Beats the shit out of me."

"Everywhere you turn it's pumpkin this, pumpkin that, and they eat it up."

"People love having something to be excited for."

He turned to face me on his barstool and draped an arm across the back of the chair. He'd changed out of his fisherman's sweater, thank God, and opted for a plain gray long-sleeved one with light wash jeans. He looked much more suitable for the city than he did when I visited him on his

houseboat. “Speaking of things to be excited about, how’s the parade planning going? Drowning yet?”

“You could say that.” I picked up a menu and studied the burger list. “Carla was useless, but at least she took twenty percent of the load off my plate. Twenty percent is better than nothing. And the mayor is up my ass with all his bogus requests.” I shook my head, slid the menu away after making my selection, and slumped against the back of the barstool. “The guy thinks he’s presidential.”

Blane snickered. “Yeah, he’s about as presidential as my left testicle.”

I snorted.

We put in our food orders with the server and Blane kept an eye on the pretty brunette across the bar still sipping her pumpkin martini while we talked.

“How did the pumpkin farm visit go yesterday?”

“Decent,” I said. “I should have taken your advice about the shoes, but it went decent. The farmer’s daughter impressed me.”

“The farmer’s daughter, huh?” Blane laughed. “I know you have a type, man, but it sure as shit has never been pigtails and manure.”

“She had pigtails, but she had class, too. In that small town sort of way. And her work ethic was the kind of thing I’ve been looking high and low for. The girl loaded a thousand pumpkins into three wagons. Alone, dude.” I sipped my beer and eyed him over the rim. “You should see her shoulders. She’s more cut than I am.”

Blane arched a dark eyebrow. “Pigtails, manure, and beefcake. I never saw this coming for you.”

“Shut up.”

He chuckled in good humor. “Why don’t you see if she wants the assistant job?”

Funny thing was, I’d already considered that. Macy Wright had been on my mind the entire drive back from her small

town yesterday, and again this morning as I worked out, drank my protein shake, and made the drive in to work in my AMG GT. The beautiful car had just come off the line after a custom order. I'd waited eight months to get her, and the drive out to the country had been the perfect thing to test her limits, take some corners, open up the throttle, and see how she could perform. I thought that would have been the highlight of the day, but imagine my surprise when I met Macy.

"I think she already has her hands full on the family farm," I said. "She implied that money was tight, and she had the look of a woman who'd been on the go since the crack of dawn. I think it's just her and her old man running the place."

"Even more reason to offer her the gig. It's not like you're paying minimum wage salaries, Trey. You'd be offering her the kind of money that could make a difference. Why not see what happens? It could be a win-win for both of you."

We weighed the pros and cons while we waited for our food to arrive. Once it did, we dug viciously into our burgers, and I tried to ignore the incessant notifications rolling in on my phone. I didn't check them until we were waiting on the tab, at which point Blane had ordered a pumpkin spiked coffee for the pretty brunette, and after she received it, he had wandered over to introduce himself.

I eyed them from where I sat and couldn't tell if the conversation was going well or not.

My attention returned to my phone, where I saw I had eighty-seven new emails, eight missed phone calls, several invitations to calendar events related to the parade, updated notes from my secretary about even more phone calls that had gone through the office, and a text message from Mayor Hopkins inviting me to go golfing with him and some buddies on Sunday.

I groaned.

Blane arrived back at the bar conveniently moments after I'd paid the bill.

I slid my credit card back into my wallet. "How'd it go?"

“She was flattered.”

“And?”

“Married.”

“Ah, shit.”

“Still gave me her number though.”

I gave him a dark look. “Blane.”

He crumpled up the piece of paper and left it on the bar top. “Obviously I’m not going to call her. Don’t get your boxers in a wad.” We wove through the tables in the bar and passed out the door onto the crowded New York street. Everyone was bundled up in thick coats to brace against the chill and gloomy weather. We turned and headed back toward the office. “One of these days I’m going to meet a nice girl who isn’t betrothed and doesn’t have the moral compass of a spoon.”

“Maybe you need to change the type of women you’re pursuing. Stop trying to pick up sexy brunettes in bars at two o’clock on a Thursday.”

“What’s wrong with sexy brunettes?”

“You’re missing the point. If what you’re doing isn’t working, change what you’re doing.”

Blane laughed and slid his hands into his jean pockets. The cold didn’t seem to bother him much. It never had. “The same applies to you. Stop hiring pencil pushers who want to prove themselves to the titans of industry and hire someone off the beaten path. Someone like your farmgirl.”

I stroked my jaw. It might be worth a shot.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Blane pressed. “She says no? You hire her and a few weeks in realize it doesn’t work and let her go? So what? That’s what probation is for.”

“You make good points.”

“With her work ethic, she might just be the relief you need to make it through the season. Go talk to her, man.” Blane

stopped abruptly outside a shop window two blocks from the office.

I doubled back and peered into the store beside him. It was a clothing store with minimalist design, swanky chandeliers, and plenty of plants inside. It reminded me of something that belonged in Los Angeles, not New York.

“What are we looking at?” I asked.

Blane grinned. “Back of the store. You see her? The brunette in the jeans and the black shirt?”

I sighed. “You never stop thinking with your dick, do you?”

“Who said this is about getting laid?” He moved to the door. “Come on, wingman for me like the old days.”

I shook my head. “I have too much work to do. You’re on your own. Invite her to carve pumpkins with you. See how that goes. Maybe she won’t think you’re a serial killer trying to lure her and you’ll get lucky.”

He flipped me his middle finger.

Chuckling, I moved down the sidewalk and heard my brother’s joyous voice as he stepped into the shop. He’d always been brazen with women and took risks. Eventually, it would pay off, but he needed to meet someone just as out there as he was.

And someone who wouldn’t mind spending most of her time on a soggy boat.

CHAPTER 8



MACY

My father gripped the bottom of the ladder as I balanced on the top, one leg down on the third step from the top, the other bent for leverage on the second. Overhead, I screwed a new lightbulb into the old porch light over Mom's swing.

"Steady," Dad said, unease thick in his voice. "Not too tight."

I paused my work and looked down at him. "Daddy, I've done this a hundred times over since I was twelve. Because *someone* is as stubborn as an ox and refuses to buy LEDs."

Not this time. I'd gone to the hardware store in town on my own, bought the damn LED lights, and safely tucked the box under my bed. What Daddy didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

"I've been using that there lightbulb in that light for thirty years. No reason to change something that isn't broke."

"Even if changing all the lights would save hundreds of dollars on electricity annually?"

He snorted. "Pfft. Nonsense. That's all a marketing ploy."

Daddy was a bit jaded. Progress was, in his mind, the pursuit of shallow men who prioritized dollar signs over good honest work, like labor. He had immense respect for tradesmen, especially truck drivers, who he believed sacrificed the most by giving up precious time with their families for a lonesome life on the road. That applied to a lot of truck drivers, and I agreed, but not all of them.

Some of the most unsavory men who'd tried to pick me up at Charlie's Bar in town were truck drivers.

By the end of the year, I intended to have every single lightbulb on the farm replaced with an LED. It had been a two-year endeavor, and I was almost done.

We moved down the porch to the next bulb, which I pulled out of an old lightbulb box to conceal my sneakiness. Dad braced the ladder once more while I climbed up, and when I reached the top, we both turned and looked to the driveway, where a flashy dark gray car had just pulled up.

"Who's that?" Dad barked.

"Treyton Corral."

"The City Slicker from the parade?"

Treyton got out of his car, fixed his suit jacket, and looked up at us on the porch. He lifted a hand in a small wave and smiled.

"Yep," I said, "that's him all right."

"Could his suit be any tighter?" Dad asked dryly.

"It's not tight, Daddy. It's tailored. There's a difference. That's the style now."

"Style?" He rolled his eyes. "Men should worry themselves over more important things than *style*."

"Stop it," I hissed down at him as Treyton reached the porch steps and took them two at a time. At first I'd thought his suit was black, but under the porch lights, I could see that it was a dark, ashy gray. It suited him. I supposed with a face and body like that, almost anything would suit him.

"Good evening, Mr. Wright." Treyton gave a polite bow of his head and extended a hand in greeting to my father.

Dad looked smugly at the outstretched hand, no doubt noticing how smooth his skin was and how his knuckles were free of nicks, scabs, or scars. "Can't you see I'm holding a ladder?"

"Daddy," I scolded.

Treyton took my father's attitude in stride and chuckled, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Safety first."

I finished screwing in the bulb and climbed down, shooting my father a steadying look that pleaded with him to behave as I did. I wiped my hands on my pants—an old pair of men's jeans that one of the ranch hands had left behind when we let him go last year—and shook Treyton's hand to prove a point.

"Tight grip," Treyton noted.

Blushing, I pulled my hand away. He wasn't the first man who'd said as much. I'd been told on numerous occasions that I shook hands like a man, and other women who'd shaken my hand had been known to yelp in surprise or pain. Once, when I met one of Peach's friends, I'd spotted the poor girl massaging her knuckles half an hour *after* the shake.

Still, I forgot my own strength sometimes.

"She's a Wright," Dad said proudly, lifting his chin. "Brute strength is in her blood."

"Okay, Dad," I said, laughing nervously. "What do you say you go put on a pot of tea? Would you like some tea, Trey?"

Treyton shook his head. "I'm all right, thank you though. I actually came by to speak with you about an opportunity, Macy. If now is a good time, of course?"

I searched his eyes, light green and steady, almost the same shade as the fields when they first bloomed with life in the spring.

An opportunity?

"Sure," I said.

My father went inside grumbling. The screen door banged against the doorframe behind him and bounced a few times. I held it down to silence it and closed the old front door. It creaked and groaned as it always did, and I had to give it a sharp tug at the end so the lock slid into place. The old house had been built in 1910, and with most of the original bones still intact, her age was beginning to show. Decades of

swelling in the summer and shrinking in the winter had shifted the frame, so certain doors didn't quite fit into place anymore, and certain single-paned windows didn't open either.

A problem for another lifetime.

I nodded to my mother's swing. Presently, it was the only place on the porch to sit down. The other chairs had been dragged around the wraparound porch to the back of the house, where I planned on washing them tomorrow. They needed a fresh paint too, like most things did around here, but that wasn't a priority.

Treyton moved to the swing. The heels of his boots—I noticed he hadn't worn Oxfords this time, but dark leather boots with a rubber sole that were still, in my opinion, quite fashionable compared to the Blundstones on my feet—thudded against the wood boards of the porch. He lowered himself into one corner of the swing. The chains creaked and whined.

As soon as I sat down beside him, I regretted it. He smelled good. Like, really good. Like, *really, really, really*, good. Peach would have melted into a puddle beside him. I tried to play it cool by leaning as far to the other side as I could, creating space between us.

He seemed content and leaned back, stretching his long legs out in front of him and using them to nudge us back and forth.

He stared out at the property before us. Most of the farm was behind the house, but in front, we had a small bunkhouse that had been empty for almost two years, a miniature barn where we stored tractors and riding mowers, and a long driveway that led out onto the main road.

"It's beautiful here," he said.

"You should see it in the summertime."

I wasn't sure why I said that. Something to fill the silence, I supposed. Why would he care what it was like here in the summertime? By then, Mallory Farm would be a thing of the past for him, and he'd have moved on to greener pastures. Literally.

I licked my lips. “My father is going to come out here in about eight minutes once the tea is made, and he’ll do everything he can to get you to leave. Don’t take it personally. He’s set in his ways and has a bit of a grudge with anyone who associates with Mayor Hopkins.”

Treyton’s brows lifted. “Is that so?”

I nodded. “Family history between their fathers.”

“Well, I’ll make this quick then.” He twisted on the bench so that he was facing me. “I would like to offer you a job.”

“What?”

“A job,” he said again, lips curling in a handsome and bemused smile. “I don’t like to admit it, but I’m in over my head at work getting things ready for this parade, and I just lost my assistant. I need someone to fill her shoes who knows how to get shit done. Pardon my language.”

“Getting shit done is my middle name. Don’t pardon my language.”

He laughed. The sound was deep, masculine, and rich, and I found myself leaning comfortably toward him as I laughed, too.

The moment fizzled quickly as reality closed in on me. I wasn’t in a position to take opportunities from attractive businessmen from the Big Apple.

“I’m sorry, Trey. Whatever this opportunity is, it might be best if you extend it to someone else. I can’t leave my father here alone on the farm. All the profit we make is because I’m here. That’s not a brag,” I added hastily. “I just—”

“Get shit done,” he finished for me.

“Precisely.”

“Hear me out before you turn me down. I’m in a pinch, and I know you are too. I’d like us to help each other out. Let’s cut right to the chase and talk money.”

I blushed. *Awkward.*

He carried on like he hadn't noticed. "If you do your job to my standard, I'll pay you ten thousand a month for forty hours a week."

Ten thousand?

"And," he added, "I'll give you a ten thousand dollar signing bonus to start so that there is money here at the farm. Maybe you can hire some extra people to keep your pumpkin patch and daily operations running smoothly while you're in the city."

My mind spun. Ten grand right off the bat and another five thousand at the end of the month, followed by *another* ten after Thanksgiving?

"So, just to make sure I'm understanding this," I said slowly, doing the math in my head, "by the end of November you'd be willing to pay me a total of twenty-five thousand dollars *just* to be your assistant?"

Treyton nodded.

"No strings attached?"

He shook his head, pulled the same check book out of his jacket that he'd paid me for the pumpkins with, and scrawled upon it. He handed it to me and I stared down at the dollar amount.

Ten grand in my hands.

Just like that.

I studied him, eyes narrowing. "This feels too good to be true."

"It's what the position is worth to me if it's done by someone who is capable, takes initiative, and doesn't need me chasing after them all the time to do their damn job." He shifted, and the swing chains grated. "I've had a hell of a year trying to find the right help, and when I saw you working yesterday, I realized that maybe I'd been looking in all the wrong places and needed to widen my search area. I know you're used to hard work, Macy. This would be a different kind of hard work. There's a lot of pressure and expectations

involved. And, occasionally, you might have to deal with Mayor Hopkins. Will that be a problem?"

I bit my bottom lip.

Daddy wouldn't like the sound of that. But he also didn't like the sound of selling one of the horses when I'd pitched the idea this morning to him over my second cup of coffee. He'd balked at the idea, called me a heartless child, and steadfastly refused to put any of the beasts up for sale. I didn't want to part with any of them either, of course. I had deep love for our three remaining horses. But I had deeper love for this farm and our livelihood.

But this offer could change *everything*.

Treyton got to his feet. "Think about it, Macy. You have my contact information if you want to get a hold of me."

I nodded, and my whole body felt numb.

Twenty-five thousand dollars. Just like that.

I looked up at him. "Is the work temporary? Would you lay me off after the parade?"

"Not if you're an asset. I'd offer you a full-time salary position. Benefits, 401K, semi-annual raises..."

I popped up to my feet and thrust my hand out. "I'll take it."

He grinned and slid his hand into mine. "That's great news. *Shit*." He pulled his hand free and shook it out. "Damn, woman. You have a grip like a vise!"

I held my hands behind my back and winced. "Sorry. I'm just excited."

He shook his hand out as he made for the porch stairs. "You start Monday. Take the weekend to get your affairs in order. Be at my office at nine o'clock sharp, and let me know if you need transportation. We'll sort things out with your commute once we get started."

I wasn't sure what that meant as I stood there like an idiot under the new porch light, waving as he peeled off down the

driveway and turned on to the main road.

Seconds later, Dad poked his head out the screen door. “What did the fool want?” he asked gruffly.

Beaming, I turned to face him. “Daddy, we don’t have to sell one of the horses. I think we just got the chance we’ve been hoping for.”

CHAPTER 9



TREYTON

Giving Macy the check before getting her to do any work might have been a bit overzealous of me. I wanted her help—and admittedly, her company—but as I drove in to work on Monday morning, I couldn't help but wonder if she was going to bother showing up, or if she'd just cash the ten thousand dollar check I'd given her and call it a day.

I'd also told her to arrive at nine o'clock, but I was willing to give her until nine-thirty. New York City traffic was abysmal, especially on Mondays and Fridays, and she had a long drive in from her small town. Not to mention it was her first day coming in, so she might miscalculate her time. I'd forgive her one oversight, but once she knew how long it took to get here, I'd expect nothing short of consistent punctuality.

When I pulled into my reserved CEO parking at the office building just after eight thirty, I was surprised to see her beat up old pickup truck parked a few spots down. She'd been waiting for me, leaning up against the bed, and when I put the car in park, she pushed off and strode toward me.

She was wearing her overalls.

I got out of my car and looked her over. "You're early."

"For the ten grand you gave me I'd drive here and sleep in my truck to make sure I was on time."

I chuckled. I liked her spirit and grit. This was the exact kind of attitude I needed.

She stopped in front of me and planted her fists on her hips. “What’s the plan for the day?”

“For starters?” I gestured at her outfit. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think we need to get you some new clothes.”

“Oh, I brought a change of clothes. This is what I was wearing when I did my chores this morning and I ran out of time to change. One sec, they’re in my truck.”

“Perfect.” I had nothing to worry about. So far, she was taking initiative and covering her bases, just as I’d hoped. I watched as she tugged open the back door of her truck and pulled a white shirt out of a canvas bag.

She dropped the shoulders of her denim overalls and, like she’d forgotten I was standing there or didn’t care, pulled her flannel shirt over her head.

I tried not to gawk, but I’d never seen a woman so dressed-down look so hot. Her bra was nothing special, just a plain nude-colored piece of fabric that was more of a sports bra than anything. Her skin was tight over her toned muscles, and I couldn’t help but stare at the curve of her spine and the two dimples in her lower back as she worked the white shirt over her head and slid the overall straps back up.

She turned to me. “Better?”

“Uh...”

She frowned and looked down at herself. “Is it dirty? I swear I looked it over before I packed it. It’s so hard to keep clothes clean on the farm.”

“No, no, it’s clean. It’s just... I think it’s the overalls that are the problem.”

“Oh.”

Bless her. She didn’t even blush.

“I can go shopping after my shift tonight,” Macy said. “How many outfits should I buy? Two? Three?”

Two or three?

Apparently, farm women were a total league of their own. I'd hooked up with chicks who owned over a hundred pairs of heels—and that count didn't factor in their boots, sneakers, or other footwear. The same women had two full-sized closets of their own. Some had walk-ins the size of my childhood bedroom. And here Macy was, thinking she'd get by in New York with two to three outfits.

“Tell you what,” I said. “Let's go shopping right now. You'll still get paid for the day.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Paid to shop?”

I nodded. “It's only fair. I can write it off as a business expense, and we can make sure your clothes are stylish and practical for the job.”

I had a feeling my oversight would be required. If she thought changing from a flannel to a white T-shirt upped her outfit from farm to business casual, I could safely assume she would have no idea what to do with herself in a New York boutique. I, on the other hand, had a keen eye for picking out clothes that looked good on women.

It was a gift.

“I'll drive,” I said, casting a wary look at her beat up old truck. From where I was standing, I was impressed the damn thing even ran. “The shopping district is just a couple blocks away.”

“Why don't we walk?”

On the walk to the shopping district where I knew we'd have some good luck finding clothes for her physique, I pointed out some sights to Macy, most of which had been used as filming locations for movies. She didn't seem entirely interested. If anything, she seemed unsettled. Perhaps she wasn't a fan of shopping. She wasn't a big girl, but she had broader shoulders than most and solid thighs—she was built for life on a farm, after all. Was she worried she wouldn't find anything that would fit her? If so, she was about to get a wake-up call. I had a feeling she'd look good in anything and everything.

Or nothing.

We arrived at the first shop. I opened the door for Macy and stepped back for her to walk in first.

Macy thanked me, stepped inside, and inhaled deeply. “It smells so good in here. Why does it smell so good in here?”

I chuckled and came in after her. “Shopping in the city isn’t just about finding what you’re after. It’s an experience.” I nodded to an essential oil diffuser on the closest shelf. Clustered around it and down the length of a series of staggered shelves were varying plants with long, bright green vines.

Macy moved to a sales rack and picked up a pair of jeans that were almost the same wash as her coveralls. “I like this.” She held them up to herself. High waisted, wide leg, with distressed knees and an intentionally tattered hemline. “Would they work?”

“Let’s try to stay away from denim.”

Macy’s nose scrunched up like she’d just smelled something foul. “What’s wrong with denim? It’s protective, you know. Everyone in the city is always so obsessed with what type of denim is ‘on trend,’ but on a farm, we know good material when we feel it. And this?” She rubbed the pant leg between her thumb and forefinger. “This is real quality stuff. No spandex. No compromise to the integrity of the jean. Aside from the rips and tears, I think it’s a pretty good staple.”

How did I break this to her kindly without sounding like an ass?

She blinked expectantly at me.

“I’ll buy them for you as a consolation prize if you humor me and put on my picks,” I said.

“A consolation prize?” Her lips curled in an adorable, cat-like way.

“I have a feeling you’re not going to enjoy this much, so yes, if you indulge me for the day and let me build your wardrobe, you can have the jeans.”

“As a pity reward?”

I laughed. “Call it what you want.”

“Fine.” She lifted her chin, released the jeans, and folded her arms across her chest. One of the overall straps slid down once more, but she didn’t bother to fix it. “I will be your mannequin for the day. Dress me as you see fit.”

Perfect. That was all I needed to hear.

Within seconds, I tracked down a sales associate and asked for her help. I explained that Macy needed to migrate her wardrobe from farm aesthetic to business chic, to which the associate, a woman in her late twenties named Julia, severely agreed. She looked Macy up and down and didn’t bother to hide her judgment before she whipped around the store plucking items from shelves and racks.

Macy stared into the depths of her daunting changeroom. Clothes hung from every single hook, of which there were many, and outside her door were a row of various pairs of shoes. Not a single pair had a flat heel.

She looked warily down at them. “I’m not sure if I’ll be able to walk in those.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time. Literally.” I settled into a deep, comfortable leather chair in the waiting room area. Julia brought us both waters with slices of cucumber in them. Macy stared at hers like the cucumber slices might come alive and try to eat her.

Her attention shifted back to the dozens of clothes Julia had picked. “Where do I start?”

Julia smiled and leaned into the changeroom. “I paired them up into different outfits for you. See how the hangers are crossed and hooked together? That means it’s an outfit. Other items like the dresses can be worn alone. Once you’re dressed, we can make changes and adjustments based on preferences, but we have to start by getting you in the clothes.”

Macy looked over her shoulder at me.

Was she nervous?

She hadn't struck me as the sort of woman who would be daunted by a little bit of shopping. Then again, she'd probably never gone shopping like this, and it had probably never appealed to her, either. She was stepping out on a limb for me.

I gave her a reassuring nod.

Macy squared her shoulders as if she were stepping into a fighting ring, entered the fitting room, and closed the door behind her.

Julia gave me a victorious smile.

I mouthed the words *thank you* to her before she hurried off to greet more customers wandering around the store.

While I waited for Macy to change, I checked my emails on my phone. I responded to a few time-sensitive ones before I realized a lot of time had passed.

"You okay in there?" I called.

"I feel like an idiot."

"Come out. Let's see."

"I look like an imposter."

"Everyone in New York looks like an imposter." I pushed up from the comfy leather chair and leaned on the frame of the door. "You can't look that bad, Macy. Trust me."

The girl could have pulled anything off.

I heard her sigh before the lock unlatched. She pulled the door open and stared pitifully up at me. It took everything in my power not to laugh. She didn't look bad, but she looked messy, to put it lightly. She wore a tight pencil skirt with a dark green silky blouse, but the blouse wasn't tucked in and it hung around her hips in a rather unflattering way.

"This feels wrong," she muttered.

Julia materialized out of nowhere like a magical fairy to grant my wishes. She ushered Macy back into the fitting room and used her own body as a shield as she began tweaking the outfit. She squared it on Macy's shoulders, tucked it into the

skirt, clicked her tongue at Macy's bruised knees and shins, and thrust a pair of dark nylons into her hands.

"Put these on," Julia demanded. She bent down and slid her a pair of black high heels that had been sitting outside the room. "With these. We'll accessorize after."

"Accessorize?" Macy gulped.

Julia flashed her a dashing smile. "If you want to run with the big boys in this city, you have to look the part, sweetheart. You're a beautiful girl. Overalls are practical for the farm, and *this* is practical for the office. You just have to reframe your perspective. Adapt."

Julia closed the door and waited on the outside, tapping her foot. When Macy announced she was ready, Julia opened the door, and a totally different woman stood inside the fitting room.

Her legs were long and sleek in the sheer black nylons. You could barely tell her knees were bruised anymore from working on the farm. The silhouette of the clothes now showed off her shape rather than concealed it.

She took a few wobbly steps in the heels. "How much walking will this job entail?"

I shrugged. "Some days, a fair bit. Others, none at all."

Julia nudged Macy in the ribs with her elbow. "We sell an *incredible* pain relief spray. It's like Tylenol for your feet. You just give them a good spritz before you put your shoes on and *voila*, no pain."

Macy couldn't hide her horrified expression.

I would have laughed, but I was too busy checking her out. I could still see the farm girl in the way she held herself, tall and proud, but there was a sophisticated woman peeking through now, and she had the kind of body that a man like me wanted to wrap himself around and get to know on a very intimate level.

Macy's gaze flicked to me. "I feel less bad about accepting the consolation jeans now."

CHAPTER 10



MACY

I wanted to have a nap and my workday technically hadn't even started.

I'd always found shopping tedious. Usually, if I needed clothes, I'd head to a local thrift store about an eight-minute drive from the farm and buy what I needed. Old T-shirts, jeans, overalls, sneakers, and boots. I had no use for brand new clothes. There was nobody to impress on a pumpkin farm.

These clothes weren't only brand new. They were *expensive*. I'd been shocked that the jeans I fell in love with were three hundred and fifty dollars, and even more surprised by the price tags on some of the nicer items Julia and Treyton selected for me. We'd narrowed it down to about a dozen outfits, all of which could be mixed and matched, Julia claimed. I wasn't sure I'd be capable of putting the clothes together in the effortless way she did. I'd stick to how she'd paired them up for me in the fitting rooms. Between changes I'd snapped pictures on my phone so I wouldn't forget what went with what.

Treyton had left me with one outfit to change into and wear for the rest of the day while he and Julia worked out the price at the counter.

In my bra and underwear, I stared at the ensemble hanging on the hook. Sleek black pants with gold buttons on the side that cut off just above the ankle—a shame I hadn't shaved my legs in days. Okay. Weeks. But whatever. What does a perpetually single farmgirl need silky smooth legs for?

Julia had paired the pants at first with a loose sweater that she wanted me to “French tuck.” It took a while for me to figure out the strategy of tucking just the front of the sweater in and leaving the rest of it flowing. She claimed it elongated my legs.

With a sigh, I began getting dressed. Unfortunately, I had to admit when I was wrong. I stood in front of the mirror and ran my hands over my hips. I looked *good*. Like, really good. Like, if Peach were here, she’d have been jumping up and down clapping her hands in excitement good. She’d long since given up on trying to get me to go on dates, but I had a feeling she was going to start singing that old familiar song pretty soon.

If she saw me looking like this?

She’d be pushing me into the arms of a stranger just so I could “get some D,” as she liked to call it.

Apparently, I needed to get laid, according to her. All the work on the farm was making me stoic and tense. When I refused to waste time on the local mama’s boys in our hometown, she’d finally given up, booked me a deep tissue massage instead, and sent me there.

It was the closest I’d come to pleasure at another man’s touch in years.

But looking like this?

I turned from side to side, impressed by how good my ass looked in the pants and what the heels did for my legs.

Looking like this, I almost felt—I don’t know—horny?

No, not quite horny, but open to the possibility that something could happen. I wasn’t just a farmgirl covered in mud. I was an “it” girl.

I grimaced at myself in the mirror. “Ew, don’t think like that, Macy. An ‘it’ girl? You’re not a Kardashian now just because you have nice clothes.”

Someone knocked on the door. “Did you say something, Macy?”

I almost toppled over in my heels and scrambled to right myself, clawing at the walls of the changing room like a deranged cat. “Nope! I’m fine. Be out in a minute.”

“Take your time.”

Once I was satisfied that I’d done the French tuck as per Julia’s standards, I emerged from the fitting room feeling like a chic businesswoman.

Treyton looked me up and down with those stormy green eyes of his, and I found myself *wanting* him to keep looking. So, despite myself, I did a little turn, showing off my best *asset*.

“Better than the overalls?” I asked.

He chuckled deep in his chest, rubbed his jaw, and tore his eyes away from my rear end. “Much better. You look the part now.” He nodded toward the door. “Come on, there’s one last place I’d like to go. Something is still missing.”

“Please don’t say accessories,” I groaned as I followed him. “I’m not a bling girl.”

“You don’t say?”

Julia waved goodbye and wished me luck with the new job. “You can come back anytime. I’ll be your personal wardrobe assistant.”

Treyton and I crossed the street. At first, I thought he had the audacity to suggest I get a haircut as we walked toward a hair salon. I was about to tell him to stick it where the sun don’t shine when he moved toward the store next door.

I stopped in my tracks and blinked up at the glossy sign overhead. “Chanel?”

“Every businesswoman worth her salt in this city carries a designer handbag,” Treyton said.

“I don’t have anything to *put* in a handbag,” I said. “Why on earth would I need one that costs two hundred bucks?”

He laughed and opened the door. “Two hundred bucks, huh? Come on. Stop dragging your feet. That’s an order.

You're getting a bag."

Groaning, I followed him in and was bombarded with the scent of leather and silicon packets. Eager sales associates rushed us, and Treyton explained what I needed—a sophisticated, *practical*, simple bag to carry my essentials.

What essentials he was talking about, I had no idea. All I ever carried was my ID, bank card, and phone. Maybe chapstick in the winter. Other than that? I was a hands-free gal.

We wandered the showroom floor, and our sales associate, who was much less charming than Julia, pulled bags of varying sizes and shapes. She opened them up to show me all the storage compartments. I couldn't care less which bag they picked.

"Whichever one is cheapest," I said at one point.

That earned me eye rolls from the both of them.

Later, when she showed me a larger bag and I wanted the torment to end, I said, "It's perfect. I can fit my lunch in there."

The sales associate scolded me. A Chanel bag was *not* a lunch box.

I grinned back at her. "My Chanel bag will be."

Treyton agreed to buy one in the middle of the road. Not too small, not too big. It was black, matte leather—not the obnoxious glossy one—with no bells and whistles. There were some compartments inside for easy storage, and I would definitely be able to pack my lunches in there, as well as a change of clothes if necessary. I'd have to find some way to fill it up, wouldn't I?

We made the walk back to the office tower. Treyton paid attention to me trying to learn the ropes of walking in high heels, and he offered me his elbow every time I had to step off a curb to cross the street.

"Thank you," I muttered out of the corner of my mouth. "I feel like a newborn giraffe."

“You’re doing really well for someone who’s never worn heels before.”

“I never said I’d never worn them.”

He shot me a curious look. “Let me guess, the last time you wore a pair was at your senior prom, and you took them off as soon as the first dance was over?”

I laughed. “Am I that transparent?”

“Transparent?” Treyton shook his head. “No, not at all. You’re a hard read, Macy. But some things just make sense.”

We were only two blocks from his office tower. It rose up like a spire in the city, piercing the sky like a glass dagger. All the windows reflected the low sun of the October afternoon. Soon, the rainy season would be upon us, and days like this would be few and far between.

“Same with you,” I said.

“Is that so?”

“I bet you were prom king with your high school sweetheart,” I said.

We crossed one last street to get to the office, and he took the concrete steps up to the front door slowly so as to offer me his elbow. I kept my touch on his arm lighter than a feather, using him just in case my shit went sideways and I started to fall. The last thing I needed on my first day of work was a bruised tailbone.

“It might surprise you to know that I was not,” he said.

That did surprise me. “Really? Not even runner up?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t go to prom.”

“Ah, a rebel then?”

“You could say that.”

A mystery. I liked a mystery. Not only were overalls good for carrying my phone and ID, but they also had deep pockets to tote around small paperback novels, and I *loved* a good story with twists and turns and surprise reveals. Treyton was

beginning to feel like one of those books to me. Every time I thought I had my finger on his pulse, he did something to surprise me.

“I sense a story there,” I said.

“Maybe one for another time.”

We got on the elevator and rode it up to his office. By the time the doors opened, he’d already shifted into business mode. We moved into the office, and he gave me a brief and succinct tour, introducing me to most of the staff, who all seemed friendly. Then he led me to my desk, which was situated very close to his private office.

He presented me with my own laptop and tablet—why I needed both was beyond me—and told me I could use them in whichever way suited me best. He suggested I use the tablet when on the go, giving me a flash of a smile when he said it would fit in my new bag. The computer was for in-office work.

I agreed. He probably knew best.

He leaned against the wall behind my desk and crossed his arms over his chest. “Decorate your space as you see fit. I want you to be comfortable here, Macy. However, any time you spend on that kind of thing can’t cut into your productivity. I don’t want you to prioritize the wrong things.”

I stared up at him. “Obviously.”

“Hey, you’d be surprised by what I’ve had to deal with and what some people need to be told in order to not be a fuck-up.”

“Fair enough.” I tucked my chair under my desk and ran my hand over the smooth surface of the gold Apple laptop. Daddy and I had a computer on the farm, but it was an old cube-shaped PC by Microsoft from the late nineties, and it took seven minutes to power on. No joke. We only used it to print documents in a pinch. Other than that, it just sat there collecting dust.

He pushed off the wall, opened my laptop, clicked his way to a colorful and organized calendar, and turned it toward me.

“I want you to spend some time this afternoon reviewing my previous month of schedules, so you get an idea of how time is managed here. Then I want you to build a schedule for this and next week. In your notes here,” he clicked on the right-hand side, bringing up a small document with a bullet list, “are all of the commitments I need to meet over the next two weeks. We both have access to this calendar, so we can both add and remove things. I have an important call to take in,” he paused to look at his watch, “shit, four minutes. I’m going to do that, and I’ll come check on you after. If you have any questions, ask Cherise. She’s HR now, but she used to be my assistant way back when, and she can at least give you a bit of guidance if I’m not reachable.”

“Go,” I said. “I’ve got this.”

Treyton went into his office. From where I sat, I had a great view of him as he picked up his phone and made his call. He paced his office, but not like a man who was stressed. He looked confident and calm, and every now and then I’d hear his booming laugh through the closed door. It was infectious, and as I worked, I found myself grinning every time I heard it.

I worked diligently. This was my first assigned task, and I would get it right. I wanted to prove to him that he’d made the right choice hiring me and that all this money he was throwing at me would be worth it. I also wanted to secure this position. Daddy and I needed it. The farm needed it. Screw the banks. I could do this on my own.

Treyton was on the phone for a good hour and a half before he came out to check on me.

I’d built almost the whole schedule for the next two weeks, and I turned the computer around to show him. “I hope you don’t mind, but I made some changes to how things are organized,” I said. “Your previous assistant—or you, I don’t know who built your old schedules—weren’t optimizing all the features to simplify things. I color-coded your commitments. Phone calls are purple, conference meetings are blue, out of office meetings are lighter blue.” I pointed as I explained. “And you get the idea. Here, in our shared notes, is a legend to show which color goes with what, but I’m sure

we'll both get the hang of it in the next week. Everything related to float clients is orange so it stands out. I frontloaded this week with float-related business. I know that's the priority right now. That way, we can get the ball rolling, and if any problems arise, we have a bit of a buffer working toward the end of the week."

He stared at the calendar.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. *Uh oh.*

"Did I completely botch it?" I asked.

He shook his head slowly. "This is... this is better than I'd hoped for."

I tried not to grin like a proud child who just lost their first tooth. "Not too bad for a shit shoveler, huh?"

He gave me a handsome smile. "It's only day one. I'm going to manage my expectations. But yes, not too bad for a shit shoveler."

CHAPTER 11



TREYTON

Blane rubbed his hands together when he spotted our server coming out of the restaurant kitchen with our plates of food. The hole in the wall breakfast joint smelled like coffee, frying onions, and bacon, and my mouth was watering by the time our plates were set down in front of us. Our server flashed me a charming smile—and a youthful one, the girl had to be twenty, twenty-one at most—while she topped up our coffees.

“Can I get you boys anything else?” she asked, hovering at our table while Blane popped a piece of crunchy bacon in his mouth.

“I think we’re good,” I said.

“Okay, well flag me down if you need anything at all,” she said sweetly. “Anything.”

She took her leave, and Blane shook his head while he chewed.

“What?” I asked.

“Women. They see you and immediately fall in love. Or lust. It’s like I’m invisible.” He held up a finger at me. “Don’t say it’s the sweater.”

I eyed his fisherman’s sweater. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

We liked to meet up at this place once a month to catch up. The last couple of weeks had been crazy busy with work. Macy had my schedule so meticulously organized that nothing had slipped through the cracks—but that meant my time was

micromanaged and I was busy as hell. I preferred it over feeling disorganized and scattered, but when I saw the open hour in my morning, I knew it would be a perfect time to meet Blane for a bite to eat.

When I called him, he'd been ushering some girl off his boat. How the guy had game on a piece of floating shit like Destiny, I had no idea, but he continued to surprise me. The sweater might have been a flashing "Do Not Approach" sign, but when he was in a T-shirt and jeans, women were lured to him.

"So how are things going with the new girl?" Blane poked a hole in the top of his over-medium eggs and dipped his toast in it. "Has she got the swing of things yet?"

"She's kicking ass, actually. She doesn't need much direction. She's punctual. She can differentiate between time-sensitive tasks and ones that can wait. It's made things much easier." I spooned hashbrowns into my mouth. "She's not hard on the eyes, either."

"There it is."

"If you saw her, you'd think the same thing."

"Got a picture?" He gave me a devilish smile I sometimes saw in the mirror.

"Not a chance."

He chuckled. "Interesting."

"What is?"

He leaned back to sip his coffee. Steam rose from the top of the mug. "You're protective over her."

I frowned. "That's not true."

Or was it?

"Why else wouldn't you want me to look at her picture?"

"Because you're a pig."

Blane laughed. "And you're not? We're the same, you and I. Don't kid yourself."

Outside, a bus rolled by. The sun glinting on the windows momentarily blinded me. I shielded my eyes and looked down at the red table, blinking to clear the white spots burning against my eyes. “I’m just impressed by her, is all. Her attractiveness is more than just her appearance. Yes, she’s objectively hot—” I paused, considering the word. It wasn’t the right one. Macy wasn’t just hot. She was sexy, and strong, and confident. I wasn’t sure if there was just one word to summarize just how attractive she was physically. “But her mind and her work ethic make her even more attractive.”

“You’re smitten.”

“You’re trying to stir the pot and ruin a good thing. I won’t be deterred by you, the guy who will bring anything with legs onto his boat for a one-night stand.”

“What’s wrong with one-night stands? You should have one. It might clear your mind about your assistant so you stop thinking such airy fairy shit about her.” He poked at his eggs some more and snorted. “Her work ethic makes her more attractive. Listen to yourself, Trey.”

“I’m too busy for one-night stands. As soon as December rolls around, you’d better believe I’ll get back into the action, but for now, I’m out of the game.”

“Don’t fuck your assistant. That’s all I’m going to say.”

I scowled at him over my coffee. “I’m not going to fuck her.”

Maybe in my dreams, or my waking fantasies, but not in real life.

Blane didn’t look like he believed me. He wore that smug, judgmental smile we’d both inherited from our old man.

“Piss off, Blane,” I grumbled.

He shrugged innocently. “I’m just looking out for you. I can see this whole thing playing out in my head and it doesn’t have a good ending for anybody. Having sex with your employee, who *you* recruited, who was perfectly happy with her simple life on a farm before you dragged her to the city and gave her a makeover like she was the main character in

some shitty rom-com movie, is a one-way road to fuck-town, bro. And you know what's going to happen if you screw her?"

I glared at him with a mouthful of toast.

"She's going to fall in love with you," he said, "and then you'll have to fire her."

I rolled my eyes. "Give me a break."

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I won't," I said, feeling my jaw tighten in irritation.

Nobody could get under my skin like my little brother. It had always been that way, but I supposed most siblings were the same. He knew the right thing to say to get my hackles up, and once I was on the defensive, he'd poke and prod the same way he'd poked at his eggs until they were runny. When we were kids he used to pick fights he couldn't win. And when we were teenagers? Even worse. We drove our mother mad with all our emergency room visits at the hospital. I broke his ribs once. He broke my nose. We'd both broken each other's fingers and dealt bruises that lasted weeks.

In the end, I would die for him. But I would also throttle him with his stupid fisherman's sweater if he pissed me off.

We finished breakfast with him warning me one more time not to take things too far with my assistant. I flipped him the middle finger. I would have offered him a ride back to his stupid boat but not today.

I got back to the office and was immediately bombarded by a ticked-off Macy.

"Where have you been?" she asked sharply.

"Excuse me?"

"My whole schedule has been thrown out of sync because you're a whole *hour* late. I work hard building those schedules, and you're always the one who gets his panties all twisted when things get messed up. So where were you?"

"Having breakfast with my brother." I strode past her into my office. She followed. "Not that it's any of your business."

“Actually, it is my business. It’s kind of my whole job description. Next time add it to the calendar and I can make adjustments and then we won’t have to work late to make up for lost time. I have chores at the farm when I get home.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Who is whose boss again?”

She blushed and wrung her hands.

Sighing, I sank into my chair. “I had breakfast with my brother and he ruffled my feathers. I lost track of time. It happens.”

She studied me expectantly, like she was waiting for an apology, but this was just part of the gig. Not every shift ended at five o’clock. There were inconveniences and disruptions. She needed to be okay with adapting, for the salary I was paying her.

“Tell you what,” I said. “I’ll order us dinner tonight. We can wrap things up over Chinese food. Will that appease whatever this is?” I gestured up and down at her.

Her eyes narrowed. “Make sure there’s chow mein.”

I hid my smile. “Consider it done.”

CHAPTER 12



MACY

Treyton and I sat on the floor in his office eating out of white Chinese food take-away boxes. I used chopsticks with woeful results but big effort. Treyton watched me, his dark green eyes glittering in amusement, and I didn't indulge him. I pretended not to notice even as I lifted a bite to my mouth. By the time the chopsticks reached my lips, there were two noodles left dangling between them.

He broke and started laughing.

I scowled at him. "It's not funny. I'm no good with these things. Daddy and I always use cutlery when we order in. Well, when we used to."

Chinese food take-away cost a good forty bucks for two people now. That simply wasn't in the budget.

"Here, let me show you." He moved on his knees across the office floor and came to sit beside me. Both of us had our backs up against the dark gray sofa. My laptop was open on the coffee table on my other side. We'd been diligently going over details of the float lineup, and I'd been reviewing all the points of contact I'd had with float owners to bring him up to speed. In the past two days I'd touched base with everyone to get status reports and updated the working file I built for us so we could reference it from any of our shared devices.

Treyton held his chopsticks up. "Here, hold your fingers like this."

I stared at his hand. Even though he was a businessman who didn't do physical labor, he had big hands. He'd have

made a good farmer if he chose that life. His knuckles were broad, tendons sharp, dexterity evident with the way he used the chopsticks with ease.

That was a lot of detail for a person's hands, but hands were a thing for me. A dude with nice hands could make a farm girl like me weak in the knees.

He watched me try to copy him. "No, like this, balance it here."

"That's what I'm doing."

"That's definitely *not* what you're doing." He chuckled. Finally, he put his own chopsticks down and guided my fingers into position. "There you go. Try it like this. Open and close. It shouldn't cause strain or feel like effort."

Liar.

It caused both.

I abandoned the chopsticks and rummaged around in the plastic bag, where I found plastic cutlery. I tore into them, grabbed a fork, skewered a giant chunk of chow mein, and shoveled it into my mouth.

He cracked up some more.

"I'm starving. I've been eating one noodle at a time for the last fifteen minutes trying to use those things." I rested my fork on the inside edge of the box. "You must think I'm such a bumpkin."

"I think you're endearing. Macy Wright, the bumpkin pumpkin farmer slash corporate assistant. You've got range. Not enough range to use chopsticks, but so what?"

I laughed. "Thanks. And what about you? Treyton Corral, the event planner extraordinaire slash high school rebel?"

Ever since his little comment two weeks ago about not being prom king, I'd wondered what he was like as a kid. There was so much I didn't know about him. Not that I *needed* to know. He was my boss, nothing else. All personal information should be considered off the table. It wouldn't be relevant to the job.

And yet I was curious enough to bring it back up a whole two weeks later.

He gave me an amused, thoughtful look. “I don’t know how I feel about being called an event planner.”

“Extraordinaire,” I said. “Can’t forget that part of the title.”

“Right, of course.” He set his food aside and stretched his long legs out in front of him, crossing one ankle over the other. He’d removed his suit jacket over an hour ago, and the longer into the night our work took us, the more disheveled and less polished he became. He now sat beside me with his shirt sleeves uncuffed and rolled up to his elbows, and he had just recently undone the top two buttons of his shirt.

I wished I had my overalls so I could be more comfortable, too, but I was stuck in my tight skirt, nylons, and loose sweater. Julia hadn’t paired them together, but I’d gained a bit of confidence around my new wardrobe in the past weeks and had begun experimenting. I found that I liked mixing something polished like the skirt and nylons with something a bit more relaxed, like the sweater. It felt balanced and less like I was trying to be someone I wasn’t. My heels sat a few feet away, tipped over on their side by the end of the sofa. I wiggled my toes, liking how it felt against the nylons.

“I have a meeting tomorrow I’d like you to accompany me to,” Treyton said.

“The site visit for the Dunleavy’s float?”

He nodded. “Precisely. If you stick around, I’d like you to know what to expect for next year. Maybe you’ll be able to lighten my load and do some of that kind of stuff without me.”

“Really?”

Next year? He was already thinking that far ahead? It must mean I was doing something right. But still, I had no idea where I’d be this time a year from now. With this kind of money I might have to be back on the farm helping Daddy with all the renovations and improvements—renovations and improvements I still hadn’t pitched to him. We had to increase

interest in our property for seasonal events somehow, and the only way we could do that was to adapt with the times.

We had to be innovative.

The alternative?

Sinking.

“The Dunleavys are a decent drive away, an hour past your town at least,” Trey said. “I can pick you up in the morning at nine so you don’t have to backtrack.”

“Works for me.” I’d have the majority of my chores done on the farm by then.

“No overalls.”

I laughed despite myself. “I’ve learned my lesson. Don’t worry. I’ll be there all dolled up for you with my fancy-shmancy handbag and ankle-rolling shoes.”

“Good girl.”

My stomach fluttered. *Good girl?*

Normally, hearing a guy say something like that would make me want to give him a knuckle sandwich right in the teeth. But when the words fell from Treyton’s sexy smirk? Well, they hit different, that was for sure.

“Anything else I should know?” I asked, feeling like I was pushing the envelope a little. “Will a certain shade of lipstick help?”

“I’ve always leaned toward red.”

I blinked.

Trey shot me a side-eyed glance before his face cracked into a devilish grin. “You don’t have to wear red lipstick. I’m not that much of a misogynist that I expect female employees to dress to my preference.” His shoulder nudged mine. “Although it wouldn’t hurt the day of the parade.”

My cheeks flushed. I didn’t even own any lipstick, let alone a red one. I wore chapstick, and if I was feeling up to it, a sparkly lip gloss Peach had given me for Christmas a couple

years ago. It was probably well past expired, but for how often I used it, I didn't see a need to throw it out. And I suddenly wished I was wearing some as I sat so close to Treyton that I could smell his cologne. What was that? It had a deep, smoky scent mixed with something fresh like pine.

I swallowed. "I'll remember that."

Treyton got to his feet and glanced at his wristwatch. "We should call it a night. It's getting late."

"Oh, yes, we probably should."

He held out a hand, and I accepted his help to my feet. We cleaned up our dinner mess and I slid my feet back into my heels. I was beginning to get used to the ache. While he sorted his office, I put my computer back on my desk and plugged it in. I wouldn't need it for tomorrow since we'd be on the road, but I decided to take my tablet and charging cord home with me so I could at least have that.

"I'll walk you down to your truck," Treyton offered.

We rode the elevator in silence. It wasn't uncomfortable. In the past couple of weeks, we'd gotten pretty good at working closely together and not having to speak to fill up the quiet. I didn't know many people like that. Even on the farm before Daddy had to fire our old ranch hands, I'd been stuck in aimless conversations when all I wanted was to put my head down and work without having to say anything at all. They'd talk about their dating lives, their families, the pressure their mama was putting on them to settle down and have babies. I'd nod along and empathize, but internally I'd be screaming at them to shut up.

Sometimes, when a girl had a heavy burden on her shoulders, she needed peace and quiet to just be with her own thoughts.

That was why the morning and late night chores on the farm were the best. I could just *be*. The animals never pestered me with conversation. Sure, the horses were affection-demanding whores, but they deserved all the love they got,

and I could scratch their cheeks and kiss their noses without compromising my peace.

We stepped off the elevator. I kind of wished we didn't have to. I wanted to bask in the scent of Treyton's cologne a little longer.

He walked me through the lobby and out to the parking lot, where I'd parked my truck right under a light post. Daddy always taught me never to leave my car in a parking lot too far from a light source if I knew it would be dark when I came back out. Good advice for any young woman, in my opinion. I'd never deviated from it. Not only did it prevent break-ins or vandalism, having a spotlight shining right down on the vehicle, but it also made me less of a target. I'd never had any worries in my hometown, but being in the big city so often felt different.

I felt more exposed here. More vulnerable.

But not with Treyton by my side.

He hovered next to me as I rummaged through my Chanel bag for my keys.

"Did you leave them up in the office?" he asked after waiting patiently for some time.

"No," I grumbled, "I just lose everything in the depths of this overpriced sack you insisted on buying me."

He chuckled. "You're welcome."

"It's more trouble than it's worth."

"Give it a few more weeks. Maybe it will grow on you. There has to be a reason why every woman in this city wants one."

"Yeah, it's called consumerism, Treyton." I found my keys and pulled them out, giving them a victory jingle before unlocking my truck door.

He held my door open as I got behind the wheel and put my Chanel in the passenger seat. It felt like blasphemy to have such a beautiful bag—words I never intended to tell him—sitting on the torn-up upholstery of the old truck.

“I’ll see you at nine tomorrow?” He leaned a little further into the truck, checking my gas gauge. He knew I had a long drive home to the farm.

I nodded. “Yep. Nine.”

He was so close I could still smell the notes of smoke and pine wafting off him. The Chinese food had overpowered the scent when we were up in his office, and thank goodness for that, because the smell of him and the way he had his forearms exposed with his rolled-up sleeves was a wicked combination.

He drummed his fingers on my doorframe. “All right then. Drive safe.”

“I will.”

His blue steely gaze wandered to my lips, and I froze. My breath hitched in my throat. His jaw muscle flexed. My pulse picked up speed. The smell of his cologne mixed with the musky interior of the truck and I breathed in deeply, trying to calm the sudden fraying of my nerves. We stayed like that, paralyzed by whatever was transpiring in the space between us, until suddenly he cleared his throat and pulled back.

“Goodnight, Macy.”

“Goodnight.”

He closed my truck door and I started the engine.

What the hell was that?

CHAPTER 13



TREYTON

The tires of my AMG bit into the gravel drive. Up ahead, Macy's farmhouse stood like a proud—but old—beacon of loyalty to an age of farming long since passed. The white wood slat siding had to be original, which meant it was over a hundred years old, maybe a bit more. The closer I got, the more apparent it became that it wasn't exactly white anymore.

The house was stained from weather and worn from age. The paint had peeled and lifted, revealing dull and damaged areas and old pieces of wood. If I hadn't known the owners, I might have thought it would be a good place to film a horror movie.

I parked the car in front of the wraparound porch, got out, buttoned my suit jacket, and strode forward. The porch door was open, but the screen was shut, and I could hear Macy's voice calling out to her father from deep within the house. I assumed she was upstairs. From the outside, it looked like there were three, maybe even four bedrooms up there with single-paned windows in need of replacing.

The porch floorboards creaked under my feet.

This whole house is in need of replacing, I thought, noticing more precarious things like loose railings, exposed electrical wiring in the porch roof, and rot eating away at the steps.

The screen door suddenly swung open. Macy's father, all five foot nine of him, lumbered out onto the porch in heavy

work boots and a Canadian Tuxedo. Clearly, Macy wasn't the only one with an affinity for denim.

I smiled. "Mr. Wright, nice to see you again. Is Macy ready?"

He quirked a bushy dark gray eyebrow at me before walking by. He had a limp to his walk and favored his right side, and his back was slightly hunched, probably from decades of physical work. He went over to the porch swing and lowered himself slowly, grimacing and grunting until his ass hit the bench.

"She'll be down," he said when he finally got situated on the swing.

I stood at the top of the porch steps with my hands in my pockets and admired the property. There were no pumpkins growing in the front fields of the farm, but it was full of golden grass. A little ways off was an old horse paddock. Three horses roamed around, dipping their heads to nibble on grass before tossing their manes and looking in our direction.

"You have a beautiful property," I said.

Mr. Wright grunted. "Don't fluff my feathers, kid. I know it's going to shit. She was magnificent in her prime. Now all this new-age shit has left us in the dust."

I turned to him. "Sometimes change is good."

He eyed me, lips pressed into a stern line, bushy eyebrows drawing together until I couldn't tell them apart. "I suppose a City Slicker like yourself would think so."

What was that supposed to mean?

I chuckled. "Things do move quickly in the city. You get left behind if you don't adapt and keep up."

"Is that what you're going to do to my Macy Mae?"

I blinked. "Sorry?"

"Change her? Make her adapt? Pluck her from a place that is beneath you, brush the dust off her, slap her in some new

clothes, and tell her she's better now that she's not who she used to be?"

"What? No. I—"

He held up a hand. "I've known boys like you, Mr. Corral. My fair share of them, anyway. They always think they know best. But my daughter? She's perfect just the way she is, and if she starts thinking she needs all this glitz and shit to be successful, I'm going to have words with you."

Even though Mr. Wright wasn't physically large, his presence was, and for the first time since I was a kid, I felt intimidated.

I opened my mouth to say something, not really sure what exactly, but before I had a chance to respond, Macy came out of the house. Her heels thundered on the porch as she stared into the depths of her Chanel bag on her shoulder, muttering to herself about making sure she had everything. She looked good, as always, in a pair of flared slacks and a fitted blazer. She was navy blue from head to almost toe. Her shoes were burgundy. She had no jewelry on but she'd done her hair differently. It was tied in a low bun at the nape of her neck. A few gently curled pieces framed her face.

She looked up and smiled at me once she confirmed she had everything she needed for the day. "Morning. Ready to go?"

I cast an uneasy look at her father, who was staring darkly at Macy's shoes.

"Ready," I said.

I descended the porch steps and Macy went to her father, bending over to give him a kiss on each cheek and whisper something in his ear that made his hostile demeanor soften. She squeezed his shoulder, promised to be back in time to feed the horses and muck the stalls, and hurried after me.

I looked down at her feet as we approached my car. "You're getting better in those things."

"You were right. A little practice goes a long way." She got in the passenger seat and placed her Chanel bag between her

feet on the floor. “I’ve been wearing them while I clean the stalls and do my chores.”

“You have?”

She snorted. “No.”

We chuckled, and the tension her father had created in me began to ease as I reversed, turned us around, and drove up to the main road. My GPS navigated us out of town and we hit the open road toward Lafayette, NY.

We had new float participants registered from the town, and I wanted to make sure I saw all of the new members’ work before giving them the final green light that they were part of the show. While we drove, Macy worked on her tablet and sent a heads-up message to the float owners, letting them know we were on our way.

She rested the tablet on her lap and looked over at me.

Feeling her eyes on me, I glanced back at her. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m sorry about my father.”

“What for? Don’t worry about it. He was fine—”

“He wasn’t.” She gazed out her window at the passing trees on the side of the freeway. A few weeks ago they might still have been deep rich greens, but now they were vibrant oranges and yellows. “He’s set in his ways. Always has been. And all this?” She gestured down at herself, and then made a sweeping gesture with her arm, including me and the car. “It’s a lot for him to take in, and no offense, but it’s everything he hates. Flashy cars. Needlessly expensive clothes. Status seeking.”

“Status seeking?”

She gave me a tight-lipped smile. “I’m not calling you a status chaser. It’s just how he feels. He thinks the simple and honest life is the only way to live. But the world is leaving us behind. One of us had to step outside the norm and make a change. It had to be me.” She looked down at her lap and brushed away imaginary lint from her pants. “It feels like a

burden sometimes. We used to understand each other so well. We were the same, he and I. But over the last few years, things have been shifting.”

I could hear the tightness in her voice and feel the strain inside of her. I didn't know what it was like to have a father I adored, but I knew what it was like to have a mother who was my whole world.

“I'm sorry,” I offered. “That sounds hard. But the alternative sounds harder.”

She sighed. “I know. He's just so damn stubborn.” Her resolve hardened and she stared steadfastly out the windshield as the painted yellow line rushed under the car. “You'd think he could pull his hairy head out of his ass long enough to see that I'm doing all of this for us. For the farm. For our legacy. But no. All he sees is the fancy clothes and the new shoes and instantly thinks I'm a sell-out.”

“What's his worry? That the lifestyle will corrupt you?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “That and that I might like it so much I won't go back to him. He's used to me being on the farm all the time. Now I'm in the city every day, sometimes until after dark. He doesn't have the energy he used to. I'm missing out on little rituals that mean a lot to both of us. I think...” She trailed off.

“You think what?”

“Never mind.”

I considered her words. “Are you worried he thinks you're going to forget about him and move on?”

She nodded. “I'm all he has. And he's all I have.”

“That's not true.”

She looked over at me, hopeful. Despite her posh suit and sleek hairstyle, I saw the farmgirl in the innocence of her eyes as she clung to what I might say, like it might hold all the answers to release her from her guilt.

I nodded at her feet. “You have Chanel.”

She burst out laughing. I reveled in the sound and the lightness of it. Her worries seemed to evaporate as she gave my shifting arm a playful slap.

A playful slap from a tough farmgirl hurt.

“Ow,” I said.

“Baby.”

We covered more miles. When we passed through a small town, I veered off the freeway and took us through a Starbucks drive thru. Macy didn’t know what to order, so I ordered for her. On the way out of town she studied her coffee cup.

“So when you say everyone drinks these, you mean everyone?” she asked.

“Pumpkin spice lattes are like crack to millennial women,” I said. “Give it a sip.”

She pursed her lips to the lid in a way that made my pants feel a little tight. There was nothing seductive about it, but I couldn’t help but imagine her pressing her lips to something else. I shifted in my seat, trying to give myself more room as blood rushed to my groin. *Shit.*

She nodded in approval. “Not bad. A bit sweet for my liking, but this is really good.”

“You should sell those on your farm during pumpkin-picking season.”

She eyed me. “That’s not a half bad suggestion.”

“Would your father go for it?”

“Lattes with whipped cream on top? Indulging in an espresso machine to make said coffees?” She snickered. “No, he wouldn’t go for it. I’d just have to make it happen on my own. My friend has café experience though. She could teach me how to make something like this. Would people really order them, you think?”

I nodded. “People like experiences, Macy. If they come to your farm and can take a picture of their pumpkin latte against a backdrop of pumpkins, they’ll come in droves. You just have

to offer things that make it feel like fall. That's what this parade is all about. Kicking off a season. Inviting people to step into warm and cozy and embrace the bad weather rather than resent it. You have to sell experiences and social-media-worthy content so that your consumers can post pictures and prove to all their followers that they're happy and thriving, even if they aren't."

"That sounds dishonest."

I laughed. "It's social media, babe. Of course it's dishonest."

She didn't comment on me calling her babe, and I wasn't sure where it had come from, so I blew past it.

"Tell me more about your dad," I said. "For all his stoic machoism, he seems like a nice guy."

She sipped her latte. "Oh, I can assure you he's not."

Again, we started laughing, and the rest of the hour of our drive went like that.

CHAPTER 14



MACY

I strained against my seatbelt as Treyton guided his fancy Mercedes down the long, winding, paved driveway of a modern farm. It was everything my family's farm wasn't. A metal roof glinted in the sunlight, a ruby red front door boasted a fall wreath, and a large freshly painted barn stood proudly to the right with its doors open. Inside, I could see the front of the float they were working on.

I felt a flutter of excitement in my gut. "Look!" I pointed to the barn. "There it is!"

Treyton palmed the steering wheel, tucked the car into a visitor space *in* their driveway—I didn't even know people had big enough driveways to do that—and killed the engine.

"Let's go check it out," he said.

I got out of the car, shouldered my Chanel, and hurried to match his long strides to the barn. A group of people were busy working away inside. I stood in front of it and soaked in the glory of their work. It was a giant pirate ship with a mermaid on the front and waves crashing against the bow. The waves were still white and unfinished, as was most of the ship, but I could picture it coming together in my mind's eye. The silhouette of treasure spilled over one railing, and up on the very top was a platform where the driver would stand behind the helm.

"This is incredible," I breathed.

Treyton walked slowly around the front until a woman in her fifties, presumably the owner of the property and the float,

noticed us. She'd been in deep conversation with another man around her age, and they both lit up when they saw us and hurried over to greet us.

"Mr. Corral!" The woman walked with a bit of a waddle. She had wide hips and a smaller lower half, a dashing smile, and twinkly eyes that narrowed when she smiled. "Sorry, we didn't see you there. Thank you for making the drive up to see us in person. It means a lot." She held out her hand.

Treyton shook it. "Quality control is important at this stage of the game."

"Yes, yes of course." She glanced nervously up at her husband, who stood over her right shoulder. "Quality control."

Treyton nodded at the float. "Will you walk us around it and explain the decisions you've made?"

"Um, yes, absolutely. Carl, lead the way."

Her husband broke off, but I stayed where I was and cleared my throat.

Treyton looked back at me.

I widened my eyes. *Are you going to introduce me or not?*

He seemed to catch on. "Mr. and Mrs. Dunlevy, this is my assistant, Macy."

I smiled warmly. "It's a pleasure. We've emailed a bit back and forth over the last week. I'm so excited to be here and finally see all your hard work in person. I can't believe you built this. How long have you been working on it?"

Mrs. Dunlevy beamed at me. "Oh, you're a sweet thing, aren't you? We started planning in early April and the physical work began in July. It takes a long time, and we made sure to leave room for speedbumps or mistakes so we could fix them. We've done a lot of floats before, but mostly for our local parades. We've never done anything of this scale, but we want to do it right. This is a big opportunity for us."

I felt suddenly worried about how late work on my float was starting. Volunteers from town would be arriving tomorrow to start assembling everything. Work had stalled

over the past month when all our attention had to go to the pumpkin patch.

What if we didn't have enough time to bring it up to snuff?

Treyton nodded at the float. "Can we begin?"

The married couple walked us around the float. I snapped pictures with my tablet and became consumed by the minute details of some sections, like the ripples in the waves and the texture of the wood on the ship, even though it wasn't made of wood but some sort of moldable clay material that would be painted next week. I spotted a massive shipping container spilling over with materials and wondered just how much bigger this float was going to get over the coming weeks.

"There is going to be a cast of pirates on the top deck," Mrs. Dunlevy explained as we reached the front of the float once more. "We will have speakers mounted and playing pirate-themed songs, and we'll be throwing chocolate coins. You know, the foil-wrapped gold ones? Yes, we'll be throwing those out to the crowd."

Treyton hadn't said a word the entire time. He stood silent and reserved beside me, arms folded over his chest, one hand stroking his chin.

I snapped a couple more pictures. "I bet the kids will *love* this one. There's something so exciting about pirates when you're little, don't you think? The mystery, the adventure?" I leaned forward and winked at Mrs. Dunlevy. "And Johnny Depp for the adults, am I right?"

She let out a surprised giggle and clamped a hand over her mouth.

Treyton held up a hand. "I'd like to stay focused, please."

"Sorry," Mrs. Dunlevy muttered.

I held my tongue and navigated to the calendar app on my tablet, assuming we were going to review the next time we came out to see the float, if necessary. From where I was standing, I felt confident slapping a seal of approval on their work and trusting them to move forward.

Treyton seemed to feel otherwise.

“I have some criticism,” he began. And then he didn’t stop. We walked several laps around the float and he spewed out all the things he saw and didn’t like. He wanted them to redo this. Repaint that. Reform that. Remove this. Add that. The Dunlevy’s nodded along while I jotted down notes. Treyton instructed me to email them after our meeting. I could hardly keep up with everything he said and had to ask him to repeat himself a couple times, which felt cruel, because with every one of his comments, I saw Mrs. Dunlevy getting smaller and smaller.

She’d been so full of pride and enthusiasm when we arrived. Now she and her husband looked defeated.

The volunteers who’d been working on the float when we arrived had stopped. They sat at their stations listening to Treyton while looking woefully up at the float and all the work they now had left to do.

He finally finished. “Let’s talk about what this means for your schedule.”

The Dunlevys were scattered. I doubted they remembered what day it was, let alone how much time they had left to finish all these changes.

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Can I speak to you for a moment? Privately?”

“Now isn’t the time.”

“Yes it is,” I said sternly.

He didn’t like that, and I could tell, but I wasn’t going to stand idly by while he bullied people who’d been busting their asses for half a year to build this float for him. He followed me out of the barn. My heels clipped on the driveway, echoing the beat of anger pulsing inside me.

When we were far enough away to be out of earshot, I spun to face him. “What was that?”

Treyton arched an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“You didn’t have to be so mean. Can’t you see how hard they’ve been working? That float is *incredible*. Sure, a lot of your critiques were valid, and once you pointed them out, I agreed with you, but there is a way to go about such things to encourage better cooperation and—”

“And what?”

“Team spirit.”

He chuckled. “Team spirit? Macy, this isn’t an elementary school dodgeball game. This is the big leagues. Pressure is important. It motivates people.”

“Not everyone,” I said. “It motivates *some* people. Others shrink away from it, especially when you don’t bother to spend a single second commending them on everything they’ve done right. Did you see Mrs. Dunlevy’s face? She was enthusiastic and excited when we arrived. Now look at her.”

H glanced over his shoulder.

Mrs. Dunlevy stood with her husband. He was rubbing her back in slow circles while she wrung her hands. Some of the other volunteers had left their work to speak with the float owners.

I clicked my tongue at him. “You want masterful work? Well, you need inspired creators to pull it off. Do they look inspired to you? Because from where I’m standing, they look like kids who’ve just been told their sandcastles stink by older, much more powerful kids, who stomped through their creation.”

“Are you done?”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Treat me like a child having a tantrum. You might be a good businessman, Treyton, but I know people, and I know work ethic. You just snuffed theirs out.”

“I have standards,” he said. “This isn’t a sandcastle contest or finger painting in art class. The stakes are much higher in this league, and they should know that. Participation medals

and pats on the back are not handed out for free. You have to earn them. If they want a shot of coming back next year, which I assume they do because they know how big of an opportunity this is for their farm and their community, they will step up. If not? I can remove them from next year's roster and give someone else a chance at their slot."

What a dick.

"They aren't your employees," I said. "They aren't getting paid to do this."

"You're right. *I'm* paying to do this. Me. My business." He pressed a hand to his chest. "So if I say it isn't good enough, it isn't good enough."

"You're impossible."

"And you're as stubborn as your father."

"Don't pretend you know me because I shared a few vulnerable things with you on the drive," I snapped. "This has nothing to do with being stubborn and everything to do with standing up to a bully when I see one."

He laughed. "A bully?"

I crammed my tablet back into my Chanel bag. "You know what? Handle it however you want. Be an ass for all I care. All I'm saying is maybe the way you've been doing things isn't the only way, and in my experience, you get better results from happier and more motivated people. But what do I know, right? I'm just a country bumpkin with a head full of hay." I stormed off. "I'll wait for you at the car."

Treyton took his time up in the barn wrapping up his conversation with the Dunlevys. In the meantime, I stewed. I didn't like how he'd spoken to me or that he felt so entitled to his opinion and being right that he didn't even care enough to hear me out or consider my side. I knew I was right. The Dunlevys were simple people, like my father, and this was way out of their comfort zone. Who knew how many hours of labor they'd poured into this project? They deserved a bit of recognition and praise before being told they needed to redo thirty percent of their work.

It was the least he could do.

Treyton came back to the car and neither of us said a word as we left the property. I pretended to be busy on my tablet, and he turned on the radio to listen to an interview with a talk show host and Mayor Hopkins. They did a segment where they talked about the parade, and Mayor Hopkins mentioned Treyton by name, saying how he had all the faith in the world that this would be a parade for the books.

I looked over at Treyton.

Maybe the Dunlevys weren't the only ones feeling the pressure.

We had a three and a half hour drive home, but when we hit terrible traffic that stretched on for miles and was at a dead stop, I realized we were in for a much longer ride. I should have packed snacks.

I sighed. "Take the next exit. Let's find somewhere to eat. I'm starving."

"Are you sure you want to share a meal with a bully?"

I rolled my eyes. "Trust me, I'll be much more pleasant company on the drive home with a full stomach."

CHAPTER 15



TREYTON

I didn't know the name of the small town where we pulled into the parking lot of a rustic bar. It looked like the place used to be a log cabin and someone's home, but now it was full of tables, local beer fanatics, billiard tables, dart boards, and TV screens. We sat ourselves near a window at the back of the bar near a stone fireplace that crackled behind Macy.

She opened her menu, scanned the list, and made some quick decisions.

We'd investigated why the freeway was closed and discovered that there had been a major accident that closed all the lanes. There were some backroads we could take, but with the overflow traffic spilling over onto them, we were looking at a three-hour delay, which meant we had lots of hours of driving on top of the commute we'd already made out here.

And we were hardly talking.

Maybe food would clear our heads and lighten the weight of the day.

A server came over to take our orders. Macy ordered a burger and a beer, and I did the same. Neither of us said anything. She turned her chair a bit so she was angled slightly toward the fire and kicked her feet up on one of the extra seats at our table. The flames painted her features in a warm orange glow that made her look like she belonged in a movie scene. I admired the curve of her upturned nose and the shadows across her cheeks from her eyelashes before she caught me staring.

“What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

She sat up a little straighter. “And here I thought you were going to apologize.”

“Apologize for what? Doing my job?”

“Being a dick,” she snapped.

I chuckled. “You can take the girl off the farm, but you can’t take the farm out of the girl.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I leaned on the table. “Your father was all bent out of shape this morning, worried that I was going to change you. You can assure him he doesn’t have to worry about that. I’m your boss, in case you’ve forgotten. You can’t call me a dick.”

She leaned forward too, the fire now burning at her back and casting her features into shadow. “I’ll call you whatever I damn well please, especially if it’s the truth. If you don’t like it, you can fire me.”

I gritted my teeth. Damn her.

She knew how to play her cards, and she knew how much of an asset she’d been to me these past couple of weeks. She performed better than any assistants I’d had over the last five years, and that was saying something. She was consistent, punctual, and I hardly ever had to manage her. She knew what needed to be done and stayed on top of things. Without her, I’d still be scrambling to set up appointments with float participants. She’d seen to all of that and my timetable leading right up to the parade.

She gave me a sneaky, cocky little smile. “Or you could just say you’re sorry.”

“Woman,” I growled. “You’re testing your luck.”

“Have you never said sorry to someone before? Why is it so hard to say two little words? Here, I’ll start.” She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Treyton, I’m sorry that I called you a dick.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth. Either way, I lost. If I didn't say I was sorry, I was proving that I was in fact a dick. But if I did say it, I was letting her win.

I clenched my jaw and spoke through my teeth. "I'm sorry."

"See? How hard was that?"

You're maddening, I thought.

"Now you can email the Dunlevys and apologize to them, too." She slid her tablet to me, and it was already open to an email drafted to Mrs. Dunlevy. She tapped her finger on the screen. "Say you're sorry today didn't go how they probably hoped, but you're very optimistic about their float and can't wait to see how it turns out. Positive strokes, Treyton. Positive strokes."

"Absolutely not."

"Fine." She pulled the tablet back, typed furiously, and hit send. I heard a whooshing sound.

"What did you just do?"

"Sent your apology email." She turned it around to me. "Sincerely, Treyton," she said in a honey-sweet voice. "You can thank me later."

I felt like the vein in my forehead was going to explode and I massaged my temples. "Can we put this to bed now? We still have a long drive home."

She leaned back in her chair. "I'm over it if you are."

"Good."

"Good."

We glared at each other until our food arrived. Once it did, both of us seemed to realize that our tempers had been stoked by our empty bellies. We hadn't eaten since Starbucks, which was a good four hours ago now. We'd been at the Dunlevys for two hours, sat in traffic for another two, and rerouted here, a forty-five-minute drive. It was now six fifteen in the evening.

The sun had gone down and we were famished, and the beers got a little ahead of us.

I swallowed a burp. “I’m going to have to let this settle before we get back on the road.”

Macy groaned and rubbed her full stomach. “I don’t want to sit in a car anymore. I think I might hurl, I’m so full.”

There would be no hurling in my AMG. I’d just had it detailed.

“How do you feel about seeing if there are some rooms we can rent for the night?” I asked.

She frowned. “I promised my father I’d be back to take care of the horses.”

I checked my watch. “Even if we did drive and we left after the beer settles in an hour, you wouldn’t be home until ten thirty, maybe eleven. Can the horses wait that long?”

Her shoulder slumped. “Shit.”

“Is there someone else who can do it?”

She gnawed at her bottom lip. “I could ask my friend Peach. She won’t be happy about it, but I could owe her a favor. She’s good like that.”

“Call her. I’ll go ask our server if there’s a place in town we can hunker down.”

The Little Kettle Bed and Breakfast was situated right downtown—if the main hub of the tiny town could be considered a downtown at all. The house sat on a piece of property between city hall and the library. It was an eclectic old home with a pretty garden full of solar lights that lit the wandering cobblestone path through the front gate and up to the front door. It was seven thirty when Macy and I pushed our way in through the front door and were greeted with the smell of mulling spices.

Macy breathed in and smiled. “It smells like my childhood in here. And the holidays.”

A woman with gray hair and round glasses popped up from behind a counter in front of a grand staircase. “That would be cinnamon, orange, and cranberries, my dear. Welcome to the Little Kettle. Are you two lovebirds here for a room? Our Lovers Suite is available, if you’d like. Claw-foot tub, chocolate-dipped strawberries delivered to your room, plush robes, silk sheets—”

“Uh, no,” I stammered, “we’re not—”

“Together,” Macy finished for me. “He’s my boss.”

“And she’s my assistant.”

“Not together,” Macy reiterated. “Very much not together.”

The woman, presumably the owner of the bed and breakfast, lowered her glasses on the bridge of her nose and studied us more closely. “Mhm.”

“We’d like two rooms, please,” Macy said. “Just for one night and then we’ll be out of your hair.”

“Two rooms.” The owner flipped open a schedule full of penciled-in bookings, took our names from our IDs, and gave us rooms across the hall from each other. “There is a complimentary breakfast in the dining room at eight o’clock if you’d like to join. There are three other guests currently with us, all of whom will be there. Feel free to use the gardens as you like. There is a nature path in the backyard that leads to a stream with water clean enough to drink, and a gazebo that is quite romantic, if I do say so myself. Guests are free to use the kitchen as they like until eleven o’clock, so you could brew yourself some tea to take with you on your walk. It’s chilly at night lately.”

Macy took the keys the woman held out. “Thank you. But again, not together. We don’t need romance.”

Macy shot me a look as we made our way up the stairs. I chuckled, took them two at a time, and beat her to our rooms but had to wait because she had the keys. She stifled a yawn as she handed mine over.

“Should we meet downstairs for breakfast at eight?” she asked.

“And we’ll hit the road after.”

“Sounds good.”

“Good.”

She turned her back on me and slid her key into the old handle of her door. It gave way with a twist, and she shouldered her way in, stopping in the doorway. “Oh my God.”

“What is it?”

She pushed the door open the rest of the way, exposing the room.

“It’s... it’s...”

“Hideous,” I finished for her.

“I was going to say horrifying.”

Her room had dark walls and dark-stained wood floors. A four-poster bed was pushed up against one wall. It had outdated floral sheets and half a dozen fluffy pillows, but resting upon those pillows were dolls.

At least thirty of them.

“Why?” she breathed, inching into the room.

There were more dolls seated in a row on the shelf of the bay window and more on the shelves that should and could have been used for literally anything else—books, picture frames, knick-knacks. Anything would have been better than the old dolls dressed in frilly white dresses with unseeing, creepy eyes.

I retreated to my door. “Well, good luck with that. See you in the morning.”

She whirled on me. “Treyton Corral, don’t you dare abandon me in this room of horrors!”

Laughing at her expense, I unlocked my door and hurried to get inside as she charged me. I almost managed to close the door, but she caught it just in time, dropped her shoulder, and shoved. Her strength always surprised me. She managed to

push me back just enough that she could slip into the room behind me, a manic smile stretching her cheeks.

“Switch rooms?” she asked.

“Hell no. I’m not sleeping in there with those things. Go sleep in the gazebo.”

“Chivalry really is dead. Look.” She nodded at my bed. “You have a California King in here. There’s plenty of room for both of us. Or, preferably, you could sleep on the floor,” she added.

“Not going to happen.”

“Then we share platonically. People do that all the time.”

I wondered why she felt the need to define it like that. Platonically. Like just because a man and a woman were in a bed together, they couldn’t control their own impulses.

It suddenly struck me that we didn’t have a change of clothes. What would she be sleeping in? Her bra and underwear?

Suddenly defining it as platonic made sense.

“Should be easy,” I said, kicking off my shoes. “I find you terribly unattractive.”

She grinned and shrugged out of her blazer. “What a relief. You look like the underside of a donkey.” She moved to the bathroom. “Do you think that crazy woman has spare toothbrushes and toothpaste lying around in here?”

“Beware of more dolls.”

She hesitated before flicking on the bathroom light. “Very funny.”

CHAPTER 16



MACY

Luckily, there were toothbrushes and toothpaste in the top drawer of the bathroom vanity. I freshened up and frowned down at my clothes. They were all I had on me, and I wasn't going to be able to sleep in these slacks. They were too tight around the waist, not to mention I'd be ironing out the wrinkles for days. But I couldn't sleep in my bra and underwear beside my boss, either.

"Crap," I grumbled.

Maybe there are clothes in the closet.

I emerged from the bathroom to find Treyton on the bed with his hands clasped behind his head. He was half propped up on the pillows with his ankles crossed. He'd taken off his shoes, suit blazer, and belt. All of it sat neatly folded on a chair in the corner of the room. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, and his dark hair was slightly disheveled. He looked good. Better than he had any right to when we were sharing a room. If he were a gentleman, he'd have started setting up a bed on the floor. Or he'd grow some balls and sleep in the creepy doll room.

He ran his fingers through his hair and watched me go to the closet.

"I already checked," he said.

I opened the doors. Nothing hung inside except two robes. There were extra pillows and blankets on the top shelf and a laundry hamper on the floor.

Treyton propped himself up a bit higher. “I could go down and ask the owner if there’s anything we could wear.”

“She’d send you back up with a lace nightgown and silk boxers,” I muttered. The old lady had really been pushing the romance element for some reason. I closed the closet doors, turned my back to them, and stared expectantly at Treyton. “So.”

“So.”

My gaze flicked to the floor. “Are you going to move?”

“No. Why should I? You’re the farmgirl. I’m sure you’ve slept in more uncomfortable places.”

He was right, so I had no leg to stand on in terms of being offended. But I also had to give it one more shot to get him off the bed. Now that it looked like that was clearly *not* going to happen, I had no choice but to fold. The sheets and pillows looked terribly inviting after the day we’d had, and all I wanted to do was curl up, tuck myself in, and sleep.

“Fine.” I walked heel first to the bed, wrenched my side of the blankets down, and began fluffing pillows. Treyton laughed and rolled away from the chaos I was causing. He swung his legs over the bed. With his back to me, he worked to undo his shirt buttons. I couldn’t help but watch the way his shoulder blades shifted beneath the white material.

I hurried to pull my shirt over my head and shimmy out of my pants. They were such a perfect fit that I always had a hard time getting them over my hips. I stepped out of them, draped them over the chair on my side of the room, along with the shirt, and slid under the blanket in my bra and underwear just in time. Treyton stood up and shrugged out of his shirt.

Whoa.

I’d known my boss had a body under his suit, but I had no idea it was such a chiseled, hard-earned, physical work of art. Muscles rippled beneath taut skin, and I didn’t dare look away and miss the show when he dropped his pants. His boxers sat low on his hips. He had that delicious V cut and a trail of dark hair from his navel all the way down, down, down to—

“I know, right?” he asked with a cocky smirk.

My cheeks burned fiercely. I rolled over, putting my back to him, and tucked the blankets in all around me like a burrito. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Nothing wrong with liking what you see.”

“Who said I did?”

His deep chuckle filled the room and I felt him get into the bed. The frame creaked. The mattress shifted beneath me. I could smell him. Fresh and musky all at once. He tugged at the blankets and I tugged back.

“You have to share,” he said.

“There are extra ones in the closet if you don’t have enough.”

“You just want to see my ass as I walk away.”

I flipped over and glared at him. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-four.”

“Not literally,” I grumbled before wrenching a pillow out from under me and using it to smack him right in his stupid handsome face. He sputtered. I wound back and whacked him again. “You’re acting like a teenage boy. I’m going back to the creepy doll room.”

“Macy.”

I threw the blankets off and shamelessly got out of bed in my underwear. “You’re making this impossible. I’d rather take my chances with the haunted porcelain faces from my nightmares.” I gave him the dirtiest look I could muster as I walked around the end of the bed to the door. “I’ll just catch up on my sleep on the drive home.”

He sighed. “Okay, fine. Fine!” He patted the empty spot beside him. “Come back. I’ll behave.”

I didn’t believe him. Not even a little bit. But he’d called my bluff. I *really* didn’t want to go back to the other room. The thought of those dolls watching me sleep? Nope. No thank you.

I stomped back to the bed, got in, leaned over to my nightstand, and turned off the stained-glass lamp that reminded me of the one my mother used to have on her nightstand when I was a young girl in the early nineties. A few seconds later, Treyton turned his off as well.

Shimmying deep under the covers, I made myself comfortable. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Macy.”



I woke to a pitch-black room and the sound of a tree branch tapping lightly on the bedroom window. Wind howled softly outside and rain pattered upon the roof overhead. The sounds were peaceful, and as I lay there listening, I realized Treyton was sleeping right up against me with his arm resting over my hip. My bare, basically naked hip. The only fabric between us was the thin strap of my cotton thong. For the record, I’d never worn a thong in my life until Treyton and Julia built me such a form-fitting wardrobe.

Gently, I began lifting his hand.

He mumbled something incoherent, and I froze, not wanting to wake him. But perhaps I should have because he lifted his hand from my hip and slid it up over my waist. His touch set my skin on fire, even if it was unintentional, and when his hand came to rest across my ribs, just below my breasts, I worried my pounding heart would wake him.

Slowly, cautiously, I rolled onto my back. His hand remained over my sternum, heavy, large, and warm. I could only make out half of his face in the dark. The rest of his profile was swallowed up by the depths of his pillow. Knowing I should have flicked him in the forehead and woken him up for being a creep in his sleep, I did the opposite. I watched him. I admired the lines of his face, the sharpness of his jaw, and listened to the deep swells of his breathing.

Suddenly, his eyes fluttered open.

If ever there was a time where I wished I could snap my fingers and disappear into thin air, it was that moment.

His brow furrowed and he lifted his face from the pillow. Holy hell, he looked good all disheveled and vulnerable like this. I'd gotten so used to the polished, refined version of him, but this raw and authentic moment made my insides squirm. I wanted to run my fingers through his dark hair. I wanted to feel the swollen muscles in his shoulders.

More than anything, I wanted him to touch me.

"Macy?" His voice was thick and deeper than usual with fatigue.

"Go back to sleep," I whispered, desperate he'd forget all about this come morning when we had a long drive ahead of us.

It became quickly apparent that wasn't going to happen.

His dark eyes slid down to his hand on my ribs. He didn't remove it and instead looked back up at me.

Oh God.

I knew before he moved that it was over. The jig was up. We were in too deep, and neither of us had the will to swim back to shore now that we could feel each other's heat under the blankets. We were done for.

Treyton's hand slid up over my breasts. My stomach did a little backflip as his palm brushed my cleavage. I'd almost spilled all the way out of my bra in my sleep. His hand continued up, cupped my cheek, and turned my face to him. He met me with a soft kiss—the kind of kiss a silly young farmgirl like me had always dreamed about when she was sixteen and mucking stalls, thinking love was out there in the wide world waiting for her somewhere.

He broke away just for a moment, forehead pressed to mine, and looked me in my eyes. "Tell me to stop now, or I won't be able to."

My breathing was already ragged. "Don't stop," I whispered.

We crashed together. My body acted of its own volition and turned toward him. I pressed myself flush against him and he grabbed my hip and ass, squeezed hard, and held me against him. I felt him grow hard against my thigh as his tongue dipped into my mouth and explored me. He was a good kisser. Better than good. My nerves sang with pleasure and lust. In the background, I was dimly aware of the sounds of the autumn storm outside.

Treyton unclipped my bra with effortless ease. He pulled my straps down. The fabric stretched and strained until stitches tore. I didn't care. My breasts spilled free, and he wasted no time dropping down and taking my nipples in his mouth one at a time. I sighed with pleasure and fell back against the pillows. He licked and nibbled before sucking hard and pinching with his teeth. I flinched, and his apologies came in the form of sweet kisses. I struggled to catch my breath as those kisses wandered down my stomach, past my navel, to the top of my panties.

He began rubbing me in slow circles over the thin cotton fabric while he teased me with kisses across my lower stomach. I whimpered, and my ass left the mattress, hips lifting in a silent plea for him to give me more. He smiled against my tummy, tugged my panties aside, and swept his fingers through my wetness.

I moaned. He'd barely touched me, but I felt like I was coming undone.

"What do you like?" he purred, lips now passing over the sensitive skin below my waistband.

"I-I—" *I don't know.*

He slid a finger inside me. I clawed at the pillows behind me like I was coming unhinged. He eased his finger in deep, exploring me, pressing into sweet, soft, tender places.

"Hard? Slow?" His lips sealed over my clit and his tongue swept lower as he fucked me slowly with his finger.

My eyes rolled back in my head.

"Tell me," he growled.

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “It’s been—it’s been too long. I haven’t...”

He growled against my flesh. “Then we’ll learn together.”

Treyton stretched me with another finger. I wanted to resist how good it felt. How was I supposed to relax and let down my walls with my *boss*? But what he was doing felt so good, and the longer he went, the more incredible the sensations became as he got to know my body.

He pressed up inside me with two fingers. “Relax, baby. I’ve got you. Just let go.”

He drew my clit into his mouth and suckled, his tongue flicking over me. It felt so damn good. He fucked me harder until I saw stars and the room around me vanished. There was nothing but his mouth on me, his fingers inside me, and I finally broke. I came with a cry of ecstasy that I muffled by biting into the pillow.

Treyton lapped at me before getting to his knees, stepping off the bed, and grabbing his pants from the chair. He pulled a condom out of his pocket.

“Did you plan this?” I asked between gasps for air.

“No, what sort of boss do you think I am?” He flashed the condom with a twirl of his fingers.

“The sort who brings a condom on a business trip with his assistant,” I said.

He gave me a sly smile before dropping his boxers. His cock sprang free, and all of a sudden, his charisma and cocky attitude made a whole lot of sense. The man had no reason to have a single insecurity. Good grief.

He rolled the condom on and pointed to the end of the bed. “Come here and get rid of that thong. It’s in my way.”

I crawled to the edge of the mattress, removing my thong as I went, and turned around when he spun his finger in a slow circle. I felt vulnerable on all fours in front of him like this. Twenty minutes ago, we were colleagues who hadn’t crossed any lines. Now my ass and pussy were on display for him, and

he had my juices on his lips. I trembled as he spread my cheeks and stretched my pussy.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he growled.

I tried to turn around, but he put a hand in the small of my back and pushed down, forcing my tits down onto the mattress. I wanted to ask him if we could change positions, but his cock pressed against my opening. I clutched the blankets, knowing he was bigger than my body had ever seen, and I braced myself as he gave me the first few inches. It felt amazing.

“Fuck,” he hissed, “you’re tight as hell, baby.”

The pressure continued to build until he was buried in me up to the hilt. I managed to suck in a shaky breath. There was no pain, but the pressure was incredible, and it didn’t alleviate until he pulled out before plunging back in. I gasped. He let out a low groan.

And then, when I was ready, he fucked me like he meant it.

Had we not been in a thin-walled bed and breakfast, I’d have screamed. It felt so good. He filled me up with each thrust, and every time, I thought I might break. He leaned over me, held me down with a hand between my shoulder blades, and fucked me until I came again, hard and fast. The pleasure left me damn near delirious. He slapped my ass to bring me back to my senses. I whimpered and pushed back against him.

More.

He gave me everything and then some. My third orgasm was an eye-crossing wave that dragged me under and held me there. I lost all sense of who I was and knew only that I was *his*. When he finally climaxed I was able to come back up for air, and we both broke apart and collapsed on the bed, sweaty and breathless.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

My pussy ached in the best possible way. “Yeah. Holy shit.”

We stayed there for a few minutes, him with his hand on my thigh, until he got up and went into the bathroom to clean up. I'd have to do the same when he was done. Until then, I stared up at the ceiling wondering what all this meant. Would everything be different now? Was I still just his assistant?

I stared at the closed bathroom door and the light peeking out from under it.

Halloween was coming up, and I had a haunted event at that Red Moon Farm I wanted to check out. Maybe it would help me with inspiration for what we could do at our family farm next year. I didn't want to go alone, though. Was it appropriate to ask Treyton? Should I assume things were to carry on, business as usual, or would he want to go on a little outing with me?

The light flicked off and the door opened. He strode out, naked in all his glory, and flashed me a smile. "Stay where you are, girl. I'm not through with you yet."

Oh.

He swung himself back up onto the bed, forced my knees apart, and made himself at home back between my thighs. I plunged my fingers into his hair and held on for dear life.

CHAPTER 17



TREYTON

The Red Moon farm was not nearly what I'd expected it to be when Macy invited me to come check out their Haunted Halloween event with her. I figured the place would be similar to her father's farm—rustic, weathered, and disheveled. But no. This place?

This place was immaculate.

I got out of my car dressed for the cold Halloween night in a suit and peacoat. And boots. Because I only needed to learn a lesson one time.

I scoured the parking lot looking for Macy's truck but didn't see it anywhere. There were too many cars. This place was *packed*. Families with young kids along with throngs of teenagers passed through the parked vehicles and made their way to the ticket entrance and the large red barn beyond. I heard screams off in the distance—the playful, spirited kind—and the mechanical roar of monstrous props. It smelled like cider, pumpkins, and smoke machines.

And mud.

These farms always smelled like mud.

“I knew you'd be a buzz kill.”

I turned and found a woman in a sleek, head to toe black outfit under a long black and white patterned coat comprised of multiple animal prints—zebra, leopard, and solid black spots. She had the sexiest curves a man could imagine, and

after our night at the Little Kettle Bed and Breakfast, I knew just whose curves they were.

I grinned. “And what are you supposed to be?”

Macy turned around and showed off her ass in the tight pleather leggings. Okay, correction. She wasn’t showing me her ass but the back of her coat. She gave it a little twirl over her hip, but I was too busy looking at the flexed calf and sexy red boots. “Cruella De Vil, obviously.” She fluffed her black and white curled wig. “You need to get out more.”

“Ah, the puppy killer. Charming.”

She giggled. “It’s Halloween. It’s supposed to be scary. And what’s scarier than a deranged woman who hates puppies?”

“Can’t think of anything. What’s in the bag?”

Macy had a black garment bag draped over one arm. She lifted it and pumped her thin, filled-in black eyebrows. “I knew you’d show up looking like yourself, so I brought you a costume.”

“How dare you?”

She giggled. “Come on, you can change by my truck. It will give you cover.”

I followed her to her truck. She opened the passenger door so I could stand between it and the frame of the truck. She stood in front of me, holding her coat open wide, and it created a makeshift changing room away from prying eyes.

I unzipped the bag and groaned. “Seriously?”

“Just put it on.”

I pulled out the adult-sized Dalmatian onesie. “Are these pajamas?”

“Technically, but tonight it’s your adorable puppy costume. Look at the floppy ears. Cute, right?”

“I’m not wearing this.”

“Uh, you absolutely are. It’s the perfect cover. I don’t need the farm owners thinking we’re here to steal any of their ideas—because we’re not,” she added hastily. “We’re here for inspiration, and maybe a bit of fun. And if I’m being honest there’s a big part of me that wanted to see my hardcore boss dressed in a fleece puppy outfit.”

“Very funny.”

“All of this could have been avoided if you just brought your own costume.”

“You didn’t tell me we were dressing up!”

She cracked a devilish, red smile. “Oops.”

Backed into a corner, literally, I stripped out of my tailored suit and jacket and put the stupid puppy ensemble on. Macy watched with a glint in her eye, her attention lingering on my stomach and chest before I zippered myself in.

Things between us had been the same but different since we hooked up at the Little Kettle Bed and Breakfast. We’d woken later than we meant to in the morning, which pushed our drive back yet again because we had to stop for breakfast after sleeping through the free one downstairs. It was probably for the best. We’d fucked hard and well into the night, and odds were high that everyone staying there had heard us. Macy had been horrified and just wanted to get the hell out of there the next morning.

Over brunch at a local diner, we’d confirmed that the sex was some of the best both of us had ever had, but we couldn’t let it affect our working relationship right now. The stakes were still too high with the parade. We only gave in because of situational circumstances. Had we not been forced to share a room together, it never would have happened.

I wasn’t entirely sure if that was true, but it was what we were both telling ourselves, and for now I could get by with the memories of how she’d tasted, how she’d sounded, and how her spine arched in the most glorious way when she orgasmed.

Macy tossed my suit on the passenger seat of her truck. “Ready?”

I felt like my eight-year-old self again dressed like a dog with a red collar around his neck. Blane had been only five that year, and our mother had thought it was hilarious that my younger brother was *my* owner, walking me on a leash and everything. Stupid.

“I guess,” I said solemnly.

She laughed and closed the truck door with her hip. “You’ll be fine. You know, you don’t have to look handsome everywhere you go. Sometimes you can dress down like us normal folk and not take yourself so seriously.”

“I don’t take myself seriously.”

She gave me a deadpan stare as we got in line to buy our tickets. “Says the guy who almost fired a float participant the other day for having the gall, and I quote, to ‘paint the turkey black’ on the front of their float.”

I blinked at her. “Who paints a turkey black?! Gold? Sure. Brown? Makes sense. Red and orange? Festive. But *black*?”

She laughed. “I’m just saying. They were trying to do something modern and aesthetically fresh, and you blew a fuse.”

I folded my arms. “I didn’t blow a fuse. I provided helpful feedback to spare them embarrassment. People enjoy the parade for nostalgia, not remaking the wheel. A black turkey?” I scoffed. “Ridiculous.”

Macy pouted her lips and scratched me under the chin. “Do you want a treat to make you feel better, handsome?”

I swatted her hand away and she exploded in hysterical laughter. She continued poking fun at me until we were both laughing and pushing each other around. I paid for our entrance tickets once we reached the front of the line. Macy hooked her arm through mine and led me first to the red barn, saying she wanted to check out what sort of festive treats they were offering.

“Last time I was here they had all this pumpkin-centric stuff at their café and a cute outdoor seating area.” She led me through the barn doors and drew up short. “Whoa.”

The whole interior of the barn had been done up to look like the inside of a spooky mansion. A giant chandelier hung overhead that may or may not have been made out of paper mache, which I thought was very clever. Battery-powered candlesticks hung on fishing line from the rafters with flickering flames. Fake bats dangled amongst them. A fog machine kept the ground looking like it was full of mist that broke and swam in front of us as we walked through it.

Macy gazed up at the menu board in the café. They had three drink specials broken into categories: kids, adult-only, and for everybody. The witch’s brew was a spiked lime green concoction of some sort with a vodka base, the kids’ drink was a steamed apple juice with cinnamon, and the last drink was a pumpkin steamed milk with whipped cream on top.

“Brilliant,” Macy breathed. “Just brilliant. Look at everyone taking pictures. They have their customers doing all their marketing for them without having to lift a finger.”

I looked around. She was right. Everywhere I turned, people were snapping pictures of the ceiling, the walls, themselves, their drinks, or their kids posed in front of haunting backdrops against the walls.

“It’s pretty clever,” I admitted. “You could easily do something like this at your farm.”

She sighed. “I wish. But do you know how much money would go into this with no guarantee on return? The risk would be so high.”

“Every smart business decision worth its reward is high risk.”

She pursed her ruby red lips. God, how I wanted to kiss them. “But not everyone is a billion-dollar businessman who can afford to take said risks. I’d like to do something like this next year, but we’ll have to start on a much smaller scale and work with what we have. I was thinking a pop-up coffee stand

and making our corn maze haunted. It's already standing. Why not spook it up a bit at night? We could even do adults-only evenings and make it super scary."

She was selling herself short. Sure, she might not have the resources in the bank to make a production like this happen but she had me.

I couldn't stretch myself too thin this close to the parade, but when all was said and done, maybe she and I would be able to arrange a partnership of some sort, or I could operate as a consultant to help her navigate the murky waters of opening a new enterprise on her property. Her father would hate it, but at the end of the day, the farm was going to be hers. Eventually he would come to see that he'd rather hand her down a working, high-earning business than one that was sucking out her soul.

Wouldn't he?

Macy tugged on my arm. "Let's try one of those Witch's Brews."

CHAPTER 18



MACY

Treyton and I sipped our nearly fluorescent drinks and left the smoke-filled barn. I breathed in the fresh air of the Red Moon property. I could smell the sweetness of the apples in the orchard mixed with the damp earth. We'd had a lot of rain this year. The bottom of my Cruella coat was already coated in mud but I didn't care.

I was having too much fun.

Yes, tonight was supposed to be about research for my own farm, but being out like this with Treyton without having work on our plate?

Well, it felt right. Like we were always supposed to be more than boss and employee.

Of course, he might not feel the same way at all.

"I can't decide if I like this." He scrunched up his nose at his drink while we wandered over to the haunted corn maze. In his dog costume the expression almost made me keel over with laughter. He looked like a dog whose owner was trying to convince him to take medicine hidden in a piece of cheese. He arched an eyebrow at me. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I said innocently before sipping my own drink. "I like it. It's obnoxious to look at, but the flavors aren't overpowering. How do you think they got a liquor license for this?"

"It probably took years of effort."

He was probably right. A big production like this didn't come together all in one season. This had taken years of dedication to build. There was no way I'd be able to pull off something like this by next year—it just simply couldn't happen. But I could make it better than what it was now, and if I could get enough people on the farm, I could promise them an even better experience next year if they returned.

We flashed our tickets to the employee working in the reflective vest outside the corn maze entrance. He waved us in with his flashlight, and we stepped between the stalks of corn that rose several feet over our heads. The employee called over his shoulder to us that there were garbage cans and recycling bins throughout the maze.

“Please don't litter,” he added.

We wouldn't dream of it. This was good land and someone's property. Not to mention when the winter closed in and the stalks died, this would be great food for crows and other scavengers. Garbage had no place here.

The deeper into the maze we went, the darker it got.

The vodka was already loosening my tongue. “I just love Halloween. The silliness of it all always brings back old memories, you know?”

Treyton shrugged. “Sure.”

“Were you never into Halloween as a kid?”

“Of course I was,” he said before polishing off the rest of his green drink. He crumpled his cup and tucked it in the large, deep pocket of his Dalmatian onesie. “I dressed up every year. My mother made sure my brother and I always had a good costume to wear. She refused to buy the bagged ones at the store and she was pretty creative, so she'd make them herself.”

“My mother did the same. What was your favorite costume?”

I loved the way his jaw flexed and his lips pressed together in a fine line as he thought. He made a low, thoughtful sound in the back of his throat. “My Han Solo costume was probably my favorite. I was nine. Old enough to be brave enough to go

up to the big scary houses, and young enough to still enjoy the fun of it all without feeling like I was too old for it, you know?”

I nodded. “Totally. Han Solo, huh? I would love to have seen a little Treyton as the smuggler turned rebel hero. Please tell me your brother dressed up as a Star Wars character, too.”

“Nope. My brother was much more interested in being a turtle that year, despite me trying to convince him to dress as Chewbacca. You like Star Wars?”

“I grew up with very little access to TV when I was a girl,” I said. “But my dad *loved* movies. He and his father used to watch old Westerns together every Saturday night, and he kept the tradition going with me, except we’d throw in all kinds of stuff. Star Wars changed my life. And Jurassic Park,” I added.

He laughed. “Dinosaurs on the big screen blew my mind, too.”

“Right?!”

We wandered the maze, deep in conversation about movies that changed and shaped us as young kids. We were so engrossed in the conversation that we missed checkpoints where we were supposed to take pictures. If we collected all the pictures, we’d get a prize at the end of the maze. Honestly, I didn’t care about the prize. Laughing with Treyton was worth way more than whatever Red Moon wanted to give us.

“Has your father come around to you working for me yet?” he asked after winding down the talk about movies with my father’s favorite Western, the original *Magnificent Seven*.

“Not really,” I admitted as we took a corner in the maze and came to a fork. We looked left and right before deciding to go right. I wrapped my Cruella cloak a little tighter around me. “Things have been a bit tense at home. He softens up over the weekends when things start to feel normal again and I’m working the property, but then as soon as he sees me on Monday morning dressed for the office? It’s like it all comes back to him at once and he thinks I’m leaving him. Or selling out. I’ve tried to get him to understand that I’m doing this for

us and those who came before us so we don't lose the farm. But all he sees is rejection."

"I'm sorry I've made things difficult for you at home."

"You haven't. You're saving our farm, Treyton. I don't know how I can ever thank you properly for that. I think when Daddy sees with his own eyes how much help this is going to be that he'll come around. It'll just be a journey to get there."

"Is there anything I can do to make it easier?"

I stopped walking. "No, you've already done it."

He sighed. "I feel bad. I don't want to come between you and your father. I know how special you are to him and how much he means to you."

I took his hand in mine. "It's not your concern, and you don't have to feel bad. My father and I have worked through tougher times than this. He can just be an ass, and I'm as stubborn as he is, so once we knock ourselves senseless butting heads over this, the dust will clear and we'll figure things out. I promise, you don't need to worry or feel bad. Nothing will ever tear me and my father apart. We love each other too much."

Treyton gave me a hopeful smile.

Even dressed like a derpy puppy, he was still handsome as hell.

"What about your father?" I asked. "What was he like? You talk about your mother, but never about him."

"There's not much to say. He left my mother after Blane was born. One night he was there, and the next morning he was gone, leaving Mom with a three-year-old and a crying newborn. I was too young to have any memories of it. We moved in with my grandma, my mother's mother, until we were on our feet, and then my mother managed to buy a small house on a greenbelt where she raised us on her own."

"She sounds formidable."

"She was."

I felt my chest ache. “Was?”

“She died when we were kids. It’s just me and Blane now.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. I of all people knew how hard it was to lose a mother. It was the worst pain I’d ever felt, and I didn’t wish it upon my worst enemy, let alone a man I respected and cared for. “How?”

“Cancer,” he said.

“Fuck cancer,” I whispered.

“Yeah. Fuck cancer.”

“My mother died in her sleep. Brain aneurism. I was six.”

Treyton grimaced like the news caused him physical pain. “I’m sorry.”

“Look at us,” I breathed, holding back tears. “Two motherless assholes in a corn maze trying to steal ideas.”

He chuckled. “Yeah... and this onesie keeps riding up my ass.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Come here, boy. Let me pick it for you. Turn around.”

He swatted at my hand as I playfully reached for the back of his onesie. I managed to grab the fabric at his hip and yanked so hard I almost pulled him off balance. He stumbled right into the corn, which swayed and swished as he peeled himself out of it. Once he’d righted himself, I made a grab for him again, but he caught my wrist, yanked me forward, and kissed me.

Just like that.

He cupped my cheeks and kissed me like he wasn’t in a puppy costume. I melted into the fleece fabric of his chest and my lips parted. His tongue dipped into my mouth. He tasted like vodka and lime.

Just then, someone leapt out of the corn with a scream.

I shrieked and stumbled backward. Treyton let out a startled yelp that was very doglike and swung in reflex. The

maze employee who was dressed like a wolf vanished into the corn with a mock howl and ran off, leaving rustling stalks in his wake.

Treyton bent over with his hands on his knees, panting for breath. “Holy fucking shit, that scared the hell out of me.”

I snickered until it turned into full-blown laughter. “You yelped like an actual dog. Did you know that?”

“Shut up, Macy.”

“You did,” I wheezed, wiping away tears with my thumbs and smudging my dark Cruella makeup. “I’m going to remember that forever.”

He tried not to break, but eventually he started laughing too, and we both succumbed to the hilarity of it all and clutched at our aching ribs.

Best. Halloween. Ever.

CHAPTER 19



TREYTON

For once, the sun was shining. The weather had been shitty the last couple weeks, and I hated going to see Blane down at his boat when the docks were slick and the air had that heavy, damp, early-November feeling. I reached the end of the dock where my brother's boat was tucked between two large, pearly white yachts. They were new additions. I admired their sleek lines and polished hulls. Porthole windows were crystal clear and lights were on inside. I saw shadows moving around in there, and classical music spilled out of the top deck of one.

I could live on the ocean like that. But in my brother's boat?

I looked down at the pathetic, desolate thing.

No way.

Just as I was about to step down onto the dock and knock on the interior door, it swung open. A tall, slender, black-haired young woman stepped out. She was so tall in fact that she had to duck under the door. Her hair fell in front of her face like an obsidian curtain, and she tucked it behind her ear.

She noticed me standing there and smiled. "Oh, hello."

"Hi. Uh, is Blane in there?"

She turned back to the door and called for my brother, who appeared seconds later, shirtless, with rock hard nipples that could have poked someone's eye out.

As soon as he saw me, his face lit up with a proud, animated grin. "Trey! Buddy! What good timing. This is

Rachel. Rachel, this is my brother, Trey.”

Rachel’s hazel eyes bored into mine as she shook my hand with long, elegant fingers. She moved like a model with long limbs, grace, and poise.

“Rachel shoots perfume ads,” Blane boasted.

She blushed. “Shut up. I’ve shot *some* before. Right now, work is a little scarce. I’ll take whatever job I can get. Speaking of which.” She paused, checking the time on her phone and tucking it back into the small purse she wore on her shoulder. “I have to get back to the boat. I’m on the clock.”

I arched an eyebrow.

Blane gave her a hand up onto the dock, and I watched, ridiculously impressed, as she strode down the dock in her tiny black dress and sky-high heels, all the way to the glossy black boat that had docked last month.

Blane grinned like the devil. “Told you I’d pull one of those girls from that asshat.”

I laughed and stepped down into the boat. “Well done. She’s gorgeous. But for the love of God, please put a fucking shirt on. It’s freezing out here.”

Blane reached into the small interior cabin, grabbed his fisherman’s sweater, and pulled it down over his head. He opened his mini fridge to grab us beers only to discover he and Rachel had drunk the last of his stash. He mumbled about needing to buy more and offered to pour me a lukewarm, half-full glass of vodka.

“I’d rather get caught in public wearing your sweater,” I said.

He poured himself a drink and we sat down in the small enclosed area outside the interior door, under the top deck. He had a small space heater hooked up and turned it on. It blew hot air around our feet.

“Rachel slept in this sweater last night,” he said. “I’m telling you, babes like it.”

“Or she was just freezing her ass off.”

“Either way, works for me. The only thing that looks better in this sweater than me is a tall, sexy vixen like Rachel. Bare legs. Bare feet. No panties. Just the sweater between us.”

“Stop.” I held up a hand. “Now this shit is all getting a little too weird for me. Your love for this boat and that sweater make me uncomfortable.”

“That’s how I feel about your love for your damn parade.”

“The parade is a New York City tradition,” I said. “It means something to a lot of people. Your sweater and this boat should have been burned a decade ago.”

He took another swig of his drink and leaned back, draping an arm over the railing. “How are things going, by the way? Everything coming together? You’ve got what, two weeks left?”

I sighed. “Yep, two weeks.”

I couldn’t comprehend how fast time was going. One minute, I was waiting on Carla in a coffee shop and hoping like hell she put in her notice so I could carry on without her. And the next, the parade was two weeks away and I had a new assistant making my life easier during crunch season than it had ever been.

“It’s been going well,” I told Blane. I shared with him all the updates over the past couple of weeks about the site visits Macy and I had done together, and how all the floats were coming together. “She keeps me honest. She had a bone to pick with me about how I communicated with float owners, and even though it hurts to say it, she was right. You get more bees with honey.”

His eyebrows lifted. “She was right? Shit, man. Who are you and what have you done with my big brother?”

“Fuck off, I’m not that bad.”

“You’re the most stubborn bastard I know.”

“Well, she gives me a run for my money. Macy is tough as nails and backing down isn’t in her repertoire.”

Blane nodded slowly, like he was digesting my words even though I hadn't said very much. He stared at me and I stared back.

"What?" I asked finally.

"You slept with her."

I blinked. *Act cool.* I laughed and tilted my head back. "Give me a break, Blane. You're the whore out of the two of us. Not me. I'm not crossing any lines. She's my assistant."

"Who you screwed."

"No, I didn't."

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "Almost anyone on this earth can lie to me, and I'm a big enough sucker that I'll believe them, but you? I know you better than I know anyone. And you, big brother, are wrapped around this girl's finger. I can see it in your eyes. You slept with her, and it wasn't just a good fuck, was it?"

"Blane, I—"

"Was it?"

I considered trying to draw the lie out, but at this point it seemed pointless.

Grumbling, I said, "Fine. I slept with her. But it only happened one time, and that was almost three weeks ago, and it was because of... circumstances."

"Circumstances? Your cock came out of your pants because of 'circumstances'?" He made air quotes with his fingers. "Give me a break. It happened because you wanted it to happen. What are you going to do once she makes the money she's after and bails? She's a country girl, Trey. She's going to go back to where she came from and keep building the life she was living. You're a city boy. This will never work. You're just digging a deeper and deeper hole here."

"Because I slept with her one time?" I asked dryly. "She can do whatever she wants after this. I don't own her. I won't force her to sign contracts."

He rolled his eyes and laughed. “You’re so blind.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You like her, Trey. And the only circumstances that should come into play here is how different you are and how messy this will get when she gets what she wants and leaves.”

I’d been too busy and, quite frankly, enjoying myself too much, to think about what would happen by the time the parade wrapped up. With how helpful Macy had been, I couldn’t picture not looking up from my desk in the office and seeing her working feverishly at her computer or hearing her laugh as she joked around with the other staff on the floor. She’d made friends with almost everyone, which made sense because she was so damn charming.

Shit.

My brother was right.

I had feelings for this girl.

I felt my lips try to twist into a frown and fought to keep them in place. I refused to give away what I was thinking about in front of Blane. The prick would never let me live it down. What did he know of feelings and boundaries, anyway? He was fucking a hired model from a few boats down all to stick it to the rich asshole who owned it.

Finally, I said the only thing I could think of. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“For your sake, I hope you’re right.”

CHAPTER 20



MACY

Peach wiped sweat from her brow even though the night was cold enough that we could see our breath steaming on the air. She braced herself against the handle of her shovel and used her foot to steady the blade as she held it against the concrete floor of the stall.

“You can call it a night,” I told her. My lower back ached fiercely as I scooped pounds upon pounds of shit out of the horses’ stalls. I felt like they’d been eating extra just so they could take larger dumps to punish me for not being around as often. “You’ve already been so much help this weekend. I really appreciate it, Peach. I can’t believe how much I’ve fallen behind.”

“You’ve been MIA. How can you keep up if you’re not here?”

I might have been imagining it, but it sounded like her voice held a bit of an edge.

My back flared with hot new pain as I straightened. “I know. I thought I’d be able to balance the farm and the assistant job better but I guess I’m not doing a very good job of that, am I?”

Peach sighed. “I’m sorry. I know your motivations are good. I know why you’re doing this. I just miss you, that’s all.”

“Oh, Peach! I miss you too!” I abandoned my stall to give her a hug. Her hair smelled like coconut and vanilla, a sweet contrast to the muck and hay. “I promise, when all this is

behind me, I'll make it up to you. We'll do something fun. Maybe you could even come out to the city and we could..." I trailed off when her expression went blank. "Right. Okay, not the city. Not your thing. That's fair. But hey, as soon as all this parade stuff wraps up, Christmas will be starting. We always have so many fun traditions over the holidays. We'll pick up right where we left off."

And hopefully I can do the same with Daddy, too.

Peach smiled begrudgingly. "As long as you make time for our annual Christmas baking day, I'll forgive you."

"I promise. It will be a shortbread extravaganza."

She nudged my hip with hers, knocking me toward my stall. "Let's get this over with. I have to pick my sister up from Brandon Dowrey's house on my way home."

"Brandon Dowrey, huh?"

Brandon was a few years younger than Peach and me. He and Peach's sister, Kelly, had gone to high school together, and it was no secret that Kelly had eyes for him. But he was a bit of a wandering soul who was restless in our small town. He'd moved away for a year after graduation to "sow his oats" but came home at the end of said year after feeling homesick.

He moved back into the room on top of his parents' detached garage, rejoined his old band, and got a job as a bartender at Charlie's Bar. It was rough around the edges, but they let him and his band play on Friday and Saturday nights and holidays, and apparently, he made decent tips. It paid to have a handsome face and broad, farmer's shoulders.

"Things are getting a little serious," Peach said. "Kelly really likes him. But all this driving her around so she can go on these dates is driving me a little crazy. She needs to buy her own damn car."

"She can have the old Chevy parked out back," I said. "It needs a few parts, but I'll help her get it running."

"I'll let her know. You're sure your dad won't mind parting with it?"

I shook my head. “The thing just takes up space and is an eyesore. If we’re going to revamp the farm, we’ll need to get rid of it anyway. Just forewarn her that it somehow still smells like my grandfather’s cigars.”

We continued mucking until the stalls were fresh and clean. Then we filled them with hay and led the horses back inside to feed them and fill up their water troughs. Peach and I locked up their gates and put our shovels away.

She crammed her hands into her pockets and waited while I locked the chain on the back doors to the barn. “Speaking of things getting a bit serious, how are things going with you and Treyton?”

I looked over my shoulder at her. After he and I hooked up at the Little Kettle Bed and Breakfast, I’d told Peach as soon as I had the chance. I needed someone I could talk to, and she was a great, judgment-free zone for me. She’d been shocked to hear that I’d crossed such a line with my boss—about as shocked as I’d been when I woke up the next morning still buzzing from the most incredible sex of my life—but hadn’t made me feel bad or guilty. She’d just warned me to be careful.

I already knew I had to tread lightly going forward.

“Nothing has happened since that night?” she asked.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “We’ve been too busy with work.”

“Has he brought it up?”

“Casually, yes. He’s joked about it. Made the occasional reference. Flirted a bit. And so have I. But in the grand scheme it’s been nothing. Just two people who work well with each other and are attracted to each other.” We stepped out the front doors of the barn, and I turned to lock those, too. “I have to admit, he’s surprised me. The more I get to know him, the more I start to like him. And understand him.”

Peach shivered out in the cold. “Oh yeah?”

“Sorry, I know it’s colder than the arctic out here. I’ll brew you some tea to take on your drive home and warm you up.”

We strode slowly from the barn to the house. The living room and kitchen lights were on, and so was the bedside lamp up in my room. Frost had frozen the mud solid beneath our boots. It crunched, and I warned her to watch her step. “We have a lot more in common than I thought. He laughs easy. You know when a guy isn’t afraid to be silly with you? Well, I didn’t think he had a shred of silliness in him when we first met, but he surprised me on Halloween.”

“Be careful, Macy.”

“My boots have good tread,” I said, opening the gate to the back garden of the house.

She passed through first and shook her head at me. “Not of the ice. Of Treyton. You don’t know what this is yet, and there are so many variables at play here. Remember why you took this job in the first place. The farm. Don’t get too distracted.”

“I’m not.”

“I think you want to believe that, but it isn’t true. This is happening really quickly. You guys haven’t defined what it is, either. Is it a fling? Does he want to keep seeing you when the job is over? If you guys are dating, or hooking up, or whatever it is you decide to do, will he want to do that and keep you on as a salaried employee? What if you’re risking a stable income that will save your farm all for some good dick?”

“We had sex *one time*,” I reminded her.

It wasn’t true. We’d had sex multiple times over one night, but that was an unimportant detail.

We stepped up onto the porch at the back of the house. The door to the kitchen was closed, and I could hear the TV playing inside. Daddy was probably sitting in his recliner, passed out, waiting for me. I felt a pang of guilt. Peach wasn’t the only person I’d been neglecting lately.

She sighed. “I’m not trying to tell you what to do. I’m just telling you to be careful. Keep your eye on the prize. If this is just a fling that doesn’t mean anything, make sure you’re aware of that so that the farm stays at the top of your mind. So your *dad* stays at the top of your mind.”

“My father and this farm are always at the top of my mind. Always, Peach. It’s infuriating how much I think and worry about it. Do you know how many years I’ve spent watching both of them wither away before my eyes? How helpless I’ve felt? So what if I’m having sex with the guy who’s going to save us from ourselves? Why is that such a bad thing?”

“It’s not.”

“Then what is this about?”

“I’m just worried you’re using each other, and you’re the one who’s going to get hurt.”

I stared at her. Using each other? “I’m not using Treyton.”

“Then what if he’s just using you?”

I opened my mouth to retort, but snapped it closed when we heard boots on the porch.

My father rounded the corner, a cigar burning between his lips.

Peach sucked in a sharp breath.

She hurried down the steps. “I’ve got to go. Kelly is waiting on me. Goodnight, Macy. Goodnight, Mr. Wright.”

My father watched her go, his eyes burning orange every time he took a puff of his cigar. He took it from his mouth and put it out in the ashtray balanced on the railing. Then he brushed past me and went inside through the back door. I stayed out in the cold and waited as the lights turned off and the TV went silent.

How much had he heard?

CHAPTER 21



TREYTON

The two piping-hot Americano Mistos were burning my hands in the elevator ride up to the office. I kept adjusting my hold, but that only ended with coffee sloshing out the hole in the lid and spilling down the side of my hand.

“Damn it,” I hissed as my skin burned and my palms continued begging for relief. Next time I’d have to remember to ask for sleeves.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, I rushed off like a Disney villain in pursuit of the hero, weaving through desks and around corners until Macy’s desk came into view. She sat with immaculate posture, one leg crossed over the other, foot bouncing under her desk. She was typing—it seemed like she was always typing something—and had the traces of a smile playing on her lips.

I set the coffees down a little too hard on her desk, and within seconds, they both left dark rings on the white surface.

Macy stopped typing.

“I hope you like Americano Mistos,” I said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had one.”

I nudged one toward her. “Espresso, hot water, and a bit of steamed milk on top. The perfect kickstart to a busy day. Careful, they’re really hot.”

Macy lifted hers to her lips and took a delicate sip. She licked foam from her upper lip and nodded in approval. “Really good. Thank you.”

I picked mine up and took a sip, too. It burned like the depths of hell. If my tongue had a voice box, it would have screamed. I winced, set the coffee down like it had betrayed me, and pressed my already fuzzy tongue to the roof of my mouth.

Macy hid her smile. “Did you burn yourself?”

“No.”

“Are you lying?”

“Maybe.”

She leaned back in her chair, taking her coffee with her, and held it in both hands like it wasn't five thousand degrees. Farmers were built different, I supposed. And Macy? *Definitely* built different, from head to toe, heart to mind.

I pulled up a chair from an empty desk nearby and sat. “How was your weekend?”

“Busy. But good. Dad's been avoiding me...” She trailed off and chewed the inside of her cheek. “But I guess I just have to get used to that. He can't be mad forever.”

“Did something else happen?”

“Just Dad being Dad. How about you? What did you do?”

I told her all about visiting my brother and painted a vibrant picture of what he was like, making sure to include his fisherman's sweater, boyish personality, and womanizing ways.

She laughed. “I can only imagine the handful you two were to your poor mother growing up.”

“She deserved a lot better than the likes of us. We put her through hell.”

“Boys.” Macy sipped her coffee again and I wondered how she managed it. How could she even enjoy it? The water was still practically boiling. “I'd like to meet him sometime. He sounds like quite the character.”

“Blane? He's something, all right. A pain in the ass more than anything.” I wasn't sure I wanted the pair of them to

meet, especially not with how anti-sleeping-with-my-assistant Blane had been. He was riding that train hard. Usually he kept his opinions about my dating and sex life to himself, but this go around, he had a lot to say.

I knew he had good reason, too. My job was my life, and a lot was riding on this parade. He knew my priority was and always would be this career, and a relationship with a subordinate could compromise everything. But he didn't know Macy. Two things could happen if he met her. One, he could realize she wasn't a risk at all because she would never do anything to sabotage me. Or two, he'd see just how big of a threat she really was because I wouldn't be able to hide how I felt about her in front of him. Nobody knew the ins and outs of my soul like my little brother.

The bastard.

“Maybe we'll hold off on that for a bit,” I said. “Until after the parade, at least.”

She frowned but wiped it away within milliseconds. “Okay.”

I felt a pang of guilt. Things had been going so well between us. I looked forward to seeing Macy as soon as I walked into the office every day, and where I used to look forward to weekends, now I sort of dreaded them because I wouldn't be able to see her smiling face.

Fuck me.

Maybe Blane was right.

Macy tucked herself back under her desk and made a few clicks on her laptop mouse. “I made some updates to the shared file of float participants. Balloons have been secured for everyone and we even have a back-up giant turkey in case one pops or won't inflate. Don't worry,” she added coyly, “it's not black.”

I stood up. “Let's play hooky today.”

“What?”

“Yeah, come on. You’ve done so much these past few weeks that I’m more ahead than I’ve ever been. Things are going smoothly. We deserve a break, and I have a meeting later that isn’t in the books that I’d like you to come to.”

She looked from me to her laptop. “But, Trey, I have so much work to do still. I’m waiting to hear back from sponsors and—”

“Bring your tablet.”

“Shouldn’t we be buckling down right now?”

I waved off her concern. “I’m the boss. We should do what I say. Come on. Grab your coffee and your tablet. Let’s get out of here.”

She looked reluctant for a few seconds longer before grinning broadly and standing up. She looked good today, as she always did, in a dark green dress that hugged her figure and went just past her knees. She’d paired it with a pair of nude heels that she had no trouble walking in as we made our way over to the elevator. Nobody would ever know by looking at her that she spent her nights and early mornings mucking stalls, or her weekends selling dirty pumpkins to kids and their parents.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked.

She gave me a blank stare. “I don’t know. You’re the one who insisted we play hooky. I figured you had a plan.”

By the time we reached the lobby, I had a course of action. The sky was clear, the sun was shining, and the leaves were competing for attention in bright shades of yellow, red, and orange. I knew a girl like Macy could appreciate nature better than the rest of them, and there was only one place in this city I could think of that every New Yorker had seen, and Macy perhaps had not.

It was worth a shot.

Macy stared down into the little paddleboat bobbing in the water. I sat on one of the small benches and held out a hand to

her, inviting her to step down from the dock. She looked skeptical, but she took my hand, stepped down, and let out a nervous yelp when the boat began to wobble. She dropped instantly to her knees and clutched at the sides.

“Are you trying to drown me?” she asked. “How cold is this water?”

I reached over the side of the boat, put my hand in up to the wrist, and felt the chill snake up my arm. It didn’t stop me from splashing a bit in her direction.

Macy giggled, picked up a paddle, and threatened to use it to splash me back. “Watch it, buddy. I’ll capsize us both in the name of vengeance.”

I held up both hands and chuckled. “All right, all right, you win. Hand me that. I know exactly where to row to.”

She handed over the paddle and leaned back as I used both oars to turn us around and paddle us across the Conservatory Water in Central Park. The trees along the water’s edge stood proud in all their glory, boasting beautiful shades of foliage. Other couples and families in boats snapped pictures with their phones and sipped hot coffees. The sun warmed our backs and shoulders, but the air was crisp and fresh. It smelled good out here, and even though we were in the heart of the city, it felt like we were somewhere far, far away.

“I can’t believe I’ve never done this,” Macy breathed, tipping her head back and letting the sun kiss her cheeks.

Her dress exposed a bit of cleavage, and I couldn’t help but admire the swell of pale flesh at the neckline of dark green fabric. She stretched her legs out and, as if she’d forgotten I was there and that we were trying to do this whole platonic thing, she inched the hemline of her dress up, showing a bare knee and a few inches of thigh to the sunshine as well.

I gulped like a bashful tenth grader seeing his first full-bodied woman in a bathing suit. Normally I could keep my cool around sexy women, but Macy made me feel like I was coming undone—unraveling like a piece of thread that never seemed to end. More than anything, I wanted to lean over her,

kiss her, and pull her down to the depths of the bottom of the boat and tear her dress away. I wanted to pull her breasts into my mouth, taste her flesh, taste all of her, and hear those delicious little moans she made whenever I touched her the way she liked.

She cracked open one eye. “So, what is this meeting you have planned for later today?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“I hate surprises.” She sat back up, pulled her dress down, and sighed.

Damn.

Moment over.

“I think you’ll like this one,” I said, leaning back and putting my back into it. I rowed us across the water. We passed under branches that reached over the water’s edge like long arms. Sunlight broke through the leaves overhead, which rustled in the afternoon breeze, making it look like glitter on the surface of the water. Macy talked about how beautiful it was, but all I could look at was her.

I wished she’d come sit closer. Wished she’d place herself right between my legs and lie back, using my chest as a pillow, to soak in the sights.

Blane was definitely right.

I was in trouble.

CHAPTER 22



MACY

I'd lost all track of where we were after piling into Trey's AMG after our paddle around Central Park. We'd been stuck in traffic for a good twenty minutes, and he knew the streets of New York better than I did, so after he made some turns onto less crowded streets and used an alternate route to get us out of Manhattan, I wouldn't have been able to find my way back even if I had a map.

"So you still can't tell me where we're going?" I asked.

He shook his head, left elbow resting on his open window frame. His watch face glinted in the sunlight. "Nope, you'll just have to wait and see. Five minutes, tops."

"It had better not be another shopping trip."

He laughed. "It's not. I swear."

I made an uneasy sound in the back of my throat even though I didn't really feel uneasy at all. On the contrary, I felt perfectly at ease. Sure, surprises weren't my favorite thing in the world, but spending time with Trey? Well, that was sliding into the top spot right alongside snowy Christmas mornings at the farm with my father and the first ride of spring on my horse. I felt safe with Trey. When he was around, it was as if no problems could touch me. Yes, my farm was still sinking, and yes, my father was still upset and disappointed in me, but Trey's company gave me relief from that heaviness.

And I felt like myself.

In all my dating history I'd always felt like I had to fake it to get men to like me more. I had to tone myself down. Appear weaker. Pretend to think they were funnier than they actually were. I didn't feel comfortable to make jokes at their expense or tease them, whereas with Trey, I was confident he could take anything I threw at him and would throw it right back.

I hadn't known how much I needed someone in my life like that until him.

You're getting ahead of yourself, Macy Mae, I thought sharply.

I looked out the passenger window at the passing boutiques, coffee shops, and yoga studios. Trey shifted into a lower gear to bring down the speed and take a right-hand turn. A cool breeze poured through the window and I closed my eyes, enjoying the rush in my hair and ears.

All of this was going to be over soon. There was the promise of him offering me a full-time salary position, but it wasn't a guarantee, and with the strain this had put on me and my dad, I wasn't sure I should accept it. Maybe I should just take the good money I'd earned in the last month and a half and spend it wisely to spruce up the farm. I could make some smart investments. I could leverage it to get another loan—the thought made me cringe. The closer we got to the parade, the more I worried that I couldn't sustain this career.

Things at the farm were slipping. Guilt was eating away at me for not being there enough. My father was overcompensating for my absence and working too hard for his body to handle. No matter how many times I assured him I could get the tasks done at night, he still did too much. Over the past two weeks I'd yet to come home one time to him awake. He fell asleep in his recliner every night and had been eating the same ham and cheese sandwich for dinner.

Something had to give, and that something was going to have to be me.

I looked longingly over at Trey.

I so did not want to give this up. Who would have thought that little old me, a farm bumpkin, pumpkin farmgirl, would fall so head over heels in love with this city?

It's not the city you're falling for, girl.

Trey parallel parked between a sleek white Audi and a Range Rover and flashed me a charming smile. "We're here."

I peered up at the building on the other side of the sidewalk. A hotel.

Had he booked us a night away? That was forward of him. And right in the middle of the week?

Frowning, I unbuckled my seatbelt. "What are you playing at? When you said play hooky I didn't think you meant overnight. I didn't bring a change of clothes. I have to go back to the farm tonight, too."

"Oh, no," he said, shaking his head once. "We're not staying. We're meeting someone here."

I hated how disappointed I felt and got out of the car to hide my blushing cheeks. "And just who is that someone?"

Trey looked around like people might be eavesdropping on us. Down the sidewalk, I spotted a throng of people dressed in black carrying cameras, talking amongst themselves.

"Who are they?" I asked.

He grabbed my hand and we jogged across the street. We hurried through the gold-trimmed front doors of the lobby. The inside of the hotel smelled like clove and citrus. My heels were obnoxiously loud on the dark green marble floors that swirled with traces of copper and gold. I looked around in awe as he tugged me to the concierge desk—a sprawling single piece of green marble that flowed up from the floor. A young woman smiled up at us.

"Good afternoon," she said. "How can I help you?"

"We have a meeting in the Gold Suite," Trey said.

"She's expecting you?"

He nodded. “Yes. We’re a bit early and can wait until whenever she’s ready.”

“Take a seat.” The concierge gestured at deep, comfortable-looking plush sofas in a sitting area around a crackling fire. “I’ll let her know you’re here and send you up when she’s ready for you.”

Trey and I sat down. I crossed one leg over the other and stared skeptically at him while the fire burned at my back. “Seriously, I’m starting to freak out a bit here. Who’s up there?”

“I have a feeling you’ll know her when you see her.”

My eyes narrowed. “Treyton Corral, if you don’t tell me right now, I’m going to—”

“She’s ready for you.” The concierge appeared as if by magic, startling me. She offered me an apologetic smile before leading us to the elevator, where I found yet more green and gold marble, and used her ID card to scan us up to the top floor. “Turn right when you exit the elevator, go around the corner, and her suite will be the only door there.”

“Thank you,” Trey said.

The doors closed.

I leaned into the corner, pulse racing, mind conjuring all kinds of conclusions as to who was upstairs.

I ran my hands up and down my thighs, trying to dispel the sweat from my palms. It was no use.

Trey looked back at me. “Are you coming?”

“I’m having heart palpitations.”

“I thought you were a tough farmer. I didn’t expect a little surprise to make you squirmy.”

“I’m not squirmy.

He smirked. “You’re a little squirmy.”

“I don’t like not knowing what to expect!”

“Relax,” he said, moving toward me and putting a hand on my arm. We were so close I could have leaned forward a few inches and kissed him. “It’ll be worth it.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“Feel free to plan your revenge as you see fit.”

I smiled and rolled my eyes at him. The only reason I didn’t like surprises was because I didn’t like feeling vulnerable. While Trey might have made me feel comfortable and safe, he simultaneously made me feel like an exposed artery that could be nicked at any time. It was terrifying. With just a word or a look he could have me coming undone. Like right now, with him standing so close and my heart pounding in my chest, I felt dizzy with how badly I wanted to kiss him, and how I wanted even more for him to push me up against the wall of the elevator, press his knee between my thighs, and take me—

The doors opened.

Trey stepped back and I pulled air into my lungs in a desperate attempt to clear my lust-muddled brain.

I followed him out into the hall. It was the widest, most luxurious hotel hallway I’d ever seen. It smelled like a spa. Eucalyptus and mint tingled in my nose as we rounded the corner and came to an arched doorway with a gold knocker. I felt like I’d ridden the elevator up to a new world dripping in wealth and maximalism. The walls were royal blue and filled with all kinds of artwork that didn’t match.

Trey lifted a hand and used the knocker on the door before stepping back and sliding his arm around my lower back. “Ready?”

“No,” I squeaked.

To my surprise, he leaned in and kissed the top of my head. “Deep breath. This is going to knock your socks off.”

The door swung open.

For a moment, the human grinning out at us was foreign to me, perhaps because I never expected to see her in the flesh.

I'd seen her a thousand times on TV. Her face was all over records in my living room, and CDs in my bedroom next to my old CD player from when I went to high school. I even had cassettes in the glovebox of my old truck that I used to play before I hooked up a new custom stereo.

Her blonde hair was bigger than possible and the color of honey and gold. She had a dazzling bright pink smile, the kindest eyes I'd ever seen, and the most petite figure in a pair of sparkly jeans, even more sparkly silver cowboy boots, a white vest, and yes, a sparkly shirt underneath.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

Perhaps not the most appropriate words to say in front of a legend like Dolly Parton.

The famous musician giggled and sounded just like she did in all her interviews. "Why hello, darling. Aren't you a pretty young thing? Come on in, you two. Come in. I just had some tea and sandwiches sent up for us. I needed to bring a bit of the south to the Big Apple, you know what I mean?"

Chuckling, Trey put his hand under my chin to close my gaping mouth and guided me into her suite with his arm still wrapped around me. "Thanks for having us like this, Mrs. Parton, and for seeing us a bit earlier than expected."

"My pleasure." She stepped back to let us walk into an expansive living room with high ceilings, glistening chandeliers, floor-to-ceiling windows, and burgundy velvet drapes. A tiered serving tray full of sandwiches and miniature wraps sat on a coffee table amongst comfortable-looking chairs with gold legs.

We all took a seat.

Dolly poured us tea.

Dolly Parton just poured me a cup of tea. I stared at the cup in my hand as she held up a sugar cube, offering it to me. I nodded and tried to force my tongue to work, but it was glued to the roof of my mouth. I finally understood what people meant when they said they were starstruck. It felt like someone

had literally knocked me senseless without laying a hand on me.

“Who’s your shy friend here, Treyton?” Dolly asked, batting her long lashes in my direction.

Trey leaned back in his chair. “This is my assistant, Macy Wright. She’s the hardest worker I’ve ever met, a country girl through and through, and... and a dear friend.”

Friend?

Dolly smiled so warmly at me I was afraid I was going to start crying. “Friend, hmm?”

I nodded. It was all I could do.

Dolly Parton—the *actual* Dolly Parton in the flesh—turned her attention back to Trey. “You two look good together.”

For the first time since I started working for him, I saw him turn a little pink around the collar. He cleared his throat and shifted in his chair.

Dolly laughed. The sound was nothing short of sheer magic. “I’m just playing with you, kids. I know we’re here to discuss business. Tell me what to expect on the day of the parade, Treyton. Where do you need me?” Her eyes slid back to me and glittered. “Then we can talk about the fun stuff.”

I gulped, nodded, and sipped the tea she’d poured for me. It was probably just delusion talking, but it was the best cup of tea I’d ever had.

CHAPTER 23



TREYTON

“Dolly fucking Parton?” My brother’s voice hit a higher pitch than usual. He barked with laughter over his cup of black coffee, shook his head, and clicked his tongue at me. It was the exact same way our mother used to smack her tongue against the roof of her mouth whenever she disapproved of something one of her little boys were doing. “You’re getting in too deep, man. Way too deep. You can’t introduce a girl to Dolly Parton—a farmgirl no less, who probably grew up listening to the Queen of Country—and expect her not to catch feelings for you. That’s like...” He trailed off searching for an analogy.

I didn’t let him find one. “She’s been working her ass off for me, Blane. I thought it would be a nice way to thank her. And it was,” I added for good measure.

Meeting Dolly had literally blown Macy’s mind yesterday. It took her a good twenty-five minutes to warm up enough to be able to string a few words together. Dolly had been gracious with her. We talked business before Macy loosened up and talked about how much she had listened to Dolly growing up.

Blane hadn’t been wrong about that.

Macy was over the moon excited that Dolly Parton would be performing at the parade. I’d done everything possible to keep it a secret, and Dolly had been nothing short of spectacular with her cooperation. She’d been in the city for a few personal visits of her own and made time to sit down and iron out the final details with me. We wanted to make sure that

nobody knew she was going to be there. At the end of the parade, she'd take to the stage and take the crowds by storm with an epic set of her top songs that were sure to get the crowd engaged and singing their hearts out.

I couldn't wait, and neither could Macy.

She spent the entire drive back to the office yesterday afternoon telling me all about how her mother had been a huge Dolly Parton fan, and she had fond memories of being a little girl playing dress up in her mom's clothes while Dolly sang on the record player in the master bedroom. Her mother had let her play with her red lipstick and wear her high heels, and apparently had a pretty decent singing voice.

I couldn't help but wonder if Macy did, too. Maybe I'd get lucky enough to hear her sing along to a Dolly song.

The thought made me flinch with realization. A man only wanted to hear a woman sing when he had feelings for her.

Didn't he?

Blane clicked his tongue again. "You're in hot water, brother. No matter what way you cut it. If I were you—"

"Which you're not."

"No, but if I were, I'd be sitting the girl down and having a conversation sooner rather than later about where this is going. Don't leave it up in the air. Shit falls eventually, and you want to catch it when it does, or at least know where it's going to land."

I blinked at him and tried to decipher what he'd just said. "What the fuck does that mean?"

He shrugged. "Sounded better in my head."

We finished our coffees and left the café. It was only a few blocks from the office, and I'd met up with Blane early enough to only be half an hour late for work. I'd messaged Macy to let her know and still hadn't heard back from her. Hopefully, I wouldn't be walking into the office to face her wrath. We had played hooky yesterday, after all. I imagined we had some catch-up to play.

Blane hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "I'm the other way. Gotta hit up a guy who's scrapping parts of his old boat that I think will fix Destiny up. Getting closer to launch day." He pumped his eyebrows. "I'm trying to convince Rachel to sail down south with me."

I laughed. "Oh yeah? She's going to sleep in your little rinky-dink boat after she's been put up in that yacht down the dock from you all week? Come on, Blane. Even you don't have that much game."

"Says you."

"Precisely. I know you better than anyone."

He laughed and waved me off. "Talk to your assistant. Catch the shit before it falls."

I scrunched my nose up at the reference, tucked my hands into my coat pockets, and walked to my office. The building was quiet, and I rode the elevator up alone before stepping off and weaving down hallways and around desks, making my way to Macy's.

She wasn't perched in front of her laptop like normal.

I frowned and looked around. Where was my girl?

My girl? I thought, shaking my head at myself. I had to stop talking to Blane about her. He always got in my head.

I asked a few people who sat around her if they'd seen Macy today, and they all said she had yet to arrive.

Terribly out of character.

I went into my office, closed the door, and called her cell.

No answer.

If Carla had pulled a stunt like this my immediate response would have been anger, but not being able to instantly get a hold of Macy on top of her being late for work without a word made me deeply concerned. My stomach tightened as I called her again and it went straight to voicemail.

She had a long drive to work every day. Had something gone wrong? A car accident? Had her truck broken down and

she was stranded on the side of the freeway?

Did she need me?

I rushed out of my office and called to the nearest employee that I would be reachable on my cell if anyone needed anything. They didn't have time to answer. I was already gone, rushing back to the elevator. I tapped my foot anxiously the whole ride down to the ground floor, and by the time I reached my car my stomach was in twisted-up painful knots. The last time I'd felt like this had been that day I scared Blane down by the creek and he fell and scarred his chin.

Fuck me.

Behind the wheel, I wasted little time weaving through traffic. If Macy needed me, I was going to get to her, come hell or high water.

My phone rang through the Bluetooth speakers when I was leaving the city skyline in my rearview mirror. Macy's name lit up the caller ID on the sleek screen in my dash. I practically punched the green phone on the screen.

"Macy? Are you okay?"

"I'm so sorry I didn't show," she said. Her voice sounded different. Thinner than usual, softer. "I should have called you, I just... I've had the worst morning." Her voice cracked.

So did my heart.

I'd never seen her exhibit a single shred of weakness or a crack in her foundation. Something must have been really wrong to get to her like this. I wondered if things between her and her father had gotten worse. Had this job caused irreparable harm to the most important relationship in her life? I knew how much she cherished her father, and how aware she was that they were on limited time both for his quality of life and the life of their property. I hated the thought that I might be the thing that broke the tether holding them together.

"What happened?" I asked. "What do you need?"

"I don't know. Just some time." She drew a deep breath that I mimicked, filling my own lungs to ease the storm in my

gut. “My horse died.”

Oh shit.

“Macy,” I breathed. “I’m so sorry.” I cut through more traffic as the freeway opened up, and gave the car more gas. “I was worried for you so I’m on my way to the farm right now. Do you want me to turn around? I understand if you want space to grieve—”

“No,” she said, her voice clipped and hurried. “Come. I want to see you.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

When I pulled up to the farm, everything looked as peaceful and desolate as normal. Crows pecked at the dying grass around the porch and paid me no mind as I walked around the side of the house to the barn out back. I had a feeling that was where Macy would be.

I was right.

I found her sitting on a low stool in one of the horse stalls, long legs stretched out in front of her. She had her coveralls on and her blonde hair was pulled up in a loose, messy ponytail. Her eyes looked heavy, probably from shedding tears all morning, and she was staring unseeing at the hay scattered along the floor.

I leaned up against the frame of the stall gate. “Hey.”

She looked up, startled. “Trey.” In a fluid motion she got to her feet, closed the few feet of space between us in some easy strides, and threw her arms around me to bury her face in my shoulder. “Thank you for coming. I feel so silly but... it hurts so bad.”

I rubbed her back before engulfing her in my arms. I hadn’t held her this closely since the night at the Little Kettle Bed and Breakfast, and it felt good to have her back like this, even if it wasn’t under the best of circumstances. Her fingers curled in the shoulders of my jacket and she drew a shaky breath.

I had no experience when it came to losing an animal. Sure, I'd owned a few pets as a kid, like a hamster, some fish, and I liked to think of the neighbor's outdoor cat Sammy as my own, but I'd never bonded with an animal the way Macy probably had with her horse. The only thing I could compare it to would be losing a friend.

"I wish there was something I could do," I said. The words felt hollow. What were words in the face of grief? I wished I could take all her pain away and carry it for her, or bury it somewhere out of mind, out of sight.

"You're doing it," she whispered.

Part of me wondered if I should ask for details, but this moment felt right, and talking about what had happened might ruin it. Besides, she probably needed a distraction from her thoughts. They looked like they'd been eating her alive when I first walked in and saw her sitting on the stool. She clung more tightly to me, and I held her tighter in response, silently letting her know I was there, and I wasn't going anywhere.

Someone cleared their throat nearby.

Macy lifted her face from my shoulder and sniffled. Her eyes were glassy, but no tears moistened her cheeks. We both turned to see her father leaning on a walking stick, his glare fixed on me. He wore flannel and denim, crusty old boots, and a scowl.

He pointed his walking stick at me. It wavered in his grip. "What are you doing here? There's no float business today."

Macy didn't step away. Her hand stayed on my chest. "It's okay, Daddy. I asked him to come. He's being a friend."

"A friend?" Mr. Wright scoffed and barked with laughter that made him cough. Macy flinched in my arms. "A man like him isn't friends with folk like us, Macy Mae. I've been trying to tell you, but you won't listen. He wants something. You mark my words. Don't you, City Slicker?"

If he'd been anyone other than Macy's father, I'd have flicked his walking stick out of the air and told him where he could put it.

Instead, I loosened my hold on his daughter and stepped back. “I don’t want anything from Macy, sir. Or yourself. I don’t want to make an already hard day harder, either. I should go.” I gave Macy’s hand a reassuring squeeze before creating more distance between us and stepping out of the horse stall and around Mr. Wright, whose eyes followed me like a predatory cat watching a mouse. I ignored him. “Take as much time as you need, Macy. The office work can wait. I’ll see to things while you’re gone. And if you need anything else, just call me, okay?”

She nodded and wrapped her arms around herself.

I walked out of the barn. As soon as I was outside, I heard their voices erupt. The echo in the barn made it impossible to make out what they were saying, but I had the feeling that Macy was trying to defend me, while her father did the opposite.

Perhaps this was the writing on the wall. If her father couldn’t accept that I wasn’t using his daughter for personal gain, how could he ever accept a potential relationship in the future? The anxious feeling in my gut had hardened to disappointment when I got behind the wheel and started the drive home.

Maybe this was the falling shit that Blane was talking about.

CHAPTER 24



MACY

As soon as Trey stepped out into the daylight, I rounded on my father.

“What the hell was that about?”

“Watch your tongue, young lady. I will not be disrespected on my own damn land.”

“Disrespected?” I asked incredulously. “Hold up a mirror, Daddy! You’re the one who came in here and disrespected *me*. I get that you don’t like men in flashy suits and even flashier cars, but you can’t paint each and every guy with the same brush just because he lives in the city. It’s ignorant. Trey isn’t like Mayor Hopkins, Daddy. He’s a good man.”

“He’s a snake. I know one when I see one. And he has his eye on you, Macy Mae. I don’t like it. All this poking around he’s doing. It’s no good. Smells of nothing but trouble!”

I rolled my eyes and threw my arms in the air. “Of course it does, Daddy! You always think everyone is up to no good unless they’re just like you!”

“Honest work breeds honest men.”

I shook my head. “This is stupid. We’re going around in circles. I thought that maybe today of all days, you’d take it easy on me. Topsy just died. Couldn’t you have given me a moment with a friend who was offering me comfort instead of —” I let out an exasperated sigh and shook my head again. There were no words to change my father’s mind. I’d tried

dozens of times over these past weeks. He was stubborn and merciless, and his judgment would not sway. “Forget it.”

“I can’t. I worry about you, Macy Mae. All this time you’re spending in the city is changing you. I can feel it. You’re pulling away. But your life is here, on this farm, in this world, not his.”

“So that’s what this is about?”

My father stared blankly at me. “What is?”

“Jealousy.” I planted a hand on my hip. “You’re jealous that I’ve found something good that makes me happy and it isn’t here on this farm.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes it is!” My temper flared. “You’re upset that I’m spending time in the city and less time here. Well, newsflash, Daddy. I’m working in the city to save this farm. To save us. I have been busting my ass to make ends meet, and all you see is Trey in a suit and assume that he’s using me. What if I’m using him? Huh? Did you ever think about that? What if I’m the one who’s keeping her head above water and working her ass off to bring everything I earn back to this farm, and he’s the one who doesn’t know the shoe is going to drop?”

I had no intention of leaving Trey if he offered me a salary position, but Daddy didn’t have to know that. It was a hurdle we could jump another time.

My father said nothing, but his bottom lip turned down.

I pressed a thumb to my chest. “The work I’m doing is going to save this farm. Trey is going to save this farm. We’re down to two horses and our pumpkins aren’t selling for shit. Every year, our prospects get worse. And every year, I beg you to do something different. Your complete and total lack of action because of your fear of change has put this business in the ground, Daddy. Don’t pin your shame on me when I’m the one doing something about it. The person you’re angry with isn’t Trey. It’s yourself, and you know it.”

As soon as the words came out of me, I sucked air into my lungs and wished I could take them all back. My father stood

there staring at me like I'd slapped him, and I sort of had. Guilt swirled to life, loud and impossible to ignore, and I opened my mouth to apologize, but he turned and limped out, boots scuffing through the hay.

I groaned and slumped against the stall behind me. "Shit."

Our black horse, a twelve-year-old stallion named Bruce, whinnied in the stall across from me and tossed his head, as if he too was exasperated by the conversation. I pushed off the stall door, crossed over to his, and met his nose with a kiss and some scratches when he greeted me over the gate.

"Sorry you had to see all that, buddy," I said, letting him lift his head over my shoulder and pull me forward with his chin against my back. I smiled against his broad chest and patted him hard. Dust flew off his coat in plumes with every smack. "Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of me."

He rumbled, and our other horse, a honey-colored mare named Mama, poked her head over her gate.

"I suppose everyone in here is having a hard day, huh?"

I went to the tack wall, collected some brushes, and smiled when Bruce and Mama nickered in appreciation. Everyone deserved a bit of extra love today after losing Topsy, especially the horses, who had known her just as long as me and loved her in their own right.

I started with Bruce and brushed his black coat down until he was so glossy he looked wet. He reveled in the attention and began shifting his weight to pop one leg at a time, flashing his hooves at me. I worked on those too, digging out crud and cleaning his horseshoes. I moved on to do the same for Mama, who showed her appreciation by nibbling gently on my coveralls or rubbing her nose against the side of my head.

While I worked, I found myself telling them about Treyton.

"He's not what Daddy thinks, you know. I get where he's coming from about Mayor Hopkins and men like that, who will climb on anyone's backs to get ahead, but Treyton isn't like that. He's good, and honest, and he knows the difference

between earning something truthfully and taking something that he shouldn't. And he makes me laugh," I added, feeling my lips curl up in a smile. "Really hard. He's surprisingly goofy. I didn't realize how much I liked that in a man until him. But I do. I like how he can just, I don't know, effortlessly help me let my guard down and relax just by cracking a joke or two. He's so easy to be around."

Bruce tossed his head.

Mama swished her tail.

"I'm boring you, I know." I returned all the care items to the tack wall and brought over some apples and fresh hay. The horses devoured it while I set to work on mucking Topsy's stall for the last time. I removed all the soiled hay, swept out the dust, and hosed off the concrete until the pad was sparkling clean. I couldn't bring myself to remove her name plaque from the gate on her stall, however, and as I ran my fingers over the trim on the piece of thick copper, the tears finally started to fall.

"Damn it," I breathed. "I'm going to miss you, girl. I'm sorry I wasn't around as much lately. I wish..." I trailed off as my voice broke.

I wish we'd had more time for one last ride.

CHAPTER 25



TREYTON

Mayor Hopkins strode into my office at twenty minutes to nine. He was talking loudly on his phone, scolding some employee for this or that, while I responded to emails. I looked up from my monitor, gave him a curt nod that said, *give me a second*, and went back to typing. When his back was turned, I stole a glance past him to see if Macy had arrived for the day.

Her desk was empty.

Damn, not even she can save me.

The mayor hung up the phone, hooked his thumbs in the belt loops of his gray slacks, and rocked back on his heels. “Busy morning already, my boy. Busy damn morning. How about you? Up to your eyeballs in busy work for the parade?” He stroked his jowls and thin goatee hair. “I bet you are, I bet you are. Got time for a coffee this morning?”

My fingers were still flying over the keyboard. Apparently his assumptions about how busy I was did not lead him to conclude that I did not have time to indulge his aimless visits.

I finished the email and pushed back from my desk, rose smoothly to my feet, and walked around to shake his hand. “Good to see you, Mayor Hopkins. I’m hanging in there.”

He patted the back of my hand with his free hand. “Course you are. You’re one of the good ones, Treyton. Through and through. What do you say about that coffee?”

Shit.

I needed an excuse. A get out of jail free card. But nothing came to mind. I was about to sputter out nonsense about having an appointment out in the country when, much to my relief, Macy rounded the corner of my office. She looked good—better than good, actually—with her blonde hair down and curled, framing her face. She never wore it down. She was dressed more casually than usual for work today in a pair of loose pants, heels, and a half-tucked sweater. I could still see grief and loss in the puffiness under her eyes, but she lit up when she saw me.

“Macy,” I said, perhaps a little more enthusiastically than the moment called for. “Mayor Hopkins, this is my assistant, Macy.”

Macy smiled and avoided shaking his hand because she had hot coffees in each of hers. She came forward, handed me mine, and gave me a curious look that I returned with a thin smile.

“Did you two have a meeting in the books I wasn’t aware of?” she asked.

The mayor shook his head. “No, not at all. I just popped by to say hello and see if your boss here had a free minute this afternoon. He’s a downright impossible man to schedule time with.”

“Duty calls.” I sipped my coffee.

“Indeed, indeed. You look familiar, girl. Do I know you?”

Macy shook her head. “I don’t believe we’ve ever met.”

I cleared my throat. “Her name is Macy.”

Mayor Hopkins’s beady little eyes flicked to me, and I saw a series of thoughts pass through his squishy pea-sized brain. He didn’t like that I’d corrected him, or that I’d taken issue with him calling Macy “girl.” Sue me. I didn’t like it.

His irritation disappeared with a smile. “Funny, I swear I’ve seen you somewhere.”

“Perhaps a rally,” Macy supplied, lying through her teeth.

He nodded. “Yes, perhaps. Treyton, let’s you and I go grab a bite to eat. I know a great place with staff that knows how to take care of men like us. Great service. Above and beyond. They know what’s good for them.”

Before I had a chance to answer, Macy stepped in for me. Her tone was full of apologies and sincerity. “Mr. Corral, I’m sorry to remind you and spoil the occasion, but we have three meetings this afternoon.” She checked the time on her phone with a regretful sigh. “And we have to leave shortly. Important parade business, sir. I’m sure you understand.”

Mayor Hopkins huffed. “Ah yes, I suppose so. It’s always the same with you, Treyton. Mark my words, when this parade is over, you and I will sit down to a good meal and shoot the shit. Eh?”

“Sounds... great,” I said.

Macy shouldered her purse. “We should get going. We could do with being a bit ahead of schedule. Our appointments are pretty back-to-back today and a buffer would be nice. Nice to meet you, sir.” She nodded curtly at the mayor, whose eyes did a slow sweep of her from head to toe.

I cleared my throat.

Hopkins looked up at me, blinked, and chuckled. “I’ll get out of your hair, lad. See you around.”

With that he wobbled out of my office, announcing his departure to everyone out in the cubicles. People paid him no mind. Those who’d been working here for longer than a year knew his impromptu visits were a damn near annual tradition at this point.

After he got on the elevator and disappeared from view, I turned to Macy. “You saved my ass.”

Macy giggled and gave me a coy little smile that made my blood run faster. “I know.”

“What appointments do we have in the books today?”

“None.”

“What?”

“I lied,” she said. “The day is pretty wide open. I scheduled it that way to give us a buffer in case we needed time to fix last-minute catastrophes, but none have arisen.” Her coy smile turned downright cocky. “I’m just that good.”

“Yes you are.” I stared at her, and she stared back, and when I walked toward her, she didn’t retreat. She stayed where she was and even leaned up against my desk. If the blinds weren’t open and the office couldn’t see us, I would have stood between her thighs and kissed her. I wished I could taste her coffee order on her lips. Without thinking, I put a hand on her hip. “You were on my mind all night last night.”

She gazed up at me, pulse fluttering at her throat. “I was?”

I nodded. “I hated leaving the farm like I did... when you were still hurting.”

She put a hand on my chest. So what if people were looking? “Your visit meant a lot to me, Trey. I’m sorry my father ruined it. It would have been nice to continue talking.”

“I hate that I’m adding to the friction between you and your father.”

“You’re not at fault. He is. He’s so stubborn.” Her lips pressed into a fine line and she let out an irritated, bitter sigh. “No matter how I try to explain it to him, he insists on seeing you like you’re the enemy. Like you’re the same as Mayor Hopkins and his old man. Lying, no good, take-you-for-everything-you’re-worth politicians, and do it with a smile on their face kind of men.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t tell you?”

She blinked up at me. “Tell me what?”

“I *am* going to take you for all your worth.”

She giggled. “Oh yeah? A pile of old lumber barely holding up a farmhouse and some old horses?”

“No,” I mused, sliding my hand from her hip up to her chin. “I have my sights set on other plunders.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. “*Treyton*. We’re at work.”

“Is anyone looking?”

She leaned to the side, peering past me. I expected her to say no, but her eyes widened with surprise and her cheeks burned neon pink. I stepped back and looked over my shoulder and saw the last person I expected.

Blane stood in my office doorway. Apparently, today was the day for visitors.

He wore a cheeky smirk, black jeans, boots, a sweater, and a heavy coat for the crisp weather. “You must be Macy,” he said, striding in. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Macy and I stepped apart. She looked at me with uncertainty, and I helped fill in the blanks.

“Macy, this is my brother, Blane.”

“Oh.” The color in her cheeks eased up a bit. She smiled and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

He slid his hands in his jean pockets. “I’m not interrupting something, am I?”

“We’re just working,” I said.

“Pretty close proximity for ‘just working,’” he mused.

Prick.

“Are you here for a reason, Blane?” I asked sharply.

Macy looked back and forth between us. I felt ripped off. I’d been right where I wanted to be, close enough to smell her shampoo and feel the heat of her body. Now my brother, the cockblock, was going to ruin it because he knew what he’d just walked in on.

He shrugged. “I was going to see if you wanted to grab breakfast. Would you like to tag along, Macy? There’s a great place down the block where Trey and I like to go. They make great omelettes.”

Macy smiled. “I love omelettes, and our day is wide open, right, Trey?”

Damn it.

“Great!” Blane threw his arms in the air like a marathon runner breaking through the ribbon at the end of the race. “It’s on me. Grab your coats. Let’s get out of this stuffy office. I don’t know how you can spend so much time way up here under these lights and surrounded by so much concrete.”

Macy glanced at me.

“My brother is somewhat of a nature enthusiast,” I explained. “He lives on a boat.”

Macy’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Really? I want to hear way more about that over breakfast. I get what you mean about the office being stuffy. I miss the fresh air at my farm every time I’m here.”

Macy and Blane chatted each other’s ears off and forgot about me entirely while I put on my jacket and signed out of everything on my work computer. They strode to the elevator, and I barely made it on before the doors closed. Neither of them spared me a glance. They were too busy talking about New York weather and the most ideal times to plant crops or sail down south.

I sighed.

Two worlds colliding.

CHAPTER 26



MACY

The breakfast place Blane took us to was cute and cozy, and not at all the kind of place I expected to find in the heart of New York City. It reminded me much more of the casual, seat-yourself sort of cafés we had down the road from the farm, which had been run by generations of families, just like our property. It smelled like sausage and onions as soon as we walked in, combined with the rich earthy smell of coffee, and my mouth had begun watering before we even took our corner booth by the window. The glass was covered in window art for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. A cartoon turkey took up most of the space, surrounded by swirling gold and red leaves around the outer trim of the window. Twinkle lights sat in the inner frame, lending the corner even more of an inviting, warm atmosphere.

Our waitress, a plump, stout, older woman with frizzy copper hair and a thick Boston accent, took our orders, topped off our coffee mugs, and laughed loudly in the kitchen with the other staff when she wasn't in the front of house serving customers.

I wrapped my hands around my coffee mug. It was my second cup of the day and almost guaranteed to get me a little wired on caffeine. "This place feels so homey."

Blane, who sat across from Trey and me, nodded eagerly. "Right? It's been around a long time, too. It's a great place for a first date."

Trey scoffed. "Yeah, Blane really likes to pull out all the stops and impress women with eggs and bacon."

Blane rolled his eyes. “It’s not about that. It’s the casual vibes. No pressure. And every woman loves breakfast food, Trey. And if they don’t? Well, she isn’t the girl for me anyway and I get to find that out very quickly.”

“Smart,” I said.

“Lazy,” Trey amended.

Brothers.

They’d been at each other almost the whole walk over. I could tell there was a lot of love and history there, but I could also tell that all these things Blane had heard about me were probably not just casual comments about my job performance as Trey’s assistant.

I wondered if he’d told Blane about our night at the Little Kettle Bed and Breakfast. I’d told Peach. She’d been chomping at the bit for details. I didn’t really give her much to go on, but I confirmed that the sex had been incredible and that I hadn’t stopped thinking about it since, which was a fact. Every morning when I drove to work, I played over the dream from the night before of lying with Trey again, and when I saw him upon entering the office, a rush of desire came over me that I felt powerless to. That was why when he put his hand on me this morning, I hadn’t pulled away.

I’d wanted more, onlookers be damned.

I still did.

But I had a feeling the moment had passed. Unfortunately, my panties had paid the price.

“Has Trey told you about the time he got drunk at our family Thanksgiving dinner?” Blane asked abruptly.

Mid-sip of my coffee, I arched an eyebrow and looked at Trey, who had a vein growing thicker with every passing second on his forehead. I grinned. “No, he hasn’t.”

Blane rocked back against the booth seat with force. The couple sitting in the booth behind him scowled over the top, but he didn’t seem to notice. I had a feeling he wasn’t the sort

to notice much around him besides the blatantly obvious. He and Trey were very different that way.

“Well, you were what, Trey, twelve?”

“Give or take,” Trey grumbled. “I don’t see what value this story brings anyone.”

“Value?” Blane snorted. “None. Entertainment value? Plenty. Anyway, Macy, he was twelve, so I was about nine or so, and our mother got it in her head that she wanted to host a traditional Thanksgiving dinner for the first time since she and our father split. She’d been on her own for a long time, but this specific year, she was seeing a guy named David. Nice man, pretty simple, but nice. What did he do for work again, Trey?”

Trey massaged his temples. “He sold home appliances.”

“Right! Yeah, he did. The man could talk forever about dishwashers and shit. Boring as hell. But like I said, a good guy. And he seemed to make Mom happy. Anyway, she invited over some family—her sister, brother, their spouses and kids, and David. She had all her eggs in one basket, and looking back, I think she thought that if she could prove she was this domesticated goddess, David would make things even more serious between them and maybe even propose. Mom was a hopeless romantic, you see. And I think she was tired of being lonely. Trey and I were still stupid kids at the time, so all of this was lost on us.”

“Naturally,” I said.

Where the heck is this going?

“So Mom works her ass off in the kitchen the day before, prepping all the side dishes. She mashes yams. Dices potatoes and scallops. Makes a pecan pie.” Blane lit up at the memory. “Do you remember that pie, Trey? She said pumpkin was too easy, and she had to up the ante with the pecan pie.”

“I remember,” Trey said.

“Anyway, everything is going off without a hitch. Thanksgiving Day rolls around. She has Trey and I help out around the house to make sure everything is so clean that our guests might think we don’t even live there. Trey and I cram

everything under our beds. We help her set the table..." He trailed off, fondness coloring his voice, and smiled. "Mom knew how to set a good table."

"She did," Trey agreed. "She knew how to make things special."

I found myself thinking of my own mother and how she used to light candles even when it was just me, her, and Dad around the table on an ordinary Tuesday evening. There was more money back then with their two incomes, and she loved to cook. The combination of her excellent food and the ambiance she went out of her way to create had left me with treasured memories and special moments. One day, I hoped to do the same for my child. It might even be nice to be able to have an evening like that just for my father.

Maybe when we patched things up.

If we patched things up.

A heaviness settled in the pit of my stomach at the thought, and I realized I'd missed a good chunk of Blane's story. He was now talking excitedly about everyone being gathered around the table for Thanksgiving dinner and how Trey was balanced on the edge of his chair, looking pale and like he was about to spill his guts all over his dinner plate.

"Oh no," I breathed, looking to Trey. "Please tell me you didn't vomit all over your mother's beautiful table."

Trey shook his head. "I wish."

Blane roared with laughter. "This guy panics, runs from the table, and in a desperate attempt to hide that he got into the liquor, decides the best place for him to puke is in the nearest bowl-shaped item he sees. David's shoes."

I gasped. "You didn't!"

Trey hung his head.

Blane smacked the table so hard our cutlery jumped into the air. The couple behind him shot us more dark looks as he lost it to his laughter.

I put my hand on Trey's shoulder. "You poor thing. You didn't know better. You were only twelve."

He grimaced. "I never told anyone. So, at the end of the night, when David went to leave..."

"He put his feet right into the puke!" Blane clutched at his ribs and rocked forward. "The poor guy was such a champ about it, but our mother? Oh man. She looked like she was ready to commit murder. She'd poured her heart and soul into the night, and everything was going so well until that moment."

"Personally, I've never found it that funny," Trey said. "I still feel guilty about it. I think I was the reason that relationship didn't work out."

"What?" Blane blinked, shook his head, and abruptly stopped laughing. "Not true. The relationship didn't work out because of what happened at the cabin. It had nothing to do with you."

Our food arrived. Treyton didn't even look at his plate. "What do you mean? What happened at the cabin?"

I cranked pepper onto my omelette.

"They went away for a romantic weekend, and when they came home, they were over," Blane said. "Mom never gave me the details, but she said she realized he was too much like Dad, and she never wanted to be with a man who made her feel like that again. Odds are, he drank too much one night, and she saw red flags. David buried himself. It had nothing to do with your puke in his loafers."

Treyton visibly relaxed like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "I had no idea."

"Dude! I can't believe you've been thinking this whole time that you somehow had a hand in it. Mom was totally at peace with the breakup. And hey, she deserves some credit. She really liked the guy and she walked away as soon as she realized it wasn't going to work. That takes guts, especially when we both know how lonely she was and how badly she wanted it to work."

I listened to the men talk about their mother. They seemed to know and understand her well, and as we ate, Trey's mood lightened, and soon they were sharing funny memories of their mother that they both remembered fondly. She sounded like an impressive woman raising two boys on her own. I hated that they'd lost her too early, and I could relate better than most.

"So, you guys had a family cabin?" I leaned back after finishing my meal and nursed the last half of my coffee. "Are we talking like, a house on a lake sort of cabin, or a shed in the woods sort of cabin?"

"The happy medium between both those things," Trey said. "We went every summer, and if the roads weren't too bad, Mom would sometimes drive us up in the winters. We spent Christmas there one year. Best Christmas I ever had."

"Same," Blane agreed.

I sighed dreamily. "I always imagined what it would be like to be the kind of family who had a home away from home. It wasn't in the cards for us, what with having to be on the farm to take care of the animals every day, but still. I liked to dream about it."

Blane spread his arms. "Trey, you should take her to the cabin."

"You still have it?"

Trey nodded. "Been a long time since I went. How about you, Blane?"

"Last summer," Blane said, almost wistfully. He smiled as if picturing the last time he'd been there. "It was just as I remembered. Just as Mom used to keep it. Like a time capsule almost. Shit." He cleared his throat and gave his head a shake, like the memories were closing in on him. "Sorry, Macy, you probably don't want to listen to two suckers talk about how much they miss their mommy."

My heart swelled in my chest. "Quite the opposite, actually. I feel like I know you even better now." I nudged Trey's arm with my elbow.

He gave me a soft smile.

“You should take Macy up there this weekend,” Blane said abruptly.

“What?” Trey asked.

“Yeah,” Blane continued. “She’d love it! And it would be beautiful right now with all the leaves changing colors. You both deserve a getaway after all the hard work, and the following week is the parade. Why not?”

Trey stammered to think of a reason not to go.

I put my hand on his knee under the table. “We don’t have to. It sounds like a very personal place to you. I wouldn’t dream of overstepping. But after the parade is done, you should definitely go. Unwind. Be closer to those good memories you have up there. I spend time in the hayloft every summer because my mother and I used to sit up there looking at stars while Daddy did chores down in the fields below. Places like that, they’re the closest thing we have to magic. And I’m sure it would make her smile to know her sons still find joy there.”

He put his hand over mine. “I want you to see it.”

Blane smirked on the other side of the table.

We ignored him.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Trey nodded. “We’ll leave on Friday and spend the night. So long as your father can spare you, of course.”

“He can’t,” I said, “but he’ll have to do without me for the night. I’d love to come.”

CHAPTER 27



TREYTON

The tires hadn't seen pavement in the last fifteen miles. Macy sat with a scarf bundled around her neck and a thermos of hot tea in her lap, knees holding it in place. She wore a cute fluffy toque the same shade of green as her scarf, and as we drove she would occasionally tuck her chin into it while she gazed out at the ever-changing foliage and cloudy blue sky above.

"Are you cold?" I reached for the temperature controls.

"Not at all." She leaned forward to peer out the windshield as we took a slow, gentle curve. The road narrowed further still, and an expanse of trees fanned out in front of us. We were nearly there. "It's gorgeous out here. How did your mom find this cabin?"

"She rented it for us to take a family holiday one summer. That was a few years after she got out from under my dad's thumb. She was making good money, financially stable, and ready to start living again. I think the first time we came here was a big celebration for her. Bigger than Blane and I could comprehend at the time, anyway." I drummed my fingers on the wheel as a trickle of excitement went through me. A couple more bends and the cabin would be in sight. "She found out the day we were leaving that the owners were selling the place. She called her realtor as soon as we got back to the city and made an offer. I think it might have been the most spontaneous thing she ever did, and she never regretted it."

"I love that."

We rounded the final bends, and the cabin materialized out of the wilderness, as proud and rustic as I remembered. It was made of logs, all weather treated and stained dark, and the shutters were drawn. Leaves covered almost the entire porch, including the two benches down on the ground around a small fire pit where Blane and I used to roast marshmallows and where our mother taught us how to make s'mores for the first time. The A-frame stood proud and somewhat stoic, the brick fireplace rising from the roof like a mast.

“Oh my gosh,” Macy breathed as she strained against her seatbelt. “It’s exactly what I pictured.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “A family home nestled amongst the trees. A safe haven for your mother. A remnant of the eighties,” she added with a smile.

I parked the car close to the porch steps and Macy and I got out. She wrapped her arms around herself, shielding her body against the biting cold air. It had rained earlier. The ground was soft from moisture and fallen leaves were slick beneath our feet. I got our bags out of the trunk and Macy insisted on taking hers off my hands.

She slung it over her shoulder. “I’m not a damsel.”

“Never said you were.”

We climbed the porch steps, and I turned the key in the deadbolt. The front door creaked just like it always used to and gave way to a dimly lit living room full of mismatched furniture my mother had collected at garage sales over the first two years of cabin ownership. Macy flicked on the light switch, and the room glowed with three side table lamps: one from Alaska with polar bears walking across the shade, one with a rooster base, and a third with a stained-glass hood.

It was just enough light to illuminate the old stone fireplace with the wide hearth and timber mantel where, one year, we’d hung our Christmas stockings. Two open doors on the main level opened to a bathroom and the bunk room, where Blane and I had slept in bunkbeds. A set of stairs

climbed up to the loft, where our mother had slept in a large four-poster bed that the owners sold with the cabin. She'd called it her Kingdom up there, and as little boys, we'd taken it seriously, calling her the Queen of the Cabin.

To our right, the simple but well-appointed kitchen waited to be used once more. I set my bag down on the small, pine kitchen table surrounded by chairs from different decades and homes, and passed through the kitchen, pausing to turn on the sink and see if it still sputtered for the first five seconds that it ran.

It did.

"It's freakishly clean for a place that hasn't been used for so long," Macy said.

"I had cleaners come in yesterday to get it ready for us."

"Of course you did."

"The dust would have been atrocious. And the oven unusable. I had to make sure it was up to standard."

I stood in front of the oven and sifted through old memories. What had been the last meal my mother prepared here? Had it been winter? Summer? Neither? Had we sat down to eat at the table, or was it one of those laid-back nights where she let us eat dinner on the sofa while a movie played on the old tube TV?

For the life of me, I couldn't remember.

Sorry, Mom.

Macy had moved into the living room. She picked up a framed picture of me and Blane with our mother behind us, her hands on each of our shoulders. I knew the picture by memory without having to go over and look, but I did anyway.

Macy ran her thumb gently over my small face. "You and Blane looked so alike back then."

"Now he's the uglier brother. I know."

She giggled. "Your mother was beautiful, too. You have her eyes."

We spent the next ten or so minutes unpacking the food we'd brought up to prepare dinner tonight. Macy had insisted on cooking us a good old fashioned autumn meal. I couldn't recall the last time someone had cooked for me. Once that was done, we headed upstairs to the loft to drop off our bags and probably change into more comfortable clothes.

Macy stopped at the top of the stairs. "Oh."

I came up behind her and got a nice face-full of ass.

She yelped and shimmied out of the way, letting me up the final steps. I froze at the top.

The whole loft was scattered with red rose petals. There were unlit candles on every surface with a box of matches and a note sitting on the end of the four-poster bed. I didn't need to look to know the note was from my brother, the shit-disturber.

Macy pinched her bottom lip between her teeth and pointed at the bed. "Did you..."

"No."

"Blane, then?"

"I think we can safely assume so, yes." I went to the bed and picked up the note.

Don't say I never did anything for you, big brother. You might be playing with fire, but that Macy is the kind of girl who only comes around once. Make sure she knows it.

I crumpled up the note and crammed it into the front pocket of my bag. "Fucking Blane. I'm sorry. This is totally inappropriate. I can clean all this up. We haven't even talked about sleeping arrangements."

"Sleeping arrangements?" She quirked an eyebrow before depositing her bag on the floor by the dresser. She opened the curtains on the window, revealing a forest scene beyond. She turned back to me. "Who said anything about arrangements? I didn't come all this way to sleep alone."

Her forwardness surprised me.

And turned me on.

My body responded to the simmering lust in her eyes and the promise of what was to come later tonight. “So... the rose petals stay?”

She frowned at them. “Since they are from your brother, of all people, it’s a little weird.”

I lifted the blankets and fanned them out furiously. Rose petals blasted into the air and floated down to the floor. A few stragglers returned to the blanket, but I swept them off. “Better?”

She nodded. “Much.”

We both stared at each other as the heat in the cabin seemed to increase by several degrees. I tugged at the collar of my shirt. Macy shifted her weight.

“Wine?” I asked.

“Yep.”

We both hurried downstairs, where I poured us glasses of red wine and Macy began pulling out food from the fridge to cook. She told me she was making her mother’s famous recipe: pan seared steak with potatoes cooked in foil in the oven with butter and onions. She chopped vegetables, and while she worked, I leaned against the counter and offered to help.

She steadfastly refused, claiming preparing a meal was the least she could do when I was letting her stay somewhere so important to my family.

“You just want control in the kitchen,” I said.

She pointed a knife at me. “That might be true, but you reap the benefits, so shush. You can do the dishes after. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Macy worked with purposeful ease in the kitchen. Everything she did was intentional, and she had an impressive ability to know where everything was even though she’d never been here before. She found tools quicker than I could, which

made me realize I'd never been much help to my mother in the kitchen in all the times we'd been here. I supposed I'd only been in my early teens the last time we'd made the drive. Back then, I hadn't really wanted to be here at all.

I wanted to be back home with all my friends.

Blane was still young enough to love family trips, but I'd outgrown them. I felt like my mother was smothering me. Guilt had eaten away at me for years after feeling such things.

"What are you thinking about?" Macy asked as she bundled tinfoil around chopped potatoes. "Is this place bringing back a lot of old memories?"

I nodded.

"Hard memories?" she pressed.

Again, I nodded.

"Sometimes keeping them bottled up doesn't serve them. Sometimes it helps to let them out and share them. Give them a chance to breathe. If you want," she said.

Macy had this easy way of making me open up. The words started falling before I realized it. "I was thinking about the last time I was here, and how much of a brat I'd been."

Macy said nothing as she pushed scraps from her cutting board into the compost bin. She nodded for me to continue.

"My mother had packed me and Blane up rather spontaneously one Friday morning, offering to let us skip school. Blane had been all over it, but I was on the cusp of the age of being too cool to go on a trip with my mom and kid brother, so I begged her to leave me behind and let me stay at a friend's house, but she wasn't having it. We argued. I got mean. She put me in the very back seat of the car and drove, and we didn't speak for almost the whole drive. I kept trying to figure out why it was such a big deal that we went to the cabin, and she kept saying it was tradition, and that we had to go, and that I'd have fun when I got there."

"Did you? Have fun?"

“No. It was the worst trip to the cabin any of us had ever had. Mom was... controlling. She wanted everything to be a specific way. She was recreating old memories and things we used to do from years earlier when we were little. Too little to be the same or want to do the same things. Blane played along with it, but I resisted every step of the way. She sent me to my room. I ate dinner in there. She and Blane sat at the table. I don't think we laughed once, and three nights later, she drove us home, and we never spoke about it again. It was like it never happened.”

Macy had stopped food prep and was just listening now. “She already knew she was sick, didn't she?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice sounding far away. “She knew. And she knew she was on borrowed time. All she wanted was one last trip to her cabin with her boys. She wanted to give us another year to remember, and I ruined it. I took that from her.”

“You didn't know.”

“I wish I could take it all back.”

Macy came to me, wrapped her arms around my waist, and put her head on my chest. I gathered her up and held her, clinging to her, *needing* her.

She took a deep breath against me. “Children hurt their parents all the time, Trey. Your mother knew you loved her. She knows you still do. You kept this place, after all. You kept it just for her, the same as she had it, when you have all the money in the world to remake it into a modern sanctuary.” She pulled back and smiled up at me. “Both of our mothers knew we loved them, even though we hurt them. I think, perhaps, that is one of the curses of motherhood. She wouldn't want you to carry this regret with you. She'd want you to let it go. Let's do that together this weekend.”

I didn't know how, but God, how I wanted to. As Macy gazed into my eyes, all I wanted was to lean into the goodness of her heart and let it swallow me whole. Whatever Macy wanted, whatever she thought was best, I knew was true.

My brother was right. A woman like this came around once in a lifetime if a man was lucky. And me?

Well, I felt like I had horseshoes up my ass.

I stroked her cheek and she pressed into my palm. There were a thousand things I wanted to say, but none of them were necessary. She knew the depths of what I was feeling as she turned to kiss my palm. I pulled her into my chest once more, and we stayed that way until the timer on the stove went off.

CHAPTER 28



MACY

I lit an old candle I found in the back of a kitchen drawer and set it on the table between us. Trey and I sat down to our meal, toasted with our wine glasses, and dug in. He raved about my cooking, which felt nice, and shared stories about the things he and Blane used to do when they were boys and would come up here, like catching frogs at the pond not far from the back door or trapping squirrels in milk crate containers before setting them free.

I could only imagine how glorious a place like this would have been for two little boys.

I pictured their mother as a peaceful woman who would read books while her children played. Perhaps sometimes she would sit in the stillness of this place, sipping a cup of tea, soaking up the sounds of nature and the shrieks of her boys as they ran through the trees. I'd always envisioned myself as the same sort of mother someday, but lately, the farm had been sucking too much life out of me for me to believe motherhood was in the cards for me.

I marveled at Trey's mother's courage to come up here one last time when she knew she was dying. Even when confronted with her own mortality and the deep, dreadful knowing of leaving her sons behind, she had been strong enough to give them one last gift, even if it hadn't gone how she'd hoped. Her intentions were pure.

No wonder she had raised such a strong man.

"Where did you stay after she died?" I asked.

The candle danced between us.

“With my uncle,” he said. “Blane and I had always been close to him. He understood us. And he wanted us around after his sister died for good reason. He gave us a safe place and his wife was nurturing and kind.”

“Are you still close?”

“Sort of. This time of year always creates space between me and the people in my life. I get so wrapped up with work that everything and everyone else kind of falls to the wayside.” His brow creased. “I should probably call and check in and see how he’s doing.”

“I’m sure he’d love to hear from you.” I leaned back with my wine.

He switched topics. “How did your dad take the news when you told him you were coming up here with me?”

I winced. “I didn’t tell him.”

“You played hooky? Tsk, tsk.”

Giggling, I shook my head. “No, I told him I was working late. Bookkeeping stuff. Lucky for me, Peach is a *literal* peach, and she agreed to go to the farm to do my chores for me tonight and tomorrow morning. I’m going to have to pay her back for all her help recently. And some of the locals. They’ve been coming around more than they used to. I think... I think they know how dire things are getting.”

“It will all work out in the end.”

I wished I had his confidence. A man like Trey, with the kind of money he possessed, could never fully understand how it felt to be on the brink of losing everything he knew. The memories of his mother and childhood were tied up in this cabin, just like my memories were tied up in the farm. Early morning summer rides through the fields, pumpkin harvesting and keeping an eye peeled for the one I wanted to carve, Christmas mornings where it felt like we were in a snow globe, and everything around us was white as far as the eye could see.

Trey rose from his seat and collected our dishes. He washed them in the sink while I stood by the window staring out into the surrounding darkness. The sun had set well over an hour ago. I could see the moon if I leaned to one side and peered directly up through tree branches. It was full and bright, with just enough light to illuminate the property down below.

He came up behind me when he was done with the dishes and put his hands on my hips. He stood with his chest and stomach flush against my back, and I leaned into him, resting my head back against his shoulder. The moment felt like a new kind of intimacy we hadn't shared before—a surrendering of sorts. We'd both resisted for so long, except for that one falter at the Little Kettle Bed and Breakfast, but now, standing in the moonlight, we knew that the charade was over.

He took my wine glass from me and placed it on the windowsill next to a wood-carved fox with a bushy tail. Like everything else in this cabin, I was certain it held memories.

Trey's hands slid up the inside of my sweater and over my bra. The touch set me on fire, and I burned so hot I felt dizzy in his arms. He pulled my bra down, almost mercilessly. Stitching tore. My breasts spilled free, and he gathered them in his palms and squeezed as he bowed his head and pressed kisses to my neck. I leaned harder against him and felt him grow hard against my ass. I gave my hips a little wiggle. He chuckled against my neck and the hair on my arms stood up. Outside, the moon continued to glow as if she was watching us. Maybe she was.

Trey pulled my sweater over my head, exposing my breasts and bare skin to the moonlight. I basked in it as he kissed me all over and finally unclipped my bra. Next, he worked my leggings down. I stepped out of them and was about to turn to face him when he gathered a fistful of my hair, pulled me flush against him once more, and spread my legs with his knee between my thighs. I let out a surprised breath but didn't resist. He could have me however he wanted me.

He ran his free hand up the inside of my thigh, squeezing flesh and muscle as he went, and finally touched me where I

wanted him too. I whimpered and shifted my weight. His grip in my hair tightened. Involuntarily, I stretched to the tips of my toes.

He swept his fingers over me and let out a low, primal growl. “You’re so wet, baby.”

I had been all day.

I spread my legs a little further in invitation.

Trey got the hint. He slid a finger inside me, then another, and I melted against him. He fucked me slow and deep with his fingers. His patience deserved some sort of award. I fumbled behind my back, searching for his belt, and managed to get it undone. Blindly, I pulled his zipper down. I felt his cock straining against the fabric of his boxers. His grip in my hair made my scalp ache, but the pain and pleasure were a delicious combination.

He released me, pushed me forward so that my breasts were crushed against the cold window, slapped my ass, and fucked me harder. I moaned. My nipples budded against the glass. There was nobody around for miles to see me, but the thrill of being so exposed like this made the moment even more electric. My thighs began to quiver. I clawed at the glass like a rabid animal.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Yes!”

Trey made me come hard and fast. My knees felt unreliable as I pushed off the window and turned to him. He had a dark, lustful look in his eyes as he looked me over. I dropped to my knees in front of him, pulled his pants down, followed by his boxers, and gazed up at him. His eyes burned and he reached out to run his fingers gently through my hair this time.

I took him in my mouth and teased him, flicking my tongue over his head. As I worked my way down his shaft, he let out a low sound that made my pussy ache. I filled my throat with him, gave up air for him, and sucked him like he deserved after the orgasm he’d just given me. Soon, he had me on my knees up against the wall, tucked beneath the window.

With nowhere to go I stayed put and let him fuck my mouth. Unable to resist, I touched myself while his hips thrust, and I trembled at the thought of him fucking my pussy soon. I moaned around his length and took everything he gave me until all at once he backed off, breathless, cock more swollen than ever.

Trey pulled me to my feet and guided me to the stairs. My legs still felt numb, so climbing the stairs was a feat. Halfway up, he smacked my ass, pulled me down to the step, and fingered me while I was on my knees. I arched my back and begged for another orgasm. He knew exactly how to make me come, but he took his time, turned me over, and settled between my thighs as the higher step dug into my lower back and shoulder blades. I didn't care.

His tongue flicked over my swollen clit. My world spun and dipped like I was on a roller coaster. The lust and desire were unlike anything I'd ever felt. I begged him for more. He sealed his lips over my clit and sucked while he fingered me, and I broke into a thousand pieces on the steps. Delirious, he had to carry me the rest of the way.

He laid me down on the bed and went to his suitcase. I tried to recover in his brief absence, but my body was in control, and she wanted more. My pussy ached with emptiness.

"Trey," I mumbled. *Come back to me.*

He appeared over me, fidgeting with a condom in his hands. He tore open the wrapper, discarded it on the floor amongst all the rose petals, and rolled it on. He grabbed me under my knees and dragged me to the edge of the bed. I giggled until he ran his cock through my wetness. Propping myself up on my elbows, I watched him enter me, filling me up to the hilt. My breath caught in my throat. He watched, transfixed by the way we became one, and looked up at me.

He leaned over, cupped the back of my neck, and kissed me hard. His tongue plunged into my mouth. I yielded to him, loving the way he filled every part of me, and rolled my hips,

needing to feel him even more. He smiled against our kiss and began fucking me nice and slow. I whimpered. He groaned.

In this moment, he was no longer my boss.

I was no longer a farmgirl.

We were ecstasy and pleasure and nothing else.

I felt safe with him, even as he pushed me down, forced my legs back, and fucked me so hard I saw stars. I came once more and couldn't hold on to the scream that tore out of me. Trey silenced me with more kisses and slowed his rhythm.

Desperate, I clawed at his shoulders and explored the muscles in his back. I squeezed his ass and wrapped my legs around his hips. We stayed intertwined like that, him moving inside me, me clinging to him like I might never let go, until he finally gave in and lost control. His climax shook him, and I held him until he was spent. Eventually, we broke apart and lay on the bed, sticky with sweat and panting.

Now I knew what people meant when they said “fucking each other's brains out.”

A dozen questions ran through my head as I stared up at the four-poster ceiling.

What does this mean for us now? Are we even an us? Has anything changed? What does he want? Better yet, what do I want?

The last question brought with it clarity that had evaded me for weeks now.

I wanted this. Him. Us.

Everything was going to change after the parade. Of that, I was certain. He was going to offer me the salary position, but I didn't know if I could take it. It would cost me so much with my father. If I turned him down and we weren't connected by proximity at the office anymore, would we still stand a chance, or would he move on?

Trey pushed up from the bed and closed a hand on my thigh. “There's a soaker tub in the bathroom big enough for two. Rest. I'll run the water and go down and grab the wine.”

“My hero,” I purred.

I watched his bare ass and muscled back as he left. Yep. That was what I wanted. Every inch of him, body, mind, and spirit. I’d never met someone who challenged me the way he did, or who saw my strengths and knew how to help me use them for new things. He’d shared parts of his world with me and introduced me to things I never would have experienced without him. I liked to think I’d done the same with him. I’d shown him there were other ways to do business with people that didn’t involve making them feel like they were walking on eggshells around him. I’d shown him that he didn’t have to be serious all the time. And I’d shown him that I knew how to take care of him, too.

He came back upstairs with the bottle of wine and our glasses in hand. “Did I fuck you too hard?”

I smiled, closed my eyes, and shook my head. “I’m just soaking in the moment.”

CHAPTER 29



TREYTON

A few days after our cabin getaway, Macy and I piled into my AMG, bundled up for the cold, and took the long drive back to the Dunlevy property. Just like last time, we went through a Starbucks drive thru and sipped our coffees for the last sprint of the drive. All cozy in my passenger seat, Macy reviewed my schedule aloud from the tablet resting on her thighs.

“Am I missing anything?” she asked before tipping her head back to sip her coffee.

“It all sounds good to me. Just make sure you send out the last communication to the float owners by end of day tomorrow. I want them to have all the final details sooner rather than later. Floats need to be at the start location by next Wednesday at five o’clock at the latest. If anyone needs help getting theirs into the city, have them reach out by the end of this week and we can coordinate something.”

Her fingers flew over the tablet keyboard. “Got it. Anything else?”

“I think that might be it. Oh!”

She glanced over, eyebrow arched, pretty lips pursed thoughtfully.

I reached over and put a hand on her knee. “Schedule in some time for us next Thursday night. After the chaos that’s going to be next week, I want some one-on-one time with my girl.”

Macy gave me a gorgeous smile. “Your girl, huh?”

Our night at the cabin hadn’t been enough time to spend alone with Macy, but it was all we’d been able to get, and if all I could have was scraps of her, I’d happily take them. I couldn’t recall a time where I’d ever felt so present in the moment and at ease. No thought of parade stress crossed my mind the entire time I was with her. We talked about anything and everything, including old memories I’d kept buried deep down for years because they usually hurt too bad to talk about. Not with Macy. She listened with an attentive smile and wondrous curiosity and wanted to know everything about the boy I’d been and the mother who’d raised me.

In turn, she’d revealed things about her childhood I hadn’t known prior to our trip. She shared how her father didn’t used to be the bitter man he was now, and how, when her mother Mallory was alive, he was a hopeless romantic who would bring her back flowers whenever he went into town. She also shared how every Christmas Eve she would creep to the top of the stairs of the farmhouse and look down into the living room, where her parents would be dancing to old country songs and sipping port or B&B liqueur. She’d watch them through the railing as the snow fell outside and the lights of the Christmas tree lit up their dancing silhouettes.

She’d also shared that she wanted to create moments and memories just like that. It was the first I’d heard of her wanting to be a mother someday. I knew in my gut that she’d be an incredible mother. A tough, honest, fiercely loyal one who wouldn’t back down from anyone, but who could also be soft and gentle.

I stared out at the freeway before us. *My girl.*

“How did you sleep last night?” I asked.

She shrugged. “It’s been shitty. Daddy is coming down harder on me, if he talks to me at all, and winterizing the farm is a pain in the ass this year. Once this parade is over, I’m going to take a day off just to sleep, I think. I can’t tell my right from my left hand anymore.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been working you so hard.”

“I like the work. And being with you,” she added, before admitting somewhat under her breath, “but something is going to have to give.”

“We’ll talk about logistics after next week.”

She nodded, sipped her coffee, tucked her tablet into her Chanel bag, and got comfortable in the seat. She dozed off, and I let her sleep for the last part of the drive until we pulled into the Dunlevys’ driveway. This was our last site visit to check out their pirate ship float, and for the first time in years, I felt genuine excitement for an in-person visit. Usually, I sent other people to do them.

I woke Macy with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

She stirred, gave her head a shake, and mumbled an apology. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It’s all right. We’re here. Come on, we’ll keep it short and sweet so we can be back on the road at a reasonable time.”

We got out of the car. Macy took a deep breath of crisp autumn air and sighed dreamily. I knew she loved this farm. It was everything she wanted her property to be: organized, well kept, fertile, with huge curb appeal.

We strode up the driveway to the barn, where we stopped and gazed up in awe at the massive pirate ship that was, from where I was standing, fully complete. The waves crashing against the bow had been painted electric blue, and the breaking water had been tipped with foamy white material and spattered with silver glitter. The wood siding of the boat looked real, and so did the massive black pirate flag that stuck out from the mast—except the skull and crossbones was the skeleton of a turkey.

Macy giggled when she saw it. “Oh my gosh, that’s awesome.”

She pointed out more details, like cannons sticking out of portholes and the detail in the mermaid mounted to the front. We were admiring the scales and her shock of red hair when the Dunlevys came into the barn to greet us.

Mrs. Dunlevy wobbled over with a beaming smile. She wore a Thanksgiving sweater covered in wishbones. “Good afternoon, you two. So glad you could come by again.” She clasped her hands together while her husband stood behind her. Both of them suddenly seemed on edge as they gazed up at their float. “So, what do you think? Do you approve?”

Macy turned to me expectantly.

“Approve?” I asked, gesturing at the mermaid and the waves. “You’ve outdone yourselves. This is incredible. I can’t believe the detail. It feels almost...” I trailed off, searching for the right word.

Macy found it for me. “Magical.”

Mrs. Dunlevy’s eyes twinkled with pride. “Thank you. We’ve worked very hard. Everyone has. So many months of effort and we finally have something to show for it.”

“You should be proud,” I said.

Mr. Dunlevy put a supportive hand on his wife’s shoulder. “We are.”

We spent the next half hour walking around the float. I pumped up their egos a bit more in an attempt to make up for how I’d behaved the last time we were here. Their radiant enthusiasm about their work inspired me, and I remembered this was what I had loved about the job when I first started before it became consumed with pressure and expectations, and higher-ups like the mayor breathing down my neck about making sure they had their limelight. I had to bring it back to basics. Next year, I was going to do things differently. Next year, it would be about the people participating more so than any city officials or sponsors.

On the drive home from the property, I revealed those thoughts to Macy.

She listened with her head leaning back and heavy eyelids, but she wore a smile. “I think that’s a great idea. Maybe you could run a contest somehow inviting people to enter their design ideas. The winner could get funding to build their own float. It would be great advertising. You could run a social

media campaign that showed highlights of the contestants and updates on the progress of the float. Maybe open it to people who need the recognition and spotlight on their business, like the Dunlevys.”

“Where have you been all my life, Macy Wright? You are so damn brilliant.”

She giggled softly. “I know, right?”

Traffic on the freeway flowed smoothly. I encouraged Macy to get more rest, but she resisted and pulled out her tablet, deciding to draft the email with final details to all the participants. She edited it, reviewed it, and hit send, claiming she wanted to give everyone as much time as possible. If there was a scramble, we’d have an extra day to make up for it.

She stifled a yawn as she tucked the tablet back in her bag. “So what’s the plan for Thursday? Where will you need me? I assume someone has to be coordinating things from the office?”

“What?”

“I assume I’ll be covering the shift in the office while you’re at the parade?”

I blinked and shook my head. “Hell no. You’ll be down on the ground with me.”

She sat up a little straighter. “Really?”

“You thought you weren’t coming to the parade after all the work you’ve done?”

She shrugged. “I was hopeful I would get to go, but I didn’t assume anything. This is a job, after all. Not a free pass to the parade.”

“Well, you have a free pass,” I said. “I wouldn’t go without you. Besides, I wouldn’t dream of letting you miss Dolly’s performance now that I know how big of a fan you are.”

She grinned from ear to ear. “Do I have to dress up?”

“I’ll send something for you.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I’ll send something,” I said again.

She blushed, leaned across the console, and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “I can’t wait.”

After some convincing, I finally managed to get her to close her eyes and get some rest. She dozed off in the passenger seat while I drove, and the entire way back to the city, I stole glances in her direction. I couldn’t keep my eyes off her.

Soon, we’d have more time together that wasn’t consumed by work.

Soon, I’d be able to tell her how I really felt.

Once we made it through the parade, she and I would finally get our fair shot at this. I had a feeling this was going to be the best holiday season I’d had in two decades.

CHAPTER 30



MACY

I stared out at the field of un-picked pumpkins. There were hundreds, if not thousands. Starting tomorrow, I'd spend my weekend picking some and wheeling them out to the side of the road with a giant "free" sign for locals to take as they pleased. They could use them to make soups, pies, or roast seeds. Of course, I'd only be able to put the good ones out. The others that had already begun to rot would be plowed back into the fields and serve as fertilizer for next year's growth.

I had a lot of work ahead of me and just thinking about it made me yawn.

Peach, sitting beside me on the back porch, watched me out of the corner of her eye. "You're overdoing it."

"Hmm?"

"With how much you're working. You're spread too thin, Macy. Something has to give."

"The parade is almost over." I bundled myself deeper into the blanket and hunkered down in my chair. A small propane fire burned between us, courtesy of Peach, who'd brought the tank so we could have warmth. Inside, I could hear music playing from my dad's re-run TV shows. "Once that's done it will free me up to get everything ready for winter here. Then... well, I'll figure out what comes next after that."

"Figure out what comes next as in decide if you're going to keep working for Trey, or just having sex with him?"

"Keep your voice down."

“Your dad is half-deaf,” she said dryly. “With the TV on he’d never be able to hear us.”

“You’d be surprised. He hears Trey’s name and all of a sudden, he turns into a bloodhound.”

Peach sighed. “You two still haven’t patched things up, huh?”

I shook my head. “Nope. He still thinks I’m a traitor. I don’t think this old house has ever been so quiet. Mom is probably rolling in her grave.”

“What do you think she’d have to say about Trey?”

I considered the question. My mom was a pretty open-minded woman. She accepted everyone as they were, and she helped my father do the same, but after we lost her, his gruffness returned anew, and like his father before him, he became closed off and bitter. I supposed the same thing might happen to me if I’d been ripped off the way he had. The love of his life had been stolen from him too early. He had a whole future mapped out with my mother that was snuffed out overnight, and he hadn’t even had time to properly grieve because he had to take care of me.

I couldn’t imagine how heavy of a burden that would be to carry, and I’d tried to understand it ever since I became old enough to understand loss fully.

The flames of the propane fire drew my attention in. I watched them dance. “I think my mother would have liked him. She’d have thought he was a bit severe, but it wouldn’t have taken her long to get to the nitty gritty of his soul and figure him out, you know? She had a way with people. She’d have unpacked all his baggage way faster than I have.”

“Baggage?”

“Family stuff.”

“Ah.” Peach nodded. “Same as the rest of us, I suppose.”

“Pretty much,” I mused. “If she were here, she’d tell my dad to get the stick out of his butt and stop being so stubborn. She’d be happy for me—maybe not excited about how much

time I've been spending away from the farm—but she'd trust me.”

Peach put her feet up on the edge of the firepit. “Maybe you should ask your dad how your mom would handle all this.”

“He won't hear me.”

“It's worth a shot.”

Peach meant well, but she didn't fully understand my father and how he could dig in his heels. I let the subject go and tugged my chair a bit closer to the fire.

“How was the trip to the cabin? You never had a chance to tell me.”

The word “cabin” made me feel warmer inside. I'd replayed mine and Trey's moments together out there in the middle of nowhere every night before I went to bed. If I was lucky, I'd dream about them and be able to relive them again.

“Wonderful,” I sighed. “It was almost too good to be true. I didn't realize how badly I needed to get away from it all. The office. The farm. My life. He made it all disappear for the night. He took care of me.”

“You don't usually let people do that.”

“No, I don't,” I admitted. “But with Trey it's different. He sees me. He sees what I need, and he fills those holes without making me feel like I'm a burden, you know? It's hard to explain, but I've never been able to just *be* with a man. There's always this feeling that I'm too much for them and I need to tone myself down, but Trey makes me feel like I can be even *more* myself with him.”

Peach smiled at me. “I'm happy for you, Macy. Seriously. He sounds like he really gets you.”

“He does. And I think I get him. It's just so easy, and fun, and...” I trailed off and flashed her a devilish grin, “and sexy.”

“With a man who looks like that? It had better be!”

We both giggled.

The fire crackled and I smelled it and frost on the air. Winter was closing in.

“Tell me what’s new with you, Peach. I feel like we’ve been talking about my drama all month. I’m sick of listening to myself.”

She took her feet down from the edge of the firepit and adjusted in her seat. It creaked softly beneath her as she got comfortable. “Oh, you know, same old. My sister is head over heels for that Brandon Dowrey. He’s at my house all the time and he’s one of those guys who’s too young and too dumb to know how to talk about anything but himself.” She gave me a sidelong look. “You know the type. Immature alpha with a point to prove and an ego that sucks all the air out of the room.”

“I’m sure he’ll grow out of it.” I giggled.

“We can hope. He’s going to be at my family’s Thanksgiving dinner, so we’ll see how that goes. I have a feeling that my father and my uncle might give him a hard time. Knock him down a peg or two, you know? Humble him a bit. See how he handles it.”

“Oh how I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that dinner.”

“You’re welcome to join. Your dad, too. I know this year is a bit weird, but the offer stands.”

I thanked her but explained that with the parade, I probably wouldn’t be around that night. “But my dad might want to go, if it’s not weird inviting him and me not being there.”

“I’ll extend the offer. Maybe let him know Brandon will be there. Your dad is always down for that kind of entertainment.”

“Very true. What else?”

Peach shrugged and gazed into the fire. “Not much, really. Feeling a bit aimless. Longing for summer to come back. You know I’m at my best when the sun is shining, and everything is warm and bright. And with you gone all the time, I don’t know, I feel like I need to make some changes. Grow a bit. Step out of my comfort zone.”

“Peach...”

She gave me a reassuring smile. “It’s not a bad thing, Macy. You’re changing. We’re supposed to. And I sort of just feel stuck here. I know the small-town life is in our blood, but maybe it doesn’t have to be my whole life anymore, you know? I’d love to have an adventure of my own somewhere.”

“You could travel somewhere warm. Stay on a beach. Soak up the sun.”

She sighed dreamily. “That sounds heavenly. And expensive.”

I wished I had the money to send my friend on a month-long retreat away from the winter weather *and* save my farm. I wished I could prove to my father that my absence was intentional and would pay off in the long run. I wished I could give Trey all the time at my disposal—wished we could wake up together every morning, fuck like rabbits, and go about our day before coming home and doing it all over again.

How could I have everything I craved all at once? It felt like too much.

“Do you ever wish we’d been born somewhere else?” Peach asked out of the blue. I looked over at her. She sat gazing up at the stars, her expression unreadable. “Who do you think we’d be if we weren’t small-town farmgirls with the weight of our parents’ expectations on our shoulders? Do you think it held us back? Do you think we were meant to do more?”

“I don’t think I know how to answer that, Peach. I don’t know if any of us are *meant* to do anything. I think we get to choose. Those of us that are lucky enough to, anyway.”

She picked at a loose thread on her blanket. “Sometimes I feel so grateful for this little town. Other times I hate everything about it. The people. The endless fields of nothing. The gravel roads. The dust. The way nothing has changed since we were kids.”

“You need an adventure, Peach. A change of scenery. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Just because this is

home doesn't mean you have to stay indefinitely. This is your life. You get to fill in the blanks of who you want to be, where you want to go, and when."

"And if I never come back?"

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. "Then this place will never be the same, but I'll come to you. Somehow."

She smiled, but there was sadness in her eyes. I had no idea my friend was struggling so much, and I felt even more guilty than I already did for not being around enough.

"Hey," I said softly. "I love you. You know that, right?"

She untucked her arm from under the blanket and reached for me. She held my hand. "I know. I love you too. To the moon and back, a thousand times over."

"A thousand times over," I whispered.

She gave my hand a squeeze before letting go. "For what it's worth, you've inspired me. You're right. I need an adventure, just like yours."

"Like mine?"

"Trey," she said simply. "He's your adventure. Your big unknown. You have no idea where it's going, but you're throwing yourself headlong into it anyway. I think that's pretty brave, and I have this feeling right here," she put her hand on her stomach, "that everything is going to turn out the way it's supposed to. I want to find my Trey, even if it comes in the form of a beach in a tropical paradise somewhere. Or," she added slyly, "I could find someone as rich and sexy as Trey who could pay to fly me to said beach."

I laughed, and we descended into silly jokes about becoming Sugar Babies.

The humor masked the sense of dread I felt at losing my friend to the wide expanse of the world. It was so odd to feel like I was losing her, while I simultaneously felt like I was gaining Trey. Perhaps we couldn't have it all at once. Maybe once I made peace with that, all the pieces would fall into place.

CHAPTER 31



TREYTON

Even though Macy had been putting on a tough front, I knew she was operating on an empty tank. She needed a break, and soon, so I'd offered for her to come in a bit later on Monday morning, the week of the parade. She'd refused at first. Classic Macy. She'd sworn up and down that she could handle it. I didn't doubt her, but I felt like I owed her a slower start to the week. She was up to her eyeballs in work on the farm. Why not make the most of all the intentional scheduling she'd done to make this week a smooth one?

After some back and forth she finally relented and agreed to come in at noon instead of nine.

I spent the morning seeing to the more tedious last-minute items on the to-do list, one of which was a phone call to the mayor to bring him up to speed on all the floats in the lineup and review all the sponsors. It mattered to him which companies and brands were willing to fork out money for "his city."

Politicians.

"I looked into that assistant of yours," Mayor Hopkins said on the other end of the line after we'd talked business for twenty minutes. "Macy Mae Wright. That's the girl, right?"

I considered lying. "Yes, that's her."

"Beautiful young thing. Who'd have ever thought that Wright bastard had genes like that. Must've got her good looks from Mallory."

“Mallory?”

“Her mother.”

“You know the family, then?”

Mayor Hopkins took a long breath. I pictured him sitting at the oak desk in his office, reclined in his green leather chair, phone pinched between his meaty cheek and shoulder. “My father knew them. Old man Wright and my daddy go way back. Bad blood, you know. People like that... you ought to be careful, Treyton.”

I rolled my eyes. “People like that? What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know.”

“I assure you, I don’t.”

The mayor continued digging his hole even though he wasn’t getting the reaction out of me that he wanted. “Simple folk. They should keep to their small towns, where they belong. A girl like Macy might get farther because of her good looks, but her old man is smart to keep his ass on his decrepit farm. My daddy made sure they couldn’t keep up with the costs of running that old farm when he was mayor. He had a thing for Mallory Wright, you see.”

I leaned forward on my desk. “So, because she rejected him and chose someone else, he fucked with her livelihood and future?”

Mayor Hopkins laughed. “You make it sound so...”

“Vile?”

“Times were different back then, my boy. Much different. A woman like Mallory had no sense in her head to choose the country life over what my father could have offered her. He had wealth, influence, and access to anything she could have wanted. He certainly could have given her children a better future than what your assistant has ended up with. She fell into working for you. Otherwise?” He let out a bark of laughter. “She’d be picking pumpkins and scrubbing dirt out from under her nails for the rest of her life, all to keep up with a dying farm and a legacy nobody is going to remember.”

“Hey, Hopkins?”

“Yes, my boy?”

“Don’t call my office anymore.”

I hung up the phone only to pick it back up and call the sponsor in charge of building the float that would host the mayor’s seat. I told them to remove his chair. He could stand.

See how his influential wealthy fat ass handled that.

The next hour ticked by, and shortly before Macy was scheduled to arrive, I went and poured us coffees from the break room and grabbed some pastries I’d ordered for the morning staff. Everyone had been busting their ass around here, not just Macy. I waited for her in my office, mulling over last-minute details and making sure everything was up to par.

My phone rang.

It was Mrs. Dunlevy.

“Good morning,” I said after she told me who it was. “How are you and Mr. Dunlevy doing? Looking forward to the big day?”

Mrs. Dunlevy was giddy with nervous excitement on the other end. She giggled and went on about some details they’d added and how they were so proud of their work and couldn’t wait for a chance to show it off. “I only have one concern and wanted to make sure I’m not missing something. In the last communication from Macy, it said that we could bring the floats on the Thursday morning to the start location. I’m worried that with city traffic and everyone else doing the same thing, we won’t be able to get there in time. I don’t want to be the reason the parade is delayed, or worse, miss out.”

I frowned. “She said not to bring the floats into the city until the day of the parade?”

“It’s right here in my email. A few other float owners have sent some correspondence expressing the same worries. Is it perhaps a miscommunication?”

“Can you hold on one moment, please?”

She said yes, and I put the call on hold before rushing to open my email inbox and find the email Macy had sent out at the end of last week. She'd blind copied me in it, and I pulled it up and read through all the details. It was professionally written, to the point, concise, and clear.

And she'd given everyone the wrong date.

Fuck.

I picked the phone back up. "Thank you for calling, Mrs. Dunlevy. You're right. This is a miscommunication. I apologize for any concern or stress this might have caused. I'll send a follow-up email right away both to you and the other float owners to make sure they have the right information."

Just as I was frantically opening a new tab to draft that second email, Macy strolled into my office looking bright-eyed and refreshed. She had a pep in her step and was brightly dressed in flowing white slacks, bright red shoes, a black blouse, and a long navy-blue winter coat. She shrugged out of it and hung it on the coat stand by my door before hurrying over to my desk, where she'd spotted the extra coffee and a chocolate croissant.

She pumped her eyebrows at me and took a bite.

I turned my chair to the side so I could focus on wrapping up the call with Mrs. Dunlevy. "All floats are expected to arrive tomorrow so we can do final safety checks and inspections over the days leading up to the parade. Is that going to be a problem for you?"

"Not at all," she said cheerily. "We'll be there."

"Thanks again for calling and bringing this to my attention."

"My pleasure. Mistakes happen, after all!"

We ended the call.

Macy sipped her coffee and crossed one long leg over the other. "Who was that?"

"Mrs. Dunlevy."

She nodded and licked chocolate from her bottom lip. “Oh? Is everything okay? Does she have the pre-parade jitters?” She cocked her head to the side. “Is that a thing? Parade jitters?”

I studied her. *Stay calm.*

Macy paused with her croissant halfway to her mouth, suddenly sensing something was wrong. She set it back into the pastry bag and frowned. “Trey?”

“You sent the wrong date to all the participants in the parade. Everyone is under the impression they don’t have to be here until the morning of, which leaves no room for safety inspections. They’re supposed to be here tomorrow by two o’clock at the latest.”

Macy visibly paled.

Frantically, she grabbed her Chanel bag, opened it, and pulled out her tablet.

“I already checked,” I said. “You don’t need to look again.”

She shook her head and mumbled. “I can’t believe I’d make a mistake like that. I thought—I double checked it. Triple checked it!” She brought the email up. Her eyes flew over the words until they widened in surprise when she saw the truth of it. “Trey, I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I messed this up. I was so tired, and—”

“We’re all tired.”

She licked her lips. “It was a mistake. You know how seriously I’ve been taking this. And I know how important this is to you. I would never—”

“You should go. Clearly, you needed more time off than what I’ve already given you. I should have handled the important parts on my own. That was my mistake.”

“I can fix this.”

“No.”

Macy's expression shifted from guilt to confusion, and then quickly to anger. She got to her feet. "You do not get to disrespect me and treat me like gum on the bottom of your shoe because I make one mistake in two months of working for you. You may think you're a god among men and the sun shines out of your ass, but I can assure you, you're just as human and mediocre as the rest of us. Give me a chance to fix my mistake. I've established excellent rapport with all the participants, and I will do whatever I have to in order to help them get their floats here by tomorrow afternoon."

I stood as well. "Do you know how many eyes are going to be on me when that parade starts? I've made so many promises, Macy. And you have decimated everything because you couldn't get a date right? Are you kidding me? Just go home and sleep. You clearly need it."

Color surged back into her complexion and her glare turned stormy. "And just like that, you prove my father right."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," she growled. Suddenly, she turned her purse upside down on my desk, dumping the contents everywhere. She grabbed her phone, wallet, and keys before throwing the purse itself right at me. Next, she kicked off her high heels. "Keep your brand name designer bullshit. I'm done parading around like I belong in any of this. I don't want your handouts or your favors. I'm done."

CHAPTER 32



MACY

W hat a dick.

I had half a mind to throw one of my shoes at him, heel first, and hit him right between the eyes, but I thought better of it. My pant legs swooshed and dragged across the floors as I marched barefoot to the door, leaving my coat on the hanger.

“You can’t go home without shoes on,” he called after me. “It’s freezing out there.”

“My boots are in my truck. Don’t pretend to worry about me, Treyton. You don’t get to have it both ways and treat me like garbage when I make one mistake and then pretend to care. You’re shallow and self-centered, and I’m done defending you to the people who’ve told me so from the beginning. Goodbye. And good luck.”

I stormed out. People in the office turned in their chairs to look at me, but I kept my chin up and my jaw tight, daring myself to hold it together. I wanted to cry and fall apart but I refused to give him the satisfaction of thinking he had any sort of hold on me.

I wanted him to think it was easy for me to walk out on him.

It seemed easy enough for him to turn on me. Why couldn’t it work both ways?

The elevator carried me down to the ground floor, and my feet froze on the concrete as I rushed to my truck and hurried

to put my socks and boots on. The truck was still warm from the drive into the city, and I cranked the heat before pulling out into traffic.

I made it six blocks before the tears started, and they didn't stop until I pulled into the driveway of the farmhouse.

After I parked, I didn't want to get out. My father was on the porch, looking out at me. He hadn't expected me to come home so soon. Knowing him, he was concerned. Even though we'd barely spoken for weeks and tension was high, I knew he still watched me leave every morning and waited for me to come home every night. He hated that I had such a long drive in a beat-up old truck. Hated that I was out in the city where people were more unstable, according to him. Risks were higher. Statistically, he wasn't wrong.

But his main concern had been Treyton. How would I face him now that he'd been proven right?

Sighing, I got out of the truck and wrapped my arms around myself, fending off the biting wind as it blew across the fields. I hurried up the porch steps.

"Where's your coat?"

"I left it at the office." I opened the screen door and then the front door and ducked inside. The warmth of the house greeted me, along with the smell of home. Musky carpet, tea leaves, and vanilla.

Daddy followed me inside. "Why are you home so early?"

Halfway up the stairs to my room, I rounded on him. "Why do you suddenly care enough to act like I'm here? Aren't you supposed to be ignoring me?"

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his Mac jacket. The plaid, torn-up old thing was practically as old as I was. He looked away. "I deserved that."

I sighed and felt the fight go out of me. "No, you didn't." I trudged back down the stairs, dragging my heels before dropping down to sit on the third step and stretching my legs out in front of me. "You were right, Daddy. About Treyton.

About the whole thing. You were right. I should have listened to you.”

“What happened? What did he do?”

The overprotective edge to his voice made me smile. Even though we’d been fighting for weeks and our relationship was as thin as it had ever been, he was still my father, and that primal desire to make sure I was safe wasn’t going anywhere.

“I made a mistake,” I explained. “A big one with serious ramifications for his business, reputation, and all the people who’ve worked really hard to be part of the parade.” My eyes started to burn, and I fought back the fresh sting of tears. “I sent an email telling everyone the wrong date to have their floats in the city and prepped for the parade. Now he has to scramble to make sure everyone can get there on time, and there’s a good chance some might fall through the cracks. People have spent so much time, effort, and money on these floats, Daddy. If I cost them their chance to be in the parade...” I trailed off and shook my head. “I messed everything up.”

For what felt like an eternity, my father didn’t say anything. He watched me fight to stay in control of my emotions before finally coming and sitting on the step beside me. It took him some time to get down there, what with the arthritis and all, and he let out some grunts and groans. If we’d been on better terms, I would have poked fun at him.

“Macy, everyone makes mistakes. Everyone. It’s how you react in the aftermath that determines your quality.”

“I offered to fix it.” My temper flared as I remembered how dismissive Treyton had been. “I offered, and I know I could have done it, but Treyton sent me away like I was a fly buzzing in his ear, annoying him.”

“Do you need his permission to fix a problem you created?”

I swallowed and looked over at my father. His whiskery upper lip twitched as he stared right back at me.

“Macy Mae,” he said softly, “you are a capable, strong, take-no-shit young woman. I should know. I raised you. You’ve got your momma’s heart and my attitude. Treyton Corral is a city boy who has only seen a glimmer of your potential. Don’t let his snap judgment hold any sway over what you do next.”

My throat ached. “I’ve missed you, Daddy.”

He smiled. “I’ve missed you too, baby girl. On the topic of mistakes, I think I’ve made the biggest one of all by trying to control a woman who cannot be controlled. If your mother were here, she’d have whipped my ass into shape before I let this whole thing spiral out of control.”

I wiped my tears and laughed. “You’re right. She’d have sat us down or locked us in a room together and forced us to sort it out. We’re too alike, you and me.”

“Stubborn as mules.”

“Temperamental as wild boars.”

I laughed, and it felt like all the tension, stress, and pain of not being close to my dad all this time came pouring out of me. I let it go and laughed harder until I was crying, and soon Daddy was laughing too, and we both clung to our ribs until we were in stitches and couldn’t breathe.

After the giant exhale of emotions, I took his hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry I haven’t been here. I saw this new job as my way to save the farm, but I think it cost me—both of us—too much for it to be worth it. I should have been here more. I dropped the ball on the chores. I let our float project fall into other hands. How is it going, by the way?”

We had a float in the parade, and between working my full forty to fifty hours in the city, my commute, and my morning and evening chores, I hadn’t even had a chance to look at it in weeks.

He patted my hand. “It’s good, baby girl. The community showed up to help in full force. Peach wouldn’t have let it happen any other way.”

I leaned into him and rested my cheek on his shoulder. “I think I have a lot of work to do today to save this stupid parade.”

He chuckled. “How can I help?”

CHAPTER 33



TREYTON

Blane emerged from the inside of his boathouse, eyes squinting in the glaring brightness of the morning. He looked around, disheveled and sloppy, hair sticking out every which way, before he finally narrowed his gaze on me, rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands, and grumbled an incoherent good morning.

“What are you doing here so early?” My younger brother looked at his wrist, where he never wore a watch, and frowned as if surprised not to find one there. “What time is it?”

“Ten thirty.”

“You know not to come knocking before eleven.”

“I needed to talk to you.”

“Come back in an hour.”

Blane went to close the door, but I caught the edge and yanked it back open. “You’re up. I’m here. Put a shirt on for fuck’s sake. I brought coffee.” I held up two take-out coffee cups. I’d stopped at a pop-up street vendor that set up shop every other day of the week near the docks. The line had been long, but the coffee would be worth it.

Blane eyed the coffees. “Fine. Wait here.”

While my brother got changed, I made myself comfortable on his boat. The sun was shining this morning and the weather forecast looked like it would be in my favor this year. Last year, it had rained throughout the entire parade. This year the

skies were supposed to be clear and the temperature generous for the end of November in New York City.

At least one thing was looking up for me.

Blane came out of the interior cabin still blinking in the sunlight. He snatched one of the coffees out of my hand, slumped down into the seat across from me, and studied the side of the cup skeptically. “What is it?”

“Triple shot latte, no foam.”

“Perfect.” Tipping his head back, he took a greedy sip before licking his lips and studying me. “So, what did you do?”

“Who says I did anything?”

“The fact that you’re here, on my boat that you hate so much, two days before your precious parade. Normally you have much more important things to do and I don’t see you for half the month of November. So, if I were a guessing man, which I *am*,” he added with a cheeky grin, “I’d wager you fucked up somewhere and you’ve come to little old me for advice. Am I close?”

I had half a mind to lie to his smug face and tell him I’d just come for a visit. But that would have been a waste of a trip and two lattes.

I sighed. “I fucked up with Macy.”

“There it is.”

“Don’t be a dick.”

“Sounds like *you* were the one who was a dick, not me. What happened?”

Blane listened intently while I recounted how well things had been going between Macy and me. I shared all about how hard she’d been working and the toll this job was taking on her while she juggled it alongside all of her responsibilities at the farm. While I shared this information, the guilt that had been building up inside of me since I saw her yesterday morning felt like it was going to boil over and flood his boat, sending it to the bottom of the sea where it belonged.

I explained how her tiredness had proven to be one thing too many for her to balance, and she'd made a mistake in communications with the float participants.

I rubbed at my temples. "I had to spend all yesterday afternoon trying to get in touch with all the float owners, which was much more difficult than I expected. Several were out of town for Thanksgiving events with family since they'll be in the parade the day of. I wasted time trying to find emails. Macy would've had it handled in half an hour."

"But you sent her away."

"I sent her away," I acknowledged. "And I wasn't nice about it, either. But she knew what's been at stake this whole time. When she was drowning, she should have told me, and I could have lightened her load. The potential damage her fuck-up has caused..." I trailed off and grimaced at the thought of several of the floats falling through and this being the worst Thanksgiving Day parade since my takeover. "It's going to be a disaster."

"Sometimes people don't know they're drowning, Trey. And you're making a lot of assumptions. Macy isn't the sort to back down when things get tough, especially during crunch time. And it seems worth noting, *everyone* makes mistakes. Including you." He cocked his head to the side. "What reveals the most about a person is how they act after said mistake. You took away Macy's chance to make things right. If she was drowning, you stole her lifeline and were a total ass. She's not just your employee, man."

The guilt nearly choked me.

"Not what you wanted to hear?" Blane asked.

I shook my head and gazed out across the water at the other boats sparkling in the autumn sun. "Not exactly."

My brother leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and held his paper coffee cup in both hands. "On the subject of mistakes, are you going to abandon the only person you've ever loved, like our old man did?"

"Don't."

“Why not? Macy has you wrapped around her little finger, Trey. I know it. You know it. And there’s nothing wrong with it! She’s hell on wheels. You’ve finally met someone who gives you a run for your money. There’s no way it’s past saving. If you had time to come see me today, you have time to go to her.”

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s not. You’re just being a coward.”

I glared at him. “Watch your mouth.”

“Tell me I’m lying. Tell me you didn’t know in your gut that while you were driving all the way out here to the water, you knew you should have been driving to her farm.” Blane shook his head and leaned back. “Listen, you’re not going to like this, but at the end of the day, it’s just a fucking parade, man. So what if you’re a few floats shy? Nobody in the crowd is counting. They’re just there for the memories with their kids and the nostalgia from their own childhood. They’re there for the feeling. Nobody cares about this thing as much as you do. Except for maybe one person.”

I eyed him darkly.

“That person being Macy,” he said, “because she knows how much *you* care.”

Fuck.

My silence made Blane feel victorious. He draped an arm over the back of his seat and grinned. “So, did I provide the help you were looking for?”

“I kind of hoped you’d let me wallow a bit longer.”

He laughed. “Fuck that, us Corrals aren’t wallowers.”

I managed a grin of my own. “True.”

We sat a bit longer as the sun continued to creep higher in the sky and morning shifted to afternoon. The docks grew busier. Gulls screeched overhead and swept down to the docks to pillage garbage cans or rifle through food wrappers discarded on the wood planks. We talked about things that didn’t matter for a while, and he told me all about his model

hookup Rachel, who'd brought a friend over with her the last time they'd "rocked the boat."

"Gross," I said.

"You're just jealous. Boats pull chicks, man. I'm telling you. I don't know why you won't believe me."

"I don't think it's the boat, Blane."

He pumped his eyebrows and nodded down at his crotch. "It's the boat and one other thing."

I rolled my eyes.

He laughed. "Motion of the ocean, brother."

I got to my feet. "That's my cue. I'm out of here."

Blane stood as well, cracked his back, and indulged in a full body stretch before tossing his empty coffee cup up onto the dock and expertly into the nearest garbage can beside a wooden bench. He clapped me on the back before I stepped off the boat. "Good luck with Macy, man. And the parade. I'm sure things will come together in the end. They always do. And if they don't?"

"It's just a parade," I said. "I know. I know."

"Nah. You care about it. I was just being a dick. If they don't, we'll drink our faces off on Thursday night and I won't give you a pep talk. Deal?"

"Deal." I grinned.

I set off down the dock, heading back to my car. I'd come to Blane for resolutions. He hadn't given me easy-fix answers, but he'd given me more than I could have asked for, and I knew what I had to do now. I had to make things right.

When I got back to my car, I had several missed calls from the lead float operator. I called him back right away.

"Mr. Corral." His baritone voice filled the line. In the background I heard pumps and other heavy machinery running. They must have been filling balloons. "Hang on a moment."

I waited while Dean Winthrop, an expert at all things concerning float operations and mechanics, tucked himself away in his office at the warehouse where the floats were being stored. The background noise died away as soon as he closed his office door, and I heard him sink down into a creaky chair.

“Please tell me things are still running according to plan,” I said, not caring if my desperation seeped into my voice.

“Better than according to plan, sir,” Winthrop said. “All the floats are here and accounted for. Our first round of safety inspections had a couple hiccups, but everything has been resolved. I just wanted to give you the update. I know things were looking a little choppy for a moment there. But dare I say, we’re ready to open the doors on Thursday and roll these bad boys out.”

My brain couldn’t quite process the information. “*All* the floats are there?”

“Yes, sir. Counted them myself a dozen times. They’re registered and approved. Drivers’ signatures collected. Waivers signed. We’re good to go.”

“How?”

Winthrop laughed. “That is a question for your assistant, sir.”

CHAPTER 34



MACY

Peach slid out of the driver's side door of my old truck. Her boots landed in a puddle in the gravel parking lot of the town hardware store. Groaning, she stomped out of the water and stepped up onto the sidewalk with me.

"I *hate* winter," she grumbled.

"We still have a month of autumn to go." I tugged open the hardware store door. A bell chimed overhead.

Peach stepped inside ahead of me, shivering dramatically in her puffy parka jacket. She'd owned the thing for ages. It was a light cream color with a faux-fur hood lining, and the thing was so big it made her look like she was drowning in it. "Don't remind me. What are we here for again?"

"Nothing. I have a bill to pay."

"Right."

I went up to the register, where the shop owner's son, Jasper, sat with headphones on and a car magazine open on his lap. When he didn't notice me right away, I picked up a lighter from a bucket on the counter and threw it at him.

He came to with a start, dropped the magazine, and hurried to remove his headphones. "Oh, it's just you, Miss Macy."

"Just me? A paying customer?" I folded my arms and tapped my foot in mock irritation, but he must have seen the smile curling the corners of my mouth because he didn't look intimidated.

Jasper leaned on the counter. He was just shy of nineteen, long and gangly everywhere, with black hair that needed to be chopped and green eyes that would probably be his hook, line, and sinker feature when he grew into the rest of his body. “What can I help you ladies with?”

I pulled a receipt out of the pocket of my overalls. “I’m here to pay my last installment on an outstanding bill for our float supplies.”

“Right.” He straightened up, grabbed a binder from where it sat beside the register, and flipped through it, comparing order numbers to my receipt. When he found it, he went about the long, arduous process of settling my bill. Nothing in town was set up for fast electronic payments. Sure, we had debit and Visa machines, but there were no computers keeping records or being used as points of sale. Instead, things were still like they were in the eighties.

Jasper finally got everything sorted. “Four hundred and twelve dollars, please.”

I handed over my debit card. I had money in the bank from my last paychecks from Treyton, but it still hurt to part with the money. Hopefully all the costs of building our own float for this year’s parade would pay off and people would flock to Mallory Farm. I was back at square one in terms of how to upgrade the farm to be more inviting, but now that my father and I were back on talking terms, I hoped he’d be willing to jump into the process with me.

Otherwise?

We were going to have to sell off acres of property.

Peach wandered the nearby racks, poking at random items like Christmas garden decorations, discounted autumn décor, and a large fuzzy Christmas stocking. She turned to Jasper. “Since when do you guys sell all this random crap? Aren’t you supposed to be a hardware store?”

“You gotta cater to the consumers, Peach.” Jasper tapped the side of his temple. “We had people buying Christmas decorations in August.”

“Gross,” Peach said.

He closed his binder and handed me my receipt. “You’re all good to go, Macy. Anything else you need help with?”

I shook my head. “Nope, thanks. Come on, Peach. Let’s go make some lunch before you get hangry.”

Back at the house, I threw together ham sandwiches while Peach brewed us a pot of tea. The sun was out and streaming through the windows, warming my back and shoulders. I inhaled deeply, savoring the scent of the brewing English breakfast tea, and cut our sandwiches into triangles.

Peach stared out the kitchen window over the sink. “Is that your dad out there?”

“Yep.”

“I thought he was too sore to do that kind of work?”

I leaned back and looked out the window. Daddy was plowing the pumpkin fields, crushing the pumpkins that weren’t picked into the earth and grinding them up to rot into fertilizer.

“He and I have had quite a few chats since last night. We’ve made some changes and created some wiggle room to afford his arthritis medication again.”

Peach spun to me, eyes wide with surprise. “Seriously? Isn’t that stuff like five hundred bucks a month?”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “yes. But it’s a better use of the money than dumping it into the farm. Five hundred bucks won’t do us any good in terms of upgrades, but if it can give him relief? It’s well worth it. It took some convincing, and I had to drive him to the doctor’s office this morning but look at him. It’s like he shaved a decade off his life after one injection.”

Peach smiled and folded her arms as she watched my dad. “I didn’t think I’d ever see the day.”

“Me neither.”

“What’s the plan to be able to keep buying this medication? Five hundred bucks a month? That’s steep, Macy. And without the money coming in from Treyton...”

I put all the sandwich ingredients back in the fridge and was grateful I didn’t have to look her in the eye. “We made some sacrifices.”

Peach closed the fridge door on me. “What sacrifices?”

My eyes stung and I sniffled. “We sold the horses.”

Her expression fell. “No,” she gasped. “Oh, Macy, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s okay.” I wiped at my cheeks as the tears fell and gave my head a shake, as if I could dispel the grief. I could not. “Daddy’s health is more important. Seeing him out there is proof enough for me that we made the right choice. I just...”

“They were your mother’s horses,” Peach whispered, hearing all the unspoken thoughts in my head.

I nodded.

She wrapped her arms around me and put her head on my shoulder. “I wish I was a rich socialite with a fancy stable and lots of stall. I could have bought them for you, and you could have come to see them whenever you wanted.”

I rested my cheek on top of her head. “You’d make a pretty good rich socialite.”

“Right?” She straightened, wiped more of my tears away, and knuckled my chin the way a supportive father might. “You’ve always impressed me with how you can do hard things, Macy. I know this hurts, but you’re right. The relief this gave your dad? Well, it’s priceless. And with the two of you working the property, maybe by next pumpkin season things will be a little different around here?”

“One can hope,” I sighed.

Peach and I fixed our cups of tea. She liked hers with plenty of milk and two heaping teaspoons of sugar. I preferred mine with just a splash of milk, as strong as possible, with half a teaspoon. Just like how my mother used to take hers. We

brought our steaming mugs and sandwiches into the living room, where we sat near the fire and ate.

When Peach was done, she leaned back with her tea. “Are you going to tell me exactly how it all went down with Treyton, or would you rather not talk about it?”

Ever since he kicked me out of his office the day before yesterday, I’d been doing my best to think about everything *other* than him. But Treyton had this way of getting in my head and staying there. Even my fictional concoction of him was stubborn. It was terribly unfair.

“I don’t know what else I can say, Peach. I screwed up and walked out. He had every right to be upset but not a total asshole. I mean, it was a reckless mistake that I never would have made if I’d been managing my time better.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“People are allowed to make mistakes, Macy. Especially people who work as hard as you do and sacrifice everything you do. He should know that. He was a reactive asshole.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, but this parade is important to him. It’s his legacy. I should have handled it with more care.”

She rolled her eyes. “If he’s the kind of person to push you away over something so trivial—I know, I know, the parade is his *baby*—then he’s not your guy anyway. You deserve someone who will give you grace when you drop the ball because it, like, literally *never* happens. Someone who will hold you up when you start to falter and see that you’re spread too thin. Because you were,” she said firmly. “And still are. You have been for years.”

My friend was right, of course.

Over the past several years I’d been driving myself into the ground trying to save the farm. Perhaps accepting the job from Treyton had been the thing that snapped the strings holding it all together for me. I was missing out on sleep, spending too much time commuting, and working a forty to fifty hour work week in the city while also finding a way to give forty hours to

the farm. Two hours every morning, starting at four o'clock. Three hours every evening. Full days on the weekends. It barely left time to take care of myself. Fatigue had settled into my bones and muscles over the past two weeks unlike anything I'd ever felt before. I was pretty sure I'd fallen asleep at my desk a couple times while working at the office, too. Luckily nobody had noticed. I often grabbed a coffee from the break room before I went home because I needed the kick of caffeine to keep me awake on the drive. Sometimes I had to drive with the windows down because the blast of cold air stopped me from getting drowsy, all to stay awake to go back to the farm, muck stalls, take care of horses, and do whatever needed doing.

It just wasn't sustainable. I should have seen that before I let it destroy everything.

"It just sucks," I said softly.

Peach fluffed up a pillow and tucked it between her and the armrest of the sofa. "Treyton sucks."

I smiled. "You have to say that as my best friend. But I was really starting to love him, Peach."

My best friend sighed and tipped her chin in acknowledgement. "I know, babe."

My chest ached as I felt all the losses of the last few days. The horses. The future I thought I would have working a high-end office job in the city. My chance to be in the parade—to be part of something a small-town farmgirl like me never got opportunities for. And Treyton, the biggest loss of all. It hurt deeply, but what hurt more was knowing I had been my own undoing.

If I'd told Trey that I was burning out, he would have adjusted for me. I knew that in my heart. He never would have expected me to keep pushing myself when I was running on empty. But I had kept pushing. I wanted to prove myself. I wanted to lighten his load, save the farm, and be the best assistant he'd ever seen.

But everything ended up slipping through the cracks anyway.

My ego had ruined the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't blame him for being mad. Peach didn't understand, but I knew what this parade meant to him. Hopefully my last-minute patch job to get all the float participants out to the city this morning would be enough to redeem the event. I didn't need forgiveness or gratitude. I just needed to know I hadn't sent it all to hell in a handbasket.

That had to be enough.

CHAPTER 35



TREYTON

The dirt driveway of the Mallory Farm didn't give way beneath the tires of my AMG. Night had fallen and brought with it a sharp chill that blanketed the surrounding fields and roads in frost. The dirt was packed solid and frozen, and when I got out of the car, a wind bit into my exposed cheeks and hands. I shivered, wrapped my coat tighter around myself, and hurried to the illuminated porch that gave the illusion of warmth. At the top of the stairs, it only felt colder and more exposed.

I opened the screen door and knocked on the main one.

And waited.

And waited.

The lights were on inside, but I couldn't tell if anyone was home. Macy's truck was parked a few feet ahead of where I'd left my car, but for all I knew, she and her father were out somewhere in town.

Abruptly, the door swung open.

Macy's father stared out at me, unblinking. His whiskery face looked more groomed than usual, but he still had the severe, wild look of a farmer who would chase me off his property with a shotgun if properly motivated.

"Mr. Wright," I said, desperate to keep my teeth from chattering and making me look weak in front of Macy's father. "Sorry to bother you at this time. Is Macy here?"

"Why?" he barked.

Should've expected that. "I owe her an apology," I said.

He looked me up and down, lips turned down in a frown, thick fingers gripping the door so hard his knuckles were turning white. He looked younger than I remembered. What was that about?

"Maybe she doesn't want to speak to you," Mr. Wright said finally. "You drove a long way for nothing."

"I wouldn't blame her if she didn't. I treated her poorly—worse than poorly," I added for good measure, "and I just need her to know how sorry I am. I messed up. She deserved better."

He continued staring at me, unflinching.

Okay, time to just lay it all out there and hope for the best.

"I know you don't like me, Mr. Wright. I don't blame you. I don't like myself very much right now, either. But regardless of what you think of my character, I'm in love with your daughter. I'm fully aware that she's out of my league. She has more grit and integrity in her pinky finger than I have in my entire body. I learned a lot from her these past six weeks, including humility and kindness and doing the right thing." I looked him right in the eyes. "I'm not here because I want something from her, sir. I'm not here because I expect her to hear me out and forgive me. I'm here because telling her I was wrong and apologizing is the right thing to do. She deserves at least that. Then we can all move on in whatever capacity Macy decides." I couldn't think of anything else to say to change his mind, so I said the only word left in my arsenal. "Please."

Macy's father's expression never faltered. He continued staring at me, and I stared back at him, hoping with every fiber of my being that he wasn't going to close the door in my face and make me throw rocks at her bedroom window.

Very high school, I knew, but I was prepared to do it if I had to.

Finally, he let out a sigh, leaned back into the house, and bellowed his daughter's name.

"Thank you," I said.

“I’ve done nothing for you,” Mr. Wright said. His words might have been harsh, but his voice wasn’t. “This is Macy’s decision to make. I wouldn’t stand between her and this conversation. But a father sometimes wants to know the quality of the man who owes his child an apology.”

“I understand.”

He grunted.

A few seconds later, Macy came around the corner of the door. She drew up short when she saw me. Her father kissed her cheek, muttered something in her ear, and left us to talk.

She wrapped her arms around herself as a cold wind blew up the porch steps and into the doorway. She wore a large red sweater with a winter print on it as well as patterned thick leggings that appeared to be lined with fleece. Her feet were hidden in fuzzy white slippers. She looked fit for Christmas morning.

“What are you doing here, Trey?”

“Can we talk somewhere private?”

She chewed the inside of her cheek. We heard her father sit down in his recliner. It creaked softly. I didn’t want to pour my guts out with him sitting a few feet away.

Finally, she nodded, traded her slippers for a pair of boots, threw on her father’s Mac jacket, and told him we’d be back. He told her to be safe. He’d wait up.

As soon as I turned on my car, I cranked the heat. She buckled up and didn’t say a word as I drove down the driveway and pulled out onto the street. We drove in silence down some long country roads before I found a good spot to pull over and kill the headlights.

I took off my seatbelt and turned to her. “How’ve you been?”

“You didn’t come all this way to ask me how I’ve been,” she said, leveling me with her stare. “What do you want?”

Fuck.

I'd rehearsed this speech a thousand times over, but now that the girl I was in love with was sitting so close and making my whole car smell like vanilla, the words were lost on me. I fumbled for a moment, grasping at straws to find where I wanted to start, before I just started talking. Damn it all to hell if I sounded like a fool. I'd already embarrassed myself enough with her as far as I was concerned.

"I want to tell you I'm sorry," I said lamely. "And to thank you."

She folded her arms. "I'm listening."

"I was an ass, Macy. I never should have kicked you out of the office like that the other day. I should have heard you out, and I should have acknowledged the circumstances that led to the error. I was well aware of the fact that you were running out of steam, and I don't think I did enough to adjust for that. Mistakes happen. I overreacted and prioritized the problem over your wellbeing, and I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry, Macy."

She licked her lips. "Thank you."

"No, thank you," I pressed. "I found out that even after how I'd treated you, you went out of your way to fix the error and communicate to all the float participants. Everyone showed up on time and prepared. There were no hiccups, no speedbumps. I don't know how you did it, but I shouldn't have been surprised. You've shown me nothing but unconditional support and loyalty since I hired you. I wished I'd returned the favor on Monday when I had the chance."

Macy swallowed and looked down at her hands. "I wish that too."

I grimaced. God, I must have hurt her so bad.

She sighed. "But I understand why you reacted the way you did. I know how important this parade is to you, and my mistake could have cost you everything. I knew I had to make it right. So many people look forward to this event, and I didn't want to tarnish your reputation, and—"

"Macy, stop."

She looked up at me, uncertainty dancing in her eyes.

“You are more important to me than the parade,” I said. “I hate that I ever made it seem like I felt otherwise. My priorities have been backward for a long time, but as soon as you came along...” I trailed off, losing the words to describe how I felt and what I wanted. I forced myself to find them. “I realized why I didn’t feel fulfilled. I was chasing success in all the wrong places. I was chasing praise and reputation and superficial things. And then I meet this farmgirl with a heart of a thousand lions and a smile that knocks me on my ass, and it’s like the ground is falling out from under me. I’m grateful for you, Macy. You’ve made me a better man.”

To my relief, she gave me a cheeky little smile. “I was working with scraps. It was bound to happen. Don’t give yourself too much credit.”

Humor. A good sign.

I chuckled. “I give myself zero credit. It was all you. I don’t want to go backward. I want to go forward. Together.”

Her eyebrows drew together. “Together?”

Here we go.

“This isn’t just an apology visit, Macy. I should have told you weeks ago how I feel.”

She leaned a little closer. “And how do you feel, Trey?”

“Like I’m spinning out of control,” I whispered.

“Me too.”

“Like every choice I’ve ever made has led me to this moment, and if I don’t take advantage of it, I’m going to regret it forever.”

Her eyes searched mine and her lips parted. I wanted to kiss her more than anything. If only a kiss could say the words burning in my throat.

But no. I had to say them. I had to breathe life into them and make them real. She deserved to hear them. Then, once they were out in the world and I couldn’t take them back, the

truth would be revealed and maybe the ground would settle beneath me, and I could finally come back down to earth.

“I’m in love with you, Macy Wright,” I said, reaching out and cupping her cheek, tracing her jaw with my thumb as if I could commit the curve of her cheek to memory.

Her eyes danced with tears. “I didn’t expect this.”

“I know, it’s a lot at once.” My gut squirmed. “Too much. But I needed you to hear it. And if you don’t feel the same way I can walk away and know that I gave it everything I had ___”

“Trey.”

“I understand.”

She laughed softly, leaned in the rest of the way, and kissed me. I breathed her in and pulled her close. She clung to the collar of my jacket. The car suddenly felt like it was a thousand degrees inside.

She smiled against my lips and pulled back. “I love you too. And I forgive you. But,” she added, her voice taking on a menacing tone, “if you ever speak to me like that again, I will ___”

“Compost my body with the pumpkins?”

She grinned. “Precisely.”

“Noted. Come back here.” I pulled her in for more kisses.

CHAPTER 36



MACY

The gear shifter was in my way. So was the console. And the small confinement of the car was just not practical. I muttered my frustrations against Trey's buttery soft lips, which gave way to a smile.

"We can go someplace a little more comfortable," he offered.

"I'm not taking you home." I kicked off my boots one after another and left them on the floorboards. "My father is there."

"Who said anything about your house?"

"*Your* house," I grunted as I climbed over the console to straddle him, "is way too far away."

He rested his hands on my hips and gazed up at me. It was almost pitch black out here, but the car was still on, and the interior lights from the dash and the mounted tablet for the controls gave me enough light to see by. He looked more handsome than ever with his hair slightly disheveled from me running my fingers through it during our steamy make-out session.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"You. Me. How I didn't think I'd ever get to kiss you again." I leaned in for more kisses and peppered them across his cheek to his neck. "Or feel you like this again." I ground my hips, feeling him growing hard beneath me.

He squeezed my hips and let out a deep, rumbling chuckle. "You're playing a dangerous game."

“I’m playing to win.”

Slowly, I began peeling off layers of clothing. The car was hot, and so was I, and I no longer needed the heavy jacket or the thick sweater. I crammed it all on top of my boots and straddled him in just my tank top, no bra underneath. I’d been preparing to go to bed when he showed up, but this turn of events was so much sweeter.

Trey ran his hands over the tight fabric before discovering I was naked underneath. He pulled the neckline down. My breasts spilled out, and he pulled me to him so he could take my nipples in his mouth one at a time and gently bit the soft flesh that felt swollen from the heat in the car and the arousal coursing through me. He let out a soft sound of pleasure while I draped my arms behind his neck and continued to grind in his lap. My whole body began to hum, as if we were two magnets charging each other up. My fingers slid up the back of his neck and into his hair once more. I grabbed a fistful, pulled his head back, and devoured his mouth.

Trey ran his hands over my hips and around to my ass, sliding them inside my leggings and under the band of my panties. I let out a soft moan—a little plea for him to keep going—and kissed him deeper.

Just half an hour ago, I’d been wallowing in my own self-pity and feeling like I’d ruined the best thing to ever happen to me. Spending the day with Peach had brightened my spirits some, but as soon as I was alone, truly alone with no other company, the walls started closing in on me again. All I’d been able to think about all night was Trey and how much I missed him. And craved him. Funny how you don’t realize how much influence a person has in your life until they’re gone.

And then there he was, standing on my front porch, cheeks cold and bitten by the wind.

I’d never seen a more beautiful sight.

Trey’s hands wandered deeper into my pants and squeezed my ass cheeks. I giggled against his lips, and his fingers inched toward my pussy. He felt how wet I was and mumbled

something incoherent into our kiss. I swallowed his oxygen, kissed him deeper, and nodded.

Feel me.

Two fingers brushed over my clit. The other two slipped inside me.

I let out a sigh as he filled me up. The sensation chased away any remnants of loneliness I might have been feeling. He tried to push in deeper, but my leggings trapped his movements. Immediately impatient, he grabbed me around the waist, turned me over, and directed me to rest my legs over the console, my socked feet now resting on the empty passenger seat. He had easier access to what he wanted this way. He slid one hand down the front of my leggings while the other cupped the back of my neck, protecting my head from the driver's side window.

He eased back inside me.

My eyes practically rolled back in my head. I must have cooed his name because he turned my head to him in response and rewarded me with more kisses while he fucked me with his fingers. I found it impossible to stay still and pushed up against his touch. He could have whatever he wanted from me right now. I didn't care if someone drove by. If a cop came knocking. If a chopper flew overhead and shined a spotlight down on us.

I needed him.

Now.

Clumsily, I reached beneath myself and fumbled with his zipper. He didn't seem inclined to help me but was rather amused by my struggle. When he pushed down on my clit and up on my G-spot, I gave up trying to free him from his pants and rubbed him over the fabric.

“Good girl,” he purred. “Give in.”

Damn him.

He pressed in deeper. I clung to the nearest thing within reach, his seatbelt. I gasped as my climax amped up. Trey

teased me, edging me and backing off over and over until I was delirious and drunk with pleasure. I couldn't catch my breath, couldn't find my voice to beg him to have mercy on me, or see straight. Finally, he gave me what I wanted, and I let go of what little control I had left and came hard and fast. Stars exploded behind my eyes, and I melted deeper into his lap as all my straining muscles gave in.

He kissed my cheek and neck. "That's it, baby. Just like that."

"More," I panted.

His fingers feathered over my clit. "Whatever you say."

"No," I managed, giving his cock a firm squeeze. "*More.*"

He chuckled, and we were confronted with the "how" of our little situation. Finger fucking me was one thing, but actually having sex? Well, that presented a new set of obstacles in his sleek sports car that, in my current state, I was not able to solve.

I gazed imploringly up at him. "Please."

Trey must have felt the urgency in me, or it was burning within him too because he reached back and reclined his seat all the way. It was electric, so a bit of a slow ride, but it created enough space for me to sit up, turn over, and with a well-placed knee between his thighs, wiggle my hips and remove my leggings. Was it easy? No. Cute? Probably not. But did it work?

Yes.

Next, I undid his belt and zipper while he slid his seat backward, creating more space for me to crouch down, head precariously under the steering wheel, and pull him free of his pants. I worked them down his thighs a bit before taking him greedily in my mouth and thanking him for the pleasure he'd just given me. Trey lifted his ass from the seat, pressing deeper into my throat, and I took all of him. He growled my name. The sound only made me more eager to make him feel good. I worshiped him until he swore under his breath.

I looked up, mouth full.

His eyes were on the rearview mirror. “A car is coming.”

I came up for air. “Turn off the interior lights.”

He did, and we were plunged into darkness. He kept his eyes on the approaching car and I took him back in my mouth. Nobody was going to stop for a blacked-out car on the middle of these old farm roads. Besides, he was reclined and probably not visible even if they turned their headlights on us.

Trey gripped the sides of his seat and groaned with pleasure. The passing car’s lights briefly lit up the inside of the AMG, but they were gone in an instant, and there was nothing but taillights on the road before us.

Trey pulled me up, fished a condom out of his pocket, and rolled it on. I climbed into his lap but couldn’t find anywhere to put my knees. He frowned, his cock rock hard between us, before flipping me over in one fluid motion that surprised and impressed me all at once. I landed beneath him on the seat he’d just lain in, and he lifted one of my legs, dropped his hips low, and pressed into me.

I gasped.

He leaned in and silenced me with kisses. I didn’t care that I was folded like a pretzel or that this was literally the most inconvenient place for us to have sex. I wouldn’t have traded it for anything. There was no way I’d have been able to make it all the way back to his place in the city without jumping his bones while he drove, and that simply wasn’t safe. This was better.

Not to mention a good memory to cherish forever. Sure, we were probably both going to have some surprise bruises in the morning and some aches and pains, but we’d never question whether we let an epic roadside lovemaking session pass us by.

He pushed in deeper. I clung to his forearms. He fucked me until I came again and then somehow flipped me onto my stomach beneath him and took me from behind. I whimpered and gripped the edges of the leather seat beneath me while he filled me up. Every thrust brought me to the brink of another

orgasm. He leaned over me, gripped my chin in one hand, and forced my head back so he could kiss me deeply. I surrendered, loosening my grip on the seats and melting into the leather. He must have felt it because he pressed inside me even deeper, ran his thumb over my bottom lip, and purred in my ear.

“You’re mine.”

I couldn’t speak, but I managed a lustful smile.

His thrusts slowed and he bowed his head to kiss my shoulders and across my upper back. I let out a dreamy sigh as he let my head fall, but soon he pulled me back up to him so he could kiss my lips and taste me.

His cock pulsed inside me.

I lifted my hips from the seat, eager to show him just how much of him I could take.

“I fucking love you,” he growled.

He didn’t give me the opportunity to respond. He drove in deep. I cried out. He swallowed my cry, and we both descended into ecstasy together, releasing the final hold we had on the tethers holding us intact. It wasn’t until we were both done that I realized there were tears running down my cheeks. Trey wiped them gently away, and we stayed there, folded up into each other in the darkness, our rapid breathing finally slowing back to normal.

I closed my eyes and rested my cheek on his chest. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER 37



TREYTON

Macy adjusted the hardhat she wore. It didn't match her stylish forest green pantsuit, but damn, did it ever look cute on her. Her long blonde hair was done up in a low, sleek bun, and she'd gone over the top with a bit of makeup to mark the special day of the parade—a red lip, as a matter of fact. Part of me wondered if she'd paid attention to that detail because she knew I was a fan. It suited her.

Hell, everything suited her. Who was I kidding?

She held her tablet in one hand, balanced against the inside of her forearm, and jabbed at the screen with the other hand. “It looks good, Trey. All the floats have left the hangar. No problems there. The first float is at the starting point and the others will be there in fifteen minutes. Right on schedule.” She looked up and grinned at me. “Are you ready?”

“I've been ready my whole life.”

She laughed. The sound was music to my ears. I still couldn't believe that in the heat of the moment, I'd been willing to let that sound go. She was the best thing that had ever happened to me, or probably would ever happen to me, and I was going to hold on for dear life from here on out.

“Have you heard from your father?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yep, he and Peach and a few other town locals are on their float and ready to go. They're behind the pirate ship. Good spot. Thank you for making that happen.”

“Mallory Farm deserves the attention.” I leaned in and pressed a kiss to her cheek. We were still at work, so I wasn’t going to kiss her on the lips in front of all the safety officers and other employees on site, but I wanted them to know that she was spoken for. I nodded at my AMG parked on the other side of some orange cones separating our work area from the rest of the road. “I have a surprise for you.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Another one?”

“You’ll like it.”

She pursed her lips, and I knew a witty comeback was about to come out of her mouth, but she trapped it behind her teeth and suddenly slapped on a fake smile. I didn’t have to ask what was wrong. The source of her awkwardness made himself known within seconds.

“Mr. Corral. Ms. Wright.”

I turned and found Mayor Hopkins standing behind me with his hands clasped behind his back. A power pose for weak men like him.

He squared his rounded shoulders and lifted his chin. “Looks like things are moving smoothly. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” I said.

He and I hadn’t spoken since I told him to pound sand. I doubted he understood why he’d pissed me off so much with all the disrespectful shit he’d said about Macy and her family, and I didn’t care to break it down for him. He wasn’t worth my breath. All I needed was for him to know we were not friends, and we were not friendly, either.

Ideally, he’d be voted out of office next term. I would have to donate some money to his opponent.

Macy chewed the inside of her cheek. “You should probably make a point to be at your float in the next few minutes, sir. You don’t want to miss your boarding slot or they’ll have to put someone up there for you.”

His beady little eyes lingered on her. “Yes, well, I just wanted to make sure you two had a handle on things before I

go and smile at the people.”

“It’s all smooth sailing, sir,” I said.

He gave me a curt nod. I supposed that was as much courage as he could muster, and deep down, he probably wanted to tell me what he really thought about me. If he’d done that, it might have made me respect him a little more.

Probably not though.

He turned on his heel and left to get into a blacked-out SUV, which took him to where the floats were ready to start the journey through the city streets. Macy and I would be right behind him.

She leaned in and nudged me with her shoulder. “Does he know he’s standing yet?”

“Nope.”

She laughed. “Did you see his shoes? Bad support. Glossy black. Blister central.”

“Good.”

She slid her tablet into her Chanel bag and hooked her arm through mine. “What’s this surprise of yours?”

I nodded at the AMG. “Let’s go for a quick drive.”

Macy and I had a few inside jokes about my car now. She liked to call it the “love machine,” which seemed like a huge disservice to such a sexy vehicle. Sometimes she’d stroke the leather seat and tease me by talking seductively about our roadside romp while I drove. It always resulted in a hard-on and loss of sleep that night. She couldn’t tease me like that and not pay the consequences.

We pulled up to the starting line of the parade. The energy was buzzing. Electric. Magnetic. Macy grinned from ear to ear as she followed me past security, through a blocked-off section of road, and in behind the floats where a pop-up changing area had been set up. I led her into the change room, which was brisk and chilly just like outside, and revealed a changing rack loaded up with fantastical garments: a princess, gown, gloves, cloak, crown, and a matching princely suit.

She looked over at me, confused. “What’s this for?”

“Us.”

“I thought we were running operations on the ground. I won’t be able to move in this thing.” She reached out and lifted the wide, tulle skirt of the princess ballgown. “It’s huge!”

“We’re not running communications,” I mused, “and we’re not going to be on the ground.”

She studied me, a curious smile curling her lips. “Where are we going to be?”

“On the pumpkin float.”

She blinked.

The pumpkin float was one of the biggest attractions. We’d used Mallory Farm pumpkins to fill the thing, and a giant pumpkin made out of mostly compostable materials sat atop a stack of smaller real ones. On top of the large pumpkin was the throne for the pumpkin princess and her esteemed prince.

This year, that princess was going to be my girl.

I took the dress off the rack. “Better strip. They’re waiting for us.”

Macy put a hand over her mouth and giggled. Her body language went from businesswoman to gleeful child in a matter of three seconds as she took the dress from me, spun with it, and whispered, “It’s so sparkly.”

Laughing, I helped her out of her blazer. “Princess dresses are sparkly, yes.”

“I’ve never dressed up as a princess before.”

“Never? Not even for Halloween as a kid?”

She shook her head. “Nope. I was always much more inclined to do something ghoulish or monster-like, much to my father’s enjoyment. My mother would craft me whatever I wanted. I think one year I was a dinosaur after seeing Jurassic Park for the first time. I got a lot of candy that year. Was your Hans Solo your only favorite costume?”

I frowned and tried to recall old memories of childhood. Blane and I always went trick or treating together, even when I was too old for it, but he needed someone to watch him go from door to door. “I think a Transformer made out of cardboard boxes was another favorite.”

“Classic.”

She stepped out of the rest of her clothes and shivered in her bra and panties. I held the dress open for her to step into and stole a little slap on her ass before pulling it up. She scowled over her shoulder at me and I kissed her bare skin in apology.

“I packed you a pair of fleece leggings to wear underneath,” I said. “It’s cold out here and half the parade will be in the shade.”

“My prince charming.”

I did up the back of her dress, helped her into the matching silk gloves, the shoes, and the tiara, and changed into my prince costume. She teased me for how tight the pants were and how high the boots came on my shins before fanning herself.

“Actually, this is kind of doing it for me,” she admitted.

“We can keep them.” I winked.

She grabbed me by the front of my vest—a royal blue and gold stitched work of craftsmanship—and stretched to the tip of her toes to steal a kiss. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

I kissed her deeply, told her to wait while I grabbed her leggings, and hurried out to the car. I paused to look around at the looming skyscrapers and office towers all around, caging in the massive floats and their attached balloons. It was the calm before the storm, my favorite part of the event. Normally, at this time, I was scrambling to make sure everything was just right. This year?

I didn’t have to scramble because the most important thing *was* just right.

Me and Macy.

The rest?

It was all just icing on the cake. I trusted that all of our hard work would pay off in a big way. I felt in my gut that the parade would go off without a hitch, and the ducks I'd been lining up over the last couple of days for other big moves I wanted to make would pay off, too. Soon enough, I'd be able to let Macy in on just what I'd been working on. She knew something was taking up the bulk of my free time, but she hadn't asked yet. Knowing her confidence, she trusted I would tell her in time.

The late morning sun glinted off the windows of a tall office tower to the north. I shielded my eyes against the glare, breathed in the crisp autumn air, and stole a moment to feel present and grateful—something I'd learned from Macy.

She called my name. "I'm freezing my butt off in here!"

"Coming! That butt isn't allowed to freeze off. I like it too much."

CHAPTER 38



MACY

When my father saw me making my way across the street to the giant pumpkin float, he put a hand on his gut, threw his head back, and laughed like a total heathen. I hadn't heard him laugh that hard in ages, and even though it was at my expense, I grinned, gave a little twirl, and committed to what I hoped was a graceful curtsy right there in the middle of the New York City street.

He shook his head in disbelief. "Now I've seen everything. I always thought you were a princess, Macy Mae, just not such a sparkly one."

Admittedly, the dress was infinitely more sparkly now that we were out in the sun. It was almost as if someone was shining lights under it. It was obnoxious, loud, powder blue, and oozed Cinderella vibes.

Peach, who was going to ride the Mallory Farm float alongside my father and some other locals, hurried over and gasped. "You look *amazing*. Where's my princess get-up, Trey?" She turned toward him wearing a dramatic pout with her hands planted on her hips.

"I'll add it to the to-do list for next year," Trey swore. "Are you two ready to get this thing going?"

Peach nodded excitedly. "Yep! We're ready. Right, Mr. Wright?"

My father wrapped an arm around her shoulders the same way he had since she was a little girl. I remembered how she used to light up under his attention when we were growing up.

Peach's own father was a distant, withdrawn man. All the affection in her life came from her mother, who made up tenfold for her father's lack of presence, but as a little girl, she couldn't help but want that fatherly presence in her life. In hindsight, I knew my father saw that in her and tried to fill that need as best as he could without overstepping.

When we were quite young, he was the one to enforce traffic safety with her. He would always tell her to look both ways before she crossed the street, and if we walked the sidewalks in town to the local video store on a summer night, he would ask her and me to point out potential dangers. Back then I hadn't understood why Peach loved it so much. I'd been at the mercy of his lessons day in and day out. But for her, it was undivided attention from someone she looked up to.

I could still see that admiration on her face now as she grinned at my father. I was so glad they had each other today to ride the float together.

"Can we escort you?" Trey offered.

The four of us made our way to the floats. My father gave me a big hug, tugged playfully on my dress, and told us to have fun. He and I had not only turned a corner when it came to all the distance that had formed between us these past weeks, but we'd gotten closer than ever. I think part of his good mood had to do with the fact that he was taking effective medication for his arthritis for the first time in almost five years. That relief must have been such a game changer for him.

I watched him and Peach climb the steps of their float with ease. I doubted he'd have been able to do that so gracefully just two weeks ago.

Trey wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Ready?"

I nodded. "Ready."

We climbed the staircase up the back of the giant pumpkin float. In the distance, I could hear the hum of a massive crowd. Music filtered down the block. Every now and then I got a whiff of apple cider and other sweets. My stomach fluttered

with excitement as we reached our two fake thrones that glistened in the sunlight. Between the massive chairs were bowls of candy that we would throw into the crowd lining the sidewalks.

I took my seat and Trey stood in front of me, gazing down at the street below and out at the expanse of floats stretched out in a single-file line ahead of us. We were the fifth float from the front. Unfortunately, Mayor Hopkins would ride up front, but in the grand scheme of things it didn't really matter. Behind him was a glistening float inspired by superheroes. Behind that, the giant pirate ship made by the Dunlevys, who had come to greet Trey and me when we first arrived with gift baskets in hand to thank us for all our support. It had shocked both of us. We weren't expecting gifts. The Dunlevys thanked us again before rushing off to their float.

Behind them was my family's float from Mallory Farm, and then mine and Trey's. Attached to the back of our giant pumpkin was a massive balloon—a Jack-o'-lantern head attached to a small body. It bobbed up and down gently as if it too were excited to kick things off.

Far up ahead, someone made the announcement that the parade was beginning. Cheers thundered down the block.

Trey turned to me with a wide grin. "Here we go."

Seconds after he took his seat, the float lurched forward. I gripped his hand and giggled as the machine rolled along behind the others. He rubbed his thumb across my knuckles hidden under my silk gloves, brought my hand to his lips, and kissed it.

I mouthed *I love you* to him, and seconds later we came around the corner and the parade sprawled out in front of us. A sea of people filled the sidewalks. Children sat atop their fathers' shoulders and waved up at people in the floats. Trey and I got to our feet, took bowls of candy, and began tossing treats over the sides of our giant pumpkin. The float was so big that we had to toss the candy a good distance away, so it didn't slide down the edges and get trampled by the cart.

Street vendors sold mini donuts, hot dogs, hot chocolate, pretzels, cider, and all kinds of treats. My father stood from his place in the Mallory Farm float in front of us and waved down at all the children, who waved eagerly back. His booming laugh reached my ears and I leaned into the moment and the character I was supposed to be. Little girls jumped up and down when they saw me. I wiggled my fingers in a playful wave before throwing candy their way.

I couldn't believe how many people were in attendance. Every time we came around the corner, I expected the crowds to dwindle, but they never did.

It felt like I'd been transported into a totally different world.

Up here on the giant pumpkin, I wasn't just Macy Mae Wright, the broke farmer's daughter. I felt like the princess dress, the glitter, the sunshine, and the joy and gratitude of the day totally encapsulated how I'd been feeling since Trey and I shared our feelings with each other. All the exhaustion and fatigue from the last two months was gone. Up here, no negativity could touch me. No grief over losing my horses. No angst over my father's ailing health. No worries about how we were going to cover the bills for the farm come the new year.

It was nothing but peace and love up here.

I caught Trey looking at me and grinned back. "What?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "You look like you belong up here."

"I *feel* like I belong up here." I turned my face to the sun, inhaled deeply, and closed my eyes. "You never told me how magical this would be. How tall I would feel." My eyes fluttered open, and I squinted in the brightness. "I get why you love this so much now. I can feel everything."

He threw handfuls of candy until his bowl was empty and then came to meet me in front of the thrones. "Feel everything?"

"The people. The city. All of it. It's like Thanksgiving dinner on the farm, only on steroids." I laughed when his brow

furrowed. “It’s the best way I can think to explain it.”

“I think I get it.”

“Thank you for this. I’ll never forget it.”

He cupped my cheek. “Neither will I. This year has been one for the books.”

“Careful,” I whispered. “Everyone is watching.”

“Let them watch.”

Trey closed the distance between us. His knuckles brushed a strand of hair from my cheek as he kissed me. I inhaled his cologne and savored his kiss. He tasted like cider and smelled like pine. Down below, the crowd went wild, and he gathered me in his arms and held me against him like he would never let go.

For once in my life, I didn’t feel like I had to be strong or like I had to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders. I felt like I could be the damsel for once, and there was power in that I didn’t expect. The kiss softened, and so did I.

Under the sunny November sky, I knew I was standing on the brink of the rest of my life, and even though there were still so many unknowns spread out before us, I had no fear. We would face them together and weather whatever storm awaited us.

After all, that was what farmers did best.

CHAPTER 39



TREYTON

Blane shivered and folded his arms over his chest. Apparently, his trusty fisherman's sweater wasn't warm enough for mid-December mornings. His breath steamed on the air, which inspired him to breathe into his hands and rub them together as we stood shoulder to shoulder on the dock, looking down at Destiny.

Macy stood on my other side bundled up in a burgundy winter coat, thick black scarf, winter boots, and a knit wrap over her ears. "Is something supposed to happen?"

I crammed my hands into my pockets. "Are you going to jump in there and try to start it, or are we going to stand here and stare at it?"

"*Her*," Blane corrected. "Destiny is a *she*. A proud, gentle, graceful lady in the water."

I shared an arched eyebrow look with Macy, who agreed with me. The boat was a sore sight.

Blane hopped down into the boat, ducked under the canopy, and went to the wheel. He took the key out of his jean pocket and held it up in front of his eyes.

Out across the ocean, the sky looked heavy and white.

Snow was coming.

"Move your ass, Blane. We have places to be."

My brother scowled. "Places to be. Things to do. It's always the same with you. You have to slow down and smell

the roses, Trey.”

“Maybe I would if it wasn’t below freezing when you got it in your head to finally finish this damn hunk of metal and get it started.”

“*Her*,” he hissed again.

I rolled my eyes.

Macy shimmied her feet in an attempt to warm up. “I have faith in her, Blane.”

He turned a sunny smile in her direction. “Thank you, Macy. See, Trey? That’s how you show support. It’s not that hard.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Macy clamped a gloved hand over it. “Hush,” she whispered. “You’re just making this last longer.”

Holding my tongue, I sighed, pulled her in close, and watched as my brother slid the key into the ignition. He gave it a turn. Nothing happened.

Why he wanted to try to start the damn boat in December was beyond me. The weather wouldn’t be suitable to take it down the coast and head down south for at least a couple months, possibly more. Maybe he was sick of running his generator for heat. Maybe the lack of yachts parked in the marina meant there weren’t any models running around to keep his bed warm.

Or maybe he’d gotten lucky and finally got all the parts he needed and didn’t want to delay any longer.

“Come on, baby,” Blane muttered before giving his wrist a twist. The key turned. The engine sputtered.

And then went silent.

He gave me a weak but still hopeful smile. “Hang on, hang on. She hasn’t started up in over a year. We have to be patient with her.” He patted the steering wheel like a man might pet his beloved dog. “You can do this, Destiny. I believe in you. We’ve got prospects, you and I. Come on.”

He turned the key again, and again, and again. The engine continued trying to turn over, but it would only run for three or so seconds before going dead in the water.

Macy frowned. “Something isn’t right.”

“Yeah, my brother,” I said out of the corner of my mouth.

She shoved me playfully with her hip before dropping down into the boat. Blane still continued to try to turn the boat over, and she gently nudged him aside. “Are your safety features engaged?”

“No,” he said, eyeing her. “What do you know about boats?”

“How different can they be from tractors and turbines?”

“Very,” he said.

She pursed her lips thoughtfully.

Blane sighed. “I probably fucked up somewhere. Got wires crossed. Or dirt or water got into the fuel tank. Sorry to bring you guys all the way out here for nothing.” He shivered again. “If you have somewhere to be, you can go.”

“Put a fucking jacket on, Blane,” I said.

He flipped me the middle finger.

“We should go, Macy. Your father is waiting on us.”

She held up a hand. “Aha. This might be it. You’re in forward.” She reached for a lever and pulled it down into neutral. “Try now.”

Blane’s eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. “Holy shit balls, you might be right.”

“I almost always am,” she teased.

Blane held the key in the ignition, closed his eyes, said a prayer, and twisted. The engine sputtered. White frothy water kicked up at the back of the boat. The engine began to roar and then settled into a steady hum. He opened his eyes, let out a victorious cry, fist punched the air, scooped Macy off her feet, and spun in a circle with her.

She laughed until he set her down and fixed her scarf.

“You are a lifesaver,” Blane said before looking up at me. “Thank God you decided to date someone smarter than you are, Trey.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed before breaking into a grin. “Congrats, Blane. This is a long time coming. You’re one step closer to those sandy beaches and bikini-clad babes.”

He rubbed his hands together. “You don’t have to tell me. And the best part? I’m going to be able to keep living here through the winter. For a minute there I thought I was going to have to rent an apartment.”

“Oh the audacity,” I mused before leaning forward and offering Macy a hand.

Macy giggled, took my hand, and stepped out of the boat back up onto the dock. “Glad we could help, Blane.”

He flashed her a dashing smile. “If any of your friends have a thing for boats, Macy...”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh God. Sorry, Blane. But no. I’m not condemning any girls I care about to life on the sea in a piece of scrap metal like *that*. No offense.”

He waved us off. “You two just don’t know how to appreciate good old fashioned aluminum work. Destiny has character. She’s an old girl but she’s got spirit.”

Macy snickered. “The way you talk about her makes me think you don’t need a girlfriend at all.”

I wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “He talks to her like the volleyball in *Castaway*. It’s unsettling. I should probably call someone about it, huh?”

“Piss off, Trey,” Blane said.

I turned and began leading Macy down the dock to my car. I called to my brother over my shoulder. “You just let us know if she ever starts talking back to you, Blane.”

Macy sat in the passenger seat of my winter vehicle, my Bentley Bentayga, and frowned. She'd caught on that we were heading to her family farm when we were still on the freeway, but I hadn't told her why, and I didn't intend to now. We were only a few minutes away.

"So, is this whole surprise thing going to be something I have to get used to?" she asked.

"Yup."

She slumped in her seat. "I was hoping you'd grow out of it."

"Nope."

"I don't need grand gestures, you know? I'm happy. You got the girl. You can stop trying to sweep her off her feet."

"Trying? Baby, I sweep you off your feet every day."

She broke and giggled. "Maybe I just want to let you think that. That's my grand gesture."

"That's just cruel."

She leaned across the console to give me a kiss with her peppermint ChapStick. I would never get enough of her and her kisses. "I just like to keep you on your toes," she whispered.

A few minutes later, I pulled down the farm driveway. We spotted her father on a ladder at the bottom of the porch steps. Down below, a young man held a set of Christmas lights and the bottom of said ladder.

"No way," Macy breathed.

"What?" I put the car in park but left it running for heat.

"Daddy hasn't hung Christmas lights in..." She trailed off and counted on the fingers of one hand. "Four years. I've always had to do it, and I'm not great with ladders, so I sort of toss them into the bushes and call it a day. But this?" A grin stretched her cheeks from ear to ear. "He's doing full-blown Christmas."

Macy had been spending most nights with me in the city. It just made sense and saved her the commute from the farm every day to and from work. Her father hadn't hated the idea, though he'd openly admitted to her that he was going to miss their routines. She promised to come around as often as possible and had held true to that promise over the last two weeks. She drove out to the farm for a full day on Saturdays to help out, visited for a weeknight evening where she made dinner, and sometimes added another visit here and there where she could. Her father appreciated her efforts, and I knew the quality time with him was good for her soul, too. I'd been tagging along on some of said visits and he and I were finally getting acquainted properly.

I was pretty sure he no longer hated my guts.

Not positive but pretty sure.

Macy got out of the car and I followed her toward the porch. Her father heard us coming but didn't turn around. He kept mounting lights to the hooks on the trim while the young man down below, the newest farm hand Macy had hired, kept hold of the ladder.

Her father had handed over all financial decision making to her, and she was already making changes. She had hired help on the property six days a week—every day but Sunday. She was working with a landscaping team to remap the land and create the features she wanted. I'd connected her with some developers who built high quality structures to add another barn as well as an on-site café. She had big plans, and I was going to help her achieve them by being an investor in Mallory Farm Enterprises.

She'd pushed back on that a little but eventually folded.

“What're you doing up there, Daddy?” Macy called, tucking her hands in her pockets. “Did the Christmas spirit bite you properly this year?”

“Don't patronize me, Macy Mae.” He clipped a final light in and descended. “We have a lot of reasons to celebrate this year. I thought the place could use some cheer and curb appeal.”

She gave him a hug and kisses on each cheek. “Do you want some help?”

He smiled past her at me. “Think you can handle it, City Slicker?”

“So long as I can borrow a pair of gloves,” I said.

Mr. Wright chuckled. “All right. Deal. But first let’s go down to the barn.”

Macy frowned. “Why?”

He pushed the string of lights he’d been stringing into the young farm hand’s arms. “Hold these. Put ‘em in the box or something and take a break. There’s coffee in the pot in the kitchen if you need to warm up.” He started walking off toward the barn. “Come on, Macy Mae. You’ll see.”

“Great,” she grumbled, “more surprises. Do you know about this?”

“Me?” I asked innocently.

She scowled. “Yes. You.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Macy’s father beat us to the barn. He had an unusually spry spring to his step. Macy had been gushing about how his arthritis medication seemed to just keep making him feel better and better. I was glad for him. I couldn’t imagine how difficult it had been to lose so much physical strength and capability after a lifetime of working with his hands and using his body as a tool.

He shouldered his way into the barn, gave me a whiskery grin over his shoulder, and held the door for his daughter to pass through first. It was warm inside and smelled like hay. Macy’s boots scuffed across the concrete floors and she turned to ask us what this was all about, but never got the word out.

A horse whinnied.

She froze, turned slowly, and took off running toward one of the stalls. She gripped the gate, let out a delighted shriek, bounced up and down, and scrambled to unlock it. She had the

gate open before we caught up to her, and by the time we did, she was in the stall with her arms around the neck of one of her and her father's old stallions.

Well, technically one of her mother's horses, before her mother passed.

She buried her face in the horse's neck. "I never thought I'd see you again."

The horse, who I understood was named Bruce, lifted a foot, pawed at the ground, and bowed his head, using his chin against her back as if he was hugging her back.

Her father sniffled beside me.

I glanced over and noticed his eyes were misty.

He caught me staring. "Not a word."

I didn't feel the need to tell him that it also felt like there was a frog in my throat.

After saying hello to Bruce, Macy went to the next stall over to give the same warm affection to Mama, the slightly older mare. Once she'd soaked up as much as she could, she turned to us, sniffing and puffy-eyed.

"How did you do this?" she whispered.

Her father nodded at me. "Don't look at me. This was all Treyton's idea."

"How?" was all she managed.

I shrugged. "I pulled some strings. Made some calls. Begged shamelessly," I added, the frog in my throat easing up some. "We had to get them back. You never should have been in a position where you had to sell them while you were working for me. It wasn't acceptable. Your father helped connect me to the buyers and we whittled them down until they couldn't say no."

Macy sobbed, rushed to us, and embraced us each with one arm. "Best Christmas gift ever."

EPILOGUE



MACY

One Year Later

It had rained all morning.

The streets of New York were flooded with puddles. Umbrellas swarmed sidewalks like bat wings, hovering over the heads of pedestrians doing their last-minute Thanksgiving errands. Car horns blared down a side street. Traffic seemed worse than usual, probably a combination of the parade and the rain, and people were impatient.

Not me.

I hurried between bodies, the wide skirt of my princess dress practically knocking people over like bowling pins. Some people shouted after me that I was a damn nuisance. Others laughed at my ridiculous getup. I couldn't blame them. I hadn't intended on wearing it to run six blocks down the street to tell the safety inspector that he had the green light, but hey, sometimes a girl had to do what a girl had to do.

I came to a stop, huffing and puffing outside the hangar as the last of the floats rolled out. At the same time, the stormy skies overhead seemed to breathe a sigh of relief before holding their breath. I felt a couple raindrops on my forehead but, other than that, *nothing*.

"We're good to go," I announced. "Where's Trey?"

The safety inspector nodded up at the giant pumpkin. Unlike last year, it wasn't orange. This year we'd changed

things up and painted the entire thing in a dazzling sparkling silver. It was supposed to resemble a giant disco ball, but some of the effect was lost with the gray skies. If the sun decided to make an appearance, the pumpkin would take everyone's breath away.

I hurried up the staircase of the pumpkin, princess-gown skirt in hand, blisters forming on my heels.

Trey turned when he heard me reach the top. "There you are! What the hell happened?"

I huffed and puffed for breath. "The car. Wouldn't. Start." I sucked in a ragged gulp of air. "I had. To run. Here."

He blinked. "Do you need some water?"

I nodded, and he handed over a water bottle stashed under our thrones. Just like last year, we were riding as the prince and princess of the parade. And, just like last year, Trey looked handsome and dashing. He wore a black suit this year—we'd decided to modern-up the fairy tale and opt for something a bit more present day. My dress was a deep scarlet color, and my makeup was vampy and sultry. We looked good together and fit to go to a ball.

Or ride a giant pumpkin down the streets of New York.

He checked his watch. "It's time."

I felt a thrill in the pit of my stomach. I'd worked for *months* on this parade this year. I fully appreciated just how much time and effort went into a project of this scale now. Trey said this was the easiest year he'd had by far because he had my help. Personally? I found that absolutely bat shit crazy. There had been multiple days where I wanted to rip my hair out dealing with the early stages of float participants and getting people to commit. It was like pulling teeth. Then came the tedious work of securing sponsors, who always wanted a better deal than what they got last year, and schmoozing the other big players, like the mayor.

At least Mayor Hopkins was no longer in the picture. He'd lost his election and was replaced with someone slightly less

foul and a teaspoon more tolerable. But only a teaspoon. As my daddy would say, a politician is always a politician.

After all the hard work, the late nights, the early mornings, the disappointments, scrambling to fix errors, firing people, hiring new people, backing out of contracts with sponsors, talking with lawyers—among other things—I was ready to see the fruits of our labor.

When the parade began with a jovial announcement up ahead, I grabbed Trey's hand and squeezed. He squeezed back—a silent gesture that he knew exactly how I was feeling inside. How could he not? He'd done this a dozen times over. This morning, while we were rolling out of bed and making our way to our shower, I'd asked him if the nerves ever went away.

He assured me they only got worse because the pressure was higher and higher every year.

It hadn't made me feel better.

Luckily, the three orgasms he gave me in the shower had.

As I stood on the giant pumpkin, dressed like royalty and holding my man's hand, I truly felt like a princess. I had everything I could possibly want. The love of my life, a challenging career that pushed me to my limits, my father's good health, and a trip to look forward to in January to see Peach, who had taken a job in Hawaii after up and moving there at the end of September, swearing she couldn't do another New York winter.

On top of all that?

Mallory Farm had turned over a new leaf.

It wasn't easy. Far from it. But we had poured our hearts and souls into the farm over the past year. Daddy finally succumbed to the need to bring the property into the next century. We created attractions for families, registered ourselves on more school field-trip lists, and upped the stakes by also catering to adults for date nights and special events. With Trey's help, we'd started looking at a five-year plan which involved hosting more glamorous events like weddings

and parties. With any luck, we might even be able to offer farm-to-table dining in the future.

The very far future, of course.

It was still up in the air who would run the farm once my father no longer could. It would stay in our family, of course, and Trey had mentioned in passing a few times that he thought the farm was a much better place to raise children than the city.

The words had set a fire burning in my heart that hadn't faltered since I first heard them. The thought of starting a family with him and raising them up in the place I had so many fond memories of made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. My children would walk the same halls in the morning to go down for breakfast that I had. They would find their mother boiling water in the same kettle my mother had. We would share Christmas mornings in front of the same bay window and crackling fire.

Trey pulled me into him. "What are you thinking about, Macy Mae?"

He'd taken to calling me that when he knew I was daydreaming about the future.

I bit my bottom lip and gazed up at him. "Everything that's coming next for us."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"I don't know," I admitted, "but whatever it is, I'm excited. And I'm ready."

With him by my side, I was ready for anything.

"Are you?"

"Yes," I said confidently.

Down below, the crowds hummed with energy. I was struck with the scents of the event, just like last year, and breathed in the cinnamon hints of cider and the sugary sweetness of powdered donuts. I'd have to get me one of those when this was done.

“I’m ready too,” Trey said softly, grazing his lips across mine.

I giggled. “Aren’t we supposed to be working up here? You know, throwing candy?”

“The candy can wait.”

“For what?”

Trey got a devilish look in his eyes.

My heart skipped a beat.

Yet again, my man had a trick up his sleeve—another uncanny surprise, I was sure.

I prodded him in the chest. “Spit it out, you devil. Whatever it is, whatever you’re planning, better not make me cry. I’m warning you.”

Suddenly, the floats came to a grinding halt. I yelped and grabbed Trey for support. He braced me, and we both peered down over the edge. I wondered if our float had broken down. But everyone else had stopped, too. An eerie quiet settled over the city street before whispers broke out down below. What was going on?

I went to the stairs and stepped down. “I’ll be right back. Maybe one of the flaggers can tell us what’s going on. I hope it’s not an accident or something at the front and everyone is okay.”

“Macy.”

“I’ll be quick, I promise.”

“Macy Mae Wright.” His voice was louder this time, amplified beyond human means. I turned, wide-eyed, to find Trey with a microphone in hand. The city seemed to inhale all at once, piecing together what this meant far before I could.

What the hell was he doing? Didn’t he know we were on a time limit? We had to have this parade finished and cleared out in time to get the street back up and running. We already caught enough heat from people for blocking traffic. We didn’t need to make more of a scene.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

Trey took a knee.

I stared at him, trying to process what he was doing.

He reached for my hand.

The crowd erupted in gasps of excitement.

I frowned.

And then he pulled something out of his pocket. A tiny little box made of velvet and satin. He held it out but didn't flip it open.

“Macy,” he said, his voice soft, the way it sounded sometimes in the morning when he woke up, “you and I have had quite the year. Through all the ups and downs, you've been consistent. You're what makes me excited to wake up every day. I chase the high of making you smile or laugh. I'm totally addicted to you, and everyone who knows me has told me I'm a better man for it. I believe them. You challenge me to be better. Make me grow. Hold me accountable. Drive me crazy sometimes,” he added with a cheeky smirk. “And I love you for it. Baby, I don't want to spend another second as your boyfriend. I want more. So, on that note.” He paused to flip open the ring box. Inside, a dazzling ring glittered even though the sun hadn't come out to play.

My knees almost went out from under me.

Trey held the ring up. “Will you marry me, Macy?”

I nodded and cried all at once. “Yes! Of course I will!”

Everything that happened after that got lost in the chaos of the screaming and cheering down below. Trey slid the ring on my finger, and I dropped to my knees to throw my arms around him and kiss him.

“I told you not to make me cry,” I whispered.

He held me tighter. “Happy Thanksgiving, Macy Mae.”

Images of our children running barefoot across the farmhouse porch in the summer danced in my mind. I saw them chasing the family dog through the grass in August and

riding ponies in July. I saw campfires, pumpkin harvests, first dates, prom night, and baby's first night home from the hospital, all in a matter of seconds.

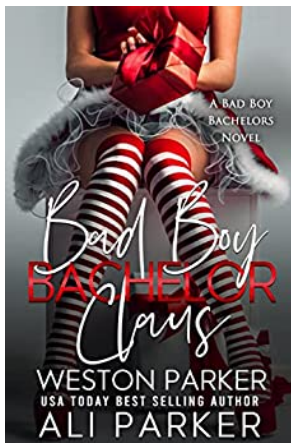
Gratitude flooded my heart.

Even if our future didn't look like that, I knew it would be bright, and I knew it would be *ours*.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Treyton," I breathed. "You are what I'm most thankful for."

Enjoy that? I hope so!

If you need some sexy Holiday fun with a good side of love, pick up [Bad Boy Bachelor Claus!](#)



They want me to pose as Santa this year.

And the media turns it quickly to "Naughty Santa."

Say what? You cannot be serious.

But it's what I'm required to do if I want the billion-dollar family business come New Year's.

There's always a catch.

The prize is just worth my efforts this time. Our sprawling chain of department stores are a cash cow like the world has never seen.

And it's all mine.

New York's hottest bachelor is on the hunt, dressed up as Mr. Claus and he's looking for an elf that'll hop off the shelf and entertain him.

Just my luck that she's cute, spicy, and doesn't put up with me. Thankfully she looks stunning in a tutu and elf shoes.

Too bad she hates my guts.

My playboy ways and smart-mouth remarks haven't won me any favors with her over the last ten years and that's not

ever going to change.

Or is it? It is Christmas after all.

The world thinks I'm calling the shots, but they have no idea my little elf has me wrapped around her pointed little finger.

Get ready for a good time!

Insider Group



Well hello again! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you loved it.

I'd hate to part ways now that you are through the book. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on

my Insiders Newsletter Group that you just can't miss out on.

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See you on the inside...

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ALI'S ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

She's a creative at heart and loves coming up with more ideas than any one person should be allowed to access. She lives in Tennessee with her hubs, teenage son, two grown daughters and two love-of-her-life grand babies! Telling a good story that revives hope, reminds us of love and gives a

vacation from life is all she's up to.

Questions, comments or concerns? You can always email her at Ali@aliparkerbooks.com.

Let's connect...

[Website](#) ~ [Insider's Group](#) ~ [Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#) ~ [The Parker's Playground](#)

WESTON'S ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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[The Parker's Wicked Playground](#)

Bad Boy Bachelor Thanksgiving

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