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–Publishers Weekly



a real love novel by
Jessica Lemmon

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MAN CANDY

A REAL LOVE NOVEL

BOOK 3

JESSICA LEMMON



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PRAISE FOR JESSICA LEMMON

“Becca and Dax’s instant chemistry is enhanced by their growing emotional bond. Readers will want more of this charming couple.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“A sexy one-night stand turns deep and you can’t help being drawn right in with these fabulous characters. Another unmissable entry in Jessica Lemmon’s Real Love series!”—*USA Today* bestselling author **Kate Meader**

“Explosive chemistry, real characters, and a lot of heart—*Man Candy* gave me all the feels!”—*USA Today* bestselling author **Stacey Kennedy**

“Then there’s the whole setting which is magical. . . . Seriously, who wouldn’t want to be rained in a mountain cabin with a sexy, gorgeous, sex god? . . . This is my ideal vacation and I loved it. Another great installment to this fantastic series!” —**Smitten with Reading**

“I love the words that are Jessica Lemmon! She sure knows how to hook her readers. I *adored* this read and couldn’t put it down.” —**Books According to Abby**

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“Great characters . . . amazing chemistry . . . I loved it.” —
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“*Man Candy* was my favorite book in the *Real Love* series by Jessica Lemmon. It was so fresh and funny. I adored Becca and Dax.” —**A Novel Glimpse**

“The romance, the scenery and just, the whole story worked for me. I enjoyed Dax, I liked Becca, and I really liked seeing them come together in love. This book was cute, funny, and had a lot of heart so I definitely recommend.” —**Front Porch Romance Book Review**

“I loved the conflict with family, tension between the two characters and the self-doubt, as it is something we all struggle with in one way or another. Another wonderful book by Jessica Lemmon.” —**Sultry Sirens Book Blog**

“Once again, Lemmon has written a novel that has all the swoon-worthy elements you look for in a lighthearted romance: sexy characters, a charming story line, lots of heart, and a happy-ever-after ending that will make you smile.” —
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CHAPTER 1

FRIDAY NIGHT

BECCA

“You are fired!” My brother’s neck is beet red, his nostrils flared. He’s the picture of incensed at the moment. But. He loves me. I excel at finding Tad’s heart.

“The traffic on the way in—” I start.

“I’m not joking, Becca.” His eyebrows go higher, his mouth half open for a beat before he finishes his thought. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

I’m at the entrance of Grand Lark Retreat, where the unmanned front desk sits empty. The bar-slash-restaurant beyond holds a total of seven human beings—including the staff: my brother and Dominic, who’s busy holding up a wall.

Every pair of eyes is on me, but I walk in, head held high after being called out in the least subtle way ever.

“Can’t deal with what?” I ask Tad when I reach the far, unpopulated end of the bar. “This rush you and Dominic can’t handle without me?” I rest my bag on an empty barstool and

swipe my hands over my soaking-wet arms. “I *swam* here. It took extra time. Sue me.”

“I’m not suing you, Bec.” He washes a glass in the angriest way possible. “I’m firing you.” He dries it in the same manner.

I flick my eyes around the room. A couple sits at the bar, ignoring my drama. An older guy occupies a booth in the corner, also ignoring me. The single woman at the bar watches me unabashedly. I pull my eyes from her judgy ones and reroute to the only patron left—an incredibly attractive guy who narrows his focus on me before returning it to the screen of his phone.

I experience a whole-body *oomph* like someone knocked the wind out of me. My gaze snags on his broad shoulders and square jaw a little longer than appropriate before I force myself to deal with my brother.

“You don’t want to fire me. You need me!” I try grinning.

Tad glares.

“You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago.” He snaps his arm straight and points at the office where our shared desk sits. “Any phone calls that come in are supposed to be answered by *you*. Not by me. Not by Dominic. That’s why I pay you.”

“Which I totally appreciate and need,” I chirp.

My brother is a taller, angrier version of me. Darker blond hair that’s much, much shorter than my own. Flat line of a mouth where I mostly show off my smile. I’m chipper; he’s more of a wood chipper.

Grand Lark Retreat’s phones weren’t exactly ringing off the hook until recently. Forest fires damaged a portion of Gatlinburg’s rental properties, which made vacationers venture

away from the familiar and give us smaller outfits a try. We're grateful for the bump in popularity, but we all wish it hadn't come as a result of someone else's nightmare come true.

"I grabbed the phone a few times. It was no big deal," Dominic mutters in the soft-spoken way he has. He pushes off the wall where he was leaning. He's been my brother's best friend for most of my life, so I know him well.

"Hey, Bec." He shoves his hands in his pockets.

"Hi, Dom. I appreciate it."

"Regardless." Tad marches out from behind the bar and I follow. He clears the dishes off a vacated table with angry, jerky motions and then points at me with a spoon and a fork. "It's not like this is your first warning."

I wince because it's totally not my first warning. It's not my second either. It's not even my third. I know. I *know*. Believe me when I say I'm doing my best.

I came back to Tennessee to lay low for a while. My brother and his wife (and my two adorable, angelic nieces) were nice enough to let me move in while I figure a few things out and save some money. I've been doing the latter—not so much the former. It's been more fun lately *not* figuring things out. Letting myself blow in the breeze. Go where the wind takes me...

Tad delivers a bottle of beer to the guy in the corner booth and I smile sweetly at him. He grimaces.

Does everyone on the planet think I'm a screwup?

"Tad—"

"Not now, Becca."

With a sigh, I head back in the direction of the office, only to become distracted by the Magic Mike look-alike hunkered over my brother's bar. I should grab my bag, walk directly to the office, and start returning emails. Instead I grab a discarded towel and surreptitiously check him out while pretending to wipe down the barstools.

At second sight, I reconsider the Magic Mike comparison. He's not quite pretty enough to be a stripper. He's rugged. Has a *presence*. Everything around him suggests he's not only strong but also warm. Kind.

I pull in a deep breath as I consider that tantalizing possibility. Kindness is a dwindling resource. Sure, Dominic is nice to me, but he has to be. He's known me forever.

Tad, on the other hand, has been so short fused lately that "kind" isn't in his vocabulary. I suppose that's deserved. I'm not exactly a shining example of a woman who has her life figured out. I truly have been trying, but I don't fit into his mold...or any.

It's still not a good reason to fire me. I'll talk him out of it.

I wiggle my shoulders and straighten my spine. No one is better at faking it until making it than I am. Even if I haven't "made it" anywhere yet.

I wipe the seat of a barstool and peek through my lashes at the stranger at the bar. I wonder where he's from. No wedding band on his left finger. His attention has been glued to his phone, so other than the brief glance at me a few minutes ago, his head's been down.

A loud laugh burbles out of a drunk-and-getting-drunker woman at the bar. The stranger's eyebrows crash down over a

strong nose as he drags his eyes up at the sound. Strong nose below a strong brow and a firm jaw to match.

Holy...

He's freakin' *hot*.

I move toward him as I polish the shiny wood of the bar, taking him in below the neck. He's less Magic Mike there, more lumberjack. An absolute hulk of a guy. I'm hovering around five feet nine inches, so I'm not impressed by merely tall.

But this guy? His width is as impressive as his height. Round, strong shoulders testing the seams of his T-shirt. Back bent, his phone dwarfed in one large hand. He's almost slouching but there's nothing weak about his posture. His back is as wide and sturdy as a support beam.

I work in the office most of the time, but I take breaks and wander out here to people-watch. I've witnessed plenty of guys checking their phones at this bar. Some of them have been attractive guys—but no one has ever snagged my unwavering attention. Not until tonight.

What gives?

I'm not lonely. Not desperate. I don't make a habit of approaching men I don't know in bars. And yet that's exactly where my mind goes. Approaching him. Finding out how his jeans became ragged at the bottoms and worn at his heavy thighs. Finding out if he owns a motorcycle. He's wearing a pair of motorcycle boots with buckles on the sides, one foot on the floor, the other hooked by the heel on the lower rung of the stool.

I automatically cast my eyes to the parking area out front. Only two trucks and a Jeep sit in the lot. No bike. That's his

Jeep, I'd bet. It's deep gray hardtop attached to thwart the never-ending rain. I imagine him in it. It suits him, top on or off. My imagination supplies a visual of him with *his* top off and that's even better. In the sun or the rain. Oh, the *rain*.

My teeth stab my bottom lip as the images come without my trying—a welcome reprieve from the here and now.

The stranger. The rain. His shirt's off as he twists the bolts off a flat tire. I'm about to cast myself as a passerby who's going to offer help when my brother's voice booms like thunder.

“Becca!”

I jerk out of my fantasy to find the stranger looking right at me. He meets my gaze and holds it. Heat licks up my thighs and teases there so intensely, I almost forget why Tad is pissed at me.

“*Becca*,” he repeats, minus the exclamation point.

“Yes, Chosen One?” It's been my nickname for him since I discovered he was our parents' favorite.

He frowns and sneers—a typical Tad combo—and tosses a bar towel over his shoulder.

“Why are you cleaning if I fired your ass?” he asks. Loudly.

Okay, that's embarrassing. I sneak a glance at the stranger to find he's still looking in my direction. His brow crashes down again and his curved back goes straight, like he's ready to speak out in my defense. Interesting. Nay... *intriguing*. With an audience, I can't resist being cheeky.

“Is that what I'm doing?” I regard the cloth in my hand in faux shock. “I must've been sleep-dusting again.”

Tad snarls a few sentences. It's not that I'm ignoring him so much as that what he's saying is zapped from my head by two heat-seeking silver-blue irises that vanish beneath narrowed lids.

The stranger's not only watching me now. He's *smiling* at me.

It's brief, but I'm rewarded by the flash of white teeth before they vanish behind full lips. He snaps those gorgeous eyes away from me and back to his phone.

I hope he's not texting his girlfriend.

I'm struck with the overwhelming need to approach him. If I don't, I'll forever regret not seizing the moment—a moment that could result in finding out if Magic Mike has anything to offer other than an amazing physique. Is he kind? Is he smart? Is he willing to give his phone number to a virtual stranger?

Sky's the limit, really. I'll never know unless I approach him.

There's a *ping* in the center of my chest telling me that's exactly what I need to do. I've followed that *ping* to several states. Into several jobs. Except when I returned home. That wasn't a *ping* so much as a deflating balloon. It felt like giving up, but I was unmotivated and out of money. At least I followed my gut to New York in the first place and made amazing friends as a result.

The *ping* happens again and my gut resonates with certainty. I have to approach him. I'll forever kick my own ass if I don't.

I drop the cloth back onto the bar top. I've taken two steps in his direction when he asks Tad for another beer. My next step falters. His voice is *rich*. As thick as honey. Heavy, dark,

amber-colored honey that takes its time sliding out of the jar while you anticipate the first taste.

Oh, man.

I bet his laugh is *phenomenal*. I bet if he let loose that chuckle into my ear—complete with warm exhale—I'd go up in flames.

Only one way to find out.

DAX

The rain started when I crossed the Ohio border into Kentucky. Light at first, then heavy and pelting, accompanying some wind that at one point had me wondering if I'd make it down here at all. I did, but the storm followed me to Tennessee.

Some vacation weather.

I rented a cabin, but I also brought my tent and camping gear. I'm planning to find a nice spot under the stars in the woods to sleep for a night or two. I need a break.

From *everything*.

From my buddy Barrett, who's staying at my apartment thanks to a messy breakup with his on-again, off-again girlfriend, and from my mother's constantly asking me if I'm hungry or if she can make me something to eat.

My dad died recently. I spent early spring living back home, helping my mom clean out the shed and the garage. A

task I thought would take two weeks but ended up taking two *months*.

Barrett's timing wasn't the best—he asked if he could crash on my couch for a week or so. I'd just returned home from my mother's house and was looking forward to peace and quiet.

My friend is still bunking on my couch and watching countless hours of television. It was either blow my stack and kick him out on his sorry ass or take myself on a much-needed vacation.

So here I am.

The bartender, a slight guy in his late thirties, brings me another beer. I started a tab. As ready as I thought I was to have solitude, postdrive beers taste better in public. I'm a bar owner. Drinking in public feels normal.

I remember my dad as I sip my fresh mug of Miller Lite—his beer of choice. My throat tightens with grief and sorrow. The kind that hooks into you and forces you to pay attention to it. There's no escaping missing him.

Losing him meant losing our weekly phone calls. Football season is really going to suck. We used to watch a lot of games together. Picturing myself alone on the couch with a beer is a sad sight indeed.

Bubbly laughter drifts my way from the girl on my right. She works here—or did until about ten minutes ago when the bartender who refilled my beer fired her. She's dressed in dark, slim jeans accentuating long legs below a white, flowy top. The second she set one high-heeled sandal in this place, that guy laid into her, much like he did a minute ago when he yelled her name.

He called her Becca.

I wonder if it's short for Rebecca.

Anyway, I'm not much for disrespecting women, and this jerk seemed to do it no problem, but I didn't see a reason to intervene. His harsh attitude rolled off Becca's back like she was coated in oil.

She didn't stomp out or raise her voice. She handled him respectfully, quietly stating her case. If anything, he was the one stomping around and raising his voice. After he unprofessionally pitched his fit, Becca maintained a bounce in her step and a smile on her pretty face. That made me smile, which is a feat lately, let me tell you. My employees have taken to calling me "Grumpy Dax," which is not only uninventive but also telling.

Becca is chatting up the other guy who works here. He leans a hip on the bar and sends the stink eye to the bartender who served me—their boss. They don't seem to like him much.

Boss Man steps in front of me now, cellphone in hand, and informs me of some bad news. "Mr. Vaughn, I need to swap keys with you."

He pockets his cell and slaps down a key on a red key fob reading GRAND LARK. It's exactly like the one he gave me earlier, only that one's yellow.

"I'm moving you to cabin thirteen," he tells me. "I received a text from maintenance. The rain has made the hill impassable."

The key to cabin 7 is still in my pocket from when I checked in (from this very seat, since the front desk was

empty). Not that I'm superstitious, but cabin 7 sounds a hell of a lot luckier than cabin 13.

"Mine's the Jeep," I tell him, jerking my chin toward the parking lot. "I can make it up there."

"I doubt it." He smiles but there's no humor there.

"Guess we'll find out." I handpicked cabin 7 because of the location. It sits deep in the woods, well off the main road, and the view beyond the balcony is breathtaking. I don't use that word *ever*, so it has to be true.

"Sorry." He shakes his head. "Company policy. If you and your Jeep go sliding off the mountain, we'll be liable. I'm not only the manager of this fine drinking establishment, but I'm also the owner of Grand Lark."

Well. Shit.

With a heavy exhale, I reach into my pocket. I surrender the yellow key fob, laying it on the bar. "If it opens up..."

"We'll move you immediately," he finishes for me.

Lightning illuminates the entire bar, a loud peal of thunder following right behind it. Becca lets out a startled yip before settling a hand on her chest and bursting into laughter. Her laugh transforms her face, brightens the color in her cheeks. I reluctantly tear my eyes off her as Boss Man spouts directions for my new (and unwanted) digs.

I take the red key fob and cram it in my pocket as he slides a map across the bar and points out cabin 13. It's closer to the main office than I'd like, with other cabins nearby. I'm not happy about the change, which he must've discerned.

"I know it's not ideal," he tells me. "We should be able to open up the road in the next day, maybe two."

I dip my chin in a nod. It'll have to do. I'm not willing to start my six-hour-plus drive back to Ohio now, nor am I going to look for another cabin rental this late at night. Getting this one was a bitch considering the recent Gatlinburg forest fires. I was lucky to find an opening.

He asks if he can get me anything else before he clocks off for the night. I say no, and he tells me Dominic can help me with anything else I need.

I'm assuming Dominic is the besotted Italian-looking guy mesmerized by Becca. He likes her. Probably hasn't dated her yet. That look in his eyes is more pining than reminiscent.

She's either cruel or doesn't recognize his suffering, because next she squeezes his biceps and walks away. He inspects his arm after she goes, pulling his shoulders back like his day has just been made.

He's young. Probably closer to her age than I am. I'm thirty-three; she can't be older than midtwenties.

I glance up from my phone again to watch her. At first blush, she's what you might call "cute." Tall, her chin-length light-blond hair cut at choppy angles. But if you watch her for longer than five seconds, the cuteness morphs into more.

Becca moves with grace, like a dancer or an athlete. She's lithe, not skinny, and it only takes one glance down those long legs to notice the muscles in her calves, even beneath her jeans.

She's a beauty.

Though the "cute" assessment reemerges the moment she opens her mouth. From the small amount of conversing I've overheard, I know she has a sharp wit and a sharper tongue. She's funny.

And in the face of being fired by her weak-chinned boss, she hasn't abandoned the premises yet. Which also means she has balls.

Figuratively speaking, I like a woman with balls.

I don't like them meek. I don't like when they play dumb. And thanks to my last relationship, I *really* don't like when they treat me like I'm a big, oafish former jock who doesn't understand how relationships work.

I understand, all right.

It's an understanding that keeps me from wanting to enter another one. They're good and fine for a great many people, but I'm not one of them.

The only relationships I'm interested in are the ones I have with my bartenders and other staff and maybe, on occasion, if the mood is right, the one I have with a woman on a temporary, no-strings basis.

A flash of blond catches my eye. I turn my head to find Becca, her glossed lips hitched, approaching me with a confident, easy walk.

I straighten in my seat, ignoring the text that just buzzed my phone.

Looks like the mood could be right for a little no-strings fun tonight.

CHAPTER 2

DAX

The high-heeled sandals on Becca's feet give her a few added inches of height, making her legs look a mile long. She doesn't quite strut, but she doesn't hesitate either.

Boss Man doesn't seem to care that she's lingering, since he's on his way out the door, his scowl a permanent fixture.

She's a few feet from my seat. I pull back my shoulders and lock my gaze with hers. It's dark in here, so I can't tell if her eyes are hazel or golden-brown. I'll know soon enough.

She shuffles to a stop in front of me, her smile somewhere between shy and confident. Interesting mix.

"Hi."

"Hi, yourself," I rumble after a brief pause.

She grins and I feel a smile pulling my lips. It's not like random gorgeous women approach me on the regular. I can't remember the last time *any* woman approached me. I've been in my head a lot lately—stomping around frowning isn't the most open body language for attracting the opposite sex.

Becca doesn't twirl her hair or inspect her shoes. She simply pulls out the seat next to me and sits down.

"I saw you and Tad swap keys."

My eyebrows lift.

Her mouth drops open before a laugh echoes from her throat. When she covers her lips with her fingers, she looks adorably chagrined.

"I didn't mean that to sound strangely sexual." Another laugh. "I'm assuming the cabin you booked isn't available?"

I fish the red key fob out of my pocket and show her the proof that I've been relocated. "I'm now in thirteen. Tell me there's no weird lore I should know about."

"Besides the guy in a hockey mask who murders teenagers and throws them in the lake? None at all."

I let loose a smile of my own. "I'm safe, then. I haven't been a teenager for a while."

She taps her lips with one finger. I admire the full plushness of her mouth while trying to remember the last time I kissed someone because I wanted to. It's been way longer than I like to admit.

"So you originally booked cabin number..."

"Seven."

"I'm trying to remember the name on the reservation." She narrows her eyes—hazel, I notice before they disappear under mascaraed lashes. "Dex?"

"Dax," I correct. "You were close."

"Dang! I really was. I thought you were 'Dex,' short for 'Dexter.'"

“It’s ‘Dax,’ short for nothing,” I reply. “Is ‘Becca’ short for ‘Rebecca’?”

“It’s ‘Becca,’ short for nothing.”

We smile at each other, the air sizzling between us with a special brand of fire: *want*. I’d use the two-ships-in-a-storm metaphor but that’d be lame. Instead I point out the obvious.

“Your boss is a prick.”

This earns me a loud “Ha!” followed by “He’s been like that since he was five years old. I’m his younger sister, so I would know.”

“I take it back. He’s not a prick. He’s an asshole. I’ve fired people before and my form is much better. Who fires his younger sister?”

“What if I deserved it?” She leans on an elbow. Despite her shirt having an enticing V-neck, I keep my head up.

“Did you?” I ask.

Her confident expression falters, her eyes glancing away before landing on me again. Damn. Does she think she deserved that little respect? An odd urge flows through me—the urge to protect her, or avenge her. Again, not the norm where I’m concerned.

“Maybe,” she finally answers.

I glue my gaze to hers. “Even if you deserved it, he should respect you more than to bark at you in front of a bar full of patrons. You’re worthy of respect.”

“That sounds like a line.”

“Don’t do lines, babe.” I drink my beer and shrug. I don’t have time for bullshit these days. Maybe that’s me getting

older, or maybe losing my dad has narrowed the list of what's important down to a lean top five.

“Cabin thirteen doesn't have any creepy lore, but it's nothing like cabin seven.” She crosses her legs and wiggles her foot. I wait for her to continue. “Cabin seven is remote and woodsy. Nestled in a sea of pines next to a clearing of wildflowers, with a view of the mountains.”

Exactly what I wanted. Exactly why I came here. Peace, quiet, and pine trees.

“Cabin thirteen,” she says, her face pinching, “is a short drive from this building. Its features include a sprawling downstairs area, two bedrooms and two bathrooms on opposite sides of the cabin, a balcony with hot tub, an elliptical machine, and an arcade room off the back.”

I don't need a mirror to know I'm frowning.

“The balcony overlooks the parking lot for the casino at the bottom of the mountain,” Becca continues like a commercial from Grand Lark, “and is convenient to both the Grand Lark office and bar *and* cabins ten and eleven, which are multifamily and perfect for reunions or weddings. How's that sound?” she finishes with a grin. She enjoys teasing me.

“Utopic.”

“And he's funny.” She presses a finger onto my forearm. The least sexual touch ever, and yet my skin is warm even after she pulls away.

“Lucky for you, the rain has deterred nearly every family from our 'utopic' establishment. Cabins ten and eleven are empty for the week.”

“Good news.”

Outside the rain falls harder and faster, splattering the windows and likely flooding another road to another cabin. Becca shudders as she watches out the window.

“Don’t like storms?”

“I love them,” she corrects, all of her brightening. “You never know what’s going to happen. When they’ll end. How strong they’ll be. It’s exciting, the not knowing.” Her eyes go to the windows again. “Hope your Jeep top is on tight.”

“Fancy yourself a stalker, do you?”

“Hey, I didn’t get your name right.” She takes my joke in stride. I like her. That’s a big statement to make, since I met her about five minutes ago, but it doesn’t make it any less true.

“You don’t sound like you’re from Tennessee.” Her accent is neutral, at least it is to my midwestern ears.

“I’m from Tennessee. But I’ve lived in a few different states. Must’ve become muddled.”

“What states?”

She’s just opened her mouth to answer when the other guy who works here looms over us, closer to Becca than to me.

“Hey, Dom,” she says with a smile he doesn’t return.

“Are you cashing out?” he asks me.

Becca’s eyes widen in amusement before sweeping to me.

“No,” I answer.

Dominic works his jaw, clearly displeased that Becca and I are talking.

“Becca needs a drink,” I tell him.

“Aren’t you on the clock?” he asks her.

“She’s fired,” I say to Becca’s pleased-as-punch smile.

“Officially done for the day,” she tells Dominic. “Rosé, please.”

Dominic narrows a sharp glare at me before he pours her a glass of pink wine and delivers it without looking in my direction again.

The last of the bar guests fritter off over the next hour or so. Becca and I stay where we are, talking about favorite drinks and movies and what kind of music we listen to.

Me: anything. Her: mostly dance music.

It suits her.

Over the course of our neutral conversation, she orders a basket of popcorn, which we bottom out. Her glass of wine is still half full and I have an inch or two of beer left in my glass. The storm’s worsening outside. We both know it, but neither of us wants to break stride. Neither of us wants to leave.

Dominic returns, offering a refill on the popcorn.

“I’m good,” I tell him.

He snaps his attention to Becca. “You okay?”

By the look on his face, I’m guessing he’s hoping she answers, “No, I’m not having any fun at all. Will you marry me?”

Instead she says, “Doing great, thanks,” to his visible disappointment. He shoots a few more daggers at me before busying himself cleaning the bar.

“He doesn’t like you very much,” she points out before pressing her lips into a flat line of apology.

I can't help chuckling, and it's been so long—months? years?—since I've done something as jovial as chuckling, the sound startles me. This vacation thing has its merits.

“It's because he likes you, Princess.” I've been watching him out of the corner of my eye since Becca sat down. Dominic is as territorial as a rabid dog.

“‘Babe’? ‘Princess’? Don't you know this is the era of feminism? I could have you arrested.”

“For what?”

She leans close, right into my personal space, and the pull in my gut is like a cable strapped to my balls. “Indecent exposure.”

I lean an inch closer. The air between us heats. Lowering my voice, I give her a gravelly “I'm not exposed.”

“You could be.” She plucks the fabric of my T-shirt and raises an eyebrow. “If you took this off.”

My gut tightens. I know that feeling, but it's been eons since I've felt it.

White.

Hot.

Attraction.

It's been simmering on the back burner this entire time, but she just cranked the heat to high.

She breaks the cord strung between us, sitting back in her chair and crossing one long leg over the other. The scrape of the denim of her jeans is enough to send me on an imaginary adventure involving those legs wrapped around my waist.

Becca raises her wineglass and sips. I ease back into my chair, not wanting her to know where my head's at. Not yet.

“Dax what?” she asks, as if no time has passed since her guessing my first name and right now.

“Vaughn. Becca what?” I ask in kind.

“Stone.”

“What did you do before you were fired from Grand Lark, Becca Stone?”

“Oh, you know. This and that.” Another sip of her wine. Her confidence flags. I wonder if something bad happened between the this and the that.

“Where did you do this and that?”

“New York for a while. Virginia. Ohio. Michigan.”

Coy as she's been, I'm surprised she answered me.

“What do you do, Dax Vaughn?”

“Bar owner.”

“Where's your bar?”

“Columbus.”

Her eyes spark with interest. “I lived in Columbus for six months.”

“No shit.”

Her grin gets bigger. “No shit.”

We're teetering. I know it—she knows it. The question is, who is going to topple first? I'm not sad to say it might be me, but I'm going to wait this one out a bit.

I settle into my barstool like I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. “So where in Columbus—”

My words cut off when the bar goes black. For the count of a breath, the electricity snaps off.

Then on. Then off.

Off is where it stays.

I turn on my phone screen, and in that faint bit of light, I can make out Becca's wide eyes on me at the same time I feel the warmth of her palm, striking like flint, on my arm.

Dominic announces that he's going to power up the generator. He doesn't ask Becca if she's okay again, but I sense that he'd like to. Her eyes don't leave mine. I can feel them on me even when my phone light winks out.

"Scared, Becca Stone?" My voice is barely above a whisper, but it sounds loud without the humming backdrop of electrically powered appliances.

"No." She squeezes my arm. "Are you scared?"

"No. I love the dark."

"Me too," she says. Breathlessly.

A beat passes and her hand runs the length of my arm, tucks under my shirtsleeve, and grips high on my biceps. I flex for her. Another beat passes where nothing but our truncated breaths saturate the air. And then we're bathed in light.

"It's back on," she says needlessly. She's still touching me, her cheeks pink with heat. Our bodies lean in and we just keep leaning.

"Dax?" she whispers, her voice the slightest bit unsteady.

"Yeah?"

She responds by coming my way. *Slowly*. Until her lips touch mine in the barest, faintest brush. Every inch of me

ignites, as if Dominic plugged my body into that generator. My eyes close and I lose the softness of her lips. Her hand strokes down my arm and she takes my fingers in hers and squeezes.

“Sorry about that,” she mumbles.

I open my eyes. “Don’t be.”

“I didn’t plan on doing that. I was going with my instincts.”

“Good instincts.”

“Do you...” She licks her lips and her eyes flit to the door and then back to me. “Do you want to—”

“Check,” I bark at Dominic the moment he steps behind the bar again. I don’t break eye contact with Becca. Her resilient smile returns as Dominic reluctantly prints my bill and slaps it on the bar. I don’t pay him any attention as I pull cash from my wallet and throw it down.

“I should ask you if you’re sure. I was just fired. I approached you. I could be trouble. You don’t *really* know me,” Becca says.

“You don’t know me.” We both stand.

“I know you’re a bar owner from Ohio. I know your first and last name.” She’s taller than I would’ve thought. She’s far from dwarfed by me.

“I know you’re Becca Stone and your brother has questionable manners. I know you’re determined and ballsy and, babe, you are *wearing* that pair of jeans.”

Challenge sparkles in her eyes. “I know your body feels like smooth steel and your mouth tastes like beer and clean, cool mint.”

I duck my head, so close to kissing her again it's not even funny. "But do you know the way to cabin thirteen?"

She purses her lips and whispers, "By heart."

CHAPTER 3

BECCA

Dax unlocks the door to cabin 13 and gestures for me to go ahead of him. Thanks to the covered porch, we're at least out of the elements, but even during the short jog from our cars to the porch, we were soaked in an instant.

I know this cabin, so I reach to my left and flip the light switches. After a few impotent clicks it's clear that the power's out.

Anticipation wriggles in my tummy. Outside of Grand Lark, bag in hand, I hesitated ever so briefly at the door. Not because I was having doubts about Dax but because I wanted to give my body one more chance to take back that *ping* of premonition.

I counted to five, and then Dax pulled up to the overhang and rolled down his window. "Say the word, Becca. I can go in and grab the map. Find it myself."

In other words, did I want to continue this date or let it go? At the thought of letting it go—of going back to my brother's house to sleep in the same room with my niece—the *ping* returned with a vengeance.

I couldn't pass up the chance to explore what Dax and I started, so I lead the way in my car.

Dax leans out the front door and retrieves a dripping-wet duffel bag, a large cooler, and another sizable bag.

"Wow. Is that everything?" I tease, sweeping my phone's flashlight beam toward the mountain of supplies.

"Camping gear and fishing rods are in the Jeep," he answers drily. "Won't be using that until the rain lets up."

I like his truncated speech about as much as I like everything else about him. Especially the way he's looking at me right now. I sweep the light from his luggage to inspect him. His hair is plastered to his head, water dripping off the hard planes of his handsome face, T-shirt molded to his pecs, abs, and shoulders as if he dove into a lake rather than dashed in from a thunderstorm.

"There's a generator. Want me to find it?"

In the low light I can make out his eyes trained on me. "Becca."

"What?"

"We could have another drink. Postpone this another hour or two. Ask more questions about pop culture and each other's pasts."

I shake my head because I don't want to overanalyze or stall or weigh my options.

"Or?" The word exits on a breath of anticipation. Dax stalks toward me, all that bulk moving at a seriously sexy pace.

He's in front of me, *surrounding* me. I'm delicate in comparison to the sheer size of him.

“Or.” His one word is followed by his chilled fingers sinking into my damp hair. He tugs my nape, forcing my chin forward and up, and I come a step closer and rest my hand on his soaked shirt.

“I have something else in mind.” His gravelly promise gives way to a heated kiss, his warm lips covering mine. He pushes his tongue into my mouth but takes his time once he’s there, mingling, dancing, teasing. I taste him and taste him until a clatter sounds in the room—my phone hitting the floor. The light illuminates the immediate area, but I don’t need to see him to know what he’s doing.

Dax runs his hands down my shoulders, down the sides of my breasts, around my waist. Then he stops. Tugs me closer. Deepens the kiss.

Oh, man this guy can *kiss*. Really, really kiss. My brains are turning to mush and my knees to jelly. I wouldn’t be surprised if all of me puddled at his feet like the rainwater rolling off his body.

He stops kissing me, robbing me of his heat as he pulls his pelvis away from mine. “Bec, I need a yes.”

“What?” I’m dazed.

“You sure you want to do this?”

Yep. I’m melting. This time from the inside. I take a bold step forward and press my breasts against his solid chest. I bump against the part of him he shielded from me a second ago—the many steely inches buried beneath the fly of those well-worn jeans.

“You know it, Magic Mike,” I tell him with a saucy grin. He can’t see it, but I make sure he can feel it. I push up on my

toes and throw my arms around his neck and kiss the life out of him.

Luckily, he's as good on his toes as I am on mine. When I lean heavily, he adjusts his weight to support me. When I slide my tongue into his mouth, he accepts it gratefully. When I snake my hand down his chest and over the ridges of his abs—seriously, this is one hard-bodied dude—he lets loose an exhale that's more a feral grunt against my lips.

Sexy.

I push his shirt over his chest and he peels the sodden material off the rest of the way.

When I reach for the button on his jeans, he growls into my mouth, “Where the hell's the bedroom?”

“There are two on this floor. Which—*eeeeee!*” My shriek turns into a giggle as Dax literally throws me over his shoulder. I didn't even sense it coming. One second I was standing on the floor, and the next I was airborne, then upside down. In a dark, dark room he sets me on my feet before the room is lit by his phone.

“I wonder if the flashlight makers have suffered a business slump since the invention of the smart phone,” I wonder aloud.

“Not what I'm thinking about.” He props the phone up on a lamp with a base made out of faux deer antlers. He thumbs open the stud on his jeans and works the wet denim over his legs. With the helpful spotlight pointing about waist high, I can see the outline of his erection in a pair of tight black briefs.

Before I can further admire his muscular, thick thighs, he's in front of me, lifting my shirt and tossing it aside. I shiver. It's a chilly spring night, and not warm in this cabin.

“Once we turn on the generator, let’s also turn on the heat.”

Dax pulls me close, his big hands warm despite the room’s temperature. “I’ll keep you warm, Princess.”

Again with the Princess?

“Are you under the impression I’m a diva or something?”

I sigh when his mouth hits the space between my neck and my shoulder. He sucks my skin gently and that sigh becomes an appreciative moan.

I... What was I saying?

“Shimmy onto that mattress.”

I do as I’m told and when I’m there, he tugs at my shoes.

Ineptly.

Not his fault. The wedges are fastened by tiny straps with tiny buckles at my ankles. Dax’s wide hands aren’t nearly nimble enough to—

I gasp when one shoe hits the floor with a dull thud.

Did he just...?

I prop myself up on my elbows and watch as he delicately lifts my other ankle. He slides the tiny strap from the tiny buckle, frees my other foot, and tosses the sandal aside.

Our boy has skills.

He’s over me a moment later, strong arms caging me in, eyes dark with intent.

“Want me to take off my pants?” I ask.

“That’s my line.” He kisses me briefly. “Still waiting on that yes, Princess.”

My, but he is a stickler for that rule.

“Yes, *Princess*,” I repeat.

He doesn't waste a second. He kisses the space between my breasts before his tongue glides into one of my bra's cups, teasing the flesh there. Then he kisses a path to my tummy as he reaches for my jeans. Stud undone, zipper down, he wriggles me out of wet denim without chafing my legs. Impressive.

At the end of the bed, he stands over me and I do my best to pose. Arms overhead, I stretch out, pull one knee in and tilt my head to one side.

“Lucky cabin thirteen.” A smile hitches his mouth.

I let out a hearty laugh. Being wanted, being attracted to someone, feels incredible. He eases down on the queen mattress without crushing me to dust.

“You're remarkably agile given all your bulk.” I wrap my hand around his biceps and give them a squeeze. He shifts between my legs. Several inches of hardness press against my inner thigh.

“You're fucking beautiful.”

The harsh word paired with a compliment causes the throb of my heartbeat to traverse lower until it's between my legs. I pivot my hips and press against his hard-on.

“You promised to warm me up,” I say, my voice husky with need.

“What's your pleasure?” He kisses that spot on the side of my neck again. I thrust my hips.

One of his fingers traces the lace of my bra, sliding over my nipple and around before moving away.

“That’s nice,” I let him know.

“Not going for nice, Princess.” Without preamble, he tugs the cup of my bra away and sucks one nipple into his mouth. I jolt at the sensation, opening my mouth to let out a sound steeped in pleasure.

He lets me go and kisses me briefly, saying, “Closer,” against my parted lips.

Closer?

Then he’s on the move, sliding my bra cup back over my breast and licking his way south. My hips tilt toward his mouth when his heated breath hits my inner thigh.

“Think I know what you like,” he says.

“Everyone likes this.” My voice is paper thin.

“Not everyone.” He spares me a glance and lifts one eyebrow before tugging my panties aside and delivering a slow lick along my center.

It’s like the lightning flash outside happened inside my veins. I spark on contact. The sound that rolls off my tongue isn’t a scream of satisfaction but a whimper of “Don’t stop.”

“Bingo.” He tugs my panties—nude lace, matching my bra—and drags them down my legs. I lift my feet to help, impatient for another of those long licks, but Dax apparently feels like taking his time.

He parts my legs, propping me wide and smoothing his palm up the inside of one leg while he strokes the inside of the other with his tongue.

I’m quivering, fists bunching the quilted bedspread, a kaleidoscope of color behind my lids. The room is chilled, my nipples pebbled, Dax’s damp hair sending a trail of

goosebumps to the surface of my skin. But his mouth is warm, his lips are warm, his tongue is *hot*.

Like the rest of him.

Higher he kisses. I eagerly shift my hips, my desperate whimpers lost under the pounding of the rain. The thought comes that he's doing this on purpose; that he'll get me wound up and then pull away and leave me wet and ready. But Dax is into no such cruel game.

He's into me.

Thank. God.

At the junction of my thighs, he tenderly lifts one leg and props it on his massive shoulder, and then does the same with the other. I'm open and vulnerable to him but I lift my hips, ready for what he's about to deliver.

The wait is over, and so is the teasing. He lowers his head and *devours* me.

CHAPTER 4

DAX

Finding what turns Becca on and being rewarded by her shouts of “Yes!” isn’t a bad way to spend a Friday night.

I haven’t surfaced from between her legs yet. Not only because she tastes like a heady mixture of heaven and sin but also because I’d like to wring one more orgasm out of her.

She’s new to me, and chances are we’re only going to have this one night. I want her to remember this for a long, long while. Like when she’s gumming her food well into her eighties and whispering to her granddaughter about the stranger in Tennessee who took her to greater heights than any man ever had.

Hey, it’s my fantasy.

I swirl my tongue, speed up, slow down. I can tell she’s close by the way her back bows. I slide one finger along her seam before slipping it deep, and then she *blows*.

That’s the one I was looking for.

I gentle her out of the orgasm, easing my finger away and leaving a few light kisses in my wake. I pepper a few over her

flat stomach and climb her body, pulling back the cups of her bra to deliver a wet kiss onto each nipple. Each of those earns me a shudder.

It's like winning a gold medal.

"Found your pleasure," I say against her mouth, curious if she'll kiss me with the taste of her on my tongue. To my surprise she does, lifting her chin and pressing her mouth to mine—hard.

"Yes," she whispers, and whispers, "Yes, yes," again as she tries (and fails) to push me onto my back.

"Yes to what?" I know what she's doing. I was adamant about getting a yes before I took her and now she wants more.

She reaches between our bodies, palms my dick, and strokes once. Twice. Third time's the charm.

"Tell me you have a condom or I'm going to cry so much I'll flood the inside of this cabin too." She pushes her bottom lip into a cute pout. I kiss it.

"Don't worry, Princess, I've got it covered."

I packed condoms. I tend to keep a few in the Jeep just in case too. I've always been a bit of a Boy Scout about that sort of thing because you never know. Or maybe I'm optimistic when it comes to getting laid.

I have to take the phone to see my way to my bag by the front door. I have the packet in hand and return to Becca in record time. Once there, I don't put the phone down right away. Starting at her toes, I take inventory. *Slowly*.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asks, but I hear a smile in her voice. See it too, when I jerk the light to her mouth.

“Having a look. Do you mind?”

She shakes her head. “Not at all. Just warn me first.”

She bends her body, striking a pose that would make any professional voguer proud. I move the light to her toes again. Watch painted red nails stroke the side of her other foot. The way she moves is like watching water lap the shore. Like I noticed at the bar, Becca knows how to use her body.

Her knees rub together as I inspect her long, long legs. Legs I had resting on my shoulders. Smooth, golden legs. Up to the *V* of her thighs. She moves her hands there now, but only to tease as she brushes her fingers over the thin line of hair. Now my path of light follows her fingers as they move up, up, up.

She reaches behind her back to unhook her bra, and when the cups sag, I swallow heavily. My dick jumps, eager. Another teasing smile finds her face and she slips the straps off her arms and tosses the garment to the side.

Oh, fuck me.

I stare, mesmerized by the sight of her delicate fingers circling perfect nipples. Becca’s breasts aren’t big, but they’re pert and she’s not the least bit shy about showing them off.

I don’t want to lose sight of her, so I take care to rest the phone on the lamp again before returning to cover one of her breasts with my fingers and the other with my mouth.

She gasps, undulating like a wave.

“Ready?” My voice is little more than a deep growl, and hers isn’t much more than a high-pitched sigh, but I heard the word she said on that sigh. A “yes” that floated out and nailed me dead center in the chest.

I make quick work of the condom. “Head on the pillow, Princess.”

She obeys. I like that. I like the nickname for her too. I’ve never called any woman “Princess,” but it suits her. Becca moves like she’s royalty. There’s an elegance that cloaks her, even when she’s wearing jeans. Even when she’s touching her nipples and writhing on the bed for my own private flashlight show.

Propped over her, I brace my weight on my elbows and lay a kiss on her mouth before nudging her entrance. One roll of my hips and I’m sliding home—my breath hissing from between my teeth.

Heaven.

Her nails scrape down my back, thighs tightening around me. “Yes, Dax.”

Sweet Jesus, that’s nice to hear.

Another push and I’m seated deep. We each blow out a ragged breath. Hers accompanies a compliment.

“That’s as big as the rest of you,” she says before she nips my earlobe.

“Getting bigger if you keep that up.”

She legitimately clears her throat and then my siren says, “I’ve never felt anything so huge in my life. Take me, Dax Vaughn. Take me hard and fast—”

I smother the rest of her words with my mouth as a giggle shakes her petite shoulders. I draw out as I take my lips from hers. I can just make out the curve of her smile fading as her eyelids dip.

I slide in slowly.

Out again just as slowly.

Back in. Out.

She's no longer trying to be cute. She's absorbing what I'm giving her and I'm giving it to her really good. For me, sex borders on sacred, and every reverent push and pull is done with the intent to make her come.

I'm reduced to the nerve endings concentrated at the head of my cock.

She bends her body as I stroke into her, her fingers playing along the back of my head where my hair is shaved short. When she rakes her nails through the longer strands at the top, a quake works its way down my spine.

There's no talking after that. I move, watching her closely to make sure she's enjoying herself. She lifts her eyes to mine. Even though half of her face is in shadow, we lock gazes as I work faster. In the muted lighting her eyes are dark and fathomless. Her mouth drops open when I go deep.

Found it.

I wrap one hand around her hip and tip her ass up, driving forward again. A sharp sound of pleasure escapes her gaping mouth. A charge of *Hell, yeah* shocks my system. I repeat the move, sliding out slowly, back in—*deeper*.

She clutches, squeezing every part of me tight with every part of her. I tumble down into the abyss with her. My release is louder, harder than hers, my mind blanking as thunder rumbles. The room vanishes behind my closed eyelids.

Sheer magical silence follows, a blinding bliss that erases everything apart from this moment. I may have lost a minute—two—because the next sensation I'm aware of is Becca softly kissing my eyebrow.

Then she kisses my temple.

Her fingers dance over my shoulders as she kisses my cheekbone.

I turn my head and kiss her, still embedded deep. My tongue tangles with hers but there's no urgency. Sated, satisfied, we take our time, no longer frantic to get to the good stuff. Now it's all good stuff.

I'm as pleased with the limp smile on her lips as I am with the drowsy droop of her eyelids. Then I pull out, and we're disconnected.

And damn if she doesn't look as disappointed as I feel that it's over.

BECCA

W. O. W.

Wow.

I didn't know that every part of my body could tingle simultaneously. It's not like after I finish leading an hour-long Zumba class and stand catching my breath, my body soaked with sweat and my chest heaving. No, this tingle more resembles the best yoga buzz *ever*. I'm not soaked in sweat but damp from the rain—damp from, well...the...*you know*. The other thing.

I bite down on my bottom lip as I recall what it felt like to have Dax over me—inside of me. Totally dominating and demanding, but his domination was about me enjoying myself.

I could tell by the way he watched me carefully, his sandy-brown eyebrows drawn together in concentration.

He took the time to find the right spot to kiss me before. Sex with Dax was memorable—mainly because it was him giving me what I needed before he took what he needed.

And, oh, I made sure he took his release.

My grin emerges as a shadowy figure strolls in from the attached bathroom.

“Ow! Fuck!”

I bolt up, adrenaline dumping into my bloodstream at the shock of hearing him yell. I find Dax bent over, hand holding one foot, knee raised.

“Busted the shit out of my toe,” he grumbles.

I laugh. The idea of him hurting his toe when he looks like he could take a bullet is a humorous thought indeed.

“Oh, you think that’s funny?” he asks, his tone sliding into playful.

“Yes,” I answer as he returns to bed and slides close. He kisses me long and lazily, which seems to be his signature. I like it way too much.

“That’s fair.” He rolls to his back and drops one arm over his forehead. “I can’t be mad at you about anything at the moment. Do your worst.”

“Ah, the power of sex.”

“Superpower.” His eyes sink closed like that’s the only word he can manage after his five-star performance.

Unlike my sleepy bedmate, I’m energized after that little workout. Satisfied, yes. Knees a little wobbly, check. But

energized.

I watch Dax in the light from his cellphone until his breathing slows and he sinks into sleep. I wonder if he always sleeps this deeply or if the long drive, paired with the late night, is the reason for it.

There are a lot of things I'll wonder but not get the answers to, because that's the way one-nighters go. An evening of fun and then you walk away with only memories to keep you company. Though the unanswered questions about Dax might bother me more than I'd like, and for *longer* than I'd like.

I linger, propped on one arm, and watch him sleep. Unable to resist, I arrange his hair—which is almost dry. Admire the shadows cast on his cheeks by thick eyelashes. He doesn't so much as flinch.

I slide out of bed, find a light blanket in the closet (there's no moving him from on top of the comforter), and drape it over his body. I steal one more peek at his physical perfection before turning off his phone's flashlight. I get dressed, shivering as I pull clammy, cold clothes over my sex-warmed body. If I was patient, I'd throw them in the dryer—he's sleeping so deeply, I'm fairly certain it wouldn't wake him. As it is, I'm itching to escape this cabin. You know, leave on a high note.

Out back I fire up the generator, earning pockets full of rainwater for my efforts. Inside, I listen for evidence that the blubbering power source woke Dax, but evidently he can sleep through anything.

I towel myself off. A nightlight in the bathroom and one in the main room provide enough light for me to find my bag and my phone, which dropped to the floor.

I smile, remembering why I dropped it. Holding on to Dax was more fun than holding on to my phone.

A text from Tad sits on my phone's screen reading simply:
WHERE R U?

I knew he still cared.

I text back: **Be home soon xo.**

Then I dig my keys from the recesses of my bag and walk to the door. I hear Dax's soft snore, and a stab of regret accompanies my thudding heart.

I feel kind of bad leaving. I tell myself that he's tired and things will only be awkward come morning. I further console myself with the fact that I work here, and he knows where to find me.

A surge of *want* thrums in my chest. I push it down.

"It was just one night, Bec," I whisper to myself. It's rare for anything to last forever—even really good things.

Especially really good things.

It's a night I'll treasure for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 5

SATURDAY MORNING

DAX

I wake up alone.

Nothing new there.

After my shower, I wander around my enormous temporary cabin. I check the bathrooms for my date. Check the kitchen counters and the front of the fridge for a note. I even check the front porch and the back. I stand in the center of the living room staring at the upstairs and hearing nothing. Sensing no one.

No Becca. No note.

It's fine. It is.

Disappointing but fine.

What we had was last night, and last night was fucking spectacular, and now it's in the rearview.

Totally fine.

I pour myself a cup of coffee and head out to the back porch. The second I kick back on the swing, the sky splits

open. I check my phone's weather app, crossing my fingers that I have reception up here. I do.

Aces.

The bad news?

So much rain. I'm talking Noah-go-build-an-ark rain. Fishing and camping are going to have to wait.

I pocket my phone, sip my coffee, and watch as the sky further darkens and the rain comes down in sheets. It's splattering off the boards and getting me wet, but I sit here anyway.

Maybe because wet denim reminds me of last night.

Proof that it wasn't an erotic hallucination.

CHAPTER 6

SATURDAY

BECCA

“It’s monsoon season out there!” I slosh in through the front door of Grand Lark’s greeting-center-slash-restaurant. I slip my jacket from my arms and shake it over the rug.

Dominic is pulling chairs off of tables and setting them on their legs like he’s opening.

“What gives?” I ask, walking in his direction.

The layout is thus: front desk (like at a hotel) giving way to a small restaurant-style bar. Three booths line the wall, six tables surrounded by chairs dot the middle, and the bar seats eighteen.

Grand Lark Cabins is a small affair, with thirteen cabins that aren’t always full but for the occasion we do have a packed house (unlikely, since most families bring their own food and eat at the cabin, or in town), there are also picnic tables outside under the patio roof.

“Shouldn’t we be open already?” I’m forty minutes late, twenty minutes later than my normal twenty minutes late.

Seriously not my fault this time. Blame it on the rain. A song by the same name drones through my head but I have no idea how I came to know the words.

“Opened late because of the rain,” Dominic tells me. “I just got here.”

I’m not the only one who’s late! That’s refreshing.

“Didn’t Tad fire you?” he asks.

“Yeah. But I’m rehired.” I’m convincing when I need to be. This morning, at the breakfast table with the fam, I apologized. Tad shook his head and left the room, which I took to mean that all was well. When Lara and I were in the kitchen cleaning up, she confided he was grouchier than usual despite the sex they’d been having. She spared me further details about my brother’s sex life because *gross*. But when she elbowed me and asked where I was last night, I couldn’t keep the Cheshire Cat smile from my lips.

I didn’t tell her nothing, but I didn’t tell her *everything*. A girl’s gotta have her secrets.

I left for work, but I was the only one. Tad has the day off. Lara asked if I was sure I wanted to risk the drive in the downpour, but I told her I wasn’t afraid of “a little rain.”

Turns out the rain was more than a little. I had to reroute not once but twice due to flooding. The main road was drivable only if I stayed in the middle, since the edges were already pooling with water. I climbed the mountain in my little-car-that-could. The hill resembled a Slip ’N Slide, but I’d come this far, so here I am.

“I hope it stops soon.” I walk from the restaurant to the office. Dominic follows me.

“No end in sight,” he says with a head shake. “You might have to bunk in the supply closet if we’re rained in.”

The supply closet is actually a bedroom, given the main office is a rehabbed cabin. Tad keeps a twin bed in there for emergencies or if he stays late.

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I say. “And if it does, you are sleeping in the supply closet, not me. I can curl up on a booth or something.”

“Forget it, Bec. I’m a gentleman.”

Dominic is a gentleman. A rare breed. He’s a good thirty pounds overweight on his top half, but it only serves to make him look cuddly, not doughy. Dark hair, tall. Deep brown eyes and nice hands.

“I appreciate the chivalry, but I wouldn’t kick you out of the only bed big enough to possibly support your frame.”

“Okay, fine. But I offered.” He puts a palm on the swinging door leading to the kitchen. “Hey, let me know if you want something to eat. I’m the cook today too, since Steve couldn’t make it in.”

“Will do.”

In the office I sit at the desk and turn on the laptop. My mind wanders to last night. I think about Dax. Wonder if he woke up looking for me. Wonder if he was angry that I left. Or if he was relieved. I’d prefer no reaction at all.

No texts. No calls. No strings, worries, or attachments.

It’s easier that way. I’m capable of being responsible for myself, but being responsible for the other half of a (gulp) relationship? *Yikes*.

Still, as I check my email and the incoming bookings—two! score!—I find my mind returning to Dax. It wouldn't be *that bad* if I saw him again.

Provided he doesn't hate me.

Six hours later, Dominic and I are sitting at the bar eating grilled cheese sandwiches that he made.

“Pretty good for a bartender,” I comment around a bite. “But you forgot the tomato.”

“Disgusting, Bec. Pickles go with grilled cheese, not tomatoes.”

“Peasant.” I make a show of rolling my eyes. He laughs, right on cue.

We turn our attention to the television. On the screen, flood warnings dot the surrounding area, the map a swath of blue and green “flood zones.” Grand Lark is right in the center of the mayhem.

“Damn,” Dominic says, and really, what else is there to say? “Supply closet for me it is. You gonna sleep on the bar top?”

“Ha-ha.” My phone rings. It's Tad. “What's up, big bro?”

“Maintenance called me with an update,” he says, cutting right to it. “Cabins one through seven—”

“I know the status of our cabins. Ray called me.”

There's a pause. “Really?”

“Yes, Tad. I'm at work. *Working*. Ray told me about the flooded roads, the trees that have fallen, and he mentioned that

there are a few cabins where the generators aren't working, which makes us lucky no one is in them."

"Right." Tad sounds surprised. Or suspicious. Funny how I can't differentiate between the two when it comes to him. "Our only guests are the family in number twelve, the honeymooning couple in nine—"

"And Dax in thirteen," I finish for him.

"Guess you're caught up."

"Just doing my job," I remind him. I may run late most of the time, but it doesn't mean I'm inept.

"Tell Dom to let you stay in the supply closet." Tad's authoritative tone is back in full force. "The main road washed out."

"Why don't we call it a bedroom, since that's what it is?" I know the main road washed out. I saw it on the news. They're guessing we'll be trapped for a day or three depending on when the rain stops. Thankfully, I think as I polish off my sandwich, we have plenty of cheese.

"Dom can sleep standing up, like a horse," Tad says. "I've seen it when we go hunting."

I laugh. "I'm not asking Dominic to sleep standing up."

Dom smiles. I smile back.

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Don't worry about me."

"Bec—"

"I'll be safe. I promise."

I end the call and stare down at my phone for a long, long time, while the news drones on in the background. To text Dax

or not to text Dax? That is the question. I don't want him to turn me down, and I don't want to appear overly eager. But I really, really want to text him.

Hmm.

I retreat to the office and do the next best thing. I call the remaining residents (except for Dax) and make sure they have what they need. They assure me that everything is in working order, which is good news. We're in the midst of a major emergency, but at least there aren't a bunch of smaller emergencies to contend with.

I then call our maintenance manager, Ray, who is safely ensconced in his maintenance cabin. He tells me he has enough food to last until the apocalypse. I ask him if he means zombie apocalypse and he answers, "The nuclear fallout," with so much sincerity, I begin to wonder if he's also built an underground room. Best not to ask.

The restaurant is eerily quiet, the office dim. It's just Dominic and me. And no, I'm not sleeping on the bar top. Or a booth.

I have a better idea.

DAX

A frantic knock at the front door jolts me out of the nap I was taking. I didn't know I fell asleep. It sounds again as I jump off the couch, disoriented for a good bit. It's dark, I'm in a

house I'm not used to, and I'm sure as hell not expecting anyone.

Especially in this weather.

Unless...

My suspicions are confirmed when I open the door to find Becca on my doorstep. She's standing on the porch, but rain comes in at an angle, further soaking her. Her blond hair is plastered to her cheeks, her teeth are chattering, and her mascara is smudged under her eyes.

"What the hell? Get in here." Not my most charming greeting, but I'm too surprised to see her to say anything more intelligent than that.

She steps inside, shivering while I grab a blanket off the nearest chair. I wrap it around her and she sets two big bags on the floor. She shivers more.

"I had to park my c-car at the top of the d-d-driveway," she says, shuddering. "So I hoofed it the rest of the way d-down."

"Holy shit, Princess, that's gotta be fifty yards." I rub her blanket-covered arms, futilely trying to warm her up.

"Only fifty?" She beams up at me, her humor intact. She looks like a drowned rat, if a drowned rat were the cutest, most welcome sight you've ever seen in your life.

"What's going on?" I have a million questions but that one seems safest, if the most generic.

She explains that the main road is flooded and adds that it's a good thing most of the cabins are empty, since those roads are impassable too.

"Soooo," she says after sharing the details, "I can either sleep in my car or at the restaurant with Dominic. Or try my

luck on the cabins nearest you, though eleven's driveway is a swimming pool... Or"—she shrugs—"I could stay with you. You have two bedrooms. Two bathrooms. I'm a great roommate. I'm neat. I can cook. I can—"

"Skip out on me in the middle of the night?" I finish, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Yes." She nods, owning it. "I can do that too. Quite well."

When I don't respond, she adds, "We might be stuck for a few days, so I brought food." She gestures at one of the two bags at her feet. I lift the enormous tote off the floor—it weighs a good thirty pounds.

"You hefted this from the end of the drive?"

"There was too much water. I didn't want to risk driving down and then not be able to leave. Just in case... In case."

In case I rejected her? I carry the bag to the kitchen counter.

"I knocked for a while. Were you asleep?"

"I was taking a nap."

"You're a deep sleeper all the time, then." She picks up the other bag—an overnight bag—and follows me to the kitchen. "Not only after a long drive and..."

She trails off, resting her teeth on her plump bottom lip.

I wonder if she was going to finish that statement with "and really great sex." That's how I would've finished it.

Coming out from behind the counter, I stand over her and lift my palm to her face. She rests her chilled cheek in my hand and peers up at me with bright green-gold eyes surrounded by smudged mascara.

“Sorry about leaving,” she says. “And crashing your vacation.”

“I believe you about the leaving part. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here. But the second half...” I shake my head. “You came to me first, I assume? Or did you do an inventory of every empty cabin before trying me?”

There’s a weighty pause, as if she’s deciding how much to reveal. “I came to you first.”

The news has me pulling my shoulders back. She’s here because she wants to be, not because she has to be. I like that. I hide my smile, not wanting her to see what it means to me that she wanted to come back. To see that I wanted her to come back.

Hell, I never wanted her to leave.

I gesture to the bedroom on the opposite side of the cabin from mine. “Help yourself. Plenty of hot water for a shower, and I have food. I’ll add what you brought to the cabinets and fridge.”

“Thank you.” She gathers the blanket around her shoulders, picks up her bag, and heads for the guest bedroom.

“You always travel with an overnight bag?” I call after her.

“Yeah.” She nods from the hallway. “You never know.”

Is it me, or was her smile a little sad before she closed the bedroom door?

I pull a hand down my face and pace to the kitchen. As soon as I put the groceries away, I’m having a beer.

CHAPTER 7

SUNDAY MORNING

BECCA

By the time I dress in the en suite the next morning, I've realized my mistake in showing up at Dax's cabin.

The reason one-night stands work is because they last one night. One exquisite, perfect, no-regrets night before you each return to your respective lives. I should've thought about the consequences of sleeping with a guy who's on the first day of his vacation. Hard to go back to your respective anythings when you live on the same mountain.

There was no mind-blowing sex last night like the first night. There wasn't so much as a kiss. I came back out of the bedroom and sipped half a beer until it grew warm, then excused myself to bed. I should have suspected that outcome. After all, I've never heard of a *two-night* stand.

I have no excuse for my showing up here rather than bunking in a variety of other places at Grand Lark. Other than the real reason: I wanted to see him. I wanted to see his handsome face and hear the low rumble of his voice. When he

tossed that blanket around me last night and zeroed those gorgeous eyes in on me, I nearly started purring.

I should've prefaced that by saying I'm not the clingy type. I don't mind temporary, or moving forward. Heck, I love it. I've made several moves—changed states, made new friends, switched roommates. Not only do I not mind change: I *thrive* on it.

However. There's no denying I've made things awkward by being here. I could've muscled Dominic out of the restaurant's spare bed—he'd have let me. Then I'd be awake and in my office working away. Instead I have to walk out into the common area of cabin 13 before canoeing up the driveway to my car.

I was hoping Dax liked to sleep until noon so I could escape without seeing him. Cowardly, I know, but that was my hope. Until I heard him pattering around in the kitchen.

Well. Here goes nothing.

I whip open the door and then step into the living room. Dax stands in the open kitchen, hip leaning against the countertop, fingers wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee.

“Good morning!” Maybe if I act like nothing's wrong, nothing will be. He dips his chin in a nod before sipping from his mug.

“Wow. It's coming down out there.” Great. Now I'm talking about the weather.

I swallow nervously as I pace to the kitchen. Dax's eyes go to my bag, which I slip off my shoulder and rest on one of the barstools.

Because of course I'm leaving. *Of course* I'm vacating the premises. Before things get really weird. We didn't make

promises, and I don't want him to feel as if he has to make any.

"Look," I start.

"Tree's down."

"Pardon?"

"In the road at the top of the driveway. You can't drive back to the office until we remove the tree."

Not that I don't believe him, but I walk to the front door and look out the window. I can see my car. A *huge* downed tree, fat limbs pointing to the sky, blocks the road.

"Oh my gosh." Six inches to the left and my Toyota would've been a crunchy metal pancake. In the driveway, close to the house, Dax's Jeep sits in gathering water.

"Guessing you can't drive me to work either?"

He shakes his head, just once. "Not until this lets up."

With a sigh, I face him. He's leaning there on the counter looking too good for words. Strong and sexy. Silvery stare focused on me, T-shirt hugging his muscular arms...

"How do you feel about a two-night stand?" I ask with a grin.

A low laugh escapes his throat. I grin wider. I thought I was kidding, but now that he's smiling at me, I'm sure that I'm not.

"Seconds," he says, pushing off the counter to approach me, "are not out of the question."

"No?" I ask on an exhale.

"Not for me. You?"

I shrug one shoulder and drop it.

“You know how I feel about uncertainty, Princess.” He hoists an eyebrow.

Oh, I know. He likes to hear the word “yes.” Clear, concise “yeses” back to back when he’s in the process of making me lose my mind.

Is it suddenly hot in here?

“Why do you call me ‘Princess’?” I ask, rather than talk about any of this “yes” business.

“Do you drink coffee?”

I blink at his question in response to my question. Sly, this one. “Who doesn’t?”

“My ex-girlfriend.” He turns away to pour me a cup.

I stare at his broad back and wonder who she was. What she was like. How long they dated.

Something else I don’t make a habit of is feeling jealousy’s sting. I don’t worry about the past...or the future. I’m frowning by the time he faces me, steaming cup in hand.

“I have milk but no cream.”

“Black is fine.”

“Not going for fine.” He levels a lingering gaze at me that reminds me of every delicious thing we did Friday night. Then he walks to the fridge and returns, tipping the half-full gallon of milk until a healthy splash lands in my coffee. It’s the perfect tan hue. Just the way I take it.

“Sugar?”

“Yes, dear?” I quip, and the air electrifies between us. I clear my throat and quietly amend, “No, thanks. This is

perfect.”

He leans forward and I smell the spicy, earthy fragrance of his aftershave or soap or cologne. “*That’s* what I was going for.”

DAX

I can tell Becca’s uncomfortable. Which is counter to the way she was on our first night together. She wasn’t shy or awkward, but now... I watch her as she stands rigidly at the sliding glass door and looks out at the trees in the back.

Definitely uncomfortable.

I’m not.

My comfort level has been tested and retested over the last year. Once you’re holding the worst hand life can deal you, you have a certain resolute spirit about the rest.

I consider what I know about the blonde in my cabin. She’s lived in a lot of places; her brother and she have a challenging relationship. She showed up at my door with enough supplies to last the week but then tried to escape come morning.

She’s a runner.

I recognize the trait because I used to be one. When I was in my early twenties and I didn’t know how to handle women or sex or relationships. That shit’s behind me and has been for a decade. My thirties, even though I’m only in my third year, have brought perspective.

It's been a hell of a trio of years.

"How old are you, Princess?" I wash my mug and turn it upside down on a dry dish towel. I turn to face her, watching as her eyebrows climb until they disappear beneath her hair.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that a lady never reveals her age?"

"I didn't mean any disrespect. Just figured I'm older than you."

"Not by much." She assesses me as if she's never considered how old I am, purses her lips, then says, "You're, what? Twenty-eight?"

I offer a wry smile.

"Thirty?"

I hold up my thumb and gesture that she needs to go higher.

"Thirty-tw..." she hesitates and I hoist my thumb higher. "Thirty-*three*?"

"You said 'thirty-three' like it's geriatric."

"You look younger. That's all. Six years isn't *that* big of a gap." She rolls her pretty eyes.

Six years makes her twenty-seven. That's about what I'd have guessed.

"Your brother's older," I say.

"Doesn't his bossiness presume that?"

"Absolutely."

She's been walking toward me as she talks. Her swagger's back. That easy, smooth gait hinting that she's good on her

feet. She's in a tight pair of dark blue jeans with a few rips at the thighs. They elongate her already long legs.

“And what of your siblings, Dax?”

I shake my head.

“Parents?”

“They live in Ohio too.” My brow crinkles as I realize what I said. “My mom lives in Ohio,” I correct. “Dad passed recently.”

Her entire face changes. Her pale eyebrows angle to show her concern, her mouth softens, and her eyes broadcast the words before she speaks them. “I'm so sorry.”

She closes the gap between us and rests her palm on my chest, and it's not a rehearsed move.

Becca means it. She's looking up at me with so much care, her small hand warm against my shirt, that my throat thickens with grief.

My biggest concern when my dad became sick was making sure my mom was going to be okay. After he passed, my focus was on guiding her to the next stage of her life—a life without him. I became so preoccupied with my mom's *okayness* that I haven't given enough (any?) thought or attention to my own.

I manage a silent nod of thanks to Becca.

“My parents drive me crazy,” she confesses easily, “but I would miss them very much if they were gone.”

I nod again. I miss him a ton.

She stops touching me, and only then do I suck in a breath and narrowly avoid doing something really manly...like tear

up. I clear my throat to dislodge the lump there.

“Did your brother give you the day off?” I ask, mostly to change the subject.

“Tad texted me frantic that I’m not at the office. He has no reason to worry. Last night I stuffed the office laptop into my overnight bag.”

“So you could’ve worked remotely the entire time.” I narrow my eyelids and reroute my gaze to her bag, still sitting on the barstool. She has the decency to look chagrined. Nose wrinkled and teeth bared, she gives me an exaggerated wince.

“I didn’t mean to run away this morning,” she says. “I just... I don’t know what I expected.”

“A weekend filled with sex?” I venture.

She lets out a surprised “Ha!” And we’re back. The vibe in the air isn’t quite the white heat of Friday night, but it isn’t far off.

“Maybe. Yeah. I don’t usually do this.”

“One-night stands? Me neither.”

“Um...no. I don’t usually do more than one night.” She squeezes one eye shut like she’s expecting a blow of judgment. She won’t get it. I don’t make a habit of judging anyone. Too time-consuming.

“I changed your mind?”

“Well.” She finishes off her coffee and sets the mug down. I take it to the sink. “Keep in mind I was choosing between holing up with Dominic and coming here, where there’s plenty of space, an indoor gym, and a hot tub. Plus, you have a shower.”

Despite her joking tone, I feel a frown transform my face.

“Dominic?” A bite of jealousy lurks in my response.

“I didn’t mean we literally would have holed up together. He was stuck at the office too.”

“He likes you, Princess.”

“Ew!”

“Gorgeous women usually know when they hold the cards. Know how to use it against us.”

She overlooks my compliment and goes with “Ooh, spoken like a man who has been at the whim of a gorgeous woman.”

Shit. Walked into that one. I press my lips together.

“Let’s agree not to talk about your past relationships.” She holds up a hand like a stop sign.

“Or yours?”

“That seems fair.”

She leans against the counter, training her foxy little smile on me.

White-hot.

It’s back.

“We can play this weekend by ear,” she suggests.

“Princess.” I straighten, folding my arms over my chest. “You’re going to be in my bed again and we both know it.”

Her mouth drops open like she’s alarmed, but there’s no denying the spark of interest in her eyes. “Easy, there, mister. We had one good night, but it doesn’t mean you’ll woo me into another.”

“I don’t woo, babe.” I stand over her, lowering my lips to her ear to whisper, “You’ll come to me. And when you do, I’ll give as good as I gave Friday night.”

When I back away, her breasts lift as her breathing speeds up. She doesn’t have a quip for that, which tells me plenty. She wants me again—as much as I want her.

“You mentioned cooking.” I throw her words from last night at her. “Lunch is on you.”

“What about breakfast?”

“Coffee was breakfast.” I wink and leave her in the kitchen, flustered, pink cheeked, and wanting me.

Perfect.

CHAPTER 8

SUNDAY

BECCA

Let's play Never Have I Ever. I'll start. Never have I ever had a guy play hard to get.

If that's what Dax is doing.

I thought men wanted sex 24-7. And I'm pretty sure what I have going on works for him—in the bedroom anyway.

Yet here I am, with a book in my lap while Dax carefully crafts a handmade fishing lure over an open tackle box. Watching those big fingers tie tiny knots and fasten feathers to the hook is weirdly erotic. It reminds me of how he unlatched the delicate straps of my sandals. He has nimble fingers for a wide, muscly guy.

The flat-screen TV hanging above the fireplace is on and tuned to the Weather Channel. Same outlook as yesterday. Flooding. Storms. More rain. Tad texted me again to let me know that most of the roads leading in and out of town are okay. It's our mountain that has issues.

My phone tweets—my text ringtone—and I lift the screen and read yet another text from Tad: I forwarded the main office number to my cell. I'll handle any calls and maintenance. Don't worry about work.

Sure, *you* may see it as a day off, but I know what this is about. Tad isn't giving me time off out of the goodness of his heart. I heave an audible sigh and plunk my phone down before staring blindly at my book.

“Bad news?” Dax asks, not looking up from his work.

“Tad thinks I'm an imbecile,” I huff. “Like I can't handle phone calls or maintenance or running this place in his absence? He's doing everything remotely for me!”

I slap the book closed. Frustration set to simmer, I cross my arms and address Dax. “You asked how old I was earlier.”

This earns me a chin raise. He pegs me with pale eyes.

“*And* you've addressed me as 'Princess.' Does that mean you also believe I'm immature and imbecilic?”

His mouth pulls at the corners, his brow wrinkling. He snaps into the expression so seamlessly, I have the impression he's more a frowner than a smiler. He sets the lure aside and rests his elbows on his knees.

“Listen closely, *Princess*. You have an issue with your brother and I get that, but don't take it out on me. And don't accuse me of things that aren't true.”

That's fair.

“Why 'Princess,' then?” I ask with fifty percent less venom.

Dax doesn't have to pause to think of his answer.

“It’s the way you move. There’s an elegance to you. You hold yourself with confidence. Like a princess. A duchess.” He tosses a hand. “Royalty shit.”

I blink, flattered despite the fact that he just used the words “royalty” and “shit” together.

“You a dancer?” His eyes are assessing.

I’m stunned speechless for a few seconds. “I was.”

“Thought so.” He nods, reaches for his lure, and resumes tying feathers on it once again.

“How’d you know that?”

“Didn’t know,” he says. “Like I said, it’s the way you move.”

Observant for a guy who slings drinks.

“Have you always been a bartender?” I ask.

“Never bartended. I own bars.”

“Bars plural?”

“Yep. Two.”

“And you’ve never tended bar.”

“Filled in, but no, not full time. I’m better at owning. Not that great with people.” He spares me a glance. He doesn’t strike me as “not that great with people,” but then again he had my pants off inside two hours of meeting him, so maybe I’m not the best person to ask.

He drops the lure into the tackle box and shuts the lid, sitting back on the couch in a sturdy slouch that doesn’t make him look any less powerful.

I'm not the relationship type, so hanging out with a guy is a new concept. Moments where the only sounds in the room are the low murmur of the television and the other person breathing (while you study his profile and wonder which parent is responsible for that fantastic nose) are rare for me.

"I guess I'll make us lunch." I stand and start for the kitchen. "Do you have a preference?"

I stop short when Dax shoves his fingers into my back pocket and tugs me backward a few steps. His tug becomes more of a pull, but I recover my balance and end up sitting on one of his heavy thighs. When I turn my head, I'm looking down at his upturned chin, narrowed eyes, and sensual smirk.

"Graceful," he says.

"Always."

"Maybe I should call you Grace."

"Maybe you should."

We smile at each other.

"I'm glad you're here, Princess."

"Even though you planned a fishing vacation all by yourself?"

"Even though." He dips his head into a nod.

I believe him. He hasn't minced a word with me yet. It doesn't seem to be his style.

I think I might be in way over my head.

Dax has yet to come up for air.

I set a quesadilla in front of him a few minutes ago and I'm watching, eyes wide, as he gobbles the last of it while moaning "Mmm" as he chews. He's not covered in food or anything. In fact, watching him eat is almost erotic. Memories of the other night and him doing some *fantastically* fine dining cause a shudder to tap-dance down my spine.

"Want mine?" I tip my plate, which holds the other half of my own quesadilla. They were big. I'm too full to eat the rest.

He doesn't ask if I'm sure, simply takes my plate and wolfs my food down as well.

"That," he says around a final bite as I clear the dishes, "is what we need at McGreevy's."

"McWhat-ys?"

"One of my bars." He crumples the paper napkin and drops it on the breakfast bar, propping himself on two thick forearms. "Redoing the menu. We have very limited offerings."

I love the way he talks. Truncated sometimes, dropping the pronouns and then interspersing phrases like "limited offerings."

"Can I buy the recipe from you?"

I eye him over my shoulder from the sink and let out a disbelieving chuckle.

"First off"—I shut off the water and dry my hands—"there is no official recipe. I threw it together. And second, of course you can't buy it. I'll give it to you, though."

His face crinkles like I've seriously confused him. "Don't give it to me."

"Why not?"

“I paid good money to a local chef to provide me with menu options and none of them is as good as your quesadilla.”

“I threw it together,” I repeat. Then I shrug, uncomfortable with the compliment. “It’s a hobby.”

“It’s a talent.” After a beat of silence, he asks, “Do you ever create recipes for the bar here?”

“No.” I can’t keep the gruffness out of my voice. “King Tad wouldn’t let me do something as significant as create a recipe to serve in *his* bar.”

“How do you know what ‘King Tad’ would say, *Princess*? Have you asked him?”

“No, but—” I make a choking sound and gesture like it should be obvious why not. “You saw him. He fired me.”

“You’re not a timid creature, Becca.”

I wind the dish towel in my hands and avert my gaze. “It’s just a hobby.”

He reaches an arm over the breakfast bar and offers his palm. I take one step, then another, and place my hand in his. Warm hands. Strong hands. He gives my fingers a gentle squeeze while I look at him. I like looking at him. The strong cheekbones, the contoured shape of his firm mouth. There’s the barest shadow of a dimple in the center of his chin—a shallow one virtually invisible beneath the scruff he hasn’t shaved yet.

“Write it down for me,” he says. “Unless you’re going to pitch it to your brother. I’ll compensate you. I promise.”

He lets go of my hand and I lower my elbows onto the countertop between us, leaning closer, towed in by his strong presence as much as his genuine offer.

“No compensation necessary.”

There are a few inches between our mouths, and for my kiss to successfully land on his lips, either I’ll have to hoist a leg onto the counter between us—which, let’s face it, seems desperate—or he’ll have to lift his fine ass off that seat and meet me halfway.

He does the latter. Pushing off his chair, he briefly touches my lips with his and then moves away. I watch him disappear in the direction of the bedroom and want to follow him so badly, I have to give my raging lady hormones a talking-to.

He returns a second later carrying a paddle and a feather duster. Oh, wait. That’s a laptop.

Well, a girl can dream.

He sets the sleek silver laptop on the counter where I’m leaning and slides it in my direction. “Are you Mac friendly?”

“Yes. I took graphic design classes before I went to dance school.”

His grin spreads slowly, and the southerly parts of me tingle.

“Of course you did.” He steals another kiss and pats my ass before moving to the living room and retaking his seat on the couch.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He doesn’t answer, so I open the laptop. I’m met with a password box. “It’s locked. Did you want to—”

“Eight-zero-eight-four-seven,” he says.

I type in the number and like that, I’m in. I watch the back of his head for a moment, wrestling with the idea that he rattled off his password to a virtual stranger.

He trusts me with his five-digit code.

I mean, it's not access to a vault containing millions of dollars, but a password is significant, right? I only recently met Dax, and he's handed me the keys to his virtual city. Meanwhile my brother doesn't trust me to execute even the simplest of tasks.

Like my job.

I'm not the fastest keyboardist, but I peck out the recipe, trying to guesstimate the amounts of the ingredients. As I type, my mind replays each knife slice, ingredient, and spice I pulled out of the cabinet. I had access to a full kitchen at the main office, so I brought fresh cilantro, lime and avocado, and seasonings like cumin and smoked salt.

I sneaked a few extras onto the order last week when I was craving some really great Mexican food. There's only so much barbecue a girl can eat before she craves lighter fare.

At one point I stop what I'm doing and measure a teaspoon of cumin. Then a half teaspoon. I never measure, just sort of throw it in. After rifling through the drawers, I determine that there is no quarter teaspoon, and the tablespoon measure is missing too. I'm forced to fudge the numbers, but I'm pretty sure I'm close.

I carry the laptop into the living room, rest it on the coffee table, and sit next to Dax on the sofa.

"Do you have a grill at McGreevy's?" I scroll through the recipe to the numbered instructions. "Ideally you would have a grill for those great char marks on the chicken. You could even use blackening season for a Cajun flair if you wanted to.... Oh! Cajun seasoning..."

When I notice his smile, my words taper off. He's so good-looking that it hurts a little to look directly at him.

"What?" I ask.

"In between dancing, graphic design, and rental cabin management, did you also take cooking classes?"

I shake my head.

"Interesting." He goes back to fiddling with the items in his tackle box.

"Did you ever take a fishing-lure-making class?" I shoot back.

He lets out a soft laugh. "If my dad's instruction counts. He taught me."

My heart squeezes. Dax's face softens whenever he mentions his dad. He misses him.

"That counts," I reply quietly.

Dax's eyes appear bluer in the lamplight. The room is dim, thanks to the constant cloud cover and never-ending rain.

"I'll test the recipe again if you don't mind eating more quesadillas. How's that sound?"

He answers by leaning forward and capturing my lips in a warm, slow, drugging kiss. As my eyes sink shut, I'm hyperaware of him—of the tickle of his fingertips along my cheekbone before he sifts them into my hair. Of the firm heat of his tongue as it slides along mine. I lean forward to claim more of his incredible mouth.

When he breaks away, I whisper, "This feels a lot like wooing."

“I thought this was you coming to me.” His voice sounds as dazed as mine.

“Agree to disagree?” I ask with a grin.

He delivers another electric kiss, his hands going to the hem of my shirt and tugging it upward. I hoist my arms over my head to help him, because seriously, am I going to resist a chance at more sex with Dax?

No.

No, I am not.

His kisses sear my neck as he sweeps my bra from my arms. I lean into him as his palms cup my breasts. I reach for the waist of his jeans, my fingers fumbling for the stud.

Our breathing grows erratic, our kisses more frantic.

“Condom?” I suggest.

“Tackle box,” he answers. His lids are lowered, his smile more of a smirk.

I pull my chin back to focus on his face. “Boy Scout.”

“I’m not that good, Princess.” He slides a hand into the back of my jeans and grips my ass, giving it a hard squeeze. “Take these off and don’t be slow about it. Then climb onto my lap. I’ll do the rest of the work.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I like the ‘sir,’ ” he says as I stand from the couch and strip off my jeans. He works his own jeans down his legs. “Keep the ‘sir’ part.”

“Poor Dax.” I offer a pout as I roll my thong to my ankles. His eyes lock onto my naked body, so I jut one hip to give him a better view. “Don’t you get any respect at home?”

Something feral leaks into his expression and instead of teasing me back, he tugs me by the hips and kisses my belly button before lifting my leg by the ankle. “How high up can you lift this leg?”

In answer, I balance on my left foot, hold the inside of my right foot and lift it until it’s vertical, my toes pointing at the ceiling. Dax inventories the impressive pose before gripping my bottom, tugging me forward, and burying his face between my thighs.

With a gasp, I drop my leg over his shoulder, my hands on his head. His hair’s too short to grip, so I brace myself on his shoulders. He’s relentless in his endeavor, laving me gently but thoroughly while I fight to keep my other leg under me. I have incredible balance, but I’m not sure my superb stability can stand the test of a Dax-delivered orgasm.

His fingers dance along the seam of my ass and squeeze the flesh possessively as he sucks my clit.

That’s what ultimately sends me over. I rock my hips toward his face, my fingers clutching at his hair, his bare shoulders, wherever I can gain purchase. As my left knee weakens and my body buzzes, I’m suddenly in the air—in Dax’s arms.

He rests my back on the sofa, rolls on a condom, and lowers his big body over mine. I part my thighs to make room for him. Without warning, he slips home.

Filled and surrounded by Dax Vaughn again, a scary thought occurs: *I could get used to this.*

CHAPTER 9

DAX

Rain pounds the windows outside with no end in sight, shrouding the cabin and us inside. Becca and I started out hot and heavy, her on her back and me with one knee on the sofa, the other foot on the ground, driving into her again and again.

As the rain eases, I slow to keep time, the drumbeat on the windows the rhythm to which I match each long stroke. Rather than digging her nails into my shoulders some more, she gently sweeps them along my traps instead, her eyes drilling into mine.

Hazel normally, but favoring leaf green in the meager light.

Golden skin glowing, fair eyebrows pinched in pleasure, her mouth drops open as I slide in slow and sure and deliver another orgasm she can't resist. One that truncates her breath and elicits tight, high mewls from her throat.

Sounds I *earned*.

I finish her off. She clutches me tightly, eyelids squeezed shut, her moans saturating the air. My release follows—

another stroke, and another, and I pump into her, my groan more of a guttural growl.

Hell.

Yes.

I exhale. Place a kiss on her forehead and then one on her temple. She smiles when I dot her jawline with more kisses.

“I don’t know about you, Princess.” I pause to slide out of her warmth. “But I like this eating-interspersed-with-bouts-of-sweaty-satisfying-sex-with-you thing.”

“Is that so?” she asks through a completely sated giggle.

I like that giggle.

“That’s so.” I stamp her mouth with a hard kiss and then deal with the condom in the half bath next to the kitchen.

Angling across the gigantic living room, I shake my head. “This place is ridiculous. It’s more like a mansion on a mountain than a cabin. Not exactly roughing it.”

“I like it.” She’s laid out on her side, her purposefully messy blond head propped up on one arm. She’s posing all those long limbs, but I don’t mind. Anytime she wants to flaunt that beautiful body, I’m game.

Speaking of...

“Have an idea.”

“Wasn’t couch sex your idea?” asks the smart-ass.

“Okay, it’s less an idea and more of a game.” My gaze dances around pert, rose-colored nipples. “It’s called Becca Doesn’t Wear Clothes When She’s in My Cabin.”

“Hmm. Turnabout is fair play. You can’t wear clothes either.”

“Fine by me.” I shrug.

“Will you flex for me?”

“Will I *flex* for you?” She’s kidding, I assume, but her eager nod says differently.

I fist my hands and pull my arms in, popping my biceps for her. Her smile widens, then she makes a twirling motion with her hand.

“Let’s see the back.”

“Babe.”

“Dax.” She hoists one eyebrow high to let me know she’s serious. With a sigh, I turn, but I drop my arms.

“Flex,” she demands.

I flex and earn another peal of laughter.

“Not your ass!”

I turn and lower to my knees, resting my arms on the sofa cushions. I sample first one nipple, then the other. By the time her hands go lazily to my hair and start ruffling it this way and that, I wonder if we’ll ever need to get dressed again.

“Mind if I grab a shower?” she asks, her voice quiet.

“It’s your vacation too, Princess.”

She sits up and palms my cheek, watching me carefully before delivering a peck to the center of my mouth. Then she’s off the couch and trotting to her room.

I watch her ass wiggle away, smiling in her wake when she flexes those sweet cheeks before sending me a wink over her shoulder.

This girl.

BECCA

“He’s so...honest.” I lower my voice and speak into my cellphone as quietly as I can, but the fact that I’m in the bathroom, door shut, attached to my bedroom, also door shut, should be enough of a barrier to keep from being overheard.

I’m not hiding, *exactly*. And I didn’t lie to Dax—I took a quick shower. Now I’m sitting on the edge of the tub, towel wrapped around me and hair damp, phone pressed to my ear.

“You’re not used to a guy being honest with you?” Porsha’s laugh is the best on the planet. Velvety and deep, and filled with good humor. When I lived in New York, she was my roommate. During those four short months, we became crazy close. I never believed in love at first sight until I met Porsha. She swept me off my feet as my best-friend-forever with scary ease.

“I don’t mean ‘honest’ as in ‘not a liar’; I mean ‘honest’ as in he blurts out what he’s thinking.”

“Ohh, like what?” I can tell her interest is piqued.

“Like...he’s glad I’m here.”

She hums in thought. I filled her in on everything that’s occurred since Friday night, arming her with details. Not too many details. I *am* a lady.

“He speaks his mind. He sounds like you,” she says. “How’s the sex?”

I blow out a breath. “Amazing. Pretty sure I’m still glowing from that last orgasm.”

I stand and swipe the steam from the mirror to verify. Yep. Glowing.

“Lucky girl. Who other than Becca Stone winds up rained in at a cabin on a mountain with a guy who looks like Channing Tatum?”

“I didn’t say he *looked* like Channing Tatum. I said he looked like a dancer from *Magic Mike*. Dax is more rough-hewn than Channing. And probably taller.”

“Well, he sounds dreamy.”

Only Porsha can use the word “dreamy” and not sound ridiculous.

“How’s Tae?” Her Korean hotter-than-hell husband, just so you know.

“He’s great!” she chirps, but follows it with a strained “Busy.”

“And the studio?” I ask about her recently acquired teaching gig with only the barest hint of envy.

“I’m in heaven.” She tells me her schedule and about the mentor she’s picked up. Some famous dancer by the name of Belle Houghton whom I’ve never heard of. While Porsh talks, her voice aerated, my envy evaporates.

I’m not jealous that my friend has succeeded in a pursuit I walked away from. I’m not even jealous of her good fortune. My jealousy has nothing to do with her at all. If this pang of longing can be called jealousy, it can be blamed on the fact that Porsh *found* her calling. I haven’t found mine despite years of looking under every random rock.

Porsha is on a path that's pointing straight ahead. Her face is held high and she marches forward with confidence. Right into the sunset.

I've always been more of a veer-left, take-a-sharp-right, plummet-into-a-cave-mouth-hidden-by-a-leaf-pile kind of girl. I thrive on not knowing. On change. On surprises. For the first time in my life, I'm noticing there is a gap between what I love to do and what I'm actually doing.

Have I settled?

"I wrote a recipe today," I blurt. "Remember those chicken quesadillas I used to make?"

"I miss those." She lets out a sound that's almost orgasmic—and trust me, I know of what I speak.

"I made them for Dax and he asked if he could buy the recipe from me. He owns a couple of bars and is working on revamping the menus."

"How cool!"

"Yeah, it is kind of cool." A ribbon of pride to threads through each of my ribs. "I'm going to test it again, to make sure my measurements are right on the spices."

"Sounds like you have a fun little side project along with the *other* fun side project you guys are working on." Her voice takes on a feisty lilt. "Seriously, Bec, you have all the luck." An uncharacteristic note of sadness leaks into her words.

"Are you *sure* you're okay, Porsh?"

"I am, it's just...the city is expensive."

She doesn't have to tell me twice. Within a few months of living in Manhattan, I was as sick of the cramped quarters as I was of the outrageous rent.

“But you love it, right? The city?”

“Oh, totally! I wish living here didn’t come at the expense of seeing my husband. That’s all. Tae works nearly eighty hours a week, and I picked up an extra class teaching ballet to second graders.” She sighs, then adds optimistically, “It’s only temporary. Once things are rolling and he gets a raise and my studio gains popularity, we’ll be off and running!”

Is it me, or did the perkiness in Porsha’s voice sound forced? I bite down on the side of my cheek and think of the times I’ve answered that I’m doing “great” when I was less than satisfied with where I was or what I was doing.

Who are we trying to impress with our false bravado? At the very least we should be able to share with our close friends that we’re unhappy... that is, if we’re *aware* that we are.

Am I unhappy?

“Bec?”

“Yes! Here. Sorry, hon. My mind wandered.”

“Back to that hunk of man sharing your cabin?”

“Totally,” I lie. Then, because I love her and I want her to be happy, I add, “You’re right. This’ll all shake out and then you and Tae will forget how hard you worked for years to get yourselves settled.”

That part, I pray, isn’t a lie. If anyone deserves happiness and a long, blessed life together, it’s Porsha and Tae.

I thank her for taking the time to chat, and then she’s off to her studio and I’m pulling on pajama bottoms and a T-shirt. It’s bedtime. *Ish.*

Anyway, I promised Dax I’d test the quesadilla recipe again.

A zing of excitement jets through me at the idea of cooking for him. Cooking for anyone who enjoys it. I remember Porsha begging for my pancakes every Sunday morning when we lived together. She didn't have to beg—I made them for her because she loved them.

Funny, I never thought of myself as having a singular passion—only a plethora of interests. But each of those interests came and went. Fading before flickering out.

Could cooking be different?

I exit my bedroom and find Dax, beer bottle in hand, pajama bottoms hanging on his lean hips, T-shirt stretching over his thick chest. Relationships are another category where I've never had lasting interest.

Could Dax be different?

Not that we're breaking any records. We've spent all of two days together.

Keep your pants on, Bec.

I mean that figuratively speaking.

“I see you had the same idea that I did.” I gesture to my bedtime attire.

“I was gonna stay naked, but that takes the fun out of getting naked.”

“Getting naked is pretty fun.” I walk to him, hands linked behind my back. My tee is white and I'm going braless. He blatantly checks out my chest. Totally my intention. Tempting him is way, *way* too fun.

I swipe his beer, take a swig. When I hand it back, he does the same, then palms my lower back. I rise to my toes and we

kiss. Bubbly, beer-flavored kisses from Dax are my new favorite.

“You’re yummy,” I mutter when he sets me back on my heels.

“So are you, Princess.” His lips are slightly hitched, his eyes warm.

Mmm.

“Hungry?” I ask.

“Starving.”

The way he said that suggests he’s hungry for *not* quesadillas. “I mean for food.”

“Right. I knew that.” He feigns confusion before dazzling me with a grin.

“Lucky for your stomach, I’m your girl.” I sidestep him, go to the fridge, and pull out ingredients. As I sneak a peek at him settling onto one of the barstools, hand wrapped around his beer bottle, I allow the idea of being “his girl” to take root.

Just for a few days.

Like every other preoccupation in my life, Dax will vanish when I lose interest. He’ll go back to Ohio. Back to the bar. I’ll move on to my next flight of fancy....

I grab the box grater for the cheese and try not to feel sad about that. There’s nothing but good vibes happening here. Instead I imagine him adding one of my recipes to his new menu.

I’ll make a mark on McGreevy’s that’ll last forever. Even when Dax and I don’t.

CHAPTER 10

SUNDAY NIGHT

DAX

Grief is heavy. Has a weight to it. My mom and I haven't been the best company since Dad's diagnosis over a year ago. Fast-forward to a few months ago, after the funeral and the initial delivery of casseroles to her front door, and we were even poorer company than before. We tended to the unfortunate but necessary business of disassembling Dad's life.

Getting rid of his clothes. Cleaning out his tool shed. Arranging for someone to take care of the chores he used to do. Chores I'd temporarily inherited (like yard mowing) but abandoned once I resumed my life.

When I did resume my life, I found I'd inherited something else: a roomie at a time I wanted to be alone so badly, I could taste it. Not Barrett's fault. I was the one who told him he could stay at my place, even though I'd bet my left nut the breakup with his girlfriend was mostly his fault. He's kind of an ass. Has been since we played ball together. He was good enough to go pro and earned the "Bad Boy of the NFL" title, whereas I petered out in college.

After taking care of Mom and Barrett and making sure my bars would run smoothly without me (they do—my managers are incredible, especially Grace), I hightailed it out of Columbus in search of much-needed solitude. After so much company I was drowning in it, I didn't want anyone by my side on this trip. I wanted to hide in the deep, dark woods with only the sounds of nature as a backdrop.

Then I met Becca.

Becca, who's now chattering excitedly as we eat our chicken quesadillas. She's describing how I could offer the option of beef or salmon too. About how she'd change the seasonings and offer an alternate dipping sauce for each. Horseradish for the steak, she decides. Capers and fresh dill for the salmon, she tells me.

One night with her turned into two, and now it's turning into three. Once the rain has stopped, she'll probably head back to wherever she normally spends her nights.

To be completely honest, I'm not looking forward to her leaving.

But she will. The sun is expected to come out and put us under a thick blanket of humidity by tomorrow morning.

Becca takes another hearty bite of her quesadilla, lifting a string of cheese off her chin and sucking it off her thumb.

She's fucking adorable.

Her choppy blond hair adds to her spunk, but it's not the source. She slid out of that bedroom in a baggy pair of white pajama bottoms covered in little cartoon wine glasses, her tight white shirt leaving nothing to the imagination. Makeup free, her golden skin is smooth and beautiful.

She's not the least bit concerned about eating in front of me or being naked with me or talking about anything we've done or if we'll do it again. She's nothing short of incredible—and unlike any woman I've been with before.

My last girlfriend and I imploded a year and a half ago. I'd purchased my second bar by then—Chaplan's—and kept myself as busy as I could so I didn't have to think about Courtney leaving me at the same time I was running two businesses and hiring new employees.

Court left, saying I didn't value her, whatever the hell that meant. She said I didn't share enough, that I never opened up. She then piled on how I didn't take her seriously, which was as confounding and hard to grasp as every other reason she'd listed.

Until a photo popped up online a few weeks later, and then it all made sense. She was standing at a state park with an engagement ring on her finger, her arms wrapped around another guy.

I'm not sure if he “takes her seriously” or “values her,” but I'm guessing the main reason she left me wasn't my inability to be who she needed. She'd found someone else. Courtney and I dated for a hair short of two years, so yeah, her bailing was a blow.

Becca's hand lands on mine and I jerk my attention to her.

“What's up?” she asks gently.

“Nothing, why?”

“You got really quiet.” She wrinkles her nose. “Am I boring you by talking about food?”

“No. I'm just...” I recall our agreement not to talk about our pasts. I understand why she laid that rule out. The past can

be fucking depressing. “I was thinking about how you have all these ideas and nowhere to use them. Until now. You’re hired.”

She laughs as she clears our plates instead of staying with me. “I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be flattered. Be *hired*. I was serious about paying you. You can be my chef consultant. My consulting chef.”

“Is that even a thing?”

“Could be.” I shrug. “Why not?”

“Um. Because I’m not a professional?” she continues arguing.

“Doesn’t mean you’re not valuable.”

For the second time, I watch as her chest puffs with pride. Does no one compliment this woman? I stand and cross the room. When I reach her at the sink, I sift my fingers through her short hair and appreciate how tall she is.

“You’re talented in the kitchen, Becca.”

“And in the bedroom?” she quips.

“Well, yes, but I was trying to give you a compliment outside of great sex.”

She loops her arms around my neck, leaning against me for a kiss that could spiral out of control really fast. She doesn’t let it, pulling back and gazing up at me instead.

“Speaking of bedrooms, how’s your bed?” I ask.

“My bed?” Her eyebrows rise. “Fine. How’s yours?”

“Bigger than yours.”

“You’re bigger than me, so that only seems fair.”

“There’s room for you in it.” It’s a blatant invitation and one I’m not sure she’ll accept. Becca has a bunch of strange boundaries I haven’t quite figured out yet. “There’s a rule, though.”

“Just one?”

I pull her closer, lacing my fingers at her back. I like her in the circle of my arms.

“Let me guess.” She tightens her hold at the back of my neck. “I’m not allowed to wear clothes.”

“If you’re as good a psychic as you are a cook, you should start working the fairs.”

“Ohh.” Her eyes pop wide. “A career to fall back on.”

I match her smile with one of my own.

She takes my hand and leads me to the living room. “I demand we watch television before we disrobe and climb into bed together. Think of it as a date.”

“A date?” I allow her to tow me to the couch. I don’t mind sharing a cushion with her in the slightest, but a date? After we had sex on this very piece of furniture?

“Sure, why not?”

I can’t think of a single reason why not, so I sit. She sits too, leaning against me, remote in hand.

She flips through what feels like a thousand channels, lingering on each one for about two seconds before flipping to another. Until she lands on the Cooking Channel. She sends me a questioning gaze.

I answer by taking the remote from her, tossing it on the coffee table, and tucking her closer. We watch Giada De

Laurentiis work her magic.

Me? I don't believe in magic. But I don't believe in coincidence either.

The woman who smells sweet like sugar lying delicately against me isn't a coincidence. "Fate" isn't the right word either, but I don't believe it was an accident that I ended up trapped on the same mountain—in the same cabin—with Becca this weekend.

MONDAY MORNING

BECCA

Dax's bed isn't only bigger. It's *better*. The one in the other room has a notable sag in the center. I make a mental note to talk to Tad about upgrading the mattress in there.

I stretch and the sheet slides over my bare breasts, startling me. I don't sleep naked—I've always had roommates and now I live with my brother—but when I move out on my own, maybe I should start. Then again, given how frisky I feel, maybe I *shouldn't* start. Waking up nude and not next to someone doesn't sound as fun.

I roll over to greet my bedmate, but it looks like I woke up by myself after all. Dax isn't in bed, and after I check my phone I understand why. It's after eleven. I'm not an early riser by any stretch of the imagination, but I never sleep this late.

I pull on last night's jammies and walk to the kitchen to find the coffeemaker off, a few inches of cooled brew in the

bottom of the pot.

“Dax?” I squint in the sunlight streaming in through the blinds. Last night while we watched TV, the rain stopped. No storms meant my first full night of sleep since they started.

In the middle of pouring out the cold coffee in the carafe and scooping grounds into the basket so I can make a fresh pot, I hear the unmistakable buzz of a chainsaw. I leave the kitchen and walk to the front door. Then I pause in the doorway, leaning on the frame, arms crossed over my chest.

The sight before me is nothing short of glorious.

Dax stands atop the thick fallen tree trunk, chainsaw in hand, buzzing through limbs. He’s shirtless. He’s sweaty. Sawdust sticks to every ridge of manly landscape above the waist.

And I thought he was hot *minus* the manual labor.

Mercy.

Movement to the left catches my eye and I look over to see our maintenance guy, Ray, give me a wave. He isn’t shirtless, and let’s all take a moment to be grateful for that.

I wave back, slip into my tennis shoes to the right of the doorway, and on second thought... I dart back to the bedroom to put on a bra beneath the leaves-nothing-to-the-imagination tank I’m wearing. Once I’m decent, I walk up the short driveway, skirting several big puddles that haven’t dried up yet.

The sawing stops and Dax turns, the blubbering machine vibrating beneath his gloved hands, his muscles flexing as he holds on tight. He pegs me with a smile that makes me wish we were both still in bed.

“She rises!” he shouts over the noise.

“Beauty sleep!” I call out.

He kills the motor. “It worked.”

I try not to visibly bask, but with my hands clutched in front of me and my smile prominent, anyone looking can tell I’m basking.

“Who knew she could get more beautiful?” he asks Ray.

Aw. That’s sweet.

“Can I help?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Ray answers. “Have any coffee?”

“I was about to make some. How about an egg sandwich to go with it?”

“Yes,” Ray and Dax answer at the same time.

“Bacon?”

“Yes,” they again answer in unison.

I make quick work of their breakfast, using Dax’s laptop to jot down the recipe for the spicy mayo I slathered onto the buns. I deliver theirs and return to the stove to make myself the same sandwich, this time adding sun-dried tomato hummus and determining it’s not as yummy as the mayo.

A little later a few more guys arrive to help saw and remove the rest of the tree. I walk up the driveway to check on everyone’s process as a truck loaded with wood is pattering down the mountain.

“There are lots of trees down. We’ll be at this all day,” Ray says with a head shake. “Your brother wanted us to free you up first.”

He gestures at my Toyota. Other than a few smaller branches sitting on the hood and nature's debris covering the white paint like confetti, my car is virtually unharmed.

"I appreciate it. I can work from anywhere on my laptop, but Tad insisted on stepping in to help."

I cut my gaze to Dax. He's sitting on a fat limb. He's still sweating. Still covered in sawdust. Still sexy as sin and I don't care how stinky he might be. Right now he's the manliest man to ever man, and I intend to be the woman who claims him at least one more time before I leave.

I thank Ray again as he climbs in his truck. He nods and heads up the mountain in search of the next downed tree.

I return my gaze to Dax. "You look like you need a shower."

"You offering to join me?"

He's so disarming slouching on that log, a playful tilt to his lips, squinting in the bright sunshine.

"I sure am."

"In that case." He hops off the log, sets aside the chainsaw and, in a move he hasn't attempted since our first night together, hauls me over his shoulder. He marches me toward the house and I'm laughing the entire way, mostly because his shoulder is nestled squarely in my diaphragm.

He sets me on my feet in the shower of the master bathroom and spins on the shower knob.

Mind you, I'm still dressed in my jammies and the water isn't hot yet. He climbs in behind me and kisses the frigid laughter from my lips.

Before too long we're stripping each other out of wet clothes yet again.

"Damn. Wet denim is *not* cooperative." Dax's gorgeous chest lifts and drops from the effort of wrestling his jeans off and tossing them outside the shower door. I divested myself of my own wet clothes much more easily, since my pants had a drawstring.

I palm the bar of soap and swirl suds over his pecs while he watches, amused.

"This could be my other part-time job," I murmur, swirling down, down until I reach the army of ripped abs lining his belly.

"Again, Princess, you're hired." He sticks his face in the spray and swipes away the sawdust sticking to his cheeks.

I watch, mesmerized by every part of him.

"Gimme." He extends a palm.

I slap the bar of soap into it and he goes right for my breasts. I stop him but maintain my playful side. "I could've guessed that's what you were going to do."

He shrugs just as playfully.

"Try here instead." I turn and point to my back.

His soapy palms start on my butt and, really, who didn't see that coming? I lose the urge to complain when he pulls my back flush against his front and nibbles on my earlobe. His hands return to my breasts, his thumbs and forefingers kneading my nipples.

Mmm.

I can't resist encouraging him, so I back my ass into his crotch and wiggle.

"Don't suppose you have a condom stashed in the shower somewhere?" Lifting my arm, I palm the back of his head and pull his mouth close to my ear.

"Nope." His breath is warm, his tongue teasing my earlobe. Between my legs, his firm fingers slip between my folds. "Guess we'll have to improvise."

My "I guess so" comes out as a weak breath of air. I don't know that I've ever been touched with this much accuracy. No matter what we're doing, Dax knows *exactly* where my hot buttons are.

In a matter of a few steamy minutes, I'm lost, coming and grinding against his hand. He cups my sex and kisses me hard as I reach for his erection.

Plenty of long, hard inches rest in my hand. I stroke him, accepting more of his ravaging kisses. I return them as eagerly, until his mouth drops open and he comes. His lips peel over his teeth and his forehead drops to mine. A shake works down his mighty form and all of a sudden I understand how a springtime storm can fell a tree.

It's not the power. It's the *precision*.

"Damn, Princess." Dax opens his eyes, then sets his lips on mine for a soft but firm kiss. The kiss feels final.

So does the moment he shuts off the shower and helps me step out. Our private bubble has been popped by the arrival of sunshine, of all things.

We're no longer trapped.

I'm free to go.

Bummer.

CHAPTER 11

DAX

Becca's on the phone in the other room talking to her brother. She's saying something about heading back to the office, followed by a lot of gaps of silence interspersed with the occasional "okay." I heard her call him "Chosen One" at least once, so I know her fire hasn't been completely snuffed.

She emerges from her bedroom wearing jeans and a T-shirt, her packed bag slung over her shoulder.

Déjà vu.

The End is written on her face. I knew it'd come to this. Hell, we both knew it'd come to this. When we were in the shower, I made sure to touch her everywhere in case I never got to do it again.

I've never been the sentimental type, and I'm not going to start now. I'm on vacation—a temporary visitor in Tennessee. I'll be heading home around the time Becca would have grown bored with me anyway.

"So..." She shifts from foot to foot, uncharacteristic shyness sneaking in. "I have to go back to work before my

brother fires me again.” She smiles sheepishly. “Good news. He told me that cabin seven will be available by this evening if you’d like to move there tonight.”

“Great,” I say, though “great” isn’t what I feel. I’m not as ready as I thought to be secluded on the mountain. But. This is why I came here. To clear my head and to drown some worms. I didn’t come expecting to get laid by a cute blonde who makes me moan with pleasure both by what she fixes me to eat and by the way she touches me.

“I thought you’d like to hear that.” She hesitates, her gaze snapping to the door before it lands on me again. “We don’t have to make this awkward, right?”

“No.” I offer a casual shrug.

“There’s no unfinished business of any kind.”

“One bit of unfinished business,” I argue. Her smile flags. “You need to tell me what you’re charging me for the quesadilla recipe.”

Predictably, she shakes her head. “It’s on the house.”

She walks to the door. I follow, hands in my pockets, unsure how to say goodbye or if I need to. She answers that question for me.

“I’ll bring your key over as soon as it’s available. I’ll probably work the rest of the day to catch up on what I missed over the last few days. I assume you’ll be here?”

“Nowhere else to be.”

She hesitates for only the briefest of moments and then, with her hand wrapped around one of my biceps, she pushes to her toes and lays a kiss on the side of my mouth.

That’s it.

She turns, walks outside, climbs into her car, and drives away. Finally I have what I thought I came all this way to get: time alone.

Only now I'm not sure I want it.

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop worrying?” my mom asks, a note of frustration in her voice.

“At least fifty thousand more times,” I answer.

“I appreciate your checking in on me, Dax. I do. But Tracy with her euchre club and Mary with our choir practice and my neighbor Bethany with her questions about begonias... I'm plenty 'checked on' and plenty busy.”

She may be reprimanding me, but I can hear the gratitude in her voice. Whenever I picture her home alone, setting the table for one, I have a pain in my chest like somebody planted an ax there. It's good to hear that she's busy. Makes me worry less.

“How's your vacation? How is Tennessee?” She handily changes the subject.

Now, don't freak out when you hear my answer. My relationship with my mom is atypical. She's not elderly and out of touch; she's a spry fifty-five and understands exactly how life works.

“Unexpected,” I start. “The road leading to the mountain washed out, stranding me in my cabin. I ended up with a roommate. Girl who works here. Gorgeous, spunky, and she wrote a recipe for the menu at McGreevy's.”

An excited gasp comes from my mother's side of the phone. "You met someone?"

She's wanted to make sure I find "a good woman" since Courtney left. I haven't had the heart to tell her I haven't been looking.

"Don't get your hopes up," I warn. "Becca lives in Tennessee, and she's not interested in permanence."

With her relationships, with her jobs, or seemingly with anything else.

"I like the name Becca. And she cooks. She sounds fascinating! How do you know she's not interested in permanence? Did you already have a big relationship talk in the few days you were stranded together, I imagine wearing very little?"

Told you she was sharp.

"First off, that's none of your business." I earn a sage laugh for that. "Second, it was only two days. We rode out the storm together. I'm not sure it's turning into more."

"But you'd like it to."

That wasn't a question.

"If she came knocking on my door again, soaking wet or no, I'd let her in."

I'd let her in, throw her over my shoulder, and put her flat on her back. I'm too much of a gentleman to share those details with my mom.

"Beyond that, I'm not sure we have much to offer each other. We're seven hours apart. She's also a few years younger than me. She's not looking for anything beyond a good time."

“If that’s the case, Dax, then it’s because she doesn’t know you well yet. You’re irresistible. You’re handsome, you’re strong, and you have a huge heart. Just like your father.”

At the mention of Dad, we both go quiet.

“You have to say that. It’s in the mom rule book.”

Her laugh comes through the phone and smooths over the grief I feel.

“I like the new landscaping company you set me up with,” she shares. “They’ve done a lovely job with the edging and the mowing.”

And so goes the rest of the phone call. Mom gives me the household rundown and doesn’t lecture me further about my mountaintop fling. I remind her to take a walk and drink plenty of water before telling her I love her and ending the call.

I pocket my phone, leaning against the railing of the front porch as I look out into the surrounding woods and the street at the end of my driveway. Everything feels more real since I told her. I used to update Dad about my life. About girls. He always told Mom. Those two were close. No secrets between them.

Honestly? I always imagined I’d find that. Like it was a rite of passage. You grow up, meet someone, and fall into line with marriage and forever the same way my parents did. Then I ventured into the dating realm for a decade and found that it wasn’t as easy as I’d thought. After Courtney left, I wasn’t sure it *existed*.

I’m still not.

For a long while I’ve lived by the rule that I have no rules. I take what comes, pursue what interests me, and don’t think

more about it.

No reason to change my rule, or lack thereof, after a few rainy days with an incredible woman.

Becca accepted me at face value. I'd be smart to return the favor. When she made us promise we wouldn't talk about the past, there was another implied promise with it: no talking about the future.

I can live with that.

I descend the wooden porch steps leading to the drive and start clearing sticks and other debris downed during the storm. I'll pile them up at the top of the driveway to make it easier for Ray to remove them. I decide it'll give me something to do before Becca comes back with my key to cabin 7.

But as time passes and the pile of sticks grows, I find myself counting down the hours until I see her again.

BECCA

Tad relieved Dominic this morning, so my brother's already at the desk when I step into the office. I pull the laptop out of my bag and set it on the desk, but he already has his out and he's pecking away at an email.

"I came in here to do exactly what you're doing," I tell him. "You don't have to work around the clock, you know."

Without looking up from his frantic (if clumsy) typing, Tad says, "Well, somebody has to do it. Not all of us can answer

the call of every whim that wanders by. Some of us are married, have kids, have responsibilities.”

Yowch.

“That’s hardly fair,” I say, unable to keep from defending myself. “What was I supposed to do? Sleep in the supply closet with Dominic? Dax was nice enough to offer me his spare room.”

Tad spears me with a glare that says he doesn’t believe I slept in the spare room.

“I didn’t sleep next to him the first night I was there,” I argue, then mumble, “Only the next.”

“You can go back to the house. I don’t expect you to stay and work after you’ve been stuck here for three days.” His voice is tired, like he hasn’t had much sleep.

“I’ve had access to a shower, a full kitchen”—*and the best sex of my life*—“so it’s not like I’m in need of rest. I came to work. Let me work. Anyway, I already told Dax that I would bring by the key to cabin seven the moment it was ready.”

With a heavy sigh that I’ve grown used to hearing from my brother, Tad returns his fingers to the keyboard and his eyes to the screen. “Fine. I have to go back out to the restaurant in case someone comes in. You can have the desk as soon as I finish this email.”

That feels like such a win that I have to resist punching the air. Amazing how his agreeing to let me do my job is like taking first prize. I’m more trustworthy than he gives me credit for, and I intend to prove it to him eventually.

Later that day, I tend to a visitor at the front desk. It seems the flooding put a damper on the stay of at least one set of guests at Grand Lark. The family of four who booked through Wednesday have decided to cancel the remainder of their stay.

Mr. Wachowski returns the key. I take the cancellation, trying in vain to talk him into another cabin. When that doesn't work, I promise to dispatch Ray to their current cabin posthaste to clear the downed limbs from the driveway so that their stay would be more pleasant. Sadly, that leads to Mr. Wachowski confessing to his shoes that his wife has already booked a new cabin in Pigeon Forge. Being rained in was too much for their kids, so his wife promised them amusement parks. Our little town's idea of amusement is quaint shopping, so I feel for him trying to entertain a six- and eight-year-old. After minimal arguing, I bend the rules and give him his money back for the remainder of his booked stay, and wish him well.

Tad probably won't like that either.

When the bell rings over the door for the second time an hour later, I worry I might be greeted by the other couple on the mountain coming in to do the same thing.

My fears are justified.

"Hey, guys," I greet the freshly married couple. "Did you come in for lunch? The bar and restaurant just opened."

But no, they didn't come for lunch. They request to leave early too. Something about how they have to be home for work, but I can tell by the way the missus stands with her arms crossed over her middle and an angry expression on her face that maybe those two didn't have the most pleasant weekend rained in together. Thankfully they don't ask for a refund,

simply accept the cancellation policy as it's written and return their cabin key before stomping out the door.

"I guess being trapped in a confined space brings out the worst in people," I say to Tad after they leave. He's wiping down the seats ringing the bar and not looking at me. Hmm. Perhaps I'll tell him about the refund later.

Like, next month.

"I hope Dax doesn't check out on us next," I sort of joke. "He's our last guest standing."

"Guess that depends on how your time together went," Tad snidely returns. He lifts his eyebrows and dares me to say more.

I accept that challenge.

"Things went *really* well. Dax and I have a lot in common. In fact," I add, without putting too much thought into it, "I wrote him a recipe for his restaurant."

Tad frowns.

I stand taller. "That's right. He hired a bunch of expensive chefs to revamp his bar's menu, but evidently their recipes weren't to his liking. My chicken quesadilla, on the other hand..."

"Did he pay you for it?" my brother snaps.

"He tried to. I wouldn't accept."

"Why the hell not? Are you under the delusion you don't need any money?"

This right here is exactly the reason I never tell Tad what's going on.

"It was a gift. I'm not charging him."

“He’s going to profit off your idea. Use your brains, Bec. If he turns a profit, you should too. What an asshole.”

“You know what?” I practically shout. “Forget it.”

Leave it to my stupid brother to twist something fun and generous into something heavy and scandalous.

“I’ll be in the office if you need me.” I raise my voice as I cross the bar. “Doing my *job!*”

CHAPTER 12

MONDAY NIGHT

BECCA

Thanks to plenty of sunshine, the puddles in cabin 13's driveway have dried enough so that I can park in front of the cabin instead of at the top of the hill. It's a little after eight, nearly dark. There's a pleasant nip in the air.

I knock on the door, then peer through the window beside it. Dax advances with a confident swagger.

The door swings aside, and instead of the frown he greeted me with when I was dripping on his welcome mat a few nights ago, he's wearing a grin.

He leans one round shoulder against the doorframe and crosses one foot over the other ankle. The casual lean looks one hundred percent natural on him.

"Hey, Princess."

Not gonna lie, that melted my undies a li'l bit.

I dangle the keychain we originally swapped out. "The key to your castle."

He continues leaning but holds out a palm. I drop the key into it.

“It’s ready for you when you are,” I announce over the symphony of frogs and crickets.

“Thanks.”

“Are you going up there tonight?” I shove my hands into my back pockets, almost nervous.

“Plan on it.” He tips his head to the right and I notice his duffel packed and ready to go, along with a cooler I imagine is stocked with the contents of the fridge. “What about you?”

“What about me what?” My heart thuds with anticipation of what he might ask next.

“Where are you going tonight?” His lips quirk into an almost-but-not-quite smile.

Is he going to ask me to join him? Do I want to join him? I can either tell him I’m super busy and have to go back to the office, or make up a chore to do at my brother’s house. Or I can tell him the truth.

Since we don’t make a habit of lying to each other, I decide to tell the truth.

“I was planning on grabbing dinner and then heading back to my own borrowed bed.” At the lift of his eyebrow, I mention something I haven’t mentioned yet. “I live with my brother, so my niece is sharing her bedroom with me.”

He nods. Slowly. What he doesn’t do is ask me out—or in.

Well. It’s stupid not to ask for what I want. I always ask for what I want.

“Unless...” I clear my throat. “Do you want to join me for dinner?”

His eyes go over my head to the road beyond. “Better not. I want to get settled in my new digs. Hit the sack early. I’m going fishing tomorrow.”

“Sounds relaxing.” He has to notice the disappointment in my voice.

“It does.”

Okay, now that I’ve been shot down, standing here is awkward.

“I’m going to go.” I point over my shoulder with my thumb. “Enjoy the rest of your stay, Mr. Vaughn.”

“Thanks, Princess. Have a safe trip home.”

I nod, turn, and walk to my car. Despite that I’m *dying* to turn around to check if Dax is watching me, I don’t. I drive away without a single look back, and grab a bag of strangely satisfying fast food that I eat in the car on my way home.

My sister-in-law, Lara, is coloring with my niece Kiera when I walk in. Tasha is nowhere to be seen, but then, my three-year-old niece is usually in bed by the time I return home anyway. Like her aunt, the girl loves her sleep.

“There she is. Survived the flood,” Lara says.

“Becca!” Kiera leaps off her chair and I’m wearing her like a second skin a moment later.

“Okay, Monkey.” I jokingly make a strangling sound before unlooping her arms from around my neck and setting her on her feet.

“Good news,” Lara says, still coloring. “I bought us a new king bed, so the queen is now in the sewing room. That means Kiera can have her bed and you can have your own.”

“Lara...”

She holds up a hand to stay my argument. “We needed a bed anyway.”

“I’ll never be able to repay you guys for all you’ve done. I’ll move out eventually, I promise.”

“I hope not soon.” Lara pauses to tell Kiera to put her pajamas on so that Aunt Becca can read her a bedtime story. The bribe works, and fifteen minutes later, I emerge from Kiera’s bedroom with a tattered copy of *Goodnight Moon*.

“She’s out.”

“I figured it wouldn’t take long. She played hard today.”

“Ah, to be tired from playing hard,” I sigh.

“I like having you here.” Lara pours two glasses of white wine and continues her earlier thought as if we never broke stride. “I like having a babysitter on call. And I like when you force me to work out. You know how lazy I am.”

I snort and accept the wine, sitting down at the kitchen table with her. “You’re not lazy. You work *all* the time. Raising a family. Managing a household. It’s a lot.”

I work part-time and take care of myself, and it’s too much for me to manage some days. In my defense, I do pull my weight around here. I’m not a total leech. If I can sneak out to buy groceries or pay the cable bill before Tad grabs it, I do. Both Tad and Lara insist they don’t want anything in return except babysitting, but that doesn’t seem fair. I’d hang out with my nieces for free.

I'm saving money to move out, and they know it. The thing is, I'm not sure where my next home should be. Tennessee doesn't feel like a permanent landing spot. But then again, I've never lived anywhere that felt permanent. New York didn't. Virginia didn't. Neither did Michigan. Or Ohio.

I think of Dax from Columbus. I wonder where he lives in Columbus. I wonder if I didn't give Columbus a fair shake, if I could try living there again.

While dating a certain tall, hotter-than-Hades stripper look-alike.

Hmm...

"That was a hum of sheer bliss," Lara points out before tipping her glass to her lips. After a hearty sip, she says, "I'm surprised you came back. Did your hot guest check out already?"

"No." I grab a crayon and start filling in one of the pages Kiera was coloring when I walked in. Kiera has wisely colored the unicorn's hair purple and the horn pink. I'm coloring the hooves gold, though Crayola's gold needs some work—or some glitter. It's more metallic brown than anything.

Lara starts shading in the clouds on the adjacent page. "I feel like there's more to this story."

"Not much more," I announce with a token amount of misery. "He's packing up now to relocate to cabin seven, which is the cabin he'd originally booked. I delivered the key to him tonight and I asked him out to dinner. He said he couldn't."

My smile is tight. I can feel it.

"Bec." Sympathy curves Lara's eyebrows. "What a jerk. I'm sorry, hon." She rubs my shoulder. I'd love to board the

“jerk train” with her, but that’s unfair to Dax.

“It wasn’t like that.” When she gives me a *Yeah, right* head tilt, I add, “Honest. Dax is a really good guy.”

“He slept with you, stole your recipe, and now has no time for you?” Her expression changes from sympathetic to angry. “Sounds like bullshit.”

“Tad told you about the recipe.” I’m trying damn hard not to be angry with my bigmouthed brother. “It was a gift.”

“You know what?” She continues coloring. “Cut your losses. He’ll be gone soon and you won’t have to see him again. *Ever.*”

“Lara,” I say around a laugh. As much as I disagree, I appreciate her support. “He’s not like that. I’m... I think this is my fault. I made this rule not to discuss our pasts, not to get too personal. I’ve been the one running away. Sneaking out. Nothing about the way I’ve behaved suggested I wanted anything more. He’s probably cutting *his* losses.”

That was supposed to be a throwaway remark. I hate how true it felt.

“How much longer will he be in town?”

“He’s booked for two weeks.” *If he doesn’t check out early like everyone else did*, I mentally add.

“So what are you going to do?”

I regard her as if she asked me a complicated mathematical equation.

“Are you going to see him again?”

I shrug and try really hard to look nonchalant. “Probably. He has to come to the office to return the key before he

leaves.”

She rolls her eyes.

“I know what you meant.” I spin my wineglass on the table, watching the golden liquid swirl rather than meet my sister-in-law’s assessing stare. “You’re asking if I’m brave enough to show up on his doorstep one more time?”

“Are you?”

I close my eyes and picture Dax, sure and strong, leaning against that doorframe, daring me with his eyes to invite myself in. I could have offered to make him dinner. I could have insisted on following him up to cabin 7. I could have offered to have him follow me under the guise of helping him find it okay.

I didn’t. I chickened out.

I know it. *He* knows it.

“I could always mosey up there tomorrow and offer to make him breakfast.”

“You do make *great* pancakes.” Lara’s smile is approving.

She’s the best. Just the best.

Dax is going fishing in the morning. This I know. I stab my bottom lip with my teeth, wondering what time people go fishing around here.

And what time they get back.

TUESDAY MORNING

It's a glorious morning! Warm and sunny but not hot and sticky. Very few clouds dot a clear blue sky, and the backdrop of swaying green-leafed trees tempts me to play hooky and soak up the sunshine instead.

Except I have to work.

Womp.

I hopped out of bed and made myself a to-go mug of coffee, pulled on my nicest *cabinwear*, and drove here to the tune of all but one green light.

Tad doesn't come in until late this afternoon, so it's my job to open. Dominic is here when I walk in. We exchange waves.

I try to focus on working, but nothing can distract me from the fact that Dax is on the mountain.

I fully intend to head up there as soon as I check email.

I'm pecking in the password on the laptop as Dom appears in the doorway of the office. "What are you doing here so early?"

I eyeball the clock. "It's eight o'clock. That's when I'm supposed to be here."

"Right. It's eight o'clock and you're usually here around eight twenty."

"So?"

"You're on time."

Okay, I'll give it to him. That's noteworthy. I'm never on time.

"I have a few things to do out there." I wave a hand toward the parking lot.

"I bet you do." Dom frowns.

I cluck my tongue at his rude comment. But it's too beautiful a day, and my coffee is too perfect for me to feel down.

Or so I think.

I click my email icon and am greeted by email after email *after email*. Twenty-two of them, then my computer *bings* again and six more emails infiltrate my in-box. Ten of them are from our booking operator with good news: Ten full cabins. Scheduled for this weekend.

Dammit.

The one time I show up on time so I can skip out of work early, and I have to actually work!

Crap.

I settle in, remembering Tae's favorite saying: "There's nothing to it but to do it." If that mantra works for a hot Korean guy in the Big Apple, it's good enough for me.

Besides, Dax isn't going anywhere.

I know just where to find him.

CHAPTER 13

TUESDAY EVENING

DAX

Of all the useful skills my dad taught me, he never shared how to clean a fish.

When my fishing efforts earned me three decent-sized bass this morning, I realized I'd have to consult the Google machine, or watch YouTube videos to learn.

It's not as easy as the guys on the screen make it look. Even with the sharp-as-shit boning knife I purchased. But I prevail. I don't save as much fish meat, since I'm not yet as deft with the knife as I'd like. I also earned a shallow slice in my left forefinger that bled like a bitch, but I quelled it enough that I didn't have to resort to an emasculating Band-Aid.

Let it never be said I shy away from challenge.

"Except where Becca's concerned," I mutter aloud as I bag the fish and toss it into the fridge.

After all that work, who the hell has the energy to cook it?

So yeah, Becca. I could've taken her up on the offer of dinner. I didn't, and not for the reason I told her. Yes, I'd

planned on going to the cabin, but her invitation seemed to come from a sense of obligation on her part. I'm not sure she was sure she wanted to ask me out.

She's not obligated to hang around with me because we shared a few nights. Anyway, if things were ending, last night was as good a stopping place as any. Or so I keep telling myself in between kicking my own ass for not saying yes. She looked a touch hurt before she pasted on a smile and bade me farewell.

I pull a beer from the fridge and take a sip. God, that tastes good. Instead of fish, I'll have beer and potato chips for dinner. Not like I haven't done it before.

I clean up my mess, pulling the trash bag and walking it outside. The cans are locked in an enclosure to keep the bears out, so I take the key from the hook by the back door. Once the trash is secured, I start up the back steps as headlights slice across the drive.

It's a Toyota. A white one.

The lights shut off and Becca steps from her car, reusable grocery tote on her shoulder. She starts for the front door, totally missing that I'm at the corner of the porch when she puts a foot on the first step.

"This is a surprise."

She shrieks, clutches her chest, and then bursts into surprised laughter. It's contagious. I let out a chuckle I didn't expect. She slumps, her form grainy in the darkness since I didn't bother with the porch light. Too many moths gather, so I left it off.

"You scared the life out of me." She's still smiling. I've missed her smile, and it's only been one day since I saw it.

“Don’t know about that. You look lively to me.”

Dressed in a pair of heeled sandals, a dark pair of dressy pants, and a slim tank top baring her golden shoulders, she looks more than lively. She looks amazing. Her hair is its normal choppy, stylish mess, but pinned it up one side, which shows off one cute ear.

“I won’t bite.” She gestures at the distance between us, since I stopped short of approaching her on the porch.

“Not why I’m keeping my distance, Princess.”

Her smile falls like she’s been expecting a rejection since she arrived. “Oh.”

“No, not *oh*. I’ve been fishing since ten this morning. Gutting fish for the last hour. I need a shower, and I need one bad.”

She licks her lips, not quite smiling, but she doesn’t look dejected anymore. I gesture to the bag on her shoulder.

“If that’s the makings of dinner, you have my undying loyalty.”

“Well...” Despite her hesitation, her entire face brightens. “If you’re okay with breakfast for dinner.”

Against my will, my stomach releases a loud grumble.

“I will take that as one vote yes.” She surveys my body, then her gaze ventures to my face again. “What say you, Dax Vaughn? May I come in and make you breakfast for dinner?”

Fuck yeah, she can.

“Yeah, Princess.” I gesture to the front door. “It’s open.”

She lets herself in and I follow behind her.

“Like what you’ve done with the place,” she comments as she sets the bag on the counter. “The fishy smell is new.”

“Sorry about that. I probably don’t smell much better.”

“Go take your shower.” She waves me off. “I know where the cleaning supplies are. I’ll give the countertops a fresh wipe-down and start on your meal.”

This place is smaller than the last, thank God. One big master bedroom. One bathroom. Kitchen. Living room. Wraparound porch with a deck. No game room or hot tub. Though it does have a fireplace, which is useless in this sticky spring weather.

Glad to have her here, I duck down the hallway and leave her to it.

BECCA

Dax emerges from the hallway, hair damp and spiky, wearing a familiar pair of frayed-at-the-bottom jeans. His T-shirt is black, making his eyes appear a dark shade of blue.

“I thought I was hungry before. Now I’m starving.” He puts a hand over his stomach and another rumble comes from the depths. “It smells incredible in here.”

“What was your plan tonight, before I gifted you with my culinary genius?” I ask as I slide another fluffy flapjack onto a plate.

“Beer and chips.”

“Healthy.”

“Not sure you’re winning a health award with pancakes for dinner, Princess. Are those chocolate chips?” He rounds the counter and my entire body goes on alert when he stands next to me. He places a kiss on my temple and a buzz of pleasure slides down my spine.

“Yes, they are,” I say as he pours himself a glass of milk. “But I skipped the espresso powder since it’s evening. Wouldn’t want to keep you awake.”

We share a lingering glance. I wonder if his mind went where mine did—the other ways we’d like to keep each other awake.

I pull the bacon from the oven and slide four slices onto a plate with a stack of pancakes and hand it over.

“What about you?” he asks. Sweetly.

“Just finishing mine up.” I gesture at the table, where I set out real maple syrup and foil-wrapped pats of butter I swiped from the restaurant. “Start without me. I’ll be there in a few.”

Dax is half done with his meal when I sit across from him. I dig in to my own plate of sweet, syrupy pancakes and crisp, smoky bacon. He finishes in record time, sits back in his chair, and pulls a hand over his flat stomach.

“You know how to make a guy miss you,” he says.

Unf. That honesty again. That bold, naked way he has about him. I missed him, but no way can I admit it.

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

He doesn’t accept my lame platitude.

“I’m not only talking about the food.”

I sip my own glass of milk, unsure how to respond. Luckily, I don't need to, since he's willing to steer the topic to safer shores.

"You're working late tonight."

"Yeah, we had all these bookings come in. And here I thought we were about to go out of business after the storm. Our two other parties left, and you were the last man standing. I thought for a second I'd have to make my other part-time job my new full-time job."

"What do you do when you're not running Grand Lark?"

"You mean when my brother's not watching me like a hawk while I *try* and run Grand Lark?" I joke, then answer, "I teach a Zumba class in town sometimes."

"What the hell's that?"

I can't help giggling at how confused he looks. "You never dated a woman who took a Zumba class?"

"Not that I recall."

"It's cardio with a lot of dance movements. High octane, an hour long. You sweat your ass off."

"My dancer," he says with a note of possession. I don't mind it even a little.

"The movements came more naturally than if I hadn't had any experience. I took a Zumba class about five years ago and was hooked instantly. I liked the movement, the fluidity, the community. The dance-club feel of it. Then I mistook that passion for actual dancing and moved to New York City to dance with the best dancers in the world."

Mistake. They were (quite literally) leaps and bounds above my skill level. I tried to keep up but eventually accepted

that I'd never be good enough to be great.

I push my plate aside. I am pleasantly full of pancakes. Dax's eyes go to my half-eaten stack.

“Want the rest?”

“More than my next breath.” He takes my plate and polishes off my pancakes in three big bites.

I stand and reach for the dishes, but he stops me with a palm on my arm. He offers to clear the table, so I settle back into the chair.

“How long were you in New York?”

“About six months. It wasn't for me, so I moved again.”

“You move a lot?” he asks over the sound of running water as he rinses and washes our plates.

“I used to. I'm trying to be super careful about where I go next. I don't know. I guess I never put down roots except when I lived at home.”

He shuts off the water and leans on the counter, his arms bracing his weight. I'm facing him, my arms resting on the back of the kitchen chair.

“What about you?” I ask. “Have you always lived in Ohio?”

“Never saw a reason to go anywhere else.”

“What'd you do before you owned a bar?”

“Drank in a lot of them.” He smiles. “More milk?”

“No. I'm good.”

“Yeah, me too.”

He comes to me and extends a hand. I slip my palm into his, loving the feel of the warmth radiating from his palm to mine.

He leads us to a fat leather sofa in the living room and we sit.

“I played football,” he says.

“College?” I guess. I can picture it. All his bulk strapped down in pads, a pair of tight pants, black smudges under his eyes. *Purr*.

“*The* Ohio State University.”

“Emphasis on the ‘The’?” I ask.

“There’s only one. Friend of mine went pro but blew out his shoulder. He’s sacked out on my couch right now. Hence my being here on your mountain.”

“I should thank him,” I say, following Dax’s lead to be honest and blurt what I’m thinking.

“Maybe we both should.”

Another silence sizzling with shared attraction hums in the air before Dax shatters it to ask the obvious.

“Why’d you come here tonight, Becca?”

“I meant to come this morning and make you *actual* breakfast, but I was swamped all day and couldn’t get away.”

“Not what I meant.”

I sigh. “I know.”

“I thought we were done. Thought the sun came out and dried up all the rain and took you with it.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.” My whisper is almost loud in the quiet cabin. I’m used to talking to Dax over pounding rain. Or maybe confessed truths always sound loud to your own ears.

Before I mean it to, “Did you really miss me?” comes out of my mouth.

What a needy question! I retract it with a quick “I’m sorry. Ignore me.”

He doesn’t ignore me. He levels me with that silvery stare of his and repeats, “Why are you really here?”

“Truth?”

“That seems the way to go.”

I swallow around a lump in my throat. Rather than answer, I tentatively lean forward and touch my lips to his. He doesn’t come closer, but he doesn’t stop me, either. I continue moving my mouth on his, touching his bottom lip with my tongue. He doesn’t take over or pick up the pace, which tells me he’s only being polite.

Or so I think.

I accept his rejection and have started to pull back when one of his hands curls around my nape, his fingers spiking into my hair. He tugs me against his insistent mouth and kisses me hard, his tongue sparring with mine.

I don’t hold back.

I tangle my tongue with his, climbing to my knees in front of him. He lifts one of my legs and encourages me to straddle him. I settle onto his lap as the thick ridge of his growing erection nestles against the inside of one of my thighs.

I tear my mouth from his to catch my breath—a much-needed inhale. From where I sit, Dax’s chin is lifted and I’m on top of him looking down.

“This why you’re here, Princess?”

Yes. It is. I didn’t come here to feed him as much as I came here to devour him. I can’t resist him. I don’t want to be away from him. Since I’m a terrible liar, I answer with a jerky nod.

“Can I interest you in dessert?” I ask.

A laugh tumbles from his chest, further dampening my panties. What he does to me... It’s unfathomable.

“You’re a helluva lot sweeter than those pancakes, babe.”

I kiss his lips briefly, then veer to sample his neck, inhaling his scent as I do.

“Mm, you taste good.” Clean, and he smells like that blue soap guys always use.

He sucks in a sharp breath as I continue placing open-mouthed kisses on his throat. He likes this.

“I have an idea,” I whisper into his ear. I fist the hem of his T-shirt and shove it up, revealing his wide, beautiful chest. I kiss my way over his pecs, along his ribs, and to his belly button, until I’m on my knees on the floor.

“Like your idea already.” He’s leaning back but also coiled—fists balled, nostrils flared. Even his voice is strained. The ridge I felt when I rode his jeans is larger from this vantage point. I look him right in the eyes and lick my lips. His hips buck.

Oh, yeah. I’m going to enjoy this.

“*Princess.*” It’s nothing short of a growl.

“Yes, my liege?” I bat my eyelashes as I unloop his thick leather belt and carefully slide his zipper aside to reveal several inches of happiness pointing straight up. “No briefs tonight?”

“Not tonight,” he manages. Barely.

“Tell you what, Dax.” I reach for a pillow and wedge it under my knees, my arms resting comfortably over his big thighs. “The only words you need to say from here on out are ‘more,’ ‘don’t stop,’ and your favorite swear word.”

“Fuck,” comes his rumbled response.

“Sounds like you’re ready.” Without any further teasing, I lick the head of his cock and take him inch by inch into my mouth until my lips hit the root.

Then the fun begins.

CHAPTER 14

DAX

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I stopped saying it aloud since I can't enunciate at the moment. Not with Becca between my legs licking me like her favorite ice-cream cone.

She's not in a hurry, either. She's going so slow that my brain has melted and oozed out of my ears. There's nothing rattling around in my head. My body's just a mangle of sensations. Her hot, wet mouth, the attention her tongue pays to the ridge around the tip of my cock, the way her hands massage my balls.

She takes me deep, then lets up. Cool air chills my damp flesh before she takes me all the way in again, until the tip of my cock hits the back of her throat.

"Fuuuuuck." It's strangled, but I manage one more. Hands on her head, I attempt to lift her off—I'm seriously close to

going over—but she’s not stopping. Her fingers continue dancing around my sack as she picks up the pace.

And now I can’t breathe.

“Princess,” I pant. “Babe.”

She continues her work as my balls pull up, and a tingle at the head of my dick warns me I have few precious seconds left to stop her.

“Becca.”

She doesn’t even slow down.

I’ve never thought of myself as possessing superhuman strength, but that’s exactly what it takes to put my hands on her shoulders, pry her off my hard-on, and get my knees working well enough to stand. As I’m ripping my jeans off my legs, Becca sits on her knees, prettily swiping the corners of her mouth with her delicate fingers. I swear to God I nearly blow right then.

I blink. Hard. Then open my eyes to find her still on her knees, looking up at me and biting her lip. She looks like every fucking fantasy I’ve ever had.

“On the couch, Princess. Ass in the air.”

Her eyes widen with interest. I fish a condom out of the pocket of my jeans. As I roll it on, she strips out of her dressy clothes, but I only let her go as far as her underwear before I wrap my hand around her thong and pull her back against my front.

Pressing my erection against her butt, I put my lips to her ear. “Say it.”

“Yes,” she breathes.

I rip her panties free and toss them aside. The moment she rests one knee on the couch, I join her and enter from behind in one long, smooth, mind-melting thrust.

She grips the arm of the couch, and I let her get one more knee beneath her before I stroke into her again. I free her of her bra next, reaching around to fondle rose-tipped nipples with one hand. I use the other to clutch onto her hip while I slide in deep again.

And *again*.

She cries out in pleasure and utters another “yes” for me before her breathy request of “faster” almost floors me. I can go faster.

“Harder?” I ask.

“Harder. Faster.” She drops her head, arches her back.

“Hang on, gorgeous,” I warn, but she turns her face to the side to make sure I see her smile.

Absolutely. Missed. That smile.

I do as she requests. Harder, faster. When I’ve pushed myself to the brink and notice she’s not there yet, I find her clit and massage with my fingertips until she gives me another barrage of “yeses.” I’d love a “Yes, Dax,” but beggars can’t be choosers.

She’s squeezing me from within, her fists clawing at the cushions, though she’s unable to get a grip on the leather. She knocks off pillows and writhes to the sound of her own shouts of pleasure.

Only then do I give in. Embedded deep, I come hard. The slap of her ass against the fronts of my thighs make my release

that much better and last a helluva lot longer than I thought possible.

I finish us off and slide my hand around to her breasts, giving each nipple a gentle tweak.

When I pull out, it's to the tune of Becca's sated exhale. She slides from ass in the air to flat on her belly on the couch.

"Wow," comes her muffled praise.

No shit.

"Don't move."

"Don't worry," I hear her say as I pace to the bathroom. "I can't."

"So this is becoming a habit." Becca's draped over my body. My back is flat on the couch and I'm wearing her like a blanket. She's naked, and I didn't bother with clothes either, so she's wearing an *actual* blanket she yanked off the bed.

"That didn't sound like a complaint." I smooth my hands over her back and hug her tight against me. I like her here. Right here. I mean, yeah, I like the sex. The BJ is enough of a reason to beg her to stay, but this—her in my arms and the soft scent of her perfume in my nostrils—is somehow better.

Which is unbelievable, because that was some blow job.

"It's not a complaint." She doesn't say any more, and for a long while we lie here, my hands stroking her back, until our hearts beat in sync.

My cellphone buzzes. Then buzzes again. Then once more. I turn my head in the direction of the phone, face down and

half out of one of the pockets of my jeans.

“Need to check that?”

“I don’t know what I could do for whoever that is.”

She slides off me, dragging the blanket with her, and grabs my phone.

“Peggy.” Becca hands it over as I sit upright. “She’s insistent.”

I take the phone as it buzzes with two more texts from my mom. “What can I say? She’s been on my ass since birth. Can’t convince her to leave me alone.”

“Your mom?” Becca guesses as I swipe the screen.

“Yes, she is.” I scroll through the texts. The first one says, *Forgot to send you the pics from earlier today*, and the following five—now six—texts are photos of her flowers. I hand the phone to Becca.

“They’re beautiful. She has quite the green thumb.”

“I’m glad she has hobbies.”

“What was your dad like?”

I train my gaze on her, but all she does is wait for my response. I guess getting personal and talking about the past is a thing we do now.

“He was outdoorsy. Loved to fish, hunt, camp, and take care of the acres of land my parents live on. He had a stroke last year and slid downhill from there.”

She doesn’t say she’s sorry, but she doesn’t have to. She snuggles close and covers me with the blanket, cocooning me with her. I wrap my arm around her shoulders.

“How old was your dad?”

“Sixty.”

“Young.”

“Too soon,” I mutter. Because it was.

“Did he play football too?”

“Not like I did. He played a little in high school. He could throw a ball. Graduated OSU, which meant he was a huge Buckeyes fan.”

“I bet he loved when you were on the team.”

Warmth floods my chest at the memory. “He came to every game. And those were Saturdays he could’ve been hunting, fishing, and camping.”

She hums while I tell her a story about the time my friend Barrett and I teamed up to score a winning touchdown against Michigan State.

“I bet you were one sexy linebacker.”

“Tight end.”

“I have evidence that you have one fine tight end,” she teases.

I trap her beneath me, a mountain of comforter between us.

“Where are you staying tonight, Becca Stone?” At home, I’m guessing. I don’t want her to go home. I can’t think of a single reason for her to leave.

She swipes her fingers along my cheek and loses her smile. If there was a line, I just overstepped it.

“Back to my brother’s. I have my own room now, so that’s a plus.” She touches my bottom lip, her eyes flicking to my mouth. “I’m not the staying type, Dax.”

“I’m not the ask-you-to-stay type,” I admit.

Fear freezes her face into an uncertain wince. Not what a guy wants to see when he invites a woman to stay.

I sit up, taking her with me, and then wrap her tight in the blanket. I grab the remote, because if the other option is that I keep talking about myself and she offers nothing in return, I’d rather not talk at all.

Hell, what is there to talk about if she’s on her way out the door again?

“Hate to point this out, Princess, but someone should.”

She stiffens like I just confessed I was a serial killer and my ax was under the couch.

“If this is sex and pancakes”—I toss the remote aside without turning on the TV—“or showers and quesadillas, then there aren’t a lot of conversations that need to happen.” I turn my head to find her chewing on her cheek in thought. “Right?”

“Right.”

“You want to get to know me, or do you want to fuck me and then leave? Pick one.”

Heat seeps into her gaze, and it’s not the sexy kind that will end with us sharing a bed tonight.

She’s *pissed*.

I, for one, don’t care if she’s pissed. I’m glad she’s committing to an emotion. The ambivalence isn’t only lazy; it’s also disingenuous.

“I can guess what you’d choose.” She tosses the blanket off her shoulders but isn’t able to disentangle herself from it before I catch her up in the folds.

“No. You don’t know what I choose. You never asked.”

Her nostrils flare as she sucks in an irritated breath.

“I’m guessing you don’t want me to ask you what you want,” I tell her. “I don’t think you know.”

She shakes out of my grip and, still partially concealed by the blanket, drags on her clothes in jerky motions.

“Yeah, well, I *do* know, but you don’t want to hear it. And like every guy who came before you, you want me to promise that I’ll be loyal, but it’s not like you’ll give me the same assurance.” She pulls on a sandal and wobbles while she balances on one foot to pull on the second. Then she throws my jeans at me.

I catch them an inch from my face and stuff my legs into them. In the kitchen she angrily throws ingredients into the shopping bag she brought.

“I came over to spend time with you because I wanted to see you. I hoped you wanted to see me,” she says.

“I did. I do,” I say, buttoning my jeans. She storms past me.

“I don’t know what you expect from me! Isn’t pancakes and a blow job enough?”

Her question shocks me into silence. Because, God in heaven, shouldn’t it be? My life is in Ohio and hers is here. I’m visiting for a limited time, and she’s been here for months and isn’t willing to put down roots. A no-strings fling during vacation should be utopia. Ask any guy if he wants pancakes and a blow job and I promise you he’ll say yes to both. Simultaneously.

Becca's eyebrows draw down over her nose as her mouth flattens into an angry line. Trepidation shakes her arm as she jerks the bag onto her shoulder. She doesn't want my honest answer.

She's getting an answer anyway.

"You bet your sweet ass it isn't enough, Princess. Question is, are you brave enough to do something about it?"

CHAPTER 15

BECCA

If my brain had a transcript, it would read something like “Uhhhh...”

When it comes to guys demanding more from me, I don’t have a lot of experience.

“We don’t have to have a natural disaster for you to admit you want to hang.” Dax stands sentinel over me while my tongue is tied in a double knot.

When he puts it that way, it does sound ridiculous. What am I hiding from?

His thick eyebrows lift. “You leaving?”

It’s a dare. I can hear it in the gruffness of his tone. And yet I don’t feel the least bit threatened. I’m challenged, though. By his words as much as by what’s behind them. Am I brave enough to step up and take what *I* want?

“I’m leaving.” When his stubborn jaw goes rigid, I explain. “I’ve had a long day. My bed is waiting for me. My fancy face soap is waiting for me.”

He tilts his head. I can tell he's smiling on the inside, even if his signature smirk hasn't made an appearance yet.

"But if this is a sincere invitation," I say, wrapping my fingers around the bag's handles and stepping closer to him, "then I won't say no to coming back."

He uncrosses his arms, which I take as a sign that he's no longer upset with me. He confirms that suspicion with "Tomorrow—do you work?"

I nod.

"Bring a bag. Your fancy face stuff. Clothes you can wear in the wilderness." His gaze rakes appreciatively over my nine-to-five outfit. "You're welcome here as long as you want."

A surge of excitement engulfs me. I'm coming back. I'm staying as long as I want. I know I should be more scared than excited, but I can't help it.

"No longer interested in spending time alone?"

"No, Princess, you seem to have changed that." Finally, his smirk arrives. It's gone in a blink.

"I'll cook."

"Won't argue with you there."

"Why do you want me here?" I can't help asking.

"Because I've felt like dog shit for the last year. Hell, the last couple of years. No one has clicked with me. No one wanted to. You make me feel good. Great. Epic. Phenomenal. I'm trying my damndest to make you feel the same way."

Is it me, or did a trickle of hurt seep into the hard planes of his face?

“You do.” I don’t hesitate to tell him that—he absolutely makes me feel all of those things, and he should know.

“I brought you home for night one, Becca, but you were the one who came to me on night two.”

“Dax—”

“Tomorrow.” He ducks his head and places a kiss on my forehead. “Tomorrow you’re coming back to me.”

That’s the ends our conversation.

He opens the door for me to leave. I leave.

I guess that’s that.

WEDNESDAY

I spot Dax as I’m slowly driving down cabin 7’s driveway the next morning. He’s standing on the front porch, a steaming cup of coffee resting in front of him on the railing’s edge.

I’m on a similar edge—I want to go to him, cozy up, and stay here until he heads back. I’m also tempted to cut and run.

The battle waged on in my head after I left his cabin, which made for a practically sleepless night. Indecision also tormented me for a good part of my morning while I packed an overnight bag. I hesitated before adding two extra outfits, zipping the bag closed, and accepting my fate.

I want to be here.

I admire Dax’s strong forearms leading down to hands braced on the railing. He’s wearing jeans and a tee with an open flannel over top, and I have to laugh. I packed a similar wardrobe.

Such is life in the sticks.

I climb out of my car, which I parked beside his Jeep, and then move to the back door to gather my stuff. A moment later, my host is at my side, hand extended.

I give him my overnight bag and a shopping bag full of food, since I planned a few meals. No questions asked, he takes the straps of both bags in one hand and holds out the other, his eyes surveying with sharp approval the number of bags I have with me.

I packed for the week. It's obvious.

"That it, Princess?" he asks, both hands full.

I pull my purse over my shoulder and grab my makeup bag. "That's everything."

He hefts the load inside, holding the screen door for me even though I'm the one carrying the lightest bags.

"Only one bedroom, babe," he says when he walks in to find me frozen in the center of the living room. "That's where you go."

He moves past me to plunk down the groceries on the counter before walking into the bedroom and depositing my other bags on the bed. When he turns to the doorway, I'm across the hall in the bathroom divesting myself of the makeup bag.

I step into the bedroom and hang my purse on the doorknob. This room's smaller than the previous bedroom we shared at cabin 13. "Cozy" is the way our website phrases it. "Stifling" might be a better adjective for this gun-shy girl who's staying with a guy she was only supposed to know for a few hours.

My eyes survey the king bed. At least we have plenty of real estate on the mattress.

“You okay?” The gentle but rough quality of Dax’s voice puts me at ease. I trust him. I really do.

“I’m okay,” I answer with a smile.

“Wanna be more okay?” He sticks a finger in my belt loop and hauls me close. I come to him and rest both of my hands on his cotton-covered chest. A second later I catch his kiss with eager lips.

My eyes are still closed when he pulls away. “You’re making it hard to regret my decision.”

“Good.”

I follow him to the kitchen, where we start unloading groceries. He holds up the plastic pack of fresh mint leaves and shoots me a dubious look.

“It’s for my mojito fish tacos. Assuming you didn’t cook your fresh fish yet?”

“Not yet.”

I point to the coffeepot, where there’s one cup left. “Are you done, or should I make a new pot?”

“I’m good. Help yourself.”

I pause my grocery divvying to pour myself a cup of coffee to sip on while we work. We do so in silence, until the last of the bags is emptied.

“What’s on your agenda today?” I rest my hip on the countertop and curl my coffee mug close to my nose.

He opens the fridge and pulls out a container of half-and-half I left there the night I made pancakes. I give him a smile

after I cream my coffee.

“Better?”

“Perfect,” I admit.

“When are you gonna learn you don’t have to compromise, Princess?”

It sounds so good when he says it. If only the world worked the way Dax decided it did.

“Thanks.” The sentiment seems small for what his gesture meant to me. I was sipping my coffee black and bitter simply because he was in the way of the fridge while I filled the cabinets. He never lets me settle for less than “perfect.”

“Camping tonight. Fishing tomorrow. Hiking in between.” His eyes go to my flat white tennies and skinny jeans, then up to my loose gray shirt with a screen print of a glitter-dusted unicorn on the front.

“You bring clothes that might aid in those pursuits?”

I make a choking sound to communicate how insulted I am. “Yes. I was trying to look cute. I have functional clothes too.”

“You don’t look cute.” Before I become more insulted, he adds, “You look fucking hot.”

“I’ll take hot.” I’m glowing from the compliment.

“Yeah, so will I.” Instead of kissing me, he snaps up the bags I folded and holds out a hand. “Keys.”

I hand over my car key and follow him as far as the door. Then I watch him open my trunk and put away the shopping bags. He swaggers back, large and broad and so handsome it hurts.

I know what you're thinking: *Come on, Bec, how could you for a second doubt sharing several sex-and food-packed days with this guy?*

Simple.

In the past, I've purposely left myself an out in every relationship, save one: The first one. The one you lose your virginity to, assuming you'll be with that person forever. Until they leave and drag your heart across a football field's length of broken glass.

After that happens, you might decide that not having long-term relationships is better than having them.

"The ground's still damp. Think I'll forgo the tent and sleep in the Jeep tonight," Dax says as he comes back inside. "You good with that?"

"Sure. I can camp." Maybe. The Jeep sounds more doable than the ground.

"Have you *ever* camped, Princess?"

"Now, see? When you say it that way, it feels like you're slotting me into the 'fussy' category."

He smirks.

"The answer is *yes*, I *have* camped. Once, when my brother and I were kids. I remember s'mores and campfire beanie weenies and singing. It was fun."

"Beanie weenies," he repeats.

It's really hard not to giggle when a grown man uses those words together.

"I was eight. Give me a break."

"Uh-huh." Still smirking. What a sexy *jerk*.

The rest of the morning passes easily. I downsize my belongings to an overnight bag and further downsize my toiletries bag. Thankfully, the roughing-it portion won't be too terrible. Dax divulged that we're sleeping in the field out back, the cabin within sight.

"Isn't that silly?" I ask as I pack food in a cooler. It's sufficiently stuffed with snacks and drinks for tonight.

"What?"

"To camp mere yards from your cabin."

"Clearly you don't recall the majesty of the outdoors from your camping trip."

"Remember the part where I told you I was with my brother, Tad? He sort of sucks the majesty out of everything."

With a deep chuckle, Dax asks, "Ready?"

"Ready."

He snags a rather slouchy-looking backpack off the kitchen table—the entirety of his needs fit in there—and then grabs my weightier bag. It was as downsized as I could manage. I did my best.

The afternoon sun was as warm as promised, drying the damp blades of grass from this morning. Even so, the shaded trail behind the cabin is on the soggy side, squishy under the Jeep's tires. When we arrive at the clearing, the ground is much firmer. I pause to admire the sun-soaked field, the tall grass, the wildflowers. It's beautiful.

Oh, and I was wrong about Dax's belongings fitting in that slouchy backpack. The back of his Jeep is filled with sleeping bags and tent accoutrements, and he even brought firewood

that he'd hauled from the covered porch for the fire he plans on starting.

We park and I hop out. Dax took the top and the doors off. He strolls to a burned-out circle where the grass hasn't grown, a few large logs arranged around it like seats. "Looks like we're not the first ones to have this idea. Perfect spot for a fire."

Already the prospect of sitting at a campfire, this time across from Dax, sounds like a hell of a lot more fun than it was when I was eight. That's a big statement considering that when I was eight, I thought roasting marshmallows was as good as life could get. Even now I silently wonder if Dax could run a close second to a perfectly roasted marshmallow.

Guess I'll find out.

By dinnertime he's built a fire and set up a rack for cooking over the low flames. He grills the fish that he caught and cleaned—color me impressed—which have been bathing in my magical mojito marinade. I tell him as much, admiring the line of his strong body as he tends to our dinner with a metal spatula.

"Magical Mojito Marinade sounds like my next menu item."

"Really?" Careful excitement laces every letter of the word. He pauses in his flipping to regard me curiously.

"Told you that you were hired. Still don't believe me?"

"Well, you haven't tasted it yet. You might not want to include it on your menu." There's plenty of space on the log next to him, so I sit. The moment my butt hits bark, he leans close.

“I haven’t had anything of yours in my mouth I didn’t enjoy immensely.” His lips brush the shell of my ear when he growls, “*Anything.*”

Don’t mind me while I excuse myself for a cold shower.

He finishes the grilling and I busy myself setting the “table,” which is a blanket spread out on the bed of his Jeep. I set out a few extra-thick paper plates and bamboo cutlery, and find an empty beer bottle that, a few wildflowers later, makes the perfect vase.

I’m stepping back to admire my handiwork when Dax sets a plate holding our grilled fish next to our plates.

“Is that salsa?” he asks of the bowl of mango relish I whipped up this morning.

“Close enough.” I point to another dish. “That’s red cabbage slaw with quick-pickled jalapeños. And if you give me thirty seconds, I can whip up fresh guacamole.”

“I was right,” he tells me as I split a few avocados and mash in red onion, cilantro, lime juice, and jalapeños. “You don’t know how to camp. This is fancy.”

I peek up at him as he lifts the beer-bottle vase. He’s not complaining, though. There’s a difference between complaining and being impressed. Dax Vaughn, I’m learning, is continually impressed with me. I’m embarrassed to admit that whenever I’m with him my pride-heavy chest swells to embarrassing proportions. His words of encouragement, even his teasing compliments, fill a deep, empty well inside of me.

We settle on the back of the Jeep to eat. I accept his offering of a light beer, tapping the can against his and enjoying a long, cold sip. Then we dig into some of the best mojito fish tacos I’ve ever made.

“These are good,” he says after he polishes off one taco and starts on the second.

He’s not kidding. The mojito marinade is sweet and citrusy, the slaw is tangy and crisp, and the mango relish is spicy and verdant. Add a dollop of two-minute guacamole, and our meal upgrades to phenomenal.

“We’re a good team.” I polish off another taco. “Usually I make this with mahimahi.”

“Dolphin,” he corrects. I scowl. He lifts his third taco. “Dolphin the fish, not dolphin the mammal. Hence the term mahimahi, or else everyone would lose their shit.”

“A little insider restaurateur knowledge.”

“Free of charge,” he says around a mouthful. He shovels in the rest while I take a dainty bite. I admire the way he eats. I know he’s enjoying it, and watching Dax enjoy my recipe is akin to watching him enjoy anything. It fills me with more pleasure than it should.

“I want it,” he says.

When I look up at him, he’s guzzling his beer and pointing at my remaining taco. I promptly lift the plate and offer it.

“Not the taco, Princess.” He crumples the beer can and sets it aside. “The recipe. How much for that one?”

“Like I told you before, I’m not selling you anything. You can *have* it.”

“And like I told you before, I’m not taking anything. I’m *buying* it.”

“Dax.”

“You’re worth it. Hasn’t anyone told you that before?”

Just you, I think to myself.

CHAPTER 16

BECCA

Is it bad that I feel like purring?

Because it feels like something I shouldn't let myself do—accept a compliment and roll around in its decadence.

I shrug off his comment, but in true Dax fashion, he's not interested in anything on the surface. Which is interesting in and of itself.

“You are, you know. Worth it.” He's serious, and *scowling*. “Can't get over the idea that you don't believe your ideas have value. Why is that?”

“I can't get over the idea that you feel the need to pry.” It's out of my mouth before I can stop it.

We're a few hours from sunset. This feels like an after-hours conversation. Yet here we sit, in the sun-dappled shade under a tree, having this talk. I eat a sliver of red cabbage off my taco that I'm too full to finish.

“You're asking me to share something really personal,” I confess. “To admit the genesis of why sitting here with you

makes me jumpy.” I offer him my plate again. “Take it. I’m stuffed, and I want to finish my beer.”

I have to hold up the plate for a few seconds before he caves under the perfection that is our mojito tacos and takes it.

“You’re asking why I’m the way I am. Why I’ve accepted less than I deserved, or maybe not that. Why I didn’t pursue what I wanted, instead of letting it go because the stakes could be too high.”

“I said all that?” He chews slowly, watching me through narrowed eyelids.

He didn’t, but he implied it. I nibble my bottom lip, unsure what he’s gleaned from my admission. I haven’t had nearly enough alcohol for this discussion.

“Which is it?” he asks. “Did you accept something or did you pursue nothing?”

Dax is so much deeper than his exterior suggests. Either I play his game and rise to his level, or I turn and run. It’s a good jog to the house from here. Just sayin’.

On a sigh, I admit, “A bit of both at varying intervals.”

He swipes his teeth with his tongue, which shouldn’t be sexy but somehow is.

He slides his ass back so his legs hang off the edge of the bed of his Jeep and then props himself up with his elbows. He looks out at the field, but I have the impression his mind’s 100 percent on me.

I gather our plates and he says nothing. Not even when I move to the fire and throw them in, poking them with a sturdy stick he’s found for that purpose. I stab it into the ground like a post and turn to find his eyes on me, his body still propped by

his elbows. Next to the bouquet of yellow and purple wildflowers, his rugged jeans-and-tee-and-boots combo clashes. I walk toward him, each step bringing me closer and closer to an outcome I don't want.

I don't want to talk about who I am or who I've been. I don't want to talk about his past hurts and failures. I don't want to expose our delicate underbellies.

I don't want to know any more about him because I'm afraid that on the other side of that is a scary emotion I'd rather avoid. The walls climb, the metal gates drop, yet when I reach the Jeep, the impossible emerges from my mouth.

“Are we officially throwing out the rule about not talking about our pasts?”

His eyebrows lift subtly, but there's no missing his surprise.

“As long we promise not to hold it against each other,” I tack on.

“Never, Princess. You're my new business partner, so I can't see how blackmailing you could benefit me.”

Oh, he's sly. I smile. He doesn't return the smile with his mouth, but mirth dances in his pale blue eyes.

He sets aside the bottle holding the wilting wildflowers and pats an empty spot on the quilt next to him. I hop onto the bed of the Jeep—our shared bed this evening.

“However,” I say as I make myself as comfortable as possible, “I will require a few more drinks. Or shots.”

Dax reaches under a blanket in the back of the Jeep and comes out with whiskey. He waggles the bottle at me. “What's your pleasure, Princess?”

DAX

I laugh, which feels *great*. It uncoils the tension that's been strung tight for far too long. Becca's giggling too, at her own expense, I'm afraid.

"That's a hell of a prom story." We've moved to sit on the log by the fire. I reach for the whiskey bottle resting in the grass. It was three quarters full when we started and is now flirting with empty. I splash some into my plastic cup and hand it to her. I don't normally get sauced, but what the hell? I'm on vacation and Becca promised to share deep, dark secrets if she had some primer.

We started light. Dumb shit we did when we were teenagers. The way we looked at life as kids. That sort of thing. Now, though, as we tip back our shots, the fire crackling at our feet, the air shifts. She scoots closer, complaining she's cold even though she's wrapped in a blanket. I hug her close, not all that warm myself. When the sun went down, the temperature plummeted.

"We can sleep in the house if you want," I offer.

"Why?"

"Because I can hear your teeth clacking together."

She gives me a playful shove but snuggles close immediately after.

"We'll climb into the same sleeping bag tonight to keep warm," she says.

“I like the sound of that.” I kiss the top of her head and squeeze her with my arm wrapped around her shoulders. “Should I start?”

“Start what?” She tips her chin to look at me and I put a kiss on her lips this time.

“Sharing the real shit we swore not to talk about.”

“Oh. That.”

“Yeah, that.”

“I’m sufficiently buzzed to participate, so I’d say it’s now or never.”

Now, it is. I take a breath but realize this isn’t going to be so hard, since we’ve had several warm-up pitches.

“My last girlfriend was named Courtney. We’d been together about two years, and I was sure we were headed for something serious. All the signs were there. The way you assume you have a date for parties. You hang at each other’s parents’ for holidays or cookouts. You know.”

Becca stays quiet, I assume to let me finish.

“We weren’t living together yet, so I asked her to move in. She left me. Not long after that she started dating some schmuck she worked with who was half my size. I couldn’t figure out what she wanted with a mousy guy, but then I realized that it wasn’t him she wanted as much as it was me she didn’t want.” I toss another split log on the fire. “I guess it was then that I decided, *No more*. No sense in looking forward and making plans when all that lies ahead is getting left behind. She undid what we had, and we’d worked hard to get there. She swapped me out and left me at ground zero. She was whole; I was fractured. Explain that.”

Those last two words I didn't even mean to say.

"Guess I have unfinished business with her," I admit. "I'm not in love with her anymore. It shouldn't sting so much that she went." Becca says nothing, so I nudge her with my elbow. "You asleep?"

"No." She tsks and sits back to look at me when she speaks. "I was thinking how I can't explain it. I've never actually been in a situation like that."

"Never been left for someone else?"

"Well, it doesn't go that far for me. I've never had an assumed date for holidays, and I've only met the parents one time, and that was my prom date."

"Sounds like a great intro to your turn, Princess."

I wonder how much she'll share.

BECCA

"I've never spelled it out for anyone," I say. "Maybe not even myself."

"I've never told anyone about Courtney before." His eyebrows jump as if that's a realization.

I'm not completely sober, but I'm far from drunk. I'm in that loosey-goosey veil when you've had enough to drop your inhibitions.

More than my inhibitions has dropped—my guard has dropped. I see so clearly what I didn't before Dax started

talking about his ex. He and I are two lonely souls.

“I don’t have any relationship stories to tell,” I start. “I don’t have relationships. I’ve had hookups. I’ve gone to parties. I’ve had disastrous dates that have ended without kisses good night.”

Dax’s mouth tips into a sad smile like he can relate.

“I’m a risk taker in every other sense. I’ve picked up and moved away a dozen times. Half of those times I moved out of state. I thought I was following my passion, but now that I look back... I don’t know. It’s like I was looking for something I never found.”

“Not all those who wander are lost,” he quotes.

“I’ve heard that. I’m not sure it applies to me.”

“Are you lost?”

“I’m living with my brother with no move-out date since I’m not sure where I’d go. He offered me the position at Grand Lark, and I decided it’d be sufficient until I figure out what the hell I want to do with my life.”

“Have you?”

“No.” I feel a frown crease my brow as I watch the fire. “But I feel closer to figuring it out.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dax smile.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing’s funny. Doesn’t sound like you were lost while you were doing that wandering. Sometimes you have to wander far away to know that the right thing was always close to home.”

“That’s some *Wizard of Oz* wisdom.”

“It’s a wise movie.”

We fall into silence and watch the flames.

“I guess...” I pause, realizing that I’ve arrived at a conclusion. “I’ve always wanted to feel safe enough with someone to have more than a hookup or a surface relationship. But I never allowed myself to explore more. It always felt scary. Too big. I didn’t want to lose myself before I figured out who I was.”

“You’re cringing,” Dax points out. “Was that a big admission?”

“A monster.” The glow of orange from the fire dances on the sharp planes of his jaw, his cheekbones. He’s so much more than an attractive face. A pang of loss followed by a swell of gratitude comes when I realize that had it not been for that storm, we never would’ve had this conversation.

“Do you feel safe, Bec? With me?”

“Yes. I do.”

He straddles the log and then pulls me close. My back to his chest, I feel strong arms band around my middle. He kisses my temple while holding me like I’m precious. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I am.

We sit like that for a while, watching the fire burn through the new log and then reduce to small flames that barely throw off heat.

“Time to make our bed, before you catch hypothermia.”

Dax’s deep voice startles me. I was drifting off, I think. I sit away from his chest and he stands and stretches his long body.

“Can I help?” My voice is groggy. I must’ve been asleep.

“Nah, I’ve got it. You just sit there and look pretty.” His smile is tired. I really should help. A brisk wind cuts through the field and lifts my hair, and I pull the blanket tighter.

Sitting here and looking pretty while he readies our bed doesn’t sound like such a bad idea after all.

CHAPTER 17

THURSDAY, THE WEE HOURS

BECCA

“Warm?” Dax’s sleep-heavy voice cuts into my brain.

“Mm-hm,” I hum, snuggling against him. I’m wearing leggings, socks, and a long-sleeved T-shirt. He’s in boxers and a T-shirt, and throwing off as much heat as a furnace.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. I dozed.” I reach an arm out of the sleeping bag, atop two layers of thick blankets, and grab my water bottle. I tuck my arm, bottle included, back into my cocoon quickly. “I thought it was supposed to be warm by now! I’m freezing.”

“It’s not summer yet, Princess. And it’s worth it.”

I sip my water. I offer him some and he accepts, before stashing the water bottle on his side of the Jeep this time.

“You’re right. It’s worth it,” I admit. “It’s gorgeous out here.”

He wraps an arm around me and I rest my cheek on his chest. The stars are out in full force, perfectly visible in the deep navy sky stretched over the field.

“What are you going to do when you get back to Ohio?” I ask.

“Work. Kick Barrett out of my house. The usual.”

I let out a soft laugh. “You’re a good friend to let him stay with you.”

“I guess.”

Dax is a good person. Probably a *great* person. And next to him, in his arms, snuggling deep in a thick sleeping bag, my mind has wandered out of normal territory and right into treacherous territory. I haven’t made a habit of *really* getting to know the guys in my life. And before you judge me, let me remind you that guys do it all the time. I’m selective, but I know how to scratch an itch. I also know how to escape before one of us has to have a conversation involving the words “We have to talk.”

Yet here I am. I’m the one who turned up at Dax’s door again and again, proving that I can’t keep out of harm’s way. Like a curious mouse lured by cheese in a trap...

“What about you? What will you do when I go home?”

“Work. Sleep indoors. The usual,” I quip. In truth, I’ve been thinking about this since I opened my eyes however many minutes ago. What *will* I do when he goes home? Miss him, I imagine.

A puff of air from his nose might be a weak laugh. I wonder if we’re thinking the same thing. I wonder if, in the wee hours, out in the woods, it’s safe to tell him what’s on my mind. Why not?

“Will you date?” I blurt.

He pulls in a deep breath. To buy time? His chest expands, lifting me with it, since my face is resting on his rib cage.

“Never dated much as it was, Princess,” he says, which isn’t an answer.

“Will you date?” His voice is quiet. “Pick up a stranger at Grand Lark’s bar and show up on his cabin doorstep?”

I pinch his side in admonishment. “You were my first and likely my last Grand Lark hookup, Dax Vaughn.”

His palm rubs up and down my arm soothingly, and soon after my eyelids grow heavy. Before I overthink it, I tell him the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

“I don’t think I’ll find another you up in these mountains unless it’s actually *you* returning for another vacation.” My heart pounds under the weight of that admission. It’s unlikely that we’ll wait for each other—or that we’ll date long distance. The geographical distance isn’t insurmountable, but what about the emotional distance?

“You have to come visit me next,” he says, pretty as you please. “Your name’ll be on the menu and you’ll have to do a quality check to make sure my cook didn’t screw up your quesadilla. You never told me what you charge, by the way.”

That transition was as smooth as a fresh jar of Skippy.

“I’m not sure what to charge you.”

“Google some chefs for hire. Find what feels fair and bill me. I’ll double it and pay you.”

“Dax, I don’t want you to overpay me.” I rest my forearms on his chest and look down at him. He brushes my hair from my face before tucking it behind my ear. Such a sweet move.

He has a lot of those. That Courtney girl was an idiot for leaving him if he was even half this attentive with her.

“Want to take me into town tomorrow?” he asks. “We could do lunch. You can show me the sights.”

“I thought you wanted to rough it.”

“I do. But not at the cost of boring you to tears.”

“It’s your vacation. You should do what you came here to do.”

“Did you, and that’s not what I came here for.” His lips twitch. He knows I know he’s kidding. I’m not the least bit offended.

“I work until five tomorrow.”

“Dinner, then.”

“Another date?”

“Starting to sound that way, isn’t it? Are you opposed?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” I say, my tone teasing.

“That’s because I want you to say my favorite word.” He lifts his head off his pillow, laces his hands behind my back, and waits.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“That’s the one.” He kisses me lightly. Light turns to hard. Hard turns to deep.

I slide my hand between our bodies, down, down until I cup his balls. Then I grip his cock in my palm and give him a slow stroke. He pulls his lips from mine to let out a low, pleasure-filled groan.

“I have an idea,” I say.

“Yes,” he answers without hesitation. His eyes are hooded, saturated with heat.

I move down his body, beneath the sleeping bag, and pull down his boxers. His erection is impressive even at half-mast. I deliver a long, slow lick to the tip and feel his hips lift, his ass clench. Then I take him deep into my mouth. He rests his hands on my shoulders, hips still lifting to meet my mouth, as his deep groans fill the air. It’s suffocating under the heavy down sleeping bag and blankets, but I refuse to stop until he’s done. Or so I think.

Without warning, he grips my upper arms and pulls me off him.

I suck in a breath of crisp, cool air as I surface, and am met with deep silvery eyes that have grown dark with intent. His nostrils flare as he throws open the sleeping bag and rolls me to my back. In record time, my leggings are dragged to my ankles and then off completely.

He palms my breasts through my shirt, toying with my nipples as he kisses his way down my torso. At the juncture of my thighs, he stops, yanks aside my panties, and buries his face between my thighs.

Dax locates my clitoris like it has a homing device. He sucks and licks, not letting up until I’m moaning louder than he was. He sets the pace—deep and slow. I thrust and squirm, matching his rhythm as he ravishes me.

A minute later I come. *Hard*. I attempt to push his head away, but he shows no signs of letting up. His hands grip my ass and squeeze as he renews his efforts. He wrings one more orgasm from me before he stops.

Before I can catch my breath, he's on top of me. I open my legs to accommodate his width and he slides home in one slow, long, wet stroke.

Oh, he feels *so* good.

The stroke that follows is even better. I toss my head back, luxuriating in post-orgasmic bliss. He feels better than good—he feels like he belongs here.

After another few luscious glides, Dax comes to an abrupt halt. He's seated deep, and I can feel him pulsating inside me.

He blinks, dazed. “Fuck.”

“It's okay. I came earlier.” I weakly stroke his neck. “Go for it.”

“Not that, Princess.” He hovers there, his eyes drilling into mine, his breathing ragged. “Protection.”

“Fuck,” I whisper. We've never forgotten that essential step before. “I'm, um... I'm clean. You're clean, I assume?”

“Babe.” He tilts his head like I shouldn't assume otherwise.

“Well, slide out and put one on,” I tell him. Then with a devilish smile I add, “Or come inside me, because I've been on birth control since I was fifteen.”

“*Becca.*” I like the growly, desperate way he says my name.

I rest my hand on his T-shirt-covered chest and tilt my hips toward his greedily. He moves only a centimeter, frozen over me in suspension, like hasn't decided whether to stay or go.

“Do you trust me?” I'm asking so much more than whether he trusts that I'm on birth control.

His answer is to lower to his elbows and kiss me thoroughly. While our tongues mingle, his hips move lazily, his cock sliding deep, and then deeper before pulling out again.

My breaths match his—tight and thin—but he doesn't pick up the pace, oh no. He continues his sluggish, rhythmic slides. He thrusts with precision, and I tilt to meet him. Soon I'm on the brink of an orgasm so spectacular I wonder if it'll be like Halley's comet—once in a lifetime.

“Princess,” he growls.

“Yes. Yes, Dax. *Yes.*”

“Now.”

On his command, I arch, tightening my channel and clutching his cock. I pulse along with him as he releases a primal growl, his entire body coiled as he comes inside me. He pumps until his hips come to a resting stop and our pelvises are flush against each other.

Then. We breathe. Hard and fast at first, then long and slow.

His kisses warm the center of my chest. We're still connected where it counts. His fingers play in my hair as my hands stroke up his back and down. I reach lower to grab his taut ass where his muscles flinch.

“Your body is unfairly perfect,” I mutter, happiness lacing my voice.

“Wrong, gorgeous. You're the perfect one. Can't think of anywhere I'd rather be than wrapped up in these long legs.” He slides one hand over my thigh and down my calf, lifting my leg and hooking it over his hip. “How long can I rest here

before I need to get out? Nothing feels as incredible as your pussy. Could stay here till morning.”

I release a quick exhale of surprise at the word I thought I never liked. When Dax says “pussy,” it’s almost...reverent.

“Morning is a long way away,” I joke.

He kisses me again. We share a smile and an intense eye lock before he pulls out.

I sleep well the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 18

THURSDAY AFTERNOON

BECCA

“I can’t say that anyone has taken me out for vegan food before,” Dax says as we walk the sidewalk downtown.

We ate at a small café called Peace, Love, and Dumplings. They have the most incredible Thai fusion.

“It’s just *food*,” I say. “Did you like it?”

“No. I loved it.” He shrugs, accepting without any fuss that he ate a meatless meal. “I love food.”

“Anyone can take you out for Tennessee barbecue. Only someone special can take you for Tennessee Thai.”

He captures my hand, lacing his fingers between mine. Our arms brush as we match each other’s leisurely pace alongside the sunshine-saturated street.

“Those sweet potato things...” he starts.

“Spicy Thai sweet potato peanut rolls,” I answer. They’re my favorite item on the menu. Deep-fried like an egg roll and filled with the unlikely ingredients of mashed sweet potatoes

and spicy vegetables, served with a thick, rich peanut butter sauce for dipping.

“Can you re-create them?”

“Maybe. I’ve never tried. The kitchen at Tad’s house is usually filled with their two kids and Lara tossing everything into a Crock-Pot for that evening’s meal.”

“You sound unimpressed.”

“I’m grateful that she feeds me,” I hedge.

“You don’t cook for them?” His question contains an element of surprise.

“I don’t want to be in the way.” My answer contains a dash of chagrin. Lately Dax has reminded me that I’m valuable, and I’ve been noticing the ways I try to make myself smaller. To stay out of the way of people who are leading *real* lives. “I’m interloping hard-core.”

“That’s what family’s for, Princess. They step up and help out when someone they love needs them. It’s what I did for my mom. It’s what I did for Barrett.”

My heart squeezes. What a simple, awesome way of looking at life.

“Who does that for you?” I ask. “Who helps you out when you need it?”

“Don’t need it.” He lifts those big shoulders into a shrug. Shoulders the people around him lean on.

“Everyone needs someone,” I say quietly.

He squeezes my fingers as we walk.

We pass a gaudy T-shirt store, a movie theater, and an antiques shop.

“Oh, I love that.” I pause in front of the window and admire a tall grandfather clock. I can’t stop staring at the intricate woodwork. It’s *beautiful*—my dad would love it. I wish I could afford to buy it for him for his upcoming birthday.

“Princess.”

“Yeah?” I turn to face Dax, but he’s not transfixed by the clock. He’s pointing at a faded poster taped to a telephone pole. “This you?”

I run a hand over the weather-beaten, faded hot-pink paper. The title reads ONE NIGHT IN TUSCANY. My name, in bold type, sits beneath a photo of a country landscape, but the staples have rusted and the orange streaks make it hard to tell what it is.

“A few months ago, I danced at the cancer ward in the hospital.” I pull up a torn bit of paper and piece together the name of the hospital with the address. “I wanted to perform. I wanted to make people happy. I figured patients undergoing chemo needed a reason to smile. I made the flyers for locals who have relatives going through treatment.”

I glance up at him. He takes his attention from the flyer to meet my gaze, his eyes narrowing in consideration.

“Cute. Sweet. And you care about other people.”

“I just wanted to dance.”

“Yeah, sure,” he says, but I can tell he doesn’t buy my excuse. “You’ll have to show me sometime. What else you can do with your amazing body.”

I take his hand and pull him with me. I wait until we pass a few loitering teens to lean close and say, “Was that a request for a striptease?”

“It wasn’t. But I could put in a request for that as well.”

I laugh.

“I’m serious.” He stops in the middle of the sidewalk, heedless of slowing pedestrian traffic. “I want to see what you did for the hospital. Will you show me?”

“Here?” I look left, then right. People are walking in and out of shops. Couples linger on the edge of the street and sidewalk.

“Why not? Street performers are a thing in Tennessee too, I assume. Do you have the song on your phone?”

“Yes, but—”

“Perfect.” He drops my hand and walks over to the group of teens. He has a brief conversation that involves him pulling out his wallet, and then he returns with a ball cap. The teen holding the money has a bad case of hat hair and a grin on his face.

Dax tosses the hat on the ground and plunks a five-dollar bill into it, along with the change from his pocket to keep the bill from blowing away.

“I’m your first paying customer. Let’s see whatcha got.” He backs away, leans on the telephone pole, and crosses his arms over his chest.

My heart is fluttering but not from fear. From excitement. I *love* to perform. Shakily I pull out my phone and cue up the song, do a few stretches as the music starts, and then I *dance*.

DAX

Eyes closed, Becca moves her body to the beat. I'm transfixed. On the periphery, I notice a crowd gathering, but I don't take my eyes off her. I have no idea what kind of dancing this is, whether there are bits of ballet thrown in with interpretive dance, or if this is something new—a combo of the two.

Whatever it is, I'm rapt. And not just me. Even the kid I paid for his hat is a part of the circle of people surrounding Becca, his crooked smile suggesting a dirty fantasy is brewing inside his mussed head.

One of the first details I noticed about Becca was the way she moves. She's in complete control of her body. She's not the least bit afraid to use her body to communicate what she's thinking or what she's feeling.

That's when it hits me. She's shared a million tiny secrets over the course of the last week, and she's said them all with her body. When we make love, when she cooks, when she snuggles against me and we watch TV.

She's incredible.

The instrumental music shifts and the beat picks up and, yeah, I'm not ashamed to say that I recognize the pop princess my pop princess is now shaking her ass to.

The crowd knows their Taylor Swift. They're clapping, cheering, and dancing along with the moves Becca beautifully executes.

She drops her head back and laughs—a sound of pure joy—when a little girl steps into the middle of the circle and starts dancing with her.

Becca meets my eyes over the crowd as she lifts her arms, drops her hips, and swivels. I uncross my arms and clap, as mesmerized as the rest of them. We're all eating out of the palm of her hand.

Or maybe I have been since the beginning.

She finishes with a flourish, doing a dramatic bow as the song fades to an end. More clapping accompanies more cash in the hat.

She scoops up the money, puts the hat on the head of the boy I bought it from—he gives her a sheepish smile—and stuffs the bills into her pocket. She delivers a hug and allows a photo with the little girl who danced with her before waving farewell to her fans.

At her side, I put an arm around her and pull all that warmth against me. She's a little out of breath. Lately there's nothing I've been enjoying more than the sound of Becca catching her breath.

“That was incredible.”

“Thank you.” She wraps one arm around my waist, coming so close our hips bump as we walk. “Now that I'm independently wealthy, can I offer to take you for dessert?”

“No. Save that money for the restaurant you open. Or, hell, the dance studio you build.”

“How do you do it? Own two bars and have a life? I've seen the way Tad burns the candle at both ends—and then buys more candles and lights those up too.” She shakes her head. “It's a nightmare.”

“Hire people you trust. Don't hover. That's how I do it. I put in a bid for another location about a week and a half ago.” The new place is close enough to my other two that I can

check in, though it's going to need a lot of work inside. "It used to be a coffeehouse. I want to turn it into a restaurant and bar like McGreevy's. But with a different style."

"Sounds amazing."

"It doesn't have to be as miserable as your brother makes it look, Princess. Some of us can handle running a business alongside burying a family member and still appreciate that life is pretty fucking great."

"You're pretty fucking great." She lifts her chin for a kiss that I duck my head to deliver.

Ah, hell. She's being sweet again.

"Yeah, so are you. On second thought, where are you taking me for dessert? Is there any other weird food you'd like to treat me to while I'm here?"

"Actually..." She stops in front of a shop with a sign that reads HERBAL REMEDIES. "Why don't I make you something special tonight?"

She drags me into a shop that's half health-food store, half apothecary. Nearly everything the store sells is displayed in big glass containers. Blooming teas, dried herbs, essential oils...

"Oh, I get it. You're going to sacrifice me to the gods," I say as she tugs me down the aisles.

"No. But I am thinking sake bombs for a nightcap, and maybe some of the really cool chocolates they sell by the ounce."

"Sake bombs?"

"Mm-hm. You haven't lived until you've dropped a shot of sake into your beer by banging the table and knocking it off

the chopsticks it's balanced on." She says this while grabbing two sets of chopsticks and a small bottle of sake from the shelf. "Just you wait."

We stop in front of a glass case filled with chocolates as the woman behind it greets us with a smile.

"Let me guess," the woman tells us. "Lovers' special? We have many aphrodisiac chocolates. Ones with strawberries, chili peppers, and, if you're truly daring, oysters."

"Good God," Becca says at the same time I have to mentally will my lunch to stay in my stomach. "I don't think we'll be that daring. Thanks, though."

Becca buys an array of chocolates—oyster-free, thank you very much. We drop off the goods at the Jeep and then drive up the mountain for one last experience she insists I have while I'm visiting.

Zip-lining.

No. I've never done it.

She says she hasn't either, but she double-checks her harness like a pro. Twilight is setting in, and from the top of the hill I watch as several visitors scream their way down. The rocks and tops of trees resemble a canyon that is gradually growing darker. Once I'm strapped in, a surge of excitement laced with adrenaline courses through my veins. Like with Becca, I'm trusting the ride will be worth it.

Turns out zip-lining is fast, fun, and over before I know it.

As we're disconnecting from the cable with the help of the guy working the platform, I can't help thinking that zip-lining is very similar to what it's like to be with the blonde at my side.

The fast and fun I like, but the closer we get to “over,” the less inclined I am to wrap things up with her.

CHAPTER 19

SATURDAY

BECCA

Two days later, Dax and I are in his Jeep, the windshield wipers working hard to keep the window clear of rain. He navigates downtown as we make our way to the movie theater for a matinee. Going to the movies had not been our original plan for today.

The original plan involved a hike in the mountains, stopping to soak in a picturesque view, and then enjoying a picnic lunch.

“You are officially the rain king,” I say, watching the rain pour in sheets from the sky. “Our romantic wine-and-crab-cake lunch is about to be reduced to Jujubes and flat fountain Coke.”

“Jujubes are plenty romantic. You’ll see.” Dax, arm outstretched, fist gripping the top of the steering wheel, takes his eyes off the road for a second to send me a smirk.

That one look sends shivers up both my arms.

“I guess I’ll have to save my outfit for another time.” I let out an exaggerated sigh. “Super short shorts, hiking boots, and a red and black plaid I would have knotted at my bare midriff...”

I grin when he groans.

“You did that on purpose.” He shifts in his seat like he’s feeling a bit of tightness down below.

Heck yeah, I did it on purpose. It’s nice to be liked. It’s extra nice to be liked by him.

My cellphone rings. I dig it out of my bag, consider the screen for the length of another ring, and finally accept my fate.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Sweetheart! So glad I caught you! I’m running late.” She sounds frantic, and that’s not unusual. My mom is going to be late for her own funeral. I guess we have that in common. “Dad’s birthday is tomorrow,” she tells me, referring to *my* dad, not hers.

“What’s the plan?” If there is one.

“Well, dinner”—I hear the oven door bang open and then slam shut—“will be done in an hour.” I let that sink in before asking her to clarify.

“Pardon?”

“Dinner, sweetheart. For Dad’s birthday. One hour. Oh, and can you pick up a cake? I didn’t have time to make one and the lasagna is in the oven, so I can’t put a cake in there with it, now can I?”

“But...tonight?”

“The Masons invited us out to an art show and dinner *tomorrow* night. Something about how Debbie’s sister couldn’t go because she came down with the flu, et cetera, et cetera. Anyway, the tickets were free. I didn’t want to leave you kids out of Dad’s celebration, so I thought we’d do dinner tonight.”

“Mom, I can’t come over in an hour.”

“Why not? Tad said you weren’t working, and he’s leaving Dominic in charge of the restaurant so that he can come to dinner. What are you doing that’s so important?” Another *crash-bang-boom* comes through the phone, like she’s rearranging the pots in the cabinet or perhaps pulling out the silverware for the table.

“Uh...” I turn to Dax, who sends me a curious glance as he spins the wheel to the left and parks in the back of the parking lot at the cinema. “Nothing. I’ll be there. What kind of cake?”

“No matter. And you don’t have to have his name written on it if you don’t want to. I mean, we all know who he is, right?” She laughs at her own joke. “It’ll be me, you, Dad, Tad, and Lara and the kids. That’s one, two, three...seven. Buy a cake for seven. Or, well, eight. I think they sell them by even numbers, right? Like ‘feeds six to eight’? You’ll figure it out. There’s a nice bakery on—”

“Mom. I’ve got it.” I have to cut her off, or else she’ll continue hammering out every detail and she’ll burn that lasagna she has in the oven. “I’ll see you soon.”

I tap the screen of my phone to end the call and sigh.

“What’s up, babe?” Dax shuts off the engine.

“Last-minute birthday party for my dad tonight. My mom isn’t much of a planner, and—surprise, surprise!—She’s running late.”

“Now I know where you inherited your spontaneity.”

I give him an eye roll when he touches the tip of his finger to my nose.

“She needs me to pick up a cake at Tracee Bakes and be there within an hour.” I rub an aching spot over one eyebrow as I consider the clock on the Jeep’s dashboard. “Or, well, ninety minutes. Whenever she plans something or I’m involved, everyone knows to add twenty to thirty minutes.”

“No problem, Princess.” He starts the Jeep and reverses out of the lot. “Where to?”

“What? Oh, no, you don’t have to chauffeur me. Just take me back to the cabin and—”

“Took us thirty minutes to get *here*. I drive you home, you’ll have to drive back down the mountain, pick up a cake, and *then* drive to your mom’s. Where’s she live?”

“Spring Falls. About twenty-five minutes from here,” I add, since he doesn’t know the area.

He lifts his eyebrows like I’m proving his point, then gestures to the road in front of us. “Where to?”

“I can’t ask you to come to my dad’s impromptu birthday shindig.”

“Why not?”

So many reasons.

Every one of them flies out of my head the moment he grabs my hand, curls his fingers around mine, and kisses my knuckles.

“They’re the worst,” I manage. Lamely. This brings forth a low chuckle. It’s impossible to be stressed around him. The

man exudes “chill.” When I was screaming down the mountain attached to a zip line, Dax’s brief yawp was both manly and calm.

He returns both hands to the wheel. “Left or right?”

With another sigh, I give in. “Tracee Bakes is to the left.”

He turns left, and we’re off.

Off to my dad’s impromptu birthday shindig, which I’ll be attending with a plus-one.

DAX

“Sweetheart!” A tall blond woman, her smile broad, her eyelids coated in a ton of eye makeup, throws open the screen door the moment Becca sets foot on the porch. She takes the cake, studying it through the plastic cellophane on the box top. “This looks delicious.”

I’m a few steps behind, so when I put a boot on the top step, her mom looks up from the cake and inspects me with interest. Gaze locked on me, she addresses her daughter. “Who’s this?”

“*This* is Dax Vaughn. He drove me here,” Becca replies stiffly. “Dax, this is my mom, Carol. Stone. Obviously.”

She’s not comfortable introducing me to her family, that much is clear. I keep my observation to myself and extend a hand. “Mrs. Stone.”

Carol shakes my hand and surveys me up and down. Becca worries her lip in that way she has, looking like she might throw up any second. I'm guessing she's not used to bringing men home to her parents.

"I didn't realize you were bringing someone, dear," Carol says as she lets go of my hand and assesses me once more.

"I don't eat much," I lie with a smile. "We were going to the movies before you called, so if you happen to have a tiny bag of gummy bears I can pay you five dollars for, that should suffice."

Carol Stone's face breaks into a smile. No laugh yet, but I'll get one out of her.

"You were on a date." She elbows Becca. "And I interrupted your movie."

"The movie's my fault," I explain. "The rain came with me."

"Anyway!" Becca loops her arm through one of mine and walks me toward the house. "We'd better say hi to Dad. Is he in the basement?"

"Where else?" Carol asks rhetorically before disappearing in the direction of the kitchen. Inside, Tad is holding a toddler-aged little girl I assume is one of Becca's nieces.

By the look of startled fury on his face, I believe he's more surprised than her mom was to see me. His eyes cut to Becca.

"Tad, you remember Dax," she says.

"You brought him to Dad's *birthday dinner*?"

What the fuck is wrong with everyone? Does "Dad's birthday" involve a satanic ritual with live chickens or something?

“I brought her,” I correct. “We were on a date.”

He nods, but his frown is more indecisive than angry. Kind of reminds me of...me. Wonder what Becca would've thought of me if she could've seen me back home, glowering at the world.

Took me getting the hell out of Ohio to crack through the misery. I don't know what Tad's excuse is, but it better be a good one. For his wife's sake, I hope he's not a miserable bastard all the time.

Speaking of, a woman, trailed by another little girl, exits the kitchen. “Hey, Bec—oh, *hi*.”

Tad puts the toddler on the ground and finds his manners. “This is my wife, Lara. Lara, this is Dax. He came with Becca.”

“I've heard about you. Hi. So good to see you.” She drags the “so” out an extra syllable or two.

Her smile is cautious, her grip firm as she shakes my hand. She flits a pointed look at Becca.

“You been talking about me, Princess?” It's fun to watch Becca squirm. How is she brazen enough to perform on the sidewalk in front of random strangers and this backward about introducing me to her family?

She presents her nieces next. The little one is Tasha, the older one, Kiera. I earn a high five from Tasha, but Kiera isn't sure about me yet. She gives me a shy wave instead, which I return with a wave of my own.

“Has Len met him yet?” Lara asks, jerking her chin toward the basement stairs.

“Not yet.”

“Send him down alone. See what happens.” Lara is grinning at me as if that might be like throwing a mouse into a hungry snake’s terrarium.

“I think we’ll tackle this one together,” Becca says with a laugh.

I follow her to the stairs. “Your mom likes me, your brother doesn’t, and I can’t get a read on Lara.”

“She’s on the fence. Like Kiera,” she adds as we descend the basement stairs. It’s a finished basement. I grip the white handrail attached to a painted beige wall.

“So that’s a ‘no’ from Tad, a ‘yes’ from Mom, a ‘yes’ from Tasha, and two ‘maybes.’ ” I do a quick count. “Sounds like Dad’s the tiebreaker.”

“Well, *I* like you.” She stops at the second-to-last step. “So you have that going for you.”

I descend to the wood floor so that we’re standing eye to eye. After placing a kiss on the center of her lips, I say, “Thanks, Princess. I like you too.”

“Down here!” comes a shout.

“Come on. Let’s meet Len.” We pass a darkened home office and a family room with a TV, then round a corner to a room filled to the brim with clocks.

I’m not shitting you. There have to be fifty of them in the massive room, including the grandfather clock laid on a long bench, open, its parts lying everywhere. The man standing over the clock’s innards, like a surgeon performing an operation, does a double take when he sees me. He pulls his glasses off his nose and smiles.

“Hey, there. Lenny Stone.” He rounds the bench, extending a hand. He’s shorter than I am, stouter than I expected—Becca must’ve inherited her height from her mom—and ten times friendlier than Lara alluded. I barely suppress a chuckle of appreciation. It’s good that Becca has people looking out for her.

“Dax Vaughn. I’m crashing your birthday dinner, if that’s all right.”

“Sure, sure! Carol always makes enough for an army. You look like you can handle a few servings of lasagna.”

“It’s a favorite,” I say honestly.

“Happy birthday, Dad.” Becca loops her arms around his neck, and he gives her a hearty hug.

My dad wasn’t much of a hugger, but I feel a pang of loss anyway. His birthday would’ve been next month.

“You wouldn’t believe the grandfather clock I saw at the antiques store the other day...,” Becca starts. Len gives her his full attention, rapt as she describes the clock in full detail.

I walk around the room admiring the many ticking contraptions. I wonder where Becca got the impression she wasn’t valuable, or that her ideas weren’t appreciated. I can tell that her mother, spontaneous like Becca, supports her. It’s clear that her clock-obsessed father adores her.

“Is this what you do for a living, Len?” I ask when he and Becca wrap up their conversation.

“Hobby, mostly. I work as a salesman at an appliance store. Been there, oh, I don’t know, forty years now.”

“This is intricate.” I point to the clock on the wall, metal gears on the outside, hands circling a made-to-look-rusted

face.

“That one I made from scratch,” he shares proudly.

“Is it for sale?” When he doesn’t answer, I turn to face him. He blinks, startled.

“No one’s ever asked me that before.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Told you, Dad. They’re amazing.” Becca palms her father’s shoulder. His cheeks grow pink from embarrassment.

Ah. That’s where her self-doubt comes from.

Before I can make an offer for the clock, Carol shouts down from the kitchen that dinner’s ready.

“You think *I* can cook?” Becca asks me as she walks toward the stairs. “Wait’ll you taste Mom’s lasagna.”

She leaves the room before her dad and I do, and he shakes his head as he watches her go. “She’s so much like her mother. Incredible,” he says with obvious appreciation.

“Yeah. I thought that same word about her.”

Just so I don’t forget he’s the man who supplied half her DNA, he snaps his shoulders back and, though he’s shorter than me, manages to look me dead in the eyes. “You’d better have figured that out if you’re here with her.”

I dip my head in acknowledgment. “Yes, sir.”

He nods curtly and gestures for me to walk ahead of him.

There are three people looking out for Becca, then. I smile as I climb the stairs toward the heavenly smells of tomato sauce and warm garlic bread.

CHAPTER 20

BECCA

Watching my family interact with Dax is sort of fascinating. Now, keep in mind the last time I brought a guy to the dinner table, I was sixteen years old.

Dad can't stop talking to Dax about bar ownership, and once Dax mentioned owning two places, something extraordinary happened. Tad stopped imitating an asshole and started talking to him.

"You own two bars?"

"Yeah." Dax grabs another slice of garlic bread—not that I'm counting, but it might be his fourth—and drags it through the sauce on his plate.

"And you can take a vacation. Must be nice," Tad grunts.

Correction: His assholery is still intact.

Dax, chewing, raises his eyebrows and remains quiet.

"What my husband means to say," Lara interjects, "is that he hasn't been able to work any less than sixty hours a week since he opened Grand Lark. He would love to take a family vacation."

“Dax, would you like more lasagna?” my mom offers.

“No, thanks, Mrs. Stone. I’ve nearly eaten what could’ve been your leftovers as it is.” He winks at her, and I swear to you she blushes. Then he loses that boyish chagrin and speaks directly to my brother.

“It’s within your ability to take a vacation. Ownership doesn’t require your living there.”

Tad’s eye tics and his smile is anything but polite. “You don’t run thirteen rental cabins. You run two bars. There’s a difference.”

“A big one,” Dax agrees. “But you don’t have to sacrifice all your time if you don’t want to.” As Tad turns an interesting shade of red, Dax continues explaining. “The trick to being able to walk away is *actually* walking away. Trust the people in your employ to do the job while you’re gone. Trust that they know what they’re doing. That they can handle the tasks you assign them. After all, it was you who trained them. If you don’t trust them to do the job you hired them for, why did you bother?”

Lara and I exchange glances as Tad and Dax regard each other like gladiators in a ring. Well, Tad looks like a gladiator. Dax is as laid-back as a sleepy lion on a sunny African plain. He doesn’t appear the least bit riled.

“Who wants dessert?” my mom interrupts.

“I’ll help with the ice cream,” Lara says, pulling Tasha out of her chair and into her arms.

“Me too!” Kiera shouts, following them out of the dining room.

My dad goes next, swiping our plates out from under our noses and vanishing as well.

“Dax makes a good point,” I tell my brother, folding my arms on the tablecloth. Next to me, Dax doesn’t move a muscle. He’s still leaning back in his chair, regarding Tad.

“Listen, Bec—” he starts, but Dax interrupts.

“Why’d you hire her?”

Tad’s eyebrows slam down. “Excuse me?”

“You’re excused. Now answer my question. Why’d you hire her if you don’t let her do anything. Do you not trust her?”

“You don’t know her like I do,” Tad says.

“Excuse me,” I mutter. “I’m right here.”

“I know she can cook like a five-star restaurant’s chef,” Dax says.

“You know that because you scammed her out of a recipe you didn’t pay her for.”

Dax, his energy harnessed, sits up. The words that follow are low and humming with warning. “Careful, Tad. She’s too smart to get scammed.”

“He offered to pay for them. I was the one who said no,” I interject. Dax and Tad both glare at me like I spoke out of turn.

“*Them?*” Tad asks. “You gave him more than one recipe? Are you crazy?”

“Once more,” Dax says, his tone lethal. “Watch the way you speak to her.”

“What are you going to do? Beat me up?” Tad waves his hands in front of his face.

“No. But I will take her hand and walk her out of here. Maybe offer her a better job where she won’t be treated like

shit on a daily basis.”

“Yeah!” I agree, then snap my head around to Dax. “Wait. What?”

“A place,” Dax continues, ignoring me, “where she’s appreciated. Where she can experiment with all the recipes she wants. Where she can run the place as she sees fit without the boss over her shoulder rerouting calls to his phone because he can’t let go of the smallest of details.”

“Is that a fact?” Tad asks, standing from the table.

“Your call.” Dax stands too and I feel my jaw drop.

“She’s not going to move to Ohio to be with a guy she just met.” Tad sneers at me. “You’re not that stupid.”

“Hey!” I stand up too, just as Dax’s arm strikes like a snake. He grabs a handful of Tad’s shirt and tugs. “Dax!”

“Happy birrrr...” My mom’s singing trails off as she steps into the dining room, where she finds an interesting still life. Dax’s fist is wrapped in Tad’s shirt. Tad’s hands are wrapped around Dax’s fist. I have a hand on each of their arms in a futile effort to disconnect them.

“Let go,” Tad says.

“Tell Becca you’re sorry for calling her stupid,” Dax says, unfazed by the arrival of half my family.

“Tad!” That’s Mom, still holding Dad’s blazing birthday cake.

“Tad, seriously.” Lara gestures with the ice-cream scooper in her hand.

“Really?” Tad swipes away Dax’s hands and mine and throws his arms in the air. “You’re all siding with him? This is

bull... Bull,” he concludes when my nieces appear on either side of Lara’s legs.

“Did you forget whose big day it is?” My dad holds up the festive paper plates and napkins I picked up when I bought the cake. “We’re celebrating, not fighting.” He levels a glare at Tad and then at me. “Now, what do you say to each other?”

Tad and I exchange glances and at the same time mumble, “Sorry,” to each other. Len Stone has never stood for us arguing or bickering, and he’s not about to start.

My dad slaps down the plates and napkins. “Dax? Tad?”

Dax frowns in misunderstanding.

“Do you also have something to say to each other?”

Dax looks at me like my family has lost their minds. I’m not sure what to say, because I think they might have.

“No,” Dax answers. “I don’t.”

“Neither do I,” Tad snaps.

Ha! Oh, this is too rich.

Before another standoff can occur, I burst into song, a rendition of “Happy Birthday” that might be my best ever. Everyone joins in, except for Dax.

Then it’s cake and ice cream and awkwardness for everyone except my nieces. They’re too plied by sugar and naïveté to be aware of how damn hard it is to be an adult.

DAX

In the passenger seat, Becca rests her head back and eyes me. She's turning something over, but I don't know what it is yet. I'm not great at reading her mind—or her expression.

“For a while,” I start, because I'm not sure if she's going to do a nosedive into this conversation, “I thought maybe you didn't feel valued because your parents ran you down. After tonight I know it's not them. It's Tad.”

“He's his own creation,” she grumbles.

“But they don't stand up for you either.”

She sits up in the seat and turns to address me. We're on our way up the mountain. Soon she'll be able to leap out of my Jeep and run away from this conversation if she chooses.

“I don't need standing up *for*. And what's with you trying to strangle Tad?” she asks, her voice escalating.

“I bet you've wanted to do that for years. You never had the support.”

“It wasn't your place, Dax.” Her voice is hard. Unyielding.

In silence, we complete the climb up the mountain road. The rain has almost stopped, and the wipers on the windshield swipe intermittently. I reach cabin 7's driveway and kill the engine. We sit in silence as raindrops fall from the trees, randomly tapping the roof.

I unhook my seatbelt and wait for Becca to say more. She doesn't.

Guess it's on me to let it go or keep going.

Fuck it.

“I know you're not used to having a man in your corner, Princess, but that man is me.” *For now anyway.* “You brought

me to your family's home and—”

“And you disrespected them!”

“How?”

Her mouth is frozen open while she tries to come up with a reason that's not BS.

“Because. Because you were...you were manhandling my brother.”

“He insulted you.”

“He always insults me!”

I touch her arm and, in my calmest tone, agree with her. “I know.”

Her shoulders slump. Not because she's backing down. She understands why I did what I did. Not to show off. Not to usurp control at her father's birthday dinner. In the days I've known her I've witnessed Tad undermining and overlooking her repeatedly. It pisses me off.

“You're too valuable to be disrespected.”

She sighs before she asks the last question I expect her to. “What was that about you offering me a position at one of your bars?”

Yeah, I didn't really think that part through, but I was on a roll. Although honestly, what is there to overthink? If she wants a place to work out from under her brother's thumb, I can provide that for her without issue.

“It was what it was, babe. An offer for you to work at one of my bars.”

“You'd just...hire me?”

“Yeah.”

“And I’d...what, *move* to Ohio?”

“You say that like you haven’t moved in and out of several states multiple times. Like you can’t leave. Like you’re tied down. You’re none of those things.”

Her eyes go to the side in thought. “But I’d be working for you. It’s a commitment. What if I changed my mind in three months? In three *weeks*? What if I wanted to leave?”

Her comment stings more than I expect.

“I’m not sure a move to Ohio is the right one to make. I’m near my family now. It’d be hard to leave my nieces. I like reading them bedtime stories and hanging out with Lara. I like Grand Lark,” she continues justifying. “I like Tennessee—the mountains, the scenery. The vacation spot you picked to take a break is where I’m privileged to work every day. It’s a lot to give up, Dax.”

“A simple ‘No, thank you’ would’ve sufficed.” Gritting my teeth, I let my stare soften out the windshield and realize my mistake. I was going for ten more yards, not realizing Becca had already quit playing the game.

Our one-night stand may have shifted into a week, going on two, but for her the rules never changed. I wasn’t trying to change the rules. I was going with my gut.

I like Becca. I like her a whole hell of a lot. I like hanging out with her, and I like having sex with her. I’ve scratched the surface of who she is and what she desires, and I’d like to keep digging.

She doesn’t want me to.

“You want me to stop coming for you, gorgeous?” I’m done doing this in my head. Fun as it is to argue with myself

and not come up with any answers, it's time to behave like a grown-up.

“What's that mean?” she asks quietly.

“I'm persistent. Pursuing you. I can shut that down if you like. I check out next week. I can lob this ball into your court and see you when you want to be seen. In other words, I can stop coming for you.”

“*See me when I want to be seen?*” Her eyes flash like I've hit a hot button and, hell, I probably have.

“I know you don't like absolutes. That you avoid firm 'yeses' and 'nos.' That you prefer to show up when you want to and make decisions minus the committee.”

I point to myself, because lately I've been telling her my vote.

“I'm giving you the chance to do that.” I put my hand on her leg to let her know I'm serious. “No strings. It's how we started at the beginning, when I brought on the rain. You want to go back to that, babe, just say the word.”

CHAPTER 21

BECCA

So. Many. Thoughts.

1. What words? “Fuck you”? I might say those words.
2. An out! *Take it, take it, take it!*
3. Is that dart of pain actually fear? Loss? Do I miss him already, even though we’re sitting side by side?

I’m not sure which response to grab onto. Especially since they’re blowing around inside my head like lottery balls.

The truth of the matter is, I was both flattered and frustrated when he stood up for me with Tad. On the one hand, it was embarrassing—which I’m not accustomed to feeling. He put me in a situation I couldn’t control.

Plus, I don’t like the way Dax accurately pegged my family dynamics. When you can’t hide behind your own facade, where can you go?

Not to Ohio. That’s for damn sure.

I’ve never had an offer as tempting as it was terrifying.

I blew a lot of smoke just now and Dax called my bluff. If I don't want any part of his offer, then he'll retract it, no questions asked.

Now he's looking at me with a patient expression, waiting for me to make the call. Me and no one else.

"Sounds great," I force out. I also force a smile, hoping he buys that I'm as nonchalant as I hope I look. "I don't want to invade your personal space, but I don't want to avoid you either. If you're okay with us continuing what we have until you leave, I'm game."

If I was hoping to elicit an argument from him, I failed. He gives me a nod that feels really, *really* final.

"Sounds good to me, Princess. If you're staying tonight, you might want to hustle inside before this rain picks up again."

"Yeah. Good call." Still smiling, I climb out of the Jeep and meet Dax on the porch. He unlocks the door and opens it for me. A second later the sky opens again.

"So..." I say once we're inside. "Now what do we do?"

His big shoulders shrug. "Whatever you want."

The vibe in the room isn't our usual crackling sexual tension. There's something else lingering—something forced. Like both of us got what neither of us wanted.

"Maybe I should head back to Tad's house and try to smooth things over," I say, testing the idea of leaving.

Dax doesn't comment.

"I should reassure Lara that I'm not angry. She's married to my brother, but she's also my friend."

More silence from Grand Lark's hottest guest. Dax moves to the fridge, opens a beer, and takes a few long guzzles.

"Do you have an opinion?" I ask.

"Yeah." He rests the beer on the counter between us.

"Would you like to share it?" We might be on the brink of an argument, which would be better than...whatever this is.

"Not my place. You drew a boundary line in the Jeep. I respect it."

It's not fair, but he's not wrong. I *did* draw a line. He told me to speak up if I wanted to resume our one-night-stand status. I did, and now here we are. I can't expect to entwine him in my family drama or my personal life if I'm walking away in a few days.

"Well. If it's all the same to you, I think I will head back to the house, just so they know everything's fine. I don't want there to be any ill will or anything..." I trail off.

"Makes sense." He takes another slug of his beer.

"Do I leave my things here? I'm planning on coming back."

"Good."

That word loosens some of the tightness in my chest. I round the counter and kiss him goodbye—a brief peck, but walking out still feels like the wrong call.

Behind me the TV comes on. I hesitate at the door, and then turn to find Dax standing by the couch, beer in hand, his eyes on me.

Without a word, I softly shut the front door.

He puts down the remote and the beer.

I cross the room and I'm in his arms before my next breath.

"Change your mind?" he murmurs, his arms tightening around me.

"I'm delaying my decision to leave."

"It's your decision to make."

The choice is in my hands. The power is heavier than I'd like, but in this case, I'll take it. It's safer than discussing where to go next.

"Whatcha watchin'?" I grin, forcing the mood to lighten by about two tons. "Do I have a vote?"

"Sorry, Princess. You get the say-so in everything but the TV. That's my domain."

I give in with an "I can live with that."

Then we go to the couch and settle in.

Well, after I grab myself a beer.

SUNDAY MORNING

DAX

The coffeepot sputters at the end of the brew cycle, and I hold my breath to listen. From the bedroom comes a sound between a snore and a purr. I let Becca sleep in. I woke up about fifteen minutes ago, slid out of bed, and fired up the coffeepot. Somehow she didn't stir when I climbed out of bed, and she

still doesn't now, when the scent of freshly brewed joe saturates the air.

Understandable. It was a long night.

We watched back-to-back movies on HBO. She fell asleep on the couch, conking out halfway through the second. I guess *Hitman* wasn't her bag.

She didn't go back to Tad and Lara's house, and I didn't put that option in front of her again. I don't think she wanted to leave. I didn't want her to leave. Even with our newly minted rule, I want her here.

My phone vibrates on the counter. This early, it can only be one person. I check the screen.

Yep. Just as I thought.

I slip out the front door, mug in hand, and answer with a hushed "Hey, Mom."

"My, don't you sound spent. Rough night?"

"You know better than to ask me that. You won't want the answer." I walk to a wooden rocker and lower myself into it. The sun is out, drying up yesterday's rain.

"It's the girl, isn't it?" my mom asks. "I told you after she got to know you, she wouldn't be able to resist you."

"Yes, you did," I agree, though Becca's resisting me just fine. "We'll wrap it up this week."

A squirrel skitters down the post closest to me and jerks like he's surprised to see me there. He leaps off the railing and dashes through scattered pine needles before climbing a tall fir.

Reminds me of Becca's reaction last night. Except she turned and came back to me. I pinch the bridge of my nose. I don't know what to make of any of it.

"Why do you say that?" Mom asks.

"We had a *discussion*. The 'will we last past next week' discussion," I reiterate. "She decided now was enough for her."

My mother lets out a grunt of disagreement.

"Don't worry." I finish my lukewarm coffee. Gonna need a few more of these today to keep my eyes open. Especially if I want to hike like I planned yesterday. Rain or shine, I'm going.

"I tell you not to worry about me all the time, and do you listen?"

"No." A tired smile pulls my lips.

"Well?"

"Fine. *Worry*. But it'll be in vain. No sense in developing new wrinkles over it or anything."

She takes my good-natured ribbing on the chin and then fills me in on the reason she called. Apparently a farmer called about the land at the back of her property. He offered to buy it.

"It's a generous offer," she concludes.

"No shit." The number is such a high one, I had to ask her to repeat it. She doesn't scold me for swearing. Mine was the right reaction to that amount of money.

"I don't want the chores that come with keeping the land. I have plenty of money. I just want my little house."

Her “little” house is 2,500 square feet, so don’t take that statement to heart. “Then sell the land.”

“You won’t be upset?”

“Why would I be upset?”

“You used to climb the trees out there. Explore the creek. Camp in the woods.”

“I’m camping in the woods now, Mom. I haven’t camped in your backyard for nearly twenty years.”

“That’s a good point.” In the silence stretching between us, I sense more is going on than she’s telling me.

“Are you sure you want to sell it?” I ask.

“I don’t need it.”

“Do you want it?”

There’s a lengthy pause as she considers. “Whenever I look back there, I picture your father on the riding mower, wearing his hat, cutting down the tall grass. I hated losing that.”

“I know.” We hated losing him and everything he embodied. “But even if you sell it, there will be grass. Unless the buyer builds a shopping mall.”

“No, nothing like that,” she’s quick to say. “It’s not zoned for shopping.”

Mom’s a retired city surveyor. That’s why I don’t ask a million questions. She knows her stuff.

“Well, then, you can still look out at the field and imagine Dad mowing and wearing his hat.” I remember that too.

I have the same picture in my head. It brings a smile with the hurt, and I’m beginning to think that’s the way I’ll feel for

the rest of my life whenever I remember him. Happy and hurt at the same time. That emotion needs a name. I guess that's what grief is, isn't it?

"I don't need those acres," Mom says.

"But you want it."

"I can't take care of it."

"But you want it," I repeat.

"I want it. But selling it is more logical."

"But you want it. So keep it. Keep paying the landscaping company to take care of it, and call that guy back and let him know you're not ready to sell yet."

It's her choice; she should make the one she wants. God knows not all of us can have what we want. She may as well. I pinch the bridge of my nose again and resent that my ability to frown has returned with such ease.

"Hmm. Maybe I could ask him to check back in a year," my mom says, sounding thoughtful.

"Tell him it's a 'no, not right now.' Sometimes that's all no means."

"I could say the same to you about your girl in Tennessee. Maybe she'll change her mind later."

"Mom."

"To know you is to love you."

"Mom."

"Trust me, son. I've known you for thirty-three years. And I love you."

Yeah, but she isn't like Becca. Mom sticks things out. Sees them through. She's loyal and steadfast.

Even if Becca were all of those rolled into one, I'd have to consider the scars left from my last relationship. I loved Courtney and she bailed with no more than a thinly veiled excuse. Then, almost immediately, she started dating another guy.

Becca and I will part ways eventually anyway—she said so herself. Now, or in three weeks. Or three months. I'm not big on having another wound to lick. Mourning my dad is hard enough. And I'm not going to try to force Becca to change her mind. I promised her I wouldn't, and I won't.

So our last week together has been reduced to fling status. So what? I have plenty to do when I go back home without maintaining a relationship. Remember what I said about how pancakes and blow jobs should be enough? Well, they are.

I decided that.

No.

I *decreed* it.

Come this time Saturday morning, I'll be packing up and leaving Becca in Tennessee. I'll kiss her goodbye, I'll climb in my Jeep, and I won't look back.

Starting to have second thoughts about naming the recipe after her too. She wants the ties cut? I'll cut 'em. Right off at the ankles.

I end the call with Mom and set my coffee cup at my feet while I watch the woodland creatures fly and climb and scurry. I'm deep in thought about nothing at all when I hear the squeak of the screen door.

Becca walks out, her hair its usual styled mess, a steaming mug in hand. She's barefoot and wearing last night's clothes. She sits in the rocker next to mine.

After her first sip of coffee, she says, "We literally slept together last night and did not have sex."

"Some fling havers we are." I give her a wink and rock my chair.

"Sorry to conk out on you. My family wears me out."

"Families do that."

"Was that your mom on the phone? How is she?"

Becca looking sleep-rumpled is doing more than stirring my dick. She's tempting me to lean back in this rocker and listen to the birds chirp while I talk about my mom and the land and how much we both miss my dad. But that conversation would cross several lines we agreed not to cross.

I keep rocking and say nothing, hoping I don't have to explain. Becca's smart. She figures out the reason behind my silence.

"I guess asking about your mom isn't very flinglike either, is it?"

"You tell me. You ask other guys about their moms?"

She shakes her head. If I weren't planning on leaving her behind in a matter of days, I might say it's a sad head shake. I might sweep her off that chair and pull her onto my lap and tell her everything. About my mom. About my dad. Then I'd listen to stories about her parents. But that's not who we are.

Not anymore.

"I guess the lines are a little blurry." She wrinkles her nose.

“You’re in charge of when you come and go, Princess. I’ll give you that.”

“And that’s all you can give me.”

“That and a few screaming orgasms.” That’s what she decided.

I vow to make it as fun for both of us as possible.

CHAPTER 22

TUESDAY

DAX

I kiss Becca's neck as I collapse on top of her, supporting my weight on my elbows to keep from smashing her flat.

"We found our way back." She grins. Satisfied and smiling.

Perfect.

Wonder if my dad's death had started clouding the way I was with Becca. Losing him made me consider a future with a woman for the first time in a long time. Not that I came here looking for that, but it was stewing in the back of my mind. Then I met Becca and let myself think that she could be my future. I put a lot on her, a lot on myself.

Now that I've gone back to letting things come naturally, my relationship with her means only what it should, and no more: that we're *really* good at blowing each other's minds in the sack.

I lay another kiss on her neck and inhale her soft perfume. Most of the traces of it have faded, but it's there. I hum against

her skin and kiss her again before pulling out and dealing with the condom.

I walk back to my cabin bedroom from the attached bathroom to find her lying there, sheet pulled to her chest, eyes on me.

“That smile is what keeps me working hard, Princess.” I climb into bed next to her.

“Well, you trying so hard is what keeps me coming back.” She rolls over and hugs my rib cage.

I gently stroke her arm. I suck in a breath and almost ask if things are good with her brother, but it’s better not to sail those choppy waters.

I reroute with “Work good?”

“Yeah...” Sounds like there’s more to come, but after a second or two, she exhales without saying more. I wonder if she was going to but decided those waters were choppy for her as well.

Getting used to our new arrangement is taking some doing.

“It never would’ve worked,” she blurts.

Assuming she means us, I say nothing. I’m not turning over what could’ve or would’ve been. That’s a dangerous road down which lies regret. I don’t do regret.

“Me cooking for Grand Lark, I mean.”

Right. That.

“I like the office work. I call vendors, and book guests, and answer customer service emails. Ordering the supplies is fun. Oh! And today I shopped for new wall hangings for some of the cabins. It was like playing house.”

I continue stroking her arm and absolutely do *not* think about how she might also be “playing house” with me.

“Glad to hear it.”

“About the quesadillas recipe...” She leans on an elbow, eyes wary as she watches for my reaction. “It’s my gift to you, Dax. Don’t put my name on it. Don’t pay me for it. Please. Take it. I want you to have it.”

If that didn’t sound like the final nail in the “us” coffin, I’m not sure what would. How about that? We made it. Not many flings are this successful—where everyone walks away with what they want.

I swipe her cheek with my thumb, then drag that thumb around to her chin. I study her beauty in the fading light from the windows, memorizing the way her nose slopes and the freckles that dot her cheekbones.

Truth? I’m not sure I’m getting what I want. She’s given me no choice but to graciously accept, so that’s what I do.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she says.

She looks away first. I move my hand down her bare back and, because I can’t resist, around to cup her breast. I slide the pad of my thumb across her nipple and watch as she shivers in response.

“What are your big plans for the rest of your stay?” she asks. “I only ask as a dedicated customer service provider of Grand Lark.”

Cute.

“Tomorrow I’m going to hike to that spot we were going to hike to before we were rained out.” Rained out and rerouted to

a birthday dinner for her dad where I nearly beat the shit out of her brother.

“You’ll love that area.” She traces circles over my chest and averts her gaze. “If you need a tour guide, I know a girl who would go with you. *And* she’ll pack a homemade lunch.”

“Throw in sex on the picnic blanket, babe, and you have yourself a deal.”

“Really?” She beams.

“It’s your fling.” I want her to enjoy every second of it.

“I’d love to show you around. I can categorize that as part of my job and take a little extra time off to do it.”

“Not the sex part. I think that’s illegal.”

“I think sex this good should be illegal, Mr. Vaughn.” She leans closer and lowers her voice. “Have you ever considered offering a moonlight escort service for female clientele back home?”

I slide my palms over her ass and pull her on top of me. All my favorite parts of her are now touching all my favorite parts of me.

“You think I could have a backup career?” I squeeze her supple cheeks with both hands.

“I know you could.” She arches one eyebrow before she kisses me.

After a lot of tongue, complete with roaming hands, we find our way back to what we’re best at: Me wringing orgasms out of her, and her giving them to me in return.

WEDNESDAY

BECCA

I'm sure you want to lecture me right about now, but I know what I'm doing. I know how to have sex and not let it cloud my judgment. I know how to keep the man I'm sleeping with out of my every waking thought.

Usually.

Today feels different.

Dax and I are going on a hike. I'll be outside, surrounded by glorious mountains, soaking up the sun, and sweating out my demons. Not in the way I've been sweating them out lately—beneath the two hundred pounds of muscle that is Dax Vaughn. Nope, I'm going to clear my head the old-fashioned way.

With exercise.

I wear the outfit I'd planned on before the rain delay—short, frayed pale blue shorts that ride quite high on my thighs, Timberland hiking boots and sturdy socks, and a white tank top with a red-and-black plaid shirt tied in a knot at my waist. Beneath my “lumberjill” outfit I'm wearing the naughtiest underwear I own.

Dax picks me up at the main building, since the hiking area is closer to Grand Lark's home office. I know it sounds dumb to drive to where you're going to hike, but there's no way to get there from his cabin without sliding down a ninety-degree hill face.

His Jeep turns into the parking lot, where I wait under the overhang. The top's off. The doors are off. A ball cap shields

his eyes. He does that one-handed circle thing with the steering wheel to straighten the tires. My pulse flutters at the side of my throat.

I ignore it.

Of course he's going to make my heart flutter. I'm looking forward to fantastic food, fantastic sex, and a welcome break from work. Whose heart wouldn't flutter?

Toting our lunch in a soft-sided cooler, I hop into the passenger seat. From underneath a pair of reflective aviator sunglasses, Dax gives me a swoony grin.

"How long we got?" He takes the cooler from my hands and places it behind the seat.

"I took an extended lunch, so I don't have to be back for two hours. Ish."

"*Ish*, huh?" He reverses out of the lot as I buckle in.

"You know me. I like to leave an opening."

"Yeah, Princess. I know that about you."

He has been nothing but supportive for days. Which I'm all for. I think. A nagging voice in the back of my brain speaks up whenever he's super compliant. I'm trying to ignore it.

I direct him to the entrance to the woods, and after bumping along a path clearly marked NO TRESPASSING (Tad posted that sign—the land is his), we come to a stop and park in the sun.

"This it?" Dax grabs the cooler.

"I can carry it."

"My ass." He steps out of the vehicle, pulls on a backpack and then slides the cooler's strap over one broad shoulder.

I admire the way he moves. The smooth way he does just about anything. He's wearing a coffee-colored LIFE IS GOOD tee. The screen-printed image is a dog holding a marshmallow on a stick next to a campfire. Dax's baggy cargo shorts are deep green, and on his feet: a good ol' pair of Nikes.

His cap has a Guinness logo. I wonder if he bought it or if a vendor gave it to him for free.

"You look amazing. I know we're supposed to be creating distance, but you're as hot as hell." I come around the Jeep to stand in front of him. "I thought you should know that."

I can't see his eyes for the dark shades perched on his nose, but his mouth is a flat line. Under those lenses, are his eyes heated with lust or wary with caution?

"Trust me, Princess, hell doesn't get as hot as you in those shorts." He grabs me by the waist and jerks me close. I grin up at him as I clutch his bicep. I bet I resemble a romance novel cover's heroine in this pose. "And you smell too good for words."

He leans down and nibbles my earlobe until my casual grip on his biceps turns into my clawing his bare arms.

Inches from my face, his voice low and growly, he says, "Leave enough time after the hike for me to slide those shorts off your long legs and bury my face between your thighs, yeah?"

Breathlessly I answer, "Okay."

"I want five orgasms. No less."

"I can do that," I say, still breathless.

He kisses my mouth. I melt against him.

“Or we could skip the hike altogether?” Oh, boy, I can hear the hope in my own voice.

“Nope. We’re doing it all. Within two hours’ time, evidently.”

The hike lasts fifty-five minutes, so by the time we settle on the blanket I packed, we’re cutting it close. We’ve stopped about a mile from the Jeep to eat under a wide shade tree with a view of the pond.

I pull out the container of chicken salad. “If we hurry, we can— What are you doing?”

My question is asked with a smile because there’s not a lot of mystery surrounding what Dax is doing. He undid the button on my shorts and is now sliding the zipper south.

Next he takes his sunglasses off and tosses them on the blanket, then spins his ball cap around backward.

So. Freaking. Sexy.

“Take off your shorts,” he demands.

“Orgasm number one achieved.” I set aside the food.

“Sorry. No cheating.”

I remove my shorts as he fists the back of his T-shirt and pulls it over his head, knocking off his hat in the process. He replaces it right away, which means he *has* to know how hot he looks wearing it.

He’s ridiculously gorgeous. Wide, tanned chest. Perfect pectorals dotted with flat male nipples. Low-slung, baggy shorts hovering at his hips.

“Hot,” I say before I mean to.

“You’re the hot one, babe.”

My heart is pounding so hard, it’s a wonder I can’t hear it.

“On your back, Princess.” He snags the edge of my bright pink panties and pulls them off.

I do as I’m told.

Dax kisses his way up my legs, lifts the left one, and settles one of my heavy boots on his shoulder.

“Should I take my boots off? I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can’t hurt me,” he says while paying particularly close attention to the inside of my knee.

I drop my head back and let my eyes slide shut, enjoying his mouth as he tongues my inner thigh. Enjoying the warm air and his warmer body brushing against mine.

“Orgasm *número dos*.” I squirm, already damp from the attention he’s paying to my leg.

“I’ll start counting when you start shouting my name.”

I feel his smile as he nips me very, *very* close to where I want his tongue. I lift my head to find him all white-toothed smile and sin.

Then he turns serious, and I lie back. My eyes closed, I enjoy the attention he’s paying me, my hands clutching the picnic blanket for purchase as lust coils tighter and tighter in my belly.

I come. Again. And again.

I lose count, but Dax doesn’t.

When I surface, he's on top of me, shorts down, sliding deep. He reminds me in a succinct, deliciously filthy way that I owe him "one more."

I give him that one too.

On a shout that quiets the birds.

CHAPTER 23

THURSDAY

BECCA

Rare is the occasion when Lara has a spare minute, so when my brother offers to take the girls out for ice cream and give her some alone time, I pounce.

Carefully, because she doesn't get a lot of time to herself.

"Mani-pedi?" I ask, holding up the small cosmetic bag where I store my emery boards and polish.

Lara narrows her eyes suspiciously. "What's the charge?"

"Free." I grin.

Her eyes close so much I lose sight of her irises. She knows me well.

"The fee is that you listen while I talk through my relationship questions. You can talk through yours too." I make a face as I reconsider. "Only, no intimate sex details about my brother or else you'll scar me for life."

"Deal." She shoos me away and grabs her purse. "But we're discussing this over chardonnay, and you're not required

to do the manual labor.”

Within the hour we’ve moved our girls’ day to a nail salon, where Lara and I sit side by side with our feet submerged in warm, bubbling water.

We decided on pedis only, followed by lunch out. She texted Tad that he’s in charge of the girls for longer than he anticipated. If he minded, he never said so.

He’s smarter than I give him credit for.

“All right. We have wine in hand and our feet in miniature Jacuzzis. Out with it. What did you want to dish about?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing!” I sort of whisper-shout.

She giggles at my plight. “You’re going to have to back up and fill me in on what I’ve missed.”

After my hike and “picnic” with Dax yesterday, I tried to make amends with Tad. I returned to the office about thirty minutes later than I’d promised—hey, a girl’s gotta eat, plus, I worked out a lot. My late arrival was not well-received, especially since my brother knew whose company I was keeping. Tad was all, “That asshole has to go! He’s not allowed on my property!”

Hopefully Tad doesn’t do something stupid—like pay Dax a visit. I love my brother, but I have a feeling if those two tussled, I’d be visiting Tad at the hospital and his entire body would be in traction.

I kid, I kid. I don’t think Dax is that mean. But if Tad went over there and flapped his lips about me, I bet Dax would at least pop him in the nose.

Today’s my day off, so I haven’t seen Dax. I’m not sure if I should. There are so many conflicting thoughts in my head

that I don't trust myself to go to the cabin and make any rational decisions. Not until I straighten myself out.

Hence my running to Lara for help.

"You've been cool about Tad and Dax nearly going to fisticuffs at Dad's dinner," I tell her.

She shrugs and sips her white wine. I do the same. It's delicious and, paired with pampering, downright heavenly. Lara's wine and pampering are hard won. She works so much more than I do. Sure, I'm at the intersection of What's Going On Street and Hot Guy Avenue, but it's Lara who's maintaining a household and raising tiny humans to be incredible adults. Plus, she has to deal with my brother. Like, daily.

"Boys will be boys," she says. "I know Tad has a temper. *You* know your brother has a temper."

I nod.

"I trust your judgment of Dax. I ran to your defense where he was concerned, and you put me in my place quickly. I was looking after you, but you didn't need it. You know what you're doing, Bec. It's different than what I'd do, but that's not the point."

"What *would* you do?" I ask almost desperately. Then I realize I haven't filled in the gaps for her like she asked. "If your one-night stand turned into a two-week stand and the ball was in your court and he liked you more than you ever imagined possible but you don't know what to do because no one has ever liked you that much before—what would you do?"

Her eyebrows climb her forehead as she listens to my run-on question.

“I’d be thrilled,” she answers. “That’s what happened with Tad and me. I was determined to stay single. He fell in love with me in about forty-eight hours.”

“I remember.” I smile. There was so much happiness in my brother’s voice when he called to tell me about Lara, I almost didn’t recognize that it was Tad Stone on the other end of the line. “You were determined to stay single?”

“Yep.”

“And he changed your mind?”

“I regrouped.” She puts a hand on my arm. “After two months. In my head, it was too soon to know, even though I really did know. Now that I look back, there never should’ve been any doubt.” Her smile is genuine and the slightest bit softer thanks to the wine. In her eyes dances the wisdom of a woman who got it right. She has a nine-year marriage and two beautiful kids under her belt. “I was afraid of the unknown. That’s what you’re feeling, Becca.” She loses her smile abruptly and says, “Unless it’s not that. Is he behaving like a jerk?”

“Dax isn’t a jerk. That’s the problem. I’m used to dealing with jerks. He’d be easier to send packing if he treated me like crap. I know how to react when a guy is a flake.” I shake my head. “Dax tossed my playbook out the window. When he brought up the possibility of my coming to Ohio, I was quick to step in and tell him that I wasn’t going. I told him I didn’t want him interfering in my life or with my family. He backed off.”

The women administering our pedicures return with polish colors and Lara and I choose—she goes with pale pink and I choose hot pink. She always was the tame one of the two of us

—with nail polish colors anyway. In relationships I’m the one scared of my own shadow. Lara is brave compared to me.

I lower my voice, considering we have an audience now, and lean closer to Lara. “He backed *way* off. Sex when I say and no more talking about personal matters.”

“And that’s what you want?” she asks, her tone neutral.

“I thought so. I don’t want to live in Ohio. I like Tennessee. I like working for Grand Lark. Being close to my nieces is really nice.”

“My, what a glowing review.” Her voice is playful. “Besides ‘liking’ where you are and it being ‘really nice,’ are you feeling called elsewhere?”

“I don’t know.” I set my wine aside. Heart pounding, I ask her the question that’s been knocking around in my head since last night. “Would you follow a guy you barely know to another state in the hopes that it works out?”

“Depends on how much potential I saw in the guy.” She waggles her ring finger at me. I must look pretty crestfallen, because she pats my arm, consoling me.

“It was the right decision for me to leap in with both feet with your brother, but that doesn’t mean the same reaction would be right for you. There’s only one *you*, Becca. Only you know if it’s right to answer the call or let it go to voicemail.”

Answer or let it go. I cringe at how final those two choices are.

Lara must pick up on my conundrum because next she says, “You can always try and return the call later.”

“Return it later,” I mumble as hope bursts to life in my chest. “We can finish out the week, and he can leave, and then

if I miss him, I can pick it up later.”

The solution is so stupidly simple.

I lift my wineglass, feeling freer, lighter. I was so gummed up in my head, I hadn't even considered a third choice. Not a yes or no but a *maybe*.

Oh, how I love maybes.

“Unless he meets someone else when he goes back to Ohio,” Lara says before the wine touches my lips.

I snap my attention to my sister-in-law, who swallows the wine in her mouth before apologetically amending, “Which would be totally okay! Then you'd know it wasn't meant to be!”

“Would you have been okay leaving Tad in fate's hands?” I already know the answer. Lara prefers control over her destiny. Her wan smile tells me she absolutely wouldn't have been okay leaving Tad in fate's hands.

“If you love something, set it free,” the dark-haired woman at my feet says.

“If it loves you, it'll come back.” Her blond cohort nods as she carefully paints Lara's toenails.

“Love,” I murmur, feeling the burdensome weight of all four letters.

“You don't have to love him to set him free,” Lara says, picking up the dropped ball.

“That's a relief.”

Love is big and scary and I'm not sure I completely understand it. It looks like obligation and risk. Except for where my brother and sister-in-law are concerned. Then it

looks like matrimony and two kids and a household that's run like a small business.

Yikes.

I don't know which sounds more terrifying.

FRIDAY MORNING

DAX

I'm up at dark, coffee in hand, when a truck pulls down my rental's driveway. I watch out the window as Becca's brother parks and climbs out, and then makes his way toward the house.

I sigh in resignation before I step outside to meet him. I figured it'd come to this.

He's not boiling over like he was last week, but he ain't happy with me. Imagine that.

"Morning." I lift my mug and offer, "Coffee?"

"This isn't a social visit." He ascends the steps of the porch slowly. Shoulders pushed back and chin up. Ready to rumble.

I hope I don't have to hit him.

"I don't want any trouble, Stone." To prove my point, I take a seat on one of the rocking chairs and sip my coffee.

He hovers indecisively for a moment before sitting in the rocker next to mine, his gaze on the forest in front of us. After

a few minutes of listening to the birds chirping, he says, “I came here to ask you to leave.”

“I figured.”

An indecisive squirrel darts down the tree, then up, then down again.

“What are you doing with my sister?” he asks.

“If you’re asking for specifics, you’re not getting them.”

He grunts in agreement, but we both know that’s not what he’s asking.

“If you’re asking what my intentions are—”

“Are you moving her to Ohio?” His patience must’ve run out. I’m surprised he had any to start with.

“Far as I know, I’m the only one going back to Ohio. Becca has no interest in joining me.”

“*Good.*” His mouth flattens and he watches the same squirrel dart about before shifting gears. “I married a smart woman. A woman who told me that you made a valid point that night at Dad’s.”

Wow. I didn’t see that coming.

“The night I almost kicked your ass,” he adds.

It’s a cheap shot I let him have. I smile against the rim of my mug.

“I don’t trust Becca for one simple reason. She’s never given me a reason to trust her not to hurt herself. She’s the baby. She’s the one who jets off without notice, or leaps into traffic without looking, or—”

“Goes zip-lining without warning?” I interject.

“Did she make you do that too?” For the first time, I witness him lightening up. He sighs, his concern evident. “She’s careless. She doesn’t worry, which means I have to be the careful one. The one who worries about her. Someone has to look out for her.”

“You feel responsible for her.”

“She’s my sister and I don’t want to see her hurt.”

“So your idea was to boot me out of Grand Lark not because of what I did but because—”

“Of what you’re doing with her.” We glance at each other and then he frowns. “Of what I *thought* you were doing with her. You’re not using her, are you?”

“Not at all.”

“You were serious about Ohio.”

“I was. She’s not interested.”

I watch his face as that info sinks in. Then Tad’s expression changes altogether. Suddenly he’s a guy who can relate to another guy who likes a girl a lot more than she likes him.

“She shot you down and you backed off,” he concludes with a nod.

It’s not a question, so I don’t answer. I didn’t exactly offer, and she didn’t exactly shoot me down, but close enough. The result’s the same.

“But she’s still seeing you.”

“On her terms,” I tell him.

“You’re letting her do what she wants. Come and go as she pleases. It’s what she does best.”

I drink my coffee.

“Shit, Vaughn.” He laughs. “I don’t need to kick your ass. Sounds like Bec did it for me.”

I let him have that one too. I promised Becca I’d be who she needed me to be while I was here. Socking Tad in the mouth isn’t about her at all—it’d be about me. And as we’re all clearly aware, I’m checking out soon. No good could come of punching him in the face, save a fleeting moment of triumph.

Tad stands and walks down the porch steps. When he reaches his truck, he opens the door and pauses to call out, “Guess I should’ve warned you about my sister when you sat down at my bar. She’s the heartbreaker, not the one whose heart is broken.”

“I wouldn’t have listened,” I call back.

“Yeah.” He nods, adding another head shake as he climbs in the truck. “Yeah.”

He drives off and I toss the remainder of my cooling coffee in the greenery below as the friendly neighborhood squirrel dashes from tree to tree like he’s already had a cup or three.

I wouldn’t have listened, but would I have approached our time together differently?

Maybe. Maybe not.

But I would’ve approached her. No doubt about it.

CHAPTER 24

FRIDAY, LATE MORNING

BECCA

Tad left the house at the ungodly hour of six A.M.—and he was whistling this morning. Whistling! I went back to sleep for several glorious hours before straggling in at my scheduled time of eleven.

Okay, *okay*, 11:20.

“Sorry! Traffic!” I announce when I walk into Grand Lark’s restaurant. “I allowed extra time, I swear. I don’t know where it goes. If minutes were made of marbles instead of thin air, I could keep better track of them.”

To my surprise, one side of Tad’s mouth goes up in an amused half smile. He lifts a plate from a table and wipes it down. I help, clearing a glass and the silverware.

The place is otherwise empty, so I take the opportunity to ask, “You okay?”

“Yeah, Bec. I’m okay. When you have a second, though, we should talk.”

My heart leaps into my throat. Sounds bad already.

He tosses the damp towel on the bar top and takes the glass and silverware from my hand. “Give me a minute.”

In the office, I attempt to put the “we should talk” phrase out of my mind while I check email and answer a few phone calls. I’m successful until Tad shows up, leaning in the doorway, his arms folded over his chest.

I end the call with the liquor supplier and swivel my chair in my brother’s direction. “Let’s hear it. What’d I do?”

“It’s not what you did.” Arms still crossed, he pushes off the doorframe and then lowers himself to sit on the only clean corner of the desk. “It’s what I did.”

“Knock me over with a feather. This is beginning to sound like an apology.”

He laughs. Actually *laughs*.

“Or a dream. Did I doze off?” I make a show of pinching my arm. “Nope. Still awake. Unless this is like *Inception* and I’m in a dream within a dream.”

“No one understands that movie.”

“I know. It’s good, though.”

“The best,” he agrees.

“Leo,” we both say at the same time.

My love for Leonardo DiCaprio started with the movie *Titanic*. Tad was a late bloomer with Scorsese’s *The Departed*, which didn’t tickle my fancy since Leo’s character— Well, I won’t spoil it for you in case you’re an even *later* bloomer and haven’t watched it yet. But seriously. Watch it.

“I’m sorry, Bec. I treat you like you’re a kid and you’re not. It’s not right and I’m going to do better.”

I tap my chest just above my heart. “I’m having cardiac arrest. An *actual* heart attack. Has anyone ever died of shock?”

He ignores my theatrics.

“I paid Dax a visit this morning to kick his ass out of here. A guy doing you wrong has no place in my resort.”

I open my mouth, but he holds up a finger to shush me.

“*But*. He told me he’s heading back to Ohio without you. I also believe that you’re in complete control of your faculties. He can stay.”

I was going to yell at him for butting in, but I’m blown away by Tad admitting I’m in control of my faculties. He’s never admitted I owned faculties, let alone believed that I was in charge of them.

“Plus, he wasn’t wrong when he told me I don’t trust my staff enough. I’m a control freak.”

I snort my agreement.

“Believe it or not, Bec, this has nothing to do with how capable you are and everything to do with the fact that I’m worried I can’t keep this place running. With a business, a wife, two kids, and us trying to have a third, I’m under a lot of stress.”

“A *third*?” I repeat, stunned.

Tad stops running his fingers through his hair.

“But Lara drank wine yesterday.”

“We’re not trying at the moment. We’re taking a break. We haven’t been able to...” He winces, uncomfortable. “We tried for the last three months, but she’s having some trouble. The

doctor thinks it's stress. Too much on her plate. Maybe too much on mine."

My heart sinks as I consider the stressors in his and Lara's life. Taking on a sister who has no immediate plans to leave can't have helped.

"I didn't know you were trying for another baby," I tell him, my voice weak with guilt.

"A boy is the goal." He gives me a soft smile.

"Silly Tad. Lara makes beautiful girls."

"Exactly why I want at least one boy. Some day my girls will start dating, and when that happens I'll have to worry if they're being taken advantage of." He tilts his head and spears me with a look that suggests I'm one of his worries.

Shit. I totally understand where he's coming from.

"Anyway," he says. "I'm giving you more responsibility. I'm upping your salary by six thousand dollars a year, giving you a management position and title, and I'd like you to work on the menu here as well, if you're interested."

Good thing I'm sitting. This is too much to absorb standing up. Almost too much for a sitting position. Maybe I should lie down.

"Will you write a few recipes for the kitchen? You can hire an assistant for the office, or another kitchen guy—whichever would help you more. Anytime I'm not at Grand Lark, you'll be in charge. But I'm here for you every step of the way."

"Tad, I...I don't know what to say."

"Say yes. You'll have a respectable full-time job that hopefully you'll love, now that I'm not breathing down your

neck about every minute detail. I trust you, Bec. You're smart. You'll figure it out."

Plus, six grand more a year? It boggles the mind.

"I can afford to get my own place," I say, the idea taking root.

"You can. It's a good gig if you're going to stay. Will you stay?"

I've been putting off making that decision for five months. I would've continued to put it off longer if Tad hadn't offered me the sweetest position available at Grand Lark—one I create.

"Are you sure about the raise?" It's almost too good to be true.

He considers, then shakes his head. My stomach tightens until he says, "Make it a ten-thousand-dollar-a-year raise. I can afford it. You're going to bring in more business now that I'm giving you more responsibility. Everyone likes you. Maybe we'll put you in our next TV commercial."

"I can't believe this." I blink away the tears pooling in my eyes. "Thank you. Can I...think about it?"

"I want you to think about it." He agrees easily, which is as surprising as every other thing he's said so far today. "*Carefully*. If you're not going to stay—if this isn't where you want to be—let me know and I'll fill the management position. Maybe Dom wants it, I don't know."

"Dominic." His best friend since childhood would make so much more sense. "Why didn't you ask Dominic?"

"You're my sister, Becca. My first choice."

Oh, my heart.

“I want you here,” Tad continues as my heart swells. “I trust you more than I trust anyone. But I won’t obligate you to stay if it’s time for you to go elsewhere. Like, say, to New York to be a dancer?”

I regard my shoes. “That was silly.”

“No. That was brave. Just because it didn’t work out doesn’t mean it was the wrong thing to do. Lots of things in life are like that. Jobs. College. *Relationships*.”

“I thought you didn’t like Dax.” We both know that these past few weeks with Dax is the closest I’ve come to a relationship in years.

“I like him now that I know you’ve got him by the balls.” Tad shuts his eyes like he’s trying to disrupt that mental picture. “Not literally.”

I laugh.

His features soften. “You can handle yourself, can’t you?”

“Yes. I just handle myself differently than you handle yourself.”

He leans down and kisses the top of my head. “One of your best qualities is that you’re not me. Don’t ever forget it.”

With a wink, my brother leaves me with a lot to think about.

I’ve struggled for so long to gain his trust. Now that he’s offering it, it’s jarring. I can handle it, though. Without a doubt. But I don’t want to accept, then change my mind. I’m sort of known for heeding my wild urges. For flitting off to try something new. Putting down roots—permanent roots—would be a huge change. A good one?

If I stay, the first order of business is to move out of Tad and Lara's house. They have a family to raise, and while I love helping out, it's time to give them the space they deserve. If I've learned one thing about relationships, it's that two people involved is *plenty*. Tad and Lara have their own lives to lead, separate from me.

I decide to sleep on the decision, just to be sure. But while I'm waiting it wouldn't hurt to look around at a few available apartments in town.

I tap a few figures into the calculator on the desk and then jot them down on a Post-it note. Then I tap another couple of numbers into the calculator, and bite my lip in consideration. If I accept the raise, I will have enough to buy a house—another dream I never allowed myself to have.

I consider my path before I moved here. Consider that I've tried nearly everything. Being a student and working side jobs. Waitressing and teaching Zumba. But recipe creation—being in on the development part, and being in control of what the kitchen serves... Every organ in my body leans forward in anticipation.

I *want* that. Badly.

And my brother is handing it to me. In a place I already work. Close to my family. Under his tutelage. I'd be helping him out, helping myself out, and it wouldn't involve the risk of going with Dax to Ohio.

Tad and Grand Lark are the sure thing.

Dax isn't.

CHAPTER 25

FRIDAY NIGHT

DAX

Fresh out of the shower, I'm scrubbing the towel over my hair when I hear a knock. I assume it's Becca. I've been expecting her, since it's my last night here.

Though you could replace "expecting" with "hoping for."

Looping the towel around my hips, I walk barefoot to the front door and pull it open, pleased when her eyes widen and she takes me in from face to feet. I like how much she likes me, though I wish she liked me just a bit more.

"Hey, Princess." I lean, one arm high on the door.

"Hi. Dax. Hi." She's dressed in a tight, tight pair of jeans that taper at the ankles and the heeled sandals she was wearing the first night we were together. The ones with the tiny straps held together by tinier buckles. "Um. Yeah. So." She raises a plastic bag holding two foam containers. "I made you dinner for your last night. Unless you ate?"

I shake my head and step aside. "I didn't eat. And fishing was a bust. I now know why they refer to it as drowning

worms. Come in.”

She does, both hands on the takeout and her purse hooked on one shoulder. Her shirt is a button-down. I remind myself to do some finger stretches to limber up. Every time she’s with me, I take her clothes off. I don’t expect tonight to be different.

“I’ll get dressed.” I lean down and kiss her, but she goes up on her toes and makes the short peck last longer. When we part, her eyes search my face—for what I’m not sure.

“Back in a sec,” I tell her, then I go to the bedroom.

I come out in jeans and a tee to find Becca has kicked off her sandals. She’s sitting at the table, one long leg crossed over the other, a foam container at each place setting with plasticware and a beer for her.

“I helped myself.” She lifts the beer bottle. “Want one?”

“Yeah.” She starts to stand, but I stop her with a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll get it. You’ve done plenty.” Beer in hand, cap off, I take my first drink and let out a beer-ad-worthy sigh. It tastes damn good. “What’d you cook?”

“Well.” She sucks in a breath and holds it. “Two new recipes. I wanted your opinion on them.”

Time to regroup.

Is she reconsidering my offer to help with the menu? Is this meal going to include a pitch and a bill for my using them at my bars? Whatever she charges, I’ll pay it. I haven’t tasted a single meal by Becca that hasn’t been amazing.

I sit and place my beer bottle on the table next to the foam container.

“The first,” she starts, her voice an excited chirp, “is a pepper jack and prosciutto panini with arugula and roasted red

peppers.” She flips the top open on the container in front of me to reveal a sandwich with perfect diagonal grill marks nestled in a bouquet of seasoned fries.

My mouth is a waterfall.

I lift the sandwich, take a hearty, crunchy bite, and moan in appreciation.

“Damn,” I say when I’m done chewing. “That’s fucking delicious.”

She nods with exuberance as I shove a few fries in my mouth.

“It’s the sauces. The Dijon is on one slice of bread, and I slathered raspberry jam on the other with a bit of freshly cracked pepper. Good, right?”

I shake my head and swallow a drink of my beer. “Not good, Princess. Perfect.”

I take another bite of the sandwich as she flips the top on her other container.

“This one is an appetizer. Cubes of pepper jack cheese rolled in panko breadcrumbs, deep-fried, and topped like nachos. Seasoned black beans, Tad’s chili—which cannot be improved upon—lettuce, diced tomatoes, sour cream. The usual.”

I grab the fork and stab a cheese cube, scooping up toppings with it. Imagine nachos but with gooey, spicy cheese as the bed instead of chips.

God. It’s incredible.

I finish one bite, take another, and follow it with one more bite topped with pickled jalapeño slices she thoughtfully included on the side. Only then do I put down my fork.

“One question.” I swipe my mouth with the napkin. “Did you bring yourself anything to eat?”

Her grin is incomparable. Beautiful.

Fuck, I’m going to miss that smile.

“This is all yours,” she says. “I tested it several times and ate some of each one. Dominic ate the castoffs.”

“And you brought the final products to me.”

“I trust your palate.” She clasps her hands together and takes a deep breath. “I have something to tell you.”

“I’m all ears.” I’m proud of her already and she hasn’t even said anything.

“Tad offered me a higher salary and a change in title. A management position here at Grand Lark. He also asked me to add to the menu. Anything I want. He’s giving me room to hire office or kitchen help to fill in the gaps wherever needed. He said he trusts me. That he was wrong.”

Her eyes mist over as she tells me the news. I imagine it’s because she’s grateful that her brother finally quit being a prick and gave her the respect she deserves.

“That’s great,” I tell her, because this isn’t about me. It is great news that she’s finally being recognized for her accomplishments and valued as a person. Becca deserves to have her talents rewarded. She deserves to thrive.

“That was this morning. He’s giving me time to turn it over, so I agreed to sleep on it. Nothing’s final, but the possibility of creating a menu at Grand Lark...” She beams, her eyes dancing with joy. “As soon as he mentioned it, the ideas came bursting out of me.”

Everything is suddenly crystal clear. Diamond hard. She is definitely not offering me the use of these recipes. She's not reconsidering my offer to run my bar back in Ohio either. I didn't realize how high my hopes were until just now.

I nod my approval anyway. "It's amazing, Becca."

"It's a great opportunity. An opportunity I might not have had without your encouragement." She places her hand on my arm and squeezes. "The chicken quesadilla recipe is yours. No take-backs. Anything I create for Grand Lark will be fresh. I meant it when I said I wanted you to have it."

Sounds like she doesn't need to sleep on it. Her mind is made up. "It's chicken and cheese, Princess. I don't have the right to patent it."

"It's yours."

"It's *yours*," I correct. At one point I thought we'd collaborate on a menu—at another point I thought we'd collaborate on more than that. Now that we're not doing either, I refuse to take anything away from her. "I'll come back and order it sometime."

Her smile turns sad. "Promise?"

"Promise." I put my hand on top of hers, feeling the finality of the moment. But I'm not staying in that zone for my last night here. "Seriously, I can eat all of this? Don't say it if you don't mean it."

"I mean it." Her smile is more cautious than before, but it's no longer sad. I'll take it. "Except for this fry." She swipes a spud and nibbles as I dive into the sandwich again. I finish every bite of it plus the nachos, save for the couple of fries and cheese cubes she steals.

Leaves me wondering what else I would've let her steal if things had gone a different way.

BECCA

Dax didn't explain to me what we were doing before we climbed in his Jeep, only that he "didn't get the chance to do it yet" and "we won't go far."

I discern quickly that we are, in fact, not going far. Back to the field behind the house, to the same campsite where we made a fire and then made love in this very vehicle.

"Uh-oh." I laugh as he drives out to the middle of the field and parks.

"Uh-oh what?"

"Nothing." The top is off the Jeep, so I reach up and finger-comb my hair. "I figured out why we're here."

He gives me a practiced look of confusion.

"To stargaze. Obviously." I gesture to the clear night sky above us. It's dotted with shining, bright stars.

"That's why I'm out here, Princess. Unless you have something else in mind?"

I laugh again. "Nope. You guessed it. I was planning on stargazing this whole time."

He redirects his gaze heavenward. "It was cloudy the night we stayed out here, and I kept meaning to come out and look up but haven't yet. Seemed like a good night to do it." Without

looking over, he grabs my hand and holds it. “And a good person to do it with.”

I ignore the lump in my throat. I gaze up as well, resting my head back on the seat. Dax does the same, but we don’t let go of each other. I weave my fingers with his and enjoy the comforting warmth of his palm.

“Warmer tonight than it was then too,” I murmur after a long stretch of silence.

“Much.”

That’s all we say for a very long time.

“What do you know about astrology?” I ask out of the blue.

“I know that I’m a Cancer sign and that those three stars over there are Orion’s belt. That’s about it.”

“A sentimental crab is your sign? Not how I’d describe you.”

“Cancers are also tenacious.” He pegs me with a sincere gaze. “Persuasive.”

I nod. He’s both of those.

“And loyal,” he adds.

“Sounds like you,” I say barely above a whisper. “How do you know about your sign? Call me crazy, but I can’t picture you checking the newspaper for your horoscope every day.”

“Nah. I have an app.” I can’t tell if he’s joking until he continues. “A former girlfriend was really into it. She told me what I was and what my tendencies were. She focused a lot on the bad ones there at the end.” He frowns. “She said I was manipulative and pessimistic.”

“Sounds like bullshit.”

“She saw what she wanted to see.” He shrugs one big shoulder and I consider the sensitive, thoughtful man inside the muscular, yummy package.

“I won’t ever say that about you, Dax.” His attention is back on me, and even though it’s a really vulnerable thing to say, I keep talking. “If anyone asks me about this spring, I’ll say that I met a man who was thoughtful and kind and encouraging. And if I’m not talking to one of my nieces, I’ll add that he was drop-dead gorgeous and second to none when it comes to sex.”

“Second to none,” he repeats, the corner of his lips hitching into a tentative smile.

“So far you’re the only one I’ve been with who made me want to shout ‘yes’ repeatedly.” I squeeze his hand.

“When I’m asked about my vacation,” he says, “I’ll tell people I met an exciting, unexpected, rare woman who made food so good it was criminal. And if I’m not talking to my mom, I’ll add that she possesses the sexiest legs I’ve ever had the privilege to wrap around my hips.”

Shyly, I look down. He tips my chin.

“Never doubt your value, Becca. You’re the most genuine woman I’ve ever met. *Ever*. Don’t change.”

I close the gap between us to rest my lips on his. His hand goes into my hair and wraps around the back of my head. He deepens the kiss and I go where he leads, taking my time tasting his tongue and trying to memorize how great it feels to make love to his mouth. Soon he won’t be in cabin 7. Life will return to the way it was before he was here.

Only it won’t.

I met Dax Vaughn and everything changed. For the better. Maybe he should add “lucky charm” to his list of attributes. He’s been that for me. And more.

So much more.

“Dax. I have something other than stargazing on my mind.”

His nostrils flare as his fingers tighten at the nape of my neck.

“Once more before you go?” My heart pounds. What if he says no? What if this ends now? What if the time to have him has already passed? What if I didn’t pay close enough attention the last time and my memories have faded too quickly?

There’s no need to worry about any of it, because he kisses me again. Harder this time. While removing my shirt.

CHAPTER 26

BECCA

On the open sleeping bag, under the stars, Dax settles in next to me. Slowly, attentively, he kisses down my body and back up, taking his time like he did that first night to carefully remove my shoes and clothes.

“Hope I didn’t pressure you with that ‘second to none’ comment,” I tease, my hands ruffling his hair as he swirls his tongue around my belly button.

“Pressure? Try *challenge*.” He comes up to steal a kiss from my lips and whispers against them, “Remember, I’m tenacious.”

“Dax?”

He looks at me, but his hands continue rolling my panties down my legs.

“Can I look at you?”

His brows pinch. “You are looking at me.”

“No, I mean really *look*.” It may be nighttime, but in the dashboard lights of his Jeep, and with the aid of the stars and the full moon, I can see plenty. I want to see it all.

On his knees in front of me, he fists his shirt and yanks it off, revealing the chest I've admired nearly every day for the last two weeks. I sweep my hand over his stomach and sit up when I can't reach higher. Then I'm on my knees, almost eye to eye in front of him. I unbutton his jeans and notch the zipper down carefully.

Today, again, no briefs.

I look there too, stroking his length and admiring his handsome, proud cock. It has a lot to be proud of, I muse as it grows heavy in my palm. It's responsible for my most powerful orgasms.

I kiss his chest and then slide my tongue up to his throat before kissing him there too. His fingers thread through my hair and he massages the back of my head. His chest expands to its glorious limit when I nip his earlobe with my teeth.

"The minute I saw you at my brother's bar, I knew I had to have you." I rest both hands on his chest and look up at his painfully handsome face. "I never dreamed I'd have you over and over. I never imagined you had so much to teach me. In bed and out. I'll never forget you, Dax Vaughn."

I smile, but I also feel a touch of sadness. No. More than a touch. It's weighty and oppressive. But that's not what right now is about. Right now is about honoring who we are in this moment.

"Someday I'm going to visit Columbus and order my chicken and cheese quesadilla off your bar's menu."

He doesn't smile. The moment's too intense.

Gently he kisses me, like I'm porcelain and I might break. He removes the rest of his clothes and I lie down. Then he rolls on a condom, his expression set to serious.

Silently he widens my legs and positions himself between them. He slides forward, penetrating me inch by precious inch. My eyes close completely, and I'm blind to the beauty that is Dax.

I'm reduced to feelings and sensations. I'm nothing but want and desire. In the background the radio plays. I can't make out the words, only the rhythmic thump of the bass.

I'm surrounded by Dax—invaded by him. The fullness and depth of him inside of me. Each slide is achingly slow. I open my eyes, palm his face, and lock eyes with him. He watches me as he moves, each glide deliberate and measured.

My heart suffers a tiny fissure. Tears pool in the corners of my eyes. I should tell him what this means to me—what *he* means to me—but I don't have to say anything. He knows.

He puts a soft kiss on my mouth. All our doubts and passion and fire and loss have culminated in this moment. I let the tears slide down my cheeks without shame.

He swipes them away with his thumbs as he whispers, "I know, Princess. I know."

I place my fingers over his lips because I don't want him to say more. I don't want him to say anything that might make this moment harder than it is.

It's goodbye.

Even if it's not forever, it's goodbye to the bubble we've lived in for nearly two weeks. He has to leave, and no matter how we feel, there's no avoiding that both of us have separate lives to return to after this night.

And right now, we are the most "us" we'll ever be.

I shudder my release as his orgasm rocks his solid form. His muscles bunch and pull. He bares his teeth as his eyelids pinch shut. I commit his beautiful pain-mixed-with-pleasure expression to memory. I absorb it, and what he offers, as the waves of my own orgasm ripple through me.

He drops his forehead to mine. We breathe each other in—sharing the same air for the last time for a long time.

I can't deny what this is any longer, what it has been. Lara was right. And since I know myself well, that means the feeling in the center of my chest—the one stretching my heart to uncomfortable limits—is exactly what I think it is.

Love.

Inconvenient. Awful. Incredible. Painful.

I was right about him. He's truly second to none.

DAX

Becca doesn't want to stay the night. I can tell, so I don't ask.

We didn't leave the field right away. I lay there, my arm wrapped around her shoulders, her head on my chest. I pulled the sleeping bag over our naked bodies. We were sated and satisfied. Both accepting and reeling that we had no future to discuss, even though we both felt the earth shake.

I was there. I know what happened. There's no denying it, no matter how much we don't want to talk about it. It was there when I pulled on my clothes and she buttoned her shirt over a sexy lace bra. It was there when I rolled up the sleeping

bag and she waited for me up front while fiddling with the radio.

It's here now, like a third party, while she kisses me good night on the porch of cabin 7. She sighs when we part.

"I meant what I said about the quesadilla. I meant every word."

Spoken or unspoken, I have no doubt she means every word she says.

"Promise me you'll put it on the menu. Please?"

And think about her every time I look at one? No, thanks. That's a specific type of agony only a masochist would enjoy.

"I don't want you to forget me." Her eyes are swimming with sincerity.

Fuck, what can I say to that?

"Okay, Princess. I'll put it on the menu. Does it have a name?"

She flits her eyes to the porch's roof while she thinks, then grins when she comes up with it. "Cabin Seven Quesadillas. Even though I technically cooked them in cabin thirteen, this place feels more like ours, you know?"

Yeah. I know. I regard my shoes as her nervous laughter electrocutes my rib cage. I'm really, *really* going to miss that sound.

"Is that corny?" Her cute nose wrinkles. I kiss it.

"No, babe. It's perfect."

"What time are you returning the keys tomorrow?"

"Don't know. Early. Are you working?"

“In the afternoon.”

“It’s a long drive, so—”

She launches herself at me, cutting off my words as I catch her against me. Her arms wrap around my neck, her breasts flatten against my chest. I scoop her up and hold her as tight as I dare.

“Thank you,” she whispers in my ear. “For everything.”

There’s a wrecking ball of emotion lodged in my esophagus, so I don’t say anything. We’ve already said it all.

I lower her to her feet. She lifts her purse from the rocking chair and pulls it over her shoulder. Then she pushes her hands through her hair, spins, and walks off the porch to her car. Finally when she opens her car door, my voice box cooperates.

“Be safe,” I call out.

She waves, climbs behind the wheel, and leaves.

I watch her car disappear behind the trees lining the road before I go back inside. I decide to pack, then crash, but sleep doesn’t come for several hours.

I spend those hours staring blankly at the ceiling, my thoughts a perfect storm of regrets and wants, hopes and dreams.



SATURDAY

BECCA

I race into Grand Lark in the morning, stoked because I'm only fifteen minutes later than I intended. I was shooting for 6:30, but I'm here at 6:45 and come on, who leaves earlier than 6:45 to drive to Ohio?

I unlock the door, step inside, and find Tad at the front desk. His expression quickly morphs from surprise to sympathy.

"You just missed him." He holds up the yellow key fob for cabin 7 and my heart sinks.

"Oh. By much?"

Tad shrugs, having no idea he's delivering the worst news possible. "Ten minutes or so."

Ten minutes or so.

Ten. Minutes. Damn my lateness.

"Didn't expect you here this early. Did you come to see him off?"

"In part," I lie. I came here to see him off. I also planned how to spend my additional morning hours. "I came in early to work on the menu some more. Have to earn that extra ten thou."

"You're accepting my offer." My brother smiles. It's so good to see him not frowning.

I lift my arms despite loss weighing down my entire body. "I'm here to stay. For better or worse."

"Better, Bec. It's for the better."

I've never said this before, but man, I hope Tad's right. Right now it doesn't feel better. Maybe it will someday.

DAX

At eight A.M. I take the phone call.

I'm on the road heading home and have been for over an hour.

"Good morning, Mr. Vaughn!" My realtor, Cindy, sounds way more awake than I do. Her chipper demeanor is almost painful. Then again, she didn't leave the woman she loves on a mountain in Tennessee without so much as getting her phone number.

"Morning," I manage.

"I'm *thrilled* to let you know that your loan for 123 North Street was approved and you are clear to close. You are inches away from being the proud owner of that building. Congratulations."

I let that sink in.

"Dax?"

"I'm here. Coffee hasn't kicked in yet. That's great news."

She rattles off the next steps. I respond with the occasional "yeah" and "uh-huh" so that she knows I haven't dropped the call. I expected to be excited to hear about the bar, but my excitement is dimmed thanks to exhaustion over a great number of things. Not the least of which is the fact that turning the coffee shop on North Street into a bar is a hefty endeavor. A lot of sweat equity. That will keep me busy.

Then again, I consider after I end the call with Cindy, *busy* is exactly what I need to be. Busy with no excess time on my hands. Too tired in the evenings from building walls and laying floors to lie awake and stare at the ceiling and wonder why some relationships—like my parents’—last until the end while others just...*end*.

I crack my neck and roll my shoulders, my eyes on the road ahead, but in my mind I’m designing my new place. Deciding how to advertise, how many people I’ll need to hire, how I’ll redesign the interior. I consider paint colors and themes and styles. I mentally mock up a plan for the menu.

Cabin 7 Quesadillas.

I’ll put it on the menu because I promised Becca I would, but the name’s all wrong. I’m going to change it.

CHAPTER 27

TWO WEEKS LATER

DAX

“Got ’em.” Barrett strolls into the North Street building, his thumb pointed behind him. “They’re on the truck.”

I set aside the saw and pull off my safety glasses. The rebuilt bar doesn’t look like much, but it will once we stain the top and tile the sides. I’m going with a bohemian style for this one. At least, that’s what my mom called it when I texted her a few photos I found online and asked what she thought.

“I was going to say ‘I got wood’ instead, but that seemed immature.” Barrett shrugs his shoulders and gives me the grin not dissimilar to the one he uses to convince girls to come home with him.

“I’m impressed by your restraint.”

“What can I say? I’m growing.” He opens a cooler, pulls out a few cans of beer, and tosses me one.

I catch it, but toss it back. Barrett catches it effortlessly. I point to the saw. “How about a water? I’d rather not slice off a finger this early in the day.”

He throws a bottle of water in a neat spiral that I have to back up a few feet to catch. He winces in pain and grips his right shoulder. That's the one he fucked up. The injury lost him his Miami Dolphins contract. It also landed him back in Ohio, and in the arms of his ex-girlfriend-turned-girlfriend-turned-ex-girlfriend again.

The injury and the girlfriend share the blame for Barrett's still living in my apartment. But he's been helping me build my bar, so I can't complain. We don't do anything more at the house than crash for six to eight hours before we come here and work a full day.

"I got it," he announces as I slug down half the water in the bottle.

"What, wood? We covered this." I swipe my mouth with my arm. His smile and cocky-ass expression tell me all I need to know, but he spells it out anyway.

"The sportscaster position. I got it." He spreads his arms and waggles his beer can. "Sure you don't want to celebrate?"

"Fuck yes, I want to celebrate!" I say, changing my mind.

Barrett's been trying to land the sportscaster gig ever since he returned to Columbus. It'll put him on the field as an announcer for OSU games.

I abandon the water bottle, and the rest of my chores for the day, to crack open a beer. I tap his can with mine and we drink. He sits on a chair while I collapse onto a stack of tile.

"Feel sorry for the cameraman that has to line up your ugly mug every game, though."

He grins. It's eat-shit-and-die dazzling. Barrett's what the girls call a "ginger," though he has some golden tones mixed

in to keep him from being a true carrottop. If the hair doesn't work for women, the sea-blue eyes and dimples seal the deal.

“This face sails ships, my friend.”

“I never understood your appeal. On the field or off.”

He laughs, knowing I'm giving him shit. It's what we do best. “Good news is there's a big signing bonus, so I'm almost out of your hair.”

“No more free labor in trade for room and board, then. Bummer.” But I'm happy for him.

“No, I'm not quitting before this bar is done. I'm finishing what we started. You could throw in free beers for life.”

“You're not a TV star yet and already you're trying to swindle free stuff from local establishments? Pathetic. Besides, you'd drink me out of business.”

“Free food, then?”

I shake my head but give in. “Free food it is.”

We finish our beers and stop at one. Because who are we kidding? Neither of us can leave the day's work unfinished. We unload the truck, do a few more hours' worth of sawing and nailing, and then clean up the mess.

Barrett and I were a good team on the football field. It's cool to find out that we work as well together off.

“That's it for me. You should come out,” he says for the eightieth time today.

“Double dates are a bit too high school for me, Bare.”

“If you saw Kim and met her friend Cherokee, you'd eat those words. Hot chicks.” I shit you not, he draws an hourglass figure in the air with both hands.

“I’ll pass. I’m beat.”

“You’re not beat, friend,” Barrett says. “You’re *whipped*. By a Tennessee cutie you refuse to talk any more about.”

The night I came home from vacation, Barrett and I drank a few beers. Those few beers loosened my lips and I ended up telling him about Becca. Never have I more regretted sharing so many details with anyone. I was exhausted from driving, heartbroken, and overwhelmed by the call from my realtor about this very bar. He caught me at a weak moment, and I spilled everything to him.

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?” I ask him now.

“You vacationing in the woods and falling apart over a long-legged beauty? Never.”

“Have fun with Kim and Cherokee.” I grab a broom and sweep the remaining specks of sawdust into a pile.

“Why don’t you call her? The Tennessee girl?”

“I don’t have her number.”

“The main office of the resort. The place she works. Come on, Dax. I’ve never known you to be shy about these sorts of things. You want the girl, go get her. It’s only been a few weeks.”

He’s trying to goad me into calling her, but he doesn’t understand.

Two weeks felt more like two months. The miles between us are nothing compared to the distance created when we kissed goodbye at cabin 7.

“Sometimes, Bare”—I lean on the broom on the edge of the unfinished bar—“there’s no way to go back to what you

once were. You and the ex-girlfriend. You know what I'm saying. You go back to her over and over and it doesn't work. Why do you think that is?"

"Probably because every time we split up, I date other women like my life depends on it. She hates that shit."

They didn't call him "the bad boy of the NFL" for nothing. But he's also full of it. Yes, he dates, but he's not solely responsible for their horrible relationship. Beth has broken his heart a few times too. I'm not sure why he goes back to her when he knows they're going to fall apart again. Hope springs eternal for some, I suppose.

"I hear you," he says. "Once bitten is enough. You want to leave it pure. The memory of her. But know this: you're setting a high bar. Becca will be the unachievable goal all other women in your life will aspire to reach. You're setting up a lot of honeys for heartbreak. Never knew you to be so cruel."

He's wrong. The real reason is because, like an idiot, I fell in love with Becca on that mountain. And like an even bigger idiot, I turned and walked away without telling her. It took me two weeks to fall in, and I'd hoped it'd take two weeks to fall out.

I'm not there yet.

Maybe it'll take twice that long. Maybe it'll take ten times that long. I hope it doesn't take longer than that.

"Exactly right," I say anyway. Telling him the truth would be social suicide. You've never seen this guy at a cocktail party. He'd skewer me like one of those weenies dipped in barbecue sauce.

"You're sure you don't want to come out with me tonight?" he asks one last time.

“Maybe next time.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He waves a hand and walks out of my bar. I kill time for another hour, then head across town to McGreevy’s to check in.

One of my managers, Grace, with her bright smile and brighter red hair, is behind the bar. She fakes like she’s having a heart attack when I stroll into the restaurant.

“Is it really you?” She gapes. Her boyfriend—excuse me, fiancé—Davis chuckles at her reaction. He’s in his usual spot on the customer side of the bar. Those two are quite the mismatched set. Grace is tats and tight leather pants, and Davis is suit and tie. Mismatched, kind of like a former-jock bar owner and a plucky blonde who can’t show up anywhere on time.

“I haven’t seen you since the day after your vacation,” Grace says. “I thought maybe North Street Bar was your new bae and you were giving McGreevy’s the shaft.”

“I still need someone to run North Street, you know.” I already asked Grace if she’d like to manage her own place. She promptly and politely gave me a “no,” explaining that she loved McGreevy’s and her schedule.

“Sorry.” She turns me down again. “I’m planning my wedding. I can’t run a bar right now.”

Davis smiles and she grins at him. They’re gone for each other, and it works. Amazing. Why that shakes out well for some people and not for others will forever mystify me.

McGreevy’s is winding down for the night. Only a few tables are full and, other than Davis, there are three patrons at the bar.

Grace moves to cash out one of the barflies while I check the office. I can do the number crunching on my laptop at home, but on occasion Margo leaves me a note taped to the office computer's keyboard. I keep asking her to text me or email me instead, but she's old school and insists on Post-its.

The second I unlock the door, the office phone rings. I grab it to save Grace the hassle. "McGreevy's."

There's a beat of silence, but I hear a short gasp of breath on the other end.

"McGreevy's. Hello?"

"Dax."

My heart hits the bottom of my stomach the moment I recognize that soft voice.

"Becca."

"Hi." She laughs nervously. "So. There's only one McGreevy's in Columbus. I didn't expect you to answer. I thought you were rarely there."

"I'm never here," I agree. "You happened to catch me. I've been at my new place, fixing it up."

"You bought it?"

"I bought it."

"That's great. You're probably so busy."

I have a premonition of doom like she's dancing around bad news, but I can't put my finger on what it might be.

"Barrett's still staying with me. He's been helping with the remodel. It's coming along." Inviting her out to see it is on the tip of my tongue, but she called me. If she has news to deliver,

I'm going to let her do it before I shove my size-twelve boot in my mouth. "How are you? How's the menu coming along?"

"Great! Better than I would've thought."

Snippets of our last night together pummel my brain mercilessly. Her breath in my ear. The stars above, shining bright in a dark navy sky. Tears streaming down her cheeks, and the bone-aching love we both felt in that moment. Improbable after two weeks together, but there nonetheless.

It was real. And because I know how real it was, I know how fake this conversation is. How *forced*.

We didn't used to have to force it.

"Princess."

She lets out a sigh of resistance.

"What's going on?"

"I'm...leaving. Tennessee." Her voice wavers, and the laugh that follows is more nervous than the last. "I'm going to move back to New York. I might go to culinary school. I have a friend of a friend who needs a roommate. She's a sommelier at a really fancy restaurant and said she can get me a job there. I had a long talk with Tad, but he'd already figured out I was ready to leave. He said I didn't seem happy here, and he's right. I'm not happy."

I'm not happy either. I press my lips closed to keep words like "I miss you" and "What we had was real" from tumbling out. I press them tighter when I'm tempted to admit that I might still love her.

No, fuck that. There's no "might" about it. I *do* love her.

I was in denial until I heard her voice. Now that I'm numbly holding the handset of the piece-of-shit desk phone to

my ear, I know.

I love her, dammit.

And she's leaving Tennessee yet again.

"Is that what you want?" I finally ask. I should congratulate her, but I can't get the word out.

"Yes." To her credit, she doesn't hesitate. She doesn't say, "I think so" or "Maybe" or even "Yeah." She says a clear, concise, absolute affirmative. *Yes*.

"I wanted to call you before I left," she says. "You were important, Dax."

Were. I caught the past tense.

"I appreciate that," I say, my chest caving in.

"Hey, we'll always have cabin thirteen. And cabin seven." Her casual tone is false. There's not a note of sincerity in it. I wonder if she's as miserable as I am, but then figure she's not. She's the one who called me to tell me that she's heading off to new horizons. She'll have new experiences. New relationships.

That sucks.

A long, awkward pause precedes her asking, "Did you put the quesadilla on the menu?"

"Yeah. Here, at McGreevy's. It's a big hit." I debate telling her, then decide it doesn't matter and tell her anyway. "I didn't name it the Cabin Seven, though."

"No? What'd you call it?"

I swallow hard and then say, "I call it the Princess."

"Oh." The word is so quiet I almost miss it.

Meanwhile, either I'm experiencing cardiac arrest or that cracking sound coming from my chest is my heart suffering an irreparable split. I'm not a total selfish bastard, so I say something supportive.

"You're going to do great things, Becca. You're bigger than Grand Lark. Go get 'em."

I swear I hear her snuffle before she replies with an upbeat, "I'm so excited."

"You should be. You deserve an amazing life."

"So you keep telling me."

Fuck, this hurts.

"Bye, Dax."

It hurts too much for words. So much that I forgo the farewell and rest the handset on the cradle. I don't sit on purpose—I lose the ability to hold myself up. Or, hell, maybe I'm tired from the long day.

That's what I tell myself.

That's what I'll *keep* telling myself.

For as long as it takes to get over Becca Stone.

CHAPTER 28

THE NEXT DAY

BECCA

I'm facedown in the bathroom sink—a sink filled with ice water. The frigid water is burning my pores. I emerge, mouth open, and gasp for air.

Lara, next to me, hands over a towel and then inspects my eyes after I pat the water from my face.

“Definitely better. Nothing gets rid of the crying puffies from the night before like ice water. Maybe one more dunk?”

“Forget it.” I shudder. “That’s my fourth dunk and I can’t feel my eyeballs.” I toss the towel into the hamper. “It doesn’t matter if everyone at work knows I’ve been crying. I’m leaving anyway.”

A tear trickles from my itchy eyes, hot against my hypothermic cheek.

“Becca.” My sister-in-law comes toward me in hug mode, her arms out. I grip her wrists to stop her.

“Please. Don’t hug me. I’ll dissolve.” After I called Dax last night I felt three simultaneous emotions. Longing. Love.

Regret.

I messed up. I'm a ginormous chicken. I called not to tell him that I was fleeing to New York, but to ask if he'd reconsider my living in Ohio. Then he answered the phone and after only a few seconds, I could tell it'd never work. I *felt* the distance between us. He might as well have been on Mars.

It wouldn't have been fair to ask to intrude on his life. I bet he would've said yes. He lived with his mom for months to help her clean out her house and be there for her while she grieved her late husband—Dax's father. Then he let Barrett move in, and I found out last night that he still lives there. Dax has a habit of putting what he wants on the back burner to make everyone around him comfortable. Why would I be any different?

I can't do that to him. I can't ask him to put me first and ignore what he wants. He said I deserve great things—well, so does he, dammit.

Realizing I'd lost him for good cut like a thousand razor blades. And when I said that final goodbye, I could tell it was *final*.

“New York will be a great beginning for you.” Lara doesn't hug me, but she's unable to keep from stroking my arm in sympathy. “You never know, Bec. Maybe your true soulmate is in NYC. You could meet the man of your dreams. What's meant to be will be. Right?”

“Right.” I'm not sure I believe that, but I have to hold on to hope or I'll curl into a ball and cry enough to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool, and honestly, who has the time?

“Are the tears done completely? I'm not bothering to do your makeup until they're dried up.”

“Dry.” I sniff mightily and square my shoulders. “Mojave Desert over here. Waterproof mascara just in case, though.”

“Oh, that was never not an option.”

I sit on the closed toilet seat. While Lara applies my makeup, I busy my brain with recipes and ingredients. I mentally slice, dice, prepare, and plate them.

Anything to avoid thinking of the phone call last night. To avoid thinking of Dax at all.

THE DAY AFTER THAT

“Here they are.” Tad strolls into the office and plunks down a small stack of printed menus. “All we have to do is slide ’em into plastic.”

I lift a one-sided menu and run my fingers over the thick paper. *Two* of my recipes will be served in my brother’s restaurant. The achievement is nothing short of monumental.

“I thought I was done crying yesterday,” I tell him, my voice watery. “I’m leaving you high and dry after I promised I wouldn’t! I’m a horrible sister. The worst.”

“Bec. We talked about this.” He sits in his usual spot at the corner of the desk. “Your food isn’t good. It’s *beyond*. You’re wasting your talents serving this sort of high-end fare to people with pedestrian palates. Like me.” His smile is one of good humor.

I return it with a weak one of my own.

“I want you to be happy. I can’t pin this on you. This is my business. My responsibility. Plus, Dominic about shit himself

when I asked if he'd like more responsibility and more money."

"Thanks for that visual."

"Hey, I'm the lucky one who will profit off your amazing creations. Those fried cheese nacho thingies?" He mimes a chef's kiss, making an okay symbol with his fingers and kissing the air. "Superb."

My smile is real for a change. Lately real smiles have been few and far between. "Thank you, Tad. For everything."

"Don't act like you're not coming back to visit. You will. Your old room will now be our guest room. Limited time, though. Lara and I have restarted our baby-making endeavors."

"Eww." I make a disgusted face, but he knows I'm kidding. Tad and Lara make beautiful babies. And if they give me another niece or nephew, I'll be overjoyed.

"What time do I need to have you to the airport tomorrow?" he asks.

"No, no. I can't ask you to do that. I can take an Uber. It's not a big deal."

I'm flying in for an interview at the restaurant in New York and taking a few suitcases to my new shared apartment. I'm scheduled to fly back a day later, when I'll rent a U-Haul and hook it to the back of my Toyota and take the rest. I can't believe it. Back to the city. I blink, but my eyes are too dry to cry any more tears.

"It is a big deal," Tad argues. "My baby sister is chasing her dreams. Again."

I sock him in the arm for the dig, but follow it by standing from my chair and embracing him in a huge hug.

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out like you wanted, Bec.” He rubs my back gently, and I learn that there *are* more tears. *Fabulous.*

“You didn’t like him anyway.” I pull away and swipe the hollows of my eyes, trying like hell to hold myself together.

“I like him less now. He broke my baby sister’s unbreakable heart.” Tad gives my shoulders a squeeze. “I’d better go back out there. Dom is behind the bar, but Anna called in. We don’t have a server today.”

“I can help.”

“We’re okay for the moment, but I may need you to run food. I’ll let you know. Since the mountain’s full, we could have a dinner rush.” He strolls out of the office and I set aside the menu I helped create.

Two hours later, I take a break from incoming bookings and cancellations to stretch my arms overhead.

“Need you, Bec.” Tad sticks his head in the doorway.

“Are we full?”

“Filling quickly. Can you help bring food from the kitchen?”

“On it.” I steal a drink from my largely ignored water bottle and lock the office door behind me and then hustle to the kitchen to find that Steve, the line cook, and Eric, on cold side, are buried. Baskets of food with tickets resting on top line the shelf as they race to fill more orders.

I make quick work of delivering basket after basket to the dining room. The restaurant isn’t quite full, but close. After

three trips, I've nearly relieved the kitchen, so I head back for more.

"Bec, can you take this special order to table seven for me?" Tad, who is on the other side of the line next to Steve, pushes a basket into the window in front of the others.

"Sure." In get-er-done mode, I take the basket, my mind on autopilot as I speed-walk to table 7. I stop short when I spot the hulking figure sitting at the table.

Table 7.

He's rugged. Even from behind, he has a *presence*. His jeans are ragged at the bottoms and he's wearing a pair of motorcycle boots with buckles on the sides.

I'm standing behind him, frozen in shock, when a guest behind me calls out, "Miss?" That's when the guy at table 7 turns his head.

He has a strong nose below a strong brow matching his firm jaw.

Lips that I've kissed over and over tip into half a smile as his eyes go to the basket. I take my first real look at the food nestled in the red-and-white checkered basket liner to find a quesadilla alongside a pile of fries.

"Looks like a chicken and cheese quesadilla." I clear my throat and set the basket in front of Dax. "Interesting choice."

"You didn't have one on the menu, so I made a special request," he says. "I have this at my bar. I call it the Princess."

"Miss?" the guest calls again.

"One second," I call over my shoulder. Then to Dax, "What are you doing here?"

“Tasting the competition. Did you make this?”

“No. I didn’t know anything about it.”

“Well, it’s not a fair comparison unless the chef in the kitchen has your recipe.” He stands from the table. Every lumbering, sexy inch of him.

“I gave that recipe to someone else, so I didn’t think it was fair to use it here.” I meet his silver-blue eyes, which appear to be filled with... Is that hope?

Oh, God, I hope it’s hope.

“You gave away your best recipe?” He shakes his head. “That’s not very smart.”

“How do you know it’s my best?”

“I’ve tasted a few.”

“The others made it onto Grand Lark’s new menu. They’re debuting tomorrow.”

“No quesadilla on that one, either?” His low voice trickles down my spine and weakens my knees.

“I meant what I said. That one was for you exclusively.” I swallow thickly.

Him being this close messes with my equilibrium.

“Are you really here to eat?” I’m half scared of his answer.

He shakes his head. Slowly. “No.”

I’m in his arms a second later. I’m not sure how I got here, but I’m relieved as hell that he’s holding me. Big, strong arms pull me close and cradle me against his impossibly broad chest.

I squeeze him tighter. I never want to let go.

“Don’t leave, Becca,” he breathes into my ear. “Don’t leave for New York. It’s a shitty thing for me to say, because I know you want it. I don’t want you to go there—it’ll feel like you’re on the dark side of the moon, and I can’t deal with that.”

I move my hands to his biceps and feel a shake work down both his arms.

“I’m selfish,” he says. “I tried like hell to fall out of love with you. I’m horrible at it.”

A tear-filled laugh escapes me. I cover my mouth with one hand.

“Just the worst.” His laugh follows. I pull back so that I can look at him. His eyes are misted over, damp and filled to the brim with emotion.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Yeah?”

I nod. “I’m probably worse at it than you are.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.” He lets go of me, but we can’t stop staring at each other.

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Didn’t have a choice, Princess. You pulled the rug out at a time I was trying to find my footing.”

“You’re not selfish, Dax. *I’m* trying not to be selfish. I called you that night to ask if you still wanted me—in your life. Maybe in Ohio. But I didn’t want to ask more than you were ready to give. I didn’t want to be one more person in your life taking from you.”

“You can’t take what’s already yours.” He turns and reaches into a backpack sitting on the table and comes out with a slightly wrinkled, folded sheet of paper. “I have an offer for you if you’re not one hundred percent sure about New York.”

He knows I’m not.

I unfold the paper and smooth it on my thigh, holding it up to read the bold, black header at the top. “North Street Bar. Menu by in-house chef, Becca Stone.”

I blink up at him.

“I want you there. I want you, period. If you’d like, I’ll put you in charge of the place, which will be like having your own restaurant. It’s not in New York, and you’ll be settling, but... babe.”

I smile, remembering the first time he called me that.

“*Princess,*” he corrects, and that’s even better. “You’re it for me. I love you just the way you are. I know value when I see it. You’re it,” he says again.

I must be in shock. My extremities are cold, and my brain’s slogging through thoughts as thick as mud.

“I’ll pay you whatever Tad is paying you here. I can’t open yet, but we’re close. I’ll pay you even though we’re not open. You can design the menu. Hell, design the restaurant. Whatever you want. As long as you’re there. With me. As long as you—”

I crush my lips to his to stop the stream of words. I give him a bruising kiss, and hope that it successfully communicates what he means to me. His tongue plunges deep, his teeth scrape my bottom lip, and my entire body weakens against his.

You're it for me.

"I've got you, Princess," he whispers against my lips when my body goes slack.

I steady myself by gripping his biceps. I still can't believe he's here. That he invited me to come back to Ohio. That he *loves* me.

"I've got you," he repeats. "This time I'm not letting go."

At the same moment we both become aware of the palpable silence around us. His eyes slide to the side and my gaze follows. We're surrounded by interested onlookers in the packed restaurant, Dom behind the bar, and Tad, who's standing off to one side, arms folded over his chest.

"You knew he was here," I say to my brother.

He dips his chin in a nod.

"And you didn't kick him out."

He shakes his head.

"I wouldn't have left," Dax says, his attention on Tad. When he snaps his gaze back to me, his eyes are smiling. "Your brother and I have an understanding."

"That's incredible." I let out a surprised laugh.

"What's your answer?" the woman who kept calling me "miss" asks. Her eyebrows are raised into her gray bob, her whole body leaning forward. "Are you going to New York or what?"

I fix my eyes on Dax, who raises his eyebrows in interest. "No. I'm moving to Ohio instead."

That's when the applause starts. Whistling follows when Dax lifts me off the ground to kiss me. When he sets me on

my feet, the applause dies down. Gradually, the diners go back to their meals and the low hum of chattering guests returns.

“I have one last question for you,” Dax squints one eye. “Can I have your phone number?”

I toss my head back and laugh. In all the time we’ve spent together—and apart—we’ve never exchanged those ten precious digits.

“To think we could’ve been texting this whole time,” I say.

“No.” His mouth pulls into a frown. “I prefer you in person.”

I run my hand down the T-shirt stretched over his fit torso. “Much better in person.”

I fist that shirt and tug, but I don’t have to encourage him much. A second later, I’m savoring the press of his lips to my neck. He enters inappropriate PDA territory when he blazes a trail to my earlobe, but I don’t stop him.

“Where are you staying tonight?” I ask when his lips leave my skin.

“Grand Lark is at capacity. But I have a Jeep.” He shrugs as easy as you please. “I’ll park under the stars. Curl up in a sleeping bag. Though having someone there to keep me warm would be better.”

My smile is all the “yes” he needs. I can tell when he grins back at me.

“Barrett’s moving out this week.”

“So you have a spare room,” I tease.

“Sorry. It’s a one-bedroom. I have a couch, or you can take the left side of the bed.”

The cold shock recedes and is replaced by warmth as my heart beats at twice its normal speed. Dax easily reads the terror on my face.

“Too fast?” He tucks my hair behind my ear. Still calm. Still collected. I have to take a few breaths to become both of those things, but I manage.

“It should be too fast.” I turn over the idea of moving in with him. Moving to Ohio *for* him. “But it feels right.”

Palm on my cheek, he says, “Let me try something else out and see if that feels as right as the rest of it.” He pulls in a breath. “I love you, Becca.”

I blink. Stunned. Thrilled.

Amazed.

“Damn. That felt really fucking right.” He lets out a laugh that might be an exhale of relief.

“Maybe I should try it.” I put my hand over his. He loses his smile and focuses on me intently, his eyes heated, his body stock-still. “I love you too.”

Silence hangs in the air between us.

“How’d that feel?” he murmurs, his thumb brushing my bottom lip.

“Really right.”

He kisses me again. Softer. Slower. We are *so* going to need a room. Or the back of the Jeep. Whatever. I’m not picky.

He loves me. Dax Vaughn is in love with me and I love him. It’s unbelievable, but I trust my gut. If I were any happier, I’d be levitating.

“One condition,” I murmur against his mouth.

I make out the slightest trace of doubt in the concerned bend of his eyebrows. I put him out of his misery quickly.

“I’m more of a right-side-of-the-bed kind of girl.”

His eyes narrow as if he’s trying to decide if he should scold me or make out with me. I know how to tip the scales in my favor. I push up to my toes and whisper in his ear, “I’m really good at blow jobs and pancakes.”

His hand drops to the waistband of my jeans and he grips the material, holding me hip to hip against every firm inch of him.

“Check!” he shouts. Then to me, “Can you take the rest of the day off?”

“No,” Tad answers as he delivers food to a nearby table. “You’re fired, Becca. With a smile, he adds, “Get the hell out of here.”

He extends a hand to Dax, who shakes it.

“Hurt her, I’ll kill you,” Tad says.

Dax tugs Tad slightly closer and promises, “Same to you.”

They nod after their cavemanlike exchange, and then Dax slings his backpack over his shoulder.

“I have to collect a few things from the office,” I tell him, and in a way we’re reenacting the first night we met. *The first night of the rest of our lives*, I think, like a sap. “Meet you out front?”

“Okay, Princess.”

I watch him walk out of the restaurant, admiring his perfect ass and the strong, capable way he holds himself. And then I think about how he’s in love with me. How he showed

up and asked me not to go to New York because he worried that my choosing him was second best.

What he didn't know was that I love him too. I don't care what side of the bed I sleep on, as long as Dax Vaughn is on the other side of it.

Damn. This swelling, swirling, too-full feeling in the center of my chest feels really *good*. Feels really right.

I think I might have found my destiny.

Finally.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

BECCA

North Street Bar is packed with diners, and not one of them is paying a single penny to eat or drink here tonight. It's a practice run for the full menu and for the newly appointed waitstaff, bartenders, and kitchen guys.

In a lot of ways, North Street is my and Dax's baby. Our firstborn. Sure, he and Barrett may have done most of the manual labor, but Dax and I were creating something new. Something that was *us*.

"I can't tell if I'm nervous or excited," I say, standing over a table of four with my hand resting on my middle. "How can you tell if they're butterflies or bats in your stomach?"

"Bec." Grace, the bawdy redhead who runs McGreevy's, raises an eyebrow. "You've got this."

"Yeah," Davis agrees, looping an arm around his fiancée's neck and kissing her cheek. "You learned from the best: Gracie."

Grace and Davis are an odd couple at first blush, but since I've gotten to know her—and him too, since he rarely leaves her side—I've learned they're perfect for each other.

The other couple at the table is equally doomed to be together forever, but where Grace and Davis seem like an odd couple, Jackie and Vince are a matched set. His dark good looks and her girl-next-door charm are darling together. They're full-color-catalog perfect. Plus, they're really freaking cool.

"You'll do great," Jackie tells me. I've been on a few girls' nights out with her and Grace. Jackie's fun, but don't give her liquor. She's just this side of crazy if you get a shot of tequila in her. "Just picture everyone in their underwear."

"Especially me," Vince says, his blue eyes sparkling. He oozes charm and good humor. Jackie never stood a chance.

"I'm not wearing underwear," Dax says, approaching the table.

Grace slaps her hands over her eyes and Jackie covers her ears.

"Which one of you is 'speak no evil'?" I poll the guys. "We have the other two covered."

"Ready to do this, Princess?" Dax asks. Jackie and Grace coo over the nickname. He frowns down at them. "Shut up."

"I think it's sweet." Grace purses her lips and makes a few kissy noises, and everyone at the table laughs.

"Gotta go," I tell them. "Wish me luck."

"Luck!" my new friends shout.

Dax links his hand in mine and leads me to the stage at the front of the restaurant. We decided North Street needed an

open-mic night. The stage added a month to the construction, but we didn't care. We wanted it to be right. Now it is.

Dax insisted that I dance on some nights. I agreed. Like I'd pass up the chance to shake my groove thing at my own place?

I know, I know. You're coming in late. I skipped about a million details. To bring you up to speed: North Street Bar is half mine—a fifty-fifty partnership with Dax. I couldn't think of a better way to spend the bulk of my savings. I guess you could say he and I went all in all around.

I moved into his apartment and yeah, it's a tight fit, but since Dax and I haven't managed to pry ourselves apart yet, it works. We are looking for a bigger space, but we still haven't found the *right* space.

It's okay, though. We have time. After all, babies take nine months to grow, and I'm only ten weeks along.

Surprise!

Just do me a favor and don't tell Grace and Jackie yet. I have a feeling it'd break their hearts to know that when I go out with them next weekend I'll be doing so as the designated driver.

Onstage, Dax has no need for a microphone. He bellows, "Good evening," and easily gains the room's attention.

"Thanks for being at North Street's soft opening," he says. The crowd claps. As do I. "When Becca and I decided to do this together, everything became easier. Plus, guys. She can cook her face off."

"Hell yeah!" Vince shouts, and Davis whistles his approval. They know. I've been feeding them since I moved here.

“As you know, the grand opening is tomorrow, but that’s not the only grand opening I have planned.”

I cock my head at him. That’s news to me. Did he buy another bar or something?

“Couldn’t think of a better time to do this,” he continues. “So here goes.”

The crowd goes silent as he drops to one knee in front of me. And *ohmygawd*, I feel faint.

Speaking low so only I can hear, he cracks open a velvet box and reveals a stunning diamond solitaire in a platinum band. It’s a princess cut.

Swoon!

“Marry me, Princess?” he asks. *Perfectly*.

I’m such a cliché. My jaw drops. My hand rests on my collarbone. Tears flood my vision.

“Do it!” comes a shout that I’m pretty sure was Davis.

“Do it, Princess. I’m lost without you.” Dax lowers his voice even more to say, “Plus, my mom won’t freak out that we’re not married when we tell her about her first grandchild because she’ll be too excited about the engagement.”

I grin, bend at the waist and kiss Dax, and the room erupts like it did at Grand Lark a few months ago. Only this crowd is three times bigger and three times more invested, since they’re Dax’s friends and coworkers.

“About fucking time!” comes a supportive shout. I’m certain that was Barrett, the bad boy of the NFL, turned bad boy sportscaster—because OMG did he get himself into trouble recently!

What am I doing?! I don't have time to tell you about that. I have to answer Dax.

"Yes!" I shout and, you guessed it, earn more applause. I've always wanted to be onstage earning this much praise, but being proposed to might exceed even my biggest dreams of stardom.

Dax slides the ring onto my finger and chucks the empty velvet ring box into the crowd. Barrett, reflexes honed from years of playing football, catches it.

He holds the box in the air, triumphant, until his expression shifts with the realization that catching the ring box could mean he's doomed to be the next one walking down the aisle. I doubt he's in any real danger. Finding a woman who would accept all that he is would be stone-cold miracle. Trust me on that one.

Dax stands and holds me close for a long kiss. I'm dizzy with joy when we part and he shouts, "Let's do this!"

We hop off the stage and dart in different directions, Dax to oversee the bar and me, the kitchen. Amid waitresses and waiters buzzing between us, we wink at each other from across the room.

I take a second in the dim corridor between the bathrooms and the kitchen to admire the sparkle of my diamond in the weak light overhead. Then I rest my hand on my still-flat tummy and blink away more tears as my nose stings.

When this kid comes into the world, the first thing I'm telling her is that her father swept me off my feet at a time I wasn't looking for anyone. I'll tell her how her dad encouraged me to chase my heart, while reminding my family that I was capable of anything. I'll tell her that he came for me

again and again and let me spread my wings wide, but never wide enough to leave him.

Unless this bundle ends up being a boy. And then I'll mostly tell him about the flood and the Jeep campsite and how his dad once cut a massive downed tree with a chainsaw.

I take a step toward the kitchen and pause to look for Dax. He's watching me while the bustling bar staff races around. He gives me a tender smile that I return, even as I stand frozen in the middle of the melee of waitstaff running to and fro.

In the chaos we find each other. Gazes locked. Hearts beating in sync. That familiar string of longing and heat stretched out between us.

“Love you,” he mouths.

“Love you too,” I mouth back.

Now.

We'll start building our future.

*For LL,
Wine time yet?*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I set out to write Dax and Becca’s book, I wanted to explore what would happen when a one-night stand turned into a two-week stand that eventually turned into forever. Forced proximity is my *favorite* trope, so writing a rained-in romance was a blast! I know I say this a lot—but this book was really special. I teared up when I wrote it, and each and every time I read it! Something about this couple got to me, and I hope they get to you too.

Thanks to my agent, Nicole, for all you do. To Shannon Richard for your advice on this book, and to Jules Bennett for brainstorming with me—your idea: “Hey, what if she liked to cook?” ended up being a huge plot point! Big hugs to my Facebook group, the Lemmondrops, for your enthusiasm for this book when I shared a few early passages. You all keep me smiling.

And last but not least, thank you to my readers. You’ve followed me from bad boys to billionaires to dark angst and back around to romantic comedies. I’m so grateful to have you!

RUMOR HAS IT - EXCERPT

The Real Love series continues with a notorious bad boy seeking to repair his reputation, and a type-A journalist whose feathers he loves to ruffle...

xo, Jessica Lemmon

CATARINA

To keep from becoming antiquated, the *Columbus Dispatch* newspaper split into two parts five years ago. The *Dispatch* still “dispatches” print newspapers—the kind that line the bottoms of canary cages for our more senior readers—but its online presence has been growing steadily over those five years, thanks in part to new blood in the office.

Thanks, mostly, to me.

Columbus Community Chat, or the *Chat* if you're an insider, is the online version of the *Dispatch*. Some of the articles I write also run in the actual printed paper, which is fun to see. Even though "seeing it" requires me to flip *waaaaay* back to the relationships section of which I'm in charge.

Before you accuse me of writing "fluff", let me assure you, I know my strengths. Much as I'd like to aspire to landing on the front page of the *Dispatch*, unless Channing Tatum becomes our next president, chances are it's not going to happen.

I don't attempt any feat that I'm not sure of achieving one hundred percent. That includes jobs, relationships, and every other nook and cranny of my highly organized life.

Mia Blakely, my boss, stumbles into our weekly meeting in her usual manner. Her curly hair is barely tamed, a pencil is jutting out of the brown locks just over one ear, and her brown skirt/peach blouse combo is outdated, though, honestly, not *that* bad. I'm not being unkind—just stating the facts. Mia doesn't care about the latest trends or fads. What she does care about, and what she does best, is run this office, manage this newspaper, and keep her journalists paid. She's entrusted me with more large assignments than she has anyone else who writes for the *Chat*, and for that I'll owe her my firstborn son.

"Good afternoon, kids." Mia eyeballs us over a pair of glasses with half lenses. She flips through a few scribbled-on sheets in her yellow legal pad, finds our agenda, and sits.

Megan, a young and plucky intern, dutifully places a mug of coffee at our boss's right hand. Mia nods her thanks.

While Mia recaps the assignments for this summer, I jot notes into my planner—a black and white beauty with thick, luxurious paper and a posh striped cover—with a black gel

pen, appreciating the precision of my handwriting in the “notes” section for June.

I can’t believe it’s June already. Seems like only yesterday I was huddling over the space heater under my desk in an attempt to ward off Columbus’s winter chill, which has the naughty habit of creeping through the walls of this very building.

“The last order of business is Catarina.” Mia smiles and peeks over her glasses again. I smile back. “I’m changing your ‘Fun in the Sun’ column this year to something more focused on relationships. A personal relationship. *Your*. Personal relationship.”

I rarely blush, but I can feel heat work its way from the placket of my white blouse to my neck. I place a hand to my cheek and press my lips together. All of my fellow co-workers’ eyes are on me.

“Oh?” It’s the only word I’m capable of at the moment.

“Dating in Summer. Summer Fling. Fling into Summer.” She makes a “help me out” motion with her hand, and our writing staff begins scrawling furiously on their notepads in an attempt to come up with an idea she might like.

Carla’s suggestion of “Sex in the Summer” quiets the entire boardroom.

“That. I like.” Mia sends me a saucy wink, and I bristle. “Sadly, we can’t pimp out poor Catarina.”

“Your Sexiest Summer Ever,” Adam blurts.

“Yes, but no,” Mia says. “Catarina isn’t being assigned a self-improvement article. She’s going to date a bad boy and tell our readership about it. In detail.”

I make a choking noise and force out a laugh. “Mia, with all due respect to my boyfriend, North isn’t exactly a bad boy.”

What an exaggeration. Northrop Phillips, III, is as far from a bad boy as you can get. He’s a country club guy who loves golf and finance in equal measures. He’s the perfect pick for a partner, and that’s why I picked him. One hundred percent in everything, remember?

“Not North, Catarina. I’ve pulled in a bad boy especially for this occasion.” The gasps around the table suck the oxygen from the room.

“I thought you *weren’t* pimping me out,” I reply carefully.

“You don’t have to have a *physical* relationship with the guy.” Mia leafs through her papers again. “But you do have to *pretend date* him and write about it. We want our readership living vicariously through you. Think of it as an acting role.”

I blink at her. A heads-up that she wants me to “pretend” date someone before our staff meeting would’ve been nice. Then again she knows I’d have said no.

“Your cohort will be writing from his own POV on what it’s like to be the bad boy now committed to dating. It’s a dash of fiction, a dash of romance, and a dash of what you’re best at writing: *relationships*.”

“Who is it?” Nanci asks, excitement rounding her blue eyes. I’m not there yet. I’m still in shock.

“Me,” a rough voice announces from the doorway behind me.

I turn my head to look over my shoulder, stunned further into silence by the sheer attractiveness of the man standing there. He’s so good-looking it’s criminal. But then, he is—

“Barrett Fox!” Nanci says and then bursts into a series of nervous giggles.

“In the flesh.” He bends at the waist to place a kiss on Mia’s temple. “Sorry I’m late.”

“I’d expect no less,” Mia says with a smile that—yeah, is a little gooey. She bats her unmasked lashes while she’s at it.

Who knew my boss had a sexual bone in her body? I thought she was made of steel beams and asbestos.

Everyone at the conference room table, save me, stands as one and moves to Barrett Fox like he has his own orbit. Mia shushes the chatter around us.

“Okay, all right. Now that you all have your assignments, let’s leave Barrett and Catarina to theirs.” She makes a shooing motion, and everyone shuffles reluctantly out the door.

I slide a derisive glance to my new “co-worker” and wonder what I did to Mia to make her stick me with this assignment. Except I know exactly why she did it. My boss’s work ethic can be described in two words: bottom line. She knows a prime opportunity to bring money to this paper when she sees it.

She flips to another sheet in her yellow pad before ripping it out and laying it in front of me.

“I’ll let you hash out the details.” Before she shuts the door, she adds, “Barrett. You know where to find me.”

“Sure do, doll.” He winks, then takes her chair at the head of the table, going as far as leaning back and kicking up his feet on the table.

I recoil from the blatant rudeness of that move, but I shouldn’t be surprised. Barrett Fox is known for his rude

antics, and this one is tame by comparison. Unlike the photos of him I've seen online: sweaty, streaked in dirt, or even dressed in a suit making lewd gestures at the camera.

There's no way to escape the popularity of the local OSU football player who went pro, especially in Columbus. This paper was built on a foundation made of footballs.

He wears a crisp, white shirt tucked into dark pants, black leather shoes, and because he kicked his feet up and crossed them at the ankles, I also notice a pair of red socks with white polka dots.

“What's your name, gorgeous?”

I reroute my gaze to his face. Sharp, angular, a deep dent in his chin. His eyelids are narrowed in assessment, but I know under those red-brown eyelashes his irises are so blue they border on turquoise.

Nanci had a calendar of him last year. I've seen this guy in every pose from decked out in full gear to shirtless, to the one where he's lying on a beach, his shorts pulled down past his ass crack.

He's long and lean, and I might have had a passing appreciation for how attractive he is if I didn't know so much about him.

“What if I called you Ginger? Would that upset you?” I ask tartly, referring to the perfectly coiffed reddish hair on top of his head. He's good with gel, or has his own stylist. Or maybe he's sleeping with a stylist.

He grins at my question—straight white teeth he didn't lose any of playing ball for eight years—and laces his hands behind his head. His shirtsleeves are uncuffed and rolled to the elbows, the scruff on his face two days past clean-shaven.

“Apologies, beautiful, but you know my name. I don’t know yours.”

“You mean Mia didn’t tell you my name when she threw me to the wolves?” I have a momentary fantasy where I talk her into reassigning this puff piece to Nanci, but she won’t. Nanci mostly helps out with articles. She hasn’t honed her journalistic skills well enough to be entrusted with a column.

When ad dollars are involved, Mia’s focus is ensuring a climb in readership. Not to brag, but that’s the reason I’m in charge of the relationships section. I’m good. Not because of some magic fairy dust but because I work my ass off.

Still, it would have been nice to write a commentary about how to date a *real* man instead of this one. A man who knows how to properly wear a button-down shirt, for example. *Like North.*

“Ouch. I’m guessing you’re not a fan?”

“Of you? I barely know who you are, Mr. Fox.”

“You seem to know plenty. I can read it in the pleat between those two perfect eyebrows.” He runs those blue eyes over my face, down my blouse, and lingers at my breasts.

I lift the paper Mia left behind in front of my chest to avoid further scrutiny.

“Catarina Everhart,” I say as I read over the sheet of paper in my hand. Mia’s shorthand is atrocious but after five years of practice, I can read her hieroglyphics without any problem.

“Do you go by Cat?”

“No. I don’t. Do you go by Bare?”

“Sometimes.” He shrugs, lowers his feet to the floor, and leans over the table. He flicks the back of the paper I’m using

as a shield.

“Is this what ‘dating you’ is going to be like?” I sneer.

“Close.” His lips twitch at the corner. “Add in a few slow, long, wet kisses that’ll curl your toes and a little under the shirt/over the bra action, and you’re there.”

Barrett

There it is. The reaction I was expecting. Catarina’s back snaps straight. She slams the paper onto the table and proceeds to lecture me. She’s saying I won’t ever touch her, let alone kiss her. She mentions a boyfriend and says that even if she didn’t have one there’s no way she’d allow me anywhere near her. While she’s complains, I commit to a plan to taste those lips.

Mia told me about this “boyfriend” of hers. He was described to me as a stick-in-the-mud guy who is self-consumed and aloof and doesn’t treat Catarina the way she deserves. I’m not sure if Mia has an ulterior motive to break up Catarina and the bozo she’s dating, but I’m not getting involved either way. My job is to date Catarina and be myself. That’s what I’m doing. Or well, the version of myself Mia’s paying me to be.

Catarina is fucking beautiful, by the way. And prissy. Rigid. *Haughty*. But beautiful. Long, dark brown hair with the right amount of weight and wave rolls over slender shoulders. Her white blouse is classy, like her. Even angry, her shaped eyebrows slammed together, all I can think about is winning her over to my side of the field. If she let me kiss those lips,

she'd forget her problems. They're the pinkest, fullest lips I've ever seen, and I'm an excellent kisser.

"Mr. Fox, could you do me the courtesy of looking me in the eye?"

"Sorry, Kitty Cat. I'll try." I shrug helplessly. "I like that lip color."

Her mouth drops open before snapping closed. She's decided not to like me, which is par for course where I'm concerned. Most women don't like me, but are willing to stoop to hang out with me to get what they want. I'm used to it.

I do as she asks and look at Catarina's eyes. They're as beautiful as the rest of her. Coffee-brown and sparkling. Big and wide and taking in the world around her. Not innocent though. More jaded. This is a woman who's seen a lot of what the world has to offer and has decided not to like most of it.

"...going to talk to Mia about this," she announces as she stands.

I stand with her and she turns and pokes me in the center of my chest with one short, polished fingernail.

"Alone."

"I'm on assignment here, too, Kitty Cat."

"Stop calling me that. I don't care how much money you'll bring to this paper. I'm not pretending to date you. I can't stand looking at you."

With that she opens the conference room door and storms through the office. I watch her go, admiring the proud way she holds her shoulders back and the flow of her long hair behind her as she walks, and yeah, okay, the wiggle of her small, round ass in a superslim skirt.

I catch the eye of the cute blonde who was in here a moment ago. She's still mooning. She bites her lip and gives me a little wave. I wink at her, knowing that made her whole day. I can tell by the way she blushes fiercely.

Whistling, I amble in the direction of Mia's office in hot pursuit of Catarina Everhart.

Damn.

I love being me.

[Buy Rumor Has It](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica Lemmon is a former job-hopper who resides in Ohio with her husband and rescue dogs. She holds a degree in graphic design currently gathering dust in an impressive frame. When she's not writing emotionally-charged stories, she spends her time drawing, drinking coffee, and laughing with friends. Her motto is *Read for fun*, and she believes we all should do more of what makes us happy.

Jessica Lemmon's romance novels have been praised as "purely delicious fun" and "lavish, indulgence-fueled romance" by *Publisher's Weekly*, as well as "wonderfully entertaining" and "a whole lot of fun!" by RT Book Reviews. She is the bestselling author of over forty books that have been translated into a dozen languages and sold in over 30 different countries worldwide, with her debut novel releasing in January of 2013.

Her work has been honored with awards such as a *Library Journal* starred review, an RT Top Pick!, Apple Books Best Book of the Month, and Amazon Best Book of the Month. She has been recommended by USA Today and NPR.com, and has achieved the rank of #1 bestseller on Nook as well as earned a seal of excellence nomination from RT Book Reviews.

Through witty banter and fun, realistic situations and characters you'll want to "sit down and have a drink with," Jessica tackles tough relationship issues and

complicated human emotions while delivering a deep, satisfying experience for readers.



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