

A romantic couple is shown in profile, facing each other and about to kiss. The woman has long blonde hair and is wearing a brown leather jacket over a white top. The man has a beard and is wearing a plaid shirt over a white t-shirt. They are standing in a field of tall grass, with a sunset or sunrise sky in the background.

Love, Canadian Style

# CANADIAN

*Harvest*

KIMBERLY ANN

# CANADIAN HARVEST

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# A LOVE, CANADIAN STYLE NOVELLA

KIMBERLY ANN

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# MITCH

Chaos.

That's the only way I can describe the scene in front of me.

I'm sitting around the fire at my friend Brody's farm, drinking the cider he makes on site from the apples he grows, thinking I was coming to a barbecue with some friends.

Instead—chaos.

Is this normally how I spend my days off? Being the only single guy at a barbecue filled with families? No, but you can't live in Logan Creek and escape being drawn into their circles, even if it does make you the odd man out.

I watch as Brody's eighteen-month-old son, Noah, runs through the grass, screaming as if the world were on fire. Our buddy Travis' daughter, Amelia, is following him around, like the self-appointed leader that he is, acting as if they are going into battle.

A baby cries. I'm not sure if it's Travis' little one or the other baby here, but it's loud and high-pitched.

The women are all chatting around a table under the shade of a tree, laughing while Travis and Brody man the barbecue.

I'm not bothered by the noise. I'm a partner in the local brewery in town. Noise is what I'm used to. What I'm not used to is the chasing and herding of the children that comes with this category of noise.



I look over at Dyllan Thompson, the town mayor and resident grump, wondering how he's staying so calm and unaffected by it all. If anyone, he's the least likely to be in a yard of screaming children, casually drinking as if he was alone at a lake.

"You're staring," he says, taking a sip of his beer while not taking his eyes off of his wife and daughter under the tree.

"I'm just wondering how you're so immune to...this," I say, tilting my bottle of cider at everyone.

"This?" he repeats.

"The...chaos." I take a sip of my cider, dismayed it's the last. "I dunno, man. A lot has changed in the time since I moved to Logan Creek. I for sure never saw you settling down and having a kid."

Dyllan's gaze travels once more to his wife Skylar and their baby, Bella. "Things change," is the only answer I get out of him,

"Hmph," I respond, not knowing what else to say.

"Hey, man. You want another?" Travis asks with a smile as he stands at the cooler.

I stand from my chair, empty bottle in hand, as I walk toward him. "Yeah, thanks." I'm grateful for the opportunity to break from whatever heart-to-heart that was with Dyllan. Or at least, that's as close as you get with him.

I walk to Travis, tossing my bottle in the bag designated for empties on the way.

"You look like you need another one," Travis laughs, handing me a fresh, cold cider.

"Is it that obvious?" I laugh, twisting the cap and taking a sip.

"That you're a single guy surrounded by married couples and their kids? Most definitely."

"Thanks for inviting me, though. It's been a long time since I've done anything other than sleep on my day off."

“Maybe you should tell Zach to stop working you so hard.”

“Coming from the cop?” Brody says, glancing at Travis, eyebrow raised. He continues flipping the burgers and drinking his own cider.

“Like you’re one to talk, farmer?” Travis retorts.

“We’re all a group of workaholics...”

“Hey, I’ve been taking it slower...sorta,” Travis says defensively, taking a sip of his beer.

“Only because you have two under two,” Brody ribs.

“Who has what under what?” I ask, completely puzzled by the conversation in front of me.

“Two kids under the age of two,” Lila, Travis’ wife, says as she passes him a wrapped baby.

“Ah,” I say, watching Travis flawlessly switch his beer to his opposite hand while scooping the bundle against his body. I don’t know why I find this so fascinating. I don’t want kids. I’ve never wanted them. Hell, I’ve never even lasted in a relationship long enough for that to be a topic of conversation. But here I am, staring at one of my friends with a baby, wondering if I could do something like that.

What the fuck am I thinking?

“Do you want to hold him?” Travis asks, shifting the squirming bundle.

“No!” I say a little too aggressively, holding my hands up in front of me. Brody, Travis, and Lila chuckle.

“It’s a baby, man. Not a bomb,” Travis jokes.

“That’s debatable,” I say, wearily eyeing him up. “I’ve been around Zach’s kids.”

I’ve known Zach Richardson for years, having met him almost a decade ago in college. Since then, we have both ended up in his hometown of Logan Creek, and are now partners in a local brewery. While I’ve embraced my bachelorhood into my thirties, Zach settled down a couple of

years ago with Mandy, adopted her two children after she became a widow, and they had their own daughter, Emma. And while I'll admit the kids are cute, I know they are, in fact, very much like little bombs.

"Aw, leave him alone, Travis. Not all guys are baby-crazy like you are," Lila says. "Speaking of babies, Brody, Kade needs another water. Where are you keeping those watermelon ones she likes?"

"I'll get it." He gives the burgers one last glance before rushing off.

I look over at Kade as she rests in the shade sitting on a lawn chair, her feet up on a tree stump, rubbing her very pregnant belly.

When did all my friends become baby-making machines? And why does this make me feel a little left out?

I move to the barbecue, picking up the spatula and taking over grilling duties. Not because they need attention, but more for the first time since calling these people my friends, I don't know what to do around them.

Travis and Lila are fussing over their baby. Brody's sitting with Kade, laughing with her and Skylar while rubbing Kade's belly.

Dyllan is acting grumpy while the toddlers climb all over him, shrieking with laughter. But I see him biting back a smile, showing he loves it as much as they do.

Then there's me.

I should have traded days off with Zach. He and his family would have fit in here better than me at their Labour Day gathering. I should be working, letting those with families enjoy the late-summer evening.

"What about Rachel?" Skylar asks, drawing my attention away from my spiralling thoughts.

"I texted her, but she said she'd have to get back to me. I guess she's not coming," Kade says in disappointment.

Rachel's name piques my interest. Unless there's another Rachel that's popped up in Logan Creek, they're talking about the cute florist in town.

Putting down the spatula after giving the burgers another once over, I grab my drink and head over to the seating area.

"That's too bad. I was hoping she'd get out and join us today. I know she closed the shop early," Skylar says, shifting baby Kendall to her other arm.

"You know how she is," Lila says.

"What do you mean? How is she?" I ask, unable to help myself. I put my elbows on my knees, leaning forward, trying to be casual while trying to get more information about her.

"She just likes being at home," Kade says, shooting a look at Lila, that if I spoke woman, I'm assuming, would be telling her to shut up.

Interesting. I want to know more about this quiet introvert. "Now I know why I never see her in the brewery with you guys."

"Yeah, we've tried, but it's not her thing," Kade says.

They start talking about babies, and toddlers, and things I don't understand, but my mind stays on Rachel. I don't know what it is about her, but I'm determined to learn more. Now, I just need to figure out a way to get her to talk to me.



## RACHEL

“Well, aren’t you pretty?” I say, placing the last white hydrangea in the vase. There’s something about a pomander bouquet in an all glass vase that makes me so happy. The simplicity. The elegance. It’s just so timeless.

And am I talking to my flowers? Yes, I am, but I find it therapeutic. They don’t talk back. They don’t make demands of me. They just let me create. Let me use my imagination to take singular beautiful flowers and turn them into breathtaking works of art. Like the twenty identical arrangements that will make up an event at Logan Creek Brewery tomorrow.

Humming along to the latest Josh Ross song on the radio, I grab another vase and get to work on the next arrangement when the door opens. Skylar breezes into my shop, her long blonde hair up in a messy bun, with sunglasses pushed onto the top of her head, and a bright smile.

“I brought coffee,” she says, holding up two signature to-go cups from Charmed Bakery.

“Are those also lemon danishes in the bag?” I ask, putting the flowers down on my table and standing, wiping my hands on my apron.

“You know it,” she laughs.

Kade and Lila run Charmed Bakery, and no one can leave there without some sort of delicious treat.

“We missed you at the barbecue yesterday,” she says, handing me my coffee. “It was a lot of fun.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I got busy here at the shop and I lost track of time. I did plan on coming.” Sort of. That wasn’t a lie. I meant to stop by at some point, but by the time I left the shop, it was too late to stop by. I went home and finished reading my book instead.

“Rachel, your store was closed yesterday for the holiday, along with every other store on the street.” She tilts her head.

I hate feeling like I let her down. Let them all down.

“I know, but I had to get started on all these arrangements; make sure the order for the wedding next week was correct and placed on top of our normal orders and deliveries. I meant to stop by for an hour and the next thing I knew, it was past nine.”

“I wish you didn’t work so much,” she sighs.

“Coming from the woman that single-handedly organizes and attends every event at the brewery and cidery?”

“Yes, but I still make time for things outside of that, especially now that we have Kendall.” She places her coffee on the counter next to us and places her hand on mine. “I worry about you, Rachel.”

I take a sip of my coffee, inwardly moaning as the pumpkin spice and coffee flavours hit my tongue. Damn Skylar and getting me my favourite drink to butter me up for this.

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“When was the last time you were on a date?” She raises her eyebrow at me.

“I...date.” I avoid her gaze. In honesty, I can’t remember the last time I went on a date.

“Fictional men don’t count.” I open my mouth to respond, but she forges ahead. “I’m all for reading—I loved that last book you gave me about the lumberjack, by the way—but I just want you happy.”

“I am happy.” I don’t even convince myself when I say it.

She looks at me for a long moment before taking back her hand and wrapping her perfectly manicured fingers around her cup. “Mitch was there.”

My heartbeat quickens at the mention of his name. Mitch Brandt. Tall, dark brown hair with hazel eyes that make me melt, and dimples that make me swoon. I try to play it cool, though.

I look down at my mug as I raise it to take another sip, willing my voice to sound neutral. “Oh, yeah?”

“Mmhmm,” she says with a coy smile.

“What’s that for?”

“You know exactly what it’s for. You aren’t good at hiding things, Rachel,” she chuckles.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Right. We both know you have a little crush on him. I don’t know why you haven’t just gone for it.”

I look at her, dazed. Gone for it? Me? I don’t go for things, especially dates.

“I can see you overthinking it. Why don’t you just ask him out?” She reaches for the bag on the counter between us, pulling out a danish before handing it to me.

“I don’t know how you can ask me that so casually.”

She takes a bite of the danish and tilts her head, observing me while she chews. “I don’t know how to approach that other than casually. You like him. He’s single. Ask him.”

“It’s not that simple, Skylar,” I huff, taking a bite of my danish, letting the sweet and tart flavour distract me from having to explain to my friend why I can’t just walk up to a man and ask him out.

“Well, it would have been easier if you had shown up at the barbecue,” she ribs. The smile on her face letting me know I didn’t upset her by not coming, which is good. I never meant to upset anyone.



“I know. I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I’m not the type of girl that can just walk up to a guy and ask them out. That’s not me.”

“And you’re not going to get very far if you just sit back and wait for things to happen to you, either.”

“Says the girl who literally woke up married to the love of her life without realizing you’d done it.”

“I know how Dyllan and I got together was... unconventional, but that doesn’t mean we both didn’t take risks in getting to where we are today. Yes, I may have disliked him a little when we first met...”

“A little?” I interrupt.

“But,” she continues, narrowing her eyes at me, “that doesn’t mean that once we realized we had gotten married after drinking too much, we didn’t have to push through and go outside of our comfort zones to be where we are now.”

“But Mitch doesn’t even know I exist.”

“Rachel, this is Logan Creek. No one goes unnoticed. But also, he knows who you are. He perked up when we brought your name up last night.”

“He did?” Now she has piqued my interest. I want to know what was said. What did he say? What was his reaction? So many thoughts rush through my mind; the speed only rivalled by my overactive heart.

“Yes, he did. So, the question now is, what are you going to do about it?”

I take another bite of my danish, not knowing how to respond to that.

“I’ll leave it alone—for now,” she concedes. “Mitch isn’t the only reason I stopped by. I wanted to do a final confirmation for the Martinez wedding at the brewery next weekend.”

Thankful for the change in subject, I pop the rest of the danish in my mouth and grab my tablet, pulling up the details of the order. We spend the next half an hour discussing flowers

and arrangements, making sure we're on the same page, which we almost always are.

One great thing about living in a small town is when you're friends with the only event planner in town, you get to spend a lot of time together. Our business meetings usually turn into coffee dates or grabbing lunch at the diner. Sometimes it's just like this with the two of us hanging out in the floral shop.

It's later in the afternoon, so I haven't been too busy, which allows us time to catch up.

She doesn't bring Mitch up again but stops as she's about to walk out the door, giving me a sad look. "I don't mean to harp on you, but please just think about what I said about taking a chance."

The bell over the door rings as she walks out, leaving me alone with my flowers and a Lee Brice song playing on the radio. Folding my arms on top of the counter, I lower my head and rest it on top of them.

What am I going to do?



# MITCH

*W*orking the opening shift at a bar has never been my favourite. It's too quiet. Too bright.

I love working late. The crowded bar rooms and thumping music are more my style. The rush of never-ending drink orders and tasks that need to be done. Nights like that are when I run on adrenaline from the moment I walk in until the moment I leave. The endless rush keeps me going and makes me look forward to the next night.

The opening shift? Not so much. The quiet in the room right now feels louder to me than any crowd on Saturday night. The quiet means that I have time to think, which isn't something I want to do right now.

Wiping the damp cloth across the smooth wooden bar top for the millionth time, my mind wanders back to the barbecue at Brody's place. Seeing them all with their families was shocking to me, and I can't quite figure out why. I know them all individually or as couples, but seeing them all together with their kids was a revelation I wasn't ready for. It made me realize just how much my life has changed since moving to Logan Creek.

When I lived in the city, all my friends were single and childless. We went to the bars and partied when we weren't in school or working. We did all the stupid shit young people do without thinking. Now, my friends are all married with kids, and I'm searching for the next hook up like it's my next fix, which I guess it is.

When Zach called and asked me to come up to Logan Creek, I knew I'd be moving to a small town. I just didn't realize *how* small. There isn't much of a singles scene, which is why I usually end up in Kelowna to get my next hit. But seeing them all with their families made me wonder just how much I really want to keep doing that. Fuck, even Dyllan has been less grumpy since Skylar came along.

"Hey, can you help me with something?" Zach asks, walking through the front doors carrying so many boxes, I can only see his legs.

"Yeah, man." I rush from behind the bar, taking the top two boxes from him.

He smiles at me, a light sheen of sweat on his forehead. "Thanks. I didn't want to make another trip."

"What's all this?" I follow him through the main tasting room into the event room.

"Skylar asked me to pick up the tablecloths and chair... something since I was going to Okanagan Falls, anyway. She'll be here any minute to set up for the tech awards."

I set the boxes down on the closest table. "She's doing a great job in here." The normally empty room has been transformed into a banquet-style setting with a stage and large screen along one wall.

"She always does," Zach adds, placing his boxes next to mine. "Rachel should also be here soon to drop off the flowers. I'm sure she knows the drill, but she just needs to put them in here. Her and Skylar have a system." He doesn't look at me as he starts fussing with the bar we installed by the door.

I try not to show my heightened interest in the florist that will be stopping by. "Uh, yeah, okay."

Zach stops what he's doing and looks up at me. "What was that?"

"What was what?" I fidget with the top of the box in front of me, opening to find stacks of neatly folded white linen inside.

“You’re acting weird.” His eyes flare open. “You like Rachel?”

“What? No. I mean, I don’t know. I don’t even know her.”

The smug smile on his face almost makes me want to punch him. Almost. “Well then, get to know her. Wasn’t she at Brody’s place the other day?”

“No. I take it she was supposed to come, but she didn’t show.” I take a deep breath, seeing this as my way to get to know more about her, even if it’s going to give Zach endless reasons to stick his nose in more than he should. “So, uh, Lila said something that made me think she does this a lot. Does she not like parties or something?”

“I wouldn’t say that. She’s more...introverted, I guess? She’s quiet, but really sweet once you get her talking.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen her in here other than setting up for events.”

“No, I know Mandy and the girls have tried getting her out before, but I think she likes to stay in.” He tilts his head as he assesses me. “How serious are you about her?”

“Why?” I ask, cautiously.

“She’s a sweet girl, Mitch. She’s not your usual type.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I know I’m getting defensive and deep down, I know the answer. She’s not a hook up. She’s not a booty call. She’s a forever kind of girl. The girls I usually stay far away from because I’m no good for them.

“You know I love you, man.”

I roll my eyes. “Here we go.”

“Just listen, asshole,” he says with a smirk. “I don’t want you to get hurt—either of you to get hurt. You’re the opposites attract type.”

“Opposites...are you reading one of those books the girls are always talking about?”

“Listen, if you aren’t able to pick up a book to find out what your woman is into, you’re missing out. Believe me.” The smile on his face is so wide I’m tempted to ask what he’s reading, but I don’t know if I’m ready to open that can of worms.

“*Anyway...*” I need to change the subject. “I don’t know what I’m thinking other than she interests me. She’s pretty, that’s all I know.”

Zach sighs, dropping his shoulders. “If you’re serious about getting to know her better, just remember to be careful, okay?”

He slaps me on the shoulder as he moves past me, leaving me staring ahead.

I brush it off, walking back into the tasting room and behind the bar. Picking my discarded towel off the bar top, I throw it over my shoulder and move to check I have everything where it should be.

What does he mean ‘be careful?’ Be careful of what? I might not have been the settle down kind of guy, but I’m not a complete asshole.

The door opens and I welcome our first customers of the day. A couple of construction workers that have been upgrading the local highway come in, looking for lunch. The construction has been a pain for anyone trying to get between towns, but it’s been great business for us with all the workers in town.

I spend the next hour chatting them up and getting them their food and drinks, along with a steady stream of people looking to enjoy their lunch on a sunny afternoon.

I’m facing the back of the bar, grabbing more bottles of our Hoppycock Ale when the door opens and I feel someone standing at the counter. “Just a second. I’ll be right with you.”

The person doesn’t say anything as I bend to grab a couple bottles before standing and turning to find Rachel’s eyes shooting up from where my ass just was, a beautiful pink tinting her cheeks as her eyes reach mine.

“Well, hi,” I say, giving her a bright smile. I know she was checking me out, and now she’s looking at the dimple on my left cheek. The one that always makes women lean in just a little closer to me.

“Um, hi.” She’s holding a box with white flowers sticking out of the top, shifting from foot to foot slightly.

Her long, dark blonde hair is down over her shoulders, framing her face. Her bright green eyes widen as I take her in. She’s wearing some sort of sweater dress in a colour that matches her eyes, belted at the waist with black leggings. Fuck me, she looks adorable.

“Let me drop these off and I’ll give you a hand.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“I’m assuming you have a lot more of those in your car?” I nod at the box in her hands. She nods. “Then give me a second and I’ll help you. You can go ahead into the event room if you want to put those down.”

I don’t wait for her to answer as I make my way to the table of three in a booth in the corner. I give them their beer, talking with them for a moment before I catch up with Rachel as she heads out to grab more.

“You don’t have to help, Mitch. You’re busy,” she says, opening the back of a white van that has the logo for ‘Rustic Charm Flowers’ on it, both of which have seen better days.

“I’m never too busy to help you, Rachel.” I give her a wink, which makes her blush return.

Fuck, she’s cute.

I reach in and grab more boxes filled with the same type of flowers she had before. The van is packed with more boxes than I can count. “Are all of these coming in?”

“Yeah,” she whispers, pulling out another box.

“And you were going to do all of this yourself?” I grab another box, making sure I’m not going to tip them over before I start walking.



“Um, yeah?”

I shake my head as we make our way back to the bar. We walk in silence as we place the flowers down in the event room.

“Hang on, I have a better idea.” I go to the storage room and grab a platform truck and motion for her to follow me out the back door.

She holds the door open for me while I wheel the cart out. “Has Zach never told you we have one of these? Or that you can park in front of this door.”

“Um, no, but I haven’t really asked either. I usually just try to get in and out as fast as I can without bothering anyone.”

I shake my head again. And he’s the one telling me to be careful with her.

“Well, you’re more than welcome to use this anytime you have to make a delivery. Just drive around back and one of us can let you in. We usually have it propped open for the vendors if Skylar has an event going.”

We get to her van and load most of the flowers onto the cart. I motion for her to pull it while I carry the few remaining boxes.

“Thank you,” she says as we round the building.

“For what?” I play dumb, mostly just because I love the sound of her angelic voice. She’s so soft-spoken I feel like I need to work to hear her, which isn’t something I’m used to. I don’t have to work for women to pay attention to me.

“For helping me. For, uh, letting me use this,” she motions to the cart she’s pushing.

“It’s no problem.”

“Wait, what about the people in there? I’m sorry to make you leave them.” She has a panicked look on her face that makes me want to kiss her to make it all go away.

“Don’t worry about it. Zach’s in there. He can handle it for a couple of minutes.”

That seems to calm her as we walk into the event room just as Skylar rushes in from the tasting room.

She stops as she looks between us, a wise smile on her face. “There you are! Oh, good thinking about the cart.”

I put the boxes down and turn to Rachel. “You got it from here?”

She looks up at me and nods.

“Good. Next time, let me know if you need help.” I give her a wink as I walk away. Just before I enter the tasting room, I turn back and see her watching me. “Oh, and Rachel? It’s good to see you.”

My body heats like it’s the middle of August, not a chilly October afternoon. I can’t stop smiling as I walk back to the counter, my heart beating out of my chest, and now a sweet brunette on my mind.

I’m in so much trouble.



## RACHEL

“*D*on’t be ridiculous. You can do this,” I say to myself as I turn onto Main Street.

I let out a sigh as I make my way down the road, praying my van doesn’t start making that weird noise it was making yesterday. The one that made my heart stop thinking I was going to be stuck at the side of the highway with a van full of flowers on an oddly warm fall day with only the occasional car passing by.

It’s not just the van that’s making my heart race and my palms sweat. It’s the thought of seeing Mitch again. After the day he helped me with my delivery last week, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him. Every hero in my romance novels are him. He’s invaded my thoughts and even a couple of dreams. I don’t know what to do about it.

I know he’s going to be working tonight because Skylar wouldn’t stop mentioning it now that she’s got it in her head that I need to ask him out.

I’m pulled from my thoughts by the deep, rich timber of the narrator’s voice as my audiobook streams through my speakers.

“My hand slides under her skirt, slipping along her silky skin as I creep up to the place I crave touching the most.”

I press my thighs together against the pressure building inside my body. I don’t want to think about how long it’s been since I’ve been with a man that’s touched me like that. Even

then, they never wanted me with such desire as Adam wants Chantel. Not wants—needs. Craves. Desires.

I sigh again. “One day.” I tell myself. One day I’ll find a man like those in my books. The one that will want me, and only me. The one that will forget all other women exist once they’re with me.

As the narrator continues describing all the deliciously naughty things they are doing to each other while they sit at a table filled with his business partners and their wives, I can’t help but think about what it would be like to have Mitch’s hands on me.

I imagine his fingertips would be calloused from working at the bar. Skylar also mentioned he had started hanging out with Craig, the carpenter that had done most of the woodwork for the events room at the brewery. I think of him working over a piece of wood, sanding it, his strong forearms working the grinder.

Damn, I need to get laid.

Shaking my head, I focus on the road, only letting my mind focus on my audiobook and actively not picturing the character of Adam with Mitch’s dark brown hair and blue eyes.

As I pull into the parking lot of the Logan Creek Brewing Company, my heart flutters. As much as I love seeing him, our recent run in has me nervous about having his attention on me again. I don’t feel comfortable being anyone’s centre of attention, let alone the man I think might genuinely be the hottest man in existence. I’m too quiet. Too awkward to hold court with someone like him.

‘Hold court?’ What the actual fuck? That is why I can’t be trusted with talking to hot men.

I drive around the main building toward the back, where the larger event space is. Zach had a beautiful barn built where they hold the majority of their weddings. I have to say, he did an incredible job. The large red structure is just like one you’d see in any Canadian countryside, but inside, it’s a bride’s

dream. I've seen Skylar work some serious wedding magic. If I ever get married, this is where I want it to be.

I park my van and jump out, grabbing the box closest to me while I go in search of the trolley Mitch showed me. In all the action, it must be in use because I don't see it around and it's not in the room he showed me. Back to manual labour, it is.

I carry a box in, taking in the organized chaos inside. People rush to get the last of the tables set up with decorations. Caterers set up the buffet, setting out chafing dishes and plates in preparation of the food being served. Lila's in the corner arranging an impressive four-tier cake on a small round table.

It's all coming together.

As I place the box of flowers on an empty table, I scan the room for one of the trolley things Mitch showed me last week. I sigh, not seeing one. I guess it's back to the multiple trips with the centrepieces.

I'm on my third trip pulling boxes out when a shadow falls over me.

"Why didn't you ask for help?"

I don't need to turn around to know who it is. That voice can rival any narrators.

I sigh, pulling myself from the van and placing my hands on my hips while I face him. "I can manage."

"I know you can, but you don't have to," Mitch says, crossing his arms over his chest.

Damn those arms with the muscles and their rolled-up sleeves.

His gaze drops to my lips as I say his name, an expression I can't read crossing his face before he meets my eyes again.

"I'm never too busy for you, Rachel." His voice is deep and husky, adding to the overwhelming feeling of desire I already have when he's around.

“I...uh...” I can’t think as he takes a step toward me. “You don’t even know me.” I look up at him, realizing for the first time just how much taller he is than me. I barely come up to his shoulders.

He leans in, his arms caging me in against the corner of the van. I have nowhere to go; I can only look up into his hypnotizing blue eyes as I’m captivated by his scent. It’s rugged, and spicy, and makes me think of all things manly.

He drops his head, bringing his mouth to my ear and whispers, “Maybe I want to get to know you.”

He’s so close if I moved slightly, the stubble on his cheek would brush against my skin. I have to resist the urge to raise my hands and clutch his shirt to hold him tightly to me. I want to bring my lips to his and officially close the distance between us. I want to know what his kiss feels like. Tastes like. I’ve never *needed* to know something so bad in my life.

He leans forward slightly until our skin almost touches. I can feel the heat of his body, smell the mint on his breath, as if he’s been chewing gum. I close my eyes and tilt up my face. My breath stops when I feel him get closer.

That’s when he chuckles.

I open my eyes to find him reaching inside the van and grabbing a box.

“Let me help you with the rest of these.”

He was grabbing a box. Of *fucking* course, he was just grabbing a box. He wasn’t going to kiss me. Why would I have even thought that was a possibility?

“Right. Of course. We need to get these inside.”

I avoid his gaze as I reach for a box. I’m embarrassed and kicking myself for misunderstanding what he said. We live in the same town and have the same friend group. Of course, we would get to know each other.

“Hey,” he says, blocking my way from making a quick exit. “Are you okay?”

“Yup, great!” I say with as much fake enthusiasm as I can manage, while forcing a smile on my face.

He gives me a quizzical look before he nods and turns. Blowing out a breath, I take a moment alone to centre myself before following him back in.

“Smooth, Rachel. Very smooth.”



“Rachel!”

I have one foot out the door, ready to make my escape, when Skylar’s frantic voice calls me back.

After dropping off the flowers, Mitch had been called back to the tasting room and I haven’t seen him since, which relieves me. I’ve embarrassed myself enough for one day, thank-you-very-much.

I watch as Skylar weaves through tables. Her cheeks red, looking stressed out. “Thank goodness I caught you! I have to ask you for a *huge* favour.”

“What is it?”

“Are you able to help with the wedding?”

I open my mouth in shock. “Me? Help? I’m not sure there’s anything I could help with.”

“I promise it’s not going to be anything too hard. I’ve had half the wait staff call in sick with a stomach bug that’s going around. It’ll just be helping clear plates, run things for the bar, things like that.”

“The...bar?” I swallow the words, frantically looking at where trays of glasses are being stacked behind the bar. Mitch still hasn’t come back, but I know it’s only a matter of time.

“Please? I know this is a huge ask. I’ll pay you, of course. We have just enough staff to rearrange and make it work in the kitchen, and with the food, it’s just for the small tasks.



Please?” She laces her fingers and holds them under her chin as she pleads.

This isn't how I pictured spending my Saturday night. I was ready to curl up with a book in front of my fireplace as soon as I left here, hiding away with the broody-yet-loveable fireman in my current novel, but my friend needs me more. Releasing my tense shoulders, I nod. “Okay, I'll stay.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she exclaims, pulling me into a hug.

“Do I, uh, need to get changed?” I look down at my black slacks and white shirt, which is currently hidden under a deep blue sweater.

“Nope, you're perfect. For the safety of your sweater, you might want to take that off. I can't guarantee you won't have any food or drink on it by the end of the night, but other than that, you're good!” She takes a step closer to me and lowers her voice. “Plus, it'll be a good way to get to know Mitch. He's working the bar tonight.”

I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Of course he is.”

“Why? What happened?”

I tell her what happened in the parking lot, which gives her a fit of giggles.

“It's not that funny,” I huff.

“You're right, it's not.” She schools her face, looking more serious, but the bite of her lip tells me she's not done with her fit of laughter. “It's not that bad. It sounds like he was flirting, that's all.”

“Flirting...guys don't flirt with me, Skylar. They order flowers for their wives and girlfriends. They say excuse me at the grocery store. They. Do. Not. Flirt.”

“Yeah, okay,” she says as she rolls her eyes. “Whenever you're ready to start, I would love it if you could help place the centrepieces you just brought on each table and three on the head table, please.” She walks away, but I hear her muttering about flirting under her breath as she walks away.

I go out to put my sweater in my van and lock it, wondering what the hell I just got myself into.



# MITCH

*T*onight is going to be a long fucking night.

The wedding reception is in full swing, and even though we are working with significantly less staff than normal, it's been a good night. Brad, our newest bartender, has jumped in to help when needed, but it's a certain blonde that keeps me distracted.

Skyler told me Rachel would stay to help, and I didn't miss the mischievous glint in her eyes when she told me. My heart nearly stopped when she walked back into the room after dropping off the flowers, her sweater gone, leaving her in a tight white button-up shirt. It was just see-through enough to see a hint of her bra while remaining professional.

All the men had stopped what they were doing to watch as she reached her arms up, putting her long hair in some sort of updo. The bottom of her shirt rose just enough for us to get a glimpse of her toned skin underneath as her shirt rose ever so slightly.

I had no right to bark at them to get back to work. She's not my girlfriend. I don't have any sort of claim on her.

But damn, I want to.

The dance portion of the night is in full swing, and the bar line is picking up. I wave Rachel over as she's carrying empty water jugs past the bar. I do genuinely need help since I can't leave, but I also want to use it as an excuse to spend time with her.

I haven't been able to talk with her since our moment at her van. She looked so cute with her eyes closed, face tilted up toward me as if she was waiting for a kiss.

I wanted to kiss her. Heaven help me, I wanted to, but she's not ready. When I do kiss her, it's not going to be in the brewery parking lot with caterers rushing around.

"Hey, I need your help here," I say as she rounds the bar.

"Oh, I don't have my license to serve alcohol." She looks wide-eyed between me and the bottles of liquor.

"That's okay, I just need you to go get me more ice. It's in the kitchen in the stand-up freezer."

"Oh, yeah, sure."

I watch as she scurries off, zeroed in on the way her ass fits into her black pants. I don't have time to admire her too long as the line grows longer.

She comes back with two bags of ice lying over her outstretched arms. I finish the drink I'm making and hand it to the guest before taking them from her.

"You don't do anything half-assed, do you?" I chuckle.

"I didn't want to make another trip," she huffs. Her cheeks are a little pink, her sleeves wet from where the ice was lying across them. "Do you need anything else?"

I look at the ever-growing line up behind me. "Yeah, do you think you can handle the non-alcoholic drinks? It'll help me get through this line."

"You got it."

For the next hour, we work in tandem. She's on top of all the non-alcoholic drink requests, filling up the ice when it runs low, and doing runs for me to the kitchen when I run out of lemons and limes. We're a pretty good team. I take advantage of the small space behind the bar to brush up against her. I place my hands on her hips as I move behind her to grab something. I give her a wink when I catch her looking at me, which makes her blush.

Damn, I love that blush.

“Hey, how’s it going over here?” Skylar walks up as the line dies down. The wedding is wrapping up. Which means we will be moving into full take down and clean up mode soon.

“Good, no complaints,” I say, giving Rachel a smile. “You got me a great assistant here.”

And there’s the blush again.

“That’s great. I knew you two would make a great team.” She smiles as she looks between us.

Rachel narrows her eyes at her, which makes Skylar laugh.

Interesting.

“I’d be happy to have her work the bar with me anytime,” I add, shooting a wide smile at Rachel, making her blush deepen.

“Well, that’s good to hear.” Skylar’s smile widens. “Rachel, are you okay staying just a little longer to help clean up? Many hands make light work and all that.”

“I don’t mind,” she answers, avoiding my gaze.

“I really can’t thank you enough.” Skylar gives her a quick hug and then rushes off as the last of the wedding guests leave.

“It’s really nice of you to help her, you know. You didn’t have to.” I lean my hip against the bar, crossing my arms over my chest.

Her shirt is a little wrinkled; spots dirtied from cleaning discarded drinks and plates. Pieces of hair stick out around her ponytail, but she’s still the most beautiful woman at the party tonight.

“She’s my friend. Why wouldn’t I help her?”

Her genuine answer pulls at my heart. Not only is she beautiful, but she’s kind and thoughtful. I can’t imagine why it took me so long to notice her and how amazing she is. I’ve lived in Logan Creek for years now, and the last few weeks have been the first time I’ve ever thought about her other than someone who lives in town.

Pushing myself away from the bar, I take a step toward her, reaching up and twirling a stray strand of her hair around my finger. I hear the hitch in her breath and take in her wide eyes as she looks up at me. “I’m starting to learn a lot about you, Rachel, and I’m really liking what I’m seeing.”

The music abruptly shuts off and the overhead lights turn on, waking me up from the dream she has me in. The one where it’s just us in the barn. The one where I can bend slightly and cover her lips with mine. Instead, we’re standing behind the bar with a flurry of people trying to pack up so they can go home, and I have my fingers in her hair, looking down at her like she’s my last meal.

“Should we...uh...pack up the bar?” she asks, not moving.

“We should,” I say, not moving.

There are a million things we should be doing. Packing up the dirty glasses. Putting away the unused liquor. Wiping everything down. But I don’t want to do any of that. I want to whisk Rachel off somewhere where it’s just the two of us. Where I can get to know her better. Where I can give her a proper first kiss.

“Mitch, where do you want this?” Brad asks, hauling a box of god-knows what up to the bar. He looks between Rachel and I. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry. I’ll just, uh, put them over here.”

I don’t know what’s in the box, but they sure as hell can go into whatever corner he’s found.

“I guess we’d better start helping.” Rachel gives me a weak smile.

“Yeah.”

I don’t want to let go of her, but I do. I drop my hand, releasing her blonde locks, and take a step back. She breaks our gaze and turns; I allow my eyes to roam over her petite frame, down to her ass that fills out her pants like a wet dream.

Fuck, I need to pull it together. I’m a thirty-year-old man. I shouldn’t be lusting over a woman like I’m a teenager. But at the same time, I haven’t felt a pull toward a woman like this in

a very long time. No one has caught my eye like Rachel has lately, and no one has definitely held it for as long as she has.

And I haven't even kissed her yet.

I'm so screwed.





# RACHEL

“*N*o, no, no, no, no.”

This can't be happening. Not now.

I turn the key again, watching as the lights on the dashboard light up while the engine makes a grinding sound.

It's after one in the morning, it's pitch-black outside, and now it's starting to rain. The cars that were parked around me are now gone, and I'm left pleading with my van to start.

Turning the key back toward me, I lower my head to the steering wheel, praying for a miracle. Anything that could get me out of here and back home.

The moment Mitch and I shared in the barn was too intense. My heart was racing and my palms were sweaty as he played with my hair. Add in the moment where I thought he was going to kiss me, and I wanted to self-combust.

I take a deep breath and raise my head, trying the key again. I get the same response. The dash lights up, but the same grinding noise is back.

A tapping on my side window makes me scream and reel back in my seat.

A soaked Mitch stands on the other side, completely unbothered by the steady pouring of rain drenching him.

I open the door slightly. “What are you doing here?”

He tilts his head and looks at me, as if unimpressed. “What's going on?”

“I can’t get my car to start. It’s making this weird noise when I try.”

“Pop the hood.”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer, but instead stalks to the front of the car. I sit and watch him for a moment before I shake my head. I reach down and pop the hood, watching as he disappears behind the lifted metal. Keeping my door open in case he needs to talk to me; I try to drown out the pouring rain to listen for him. I hear banging and him tinkering; the car moving slightly as he works. Through the gap at the bottom of the hood, I can see he’s pushed up the sleeves of his jacket, showing off his forearms.

Ugh, those forearms are book boyfriend worthy.

“Try starting it again!” he yells over the rain.

I turn the key, finding the same grinding noise as before. I let go, stopping the engine but leaving the battery running. The headlights turn on, letting me admire him as he walks to my door.

“It’s your alternator. I can’t get it started right now, but we can get the car towed to the shop in the morning.”

I open my mouth to answer when the stereo clicks on and bursts through my van.

“I thrust into her—hard—letting her feel every inch of my long, thick...”

I click off the van, mortified. I can’t look at Mitch. I can’t see his face after hearing the narrator’s deep, rumbling voice *loudly* through my speakers.

I want to die. I want the earth to literally open up and just swallow my van right now.

Covering my face with my hands, I will Mitch to disappear. To just go home and forget he ever saw me. Heck, that he ever met me.

“Rachel.”

His voice lets me know that didn’t happen.

“Rachel, please look at me.”

I shake my head, hoping that this is all just a dream.

His hands touch my wrist, gently pulling my hands away from me. When I don't look up at him, he releases one of my hands and cups my cheek, making me face him.

When I open my eyes, I'm surprised to find he's not laughing or even smirking. He's very serious as he looks down at me, drenched from head to toe. The white shirt under his jacket sticks to him like a second skin, showing off his defined chest. I rake my gaze over him, along his shoulders and up the long column of his neck, and on to his short, neatly trimmed beard. His eyes locked on me. Watching. Assessing.

“I need to get you home, Rachel.”

His words spark my body to life. Images of him in my house—in my bed—fill my mind. My core tightens and heat rushes through my body at his words.

“You—what?” I'm breathless as I ask, needing him to repeat himself.

“Home, Rachel. It's almost one-thirty in the morning. You can't stay out here. Grab your stuff and I'll drive you home.”

Right. He needs to get me home because it's the middle of the night and my car has broken down. No other reason. Of course.

Cursing myself for even thinking it was anything other than him being chivalrous, I grab my sweater and purse and get out of the van as he closes the hood. We don't say anything as I follow him to his truck, which is parked around the corner. We hurry through the rain until he opens the passenger door and waits for me to climb in. Once he's in the driver's seat, the truck roars to life, and Mitch fiddles with the nobs and vents on the dash until warm air is blowing in my direction.

“What about you?” I ask as I buckle my seatbelt.

“I'm fine,” he grits through his teeth.

Panic fills my body at the sound of his voice. It's not the easy, flirty Mitch that was in the bar. This is something else.

Fuck, it was the audiobook. Why did it have to click on right at that moment? Also, why did it have to be at a level that the dead could hear? I wasn't listening to it that loudly before, was I?

He pulls out onto the main road and, for the first time, I'm noticing just how alone we are. There aren't any other cars on the road. We don't pass any as he turns onto Main Street. Even The Nest, the town's only other bar, is closed and locked up for the night. It's as if we're the only two awake in town.

"Do you need directions?" I ask meekly.

"Nope," he bites out, not taking his eyes off the road.

"You know where I live?"

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye. "It's a small town, Rachel. I know where you live."

I watch him as his jaw ticks. He's focused intently on the road and his hands clutch the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles are white.

I don't say anything, not wanting to make the situation worse. I've clearly upset him. I'm sure the last thing he wanted to do after working a long shift was to have to worry about me and my car problems. And then there's my audiobook. Damn Kylie for recommending the smuttiest book she could find.

I think of my friend who owns the bookstore in town, and how I unintentionally brought her and her husband, Craig, together. If it wasn't for me being so overworked that day and delivering flowers to the wrong Kylie in town, they never would have gotten together.

I want to smile at the thought, but my current situation doesn't leave me in a smiling mood.

Kylie's going to laugh so hard when I tell her about all of this.

Mitch turns into my driveway but doesn't shut off the truck. I take it as a sign that I need to make a quick exit, which I'm more than okay with.

“Thank you for the ride. I’ll...uh...get someone to move my car in the morning.” I bend to reach for my purse and sweater when his voice stops me dead in my tracks.

“You’re not going anywhere, Rachel.”



# MITCH

*M*y hands grip the steering wheel so tightly they hurt.

I've been hard since she opened her door to me. My slacks provide a little more relief than my usual jeans, but not much. Not when she's so close to me and I can't reach out and touch her.

Seeing her alone in her broken down van was enough to awaken every protective instinct I've ever had. Knowing she was all alone and more than likely not going to call anyone for help in the middle of the night, I knew I wasn't going to take 'no' as an answer from her.

Now that she's here in my truck, soaked through that now see-through shirt and shivering, it's only getting worse. I can see the full outline of her bra and her full breasts spilling over the top. The material of both is so thin her pebbled nipples poke through, teasing me. Her sweater is draped over her legs, but I can see them pressed together, as they have been the whole ride from the brewery. It was so fucking hard to keep my attention on the road when all I wanted to do was run my hands over her body and tweak those buds until she moaned.

Fuck, I want to hear her moan.

"Phone," I demand, with my hand outstretched. When she doesn't move right away, I add a gritted, "Please."

That's enough to make her scramble for her purse, pull out her phone, and place it in my palm.

Well, that's interesting. She takes commands well. I wonder if she's like that in the bedroom, too.



I look down at it. “Unlock it.”

Without a word, she takes it back from me and enters her code before giving it back to me with a shaky hand.

Pulling up her texting app, I send a message to myself and save my info for her to have. “Call me. Anytime. Day or night. For anything. Got it?”

She takes it back from me, nodding her head with her mouth slightly open.

My mind drifts to all the things I want to do to that mouth. I want to kiss it until we both can't breathe. I want to run my tongue along those soft, pink lips. I want to fill it with my cock.

When her van filled with the sound of her audiobook, it took everything in me not to pounce on her and do exactly what the narrator was describing. My vision blurred and all I could think about was pushing her back in her seat, ridding her of her pants and filling her so deep nothing else existed but us.

“Um, thank you...for the ride and everything.” Her voice is so quiet, so small.

“You don't need to thank me, Rachel.”

I like to think I'm a good man. One that wouldn't leave anyone stranded in a deserted parking lot in the middle of the night. But there's something about her that isn't just about that. There are things I want to do to her that are decidedly *not* good.

“I'm, um, also sorry about what happened. Back there. I... uh...oh crap.” She covers her face in her hands again and it takes me a minute to realize she's apologizing for her book.

“You don't have to apologize for that. Ever.” I rest my arm against the back of her headrest, allowing myself to play with the hair falling from her ponytail. When she doesn't move or tell me to stop, I keep going, wrapping it around hand and letting her silky strands fall between my fingers.

“I can't believe it was *that* part that came on. Of all the parts, it was that one,” she says into her hands. “Kylie's going

to die of laughter when she hears about this.”

“Kylie?” I ask casually, watching her as I continue playing with her hair.

Rachel’s shoulders drop along with her hands. “She recommended the book to me last week. I thought since I had so many deliveries this week, it would be better to get it on audio. I won’t be making *that* mistake again.”

I can’t help but chuckle as I lean over the console, bringing my lips to her ear. “I think you should listen to whatever the fuck you want.”

Her gasp at my words makes me smile. She turns her head and looks at me, our lips almost touching. Her quick breath is warm as it fans my face; our eyes locked on one another.

She runs her tongue over her lips, only further casting her spell over me.

“Rachel?”

“Yes?” Her voice is breathless as she stares deeper at me.

Her proximity. The feel of her wet hair in my hand. The way her breasts rise and fall at a rapid rate. It’s all driving me crazy. I need to get my hands and lips on her. I need to make some sort of claim on her until I’m the only man she’s thinking of. Not anyone in town. Not a fictional asshole in a book. Me. I want her consumed by me the way I’m consumed by her.

“What book was it?” I lower my voice, not asking so much as giving an order for her to tell me her little secret.

My question throws her off guard. She jerks away a little in surprise, but I hold her still with my hand in her hair. “It... uh...what?”

“The audiobook. What was it? Small town? Regency? I know...it’s aliens, isn’t it?” I tick the corner of my mouth up in a slight smile, trying to seem less imposing. I don’t want to scare her off, but something inside of me needs to know the answer.

“How do you know so much about romance novels?”

“I have sisters that forget I’m in their group chat.” I lean in, closing the distance between us, crowding her against her seat, my hand pulling lightly on her hair. I lower my voice, making it husky as I whisper to her. “Why don’t you want to answer me, Rachel?”

She closes her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“Tell me if this is too much. I’ll back off if you want me to.” I move to give her space, when her eyes open wide in panic.

“What? No! No, that’s not it.”

I don’t know if she knows she’s doing it, but her hands curl into my shirt, holding me tight to her. I smile, running my nose along her cheek. “Tell me, which one was it?”

“Billionaire,” she whispers.

“I never took you for a city girl that would want all those extravagant things.” I brush my thumb along her cheek, needing to feel her.

“I’m not, but sometimes it’s nice to read about.”

“Tell me, Rachel. What do you want then, if it’s not city lights and high rises?” Whatever it is, I’ll give it to her. I’ll give her the whole world if she’ll let me.

“I don’t know. I like simple. Nothing fancy.”

I run my nose along her cheek, feeling the shiver that runs through her body, and I don’t think it has anything to do with being cold and wet.

“Can I take you out?”

“What?” She rears back. “You want to take me out? On a date?”

“What did you think this was?”

“You being friendly? Taking pity on me after my van died?”

“There are many things I’m feeling toward you, but none of them is pity.” I give a slight tug on her hair until her face is

tipped up toward mine. “And this? If you want me to back off, I will. But you should know I like you. I want to take you on a date.”

“A...date,” she repeats.

“I’ll pick you up, take you for dinner. Since you don’t like fancy, we’ll stay in Logan Creek. We’ll go to Angelo’s.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

“Okay. Tomorrow night.” I glance at the clock on my dash, showing its two in the morning. “Tonight now. It’s my day off. I’ll be all yours.”

She nods.

“Good. It’s a date. I’ll see you soon, Rachel.” I brush my lips across her cheek and release her hair, leaning back in my seat.

My eyes are drawn down when she pulls her lower lip between her teeth. I form my hand into a tight fist, which is the only thing I can do to stop from reaching out and pulling her to me, pulling her lip out with my teeth and kissing her senseless.

Gathering her things and opening the door, I call out to her before she runs off. “Sweet dreams, Darlin’.”

Her eyes flash open wide as she sucks in a breath before she slams the door closed and runs to her front porch. I watch until she’s inside with the door closed, running my hand along my thigh.

“Goodnight, Rachel.”



## RACHEL

Walking into The Novel Bunch always gives me a comforting feeling. The smell of the pages, the warm lights and bookshelves filled with every story I could ever want. I smile every time I come here, and today is no different.

I've probably spent a good chunk of my money here over the years, but it's a worthwhile investment, if you ask me. Not only am I supporting my friend, but I have a whole library for myself at home.

"Hey, Rachel," Kylie beams, as she places a stack of books down on the counter. "What brings you in today? Did you finish that book already?"

I cringe, handing her the Pumpkin Spice Latte I brought for her. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean? Do you not like it? I thought for sure it would be right up your alley." She motions for me to take a seat in one of the two oversized chairs she has placed by the window.

It's one of my favourite spots in the store. She set it up in the corner with the most sunlight streaming through the large windows overlooking Main Street. A worn green rug sits between the two chairs with a small rounded coffee table; its glass top provides just enough space for us to put our cups down as we settle in.

"Well, I went to deliver the flowers at the brewery last night, and Skylar asked if I could stay and help with the

wedding because they were short staffed...”

“And?” She reaches over for her coffee, taking a sip as she studies me intently.

“And Mitch was there.”

“Ooh, here we go. Did you work at the bar with him? Did he flirt with you? Tell me everything!” She leans forward, wrapping her hands around her cup, her eyes wide.

“Yes, I helped him behind the bar for most of the night. I think he was flirting with me.”

“You think?” She tilts her head. “Wait, what does this have to do with ‘The Billionaire’s Secret Hideaway?’”

I reach for my cup and take a sip of my latte, letting the warm flavours of pumpkin, cinnamon, and nutmeg wash over me. “After the wedding was done and cleaned up, I went to go home and my van wouldn’t start.”

She rolls her eyes. “I told you to get that thing looked at.”

“Anyway—it started raining and Mitch came to help me. When the engine wouldn’t start, I didn’t turn the van all the way off and the audiobook started streaming through the speakers.”

“No!” Kylie yelled in horror.

“Oh, yes.” I feel the heat return to my cheeks as I recount my evening to her. I tell her all about the car ride home, how I thought he was going to kiss me in the parking lot before the wedding, and then how he kissed my cheek in the truck.

“So then, what’s the problem?”

“The problem, Kylie, is that I’m going on a date with *Mitch Brandt* tonight.” I don’t bother trying to hide the panic in my voice as I stand, pacing while drinking my coffee. “He’s....well, he’s *Mitch*, and I’m *me*, and ugh!”

“Still not seeing the problem here,” Kylie says, watching my little moment of panic.

“Do you remember how you felt when you first got the flowers from Craig?”

A smile touches her lips. “Yes.”

“Well, that’s me right now. Except times ten worse because now he’s overheard my smutty book at the worst possible moment.”

“Or the best,” Kylie interjects with a smirk on her face.

I ignore her and continue my pacing. “And then he went all quiet on me on the ride to my place. And he just knew where I live.”

“Rachel, this is Logan Creek. Everyone knows where everybody lives...”

“But then when we parked, he just changed. He was playing with my hair and acting all....”

“Alpha?” She smirks.

I stop and narrow my eyes at her, placing my free hand on my hip. “You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“And you’ve had too much coffee, by the looks of it,” she jokes.

“My caffeine intake has nothing to do with this.”

“*Anyway*, I called to get my car towed to the shop this morning and Carl said it’d already been done. Mitch called it in first thing and it was already there.”

“Wow, you found yourself a real book boyfriend there, Rach.”

“Don’t you get it? It’s too much. It’s too much, isn’t it? We went from barely talking to—this.” I wave my hands in front of me. “Whatever this is—in, like, two seconds.”

Kylie stands, putting her cup on the coffee table before placing her hands on my shoulders. “You have nothing to worry about, Rachel. Mitch obviously likes you, otherwise he wouldn’t have asked you out.”

“Hmph,” I huff, looking out the window. Cars pass by and people mill about. It’s a perfect fall afternoon. The leaves on the trees are vibrant oranges, yellows, and reds. A faint breeze ruffles them enough to make the fallen leaves dance in the



wind. It's my favourite time of year, and yet the picturesque view outside the bookstore window isn't comforting me. "What if I mess it up?"

"You won't." Her reassuring voice brings me back to her. "I'm closing the store a little early today. Do you want me to come over and help you get ready?"

I shake my head. "No, thank you. I just need you to reassure me that I'm not going to mess this up so bad I'm going to have to leave Logan Creek."

Kylie giggles, the light and airy sound carries through the store as she steps away. "No, you definitely won't have to do that."

"Listen, I was where you are. I know how you're feeling. That night that I had my first date with Craig, I felt so overwhelmed I nearly ditched him at the restaurant."

"You did?"

"Yup, but I ran into Lila in the bathroom and she talked me out of it, and now I'm married to him. I want the same for you, Rachel. Even if it's not Mitch, you owe it to yourself to at least try."

I think about her words. I know she's right. I'll never find a boyfriend—or husband—at this rate.

Then my mind drifts to Mitch. He's so handsome, and the way he spoke to me last night in his truck? Hell, it had me running inside and sneaking under my covers as fast as I could with my vibrator. I've never had a man speak to me like that before, and I'd do anything to hear him do it again.

"What would you do if you were in a novel?" Kylie asks, bringing me out of my lust-filled memory.

"What?"

"What would you do if you were the heroine in a novel and Mitch was the hero? What would you want her to do?"

I don't have to think. I've read enough story lines with the shy girl and the popular boy to know how this goes. "I would go, wear something hot, and knock his socks off."

“Thatta girl!” she exclaims, clapping her hands together.

I smile, reaching up to drink the last of my coffee, but Kylie takes it out of my hand.

“Maybe no more of that. We don’t want you more jittery than you already are.”

“Fine,” I huff, knowing she’s probably right, but not wanting to give up my Pumpkin Spice. It’s another reason why I live for the fall.

“Are you sure you don’t want me over to help you get ready?”

“No, I’ve got this, but thank you. Your pep talk helped. I’m going to go home and get ready to wow him. And just pray I don’t embarrass myself any more than I already have with him.”

“That’s the spirit,” she laughs.

I hug her goodbye and make my way out onto the street, feeling slightly better about the prospect of my evening. I might have oversold how much confidence I have at being the lead in my own romance novel, but I do feel a little better.

I make it two steps before my phone dings with a text message.

HOT NOT-BILLIONAIRE

Can’t wait to see you tonight, beautiful.

‘Hot Not-Billionaire?’ I laugh, thinking of my embarrassment from the night before, earning a questioning glance from the ladies as they pass me to enter The Novel Bunch, book club bags in hand. I wonder if they’d let someone at least thirty years younger than them into their exclusive ‘Afternoon Tea-Light’ book club.

I can’t wait to see you, too.

Thank you for getting my car towed. You didn’t have to do that.

I watch the bubbles as they appear and disappear, holding my breath until his name appears on my screen.

I told you. Anytime for anything, babe.

‘Babe?’ A dopey smile crosses my face as I clutch my phone to my chest. Am I swooning? Is this what it feels like to swoon?

Whatever it is, I feel like I might just be the heroine in my own novel, which means I need to rush home and get ready for my hero.



# MITCH

*M*y knock on Rachel's door is harder than I meant it to be. The resounding *thud* echoes through her quiet neighbourhood. I look around, nervously waiting for the door to open.

When did I start letting my nerves get the better of me?

After I dropped her off this morning, I couldn't stop thinking that maybe I'd come on too strong, but I couldn't help it. The thought of her sitting in her broken down van in the middle of the night, alone, in the dark, was too much. I've never felt overly protective of a woman before, but with Rachel, it's all I can think about. What if something had happened to her? What if she wasn't able to make it home? Logan Creek is a safe town, but anything could happen.

Clutching the small gift I brought in my hand; I take a steadying breath. I don't need her seeing me all riled up when she answers the door.

It doesn't matter, because my thoughts are silenced the moment she opens the door.

She's wearing a dress that looks like a fitted black t-shirt that gives way to a pale pink polka dotted skirt. There's a pink belt around her waist. Dragging my gaze up her body, over her curves, and on to her full breasts, I've lost the ability to speak.

Her hair tumbles over her shoulders in curls. She's wearing more makeup than I've ever seen her wear, making her bright green eyes stand out.

"Hi," she says breathlessly, almost sounding unsure.

“You look so beautiful.” It’s cliché, I know, but nothing else comes to mind as I stand here and stare at her. At least, nothing that doesn’t involve throwing her over my shoulder and demanding she direct me to her bedroom.

“Thank you.”

Dammit, there’s that blush again.

“I got this for you.” I unceremoniously hand the package in my hand to her. “I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t get you flowers. I thought you might like something different, given what you do.”

“That’s so thoughtful of you. You didn’t have to buy me anything.” The corner of her mouth ticks up in a smile. “Can I open it?”

“Of course.”

I watch in admiration as she rips the brown paper wrapping. She gasps, her eyes light up as she looks up at me.

“You bought me a book?”

“I hope it’s one you like. I had Kylie help me pick it out.”

“Kylie...” she repeats the name, frozen, while she looks at me.

“Yeah, I caught her right before she locked up for the night. Bernice Johnson was leaving with a bunch of other women from some book club. Mentioned something about me being a ‘book boyfriend’ and a ‘golden retriever.’ I’m not entirely sure why they were comparing me to a dog.”

Rachel lets out the most adorable giggle, covering her mouth with the book. The lower half of her face is now covered by the torso of a very ripped, and very hairy, man with a title promoting monsters and prey.

“Did I get you the wrong thing? I was a little suspicious when Kylie gave me a book that wasn’t...human.”

“No, it’s perfect,” Rachel says, lowering the book and showing me her stunning smile. “And they weren’t calling you

a dog. Not really. They were calling you sweet—thoughtful—which you are.”

My thoughts about her are anything but sweet with the way she’s looking at me right now.

“And the monsters?” I nod toward the book in her hand. “I thought you liked romance, not horror.”

“Oh, well, it’s very much romance.” She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, drawing my attention to her sweet mouth.

“Oh,” I say, not thinking of anything but wanting to kiss that mouth, smudge her lipstick, and sift my fingers through her hair. Wait, if that book is romance...and there are monsters. The lightbulb goes off in my head. “Wait, romance with monsters? They, like...?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s called monster smut.”

Her eyes lower to the ground between us, but that won’t do. Taking a step, I lift her chin until her eyes meet mine. “Is that what you want? A monster?” Dark thoughts cloud my mind as I think of the ways I could take her.

“I...well...” I back her up against the door, caging her in with my arms on either side of her head.

She’s clutching the book to her chest, her green eyes wide as she looks up at me.

“You don’t have to tell me now but know I will *never* judge you for telling me what you want. Either inside the bedroom or out. Do you understand?”

She nods, her mouth open in a silent gasp.

“Good.” I lean down and place a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose before straightening and taking a step back. “Do you need to grab anything? A jacket?”

My movement breaks her from her trance. “Uh, yeah. I’ll be right back.”

She turns quickly and disappears inside the house, leaving me to take a minute to catch my breath. I hadn’t meant to get

that intense—again—but knowing I bought her ‘monster smut’ has me on edge. I want to know what’s in that book. What makes them a monster?

More importantly, I want to know what I can do to bring those fantasies of hers to life.

Seems like I’ll be stopping by the bookstore again first thing tomorrow morning.

She reappears a moment later, wearing a denim jacket and holding a small black purse. Fuck me, she looks like the pinup of a dream small-town girl.

I back up, giving her a little space to close and lock her door, but not too much. I want to smell her floral scent. I want to feel her body heat in the chilled autumn air. I want to hold her in my arms.

“Are you ready?” She turns, looking up at me.

I could reach out and touch her. I could pull her into my arms and kiss her. Hold her.

Fuck, I just want to hold her.

But that’s going to have to wait. I’m going to do things right with Rachel. She’s not like other women. I don’t want this to just be one night. For the first time in my life, I want it all. I don’t know if it means with Rachel, but I know I’ve never felt like this before, and seeing my friends with their families at the barbecue makes me think that maybe that could be me.

I feel a tug in my chest at the thought. It’s not fear or anxiety, more just a shift in knowing what I want now.

Holding my elbow out to her, I let out a sigh of relief when she wraps her small hand around the inside of my arm.

As I lead her down the few steps to my car, I can’t help but think how right this feels.

And how I need to start reading those damn romance novels.





## RACHEL

*H*e bought me a book.

Not just any book. One Kylie said was the hottest one she's read all year.

I'm going to have words with her tomorrow.

The ride to the restaurant is quiet; the soft drawl of Riley Green singing about finding love drifts through the speakers as Mitch drives through town.

I don't know what sparked the change in him when I opened his present, but it took everything I had not to fan myself. And when he realized he bought me monster romance? There was no coming down from that. His heated gaze told me just how much he liked it.

I fidget with the hem of my jacket, not sure what to do with our piercing silence. First dates are bound to be awkward, but this is more. It's not uncomfortable, not entirely. But it's not peaceful either.

I can't stop picturing his hooded eyes when I opened the door. His eyes raked over me from head to toe like he wanted to devour me, and I wanted to let him.

Needing a break from the silence, I say the first thing that comes to mind. "Thank you again for taking care of my van. Carl says it will only take a couple of days."

"Do you have any deliveries to do before you get it back?" He doesn't take his eyes off of the road as he replies.

“I, uh, I don’t know.” I want to smack my head. Between the van breaking down, helping with the wedding, and now our date, I didn’t think to look. “I’ll have to check when I get to the shop in the morning.”

He gives me a sharp nod. “Let me know. I’ll do them for you.”

“Mitch, I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Good thing you’re not asking. I’m not leaving you without a vehicle to run your business.”

“But the bar?”

“I work nights this week.”

“When will you sleep?”

“Don’t worry about me, babe.” He gives me a wink that sends a fresh wave of heat through my body.

My shoulders relax at the return of playful Mitch—the one from the wedding. Even with the silence that fills the truck once again, I feel myself relax.

He pulls into a spot at Angelo’s but doesn’t move to put the car in park. I watch as he stares ahead at the building, frozen.

“Is everything okay?” Now I’m worried that he’s changed his mind. I’m fully prepared that he’s going to turn around and take me home, realizing that it’s not me that he wants to date.

I’m aware of how this must look. He’s from the city, outgoing, is used to being around lots of people and thriving in that environment. Then there’s me. I grew up in Logan Creek and haven’t gone much farther than two hours away. I prefer to stay home. I don’t like crowds, and I definitely don’t like noise. We couldn’t be more wrong for each other.

*But opposites attract.*

I sigh, thinking about the audiobook that embarrassed me. That story is opposites attract. In fact, other than the hero being a billionaire, it’s pretty similar. He’s from the city and has his own company. He’s used to galas, fundraisers,

corporate events. She's a small-town girl that had only ventured out into the city for her friend's bachelorette party and met the handsome billionaire at the restaurant.

Except this isn't a romance novel. This is real life.

"This is all wrong," Mitch says, turning to me. "I'm sorry."

I close my eyes, feeling the tears well up in them. I nod, clasping my hands in my lap.

"Let me..." he trails off.

"It's okay, Mitch. I understand. If you could just drop me off at home."

"What? No!" He turns to me, panic on his face. "I mean, unless that's what you want, but that's not what I want."

"It's not?"

"No, not at all. I just realized I shouldn't have brought you *here*. I wasn't thinking. This is, like, *the* date spot for Logan Creek, so I just assumed this is where we'd go. But you even told me you like low key, and here I am, bringing you to Logan Creek's version of fancy."

"This restaurant is fine, Mitch. I like Italian."

"Yes, but our first date shouldn't be *fine*." He glanced out the windshield one more time before returning his gaze to me. "Do you trust me?"

I search his eyes, finding only honesty in them.

Do I trust him? I don't really know him. But he's also the man that insisted on driving me home when my van didn't start. The one that arranged for it to be taken care of before I had even woken up. The one that has been nothing but incredibly kind and thoughtful to me.

"Yes," I whisper. "I trust you."

The smile that crosses his face makes my heart melt. He puts the truck in park and takes out his phone, tapping the screen furiously.

"What are you doing?"

“You’ll see,” he says, giving me a wink before going back to his phone.

He must be satisfied with whatever answer he got, because he suddenly shoves his phone back in his jeans pocket and puts the truck in reverse.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going where I should have taken you in the first place.”

I stare at him for another moment, wondering what is happening. But then I realize something. He’s doing what none of my previous boyfriends have ever done. He’s listening to me. He’s catering the date for me. The book. The change in the restaurant is because he heard what I told him when I said I like low-key dates. He listened when I said I like to read. He may have gotten more than he bargained for when he heard my audiobook, but he still listened.

“Is there something wrong? I mean, I’m sorry I made you think...well, whatever it was I made you think back there,” he says, pulling back onto Main Street. “I want to spend tonight with you, Rachel. I’m sorry if I made you feel otherwise.”

I nod, unable to say anything else.

“I mean it, Rachel. I’ll make this up to you, I promise.”

The sincerity in his voice nearly breaks me. He sounds like it pained him when he clued in that I had misunderstood him.

I don’t know what he has planned, but for the first time tonight, I’m more excited than nervous. I can’t wait to see what he has in store.



# MITCH

*I*'m such an idiot.

I can't believe I thought taking her to Angelo's was a good idea. It might not be a swanky place in the city, but it's fancy by Logan Creek standards.

She told me she doesn't like fancy.

Thank God Zach had his phone on him and wasn't busy when I messaged him. He said he's able to put in the order for our food and have it ready when I get there.

I also wasn't thinking when I told her the night was wrong. The crestfallen look on her face made me want to punch any asshole that didn't let her know just how beautiful and deserving she is. As soon as my dumbass brain kicked in, she thought I was talking about us, not the location. I vowed I would do everything I could to make her feel cherished. Desired. Loved.

*Loved?* Fuck me. That's a word I've never even thought of using regarding a woman.

A good hockey game? Yes. Perfecting a new batch of beer? Most definitely. How I wanted to make a woman feel? Never.

Pulling into the Brewery parking lot, I throw the truck in park and turn to her, seeing the questioning look on her face. "I'm just going to run in."

She looks between me and the brewery doors. "Okay," she says, drawing the word out in that soft drawl of hers.

I can't stand the distance between us. I won't kiss her now. Our first kiss won't be in the truck in front of my bar, but it'll happen tonight. Instead, I lean over the console, cupping her cheeks in my hands, and placing a kiss on her forehead. The soft sigh she lets out makes me smile.

"Two minutes," I say, pulling back before jumping out.

Running up the smooth, wooden steps, my mind races, working out my plan for the rest of the night.

Zach's waiting for me at the bar, takeout bags waiting in front of him, with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Change of plans?"

"Shut up," I snap. I already feel like an idiot. I don't need Zach rubbing it in.

"Hey, I'm happy to help you," he says with a chuckle, his hands raised in front of him in surrender. "Seriously, man. What happened?"

"I misjudged what Rachel would consider a good time. That's all." I survey the supplies in front of me. "Did you find that blanket?"

"Oh, right, It's just in the back. Give me a minute." He rushes off, disappearing into the kitchen.

We had a stray blanket left behind after a summer sip & show event on the brewery grounds. Everyone brought a blanket and watched a movie against the barn wall on the back of the property while tasting our beers. Normally, we would have donated any items in the lost and found by now, but we haven't gotten around to it. Which, now, I am grateful for.

"Here you go." Zach hands me the blanket over the counter.

"Thanks, I owe you one." I drape the blanket over my arm before gathering in the food bags and making my way to the door. It's still pretty early in the night for there to be a crowd, which means I'm able to grab our food and go quickly.

"Don't thank me, thank Craig. He's the one that busted ass to get this to you. New guy didn't want to be the one to fuck



up the boss' date and all." Zach chuckles.

"Did you threaten him?"

"No. I may have just merely mentioned it was for your date with someone that we're all rooting for. You know, as his boss, he would want to see you happy."

"You're an asshole," I laugh without any ill intention behind my words.

"Hey, Mitch?" Zach stops me before I go too far. "Don't fuck it up even more. Mandy won't stop talking about you two."

"Thanks." I roll my eyes, leaning my back against the door to open it.

My gaze immediately locks on Rachel's as I step foot outside. She's waiting patiently for me.

And she's so goddamn beautiful.

I rush to put my items in the backseat, not wanting to waste another moment of my time with my girl.

That's right. *My* girl.

I'm not taking into account what Zach said. I'm aware the women would be rooting for us since we're all part of the same friend group. Lord knows they love their tight groups with get-togethers and parties. While I would never be with someone purely to be a part of that, I can see myself settling in. I can see Rachel there, too. I don't know if that means we would do that together, but the thought doesn't scare me as much as it should.

"Sorry that took so long. No more interruptions tonight, I promise," I say, firing up my truck.

"It's okay." Her hands are clasped on her lap, her eyes down.

I reach over the console that separates us, grabbing her hand, and lacing her fingers with mine. Her wide eyes shoot to my own at our connection.

My reaction to holding her hand is unexpected. There's electricity—a zap that shoots from our joined hands right to my dick—but it's the calmness that is surprising. My unruly heart slows down and an overwhelming sense of 'right' washes over me. I've never experienced anything like it before.

I can't help myself as my thumb rubs along the back of her hand. Her skin on the back is so soft, while her fingers are calloused from working with flowers and tools. I love the contrast.

“This isn't how I wanted to start our date off, and I apologize for that. I want to make it up to you. If you'll let me.”

“There's nothing to apologize for, Mitch.” Her voice is airy as she settles back into her seat.

“Yes, there is. You deserve everything, Rachel. Not some shitty start to a date. I promise, I can fix this.”

The small smile on her face is genuine as she looks up at me. “Let's do it.”

I pull back onto the main drag, heading toward the outskirts of town. “So, tell me about you.”

“Oh, I don't know if there's much to tell.”

“I highly doubt that,” I say, shooting her a smile.

“Not really. I grew up here in Logan Creek. I started working at the florist out of high school and took it over when the previous owner retired a couple of years ago.”

“That's impressive. They must have trusted you a lot.”

A soft smile graces her face. “She did. She was an amazing mentor, too.”

“Is she still in Logan Creek?”

The smile fades. “No. She died last year.”

“I'm sorry.” I squeeze her hand.

“Thank you. She was a wonderful woman. She taught me everything I know about flowers. I hope that she’s proud of what I’ve done with the shop.”

“I’m sure she is. I know I haven’t been in there much, but Skylar tells everyone what a great job you do. She recommends you whenever she gets the chance.”

“That’s sweet of her. She’s a good friend.”

Silence falls again as I drive up the hill, leaving the city lights behind. With just my headlights guiding us in the fading sunlight. I don’t let go of her hand as we make our way along the bumpy dirt road.

“Where are we going?” She squints, trying to see out the windshield.

“It’s a spot I found while hiking not long after I moved here. It has the most amazing view. I come up here sometimes when I need to think.”

“Like your own secret slice of Logan Creek,” she says in awe. “I don’t think I’ve ever been up here.”

“Really? A hometown girl like you?” I jest.

“No.” She shakes her head, sending the cascade of curls flying over her face. “I can’t say I’m much of a hiker, though.”

“Hmm, I might have to get you to change your mind on that one. There’s nothing like being out with nature, hiking to the top of a hill or mountain and seeing a sight that the majority of people never get to see.” I don’t regret moving to Logan Creek, but I can admit that the initial shock of moving from Vancouver to a small town like this was a bit overwhelming. The first couple of weeks that I was here, I tried to explore every inch of it, trying to find something that resembled my life back in the city. When I found this hiking spot, and later the dirt road that allowed cars up, I knew I’d found it. It reminded me of hiking the valleys and coves back home, letting me look out over the city and water, feeling like I was alone even with a mass of people around me.

“That’s true. I guess if you didn’t go hiking, you wouldn’t be showing me this place.”

I put the truck in park once we reach the end of the road, leaving it running. “Just give me a minute.”

Grabbing my items from the back, I jump out and make my way to the clearing, letting my headlights guide me as I set everything up.

I may have messed up the start of the night, but I know it’s only going to get better from here.



# RACHEL

“*M*itch, it’s beautiful.”

I can’t take my eyes off of the scenery in front of me. Now that he’s turned his truck off and it’s just us in the pitch black, I can see everything below us.

Sitting on the blanket Mitch placed on the cold dirt beneath us, I look out at the city lights below us shining like a jewel box in the pitch black of the night. The moonlight gives a hint of the silhouettes of the mountain range before us. I feel like we’re at the top of the world here, alone in the dark. I can’t believe I’ve lived here my whole life and never knew a view like this existed.

“Sure is,” he whispers. I peek over at him to see him looking at me.

I bite back a smile as he reaches up and tucks my hair behind my ear.

We share a moment so intense I almost forget to breathe. Our gazes lock. His fingers are playing with my hair.

We don’t say anything, but we don’t need to. There’s an intensity connecting us that is stronger than anything I’ve ever felt before. I’m afraid if I move, the connection will be broken.

“Rachel?” he whispers.

“Yes?”

“You’re breathtaking. I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to be alone with you.”

I don't know how to answer that. I can't tell him that I've been pining after him since he moved to Logan Creek. That he's what I picture as every guy in every romance novel I've read since then.

His hand shifts from my hair, cupping my cheek. His thumb brushes along my skin, causing a wave of goosebumps to prickle over my skin.

We stay like that for another breath. I don't know if he's going to kiss me. I want him to. I want his kiss more than anything I've ever wanted in my whole life.

Mitch drops his hand and turns, instantly severing the intensity. I miss the connection, even knowing that we couldn't just sit and stare at each other all night.

He turns back with the bags from the brewery in his hands. The smile he gives me is more reserved, almost shy, which isn't a look I've seen on him before.

"I hope you don't mind that I ordered for both of us." He begins to pull out container after container, placing it on the blanket between us. I don't miss how he shifts over, closing the distance between us so our legs press close together.

"No, I don't mind."

My mouth waters as he lifts the lids off the containers. Sweet chilli chicken, potato wedges, poutine, wings. It looks like most of the brewery's appetizer menu is laid out on the blanket before us. "This smells amazing."

"I give Zach shit for a lot of things, but the man knows his food." He smiles, sneaking a glance up at me while he uncovers the last container.

I grab a disposable fork, digging into the chili chicken. The sweet and spicy flavour immediately fills my mouth, making me moan. "This is amazing."

Mitch's hand freezes, hovering above the potato skins container, eyes wide as he looks at me.

"What?" I ask, wiping the corner of my mouth with my finger. "Did I get the sauce on me?"

He raises his hand, his thumb brushing against my bottom lip. He doesn't say anything as he continues, his gaze never straying from the movement. I resist the urge to look away. I want to pull my bottom lip between my teeth, but I don't want him to stop touching me. He looks like he wants to kiss me. Maybe even do more than kiss me. While I want that, too—more than anything—I'm afraid of opening myself up to that. What if I'm just a passing phase? What if I let him in only to find he just wants a hook up? I can't stand the thought of losing him and then watching him with other women around town.

“You're thinking too hard,” he whispers, meeting my eyes but not letting go. “What are you thinking about?”

I shake my head, causing him to drop his hand. I can't let him know what I'm thinking. I don't want to sound like some stage five clinger thinking about anything past tonight. It's our first date, for heaven's sake. Instead of being truthful, I pick up a jalapeño popper. “So, how did you get into making beer?” I take a bite of the popper, preventing myself from saying anything further.

He looks at me for another moment before dropping his shoulders and looking out at the city before us. “It's not that interesting, really. I was looking at programs at local colleges and universities and saw one about making beer. I figured I like beer, so why not?” I let out a chuckle, drawing his attention back to me. “What?”

“Nothing, it's just—cute.”

“Cute,” he repeats slowly.

“Yeah, I don't know how else to explain it. You knew what you liked, and you went for it. I like that.”

He sends me a heated look. “Damn right, I do.”

Now I don't know if he's talking about his degree or me.

Heat rushes through my body, even in the chill fall night. A shiver runs through me, and I'm unable to hide the intensity of it.



“Cold?” Mitch asks, shrugging out of his jacket and placing it over the shoulders of my own thin coat.

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine.” He gives me one of his signature smiles that melts every part of me.

Even though I’m not cold, I hold his jacket to me, wrapping myself in his woodsy scent. I try to act like I’m burrowing into his jacket when, really, I’m taking in the smell that will now be forever associated with Mitch. It reminds me of the forest and mint gum.

We eat our way through the buffet of appetizers, talking about everything from our families to what it was like growing up. I learn he has two younger sisters that are still in Vancouver, who keep him up to date on everything, including their latest romance reads, in a group chat. His dad is an accountant, and his mom has always been a stay-at-home mom. He boasts about them, showing me just how much he loves them. I find that makes him so much more endearing.

I tell him about how I’m an only child and how amazing it would have been to grow up with sisters. He playfully debates that I’m the lucky one, but I can tell how much love he has for them.

We clean up the containers and I settle in, leaning back on my outstretched arms behind me. “That was amazing, Mitch. Thank you.”

“It’s not over yet.” He reaches beside him, pulling out another container.

“More food?” I chuckle, sitting up. While I’m absolutely stuffed, I’m curious about what else he has.

“Did you think I was going to do all of this and not bring dessert?” He jokingly acts shocked, placing his free hand on his chest. “Babe, I *always* bring dessert.”

And I don’t think he just means food.

He opens the container to two slices of swirled cheesecake.

“Oh my gosh, that looks amazing. What kind is that?”

“Two layer pumpkin spice cheesecake. Lila’s started making her fall desserts.” He lowers her voice and leans into me. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Always.” I’m lost in his eyes. I don’t know what he’s about to tell me, but I’m hanging on to his every word.

“I sneak a slice of whatever she’s making every day. It means I spend extra time in the gym, but it’s so worth it.”

I let out a giggle—an honest to God schoolgirl giggle—as he smiles at me.

“I don’t blame you. If I worked there, I’m sure I’d be sneaking more than one.”

He hands me a fresh fork, holding the container between us. I dig in and immediately the rich flavour of pumpkin, cinnamon, and nutmeg fills me. “Lila really outdid herself here.”

“I know; this is one of my favourites that she’s made so far. It’s closely tied with her snickerdoodle blondie.”

“Oh, wow. That sounds so amazing.”

“I’ll bring you one the next time she makes it. Hell, I’ll even put the request in because you need to try it.”

“I’d like that.” I smile, taking another forkful of cake.

My heart skips a beat, knowing he’s thinking of seeing me past tonight. I don’t know why I’m so hesitant to think we won’t have a second date. He’s been nothing but kind and attentive. A perfect gentleman.

But part of me wants that other side of him. The side that acts like the alpha heroes in my books. The side he showed me when my van broke down.

“What are you thinking right now?” His voice is husky and low, a combination that makes my core clench. It reminds me of the voice he used last night. The one that made me want *things* with him. Things that I don’t know if I have the right to want.

“I’m thinking of when you rescued me in my van.”

“What about it?” he asks, putting the dessert container behind him without breaking eye contact.

“I, uh...I was thinking about how you almost kissed me.” Holy shit, did I just admit that?

A smirk crosses his handsome face. “That’s true. I almost kissed you. Many times that night, actually.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“It wasn’t right. I wasn’t going to have our first kiss in a parking lot. You deserve better than that.”

“I do?” My brain is on autopilot. I can’t think when he’s looking at me like that with his gorgeous hazel eyes focused only on me.

“Oh, yes, Rachel, you do.” He reaches up and cups my cheek, leaning in slowly.

“And in my driveway?” I breathe.

He shakes his head subtly. “No, not there, either.”

“So where do you think, then?”

“Here, underneath the stars, I think it’s a perfect place for our first kiss. Don’t you think?” His eyes darken as he leans into me. His voice lowers into that growl that I’ve only heard audiobook narrators do.

I have no words. I just nod, not taking my eyes off of him.

He smirks, finally closing the distance between us.

His lips are soft as he presses them to mine. The scruff of his beard brushes against my skin, causing a delicious friction as he presses deeper into me.

My hands find their way to his shoulders, gripping tightly as he brushes his tongue along my lips.

He breaks our kiss, reaching over and pulling me onto his lap. With my arms wrapped around his shoulders, he joins our lips again, running his hands through my hair.

I’ve never wanted to purr like a kitten, but when he does that, I want to.

Our kiss becomes all-consuming. I've never felt anything like it before. The world outside of the two of us ceases to exist. My hands make their way to his hair, weaving my fingers through the strands while he wraps my own around his fist. He's demanding; kissing me like he needs my air to breathe. I've never felt anything like it before in my life.

My body is on fire. Every nerve ending is firing. Every sense I have is heightened. When he pulls away from me and stares into my eyes, the intensity of it is overwhelming.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

"Holy shit is right."



# MITCH

“*T*he hard ridges on his tail brush against my skin, making me shiver. The scales on his tough skin brush softly against my inner thigh, surprising me with its silk-like texture.”

“How the fuck are scales silky?” I mutter, raising an eyebrow at the case of ketchup in front of me. The breathy feminine voice continues to play through my earbuds as I shake my head and record the number of bottles into the software on my tablet and move on.

After seeing Rachel’s reaction to the book Kylie had picked out, I knew I needed to read it. I figured since I was doing inventory this week, an audiobook would be the best way.

What I discovered was interesting, to say the least.

Have I ever imagined a scenario where a woman would bang a Godzilla-like creature? Can’t say that I have.

Do I find it hot as hell in this scenario? Abso-fucking-lutely.

I spend the next hour making good progress with both the inventory and the book, finding myself fascinated by how enthralled I am with Mary’s love for Zekon. Following their love—and crazy monster sex—makes the hours fly by.

I can’t help but imagine what Rachel looks like when she’s reading these. Is she curled up on her couch drinking a cup of tea? Or is she in bed, under covers, touching herself when the characters have sex on the page?

I feel myself lengthen at the thought, even though I quickly push that line of thinking aside. I've managed to listen to a fair bit of this book without making it apparent I'm turned on. I'm not going to start now.

By the time I make my way to the tasting room, Brody, Travis, and Dyllan have joined Zach at the bar.

"There he is," Travis exclaims with a wide smile on his face. "I thought you were going to lie low and get out of telling us how your date went."

"Here we go," Brody mutters, taking a sip of his beer.

"I'm working," I shoot back, taking the EarPods out and placing them in their case. "Which, I see you all snuck out early for a drink."

"We're celebrating," Travis says, ignoring the brooding glares from Brody and Dyllan.

Zach stands next to me, chuckling as he dries a glass.

I sigh, knowing Travis and his antics. He's not going anywhere. "Alright, I'll bite. What are you celebrating on a Monday night?"

"Well, it's almost the end of harvest, which means we get to see this asshole again," Travis jokes, throwing his arm around Brody's shoulders, earning him an eye roll from his friend. "And the women told us to go out and have a beer together."

"Kicked out, were ya?" I joke, knowing they're nothing but devoted husbands and fathers.

"There may have been some words about 'hovering' and 'needing guy time,'" Dyllan grumbles.

"Don't think this gets you out of telling us about your date with Rachel," Travis adds.

"There's not much to tell. We had a good time." I don't know why I'm being so tight-lipped about our date. I feel protective over her, even though I know these guys would do anything for her if needed, I still don't want to share.

“Even if you changed your plans halfway through?” Zach shoots me a shit-eating grin.

Fucker. I should have known he would gossip as much as Travis.

“Ooh, what happened there?” Travis asks. Brody and Dyllan don’t say anything, but they both lean in, settling themselves for my answer.

They’re just as bad as each other.

“It wasn’t halfway through, it was at the beginning. I just realized Angelo’s isn’t her scene, that’s all.”

“Right. So where did you end up taking her with our whole happy hour menu?” Zach asked, leaning against the bar.

Dammit, they really aren’t letting this go.

“For a picnic.” I avoid their gazes, taking a damn cloth and wiping down the already clean bar top.

“A picnic in the dark?” Zach questions.

I close my eyes and take a steadying breath. “Yes. I brought her to a lookout I found, alright?” I snap, glaring at my business partner, never wanting to punch his smug face more than I do right now.

“A lookout? What are you, in high school?” Brody scoffs with a hint of amusement on his face.

“Trespassing more like. I’m pretty sure town parks close at dusk,” Dyllan, Logan Creek’s mayor, jests.

“What lookout? The Johnson Hill one?” Travis asks.

“You’re such an asshole,” I mutter to Zach.

“I need to keep the place entertaining.”

“Don’t you have drinks you need to serve?”

Zach surveys the room. “Nah, I’m good right now.”

“Come on, Romeo. Don’t leave us hanging,” Travis urges.

“Fine. I don’t know what the hill is called. I found it not long after moving here. It’s about ten minutes out of town. It’s



a dirt road all the way up where there's a lookout over town."

"I know the one. It's an old logging road," Dyllan says.

"So, that's where we went. I realized after getting to Angelo's she would prefer something more low-key, so I took her there. That's it." I rush through my words, frustrated I'm even explaining this. They're worse than the ladies in the book club.

"Except you dropped her off at her shop this morning," Travis added smugly.

"How the fuck do you know that?" I demand, ignoring Zach's surprised look.

"You dog." Zach punches me in the shoulder.

"I was just ending my shift and drove past."

"Right." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "It's not what you think. Her van broke down after the wedding Saturday night. I dropped her off after our date last night and picked her up this morning to take her to work."

"And when you snuck off earlier?" Zach asks.

"I was driving her home and also did a delivery for her."

"Whipped." Travis coughs, earning him a chuckle from the guys.

"Really? Says the guy with two young kids and a cat named *Kerfluffy*?" I narrow my eyes at him.

Travis has the decency to look a little taken aback before saying, "I never said I wasn't." We all laugh. "Oh, shut up. Like you all aren't, too."

That only made us laugh even harder.

"Look, we're just happy it's working out between you two," Zach says, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes.

"Why do you care so much? You've never given a shit about my dating life before this." I cross my arms over my chest, leaning back against the counter behind me.

Zach's about to answer when a loud voice sounds from beside me. "I can't help myself as I pound into her, her breasts jumping at the movement under my punishing thrusts. My tail thumps in time with our hips as if keeping rhythm."

My eyes dart open as I realize that the voice is coming from *me*. My pocket, more specifically.

I frantically rush to pull out my phone, realizing I must have knocked it to start playing when I leaned against the counter.

"What the fuck are you listening to?" Dyllan narrows his eyes at me.

"Just...uh..." I pull my phone out and tap the screen until the oversized lizard stops describing the wicked things he's doing to his human.

"Ho-ly shit. You're listening to a romance novel," Zach says, beaming.

"You know what? Yes, I am. This book was recommended for Rachel, so I bought it for her, and I'm listening to it as well." I don't give a damn what they think. I'm doing this to understand my woman and to find more ways to make her happy. I can feel my temper rising, which isn't their fault. They're just doing what guys do. I'd be doing the same if any of them blasted monster smut from their pocket. But this is about Rachel, and I can't seem to keep my cool when it comes to her.

"So, is it any good?" Brody asks, acting completely unaffected by the events. When we all turn our surprised attention toward him, he adds, "What? I've read some of Kade's books over her shoulder. They aren't all that bad. I'm also not going to deny getting the benefits of her reading them."

The rest of the guys mumble their agreement.

"It's not bad. I don't know how I feel about the leading guy being an oversized lizard monster."

"Hero," Dyllan adds. Now we all look at him with gaped mouths. He rolls his eyes. "It's not a 'leading guy,' it's a hero."

Skylar reads the same books. Don't act like Lila and Mandy don't, too. I swear they have their own book club and they're as bad as the ones that meet at the bookstore."

"Afternoon Tea-Lighters," Travis snickers as he takes a sip of his beer. "Seriously, though, man. You and Rachel? So awesome."

"Skylar won't stop talking about it since the wedding," Dyllan adds.

"Not you, too." I glare at Dyllan. "When did you turn into a gossip like this one?" I nod my head at Travis, who has a big fucking grin on his face.

"I'm not. I'm just commenting that your recent choice in a date is all that my wife talks about. Something about a cute meet or something."

"Meet cute," Zach adds, not making eye contact with us. "Which, by the way, is the exact opposite of what you had with Skylar."

Dyllan rolls his eyes.

"I mean, I was surprised. You aren't like the other guys she dates," Travis says.

"What the fuck does that mean?" And there's my temper again. I ring the towel between my hands as I try to read Travis' face.

"Woah, I didn't mean any harm, man. I just mean that she normally goes for a different type. White collar and whatnot."

"Wasn't her last boyfriend an accountant?" Brody asks.

"And there was the manager at Mandy's bank," Zach adds.

"How do you know so much about her dating history?" I turn my anger on Zach.

"She's friends with our wives, Mitch. We overhear things," he says.

My mind starts racing, thinking of the other men that she's dated. Obviously she's had boyfriends, but now I want to know more information that I don't know if I have the right to

yet. Are they still in Logan Creek? Who are they? More importantly, what does it mean that I'm not like them?

Rachel hasn't expressed any reason for me to be concerned about this, but I can't help but let my mind wander there. As the guys go back to their own conversation, I think about this morning when I picked her up. She looked beautiful in a pale green dress that looked retro with its fitted top and flared skirt. Her hair was down in curls, just a little makeup on her face.

She was out the door before I put my truck in park. She surprised me by bringing me a coffee in her travel thermos and let me kiss her for longer than appropriate outside her flower shop when I dropped her off. She wouldn't do that for someone she wasn't overly interested in, right?

It's not something I can do anything about now. I have more inventory to do before the end of my shift.

I pop my ear pods back in as I head to the back. As I pull out my phone to start the audiobook again, I smile, seeing a text.

RACHEL

Thinking of you. Thank you again for picking me up and dropping me off.

I'm sorry you have to go out of your way for me.

Maybe I don't need to worry. Maybe I have something those white collar guys don't have. I don't know what it is, by I'm going to fucking hold on to it as long as I can.



## RACHEL

*I* try my best not to get too frustrated, but these snapdragons are getting the better of me. No matter what I do, they aren't sitting the way I want them to, and it makes me want to scream.

Deciding the best thing to do is take a break before I snap one by accident, I put them down and stand from my stool. The shop has been a little quiet today, which has let me get caught up on some orders. I feel bad knowing I need to ask Mitch for a ride for these deliveries, but I don't have an option other than turning down business, which I really don't want to do right now.

Mitch looked so tired this morning when he picked me up, and I know a lot of that is my fault. He would normally still be sleeping at the time he pulled into my driveway, but he won't listen to me about finding my way to work any other way. It makes me feel a little better to bring him coffee in the morning. We may only be a few days into our little routine, but it's been working really well. I bring him coffee in my travel mug in the morning. He brings it back to me in the evening with a treat from Charmed Bakery. Lila's been going overboard with her fall baking, which means I've been getting a lot of pumpkin and apple flavoured treats, which makes me really happy.

I don't know if Mitch knew they were my favourite or not, but I'll take it.

I'm both looking forward to and dreading the call from Carl that my van is ready. While I do feel bad for having

Mitch change his schedule for me, I'll admit I like being able to see him every day.

I never used to watch the clock, counting down until the shop closed, but lately I have been. Closing the shop used to mean not doing anything but going home to an empty house. While I still do that, I get to see Mitch on my way there. It means that I get to talk to him about our days and kiss him on my doorstep when he leaves. It means that I get little texts from him when he's made it back to the brewery and sometimes even ones late at night if he's thinking of me or to tell me something funny that happened in the tasting room.

The only thing that makes me hesitant about us is he hasn't mentioned a second date. Granted, we get two little mini dates every day, but it's not the same.

Is he only dropping me off and picking me up because he feels sorry for me? Running my deliveries in town because I don't have anyone else? Are the baked goods just a way of repaying the coffee I bring for him in the morning?

I know I've overthinking it, but I can't help it.

The bell above the door chimes, and Mandy walks in with a bright smile. "Hey, Rach!"

"Hey, Mandy. How are you?"

"Good. I'm just here to pick up the order for the bank. I think Sarah called it in last week."

"Yes, I have it right here." I walk over to the standing coolers, feeling the comforting *whoosh* of fragrant flowers on a cool breeze wash over me.

"Those are so pretty!" she exclaims as I hand her the vase filled with vibrant yellow, purple, and red alstroemerias. "Judith is going to love these."

"She's retiring, right? I think Sarah mentioned that when she called in the order."

"Yes. She deserves it, too. She's worked at the bank her whole life, almost." Mandy lowered the bouquet after smelling

the flowers. “So, Matthew was asking about you today when I was heading out.”

“Ugh,” I groan, dropping my head back. “He didn’t.”

Mandy chuckles. “Oh, he did. He even offered to come with me.”

“No.” I drop my head forward, resting my face in my hands. “Do you think it’s because I’ve been seen with Mitch?”

“Who knows? What ever happened with you two, anyway?”

I lower my hands and look up at my friend. I don’t want to think about my ex-boyfriend, especially when I’m possibly seeing someone new, but I guess it can’t be avoided. Small town perk.

“Nothing *happened*. He just wasn’t for me. He was nice, just no spark.”

“Like there is with you and Mitch?” she asks, the corner of her mouth raised in a small smile.

“You could say that.” I feel myself start to blush, the heat rushing to my cheeks. “But, I don’t know. He’s been so good to me, especially since my van broke down, but how would this even work? I mean, how do you make it work with Zach? You work days and he works nights. When do you even see each other?”

“It’s not easy, that’s for sure. We make the time we do have together count. Especially with the kids, we can’t always go out on dates, so we make our own at home when we can. He drops by the bank when he has a break, or I’ll stop by the brewery on the way to pick up the kids. You find a groove and what works best for the two of you.”

“I don’t know. I might be thinking too far ahead. I’ve been on *one* date, and he hasn’t said anything about a second one.”

She places the bouquet on the counter between us and places her hand on mine. “He likes you, Rachel. Anyone can see that he does. Plus, I heard he’s been your personal



chauffeur all week. A guy wouldn't do that unless he was really interested."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Think about all the other guys you've dated. Matthew is a nice guy, but I don't think he would take time off work to pick you up, drop you off, and make your deliveries for you. He's the type that would suggest that you get a rental car from Okanagan Falls and do it yourself."

"That's true." She does have a point. Matthew, and all my other boyfriends, would be sympathetic to what I was going through, but they definitely wouldn't be going out of their way to drive me around.

"Plus, Zach said he was listening to one of your books yesterday while he was working. The guys got a good kick out of it. It sounded like it started playing from his pocket when he was behind the bar."

"No! That happened to him, too?" I gasp. "Wait, he was listening to a romance novel?"

She gives me a funny look before answering. "We're going to circle back to how that also happened to you, but yes. He was listening to something about a lizard?"

"He's reading 'The Monster's Human Prey?'"

"You know it?"

"He bought it for me! He gave it to me on our date. He said Kylie recommended it to him." I look out the window over Mandy's shoulder. "I can't believe he's listening to it."

"And you're still doubting that he's into you?" Mandy chuckles.

I bring my gaze back to her, realizing for the first time that I haven't been seeing what's right in front of me. Mitch has paid me more attention in the last few days than any man ever has my whole life.

So why am I waiting for it to all fall apart?



# MITCH

I close my eyes and let go of a yawn so big I almost feel my jaw crack. My eyes droop as I sag into my couch, barely keeping track of the hockey game on the screen. Travis does the same beside me, stretching his arms up over his head.

“Can you believe we traded Karlson for Merrick? I don’t know what the management was thinking. Karlson was our best forward,” Travis says, rubbing his hands over his face.

He texted an hour ago, asking if he could come over. Apparently, Lila told him to get out of the house for a few hours because he was driving her crazy trying to help with the kids. He looks like a walking zombie, but I assume that’s what anyone would look like if they had two young kids while also working shift work.

“Merrick’s young, but he’s good. Give him a year or two and you’ll be thinking differently.” I lean my head against the back of the couch, closing my eyes while trying not to fall asleep. My eyelids are just so damn heavy.

“Why are you so tired? Are you still driving Rachel to work every morning?”

“Yup. Carl’s having a hard time getting the part in, and she doesn’t have a backup. Her insurance doesn’t cover a rental, and she has deliveries to do.”

“You’re a good man, Mitch.” He yawns again.

I stifle my own yawn. Why is that shit so contagious?

“So, when’s your next date?” he asks.

I lift my head and look at him. He's sprawled with his legs out in front of him, arms crossed over his chest. His eyes are open but he looks barely awake.

"We, uh, haven't set a date."

Travis gives me a side glance, raising his eyebrow.

"What?"

"I know you've been seeing her every day, but you haven't made plans to see her outside of a work situation?"

I sigh. "Um, no?"

"Dude," Travis groans.

"Again, what?" I feel my patience wearing thin, and it's not just because I'm tired.

"You've probably left the poor girl wondering if you're driving her out of pity or if you actually want to date her."

I stop, thinking of the last few days when I've picked her up, and she's been ready at her door with a coffee for me in her hand. I smile all morning as I drink her coffee, wash the mug, and bring it back to her with a dessert from the bakery. I love the smile on her face when I show up with a box just for her. It's worth all the harassment I get from Kade and Lila when I stop in.

But now I worry that she's concerned about what that means.

"Do you want to go on another date with her?"

"Yes," I answer quickly, not even having to think about it.

"Then do something about it. I think you've watched enough of us go through our shit to realize there's no time to waste when you find the right one."

Have I found the right one? As in *the* one? I mean, yes, I've technically known Rachel for years, but we've been talking for less than a week.

"You're overthinking it," Travis grumbles, his eyes closed again. "Ask her to the Fall Festival this weekend. I've heard

they are going to revamp it to be more harvest based. Something about needing to ‘connect to our roots.’ Whatever that means. They’re even bringing in some singer from Whiskey Falls.”

“Singer from...Do you mean Greyson Wallace?”

“Yeah, that guy.”

“Only you would call one of the biggest country singers in the world ‘that guy.’” I scoff.

“You run on an hour’s sleep consistently with a colicky baby and see how your brain works,” he mumbles.

That’s fair. No matter how tired I am, he must be feeling it a hundred times worse. I wonder if Lila sent him here to try to get a nap in.

I see him doze off and figure this is the best time to message Rachel without him trying to take my phone and run the conversation.

How’s your day going?

That’s easy enough. Not out of the ordinary of anything that I would normally text her.

I don’t know why I’m so nervous, but when I see the three little dots pop up, my heart starts beating like it’s going to burst out of my chest.

RACHEL

Pretty good. Skylar put in the orders for the spring weddings being booked at the brewery.

What about you?

I smile, thinking there’s at least more guaranteed dates to see her, even if they are months from now.

Good. Travis is over to watch the hockey game I recorded last night but he fell asleep.

lol. I can only imagine with two kids that young at home.

Right?

Listen, I know we haven't talked about our second date, but I was wondering if you'd like to go to the Fall Festival with me tomorrow?

I hold my breath, waiting for those bubbles to pop up again.

I'm never this nervous when texting a woman. Then again, I can't remember the last time I asked one out on an actual date. Or texted. I try not to think too much about my dating history of late, because it doesn't paint me in the best picture. Usually meaningless hookups where both of us are just not wanting to be alone. Definitely not anything I would want for Rachel. She deserves only the best, and this is far from just another hook up.

I'd love to. It's always my favourite event of the year. I also heard they booked Greyson Wallace! Can you believe it?

I smile as I type.

Yeah, I heard a thing or two about him coming.

I can't wait to see you tonight. It's my night off; do you want to grab dinner at the diner?

There. Two dates in two days. Take that, Travis.

I'd love to. I can probably close the shop a little early. I'll be ready when you are.

Her last words stir something up in me. I'm ready. I'm so ready for her. I'm going to take it slow and be a gentleman because that's what she deserves, but I want nothing more than to undress her and show her I'm man enough to act out any fantasy she may have from her books. I might not have a tail or a scaly ribbed-for-her-pleasure cock, but I can be her hero.

Now I sound like a fucking Enrique Iglesias song.

Travis lets out a snore, which causes his body to jerk. He scratches at his chest and readjusts his head before falling back asleep.

I think of the man he was a few years ago when I first moved to Logan Creek. I heard rumours of him and Lila starting off as pretending to date to save his job, but everything I've seen from them is real, just like all the others and their wives. The more time I spend with Rachel, the more I see that maybe I am ready for that kind of life. Maybe not the babies yet—they still scare me a little—but the forever kind of deal. It's too early to tell if that's with Rachel, but tonight is a good way to find out.





## MITCH

“Get yourself together, man. You’re just going to the fucking diner.” I grumble as I pull into a parking spot in front of Rustic Charm Flowers. My heart is racing, my palms are sweaty. I can’t focus. I’m only partially blaming it on the lack of sleep. And possibly a couple of doses of caffeine.

After texting with Rachel until she had to go help a client, I did the best I could to catch a nap while Travis was still passed out on my couch. He only woke up when his alarm went off, letting him know he needed to go get ready for work. How that man functions on so little sleep and endless amounts of coffee and energy drinks, I’ll never know.

While I might have only slept for about twenty minutes, it helped make me more alert, or at least as alert as I need to be to pick up Rachel and go to the Creekside Diner. Thankfully, I remembered to stop at Charmed Bakery on the way here and may have also ordered a double espresso that I downed the second I walked out of the door.

Rachel appears in the doorway with a bright smile on her face. Today she’s wearing skin tight dark denim jeans, a black sweater that shows off all her curves, and brown boots that go up to mid-calf. I was so tired this morning that I hadn’t noticed, but now that the caffeine and nap is hitting my system, I’m overwhelmed by her beauty. I can’t believe what a lucky bastard I am to be taking her out. While there’s still the chatter in my head about how I’m not like the other guys she’s

dated, I'm trying to focus on the fact that maybe that will work in my favour. There was a reason it didn't work out with them.

I get out of the truck and walk to her, pulling her into a hug and giving her a light kiss on her lips. "Hi," I say as I pull back.

"Hi," she says, her voice breathless.

I want to do more than this, but there are too many people walking around and I know she wouldn't like it. As much as I have to learn about Rachel, I do know she's a private person and wouldn't like to be the centre of attention, especially with me making out with her in front of her store.

So instead, I hold out my elbow. "May I escort you to the Creekside Diner, Ma'am?"

Rachel giggles, a sound that makes me instantly happy and calmer. "Yes, you may, good sir."

She laces her hand through my arm, and we begin to walk down the street.

"How was the rest of your day?"

She excitedly tells me of the arrangements she's been working on and a shipment of flowers she got in from Hawaii. She also tells me she's been working with the elementary school in town to start teaching classes to the children, which she's very excited about.

"It just makes me so happy to think that the kids are interested enough to even just give it a try." She's practically vibrating as we walk, and she tells me about her plans.

"That's great. I bet the kids are all going to love you."

I know I do.

That thought should scare me, but instead, I only feel a sense of calm.

We get to the diner and I usher her inside. Sheila waves us in and tells us to grab a seat, so I lead her to a booth by the window. My nerves are back as I pick up the menu, my eyes

scanning the offering but not really seeing what's in front of me.

“What can I get ya?” Shelia asks as she comes to our table. She's well into her sixties, with no sign of slowing down. She's always been incredibly welcoming to everyone and especially made me feel at home after I moved to town.

“A coffee, please,” I say, knowing I really don't need more, but I can't help it. Might as well go all in at this point.

“A Diet Coke for me, please, Sheila,” Rachel says with a smile.

“You got it. Do you want your regulars, or are you wanting to try something new?”

That's another great thing about small towns. She always knows what I want when I come in.

“The usual,” Rachel and I say at the same time, causing us to chuckle.

“All right then,” Sheila smirks. “I'll be right back with your drinks.”

I look at her for a moment as Sheila walks away, noticing that she's much too far away from me, even with just the table between us.

I stand and move to her side, sliding in beside her, making her move over.

“Is this okay?” I ask, sliding my arm over her shoulders.

“Uh huh,” she replies, her eyes wide and mouth open in shock. “What are you doing?”

“I wanted to be closer to my girl.” I wrap a few strands of her hair around my finger.

“Your... girl?” she repeats.

“That is, if you'll have me.” I wink at her. “I know this is fast, but things feel right with you, Rach. Do you feel it too?”

She opens her mouth to respond when Sheila comes back with our drinks, a knowing smile on her face when she sees

our change in seating.

“Here you go. Your dinners should be up soon,” she adds before walking off.

“Yes,” Rachel says, drawing my attention back to her. “I feel it, Mitch. I’ll...uh...I’ll be honest. I didn’t know why you asked me out.”

“Rach...” I interrupt.

“No, please, let me get this out.” She places her hand on my thigh, very close to my cock, which is now very much awake and on alert. “We’re very different, and I would be lying if I said I haven’t had a crush on you since you moved to Logan Creek.”

Now that puts a smile on my face. That is, until a thought hits me. “Wait, why didn’t you say anything?”

“What was I supposed to do, Mitch? Introduce myself when you moved to town and ask you out?”

Her question seems like a reasonable course of action when you’re interested in someone, but her tone tells me that’s not how she feels. “Um...no?”

“Right, no. I saw the women in town fawn over you. I can’t compete with them. I’m a bookworm florist that prefers a night in over crowds. I don’t like a lot of noise. I don’t like drama.” She stops, closes her eyes, and takes a deep breath. “You know what? Maybe this is a mistake.”

Her hand grips my thigh tighter, like she’s forgotten it’s there. Blood rushes through my veins, heart pumping in my ears. Surely she can’t be suggesting what I think she is.

“Hold on. Why is this a bad idea? Do you mean us?”

She opens her eyes and I hate the tears that well in them. “We’re too different.”

“Who cares?” I stop myself from raising my voice any more than I already have. Her eyes dart around the room, looking to see if anyone noticed us. I don’t care. Let them hear how I feel about her, but I lower my voice, knowing it makes her feel uncomfortable.

“Rachel, listen to me. I know you think all of those things are reasons we shouldn’t be together, but I think they are the reasons we *should* be.”

She gives me a quizzical look. “Please explain.”

“Those women that you say were ‘fawning over’ me? They’re a dime a dozen. They just want something new and shiny in town. They didn’t care about me. To be honest, I didn’t give them the time of day. I was kind and flirted a little because of my job, but I had no interest in them and I didn’t date any of them. In fact, I would always go to Kelowna to meet women, and even then, they were only hook ups.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders drop, her gaze looks down at the table.

I cup her cheek, bringing her eyes back to mine. “I love that you’re a bookworm—and florist. I’ve been listening to the book I gave you, you know? It’s not that bad.”

“I may have heard about that.” The corner of her mouth ticks up in the most adorable smile.

“Did you now?”

“Yeah, Mandy said the guys were giving you a hard time about it.”

“I can handle the guys,” I chuckle. “As for everything else, once I leave the brewery, I don’t like noise or crowds. I keep to myself, stay in my apartment, and watch sports and movies. I think I might even take up reading now that a pretty blonde has gotten me into it.”

That makes her smile, the edge of sadness taken off.

“See, that’s what I think makes us perfect. We balance each other. You can be my calm. I’ll be your chaos.”

“You’re not that chaotic.”

“No, but my work is.” I take her hands in mine, caressing them with my thumbs. “What I’m saying is that our opposites work for us. When I come and pick you up from work, it’s not that I just look forward to seeing you, which I do, but it’s my moment of quiet in my day. It’s when I get to just sit with my

girl and be still, and that's so incredibly important to me. You're important to me."

Sheila appears and slides our dinners in front of us. We turn and face our plates, me with the jalapeño bacon burger, Rachel with the Greek chicken wrap. It pains me to know that she feels that way, that she's somehow not 'enough.' I've lived in Logan Creek for years, and I'm now kicking myself that I didn't take it upon myself to get to know her sooner. I could have been the one to approach her. I could have asked her out earlier. To be honest, a woman like her intimidates me. She's a forever girl.

But maybe I'm ready for that.



## RACHEL

We're standing on my porch, holding hands under the light. I'm not ready for the night to end. We're both exhausted and we're going to see each other tomorrow, but I can't help it. I don't want to let him go.

"Do you want to come in?" I ask hesitantly.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," he says, his eyes searching mine.

"Right." Of course, why would that be a good idea? I made a fool out of myself at dinner, questioning why he asked me out. We both ate in relative silence after that, almost as if he was rushing to get through the meal. I have to admit, I was rushing, too.

I wish I knew what he was thinking right now. I want to end the tension between us.

"It's not what you're thinking," he says gruffly. He looks over my shoulder down the street, warring with himself about something. Whatever it is, he makes a decision, brushing his body against mine, making me back up until I'm against the front door. "If I come inside, Rachel, we're going to do more than just talk, or drink coffee, or do whatever you think it is we're going to do in there."

"Oh," is all I can say. I had read the whole situation wrong for the last half an hour.

"Yeah, oh." He brushes his nose against mine, inhaling deeply, as if he's breathing me in. "I'll still come in if you want me to. The choice is yours. Just know that what I'm



feeling right now isn't very gentlemanly, and I'm trying very hard to be a gentleman."

My thoughts race in time with my heartbeat. I can hardly hear myself think over the pounding in my ears. Am I ready for this? Are we ready for this?

Then his lips graze my neck and I know I absolutely am.

"Come inside, Mitch," I pant.

He nips at my neck, causing me to squeak as I turn, fumbling with the lock. I don't know how we make it inside, but we do, and he's on me the moment the door is closed. He turns the deadbolt and cages me in with his arms, my back against the door.

"Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'm sure."

He searches my eyes for another moment before pressing his lips to mine. His touch is overpowering. Intoxicating. I can't think and at the same time, I don't want to. I want him to take charge and act as if he owns my body, because right now, he does.

"Bedroom," he demands, kissing his way down my jaw and neck.

"Upstairs. First door on the left."

He doesn't waste time squatting and wrapping his arms behind my knees and lifting me.

My legs wrap around his waist, his hands now on my ass as he carries me up the stairs. Our lips don't break apart once while we make our way to the bedroom. My nails dig into his shoulders, my back arching into him. I can't get enough.

I'm not looking, but he knows exactly where to go. I try not to think about the pile of dirty clothes in the corner of the room, or the books stacked in disarray on the nightstand. I know that right now, he's only paying attention to me.

"You're thinking too much," he says between kisses.

"Sorry," I mumble, not wanting him to stop.

He drops me on my bed, standing over me like a predator about to pounce.

Shit, just like in the book he gave me. He might not be a lizard king, but he's definitely the alpha.

I immediately get an image of Mitch with scaly skin and a tail, making me snicker.

“Something funny, Belle?”

“Belle?”

“Like Beauty and the Beast. You have your nose in a book. There're flowers involved.”

Why does that turn me on so much?

I immediately sober at his tone. It's so dark and authoritative. And hot as hell.

“No, not at all. I was just thinking of the change in your demeanor now that we're here.”

He lowers himself onto me, delicately brushing my hair off of my face. “Oh, honey. You have no idea.”

His lips find mine and once again, we are locked in such a passionate kiss that I don't even remember what we were talking about. His hands roam my body, feeling up my sides and cupping my breasts over my clothes.

Shit, what underwear am I wearing? Does my bra match? I hope I'm not wearing those granny panties I only use for that time of the month.

“Stop. Thinking.” Mitch says between kisses.

“I just...I didn't expect this to happen today.” I gasp, my hips rising to his, finding myself unable to stop from moving my core along his hardening length. Shit. Fuck. That's not helping my train of thought.

“I didn't expect this either, babe. Call it a happy surprise.” His lips trail down my neck, the scruff of his beard leaving a delicious burn along my skin.

“I just mean that I don’t know what I’m wearing. Underneath this.” My damn hips won’t stop. I can’t. It feels too good.

“Don’t care. You won’t be wearing them much longer.” He doesn’t stop kissing along the skin of my chest where my sweater is being pulled down.

Dammit, did I shave my legs? I don’t remember when I did that last. Dammit, I needed prep time!

“Rachel!” His voice is loud and demanding, breaking me from my internal freak out as he pulls back. “What the hell are you thinking about so intently that isn’t what I’m doing to you right now?”

“I can’t remember when I last shaved my legs.” I hold my breath, waiting for his response.

“Does it look like I fucking care if you have hair on your legs or what underwear you’re wearing?” He grinds his hips into me, letting me feel *everything*. “Does it feel like I give a shit?”

“No,” I answer honestly. Usually when I’ve come this far with a man, I’ve somewhat had a warning. I was able to take a long shower and shave every inch of my body. Scrub, rinse, repeat until I’m silky smooth. I would have planned out a matching bra and underwear set that looked cute and pushed my boobs up.

But now? I had no warning. I can’t remember if this is my bra with the coffee stain or a nice lace one.

“No. I don’t fucking care. You could be completely bare or a fucking jungle. I. Don’t. Care.”

He doesn’t give me time to answer when he crashes his lips to mine. It’s hard and punishing, as if letting me know he didn’t like my train of thought with not being prepared.

It must be working, because I feel myself melting into him. I no longer care if I have hair on my legs or what bra I’m wearing. All that matters is having his lips on mine.

“Tell me how you like it, Rachel.” He grazes kisses down the column of my neck.

I tilt my head, giving him better access as I moan.

“Use your words,” he commands in that sexy, growly voice of his.

“I, uh, I don’t know,” I pant.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” he asks, lifting his head.

I lift my own, meeting his eyes. “I mean, I don’t know. I like what you were doing there. I like everything we’ve been doing.”

He studies me, looking for an answer. “Do you trust me?”

I nod quickly. “Yes, Mitch. I trust you.”

He grasps me by the back of the neck, pulling me up to sit while bringing his lips to mine. “I’m going to erase all the other assholes that have ever touched your body. You’ll only remember my touch. There will only be me after tonight.”

Holy hell. I want that. I want that so badly.

He sweeps his tongue past my lips, making me open for him, which I gladly do.

Lowering me onto my back, he presses his body against mine, letting me feel just how aroused he is. His hard length presses into my belly, making me arch further into him.

A wave of goosebumps wracks my body as his hands trail down my arms until he reaches my wrist. Holding firmly, he raises them above my head. “Hold on to the headboard.”

I curl my hands around the iron posts, not breaking eye contact with him. His hazel eyes darken, his jaw set as he gazes down at me with an intensity I’ve never felt before.

“Good girl.”

I press my legs around him, writhing against him, trying to find relief. Holy shit, I’ve read those words in books, but hearing them in person? That’s a whole other fucking level.

“Now, hold them there. Don’t let go until I say.”

“But I want to touch you,” I moan.

He wraps a hand around my throat. Not too tight, just enough to let me know he’s in charge. “When I say, or this ends. Do you understand?”

I nod. My breath is now a pant, quick and uneven as he lets go of me. Leaning down, he grazes his lips softly with mine until my body relaxes into the mattress.

Kissing his way down my body, he pulls my shirt to just above my breasts. Looking down, I’m relieved to see my light purple lace bra. Thank goodness I grabbed that one this morning.

He tucks his fingers into the top of the cups, pulling them down, and creating a perfect peep show of my breasts between my shirt and bra.

“Beautiful. You’re so fucking beautiful.”

He pulls one of my nipples into his mouth, sucking and nipping as his hand trails down my stomach and toward the top of my pants. He makes slow, lazy motions across my skin with his finger while sucking hard on my stiff peak.

I’m a moaning, writhing mess as I trap him with my legs around his waist, rubbing my core along his stomach. I’m trying to find relief, but not finding any.

“Impatient little minx,” he scolds, no heat behind his words.

“Mitch, please,” I whine.

I’m consciously holding on to the headboard, not wanting to lift even a finger off the pole in case he holds true to his threat and stops. I can’t risk that. Not with how good this feels, and we’re just starting.

“We’ll get there, babe.”

He moves to my other nipple, giving it the same attention. He nips and sucks, all while continuing to trace the skin of my stomach and along the line of my pants. I’m arching and

gasping at his touch. I want more, but don't want this to end, all at the same time.

Taking mercy on me, he kisses his way down my stomach, reaching behind him to unlock my ankles from his waist and lower himself further down my body.

Once he's lined up with my core, he unbuttons my jeans, peeling them down my body, taking my underwear with them. I close my eyes, not able to see his reaction to what I'm sure is the jungle he described. I move to close my legs, but he won't let me, holding them open with his arms.

"Rachel, look at me," he demands.

I wait for a breath before opening my eyes. When I do, I see him looking at my body like a starved man. I watch as he wraps his arms under my legs, his hands coming over my thighs, his fingers digging into my skin.

"I want you to watch how much I want you, Rachel."

I suck in a breath as his tongue licks me. I want to drop my head back and close my eyes so all I know is his touch, but I also don't dare disobey him. Not now. So instead, I hang on to the headboard as if it will provide me strength as I watch the hottest man I've ever known make me his own personal dessert.

His eyes are locked onto mine as he devours me. Every lap of his tongue brings me to a new height, and I'm never sure when I'm going to fall. I'm almost a goner when he slides a finger into me, and then two, curling and hitting the spot I thought was just a myth for romance novels.

"Mitch," I pant, closing my eyes without thinking.

He pulls his fingers out of me and his tongue stops.

I whimper, opening my eyes and meeting his. His neatly trimmed beard is shining in the moonlight with traces of what he was just doing.

"I said don't stop looking, Rachel. I want you to watch every second of this—ingrain this in your memory. I'm here. I don't care what you're wearing or aren't. I don't care if you're

shaved, wearing a ball gown, or nothing at all. You remember this. You remember *me*.”

Ho-ly shit.

“Yes, sir,” I say without thinking. I didn’t mean to say it. It must be embedded in my head from all the alpha/dom heroes I’ve read. Mitch stirs something up in me I never expected. I don’t know who I am right now, but I like it.

His jaw ticks as he looks at me. Assessing.

Now I start to worry I’ve said the wrong thing. Maybe he doesn’t like it. Shit, maybe I crossed a line about names and titles.

“I’m sorry,” I sputter, worried I’ve ruined the whole night. “I shouldn’t have said that. Just holy cow with what you were doing and your bossiness, it just slipped out.”

He raises an eyebrow at me but doesn’t say anything.

“Did I, uh, upset you?” My palms are sweaty as I grasp on to the headboard for dear life. I’m not going to let go of it. I’m not going to give him another reason to be disappointed in me.

“You’ve done a lot of things, sweetheart, but upsetting me isn’t one of them.”

He lowers his head back down and sucks my aching nub into his mouth, showing it no mercy as he thrusts his fingers back into me.

I don’t know what happened a moment ago, but whatever it was, I’m no longer sorry for it.





# MITCH

*S*ir.

I've never had that title used for me, never thought of using it myself, but holy hell, did I like it.

The sound of that word coming from her lips stirred something up in me, and now I'm on a mission to give her the best experience of her life.

There's no doubt that she's mine after this.

I devour her like a man on a mission. My only purpose in life right now is to wring this orgasm from her. I know she's on the edge. Her breaths are shallow pants. Her hips move in time with my fingers and my tongue. Her thighs are pressing against my head so tightly I can hear my heartbeat in my ears, but I don't care. I will die a happy man just like this if it means I get to give her the biggest orgasm she's ever had right here. Right now.

"Mitch!" she yells as she flies over the edge, her body taut as her chest rises toward to the ceiling.

I don't let go. I clamp onto her thigh tighter, pressing on her stomach with one hand as I suck her bud harder, pump her faster. She's not forming words as she rides out her high, her tight channel squeezing the fuck out of my fingers. I can't wait until it's my cock filling her up. Feeling her spasm around me.

As soon as she melts lifelessly into the bed beneath her, I let her go, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand as I crawl up her body.

I unravel her hands from the headboard, giving them a quick massage with my thumbs. They must be cramping, but she didn't complain, didn't even flinch to take them off from their posts.

"You come so beautifully, Rachel," I whisper, lowering her arms to her sides. "Do you think you can do it again?"

She opens her eyes, a lazy smile on her face. "Is that a challenge, Mr. Brandt?"

Fuck me. Sir and Mr. Brandt in one night? What is she doing to me?

"Oh, I think it's a challenge you'll gladly accept."

"On one condition," she says in a sleepy voice.

"Oh, yeah, what's that?"

"I get to touch you this time."

I smirk. "I think that can be arranged."

I reach into the back pocket of my jeans, pulling out a condom from my wallet.

I look up at Rachel, who is biting her lip, eyebrow arched.

"I didn't plan this, if that's what you're thinking," I say, standing and dropping my pants and boxers to the ground. Whatever she was going to say is lost on her tongue as she takes me in.

Her eyes widen as she watches me rip the foil and roll the condom over my hard length. I'm not a small guy, I know this, but the way she's looking at me right now has me absolutely throbbing. It's a mix of excitement and trepidation, and I love it.

Stalking up her body, I let her take me in as I hover over her. The pads of her fingertips brush over my chest and my abs. She traces lower and lower but doesn't go for what she really wants.

"I've touched every part of you, Rachel. You can touch me." I keep my voice low, not wanting to make her shy away from taking what she wants.

Her hands brush my sides and my back, sinking lower as she grasps my ass in her palms and squeezes.

“Butt woman, are you?” I joke.

“I never thought I was, but I might be persuaded.”

Tracing around my hips, I try to hold still as she tickles my skin, brushing along my front and the top of my thigh. She hesitates for a moment before continuing, grabbing my shaft and giving it a slow pump.

I don't bother trying to contain my moan. She feels too good. Too right. “Fuck, babe.”

She chuckles as she increases her speed, grasping tight.

I can't let her go on much longer or I won't be able to tell her to stop.

Reaching down, I grasp her wrist and hold it beside her head.

“Did I do something wrong?” I hate the quiver in her voice.

“No, babe. You feel too good.” I drop my voice and lower my face to hers. I want her to hear every fucking word I'm about to say. “I never want you to doubt anything we do together. If there's something I don't like, I'll tell you. If you don't like something, I trust you to tell me. Got it?”

With her eyes wide and her mouth open, she nods.

“Good girl.” I release her hand and place my knuckle under her chin, closing her mouth before I seal my lips to hers. All is forgiven and forgotten when she wraps her arms and legs around me, climbing me like a tree.

I slide my hand from her chin to her hair, taking a fistful in my grasp. She moans into me as I give it a pull, tilting her head back so I can kiss her neck, loving the way she reacts when I find the spot that meets her shoulders. With her breasts still on display for me between her bra and shirt, I decide to leave them like that. They look forbidden, as if they aren't meant for me and *only* meant for me at the same time.

Hitching her leg higher up my body, I reach down and place myself at her entrance. “You ready, baby?”

“Yes,” he moans, her eyes closed.

“What did I say about closing your eyes?” I say sternly, dropping my voice.

Her eyes shoot open. “I... uh...”

“You keep them open. You watch me. Watch us.”

She nods, daring a glance where we’re about to be joined before shooting back up into my eyes.

“You can look there, or at me. Just don’t close them.”

Her eyes shoot back down our bodies as I push in. I almost break my own rule and close my eyes as my tip brushes in. Even through the thin latex, she feels fucking amazing.

Needing to ground myself before I lose control, I place my hand on her hip, letting my thumb rest along her soft skin.

She turns her head to my other arm, propped up next to her head, holding me up. Her eyes lock with mine as she peppers kisses along my inner wrist, darting her tongue out and running along the sensitive skin. I picture that tongue on my cock, making light brushes before swallowing me whole. The image only makes me push harder, thrust faster until we’re both moaning and bucking against each other. Her breasts circle and jiggle in the confines of the clothing, drawing my attention and spurring me on. The harder I thrust, the more they move. I’m hypnotized by them, broken of my trance only when Rachel starts to raise her hips with a motion that my brain can’t comprehend that has her drawing me closer while rubbing herself against me at the same time.

“Do you like that? Rubbing yourself all over me? Is this just like your book, Belle? The wanton woman taking what she wants from her man?”

“Fuck, Mitch,” she whimpers, her eyes hooded. I can tell she’s struggling to keep her eyes open, but I’m not letting her close them. Not yet.

Placing my free hand under her ass, I prop her up higher on me, changing the angle to let me get deeper while rubbing her clit over me with every punishing thrust.

“This time is meant to be gentle. Our first time. But you make me want to do things that aren’t gentle, Belle.”

“Do them. For fuck sakes, do them,” she whimpers.

I don’t hesitate. I pull out, instantly missing the connection, but knowing it won’t be for long.

Flipping her over onto her stomach, I pull her hips until she’s on all fours and slide back into her. Rachel moans with the change in position. I’ve always loved taking women from behind. I’m deeper, filling her more. Knowing that I’m giving her even more pleasure.

I start to move, holding onto her hips while she bucks against me. I let her adjust to me, so she is able to take me all in. Once she’s matching my rhythm, I snake my hand around her stomach, between her breasts, and take hold of her throat, pulling her up until her back is against my chest. I position us to face the foot of the bed; our eyes lock in her mirror above her dresser. I notice the moment she comprehends what I’ve done. Her body is on display, and we have the perfect view to see where we’re joined. With one hand holding firm to her throat, the other wrapped around her waist holding her up, she looks like a beautiful prisoner against my body.

“Look at us,” I whisper in her ear. “Look how perfectly we fit together.”

I press her body against mine as I start to move again, sliding her up and down.

Her head begins to roll back onto my shoulder when she catches herself.

“Good girl,” I whisper, nipping at her earlobe.

Her arm reaches back, her fingers sliding into my hair and gripping the strands.

I move faster, bucking into her, all while having her bob up and down on me. Sweat breaks out over our bodies, but we

don't care.

My hand on her stomach lowers, my fingers circling her clit, drawing out more moans and incoherent words out of my blonde beauty.

“Come for me, Belle,” I groan, my fingers picking up their speed, making tight circles over her bud.

In no time at all, she's coming once more, grabbing my hair in her hands and pulsing around my cock. I groan, letting myself go while helping her ride out her own orgasm. I let her head fall back onto my shoulder this time, her mouth open in a silent scream. It takes every ounce of energy I have to hold her up while I let go. There's nothing in this world that could rip her from my arms right now.

Once our bodies are still and our heart rates start to lower, I kiss her shoulder and her neck as she lowers her hand from my hair. Placing her gently back on the bed. I kiss her lips and her temple as she closes her eyes with a smile on her face.

“I'll be right back.”

Moving quickly into the adjoining bathroom, I take care of the condom and make my way back to her. She's still in the same position I left her, on top of the blankets, legs spread out, one arm out to the side. The only difference is she has one arm over her eyes and a smile on her face.

“Come on, sleepy. Let's get you out of your shirt and bra and into bed.”

She moves like she's made of Jello but lets me help her up and take off the rest of her clothes. As we crawl into bed and I tuck her into my side, I think of how different I feel.

The old me would have been putting on my clothes and saying goodbye about now. With the deed done, the itch scratched, there would be no need for me to stick around.

But with Rachel? I can't think of a single thing that could make me leave her side right now. I want to wrap my arms around her. I want to fall asleep with her in my arms and wake up with her by my side. The thought doesn't scare me. Instead, I find it exhilarating.

Kissing her forehead as she drifts off to sleep, I stare up at the ceiling with a smile on my face, knowing I'm right where I'm supposed to be.





## RACHEL

“Oh my gosh, the town has really outdone themselves this time.” I look around the town square in wonder, my hand holding tight to the crook of Mitch’s elbow. There has to be at least double the amount of booths there usually are, even with some vendors from out of town. Country music plays from the speakers on the stage. It must be someone local, as I know Greyson doesn’t come on until later tonight.

I haven’t been able to take the smile off of my face since I woke up this morning. I was wrapped around Mitch, deliciously sore, ready to spend a full day with Mitch. After we took our time getting out of bed where he showed me again just how beautiful he thinks I am. My smile is just as big now as we walk through Logan Creek’s Fall Festival, taking in all the sights and smells of fall.

Needless to say, the last two days have been the hottest, most intense, days of my life.

“Do you want an apple cider? Or a muffin? Brody and Kade have their tent over there.” Mitch points up ahead where our friends have their companies’ booths next to each other, just like at the summer farmers markets. This time, instead of fruit and vegetables, Brody is selling the hard apple cider he makes at his farm.

“That sounds wonderful.”

I let him lead me over to the booths and we wait in line for our treats.

“I wish you didn’t have to work tonight and you could stay for the concert,” I say, placing my head on his shoulder. I might be acting clingy, but since last night, I don’t want to say goodbye to him. I also wish he could be here with me to watch Greyson Wallace perform. It’s not every day Logan Creek gets a big name like him to come and play in our town. While crowds are not my thing, being in the town square where I can stand away from the crowd and still enjoy the music is better than being indoors where everyone is crammed together into tiny rows.

“I know, me too,” he says, kissing me on the top of my head as we take a step forward in line. “You could always come visit me after the concert.”

I stiffen at his words. I’ve been to the brewery, obviously, for deliveries and the wedding, but never during their busy time. On a weekend. Weekend evenings are when I’m curled up with a cup of tea and a book, enjoying the silence in my home.

“You don’t have to,” Mitch says, a hint of disappointment in his voice.

I raise my head and look at him. “No, it’s not that I don’t want to. I always want to see you. It’s just...”

“Chaos?” he chuckles.

“Yeah, chaos.” I smile shyly at him. Looking into his hazel eyes, I think of how he’s done so much for me in the short amount of time we’ve been together. Giving up everything so that I have a ride to and from work every day. Making my deliveries for me. The least I can do is show up at his work and have a drink. “You know what? I will.”

“Rach, you don’t have to...”

“No, I want to,” I interrupt. “Kylie told me she was meeting up with some friends for the concert. Maybe I’ll bring them with me.”

“You’d do that?” The joy on his face warms my heart.

“I’d do that.” I reach up on my tiptoes, giving him a kiss.

“You going to get some cider or what?” Brody’s voice makes us separate.

I notice the line in front of us has disappeared, and Brody’s watching us with a smirk on his face. Kade’s at the booth next to him, sneaking glances and smiles as she helps a customer.

“Asshole,” Mitch mutters under his breath without any heat, making Brody laugh.

I’ve known Brody my whole life, and I’ve never seen him smile as much as he has since Kade moved to town. I heard they had a fling years prior, but now that she’s back and they’ve started a family, he’s lighter. Happier.

I wonder if that would be the same for me. If I were to settle down and start a family, would I feel happier? Less alone and stuck in my ways. Is going to the brewery tonight to see Mitch the first step in that?

“Rach?” Mitch’s voice draws me out of my spiralling thoughts.

“Huh?”

“Which cider do you want?” He looks at me questioningly but doesn’t prod further.

Yet.

“Oh, uh.” I look at the options in front of me. “I’d like the Apple Pie Cider, please.”

With a nod, Brody gets to work opening our ciders and pouring them into plastic cups. Mitch chats with Brody as he gets our drinks and pays, but I can’t follow the conversation. I can’t stop thinking of what it would be like to be married and have kids. Would we bring them here and let them run around like all the other children in town? Would we ply them with ice cream and fudge and then carry their sleepy bodies to the car, buckling them in as we smile at each other across the back seat?

Could this be something I see with Mitch?

“Here you go,” he says, handing me my cider and leading me to the side as we get in line for Kade’s booth. “Are you

okay?”

“Um, yeah. Why?” I try to play it cool as I take a sip of my cider, pretending I’m not having a complete freaking meltdown.

“You seem—quiet. Not your usual kind but like, quiet, quiet.” He takes a sip of his own cider, watching me over the rim of his cup.

“Everything’s fine. I’m just tired, I guess.”

My words seem to spark something in him. He lowers his cup, leaning in until his lips are at my ear, whispering words only I can hear. “Oh yeah, Belle? And why would that be?”

My knees go weak at the growly voice he’s using. “Someone kept me up late last night.”

“Hmm. That someone wants to keep you up tonight, too.”

I close my eyes and clench my legs together because holy hell, that’s hot.

“Come on now, you little addict,” Mitch jokes, nipping at my earlobe and placing his hand on the small of my back, urging me forward. “We don’t want to be caught for a second time, do we?”

I open my eyes to his playful gaze.

Damn, he’s hot.

We wait our turn and are greeted by Kade. “Well, hello! How are you guys?”

“We’re doing great, thanks, Kade. It looks like you’re doing well today. You’re almost sold out.” Mitch says. I’m grateful he’s holding the conversation because I don’t trust my brain to string words together right now.

“I know, it’s been great. Lila’s back at the bakery working on another round. It should be here any minute. Can I get you anything from what I do have?”

“What do you want, babe?” Mitch turns to me.

I bite my lip between my teeth as I gaze up at him. I'll never tire of him calling me that.

I draw my attention away from him, looking at the treats before me. I give Kade a friendly smile, ignoring the curious look on her face.

"I would love the pumpkin spice blondie, please."

"Make that two, and a couple of the pumpkin S'more cookies," Mitch adds.

"You got it." Kade pulls out a small box and loads up our desserts.

I place my hand on his when he starts to pull cash out of his wallet. "You don't have to buy me all of these."

"I know, but I want to." The sincere look on his face makes me drop my hand.

I watch as he hands Kade more than enough for the treats, telling her to keep the change. His kindness and generosity are just as much of a turn on to me as the growly, sexy side of him.

We walk over to a table with chairs set up for an eating area when Mitch hands me the box of treats. I put my cider down on the table, open the box, and grab the first blondie I see. Taking my first bite, I'm overwhelmed with the flavours of pumpkin, nutmeg, and cinnamon. The cream cheese icing on top is a nice bonus.

I look at Mitch, who hasn't touched his own treats. Instead, he's looking at me intensely, watching every movement of my mouth, trailing the lines of my throat as I swallow.

Heat rushes to my face, and throughout my body, as I watch him watch me.

Heaven help me, if we weren't in the town square with half of Logan Creek around us, I feel like I'd be naked and underneath him right now.

He opens his mouth to say something, and I want to know what it is so freaking badly, as if his next words would be

filled with all the secrets in the universe, but his words die in his throat as he digs into his pocket and pulls out his phone.

I can't decipher the look on his face as he looks down at the screen.

"Is everything okay?"

He sighs. "Yup. Looks like I don't need to come into the brewery until after the concert tonight."

"What? Why? I mean, not that I wouldn't love to watch the concert with you, but what changed?"

"Zach just texted. Word got out that we're here together and he said not to come in until after it closes. He got someone to help him out until then. Not that he probably has a lot of customers since most of the town seems to be here right now."

I can't tell if he's happy or upset about the change in his plan.

"Mitch, if you'd rather go to work..." I don't want to say the words, but I don't want to make him do something he doesn't want to do, either.

"What? No. That's not it. I just don't like having everyone up in our business. That's all." He looks over my shoulder in the distance.

"It's what happens in a small town." I shrug my shoulders. "You get used to it."

He gives me a quick nod before grabbing his blondie from the box, but I have a feeling he isn't convinced.

I hope whatever happened with Zach isn't going to turn him off of small town life.



# MITCH

*M*y phone keeps buzzing, but I've been reluctant to look at it again after the first round of nosy texts from the group chat I was added to today. Without permission. And now I'm inundated with the male gossip of my so-called friends.

TRAVIS

\*high five\* Mitch. I thought I moved fast with my hellcat but you're putting me to shame.

ZACH

Fast? You had to beg her to go on a date with you, dude. Or did you forget?

TRAVIS

The second time. The first time it was all my moves. \*smirk emoji\*

DYLLAN

Shouldn't you be working, Travis? The city doesn't pay you to gossip.

TRAVIS

Slow day, my man. Looks like everyone's being a law-abiding citizen today. Even Old Man Rathers hasn't called in a bogus complaint.



BRODY

You've jinxed it now.

TRAVIS

Whatever. Back to Mitch. Are you taking Rachel to the Halloween dance next weekend? Please tell me you're doing some cutesy couples' costumes.

TRAVIS

I can't be the only one. Lila's making me as some sort of payback.

I groan. I haven't thought about the dance. I assumed I would volunteer to work and let Zach have the night off to do his couple thing with Mandy.

Don't know. You're all assholes.

I put my phone on do not disturb and slide it back into my pocket, not wanting them to take any more of my attention away from Rachel. She's picking at the napkin from her blondie, and I realize that I also have been an asshole for paying attention to my phone and not her.

"Sorry about that. The guys gossip worse than half the people in town, I swear."

She giggles, looking up from her napkin. "It's alright. I get it."

Reaching across the small table, I take her hand in mine, drawing her attention to me and only me. "I'll make it up to you. Are you all done with your cider?"

She looks over at her near-empty cup, taking it with her free hand and downing it in one gulp. She places it back down and gives me a nod.

"Good. Let's clean up, grab our cookies, and then I have somewhere I want to take you."

We grab our things, taking the cookies out of the box and disposing of our garbage before lacing her fingers with mine and leading her to the edge of the festival. We get behind a small line.

“Oh! Hayrides?” Rachel rocks to the tip of her toes and back to her heels as she looks around the crowd. “I love hayrides.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her tight to my side. I love seeing her so carefree and happy. I love the smile that crosses her face, and her pure excitement. I bite into the gooey cookie, not knowing how the flavours of S'more and pumpkin mix together, but it's surprisingly good. Not that I would ever doubt Lila and her baking.

Rachel takes a bite of hers as well, never letting go of my hand. “I don't know how Lila does it, but her baking just keeps getting better and better. I'm going to have to join the gym with how addicted to these I'm getting.”

I lean in and whisper in her ear. “I can think of another way we can burn off these calories.” Her cheeks flush and she lets out a small gasp, making me chuckle. “Eat up, babe. You'll need your energy for later.”

She looks at me wide-eyed as she shoves the rest of her cookie in her mouth.

The tractor comes to a stop in front of us, unloading everyone from the trailer as they chat excitedly. When it's our turn, I help Rachel up the small wooden ladder, leading her to the corner at the front. Once we're all settled and we hear the safety instructions from Jacob, who I recognize as one of Brody's employees, we get started.

The tractor engine roars to life and we start moving. The trailer bumps and rocks as we move into an adjacent field. Being from the city, I can't comprehend how there's still a farm in the centre of town, but I guess when it turns into the town's official pumpkin patch and lends its land to festivals and events, it's easy to keep around.

Rachel leans into me and takes in the sights as we drive through the pumpkin patch, seeing all the families picking theirs to take home. The edge of the field is lined with sunflowers, creating a wall around the property. Off to the side is a corn maze where kids are running and laughing, their happy sounds drifting from the rows of green.

My mind drifts back to the group chat with the guys. I'm not a fan of dances, especially ones where I would need to dress up. I'm a jeans and t-shirt kind of guy. Always have been, always will be, but the idea of showing up with Rachel on my arm, having her dressed up in some sort of sexy costume has me rethinking things.

Zach and I have already discussed closing the bar that night. Since the dance will be at the barn on the back of the brewery property, we are going to be closing the tasting room for the night. I had planned to go home and spend a quiet evening in, but now I'm thinking there might be a better offer.

"Are you going to the Halloween dance?" I ask, brushing her hair off of her face as it floats in the breeze.

"I, uh, I haven't thought about it, really."

"Have you ever gone?"

She looks down at her clasped hands in her lap and shakes her head.

"Why not?" I whisper.

"I've never had anyone to go with."

"None of your old boyfriends would go with you?" The thought of her being left out of anything she would want to do because some douche wouldn't suck it up to make her happy for an evening makes me madder than I ever thought it would. This beautiful angel deserves everything, even dressing up in some god-awful costume.

"No. They all said it was lame and not worth their time."

"Do you want to go?" When she doesn't say anything, I cup her cheek, bringing her full attention to me. I drop my voice, knowing that she'll answer me. "Rachel?"

“I do,” she whispers, barely audible over the tractor’s engine.

I lean in closer, knowing that no one can hear us, but still wanting to be as close to her as I possibly can. “Then we’re going. I want you to pick out our costumes. I don’t care what it is. I’ll go along with whatever you have planned...within reason.”

She laughs. “Do you mean it?”

“I don’t say anything I don’t mean, Belle.”

Her laugh dies on her lips at the sound of my voice. I think of all the things I’ve promised her. Ways to work off our treats today. Ways I want to worship her body. Taking her to the dance is just another thing on the long list of things I vow to do for her.

“Oh...okay.”

I lean in closer to her, feeling the shiver that runs through her body at our contact. Our thighs are pressed against each other, my arm around her shoulders. My breath at her neck. “Is this okay, Rachel?”

“Uh, huh.” She keeps her head straight, eyes darting to the other people on the trailer with us.

To everyone else, we’re just a couple cozying up on a hayride. Which we are. What they can’t tell is how I’m about to make her wish we were alone.

“Good, because I want to you know how fucking sexy you look today. I had to restrain myself when we were leaving because all I wanted to do was carry you back to your bedroom and fuck you until we both passed out. Again.”

She closes her eyes, sucking in a breath.

“So when you pick out our costumes, keep that in mind. If you’re going to make it a fucking sexy outfit, you’d better make it easy for me to pull you behind the barn and fuck you against the side, otherwise we might not make it out of your driveway.”

“Holy hell,” she pants.

I discreetly place my free hand on her thigh, low enough to be decent among other people, but high enough to be able to casually graze the top of her inner thigh with my fingertips.

The trailer comes to a stop and the tractor engine dies. The sudden silence is deafening as we both sober to the fact our imposed privacy is gone. Rachel jumps up as if caught doing something she shouldn't, looking down at me as everyone piles out of the trailer.

I smirk, grabbing her hand and helping her off the trailer.

Tonight's going to be fun.



## RACHEL

Can you self-combust from being too turned on? If so, it might happen to me, right in the middle of the square.

I've barely been able to concentrate or sit still since the hayride. Since we got off the trailer, Mitch has been the perfect gentleman, buying me dinner from the BBQ food truck and pumpkin pie ice cream for dessert. We walked through the pie contest where our mouths watered over all the different entries from people in town.

As we roam through the crowd, Zach waves his hand from beside a booth, calling us over.

"Shirking your duties?" Mitch jokes as we approach.

"Relax, I was just dropping off some more beer to the tent," Zach laughs. "I want you to meet some friends of mine that came down for the festival."

He holds his hand out to the couple beside him. The guy is not only tall but built. While he's attractive, he's got the male equivalent of a 'resting bitch face.' The small blonde beside him is the opposite. She's a beautiful blonde that comes up to the middle of his chest with a bright smile. She's also wearing a sweater with embroidered pumpkins and leaves.

I immediately like her.

"Mitch, Rachel, I want you to meet Krissy and Brett. They've come down from Whiskey Falls to see Greyson perform."

“Nice to meet you,” Mitch says, sticking his hand out to Brett.

“Same,” the man grumbles.

“Hi!” Krissy says, pulling me into a hug. “Sorry, I’m a hugger.”

“It’s okay,” I laugh as she pulls away.

“Brett’s from Logan Creek but owns a bar up in Whiskey Falls now,” Zach explains.

“Oh, no way.” Mitch, Zach, and Brett start talking about bars, which most of the conversation I don’t follow.

“So funny how they just start talking shop, isn’t it?” Krissy jokes.

“It is. I get it, though. When I meet other florists, I do the same.”

“Oh! That’s so cool that you do that.” Krissy asks me about my shop, and she tells me she runs a year-round Christmas ornament store in Whiskey Falls where she makes her own products.

“We came down to support Greyson. I’m good friends with his fiancée. She’s around here somewhere.” Krissy stands up on her tiptoes, looking around the crowd. “Ah, there they are.”

She waves her hand above her head, getting the attention of a pretty brunette and a young girl. Their hands are filled with festival food and they’re laughing with each other as they walk toward us.

“Did you guys buy one of everything?” Krissy laughs.

“We tried to,” the brunette says. “Hi, I’m Ella. This is Charlotte.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Rachel.”

“We were trying to get a snack for Greyson because he said he was hungry in the camper they have him in, but we couldn’t decide what to get him. And then we couldn’t decide what we wanted, so we ended up getting a little of, well, as much as we could,” Ella laughs.



“Plus the samples. Don’t forget about those,” Charlotte adds.

“Right. How could I forget?”

“Did you go to the Charmed Bakery booth? That’s my friends’ business and I swear they make the best, well, everything,” I say.

“Yes! That’s where most of this is from,” Ella says with a smile. “We should get these back to Greyson. Why don’t you guys join us? He’s got a little while before he needs to be on stage.”

“Oh, we don’t want to impose,” I say, my eyes meeting Mitch’s over Ella’s shoulder while the guys continue to talk. I don’t think he heard the invite, and he gives me a questioning look.

I’m here on a date with Mitch. I don’t want to commit us to hanging out with people we just met, even if one of them is the biggest country star to ever come out of our province.

“You won’t be! Plus, we can’t eat all of this ourselves. We may have overdone it.” She holds her boxes a little higher to make her point.

Mitch walks around Ella and places his arm around my waist. “That’s really kind of you, Ella, but if you don’t mind, I’m going to pull Rachel away here. I want her to myself. I may be a selfish asshole, but I don’t want to share her with anyone tonight.”

“Next time,” I say with a smile.

We say our goodbyes to everyone and leave them with their treats. Mitch links his hand with mine, drawing me over to where the crowd is gathering for the concert. Since there are no seats, he sits on the grass and pulls me to sit between his legs. I relax into him, letting my back rest against his strong chest, loving the feel of his arms as they wrap around me.

“I hope you aren’t too disappointed I pulled you away. It may be selfish, but I want you all to myself tonight,” he whispers into my ear.

“No.” I don’t want to admit that I am. It’s not every day that you get the chance to meet a popular country artist, but I also love spending time alone with him.

“Don’t lie to me, Belle,” he growls, low enough that only I can hear.

He holds me tighter to him, his lips at my neck, his breath fluttering across my skin. I close my eyes as my breath quickens, pressing my legs together.

Damn that voice. I’ll do anything when he uses it.

“I’m a little disappointed. They seem nice. But I like my time with you, too.” I look over my shoulder, meeting his eyes. “I’m never disappointed spending time with you, Mitch.”

He gives me such a heartfelt look. I feel like he’s never heard those words from anyone before, and that makes me sad. He’s such a wonderful man and I can’t see why anyone wouldn’t want to spend every possible second with him.

He follows the contour of my face with his fingertip, brushing my hair back as he goes. He studies his trail, as if committing it to memory. His voice is soft when he speaks. “I feel the same way about you, Rachel.”

I love it when he calls me Belle or babe, but there’s something so intensely personal about him using my real name, it makes my heart skip a beat. We’ve shared so much in the short time we’ve been together, but it’s in this moment that I feel truly connected to him. As if our hearts reached out and truly touched for the first time.

“He’s coming to the brewery after the concert.”

“What?” I say, completely confused at his word.

“Greyson’s going to the brewery. Zach said that he invited them all back after the concert. He’s getting the events room all set up. You’re invited to go and hang out, too. You seemed to hit it off with the girls.”

“I did.” My brain is catching up with what he’s saying. As cool as it would be to meet Greyson, I truly liked Krissy and Ella. They seemed like women I’d want to be friends with.

“Then it’s settled. Invite Kylie and whoever you were planning on going to the bar with after. Zach’s turning it into quite the afterparty.”

“You’re amazing.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it,” he laughs, shaking his head slightly. “Apparently Zach and Brett go way back. Krissy and Ella are friends, and well, it just happened. Of course you’d be invited. You’re my girl.”

His girl. I like the sound of that.

“You are my girl, aren’t you?” he whispers in that low, gravelly voice of his.

“Only if you’re my guy,” I say back. I don’t want to seem overly eager, but I want him to be mine. But I want him to be *only* mine.

“You bet I am, Belle. I can’t wait until after closing tonight. I’ll show you I’m *all* yours.”

I lean my body back into him, pressing my thighs together as he wraps his arms around my waist.

Closing can’t come fast enough.



# MITCH

*B*eing turned on at a festival concert is hell.

Absolute hell.

And then having to go to work after?

Fucking miserable.

All I want to do is get Rachel alone and do all the wickedly delicious things we did last night—and then some.

We've all been sitting in the brewery's event room for the past couple of hours, chatting about everything and nothing, getting to know one another.

I have to admit, Greyson is a great guy, and he puts on one hell of a show. He had the crowd dancing and singing the whole time, including Rachel. I could barely contain myself with her moving and rubbing herself against me. I was about ready to pull her behind the abandoned hayride tractor and show her just how much she was affecting me, but I also knew that she would be horrified. As much as she loves what we do, I don't think public sex is in her comfort zone.

So instead, I'm sitting in the event room at the brewery, being the bartender, but not really, for our little party. Greyson's daughter, Charlotte, who is the cutest nine-year-old I've ever met, is fading into sleep as she lies on a chair between Greyson and Ella. Her head is on his lap, her feet on Ella's. It's not something I would normally notice, but it seems I've been paying more attention to families and kids lately.

I never would have imagined that Ella wasn't Charlotte's biological mom if Zach hadn't mentioned their brief history. The two are so close and in tune with each other, it's naturally easy to assume they are mother and daughter. Ella insisted an hour ago that she would bring Charlotte back to the inn they're staying at to get some sleep, but Charlotte refused, saying she wasn't going to be the reason the party ended. So, this is their compromise.

I find that I can't stop looking at them. I'm playing with Rachel's hair as she talks excitedly with Krissy. I'm thinking about how I want that one day. I want the comfort of having one person to share my life with. To have a family with. I want to spend time with friends while sneaking smiles and glances at each other while having different discussions. I want to know what the other is thinking without having to say it, like Ella grabbing Greyson a Coke without him asking, or how he gives her his jacket at the slightest shiver from her.

I draw my gaze away from their family and look at Rachel. My heart beats in a wild rhythm as I look at her. It's right here that I know that I want that with her. I want the glances and the thoughts and the moments. I want the house and the kids. I want it all.

I want it all with Rachel.

"So, Mitch, tell me about this place. It's very unique," Greyson asks, drawing my attention away from my life altering thoughts.

"It's Zach's baby, really. He grew up here in Logan Creek and wanted to open a rustic brewery where he could make his own flavours. Once he got this main tasting room up and running, he had the barn built in the back for the larger events, and we just expanded to open this room for smaller events. We also have a decent sized patio that overlooks the creek, which is really popular in the summer."

"So, when did you join him?"

"A couple of years ago. We met in college and once he had this place up and running, he gave me a call. When he got together with Mandy, he finally realized he couldn't do it all

himself and asked me to be his partner. And now I'm here." I give Rachel's shoulder a squeeze, earning me a smile as she looks over at me.

"Did you have your hands in this, too?" Greyson asks Brett.

"No," he answers, shaking his hand as he leans back in his chair, the last of his beer circling in his pint glass. "Zach and I lost touch for a while when I was over in Clearwater. We just reconnected a little while ago at a brew fest in Kelowna."

We start talking about Brett's bar, The Lucky Dog, back in Whiskey Falls. I learn Greyson doesn't drink after a scandal that happened a few months prior. I have to admit that while I knew a few of his songs. I don't keep up with the gossip so I had no idea what had happened. It sounded like he went through a shit time, but managed to get his life together and has it better than ever now by the look of it.

My thoughts are drawn back to his little family. Charlotte's fully asleep on his lap now and he's absentmindedly running his hand along her hair as he talks with Brett. They've moved on to discussing the current state of our local professional hockey team, but I'm not following. I'm thinking about getting Rachel back to her place—a place that's quickly feeling like home. I'm thinking about undressing her. Filling her.

With the night winding down, I'm counting the minutes until I can clean everything up and whisk Rachel away. I know it's later than she usually likes to stay out. There are more people. It's louder. There's more chaos. But at the same time, I've never seen her laugh as much as she has. She's making friends and building connections. I'm just the impatient asshole who wants her all to myself.

"I need to get this one back to the inn. I miss the days when I could just carry her," Greyson says with a chuckle, trying to wake up his daughter.

"Aw, come on. You can't carry around eighty pounds of sleeping deadweight?" Zach asks as he walks into the room.

“You’re welcome to try,” he jabs back, getting her into a sleepy-eyed, sitting position as we all laugh. “Thanks again for this, Zach and Mitch.” He stands, holding his hand out to us, which we shake in turn.

“It’s no problem. You’re welcome back here any time,” I say.

“Yes, thank you so much. It’s been a long time since we’ve been able to just hang out like this,” Ella adds, wrapping her arm around Charlotte’s shoulder and helping the zombie-like girl up.

We say our goodbyes as Brett and Krissy follow them out, all making their way to the inn down the street.

“Do you need any help out front?” I ask Zach as I start cleaning up the empty glasses on the tables.

“Nah. It’s all done and locked up. You two get out of here.”

“Are you sure? I can clean up...’

“Mitch, how many times have you done this for me with Mandy and the kids? Go—spend time with your girl,” he says, nodding over at Rachel, who’s started stacking chairs.

“Thanks man. I owe ya.”

“I’m sure I’ll call in that favour. Now get out of here.”

I clap him on the shoulder, then walk up to Rachel, pulling her back to my chest and wrapping my arms around her.

“What do you say we get out of here, Belle?”

“Are you sure? It looks like there’s more to do.” She places her hands on my arms as they wrap tighter around her stomach.

“Oh, there are things to do, all right. But I don’t think you want any of them to be done here.”

She gasps, realizing my meaning. Turning in my arms, she looks up at me with her big doe eyes, her voice breathless. “Take me home, Mitch.”





## RACHEL

“*I*’m not doing it,” Mitch whines through the bathroom door.

I have to laugh, because the thought of Mitch whining about *anything* is so shocking to me, I’m finding his child-like behaviour very entertaining.

“Can I at least see it before you take it off?” I ask, patting down the fabric of my dress.

When he told me to pick out our costumes for the dance tonight, I thought it would be fun to not only be book characters, but ones that would mean something to us. So, I’m standing in a long yellow dress with off-the-shoulder sleeves and an organza trim. It’s not the exact Belle dress, but it’s the best I could find in a week’s notice.

Which left Mitch’s costume. I would never call him a beast—except in bed, maybe—but it was the logical outfit for him. I tried to find one that would be true to the character but also not just as heavy, hot mask he would have to wear all night.

“I look like the lead singer of an eighties metal band,” he huffs.

“Now I have to see. Come out, please?” I scratch under my brunette wig for the twentieth time since putting it on, thinking maybe I should have gotten him the mask so he could share my discomfort.

With a final sigh from behind the door, it opens, and I have to cover my mouth with my gloved hand not to let my laugh escape.

His wig is oversized with tight dark brown curls standing at least six inches above his head and flowing down past his shoulders. His white flouncing blouse and blue vest are sleeveless, showing off his incredibly muscular arms. His tight black pants leave nothing to the imagination as they gave way over his thick thighs and toned calves into black boots.

“Don’t say it,” he says, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I love it,” I say, closing the distance between us and placing my hand on his chest.

He looks down at me, breathing heavily through his nose. His eyes are dark, jaw set. His eyes roam down from my wig to my breasts that admittedly spill out a bit from the dress. Another mishap from ordering something last minute, but there’s nothing I can do about that now.

“You look stunning,” he says, his voice softening, but the intensity in his eyes remains.

“We make quite the pair, then.”

“I see you listened to me, like the good girl you are. I can’t wait to pull you behind the barn and have that skirt around your waist.” He lowers his head and kisses down my neck until he reaches my shoulders.

I moan, grazing my fingers up his chest until I’m digging my nails into his vest. He raises his head and captures my lips with his. We’re a mess of hands and lips and teeth. Both of our wigs will need fixing, but we don’t care. Right now, I don’t even care if we make it out of this room.

“Let’s go,” Mitch growls, pulling back from me.

Now it’s my turn to whine.

He chuckles, straightening the wig on my head before going back into the bathroom and fixing his own.

“I thought you didn’t want to wear that,” I joke, smoothing down my dress.

“I think I just found a new incentive to.” He winks at me, making me melt all over again.

I glance at the clock on the nightstand, wondering if we have enough time to have some fun before going to the dance.

“Don’t even think about it,” Mitch growls in my ear, trailing his finger up my arm. “You wanted to go to the dance. I’m not going to make the princess late for the ball.”

“I don’t believe Belle went to a ball. This was for a dinner date.”

“Belle,” he warns in the growly tone of his that makes his costume so fitting.

“Beast,” I say back in my best—but still pathetic—growl.

His fingers find their way to my shoulder and along my collarbone, kissing the sensitive skin of my throat. “You’re cute when you try to be tough.”

Goosebumps break out over my skin as a shiver rolls through my body. I close my eyes, leaning into his touch. Taking away my sight makes my other senses heighten. The feel of his fingertip as it lightly caresses my skin. The clean, woody scent of him. I hear the intake of his breath as he dips down to the neckline of my dress, trailing along the curve of my breasts and into the valley below them. Instinctively, I remember the taste of him. Of his skin under my lips. Of his kisses.

My breath hitches as I take it all in.

“Soon, babe. Real soon,” he whispers before I lose his touch.

Opening my eyes, I see his handsome face with that sexy smirk that shows off his dimples, barely visible under his beard. Damn him and his hotness.

I whimper as he steps away, giving himself one last look in the bathroom mirror, fixing the untamable curls on his head. “I still can’t believe you picked this.”

Giving my head a shake, I snap out of the lust-induced trance he has me under. “Would you have preferred a big heavy mask? That was the alternative.”

“Hmm, no. Probably not.” Walking back into the bedroom, he crowds into my space once more as he places a kiss on my cheek but stays rested against my skin. “You make the most beautiful Belle.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, leaning into his touch.

I’m wanton. I’m shameless. I’m in such a heightened, over-sensualized state that I want it all. I want to go to the dance with him and be on his arm, but at the same time, I want him to pull up my dress and do all the dirty things he promised me.

I want him to do those things to me against the barn tonight.

“We should get going,” he says, not moving, but no longer touching me.

“Uh huh,” I resist the urge to reach up and grab the ruffle of his shirt, afraid that if I move, it will break our spell.

“We’re going to be late.”

“Uh huh...”

“Rachel?” he breathes.

“Yes,” I say, my voice equally breathless.

“I noticed you listened about your dress. You’re such a good girl.” He nips my earlobe and strolls out the door, leaving me biting my lip and closing my eyes, willing for any sort of relief.

It’s not until he playfully calls my name from downstairs that I whimper, realizing my prayer is unanswered.



# MITCH

I was more confident about walking into my place of business dressed like Beast meets Poison when we left Rachel's house, but now that we're sitting in the parking lot in front of the barn, I'm not feeling as sure.

"What's wrong?" she asks, placing her hand on my arm.

"Nothing," I say, looking at the packed parking lot.

While the dance is being held at the barn, it's actually being thrown by the town's appointed social committee. Because that's what happens in this town, apparently. As if we need more reasons to be social with one another in a small town like Logan Creek. Skylar worked with the committee to organize it all, but other than getting our bartending and serving staff to move their shifts from the tasting room to the barn, there wasn't much that Zach and I needed to do. Which means that we get to come as guests to an event at our own business.

Which is actually kind of nice.

But now that I'm seeing the whole fucking town is here and I'm dressed like this, I'm wishing I stuck to my original plan and stayed home.

"It's not nothing," Rachel says, drawing my attention back to her. "If you don't want to do this, it's fine. I understand. We can just go back to my place and watch a movie."

I'm being such a selfish asshole.

The whole reason I'm doing this is because she wants to be here. Because every douchebag ex that's ever come before me has refused to take her.

Because she deserves everything she wants and more.

Steeling myself for the impending harassment I know I'm about to get from my friends, I suck in a breath and get out of the truck before I lose my nerve.

I round the hood to the passenger side, helping Rachel down in her gown. It's big and poofy, and I can't wait to see it around her waist later.

She's so fucking beautiful, even with her fake hair that feels like straw. I long to run my hands through her natural blonde strands, but I can wait.

I hold her hand as we walk through the gravel parking lot, making sure she doesn't fall in her heels but also loving the feel of having her on my arm.

I stand tall and puff out my chest, exuding every ounce of confidence I'm faking as we step into the barn.

The lights are low, and the music is pumping through the speakers. People are laughing and drinking and thankfully no one has paid us any attention. Yet.

"Holy shit!" a familiar voice yells from behind us, making me stop in my tracks and brace myself.

Two minutes. I made it two minutes into the barn before someone noticed.

"Nice costume. I'm not sure if I should start singing 'Tale As Old As Time,' or 'Every Rose Has Its Thorn,'" Travis laughs.

"Langston," I growl, turning to face him.

I almost break out into a laugh because fuck, his costume is almost as bad as mine.

He's dressed head to toe in green, including green tights that show off more than I ever wanted to see on my friend.



He's got a green cap with a red feather sticking out, and he has his hands on his hips, jutting out his chin as he poses.

"Great, isn't it? Wait until you see hellcat. She's the hottest little Tinkerbell." He crosses his arms over his chest. "But first, we need to talk about your costume. This is epic, man."

"Travis, have you seen...?" Brody walks up dressed in a red and white plaid shirt, jeans, and straw hat, stopping mid-sentence when he sees me. His face breaks out into an uncharacteristic grin and he lets out the loudest belly laugh, drawing the attention of everyone nearby.

"Fucking hell," I mutter.

Rachel squeezes my elbow as she hangs onto me. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I never meant for...this."

I look down at her and hate the tears in her eyes, knowing that I'm to blame for putting them there. She's looking around the room at people who are now looking at us—well, me—with wide eyes. Dyllan dressed in all black with a cowboy hat and Zach dressed as Fred Flintstone walk up in their costumes with smiles on their faces.

"Nice costume, man," Zach says, stifling a laugh.

Dyllan just holds his beer up to me in a cheers with a smirk on his face.

"Fuck you, asshole," I say with more heat behind my words than I actually intend. I could have handled their jokes better if it wasn't making my girl cry. "You're dressed as a man boy, Zach is a caveman, Dyllan is some fucking Johnny Cash wannabe, and Brody. Did you even attempt to dress up? It's fucking Halloween."

Everyone becomes silent. Only the music from the speakers and chatter from those not immediately around us can be heard. I don't break eye contact with Travis, the fucking instigator of it all.

"Hey, we're just having fun," Zach says, trying to lighten the mood.

Brody's gaze travels to Rachel's quickly before returning to mine. "Sorry. For the record, I'm a scarecrow."

"Fitting. You scare everything in the fields," Travis adds quietly.

"Shut it, Langston," Brody threatens.

"And I'm some guy named Rip, not Johnny Cash," Dyllan mutters.

Now that makes me laugh. Of course, he's a broody tough cowboy.

Brody nudges Travis in the ribs, earning him an 'ow' before they share a silent conversation. Travis huffs before turning to me. "Sorry. It's a cool costume. Rachel, you look beautiful."

The guys all mutter their agreement.

"Thank you," she says, her eyes looking around the room.

Great, now everyone is looking, and we're the centre of attention. Something Rachel hates being.

"Oh my gosh, Rachel! You look amazing!" Skylar walks up, bringing her into a hug. She's dressed in a leopard-print jacket and high boots.

Rachel is stiff for a moment before returning the hug.

"What did I miss?" Skylar asks.

"We're just, uh, letting them know how much we like their costumes," Dyllan answers, pulling Skylar into his side.

"Hmokay." She looks around the group, not believing us, but not pressing the issue.

It's then that Kade, Lila, and Mandy walk up, all dressed as the female companions to their husbands. Kade's also a scarecrow but more believable, with dark makeup circling her eyes and some straw sticking out her pockets. Lila is Tinkerbell, like Travis had said, and Mandy dressed as Wilma with her red hair up in a bun.

"What did we miss?" Lila asks, looking between all of us.

I shake my head, taking Rachel's hand off of my arm and lacing her fingers with mine.

"Do you want to go get a drink, Belle?" I ask, pretending the others aren't with us.

"More than anything."

I'm grateful the tears in her eyes are now gone. The hint of her blush still remains on her cheeks, a lasting reminder of the embarrassment I know she is feeling.

I'm going to make it up to her. I'm going to turn this night around. There's no way I'm going to have this as the lasting impression she's going to have on her first Halloween dance in Logan Creek.

Even if it means I do it while dressed as some sort of glam metal monster.



## RACHEL

I can't remember the last time I had this much fun.

Once the incident when we first arrived blew over, it was as if it had never happened. The guys all talked and drank their beer while us girls danced. Once the guys had more drinks flowing, they joined us. Mitch didn't waste time taking my hand and pulling me to the far side of the dance floor, more in the shadows.

The more we dance, the hotter my body grows for him. My mind never strays far from his sultry promises. With every passing song where my body is held tight against him, I grow more impatient.

With our bodies slick with sweat, we writhe against each other in a way that's borderline inappropriate. While it's not a way that I would normally find myself acting, I find confidence in the costume, as if I'm not myself, but instead a woman claiming her beast. It's also Mitch. He makes me feel confident. Sexy. The type of woman that I see in bars or clubs that I want to be but never feel I have the right to be.

"You doing okay, Belle?" He asks, placing his hand on the small of my back and drawing me in even closer.

"Uh huh," I answer, tilting my head up so he can hear me.

His eyes catch mine with a mischievous look in them. "What do you say we get some air?"

My body clenches in anticipation. This is it. This is the moment he's been promising ever since he brought up the dance.

My mind races as he takes my hand and leads me out of the bar, stopping to say hello to people as we pass. I find myself growing impatient.

Did I ever think I would be this turned on at the thought of having sex outdoors with most of the town on the other side of the wall? Hell no. My heart still pounds in a bit of anxiety at the thought.

But I trust Mitch. I trust him with my whole heart, knowing that he wouldn't do anything to hurt me. That he would protect me. He wouldn't do this if there was any chance of us being found or exposed.

How do I know this? I have no clue, but I believe it with every fibre of my being.

Once we're out in the parking lot, the cold night air hits me like a wave. The contrast from being overheated on the dance floor to the fall breeze makes my body shake.

"Come here," Mitch croons, pulling me into his arms.

Wrapping my arms around him, I rest my head on his chest and listen to his heartbeat. The steady rhythm of his melts with my own, calming me.

"It's a nice night," he says, his face tipped up to the sky.

I follow his gaze, seeing the bright Hunter's Moon surrounded by twinkling stars.

"I'm sure there's something to be said about a full moon and Halloween..."

"Are you afraid of the monsters coming out, Belle?" he growls in that sexy, deep voice of his.

"What makes you think I'd be scared of them?" I lift my eyebrow in a silent challenge.

His eyes darken, and his grip on my body tightens until there's no space between us. His head lowers, the curls of his wig brushing against my face as he dips down.

"Maybe you should be," he says as he nips at my neck.

I gasp at the brief pain before I start to laugh as I'm pulled around the side of the barn. It's passed where I load the flowers, fully in the back, facing the trees. We're surrounded by darkness with only the moonlight streaming above us. The thumping of the music from inside pulses through the walls like its own heartbeat, drowning us out.

"Be careful what you wish for, Belle," he growls, backing me up against the wall.

"You don't scare me, Beast," I mock.

His hand flies to my throat, holding tight enough to let me know he's in charge. My body awakens, anticipation coursing through my veins, making me weak. He tilts my head back and brings his lips to mine. This isn't a gentle or loving kiss. This is demanding. This is him letting me know that he's in charge. That he is the beast.

I moan, my fingernails digging into the skin of his arms, likely leaving scratch marks, but we don't care. I lean back into the hard, unforgiving wood behind me, hooking my leg around his calf to feel him closer.

"No, up here," he says, grabbing my leg and lifting it around his waist. I instinctively arch my back, making my core rub against his hard length.

"Ooh," I moan, my head leaning back against the wood behind me.

His hand remains on my neck, holding me in place while he kisses the top of my breasts, his other hand sliding up my thigh that's wrapped around him. He freezes as he reaches my ass, pulling his head up and looking into my eyes.

"You're naughty, aren't you?"

"You told me you wanted to make it easy for you to fuck me here."

"And no panties is definitely doing the trick." He lowers his head, his thumb caressing the skin just below my ear. His breath is warm as it fans across my chest. "But the thought of you in there without them on, so close to all those other men? It's driving me crazy, Belle. That's mine."

His lips are on mine again in an instant. My breath is his as our lips and tongues battle. His hand shifts from my throat to my hair, ripping off my wig and throwing it to the ground. He breaks our kiss to look at me, my hair in a tight bun on my head.

“Take it out.”

“Wh-what?” I ask, my mind grappling with what, exactly, he wants me to take out.

“Your hair. Take it out. I want to feel your hair, not the fake shit.”

I smile as I reach up, tugging at the elastic holding it in. It hadn't crossed my mind before that he would want the character I'm dressed as, but now he's making his demands. I'm thrilled that it's *me* he wants. The real me.

I put the elastic around my wrist and fluff my hair out. I imagine it looks as untamed as his wig right now, but I don't care. He's looking at me like I'm the most beautiful woman in the world.

“Better. So much better,” he whispers, running his fingers through it.

I reach up and tug his wig off, throwing it to the ground with mine. His short, dark hair is matted down with sweat, but I don't care. He's still the sexiest man I've ever seen.

We stand like this, staring at each other for a few more breaths, just taking each other in.

“Has the beast gone soft on me?” I joke.

He places his hand on my thigh that's wrapped around him, thrusting up into me. “Does this feel like I've gone soft on you?”

“No, it definitely doesn't.”

Our kiss becomes more frantic as he pulls at the strings of his pants. We chuckle as he needs to break his lips from mine to figure out the lacing where a zipper would normally be. He pulls them down just enough to set his cock free, placing it between us as he brings the foil of a condom up to his mouth.



“Where were you hiding that?” I laugh. There wasn’t any space for him to have his wallet or keys, making him leave those in his truck—thank goodness for safety in small towns—but he was able to hide a condom.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find a way to hide this in these ridiculous pants? No way, I wasn’t going to take a chance.”

I’m not laughing any longer when he picks up my other leg, wrapping me fully around his hips and shifting into my entrance. My arms circle his neck, using the side of the barn behind me as leverage as he slides in.

He’s gentle at first, giving me long, slow strokes as he rests his head in the crook of my neck. My fingers find their way into his hair, holding on tight as we start to find our groove. Before long, our tempo is increasing, matching the heaving beat of the base rocking through the barn walls.

With my skirt around my waist and my legs wrapped around his, he leans down and pulls my breast out from my dress, taking my nipple in his mouth with one hard suck.

My fingers grip his hair tighter as I moan, bucking my hips to take him deeper.

“So needy,” he says as he nips at my bud.

“Mitch,” is all I can say. My brain is on overload with the music behind me, Mitch filling me. It’s thrilling being outside, knowing that anyone could round that corner and see us, but also feeling completely safe that Mitch would take care of me if that happened.

If he didn’t like the idea of me being around other men without wearing panties, I don’t want to know what would happen if another man saw us like this.

The tempo of Mitch’s thrusts increase, as does the beat from the music inside. I feel myself climbing, getting closer and closer to the edge that I want to fall over more than I’ve wanted anything in my life. Mitch is holding me up with his strong hands under my thighs, but I need more.

“Touch yourself, Belle. Do it for me,” he pants.

My eyes meet his for a brief moment before his gaze trails to my hand sliding down my body. I cup my breast, tweaking the stiff peak and rolling it between my fingers.

“Rachel,” Mitch warns, his eyes never stray from my hand, but there’s impatience in his voice.

I give a throaty laugh, which is cut off when Mitch starts to get rougher with his hips, building the pressure within me.

My hand skirts down the fabric of my bodice, gathering my skirt around my waist so I can reach underneath. We both moan when I reach my core, pressing tight circles. I’m not going to last long, and I don’t think he’s going to either.

We stay like that, not speaking or making a sound but letting our bodies do the talking.

My hand moves faster, so does Mitch. His hand winds its way up my side, grabbing onto my hair and tugging, holding my head back, resting his forehead on mine. We breathe each other in as we come together, our bodies nothing but mixed sweat, disheveled clothes, and jagged breaths.

“I bet you’re going to regret no panties now, Princess,” he chuckles in that low, rugged voice of his.

“I regret nothing, Beast.”



# MITCH

Are you free tonight? I want to take you somewhere.

It hit send, and immediately my nerves make my stomach drop. It shouldn't. Rachel and I have been seeing each other for over a month now and things are going great. Why would it make me nervous to want to take her anywhere? Maybe it's because for the first time I'm taking us out of the comfort of Logan Creek. Or maybe it's because I feel like we're getting serious. Like really serious, really quickly.

While I thought I wanted to start settling down after seeing all my friends with their families, the fact that I might actually be getting close to that is scaring the shit out of me. Normally, this would be where I would run away. If a woman even hinted at anything other than casual, I'd make up some excuse and make sure I didn't run into them again.

While I still have that instinct to run the other way, the thought of never seeing Rachel again hurts worse.

My pretty little Belle has worked her way into my heart, and I don't know what to do about it. The sex is incredible, but it's more than that. It's knowing that I have someone that I can talk to about anything, and I won't be judged. It's someone that I have fun with. Love to hold. Could spend all night just curled up on the couch watching a movie or doing something like dressing up in horrific costumes and dancing all night.

But instead of running, I'm facing them because aside from all of that, I want to enjoy my night with her.

That also makes me think about what it would be like if she was my forever. Would we stay in Logan Creek? Is that what I want?

She's all the things that I didn't know I wanted and now that I have them, I'm freaking the fuck out.

Even though I took Zach up on being his partner here, I never really thought that would mean spending the rest of my life in Logan Creek. I'm a city guy. I like the busy streets and the downtown crowds. I like being able to go to concerts and events without driving for hours, or having everything I could need a short distance away. But here in Logan Creek? That's the exact opposite. I've been happy enough the last few years, but could I spend forever here?

RACHEL

I'm just about to close up the shop. I'm all yours.

Damn right you are.

Her words help drive me out of my funk. I think of our nights together. The Halloween dance where I had her pinned against the barn and made love to her with the party at her back.

Made love? I don't think I've used that term before.

Fuck, am I in love with her?

See you in ten.

"I'm outta here," I tell Zach as I shove my phone in my back pocket and put on my jacket.

"Where are you rushing off to? You've been in a weird mood all day," he says as he puts the last pint on a tray and hands it off to Jessica to deliver to the tables.

"I haven't been in a weird mood. I just...have a lot on my mind."

“Everything okay with Rachel?”

That’s a loaded question. “Yup.”

“Mitch…”

“Zach, I know what you’re doing and thank you for being a friend, but I’m fine.”

He looks at me for a moment without saying anything. I know him well enough to know that he’s thinking through the many things he could say, and I just hope he goes with the less douche-y one.

“Do you remember when I was being an ass with Mandy?”

Ah fuck, here we go.

“I do.” I seethe.

“Do you remember how you told me to not fuck it up?”

“Again, I do.”

“Well, this is me telling you that about Rachel. You have a good thing going. She’s amazing and I’ve never seen you this relaxed and happy.”

Is that true? Was I not relaxed and happy before her?

“Whatever’s going on in your head, deal with it. I promise you, losing her is going to be worse.” A customer grabs his attention, and he gives me a nod before walking off.

His words make me think. Even just a few months ago, I wouldn’t have put this much thought into a relationship. Even the thought of me being in a relationship would have been laughable, but here I am. Not only am I in one, but one that makes me think of things like marriage and kids. One that has me driving her around a small town even though her van was fixed weeks ago.

I barely recognize myself. Going to festivals and dances. Going to Kelowna tonight for a reason other than looking for a hookup. Listening to romance novels.

Making my way to my truck, it dawns on me that I don’t know how I feel about all this.

I have strong feelings for Rachel. I can't deny that. I feel things for her that I've never felt for anyone before.

But is it enough?



“Are you okay?” Rachel asks, breaking the silence filling my truck.

“Yup,” I answer, flicking on my blinker and changing lanes.

“Are you sure? You've barely said a word since you picked me up.”

I let out a heavy sigh. I've been so in my head I didn't grasp how much I've been ignoring her. I ask her out, pick her up, and then promptly ignore her.

*Great job, asshole.*

“Did I...do something?” Her voice is shaky and I hate it.

“No,” I say, reaching across and taking her hand. “I'm sorry. No, it's not you. I'm just—fuck—I don't know. I'm having an off day.”

“Okay.” She gives me a small smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

I feel like the world's biggest ass. I have a beautiful woman with me and all I can think about are ways to fuck it up. She's never asked anything from me that I wasn't willing to give. She's never questioned me or given me a reason to do anything other than enjoy what we have.

“Can I ask where we're going?”

That makes me smile. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes! I can't take surprises!”

I let out a laugh, instantly cutting the tension that plagued us only moments ago.

“I got us tickets to a book reading and signing for Anita Johnson.”

Rachel gasps. “The author of ‘The Monster’s Human Prey?’”

“The one and only.” I smirk.

“How did you...? I didn’t even know she was coming.”

“I ran into Kylie earlier this week and she tipped me off.” I sneak a glance at her, taking in how happy she is.

How could I ever doubt this? Doubt us?

My heart riots at how stupid I’ve been tonight. Am I ready to walk down the aisle? No, but I’m ready for what we have, and that’s more than enough for right now.

I pull off the highway and onto the off ramp, stopping at a red light. Looking over at her, I can’t get over her beauty. My heart stills when the only word I can hear is love. I’m in love with Rachel Bennett.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks with her eyebrow raised.

“You’re so beautiful.” I know it’s not the answer to her question, but it’s all that I have.

The light turns green, and I let my foot off the brake, easing on the gas. Her hand is still in mine. I bring our hands across the console and brush my lips over her knuckles.

This is a moment I never thought I would find more intimate than any hookup. I love sex with Rachel more than anything, but this feels like more. It feels real. Even in the silence, we can be exactly what we are meant to be.

I’m rocked by the sudden screeching of tires before my truck is tossed to the side like a rag doll. We circle through the intersection while I frantically try to gain control. The airbags are deploying as Rachel screams, but what scares me the most is when it all stops.

The truck stops moving, and she’s silent, slumped over. My body is sore and I’m sure I’ve got more bumps and bruises



than I can count, but that's not what concerns me.

"Rachel!" I yell, frantically trying to unclip my seatbelt to get to her. She's slumped over in her seat. There's blood everywhere. So much blood.

A few people run up to us, trying to open the door. I'm able to think clearly enough to hit the unlock button while a man stands at Rachel's door, pounding on the window. Once it's open, he says words like 'help's coming' and 'are you okay?' but all I can do is look at her.

I'm trying not to move her, trying to think of anything I might have heard about first aid.

Her neck. Don't injure her neck.

The man is pressing something to her forehead now, but I'm frozen on the spot. I don't know if I'm injured and physically unable to move or just mentally frozen, but all I can do is hold her hand and pray the man knows what he's doing to help her enough to save her.

Tears fall from my eyes as I look at her, seeing the woman that I love so helpless. So injured.

Flashing lights approach and paramedics rush towards us, but I can't take my eyes off of her.

"Sir, can you move?" someone asks from my side, but I can't answer. All I can do is look at Rachel.

"Rach? Please wake up," I chant, but she doesn't.

"Sir, can you move your legs?"

"Don't worry about me. Help her!" I roar.

"Sir, we're doing everything we can, but I need you to let go of her and pay attention to me for a minute." The woman's voice is soft and kind, but I don't miss the underlying tone of pity.

The paramedics with Rachel are moving quickly to assess her injuries as I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss her knuckles, just as I did before all hell broke loose. I pray this

isn't the last time I touch her. Hold her. If there's anyone listening up there, I need them to hear this and save her.

“I love you,” I whisper as I drop her hand and watch my whole world being lifted from the truck.



# MITCH

“*I* need to get the fuck out of here,” I grumble, staring up at the ceiling.

I’m hooked up to IV’s and monitors and it’s making me want to punch something. I need to be with Rachel wherever she is in this godforsaken hospital.

“You’re not going to get out any faster by raging like The Hulk,” Zach says from his seat beside me.

I called him the second the paramedics would let me. I didn’t know who else to call. My family doesn’t live near here. Only Zach knows how I really feel about Rachel, how crazy I would be to see her like that. He’s not only my business partner but also my best friend, and right now, he’s the only thing keeping me from ripping out these fucking tubes and yelling through the halls until I find my girl.

“Craig and Kylie are waiting for her to get out of surgery. They’ll tell us when they know anything,” Zach reassures me.

“How can you sit there so calmly? I’m freaking the fuck out right now.” I run my hands through my hair, gripping the short strands until they feel like they’re going to be ripped from my head.

“Because I’m here to take care of you and make sure you don’t do something stupid, like rip out your IV and go yelling through the halls.”

I narrow my eyes at him. Now he’s in my fucking head?

“Don’t look at me like that. I know you’re thinking it. That’s what I would be doing if it were Mandy.”

“So, then you know I need to get out of this fucking bed!”

He keeps calm as he sits up in his chair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “What I know is that there isn’t anything you can do right now other than drive the nurses and everyone around you crazy acting like a bear with a thorn in his paw, so you’re going to stay right fucking there and wait for Craig to let me know when he hears anything.”

He stares at me, letting me know that he’s not above tackling me to the bed if I so much as flinch the wrong way.

Throwing my head back on the bed behind me, I close my eyes. My heart beats wildly, thinking of my last image of Rachel. Her hair was matted with blood, her eyes closed. She looked fucking dead, so limp and fucking lifeless in the seat next to me.

“I can’t lose her,” I whisper.

“You won’t,” Zach says.

“You don’t fucking know that!” I yell, my eyes fly open, sitting up in my bed. My heart rate monitor is setting off some alarm with its erratic beating, but I don’t care. “You can’t fucking sit there and tell me she’s going to be okay when you have no fucking clue! You didn’t see her, Zach.” The fight leaves me as a tear streaks down my cheek. My voice lowers to a whisper. “You didn’t fucking see her.”

A nurse comes rushing in, but stops just inside the door when she takes us in.

“It’s okay,” Zach says to her reassuringly. “He’s just worried about his girlfriend.”

“I’ll go see if I have an update on her,” she says, backing out of the room and closing the door behind her.

The beeping from the monitor slows to a steadier beat.

I close my eyes again, willing the tears to stop. Willing everything to stop. I want to go back to when we were happy

in the truck. When I finally figured out that I'm in love with Rachel.

That she's the one.

I might not have known it then, but I sure as fuck know it now. If she makes it through this, I'm putting a ring on her finger and babies in her belly. I want it all and I only want it with Rachel.

I hear Zach move before he places a hand on my shoulder with a tight squeeze.

"You need to make sure you're okay before you can help her. She's going to need you, man."

Fuck, there's another tear. Thankfully, Zach doesn't say anything.

"I know you're right." I steel myself, wiping my face before opening my eyes to meet his. Thankfully, I don't see pity or disgust, just understanding. "But how the fuck do I do that when I don't know how she is? When I know that when I see her again, she's going to be so...broken."

"You'll be strong for her, because she's going to need it. You can let her know you're scared and hurting, but you have to be the rock she needs you to be. When you need a rock, you come to me. Or Travis. Or Brody. Or Dyllan. You turn to one of us because we know what it's like to love someone so fucking much that you can't breathe without them."

I hold his gaze for a few breaths, letting his words sink in. I know he's right. I might not know what her injuries are exactly, but I know there's a lot of them and she's going to have more recovery than I will. She's going to need me. Need everyone.

"Shit, her business..."

"I've already spoken with Skylar. She's going to get in touch with some people that have helped Rachel out during busy seasons. She's on it."

"Thanks, man. I really can't thank you enough for all of this."

“It’s what friends are for.” He gives me a smile and another squeeze on the shoulder before taking a seat again.

“And the bar? Who’s there right now?”

“Brad’s got it covered.”

“Brad? The guy we hired two months ago?” And there’s my elevated heart rate again.

“Yes, Brad. The one that we both agreed was the best choice because he has as much experience as we do, who just happens to be new in town.” Zach rolls his eyes. “Plus, we don’t have to worry about bottling the next round of beer for a couple of weeks. We’re fine.”

I rest back on the bed, looking up at the ceiling once again.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fucking useless,” I answer.

“Mitch,” Zach groans.

“I’m fine. My ribs are sore, my back hurts, and my neck is stiffer than a board, but I’m fucking fine,” I snap.

Zach huffs. “You’re going to be one of those patients, aren’t you?”

“Like you’d be any better, asshole,” I bite back.

“Just making sure you’re going to be okay to help Rachel.”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

He opens his mouth to respond when the door opens and Craig walks in.

“She’s out of surgery. You should come.”





# RACHEL

The incessant beeping around me is making the thudding in my brain worse.

I groan, wanting to make it stop. I try to lift my arm to hit whatever is making that horrid sound, but I can't move. My breath quickens as my brain tries to catch up with what's going on.

The last thing I remember is being in the truck with Mitch, him kissing my hand...

And then the screeching of tires.

Mitch? Where's Mitch?

"Rachel?" a soft voice calls.

Kylie?

I struggle to open my eyes. Once I do, I'm immediately blinded by the bright light.

"Take your time, honey. You've been through a lot," an unfamiliar voice says.

Someone pats my hands, but I can't tell who.

"What...?" I croak. My throat is so dry, I'm not sure I had actually formed a word.

"Just wait. Don't talk yet," the unfamiliar voice says.

"Rach, you're okay. Try not to move," Kylie soothes.

I hadn't even realized I was moving, or trying to, at least.

I open my eyes, letting them adjust to the brightness. Kylie's blurry figure comes into focus. It's her hand holding mine as she smiles warmly down at me.

"Hey, there. You gave us quite a scare."

"Here you go, hun. Drink this." A nurse comes into the room with a cup in her hand. She's the owner of the unfamiliar voice.

She helps me take a few small sips of water, enough that I no longer feel like the Sahara Desert lives in my throat.

"What happened?" I croak.

"You were in a car accident. Some asshole ran a red light and hit you," Kylie says.

"You have quite the concussion and a broken arm on top of a bunch of cuts and bruises."

They must have me on some good meds because I'm not in as much pain as I should be, if that's the extent of my injuries.

"Mitch?" I ask.

"He's okay. They're giving him some fluids to make sure, but he should be here any minute. Craig said Zach had to basically sit on him to get him to stay put."

I let out a weak laugh, trying to imagine not only Kylie's boyfriend saying that but also Zach sitting on Mitch. "He said that?"

"I may be exaggerating that, but Mitch has been fighting to see you."

Kylie barely finishes her sentence before the door crashes open. Mitch stands at the foot of my bed in a hospital gown, looking like a madman.

"Rachel," he breathes.

Zach and Craig walk up behind him.

"Yes, Hulk. You found your woman," Zach groans, but sends me a wink behind Mitch's back. "Wouldn't even put on clothes before stomping off to find you, which means Craig

and I, on top of half of the hospital, have had to see his bare ass hanging out of his gown.”

“Out,” Mitch demands, not taking his eyes off of me.

“Mitch,” Craig warns.

“Out. Now.”

The nurse looks at me and I give her a nod and smile, letting her know I’m okay. I’m sure she’s worried about this wild man showing up growling, but I know that he wouldn’t hurt me. He’d never hurt me.

Kylie leans down and gives me as much of a hug as she can. “Call us if you need anything.”

“Thank you for everything, Kylie.”

“Always,” she says before she takes Craig’s hand and they leave the room with the nurse.

“Mitch,” Zach says, but is cut off when Mitch puts up his hand.

“I’m fine, Zach. Go home to your wife and kids. I’ll call you later.” He still doesn’t take his eyes off of me.

Zach flashes his gaze to me for a moment before turning and leaving, closing the door behind him.

“Mitch, how...”

“If you ask me how I am, I’m going to lose it, Belle. I don’t give a fuck how I am.” He doesn’t move, just lets his eyes roam over me.

“I care how you are, Mitch.” I suck in a breath; thankful he doesn’t have any major injuries that I can see.

“You scared the hell out of me.” His voice is quieter, less sure. “I thought I was going to lose you.”

“But you didn’t.” I try to sound reassuring, but I don’t know how well it works.

He’s quiet for another few intense moments before he moves to my side, sitting in the chair, and taking my hand so gently it’s as if he’ll break me.

“I’m fine, Mitch.”

“You’re *not* fine, Rachel.” His eyes travel from my forehead to my other arm, which is currently in a cast and sling.

“Talk to me,” I whisper.

His eyes shoot to mine. “You were lying there, so limp. I thought...” he takes a moment, choking up. “There was so much blood.”

His eyes briefly move to my forehead. I take my hand from his and lift it to my head, feeling a bandage. “They said I had a concussion. I guess I hit my head.”

I reach out and cup his cheek in my hand. I smile when he leans into it, kissing my palm.

“I thought I lost you.”

“You said that.”

“Don’t make light of it, Belle.”

“I’m not.” I lower my hand and lace my fingers with his. “But I’m here now. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes, Mitch. I mean that. I’m sorry I scared you, but I’m fine, or I will be. I’m sure I won’t be thinking I’m fine when these pain meds wear off.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “I love you, Rachel.”

I search his eyes, stunned.

Love. He said he loved me.

“You don’t have to say anything right now, but I couldn’t spend another minute without you knowing. I’m all in. I want it all. I want to marry you. I want to have kids and a house. I want the chaos, but have it be *our* chaos.”

“I want that too,” I whisper.

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes, Mitch, I mean that. I love you, too.”

“Oh, thank God.” He lowers his head to our joined hands. “Thank you, thank you,” he mutters over and over.

I don’t know if he’s talking to me but seeing him like this breaks my heart. I can’t imagine what he’s gone through during the time we were apart. I know I would be a wreck if the roles had been reversed, and he was the one in this bed.

He lifts his head, relief showing on his face. “I love you, Rachel Bennett.”

“I love you, too, Mitch Brandt.”

“Marry me.”

“What?” My voice cracks as it echoes through the room.

“I mean it. Marry me. Be my wife. Let me wake up next to you every day for the rest of our lives. I don’t want to be without you, Rachel. I know this is fast and we’re both running in the aftermath of what happened, but if this has shown me anything, it’s that I can’t live without you.”

I’m speechless as I look at him.

I don’t know what’s crazier, Mitch asking me to marry him, or the fact I’m considering it.

“Say something, Belle. You’re killing me.”

My heart leaps into my throat with what I’m going to say, but I know with all my heart it’s the right answer.

“Yes.”

# EPILOGUE

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## MITCH

### *One Year Later*

Chaos.

I'm standing in Brody's field, looking at the scene before me, seeing how it's almost exactly like the gathering I was at last year. Except this time, so much has changed.

"Another?" Travis asks, holding another beer out to me.

"Thanks," I take it, almost in a daze.

I haven't been sleeping much, thanks to the little baby burrito wrapped up in Rachel's arms. It's been a whirlwind since our accident. We couldn't wait and got married at Christmas once the majority of her injuries healed, only to learn that she was pregnant.

So in the span of the year, I fell in love, almost lost her, got married, and now have a baby.

Fuck me.

"It gets better," Travis says with a chuckle. "The first couple of months are the hardest."

"That's what everyone keeps trying to tell me. I think you're all full of shit."

That only makes him laugh harder.

"Plus, how would you know? Every time you get out of the newborn stage, you knock your wife up again," Brody says as he walks up to us.

It's true. Lila's currently pregnant with their third. I've heard enough threats of 'getting snipped' or never touching her again to know that she's perfectly happy with their three.

"Says the guy with another newborn in the house," Dyllan grumbles as he approaches.

"You know you all wouldn't change it for anything," Zach laughs.

We stand around, shooting the shit, but mainly talking about our kids. I'm half listening, my focus intently on Rachel as she sits with the women under the shade of a large tree. She's laughing while rocking our baby, Damien, but I can't help noticing how she sneaks glances at me every chance she gets.

And I fucking love it.

"That was all Mitch's idea," Zach says, pulling my attention back to the group.

The guys are all looking at me expectantly, and I have no idea what the fuck they're talking about.

"Your beer," Zach prompts with a cocky fucking smile on his face.

"Ah, yeah. The batch should be ready in the next day or two."

"Are you messing with flavours like Zach does?" Brody grumbles.

"Not so much," I laugh, shooting Zach a laugh as he rolls his eyes. "I'm trying a cranberry ale."

"Don't they make that already?" Dyllan asks.

"Yes. What I'm trying is brewing it with ginger and spices so it's like cranberry sauce in an ale."

"What are you calling it?" Travis asks.

"Cran-you Believe it's Ale!"

Dyllan and Brody groan while Travis and Zach laugh.

"What's so funny?" Craig asks.



We all shake our heads.

I let Zach fill him in as I walk over to Rachel, pulling Damien out of her arms. He's still fussing, needing to nap but refusing to.

She mouths 'thank you' to me as she takes a sip of her lemonade, relaxing back into her seat.

I stand next to her, rocking my boy in my arms. I can't get enough of him. When I'm at work, I miss him. When he's sleeping, I just want to hold him—although I would never dare. I learned quickly about waking sleeping babies.

Damien's eyes drift closed as I bounce on the spot, rocking from side to side. His mouth does that cute phantom sucking thing that always makes Rachel aww and if I'm honest, it does me, too.

As soon as my little man falls asleep, I lean over and give Rachel a light kiss. I can't be far from either of them for too long. I've started changing my shifts at the Brewery, letting Brad take on more of the night shifts so I can be home for bedtime. Some nights I miss the craziness of the crowds and being busy, but I've learned to embrace the quiet. I love the nights that we just stay home. Where we curl up on the couch and watch a movie—or more accurately, fall asleep as soon as we put one on. It's the little things that I've learned to love so much, because they mean so much more.

All I know is no matter how fast this year moved, I wouldn't change anything about it. This time last year, I was questioning everything about my life. Now, I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

# THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for reading Canadian Harvest! It's been bittersweet to bring Logan Creek to an end, but I think this was the right way to do the send off. Since we now have the link between Logan Creek and Whiskey Falls, you never know who might show up!

Thank you to my husband for always being there. You've been my biggest supporter through this whole crazy journey. Thank you to my kids for being so patient and understanding when I have to lock myself in my room to finish a book.

Thank you to Dallas for being the best alpha/beta reader I could ever ask for!

Colleen, you're amazing. Thank you so much for everything you do for me.

Last but definitely not least, thank you so much to all of you! I'm in awe of all of the love and support you have shown me. I really can't thank you enough!

To anyone else I might have not mentioned. It's not intentional. You know me, I have the worst memory possible, especially when trying to get a book done!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Ann lives in BC, Canada with her husband, two children and ridiculously cute German Shepherd. When she's not dreaming of stories, she homeschools her two children as they explore and learn the world together, reads anything she can get her hands on, and drinks a lot of coffee.

Growing up with her head lost in a book, it was no surprise when she picked up a pen, or her laptop, to write her own. Kimberly Ann's stories are based on the world around her as she brings her imagination to life with stories of small towns, swoon-worthy men, and the women that keep them on their toes.



## ALSO BY KIMBERLY ANN

### Logan Creek Series

Canadian Summer (Kade & Brody).

Canadian Fall (Lila & Travis).

Canadian Winter (Mandy & Zach).

Canadian Spring (Skylar & Dyllan).

### Bonus Logan Creek Stories

Mistaken Arrangement (Kylie & Craig).

Canadian Thanksgiving (Skylar & Dyllan).

Canadian Valentine (Lila & Travis).

### Whiskey Falls

Baby, It's Cold Outside (Krissy & Brett).

Second Chance with a Country Star (Ella & Greyson).

### Stand Alone

As You Wish: A Steamy Christmas Novella