



# Brewing *Sunshine*

BROTHERS THREE ORCHARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# TARYN QUINN

# BREWING SUNSHINE

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A STEAMY SMALL TOWN ROMANCE

BROTHERS THREE ORCHARD

BOOK ONE

TARYN QUINN



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## BREWING SUNSHINE

*Kira Webb was one of the strongest women I knew—she just didn't realize it yet.*

She calls me Viking, and she's not wrong. I'm rough around the edges and work as hard as I play. What she's going to find out is that I love even harder.

I knew from the moment I met her she was made for me.

The problem?

My Kira is stubborn and she takes her job very seriously. We both want to prove ourselves and make the new Brothers Three Taproom a success. I'm the brewmaster, hired for my out of the box thinking and creative hard cider formulas. Kira is order and spreadsheets and safety. She has a contingency plan for every problem.

Except me.

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Also, a special shout out to all those who have loved our Lost in Oblivion series. Happy Acres has been a part of our publishing journey for almost ten years and we're happy we were able to create a series for this place that has meant so much to us.

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



## AUTHOR NOTE

Happy Acres has gone through a few iterations over the years and while we gave it a makeover to create **BROTHERS THREE ORCHARD**, one thing remains the same—family, and found family are the basis of all the stories.

Oh, and we can't forget the love stories. Especially since all our guys fall **HARD** for their women.

Thanks for coming on this journey with us.

### READING ORDER:

- **Brewing Sunshine**—Ronan Parrish and Kira Webb
- **Fiancée by Christmas**—Clay Winslow and Rachel Doyle
- **Bodyguard by Night**—Ransom Douglas and Willow Doyle
- **Forever by Morning**—Beckett Manning and Helena Danbury

# CHAPTER 1

KIRA

## COSMIC JOKE

July in the orchard was more buzz than hum.

The bees bouncing from apple to apple looking for a spare blossom, the whir of machines cutting back the strawberry plants that had finished producing, and the chipper working overtime on the branches that had fallen in the last storm. But my favorite was the earthy scent of apples almost ready for their season.

The advancing whomp of horse hooves rushing through the acres of trees told me my best friend, Beckett Manning, was nearby. Ever since he'd traded a tractor for his horse, he'd been a menace. At least the tractor had to stay on the main path.

I ducked into the copse of Honeycrisp trees. I wasn't quite ready to face people just yet. I brushed my fingers over the glossy dark leaves and picked off a few dead ones automatically. I supposed it was pretty basic of me, but they really were my favorite apple.

After twelve years it was a miracle that any apple would be palatable, but they were the ones I looked forward to every year. I ducked under a branch of one of the dwarf trees that were interspersed with the larger, older ones to find just the right one.

There she was along the back of the quadrant. The early sunlight left dappled golden light on the gnarled roots that popped up out of the ground no matter what we did to prevent

it. Flaky bark gathered and continued to grow around the grooves I'd made my first summer.

I traced my finger over the jagged KW and year that I'd made with my pocket knife. I dipped my hand into my work pants to find the same scarred red Swiss Army and added this year with a dash.

This would be the first harvest where I wasn't part of the chaos. I'd been a part of the orchard since I turned seventeen. Working up from seasonal picker for extra cash to lead manager of hiring.

I couldn't say I'd miss juggling seasonal staffing with the full timers. I'd spent the last three months training my replacement, and Patty was born for the work—far more than I had ever been.

When harvest was upon us, there was a collective hum of rotating seasonal workers underfoot. People came for day labor for extra cash—most of them were guys taking a gap year before starting college or others bumming around in search of jobs that didn't require much more than a strong back. We kept some, but most moved on. Sometimes they came back to us year after year, happy to work outside in the twilight of summer.

I couldn't blame them. Central New York was pretty perfect during that time of year. It was how I'd been lured in.

That and a foolish heart that had believed it beat for the eldest Manning son. Beckett had always walked the line of wild and responsible. His motorcycle, denim and leather uniform, and unruly curls were like catnip for half of Turnbull High. The fact that he could straddle the line between jock and badboy certainly helped net him any girl he could ever want.

Luckily I'd come to my senses before he could add me to the roster of his broken hearts club. But instead of Beck, or his equally delicious brothers, I'd fallen for the sprawling orchard that had expanded every year. And that was the love that had always endured.

Hooves thundered behind me and I knew my time was up.

“I knew I’d find you out here.”

I turned, raising my hand against the sun rapidly rising overhead. I unhooked my sunglasses from my shirt and slipped them on before I grinned up at him. His ever present Yankees cap was threaded through his leather belt on his hip, his hand draped over the pommel, and his knees gently controlling his gray gelding, Storm.

“Being predictable is annoying.”

Beck tipped back his black cowboy hat. “I prefer to call it comfortable.”

“No woman wants to be called comfortable.”

“Aww, c’mon, Key, you know it’s not like that.” He absently rubbed Storm’s side as he sidestepped at the roar of a plane overhead.

I was well aware it wasn’t like that. No man in this entire orchard saw me as a woman. I was Kira, the sturdy friend to all. Kira, the dependable. Kira, the hard worker. Kira, the one who would do any dirty job without a complaint.

“It’s fine.”

He leaned back in his saddle. “I may not know much, but I do know when a woman says it’s fine, it’s anything but.”

I waved him off. “I’m just nervy about saying goodbye to the orchard.”

“You’re not saying goodbye, you’re just moving into the taproom. You’re wasted out here in the trees, I keep telling you that.”

“It’s where you are, buddy.”

“Yes, it’s where I belong. You have always been meant for more. I wouldn’t trust anyone else to get the Brothers Three Taproom off the ground.”

I rubbed my hand along the thigh of my work pants, my palm itchy and about to turn into a faucet from nerves. “You had plenty of more qualified people inquire about the job.”

“But there’s only one Kira Webb. For years, you’ve been organizing me until I’m ready to saw your tongue off. Who got me to upgrade the cold storage?”

“We need the ability to have longer storage times for the hard cider production.”

“Who badgered me to expand distribution?”

“Justin.”

He grunted. “My brother only got the idea after you put the bug in his ear about those new pasteurizer machines.”

“We could manufacture faster than we can sell in the store. You were leaving money on the table.”

“You mean after I spent it first, as usual.”

I opened my mouth to remind him that we tripled our revenue in two years, but he was already getting impatient to move. I could see it in his body language and general antsiness that was starting to mirror in Storm’s demeanor.

I stepped forward to run my palm down the horse’s velvety nose. “Your master just likes to argue with me, even though he knows I hate it.” He nibbled at my fingers then swung his big head over to my shirt pocket. “You know I have something for you.” I unearthed the baby carrots that were supposed to be my snack, but inevitably became his.

“No, I just know you need to innovate and improve. The taproom is what needs your attention. You’ve outgrown the orchard and you know it.”

I huffed out a breath. “I—”

“If you tell me one more time that you aren’t qualified, I’m going to kick your ass myself.”

I growled. “You know I haven’t been able to go back to school.”

“You don’t need school, dammit. You have more experience than any kid coming out with a master’s degree, for fuck’s sake. You’re ready to move onto something more challenging, Key.”

I clenched my hands at my sides. “I know.”

“Then stop trying to find reasons to say no and just say yes. You know you’re going to, or you wouldn’t be out here saying goodbye to your damn tree.”

“I have a proposal written up.”

“Good. Show it to Laverne if you have to, but just get in there and make it work. I hired a new cider master last week and he wants nothing to do with the running of the taproom.”

“You what? Without talking to me?”

Beck grinned at me. “See, you’re already invested.”

“Well, if you looked at my proposal, I’d show you the people I’d researched to come in to work with us.”

“And I’m sure there’s a nineteen page dissertation on each candidate.”

“Five,” I muttered. I liked to be prepared for any eventuality. “Two of them came highly recommended. Stanford Lang won best hard cider of New England last year.”

Beck tipped down his hat. “And that jackass wanted triple my budget as his first year salary. I did my homework too.”

“I could have talked him down.” I had a plan to do just that as well as incentivize with a small percentage of profits if he exceeded my projected earnings. Which would be hard to do, so I wouldn’t have to pay him extra until year three at minimum.

“I have no doubt, but I think he’s a douchebag.”

“We don’t have to like him for him to make a good cider.”

“No, we don’t. But I’d rather respect the man who comes in, and Stanford Lang is an opportunist. He’d leave us high and dry within a season, I’d bet my six-digit pasteurizer on it.”

I folded my arms. “I still would have liked to be in on the decision. If I’m to run the taproom, I have to be able to work with this guy. He needs to know I’m the one making decisions, and you doing the hiring undermines my authority.”



He sighed. "All right, I can see where you're coming from there. But I know he's the one, Key. He's brilliant and has the nose."

"You and the stupid nose."

"It's not stupid. You either have it or you don't. And he does. Even if he's a little...unorthodox."

"Dammit, Beck."

*Unorthodox* was code for hell, I just knew it. Beckett had a habit of picking the underdog. I knew it because I had definitely been one of his favorites to champion.

"Give it three months and if he doesn't work out, we can revisit your hire list, all right?"

I sighed. "Fine."

This time he didn't try to argue. He just lifted the reins. "You'll like Ronan."

"What the hell kind of name is Ronan?"

"What the hell kind of name is Kira? I still like you."

I flipped him off.

He laughed and turned to give me a fine view of Storm's ass. Before he let the horse break into a trot, he yelled back at me. "Say goodbye to the old you, Key! I know you're ready."

I walked back to my tree and brushed my thumb over the year I'd just carved into the bark. What if I wasn't ready? What if this was all a cosmic joke and Beckett was wrong?

A smaller voice nagged at me. *What if he's right?*

## CHAPTER 2

RONAN

## TESTING LOCKS

I jangled the keys in my hand. Actual keys. No security protocols that made me feel like I was being microchipped, for fuck's sake. I'd worked in so many electronic-based operations that anything analog now felt foreign.

But was that a bad thing?

Beckett and Hayes Manning had contacted—actually, more like ambushed—me and had thrown a stupid amount of money my way to come out here and work for them in Bumfuck, New York.

What the hell kind of name was Turnbull? When I Googled it, the first thing that came up was that it was in the top five places for snow. One hundred and fifty inches of fucking snow each winter on average, thanks to lake effect.

What?

That was just...disturbing.

But the next tidbit seemed to be the remarkable amount of apple orchards that were out this way. Goddamn apples as far as the eye could see. Not just on the Happy Acres acreage either. Drive down any road in the area and you'd trip over three orchards.

Complete orchards—and most of them weren't mom and pop operations either. Not to mention the wineries sprinkled into the mix. I'd have to research that a bit more now that I'd accepted the position. It was a pain in the ass to go all the way to the Northeastern half of the state to visit the Catskills when Central New York was ripe for a wine and spirit expo.

I made a mental note to look into that as well. New York was a big state and I didn't know all the ins and outs of how things worked here. I was surprised just how long it took to drive across the state lines.

I'd lived most of my life in major cities where apples were trucked into the markets and grocery stores and that was about it. Unless you took a road trip to check out the foliage and for a bit of time travel into rural America.

The last few years I'd lived in Chicago with a pit stop in Milwaukee to learn from the major beer markets from the ground up.

From yeast and hops innovations to bottling and distribution, I'd been involved with all of it. I'd quickly discovered the nuts and bolts of a business weren't for me and concentrated on becoming a brewmaster. That was the magic and where I became obsessed with the chemistry and, more importantly, the instinct of it. But beer wasn't nearly as sexy as cider in my opinion.

Blends, soils, different fruits, and even spices could take the flavor profile from bland to outstanding. But I'd always been hamstrung by the almighty dollar.

Working with major bottling brands was good in theory, but they only cared about the bottom line, not the creativity of creating a small batch cider.

Until Beckett found me at a wine tasting in the Catskills last month. I was fairly sure he'd stalked me. Damn that location option on my social medias. I had to remember to turn it off, but I'd been interested in the apple wines and impulsively checked into the festival to hopefully link up with a few friends.

And now...I had a new job.

It included a bump of thirty percent in pay from my last job which was nice, but the creative control had really been the draw. With an option for stock if I wanted to stick around.

Fucking stock.

In a company.

Not just an employee number, bitch ass 401K, and a badge from human resources. I had a drawer full of badges from all the places I'd worked at—none had ever lasted long enough to get a scar on the plastic, let alone make me feel as if I'd belonged.

I jingled the keys in my hand again. Until this moment, when I'd stepped onto the porch of this rustic freaking building.

I tried to shake it off. I didn't want to get excited, but every time I ignored my gut, it knocked me on my ass.

And I'd ignored it for too goddamn long.

The key slid into the lock and jammed a little. It took some jiggling to get it moving, but I had a feeling it was more due to disuse than a sign from the universe to hop back into my truck.

The lock finally clicked and I muscled the massive sliding barn door open. The track needed about a gallon of grease and oil, but that was easy enough to fix.

Cement floors gleamed in the patchy streaks of sunlight struggling through the old windows. But I only had eyes for the weathered discovery bench in the center of the room. A series of medium-sized tanks to ferment, steam, and clarify were waiting to be filled. The brushed nickel tanks were dented and well-abused, but also taken care of.

Lovingly.

Beakers, torches, and droppers were lined up in individual slots with amber jugs and bottles ready for mixing. Under the bench were more supplies like yeast and a mini-press to do my own fresh juice to toy with. The back of the barn was full of larger equipment for bigger batches, but this space was definitely made for the creator.

A lab in the truest sense of my world.

Trunk freezers lined the wall, with one big ole fucking sunbeam leading me right to the one in the center. The urge to explore and catalog made my blood hum. To rearrange to my own preferences. Make it mine.

I needed it to be mine.

I tried to flip the freezer open and found the very first bit of electronic barrier.

“4-4-9-9.”

I turned toward the voice, my shoulders tight in reaction.

Hayes Manning leaned against the doorway, his hands tucked in his pockets in a deceptively relaxed stance. He wore cargo pants with the pockets bulging with God knew what and a Brothers Three Orchard T-shirt.

Hmm. That was different than the weathered sign I’d seen when I pulled into the orchard. Rebranding?

Interesting. I hadn’t really looked around when I arrived. I’d been too interested in the taproom setup and followed the signs accordingly. Hell, even the large industrial-looking barn labeled the taproom hadn’t been able to dissuade me from driving toward this particular old building.

I’d known it was mine before I could fully identify where I was supposed to be going. I wasn’t exactly a guy who believed in fate, but I knew when something felt right.

And this felt like I was supposed to find it. Or rather I was supposed to be found, because I sure as hell wouldn’t have imagined myself out here without an interesting invitation.

The Mannings didn’t take no for an answer anyway. Not that I’d tried very hard. I was pretty sure Beckett had done his homework. He’d hit me with far too many arrows on the first meet.

Hayes was the quieter Manning brother. Beckett knew how to turn on and off the charming tap depending on where he was, but based on my initial meet, Hayes was more reserved.

The man in question straightened and came farther inside. His dark-lensed glasses were shaded so I couldn’t read him.

I leaned against the freezer and waited him out.

“I filled the freezers with all the apples we have left from last year. I know frozen isn’t ideal for everyone, but we flash

freeze a healthy batch for us to play with through the winter and summer. You should be able to thaw and ferment them at the same time.”

I nodded. “Actually works great for the kind of dry cider I like.”

Hayes came closer and his glasses transitioned to clear lenses. “Same. At least until you can get some fresh product to use. I made sure you had an initial supply of all our apples to test. The far freezer includes some local orchards we work with as well. The one on the other end includes flash frozen berries and pumpkins we grow on site too.”

The little hairs on my arm lifted.

Testing.

Open options.

Not worrying about what was actually available to distributing centers in mass quantities.

Hayes’s mouth tipped up in the corner in a grin. “I’ll leave you to it. I know how it is to want your own space, Ronan. We want you as comfortable as possible. Between me and Kira, you should be able to work by tonight.” He paused for a moment, his gaze direct. “If you want.”

I wanted that.

It was hard not to look as eager as a puppy, but when his grin widened, I resisted the urge to curse. “I thought so. There are crates at the back of the room with older gear. I didn’t want to throw anything out—”

“*No*. Don’t throw anything out. I like using older bins, barrels, and steel for their different flavors.”

“I’m more on the spirits side of the operation, but I damn well know a barrel can make all the difference for flavor for both of us. We have lots of different woods at our disposal and can pretty much get whatever you need.” He raked his fingers through his short, choppy hair with a wince. “Within reason. Kira Webb is head of the taproom and she’s hell with a budget.”



I crossed my arms over my chest, the obsidian beads of my bracelets clacking together mirroring my annoyance. “I thought I had complete autonomy.”

“State your case and Kira will comply most of the time. She’s fair, but she won’t spend needlessly. You’ll have to have reasons for any specialty item. At least until you turn a profit.”

I lifted my chin. “Oh, you’ll see a profit.”

“What I like to hear. I’ll let you settle in.” As he was turning away, he thought better of it and faced me again. “Oh, we have a few cabins on the property if you want to use one of them until you find a place.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want something like an apartment. I wanted something for the long haul. “I’m good there. I found a rent to own place out on Route 40.”

“Even better. That one actually gets plowed.”

At my blank look, Hayes laughed again.

“What do you mean actually gets plowed? Doesn’t everywhere get plowed?”

“One would think. I’ll make sure to order chains for your truck when I get them for the staff.”

“Jesus.”

“You lived in Chicago. You’ll survive.”

Chicago was wind and city snow. Not chains on the road snow. “Do you really get over one-hundred inches of snow?”

“Yeah. Sometimes almost two.”

“Holy shit.”

“You’ll get used to it. You’ll find out the summers will test you too. Supposed to be over ninety-seven tomorrow. It’s pretty hard to cool the barns, but we have large fans.” He pointed up at the propeller-sized trio of fans overhead. “And you can open both barn doors for some cross breeze.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“I have no doubt. Beckett will be by later. Kira will probably stay out of your hair while she’s getting the taproom ready to go live with the updates we’ve done, but she’s your first line of defense for most anything you need. She’s been with us since I was a teen.”

“Cool. I’ll be sure to tag her if I need something.” I nodded to his T-shirt. “Is that another orchard?”

He glanced down at his chest. “Actually, that’s one of the reasons we wanted you on board. We’re rebranding the orchard a bit. My folks are mostly retired now and we’re hoping to diversify the orchard. We have the concert series which has done well for us and it was enough of a cash infusion that we could try the same with the taproom.”

“Why I’m here.”

He nodded. “Exactly. If all goes well, we’ll move onto moonshine distribution in a few years. Right now we do small batches for tastings. We’re hoping that with some freedom, you’ll bring a little of that magic we’ve read about here to Brothers Three. I’m particularly fond of your Sunset Sail blend from last year.”

“Not even the one that I placed with.” Surprised he liked that more light, summery style, I smiled. “Figured you would be more for the spice like Killer Crush.”

“The horror blend was pretty awesome. You’re really good with the flavors.”

“Marketing department makes me sound way cooler, believe me.”

“Somehow I doubt that. You’ve already become a name in the up and coming cider masters. We’re hoping for a mutually beneficial relationship.”

“I don’t need to be stroked. I already took the job.”

Hayes tipped his head back and laughed. “Good. We’re more apt to trounce you in pool and darts at Lucky’s than stroke your ego.”

“Sounds like my kind of deal. Is that the neon shamrock monstrosity in town?”

“The one and only. Why don’t we meet there for dinner around seven? Serves decent pub grub and good beer. Nothing fancy.”

I dug out my phone and saw that it would give me about six hours to get the room just how I wanted it. “Sounds good.”

“Perfect. Welcome aboard.” He held out his hand.

I shook it. “Brothers Three has a nice ring to it. Will look good on a label.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

When Hayes left, I shrugged out of my vest I’d worn just in case my first day was a little more formal. A vest over a T-shirt was about as dressed up as I got, especially on a warm July day. I scraped my long hair up into a quick braided tail at the top of my head and snapped the elastic around the end.

I had a lot of work to do.

## CHAPTER 3

KIRA

## HIDDEN ASSETS

Lucky's was bumping as usual. The bar was one big room with lazily spinning fans overhead to combat the humidity that was already creeping in. The next day was supposed to be a scorcher, and it looked like it was going to start with a steamy night.

A perfect sendoff for my last night at work. Now that I was taking over the taproom, it left me little time for a second job. I hadn't really needed to work at Lucky's for over a year. Tips didn't need to be allocated to bills and savings, but I liked padding my drawers with extra play money.

Literally.

I had a secret compartment in my silverware drawer that I'd built to hold a stack of cash. It was annoying enough to get to that I had to really want the treat.

In my case a treat was often shoes and clothes—my secret weakness. And okay, sometimes a pint of ice cream or a fancy bar of chocolate.

Between the bar and the orchard, I didn't really have any reason to dress up. Now that I was the face of Brothers Three Taproom, I could let that side of me out to play.

Starting tonight.

I fussed with the belt of my one-piece romper. The shorts were far more daring in length than I usually allowed myself. My body definitely leaned heavily into the sturdy column. Strong thighs and curves that headed a tick past lush, to be honest.

But I was tired of hiding everything beneath baggy shirts and khakis or the black-on-black uniform of being a bartender. I had a closet full of gorgeous clothes that I had lovingly curated. I wasn't going to be afraid to wear them, dammit. Since I was only working a few hours, I'd spent extra time in the shower, scrubbing every-damn-thing with a sugar exfoliant, leaving my skin super smooth and tanned with a light shimmer.

It was too blasted hot to leave my thick hair down so I'd just gone with a messy knot that TikTok taught me how to create. Damn videos always held me in a stranglehold, which was a good thing since I didn't have a lot of girlfriends to teach me how to be a freaking girl.

Spending all my days with men definitely didn't help in that regard. There was something to be said for a bit of girl armor when it came to this new phase of my life.

I slipped behind the bar and tied a short apron around my waist as I gave the room a quick perusal to see what I'd be dealing with tonight.

Summer meant long days and short nights with an extra layer of vacation vibes. Turnbull was primarily blue-collar men and women, many who worked the orchards and farms in the area.

July was the sweet spot, where people could still play a little harder before the harvest season really took over. Our version of a seasonal break.

Kids were out of school and schedules were much more relaxed. A rather large group of women were ruling the upper section of the bar. It looked like it was a moms' night out, and based on the decibel of their rowdy laughter, I'd bet they were a few pitchers and shot glasses into their evening.

Time to boot the kids off to summer camp for a few weeks and let the adults play. I'd overheard a few people at the orchard doing a countdown for freedom. Being a parent was hard work and I was pretty sure in their place, I'd be doing the same.

The music was a mix of rock and country with a raucous feel to it. Ruby, the owner of Lucky's, was good at knowing how to read the room and change the music up accordingly.

A pack of guys was holding court on the lower level near the huge television showing Wimbledon. Even the most seasoned of sports fans had to have something to watch, but tennis wasn't exactly the draw for this crowd, even if it was the finals. They were looking for a way into the crush of women on the upper level. It didn't matter if it was a high school dance, or a bar—there was always a line in the sand between the boys and girls. Someone needed to break the ice.

“Aren't you dolled up tonight.”

I grinned over at Ruby. “Special occasion.”

“I don't know what I'm going to do without you.” She glanced out at the lower level to point out the ever-klutzy Shayna currently bumping her way around tables. “I really need to fire that girl.”

“Nah. She's getting the hang of it. She just needs to find a little confidence. When she's not being self-conscious, she does an awesome job.”

Ruby grunted and shuffled three pint glasses under a trio of taps and pulled the levers down to fill them all at once. The sweet hops followed by the sharp tang of citrus rose off the summer beer.

“Then why don't you give her a dash of confidence so I don't kill her?”

I laughed and grabbed a bucket and filled it with crushed ice and dumped a bunch of quartered limes inside and a bottle of tequila along with a sleeve of plastic shot glasses. As I stepped around the bar, I grabbed a salt shaker off one of the tables and tucked it in the pocket of my romper. “I'll go get the moms juiced up and do the rounds.”

“Not sure they need any more,” she called after me.

Tequila shots were always a good way to help people mingle.



I waded into the crowd and slapped a smile on my face as I enjoyed a few startled glances. My usual uniform of a T-shirt and jeans was little different than the orchard.

I'd worked at Lucky's since I was old enough to bus a table and had advanced my way up to bartending. There had never seemed to be enough money, even before I'd become the pariah of Turnbull. Cleaning up after my family always seemed to include losing whatever savings I'd managed to squirrel away. Because of that I'd never made time to do anything other than work and try not to get noticed.

Needless to say, people weren't used to seeing me dressed up. Tonight I had big gold hoops at my ears, and stacked necklaces in a few different layers filled the deep open collar of the button-down romper. A heavier linked chain hugged the top of my neck with a tiny lock, making me feel sexy.

A hushed murmur followed me as I climbed the stairs, my paisley heels clicking on each step. The bucket was starting to sweat in my hands, or was that nerves?

I lifted my chin as I got to the top of the stairs and set the bucket down with a snap. "Hi, ladies. Thought a little tequila might bring the boys up to play. What do you say?"

A busty blond stepped forward. "What if we don't want to invite them?"

I grinned wider and snapped the salt shaker on the table. "Guess I'll just have to do the shots with you."

"Is that you, Kira?"

I heard a voice from the back that I vaguely recognized. I was used to knowing everyone, but maybe I was forgetting a name. I started lining up the cups, ready to get in and get out.

As the crowd of women parted, I swallowed down a quick bubble of panic.

Dammit, not her.

Anyone but her.

I closed my eyes for a moment and steadied my hand before pulling the bottle out of the ice. "Care for a shot,

Anne?”

She looked down her nose at the plastic shot glasses. “There’s only one kind of tequila worth doing a shot for.”

I shrugged. “Your loss.” I filled a cup, licked my hand and sprinkled salt on the skin above my thumb. “José always works for me.” I licked the salt and quickly drank the shot, chasing it with the crisp lime. “Anyone else?”

The blond held up a cup. “I’m in.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” I poured her one and started filling cups.

“Leave it to a Webb to have the tequila at the ready.” Anne arched a brow and crossed her arms.

“Lay off, Anne.” Another voice came from the crowd of girls who were lining up for a free drink.

I forced my smile to brighten. “I’m just here to have a good time like everyone else.” I’d learned long ago how to compartmentalize the pain of my family’s reputation versus my own reality. But the stab hurt, as it always did.

“Aren’t you working?”

I poured myself another shot, Anne’s voice grating enough for me to make it a double. “Last night at Lucky’s for me.” I tossed it back and stared her down. I desperately wanted the lime to help out the burn, but I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

Anne frowned at me. “Since when didn’t you need two jobs for your debts?”

My hand fisted at my side. The urge to stab her in the eye with my pen was almost too much to ignore. “My debts are paid.” At least the ones to anyone I’d hurt. The bank still owned me for a few more years.

“Right.”

One of her friends urged her back to their table, and the uncomfortable silence went with her.

Soon enough, the idea of free drinks overrode the snide Anne Montgomery's jabs. And as predicted, flashing a bottle of alcohol brought a few more people of the male persuasion upstairs.

It took a few minutes to get the vibe back into the party zone. Passing out limes and tiny plastic cups kept things light and fun until I had to flag Ruby for another bottle. She flashed me a middle finger, but I noticed the cash register was ringing up fast and furiously.

Kenny, one of the waiters, came up with another bottle and was surrounded by women before he could get the cap off. He laughed as he helped to pour. His gaze slid to me with a raised brow. He was a few years younger than me, but I caught him checking out my boobs. I didn't hate it.

The taste of tequila prompted more beers and a round of margaritas as well. Pretty soon the buzz of conversation was laced with more laughter and the syrupy flirtatious banter that a good night always included.

My job here was done. I figured a pair of twenty dollar bottles had netted at least a few hundred dollars' worth of drink sales. I'd have to remember that for the taproom on the slow nights.

"Thanks for the assist, Kenny."

"No problem." He took the pail and put the empty bottles inside. "Should have done that sooner."

I stacked the cups and tossed the last of the limes into the bucket. "Tequila is always the way to a good time. Or trouble," I added with a laugh.

"No, I mean, uncovering all of that." Gesturing vaguely toward me, he licked his lips and cleared his throat. "Respectfully, you're hot as fuck."

I pressed my lips together. "Not exactly the uniform."

"It should be."

My cheeks heated. "Thanks, I think."

"Oh, it was a compliment."

“You’re barely twenty-two, Kenny.”

“You’re what? Twenty-five?”

“I wish, but thanks.” I was still the same Kira, but I couldn’t deny the little buzz of pleasure at being found attractive. All too often, I’d been slotted in the friend zone with the men around me. Knowing, and working, with the same people for all of your life would do that.

Especially having the last name Webb as the shittiest whiskey chaser ever.

But today was a day to celebrate, not to think about my fucked-up family’s past. I was finally working my way forward and away from all of that, I hoped.

Kenny took the sticky plastic cups from me. “I’m serious. Let me take you out.”

“That’s very sweet, but I’m going to be busy.”

“Kenny, you are not seriously hitting on her.”

I turned toward the sound of Anne’s voice. “You know what? Tonight’s my last night and I don’t need to be nice to you anymore.”

“Just because you poured yourself into an outfit better suited for someone at least six sizes smaller doesn’t change who and what you are.”

A flush raced up my neck to my cheeks as I stiffened.

“I’m not sure who you are, ma’am, but you need to return to your friends before you say something that will likely get you slapped.”

The deep voice behind me startled me enough that I stumbled sideways as my ankle rolled on the heels I wasn’t used to wearing.

A large hand firmed on my hip to make sure I was all right before falling away just as quickly.

I started to turn to see who was speaking, but he crowded up against my backside, the growl still in his chest. But he wasn’t talking to me even as his body pressed close.

“And if you had an ounce of class, you would never body-shame another woman, especially one this stunning.” The deep timbre of his voice raised the little hairs on the back of my neck.

Anne’s mouth dropped open. “Mind your own business.”

I was pretty sure my expression mirrored hers. My scarlet flush of embarrassment was becoming something far different, and I hadn’t even seen what this guy looked like.

*Stunning? Me?*

“It’s okay. I can handle myself.” My voice sounding more firm than I thought it would.

“Obviously. You shouldn’t have to, though.”

Kenny’s Adam’s apple bounced as his eyes tracked upward, making my breath stall. Just who was this guy?

Anne’s lips twisted into something ugly and harsh. “You’re not worth the trouble anyway.” She shoved aside another customer in her haste to return to her friends.

My back stiffened. Shame trampled the quick rush of pleasure at someone standing up for me.

“Excuse me, can you take our order?” A guy oblivious to the uncomfortable moment broke in.

Kenny waved me off. “I got it.”

I gave him a weak smile. “Thanks.” Now that I didn’t have Anne in my face, I could slink away. I didn’t even want to see what the guy looked like now. I could live off the voice for a night and not be disappointed in the reality.

“She’s a vain, unattractive woman.”

A nervous laugh bubbled up. “She’s definitely not unattractive by anyone’s standards.”

He gently curled his fingers around my upper arm to turn me around. “I beg to differ.”

Whatever fantasy guy I’d put together when I was alone wouldn’t even come close to what this stranger actually looked

like. Wild honey and caramel-colored curls framed a sharp face. He had a neat beard that softened his jaw slightly and his eyes were dark and intense.

He wore a navy T-shirt with a hawk logo on it that I didn't recognize, but the heavy belt buckle with the Celtic knot made me swallow down a sigh of pure feminine pleasure. His shoulders were wide and muscular leading to arms that strained the cotton sleeves. Ink swirled around one bicep and down along his forearm in more of the same Celtic flavor.

Heavy black beads circled the wrist of the arm holding me. A leather strap circled his other wrist. He was close enough that I could smell... Was that ginger?

Dear God. Who *was* this guy?

## CHAPTER 4

RONAN



## FRIENDS, LOVERS, OR OTHER

I should *not* be touching her.

The first thought that blasted through my brain was *don't touch*.

Which actually made me want to touch her every-goddamn-where.

Something deeper and hotter sent warning signs up my arm and into my brain. I had to forcefully not tighten my hold to drag her closer.

Her amber eyes glowed with surprise and the pulse at her throat fluttered wildly just before she licked her lips.

She simply glittered.

Not in an artificial, manufactured way, but beneath the skin and the warm, honeyed glow echoed in the gold at her neck, streaks in her dark hair, and endless length of leg that peeked from the shorts she was wearing.

Legs I wanted around my neck.

*Pull it back, you animal.*

But I'd need a fucking leash if she didn't stop staring at my mouth.

"Ronan, you found us." Beckett's voice cut through the buzz.

Her amber eyes widened and snapped up to meet mine. The hazy pleasure bled right out of her face. "Ronan Parrish?"

I frowned. “Yes.”

“My luck is spectacular,” she muttered with a half-laugh as she gently disentangled herself from my hand.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Beckett pushing his way through the increasingly thickening crowd on the lower level. He jogged up the stairs while Hayes and Justin were waylaid by a few people downstairs.

I returned my attention to her. “Someone want to let me in on the joke?”

She tipped her head back to meet my gaze once more and the molten heat cooled to a burnished gold. “Kira Webb, nice to meet you.”

The name niggled at me. However, I’d been fighting with my brewing room for the last five hours and was in need of a beer, food, and obviously a fuck. Even if that suddenly did not look like it was on the horizon, though I wasn’t sure why.

Beckett got to the top of the stairs where we were standing by one of the tables. She was backing up and her spicy, floral scent was going with her.

I stuffed my hand into my pocket so as to not grab her and pull her into me.

Beckett’s gaze widened. “Whoa.”

Kira suddenly fussed with the strings of her apron. “Hey, Beck.”

“I see you’ve met your new cohort.” Beckett was holding a beer and took a quick sip as he quickly looked over Kira for longer than I liked.

My other hand curled into a fist at my side.

Beckett whistled. “When I said you didn’t belong in the orchard anymore, I didn’t know you were going to kill us all, Key.”

Kira flushed and her shoulders went back again. My mouth watered at the way her shirt parted, showing the generous

curve of her breast, with more chains leading my eye lower into all of that gorgeous softness.

Jesus.

“I think that was a compliment.” Her brow raised. “Not sure what to do with it.”

What woman didn't know what to do with a compliment? Even as she stood taller, it felt as if it was part of an internal pep talk rather than the preening most women did after getting attention.

Justin came up behind his brother. He was rangier than Beckett, with a perpetual smile on his pretty boy face. “Goddamn, girl. Where you been hiding all this?” He pushed his brother aside to curl his arm around her waist, pulling her up on her toes for a quick kiss.

Kira was flustered as she pushed him back. Again, I had to hold myself back from hauling the youngest Manning off of her. “Idiot. I'm not any different.”

“Bullshit. Hayes, get a look at our new Kira.” He twirled her in a small circle, his eyes practically glowing with interest. Her laugh was rich and husky to match all that gold skin of hers on display. A few people glanced over, and I vibrated at the urge to snarl at every one of them to mind their damn business.

What the hell was my problem?

Hayes pushed his glasses up his nose as he got to the top of the stairs. “She's always beautiful.” His Adam's apple bobbed as he drank deeply from his own beer, but at least his gaze stayed up on her face, unlike his brother.

“If you're done objectifying her, you could fill me in,” I growled.

Hayes choked on his beer, swiping at his mouth with the back of his hand.

Kira's eyes flashed hot at me before she gave everyone a tight smile. “It's not like you've never seen me out of jeans, guys.”

“It’s a rare thing.” Justin slipped an arm around her shoulder, his hand dangling dangerously low over her breast.

Breaking his fingers seemed extreme, but it was going to happen if he didn’t step back.

He leaned into her hair, smelling her like she was a goddamn steak. “I like it. You should let me take you out this weekend to show you off.”

She elbowed him. “Not a chance. We’d have to dodge too many of your ex-girlfriends.”

He rubbed his ribs. “You’re a harsh woman.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts, and I shoved my other hand into my pocket to relieve the sudden pressure. Inconvenient attraction aside, I could control myself even if the urge to piss around her tickled my lizard brain.

Her name finally connected as Beckett’s words sunk in through the annoyance and animal-like reaction to her. Just because Brothers Three Orchard didn’t have an HR department didn’t mean I couldn’t get booted for being a creep.

Not only would we be working together, but we’d be in each other’s pockets. While I had no interest in the day to day running of the taproom, I’d have to speak with her about tastings, food, and supplies.

A major part of designing seasonal blends included showcasing the end product. Two things I loved in this world were alcohol and pairings. And I’d have to be discussing them with her, trying them with her—doing every damn thing with her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to come over to the taproom and introduce myself today.”

She gave a little shrug and glanced at me through her lashes. I didn’t like that she wouldn’t look at me now. “No problem. It was my last day out in the orchard—unless I’m needed, of course—so I wasn’t around to welcome you.”

Somehow I didn't think she really meant the welcome part. I wasn't sure exactly why. Was she that put out by the flash of attraction between us?

Not that I could feel any of it right now.

It was like she'd turned it off like a defective tap even as it still hummed under my skin. Which didn't make sense to me. Not when it had been so obvious between us.

Or maybe I was just delusional.

Wasn't the first time a woman had pulled one over on me. And thoughts of Darcy immediately flushed any lingering ideas about getting Kira Webb to sit on my face.

Even if I knew both of us would enjoy it.

Kira gripped the top of a chair, her rings winking in the low light. "Why don't you guys go sit down, and I'll bring over some food."

"You don't have to wait on us," Beckett said.

"One last time won't hurt anyone. Maybe I'll steal a fry or five." She gave us a winning smile then sashayed her way down the stairs.

Beckett slapped Justin the back of the head. "Don't even think about it. You're not going to mess with my best friend."

Justin ducked his head. "I wouldn't. She's like my sister. Sort of. At least she used to seem more like a sister. Christ, did you see that ass?"

Beckett's eyebrows snapped down as he stared at Justin.

"Sorry. I don't know what came over me. Did she lose weight or something? Put a spell on us?"

Hayes rolled his eyes. "No. You idiots just don't pay attention."

Justin spun his chair around and straddled it. "Oh, and you do?"

"Kira is a lovely woman."

“Yeah, but you can’t stop staring at Willa.” Justin wagged his brows.

“We’re just friends.” Hayes dropped into his chair and set his beer bottle down.

“Not for lack of trying, bud.” Beckett nudged his brother.

“Yeah, well. It’s not going to happen. Can we change the subject?” Hayes nodded at me. “Sit down. We don’t normally gossip like a bunch of girls.”

I sat down. “Curse of the small town. Why I usually keep to the big cities.”

“Times will be a-changing.” Beck hooked his arm over the back of his chair. “You settling in okay?”

I nodded. “The work room is perfect. I just had to move some things around to how I like it set up.”

“Space is yours. I figured the back barn would give you a chance to get away from the noise of the remodel.”

That was good to know. I’d be sure to pack my headphones. “Yeah, I didn’t get over to the taproom to look around yet. I was distracted.”

Hayes took a sip from his beer and pointed at me with his bottle. “He barely noticed when I came to visit him today. Practically had hearts in his eyeballs.”

I laughed. “It’s perfect.”

“Even after the lab CBS set up for you?” Hayes seemed genuinely interested.

One of Chicago’s largest distributing centers had pulled me away from a small brewery the year before, but the sterile room wasn’t much for creativity. That and the very narrow parameters they’d given me for designing a beer.

“Worrying about massive output puts a damper on the creative juices. Especially when they give me three ingredients to work with.”

Hayes winced. “Man, that sucks. No wonder you were ready to pet our freezers.”

“I am more than excited to get moving on the summer blend for the opening. Even if you only gave me two months.”

Which was going to be pushing it since a good fermenting took six weeks. It was going to be an intense timetable.

I was also more excited than I had been in years.

Justin peeled at the label on his beer. “Look at him. It’s Christmas in July for our boy.”

“Better than Christmas,” I said as I kicked out my legs.

“That’s right. I foresee very good things.” Beckett finished his beer and was about to start talking again when Kira came up to the table with another woman, both burdened with large trays.

“Gentlemen, hope you’re hungry.”

Justin sat up. “I’m always starving.”

“That’s for sure.” Kira set down a platter of loaded fries, wings, and jalapeño poppers while the other girl passed around beers.

When no beer came in front of me, I frowned. Then Kira was at my elbow with a pint glass.

She set it down and her spicy night flower scent cut through the salt and spice on the table. My nose was a little more nuanced than most since I used aromatics in my design for bar drinks as well.

“I thought you might want to try one of our ciders.”

“Thanks.”

She looked eager for me to try it before she moved away, so I took a sip. Surprised at the flavors, I took another longer drink.

“I don’t think I’ve had this one. I thought I’d tried all of the ciders you guys made.” I was pretty thorough in my research before I accepted the job.

Hayes grinned. “I did a small batch oak barrel in February. We didn’t have enough to put into bottling, but it’s been doing

pretty well here. More beer people than cider here though.”

“They’re missing out.” I let it sit on my tongue before taking another swallow. There was room for some more layers and the aftertaste was a little more acidic than I liked, but it was a solid effort, especially since Hayes specialized in spirits over ciders.

I glanced up at Kira. “And what’s your preference?”

“Bourbon.”

My chest tightened. “How about you bring me your favorite then?”

“You got it.” She gathered up our empties with an efficiency only a lifelong waitress had. Her long fingers sparkled with rings and a dark polish on her short nails.

I spotted the small tattoo of a crescent moon on her inner wrist and wondered if there were any others to find.

She leaned over to gather the label confetti Justin left behind with a shake of her head. Her hip brushed my arm and I stilled instantly.

“Sorry.”

“No problem.”

She stuffed the scraps of paper in her apron pocket and hurried away, back down the stairs.

Now that she was gone I realized how hungry I was. I reached over for a wing and caught Beckett’s gaze. “Problem?”

“Not sure yet.”

“Warning me off for yourself or because she’s your friend?”

Beckett’s eyebrows snapped together. “Kira isn’t the kind of woman you mess with.”

“Pretty sure Kira can answer for herself.”

Beckett curled two fingers around the top of his bottle. “I’ve known her since we went to school together. You might



say I'm protective."

"Again, is it because you're interested?"

His eyes glittered dangerously, but he was saved from answering when Kira came back up the stairs with two glasses and a basket of fries with an array of dipping sauces. She plopped down next to Beckett, which was handily across from me.

Her ankle slid along my outstretched legs. "Oh, sorry." She sat up, tucking her legs away from me before she pushed a glass toward me. "Welcome to Brothers Three, Ronan."

And damn if I didn't like my name on her lips.

I lifted my glass toward her and she clinked it with hers. "Sláinte."

"Sláinte."

My gaze slid to Beckett, and the warmth of the bourbon suddenly felt more like a cold vodka. I didn't want to make enemies of the man who hired me on, but I wasn't exactly ready to douse the interest firing in my blood.

For the woman, or the job.

## CHAPTER 5

KIRA

## VIKING ENTERS THE CHAT

The weather person—our local meteorologist was a woman—had lied. Like all the weather people in my experience. Scorcher wasn't even close to the reality of the whole week.

97° but really felt like 104°.

At freaking six in the morning.

Obscene.

I tucked up my T-shirt hem into my collar and made a knot. I didn't even care that it meant I would be showing off my less than perfect middle. At least no one else was around to witness me melting.

I swiped my forearm over my dripping brow and stood back to look at the dining area of the taproom. I'd moved the furniture around three times, trying to figure out which of the four styles of tables I'd ordered off the restaurant website would actually suit the space.

They'd overnighted the samples to me—I was still recovering from the cost of that, thank you very much—so I could make the bigger order by the end of the week.

Did I want more high tops or lower tables and booths? As a taller woman, I appreciated the tables I could stand at. It was easier to have conversations at them even if the chairs were a pain in the ass for the curvier body type, which I also had. Lucky me.

They also tended to get out of balance quickly. Rickety tables weren't exactly my favorite. I moved over to shake the

table. The pedestal base was damn sturdy. That shouldn't have surprised me since I'd been moving them all over the damn place this morning.

I took a step back to look at the entire space again. Did I want a second bar to break up the flow of traffic? If it was a light crowd, we didn't have to have both bars manned. We could use it as a buffet table for a finger food night. Maybe a pairing night.

Hmm. Maybe I'd talk to Ronan about that one.

I wasn't sure how many ciders he was creating for the re-opening. I really needed to get together with him about it, but I'd definitely been avoiding him.

Coward?

Maybe.

No. More like really busy.

*Liar.*

I shut the door on that internal conversation. Thoughts of the brewmaster invited far more trouble than I had time for this morning.

*Tables, Kira. Back to tables.*

Did I want a grid pattern or should I go with a more organic layout? Make more intimate spaces near the fireplace maybe? One of those massive curving booths for a bigger party?

Maybe I should use the oak barrels that didn't pass muster for brewing to plant topiaries that would entice people to enjoy the massive room by drawing their attention up and around to all the details from the recent renovation.

The dark stain and black iron braces should have made it look more like a cave. Instead it was open and airy thanks to the wall of windows along the back—from the peak of the barn down to the sliding glass doors that all but disappeared when they were folded open. Industrial garage doors along the side of the taproom could also be opened so there was a 180° view of the orchard.

The rolling hills of the property went on forever, from the trees heavy with apples that were nearly ready for harvest, to the pumpkin patch in the distance full of fat leaves shading the quietly growing fruit, to the expansive Christmas tree farm. Not to mention the massive old oak trees and pines that gave some privacy to the cabin rentals on the far side of the property.

And the taproom showed it all off. Or it would when I figured out a good seating pattern.

I'd attempted to hire a decorator, but after the fifth person gave me a 3D rendering that looked more in line with a city taproom, I'd given up.

It wasn't right. And I couldn't seem to convey that to anyone. I had a vision and I had to trust it was spot on.

We weren't city.

We weren't exactly country either—at least not really. The more modern slant that Beckett, Hayes, and Justin were trying to infuse into Brothers Three Orchard would reinforce the relevance of Happy Acres.

The family orchard had been the heart of Happy Acres for a damn long time and part of me wanted to keep it just like I remembered. Kids running around, people buying pies and baked goods, huge crates of apples ready to be shopped.

The problem was, the amount of families who took the time to visit the orchard was dwindling. We had to decide to either lean into the family design with playgrounds for kids or swing toward the adults looking for an experience.

Thanks to the familial ties with musicians, the concert series had started gaining momentum and the Manning brothers pivoted to add entertainment to the orchard. Happy Acres was a blend of the visions from two families. The Lodge and the chapel had been the Ronsons' domain and was thriving due to their year-round wedding season.

There was overlap between the different aspects of the business too. A café and bakery catered to the seasonal fruit grown in the orchard. From berries to vegetables in the

summer, the farm to table element had exploded into a major source of revenue.

And still I could tell Beckett was restless with how the Manning half of the orchard still had room to grow. Which was where I came in. If I could get the taproom to take off, it would go a long way in making a name for Brothers Three.

Solidifying the younger and more modern aspect of the business wasn't just good for the orchard, it created revenue for Turnbull. Which the town desperately needed.

But no pressure.

I unearthed a can of Diet Coke from the cooler I kept stocked for the workers and wandered to the edge of the room and out onto the wraparound porch.

Fire pits, comfortable chairs, and couches were clustered together in groupings across the outdoor space, with a stone path joining them together. It was a good space to listen to the music and visit with friends if people didn't want to join the crush of the crowd in the actual concert space.

Justin had pushed hard for a more professional stage to draw more acts into the area. We were a perfect fit for the in-between and upcoming musicians who weren't quite big enough for the large outdoor arenas, or maybe who wanted a more intimate flavor.

His idea had blown up, and now we had a full summer roster of musicians from rock to country to more folk and alternative acts. The stage was on the hill above the orchard and created one helluva backdrop for the concerts.

A caravan of food trucks kept most of the attendees happy, and the old taproom shed was more like a hard cider and moonshine concession stand these days. But it had been enough to fund the renovation to turn this old building into a real taproom.

I turned back to my domain and leaned against the post as I drained my can. The cold jolt of caffeine perked me up a bit and allowed me some perspective.

The taproom didn't look like much yet, but I could see the potential.

The room was finished save for the final pieces of the bar installation. The actual bar was a deep walnut with a natural edge that had been buffed and sanded smooth. It was a statement piece that I'd commissioned by a local carpenter in Crescent Cove. He'd exceeded my expectations, and I was excited to build around it to put our spirits and ciders on display.

I'd requested the shelves and lights be last, after all the workmen were out and the floors had been finished. Nightmares of shattered mirrors had given me more than one sleepless night. The Brothers Three Taproom did not need that kind of bad luck.

And neither did I.

Being a bartender and a waitress, I knew the need for good flow in a room. While Lucky's had the perfect bar atmosphere, our venue would create intimacy as the focus.

A place to chat and sit over drinks, not shout over loud music and sports. A good place for a date, or a birthday party, or spending time with friends without being worried you'd be rushed out the door.

Which meant the grid pattern was out. I straightened and went back inside to move around the high top tables.

Again.

"Need some help?"

I grunted as I pulled the table over to the side of the room. "I'm good."

"You sure?"

I knew that voice. I really preferred when he stayed in his workshop and left me to my space. Mostly because he was too big and distracting.

I brushed my dusty hands on the ass of my cutoffs and took a fortifying breath before I turned around.



Jesus.

Ronan was also dealing with the ungodly heat, but instead of looking wilted like me and my gross T-shirt, he was wearing a black tank tucked into his battered jeans.

A heavy Celtic knot design on his buckle cut the black denim and cotton and made his tight abs even more defined. His shoulders and arms were slick with sweat and grime and so many freaking muscles. Not to mention the sleeve of Celtic artwork that made my mouth water.

Mercy.

He was drinking from a large metal water bottle as he stared me down.

I hated when he did that.

No unnecessary words out of this one. Just expectantly waiting as he chugged the water too fast and it dripped down into his beard and finally disappeared along his bristled neck.

His neat beard had grown out a bit in the week since our first meeting. We'd both been too busy to talk much. At least I'd been able to avoid him.

Damn him for being an early riser like me.

I liked coming in before my small staff and getting a jump on the to-do list before everyone started asking me questions and expecting me to know who should be assigned to do what.

He looked around then set his water on the floor and came forward to move the large square table over to where I'd placed a barrel. He seemed to think for a moment, then he nodded.

"It's a good space."

I picked at the cuticle on my thumb and resisted the urge to move the table back where it had been. An empty space was what it was, and I really hadn't let anyone else into my head about it. "Why did you do that?"

He shrugged, jangling the Celtic charms tangled in the wet curls that escaped his intricate series of braids. The fact that I

wanted help him unravel all those little braids and massage his scalp was something I was working on forgetting.

Mostly.

He finally spoke and that rumbly voice of his made me want to massage something else. Crap on a cracker, that man was distracting.

“The barrel offers some privacy and a few of them would make a nice path through the room. Organically.”

“Yes.” Excitement overrode the attraction nonsense, making my agreement louder than I’d intended. I tried to temper the urge to share what I’d been thinking, but maybe I shouldn’t. He was kind of an outside source. “Maybe some boxes instead of just crates?”

He jammed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. More jangles from the beads he wore on his thick wrist, and why oh why did all those muscles have to flex and move?

And he wasn’t doing the obnoxious douche who loved showing off his body kind of flexing, it was just that he couldn’t really keep still. It was my problem that I thought about mounting him more than I should.

Yeah. Mounting.

Even the word was more growly and earthy, like him. What was my problem? I was a healthy red-blooded woman, but sex really didn’t sit in the forefront of my mind on the regular.

“Yeah. I like it. If you wanted to shill some products, you could do a plexiglass encasement with a bottle of the high end spirits too. Creatively.”

I frowned and grabbed my iPad from the bench. “I know a few artists in the area. I’ll ask around.” I made a few quick notes. “Shilling, huh?” Amusement laced my voice.

He grinned and his very sharp canine flashed charmingly from the harsh line of his lips. Licking it would be bad. “Money tends to be the bottom line for most people.”

“Money is nice, yes.” I’d have to see if it was feasible with our current budget. But maybe a few of those displays to spice up the space could work.

He walked closer to me and my heart knocked hard against my chest. He was so freaking big. Curiosity lit his cognac-colored eyes. “*Nice?* From my experience, women, especially manager types, get more than a little excited about the prospect of money.”

“You must have known some...interesting people.”

He huffed out a harsh laugh. “I’m a city boy, Kira. Interesting people are a way of life.”

“Funny, you look more like a Viking.”

He took another small step my way and studied me. His eyes were so dark under that furrowed brow. As if the day wasn’t warm enough, his skin seemed to radiate heat as well. “I am.”

I blinked.

“Viking and Irish if the family tree is to be believed. My mother is a silversmith. She gets a kick out of making jewelry for her boys.” He tapped the buckle and thumbed the heavy silver ring on his left hand. “I confess I may have leaned into it more than my brothers.”

“Brothers? There’s more of you?”

He chuckled. “Lochlan and Niall, my older brothers. Niall actually lives in Ireland. Businessman type. Finance or some shit.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Some shit?”

He shrugged. “Boring money guy. Now there’s one whose eyes sparkle at the idea of the green.”

I covered my middle with my iPad. He was so damn big and smelled like earthy ginger. I was so sweaty and gross, but I didn’t want to back down and make him realize how uncomfortable I was.

Something I'd learned while working with men for the majority of my life. Never show weakness.

"The green?"

"His words. His favorite color. He's picked up the vernacular since he's lived over there for so long."

I licked my lips and tried to follow the conversation. The idea of two more men who looked like this one seemed a little cruel to the women of this world.

The Manning boys were objectively hot, but I'd slotted them firmly in the brother column for so long I didn't notice them that way anymore. And they certainly didn't make my skin prickle in all sorts of places like *this* man.

"Are they...big like you?"

That eyetooth flashed again. "Not really. I might be the youngest, but I was definitely not the runt of the Parrish litter."

"Oh. So you were the freakishly big one?"

"Lochlan is tall like me, but he's more the runner type. I'd rather get on my rowing machine than run."

And now I had the image of all those bunching muscles in my head. Great.

*Focus, girl.*

"You came here from Chicago, right? Your parents live in the Midwest too?"

He shook his head. "I grew up in Portland, actually. I liked it well enough, but I never felt connected to the damp and the gray. Hiking," he muttered with a snarl. "Give me contact sports any day."

"And yet, you came here." I laughed. "Wait until you get into your first winter. Endless gray *and* snow. Oh, and people also like to hike around here too."

"With all the lakes so close, I'm sure I can cope. There's something about this land. I knew it the moment I drove past that weathered Happy Acres sign. When I followed the signs

to the taproom, the feeling only grew stronger.” His cheeks flushed a little as if he’d realized he had overshared.

I folded my other arm over my iPad to hug myself. “Now that I get. And I felt the same way when I first started working here when I was seventeen.”

“And you never left?” He tipped his head. “No college?”

The pang was a bit duller these days, but it was still there. “No college. Wasn’t in the cards for me.”

And I liked that he didn’t know the reason why, unlike every other person in this town. The family I’d created at Happy Acres didn’t hold my past against me.

That wasn’t the case everywhere, however.

“You sure you don’t need any more help? I’m good at moving big things.”

“Kira? You back there?” The voice coming from the front of the building saved me from any bad ideas I might have about making Ronan show off those arms any more today.

“Thanks, Viking. I think I’m good.”

His lips twitched. “Is that going to be a thing?”

I laughed and brushed his arm as I moved past him. “It just might.”

I hurried to the front of the taproom to where Matt and Connie were unloading their cleaning gear. I was borrowing them from the Lodge. The workmen had left a fine layer of dust on everything, and while the black and dark wood was stunning, it showed dirt like crazy.

“Hey, guys. If it gets too hot, we can push the big rafter clean to the end of the week when the heatwave is supposed to break.”

Matt held two really long mop-looking things. His curly hair was already trying to break free from the bandana he wore. He was only in his thirties, but his hair was already heading for silver. “We’ll be fine. Keep the water coming, and we’ll be out of your way in no time.”

Connie trundled forward with arms heavy with buckets. “If you have some cardboard, we’ll move it along under us to keep the drips to a minimum.”

“You guys are the best.”

“Laverne loves her hardwood floors more than apple pie. We’ve learned a thing or two.” Connie straightened with a low whistle. “Who’s the hottie?”

I turned back toward Ronan, who was heading for the open porch with his long-legged gait. He gave the room one last thoughtful look before lifting his water bottle to me in salute.

“I don’t mind watching him come or go.”

I stifled a laugh. “That’s Ronan Parrish. He’s our new cider master. He tends to keep to himself mostly, but we’ll see him pop in here and there.”

“Make sure I’m on the schedule on the days he comes in.” Connie wagged her brows as she scooped up her brassy blond hair into a messy bun.

“I’ll keep it under advisement.”

The rest of my skeleton crew was arriving and I put Ronan firmly out of my mind.

I had a lot of work to do.

## CHAPTER 6

RONAN



## SUNSHINE & APPLES

I double checked all the batches I started. The sterilizing process was harder here than in the lab I used to work at, but I took it as a challenge instead of a detriment. I liked having my hand in the actual process from start to finish since the larger batch processing would be less about me and more about the end product for bottling.

Right now I just needed to perfect the base.

Each bucket had a notebook full of details in front of it. And they were tacked down with some Velcro I found in a drawer.

I didn't have a lot of wiggle room for fuck-ups. I had the rest of the season to play with fresh apples for the winter and special batch barrel aging. But this first trio of hard ciders needed to be done early for the August kickoff party.

Ian Kagan was doing a show at the concert stage, and the Brothers Three Taproom would be having their grand reopening with the new name and branding. A major reason why I'd been hired was because I was damn good at handling these tight timelines.

I was learning far more about this farm than I ever had working for three years at the Chicago plant. Damn near everyone was related to someone either by marriage or blood. And those who weren't had an unusual level of loyalty bred into them.

It was refreshing and scary as hell. I knew the cost of family and weight of it. My family tree was as wide as a five-

hundred-year-old oak, with just as many roots embedded deep in the earth. But that didn't track into my job.

Not like the Brothers Three operation. Beckett Manning ruled the orchard with startling fairness which, in turn, created a place where people actually liked working hard.

I was the new guy and I expected to have to prove myself, but it felt bigger than that. Not just to challenge myself—though that was a large part of why I'd taken the position.

I wanted to belong.

And damn if that didn't make me nervy on a level I haven't experienced before. I'd prided myself on being unattached to the businesses I worked for so I could take what I needed and move onto the next.

And here I was babying twelve batches of mash to make the perfect cider. I had six buckets already fermenting. I could add more flavors to the base on the back end, but I was experimenting with a mix of the apples from the freezers for a little something more special.

Using frozen fruit accelerated some of the process, and the scorching heat of July made for an extra variable. The one nice thing about a lab was the temperature control aspect. This was an earthier and more back to basics situation, which made my blood hum and my brain whirl with the possibilities.

I lifted the top on one of my buckets and swore at the sludge inside.

“Fuck.”

But there were also more mistakes. Something must have happened to the seal or it had been a shitty batch of apples. I lifted the bucket and the handle snapped off, dropping with a thunk on the floor, splashing the contents on me from crotch to neck.

“Motherfucker.”

I bent at the knees and lifted the whole damn thing up, hugging it to my applesauce-and-shredded-apple skin-covered chest before I hauled it out the door.

Thank God I'd opened the huge barn doors for some cross breeze. I was ten feet from the compost pile when the bucket slipped out of my hold again, splattering across the stone path, leaking into my boots, and pooling around my feet.

I stared up in defeat. "Fucker."

The sun was high in the sky and blazing down on the entire mess, bringing out the bugs to add to the shit show. A sticky film congealed on every part of me.

I looked around for anything to help and suddenly a shot of cold water hit me square in the back.

I whirled around and Kira stood there with the hose dripping. She'd been watering the plants in the seating areas and had her hand over her mouth. She lowered her hand and I could hear the laughter bubbling up. "I didn't know what else to do."

I stalked toward her and she turned it back on, thankfully this time at a lower setting. But not by much. "I don't want you to get stung. It's for your own good, Ronan. There were bees."

She ducked around the massive planter as I headed for her.

"Bees, huh?"

She nodded and held up the sprayer like a weapon. "Stay back."

I swiped the water off my face as she backed up the walk. "You were just helping, right?" My voice was cajoling as I stripped off my dripping tank. My heavy Celtic cross stuck to my chest hair with the sticky, now soaking wet apple mash clinging to me.

"Right." Her huge amber eyes were bright with laughter. "Absolutely." She scratched at her cheek lightly. "You got something..."

I had a lot of something all over me. I pushed a chair out of my way and she squeaked, letting the water jets go on full blast at my chest. When the stream headed south, I managed to

grab the hose and turn the blast upward, getting both of us in the process.

She shrieked and the threadbare cropped T-shirt she was wearing went nearly translucent as water dripped from our faces and chests.

After the initial shock, the water felt damn good. The hose was kinked and only let out a dribble of a stream between us. She looked up at me, her dark hair hanging in a wet hank along her makeup-free face. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were gonna kill me.

Bronze colored now and dilated with the shock of the water and how close we were.

Her nipples beaded up as my fingers dug into the loops of her cutoff jeans, locking her in place.

It was just so she wouldn't hit me with the hose again.

*Bullshit.*

I couldn't resist the slice of skin above her jeans. My thumb slid across the silky flesh. It was tight with surprising muscles. She was lush and solid in ways that made me want to put her on my bench and see how strong those thighs really were.

Around my neck.

Around my hips.

I didn't really care.

Her skin was wet and warm and now she was as sticky as I was. My knee slid between her legs as we lined up perfectly. I was a big guy and not used to women actually fitting against me.

This woman wasn't breakable or coy.

She was made for a man like me.

The flush raced up her neck and bloomed across her cheeks as she stared up at me.

I jerked her tighter against me and her lips parted. “You started this.”

Her gaze bounced from my eyes down to my mouth then back up. “You gonna finish it?”

My fingers moved down to dig into her hip, surprised she would own up to it. She’d been actively avoiding me for the last week.

Until today.

Of course I was the one to look for her earlier. Catching her mid-brainstorm when she was puzzling through the layout of the main dining area had been fascinating. I’d ducked in a few times to get a lay of the land but never managed to catch her alone.

She was always rushing around, giving orders, or on the damn phone. Always iPad at the ready as she put out fires with distributors, doing interviews for staff, or training those she’d already hired. Through it all, she was friendly and scarily proficient at damn near everything.

I was definitely in the way every time, which had me hightailing it back to my brewing barn. All day I’d tried to put her out of my mind.

It was getting harder every damn day.

And now she was in my arms—finally.

My thumb slid higher along her middle to dip under the cropped shirt. The cotton clung to her chest, outlining the lace underneath and the nipple tightening in reaction. To me or the cold water? I swiped under the heavy curve of her breast then coasted a little higher.

Her eyelids slid down, leaving a slit of gold as she watched me.

The gentlemanly part of me that my ma raised kicked at me to ask for permission. To beg for the right to touch her in the bright summer sun beating down on us in this space between our two worlds. The taproom she was working so

hard to pull together and my brewing house that would pull in the people.

Was this the liminal space where we could be just us?

Or was this the space out of time, and we'd go back to our respective corners and forget it happened?

My cock hardened painfully, hampered by wet denim and apples, but no less eager to get her naked.

She swallowed hard and my gaze drifted to the wild fluttering of her pulse. I wanted that under my mouth as much as I wanted to see if her nipples were a soft pink or cinnamon dark.

Her breast filled my hand, firm and weighty. One swipe of my thumb and she let out a shaky breath. Another swipe and it hitched and stalled.

My other hand palmed her ass, lightly rocking our hips together. Her head dropped back, exposing that endless neck. A single chain glittered at her throat today.

I dipped my head to trace the tiny rubies clustered just above the notch of her collarbone. Salt and that rich moonflower scent lingered there.

And now apples.

My failed recipe clung to her skin, making it so much better in a way I didn't want to examine too closely. I nosed my way up the column of her neck to scrape my teeth over her chin.

My beard left abrasions on her golden skin. Marks I ached to leave all over her.

There was no gentleness left in me, not when her nipple stabbed the center of my palm and her lips were so close to mine.

My thumb slid over the tip gently before I pinched it tight enough that she gasped. My other hand raced up her back to the heavy tangle of hair knotted at the nape of her neck and anchored her to me as I finally took her mouth.

She tasted of sunshine and something citrusy and sharp laced with a groan I took inside of me to feed the beast I hadn't expected to rage between us. The kiss held little finesse and all aggression.

For a moment, I thought I went too far.

She made a soft sound of surrender, then her arm came up around my neck and she was all in. We were a tangle of tongues and breath, lips and even teeth as we slanted first one way and the other to get the perfect combination.

Her mouth was as lush as the delicious handful of ass I couldn't stay away from in one hand and her breast in the other. She didn't seem to be in any more control than I was if the nip of teeth on my lower lip was any indication.

As I stepped back to get my mouth on more skin, the Adirondack chair hit me on the back of my calf just right and I stumbled.

Instead of saving me, she pushed me into the chair and climbed into my lap. The chair was oversized and made of sturdy teak. The angle forced her knees to hug my hips and my cock to lodge itself into the wet denim between her thighs.

She gripped the back of the chair and loomed over me, all golden fire and heat. I snaked my hand between us, roaming over her wet shirt and lightly circling her neck. Her eyes flashed and her pulse went wild before I slid around to release the hair tie at the back of her neck.

Her curtain of dark hair slid forward and teased my cheeks and neck. My hands went back to her ass and ground her against me.

“Lift that shirt for me. Let me see you.”

She touched her forehead to mine.

“Let me see you, Kira. Your beautiful golden skin. Here in the sunshine.”

Her arms tightened. I could feel her muscles lock and the first vestiges of unease crawl through her.

“Eyes on me. No one is around. It's just us.”

“How would you know?”

“Because you’re not ordering anyone around. This is how you end the day. Watering the plants before you leave.”

She frowned. “Watching me, Viking?”

“Yes.” I lifted my hips. “But you knew that.” My fingertips teased the edges of her cutoffs to the curve of her ass. I slid the denim higher to get to more skin, rubbing her against my cock more firmly. “Now lift your shirt for me. I want to taste you.” I brushed my fingertips along the lace of her panties. “Or do you just want me to get you off here? I don’t mind if it’s just for you.”

Her golden eyes were wary, but she leaned back and lifted her shirt up.

The black lace made my chest ache. Christ, she was beyond beautiful. “Off.”

“You just said lift.”

“Now I want more. I have a feeling that will be a problem for me.” I nipped at her chin and stroked over the panel covering her pussy from me. “I will always want more.”

“And if I don’t want to give more?”

I relaxed back in the chair, but I didn’t move my hands. “I can wait. I’ll have my hand on my cock in the shower every morning and every fucking night, but I’ll wait.” I brushed my nose along her neck. “But I don’t think you really want to wait or you wouldn’t have climbed onto me.”

At her silence, I had two options. To let her keep the safe distance. It was probably the smarter way to go, but it didn’t feel right.

“Or do you want me to take away the decision?” I found that fluttering pulse and licked at it gently. “Are you tired of making decisions?” My voice was gravel-rough and I was harder than stone.

Her grip tightened on the chair and her pulse kicked—hard.



“Is that what you need, baby? Just say the word.”

## CHAPTER 7

KIRA

## HAD TO BE HEATSTROKE

I had the strongest urge to jump off of him and run back inside. Because that was the safe thing to do.

Smart and responsible Kira Webb, who was everyone's buddy.

Kira Webb who didn't remember how to have an orgasm that wasn't self-serviced. And I could take care of myself when necessary, but it wasn't nearly as fun as sitting astride a man who literally gave off heat and pheromones like a fantasy come true.

But this man didn't know me. Didn't look at me like everyone else at the orchard did. Like the little sister or best friend they'd grown up with.

And in town, like the other Webb sister who...

No, that did not have room here in this moment. With this huge man hard and ready under me.

His hands moved up to my hips, firm and confident, but somehow I didn't feel trapped. More like found.

That was the part that made me want to run more than the orgasm I knew was waiting for me. Because Ronan Parrish would provide.

There was no doubt based on those steady dark eyes staring unflinchingly into mine.

Not the cocksure male boasting of the idiots I've known at the bar.

Nope.

This would be the real deal.

“We have to work together, Viking.”

His fingertips drifted up to the skin of my lower back, lightly tracing into the dip where the denim gapped, then slowly up to the wide strap of my bra.

I internally winced. This girl couldn't wear cute, skimpy bralettes. I needed support and that came with lots of fucking hooks. But I splurged on lace and satin to combat the sturdy nature of it. Even if one of my bras cost more than two shirts for a tiny woman.

And dammit, my tits were spectacular.

I flipped the shirt over my head and tossed it behind me. Okay, so maybe the heavy plop of the wet shirt on stone took a little away from the sexy moment.

“Goddamn.”

His whispered reverence wasn't a bad thing though. I shook my hair over my shoulders and arched my back. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes.” His gaze shot to mine. “Yes, I fucking want all of this. I want to put you on my work bench and fuck you so hard your teeth rattle.”

I swallowed. Okay, so my bravado really wasn't ready for that one.

He leaned forward, the muscles of his stomach flexing because of the deep angle of the chair. His chest was a masterpiece, and I had no shame about looking my fill. I splayed my fingers over the warm skin of his abs and up to the furred planes of his chest. I dug my nails into the coarse hair, finding the flat disks of his nipples before making a return trip down the ridges of dense muscle to his buckle.

“Your body is ridiculous.”

“Back at you.”

My gaze lifted to his again. “I've got good tits.”

His hand came down on my ass with a hearty clap that made me blink and clench. “You are the complete package. Brains and curves and yes, your tits are fucking spectacular. I’ll spread you out on whatever available surface we’ve got for hours to show you just how superb each and every golden inch of you is.”

My heart thundered and my mouth dropped open.

“Now show me those fucking tits.”

I gripped his sides, my nails digging hard into his skin.

Did I dare?

Once I did, there was no going back. His black work pants were rough under my thighs, and I had a feeling I was going to be one long abrasion after we got done with one another.

I reached behind me and released the triple hooks so the black lace loosened and slid down my arms.

Ronan gripped my ass and dragged me up to get his mouth on my skin. I steadied myself with one hand on his shoulder. The other sunk into his wet curls and braids. The heavy beads slid around my fingers to tease my wrists.

His hands came around to my front, cupping my breasts to lift them high for his mouth. He dragged his beard along the fragile skin and I threw my head back with a broken sigh.

I rocked against him lightly, looking for more, seeking out the friction I needed. Hell, I might be able to just come from his mouth on my breasts.

I gripped his hair. “God, you’re good at that.”

He grinned up at me from the valley of my cleavage. “Sunshine and your skin were made for one another.”

“Yeah, well, that skin has never seen it.”

“Sacrilege. You should be naked all the time.”

I laughed before it tripped into a groan when he took one nipple into his mouth and sucked deeply before letting it free with a pop. That sharp canine of his winked at me as he closed down his teeth over the tip and pulsed a little.

“So sensitive. Like perfect raspberries.” He twirled the tip of his tongue around the hard flesh and then gentled with the flat of his tongue for a long lick. “But you taste like my apples. My ruined apples, which I will forever be grateful for.”

“For your ruined batch?” I tried to get my brain back online for a conversation while we were deep in foreplay.

Actually, this was better than any full-on sex I’d had before.

“If the mash hadn’t created too much sugar, then I wouldn’t have you in my lap, now would I?” He dragged his nose around the underside of my breast. “I wouldn’t know that you wear a bikini sometimes.”

He dragged his fingers down my midriff. “Honey-colored here, lighter gold here.” Then back up to cup my breast. “And the surprising raspberry here. I expected dark.”

“I never really noticed.” I was more worried about shoving them in a bra so I didn’t hurt myself with the weight of them getting in the way.

He set me back on his thighs a little, which was hard to do with the angle of the chair. His rough fingertips danced over the tips of my breasts. “This curve and how high they point? This should be in a sketch book with how fucking perfect they are.”

“Stop.” I couldn’t help the bubble of laughter. “No one wants to see me in a sketchbook, Viking.”

His brows snapped low over his fierce eyes. “I can show you a museum full of gorgeous women with miles of curves who inspired artists.”

“Guess I was born in the wrong century.” I stroked away the furrow in his brow. “So fierce.”

“Evidently it’s part of my purpose to show you how fucking gorgeous you are.”

Now I really did laugh. “Purpose?”

“There are people who are supposed to come into your life when you need them. Moments you’re meant to have. I didn’t

expect you, Kira Webb, but I'm not going to ignore this between us."

I'd never been anyone's purpose in life.

And that seemed way too big for sitting here in the sun with my top off, with a gorgeous man under me. "I don't need \_\_\_"

"You need the words." His hand raced over the swell of my ass to slide through the frayed denim fringe of my cutoffs to my panties. "You deserve them," he said low against my lips before he slanted his mouth over mine.

I hummed into the kiss before it turned into a strangled groan as he dipped his fingers into my slick slit. He pulsed two thick fingers inside me and ground the front of me into his bulge.

My breasts were flattened into his skin. The heat of the sun overhead and the molten muscled flesh of him under me made my head swim.

I tore my mouth away and gulped in a huge breath. "Oh, God."

He dragged his teeth along my jawline to my ear. "You mean oh, Viking."

And for the first time, I laughed as I fell right into the shuddering vortex of an orgasm. He held me tight against him as his fingers plunged deep inside me, stretching me as if he could crawl inside and snatch the pleasure out of me.

"Soaking my fingers. Fuck, you're so wet. Wet for me, Sunshine?"

"Yes." My voice was little more than a whisper.

"Louder." He curled his fingers against the inner walls of my pussy, stroking and pulsing until my legs shook. "Wet for me?"

"Yes." I gripped his sweaty curls and growled out the word.



“You’re going to soak right through my pants. And I’ll wear that salty moonflower scent home with me.” His other hand gripped my ass, rubbing me harder against the bulge behind his zipper. “Come again. Come for me here until I can get my mouth on this pussy.”

“Holy shit.” I choked out a gasp. There was no way I was going to come again so soon.

But no man had ever spoken to me with such a deliciously dark-flavored tone. At least not one that didn’t sound ridiculous and like he was trying too hard as if he was in a damn movie.

He nipped my ear, then the spot just behind it on my neck. It was a sharp tiny bite that stung then burned as I rode his dick through our clothes. “Until I tattoo your skin with my lips and tongue, this will have to do.”

“Ronan.”

“That’s right, Sunshine. Soak me.”

The scream was so close to the surface, but I couldn’t let it go. Not here in the open. Instead, I buried it down deep and held onto it until he covered my mouth and kissed me. Our clash of tongues and lips wouldn’t let me use the shield I was so used to.

He teased it free, his fingers pulsing so deep inside of me until the cry rolled out with a little sob.

“Yes. Let go. It’s okay. It’s just us.” He pressed his sweaty forehead to mine, the spice of his skin and apples, and dear God, the scent of me was overwhelming.

I shuddered and clenched around him, then collapsed.

He dropped back into the chair himself and I didn’t realize he’d been leaning forward so much. He’d lifted his knees a little to keep me tight against him, and his belly was now twitching under my own.

I tried to fumble between us to release him from the confines of his jeans, but he shook his head and tucked my

head under his chin. “Much as I want those fingers around me, we’ll both pass out if we try for more.”

I let my hands drop and settled my cheek against his chest. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so small. And now that my brain was coming back online, I had to agree the spinning in my head was definitely from more than just an orgasm.

We were slick with sweat and the skin-on-skin action only made the heat grow between us. I was just going to try and find the will to stand when he lifted us both out of the chair.

I yelped. “Are you insane?”

He hooked my legs around his hips. “Maybe. But if I don’t get your fine self out of the sun, you’re going to be in more trouble than a little heatstroke.”

“There’s no *little* heatstroke, Viking.”

He grinned and shuffled me higher on his waist. “Hang onto me. I’ll get us into some shade.” He handed me my bra that had bunched between us.

“What about my shirt?”

His grin widened. “What about it?”

“Someone could come by any minute.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to duck into the back room.” He squeezed my butt. “Bet there’s a counter I could use.”

“And if it’s Beckett?”

His smile slid away. “Why would you care if it was Beckett?”

“Because he’s endlessly nosy. And my best friend. And our boss.”

His jaw firmed. “Is that the only reason?”

I tried to push away and lower a leg but he shuffled me tighter against him. “Dammit, Ronan.”

“I like it when you call me Viking better,” he growled. “Do I need to worry about Beckett?”

“Yes!”

He set me on the bar, which was higher than a counter so I was looking down at him. But he didn't move from between my legs.

“Can you give me some space?”

“No.”

“You're impossible.” I shoved the straps of my bra up my arms and he pulled them back down. “Really?”

“I like looking at you, Kira.”

I huffed out a breath. “As much as I appreciate the body positivity, I can't talk to you like this.”

“Good. I don't want to talk.” He gripped my waist. “Unless it's you telling me there's nothing between you and Beckett. And if there is, I'll change your mind.” He drew my nipple between the knuckles of two fingers. The pressure both whisper-soft and rough at the same time. “With the quickness.”

“Going...did you hear me say he's my best friend?”

He pinched again, this time harder until it fucking throbbed. “That doesn't mean anything. My sister fell in love with her best friend.”

I frowned. “You have a sister too?”

“Two of them.”

“Jesus, there's five of you?”

He shrugged. “I'm Irish.”

“You say that like it's a foregone conclusion that you'd have a bunch of siblings.”

“Also that I'll want a bunch of babies.” He leaned forward and took my nipple into his mouth again, tugging it playfully before he let me go. “Does that stir you up?”

I pushed him back. “Babies? Okay. Maybe you're the one with heatstroke.”

He sighed and stepped back to give me some room. I quickly pulled my bra on this time and put the girls away. I

hopped off the bar before I got myself into any more trouble. I didn't think very well when he got close to me.

"I didn't say I'd be putting one in you today, Sunshine. But I'm definitely open to the option."

I didn't know what to say to that one. Again.

This man was way too much for a day as hot as today. I needed to find a large glass of ice water. Maybe a sink of it to soak my head in too.

Cold shower?

Probably.

He crowded me into the bar again. "I'll let you go off and think about that one, because I have a feeling you're the thinking sort. But the Beckett question is something I need an answer to right now. I saw the way he looked at you last week."

"You're delusional. He doesn't look at me like that."

"Then maybe you're the one with the delusions, because most men look at you like they want to eat you alive. Including the Manning men."

"They certainly do not. And even if that was a thing, which it is not, they're like my brothers."

He lowered his mouth to hover over mine. "Good." He brushed my nose with his. "Now I have to go clean up my mess. And probably hose myself off too." His dark eyes were hooded as he glanced down at my mouth then stepped back. "I'll see you tomorrow, Sunshine."

I huffed out a breath as I watched him walk out of the open doors and onto the porch before disappearing around the corner to his domain.

"Girl, what have you gotten yourself into?"

There was no answer in the empty room.

Or my very confused and chaotic mind.

## CHAPTER 8

RONAN

## DO IT WITH FLAIR

Organizing the batches of apple mash for fermentation took the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. It was messy work and I'd wanted the extra earthier flavor of the peels to be part of the juicing. By the end of it, my arms were shaking from the hand-wringing of the cheesecloth.

It was old school work and not sustainable for big batches—but I wanted to see what the apples could do for me. The soft opening at the end of summer would consist of mostly small batch brews anyway. This was a way for me to try new ideas, and if it worked out well enough, we'd be able to submit our cider for competition.

The more eyes, the better for getting the Brothers Three brand into distribution. Being part of the creative process had always been my ultimate goal when I discovered how much I enjoyed brewing. But Brothers Three gave me the opportunity to also make a name for myself within a brand for the first time in my life.

I'd always been a hired gun with a knack for finding interesting blends—with a heavy emphasis on hired. Sure, I had a reputation for the innovation companies could use to make their product better, but for the first time, it was about my vision in concert with someone else.

And if things worked out, I'd get to be a more active part of the company. Not something I'd ever thought I would be interested in.

I straightened up, my back cracking from crouching over buckets. I was gross as hell. Not even the hot, and ever distracting, scent of Kira Webb lingered on my skin at this point.

While looking for supplies, I'd found a crude shower in the back room of the barn. I made good use of it and washed off the first layer of grit and stickiness. My hair was a lost cause, so I just scraped it up into a messy knot on top of my head.

I might have to rethink the length of my hair when it came to the heat of the non-air-conditioned barn, but that was a decision for another day. I swapped out my hopelessly crunchy workpants for an ancient pair of jeans and T-shirt.

Part of me regretted washing off the scent of the Honeycrisp apples I'd been working with today. It would be forever joined in my head with the heavier night flowers scent of Kira since I'd dumped her in my lap this afternoon. The two didn't belong together in any way and yet it had fueled my work all day.

If I hadn't had such a tight deadline, I'd have chased her down to convince her to give our unique reaction to one another more time for data and testing.

If by testing, it meant her flat on her back in my truck, or in the storeroom—I wasn't fussy. Neither was my dick. It just wanted inside her sweet and spicy heat.

Having her crawl on top of me like that had cranked my already dangerous attraction to her up to an eleven. Lust, I understood and had even embraced more than once in my life, but it wasn't so simple with Kira.

And it wasn't even just the work situation.

It was a little tricky, sure, especially since Beckett was technically my boss. Right now I was still in the testing phase there too. And it remained to be seen if I wanted to lock myself in here at the orchard.

Even as I thought that, I knew it was a lie. The moment I'd seen the front porch, I had known this place was meant to be



part of me. As if my bones knew they were in a sacred space that I'd been searching for all my life.

Was Kira part of that? Or was I just getting her mixed up with the excitement of the job? My instincts were usually a better judge, but something about her clouded my intuition. As if sediment had gotten mixed into the golden liquid of a perfect brew.

Would it settle?

Or ruin it all?

And that was too heavy to think about on a hot fucking day like today.

Not to mention, I had a feeling pushing either of us to figure it out right now would be a mistake.

Kira wasn't the kind of woman who leaped into bed with someone. She was a careful sort who needed some time to get her thoughts together.

While my dick, and his friend the lizard brain, wanted to pin her down and prove to her how good we would be, she wasn't wrong. I'd lost my head there for a minute. She'd smelled so good and felt so right in my arms.

And when she'd said those stupid things about no one wanting to see her naked, I'd gone from hot to red-line pissed. How could she not see how sexy she was?

One taste and I'd been a goner. I couldn't be the only man to see it or experience it. Not with all the wisdom and fire I saw in her eyes, let alone how she reacted to me.

For now, I needed a beer and something to eat. I was getting to know the area and spent most evenings scoping out places to eat in Turnbull. Thankfully I'd brought an extra stack of T-shirts into work when I'd seen the forecast.

So far Lucky's seemed to be the easiest for food and a beer, but I wanted something more than pub grub tonight. But I was also wearing an ancient pair of jeans and a T-shirt with a brewing house logo.

If I went home, I'd land on my couch and then be pissed that I didn't have food in me.

I really needed to go grocery shopping, but it was too damn hot to cook. Getting a grill for my deck was at the top of my shopping list. Working ten hours a day in the barn left me with very limited hours where an actual store was open.

I'd have to order one for delivery.

"Fuck it." I locked up and crossed to my truck, my boots still squishing from my hose dunking earlier in the day. Maybe I just needed to get some greasy fried chicken at that spot I'd found in Crescent Cove and go the hell home.

Even at seven at night, the air was oppressive. Just the thought of greasy anything made me queasy.

Figuring out a direction made more sense in my truck where the windows were open and I could have the air conditioning blasting at me at the same time.

Energy conscious? Hell no.

Did I care right now since my balls were already sweating? Nope.

I found myself heading down the back road out of Happy Acres, past the newer signs for Brothers Three Live where the concert series had carved out a spot in the woods. I'd already had a look at the upcoming artists through the summer and a few of them had itched at my brain for a pairing cider.

The heavier country rock leanings of Flynn Sheppard coming out of the speakers begged for a whiskey. Not that whiskey was in our wheelhouse here. But maybe it could be. I'd never looked into the distillery side of grain alcohol. For now, I could collaborate with Hayes on a moonshine that would go well with a higher proof hard cider.

Because my brain was still on work, I didn't really pay attention to the fact that I'd headed down the winding road toward Crescent Lake. The small town there was more on the family-friendly side, but along the lake there were a few more restaurants—including The Mason Jar which I'd been meaning to stop into.

Good time as any.

The parking lot was bumping and the porch held a damn lot of foot traffic. I almost pulled back out of the gravel parking lot to head to my default pizza spot when I noticed a familiar hatchback.

Not many old ass Mercury Tracers were still road-worthy. I had a feeling that even less were that very ugly rust orange color that Kira owned. Was she here with friends?

Just maybe I'd bump into her.

I found a spot at the far edge of the parking lot and hoofed it up to the wraparound porch that made up the front of the restaurant. The steps were three deep with people even before I got in the front door.

A sunny blond was slipping in and around the people waiting on the porch. She made notations on the tablet strapped to her hand and seemed to have a limitless apron full of small buzzers restaurants used to let people know their table was ready.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, waiting patiently until she got to me.

“Hi. Our wait time is about thirty minutes.” She was focused on her tablet and tapping away efficiently, her head down. Finally, she looked up and her eyes widened. “Wow.”

“Thirty minutes is a bit more than I can handle. Growing boy and all.” I added a little charm to my voice as I rubbed my belly.

Her gaze dropped to my hand then bounced back up, her cheeks flushed.

“If you don't mind eating outside, we have a bar on the back patio with seating.”

“I don't mind.”

She nodded and peeked up at me one last time before she typed something. “That should just be a five minute wait.” She handed me the small disk. “You can go around the porch or

through the restaurant to the back when this buzzes. There's a hostess around the back."

"Great." I grinned down at her. "Thanks."

I wandered to the side of the wraparound porch where fewer people were waiting. The view of the lake was impressive at every angle—especially now when the sun was heading below the tree line. Torches lit the porch and twinkle lights led the way to the corded off back patio.

No runners for The Mason Jar.

Smart. I imagine more than one person thought they could get a free meal off the busy place. I wasn't exactly a design kind of guy, but I saw the appeal of the view.

Kira and the Manning men had built a great space at the orchard with the Taproom and the concert space that was close enough for ambiance, but far enough apart to allow for conversations. The outdoor patio was set up with more of an industrial flair than the homey Mason Jar.

I liked both, but preferred the Taproom when all was said and done. The dark stains and crisp apples on the air held an earthier flavor. Sure, some romance could be found, but it was more of a hangout spot.

Something that was sorely lacking in the area now that I'd been exploring. I'd talk to Kira about it—maybe that was exactly where we should lean in.

There were plenty of restaurants around that covered the romantic angle. The Brothers Three Taproom would be a good first date place. The safety of a lot of people with some finger food or appetizers was far less pressure than a full-on dinner date.

I dug out my phone to make a few notes when I felt the buzz signaling my table or bar-top was available.

With Kira on my mind again, I decided to walk through the restaurant to see if I could spot her. It was a longshot in the busy establishment, but I was nothing if not persistent when it came to this woman.

I'd let her walk earlier.

But it had been at least five hours since I'd seen her. That was enough time to think for even the most stubborn of people.

I checked in at the hostess stand and the trio of ladies who were poring over seating charts and an overfull basket of buzzers. I added mine to the pile. All three of them gave me winning smiles. One with dark hair and flat shark eyes zeroed in on me.

A younger Ronan would have been intrigued. She had danger and drama written all over her. Now that kind of woman just gave me indigestion.

“Parrish.”

The blond who had given me the heads up about the patio slipped out from behind the stand. “Hi.”

The other two women practically growled. Especially the dark-haired one.

I beefed up the wattage on the blond to deter the shark. “Find a corner for me?”

“I sure did. Hope a bar-top is okay.”

“Just fine.” I held out an arm for her to go ahead.

I glanced around the cavernous room. It had three levels. The ground floor had two fireplaces that flanked the space with tables in all different sizes. Intimate ones pushed into corners where there was a view of the water or a patron could bask in firelight. Still other areas on the second level were designed for large parties or families, with easily converted tables that could be stuck together to cover a large group or broken apart for busier date nights.

The large bar on the third level was two deep with people grabbing drinks to go out on the upper patio for some air.

The blond might be tiny, but she was quick and her ponytail bounced as she walked. She was a cute thing, but where the shark was scary, this one was benign. Ten days earlier she would have been infinitely interesting.

After Kira...

Unfortunately, the blond was more of a sweet rabbit who needed protecting. A flash of Kira shoving me in that Adirondack chair this afternoon proved she was no meek bunny.

It also proved to me that I wasn't made for the meek. A strong woman had always fired my blood more than one who played games or pretended to be flirty and coy. Darcy, my ex, had cured me of that for sure.

She led me out French doors off the first floor where a sprawling deck framed out the crown of the property—the vast Crescent Lake, gently lapping at the dock and shoreline. A few picnic tables dotted the grass, placed nearer to the water for more of a party or picnic situation.

They were empty at the moment as was a large barge-style boat moored at the dock. Since it was a weekday evening, it was empty, but I imagined they did a good business on the water through the weekends.

The hum of people, many more than a few beers or cocktails into the night, drifted over me. A large U-shaped bar took center stage and two male bartenders in jet black were efficiently serving up well drinks while a female bartender flipped bottles with practiced ease as she smiled brilliantly. Golden skin was on display with flashes of gold at her neck. Large hoops dangled from her ears. She wore a high-necked black tank that showed off her toned arms and shoulders with each flick of her wrist.

The bottle of tequila sailed through the air, flipped twice before landing top down into the steel cup.

A huddle of guys and girls whooped and hollered as she built whatever line of shots she had going in front of her.

“Kira.”

The hostess glanced up at me. “You know Kira?”

“What?” I blinked and tore my gaze away from the scene before me.

“Kira? Or are you one of her groupies?” Her smile was indulgent and didn’t hold any of the catty flavor some women could release like a breath.

“Groupies?”

“Yeah. People come here specifically to see her at the bar. Did you know she was a champion at one of those bartender expo things? You know, like the ones on TV based in Vegas?”

“I definitely did not know that.”

“Yeah, Mason put televisions out here so we could watch it after shift last summer.” The girl’s smile lit up her face. “Mason is the owner.”

“I figured.”

She blushed. “Anyway, she’s really good. Sometimes people just come in when she’s working to watch her.”

I knew I fucking would, if I’d known. There was some of that playful Kira I’d seen today in the way she tossed smiles around and laughed with the customers.

Especially the devilish grin when she’d aimed that hose at me.

But what was she doing working here when she’d quit Lucky’s? I understood needing some extra scratch, but running the Taproom had to come with a decent salary. Beckett was a fair boss from what I could tell.

Based on the loyalty I saw from his people, there had to be some money behind it. Not everyone wanted to be best friends with the owners. I knew that my situation was a little different—the Mannings were paying for my knowledge.

But if I remembered correctly, Kira had only done waitressing at the bar as well.

More things didn’t add up there either. I was sure the tips were better out here than with the blue-collar types in Turnbull. Lucky’s had been my usual after work haunt lately and from what I’d seen, the owner would have been utilizing Kira’s talents behind the bar at least on the weekends.

Instead, Kira worked out here—at least twenty minutes or more outside of Turnbull.

Not that far in the grand scheme of things, but after a full day at the Taproom or orchard, it just didn't make sense.

The hostess smiled. “Well, the bar-top table I have for you has a perfect view of Kira.”

“Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude or that obvious.”

“It's okay. Kira has that effect on people. Not that anyone has had a chance with her. She likes to keep things all business.”

That part I knew. However, I'd had her in my lap today, so I still had hope.

The drunk idiots leaning in on her at the bar did not.

The hostess handed me a menu as we stopped beside my bar-top. “Stef will be your waiter. He'll be around soon.”

“Thanks.”

I felt mildly pathetic about how focused I was on Kira, but she was so different here than the woman I'd been used to for the last two weeks.

The Kira I knew was definitely all business—until today. Until she'd hit me with the hose, then melted over me.

Thankful for the shadows, and the table hiding the bottom half of me for that matter, I was able to take a second to get my brain back in gear.

My hands fisted on the table as the guys crowding around Kira at the bar got rowdier.

I noticed a tall man with windswept blond hair hover at the threshold of the patio. He was wearing a collared shirt and holding a clipboard. Probably a manager type.

Kira gave the manager a subtle shake of her head. Evidently she was used to dealing with idiots.

The blond crossed his arms, but he didn't leave his post at first. Until the vampy dark-haired woman from the hostess



station came up to him with what looked to be a problem. He seemed to torn to leave the patio, but whatever the server said to him convinced him to follow.

Before I could get a look at what was happening at the bar, my own server was standing in front of me with a polite smile. He looked like he belonged on the party boat with curling sunny blond hair and a tan that said he probably wore board shorts when he wasn't at work. "Hi, I'm Stef. I'll be taking care of you tonight. Can I get you started with a drink from the bar?"

"Yeah. Whatever local brew you have on tap works." I didn't bother looking at the menu. "T-bone medium with a loaded baked potato."

Stef typed on his handheld. "Grilled vegetables okay?"

"Works for me."

"Cool. I'll just go get your brew."

"Thanks."

Just as my server turned to go, the crash of glassware and the tinny thunk of a steel shaker hitting the patio tile had both of us swiveling our heads toward the bar.

"Idiot," came the whispered growl from the server.

I pushed the table out of my way to get to Kira.

## CHAPTER 9

KIRA

## WOULD YOU QUIT CARRYING ME?

“Back off.”

“C’mon. I saw how you were showing off for me. I just want a better perspective.” He leaned into the bar. Obviously he was standing on the footrest in front of the bar stools. One of the shot glasses tipped as lemon tinged water pooled on the gleaming teak.

I’d switched him to water two drinks ago and the moron couldn’t even tell.

The tequila-laced slur of his voice pissed me off. I’d come in for Mason to make a few extra bucks because I couldn’t settle after...well, just after whatever today was. There was only one man I was interested in checking out my tits, and it wasn’t this asshat.

His buddies were laughing uproariously, egging the taller bald guy on. I could feel all eyes on me and the scramble of stools and glasses scattering as the guy tried to hop onto the bar.

My shoulders wanted to hunch up at the spectacle we were obviously making. Distantly I heard the other bartenders trying to get to me, but the U-shaped bar was crowded and now glass shards and tequila were splattered all over the rubberized mats that usually kept us from slipping.

Kelly slipped and crashed her hip against the metal shelf behind the bar as she tried to push back one of the other guys who tried to come around the side. Which in turn caused a

chain reaction behind the bar. My other bartender, Lisa, tried to save the bottles of liquor from hitting the floor.

I heard Mason's roar from the back of the patio to try and break it up, but it seemed like everything was happening in slow motion. The drunk guy trying to cop a feel had no coordination—full-blown inebriation made him a wild card.

He crashed over the bar toward me and I had seconds to decide if I was going to rescue the idiot from breaking his neck or let him hit the floor.

“Fucking idiot,” I growled and grabbed his arm which took us both to the floor, with me under him.

His laugh was chaotic and brash as his long, ape-like arms came around me.

“Kira!”

Distantly, I recognized the voice, though it didn't make sense to be here at the bar. But I was too busy flipping the drunk guy over and pinning his arms behind him as I landed a knee square into the middle of his back to keep him immobile.

My hair had fallen out of the messy bun I'd clipped it up into and curtained around my shoulders. All I could hear was yelling and the crash of the aftermath of the idiot knocking over the garnish station.

Cherries, lemons, and limes rained down on us as the drunk guy laughed hysterically.

“Holy shit, are you okay?” Kelly yelled from behind me.

I flipped back my hair to see Ronan standing at the other end of the bar.

I frowned. What the hell was he doing here?

He hustled forward, his eyes burning with malice.

“I'm fine—” I broke off as Mason came from the other side of the bar and an angry Viking came from the front. I glanced around to see where I could put my foot and not end up falling on my face.

All eyes were on me and my chest tightened at the onlookers crowding around to gawk. Before I had a second to call off all the attention, Ronan plucked me up off the guy and hooked me around his hip. His huge booted foot landed about a millimeter away from the drunk guy's nose.

"You know this guy?" Mason yelled over the cheers, gesturing to Ronan.

It was either hook my arm around Ronan or land on the drunk guy again. "Yes. From the orchard."

"From the orchard? Is that all I am to you?" Ronan asked in so not his indoor voice.

"Not helping," I whispered furiously.

My boss grunted. "Get her clear then."

"I'm fine. Stop manhandling me, dammit." I pushed at Ronan.

He only held me tighter. "Shut up, Kira."

My molars snapped shut in shock.

"Relax, Ronda," he said when I would've spoken.

I frowned. Who the hell was that? "Put me down. I have to help clean up."

"It's all glass back here and you're dripping—again."

My cheeks heated.

He buried his face in my hair. "I prefer you smelling like sex and apples than tequila, Sunshine."

I had a feeling I smelled worse than tequila. I'd been sweating my ass off working for the last four hours and I still had two to go.

"We're going to close off the patio," my boss called. "Why don't you head home?"

"It's okay, I can help." I pounded on Ronan's shoulder. "Would you put me down?"

"Nope."

“Can I at least talk to my boss?”

He turned us around so I could see Mason. The drunk guy grunted as Ronan kicked him in the ribs, almost as an afterthought.

“Was that necessary?”

He shrugged. “Yes.”

Everyone was staring at us. My heart seemed to be pounding in my ears and everything sounded overly loud.

Mason glanced from me to Ronan. There seemed to be some sort of unspoken thing between the men which only pissed me off more. “Yeah, you guys should just go.”

“I still have two hours left on my shift. And I need to help you guys clean up.” I tried to wiggle my way down, but the damn Viking’s arms were like iron.

“It’s chaos back here, but we can handle it. I’ll have Jared come out for the handsy jackass.”

I glanced around. Great, Mason was calling in his brother, the Chief of Police in Crescent Cove. “Where are his friends?”

“Not such great friends. I think they escaped while you were pinning their buddy to the floor.” Mason crouched down to check the guy who had passed out.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. Nothing a few hours in the drunk tank won’t fix. Impressive skills though. I wouldn’t want to get into the octagon with you, K.” Mason grinned up at me.

Finally the Ronda name clicked. I’d worked in enough sports bars to know who Ronda Rousey was, even if she hadn’t fought much in a while.

“At least take my tips to cover some of the mess I made.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Ronan’s voice went from cheerfully annoying to dark.

My eyes narrowed. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I was going to have a steak and a brew.”

Mason tossed a bunch of bar towels on the rubber mat to cover glass. “We’ll bag it up, and you can take it with you.”

“That’s okay. I just want to get her out of here.”

I couldn’t argue with him. Mostly because my skin was going to crawl off my bones with everyone staring at me.

If Ronan would’ve just put me down, people would have gotten bored and returned their attention to the game or something. Not that there was much to watch in the summer, but something—anything—had to be better than having all eyes on me.

Stef cleared his throat from the end of the bar. “I didn’t get to put his ticket in...”

Mason sighed. “All right then. Thanks for coming in to cover tonight, Kira.”

My cheeks burned.

“Hey,” Mason pointed a finger at me, “don’t go there. With your quick thinking, it wasn’t worse. Instead of the drunk tank, this idiot could be in an ambulance right now and suing me.”

I nodded mutely. The guilt still tried to fillet me from the inside out. I worked at The Mason Jar a few times a month for the impressive tips I couldn’t say no to. And the best part was most people didn’t know who I was.

I was just the chick who could twirl bottles for a little entertainment. Just Kira. Not one of the Webb sisters of Turnbull.

Ronan juggled me higher on his hip.

“Would you put me down? I’m too heavy.”

“You’re stiffening up. Relax.” His voice lowered as he brushed his nose along my ear. “Until I want you wound up again.”

I looped my other arm around his shoulder to secure myself against his chest, then I tugged his hair none too gently. I gave him an admonishing look to shut his damn mouth, but he grinned wider.



“I like when you pull my hair, but save it for later.” He clamped one large palm on my ass and stepped over a large puddle of glass sprinkled tequila.

I snuck a glance at Mason who was mopping up the worst of the spill with a bar towel. His lips were twitching, but he didn't look at me again.

I'd take that small concession. The faster Ronan got me away from the bar, the faster I could get my feet back on the floor. It was easier than making any more of a spectacle.

The murmurs and giggles that followed in our wake made my nerves jangle.

“Relax, Sunshine. I'll have you out of here in a sec.” But instead of putting me down when we got to the edge of the tables, he kept walking. His stride was impressively wide—just like his shoulders, which I should not be noticing, dammit—and we were in the dining room before I could open my mouth again.

More eyes.

Crap.

“Put. Me. Down.”

“So you can drip and squeak all over the dining room? I don't think you realize just how decorated you are in garnishes.”

“Freaking great.”

His dark gaze raked over my face and I could only imagine the state of my hair and makeup. The humidity of the day and the cherry juice alone made me want to cry.

He brushed his nose along my jaw and gave me a light lick. “Mmm, cherries.”

“Ugh.”

He tipped his head back with a booming laugh. Nothing about him was quiet or unassuming. Another three dozen glances and heads on swiveling necks were indeed my worst nightmare come true.

When Gillian flew out from behind the hostess station, her jaw slack with shock, I wanted the world to just swallow me whole. I knew I'd never hear the end of this for the rest of my life.

Maybe I would quit.

Gillian loved to make my life hell at work. She was the queen bee with her stunning face, sharp blue eyes, and acid tongue.

Unless Mason was around anyway. Then she was nothing but warm honey.

I *should* probably quit. Not that I had much time for nights here with my work at the Taproom. Even if the tips paid my rent for two months in one night.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Gillian called out as Ronan headed straight for the front door. Her gaze tracked down to where Ronan’s hand was on my ass and she sneered. “It’s not time for your break. And you’re making a spectacle of yourself—again.”

Ronan didn’t break his stride, just kept on going.

Gillian ran after us. “I don’t have coverage for you,” she shouted then stomped her foot as Ronan let the door swing in her face. Her hand came up to slap the window of the door.

The wraparound porch was still full of customers, all of them watching Ronan carry me like some hag.

“You are really living up to your name tonight, Viking.”

He gave me a feral smile. “Just wait until we get to pillaging part.”

The laugh bubbled up even though I should’ve been outraged. “Think we already did that.” I hooked my arm tighter around his neck as he took the stairs two at a time through the crush of people.

He’d effectively stolen me from my job. What the hell was happening right now?

Gillian was still staring out the window, her eyes narrowed, her hands on her hips as I glanced back at The Mason Jar rapidly disappearing from view.

Without the hum of voices pressing in on me, I noticed Ronan's smile was a little forced. "I'm really okay. You can put me down now."

"I really can't." His boots crunched over the gravel parking lot as he stalked to the edge of the property where his truck was parked.

"My car is the other way."

"We'll come back for your car."

"Ronan—*oof*." I linked my ankles as he twisted me to the front of him, my breasts flattening against the muscled slab of his chest and my thin, cotton pants curving to every ridge at the front zipper of his jeans.

He reached into the back of his truck and released the lever for the tailgate then set me down. His big hands gentled as they cupped my face. "Sure you're okay?"

I rolled my eyes. "I've dealt with drunk idiots nearly every day of my life."

He plucked a slice of orange out of my hair and tossed it over his shoulder. "Yeah, well, from where I was standing, it looked like more than just a drunk guy trying to grope you."

I slapped his hand away when he fished out a cherry from under my neckline. "Would you quit that?"

"Just cleaning you up before you get in my truck."

"Which is why I should be getting in my car."

"While I agree your beater is not going to be hurt by your current state—no."

"I'll have you know Matilda is pristine on the inside. Mostly." I tried not to think about the rusting spot on the back floorboard.

His eyebrow hiked. "Matilda?"

I shrugged. “I named her after my grandmother who gave me the car.”

The only person who had helped me...*after*. The least I could do was name the car after her when she left it to me in her will.

His thumb drifted over my cheek as his long fingers tunneled into my hair to get the last of the debris free. When a lemon rolled down my breast to plop onto my lap, I was horrified at the quick prick of tears.

I must be frightening to look at.

The Mason Jar was the one place where I was generally pulled together. The one place who only ever saw the confident and self-assured Kira.

And now I was—*this*.

I flicked the lemon wedge away, watching it bounce along the dusty gravel.

“Hey.” He tried to tip my chin up.

I sniffled and then punched him in the gut. Anger was easier than tears. Because not only had that idiot drunk guy caused chaos, this outrageous Viking of a man had created more.

Making a spectacle of me again.

He barely grunted.

I tried to push him back. “Let me down.”

He simply settled his big hands at my waist and let me push and struggle—all the while, he remained a granite wall in front of me.

I growled and sniffled and dashed at my eyes as angry tears burned down my face. I hated to cry more than anything in this world. It didn’t accomplish a damn thing except give me a headache and a red nose. Not to mention the snot.

I was not a pretty crier.

Generally tears made most men head for the hills, but somehow not this one.

“I have two sisters. I can wait an hour if I need to.”

I sniffled again. “What are their names?”

He sighed. “Not exactly on topic, Sunshine.”

“I do not look or act like sunshine!”

He laughed.

“Do not laugh at me, dammit.” Which of course made a giggle bubble up in my chest. “It’s not funny.”

He picked out another bit of garnish from my hair and tossed it over his shoulder. “It’s a little funny.” He tugged on my hair until I tipped my head back to meet his gaze. The fact that the tiny lick of pain hit something low inside of me was to be ignored at this particular juncture in time.

Finally, I stared at him. The sun was setting behind him which tossed most of him into shadow with the halo of firelight on his wild curls. “Even on the shittiest days, the sun is always there. And that’s what I’m used to when I’m around you. You are always moving forward, making things better. Maybe a little bossy.” His eyebrow rose sharply. “But you’re a force. And that’s why you’re sunshine to me. That and when I’m around you, I want to take my clothes off for some reason.”

I didn’t want to smile up at him, but I couldn’t stop my lips from bending upward. I even put my hand up to cover my mouth and he pulled it away.

“Now tell me why there’s tears. Or if you don’t want to tell me why, tell me how to fix it.”

“I’m just embarrassed.”

He frowned. “Why would you be embarrassed? You kicked his ass and were the ultimate badass.”

“You manhandled me out of that place. We were a spectacle!”

“Ashamed of me?” He tipped his head and those killer eyes blazed.

“What? No. There’s nothing to be ashamed of because we’re just colleagues. Not that anyone will believe that after today. Gillian will be sure to push that information far and wide.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“The super-hot brunette hostess.”

“I only saw the super-hot bartender.”

“Stop.” I poked him in the belly. “Now you’re just being ridiculous. No one can miss Gillian—and if they do, she makes sure that doesn’t last for long.”

“And who cares if she does?”

“The Taproom is the first time I’ve managed anything. I don’t want anyone thinking I’m not taking my job seriously.”

“Okay. I get that. But why would that make a difference at the restaurant?”

The laughter was easier now. “You really don’t know how small towns work, do you?”

“Gossip, all right. I get it.”

But he really didn’t because this didn’t matter to a man who had his level of confidence. He didn’t know how it felt for all the eyes to be on you and for the whispers to chase you.

Because I’d been whispered about for the last five years. And none of the whispers had been kind.

*Trash.*

*Liar.*

*Thief.*

## CHAPTER 10

RONAN



## I WON'T BE A MISTAKE

The pain shimmered in her golden eyes. While her moonflower scent teased under the sticky sweet cherries and sharp citrus, I could tell whatever was going on with her was about more than just a shitty drunk guy hassling her.

Carrying her out of there might not have been the best idea, but I wasn't sorry about it. Seeing her take out that frat boy with such ease had given me a moment. First—hot. Very hot. Secondly—the fact that she probably knew from experience how to put a guy down was what made me see red.

The bitterness got under my skin to fester.

I hadn't even thought about how others would look at us. I'd just scooped her up and then I needed to keep my arms around her. As if it was more important than anything in my brain in that moment.

What the hell was this woman doing to me?

More importantly, what was going on in *her* brain? And would she let me in enough to find out?

I coasted my thumb over her cheek. Her skin was like silk and her hair a heavy fall of wild around her shoulders.

I could distract her. Indecision swirled in the amber of her sunset-colored eyes. She seemed a little lost—so unlike the ball-busting woman I'd come to know the last few weeks.

The urge to bundle her up again was strong. Instead, I leaned in and gently laid my lips on hers. She tasted of cherries and salt from the heat of the day.

Her fingers gripped the tailgate and I wished they were around me. Instead of dragging her under, I coaxed. A taste, a tease, a breath-stealing sip from those full lips wasn't enough.

I was pretty sure it would never be enough.

But I waited her out.

My fingers twisted into the heavy tangle of hair while my other hand dug into the belt loops I found at her waist.

"Let me take you home, Kira," I said against her mouth.

Her amber eyes fluttered open. Questions and worries swirled in the gold. It seemed like there were always worries living there. As if she didn't trust anything, even herself.

Suddenly her eyes cleared and she nodded.

Before she could find a reason to change her mind, I lifted her off the tailgate and brought her to the passenger door.

"You don't have to keep carrying me."

"I like carrying you."

The words felt heavier than I intended, but no less true. I had a strong feeling not many people thought she needed that kind of support. She was so capable and sturdy in every way.

Not just in her lush body that I craved, but in the absolute capability she wore like a shield. Even the most self-sufficient people needed a little care. In fact, knowing the strong and self-reliant women in my own family, they needed it most.

I hiked her up on my waist to get my hand free for the handle and grinned up at her when she gripped my shoulders with a startled gasp.

"I won't drop you."

When her brow furrowed, I simply nipped her chin, rewarded when her mouth dropped open with the stark pleasure that bloomed between us like a summer wildflower.

I set her inside the truck and swung her legs gently under the dash. She dragged those long, capable fingers down my

chest, and the urge to splay her out on the bench-style seat was overwhelming.

But I knew she deserved more. Needed to know that I would worship her for tonight and forever—

Best not to go there. Maybe I needed the one day at a time as much as she did.

Even if it killed me.

I pulled the seatbelt over her shoulder and harnessed her in before she could complain about that too.

Slamming the door, I went around the back of the truck to relatch the tailgate and give myself a second to get under control.

An older lady was walking to her car. She had her hand hooked into the crook of her husband's arm. She had a huge smile on her face, and a twinkle in her faded denim eyes.

“I remember those days, don't you, Harold?”

He patted her hand. “I'll tuck you into the truck, Genie. We still have some spark in us.”

She patted his arm. “Save the spark for home.”

I laughed and gave them a two-finger salute before I climbed in.

Kira was already scrunching herself down in her seat.

“Ashamed to be with me?”

She squared her shoulders. “It's not that.”

“Isn't it though?” I turned over the engine.

Her head snapped up to face forward and her arms crossed.

Great. I knew how to step in it when it came to this woman. My tires dipped and the shocks absorbed what they could, but the gravel wasn't kind this far to the left of the parking lot.

Ruts remained from the last storm and the natural erosions of people parking where they shouldn't. I maneuvered over it silently, unsure where I should push her and where I needed to

pull back my natural aggression when it came to how she reacted to us.

“Obviously I can’t read your mind, Sunshine. Where am I heading?”

“Back to my car.”

“Ain’t happening.”

Her jaw worked as she bit back a word or seven.

“Spit it out. Better out than in, my Ma always says.”

“Oh, you don’t want to know what I’m thinking.”

“I do. I can take it.”

“You’re a caveman.”

I nodded. “When it comes to you? Yes. First time for everything, I guess.”

“I would never have guessed.”

I laughed. “I have perfect manners unless you’re involved. Not sure what that says. From the moment I laid eyes on you in Lucky’s, you got under my skin like no one else.”

“Do you have to be so...truthful?”

I shrugged. I had a feeling it was exactly what she needed from me. Games weren’t for us. With her reaction to how people perceived her, it told me one thing—fuck around and find out wasn’t going to work for me.

For us.

“I won’t lie to you. Even if the words aren’t pretty—that I can promise you.”

She nibbled her lower lip, but she nodded slowly.

I wasn’t sure she really believed that, but I was more of an action guy. So it might take a little time to make her believe it.

I sure as hell wasn’t going anywhere.

“You’re also insufferable.”

I couldn’t stop the grin. “You like it.”

“No, I do not.”

I waggled my eyebrows. “You do. If I reached over and dipped my hand between your thighs, the truth would be there.”

She reached over and punched me. “Lines like that do not work with me, buddy.”

“Keep telling yourself that. You know the problem with you, Kira?”

“Oh, please. Do tell.”

“You’re too comfortable.”

Her head snapped to the left to face me. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’ve become accustomed to the men in your life seeing you one way. Which actually works in my favor.”

“You’re making no sense.”

“You continue to act like you’re one of the guys and you’ll get treated like that.”

Her molars clicked together and I could literally feel the anger roll over to my side of the truck.

“I don’t want to be your buddy. You have more than enough of those. Whatever is going on between us isn’t a way to pass the time. It sure as shit isn’t comfortable. And I like that.”

She crossed her arms over her chest again protectively.

She was driving me crazy but being as straightforward as possible seemed best. “Easy doesn’t mean anything. At least not to me.”

“Who wants to be...” she waved her hand, “like this all the time.”

I glanced at her. “Like what?”

“Like I want to rip my skin off.”

“More like your clothes.”

She huffed out an annoyed breath and faced forward again. “I know you might be shocked, but I have had sex before. Good sex.”

And there was the problem. “I don’t doubt it. But you haven’t had the kind of sex you’re going to have with me.”

“You arrogant ass.”

I shrugged. “Maybe a little. But I guarantee I’ll back it up. Not because of anything that has come before us, Sunshine. But because when I touch you, I feel the difference.”

“That’s just lust.”

“I know lust. If it was just lust, we would have fucked earlier today and that would be the end of it. Okay, maybe more than just once today.”

She looked toward me and her chest rose and fell faster. Outrage put color in her cheeks, and I knew I only had a few minutes to turn this around.

“Smarter to just be a summer thing, right? I know you want to carefully put this in a box.”

“You don’t know the first thing about me.”

“I want to. I want to know where and how many freckles you have. How you moan when I slide into you.” My voice lowered and I shifted a little to give myself some breathing room behind my zipper.

Her eyes went wide and she swallowed—hard.

“I want to know what you look like when you wake up. If you’re going to be the little spoon or the big spoon.”

Her lips parted.

“Ahh, babe. You’re as starved for me as I am for you. Can’t you see that?”

“Do you have any other gear besides full throttle?”

I grinned. “Not when it comes to you.”

She blew out an exasperated breath.

“Besides that part. The part where I want to know everything about you—inside and out. There’s the Taproom.”

“Which is why we should not be doing this. What if this thing isn’t what you believe it is? What then? We still have to work together.”

I was completely winging it with this woman, but I knew it was more than just sex. “That’s just it. The minute you walked into that Taproom, you felt the shift. How right it is for you. You’re just not ready to face it. Whatever’s between us isn’t a part of that.”

“How can you say that? We literally have to make pairings together.”

“You’re the boss, Kira. You make the decisions and the plans. And believe me, I know you have a plan B, C, D, all the way to Z.”

“And when I fuck it up?”

My chest tightened with anger and a healthy edge of annoyance. “Who says you’re going to fuck it up?”

“Ever—” She cut herself off.

“No one. Beckett wouldn’t have put you in charge if he didn’t believe you could do it.” As much as it grated that they were so close, I knew that much was true.

I might be the new guy at Brothers Three, but even I could see how scarily capable she was at damn near everything.

“And you know what? You will fuck up some stuff.”

Her arms clenched tighter around herself.

I pulled one of her arms free then opened my palm. She stared at it for a moment before placing her hand in mine.

Something inside of me unclenched. I didn’t even realize how tight my shoulders were. I laced our fingers. “I know you’ll have a fix for it. And when you don’t, I’ll be there to help. I know I’ve been letting you do everything when it comes to the Taproom, and that’s because you *are* so capable.

But I'm right there in the brew room when you need me. And I don't care if it's just to move tables around for you."

She huffed out a breath, but her shoulders dropped a little.

"But when I say that you act like one of the guys, I mean, you have forgotten you are a sexy and incredible woman. And you know what—I'm glad about that right now. Because I can be the one to show you exactly how fucking sexy you are."

We idled at the entrance to The Mason Jar as I waited her out. A car came up behind us and honked.

"I can pull back into the parking lot."

"Go left," she said on a shaky whisper.

I lifted her hand to my mouth and scraped my teeth over the fragile skin of her wrist, then lowered our linked hands to my thigh before turning onto Crescent Lake Road.

The sun slipped behind the trees and into the horizon as we headed back toward Turnbull. The only conversation included her directions and her soft breaths.

I didn't even put music on.

The silence in the cab of my truck added to the molasses-thick tension between us. She directed me down a winding road to a dead-end street and a hundred-year-old Victorian with an improbably-sized parking lot for the era.

Probably an old elephant that had been chopped up into apartments in the nineties. At least that was what my mom used to call them. The old factory towns across the east coast were famous for the ostentatious houses that fell to ruin when the job opportunities ended. When I'd researched the area, I'd seen lots of ads for them while looking for a place to rent.

"Park towards the back."

"To hide my truck?"

Her jaw flexed in the dim light from the dash. "Because my place is in the back."

I found an empty slot and jammed my gear shift into park. Before we could get into another argument—because we were



so good at them—I unclipped her belt and drew her across the bench to get out on my side.

“Caveman,” she muttered.

I kept our fingers tangled, firming when she tried to brush past me. She led me along the path to the back of the house. There were three cracked cement stairs at the entrance to a back porch.

Deep green and white paint tried to mask some of the age and disrepair, but I could tell the old place needed work. She toed away a few rocks and bent to retrieve a plastic rock that held a key. I let her hand go so she could open the poor excuse for a lock that made me instantly want to haul her off to the hardware store for a new kit.

Maybe for a complete security system.

I glanced at the postage stamp yard then beyond to the gnarled paths crowded out by brambles and felled trees.

I had to shimmy my way through the door because it was definitely made in a time where men were not my size. The hallway was just as narrow with barely any soundproofing. The oppressive heat of the day hung in the air mixing with... was that taco seasoning?

The hum and murmur of television voices from two different doors added to the claustrophobic feel. A child was not at all happy with her food situation as we passed one of the doors, while a dog was barking with outrage from the other side of the hall.

We got to the third door at the end of the hall and she unearthed a second key from the rock before she stuffed it in her pocket. She jammed her shoulder into the door and kicked the bottom before it popped open.

“Don’t get too excited. It’s not much.”

I crowded behind her and slid my hand along her hip. “I don’t care.”

She sighed and nodded before slipping inside. She flicked on the lights and I was surprised with the view. Based on the

exterior, I'd expected a narrow, airless, crowded room.

Instead, she'd been thoughtful with everything in the limited space. Floating shelves dominated the main wall and made the room feel taller. She utilized the space for plants and photos of people I recognized from the orchard and Lucky's. A small glass plaque hung between the shelves half hidden by fat leaves from a monstera exploding out of a pot on the floor. I couldn't read what it was, but I wondered if it was from the Vegas bartending expo.

I wasn't sure how she'd gotten that monstera to grow in here with the lack of light, but then I noticed the small lights mounted under the shelves. Pretty ingenious. Grow lamps repurposed for lighting the space as well as feeding her obvious plant addiction.

They covered every spare inch. Pots, cups, even a teapot with a cracked spout were all full of greenery. From the variegated, to the solids, to leafy purple ones I couldn't name.

Evidently my Kira loved plants.

A corner bookcase was her only furniture besides a decadent couch I had no idea how she'd managed to fit into the room. It must have been built in there.

Shelves were stuffed with books on horticulture and true crime with a few bright-colored ones that looked like some sort of feminine fiction. Did she read romance novels? How spicy were they?

The topmost shelf was lined with beakers, bottles, and shot glasses of water full of cuttings in varying stages of propagation. More grow lamps were tacked along the top of the bookcase to give the cuttings maximum light.

Beyond the plants, the space was orderly save for a blanket thrown over the back of the couch and a jelly glass of water on the small table jammed between the couch and wall. It was also surprisingly cool. Her shades were drawn and the low hum of a double box fan in each window drew the hot air out of the room, leaving the place far cooler than I'd expected without an overworked air conditioning unit.

The air was clean thanks to all the plants and underlying moonflower scent that was so uniquely Kira.

“I just want a quick shower before...” She cleared her throat. “Well, just before.”

I nodded.

She headed toward a doorway past the small kitchen which was ruthlessly clean and just as orderly. More plants lined the walls in there too, but these were of the cooking variety. I followed her down the hall, and she stopped at the threshold of her bathroom.

“Can I have a minute?”

I backed her into the bathroom.

“Jeez, Ronan. I take a quick shower. Don’t worry.”

I always felt too big around women, but never around Kira until this moment. The Victorians were definitely stingy when it came to building a bathroom, but one thing they did right was a tub. It was an old claw-footed one that was perfect for a deep soak. A little table sat beside it with a candle and speaker.

I crowded into her, my arm sliding around her waist to reach the faucet. I turned on the water, then I snapped the shower curtain back and tucked it behind the tub before I pushed the stopper into the drain. A little jar of something like salt sat on a shelf. I took off the top and her scent rose up with the steam. I dumped two heaping scoops into the water.

“Hey, that’s expensive stuff.”

I took a mental snapshot of the label so I could order her a damn case of it.

She sighed. “I just need a shower.”

I cupped her face. “Take a bath. I’ll be outside.” I dropped a kiss on her forehead then on her slack lips. “I’m in no rush.”

She laid her hands on my chest. “And if I am?”

“Even more reason for you to take some time. I’m not going to be a mistake, Kira.”

Taking a step back from her was one of the hardest things I'd ever done.

But she was worth it.

## CHAPTER 11

KIRA

## HOLD ONTO ME, VIKING

“I don’t like being handled.”

He tipped up my chin. “Just get in the tub, Sunshine.”

The room was steamy from the heat of the day and the boiling tub full of water behind me. The fact that he seemed to know that I liked it lava-hot made me want to punch him all the more.

He towered over me in the bathroom and made every inch of my skin prickle with awareness. And yet not one bit of him seemed to want to get into the tub with me.

Okay, so the scent of me was questionable, but in my experience most men didn’t care when the end goal was a naked female. Especially a more than willing one such as myself.

He brushed my lower lip with his thumb before he backed up the last few inches in my tiny ass room and ducked back through the door—yes, ducked. My entire apartment never felt smaller than this moment. In fact, I’d actively worked to make sure it felt as spacious as possible and right now it seemed like a damn thimble.

He closed the door firmly and I resisted the urge to growl.

Who was he to tell me to take a bath? Didn’t he realize it was ninety degrees right now?

And yet I found myself peeling off my clothes. I was tempted to burn them, but I wore black for a reason. It hid all of the sins of work—including syrup and alcohol stains.

Instead, I dumped everything into my hamper, pinned the sticky mess of my hair up, and wrapped my terrycloth headband around the whole of it.

I hooked my phone to my Bluetooth speaker and cranked up the music.

Normally I listened to soothing tunes in the bath, but I was still pissed off enough to boost the bass heavy pop song playlist I used for cleaning. In the end, it annoyed me more than it probably worked to annoy him—because he was a jerk.

I hissed as I lowered my aching body into the silky water. This tub was why I'd rented the minuscule one-bedroom place. When I'd moved in here five years ago, it was because the owner of this converted house wasn't from Turnbull. He didn't know who I was beyond the fact that I had Beckett as a reference.

But the tub had been the only bit of indulgence I'd allowed myself. Working sometimes four jobs at a time—and almost all of them had me on my feet—required something for recovery.

And a bath was mine.

I was tired enough to dump another scoop of my special bath salts into the water. Epsom would be a better bet with the soreness of my shoulders from the flying drunk tackle from the asshat at The Mason Jar. But I had a six-foot-four Viking in my apartment and if he didn't piss me off for five seconds, I might even let him see me naked.

If he wasn't contrary enough to tell me we were waiting for my own good.

I lowered myself until I was submerged to my neck. When the song changed to a bombastic Miley song, I'd had enough. I reached for my phone and scrolled for the instrumentals I generally listened to during my winding down time, but I accidentally opened the sexy times playlist. Not mine—but the music app sure knew what it was doing as The Weeknd filtered out of my small but mighty speaker.



This would probably backfire on me too, but I didn't care at this point. The warm water did its job and I was close to a parboiled potato before the water cooled off enough to get my ass moving once again. I took a few minutes to use my razor since it was right there.

I had a mile of leg to shave, but it was much easier to do while my skin was soft and slightly oiled from the water. I took my time exfoliating with my body sugar until I was practically rosy. I unplugged the drain with my toes and stood to do a rinse and washed my rat's nest of a head.

Another few cherries and a lemon wedge dropped from the lather. I washed my hair twice for good measure and conditioned the hell out of it before turning off the water.

And because I couldn't help myself, I quickly spritzed the tub with the cleaner I kept in the skinny cabinet.

I was squeezing out the last of the excess water from my hair when I heard his voice outside.

“Dinner.”

I frowned. What the hell had he found in my fridge to cook? He had to have ordered something.

And of course I didn't have anything to wear. I spotted the silky kimono on the back of my door. Not exactly the best for drying off. My big towels were in the linen closet outside.

I did the best I could with the lone oversized hand towel and slid into the silky kimono. All I had to do was make it to my bedroom. Of course it was down the hall with a prime view from my galley kitchen.

“Dammit,” I whispered.

Oh, yeah, I was a femme fatale—obviously—with a silky robe sticking to every roll and bit of pudge. So hot.

This sucked.

I blew out a breath and opened the door. Steam furlled out behind me as the raspy voice of Dermot Kennedy flowed out with it. I'd forgotten to turn off the music while I'd been angsty about my lack of clothes. It was a favorite song of

mine and I didn't want to think too hard about how it reminded me of Ronan.

The rasp.

The deepness.

The passion and watery tones of the music mixed with the epic, rolling layers of longing and building drums.

He stood in the dim light of the hallway wearing one of my frilly aprons around his wide chest. A cast iron frying pan was in his hand with a towel around the handle. The scent of garlic and basil, tomatoes, egg, and cheese made my stomach roar even as my breath backed up in my chest. This big man had carted me around half the evening, and now he was in my kitchen cooking for me.

I couldn't remember the last time anyone had done anything for me, let alone make me a meal.

Or worry about if I was hurting—body and mind.

His dark gaze swept down my body, lingering at my legs peeking from the lavender robe, before returning to my face. The pan clattered back to the stove and the heavy thud of his boots shook me out of my stupor.

My eyes suddenly pricked and I rushed out of the bathroom to my bedroom, leaving puddles in my wake. I slammed the door to my bedroom and collapsed against it. My chains and earrings rattled on the jewelry organizer on the back of the door. I quickly straightened before everything fell off. I bent to pick up a few necklaces and tucked them back into their felt envelopes. "Get it together, Webb."

I huffed out a breath and tried to calm my racing heart.

It was just dinner.

And maybe a bang—no matter what he'd said in the truck.

Yes, it would be a very good bang. If not for the sheer size and scope of how we fit together, simply because it had been a damn long time since I'd had time for sex.

*I want to know where and how many freckles you have.  
How you moan when I slide into you.*

Who the hell talked like that? Or one better—who didn't sound ridiculous when he said it?

"Kira?" He knocked softly on the door.

"I'll be out in a second."

"You sure you're okay? I can go if you really want me to."

"No." The word flew out of my mouth with a sharpness I didn't mean. I clenched my hands and evened out my voice. "No. I'll be right there. I just need to get dressed."

"Personally, I like the robe." His voice was gravelly and low. "No need to change."

My hand was on the knob before I knew it. This seduction scene would only get more awkward if I kept thinking about everything. What to wear, what to do with him, what did this mean?

Overwhelm became overload and I opened the door.

Cotton and denim-clad man filled the doorway. The silly blue gingham apron didn't take away from the sheer hotness factor. His hair was damp around his temples from the humidity and probably the stove. The small braids he tended to wear to tame some of the volume of his curls only added to the wildness of him.

I reached up to finger one of the small beads at the end of a braid. A symbol was carved into the forged silver. I was pretty sure it was a rune, only reinforcing my Viking nickname for him.

He caught my hand and turned it so he could brush his lips over my wrist. "My Ma likes to think she's protecting her sons and daughters."

"Do you believe?"

His dark eyes were heavy-lidded as he spoke quietly. "I believe in her, so I guess so."

What must that be like? To believe and love someone like that? There was no love lost between me and my mother. The only thing that linked us was biology and a name that meant even less in Turnbull.

He set my hand on his bearded cheek. “Let me in, Sunshine.”

Into my room was easy compared to the heat and intensity of his gaze. I knew he meant so much more, but this was all I had for him. I tugged the sash of my robe open and the silk slithered apart.

He sucked in a breath and stepped forward. I slid my fingers from his cheek into the curls and along the nape of his neck to drag him forward. I didn’t want to think anymore. I just wanted his hands on me until all the noise went away.

The embarrassment of the day.

The complications of him.

The Taproom’s success landing squarely on my shoulders.

Not wanting to let anyone down.

I let all of it fall away with my robe on the floor.

Heat licked at the deep espresso brown of his eyes, leaving them almost otherworldly in the dim light of my room. A single lamp behind me kept everything from being too overwhelming. Shadows were definitely my friend when it came to getting naked with someone for the first time.

His gaze raked over me as we both fumbled to get him free of the apron. I laughed as the beads and the heavy leather cord of his necklace tangled with the neck strap of the too-small garment. Finally he flipped it off and the apron landed with my kimono.

He toed off his boots, kicking them out of the way. I was busy working on the button of his jeans as he dragged his T-shirt over his head in that way men had. The reach behind showed off every line of his arms, the ink that danced along the underside of his bicep, and the strong lines of his neck and shoulders as he stripped away the worn cotton.

I hadn't noticed the ink on his torso when I'd hosed him down earlier today. I was much more interested in the tight slab of muscles that made up his chest and the mouth-watering ridges of his abs.

He was earthy and intense. So different from the men I usually found myself attracted to. When I allowed myself the time for relationships, they'd been uncomplicated men. Kind and unthreatening with steady jobs and even steadier demeanors.

There was nothing steady about Ronan Parrish. Solid, yes—but he was too volatile to be called steady. Too much lived in his brain, and the passion for his work came out in waves.

His intelligence and way he saw through bullshit was scary. Especially my bullshit. Calling me out as much as he demanded more from me.

“Stop thinking, Sunshine.” He grabbed my hand and instead of pulling it away, he dragged it deeper into his boxers. Wrapped his long fingers around mine as I took his cock in my hand.

He was already firm and rapidly growing as my grip tightened. He crowded into me, our feet tangling into a shuffling dance that matched the strumming guitars still pouring from the bathroom.

I twisted my hand to draw him out of the denim and cotton, letting out a whooshing breath as the length of him pressed tight against the rough hair of his lower belly. He dragged me against him until the silky cap of his cock rubbed against my soft middle.

I stroked him, learning his length and just how he liked me to touch him. His hands were gentle on my hips, allowing me the time to get used to his big body. When the tips of his fingers dug into my ass, I took it as a sign he liked the twist and pull at the tip of his shaft before I delved back into the cotton recesses of his boxers.

I wanted them off.

But I also liked the safety of the almost naked versus me dealing with all of him.

He didn't seem to mind taking our time. We slowly swayed into a sort of box step while I learned he was slightly ticklish along his hip, he liked a firm tug, and dancing cheek-to-cheek would never be the same for me again.

My breasts brushed across his furred chest as I raised one arm to circle his neck. He bowed his head and groaned into my mouth as the first licks of languid turned to burn. The tip of his tongue flicked and teased, drawing mine deeper into his mouth to tangle.

I sighed at the warmth of his taste. The bite of hoppy flavor from the beer he must have found in my fridge mixed with pure Viking. I stroked his shaft harder in tandem to the kiss that spun out from gentle teases to taking.

His grip on my hip became a rough caress up my back. He gripped my hair, angling my head where he wanted it. His other hand slipped lower to delve beyond the cleft of my ass.

I sucked in a quick breath as he teased the tips of his fingers along the entrance of my pussy.

He raked his fingers through my hair, then wrapped the long length around his hand, dragging my head back to get to my neck. The spark of pain lit up my skin, and my nipples tightened in reaction.

He scraped his teeth down the column of my neck to my shoulder, then he rushed back to my mouth. The kiss wasn't gentle now. Gentleness had fallen away like the clothes littering my floor.

I went up onto my toes so I could wrap my arms around him. Releasing my hair, he took the hint and banded his arm around my back so he could jam his thigh between my legs.

The rasp of the denim along my inner thighs and the more sensitive skin between my legs ratcheted up the buzz under my skin. He lifted me, hooking my legs around his waist as he took the precious few steps that would get us to my bed.

He laid me out on my cool summer quilt. I expected him to dispose of his jeans, but he shouldered his way between my legs and opened me wide. There was a maniacal gleam in his eyes as he dragged the flat of his tongue along my center.

“You’re not nearly ready enough for what I’m going to do to you.”

Considering my thighs were damp with how *ready* I was, I seriously doubted that. I tried to scoot up the bed to give him room, but he dragged me lower so he could kneel on the floor instead.

“Open for me,” he demanded.

“I’m open, dammit.”

He gripped my inner thighs and splayed me further. “I’m no shy boy down here. I’m going to taste you from stem to stern, Sunshine.” He licked again and lower, swirling where no man had dared go.

I shifted on the bed, unprepared for the friction of his beard along the sensitive skin of my ass as he sampled every square inch of my pussy and beyond until I was a writhing mess.

He looked up from between my thighs. “Touch your tits since I can’t.”

His rough voice and even rougher language urged me to let go. He wasn’t afraid to show me we were in this together—and to demand my total participation.

I cupped my heavy breast. It was more than a handful and my nipples were tighter and harder than they’d ever been. Each firm tug gave me a brief respite from the wildness humming inside me.

The flat of his tongue was back to create havoc on my clit while his beard buzzed over my ass again and again until the burn became a firestorm. My thighs shook as he held me down and demanded I let go.

I arched off the bed, needing more. I didn’t know *how* I needed more, but I did. I squeezed my breast and gripped his

hair with my other hand, holding him there.

His dark, rich laughter pissed me off enough for me to growl out his name.

“What do you need, baby? Tell me.” He sucked and stroked but I was so damn empty.

“You. I need you.”

“Not yet.”

I dug my heels into the quilt, bunching it under me as I ground myself against his face. He let one thigh go and drove two fingers inside of me, and I detonated.

I clamped down around his fingers, my legs shaking, as he held me down with one shoulder and one hand and drank from me greedily.

The sounds—dear God, the sounds. I would have been embarrassed if I wasn't riding a euphoria-laced orgasm that bent my brain.

The pinprick of a light in my bedroom blurrily came into focus as Ronan climbed over me. Pleasure and satisfaction gleamed in his eyes as he rolled me onto my back and rocked himself between my thighs, gently this time.

I'd curled into myself sometime between orgasm one and three. At least I was pretty sure it was more than two. I wasn't sure. One was usually a gift for me, let alone two in one huge rolling wave.

He nipped my chin before he buried his face in my neck. “I haven't even gotten inside of you and I'd happily die right now.”

I slapped his ass as he rocked against my thigh. I could feel him hard and ready there, just waiting to kill me one more time. “Liar.”

He propped himself up on his elbows and his heavy silver Celtic cross swung just over my breasts. “No lies. Watching you, tasting you...” He nipped my lower lip lightly with that wolfish grin. “Addicting. Breath-stealing.”



“All right, all right.” I could feel the flush burning up my chest to my neck.

“You’re beyond gorgeous, but this body.” He rocked his hips. “Made for me. Made to take me. You’ll take me, won’t you, Kira?”

I swallowed. I didn’t know how to accept the words, or even the idea that I could be worshiped like this.

I hooked my leg up on his hip and shifted him more firmly over me. I could give him the yes with my body. I reached between us, happy to see he’d had the foresight to wrap himself up for me. That I didn’t have to fumble for a condom or even analyze the fact that I might’ve said who the fuck cares if he didn’t.

My eyes flooded as he watched my face with reverence and slid into me as if I was his home. I wanted to close my eyes against the intensity burning between us.

It would be easier to lock myself away and just focus on the pleasure.

But he rose up a little to rock inside of me again and again. His huge hand gripped my hip and thigh tight against him as he undulated over me, filling me endlessly.

The cross swung between us as he took my hand and laced our fingers next to my head to pin me in place. His muscles strained as he held himself over me, somehow not crushing me, his gaze never wavering.

I could tell he needed more and was waiting for me to offer it. His jawline firmed as challenge rose in the snap of his hips.

Demanding that I do more than take. And for the first time, I wanted to give without reservation.

Without the fear I would fall on my face and have the rug ripped out from under me.

I pushed him back and locked my legs around him, rolling him like I’d learned in self-defense classes. His eyes went from intense to startled, but I got him on his hip before he hit the edge of the bed and he finally grasped my intention.

He inched his way back into the middle of the bed as I fumbled my way into a position of dominance. Straddling his powerful legs, I glimpsed more ink on his muscled thigh. Another tattoo on his hip crawled up the sin lines to his waist.

I brushed my fingers over the swirls of Celtic knots and sharp fonts in another language, the Irish and the Nordic sides of him so proudly displayed on his body. But right now there was only one bit of Viking I wanted to explore.

My knees hugged his hips as I rose over him and sank down onto his cock. He hissed and growled as he stared up at me.

I took his hands and put them on my breasts, groaning as he knew just the firm touch I needed. He always seemed to know what I needed, even when I bucked back at him.

And in this one moment, I knew what he needed too. I slipped my fingers down his back and dragged my nails up over the ridges of muscle at his back. The flash of surprise in his eyes swirled into hot, wild rapture.

I linked my arms around his neck and rolled my hips to take him deep. His jaw firmed and the corded muscles of his neck strained.

“Hold onto me, Viking.”

“Always.”

His arm banded around my back and the other hand went to my hair to catch my mouth in a growling, rabid kiss.

Sweetness was gone again. This time we were on an even playing field as he rose up and we were chest to chest. Friction and sweat poured off of us but we raced for glory.

He growled my name into my mouth and held me tight to him as he jerked under me. He used all the leverage in his big, beautiful body as he drove into me and I crashed over him.

It was messy and amazing and we both raced to outdo the other until our battle scars were badges and the prize was simply us.

*Together.*

## CHAPTER 12

RONAN

## STOP HANDLING ME

I melted into the mattress. For once, a bed almost fit me even though I longed to show her another round on my California King. For now, my brain was blissfully empty and I was pretty sure I'd used every muscle in my body on the way to killing us both. I slung my arm over my face and dragged in a breath.

When she tried to climb off of me, I tugged her down to sprawl across my chest. "Just a second."

"I need to go get cleaned up."

The air was thick with heat, the scent of exceptional sex and I was content to steep in it, dammit. "You need to lay here for a minute before we both have heart attacks."

She sighed and shifted until she was half on and half off of me. She kept trying to give me space and I didn't know why. With my other hand I clamped her against my side until she finally hooked her leg over mine and pinched my side before she rested her cheek on my chest. "You're sweaty."

I swiped my free hand along her sweat slicked ass. The room was dark save for a tiny corner lamp. "Same, babe."

"I know—which is why I need to get cleaned up."

I dropped my arm and looked down at her. Her face was flushed and her hair was still wet from her post bath shower.

She frowned at me. "What?"

"Best sex ever and you just want to roll back off me like it was nothing?"

She rolled her eyes. “Isn’t that the girl’s line? Let’s cuddle?”

I shrugged. “Sue me, I like a cuddle after a fuck. But you know that wasn’t just fucking, Kira.”

Suddenly my necklace was very interesting. She traced the Celtic knot at the center of the cross. “It doesn’t have to be anything other than it was.”

“Why?”

Her gaze snapped back to my face. “What do you mean, why? We barely know one another. We were hot for one another and we acted on it.”

“I’ll agree to part of that statement based on the new tattoos on my back.”

“And the rug burn from your beard on my...” she trailed off. “Whatever.”

“Your ass?” I lifted her hand and scraped my teeth over the wildly fluttering pulse at her wrist. “When I tasted you everywhere? And let me tell you right now, I’ll be back for seconds on all of them too.”

“Is that right?” She took her hand back and rubbed it against the quilt. As if it would be easy for her to rub away the burn that flared so hot between us. “And if I want a one and done?”

“Lying won’t make it so, Sunshine.” This time I sat up and dragged her off the bed with me. She yelped as I swung her up in my arms.

“Would you stop carting me everywhere?”

I swung her feet through the door so we both could fit. Damn Victorian doorways. “Nope. Can’t.”

Her amber eyes fired with anger. “Maybe I should call you Barbarian, instead.”

Once we got into the hall, I swung her over my shoulder and slapped her amazing ass. “I worked up a powerful hunger, and unfortunately your pussy can only sustain me so long.”

“You’re an animal.”

“Viking, remember? Are you really surprised?”

She slapped my ass in return. I laughed as I padded out down the hall and into her tiny bathroom. I could use a shower, but there was no way I was fitting in there with her. I’d have to do with a quick wash up.

I set her on her feet and stepped away, ducking when she swung at me. Damn, she was amazing. I grabbed her hands to press them to my chest. The anger sizzled off her, but I knew it was mostly because she was overwhelmed with what happened between us.

Hell, even I was. Fucking was one thing. Kira and I made angels sing and the devil laugh. I knew it was more than just a stress release valve between us. She’d just have to catch up, and that meant I needed to be patient. Which I sucked at, but I had a feeling she was worth the effort.

She blew her hair out of her face. “Just because we had sex—very good sex, yes—but it was just sex. I’ve lived without it before and I can do it again.”

“Uh huh.” Not the way she screamed for me. And there was no way I could live without it. Not after I’d tasted her.

“Arrogance is not a good look, Ronan.”

“Viking.”

Her lips firmed.

I cupped her face. “I like when you call me Viking. Ronan when you come for me, though. Especially when you come so hard you scream it.” I lowered my face to murmur it softly against her mouth.

Her nails bit into my chest. I took the pain and there was something obviously wrong with me because I enjoyed the little bites and blood. And I really liked that I didn’t have to worry about hurting her. That she matched me on every level—mentally and physically.

But I knew her heart was a different matter. She guarded it so profoundly that I needed to be careful there.

I pressed a kiss on her angry mouth. “Take a shower. I’ll wash up at the sink and get our dinner reheated.”

“You’re handling me again.”

“You like how I handle you.” I ran my hand down her ass, dragging her tight against me until our thighs tangled. “And it’s okay to lean on someone, Sunshine.”

Her eyes clouded over, but she backed up and climbed into the tub before snapping the curtain closed.

The shower came on and steam plumed above the oval hanger bolted from the ceiling. I shook my head when I noticed more plants hung in creative baskets and pots both from hooks and attached to the walls. These plants had a more tropical flavor including fragile blooms from orchids that created more of that heady floral scent I associated with her.

She wasn’t frilly, but she leaned hard into the female in her own space. An insight that I tucked into the corner of my mind. She worked with men all the time and made sure to downplay the earthy, womanly side of her.

Botanical greens and sharp deep purples left the bathroom feeling more like an oasis than simply functional. I was afraid to use one of her washcloths to clean up. I had enough sisters and an artist mother to know the decorative embroidery wasn’t supposed to touch my balls.

I opened a few cabinets before she called out directions to the linen closet outside. I found more suitable things there and grabbed an oversized bath sheet for her, and an older, half threadbare one for myself.

I quickly washed up. My cold shower at the barn had barely made me suitable for burning up the sheets with Kira, and now? Yeah. It wasn’t pretty, but this would do until I could grab a shower. She needed to eat and relax for a bit.

Talking with her earlier brought it home that I needed to start helping when it came to the Taproom. Getting a better idea of what kind of food she wanted to have in there was top on the list so I could choose which flavors I wanted to focus on now that I had a feel for Brothers Three. However, just



because she was scarily efficient didn't mean I could continue to fuck off and leave everything to her.

August would be here before we knew it. The small batches of hard cider didn't need as much fermenting time as bottling would, so I'd had more room to play, but that window was closing. Bottling would be a whole different deal. Thankfully Beckett was giving me some lead time to figure out how the orchard worked and how their apples would match with my vision for the future of the Brothers Three Taproom as well as distribution.

I liked a more robust style of cider and could go dry or back sweeten the batches depending on what Kira had in mind. I was pretty sure I'd need to make another order of yeast, and research some of the champagne and wine yeasts for the larger batch processing during the winter months.

Thoughts of work took a backseat to my very loudly growling belly as I made my way to her bedroom. There was little difference between the steamy bathroom and the hallway. Whatever miracle of air quality she created in her apartment had been dented by using the oven and our own gymnastics.

The night was turning out to be as oppressive as the day, and I opted to just pull on my boxers to reheat the frittatas in the tiny air fryer she had. I found a few more tomatoes in her crisper and made a quick vinaigrette with the plethora of supplies in her pantry.

I was pinching off a few herbs as she came down the hall.

"It smells amazing." She wore an old Foo Fighters T-shirt with a wide, ripped collar that slid over one golden shoulder.

"Your fridge is pretty bare, but I managed to put something together." I popped a tomato in my mouth to see how far off I was and added a splash of red wine vinegar to balance the dressing.

"Hasn't been much time to cook lately."

I shut the skinny cupboard that had been packed with spices. "But you must like to cook with that stash."

Her cheeks pinked up. “Maybe. Cheaper to dress up chicken than buy out all the time.”

“Because you’re very smart and pragmatic.” I pulled out the frittata and slid it onto a plate then garnished it with a few of the tomatoes. I grabbed the plate, and the bowl of tomatoes and mozzarella I’d managed to cobble together in one hand, cutlery in the other as I herded her toward the Barbie-sized round table by the window.

“Handling me again.”

“Someone needs to. Might as well be me.”

“Who says?”

“If anyone needs some care, it’s you, Kira.”

She frowned and sat down. She tucked her foot up on the seat by her very distractible ass and circled her knee with her arms. Her shirt slid farther down her shoulder and I couldn’t resist brushing a kiss over the golden skin before setting the plate in front of her.

“You don’t have to—”

“Eat.” I spun the other chair around and straddled it. I figured it was safer for support and a shield in front of my cock was probably a good idea as well. I wanted to pamper her, take care of her, and fuck her all at once. Right now, she just needed to be fed. I guess that counted for pampering—for now.

“Aren’t you going to have some?”

I held up two forks. “Dig in.”

She stared at me for a minute before taking one of the forks.

“Problem sharing food?”

“No.” To prove her point, she cut into the eggs and stabbed a fluffy bit oozing with cheese. “It’s not that, just...” she trailed off as she sampled a bite. “Oh, wow.”

I waggled my eyebrows. “I know.” I cut off a hunk and speared a tomato with it. “Mom made sure all of us could

cook. I found out I liked it.” I hummed a little as I chewed.  
“Got any wine?”

She moved to get up, but I waved her back. “Where?”

“I hide it from myself in the fridge.”

I looked over my shoulder with a raised brow. “Why?”

“Because I usually only get two sips into me before I pass out, then I just waste it.”

“Well, no wasting it tonight. I’ll finish it off if you pass out.”

“Gee, thanks.”

I laughed and found the bottle of local Riesling in the deli crisper, behind a package of shredded taco cheese and pepperoni that I’d missed on the first perusal. I grabbed that and the wine.

She was quiet as I opened the bottle and finally found glasses in the fourth cupboard I’d opened. I could tell she was barely holding her tongue. I also had a feeling I screwed up her very carefully organized space, but she was too polite to tell me.

Or too tired.

That was probably the actual answer. She had no problem bossing me around any other time. I finally found a few aluminum stemless cups with Wine Down and Wine Time scrawled over the glittery sides with ridiculous sippy cup tops. I tossed the tops back into the cupboard and poured the wine into both. At least they’d keep the wine cool.

By the time I cut up the pepperoni and brought everything over she was more than half way through the frittata.

I set the bowl and cups on the table.

“It’s really good.”

“I’ll let my sister know you like her recipe.”

“You have two, right?”

I nodded. “And two brothers. You?”

She looked down at the plate and chased a tomato that tried to roll across the plate. She finally stabbed it with a bit more force than needed.

“That good, huh? Family can be hard.”

“Sounds like you love yours.”

And she didn't? The idea of it filled in some gaps. She didn't really have a lot of photos in her place—it seemed as if greenery had replaced any bit of familial space on the walls. Not that it told the tale for everyone. Some people weren't big on keepsakes and photos, but the few I noticed were of the Mannings, especially her and Beckett mugging for the camera.

“My family is noisy and chaotic, but yeah.” I snagged a piece of pepperoni. “What about you?” I prompted again.

She lifted her shoulder. “Sister and mother.” She lifted her wine and took two long gulps.

Must be really good on that front. I laid my hand on hers until she gentled the grip on her fork. “You don't need to talk about them.”

She sighed. “It's fine. You'll probably hear about it sooner or later.” She drained the glass and stood. There wasn't much ground to cover in the small space. “Want more? I definitely want more before I tell you about Kaylee.”

“Hey.” I caught her wrist and dragged her back.

She curled her fingers into a fist, the tension pinging off her like a live wire. Her hair fell forward, and that intoxicating blend of clean and moonflower drifted my way. A fat, still damp curl hid half her face, but one burnished gold eye peeked out and was flecked with angry amber.

“It's okay. You don't need to talk about them—her—if you don't want to.”

“Might be nice for someone to have the correct story before they get the more creative one.” She shook me off, this time more gently, then picked up her glass. She seemed to collect herself while she had her back to me at the counter.

The clatter of something wooden followed by the hefty whomp of the knife sliding through the last of the pepperoni made me wince. When she came back there was an orderly display of meat fanned out on what could only be a mini charcuterie board.

She traded the board for the now empty frittata plate and set her wine goblet down before going to the sink to wash the plate and wipe down the counter.

Because she obviously needed the time, I sipped my wine, surprised that it was actually a lovely fruity taste. It didn't really go with the spicy and acidic meal, but I knew a good wine when I tasted one. I was more of a dry red guy, but I'd definitely have to try something else from the winery.

She gripped the edge of the sink and I heard the tink of her rings on the stainless steel.

I set my cup down and went to her. Sometimes it was easier to tell a story when it wasn't face to face. I slid my arm around her middle then eased her back against me. I nudged her hair back over her shoulder and dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder, waiting her out.

Her hand came up to push mine away, but I kept my hold firm. Finally, she relaxed against me and let her head rest on my chest. Her hair was silky against my skin, still damp because it was so damn thick. I slid my hand along the short hem of her chopped up shirt, my thumb sliding across the slice of her belly showing.

“Kaylee is younger than me. From the minute she realized there was life outside of Turnbull, she planned to leave.”

“And you planned to stay?”

“No. I'd been saving up to leave, but I like a plan. I'm not impulsive like...them.” It seemed as if she was choosing her words carefully. “I have a good head for numbers and can wrestle a budget into submission—just ask Beckett. I annoy the crap out of him. It's probably more than half the reason he put me in charge of the Taproom.”

I breathed through the knee-jerk reaction to get pissed about how close she was with Beckett. I didn't see them around each other a lot to know if it truly was friendship only. When I'd first met her at Lucky's, Beckett hadn't looked at her like a friend.

Whether that was just surprise because of the way she dressed or he had an epiphany was still something I needed to follow up on for my own peace of mind.

And that was my own bullshit, which didn't belong here right now.

"I'm positive he wasn't just getting you out of his hair."

"Hmm." She didn't sound convinced. "Me and Kaylee went into business together since we were both good with numbers. Lots of small businesses in Turnbull suck at bookkeeping. It's not a sexy talent and once people figured out they didn't have to tear their own hair out over doing that and taxes—well, word of mouth got around and we were juggling quite a few accounts."

"I don't hear the bad." And I also wondered why she didn't continue to do that instead of working in the orchard. Physical labor was miles away from number crunching.

She was quiet for a moment. I could feel the tension ratcheting up inside of her as a moment became two and then extended into an uncomfortable silence. Just as I was going to turn her in my arms, she detangled herself from me. "Let's just say she left me high and dry. I couldn't continue and it screwed up my reputation. I let a lot of people down." Her voice was rough and thick.

She grabbed the wine glass and went back to the table to sit.

Well that was that, I guess. There was obviously more to that story, but I wouldn't press her to tell me tonight. It would only push her further away. Instead, I sat across from her and filched a pepperoni from the bowl. "So, sister that is a jackass, then."

The harsh laugh was full of contempt. “Something like that. She left town and I haven’t spoken to her since. My bio-dad was never really in the picture and me and my mom don’t exactly do the family dinner thing that often.” She lifted her cup and took a regular sip. “Or holidays for that matter. She’s usually conning one of her current boyfriends to take her on a cruise or an all-inclusive resort. Until she ends up back in Turnbull when she gets tired of them or they run out of money.”

“Ouch.”

She winced. “Sorry. I guess maybe I shouldn’t drink any more of this.” Then she shrugged and lifted it to her mouth again. “Fuck it.”

I took the cup away from her.

“Hey.”

“If we’re going to get drunk, we should do it somewhere more comfortable. I didn’t see a TV in that jungle of a living room.”

One dark brow rose. “Don’t think one bottle of wine is going to do the job, even if I am a relative lightweight.”

“Ah, but the miracle of delivery is always to the rescue.”

She shook her head. “I don’t do delivery. Too expensive.”

Again, that money thing. It itched at my brain with all the jobs she had when I knew she made a good living at the orchard. A few more puzzle pieces clicked with the sister information, but tonight wasn’t about figuring out everything.

I wanted her in the now.

Not in the murky past and not in the nebulous future. Just here, with me.

“Good thing I do. Take that very fine ass out to the couch and find a movie for us.”

She frowned. “You’re handling me again.”

“How about we call it taking care of you, and I have a feeling not too many people do. I don’t mind being one of the

few.”

“Fine. I’m too tired and sore to argue.” She shuffled out of the kitchen.

A whir of something mechanical I couldn’t identify floated after me as I headed to her bedroom for my jeans to find my phone. It was still too hot to put my clothes back on. I was quite sure the delivery driver had seen much worse than me in my boxers.

Flicking open my often used delivery app, I found a nearby pizza joint. It was still early enough to add on an order to a local liquor store. I ordered a few bottles of white that I figured she’d like and some red for myself.

I didn’t care if I had to watch a movie on the iPad I’d spotted on her couch. Right now she needed some pampering. And that started with cleaning up the rest of the kitchen so she didn’t have to deal with that either.

By the time I did both, I found her settled on the massive couch as she absently pointed a remote at the projector screen that had been hidden in the ceiling.

“Wow, that’s some system.” I glanced at the high definition projector tucked behind her couch on a shelf.

“Yeah, Beckett went overboard for me at Christmas.”

“Beckett bought you a thousand dollar projector?” My voice darkened. Best friends my ass. That’s what a man bought for a woman he cared for.

“Probably.” She rolled her eyes. “He probably brought Justin with him to shop. That’s his other brother. He’s been busy with getting ready for harvest. I swear, all the tractors in the orchard know to break just before the busy season. Better than during, I guess.” She frowned up at me. “What’s with the face?”

“You keep telling me Beckett is just a friend—quite the showpiece for just a friend.”

“You gotta get over this crap or we’ll never be anything other than tonight, pal.”



“You don’t think it’s weird?”

“No. Because we’ve been friends since we were seventeen. Beckett is generous with his family and he was tired of watching movies on my iPad with me.”

“How many times does he come over to watch movies?”

“You’re ridiculous. And not often. We’re both really busy.” She sighed. “Look, I never had much and he knows I like to watch things blow up on the big screen, but I don’t have the time to go the movies. So...I got a cool projector set up from my best friend. Simple as that.”

My chest hurt at the thought of Kira not having anyone spoil her. I’d just have to be the one to do it from here on out. “I guess.” I tossed my phone on the hassock that doubled as a coffee table before stretching out on the long part of the couch. She’d taken the short part of the L, and from the way she’d curled into the corner, I knew that was her spot. I appreciated that she knew the joys of a comfortable couch and bed. I was usually hanging off both when I went to anyone’s house, save for my relatives.

I inched my way over to her and laid my head in her lap. “What are we watching?”

She looked down at me with that little frown between her eyes again, but stretched one leg out on the chaise style cushion to let me use her lap.

I slid my arm under her silky thighs and lightly brushed my thumb along her calf then draped my other arm over the top of her legs. “I like your toe ring.”

She curled her toes as if to hide them.

I looked up at her. “I like how you shine. You shouldn’t hide it. The glitters at your neck and ears and now toes. Even the anklet. You’re like summer in a bottle.”

“Why do you say stuff like that?”

“Why do you think I shouldn’t?”

Her mouth dropped open, then snapped shut.

“Yeah, it is a good question, isn’t it?” I rubbed my beard against her leg and snuggled in. “Wine and pizza is coming.”

She tried to shift over, but I pulled her in like a pillow. “You already made us dinner.” Her voice was tight with exasperation.

“That was just an appetizer. And while I don’t mind your fruity wine, I want a red.”

She huffed out a breath. “You’re...a lot.”

“Yeah, but I’m worth it.” I took the remote from her. “What do you have on this thing?”

“I don’t watch much television.”

“But you have a sweet projector? Doubtful.”

She tugged my hair. “Fine. You got me. I like to watch *Criminal Minds* on the widest screen possible.”

The doorbell saved me from asking more on that one.

I sat up, but she pushed me back. “Okay, naked boy. I’ll get it.”

“I’m sure they’ve seen worse.”

She tipped up my chin. “Or maybe I don’t want them to see all of that. Think of that, smartass?”

I sat back with a grin. Nope, but I sure liked that she did.

## CHAPTER 13

KIRA

## BLAME IT ON THE WINE

I wasn't sure what to make of the linebacker-sized Viking in my living room. Worse, I kinda liked him being there. All too often it was just me and a bowl of popcorn taking up space on the criminally comfortable couch that I spent way too much money on.

What good was it to lie about my streaming television situation? It was the cheapest way to be entertained when my body was completely depleted by the end of the day—both when I worked the orchard and bars. Add in my new job, and I was lucky I managed even an episode of my favorite show these days.

I didn't have the energy to go out and socialize with people I worked with, and making friends when you were an adult was hard. Add in the small town crap I'd dealt with the last few years, and popcorn and Spencer Reid seemed like the lesser of two evils.

I padded down the hallway to the side door. Mrs. Schultz had the news blaring, and as usual their kid sounded like he was being tortured. Which of course made me think of that offhand comment Ronan made about kids.

Dear God, I wasn't made for that.

*Or your kid wouldn't be ignored like that.*

I stifled the very annoying inner voice and shoved it in the back of my mind where it belonged and dealt with the delivery person. I patted my pockets looking for the spare five I usually

kept on me, but the bored teen just dumped the bag on the stairs and handed me the pizza box.

“Okay then.”

“Let me get it,” Ronan said from behind me.

“You have no pants on.”

“No shirt either.” He shrugged. “No worse than a bathing suit, Sunshine.”

The fact that he filled the entire hallway—and bonus points for looking damn good in those boxers—I had no comment. He tucked the four bottles of wine under his ridiculous arm and left the pizza box for me.

Mrs. Schultz peeked her head out into the hallway and her eyes went huge. “Everything all right, Kira?”

“It’s fine.”

“I’ll say,” she said with a wistful sigh and shut the door.

I glanced down the hall and had to agree. He looked almost as good going as coming. I quickly followed him down the hall and back into my apartment.

“Do you have real glasses? I don’t mind the cups, but... you know.”

I opened the skinny cabinet next to the fridge—the only one he hadn’t searched—and pulled down two large wine glasses. Luckily they didn’t have dust on them, because I couldn’t remember the last time I used one.

He drained almost one bottle into the large glass and grinned. “My kinda girl.” Then did the same with the white and took a piece of pizza out of the box before returning to the couch.

I couldn’t say I ate at my little table all that often, but at least I used a freaking plate. I flipped the top of the box back and nearly groaned. It was dripping with cheese and mushrooms. He was kind enough to put peppers and onions on one half of the pie. I took one of each and loaded up my plate and another for him.

Good thing, since he'd already scarfed his slice by the time I followed him with a roll of paper towels under my arm. I handed him a plate, and that stupidly charming broad smile nearly melted my knees. I tossed the paper towels into his lap. "Got some on ya."

He ripped a sheet off and wiped at his face. "Sorry. I didn't realize how hungry I was. Gotta keep up my strength for round two."

"Who says you're getting a round two?"

He pulled me down into his lap. I yelped and almost upended my plate. "Ronan!"

He dumped me off into the corner of the couch and swung my legs over his lap. "Drink your wine and eat your pizza. We're watching a movie."

I tried to lift my legs off him and he only held me tighter, using his forearm to hold me in place as he cradled his plate in one huge palm, sipping his wine almost delicately with the other.

I gave up and leaned back on the arm of the couch, finding the whole situation insane and oddly comforting. "What are we watching?"

"Well, you said you like Criminal Minds, but that puts me off my pizza."

"Wimp."

He grunted. "Like Ireland?"

"Never been. You said your brother lives there, right?"

He set his wine down, hit play on the remote, then draped his arm over my legs. "Niall, yeah. I've never seen anything so green in my life. I can see why he loves it. I've watched a few movies set in Ireland, but this one always amuses me the most."

I gave a delighted laugh when I saw the opening credits to a movie I'd seen a few times. "You like rom-coms?"

"I like this one."

And so we ate pizza and each polished off a bottle of wine as Anna, Declan and her beloved Louis Vuitton bumped their way over their wild adventure in *Leap Year*. He looked over at me as the movie ended, his smile soft as he reached over to brush away the tear that had rolled down my cheek.

“They are both stubborn souls.”

“How do you trust love that happens that fast?” The movies made it seem so amazing, but that was entertainment for you. The fantasy was condensed to eighty-nine minutes.

“Sometimes all it takes is a moment.” He took my glass and set it on the floor beside his then urged me to straddle him.

I had just enough wine in me not to argue. I toyed with the curls that brushed his shoulders. “Is that what you say to all the girls? Here’s a rom-com and now you know you want to lose your panties?”

“Ahh, Sunshine. I already got you out of your panties.” He cupped my ass and settled me against his very happy boxers. “The only ulterior motive I had was to get you to relax.”

“Uh huh.” I lowered my mouth to his. The sharp red wine on his tongue tasted warm and full bodied. A lot like the man under me. He was big and earthy, with a lazy sexiness that I’d never be able to personify.

I was lists and stress and too many jobs to juggle without a whole lot of neurosis.

His big hand stroked up my back, under the old shirt I wore. Unhurried and gentle, he lightly buzzed the tips of his fingers down my spine then back up. The kiss was just as sweet and a little hazy. The heat of the day had soaked into my apartment and wine always left me a little flushed.

Not to mention the heat pumping off his body beneath me.

My hair cascaded around us no matter how much I tried to push it back, but the curls would not be denied thanks to the humidity.

He nipped at my lower lip. “You smell like the moon.”



I rubbed my nose against his. “The moon doesn’t smell, silly.”

“It does. The moonflowers that come out just for the big moon in the sky. They only really open at night to show off their pretty blossoms from the shadows.” His fingers slid around to my belly then cupped my breast, testing its weight and groaning when my nipple tightened against his palm.

My fingers flexed on his shoulders as I unconsciously rolled my hips.

He lifted my shirt up and off, cupping my breasts to lift to his mouth. He brushed his beard across my skin. A mixture of bristle and silk that made my nipples tighten all the more. His eyes seemed almost black in the shadows of the curtain of my hair. The espresso brown intense and watchful.

He sucked harder and my head fell back as the zing of awareness dented the foggy pleasure and arrowed down between my legs. “What are you doing to me?”

“If you have to ask, maybe I’m not doing it right.” He switched from one breast to the other, the pressure making me lightheaded.

My knees dug so deep into the couch cushions that I couldn’t move more than a few inches, which tucked the stiff shaft of his cock tight against my cutoffs. I scraped my nails down his chest, and the hair along his pecs danced around my fingers and left me even buzzier.

I tried to shimmy back but we were locked together.

He groaned as I rubbed against him. “Kira, you’re killing me here.”

I reached between us, using his rock hard middle to push myself up enough for a little distance between us.

He dragged me back down, flattening my breasts against his chest. “Don’t go.”

“We’re going to start a fire with the cotton and denim here, Viking.”

“Yeah, we are.”

I laughed and gasped as his clever teeth scored down my neck to my shoulder. “Get those fucking shorts off so I can get inside you again. My cock already misses you.”

My brain still didn't know what to do with his dirty mouth. All I knew was that I was wetter than I'd ever been with anyone else, even though it didn't make a lick of sense. I tipped my head to give him a little more access as he swirled his tongue along my pulse point then bit lightly.

“I have a perfectly respectable bedroom.”

“Later,” he said as he raced over the skin between my shoulder and neck. He scooted to the edge of the couch and helped me stand over him. He looked up at me, my breasts right there swinging in front of him. They were just too big to be perky.

Not that it seemed to matter to him. He used two knuckles to pinch my nipple until it throbbed then freed it to taste again. His tongue stroked and scraped over the insanely sensitive tip.

“Ronan.” I cupped his face, feeling the muscles and jaw working as he never stopped tasting me. My breasts were bright pink from his scruff and lips, and I cried out as my nipple popped free only for him to search it out once more.

He reached between my legs, pushing aside the cotton and denim. “Off,” he said as his thick, long fingers slid just inside me with the tease of more.

My hands shook as I tried to get the snap free.

He dragged the denim off my ass, his touch as rough and clumsy as my own to get to my skin. I tried to push him back to climb on again, but he kissed his way down my belly to the hair above my pussy. He dipped his tongue into the curls there.

“Wet for me. Those moonflowers and salt.” He licked, the tip digging deeper to find my clit. He opened me and sucked and stroked until my legs shook.

“Ronan,” I gasped out his name and held onto his shoulders.

He cupped my ass and swung me around to splay me out on the longest part of couch, flipping my knee over his shoulder as he gripped the back of my thigh.

My fingers went to his sweaty curls, the braids and beads winding around my fingers as I held on. "Sweet Jesus."

"No Jesus here. No God at the moment either, I hope. He won't want to see what I do to you."

I giggled because I couldn't do anything else. And then I was arching up off the cushions as he twisted one, then two fingers inside of me and tasted every inch around and above.

My heel dug into his back and he groaned louder. The wet sounds made me glad I was still a little drunk or I would have surely rolled off the couch to die. I kept trying to get away from him, from the scorching pleasure I couldn't comprehend.

He followed until we were at the other end of the couch. "I'll keep chasing you as long as I have to." He leaned back and swiped at his face with his forearm. "You taste amazing."

"You're killing me."

He grabbed my ankle and pulled me back under him so he could slide his cotton covered cock over my sensitive pussy. He hovered over me, his knee pressed into the edge of the couch, caging me in. "I won't be happy until you come for me again. I don't care how long it takes."

I reached between us, and into his boxers. Bold on wine and lust. And I needed a minute. I swear, my brains were scrambled from his touch. "What if I want a taste?"

His dark eyes went a little wilder.

I wasn't sure that was possible, but here we were.

And it had been a damn long time since I had a man's cock in my mouth. Funnily enough, it watered at the thought. Just what kind of wine had he bought me?

Or maybe it was just this man.

Open and so giving. I didn't know what else to do, other than try to do the same.

As terrifying as that was.

He straightened up and I pulled down his boxers. He dragged in a ragged breath as I swirled my tongue around the flared head of him. He gripped the arm of the couch behind me and his whole body locked above me.

“Fuck.” His voice was little more than a guttural growl as he slowly slid his shaft over my tongue.

The room darkened a little as I got slightly overwhelmed at the angle. He pulled back, but I gripped his hip and blew out a slow breath through my nose as I took him a little deeper. He had more length than I could manage but the fullness and salt gave me a rush.

My pussy clenched in reaction as he slowly canted forward and back in my mouth. We found a rhythm and his whispers of praise left me shaking and wetter than before.

“Kira,” he groaned and I held on. He tugged my hair. “Baby, I’m way too close.”

I gripped the base of him and kneaded his balls as I sucked.

He cupped the back of my head and pulled at my hair as he came. The quick bright flash of pain as he lost himself in me made me slide my other hand between my thighs to chase his orgasm with one of my own.

Ronan curled around me for a moment, breathing hard as his muscles slowly unlocked and he eased a knee back on the couch.

“Up for me, sweetheart.”

Disappointment lanced through me. I was so close, but I managed to get up on unsteady legs.

He stretched out on the couch then urged me closer. “On my face. Let me take care of you.”

“On your what?” Horror choked back the sparkly orgasm I’d been ready for a moment before.

He dragged me closer and turned me so I could straddle his chest. His hair was curling and wild around his face as he looked up at me. He gripped my ass and pulled me higher until my knees hugged his damn ears. “Take a gulp of wine if you need it, but I told you this isn’t over until you come again.”

“I’m good.” The lie was there because I couldn’t quite get past the intimacy of my situation. What if I killed him, for God’s sake? *Death by lack of thigh gap, news at eleven.*

“No, you’re not. You’re pent up.” He kissed my inner thigh. “I’d never leave you hanging, even if my brain is scrambled eggs right now from your mouth.”

I spotted my glass on the floor and leaned down to get it, tossing the last of my wine back like a shot. I reached over him to put it down on the tiny end table at the other end of the couch and yelped as he lifted his chin to swipe his tongue over my center.

“Hang on to something, it’s about to get dirty.”

I gripped the arm of the couch and my other hand instantly went to his hair. “Ronan, you—fuck.”

He laughed against my pussy. Literally laughed and then melted my brain. I was already so close from before, from getting him off, from the warmth and the wine and the odd, wonderful night.

The last of the wine hit me, and I rolled my hips in time with his mouth, with his amazing tongue and fingers that knew me better than I knew myself.

I cupped my breasts and the swirl of his tongue found exactly what I needed. I shook above him as darkness and streams of light shifted together like cosmic puzzle pieces. I rode the roughness of his chin, the softness of his mouth and the wicked edge of his tongue until everything faded but Ronan.

I sagged over the back of the couch and couldn’t seem to catch my breath.

He grinned up at me, nipping my knee. “Goddamn, woman. Let me go again.”

“God, no. I’m going to pass out.”

He laughed and lifted me up and over his shoulder.

“Ronan! Did you hear what I said?”

“I did.” He strode across the living room to the kitchen. He stopped at the pizza box and grabbed that and the bottle of red. He handed me the wine opener. “Round three!”

“No round three. You’re insane.”

But I was laughing as he took me to bed.

A drunken round three sounded really good right about now. Especially since I had condoms in my bedroom.

## CHAPTER 14

RONAN



THINK THERE'S A HALLMARK CARD FOR  
THAT?

I woke to my cheek pressed to a foreign mattress. I peeled my eyes open and winced at the sun streaking around the cracks in Kira's blackout shades. The room was dim for the most part, which my throbbing head appreciated, but there was still a considerable amount of light trying to kill me.

Chancing movement, I lifted my head and found a tumble of dark hair beside me. The whiskey and blond streaks seemed more chaotic than usual thanks to our very sweaty evening's activities. My arm was clamped around her waist and our legs were tangled intimately.

Not the vying for space kind of deal—more like we simply fit.

And dammit, I'd felt that all last night.

I'd been nearly obsessed to keep my hands and mouth on every inch of her. For fuck's sake, I'd left brands on her skin. Tiny, purpling bruises dotted over her golden shoulders and along the nape of her neck where I'd feasted as I took her from behind a few hours before dawn.

Losing myself in her so many times, I'd lost count.

We'd killed all four bottles of wine, the pizza, and not nearly enough water to combat our sins.

I was a husk of a man, and I couldn't stop smiling.

I rolled over and the groan escaped before I could bite it back. I needed a gallon of water followed by a gallon of coffee and a shower hot enough to flay a layer of skin off.

Kira made a grouchy grunt and kicked at my leg.

So much for the perfect pretzel we'd started with.

I curled around her, dragging her onto her side so I could spoon around her. "I think we need to get up."

Her answer was more whine than groan. Unfortunately, the traitor that was my dick didn't really care. The curve of her ass against my thighs was enough to wake him. Okay, so the morning didn't really count. Having all her soft skin against me, smelling of us combined as well as a hint of that moonflower I couldn't get enough of didn't help me ignore it.

I dragged my lips along her shoulder, pushing the silky mass of her hair aside so I could trace the outline of my marks on her neck.

She shivered and tucked her ass more firmly into me. "Don't make me wake up yet."

I sucked lightly on her skin and slipped my hand between her thighs.

She hissed, clamping my hand from moving. "Sensitive."

"Well used," I said with a smile against her neck. "I'll be gentle."

"We need to get up."

"You just said you didn't want to." I feathered the tips of my fingers along her pussy. Still wet for me. I loved that every time I touched her, she was half ready for me. "Silky soft," I said as I dipped inside and lightly pulsed the palm of my hand along her clit and her answering squeeze made me groan. "Just like that."

"You're far too good at this."

I tipped her head toward me with my other hand to tangle my tongue with hers. "I'm good at learning things." Her amber eyes were soft and unfocused as she watched me through her slitted lashes. Again, that little crease was there between her brows.

As if she couldn't figure me out.

I felt the surrender. The way her body opened for me was a gift I had a feeling I'd never tire of. At least here, she trusted me a little.

I hooked her long leg over my thigh to make room to slide two fingers into her again and again. Her pussy sucked my fingers back in each time, her body flexing and accepting each time as she soaked my hand. I widened her and dipped in another until she was arching off of me, her arms lifting so she could grip my hair, then the sheets beside us.

Restless and searching, I didn't let her go over.

“Edging was never so delicious until you were mine, Kira.”

She dug her heel into the mattress and tried to leverage herself up to grind on my hand. “Stop teasing and fill me up, dammit. I need you.” She twisted and I knew I'd be a goner if she got on top of me.

I clamped my hand around her waist so she couldn't roll over. My dick pressed into the perfect cleft of her ass. I really wanted to get inside of her, and my hips followed her bucking, angry thrusts for release. Holding on for dear life, I speared my fingers inside her until she was shaking.

I tucked my chin into her shoulder and used every muscle I had to keep her open while she drenched my hand and her thighs. I wanted to lick all of it off her, to drown in her taste, but she was lost to the wild need to come.

I rolled us to the side and reached for the box of condoms on the bedside until they scattered all over the floor and bed.

Thank God one bounced across the sheets toward us. She grabbed for it and I snatched it from her as she pumped herself against my fingers. I couldn't rip it open with one hand especially since her hair was tangled around my mouth. She laughed as I growled.

I'd been able to hold myself in check until she went redline with need and now I was just as close.

She ripped it open with shaking fingers and we both fumbled to get me suited up. I rolled onto my knees to get

behind her, folding both her legs to pin her to the mattress as I blindly thrust forward.

She screamed as I drove into her again and again. The friction from clamping her legs together made me throw my head back with a guttural groan. I couldn't stop, even when I saw how red her thighs were from the rougher hair on my legs.

She gripped the side of the mattress and pushed back on me, taking everything I gave her and demanding more.

I gripped her hip, my fingers making marks in her skin—more marks. She would be painted by the end of this and I wanted to be sorry for it but I couldn't. I was just grateful she could take me, seemed to want this as much as I did.

Her keening cry dented the haze that had enveloped me like a dream. Only then did I realize how my heart thundered in my ears and my chest heaved with exertion. Sweat soaked both of us as our skin slapped together. She vised around me and she'd clamped her fingers around the wrist of the hand that practically dented her hip.

Her nails dug into my skin, and the prick of pain set off a chain reaction. Heat blazed up my spine then back down like racing electricity as I gave a final thrust and filled the condom. The room went dark, and I staggered a little to fall onto the mattress behind her.

“Jesus.” I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. “Fuck.” How could it be that good again? I draped my arm over my eyes and focused on dragging in oxygen.

Kira laughed. She was slumped half off the bed, but kept giggling even as she whimpered.

“What's the joke?”

“Death by orgasm. I've read about it. Thought they were lying in books.” She rolled back toward me, as out of breath as I was. “Fiction and fantasy, but it's real.” She kissed my arm. “So very real.”

We laid side by side, twin pieces of wreckage in the very best war.

I turned my head and met her gaze. She was softer than before. The furrow in her brow had been replaced with smooth happiness.

“We ate all the hangover cure pizza.”

I winced. “We sure did.”

“Personally, I’m shocked I was able to…” she waved her hand weakly, “so many times with that many carbs in my system.”

I rolled onto my side and nipped her shoulder. “Fuck?”

Her cheeks pinked up. “Seems like such a flat, cold word for something so amazing.”

“Brain frying sex?” I said against her skin, digging my chin into her shoulder. “Synapse seizing sex? Think there’s a Hallmark card for it?” I nipped her ear lobe as the giggles bubbled up in her chest. She didn’t let them free that often. I liked hearing the happiness, and my goal was to hear it at least once a day.

“Menace.” She pushed me away and sat up. “I don’t even want to see how bad I look.”

I dragged my beard along the back of her arm, not ready to lose all contact with her yet. “You might actually be a little pissed.”

“That good?”

“More like the marks,” I said ruefully, then flicked the slope of her breast where a tiny bruise bloomed above her nipple.

She looked down with a gasp then scrambled off the bed. I propped my head up with my arm and enjoyed the jiggle and sway of all the best parts of her as she swung her bedroom door closed to look at herself in the full length mirror attached to the other side.

“Ronan Parrish, what did you do to me?” She spun around and looked over her shoulder at the map of marks I’d left on her.

“You left a few of your own, Sunshine.” I swiped my hand over my hip bones where matching fingertip marks showed just how hard she’d gripped me as she rode me last night.

“Unbelievable.”

I crossed my legs at the ankle and grinned. “Sex bruises are the best bruises.”

She bent down and picked up my jeans and tossed them at my head. I ducked, and they landed with a whomp against her headboard. My Kira was a tough one.

“Quit grinning, you lunatic,” she said as she stalked out of the room.

I dragged a pillow of the floor and tucked it under my head as I heard the shower turn on. Sated, even if my head was pounding again now that my blood had returned from my recalcitrant cock, I let myself doze.

The scent of moonflowers roused me. Kira came into blurry focus as she bustled around the room getting ready. It was still hot, but not quite as oppressive as it had been for the last few days. She was wearing a flowy cotton dress with dark pink flowers all over it and sliding a belt around her waist, emphasizing her hourglass shape that made my mouth water.

“Wow.”

She glanced over her shoulder, some sort of makeup wand in her hand. “Finally awake, princess?”

I sat up and scrubbed my hands over my face. “Helluva sight to wake to.”

She glossed something pale and shiny over her lips before snapping the cap back on and the lip stuff disappeared into a pocket of her dress. She wore minimal makeup, but she’d done something to eyes to make them look wider and brighter.

She stepped into mile high heels in a surprising dark teal that made her legs look like a million bucks.

“A little dressed up for moving furniture, aren’t we?” I scooted to the edge of the bed to put my feet on the floor so I

could stretch my back and shoulders before I stood up. I had a feeling I'd be swaying oh so manfully thanks to dehydration.

"I have interviews this afternoon."

"Oh." I dropped my arms to my sides. "Did you need me for that?"

She shook her head. "Bartenders today, but I'll be starting with the chefs tomorrow."

"Yeah, we need to figure out menu stuff." I pushed away the frizzy mess of my curls. "Mind if I take a shower?"

"As long as you're cool with smelling like me."

I stood, and yay for only a mild sway. I walked up behind her to stare at her in the mirror with a wiggle of eyebrows. "I don't mind that at all."

She elbowed me. "One track mind."

I slipped my arms around her waist and brushed my beard along the side of her neck. "Only track when you're around."

"I hope not. We have a lot of work to do."

"I'm trying to be sweet and romantic here, Sunshine."

She rolled her eyes, but there was a definite flush to her cheeks. "All right, hurry up. I don't want to be any later. We need to stop and get my car, and it's already after ten."

"Right. Forgot about the kidnapping." I kissed her neck. "How about I just get dressed and we'll grab some coffee. I'll do the shower and change thing at my place."

"You sure?"

"I don't mind smelling like us a little longer." I swatted her ass then gathered my things and headed to the bathroom.

I could feel her eyes on me and a niggle of annoyance tried to dent my morning. I had a feeling Kira Webb didn't really know what to do with me. Being patient wasn't exactly my forte, but I was playing a long game.

That was the part that should worry me, not her post sex reactions.

And yet thinking about Kira and me in the future tense was far easier to see right now. I guess the rest of the details would work themselves out.



## CHAPTER 15

KIRA

## ARE YOU THIS INTENSE ABOUT EVERYTHING?

The ride to my car wasn't exactly tense, but it was freaking close.

I didn't know what to do with myself now that the clothes were back on and wine was out of my system. At least I preferred to blame the wine.

I wasn't that drunk last night, but something about us had been easier than when the sun was blazing and responsibilities were weighing on me once more. Add that he looked all sex rumped and sated while I was in knots and...well, it sucked.

I wanted to be relaxed, but it just wasn't in my nature.

Instead, I scrolled my app that updated both my phone and work iPad letting me know just how hairy of a day I was going to have. I had a few bartenders in mind and had put out a few feelers for people I knew in the industry.

The best thing I'd ever done was enter that bartending expo. The balloon payment for one of my loans had come due and I'd had to get creative. Of course, the company had offered a way to refinance the stupid thing—again.

Just the idea of extending the loan and all that interest had nearly killed me. Entering the expo had been a hail Mary. I'd hoped the prize money would give me some breathing room, but after taxes I'd only had enough to make my payment, buy a cute pair of shoes, and add a measly eight hundred dollars into my savings.

However, the network of bartenders I had access to was better than a check right now. I just had to juggle the budget a

little to hire one who could run the bar and train the rest to be nearly as awesome.

“You’re quiet. Sure you don’t need me to come in and help out today?”

I glanced at him. I probably should bring him in on the idea I had for the bar end of the taproom. For the most part, Beckett’s plan had been to highlight the ciders only, but I wanted to make sure we were ready to expand in a few years. Hayes had his sights on moonshine, and if I had my say, I’d get us into the bourbon side of things as well.

Brothers Three was prime for growth, I just had to nudge my bestie into thinking bigger. Beckett always took a little longer to come around. He was careful by nature like I was, but I had always been big picture focused. Even when it scared the crap out of me.

I shoved my phone into my bag. “I want to hire Lennon Hathaway as our lead bartender.”

Ronan’s wrist was draped lazily over the top of his steering wheel. “All right. Why?”

“Do you know who she is?”

He shook his head. “Unless she was big in the Pacific Northwest or Chicago, I’m not likely to know her. Tell me about her.”

I relaxed a little. His body language was open and not as intense as the man who had backed me up against every spare surface the night before. “I’m not entirely sure she’ll be open to the hire since I stole her title in Vegas.”

He whistled. “So, she’s a badass famous bartender?”

“To say the least. Won three years in a row until I came in.”

“You’ve got a brass set, Sunshine. Did you send her the invite to come in for a job?”

“I did. I hedged my bets and have three others I like, but Lennon is my top choice.”

“You don’t think our cider will be enough of a draw?”

“That’s not it.” I turned to him. Not so open now. “Brothers Three is still new and yes, we have the Happy Acres legacy...”

His finger tapped on his knee even if his driving hand was still loose.

I hurried on. “I want to give us the best possible start. And Lennon is a draw, yes. But she’s also super creative and smart.”

“Even though we don’t really cater to the whole twirling bartender aesthetic?”

I was quiet a moment. That was the big question, wasn’t it? Going safer was smarter. Was I being stupid about this?

“She’s got skills behind the bar, yes. But she’s also got charisma. Doesn’t hurt that she’s gorgeous, but she also takes no shit. I wouldn’t have to worry about her keeping people in line.”

“There’s plenty of good bartenders that can do the same without pulling in someone with her kind of price tag. Or is there more to it?”

“Like what?”

“I know I’m an unknown quantity for both you and Beckett, but I’m damn good at brewing.” His voice was quiet, but there was steel there too. “I won’t let you down, Kira.”

“It really isn’t about your work, Ronan. I just want to make the taproom the best it can be from the drinks right down to the aesthetic. And hell yes, the flair.”

His fingers went tight on the wheel.

“I think we both have to go on faith here.” I wasn’t good at the faith thing, but dammit, I was trying. This whole taproom thing required a lot of intuition. It didn’t fit with my worst case scenario brain.

He glanced over at me, his brow easing as did his grip. “Then I back you.”

“Just like that?”

He nodded. “How am I going to expect faith from you if I don’t give it. You say she’s worth it, she’s worth it.”

I stopped fiddling with my ring and turned in my seat toward him. “Are you just saying that because you don’t want to deal with it?”

“No. Well, not all of it.”

I snorted.

He laughed. “Okay, I’ll admit the staffing part of the taproom isn’t my favorite thing.” He reached over to twist our fingers together and pulled my hand to his mouth. He kissed my wrist, before letting me go.

I resisted the urge not to rub at the buzzing under my skin.

“But I’ve been around enough while you were training some of the people from the bakery who wanted to make a change. You seemed to know who’s suited for the taproom and who isn’t. Without crushing their hearts like a bug.”

I flushed. Not everyone who put in for a transfer was right for what I wanted. The customer service aspect was important, but being a server was way different than working behind a counter. And I honestly didn’t know how well we’d do when we opened.

We had to figure out if we’d do well only during the times there was a concert or if we could pull people in on our own. It was a big gamble all around and I was nervous about all of it.

“But I hope you don’t ignore help. I’m here to be your support.”

I blew out a breath. A tiny part of me relaxed at him saying that. “Thanks. It helps to know you’ve got my back.”

And I didn’t say that lightly.

He turned into the parking lot of The Mason Jar and I started gathering my things.

“I’m not sure when I’ll be back to the workshop. I worked late setting up a bunch of batches, so it’s a bit of a waiting

game for me. This heat is messing with some of it for me. I might have to wait it out.”

“Okay. I’ll just be doing some interviews.”

He put the truck in park beside my car. “Can I see you tonight?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

He unbuckled my seatbelt and slid me over the bench seat of his truck. “It’s a good idea. A very good idea.”

Before I could tell him why not, he covered my mouth. His long fingers speared into my hair, cupping the back of my head as he thoroughly tasted me. The voices in my head dimmed as I let myself have this moment. To sit in the early morning sunshine, in his quiet truck with the air conditioning blasting around us. I was pretty sure his ginger and man scent was going to stick to my dress by the end of it.

His other hand slid around my hip, tugging my dress up until the air conditioning vents gave me a quick blast of cold along my thigh.

I nipped at his lower lip. “I gotta go.”

“Just one more minute.”

“We don’t do one more minute. We do twenty more minutes.”

He smiled against my mouth. “So, we go with twenty.”

“I still need to get back and make some calls.”

“So responsible.” He rubbed his nose along mine and let me go with a sigh. “You sure?”

I couldn’t help but smile back at him and pat his cheek. “I’m definitely not sure, but I gotta go.”

He slumped back against the door. “Cruel woman. I still think you should see me tonight.”

“We’ll see.”

“That’s not a no.”

“It’s not a yes either.” I wiggled free and slid back to the passenger side of the truck. I grabbed my bag and hopped out, pulling the skirt of my dress down. I glanced over my shoulder, but the parking lot seemed blissfully empty except for Mason’s truck.

He was always here.

Maybe I should go talk to him about the day before.

Ronan frowned at me. “Problem?”

“No.”

“Afraid someone saw us together, Sunshine?”

“Why would I worry about that? You carted me out of here like a caveman yesterday. Damage is already done there.”

He opened his door and hopped out.

“Geeze,” I muttered. “Get back in the truck, Viking. I gotta go.” I went around my car to the driver’s side and stuffed my crap inside. Before I could get into the car, one of his big paws curled around the frame of my door. “What?”

“It wasn’t my finest moment yesterday, but I was worried about you and wasn’t really thinking. Just wanted you out of there.”

“I know.” I forced myself to blow out a slow breath. I wasn’t used to someone as passionate as Ronan was. Not about how he showed his feelings, and definitely not about how handsy he was. “I know it, but you have to understand I’m used to dealing with things on my own.”

“Doesn’t mean it has to stay that way.” He tipped my chin up. “You get that, right?”

“Are you this intense about everything?”

“When it’s important.”

“You barely know me.”

He let his hand drop and backed up a step. “You’re right.”

“I am?” I shook my head. God, what was wrong with me? He was obviously rubbing off on me and not just skin-to-skin.



“And I’m going to rectify that. Because you’re coming to my house for dinner tonight.”

“Ronan, I think we need to just take a step back, maybe.”

“I know you think you need to think about shit. But maybe that’s the problem.”

“Thinking is a problem?”

“For you? Yes.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Well, you’re going to be very disappointed because that’s me. And it’s not going to change. So if you’re not good with that, we’ve already got problems.”

He crowded into me. “What’s to think about right now? All the reasons we shouldn’t work? That’s easy. How about thinking why we would?” He cupped my face. “Looking for a way in instead of out.”

I opened my mouth to reply and he settled his lips on mine. I curled my fingers into his shirt.

“Good luck with the interviews. I’ll find you later.” He went around my car toward his truck and gave me a smile as he climbed up. “Don’t look so worried, Sunshine.”

I got into my car. “Too bad it’s my default,” I said to no one.

My phone rang in my purse, thankfully giving me a reason to focus on anything but me and Ronan. I dug out my headphones as I turned on the car. Matilda was too old to have a Bluetooth hookup, and she wasn’t worth the upgrade.

Not like I could afford it anyway.

I tucked in my earbud as I answered. “Hey, Beck.”

“I’m at the Taproom.”

I hurriedly snapped my belt and looked over my shoulder as I backed up. “Shit, did we have a meeting today?”

Damn Viking waited until I put my car in drive to leave. I would not have a squishy moment about him being worried

about me. Nope. I would not.

I followed his truck down the gravel path to Crescent Lake Road. He took a left and headed into Crescent Cove while I turned back toward Turnbull and the orchard.

“No. I just figured you’d be here. You’re here most mornings.”

“I got a late start.” Very late start that left a memory between my thighs that no shower could soothe. And I wasn’t really mad about it.

“No prob. It wasn’t anything important. We just haven’t checked in with one another much lately.”

*Sorry, boss. I was too busy banging the new guy.*

“How does tomorrow sound? If you can make time. I have interviews scheduled most of the afternoon, so I’m a little jammed.”

“Sure. I’ve got a light day tomorrow.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

“Everything all right, Key?”

“Yeah. Just...”

What? I was on track with my to-do list. Overwhelmed with the list itself, but I wasn’t behind. All my bullshit was personal. And while me and Beckett were best friends, we didn’t really talk about relationships.

Mostly because neither of us really had them.

Beck was married to the orchard, especially now that the brothers were trying to rebrand Happy Acres into a more modern Brothers Three direction.

“Just?”

I sighed. “I had a little incident with a patron at The Mason Jar last night and it blew out my night.”

“Is that right?” His voice was tight.

“Take it down a notch. It was nothing. The dude ended up in the drunk tank and I lost a few hours of work.”

“Key, you can’t keep working eleven jobs.” His voice was resigned, but I could hear the annoyance in there too.

“I’m down to two.” And while I knew it was unreasonable for me to take on anything else with everything I had on my plate for the taproom, having that cushion in my bank account—not to mention the tips for my drawer stash—made me feel more in control.

“I know this is kind of a delicate subject, but if I’m not paying you enough—”

“God, no. No, that’s not it. You know my situation.” My voice tightened. I hated talking money, but Beck was the only one who knew everything. Well, almost everything.

I had to have some privacy. My loans were my business. I clenched the wheel as I stopped at a red light.

“Kira, you aren’t your sister.”

I laughed harshly. “Tell that to the fourteen families she hurt.”

Fourteen families I had to pay back so my sister didn’t go to jail.

“Dammit. I’m sticking. We’ll talk when you get here. You must be almost here, you’re only ten minutes from the orchard.”

“I was running an errand this morning. I’m still fifteen minutes out.” To pick up my car for my version of a walk of shame. Even when I’d done the deed all at my own damn apartment.

Deed?

Ha.

Gold star fucking is what it had been.

“Look, Beck. I’m fine. It is what it is. You and your family never made me feel like a Webb, and that’s what matters. Period.”

“Kira Webb is amazing.”

My eyes burned. Damn him.

“Back atcha. Now go away so I can do my interviews.”

“Yeah, yeah. Won’t hear me complaining about that part. You are aces when it comes to schedules and hires.”

Much like Ronan, he didn’t want to deal with the logistics of staffing. I knew it was where I excelled even if it wasn’t the sexy part.

“While I have you, I wanted to let you know I’m interested in bringing in a name for the bar.”

“What kind of name?”

“She’s a flair artist.”

“Like the Vegas thing?”

“Yeah.” I could hear the skepticism in his voice, but I gave him the details as I did with Ronan. “I think she’ll give us a leg up with bringing in people too.”

“Do people in this area know what a flair artist is?”

“You’d be surprised what people watch on the internet.”

“You got me there. Hayes is always nattering at me about something he saw on one of the social media apps. Annoying as hell. Who has time for that shit?”

Knowing Beckett’s version of downtime was a beer and his guitar, I didn’t argue.

“It’ll eat into my—our—budget, but she’s also got a following. If we market it right, we can get some of the younger people in the doors, even when we don’t have a concert.”

He was quiet. Long enough that I opened my mouth to back out of the idea. “It’s an angle I didn’t think of. Exactly why I put you in charge of this.”

Now I was the quiet one and my eyes stung again. “Dammit, don’t get me emotional.”

“For fuck’s sake, don’t do that.”

I laughed and it was only marginally close to a sob. “I appreciate you trusting me.”

“Beyond my family, there’s no one I trust more, Key.”

And because he was Beckett, that was how he hung up. I tossed headphones into my bag. I practically sagged in my seat when I realized I was already in town. I needed some coffee and some thinking time, dammit. First, an overwhelming Viking and then Beckett.

Far too much for one morning.

I pulled into a Starbucks and decided if any day was perfect for a splurge, it was today. With caffeine, I could do just about anything.

Now I just had to convince Lennon Hathaway that Central New York was special enough to get her to work for me.

## CHAPTER 16

RONAN

## OLD TIMES

It was a little early to stop and get fried chicken from Crescent Cove, but the hangover gods were still playing havoc with my gut. Wine wasn't my usual drink of choice, and the two bottles plus lack of sleep equaled a desperate need for grease. So much so, I was tempted to land at the diner near the gazebo. With a name like The Rusty Spoon, it seemed a no brainer for what I needed.

However, a lack of sleep added to my urge for a full reset. Bucket of Love was my only hope. And the joint was my happy place ever since I found it.

Unfortunately, that meant I had some time to kill before it opened. Some fresh air and exercise helped blow out some of the cobwebs, especially after an exceptional cup of coffee from a place called Brewed Awakening.

I ended up in front of a catchall book and craft store on the main drag. The inviting window was decorated with canvas bags full of books perfect to bring to the nearby beach. Handmade wearables were cleverly draped over a vintage metal beach chair in candy apple red. A rack of more mesh-styled bathing suit coverups was discreetly tucked behind it. Surprisingly, a basket of cotton yarn exploded with summer colors beside the chair and a half finished project was set in the chair as if someone had just gotten up and left it to go in the water.

Damn good marketing since I planted my boots outside the window for a full minute looking around. Every Word A Story was scrawled across the top of the window, hand painted on an



old school wooden sign. Seemed like the perfect place to find something to send to my mother and sisters to remind them I was their favorite.

Five minutes later, I had to grab one of the cotton shopping bags to hold the collection of gifts I'd found. A pewter dust catcher for my mother—she loved anything to do with turtles. A leather bound sketchbook for my brother-in-law and fancy watercolors in an array of stormy grays and blues, also for my mom.

I wandered to the second floor and found some ridiculously expensive yarn for my sister Norah. She was as creative as my mother but preferred textiles. I was helped by the colorful yarn saleswoman who definitely saw a target on my forehead. She even offered to package up and mail my purchase off for a fee. I suppose it was the least she could do considering the triple digits I spent on cashmere yarn. But Norah would love it, and it would make up for me missing her birthday party thanks to my move to New York.

Before I could do any more damage in the yarn section, I returned to the first floor. For my little sister, Maeve, I ended up with a stack of books. Most of them were from the used shelves and were lovingly thumbed through. She was the thrifter in my family and appreciated upcycling in its many forms. I paused over the Yeats Irish folklore hardcover with little notes scribbled in the margins.

I snapped a photo of the page and put the book on top of the stack. I sent a text off to her with the photo and noticed three others waiting for me. One from an unknown number. I almost ignored it—probably a spam text.

UNKNOWN

Hey Boa—new number for now. I'm road tripping your way. Got time for a beer? Maybe seven.

“Kain,” I muttered out loud. Surprise and confusion warred inside of me.

“Were you talking to me?”

I blinked up from my phone. “Sorry?”

The dark haired woman smiled as she toyed with the curling ends of her ponytail. “I wouldn’t mind if you called me Kain.”

I laughed. “Old friend texted me.” I noticed her tag and relaxed. The idea of a woman flirting with me generally wouldn’t cause me to put my back up, but I was working on little sleep and a dash of credit card shock. I waggled my phone before stuffing it in my pocket. “I have to answer this, but is there somewhere I could set this down?”

“Sure. Follow me.”

She was a little bit of a thing, but she moved fast, winding around the maze-like shop. As I was speed walking behind her, I grabbed two more dust catchers and tucked them into my bag. One more for my mom and a piece of stained glass—that one was for me. Since most things seemed to be one of a kind, I would rather hold onto it and decide if it was really for me when I could pay attention again.

She pointed toward the checkout counter. “You can set it on the side counter there. Sure hope you’re buying all of it.” She winked. “Since I’m the owner.”

“Oh, really? This place is great. I’ll definitely be back for all my gift buying.”

“What I like to hear. I’m Colette, if you need anything. And I do mean anything.”

“Um, thanks.” Why was it that women were the most flirtatious when I was less than available? Not that I had any pull toward her other than noticing the fact that she was attractive. Big hazel eyes, creamy skin, and dark chocolate hair would have had me lingering to chat her up, once upon a time. However, Kira had me locked down, even if she didn’t know it yet.

I slipped outside and was glad to see a bench a few doors down so I could get out of the late morning foot traffic. I took a seat, quickly added his contact into my phone, then texted Kain back.

RONAN

Where are you?

KAIN

Aloha to you too. Think I'm someplace called Dewitt. You somewhere you can take a call?

Yeah.

My phone buzzed and I lifted it to my ear. Before I could say hello, he was talking.

“What’s up, *Boa*? Long time no talk.”

I laughed. “What the hell are you doing in New York?”

“This and that. I needed to get away. Got on my bike.”

“You rode your Harley out from California?” My ass immediately had sympathy pains at the thought.

“I spent a week at Shane’s and realized your new digs were pretty close.”

“Really? Huh. I didn’t realize Winchester Falls was upstate.”

“Yeah. A bit more east coast, but just a handful of hours. After driving the PCH, seems like a blink.”

Memories slapped into me hard. Me and Kain on our bikes in our twenties when we were both running from responsibilities. Him running from the N’ai name and his father’s insane moneyed reach in Hawaii, and me from college that never quite fit. We spent a year doing shit jobs along the coast to cover the cost of campsites and beer in between good surfing spots.

Sometimes his best friend, Shane Justice, would meet up with us for a week or two before he had to get back to work with his father. We were wild and free and more than young and dumb, but that year had solidified our friendship.

“And my ass remembers the chafing.”

Kain's booming laugh crackled through the phone. "Not so bad when you find a warm and willing *nani*."

I shook my head and relaxed against the bench, kicking out my long legs. Kain's deep baritone gave me an instant boost. "And how many did you find on this trip?"

"Not nearly enough. I was more about the scenery on my bike than the stops. I found myself heading east. I went to see Shane first. He and his woman are settled and disgusting with it. Hell, they're even doing the kid thing. Tell me you aren't the same."

"Guess I'll have to tell you all about that when you get to my house. I'm assuming you're staying?"

"Man." His laugh was goodnatured if a little sadness crept in. Enough that I sat up a little straighter. "Not you too."

"Everything good, Kain?"

"Yeah. Just miss your face. And I want to see this orchard you moved across the country for."

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees to cut some of the street noise so I could hear him. Something seemed off. "Don't look too hard or you'll fall in love with it too."

"Not a chance. Unless there's a wave I can ride in these big ass lakes."

"The storms can be pretty epic, so I hear."

He grunted. "Doubt that one, bud. Text me your actual address."

"What happened to your other phone?"

"Just needed to cut ties for a bit. Someone always needing something, for fuck's sake."

Something was definitely up. "Like old times?"

"Yeah. I could use some old times, man."

Again, I caught that edge in his voice. "Hungry?"

“Always. And don’t leave me hanging, *Boa*. I need a lot of that food. I worked up a powerful thirst too. Got any of that bitchy cider for me?”

I groaned. Sounded like another hangover was in my future. Kain N’ai was an epic drinker. “My hard cider is anything but bitchy. Not ready for prime time yet though. But I have some reserve stock you might like.” My first day in town had included a damn good bourbon. Right up my friend’s alley, even if it would probably put me on my ass by the time he was done with me.

“I’ll see you soon, *palala*.”

And he was gone.

I raked my hands through my hair and winced. Food and a shower would need to be in my life a little faster than I figured. I checked the time and was glad to see it was just about time for the lunch place to open.

My shopping spree would have to wait. Luckily I’d covered the most important people. By the time I got to the counter, Colette was ringing out someone else. While I was waiting, I spotted a weighty fountain pen under the glass where my books were stacked.

The proprietress chatted genially with the customer but wrapped it up quickly. She turned to me with that beaming smile. “Did I see you eyeing something in the case?”

“You’re very perceptive.”

“That’s my job.”

I tapped the glass where the cobalt blue pen was. “Can you add that to my very extensive pile?”

“You have a very good eye, Mr...”

“Just Ronan.”

“Well, just Ronan, it’s a gorgeous pen. We have a selection of inks to go with it if you need some?”

“I’ll let my father handle that end. He’s a pen snob. Wouldn’t want to pick something he didn’t like.”

“What does he do? Assuming he’s not retired.”

“He’ll probably never retire. He manages a gallery in Portland, Oregon.”

“Wow. That’s a long way from here. Would you like me to mail your purchases?” She lifted the stack of books and moved them to the front counter.

I glanced at my phone and saw I still had a few minutes to kill. “That would be amazing.” I gathered the rest and between the two of us we made piles.

While she started boxing, she pushed a cream colored pad my way. “If you want to make a little personal note for them, I’ll put it in each box. Lots of bonus points, trust me.”

I laughed. “And this is why you have a very successful business.”

“Are you just passing through or...?”

“I work at Brothers Three Orchard—well, you might know it as—”

“Happy Acres, yes.” Her smile brightened even more. “I like the new additions. I’ve caught a few shows over there this summer already.”

“Then I hope you’ll come to the Taproom when it opens in August.”

“End of August? I have tickets for the Ian Kagan show.”

“That’s our opening night.”

“Then you’ll definitely see me.” She smiled. “I hope maybe I’ll see you sooner.”

I took the small bag with my personal purchases—including a snazzy planter for Kira—and gave her a tight smile. “Pretty sure my girl, Kira, isn’t into sharing.”

“Dammit. Always the big and hot ones taken.”

I laughed. “Thanks, I think.”

“Oh, please. You know you’re hot.”

I was pretty sure the tips of my ears were on fire. “I’m flattered.”

“Yeah, yeah. This town is full of men who are taken, usually with a pair of baby booties lined up next to their wedding ring.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Is that right?”

“You really are new to the area. Careful where you take... Kira, was it?” At my nod, she grinned. “The water is potent in Crescent Cove.”

I laughed. “I don’t think she’s ready for that.”

Colette sighed. “And you are? God, what is it with my timing?”

And just like that afternoon with Kira on the bar when I mentioned babies, it felt right. She was definitely in my future plans, and that included a family if Sunshine was willing.

“Yep. The look on your face means Kira is a lucky girl.”

“I could be an asshole.”

“Nope. The assholes are attracted to me.” She handed me the paperwork for the boxes she packed up. “I’ll make sure these go to the post office this afternoon.”

“Thanks, Colette. And I’m sure there’s a nice guy out there waiting for you.”

She flipped her ponytail over her shoulder. “The eternal hope, right? Have a great morning.” She glanced at her register. “Well, almost afternoon.”

“I was killing time before I could load up on the fried chicken place you have.”

“And I’m so glad you spent your hard earned dollars here.” Her smile was brilliant and still a touch flirty.

“Have a good one.” I backed out of the shop and headed to my truck. I called ahead to Bucket of Love since my order had just tripled. Kain did everything big, and that included eating. I also got something for Kira because she probably hadn’t

thought about herself with me messing up her usual morning routine.

A grocery order would also be in order. My houseguest was a foodie. He wouldn't find any of his high end supplies in Turnbull, but knowing Kain, he'd find a way to get it delivered. Chicken in hand—literally because I'd ordered an extra chicken sandwich for the drive—I headed into town.

I'd be cutting it close, but I stopped at the taproom for some of the bourbon I'd ordered for the opening. I was pretty sure there were a few cases of Hayes' small batch moonshine hiding in the storeroom that I could borrow from as well.

I still resembled a man who'd been on a bender, so I avoided the taproom where Kira was conducting interviews and left her lunch on the bar. I caught her attention and waved her over to the storeroom.

She gave me an annoyed shake of her head, but I waved her over again.

With an exasperated eye roll, she held a finger up for me to wait a second. Which gave me time to tuck two bottles of moonshine and a bottle of bourbon into a case of our reserve stock cider.

“What are you doing?” She whispered furiously.

“Impromptu guest at my place.”

She arched her brow at the case and crossed her arms over her perfect breasts. Damn that dress was distracting. The heat wasn't nearly as intense as it had been for a week, but hot enough that she'd left her arms bare. “Is that right?”

I crowded her into the wall, dragging her knee up to hook along my hip. Before I could get my lips on hers, she pinched my side.

“You did not interrupt my interviews to make out,” she said, her voice was tight with anger.

“No.” I laughed when she pinched me again and I tugged her fingers up to rest against my chest. “No, I promise I didn't. Just a handy side benefit. Christ, you are beautiful.” I braced



myself against the wall, caging her in with one arm while the other roamed down her curves.

Her cheeks pinked up as she wrinkled her nose. “Don’t try to butter me up. What do you want then?”

I dipped my nose into the deliciously clean scent of her neck and nipped her ear. “Mostly just to let you know I have to break our date tonight.”

She stiffened. “We don’t have a date.”

I eased back. “Yes, we did. I was going to woo you with dinner and fuck you into oblivion.” I rubbed my nose against hers and rocked against her to remind her where we fit best. “Remember?” My fingers stole away under the hem of her dress.

Her mouth dropped open and I took advantage of her shocked face and covered her mouth. I barely got a taste before she pushed me back. “I have three more people to interview as well as a meeting with Lennon in an hour.”

So we were one step forward and two back. I shouldn’t be surprised. “Okay, okay. Sorry. I couldn’t resist mussing you up.” I slid my hand up her thigh to palm her ass and kissed her hard before gently letting her foot fall back to the floor.

“And those plans were a maybe.”

I huffed out an exasperated laugh. “You never make things easy, Sunshine.”

She ducked under my arm. “We have a lot of work to do to get ready. August will be here before we know it.”

“I’m well aware, but we don’t work twenty-four-seven. Nor should we.”

“Tell that to my checklist.”

I followed her toward the doorway before she could escape, pulling her back against my front. “And you’re not alone in getting the list done. My batches are in fermenting, so I don’t have a ton to do until they’re ready for the back sweetening I have planned.” I swept her hair back over her shoulder. “Let me help.”

“You have company. Enjoy it.”

I stiffened. “He can entertain himself if you need me.”

She turned and pressed me back into the room, glancing over her shoulder.

“Still afraid to be seen together?”

“Yes. I don’t need you undermining my authority because we can’t keep our hands off each other.”

“From where I’m standing, you aren’t having trouble there.”

Her eyebrow rose. “Are you whining, Viking?”

“No.” I grit my teeth. “Maybe.”

Her full lips twitched and her eyes glowed in the dim light. She scraped her nails over my T-shirt to my buckle, then cupped the front of my jeans. “First of all, you need a shower.” She frowned. “Why do you smell like chicken?”

I grinned. “Greasy fried chicken.”

“Oh, that’s where you went. I wondered why you didn’t head toward your house.”

“Wondering about me?” I managed to bite back a growl as she squeezed my shaft, waking him up.

“Maybe.”

“I brought you some. Figured you didn’t get yourself anything for lunch.”

Her face softened, even as her eyes narrowed. “More buttering up?”

“I call it being thoughtful.”

She snorted. “Uh-huh.”

I had a feeling not many people thought about Kira and I tucked that in the back of my brain for future ruminating. “Probably need to reheat it, but I left a bag on the bar for you.”

She squeezed a little tighter. “I’d thank you properly if I had time.”

“For that, I’ll bring you lunch daily.”

Her lips curved this time. “Who’s visiting?”

“Guy from my almost college days.”

“Sounds like a story.” She snuck under the hem of my shirt to brush the pads of her fingers over my belly and around to my lower back. “That case on the floor says you’re probably going to get into trouble.”

“Maybe.”

She shook her head. “Well, have fun. Don’t get arrested.”

“I stopped getting in that kind of trouble years ago.”

“More stories?”

I tipped my forehead against hers. “I want to tell you all of them. And maybe you’ll tell me some of yours.”

The fun slipped out of her eyes. “Maybe.” She cleared her throat as she stepped back. “I have a ton of paperwork to deal with tonight anyway.”

I slapped a hand on my chest. “Arrow hit.”

“You can’t help with paperwork. Somehow I don’t think that’s your strength.”

“Not my favorite, but I’m there if you need help.”

“Tomorrow is soon enough. We’re interviewing the chefs tomorrow. Still want in on that?”

“Definitely. Once we figure out who we agree on, I’ll know better what kind of pairings I can do. Test out some ciders.”

“All right then. Interviews start at nine.” She nodded to my stash. “I’ll put the case and bottles on your tab.”

Of course she would. “I’ll be here.” I dropped a kiss on her distractible mouth. “I’ll miss waking with you tomorrow, Sunshine.”

“What if I said I like having my bed to myself?”

“I’d say that’s a lie.” I palmed her ass through her dress, dragging her closer. Letting her feel how hard I was still. “You liked waking up to me sliding inside you.” I scraped my teeth over her lower lip. “And I could get used to hearing you sigh my name while you’re all sleepy.”

Her hand slid up my chest before she cupped my jaw. The kiss was hot and left me a little scrambled. She pushed me away by the face. “Take a shower and maybe you’ll get back in my bed.”

With that she turned on her heel and sashayed back into the taproom.

“Oh, I’ll be getting back in your bed, Sunshine. Count on it.”

## CHAPTER 17

KIRA

## I WANTED THE BEST

I glanced at my watch. As usual, Ronan threw off my schedule. However, I did take five minutes to scarf down the lunch he brought me. And okay, that was a little thoughtful.

And I wouldn't be disappointed I didn't see him tonight, dammit.

Nope.

Not at all.

But the buzz under my skin from our quick semi-make out in the storeroom pushed me through another three interviews. Two of which were very promising.

“Hey, Key there's a very purple Jeep pulling up outside.”

My palms instantly tingled. “Thanks, Annette.”

I had a feeling that was Lennon. Her purple Jeep was often featured in her social media posts. The buzz from Ronan now transformed into a hum of nerves.

Annette backed away from the double doors and met me at the bar. She was the first person I'd hired on as part of the permanent staff. She'd manned the old taproom shack during concerts and bummed around Happy Acres, jumping from the bakery to covering weddings—pretty much wherever Laverne needed her. She was tired of juggling jobs and wanted a steady schedule where she could learn the business side of things.

We'd both been at the orchard for over a decade and worked well together.

“Did I see Ronan stop in?”

I willed my face not to flush. “Yeah. Can you put a case of the Bourbon Barrel cider, a bottle of the Brothers Bourbon, and two bottles of moonshine on Ronan’s account? He’s got a friend in town, and I think they’re going to get stupid with it.”

“Is he as hot as Ronan?”

“I have no idea.” I slipped off my heels to flex my feet on the soft cushioned mat behind the bar. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out. One Viking was enough of a problem as far as I was concerned. “I don’t think it was an expected visit. He’ll be in tomorrow for the chef interviews.”

“Damn. I do enjoy watching him wrestle with those big buckets.”

“You like watching any guy with shoulders.”

“That’s a fact.” She grinned and fixed her messy bun. The door opened and she turned, leaning against the bar with her arms folded. “Think your appointment has finally gotten out of her vehicle.” Her eyebrows shot up. “Holy shit. None of us will have a chance with any male if she gets a job.”

I hurriedly stepped back into my shoes and walked around the walnut bar. I’d waited until the final installation of the bar and the first liquor delivery to do these interviews.

Lennon Hathaway had a compact, curvy body packed in jet black jeans with holes at the knees. A cropped black T-shirt showed off her strict yoga and Pilates regimen. This woman definitely didn’t have any extra around the middle like I did. She wore flat sandals in deference to the heat and her magenta and black hair was scraped back into a high ponytail.

Not exactly interview attire, but she walked in with her shoulders back and chin up. She knew the interview was more formality and her sizing me and mine up. I looked through her résumé on her website before contacting her for a meeting. She’d had an impressive list of awards, high end bars she’d guest starred at for events, the celebrity parties she’d run, and of course her Bar Expo awards, save for last year when I’d stolen her title.



I met her with an equal level of alpha energy. I may want her for her cachet to build up our reputation, but she would not be walking all over me.

I held out my hand. “Hi, I’m Kira Webb.”

She glanced at my hand and arched a brow. “I know who you are.”

I continued to hold my hand out and met her glacial stare with a warm smile. “And I know who you are. Lennon Hathaway, flair artist, mixologist, six-time Bar Expo champion, should I go on?”

The ice in her gaze thawed a little and she shook my hand. “I should be seven-time Bar Expo champion. You got lucky.”

“No, I’m good.”

Lennon’s dark eyes narrowed, then she threw her head back with a laugh. “Okay, you got me there.” She dropped my handshake and instead held her fist out for a bump. “You were surprising. You won’t beat me again.”

“It was a onetime deal. Training for that left me with more bruises than a full season in the orchard when I was seventeen.”

“Hmm. Not sure how I feel about that. I’d prefer a rematch.”

“And I prefer to go out on top.”

Lennon’s eyes sparkled then. “I do prefer to be on top too.”

A laugh bubbled up before I could catch it. “Can’t deny that one either. How about I show you around?”

“I’m not really in the market for a permanent gig. I get bored.”

“And yet you came to see me?” The quick kick of disappointment nearly cracked my genial smile.

“I was curious why the woman who beat me would call me up for a job.”

“I wanted the best.”

Lennon's dark stained lips quirked up at the corner. "Well, I am that. But I really don't think you can afford me."

"You'd be surprised with what I can afford."

"Then why don't you run the bar?"

I held out my arm. "Let me show you why."

She huffed out a breath. "Fine."

"We'll look at the bar last."

Lennon's gaze tracked to the bar before flicking back to me. "All good."

My heels clicked on the hardwood floors. "We just had the final buff done on the floors and we'll be setting up the tables next week." They'd been lovingly renovated and patched in areas that hadn't been able to be saved from the old barn. The dark stain had been a gamble, especially with all the wrought iron in the space.

I pointed to the secondary bar we had installed. I hadn't bothered to talk to Ronan about that. I had a vision and I had to stick with it and trust it was correct. "We have a smaller bar for busy nights but it can also be used as a food station. If you work here you'd be responsible for the main bar and training people."

"Wait, training?"

I nodded. "Yes. I'm not only looking for your expertise behind the bar, but for you to teach my bartenders."

"Flair isn't exactly something you pick up."

"Flair is only part of your repertoire. I know you specialize in mixology as well. And you've been branching out."

"And where did you learn that?" She stopped in the middle of the dining room and crossed her arms. "It's not on my website."

"No, but you're not exactly shy about it. YouTube, subreddits, socials—you name it, you get tagged."

She gave me a sly grin. “You cyber stalking me, Ms. Webb?”

“Kira. And yes—I sure did. That party you did for Brooklyn Dawn’s album release a few years ago still gets reshared.”

Lennon’s smile went from sly to wide and delighted. “That guitarist chick, Jamie, sure knows how to party. I swear we almost got arrested.”

“She is always a handful. Her manager’s family owns half of Happy Acres.”

“No shit? That frosty blond? The one that looks like a Barbie and an ice queen had a baby?”

“Lila, yes. Rockstars are in and out of the orchard all summer. Our opening night coincides with Ian Kagan’s concert here in late August.”

“Huh. Ain’t that some shit.”

I stuffed down the urge to smile. I was getting to her. “Let me show you the patio.”

She glanced around the dining room with a more shrewd eye before following me out the patio doors. It was a cooler day and we’d opened both the garage bay doors as well as the folding glass paneled doors for a breeze.

“The barn over there is our workshop for ciders. It’s the main focus for the taproom and what we are here for. We’ll be branching out into moonshine hopefully in a few years. We do small batches now, but we’re hoping to distribute soon.”

“Moonshine, huh? Like grandpa in the basement?”

“No, Hayes Manning is quite the chemist there. But moonshine still has a lot of red tape and we have to make sure it turns a profit before we dive into that.”

“Gotcha. I can’t say I’ve ever had one I liked.”

“Then you haven’t tried his Apple Pie Moon. Doesn’t even taste like alcohol.”

“And that’s dangerous.”

I laughed. “As me and my day spent next to the porcelain god can attest.” I stepped down the three stairs to the winding maze of fire pits. “Hayes only got me once.”

“Wow, this is a lot more space than I thought.” She put her hands on her hips and looked out on the orchards in the distance.

“The concert stage is over that way. Not too close so we can enjoy the music but not get blasted out. But nice for people who like to wander.”

She shivered a little. “Not exactly down with woods for the night walks.”

“It’s lit very well actually.” I pointed toward the swings on the edge of the property with wrought iron lamps. “Solar lights all over to make sure everyone’s safe.”

“It’s beautiful here.” Again, she turned toward the view.

“There’s a pumpkin patch down there too. We grow some other produce as well, which we’ll take advantage of for some of our tastings. We won’t be running a full menu here, more like pairings to go with our various ciders through the summer season.”

“I’m not sure how I fit here.”

“As I said, I want your name to help boost the younger set. Beckett Manning—one of the main owners of Brothers Three Orchard—wants to modernize and build off the concerts. Too many orchards are struggling, and diversifying will make sure we’re here for years to come.”

“Okay. I get that. But we’re a far cry from the major cities I usually work in.”

“Upstate and Central New York does well during the summer and fall seasons. People love to come up here, but there isn’t a whole lot of nightlife. We think it’s an untapped market.”

She looked back at the taproom. “And I’d have control of the bar?”

“Within reason. I do have a budget until we start turning a profit.” I tucked my hands into the pockets of my dress. “And you’d have winters off. Do what you want.”

She spun around. “So this is seasonal?”

I nodded. “Winters are tough up here. People like to bunk down and hibernate, especially during storms. It’s near impossible to have a regular schedule. We’ll rent out the space for events, but it’s up to you if you want in on that part.”

I could see her brain whirling. “And if I wanted to maybe do some events.”

“I’d be willing to talk about it.”

She smiled at me. “Let’s go see that bar.”

Relief rolled through me. “Maybe you can make me a drink.”

“I just may.” She ran up the stairs and inside.

I threw one last look out at the orchard that had been my solace for so long before following her into what I hoped would be my future.

## CHAPTER 18

RONAN

## I NEED ALCOHOL FOR THIS

The rumble of a motorcycle broke the peace of my quiet spot off the beaten path. The A-line style cabin was a work in progress, but I liked it well enough to figure out if this was where I wanted to plant myself for the future or find something else.

I opened the sliding door to my porch. I'd had time to take my coveted shower and polish off a few more pieces of chicken along with about a gallon of water. I was definitely pre-gaming for my liver to be demolished by Kain's arrival.

Half of the cider was on ice beside the two oversized Adirondack chairs on my deck. I'd found them at a furniture store on one of my trips into Crescent Cove for my current chicken obsession. The fact that the chair was sturdy enough for a big man like me had been worth the price.

Now I was glad I'd bought a pair.

The back tire of Kain's bike kicked up dust as he flew down the winding dirt road to my house. I had a feeling it would be a bitch in the winter and the wet. Good thing I'd been researching an ATV with a plow hitch along with those chains Hayes had mentioned for my tires.

The idea of hibernating also didn't seem so bad if I had Kira here.

I quick stepped it down my stairs and met him in the driveway. "I can't believe you're here, man."

"Brah!" Kain's tanned face crinkled up into a wide smile. He released the chin strap of his helmet and tucked his goggles



inside. His green eyes were bloodshot with fatigue and... something else. Not many would pick up on it, but I knew him far too well. His long dark hair was wild around his face and fell well past his shoulders now. He'd shaved the sides and had a few braids like my own. I was surprised to see my mother's rune beads in his hair along with a few Hawaiian shell beads.

The more he connected with his ancestors, the closer he was to the edgy Kain of my youth. There was no hint of the businessman he'd become.

He swung his leg off the bike, then hooked his helmet on the handle before lumbering at me full speed.

"Oh, shit." I cringed as he lifted me off the ground in a bear hug.

"It's been too long, *Boa!*"

I rolled my eyes. A true testament to Kain's love is if he gave you a Hawaiian nickname. He'd given me the name "warrior" a damn long time ago, but it had stuck. I had a feeling Kira would get a kick out of it when she found out.

I hugged him back. "Put me down, you idiot."

He whaled me on the back with one of his massive paws. Kain was a few inches taller than me with his motorcycle boots. The buckles on his jacket jangled as he shrugged it off and tossed it back toward the bike. "Look at you. I figured you'd be all corporate by now. You're still wild like me." He tugged on one of my curls, then threw an arm around my shoulders. "You even showered for me, I'm honored. I could use one of those."

I coughed. "Yeah, you could."

"Road baths only do so much. The hot blond I met in Winchester Falls didn't seem to mind."

"I just bet she didn't. I thought you were staying with Shane."

He shrugged. "I did for a few days, but I got restless. The B&B is always full these days. *Ānela* has turned that place

into a destination spot. Between her and her mom, I couldn't handle all the poking at me."

Shane's wife, Kendall—also known as angel to Kain—wasn't exactly a super caretaker sort, which immediately got me wondering what was going on with my friend. I'd get it out of him soon enough.

"Well, it's just you and me and the woods."

"A-fucking-men." He went back to his bike and unstrapped his saddlebags from the back then tossed it over his broad shoulder. "Shower and food and one of those brews. Any order."

I laughed. "That I can handle."

He climbed the steps two at a time. "This place is... interesting."

"I know it isn't much yet. It's a rent-to-buy. I haven't decided if I'm sticking or not."

"Yeah?" Kain looked around the property.

I was mostly too tired to notice when I came home, but looking around now I winced. A forest of pine trees, a few other types of deciduous trees, and a handful of pathetic shrubs was the extent of the landscaping. Pine needles had choked out most of the grass and were currently trying to eat the picnic table decaying on the side of the house.

"Guess I came just in time. It needs a lot of work."

"Was better than a doublewide—which were most of my other options if I didn't want to live in an apartment complex."

Kain clomped across the deck with a grunt. He spotted the cooler and flipped the lid. "Hopefully this will make up for your lack of landscaping and charm."

I snorted. Kain took houses very seriously. He might own a construction empire, but he was an architect first and the way a house looked was very important to him. I imagined he would have a lot to say about the inside of my place too.

He used one of his chunky silver rings to pop the top on the bottle and flicked it into the unlit fire pit. He took a long swallow, then looked down at the bottle, back to me, and took another long sip. “Not yours.”

I barked out a laugh. I had no idea how he knew that. “No, that’s not my blend.”

“Decent though. Yours will be better.”

Friend until the end, that was Kain.

He finished off the bottle and set it by the cooler. “Food and shower is next, bud.”

“You get in the shower, and I’ll reheat the food.”

He hiked his saddle bag more firmly onto his shoulder and ducked through the sliding door. “Fuck, who built this place?”

I followed him in and nudged him along. “Yeah, yeah. I know. I got some rent knocked down because I said I was handy.”

Kain shot a look over his shoulder. “Hope it’s under a grand a month.”

“Squeaked under.”

He muttered something in Hawaiian. “There’s that at least.”

“Top of the stairs, you can use my shower. It’s bigger than the one in the hallway for the other bedrooms.”

“Mahalo.”

The stairs groaned with his weight, but I relaxed when I heard the water running. Something was up with him. The bravado was there as it always was. You couldn’t be a damn billionaire like he was without it, but something seemed heavy around him.

I popped the chicken into my air fryer and made up plates with the cold sides. And because not much changed when it came to Kain’s appetite, I used two plates for him—and hell, for me too. I’d need the help against the alcohol coming my way.

Drinking in my mid-thirties was hella different than my twenties.

Kain came back downstairs a few minutes later wearing only a pair of board shorts and a towel wrapped around his head. I suppose I was lucky he was wearing anything. The guy hated clothes even more than I did. “You need a bigger shower.”

“Most people aren’t 6’5”.”

He only grunted. “Do I smell fried chicken?”

“You do.” I pulled out the tray and transferred the perfectly reheated food. The grease actually made it taste better thanks to the magic of the air fryer.

He clapped his pitcher mitt sized hands together. “Hot damn.” He did a little shuffle dance to me and took two of the plates. “Almost enough for me.”

I laughed and shoved a bottle of water in the pockets of my ancient cargo shorts before I followed him with my own two plates and some silverware.

Kain was already sprawled in one of the Adirondack chairs, his long legs kicked out, feet bare, and food in his mouth.

I dropped a fork on his plate. “I see some things never change.”

His laugh was contagious as he picked up the fork and stabbed at the potato salad. “Pretty good for the middle of nowhere. How the hell did you find this place?”

“Chicken or Turnbull?”

“Both,” he said around a bite of cold slaw.

“You know me, I like looking for the good eats. Chicken is from a nearby small town that looks like it should be on a postcard. As for this?” I dropped in my own chair and dug in. “Beckett Manning cornered me at a wine festival in the Catskills. I don’t know how he found me. I wasn’t even on a panel. Wine isn’t really my specialty—more your thing.”

“Whiskey is more my thing,” he corrected.

“Speaking of, I have a few things for you to try.” I nodded toward the cooler.

“You don’t cool down whiskey, idiot.”

“Not whiskey first of all. But don’t worry there’s a separate compartment.”

Kain reached down and opened the soft sided flap. He went right for the clear bottle. He set his plate on his lap. “No way.”

I grinned. “Yes way.”

“Shit. I haven’t had any shine since...hell, from back home. Gasoline, but it’ll get you fucked up.” His eyes crinkled as he cracked the top on the moonshine. I was surprised he actually checked the bag for a cup before shrugging and taking a swig.

I tipped my head back with a laugh when his eyes bulged. I couldn’t tell if it was disgust or lust.

He swallowed and smiled hugely. “That’s dangerous.”

“I know. Tastes like mile high apple pie in liquid form.”

“Yes, that’s it!” He read the label with a shake of his head. “Where was it?” He took another swig before blowing out a breath. “That hole in Pismo Beach?”

I pointed at him. “Yes. I didn’t know what it was, but that’s it. Bet the apple pie from the bakery here will be even better. I’ve never seen so many damn apples in one place.”

He took another long swallow and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before setting it beside his chair. “When you gonna show me the orchard?”

“We can take a walk around after I check in at the taproom tomorrow. We’re interviewing chefs and I can’t leave everything to my—well, the manager.” I wasn’t sure how to bring up Kira, but I knew once I did Kain would give me nothing but shit. “Besides, I want you to see what I’ve been up to.”

“I’m intrigued. Mad scientist *Boa*.” He switched to another cider from the bag, draining it between bites of chicken.

“You should see the barn. It’s nearly analog, for fuck’s sake, but I love it.”

“Nothing wrong with low tech.”

“Says the best modern architect of the twenty-twenties.”

“Bah.” He flicked another cap into the fire pit. “I don’t want to talk about that shit.” He opened another, setting the plate on the wide arm of the chair. “I like how secluded this is. The trees are nice and you have a bit of privacy, not to mention it mutes some of the road sounds.” He gave a long belch before grinning like an idiot. “Behind me needs to be scrapped.”

“It just needs a little love.”

Kain threw a look over his shoulder. “A whole lot of love.” But his eyes went from dismissive to speculative.

“Ah, shit. Don’t get that look.”

“If I tore out some walls and put in some truly excellent glass it would be a stunner.” He twirled his finger. “Especially this monstrosity of a front.”

I sighed. “It’s not terrible. Just needs finessing.”

“With a bulldozer.”

“I still have to live in it. Don’t get any ideas. And it’s not mine. I’m only renting right now.”

He only grunted. “Think we need some music.”

“That I can handle.” I stood up and snagged a bottle of cider myself. I went back inside. One thing I’d made sure to unpack was my record player and albums. I flipped around the Marshall speaker Kain had sent me for a birthday present one year.

I’d made sure to put it on a shelf near the window for just such a moment. I spent as much time on the deck as I did in my living room. I flicked through my crate of albums that I

knew Kain would enjoy. My taste was eclectic, and I had everything from Harry Styles to Miles Davis in my stash.

But my buddy was all about the dirty guitar laced classic rock. When Led Zeppelin's obscure remastered cuts blasted into the trees, I heard a whoop from my friend. I returned to the deck after making a pit stop for some wood.

The shade of the pines brought out the bugs even with sunset a ways off. I got the fire pit crackling and we shot the shit about Shane and baby number two on the way.

"Shane and Kendall having kids. Who knew?"

"I did." Kain dangled his bottle from the tip of his fingers. "I knew it the minute he landed in New York that he'd be all about family."

"I mean, he was never against it, just seemed focused on work."

"We all are until we're not." He looked out at the darkening woods. "You find out what's important."

"What's going on with you?"

Kain glanced at me, his gaze steady and his eyes lost some of their sparkle. "I just needed to get away."

"Bullshit."

"What? I pick up and take off all the time." He drained his bottle and pushed out of the chair to pick up the debris from our dinner.

Now I really knew something was up.

I followed him into the house. Kain went over to my tiny sink and rinsed the dishes, tucking them into the dishwasher. "Your place needs a lot of updating. We can repurpose some things, but man, it's all pretty much shit."

I leaned against the sliding door. "You didn't come here to redo my house, man."

"What if I want to?"

I barked out a laugh. "Right."

“Seriously. I need a project.”

“I can almost guarantee you have five corporate jobs and eleven houses on your slate.”

“My people have that handled. Hell, Malia practically kicked me out of the San Fran office.”

Malia was Kain’s right hand woman. She pretty much ran his operation because Kain couldn’t be trusted to keep a schedule. He got too into a project and it became everything. I wasn’t sure I was ready to have that single minded focus attached to anything that included me.

Kain was overwhelming for a weekend, let alone for a full scale remodel on my place.

“I don’t even own this place.”

He dug his phone out of his pants and typed off a text.

“What are you doing?” I straightened.

“Having Malia buy this place.”

“Dude, no way. I don’t even know if I’m sticking in New York.” Even as I said it, I knew it was a lie. I was already past stuck even if my brain needed to get caught up with my idiot heart.

“Already rolling.” He tucked his phone back into his shorts as he headed into the living room, swapping the vinyl for the sad brass of Coltrane and Davis.

“Shit,” I muttered. It was worse than I thought if he was dragging out the jazz already. “What is going on with you?”

Kain squatted down to pick through one of my crates. “I just needed to get away.”

“That’s not all of it.”

He tapped his heavy silver ring against the old milk crate a few times, flipped another few records then sighed. “The old man died.”

“What? When?”

“Four weeks ago.”



Shock laced my voice. “And you didn’t call me? I would have flown out.”

Kain dropped onto his ass on my floor and sat cross-legged. “Yeah, I know. It was a fucking mess.” He scooped his hair back away from his face. “He just dropped dead on a work site.”

“Jesus.” I sat next to him. I wasn’t quite as flexible, but I leaned on the sturdy shelves and kicked out my legs. “Was he sick?”

“Jackie? Nah, at least not that he told anyone. Too stubborn to actually go to the doc if something was wrong anyway.” He tipped his head back against the rough-cut wood and closed his eyes. “We hadn’t spoken in more than a year, man.”

“Hell.”

“Yeah.” Kain glanced over with a half-smile. “Some things never change, hey?” He shrugged. “After all the will bullshit was done, I couldn’t concentrate at work. Malia told me to take off—get my head straight.”

“Insert bike.”

“My ass feels like it. I’ve been driving for weeks.”

I laughed because he needed me to. And I needed it too. I’d never met Kain’s father, but I knew they had a lot of issues. Two big personalities who needed an ocean to be between them to live peacefully. Kain wanted to prove himself and started up his own company in California and blew up before he hit thirty years old.

“I’m sorry, man.”

“Me too.” He looked around. “I need alcohol for this.”

I glanced out the door to the deck where our booze was. “It’s so far away.”

He tipped his head back for a deep chuckle. “That it is.”

I reached above my head for the small bottle of single malt I’d stashed there.

His eyebrows shot up. “Magic bottle?”

“My old man gave it to me for my last birthday. Seems right.”

“God bless Erik for our lazy asses.”

I cracked the seal. My dad would approve. “No glasses. Like old times.” I handed him the bottle.

“To Jackie.” He took a healthy swig. “Even if the bastard left me his empire.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“Leave it to the old man to have the last word.” Kain took a deep swallow and coughed before handing it back to me.

I lifted the bottle to the sky. “To Jackie.”

After a slug or two from the bottle, things were definitely feeling warm and tingly.

“Hey, we should go look at your laboratory.”

“Tonight?”

Kain giggled. “Yeah. Best time is when we shouldn’t be there.”

“We are in no condition to drive, my friend.”

He dug for his phone. “I’m very rich, brah. If you pay enough, even ride shares come out to nowhere.”

“We aren’t *that* small town, jackass.”

Kain squinted at his phone. “We’ll see.” He handed me the bottle. “Hold my beer—err, whiskey.”

I rolled my eyes, but took it and shrugged. If my friend was laughing after telling me that shit news, who was I to be a drag? I took a slightly less healthy sip though.

My liver would absolutely be crying tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 19

KIRA

## TWO LARGE IDIOTS

I dumped my bag on the bar, leaving my sunglasses on. Sleep had been elusive, and by dawn I'd given up and dragged my ass into work. I had plenty to do before the chef interviews. And a meeting with Beckett had me on edge.

Things were moving at the taproom, but there was still a ton to do.

Bringing Lennon on was a big load off my shoulders. By the time she left yesterday, we had a tentative schedule for training bartenders. A few of the new hires would work both on the floor and behind the bar. By the end of the day we'd hashed out a salary that only made me weep a little. She said she needed to sleep on it, but I knew she was in.

Especially when she'd found out the seasonal aspect. It gave her a lot of freedom, and I was challenging her to be more than the social media flair artist. Her intelligence had been apparent when she walked in, but I could taste the restlessness in the air around her.

I understood it and recognized it.

And more importantly I knew we'd work well together.

I took my iced coffee with me to open the back doors and walk the property as golden fingers of sun slid over the orchard. In the distance I heard Beckett's horse. It was too early for the machines to be out in the field, but my best friend liked to ride out alone in the early part of the morning.

Why I wasn't surprised when Storm and Beckett ended up picking their way up the path to where I stood. I waved at him

and sucked down a full inch of caramel laced cold brew. I had a feeling it was going to be a two cold brews before noon kind of day.

He tipped his hat back as he took in the porch. “This place looks amazing, Key.”

The landscaping crew had come by in the late afternoon with some of the items I’d requested. Older barrels that were too damaged to use for distilling had been repurposed into cement filled bases for railings. Each had been bisected horizontally then filled with herbs and ornamental plants to pretty them up. The barrels were becoming a theme and I kind of loved it.

A dozen more dotted the stone path. The cement was still curing, but eventually the posts would allow us to have the whole outdoor seating area lit up for safety. I was just waiting on the Edison style bulbs to come in.

“Thanks. It’s getting there.”

He swung his leg off his massive gelding and stepped down to the dry ground at the edge of the path of stones. They were rough on Storm’s hooves, so he dropped the reins, signaling the horse could graze along the patchy grass by the path.

His boots were already dusty, telling me he’d been up even earlier than me. A few more lines were grooved into the creases at the corners of his eyes. Harvest hadn’t even begun and he was stressing about something.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.” I folded my arms across my chest, resting my aluminum cup on my arm. “I know you too well.”

He sighed and pulled off his wide brimmed cowboy hat, swapping it for his ancient Yankee’s cap. He strapped it to his saddle before patting Storm’s neck. Urging him into the shade. “One of the freezers is acting up. I had to get a second generator rushed in from Jersey.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Wow. That far away?”

“With all this endless heat, we aren’t the only ones overloading the grids.”

I waved him inside and went to the cooler I kept stocked with water. July was always a bitch, but the last week had been brutal. I dug out a bottle and handed it to him. “Well, you don’t have to worry about us up here. Things are moving along if you want to skip the meeting.”

“Nah. Nothing I can do until it comes in. I almost drove out to get it before Justin talked me out of it.” He cracked the seal and guzzled down three quarters of the bottle.

I grinned. “Justin? Being the voice of reason? What’s this world coming to?”

Beck gave me a squinty eyed look.

“My little brother might be a pain in the ass, but he has his moments. And thank God he’s handy. He managed to get the freezer going, but even his MacGyver ways will only hold for a while.”

I opened my mouth and he tossed the empty bottle at me. I deflected it with my arm.

“Shush. I know you told me to replace the freezers.”

I pressed my lips together against the grin.

“I know, I know.” He bent to pick up the bottle and tossed it in the recycle bin I kept beside the cooler. He glanced into the taproom as he stood. “Man, you got the tables and chairs in?”

I turned to look around from his point of view, standing beside him. We got in all the tall tables and chairs and a few of the oversized box planters to match. They worked well with the barrels we already had. Seeing them in the space reminded me time was ticking away so quickly. “The first round was delivered late yesterday. I put a few of the new hires to work helping me unpack them.”

“Did you let the delivery dudes leave before you checked them all?”

I elbowed him. “Easier to check before they suddenly lose my contact info.”

He snorted. “And that’s why you are the manager here, babe.”

Being detail oriented and always looking for problems were two of my best features as far as I was concerned. Beck was too impatient for that kind of wrangling.

“We have a few circular booths coming in to mimic the seating outside for bigger groups of people. But I really think our initial customers will be first dates and post work drink types. The weekends will be the big turnouts with concerts. Why I hired Lennon.”

“You got her?” He gave a low whistle. “I didn’t think that would be so easy.”

“Oh, it wasn’t. She hasn’t signed yet, but I know she will.”

“You are a wonder, Key.”

I rattled the ice in my cup. “Why you put me in here.”

“Singing a different tune than a few weeks ago.”

“You always know I need the push.” I bumped his shoulder. “Want to see the rest?”

“Lead on.”

I gave him a brief tour of the dining room, showing him how the side doors opened to make the space seem even larger now that there was furniture to fill the space. We moved onto the kitchen that had been finished since the last time he’d stopped in. I was sure he’d looked around yesterday, but it helped ease my mind to do the mental checklist while he walked through with me.

He spotted a few things I hadn’t thought of in the storage room and I made a few notes to order some local wine as a backup for those who weren’t into cider. I’d already looked into a few local spirits, but the wine would round out our offerings. My budget would feel the pinch, but I had to believe it would bring a good return on investment.



While we were in there, I tried not to think about me and Ronan against the wall yesterday. I was wearing another cotton dress in deference to the heat and doing interviews today. The swish of the cotton around my knees reminded me of his hand gripping my thigh, diving right under my dress to get his hands on me.

He was so tactile. I wasn't used to being touched all the damn time.

“Key?”

“Huh?” I turned to Beckett's voice.

“I asked if you want me to talk to Hayes about the batch of cider he found in the cooler. Do you want it or should I send it on to Ruby over at Lucky's?”

“Oh.” I tucked my hands in my pockets. “Maybe send to Lucky's. We should probably promote the new with ciders Vi—Ronan designs.”

His eyebrow lifted. “Vi?”

I sighed. “Viking. I call him Viking because he's a damn brute.”

Beckett's eyebrow lifted sharply. “I see. Do I need to have a talk with him?”

“What? No. I can handle myself.”

He took his hat off and scooped his curls back before fitting it back on his head. “Hmm.”

“Shut up. Not like that.” At least I wasn't complaining about that part. “He's just a little intense. You know his personality, since you hired him out from under me. Remember?”

He rolled his eyes. “Let's not go back to that. Do you think he'll be ready for August? Or should we push the opening to September?”

I shook my head. “I'll talk to Ronan today when we do the chef interviews, but I think we're good there. Ian will also be a big draw. We want to capitalize on it. And he and his band

know how to work a room. I've already been thinking about utilizing both Lennon and Ian to make it an even bigger event. If he's amenable anyway."

"I'll check with Aunt Laverne. She has a way with him."

"Good idea."

"Mind if I take a look at the barn? See what this Viking's been up to?"

Regrets, I had many. And he'd never let me live this one down. "Sure. I have a key."

"Of course you do."

"Shut up."

I set my empty coffee cup on the bar and we both grabbed another bottle of water on our way out to the workshop.

"Viking, huh? Does that mean we have to use big chalices for the opening day?"

"You're a menace."

"I wouldn't mind a big horned one." He mimed hanging onto his bottle and a phantom one in the same size with his other hand. "Tankard of ale?"

"Are you trying to live out a *Game of Thrones* thing?"

"No, I'm definitely going with the Viking thing."

I rolled my eyes with a laugh as I lifted the key to the lock, but the door was already cracked open. "Shit," I muttered and was about to step back when I heard the music.

I hadn't seen Ronan's truck when I pulled in, but maybe he snuck in while I was talking to Beck. I would have thought he'd come out to talk to our boss, for God's sake.

Hauling the door open was a lesson in brute strength. Beckett wedged his hand into the crack above my head and added his muscle into it. The unholy screech of the roller on the rusty track elicited a moan from inside.

"Go the fuck away!" Came a bellow I didn't recognize.

Inside was chaos. There was no other word for it. Empty five and six gallon buckets were stacked like milk jugs at an impromptu fair stall. Not just one, but five of them in a semicircle along the perimeter of the workshop. A smaller metal canister lay drunkenly beside one with three buckets knocked over. In between each of the bucket displays were smaller bottle versions with a whole lot of empty hard cider bottles.

From the scent of the room, I'd say most of them had been consumed the night before instead of from the stash of empties waiting for Ronan's fermenting tanks.

And in the center of the room were two large idiots.

One was mine—sort of. Though I was rethinking that at the moment.

The other was a stranger who was somehow bigger than Ronan. They were both bare to the waist with a stack of pizza boxes between two chairs they'd stolen from the grounds. The large dark haired one had the top half of his body draped over the arm of the chair as he tried to get out of the sunlight's line of fire. I couldn't see his face, just a startling amount of tangled curls dripping onto the cement floor.

Ronan's head was tipped back, his mouth slack. Either still asleep, or probably still drunk.

"Are you kidding me right now?" I yelled.

Beckett stood beside me, his hands in his back pockets as he snickered.

"You are not helping."

"What?"

Because I knew the Manning boys were almost as bad as these two idiots when it came to a night of drinking, it only made me more angry. I stalked over to Ronan and kicked his boot. I was glad I wore my platform paisley pumps instead of the strappy sandals I was going to wear today. "Wake up."

Nothing.

"Ronan Parrish, wake up."

A soft snicker came from the stranger. “You’re in trouble now, brah. All she needs is your middle name and she’d sound like your Ma.” He slowly straightened and stretched his beefy arms out then cracked his back and shook his head like a lion.

Since Ronan still wasn’t moving the stranger gave him a good kick with his much larger motorcycle boots.

Ronan’s head snapped forward. His dark eyes were bloodshot and glassy. He frowned and squinted then caught sight of me. His frown softened into a sleepy smile. He hooked his foot around my knee and dumped me on his lap. “Hi, Sunshine.”

“Sunshine?” Beckett said from behind me.

I tried to push up, but the angle of the Adirondack chair wouldn’t let me go easily.

Ronan slid his arm around my waist and shoved his face into my neck. “You smell pretty.”

“Let me go, you ass.” Embarrassment blazed through me and I tried to get free.

“Who’s the hottie, man?”

Ronan peeked around me. “Back off.”

Beckett curled his arm around my waist and lifted me off Ronan. “Anyone care to tell me what the hell’s going on in here?”

Ronan’s hands gripped the arms of the chair, his knuckles white. His dark eyes went shark flat as Beckett put me down but kept his hand at my hip as he shoved me behind him.

“Evidently I am not up to speed with what’s been going on at all.”

I shoved Beckett to my other side and angled toward the stranger. “I stand by the first question. Who the hell are you?”

The dark haired lion of a man gave me a sleepy smile. His green eyes were lazy and full of indulgent charm as his gaze drifted down my body. He was broad and deeply tanned with a series of tribal tattoos that skated down his neck and forearm

in a repeating arrow pattern. He wore board shorts that belonged at the beach and massive, unbuckled motorcycle boots—and that was it.

I crossed my arms and stared him down. The lazy charm slid into amusement as he arched his brow at me. A scar bisected the jet colored left brow. “I see why *Boa* has a thing for you.” He glanced at Ronan. “Sunshine, that part I don’t quite see.”

Ronan said nothing, just gritted his teeth.

“I’m Kira. I’ll ask you again, who are you?”

And who the hell was Boa?

Embarrassment and anger were running neck and neck right now. I hadn’t even told Beckett about Ronan. We weren’t exactly bosom buddies when it came to hookups. And hell, me and Ronan were supposed to be opening the taproom, not my damn legs.

The lion tipped his head back with a laugh before hauling himself out of his chair. “You two are definitely well matched.”

“Jesus,” Beckett muttered as both of us tipped our chins up to take him in.

He looked broad in the chair, but when standing, the guy was a damn giant. He held his hand out to me. “Kainoa N’ai. *Boa’s* my brother. Most people call me Kain.”

My gaze whipped to Ronan. “Your brother is a Hawaiian giant?”

His jaw was still tense but he sighed. “More like best friend, but yeah, we’re pretty much family.”

Kain shot a look over his shoulder and dropped his hand. “Pretty much?”

Ronan flipped him off.

Kain snickered as he raked his fingers through his hair, pushing it behind his shoulders. “I’m starving.”

Sarcasm rolled off my tongue. “I’m sorry for you. I’m still confused as to what you two are doing in here and what the hell is with the buckets?”

Kain craned his neck to follow where I pointed. “Huh. Not sure on that one. Think we wanted to play beer pong and bowling and made up something in between. We hit the bottom of the moonshine bottle around four in the morning. Things got fuzzy.”

“Fuzzy?” I curled my fingers into fists under my arms once more.

Kain shrugged, his grin affable. Ronan was still quiet, his gaze zeroed in on Beckett, his brows lowering another millimeter per second.

What the hell did he have to be pissed about? I was the one who found them hungover in the workshop.

Beckett was still standing close to me, amusement and bewilderment warring over his face.

“Nice to meet you, Kain.” He held out his hand and Kain shook it. “Beckett Manning.”

“Someone has manners today. It ain’t these two.” Kain slapped Beckett on the arm. “I really could do with some food. That moonshine is killer.”

“Tell me about it.” Beck tipped his ballcap up. “My brother makes it.”

“No shit? Oh...you’re the big boss man here?”

Beckett huffed out a laugh. “Some days.”

“I do not have time for this.” I whirled on my heel. “I have interviews starting at nine.”

“Wait up, Key.” Beckett snagged my elbow. “What’s got you so riled? They had some fun on their downtime. I’m assuming you didn’t hurt the batches we are using for the opening?”

Ronan stood, his body language rigid with anger. “Of course not. I’ve got them fermenting in a temperature

controlled shed.”

“It’s unprofessional. You haven’t even seen the way we’ve been running things and now it looks like a freaking frat party in here.”

Ronan’s hands fisted. “I wanted to show my best friend my workshop. And this isn’t exactly how I wanted him to meet the girl I’m crazy about.”

## CHAPTER 20



RONAN

## WHAT ARE YOUR QUALIFICATIONS?

Watching her close down cut deeper than I expected.

I knew she was angry and in full strength defense mode. But she stepped back as if I'd legit slapped her. She bumped into Beckett, leaned against him for a moment, then whirled on those ankle breakers she wore that made my dick pulse and took off.

"Goddammit," I muttered and moved to follow when Beckett moved in front of me. "Look, I know you're my boss, but really not the time."

"Saving you from yourself—both your job and the bruised balls you'd get right about now if you go after her. Let her cool off."

I stiffened. "Job?"

Beckett inclined his head. "Looking like some blurred lines from where I'm standing."

"I've been busting my ass since I got here. What's between her and me has nothing to do with that."

"You sure about that?"

Guilt churned in my gut as I looked around. It looked less like a workshop and more like a man cave after a rager. I didn't even remember half of what happened in here. That moonshine should never have been mixed with whiskey.

When my attention was on Beckett again, he spoke. "She's an adult and what and who she chooses to do on her off time isn't of my concern from a business standpoint. Now as her

friend, I'd say you better watch yourself." His face was expressionless, but his blue eyes were hard.

"Not your business."

"You're wrong, there. I won't have her hurt. Now I don't know if this is a game, or a...dalliance."

Kain snickered. "Dalliance? Not sure I've heard that word since my aunty passed."

I pointed at Kain. "Not now."

"Right—zipped." He twisted a key over his lips and mimed throwing it over his shoulder. A moment later he rocked back on his heels. "Still hungry though," he whispered.

"Later."

Kain rubbed his belly with a sigh.

"I need to go talk to her," I gritted out between my clenched teeth.

Beckett stuffed his hands in his back pockets. He wasn't quite as tall as I was, but he was rangier and honed where I was bulky. My brother would call him scrappy. And those were the ones you had to be careful with.

"You need to get cleaned up and give her some space, then maybe you can talk to her."

I shook my head, eyes steady on his. "Wrong play."

"How about we don't play with her at all? She's had plenty of that in her life."

"What the hell does that mean?"

His eyes went from hard to blank. "You'll need to talk to her about that."

I fisted my hands at my sides. "Goddammit."

I hated to be in the dark about her, but I was trying to be patient. The fact that Beckett knew all her secrets made me want to punch something. I knew it would be worth it if she told me about her past on her own. And that would take time, but it was another thing keeping her just out of reach.

“She’s a complicated woman.”

“No fucking kidding.”

He pulled his hands out of his pockets. “Look, why don’t you just take twenty and clean up in here? That should give her enough time to cool down.” Beckett swung his ball cap so the brim was around the back. “I’ll help.”

“You don’t need to do that. I made the damn mess.” I stared hard at Kain until he picked up the pizza boxes with a grumble.

I shook my head when he peeked into one of them and found a slice. I would not have eaten that, but Kain had a cast iron stomach. With a pizza crust sticking out of his mouth like a cigar, he started stacking the larger buckets over in the corner with the others.

As I cleaned, the anger brewing rolled back to a dull annoyance and finally, resignation. I got myself into this, now I’d have beg my way into her good graces again.

Half a dozen large pails were busted from our game last night and I tossed them to the side. I’d use them for some bucket plantings along the side of the barn. I had some ideas for aromatics to go with the fall apples. While the flash frozen fruit I had was great for accelerating fermentation, I was anxious to try some new blends with fresh apples.

I preferred a dry cider, but I knew I needed three solid options for the opening. That would need to include a sweet one for variety. Instead of stewing about Kira’s reaction—and the more annoying aspects of her relationship with Beckett that twisted me up—I methodically put my workshop together. Distracting myself with flavor profiles I still had to try evened me out.

Beckett and Kain took direction well, thank God. Kain had switched out the music on the stereo to some 80’s Springsteen, and by the end of our cleaning spree we were howling to “Glory Days” while the two of them swept the cement floors and I followed with a mop.

I had a lot of work ahead of me before the end of August. No matter how much I wanted to focus on Sunshine, the two of us needed to work together to get this place ready. With the added complication of Kain, I needed to get my head on straight before I did something stupid like push her completely away with my jackassery.

Kira wasn't a runner—she was far worse.

She would simply freeze me out and I wasn't sure how long a thaw would take.

Beckett cracked his back and stretched his arms over his head. “Okay, now I'm officially starving too.”

Kain grunted. “That six gallon jug over there was starting to look tasty.”

I went into the small cupboard where I kept my extra clothes, tossing a T-shirt at Kain. He frowned at me. “Pretty sure Kira wouldn't appreciate you being half naked with her interviews starting.”

“Bah.” But he pulled the shirt over his head and wound his wild hair into a messy knot at the top of his head. “Better?”

“Marginally.”

Beckett snorted. “Doesn't help with how ripe you two are.”

“Yeah. I don't think I can push my luck with a shower.”

Beckett's eyebrows shot up. “That janky thing still works back there?”

“Kind of.” I laughed. “I used it after I got mash all over me recently.”

“I suppose we need a place for you to clean up—safety regulations and all. I'll have Justin hook up a real station back there with some big sinks.”

“Appreciated.”

Beckett nodded. “Think Kira would kill us if we raided the fridge?”

I tugged a Brothers Three T-shirt over my head. “We do have a brand spanking new kitchen. Or we can go into Happy Acres. The bakery should be open.” Not that I could really leave Kira to take care of the interviews since I bailed on her yesterday, but it might be preferable to our bedraggled appearance.

I could hear Kain’s stomach growling. “What kind of kitchen?”

“Top of the line,” I said carefully. “Better than my setup at the cabin.”

“An Easy Bake Oven would be better than what you have, *Boa*.”

Beckett shook his head with a rueful smile. “You two sound just like me and Justin.”

I pulled open the second set of doors to let the cross breeze kill the rest of the stank in the workshop. I made a cursory pitstop in the shed to make sure my gauges looked okay, made a quick note on my clipboard on two of the tanks that needed to be watched, and closed up to meet them outside.

Kain was scanning the property in that calculating way he had. Not as disgusted as the way he’d looked over my house at least.

“What do you think?” I asked as I came up to them. “You’re the—”

Kain gave me a subtle shake of his head. Right—kind of incognito. I didn’t blame him. When people found out he was an architect questions came fast and furiously. Kain the billionaire was a whole secondary level of fuckery.

“You’ve got the fresh eyes,” I said, editing myself.

Kain put his hands on his hips. He nodded absently toward the taproom, but his attention was on the orchard below. “This place has limitless possibilities.” He whistled softly and tucked his hands into his pockets. “But man, that view.” He stepped closer to the edge of the property and gave a delighted laugh.

“That’s a horse.”

“That’s Storm,” Beckett said with a grin.

Kain went right over to the horse and laid a hand on its massive neck. He ducked his head down then straightened. “Hey, boy.”

The horse whinnied and chuffed, chewing at the hem of Kain’s shirt.

“He’s looking for a carrot.”

“I’ll find one for you soon.” He pressed his forehead to the broad line of the horse’s head. Kain always had a way with animals, but I wasn’t sure I would have gone right for such a close hello.

“Storm doesn’t usually take to people that easily,” Beckett muttered.

“Kain has a way.”

“So I see.” He crossed his arms and seemed mildly put out.

Kain gave the horse another pat then came back to us. The three of us looked out on the vista of pregnant trees and endless greenery. “It was dark when we came in last night. This is a whole different experience.” He glanced over his shoulder at the organic maze of landscaping and seating nooks that made up the property. “And you’ll be lighting this up?”

“You’ll have to check with Kira on the details, but that’s what she told me.” Beckett twisted his hat back around against the blinding sun. “Down that path is our concert stage.”

“It’s impressive,” Kain murmured, but I could tell his thoughts were elsewhere. I’d hear all about this, I was sure.

I swiped my arm over my forehead, the need for water outweighing food at that moment. My back was already wet and I’d only just put on the new shirt. It was going to be another hot one. It made me long for the ocean on a day like today. Not that it would be in my future any time soon. There was still so much to do before I could think about getting out even to the nearby lake for a free day.

Kira had been damn busy and was outpacing me. It seemed like every day, I came out and found something new. Today, it

was planters and railings to finish off the stairs. The steps were wide and deep, allowing for people to hang out in the back with a few different levels for conversation before it widened to the flagstone walkways. More seating areas were set up with fire pits and comfortable seating.

As usual the massive back doors were open, as well as the garage style doors along the side of the building. Between the dark stains, the wrought iron touches, and the overall industrial feel—and now the organic touches she'd added—the buzz under my skin had intensified. This place was coming together now.

And there she was—the other reason for the endless hum inside me. She was wearing one of those distractible dresses, daffodil yellow with a wide white belt that showed off every damn curve. Wicked heels in some sort of purple print gave those Amazonian legs all my attention. Especially since her dress had tiny buttons down the front that showed a flash of her thighs when she walked. She was speaking with Matt and Annette, her heels clicking as she walked fast, pointing out something in the dining room.

This was what she was born to do. I tried to picture her out in the fields, but all I saw was determined Kira with her clipboard ordering people around in the taproom. From what I could tell, the people she'd hired were just as invested as she was in getting everything perfect. And she'd done it while I wasn't paying attention.

I had it easy. Sure, I had formulas and manual labor to deal with. Once I'd figured out the workshop and just what kind of cider I wanted as a base, it had been smooth sailing on that end—it was the flavors that were giving me hell. Well, except for dealing with the damn heat, but nothing like what she did day after day.

I shoved my fingers through my hair. I'd let her down today and I needed to make it up to her. I headed up the stairs. I could tell she noticed us because she went from no-nonsense orders to that silent killer persona she was so good at.

“Sunshine—”



“Don’t Sunshine me.” She gave Matt and Annette a tight smile. “You guys can head over to the restaurant supply place. I didn’t have a big enough order for delivery.”

“We got it.” Annette glanced over at me. “Hey Ronan.” Her blue eyes full of sly interest. “Who’s your friend?”

“Kain.”

“I didn’t know they came bigger than you. Should we expect a wrestler next? Someone on WWE?”

I laughed. “No. Well, my brothers are pretty big, but not like him. You might see them at the opening. Depending if my family can come out or not.”

Annette fanned her face, her halo of dark curls dancing. “I’m here for it.”

Matt rolled his eyes and turned her away. “Drool later.”

She gave a dramatic sigh. “Fine.”

Kira’s eyes warmed slightly. “I didn’t know your family was coming out.”

“They miss me.” I lifted a shoulder. “They’re also curious and want to see what I’ve been up to. They want to see for themselves why I’m so obsessed with this place and make sure I’m doing okay.”

She looked down at the floor. “Nice that they care.”

I moved closer and she held her hand up. “Look, we don’t have much time before the interviews start. I don’t need you here for them if you need to be elsewhere.”

My shoulders tensed. “I don’t. I’m here to—”

Kain and Beckett were laughing at something as they came up the stairs.

“We’re going to raid the kitchen, Key.” Beckett slapped Kain’s arm. “Evidently this big dude is going to astound us with his cooking prowess.”

Kira’s fingers went white around her clipboard. “I have interviews coming in.”

“Are they in the kitchen?”

“I’m interviewing chefs,” she said tightly.

“We’ll be out of your hair quickly, *Hina*. I bet you didn’t eat anything more than yogurt, did you?”

I shot a look at Kain. Already a nickname for her?

Kira’s eyebrow spiked. “With raspberries.”

Kain held out his hand to her, this time like a damn Disney prince. “That’s not nearly enough for someone as gorgeous as you.”

“Watch it,” I muttered.

Kira looked at his hand, then inclined her head but didn’t take it. Again. “Fine. Show me what you’ve got, Mr. N’ai.”

His smile stretched wide. “I’ll win you over.”

“We’ll see.” She tucked her clipboard and iPad under the bar then led the way to the kitchen.

I pulled up the back of the line, wondering what kind of punishment I’d be in for after this mess.

The kitchen was large and as industrial as the front end of the taproom. But where everything in the main dining room was dark stained wood and wrought iron, the kitchen was stainless steel and bright. Cork floors instead of wood kept the warm tones, but were much easier on the joints. Not to mention easier to clean.

Butcher block counters made up the perimeter with various prep stations in gleaming steel. A massive restaurant grade oven took up most of one wall with a brick oven taking up the rest. The ceiling was a web of skylights and ventilation tracks.

Kain muttered in Hawaiian as he walked around. His big hands slid across the butcher block with reverence. “Who built this?”

Beckett sat on one of the few stools at one of the prep stations. This kitchen was set up for movement, not sitting. “My brother worked with a local guy.”

“Incredible,” he murmured as he moved to the massive double doored fridge and opened both.

Kira stood off to the side, her arms folded and face a mask of cool disinterest. I caught her glancing at her watch with a tightening of her jaw.

Kain better make her the best breakfast in the history of breakfasts or I’d pay for this forever.

An armful of meats, cheeses, and crate of eggs made up his first trip.

He raided the pantry for vegetables, and after searching through a few cupboards, he found a closet of spices. Satisfied, he muttered in a mix of English and Hawaiian as he piled all the food on the stainless steel table and started gathering his tools. He reached for pans, swore, and rearranged the kitchen as he cooked.

Kira opened her mouth to stop him, but then snapped her teeth shut with a huff.

Kain spun a huge bowl as he broke eggs with a scary efficiency. He moved to the butcher block near the stove and chopped onions, peppers in bright red and green, then diced up potatoes before tossing them all on a baking sheet with a slew of spices. Then he hacked apart a pineapple with a damn cleaver, for God’s sake.

All the while, he listed off things the kitchen still needed.

Instead of telling him to fuck off, Kira took out her phone and started making notes.

I knew my friend could cook, but not like this.

The potatoes went into the oven, the pineapple on the grill, and then he turned his back to me as he went to town with eggs and more peppers on the cooktop. He tasted, swore, rearranged more tools. All the while, a towel danced at his hip as he hustled around the space to some internal song.

Ten minutes later we all had huge bowls of fluffy scrambled eggs and crispy potatoes with a hint of fire tempered by sweet, grilled pineapple.

Kain shoved a healthy forkful in his mouth before any of us. “That’s the stuff. Well, it would be better if you had a good hot sauce. I’ll tell you where to order.”

“You’ll tell me where?” Kira stood there with her bowl, gobsmacked.

“Yeah.” Kain wagged his eyebrows. “I’m going to be your new chef.”

My mouth dropped open. “Kain—”

He shot me a look. “It’s perfect.”

That wasn’t the word I was thinking. Insane was a better one. Trouble, even better.

“And just what are your qualifications?” Kira snapped her bowl on the table.

“Taste your food, *Hina*. Then we’ll discuss.”

“Don’t call me...what is it? *Hina*?”

Kain just grinned at her and took another huge forkful.

“Breakfast isn’t exactly what we’re looking for, Mr. N’ai. It’s specialty food that pairs with our hard cider and occasional specialty spirit.”

Kain chewed, then swallowed with a deep ahhh. “Just taste it.”

She picked up the bowl and stabbed her fork into the dish hard enough that it scraped the bottom. She lifted it to her mouth, staring at Kain as she did so.

Goddamn, my woman was hell on wheels. There was no way I should be turned on by her standing up to my friend, but—well, here we were.

Very few people tried to handle Kain, but she showed no fear.

She sucked in a breath and took another bite, glancing down at the bowl then back at him.

Then she growled and stalked out.

One second later she came back in and took her bowl, giving me a hard stare before jerking her head toward the door and pushing back through the doors.

Kain grinned and waggled his eyebrows. "I'm going to like it here. You're probably in trouble though."

Now I had her mad at me for two things. Great. "We will discuss this later."

Beckett glanced from Kain to me, then shrugged. "I like it."

"Want more?" Kain asked.

Beckett held out his bowl. "Oh, yeah. I do think it needs some hot sauce though."

"Right?" Kain scooped up another forkful. "Needs some Inner Beauty."

"Oh, man. I haven't had that since college. Yes." Beckett sighed. "Maybe we can get her to order some?"

"I'll make it happen."

I rolled my eyes and took my bowl with me to face Kira's wrath.

## CHAPTER 21

KIRA

## THAT WAS NOT ON MY CHECKLIST

I didn't want to like the food. My stomach absolutely roared when I took the second bite. It was freaking delicious, but that didn't make him a perfect fit for Brothers Three Taproom.

Unfortunately, it made Kain N'ai even more appealing than he should be. Did Ronan align himself with brutes to match his own personality?

"Arrogant idiots," I muttered as I took another bite. I wanted a bowl of the grilled pineapple all on its own. Maybe to even dip it in something spicy as its own appetizer. "Dammit," I whispered and picked out another pineapple.

"Excuse me? Is this where I go for the interview?" A bright-eyed blond stood by the edge of the bar. Her hair was in a high ponytail and she wore black shorts and a black T-shirt as if maybe she had already come from a job. I knew the uniform well.

Crap. My interview.

"I didn't plan that." Ronan's voice came from behind me.

"Evidently planning isn't any part of your life right now, pal," I said out of the side of my mouth.

A rumbled growl came out of his chest.

I smiled at the girl. "Have a seat at the bar, I'll be right with you."

She nodded with a smile. "Great, thanks."



I pushed Ronan out the back doors and down the stairs. “I cannot believe you. All this talk about how I can count on you and first you’re drunk in your workshop—”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Really? It sure smells like moonshine is still coming out of your pores.” I pointed toward the taproom in the general direction of the kitchen. “And now you’re taking over the kitchen. Just like all the other men in my damn life.”

His eyebrows snapped down. “What men?”

“Oh, don’t even start with that.” I had to try and keep my voice down.

He stepped closer and the heat of his skin tried to scramble my brain. His earthy ginger scent was wrapped in the staleness, but it was still there, which just pissed me off. I put my hand on his chest to stop him from coming closer. This stupid jealousy kick was getting annoying. As if there had been anyone like him in my life before.

That alone scared the crap out of me. I shouldn’t be this wound up about him after a few weeks, for God’s sake. Not to mention that the hum under my skin just wouldn’t go away no matter how angry I was. Or that I longed to lean into him even now when I was pissed at him.

He didn’t come closer, but it still seemed like he was crowding me. “This is why we shouldn’t have gotten involved. No part of this is proper.”

“What the hell do we have to be proper about?”

“This! It’s my responsibility to be a goddamn professional, and you come out like a hungover frat boy with your friend who’s even worse.” The fact that he didn’t understand that made me want to rip one of his braids out.

“You don’t even know Kain or what’s going on with him.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see the applicant was craning her neck to see what was going on. Yeah, she was definitely someone who was used to food service. Most were gossipy as hell. I’d been on the receiving end of gossip for

long enough that I didn't want to create it here too. I bunched his shirt in my hand and dragged him further out of earshot. "I don't really care."

"Nice, Kira."

I let him go and folded my arms. "I don't have time to care. I have eight people coming in for interviews today. And you were supposed to help with that. And now I've got Beckett making gooey eyes at him because Kain's a dude's dude type. Next, he'll club the animal himself before cooking it, for God's sake."

Ronan folded his arms to mirror me and tipped his head, giving me a bland stare.

"Okay, so that's maybe a slight exaggeration, but I don't think it's by much."

He rolled his eyes. "Beckett is the one we want to impress, right? What does it matter if it's my friend or some person we interview?"

"That's not the point. I have gone through the applicants to find people who actually are, I don't know, chefs maybe. So what if your friend can make delicious eggs." Best eggs I'd ever tasted, but that wasn't important at the moment. "Go get him a job at the café if he needs one. I'm sure Laverne would love him. Especially if he's a project."

"First of all, I didn't know he was going to do that. Secondly, Kain has an eclectic set of skills. And you should give him a chance."

It seemed like he wanted to say more, but he tightened his jaw and just gave me a hard stare.

"I need someone I can count on to work their butt off for me for the next few months. I'm sure Mr. N'ai—"

"Jesus, Sunshine. It's just Kain. He's one of my oldest friends. And isn't this taproom about taking chances?"

He was right, Beckett had given us both a chance. But there was one big difference between what Beckett had done and this. He had known Ronan's reputation before he offered

him the job. And I'd worked for Happy Acres for over ten years. "He could flake and disappear. I have no background on him."

"You have me."

"Yeah, well, I don't know you very well either." The words came out of me like a shot. This was something that needed to be carefully thought about. Not just because it sounded like fun.

Ronan took a step back, his face going blank. "I get you're upset."

"You act like this is all a game. Hell, you made a sleepy grab at me while Beckett was right there in the workshop and now this. He's our boss, Ronan."

"It's not that serious."

"Yeah. Obviously not to you." Again, making me look like I can't do my job or that I'm in control of the taproom.

"Are you ashamed of me or something?" I could see his fists tightening under his arms, making his biceps bulge. "Or is it you have trouble with Beckett seeing you with someone?"

"You are ridiculous. Whatever we have going on is separate and private from work. And not what this is about."

"Couldn't prove it by me."

"If you got your head out of your ass, you'd see what I'm saying. Put yourself in my shoes. I worked my ass off to get this place ready, and your friend walks in with a borrowed shirt and starts rearranging things like he already owns the place. Talk about entitled." He opened his mouth to interrupt and I just kept going. "I'm just supposed to hire him because he can scramble some eggs!"

"Maybe if you weren't so rigid about going with the flow. Or," he made a sarcastic gasp, "if you had an open mind about what's good for the taproom and not just what's already listed on your clipboard. Kain and I know each other. We wouldn't have to waste time getting to know each other to make the menu amazing. Did you look at it that way?"

Another thing out of my control. Just like when Beckett brought him in. Like I'm just supposed to fall in line without details and information.

“And if the hiring was supposed to be about both of us, as you said when we were supposed to do the interviews together, then I'm tossing Kain's name in the ring. Keep the scheduled interviews. Bet you'll see that he's the best one for the job anyway. Difference is, I don't mind being proven wrong, unlike you.” He went around me and back up the stairs.

I tipped my head back, staring at the blue sky that practically hurt my eyes with its perfect blue. Now I was the bad guy? The hell with that. He didn't like being wrong either, stupid Viking brute.

Storm whinnied and I moved over to pet his neck. “I don't have to be right, dammit,” I said under my breath. He bumped my shoulder with his huge head. I just needed to look at things from all sides. And all the problems. I couldn't just *try* someone out. We didn't have that kind of time.

Storm tried to nibble my hair and I pushed him away. “Sorry, I don't have a snack, buddy.”

And why the hell did Ronan care so much about me and Beckett? He was my best friend—that was it. If he couldn't deal with me having a best male friend, then we had even more troubles to contend with.

Reason number eleven why we shouldn't be doing any of this hooking up crap while we were trying to work. It muddied the waters. Just business from here on out.

I went back up the stairs to find him speaking with the woman. He was reading over her application, chatting with her as if we hadn't just argued.

Damn him.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said pleasantly.

“No problem. I was just telling Ronan that I'm on my lunch break.”

Of course he was on a first name basis. “Jessica, right?”

She nodded.

I walked behind the bar to find my clipboard. I’d already looked through the applications and did a first pass on vetting them. “You work at a restaurant in Kensington Square?”

“I’ve been stuck for a while at Bella’s. I haven’t been able to move up to what I really want to do. Mostly because there’s a lot of seniority ahead of me. Not to mention it’s a family restaurant.” She fiddled with the hem of her shirt. “I don’t have the right last name, let’s just say.”

Ronan nodded. “Yeah, I get that. What are you looking for, Jess?”

She nibbled her bottom lip.

“We’re looking for chefs and creatives,” I said gently. “We want to find ways to bring in young adults and the date night type people. Specialty drinks and food to match. Not a set menu.”

Her blue eyes widened. “Wait. A different menu all the time?”

Ronan grinned. “Think of it as a micro-brewery for hard cider. We’re opening with three main ciders for the first week or two and I’ll be rotating in different small batch ciders based on what’s popular once we start going. This will be a fast paced kitchen with a lot of collaboration between me and the chef.”

I wouldn’t have put it that way. It might be too chaotic for people looking for a stable job. And honestly, the way he talked about it scared me a bit. But I was trying to get out of my comfort zone. The steadiness of the orchard had left me feeling restless—the taproom had me pumped.

“I’m creative and I can tell you right now, I’m interested based on that alone.” Jessica stopped fidgeting and laced her hands together. “I’ve been making the same cheesecake for four years. I hate it.”

I pressed my lips together against a laugh at her vehement tone.

“Okay,” Ronan said amiably. “What would you bring to the table?”

That was not on my checklist of questions for the interview. I started to interrupt when she smiled and lifted her chin in pride.

“My specialty is plating. There’s not a lot of time for that in the restaurant. Nor can I do much with the same menu night after night. But if you look at my social media account and website, you’ll see I’m good with small plate and meal prep.”

Ronan handed her back the application. Her face fell. He cupped her hand before she could pull away. “The references on here are good and I’m sure Kira will vet you completely, but tell me why I—*we*—should hire you.” Then he encouraged her reply with a reassuring nod.

I opened my iPad to look at her website and my chest fluttered with interest. I jumped to her social media accounts and saw her engagement. I hadn’t really thought about that aspect. I assumed I’d have to farm things out to a marketing group for our various accounts but maybe not.

“Because I love making things pretty.” She laughed softly. “That sounds vapid, I know—but when it comes to bringing people into a new place, I think the aesthetic is as important as the product. At least at first. No offense.”

Ronan grinned. “None taken.”

I scrolled a few more of her posts and saw she was as good with desserts as she was with snack food. That she always found a way to taste her food at the end of her quick videos with as much unabashed pleasure in the actual food as she was with the pretty plate.

I glanced at Ronan, who was looking over my shoulder. Our eyes met and his eyebrow quirked as if daring me to go off book.

My heart pounded so loud, I had to take a slow breath to ease the roaring in my ears. She may have come in looking to

be a chef or an assistant chef, but I had a feeling she might actually be better at the social media side.

Something I hadn't thought enough of. Especially if we wanted to bring younger people into the taproom. The way to do that would be through social media and using both Lennon and...hell, even Kain's outrageous style to our advantage.

I sure as hell hoped I didn't regret this.

I closed the iPad cover over the screen and held it against my chest. "I'm not sure you'd be a good fit for our chef position."

Jessica's eyes dimmed.

"However, I would like to discuss perhaps hiring you on to help us with social media, as well as photography and video. If these videos are your own, of course."

Her blue eyes widened. "What? Oh, yes. I do all my own edits. I don't have money to pay someone to do them for me."

"Good. Perhaps we should have a conversation about this further. I understand you're under a time constraint today, but I'd really like to have a longer meeting with you, and maybe we can figure out something that would work for both of us."

"I-I don't know what to say."

Ronan leaned both his elbows against the bar and gave me a near smirk. "I'd say you and Sun—Miss Webb here have something to talk about. Both of you being creative types."

I'd never been called a creative person in my life.

Organized.

Spreadsheets had been my life once upon a time.

I was exacting with a schedule.

But not creative.

Never before Ronan anyway.

I held my hand out to her. "Call me Kira. Can we discuss a time to talk?"

"Yes." She nodded quickly, her smile huge. "God, yes."

“Perfect. We may have our chef already. If you have time, maybe you’d like to meet him? See if you two would mesh.”

“I’d love that.”

The next interview was waiting by the door. There were two of us. I forced myself to relax my fingers on my iPad. “Ronan, why don’t you talk to the next person? I’ll introduce Jess to Kain.”

“No problem.” He pushed off the bar and straightened. “Sure you’re all right with this?”

I met his gaze. The stubborn edge was still there under the layer of professionalism, but I appreciated that he asked. “I’ll catch up.”

“You got it.” He turned the charm to a twenty as he headed toward the front doors.

Even in stained shorts and a shirt that was a touch too small for him, he still had this aura to him that said leader and boss.

I wasn’t quite sure how he did it and I might have hated him a little right then.

I gave Jessica a tight smile. “Let’s go meet our possible chef.”

I said possible, but I had a feeling my careful plans would need to be rearranged—again.



## CHAPTER 22

RONAN

## WILDCARDS

Unfortunately, the first interview was the only easy one of the day. Beckett had escaped on his horse after he'd filled his belly with Kain's breakfast feast. Honestly, I was still a little surprised about the massive horse waiting in the trees when I'd chased after Kira.

The orchard was a whole new world from Chicago on a number of levels.

As I'd figured, Jess and Kain had hit it off. The two of them were going to meet up for drinks to talk over menu ideas later. I only hoped my friend would keep things platonic. He tended to get excited about a topic, and his charm was a dangerous thing.

Thank God for ride share apps. Evidently small town USA was just as up on them. Maybe even more so since public transportation wasn't really a thing out here in the rural sectors.

I sent Kain back to my place to crash while I dealt with a chilly Kira for the rest of the day.

Between interviews, she trained our rapidly multiplying staff on the use of our sparkly new registers, which were essentially iPads on crack. We had the main one behind the bar and a smaller setup located at the hostess podium near the front of the taproom. As usual, Kira was always thinking about efficiency during busy times.

Unfortunately, the rest of the afternoon's interviews were a bust.

Two of them thought they were the next social media sensation.

News flash, they were not.

Where Jess was thoughtful and clever, they were more interested in posing for the cameras than actual cooking and creating. We needed staffers to feed our patrons, not build their clout during taproom hours.

A handful of chefs came in, but they were just too set in their ways to be creative with an ever changing menu. They were actually built more like Kira. Organized and brutally efficient at the numbers game, but even my partner in crime saw they weren't what we needed in the kitchen.

She was still fighting it, but we'd literally tripped over exactly what we needed twice today. Kain, who opened the fridge and just clicked with an idea in his staggering brain, then somehow made everyone in the kitchen want it too. The problem was—Kain wouldn't be a permanent fixture, no matter how he was feeling right now. Eventually his empire would require his attention for more than a few satellite calls and whatever else he couldn't unload on his second-in-command. While the kitchen was a good distraction for him right now, Kain wouldn't be happy being a chef in a small town for very long.

And that was trouble for the taproom.

It might be great for the first season...

Hmm. Maybe that was the answer. Seasons and more importantly, changes.

I showed the latest contestant—because it had started feeling like a freaking game show—to the door and looked around for Kira. I found her in one of the swing chairs at the edge of the property.

Her mile high shoes were kicked to the side and she was curled into the bamboo, egg shaped swing. One foot lazily sent the chair into a gentle rock as she stared out on the orchard below. The sun had gone from brutal midday heat into a muted warmth that teased an ending to the heat wave that had

plagued most of July. A perfect evening to bask in the view of the landscape below.

I was glad to see she had taken a moment to relax, but the closer I got, the more I wasn't so sure about that. She was in profile from my vantage point, the waning sun gilding her in a soft gold. Her hair was down and in a disorganized tumble, which told me she'd been rubbing at her scalp in frustration. The skirt of her dress had shifted up in her position, showing off all that leg that made my mouth water. Instead of her usual water or coffee, a tumbler full of dark liquid rested against her bare knee.

The bourbon was out.

Because of me? Or because of the day?

Probably both.

I came up behind her in the swing, twisting it lightly so she could see it was me.

The relaxed body language morphed into tension. "Go home, Ronan. It's been a long one and I don't have the energy for you right now."

I moved around in front of her and dropped to the ground, propping my forearms on my knees. I reached for her to give me the glass.

She rolled her eyes, but handed it to me. It was a good sign that she didn't tell me to fuck off. I took a quick sip and the smoky bourbon settled on my tongue. The aftertaste of apples left a nice echo in the mouth. Gave me a few ideas for one of the ciders. I handed the glass back. "Nice."

"It was."

I sighed. Yeah, I was definitely still in the doghouse. "The day started off rocky, but I think we did okay."

"Oh, sure." She tucked her other foot up under her leg and pulled her dress over her legs. Balls, I was enjoying the view. "Eight crappy interviews and one possible hire—not for the job I was looking for, by the way—is not a good day."

“You may not have been looking for Jess, but you know she was a good find.”

She took a healthy sip. “She wasn’t in the plans.”

“It’s okay for the plans to change, Sunshine.”

“My schedule is already tight—something I don’t think you seem to comprehend.”

“I get it.”

“No, you really don’t. You’re playing with your friend and have the good ole boys charm with Beckett. I have to be the one who does all the boring stuff. You know, worries about logistics and plans, and staffing and supplies. While you guys just make chaos.”

I scooted forward to touch her.

She gave me a frigid stare and I sighed again, letting my hand fall away. “You’re right.”

One eyebrow rose as she paused before taking another sip. “Oh, really?”

“Yes. Except one part.” I linked my fingers. It was natural for me to touch and reach for her, and she practically had a neon sign above the swing saying back off. “Chaos is kind of part of the deal. The taproom is ever changing and some disorganization is going to come with that. One of the things I came to talk to you about. I was thinking about Kain—”

“Of course you were.”

“Just hold on. You’re right about Kain being a wildcard. But maybe we lean into that. Instead of banking on one chef, we lean into the idea of a seasonal one. If we find one that works all the time, that’s great. However, it gives us an easy out if people don’t work for the taproom. A handy way to not get locked into a long term contract.”

“So, you think Kain is going to flake? Is that what you’re telling me?”

I shook my head. “Kain is one of my oldest friends, but I can tell you he’s going through something personal.

Something I can't really talk about until I see how much he wants to share."

She narrowed her gaze at me. "Is he not going show up one day?"

"No. He's got too much integrity for that." I held up a hand when she opened her mouth. "I know, I know. You don't know him. I need you to put a little faith in me this time."

"Unfair."

"No, this next part will fall under that category." At her frown, I rushed on. "I would appreciate it if you didn't dig into his background. I know you're thorough with research on employees."

She tossed back the rest of her drink and set the glass down on the small table beside her. "That's a lot to ask."

"I know it. He's not a criminal—don't worry about that. But he's got a lot of heavy shit to work through, and I think the orchard will be good for him. I didn't really see the kitchen being part of that, but it's probably the best place for him. He's well-traveled and has a huge knowledge of food and cooking. While he may not have gone to culinary school, he's got a lot of hands on knowledge that will help us. He's also very business minded."

That was an understatement, but I didn't want to lie to her.

"He looks like he belongs on a beach."

I laughed. "You're not far off. His family is from Hawaii, though he moved here a long time ago. It's how we met actually. Bumming around the Pacific Coast Highway, working just enough for us to get to the next place to surf."

"Really?"

I nodded. "But Kain got his shit together and so did I. We got real jobs and moved on from our bum ways, but never lost touch. I have a good feeling his energy will be exactly what we need. Where you wanted Lennon because of her rep and flair, Kain will do the same with food. He'll pull people in. I can almost promise you that."

“Almost.”

“Nothing’s a guarantee, Sunshine. I think you know that more than most.”

She frowned at me and her face closed off again as she folded her arms in her lap.

I knew there was more to Kira’s story than she told me. Especially when it came to the backlash of what her sister did. But she held that piece of her in a tight little box and didn’t want to share it with anyone. I also didn’t want to ask about it because gossip was always heavier than the reality of what happened.

It wasn’t going to be today unfortunately. I pushed off the ground and stood. “I’m going to go home and shower off this day and we’ll start again tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Best I could ask at the moment. “Okay.”

Leaving her there didn’t feel right, but I knew I wasn’t welcome. Annette and Matt were pulling the garage doors down as I dragged myself up the stairs into the dining room. “Hey guys. Thanks for today.”

“No prob, Ronan.” Annette brushed her fingers off on the leg of her pants.

The dry days were bringing some extra dirt in when we had everything open. Another thing to worry about for keeping things clean on all the dark stain and ironwork in there. Further reminder of all the things on Kira’s list that I was oblivious about.

“Make sure she leaves when you guys do, okay?”

Annette nodded. “Will do. She’s still mad at you, huh?”

I grinned. “Probably will be a forever thing.”

“You’re good for her. I’ve known Kira a long time. She might be pissed at you, but it’s only because this matters so much.” Her voice lowered. “And because you get under her skin. No one has in a long time.”



I wasn't sure what to say there. Kira didn't really want people to know there was an us. I could see where she was coming from, even if it grated on me. And seeing how close she was with Beckett, with the natural intimacy between them—all of it left me unsettled.

Mostly because I wanted that with her.

It pissed me off that I didn't have it, because I damn well had to earn it.

And the only way I'd be able to do that was to keep showing up.

“Because you're one of her friends, I'll tell you—she gets under mine too. See ya tomorrow.”

Annette leaned on the pole used for drawing down the doors. “Never boring in here, that's for sure. See you tomorrow.”

My feet felt like cement bricks as I trudged through to the front doors. I said a small prayer when I saw my truck parked in the lot. Kain must have dropped it off since my truck bed was empty except for a bunch of loose tie downs.

I climbed into the cab and found my keys under the mat. “Just like old times.” I turned the truck over and backed out of the parking lot. The orchard was quiet in the waning sun.

Staffing was light in the months just before harvest. Most of the activity included taking soil samples and testing the apples to make sure they were doing what they were supposed to do. Right now the canopy of trees were bursting with apples in varying stages of green, yellow, and red. My untrained eye knew jack shit about it, but I did know that the cold storage bins were my favorite place to visit.

The more I researched, the more I learned about the lifespan of the trees and the fruit after it was picked. It was so much different than brewing beer, and far more interesting in my opinion. I needed to remember that I was here for a job. One that I'd been dreaming about without even knowing it.

One that could become so much more if I'd just get my head on straight about this opening. And about Kira.

The fun part had to take a back seat right now, much as it killed me.

Everything required nurturing—from my cider right down to my future with Kira. And just like the apples growing over my head, I couldn't make them move along faster.

I had to wait. And dammit, did I suck at waiting.

I stopped in at the café in the shopping section of the orchard. The gift shop, café, and bakery were the main hub for foot traffic. There was also a shop attached to the lodge that was designed for specialty foods ready for shipping or pick up. Seasonal pies, jarred foods, and catering-sized orders made up the bulk of that business.

The Ronsons and the Mannings were no joke when it came to making the apples work for them on every level. I was going to stop for some food, but wedding season was in full swing in this part of the orchard.

A gaggle—I really didn't know of a better word for it—of women clogged up the front of the bakery. It was a pastel explosion of female energy. Women in every size, shape, and color were in attendance. There was also a whole lot of alcohol being passed around.

I kept driving. I definitely didn't have the mental fortitude for what looked like a bachelorette situation. Instead, I stopped at a fast food drive thru in Turnbull before heading to my place. Kain's motorcycle was missing. I glanced at my dash clock. I wasn't sure if it was a good thing that he was still out with our new social media maven.

Or he found someone else to entertain him.

I checked my phone, but no messages from anyone other than my mother.

I shot her a reply that I'd give her a call tomorrow. It had been awhile since I'd checked in and it was too soon for her to have gotten my gifts in the mail.

I parked and grabbed my sack of food, then dragged my way up the steps to my porch. I didn't even have the energy to

go inside, so I dropped into my chair and fueled up. I barely tasted the burger and fries, but it filled the hole.

As I finished my Coke, the rumble of a motorcycle dented the silence of the night. I kicked off my boots and stretched my legs out to wait for my friend to pull in. Sure, it could have been another bike. It was a fine summer night for a ride, but the distinctive purr of his vintage Harley was unmistakable.

He downshifted and slowed instead of kicking up dust like yesterday. He wore jeans, a Metallica T-shirt, and his huge boots. No one would be able to tell he was worth a few billion. Probably more than that since he'd inherited his father's fortune as well.

I set my cup down beside my chair. "How'd it go with Jessica?"

"She's pretty brilliant. Good choice. I'd snap her up for one of my restaurants in Monterey if I didn't love you."

I laced my fingers behind my head. "You own restaurants too?"

He shrugged then dropped into the chair beside me. "I do some angel investing sometimes. I like to be a pain in the ass when I'm in the mood to crunch numbers, but generally leave it to the owners. They usually just need some restructuring and cash flow before they're back on their feet."

"Does that mean you'll do the same here? Just move on when you're bored?"

Kain sighed. "Yeah, my impulse control got a little out of hand today."

"Ya think?"

"I like the taproom. Has a good energy. New beginnings all around."

"Don't start with the energy thing again." I let my hands drop to the arms of my chair. Kain had been known to abandon a project when the vibe was off on more than one occasion. When we were young, it didn't make much of a difference to me. Now? It was my life.

“I’m serious. I was too drunk to really feel it last night. I do like your workspace though. Analog was a good word, brah. Exactly how it felt. But in the best way. Like going back to basics.” He flipped the top of the cooler open and grunted when there was no magic cider to be found. He stood up and went in through the sliding door. “The taproom has a different feel though,” he called from the open door.

“Good or bad?”

“Very good. Why do you think I want to work there?” Kain came back in with two tall cans of beer that he must have picked up the first time he came back to my place. My fridge definitely didn’t have cans that size in it. He handed me one and sat back down. “I picked up some food with your truck earlier. You live like a bachelor.”

“I’ve been spending most of my time at the workshop and eating takeout.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll get real food from me. At least until you disappear back into *Hina’s* bed.” He waggled his brows. “If she lets you back in. She’s pissed at you.”

“Thanks to you, pal.” I frowned. “How do you know we’re sleeping together? And she got a nickname already?”

He cracked the can. “Evidently you and Shane pick women that are big personalities. Where *Ānela* is tiny and ethereal like an angel, yours is a fucking goddess. The kind of woman you want to get a hold of and don’t let go.” He got a wistful look on his face. “I met a woman like that once.”

My eyebrows lowered as I stared at him.

Kain threw his head back with a laugh. “Don’t worry.”

“I don’t need to. She’s mine.”

“Then why do you get so growly about your boss? I like him by the way. He has a steady and true way about him. Like he’s part of the land.”

And that was a big compliment from Kain. He may have been quick to escape Hawaii when he was looking to make his own name, but he was serious about legacy and his attachment

to the land and the ocean. One of the reasons we spent so much time in the Pacific when we were young and dumb.

He'd returned to Hawaii to connect with his family, even if he couldn't see eye-to-eye with his father most of the time. Both of them were far too stubborn.

"Yeah, I like Beckett. I did follow him here practically sight unseen."

"See. Look at you following your instincts. I'm so proud." He took a long swallow.

"Ass."

His chuckle eased some of my annoyance.

"If you like him, why do you act like you're going to chew his arm off?"

I opened my own beer and took a drink before I answered, then held the can up to my forehead. "I don't know, man. She fucks with my head."

"You do know men and women can be friends, right?"

I grunted. Yeah, I knew it logically.

"My sister married her best friend."

Kain rolled his eyes. "It happens, *Boa*. Maeve and Brian were dancing around each other since they were freaking teenagers."

"Yeah, well, that's how long Beckett and Kira have known one another."

"All right, you got me there." He gave me a big sigh. "You don't think you can trust her?" He shook his head. "She's not Darcy."

I tried to roll off the tightness across my shoulders. My ex-girlfriend hadn't been topmost of my mind, but now it made sense why I got itchy about Kira and Beckett. "No, she's not." I took a long swallow from the beer.

"You and Darcy were long over before she started with that bullshit and you know it. You were just being stubborn

about pulling the plug on the relationship.”

I set the can on the arm of the chair and rotated it slowly. “At the time, I thought it was a gut shot.”

“And now?”

“Now, I know it wasn’t even close to how I feel about Sunshine.” I lifted it for another sip to wet my parched throat. “But Darcy was in denial about how she felt about Jim. A piece of me wonders if Kira is the same with Beckett.”

Beckett was damn protective of her.

“I didn’t know Darcy that well, but you never looked at her like you look at Kira. And vice versa. *Hina* wouldn’t have gotten so mad at you today if she didn’t have feelings messing her up.”

A few of the bands across my back eased. “Yeah. Hindsight and all that bullshit.”

Kain rested his beer on his belly. “So, are you saying it’s more than just banging?”

“Who says we’re sleeping together?”

Kain gave me a bland stare. “Then why the hell are you getting ahead of yourself? You might find out she snores and want to toss her out the window.”

“She doesn’t.”

His scarred eyebrow rose. “Yeah, I knew you were sleeping together.”

“Once.”

“And you’ve got the hearts and flowers action going on? Ah, hell. Maybe you are in trouble.”

“Worse. I see babies, man.” I saw my future and it should scare me way more than it did. It was just a certainty in my chest as much as in my head.

Both of his eyebrows shot up. “Really? How the hell do you know that so soon?”

“I just know it.” I set the can back on the arm of the chair.  
“Like catching a wave.”

He grinned. “I bet you ride that wave. She’s got curves for days, my friend.”

“Watch it. That’s my future wife you’re talking about.”

He took a long pull from his can. “Man, I’ll never fall that hard. If she figures that out, she’ll have you sprinting down the aisle.”

I laughed. “Pretty sure she’s the one who’ll have to catch up.”

“Be careful. Right now it’s your lust brain talking.”

“I know what I know.”

He shook his head and took a longer sip. “Gonna be an interesting summer.”

I had a feeling he was right.

## CHAPTER 23



KIRA

## NOT READY YET

I was going to push that man off the damn side of the hill.

I stood with my hands at my hips as the he in question, and Kain, built a bench swing in my spot. I knew it was the perfect place for a couple to sit and look out on my favorite view, but it was my spot, dammit.

My lone swing had been there since we started building and now he was changing it.

Both of them had their shirts off and were using power tools like professionals. Laughing as they worked but no actual screwing around. They'd been jumping in to help whenever someone asked all damn day—with a smile and not a single complaint.

Very annoying.

It was the fourth project they put together this week without me even mentioning it. Hell, I was going to ask our landscaping team to do it with the final plants, but nope. I'd wanted that swing in a different spot, but they were right to install it there.

Still pissed me off.

The jerk also checked the project management app I'd set up for all the senior staff. Then Ronan went ahead and ordered the pieces, got them shipped, then he even put the scanned invoices into the right place in the program. All freaking tidy and efficient.

Then he had the nerve to be friendly and sweet—if hands off.

Not dragging me into a dark corner for a kiss.

Not a single flirty, Viking-esque remark.

Not a single inappropriate touch.

Completely professional, as if we hadn't lost brain cells from hot, bone rattling sex recently. Eleven days ago, to be exact. Eleven long nights of staring at my ceiling having stupid flashbacks to what he did with his mouth and those big, very capable hands.

The same hands that were currently using a level to make sure the swing was perfectly straight as Kain bolted it in place.

Jerk.

I balled up my fists and stalked back into the taproom, leaving them to the swing. It wasn't like I didn't have my own to-do list. Lennon had convinced me to rearrange the shelves behind the bar to showcase a few local distilleries as well as add a spot along the top for the hard ciders—when they were ready.

Hopefully it would be soon.

For the last week and a half, Ronan had been helping in the taproom as much as he'd been in his workshop. And when he wasn't in the workshop, he and Kain had their heads down over plans. Whenever I got near them, they always put them away, so I didn't know exactly what they were working on.

I hated not knowing.

I hated that I didn't feel like I could ask.

“Kira?”

“What?”

Annette's eyebrows shot up at my tone. “You okay?”

“Sorry.” I sighed and lowered my voice. “Sorry. Just a little crazy today.”

She glanced past me. “Ohhh.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets of my shorts. It was a dusty and dirty day with no interviews, so I hadn't bothered dressing up. And now I looked like the unprofessional one, mooning over the man. Ugh.

“Did you need something?”

“Lennon changed the order for glasses. Just making sure it's okay.”

I closed my eyes. “How much more?”

“Cheaper this time.”

My eyes snapped open. “Oh. Well, that's new. Sounds good.”

She grinned. “I figured, just wanted to be sure it was okay. I'll finalize the order and pick them up on my way in tomorrow. Unless you want them to deliver?”

“If you don't mind picking them up, I could use a break on the shipping fees. As well as their less than careful delivery guys.”

“No kidding.” She rolled her eyes. “Matt had to request a return for the last delivery of pint glasses.”

“Great.”

“Always something.” She patted my arm. “We're getting there. That dishy artist from Kensington Square dropped off a bunch of goodies.”

“Now that's two bits of good news. Can we make it a trend?”

“Don't say that too loud.”

I laughed in spite of my annoyance. “Ain't that the truth. Thanks, Annette. Why don't you knock off early? You've been working long days.”

“Oh, and like you haven't?”

“Comes with manager status. Take Matt with you.” I walked over to the bar where I'd stashed a few gift cards just for this purpose. “Have dinner on us.”

She frowned and tucked a dark curl behind her ear. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t. But you guys have been working your butts off. And I don’t think you’ll mind going solo with him...”

Annette’s ears pinked up. “Maybe.” She snatched the card. “He does love Chester’s.”

“Best pizza in Turnbull.”

“Only pizza, you mean.”

I snickered. “That too. Handily, they make one helluva pie.”

“Okay. But I’ll be in early tomorrow.”

“Good. I’ll need your eye to hang all those freaking paintings.”

“You got it.” She stuffed the card in her back pocket and hustled over to Matt.

She might be still in the wonder-if-he-likes-me stage, but I was pretty sure Matt was already there. Part of me wanted to dissuade them. Workplace romance was a headache waiting to happen. But the heart wanted what it wanted and Matt was a good guy. He stepped closer to her as she tugged on his arm until they were just a breath away from touching.

Yep, he was definitely into her.

I turned away from them and zeroed in on the crates against the wall. No doubt, I’d need help with them tomorrow. Now, I just needed a screwdriver or a crowbar to get them open so I could take a peek.

I’d bartered with an artist in Turnbull who did paintings and sculptures. He said he’d make the display cases for the dining room if I hung his paintings in the dining area for the first month with no commission. I couldn’t fault the guy for the hustle and it saved my budget for the first month. Win-win for everyone.

I glanced over at the guys who were currently glugging down bottles of water. Dear God, Ronan was distracting. That long throat worked as he swallowed, and I flashed back to the night on my couch. When he was drinking wine with the same abandon, but at least then I'd been able to nibble my way along his neck. I could still taste the salt on my tongue.

Good grief. My breasts felt heavy and my nipples were tight with stupid memories clogging up my brain. There was no way I could go out to the guys to ask for a tool.

I was too wound up to talk to Ronan. There had to be something in the junk drawer behind the bar. I'd ordered a multi-tool to have on hand, but who knew if it had actually made it into the correct spot.

The chaos around me was getting to me, but I knew it meant we were getting close to the end. We were in good standing for employees, and while a few of them probably wouldn't work out past the first week—it was to be expected. A startup required a lot of work, and not everyone was ready for that. Especially those from the young and partying age group who thought they'd get free drinks.

I dug around and found a rusty flat head screwdriver that had probably been in the first taproom. I went over to pry open the first crate and found a trio of paintings that would look good in the main dining room. One of those triptychs where the separate paintings made up a larger picture.

“Wow,” I said softly. It was of the orchard. I hadn't commissioned him to do anything specific to the Brothers Three or Happy Acres, but it looked like he'd taken it upon himself.

I pulled the pallet wood off the front and set it against the wall, then dug into the packing paper so I could get a good look at them. I knew right where it should go—the main dining room near the windows. It would be protected from the elements when the large glass doors were open, but it would be a feature for photos as well as enjoyment.

I muscled the springtime one out of the crate and duck walked my way over to where I wanted it.

“Why didn’t you call for help?”

My shoulders stiffened at Ronan’s voice. “I can handle it.”

“Just because you can, doesn’t mean you have to. That’s why we’re here helping.” His big hand slid across mine to get to the center of the tin painting for a good grip.

He looked down at me, and for the first time his dark eyes flickered with something more than the genial, helpful Ronan I’d been dealing with for the last eleven damn days.

I backed up. “Thanks. Over in the alcove.”

He glanced over to the cut in section of the dining room. “Perfect spot.”

I nodded. “There’s two more.”

He whistled sharply and Kain’s head whipped around from where he was standing outside. He hustled up the patio’s steps.

“*Hina*, you trying to do everything again?”

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t know what the nickname meant, and I was almost afraid to ask. His big personality had changed the flavor of the taproom, and I wasn’t sure if it was for the better.

“There’s two more over there in the crate,” I said with defeat in my voice.

He pulled the ever present scrunchie hair tie off his wrist and put his hair up. “Hanging paintings is my favorite thing.”

I didn’t know much about the secretive Kain. Because I was used to people talking about me for the last five years, I didn’t push him for details. Especially after Ronan asked me to give him space.

But in my experience, men never loved hanging paintings.

Kain went over to the crate and lovingly lifted the summer version of the trees. The artist had a strong, bold style. Even the spring painting Ronan held had pops of color out of the dark green instead of leaning into the pastel as most people did for that season.

“Who’s the artist?”

I glanced over at Kain. “Sullivan Kelsey. He’s local.”

“Impressive,” he murmured. He pried open the next few crates and pulled out paintings in a variety of sizes. Some on tin, like the trees, others on canvas or wood. All of them were evocative in one way or another.

“For three months, I won’t charge him a commission on any artwork sold. In return he built those.” I pointed at the display cases with Plexiglass toppers. “Once we have the bottles...” I glanced at Ronan with a raised brow. “We’ll make sure we have the first of each batch to show the history of the taproom.”

“They’re not ready yet,” Ronan said tightly.

“Well, get it ready because we’re running out of time,” I snapped back.

He stomped over to where the paintings would go, then out to where they’d been working for his toolbox. I tried not to notice the bunching muscles along his back. Or the new ink that had been added to his shoulder blade.

More in the Celtic style I was used to, but this time something that echoed Kain’s more tribal artwork. The two of them stood at the wall talking quietly and sure enough, there was a matching swirl of ink on Kain’s shoulder as well.

The pang hit me low and harder than I was prepared for. What must that be like to be linked so closely to someone that you’d be willing to get a permanent reminder of a friendship?

Beckett and the Mannings had become my surrogate family, but the idea of stamping myself with a symbol like that wasn’t one I’d ever been called to do. I glanced down at the small star and moon on my wrist.

A crazy moment I’d commemorated the night before I was supposed to go to college. Now it was a reminder that my future wasn’t so easily assured. Especially when my sister had left instead—taking any option of college and the money she stole with her.



I rubbed the phantom burn from that long ago night against my shorts and shook off the old memories. Lots of things still needed doing for the current iteration of my future. And I'd use all the help available to make sure everything was perfect.

I went back to the crates and found an envelope with Sullivan's logo on it. Inside were discreet QR codes on small cards to place beside the paintings. It gave people the option to buy if they were interested—no hard selling.

Win-win as far as I was concerned.

I wanted to work with local people as much as possible. Both to give back to Turnbull and also to show that Brothers Three was focused on creating community. On a personal level, I wanted to prove that maybe a Webb could help instead of hurt.

This was my first step that didn't include my bank account.

I straightened my shoulders and went over to supervise. It was my strongest trait after all.

An hour later, we'd argued over height, where to hang, and whether to use wires or nails.

Two hours later, all the paintings were hung—with wires—because I wanted as few holes in my beautifully refinished barn walls as possible. The wires were more of a pain in the ass, but damn if they didn't look classy.

I left them to clean up the crate debris as my phone buzzed in my pocket.

Beckett.

Just what I needed after a long day.

## CHAPTER 24

KIRA

## THIS ISN'T A GAME

I went outside out of the noise and answered. "What's up?"

"Hey, Key. I've got the graphic designer friend of Zoe's up my ass. Any movement on names for the cider?"

I tipped my head back, staring up at the rapidly darkening sky. The evening had disappeared into work as usual. "I was just bugging him about it tonight. I'll push again."

"Thanks. My sister's just as scary as my mother. I'd rather not have her yell at me again. She sure is belligerent lately."

"Planning a wedding will do that."

He just grunted. "Well, light a fire under his ass. The designer has printing capabilities in house, but we still need time to slap the stupid labels on the bottles and fill some."

"Understood."

Most of the cider would be kegged because of the small batch processing, but the bottles would be used for marketing and hopefully distribution in the future.

At the very least, we needed something to go with the distinctive barn owl of the Brothers Three logo.

"How's it going up there?"

"We're getting there. Once Ronan gives us the final flavors, Kain will make up our opening menu. They've been heads down for days, so I think they're getting close."

At least I hoped so. I was also avoiding him because I... well, because I was doing exactly what I had feared would

happen. Only it was me, instead of Ronan, with the problem. If there was a wall or table to thunk my head on, I'd be doing that now. Crap.

“Good. I was thinking maybe a soft launch for Hayes’ birthday would be a good idea to test everything out. You know, before our resident rockstar drives everyone insane.”

My belly twisted. Not that I wasn’t expecting all the family to show up for opening night, but an actual family party? One more thing to figure out and plan.

“It’s a good idea. See where the kinks are before the actual opening night.”

“Gotta say, I didn’t even think about kinks.” I heard the slam of a door through the phone. “Laverne ambushed me. I know you have stuff under control, but she’s got a point.”

I’d been planning for every problem since Beckett had come to me about running the taproom. The reality of how close the opening was suddenly crashed in on me. I sat down on the new swing and stared out on the shadowy orchard. “She has a way of doing that.”

“Twenty-fifth for my middle brother. Somehow we managed to keep him alive for a quarter of a century.”

I leaned back in the swing and set it to rocking. The chains on either side barely made a sound. As much as Kain and Ronan drove me crazy, they did amazing work. “Does he know we’re doing a party? You know he hates being the center of attention.”

“What makes it fun.”

“You’re evil.”

“Also the fun part. I had that graphic designer make up a label for his moonshine too. You know, a surprise present.”

My eyes stung. The moonshine had been a passion project for Hayes for as long as he’d been legally able to drink. And before, but he’d done that part in secret. But the bottles always had the simplest label on them. As minimalist as the man who made the dangerous brew.

“He’ll go crazy.”

“Crazier still when I show him the gear I ordered for him to start up operations next year. It will take a long time to get through the red tape for it, but our distributor is interested. So, we’ll let them figure it out.”

“You’re a good man, Beckett Manning.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just tired of looking at his puppy dog eyes.”

I laughed. “The Brothers Three Taproom will be ready for it.”

“I know it.” I heard the rumble of Beckett’s truck. “I’m heading home to soak my head. You best do the same. It’s late.”

I laughed. “I’m ready. I’ll work out the details with Laverne and figure out a menu.”

“Thanks, Key.”

“You got it. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I tucked my phone into my pocket and stood. Out of the corner of my eye I caught Ronan in the shadows. He stalked to his workshop and the lights flicked on inside.

“Great,” I muttered and went back into the taproom.

I heard music and banging in the kitchen and found Kain with his head in the pantry with his iPad open on the table. He’d put on a shirt—sort of. It was missing its sleeves and half the sides of the shirt, leaving his arms on display as usual.

Today’s music of choice piped in the kitchen matched the concert promoted on the shirt. Santana’s epic guitars soared in the wide space. The sultry “Black Magic Woman” was sad and sexy at the same time.

“You finally ready to order for the opening?”

He hit his head on one of the shelves above him. “Dammit. Don’t sneak up on a man like that.”

I grinned as I leaned an elbow on the tall table. “You’d make my life infinitely easier if I had a menu.”

“Talk to *Boa*. But at least he told me a few of the flavors he’s using. He’s a precious little bitch about these ciders.”

“We both have a lot of pressure on us.”

He tucked the Apple pencil behind his ear. “Yeah, I get it. He just doesn’t want to disappoint you or the Mannings.”

“Well, until you guys can agree, I’ve got another project for you. Beckett just asked if we could do a dry run of sorts. Hayes’s birthday party. Kind of a trial run.”

Kain nodded. He rubbed his massive hands together, his silver rings clicking. “Good thinking. Do I get to do what I want?”

“Within reason. You’ll have to talk to Laverne. She’s the one who came up with the idea.”

His tanned face split into a smile. “I love that little snowy bird. I’ll talk to her tomorrow.”

“Good. Thank you. That, of course, will be a different budget. So we’ll see how much the family wants to chip in for.”

“Always with the numbers.” Kain shook his head.

“If I let you and Lennon run free with the checkbook we’d be in the red for the first month.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “Then we’d be in the black because people won’t be able to resist this place.”

“I’m more than willing to be proven wrong. With a budget to start.”

“Bah.”

I grinned. “It’s good for you. Creates character. Now go the hell home. We’ve all been here for fourteen hours.”

“Just needed to put an order in with my friend in Honolulu. Different spices back home.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “I’m heading out. I’ve got a date with Ruby tonight.”

“Dear God, don’t burn down the town.” My old boss over at Lucky’s was just as wild as Kain.

“No promises.”

“Okay, I’m going to lock up.”

I wandered back out to the dining room. The paintings made the space—a final piece that I hadn’t even realized was missing. I made a note to order a few lights to showcase the art.

I wove my way through the chairs and tables and back to the bar. Lennon was in Los Angeles for an event. She would be back Monday and we’d hammer out the last of the details for the drinks menu. The taproom would showcase apples for the opening—from martinis to daiquiris and everything in between.

The cider would continue to be the star, of course. Once our resident mad scientist gave us something to work with, we’d be able to wrap up the final details.

I shut off the lights in the case, and locked down the alcohol. There were no concerts this weekend, but there was no need to advertise the high end booze stockpiled at the moment. The lockup process soothed me with its reliability. Everything had its place, and the quiet, the order of it, let my spinning brain even out. The music shut off and Kain checked on me before disappearing out the door with a wave.

He didn’t like to leave me alone to close up, which I appreciated. We were very remote and I always felt safe, but that would probably change after we opened. We’d have safety protocols in place for closing time. Another thing to add to my ever present to-do list.

The rev of his motorcycle engine followed by the spit of gravel traveled all the way out to the back as I pulled the large accordion doors closed. I noticed the light was still on in Ronan’s workshop.

The urge to leave him to it was strong.

However, it was my job to check on the status of the cider. I wanted to let him have the space he needed, but time wasn’t



exactly on our side. August was here and the days would only fly faster now.

I flipped the locks and sighed before slipping outside to cross the walkway into Ronan's domain. The pathway was dark, save for a few solar lights for safety and a surprising amount of fireflies flashing thanks to the humid evening.

As usual, music floated out into the darkness. Tonight it was angry rock with bass heavy guitars and pulsing drums. I shook out my fingers and cracked my neck before stepping into the shaft of light from his workshop.

He was at his bench, back to me. Beakers and jars of various sweeteners were spread all over. A gallon jug of what I assumed was his hard cider base sat to his right. The plastic was sweating and two tasting glasses were empty at the end of the bench.

His fingers gripped the edge of the scarred wooden surface before he flipped the beaker in one of the stands across the room. "Fuck."

Okay. Maybe not the best time to pay him a visit.

Just as I was about to step back into the darkness, he turned so his profile was in view. "What?"

His tone was the exact opposite of the even keeled Ronan who I'd been treated to lately. Anger and frustration hummed in the air, matching the beat. The singer's voice was a growl of intensity that somehow created a melody in the pulsing rage.

"I was going to ask how it's going, but I'm afraid to now."

He turned to face me fully, all feline grace in the lines of muscles and wildness of his hair. No braids and jangling beads today. Instead his untamed curls haloed around his head in a dozen colors of caramel, blond, and cinnamon. His beard was overgrown, adding to the lion effect. He crossed his arms over his chest. A splattered T-shirt with a Chicago brewery logo on it pulled tight across his biceps and shoulders.

I'd kept myself busy, as well as being pissed at him, which allowed me to mostly ignore how he affected me. I left the

room when he was in it, avoided being alone with him, kept myself under control.

Anything to distract me from the fact that I hadn't touched him in days.

More importantly, he hadn't touched *me* in days.

"I'm assuming Beckett called for an update?"

"What do you think?"

"Since he's been texting me for the last three days, I'd say yes."

"Did you answer him?"

He frowned. "Of course I answered him. He's my boss."

My eyebrow rose.

"I may have told him to fuck off—without the fuck part." His jaw flexed. "It'll be ready when it's ready."

"What seems to be the problem?" Before he could open his mouth, I held up a finger. "There has to be one, since you've become invaluable to our staff instead of locking yourself in your workshop."

"Because if I stared at these walls anymore, I'd actually toss the tank of cider base down the hill?"

"Okay, so we don't want that."

"Ya think?"

"Don't get pissy with me, Vi—Ronan." I swallowed down the nickname. If we were going to keep it professional, that wasn't going to help us.

His eyes flared as he straightened. "See that shelf right there?"

A small part of me was afraid to look away from him. He seemed restless and watchful in a way that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Like something was shifting behind the mask he'd been wearing. Finally, I glanced over at the rows and rows of hard cider bottles. Local brewing companies, national brands, even some international—all

looked as if they'd either been fully consumed or discarded. "Looks intense."

"It's really hard to be original when nearly everything has been done before."

"You don't have to be original, you just have to be you. Not some knockoff. The creative genius we hired, remember? The one you boasted you were the first day I met you?"

He came around the work bench toward me. "Yeah, well my genius seems to have left the building."

"Or you've been too wound up in—" What the hell was wrong with me?

"Wound up?" He crowded into me. "You mean thinking about your silky, golden skin every goddamn night? Yeah, I'd say that was a problem."

I tipped my head back to meet his eyes. "Yeah? Couldn't prove it by me. All smiles and, 'can I help you with that? Let me get that.'"

He lowered his head until our noses brushed. "You could have come to me, too. Let me know you gave a shit."

I fisted my hands at my sides so I didn't grab him. God, how I wanted to grab him and drag him in. I was here for a purpose, but the ginger scent of him made my head spin.

He moved a little closer, until his lips barely whispered across mine. "So stubborn. Think you have to do this all alone. Be Wonder Woman. Won't let me in even though I know you crave me as much as I crave you."

I swayed closer to him, my nipples tingled and tightened as they brushed the hard planes of his chest. I stared at his mouth as I sunk my teeth into my lower lip to stop myself.

"Even with me right here, you won't give in."

My gaze snapped up to his. "It's not some game. This place is important, my job is important."

"It's not a fucking game, Kira. How I feel about you." He cupped the back of my head, his fingers spearing into my

tangled hair. “How much I want you—dream about you.” He hauled me in close until I could feel how hard he was. “I wake up so hard I can barely think.” He pressed his forehead to mine, his breath hot across my lips. “Remembering how you taste. The sounds you made for me. How you rode my face.”

“Ronan.” His name was a plea. I wanted to let him take over the deciding. To just make me forget about the worries and fears. When he took over, I could just be.

“Leaving your scent on my skin, in my beard, in my head.”

My skin flushed along my neck and chest. He never held back telling me how he wanted me. It was as overwhelming as it was thrilling for anyone to want me like that—but this man. God, he consumed the doubts for a moment.

I lifted my hand to his face, cupping his scruffy cheek. I closed my eyes and breathed in his heat and the apples on his breath. Sharp and tart enough to lure me in to taste.

I flicked my tongue along his lower lip, then slipped inside with a groan. The memories of us together crashed into the current moment. Hazy pleasure bubbled up like the carbonation of his hard cider and made me want more.

He held back, didn't let me in closer for more.

“Ronan,” I said with a plea. “Viking.” I changed it up, hoping to help convince him without words. They were stuffed inside me behind a wall.

“We aren't a game. Not to me.” He twisted his fingers in the beltloops of my shorts at the small of my back. “Real. So real, I can't breathe around it sometimes. Like an undertow, dragging me back under.”

“Why would you want that?” I asked against his mouth. “To be out of control?” It was terrifying, how huge it felt when he touched me.

“Because when you're in my arms, it's the opposite. It's like being in the barrel of a perfect wave. Balance and the thrill of adrenaline and the peace of the water. That's what you are.”

I swallowed and pressed my forehead to his chin. The softness of his beard and the warmth of him seeped into me. I lifted my other hand to his chest, concentrating on the heartbeat there.

I slid my hand down and under the hem of his shirt to get to his skin, to feel it more fully. The fur of his chest and the light sheen of sweat from the heat of the workshop, the heavy cross that laid between his pecs.

“You overwhelm me.” I lifted my head again to look into his dark eyes. The wild was there, like always, but it wasn’t just that brazen man who swept in and made me sit up and take notice. There was truth and acceptance for me. And something bigger there that scared the hell out of me.

I went onto my toes and lined our mouths up, closing over his with my own. I pushed at his shirt until he leaned back and whipped it over his head, then came back for more.

Whatever had held him back had been unleashed. He reached around me and pushed things out of the way on the work table then lifted me up to set me on the bench.

The softness was gone, and my Viking had returned. I didn’t want to think about the emotions that had flooded his dark eyes. The intense lust was easier to embrace even if it also scared the crap out of me. Everything was huge with Ronan.

I reached for the button of his work pants. At least this huge part, I was more than willing to get a piece of. “Hurry,” I said and reached in to find his length.

He gripped the bench on either side of me, his head bowed. “Sunshine, finesse is not in this workshop right now.”

“I don’t want you to hold back. I don’t need pretty. I just need you.”

His chin snapped up and his eyes blazed.

I curled my fingers around the base of his cock. So hard and hot and perfect. Made for me. “I need this in me. You fill me up so good.” I couldn’t believe I said that, but it was true.

“Tighter.” He pressed his forehead to mine, growling as I obeyed.

I opened my legs wider so he could get closer. My thumb swirled over the crown of his head where it was damp with precum. I lifted my thumb to my mouth and licked it clean. “I missed your taste. When you came in my mouth for me.”

“Fuck.” He slanted his mouth over mine, his tongue swirling over mine as if to steal the taste back.

I chased it. The salt mixing with his cider—our cider. It would be ours when we were done. I was sure of that now.

I drew him out of the confines of canvas and the heavy zipper.

He ripped his mouth free from mine and threw his head back with a groan. “Sunshine.”

“Help me.” I let him go enough to grab onto his shoulders and he seemed to understand.

He jerked at my shorts, dragging them over my ass with my underwear before setting me back down on the wood. I’d probably end up with a splinter in a less than ideal spot but right then I really didn’t care.

My legs got tangled in the worn cotton until finally my ankle was free and he pushed my knees open. “Kira, you make me insane.” His gaze focused between my thighs.

I hadn’t really thought this one through. It wasn’t like we were in my bedroom. “Protection?”

I probably could wing it based on where I was in my cycle, but that was so damn reckless. So not me. I hadn’t been intimate with anyone in so long, there hadn’t been any need for me to be on birth control.

“Where’s my fucking bag?” He tried to back up, but my hand was already back in his pants. “Jesus. Give me a second.”

I dragged the tip of him against my inner thigh. “Hurry.”

He reached over on the bench, crowding into me. “Where’s my fucking wallet?”

He was so close to me. I lifted my hips instinctively to take him, to get him closer to where I was so hot and...God, was the word was needy? Who the hell was I? I’d worry about that later.

After I came.

“Hurry the hell up, Viking.”

“I wasn’t prepared.” He pushed papers and notebooks aside. A glass beaker rolled across the table and hit the floor with a clink then rolled away.

The music was still playing. A bluesy guitar piece with an epic voice swelling over it. It invaded my brain and rolled through me as I slicked the head of his cock through my wetness.

“Shit, Kira. Give me a second.”

I scraped my nails up the line of hair that bisected his abs to his chest. I needed to taste whatever I could get my mouth on. His jawline, which was far more beardy than the last time I’d kissed him, buzzed against my lips. I moved down to swirl my tongue along his Adam’s apple. The rasp of the shorter hairs abraded the tip of my tongue, ratcheting up my desire.

I buried my face into his neck and nibbled on the pulse point. Thrilled at how it fluttered under my tongue, echoing how crazy I felt as well. “Inside me. Or in my mouth.”

He laughed harshly. “You’re trying to kill me.” He straightened back up with a foil packet in hand. “In that perfect pussy first.”

I peeled open his pants further, letting go of his cock only so I could push at the canvas work pants and was rewarded with a handful of his flexing ass.

His hands worked the condom down his length and his wild eyes met mine. “I didn’t have time to get you—”

I grabbed his hand and brought it to me to see how wet I was. “I’ve been ready. There’s no worry there.”

He slicked his knuckle along my pussy and groaned. “Soaked for me, baby.”

“Yes.” I gripped my nails into his ass. “Now stop making me wait. It’s been eleven days.”

He grinned. “Counting them since I’ve been in here?” He dragged a knuckle along my pussy, nudging deeper before adding a second finger and pulsing his knuckles on either side of my clit.

I threw back my head and resisted the urge to shout out my frustration.

“Just you and me. This time it’s not in the sunshine. But I want you to scream my name, Kira. Don’t hold back.” His other hand gripped my hip, urging me closer to the edge of his work bench.

I circled his wrist to tug his hand away from me, but he resisted. Staring into my eyes as he kept on rubbing. He kept me on the fringes of an orgasm with a little too much glee.

“Tease,” I panted out.

He lowered his mouth until his beard tickled my lips, eyes still locked on mine. “Come for me, baby. Before I rattle your teeth like I promised.”

That day felt like a million years ago. When he promised me he’d take me in here and fuck me thoroughly. “I want that, but I want to come around you.” I pushed away his hand and reached for his cock. “Around this.” I hooked my knees around his waist and urged him closer.

He pushed up my shirt. “Skin. I need all your skin.”

I quickly flipped it over my head, and my hair tumbled free from my clip which pinged along the table and onto the floor. He lowered his face to my chest, dragging in a deep breath of me before he nosed the fragile necklaces I wore out of the way to get to skin.

He flicked open my bra at the back and gave a happy groan as the straps gave way. He found my nipple, sucking



hard enough that my fingers speared into his hair. I wasn't sure if it was to hold him there, or drag him away.

The underside of his shaft bumped along my slit, and then he flexed his hips to get to my entrance. He lifted his head to watch my face as he slid into me ever so gently.

I hissed out a breath as I relaxed to take every inch. God, I'd missed this. How perfect he fit inside of me. Not too big, not too small—just perfect for me. As if there was some piece of divine timing out there to make us find one another.

My eyelids fluttered shut as his name sighed from my lips.

And then he unleashed. His hips ground against my thighs as he angled each thrust for maximum pleasure. I lifted my arms to his shoulder and curled around him, drawing him even closer.

Accepting each jarring thrust inside of me as if I were drowning and only this could keep me tethered to this moment. I still cupped the back of his head, his wild curls twining around my fingers as I held on.

He gripped my hips as sweat gathered between us and the friction grew unbearable. I tipped my hips up, raising my knees to get him where I needed him.

“Fuck,” he said into my shoulder. “I need you closer.”

I laughed. I wasn't sure how I did without sawing off my own damn tongue from each thrust. “Only way is climbing inside of me, pal. Dear God, right there.”

He powered into me as the entire bench shuddered around us. Papers fell to the floor, glasses toppled and rolled away. But I couldn't do anything but hang on and take it.

Swamped in the perfect cone of silence where it was nothing but us, I shouted his name and clamped down on him. The entire room went sparkly and dark with little fissures of light dancing around the dim ceiling of the barn. I tried to drag in a breath, but it was clogged with an endless stream of words I couldn't hold onto. Distantly, I realized it was his name. Over and over again.

He finally slowed, his shoulders shook as he gave a few more jerky pulses inside of me then leaned hard on me. We both dragged in huge gulps of air, heartbeats racing to recover from the rush.

His head dropped to my shoulder, his lips burning a trail across to my neck. "I think you killed me." His voice was little more than a grumble at my ear.

I laughed, my body now loose with endorphins and the sparkliest of orgasms. Talk about pent-up. Then I realized the sparkles were actual fireflies that had found their way into the barn with the doors open.

A little bit of magic had followed us into the workshop.

## CHAPTER 25

KIRA

## FIREFLIES

He staggered a little, then shook his head. “One of these times we’re going to pass out in this heat.”

“Worth it.” I leaned back on the bench, wincing a little when a cup rolled against my wrist and the heel of my palm landed in something sticky. “We kinda made a mess.”

“We sure did. Don’t move.” He pinched his fingers around the base of his cock and pulled free of me, holding onto the condom. “No elegant way to do this one either.”

I laughed as he waddled backwards, his pants down around his knees. I let my head fall back as I swung my feet, content to get a little air on my overheated skin from the fan above. And there was no harm in enjoying the flashing bug butts once more. I couldn’t wipe the smile from my face.

“Sunshine, you destroy me.”

When I focused on him again, he was already making his way across the room. He disappeared into the back, returning with towels and what looked like a shirt. Unfortunately, his pants were zipped, but they were still unbuttoned. Damn distracting man. His hair was massive after I’d gotten my hands in it, his curls expanding in the humidity.

Now, I could see exactly why he used braids to tamp it down. I suppose cutting it would be smart, but I wasn’t mad that he didn’t.

Mercy, he was the sexiest man I’d ever seen up close and in real life. The fact that he wanted me so much was confounding as much as it was amazing.

I loved that he made me feel so sexy. Here I was, post sex blissed out with all the hormones making me stupid and I still hadn't jumped off the bench to cover up.

I hissed out a breath as he stood in front of me and dragged the cool towel over my thighs, nudging me open wider. That he didn't just throw the towel at me, but instead cleaned me up gently made my heart trip and my chest tighten.

"I can do that."

"Let me take care of you."

My breath stalled in my chest, but I let him. I lifted a hand to his curls as he diligently cooled me down with the towel.

He leaned down to kiss me lightly. The tiniest slip of tongue at my lower lip. "I missed you."

"I was here," I said quietly.

He cupped my face. "So capable. You astound me with how capable and efficient you are. That you don't need me."

I frowned. "I do. I couldn't do this without you."

"You could. I've been little better than a hired hand lately." He bent down to grab my shorts and underwear. Instead of handing me both, he tucked my underwear into his pocket. He grinned. "You can have these."

I snatched my shorts out of his hand. "Gee, thanks."

He handed me the shirt. "Don't think you want to try to get back into your sweaty clothes. I won't even be mad when your spectacular tits stretch out this shirt." His wolfish smile made me snort.

I quickly tugged the shirt on and gasped as he lifted me off his work bench and gently set me on the floor. I should be used to him picking me up at this point, but it still shocked the hell out of me every time.

I quickly put my shorts on and tried not to focus on the fact that I was going commando under them. Especially when everything was still so sensitive. But the more important issue at hand was how out of sorts Ronan was.

He started picking up the shrapnel of our impromptu... tension breaker. It started out as fucking, but as usual, it never stayed just sex between us. And it always left me unbalanced because I couldn't stick him in the careful boxes I was used to.

I stilled his hand. "Why do you think you aren't pulling your weight?"

He braced under my touch, but said nothing.

"I know you're working in here. The proof is in the massive fermenter back there. What's the problem you're having after that?"

"I've created four bases from the apples in this orchard. Hell, I even used some pears in one of them."

Surprise kicked in my belly. "I didn't realize we still had pear trees." It had been one of the experiments in a few of the back acres of the orchard to try other trees. Unfortunately, pear trees were notoriously prone to bacterial issues and required a lot more work than Beckett was willing to put into them.

He leaned a hip against his workbench and crossed his arms over his chest. "Hayes has been trying to revitalize an older part of the orchard that went dormant."

"Yeah, I vaguely remember the pears when I worked in the fields. They were too erratic to produce steadily."

He straightened and went around his bench to a cooler to pull out a jug. He rescued a glass that had rolled to the end of the bench and filled a third of it before he held it out to me.

I took the glass. "I'm not exactly an expert."

"Maybe that's what I need."

I nodded. "All right." I raised the glass to my nose and the sharp tang of pears made my mouth water. I took a small sip and my eyes widened. It was a bit dryer than I preferred, but the apples and pears were strong and aromatic. Which was saying something since pears were often hard to taste.

I took a larger sip and felt my taste buds lift at the back.

"It's good, right?"

I met his gaze. “Very. Why are you so worried?”

“Because it’s missing something. I’ve tried to back sweeten it with a few things, but it keeps overpowering the pear.”

I took another drink. “So, why add anything?”

“Maybe a brewer would be excited by it, but the average drinker wouldn’t find it special. They’ll go for a beer instead.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Most beer tastes the same to me.”

“I’ll give you that. But if you tried the microbrews, you’d say there’s a difference. And if we want to build a whole menu around the damn cider, it needs something to make it special.”

The frustration burned in his voice. Was this living under him all this time? And why was he hiding it?

“Okay, I can see that. And the others?”

“I’ve got one final brew. Just no name.”

I chose my words carefully. “Do you think staying in here alone is the answer? If it’s driving you crazy, you might need to share the tastings with oh, I don’t know...the people who want to help?”

“Beckett brought me in here because I’ve got the magic. I’ve always had the ability to find a way around the flavors I’ve been given to make something stellar. I’ve got everything at my fingertips, and I’m sitting in Blandsville, for fuck’s sake.”

My blood hummed at the annoyance in his voice. This was the Ronan I’d been missing. “Maybe you have too many options?”

He leaned toward me. “And maybe I don’t look like I’m worth my paycheck. Why else do you think I’m out there helping? At least I’m useful there.”

Tempered Ronan wasn’t who we needed. *Take one for the team, Kira.* Time to poke the bear. “Now you’re just pouting.”

He came around the bench and stalked toward me, the lion replaced with aggravated male. “Pouting?”



“Yes, pouting. Instead of coming out and asking for help, you’re hiding away.” I tipped my head to the side, my eyebrow cocked. “Licking your wounds. Poor Ronan can’t do his job.”

He nudged me aside and the heat of his skin made my skin prickle and my heart thump louder. He jerked a box out from under the bench and slammed it on the top. Tongs, beakers, and glasses bounced and clattered.

“I’ve got three dozen styles of honey here.” He went over to the white shelves and came back with another box. “Thirteen different fruits I’ve cooked down to a syrup here.”

Now I noticed his big hands were scarred with burn marks and his arms were splattered with something that looked like one of the syrups. Again he brought more boxes over full of anything from coffee syrups to vinegars until there was a massive pile ready to topple.

“I have all this and no fucking answers.”

“Did you try them all? Or are you just showing me all your discarded toys?”

He stepped to me, his boots a millimeter away from the toes of my sneakers. He towered over me, his ginger scent rolling over me, making me want to soothe. But I couldn’t back down now. He needed the tantrum and maybe I did too.

I tipped my chin up and stared into his dark eyes, a smile pulling at my lips because it was the first time I’d felt alive in days. “You stopped thinking out of the box and instead just are looking for some magic sauce when all you need is to think of what matches the feel you’re looking for.”

“Have you brewed before?” He elbowed one of the boxes that was slipping back onto the top of the chaos. “You don’t know jack shit.”

My nerves jangled, but I knew it was just anger talking. And the anger was what was needed right now. Not handholding. “No, but it sure sounds like you’re being one of those douche brew guys like Stanford Lang.”

He stepped back like I slapped him. “How the hell do you know that name?”

I shrugged and lifted the box that continued to slip and set it back on the shelf calmly. I needed a second out of his space or I'd do something stupid like climb on him again. Or hug him. "He was who I wanted when I first took this job."

"He's an idiot who cares more about some expensive additive than using real flavors." He fisted his hands at his sides. "You were going to pick that guy over me?"

I lifted one shoulder. "Seemed good at the time." This time, I was the one who nudged. Only Ronan acted like Ronan—as I knew he would—and didn't budge. I pressed my hip against his thigh as I slid the box of syrups in front of me. "I mean that's what we want right? Get the bodies in the taproom. He's got the flair like Lennon."

I pulled out each one to read them. Ronan's bold handwriting was scrawled across each label in black ink. I almost smiled at how smudged and imperfect they were, much like the man. Cherries, peaches, raspberries, and pomegranate, and finally, I paused on the blackberries. I pulled that one out and set it on the bench.

"He's all show, no substance. He's just looking for fame. He doesn't care about the art of it. You really wanted him over me?"

I glanced at him. "I didn't know you."

He was practically vibrating beside me. I had to force myself not to smile. Angry Ronan made the air crackle. The light hairs on my arms lifted and the underlying beat of the song playing on his sound system added to the hum. It had switched out from angry dude rock to something bass heavy.

I never knew what would be on his playlists, that was for sure.

"Did you say you'd tried all the honey?"

"What?" His gaze snapped to the box, a frown digging deep between his brows. "Not all of them. I gave up when they all started tasting the same."

I checked each one, looking for exactly the one I wanted. "Did you know honey takes on the taste of where the bees are

located?”

He folded his arms, but didn't give me space. The fact that he still wasn't wearing a shirt made it very hard to concentrate.

He growled. “Vaguely.”

Ronan might not know what the quadrants of the orchard meant, but I sure did. I'd been here for over ten years and knew just what I was looking for. First, for me. I pulled out the honey from where my beloved Honeycrisps were grown. The next was where the pears were grown.

I shifted and twisted until I found it. The jar was much smaller since it didn't require a full hive of bees to pollinate such a small part of the orchard.

But the beekeepers knew their job.

Knew that it was better for the apples to keep the bees separate so they wouldn't cross pollinate and create hybrid apple trees. The art of an orchard was far more intricate than the average person knew. Even I didn't know the ins and outs of all the science.

I'd always been better with people. With the running of the orchard. But after ten years, you picked up things whether you specialized in them or not.

I set the smaller jar on his bench. “Try it.”

His eyes narrowed as I nudged the jar closer. My heart fluttered madly in my chest. “What do you have to lose?”

## CHAPTER 26

RONAN

## IT'S BEEN HERE ALL THE TIME

She smelled like sunshine and the moon at the same time. And me. That killed me most of all. Now she pushed at me with that logic and strategic brain of hers after she'd hollowed me out with sex.

My goddamn brain was on fire with frustration. Add in the fact that I already missed touching her, and I was strung so tight I could barely see around it.

Now she wanted me to test my damn cider?

She lifted the box and left me there vibrating. She was cool as a fall breeze and crisp with it while I was ready to leap out of my skin.

I scooped up the ingredients, reading the jar names.

Blackberry.

Honey.

The flavors were tart and earthy.

Just like us.

I circled my bench, situated in the center of the room. I liked room to spread out while I was thinking. And now the carnage of failed experiments and a very healthy bout of sex taunted me.

Instead of organizing like I usually would, I chucked all the extras I didn't need into a box and went back to basics.

Jug of cider, glass, and the sweetening agents.

Old school.

I gripped the edge of the scarred bench and stared at the ingredients until my blood stopped boiling in my veins. I twisted the edge of my ring and popped the vacuum on the honey jar and lifted it to my nose. My mouth watered at the notes of lavender and lemon within the viscous fluid.

I dragged my torch over and set it to low under a stainless steel bowl. I only needed to warm the honey so it would dissolve in the cold cider. As I poured the rich, dark honey into the bowl it took on a fragile amber cast.

Like Kira's eyes.

I dabbed the tip of my finger into it and tasted it. The sharpness was a surprise, but then it was warm comfort. I dug for a dropper and added blackberry in and the tart was too much at first.

“Cherries,” I said absently.

She went to the shelves she'd already ruthlessly organized within the time I'd been messing with the honey. I'd probably never be able to find anything again.

But my Kira was organization where I lived in creative chaos.

She came back to the bench and stood across from me with two jars. I took the North Star cherries and added two drops. Then more honey until it tasted right to me.

I could never quite describe why combinations worked. It was just something I'd always done. But the hum in my brain replaced the wildfire anger and I found my center once more.

I lined up glasses and tried to answer questions when she asked them of me, but the narrowed focus left me muttering more than making sense. I wasn't sure when she wandered away from me, but I discarded and started over a half dozen times before I got the right mix of cider and sweetener.

“Got it. Holy shit, I got it.” I turned with the glass and found myself alone.

She'd opened up the back door to the workshop and I hadn't even noticed. But my body certainly appreciated the cross breeze. My back was screaming from standing all damn evening. Not to mention losing myself in Sunshine for a while earlier tonight.

I double checked that I had the formula written down. It might fluctuate when I did a larger batch for pasteurizing, but for now I was happy with it.

Learning about the honey trick made the excitement fizz inside me like a bottle of champagne. I'd have to research that aspect of flavor now that she'd given me my first lesson.

But for the pears and apples, it had hit all the right flavor profiles.

And it was the first time I'd been able to line up the orchard and my own style of flavor combinations to match.

And of course it was because of Kira.

It was always Kira's taste that brought me around to my center.

Even when she was infuriating.

I took a glass out with me—after I'd tasted it again, because damn, I was good—and followed the path to where I knew she'd be. She was always looking out on the orchard. It was why I'd put the damn swing there, so she always had a perfect seat for the stunning view.

And I planned on sitting there with her for years to come.

I got to the top of the path where it was just slightly elevated, and my breath stalled. She was there in the shadows, her hair was still down and dancing lightly in the breeze. Her back was to me as she used one foot to rock and the other was tucked under her as usual.

She was enough to trip my heartbeat—I had a feeling that would always be the case—but the darkened foliage and trees were alive with thousands of lightning bugs.

Fireflies.



The night glowed around her. The light led me to her and right then it solidified my future as if were a bolt of lightning, not the mating call of some horny bugs.

Then again, that was us too. I was forever trying to light up the dark spaces that lingered around her. And sometimes I was just trying to show off so she'd laugh and try to get into my pants. Because my Kira needed laughter more than I realized.

My family had always been a constant, but they also encouraged me to go out and find my passions. They were loud and obnoxious, but I never wondered if they loved me. I knew I could go home and recharge, then go back out and find the next thing that excited me.

But Kira was different. She didn't have that. She had Beckett for support, and me being jealous of that undermined what we could be as a couple. I needed to prove to her that I believed in us.

Right here, it showed me just how much she'd become a singular source of recharge and light for me at the same time.

My home.

My future.

Just like this orchard that challenged me, she was all that and more.

I slowly walked toward her and took everything in. Realizations should be savored especially when the love of your life was involved. The urge to blurt it out burned on the tip of my tongue, but just like the perfect cider, it was all about timing.

I stepped to her side of the swing and she looked up at me. Moonlight highlighted the slightly uptilted end of her nose, her cheekbones, and the line of her jaw. Her eyes glittered in the dark, a hint of gold glinting thanks to the warm glow of the fireflies.

“Did you find it?”

“It's been here all the time.”

Her eyebrow arched. “We're still talking cider, right?”

“You tell me.”

She swallowed hard. I could hear it in the quiet of the night. As my eyes adjusted to the night, I noticed more about her. The need and the uncertainty flitted over her face.

I’d wanted to make myself indispensable to her for the last ten days. But I’d been hiding in the busy work at both the taproom and the renovations on my cabin.

I hadn’t been able to dissuade Kain from buying my place. Mostly because he was using it as a project to distract himself from his grief. And I was using the manual labor to exhaust me so I could sleep without her.

Trying to wait her out.

Hoping she’d see that if I proved to her that I was serious about what we were building at the taproom, she’d open up to me again. Right now, I realized where I’d made the mistake.

It was exactly what she was used to with the men in her life.

Holding her at arm’s length.

Making it about work when it really needed to be about her.

I set the glass down on the small table beside the swing. She frowned up at me, then over at the glass. “Didn’t you bring that out for me to taste?”

“I did.” She reached for it and I shook my head, then sat beside her.

“It wasn’t what you wanted?”

“It’s perfect. Probably the best thing I’ve ever made.”

Her teeth flashed in the dark. “Then why can’t I try it?”

I turned toward her. “I want you to. You should be the first one to try it, because as usual, it was made with pieces of me and you. That’s the part I want you to know first. How we work together is one of the best things that has ever happened in my life.”

Her fingers gripped the top of her thighs. “I...wow.”

She looked out on the orchard, then startled a little when I took her hand and brought it up to my cheek. “But work is always going to be secondary to how I feel about you, Sunshine.”

Her head swiveled to me.

I turned her the rest of the way so we were facing one another. “I made a mistake.” She tensed and I pulled her other hand up to cup the other side of my face, covering her hands with mine. “The dark may not be the best way to make you see that, but maybe it really is the answer because I need you to feel what I’m saying.”

“Viking, I don’t...”

My chest eased and the rightness rolled through me. The fact that she called me Viking told me I was on the right path.

I turned my face to press a kiss into her palm, then slid it down to my chest. “I wanted you to see I could be there for you for whatever came at us. To prove that you could count on me.”

She frowned, but before she could speak again, I kept going.

“But I don’t want to be the safe guy in your life. I don’t want to be another Beckett.”

She stiffened. “It’s not like that with Beckett. I keep telling you.”

“I get it.” I laughed. “Finally.”

Her fingertips pressed harder into my bare skin. “You’re confusing me.”

“I’ve been so wound up about your relationship with Beckett that I didn’t see it for what it was. Safe. We aren’t safe.” She tried to pull her hand away, but I held it fast. “We will never be easy. I’m always going to piss you off because I lead with my instincts and you want definites. But I can promise you one thing.”

She twisted her hand away and out from under mine and stood. “Ronan, I have too much to worry about right now. I don’t have room for this too.”

I followed her up and pulled her back against me, my lips brushing her ear. I breathed in her moonflower scent as the words swirled in my chest like all the fireflies flashing in the distance. “Sunshine, if I waited for after the opening to tell you I love you, it would be safe.”

She twisted in my arms to face me, her mouth slack with shock. “You what?”

“I’m not that guy. I came out here and there you are with a forest of fireflies flashing around you. It may as well have been a neon sign. Yes, some of it was for the cider. The name is going to be Firefly, by the way. At least the one I made for you.”

She shook her head.

“I love you. You’ll get used to hearing it. Of course you’ll be hearing it for the next seventy years or so, I’m sure you’ll believe me one of those times. I’ll wait for you to catch up.”

“Seventy?” she squeaked.

“But that’s beside the point. I’m inconvenient and will drive you insane, but I’ll always love you—you’ll never doubt it.” I curled my arm around her waist and dragged her into me so I could brush my nose along hers. “You know it already. Just like you knew to come piss me off in my workshop tonight.”

I brushed my lips over hers. She was stiff in my arms, the need to push me away and run practically vibrating off of her. I waited her out. My hold was firm, but she could back away if she really wanted to.

“Because you know me, Kira. Knew I needed the push get out of my own way. And you’re right, I was trying to do it all on my own. It’s what I’ve always done, but as I’m learning—I’m way better with you.”

I leaned in for another kiss and this time she opened for me as she relaxed by degrees. Her flavor slid across my tongue

and tasted better than any cider could. Even one created with both of us in mind.

Her arms linked around my back as she moaned into my mouth. I buried one hand into all those heavy ribbons of waves in her hair, and the other slid along her throat. My thumb slid along the curve of her jaw to tip it up so I could take her deeper. Her tongue tangled with mine, neither of us willing to submit to the other just yet.

The way she matched me always set my blood firing. The workshop had been a fast and furious coupling of frustration and tension. But here I wanted to show her softness.

I'd believed I'd known love before, but now I knew better. I realized anything before Kira had been a half measure. I gathered her closer, resting her cheek against my chest so I could rest my chin on top of her head.

“You overwhelm me.”

I smiled against her hair in the darkness. “Right back atcha.”

She tilted her head up, her chin still tucked into my chest. “You always seem so sure.”

“Doesn't stop it from scaring the shit out of me. But I know this is where I'm meant to be. You and me were inevitable from the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“There's still so much you don't know about me. About my family.”

“It doesn't matter. I know you're a woman of integrity and I know you've been hurt by the very people who are supposed to love you the most.”

She sniffed and I felt a suspicious wetness on my skin.

“I'm not going to let you down, Sunshine. You can count on that, even if you need to catch up on the love part.”

“I—”

“Shh. You need to think things through. I know you too Kira. And I'm not going anywhere.” I stepped back and drew

her back over to the swing and sat her down. “Now, you need to take the second sip from Firefly.”

She gave me a watery laugh. “Okay.”

I reached over for the cider and swirled it along the bowl of the glass to make sure everything was still mixed then handed it to her.

She put her nose in the glass then swirled it before taking a sip. Even in the dark, I saw her eyes widen and she took a bigger sip. “Ronan...I don’t know what to say. It’s perfect.”

“Of course it is. It’s a blend of us.” I took the snifter from her and tasted it again. The honey and blackberry bloomed on my tongue and the hit of cherries warmed everything up before the final notes of apple and pears made my mouth water for more.

“I guess that makes me a genius?”

I laughed as I handed the glass back to her before I stretched my arm along the back of the swing. “You’re damn right you are.”

She curled into me as I set the swing to rock and we watched the fireflies wink in the distance. For the second time tonight, I embraced the peace of Kira Webb.

## CHAPTER 27

RONAN



## TASTE TEST

Letting her go that night was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I knew she needed thinking time. It was one of the few things I'd learned from the moment I met her.

Even when every part of me wanted to keep her naked until she finally fessed up to what I knew could be the only answer.

She loved me too.

There was no way she could lean into me, be in tune with me as she was without love being the main ingredient. So, I put her in her car late that night and went back into my workshop.

I checked in with Kain to let him know I was pulling an all-nighter and got to work.

Music filled the firefly night and into the dawn as I measured out the things I wanted to use for back sweetening.

As I played with ratios and made Firefly even more perfect.

By dawn I'd gone through all my fermented ciders and found exactly the ones I wanted to use.

And Kira was right about one thing. The Firefly base was perfect on its own. A perfect blend of the persnickety pear trees that had given Hayes nothing but trouble and Ginger Gold apples. They were also one of the first apples of the rapidly coming season.

Which would give me a few months of cider and maybe even enough for a small batch bottling run as the first cider for Brothers Three Orchard.

The longer I worked, the more the pieces fell together.

At that point, my brain was the consistency of the mash from my first week here. I'd eked out the last of the adrenaline wave I'd been riding. I walked out to the swing to rest my weary bones just as the first fingers of buttery yellow were inching their way across the orchard below.

Before I went home to crash, I sent a text off to Beckett for a visit.

RONAN

It's DONE.

After I sent it, I winced at the time. Maybe I should have waited until a more reasonable hour. The birds were barely chirping.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I looked down at the readout.

BECKETT

About fucking time. On my way.

I grinned and sent him back a middle finger emoji. I should have known he was awake at this hour. He was a farmer for all intents and purposes.

While I waited, I'd just tip my head back for a few minutes.

It seemed like a blink when a motorcycle engine jerked me awake. I groaned. I wasn't ready for Kain's big personality on twenty minutes of sleep. Not to mention he couldn't stop talking about the plans he had for my place.

My brain was offline at this point.

Instead, Beckett came down the walkway. He was wearing a short espresso colored leather jacket with threadbare jeans, a Brothers Three Orchard shirt, and sturdy brown boots.

His ever present Yankees cap was low over his eyes, giving me no idea of his mood. I stood to meet him in front of the workshop. As I got closer, Beckett tipped his hat back.

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks.”

He grinned. “So, you finally got your head out of your ass?”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“Hayes and Justin are on their way.”

The palms of my hands prickled. “All right then.”

“Might as well have us all here, right? Then if someone’s not happy, we have a good starting point.”

I rubbed my hand against my leg. I hadn’t entertained the thought that this was only step one of the damn thing.

Beckett arched a brow at me. “Brothers Three is a family, Ronan. We all make the decisions together. You’re still learning that—the reckoning is upon you, bud.” At what must be my blank face, Beckett threw his head back and laughed. “Relax. It’s not that serious.” He slapped my arm. “We’ll just toss you off the vista if it sucks.”

I blew out a breath that was more wheeze than laugh. “I think you’ll just end up with a sore head by lunch. A few of the brews ended up around fourteen percent.”

Beckett whistled. “That means we get to charge more, hey?”

I laughed for real this time. “This is no three dollar Budweiser.”

“Don’t knock a good Budweiser on a hot day.”

I curled my lip.

Beckett shrugged. “When that’s all you can afford, that’s what you learn to like.”

“I hear there’s morning brew.” Justin’s voice came from the mouth of the path leading to the side of the building. He lifted a gallon of what looked like water. “I’m ready.”

I shook my head. “It’s a tasting, you asshole. Not a party.”

Justin’s eyes crinkled at the corners. He was wearing his typical work clothes of a Brothers Three black T-shirt and dusty jeans. Evidently everyone was starting early that day. “It’s always a party when I’m here.”

Hayes hustled after him in his usual work attire of khakis and the more colorful line of the Brothers Three logo shirts—today it was bright yellow. His sunglasses were firmly on his nose and there was still a crease in his pants.

This brother didn’t start as early as the others.

He was carrying a small cooler. “Justin might be ready to put his liver through its paces, but I needed food.”

My stomach roared at the idea of it.

Hayes grinned. “I’ve got a few of the first apples ready for harvest. You mentioned you were eager for the Ginger Golds. And some bread and cheese to soak up the alcohol.”

“Excellent. Because I’ve got a few fourteens on the menu.”

“Oh, yeah, buddy.” Justin uncapped his water jug and took a glug. “I am ready.”

Beckett rolled his eyes. “I see you’re going to be productive today.”

“I already fixed the fridges at Laverne’s. So, if I need a nap...well, the orchard will survive.”

“I don’t think it’ll be a rager, guys.” I led them into the workshop.

“Does this mean you have names, too? Zoe’s graphic design friend is trying to make a home in my ass,” Beckett muttered.

It would tip my hand about Kira, but I had the names. I ignored my nerves and shook out my hands as I went to the fridge. “I do have names.” I pulled out the first three pitchers and returned to my bench.

It was long and wide enough to hold drinks for all of us. Handily it was bolted into the floor, as Justin was leaning his hip against the edge with his arms crossed. Hayes stood beside him, hands in his pockets, the cooler set on the end of the bench. Beckett mirrored him with a wider set to his feet. A wall of Mannings with just a hint of fuck you in their stance.

I swallowed. “Kira kicked my ass last night about locking everyone out of the workshop. I almost made a mess of things, but she set me straight.”

Beckett relaxed a little. “There’s a reason why I put her in the taproom.”

“Yeah, she’s the backbone here. That’s for sure.”

Justin took another swig of his water. “Key was never the wildcard. Now, let’s see if Beckett was right about you, too.”

I set the first pitcher in front of them as I stood on the other side of the bench. “First is The B3. This is what I see as the signature hard cider that will be easy to pasteurize, bottle, and distribute. It will also make an excellent mixer for the bar. Lennon’s already been excited to get her hands on it.”

I went to my shelves and found a crate of taster glasses and brought four over for them to pour off the first taste.

Beckett did the honors, splashing about half a glass for each of us. He stuck his nose in the glass like a seasoned taster. Hayes did the same, while Justin just went in for a taste.

Justin hissed. “Oh, yeah.” He winked at me. “That’s what I’m talking about. Dry and perfectly tart. My mouth is watering for more.” Justin picked up the pitcher and splashed more in his glass.

Hayes was still swishing his around, looking at the clarity. Hard cider ran the gamut of clear and cloudy, but the signature B3 was clear as champagne in color. He took a tiny taste, but his face betrayed nothing as he set the glass down. “Next.”

I swallowed hard. Okay then.

Beck sampled and made a noncommittal *hmm* sound before setting his glass down.

I forced my nerves to settle as I brought over the box of taster glasses and set up another trio in front of the Mannings and one for myself. “This is Firefly. The lead for opening night. It’s a sweet, small batch that could be extended for a limited seasonal run.”

“Good name.” Beckett picked up the cloudier, more carbonated cider. He repeated the process, with another less than stellar bit of feedback.

Justin gave a smacking, “Ahh. This is gonna be a chick drink. Sweet and tart and that...” He snapped his fingers together. “What’s that? Honey?”

I nodded with a half laugh. “Yes. Wildflower honey from bees from the pear orchard.”

Hayes’s eyebrows shot up as he took a larger sip.

I went on, listing the ingredients for them. “It’s a pear and apple cider hybrid. Definitely a limited run for the taproom only right now since the pears are scarce.”

Beckett was still not showing any of his cards.

I lifted the third pitcher. “This is Porch Swing. It’s the base of Firefly with just some honey sweetness to cut the dry. Not everyone likes dry hard ciders.” Like Kira. I’d definitely made this one with her in mind, same as I’d done with Firefly.

All of them were because of her.

It was a big risk to cater the naming to her. No matter how hard she wanted to hide her head about us, this would call us out to anyone who paid attention.

And there was no way she could ignore it. I went back to the fridge for the last batch as they tasted it.

Justin was refilling his glass with abandon. He’d broken into the cooler and had a picnic of cheese and bread spread out in front of him with three flight glasses. “These are so good,

bro. I was pretty sure Beck had lost his mind when he went to find a beer guy for this, but he was right.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Thanks, man.”

Justin held up his glass. “Cheers.”

I brought over the last pitcher, then unearthed the final set of glasses. My hands were slick with unease. There was no mistaking this one was for Kira. I was pretty sure the tips of my ears were on fire as I poured.

Hayes popped a wedge of sharp cheddar into his mouth. His blue eyes were clear and direct as he lifted the glass.

He wasn’t quite as good as Beckett with the poker face, but he was giving very little away. I knew he was the most discerning of the palates between the three brothers.

“This one is Sunshine.”

Beckett’s glass stopped just before his lips. His eyes narrowed before he tasted. But I saw the flare of surprise just before he banked it.

It was the sweetest of the ciders, but it was also the perfect blend for bottling. Honeycrisps were one of the signature apples at Happy Acres. They were the highest seller, as well as the fastest to sell out. Making cider with the the “ugly” apples that weren’t ideal for selling was also a good way to mitigate waste.

Not that the bakery wouldn’t make good use of them, but according to Beckett they’d increased the plantings since they were such a stellar seller. So, why not use them for this new branch of the company?

“It’s perfect for the hot summer days and into the fall for the taproom. Easy to pasteurize for kegging and bottling. It’s also a great mixer for signature cocktails in the taproom.”

Hayes actually finished off his glass and reached for the pitcher again. “The marketing for this one and The B3 would make them fly off the shelves. Especially with the logo Zoe’s friend created. The hand carved style is perfect.”

I folded my arms this time, trying to keep my nerves in check.

Beckett looked at his glass and did another swirl of the buttery soft cider. It wasn't quite as clear as The B3 because it was sweeter. He reached for the champagne colored dry cider and took another sip of that before reaching across the bench with his hand. "I knew you were the guy, Ronan. But this is even better than I'd hoped."

I clasped his hand and gave a surprise grunt when Beckett dragged me across the bench for a hard hug.

He moved his face close to my ear. "You're a genius, but if you break her heart, I will personally kick your ass off this property. Your body may or may not be found."

I gripped his arm. "Understood." Though if anyone was in trouble of getting their heart broken, it was me. I was in it for the long haul when it came to Kira.

Beckett let me go and lifted the freshly filled B3 for a toast. "Now, we are toasting to what is going to be a beautiful relationship."

Justin lifted two glasses with a laugh. "I can drink to that. Goddamn, we are gonna kill it on opening night."

Hayes stared down at the array of ciders in front of him and went with Sunshine for the toast. "To a very successful Brothers Three Orchard reveal."

I went for a glass of Firefly for myself. "To Brothers Three Orchard."

We clinked our glasses together over the workbench then drank deeply.

Kira had unlocked this entire line and should be here. "Kira should be here. In fact, let's get the whole crew here for a taste today, yeah?"

Beckett finished off his glass and grabbed a piece of cheese and bread from Justin's stash. "We better get some food into all of us or we'll be drunk before noon. This stuff has some kick."



I laughed. “Yeah, the only one that I was able to keep under ten percent was Sunshine.”

Justin whistled. “My kind of drink.” He slapped the bench. “Let’s get our party on.”

I dug out my phone and got started on the calls.

## CHAPTER 28

KIRA

## IF I COULD, I'D BOTTLE THIS

Starting off my day with an impromptu party was not on my schedule. I parked my car and rushed into the taproom, dabbing at my brow with the back of my arm. August was showing itself to be just as hot as July. In deference to the heat, I went with a sundress and flats.

While not in my plans, the boost of morale was important. And hopefully most of the staff could make it in to enjoy a little fun after all the work we'd done.

Not to mention all the work still to be done to get us to the finish line. It was a good idea to show them just how much we appreciated them.

As I came in, the Manning boys were standing at the bar with Lennon tending it. She was flirting with Justin, showing off her balancing techniques. One of her best tricks was how she could twirl and catch a bottle with nearly any body part.

Justin was leaning over the bar as she caught a shaker at the small of her back, using her very curvaceous butt to tip it back along the curve of her spine. She did this little hip bump and the shaker flipped, landing neatly into her palm.

She shook it and twirled it a few times along the flat of her hand before breaking the seal on the two stainless steel cups to pour whatever she was making over a martini style glass.

"There she is. Just in time to try my new B3 Mule!" Lennon waved me over. "Wait 'til you try it."

"It's not even nine in the morning." I dumped my bag behind the bar.

Justin gave me a sleepy smile. “You gotta catch up. We’ve been drinking since six.”

“No way I’m catching up.”

“C’mon. You gotta try Len’s magic Mule.”

Lennon snorted. “That is not the name.”

“Well, it should be. It’s friggin’ magically delicious,” he slurred.

“Just how much have you been drinking today, Justin?”

He shrugged. “There was the tasting with our masterful brewmaster, and then Lennon joined the party with her Paula Red infused vodka.” He made a chef’s kiss noise with his fingers. “Magic.”

“It is pretty magical.” She strained off the drink and pushed it down to me.

“I’m assuming Moscow Mule-ish?”

Lennon’s dark eyes twinkled. “Try it.”

“If we’re going to be drinking like this, make sure you take keys.” I lifted the glass. “Sláinte.”

“Yes, boss.” Lennon’s burgundy tipped dark hair was plaited down in two fat braids. She was wearing her usual black-on-black ensemble, but today was a tank top instead of a cropped T-shirt. Her eyes were made up with glittery purple shadow and thick lashes.

I was pretty sure Justin was ready to ask her out based on the way he was looking at her, with his head propped on his hand. Little heart bubbles were practically popping around his eyes.

Then again, Justin was a perpetual flirt. No woman was safe in a thirty mile radius.

I took a careful sip and the warm, sweet layer of apples in the otherwise refreshing drink was amazing. “Wow.”

Lennon winked at me and brought out the homemade apple vodka from behind the bar. “I might have to go up

against moonshine boy with my creation.”

“Don’t say that too loud. Hayes will be talking your ear off about the process.” Justin wrinkled his nose adorably. “You don’t want that.”

Lennon glanced over to where Hayes and Beckett were talking quietly at the other end of the bar. “I don’t know, maybe I want to talk geek with him. He’s hot.”

Justin frowned. “Hey. What about me?”

She reached over and tapped his nose. “You’re adorable, too.”

His smile was soft and...well, adorable. There was no other word for it. Then again, I’d always looked at Justin as my baby brother. He was twenty-three and still thought an evening of beer and darts was the height of fun.

He worked hard, but he was definitely still in the play hard mindset.

I wasn’t sure I’d ever had that.

Lennon snapped her fingers in front of me. “Lighten up, boss. You’re getting a frown line already. Today is for celebrating.”

I rolled my eyes and took another drink. “What are we celebrating? Besides all the hard work you guys have been doing for us.”

“That’s all you, mama. I just come in and look pretty most of the time.”

“And boy, are you,” Justin said with a sigh.

She shook her head with a laugh. “Don’t make me cut you off.”

“You’ve been working your ass off, too. Just look at that bar you’ve created. You’ve been training the new staff in between all your trips. You’ve been invaluable.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts and Justin perked up.

I elbowed him. “Don’t be gross.”

“I can’t help it. She’s wow.”

Lennon gave me a half grin. “He’s harmless. But I do appreciate it. I wasn’t sure about taking this gig, but I’ve never had complete control of a bar before. I kinda like it.”

“We love what you’ve done for us, Lennon.” Ronan’s voice floated behind me.

I forced myself not to stiffen, even when he came closer to me. God, all that warmth was right there and it would be so easy to just lean back on him. Not smart to do at work. Not professional in any way, but I was so very tempted.

I turned with the glass in my hand. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” His gaze drifted to my mouth then back to my eyes. The heat was on display for everyone. Sheesh.

I took a fortifying sip from my drink. “Have you tried The B3 Mule?”

“Nope. I’m still trying to recover from her Firefly Margarita.”

“Firefly?” I turned my attention to Lennon. “He let you try it?”

“He did. I can’t wait to make some cocktails with all of them.”

“All?”

Ronan lifted me off my feet and spun me around. “Come see.”

I gripped his shoulder with one hand and held my drink up and away so I didn’t douse us. “Ronan, put me down!”

I said that a whole lot when it came to this man.

Lennon stepped up on the footrest behind the bar and snatched the glass out of my hand. “Go on, you two lovebirds.”

I frowned. “Put me down.” I looked around. “We’re at work.”

He put me down, looking mildly contrite. But it didn't last long, because he grabbed my hand and dragged me across the dining room, to the patio.

I glanced at Beckett, who stopped talking to Hayes as we rushed through the room. Great. This didn't look at all suspicious. Nope.

Ronan rushed me down the steps and across to his workshop. "I worked all night."

"You didn't go home?" Now that I looked at him, I noticed how disheveled he was. The top part of his hair was scraped back in a stubby tail while the rest of his curls rioted around his ears. His work pants were splattered with a rainbow of colors, and he smelled of syrup and lemons. Thankfully, he'd put on a shirt, because I left him shirtless at around two that morning.

"Nope. I was too keyed up. Now, I think I'm a little buzzed." His dark eyes were unfocused. "Whatever. It's a good day." He urged me past the workbench that was littered with glasses.

"What's going on?"

He pulled me into the fermenting shed with two large steel drums. There were a number of smaller containers stacked along the wall. I'd never really been back here before. It was the only temperature controlled area in his workshop.

The pasteurizers were in another part of the farm, but he'd been working toward that part of the process. The last few weeks had been perfecting the formula.

Luckily, most of the small batches could be done right in the workshop until he and Hayes decided which would be mass produced.

"First." He slammed the door and crowded me against it. His ginger scent had a tart, lemon tone to it, and then his mouth was on mine. The kiss skipped teasing and went right to intense.

I didn't have time to push him back and remind him a bunch of people were out there waiting for me. Mostly



because my brain went offline and I found myself wrapping my arms around him.

He lifted me off my toes as one hand snuck under the skirt of my dress to grip my thigh and hike it up along his hip. He ground his rapidly hardening cock against my center. “Just a quick taste,” he said against my mouth. “Promise.”

And then we both went under again. He rolled his hips to grind himself against the cotton panties I was wearing. His hand went higher on my hip to find the top band of my underwear.

“Are you wet for me? Can I see?” His pupils were blown out as he nipped my lower lip.

“Did you drag me in here to get laid?” I huffed out a breath and tugged his hair.

“No. I dragged you in here to show you something, but then you looked so pretty and fresh.”

“So, now you’re going to make me a wrinkled mess?”

He licked his lips and stared at my mouth while his long fingers slipped down into the front panel of my panties. “I like wrinkling you up. I like touching you. I like you in my space.” He ducked his face into my neck. “I like your taste on my lips.”

I gripped his belt loop. “Ronan. How much have you had to drink?”

“Kind of a lot. God, you’re pretty.” He leaned harder and his shaft dug deep into my thigh. “I already miss being inside you.” He slipped the tips of two fingers along my slit. “Let me sink in for just a second. Just so I can taste you.”

“Ronan.” I stared at him, all unfocused. An edge of excitement vibrated off him that was very contagious. I relaxed with a groan as he slipped two fingers into me and twisted so he could pulse lightly.

“Ahh, there it is. Slick for me. I just need a little taste to get through the day.” He rested his forehead against mine. “I

showed Beckett and his brothers my new brews. The brews I made because of you. For you.”

I tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but even buzzed, Ronan knew exactly how to get me off. “You let them taste Firefly?”

He rubbed the top of my pussy with his palm as he pushed back into me. “Yeah. So much of me and you. It’s all for you, you know. My sweet and saucy muse.”

Before I could reply to whatever that meant, he covered my mouth and drove me up and through a ridiculously fast orgasm. He swallowed the groans, and the rumble in his chest made me grip whatever I had available to me.

His muscular shoulders, his side—I could only hold on as he left me shattered against the door. As I came back down, the hum of the machines invaded my senses. The coolness of the steel door along my thigh since he’d flipped up my damn dress.

And then he slipped his fingers free of me and licked them right in front of me. “If I could, I’d bottle this.”

I didn’t have words for that one. I wasn’t sure I could come up with any at all right then.

“Taste?” He covered my mouth again and I sucked in a startled breath at how earthy I tasted on his lips. Salt and more that I couldn’t identify. “Taste of sunshine,” he said against my mouth. “My Sunshine.”

“Ronan...”

Everything I wanted to say was just stuck in my brain and seemed inadequate in response.

“I made all the ciders, Kira. I finished them and they loved them.” He brushed his beardy jaw along my cheek and nibbled on my ear. “You broke it all open last night.”

“I did?”

“You did.” He moved back to my lips, grinning against my mouth. “You can let go of me now. Unless you want to go for round two.”

I unhooked my knee from his hip and set my foot down. “Right.” I pushed him back then smoothed out my dress. I was wrinkled beyond repair.

He tipped my chin up to look at him. “I really did bring you in here to tell you about the ciders.”

“Did you need to bring me into the shed?”

“Nope.” He shrugged and threw a devilish grin at me. “I just needed a second with you alone.” He moved to the large, center tank and patted it lovingly. “I did set this bad boy up for a full batch. We’ll be able to keg it up a few days early. Make sure everything is smooth behind the bar.”

“Oh. Really?” I fixed my belt and tried to focus on the fact that I went from zero to orgasm and back to work in the space of a few minutes.

He came back to me, invading my space again. He slid his knee between my knees. “You inspired me last night in more than one way.”

“Back it up, Viking. You’re dangerous.”

One eyebrow spiked. “I don’t mind hearing that.”

“That’s not why I’m here.”

He lowered his face to mine, brushing my nose with his. “That’s true. I did miss you though.”

I licked my lips. “I missed you too.”

The smile that spread across his face made my stomach flip and my chest tighten. He really was the most beautiful man.

He reached beyond me to open the door. “So, I brought Beckett and his brothers out here to try out the ciders.”

“Plural?”

“Yes. I finished them all last night.”

“All?”

“They were all nearly ready, just needed the flavor profiles. Now I have them. Because of you.”

I shook my head. He really had no clue how amazing he was. Some of that was on me. I was so afraid to tell him just how much he meant to me. To let him see inside me because I was sure I was the one who was lacking.

But all along, he was here. He was standing for me in every way. “No. It’s because of you, Ronan. Always has been.”

He shook his head. “You were the key. Since the first day we met.”

I lifted my hand to his flushed face. “The things you say to me.” Happiness and pride shone so clearly in his dark eyes. Sure, he was a little buzzed on the actual alcohol content of his work, but he wasn’t that inebriated.

Would he still feel the same way if he knew the truth about my family? About the things I allowed to be hung on me to protect them? Especially since they didn’t deserve my protection. I didn’t want to burst that happy bubble he was in.

He covered my hand with his. “They’re all true. I came here for a fresh start. The minute I stepped foot on the threshold of this workshop, I knew it was special. Then I met you and everything clicked.”

“I—”

“I was looking for you two.”

I whirled at the voice behind me. Beckett stood in the open barn door. My heart dropped. “Beckett...” The words seized up into my throat.

Excuses for my behavior bubbled and tried to come, but there was no real way I could talk myself out of this one.

Ronan came up behind me. I could feel his warmth even before his big hand settled on my waist. I could feel the tension in him, but as usual, he was an immovable monolith.

The urge to ignore and downplay what we were just wouldn’t come anymore. Instead I cupped my hand around his. “I’m seeing Ronan,” I blurted out.

Ronan stiffened behind me, but was silent.

“It won’t interfere with work—well, much. And okay, yes, we were in here alone and definitely not working, but we ended up talking about work. That counts right?”

Beckett tucked his hands into his pockets and didn’t say a word.

“I can do my job and still have a relationship with someone. It happens all the time in the world, right? And we work so well together. Even when we fight, we still do our jobs. I mean we don’t fight a lot, but sometimes because he can be an idiot.”

Beckett’s eyebrow rose.

“Thanks, Sunshine.”

I looked over my shoulder at him. “I mean, you can be an idiot. You didn’t sleep all night and then started day drinking.”

He just grinned at me. “It’s called a tasting.”

“Yeah, right. The color in your cheeks says otherwise.”

I released Ronan’s hand and stalked toward Beckett. “I bust my ass and give everything to the orchard, but I think I can have both. I deserve both, dammit.” I poked him in the chest when he didn’t say anything. I was just babbling at this point, but the boulder in my throat started to dislodge with the rightness of it all. “I hope you’re good with that, because I’m not giving him up.”

Beckett grabbed my finger. “Stop poking me.”

My chest was heaving as I stared into his blue eyes. The man gave very little away at the best of times, but right now he was a blank slate. Suddenly he grinned at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “It’s about damn time, Key. He seems like a good guy.” He looked over my shoulder at Ronan. “He better be.”

I reached behind me and found Viking right there. The nerves evened out at how real and right he felt behind me.

Ronan drew me back to stand beside him, our fingers linked. “I think we make a pretty good team, especially since I

plan on marrying her as soon as she gets comfortable with the idea.”

My head swiveled to him. “Pump the brakes, pal.”

He grinned down at me. “There’s no brakes when it comes to how I feel about you, Sunshine.”

“Okay, I’m out. I’ll be at the taproom if you guys can tear yourselves away.”

I moved to follow him, but Ronan held me beside him. “We’ll be right there.”

“Viking, we have so much to do.”

“Just another minute.” He drew me in front of him. “It’s not every day my girl tells her best friend she’s into me.”

I curled my arms around his waist. “Beck and I don’t exactly talk about that kind of thing, but I don’t want to hide us. You don’t deserve that.”

“But it was a big step.” He dropped a soft kiss on my mouth.

“And would you stop talking about marrying me?”

“Never. At least until you’re at the end of the aisle walking my way.”

“How can you be so certain so fast?” I would probably be asking that until the end of time. At the same time, I didn’t want to let go of him.

Nothing in my life had ever felt so big or so overwhelming since I’d taken the job at the taproom. Was I getting my feelings mixed up with the stress of the opening, and it would fade?

Or was it just as important?

How could I tell?

He cupped my face and some of the worries fell away. “I just know.”

“Kira, c’mon!” Justin called from the porch.

I started to pull away, but he held fast. “I’m not going anywhere. What can I do to make you believe that?” His brow furrowed in frustration. “I know this isn’t the time, but give me something.”

“That you’ll stick, no matter what. So many people have let me down.” My voice broke and I hated it. “No matter how much we fight about the taproom or about us, I need to know you won’t bail on me.”

He opened his mouth, and I rose on my toes to cover it. He growled when I stepped back. “Think about it before you promise me anything. Because I need to know you mean it, even when it’s hard.”

Then I slipped away and ran for the taproom.

I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear if he agreed.

## CHAPTER 29



RONAN

## CELEBRATION

I let her go.

No matter what I said she wouldn't believe it right now. Because I damn well was sticking no matter what. She was everything to me. However, all that pain swimming in her eyes told me I needed to be careful with her.

There was a lot I still didn't know about her. Not that it would matter, I knew the important pieces about her and I'd learn the rest. Patience was not my strong suit, but if she needed the actions, she was going to get them.

I followed her back to the taproom. Most of the staff had arrived while we were in the workshop. Lennon was making drinks and laughing. She had a row of glasses lined up, and when she spotted me, she waved.

"There's the man of the hour. We thought you were never going to show yourself."

I grinned. "Just making sure I made enough for you to play with, Lennon."

"And I have been with the pitcher you gave me. Come try my new drink. I think you'll love it." She flipped the shaker, then balanced it on her forearm and popped it into the air with a flourish, catching it behind her back.

Most of my buzz had worn off with the Beckett talk, as well as getting a quick and dirty taste of Kira. Right now was about the crew, not my romantic issues.

"Pour me a big one then."

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Lennon strained the golden drink into a tall glass. “I think you’ll enjoy this one.”

I sat at the bar beside Justin and Annette.

“Be careful, Lennon is trying to get us all drunk.” Annette took a deep drink of a matching glass.

“I call it Sunshine Lemonade.” She flicked a napkin in front of me with a quick hand flourish and set the drink down in front of me. She added a drizzle of something orange that danced through the liquid, then garnished it with a sugared lemon.

“Did you say Sunshine Lemonade?”

She grinned. “Sure did. As if we haven’t heard you call Kira that every day.”

I flushed a little. Then again, I’d asked for it by naming the cider after her. I lifted the drink to my lips, and my sour taste buds went wild and then mellowed out with the sweet Honeycrisp cider she’d used to make the drink.

“That seems very dangerous.”

Annette hiccuped. “You’d be right. This is my second.”

I laughed. “I’m assuming Lennon took your keys?”

“Of course I did.” Lennon pointed over her shoulder. “The basket is full. Laverne said she’d send the drunk bus for us after lunch.”

I took another sip and savored it. She was a damn good mixologist. “Speaking of lunch. Where’s Kain?”

“Kitchen.”

I took my drink as I stood, then laughed when she put another one in front of me. “Bring that to the big guy. He’s currently addicted to them, too.”

“Will do. Thanks, Lennon.”

“No, thank you. I didn’t realize just how much I would love creating here.” Her long lashes swept down to hide her emotions. “Or how much I needed it.” She cleared her throat.

“Now go on. I have to go kick my staff’s ass since I’m the only one making drinks around here,” she said with a raised voice.

A sandy haired man scrambled around the back of the bar. “You only had to ask, princess.”

Lennon rolled her eyes. “Save it for the waitresses who love that shit, Dean.”

He grinned as he grabbed a white towel and threw it over his shoulder. “You wound me.”

I shook my head as I took my drinks into the kitchen. The scent of bacon and cheese made my stomach roar.

“*Boa!* You finally came out of your workshop.” Kain waggled his eyebrows at me. “Did you let Kira out with some whisker burn?”

“Shut up.” I held out the glass for him. “Compliments of Lennon.”

“Ahh, she’s a miracle, man. I usually don’t even like mixed drinks, but she’s got a way.” He took a drink and gave a smacking, “ahh.”

“What are you making? I’m freaking starving.”

“Figured grilled pizzas would be easiest. Soak up some of that dangerous alcohol. Goddamn, that cider has some kick. You done good, man.”

“Thanks. I can’t believe it finally came together.”

“Just had to wait out the perfect wave, brah.”

If that wasn’t the truth. And its name was Kira. “Yeah. I’ll probably play around with lower alcohol for bottling. I’m just glad we’ll be ready for the opening.”

“Now I can finally make a fucking menu.” He nodded to the leather notebook on the butcher block. “You can take a look.”

“Nice.” I headed for the counter, but he stopped me. “We have time for that.” He pulled out a large pizza flipper and

spun it, then handed it to me. “Now help me take out the pizzas.”

“I can do that.”

The morning quickly melted away into food, laughter, and the buzz of excitement. The staff was enjoying my ciders, and the flavors had instantly started conversations behind the bar and amongst the kitchen staff. How fancy to make the menu versus making it a more mass appeal with sliders and poutine.

I voted for poutine.

I convinced Kira to test out the large U-shaped booth in the corner to have some pizza, but found myself yawning my head off halfway through my third slice.

“You need sleep.”

“Gonna put me to bed?”

“No. Now that you’re finally done with the ciders, I have tons of work to do.”

I laid my head on her shoulder. “Mean.”

She laughed, but leaned her head against the top of mine. “But if you want, I can come by tonight.”

“Yeah?” I stretched my arms above my head, then shook it as the exhaustion that came down on me like a blanket. I draped my arm around her neck. “Kain is working on my place. It’s a friggin’ wreck. I have a mattress on the floor like a damn college student.”

She leaned in and kissed my neck. “It’s been awhile since I made out with someone on the floor. I’m game if you are.”

I might be exhausted, but my dick had other plans. “I kinda want you to finally see my place when it doesn’t look like a shack.”

“I understand.” Her face fell.

“Can I crash at your place? I’d rather have you crawl in with me later tonight, and I can have sweet moonflower smelling sheets to sleep on.”

“Oh.” She glanced at my mouth, brushing her thumb along the corner of my mouth. “Sauce.”

I flicked my tongue out and caught the pad of her finger. “Thanks.”

She swallowed, then her gaze bounced up to mine. “I’d like that. As long as you take a shower.”

I laughed. “A long one.” I yawned again. This time I was pretty sure my jaw was going to unhinge from how wide it was. “I’ll stop at my place for clothes. Maybe I can stay the weekend.”

“You’re in no condition to drive.”

“I stopped drinking hours ago.” To be honest, I was a little sick of my own brew.

“You can’t keep your eyes open.”

“Sure I can,” I said mid-yawn. At her look, I chuckled. “Okay, you have a point.”

“Laverne has been sending the shuttle over for people who want rides home.”

“You sure you can’t go home with me? There’s not much you can do today.”

“I’m going over the books before Kain decimates my budget with his menu ideas.”

“Fine. You’re far too responsible for your own good.”

“You love that about me.” The surprise in her eyes and the way she looked down made me tip her chin up.

“You’re right about that. And if I wasn’t completely offline brain-wise, I’d stay and help. I know how much you want to do a good job here, Sunshine. And your brain is sexy as fuck.”

“Stop.” She pushed me out of the booth. “I gotta work. Go away.”

“Fine.” I got up with a groan. Everything hurt. I might have to take a pre-nap before I went to Kira’s place.

“We’ll take him home, boss.” Annette and Matt stopped at the booth. She hip bumped Matt. “We came together, so I can drive Ronan’s truck, then you won’t have to get someone else to bring back your ride.”

“You sure?” I asked.

Matt’s smile faded. “Uh, yeah. Sure, no problem.”

He did not look excited about the prospect. Then again, my place was a little out of the way.

Annette frowned at him. “We drank water for the last few hours so we could drive ourselves. It’s fine.”

Matt nodded. “Right. It’s no problem.”

Kira smiled. “That would help me out. I have to get this place cleaned up.”

“Do you want me to come back?” Annette asked.

“Nah. Today was supposed to be about fun. You guys earned a night off.”

“For you too.” Annette frowned. “You need it, Kira.”

She glanced at me. “I’ll have it—later.” She tucked a curl behind my ear. “Shower, pal.”

“On it.” She was so damned beautiful. Mussed up from me and from running around taking care of everyone, but that only heightened it for me. That she cared about this place and her people so much.

She kissed my cheek and left me with the secret smile that always got my dick twitching. I definitely needed a nap so I could enjoy all of her when she got home.

“All right, Romeo. Let’s go.” Annette slid her arm around mine and dragged me toward the door.

I trotted along with her. I was so tired that I could barely think around putting one foot in front of the other.

“I can’t believe you made that whole flight of ciders for Kira. That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

I squinted down at her. “How do you know it’s for Kira?”

“If I didn’t know then, I sure as heck do now.” She glanced back at Matt. “Take notes, Matt. This is the way to woo a girl.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Good luck with that one. I don’t have that kind of money or talent.”

“Just takes some creativity. A girl loves to know a guy is thinking about her, that’s all.” She pointed me toward Matt’s beat up SUV, then opened the passenger door. “I’ll meet you at your house.”

“You know where you’re going?” I wasn’t entirely sure I could give directions clearly.

She pushed me inside. “I dropped off some paint samples to Kain last week. I got it.”

I sat down and swung my legs in, nearly delirious. “Okay.” I grabbed her hand before she could close the door. “Thanks, Annette. You’re a good friend.”

“Of course. You’re really good for Kira. I know she can spook easy, but she hasn’t had an easy time of it for a few years. She’s really happy lately. Keep it up.” With that, she shut the door.

Just how badly had her sister screwed her over? I didn’t really have the mental acuity to puzzle that out right now, but I’d figure it out.

Matt opened his door and got in. “Think you’ll stay awake enough, or should I put your address in my GPS?”

“You’re not going to follow her?”

“You’ve never seen Annette drive, have you?” He grinned as he put his SUV in gear.

I grabbed my seatbelt and clicked it in place. “I guess I haven’t.” I squinted at him. The sun was getting low and blinding me. I flipped down the visor and a paper fell in my lap. “Is my truck safe?”

“Mostly.”



I picked up the paper. It looked like an invoice, though I didn't recognize the address. "Is this for Kira? She'll kill you if you didn't turn one in."

Matt laughed and took it from me, stuffing it in his pants. "I had to get my truck serviced."

"Oh, gotcha." It didn't look like a mechanic's name, but then again, I was so damn blurry, it could be my name and I would have read it wrong. I stretched my legs out as much as I could, but I bashed my knees into the glove box. "As long as me and my truck make it to my place, I'm good." I clicked the seat to go back as far as it could and heard the rattle of what sounded like bottles in the back. "Oh, sorry, man."

Matt reached back and moved a box. "No prob. Not used to a giant dude in my ride." He tugged a blanket over it. He grinned and nodded at my rapidly disappearing brake lights. "See? She's already leaving me in the dust."

I turned back around. Yeah, she was outta here. "Maybe I better give you the address."

"Good plan."

I obviously needed that nap.

## CHAPTER 30

KIRA

## IT'S ALL COMING TOGETHER NOW

Ronan had all but moved into my apartment since the night of the first tasting. I'd come home that night to find a pasta dish waiting for me and a note that he'd crashed again and couldn't wait for me to join him.

I'd been doomed to disappointment for some action that night, but dinner waiting for me made up for it. In fact, that was the biggest perk of having him around. He loved to cook—as long as it wasn't just for him—and I lived to keep things neat and orderly. Because, boy, did I have to tidy up behind him. The man was pure chaos when it came to cooking.

I wasn't complaining—much. I wasn't quite used to someone in my space at all times, but it wasn't as off-putting as I'd expected. Thankfully he was good about putting his clothes in the hamper and not leaving wet towels on the floor. Or at least he was since he was still on his best behavior.

He even did laundry. I counted that as a win since it was my least favorite chore. He left my dressy bits, as he called them, to me and took care of the big stuff. He even made the bed without asking. We were becoming a team more and more as the days went by.

I couldn't help be still suspicious that he was trying to fool me into complacency, but so far we were doing pretty well.

Starting the morning with an orgasm or two didn't hurt either. My Viking loved morning sex the best. Not surprising, since we were both working our asses off every day and dropped into an exhausted heap after we ate a late dinner.

It was three days until Hayes' birthday party, and I had the cleaning crew come in to do a deep clean. While I loved keeping the doors open because of the unrelenting heat, it got damn dusty in the taproom and we needed everything spotless for opening night.

The semi-quiet also would allow me to do inventory to make sure we had food, spirits, and cider ready to go. I needed a baseline of what we had on hand so I could figure out how sales went on opening night. Not to mention just how dented my budget was.

From a brewing standpoint, Ronan and Beckett had been steadily bottling and filling up kegs for the taproom. The storeroom was stacked with cases that were freshly stickered thanks to a few labeling nights.

Zoe's graphic designer friend had come through and then some. She'd set us up with a few hundred labels for the bottles to sell at the bar. Not everyone liked to drink from a glass. Jess reminded me again and again, we needed people to take photos of the pretty bottles to get our name out there.

I flipped open the box with Sunshine on the side to pull out a bottle. The large sun and rays looked like it was carved out of wood and painted in retro colors of sunny yellow and orange. I couldn't help but imagine how amazing Ronan's cider would look on a shelf when it went into distribution.

For now, we were labeling a few hundred of them by hand for the opening. As a reward for the tedious work, Kain tried out a few of the menu items on us. Taco Tuesday had been a hit. His special Hawaiian smoked pork was going to be a winner, and while we figured on a rotating menu, I was sure that was going to be a staple.

It was all coming together. I set the bottle back into the box and closed the top. I flipped through my management app on my iPad and counted each case and put the numbers in my spreadsheet, then sent the numbers off to Beckett.

I was cautiously optimistic about the opening. Our staff was almost perfect. As I'd feared, a few of them were not going to survive working in the taproom. It was to be

expected. I'd taken a chance on a few people who had turned into amazing employees and some who would probably quit after the opening.

This life wasn't for everyone, that was for sure.

I moved onto the spirits and counted cases of vodka, bourbon, and tequila. We were keeping things simple and only carrying alcohol that could be used in Lennon's special menu.

She and her bartenders were my shining stars, though. She'd exceeded my expectations there. She knew just how to handle the seasoned bartenders and improve upon their natural talents, as well as boosting the confidence on those with less experience.

Opening night would be a trial by fire for a lot of us, but at least the bar was well in hand.

Now I just needed to pull it all together.

"Coming thru, Sunshine."

I turned to find Ronan in the doorway with a hand truck packed with cases. He'd tied his hair down in the braids that made my mouth water, but as usual, his curls would not be completely tamed and some curled around his ear. He was wearing a black tank and jeans dusty with hay that told me he'd been at the pasteurizer barn at the main orchard.

I moved as he came in and made quick work of the cases by pulling two at a time off the hand truck.

His eyetooth winked from his beard as he grinned. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing." I hugged my iPad to my chest. "Just admiring the view."

"Is that right?" He slapped his palm on the side of the boxes to make sure they were straight, and my breath hitched.

His muscular shoulders, arms, and those massive hands did give me a few moments. He could be so gentle and then so rough. And I loved it. Loved...

He moved the hand truck out of the way and tugged at the belt loop of my cutoffs. “How about you come over here and show me that appreciation?”

I tried to calm my racing heart as that L-word tripped around in my brain and then my stupid hormones got wrapped up with it too. I set my iPad on the case and slid my hand up his chest to play with his chunky Celtic cross. “Like what?”

He lowered his mouth to hover over mine. “Unless we want to give the cleaning crew a concert, I’ll take a kiss.”

I arched a brow. “I beg your pardon?”

He grinned as he palmed my ass and bypassed my mouth to nip at my ear. “You aren’t quiet, Sunshine.” He tugged harder, then nipped at the pulse point of my neck. “And I love it. I love hearing you sigh and groan for me. Say my name in that annoyed tone that says you’re close.”

I reached my other hand down to cup the front of his jeans. He hissed out a breath and hardened under my touch. “I’m not the only noisy one, pal.”

He leaned back and bit my lower lip. “Because I’m a Viking.”

I grinned against his mouth. “My Viking.”

His eyes flared, then darkened. “Always yours.” He covered my mouth and possessed every inch.

I lifted my arms to his shoulders and went onto my toes to get closer. Would this ever get old? Would it ever cool off?

“Stop thinking,” he said against my mouth and chased my tongue to drag me back down into where everything made sense.

I didn’t have to wonder how much he wanted me. The proof was always between us. And always seemed to be growing.

A man cleared his throat outside the door. “Sorry to interrupt, guys.”

My eyes widened, but instead of scrambling away, we both laughed. “Sorry, Beckett,” I said on a laugh.

“It’s cool. We all gotta find our moments. You’re not the first one to make out in a storeroom, Key.”

Ronan grinned and shifted himself before turning around. He wiped his mouth. “Been a long few days.”

“You’re telling me. Unfortunately, I need to talk to you guys about something.”

I frowned. The haze of our quick make out session instantly dissipated. “What’s wrong?”

Beckett nodded toward my office. “Let’s go in there.”

I grabbed my iPad on the way out and followed them into my barely used office. It was mostly just where I filed away paperwork and did payroll. It was a glorified closet full of extra uniforms, aprons, and a stash of keycards for the registers.

Beckett pulled the club chair out of the corner and sat down. I noticed a manila folder in his hand, and my stomach cramped.

“What’s going on?” I set my iPad down.

“I just pulled in when you sent me over your inventory. I was already on my way over since Ronan had put another order in for Firefly to be bottled yesterday.”

Ronan stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Yeah, we’ve been bottling daily. Firefly is our signature, so I figured that would need the most cases.”

“And you’d be right. Except the numbers don’t match.”

The room started feeling very small. “What do you mean, they don’t match?”

Beckett handed me the folder.

My hand shook a little as I reached for it. “I did the numbers myself. Counted every one—twice.”

Beckett pulled off his hat and curved the brim of his cap.



I knew that gesture. That was his thinking move. When he was trying to figure out something that didn't make sense.

The blood pounded in my head and I tried to focus on his voice. I looked down at the numbers, but they blurred and jumped as old fears crashed in on me.

"I believe you. I'm going to need you guys to count them again." Beckett looked at me, then Ronan. "Maybe some ended up in your shed?"

Ronan shook his head. "Just the fermenters are in there now. We've been running them at max capacity to make The B3 for kegs."

"Okay. Nothing in your workshop?"

I swallowed down the surge of saliva in my mouth. *Do not puke, do not puke.* "What's missing?" I looked down again, but the papers were crinkled in my hand.

Beckett put his Yankees hat back on and took back the folder. "It's not a huge amount. And I know at least a few cases were written off because of some of the staff trainings \_\_\_"

I shook my head. I wanted the paper back so I could triple check. I just needed to calm down and think. "No. I took those off. I counted them as write-offs."

"All right," Beckett said carefully.

The room was getting a little darker, but I forced my voice to stay even. "How many?"

"Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three?" I swayed and Ronan grabbed my hand, gripping it tight.

"There has to be a mistake. Transposed numbers?" Ronan asked.

"I double checked. So I need you guys to recount the storeroom."

I lifted my chin. "Of course. You can take it out of my pay."

“What?” Beckett stood up. “No. That’s not what I’m saying.”

I shook back my hair. “It’s my responsibility to make sure this taproom—”

“Our responsibility, Kira.” Ronan’s voice was sharp. “Not just you.”

I turned away from Ronan and toward Beckett. “It’s my job to make sure inventory is accounted for. My responsibility.”

“No.” Ronan moved beside me.

“No, I’m not letting you get into trouble.” I couldn’t look at him right now. He must think I was so incompetent. “It’s not your fault. It’s mine.”

Beckett stepped in front of me. “Key. I’m not saying you stole anything.”

My breath stalled. “I know it,” I said on a whisper. “But it’s still my fault.”

“It could be my fault.” Ronan caught my hand again. “Sunsh—Kira—I’ve been bringing the cases over in my truck. I could have miscounted somewhere.”

I shook him off. “No, you couldn’t, because I check you in. My responsib—”

“If you say responsibility again, I’m going to tape your damn mouth shut. This is on both of us, and we’ll figure it out together. Period.” Ronan turned me and cupped my face. “Together.”

I tried to shake my head, but he lowered his forehead to mine. “We’re in it together, remember? I don’t bail on you, you don’t bail on me.”

“You shouldn’t get in trouble for me,” I whispered.

“Key. No one is in trouble. I promise. Except for the person who is stealing from us. And that isn’t you.” Beckett’s voice was firm. “I know you’ll figure it out because you’re the best numbers woman in this damn county.”

My eyes burned and a tear slipped down my cheek.

“Dammit, Sunshine. Don’t you cry on me.” Ronan looked over at Beckett and held out his hand for the folder. “Give us a minute?”

I couldn’t look at my best friend. I wanted to push them both out of the room and scream so I could get all this emotion out so I could focus.

Beckett sighed and handed over the folder. Ronan passed it to me and I hugged it against my chest.

“Key, you didn’t do anything wrong, but we might have someone in the taproom who did.”

“I’ll—” I locked eyes with Ronan. His dark eyes were fierce with anger, but there was something more swirling with it. It wasn’t directed at me. Was it *for* me? “*We’ll* figure it out.”

Some of the rage simmered down. “Goddamn right, we will. Together.”

Beckett put a hand on my shoulder and he and Ronan had some silent conversation, then I heard the door open and close quietly.

I closed my eyes and Ronan enveloped me into his arms. “Let go.”

“No, I might not stop.” My shoulders were already shaking as I tried to hold on.

“I’m here. Just let go.”

I curled my arms under his and gripped his back. The folder crumpled under my hand, but I did let go. The tears, memories, and fear coalesced into a shame knot, but he held on. He didn’t let go. In fact, he only tightened his hold and tucked the top of my head under his chin.

He didn’t tell me to stop.

Just let me cry it out until I was wrung out and the consistency of silly putty in his arms.

Finally, when there wasn’t a tear left in my swollen eyes, I eased back.

He looked down at me. “Better?”

“I have a headache, but yeah.”

“My sister’s the same—holds it in until there’s no room, then bam! No one is safe.”

I gave a watery laugh. “So, does that mean you’re not running?”

He shook his head. “Not even close.”

“Which sister?”

“Norah.” He thumbed away a tear from my cheek. “You’ll like her.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

I sighed and licked my salty lips. I held up a finger to him and took the folder with me and put it on the desk. I opened a drawer where I kept wet wipes and cleaned up my face. “I’m probably blotchy as hell.”

He smiled. “Maybe.”

“Great.” My laugh was a little rusty, but the torrent of tears left me a little more even. I tossed the wipe away and went back to him. I took his hand. “I suppose I should explain some of this.”

“Would be nice.”

That was my Viking. Sturdy and direct. I owed him this at least. The whole truth to give him one last out. “Remember when I told you Kaylee left me high and dry?”

He nodded. “Right. Ruined your business together.”

“Well, that’s not quite all of it.”

“I kinda figured.”

“And no one told you?”

He shook his head. “I’m not one for gossip. But I gotta tell you, Sunshine. No one talks badly about you that I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s been a few years. I’m sure some have forgotten.”

“More like no one says anything about you.”

“Unlike Anne Montgomery in the bar when we first met?”

He frowned. “That plastic blond?”

I laughed and went onto my toes to brush a kiss over his mouth. “Yes, her.”

He settled his hands on my hips. “She’s nothing compared to you.”

“It’s sweet of you to say. Her family might not agree with you.” I sighed. “The Montgomerys were one of the families that were hurt in the fallout. My sister didn’t just leave me hanging with the business. She stole over a hundred thousand dollars from the accounts of all the businesses we took care of.”

“Dear God.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at his cross and traced my finger around the shape. “My mom begged me to find a way to fix it. So my sister wasn’t arrested or a warrant put out for her.”

“But how?”

“Loans. Lots and lots of loans to pay back the businesses, and in return they didn’t press charges.” I swallowed hard. The memories of those stress filled days made my stomach churn. “I paid every single person back. I took out loans from places I had no business taking from.”

His eyebrows snapped down. “What kind of places?”

“Not a loan shark or anything.” I was shocked to find a laugh inside me, but there it was. “But there are tons of places who will charge you two arms and a foot’s worth of interest.”

“Oh, babe.”

“Yeah. We tried to keep it as quiet as possible, but Kaylee disappeared and I suddenly didn’t have any clients. It didn’t take much of a leap to figure out I fucked up in a big way. Stories built and some of it was true, but a lot of it was just gossip.”

“And you didn’t defend yourself? Why?”

“She’s my sister. Not that I feel much in the way of love for her anymore. She was always looking for the easy way out. I worked way more than she ever did, which just made it worse in the end.” I tucked his cross back under his shirt, then looked up at him. “But my sister was a damn genius when it came to spreadsheets. If she hadn’t been so selfish and calculating, she could’ve made her money the legal way.”

“And that’s why you had so many jobs.”

I nodded. “I worked part time at the orchard, but went full time after everything imploded. Beckett believed me. Believed *in* me when no one else would. He co-signed a loan at the bank that got me the first bit of settlement money. I did the others on my own.”

Ronan tugged me into his arms. “And didn’t tell anyone.”

I laid my cheek on his chest. “Beckett figured it out, but it was too late. I’d already signed the papers to get the rest of the money. He wasn’t exactly in a position to help me out at the time, and I wasn’t going to take money from him. He’d done more than enough.”

“And your mom let you do this?”

“She asked me to.”

His whole body vibrated. I looped my arms around his waist and hung onto him. “Don’t get mad for me.”

“And who should then?”

“Me. But I just took it on and I shouldn’t have. It took me a long time to figure that out. Until about twenty minutes ago.”

“You don’t have to do anything alone anymore, Kira Webb.”

“Handily, I have paid off most of it. I do have one last loan, but it’s manageable.” I tipped my head up to look at him. “That’s why I started doing the bartending flair. I had a balloon payment due on one of the loans or I was going to be locked into ten years of shitty interest.”

He shook his head. “And you won an expo in Las Vegas.”

“I won an expo in Vegas,” I said with a laugh. “I was tempted to do a few more, but the taxes were just killer. It wasn’t worth all the practice or the bruises. That was Mason’s brain child anyway. He bought the ticket and sent me there.”

“So, that’s two people in your corner.” He rubbed my nose with his. “And there are so many more. You just need to believe it and see it. I’m the number one though.” He narrowed his eyes. “Okay, maybe Beckett can stay number one.”

I went onto my toes and kissed him. “I love you, Ronan.”

He stilled. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. I’d kinda figured it out already. I definitely did when we were in the storeroom today. But when you stood up for me.” I couldn’t believe there were any tears left in my body. “When you wouldn’t let me take the blame. No one has ever stood for me like that. Even Beckett. He supported me after it all went down, but he didn’t know about it when it happened.”

“Because he wouldn’t have let you.”

“You know him better than I thought.”

“Because that’s what I would have done. It wasn’t your responsibility.”

“But this thief problem we have is.”

“It’s our responsibility. We’ll figure it out together. But let me tell you one thing—you aren’t paying for it. Businesses take losses for bullshit that happens all the time. Believe me. But we won’t let it happen again.”

I didn’t really like that answer, but he was right.

“No, we won’t.” I tried to step back and he held me tight. “We have to figure out what the heck happened.”

“We will. I just need you to say that one thing one more time.”

I smiled up at him. “Which part?” He lifted me up along the back of my thighs and I grabbed onto his shoulders. “Okay, okay.”

“Say it again.”

I lowered my face to his, my hair falling forward to curtain around us. “I love you, Ronan.”

“Again,” he said against my mouth.

“I love you, Viking.”



## CHAPTER 31

RONAN

## BUTTONED UP TIGHT

“Quit grinning like a lunatic. We’re counting.”

“Yep, got it. No grinning.” But I was still smiling as I dug through every case in the storage room.

While we were double checking everything, we took the time to sweep and mop, then rearranged the stock to make things easier on the staff. We’d had the materials on site for a key swipe to get in and out of the room, but we hadn’t set it up yet since things were still a little chaotic.

But that was no more.

Key swipes needed to be used for the registers anyway, so it was time for everyone to get used to them. We also set it up at the front door, but the back door was open most days and evenings, so that wasn’t foolproof in the least.

By the end of the night, we’d counted the entirety of our stock and even found a box of moonshine tucked near the back door.

That, alone, made me suspicious. It would be easy to stash and grab at the end of the night while people took out the trash. We didn’t have parking near the dumpsters, but we also didn’t have cameras over there.

I checked in with Beckett and he sent Justin out to install two of them before he went home for the day.

Beckett was even quieter than usual when he checked in with us, but I knew the orchard was more family than business

to him in some ways. Unfortunately, I knew more about theft in the industry than I did about trust.

Recipes for beer could run in the millions for the larger corporations. And while I had no delusions about my ciders, I knew it was something Beckett would need to think about for the future. If Brothers Three Orchard was serious about distributing, then it would be a much higher dollar figure involved than a few hundred cases for a taproom.

In the long run, these actions were to cover our asses, not because we had to be mistrustful of everyone.

I did a walkthrough of the entire taproom after the cleaning crew finished up and met Matt and Annette at the front door with two swipe cards.

“Here you go. Keep these on you at all times. It’s for swiping in for work from now on and for your time cards.”

Annette frowned. “Oh, wow. I didn’t realize we were doing these.”

“Yeah, we have them for the registers anyway. That’s how you’ll swipe in and out for the day. But now there’s no open access for the back door to the dumpsters. You’ll need your card to swipe in and out.”

Her eyebrows went up. She glanced at Matt who took his and stuffed it in his pocket. “Guess it’s getting really real now, huh?”

“I guess,” Matt mumbled.

“I wanted to ask you if you’d seen anything odd in the last few weeks? Anyone in the storeroom that shouldn’t be there?”

Annette blinked at me. “What do you mean? Like...taking stuff?”

I knew Kira trusted Annette. She’d been with her from the start and had known her the longest. I hedged my bets and nodded. “We’re missing some cases of cider. We think we managed to save a case of moonshine today. Found it where it shouldn’t be.” I didn’t want to give specifics.

“No. I can’t think of anyone. We’ve all been working hard to make sure everything is ready for the party and for the opening.”

I gently patted her arm. “It’s okay. I’m just asking. If you see anything, let us know, okay?”

“Absolutely. There’s nothing worse than a thief. I can’t imagine anyone who would betray Kira and Beckett—and you, of course.”

I smiled at her. “Of course.”

“Not after all the hard work we’ve all done.”

“We’re hoping it’s just a mistake, but we have to take precautions.”

“Yeah, of course.”

I glanced at Matt, who was quiet. “Did you see anything?”

He shook his head. “I just come in and do my work, man. I gotta go, Annette. You good?”

She frowned. “I thought we were going to dinner.”

“Yeah, maybe next time. I’m tired.”

“Okay.” She frowned as Matt swiped his card at the door, then pushed it open and hustled down the stairs. “This sucks.”

“I know. We don’t want to think about anyone stealing.”

“Are you sure someone did?” Her dark eyes were shiny as she looked up at me.

“We’re pretty sure. And you can’t think of anyone?”

“I mean, Janice and Sherry are kind of annoying, but they’d probably backstab you before they’d steal a case of brew.”

“Good to know.” I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Do we need to talk to them?”

She snorted. “I can deal with a few girls with more looks than brains any day.”

“I’m sure you can.”

She paused at the door, then swiped her card. “This really sucks.”

“I know.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I stayed at the door and watched her go to her car, then locked up. I went to the storeroom to check on Kira, but she’d already shut off the lights. I double checked things for my own peace of mind and slipped a bottle of Firefly out of its case.

The label was in the same carved linocut style of the owl logo for the orchard. It was a little cleaner than actual linocut work. I was familiar with it from my mom, since she’d tried every form of art during my childhood. But the same graphic look here was sharp and masculine with a bit of softness in the colors the artist had chosen.

Purples and buttery yellows reminded me of the field of fireflies from that night. It was hard to believe so much had happened in less than two months. Even with the annoyance of the theft, I felt nothing but pride for the cider I’d created with Kira.

And I could only imagine how many other things we’d do together.

I slid the bottle back into the case, then looked around the room one more time before locking that up too.

I found Kira in her office. The papers had multiplied on her desk and she was poring over each one.

“Sunshine, it’s time to wrap it up.”

“I just want to review it one more time.”

“Babe.” I took her hand and pulled her out of her chair, then clicked the light off over her desk. “Enough.”

“How did I not see it?”

I sighed. “Because they probably took a case at a time.” I drew her out of the room and grabbed her bag, which was hanging on hook near the door. “Oh, hey. I’ll grab the trash for you.”

“Who would do that, though?”

“We’ll figure it out, or we won’t.”

She frowned up at me.

I lifted a shoulder. “Maybe the new security will make them think twice.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like the thought of someone I can’t trust working for me.”

I brushed a kiss over her forehead. I didn’t either. “We’ll just do the best we can. And we’ll give Hayes one helluva birthday party.”

She gave me a small smile for that one. “Yeah, we will.”

The ride home was dark and quiet. Both of us had been going hard all day. Trying to find answers and tighten up any holes for the future. Nothing was a guarantee, but I knew my girl hated that more than anything else.

The first wisps of coolness on the breeze spoke of fall coming. August nights were my favorite part of the summer. We rolled down the windows of my truck and listened to the night sounds of the orchard. The tree frogs and crickets created their unique symphony with the owls out for their evening meals.

As we traveled through Turnbull, then turned down her lane, she looked over at me. “Thanks for keeping me from freaking out.”

I parked in the small lot beside the old Victorian. “You would have figured it out, but I’m really glad you let me in.”

“You’ve been getting in since Lucky’s bar, pal.”

I unclipped her belt and dragged her over to my side of the truck. “Is that right?”

“Yeah. Defending my honor from the first moment I met you.”

“Huh. I guess when you put it that way, you owe me a little something.”

“Is that right?” She placed her hand on my thigh and moved it up. “What did you have in mind?”

“Think that tub of yours can fit us both?”

“Definitely not.”

I laughed. “Okay. Guess we’ll have to make sure we have a bonus sized tub in our house.”

“Our house?” Her laugh filled the cab of the truck.

“C’mon, Sunshine. You know you’re gonna live with me, marry me, and make all of the babies.”

She poked me in the chest. “And just where is this house going to be?”

“What do you think Kain’s been working on so diligently?”

“I don’t get a say?”

With everything going on, I didn’t even think about the fact that Kain hadn’t given me the go ahead about telling Kira about him. Well, a man told his woman everything, didn’t he?

“Since it’s been a day of revelations, I suppose I should tell you about Kain.”

“I knew it. He’s an ex-con.”

A belly laugh rolled through me. “Oh, man. He’ll get a kick out of that one.”

She pinched my side.

“Ow. Okay, okay.” I brought her hand up to my mouth for a kiss along her wrist. “Kain is not just a chef.”

“Duh.”

“He’s hiding out because his dad died recently.”

“Oh.” Instantly contrite, she turned into me to cup my face. “I’m so sorry. Why didn’t he tell any of us?”

“They didn’t have a great relationship and he’s pretty messed up about it. The thing is, Kain is kind of...”

“Kind of what? Famous? He’s a model.”



“What?” I laughed again. “No, not a model. Don’t say that shit to him. He’s got enough of an ego.” I laced our fingers. Mostly so she wouldn’t hit me. “He’s rich.”

“Rich?”

I winced. “Like eight figures rich.”

“What?” Her voice went shrill. “A billionaire is cooking at our taproom?”

At least she called it our taproom. “Yeah. He loves it. And it’s helped him a ton. Kain’s actually a pretty famous architect, so the famous isn’t that far off.”

“And he’s making you a house?”

“Pretty sure it’s going to be our wedding present.”

“You do realize you haven’t even asked me yet, right?” Her eyes were suspiciously shiny in the dark.

“I know. But you’re going to say yes.”

She leaned across me and opened the door and pushed me out. “Go. I’m starving and you’re going to feed me, then we’re going to have some really hot sex. Then I’m sleeping until I wake up.”

I stumbled out onto the pavement and saved myself from landing on my ass by grabbing the door. “Why you gotta be so rough?”

She scooted out of my side of the truck and slammed it shut. “You like when I’m rough.”

I scooped her up and tossed her over my shoulder. “You’re damn right, I do.”

## CHAPTER 32

KIRA

## THE TAPROOM

The next few days were a blur. I was glad I had Ronan in my corner because I needed him every damn hour of the day. Between kegs malfunctioning behind the bar and a billionaire diva in my kitchen who was in a snit about some hot sauce being stuck in transit, I was ready to lock myself in my office and let them all figure stuff out on their own.

But Hayes had the best twenty-fifth birthday party we could hope for.

Sometime in the middle of all our emergencies, Beckett and Ronan had managed to make a special cider for the party using The B3 as a base and making it a sour blackberry. I'd had far too many of them, to be honest.

Ronan's cider was dangerous.

But it was pretty amazing to see the Manning brothers get their middle brother drunk. He was the serious one of the bunch, but he was laughing and hugging everyone by the end of the night.

The matriarchs of the orchard, Laverne Ronson and Sarah Manning, were holding court. I was pretty sure Laverne was buzzed by the end of the night, as well. She even danced with my guy, which had been pretty adorable.

Kain managed to get Sarah to smile a few times. Beckett's mom wasn't exactly the type to get excited at a party. She always seemed to have such a dour expression for some reason. The power of Kain, and a good pork taco, could turn anyone around.

Beckett and Ronan were thrilled with the response from the family and friends who came to the party. Even a few people who didn't like hard cider were converted. Lennon tried out a few of her mixed drinks on those who were feeling adventurous. I could tell her brain was already whirling with ideas and changes to her cocktails.

From a business standpoint, I was very glad we'd found out about the keg problems before we had a room full of strangers clamoring for drinks.

Justin was a handy one, that was for sure. He'd rigged the taps to work for the party, but came back to fix it properly on the morning of our opening. He ended up helping a lot through the day. I'd even caught Kain and Justin talking over equipment a few times, so I imagined a few more cameras and gadgets would be in the taproom soon.

I was trying not to dwell on the fact that we had a thief working for us and kept my eye on the prize. The opening night we'd all been working for.

Lennon and her crew were doing last minute run throughs of the registers and making sure everyone's login worked.

I was quizzing my waitstaff on table numbers and making sure the schedule made sense. It was all hands on deck for the first night of our opening, so there were bound to be people bumping into one another.

I was a little disappointed that Laverne wouldn't make it to opening night. There had been an emergency with one of her nieces and she'd ended up traveling to New York City to take care of her. I didn't know Rachel well, but I'd seen her a few times over the years.

Zoe and Ian would keep things exciting during the night if things started to slow down. Our family rockstar took his job very seriously when it came to helping out the businesses.

I couldn't worry about that right now. The buzz of excitement was already in the air, and we still had three hours before the doors opened.

*"Hina, get in here."*

I rolled my eyes at Kain's bellow, but went into the kitchen. I found him in there barking orders at his staff. Jess was dodging and weaving around everyone to take photos of the food and do her thousandth test plating.

"How's it going?"

"Good. We've got it handled. Sit."

I frowned. "I don't have time to sit."

He lightly grasped my upper arm and dragged me around to the small table set up at the edge of one of the prep stations. "Sit. Eat. You haven't eaten since six this morning, when I made you breakfast. I bet you have a headache."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because your little eyebrows are pinched. Eat." He set a bowl full of rice and pork on the table. He knew my weakness, dammit. "It's not too heavy for your nervous stomach."

"And how do you know I have a nervous stomach? If I had one, I mean."

He rolled his eyes. "Because you eat like a bird when you're revved up about something."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"What? I pay attention. You're important to Ronan."

"That's sweet." I picked up a fork. "I'm only eating because I have a long night ahead. Not that you're handling me like a certain someone."

He sat across from me. "I also wanted to talk to you."

I forked in a bit of rice and pork with a sigh. "Good." I quickly dabbed my mouth. "About what?"

"My hot sauce."

"Not that again."

"Nah. I'm not crying about it. I found something else to work for now until my new order comes in. But it's a high end sauce."

“Aren’t all your sauces?” I stabbed at the pork. My budget could use a few of his billions, the way he made his orders.

“Yes, but it elevates the food. However, I did find the missing shipment, and it went to a local address.”

“Can’t you just get it from them? It was a mistake, right?”

“Maybe.”

I put my fork down. “What?”

“Normally, I’d just think it was an error. We’ve all been rushing around in here for the last few weeks.”

“Right.” My belly tightened, but at least it wasn’t going to revolt. I hoped.

“Matt has been helping me doing orders, since my big fingers are always messy with making food.”

My heart sank. “Oh, no.”

I had a flash of memory. Matt had been really upset when we’d given him his new keycard as well. That should have been a clue.

“The address was a glorified PO Box, just with a regular looking address. A lot of people use them to get around the rules of ordering from certain places.”

“Right. Restaurant supplies especially need a physical address.”

“A few of my orders have gone missing, and the more I went through the paperwork, the more I didn’t like it. Distributors are a pain in the ass, but they will jump through hoops to find a way not to send you free product if it’s not their error.”

“So they gave up the address.”

“Bingo.”

“Can I have the paperwork? I need to go to Ronan.”

“Eat first.” He sat back and crossed his arms. “We can fire him in twenty minutes.”

I picked up my fork. Surprisingly, my stomach allowed it. I'd rather know who it was than keep wondering. Even if it would break Annette's heart to find out.

After eating, and drinking a bottle of water, I went back out to the dining room. A few of my waitstaff had set up a silverware station and were wrapping them with our black napkins. Others were wiping down tables and hitting the windows with glass cleaner.

We would be spick-and-span by tonight. I just had to believe everyone would do their jobs while I did this hard one.

I found Ronan in his workshop and knocked on the door. "Got a second?"

"For you? Always." He smiled and set down his tongs and blowtorch.

"What are you doing now?"

He wagged his eyebrows. "Secret."

"Hmm."

He leaned his hip on the bench. "I know you didn't come in here to check up on what I was cooking in here." He took a good look at me and straightened. "What's wrong?"

"I just talked to Kain."

"Did you tell him to take a pill about the damn hot sauce?"

I laughed. "I did. But it ended up being a little more involved than that. An invoice had a discrepancy on it."

"Another one? What the hell?" His brows furrowed. "Invoice..."

"He says Matt's been helping him with orders, and an expensive shipment went to a local address."

His dark eyes went wide. "Dammit. Dammit, I wasn't paying fucking attention." He pounded his fist on his workbench.

I went around the bench to him. "What?"



“I was in Matt’s SUV that night of the first tasting. I saw a weird invoice, but I was too tired to pay close attention. And he had something in the backseat that he covered up.”

I closed my eyes and sagged against him.

He instantly curled his arms around me. “Dammit, Sunshine. I’m so sorry.”

“He’s been with us since the beginning. How could he do this?” I pressed my cheek into his shoulder. “This is gonna kill Annette.”

“What’s going to kill Annette?”

I stiffened in Ronan’s arms. He gently eased me back so we could turn and look at her together. We really needed to talk to Matt first before anyone else found out, but it seemed as if that wasn’t to be. Especially since Matt was right behind her.

“What’s going to kill me?” Annette turned to Matt, then back to us.

Matt’s face went blank, then he quickly backed up and bolted.

“Dammit.” Ronan squeezed my hand briefly, then dodged around Annette to give chase.

“What’s going on?”

“Matt’s our thief.”

“No. He wouldn’t.” Annette’s bouncy curls fluttered around her face as she shook her head. Her blue eyes filled with tears. “He would *not* do that.”

I went to her. “Then why would he run?”

She shook her head. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” I wasn’t exactly a hugger with people, but Annette had been a friend for a long time. I eased her toward me and she hugged me—hard.

“Why?”

“I wish I knew.”

Ronan came back with a shake of his head. “He was already in his SUV.”

“Yeah.” I rocked Annette a little as she cried on my shoulder. “Do you want to call the police?”

“Let’s wait until tomorrow. Today is going to be too crazy.” Ronan came over to us and patted Annette’s shoulder.

“Agreed.”

“You okay, kiddo?” he asked Annette.

“No.” She pulled away from me and swiped at her eyes. “I will be, but not right now.”

“Why don’t you go home and get a shower? We understand if you can’t do the opening under the circumstances.”

She shook her head. “No. This is my job. I’m not gonna let some asshole ruin today. Not after we worked so hard.” She sniffed. “I will go home and take a shower though. And put on my warpaint.”

I gave her a small smile. “That’s the best way.”

She clutched my hand. “I’m sorry, Kira.”

“Don’t be sorry. You didn’t know.”

“I didn’t. I swear it.”

Ronan came up beside me and placed his hand on my shoulder. “We know. He had us all fooled.”

She nodded and her eyes filled again. “I gotta go.”

“Go. We’ll see you tonight.”

She took off and I turned into Ronan’s arms. “Well, that wasn’t how I saw today going.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Me neither, Sunshine. But we faced it together. And now we will do this opening together.”

“And then I’ll marry you?”

He slung an arm around my shoulders. “Are you saying I’m too predictable?”

“No. I’m saying I like you just how you are.”

“Like?”

“Love, Viking.”

# EPILOGUE

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## RONAN

I stood beside Kira's swing. Twilight was a swath of hot pink and purple over the orchard below. Music from the nearby concert lit the air, leaving behind a faint rumble of bass from the powerful speakers. We were about to open the doors, but I needed a second alone before the chaos began.

I'd come to Brothers Three Orchard for a fresh start and a chance at proving myself on my own merit. I'd started my career as a hired gun, happy to play in the background until I'd grown restless. Then Beckett found me and made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

The moment I stepped on the property, my life changed in so many ways.

I created relationships born out of the same passions. Some new friends and some old friends who needed a place to heal.

I had a job that fit me down to the ground and gave me room to grow into my skills. And I was pretty sure it would turn into a partnership someday.

I turned away from the fiery sky to see Kira at the top of the stairs.

She was the best part of all of this. My muse, my passion, and the love of my damn life. She didn't know it, but I was going to actually ask her to marry me tonight. I tucked my hand into my pocket and pulled out the ring my mother had sent.

I knew tonight would be too crazy for her to meet my whole family, but Brigid Parrish wouldn't wait long to meet

her future daughter-in-law. I had a feeling the entire Parrish clan was setting up flights to come out here.

Good thing, because I couldn't wait to introduce Kira to them.

I headed down the hill to the path and up the steps to meet her. The taproom cast a golden glow around her hair, turning it copper in this light. She'd left it down and curled it so it fell around her shoulders in beachy waves. All her curves were on display in the poppy red dress she wore. Her waist was cinched with a wide leather belt that echoed in the shimmery black tank that peeked from the deep vee of her dress. She glittered with gold at her ears and layers of fine chains that sparkled in the low light.

"You're stunning."

She smiled. "You clean up pretty damn nicely yourself, Viking." She lifted a hand to my face where I'd trimmed up my beard. "I still like you wild." She fingered one of the beads in the smaller braids I wore tonight. Her hand smoothed down my chest, over the black dress shirt I wore to the heavy silver buckle.

I caught her fingers before she could go any lower. "Don't start what you can't finish."

She grinned. "Later."

"Later." I flipped her hand and brought her wrist to my lips so I could nip the fragile skin. "You ready to do this?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." She glanced over her shoulder at our staff waiting for us. "They've worked their asses off."

"And we haven't even opened the doors yet."

She stepped closer to me and her voice dropped to a whisper. "There's a line. I'm not sure how that happened."

"Jess is worth her salary, it seems."

"Evidently." Her eyes got a little big as excitement thrummed through her. "I can't believe we're finally here."

I leaned down to press a light kiss on her blood red lips. “I can. Now let’s get this party started.”

She reached up to wipe my mouth. “You’re not nervous?”

I shook my head. “I’ve got all the faith I need right here.” I took her hand and led her to the door.

We opened the doors together, greeting people as they came in. One after the other, dozens came through the door. Murmurs of how big the place was, how cool the paintings were, and excitement for the bar filled the air.

Lennon was in her element, serving up drinks while her support staff poured drafts of cider. The first thirty minutes of the opening had dollar drafts, which had been Kira’s idea.

She’d been worried that no one would show.

That was my Sunshine—contingency plans for days.

We both grinned at each other as many went right to the bar and others spilled out onto the patio. The outdoor seating was lit for people who wanted to wander the paths between the concert stage and the taproom.

I stepped out the front door, pleased to see the parking lot was more than half full already and Ian Kagan hadn’t even finished his concert. He’d played a sunset show at the concert stage and would be here within the hour.

I opened the door for another group of women with a smile, then motioned to Annette. “How are you doing?”

Her eyes were still a little red, but her chin was held high. “I’m good.”

I nodded. “Watch the numbers. Let me know if we start looking like we’re at capacity. I didn’t think that would be a worry, but now I’m not so sure.”

“You got it.”

I moved through the room, checking on the waitstaff and bartenders to make sure they didn’t need anything. All the while, I heard people talking about my ciders.

The Firefly and Sunshine were already needing a change of kegs. Some of it was the dollar drafts, but I knew people would only crowd around for a cheap drink for so long without complaint.

I counted it as a good sign.

Kira was in her element, ordering people around and putting out fires. I left her to it and went to check on Kain.

He must have been getting lessons from Sunshine because he was barking orders at the staff. The scent of pork and baskets of french fries getting ready for plating nearly made me groan.

“Everything good back here?”

Kain was wearing a royal purple chef’s jacket and his usually wild curls were plaited in a thick braid down his back. He’d also reshaved the sides of his head for the occasion. I resisted the urge to snicker at the hairnet around his freshly combed out beard.

It was a good night when even Kain was following the rules.

“*Boa!* I’m glad you’re here. Come taste the poutine.”

“I’m never going to say no to that.” My best friend was damn good at the stick to your ribs cooking. I popped a gravy laden cheese curd in my mouth first. “Amazing.”

By the time I left, I was regretting my belt. The kitchen was going to open after the draft special was done, and from what I could tell, it seemed like everything was falling into place back here, too.

Lennon was putting on a show at the bar and tossing bottles back and forth between a few of the other bartenders who were learning some of her flair tricks.

I made my way into the main dining room and found Kira near the back door. She was standing stiffly with two women in front of her. One with red hair cut in a style at least three decades out of date. As I got closer, I noticed she was quite a bit older than the second woman. The other was slim, wearing



a sequined dress that barely covered her ass. Were those hair extensions peeking from the underside of her teased dark hair?

“Don’t get your plus sized panties in a twist. I just wanted to see what kind of craphole...”

I couldn’t make out what she said as a linebacker sized guy blocked me. I gave him a genial smile and shouldered my way through the crowd gathering near the stairs. The tables were rapidly filling and people were wandering in and out of the taproom to the patio.

The woman’s voice came in clearer as I got away from the noisy table. “It’s not terrible in here. Could use a little more excitement, though. Too many townies in here for my taste,” the younger one said as she craned her neck. She spotted me and interest flickered as she turned my way. “Maybe not all hope is lost.”

“Kaylee, don’t talk to your sister like that,” the redheaded woman said sharply.

My jaw tightened as I heard the name. Kira’s family. “Ladies, can I help you?”

Kaylee crowded into me. “Why, yes, you can. Do you work here?” She turned to Kira. “Do you work with this fine specimen?” Her obviously fake lashes fluttered. “Is he your boss?” She turned her attention back on me. “No wonder you’re working here, sis. How did she get the job, big guy? Her ba—”

“Enough.” Kira’s stern voice sliced through the air. “You are not welcome in my establishment.”

“Yours?” Kaylee laughed. “Hardly.”

I gauged the situation and decided to let Kira give me the go ahead to bounce them. Instead, I simply moved to her side and crossed my arms over my chest.

The conversations muted around us and I could feel Kira vibrating. I dropped my arms to my sides and brushed her hand with mine. She looked up at me and the shock in her amber eyes slowly warmed and her jaw eased.

She linked her fingers with mine as she looked at Kaylee. “You aren’t welcome here.” She looked at the other woman. “Neither are you, Mom. Not if you have anything to do with Kaylee after what she did.”

“She’s your sister,” the older woman spluttered.

“And that’s the only reason she’s not in jail.” Kira’s voice was firm. “And that can be rectified. I do believe the statute of limitations is still in effect.”

Kaylee’s eyes bulged as she looked around. “How dare you,” she whispered viciously.

“No, how dare *you*. Go crawl back into whatever hole you’ve been living in for the last five years. Believe me, I’ve rethought my loyalty to you every single day you’ve been gone. I have at least five people who would be happy to press charges against you.”

Kaylee backed up a step.

“And no, Ronan isn’t my boss. He runs this place with me. I am going to marry this big, beautiful man and we’re going to have perfect babies who will never know you. And they’ll never wonder if they’re loved a single day of their lives.” She glanced at her mother, who was slack-jawed with shock. “Not a single day.”

I pulled Kira against me. “I have never loved you more than right this second, Sunshine.”

She looked up at me with a light sheen of tears in her eyes. “I love you too, Viking.”

“Let’s go, Mom.” Kaylee’s voice pitched higher with her anger.

Kira’s mother stood there for a moment, looking between the women. When she followed Kaylee, I closed my eyes in regret.

Kira turned her face into my chest for a moment. When I cupped her jaw, she smiled softly. “I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’d love to die of embarrassment right now—” She broke off when a few people clapped around her.

I grinned. “All I see is my badass future wife.”

She rolled her eyes at me, then slid out of my arms and grasped my hands. “You keep telling me I’m marrying you. Well, I’m asking.”

I blinked down at her. “What?”

Her smile was huge and there wasn’t a single flicker of doubt in her eyes. “Will you marry me, Ronan?”

I picked her up and closed my mouth over hers. She gripped my shoulders and kissed me back, and the whole damn room clapped for us. She tasted of sunshine and smelled of moonflowers and she was all mine.

She laughed against my mouth. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes. That’s definitely a yes.” I set her down and went down on one knee. “You beat me to it, Sunshine. Wear my ring?”

Her hand shook a little as she held her hand out and I slipped my great-grandmother’s ring over her finger. The canary yellow diamond flashed just like the sunshine.

I heard a man with an English accent ask what the excitement was all about. The room went a little crazy after that, but I didn’t really notice.

All I cared about was Kira wearing my ring.

Finally.

*We hope you enjoyed your stay at the orchard! If you’d like to find out who the mysterious Rachel is, turn the page to find out. Oh, and Beckett’s story is right around the corner.*



**Next up is Clay & Rachel's story!**

“I told you not to fall in love with me.”

That was me saying it to my brand new boss, by the way. I'm very aware I'm not relationship material right now. Then I found out my tree farmer boss is really a billionaire. I guess I'm not the only one with secrets.

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# FIANCÉE BY CHRISTMAS

CLAY  
DON'T CALL ME SHIRLEY

I tapped the secret panel I'd had put into my office. It definitely wasn't sanctioned by my personal security.

But right now, I didn't give a crap.

I needed to hear the water.

I needed to *breathe*.

I dragged in a deep lungful of briny, sharp air. November had come in with a bite. And okay, the Hudson River wouldn't be anyone's idea of fresh air. Even me most of the time. However, sometimes the sterile, perfect air pumping through the building got to me.

Sure I could take a walk outside. We had an eatery, outside work stations, and a million dollar promenade I'd let an architect convince me to build. It was stunning and had only elevated the Winslow name across the country.

The only problem with the exquisite campus was the reaction from some of my employees. Either people tried to avoid me—which I actually didn't mind—or I had to deal with the suck-ups who came flying at me like a swarm.

I didn't have that in me today.

Instead I made do with a 360° view of the river and the vast coastline of buildings spiring up into the sky. It felt like a new one was magically appearing every time I took a moment to look. Then again, I didn't have much time to enjoy my view.

My perpetual slate of meetings seemed to take all my time.

When all I wanted to do was escape to my helipad and get the hell out of the city. I didn't even need to look at the calendar—it was as if my body was attuned to the day November hit. But this year, I felt even itchier. Enough that I contemplated doing a no show to three parties I had scheduled this weekend.

One included a date with Helena Danbury.

The perfect socialite and my grandfather's vote for the future Mrs. Clay Winslow. Too bad we had about as much chemistry as flat seltzer water. We made a very pretty picture, but the taste was bland and slightly off-putting.

A discreet chime reminded me that again, my time wasn't my own for another twelve hours, and I definitely needed to put aside wedding thoughts. Nothing good came from that line of thinking, even with my grandfather's constant lectures about adding to the Winslow family tree.

With a sigh, I slid the panel closed. It had been built to hide within the endless windows that made up my office. The canned air and dry meetings waiting for me ramped up the unsettled undercurrent that sat on me like slushy city snow.

Twelve hours until I could escape.

I glanced down at my watch with a frown. Make that thirteen, dammit. I stroked my hand down my tie to make sure it sat flat under my vest. I buttoned the gray wool Burberry suit jacket I was expected to wear just as Ransom Douglas strode through my door without a knock.

Part of the perks of being my bodyguard as well as my best friend since boarding school. He also wore a perfectly tailored suit, but instead of soft winter wool, his was made of a specialized material that let him have a free range of motion.

It made him feel better. I appreciated that it made him look slightly less threatening—just barely.

I wasn't sure why he and my board of directors thought I needed a near ninja-level bodyguard. Being one of the billionaire elite in Manhattan required a certain level of security regardless of the endless boredom of the bulk of my



meetings. I was pretty sure I didn't need a Special Forces dropout, but I was glad to have Ransom back in my life in whatever capacity he allowed.

He frowned and sniffed the air, then he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“What are you doing?”

One eyebrow spiked and he gave me a flat wintry stare, then went back to typing something before slipping his phone back into his pocket. Another thing I'd had to get used to since my best friend had come back into my life. The carefree Dougie was long gone. I was pretty sure I wasn't the only reason for that.

I resisted the urge to rebutton my jacket. Especially now that he'd told me it was one of my tells—nope. I wasn't giving him any reason to think I was guilty.

Ransom was like a dog with a bone. His brow furrowing even further as he scanned the room. He'd probably find the panel by next week, then I'd have to hire another crew to come in and save me from abject mania.

Ransom checked his jet black watch which matched his suit, shirt, and tie. “We have to be in midtown in an hour. We need to get going.”

I grabbed my leather satchel full of hard copies of contracts that should be digital only at this point. “Someday old man Jennings will get with the times, and I won't have to drag my ass over there for meetings.”

“The day you get George Jennings to do a video call is the day I run down the bike path naked.”

“Deal.”

Ransom shook his head, but as usual, a smile didn't dent his face. “Let's move.”

“Not sure how many times I have to remind you I'm not in your unit.” But I strode through my spacious penthouse office to the double doors.

“Former unit,” he reminded me and hustled to pass me and open the door for me. I was slightly taller than him, but he had me in muscle and fear factor. I could have used intimidation lessons from him my first few years in the boardroom.

Luckily, my quick brain gave me some advantage against those who thought I’d only earned my spot because of nepotism. And people like Ransom who didn’t treat me like the prince of New York.

I let him go first through the doors to make sure my admin didn’t kill me. Some days that was hit or miss too.

“Shirley, could you send flowers to Miss Danbury?”

My admin turned to face me. She was a striking Black woman of indeterminate age. I only knew she was in her late fifties because I’d hired her. Anyone else wouldn’t have a clue. She wore a ruby colored head wrap which matched her tailored suit. Tasteful gold jewelry wreathed her wrist, fingers, and neck. She commanded a wide U-shaped glass desk with a trio of screens set up with a terrifying number of windows. Shirley Hunt ran my life from her magical keystroked kingdom.

She lifted one of her elegant fountain pens and jotted a note. “Of course. Would these be regretful roses or perhaps something more cheerful?”

I resisted the urge to sigh. She knew me too well.

“See if you can find Sterling roses. She appreciates those.”

Shirley gave me an almost imperceptible shake of her head, but wrote down the information in her neat handwriting. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.” I nodded to Ransom and we strode toward the bank of elevators.

He swiped his key card over the sensor. It would override the elevator so it wouldn’t stop on any other floors as we left. “Don’t you have a date with Danbury?”

“I think I’m heading to Turnbull this weekend.”

He gripped the elevator doors to keep them from closing on us. “You mean *we’re* heading for Turnbull. Isn’t it too early for that?”

I shrugged. “I need to check the trees.”

“You have three other employees who take care of that.”

“Just down to two now.”

“What, because you can’t afford it?”

I stood against the back of the elevator and gripped my hands together in front of me. “Was that a joke?”

Ransom gave a huffed growl, strode in and stood in front of the doors, his back to me. I knew he didn’t like enclosed spaces, but thankfully, he’d stopped making me take all nine flights of stairs. Running into a threesome on the third floor stairwell had cured him of that way of thinking. The game development branch of my company was always an interesting visit.

I’d been so impressed with the choreography I hadn’t fired them. Especially since Felicity Baskins was among the trio and had earned me a cool ten million at the last gaming convention with her new adventure series.

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Mike had to retire. His grandson and new wife can handle most of the details. I just want to have a look.”

“Control freak,” he muttered under his breath and stepped out of the car.

I was. It was how I’d doubled the worth of the Winslow name in the last ten years, but I also was more than happy to use it as a reason to get out of the city.

Winslow Industries was the most advanced tech campus in New York City’s Hudson Park area. Hell, I was pretty sure the only one who could compete with my company’s largesse was Google.

And maybe Pierce International, not that I’d ever own up to that in mixed company.

But that success also felt like a jail cell some days.

A stunning cell, but a cell nonetheless.

I strode out behind him, only rolling my eyes in my mind as Ransom scanned the lobby. The central hub of the visitor's center was already decked out for Christmas. Two stately trees flanked the information desk, both in a trendy muted palette of aged gold and burgundy.

People rushed in and out of eateries and cafés. Being out by the piers meant it was easier for my company to have facilities on site than to have my employees have to go off campus.

There was a large glass enclosed business center with internet and charging stations for visiting executives. Above us was a stained glass ceiling in moody ocean colors. Each of the nine floors were represented with balconies tastefully decorated to match the main lobby. In the summer, it was dripping with plants voted on by each department.

It made Ransom twitchy to have so many vantage points for someone to attack. That concern was mostly based on his own obsessive tendencies, but I appreciated that he looked out for me. The tech industry did have its fair share of imbalanced people, but I tried to mitigate that by hiring carefully and by paying my people what they were worth.

"I wish you had built a parking garage into the base of this building." Ransom's biting tone had me swallowing a grin.

"Next time I build a two hundred million dollar campus by a body of water, I'll remember that."

"That number is disgusting. And should include parking."

"It does. At the back of the building. We could take the subway."

Ransom gave me a side-eyed stare.

I shrugged. "I've ridden the subway plenty of times."

"Not since you hired me. First of all, germs, and second, there's no way to protect yourself in a tube underground."

“But you want me to have below-street parking?”

“Shut up. It’s just not safe enough.”

“Well, if you want to get particular—and if you’d ever watch a movie—tons of shit happens in parking garages. This way, I keep my employees safe.”

Ransom gritted his teeth together and didn’t reply. He nodded to the security guards as we made our way through the doors to the executive parking structure around the side of the building. Another checkpoint and flash of a keycard brought us to the dozen cars I made available for my employees who had to have off-site meetings.

A brisk wind sliced through my suit, reminding me that soon enough I’d have to bundle up. As usual, the weather didn’t seem to faze my bodyguard.

He opened the door for me. Not to be galant or even deferential, just so he could make sure there wasn’t anything hiding in the car to kill us both. Being in the tech industry included a few too many unknown variables for Ransom’s peace of mind. When hundreds of millions were on the line for a project, it wasn’t unheard of for there to be danger waiting in the wings. The fact that I had at least seven high stakes deals in various levels of completion at any given time gave my best friend indigestion.

He slammed the door and rounded to the driver’s side of the sleek BMW sedan. It was outfitted with a dozen extras, including bulletproof glass. Overkill as far as I was concerned, but when my CFO had been carjacked last spring, Ransom had made some modifications to all the cars.

He was a competent, if slightly terrifying, driver. He weaved in and out of traffic like a seasoned cabbie. I took the time to review my notes on my phone while he fought his way up to the upper west side.

Jennings took great pride in his offices overlooking Central Park. I was also pretty sure he enjoyed making people come to him. He was all about the power plays. He might be a

dinosaur when it came to meetings and contracts, but he was as paranoid as Ransom about security.

Any digital footprint could be hacked and the old man believed in a handshake as much as a signature. So, I'd do the damn meeting. And then I was getting the hell out of the city.

I sent off an email to my admin.

The rest of the day could go hang.

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*USA Today* bestselling author, **TARYN QUINN**, is the sexy and funny alter ego of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott & Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years, but we have decided to pull the trigger on a combo name just for fun.

And so...Taryn Quinn was born!

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