



Coming Home
to the Mountain
Book Seven

Rough Around

the edges

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ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES

COMING HOME TO THE MOUNTAIN BOOK 7

FRANKIE LOVE



CONTENTS

Copyright

About

1. Fig
2. Hank
3. Fig
4. Hank
5. Fig
6. Hank
7. Fig
8. Hank
9. Fig
10. Hank
11. Fig

Epilogue 1

Epilogue 2

More of the Roughs...

About the Author

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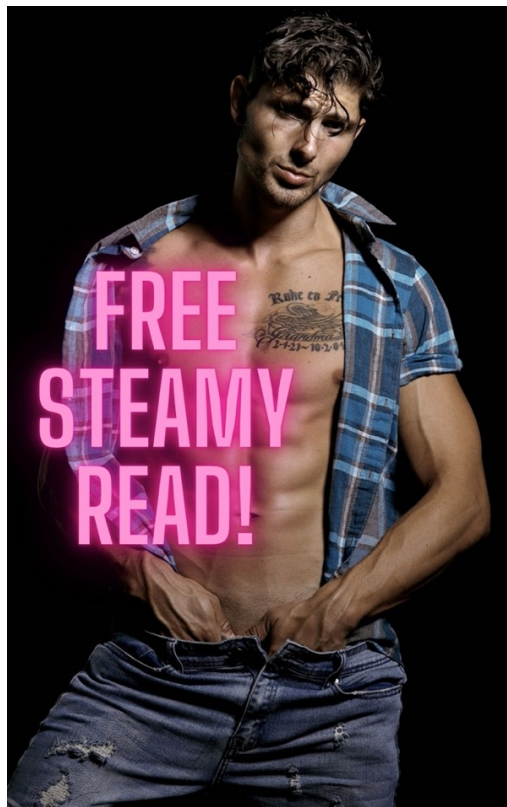
Cover Design by Cormar Covers

Editing by Happily Ever Author

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ABOUT

Coming back to my hometown after my fashion internship was supposed to be a short-term stop ... but my heart is telling me I belong right here in Home, WA.

When my brother's oldest friend Hank shows up at family dinner, I am reminded how smitten I have always been for this rough and tumble man.

He's returned to his roots, too, and he is looking to settle down for good.

We have one wild and precious life... and right now, I am determined not to waste it.

-virgin romance

-love that lasts a lifetime

-hero with values

-brother's best-friend

FIG

IT'S NOT AS IF I HAVEN'T BEEN HOME AT ALL IN THE LAST four years.

I came back for Christmas and for a couple weeks during the summer every year. And I cherished that time because spending time with family is important.

It's a fact that I learned while I was away.

Still, rolling up to my family's house after graduation, I'm hit with a wave of emotion. This is my homecoming, the first one since I left where I'm not planning to go back to California or Paris or anywhere else.

I have suggested I'll be gone by the end of the summer.

I've loved my experiences and my travels. They were educational both from a human perspective, and of course in my study of fashion. I have everything I need to go apply to a firm and start designing what may be the trends of tomorrow. I even managed to get noticed by a premier designer who offered for me to be his apprentice in Los Angeles.

But despite all this worldliness? I just wanted to come home for a while. I get out of the car, and hoist my backpack, which is stuffed full of the things I've been traveling with these past few months. Paris itself was beautiful. But backpacking through France for a couple weeks after graduation was what made me appreciate what really matters in life.

There's a slew of cars parked all around the house. My half-dozen siblings are all here, and they've all been so very busy.

That's one thing that's bothered me about being away. Everything that's happened in these past four years I've mostly had to follow from afar. And a lot has happened in that time. People have gotten married, had fantastical romances, raided not one but two cult compounds, plucked a woman and her child out of a natural disaster – all while I was in Los Angeles where yes, I was learning a ton and following my passion, but it felt like the most interesting thing to happen was when they started selling pumpkin spice lattes much earlier than they were supposed to.

It's been a bit jealousy-inducing, I guess. Maybe I expected to find some hot city slicker to come and sweep me off my feet, and make any crushes I had back here in Home seem minor. But Home must have spoiled me, because none of my attempted courtiers really hit me the right way. Douglas was a nice boy, conventionally attractive, and was super popular. Nothing seemed to be a red flag about him, and he asked me out on a date.

And I turned him down. Because I didn't feel that spark.

Same problem with Scott and Chris, and a couple others I went on first dates with over the last four years – no sparks. No second dates.

I open the front door and apparently the rumbling of my car has already set off that maternal alarm, because Mom is right there waiting for me, wrapping her arms around me and pulling me close in the tightest hug she can manage. “My precious, sweet Fig, how I've missed you so much!”

“Hi Mom, I've missed you too.”

“Have you been eating alright? You look like you could use a good meal.”

I laugh. “Regardless of how I've been eating, I'm more than happy to have any dinner you cook, Mom.”

“Good, good. I’m making my pizza casserole that you always said was your favorite.”

“Sounds awesome, Mom.” It’s really some sort of Chicago-style deep dish, but I think my poor mother got into too many arguments about pizza with people around here who aren’t used to deep dish and has just been resigned to calling it something else to avoid fights. Regardless, it’s tomato sauce, cheese, garlic, pepperoni and Italian sausage, on top of a bunch of other wonderful goodies. In essence? Whatever you call it, it’s delicious and I’ve had nothing like it in years.

“I’ve also got berry pies baking for later, your other favorite.”

“Trying to catch up on spoiling me, eh, Mom?”

“Absolutely. A few meals cooked for you over four years is far too few, Fig. I need to catch up.”

I laugh and point out that I was home every summer, then I drop my bag and go into the dining room. Everyone gets up and says their greetings with a hug. There’s a lot more people here than I’m used to, given the marriages that have happened. Everyone’s found their ‘one,’ and some of them even have families already. There are two small children sitting on their mothers’ laps, plus my first niece, Plum, who’s grown so much since last time I saw her.

The kids, the wives – their presence doesn’t change anything. It’s definitely some heavy-duty nostalgia I’m feeling.

“So how long are you sticking around for?” my big sister Lemon asks, bouncing one of the little girls on her knees. It’s not hers, but neither the child nor her seem to care.

“Well, I graduated,” I say as I sit down. “I don’t need to go back to California any time soon.”

“Yeah, well, I figured you got your degree because you have bigger ambitions than staying in a little place like Home.”

I hold my tongue. There’s a knee-jerk reaction I suppress at the idea that maybe I think myself bigger than my

hometown. But Lemon knows better. There was no any malice in her words. As the only two girls of the Rough brood, we've talked a lot about our dreams over the years, and mine were always uncertain. I was always wondering if there's more out there.

And I guess when I headed off to college, a lot of my family thought I may have become certain.

"I don't know, Lemon. I need to rest my brain, take in a bit of Mom's home cooking, and just enjoy myself for a bit."

She laughs. "After you went off and vacationed in Paris?"

"You know that there's few more stressful things than a vacation, right? Although part of that time was spent shadowing a French designer who ended up being disappointingly haughty."

"I guess you're right. There really isn't much that beats coming back here and being with family, and that's not even counting how much it's grown recently."

Prairie, Meadow, Anchor, Merit, Abby, and Tallie are all new additions, along with the kids. All of them are now my kin and I know almost nothing about any of them. It's a bit daunting to say the least.

The doorbell rings. Reuben, one of my brothers, gets up. "That's for me. We got one more guest at dinner tonight."

"Isn't this supposed to be Fig's homecoming dinner?" Mac says.

"Relax, I cleared it with the folks. And I don't think Fig minds sharing the love. Do you, Fig?"

I shrug. I'm already surrounded by lots of almost-strangers, so what's one more? "Go right ahead."

Reuben goes to answer the door. I hear some mumblings of, "Hey man, how are you doing? Good to have you back." Normal guy chat.

I'm thinking nothing of this visitor until he walks into the dining room, and I look up at him. Tight jeans and a sweater stretched over a muscular form. I look to his face and stare at

him with awe. A clean-shaven stone-cut jaw, looking like the right mix of action hero and male model.

“This is my best friend from high school, Hank Black. You remember him, don’t you, Fig?”

His eyes meet mine.

Oh, yes. I remember Hank Black.

I remember him too damn well.

HANK

FIG ROUGH WAS THE CUTEST THING AT HOME HIGH. SHE blossomed into a woman before my eyes, and really came out of her shell over the course of her first year there.

She was always a smart type, and was the kind of person who got along with both the jocks and the nerds.

I would have asked her out in a second back in the day, but there was one thing stopping me.

She was a sophomore, and I was a senior.

And I always thought that was kind of skeevy. I gave the other seniors shit for dating someone so much younger than them, but I guess when I saw Fig I understood just a little bit.

But I held to my principles. She was three years younger than me, and the gulf between fifteen and eighteen is vast. I was ashamed of my crush, so much so that I never told anyone about it.

I didn't expect to see her here today. The last time Reuben mentioned her, she was off at college, preparing for a big, exciting life in fashion design, and I just assumed a girl like her could have any guy she wanted anyway. The ship had sailed, and I didn't expect to see her again.

Now?

I'm literally sitting across from my longtime crush.

"You alright there, Hank?" Reuben asks, slapping me on the back.

“Yeah, man, I’m fine.”

I don’t know how true that statement is. I’m trying not to stare, but Fig is fucking hot. More than she was in high school. She’s a bit more seasoned now, and more fashionable too. I guess that’s to be expected with a literal degree in fashion.

She has the cutest pair of glasses on, and I’m trying my damndest not to even look at the rest of her below the neck. Still, I can’t help noticing her curves, and the swell of her breasts when she inhales. Something about her figure suggests wide, sexy hips, even looking at her from the waist up.

Fig’s as flustered as I am, distracted and not really paying attention to anyone else at the table.

“So what brings you to dinner tonight, Hank?” the Rough patriarch asks me, stroking his beard.

“Uh, just transferred back into Home. Spent a few years over in Spokane.”

“Pardon an old man’s memory, but it’s hard to keep track of all my children’s friends. What is it that you do again?”

“I’m a firefighter, sir.”

Redford Rough laughs. “They got you trained well, don’t they? If you wouldn’t mind, don’t call me sir. Makes me feel old.”

“I don’t know,” his wife says with a smile. “It makes you seem distinguished. Sir Redford Rough. Almost like you’ve been knighted.”

“Where on earth am I going to keep the armor and sword, Anise? Let alone the horse.”

“Red, being a knight in the twenty-first century doesn’t mean...” Mama Rough turns pink laughing, as do some of the other family members.

“So you’re the new Home firefighter after Jerome retired?” Bartlett asks. “They’ve been on about being understaffed for a while. Even though Home’s been blessed to be mostly fire free, I can see it being stressful. Even if it’s just taking care of a bunch of cats stuck in trees.”

“It’s scheduling, Bart,” I reply with a chuckle. “Even a small department like this needs two or three people on duty for emergencies, and when we’re bored, it’s a good day. They need me so they can spend less time at the firehouse and more time at home with their families.”

“I see.” Bart sips some of his wine. “Well, here’s hoping none of us have to see you in a professional sense then, Hank.”

My focus remains on Fig. “I’m led to believe that Fig here just got back too?”

“Yes,” she says, more meek than I remember her being.

“Fresh out of Paris, after four years in Los Angeles,” Lemon says. “Who knows where she’s off to next on her wonderful world of adventures.”

“Wasn’t some of your studying in California an apprenticeship?” a man in a suit says, and I deduce he’s Lemon’s husband. “You’ve gotta have a job lined up from that.”

“Maybe she wants to go to New York,” Mac chimes in. “Or Chicago. You gotta go to a big city to really make it in fashion I think. Not much demand for such a thing in Home.”

Well, that would suck. To come home to find the most beautiful woman on the planet only for her to run off to some big city.

“Wherever she goes, I’m so proud of her,” Mama Rough says. “She’s a brilliant thinker and I can’t wait to see what she’s going to come up with. She’s going to make the Rough name world famous, I bet.”

Fig turns an embarrassed shade of red. Everyone keeps talking her up, telling her of their high expectations, making their guesses about where she’ll end up. Everything from going back to Paris to doing something original and unique in Tokyo. Like they’re trying to load her with some of their own scattered hopes and dreams.

A room full of people talking about her, and all Fig does is sit quietly. I worry about her, but I can’t say I’m innocent of

having a dream for her myself. I want her to stay right here in Home.

Dinner is served and eaten, and it's as fantastic as I expected. Being a guest at the Rough house means never leaving hungry.

"Pardon me," Fig says, sliding out from the table. "I uh... gotta go to the little girl's room."

The way she says it isn't very convincing.

She heads up the stairs and I watch her go, unable to take my eyes off the sway in her hips, and that delectable ass her dress hides.

The gulf between an eighteen-year-old and fifteen-year-old is vast, yes. But the difference between a twenty-six-year-old and a twenty-three-year-old?

Yeah, that's a whole other thing. Maybe I should make my move before it's too late.

"Pardon me as well, I think Fig's got the right idea," I say, sliding out.

"You remember where the bathrooms are?" Reuben asks.

"Oh yeah, I'm good, man. Thanks."

I head up the stairs, trying to listen for her footsteps over the cacophony of the discussion below.

A lot easier said than done, I know.

FIG

THE STORY I WAS TOLD WAS THAT THE HOUSE EXPANDED MORE and more as my parents' family grew bigger. Dad kept adding rooms to the house, which ended up making it a bit of an awkward shape. He's a professional, though, so most of his projects had no troubles.

Until he added my room. For the first eight years of my life, everything was fine. Then we found a fatal design flaw that resulted in a horrible leak that required reconstruction.

I could either room with Lemon or stay in the attic.

Eight-year-old me thought that living in the attic would be the coolest thing ever.

And really? Twenty-three-year-old me thinks the same. I have a nice view of the fields below, it's extra effort for people to bother me, and my room is bigger than anyone else's, even if the ceiling is a little bit lower in some places than others.

It's no wonder I was happy staying in the attic even when my original room was fixed.

It's still the same as I left it. A bit dusty, to be honest. The fact that you have to use a ladder to get up here has made it hard for Mom to come up here and clean it, I suppose.

I smile as I spot my high school fashion projects on display. My sewing machine, and my way of bedazzling things and making everything my own. I always had my own sense of fashion, it's what stirred me to want to try to do it for a living.

Sure, I cringe a bit at some of the designs of t-shirts I did, but who doesn't cringe at the stuff they did as a teenager? It's simply the natural order of things.

I had such lofty dreams then. Of making clothes that would be worn by runway models, going to the most fashionable shows all over the world. And living the high life the entire time. When a top-of-the-line company rolls out their new lineup in Berlin, they aren't exactly catering the event with Burger King. My life was going to be caviar and limousines, and the fact that I came from a little town like Home, Washington, would just be a piece of trivia about my rise to the top of the world.

There's just a small problem with all of that.

I don't think I want it anymore.

Everyone in the fashion world talked down to me for the last four years. Like I was some hick who couldn't possibly know anything. I watched as they berated the models for being the slightest bit overweight, people I considered friends and people I knew had serious mental struggles surrounding their weight.

It turned out to be a disgusting world. It's not about making cool clothes, or celebrating personal expression. It's a commercialist way to make a bunch of haughty old men feel superior. Which is true for a lot of things, but I guess I was just naive enough to think maybe they hadn't infested fashion like they did.

My high school pieces are cringe as hell, but I remember what I thought back then. How I poured my heart into knitting and sewing those things. Even when I was far away, I knitted quilts for Plum and Lucy, and blankets celebrating the weddings that I was too far away to attend. One of my professors spotted me working on one of the blankets in one of the fashion department's sewing areas and dismissed it as amateurish. He said a real fashionista should aim higher.

Fuck that guy.

Fuck fashion.

That's what I want to say. I take the dress I wore to my prom out of my closet and clutch it to me. My parents paid so much to let me chase my dream. All of my brothers just followed in Dad's footsteps, got work in construction and became productive members of society almost immediately out of high school. Bartlett saved up some money to open his own store with our parent's aid and blessing.

Lemon went to college, and she's prospered in her chosen field, with a little help from the family construction company giving referrals to her interior design firm.

And me?

I want to throw it all away. The tens of thousands of dollars spent on tuition, spent on room and board, and the trip to Paris. The whole trip was supposed to be for the apprenticeship, not some backpacking trip, but I flaked out on it so quickly.

I feel like a failure. Someone who's going to disgrace the family. It wasn't like I was denying one of the boys a college education, our parents saved and planned well for all of us. But I still feel like I dashed my parents' hopes and dreams for me.

My mother expects me to make Rough a household name.

That's not going to happen. Even if I tried.

I collapse onto the small sofa I have in my room, feeling useless and pathetic.

There's a knock on the attic door. "Come in," I say, not wanting to be too antisocial.

Climbing up through the hatch is someone I didn't expect to see.

Hank Black.

I'm taken aback by his presence. I always had a crush on him when I was younger, but he graduated and moved away after my second year in high school. Sure, teenage Fig may have had some fantasies she used in her alone time, but I knew it'd never happen. Having him show up again was like seeing

a ghost. A hot and sexy ghost, but still a ghost. A small memory from high school that was meant to be put away with the rest of them.

“I think your mother is preparing to serve the pies she made.”

“Oh? Um, thanks.”

He climbs all the way into the attic. He’s tall enough that he has to hunch a little where the ceiling slopes. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“You got evidence to the contrary?”

“You seemed awfully quiet during dinner. Especially when everyone was talking about you and your future.”

“You noticed that?”

“I’ve always noticed you, Fig. Always.”

HANK

HER ROOM HAS A CERTAIN CHARM TO IT. IT'S DEFINITELY THE room of someone who is creative.

I go over and sit down on her couch beside her.

“What do you mean, you always noticed me?”

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that something is seriously bothering this woman. “Just saying. I've paid attention to you. Even when I probably shouldn't have.”

She giggles. “What, do you mean back in high school?”

“I saw that you were a gorgeous, funny, and clever girl. And I have every reason to believe that you're still those things. You're definitely still the first, I can tell that by looking at you.”

She averts her eyes, quite red in the cheeks. “I'd like to think I'm the second and third too, but I guess that's all in the eye of the beholder or however that goes.”

“True, but I think the only opinions that matter are mine and yours. And I've always had a bit of a crush on you, Fig.”

“A crush on me? I thought it was the other way around.”

I laugh. “I guess it was a bit different for me. I felt bad about crushing on my friend's underaged sister, while you didn't have to worry about that.”

“I guess you never made a move because you thought it'd be wrong? And maybe it would have been. But I'm not underaged anymore, Hank.”

She flutters her eyelashes. Damn, she can get to what she wants quick. As if I needed another reason to crush on her so much.

I didn't really expect to come up here to put the moves on her. It was legitimate concern about her well-being that brought me up here. I was going to save the sweet moves until I knew she was of the right mind.

But I didn't expect her to start suggesting things to me.

She's looming close to me as we're close on her sofa. Her hand on my thigh, and mine on hers, definitely suggesting much more.

We're inching closer and closer. Something's bound to happen, given we're up here alone and we don't have a lot of reason to stop.

"Aunt Fig? Aunt Fig, are you up here?"

Except, possibly, a child watching. That's a pretty good reason to stop doing what we're doing.

She pops her little head up, only the top of her hair showing above the opening. "Aunt Fig! Grandmama says she wants you downstairs for the pie she made for you! She says it's super-duper important!"

"Uh, thank you, Plum. I'll be right down," Fig says, grinning nervously and pushing a strand of hair out of her face.

"You should come down too, Mr. Hank! There's plenty of pie for everyone!"

"I'd love some pie. We should go get pie, Fig," I say, a huge smile on my face. It's not like the mood will return once the five-year-old is out of sight.

Plum scurries down, and Fig stands up, going over to the closet and putting the dress she's holding away. I sheepishly go behind her and slink down the ladder. We were going way too fast, I realize. Yeah, I've always had a crush on her, and apparently she's always had a crush on me, but going right to making out an hour after reconnecting with one another seems a tad extreme.

I let her get downstairs ahead of me. One, because I don't know if it's the best time to be suggesting something's going on between us just yet, and two, because that tension with her just now is more than enough to have gotten me rock fucking hard with thoughts of doing a whole lot more with her.

I head to the bathroom. I don't jack off, although with how my imagination is running, God damn is it tempting. Just taking care of my other needs and washing my hands is enough so I'm not pitching a tent in my jeans and being afraid of turning suddenly and knocking something over.

The discussion is lively around the kitchen table, slices of pie in various stages of eaten on everyone's plates.

"Finally got back, eh? What was keeping you?" Reuben asks with a sly grin as I sit down and a slice of pie is set in front of me.

"Uh, I had to discuss something with someone," I smile, not lying. "On the phone," I add, definitely lying.

Fig is on the other side of the table, oh so bashful, not exactly itching to go and rat me out.

"So, where are you staying, Hank?" Rye says. "Still with your folks?"

"For now, yeah. But I got enough squirreled away that I can get my own place easily enough."

"You need to hire the Rough and Ready Construction Company to build something to your exact specifications?"

I shake my head. "If I had time to wait, maybe I would. And maybe I will, down the road. My mother has turned my old room into her own personal library. For the sake of having some personal space, I need a place of my own, and I need it sooner rather than later."

"That's a damn shame."

Reuben raises an eyebrow. "You hitting my friend up with a business proposition at the table?"

"What?" Rye shrugs from the accusation. "He needs a place to live, we could always use more work. It's win-win,

Reuben.”

“He’s an old friend, not a customer, Rye.”

“We’d give him a healthy discount!”

I shake my head and finish my slice of pie. Mama Rough has once again delivered and surprised me with how good it is.

I look across to Fig. She’s still nervous as hell, and I wonder if I’m adding to it. She’s dealing with something, that much I know, and maybe my presence is making things more difficult.

“Well then,” I declare. “It was wonderful as always, Roughs. I’m very grateful that you’ve had me over, but I need to get home and get plenty of sleep. I have a lot of houses to go and look at tomorrow.”

“Always a joy to have you, Hank,” Papa Rough says with a smile.

“Yes, you can come by anytime,” Mama Rough adds. “I always make more than enough.”

“Gotta always over-prepare for guests, huh?” Lemon chuckles.

I turn and head for the door, looking at Fig one last time. Maybe she can get her thoughts together. I’m not a hard guy to find, and I’m sure Reuben would connect us if either of us asked. I’m just giving her time to think. To deal with whatever’s bothering her.

As I open my truck door, the front door to the Rough house swings open, and Fig runs out with my jacket in her hands.

It did seem a tad colder than it was when I arrived, but I guess Fig isn’t the only one with way too much on her mind.

“Don’t forget your jacket,” she says, presenting the coat to me.

“Thank you,” I reply. I take a deep breath, her right in front of me. She makes me feel so awkward. Usually I’m super

confident and upfront with any girl I feel something for, but Fig is different. In so many ways.

“Take care,” she says, ready to turn and leave me.

“Hey, Fig,” I say, getting a hold of myself. “What are you up to tomorrow?”

“Uh... I’m not sure. I didn’t have any plans for when I got back. I guess right now, I got ‘vegging out in front of a computer’ penciled in on my agenda tomorrow.”

“You up for tagging along with me as I look for a place to live? Could use some feminine insight if you know what I mean.”

She sucks in a breath, and takes her time replying. “Um... uh... sure! I’ll come along. What time is your first appointment?”

“Twelve thirty. I can come by and pick you up at about noon, if that’s okay?”

“That works for me. Then it’s uh...” She hesitates, not sure she wants to use the D-word for this. “An agreed upon time for us to meet and hang out?”

“Yeah. Let’s call it one of those. Have a good night, Fig.”

“Thank you, and you too.”

I step into my truck, and close the door. As she turns and heads back into the house, I can see from here that Fig is nearly vibrating. My on the fly not-date idea must have made her very happy.

Which is fair, because it makes me very happy too.

As I pull out of the driveway, I take a deep breath. Maybe I should stop by the grocery store on the way back and make sure my self-grooming supplies are stocked up. You never know what could happen...

FIG

I'M UP EARLY IN THE MORNING, JUST IN TIME TO BE ANXIOUS about everything again. I get dressed, and decide to head into the local coffee shop.

While I am looking forward to my afternoon with Hank, I can't help but think of my family and their expectations of me.

I grab a nice hearty muffin and a sugary coffee before going off to sit at a table with my phone. It's the breakfast of champions, or at least the twenty-something with no regard for their sugar intake. I'm about to go looking for cat videos to distract myself, but my phone chimes with a text message. It's Lemon.

“Where are you at? Did you leave already?”

“I'm at The First Sip in town. I haven't been here in a while.”

“Oh. Okay, stay there for a bit, I'll be over in a jiffy. Need to tell you some things I should be telling you in person.”

“Alright, I'm just vibing.”

I take my time, and take in some cat videos. I feel a sense of dread from Lemon's words though. It doesn't sound like it's going to be bad news, but why couldn't it just be a text? We text all the time, occasionally about some very personal stuff too. Being the only two girls in a family full of mountain men has led to a lot of bonding over stuff that only the two of us could really understand.

She busts through the front door of the coffee shop before long, always busy. She flashes me a smile, goes into a short line, and then joins me with a cup of coffee in hand.

“Had to go right back to the old hangout, eh?” she says, looking at my muffin wrapper. “Their apple cinnamon muffin is really good.”

“I couldn’t find anything like it in Los Angeles. Some that were almost as good, but I had to come back here to have the best.”

“You poor, deprived thing,” she jests. “Living in the big city with no shortage of food options. Home doesn’t have a good choice for so much as Indian food, let alone something more exotic like Ethiopian or Brazilian.”

“Home is good at what it does have. And we got good pizza and Chinese places, so the basics are covered.”

“I know, I know. And it’s not like Anchor wouldn’t treat me if I wanted something exotic. He’d make it happen.” Anchor’s her husband. Quite a well-off guy. The Roughs have done well for themselves, but Anchor makes us look like paupers by comparison.

“So as much as I like talking about international foods, you didn’t come here to talk to me about that. Or did you just want coffee?”

“I already had two cups this morning, but I decided why not a third if I’m here anyway? And yes, I have things for us to talk about, Fig.”

“It’s obviously not marital strife. Spill it, Lem.”

“So, me and the rest of the crew have been talking in our group chat...”

“Group chat? You and our brothers have a group chat without me?”

Lemon shakes her head. “No, no, not typically. Just for this, because we wanted to surprise you.”

I cross my arms. “A likely story.”

“We know you’re going back to Los Angeles soon, or wherever you’re going to jet off to next. And you’re probably anxious about how you’re going to juggle a new job with getting back for Christmas...”

I’m mostly anxious about the idea of going back to Los Angeles period, but I keep that to myself.

“So we’ve worked it out and we got a lead on a big cabin by the ocean to rent this year.”

I stare at her. “You what?”

“We want to bring Christmas to you, Fig. It’s nicer down south, and I think it’d be a fun change to spend the holidays without there being five feet of snow covering all the roads. Plus, we could take Plum to Disneyland, go to the beach, and make it a really interesting and fun vacation for all of us.”

A chill goes down my spine. I really don’t want to go back to Los Angeles. But here’s Lemon, talking about how big and exciting my life is going to be, and how it’ll be great fun for everyone involved. All because of me. All because of what they think I want, and what I’m afraid to tell them I don’t.

I grind my teeth, trying to work up the courage. I need to tell her the truth of how I’m feeling about all this. I don’t want everyone to be throwing so much money at this, planning their lives around a place I don’t want to be.

“Lemon, I...”

“You don’t know what to say? I knew you’d be excited. Did you ever go to Disneyland in all the time you were there?”

“No, it’s never been something I had time or money to do. Listen, Lemon, I got a confession...”

The doorbell of the coffee shop rings and my eyes dart to the source. Hank.

It’s a few hours before our date time, but I guess Lemon and I aren’t the only people whose favorite cup of coffee comes from The First Sip.

“Guess you’re a coffee person too, Fig?” Hank says as he comes over to our table.

“Good morning, Hank,” Lemon nods in a polite and cordial tone. “Yeah, we’ve all inherited our Dad’s love for the coffee bean. Usually with more sugar than Dad is used to, even if the boys try to deny it.”

Hank chuckles. “Don’t worry, Reuben’s secret love of the Chocolate is safe with me. Oops, maybe I shouldn’t have said that.”

Lemon’s smile grows devious. “I’ll be sure to tease him with that info next time I see him.”

“Hi, Hank,” I manage to say, even more nervous from his presence.

“Hey... well, since we’re both here, should our... agreed upon time to be in one another’s presence... start early?”

“Agreed upon time to be in one another’s presence?” Lemon raises an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

“Uh, it’s not important,” I say, nervously laughing.

Hank shakes his head. “Fig’s agreed to come along and keep me company as I look for a new place to live. She doesn’t want to call it a certain thing, so I’m tiptoeing around it.”

Lemon looks back and forth between us. “So... you two? Together? And doing things? Interesting.”

“Um,” I say, avoiding eye contact with both of them. “Not like I have anything else to do today.”

“Tagging along just to look at houses doesn’t seem all that fun to me, Fig. Not unless I’m doing it with someone who I want to spend time with.”

“Are you trying to imply something, Lemon?”

Lemon laughs as she stands up, coffee in hand. “I’m implying nothing at all. You take care of yourself, Fig. I’m really looking forward to Christmas on the beach. And you take care of yourself too, Hank. You two be safe out there.”

She continues to chuckle as she goes through the door.

“Is your sister usually that oblivious?” Hank says, watching her go.

“Oblivious about what, Hank?”

He looks back at me, and nervously scratches his head. “Guess I shouldn’t pry too much. It’s just a sister thing.”

The truth being pried out of me right now terrifies me. I don’t want to tell my family about my career. And I don’t want to rush things too much with Hank, either.

After all, if I’m too cowardly about the former, the latter won’t happen. I’m not cruel enough to try to wrap Hank up with me in some sort of long-distance relationship. He’s the type of guy who definitely deserves better than that, and I don’t think I’d do well only seeing my crush every few months.

“I think I’m going to get my coffee to go, Fig. Unless you have any objections, why don’t we get started on our little expedition early?”

“I’ve got nowhere to be, so I think I’d like that.”

The butterflies within me flutter ruthlessly whenever I look at him. No other guy makes me this nervous.

And he’s just offering to take me house hunting, of all things. As Lemon said, it’s not exactly the most high-intensity, fun thing I can imagine.

But above all, I want to be close to Hank. Through all the uncertainty I’m feeling, that much I do know.

HANK

“THIS IS A CHARMING LITTLE TOWNHOUSE, RIGHT NEXT TO downtown,” the realtor says. She’s an older woman in her fifties, and seems nice enough.

“I’m going to just skip that one,” I reply. Fig and I are being driven around town. “Townhouses aren’t really for me.”

“How come? Aren’t you a single man?”

I look at Fig. “For now, I am, but I’m planning on the long-term. Besides, I want a place with a nice big yard. Something a dog can run around freely in, or where I could build one of those things... you know, with the monkey bars on the playground? With the bridge and slide? What do you call them when they’re just in your backyard?”

“I believe they’re just called playsets, sir. Even when they’re just in your backyard.”

“Then yeah, one of those. Whatever they’re called. I need space, and a townhouse ain’t going to cut it.”

The realtor nods along. “We’ll go to the outskirts then, sir. I didn’t know you were planning that far ahead for yourself.”

My hand is around Fig’s shoulder. She’s quiet and nervous. I know she’s covering something up, because I’ve seen her out of her shell and that version of her is a whole lot sexier.

“You never know how fast things will happen. I’m just being prepared.”

The realtor looks at me, and then Fig, via the rearview mirror. She's making assumptions about us, and I'm in no rush to correct her.

We roll into the countryside just outside of town and stop at a cottage home. It's by no means massive, but it has a few bedrooms and looks the part for a family home.

"That's quite the cute little cottage there," Fig says.

"Old and durable construction," the realtor says. "It's been on the market for a bit, but I don't think it's because of the quality."

"Then why hasn't it been bought?" I ask.

"The younger generation is more citybound, I suppose. Wanting a big house with a yard, two and a half kids, and a dog isn't the norm anymore. Especially in a small town like Home."

"I'd love to live in a place like this," Fig says as she steps out of the car.

"Really?" I say, rising to meet her. "After all your time in Los Angeles you're eyeballing this quaint country cabin?"

"Why does everyone just assume I'm a big city girl now? Like I'm going to wilt and die if I don't have a bodega within a half mile of me?"

"The nearest store is the grocer in Home," the realtor says, trying to be helpful but mostly being background noise.

"You've spent four years there. Thought you had a taste for it."

"I spent four years there for my education, Hank. I wasn't going to get a fashion degree at the local community college."

"Fair."

"I spent long enough in LA to have a taste of it. And maybe I spent long enough there to realize that I don't want to spend my life like that. Maybe that's what some people want, but I realized I'm not those people."

This sudden passion coming from her is what I wanted to hear. I pull her into a side hug, rubbing her shoulder. She looks up at me, a bit of sparkle in her eyes, finally happy to speak her mind.

God, I want her. Bad. I'm already sporting a chub, but I planned for it this time, making sure my jeans had a bit more give to them.

I look at the cottage, imagining moving in there with her. Installing a doggie door, having a playset in the back, pushing her on it, and eventually pushing our child.

The realtor was absolutely right that I'm already thinking about the future.

We look at the cottage, which is absolutely perfect, and then at a few more houses she has available. A few are too small for my tastes, a few are a bit too luxurious, and a few are tacky McMansions that I question the durability of. To her credit, the realtor doesn't try to sway my opinion there.

After I've had enough of looking and have a decent idea of what I want, we split off from the realtor and Fig and I head to the diner for a late lunch.

I get a classic bacon double cheeseburger, while Fig opts for a big bowl of minestrone.

"So, what is it that you want, Fig?"

"Hmm? Do you mean which house I'd take? I really liked that first cottage we saw."

"I didn't mean that, but that is making me wonder things about you."

"What do you mean, wonder things about me?"

"Reuben tells me you're this aspiring fashion designer. That you're destined to be dressing the runway models of tomorrow. A big deal, who's going to be a celebrity in your own right."

"I guess that was the plan, yes. I dreamed of that."

“And now you’re referring to it in past tense. Implying that’s not what you want at all.”

She looks at me, her smile growing slightly. “No one’s been asking me what I really want, and I guess it caught me off guard.”

“Well, I’m asking you now.”

She looks out the window for a time. I follow her line of sight, and it’s to an old boarded up shop between the town’s one Chinese restaurant and the town’s one electronics store. I think it used to be a shoe store before I left for Spokane.

“I want to take that shop. I want to start my own business. A boutique with custom pieces. I want to design clothes for people personally, to go with their own looks and personality, not just whatever I think will sell when draped on some poor, tortured runway model. That’s always been my inspiration above all else. Clothes and making them something truly special for the person wearing them.”

I stroke my chin. “That’s awfully different from dominating the world as a fashion mogul.”

“Maybe I imagined myself famous once, because what eighteen-year-old girl doesn’t want to be famous? But then I saw what I’d need to do for that fame, and realized that’s definitely not me. It made me reevaluate what I really wanted, and that’s something more personal than you’ll find at any hoity-toity fashion show in Paris.”

“And you want to give up the big city life? To live in a relatively tiny place like Home?”

“I miss this place. It’s my Home, no pun intended. I grew up here, I have so many fond memories. And the ones I have in the city don’t feel anywhere near as special.”

She resonates with me on so many levels. Spokane wasn’t the biggest place in the world, but even that had made me miss the small-town charm that Home has. It’s a passion we both share for this place.

“What about your apprenticeship in Los Angeles? I thought you had one waiting for you.”

“I do have an offer.” She sinks into her seat. “I don’t want to take it. I don’t want to leave Home again. Just being here makes me feel more relaxed, even with all the other anxiety I’m dealing with. I thought it was just homesickness, but no. This place is where I belong.”

“You’re not afraid of regretting turning down the opportunity you have?”

She shakes her head. “I am afraid. I’m terrified of making the wrong choice. Of letting everyone down. But I’m starting to realize that I shouldn’t let fear control my life. That I need to build up the courage to listen to my heart first, and my mind second. And both of them tell me that my happiness isn’t in Los Angeles being an intern for some ancient misogynist asshole.”

I stare at her, in awe. That’s the girl who charmed me all those years ago with her upfront personality and passion. Now she’s a woman with those same qualities, and it makes me wish I wasn’t staying with my mother, because I really want to whisk her off to someplace private right now and explore her body as thoroughly as I’ve explored her thoughts.

“What’s going through your mind, Hank? You got some passionate spiel about how much you love being a small-town firefighter, and the corruption of the big city and how it’s not for you either?”

“Aw, no, none of that. The Spokane fire department treated me well and they’re good guys and gals. I missed this place too, so I took the opportunity when it came. No ulterior motives here.”

“And what are you thinking about as you lovingly stare into my eyes?”

“I’m thinking about how I wish that public decency laws weren’t a thing because I want to do so many things to you right now, Fig.”

She laughed, turning red, but doing nothing to suggest she disagreed with my idea.

“Alas, we’re in a civilized society. How terrible.”

More giggles. Her eyes drift away and back toward the old shoe store. “You think your realtor can get me the information on what it takes to rent that store?”

“Are you serious?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t serious.”

“I’ll call her right now.”

“Thanks.”

I’m no business-minded person. I make my money by staying fit and ready to run into burning buildings if people need me to. I have no clue what it’ll take for Fig to make her boutique dream a reality.

But I have my heart. And I’m prepared to put that behind Fig and support her, no matter what she wants to do.

FIG

WE GO OUTSIDE AND LOOK AT THE SHOE STORE WHILE HANK gets his realtor on speakerphone. She says she has one last house she wants him to see.

“I’ll warn you in advance, it has a very strange floor plan and someone used bathroom tiles for the bedrooms and put carpeting on the walls. It needs work, but the price is so good I’d love to show it to you.”

He declines.

“The reason I called,” he says, “is Fig has a real estate question for you. Do you know who owns the old shoe store off Main Stree?”

“That place?” she says. “My firm owns it. I don’t think there’s anything stopping someone from living there, but it seems like an awkward place to call a home.”

Hank throws his arm around my shoulder again, pulling me close. Just this touch is enough to make me wonder what would happen if there were a whole lot less clothes between us. “Don’t want to live there. It’s for commercial purposes, I just think we’d like to see it.”

“Certainly. I can meet you there right now if you want.”

We walk over to the empty store, and a few minutes later the realtor rolls up in her car. She opens the door and waves us in.

“This was owned by the Harts up until two years ago,” she says. “Hart and Sole Shoe Boutique, as I’m sure you both

remember.”

“Best place to get good shoes in Home,” I say. “I think I still have some trainers that are holding together from before I left for college.”

“Molly Hart retired when she turned 70, and had no one to leave the family business to. So she sold off her inventory, and sold the building to my firm. I think she used the money she made to go to Florida.”

“As retirees tend to do.”

“It’s a solid retail space. Perfect for selling anything that doesn’t require cooking, although that could be done if that’s what you’re really after.”

I look around the empty shop. My imagination runs wild. Dresses hanging from the walls, some custom t-shirts, lots of space to offer lots of options.

“There’s also a decently sized backroom. Molly used it for stock, but there’s room enough for machinery if you wanted to use this place for, say, a dry-cleaning business. Home could use one of those actually, Hugo’s place has gone downhill since his son took over.”

“My passion isn’t cleaning, sorry.”

She laughs, then her phone rings. “One moment.”

I wander around a bit, my imagination still running wild. People coming in, letting me tailor their outfits for their proms, for their weddings. People wanting a new style. Maybe I’d luck out and some celebrity would come in, and my fashion would become world-famous after all.

“I need to go,” the realtor says. “My granddaughter needs to be picked up from school. It’s an emergency.”

“Oh. So we need to clear out?” I say, letting out a long sigh.

She pauses, then shakes her head. “No, no. You’re a Rough. I trust you. The door will lock behind you, it’s electronic, and if I find something broken, I know where to find you, Fig.”

She says that in a cheerful enough tone, even though I can tell she's serious.

"I'll email you the terms of the lease and you can decide if you want to do anything from there."

"Thank you."

She hustles out the door, leaving Hank and I alone in the abandoned storefront, the sunset coming in through the front window.

I pace more, going to the back to look around a bit. There are windows there too, smaller ones. I see one of the workers at the Chinese place taking out the garbage and wave to him. He waves back as he returns to work.

The back could easily hold a deluxe quality sewing machine, and whatever else I need to make my garments by hand. Lots of storage space for yarn and thread too. Enough to make a little office to deal with the business side of everything as well.

I return to the front, and see Hank just sort of pacing back and forth. This is totally not his wheelhouse and will hopefully stay out of his wheelhouse because I would hate to see this place burn down.

"You like what you see here, Fig?"

"Absolutely. I'm thinking this could be my dream shop. Not so small it's cramped, not so big I'd feel like I was managing a warehouse."

"Does the back work for you too?" he asks as he heads through the door.

I follow. "Yeah, just the right amount of space. This place is Goldilocks to me, it's just right."

"Goldilocks? Is that what the college kids are saying nowadays?"

"No, something I came up with just now."

He laughs. "Love your wit, Fig. Love your body. Love your passion."

“I could say the same about you, Hank.”

He turns suddenly, and wraps his arms around me. He finally goes for it, what he only teased before. A kiss. Potent and powerful. I shudder with need for him, and lean right into it. My tongue dancing around with his. I’d never gone this far with a boy before, but I instantly know that kissing just any boy wouldn’t be this special.

Anyway, Hank is no boy. This here is a man.

His hands roam down my body, goosebumps forming underneath my clothing. Down my sides, squeezing my ass and making me gasp, yearning for more of his touch.

“People can see us through the back windows, you know.”

“Then we’ll just have to be careful.”

His hand slips beneath my skirt, getting closer and closer to touching my bare flesh. I would stop him if I was being reasonable, but I can’t deny I want everything he’s giving me.

Hank’s touch roams around my hips, toward the front of my panties, all while we continue to kiss, our bodies squeezed together so tight. He slides his finger in, going over my clit, a sudden shock of lightning rushing over me. I pant, breaking the kiss to moan for him.

He grins wildly, very pleased with everything he’s doing. And so I am I. “You’ve been fantasizing about this as hard as I have, haven’t you?”

“How could I not? You’re a big, strong, sexy firefighter. They sell calendars full of men like you.”

“That the only reason?”

“And you being a total sweetheart absolutely helps.”

“I want to be your sweetheart, Fig. I want your heart to be mine.”

“You’re doing a damn good job earning it.” He punctuates my words by rubbing me hard, and the surge runs through me again. Sure, I’ve touched myself before, but that can’t compare to what Hank’s doing to me. He’s such a caring sweetheart and

every time he runs his finger over my clit, or teases my sex with his fingers, my mind is aflush, wanting so much more with him.

I'm turning out to be a far hornier virgin than I ever expected to be. I love how he keeps turning up the heat, setting such a powerful yet steady pace and letting the fire inside of me burn hotter and hotter.

I tremble and waver as he massages me, but he's there to hold me tight, letting me fully enjoy everything that he's doing.

The pulse pounds, and soon I can't help but come for him. I sing for him, just as he intends.

He keeps holding me, rocking me back and forth, his digits leaving my sex to stroke me on the small of my back. It's sweet and tender, and the fingering was just another side of him, one that I definitely want to see more of.

"So what's next?" he whispers.

"What do you mean?"

"What's next for us, Fig?"

"Talking about us, now?"

"Are you saying I shouldn't? Because we got some similar plans in my opinion."

"How so?"

"I'm throwing down roots in Home again, Fig. I want to call this place home for the rest of my days. And it's sounding like that's what you want too."

"And...?"

"I'm asking you which house we saw today that you liked best. Which would you like to call home yourself?"

I slap him on the chest. "Are you really suggesting I move in with you, Hank? After a day of knowing one another again?"

“If it’s what we both want, it’s what we both want. Who says we need to follow some arbitrary timetable?”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely. Does it really seem that crazy? What if we threw roots down together? What if we lived together? What if we were something more than just a guy and his best friend’s sister?”

My heart pounds as my imagination goes wild with thoughts again. Of a life with Hank. Of making our dreams come true. Of us calling a cozy little cabin our home for the rest of our lives.

‘What if’ is one hell of a question, and I’m liking every answer I can think of.

HANK

THERE'S A LOT GOING THROUGH HER MIND, AND THAT IS something I completely understand. I'm not talking about just taking a leisurely stroll in the park, I'm talking about changing our lives entirely.

"Moving in together. It's awful sudden. My family might think I'm crazy." She pauses, and then shakes her head. "Or they might understand entirely, given everything that's happened with my siblings. I have no idea."

"If it's what we want, Fig, it's what we want. Nothing should stop us. Hell, we want to go all the way with this? How about we get married?"

She gives me with a thousand-yard stare. "What the hell, Hank? You can't just joke about things like that so flippantly."

In response, I kiss her. Deeper, harder than before. She instinctively reacts, her kisses feeding back into me, wanting me as much as I want her. Our embrace breaks, but my needful gaze into her eyes doesn't. "There's nothing flippant or joking about my suggestion, Fig. I've been in love with you since you were sixteen."

"In high school? You can't really mean that. No one knows what they want in high school."

"That's why I didn't make a move then. It didn't feel right, you were too young for me back then, and you were my friend's little sister. It felt like a bad move in so many ways. But now we're both back in Home, as if the universe brought us together again for a reason."

“Sometimes coincidences happen.”

“Maybe, but I can’t avoid how I’m feeling now. I’m still as passionate about you as ever, maybe more.”

She takes a deep breath, pondering everything I’m telling her. “What does us getting married even look like? It’s just all too crazy.”

“It is. But maybe we can tone it down. We can make it all old-fashioned and stuff. We can wait until we’re married.”

Fig laughs. “Really? You’re going to tell me you’re a virgin, Hank?”

I shrug. “Never really clicked with any girl enough to go beyond a second date. I’ve had lots of second dates, but nothing happened on them. Guess my subconscious was still thinking of your cute little ass.”

“But you’re a firefighter. You’ve been on the calendar. You gotta be knee deep in women who want you for a casual fling.”

“Casual flings aren’t my thing, Fig. Besides, I could say the same about you. Had to be beating the guys off left and right out in LA.”

She shakes her head. “Kinda and kinda not? I’m sure it doesn’t surprise you that a lot of guys studying fashion aren’t of the heterosexual variety. And outside that I’ve always been sort of conservative in my dress. Sure, I’ve been approached at parties, but nobody seemed worth the effort of going out with.”

“It’s that fate thing again, Fig. It’s rearing its head. Making us come back together after all this time, keeping us virgins for one another. It’s like, destiny.”

She parts from me, pacing back and forth with her arms crossed. “I don’t know. It’s going to be hard enough to tell my family I really don’t want to go back to Los Angeles for that apprenticeship. To let them down with that. Then to tell them I want to open a small business in Home instead... Those two things alone are gonna knock them on their asses. To tell them

I'm also suddenly getting married? I think I'm going to cause a mass heart attack."

"I know your family, Fig."

"I am my family, Hank."

"And sometimes you need an outside perspective to understand something. I think you're overthinking it. Your family will be behind you no matter what you do, girl. They're not the type to judge you unless you're doing something twisted or cruel. And nothing about you is that."

She chuckles. "You don't know me well enough to know that, Hank."

"I sure as hell know you're not cruel. Twisted? Maybe. We can experiment and see if we're both into that sort of thing."

More redness in the face. It is absolutely adorable and I want to see it every day for the rest of my life.

"So, the way you're talking," I say, stroking my chin, and matching her pacing with my own. "I'm getting definite yes vibes that you're on board with what I'm proposing."

She swallows. "And what you're proposing is marriage?"

"That's what I'm getting at, yes. So, will you marry me, Fig?"

To drive the point home, I drop to one knee.

"Oh my God," she's shaking her head, struggling to deal with the sheer immensity of everything I'm throwing at her. "Yes. It's a hasty and possibly crazy idea, but I'll marry you, Hank."

She keeps shaking her head, in sheer disbelief of the words she just said. For me? This has been inevitable ever since I saw her across from that dinner table yesterday.

"Alright. Now we're going to get you a ring. We're keeping that tradition, aren't we?"

"Gotta, since we're skipping over the whole extended courtship thing. That's usually a big part of getting married, you know."

“Seems tedious. I’d rather just cut to the chase.”

We head out of the empty shop and shut the door behind us, and it locks electronically just as the realtor said it would.

Hand in hand, we walk through the streets of Home. She’s still pink in the face from all the people around us who knew her as a little girl, seeing her hand-in-hand with a man now, seeing how life has been going on. People I’ve known all my life are seeing me too, and I couldn’t be prouder to be seen with her.

We reach Kelly’s Jewelers and head inside. It’s about an hour before closing and the shop is pretty empty.

The older woman behind the counter, Kelly herself, looks toward us, and her eyes widen behind thick glasses. “Is that you, little Fig Rough? And Hank Black? Holding hands?”

“Yes and yes,” I reply.

“Would have never expected you two to get together. I haven’t even seen you around town recently.”

“I’ve been off at college,” Fig says.

“And I’ve been a firefighter over in Spokane.”

“Please tell me you came back to get married and you’re here to pick out a ring.”

I nod. “I want whichever one my darling lady here wants.”

“Really? Not giving me a limit?” Fig says.

“There’s no limits on how I feel about you, and hence no limits on what ring I should get you.”

She smirks, amused. She looks over all the rings, including the ones with oversized diamonds that frankly look like they’d be a pain in the ass to wear day-to-day.

“I like this one the most,” she says, tapping on the glass over a small diamond set in a sleek silver-platinum band.

“You don’t have to restrain yourself for my sake, Fig.”

“I’m not. I like that ring the best. The big diamond ones are gaudy. I like my fashion subtle, and this ring says what it

needs to. It doesn't need to scream it to the high heavens.”

“Of course you have opinions on this, Ms. Fashion Major.”

“It's going to be Mrs. Fashion Major soon, thank you very much.”

Kelly takes the ring out of the display and Fig tries it on. It's a perfect fit and she loves it, so I ask Kelly to ring it up. She waves me over to the register to pay for it and I hand over my card.

Fig looks at it with concern. “Uh... you're not running up a massive credit card bill for this, are you?”

“That's a debit card, actually. It's coming right from my bank account.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And you're sure you can afford this on a firefighter's salary? The ring, the house...”

I laugh, and lead her out of the store. “Hardly. The department pays well, but it's not enough to buy a house and fancy diamond ring with cash.”

She looks at me. “I didn't think your family was that rich...”

“They're not, but for one exception. My uncle passed away last year. Was a stock trader, but really proud of me for going into firefighting. Something he always wanted to do but was too scared to try. He named me the primary beneficiary of his estate, so I'm set pretty well. Well enough to pay for our house and your ring anyway.”

“I never planned on marrying a man for his money, but damn.”

“I can help you get your business started too, Fig. But I have a more important question for you right now.”

“Do you? And what could that be?”

“You saw all the houses today. I can make a purchase and close the sale within days thanks to the money my uncle left me, and we can start to move in. We can start the next chapter of our lives. We just need to choose.”

“Buying a ring and picking a house on the same day? You’re not messing around, are you?”

“Hey, I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t serious.”

She sighs. “How do you feel about that little cottage? The white one with the pink front door? Do you think your masculinity can take that sort of hit, walking through a pink door every day?”

Out on Main Street, there are people walking past, all going about their business. I turn to Fig, wrapping my hands around her hips and pulling her close. “I don’t remotely care, Fig. The whole place could be hot pink and the lawn could be filled with flamingos, but if I’m there with you? There’s no place on this earth I’d rather be.”

“Then if you’re letting me pick? That one. It’s the perfect place to start a family. But I’ll think I’ll pass on the flamingos.”

“Good choice. Figures you have excellent taste.”

We laugh, but only briefly. I can’t resist any longer. I kiss her. Right on the sidewalk, with the world going on around us. I want them to see us. I want to shout it to the world. My love for her is sudden, but it’s so intense that I want the whole damn world to know about it.

I have her in my arms now, and I’m never, ever letting her go.

FIG

AFTER GETTING THE RING, IT'S TIME TO PSYCHE MYSELF UP TO tell my parents that I'm getting married out of nowhere to a man I haven't seen in four years.

A little buttering up goes a long way. I got a nice big bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey and a fluffy bouquet of roses, the most elaborate the florist could make on such short notice. We ride back up to the Rough house, and get out. Some smoke is coming from the backyard.

"Fire?" Hank asks.

I sniff. "Nah, my father is slow-smoking something. That's how he likes his brisket."

"Your family sounds better and better by the day, Fig. I love a good brisket."

"And my dad makes the best brisket you'll ever have."

"Just gotta hope he isn't pissed at me for running off with his little girl. Don't think I'll get much brisket if he's raging at me."

I let out a long sigh. "I'm doubting that's the case. Or at least hoping that's not the case. My father has always been supportive of us kids being our own people and not just doing what he wants us to do."

"Easy to say that, but three of your brothers ended up following in his footsteps."

“Yet they sent me off to study fashion. Hardly in line with the family business.”

I worry greatly about my family shooting my plans full of holes. Pointing out how small businesses are always threatened with failure, and how maybe Home isn't big enough to support its own bespoke fashion boutique.

I love my parents. I know they're supportive. But I don't think it's madness to have worries about what they'll think of everything.

I head into the house, and my father comes in from the back, wearing his apron, and sees me. “There's my little girl,” he says, squishing me in his bear-like hug.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Are you joining us again tonight, Hank? We're always happy to have more people at dinner.”

“You could say I'm joining you, yeah.”

“Fig, my darling!” my mother says as she comes down from her room. “Oh, and who might those roses be for?”

I walk over and present them to her. “For you, Mom. For being the greatest mom who ever mommed.”

She accepts the flowers, but has an eyebrow cocked.

I turn around and pull the bottle out of the gift bag and present it to my father. “And a bottle of Jack Daniel's for you.”

He takes it, and also eyes it suspiciously. “What horrible thing did you do, Fig?”

“What? I can't just give gifts to my lovely parents apropos of nothing?”

They both stand together, arms crossed. So much for buttering them up with gifts.

I'm trying to work up the courage to tell them the truth, but it's hard. Harder than admitting that I broke Uncle Angus's window with a soccer ball when I was a kid.

Fortunately, I'm not here alone. Hank grabs me by the shoulder and pulls me close. "We're getting married."

Mom and Dad look at one another in shock. "Already?"

"Fig and I see eye to eye on a lot of things, and we've decided we're not going to mess around and deny ourselves what we really want. We're getting married as soon as we can get it all planned out."

I timidly show my parents the ring, but they're still a bit awestruck.

"Aren't you going back to Los Angeles in a month or so, Fig?" my mother asks. "Getting married seems like it might get in the way of your plans, doesn't it?"

I can't keep running away from the truth. I have to tell them, because the longer I wait, the more likely they'll do something like rent an expensive cabin just to be near me for Christmas. "I'm not going back to Los Angeles, Mom."

"What do you mean? I thought that was always your dream. Don't tell me you're giving it all up for a man."

I shake my head. "No. It's not like that at all. I've felt this way for a while, and I've been meaning to tell you ever since I got back, before Hank showed up and won my heart so quickly."

"Fig, dear, you went on for years about your dream of being a fashion designer and taking over the world."

A tear is in my eye, but I keep shaking my head. "That was before I left Home, Mom. That was before I learned how rotten and corrupt the fashion world is. I came back, and realized how much I miss this place. And remembered what I truly love about fashion. How I want a personal touch in my projects, and not just trying to appease some crotchety old men."

"Jeez, make me feel bad for being a crotchety old man," my father says, scratching his head.

"Those guys are disgusting, Dad. Really, really disgusting."

“So, really bad co-workers, got it.”

“I’m putting down an offer on a house just outside of town,” Hank adds. “Cash. It’ll be finalized within the week by my guess, and Fig wants to join me in making it a proper home.”

My mother sighs. “What are you going to do instead of LA, Fig? Just become a housewife? There’s nothing wrong with that, mind you, I just thought you wanted more than that.”

“I do, Mom. Hank’s also helping me lease the old shoe store downtown. I’m going to open my own boutique and try to pursue my dream that way. Be my own boss, be in charge of my own destiny, free from the creeps that inhabit the world of high fashion.”

My dad laughs. “Becoming an entrepreneur is in the Rough bloodline, Fig. You’re following in the Rough footsteps whether you intended to or not.”

“I’m worried. There’s always a need for construction,” Mom says. “But fashion? Not necessarily.”

“I believe in you fully, my little Fig Newton,” Dad adds. “You got the smarts to catch the eyes of the right people and succeed beyond your wildest dreams, whether you do it in California or right here at Home.”

“I hope you’re right, Dad.”

“I am right. Always. Except the times I’m wrong, and we don’t talk about those times.”

Relief washes over me and I break into giggles. Dad always has had that way of breaking the tension and winning me over.

“Do what you want to do, Fig,” my mother says, a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Your father and I are behind you no matter what. And it seems like Hank will be behind you too, if he’s so willing to put his money where his mouth is.”

Hank smiles. “Don’t you worry, I’ve been in love with this girl since before I should have been. I’m going to do my

darnedest to make sure she succeeds, and that each and every day is the best day of the rest of her life.”

I let out a sigh of relief. I should have never doubted my parents. I should have never doubted Hank. Maybe someday I’ll learn to always trust those who love me the most.

The front door opens again. Graham comes in, followed by Tallie who is carrying her child, Lucy.

“Ah, is Hank joining us again?” Graham says.

“He didn’t tell me he was coming, is he here?” Reuben says, coming in behind them.

Looking at the street behind him, I see a bunch of cars. “Uh... what’s going on?”

“Dad’s throwing a barbecue,” Rye says as he comes in. “Didn’t the smell of brisket clue you in?”

“I just thought he liked brisket.”

Dad laughs. “I do, but we all wanted to get in as much time with you as we could. So we’re going to do two family dinners this week.”

The entire Rough clan is piling in, wives and kids with them, all of them here to make me remember what family I’m a part of.

“Well, everybody, I think I have an announcement to make,” I say. “I told Mom and Dad just now, but everyone else should hear this too.”

So I tell them. About how I’m not going back to Los Angeles, about how I’m getting married to Hank and opening up my own boutique right here in Home.

“You’re getting married, bro?” Reuben says, bumping fists with Hank and doing a weird handshake thing. “Knew you wouldn’t stay on the market for too long around here, and my sister couldn’t have picked a better guy.”

“So this business,” Lemon announces. “You think you could use an interior designer? To make sure it says fashion

boutique instead of old shoe store? It's a message you want to clearly convey."

"Are you offering your services, Lemon?" I ask.

"Pro bono. I want your little boutique to succeed as much as you do, little sister."

"I know a few things about retail," Bartlett adds. "Can give you plenty of tips to stay in the black."

Rye nods. "And you know the family construction company will help with any renovations you need."

"I...I guess I'll try to keep you from getting robbed?" Graham shrugs. "You know. Same as I do for everyone. I shouldn't be playing favorites."

Mac rolls his eyes. "Like Home has enough crime that Fig even has to worry about that."

"I do think that maybe we should still rent that cabin," Reuben says. "I was kind of looking forward to Christmas on the beach."

"I think we can make that happen," my dad says, stroking his chin. "As long as we can drag Fig and Hank away from their exciting new life together long enough for a holiday."

The conversation turns away from me, and I'm so happy no one judged me for stepping away from my dream of being a fashion mogul. Not only that, all of them were so eager to encourage me and offer whatever help they could.

Everyone wanders through the house, talking and laughing. The Roughs have powerful family values, ones I want to carry on. As I look at Hank, I'm certain that we'll carry them into the future.

HANK

THE ROUGHS ARE ABSOLUTE PROS AT THROWING A WEDDING together on short notice.

Fig and I intend to stay true to what we promised one another in the old shoe store, and that means that temptation lurks around every corner. We kiss, we do hand stuff, but we have held off from going all the way.

And damn it's hard.

Pun absolutely intended.

Anyway, the Roughts know what they're doing. Falling in love hard and falling in love fast is just something in the blood for them. Which works for me, because it would have been awfully painful to be so intensely in love with Fig if she'd needed to be romanced for months on end.

Which I still intend to do, mind you, it's just that she's been wildly in love with me from the start. The passion we have is so strong that I can't imagine it ever fading.

The family borrows a big barn from Mama Rough's family, the Rowdys. They get to work decorating it and making it look like a good and proper wedding venue, and they even arrange for organ music as if it's a church. Lemon, professional interior designer, apparently lives for this, and has had her fingerprints all over all of her siblings' weddings.

"Fig getting married just completes my clean sweep," she jokes.

A huge tent outside houses the massive catering line as well as a grand dance floor. Damn near a hundred people have rolled into town for it, the extended clan of the Roughts and Rowdys showing up, making my family's presence of my mother and a few cousins seem quite meek in comparison.

It's the big day and I'm standing at the altar, feeling nervous for some reason. I've never been more sure of anything in my life, but I guess I can't shake the natural anxiety that comes with such an occasion.

I stand across from Lemon, who has also nabbed the matron of honor role. Very productive woman. Behind me is Reuben, serving as my best man.

Up at the top of the aisle, Papa Rough stands with his daughter, nods, and walks her to me.

She's as beautiful as she ever is. She's wearing her grandmother's wedding dress, but she put her own touch on it. A few sequins and frills that respect her ancestor while making the gown all her own. A blend of tradition, free spirit, and individuality – all words that I'd use to describe Fig Rough.

That nervousness increases as she approaches, under that sheer veil. I realize it's because everything is too perfect. Everything's gone too well. I worry she'll have second thoughts, or maybe something more soap opera-ish will happen. Like someone actually objecting to our marriage or Fig having an evil twin named Gif or something along those lines.

It's silly. I wouldn't have urged us into this so fast if I wasn't so sure of how perfect we are for one another. And it all goes off without a hitch.

"I do," I say as the preacher completes his spiel about sickness and health, all without taking my eyes off of Fig.

"I do," she says as well, and we get the official pronouncement, and the command to kiss the bride.

I want to do so much more to her than that, but for now, I obey, never wanting to miss an opportunity to embrace her.

The cheering from the families is deafening, and it feels like a proper celebration. I'm proud to have gone through with this, although just going to the courthouse was oh so very tempting.

The reception is roaring. Good food, good cake. We dance the night away, and Fig drives me nearly insane with some very evocative moves where she's literally grinding into my crotch. I yearn for her so fucking bad, but it's considered rude for the bride and groom to leave their own party just after it starts.

We lean into one another, kissing and embracing as dusk turns to evening. I decide I've suffered enough.

"I'm beat," I declare loudly. "What an exhausting day."

"Huh?" Fig says. "You're tired already?"

I shoot her a look that communicates my intentions so loud and clear.

"Oh, right. I'm totally exhausted too." She's not much of an actor.

"Go on. You're not stopping the party," Rye says as he spins Prairie in his arms on the dance floor.

"Yes, go home and 'sleep,'" Bartlett's wife Abby says, making the quotations around 'sleep' loud and clear with her tone.

I nod. "We will. Goodnight, family, and thank you for celebrating our love."

They cheer, and some people raise champagne glasses to us.

Fig and I rush to my truck and climb in. We're both so excited and giddy as I consider speeding home. We get there safely, rolling into the driveway. She gets out first, but I intercept her before we get to the door, sweeping her off her feet.

"You really intend on doing this the old-fashioned way, don't you?" she says, giggling madly.

“Gotta carry you across the threshold. We’ve come this far, Fig. We can’t stop now.”

I push open the door, and deliver my bride to our new home.

Which is a bit barren, I have to admit. A card table and a few folding chairs, but I figure the rest of the home will come together.

I rush to the bedroom, which right now is just a mattress on the floor. It has a sheet and pillowcases at least, which is all we really need tonight.

My blushing bride and I roll onto the mattress, and she’s already pulling at my clothes. Button by button the tuxedo is coming off, and she’s kicking her feet to toss off her shoes.

“Unzip me!” she says, showing me her back, and I help her gleefully. She lets her dress fall and folds it quickly and neatly into the corner, treating the gown with as much care as it’s going to get in this bare room that will shortly become our love nest.

Soon I’m lying on the mattress, naked and stroking myself, and she’s sauntering up to me in her frilly underwear. My cock throbs uncomfortably, but its time will soon come.

I want her, no, I need her more than any man has ever needed a woman before.

FIG

I JUMP RIGHT DOWN ONTO HIM, HIS NAKED BODY AGAINST MY mostly naked body, enjoying the enticing feeling of them intertwining. His hands creating gooseflesh wherever they go, and making me crave him even more.

The anticipation that has built in our short time together feels all too overwhelming. The fire erupts immediately when we met and every moment we have spent apart has only built that anticipation hotter and hotter.

“Can’t believe I’m going to finally get to have you,” he says with a squeeze of my ass. “It feels like it’s been decades of holding back. I really didn’t think I was going to make it.”

“There are people in relationships who have waited far longer than we did, you know. And without getting married.”

“They’re fools. When you find someone you love, you should lock them down and embrace them as soon as possible.”

“I wouldn’t call not getting married to someone I just met foolish, Hank.”

“What do you mean? We technically met years ago!”

“With most of those years apart.”

“Details, details. All unimportant.”

I laugh, and he follows it up with another kiss. God, I don’t think I’ll ever tire of his lips, his embrace, or anything else

about him. Our time together feels so brief, but it feels so real, and so intense too.

I run my hand down his chest, feeling all of his manliness, and realizing it's all for me. My very own firefighter who has posed for calendars, who is mine now, and only mine.

He runs his hands around the waistband of my panties, his fingers siding into them, going deeper between my legs and using a gentle but firm touch on my clit, letting me call out in delight.

“For a virgin, you certainly know how to find that well,” I jest.

“I'm a virgin, yes. But I'm not naive. I've watched plenty of stuff that I wouldn't mention to my mother, Fig. And let's just say I've taken plenty of mental notes to use on my beautiful bride.”

“I don't doubt it. I guess I just expected you to be clueless like everyone always told me guys were.”

“Most of those clueless guys are more concerned with themselves than their girl. But I know better. You please the girl, the girl will keep coming back to you.”

“You're making a good argument right now for keeping me coming back, yes.”

“Oh, believe me. I already know you're mine, Fig. I just believe there's no such thing as overkill.”

He kisses me again, briefly, and it rains down my body. He pushes my panties down my legs, gently stripping me of them with a little bit of help from me. He spreads my legs and slides down my form, his hand flat on my chest, and kisses my now exposed clit, showing some intensity. A blissful surge through me forces me to moan loudly for him, exactly what he wants.

I feel a tender finger sliding around my slit, playing with my juices, already there and quite plentiful for him. One finger, two fingers poking at me, testing what's good and pleasurable as he glides over my sex and licks my clit.

He brings those licks lower, slurping my juices and laying on the attention.

I writhe as he goes to work, all of his studies in pleasing a woman now being applied and wholly dedicated to me. His fingers settle into a rhythm of pistoning in and out of me as he buries his face between my thighs, intent on eating me out nice and good.

Lick after lick, suck after suck, he shows me so much attention my whole body is vibrating. I instinctively grind my face into him, my body wanting more, my hand running through that beautiful head of hair. I never wanted to be like the girls I saw in porn films, moaning and pulling at him, all fake and dramatic. But as he laps at me, I learn that it's a more automatic response than I imagined, and there's nothing fake about this. Your entire being wants your man down there pleasing you, and your subconscious pushes you to do anything you can to enjoy it to the fullest.

Which includes fisting my fingers in his hair.

Hank isn't fazed by it. He's wholly dedicated to lapping at my sex, making me hotter and pushing me higher for him, making me grind my hips against him. The pent-up ecstasy in me is a chaotic mess and I'm crying out louder and louder as I struggle to cope with all that's being done to me.

His eagerness only grows, his smile visible even as his tongue is doing such wonderful work. I can't help but cry out louder and louder for him.

My heart pounds, and my entire being is consumed with the fires of pleasure. I cry out at the top of my lungs, suddenly damn glad we waited until we had a place of our own before doing this. I don't think I could look at anyone in the eyes the next morning if I thought they heard the sounds I'm making tonight.

But damn, it feels so good as it pulses over me, radiating through me again and again, causing me to cry out so loud.

I lie flat on the mattress, a sweaty, happy mess that he has made.

But this isn't just about me. I sit up, eyeing him up and down. I lick my lips as I look at him, and more directly, his cock, throbbing hard and pointing right at me. "That was really something, Hank, but I think I deserve a chance to show my appreciation too."

"I'm not going to tell you no, babe. I'm never going to tell you no."

I chuckle lightly as I slide onto my knees before him and grab hold of his throbbing, needy cock. I lick my lips, making my intention exactly clear. A good, long-lasting relationship is never one-sided. Both people involved bring everything they can to the table to please their lover in the bedroom and outside of it.

If he gave me his best head, it's only fair I give him my best. Like him, I'm not completely oblivious. I have a rough idea of the general mechanics of everything, but I'm going at him with the eagerness of someone who wants to learn to please him above all else.

Wrapping my fingers around his length, I look up at him eagerly as I caress him, surprised at how hard and warm he feels beneath my fingers. He shudders, and I feel a bit powerful having his cock in my hands. I'm in control of this, I can do whatever I want, he trusts me this much. He wants me this much.

My tender touch goes up and down his length, letting him shudder beneath me. I lean in closer, planting a kiss on the head of his cock, and teasing him a bit with my tongue. He only smiles in response, and I press my exploration of him further. I lick down his shaft, up his shaft, and down again, this time twisting my tongue around him a bit. Going to his balls, so big and heavy, teasing me with their contents. We've rushed into so much already. Are we planning on rushing into making a family too?

I feel strangely okay with that fact. Love does things to you, and I'm on board with the roller coaster of emotions that's certain to be my life with Hank.

Facing his cock, I open wide, encapsulating all of him. His pleasant groan is music to my ears, and I enjoy trying to make him groan louder as I take his cock deeper and deeper until I'm taking all of him, which honestly impresses me. Looking at it, and thinking about what I can fit in my mouth, it really shouldn't have worked. Just another wonderful surprise of my time with Hank, I suppose.

Getting him good and ready to take me, I bob my head up and down his cock, setting a steady pace of pleasing him, hearing his moans and groans become more frequent and ecstatic as I push on. I'm a sexual goddess when I hear him struggle against coming, knowing that his release is completely in my power. I love it.

But I know he wants something more. And I want that too.

"Hold up, hold up," he says, hurriedly pulling his cock away. "I want you, bad, Fig. And if you keep doing that I'm going to explode all over your face."

"Would that be so bad?"

"No. It wouldn't. But we've been so old-fashioned about a lot of this, I think we should consummate our marriage with something... a tad more traditional."

I laugh. "Are you afraid of spilling your seed on the ground?"

"Believe me, I want to spill my seed anywhere and everywhere as long as it's with you. I want to do things to you that would make the pastor never be able to look either of us in the eye again. But for tonight? I just want to feel you around me when I cum, girl. And I want you to be there with me, screaming my name as I fill you wholly with everything you make me feel."

I lean back on the bed, looking up at him, flashing him a seductive gaze and waving a finger his way. I spread my legs good and wide for him. "Well then. When you put it like that, how can I possibly deny you, Hank?"

His cock throbs in anticipation of what's to come.

Hank comes down to the bed with me with another kiss, reaching between my legs and massaging me as he lines himself up. I grab his cock and pull it closer, urging him to push himself into me, to claim me. I've never wanted anything more than I want this right now.

Feeling him poking at my sex, I prepare myself despite my enthusiasm. Hank watches me as he begins to push in, so dedicated to not hurting me. It's such an intense, immense feeling as he fills me, but of all the things I'm experiencing as he does so?

Pain ain't one of them.

I must have been so wet and ready for him that my body offered no resistance, only encouragement. He's steady, waiting for me to show any second thoughts, but I just nod. "I'm good. More than good. Fuck me, Hank. Give me everything you can."

He grunts in affirmation, as I enjoy the steady friction of his withdrawal and him thrusting back in. Flesh against flesh, magic sparking up so wonderfully between us. It becomes a steady pace, and I'm yearning for him to give me more and more until I'm once again immersed in nothing but orgasmic sensation.

I buck against him, and he matches my pace. I nibble on my lip as the heat turns up inside me so suddenly and so quickly. My legs close around him, as do my arms, I'm so entwined with him, so driven to get more of him. I cry out louder and louder for him, muffled by the nonstop kisses he showers on me. We're both so consumed by one another, our primal instincts taking control. It doesn't matter that we were virgins before this, our love for one another and something deep within us have guided us the rest of the way.

All of a sudden, I'm rolling over him onto the floor. There's barely a fall, and laughter the only comment to it. I'm on top now, but still keeping the fervent pace between us alive. I'm bouncing on him, my breasts swaying with the rest of my body, and he continues to fuck me from below, his hands going up my sides to grab my shaking tits.

The passion is so strong, and the energy between us so great, that all I want is for it to last forever. For him to keep fucking me like this, for us to feel this and only this for the rest of our days.

Unfortunately, we're human beings. We have our limits, but at least those limits come with a wonderful climax.

One more bounce, one more thrust, one more rub of my clit. I don't know which it is, but it sends me over the edge, my moans becoming screams and as I experience something so great that I know I'll be chasing this feeling for the rest of my days. Hank is right there with me, pounding me from below, his muscles so tense and dedicated to our pleasure that he's begging for release just as badly as I am.

Seeing me bend over backwards, arching within his grip, must have been the last thing he needed to hit his own orgasm. He cries out, and I feel the slight trembling of his cock inside me moments before he erupts and injects his warm seed deep into me. Everything I did to him comes roaring back to me, filling me to the brim and consummating our marriage the old-fashioned way.

It's so sweet on top of everything else. I know I'm going to want more of it, despite the consequences. Or perhaps because of the consequences. I just want more.

More of this. More of Hank. More of love.

We're sweaty messes on the floor, me still on top of him, him still inside of me. He runs his hands through my hair, and gives me a more powerful, intensely romantic kiss.

"I think you're mine forever now, Fig."

I nod. "Yep. Right here on this floor too."

"Do we even want to get back on the bed?"

"And disrupt how good this all feels?"

"You're right. We're going to stay here forever. Just enjoy the embrace of one another until we starve and die."

"I can think of worse ways to go out."

Maybe not in the literal sense, but I am staying here, with him. One hundred percent, for the rest of my life.

I can't imagine my future any other way now.

EPILOGUE 1

HANK

SIX MONTHS LATER

“So, just finishing up this checklist. The appropriate amount of exits? More than enough. Each of them with neon exit signs? Yep. plenty of smoke detectors and sprinklers? Looks good to me.”

Rye and Mac stand with their arms crossed. I put them through the ringer about all of this, knowing that as a new official, all of my safety reviews will be under immense scrutiny.

The Home Fire Department has a half-dozen people in total, and in addition to putting out fires, it's also our duty to inspect the safety of any new construction in the town.

I volunteered to learn and expand my skills. It's something I can do if my body ever gives out and I can't carry people out of burning buildings anymore. Hopefully I'm decades away from that point, but hey, you can never start too early.

The Rough boys recently won a sweet contract to build a new community center in the town, and they're currently putting on the finishing touches before declaring the project done.

“So that's it? We're done? We've cleared all your safety hurdles?” Mac says. He's been slightly annoyed with how much of a stickler I am being about all this.

“Hey, he's just helping keep people safe,” Reuben chimes in, a brotherly hand over my shoulder. “Don't be a dick to Hank for just doing his job.”

I nod. “If I was less strict, you should be worried. The previous inspector might have been half-assing it.”

Rye nods. “Old Man Richards did seem to be out of fucks to give about anything. If I didn't realize we forgot to put smoke detectors in that bungalow outside town, no one would have.”

Mac sighs, and relents. “Yeah, I guess. Sorry, don’t mean to be a dick at ya.”

I shake my head. “No offense taken, I’m not a fan of being a super strict asshole either, but it has to be done.”

“Job’s done now, though,” Rye adds. “We all go out and get plastered in celebration. You’re welcome to get plastered with us, Hank.”

I laugh, but shake my head. “Can’t. Told Fig I’d go and help her do the last touch-ups on her shop. Opening day is very close.”

Reuben slaps me on the back. “Ah, I see my sister has you completely under her control now.”

“Yep. I’m henpecked and I couldn’t be happier.”

Mac lets out a long sigh. “Yeah, guess we shouldn’t get plastered anymore. Maybe a few drinks. Gotta be adults now. I mean, all of us are, or are expecting to become, parents, right?”

Rye nods. “Bit of a pain, but sometimes you give something up to do something better. I’ll pass on getting the hangovers for a happy wife who is very excited to see me come home.”

“Think I need to swing by the store and get Merit some soda. Just remembered I promised that,” Mac says.

“Need some baby formula from the store myself,” Rye adds. “And maybe some of the muffins Prairie really likes.”

“Aw, jeez,” Reuben chimes in. “That’s right, Meadow wanted me to get her some guitar strings. So guess we ain’t celebrating tonight at all.”

“The time will come boys,” I say. “We take care of our loves, and that comes with some responsibility. But next family dinner, I’m sure we’ll all raise a wine glass to a job well done.”

“Can I do whiskey at least?” Mac asks. “If I wanted to drink grape juice I’d just drink grape juice.”

Rye pats his brother on the head. "I'm sure Dad won't mind, Mac."

They all laugh, and the four of us head for the door and go our separate ways. I have an errand to run before I go home to my love too, and it isn't at the grocery or music supply store.

Home's small enough that you can get through it at a brisk walk, and you see a lot of the same faces everyday, meeting them with a smile. I missed it when I was in Spokane. I was a single face in the sea there, but I really feel like I'm part of a community here.

"Britney, you really shouldn't dial 911 for this."

"But Spider is up in a tree!"

And sometimes you run into close friends and family.

Graham is talking to a six-year-old child. He looks somewhat annoyed, but knows the target of his annoyance doesn't know any better. "911 is for emergencies. I don't think this is one, Spider seems happy in that tree."

"But I need him down here! It is an emergency, Officer Rough!"

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"The old cat stuck in the tree problem?" I say as I approach.

"Hank? Aren't small animals in tall places they shouldn't be a firefighter problem?"

"I mean, we can help with that. We got the equipment."

"You think you can call in reinforcements? Britney wants her cat back, but my squad car didn't come equipped with a ladder."

I look up and down the tree, and the cat casually chills on the branch. "Nah, you don't need all the firefighters for this."

"How are we going to get Spider down then?" the kid asks me eagerly.

“Like so,” I say, before leaping onto the tree and shimmying up it enough to get hold of the branch. This is nothing compared to the training I went through to get certified.

Graham looks up at me, impressed, the kid does too.

“Here kitty, psh psh psh,” I repeat.

Curiosity gets the better of the cat and he approaches. I itch his ears and he comes close enough for me to scoop him up and start my descent. It’s a bit like sliding down a fire pole, except with way more bark.

“Spider!” Britney exclaims as I hand her the cat, who meows in response. “Thank you Mr. Guy, sir, whatever your name is.”

“Hank is fine.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hank!” She runs away, holding her cat tight, hopefully preventing it from running up any more trees in the future.

“Well then, I didn’t expect that,” Graham says. “The training cops get is mostly cardio and marksmanship. I would have climbed that tree if I knew it was that easy.”

I laugh. “I’m not throwing you any shade, Graham. Different skill sets is all. Doubt you gotta chase any crooks up trees. Not exactly the best getaway plan for them.”

“I’ll be sure to call you in if any of them do flee up a tree.” He strokes his chin. “Perhaps that’s where a cat burglar would go.”

“If I wasn’t in such a good mood, Graham, I think I’d risk being arrested for assaulting an officer over that pun. And I don’t think the jury would convict me either.”

“Fair, it’s so awful that I think I’d testify against myself.” He smiles. “But with Lucy getting older, I gotta get into the dad joke mindset. It’s easier said than done.”

“If you’re already making jokes like that, I have complete faith in your ability to master the dad joke, Graham.”

“What about you? My sister drive you seven kinds of crazy yet? I can’t imagine being married to either of my sisters, just being related to them is bad enough.”

“I can’t imagine not being married to her,” I say. “Only kind of crazy I am is crazy for her. And I think you can appreciate that kind of crazy with Tallie, no?”

He nods. “I’m absolutely insane about her, yes. Still, you married into our crazy family. And so did Tallie. Can’t believe either of you would willingly do that.”

“Never been happier, Graham. And I’m sure Tallie’s never been happier either.”

He nods. “I damn sure hope so. Her happiness is my one wish in life. Lucy’s too.”

“Take it easy man, I gotta get to the hardware store.”

“Keep on keepin’ on, Hank.”

It’s nice meeting familiar faces and having chats out of the blue. I really did miss that.

Over at Bartlett’s hardware store, I throw him a greeting, and go about my business. I pick up three smoke alarms, and bring them up to the counter.

“More fire safety, huh?” Bart says as he rings up my order.

“Can’t believe it took me until the other day to realize the alarms in the old shoe store didn’t work. They were some really old ones too, from the seventies.”

Bart grimaces. “They might be older than my Dad.”

“Last thing I want is for Fig to get her dream shop going, only to have the fire marshal come into town and shut her down for improper safety procedures.”

“Aren’t you the new fire marshal?”

I shake my head. “I’m just the inspector, and I’m still training too. I’m sure they’re going to send someone to check in on whether I’m doing a good enough job, so I’m being particular about everything.”

He shrugs. “Better that than everything burning down.”

I raise an eyebrow with a smirk. “Have you checked your smoke detectors recently, Bart?”

He gives me a cheeky salute. “Yes, I check yearly, Smokey. I know only I can prevent hardware store fires.”

“Just making sure. You know, I think Fig would like it if I were more like Smokey. The shirtless and hairy parts at least, I don’t know how she feels about hats.”

“I’d rather not think of what my sister wants in a man, thank you very much.”

I pay for my stuff, and wish Bartlett a good day, then head to my final stop before I go home for the evening.

Fig’s Fashion and Function.

My sweetheart’s new dream shop. Custom orders and tailoring, along with plenty of original designs for sale. She’s young enough to keep up with the youth, and is planning on trying to appeal to the young people of Home, with the idea that even the slightly older people want to be cool, so they’ll come to her shop too. Then she’ll win them over and make them loyal customers for life.

Fig surprised me with her little cunning business plan. Her head’s not completely up in the clouds with this, and she’s determined to succeed. As much as I want to support her, at the end of the day, fashion isn’t something I think about, so that’s all on her.

“See, you should put this shelf here, and let the customers flow through your shop. A little bit of planning goes pretty far when it comes to a store.”

Lemon is in here explaining things to Fig, about the placement of some shelves and the register.

“When someone comes in and is looking around, you want them to find something that they like. And that requires arranging everything well, setting the store up to take them on a journey through your collection.”

“I’m feeling you. So.... sunglasses near the register?”

“And make sure where you stand, the sun is pouring in from behind you. They’ll realize that maybe they need some sunglasses. Boom, extra sales.”

I didn’t expect both Rough sisters to be such shrewd businesswomen.

“Good evening, my sweet Fig,” I say, making my presence known and wrapping my hands around her waist.

Lemon cocks an eyebrow. “Speaking of the sun... it’s getting awfully low in the sky. I think I’ll let you too lovebirds be.”

The older sister chuckles to Fig as she struts out of the shop.

I dance with Fig, holding her close. “You seem anxious.”

“How can I not be? I’m throwing a big opening day party next week. Everyone in town will probably stop by. And I have to keep a smile on my face to convince myself this isn’t a bad idea and a waste of money.”

“It’s what you want. It’s not a waste of money, Fig. I believe in you. And I’m so fucking proud of you for going for this. For sticking to your guns, and for following your heart.”

“Is that just because my heart told me to marry you out of the blue months ago?”

“Well, yeah. If your heart told you to do that, your heart is pretty smart. I trust it to make good decisions.”

She turns in my arms and flashes me those beautiful brown eyes of hers. “My heart wouldn’t have done any of this without you, Hank. Without you, I would have buckled, and I’d be miserable in Los Angeles right now, working under some stuffy cruel asshole, instead of paving my own way in my hometown.”

“It’s a lovely place, Fig. It’s why I think you’ll succeed.”

“Because of Home?”

“Why’s someone going to go to some department store in the next town over when they can get something better from

you?”

“Speed? Price? Convenience?”

“I guess in some cases? But I think the people of Home are dedicated to supporting one another. They’ll come to you if they can. How do you think the store shoe before you prospered for so long? It didn’t go out of business. The owner just retired.”

She nods. “I need you to keep me grounded. To keep me free from worry, Hank. I love you so much.”

“And I love you. And this town.”

I’m not just blowing smoke up her ass.

Every day I’m here I feel like it’s more of a community, and I’m a part of a bigger family. The Roughts have taken me in by marriage, and even before that, treated me well as Reuben’s friend.

I’m blessed to be a part of them, and to be a part of this town.

But more importantly, I’m blessed to have Fig, the woman I will love until the day I die.

EPILOGUE 2

FIG

ONE YEAR LATER

I flip the sign, go back to the counter and collapse onto the chair.

I'm exhausted.

And I don't think I can do this alone anymore.

Being pregnant isn't helping things. I'm only four months along, but I'm already feeling it. Fig's Fashion and Function is my passion project, and I'm not going to give it up just because I'm too pregnant to work.

But maybe I should hire someone just to manage the counter so I can dedicate what little energy I have to the tailoring work.

I'll have to do interviews though. And go through all the business that comes with legally hiring someone. Thankfully I got a family to lean on for support, and some of them know business stuff, like Bartlett.

The front door's bells ring out as it swings open. I'm not surprised since it's the same visitor I always get around this time of day.

Hank.

"Good evening, beautiful," he says, in a sing-songy but oh so sincere voice.

He turns around and locks up the store, drawing the blinds.

"How was business today?"

"Busy," I say, holding myself up, barely. "Too busy."

"That's good, right?"

He makes his way to me. He's glistening, having broken a bit of sweat, enough to intensify his manly scent, but not too overwhelming. He's looking exceptionally alluring today in his tight red shirt with the Home FD logo emblazoned on it.

He also manages to make suspenders sexy. They're holding up some baggier thick work pants.

"Did something happen today?"

Hank slides behind me at the counter, his grip tight around my waist, and his breath against my ear. "Kitchen fire got out of hand. We were called in. Managed to put it out before it spread too much, and thankfully no one was hurt besides some minor burns on the guy who thought the answer was more vegetable oil."

"Just enough to work up a sweat, huh?"

"I've just been thinking of you all day, Fig. About how one year ago today, we agreed to marry one another." He looks around the store and gauges where we are. "Not far from this spot either."

"Ah, you remembered."

"I'd never forget any of our anniversaries. You're the most important thing in the world to me."

I'm in a dress today. I've only recently begun to show, but I've gone all-in on making maternity wear my own. I've got orders coming in from other expectant mothers who want what I've been wearing.

Hank is prepared to take full advantage of it. Those hands of his sliding down my body, and hiking the dress up from behind, grinding his cock against my ass. Even through those thick pants he's wearing I can feel how hard he is.

"Right here?" I ask.

"I closed the blinds. I think we're in the clear, aren't we?"

I giggle. "You're insatiable."

There's rarely been a day without indulging in one another, and mostly those were days where we'd been forced apart.

If we're together, and we're alone? The temptation is simply too much to resist.

He unzips, and I shimmy my panties down my legs. I'm worried someone might look in through one of the gaps in the

blinds, but I know that's silly.

Hank's touch roams up my body, all around my abdomen. "Fuck, you're just so sexy, Fig. I can't get enough of you. You being like this just makes you more tempting."

"So what? You're going to keep me perpetually pregnant?"

"You want me to do that? Because I'll do that. Gladly."

"We'll see where this goes. This first pregnancy hasn't been too bad, but there have been some challenges. My mother and sister tell me I'll get used to it, but I'm not making any promises yet."

"We'll take it nice and easy then. Whatever you want, babe. I'm here for you. I'm yours. That much I'm damn sure of."

His bare cock pokes at my sex and I spread my legs further for him, and he thrusts himself right in, making me cry out in delight. We'd gotten to know one another so damn well in the past year, and the sex has only gotten better. We were virgins in our early twenties, so the last year has been educational, and I have to say I've had simply the best study partner.

A hand on my hip and a hand on my breast, Hank starts to fuck me, every thrust shooting through me with so much intensity. I cry out louder and louder as I buck back into him, forcing him deeper inside of me.

Bent over the counter where I do business with dozens of people every day, I can't help but laugh and feel especially sinful. If only they knew what it's been used for over the past six months.

My entire form bucks into him again and again, as I crane back to kiss him. Our lips meet, our tongues meet, and become entwined like the rest of us.

Everything we've learned has taught us so much about each other. He knows just how to fuck me, and I know just how to squeeze him. All to build ourselves up to something amazing and ecstatic.

Our tryst reaches a fever pitch. I break out into a sweat comparable to his as he pushes me over the edge with a tender and rhythmic touch on my clit, making me cry out so wonderfully at the top of my lungs. Not long after, Hank joins me, the heights of orgasm too tempting for him to resist any longer, and that sweet, oh so delicious warmth being fired into me such a wonderful little feeling on top of everything else.

We're panting, and my throat hurts from singing his praises. I'm so loud that I'm convinced the Chinese place next door has to know what Hank and I do in here after closing.

Fuck it. Let them know we're madly in love.

"I'm forever addicted to you, Fig. I simply can't get enough," Hank whispers into my ear, his breath tender and sweet.

"I love you too, my hunky mountain man."

To think, I almost threw this away. To pursue some career in Los Angeles I didn't want anymore. Because of some sunk cost fallacy, and the belief that the most supportive family in the world would be angry with me for not doing what they thought I'd do. I'd have been miserable down there, probably spending a lot of time hating my boss and my life.

This, though? It was like choosing Heaven instead of Hell.

"Or maybe I should be calling you something else now," I say, smirking at him.

"Like what?"

"My hunky mountain daddy."

"No lies detected, my sweet mountain mommy."

We kiss again, and simply enjoy one another's embrace for a time.

They're the best moments of my life, and I have so many of them still in my future.

MORE OF THE ROUGHS...

**Here is how the Rough parents Red and Annie met and fell
in love:**

[Roughing It With The Mountain Man](#)

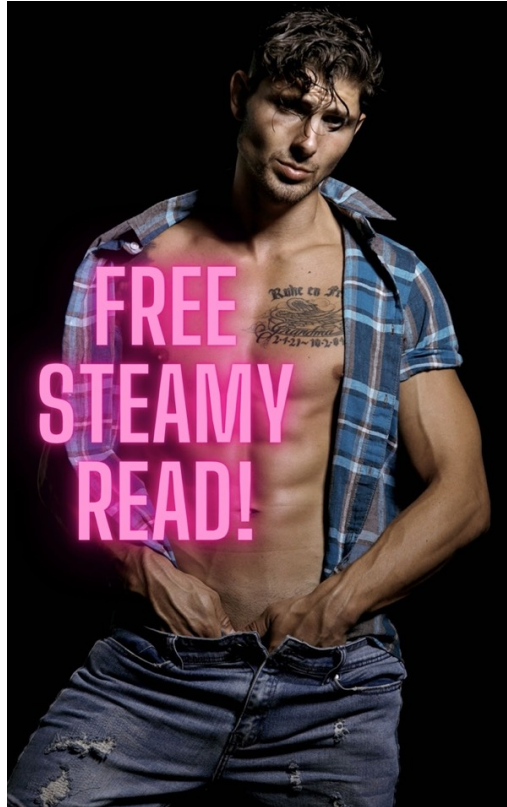
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[Coming Home to the Mountains](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Frankie Love writes filthy-sweet stories about bad boys and mountain men. Frankie is ridiculously in love with her own bearded hottie, believes in love-at-first-sight, and happily-ever-afters. She also believes in the power of a quickie.

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