

A JOBS FROM HELL NOVELLA

**MAN**

**GLITTER**

**MARIKA RAY**

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MARIKA RAY

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## MAN GLITTER

All that sawdust in every muscled crevice of my half-naked neighbor looks like man glitter when he handles his wood...

Finnie

I'm an ER doctor on a mission. My reputation is in tatters from my stint in the big city. I have an urgent care to build in this small town and I won't let anything stop me from building a new life. Not even that awful saw going in the middle of the night next door. Not even my gorgeous neighbor covered in sawdust. Nope. I'm a goddamn professional.

Charlie

I'm doing just fine on my own. Got my wood working, my dog, and a steady supply of moonshine. The last thing I need is a hot neighbor with her panties in a twist wreaking havoc on my bachelor life. But she barrels in anyway, making me cut my hand wide open, stitching me up, and living with me until I heal. It would have been torture if teasing her hadn't become so much fun.

Can opposites get along when forced to live together in a small town named Hell?

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*For Cece...thanks for the title, but more importantly, thank  
you for the friendship. <3*

# Finnie

I popped a baby aspirin in my mouth and swished it down with decaf coffee. I desperately wished for it to be magically caffeinated, but one cup of the real stuff was all I allowed myself. One cup meant good health, two cups meant a dependance on a substance. And I, Finnie Dorado, was dependent on no one and nothing.

Putting the coffee cup down on the chipped tile counter, I surveyed the damage. Twenty-four hundred square feet of brand new carpet and hardwood floors. It was gorgeous flooring, put in by my new contractor, Titus, before I moved in yesterday, but I could barely see it right now, what with the stacks of cardboard boxes in the way. I had some unpacking to do. Like weeks of it if I didn't tackle it straight away.

My ponytail swished against my back, the tank top and jean shorts I'd changed into signaling I meant business. If I only stopped unpacking for regularly scheduled meals, I could have at least the kitchen and the living room unpacked by end of day. My bedroom was more or less already set up from last night's activities when I was too excited to sleep.

By lunch, my hands were aching from unwrapping place settings and glassware for twelve, but most of the dishes were in their respective cupboards. By dinnertime, when I made a turkey breast sandwich and called it good, I had the entire



kitchen set up. Even my bright turquoise dish towel sat on the handle of the stove like I could whip up a pie at a moment's notice. Not that I would. Pie for one person seemed too much hassle.

“Good Lord, my feet are about to fall off,” I moaned to the empty house.

This called for wine.

I grabbed the bottle of pinot grigio I'd placed in the fridge after yesterday's grocery run, finding the cork screw on my first try. I thanked my past self who knew I'd need the sustenance and poured a glass. Yep, that's right. Just one glass. Two would be overindulgence.

I took the glass of wine into the living room and sat on the carpet, my back to the wall, surveying all the boxes I still had to deal with. Most of them were labeled “Books” which meant they'd have to stay in a box for now. My last place in San Francisco featured built-in bookcases on either side of the fireplace. My new house didn't, so I'd have to buy some shelves to display my ridiculous book collection. I didn't overindulge in much, but I made an exception for books. Non-fiction to be exact. There weren't many topics I wasn't interested in.

The late evening breeze fluttered in through the open window, the perfect balm to my overheated skin. Moving was hard. Which was why I intended to put down roots in Auburn Hill and avoid moving again at all costs. My business idea just had to work.

I took another sip of wine and leaned my head back against the wall, eyes closed, envisioning my new urgent care practice. In my mind, it ran like a well-oiled machine. The treatment rooms would be pristine, the equipment state-of-the-art, and the waiting room cheery, full of patients looking to me for my expertise.

A loud racket outside my window had my eyes flying open and a frown at the ready.

“What the hell is that?” I said out loud, the words nearly drowned out by something that sounded an awful lot like a saw. An industrial sized saw.

I stood up, groaning at the ache in my feet and the way my back screamed in agony, and looked out the window, seeing a light on at my neighbor’s place. Trees obscured my vision, but did nothing to abate the noise. I took a deep breath and counted to ten. It was early on a Sunday night. No need for me to go over there and demand he or she shut that thing down. But mark my words. If I heard that racket one minute after ten o’clock when the noise ordinance for Auburn Hill took effect, I’d be marching over there to bang on the door. Proper sleep was imperative for good health. Everybody knew that.

After managing to move an entire couch, two chairs, and one end table I could only guess was made of solid lead, I called it quits. A lukewarm shower and my comfy pajamas became the perfect end to a physically demanding night. The loud noise had shut off sometime while I moved furniture, leaving only the symphony of crickets outside my window. All was right in my world.

Pulling back my lavender scented covers, I climbed in and laid my head down. I’d give myself some time to envision my meeting with the mayor later in the week. I’d have my pitch down perfect. This town needed an urgent care, and I was the physician most qualified to spearhead it.

My lips tugged into a smile as I envisioned the treatment rooms again. In my mind, I was rushing from one room to the other to help a patient who desperately needed me, when that damn machine somewhere next door fired up again. My eyelids flew open, and I sat up in bed, seething. Before I could count to ten, I pulled a sweater on, shoved my feet into a pair of Crocs I used for watering plants, and trotted across the side yard toward the beam of light next door.

In my righteous indignation and haste to set this person straight about being neighborly, I tripped over a tree stump and fell to the ground, leaves sticking everywhere to my body. Who knew what other organisms I’d landed in.

“Goddammit, Finnie,” I grumbled, squinting at my hand, which had taken the brunt of the fall instead of my face.

I should have stopped to grab a flashlight, but that’s what I got for not counting to ten before I reacted. I couldn’t see much in the dark, but based on the sting, I figured I’d abraded my palm. The machine cut off and by the time I’d stood and whacked all the leaves off my body, the light beam had shut off too.

“Great. Just great,” I shook my burning fist at my unidentified neighbor and turned back to my house. I needed my first aid kit and another shower.

~

I was in that blissful state of half asleep, half awake, about to slide into dreamland when the machine started up again the next night. My eyes flew open, and the rage consumed me in an instant.

“Not again, good sir!” I said out loud, my finger punching the air.

Dramatic, I know, but two nights in a row of that god awful noise was enough to try any woman’s patience. I wasn’t known for good humor anyway, if the feedback reports from my job as an ER doctor in San Francisco were true.

*“She shouted at me for not vomiting in the spit cup.”*

*“That doctor should wear a muzzle. Great stitch technique, but...”*

*“Listen, I tried to hold the baby in when I saw who was on duty in the ER, but there was no keeping him in there when I was already dilated to ten. I’m going to suggest to Disney their next evil villain should be named Finnie.”*

Despite the feedback that I should have taken under advisement, I was ready for action this time. I threw on the sweater, jammed my feet in my Crocs, paused to grab the flashlight, and then flew out of there like a woman on a mission. It was after eleven for God’s sake and I had precious

sleep to get if I was to finish my business plan in time for my meeting with the mayor.

“I see you, stumpy!” I whispered to the tree stump that took me down last night.

I skirted around the trip hazard and made it all the way past the two tall trees that blocked my view of the neighbor’s yard. Weird there weren’t any fence lines around here to delineate properties, but maybe they did things a little different in Auburn Hill.

A large workshop came into view, light spilling out the door so brightly I was able to shut off my flashlight. A dark-haired man hunched over a huge machine, back muscles bunching and flexing as he ran a long length of wood through a saw machine that stretched up ten feet in the air. The wood clanked as it fell to the floor, the man standing up straighter, holding one piece of wood in his hands for a close inspection.

I sagged against the doorframe and blinked repeatedly. Maybe I was dreaming. Hallucinating? Because the man slowly turning to place his wood on a scarred work table was straight out of a Hollywood movie. A Marlboro man turned lumberjack. A cologne model all grown up. He looked to be mid-thirties and a hater of zippers as his worn denim jeans weren’t fastened, sliding down slim hips. My eyes dipped to take in the view like any warm blooded female’s would.

An even louder noise rent the air and I snapped out of my stupor. Hot or not—and I was most definitely going with hot—he was making a racket in the middle of the night. Saw dust flew through the air, coating his entire naked upper body, the tiny flakes of wood embedding themselves in all the nooks and crannies of his muscles.

I’d never been so jealous of a wood particle.

As soon as the machine wound down a decibel or two, I cleared my throat, wrapping the sweater further around me to cover the nipples that had suddenly stood at attention despite my attempts to tell them to calm down. Lumber man lifted his head, sky-blue eyes finding me, surprise barely registering.

“Hey,” he grunted, an easy smile showing off straight white teeth and two smile lines bracketing his mouth.

“Hey yourself,” I responded, my tone decidedly more arctic than his. “Do you know what time it is?”

His grin intensified as he glanced out the window to the left. “S’pose it’s nighttime if that dark sky and half moon mean anything.”

I frowned, my dislike for this character growing with each stupid comment. “Yes, us civilized people of the twenty-first century use these things called clocks, and mine says it’s after eleven.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he muttered, running his fingers along the edge of the board he’d cut, paying me zero attention.

I stood up straight, sensing he wasn’t taking me seriously. “Auburn Hill has a noise ordinance that says all loud noises must be stopped by ten o’clock. I’d hate to have to call the police department.”

He whistled through his teeth and spun back to the loud machine that caused a cloud of saw dust. Was he really going to keep working after I’d threatened the cops? What kind of egotistical muscle man did I move in next to?

“Oh, I’d hate for you to call poor Waldo too. Man likes his sleep since he’s got five daughters. I suspect any man would be tired out with all that estrogen around. How about you put your ear plugs in—I know you city girls all have ‘em—and call it a night before you anger the town chief?” He winked like a sexy devil I wanted to throttle while simultaneously rubbing myself all over his delicious body.

And with that he pushed a button and the machine from hell cranked back on. He put the board against a flying wheel of red, and wood particles went flying again.

“Wha—” I’d only been this angry once before and very bad, life altering things had happened because of it. “One, two, three...”

The man shifted and fed another edge of the board to the sander, his jeans slipping lower to show off more tanned skin.

The guy probably suntanned nude in his front yard. I lifted an eyebrow mid-count. I wouldn't mind that, actually.

No! What was I thinking? The guy was a grade A asshole, and I'd have to come up with another method to shut him and his machines down at night. I twirled around and marched back to my house, grumbling the entire way.

“Who the hell says ‘I’ll be damned’ anyway? What is he? Eighty?”

I slammed my back door shut and locked it, irritated with myself for getting distracted by a hot body. He was clearly in the wrong and then he had the nerve to suggest earplugs as the logical solution.

Flopping down into bed, I really didn't know how I'd get to sleep when I had rage fueled adrenaline running through my veins. When the sander fired up again, I reached over, grabbed my earplugs, and shoved them in my ears. Yes, Mr. Asshole Neighbor, I did have earplugs next to my bed. And this was the last night I intended to use them. I didn't move to this bumpkin town to live like I did in the city.

Tomorrow, I'd carve out some time to chat with the Chief.

Mr. Asshole Neighbor had another thing coming.

## Charlie

Snapping the lid on the tiny diffuser, I fired that bad boy up, inhaling deeply when the first puff of lavender infused air hit my nose. I needed some goddamn shut-eye pronto and my go-to sleep aids were failing me. In the back of my mind, I knew it had everything to do with the date on the calendar and the fact that the anniversary was looming yet again, but I was in the middle of a huge project for my best client with a strict deadline. You can't handle power tools and be chronically sleep deprived. No bueno.

Chester bumped his head on my thigh and whined. I knew what he wanted and yet I always tried to hold out and get to sleep on my own. He'd come to me a few years ago fully trained to be a therapy dog, a detail I kept on the down-low. Didn't need it getting out that Crazy Charlie needed a therapy animal to simply handle life.

"I know, Chester boy. Let me try doing some sanding and then if that doesn't work, you can come sleep on the bed with me." I patted him on the head, ignoring the way he looked at me straight faced like I was a dumbass. I knew it, he knew it, but no reason to acknowledge it.

I pulled on another pair of work jeans, identical to the other eight pairs I owned, not bothering with underwear or even zipping them properly. I'd seen *There's Something About*

*Mary* at a very impressionable age. No underwear, no zippers, no trip to the emergency room twenty miles away with mangled goods. I shuddered just thinking about that one scene.

The overhead lights fluttered on when I hit the switch inside my workshop, the place illuminated like a rock concert stage. Funny how most experts would say bright lights would cause insomnia, not heal it. It wasn't the lights so much as the methodical way wood always did what I wanted it to do that calmed the anxiety that crept up my spine at night. The smell of wood, the feel of it under my fingertips, the sturdiness of it. All of it combined to make me fall in love with it.

My brother would have teased me endlessly had he known wood would become my lifelong love affair. He was the people guy. I was the artist recluse. It had worked for us until it didn't.

I shook off all those thoughts and grabbed the cross beam I'd been working on earlier this afternoon. The church in Auburn Hill had hired me to make an outdoor pergola, to be ornate enough to match the inside of the church, but weather proof and functional for outdoor wedding ceremonies. Another few days and the main structure would be built. Then I could let my artistic side loose and carve out a design the likes of which no one had ever seen. I'd cut my teeth on cabinets, tables, archways, and doors when I first got started as an apprentice. Now though? I made one of a kind pieces of art that went for thousands of dollars. I didn't charge the church that much though. Didn't need that kind of bad juju doggin' me.

Stretching my head from side to side, I twisted my torso left and right to limber up. You know what a midnight wood session needed? Music, baby. Maybe a little Tom Petty to set the mood. I found the right channel on my phone and turned on the speakers set up high in the rafters of my work shop with the remote.

For a brief second, right before the music came blasting through the speakers, I thought about the woman next door. Didn't stop me from turning it on, but I sure did smile at the idea of her getting her panties in a tighter twist. Damn, that



woman needed to relax her fingers where they'd been clutching her sweater to her like a last line of virtue defense. Maybe she was just cross because the severe bun on the top of her head was causing headaches. Maybe she needed to do a cleanse or something to detoxify.

The music flared to life and my belt sander sang a sweet accompaniment that absorbed me completely. I had work to do, and thoughts to chase right out of my head. The work had always been a balm to my messy mind, giving me far more in return than a career. I lined up the plank back in the table saw to skim a half inch off to match the other one I'd made last night. Now if I could just get the edge of the final cross beam to look straight tonight, even with that incredible knot in the middle, I'd be a happy man.

“What the actual hell?”

I nearly jumped right out of my jeans as something tapped my shoulder, startling me. I jumped again when the back of my thumb hit the spinning blade. The skin split wide open a second before the searing pain registered.

“Fuck!” I yelped, pulling my battered hand into my chest.

I spun around and saw my new neighbor with her mouth hanging open in shock. Yep, that's what happens when you sneak up on people working with power tools. Little miss noise ordinance should have thought of that before she trespassed.

She continued to stand there, her green eyes blinking with guilt. I hazarded a glance down and saw blood dripping down my torso. Shit. I probably needed stitches. Grabbing the remote, I killed *Breakdown*, my favorite song from Tom, and darted a glance around. I should wrap it in a towel and put my hand above my head. After sixteen years, you sort of get the drill down. Cut yourself wide open, wrap, elevate, get thyself to the ER.

“How about you make yourself useful and shut the lights off behind me, huh?” I moved toward the door, irritated, but not angry. I mean, I was playing music at midnight at a level meant to wake the dead, or at least chase the demons from my

mind. Not her fault she didn't know the hazards of these machines. Anger wasn't an emotion I gave much attention to anymore.

“W-wait! Where are you going?” She finally unfroze and ran after me, her weird shoes making a suction noise on my glazed concrete floors.

I paused to throw her a wry smile. “To the ER for stitches. That's what happens when you disturb someone working with a large saw.”

She put her hands on her hips, not frozen at all anymore. Oh, here we go. Panties must be twisting right up her arse.

“Sit your ass down, Lumberjack. I'm an ER doctor. I'll go grab my bag and stitch you up.” She pushed my shoulder more firmly than I anticipated toward the stool by the workbench.

I watched her go, those alpaca pajamas disappearing into the night, surprised to hear she was a doctor. But then again, that profession kind of explained the panty problem. She must be one of those bad bedside manner docs.

“Here we go!” She came hustling back in with a large black bag held high like some Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman, intent on saving my life out in the wild.

I swallowed the snort, but only because if she'd be doing the stitches, I didn't want her pissed off at me. Before I could ask to see her credentials, she had a bunch of medical stuff laid out and reached for my hand. Her gentle touch fluttered against my naked chest, and despite my concerns about her emotional state given my only two interactions with her had been with her in a snit, I went willingly.

She put a towel under my hand. “This is going to sting.”

I barely flinched when she poured liquid lava over my injury, having done this song and dance many times. My only concern was making sure the blade hadn't sliced any tendons. I needed my opposable thumb to do my job.

“Can I get your name or do I have to start calling you Doc Anonymous?” I asked with a smile.

She barely spared me a glance. “It’s Finnie. Finnie Dorado.”

Well, that was unexpected. I’d assumed I have to spar with her just to get a name from her. “I’m Charlie. I’d shake hands, but we already are.”

Not a single reaction to our introduction. “Okay, looks like a clean slice. Only a slight cut to the tendon, so I’m going to stitch that up first and then close you up. You’ll need a heavy dose of antibiotics. I’ll start you off with an injection, but also write you a prescription for a ten-day dose. You’ll need to keep it wrapped for at least five days to make sure you’re clear of infection.” She rattled off instructions as she injected my thumb in multiple places and then began to stitch with a steady hand.

I studied her while her head was bent, the better to distract myself. Her dark hair was up in a bun again, the sharp pull on her hairline making me think of a ballerina. She was tall—maybe close to six feet with long limbs—but something about her gruff manners made me ditch the ballerina idea. There was too much aggression in the way she spoke and moved. Like she had a point to prove from the minute she woke up to the second she put her head down at night.

“So, you’re an ER doctor in a town that doesn’t have an ER,” I said, needing to figure out if she was just visiting or if she was staying and I’d have to deal with midnight visitors on a regular basis. Might have to start wearing safety gloves.

Her hand hung in the air for a second in between stitches before looping back and continuing to sew me together. “I have a business plan proposal for the city council about starting an urgent care here in Auburn Hill.”

I nodded ruefully. “Well, if you keep sneaking up on me, I’ll be your best customer.”

Her head whipped up, and she drilled her green-eyed gaze into me. “I didn’t sneak up on you. You just couldn’t hear me over those god awful machines. Which was my point.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Point taken. Maybe next time you could make your point a little less painfully, Doc?”

She had the good manners to blush before dipping her head and continuing to stitch. “Yeah. Um, about that. I’m sorry for my part in your little accident tonight.”

Oh, she was good. She was sorry “for her *part*” in my “little” accident? Maybe in her next life she’d be a lawyer, using a lot of words to say literally nothing at all.

A really hot lawyer. I screwed my eyes shut and tried to wipe my brain. Where had that ridiculous thought come from? I mean, she *was* hot. If you liked alpacas and frowns and a way with needles, which I didn’t. Maybe I’d lost more blood than I thought.

She was back to frowning, that line between her eyebrows as natural as the sawdust that covered every part of my person when I worked out here. The impish side of me that always got me in trouble, but made life worth living roared to life. She’d poked the bear, and I was about to poke back. *Quid pro quo* and all that nonsense. The only difference is that I poked so softly and repeatedly you didn’t feel it until it was too late.

“About ten years ago, my buddies and I and our girlfriends all got together for a pool party one summer afternoon. Just young kids trying to scrape out a living and have some fun on the weekends. Naturally, we broke out the snacks and one thing led to another.” Her head came up, and she looked at me like a goat might look at a watch. I smothered a smile and kept going with my inane story. “We laid out all kinds of salsas, each more potent than the next. As men do, we got a little competitive and placed bets on who could handle the hottest salsa. Loser had to walk around the apartment complex pool in a thong Speedo. Now you might be asking yourself why any of us even owned a thong Speedo, but I swear it was given to me as a gag gift.”

Finnie was watching me, her stitches halted as she studied me like one would a roach under a microscope.

“I made it to the very end, finally tapping out when my eyes and nose leaked so much I feared I lost my senses for

good. Stupid Joe won, probably because he wasn't lactose intolerant like me and drank a glass of milk after each salsa tasting."

"Did you wear the Speedo?" Finnie asked, the words looking like they tasted horrible.

I grinned, remembering the wolf whistles. "Hell yes, I did. I rocked that Speedo with a strut a runway model would envy."

She snorted and got back to stitching up my thumb.

Staring at the top of her tight bun, I finished the story. "But Joe had the runs for a week after, so who's the real winner here?"

Finnie looked up and grinned, flashing her straight white teeth. The front tooth had a little chip on the bottom edge, a slight imperfection that held my attention more than Hollywood-perfect looks ever could. She clapped her hand to her mouth, eyes swimming with mirth. It was a good look on her.

First poke complete, next poke waiting on deck.

# Finnie

I couldn't believe I was laughing inside. I'd been on a roller coaster of emotions from the moment I trudged across to Charlie's property. First raging anger at his music in the middle of the night, then horror when I saw the damage he'd done to himself because of me, and now a begrudging humor from his insane story. Who doesn't even flinch when they cut themselves that deeply? Who tells stories about losing salsa eating contests and assless Speedos? I'd met plenty of weirdos in the big city ER, but they didn't usually look this good in a pair of jeans. Maybe it was just late, and that's why I couldn't seem to keep up with this guy.

I tied off after the last suture and started to pack up. "Just need to wrap it and then you can head to bed." Please Lord, let him go to bed and not play that hideous music again.

Without intending to, I eyed his muscled chest, only catching myself when I drifted down the line of hair to the opening of his jeans. It was hard not to look, what with it all being inches from my face. The man was certifiable and unfairly gorgeous. "Probably need to get that sawdust off you before you go in though."

Charlie looked down at himself like he'd forgotten his state of undress or the fact that he was coated in a layer of

wood particles. I wrapped his hand and taped off the thick gauze, confident it would hold through the night.

Charlie hopped off the stool and started swiping the saw dust from his chest with his good hand. The flakes fell to the ground and reminded me of a homemade sign I saw at this little flea market not long ago.

“They say sawdust is just man glitter,” I said out loud, wishing I could swallow the words the minute they floated out there.

Charlie’s head popped up, and a hint of a smile danced across his face. “I believe that’s what I’ll have to call it from now on. A name that good can’t go to waste.”

A wash of warmth flooded my limbs, and I wished it was because of a job well done on the stitches. Charlie kept batting at his back while twisting around, but missed a lot of the man glitter because he couldn’t use his right hand.

Because of me.

“Here, let me help you.” I moved behind him, intent on assuaging my guilt by giving him a hand. Literally. Doctors have an oath to do no harm, and here I was, responsible for nearly cutting his thumb off.

He gave me his back and stood still. I swiped my hand across his broad back, and I nearly jumped at the warmth of his skin. I swiped again and went a little slower this time. Not to feel his bunched muscles, but to properly get all the sawdust off, of course. How did one man build so many muscles just playing with wood boards all day long? Standing so close, I saw the goosebumps form on Charlie’s arms. Could be that it was just cold out here in the middle of the night with not enough clothes on. Or could it be from my touch? I kept swiping, and the goosebumps kept coming. My face transformed with a feminine smile to know I had that power over him. Over any man, for that matter.

It was short lived as Charlie spun around suddenly, his steady blue-eyed gaze almost even with mine. In heels, I’d be taller than him, a fact that never bothered me, but tended to

bother most men who tried to date a five-foot-ten woman. His chest was just an inch away from my outstretched hands. Sawdust remained in patches, the messy remainder making my hands itch to fix it.

I gulped. “You, uh, have some man glitter on your man parts.” I gestured down to where his jeans hung open far below his trim waist in a tantalizing vee. I mean, what were even holding those pants up at this point? Did I even want to know? The flush of my cheeks told me I very much wanted to know.

Charlie just smirked and swiped at the sawdust in some kind of lumberjack version of a Thunder Down Under dance. My temperature soared, and I knew I needed to get out of there before I had a hot flash way too young to be blamed on menopause.

“Okay, well, sorry again, gotta go,” I mumbled, grabbing my medical bag and setting my sights on the door.

Charlie followed me, the heat of him padding behind me in an old pair of Vans keeping my back scorched. I reached the door and flung it open, relieved to find safety in the outdoors and the cool wind. I only turned back when I heard him grumble under his breath.

“What’s that?” I asked, seeing him fumble with the door.

His bandaged hand tried to hold the doorknob while his good hand turned the key in the deadbolt. The gauze meant he kept slipping off, and when he winced, I’d had enough. I stomped back.

“Give me that.” I shooed him away and locked the door myself, handing him the key and trying to squash the guilt that clawed up my throat.

He did a little mock bow and took the key back, his rough fingers brushing across mine much longer than necessary for a simple key exchange. I shouldn’t have felt anything through the thick blanket of guilt, and yet there was something there in the way I was aware of him. I’d never been more attuned to the fact I was a single woman and he was a half naked man.



He winked, and I wanted to simper. “You should probably move in for a while to make sure I don’t hurt myself. Well, anymore than you already did.”

I froze, not quite believing what I just heard. “I’m sorry, what?”

He smirked again, the lines bracketing his mouth somehow fascinating. “You should move in. Least you could do.” He shrugged his broad shoulders.

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?” I finally screeched, an owl somewhere in the dark trees above me agreeing with a loud hoo-hoo.

“Shh.”

The man actually shushed me. The man who blared Tom Petty at midnight through concert worthy speakers dared to shush my outburst.

“You literally are insane, aren’t you?” I nodded slowly, the conclusion making all kinds of sense now. Probably the only thing about Charlie that made sense.

He kicked at a rock with the toe of his shoe, head bowed. “Not out of my mind. Just down a finger on my dominant hand.” He raised his head. The look he gave me was all too serious, fanning the flames of my guilt. “How about just a week?”

I shook my head vigorously. “Absolutely not. I’ll just make sure you get inside your house for the evening and I-I’ll bake you brownies as further apology.”

His face lit up. “Pot brownies?”

“No!” I hissed. “What part of ‘I’m a doctor’ makes you think I’d bring you pot brownies?”

His lower lip pushed out and I could see the toddler boy he must have been, working the ladies and getting his way every single time. It was a surprisingly effective expression.

“Just—come on.” I huffed and spun around, heading for his house. I’d make sure he got safely inside and then head to my own bed. I’d already apologized, sewed him up, and

offered to bake for him. I didn't owe him my whole damn life for a simple mistake. None of this would have even happened if he hadn't been blasting music at midnight, so really, it was *his* fault.

When I got to his house, a motion sensor flood lamp flicked on and I found the back door. I turned the knob, finding it unlocked.

"You should probably keep this locked," I added helpfully.

Charlie scratched the top of his head, his long hair in even more of a disarray. "Lady, this ain't the city. Besides, all my worldly possessions are in that workshop, not the house."

I shrugged and swung the door open. "Suit yourself."

I walked in and fumbled for the light switch. Charlie came right up behind me and reached around me, yanking the chain on a little lamp, illuminating a tiny living room. He was so close. He smelled like fresh-cut wood and man, a combination I wouldn't have described as sexy before today. With a loud bark, a large golden beast ran from the hallway to the living room, nearly tackling Charlie and I where we stood.

"Hey, Chester. Welcome our new friend, Finnie." Charlie rubbed behind the dog's ears, his voice crooning to his pup.

Chester sat, his tail swishing over the laminate floor, his friendly eyes trained on me. I reached a hand down to say hello and wouldn't you know? Chester lifted his paw too. I held it gingerly and gave it a shake, delighted by his manners.

I let go and eased back over to the door, needing out of this twilight zone as soon as possible. It was probably one in the morning by now.

"Okay. You're home. I'll drop off that antibiotic prescription tomorrow."

Charlie ignored me, walking into the tiny kitchenette to grab a glass out of the cupboard. Chester continued to stare at me like he was daring me to leave without petting him. Charlie spun to the sink, but the glass slid right out of his bandaged hand. The shatter of glass had me running to help.

“Stay back!” he barked. Chester whined and stayed where he was.

“I have shoes on,” I countered.

He eyed my footwear dubiously. “Yeah, I’m sure glass can’t get through those flimsy things with holes in them.”

“They don’t have holes on the sole,” I argued, then pointed at his shoes. “And it’s not like those relics from ten years ago have a lot of tread on the sole left.”

We both stood there surrounded by glass shards, eyes narrowed, arguing in the middle of the night about our shoe choices. Chester whined again. I sighed and dropped my shoulders. The guy couldn’t even get a glass of water without hurting himself. There’s no way I could go back to my place and leave him here knowing the thumb I’d injured could lead to so many other calamities.

“Fine. You win. I’ll stay here for a few days to make sure you don’t kill yourself tying your shoes.”

A huge grin was his response. “Awesome. We’ll have so much fun this week.” Like this was suddenly summer camp, and we’d be best pals by the end.

I shook my head, pretty sure nothing about the next few days would be fun.

“A few days,” I corrected him.

“A week,” he whispered in my ear as he stepped clear of the glass shards and left the kitchen to stand by Chester. “Thank you for cleaning that up. Oh, and I wear slip-ons predominantly, so don’t worry about me tying my shoes and dying anytime soon.”

I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes to silently count to ten. A few days or a week. All of it would be straight torture. When I had my anger and disbelief at the abrupt change of events in my life on lockdown, I bent down to pick up the largest shards of glass. Tossing them in the trash, I headed to the coat closet I saw when I came in the door. An old Hoover vacuum stood at attention, the brown vacuum bag overfilled with dust bunnies escaping. I took another deep

breath and refrained from rolling my eyes. Once I had the vacuum bag cleaned out into the trash can, I plugged it in and made sure all the glass was picked up.

“Here you go, Sunshine.” Charlie stood by the hideous floral couch with a stack of linens and that damn smile I wanted to wipe from his face. Chester was right behind him, a golden shadow.

“It’s Finnie,” I snapped.

His smile didn’t falter. “I know, but Sunshine just seems to fit you so much better. Don’t you think?”

I did roll my eyes then. “Listen. We need to get a few things straight. I’ll help you with the necessities around here, but I’m not a maid. In fact, I have a very important meeting with the mayor this week to prepare for. That will have to be my priority, got it?”

Charlie nodded and Chester whined.

“Well, good night then. See you in the morning.” Charlie left the room, his muscles flexing as he went, his dog by his side.

It would be a long, confusing week stuck here.

Because even though he drove me crazy, Charlie was also hot as hell.

# Finnie

The walls were singing to me like I was trapped in some twisted animated movie and the beast would soon sweep into the room and twirl me around a fancy ballroom. Instead, I got a wet tongue scraping the back of my hand, jarring me from the bizarre dreams I'd had all night long while tossing and turning on the couch that had seen better days.

I blinked my eyes and groaned. Chester sat next to the couch, his sweet brown eyes staring me down, panting that horrible dog breath right in my face.

“Chester...” I whined, reaching up to scratch behind his ears.

Then froze when the singing started again. This time it wasn't the walls. It was coming from down the hallway.

*“Sweet Finnie-girl, duh, duh, duh, my nurse extraordinaire come fetch me my pants. Oh please, sweet Finnie...”*

I admit, I wasn't at my best before a cup of coffee in the morning, but after a rough night of sleep in a strange place with an even stranger man singing to me at the top of his lungs like I was his personal servant was just downright maddening.

I flung off the blankets and scrambled to my feet. Chester whined and backed away, sensing the storm cloud brewing. While I padded down the hall, he followed, his nails clicking

on the laminate flooring. At the doorway to Charlie's room, I skidded to a stop, every drop of heated blood going up in flames for a different reason.

Charlie laid out on his back in bed, the sheets a ruffled mess around him. His black boxers barely contained the body parts it was designed to cover, or maybe it was that his body parts were too large to be contained. Who knew? But that wasn't all. His muscular legs were that of a sprinter, defined yet bulky with a power I suddenly needed to be witness to. Even his feet were attractive and I didn't say that lightly. I now understood where foot fetishes came from. The ripped torso I'd perved over last night was back in action, no man glitter this morning as Charlie ran his hand up his six-pack abs and placed his palm over his heart, but just as distracting.

*"Sweet, Finnie-girl..."* he sang again to the tune of Sweet Caroline.

I grimaced and plugged my ears, snapping out of whatever trance his body had me in.

"You realize you're hurting Chester's ears too, right?" I took a step into his bedroom.

Charlie smiled, and I had to admit, just-woken-up-and-hair-all-a-mess Charlie was a sight to behold. "Chester loves my singing voice. He whines when I sing, like he's trying to sing along."

I snorted. "Or maybe he whines because you're hurting his ears."

Charlie batted away my comment by swiping his good hand through the air. "I need some pants."

"Yeah, I'll say," I grumbled.

"What's that?" he asked as he sat up in bed and ran a hand through his hair.

I snatched a ruffled pair of jeans off the chair in his room and threw them at him. "You need a haircut too. And a shower."

Charlie lifted an eyebrow, an impish gleam in his pure blue eyes. “Wanna scrub my back, nurse?”

I very much wanted to scrub his back—amongst other things. I sucked in a breath and shut down that thought, but not before my lady parts got excited, thinking they might see an end to the dry spell we were in.

“I’m a doctor, not a nurse,” I snapped.

Charlie stood, putting one foot and then the other in his jeans. He tugged them up his incredible legs an inch at a time, only having one hand to use. With an eye roll, I stepped forward and helped him pull them up all the way to his belly button. He yelped and pulled them down a bit, at least until I could see the two veins that ran down his lean abdominal region. Moving quickly, I buttoned up his pants and fumbled for the zipper.

“Hey, easy there, Doc.” He lurched back.

“Well, you can’t leave your fly open all day.”

“I beg to differ, but if you insist on feeling me up and then zippering me, make sure you take some care. Wouldn’t want stitches down there too.”

My face heated, and I hated him for making me blush. I dealt with semi-naked patients all day, every day, so why did this particular one have me riled up? I zipped up his jeans and took a huge step back, unable to look him in the eye. “How about some breakfast and then I’ll leave you to your day?”

“Do you make a good pancake, Doc?” Charlie’s stomach let out a rumble, drawing my eyes to his washboard abs. Again.

“I don’t have time for pancakes.” I spun and marched out the door. “And put a shirt on, would you?” I called over my shoulder.

His kitchen cabinets weren’t bare, but they were close. I found a pan, turning on the stove and twisting to the refrigerator to find eggs, bread, and butter. Perfect. I’d make a quick breakfast and then get out of there to cool off and get back to putting the finishing touches on my business plan.

“So where were you an ER doctor?”

I fumbled an egg, nearly dropping it on the floor. I hadn't even heard Charlie come into the kitchen. Chester trotted in and sat next to me, probably waiting for me to drop some crumbs. If he didn't watch it, he'd get a raw egg instead. I kept my back to Charlie and got busy making breakfast.

“San Francisco. Did my residency there and stayed on.”

“Hmm.” The grumble could have meant a dozen things. I didn't care about any of them. I was only here to make up for injuring Charlie. Making friends wasn't a priority.

“Did you enjoy it?”

I nodded, flipping the eggs with the one and only spatula in the drawer next to the stove. “I did. It was hectic, and the hours were crazy, but I had that sense of a job well done when I went home for the day.”

“Why are you here in Auburn Hill then? We don't have an ER and I'm sure any urgent care you build won't be as thrilling as a big city emergency room.”

The man was nuts, but astute. He was right. I wasn't looking to recreate the adrenaline rollercoaster I had in San Francisco. I needed something calmer. Still high-level medicine, but without the dose of panic. Fact was, I'd hit a wall in the city. I'd frozen when I needed to be reacting quickly with a level head. I could pinpoint the exact time it all changed, and I went from being a top rate doctor to a panicked worrier who was only in the way. Not that I had any intention of sharing that with Charlie or anyone else. I'd moved to a new town for a reason, after all.

“There comes a point in a woman's life when she wants something a little more stable. A bit less hectic,” I answered vaguely, sliding the eggs onto two plates.

“Why aren't you married?”

I nearly choked and shot him a look of disbelief over my shoulder. Ignoring the way he looked lounging over the tiny breakfast bar without a shirt, I had that strange mix of lust and disgust again. What was it with this man eliciting seemingly



opposite feelings at the exact same time? It was like a special talent that no one appreciated.

I grabbed the toast out of the toaster and spread the butter. “I didn’t realize getting married was something I needed to check off my list. Besides, I’m only thirty-two. I have plenty of time should I decide that’s what I want to do. Why aren’t *you* married?”

“Haven’t met the right woman yet, but I fully intend to co-habitate whether a formal marriage is involved or not.”

“Good for you.” I spun around with our plates, wanting to get out of there as soon as I could before this line of questioning went any further. I didn’t care about Charlie’s marital outlook. I couldn’t care. I had career plans that couldn’t be sidelined by a weird neighbor with a body that made me break out into a hot flash.

“So, what’s Finnie short for?”

I nearly dropped the plates, eggs and all. That was definitely not a topic I wanted to discuss.

“It’s not short for anything,” I answered primly, setting the plates down and digging in.

Charlie didn’t even glance at the food, just stared at me.

“What are you doing?” I asked around the egg in my mouth.

“You don’t really think I’m going to believe Finnie isn’t short for something right?” Charlie tilted his mouth to one side. “I mean, you did stitch me up last night, so maybe I should ask to see your credentials to make sure I’m not putting my life in a liar’s hands. For all I know, you might not even be a doctor.”

I swallowed hard, not even tasting the eggs. “Oh, that’s low.”

He shrugged and used his left hand clumsily to cut a bit of egg.

I sighed. He could find out easily enough if he dug around. “It’s short for Rudolfina.”

He whooped loudly, those lines around his mouth teasing out a smile on my own face despite myself.

“Shut up!” I reached over and smacked his chest, regretting that reaction the second I touched his warm skin. My cheeks flared hot, and I got busy eating the rest of my egg. My body was a traitor.

“Rudolfina? That’s amazing. Honestly. I fuckin’ love it.”

I rolled my eyes and didn’t make eye contact. “Yeah, okay, whatever.”

His hand landed on mine, my fork clattering to the plate not from the force but simply from the intimate touch. “I’m serious.”

I looked up, yet another mistake where Charlie was concerned. His blue eyes still had that twinkle, but they also appeared completely lucid and serious.

“You should be proud of that name. It’s whimsical and different and perfect. Just like you.”

I melted. Yep, I straight up melted into the bar stool, a reaction I hated as much as I loved. He had to be lying. No one had ever loved my name, myself leading the pack of those who fervently hated it. And I certainly wasn’t a whimsical or perfect person. If only he knew.

“You’re out of your goddamn mind,” I said quietly.

Charlie just smiled, damn him. “Maybe, but what a way to go about life, huh?”

# Finnie

The music blared out of the tiny speakers in my car as I headed back home, my approved business proposal sitting in the passenger seat underneath two bags of takeout containers from Forty-Diner. If it came deep fried, I'd ordered it. The mayor had a killer poker face, but after a grueling round of questions on the tail end of my presentation late this afternoon, he'd approved my plans. Now I needed to build out the empty retail space on Brinestone Way and I'd have myself a proper business.

Tonight, though, I would celebrate. The last two days had been stressful taking care of Charlie and Chester, as well as unpacking my new house and polishing my business plan. I could take one night to celebrate the life I was building before getting down to work again on the gritty details.

I pulled into Charlie's long driveway, not bothering to stop by my place as most of my toiletries were at Charlie's, along with a couple day's worth of clothes. I'd underestimated how much help a grown man would need down one hand. There was no doubt a woman wouldn't have needed any help, but a man? Dear Lord, they were babies with injuries.

The wound looked good so far—no sign of infection—and the stitches were so smooth I'd bet my clinic he'd barely have a scar. But the guy seemed to have an unhealthy aversion to

clothing for a fully grown male. I couldn't take much more of seeing muscles popping every time I glanced around. It was enough to have my libido spinning out of control, despite how irritated he made me when he opened up his mouth.

Climbing out of the car, I saw a stack of wood planks piled outside his workshop that hadn't been there this morning. What was that man up to? If he split my perfect sutures hauling wood, I'd kill him.

"Charlie?" I called out as I entered through the unlocked front door.

I still couldn't understand leaving your house unlocked, but none of my valuables were there so I didn't press too hard. Setting the bags on the small kitchen counter, Chester ran up to me from somewhere in the house, his happy tail wagging hello and planting an idea in my head about getting one of my own as I settled into Auburn Hill.

"Where's that crazy dad of yours, buddy?" I asked him.

He barked and trotted to the back door. I followed him outside and to the workshop. Damn fool was trying to still work with a hand he couldn't use. Hot irritation hit the top of my head at his negligence. Here I was altering my whole life to stay with him and nurse him to health and he was back here doing more damage?

This time, when I saw him hunched over the huge sander, I waited until he stepped away before announcing my arrival.

"What the hell are you doing?" I called from the doorway, not trusting myself to come in any further, because of course, the guy didn't have a damn shirt on again.

His dark head of tousled hair popped up, and he smiled, the grin so natural and pure it made me grumpier. I was here to yell at him, not ogle his model handsome face and torso.

"How'd it go?" he asked, running his good hand along a plank of wood.

Damn him. Of course, just when I wanted to pick a fight he'd be sweet and ask how my proposal went.

I took a couple steps into the workshop, inhaling the smell of wood and varnish. “It went really well, thanks for asking. The mayor gave the green light and said he’s sure the city council will agree. He already proposed one of the office build-outs on Brinestone for my urgent care and I got to check it out.”

Charlie stepped around the worktable and before I could brace myself, he pulled me into a hug, his strong arms wrapped around me tight. My cheek squished against his bare torso and I may have inhaled some man glitter as I got a signature whiff of soap and sweat and wood that already registered in my brain as Charlie.

“Congratulations, Rudolfina. That’s news we should celebrate.” He pulled back, all smiles and flexing muscles.

And there he went again, leaving me discombobulated over how I felt. The hug and sincere congratulations made me want to call him friend. The muscles pressed against me, causing a heat to bloom in my body, made me want to climb him and use his machinery. And then finally, the damn usage of my given name when he knew I didn’t like it, left me feeling ragey.

And ragey always won.

“It’s Finnie, mister,” I snapped, disentangling myself and stepping back to breathe fresh, un-Charlie-scented air. “And I’m already past you on the celebrating. I’ve got food from Forty-Diner and a bottle of red wine waiting for us in the house.”

Charlie whooped, the sound echoing off the tall walls of his workshop and bleeding out some of the rage. He spun back around to shut off his sander, put his arm across my shoulders, and walked us out the door. Chester ran around us in circles, feeling the excitement and wanting in on the party.

“I’ve got some moonshine I’ve been saving, but tonight seems like the night.” Charlie’s voice was a low rumble against me.

It felt way too good under his arm, so I dashed ahead on the pretenses of getting the back door open for him. All kinds of lines were being crossed because of our living circumstances and I wasn't happy about it. My body seemed on board and all too happy, but thankfully I was an intelligent, mature woman, run by my brain, not my hormones.

Charlie started going through the cupboards, looking for something. I had no intention of drinking any moonshine, special batch or not, so I opened one of the bags from the diner to spread it out on the counter.

"Nope. Keep it in the bags. We're traveling, woman." Charlie came up behind me with paper plates, napkins, and forks. "Let's put these in there and I'll grab the moonshine."

I rolled my eyes, but did as he asked. "Where are we going?"

He came back with a mason jar in his hand, filled with what I could only guess was moonshine, not that I'd ever had it before or knew anything about it. He'd also found a shirt on the counter and put it on. Thank God for small miracles.

"Just leave it to me."

I grabbed the two bags, and he stuffed my wine bottle between his arm and his body, leading us out the back door again. The three of us walked past his workshop, where the trees got a bit denser.

"Is this still your property?" I asked wearily. I didn't fancy getting shot for trespassing tonight.

Charlie nodded ahead of me, pointing out rocks and tree roots for me to watch out for. "Yep. I own four acres, most of which is back here. The guy who owned this place before me sold off that parcel you're on for some extra cash, but then got mad when they built a house right against the property line. When he sold it to me, I figured I'd be in my workshop more than my house, so I didn't care."

We rounded a corner on the trail and there, up on a slight hill, was a round pergola the likes of which I'd never seen before. It was already dusk, so it was hard to make out the

details, but even from a distance, you could see the structure was a piece of art. Six sides all held up with large slabs of wood, a lattice peaked roof, and fine details that reminded me of an old Victorian house.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, walking up the stairs to get a closer look at the craftsmanship. Chester curled up under one of the bench seats to snooze like he’d been here on more than one occasion.

Charlie put down the moonshine and wine, then walked over to a small box on the ground, nestled next to the structure. He flipped a switch and the whole pergola lit up with tiny white outdoor lights.

“Oh!” I turned in a circle, taking it all in, forgetting all about the bags in my hands. I turned back to Charlie, making his way up the stairs. “Who made this? It’s gorgeous.”

His head dipped, but I didn’t miss his little smile. “I did.”

“Charlie...I don’t know what to say. I had no idea this is what you made.” I put the bags down on the wood plank floor and had a seat on the built-in benches all around the inside perimeter of the pergola.

He just shrugged like it wasn’t the most beautiful structure I’d ever seen. “I make all kinds of things, but my favorite jobs are when I can make a structure more than just a structure. I want everything I make to be a work of art that can be appreciated for decades.”

I shook my head slowly, seeing him with new eyes. The man was an incredibly talented artist. And I’d just cut his thumb so badly he couldn’t work. Tears filled my eyes, and I forced them back. No need to get all emotional just because I’d carelessly stolen someone’s livelihood. Not even stole. Just put on hold. A temporary pause.

“Ah, you got the good shit,” Charlie announced, having opened all the food containers from the diner. He threw some fried chicken, a biscuit, fried artichokes, and calamari, fresh from the fisherman that morning who supplied Auburn Hill with seafood, on a plate and handed it to me.

I nodded my thanks, happy to see his bandaged hand looked no worse for wear since I'd cleaned and re-banded it this morning. Taking a bite of the chicken, I groaned. The juices threatened to spill down my chin, and I tried to mop them up with my hand.

Charlie's whooping laugh had me looking up, my mouth full. "Aren't you glad I brought napkins?" He held one out to me and I took it gratefully. "Something hot about a woman chowing down on some fried chicken and groaning."

"Oh shush," I said around my bite, wiping my chin and blushing.

He sat down next to me with his own plate of food, the conversation dying out as we dug in. The pine trees around us swayed gently in the light breeze and not a sound could be heard that wasn't from nature herself. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, which surprised me. Maybe Charlie and I were friends after all.

"Okay, it's time for the really good stuff." Charlie put his plate down on the bench and reached for the moonshine with his good hand. "Here. Open this and take a swig. Tell me it's not the best thing since that fried chicken recipe."

I took the glass jar and got the lid off, but shook my head. "I'm going to pass. I'm not exactly a moonshine person."

Charlie scoffed, that damn twinkle in his eye sparkling. "Everybody's a moonshine person, Doc." He elbowed me in the side. "I bet you haven't even tasted moonshine before."

I sniffed. "You'd be right. I'll just drink my wine, thank you very much."

Charlie sat up tall, refusing to take the jar of moonshine. "Nope. I'm not taking no for an answer. Haven't you ever heard of a 'no thank you bite'? This here is a 'no thank you sip'. Come on now, just a sip." He reached over to nudge the jar closer to my mouth.

I rolled my eyes, no will power against Charlie's peer pressure. "Okay fine. Just one sip so I can say I tried it."



The cool liquid hit my mouth, and I sputtered as the taste slammed into me. The smell went up my nose and made my eyes water. I swallowed just to get it out of my mouth, coughing violently and nearly spilling the rest. The burn went all the way down my esophagus before hitting my stomach.

Charlie burst out laughing and rescued the jar from my hands. I wanted to hurt him as much as that shit was hurting me. I couldn't even take a full breath. Everything in my body was on fire like I'd swallowed lit kerosene.

"What...the hell...was that?" I sputtered, pounding my chest to clear it.

Charlie whooped some more and Chester came by my side, whining, sensing I needed comforting. I pet his head and tried to regulate my breathing. Charlie took a large swig of the moonshine and I winced.

"How do you do that?"

He put the jar down and grabbed his phone. "I grew up on it, so it's not that bad. I hear it's an acquired taste so you may just have to keep trying it."

I sputtered, "Oh no, I'm not drinking that ever again. I'll just stick with my wine." I unscrewed the top of the bottle I'd bought at the grocery store that afternoon and took a swig since I didn't have a glass. He could have his moonshine and I'd have the wine.

A song started playing, making me jump. I swung my head around to find the source and saw tiny little speakers up in the rafters of the pergola. Charlie pocketed his phone after selecting a playlist. All the head swinging made me a little dizzy, and I wondered how much alcohol was in that moonshine.

"May I have this dance?" Charlie bowed formally, his palm extended, which looked ridiculous with all the man glitter still in his hair. The guy was a walking, talking contradiction.

"Oh no, I'm good. I don't really dance." Time spent pressed against that chest that drove me out of my mind? No

way.

“Ah, come on, Finnie,” he whispered, that smirk speaking to the juncture between my thighs. The alcohol flowing through my veins softened my resolve to the point I had none.

“Fine...” I huffed, standing up and taking his hand.

He immediately twirled me into his arms, tossing me off balance. I landed against his chest, my palm landing on one smooth pec muscle beneath the worn cotton. And once I felt the goods, I felt compelled to keep exploring. My hand slid over his shoulder and then up his neck and into his hair. I could grab a fistful in the overgrown strands, so I did.

Charlie growled, more vibration than sound, pulling me in close and putting his hands low on my back. The move pressed him in tight, his obvious erection digging into my belly. My heart thundered in my chest and I wondered if he could feel that too. He shifted left, and I went with him. The beat of the song stayed slow and as we swayed, we stared at each other in silence. His blue eyes were hooded even as he kept the small smile in place. Even the crickets had quieted down amongst all that charged air between us.

Chester barked an alarm and scrambled to his feet, dashing off down the trail. I jumped out of Charlie’s arms, startled and breathing hard. What the hell was I doing? Charlie was my neighbor, and I was only here to doctor his hand, not dirty dance with him under romantic string lights in the middle of the night.

“D-do you think we should see where he went?” I asked, looking anywhere but at Charlie.

From the corner of my eye, he stood, still frozen in place where we’d been dancing. He didn’t even bother to look over to where Chester had darted off.

I didn’t wait for an answer. My hands got busy stuffing our food containers back in the bags and cleaning up our little picnic. Who would have thought the canine would be the most sensible one of the pack, breaking up what should never have happened?

“I’m sure everything’s fine. Probably just a truck passing by or a late delivery. I get a lot of those working out of my home.” Charlie came up behind me and took the bags out of my hands, leaving me nothing to do but clench my fists at my side and demand my body not reach out and touch him like I desperately wanted to.

He went down the stairs and gestured for me to go ahead of him. I did, and when he flicked the pergola lights back off, plunging us into the darkness, my heart plunged too.

What the hell was in that moonshine?

Charlie

Finnie didn't even wait for me to wake up this morning, taking off to who knows where like a coward. I'd bet my entire workshop of expensive machinery I wasn't the only one feeling the effects of the moonlight and a slow dance with a sexy partner last night. She'd been right there with me, and if Chester, the worst wing man ever, hadn't dashed off, I would have kissed her. I would have tasted those lips to see if her grumpiness was a flavor or simply a habit.

"Chester!" I hollered as I walked to the workshop, my favorite coffee mug in hand.

At least she'd left me a pot of coffee before escaping my house to God knows where. Chester ran up from wherever he'd been playing and nuzzled my hand. I wasn't too happy with him for last night's disruption, but how could you stay mad at those brown eyes, floppy ears, and a mouth that looked like it was smiling all the time?

"Come on, boy. It's time to get some work done while the Grumpster is away." I had to put my coffee down on the step to fumble with the door lock. My thumb didn't hurt anymore, but it was still mostly useless. Thankfully, this wasn't my first rodeo, and I'd had to learn how to work while injured before. I had jobs that were due and I wasn't about to be late simply

because a dark-haired doctor moved in next door and disrupted everything.

I spent all day in the workshop, doing as much of the detail work on the pergola for the church as I could before stretching and moving on to my other project. I'd been working on a project for Finnie the night she'd butted in and I'd cut myself. If I continued with this pace, I could still get it done by next week when she moved back to her own place. She may not particularly care for me as a person just yet, but I liked her. Hopefully she'd accept my gift.

"The doctor has arrived to fix whatever you've messed up by working when you shouldn't."

Finnie's grumpy voice broke me out of my trance. I got that way sometimes when it was just me and the wood. My brain went elsewhere, and hours could pass without me noticing. I put down the board I was working on and stood up straight to see her standing in the workshop doorway with her medical bag. She looked tired, but beautiful. Like a force of nature restrained into a professional package.

"Nice to see you too, Doc. Have a good day at work?" I'd kill her with kindness until she admitted she liked me.

She nodded and got to work laying out a pad of some sort on the worktable and spreading out her tools of torture. "Sure did. Got the lease signed on the new office space and met with a couple contractors about doing the remodel inside."

I moved over to join her, sitting down on a stool and putting my injured hand on the pad like a good little patient. "I hope you met with Titus. He does amazing work and won't rip you off."

Finnie gently unwrapped my hand, the white bandage looking a little haggard after a full day of sawdust in the air. "I did meet with Titus as he's the one who put in my new flooring next door before I moved in, as you probably know. And I also got a bid from some guy named Daire, who had his contractor come look at the space for me. The mayor recommended him and he bid fairly low."

I frowned, alarm bells ringing. Always follow your gut. That's what my dad had taught me and something I believed in one hundred percent. "I wouldn't trust anything coming from the mayor and certainly not Daire. He's been through this town recently and he's not well liked. Titus, though? He comes from good people. Born and raised here in Auburn Hill. Everybody likes him and you don't stay in business long in a small town if you're screwing people over, even if his bids aren't the lowest of the pack."

Finnie nodded, pouring some crap on my hand and dabbing at the sutures. "I'll take that under advisement."

"See that you do." My voice came out harsher than I wanted. I just didn't want her to get mixed up with the wrong people.

Her head popped up, and she scanned my face before returning to cleaning my wound. "It's healing up nice, Charlie."

Hearing my name from her lips made me feel like I took a sip of moonshine. "Did you know tonight is a full moon?"

She snorted softly, swiping some ointment on my hand. "Nope, I surely didn't."

I nodded, excited about everything the full moon brought with it. "Yep, it's a time for celebrating completed tasks and looking forward to new beginnings. So, we're going to eat dinner, burn some sage, get some essential oils going, and then sit outside under the full moon."

Finnie finished wrapping my hand with fresh white gauze and looked at me with her nose all wrinkled up. "Seriously?"

I winked. "Seriously. It'll do you some good. Just wait and see."

I hopped off the stool and helped her pack up her bag.

"I put a lasagna in the oven before I came out here so it should be done shortly," Finnie said as I closed up the workshop for the day.

My stomach let out a rumble. “Good. I’m absolutely starving.”

“What did you eat today?” she asked, her cheeks pink.

Aha! She felt bad for ditching me before the sun was even up. I shrugged. “Coffee?”

She huffed and shook her head. “That’s all you’ve had?”

I smiled at her, though she refused to look at me. Time to lay it on thick with a pout. “Can’t do much with just one hand.”

She stopped walking and looked at me, guilt warring with irritation in her eyes. I couldn’t handle it and burst out laughing. That was such a Finnie look. Always irritation mixed with something else. She oozed irritation from her pores like a pheromone.

“Oh...” she grumbled and smacked me on the chest.

I laughed some more and followed her into the house for dinner. She plated my lasagna and even cut it into bite-sized pieces for me. I was perfectly capable of doing it myself with my left hand, but I liked her waiting on me. It meant she cared about me way, way, *way* deep inside.

She told me all about her plans for the clinic while we ate and I shared how the pergola was going for the church and what jobs I had after that. Kept quiet about the secret project for her, though. I’d pull that card out of my back pocket when I’d pissed her off something fierce. I helped with dishes, though I think I may have gotten more water on her than she appreciated as she shooed me away rather quickly.

“Come on, Rudolfina. We have moonlight to bask in.” I had a six-pack of beer held in my injured hand and I grabbed Finnie with my good hand. “The rest of the dishes will wait.”

“But the pasta will turn into concrete on those plates,” she whined.

Damned woman was actually arguing to spend more time doing dishes. “Then I’ll throw them away and buy new ones.”

She scoffed at that idea, which only made me smile wider. She did, however, let me lace our fingers together and tug her all the way outside into an open clearing on my property. I had chairs already set up out there as I made it a habit of drinking beer under the full moon each month. Life was too short not to enjoy the little things.

I got her settled in a chair and handed her a beer. “Prepare for enlightenment.”

She rolled her eyes but took the beer, popping the top off using the edge of the chair like a seasoned pro.

“Damn. Rudolfina knows how to drink,” I teased. I grabbed the bundle of sage out of my jeans pocket and lit it with a cigarette lighter, watching the smoke rise in the cool air.

“We’re seriously doing this?” Finnie asked.

I nodded and had a seat in the chair next to her. “Sage is used for healing purposes and since I’m injured, I figured it would be a good idea, don’t you?”

Finnie spun in her seat to face me, her legs tucked up underneath her. She was still in a blouse and slacks, but she’d ditched the heels for bright pink flip flops.

“You do realize I’m a medical doctor, right? I believe in antibiotics and vaccines and pharmaceuticals to heal the body.”

I also spun to face her, the sage held between us. She could use some stress reducing. She had every single one of her sphincters clenched too fuckin’ tight. Being a messed up bastard, thinking of her sphincters had me wishing my pants were a little looser.

“I do understand that. And do you understand that I’m a hippie in a grown man’s body? I believe in all you believe in, but first, I think you should use all the natural resources our earth has to offer before going your route. Is that so harmful?”

She lifted her nose in the air. “Not if you use these things wisely and seek medical help before it’s too late.”



I nodded. “And as big of a tree hugger as I am, where was I headed when I cut myself the other night?”

Her nose dropped back down. “The ER,” she mumbled.

I leaned closer. “What was that?”

“The ER,” she said louder. “Okay, I get it. You’re a weirdo hippie using your sage and shit responsibly. Sage away. I’ll just sit here and drink a beer while you soak up the moonlight or whatever.”

I winked at her and sat back. “The sage is working already. Look at us getting along. And shit.”

She let out an honest-to-God giggle, and I smiled up at the full moon.



“We would have been here a lot sooner if you hadn’t made me juice all those disgusting vegetables,” Finnie grumbled, pulling her car off the side of the road where I’d directed her.

“Vegetables are not disgusting,” I countered, amazed anyone wouldn’t like a celery-beet-lemon-ginger root juice mix.

Finnie flipped her huge dark sunglasses on her head. “You’re right. Vegetables are not disgusting. But juicing them all up together in some sort of concoction from hell is disgusting. It tasted worse than the damn moonshine!”

I grabbed my chest. “However can we be friends, Rudolfina?”

She climbed out of the car with an eye roll and I followed. “First of all, we’re not friends. Secondly, we’ll never be friends if you keep calling me Rudolfina.”

I took a deep breath of ocean air, my entire body relaxing with just one glimpse of the blue Pacific ocean stretching out as far as the eye could see. “My sweet Finnie. First, we’re already friends. And secondly, the only thing I like more than that juice this morning is riling you up. It’s become my favorite thing to do. It’s just so easy.”

Her car door slammed, and I looked back to see her carrying her work bag, another bag full of towels and sunscreen, and two chairs. She made one hell of a beautiful pack mule, oblivious to the beauty around her. I stifled a laugh and came over to take all but her work bag out of her hands. She nodded her thanks and headed down the path to the beach below us. This was my favorite spot to catch some sun and jump in the water. Figured I'd get some fresh air while showing Finnie some of my favorite spots since she was new in town.

“You know you can't get your hand wet, right?” Finnie squinted at me, her hands on her hips, her feet deep in the soft sand while I got the chairs set up.

“I know. I'm here for the moist air and sunshine. It's good for healing.” I stripped my T-shirt off and had a seat in my red board shorts. I tipped my head back to the sun and took deep breaths.

Finnie was so quiet I finally looked over to see her still standing there just staring at me.

“What?”

She jumped and scrambled to put her work bag by her chair. “Nothing.”

She pulled her black cover up off to reveal a royal blue swimsuit that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. I choked, sitting forward to cough as spit went down the wrong pipe.

“You okay?” she asked me, squeezing sunblock onto her cupped palm and rubbing it up and down her arms, her full breasts bouncing in tiny triangle scraps of fabric held by a single flimsy string.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Holy hell, how had she been hiding that beneath her demure blouses and alpaca pajamas this whole time? She had the body of the perfect woman, all lush curves, smooth skin, and tantalizing valleys. I should make her model for me so I could sculpt her shape into wood, preserved for all eternity.

She sat in her chair, her legs crossing daintily and cherry red toenails bouncing as she swung her foot up and down. “Okay, you go breathe the fresh air and dip in the salt water and I’ll be over here getting work done.”

A huge stack of papers slapped down on the tops of her thighs, snapping me out of my shocked daze. Another few seconds of me staring at her and she’d be sure to take a swipe at me with the grumpy stick.

I swallowed hard and attempted normal conversation. *Just picture her in alpaca pajamas.*

“You’re seriously going to ignore the natural beauty surrounding you to stare at a bunch of papers?” The idea of not enjoying the beach was crazy to me.

Finnie flipped some pages over and ran her yellow highlighter over a line. “Yep.”

I shrugged. “Suit yourself.” I stood and adjusted my shorts discreetly. Good thing she wasn’t even looking at me or she’d see the proof my body was insanely attracted to her. Although I’m sure she felt my wood last night dancing in the pergola. There was just something about her that made me want to put my hand over her mouth and have my way with her. Silently. Nothing sexier than a silent Finnie.

The wind picked up, and I yearned to feel the sea spray on my face. I didn’t get more than two steps into the cold Pacific ocean before I heard a yelp behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see a wave of papers flying through the air from Finnie’s lap.

“My business plan!” she wailed, jumping up and flailing to capture the papers, making even more of a mess.

I shook my head and made my way over, dancing through the breeze to help her grab the papers.

“Goddammit!”

“It’s okay. We’ll get them back,” I assured her, snagging another from the sand.

Then another gust swept through and more pages went flying, dangerously close to the water's edge. Finnie dashed over and I got distracted by the perfect heart shaped ass bending over in that tiny swim bottom. Then she straightened up and the panic on her face hit me in the gut. I couldn't be pervy over her body when her heart and soul was flying around in the wind, about to be ruined. I didn't understand her obsession with work, but I could still respect it.

Finnie reached out, her fingers barely grasping a stack of the papers that had settled on the sand when the wind whisked them out of her hand and into the water. She cried out and threw her hands down at her side before spinning and running back up the trail with the pages she'd been able to save. Tears of frustration welled up in her eyes and my heart lurched in my chest.

So I ran around like a madman, collecting every single sheet of paper, even if it was currently facedown in the surf. I knew what this business meant to Finnie, and I hoped she had everything backed up on a computer somewhere. If not, I'd dry out each sheet and help her piece it back together.

A seagull snatched up the last paper in his beak. I gulped. The seagulls around Auburn Hill were known for being assholes and this one was no different based on the way he stared me down as if daring me to fight him for it. Don't know what a seagull would even want with a piece of paper, but they'd been known to hoard stranger things. I crouched down low and lifted a knee at a ninety-degree angle, arms out to the side in crouching tiger position. I hung there for at least a minute, holding his stare without blinking. Just when the burn in my leg got to be unbearable, I lunged forward with a loud "caw!" and he dropped the paper and flew away.

Worked every time.

You just had to be crazier than the seagull.

I smiled smugly and added the paper to my stack, happy to have recovered every single one. Leaving the chairs on the beach for now, I hustled up the path to Finnie's car. She sat in the driver's seat, the papers arranged all around her as she

sorted through them. Every few seconds a sniff could be heard over the crashing waves below as she tried to stem the tears. Nothing a man hated more than seeing a woman cry. We were helpless, and always said the wrong things. There was just no winning when a woman started in on the waterworks.

I came around the car door and handed her my stack, refusing to look at the breasts still on display in her bikini top. Now really wasn't the time. I mean, it was always the time to appreciate beauty, but I knew Finnie wouldn't see it that way. "Got every last one. I think if we lay them out to dry, they should be okay."

She raised her face, the tears gone, but her eyes and nose were red. Her mouth opened, but she paused before speaking.

"You got them all?" she asked, her voice sounding small and completely unlike her commanding, grumpy self.

I scoffed, winking at her in hopes it would get her riled up and get us back on our normal track of arguing. "Did you think I wouldn't? I'm a master paper collector. Might even be better at catching flying papers than carving wood. I mean, that talent doesn't get put on many resumes, but it should, right next to any formal degrees."

She tried to bite back the smile. "Master paper collector?"

I gestured to the pages in her hand. "Got the proof right there. I'm your guy if you ever get a chance to get in one of those chambers where they blow money and you see what you can grab before the buzzer goes off." She bit back a smile and I wanted to pat myself on the back for a job well done. "Now how about you sort your pages while I collect our stuff down on the beach and we'll get on out of here?"

She nodded, and I turned to leave, happy I'd been able to somewhat avert her crisis. "Charlie?" she called out.

I turned again and squinted against the mid-day sun.

"Thank you," she said just loud enough for me to catch.

# Finnie

I'd fallen asleep quickly last night for the first time since I'd started staying over at Charlie's house. The couch was still lumpy and smelled of expired essential oils, but I'd been at peace. Charlie rescuing all my papers had created a truce of some sort in our relationship. Not that we had a relationship, but it seemed like the tension was finally gone. We were friends, or at the very least, friendly.

My phone ringing woke me up just a little before seven. I was getting used to Chester's tongue on my hand or cheek being my wake up call, so an actual phone call proved startling. The display said Mrs. Trudowsky, which was even more odd. I'd met her by accident my first day in town at Coffee. She'd insisted we exchange phone numbers so she could call me when they had open bowling night. I didn't have the heart to turn her down.

"Hello?" I answered, not sure if I'd be invited to bowl or if the old woman was having some sort of medical emergency.

"Doctor Finnie? Is that you?" her weathered voice scratched over the line.

"Yes, Mrs. Trudowsky, it's me." I sat up and shoved my hair out of my face, stretching my abused back. Couches were no good for long term sleeping arrangements.

“Well, I just wanted to invite you and that sweet Charlie to come bowling tonight. It’s BOGO night!”

I grinned, having absolutely no interest in bowling, but wasn’t this the sweetest small town phone call ever? Wait. I frowned. Why did she bring up Charlie?

“Um, well, I’m not sure if Charlie has plans or not.” My stomach dipped, and I instantly felt uneasy.

“Oh, well, I’ll wait while you go ask him, honey. I figured with you two living together now, you’d want to bowl together too. Nothing says romantic like a night of bowling in rented shoes, you know. We even have a new mascot. The Alley Cat!”

While that point about bowling being romantic was arguable, and the Alley Cat mascot sounded adorable, I couldn’t seem to get past the living together comment.

“Um, what are you talking about, Mrs. Trudowsky? Charlie and I aren’t living together. We’re neighbors.” I stood and paced the room, Chester dancing around with me, thinking we were playing a game.

“Well, that’s a disappointment. I heard you two were seen shacking up and got my hopes up. Charlie is such a lovely man and deserves a smart, pretty girl like you. Maybe you should invite him anyway and see if the sparks don’t fly right along with the pins, huh?” She sounded so hopeful I hated to let her down, but I couldn’t have those types of rumors flying when I was trying to start a business in the community.

“I-I don’t know about that. Um, I gotta go, but I’ll see what I can do.” I hung up on the poor lady and spun in a complete circle, like I’d find the answers somewhere on the plain white walls of Charlie’s living room.

All too quickly, the nerves morphed into anger. Here I was trying to help the guy and now rumors had gotten out, potentially damaging my business before I’d even opened my urgent care. I was a single woman in a small town. I couldn’t be shacking up with a guy and then open a clinic where I’d be the town doctor, a supposed moral pillar of society.

“Shacking up?” I asked Chester, who only whined in response.

I stalked down the hall, intent on getting Charlie up to help me deal with this debacle. It took two to shack up, after all. He and I needed to be on the same page so we could squash this rumor and get ahold of whoever started it to set them straight.

I knocked once on his bedroom door, but didn't hear anything. The guy was probably sleeping in again. Turning the doorknob, I walked in, fully expecting to see his lazy lump under the sheets. Instead, I saw a rumpled bed, but no Charlie.

A noise to my right had my head swinging. Charlie walked out of his bathroom, a white towel rubbing through his shaggy hair and not a single stitch of clothing on. His cock swung between his muscled thighs as he walked into the room, the length and girth more than I would have expected from a guy who juiced vegetables for breakfast. My jaw dropped open, and I stared, completely transfixed, even when he came to a stop and saw me in his room.

“Morning, Doc,” he drawled, and if I wasn't mistaken, he flexed his abs.

“Uh...” Words were impossible.

He turned and headed to his dresser, not bothering to cover himself with the towel. Which was fine by me because his backside was a sight to behold as well, the sculpted globes of his ass practically begging to be squeezed by my hands. A tiny drop of water slid down the indent of his spine and into the slight dimple above his ass. I was suddenly thirsty. And hot. Scorching hot.

Charlie turned again, slowly stepping into a pair of underwear and tucking himself inside. A crying shame to keep that thing covered up. Like putting a robe on Michelangelo's David. I shut my mouth and swallowed, finding my mouth desert-level dry. All my fluids had headed south.

“Like what you see, Rudolfina?” Charlie winked at me, the smug little smirk the splash of cold water to the face that I needed.



I stood tall, all five-foot-ten inches of me trying desperately to recover from seeing Charlie naked as the day he was born. He proceeded to pull on some jeans and a worn T-shirt while I watched. It was a reverse strip tease and yet every bit as exciting as the original version. He could even zip his pants without my help.

I blinked.

He could zip his pants. What the hell was I still doing living here when he clearly didn't need my help anymore?

"Charlie," I started, having to clear my throat when it came out a croak. "We need to talk."

He hissed in a breath and then smiled, always the jokester. "Sounds serious, Doc. Maybe we can get some breakfast first and then chat?"

He swept out of the room and called back that he'd make me a smoothie. I shuddered. His smoothies were almost as bad as his juice cleanses. I trailed behind him, grabbing some clothes out of my bag and getting dressed in the guest bathroom I'd taken over as mine for the time being. My brain seemed to have short-circuited. All I could see were flashes of that fabulous cock. The way it leaned left. The way it grew in the scant seconds he'd stood there naked in front of me. What would it look like fully erect? I squeezed my thighs together and begged myself to stay focused.

My priority was squashing this rumor and moving the hell out. Now dressed, I splashed water on my face and tried to convince myself that moving back to my new house was what I wanted. Somehow, that idea seemed to lose its luster in just a few short days with Charlie and his ridiculous antics. Plus, Chester. I'd miss that dog and his intuitive whine.

"You're an emergency medicine doctor, Finnie Dorado. You stay focused and do what needs to be done. Feelings are bullshit and unreliable. You know this," I said to myself in the mirror.

A flashback to me crying in a supply closet at the hospital in San Francisco hit me like a ton of bricks. That's what

happened when I let emotions rule the day. I'd pulled myself together back then under unthinkable conditions and promised myself not to indulge in those pesky feelings ever again. Maybe it worked for others, but not for me. Never for me.

With that reminder steeling my spine, I left the bathroom, took a sip of the disgusting smoothie Charlie handed me in the kitchen, and sat down to tell him two things. I was moving out, and he needed to go into town today to squash that ridiculous rumor.

“Here’s the deal, Charlie. I’m—”

Charlie held his hand up and interrupted me.

“Before you get your panties in a twist, I didn’t know you’d be in my room. I could have sworn the door was closed before I hopped in the shower, so that little peep show is on you. I’m not uncomfortable with nudity, but I have a feeling you might be.”

My hand dropped onto the counter. Problem with nudity? Excuse me?

“Um, I don’t have a problem with nudity. I’m a doctor, for Christ’s sake. I see naked bodies all the time.”

Charlie smirked, a green juice mustache above his lip. The man had no right to smirk and look that damn hot doing it when he also looked like an overgrown idiot. “I don’t know, Doc. You appear a bit strung tight after seeing me naked. I just have that effect on women. Don’t worry about it.”

I stood up, the stool almost tipping over. “I’m not ‘strung tight.’ I just wanted to have a serious conversation with you about our living arrangements.”

Charlie padded over in bare feet to put an arm around me, those muscles I’d seen this morning pressed into my side. Oh God, he smelled good.

“You saw the goods and now you want to sleep in my bed. Am I right?”

I shoved his hard body away with my elbow, nearly spilling his hideous smoothie. “No!”

Charlie cracked up. “I’m just teasing you, Rudolfina. Why don’t you come out to my workshop and I’ll show you how to work off some of that stress that’s got your panties up your crack?”

My face flamed red. “They’re not up my crack. I’m not even wearing any!”

Charlie’s eyebrow lifted. “Oh, really?”

I threw my hands in the air. “Ugh! I’m not wearing any because I ran out of clean clothes because I’ve been living out of a duffle bag to help you out when you’re not even injured enough to need my help and now the town is gossiping about us and all because I didn’t realize you could zip your own pants already!”

Charlie froze, the silence between us stretching out after my outburst. Chester came over to my side and sat, his head butting against my hand and his cute little whine calming me down.

“That’s quite a lot to take in all at once and yet I feel like I need to apologize for zipping my pants more so than being naked in front of you. Is that right?” Charlie scratched the side of his head, looking quite uncertain.

I sighed. “I don’t know. Let’s just go out to your workshop and have a conversation. Okay?”

Charlie swooped his hand toward the back door. “Sounds good.”

I walked out and took a deep inhale of fresh pine-scented air. Maybe I did overreact a bit in there. I just needed to calmly tell him I was moving out and then enlist his help to squash the shacking up rumor. Easy peasy.

“You forgot your smoothie,” Charlie said behind me.

“No, I didn’t.”

I marched off to the workshop, happy to have escaped drinking that crap. Going hungry was a better option than vegan protein and ground up wheatgrass. I was all for staying

healthy, but that just seemed like a recipe for the runs. I didn't own enough Pepto Bismol to sip that every morning.

Charlie ran ahead of me, Chester yipping at his heels. That dog was always up for a good time and Charlie was all too happy to give it to him. Despite being angry at Charlie for both flashing me—leaving me unbelievably and annoyingly turned on—and for the rumor swirling through Auburn Hill, I couldn't help but smile at the man and his best friend. A softer heart than mine would melt at the scene they made together.

Instead, I focused on all the reasons I needed to get away from Charlie and followed him into the workshop to lay down the law. He flipped on the lights and Chester went to lie down on the ginormous suede doggie bed in the far corner.

I had a seat on a stool at the workshop and put my elbows on the table, clasping my hands. “Okay, so—”

Charlie yanked on the tarp that covered a piece of artwork he must have been working on. It fell to the concrete floor in a heap, leaving a towering pergola naked to my eyes. And what a pergola it was. Smaller, but more ornate than the one Charlie had on the back of his property. It had carved details so fine I stood up and walked over without even realizing I'd left my stool. Vines climbed up the columns to burst into leaves and blooms at eye level, so intricate you could see every detail as if the wood sculpture had come alive.

“You made this?”

Charlie stood back, watching me admire his work. He smiled, but this smile didn't look like the rest. It was almost shy. Not arrogant at all.

“Yeah. I had to fashion a strap around my hand to get it done, what with the injury and all. But it turned out okay.”

I twirled under the structure, taking in the masterful wood working details that must have taken hours and hours of work to complete. “Are you kidding me? This is a million more times more than okay, Charlie. It's incredible.”

I stopped twirling and stood in front of Charlie, who wouldn't meet my eye. He rubbed the back of his neck and

looked extremely uncomfortable. “You’re a fucking wood working genius, Charlie. Say it.”

He looked at me then, wanting to laugh, I could tell by the way he fought it. “No.”

I grabbed his shoulders and tried to shake him, but he didn’t budge. “Yes! Your man glitter is your magical pixie dust. Say it.”

He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. When he looked at me, the smug look of a jokester was back. “I’m a fucking genius with wood.” He winked suggestively.

My face went red as all I could see was Charlie, naked, his cock so happy to see me.

Dammit. He probably was just as good with that wood as he was with this wood. And the hundreds of flowers carved from a hunk of tree behind me told me he was pretty fucking good.

Charlie moved away, my hands slipping from his shoulders. He slapped me on the ass, making me yelp, and dashed away to grab a simple board on the worktable.

“Come on. I’ll show you how to sand this sucker and maybe you can make your own masterpiece, huh?”

I walked over on shaky legs, wondering why I felt so out of control around this particular man. He made me angry, then turned me on, and then did something that made me wonder what was beneath all those smirks and smiles. I wanted away from him right this very second when in the next second I couldn’t wait to see what he’d do next. I liked things to be expected, scientifically proven, and orderly. Charlie was most definitely none of the above.

Charlie switched on the huge sander and stood so close behind me I could feel his heat through my tank top. His hands slid down my arms, and it was all I could do to hold in the full body shudder of delight. He held the wood plank with me, the scent of his soap filling my brain when I really should have been focused on the huge sand belt spinning by my fingertips. He pushed gently, and the board touched the sander, changing

the sound of the whine as it smoothed the rough edge of the board. Saw dust flew up in the air before Charlie pulled back. We checked the board and it was already smooth on one side. The instant transformation intrigued me and I was the one to push the board back toward the sander to smooth the other side.

I couldn't guess how long we spent just sanding a single piece of wood, but when we were done, it was as smooth as silk on all sides. Charlie spun me around and put the board on the worktable for us to admire.

"Nicely done, Rudolfina," Charlie said sweetly, his genuine smile saying he was proud of me.

I smiled back, feeling accomplished and oddly calm for the first time in many months. Maybe Charlie was on to something. Maybe working out here with your hands really was the cure for a racing mind and a troubled heart.

"You got a little something..." Charlie muttered, reaching up to my hair.

I gulped in a breath at his nearness, my breasts brushing against his chest. He drew his fingers through my hair and my eyes fluttered shut at the onslaught of sensations cascading through my body.

"Just some of my man glitter pixie dust in your hair," Charlie whispered, his breath beating against my face.

I felt him lean, and I knew I wanted that kiss more than I wanted my clinic. One little kiss wouldn't hurt, right?

"Yoo-hoo!" a loud voice from outside called, interrupting the moment.

We both jumped apart, and I swallowed hard at the intrusion. I couldn't see anyone, but there was definitely a woman on Charlie's property and we were seconds away from being seen and reinforcing that shacking up rumor.

"Who's that?" I whispered, heart beating frantically.

Charlie scrubbed a hand over his face. "That...is Poppy. Brace yourself."

## Charlie

Well, fuck me sideways. I couldn't count the number of times I'd had Finnie all flustered and blushing and looking exactly like a woman who wanted to be kissed. And every damn time, something interrupted us or changed her mind. If she didn't look so fuckin' adorable with saw dust—or man glitter, according to her—caked in her dark hair right then, I might have given up on her. As it was, she'd burrowed too far under my skin for retreat.

Even with a visit from Poppy, the original cockblocker, I was not deterred.

“Didn't want to interrupt you two lovebirds, but I have a package here for you, Finnie, and I didn't want to leave it on your doorstep since you're living here with Charlie.” Poppy handed Finnie a box from the Hardware Store, a gleam in her eye that didn't bode well for anyone.

The plain brown package seemed innocent enough, but I knew the Hardware Store was actually a sex toy shop here in Auburn Hill. If Finnie was shopping there, I had a whole new line of questioning to annoy her with once Poppy left.

“Oh, thank you, but I don't live here,” Finnie rushed to accept the package and deny the allegations. “Nor did I order anything from there. I'm not sure where the rumor came from,

but I'm just over here helping Charlie since he cut his thumb a few days ago. Being a doctor and all..."

Poppy's eyes lit up again after dimming with the denial of the juicy gossip. "Yes, that's right. Here to build an urgent care in Hell. Seems like the place for one, that's for sure. So nice of you to take care of Charlie. He's all alone out here..."

Why did women do that shit? They said something simple, but trailed off their sentence, implying something else entirely. Better to just come out and say what you were thinking. Reading between the lines was hard enough with one female, but add another, especially a conniving mail carrier known town wide for being a busy body, and you had a whole conversation that was going right over my head.

"Alone by choice, I assure you," I piped up, wanting to end whatever speculation or insinuation was going on that made Finnie so jumpy.

Although I hadn't really minded having Finnie around this week. She'd been a hoot to tease and not bad to look at either. Especially in a bikini. Or with sawdust in her hair. And she sewed my hand up nicer than any other doctor who'd given me stitches over the years.

"Yes, well, the only thing you can count on in life is change," Poppy smiled and backed out of the door.

"And don't forget taxes!" Finnie called after her.

As soon as Poppy was out of earshot, Finnie spun on me, a dangerous look in her eye.

"You, me, dinner. Tonight at Forty-Diner. We're going to traipse all over town showing people how you're injured and I've been helping you. We're going to squash this living together rumor once and for all. You got me?" Her finger drilled into my chest to emphasize her point.

I put my hands up in a peaceful gesture. "Sure, dinner tonight sounds great. Although I don't see the problem with the rumor."

Finnie's eyes narrowed and I wouldn't have been surprised to see sparks flying from her pupils. "No problem? I'm trying



to build an urgent care in a small town. The main doctor can't be sleeping around and be taken seriously."

"Are you sleeping around with more men than just me?" I asked.

Her hands flapped to the side like a bird trying to take flight. "I'm not sleeping with anybody!"

"Exactly. Nothing to worry about." I nodded. Problem solved.

She closed her eyes, head tilted back. Her lips began to move. I leaned in, wondering if she'd been taken over by a spirit. Hopefully the ghost occupying her body would be friendlier and friskier than Finnie.

"What are you doing?" I asked cautiously.

She held up a single index finger. Her lips finally stopped moving, and she took a deep inhale and exhale before opening her eyes. "I count to ten when I get angry."

I frowned.

She frowned back.

I shoved the board she'd been working on earlier at her. "Need to do more sanding?"

She rolled her eyes, walked out of the workshop, and yelled over her shoulder, "Be ready by seven!"



I knew what Finnie thought of me. It was what most people thought of me. Crazy Charlie. I'd heard about my nickname around town. Sure, I had some unique traditions and ways of doing things, but really, what was so wrong with being a hippie? Why not be addicted to kombucha and sage burning instead of a television screen or smart phone? It brought me peace and kept my stress levels low, so what was the big deal?

What I wasn't though, was dumb.

I knew Finnie was attracted to me, and I went in guns blazing to play on that emotion tonight. She wanted to show the town that we weren't an item. I wanted to show her that we

could make a very interesting item if she'd just yank those panties out of her crack and relax a little. So I showered, sprayed cologne on, actually put some gel in my hair, and buttoned up a nice pair of slacks with a polo shirt I had hanging in the back of my closet.

I'd driven us to dinner, opened doors, pulled out chairs, and asked questions I knew wouldn't anger her. Riling her up was all fun and games, but I knew she needed to know I could have a serious conversation too. She'd introduced herself to every single person we crossed paths with, making sure they knew I'd cut my hand and she'd sewn me up. By squashing that living together rumor, she'd started a new one.

That Doc Finnie was a little off her rocker.

Which meant everyone in Hell loved her. We were a community of citizens who'd collectively fallen off our rockers and banded together. Just spend one day observing the only two-lane roundabout we had in town and you'd come to the same conclusion too.

"How about you show me the office space for your clinic?" I asked Finnie as we left Forty-Diner, our bellies full.

The sun had set and all the streetlights had flickered on, giving downtown Hell a cozy ambiance. We walked along the sidewalk and I wanted to hold her hand. She looked gorgeous in a summer dress, topped off with a weathered jean jacket and brightly colored sandals. We looked like a couple out on a date. The exact opposite of what she was going for with this little outing.

"Sure," she smiled at me and headed toward Brinestone Way, the street that held most of the new businesses in town.

Finnie tripped, and I grabbed her elbow. Following her gaze, I saw she was looking up at the sign for the first shop on Brinestone Way. The Hardware Store. Her cheeks flushed bright red, and I remembered I needed to ask her about her delivery today.

"You order a wrench set or something from the Hardware Store?" I knew full well that wasn't what was in the box, but

figured a little teasing wouldn't ruin the evening. They sold tools all right, but they were of the x-rated variety.

Finnie hustled past the storefront to a shop two doors down. "Um, yeah, something like that. I guess they send a complimentary box out to newcomers as a welcome. So, here we are!"

She put a key into the lock and swung the door open, quickly changing the subject. By placing a brick against the door, she kept it open for me. Stepping through the doorway, I saw the space was quite expansive, faux wood flooring extending from wall to wall. The place smelled like fresh paint.

"We'll put in five treatment rooms, a break room for staff, and a waiting room. I'll even have my own blood lab and x-ray room on-site. I've decided to go with Titus as my contractor."

I smiled, spinning to take in the place, and genuinely happy with both her dream coming true and her decision to use someone trustworthy. "I'm impressed, Finnie. You're making your dream come true. Not many people are able to do that. Congratulations."

Her cheeks heated, and the moonlight streamed in through the front windows to back light her. I wanted to take a picture and remember this moment. Instead, I made a mental picture, labeling it with the caption *The day I well and truly began to fall for Finnie Dorado*.

There was just one thing I needed to know first before I let go of the ledge and allowed myself to slide further into whatever this feeling was I had for her.

"Why here? Why Auburn Hill and not the Bay Area where you're from?" I followed her back out the door to the sidewalk, my footsteps echoing in the empty room. She locked up behind us and stood there spinning her keyring in her hand.

I desperately needed to know she'd stay.

Finnie tipped her head from side to side, not meeting my eyes. I reached out and cupped her face. Her gaze flew to

mine, her movements stilling as we stared at each other in charged silence.

“I want to help people. I really do, Charlie. I just—I just can’t take the stress of the ER anymore.” She bit her lip and her eyes clouded over. “I know that makes me sound weak, but it’s the truth. I need a small town where I can begin to trust people again at my own pace.”

I shook my head slowly. “That doesn’t make you weak at all. It makes you a mature adult who knows what they need and gives it to themselves. I, for one, am glad you chose Auburn Hill.”

She huffed out a smile, letting me still cup her face. “Your injury was my fault, but I do have to say my sutures look amazing.”

I shook my head again, leaning in closer to whisper, “That’s not the reason I’m glad you’re here.”

She sucked in a breath, her wide eyes telling me she wasn’t ready but she was diving in anyway. It was my favorite expression of hers I’d seen yet. She leaned into me, her eyelids drooping, and I knew she felt the desire coursing between us more than fear.

I didn’t even have to lean down as she was almost my height. I just pressed my lips to hers and reveled in the feel of her softness all around me. My hand snaked along her waist and I squeezed her tighter than I should have. Her lips parted on a soft gasp and I took advantage, sweeping my tongue through her mouth and tasting her. For someone with enough piss and vinegar in them to scare a grown man, she tasted far sweeter than she had any right to.

Finnie moaned and grasped the collar of my polo shirt before her hands slid around my neck and grabbed my hair. Shivers ran down my back as her fingers dug into my hair and tugged. The woman could kiss as well as she could stitch.

I couldn’t say how long we stood there in the moonlight kissing outside her new clinic. All I felt was every curve of her body, the way she hesitated at first and then dove into the kiss

with a single-minded focus. The silky skin of her thigh distracted me as I inched up her skirt. The way I rolled my hips, and she mewled into my mouth. It went on forever and not long enough.

A car honked, most likely on the roundabout nearby that connected Brinestone Way to Main Street. Finnie jumped back, her skirt fluttering down around her knees. Her hand covered the mouth I'd just devoured, and I saw the fear flood back into her eyes.

Goddamnit.

“I, um, shouldn't have done that.” She took a couple steps away from me and looked back, a million excuses poised on the tip of her tongue. “That's clearly not the way to accomplish rumor damage control.”

“Why do you care so much?” I asked before thinking it through.

Hooking up with Crazy Charlie wasn't exactly the way to make friends in town. She was a smart woman. I was sure she knew that.

She stood straighter, and I didn't want to hear her answer. I wouldn't like it, no matter how she explained it. Bottom line remained, I simply wasn't good enough.

I nodded curtly and walked down the sidewalk in the direction of my truck. Time to end this not-a-date and get home to my canine companion, who thought I was pretty cool. The night had been nice while it lasted, but clearly I was delusional. There would never be a Finnie and Charlie. Never an us. Life had taught me I wasn't cut out for a duo.

“Charlie!” Finnie called behind me, her sandals slapping against the sidewalk as she tried to catch up. “It's not like that. It's just—can you slow down?”

I didn't. Couldn't. Shame and anger swirled in my chest and I needed to get out of there. I wouldn't leave her stranded, but I couldn't look at her beautiful face for one more second. We both race walked down the sidewalk until we came to my truck. I unlocked the doors and climbed in, Finnie following

me on her side. She was breathing hard when I started the engine and pulled onto the road to head home.

We sat there in uncomfortable silence until I pulled into my long driveway.

Finnie inhaled sharply. “I’ve made some horrible mistakes because of developing feelings. I won’t do that again. As lovely as that was, Charlie, I won’t let it bleed into my job.”

I ignored her, slid out of the truck without a word, and slammed the door. I didn’t know what she was talking about nor did I have the emotional space to explore that with her.

Nothing a jar of moonshine and a night out on my deck chair couldn’t handle.

# Finnie

Well, I finally got what I thought I wanted: a serious conversation with Charlie. Turns out serious Charlie wasn't nearly as fun as dance in the moonlight and drink green juice Charlie. Don't get me wrong, the conversation all night had been amazing. More than amazing. But then I'd gone and pissed him off. He was no longer talking to me, which made staying at his house more than a little uncomfortable. I put my pajamas on, straightened the blankets on the lumpy couch, and hoped he'd come inside, touched by the moon magic and back to his joking, teasing self.

In the meantime, I'd spend one more night here, though I doubted I'd be getting much sleep. All I could replay in my mind when I shut my eyes was that incredible kiss. The way he'd cupped my face so gently with his rough hands, but then ground his obvious desire against me. I'd lost all track of time and space, forgetting we were out in the open in front of my soon-to-be clinic. I'd never had a kiss like that. Didn't even know they existed until Charlie's lips were on mine.

I whacked my pillow and tried to get comfortable. Chester had abandoned me to be outside with Charlie. There wasn't a single noise or any reason I shouldn't be asleep by now. But my skin was on fire, my heart was racing, and no amount of squeezing my thighs together could ease whatever Charlie had

awakened in me. Just an endless loop of that kiss in my mind, over and over.

“No! Get out!”

A shout woke me from sleep. I blinked my eyes and realized I must have fallen asleep at some point.

“No!”

There it was again. Charlie.

I jumped off the couch and ran down the hallway without a single thought but getting to Charlie as quickly as possible. The door stood cracked open, so I barreled in and nearly tripped over Chester, who had his front paws up on the bed, his nose trying to rouse his human best friend from sleep.

Charlie thrashed against the pillows, his arms and legs fighting whatever it was he saw in his dream. His face scrunched up and he let out a low moan that raised the hair on my arms. That was all I could take. I needed to wake him immediately. I crawled onto the bed, being careful to avoid his thrashing legs.

“Charlie,” I whispered, not wanting to frighten him any further by waking him too abruptly. Night terrors were a scary thing.

He mumbled something I couldn’t catch, his legs heaving and tossing the sheet right off him.

“Oh, dear baby Jesus,” I wheezed, trying to stay focused.

The man slept naked.

I got a good look—give me a break, it was a mighty fine sight to see—and then put my hands on his chest. In the back of my mind I knew I shouldn’t be this close to temptation in the middle of the night, but wild horses couldn’t drag me away from someone in need.

“Charlie, honey, you gotta wake up.” I spoke louder this time. “Charlie, it’s me. Finnie. You’re having a bad dream.”

He stilled, his heart thundering below my palms. His eyes blinked open and his face cleared. He looked up and saw me,



then down at my hands on his bare chest. Chester whined and jumped down to curl up in the corner, satisfied I'd helped Charlie and he was no longer needed.

"Finnie?" he whispered, still groggy.

I pushed back some of his hair from his forehead, wanting to soothe him further. "Yeah, it's me. You were having some sort of nightmare."

He screwed his eyes shut and my heart lurched. I'd come to care for Charlie over the last few days, despite myself, and I hated to see him upset. I kept stroking his hair and holding my breath until his blue eyes opened back up.

"Want to talk about it?" I asked hesitantly.

He just stared at me for a long moment and then finally nodded his head. I realized it was odd to see Charlie without a ready smile on his lips. I'd stay until that smile came back. He moved his arm out to the side and tilted his head. I flipped over and snuggled into his side, my new point of view showing me other parts of Charlie had woken up too. His erection was obvious. Hell, the thing was pointing right at me. I froze, not knowing what to do. Did I ignore the tent pole? Say hello to it? Make a joke? What was the appropriate protocol here?

"It can't be helped, Finnie. Just calm down and don't look at him. He'll eventually go away." Charlie's voice above me held a hint of laughter that had me relaxing again.

I looped my arm around his waist, cutting off my view of things further south. The image of it would be stuck on the back of my eyelids for all eternity, anyway. "So, what was all that about?"

Charlie heaved a sigh, my head going along with his inhale and exhale as my cheek pressed against his chest. "I've never told anyone about my nightmares."

He stopped, and I held my breath. When he didn't continue, I prompted him, my doctor brain kicking into gear to see if I could help him.

"So, you've had the same nightmare more than once?"

Charlie began to stroke my hair. The pit of my stomach swooped and nosedived at his touch. I'd missed this. The closeness of two people snuggled in bed chatting. The touching. The comfort of knowing someone intimately. Of feeling safe in someone's arms.

"It's not a nightmare. It's a memory."

His voice scraped across his vocal chords, sounding like he never meant for them to escape. I frowned and snuggled closer.

"Tell me about it?"

He sighed again, and I held on tight.

"I don't sleep well. Haven't for fourteen years. My brain keeps replaying one night when I was twenty. I had a brother, Finnie. My best friend. We were twins. He hated it, but I was born first. Never did let him forget it."

His voice cut off and my heart ached for him. This story would get bad, I could just feel it.

"Like young assholes do, we were out late one night, driving way too fast and not paying much attention. To this day I can't even remember what happened. I don't know if Chris saw a deer or just missed a curve, but the next thing I know, we're flying off the road and down an embankment not far from Auburn Hill city limits. Screaming, his or mine, I don't know. And then the impact. God, it felt like we hit a brick wall. Turned out to be a tree. I must have passed out or something because my next memory is trying to get out of the car. I did. Had to climb out the window, but I got out. I ran around to Chris's side, but his door was pinned by a huge tree trunk."

He stopped again, and I blinked hard, trying to keep my tears from falling on his skin. He'd said, "I *had* a brother." Past tense. I sniffed and tried to keep it together.

"He didn't make it?" I asked softly.

"Nope." Charlie's voice wobbled. "I couldn't get him out so I made the choice to leave him and go up the embankment for help. By the time the paramedics came, he was gone. I've

asked myself every single day whether I did the right thing. Maybe I should have gone through the passenger side and tried to get him out that way. Maybe I should have stayed with him. My brother died alone, Finnie.”

I pressed an elbow into the mattress and sat up, hovering above Charlie’s face. “No. You listen to me. You did what you thought was right. Pulling him out probably would have made his wounds worse and he would have bled out, anyway. Doesn’t sound like anything could have saved your brother that night, Charlie, no matter what you did.”

A tear slid down my cheek and I couldn’t pull it back. This man had been through something awful and yet he was such a happy-go-lucky guy, keeping everything bottled up to the point he had nightmares. And here I’d been so hateful to him. His wood work in the middle of the night was probably the only thing to calm him down, and I’d yelled at him for it.

He reached up and thumbed away my tear.

“I really like you being here,” he whispered, eyes still clouded and tortured.

I smiled and nuzzled my cheek into his palm. “I really like being here too.”

“Stay with me tonight?”

Instead of answering, I gave into what my body and heart wanted. I kissed Charlie, pouring all my sympathies and affection into it. He let me for a few long seconds before grabbing my waist and taking control of the kiss. He rolled us over so he was on top of me and between my legs like he belonged there. The kiss burned hotter, and I wasn’t sure it was right of me to take advantage of him. He’d unloaded all his hurt onto me tonight and more than anything, I wanted to make him feel better.

His lips left mine to trail open mouth kisses down my jawline, my neck, and into the neckline of my pajama top.

“Please tell me I can rip these alpacas off you finally,” he breathed against my skin.

My brain officially shut off for the evening and I tipped my head back into the pillow. “God, yes!”

Buttons went flying as he ripped my shirt apart in one violent tug. I gasped, shocked that I’d inspired a man to literally rip my clothes off, then gasped again as he latched onto my nipple like a starving man. My back arched off the bed, wanting more and wanting it all at once.

Charlie put a work-rough hand on my chest bone and pushed me down to the mattress, sitting up with that smirk back on his face. “Pants are next, my little SweetTart.”

He tugged on the bottoms of my pajama pants and slid them down my legs. His smile intensified when he saw I wore no panties underneath.

“S-sweetTart?” I managed to ask.

Charlie crawled back up my body, his broad shoulders spreading my thighs as his face settled at the juncture. His grin turned positively wicked.

“You say things that are so sour and yet your lips taste sweet. Let’s see about the rest of you.”

He dove in then, his tongue and lips and teeth turning me inside out in a matter of minutes. I grabbed his hair and rocked my hips into his face, just needing a couple more seconds. Instead, he turned his head and kissed my thigh.

“No!” I whined, before remembering I was supposed to be making *him* feel good.

Charlie’s rumbling laugh had me frowning as he climbed up higher. It had been almost a year since I’d had an orgasm not brought on by my own hand. It was cruel to dangle that carrot in front of a woman and then take it away at the last second.

Then he was sheathing his cock with protection and I licked my lips, considering the alternative. Okay, fine. I wanted cock and good Lord, did I want Charlie’s. I wondered the other day what it would look like fully erect. I’d certainly gotten my wish. Long enough to make me swallow hard, chubbier than a cock had any right to be on a man with a

perfect six-pack of abs, and just the right shade of straining purple that told me he wanted me just as badly.

He notched himself at my entrance and paused. My eyes flew open, and I glared at him to get going. Now was not the time to tease me.

“You’re not going to yell at me about this tomorrow, are you?” he asked, that twinkle I loved so much back in his eyes.

My mouth dropped open right as he plunged inside. My eyes rolled back in my head at the beautiful intrusion and my teeth snapped shut. He moved, the posts of the bed hitting the wall in a fast rhythm that made my extremities all tingly. The man was strong, a full six feet of straining muscle and tan skin.

“Oh God,” I mumbled, feeling that rush about to sweep me off my feet sooner than I wanted.

“Look at me, Rudolfina,” Charlie grumbled.

With effort, I got my eyes open and realized what a good suggestion that was. Feeling Charlie, combined with seeing all the bunched, straining muscles, was simply life altering. His abs flexed with each thrust, the dusting of hair across his chest tickling my breasts with each gasping breath, the muscled arms straining to hold himself above me. And then there was the absolute lust and adoration in Charlie’s eyes that made me tip right over the edge, knowing I was safe with him.

I uttered his name at the same time he yelled mine, both of us finding what we needed in a mad spiral of pleasure together. Long minutes later, as our breathing slowed, I barely got Charlie rolled off me before he fell asleep, his arm pinning me to his bed. Thankfully, I had no plans to leave, despite that voice in the back of my head poking and prodding at what the hell I was even doing in Charlie’s bed. I snuggled in closer and fell fast asleep with the hippie neighbor I most certainly was *not* shacking up with.

# Finnie

The soft sunlight coming through the blinds in Charlie's room woke me up the next morning. With a jolt, I realized where I was and what we'd been up to in the middle of the night. Turning my head carefully while holding my breath, Charlie slept beside me, his face peaceful in slumber, the sheets pulled up around him. I took the chance to pause and study his features, so still without the smirk or the ready smile. He was handsome. With his insane athlete's body covered for now, I could focus on his face, which held a jawline I wanted to run my tongue along. The short stubble and unkempt hair made my fingers twitch. I'd pulled on that hair a lot last night under the cover of darkness.

The clenching between my thighs had me rolling to the edge of the bed and creeping out of Charlie's room on tiptoe. Last night had been a one-time thing. It had to be. I had no time for anything more and I certainly didn't have the attention span for any kind of relationship. Everything he'd shared with me last night tugged at my heartstrings, which in turn, tugged on the warning bells in my brain. Caring led to feelings and feelings led to distraction I couldn't afford.

Chester followed me out of the bedroom and into the kitchen where I started a pot of coffee. I'd have to break the news to Charlie that I was moving back to my place. His hand

was still healing, but the chance of infection was over and the stitches were already dissolving as his skin healed on its own.

I pulled out a pair of khaki shorts and a shirt that was still clean, slipping them on quickly. I shoved the rest of my clothes back in my bag and zipped it up. The blankets were next, folded and stacked on the couch where I should have slept last night. The thing was, I didn't regret sleeping with Charlie. I only regretted that I'd let it bleed into something more than a physical encounter. I cared about the man and that was my signal to get the hell out before I messed everything up again.

The thud of the morning paper hit the front porch and startled me out of my musings. I'd grab a cup of coffee to-go and get back to my house before Charlie woke up. It was better that way. If I stayed longer, he'd walk out without a stitch of clothing on and make me melt into a puddle on the floor, willing to stay longer than I should. I gave Chester a good petting behind his ears while ignoring those brown eyes that seemed to beg me to stay, poured my coffee, and put my bag over my shoulder.

I turned at the front door and glanced around the disheveled house, breathing through the pang in my chest. How quickly things could change in just six days. I was making the right decision to leave. Any longer spent with Charlie would only confuse things.

Turning, I nearly tripped over the tiny town newspaper, kicking it across the porch. It unfolded, and the picture on the back page had me slamming to a halt.

It was Charlie, and me, locked in an embrace outside my soon-to-be clinic.

His hand cupped my jaw like I was a delicate piece of fine China.

My hands gripped his hair like a lifeline.

"Holy shit," I muttered, the shock of seeing us in black and white making me dizzy.

The headline read *“Has the new town doctor mended this bachelor’s heart?”*

My extremities went numb, and the bottom dropped out of my stomach. Not good. Not good at all. I’d been hell bent on diffusing the sleeping together rumors yesterday and instead, I’d been caught in his arms for all to see in the goddamn newspaper. And then I really did go and sleep with him!

I threw the paper back down on the porch and ran.

It wasn’t until I slammed my front door closed behind me and I breathed in the scent of new carpet and paint that I could breathe. The bag slipped off my shoulder, landing with a thud on the floor.

“One, two, three...” I mumbled to myself, getting to ten and starting over again. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on just breathing. The panic began to recede after a while, leaving me with an urgency to make things right.

“Damage control,” I announced to my empty house.

I missed the sound of Chester’s nails scraping on the floor as he rushed over, his head butting my hand until I petted him.

“Nope. Not going there. I have a business to save.” I sucked in a deep breath, pulled myself up tall, and marched over to my office to sit down with my business plans.

I was knee deep in headache territory going over the financials when my cell phone rang. The mayor’s office.

“Oh shit,” I mumbled.

Time for that damage control.

I answered with a smile on my face, hoping whoever was on the other end couldn’t tell how fake it was.

“The mayor is on the line, please hold,” the secretary announced, followed by a click.

“Dorado?” barked the mayor.

“Y-yes, Mr. Mayor.” I rolled my eyes at myself. Showing a decent dose of respect was one thing, but sounding like a shrinking violet was not my style.



“What’s this business in the paper?”

I cleared my throat. “Well, to be honest, sir. It’s none of your business or anyone else’s. Nor is it something that will affect *my* business.”

He made an odd noise while I held my breath. “See to it that it doesn’t. I just vouched for you to the city council. I’d hate to have to rescind my support.”

I tilted my head at the thinly veiled threat. “Understood. Plans for the urgent care are still on target, so no need to worry.”

He harrumphed and hung up.

I stared at my phone for a minute before putting it down on my desk and rubbing my forehead. I guess that’s what I got for opening a clinic in a small town. They were notorious for being up in people’s business and turns out Auburn Hill was no different.

My doorbell rang. I wanted to bang my head against my desk. What now? A visit from Poppy wanting to get the inside scoop? I shoved back from the desk and went to the door, practicing a response that was kind yet gave nothing personal away.

I swung the door open to find Charlie standing on my doorstep, his worn jeans molded to his thighs, his faded green T-shirt straining the boundaries of cotton and thread. And that face I’d stared at just this morning, no longer still and peaceful. His eyebrows drew together, and he didn’t look happy.

“Charlie,” I started.

He stepped forward, and I stepped back. His jaw tightened, but he came through the door anyway, shutting it and backing me up against it, a heated couple of inches between us.

“Why’d you leave?”

I pulled myself up tall and answered him truthfully. He deserved that, at least. “I need to get back to running my business, not becoming the highlight of the gossip paper.”

He looked down for a second and then back up at me, his blue eyes missing that normal sparkle. “You saw the paper.” It was a statement, not a question. “So, last night...”

“Was just a one-time thing,” I rushed to finish. “Charlie, I have a business to run and I can’t be distracted.”

He winced and my stomach clenched. “Why would being with me be a distraction?”

I blew out an angry breath. I didn’t want to get into all this. “It just is, Charlie. Trust me.” He was too close and I couldn’t breathe. I pushed his chest, but he wouldn’t back up and give me the space I needed.

His face flushed red. “You want me to trust you? I let you stitch me up when I barely knew you. You’ve been living in my house. How about the fact I told you everything about my nightmares last night? All that wasn’t placing enough trust in you? What about *you*, Finnie? Do you even trust me a little bit? Have you told me anything about you? What makes you spun so tight you can barely let loose? Why is smiling so hard for you? I trust you, Finnie. It’s *you* who doesn’t trust *me*.”

It was too much. Everything he was saying was true and cut too close to home. Charlie appeared like he didn’t have a care in the world and yet I was finding him to be the deepest soul I’d ever met who saw more than he let on. And I didn’t care for that one bit.

“I don’t have to tell you anything.”

Charlie’s face cleared in an instant and he was back to looking calm. I envied his ability to do that without counting to ten on an endless loop like me. “That’s true. But do me the favor of telling me just one thing before I leave you alone.”

I nodded quickly, hoping I could answer, and he’d go away.

“Why are you scared to open your heart to me?” he whispered, his thumb coming up to sweep across my cheek.

Hot tears hit the back of my eyes and I blinked hard. I inhaled deeply, but it didn’t give me courage. It simply made me yearn for an alternate version of this universe where I

could trust Charlie. Where I could pour my heart out to him and he'd embrace me. One where people said what they meant and never turned on you. One where I could rest easy that I had a partner in life. Through thick and thin.

My chest squeezed, and the dam broke, a tear sliding down my face and wrapping around his thumb.

"Because," I started, my voice wobbling. "Because I've trusted the wrong people before and it's literally meant life or death and it ruined my career. I can't do that again. I *won't* do that again."

Charlie's eyes softened even more. "Who let you down?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and begged the universe for help. When none came, I knew I was on my own. Looking back at Charlie, I decided to unload, just this once. "I'll tell you, but then I never want to talk about it again, okay?"

He nodded.

"I was dating a doctor at the hospital where I worked. We were both ER docs and everything about that line of work is high stress. It was nice to date someone who understood the rigors of the job and the weird hours. I felt like we really had something. But that all changed one night when we were both working on the same patient who came in with a gunshot wound. He coded, we pushed the usual meds, but we didn't know he had taken some medication earlier that didn't mix with what we gave him. He died, Charlie. And turns out he was the son of an important Congressman. So, the administration started looking into it and the doctor I was dating got worried. We followed protocol, though. Had there been time to do a blood test, that would have been ideal, but there wasn't. The guy was gone. We had to try resuscitating that second. Well, my boyfriend decided to turn on me, telling the administration that he'd wanted to wait for the blood results, but I'd overridden him and pushed the IV meds."

Charlie's hand tightened on my face, his jaw clenched tight. "Bastard."

I nodded, that old flare of anger feeling more like defeat. “Yeah. Eventually, the investigation showed we did everything right, but there were rumors that my relationship with the other doctor affected my decision making. I’ve learned that sometimes rumors can be more damaging than the truth, Charlie.”

I let my statement hang there. He would read between the lines and understand why I couldn’t be mixed up with him. Too much was at stake. His thumb swept across my cheek, over and over, while his blue-eyed gaze never left mine.

“You know his death wasn’t your fault, right?”

“You know your brother’s death wasn’t *your* fault, right?” I asked him back.

And there it was.

The truth at the heart of this matter.

We both knew those deaths weren’t our fault and yet we couldn’t seem to move past them. Couldn’t navigate a world in which their deaths hadn’t changed each of us. Irrevocably. Permanently.



I couldn’t seem to snap out of my funk. The normal coffee shop sounds of chatter and plates clinking on tables hit my ears, but only as background noise to reliving that conversation with Charlie over and over again. I couldn’t believe I’d told him about my past. It wasn’t something I ever discussed due to the shame I felt. The fact that I’d told him the horrible story meant he was worming his way into my life far more than I was comfortable with.

I could only hope that he understood me now.

Understood why anything happening between us had to stop. Immediately.

The latte I’d splurged on in my emotional state tasted far more bitter than I knew it normally should be. Instead of wallowing in my house after Charlie left, I’d thrown my laptop and business plan in my work bag and sped over to Coffee to

get some work done. I'd only visited the coffee shop in downtown a couple of times before, noticing they didn't mind people camping out with their laptops plugged into the wall chargers. I was hiding from Charlie and I knew it.

"Charlie's what the kids would call BDE." An old woman at the table next to me talked to her companion, drawing my attention at her mention of Charlie.

My Charlie, probably. How many Charlies could there be in a tiny town?

"I don't even know what that means, Yedda. Listen, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the man, but you gotta admit. He has a few screws loose. You know what I mean?"

The woman with a bosom full of dropped muffin crumbs and ruddy cheeks answered this Yedda lady, a little too loudly if you asked me. What did she mean? Was she saying Charlie was crazy? I suddenly flashed back to a comment Charlie made about having a nickname in this town. A tiny flame of anger burned in my gut at these two ladies talking about Charlie like he wasn't the nicest man I'd ever met. Annoyingly positive, sure. But a good person who didn't deserve to be gossiped about.

"Sometimes the crazy ones make the best lovers, Polly. You combine the BDE with the crazy, you just might have spectacular."

If she only knew how good Charlie was in bed, she'd double down on that theory. I sat up straighter and strained to catch every word. How dare they talk about Charlie like that? He wasn't crazy. He was the most sane person I'd met, despite the oils and sage and disgusting green juice.

"I think it's fabulous he found a girl, but what do we know about her? Doesn't seem like a medical doctor should be dating the town artsy fartsy weirdo," Polly added dryly.

That anger bubbled up, nearly choking me. Nobody called Charlie a weirdo but me. They probably didn't even know him. They saw his easy smile, his penchant for being half naked and drinking moonshine in the middle of the night, and

assumed he was crazy. He had more depths than the blue ocean just down the street. How dare they assume that I was better than him simply because I was a doctor?

“Even doctors can sense the BDE,” Yedda said with a wink.

Polly slapped her thick arm down on the table. “What the hell is this BDE you speak of?”

“Big Dick Energy,” I snapped, the same time Yedda said it in a whisper-shout.

Two heads swiveled my direction, Yedda smiling and Polly frowning.

“Sorry. I couldn’t help but overhear.” I wasn’t sorry. They spoke at nearly shouting volume, so they should expect some eavesdropping. Maybe next time they wanted a private conversation they’d turn up their hearing aids. “Are you talking about Charlie Boldt?”

“Yes, dear. He’s a woodworker here in town. In fact, he made that beautiful counter over there.” Yedda pointed behind her to the single slab of live edge redwood that set the entire ambiance for the shop.

It was a piece of art, just like all of Charlie’s creations. My heart swelled in my chest, swirling with the anger I felt toward these busy bodies who dared to belittle him.

“Wait a second. Aren’t you—” Polly started, her eyes squeezed down to slits as she scanned me from head to toe.

I pushed back my chair and stood, no longer able to remain in their company. “Yes, I’m Doctor Finnie Dorado. And Charlie is a good man who is so far from crazy you’d have to pull your heads out of your asses to see it. Maybe you should get to know the person before you gossip about them behind their back.”

Only then did I realize the entire coffee shop had gone silent. A quick scan showed all eyes on me and my outburst. Well fuck a duck, that was one way to make friends in a new town. I snapped my mouth shut and hurried to grab my things. I put the loaded work bag on my shoulder and marched toward

the door with my head held high. I may have just imploded my business in a single twenty-four-hour period, but I wouldn't stand for anyone making fun of Charlie when he was the most decent human I'd ever come across. He didn't deserve that.

“You tell ‘em, girl,” Poppy said with a wink, holding the door for me in her work uniform, the mail in her hand long forgotten as she watched me tell off the whole town.

## C harlie

The outdoor lights flickered on, the first thing to grab my attention outside of the project I was working on since I left Finnie's place early this morning. When I couldn't escape the thoughts spinning through my brain or the feelings crushing my lungs, I always hit my workshop and dove into a project. It gave me an outlet for my energy and forced me to focus when working on the power tools. The monotony of sanding or staining gave me time to sort through my thoughts and feelings, while figuring out how to proceed.

Some people meditated. I worked with wood.

Everything had been a rollercoaster the second Finnie showed up in her fucking alpaca pajamas. I'd cut myself wide open and had a new roommate who turned me on as much as she pissed me off. It's like I now lived for her snappy comebacks and the way she lifted her nose in the air when she didn't agree with me. Her counting to ten had to be the most adorable thing I'd ever seen. The town had nicknamed me Crazy Charlie, but I never thought it was true until now when I found myself crazy in love with a woman who didn't even want me.

Last night had been amazing. Well, the nightmare wasn't, but then the way Finnie sat and talked with me had been everything I needed to soothe something deep inside me. And



then I'd been deep inside her and everything came together. Like all the shit I'd gone through had been worth it to get right there in that bed with her staring up at me with those wide hazel eyes. I'd slept through the night like I hadn't in years.

And then I'd woken up alone. All the abandonment issues I had came rushing back, stomping out the hope that had flared to life in my veins from her touch. I'd been angry when I went to her house, and even the whining from Chester hadn't calmed me down. I'd planned to tell her off, absolutely sick of her hot and cold treatment.

Then I found out she was just as damaged as I was.

That doctor that had screwed her over? Was now screwing me over. Because until she let go of all that guilt and shame, she'd never trust me. Not fully. And I couldn't be with her unless we were both all in. My own demons wouldn't rest if there was any doubt between us.

She'd made herself clear, and I would respect her boundary. Until she came to me and said she wanted to give things a try, I'd let her be. It might kill me, but I'd survived worse.

I laid the last board down on the worktable as the sun began to set and picked up my phone to call Titus.

"Hey man, you got time tomorrow to help me for an hour?" I swept the man glitter out of my hair and off my chest, a small smile at the reminder of Finnie. I doubt I'd ever call it sawdust again.

"Yeah, I don't start on Finnie's place until later when the drywall comes in. Whatcha need?" Titus asked.

A smile hit my face at his readiness to help me. I may be the town crazy, but I had some friends when I needed them. "I have a wall to build and my thumb's not quite healed enough to do it alone."

"No problem. I'll be there at seven with donuts and coffee."

"Thanks, man."

~

I rose before the sun the next day, lining up all the boards on the ground outside my workshop in preparation for Titus's help. I hadn't slept well by myself—again—but that was no surprise. Green juice and coffee would keep me going. Chester darted around, excited to be working outside today. He kept stopping to sit, his tail sweeping the pine needles on the ground as he stared at Finnie's house.

“She's got her own life, Chester boy.” That pit in my stomach was back. It was one thing for me to be lonely, but to see my dog miss Finnie too? Fuckin' heartbreaking.

Chester whined and continued to stare like his intensity alone could make her come back. Shit, if that worked, I'd try it too.

A truck engine rumbling up my long driveway had me turning. Titus leaned out the window and waved with enthusiasm, his mullet longer than the last time I'd seen him. I cracked a smile and lifted a hand.

“I'm stoked to see what monstrosity we're putting together now.” Titus slammed his truck door and ambled over, his tool belt in one hand, a box of donuts in the other. “Can't build without sugar. It's a known fact.” He thrust the box at me and though I knew it wasn't even close to being in the realm of healthy, I took a chocolate glazed.

He mowed two sugar glazed and a jelly filled before rubbing his belly and putting on the tool belt. “Okay. I'm properly motivated. Let's do this.”

I just shook my head at him and explained what we were doing. We got to work and had the first panel up when Finnie's front door opened and she walked out. I froze, my gaze tracing over her black pants, high heels, and blue blouse. Her hair was up in a sharp ponytail and I wanted to tug it free immediately. She threw her stuffed work bag in the car and headed out, not once glancing in the direction of my house.

“Ah, so the rumor's true, huh?” Titus was looking at me with a cheesy grin on his face.

I quickly got back to work, ignoring him while I tried to come up with something to say that wouldn't stir the rumor mill, but also explain we weren't nothing to each other either. I didn't have many friends, but I knew lying wasn't right.

“Her asshole is puckered tight, but she's got a soft heart under there somewhere. I just have to tease it out and get her to fully trust me,” I finally said, lifting another post into place.

Titus snickered. “Sounds like she'll fit right in with the women of Hell.”

I raised an eyebrow, but he didn't explain further. Sounded like Titus had his own woman issues, which was surprising. From where I was standing, he'd dated every female in Hell under the age of forty already.

We got back to work and burned off those donuts. By the time lunchtime hit and our stomachs were letting us know exactly what time it was, we were done.

“Thanks, man. I couldn't have done this without you. I owe you one.” I reached out to shake Titus's hand.

He shook it and then pulled me into a quick hug, slapping me on the back.

“Anytime, dude.” His expression got serious. “I really hope it works out for you.”

Me too, buddy, me too.



I'd gotten cleaned up, putting on my best jeans and a T-shirt that didn't have holes or man glitter all over it. I didn't know when Finnie would be home from her clinic, but I had every intention of speaking my piece. Then I'd promised myself to leave her alone. The porch to her front house was quite inviting, the Adirondack chair more comfortable than it looked. I'd almost dozed off when I heard the squeak of her brakes as she pulled up the drive.

I hopped up and scrambled to remember the speech I'd prepared. She climbed out of the car, her dark eyebrows drawn together as she watched me. The heavy work bag that never

left her side got slung over her shoulder like a metaphorical weight. She picked her way across the gravel to the porch, her high heels made more for city living.

“Charlie,” she said slowly.

“Hey. I was hoping I could show you something real quick and then I’ll leave you alone. Swear on my juicer.”

A twitch of her lips gave life to the flare of hope that had almost died out in my chest since yesterday. She didn’t answer me, but nodded, putting her bag down on the porch. I gave her a wide berth, not wanting to give her a reason to leave or argue with me straight out of the gate. She followed me around the house where you could see the long wall Titus and I had built this morning.

I pointed to it. “That night when I cut my thumb, I began work on this wall.”

She studied it, her eyes taking in all the details. The fence was ten feet high, made from pine, each board water sealed to last longer out in the elements. Carved pieces of wood decorated the bottom of the fence on her side, the swooping curve of each board made to look like the ocean. But the exciting detail was in the center.

“It’s...beautiful...” Finnie trailed off, still studying it and probably wondering why I brought her out here to look at a damn fence along our property lines.

“It’s a sound wall. It has a layer of soundproofing material in the middle. Now if I’m out in the shop at night when I can’t sleep, it shouldn’t interrupt yours.” I stared at it, afraid I’d take one look at her face and beg her to give me a chance, which was definitely not part of the script I’d rehearsed. “I, uh, haven’t finished the design yet. I’ll carve some seagulls and add that to the wall, making it look like a day at the beach. Figured you could look out your window while you’re working and see something that make you stress less, you know?”

“Charlie...” she whispered.

“Listen, I know you don’t trust me, but I don’t want us to be strangers either. Maybe over time you can trust again. I just—I want you to be happy, no matter where you live, or if you’re even speaking to me. This wall is a way to give you the peace and quiet you deserve.”

“Charlie,” she said, full volume this time, with a tone that had me finally looking at her.

A single tear slid down her cheek and I cursed myself for making her cry.

Then she launched all five-foot-ten of herself at me, her legs coming around my waist, nearly knocking me over as she clung to my neck in a graceless leap.

“You made that for me?” she asked, her breasts pressed between us, scattering my brain. Her legs tightened, the juncture of her thighs heating my waist and providing a tempting distraction.

“Yeah. I’d do anything to see you smile, Rudolfina.” My hands flexed, grabbing a handful of her backside, unable to help themselves to the bounty that had literally landed in our lap.

Finnie slammed her mouth down on mine and made me see Jesus. It had to have been him, what with the blinding light and weightless feeling that came over me. Her tongue teased mine, her hands tunneling into my hair and tugging. A long while later, we came up for air, both of us breathing heavy.

She dropped her forehead against mine and I uttered a prayer of thanks to the divine perfection of this moment and this infuriating woman.

“You’re crazy, Charlie Boldt, but only in the very best ways.”

I couldn’t believe I had her in my arms, smiling and kissing me of her own free will. I didn’t mind so much being called crazy by Finnie. Fact was, I was crazy in love with her.

“Figures the only way to break down your walls was to build a wall,” I teased, giving her a wink before devouring that mouth of hers again.

*F*innie

“Wake up, sleepyhead. We have somewhere to be,” I whispered to Charlie as he groaned and tried to cover his head with my pillow.

The satisfied smile felt natural and right on my face. I must have worn him out last night. After seeing the wall he’d built for me, the way he loved me without reservation, and even against my grumpiest behavior, I’d melted. I’d given up the tight fist of restraint that kept me from trusting Charlie. Life was meant to be lived fully and I couldn’t do that while holding him at arm’s length because of some other douchebag of a doctor. If I denied my feelings for Charlie because of not wanting to sully my reputation in town, I was just as bad as that doctor. Worse even, because I knew what it felt like to be on the other end.

I ripped the pillow out of his hands and then whooped loudly when his eyes sprung open and he grabbed me. We rolled, nearly falling off the bed.

“I want to stay right here all day, woman,” he rasped, his morning voice made sexier by the morning wood my woodworker boyfriend sported against my thigh.

I couldn’t resist tunneling my hands through his hair and pulling him to me for a kiss. I’d never tire of that. The way he always seemed ready and willing to kiss me senseless.

Before I was ready, I tugged on his hair to pull him back. “As much as I want that too, we have somewhere to be this morning.”

Charlie groaned and then stilled. “Oh shit, I gotta let Chester out!” He scrambled off me while I laughed.

My laughter died a sudden death seeing a naked Charlie run around my room trying to collect his clothes. Dear God, the man was built. “I’ll be over in a few minutes to pick you up,” I called after his retreating form.

Fanning myself, I got dressed and pulled my hair into a ponytail. A quick swipe of mascara and lip gloss and I was ready. I had minds to blow and reputations to defend. All before my first cup of coffee. Auburn Hill was going to finally get a real taste of Finnie Dorado.

I climbed in my car and tooted the horn twice. Charlie came out his back door and jogged over, his hair still a rumpled mess from my fingers. He slid into the car as I leaned forward to inspect his fly.

“Wow, you even zipped your pants today.”

Charlie gave me a look. “Figured if we’re going to your workplace, I should be a little more formal.”

I shook my head, ponytail flying. “We’re not going to my clinic.”

Charlie frowned, but I didn’t give away my secret mission.

Pulling into a spot just a few doors down from Coffee, we got out of the car and I stood in front of Charlie on the sidewalk. “Do you trust me, Charlie?”

His eyes softened, and he leaned in close, his trademark soap and wood smell making my stomach swoop and soar. “Course I do, Rudolfina.”

I smiled and patted his cheek. “Good. Then follow me and keep up.”

I marched off and Charlie followed, holding the door to Coffee for me when he realized that’s where I was headed. I

skipped the order line and went straight to the counter, the one Charlie had made for this town.

“Give me a boost, would you?” I asked Charlie.

He didn’t even hesitate, just knelt down and laced his fingers together. I stepped on his hands, and using his shoulders for balance, climbed up onto the counter to stand several feet above everyone’s heads.

Speaking of heads, they all turned my direction, jaws dropped and eyes wide at the crazy lady standing on the counter.

“Good morning, Hell!” I called out. I got a few grumbled good mornings back, but mostly stunned silence as even the baristas stopped what they were doing to stare at me. This would either go really well or I’d have to find another profession in another town. I should have asked Charlie if he minded moving.

The butterflies in my stomach took flight, and I suddenly wished we’d gotten something to eat first. Charlie reached over and put his hand on top of my foot and I glanced down to see him smiling at me, total confidence in his eyes. He had no idea what I was even doing climbing on tables in front of everyone he knew, and yet he believed in me. My heart expanded and so did my confidence.

“Hi, everyone. I’m Finnie Dorado. I’m the new doctor in town, opening an urgent care on Brinestone Way. I, uh, couldn’t help but overhear a conversation here yesterday and it made me realize that I needed to address everyone publicly. I mean, I was already in the newspaper the other day with speculation about my love life, so why not set the record straight right from the horse’s mouth, you know?”

I cleared my throat and locked eyes with Poppy, who just poked her head through the door. That woman could sniff out a story like a bloodhound. She gave me an enthusiastic thumbs up. My gaze swung over to Polly and Yedda, who looked at me with much distrust. The former, not the latter. Yedda was beaming at me.



“So, here’s the deal. Charlie Boldt and I are together. What you read in the paper was true, except for the shacking up thing. I mean, I was living at Charlie’s this last week, but only because he cut his thumb pretty badly when I startled him in his workshop.”

“Oh, did you surprise him with the naked under the trench coat move?” called Yedda, her eyes filled with glee.

I wobbled on my perch, my face heating. “Um, no. Definitely not that. I, uh, had to stitch him up and then he couldn’t use his hand so I stayed to help him out. Platonically. But that’s the thing. I got to know Charlie this last week or two and I can safely say that the general impression of Charlie is all wrong.”

I stood up taller, wanting to set the record straight, once and for all.

“I overheard someone saying Charlie is crazy. I can tell you, that is completely untrue. Charlie is the most amazing artist and human I’ve met in a very long time. He genuinely cares for people without judging them first. I, for one, can’t say I’ve been around too many people like that. I’ve been wrongly judged before and it hurts. I refuse to be that person and I refuse to let you all go around thinking Charlie’s something that he’s not. He’s refreshingly real. He’s mind boggling, really.”

“He’s hot!” a woman called out.

My head whipped right, looking for the cat caller, finding four young ladies all sitting at a table nearby, one of whom had a rambunctious little girl on her lap. The dark-haired woman with the red lips gave me a sly wink and smile.

My blush deepened. “Yes, he is hot. And he’s all mine, if he’ll have me.” I looked down at Charlie who looked up at me like I’d hung the moon he loved to dance under so much. “Will you be my boyfriend officially, Charlie?”

He smiled wide, those laugh lines on each side of his mouth making my knees weak. Polly charged out of her chair and grabbed the back of it to swing it right by Charlie.

“Better get your girl, Charlie,” she said with a grin.

Charlie hopped on the chair and then came to stand on the counter with me. His blue eyes heated and his eyelids dropped. I held my breath, hoping his answer would be yes, and I hadn’t humiliated myself in front of the whole town for nothing. His hands lifted and cupped my jaw.

“The answer is always yes when it comes to you, Rudolfina,” he whispered right before he kissed me.

His tongue darted out to lick my bottom lip, and I let him all the way in. No more barriers or reasons why I wouldn’t let him into my heart. Loud whooping and whistles from our audience had me pulling back with a furious blush, reminding me we were still on the counter in the middle of the coffee shop.

“Oh God, this thing is going to break!” All I could think of was that we needed to get down. Immediately.

Charlie smirked. “I made this thing. Trust me, it’ll hold.”

He turned to our audience, a peace to his expression that hadn’t been there last week. “Wanna see her incredible stitches?” He went to pull off the last of the gauze covering his cut. Attention shifted his way, and I sighed with relief.

A bunch of people hopped up and came over, wanting to see the gory wound and hear about how it had happened. I hopped off the counter and tried to get in line to get some breakfast like it was a normal day. Quite a few people complimented my handiwork and promised to come see me at the urgent care when it was up and running.

“Man, these couples in Hell are really something.” The woman with the toddler came up to me and patted me on the back. “This town has a rich history of publicly announced affairs of the heart. You fit right in, Finnie. I can call you Finnie, right?”

I smiled and nodded. “I’d love that.”

She tipped her head to her friends. “I’m Lucy. These ladies, Lenora, Amelia, and Hazel, befriended me a few years ago and now we want you.”

I pulled my head back, not used to the ready acceptance of a small town. “Um. Sure?”

“They call us the Hell Raisers, but don’t let that scare you. We mostly get together and bitch and drink and try to outpace Yedda with her matchmaking. You in?” The dark-haired woman asked.

I nodded, a warm glow filling every sad little empty pocket of my soul. This was my new home. If I could help it, I’d never leave. “I’m all in.”

They rushed me in a group hug that nearly knocked me over. We chatted a bit as they waited in line with me, getting to know each other and exchanging phone numbers. By the time I sat down with coffee and food for Charlie and I, it was almost lunchtime. Charlie never let my hand go, the whole time we ate, his thumb stroking my skin. When I asked him about it, he said he was touching me because he could. Because he wanted to remind himself I was really there with him.

I knew what he meant. He’d lived the last decade thinking people always left him, just as I’d thought no one was trustworthy. It would take time and practice for us to drop the old habits and trust in what we had, but we were off to a good start.

“How about we go out to eat tonight? A real date?” I blurted, wanting to show him starting immediately that us being together was something I intended for the rest of our lives.

Charlie smirked. I could stare at his handsome face for days and not get bored. He pulled our hands to his face, our fingers laced together. He kissed each of my fingers, his meticulous nature not confined to simply woodwork.

“It’s a date. I’ll pick you up at your place, neighbor,” he said.

We stood, and I kissed him quick, excited just thinking about dating him for real. “And what are you doing this

afternoon? I have plans to go over, but I could do that at your place.”

He shrugged. “I have a new project I’m starting. Just a lot of sanding to start with.”

I lifted on my tip-toes so we saw eye to eye. “Perfect. Promise you won’t wear a shirt and I can wipe the man glitter off you afterward?”

Charlie’s eyes lit up right before he bent at the waist and picked me up, hauling me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I squealed, and he laughed, the big booming type of laugh that meant I couldn’t be mad at him even if I tried. He ran us down the street to my car, catching curious glances from everyone out and about.

Yep, my Charlie was crazy. Crazy in love with me.

*Stay in Hell a while longer...keep reading the Jobs From Hell series with [Love Bank](#) and [Uber Bossy!](#)*

## LOVE BANK - CHAPTER ONE

Lucille

“Thank God for Keva and underwire garments,” I muttered, coming around the corner and seeing the lights on at the clinic already. Considering I should have been there twenty minutes ago, I could beat myself up over my own tardiness, or I could simply pat myself on the back for my insightfulness in hiring such a responsible front desk clerk. Keva was the real deal: young, hardworking, and organized. What she lacked in street smarts could be made up for by her unfaltering kindness.

A loud horn shook me from my frazzled Monday morning thoughts.

“What in the gold-digging hell is this?”

In the rearview mirror, I saw a huge gray bus behind me, the driver reaching down to the steering wheel like he was going to lay on the horn again. All because I was going thirty in a thirty-five zone. This here was Brinestone Way, the brand-new road paved just days before my clinic opened to the public. Mayor Bennett had grand aspirations of making Auburn Hill a thriving metropolis, all starting with bringing in new businesses along this stretch of road. There was no need for speeding and, dammit, I’d been here first.

I threw my free hand up in the air, hoping it properly conveyed my irritation at his aggressiveness. I refrained from using the middle finger, though I swear it was itching to get in on the action.

“Damn magical goat stirring things up,” I muttered.

I put on my blinker and tapped the brakes as I approached my turn-in. Every bolt, spring, and dried-out belt in the ol' 1968 convertible Karmann Ghia struck up a symphony as I eased her over the huge bump of a curb and into the parking lot. The huge bus barreled on down the road barely missing my back bumper, shaking the frame of poor Ghia in its aftermath.

I narrowed my eyes at the back of it, picturing it getting a flat tire or two and that nasty driver begging me for assistance. I scoffed out loud at the chances of me lifting a finger. He'd be on his knees crying and I'd simply honk at him and tell him to get out of the way. Justice was served, even if only in my own head. Where was Waldo when you needed him? Sheriff Waldo that is, not the guy with the striped hat in those kids' books. Sheriff Waldo didn't take kindly to strangers showing up in town and being rude.

I shook myself and focused on what was important. My establishment. My pride and joy.

Coastal Fertility Clinic.

Also known as a spank bank.

Now I know most entrepreneurs don't start off their solo journey thinking they want to open up a clinic where men jack off all day long, but when you have a master's degree in nursing like me, and you're sick of running your tail off all day at the hospital for middlin' wages, you had to think outside the box.

Or in my case, think inside the specimen cup.

So here I was the proud owner of the finest, most upscale fertility clinic this side of the Sierra Nevadas. We'd been open six months and already made our way to the breakeven point, meaning we could afford to start being more selective with our deposits. The higher the pedigree of the sperm, the higher the price when we went to sell it to a female looking to birth the next Michael Phelps. Forget the black market, I was selling the goods on the sperm market.

I swung my tiny metal door open and bellowed an enthusiastic “heave ho” to get myself up and out of the little car barely scraping above sea level without flashing the entire town of Auburn Hill in my knee-length wool skirt. The car was impractical, I’ll give you that, but I loved the old gal. With age came refinement and I was clinging to that adage like a fly on horse shit in August. At thirty-six years of age, I felt my grip slipping on my youth, which was why the fertility clinic before me held my own eggs, cryogenically frozen for the day I finally kissed my chances of a real live man in my life goodbye and took to science to create the offspring I’d always wanted.

My heels clacked over the pavement, already pinching my toes like they hated me personally for bringing them into this world. Flats just seemed so pedestrian, especially for such an upscale environment like the one we created at Coastal Fertility. We tried hard not to make patients feel like they were at a hospital. Sterile was not the impression you wanted to leave men with when they were pumping the family jewels for heirs.

The bell rang out as I pulled the door open and breathed in the essential oil blend I made especially for arousal—not to be confused with the oil blend best for animal arousal—that we kept running twenty-four seven. My clinic wasn’t a place for porn and dirty magazines. High-end sperm required calm, relaxation, and classy imagination.

“Good morning, Ms. Eureka!” Keva grinned from ear to ear, hopping up out of her chair like I deserved a standing ovation simply for showing up to work late.

I slipped behind the desk and kicked off my heels with a full-body shiver of delight, meeting her grin with my own.

“It’s Lucille, and please, have a seat.” I’d told her at least twenty times in the last three weeks to call me by my first name, but it hadn’t taken yet. I’d heard it took thirty days to cement a habit, so I was holding out for next week being the day we turned the corner to a less formal relationship.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I do apologize for being late.” I grabbed a hair pin out of our emergency stash in the top drawer of the desk and swooped back a piece that had gotten away from my bun on the ride over. “Nearly got run over by a bus pulling into the lot.”

“Oh, I heard the new prison would be opening any day now. Are you okay?”

Keva finally sat in a dramatic plop, those ruby red lips of hers now in an overexaggerated oval. She had a way with makeup, making herself look at least five years older. Made me ponder at what point you quit trying to appear older and used those same cosmetics to look younger.

“I’m fine, though it sped my heart rate to that of a myocardial infarction patient.” I smoothed my blouse down and sucked in a deep breath. Being rushed and stressed was not the proper way to start a Monday. “I just can’t believe the mayor approved a private prison right next door. Of all the asinine businesses to put next to a fertility clinic.”

“Oh yes, I much prefer the National Cat Protection Society.” Keva’s head bobbed up and down, reminding me of the bobblehead Hawaiian doll my mother had on the dash of her old boat of a Lincoln. I used to love to see that grass skirt swaying while the sun shined down. As a little girl with an active mind, I could practically feel the tropical breeze as I imagined that doll was a real live hula girl.

“Hmm.” The jury was still out on Yedda’s cat house on the other side of my building. While I respected her dream of giving cats a place to retire when their owners may have given up on them with their high medical expenses, I didn’t particularly care for cats as I was allergic. “All we need is a blow-up doll factory to come to town and we’d be the laughing stock of the nation.”

“Oh!” Keva’s mouth dropped open again, this time shocked delight widening her eyes.

My own eyes popped open, realizing I’d said that last bit out loud. The poor girl was only eighteen. I probably shouldn’t be speaking of blow-up dolls like the wizened hussy I wasn’t.



Though she did work at a spank bank, so her sensitivities must not be too great.

She giggled and I chastised myself silently. I needed to rein in my wayward mouth. Ever since that damn goat had rubbed its filthy head against my hip the other day, I'd lost my filter. Which was even more odd because I thought that filter had been built into my face with reinforced metal plates worthy of a NASA inspection and therefore impossible to take off.

“I'm not normally a negative Nancy, but mark my words, Keva. Nothing good will come from having a prison right here on Brinestone Way. This road was built for local businesses, not a pathway for criminals to enter our quaint town. Mayor Bennett must have lost his damn mind when he approved that hunk of concrete and metal.”

I shook my head, then just as quickly clapped my hands to shake myself out of my temper. I needed to change the mood—fast—or I'd be sadder than George, the poor senior citizen sitting outside Coffee every morning like he did when his wife was still alive. He never hesitated to tell a story about her as if the telling of it would keep her alive. I guess it must have worked because he never failed to be there, rain or shine.

“Let's get today going and forget all about criminals and wayward cats, shall we? What's on the schedule?”

Keva grabbed the paper calendar book with all our appointments written in multicolored pen off the desk and scanned the day's events. Technology was a fine thing, but not when it came to seeing what you had planned for the day. On her first day Keva had asked me if I planned to upgrade to a Google calendar we could share. I set her straight right then and there, telling her about the time I accidentally shared my calendar with the Poker Club of Auburn Hill instead of my mother, Polly Eureka. Those old men didn't need to know about my gynecological appointment that Tuesday or the exact time I was to get my lip waxed, yet there it was in all its electronic glory for them to pick through at their leisure. I'd stick to pen and paper, thank you very much.

“Well, we have our first—”

Keva’s sweet voice was cut off by the bell above the door jingling and our resident mail carrier poking her lavender-dyed head inside. Normally I’d sit and chat with the woman, letting her gossip wash over me, oohing and aahing at the appropriate moments, but my patience was running thin. Blame it on the honking bus or the magic goat, either way, I was on a mission that morning to set my life back on its proper course. A gossip session would have to wait.

“Good morning, Poppy.” I moved around the desk and took the mail from her outstretched hand. “Come have a seat with Keva. I have a quick phone call to make.”

Poppy nodded enthusiastically, seeing the bright smile on poor Keva’s face. Poppy could spot a listening ear a mile away. As for me, I’d just told a bald-faced lie. Quite unlike me, especially since I actually liked Poppy, despite my mom’s poor opinion of her. Usually I only lied to spare someone’s feelings, not to get out of conversing with a neighbor. Being neighborly was what Hell was all about.

I shuffled down the hall, realizing belatedly I’d forgotten to collect my heels from under Keva’s desk. Lord knew I’d enjoy a morning without heels, but hopefully I wouldn’t tear a hole in my stockings just for a little blister relief. I’d gone down the back hallway where the treatment rooms were located, knowing the oil diffuser blend was almost out in the back room. It wouldn’t do to have the special libido diffuser stop right in the middle of whacking the wand. Total mood buster.

The door opened smoothly thanks to the WD-40 I sprayed on the hinges on a regular basis to keep them moving. We were all about the lubrication here. I smirked at my own humor—if you didn’t laugh at your own jokes, who would—and moved quickly into the room.

My body reacted before my brain could catch up, coming to an abrupt stop and nearly wiping out on the slick floor with only my thin stockings to offer any traction. There in front of me, head thrown back and eyes squeezed shut, was a patient

on the leather couch I'd personally picked out for comfortability.

But not just any patient. He had to have been the most gorgeous male specimen I'd ever laid eyes on. Now my whole body wanted to lie on him, like a cat in heat. My eyes traveled down his body, taking in every detail like I had all the time in the world. Thick dark hair I could practically see myself grabbing hold of by the handful, corded muscles bunching and flexing down his long arm. Legs spread wide and stretched out as if even the ample couch was child size in comparison. A jaw clenched tight, a vein in his neck bulging alarmingly. And there, enclosed in his fist, the longest, thickest, most lick-worthy—

I slammed my eyes shut and nearly gasped out loud. What was I doing spying on a patient in the middle of depositing a specimen? My mouth watered at the imprint on the back of my eyelids even as the rest of me went up in flames. Dear Lord, who was that and how could I back out of the room without him noticing me?

I peeked one eye open—for scouting purposes only, I assure you—and saw him still rubbing one out enthusiastically, completely unaware of my presence. Rather than ponder how to exit the room as quietly as I'd come in, instead I wondered what was he thinking about at that moment to cause his tongue to flick out and lick his lower lip? And why was the frenzied stroking motion so fascinating when every other time I'd seen a male engaged in masturbation it had seemed so clinical? I mean, you don't open a fertility clinic without intimately knowing the ins and outs of the male anatomy, many times more informed than the men themselves.

The irony of my virgin status as a spank bank owner was not lost on me.

And for the first time, I viscerally understood how much I didn't know about men. Because I'd never, ever, not once in my adult life, been turned on by the presence of a male penis. They spat out dollar signs and that was all I needed to know. At least, until now, when faced with what had to be a legend among penises.

A male moan split the air and my skin rose into goose bumps as if commanded by that low grumble. I needed air to cool my overheated skin, possibly hand sanitizer, and maybe even a brain replacement to rid me of the most delectable sight of my life. The logical part of my brain finally engaged and roared at me to leave immediately. I took my first step back, wobbling on legs that had gone Bambi on me when I needed them the most.

White teeth flashed a split second before they bit a perfect lower lip. My leg paused midair in its retreat, enthralled by the show playing out in front of me. He stiffened, the vein in his neck becoming two corded bands straining beyond what was healthy. The hand lost its rhythm, becoming jerky and unsteady even as hips lifted off the sofa cushions seeking more friction.

The volcano was about to blow and if I didn't leave right that very minute, I would fall to my knees and let the lava burn me inside out as I swallowed it down having officially tossed all my morals out the window.

I blinked, spun on the ball of my foot, and ran like my life depended on it, which it did, professionally at least. I couldn't be caught spying on clients as they left sperm deposits. Could you imagine the backlash? I'd be closed the first day social media got wind of my impropriety. Maybe even sued. The town I'd grown up in would label me a disgrace.

My feet didn't stop until I'd locked myself into my own tiny office down the opposite hallway, ceiling fan on high. My leather chair creaked as I plopped down, a frazzled sweaty mess of hormones.

"Sweet Jesus, get a hold of yourself, Lucille." I fanned my face with my hand, like that would really do anything to stem the fires of hell burning in my nether regions. The wool skirt, which had seemed like such a good choice this morning, became itchy and unbearable against my skin.

I heard footsteps outside my door, to which I held my breath and stared at the doorknob in horror. Did he see me

leave the room? Was he coming to yell at me and shut down my clinic? Who was that stud of a man anyway?

When the footsteps receded, I finally let out the breath of air I'd been holding and slumped back against my seat, a warm deflated balloon of sagging skin and washed-up potential. Not in trouble. My secret was safe with me, forever burned into my brain where I'd think of it often, if only to keep me warm at night in my lonely bed.

As the relief set in, bringing my heart rate down into an acceptable zone, I began to smile, then chuckle out loud before I ramped up to hysterics. My eyes watered and my stomach muscles hurt from laughing so hard.

I, Lucille Eureka, had seen penises before.

I was pretty sure I'd finally seen a Cock.

That sucker needed to be capitalized. Might even need its own zip code.

My life was now divided into two eras: BC and AC. Before Cock and After Cock.

I needed to go visit that magical goat again. He was bringing in some interesting changes in my life, all of which I now wholeheartedly approved of. I mean, I felt like I was jumping off a bridge with a threadbare bungee cord, but the thrill of it all was zinging through my veins, addicting me to the shot of adrenaline.

And like a junkie, I needed more.

More adrenaline.

More Cock.

*Grab more Love Bank [here](#).*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thank you so much for reading Man Glitter!! I hope you survived your trip to Hell. : ) If you like that sort of thing, buckle up. There's a whole series of books set in Hell!

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To my Rays of Sunshine: you give me life. <3

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marika Ray is a national bestselling author, writing steamy and sweet RomComs to make your heart explode and bring a smile to your face. All her books come with a money-back guarantee that you'll smile at least once with every book.

Marika spends her time behind a computer crafting stories, walking the beaches of southern California, and making healthy food for her kids and husband whether they like it or not. Prior to writing novels, Marika held various jobs in the finance industry, with private start-up companies, and then in health & fitness. Cats may have nine lives, but Marika believes everyone should have nine careers to keep things spicy.

If you'd like to know more about Marika or the other novels she's currently writing, please find her in her private [Reader Group](#). Or you can find her in-person, on the beach in Southern California, frolicking like a Baywatch babe.

If you want to take your stalking to the next level, here are other legal places you can find Marika:

Join her Newsletter -

<http://bit.ly/MarikaRayNews>

Amazon - <https://www.amazon.com/author/marikaray>.

Goodreads - [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/16856659.Marika\\_Ray](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/16856659.Marika_Ray).

Bookbub - <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/marika-ray>.

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