

A romantic couple embracing at sunset over a lake. The man is shirtless and the woman is wearing a black top and blue jeans. The scene is reflected in the water below. The background is a warm sunset sky with silhouettes of trees and hills.

Feverburn

A Pine Bluff Novel

MAGGIE MAREN

Feverburn
by Maggie Maren

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Note to the Reader

Feverburn is a contemporary romance intended for a mature audience.

Content warnings include strong language, fully descriptive sexual acts, distressing emergent events, death, non-consensual drug use, violence towards women, and workplace harassment.

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For Ash, my wolf girl.

Baby, be my conjurer
And I'll hold you dear
Baby, be the visions in the night
And wait 'til morning light
for you to disappear
Baby, be my fire
Oh, be my flame

“Be My Fire” by The Blue Stones



But I've bit my tongue too long
to hide the blood I'm covered in
I can't explain it, what you do
You take a hold of every truth
I'm an addict at your altar
Hear the prayers I make to you
Every message that you send got

“One By One” by The Blue Stones



Prologue



My hand flew to his face in a harsh bitch slap. I reeled back, gasping at my action as a sting spread on my palm.

I had never slapped someone before.

I had also never been cheated on before.

It was a day of many firsts.

I was working my usual shift at Rise-N-Grind, a local coffee shop in Boston, when my boyfriend, Tyler, visited me. He strolled towards the back hallway, nodding for me to follow. The next thing I knew, he pulled me into the bathroom, locked the door, and swooped me in for a hungry kiss.

Tyler was always up to something, which made it fun to be on the other side of his spontaneous affections, but it also made me feel out of control. He could charm the panties right off me, so I always had a game plan.

Even if he was a total catch, there was a cost. He was one of those greedy guys who always wanted more—another kiss, another date, another selfie.

“Why are you here?” I asked between kisses.

He shrugged. “I wanted to see you. I missed you.”

We had spent last night together, but still, his confession softened me. I leaned into him, enjoying the fleeting moment. He clutched my hips before crumpling the fabric of my skirt up.

I broke the kiss nervously, “Baby, I can’t. I’m at work.”

His fingers skimmed my hip bone along the waistband. “You deserve something to get you through your shift.”

“But we’re in public.”

He lowered his hand with a smirk, causing a gasp to escape me while I clung to his shoulders. “Besides, you said one of your New Year’s resolutions was to be more spontaneous.”

The panties were charmed right off me, and I was picked up, trapped between him and the wall, my legs locked around his waist. Sure, it wasn’t one of my best moments, and in some corner of my mind, it irked me that he twisted my personal goals to get some action. But my annoyance melted away the more we kissed and moved together.

Halfway through a whimper, the door swung open with my favorite regular customer, Kaylee, on the other side. Her jaw fell along with her purse that slumped off her shoulder. The swinging bag triggered the paper towel machine to squeak out, making the moment even more awkward.

Tyler pulled from me, plopping me on my feet and causing my skirt to shift down my legs. Together, we stood there panting in shock as time lurched to a cringey crawl. I didn’t know if I should say something cheeky like ‘come back with a warrant’ or laugh it off.

That decision was made for me when she balled her hands into little fists and shrieked, “You cheatin’ asshat!”

“No, wait!” he shouted at her retreating figure before looking back at me.

My palm struck his stupid face while spots appeared in my vision. “What the actual fuck?” I spat.

He rubbed his jaw. “She’s just a crazy ex!” It was my turn to shriek as I pushed at his chest, not letting him crowd me. “She’s nothing. She means nothing to me.” He unceremoniously ripped off the condom. It snapped with my last nerve.

“She’s not nothing, Tyler! She’s a full-fledged human being, you fucking creep!” I shoved at his chest once more, forcing him to back away. “I don’t need to hear you justify it. Get away from me!”

Even though I was blindsided, my decision was easy. He couldn’t convince me of his innocence. If some lady barges in on me having sex with my boyfriend and claims he’s her man, too, I will believe her. I’ve learned in life—it’s best just to believe women.

This whole mess felt like a Dolly Parton song, and I was Jolene.

“Nothing happened. It was just a couple of dates, I swear. We haven’t even hooked up.”

I rolled my eyes, pulling on my underwear before going to the sink, aggressively pumping the hand soap in my fury. “You’re making some interesting decisions pissing off a woman with an entire album of your dick pics.”

“Rosie, you need to calm down.”

“Calm down? Oh, of course! I feel magically better with that stunning suggestion! What do you want me to say, Tyler? You were stupid enough to get caught cheating. Don’t force me to do emotional gymnastics to make you feel better. You deserve to sit here with your dick out and no dignity.” I tore the paper towel off the machine to dry my shaky hands as a tingling sensation traveled from my shoulders down my arms.

He zipped up his pants. “You’re not hearing me out.”

“I’ve heard enough. We’re over. Now leave me the fuck alone.” I pointed to the door, holding my breath until he left.

I only had five minutes to cry before returning to work. My hands kept trembling while I made drinks, occasionally burning myself. My coworkers kept side-eying me, and I had to work the whole day with Tyler’s kiss on my lips, his face in my mind.

After my shift, I found a dozen roses on the hood of my car, along with a note. Red roses for a woman named Rosie. Wow, groundbreaking. I snorted in disgust, looking at the frost

on the petals from the nippy January air before plopping the bouquet on the car parked next to mine. Hopefully, they'd brighten someone else's day. I swiped the note he wedged under my windshield wiper and used it to spit out my gum, taking away the temptation to read his lies.

When I got home, I took a hot shower to scour any remnants of him, made an appointment to get tested, and blocked him on all social media—the holy trinity of discovering you've been cheated on. Then I called my mom and ugly cried.

The next day, I drove to an empty field and shrieked until my throat hurt. Every night for a week, I curled up in bed, listening to that super depressing song from the New Moon soundtrack. You know, the one that plays when Bella sits in a chair for three months? It hurt just right. I needed it to hurt just right. Otherwise, it felt so wrong.

We had fun together in the seven months we dated as he wined and dined me. I was quickly impressed, and he knew it. We came from two different worlds. He was a lawyer raised by a wealthy family with a penchant for partying on yachts. And I was a tatted-up witchy woman raised by a single mom who loved rock concerts.

But nothing was too deep with him. I needed that after an intense chapter of my life. With Tyler, I was happy, if not a little bored. He respected my independent streak and never pushed into my life too much. I think that's what hurt the most. After leaving him, I realized how little he asked about my life or tried to take part in it. I was only a fixture in his. It was a harsh truth only heartbreak and humiliation could clarify.

Everything happens for a reason, and I was about to find out.

Three weeks after the incident, Kaylee visited me at Rise-N-Grind. She apologized for her boisterous exit and ensured it didn't jeopardize my job. Her actions earned my immediate respect. I couldn't help but smile as she slid a vase of yellow roses across the table as part of her apology. I'd never received

yellow roses. They seemed more wholesome than their vampy red counterparts. She made the vase herself, and on the bottom, she etched, *the only prick you should tolerate is a thorn from a rose*, which was all too fitting.

She told me that after the incident, she drove aimlessly to Maine and crashed her car in a remote part of the forest. Harley, a local forest ranger, rescued her and let her stay at his cabin during a blizzard. They fell in love, and the whole thing sounded like some Hallmark movie, but with Kaylee's mouth and judging how they kept each other warm, it would be R-rated.

Now that she was back in Boston, I could tell she was dealing with heartache from missing Harley, not what Tyler did to her. We rehashed our sides of the story, realizing we were both duped. He told the truth about them never having sex, but she wasn't an ex-girlfriend. She worked in the same building as him, and his firm placed a bet that if he 'fucked the weird hippie chick across the hall,' he'd rank up to junior associate. If that wasn't disgusting enough, he stalked and threatened Kaylee, and when he showed up in Maine, he got physical with her, leading Harley to beat his ass to a bloody pulp. Knowing Tyler was capable of such violence terrified me, and once again, I was grateful he was plucked out of my life by fate.

After talking it over, Kaylee and I agreed to be friends. There was no use in hating each other, and we already had a connection. I still remember the first day she came into the coffee shop. She was friendly and a bit kooky, which I found instantly endearing. We bonded over jewelry, each identifying specific stones and crystals on each other in a silent dance of recognizing a fellow witchy woman. I always looked forward to hearing her podcast suggestions and having her try my newest coffee concoctions. Now we had this weird bond, a scorned sisterhood.

The next day, Kaylee called me while I took out the work garbage. Seeing myself on the video call made me cringe. I was grimy and exhausted, and she was damn near glowing as she bounced up and down with a huge grin.

“He found me!” she squealed.

“Huh?” Maybe ten hours of making lattes had steamed my brain cells.

“Harley! He found me!” She giggled, turning her phone around to show a handsome guy waving from her couch... shirtless.

“Well, hello, infamous Harley,” I fought a laugh and heard him say something that sounded like a hello before Kaylee turned the phone back to launch into how he tracked her down in Boston to proclaim his love for her. Hearing about a good man made a small chunk of my frozen heart melt. I guess they do exist.

“Do you want a change in scenery?” her bright voice yanked me from my moody musing.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I love Harley. I’m moving to Maine to be with him. There’s just one problem. The town of Pine Bluff doesn’t have any crystal or coffee shops.”

A smile spread across my face. “Well, we’re just going to have to fix that, aren’t we?”

The Ashes

Chapter One



The little mountain town of Pine Bluff looked like a damn postcard, but I felt like shit stepped in twice. I made the rookie mistake of staying up too late packing with the delusion that a cup of coffee, or four, would fix all my problems in the morning. Now, I had to deal with the reality of too much caffeine, not enough sleep, and good old-fashioned nerves.

My hands trembled as I held the steering wheel, turning on Main Street with the small U-Haul trailer hitched to the back of my ancient, black Toyota 4Runner. When I say ancient, I mean from 2003. Seeing a CD player in my car reminded me that I was a broke millennial with an impressive collection of Taco Bell napkins in the glove compartment. These details humbled me daily.

With it being April, Maine was still melting away its wintery slush, but that didn't take away its beauty. Long rows of historical buildings lined each side, along with mature trees, creating a quintessential New England charm. The street was on a slight incline leading up to one of the mountains surrounding town.

To my right, I spotted our new shop between a bookstore and the post office. The storefront consisted of a sturdy wood door, arched display windows on either side, and our purple sign stating Silver Springs Coffee & Crystals.

Across the street from our shop was my new home, a loft above a hardware store owned by Harley's family. It was a tall two-story building of tan bricks sprawling the corner lot. The front was pristine, with a sign brushed in red stating Kouris

Hardware in giant letters. Taking a left, I went to the back parking lot framed with pine trees.

Harley's sister, Frankie, was waiting for me. She was about my age, in her late twenties, and like her brother, she was tall with an olive complexion. Her dark curls piled on her head in a bun, and watercolor tattoos peeked out of her scrubs. She greeted me with polite small talk while opening the back door before leading me up a wide stairway that creaked with each step.

Six windows filled the entire wall facing us as we entered the loft. They arched at the top with black framing, letting in warm sunlight. The wall on the right was brick with a vintage mural reading Kouris & Sons Lumber and Hardware in faded white and red cursive. The wall to our left was also brick but gave way to a kitchen towards the other side of the unit, along with the bathroom.

"This place is beautiful! The pictures didn't do justice," I said, looking around with a relieved grin. Slants of sunshine lit up the rich wood beneath our feet. "Is this flooring original?"

"Yes, it is. It was a pharmacy in the late 1800s before my grandpa bought it in the 1950s. My brothers inherited the store, and I got the loft."

She showed me the bathroom painted a dreamy lilac with a clawfoot tub and told me all about rescuing it from a landfill and how she found the vintage crystal door handles at estate sales.

Pulling the keys and lease agreement from her tote bag, she tipped her chin with a bashful smile. "Okay, I have to address the elephant in the room. Kaylee told us all about the love triangle back in Boston. That guy was a complete douche."

"Yeah, definitely not the kind of guy I thought I was dating." I fiddled with the keys, wondering where this conversation was going.

"But I liked how you banded together and didn't fight over him. That's badass."

"Thank you for saying that."

“Oh, and I love that you named the coffee shop Silver Springs. That’s my favorite Fleetwood Mac song.”

I shrugged, feeling exposed. “It’s about a scorned woman, so it was fitting.”

“Scorned brew! I love it! We need some excitement here. Come to think of it, that’s not true, but I like chaos!” She let out a mischievous giggle while opening the door to leave. On second thought, she turned around, her pointer finger lifted. “Oh, and my oldest brother Carson is the owner now. He’s away fishing today since the store is closed on Sundays.”

“Carson. Got it.” I nodded, committing it to memory.

“He doesn’t talk much, so if he seems like a grouch, I promise it’s not personal. His employees use the front door because he hates people coming back to his office.”

“Oh, okay,” I stammered.

“But you come and go as much as you want since this is your space,” she insisted. She went to leave again but turned around. “Oh, and he has a neurotic husky that sometimes loses his shit and howls like someone is murdering him, but I promise he’s fine.”

I chuckled, imagining it. “Thanks for the heads up.”

I never thought I’d live in a small town like Pine Bluff, but I jumped when the opportunity presented itself. I wanted to escape from everything that clung to my life in Boston. I was still trying to stitch myself together from dull heartache, the sting of betrayal, and the emptiness of a failed career.

After Frankie left, I fetched cleaning supplies from my car and turned on an audiobook to fill my mind. She left the place spotless, but I wanted to clean it myself. Part of my ritual to bless my new space was scrubbing the floors and walls. On all fours, I wrung out my rag, letting the rosemary water spill from its fibers before I slapped it on the floor with a loud thwack. The familiar scent tickled my brain like a simple comfort in such new terrain.

After cleaning most of the day, I nailed a horseshoe and a Shela-ni-gig over my front door to protect my space. I filled a

small leather pouch with black salt, mugwort, juniper berries, and dragon's blood resin. Adding some obsidian, black tourmaline, lodestone, and chiastolite crystals to the bag, I tied it nine times and hung it on the door hinge. Then, I traced protection symbols on either side of my door with my favorite oil my mom made for me.

After that, I found the small Crockpot I jokingly called my electric cauldron. Filling it with water, I plunked in cut lemons for purification, oranges for wealth, and rosemary for good luck. Finishing off, I threw in some cinnamon sticks for protection, cloves to ward off ill intent, and bay leaves for good health. The simmer pot filled my loft with spicy goodness as it burbled the rest of the afternoon while I brought up boxes from the U-Haul trailer. I wanted to move everything but reluctantly accepted Harley's offer to help move the furniture.

Now, in the glow of golden hour, I waited in the back lot for Kaylee and Harley to arrive. When she hopped out of the truck, we both squealed each other's names and all but pranced to each other like a bunch of dorks. I held her tight, wiggling us in the hug. She was short like me, barely five foot three if I had to guess. She was one of the few people I had met who was as pale as me, but her long, smooth blonde hair was the opposite of my loose, auburn curls.

From where I hugged Kaylee, I watched Harley hop out of the truck over her shoulder. A slight twinge of jealousy flooded me. Tyler burned us, but she was already moving on with someone else. Someone, who I might add, was sexy as hell.

I reasoned with myself that it made sense that I found Harley attractive. Given the circumstances we met, it was apparent we had the same taste in men. But where Tyler was polished and preppy, Harley was all manly and rugged. I couldn't look at him for too long because I'd swoon. I respected Kaylee too much to do something like that.

"Hey Rosie, welcome to Pine Bluff," his deep voice rumbled.

“Hey, thanks again for helping me.” I avoided eye contact, opening the U-Haul wider for him.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “Dane should be here any moment.”

“Who’s Dane?” I asked.

“His bestie. Just a warning, he’s a handsy Leo who will totally hit on you because you’re fucking gorgeous. He has no sense of stranger danger. Treat him like a dementia patient, and he’ll go away,” Kaylee said, looking around for Dane’s arrival.

I rolled my lips into my mouth, trying not to giggle. “Thanks for helping me find this place. Housing around here is tough.”

She batted the air. “No worries. Remember how you helped me pack up all my crystals to move here? All that fucking bubble wrap?”

A man approached us, cutting off our small talk. He wore a baseball cap that shrouded his eyes, so all I could make out was scruff and tan skin with tons of tattoos. He was jacked, with a thick neck, almost like a bulldog.

“The help has arrived!” he said, outstretching his arms while walking towards us.

He pulled Kaylee in one arm, and with the other, he did a weird one-armed bro-hug thing with Harley. Seeing all three in a clusterfuck of an embrace made me suddenly nervous.

Releasing them, he turned his baseball hat backward, revealing smoky green eyes that scanned me up and down. “Moosekiller! You brought a new friend?”

“Dane, this is Rosie,” Kaylee offered.

“Welcome to town.” He stepped forward to fist-bump me with a blackened hand. I imagined it was from being a mechanic.

“Moosekiller?” I asked in confusion.

Kaylee rolled her eyes. “Dane calls me that because I might have accidentally, almost, killed the town moose when I first crashed here.”

Harley chuckled. “Poor Hagrid, he was just looking for food.” He smiled adoringly at Kaylee as he wrapped his arm around her, holding her hip. I turned my head so I didn’t have to see it.

Dane added, “Legend has it, the moose still stalks her to this day...waiting...wanting...”

“That humped-back forest whore has it out for me! Who knew a moose could be so mean? I saw him the other day, and I swear he grunted at me. Grunted!” she said in outrage.

“Avoid the murderous moose. Got it,” I quipped the mental note, earning a smile from all three people.

It took us only ten minutes to unload the rest of my U-Haul. I offered to buy everyone pizza, but they politely refused and assured me it was nothing. I was indebted to them and didn’t like it. Kaylee offered to stay to help me unpack. I told her I’d get all emo and didn’t want her to see me like that. She squeezed me extra tight before taking Harley’s hand as he opened the door for her to hop into his truck. A burning sensation seeped into my stomach, and I had to look away again.

After several hours of unpacking and cleaning, I decided a steamy hot bath was a lovely idea to help me avoid soreness. I found some wine I had packed and a bath bomb I wanted to try out. The water was running so hot that I had to crack the window before sliding into the steamy water.

It was then that it hit me. Even with Kaylee as a friend, I was alone.

So achingly alone.

Chapter Two



Fishing today sucked. It was spring, and the tourists were already descending upon Maine with their wholesome antics. It made me want to puke. Little did they know, mud season up here lasted well into May. It was irritating watching the light leave their eyes as they hopped out of their cars, only to discover the lake half-frozen. I was weirdly defensive over this land because so much of it shaped me into the man I am today, for better or worse.

The sunrises got my ass out of bed for a run each morning.

The calm lakes gave me sanity while I fished.

The gentle sounds of nature reminded me that it was okay to be quiet.

And the town itself, well, it was complicated. The people of Pine Bluff barely tolerated me, and tourists amplified the feeling of being in the way, making everything worse. Their station in my personal space was annoying and constant. As the days got longer, my dread of interacting with them intensified.

Sucking in a deep breath, I tried to center myself. I should stop being such a miserable ass. I was lucky to live somewhere like Pine Bluff, not in stifling suburbia.

I needed the wild.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror, my eyes squinting between my dark hair and beard as I scowled in disgust. I had a major resting bitch face, or in my case, I guess

it was a resting bastard face. The scowl on me could scare a nun, and I knew it.

Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I trailed around the bend in the road, hoping deer didn't dash out in front of me in the darkness as I made my way back into town. I forgot Kiszka's leash at the store and wanted to have it for my morning run. I had to tether his spastic ass so he didn't chase squirrels.

A blood-curdling scream pierced my ears as I opened my truck door in the back lot. I rushed in, following the cries to the loft, taking two stairs at a time. I broke down the locked door, ignoring the scraping wood against my shin and shoulder while I followed the noise into the bathroom.

The sight in front of me was almost too bizarre to comprehend. It was a gorgeous naked woman flailing around in the tub filled with dark water. It would've looked like a horror movie if the water wasn't purple and glittery. Along with her cries, an obnoxious Celtic Woman song trilled on, creating a chaotic cacophony.

My ears rang as I watched her reel back, splashing water like a frantic fish as she covered her chest. "Who are you? Don't let it get me!" she shrieked.

"It?" I yelled back.

A high-pitched tittering filled the air as I turned, only to see a raccoon launch from the sink into the tub, dunking in the water with a loud plop. The woman screeched, swooshing to the other end, splashing out more water, and damn near drowning it. Still seated, she picked up a shampoo bottle, holding it like a sword.

I held up my hands. "Wait, stop!"

The raccoon reached the tub's edge and crawled up the shower curtain like Rambo. I inched forward as it padded along the pole before it launched directly at me. The woman squealed as I caught it like a football to my chest, grabbing it by the scruff like a cat to hold it away from my body. Purple

glittery water dripped from its tail as its little paws clawed the air in a futile scramble.

“Oh my god! What the fuck?” she yelled, slumping further in the tub as I leaned over her, shutting the window to prevent the bathroom bandit from returning.

I booked it outside with the critter, plopping him by my dumpster in the far corner of the lot as Kiszka howled in my truck the entire time. Returning to the store, I heard her sobbing as I washed my hands. I wanted to go back upstairs to check on her, but I didn't want her to feel all exposed since she was naked.

“Are you okay?” I yelled up the stairway.

“Yes,” she called back with a snuffle.

Yanking the damn leash off the hook, I opened the back door to leave, “I will fix your door tomorrow.”

The jilted woman said nothing in response. My presence made everything worse, as always.

I knew this was a mistake. Letting her live above my store was my attempt to mend things with my brother. Harley and I were estranged since he dumped the family store on me, forcing me to take over alone while he went to college. When he returned to town with his fancy degrees and forest ranger job, he acted better than me, so we had even more of a rift. Time doesn't heal all wounds. And we haven't been the same since.

Thank god for Kaylee. She took the edge off my brother being a complete asshole, so when she asked if her friend could live above my store, I felt inclined to say yes. My sister shot me daggers behind Kaylee's head as she pitched the idea, which helped, too.

Driving back to my cabin, the woman flashed in my mind. Her striking red hair piled on top of her head, the blush tracing her round cheekbones from the steam, her pale skin covered in tattoos disappearing into the dark water. Even when screaming, she was cute, which was impressive.

Thoughts about her swirled as I slid into bed that night. I heard she and Kaylee were in a love triangle with some creep back in Boston. I remember thinking it was classy that they befriended each other instead of fighting over some idiot. But I blew off the rest of the details. Now, I wish I had listened more closely.

What was her name? Why would she ever agree to move to a small town like Pine Bluff?

I also chastised myself for already scaring her away. The notion that above me was a woman living her life while I went about mine seemed like a sick joke and a dangerous distraction.

I was done with distractions. I had been properly distracted enough in my lifetime.

Chapter Three



I woke up multiple times throughout the night, dreaming of a man barging into my loft. Each time I'd jerk awake, I'd stare at the door's remnants, reminding myself I was safe.

The guy who hulked into my loft like a SWAT team member must be Carson. I was too busy screaming and shielding my tits from being chomped by a raccoon to introduce myself. Watching him clutch the critter like a damn handbag while leaving, mumbling in a language that wasn't English, felt like a fucking fever dream. I would have assumed I hallucinated the entire exchange if it weren't for the mess.

Wanting to escape the shitshow, I texted Kaylee that I was heading to the shop. Not knowing the vibe yet, I played it safe with a black long-sleeved shirt, jeans that made my butt look good (if I do say so myself), and plum Doc Marten boots. Then, I stacked my usual amber, bronzite, carnelian, and jasper beaded bracelets on my left wrist and slid on some rings.

I hadn't put much effort into my appearance over the last three months. Staring down at my cosmetic bag today was like seeing an old acquaintance I couldn't recall the name of at a party. Dabbing some concealer, dusting some loose powder, sweeping on mascara, and winging some eyeliner was all I could muster. I left my hair down, fighting the temptation to put it in a bun.

I felt ridiculous leaving because I had no solid door to pull shut. The mystery man promised to fix it, and I had to take his

word for it. Weighing my options, I decided I'd rather feel like a damsel than have an awkward phone call with Frankie this soon.

Kaylee parked her burgundy Jeep in front of our shop and hopped out wearing funky tie-dye harem pants, a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt, and a flowy black cardigan since it was still chilly. She topped off the look with lime earrings shaped like alien heads, like an eccentric art teacher. She had a certain glow about her after leaving Boston. It was probably from Harley and all the sexcapades they had in their cabin. I had to shove that thought from my mind with a hard blink.

“How did last night go?” she asked, digging around in her purse.

I forced a smile. “I got mostly unpacked already.” I wasn't ready to admit what happened. The last thing I needed as a newcomer was an embarrassing story. Shit, people already knew Kaylee walked in on me getting railed in a coffee shop. “This was an ice cream parlor?” I asked, diverting the attention away from me.

“Yep, the tourists loved ice cream so much they moved to a new place with a drive-thru and more outdoor seating.”

I unlocked the door with my keys. “And it sounds like everyone has been okay with a witchy shop in town?”

“Absolutely! This place is surprisingly open-minded for a small town. I think the promise of coffee helped,” Kaylee shrugged.

Our shop was two-sided, separated by a gorgeous brick wall that was distressed with years of history. Closer to the entrance, the brick wall gave way to an archway that led to the smaller space we'd be using for the crystal shop with empty round tables and display cabinets ready for inventory. The lighting overhead wasn't a buzzing fluorescent. Instead, we picked warm Edison bulbs to make everything look cozier.

The walls were a beautiful shade of indigo, giving the space a mystical flare. Over the register, a sign hung in Old English font stating; All shoplifters will be prosecuted by the

universal law of fuck around and find out. Unattended children will be fed to Baba Yaga on the next full moon.

I chuckled while Kaylee met my gaze with a playful smile. “So you ran with my idea?” I asked.

“Yes, you’re full of ‘em!” She slapped the top of the fortress of cardboard boxes. “And these are all the crystal babies we get to unpack.”

She then showed me her tarot reading room. Harley made her a U-shaped bench around a table that filled the entire space like a breakfast nook. She softened the area with cushions and pillows with a distinct bohemian flare inspired by her time in India, as well as recycled sari-silk curtains draped from a center point on the ceiling where a shabby chic metal chandelier hung over the table.

“That’s a pretty chandelier!” I pointed in awe.

“Frankie helped me find it at an estate sale. She’s so good at thrifting!”

“She is! I have a clawfoot tub in my loft, thanks to her. I like how magical it feels here. It sets the mood for tarot readings.”

Kaylee clasped her hands together. “Thank you! I am so excited. Okay, so your side!” She led me through the archway back over to the entrance.

My jaw slacked at seeing a giant mural on the tall wall we shared with the bookstore. Trees towered up to an inky sky with a realistic-looking moon on the side closest to the entrance. I pointed at the mural, transfixed. “This is incredible! Who painted this?”

“Carson! Harley’s brother. Did you meet him this morning?”

I shook my head, “Um, no. I came right over.”

“He’s an amazing artist. He’s been working on this mural for weeks when he has time. There’s a mural on the side of Dane’s shop as well. You should check it out if you make it down that way.”

“It’s like a magical night forest,” I said in awe, walking closer. I couldn’t help but stare, enamored with the fine details at every spot I’d looked. “I like how it’s more realistic and not kiddish. It reminds me of the Froud artwork used for *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* movies but with his unique style mixed in.”

“That’s what I was going for! I love all the magical folk he snuck in.” She gestured at some naked witches dancing around a roaring bonfire by a clearing in the woods with a cottage behind them. Between the trees, faeries were flying around as others perched on branches. Towards the base of the trees, glistening amethyst crystals nestled in the roots, along with little villages lit for the tiny fae. We laughed at a cute gnome peeking out from around a tree trunk. We decided he looked like Willie Nelson.

Kaylee explained that Frankie found mismatched wooden tables to fill our café with a homey charm. Studying them, I had another idea. “Do you think Carson could paint the tables, too? People love taking pictures of their coffee. If the tables are artsy, it’s even better. Like this one that’s round could be a sun or a zodiac wheel?”

“Stop! That’s such a good idea!”

I regarded the rest of the café. The long L-shaped bar stretched in front of the brick wall. All the shiny new machines were in place, ready for me to use. The open space in front of the mural had several small wooden tables, a funky velvet purple couch, an oversized armchair, and a long table in front of the windows filled with plants, a holder for straws and napkins, and a sign with the store hours facing the sidewalk.

“We should put a faerie garden here.” I pointed to the front table. “It might make a cool display for people walking by, and we can use it to show more crystals.”

“Abso-freaking-lutely! Oh, by the way. I’ve already cleaned this place from top to bottom like a complete maniac, but I won’t be offended if you want to clean it again to feel at peace. Sometimes, I clean something already clean, so I feel like I left my mark on it.”

“Me and you have more in common than I ever imagined.” I put my arm around her. “We’re supposed to do this together! I can feel it!”

She wrinkled her nose adorably. “Me too!”

She had errands to run for the shop, so she left me to scrub the coffee bar and mop the floors. Several hours later, the front door swung open, causing me to rip my head up from where I was entering the menu on the tablet. My mind pooled in stupidity over what I was seeing. The man filled the door as he walked through it, his broad shoulders and height almost brushing the frame. His hair was dark and short, matching the beard that framed his handsome face. He wore heavy boots, jeans, and a black shirt with an unbuttoned black and gray flannel over it. If he was going for the brooding lumberjack vibe, he nailed it.

I straightened from where I hunched over. “Hello,” I said in an overly friendly tone.

“Hey, I wanted to see if you were okay after last night.” His voice was lower than I expected.

My blood went frosty as he approached my counter. “Oh, that was you?” A jolt of panicked recognition flooded me. I tried to remain calm as I craned my neck to make eye contact with him. He was tall, the kind that makes someone feel like a mountain, not a person. Up close, long eyelashes framed his light eyes. It’s always unfair when men have longer eyelashes than women. Even more annoying were the gorgeous eyes piercing through them. They were hazel, if I had to guess, with rings of sage mixed with light amber. They stood out against his olive complexion and dark eyebrows. The mere sight of them made me all gooey and swoony.

He extended a giant, roughened hand to shake. “Yeah. Carson.”

“Rosie.” His skin warmed my hand before I released it. “What kind of name is Carson?”

His face twitched. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t hear it often. Is it an old family name?”

“There’s a story behind it, but you don’t want to know. Trust me.”

I picked up a bar rag to do something with my hands. “Well, Carson, you’ve been in my home and seen me naked, so it’s only fair I get some dirt on you.” I cocked an eyebrow flirtatiously, steadying my gaze.

He squinted, “Do you usually demand personal stories within seconds of meeting someone?”

“Do you usually barge into strangers’ homes, breaking the door down like the Kool-Aid man, only to never return?”

“By the way, don’t open that bathroom window for a few days. The raccoons keep crawling up the back of the building somehow.”

“Noted. Now spill.”

He gathered a breath. “My parents visited Nevada for a work conference for my mom. They got drunk and conceived me in a hot tub. They were in Carson City, you know, the capital. So there you go.” He shrugged like it was the most boring thing he had ever muttered.

“Wow. That is haunting,” I teased. He shook his head, trying not to laugh, so I continued. “It could have been so much worse. They could’ve been in Reno.” That did it. He cracked a smile that flashed against his dark beard.

A deep, throaty chuckle escaped him. “Nothing good happens in Reno.”

“Well, convince me something good happens in Carson City,” I said, running the rag over the counter.

“What? Was rescuing you from a purple raccoon not enough?”

“You broke my damn door!”

“It’s already fixed. I put a new one in an hour ago for you.” His gaze darted down to my lips and back up to my eyes.

“Thank you.” I didn’t know what to say. I was awestruck yet annoyed that he was so efficient and all up in my space.

“Don’t mention it. What’s Rosie short for? Let me guess, Rosaline?”

“You’ll never guess.” I picked up a scrap paper, scrawled out my full name, Roisin, and turned it towards him.

He squinted, taking a wild stab in the dark at pronouncing it. “Roey-sin?”

“Solid try. It’s Irish. You pronounce it row-sheen,” I said with exaggerated clarity.

“Row-sheen,” he echoed back with a determined nod.

“Exactly. It means little rose in Gaelic, therefore—”

“Rosie,” his eyes flashed to my hair. “Fitting.”

Ignoring whatever that was, I picked up a plastic cup. “Let me repay you for saving me. Can I make you a drink?”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t know what to order at a place like this.”

“Are you too tough to drink some girly iced coffee?” I asked while tamping the grounds in the puck to make espresso.

“Nah, it’s not like that. Make me something foofy.” He jutted his chin up, “How ‘bout you surprise me?”

“Foofy. Got it. Do you like things spicy?” I asked before I could think.

He pushed his tongue to the side of his cheek to not answer for a moment. “Just surprise me.” His face morphed into a smirk, making my heart drop. Trying not to get flustered, I focused on the drink, grateful to do something with my hands.

“So, Rosie, why Pine Bluff?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“Touché.”

“To be honest, I was getting sick of Boston. I wanted a new chapter, more nature. What about you? Your sister mentioned

that the hardware store has been in your family for generations. Is that why you stay?”

“Don’t have much choice.”

“Why is that?”

“I respect my dad and grandpa enough to make sure they never have to see it close down.” His eyebrows knit together. “I guess I just feel obligated.”

“Obligations are tricky, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, I’ll be honest; you’re the first person to ask me that in a while.”

I slid the drink across the counter. “That’s a shame. Here, have a sip.”

He picked up the medium-sized cup that looked like a children’s size in his clutch. Veins lined the back of his hand, his left ring finger bare. “That’s really good. What is it?”

“It’s a dirty chai. An iced chai tea latte with an extra shot of espresso. If you want two shots next time, ask for a filthy chai.” His eyes widened slightly at the words *dirty* and *filthy* escaping my mouth.

Kaylee clamored in, interrupting our bubble of flirtation as she juttied the door open with her hip, her arms wrapped around a large box. “The freaking bastards gave me orange straws! I don’t want straws, you know, to save the sea turtles! But I vividly remember ordering black straws!”

Carson went to help her with the box, but she heaved it on the counter before he could. “Hey dude, glad you’re here. Did Ro tell you the idea she had?”

“No,” was all he answered, looking between us.

She gestured at the tables, launching into our vision. He stood there patiently, listening to her. His demeanor was calm, damn near stoic. He must’ve felt my gaze on him because he side-eyed me once and stood up straighter, puffing out his chest. After a few minutes of listening to Kaylee, he went to leave. He held up his cup at the door and said a simple thanks

while looking directly at me. Watching him leave, I gritted my jaw to keep it from slacking.

Well fuck.

Chapter Four



I walked back to my store, holding a cup of heaven. I had no clue what Rosie put in it, but it was amazing. It was sweet but complex and addicting, much like her presence. The sticker on the cup that was supposed to show my name and drink order instead said Dirty Reno. I chuckled while taking another sip.

A grunt came from behind the register. “I see you visited the witches,” Hank said. He readjusted his flat ass on the stool, his crossword skimming his puffer vest as he tucked it under his arm.

“What do you mean, the witches?”

His fuzzy white eyebrows shot up against his rich Black skin. “They’re over there selling rocks and tea. That’s some witchy shit. Back in the 70s, everyone got really into their horoscopes and sex. It was a good time to be alive.” He slurped some coffee from an enamel mug. “God bless ‘em. I’d much rather have that across the street than a bunch of kids screaming for ice cream.”

“Hank, aren’t you supposed to be happy to see kids around? You’re a grandpa.”

“Yeah, but I only like my grandkids. And only for about four hours. Then they start bitching about wanting their iPad. When I was their age, do you know what an iPad was?”

I sighed, staring straight ahead. “A lake.”

“Exactly. Your parents raised you the same way. You turned out okay.”

“No, I didn’t. What are you talking about?”

“Don’t start that shit again, Carsyboy.”

“What, the truth?”

A customer came in, and the day whooshed away, but I couldn’t help thinking about the woman across the street. I’d catch myself glancing out the window, wishing I could see her coffee bar instead of the display window for Kaylee’s crystals.

Seeing Rosie in daylight was a privilege. She was the prettiest woman to ever stand in front of me. Sure, last night she was naked, but I’m a gentleman who averted my gaze. The raccoon helped. Even stuck indoors at work, she was captivating. Her almond-shaped eyes set fearlessly on mine. The jade-green color hypnotized me with a hint of mischief and definite intellect. Her pale, heart-shaped face was a striking contrast against her fiery curls.

When she tucked some of her hair behind her ear, it was pierced in all these places I didn’t know were possible. She had thin golden hoops and tiny gems nestled to perfection with the delicate anatomy of her ear, making her look like a damn faerie. Considering the piercings and tattoos, I was already impressed with how Rosie adorned herself. She wasn’t typical, far from it.

Her mouth was small but kissable, with lips the most enticing shade of pink. I wondered what other parts of her might be pink but decided I couldn’t go down that road at work. She was short, but compared to me, most people are. She was petite but looked healthy, covered in softness in all the places I liked as a man. Her curves were fuller at the bottom, with shapely hips and the best ass I’ve seen in my entire life. When she turned around to make my drink, I almost groaned, staring at it.

I’ve been around crusty men for too long at the store. A woman around my age shouldn’t put me in a tailspin, but seeing her walk around making my drink made me feel like a

fucking idiot. Even worse, I had to finish the damn mural with her staring at the back of my head. I took a deep breath, trying to formulate a plan. I texted my buddy Barrett for a distraction, making sure he was going to the pub quiz tonight.



Leaving my store, I damn near ran into Rosie coming through the back door. Kiszka pounced on her, which was unlike him.

“Hey, buddy!” her voice cooed as she ruffled the hair around his neck and under his ears. He opened his mouth in pure happiness, pawing her tits and torso.

“I’m so sorry. He’s trained not to do that. Kiszka down.”

“Wait, his name is Kiszka?” she asked, kneeling to pet him. “Like the dudes from Greta?” She looked up at me, rearing her head back to avoid a wet tongue on her chin from my rude-ass dog. I opened my mouth to answer, but my brain was buffering. “Kiszka like the last name of some of the guys in the band Greta Van Fleet, right?”

“I’m impressed you knew that.” I cleared my throat. “I heard it and thought it sounded cool. I love their stuff. That Jake guy is a beast on the guitar.”

A smile lit up her beautiful face. “His riffs on ‘Safari Song’ are my favorite. They tickle my brain just right. I’m a Danny girl myself. I dig the whole quiet guy thing.” She stood up while Kiszka ruffed his input. She made a face that made him spin in excitement as I stood distracted by how fucking attractive this was.

Gesturing down at Kizzy, she asked, “He’s a husky, right?”

“The shelter said he was probably part malamute too, mostly a big floofy baby, huh boy?” I stared at my gray and

white dog, watching his chocolate brown eyes turn her into mush.

“What a gorgeous boy!” she said, making him do tippy taps with his feet, snuffing in his husky-like way of talking to her. “You are!” she said in agreement, then beamed at me. “If you ever need a dogsitter, I’m your girl.” She gave his head a final pat before heading up to her loft.

“Sounds good!” I yelled at her retreating figure. She was leaving too soon, and I was ogling like an idiot again. I looked back down at Kiszka only to see him twitch his ears. “You bastard!” I whispered-yelled, making him open his dopey mouth like he was innocent. I took him for a quick walk before leaving him to guard the store as I headed down the street to Tilly’s Tavern.

The pub quiz was one of the few things I enjoyed around town involving people. The tavern was one of the oldest establishments in Pine Bluff. Once inside, my eyes adjusted to the cavernous interior of dark woods, brick walls, and thick beams overhead. Booths and tables lined the outside perimeter. Taxidermy animals hung on the walls, and a fireplace in the corner created a lodge-like feel.

I made my way around the U-shaped bar to my usual spot. Barrett and I liked to huddle in the corner by the kitchen, watching everyone like guard dogs. Besides my brother, he was the only man in town as big as me, hence the nickname Bear. He had a couple of inches on me, towering at six-foot six with a burly build. Above his medium-length beard, acne scars marked his tawny tan cheeks. His brown hair was in his usual man bun. If I had to guess, he pulled it off, but I still made fun of him and called him Khal Drogo occasionally. We were both 33 years old and had been lifelong friends since our dads fished together. We were never encouraged to leave Pine Bluff like some other guys. We agreed that being the oldest son was a burden in that way.

Bear looked meaner than shit until he smiled. The second that happened, you could tell he was a gentle giant. Little did the townspeople know we cried like bitches together over the movie *The Notebook*. We also got drunk and had a *Twilight*

marathon at least once a year. Watching him cry when Edward left Bella in the forest in *New Moon* was hilarious. Then he'd make fun of me for crying when that creepy baby was born, and Edward gave lifeless Bella CPR.

Mostly, we just fished.

"Hey man," he half-hugged me, slapping my back with a massive paw.

"Hey, Bear," I said, looking around as I sat on the stool.

"Good turnout tonight," he mumbled, his sausage fingers gripping the handle of a beer stein.

"Yeah," I said flatly, still thinking of Rosie's quick exit. "You know my brother's girlfriend, Kaylee?"

"Yeah, I towed her car when she crashed."

"That's right. So she moved to town a couple of months ago, and now she's opening a coffee shop—"

"Coffee and crystals," he corrected. I turned to look at him in disbelief. "What? You know I love geology. I hope she gets geodes I can crack open." He slurped the foam off the top of his beer.

"Okay, you fucking caveman. She talked a friend into moving up here to run the coffee side of the business. My sister moved in with Meg and offered the loft above my store because housing is so shitty around here."

"And the new girl is hot?"

"Yeah."

His mouth pulled in consideration. "Kaylee is hot, so it makes sense that her friend is, too. That's kind of the rule of things." His simple way of putting things was both comforting and infuriating at times. "And now you have a hot chick living above you."

"Right, and she knew about Greta. Kizzy adores her. And she's good at arguing with me, which I find so fucking attractive." I rubbed my short beard while Bear chortled at my misery.

“What’s the big deal? Ask her out on a date. Then you won’t be tormented that she’s above your store. Probably touching herself directly above your office.” I jabbed him in the rib with my elbow, fighting a smile. I had already thought of that and liked that visual a little too much. “What’s her name?” he asked, leaning closer to hear my response.

“Ro...sie...” I said, staring at the door while she walked in with Kaylee giggling. It was the kind of magical girl laughter that filled the air and made your heart thump faster because it sounded like audible dopamine. Bear followed my gaze, letting out a rumbling chuckle only to slap my back so hard I shifted in my seat.

My brother Harley was holding the door open for them. He walked behind Kaylee protectively while they made their way to a booth. Seeing them together was almost too much to look at if you were single. It was too bright, too wholesome, like the sunrise when you’re hungover. Without a doubt, Kaylee was Harley’s person.

He felt my gaze and gave me a nod of recognition that I returned. Moments later, Dane slithered into the booth next to Rosie. My nostrils flared, watching him. Bear had to nudge me to order a beer because I wasn’t paying attention.

“I don’t think you have time to wait. It looks like Dane is already on the prowl,” Bear said.

I clenched my teeth, “Don’t fucking say that.”

Rosie must’ve felt my eyes on her because she jerked her head in my direction before busying herself with the menu. Out of my peripheral, I caught her staring at me again moments later.

Bear grunted. “He has her trapped in the booth. What an idiot. Look at him.” We both peered over, trying not to be noticeable. I could’ve sworn he put his arm around her, but it was getting harder to see as more people sat down.

The pub quiz was essentially a trivia night for adults in the least geeky way possible. At best, it was drunk Jeopardy. The locals were competitive and rowdy, which was half the fun.

The prizes varied, usually booze, cash, or gift cards. The only cover charge was a simple drink order.

The theme tonight was *Seinfeld*. I'd never seen an entire episode. I'd rather gouge my eyes than watch Jerry Seinfeld be an insufferable prick, so I was fucked. Our team consisted of guys I'd consider friends but not close friends like Bear. We were getting our asses handed to us, but so was Harley's team, which made me happy.

When the night ended, and we both lost, I watched Harley and Dane stand up to free the women from where they sat inside the booth. Kaylee and Rosie were adorable together. They both had long, pretty hair in different shades, but when they walked, they weaved arms and looked like a strutting show of femininity. Every man's gaze in the bar was on them.

I sensed Harley and looked his way. He stared at me, assuming I was watching his woman. I shook my head, nodding towards Dane, indicating he needed to keep him away from Rosie. Harley shrugged in indifference, raising his eyebrows. The entire exchange took two seconds and went unnoticed by everyone else. I guess that's the problem with brothers—they see you when you don't want them to.

When Kaylee and Rosie returned, they stood by their booth while everyone finished their drinks. I couldn't ignore the pulse between us anymore. "Bear, I'm going to—"

"See ya," he said, knowing my next move before I made it.

Getting up and flopping money on the counter, I stared at Rosie until she made eye contact with me from where she stood. Jutting my jaw towards the door, she did the tiniest nod and turned her charm back on Dane to free herself.

As I walked past their table, she swung her purse across her chest with Dane's hungry eyes on her body. It made me want to snap his neck. I stood by the door, holding it open while she exited alone. Before letting the door shut to follow Rosie, I glared past the backside of Harley at Dane's stupid face.

I'll walk her home. Nice try, douche.

Chapter Five



The distinct warm tingle of Carson's gaze distracted me most of the night. It had me blushing. I'm sure Dane thought it was his antics, but that wasn't true. I've met guys like him. It was clear he just wanted in my pants. He had the same depth as a koi pond in a Chinese restaurant.

"Thanks," I smiled, looking up at Carson while he held the door open for me.

"Figured we were going in the same direction." Walking together, he maneuvered to my right to be closer to the street. The twinkly lights in the trees glinted in his eyes as his broad frame strolled alongside me. This close, his cologne filled my nose with each breath, all spicy and rich, deep and subtle. With each step, our arms brushed against one another.

I hiked my thumb over my shoulder, asking, "Do you usually go to this pub quiz thing on Mondays?"

He glanced down at me, "Yeah, I'm kind of competitive." His tone made it sound like that statement had a double meaning. "How was your second night in Pine Bluff?"

"Much better than my first. We should give the raccoon a nickname. I mean, we have this inside joke. We might as well elaborate on it."

"Inside joke?"

"Carson, you didn't tell anyone, did you?" I liked saying his name.

“What if I did?” he teased dryly.

“If you did, I would have to kidnap, dognap, Kiszka. He likes me more than you.”

That made him smile. “He’s an attention whore, that’s for sure. But no, I didn’t tell anyone. We can keep things between us.” Once again, his words had a double meaning. “Rambo,” he whispered, leaning in before straightening once more.

“Rambo the raccoon. I like it.”

He nodded, putting his hands in his front pockets. “I don’t want to tell you what to do, but Dane is...”

“Is what?” I asked.

“Not up to your caliber.”

“Oh, and you get to decide that for me?”

His eyebrows pulled together as he replied, “No, but consider it some shared insight.”

“Insight I didn’t ask for. You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

“I would never dream of it. Plus, I get the slight suspicion you don’t let anyone do that anyway.”

“I don’t!” I scoffed.

“That’s what I like about you. Look, I can see how you might feel pressured to date him. But I don’t think you realize all the shit he will say about hooking up with you. He’ll tell everyone and brag about it. People will think you’re flighty like all the tourists who warm his bed.”

I snorted. “Oh, so you’re swooping in as Mr. Knight and Shining Armor saving me from the big bad manwhore?”

“This is beyond purity culture bullshit. This is about guarding your privacy. You moved here for a new chapter, and dating Dane is the fastest way to ruin it.”

I walked past him, unlocking the back door to the hardware store.

“Rosie, as a newcomer, the first couple days in Pine Bluff will make or break your reputation. I hate to say it, but it’s true. You’re not in Boston anymore.”

“Yeah, no shit!” I flung the door open, causing Kiszka to howl.

I grimaced, fleeing to my loft. I didn’t like that he offered unsolicited advice and doubted my judgment. I might be new, but I’m not stupid.

I got ready for bed and texted my mom to see if she was still up. We were super close. Her conservative Irish Catholic family disowned her when she had me at 16. My dad was a rich boy she met at Catholic high school who lied about hooking up with her. After the Tyler thing, I realized he was like my dad—fickle, selfish, and an outright snob.

While pregnant with me, she fled to Vermont, where this friendly Wiccan high priestess let her stay on her farm. She gave birth to me in a tub with a midwife after two days of active labor. She never let me forget that part. She had dreams of roses the entire time she was pregnant, hence my namesake. I loved that a wild, witchy woman raised me. Times like this, I realized how lucky I was.

“Hey, sweetie!” She propped her phone against the screen of her enclosed porch filled with plants.

“Hey, Mom.”

I looked like her with my pear-shaped body and auburn hair. She kept it long and layered, like me. Tonight, she had it up in an unruly bun and a tattered Queensrÿche band T-shirt underneath a slouchy charcoal cardigan. She was in her ‘comfies,’ as she would say.

“I saw the text about the door. I’m glad it’s fixed. So the guy who barged in is Carson, like we thought?”

“Yep, he is...hmm.” I looked up to the ceiling, trying to find words.

“Handsome?” she offered with a grin. Damn, she was too good at reading me.

“Yeah, all brawny and broody. His voice is so low. I catch myself holding my breath so I can hear him better. He has this outdoorsy lumberjack vibe about him. And a cute dog.” I sighed, suddenly disgusted. My life would be so much simpler if men weren’t a factor.

My mom went on cheerily, “How fun! That’s a nice change. You’ve always dated tatted-up punks or suit types.”

I wrinkled my nose, thinking of my exes and what had just happened with Carson. “I just feel like the idiot new girl here.”

“You’ll find your groove, don’t worry. And if you don’t like this whole coffee shop owner thing, you can always go back to what you were doing before becoming a barista—”

“Not an option, Mom,” I interrupted, shifting my shoulders. “I sank my savings into Silver Springs. I want to hide out and heal. This has to work for me. You know I can’t...I can’t do that...”

“Oh, you know what you need to do!” She wrapped her cardigan around her body, excited by her idea. “You need to befriend an old lady. Old ladies love to gossip, and they always know the best shit, like who lets their cat sit on their kitchen counter so you avoid their cookies at a bake sale. Pull up to a Gladys and let that granny go! Take notes.”

I chuckled, amused at her quick suggestion. “You know, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Would I give you a bad idea?” she teased.

“So eavesdrop, but ethically, with an elder?”

“Consider it research to help you turn over a new leaf.”

The next afternoon, Kaylee and I were working together when her phone dinged with a text. Staring at it, she asked, “Will you come with me tonight? The Kouris family has these dinners now that I’ve un-hermited Harley from the forest.”

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude on a family thing.”

She looked up from her phone. “It’s an open invite. They want to welcome you to Pine Bluff.” Kaylee told the Kouris

crew about the affair when she moved here out of nowhere, but I didn't love how they knew my business. Gauging my apprehension, she continued, "I promise it won't be weird. And Dane is coming because he's an orphan, so you don't have to worry about being a lone wolf."

The idea of a good meal after working all day was tempting. However, the promise of seeing Carson filled me with a weird mix of curiosity and dread. Kaylee looked at me expectantly. "In that case, I'd love to come."

She clapped her hands with a little squeal. "Perfect! I will drive!"

Later that night, I white-knuckled the oh-shit handle in her Jeep as I bounced around in my seat. A well-trained Border Collie could drive better than Kaylee. She did everything but *drive* while driving. She put on lip gloss, changed the song three times, hit a curb, twisted in her seat searching for a crystal, then pulled a knife out of her bra like a fucking pirate, throwing the blade blindly in the back seat before rubbing her boob. It was terrifying.

Pulling up to a gorgeous cabin nestled in a loop of other homes, I couldn't help but smile. It was a home, not a house. It had that welcoming energy about it. The porch had rocking chairs and hanging floral baskets. Solar lights lit the walkway, and mature trees surrounded the property.

After knocking, she turned to look at me. "Oh, by the way, Harley's mom is a sex therapist, so get ready to see lots of dick art."

"What?" I squeaked right when the front door opened. A tall man with salt and pepper hair and a nice beard hugged Kaylee. Crow's feet crinkled around his eyes as he smiled at me over her shoulder.

"Rosie, this is Markos," Kaylee broke the hug, gesturing towards me.

He shook my hand while ushering us inside. "Nice to meet you, Rosie."

I could see where the sons got their brawn and bone structure. Markos had to be in his early 60s and was still handsome.

“Is that Rosie?” A woman yelled, making her way to us.

Markos moved to let her by. Her shaggy bangs rested on top of funky oversized glasses, with gray hair framing her face mixed in with wild rusty curls. Pinkish round cheeks and smile lines proved her lifelong warmth. She wore flowy purple pants and a white gauzy shirt with bell sleeves. Stacks of bangles clicked and clacked when she moved her arms.

“And this is Maxine,” Kaylee said while the woman gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Oh, my heavens! You’re just as gorgeous as Kaylee! What are they putting in the water in Boston?” She looked me up and down before pulling me into a jasmine-scented embrace. It was one of those hugs only a mama can give that feels like soft safety, if only for a second.

“You’re so sweet! Thank you for having me,” I said, handing her the fancy loaf of bread we snagged before coming.

The smell of yummy food mixed with something woodsy filled the air. Shelves of books lined the walls, along with plants in every corner and on windowsills. The furniture was nice but unpretentious, with cozy quilts folded on armrests. A hound dog pooled on a recliner, his ears waterfaling over the edge. His name was Mr. Mustard.

Kaylee wasn’t kidding when she said there would be lots of sensual art. Right by the front door was a watercolor iris flower that looked suspiciously like lady parts. A phallic sculpture served as an umbrella holder. On the kitchen island was a tan butt vase with flowers, one of Kaylee’s creations, I’m sure. And I swore I saw a vulva pillow nestled in a reading chair.

I wanted to spend hours looking at all the art, but I was whisked to the dining room instead. Dane was laughing with Frankie, and Carson was setting the table. He didn’t even look

up or greet us, but Kiszka ran up to me with a howl, telling me about his day. As I pet him, I caught Markos staring at me and Carson with a look on his face I couldn't decipher.

Maxine counted the place settings. "We're waiting on Harley and Meg, right?"

"Who's Meg?" I whispered to Kaylee.

"Frankie's girlfriend. She works with Harley as a ranger. They're coming straight from the station."

Once Harley arrived, he stood next to Carson, finally coaxing a few words out of him. Together, they were striking. Both were handsome, with dark beards connected to their hairline. Hazel eyes pierced below dark eyebrows, Carson's greener, Harley's more golden. Harley's cheekbones cut higher, almost hawkish, while Carson's fuller lips were more sensual to me. Harley always held his mouth on the verge of smirking, whereas Carson's was a borderline scowl.

Inch by inch, pound by pound, they were stacked with similar height and build, broad and solid, with long limbs and a confident swagger. Yet Carson wasn't quite as relaxed as Harley. An edge of alertness frayed his aura.

Witnessing them together intimidated me. They were quiet but somehow powerful. The way they walked and stood by each other, you could tell, even without knowing they were brothers, they'd spent a lifetime alongside each other.

We all sat down to eat. Carson muttered something to Kiszka, which prompted him to huff, prancing away to join Mr. Mustard in the other room.

I noticed two unique things I liked about the Kouris bunch. The men helped out as much as the women. And they valued a communal vibe. They even had a giant, round dining table instead of the typical rectangular shape, so no one sat at the end in an unnecessary power dynamic. It made talking to everyone easier because you weren't shouting down a row of people.

I sat between Kaylee on my left and Dane on my right. Carson took a seat across from me, damn near mute. He had

impeccable table manners. It was fascinating watching his huge hands politely maneuver his utensils. The conversations broke off into different pairings, and Dane put his arm around the back of my chair as he leaned in to talk. Carson's gaze burned into my skin. I glanced, catching him sawing into his steak with a murderous stare aimed at Dane.

"Rosie! Will you be coming to my class next week?" Maxine asked, startling me.

"I'm sorry, what class?" I looked between her and Kaylee in confusion.

"It's called Tantra Tuesday. We talk about connecting to sexual energy and the healing power of orgasm." Maxine smiled and chomped a piece of steak off her fork.

"Sounds interesting," I said, trying to hide my panic.

"We could carpool," Dane teased like a smartass.

Harley cleared his throat, "Mama, don't traumatize the newbie."

"What do I always say, kids?" she asked, looking around the table.

In unison, they all flatly said, "Everyone fucks."

I almost spat out my drink, unable to hide my laughter. They all joined me. It was nice to be around this many people. Tyler's family was a stuffy, unwelcoming bunch. Plus, he asked me to cover up my tattoos so I didn't offend his fossil of a grandpa. Fuck that shit.

I never had a big family. It was just me and my mom. She was a nail technician, so I grew up in salons surrounded by women. It made me extra skittish about men well into adulthood. Women felt safe, men not so much. The combination of both in a family setting was a refreshing middle ground, something I didn't know I was missing out on.

After dinner, Carson went to do the dishes without a single word. I got a tour of Maxine's office, filled with even more questionable art. A boob puppet and a tattered book titled *Our Bodies, Ourselves* were on the desk. I tried to keep quiet, not

wanting my crush's mom to ask me about my womb or Kegels. By the sounds of it, Maxine had a women's circle down at the community center, and Kaylee was teaching a yoga class for the attendees.

In the hallway, the brothers argued in a language that wasn't English. If I had to take a wild stab in the dark, it sounded Persian or Greek. Their deep voices were sexy as the words streamed out. The argument was playful, eventually erupting into boyish laughter. It made their faces soften, Carson's scowl vanishing for only a moment. I fought my urge to gawk before someone caught me.

He was the first to leave, but he wrapped his tiny mom in a quick hug, nodding at his dad in the process before opening the door. Nobody else got a goodbye or a single glance. I couldn't make sense of it. What was his problem? As an observer, it was bizarre and left me with more questions than answers.

Thankfully, the rest of the night, no one discussed what brought me to Pine Bluff. Kaylee and I agreed that we would never be ashamed of the affair.

We were the ones hurt and screwed over.

We were the ones taking our power back.

And...everyone fucks.

Chapter Six



I slept with wet hair, so my mane was an angry tangle of curls. I put it in a wild bun with pieces hanging down to frame my face. Then, I spackled on makeup to feel more human, adding highlights and shimmery powders to look dewier. A small voice told me I was preening for Carson. I wished that little voice would shut up.

I pulled on jeans with a faded black Garth Brooks T-shirt I wore half ironically, half seriously, along with a slouchy taupe brown cardigan. I had sewn a giant, black patch on the back that said Bog Witch in a scratchy white font surrounded by skulls with flowers and mushrooms growing out of the eyes.

Kaylee was running errands and asked me to let Carson in this morning. Waiting for him, I finished shelving all the beautiful pottery she made for the shop. Most were mugs in the shape of boobs, butts, and cauldrons. The boob ones were my favorite because she made them all shapes and sizes, some with endearingly lopsided nipples. Staring at a mug, I jumped when I saw him by the door.

“Morning,” I said jadedly, letting him in.

“Morning.” He wore a black Carhartt hoodie, boots, and jeans. All three had light paint splatters. Between that and the perfectly groomed beard, I wanted to climb the fine fucker like a tree. He stood there with an expectant raise of his eyebrows. “So, are we going to be weird now?”

“Weird? You’re the one that made it weird.”

“I was looking out for you. Maybe you’re not used to that.”

“Nope, I’m not.” I walked towards the counter, unwilling to give him more information. “You were quiet at dinner last night.”

He shrugged in response.

“What language was that when you were talking to Harley? It sounded Persian or—”

“Greek. We’re half Greek. My dad’s side.”

“Kouris?” I asked.

“It means forest dweller. His parents immigrated from Greece in the 50s.”

“Your grandpa started a lumber and hardware company with a surname like that?”

His mouth pulled in a crooked smile. “Listen, babe. I never said it wasn’t ironic.”

“Babe?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Rosie.” I didn’t know if he was correcting himself or testing me. I also didn’t know why I liked it so much.

“What were you saying in Greek that you couldn’t say in English?”

“Can’t say. That’s why it was in Greek.” I stared at him, trying to make him cave. “Fine, we were discussing a pottery barn we’re building for Kaylee. But it’s a surprise, so don’t say anything.”

That warmed my heart. They were so cute to her. I picked up a cup and asked, “What are you drinking today?”

“Why should I trust you not to poison it?” He pried off the lids of the paint cans, shooting me a wary look.

“Why would I poison you?”

“For starters, the back of your sweater says Bog Witch. It’s like Mr. Rogers and Elvira had a baby. Not super encouraging.”

Okay, now that was snarky. I liked it. “Good, consider it a warning.”

“People are saying you guys are witches over here.”

“That’s because we are.”

“What does that mean to you exactly? I have my assumptions, but I doubt they’re right.”

I couldn’t help noticing how thoughtful his phrasing was as I formulated my answer. “Kaylee and I both identify as Pagans and witches. Pagans have reverence for the earth and nature. We celebrate the seasons along with the moon and her cycles. And as witches, we can heal,” I paused, waiting for him to look at me, “and harm.”

He stared at me, unfazed, while jutting up his chin to say, “Go on.”

That made my blood jolt.

“We use herbs, crystals, rituals, and meditations to tap into energy. We revere the old gods and goddesses, our ancestors, and the spirits of the land around us. It’s about living within the flow around you, observing nature and how you’re a part of it.”

His eyes crinkled in understanding. “Earthy spiritual stuff. No devil or children in cauldrons; all of that was bad press.”

“Exactly. But we’re completely tolerant of other religions. There’s a bit of truth in each one. We happen to find our truth in nature.”

“I can understand that. I’m not religious but feel more at peace in nature than anywhere else.” He scrubbed a hand over his chin in consideration. “That all sounds pretty reasonable.”

I pushed a mug across the counter. “You’ll find I’m very reasonable if given the chance.”

He gestured to the mug. “Not a Dirty Reno?”

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, thinking of how fun it had been to flirt with him. “Ah, so you saw my label?”

“I sure did. What is this today?”

I scooted the mug even closer. “Try it before I tell you.”

He clutched the white squatty mug, bringing it to his kissable lips in a testing sip. His eyes flashed with concern as he committed to another swig, fighting a gag as he swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but that tastes like sour bongwater and regret.” I giggled while clutching the counter, secretly loving his deep voice calling me *sweetheart*. He sniffed it curiously. “Sweet lord, what did you put in this?” His handsome face pulled in disgust, making me laugh even more.

“Now I know you’re an honest man!” I slid his actual drink across the counter. “Try this.”

“You were testing me?”

“Of course! This is called a Flat White. Espresso, steamed milk, and a foam layer on the top.”

He grumbled and sipped the new drink, nodding that it was good. “I like it a lot. Why do I get the feeling you’re about to set me up with a crippling caffeine addiction?”

I leaned forward, bracing myself against the counter with a warm smile. “Oh, because I am.” Remembering I was supposed to be mad at him, I stood straighter while sipping my drink with his gaze on me. The space between us was suddenly too silent.

His face softened along with his posture. “I like talking to you,” he sighed, almost like he didn’t want to admit it out loud. I wondered why.

“I like talking to you, too.” Running with the feeling of us both softening, I shared what was on my mind. “Your artwork is amazing, by the way. I didn’t get a chance to tell you yet.” I nodded toward the mural, making him shrug. He was too humble.

“Anything for Kaylee. Right?”

“Right. Do you want music?”

“Sure, you pick. Anything but good old Garth.” He pointedly looked at my shirt, making me chuckle.

“You probably don’t want me sitting here watching you. I can go to the office if you—”

“Stay.” His Adam’s apple slid up and down his throat as he swallowed. It distracted me for a moment, and he noticed. I shook my head, ripping my eyes from him while I hit shuffle, hoping Garth would play.

Carson set to work adding some stars to the night sky. His strong legs and nice ass were on full display in his Carhartt pants as he climbed the ladder. I have a theory that if a guy has a good butt, he has some muscle to thrust with, so he’s probably good in the sheets. Carson was a promising contender.

I opened a box of inventory and was glad there weren’t any cheap-ass neon pink geode slabs or crackle quartz. Nothing is more insulting than people botching the beauty of what mama earth grows herself. We agreed to never sell dyed or heat-treated crystals or anything from a closed Indigenous practice like certain types of sage. It was a no-brainer.

I cut open a bag, pouring stones into a wooden bowl. The clatter caused Carson to look over his shoulder, “What kind are those?”

“Bloodstone. You can tell by the speckles of red on the green stone. That’s how it got its namesake. It brings you courage and endurance. Very popular with the ancient Romans.”

Next, I unraveled tiny chunks of brown clustered crystals, ensuring their edges didn’t break.

“That looks like popcorn chicken,” Carson said.

I snorted in amusement because he wasn’t wrong. “This is aragonite. People say it’s a very grounding stone that can help your confidence. I find it keeps nightmares away. I always have a piece of it by my bed.”

“Tell me more. This is fascinating,” he said, squinting at a line as he dragged his brush.

Unpacking palm stones that were mossy green with black swirls, I walked closer to his ladder to show him a piece the

size of a dinner roll. “This is kambamba jasper, sometimes called crocodile jasper. It’s a three-billion-year-old algae formed into a sedimentary fossil. It’s only found in Madagascar. Neat, huh?”

Stopping to touch it, he asked, “I can’t believe stuff like that is lying around. What do witches use it for?”

“It’s good for peace and tranquility. It helps you see the big picture.”

“With how old it is, that makes sense,” he mused, returning to his constellations. I liked how quick and insightful he was. It was infectious.

The next day, he came over on his lunch break to paint, saying no more than a few words to answer Kaylee’s questions. The second she left with Harley, he launched into conversation. Carson was like a frozen lake, calm on the surface, but underneath, he was teeming with complexity. I found his guarded ways enthralling like I had special access to him. But I also wondered why he’d wall up the way he did, even with his family.

Towards the end of the week, Kaylee took a couple of days off to go on one last adventure with Harley before we opened. I didn’t mind. She had been holding down the fort for months before I got here. But with no interruptions, Carson and I got bolder.

When I’d show him a crystal, he’d stand so close to me that his body heat radiated. I caught myself holding his shoulder as I leaned in to see a painting technique, the dense muscle burning into my palm. All the little touches felt possessive and testing, weaving us closer. I loved watching him eat the muffins, scones, and cookies I made under the guise of testing out recipes. And how we’d stare at each other, only to realize we were both forgetting to talk.

One afternoon, he asked me about the tattoos on my fingers, which were runes and other mystical symbols. I wondered how much ink he saw when he rescued me from Rambo. I wanted him to find out how much tattoo coverage I had, maybe with not only his eyes...but his lips and tongue,

too. The hope put raunchy visions in my mind of his mouth gliding all over me, from head to toe.

“Crescent moons?” he gestured to my pointer fingers, snatching me from my nasty daydream.

“Yep!” I extended my hands between where we stood for him to see, my glossy almond-shaped black nails tipping each finger. I had a symbol on every finger in the space between my nails to where my finger bent at my main knuckle. Each symbol was delicate yet crisp with black ink.

“How cool.” He stepped closer, placing his hand underneath mine to hold it up for inspection. An immediate buzz traveled up my arm. His hand was so big compared to mine. His skin was a beautiful shade of tan, making mine ghostly. We both stared at my left ring finger, lacking a ring. His thumb brushed the symbol sweetly before his light eyes flashed to mine. “And this rune?”

I gulped, hoping he didn’t notice. “That one stands for harmony, undying love.”

“Beautiful.” His gaze deepened to something more intense as he brought my hand to his lips to kiss the ink. Before I could reply or fully swoon at the chivalrous move, his eyes flicked above my head out the front windows. He coolly stepped back and picked up a brush on the table.

The door opened behind me, with Kaylee staring at the mural in awe. “Bro! It looks so damn good! Hey girl!” She side-hugged me, still distracted. “Wait, is that glitter on the wings of the faeries?” she all but squeaked.

“Yeah,” Carson said, looking at his work.

“I love it! Can you put more faeries on this side?”

“Sure.”

Kaylee looked at the corner piled with empty cardboard boxes. “Thanks for getting so much unpacked while I was gone! And I love the music you’re playing!”

I pointed to the display window I had set up. “We wanted to put the amethyst points in the windows, but I’m nervous the

sun will bleach out the color. So I put up salt lamps and some hanging star lanterns. I figured they'd be eye-catching, especially at night." I didn't want to be bossy, but I had ideas.

"I like the way you think! Let's get an iced coffee in me so I can help," Kaylee said, walking with me to the bar.

Carson left shortly after, and we spent the rest of the day setting up the other displays. The next day, we held interviews. It was fun to see how each person rolled with our unhinged interview process like Kaylee giving them a tarot reading after I read their palm. And fielding questions like their basic astrology details, what crystal they wore most, and their favorite drag queen.

By early evening, Carson came over to the crystal side of the shop to warn us that the café tables had wet paint. As he left, Kaylee studied him crossing the street. "He really doesn't say much, does he?" she asked with a squint.

Except when he's talking to me, some pleased part of my brain chimed. Before I could play it cool, the truth fell out of my mouth. "I think he's kinda cute, to be honest."

Kaylee's head whipped to look at me, her eyes wide. "Shut up!" Her face broke into a grin as she blinked slowly in consideration. "I mean, of course, he's all tall, dark, and handsome. And he has those gorgeous Jackson Avery eyes." She squinted back at Kouris Hardware.

"Huh?"

Her eyes swung back to mine. "He's this hot doctor on *Grey's Anatomy*. We're putting that show on the list for our binge sessions."

I smiled, "Deal."

"I mean, I might be biased, but I think all Kouris men are handsome. And I know he was raised right. Wait! Did I ever tell you about the brother's love triangle?"

"No! What do you mean?"

"It was this girl named Whitney. She was working as a ranger here three summers ago. She fell while rock climbing

and died. Harley found her.”

We both winced at her statement. “I had no clue. That’s so sad!”

“Yeah, super heartbreaking. I guess she was dating both brothers the whole summer. But they didn’t find out because they weren’t talking much.”

“So they didn’t find out until she passed away?”

“Exactly. It was super messy and traumatized the shit out of them. That’s why Harley was a hot hermit when I met him. He avoided town because of the rumors. That’s why Carson is so quiet. He’s avoiding talking to people because they might ask about it. It was scandalous, like the peak gossip of the decade. I guess they brawled it out at Tilly’s. It took half the guys in this town to pull them apart.”

The mental image of Carson punching Harley in the face made my nipples harden. I took a deep breath, wondering what the fuck was wrong with me.

She gnawed at her bottom lip. “But I don’t know, Ro. I swear I had a vision of you and Dane before you moved here. And Carson is so serious. He’s known for being a grumpy ass around town. You’ve heard the way he answers my questions. The man is damn near mono-syllabic. You need some fun after what happened with Tyler.”

I forced a smile, hoping it was convincing. “Oh, I just said he was cute to be nice. I’m not dating anyone. I came here for healing. And for some fun, like you said. Which reminds me, tell me about that Renaissance festival you found.”

She threw her hands up with a girlish squeal. “Girl! Get ready to get your tits corseted up to your chin because we are going!”

Chapter Seven



I was living on a torturous rotation of working my ass off at my store and skipping out for a couple of hours to paint the mural at Silver Springs while trying my best not to bend Rosie over the counter. She was fucking intoxicating. She had a beautiful mind and a smart mouth. I fucking loved it. She was sweet one moment, feisty the next. The constant seesawing of flirtation was creating a buildup I couldn't ignore. All I wanted was more time with her. I replayed all the stolen moments in my brain when I wasn't by her side and wondered how long they'd be enough.

I was still trying to smooth things over from pissing her off about the whole Dane thing. I needed to show her I had her back. I wanted her to find her footing before I asked her out. She was new in town and busy opening a business. I could only imagine how stressful that would be.

Once Kaylee left, I turned around to chat her up. Today, she wore black flowy pants and a tight white shirt with a scooped neckline, so her perfect tits jiggled with every movement. She didn't have any tattoos on her chest or neck, but vines peeked out by her shoulders with her hair half up, showing off her neck and all those intricate earrings.

A serene smile flooded her face as she sorted through a small box of trinkets, picking up a pendant and stringing it on a long, silver chain. "When's your birthday?" she asked.

"January 16th."

Her lips twitched. “Ah, so you’re a Capricorn. That makes sense.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“October 8th. I’m a Libra.”

“That makes sense.”

She finally looked up. “Really?”

“No, I know jack shit about that sort of stuff.”

“How capricious of you.” She tittered at her joke, walking closer to me. “I think this crystal is yours. It wants to go home with you.”

She explained the other day that crystals find their people, almost like cats. At Silver Springs, they were playing middleman. I had to fight from nuzzling my face in her cleavage as I leaned down to let her loop it over my neck. The chill of the metal chain and the heat of her hands trailing my chest longer than necessary while I straightened put me in a haze.

“What kind is it?” I asked, plucking the pendant up to look at it. It was a small crystal point encased in what looked like a mini shotgun shell that formed a pendant. It was small, no bigger than a large vitamin.

“Clear quartz with black tourmaline inclusions, also known as tourmalinated quartz.”

“It’s regular quartz, but the little black lines are the tourmaline?” I asked, squinting at the needle-like inclusions within the stone.

“Yep! It just so happens to be one of the crystals best suited for Capricorns. It’s very protective. And yours,” she beamed up at me.

I tucked it under my shirt, the warmth radiating from where it hung between my pecs. I’m unsure if the magical rock or Rosie’s open affection made it blaze against my skin, but I liked it nonetheless. “Thank you. I’ll keep it close.”

Her lips parted while she stared at my hand over my chest, her gaze then lifting to mine, simmering with things left unsaid. “Close is good,” she whispered while we shared a smile.

A few nights into this torturous rotation, I was in Harley’s woodshop for our weekly brother hangout. Something about woodshops always cheered me up. The smell does it for me. So many memories and accomplishments start with sawdust. Tonight, I was helping him finish some decorative trim for the window frames in the pottery barn.

He offered me a beer and looked me up and down. “One of the Silver Springs girls already has a crush on you.”

“Who?”

His face broke into a shit-eating grin. “Dani. She started training and told Kaylee how *cute* you are painting the mural.”

“Who the fuck is Dani?” I spat.

“She worked at the diner. You know, the short one with dark hair, really girly, looks like a Kardashian.”

“I don’t want a fucking Kardashian.”

“I guess she has a mad crush. She told Kaylee she’s been trying to get your attention. But you haven’t noticed.”

I snorted in disgust. “I don’t want her attention. You know how hard dating in a small town is.”

“She doesn’t seem to care about your reputation.”

“Are you trying to play matchmaker?” I asked. He tipped his bottle to drink instead of answering. “Har, I don’t need your help getting a girl.”

Putting his beer down, he tried to remain casual. “It wouldn’t hurt to go on a date. I mean, if Kaylee hired her, she’s probably cool.”

“You don’t get to nag me. Your ass only got a girl because she bunked with you during a blizzard with no other choice.”

He smiled at the memory. “You’re not wrong.”

I picked up a rubber mallet to do something with my hands. Deciding to use Dani as a shield, I presented my real worries regarding Rosie. “Besides, what if it doesn’t work out? She’d still be in our friend group. She’d still have to work with Kaylee.”

“So what? That’s Pine Bluff. Plus, Dani already knows about the Whitney shitshow. You wouldn’t have to unpack that with her like I did with Kaylee. That’s a huge advantage.”

“Don’t talk about Whit like that. It was only a shitshow because you made it that way.”

He let out a tortured groan. “Are we doing this again?”

We both stepped back from each other to stand up straighter. “Yeah, I guess we fucking are. You brought it up,” I said.

“It was a nightmare, and you know it. No matter how much we unpack the timeline, we will never get answers, but you should have known I was dating her.”

“Why would I be obligated to know you were dating her if you never told me?” I asked, twirling the mallet.

“She was a ranger. Why the fuck wouldn’t I know her?”

“Yeah, but she was friends with Bear’s ex. Why the fuck wouldn’t I know her? Even if it was three years ago, I know the timeline like the back of my hand. I was dating her before you got back from college in June. I started dating her that March. I loved her before you knew who she was. You can’t fucking deny that.” I pointed at him with the mallet. “You will never be able to deny that.”

He ran his hand through his hair before flinging out both arms wide. “Whitney never mentioned you. You never mentioned her. If you’re never going to believe me, why the fuck are we hanging out? I thought we were past this!”

“I guess fucking not! You think you’re better than me because you have someone now. That doesn’t erase everything that happened. You left me with the hardware store. You fucked the woman I loved and let the whole town turn on me.

Just because Kaylee is in your life doesn't mean everything is magically better."

He slapped the table and pointed at me. "You're wrong. That's just it. Kaylee is making my life better. And I want you to have the same happiness, but it's never going to happen if all you do is hang out with Bear or work."

"Even if I did like this Dani girl, I couldn't date her publicly."

"Why?"

"I know what Dane and the other people in town call me."

"Cursed Carson?" He snorted in amusement. "That's just a joke. This town is superstitious as hell. I'm sure they called me Hermit Harley or something." His smile fell when I glowered at him, causing him to double down on his stance. "You're not cursed. What happened with Whitney was an accident."

"And Jamie?" I countered as my throat tightened.

He blinked quickly, formulating an excuse, "Those were both freak accidents. That shouldn't stop you from having someone in your life. A wife and kids, you've always wanted a family. What was the point of building your huge ass cabin with all those empty rooms if you're never going to fill it up with people who love you, dude?"

I took a long sip of my beer and put the mallet down. "I need you to drop it. I don't need my baby brother telling me what to do."

"Just do me a favor and think about it. Dani is a witch. Witches are hot."

I rolled my eyes, thinking *oh, I'm well aware of that, little brother.*

A loud ding filled the woodshop. Harley pulled out his phone and tapped on the screen. "It's an alert from my trail cam."

"Are you still tracking that buck?"

"Yeah, I hope he's still around for hunting season."

He clicked the control for the TV mounted on the wall, pulling up the view from the camera hidden in a tree. Two naked women filled the screen, looking like something you'd see on a ghost hunter show. A wild yipping filled the air, sounding almost like Xena as they danced around a bonfire, arms flailing, boobs jiggling.

I reeled back, laughing, clapping my hand on Harley's shoulder. "It's—"

"Wait, is that Kaylee and Rosie? Don't look!" He shielded my eyes, but I ran from him.

"Your girl has her tits out in the forest!" I couldn't stop cackling while he chased me.

"It's a full moon! She can't help herself!"

That made me laugh even more as I lunged for the remote, snatching it from his hand. He tried to hit me in the nuts, but I dodged it. "How do I record this?" I taunted, looking at the remote while running from my brother. He caught up to me and tackled me to the ground.

We wrestled back and forth, fighting laughter while also groaning in pain. My legs were around his waist, squeezing him like a boa constrictor as he pushed at my jaw. The trilling from the women ceased, giving me an idea. "Wait, wait! Let's scare them," I groaned and loosened my grip. He kneed me in the chest while standing to be a dick. I heaved in pain, punching his injured knee, making him wince and almost buckle over.

Take that, you little shit.

In a truce brought on by pain, he helped me up, and we leaned against his bench with the TV behind us because it felt wrong to watch. Harley tapped something in the app, bringing his phone to his mouth as he creepily whispered, "I seeeeeeee youuuuu!"

Both women squealed. "Fuck! Get your robe on!" Rosie screeched.

The rustling sound of leaves and branches followed. "Holy shitballs, what was that?" Kaylee asked.

“I have no fucking clue! I thought you said this was safe?”
Rosie shot back.

Harley looked over his shoulder, tapping me to turn around since they had robes on now. He went on, “Why do you disturb by woods wiiiiitch?”

Both women walked around, scanning the forest in panic. Rosie spotted the camera on the tree and pointed at it.

Kaylee yelped in anger. “Harley Demetrios Kouris, I am going to whoop your ass!” She stormed towards the camera mounted high on a tree. Rosie followed, handing her a broom. How fitting. “I almost pissed myself!” Kaylee spat, scowling at the camera before unceremoniously whacking it down.

We both shared a laugh as Rosie picked up the camera from the ground, holding it below her face like she was in *The Blair Witch* movie. She let out an evil chuckle before saying, “Boy, didn’t anyone warn you not to fuck with witches?”

Kaylee threw her head back in a firelit cackle behind her, and the screen went dark.

The Spark

Chapter Eight



Carson's truck was gone when we exited the forest. I fought a smile the whole drive back to town. Was I a little embarrassed? Sure, but I also loved that he saw me dancing around naked like a wild woman in the woods, full-on tits out for the goddess. I wanted him to know what he'd be getting into if he kept flirting with me like he did.

Once home, I showered and microwaved a bag of popcorn for dinner because I was too tired to cook. I flopped on my sofa and turned on an episode of *Friends* for mindless entertainment. They were in a coffee shop in half of the scenes, hitting too close to home, so I changed it. I picked the show *Lost Girl* instead because it had the three best things in life—Canadians, hot werewolves, and intense side-boob.

I fell into a dreamless sleep from exhaustion and woke up later than I would've liked. We had no training scheduled till later this afternoon, so Kaylee was running to Portland for some final errands. I offered to go, but she insisted. I think exploring fed her adventurous spirit.

I weaved my hair into a side braid that hung over my right boob and pulled on simple black leggings and an old T-shirt with a cheesy wolf howling at the moon. I got it at some truck stop on a road trip. Grabbing my purse and phone, I raced downstairs, met by an excited Kiszka.

"Hi, sweet boy!" I cooed as he ruffed at me, talking in his little way. I loved how huskies did that. "Is that so?" I

countered, kneeling to give him some love. He rested a paw on my boob, turning his head in an all-out howl. Carson walked through the swinging doors with an amused smile.

“Hey, girl.” It was too early for him to sound that sexy.

“Hey, good morning.”

Kiszka huffed at me and continued his wailing story, interrupting us. Carson ducked into his office, unbuttoning his flannel, revealing a light gray thermal. I continued petting the dog, trying not to watch Carson changing. Unlike Tyler’s gym body, which was lean and cut, I could tell his muscles came from hard labor. They were somehow bulkier, less douchey. His back muscles rippled as he lifted his arms to pull on the black Carhartt hoodie. Standing up, I brushed the dog hair off my leggings, only to notice him holding the door open for me.

I walked by, dragging my shoulder against his chest, inciting a smile. I knew he was about to tease me. Beating him to the chase, I quipped, “Did you enjoy the show last night?”

“Didn’t see much. But it looked like you were having fun. Do you usually do witchcraft naked?”

“It’s called skyclad,” I said while looking at him over my shoulder as I exited the store.

“I support you doing anything skyclad,” he said, fighting to hide his smile.

I smacked his arm playfully with a laugh. “In all seriousness, it was lovely to get out in nature. I hope that once we open, I can start exploring. The whole reason I moved here was to get outside more.”

He nodded, putting his hands in his front pockets as we walked. “That’s the only reason I deal with this nosy town.” The air was cool and dewy, morning mist clinging to the bluffs surrounding us. Aside from patrons at his store and some people at the diner down the road, the town was sleepy.

“Do you live around here?” I asked, suddenly curious.

“Nah, I have a cabin on the lake, kinda by Harley.” He stopped mid-stride on the sidewalk and pointed in the opposite

direction. “If you want nature, there are a couple of lakes past town that way. If you take the same road you took last night to get to their cabin, you’ll find good trail loops to walk, beaches, and docks. The water is still too cold, but by June, you can swim. If you can get past the tourists, that is.”

“Tourists. Right.”

“You’re not used to tourists, are you?”

“No, I’m not even used to living in a town that doesn’t have a movie theater.”

“Where did you grow up?” he asked.

“My mom was a rambling rose, so I grew up all over New England. But her family is from Allentown, Pennsylvania. They disowned her when she had me as a teenager and came out of the broom closet.”

“Broom closet? Is that a witch joke?”

“Yep,” I smiled at him before pushing the back door of Silver Springs open. “As if being a pregnant teen isn’t bad enough for a Catholic family. She stuck to her guns, though. This was decades ago when people weren’t acclimated to witchy stuff in mainstream society. She’s what you’d call a green witch, you know, really into herbs and plants.”

“She sounds like a badass. Did she raise you alone?”

“Yeah, it was just her and I. Thick as thieves. She never brought boyfriends around or married. But she carved out a good life for us. I always had what I needed and her in my corner.”

The next hour went by, much like the days prior. He wasn’t staying long, so I made him a drink in a to-go cup and typed my phone number on the label, hoping he’d see it. I put on his favorite playlist and tackled inventory while he painted clear gloss on the tables and added final touches to the mural. There wasn’t a minute of awkward silence. It was like I put a quarter in Carson, and he couldn’t stop talking. I could’ve sworn the man had his jaw wired shut for years and could finally speak. It put a thrill in me.

He was quiet until he wasn't.

I was honored to be this listening ear for him. On top of all that, he made me laugh. My cheeks were already hurting.

Walking past him, I saw what he was painting with a lurch of recognition. "Carson, why do I feel you're painting that faerie to look like me?"

He let out a chuckle from where he sat on a chair, refusing to turn around to make eye contact. "I think you're projecting, sweetheart."

"Why is she naked?" I gritted out, trying to hide my amusement.

He flashed me a smug look. "Why not?" He turned back around, adding more details with small brushstrokes. "Remind me, I didn't see much in the woods or when you were in the tub. Do the curtains match the drapes?"

I picked up a blueberry scone and chucked it at the back of his head. It bounced with a distinct plunk, causing a cackle to escape me. He shot to his feet to chase me. While running, I exclaimed, "You know what they say—if the roof is rusted, the basement is flooded!"

His jaw dropped as I tried to run past him to the office, but he lunged in front of the hallway, making me squeal while I diverted to the left to run into the walk-in refrigerator.

He held up his paintbrush, threatening to paint me. "Not my cheesy wolf shirt!" I exclaimed as I ran from corner to corner to avoid him, grabbing a bottle of caramel drizzle as a weapon.

"You wouldn't."

I wiggled my eyebrows as I darted to the other corner of the refrigerator. Ditching the drizzle, I picked up a can of whipped cream and pulled off the lid. "Oh, I would."

Carson shook his head, fighting a smile. He took a single step my way, hands up to relay a surrender. "You're ruthless."

"You think you're the first guy to ask if I'm a fire crotch? Like I haven't heard every redhead joke under the sun."

His eyelashes fluttered with a darkened look cast downward at me, his voice now low. “I would never call you that. And I’d be so privileged to ever know the real answer.” He stepped closer. “Rosie, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever had in front of me. I want to keep it that way.”

“Go on.” I used the phrase he said often, pitting his words against him.

“Since you rolled into town, all I can think about is you. How close yet so far away you are from me. And how I’d like to close that gap.”

He took another step, closing the gap. “Go on.”

“I think you think of me, too, and I make you nervous.”

“Yes,” I whispered, staring into his eyes. “Go on.”

“And I think about how I’d like to treat you right and make you never regret moving to Pine Bluff.” He moved closer, his broad chest blocking my view while his scent wafted in my senses. His energy tendrils mingled with mine, ensnaring me in a delicious trap that was all Carson, all masculine energy.

He held my chin as his eyes flashed to my lips as he lowered for a kiss, freezing when a singsong, “Rooooosie!” echoed behind us.

I let out a heavy sigh as he stepped back. The fridge concealed us but left us nowhere to run. He glanced over his shoulder, then back to me as he picked up the hem of my shirt to dash his brush across my hip bone, leaving his mark. I swatted him, trying not to giggle as I quickly snapped into a lie.

“Thanks for grabbing that. I put it too high up!” I said it loud enough to ensure Kaylee heard. Picking up a box of creamer, I walked out of the refrigerator with him trailing behind me. She dug in her purse for her key fob, then stared out the window, clicking it to ensure her Jeep was locked.

“All finished,” he said, gesturing to the mural.

Kaylee finally looked away from her parked car. “Thank you! It’s freaking amazing!”

My vision tunneled to the naked faerie with the faintest auburn triangle between her legs. I sighed, realizing he got it right, and I’d have to stare at it. He picked up his cup with my number, shooting me a meaningful glance behind Kaylee’s back as he left. I clenched my thighs together, hoping to taper the dull ache, knowing he would haunt me the rest of the day.

Chapter Nine



I strolled into All Booked Up, clutching a cup with Rosie’s number. I was a floating head barely contained to reality. I was so close to kissing her. I could feel her breath on my lips as her sexy little body swayed towards me, eagerly wanting to connect. Kaylee needed to stop interrupting us. I had to get Rosie to my cabin or away from our businesses for fucksakes.

“Hey, Carsyboy,” Viviane’s small voice quaked.

“Hey Viv, how are you?”

Her joints snapped and popped as she exited her faded burgundy armchair. She was five foot nothing, with all her white hair expertly curled and teased into a rounded little puff on her head. Ribbon blue eyes gleamed around well-earned wrinkles, and the skin under her chin wiggled when she talked. She always looked like a little gnome queen wearing layers of cardigans and sweaters that she knit herself in shades of brown, olive, and sometimes dark purple if she felt extra snazzy. She never wore shoes but often wore thick socks with lace and beads sewn around the ankles. She had to wear high heels for decades when she worked at the bank, and now, in defiance, she lived barefoot.

I adored the shit out of her.

Viv was like my faerie godmother I had known my entire life. Our relationship was a good mix of wholesome and mischievous. She baked me cookies growing up, then

started putting weed in them as I got older. I helped her at the bookstore with random repair projects and lifting heavy boxes.

She was unhinged with a wicked sense of humor and an excellent sounding board for me because she never revealed my secrets to anyone, not even Bear. Plus, she was the only 87-year-old I knew who was still mobile, let alone sleeping with a Glock under her quilted pillow.

I walked around the counter and squatted to give her a gentle hug. “Oh, you’re never going to believe this shit,” she said, drawing back and putting on her glasses. Today, they were small ones that looked like the octagonal wire things you used to dye Easter eggs.

“What?”

“Boyd came in last night,” she tucked her chin, letting me prepare for the gossip. Officer Boyd was a cop in town who hit on anything with a pair of tits, even though he was married. He was worse than Dane. Completely creepastic.

“And?”

“He was looking for a book on...” she fiddled with the mousepad on her laptop.

“How to cure chlamydia naturally?” I joked, making a dry laugh escape her while she squinted at the screen.

“The history of coffee,” she looked at me over her glasses.

“Hmm, it is almost like he is prepping for a coffee shop run by women to open in town.”

“Exactly, what a nitwit. I’ve met Kaylee. Beautiful, sweet little thing. Funny as all hell. She said a friend was coming to help her. Rose, I believe.”

“Rosie,” I corrected.

Her drawn-on eyebrows lifted in two denim lines on her forehead. “Rosie, well then, it sounds like you’ve met our new budding barista?”

“Yeah, to put it lightly. She’s living above my store, and I’ve been painting the mural alongside her setting up the

shop.”

Viv gasped, loving the salacious information. Leaning in, she whispered, “Is she pretty?”

“Gorgeous. Smart. Feisty, too.”

She pulled off her glasses. “That is the best news I’ve heard all year. When are you taking her out?”

“I can’t!” I rage-whispered in frustration.

“Why not?”

“I’m cursed, you know that. I don’t want to ruin her reputation. Everyone is going to tell her I’m the grump who is going to destroy her life. And what if I do? Kaylee is her friend and now her business partner. What if we don’t work out? It would make it awkward for Rosie. She’d still have to live above my store and work across the street from me. We all know Harley is going to wife up Kaylee. If it didn’t work out, we’d still run into each other often.”

“Who cares? I dated my husband’s cousin before I got to him. We turned out fine.”

“But that was wartime, and everything was a free-for-all. You were dancing with a different sailor every night!”

“Listen, I know it was bad because it was war and all, but oh man, those fellas were handsome,” she said wistfully. “You know what I always say? If you consider the worst, you must consider the best. What if it does work out?”

I braced myself with one arm, leaning on her counter. “I can’t fathom that shit.”

“Well, you better start fathoming *that shit*. You have every right to a little lady like your brother.” She squeezed one of my pecs with a tiny arthritic hand, jiggling it. “Any woman would be lucky to have this hunk of man meat beside her, warming her bed all night.”

I groaned, hating my situation. “I’m trying to wrap my head around it. I think maybe if we start private?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Sneaking around is fun.”

“What book did you recommend years ago about redheads in Hawaii?”

She took a long sip of tea from her mug with a chip alongside the rim of it. She thought the chip made the heat disperse evenly. Therefore, it was ideal for tea. I thought she was nuttier than squirrel shit.

“Ah! *Still Life With Woodpecker* by Tom Robbins.”

“That life coach always yelling at people with that fucking vein bulging in his neck?” I asked in disgust.

“No, that’s Tony Robbins. Tom is the cool, weird one.”

While heading back to my store, I caught Rosie gawking at me as she fiddled with some plants in her café window. She blushed and looked away, which made me happy. I liked seeing her flustered. I beelined back to my office to save her number in my phone as Roisin, her real name. It felt weirdly intimate. I liked that, too.

Unable to waste more time away from my business, I set to work. I had a handful of employees at the store and some over at the lumber and garden center on the outskirts of town, where my dad still worked part-time because he was bored as hell newly retired. He loved talking to people about plants all day, so it worked out.

Among the employees, Hank was my favorite, and Skyler my least favorite. Hank was a blessing because he was a carpenter who knew his shit and was super friendly, which I needed. He worked at the store so his wife wouldn’t murder him at home. They both retired early but clearly couldn’t stand each other full-time.

Skyler was 16 and couldn’t find his ass from a hole in the ground. His mom knew my mom, so I got roped into giving him shifts after school and on Saturdays. I’ll never forget when I caught him giving a girl a hickey in the paint aisle. Hank and I threw a plunger at him to get them to stop.

“Skyler, it’s a quarter after 3 o’clock. I need you here at 3:00 sharp.”

Skyler looked at me, confused. “Quarter after would be 3:25.”

“No, it would be 3:15.” I pointed to the round old clock above the front desk. He stared blankly at it. “Jesus Christ, do you not know how to tell time?”

Hank let out a chuckle next to me. It sounded wet, like a cat hacking up something.

“I’m used to digital, bro.” Skyler lifted his ball cap and smoothed out his floppy, bleached ramen noodle hair to put it back on.

“Okay, bro, I should write all my passwords down in cursive, then it would be in secret code.” I shook my head.

“They don’t teach us cursive either, man. That’s for writing checks or whatever.”

“Yeah, I know.” I stared at Hank, who howled more, causing Kiszka to join him.

Later that night, I texted Rosie. I’m sure there’s some lame dating rule that you should wait three whole days, but I didn’t give a shit. I was already in too deep with this little firecracker. I was in bed thinking of her, wishing her sexy thighs were spread while straddling me.

Me: Hey Rosie, how’s my favorite bog witch doing?

Roisin: Heyyy, just washing off paint some guy marked on my hip bone while I was at work—the audacity.

Me: I needed my mark on you.

I stared in horror at my bold statement after already hitting send. Her text came halfway through my shock.

Roisin: Good, because I like your mark on me.

My eyes bulged reading it. She was serving it back. Who the fuck serves it back like this?

Me: Get used to it.

Roisin: Looking forward to it.

Later, she sent the sexiest selfie that damn near melted my brain. My jaw fell as my cock rose. I shoved my face into my pillow, fighting to drive back into town to see her. I also resisted the urge to jack off and lost that fight completely.

Throughout the night, I would wake up thinking she was next to me, only to realize I was alone, but I could have sworn on some level we were communicating. Dreamtalking? I'm sure she had some mystical word for it. All I knew was I had a vivid dream of peering up at her beautiful face between her soft thighs. Her jaw slacked with silent cries. Then the visions morphed to her bracing herself over me, stroking my cock with her delicate tattooed fingers, then finally, flickers of her hair like flames strewn across my chest while I held her, both of us panting in bliss.

By morning, I knew one thing for sure—this dream had to become a reality.

Chapter Ten



I found a book leaning against my front door when I got home late. I picked it up, examining the cover with a bird flying with a matchstick in its beak. I snorted in amusement after reading the title *Still Life With Woodpecker* by Tom Robbins. A light gray bookmark stuck out. I turned to the page it was marking, spotting a sentence underlined.

Red hair is caused by sugar and lust.

I smiled stupidly at the quote, knowing exactly who did this. I clutched the book to my chest, then opened it again to reread the line.

Sugar and lust. Yep. Those two things were fueling me at this point in life.

The bookmark was from *All Booked Up*. As I turned it over, a hyper-realistic eye stared back at me. It was surrounded by swirling vines and roses. It looked too familiar. Running with a hunch, I opened my front door, flopping my purse on my pub table while rushing to the bathroom. I held up the bookmark to my face, and there it was, an exact depiction of my left eye. The shape and size, even the noticeable fleck just under my pupil. The flare of my eyelashes and the gentle arch of my eyebrow. My mouth opened in wonder as I continued to gawk at it. Carson had somehow committed my eyes to memory. I was flattered and a little lightheaded.

I tucked it in the book, forcing myself to put it down. Then I stripped for a bath, needing to get the stench of furniture

polish and glass cleaner off me from work. A coppery shimmer caught my eye as it streaked across my hip bone, almost to my belly button. It was Carson's mark. I stared at it in the mirror longer than I should have, loving it too much.

As my fingers feathered over it, my mind flooded with images of how I'd like Carson to claim me—like a searing kiss or his lips covering my breasts before his teeth gently grazed just enough to make me whimper, or the rush of our naked bodies pressed together as he filled me up.

My fingers moved lower as I thought about how his hands gently and patiently stroked art into existence and how, on some level, I knew he'd gently and patiently stroke me. His deep hum when he took the first sip of coffee would probably be the same noise he'd make if I wrapped my lips around his cock.

I jumped when my phone pinged with a message from an unsaved contact. I wiggled, saving his number in my phone and adding a little axe emoji next to the name of my new favorite mountain man.

Carson: Hey Rosie, how's my favorite bog witch doing?

I fought a stupid grin.

Me: Heyyy, just washing off paint some guy marked on my hip bone while I was at work—the audacity.

Carson: I needed my mark on you.

My pussy clenched at his dominance. I immediately shot off my first thought.

Me: Good, because I like your mark on me.

I stared at my whorish text in disbelief. What was this man doing to me?

Carson: Get used to it.

I held the phone to my chest. *Oh, no, he didn't!* Needing to stop before I was outright having phone sex, I made an out for myself.

Me: Looking forward to it.

I got in the bath with my new book, which was an ode to redheads. I liked how his mind worked if this indicated his inner world.

Fully relaxed, my thoughts drifted to my intense attraction to him. Beyond the carnal desire and cerebral connection, this man tugged at my heart. I was rooting for him. He was on the wrong side of a shitty situation he had no control over. The town ousted him for loving a woman who cheated on him. And still, he stayed because he wanted to continue his family's legacy. That kind of loyalty and honor was, well, hot. It made him trustworthy.

I had so many secrets I wanted to tell him. I was all too familiar with being ousted. If anyone would understand, it was him. I needed to get closer on all levels.

An idea came to me. I covered my breasts with my hair, then dried my hands on a towel to take a selfie, holding the bookmark up to cover my left eye as I pulled a flirty face, my tongue licking the side of my upper lip.

I reasoned that he had probably already seen my tits from the raccoon and skyclad incident, or else I'd never send something like this to a guy I hadn't hooked up with. The picture showed the shape of my boobs, the water making my

hair float like a mermaid. I looked dewy and glistening in the crystal-clear water. Before I psyched myself out, I sent it.

Carson: You're a goddess.

Carson: Jesus fucking Christ!

Me: Don't give him credit!

Carson: You're right. Sweet Freya! You're gorgeous, Rosie. If you keep this up, I will have to replace another damn door.

Smiling at his quick use of the Norse goddess of love, sex, and beauty, I locked my phone screen, hoping the selfie would haunt him for the foreseeable future.

Carson crept into my dreams the entire night, on the periphery of my awareness in a maddening way. I woke up and could've sworn he was next to me. Falling back asleep, I had another dream, this time more vivid. It started with him looking up at me from between my legs as his hands clutched my thighs, his bottom lip glistening with remnants of me. The vision morphed to him lying down as I braced myself over him, stroking his dick. It was so thick that my fingers barely touched my thumb as I stroked upwards, his deep breaths layering echoes around me. The dream ended with his heartbeat thumping as he held me to his chest, both of us fighting for steady breath. The heartbeats morphed while I jolted awake, my pulse bouncing between my ears.

"Carson?" I called out in my loft, convinced he was with me. I patted my bed, confirming it was empty, and slumped back, staring at my ceiling, unable to fall asleep.

Chapter Eleven



I went for my daily run, grateful to move my body to distract myself from the last night's dirty dreams. I picked my favorite trail that had forest on either side. It rained overnight, so everything puddled and smelled amazing. The sun was about to rise, lighting the sky in a mauve color. Ten minutes in, I saw a woman jogging ahead wearing yoga pants and a jacket that matched the sunrise. As I got closer, blood pooled from my brain to my groin.

I'd recognize that ass anywhere.

Desire low in my belly coiled as I took a deep gulp and tore my hood off my head, hoping it would make my approach less frightening. A man in head-to-toe black sprinting behind you would be scary for anyone, especially a woman; even I knew that.

Rosie must've felt my gaze because she looked over her shoulder, her mouth hanging before she snapped it shut. She stopped, stretching her arms with a smile as I approached.

"Hey, girl."

"Hey, fancy meeting you here."

"Mm, not really," I teased as we began to jog together. "I told you I lived this way, so how do I know you're not stalking me?"

"You're the one who suggested this side of the valley. How do I know you're not luring me in?"

I shrugged, enjoying the way she argued with me. She wasn't wrong.

"Where's Kiszka?" she asked.

"I can't take him out right after it rains because he'll find the puddles and roll in the mud. Bathing a husky is like going to the DMV. No one has the time or enjoys it."

That made her giggle. "Do you run here often?" Her ponytail swung with her trot, bouncing along with her perfect tits.

"Daily. Keeps me sane."

She ran faster and looked back over her shoulder. "I guess you'll need more of that sanity with me around."

My instincts kicked in, and I grabbed her hand, dodging a look around while I darted to the forest line. My chuckle mixed with her breathy laughter while we disappeared. I loved her hand in mine and how she let me lead her deeper.

"Finally alone," I said, pulling her into the shadow underneath a tree.

"Alone is good," she whispered, stepping closer to me.

I held her face as her eyes searched mine. She was so beautiful, even without makeup. I stared at her pink lips parting before I lowered mine to meet them. Her lips were smooth, and she tasted as sweet as I imagined. Her hands ran along my shoulders and arms. Mine drifted down to her back, swooping her closer. I needed her softness pushing into me.

A whimper escaped her. I pulled from the kiss to gauge the moment, but her eyes remained locked on my lips as she nodded. I returned to kissing her as she wrapped her arms around my neck. I brushed my tongue against hers, sweeping and teasing. Her pheromones and sweat mingled in my senses, making me even hornier. With our fleeting privacy in the shrouded pines, we kissed hungrily, swaying together in lust and exploration. She was so fucking perfect, and a part of me was relieved our physical chemistry was as sizzling as I thought it would be. We couldn't fake this. This was something unmatched, undeniable.

Her breathy noises pushed me over the edge, and I had to do something. I needed her so much closer. I picked her up, hitching her body across mine in a swift motion. “Carson... baby...” she breathed in shock while wrapping her legs around me. With a cheek in each hand, my body hummed as her warm center pressed against me, pushing me further into my haze.

I stepped forward, pinning her to the tree trunk. She let out a slight gasp and held me tighter. I groaned at her reaction, tilting my head to deepen the kiss. Her smooth little tongue brushed against mine again, her nails raking through my hair and over my shoulders. As far as first kisses go, this was intense, far from chaste. If this is how she kissed, I couldn’t fathom how she did other things.

I nibbled and kissed down her jaw to her neck. “That selfie was so fucking sexy, but this, right here with you, is so much better.” My mouth traveled to her collarbone. “Rosie, you’re driving me crazy.”

“I know the feeling.” She ran her hands down my jaw, touching my beard. We locked eyes and fell into another kiss. She swayed into me this time, causing me to fight the urge to rock my hips. Losing the fight, I moved against her, each thrust pushing her further against the rough tree bark, causing tiny cries to break in her mouth.

Realizing what was happening, I put her down and rolled my back to the tree, pulling her up against my body and getting a handful of her ass.

“You’re so—” She interrupted herself with a kiss, her hands running under my clothes, touching my torso. I pulled her bottom lip between my teeth. She broke the kiss, her nipples hard, a flush on her face, likely from my beard. “Wait,” she breathed.

I held either side of her neck, stroking it while I fought the urge to look down at her chest. “God, I love kissing you,” I said, mesmerized.

“Same.” She nuzzled my nose, planting a delicate peck against my mouth. “I could do this all day. But I have to go. I really gotta go.” She fought for a breath, looking around the

brightening forest. “I have to train our new employees. They’re expecting me.”

My instincts bristled, mad we had to cut this short. I continued to hold her neck, only to brush one last kiss against her lips. We stared at each other, unwilling to let go. Recognizing my torment, she took a few steps away and edged out of the woods, running away from the temptation to fuck right there on the forest floor.

Chapter Twelve



My breasts ached with each bounce of my jog. I felt like a raw nerve since my first kiss with Carson yesterday. I shuddered, recalling how his lips felt on mine as he pinned me against a tree with the most dizzying kiss of my goddamn life. I didn't know what was harder, his body or the tree. All I knew was that I craved every square inch of him pushing against me again.

I needed to see him, so this morning, I French braided my hair into pigtails and put on a matching set of workout pants and a sports bra with a zip-up jacket over it. It wasn't a pretty shade of lilac like my outfit yesterday, but the black pants didn't give me camel toe, so it was a win.

I picked the same trail at the same time. I sensed him before I saw him. I have a theory that every woman can tell if a man or a woman is staring at her. Depending on the intent, a man's gaze feels distinctive, on the edge of a sharp blade of intrusive or exhilarating.

My heart thudded with anticipation as I looked over my shoulder to see a tall man in all black with a dog gaining distance in a sprint. I kept jogging as the seconds ticked by.

One Mississippi

Two Mississippi.

Three Mississippi.

By four Mississippi, my stomach rolled, hearing him right behind me. I checked again, his handsome face emerging as he

pulled off his hood.

“Hey, boys!” I said brightly.

“Hey beautiful,” his gravelly voice reached me, making my stomach drop further. Kiszka ruffed a greeting, his tail wagging. Carson grabbed my hand as he approached, pulling us into the forest like yesterday. I couldn’t help but giggle, feeling lighthearted.

Finding a clearing, he looped Kizzy’s leash around a branch and affectionately held his snout. “We aren’t going to kill any squirrels for Miss Rosie, right?”

Kiszka blinked guiltily, causing Carson to say something to him in Greek, prompting him to sit with a huff. He turned, wrapping me up in a hug, pulling me off my feet as we breathed each other in. Like yesterday, his scent flooded my senses with his cologne and pheromones, the distinct aroma of fucking sexy hot man, straight up *Carson*. It was mouthwatering.

“I’m glad I ran into you,” I admitted while he sat me down, pulling me into the shadow underneath a giant oak tree. I looked up at him, taking in all the details of how handsome he was this close.

He stared down at me, touching my face reverently. “Same. I was hoping I’d find you here.” Both of our mouths twitched in a smile before they met in a kiss. His lips smooth, his kiss slow. I melted into him, suddenly immersed. I had craved him every ticking second since yesterday.

This man kissed and held me like I was the most important thing in his world. His calm presence invited me to be in the moment with him, with his lips on mine, as everything screeched to a halt. His tongue brushed the seam of my lips, causing me to open to him, meeting his tongue with mine. I hated French kissing Tyler, but Carson was a different story. He tasted minty, and the way he stroked his tongue against mine was so naughty yet natural. If he stroked other things like that, I would be a happy girl.

A needy moan escaped me, echoing in our mouths. I let out an uncomfortable giggle, breaking the kiss. “No, come back. I liked that,” he said. “I love the way you taste, the little noises you make.”

“I love the way you feel, the way you kiss me.” My hands grabbed at his broad shoulders and arms as he surrounded me. He was so strong it made me dizzy. My legs trembled as a tingling need ached between my legs. I clung to him, needing to be as close as possible, savoring what time we had.

As if reading my mind, he broke our kiss, his gaze searching mine in overwhelm. “I miss seeing you. I’m bummed I don’t get to hang out with you anymore now that the mural is done.”

“Ah, you miss me already?” I teased.

He gave me a quick kiss, holding my face close. “Yes, but I plan on fixing that. I want to take you out on a proper date. I will pick you up at 7 o’clock tomorrow night if that’s okay with you?” He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

I appreciated his initiative. His invite was much better than most guys’ typical Netflix and chill plan. But my mind was screaming no.

“I’d love to,” I hesitated. “But I’m swamped with the store opening this week. I will let you know when life settles down.”

He kissed my forehead before stepping back, touching one of my braids. “Completely understandable. You’re worth the wait.” He gave me a small smile. I didn’t know if sadness or desire washed over his eyes, but it made me want to change my answer.

I was trying to be better at communicating my needs. I never did that with Tyler, so it was still hard. But that response made me proud. I also loved Carson’s consistency. A phrase floated in my head, a mantra my mom lived by, ‘if he wanted to, he would.’ It turns out Carson was living proof.

I held him a little longer and kissed him a little hungrier while saying goodbye. I looked over my shoulder at the tree

line only to see him standing there with his husky, like some brooding hunter. And for the second morning in a row, I had to run away from the temptation to fuck this mountain man in the woods.



Kaylee greeted me with a sweet smile as I walked into Silver Springs a little late. I decided not to tell her about Carson. We were both scrambling to get everything ready to open the shop. Plus, her stance on him seemed skeptical, so I wasn't eager to share anything. It was all so fresh and new. I had to protect myself and my privacy.

Plus, my focus needed to be on work, not Carson's dizzying kisses. Silver Springs was a gamble I needed to win. No man would fuck up my life again.

I walked up to the bar, where the baristas reviewed the menu in a huddled group. I had laminated graphics and cheat sheets on how to make each drink. It helped new hires at Rise-N-Grind, so I figured I'd try it here. Seeing them reviewing my materials registered how excited I was. It was happening! We were opening in a matter of days.

"Hey, Rosie!" Azalea greeted me. She was the first person hired. Kaylee met her at Pine Mart the night she crashed, and they quickly became friends. Azalea had a friendly girl-next-door vibe, very much like Sandra Bullock. She was tall, with long limbs and a pink glow frequenting her cheeks. It was decided she would bounce between the coffee shop in the morning and the crystal shop in the afternoons.

"Hey, Zay!" I turned to the other women, "Good morning, everyone! What questions do you have for me?" I asked with a smile.

"Will we be carrying oat milk?" Poe asked.

A blue sea glass charm necklace rolled across her clavicle. Her hair was in tight locs coiled in a bun. She had dyed them a beautiful shade of teal that looked vibrant against her dark brown skin. She was working on finishing her psychology degree at a local college and needed a flexible schedule. Maxine was her professor and told her all about us.

“I’m glad you asked because oat milk is a hit or miss. We’re going to do a trial run with almond milk first. If we get enough orders with the almond, we’ll try oat.”

She nodded. “Sounds like a good plan.”

“And you mentioned the dress code is pretty relaxed?” Dani asked.

Her hair hung in a smooth, shiny black curtain that swished above her shoulders with every movement of her head. Her crisp matte black lip color against her warm russet complexion made her pout look perfect. She had worked at a diner before and was learning to be a lash tech.

“We want you to dress to express whatever that means to you. We’re cool as long as your tits and bits are covered.”

“Love it.” Dani grinned with a nod, swishing her hair in the process.

Andrea stared at the menu, her large, expressive brown eyes contrasting her light skin. “Let me get this right. A latte has less foam than a cappuccino. And a latte can be iced or hot, but a cappuccino can only be made as a hot drink?”

She always looked concerned, which made me want to hug her. Her septum was pierced, and she’d wiggle it by scrunching her upper lip, which I found adorable. Andrea was in addiction recovery and needed a steady schedule to work on her program. Kaylee and I were happy to look past her patchy job history if it gave her a fresh start. We were all about new beginnings around here.

“Exactly. I’ve seen things go south when people try to correct the customer with our barista lingo. It sounds like you get it, Andrea. What would you recommend if they want a hot drink with no foam but some flavor?”

She gazed up at the menu with a creased forehead. “Like a mocha?”

“Exactly!” I said, causing her to eject a relieved breath.

“I like how this place doesn’t feel pretentious,” Azalea said, leaning against the counter.

“Thanks for saying that. Nothing is worse than coffee snobs. We’re giving the drinks funny names to lighten the mood, like God’s Favorite for black coffee. Meet Your Maker has the most caffeine. Morning Sex is our version of an Americano because it’s nasty but gets you going for the day.” They all snickered at that.

“Mindreader?” Andrea asked.

“Named after Kaylee, she loves caramel iced coffee.” I smiled, thinking about how cute she was. “My favorite is Bog Witch. It’s a toasted marshmallow cold brew with sweet cream.”

“Is Manwhore34 seriously the wifi password?” Poe interjected.

“Yep, ‘bout that.” I looked at the sign above our massive menu on the wall. I expertly chalked it in a cutesy yet legible scroll. “Yo, Kaylee!” I bellowed playfully.

She scurried out from her side of the shop, clutching a laptop. “Yes, my love?”

“Is now a good time to explain our story?”

In their interviews, we explained that the premise was a shop run by witchy women—a haven for magical misfits and caffeine addicts. We had lots of free events planned and cheeky little jokes, like a cowbell they could ring if a creeper hit on them. But we hadn’t explained our origin story.

Kaylee wiggled her golden eyebrows. “Sure, I’d love to!”

I clasp my hands together, “So I’d never air my dirty laundry like this, but Kaylee and I are petty.”

“So petty, but filled with righteous anger,” she added, closing the laptop while walking closer.

“You see, Kaylee was my favorite customer at a shop I worked at in Boston. One day, I got a little frisky with my then-boyfriend in the bathroom. It wasn’t my best moment, so please don’t judge me. It was a dare. Anyway, Kaylee barged in on us.” I paused as they all gasped, adding, “And it turns out he was her boyfriend, too!”

They all gasped again.

Poe clapped a hand to her chest in horror while she whispered, “Manwhore34.”

“Exactly, it rhymes, and that’s his age, too,” I said.

“I’m so sorry,” Andrea said with puppy dog eyes.

It was Kaylee’s turn to chime in. “When I found them, I ran out of the coffee shop like a bat out of hell and drove to get my mind off things. I ended up stuck in Pine Bluff after I crashed my car. A handsome forest ranger found me and sheltered me during a horrible blizzard.” A wistful smile spread across her beautiful face. “And it turns out he’s the love of my life, so I moved here to be with him. And asked Rosie if she’d join me in a business venture rooted in a scorned sisterhood.”

I smiled at Kaylee in the full-circle moment.

Azalea added, “It was so adorable. I saw them together at the market right after he rescued her. The way he looked at her...”

“Stop! That’s so cute!” Dani swooned, clasping her hands together under her chin.

Poe lightly snorted in amusement. “Now you’re out for blood? You bonded over hating the jerk who cheated on you guys and became friends instead of enemies?”

“Why not!” Kaylee and I said in unison, making everyone laugh.

I shrugged, “Why stop at getting even? Might as well get paid, too.”

“Explain the shop name!” Azalea waved excitedly, already knowing the answer.

Kaylee continued, “There’s a song by Fleetwood Mac called ‘Silver Springs.’ I’m sure y’all have heard it. It’s about a scorned woman and how she wanted to love a man, but he wouldn’t let her. We all know Stevie Nicks is the queen of witchy folks, and you can’t convince me the bridge to that song isn’t a binding spell. It gives me absolute chills!”

She looked at me for validation. I bobbed my head in enthusiastic agreement and added, “Plus, Silver Springs is an actual place in Maryland that inspired Stevie to write the song. Kaylee wouldn’t be on this side of the country if her dad hadn’t wrecked his motorcycle in Maryland. It’s this whole twisty turn of fate.”

“I love that,” Poe said, running her finger under her necklace.

“So now this cheating asshat is the butt of all our jokes?” Dani asked.

Kaylee held back a chuckle. “Yeah, pretty much. You should check back by the restrooms. There’s a nod to the incident. We decided to put his picture on the wall for a Shrine of Shame, where people can put up pictures of the men who cheated on them, so everyone knows what a piece of shit looks like. And we have paper strips and a bowl so people can write their grievances and ill will towards the men who hurt them. We will burn all of them on the dark moon in a cleansing ritual. Anyone can come.”

“Oh, and we’ll have Scornful Saturdays,” I said. “An open mic night where people can share the horrors of dating and get validation from the audience.”

Poe fished out her phone, “I fucking love this place! I have to post about this so people come visit!”

Chapter Thirteen



The next couple of days were a blur of training and the finishing touches. On the morning we opened in early May, townies supported us by flooding the place, including the Kouris crew. The first person to enter through the door was Harley, then Carson. Their sister Frankie trailed in after them, holding Meg's hand. Frankie was in scrubs, Meg in her ranger uniform. Both had curly hair in intricate French braids. Meg's round glasses made her doe eyes bigger as she read our menu. At the end of the pack, Markos walked behind Maxine, his hands resting on her shoulders as he towered behind her. He smiled at me the moment I saw him.

Maxine spotted Kaylee and flung her arms out dramatically for a hug, exclaiming, "We're here for coffee, my dear!"

A voice filled up my left side. "Quite the gene pool, eh?" I jumped, realizing an elderly lady was at the end of my counter, nearest the fridge. She was tiny, endearingly frail, with sapphire blue eyes. Her pink lipstick-stained lips were thin but curved in an impish smile.

I let out a nervous laugh. "Ah, yeah, tall."

"The bone structure on those kids is unreal." She squinted, smiling at them, then back at me. "Are you Rosie, dear?"

I held out my hand. "Yes, ma'am, I am."

She took my hand, hers cold and knotted with age. "I'm Viviane. I own the bookstore."

“Oh! I have been meaning to visit you! Viviane? Like the Lady of the Lake in Arthurian legend?” I asked, like a complete nerd. I figured she’d know what I referenced if she was a bookworm.

“Yes, exactly like the tales of Camelot.” Her smile deepened.

“*Mists of Avalon* is one of my favorite books. That’s such a beautiful name.”

“Why, thank you! So is Rosie!” She flashed another look at the Kouris group. Carson saw us talking and jerked his head away. “Do you know how to make a London Fog?”

“I sure do! It’s Earl Gray tea, foamy milk, and vanilla. We planned on naming a drink after you. Did you want that to be yours?”

“Yes!” She let out a rickety laugh that sounded almost like an owl. “Can we name it Mists of Avalon? Fog, mist, why the hell not, eh?”

“I love that idea!”

“By the way, Rosie, I have something in my shop I’d like to show you. Can you visit me soon?”

I could’ve sworn I caught the granny checking out my ass as I turned to get milk. “Absolutely. I will head over when I get off here.”

We shared a smile as I slid the drink to her. Dani and Poe made the drinks for the Kouris crew since I was helping Viviane. When I looked up, as if feeling my gaze, Carson looked over his shoulder as he exited my shop. My whole body hummed with nerves while I checked the recent drink orders, only to see a Dirty Reno.

Fucking hell, I was in over my head! I wanted to sit on that man’s face already! But I had to contain my whoredom. Seeing Mama and Papa Kouris days after sending their grown-ass son a topless selfie wasn’t something I was hoping to endure. I was grateful Viviane was there to distract me. I needed to stop being such a horny hag and get my shit together. I had a business to run.

“I need a cup of coffee blacker than iron,” a man said with a deep Southern drawl. I looked up from my tablet just in time to see the old guy pop out his fake eye. He held it up casually, “And a cup of water for this son of a bitch.”

“Um...” I stammered. “Of course. Room for cream and sugar...in the coffee?” I clarified awkwardly.

“Nah, I brought my own.” He fished inside his leather jacket and pulled out a bottle of bourbon, undoing it with one hand while holding his prosthetic eye with the other. “Don’t judge me, hon. I’ve been on the road for days.”

“No judgment here.” I slid the coffee across the counter, gesturing between it and the bourbon. “It’s a balance of sorts.” That got a chuckle out of him as he poured. I put the lid on the coffee cup while he put back his bourbon. “Are you on a road trip or something?”

“Nope. I’m a long hauler. I drive a semi from here to Florida.”

My gaze bounced between the fake eye and bourbon with mild anxiety. Reading my mind, he offered, “Don’t worry, hon. I’m off the clock now. I’m heading to Viv’s to get a book to head home and ‘crap out’ as my daughter would say. I’m sorry, I left my manners at the door. I’m Otto, Otto Harrington,” he extended a hand for me to shake.

“Rosie Hayes.”

A sizeable turquoise cuff was on his left wrist, the skin of his hand three shades darker than his right side. It clicked in my brain because the sun had been beating down on his driver’s side window for decades. It etched more wrinkles on the left side of his face, too. I found that fascinating.

“You know, Otto, you might want to check out the crystal side of our shop. Kaylee got some Bisbee turquoise last week.”

His eyebrows lifted to the bill of his trucker hat. “No shit?”

I smiled. “No shit.”

He scanned me up and down, considering. “Are you the new owner? The little gal who moved in above Kouris Hardware?”

I leaned against the counter nervously to make our conversation more intimate. “Yeah, I am. Why?”

He looked around, ensuring we had fleeting privacy, before he leaned in. “You let me know if that Carson gives you any trouble,” he whispered.

An icy shiver went up my spine. “What do you mean?”

“He is who he is, and God love him. But that man is crankier than a three-legged dog trying to bury a turd on an icy pond.”

I stood there speechless.

He batted the air. “He’s a grouch. You let me know if he makes you feel unwelcome. I’ll talk with him.”

“Okay, so far so good.” I gave him a pathetic smile, feeling a little jittery. Hearing it from Kaylee or Frankie was one thing, but from a stranger hit harder. I stuffed down my worry and went back to helping the other baristas.

Our first day was a hit and went by quickly. Afterward, I walked next door to All Booked Up. Opening the door, the calming scent of books, rich wood, and a hint of leather signaled a slowdown in my nerves. Dim lights filled the shop, along with floor-to-ceiling shelves of dark wood. Rounding the entrance, to the left, was a long desk with a twisted brass candlestick with a yellow taper candle topped with a dancing flame.

Past the flame, I spotted a cloud of hair. “Viviane?” I said, walking up to the puffball until I found her sitting in an armchair behind the desk. She squinted briefly with a sweet smile until it registered who I was.

“Oh, my beautiful Rose!” she said lightly, prepping herself to get up. She grabbed my hand as if I were a little child and guided me to the back room of her store. In a high window was a round stained-glass motif of an ornate rose on a stem

with leaves. The glass was about three feet wide, framed in wood, leaning against the window.

“That’s gorgeous!” I said in awe. Each petal was a different shade of red, each leaf a crisp green, creating a rich texture.

With a shaky hand, she pointed to a ladder. “If you can reach it, it’s yours!”

“Oh, I couldn’t! It’s so beautiful!”

“And so are you! My husband hates it. You’re doing me a favor.”

I grinned, stepping up on the ladder. Viviane’s small hand clutched my ass to stabilize me. “Why does your husband hate it?”

“An old boyfriend, a fella from the Netherlands, made it for me.”

I plotted a way to pick it up, gauging the weight. “A Dutch guy? That sounds romantic!”

“Not really. I sat for him as a nude model, and afterward, he said my tits looked like beaver tails.”

I fought a giggle making my way down with the frame, only to turn around to see Viviane lifting her sweater, revealing a set of saggy boobs. I almost shrieked and dropped the stained glass.

“Oh my! Wow!” I turned away and then forced myself to look back at her. “Those look pretty nice, especially for your age.”

She continued to hold up her sweater, now shimmying her chest. “I fed four babies with these knockers. That idiot didn’t know what he was talking about.”

“Damn straight!”

She pushed her sweater down, searching for something. “Any plans on where you’re going to put it?”

“I’m not sure. I live in the loft above the hardware store, so I feel bad putting it in my window because it might compete with their sign.”

She grabbed a rag to dust the frame while I braced it on my body. “You can certainly take up space if you live there. And if I may suggest, the owner might know how to hang it safely.” She winked and put the cloth down on the ladder.

“What if I look like some damsel asking for help?”

“Nonsense! What fuels a man is being helpful, dear. The sooner you know that the better you can put him to use. Get to it, honey!” She plucked a blunt from somewhere in her poof of hair, putting it in her mouth as she walked out her back door with a mischievous giggle.

I exited All Booked Up and made my way across the street. An older gentleman ran to open the door for me from inside Kouris Hardware. “Thank you!” I said, giving him a grateful nod as Kizzy sniffed the frame in curiosity.

“What can I help you with today?” he asked good-naturedly.

Carson’s voice came out of nowhere. “Hank, this is Rosie. She lives upstairs.” He tried to play it cool, but his whole face seemed less stern while looking at me.

“Oh, one of the witches!” Hank exclaimed with a clap, his arms sweeping against his puffer vest. “I need to visit you over there. I heard about a Red Eye drink I want to try.”

Carson took the frame and sat it on the counter as I launched into small talk with Hank. Kiszka joined us, snaking in between my legs for pets.

Although I had lived above it for weeks, I had yet to visit the store itself. The back door I used led to my loft on one side, Carson’s office on the other, with swinging doors to the sales floor directly across. But I hadn’t explored.

The store was tidy, with hardwood floors and one big desk instead of multiple registers. Behind it, photos of the Kouris family hung in frames along with news articles. A flag for the United States and Greece hung, along with a rainbow pride one, which made me smile. A sign advertising live worms for bait made that smile disappear seconds later. Customers shuffled around, all talking to each other good-naturedly while

classic rock music played from speakers. Honestly, for being an alleged grump, Carson's store was welcoming.

After a lull in my conversation with Hank, I saw Carson holding a drill and a ladder on his shoulder.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Oh, is that to hang it?" I gestured, picking up the framed stained glass.

He nodded and walked towards the back. What kind of *man efficiency* was this? We didn't talk about my plan! But a part of me liked this, though, this whole *doing* more than asking thing he had going for him.

If he wanted to, he would.

The second we passed the swinging doors into the vestibule, the energy crackled around us. He let me walk ahead, leading the way. His deep voice murmured. "You look extra gorgeous today, sweetheart."

"Thank you. I like that color green on you." My gaze flitted to his broad chest covered in flannel as I unlocked the door. "I saw you earlier. It was nice of you to support Kaylee."

"Of course. We all support you." He sniffed and looked around at my loft. "Your place smells amazing. I like what you've done with it. It's homey."

He rested the ladder against the brick wall, and we freed our hands by putting things down on my pub table. I fell into his magnetic trap the second his eyes locked with mine, both of us crashing into one another. His large hands pawed my lower back, dragging me to him. It was like our kisses in the forest—consuming, addictive, and effortless.

His soft lips slid against mine, and his beard scratched my skin, making me even more aware of his virility. He was a fucking *man*. His sheer size, enveloping me, made me feel so deliciously consumed. I kissed his neck, then teased his ear with my tongue and breath, liking how he groaned and walked us to my bed, falling together until he covered me with his brawny body.

His teeth grazed my neck while he kissed it, sending a throbbing ache between my legs. I pulled his face to mine for a hungry kiss while my legs spread, beckoning him to settle his hips between my thighs. Who knows how long we lay there kissing, a slow grind starting.

Like in the forest, my hands had a mind of their own and trailed under his flannel, needing to feel his warm skin. His hands started doing the same, squeezing my hips, then tracing up the bare skin on my sides. Warmth pooled at my center. I couldn't hold back much more. My hands drifted, tempting me to unzip his pants and go for it.

Instead, I tapped into my restraint and shoved at his chest. "Wait! Wait, I can't!"

He pulled up immediately, getting off the bed while wiping his mouth. "I'm so sorry. I didn't plan on that."

"No, you're okay. It's okay."

"I can't seem to be alone with you without..." He gestured vaguely between us, catching his breath.

"I know. It's...I know." I'm glad I wasn't the only one feeling the chemistry. My nipples poked painfully in my bra, and a dull ache filled my core.

He stepped backward, sucking in a deep breath. He picked up the frame with a slow blink, "Let me guess, Viv gave you this?"

"Yeah, you know her?" I asked, getting off the bed and smoothing my hair.

"It's Pine Bluff. I know everyone. But Viv is one of my favorites."

"I already like her. She flashed me her tits."

"That's Viv for ya. I grew up looking at this." He held it to the last shreds of sunlight and looked back at me. "I always liked it, thought it was pretty."

"Listen, I don't want to put it in the window if it looks cluttered or distracts from your storefront. I would understand if you—"

“It won’t, I promise. What window?”

I pointed to the far right, the one closest to the muraled wall that had his last name on it.

He attached black chains and hardware to match the black edge of the old window. The man had an eye for small details. I’ll give him that. I had to fight watching him drill it in. His flannel and undershirt lifted when he raised his arms, showing a tanned V-shape torso and the sexiest happy trail. I wanted to see where it led. As he stepped down from the ladder, we relished the final product.

I wrung my hands together. “Thank you for helping me.”

He looked down, stepping to stand directly in front of me. “Happy to. It’s like it was always meant to be there.”

Once again, his words felt like they had a double meaning. I couldn’t look away from his mouth, how his lips were darker than mine, the way his beard grew slightly off his chin. I wanted to tug it to me to kiss him. Before I could, he pulled me to his chest and gave me the most comforting hug of my life. Feeling him surround me, I let out a little sigh.

“I know you’re exhausted, but let me take you out tonight. I’m so worried about you,” he murmured into my hair.

I pulled away but kept my hands on his chest. “But I—”

“You’ve barely had fun since moving here. I can tell you need something to distract you from work.” His thumb gently brushed between where my eyebrows now pinched together. “You look too stressed, woman. And like you could use a good meal.”

His second open invitation made things too real. A panic filled my body as flashbacks slapped my mind.

The strobing of police lights against a brick wall.

The sickening scent of something burning in my nose and echoes of mannish laughter.

The days I spent hiding in my apartment in the darkness alone.

Cold sweat slicked the back of my neck while I fought for a breath. A fresher trauma flared, recalling Tyler plopping me down from the bathroom wall, dropping me like a child discarding an old toy as he turned to chase Kaylee. The final look at him, his muddy eyes seeing right through me, knowing all my secrets but keeping some of his own.

In my panic, Carson cupped my face with a worried look. I sucked in a ragged breath, pulling his hands off to shake my head. “I-I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” He continued to hold me, his large hands now down at my waist, unfazed by my rejection which was low-key fucking hot.

“I’m not ready. I thought I was, but I’m n-not.” I was almost hyperventilating, but I seized his flannel, fisting it on his pecs so he knew I wanted to stay close.

“Okay, it’s okay,” he soothed, rubbing my sides. His honey-sage eyes scanned my face. “I never want to make you uncomfortable. We can take it slower.” Confused, he glanced at my hands, “Or I could give you space.”

I let go of the fabric and hugged his waist. He kissed the top of my head several times and then stroked my hair. In his arms, I felt safe, almost drugged. He was so solid and steady.

“Things are going to get messy if we date. So messy,” I murmured into the soft fibers of his flannel.

“I know. I’m trying to figure that out, too. You live above my store, are new in town, and are close to Kaylee. I realize all this puts you in a tricky situation if you date me.”

I cringed hearing how considerate he was. I couldn’t keep doing this. Not only was I not ready to date, but I also had to talk to Kaylee about this first.

I lifted my head off his chest. “And what do we do about Kaylee and Harley? A part of me wants to tell her, but another doesn’t.” My lips pulled to the side in discomfort. “Her and I have been through a lot together. You know the story.”

Come to think of it, the story of Tyler never came up in our conversations, but Kaylee told me the Kouris crew got the

whole story. I assumed Carson remembered the details.

“I know you and her were in a love triangle together in Boston. And the guy who stalked Kaylee up here was the same douche you were dating.”

“Right. On one side, I feel like I can’t move to town and date her man’s brother. She might feel attacked. But I don’t feel right lying to her either. Girl code is a real thing.”

“Well, sweetheart, that’s going to be a problem. You’re not the only one with a love triangle.”

“I know.”

His upper lip curled around his question, “What do you mean you know?”

“Kaylee told me about Whitney.” I rubbed his chest in consolation. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I-I don’t like to talk about it.” He gulped with a slow blink. “About her.”

“I won’t bring it up again.” He stared at me for a few heartbeats. If I had to guess, he felt exposed, maybe a little miffed that I knew about it. I couldn’t change that fact, so I redirected him. “So you’re private with your dating life because of the love triangle? You don’t tell Harley much?”

My hands rose and fell with his chest as he gathered a deep breath. “My brother isn’t my biggest fan. They’ll probably assume I’m going to ruin your life. Harley and I have a long story, just like you and Kaylee. But I’m the villain in his.”

“But you hang out with him. You did the mural for Kaylee. They must be okay with you. I don’t understand.”

“We’re trying to repair things but haven’t been okay in years. Thanks to your friend, I’m just now getting him back in my life, but we’re still on shaky ground. I don’t want you to feel like you have to lie to her, but keeping this private would be better.”

“Doesn’t that feel wrong though?”

“Maybe,” he said, tucking some hair behind my ear, “but I’ve always considered other people in the past when it comes to my actions.”

“Like feeling obligated to run the store for your family?”

“For starters. And I’m sick of it. I always get fucked over in the end. So when it comes to you,” his hand held the side of my face, his eyes searching mine, “I don’t know the right answer. I just know I can’t get you off my mind.”

I leaned into his palm, wishing I could suspend my nerves and loyalties to pull him back to my bed without a care. But that wasn’t my reality.

My voice came out as a whisper, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I’m ready. I can’t lie to Kaylee. I can’t jeopardize this life I’ve made for myself. It’s all so new. And now all this is making me more unsure. Things happened to me in the past...”

“I understand. If you’re not ready, you’re just not ready.” He nodded, taking his hand away from my face. “I mean, it sucks, but I would love a fresh start in Pine Bluff. That’s not an option for me.” His tongue slid across his lips as if his wish left a bitter aftertaste.

“I guess the timing isn’t right,” I muttered, offering the pathetic excuse. I lifted my chin for a final kiss. When our lips touched, instead of feeling a zing, it was an empty ache of resignation. I opened the door to my loft as he grabbed his ladder, leaving without another word.

Chapter Fourteen



It was torture knowing Rosie was living above me, working across the street, yet nowhere to be seen. She didn't attend the pub quiz, and I never ran into her before or after work. Even worse, Kiszka would hang out at the bottom of the stairs, hoping to see her. Either she was outright avoiding me, or it was a case of two people working different shifts.

I didn't see her for a week, and then, one day, she walked past my office with her mom. She was in town visiting and had some questions about Pine Bluff. She was funny and pretty, with a rocker chick vibe. I saw where Rosie got it from. They had this playful yet sweet connection. It made me wonder if Rosie would be like that with her future kids. Then the thought of her with a baby on her hip evaded my mind, and I had to distract myself with admin shit for work.

After that, she went back to ghosting me. I wasn't outright avoiding her but wanted to give her space. I already came on strong with the bookmark and mural faerie. I wanted her to give me a sign before I resumed my hunt. She needed time and space, and I respected that. I might not be charming, well-liked, or persuasive, but if there is one thing I possess as a man, it's patience. I would show her that. With everything life has thrown at me, patience was my superpower, and I knew it.

I let her adjust to her new life in Pine Bluff, hoping she'd come to her senses once she had some footing. I was playing a long game. Sure, asshats like Dane or Boyd might throw themselves at her, but I wanted a real chance. No woman made

me laugh or feel lighthearted like she did. She was witty, well-rounded, and down-to-earth. I loved talking to her and missed that the most.

And the way she kissed me, fucking hell, that was something. It rooted into my nervous system and created a chokehold of yearning. I craved her softness and wanted to hold her again to forget about the world for a little while.

Eventually, she'd have to turn up. We weren't over. It couldn't end like this before it even started.

I tried to stay busy. But when I fished, the sunset blazing on the lake made me want to see her lit up like a fiery faerie. I'd sigh as I poured my morning coffee, thinking it was toxic sludge compared to what she made me. And when the weekend rolled around, I'd think about how much I wanted to take her out on a date, how something as simple as her across from me at dinner would make my chest tight.

I had to fight the impulse to leave a note on her door or visit her loft to push her down on the bed to taste her. I wanted to hear her moans echoing from the bricks of my store as her green eyes flashed to mine before she came undone.

But I was stuck waiting and another week stacked. Bear saw her with Kaylee one night at Yeti's Spaghetti, sharing a pizza. I was too scared to ask Viv if she had seen her around; her meddling would ruin everything. When I helped Harley finish the pottery barn, I half hoped she'd be at the cabin with Kaylee, but she wasn't. It was like she vanished. She was gone as soon as she appeared in my life.

In the middle of May, I got a text that would thaw the freeze.

Bear: Hey man, your girl is over at Tilly's dirty dancing with Kaylee. She's drunk off her ass. Hank is swatting them with a broom and making them dance to that Eagles song. Everyone's laughing, even them.

Bear: Boyd is circling them like a buzzard. Get here quick.

I left Kiszka at my cabin and rage-drove into town. Stepping into the tavern, there she was, my fucking gorgeous girl, grinding with Kaylee in a scene that looked straight out of Coyote Ugly or some damn porno. Their legs open, scissoring down with the winding of their hips as they moved together chest to chest. Their hair swung while they threw their heads back in laughter.

Rosie was wearing a long slinky black skirt with a slit on the side and a hunter-green top that was all strappy and sexy. It showed off her back, and various tattoos filled her arms and shoulder blades, making me want to kiss the ink. She hooked a leg over Kaylee's hip and leaned gracefully back in a dip while Kaylee ran a hand down Rosie's chest between her boobs. Her bare thigh on full display across Kaylee's hip made me groan. Both women disentangled with a fit of giggles and then held hands high above their heads while they shimmied their hips. It was then I saw Rosie's ass shaking perfectly to the beat, her hips rolling, her body moving in a way that was so hypnotic I had to blink hard to look away.

Glancing again, I saw Kaylee now in front of Rosie, swaying her butt into her while she bent over, twerking with a grin. I fished out my phone to text my brother.

Me: Kaylee's twerking at Tilly's.

He answered almost immediately.

Harley: On my way.

I side-stepped away from the entrance, hunting for Boyd. He was at the bar, unabashedly watching Rosie and Kaylee. Other people were dancing, so it wasn't out of left field that

the women were having a good time, but they were standing out. Either way, I didn't like that he was enjoying the show.

I ensured the girls' tab was closed, then went to Boyd. His sandy blonde hair receded, hanging on to his shiny forehead for dear life. He had a tiny upper lip, revealing overly white teeth that looked bizarrely out of place with the rest of his mediocre face. His hand gripped a Coors bottle with a conveniently missing wedding ring. Bear saw where I was going and met me beside Boyd, each of us taking a stool on either side.

"Hi, Chase," I said mockingly.

"It's Officer Boyd."

"It's Chase. You pissed the bed at scout camp," I said.

"You jacked off in the showers the first day of gym class sophomore year," Bear added, tipping his drink back with the burn. I nodded that it was a good one.

"What do you want?" Boyd asked, looking between us, curling his upper lip over his blocky teeth.

Bear sighed. "We want you to stop being a creep."

"And to stop circling anything with a vulva in this town like a vulture," I added.

"What's a vulva? I don't even know what that is!" Boyd whined.

Bear and I both sighed in unison. That was too easy. I ran my hand over my chin, "Oh man, we know. We know." I glanced at Rosie, who was now waltzing with Kaylee to a song by Journey. "Listen, stop watching women dancing if you're not dancing. Stop cheating on your damn wife. Does she know you're here?"

"Our marriage is none of your business."

Ignoring his statement, I continued, "Viv mentioned you were snooping around her shop for a book about coffee."

Bear snorted. "So you think if you know about lattes, it will make up for stalking half the women working there? Dude,

that's so pathetic. The last thing they need is you lurking out by the dumpsters, threatening to write them a ticket so that you get their number."

Boyd opened his mouth to argue, but I clapped my hand against his back, leaning over to mutter in his ear while standing up. "I'm here to let you know that if you bother any of the women at Silver Springs in any way, I'll be shoving your nuts down your throat."

Bear rumbled with amusement next to us. Boyd turned to look up at me. His beady eyes were glossy from his cheap beer. "Is that how you speak to an officer of the law?"

"No, it's how I speak to a piece of shit—who's also a piece of shit with a badge. Shocking, I know. Now get fucked."

Bear got up with me, returning to his regular seat with our friends as I walked closer to the women. Rosie did a double take. "Carsuuun?" she slurred.

"Hey, Ro, it's time to go."

They both looked at each other from where they embraced and parroted the unintentional rhyme in unison, "Ro time to go!" They held each other's waists while arching back in laughter, swaying, and almost falling over. I stepped closer to pull them apart like wet noodles.

"Ohmygawsh Carsuuun you," Kaylee hiccupped, "you look sooooo much," she hiccupped again, "like Har-ley." Her Southern accent was popping out, making it even funnier.

"Yeah, it's almost like we're brothers."

Rosie loved that one. She snorted and gave me a side hug. She was an adorable drunk.

Kaylee went on, "Do-do you, do you have a big 'ol dick like your bruthaaar?" She erupted in a cackle and fell into me. I caught her and propped her back up.

Rosie gasped and swatted at Kaylee. "You caaan't jus ask tha!" She bashfully looked at my groin and then at my face with a giggle.

With an arm around each woman, I stepped closer to the door, trying not to scare them away from leaving, knowing they'd get skittish if I were too obvious.

Harley opened the door, spotting us immediately. Kaylee's hollering twang filled the tavern with a gleeful ring. "HAR-LEEEY! BIG DICK DADDYYYY!"

Bear's laughter boomed behind me. Harley caught Kaylee as she launched herself at him. Without pretense, he lifted her over his shoulder like a gunnysack, casually grabbing a handful of her ass so her short sundress wouldn't move. Her arms swung down his back in resignation.

"Did you give her tequila?" he asked in horror, his face making me finally crack.

"I wasn't here for most of it, but the tab said she had three shots of it and something called a Slippery Nipple." I swayed with Rosie falling into me after trying to reach Kaylee.

"Dooon't lift me. I'll puke," she warned. I wrapped both arms around her to keep her still, causing her to nuzzle into my pec as I put on my best stoic face.

Harley sucked in a worried breath. He was a man on duty. "You know in the movie *Gremlins*, how the little creatures can't get wet after midnight, or else they multiply and cause havoc?"

"Yeah," I answered, puzzled.

"That's Kaylee with tequila. She can never have it. Especially after midnight." He turned to yell back at her from where she draped over his shoulder. "Huh, woman?"

"Youuuuuh can gih me wet after midnighhh," Kaylee garbled behind him.

"The only thing you're getting tonight is a grilled cheese sandwich when we get home," Harley said with a subtle squeeze of her ass. "Do you mind getting her back safe?" he asked, looking at Rosie falling asleep. I nodded, carefully urging her to walk.

The women mumbled something to each other while we exited the tavern in separate directions. I strolled with Rosie, wrapping one arm around her waist while she leaned into me in drunken silence.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m liiike, so so fine.” She snorted at herself, then started singing, “So sweet, so fine, so nice!” It was a line from a Greta song. She tried to sing more of it but got distracted when she looked up at me with a dopey smile. “I haaaven’t seen you. Handsome.” She tried to reach for my face but slapped it instead.

I ignored the sting, blinking it away. “Yeah, it’s been a bit, huh?”

She explained they had a staff bonding night at Tilly’s. She and Kaylee were the last ones standing. Closer to my store, Rambo ran across the parking lot with his family, causing Rosie to shriek. I distracted her by dancing with her to the door. She loved that and tried to grab my ass.

Once I got her inside, she looked around before calling, “Kiiiiiszzkaaaa!” with a heavy tongue.

“He’s not here, sweetheart. He’s at my cabin.”

“Oh,” she frowned, breaking my heart.

“But he misses you, so do I.”

“Good,” she huffed and made her way to the stairs.

“Can I carry you?”

“No!” She got on all fours and started her way up. She handed me her purse with a feminine grunt by the fourth step.

“I could get you up in no time. Let me help.”

“No! Yoooouuu already fixed my door and hung my rose. Moun’ain man.”

Why was she keeping score of how I helped her in the past?

I followed her up the stairs, helping her stand at the top. Each time I'd been in her loft, it smelled like a fucking dream. Like her, the fragrance haunted me because it was earthy, spicy, and straight-up witchy.

Turning on a light, I looked around. Not much had changed, but things were more decorated. The bed was in the corner, far from the door, right up against the wall with windows overlooking Main Street. The fact that she could see where she worked from her loft would suck on her days off. It left her with no place to retreat. The realization made me sad for her.

Aside from the gridlock, she made the loft homey by using deep jewel tones and secondhand items that looked like they had a story. At the foot of her bed was a comfy loveseat. Across from her queen-sized bed were a modest-sized TV and ladder bookcases. She positioned the TV and bookcases to not cover our old Kouris & Sons mural out of respect.

She was a damn good woman, even if she wasn't mine. Yet.

Next to her bed, she had a dresser with crystals, a salt lamp, a wooden display with little bottles full of herbs, and a cool vase with peacock feathers. Since most walls were brick, she didn't have much on display except a huge lavender and black macrame hanging.

"Do you like my witchy abode?" she asked, extending her arm like Vana White on some gameshow.

"Yes, you make everything pretty." When I said that, I couldn't help but tuck some hair behind her ear. She smiled at me and then almost tripped, trying to walk alone. I knelt, loving the way she braced herself on my shoulders as I freed her feet from the strappy contraptions she wore. Her feet had roses and lilies tattooed on the tops of them, her toenails an inky black. I wanted to rub her arches, knowing they probably hurt even in her stupor, but I figured that'd be crossing a line.

Now flatfooted, she boldly walked herself to the bathroom. "I won't puke, promise. Jus' need to pee."

I smiled at her drunken proclamation and got her a glass of water. “Can I get you pajamas or something?” I yelled out, opening the top drawer of her dresser without thinking. Rows of bras and underwear filled it with a satin bag that probably had a vibrator. I closed it, sucking in a deep breath, only to turn to see her strutting out of the bathroom without her skirt on while she coiffed her hair up in a bun. I faced the kitchen counter, reminding myself that when I saw her perfect ass, I wanted her to be stone-cold sober. As she walked past me, I got a whiff of minty toothpaste. That was a good sign. She probably wasn’t too far gone if she could brush her teeth.

The slight snapping of her top filled the air, then the scrape of a drawer opening. “All clear,” she murmured, sounding less drunk. She wore a giant Poison band T-shirt with bleach splatters and holes. It hung off one shoulder but still covered her body like a nightgown. She was so cute and cool, even when she wasn’t trying.

I turned off the overhead lights so her loft was lit only by the amber glow of the salt lamp. She shuffled over to me with open arms, wanting a hug. I wrapped her up, loving how sweet she was drunk.

“Thanks for getting me home, big guy.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m glad you had a fun time.” She didn’t break the hug, so I asked, “Are you liking Pine Bluff now that it’s been a bit?” I hoped she was getting out into nature and making friends.

She broke the hug. “Yeah. It’s a charming place. I like the girls I work with. Hey, you smell good, by the way.” She plunked down on her bed, taking the glass of water I handed her. After a testing sip, she squinted at me, patting the bed beside her. I reluctantly sat down and tipped her glass, urging her to drink more. She wiped her mouth on her forearm. “Why do you care if I like Pine Bluff?”

“Because I care about you.”

“But I didn’t go on that date with you. Remember?”

“I still care about you. I want you to have a good life here, even if I’m not a part of it.” It was the truth.

“What if...what if I want you to be a part of it?”

“You’re drunk. You don’t know what you want.”

She slumped her shoulders. “No, like for real, I want you.” She grabbed the short chin hairs of my beard. “I want to sit on your face.” She lifted her hand, realizing she said that last part out loud. “Sorry, I mean—”

“I’d like that too,” I said, kissing her hand to hide my smile.

“We can just tell Kaylee and Harley. We’ll be like—hey, life happens, and guess what, Harley? I want to fuck your brother. He’s cute. He makes me laugh, and I’m the only person he will talk to. That has to mean something.” She blinked slowly, getting rummy.

“You said you weren’t ready to date.”

“Oh, I am now. I can’t stop thinking about you. You’re so thoughtful, funny, and smart. And handsome.” She ran a little hand over my cheek. “You have the prettiest eyes and a good soul.”

I smiled at her drunken confession, knowing I couldn’t take it seriously. “Thank you. But you said the timing wasn’t right, and I really can’t get burned again—”

She crawled into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I was terrified. But I need to take a risk. You’re worth the risk. I am so ready. Are you?”

I grappled with her confession, praying it was drunken truth and not desperation. I fiddled with a hole in her sleeve, “You know I am.”

Her sleepy eyes drifted to my mouth. “Will you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Kiss me,” she said breathily.

“Not that.”

“Liar.”

“Cute drunk girl who can’t consent.”

She glowered at me while I moved her off my lap to get another glass of water. She slinked inside the covers with a grumble, miserably flopping against her pillow. “But I’m drunk. If I kiss you now, I can blame it on that. I won’t have to feel guilty.”

Handing the glass back to her, I made an offer. “I will let you kiss me if you drink another glass.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you’ll be horny *and* dehydrated. You’re gorgeous, but I doubt that’s a good look on anyone, even you.”

She grabbed the glass from my hand. “You want to get me wet?” she asked with a slow drunk blink.

I stared at her lips, only able to hum an affirmative, “Mm-hmm.”

“Good,” she said before drinking with more determination, offering the empty cup back. “So, you’ll go out with me?”

“We will figure it out when you feel better, sweetheart. You need to sleep.”

She turned away from me, facing the wall as she burrowed into bed. “I’m cold. Will you hold me?”

I rubbed her back, setting the glass down. “Rosie, babe, you’re drunk, and I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Please? I won’t try to kiss you or anything, I promise.”

Her plea tore at my heart. I pulled out my keys, wallet, and phone, placing them on her dresser. I wanted to have Rosie in my arms, but this felt too soon and not on my terms. With her under the covers and me on top, I slid behind her, wrapping her up as the little spoon. She let out a little sigh of contentment, making my breathing deepen, too. This was unlike Rosie. She was guarded, needing no one.

“You’re safe with me,” I whispered before kissing her neck right below her ear.

“I know,” was all she whispered to the wall. Her voice sounded choked up, like it was hard admitting it to herself.

I nuzzled her hair, loving her soft curls brushing against my nose. “I’ve got you.”

“I know,” she whispered again.

Her body relaxed, and tiny snores escaped her after a few moments. I needed to head home, even if I had to drive back in a matter of hours for work. Someone could’ve seen me walk her into the store only never to exit, then put two and two together. Staying was so stupid and dangerous. But with her in my arms, I fell into a deep sleep before I could fight it.

A dream barreled into my mind, feeling a little too familiar. It was the dreamtalking one from the night Rosie sent me the tub selfie. Like last time, the three scenes played out before me. Starting with me gazing up at her beautiful face from between her legs, then the sight of her pumping my cock with her delicate tattooed fingers, and finally, her hair strewn like flames across my chest as we held each other panting in ecstasy.

The sounds of our inhalations morphed into the crackle of the fire that popped and spat as flames erupted around us. Something burnt and acrid stung my nose as a blazing heat surrounded my body. It was too hot yet indirect, like when you hover your hand above a stove. Along with the warmth, the sensation of sinking overtook my body.

The crackles morphed into screaming. Endless cries rang, never pausing for breath. I peered down at Rosie in my arms. Her hair was now scarlet flames, whipping my skin in feverish lashes, her eyes glazed white in unseeing terror. Her mouth slacked with gurgling noises of pain as she clawed at my chest, trying to free herself from my arms while sinking with me. Bloody tears poured from her eyes, etching on her skin that cracked like the desert floor, disintegrating into powder as flames erupted, consuming her body while wailing pounded my ears.

The screams were coming from me, both in the dream and as I woke up in the loft beside her.

It was then I realized I couldn't love Rosie.

Not now.

Not ever.

Chapter Fifteen



I had the granddaddy of all hangovers when I woke up. I winced at the sunlight and immediately flopped over. I had a fuzzy memory of Carson screaming in the bed next to me during the night, but I figured it was a drunken dream. I recalled he got me home safe but wouldn't kiss me and how I spilled my guts about wanting to date him. That made me wince for reasons other than my hangover.

I had been busy with work and getting closer to Kaylee and Azalea the past few weeks. He never came up, and they usually talked about Harley and Azalea's friend Noah. It made me feel like an outsider. Kaylee would hint that I should date Dane, and I'd have to pretend to entertain the idea.

But Dane wasn't the guy I'd daydream about when I was doing mundane tasks at work. It was Mr. Brooding Mountain Man. In his absence, I realized how much I cherished his presence. I deeply missed him. Hell, I even missed Kiszka. I battled the temptation to leave notes on his desk or orchestrate a damsel moment where I'd need his help fixing something in my loft to get him alone. Before I could, I'd talk myself out of it. I doubted he wanted to date me now that I had turned him down and acted so cagey. I wished I could've pushed through my fears when he asked me out. It was like wanting to scream but not being able to. Trauma is tricky that way. It hangs around when you need it gone. It reminds you of what you've lived through each day, but not without a cost.

The truth is, I thought of Carson a lot. Over the past two weeks, I lived in this weird gray area of wanting to run into him while avoiding him at all costs. I had mastered Houdini stealth levels, sneaking in and out of the hardware store. One morning, I saw him running ahead of me on a trail, so I hung back to avoid him. I even turned down Kouris family dinner invites from Kaylee to give him space.

My mom visited a few days last week and stayed at a cute little place called Stonebriar Inn. Carson was in his office when I showed her my loft, and I couldn't help but notice how polite he was. He stood to greet her and shook her hand. She got him to talk, and watching him answer some of her questions about the town's history was captivating. Once in private, she gushed about how handsome and respectful he was. It made my feelings for him more complex.

When my mom wasn't in town, we had a standing tradition called Witchy Wednesdays. We'd video chat while eating a similar dinner and talk about life and witchcraft. Slowly, earnestly, I was trying to patch my life back together after feeling so broken from Boston. I couldn't tell anyone the extent of what happened there. It wouldn't get me anywhere. It felt like a burden I should deal with alone. The recent blow of not dating Carson was one more thing to deal with in silence. But after last night, I was hopeful. His patience and the way he held me showed he still cared.

After trudging downstairs, a whiny Kiszka walked around me in circles. Carson rounded the corner of his office with a tortured look. I was confused when he hugged me because his energy was frigid, his silence deafening. I could tell something was off by the way he buried his face in the crook of my neck and sucked in a breath as if he was etching the moment in his mind.

I broke the embrace, "What's wrong?"

"I care about you, Rosie." He stepped back from me while he held my hands, rubbing my knuckles with his thumbs. His tone made my stomach drop.

"I care about you, Carson. I was—"

“We can’t do this.”

“This?” I asked.

“Us. We can’t do us. We can’t talk, flirt, anything.” He pulled his hands from mine, shoving them in his front pockets.

“Why?”

“Listen, I can’t be with you. It’s for the best. You need to trust that.”

Chills ran all over my body, prickling along my temples. Kiszka’s wet nose poked my thigh, low cries escaping him. “Why? I thought we agreed to try again last night. Did I say something—”

“We both knew this wasn’t right. We need to realize that before anyone gets hurt.”

I blinked back tears. “Too late.”

“I’m sorry.” His voice was flat like the line his lips formed. He shrugged in mastered indifference, finally weaponizing it against me like he did everyone else.

“It’s too late for sorry. You know things about me no one else does. I gave you access to me, like my heart, my story... my body.”

His lashes met in a slow blink as he swallowed hard. “Give it to the right man next time.” And from there, he turned around and pushed the swinging doors open wide, the sunlight blinding me, forcing me to see the harsh light of day.



Days went by with no texts, books, or loaded looks. Kiszka was nowhere in sight, and the office light was always off. Even though I was living above him, it was like he

disappeared. I was too proud to go into the store to track him down for answers. I'd be a pathetic crying mess, so it didn't matter.

His last name was the first thing I saw when I woke up with the vintage mural across the loft from my bed. After three days, I nailed up a tapestry to cover it.

I moved tables around at the coffee shop so I could put a display of Kaylee's pottery to block my view of the fire crotch faerie. I couldn't run past the spot where he first kissed me in the forest. I couldn't listen to Greta. When I did laundry, I choked back a sob when I saw my cheesy wolf shirt with the russet mark, his mark, still on the inside.

It was over too soon before it could start. That's what hurt the most, along with the lack of reasons. It made me feel untouchable, like damaged goods. Maybe Carson didn't want to date the girl involved in Kaylee's affair. Perhaps I was too guarded? I needed to be in the past.

I asked myself why he did what he did, but I couldn't find answers. It created a numb feeling in me. The sadness quickly morphed into scorn. I renamed his drink and blared Garth Brooks in my loft on my days off. One night, I saw Rambo while out back. Out of spite, I left a trail of Wheat Thins to the backdoor and left it cracked open all night, hoping Carson would wake up to raccoon shit all over.

In my disdain for Carson, I'd have pockets of deep heartache. I almost wished I had dated him, so it was worth all this torment. To remedy my pain, I planned a healing spell of self-love to pour good energy back into myself. That way, it wouldn't matter what he did. This was my fresh start. No man could take that away from me, dammit!

On the third night of the waxing crescent moon phase, I gathered green candles and chrysocolla crystals, both great for healing heartache. I also mixed some lavender, rose, and calendula to burn on a charcoal disc in my mini cauldron. As I squared my shoulders, I set my intentions and lit the candles and herbs. Halfway through the ritual, I had to pee. When I

returned from the bathroom, the entire macrame above my altar was on fire.

I froze, staring at the blaze. It was already eating up my entire altar, flames licking the wood, smoke expanding wider. I ran to my bed to pluck my phone up to call 911 as the fire devoured the ropes of the macrame, charring the brick wall, angrily popping and sizzling. While on the phone with dispatch, I grabbed what I could around the flames like the vase Kaylee made me, yelping when the fire got too close to my hand.

Coming to my senses, I remembered I had a fire extinguisher beneath the kitchen sink. Pinning the phone between my face and shoulder, I sprayed the can, dousing the flames. My eyes burned, and my lungs stung. Cinders still flashed with smoke now thick in my loft. Coughing, I realized I had to leave.

“Ma’am, you need to exit the building. Where are you located?”

Rushing out the back door, I cringed, “I’m at Kouris Hardware on Borrel Avenue and Main Street.”

Chapter Sixteen



I got a call late one night from my buddy Rhett at the fire department. He told me a fire had happened in the loft above my store. I sat straight up in bed, seeing black spots, thinking about my dream of her dying amongst flames. I asked if Rosie was safe, and he explained she was the one who called. She was with Frankie at the clinic, getting checked for smoke inhalation.

I headed into town, hating that I somehow did this to her with my shitty luck. If Rosie ever got hurt because of me, I couldn't live with myself. Hearing she was okay, my worry morphed into dread over the damage to my store. Any attack on the store was an attack on me. It was more than my income; it was my legacy. People don't understand how heavy Greek guilt is. My pappou and yia yia sacrificed so much, moving to America. I was obligated to keep the store operating. My brother went the ranger route, and my sister went into nursing. I had several cousins, but they all passed on helping me. Some went to college, some moved, and some straight-up admitted the idea of managing a hardware store was boring as fuck. Their decisions were valid but also a pain in my ass.

I might be cursed and hated around town, but none of that could change one unshakeable truth—I was a dutiful son. I had no choice; it was one of my only redeeming qualities. I might be a cranky asshole, but I stay when most people leave.

Rhett was waiting for me in the back lot, the firetruck parked along the side street. The fire charred some brick inside, damaged the ceiling, and ruined her dresser. He said it was caused by candles because, of course, my little firecracker was playing with flames.

Due to safety and regulations, I'd have to close my store while the damage was repaired and structural safety was ensured. I didn't mind. I was glad both Rosie and the store were mostly unscathed. Rhett hung around to escort her to get some of her things to stay with Azalea at Stonebriar Inn. I thanked the fire department for their help and caught Rosie near her 4Runner.

"Are you okay?" I asked, looking her over for any signs she was hurt. I reached out a hand to touch her and shoved it in my pocket instead.

"I'm fine. I'm sorry I almost burnt your store down. I know how much it means to you, and I'm truly sorry." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Candles?" I teased, enjoying talking to her, even if it was about something as shitty as this.

"It was for a ritual. Witchy stuff, you know, candle magic."

I shook my head, mumbling, "*Magissa...*" under my breath in amusement.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

I wish she'd stop being so defensive. I couldn't date her, especially now. But it was hard not to feel like a fool around her. She was so damn tempting.

"What did you just say in Greek?"

I called her a witch but wouldn't let her know that detail. "Listen, be safe, okay? And when you return to the store, maybe ease off the candles, okay Sparky?"

She scoffed and slammed the trunk door. "You don't get to stand here and talk to me like a condescending prick! Whispering shit in Greek and mansplaining fire safety to me

after already catching me naked in the woods.” Her mouth went in a tense line. “After already catching me naked with a raccoon. Oh, and let’s not forget when I was drunk off my ass! I get it. You’ve seen me at my worse, and it’s really fucking unfair. But you don’t have to pretend to care about me. We both know I’m in the way of your life here.”

“What?” I spat.

She opened the back driver’s side door, arranging stuff on the seat. “I’m just in the way. Your precious store is fine. Okay? And I will never breathe a word of what we did to Kaylee or Harley. They never have to know we had a thing, that we kissed. Forget it. It’s our dirty little secret.”

“It’s not like that!”

“Oh, yes, it is!” she hissed, scowling at me.

I pointed at my store behind me. “Was this some revenge plot? For hurting you?”

“How dare you accuse me of that! Oh my god! You’re unbelievable!” She grumbled as she fought to put on a leather jacket.

“You’re unbelievable, woman! You’ve tortured me since you came to this godforsaken place.” I flung my arms out. “If I’m some miserable prick, leave me alone. Leave my store alone, and if you can’t manage to do that, then fucking move!”

Her nostrils flared as she sat in the driver’s seat. “You’re not my landlord!”

“You’re not my problem anymore!”

“I was never yours. I was never your *anything*. You made that abundantly clear.” And with that, she slammed the door and drove off.

Chapter Seventeen



Frankie cleared me of smoke inhalation at the clinic, and I bunked at Azalea's apothecary since Stonebriar Inn was booked with tourists. Her kooky great-aunt Eugenia owned the inn, and Azalea was set to inherit it someday. In the meantime, she helped out when she could. She used the old groundskeeper's quarters as an apothecary. There was a bathroom and enough room for me to put a cot, but no kitchen. It was better than bunking with Kaylee or someone else. I didn't want to be in the way.

The nights I stayed at the apothecary were more disorienting than usual. I would lay in bed, looking up at the vines on the ceiling, thinking of Carson. I missed and hated him.

After almost a week, Frankie told me I could move back into the loft. I arranged to replace some things, like my mattress, because of the smoke stench. But I was shocked to find a small dresser with roses carved into each drawer already in my loft. She must've scored it at an estate sale. God damn, those Kouris kids were so thoughtful.

The brick was lighter from the restoration, and the floor was unscathed. Most of my clothes were in the laundry when the fire happened, so I didn't lose much except swimsuits, workout clothes, and underwear. More than anything, I was grateful it didn't ruin the hardware store.

The next day, I worked the closing shift with Poe and Kaylee. It was a Sunday night, so it was calmer than usual.

Kaylee entered the café, opening her burnout velvet kimono to reveal a Smokey the Bear T-shirt. I studied her in confusion while she chuckled and stuck out her tongue. “Watch this. Harley has a love-hate relationship with Smokey because of the ranger gig.”

Like clockwork, he entered the shop with his new work dog, a German shepherd named Storm. His eyes ripped to Kaylee with an amused smile while she continued holding her kimono open, dancing like a flasher. He pulled her up in a hug, her feet momentarily dangling while he whispered something in her ear that made her giggle.

I looked away, busying myself alongside Poe.

“I get why she’d move here to be with a lumbersnack like that,” she murmured while wiping the counter down.

“A what?” I asked.

“A hot lumberjack. A tasty piece of ass. A lumbersnaaaack,” Poe whispered with extra emphasis, making us both giggle.

Kaylee looked over, oblivious. “Have fun on your date,” I offered, knowing she was leaving early tonight. Seeing Harley open the door for her, I had to look away again.

Sensing we were about to close, the customers cleared out. I told Poe she could leave early. She didn’t argue. I continued prepping everything for tomorrow when the door opened. Carson’s gorgeous eyes made my stomach flip before I could fight it.

“Hey,” was his stunning opening line.

My body hummed, hearing his deep voice. *Don’t betray me now, girl!* I pleaded with myself. Squaring my shoulders, I asked, “What can I help you with?”

“I came over to say I’m sorry. I said you weren’t my problem—”

The door opened again with a woman walking in. Carson side-stepped away from the counter, hunkering at a nearby table. As the woman approached, I could tell she was around

my age and, on some level, pretty. But her hair hung in a boring bob with a flat black color, like bad box dye. Her skin was chalky white and stretched over her bony clavicles. She looked boring as fuck, like a walking Banana Republic ad.

“I need a large hot latte,” she said without a hello or eye contact. Or please or thank you. Even by New England standards, that was fucking rude.

“Okay, anything else?”

“No.”

“What’s your name for the order?” I had a theory that some names were bitchier than others.

“Aimee.” She barked out the spelling, “A-I-M-E-E.” My theory was correct.

I made the drink in silence, then slid it across the counter with the friendliest smile I could muster. She picked up the cup and ripped the lid to splash me viciously. “That’s for Tyler, you fucking cunt!!” she yelled.

I yelped as I shielded my face with my forearms as the burning liquid splattered my skin. “What the actual fuck?” I shrieked, grabbing a towel to wipe myself down.

I rushed around the counter as Carson shot to his feet. She tried to throw the empty cup at me, but he caught it like a ninja in mid-air. “Get the fuck out of here!” he bellowed, scowling down at her.

Aimee snickered, holding up her phone as if she was taking a video of me. I lunged, swatting it out of her hand and flinging it across the shop. My best guess was this was Tyler’s new chick here to insult me.

“I take it he sent you?” I asked.

“I’m his girlfriend if that’s what you’re asking, you stupid whore!”

Frenetic energy buzzed around us as she stepped to fetch her phone, distancing herself. I walked closer, herding her towards the door. “Lovely, well, enjoy your trauma. It looks like you’re made for each other, you fucking twat!”

“You’re just a jealous bitch!” She bent to grab her phone, then pushed a row of Kaylee’s ceramics off the shelf. I gasped as they shattered. She delighted in my reaction, lunging for another row, destroying ass and titty vases in one sweep.

“Why did you come up here? Do you want us to take his picture down or something?” I asked as Carson inched between us, ready to break up a catfight. With each step, ceramic pieces crunched under our boots.

Aimee rolled her eyes, “Like I fucking care what you do in this shithole! It’s just a bunch of freaks claiming they’re witches. Pathetic! You didn’t keep Tyler happy. That’s your own damn problem. There’s no need to humiliate him!”

“Wow, your internalized misogyny is showing. Tyler cheated on me and assaulted two people. If you weren’t such a hag, I’d be worried for your safety!”

Carson extended his arms between us like a cage.

Aimee’s face screwed up. “He’s a lawyer. He could’ve set you up with a nice life. Now, you show off your trashy tattooed body, making coffee for construction workers. Fucking slut!”

I shrieked, pouncing at her, stopped by Carson’s arms encircling my waist, reeling me back while he roared, “Now that’s enough!”

She continued, “Everyone is raving about this place online, and I’m fucking sick of it. Stop talking about him!”

I shouted, twisting in Carson’s arms, “Or what, he’s going to sue us? With his sketchy law degree? Honey, if he were a good lawyer, he wouldn’t have taken a bet to fuck Kaylee to get a promotion at work!”

Carson had had enough. He deposited me on the ground and approached Aimee, towering over her with a gritted jaw. “Listen, if a simple coffee shop disrupts your fragile sensibilities, maybe you need to assess your own shit, lady. You know that guy who broke Tyler’s jaw?”

Aimee fixed the purse strap on her bony shoulder. “Yes,” she hissed.

“That was my brother. And if you can believe it, he’s the nice one. If anyone from your camp comes up here again, they’ll wish they only had a broken jaw to deal with. I promise you; I’m not someone you want to fuck with.” He pointed back at me. “I would take a bullet for this woman, and this whole town would protect this shop. You’re fucking with the wrong people. Now get in your stupid BMW I’m sure you sucked a dick for, and drive your dogface back to Boston.”

Emotions clogged my throat, almost distracting me from the painful burns. Aimee mumbled something and turned to open the door. Carson followed her, standing in the doorway until she raced off, blaring Ariana Grande.

“Thank you,” I said as he turned to look at me. “But I could’ve handled that on my own.”

“You shouldn’t have to. Where the fuck is Kaylee?” he barked.

“On a date with your fucking brother!” I barked back as I threw down my towel, both angry that he asked and at my answer.

His gaze fixed on my collarbone. It hurt, but I was more embarrassed than anything. He sucked in a deep breath and gestured toward his store. “I have a first aid kit in my office —”

“Please leave.”

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m also about to lose my shit. Please leave.” I turned away to pick up the ceramics with my towel. I fought tears building, a sob shaking my voice when I pleaded, “Carson, for the love of god, please leave!”

He waited a few seconds, then shut the door. I cleaned up and kicked myself in the ass for not having a first-aid kit in the shop. Searching for solutions, I realized I had an aloe vera plant at home that could ease the burns.

Perhaps it was childish, but a part of me kept thinking how unfair Kaylee wasn’t around for that act of revenge. Silver Springs was our shared creation. Kaylee didn’t get burned. She

was on a fucking date with her lumbersnack. She was living her best life while I defended us and dealt with loneliness, even though in the love triangle, I was the girlfriend, not the other woman. I took a deep breath, stuffing down my jealousy and resentment. New tears pooled while I swung open the backdoor of the dark hardware store, only to walk into Carson's broad chest. A choked cry fled my throat, blowing my cover.

He wrapped his arms around me without pretense. A rush of comfort flooded my body, causing my eyes to flutter close. A deep breath filled my lungs, his woody scent passing my nose and overpowering the latte funk that clung to my shirt. Looking up at him, I didn't know if I wanted to cry or kiss him. Unable to decide, I tucked myself into him again. His arms clutched me closer, his warmth blissfully seeping into me while his steady heartbeat thrummed.

I pulled away, coming to my senses as I wiped at the tears. I was supposed to be mad. Carson stepped back and flicked on the lights in his office, so a golden ray lit the hallway. He fetched a small tube of cream and gently slathered it on my arms without asking. "Can we please talk?" His brow creased with worry as his eyes scanned my décolletage. It was annoying seeing him worried about me. I was a blubbering mess.

I sniffled. "We...we don't have to do this."

"Do what?"

"You don't have to pretend you're concerned that a bitch hurt my feelings and took out her frustration on me. I'm a grown-ass adult." I shuddered with a sob. "Kaylee and I knew retaliation was a risk when opening our shop."

"You're also human. And I wouldn't be pretending. I am concerned about you."

His earnest tone pulled at me, but I battled it. "You don't have to be."

"You're only saying that because you're not used to people looking out for you."

I scoffed, pulling my arms away from him, “Do you realize how condescending that is?”

“Do you realize how defensive you are?”

Unfazed yet determined, he stepped closer, walking us to the wall. I stared up at him in stunned silence as his legs framed mine, his groin pressed against my waist. His fingers traveled to pick up a curl resting on my collarbone, making me suck in air through my nose as he grazed my neck. Slowly, he slathered the cream over the burns on my chest. I didn’t know what felt better, his touch or the soothing balm.

His eyes flashed up from my neck to meet mine, piercing through his lashes as a pale glimmer, even in the dim light. I grabbed the back of his head and brought him to me for a kiss. His lips silenced my dread, helping me forget my awful situation. We stayed there kissing until both of us were out of breath.

He broke the kiss, whispering, “I don’t like how stressed you always look or that you got burned. I don’t like the idea of anyone being mean to you.”

His eyes were soulful with a hint of concern. I couldn’t help but lick my lips, staring at them. “How could you possibly help me with stress?”

A smirk crossed his face before he said, “Oh, I think you already know what stress relief I could provide you, sweetheart.”

I rolled my eyes with a snort, pushing him away once more. “Of course, typical guy! Like you’re a gift to humanity or something. Like I don’t have something battery operated that can do what you only wish—”

A switch flipped in him as he stared down at me. “It would be in your best interest not to make assumptions. If it were up to me, I’d have you writhing in my bed, all flushed and fucked so well you couldn’t stand.” He shook his head, stepping back to plunk the bottle of cream on his desk before yanking a leash off the hook. “You know what, never mind. I’m cursed, and

you're not ready for anything beyond your self-imposed martyr shit."

Kiszka now stood between us, his whines getting louder.

"Martyr shit? That's rich from a guy who stays in Pine Bluff as a miserable, grumpy ass, and for what? To run a store your grandpa opened 70 years ago?"

He turned around, "Yeah, it's called thinking about what would make others happy, selflessness, consideration. Maybe fucking try it sometime." He said something in Greek, prompting Kiszka to follow him out the back door.

I ran upstairs and shrieked, kicking off my shoes, then hurried over to the bathtub, discreetly looking out the window to see his headlights still in the parking lot. I wished he would come back, but he pulled away seconds later.

And for the second time since moving here, I slumped in my bathtub with the hollow ache of loneliness.

Chapter Eighteen



My rage was replaced by heartache in the wake of the loft fire. I thought maybe, just maybe, the loft fire was my curse, and she had dodged it. And perhaps I could try to be with her again.

I visited her at Silver Springs to apologize for what I said, hoping we could be civil since it was a public place. But my plan didn't work because she was too busy dodging a latte chucked at her by Tyler's new chick the second I arrived.

Seeing Rosie's pale skin angry, pink, and blotchy with the burns was distressing. Luckily, they weren't too bad, but I wanted to kiss her all over and hold her. Before I could, she wiggled out, reminding me why I couldn't find peace with her around. It catapulted me back into my rage, angry at myself that I couldn't win either way.

I knew, on some level, I would never be that lucky.

I decided to fuck with her business as she did mine. She was determined to drive me mad, and I would ensure she was right there with me. To fight loving her, I had to loathe her. Following an idea, I texted Bear, hoping he was up for plotting.

On the day of my attack, around noon, the back door of the hardware store clicked like someone was pushing on the handle. I smiled, booking it to the front of the store in time to see her entering with a frown. "Why is the back door blocked?" she asked through gritted teeth.

“Oh, damn, sorry, I forgot to move some boxes. We’ve had so much going on after someone tried to burn my store down.”

She flipped some hair off her shoulder. “It’s a safety hazard.”

I shrugged. “Honest mistake.”

She pointed at the sign behind my shoulder that read No Cell Phones, “What in the Luke Danes shit is that?”

“You’re not the first person to say that,” I replied dryly, putting my hands on my hips. “You try helping someone find a specific part for a water pump while the dumbass is having an entirely separate conversation on the phone and get back to me on how enjoyable it is.”

Her eyes darted to the counter, finally falling into my trap: a box of Bear’s reject geodes in a small wooden treasure chest. I grabbed chunks of gravel to put in with it and a purposefully pathetic sign that read Rocks \$1 in Sharpie. I knew calling them rocks would get a rise out of her. They were stones to her, not rocks.

Her nostrils flared as she walked to the display, picking up a piece of a yellow and white geode that looked brittle. She grunted, examining it, causing Hank to chuckle. She whipped her head to glare at me, holding up the rock like evidence in a court case. “Fucker, this is baked amethyst! It’s not even real citrine! What the hell, man?”

“We are just keeping up with the competition, ma’am,” I said with saccharine innocence.

She picked up a stone that looked like bubbly, blistered turquoise. “With what? Fake shit?”

“A rock is a rock,” I said, approaching her at the counter.

“They are stones. Not rocks!” she said with a harsh squint before bolting to the back of the store, swinging the doors open to make her way to the vestibule. The area was quickly becoming our battleground. Our crossroads of chaos.

“What the fuck are you doing, Carson?”

“What do you mean?”

She flung her purse on the stairs and pulled at the four large boxes blocking the exit. They were heavy, so I was impressed when she shoved them, almost like you would push start a car in neutral to get it moving. I stood watching her, not hating the view of her bending over and heaving, knowing if I offered to help, she'd cut my arm off.

Once they were pushed to the sales floor and deemed my problem, she turned back to me, her eyes seething seas of green. "Don't you ever block the door again! I can make your life a living hell. I just choose not to!"

I swallowed hard and whispered, "You already have."

Her face twitched. "Good!" she said before continuing upstairs.

The next day, she had Hank page me to the front desk. As I approached her, she held out her hand and plopped three tumbled stones in my palm one at a time.

I snorted, "What are these?"

"Kunzite helps with emotional stability and empathy. Rhodonite helps you with forgiveness and emotional wounding. And blue lace agate helps one simply *talk*. Maybe together, they will magically turn you into less of a cranky asshole." She shared a happy glance with Hank while tossing her hair as she turned to walk out the door.

"She got you good!" Hank said as we both watched her crossing the street to Silver Springs.

I had to rip my gaze away from her perfect ass. "Not for long."

I followed her across the street, almost catching up to her. When I opened the door, I realized it was jam-packed with what felt like every woman within a hundred-mile radius. They all eyeballed me as I stood, taking in the confusing sight.

Someone pinched my ass. Before turning around, I already knew it was Viv. "Hey, Carsyboy, I'm so glad you decided to join us!"

“What is this?” I asked, stepping to the side to let her through the door, putting my arm around her frail shoulders to guard her from the crowd.

“Scornful Saturday!” she replied with a gleeful ring to her trembling voice. “Think of it as an open mic night to share dating stories. Dating men isn’t for the weak of heart, you know.”

We shifted ahead in line. I scanned the room once more, realizing I was the only guy. “Yeesh. Well, I don’t want to interrupt anything.”

“Don’t be silly!” Viv said, then yelled, “Excuse me! Senior citizen coming through!” butting everyone else in line, earning me even more side-eyed glances.

Andrea was at the register taking orders as Rosie and Poe frantically made drinks behind her. Upon seeing us, she beamed, “Hey Viv, the usual?”

“No, I have cotton mouth. I need my iced tea, please. Oh, and I’m paying for my hot date,” Viv said, winking at me before digging around in her purse.

Andrea giggled, tapping the screen. “And for you?” she asked.

It was then that Rosie approached the register, folding her arms.

“I uh...” I hesitated, looking up at the menu. The Dirty Reno was nowhere in sight. In its place was Rosie’s next trap. Clearing my throat, I continued ordering with as much indifference as possible. “I’ll take The *Valakas*.”

“The idiot?” Rosie said cheerily, picking up a cup.

“Oh, is that what that means?” Andrea asked, staring at the tablet with a scrunched brow.

Rosie shrugged, “Yeah, it’s in Greek or something,” she quipped, cocking an eyebrow at me before walking off.

Way to slap me with my own hand.

That was damn cold. Was I an idiot? Maybe. I certainly felt like one at this event as I waited with my ganja granny while some local townie cried into a karaoke mic about her boyfriend asking her to have a threesome with their Waffle House waitress. The second I escorted Viv to an empty seat by her book club pals, I escaped, shooting Rosie one last glare while plopping my full cup in the garbage.

I waited a couple of days for my next trap. One night, Rosie got off work in the evening and burst through the front door without the pretense of introducing herself to Skyler. “Again? Really?” she shouted.

I leaned against the counter, taking a long sip from a coffee cup, glad to see her burns were gone. She eyed next to the chest of rocks where I had set up a Keurig with shitty coffee and an even shittier sign that said Free Coffee.

She ripped the cup from my hands, taking a bold chug. She gagged, “This tastes like Satan’s ass crack. Better stick to selling nuts and bolts while scowling at people.” Skyler chuckled while she poured the rest into a potted plant by the newspapers.

I gestured at the fresh crime scene. “That could kill the plant.”

“Not my problem. Get better coffee.” She pushed the cup against my chest and left, Kiszka whimpering hot on her trail this time.

I caught up and lunged my arm in front of the loft entrance.

She scoffed, “I don’t know who pissed in your gyro, but you’ve got to take it down a notch.”

“Oh, a Greek joke I haven’t heard yet. What’s next, a Windex pun? Be lucky I don’t call you Glitter Tits in front of the whole town, lord knows that’s how I met you.”

Even in my fury, the flashback of her and Rambo made me want to laugh.

She twisted and glared up at me, fury in her voice. “You will regret this.”

“It sucks when someone fucks with your business, doesn’t it? Or when they disrupt your life for no reason other than torturing you.”

“You genuinely think I set the loft on fire on purpose?”

“It’s quite the coincidence.”

Kizzy barked at me, stomping a paw on the toe of my boot.

She shoved a finger at my chest. “I would never do that. You have no fucking clue what put me here and how much is riding on this. I didn’t have some business handed down from my *daddy* like you did.”

I seized her hand, gently holding it between us. “Don’t,” I said through gritted teeth as I continued, my speech clipped, “don’t, for one second, think I haven’t earned every fucking square inch of this place. Don’t ever accuse me of not working to get what I have in life.”

Realizing her hand was still in mine, I kissed it, then dropped it, knowing my action didn’t match my tone.

She stared at me, her face jerking. “Fine! But leave me the hell alone! Let me have some dignity to get into my fucking loft! What happened to the gentleman who helped me get home drunk?”

“I don’t know, what happened to the funny girl who talked to me for hours while painting the damn mural?”

We stared at each other, and then Skyler yelled for me to help, forcing me to leave.

Days passed, and I tried to put her out of my mind. I’d sometimes hear her come and go, but I never exited my office to make small talk. When I saw her cross the street, I’d try not to watch her saunter, hips rolling, hair swaying in the sunlight. And when I thought of something I wanted to tell her, I had to remind myself I didn’t do that anymore. We didn’t talk like we used to. That hurt the most.

I tried to forget all about Rosie, but it wasn’t working.

One afternoon, a package came for her. She had the day off work. I could tell because I heard her cleaning her place

earlier, blaring Garth fucking Brooks. When the delivery person dropped it off, I played dumb and signed for it. I figured it would be a great excuse to visit her, hoping to find a middle ground.

As I walked up the stairs, the sound of buzzing mixed with laughter filled the loft. I knocked hesitantly, only to hear her cheerfully say, “Come in!”

I swung the door open, hating my decision. Dane was shirtless, lying on her loveseat. Rosie sat on a short stool, leaning over his pec muscle. She wore black gloves and gripped a tattoo gun. A small table flanked her with various ink cartridges and an iPad propped up facing her, along with lamps aimed at Dane’s chest.

“What the fuck?” I breathed out. Rosie turned off the tattoo gun with an annoyed look. “What sketchy shit is this?” I asked.

She wiped Dane’s chest, revealing the crispest tattoo I’d ever seen in person like she slapped a damn photo on his skin. It was a black and gray hyper-realistic portrait of his dad, who had passed away. Instant regret flooded me.

Dane shot me a vicious look, nostrils flared, “Hey dude, you can just fucking leave, you know?”

Rosie rested both gloved hands on his bare chest. “Did you need something?”

“You have a package.” I flopped the padded envelope on her pub table. “Isn’t this a health code violation or some shit? Pretty sure Dane will give you Hep C.”

He started to get up, but she pushed his chest down while glaring at me. “That’s pretty rich coming from a guy who lets his husky loose in his hardware store and serves coffee from a crusty Keurig.”

Dane chuckled and caressed her arm, signaling for her to keep tattooing. She glanced down at him with a smile and started the gun back up, then flashed me a loaded look, lifting one of her delicately arched eyebrows.

As I turned to leave, her voice pierced over the buzz of the tattoo gun. “Oh, and Carson,” I turned back to look at her, “you can leave my packages on the steps. I will find them. No need to come up here and bother me.”

Dane chuckled while she sweetly stroked his chest with a clean paper towel, torturing me. I pulled the door shut, seeing red. I walked down to my office and picked up a carpentry pencil to do something with my hands. Flashes of her hands on him strobed in my mind as I snapped the pencil in half. Kizzy shoved his snout against my side, urging me to take him for a walk.

I couldn't believe Dane was in my store.

Even worse, in my girl's loft.

Anyone but Dane. Anyone.

Chapter Nineteen



“Good morning, Viviane! I brought you a drink.”

I wanted dirt on Carson. I needed to dish it back if he would keep taunting me with complimentary coffee and fake crystals. Tattooing Dane was the first shot, but I was hungry for more ammo. Asking Kaylee or any of my new friends would blow my cover, so my mom’s wisdom about finding a gossipy granny was my best option.

“Well, hell, you’re such a sweetheart!” She shuffled to the edge of her desk with open arms. I leaned in for a hug, needing some love. She pulled back with a happy gasp. “You’re wearing mugwort.” Her eyes crinkled with a playful smile.

“I am.” I leaned in closer. “What else?”

She hugged me again, letting out a sweet, motherly hum of happiness. “Dragon’s blood, frankincense, and something sweet...”

“Myrrh.”

“Ah! Frankincense and myrrh! A classic!”

“Those wise men were onto something. I figured if it’s good enough for baby Jesus, it’s good enough for this witch,” I shrugged, enjoying Viv’s little laugh. “I’m so impressed you could pick up all the scents.”

“You don’t make it to my age without learning some sketchy shit, that’s for sure!” She clasped her hands, “Oh, you

girls moving in next door has been such a breath of fresh air! I hope you're here with some news about Carson."

I scanned the empty bookshop, worried someone could hear us.

She patted my arm, finishing a sip of her drink. "Oh, we're all alone, dear. I have one regular in the basement, but he's hard of hearing."

I let out a relieved sigh. "Good. I don't dare ask anyone but you. No one knows we had a thing. I just wasn't ready to date yet. Then he pulled away. He's always mumbling that he's the wrong guy for me. I don't get it."

Her navy eyebrows shifted around her forehead as she tried to keep up. "Do you know about Whitney?"

"Yes," I whispered. "Did she really play both of them?"

Viviane leaned in, "Carson came in here a few times with her. She was a cute little thing." She twirled a tendril of my hair. "He has great taste in women."

"Thank you," I said shyly.

"She was working as a ranger, loved being outside rock climbing, you know, outdoorsy. I was thrilled to see Carson with someone for the summer. A few months passed, and Harley came in with the same woman on his arm."

My jaw dropped. "No!"

She put her tiny fists on her hips, "And I thought, well, Viv, you're getting old. Maybe it was Harley you saw last time and thought it was Carson. They look a lot alike. I let it slide, thinking I was senile. Then, a few weeks passed, and Carson came in with her again. I made sure it was him to rule out any possible mistake. Now, I dated in wartime. In my day, you were single until you were married. Even if you were going steady with someone, it wasn't serious unless a ring was involved."

I tilted my head. "So you figured she was playing the field?"

“Exactly! She had two handsome fellas to keep her entertained. Surely, she knew they were brothers. How could she not? The front of Carson’s store says Kouris Hardware and Harley’s uniform says Ranger Kouris right on it.”

I leaned against the counter, “Makes sense. And you didn’t dare say anything right in front of her.”

Viv nodded, the skin under her chin wiggling. “Then it was too late. Harley disappeared into the forest. I know finding Whitney traumatized him. Carson went damn near mute, refusing to talk because when he did, people would harp on it. They never let him off the hook after Jamie.”

I searched my memory, drawing a blank. “Jamie?”

“You might know her brother Dane?”

I nodded, dread seeping into my nerves. “Yeah, I know, Dane.”

“His sister Jamie loved Carson. They were high school sweethearts. It was so cute, but the poor thing lost her mom to cancer and started boozing it up to cope. She was drinking and driving one night and died in a car wreck.”

“Wait, wait, hold up. Dane’s sister Jamie dated Carson. And she died too?”

“Yep, horrendous. She was young, barely twenty. She crashed on a bridge. Poor Dane had to bury his mom and sister in the same year. He blamed Carson because she was on her way to visit him. They were so young that I thought things would improve, but then Whitney died, and it got worse. Two women, dying young, tied to Carson.” She leaned in with a whisper, “People think he’s bad luck. They call him Cursed Carson around town.”

A heaviness coiled in my stomach as a flush spread on my skin. This was all too much. Too tragic, too twisted.

I swallowed, wetting my suddenly dry mouth. “So he uses silence as a shield?”

“He was never that quiet growing up. A little reserved, sure, but never silent.”

“And he wasn’t quiet with me because I was the ignorant new girl.” It was all registering in my brain.

“Don’t overthink it. He doesn’t like you just because you’re new. You’ve seen how busy this place gets with tourists. If he wanted new, he could’ve found it. Rosie, you’re wild. I can see it. You have a fierce spirit. It takes a fierce woman to love a Kouris man. Especially Carson. I shouldn’t meddle, but you should explore things with him. It would be good for both of you.”

I sucked in a breath. “I almost burnt his store down. He thinks I did it on purpose, but I didn’t.”

Viviane rolled her eyes. “Oh heavens! What’s your plan? You’re just going to taunt each other until the end of time?”

“I don’t know. We had such a connection, and now we act like we hate each other.”

“Well, you said it.”

“Said what?”

“You act like you hate each other. That’s misguided passion. You probably want to tear each other’s clothes off, but you torture yourself instead.” She slowly blinked, shrugging as if her point was bulletproof. It was. “Welcome to a small town, m’dear. No traffic, but some bumpy roads regarding your love life.” She held up her drink as if to toast.

“He said he couldn’t be with me, that it was for the best.”

She scoffed, losing patience. “Can you blame him? He’s wounded! Let him come around to the idea. Keep taunting him. Focus on yourself and live your best life to show him what he’s missing.”

“Right...” A pool of innocent longing filled my mind and heart. I wanted to see Carson playing with Kiszka outside his cabin. I wanted to watch him paint more and slow dance with him. I needed to do something normal with him, like going on a regular date, not lurking in dark hallways.

I pulled myself out of my reverie, blinking to find Viviane’s sapphire gaze set on me with a knowing smile. With

one shared glance, I knew she knew what I was feeling. The newfound intimacy put even more emotions in my body. She felt like a grandmother I never had.

A bell mounted above the door chimed, announcing another customer's arrival. Viviane stroked a pendant on her neck. It was a milky gray moonstone surrounded by Celtic knots. "South of town, you'll find three lakes. The middle one has incredible energy. Go for a swim sometime, and maybe you'll find your answers there," she advised.

"Okay, thank you," I said, still overwhelmed.

She pulled out an old leather book from a shelf behind her, plucking out a photo serving as a bookmark and sliding it across the counter with a glossy tomato-red nail. "In the meantime, I think this will be helpful." A playful smile spread across her face, causing me to grin back.

The next night, Kaylee showed up at 9 o'clock with no notice, only a text asking to let her in. When I opened the back door to the hardware store, she had a plastic bag and a stack of DVDs.

"Yo Ro, I've got greasy Chinese food from that little hole in the wall two towns over and the classic chick flicks."

"Did we have plans?" I squeaked in worry.

"No, I can just tell you're brokenhearted. No offense, but you've been a bit mopey. It hurts to see you this way! I'm still so mad Tyler's new bitch came up here and attacked you. Of course, it happened the one night I left early!" She grumbled, shaking her head.

Kaylee and Azalea had been awesome friends throughout the loft fire and latte incident. They whipped up an herbal concoction to help me heal the burns and fussed over me each time they saw me. And they also dragged me to the Renaissance festival for a fun girl's day.

"I think I forget sometimes you knew Tyler way longer than I did," she said, following me up the stairs. "Some sweet and sour chicken and Kate Hudson might heal you."

“I’ll uncork the wine.” I hugged her and grabbed the food. A couple of hours and containers of food later, I slumped in bed, trying to stay awake. Kaylee scooted in behind me, sweetly playing with my hair.

“Ro?” she whispered to see if I was still awake.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry he hurt you.”

“Yeah,” I said, emotions clogging my throat. I knew she was thinking of Tyler, but I wasn’t. I choked back a sob, causing Kaylee to wrap her arm around me.

Now she was three impossible things all at once: the other woman, unknowingly still behind enemy lines, and a damn good friend.

I opened my mouth to tell her everything but didn’t know where to start, so instead, we lay together with things too complex to be untangled.

Later that week, I was helping Kaylee wipe down some crystal balls with damp rags to get the dust off them.

“Hey, so you have a secret admirer,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“A certain someone won’t shut up about you. He keeps talking Harley’s ear off, saying he wants to date you. He has it bad. I guess he loves the smell of your place, and he says he can’t stop thinking about it. He thinks you’re funny and sweet.” She wiggled her eyebrows and shimmied her chest with the gossip.

“Really?” I remembered Carson always telling me my loft smelled wonderful.

“Do you want to go on a double date tonight? I think they were already going to Tilly’s. It could be fun?”

A stupid smile broke across my face. “Sure, that’d be great.”

Was this all going to work out? Maybe it was all a misunderstanding. Perhaps he talked to Harley after what

happened and broke the news to him. Could this have all been in the works? I couldn't stop smiling.

Walking in, I realized I was a fucking fool. The man chuckling with Harley wasn't Carson.

It was Dane.

I was unknowingly duped.

I rifled through my recollection of the previous conversation as the shock rocketed. I never clarified; I just assumed she was thinking of Carson because I'm obsessed with the man like a lovesick idiot. An icy layer crawled over my skin as the new harsh reality set in. I deserved this. I was withholding information from Kaylee, which is only one step away from lying. I had metaphorically backed myself into this corner, and now, I had to find a way out of it.

My guts twisted in guilt as Dane paid for my dinner, then even tighter when he walked me home so we could talk more. Carson's truck was still at the store, and seeing it put a ping of sympathy in my mind.

When I learned about Jamie, I didn't intend to goad Carson again using Dane as a shield. She was gone, and Carson was to blame. And the man walking me home was the wellspring of Carson's reputation. It couldn't get messier than this.

At the door, Dane pulled me in for a hug. "I had fun tonight," he said good-naturedly.

"Me too." I broke the embrace, forcing a small smile.

He tilted his head from side to side. "No...you didn't."

"Why would you say that?" I asked with a little laugh while fishing out my keys.

"You just seem somewhere else, not in the moment. I like being around you, but I never really *have* you."

"You want me?" I asked innocently.

His face broke in a wry smile. "I think you already know that, darlin'."

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to lead you on or anything. I was in a bad situation earlier this year.”

“Yeah, I heard. No offense, but I’m not like him. I’d like to show you that, but I get it if you’re not ready to date.”

I grasped for something resembling manners. “Did-do you want to come inside? I could maybe make you some tea?” I stuttered.

Jesus Christ, Rosie! Do you think he wants some chamomile right now? Like a fucking grandma?

He fixed the collar on his shirt. “Sure, that’d be great.”

As we walked through the back door, Kiszka came barreling through the hallway, singing me the song of his people. With a loud bark, he bounced a paw on Dane’s nuts, causing a groan that he impressively disguised. Out of pity, I pretended not to notice. From his office, Carson said something in Greek that called Kiszka back without even an exchange with us.

Opening my loft, I put the kettle on for tea. “Do you mind if I get into more comfortable clothes?” I asked, wanting to get out of the jeans I had been wearing all day.

“Nah, girl. That’s fine.” He sat on my loveseat and picked up a book on the armrest. “Do you read a lot?”

I plucked some yoga pants and a cropped Alice Cooper band T-shirt from my dresser. Walking into the bathroom to change, I yelled, “Kind of. I’m trying to get back into it. You?”

He yelled back, “I read Westerns like some old man. They remind me of my dad. I guess that’s kind of weird to admit out loud.”

When I exited the bathroom, he was reading the Tom Robbins book Carson gifted me. My instinct was to slap it out of his hands. Instead, I relaxed my shoulders and brightly said, “It’s not weird to read those because of your dad. That’s cute.”

“Cute. Right. What every man wants to be considered.” He smiled, putting the Robbins book down while I sat beside him.

I tried to turn on some charm. I needed to soothe his ego; he had been kind to me and kept my secret about tattooing. I wished I could force myself into liking him; he was technically attractive.

His eyes raked up and down my body. “I like your style. Oh! By the way, the tattoo healed well.”

“Can I see?” I gestured towards his chest.

He leaned back and pulled up his shirt. I smiled and stroked his pec, squinting closer at my linework. Dane leaned in, which snapped me out of the moment and how unintentionally flirty it was.

“That looks great. You must’ve followed my aftercare directions to a T.”

“I will always listen to you,” he said with a playful look as he put his shirt down and rested his arm on the back of the couch, surrounding me.

“Did you use the salve I gave you?”

He nodded and gazed at my lips, moving a piece of hair off my shoulder. “Yeah, what did you put in that stuff? It was straight-up magical.”

A nervous laugh puffed out of me. “Ah, I can’t give away my potions.”

He chuckled. “You really are witchy, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

His eyes searched my face as he began to lean forward to kiss me. The kettle started to whistle, and I leaped up.

“Tea?” I asked shrilly.

“Tea, yeah. Right.”

Walking to the kitchen, I opened my cupboard. “I have jasmine, chamomile, or peppermint if you want the caffeine-free route.”

The entire loft went pitch black, accompanied by Kiszka howling. Dane held up his phone as we walked downstairs to

check the breaker. Waiting at the bottom was Carson with a flashlight.

“Power’s out,” he said.

“Yeah, no shit Sherlock,” Dane said, examining the breaker box. His squint was barely noticeable in the darkness.

“I’m so sorry, Dane.”

He side-eyed Carson, who was messing with switches. “I think we should just call it a night, Rose. I have to open the shop tomorrow pretty early.”

“Oh, okay.” Even I could hear how slighted I sounded. I hugged him, wondering if he was scowling at Carson over my shoulder.

As the door shut, I turned around and ran into Carson’s chest. It was still dark, so I scrambled, trying to find a direction away from him. He dodged my flailing and held me still by the shoulders. “Woman! Calm down!” He rested the flashlight on the breaker box as a makeshift lantern. The light made him look wolfish and extra intimidating as he snorted lightly, “You let him call you *Rose*?”

“What do you mean? That’s my name.”

“Your name is Roisin or Rosie, but not *Rose*,” he spat in disgust.

“Um, I’m pretty sure I’m the one who decides that. Why do you care anyway?”

His jaw flinched. “I warned you about him. Why don’t you listen to me?”

“Why would I need to listen to you? You want nothing to do with me, and when you do, you’re just an asshole.”

That made him cringe. “Did you fuck him?” he asked tersely.

I scoffed. “I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“I’m making it my business.”

We stared at each other, neither one of us breaking. Kiszka pushed his wet nose into my palm, urging me to talk. “No, okay? No, I didn’t sleep with Dane. I haven’t even kissed him. Tonight was our first date. And I didn’t even realize that was going to happen.”

His face softened in the dark hallway. “What do you mean you didn’t realize?”

“I was tricked. I thought—listen, it’s a long story. I didn’t realize it was a date. Just trust me.”

“You’re not dating him? You looked pretty cozy tattooing his man tit.”

“Also known as a pec.” I rolled my eyes. “We were exchanging ink for oil.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m giving him tattoos in exchange for maintenance on my 4Runner. Ink for oil. You know, the bartering system.”

“I don’t like that,” he said.

I stroked the top of Kizzy’s head. “You don’t have to.”

“How did he even find out you were a tattoo artist? I didn’t know that.”

“I complimented him on his ink that night at the pub quiz. He has some surprisingly good pieces on him. One thing led to another, and it turns out he was a tattoo model for a buddy of mine back in Boston. One night, I showed him some of my work when he was getting coffee at Silver Springs, and we agreed on a trade agreement. No one else knows this side of me except you. So please don’t mention it to Kaylee.”

I dreaded that my past would catch up to me here. I was so stupid to let that detail slip at the pub quiz. My days as a tattoo artist were over, so painfully over.

Carson leaned against the wall. “Why don’t you tattoo full-time?”

“Oh, I—” I swatted the air. “I’m just a shy art kid who grew up. You know? You probably get it.”

“I yapped on and on about my techniques for the mural, and you listened so intently. Why the hell didn’t you interrupt me? You know all the tips and tricks in your own right.”

I shook my head. “Even if I knew it, it was nice to hear you talk. That’s all.”

“You wanted to hear me talk?” he asked, clearly disgusted with the idea of it. “Why the hell would you want to hear me mansplain drop shadows?”

“You hadn’t said more than five words to Kaylee. Frankie warned me you were curt. It felt like a privilege to hear you speak. That’s all.” I shrugged. “I felt special.”

He took a deep sigh. “You are special. And I’m so sorry I insulted your work. I didn’t realize what was happening, and then you wiped away that tattoo, and it looked like a damn sticker. It was fucking incredible.”

I couldn’t say anything with his praise, so I bit the inside of my cheek, trying not to get emotional.

“Ink and oil. Hmm, I still don’t like that.” He got up from the wall and flipped some switches. My jaw dropped when the lights flickered back to full brightness. Carson grinned, clearly pleased with himself.

“You...you faked a power outage?” I asked.

“Yep, and it worked. I could tell how uncomfortable you were when you walked in. I could hear it in your voice. It made me mad.”

Kiszka let out a quick sneeze.

“That’s so manipulative!”

“I needed to protect what’s mine.” He looked me up and down, stepping closer to tug the cropped hem of my shirt while staring at my tits. “I love Alice Cooper, by the way.”

I swatted away his hands. “Don’t interfere with my life in these childish ways! I’m not above telling Frankie as a landlord that you’re fucking with my utilities.”

“So proper, *magissa*.”

Mah-he-sa.

I had no clue what that word meant in Greek, but it sounded a little too fucking good in his low voice as it fell out of his beautiful lips.

He shut the fuse box and continued, “I’m not above cutting the brakes in Dane’s stupid truck if it means he can’t drive your perfect ass around on a date.” He asserted dominance by crossing his arms and staying where he was.

“Stop staring at my ass!” I shouted, charging up the stairs.

“No, it’s my favorite part of this, other than seeing you flustered.” I bit back a smile, secretly wishing he had followed me. “And we both know you’re going to think of me when you touch yourself tonight!” he yelled up the stairs.

“Wrong! I’m going to think of the cast of the second Mummy movie to fuel my bi-panic!” I argued, hearing him chuckle and murmur something to Kiszka before I shut my door.

But he was right. That night, when I pinned my wrist between my thighs and rolled to my side while an orgasm ravaged my body, all I could think about was Carson, not Dane.

Chapter Twenty



I was working late again in my office. All the lights were off except a lamp on my desk, which unintentionally gave me a headache. I pulled off my reading glasses and rubbed my face, summoning the will to keep working. Behind me, I could've sworn I heard footsteps. Stilling, I held my breath. Sure enough, step after step creaked until her voice flowed behind me.

“Carson?”

I turned to see Rosie leaning against the doorframe of my office. She was wearing cut-off Levi shorts and a cropped white shirt. Her pretty hair covered most of it, cascading in waves. She was barefoot, her tiny feet pointed with how she crossed her legs over one another in her flirty stance.

Her eyes twinkled under heavy lids in the low light. I was fleetingly happy Kiszka was asleep by the front door, his neurotic way of guarding the shop.

“Rosie,” I said as coolly as I could.

She pulled up from the doorframe, sauntering to make her way in front of me. Without pretense, she held my shoulders, all but dragging her boobs against my face while she straddled me in my office chair. Her shins pressed into my thighs with her warm center on my groin. Confusion and shock filled my mind while lust took over. My hands clutched her hips to keep her on my lap. I had wanted to touch her for weeks, and now this was happening too quickly and not on my terms.

She massaged my shoulders, staring at my lips. “I think we got off on the wrong foot and need to settle some things.”

What kind of turnaround was this? Unable to think with her body on mine, I ran my hands up her sides and back down to her hips, slightly squeezing them. “What did you have in mind?”

She leaned in languidly, swiping the tip of her nose against mine, a breath away from a kiss. “I think we need to come to a truce.”

“Go on.”

She sat upright and tossed her hair, revealing that the white shirt had an embarrassing photo of me from when I was a teenager printed across the chest.

In the photo, I was spread eagle, with my shorts shoved to my groin and hot dogs duct taped up my inner thighs. Harley did it after spiking my Gatorade with Benadryl. It was revenge for drawing a dick on his face with a permanent marker while he fell asleep during a road trip. He had to walk around the beach with a cartoon cock on his chin, so I was asking for it. The evidence of the prank stretched across her perfect tits heated my blood with wrath and desire.

She shimmied her chest with a smug giggle before whispering, “You need to know who you’re fucking with.”

“I’d rather just be fucking you.”

She tried to hide her gasp at my retort, but I nipped her bottom lip before kissing her. She melted into me, losing herself in our kiss. Fighting my instincts, I pulled away, keeping my mouth close to hers. I liked watching her eyelids grow heavy with yearning as I swiped my thumb across her bottom lip. “Let me guess; you got that from Viv?”

She nodded, fighting a smile.

I held her head close, whispering in her ear. “Rosie, babe, if you wanted some of this dick, you could’ve just asked. It would be a shame if you wasted that pretty pussy of yours on something as vile as Dane. He could never make you come like I could.” She huffed at my statement, clearly not

expecting how blunt and filthy I turned this little prank. Still gently holding the back of her head, I dragged my nose up her neck, loving her scent. I brushed a kiss along her pulse, making her swallow hard. “You didn’t make that silly little shirt and come down here just to taunt me, did you? You want me,” my other hand grabbed her ass, pressing her against me, “and you want to feel what we could do to each other.”

She pulled up from me, bracing herself on my pecs. “Why would I want to be with you, Carson? You don’t talk to anyone. You always say you can’t date me but won’t leave me alone. You act like you have some claim over me—”

“That’s because I do,” I said in a rush before I pulled her back with a hungry kiss, unable to help myself anymore. I needed this. I needed this so badly. She wrapped her arms around my neck, tilting her head to deepen our kiss. Her little moans made my cock rigid within seconds. She felt it and started grinding against it, causing more cries to break in her throat.

Her hands wandered to my scruff before raking through my hair. She broke the kiss and whispered between us. “I had never kissed a man with a beard before you. I like it. I want to feel more of it.”

“Where would you like to feel more of it?” I murmured. She panted while I trailed kisses up the column of her neck. “Between your thighs?” She nodded. “Here?” I asked while running a hand between her perfect boobs, from her sternum to her throat.

“Yes. Baby, I want you. Keep going,” she breathed, winding her hips in circles on my lap.

“I’d love to. I know I’m clean, and I have condoms.” I traced a row of fingertips low on her torso. “Are you on—”

“I have an IUD,” she interrupted herself with a kiss, “and I’m in the clear.”

I pushed her to sit up. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Her nipples hardened, poking out against the edges of the picture on the shirt. I grazed my hands up her sides, watching her bite

her lower lip and rock herself against my cock. Her pupils dilated with hunger as I skimmed my hands over the peaks of her breast, letting the nipples drag against my palms before I grabbed each mound. She sucked in a breath as I rubbed each nipple with the pads of my thumbs.

“I don’t like this shirt on you,” I stated, searching her face to gauge her response. She lifted her arms, urging me on. I grabbed the hem and began lifting it off her chest when the harsh bark and the sound of the back door opening punched the silent air.

Rosie shot off my lap wide-eyed. We stared at each other in horror for a split second before I concealed my dick, standing as she slinked to the corner between a filing cabinet and the wall. I flashed her a pleading look and walked out of the office, pulling the door shut behind me.

Harley swung open the heavy back door, “Hey man!” he said, patting Kiszka, who was already greeting his dog Storm.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I asked.

“I needed more of those solar string lights for the party. I could say the same for you. It’s really late. Everything okay?”

“Ah, yeah, Skyler fucked up. I was trying to fix his mistake. I was about to leave.”

I waited for Harley to grab his shit, praying neither dog sniffed out Rosie the whole time. Together, we left the store and walked to our trucks, leaving her still hiding in my office.

His cabin was in the same direction as mine, so I couldn’t stall or turn around without him noticing. It was a fifteen-minute drive, and when the path forked, he took a right, and I took a left, flooring my truck, eating up the road to race home.

Once parked in my garage, I pulled out my phone to text Rosie. Then out of practicality, I cut the shit and sent her a voice memo instead.

“You were so ready for me,” I murmured into my phone.

She shot back a voice memo within seconds. “You were so hard for me.”

“Your little revenge plot didn’t go as planned, did it?”

“Who’s to say? Maybe I got what I wanted after all.”

“Do you know what I want?” I asked.

“Tell me.”

“I want you to take that shirt off your pretty little body. Shorts and thong, too.”

“And then?”

“I want you to touch yourself. I know you need to finish what we started.”

“And what if I don’t?” Her voice was raspier than usual. It sounded like she was already touching herself.

I gritted my jaw and sucked in a deep breath. “Do I need to come and fix that attitude myself? I already broke down one door and can do it again, sweetheart.”

“Go on.”

“You mentioned something battery-operated and how it could replace me. We both know that will never happen, but I don’t mind the extra help. Run it over every wet part of you, and imagine it’s me.” Moments passed without a response from her, so I sent a single voice memo growling, “Now.”

I saw on my phone that she listened to it, so I went on this time in Greek, telling her all the filthy things I daydreamed about in a low, slow voice so she knew I wasn’t fucking around. It was easier to dirty talk in Greek. It felt more freeing and nastier, and it always worked.

After thirty minutes, I sent another voice memo. “Show me what I did to you.”

A picture of a black thong with a glistening patch on its center came through. I bit back a tortured groan and fought the urge to drive back to the store. If I did, it would give her too much power. Gaining composure, I listened to the voice memo from her. She sounded husky and out of breath. “Don’t think this is over.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Remember what I did to you next time you consider wearing that damn shirt. If I see it again, I’m burning it.”

She purred back, “Good night, Carson.” The way she said my name sounded like an enchantment, a spell. It was then I realized I didn’t know who was truly running this steamy fuckery.

All I know is that when I went to work the next day, the same black thong was wrapped around the bottom of my Yeti cup on my desk like some raunchy souvenir. And I fucking loved it.

The Flame

Chapter Twenty-One



Last night, Carson and I almost got caught devouring each other in his office. The feeling of his bulge under the seams of my Levi's mixed with his dominant voice memos had me a little too hot. I needed to cool off. Tonight, I avoided going home after work altogether, knowing if I were so much as two feet in front of the man, I'd fall to my knees to suck him off.

Instead of indulging in my whorish tendencies, I committed to myself, deciding to spend time in nature. After Silver Springs closed, I stayed and worked on some admin stuff. Then, once the night was in full swing, I drove out to the south of town.

As I pulled up to the small lake Viviane told me about, I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror, eyes sparkling and hair wild in curls from the humidity of summer. Hopping out of my vehicle, I peered up at the almost full moon, making her way higher in the sky from where she rose above a bluff. Her light tonight was silvery lilac and bright enough to see her patterns, craters, and my path to the water.

I ensured I was alone before I stripped off my clothes and waded into the lake with my hair down. The water was brisk, but my body adjusted to it quickly. Lights from cabins glinted on the lake far off in the distance, along with a gentle hum of crickets and the occasional call of a night bird. Other than that, it was just me and the moon.

I floated on my back, soaking in the calming water and lunar rays. Meditating, I focused on the stress from work and interacting with others, melting away from me with each wave. I let my hair fan out around me like a halo while tilting my head side to side, feeling it drag against the water. With each swish, I visualized my worries leaving me.

The summer air felt good on my breasts, the softness of my stomach, and the tops of my thighs sticking out of the water. I relaxed even more, held by the lake, suspended in her nurturing waters. I cupped some water and ran it over my chest to cleanse the rainbow moonstone pendant I wore. The round shape matched the moon above me.

My ears were underwater, but I could have sworn I heard a truck driving by. Willing to remain calm and present, I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping they didn't see me. Seconds later, the heavy thunk of a door shutting carried across the lake. Standing up in the water, I squinted towards the shore. A dome light in a truck faded to black while a tall man made his way closer to me. A thrill coursed through my body, sensing he was close.

“Rosie?” his rich timbre echoed across the lake.

“Hey, Carson.” My voice was breathy and higher than usual.

Now, at the water's edge, no more than thirty feet from me, he asked, “Are you doing witchy stuff under the moon?”

His observation made me even more enamored.

“Yes, want to join me?”

“I don't see a swimsuit...” he squinted.

“That's because there isn't one.”

He murmured something in Greek before he stepped out of his pants and shoes. “Well then,” he said, fisting the back of his shirt before tearing it off over his head. His shoulder muscles moved along with his biceps, now in full view. I swallowed hard, seeing how fucking sexy his upper body was bare and how the chain I gave him glinted in the night.

Was he still wearing the crystal necklace after all this time? The sight of it made me giddy.

Silvery moonlight shined on his pecs and faint abs as he straightened before he bent to drop his boxer briefs in one confident push. His dick swung heavily between his legs, making me suck in a ragged breath. It wasn't even hard, but I was shocked. He was all man, mixed with his body hair and muscles in all the right places. My pussy pulsed a desperate beat, aching, wanting his body all over mine.

He walked towards me with a smug smile, mannishly running a hand up and down his chest. His nakedness felt bold and shameless, inviting me to look at him all I wanted. As he got closer, the moonlight brightened his eyes, making them more hypnotic. I journeyed deeper into the water so I could wade along with him. The lake concealed everything from my shoulders down.

“You're really handsome.”

“You're gorgeous. This is like a damn siren call.” He waded closer, eyes drinking me in. He pulled me in for a kiss, his hands moving up my back to press me against his chest. I sighed into his mouth, letting the rest of the world drift away.

With his added height, he was standing where I had to tread. Now floating in his embrace, my mind cleared of any thought with his lips on mine. They were soft and moved in perfect motion. He tasted intoxicating, indescribable other than outright *Carson*.

Our kisses were usually so intense they made me dizzy. This kiss was slow, full of need and longing. He clutched me close, pressing the entire front of my body to him. My breasts and some of my hair smashed between us.

I sucked on the tip of his tongue, then stroked it with mine, inciting a low hum from him. One of his hands held my face as he tilted his head to the other side, rubbing a thumb across my jaw. I tried my best to ignore his dick pressing against my mound, but it was a constant awareness both of us were disregarding to stay close.

Time was suspended while I clung to Carson. I felt weightless in the water, like I could float away at any moment without his arms surrounding me. Our bodies undulated against each other with each knocking wave, a sensual push and pull.

His hand roamed from my back lower to my ass to hungrily grab a cheek. The flesh filling his hand made a sexy groan escape his throat and echo in our kiss. His hunger for me made me pliable as I melted into him, letting every inch of my body relax under his touch and energy. He was unhurried and assured, drawing me in.

Without breaking our kiss, he grabbed my thighs to hitch me across his body underwater. I wrapped my legs around and settled against him, rocking with the waves. Still holding my ass, Carson rolled against me, letting his length separate me and glide against my clit. A breathy cry hitched in my throat as I moved in response. It was too smooth, too perfect, too tempting. I could slide down his length if I raised my hips another inch. It was an irresistible impulse. Battling the same thought, he rolled against me again with the next wave, sending me over the edge.

I pulled from the kiss to gain composure, causing Carson to distract himself by kissing my neck. Untangling from him, I set to float on my back. He stood watching my body bob to the surface with hungry eyes. I met his gaze with a knowing look, outstretching my arms from where I hovered near his waist. He was now finally seeing me fully naked. Bearing myself to him this way, subtly and under the moon, felt extra powerful and sensual.

The conversation would be more challenging with my ears now underwater, but I still heard his muffled voice say, "You're so beautiful, Rosie." His gaze was reverent as he rubbed my legs slowly to test my response.

"Keep going," I whispered, urging his touch.

He ran his right hand up my curves on the side furthest from him, over my hips to trace wet fingertips across my

stomach, mirroring the same path he made with the paintbrush months ago.

His eyes flashed to mine with an intensity I'd never seen. In the moonlight, he looked like a Greek god with his dark hair and beard, a glow on his broad shoulders and pecs. I softened my eyes as I stared at his handsome face, relaying I was eagerly consenting to him touching me. My hand mindlessly floated to caress his back and bare muscular hip.

He cupped his right hand into the lake, trickling it on my stomach before moving between my breasts. My breath became ragged as he repeated the same motion over my collarbone, lightly splattering me before kissing my chin and lips.

With his gaze back on my body, he sank his hand into the water, this time intentionally dripping across the peaks of my breasts. The cool water and direct attention made my nipples tighten. The sight caused Carson to let out a low hum of approval. He did it again, painstakingly slow. Each drop of water on my skin made my core clench.

His fingers brushed against one nipple, softly covering it before encircling it. I bit my lower lip, witnessing his hand on me.

“I like that,” I whispered.

His smile looked calm, drugged. The water muffled his voice as he replied, “So do I.” His hand moved to the other breast, teasing that nipple too. He covered one with his hand as he lowered his mouth and licked it sinfully while staring at me. I shuddered but focused on floating.

Straightening, he trailed his fingers down my body, starting between my breasts and then around my navel. A row of knuckles grazed my hip bones before his hand slowly and confidently brushed against my center.

He bent down for another kiss. A rush of heat swirled in my stomach. The water's surface tickled my clit, making me even more hungry for him. His hand covered my pussy, slow

and soft to help me acclimate. My eyes fluttered shut while he ran his fingers against me, his touch tender yet confident.

My hand boldly drifted to his cock. It was thick, thicker than the others I had touched. I stroked it under the water, making him thrust against my hand. I wanted him in me already.

“Carson, baby...you’re killing me...”

My words made him jump back as if something had zapped him. His hands left my body, his cock escaping my grip. “Wait!” he said as I pulled myself to stand in the lake. “Stop. We have to stop.”

“What’s wrong?” I tried to move towards him, but he distanced himself more.

“I can’t do this. Don’t touch me.”

I lifted my hands in surrender. “Okay, I’m sorry. I thought you were okay with me touching—”

“I want you to. God, I want you to, but I can’t! I can’t hurt you.” He scrubbed both of his hands over his face in a tortured motion. “I’m going to stay over here. Please stay over there.”

“Okay, sure, whatever you’re comfortable with.” I was so fucking confused, but I wanted to respect his boundaries.

“I want to hug you, to hold you, to have you in every way possible, but I need to say some things, and I know if I get any closer, that won’t happen.” His eyes darted around my face.

“I know what you mean.” I glided back, creating more space. We both sank further, letting the lake conceal our bodies. I could tell he was intentionally keeping his arms busy, lightly skimming the water’s surface.

An uncomfortable look hung on his face, tugging at my heart. He rolled his shoulders back, causing water to ripple around him, the moon glinting on its surface. “I need you to know I ended things because I’m cursed. Like truly jinxed or something.”

“You keep saying that. Maybe positive thinking, like a change in your outlook—”

“I had a premonition.” His eyes pierced mine as his arms stopped moving. “I had a dream the night I got you home from Tilly’s. You were drunk, and your guard was down, and I guess I could tap into something sleeping beside you.” His jaw clenched as he forced himself to collect a breath. “In the nightmare, I watched you die in my arms. It was so vivid and haunting.”

I felt queasy and feverish in the calm lake. I started moving around him in circles, hoping to ease my nerves. “Wait, you had a dream I died? How?” His face became stony as he refused to answer. “Please tell me,” I pleaded.

“A fire,” he whispered.

“But the loft fire already happened. I’m fine!” I said quickly, opening my arms with a splash.

“I think the loft fire was a warning. I know I sound crazy, but you’re into this mystical stuff. I’ve had dreams that came true before. I didn’t want to risk killing you. It felt so real. Do I want to be with you? To love you? Yes, but I can’t risk hurting you with my selfishness.”

“And because of what happened with Whitney and Dane’s sister, you think you’re cursed?”

He turned his head to track me over his shoulder. “How do you know about Jamie?”

I realized I had let that detail slip. We hadn’t talked about Jamie, only Whitney.

“Viviane told me.”

“Fuck!” he breathed out in quiet outrage. “Fuck, I hate this town! Viv always keeps my secrets. Why the hell did she tell you?”

“I asked. I needed answers.”

“I wish you would’ve just asked me,” he retorted.

“I hardly see you, and when I do, we are either about to fuck or fight.” He glared at me, forcing me to continue. “So you believe you’re cursed because you’ve had two girlfriends die? Whitney fell rock climbing, and Jamie died drunk driving,

but they were both young and dating you when they passed away.”

“I know it sounds ridiculous, and I’m not superstitious, but I believe in patterns. I can’t look past two women tied to me, dying young and in horrible accidents.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“It was after Whitney that the rumors started flying around. I heard people calling me Cursed Carson behind my back. I might be able to paint murals and sell shit to fix homes, but that’s all I’m good for in this town. The guilt of losing both of them wrecked me. Not only were they gone, but I felt responsible somehow.”

“There was no way you could have known.”

His silence made my stomach knot in realization.

I moved quickly from behind him to see his face when I asked, “Did you...did you have dreams of them dying before they passed away?”

He stared me dead in the eyes with a slow, sad nod.

Well, *that* detail changes things.

Unshed tears filled his eyes while he swallowed hard. His voice came out low, tortured. “I would’ve done anything to stop it or save them. I didn’t realize what the dreams meant until afterward. By then, it was too late.”

My heart hurt witnessing this claw at him. “Carson, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not like you hurt them. I don’t mean to sound callous, but if it was their time to go, it was their time.”

“You’re a witchy woman; don’t you believe in curses?”

“I do, but they’re rare, especially that destructive. It would have to be some ancestral tie or something.” I looked intently at the moon, racking my brain as to what caused this.

“I don’t want you to fix it. I’m not trying to lay my problems at your feet. I just wanted to be honest with what happened.” He stepped closer, cradling my face with both

hands. “I wanted you to know that it wasn’t anything you did. You’re perfect. So perfect it hurts. I would’ve been devoted to you, worshipped the ground you walked on because you’re so damn special, Rosie. You’re bright and beautiful, and I would be so lucky to have loved you, but I can’t. I’m the problem. I’m the reason we can’t be together, and for that, I am so sorry.” I clung to his arms, entranced by his confession under the moon. Too many emotions and thoughts weighed me down. As if reading my mind, he added, “I shouldn’t have let things get physical. You pull at me, and all I want is you.”

I tugged at his beard. “You said you had a claim over me in your office last night. Why would you say that if you can’t be with me?”

His face softened. “Because you are mine. You’re my favorite firecracker...my *magissa*. You’re my Rosie. I don’t know how to contend with this. I’m cursed and able to hurt you, yet I still want you more than anything. It’s impossible.” He brushed a kiss on my forehead. “But I care about you too much to let my stupid luck kill you.” His voice was now thick with emotions. “I’ve tried to fight it, but I can’t. I think the loft fire and this dream were warnings. I have to listen this time; I can’t risk it. I don’t want to live in a world without you, even if that means you hate me.”

My stomach sank at his words. I held onto him, waves rolling against us, each push attempting to knock us out of our reverie. Full of sorrow, his eyes searched mine as he tucked some hair behind my ear. I knew he was trying to say goodbye. He was stealing another moment before walking alone back to shore.

“So this curse is the only thing stopping you? Not Harley or the town.”

He sniffed a sad laugh. “I’d set this place on fire if it meant I could love you. I’d tell every person I met how I feel about you if it would change my shitty luck.”

Something snapped me out of my daze. “Let’s change your luck.”

He balked, dropping his hands from my face to my shoulders. “What are you talking about?”

“You said it; I’m a witch. It will take a lot more than a curse or some small-town superstition to take me out. Same with you, you don’t have to let this pattern, or whatever the hell this is, dictate your life. Let’s change it.”

“What?” he almost laughed.

“I’m serious. It’s obvious the universe wants us together. What if we have to fight for it? Break the curse.”

“But you could still be in danger. We’d have no way of knowing.”

“I’ve survived some crazy shit. If you have bad luck, I have good luck. Look at how lucky I’ve been with Tyler not stalking me. And Silver Springs is a wild success. I know how to bring good things to myself. Let me worry about myself. I can protect and bless you. Together, we can fix this.”

I could see the wheels turning in his head. He had never considered this. Typical guy. “How?” he asked.

I wiggled my eyebrows, running my hands up and down his chest. “By doing what we do best together.”

“Are you talking like some crazy, kinky sex magic?”

“Yes,” I giggled and tried to sober but couldn’t stop smiling. “Sex magic is some of the most powerful workings you can do, especially to protect a lover.”

“You’d do that for me?” his brows pinched in disbelief.

“Of course.” I ran my nails up his chest to soothe him. He stared down at my hands with a grunt of distress. It was my turn to retreat. I patted his pecs in assurance. “You’ve been through a lot. And I’m so sorry. Just consider it. Even if it’s not with me, I will find a way to free you from this. You deserve love.” I kissed his cheek and waded back to the shore, feeling his suffering stare.

Leaving him there with the moon was one of the hardest things I had done in a while. The newfound information shed even more light on this man who always appeared from the

shadows when I needed him the most. The least I could do was return the favor. I choked back sobs driving back to his store, realizing someone as loyal as Carson living a loveless life sounded like the real curse.

Chapter Twenty-Two



It was June 21st, the summer solstice and Kaylee's birthday. A big party was happening, and I was smuggling in her surprise present, an adorable golden retriever puppy. The little guy had been at my cabin all day with Kiszka. He showed him all the best spots to sniff and how to howl for no reason. Now, he was tuckered out in a wooden crate next to me.

I turned down Harley's private road, flashing a look at the archway that read Stormbound. It was a reference to his time snowed in with Kaylee. I helped him make the sign during the weeks they spent apart. But still, the sight of it put a pang of jealousy in my chest as my foot stepped on the gas to drive faster away from it.

I wished I wasn't cursed and that things with Rosie could be more straightforward. Her promise to help gnawed at me. It had been three days since my moonlit confessions, and I still didn't know what to do. It wasn't an easy decision; it was life or death. As I saw it, I had two choices:

I could love her and possibly kill her with my selfishness.

Or I could deny our deep bond and attraction to shield her and endure a lifetime of silence.

After telling her about the dream and curse, a third option presented itself, one I never saw coming—much like Rosie. I could let her break the curse or somehow disrupt the pattern. A new optimistic layer floated above my situation, a lightness I

wasn't used to. Could I be freed of this? Did fate put her in my life for a reason? Was she protected enough to outlive the hex?

Every night since, as I lay in bed alone, I wondered if perhaps finding her in the lake was a sign that we could turn this around. Maybe the fates, God, the universe, or whatever made sure my woman was a witch with magic in her bones and courage in her heart.

I wanted to talk to her more about our predicament, hopefully with my clothes on and not under the moon like a pussy-obsessed lunatic. Things had escalated at the lake so quickly. I wasn't expecting to find her there. I damn near drove off the road when I saw her swimming in the lake like some water nymph.

I fought flashbacks of the perfect sight of her naked under the moon. The silvery light illuminated her to perfection while she floated to the surface, finally allowing me to see all of her beautiful body. I still remember how her eyes sparkled, urging me to touch her. The drops of lake water across her pale skin, how her hums of pleasure filled the space between waves.

Blinking away at the thought, I parallel-parked my truck in an open spot within a line of cars trailing on one side of the long road. Following the noise of the party, I walked towards the cabin, letting the tree-lined path guide me to the commotion. The late June night was warm, with a golden glow filling the area with the sun in the western sky, still an hour or two away from setting behind the bluff. The air was balmy, but the distinct smell of pine and a cool breeze from the lake rang as something happy and fresh in my senses. The road opened to a plot of land, the cabin on my left, the lake on my right. In front of me, I could see three long tables set for a solstice feast and a crowd of about thirty people standing around talking. No Rosie in sight. She was probably arriving late because of work.

I nodded at Harley while I walked to the shop with the box hiding the puppy. Meg was already in there waiting to take over guard duty. We would all take turns checking in on the little guy. I nodded at her while she pulled him out of the crate

with a girly squeal, then returned to my truck for the picture I painted for Kaylee.

On the way back to the party, clutching the canvas to my body while walking, I saw Rosie sauntering down the path about thirty feet ahead of me. With each step, her auburn waves swayed along with her white sundress billowing behind her in the breeze.

As she made her way to the party, Kaylee appeared and exclaimed, “Merry meet! Blessed Litha!”

“Blessed Litha! Congrats on your solar return!” Rosie exclaimed, pulling Kaylee into a hug. I didn’t understand the greeting, but the intention was obvious. And I remembered Rosie telling me Litha was a magical name for the solstice.

Breaking the hug, Rosie grabbed Kaylee’s boobs with a giggle. “You’ll have to tell me where you got these!”

Kaylee cackled, then gave a twirl in her saffron-colored sundress. She reached for a basket to pull out a flower crown to put on Rosie’s head with a smile. In the process, she spotted me approaching. “Hey, bro! Welcome!” She waved me closer as Rosie turned around to see who she was talking to.

I’m not religious, but I’d like to thank the gods for sundress season. I think I speak for all straight men when I say—sundress season is a damn near religious experience.

I bit my cheek, trying not to react to what was in front of me. Rosie’s dress covered her breasts in plunging triangles, showing ample cleavage and bare shoulders. Below her bust, a band with embroidered flowers snugged against her body before the rest of the dress hung perfectly over her curves. Flowy, gauzy, and in the right light, probably damn near see-through. Paired with the flower crown nestled in her hair like a summery halo, she looked like a goddess.

The dress floated above strappy sandals, her limbs and neck bejeweled in the same light-colored stone I saw her wearing in the lake. I made a mental note to ask her about it. Her makeup was simple and shimmery, with wispy eyelashes and glossy lips I wanted to kiss.

I glanced down at my jeans and black shirt, wondering if I was festive enough as Kaylee reached into her basket, “Let’s get you a Litha crown. Azalea made these and plucked them straight from her garden. Isn’t that so magical?” She held up a flower crown and looked at Rosie. “I think these colors would bring out his eyes, don’t you?”

Rosie smiled with a nod, loving my torment. I opened my mouth to argue, and in an actual mindreading moment, Kaylee said, “You have to wear one, solstice rules, and birthday girl request.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll humor you.” Still holding the picture, I ducked so she could put it on me. She giggled, clearly pleased with herself, while gently pushing it on my head.

Rosie held up a gift bag. “Where do we put presents, birthday girl?”

“You can put it on the table by the porch, but y’all didn’t have to get me anything! Thanks for coming!” Kaylee all but pranced off to the other guests.

Rosie and I walked closer to the porch to bestow our gifts. “What did you paint her?” she asked over her shoulder.

“A portrait of her grandma who passed away. Though I’m sure if she knew you could tattoo it on her body, she’d want you to.”

Rosie looked around, ensuring no one caught that. “We aren’t talking about that,” she hissed.

“Yeah, I know. That’s kind of the problem, sweetheart.”

“I can’t do this right now.” She let out a frustrated grunt and plopped the gift bag on the table, bolting away from me.

Well, that was quick. I had somehow already pissed her off. I was trying to compliment her. She found Poe and Azalea, hugging them like a sweetheart. I skulked away from the gift table and went to grab a drink to do something with my hands. The party was Kaylee and Harley’s crew, so people I liked, like Bear and Rhett, wouldn’t be attending. I hung out

at the party's edge, hoping my stance wouldn't be evident that I was watching one person.

Before I could take a sip, Dane slithered in behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, picking her up as he whispered something in her ear. It was inappropriate. And I could tell she was uncomfortable because her hand flew to her chest to ensure a boob didn't pop out. She turned around to see who the hell manhandled her before she slapped his arm.

I gripped my drink, unable to look away. Rosie flashed me a bashful look, fixing her flower crown as he continued to yammer on.

Harley whistled to clear the clamor of the party. "We are all here to celebrate this beautiful woman." He gestured to Kaylee, who side-hugged him. "And we are also here to celebrate the summer solstice. The longest day of the year."

"And it's a holy day called Litha for us Pagans and witchy folks," Kaylee added, raising her goblet. The girls from Silver Springs held up their glasses in a silent toast.

"Exactly. And what Kaylee wants, Kaylee gets, and tonight she wants us all to dance."

My mom made her way into the crowd, commanding attention without trying. "Okay folks, find a dance partner, then make a row facing each other over here to the right of the tables."

Rosie grinned at Poe as if to partner up, but before they could, Dane grabbed her hand, pulling her to the impromptu dance floor, exclaiming, "C'mon darlin', that dress was made for dancing!"

My brain skittered to a halt while I tried to plan a way to intercept, but a small voice came from my side. "Hey Carson, want to dance?"

I looked down to see Dani. "Yeah, you bet."

I might be grumpy, but I can't say no to a woman. It takes guts to approach me. I knew that. She held my arm while we walked over. Following instructions, we faced each other

in a line of others. I tried my best not to gawk at Rosie four couples down.

“I heard your store almost burnt down,” Dani said, fluttering her fake eyelashes that were too big, like a damn moth was fucking her eye.

“It was an accident. All fixed.”

“Rosie needs to stop being such a spaz. I can’t believe she did that.” She snorted, peering down at my girl. I had to fight my upper lip curling in disgust.

“Honest mistake,” I shot back. Only I got to make fun of Rosie’s firecracker tendencies.

My mom instructed us to step towards each other, lifting our right hands and pressing our palms together. Dani’s hand was small but not like Rosie’s, which had pretty tattooed fingers and shiny dark nails long enough to feel amazing raking down my back. I got lost in that thought while walking around Dani. It was a courtly dance, like a scene from Shakespeare. Leave it to kooky Kaylee to finagle all of us guys into wearing flower crowns and twirling around on some ancient holiday.

Circling each other in the opposite rotation, with our left hands now pressed, I caught Dani smiling at me again, her face falling with my scowl. My mom instructed everyone to move down three people and change sides of the line. We all shifted to the right, putting me with Kaylee. Then, we moved in the opposite direction. I ended up with Azalea, who wouldn’t look at me. Another call went out for us to switch sides and move two to the right. Halfway through the spin, I caught Rosie in my stream of vision, but she didn’t see me.

“Now to the left!” my mom cheered. I felt foolish with the revelry, mindlessly letting the row of people shift me to the left.

After getting my bearings, my vision zeroed in on lively green eyes looking up at me. “Grumpy ass,” Rosie murmured, pressing her hand against mine.

“Bog witch,” I grumbled, which made her bite her bottom lip to avoid smiling.

At that moment, it wasn't just our hands that pressed together; it was also our wrists and forearms like we couldn't get enough of each other. I tried to ignore the distinct hum she had drummed up in my body while not pulling my hand away a second sooner than necessary. Moving to the next partner, we both had to drag our gazes away. Later, I caught her glaring at Dani as I spun her in the final round. We all clapped when it was over. And Kaylee's awe radiated at the crowd as she thanked us for dancing with her.

My mom hollered over the crowd, “Anyone who wants to try another dance, stay here. Everyone else, please find Markos to help bring out food.”

I gave Dani a single nod, conveying I better go. Rosie turned to help, but Dane pulled her back again. She laughed at something he said, and it looked genuine. I thought I could get through the solstice party without going crazy, but seeing his calloused, blackened paws on her body made my jaw hurt with how tight I gritted it.

My final shred of patience was severed when I saw him ignoring her while sitting beside her at dinner. I would give my left nut to do something as simple as feasting with Rosie on a holiday. To touch the back of her neck while I pour her more wine, to watch her wiggle on the first bite of something delicious or sigh before she unpacked her day. She looked so sad sitting next to him, casually ignored in the commotion of the party she helped plan for Kaylee.

That's what pissed me off the most—no one was seeing her. No one was looking out for her. No one was considering everything she was navigating by moving to town under the circumstances she did.

But I saw Rosie, and my instincts took over.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Dinner consisted of small talk with Dane and his friend Noah. I was still learning names but had seen Noah a few times. It was nice to put a name to a kind face. He seemed like a sweet guy. He was a ranger who worked with Harley but was originally from Montana. It was comforting to talk to a fellow outsider. But Noah and Dane kept talking about manshit I knew nothing about, and I was stuck at the end of the table without any women to talk to, so I got a little bored. People surrounded me at a lovely event, but I inevitably felt like a loner.

I tried to sit in the comfort of my surroundings. I was with friends, and I'm sure Dane would do me no harm. Even the table in front of me was beautiful, with floral centerpieces and brass candlesticks with suns on the bases. Yellow and orange taper candles were lit, along with crystals tucked in the foliage. From where I sat, I spotted a smoky quartz point that was as big as my hand and a chunk of honey calcite. I smiled, recalling how I picked everything out and snuck it to Harley so he could use it in the setup. It was the least I could do to make it memorable for Kaylee.

I stared intently into the smoky quartz, a rainbow formed with the sun hitting its brownish inclusions, zoning out while Dane and Noah droned on. Time froze, and daydreams of how I wish Carson were beside me took up all of my awareness as I wrapped my arms around my body.

A tingle trailed down my left temple. I surveyed that direction, spotting Carson staring at me as he leaned against the corner of the cabin. I looked away and then back at him. He slowly nodded towards the west. My blood buzzed in my body as my throat clogged with mild panic, watching him languidly lean to stand to his full towering height.

I took a deep breath, deciphering the reaction in my body, realizing what I thought was panic was genuine excitement. I brought my drink to my lips and glanced back at him again. He was already gone. I got up with the excuse to clear my dishes, Dane and Noah barely acknowledging my exit.

The land to the west of the cabin was a thick forest with no Carson in sight. Walking further north, I found his Litha crown dangling from a pine tree branch. Its soft flowers were a colorful contrast against the dark pine needles.

I fought a giddy smile while ducking into the forest, grateful I wore strappy sandals instead of flip-flops. Walking a few steps inward, I whispered, "Carson?"

Nothing.

I continued into the woods, letting its density surround me. Further in, a slight clearing appeared, and to my right, a shadow moved. It was Carson leaning against a tree. He was primal and slightly threatening as he prowled toward me. A heated look darkened his face, showing two different moods clashing. His gritted jaw indicated torment, but his hazel eyes simmered with hunger.

Tingles erupted along my neck as his low voice covered me. "Was your plan to taunt me the whole night?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

His eyes moved up and down my body, as he began to walk around me, causing me to hold my breath. His hand touched my flower crown, advancing to my hair before brushing my lower back as he circled me.

"Don't pretend you didn't wear this dress for me, that you don't look this gorgeous just to drive me crazy. After everything I've told you, everything I've warned you

about.” His fingers brushed my collarbone, stroking my moonstone pendant before trailing lower to my cleavage.

I set my eyes on his face, making him lift his gaze from my chest. “What if I did? What would you do about it?” I asked.

He fought a smirk by licking his lips instead. Stepping back, he extended his hand, jutting his jaw upwards. “Give me your panties.”

Sensing he didn’t think I would, I reached for the hem of my dress to tease him. He set his jaw in testing domination. I shimmed my cheeky white underwear down my legs, stepping out of the fabric before placing it in his open hand. Grabbing the material, he cocked an eyebrow. “They’re wet.”

I stepped closer, refusing to break eye contact. “Don’t act like you’re not anticipating something, too.” I shoved my hand into his front pocket, finding the tell-tale wrapper of a condom, its sharp edges stabbing my fingertips. I pulled it out between my pointer finger and middle finger, holding it between us sassily like some trophy. His eyes pierced mine as he drew in a deep breath, tucking my panties in his back pocket.

“Come and get it,” I said before turning to run. A freeing giggle ripped through my chest as I dodged trees and tried not to step on pinecones. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Carson standing still, giving me a head start. Dodging to the right to confuse him, the snapping of twigs behind me announced his hunt.

I picked up my pace before darting to the left. Hearing him hot on my trail, I sprinted to the right, then hid behind a tree. He passed me and circled back, almost catching me while I squealed, bolting away in a new direction. The solstice sunset streamed in golden rays through the forest, and the distinct smell of earth clung to the air.

I ducked behind another tree, fleetingly worried my dress was getting dirty, but I didn’t care. I’d rather get dirty with Carson than anything else. Hearing him approach, I bolted away from the tree, giving away my location with my dress flowing behind me while I lifted it to sprint. I pumped my legs

as fast as I could run in my sandals, gaining more ground than he probably expected.

I pushed the flower crown on my head while looking over my shoulder with no Carson in sight, so I headed in a different direction. The forest was darker now, the rays of the sun unable to pierce through the thickness of the trees. Everything turned emerald and oak around me, with softer vegetation on the ground and the distant burble of a river.

Suddenly, Carson appeared from the right, his velvety voice declaring, “Gotcha,” as he grasped my waist possessively, pulling me against him. I gasped when our chests pressed together before our lips met with a desperate kiss. He hauled us backward, leaning against the trunk of a mature tree. Standing on my tippy toes, all but dragging my tits up his ribs, my arms encircled his neck.

His hands were on either side of my body, running up my waist and back down to my hips. Through the thin fabric of my dress, I could feel the warmth of his body heat. I craved more of it. One of his hands cupped my face while he broke the kiss to whisper, “I see you, Rosie.” He kissed more frantically. “I will always see you.”

I knew what he meant; he saw me ignored at the party. I kissed him back. “And I hear you, even when you’re quiet.”

He groaned, clutching me tighter against his brawny body, our kisses deepening. I loved the lightheaded feeling when our lips met. Kissing Carson was one of the only joys I had experienced this year.

He broke the kiss again, “I’m all in.”

I nodded in earnest agreement, replying breathily, “All in.”

My mouth brushed down his thick, muscular neck, my teeth grazing his Adam’s apple right below the line of his stubble before I moved to his ear and nibbled, causing a rumbly groan to vibrate his chest.

His large hands floated under my dress to grab my bare ass. I reached for his cock, rubbing it over his pants, dizzy at how thick it felt. Without pretense, he lowered us to the forest floor,

bracing the back of my head with one of his hands. As he hovered over me, the necklace swung out of his shirt. My stomach rolled with too many emotions as I caught the chain, pulling him closer. He nuzzled my neck, moving downwards with wet kisses. I grabbed the back of his shirt and tore it off, wafting his yummy scent all around. His chest emerged, broad and solid with the perfect trace of hair. I leaned up and kissed it, yanking at his belt.

He grabbed my hands and leaned back down, playfully pinning them above my head while he returned to kissing me. My legs widened, inviting him to settle between them. His roughened palms skimmed the sensitive skin on the back of my arms before they hooked the straps of my dress, tugging the fabric down while he kissed lower on my chest. Newly freed, my nipples puckered against the crisp air.

Drinking me in, he braced himself with one hand as he traced a row of fingers against the curvature of my breast with the other before flashing me a hungry look. “You’re so perfect, every inch of you,” he whispered before grabbing the breast and swirling his tongue across the other.

“That feels so good,” I breathed, raking my hands through his hair while looking down at him. A throbbing between my legs caused my hips to move in a needy grind against his body as he continued flicking his tongue against my nipple, dragging his teeth against the bud before sucking it. I shuddered, feeling oversensitive and craving more as he continued to nuzzle, rub, and tease my tits until I twisted underneath him in anticipation.

He continued running a hand down my body, his fingers tracing paths along my inner thighs. I spread my legs wider, tilting my hips to urge him on, and when his hand feathered over my center, we both groaned.

“So hungry for it,” he rasped as his fingers slid through my drenched pussy.

“Touch me,” I whispered, too proud to beg or agree. As if testing me, he rubbed right over my aching clit, silencing my gasp with a kiss. His pattern was gentle and perfect as I

pressed against his hand, wanting more. One of his fingers sank into me, slowly filling me before trailing back to my clit.

His kisses moved lower as he pushed up my dress and gazed at my center. “You’re so gorgeous,” he said, kissing my hip bones.

I pushed at his trap muscles, knowing time was of the essence. “You don’t have to—”

“I want to,” he said with a dark look, clutching my hips to move me to a softer spot beneath the tree before he draped my legs over each shoulder, all but dragging his chest against the earth. I ran my hands through his hair as he trailed kisses closer to my pussy, gently blowing on it, making me squirm. I writhed even more as his beard scratched against my sensitive skin, the anticipation peaking.

Finally, he pressed a confident kiss against me, licking slowly from core to clit. My gasp turned into a moan at the sensation. A low hum filled the back of his throat, rumbling against me, making me grasp his arm. He continued moving his mouth over me, pulling back for a moment only to murmur, “You taste so damn good. I will never forget this.”

My mind sputtered as my body melted, unable to fight the pleasure. He continued with gentle licks and kisses, letting me adjust to him. Then his tongue became more probing, eventually adding fingers curved towards his mouth, both parts of him hitting me in a mind-numbingly addictive way.

My pussy drenched his beard as I desperately grinded against his face. “Right there,” I exhaled, running my hands through his hair and holding him in place. “Please, please don’t stop.”

Carson continued, never speeding up or getting rough. He stroked and sucked until my vision got spotty, everything building up so intensely I didn’t know what sensation to focus on—the feeling between my legs or the sight of him devouring me like some ancient forest god.

The view of his back muscles morphed with the tree trunks as my vision got blurry. His mouth pulled me into an

instinctual trap, suspended in pleasure as breathy little pleas escaped my lips as everything heightened. Unable to fight it, I cried out when an orgasm ravaged my body. Hearing the echo in the silent forest, I bit my knuckle to stifle myself. The pulsing was almost too strong as it beat inside me, causing my legs to close for some relief.

Prowling towards me, kissing up my body, surrounded by trees, the sight of him made my insides clench even more. He pulled my hand from my mouth and replaced it with his kiss. I grabbed his face, which was still wet, and brushed my tongue against his, showing him I wasn't an uptight priss. He let out a low growl, clearly liking that.

In a haze, we both freed his cock from his pants. Even in the dusky forest, I could see its girth and length looking too tempting and virile. I couldn't believe that was about to go in me. "Holy fuck," I said between panting breaths, stroking it as he ripped open the condom, rolling it on. He ran his dick against me, separating and teasing me. I whimpered, wanting more, even in my worry. "Just go slow, you're really big, and I'm not just saying that," I whispered.

His face twitched, "I promise I won't hurt you. I can tell you're so ready for me." Proving his point, the tip of his cock brushed against me before it slid in. I moaned as he filled me inch by inch, so torturously slow and gentle. Our breathy gasps filled the space between us once he was deep inside me.

"Fuck, Rosie," he hissed reverently, pulling back, only to push into me again, knowing his limits.

"Oh my god, yes, keep going," I pleaded, holding him closer as every nerve in my body fired off. He cradled the back of my head as we moved together. After several thrusts, my flower crown fell off as my boobs bounced against his chest. I clawed one hand into the forest floor. I couldn't get over how addictive this was. The chase, the forbidden moment, and the buildup of months of pining pushed me to the edge.

With my other hand, I caressed his face, needing to witness him coming undone with me as we shared a desperate, overwhelmed look. Past his head, I could see tall pines

stretching to the darkening sky before he covered me with a kiss.

He continued to slowly rut into me, grinding in such a way all I could do was match each push, stunned by how deep he was hitting. Truth be told, he was fucking the daylight out of me. I had never had a man move against me with such fluid strength, suspended in sweetness with how close he held me. I was spread out, laid bare for his taking, loving every thrust and nipping kiss.

I nuzzled his neck in overwhelm, letting the crook muffle my crazed noises as I clung to him with one arm as my other free hand clawed the earth and thick tree roots to anchor me to the moment. I never wanted to forget this.

“I want you to come for me,” he growled.

“I’m going to,” I agreed, feeling faint and warm, another orgasm building off the one he just gave me.

“You’re mine.”

I nodded, preoccupied with the sensation in my body before it spun tight.

His deep voice rumbled again with even deeper thrusts, “Mine.”

It pushed me over the edge as my orgasm hit my body like a strong bolt, trailed by pulsing throbs. I clawed at his shoulders and buried my face into his neck, trying not to make a sound.

And for a man who was so quiet, Carson didn’t refrain from making a sound. As my pussy clenched his cock, his loud groan ripped through the air as he finished. Wild like thunder. It was my new favorite sound.

Still bracing himself over me, he kissed my forehead before rolling off. Chest to chest, he hitched my leg over his hip to stay inside me. I nestled against him as he rubbed my back, both of us unable to talk. I couldn’t figure out how to move. Not only was I shaky, but I was also fucking drenched.

He touched my face to look at me, silently asking if I was okay. I nodded, causing him to grab a handful of my ass with a sleepy smile. I've had my fair share of good sex before, but that was soul-consuming. Blistering. The way he moved, his cock, his growls. Oh, I was *so* fucked.

Minutes ticked by while we sat there trying to recoup. Eventually, he asked, "How?"

"How what?" I muttered into his pec before looking up at him.

"How the hell was that even better than I thought it would be?" He looked down at me with a creased brow. "Everything about you is perfect...addictive. Your body, the way you taste, the way you move."

I squeezed his bicep. "You tell me? You are the first man who has made me come the first time together. Twice, actually." I giggled, feeling like I had hit some raunchy lotto.

He sat up slightly. "What?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I mean, the first time is always...you know..."

He slumped back down and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Don't tell me that. I am an overachiever. If making you come wasn't already at the top of my list, that did it." We both laughed as he released my leg while retreating from me. I felt boneless and weak, crashing with adrenaline. Dirt stained his pant legs, stomach, and forearms. He sacrificed his shirt to help me clean up, then returned my panties.

After pulling ourselves together, he brushed pine needles and dirt off me and put my flower crown back on with a smug smile. I felt giddy but defensive, swoony but guarded. I knew this wasn't casual for him, but we still had important things to discuss.

"Carson, I—"

He stepped closer, towering over me with his massive frame as he held my chin. "I meant what I said, Rosie. You are mine. I want you, all of you." He brushed a

soft kiss on my lips as if sealing his claim. “We’ll figure this curse thing out.”

I stared at him, still overwhelmed by my orgasms. It was like his dick knocked 40 IQ points out of my mind.

He went on, “I’ll wait here before I duck out. I can get to my truck without being seen, and I never say goodbye so it won’t look suspicious. I’m sorry if I ruined your dress.”

“Don’t be.”

“I’d like to see you later tonight,” he said, eyes searching my face as he brushed the hair off my shoulder.

I ran my hands over his biceps. Missing his arms around me. “I’d like that.”

“Go back to the party but meet me at the lake at 11 o’clock. Sound good?”

I bobbed my head in dazed agreement. He clutched the side of my neck, bringing me in for one last smoldering kiss. Releasing me, he crossed his arms, leaning against a tree once more as he watched me leave. I felt like prey, escaping the forest unscathed but somehow caught. And I fucking loved it.

I snuck back to the cabin to go to the bathroom, making a pit stop for my keys in my purse on the porch.

“Are you okay?” a voice came behind me as I bent over, searching inside my bag.

I turned to find Harley eyeing my dirty dress. I let out a nervous laugh. “Oh, yeah, I biffed it.”

He forced a small smile. “Gotcha, well, we’re opening presents by the bonfire. Will you take pictures of Kaylee for me? I have a surprise for her.”

I nodded and hauled ass to my car, hoping no one else saw me. Luckily, my Bog Witch cardigan was in my back seat, so I fetched it to hide my muddied dress. With the breezy night setting in, I could use it.

An impressive bonfire was blazing by the lake as everyone gathered to watch Kaylee unwrap presents. I sat down between

her and Poe, glad Dane was on the other side past Azalea, Noah, and Dani. They were all busy laughing. By the looks of it, Noah was giving Zay a hard time about something. She swatted at him, trying not to spit out her drink with laughter.

Harley came around with goblets and a bottle of mead, pouring all of us witches a glass. Kaylee thanked him with a quick kiss before he walked away. Holding up her drink, she squared her shoulders in a toast. “Blessed Litha, may our shortest night and longest day together be the start of many shared sabbats.”

“And the happiest of birthdays to you, Kaylee,” I added.

“Blessed be,” Poe declared as we tipped our cups in our shared little pocket of magic while the rest of the crowd settled down. I had only three sips so I could drive, but I delighted in how the mead mixed with Carson’s kiss still on my lips.

I didn’t want to tell Kaylee yet; I needed to talk to Carson, and I didn’t want to ruin her birthday. I already felt rude as fuck dodging out for a solstice screw, but on some level, I knew she’d support my hedonistic lapse of judgment. We were wild women. Wild women don’t follow the rules or social standards.

Frankie scanned the crowd. “Are we missing anyone?”

“It looks like Carson took off,” Markos added with a shrug.

Azalea rolled her eyes, sharing quiet disgust with Dani. “Of course, Mr. Life of the Party,” she teased.

“He’s such a jerk. He wouldn’t even talk to me,” Dani complained.

I fought a smile and crossed my legs, loving how slightly sore I was from a certain jerk’s massive cock.

Kaylee opened my gift, which was a rare tarot deck. *The Faerie Tale Tarot* was out of print, but my mom had an unopened deck from the 90s. We were more than happy to rehome it to a worthy tarot enthusiast. Kaylee lost her shit and started ugly crying. It was so cute hearing her Southern accent pop out while she snorted, ‘Ohmahgawsh, y’all, I’m ugly cryin’!’ only to look over her shoulder to see Harley holding a

fluffy, golden retriever puppy. She sobbed even more when he put it in her lap with a forehead kiss.

When the party ended, I took off my flower crown and hooked it over my rearview mirror, unable to stop grinning. I was running a little late, but I pulled up to the lake at 11:11, which was a good omen for me.

Carson unrolled his truck window. “Are you ready for the real afterparty?”

“Yes, I am.”

He gave me a sexy smile that flashed in the dim light of his truck. “Follow me; feel free to pull into the garage.”

My body buzzed, knowing I was finally going to his cabin. It was a short drive, no more than two minutes past our spot at the lake. He took a road that was barely noticeable in the thatch of forest. It was unmarked, unlike Kaylee and Harley’s archway. There was no way to find this place alone. It was remote, closed off, just like him.

He pulled down his private drive lined with trees, and from there, the woods parted to reveal a cabin I could tell was gorgeous even in the darkness. The house was lakeside on the top of a slight slope with plenty of trees. It was two levels, with perfect masonry of stones up halfway, then timber, with a dark, shiny metal roof that gleamed under the moonlight. Lights were on inside, making it the perfect refuge.

We both parked in his garage and before I could get out, he opened my door, yanking me mischievously by the hips with a kiss. Kiszka tore zoomies all around once he realized it was me in the mudroom. After our playful greeting, Carson said something to him in Greek, making the dog snuff and trot off. I guess even Kizzy knew what was about to go down.

Carson took my hand and led me into the cabin that smelled woody with a hint of clean laundry. I didn’t know what to expect, but it sure as hell wasn’t this. It was spotless for a bachelor pad but a little sparse in décor, which I could understand. It was lodge-style with an open living room, kitchen, and huge windows to show off his view of the lake.

The towering fireplace had gray, smoothed river rocks creeping up to the tall ceilings filled with giant beams, creating an old-worldly feel. In front of the hearth was a dark leather U-shaped sectional. Behind the couch was the kitchen with rustic custom cabinets and an old canoe tipped upside-down above the kitchen island as a long light fixture.

“Your cabin is gorgeous,” I said, looking around.

“Thank you for saying that.” He led me to the stairs to the side of the fireplace. Each stair was a log cut vertically in half, the flat side making up the step.

“You built it yourself, didn’t you?”

He looked over his shoulder. “I think you already know the answer.” He squeezed my hand.

The second floor was Carson’s main suite, spanning the entire cabin. The dark wooden floors and alcoves created a certain charm, and his bed welcomed us right as we walked in. It appeared sturdy, with a headboard and footboard encasing it with distressed wood and soft dark gray bedding.

A circular window crowned the bed between the two slanted sides of the wooden pitch ceilings. It created a cozy, intimate space with dim lanterns mounted on the wall on either side instead of lamps. The mercury glass created a faint glow, enough to see Carson’s eyes set on me as I stepped into his arms.

“I didn’t know your cabin was that close to the lake.”

He pulled the sweater off, kissing my shoulder. “What can I say? On some level, you couldn’t stay away from me.”

I shoved at his chest, trying not to laugh at his stupid joke. The memory of Viviane telling me I’d find my answers at that specific lake floated in my mind, along with the visual of Carson walking into the water to profess all his secrets and devotion. I fought a pleased smile while I pressed closer to my new lover.

I got my answers at that lake. That’s for damn sure.

Chapter Twenty-Four



The green digits displaying 11:08 on the dashboard of my truck put a burn in my stomach. After the solstice party, I went home to clean up, take care of Kizzy, and then returned to meet her. She was running late, which I didn't mind, but I started to worry. Did someone see us? Was she enduring the wrath of Kaylee and Harley all alone?

I distracted myself by thinking about her. Rosie had me in a vise. My heart, my body, my fate—it was all hers.

I couldn't forget how she pulsed against me, the way her flower crown knocked off her head while I moved deep inside her. Seeing her dress pushed up as her knees hitch around me while we moved together felt ancient and instinctual. Some primal part of me loved that I rutted into her on the forest floor like some fucking beast. She was gorgeous, brazen, and alive with me. Truly wild.

I wanted more. I needed more.

At 11:11, she pulled up and followed me to the cabin. Kiszka lost his shit, realizing it was her, and I couldn't blame him. She belonged here with us, not stuck in the loft. I walked her upstairs, fielding questions about my cabin. Someday, I'd tell her how I inherited the land and how it took forever to build out. In the meantime, I had one thing on my mind—getting her out of that dress.

“I want you so bad, but I'm worried I smell like a bonfire,” she whispered.

“You don’t.” I brushed her neck, breathing in her spicy and earthy scent before I yanked off my shirt, needing to feel her skin on mine.

“I might have dirt on me from the forest. I don’t want to get your bed dirty.”

“Don’t care. Can’t wait. Need you,” I said between quick kisses. With my lips still on hers, I reached for the faux fur blanket at the foot of my bed, ripping it up to cover most of the surface. “Better?” She nodded, giggling while raising her arms, letting me lift the dress off her body.

She peppered kisses all over my chest, her hand streaming the crystal necklace she had given me months ago. “You’re still wearing it?” she asked.

“Never took it off.”

“After all this time?” She kissed the crystal pendant and pulled me closer with the chain.

My lips hovered over hers, “It felt like having a piece of you with me.”

“You can have all of me now. Can we take it off while we ___”

I lifted it off my neck, putting it in my pocket before wrapping her in my arms again, loving how her boobs smashed against me. She undid my pants. Stepping out of them, I tugged her panties down. My hand cupped her pussy, needing to feel it again. She sucked in a breath at my touch, pushing my underwear down as my dick jutted up between us.

I kissed her down to the bed, lifting her hips, scooching her right where I wanted her underneath me. She spread her legs for me, so needy and fucking ready I had to fight swiping my dick against her. I kissed her neck to distract myself, and time halted as we lay there, making out and moving together, enjoying the feel of skin on skin. Our hands grabbing, legs entangling, tongues brushing, bodies gliding. Needing to be closer, so much closer.

I broke the kiss and rolled beside her, running my roughened palm from her throat to her mound and back up.

She tilted her chin up to expose more of her neck in surrender, enjoying the path my hand traveled. I did it again before running my knuckles between the valley of her breasts and down her tummy before brushing over her pussy.

“I like how you touch me,” she admitted, her eyes sparkling in the low light. “So soft.”

“So soft,” I echoed, returning to knead her breasts, which were all natural and bouncy, with soft pink nipples that were puffy until I decided otherwise. Ducking down, I swirled the nipple with the tip of my tongue. Her hips lifted in response as I flicked it until it hardened, only to nibble the peak.

Eyes heavy with lust, she whispered, “Baby, please don’t stop.”

I flicked, sucked, and skimmed again before moving to the other breast, covering the one I overstimulated. She held the back of my neck, her hips wriggling in overwhelm. Her nails scraped my scalp and through my hair, the sensation only making me harder.

We had tortured each other in the lake. Then we gave into temptation in the forest. Right now, I wanted to take my time with her. “This is all I’ve wanted since I met you. You, me, this bed,” I admitted.

“Same, just to be alone.”

I hummed in agreement, licking and nibbling the soft tissue of her breast below her nipples as I rolled them between my thumbs and fingers. She placed her hands over mine in encouragement, both of us working her tits together as I kissed her ribs and the crook of her waist, biting the swell of her hips.

“Baby, please,” she whispered.

I grabbed a pillow, putting it under her bum. “You rushed me before in the forest. Now, I want to take my time.” I kissed the soft spot below her belly button, clutching her hips. Unable to stop myself, I nuzzled the tiny triangle of curls. She gasped. I did it again, brushing her thighs with my hands. Her scent flooded me, making me feel crazed. “Sugar and lust,” I said, kissing her inner thighs.

She breathed out, “You were right about the faerie.”

“Good, I like you this way.” I punctuated my proclamation by kissing her open, loving her moan. Seeing her spread for me was intoxicating. She was dripping, all pink and soft and glistening. I kissed all around her pussy, letting my beard tickle her sensitive skin. She scooted closer to my face, wanting more. I licked up one rosy lip, then the other, before trailing up the center with my eyes locked on hers. Her legs fell on either side of my face, her breathing deepening, causing her perfect tits to rise and fall.

“You’re so—” she covered her eyes with her forearm, shuddering. “You’re so good at that.”

“You’re so perfect,” I countered, brushing my lips up and down hers, coating my mouth with her sweetness. I explored almost every part of her greedily, purposefully avoiding her clit. She arched her back, trying to make contact with my tongue, but I wouldn’t let her. I slid my middle finger inside her, opening her up to me. She bucked against it, biting her lower lip with a desperate hum. I added my ring finger and began to pulse them both as I finally licked her clit. Her soft thighs clamped around my head for a moment before releasing so she could move in a slow grind.

And we were off. Even though it was only our second time doing this, I could sense what she wanted. Softer, harder, faster, higher, lower. She would whisper little requests and moan when I did what she asked. I loved that. I’d do anything this woman asked if she kept her soft thighs on either side of my face.

Time suspended like honey, just as sweet as her.

Panting, she confessed, “Baby, I’m going to.”

“I want you to.”

“But I want you inside me.”

“This is just the start. You come first and often. With my name on your lips, then my cock inside you.”

She bit her knuckle while I shook my face, nuzzling her entire pussy to suck on her clit. She touched her breast,

mumbling something like, “Oh, you’re so nasty.” I didn’t catch it because whatever she said turned into a cry. She clamped down around my fingers as her hips met me with each stroke. She was getting so soaked I could feel her wet my cheeks, down my neck. It was heaven being nose-deep inside my sweet Rosie.

I loved the little noises she made and how she pushed my shoulders only to give up and tug at my hair. Somewhere in the process, she grabbed my hand that held her ass in place, weaving her fingers through mine, resting it on her hip bone. I’d hold her hand through anything, especially this.

Sensing she was getting close, I focused in, not changing the pressure or rhythm, licking the head of her clit with a flat tongue. I let her writhe and collapse as she pulsed against my hand, coming hard. Her head lolled back, and she tried to turn to her side, but I held her in place, allowing her to come back down only to start again.

“Please, please,” she panted as we ticked her higher in pleasure, building on the orgasm that just racked through her body.

I ran my hands up and down her curves. “You can come again, baby. Your beautiful body was built for this. Let me give it all to you.”

She closed her eyes, nodding. “Yeah,” she agreed in breathless anticipation, grabbing her breast again.

“Keep touching yourself like that. I want to see you.”

Entranced, she nodded, wetting her fingers with her mouth only to pinch her nipple. It was so fucking hot I got distracted for a second. Her pleading, “Faster...” ripped me out of it. I ground my face into her center, probing her with my tongue, rubbing inside her with it. She came again, hard, her thighs smothering me.

I freed my face, cupping her pussy with my hand to feel it beat against my palm as I kneeled, staring down at my gorgeous girl. She was breathless, hands in her hair. Her eyes cracked open, unable to focus on me for a moment.

Sharing a shred of lucidity, we smiled at each other, pleased, then I attempted to settle back down for more, but she seized my dick with a wicked look. “I need this in me now.” With her other hand, she cupped the rest of me.

My thoughts faded as I fetched a condom from my bedside table, letting her stroke it on me. Then I dragged her legs, locking them around me before I traced my cock up and down her center, wetting it. She wiggled her bum, hungry to take it. Before I could notch the head, her movement had done it for me. She ran her hands down my chest as I braced myself on either side of her, leaning down to kiss her while I sank in.

Her jaw slacked at the sensation, so I nibbled and licked her bottom lip until I was seated inside her. “Carson, baby, it’s so...”

I kissed her neck. “Are you okay?” I didn’t want to hurt her. She was relaxed and ready for me. I made sure of that.

She tilted her pelvis slightly. “Yeah, it’s just a lot. I needed a second.” She held my face with both hands, rubbing my scruff affectionately. “Keep going.” I slowly pulled back and delved into her again, feeling her clench my dick. She nodded with a whimper, digging one of her little heels into my ass and ushering me to continue.

We moved together as I slowly undid her with shallow thrusts, grinding her clit with each one. She’d meet me with every push, bucking with me in a steady give and take. She came again, squeezing me so tight I thought I’d blow right then and there.

Riding a high, she maneuvered herself on top of me, wetting our skin with her dripping pussy, her hair streaming down all around us. “Damn girl,” I said, reverently running my hand up between her breasts, feeling her heart wildly beat.

She smiled and gripped the headboard, lifting her body, almost letting my length escape her vise only to clench it and shimmy back down to acclimate further. She did it several times over, and when she wiggled down, she’d bite her bottom lip with a greedy little moan.

Lift, clench, shimmy.

Sweet fucking Freya.

It was mind-melting. Everything blurred as I watched my cock disappear into her perfect pussy, how the fit was so snug and soaked. My mouth hung with silent groans as her scorching heat pulled at me, her boobs jiggling with each motion.

“I knew you could ride it like this.” I gripped her hips, moving them to change the rhythm I matched with my thrusts. “Just like this.”

Her breath hitched with the change. “Oh god, yes! Give it to me!” she cried, moving her hands down to steady herself on my chest. I had little restraint left. Luckily, neither did she. She closed her eyes. “It’s so—”

“I know.” That made her grind harder. I caressed all over her chest as I repeated it, almost in a way to empathize. “I know, baby. It feels so good.”

She stilled, barely rocking on me while she sucked in a ragged breath before her release. Her quivering core pushed me past my limit, and my eyes rimmed with heat as I felt my cum spurt out of me over and over again, my vision spotty, my groans echoing from the cabin’s pitched ceilings.

She collapsed on me with a breathy sigh, her pussy still pulsing against my sensitive shaft. “Jesus Christ,” she whispered into my pec where she lay.

“Don’t give him credit,” I echoed our inside joke, feeling her smile against my chest.

Once I could move, I kissed her head while pulling out. I took care of the condom and returned with a warm washcloth to clean her up. She met me with a hazy look, half pleading, half grateful. “I can’t move yet,” she breathed.

“Then don’t,” I whispered, tending to her. Some part of me liked that even with a condom, she was a fucking mess. I did that to her.

I slumped back in bed, wrapping her in my arms as I pulled her to my chest. She tipped her head up for a kiss I happily delivered, then folded the edge of the fur blanket to cover us more. “I don’t want to leave this bed.”

“Then don’t,” I repeated as I played with her hair as she settled in. From there, she dragged the tips of her nails across my torso underneath the furs. My dick twitched in response. Distracting myself, I rifled through what was on my mind other than just sleeping with her. I lifted the covers to look down at our naked bodies. Her pale skin looked creamy next to my tan, hairy body. Grabbing her left thigh, I hiked it up over my leg. “This tattoo is my favorite so far.” I ran a row of fingers down the long sword with roses at its hilt. It stretched most of the length of her outer thigh.

“Every girl needs a sword. Speaking of,” she eyed my dick, “you didn’t warn me about *him*.”

I fought a chuckle at how she referred to my penis. “What about him?”

“He’s a lot to take in. Literally.” She let out a chuckle. I couldn’t help but notice how she delayed putting the covers down.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, you didn’t. Just, wow.”

I squeezed her. “Good. I never want to hurt you.” A silence filled the space around us, my words taking on a double meaning. I was worried that with the curse and reputation, there was too much of me to accept. I didn’t want to scare her away by being too much or a possible wrecking ball to her life. But now that we had been physical, I felt more caught up in her and worried being with me this intimately shoved her even closer to harm’s way.

“I want to shower, but I’m too tired to walk,” she groaned. She was barely coherent. I felt a sting of pride as I picked her up from the bed. While she did her thing, I turned on the water, ensuring it was hot because I’d never met a woman who didn’t shower in molten lava.

Once under the water, she stretched with a yawn. It was wonderful to see her so relaxed. With every skim of the suds, I asked her what tattoo was under my palm. She mainly had neo-traditional tattoos depicted like illustrations from faerie tales, ancient grimoires, or old botany textbooks. She was an ink witch.

It was fascinating to hear her explain that part of her craft was learning about nature around her and then tattooing it on her body to show its significance along her spiritual journey. Each herb had medicinal and magical properties, so she had foxglove and mugwort herbs on her arm. Foxglove brought her protection, and mugwort helped her trust her intuition.

She also had a deer, crow, and blue jay tattoo, explaining each animal came to her in dreams and real life with messages. On one forearm was her favorite tarot card that read Temperance. It was a lady pouring water between two chalices. On the other arm, she had realistic faeries, teacups, lyrics, skeleton keys, and an intricate tree of life inside her right bicep. I confirmed the lily and a rose interwoven on her foot was a nod to her mom. It made us both smile.

She was impressed I had decent shampoo and face wash she could use. Even without makeup, she looked dewy and still so freaking pretty it made my chest tight. I held her face and told her that before kissing all over it like a madman. It made her giggle and kiss me the same way.

How she leaned her head to one side while towel-drying her hair made me stop and stare momentarily. I caught her smiling at me while I put on beard oil and deodorant. She walked closer to sniff me. “So that’s what smells so amazing on you?”

“Yep,” I stroked my beard, winking at her.

“Beard oil? What is this, the Wild West? Are you ready for a saloon shoot-out?” She snorted at her joke.

“Oh, like you don’t always have oils on, making you smell like some ancient spice market mixed with heaven, witch.”

She balked and walked closer to rip the towel off my waist friskily. “Besides smelling good, you look like a Greek god. Look at all this.” She ran her hands over my chest, “I’m used to dating scrawny punks covered in ink. I should’ve moved here sooner. I like this mountain man thing you have going for ya.” She squeezed my pecs playfully, “This is dangerous. All manly and tempting.” She broke out in another giggle.

I pulled her in for a kiss, whispering against her lips. “I’ll show you what being with a real man is like. Trust that.” She nodded, liking the idea. I continued to kiss her, taking my turn to open her towel and letting it drop to the floor. I loved her body against mine, warm and soft in all the right places.

My hands hungrily grabbed her ass in a slow knead, loving how each cheek filled my hand just as I expected. A low primal noise escaped me beyond my control. “Rosie...”

“Yes?”

“I need you to know you have the best ass I’ve ever seen.”

She smiled against my lips. “Thank you, I grew it myself.”

She was so funny when she wasn’t trying to kill me. I could detect she was suddenly shaky, which was concerning. Still holding her against me by the ass, I whispered in her ear. “Are you nervous?”

“No? Why would I be?”

“You’re so shaky, sweetheart.” I broke the embrace to look into her eyes. She bit her lip. “Here, come with me. You can wear some of my clothes.”

She picked out a flannel that she wore as a dress. I suspected it was to drive me crazy. It worked. To get back at her, I picked out gray lounge pants thin enough to show off my dick and a black shirt. I walked her downstairs, where Kiszka escorted her to the couch for pets and his version of storytime. I covered her bare legs with a blanket and started a fire. Nights here by the lake can get chilly, and I wanted her hair to dry.

“Does Kizzy not go upstairs?” she asked.

“He’s terrified of the log steps, which can be slippery. I tried putting little grips down for him, but he was still too scared. Huh, boy?”

He snorted out, embarrassed.

“I feel bad, but I built this place six years before I rescued him from a puppy mill. Sometimes, I haul him up, but he howls. It’s probably best he doesn’t sleep up there with me because he snores.”

Mad I was outing him to our lady, he ruffed at me.

“But he has a room with a custom-built bed and an extra dark crate, just how he likes it. Isn’t that right?” I asked my dog, whose eyebrows twitched before he looked at Rosie. She smiled as he put a paw on her leg, admitting he was spoiled.

I got the fire going while she talked to Kiszka. Well, let’s be honest. She mainly listened. Then I heated some food for her, guessing she was hungry. I had snatched up some wine weeks ago when she told me beer gave her a hangover. It was a small win to uncork it for her tonight.

“Kiszka, bed.” He huffed and sprung off the couch before I handed her the bowl of spaghetti and put the wine glass down on the coffee table with some water.

Her eyes grew big while she grabbed the bowl from me. “Babe! How did you know?”

“I have a sense of what you need in you.” I didn’t realize how dirty that sounded, but she picked up on the undertones.

Her eyes widened before she twirled noodles and took a bite, nodding in approval. “This is so good,” she said between bites. “Thank you.”

“Figured you didn’t eat much at the party. Sorry, they’re leftovers. It was something quick—”

“You’re so good to me. And it’s delicious. I haven’t been cooking much lately. I’m living off granola bars.” She smiled and then looked around. “You were right. We just needed this

cabin and some privacy. This place is so relaxing. I bet the view of the lake is gorgeous.”

“Hopefully, you’ll see it in the morning. Which reminds me, do you work tomorrow?”

“No, I am all yours.” I liked the sound of that. It was already the middle of the night anyway.

“Good. Will you stay the night? I have a spare toothbrush you can have, and I’m pretty sure Kiszka wouldn’t let you leave even if you wanted.” She nodded, her eyes looking all doe-like. God, I was so fucked. I tried to play it cool as I pulled her legs onto my lap from where she sat in the corner of my sectional couch.

“I have a random question for you,” she said.

“Hit me.”

“What’s your favorite kind of food? Since we haven’t been on a date, I don’t know that detail about you. You mentioned you like hunting for good meat, but what else?” She twirled more noodles and delicately ate them. Even the way she ate was endearing.

“I’d probably have to say Mexican food. You?”

“I love sushi. I grew up kinda poor, you know, the whole single mom working as a nail lady wasn’t easy, so when we had sushi, it was always special.”

I committed that to memory. “That makes sense. Greek food is that way for me. It means something special is happening. Now I have a question for you. If you could go anywhere, where would you want to visit? You mentioned you wanted to visit Ireland, but is that your dream vacation?”

“I know it sounds silly, but I want to go to Hawaii, so it was funny when you gave me that book about gingers in Maui.”

“Did you read it, by the way?”

She bobbed her head cheerfully while chewing, then swallowed and said, “Yes, and I fucking loved it! That was such a cool way to flirt with me. I know that was only a couple

of months ago, but doesn't it feel like it took us so long to get here?"

"Yeah, I feel like I've known you longer than a few months. It's wild to me you're here. When my sister told me one of Kaylee's friends would live above the shop, I never thought much of it. Then I saw you, and everything changed."

"Was it because I was screaming topless with the threat of rabies?"

"No, it was honestly talking to you while setting up Silver Springs. Each morning, I'd look forward to seeing you, bickering with you." I brought a hand up to her face to tuck some hair behind her ear. "I knew you were different because I missed you without hardly knowing you. I didn't realize something like that was possible. Then I got to know you, which made it much harder not to be around you."

"That makes me so sad. I feel bad like I tortured you."

We both broke into a grin. "Oh, you did," I teased.

She got up, putting the bowl down to straddle my lap, and my hands clutched her ass with newfound intimacy. She leaned in and kissed me, causing Kiszka to freak out. His howls rang in the tall ceilings of the cabin as I fought a smile against her soft lips. I broke our kiss, huffing in annoyance while looking over her shoulder at my dog. "Kizzy, we like Rosie! Why are you acting this way?" He howled louder, really giving me a lecture. "You're embarrassing me!" I yelled wide-eyed, making her cackle.

Bracing on my shoulders, she twisted to look. "Do you not like me on your daddy?"

I squeezed her ass to get her attention. She whipped her head back to look at me. "I'm gonna have to ask you not to say the word *daddy* while you're on my lap."

She threw her head back in another cackle. At the same time, Kiszka bounded up on the couch, separating us with his fluffy ass along with a deafening rendition of his favorite Celine Dion song, eventually sandwiching himself between us on the couch.

Rosie continued to pet him, urging his needy behavior, but I couldn't blame either of them. It felt nice to be lounging by the fire with my new pack. And I felt better now that a fire was warming her, and she had food in her stomach.

The adrenaline started to leave my body, and the realization that I had been up since 4:30 a.m. the previous morning seeped in. I scooted Kiszka's fluffy butt until he moved out of the way, then pulled Rosie to my chest to wrap my arm around her along with a blanket. Kiszka curled himself in the crook of her legs, right below her bum, shooting me a happy look before laying his head back on her hip. Rosie leaned into me with a sleepy sigh, unable to take her eyes away from the fire. I could feel her unravel, soothed and safe. Letting her guard down and not having to hide. It was medicine for both of us.

Not wanting to disrupt her, I stroked her hair and cheek, slowly pulling her deeper into contentment. Even though she was sometimes feisty, she was naturally quiet, but even more so now. Her breathing was silent, almost undetectable, and her hand was on my chest, mindlessly skimming patterns with her sexy dark nails until she drifted off to sleep. It felt good to be here with her. So damn good.

I kissed her forehead to wake her up. "You're getting too hot, I can tell." My thumb brushed her cheek, where I could see the tell-tale sting of a blush. I told Kiszka to lay at our feet while I leaned back, trying to untangle her to take off the blanket and give her respite from my body heat.

"Wait, don't go." She held my arm, stopping me. Her face winced at her request, tugging at my heart.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, throwing the blanket off her and pulling her back to me. I felt a lump of emotion stuffed in my throat. Who hurt her in the past to make her assume that?

"Sorry, I um...I like snuggling with you. That's all."

"I like cuddling you too." I wrapped her in my arms, holding her tight.

“I’m sorry. I’m just fucking traumatized. I know you are, too. I don’t know how to do this.”

“Don’t apologize.” I kissed the top of her head. “We can go as slow as you need. Figure it out as we go. I want you in my life.”

“I want you in my life.”

I tried to swallow the lump of emotion but couldn’t. “I can’t get used to you being here. Finally. But not in the way I expected.”

“How did you imagine it?” she asked.

My eyes cast downwards, staring at our hands together on my chest. I stroked the rune tattoo on her ring finger with my thumb. “Everything with you feels so right but always out of order. I don’t know how to change that. I thought I’d take you out first, maybe several times, and then maybe take you out on the lake before you came here. But I’m happy I get to be here with you.”

“I’ve wanted to be alone with you for so long,” she whispered. That caused her eyes to flash to mine.

“Oh yeah?”

She nodded, giving me doe eyes once more. I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her tattoo. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

“*Se agapo*,” I murmured into her hair as we both stared off into the flames, refusing to let go of one another in more ways than one.

Chapter Twenty-Five



The morning light streaming through the window above his bed woke me up. I was asleep on Carson's chest, his arm wrapped around me with his hand on my hip. His breaths were steady and deep, but his face was turned away from me.

It was absolute heaven, and I wanted to partake more, but I worried I had some severe morning breath. I kissed his chest while slinking out of bed as gently as possible to not wake him. After freshening up, I slid back in and saw him turn his head with a slow smile.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, dragging me closer for a kiss. It was minty. I pulled back in confusion, which made him continue, "Oh, I did the covert mission of brushing my teeth and gargling with mouthwash only to slide back in bed to pretend I woke up like this fifteen minutes ago."

I chuckled and shoved at him, totally clocked. He kissed me again, rolling to cover me with his beautiful, brawny body. His morning wood pressed into my stomach. I reached down to rub it. "You might've brushed your teeth, but I see you didn't take care of everything."

He bucked into my hand with a naughty look as I reached for a condom with a horny giggle.

After a quick morning romp with lots of sweet little kisses and compliments, we went downstairs for breakfast. I was on coffee duty while he cooked the food. I couldn't help but notice how he held my hips while walking past me by the

kitchen island and how when I stood in front of him to talk, he'd rub his hand low on my back and over my ass. I liked this touchy version of Carson. The surefire privacy helped us relax, and being alone with him was like peeling back another layer.

I also liked that he was walking around without a shirt and seemingly in no rush to get on with his day.

As he cleaned up breakfast, I wandered into the rooms of the perimeter of the cabin that I didn't get to explore last night. Several were damn near empty, but I found his home office with an entire wall of bookshelves. I could tell they weren't just on display by their varied conditions. He had everything ranging from old cloth hardbacks to tattered and taped-together paperbacks.

His voice came behind me, "You can blame Viv for this room."

"This is impressive. I had no clue you liked books this much." I took in more details, trying not to stare at the dead animal busts from hunting trips and a suspiciously large fish mounted above his desk. Goodness me.

A baseball bat on another wall grabbed my attention. Walking closer to inspect it, several framed photos and awards accompanied it. But they weren't little league photos and third-place ribbons. These were news clippings and professional pictures of him sliding to a base and hurling the ball as a grown-ass man. I gasped, turning to look him in the eyes. "You didn't tell me you played baseball!"

He shrugged, bouncing his bare, puffy pecs as he shoved his hands in the pockets of his lounge pants. "Yeah, it was a big part of my life. My dad framed all this crap for me, so I feel obligated to hang it—"

"Carson! Now is not the time to be humble. This looks all," I gestured to the wall with an exaggerated circle of my hand, "I dunno, official."

He shifted his stance with a sober look. "I played in the minor leagues in my early 20s. I traveled a lot, so I worked at the store when I could. My parents and I had this agreement

that I could try to make it in baseball, and if I didn't, the store was waiting for me as my dad and uncle edged toward retirement."

I traced the long scar on his left shoulder, details clicking into place. "You got hurt, didn't you?" I asked, a sad awe clouding my tone.

"Torn rotator cuff."

"Huh?" I asked.

"That's from a torn rotator cuff surgery. I sustained the injury the same year Harley moved away for college. It pretty much sealed my fate." He dashed a somber look at the photo and back to me.

I could sense he didn't want this to drag down the mood. "So my guy is a baseball player. Hmm, well, that explains the absolute dumptruck," I teased, looking at his bubble butt.

He threw his head back with a laugh, held my face, and planted an appreciative kiss on my forehead. "God, you're so funny, woman."

I tried to piece together what little I knew. "You're tall, and you run, so what position did you play?"

"Left field. I'm also a southpaw, left-handed." He held up his splayed hand that he then proceeded to fill up with my ass cheek.

"All those hours watching you paint, I had never realized you're a lefty." I glanced at a different photo with him and some teammates. "It must've been nice to get out of Pine Bluff for games...and girls."

We shared mischievous smiles. "Yeah, the whole cursed thing seems only to affect Pine Bluff. While I was away, I tested that theory thoroughly just to make sure."

I swatted at him while fighting a giggle. He certainly didn't fuck like a guy who had never left his hometown. I wasn't even jealous thinking of the women he must've been with while on the road. I would've taken him home if I had also seen Carson in a bar with his teammates.

Plus, now he's all mine.

“Do you still have the tight white pants?” I asked, wiggling my eyebrows.

“Yes, ma'am.”

I walked past him, slapping his ass. “Good, you'll have to wear them for me sometime.”

Chapter Twenty-Six



The morning went by in a bubble of bliss. It was amazing to wake up with her in my bed, the buttery dawn lighting up her hair as she slept. She welcomed me into her soft little body again with sweet yet simple morning sex, and then, to keep me guessing, she made fun of my coffee during breakfast.

Snooping around the cabin, she discovered my past in baseball and how I failed miserably at it. That didn't seem to register for her; if it did, she didn't make it awkward. That was the good thing about Rosie; she rolled with the punches.

The view of the lake made her want to go out on the boat, which was fine by me. My boat had an awning over the seats, which provided shade, but I told Kiszka I'd have to leave his furry ass at home to play it safe. I didn't want him to get husky heatstroke. He howled, not liking that. I promised him I'd take him for a run tomorrow morning, which he snuffed an agreement to, but I'm sure I'd hear about later.

Rosie fetched a sexy red bikini she kept in her car just in case. I tied it to her body, knowing my only goal was to untie it sometime throughout the day. She wasn't much into fishing, but she wanted me to show her how to bait a hook, so I did. It was fun showing her how to drive the boat while she sat on my lap and bounced with the waves.

Anchoring my boat, I turned on my fishing playlist for music. The shuffle landed on "Ready for Love" by Bad Company. The song made her jump up and down in

excitement. “This is one of my favorites!” she said, dancing towards me.

I held her hips, balancing while moving with her and the waves. She turned around, rolling her body against mine, her ass nestled in my groin. Her pace matched the slow beat, starting playfully but quickly morphing into more sensuous with my hands all over her. She giggled, turning the captain’s chair away from the helm and pushing me to sit.

Standing before me, she continued dancing and giggling, running her hands up and down her body. “Go on,” I said, a grin pulling at my face. If this was her idea of fishing, she was my new fishing buddy, that’s for damn sure. She turned around to wiggle her butt. I grabbed the string on her hip, pulling her between my legs.

Turning around, she held my shoulders, climbing onto my lap to straddle me. Even better. She dragged her bikini-covered tits up my chest and whispered, “I’ve been thinking about this cock ever since I saw it.” Reaching between us, she freed my erection. Under the shade of the canopy, it felt secluded but still risky. We weren’t near any shores or cliffs, which took away some worries, but still, I dodged a look around the lake, making sure no boats were coming our way.

I fleetingly kicked myself in the ass, realizing I didn’t bring any condoms. What cleared my mind was her hand stroking my length, her eyes cast downwards. “This is the biggest dick I’ve ever sat on. By far.” She held it and all but slid herself against it. Even through her bikini, I could feel her heat. I groaned along with her while she did it again. Separating her pussy with my shaft.

“Fucking hell, that’s hot,” I growled.

Before I could make a move, she got down between my legs, kneeling in front of me in the captain’s chair. Her gaze traveled my body with awe while she tugged my shorts down more. Squeezing the muscles on my legs, on the sides of my hips, dragging her nails along my hip bones, making my dick jerk. She bit her bottom lip and continued grazing her nails

along my happy trail up to my belly button before she nuzzled my chest while squeezing my biceps.

“Carson, you’re so stunning,” she whispered before licking my nipples. “I’ve seen so many people damn near naked from tattooing, but your skin and body, everything about you, is so...intoxicating.”

Before I could respond, she nuzzled my chest. “God, you even smell good. Just you. I bet you taste just as addictive.”

She kissed down my body and settled between my legs again, her breast smooshing on my thighs, spilling out the side of her bikini top. With heavily lidded eyes, she gripped me with one hand, cradling my nuts with the other. I swallowed hard, trying to remain calm. I hadn’t gotten head for a while, let alone from someone like Rosie.

I caressed her arms and shoulders, unable to stop watching her touch my aching cock. A bead of pre-cum formed on the crown. It almost rolled down with one of her strokes, but she lapped it with her tongue. A pained groan escaped me, accepting I was at her mercy.

“I like this vein right here,” she said, eyes fixed on the right side of my shaft. Before I could say something, she darted her little pink tongue out and licked up the side with just the tip. Her eyes flashed to mine while she stroked again before licking from base to tip, swirling the head of my cock. “You taste so good, baby,” she murmured, brushing her lips across the crown, slathering more liquid.

“You look so pretty doing that.” I swept her hair out of the way. She ducked her head, taking me in her mouth with a bold plunge. It felt like someone spread white bolts of pleasure all over my body. I pushed more curls away to see her lips part around my cock. She moved her mouth and hands perfectly, each motion burying me deeper in mindless pleasure.

I loved her noises and how she brushed every part of me with her tongue, not scared to get messy while devouring my dick. With every bob of her head, I could see her perfect ass behind her, taunting me. My hand moved to her top, brushing

against one of her nipples, hardening it through the fabric. She hummed, loving that. I shoved the material aside, freeing her tit.

“More,” she moaned, popping off my dick with a wicked smile only to lick my nuts.

Fuck! I released the other one, loving how each breast pressed into my palm when she bent down. “Touch yourself,” I commanded, hoping if she fingered herself, it could distract us so I wouldn’t come as fast.

“No.”

“I like how your mouth argues, but I love how it sucks my cock even more.” I pinched one of her nipples with my statement, causing her eyelashes to flutter as she continued, eyes locked on mine. A tingle inside me intensified. “Baby, I’m gonna,” I touched her jaw as a warning.

The distinct ache coiled deep inside me as I felt everything constrict. She pulled off my dick as hot cum shot out of me. Feeling detached from reality, I watched as she stood, running a little finger through my mess across her chest with a smug smile before jumping off the boat into the water.

Well, that’s one way to clean up.

Once I could move and talk, I joined her buck naked. She splashed me before I could grab her. “Fucking hell, woman!”

“What?” she batted her eyelashes, feigning innocence. I wrapped her legs around my body. She had covered her boobs with her bikini, making me wish I had taken it off.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” I said. My simple statement made me remember the curse and how every second with her could be a ticking time bomb.

Reading my mind, she held my face. “Honey, we will break the curse. Don’t psych yourself out. Just be here with me now.”

I nodded, feeling naked in more ways than one. The far-off hum of a boat motor interrupted us. “Shit!” I said, moving us closer to the boat ladder.

“Is someone coming?” she asked, squinting in the distance. “You’re full-on cock out in the lake!” She threw her head back with a cackle.

“Rosie, baby, someone could see you with me.” That brought her back to reality. She gripped the ladder, making her way up. I couldn’t even enjoy the view. I handed her a towel, finding my shorts the moment after.

“Where do I go? In there?” she asked, pointing at the cuddy.

The small, enclosed space at the bow had a kitchenette, a toilet, and a small bed with storage. She could wait there comfortably, but it outraged me. We were grown-ass adults; we shouldn’t have to hide. “I-I...I don’t want you to hide. Maybe we could let the truth out.”

“I’m not ready for that. I need to hide. I have to!” she huffed, ducking in and shutting the door. “Tell me when they leave.”

I tried to act normal while the boat approached. It was common for fellow fishermen to pull up to your rig to ask for spots you had hit or what depth to have your downrigger set. But as the person got closer, my annoyance set in. It was Terry. Fucking Terry. He worked as a ranger with my brother. He was a typical Boomer and well-intentioned but couldn’t read social cues if his life depended on it.

“Hey, Carsy!” he shouted, cutting his motor too late, causing a wake to rock my boat.

“Hey, Terry.”

“Any luck?” I had put a line out but wasn’t watching it.

“Not today. You?”

“I got some hits over at South Bay at dawn. Other than that, it has been shit.” Even with his sunglasses on, I could tell by the movement of his head he was searching for something in my boat.

“Too bad,” I said empathetically, hoping he moved along.

“Say, was there someone with you? I thought I saw two figures climbing the ladder.”

“Just me. It’s too hot for Kiszka.”

He pulled off his sunglasses, squinting at me further. “Guess you found a way to swim without your shorts getting wet.”

I stared at him, trying to construct a lie. The saying *if you can’t dazzle them with intellect, baffle them with bullshit* floated in my mind, so I ran with it. Clearing my throat, “I was swimming naked. You caught me. But it’s good for your balls.”

Terry shifted his weight from where he knelt on the seat. “Your balls?”

“Yeah, read about it in a men’s health magazine. The cold water helps with sagging.”

“Like a facelift?”

“Yeah, but for your cursed kiwis.”

He put his sunglasses back on. He had seen enough. “You kids are all doing weird shit nowadays. Mushrooms in your coffee, hot yoga. Now, icy water for your family jewels? I don’t get it. In my day, you could let them swing like church bells.”

I shrugged.

“Well, you have fun with that,” he offered.

“Will do.”

I watched as he took off, then told Rosie when the coast was clear. She came out of the cuddy chanting that stupid song “Ice, Ice Baby!” and danced around me. I was grateful she didn’t let the interruption ruin the playful outing.

I checked my pole and got us more water. Watching me, she wound her bikini string around her finger anxiously. “You should let me do something. I feel so bad you’re doing all the work.”

“Quit your bitchin’ and come sit on this face,” I said, grabbing her hips as I slinked down on the bench.

“What?” she asked, mouth hanging.

Flat on my back, I position her straddling over my chest. I could tell she didn’t believe me, so I crunched up, biting one of the strings on the side of her bikini, letting it drop. She watched with a shocked giggle.

I ran my thumb over her pink slit, separating her. The sound and sight of it made my mouth water. “I’d love to taste you. Would you like that? Or does this bother you?” I asked, making sure she was comfortable with my brazen behavior.

“You stopping would be the only thing that would bother me at this point.” She untied the other side, throwing the fabric across the boat before scooting closer.

I brought her to me, nuzzling her sweet pussy as a hiss escaped her lungs while she fought the urge to sit completely down on my face.

“Fuck that feels good. Your mouth on me is...you’re the...”

“The only man you’ll ever want tasting you again,” I finished for her, pushing her down, completely smothering in her sweetness. With an ass cheek in each hand, I held her to me as she braced on the lip of my boat with both hands. And from there, we let the waves help her rock against my face.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Afterwards, Rosie lounged in the sun. Her bikini was thin, causing her nipples to poke through as she sprawled on the back of my boat. I put sunscreen on earlier but rubbed her down every hour, which she found entertaining.

“Babe, I’m not going to shrivel up and die!” She shielded her face from the sun while looking down at me.

I knelt on the boat’s seat and grabbed one of her legs to slather the lotion. “I don’t want you sunburnt. I’m not done touching you.” I rubbed higher and higher on her leg before

flopping it down and pulling up the other one, making her giggle. “Turn over.”

She giggled more. “Now I feel like a rotisserie chicken!”

She flopped over, and I smacked her ass playfully. “Well, if you insist on cooking like one, woman!”

“What about you?”

I scoffed. “I was made for this. I am Greek. Greek doesn’t creak.”

She turned on her back and shielded her face again to look at me. She touched my beard and slightly tugged it. “You’re so striking. I’m jealous you can tan.”

“Don’t be. I like you just the way you are.”

I sat on the bench cushion below where she lay on the boat’s back end. My shoulder was at the same level as her body, which was on full display for my eyes to feast. My fingers trailed around her navel and then on the edges of her ribs. She had a black and gray under-bust tattoo of Medusa on her solar plexus with ornate snake filigree spreading on her ribs. It was gorgeous and crisp. It depicted a fanged Medusa as fierce yet beautiful.

“Speaking of Greek, you have a love for Medusa?” I asked while tracing a snake.

Her mouth pulled into an uncomfortable smile. She must be ticklish. “Something like that, yeah.”

A shiny patch of puckered white skin caught my eye above Medusa’s head. One snake swirled around it, concealing it entirely. I don’t think I could’ve seen it if it wasn’t in direct sunlight. It was a perfect circle right where her ribs met, no bigger than a quarter. I touched it, wondering if it was a scar.

I glanced up at Rosie, who was already staring at me. “What’s this scar from?”

Her voice came out small, barely audible above the waves. “It’s a branding.”

Like the hot poker ranchers used on animals? My palm covered it as my mind sputtered, trying to decipher what could have happened. Her hand covered mine in solidarity, but she said nothing else.

“Was it done on purpose?” I asked.

She shook her head and took a deep breath. “No, I was unconscious.”

“Wait, what? You didn’t choose to do this to your body?”

“No,” she whispered, her eyes getting glossy.

“Who did this to you?”

“My ex-boyfriend, Stefan. He wanted me to let him brand me with his initials. He hinted about it for months, and I never let him. He was emotionally toxic, so I ended our relationship. But we co-owned a tattoo studio in Boston, so I still had to work with him. It bruised his ego that not only did I dump him, but I was more successful as an artist. I was booked out for a year with clients.”

“So he did this in revenge? After you dumped his pathetic ass?”

“Yeah, that’s what spurred it on. Branding or scarification isn’t unheard of in the tattoo world, but I would never want one. Stefan knew that. We were having a work party for Christmas, and he spiked my drink and did it anyway. A final *fuck you*.” Her face twitched.

“Baby, I am so sorry. That makes me sick.” I tried to gather my thoughts, fighting blind rage to find this asshole.

“The worst part, he filmed me topless, passed out in a tattoo chair and everything. Other guys who worked in the shop watched him do it. Not only did he post it on social media, but he also livestreamed it—eight solid minutes of assault. The whole tattoo world saw it, like people I saw at conventions, other artists, and my clients. Everyone.”

“He filmed himself branding you? After drugging you?” Even I could hear the disgust in my voice.

She nodded but continued to hold my hand. “Yes. That’s why I no longer work as an artist. I was humiliated, chased away.”

“This is serious. That’s assault. Where can I find him?” I lifted in my seat.

She gently pushed me back down. “I won’t tolerate any violence, Carson. You have to promise me you’ll leave him alone.”

“I don’t know if I can promise that.” I tried to take deeper breaths. My pulse thudded in my ears, and my throat went dry.

“I already sued him and won the case. This was a couple of years ago. He’s now on probation, but he gets to go on tattooing like nothing ever happened.”

“That’s fucked up,” I spat.

“It is. It truly is. I lived off the settlement because I couldn’t work or leave my apartment. I was so devastated. Stefan pushed me out of my career, something I worked hard for. Tattooing is already a male-dominated field and is toxic as fuck. It’s bad enough to be a female artist. But to have everyone see my naked body in such a traumatizing moment pushed me to my limit. He kept defending himself, saying he didn’t do anything besides the branding, as if I should be grateful that all the guys in the shop didn’t, you know...”

She wiped away a tear and swallowed hard.

“One of my clients saw the livestream and called the cops. I’m so grateful she did.” Her voice was now thick with emotions, “Waking up with a branding on your body is a nightmare. I had physical proof of the event. I had to rebrand myself to remove his mark and make it non-descript. I remember biting a belt to make sure I didn’t crack my teeth. My own singed flesh wafted in my nose. I could smell it for days after. It was disgusting.”

I kissed a tear pooling alongside her nose. She was such a tough woman. She shouldn’t have to live with this horror. No woman should.

“Once the scar healed, I covered it with a Medusa, the protector of women. I remember sitting in front of the mirror one night doing it myself, tears running down as I took my body back. I had to make it mine again somehow. I had to take away the mark of the man who hurt me. I know not every woman gets the chance.”

Our hands remained on her body, holding her pain together.

“I’m proud of you for doing what you needed to. But it’s sad to know you can’t tattoo anymore if it was something you once loved.”

She nodded. “I made an exception for Dane because I’m a softie for guys who don’t have parents. In some way, I relate because I don’t know what it’s like to have extended family or a dad. Tattooing was my world; it ate up almost all of my twenties. Right out of high school, I moved from Pennsylvania to Boston for an apprenticeship and worked up to co-owning a shop. Women felt safer coming to me with body art. That’s the irony.”

“Makes sense. Men are fucking creeps, and having access to people’s bodies is a privilege.”

“When it all went down, I lost half of the business because I couldn’t stand to be around Stefan or buy him out before trial. Luckily, my lawyer, Angie, fought for me. I got a decent settlement, but I couldn’t go back. I kept a low profile as a barista and tried to heal. I went to therapy and journaled a lot. I used the last of it to buy my way into Silver Springs. That’s why I need Pine Bluff to work out for me.”

It was all clicking into place. It wasn’t a job for Rosie. It was her way of doing something besides tattooing. “And you’re helping women with a safe space and jobs.”

“Exactly. And I’m taking my power back. I’m not hiding from the entire world anymore. I still get to own a business, and I’m not ashamed that yet another guy hurt me. I mean, I found a friendship with Kaylee because of it. We have a scorned sisterhood.” Her face twitched with the mention of Kaylee.

I changed the subject. “I’m glad you had a good lawyer.”

“Yeah, Angie was a lifesaver. She turned into my friend. She’s how I met Tyler. She works at the same firm as him.”

I felt my brow furrow thinking about the other douche who hurt her. I brushed the tattoo reverently and kissed the scar. “Thank you for telling me and for trusting me.”

She ran a hand through the side of my hair. “I do trust you—more than you probably know. I didn’t grow up around many men, so it is hard to trust guys. I’ve only had two serious relationships, Stefan and Tyler. And with Tyler, it was pretty surface-level. I had my guard up.”

“I hope I can keep being someone you feel safe with.”

“So far, you have,” she said wistfully. “Even when we tried to torment each other, you always had my back. I’ve felt safe with you since day one.”

A swell of emotions filled my chest.

Her green eyes moved over my face as she whispered, “I know you’d take an arrow for me.”

“I would.” I held her palm close to my face so I could kiss it.

“I know. Thank you for giving me that peace of mind. That freedom.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek, unsure what else to say. I had so many questions, but I didn’t want to upset her by asking them.

She sat up and shimmied down to sit by me, putting her legs over mine to face me on the bench. “Your turn. Will you tell me about what happened with Dane and his sister? The whole story.”

I looked out at the lake, gathering my thoughts. “Jamie was my first love. My first everything. I wanted it to work out because it was the hometown sweetheart thing. Her mom died of cancer when we were twenty years old. She didn’t know how to cope, so she started drinking and partying. One night, she was coming to see me at an away game and crashed on a

bridge.” I swallowed hard, thinking of her. “It gutted me. Dane wasn’t living in town; he had moved away. But he returned for the funeral saying I should have watched out for her more.”

“It’s not like you made her drink and drive.”

“Yeah, but it was my game she was going to, so I don’t know, in his mind, I was to blame. I feel bad for the guy. I think using me as a scapegoat was all he knew what to do. He was only eighteen years old. I held on to that guilt but moved on with my life. It had been almost ten years. Then, three years ago, Whitney fell rock climbing. It turns out she was fucking around with my brother too. And he was the one who found her, so the whole town funneled pity towards him. But I was the one who loved her first.” I chewed at the empty feeling my words left in my mouth. “I know that sounds possessive.”

“I get it. That’s how I felt about Tyler. But Kaylee is the one who got to drive off into Harley’s arms. I had to finish my shift at work. I had to explain that my boyfriend cheated on me while she hadn’t even fucked him.”

It was the first time Rosie had venom in her voice regarding Kaylee. We shared a loaded look.

“I guess it’s safe to say we both have complicated feelings about my brother and your friend.”

She nodded. “Complicated.” The waves of the boat rocked us together while we fell silent, our eyes locked in unspoken truths. She cleared her throat, “Everything with Dane probably helped further the wedge with Harley, huh?” she asked, returning to the subject.

“Yep. And I call Dane out on his bullshit. I’ve seen him schmooze any tourist with a pussy and a pulse who will spread her legs for him. His bed should be a frequently visited spot on Google Maps for this town.”

“Carson!” Rosie pushed my shoulder in playful outrage, bursting our serious bubble.

“It’s true. What’s worse is he’s a damn good mechanic. I am so stubborn I have Bear tow my truck to another town if I can’t fix it myself to avoid his ass.” I let out an evil chuckle. “I

painted a mural for him on the side of his shop out of respect for his dad after he died. But after everything went down, I had to talk myself into not destroying it every time I saw it. That douche doesn't deserve my art."

She climbed onto my lap with a mischievous smile. "Be glad I'm living above your shop, not Dane's."

"Oh yeah? Is that all it took? A loft?" I asked, admiring how her soft thighs spilled over mine and her hair blew in the breeze.

"Yeah, I mean, so far, I like Pine Bluff. I plan to stay. And I like being close to you." She pulled my baseball hat off my head and put it on hers. It was so damn cute I wanted to take a picture. "Thanks for trauma dumping with me." She snickered and leaned in to kiss me, taking us back to center.

We swayed with the waves, holding each other while making out. While kissing her neck, I saw her skin was getting pink, threatening to burn, so we wrapped it up and headed back to the cabin.

My girl had already been burned enough.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



I stood in the shower, letting Carson rinse off the sunscreen he insisted on slathering on my body. The view of the lake from his cabin was breathtaking, and I liked that he had a boat and explored the wild in his free time. He was a true outdoorsman.

“What are you thinking?” His gravelly voice tore me from my inner chatter.

I bit my bottom lip, feeling silly.

“Tell me!” he smiled, lathering his body. Little bubbles formed on his chest hair, distracting me even more.

“I was thinking, I kinda love how you’re all outdoorsy and shit. You don’t rot in front of an Xbox or at a golf course all weekend. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I like the whole hunting and fishing thing. More than I expected.”

“I gotta live up to my middle name.” He shot me a wink and turned to the water to rinse off.

“Wait, what’s your middle name?”

He turned back towards me, his tan skin splattered in dew drops. His eyes set in a soulful squint, “Theron, it means hunter in Greek,” he explained. Considering how he chased me through the forest and always found me in a crowd, I’d say he was living up to the namesake just fine. “And if I remember right, when I looked at your mail, your last name is Hayes.” He cracked a grin, avoiding my playful shove.

“You’re shameless!”

“It’s true. Do you have a middle name?”

“Nope. My mom said nothing ever came to her.”

“Well, Roisin, I like that.” He said, stepping out to wrap a towel low on his hips. “It leaves room for additional names.”

And with that, he left me stunned in the shower alone.

He wore lounge pants, knowing I could see his dick, just like last night. To equally torment him, I wore the same flannel as a dress since my solstice sundress was still drying from the wash. Making our way downstairs, Carson entered one of the spare rooms and returned with an armful of art supplies. He set sketchbooks, charcoal, and colored pencils down on the coffee table, a lightness filling his energy.

I stared wearily at the sketchbook, grateful Kiszka wanted pets so I had something to do with my hands. I hadn’t sketched in years. The artist in me died that day, snuffed out and seared like the skin on my body.

Carson gestured at the table, “I was thinking we could listen to some music and sketch.”

I sucked in a breath, my voice barely a whisper, “I don’t do that anymore. I haven’t since the branding. When Dane asked for his tattoo, I only said yes because he gave me a photo I needed to replicate. It took zero creativity on my end.”

His eyebrows shot up to his hairline as he sat across from me. “That’s a long time to be...without. Without, I don’t know, a funnel?”

I rested my head on Kizzy’s, hugging him from behind as I twisted his fur nervously. I already felt naked with Carson, and not just in the physical sense but emotionally. Even spiritually, he tapped into a part of my soul no one else had. Like my dreams of him and how he could sense I was around. This was going to push it even further. It was simply too much for me to handle.

“I, Carson, I can’t—”

“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t think about how this might hurt you. I thought you still did art in private.” One large hand began to close the sketchbook, triggering something in my mind.

“But I want you to. Maybe I could watch you? Kind of ease into it.”

Kiszka ruffed, adding to my request, liking the idea. Carson eyed both of us. “Okay, yeah.”

“Draw me like one of your French girls,” I teased, quoting the movie *Titanic*.

His mouth set in a sexy smile as he tilted his head, running with the idea. “Yeah, I think I might. If you’re offering that is...” My whole body buzzed with a resounding *yes*. But all I could do was smile back at him. He jutted his jaw at me. “Lay right there.”

I laughed, shaking my head. Meeting his gaze once more, I realized he wasn’t joking. “Right here?” I asked, pointing to the deep sectional I was sitting on the edge of. It was U-shaped, and he was across from me.

His lips curled before he took a sip of his drink in answer. The whiskey matched the flecks in his hazel eyes. The sunlight on the lake lit him up, leaving me backlit in the shadow of the couch. He clicked a remote until music filled the cabin from speakers high on the ceiling. Low classic rock floated in the cabin air, making it more relaxing and not so echo-y. I took a long drink of my water and then a sip of my wine. Standing up, Kiszka looked up at me in confusion. Carson said something in Greek, making him curl up over by him.

I unbuttoned the flannel, dropping it behind me on the couch. Carson’s eyes raked up and down my body, not hiding his gaze. He blinked slowly in his lusty fog as I ran my hands over my thighs and hips. Maybe I imagined it, but my skin was even softer after being with him.

The thrill of him watching emboldened me. My hands traveled over my ribs and breasts, which jiggled under the pull of my palm. Then I roamed downwards, grazing the tiny patch

of hair between my legs that was just as soft. Carson's nostrils flared ever so slightly while he sucked in a hopeful breath. Sensing he was in my trap, I whooshed my curls to the front of me, twirling a strand around my finger. "I will sit, but you can't touch."

He nodded, sweeping his tongue over his lips before pulling himself together enough to situate the sketchbook on his lap. "Be glad this thing is thick cardboard," he mumbled.

I situated a dark gray blanket beneath me and rested on my side, propping my head up with my hand. My other hand relaxed on my top hip. I felt beautiful, powerful, and trusting, realizing I was naked in a cabin in the middle of nowhere in Maine, letting a guy draw me naked. We had known each other for months, but it still felt vulnerable.

"You look beautiful." Carson's eyes gleamed in admiration before flicking down to his sketchpad. "Like the perfect muse. You can rest your arm, sweetheart. I'm drawing your chest first."

I snorted. "Right, of course. The boobs are your favorite."

He pinned me with a look over his sketchbook. "It's where your heart is."

I gulped, feeling rude. The moment was filled with things left unsaid. My limbs trembled, so I distracted myself with another question.

"So what's your greatest fear?" I asked.

"Killing you," he said without hesitation.

The breath exited me with a surprised wheeze. "God, I was asking that as a joke."

"I answered, wishing it was." He tilted his head while pulling a line across the paper. "Are we going to talk about it?"

"I said I was all in."

"I'm all in, too, but we still need a game plan."

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," I groaned, resting my head on my bicep. "I was supposed to move here to hide away

and heal. I was hoping Silver Springs would take off and I'd be a successful business owner again. Then branch out. But now I feel like this shitty person because I don't want to tell Kaylee about us."

"You're not a shitty person."

"I am. I find myself resenting her and Harley because they can date openly. If anything, you should run away from me. I'm a hateful hag."

His hand stilled as he looked up from his work. "You forgave Kaylee when you found out about the affair."

"So..."

"I beat the shit out of my little brother, then ignored him for three years. We're not the same, Rosie. You're way more forgiving. You're better than I'll ever be."

"That's not true." I leaned forward to take a sip of wine. I needed to approach this with as much delicacy as possible, but I was unsure how. I licked my lips, the tart wine drying my mouth. "But I think we should keep things, you know... private."

"Go on," he said, immersed in his process.

"I want to protect us. Everything is so new and raw. I can only imagine what rumors will crop up."

"Can you see how not telling people about us could make me still feel cursed?" he said calmly.

I snorted. "Well, when you put it all reasonable like that... yeah. Now I feel even more like a piece of shit."

He chuckled, "If we're going to put the curse behind us, why would it matter? We'll just tell people to fuck off. They'll move on. And when you live a long, happy life, it will be proof enough."

I licked my lips again. "I'm not ready."

He bobbed his head with a resigned look. "I can respect that."

"We haven't even been out on a proper date."

He stared at me with a tortured sigh.

“Not for a lack of trying on your behalf,” I amended. “Listen, I want to protect this until after the blessing. Keep it private until it’s permanent. Those are my terms.”

“When is the blessing?”

After the confessions in the lake incident, I consulted the stars, literally. “It’d be best to wait for Venus to move into a more favorable sign. So that puts us at early August.”

“It’s late June. That leaves us all of July.” His brow creased. “It’s too risky. What if something happens to you in the meantime? I can’t let that happen.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“You can’t know that.”

I got up, crawling butt naked across the couch. “Those are my terms. I want to keep this discreet. That gives us time to enjoy things before public scrutiny.” Quite frankly, I also needed a shred of autonomy in this situation.

Uncertainty pulled at his features. “What about my terms?”

I kneeled next to him. “I’m all ears.”

His hand skimmed my hip and back before pulling me to settle on his lap. He brushed a curl off my breast while he gathered his thoughts. “If you’re mine, you’re mine. I want this to feel like a real, proper relationship. Not just shared voice memos and only seeing each other on Sunday afternoons. If we do this, I want it to be as normal as possible.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Yes.”

“How about dinner tomorrow? We’ll go a couple towns over, super discreet, I promise.”

I smiled, leaning in for a kiss. “I like the sound of that.”

I felt out of control as his lips lowered to mine, loving how his hard chest pressed into my soft breasts. The way his beard tickled my face, erupting the faintest flush. And most

importantly, how his hands never left my body, yearning, squeezing, searching for something.

He broke the kiss, whispering against my lips, “You’ve been so fun to be with today. You’re addictive. I missed talking to you.”

I nuzzled his nose, love drunk. “I feel the same way. All in?”

“All in.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



I took Rosie out for sushi and a drive-in movie. Cuddling her under the stars in the back of my truck with Kiszka was fun. The night after our date, she texted me for a booty call. I happily opened my garage for her, loving how she got out wearing only a sundress and a smile, no panties. We didn't even make it to the bedroom. Instead, I fucked her right there on my dining table.

The rest of the week, I had flashbacks throughout my work day, recalling the most debaucherously hot nights with her in my cabin, all to myself. Even Kiszka knew after greeting her it was best to go to his room because I was about to make her scream.

One early afternoon, I was helping Eugenia, the owner of Stonebriar Inn.

“Carson!” she said in her shrill British accent. “Do you sell those spray mops I see commercials for?”

“No.”

She put her hand to her chest. “But why?”

“Because you shouldn't be cleaning a historic inn with a maxi pad attached to a pole, that's why,” I grumbled.

She cupped her hand behind her ear, “Pardon?”

Louder, I answered, “I recommend this one. It spins so you get a nice damp mop that won't damage the old wood at Stonebriar.”

“I guess that will do. Will you be a dear and take it to the front while we go over paint samples?”

I nodded, letting her shuffle in front of me, droning on. People always asked for my opinion. I might be the town grump, but folks knew I had a knack for what looked good. Speaking of looking good, Rosie was upstairs, and I knew on some level she wanted attention. We had a way about us that she could send me a mental signal, and I’d sense it. On cue, my phone buzzed.

Roisin: Baby, I need you. Can you come up here?

Me: Give me five minutes, and I’ll be all yours.

Showing her impatience, she sent me a picture of her body lying on her bed. It was only from the waist down, in a short skirt, with her sexy legs crossed. I almost crushed my phone in half.

“What does this shade Dove look better in, gloss or matte?” Eugenia asked, holding up gray paint swatches.

“Um,” I swallowed hard, “matte. Do you want to see Fog? I’ve noticed the shade looks nice.”

I tried to immerse myself in the less dazzling conversation of neutrals and backsplashes. Who the fuck paints their kitchen gray? That’s not appetizing. Nothing says gather and eat like the color smog. Life should be full of warmth, especially a kitchen where you nourish yourself. I was over HGTV shows cursing the nation with stark houses.

After a few minutes, I saw the tell-tale sway of fiery tresses while Rosie sauntered behind Eugenia. The warm daylight drifted in the windows, illuminating her. Along with the miniskirt, she wore that T-shirt with the photo of me on it. My blood was lava under my skin at the sight of her, a mix of disbelief and desire. A fever she created in me often that I still wasn’t used to.

She grabbed an old-school glass bottle of Coke from our small refrigerator display and turned her charm on Hank, asking him to open it for her. He could only fight to make eye contact while popping the lid off. With her nipples poking out against the white shirt, I couldn't blame him.

I watched as she flipped her hair and raised the Coke bottle to her perfect lips for a long sip. I stared, grateful Eugenia talked to herself while bending over the samples on the counter. Holding Rosie's gaze, I dashed my eyes to my right, indicating she needed to return to her loft.

She smirked and walked slower, petting Kizzy and taking another sip. Her skirt swished with each step. Every sway pulled me deeper and deeper into madness.

I cleared my throat. "Dove with this backslash is perfect. It would bring out the paint color without looking too cold, which would happen if you went with Passive Gray. You'll love it. Hank and Kiszka will be happy to ring you up," I ended Eugenia's indecision. I figured it was a safe bet. She just wanted something new and trendy.

Now free, I walked through the swinging doors to find Rosie. I grabbed the Coke bottle from her and set it on a box. Without a word, I kissed her, walking her to the wall, where she squeaked when I pushed her against it. My hands roamed her curves shaped like the bottle I put down. The sweetness of Rosie and Coke exploded on my tongue as my hands squeezed her breasts, then went lower underneath her skirt. I didn't find panties, only a warm pussy ready for me. She gasped as I hitched her leg over my thigh, her flip-flop falling off.

"I don't like that Hank saw your tits."

She hungrily rolled against my hand, helping my fingers rub her clit. "You shouldn't have made me wait."

"Drop that attitude, or I will fuck it out of you," I whispered before grazing my teeth against her neck. That made her reach for my dick over my pants. God, she was frustrating.

“You’re so bossy. You’re the one with an attitude,” she said.

“You didn’t seem to mind my attitude when I fucked that flower crown right off your head while you moaned beneath me on the forest floor.”

That made her shudder and roll her hips faster. I pulled up the shirt and licked, turning a puffy nipple hard. She gasped and looked at the swinging doors.

“Are you worried he’s going to come back? To see something more than your tits through this fucking shirt?” I asked, planting wet kisses over her other nipple before flicking my tongue against it.

“Yeah,” she moaned, still tilting herself into my palm while clawing at my back.

I yanked off the top and threw it behind me in my office. She’d never see it again. I kneeled and lifted her skirt, burying my face in her pussy while I draped her leg over my shoulder.

She shivered, tugging my hair as she shot nervous glances toward the swinging doors.

“No, watch me,” I commanded, clutching her hips while I probed my tongue, separating her with a long upward lick.

Eyes still watching the door, she exhaled, “Carson... baby...”

I could tell she wasn’t feeling safe. I called her bluff, wiping my face on her inner thighs before I threw her over my shoulder with a playful slap on the ass, making our way to her loft. Her other flip-flop fell off her foot in the commotion. She ripped my shirt off while I gently flung her on the bed. Her boobs bounced as she landed on her back, making all the thoughts drain from my brain.

“If you’re going to misbehave in public, you’re going to have to learn to fuck in public,” I said.

“I just wanted you. And this cock.” She reached for it, but I stepped back from the bed. She was in full sex-hungry she-

demon mode today, and I fucking loved it. I knew she wanted this down and dirty and quick.

Fighting with my belt and pants, I juted my chin, “Show me what’s mine.” She shifted her skirt around her waist, spreading her legs for me as I undressed. “Touch yourself,” I commanded, reaching for a condom. Her fingers slid perfectly against her drenched clit as I covered my cock. A greedy smile lit her face when I kneeled over her. I touched her chin. “Open that smart mouth.”

Her jaw slacked without hesitation, exposing her little pink tongue. I held the side of her neck and bent down, spitting in her mouth. She licked her lips, trying to hide her shock while I sat up, only to spit on her pussy, the drip hitting right on her clit. Speechless, she gasped, looking between her legs and back up to me.

“This pussy makes my mouth water.” I ran my dick against her, making her hear how wet she was for me before I notched my head at her entrance. I sealed my claim with a kiss as I thrust into her. She shuddered, clawing my ass as we moved together in hunger.

“Oh, fuck!” she cried.

“Is this what you wanted? You wanted me to fuck you right here, like this?”

She bent her knees even more and gripped me with her most intimate muscles, clenching my cock, proving she was still in control. I fought a groan and rolled into her deeper, hitching her breath. I leaned down, releasing her neck to hold her hands over her head while I undid her with hooked thrusts and messy kisses.

Her voice came out husky, “Baby, I—” She buried her face in my neck to muffle her sounds. I remember she did the same thing in the forest. Even her cries were just for me to hear.

Sensing she wanted to be thrown around more, I pulled out of her, yanking the skirt down to her knees and using it to flip her over on her stomach. She let out a breathy giggle and crawled closer to the headboard on all fours. I grabbed her

hips to pull her back, ass up, turning her giggle into a moan as my dick slipped back inside her, the sound of it damn near ending me.

“Carson!” she cried, throwing her hips back at me.

“*Thelo na chyseis gia emena,*” I growled, telling her I wanted her to come for me.

“Oh, my fucking god, you’re so deep!” She bent her elbows, whimpering, trying not to melt into the mattress as she throbbed against my cock.

“*Asto,*” I urged her to let go, to feel it all as I pumped into her. “*Asto.*”

She collapsed on the bed while her perfect ass bounced against my body. I had to slow down. I could feel her soaking my dick, squeezing it as she stilled with an orgasm. I battled my own, my chest tight as I watched my length slide in and out of her.

Bracing herself on one elbow, she reached between her legs and twisted to present two glistening fingers to me. “Taste what’s yours.”

She gasped as I sucked them dry between thrusts. As if pulling a trigger, I came hard. I couldn’t fight a loud groan, not caring if Hank or the entire town heard it. I collapsed half on her, keeping my twitching dick within her heat.

She hummed, holding my arm, signaling it was okay to stay on top of her as we both came down. She wiggled wickedly in a dangerous game of overstimulation, too much of a good thing. I kissed her shoulder in a silent plea, pulling out before she could try anything else.

I showered with her, both of us avoiding getting our hair wet so people didn’t think we fucked in the middle of the day. Walking back to my office, I swiped the Coke bottle and the T-shirt, recycling the bottle and ripping the shirt before throwing it in the trash with a smirk.

When I closed the store, I visited her for round two...and three...and four.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



“What are you going to name this little golden nugget?” I asked, cradling him to my chest, breathing in the distinct puppy smell.

“Moose,” Kaylee smiled. “A nod to what brought me here.”

“So stinking cute! Oh, we have that book about the mystical symbolism around animals as guides for spiritual teachings. You should see what moose stands for.” I nodded towards the bookcase, watching Kaylee grab the book in excitement.

After checking the index, she opened the page and began reading. “The moose comes to you when you must rest and recoup, signaling a time of inaction and healing. Above all, the moose symbolizes stillness.” Kaylee’s face spread in a serene smile. “Ro, this gives me chills. I can’t believe I never thought to look this up! I saw a moose right before I was stormbound with Harley. I somehow missed the sign.”

The puppy wiggled against my chest. “Well, this Moose isn’t too fond of stillness. Hey, I saw a raccoon the other day. Will you look it up for me?”

Kaylee flipped to the correct page. “Mm, it says here the raccoon is about adaptability and sneaking around to outwit others. Much like the rings stacked on their tail, raccoon’s message heralds a time when the odds are stacked against you.”

My stomach curled in unease. “Is that all?” I asked.

“The mask around a raccoon’s eyes is symbolic of deceit, as if wearing a mask to hide away part of yourself from the world. Raccoon animal medicine encourages you to assess the areas of your life where you aren’t forthcoming with others or perhaps being deceived by situations.” Kaylee wrinkled her nose and closed the book. “That doesn’t sound like you. I’m sure it was a fluke. Critters are everywhere in this town. If it didn’t stop dead in your path or appear multiple times, I’d say it was just nature, not an omen.”

My shoulders slumped, caving in my chest as I handed Moose back to Kaylee with a sour sensation in my mouth as the lie fell out, “Yeah, omens are pretty rare.”

When I got home, leaning against the front door of my loft was a note in a mannish yet fancy scroll that said *All In*, along with a pretty bouquet. Sniffing the flowers, I shoved my worry to the back of my mind.



Summer beat on like a steady drum. Since it was peak tourist season, we were busy at Silver Springs. We were also interviewed for the local newspaper and radio station. Then, all these food and travel bloggers discovered us and posted about it online. Scorned women and their witch’s brew. That brought all sorts of people in for some coffee and crystals, some witchy, some brokenhearted, some Karen-tastic, all good for business.

Our Shrine of Shame back by the bathroom was growing with more pictures of cheaters, and Scornful Saturday was always packed. Either I was grinding up coffee grounds at work, or I was grinding on Carson. I loved spending time with

him in his cabin or sneaking around. It was fun and made everything more exciting.

I wasn't comfortable with going public until the blessing. I needed more time and privacy. I moved here with everyone already knowing my business, and safeguarding Carson was an act of control I needed.

Meanwhile, I covered myself and my man in protection—herbs at his cabin, crystals in his pockets, and the occasional oil rubbed on our bodies while he chuckled. He was a good sport and religiously wore the necklace I gave him. It felt like our little secret how he always had it tucked under his shirt. I had enough protective sigils tattooed on my body and magic infused in my life; I wasn't too worried.

By mid-July, things took a turn for the better. Carson texted me to come over to his cabin when I got off work on a Saturday so I could spend the night and spend Sunday together. I brought fixings for my mom's chicken enchiladas and cooked them for him. He was still taking business calls while pacing back and forth in front of the large windows, casting annoyed glances out at the lake while he swirled his whiskey in the thick tumbler.

He was off the phone when the food was ready and nearly moaned over his meal. It was great to care for him and give back somehow. We sat at the table long after eating, talking about our week. He stared at my empty wine glass with a knowing smirk before retrieving drop cloths to cover one side of the couch and coffee table.

I stood up from the table to get closer to the family room. "What's this?" I asked as he picked me up in a hug.

Swinging me side to side, he kissed my neck. "Supplies," he said with a final peck before he sat me down with a playful swat on my bum. "Can I get you more wine, babe?"

"Sure!" I said, giving Kiszka a belly rub. When he returned with the wine, a whiskey for him, he drank from the thick tumbler with a mischievous lift of his brows. "You're up to something, I can tell."

“I’m not up to anything. I’m trying to enjoy a night in with my beautiful girlfriend.” He took another sip of his drink, setting it down to crouch by the fire. I watch, sipping on my wine, as his shoulder muscles move under his light gray shirt. His rough hands placed wood strategically. After a few minutes, he had stoked it to a sputtering blaze. He stood up, brushing his hands together with a satisfied nod. “Good, now you’ll be nice and toasty.”

Was it a little chilly by the lake at night? Sure, but I couldn’t see past the obvious. “It’s July. How cold can it get in here?” I disputed.

“We won’t be clothed for long,” he said while washing his hands. He returned with two towels, plunking them down on the coffee table. “I’ve been wanting to help you get back to your creativity. And I have an idea.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he grasped his shirt collar behind his neck and tugged it off his body, stepping closer to me so his pecs were at eye level. “I want you to paint my body.”

An amused snort left me. “Oh, you’re serious?” I asked, skimming a nail across one of his coppery nipples.

“Yes,” he reached for a tube of cornflower blue paint and a small brush, “my body is your canvas. Yours for the taking. If you’ll paint.”

I took in the drop cloths and fire, the wine in my hand, and the gentle hum of music. He had created a cozy space for us. And he had seen my artwork and knew my secret. All I could think was... *Why the hell not?*

“Only if you drop the pants and get buck naked,” I countered, setting down my wine.

Carson flashed me a smile as I undid his pants, pushing them down with his underwear before palming his cock while I kissed him just because I could.

I broke the kiss with a laugh when Kizzy let out a miserable grumble, plopping down in his bed by the fire.

“What?” Carson taunted his dog, getting only twitchy eyebrows, showing nothing but judgment in return. Turning back to me, he changed his tone. “This is a joint effort,” he said, reaching for the hem of my top.

I lifted my arms, letting him undress me. He crouched to remove my shorts, my hands bracing on his shoulders as I stepped out of them and my underwear. His palms skimmed the sensitive skin on the back of my knees, then over my thighs in admiration. He planted a kiss on each hip bone before running his nose up my torso, kissing the bud of each breast, then feathering kisses on my shoulders.

With the fire crackling and the dim lights of the cabin, I was lulled into a sense of safety. He was holding space for me and taking the lead. It was exactly what I needed.

We sat down together on the covered section of the couch. As he doled up patches of paint, I couldn't help but stare at how striking he was with the flames roaring behind his broad shoulders.

He twirled his brush in white paint and brought it to my clavicle with a calm smile. The second the hairs touched my skin, I sucked in a breath, my breast brushing against the side of his hand. I closed my eyes, taking in the cool paint and the warmth of the fire, the gentle exhale of Carson's breath on my skin.

“You're safe,” he murmured.

I nodded, eyes still closed.

“Would you like me to keep going?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Is it okay to paint here?” he asked, brushing his hand over my tummy. I nodded. He stroked his knuckles on the side of my arm. “What about here?”

“That's okay, too.”

Knuckles traced between my breasts, over my branding that was almost hidden amongst the intricately woven snakes of Medusa. “And here?” he whispered.

“Yes, especially there.”

And from there, he rendered a phoenix on my chest. He knew the fiery phoenix was my favorite mythical creature from a lengthy discussion at Silver Springs in the early days. It meant a lot to me that he remembered that detail.

Stroke by stroke, brush by brush, it was healing to have a man stare at my skin, and instead of seeing something to claim, it was something to revere, to love up on instead of harm.

Once he was done, I couldn't stop staring at my chest. How the flames curled around my breast, and the tail curved over one of my ribs. “Thank you,” I whispered, leaning close to nuzzle his nose before kissing him.

“You're welcome.” His lashes fluttered close before he moved in for another kiss.

I grabbed my brush, chasing my fleeting courage. “What about you? Anywhere off limits?”

“Nope,” he licked his lips as I dipped in the blue and held a breath, sweeping a long line vertically between his pecs. Still holding my breath, I started a swirl by his shoulder, dragging it down his bicep. My eyes danced back and forth, deciding whether to match his shoulder swirls to make it symmetrical. “Go on. Follow your instinct,” he whispered, pushing me out of my worry.

I grabbed my blue and started a swirl lower down on his faint abs and then went in with some green, the distinct silence filling my head that I hadn't experienced for far too long. It was creating. I was making art.

He looked down at my pattern. “I like that,” he said, brushing my cheek with his thumb as I leaned closer to set little marks within the swirl. Each time I'd pull back to examine my work before I could overthink it, Carson would say something or touch me lovingly in a way that distracted me to keep going. Time slowed, and before I knew it, his chest and arms were covered in fluid vines and swirls.

I made my way to his back, using the constellation of freckles on his shoulders as stars, painting a hunter with a bow and arrow on the top of a hill, seeking out a kill with his hound. I must've been at it a while because Carson eventually had to put more wood on the fire but returned to his seat silently. My concentration tapered off, so I finished up and took him to the bathroom mirror to show him my handiwork.

He gazed in awe, looking over his shoulder, extending his arms to see the whole motif. "This is incredible," he murmured. "You did it, sweetheart, you made art!" he said between kisses. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Thank you!" I said, beaming up at him. "Oh fuck!" I laughed, looking at our chests smeared with our hug.

"Not our phoenix!" he joked as I smeared the blue and green paint across his chest before running back to the couch for more color. He chased me, hauling me back by the waist to sit beside him before I could reach the coffee table. "Hey, now!"

I couldn't stop giggling as he gathered more red paint on his brush, almost making it gloppy before splattering it on my tummy with a smirk. "You're making a mess!" I exclaimed.

His free hand traced my inner thighs by my knees, roaming up. "I think you like it messy," he said with a sexy squint.

I opened my legs a little more. "Maybe I do."

He struggled over whether to look down or in my eyes. "I have to get it wet first," he said, delving his clean hand into my center, sweeping up and down my pussy lips, inciting a moan with each swipe against my clit.

My legs opened further as I leaned on my elbows, tilting my body for more. "Oh my goodness, you're so nasty," I said with another giggle before he brought his dripping fingers up and smeared them across my tits along with the crimson paint. I gasped, staring at the mess as he circled his fingers with a mischievous hum.

Without thinking, I pulled his head to me, motorboating him with the mess, painting his cheeks and nose. Carson let

out an evil chuckle and held me closer in a hug, rubbing his body all over mine in an all-out wrestling match. I went for a brush on the table, reaching to paint his ass cheek in my struggle.

He yelped when the brush got too close for comfort, rolling off me and triggering a thunderous howl from Kiszka. “You did not just try to paint my nuts, woman!” he shouted over the clamor.

“You got my tits, it’s only fair!” I yelled, streaking across his hip bone, almost hitting my target. He seized my wrist and distracted me with a kiss, getting my face dirty. With my free hand, I sneakily rubbed the wet paint on my chest and smacked his ass, causing Kiszka to howl even more.

While he turned to shush his dog, I bolted, trying to make it to the bathroom. Before I could reach safety, Carson came behind me, pushing me to the wall as we laughed.

But our playful chase quickly turned carnal as our bodies moved together. I arched my back, pushing my bum against his groin as he ground into me, his large arms caging either side of me. My entire body buzzed as his tall, dense form covered me, pinning me to the wall. The heat of his breath on my neck, the rumbling groan of his chest, the bristling of his body hair, and the length of his dick hardening. All of it swallowed me up in lust.

“I will always chase you, *magissa*.”

“Yes,” I hissed, arching my back even more, inviting him in.

“Go on.”

I whimpered, “Less talking, more tossing.”

And with that, Carson pulled back and slung me over his shoulder like a sack of soil. Both of us eyeing the reddish tits-and-tummy outline now stamped on his wall.

“Now that’s some fucking art!” he said before booking it up the log stairs.

Over his shoulder, I caught Kizzy grousing while pacing back and forth. I gave him a sassy little wave, prompting him to snuff and trot off.

We lounged in his hammock the next day by the lake, watching the sunset. I was content on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. His frame was wide and solid, and his chest hair smelled intoxicating. I unbuttoned his shirt to have access to it. It was like catnip for a cat. One sniff and I was all mush.

His hands skimmed up and down my arms. The rhythm and constant touch lulled me into a daze. He picked up my left hand and kissed every tattoo on each knuckle. I couldn't help but smile. He loved kissing my tattoos. He then kissed my head and said my name to get my attention.

I pulled up from his chest, looking into his gorgeous eyes framed with those unfairly long boy eyelashes. The sunset cast a warm glow on his handsome face. "Yes, baby?" I asked.

"I love you."

It jolted me for a moment before my entire body hummed. I smiled, "I love you."

A peaceful smile spread across his face before he pulled me in for a kiss. That was the first time he had ever said it. I had known for a while and knew he did, too. I was happy he finally went there.

He broke the kiss, clutching me closer, his hand cupping my face. "I do. I love you so much it scares me."

"I feel the same way."

I watched as his lips pulled into another smile before laying back down on his chest. Loaded silence filled the space between us. Carson was rarely quiet around me, but when he was, I knew it was because he experienced the same overwhelm that surged through me.

"Can I show you something?" his chest rumbled.

"Anything," I said, freeing myself from the hammock gracefully.

He took my hand and walked me to a barn behind his cabin. I figured it was where he stored his boat in the winter. His garage was clear of clutter so that I could park in it. He even gave me a garage opener and the code. It was 6969, more proof I was dating a straight guy.

As I walked into the barn, my brain tried deciphering what was in front of me. I didn't know what to make of it. First off, it was chaotic, not like the tidy garage. Second, there was a lot of wood. And when I say a lot, I mean a fuck ton. The remnants of sawdust and paint clung to the air, and different machines and tables littered the space. High ceilings with beams had canoes and skis stored.

One wall caught my attention, so I walked closer. Racks upon racks of baseball bats were stacked, displaying each one. They were all different woods and stains. About half were glossy, some etched with people's names and sports numbers.

My fingers trailed across one as I read it before looking up at Carson. "You make these?"

He rolled his lips into a fine line, nodding. "Yeah, I do. But it's kind of through word of mouth. I don't have an Etsy store or some shit like that."

I couldn't help but fix my gaze back on the bats. They were all so different but high quality.

"These are incredible! The details!" I squinted, looking at the precision. I stepped down further, pointing to smaller bats on a rack. "And you make them for little kids?"

"Yeah, I used to coach Little League." A genuine smile split his face, bright against his dark stubble.

"Wait, you like kids?"

"Love 'em. They're honest little shits. I find it refreshing. What's that saying," he snapped his fingers, trying to jog his memory. "Oh! Only three things tell the truth: drunk people, yoga pants, and toddlers."

I sniffed out a little laugh, imagining him chasing after a little green-eyed boy dragging a bat around. I couldn't dip into

that daydream, so I distracted myself. “Wait, why’d you quit coaching?”

“I stopped after the whole Whitney thing happened.” He chewed the inside of his cheek and looked down. “Things got complicated. I could hear whispers in the crowd. I couldn’t sit and listen to them talk shit about me right in front of the little dudes I was supposed to be an example for. I didn’t want to confuse them.”

It was as if someone kicked my chest. “But you’re a good man. You’re a great example. I mean, you went pro. This town would be lucky to have someone like you coaching.”

“The gossip mill is the only thing that runs here, sweetheart.”

I scoffed. “But they don’t know shit about you!”

“Yeah, well, you know what they say about people who don’t know shit...they talk shit. The curse was something to gab about while watching their kids.” His eyes flashed back up to mine before darting around the shop.

I rested my hands on his chest. “I can’t imagine how painful it would be to have something you love taken away from you like that.”

His eyes locked back in on mine. “Yes, you can,” he countered. “You can imagine exactly what that’s like. You can’t tattoo, and I can’t play ball. Life fucked us both over.”

I opened my mouth to argue but couldn’t.

He went on, picking up my hands from his chest to kiss them. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make this a downer moment. I just wanted to share this with you. No one knows that I do this. This is why I’m always hanging out at Harley’s woodshop, not the other way around.”

“Another secret?” I asked while one of his hands trailed across my collarbone before rubbing my shoulder, not answering me. “What other secrets do you have that I don’t know about?” I asked it flirtatiously, but the second it escaped my lips, I realized I was genuinely asking. My worry deepened as I watched his face twitch before he brought me in for a kiss.

“You know all about my life now.” He brushed his thumb up my cheek from where he held my face. I smiled at him, feeling his sincerity but still unsure. I looked around, and something else clicked in my mind.

“The dresser!” I gasped, darting across the shop. I walked up to a table with drawer pulls and other hardware. “You made the damn dresser, didn’t you?”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “The rose one I put in your loft after the fire? Well, yeah.” He snorted like it was apparent.

I continued to gawk at him. “I thought your sister put it there. She’s always finding treasures.”

He chuckled amusedly, caressing my lower back before resting his hand on my ass. “The dresser was all me, love. I figured it was obvious, what with the carved roses. Figured I was being subtle there.”

I elbowed him. “Stop being a sarcastic ass. This is so damn cute! I can’t believe you made me that after I burnt your store down.”

“Almost, my *magissa*. Almost burnt it down,” he corrected.

“Right.” I eyed him, speechless. I couldn’t believe he did that, especially when we were feuding. Even then, he was looking out for me.

“Oh, and I need you to take two days off work,” he said with a boyish grin.

“Wait, why?”

“We’re going to see Greta Van Fleet. They’re playing at the House of Blues in Boston.”

I let out a girlish squeal and lunged at him in a tackling hug.

Chapter Thirty



I slurped the black coffee with a slight wince.

Bear grunted across from the boat. “You’re too used to your girl’s fancy coffee.” He screwed the Stanley thermos lid back on, each squeak irritating me.

I squinted at the sunrise on the horizon. “You’re not wrong.”

“I know I’m not. I’ve barely fished with you lately.”

I glowered at him. When he was married to Kenzie, I never guilted him for missing fishing.

His chest heaved with a chuckle. “Take a load off, I’m just giving you shit, man. I take it you like your new distraction?”

“Oh, she’s more than just a distraction. She’s—” I interrupted myself to fight a smug smile, knowing she was still naked in my bed. Even my hoodie smelled like her because she stole it for several days.

“Wow.” He pawed at his beard. “You’re that far gone?”

“Can’t help it. She’s just...good. Everything feels good with her.” That was an understatement of the fucking year.

“Good enough to tell the family and town?”

I groaned, rolling my head to the side. I had told him about the dream, blessing, and our plans. “You know she doesn’t want to do that yet. Don’t rub it in.”

This woman was giving me everything: her body, her future, my freedom, our fate. I needed to respect her wishes to wait to go public.

I went on, “She has the most to lose. Her life, for one. But also her job and her friendship with Kaylee. I was there with the aftermath of what she did to my brother when she ran from here. That girl is a fucking wildcard, and I don’t want to know what she’d do to Rosie if this ends badly.”

“But what if Rosie never wants to tell people? What if she keeps you a secret forever? At what point do you take on a new curse?”

I scowled at him, running my thumbnail up and down my cup.

Sensing my torment, Bear added, “I’m just looking out for you, man. I had front-row tickets to the Whit shit.”

“No, you’re right,” I sighed. “We kept it a secret, and it made everything worse. Rosie would never cheat on me, but she’s already infiltrated my life. Everyone knows and loves her. Like she goes thrifting with Kaylee and Frankie, she even joined Viv’s book club for fucksakes. She stopped at the gardening center for houseplants and talked to my dad for a half hour. She even got wrangled into going to the women’s circle my mom hosts with Kaylee.”

I blinked in horror, wondering what the hell that looked like. Reading my mind, Bear snorted, “They probably wrote a poem about—“

I chucked an empty can at him in disgust. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence!”

Chapter Thirty-One



I rounded the corner to catch Carson on a call. It wasn't his cell but his landline, a corded rotary phone older than us. He mouthed a hello before muttering, "Yeah, I'll wait." He held the phone away from his mouth. "Morning, baby." His free hand went right to my ass as I stood beside him, planting a smacking kiss.

"Good morning. I love seeing you before work like this." I held his handsome face, kissing the crease between his eyebrows. "You stressed?"

He nodded. "Yeah, dipshits lost half my order. I've been on hold for twenty minutes as they try to track down the driver. I swear to god, if we hadn't used this company for 50 years—"

A gruff man's voice filled the phone, yammering on without breath. I ran my fingers through the sides of Carson's hair, my tits damn near in his face as he listened to the guy, and said, "It's not the first time, Stewart. This happened back in March, too. Remember? Listen, I know this isn't your fault, but that new guy of yours sucks. What happened to Tommy?"

The man went on.

Carson gritted his jaw. "No, that won't work. You know that won't work."

The man said something else, causing Carson to sigh. "Sure, I'll wait." He held the phone away from his mouth, looking at me, "Did you still want to come over tonight? I wanted to talk to you about something."

“Yes, but I don’t like the sound of that. Everything ok?”

“I think we shouldn’t keep us a secret. I did that with Whitney, and it blew up in my face.”

“I want to wait until after the blessing. Give it some time. You don’t have anything to lose. I do.”

He squeezed my hips, “You’re wrong. I have you to lose. That’s everything to me.” He stared at me in pained silence, adding, “Keeping this a secret still feels like a curse. Something to be ashamed of. I don’t like that.”

“I need more time,” I whispered.

His hand drifted to my wrist, shifting my beaded bracelets around in worry. The phone cracked when the man returned. Carson rolled his eyes, “Are you looking at this invoice? I have it right in front of me.” He paused. “Yeah, go ask her.”

He was so stressed. And I couldn’t give him what he asked for, but I could give him the second-best option. Was I playing with fire? Sure. But I wanted to bring him some semblance of happiness.

I shut the door and returned to stand between his legs. Everything about Carson drew me in. His scent, energy, and possessive little touches signaled that I was right where I was supposed to be. He was the man for me. Even the way he tasted was nice.

If I’m being honest, I never really enjoyed blow jobs before Carson. Sure, I’d do it, but it made me feel vulnerable. I’d fear they’d go all porno on me and shove their dick further back to make me gag or pull my hair. But with Carson, it was different. I craved his musky taste and the way his jaw slacked, looking down at me. How his big hands swept over my shoulders and neck, gathering my hair softly, and how his thumb would stroke my jaw. Just fully in the moment together, both of us vulnerable with the baring nature of lust.

Thinking about it, I wanted more. I took my hair out of my clip, tussling the curls. From there, I yanked the spaghetti straps of my light blue sundress, freeing my boobs before crawling onto his lap.

His hazel eyes shot wide in realization before he buried his face between my breasts with an appreciative groan. I arched my back, feeding him my softness while I circled my hips, getting him hard.

“Oh, baby,” he muttered, lifting the phone from his face. I put it back to his ear, kissing his stubble, trailing to his other ear with tempting licks and nibbles.

His eyes darkened as I slid down his body and got to my knees, undoing his pants. His cock jutted up to his belly button, hard and waiting.

“Give me like two minutes, and then you’ll have my full atten—” The air left his lungs as he stared down at me, hissing, “Fuck.”

“Relax,” I murmured, dragging my bottom lip across the swollen head.

“Mm, yeah, wrap your lips around it,” he commanded, making me shudder before a moan opened my mouth as I ushered his cock inside my soft trap. “Good girl,” he muttered in awe.

The phone crackled, causing Carson to roll his head back. “Yeah, Stewart. Still here.” He cleared his throat.

I took in more of his length, batting it from cheek to cheek. Carson lifted the phone like he was about to hang up. I popped off, licking my lips, to whisper, “If you stop talking, I’ll stop sucking.”

He gave me a pleading look, relaxing as I continued working his cock. Stroking it while I licked his nuts, sweeping the sensitive spot right where his head met the shaft only to plunge back on it with a loud slurp.

I pumped and sucked from there, enjoying how Carson could only grunt affirmative noises on the call. When he came, he let out a hiss through clenched teeth, which hopefully passed as frustration to the guy on the phone.

A long pause filled both sides of the call before Carson sucked in a breath. “Considering it’s thirty thousand dollars

worth of shit missing, I need you to figure it out. Let me know the plan by the end of the day.”

He smashed the phone on the receiver and swiped cum off my lips with his thumb while holding my jaw. “One of these days, I’m going to fuck you senseless at work and see how you like it. Cabin. Tonight.”

I got off my knees, patting his shoulder as I walked away victorious, earning a slap on my ass as he grumbled something in Greek.

Later that afternoon, I parked in his garage and found him setting a stain on a bat in his woodshop, still on a call for work. I kissed him quickly and nodded towards the hammock, indicating I was waiting for him.

I swung on the hammock, drifting in and out of sleep with a book on my chest. A loud crack ripped me out of my nap. Across the property, Carson was chopping wood. He was far enough away that I could see he was wearing earbuds, probably listening to the new playlist I sent him, but far enough away that he couldn’t see me watching in the shadows of the trees.

His light gray tank top, darker with sweat between his pecs, clung to his chest. With the high summer sun casting directly on him, his tan skin glowed to perfection, showing every drip of sweat, every vein threading down his arms. The bill from his baseball hat shrouded his face, leaving only his stubbled jaw jutting out from the shadows, gritting with each swing of his axe.

I sank further into the net hammock, wholly entranced. He placed another chunk of wood on the round base log and raised his axe before brutally hacking it. I flinched but couldn’t rip my gaze. He lifted his tank to wipe the sweat from his face. Turning away, he gave me a perfect view of his cute butt filling out his tan Carhartt pants. He removed his tank, returning to face in my general direction, running his hand through his damp hair before putting his hat back on with a determined scowl.

With his chiseled chest on full display, I stared as he raised his axe again, his abs constricting before he drove it down, splitting the wood with a loud crack. I couldn't fight my hand as it traveled lower on my body, under my sundress, while I watched him continue his pattern. His mannish grunts and motions lit up my mind with desire. My fingers moved, separating my pussy and bringing the wetness to my clit, before I encircled it.

Carson's biceps moved with every grab, chop, and toss. I flopped the book on the ground so I could dip my other hand in my dress to rub my tender nipple. My legs fell open, and my swirls got more frantic as I worked my clit, my core aching for relief as he went on, completely unaware of what I was doing in the shadows.

I focused on him, imagining it was his touch, not mine. It felt naughty and indulgent, but I didn't care. I knew he wouldn't mind me using the sight of him this way. On cue, he let out a growl, hacking into a challenging piece, the sound pushing me into this primal space where I could only chase the high of my orgasm. I swirled faster, pinching my nipple while shifting my hips. My knee jerked when I came, and he caught the movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Rosie?" he asked, plucking his earbuds out. "Are you touching yourself?" Before I could answer, he dropped his axe and strode my way.

I lay speechless and winded in the afterglow while he hovered over me, without a doubt seeing the blush on my cheeks.

"Oh, baby, that's so hot," he said admiringly.

I motioned for him to kiss me, the scent of his musky sweat tickling my senses even more.

Breaking the kiss, he whispered, "Let me taste what I did to you," while pointedly looking at my hand still between my legs. I pulled it from my pussy to sit at the hammock's edge. His heated gaze fixed on me while his mouth slowly sucked and licked my hand clean.

“I love that,” I admitted, completely transfixed.

He looked down at his hands, covered in dirt and flecks of wood sticking to his arms. “My hands might be dirty, but my face is clean.” He flipped his hat backward for better access while kneeling before me. The sight of it made my stomach roll.

“What if I fall?” I giggled.

“I’ve got you,” he said, cleverly grabbing the netting of the hammock on either side and pulling me closer to his face.

I lay down, bending my knees even more, folding myself so everything he could ever want was right in front of his face. His tongue probed my pussy, savoring the first swipe up and down, slicking through what he already did to me. I shuddered, my hands fisting my dress, pulling it even higher for him.

“So fucking hungry for it,” he muttered, kissing my inner thigh. I’m unsure if that was a reference to himself or me, but it didn’t matter. I wiggled my hips closer, my ass right on the roped edge as my legs caged Carson. The way it bit into my flesh made everything heighten. He swung me closer to him, letting his tongue fuck me with each pull, his hands clawing the netting at my hips in a dominant clutch. He held me there, suspended, as he gave his full attention to my clit. My body became pliant as he created a swirling heat in my body.

“Oh god, yes!” I screamed. “Right there.”

I came again, wiggling against his face.

“So fucking sweet and sexy,” he murmured.

“Please! Please get your cock in me,” I pleaded breathlessly. He stood, unable to stop staring at my pussy while he patted his pockets for a condom. “Don’t care,” I whined. “I really, *really* don’t care.” I felt hollow. I needed him to fill me to the brim. I wanted him to cover me in his sweaty body so I could smell him. It was so fucking nasty and instinctual. I couldn’t fight it.

The whirring of tires on the other side of the cabin made me lunge out of the hammock, my wobbly legs barely keeping

me upright. Carson caught me and helped me gain balance. “Chill, it’s okay.”

“I have to hide!” I said, pulling my dress down and trying to free myself from his embrace.

His brows pinched. “No, you don’t. I’m sure it’s just my dad we can—”

“I have to!” I patted his chest and booked it into the cabin through the patio. I was too cowardly to look over my shoulder at him. I knew there would be a hurt expression clouding his handsome face. But I had my reasons.

Carson came back in, his face scrunched in discomfort.

“Listen, I know you want him to know about me. But even if we weren’t keeping it private, I wouldn’t want to meet your dad officially as a girlfriend like this,” I gestured to my soaked sundress and red cheeks.

Carson licked his lips. “I get it.” He nodded with a slow blink. “Just a couple of weeks. Plus, you’re here now. That’s what matters.”



“Were you out late last night?” Kaylee asked, sticking her tongue between her lips as she cut open a box. We were merchandising after hours, and Azalea was helping us.

“Oh, um, yeah,” I hesitated, thinking about last night’s forays in the hammock.

“Harley stopped by the store, and your car wasn’t there. Were you on a date with a certain mechanic?” Kaylee playfully elbowed.

Azalea smiled and wiggled her eyebrows. “I heard about you and Dane. You should go for it.”

Kaylee snickered, “Tell her she doesn’t know.”

Zay touched my arm, “Oh, I lost my virginity to him. It was his first time, too. He was really sweet about it.”

“No shit?” I asked, leaning in closer.

Zay giggled, “We were in high school, so it wasn’t this sweeping romantic moment, but yeah, he was cute.” She shrugged. “He’s a good guy.”

I looked between her and Kaylee, trying to piece this small-town puzzle together. “Did you ever date a Kouris?”

Zay snorted, “No, I saw Harley eat a worm when we were little and couldn’t take him seriously after that. I’m not into chicks, so Frankie was off-limits, and Carson is all cursed and cranky. I’m barely brave enough to look him in the eyes.”

I grabbed a laptop and held it against my chest, “I guess it’s good you have Noah.”

Zay tucked a shiny strand of brown hair behind her ear with a puzzled expression. “What do you mean?”

“You’re dating him, right? I thought you two were a thing.”

Kaylee’s eyes bounced between us with a wry smile. I was onto something.

“Oh, we’re just friends,” Azalea offered, shifting her weight from one hip to another. “He has a girlfriend back in Montana. I guess it’s kind of serious. We hike together. And birdwatch.”

Kaylee picked up her iced coffee, tilting her head to sip with the straw in the corner of her mouth, “And you do his laundry,” she added.

Zay grunted and threw her arms out, “He’s a ranger. The cabins don’t have great amenities, so I wash his clothes at the inn—big whoop. Poor guy would have to do it by hand. I felt bad. Plus, he forages herbs for my teas. I consider it an even trade.”

Kaylee smiled and took another sip, then bent down to pet Moose. “Back to my original question, were you with Dane?”

she asked.

Not wanting to lie, I tried to sound bored as I turned away, opening the laptop. “Nope, definitely wasn’t with Dane.”

Chapter Thirty-Two



I was hesitant to be back in Boston, but the promise of time with Carson and damn good music outweighed my nerves.

As usual, I met him at his cabin and parked my 4Runner in his garage. It was fun to slide into his truck as he held the door open for me. I yelped, seeing the black thong I gave him months ago wrapped around the gear shift. I played it cool but felt like a badass. He was so filthy. I loved it.

His large hand rested on my thigh as his honey sage eyes flashed to me in the passenger seat. “You look gorgeous, baby,” his deep voice barely intelligible above the roar of his diesel truck.

I wore a black lacy crop top, black velvet bell bottoms, and boots that looked straight from the 70s. I finished the look with celestial-themed jewelry and bronzed makeup. I felt beautiful before leaving my loft, but his praise hit differently.

“So do you,” I squeezed his shoulder, covered in a black shirt that clung to his broad build. “Thank you for taking me and getting us a room for the night.”

“Don’t mention it.”

As we drove away from Maine, the song “Ring of Fire” by Johnny Cash came on. I didn’t expect him to sing with me. He was tone-deaf. But I sang along, applying lip gloss in the mirror.

*Love is a burning thing,
And it makes a fiery ring,
Bound by wild desire,
I fell into a ring of fire,
I went down down down, and the flames went higher
And it burns burns burns, the ring of fire*

He gripped the top of the steering wheel with a gulp, slowing down and causing a small red sports car to zip around his truck on the freeway.

“Carson?” I prompted, hoping to rip him from his daze.

He jumped and mashed the stereo button, changing the song. “Sorry. I hate Johnny Cash. He sounds like a miserable drunk ghost yodeling.”

Yeesh. Note to self: no Johnny Cash. “Where’s Kiszka?” I asked, trying to distract him.

“He’s with Bear,” he answered with a raised eyebrow. “I didn’t want to lie to Harley about where I was going, so asking him was out of the question.”

I sucked in a deep sigh, fighting a grimace. “Yeah, Kaylee thinks I’m visiting my mom.”

“It will be nice to get out of town. It’s good for us, out of the bubble.”

“Right. The bubble.”

A pit formed in my stomach, but it disappeared once we entered the outskirts of Boston. I wasn’t lying to Kaylee in Boston. I was just a girl with her boyfriend. The brief anonymity was something I craved.

Before the concert, we drove around so I could show him my old haunts, like my apartment and the tattoo shop I apprenticed. Then, the one I owned. It meant a lot that he asked to see them, to understand my story.

Four songs into Greta's set list, I danced with Carson to "You're the One I Want" on the mezzanine-level balcony overlooking the stage. I was shocked he would dance with me in public, but he did. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he clasped his low on my back, swaying in bliss as the lights flashed and the beat thumped. He was more carefree away from Pine Bluff, which I didn't know how to contend with.

Afterward, we got sushi because he knew it was my favorite. Before the trip, he had found a restaurant nearby and everything. We held up the first bite of the roll with our chopsticks and bumped them together in an impromptu toast. Something about it felt lighthearted and endearing. Tonight, we were simply a couple on a date, not hiding or worrying.

Overall, Carson was fun to date. He was polite and was a complete gentleman with things like opening the doors and picking up the tab, outright refusing when I tried. He asked thoughtful questions, and his way of telling stories was so sarcastic it kept me hanging on every word.

His life experience was fascinating, with all these wacky stories of growing up with a sex therapist as a mom and all the Greek shenanigans from his dad's side of the family. I liked his stories about camping and fishing the most. Tonight, he told me about how Bear wiped out water skiing and almost cut his earlobe off with one of the skis. Rhett and Carson held him down and sewed it back on with a fishing line so they wouldn't have to stop day drinking to head into town. A jagged scar runs through his earlobe, almost like a lightning bolt. Like Harry Potter, they call him The Boy Who Skied instead of The Boy Who Lived.

My cheeks hurt from laughter by the end of the meal, and even our server mentioned how flushed I looked. I blamed it on the plum wine but knew it was from Carson. Towering over me, he rested his hand on the nape of my neck while we walked out of the sushi place, kissing my still-flushed cheek.

"Are you sleepy now, my love?" he asked.

"Yes, I am in a post-sushi stupor. That was so good!" I said, all but waddling from my feet hurting in my heels.

The next hour was a blur of returning to our hotel room and showering together in sleepy silence. We got into bed, lying down facing each other under the sheets. Behind him, city lights flashed on the white curtains that floated over the air conditioner.

His eyes scanned my face while he tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. “Baby, I love you.”

I smiled, “I love you, too.”

“I want to build a life with you,” he said, sweetly brushing knuckles along my jaw.

“And I want a life with you, too.” I scooted closer to him, draping my arm over his side. “Did you plan on saying that?”

“Just couldn’t fight it anymore. I wanted you to know.”

“I’m glad you did.” He took us seriously, aside from keeping it a secret at my request. Yet, hearing it out loud assured me more. “What do you picture, you know, our life together?” I had a hunch of what he wanted, and I knew he’d show me in time. That’s what Carson did; he was a man of action, not false promises. But I was glad he was broaching the topic before me.

“I want to keep you happy and protected. I want to keep looking out for you and wake up beside you every morning. When the time is right, I’d love for you to come live with me at the cabin.” I nodded in approval, urging him to continue. “I plan on making you mine in every way possible.” He picked up my left hand and gently kissed the rune tattoo on my ring finger. “Do you believe in that?”

I kissed his ring finger in return. “Yes, I do.” We were both smiling at each other like giddy fools. “Go on.”

His huge hand drifted to my slightly stuffed stomach. I fought another smile, already knowing. “Do you want babies?”

His gravelly voice saying *babies* sounded a little too fucking good.

“I do. I never had a big family, so it’s something I’ve always wanted. Do you?”

He nodded as his hand brushed low on my tummy, distracting me with how much I adored his possessiveness. “I know you’ll be a great mom. You’re so patient and loving. And I don’t want to freak you out, but I want to see you swell with our baby. You’ll be so pretty pregnant. I just know it.” I couldn’t stop smiling. “When the time is right,” he amended.

I never pictured kids with Stefan or Tyler. I knew they’d be shitty fathers. But Carson, oh, he was a different story. About once a day, I thought about him on a dock, teaching a child how to fish. “I know you’d be a good dad. You’re patient and loyal. But in the meantime, let’s be grateful for birth control.”

We both chuckled. “It’s true. I don’t want to freak you out, but the other day, when we were in doggy, I could feel your IUD strings, and they poked me. That’s why I flipped you over.”

I slapped his chest. “No! Are you serious?”

“Yeah, but I had only one thing on my mind.”

In unison, we tilted our chins down and said, “Pussy!” in an overly deep voice. It was one of our inside jokes.

Sobering from laughter, I added, “Speaking of sex, the magic for the blessing would be more potent if we had nothing between us.”

“When you say that, do you mean...” he tucked his chin in uncertainty.

“Just us. Bare, no condom.”

I had also never wanted to do that with Tyler or Stefan. I didn’t trust them. But with Carson, I had secretly never wanted to use condoms. I wanted him to fill me. Every aspect of him was so sexy, and that included his cum. Something about it felt more intimate, and I don’t know, more instinctual. I liked it. I wanted to feel him burst inside me.

I added, “If you’re okay with it, that is. It’s just that your body holds a part of your essence. That’s why you hear

about blood magic or how your hair is an energetic antenna. Sexual fluids are very potent in magic.”

“I don’t know, babe. Something about you saying ‘sexual fluids’ gets me all hot and bothered.” I shoved at his chest, laughing. “It is so tough being me.” I pushed him again, burying my face. He stroked my hair, “No, but for real, we both know we’re safe to do something like that, and we’re exclusive, so I’m in. Are you shocked?”

I lifted my face. “No.” I rolled over and tucked my body against his as the little spoon. He moved some of my hair to kiss my neck. Both of us fell silent, lost in our thoughts. “Then, we will tell Kaylee and your brother.”

“And the rest of my family and the town.”

“Yep,” I agreed.

He kissed my neck again, squeezed me tighter against his chest, and whispered, “I love you. And all I want to do is make you feel it every day. If you ever question that, let me know, okay?”

His voice was earnest and made my words clog my throat. “Same here. I will fight for you. For us.”

So much of my journey to Pine Bluff was me wanting to quietly hide and pivot to another life path. But with Carson, it was as if I was being pushed to be seen, forced to step into the light. I didn’t know if I was brave enough.

And if I’m being completely honest, there was a tiny voice in the back of my mind.

What if it doesn’t work? What if this all goes up in flames?

Squeezing my eyes shut, I wiggled closer to my big, warm boyfriend and listened to him drift off into a dreamless sleep.

The Burn

Chapter Thirty-Three



It was August. Venus and the stars were on our side.

Rosie's loft was dark, lit only by the blueish moonlight high in the windows and the warm golden glow of her salt lamp. I sat in my black boxer briefs on the edge of her bed, anticipation ticking in my chest. Her bathroom door clicked open. She emerged demurely in a short, black satin robe tied tight around her curves.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Sex magic bonds you to someone deeper than regular sex.”

I grabbed her waist and pulled her closer. “I think it's already too late for that. I'm in too deep. What we have, the bond I feel with you...it is something I could never forget or replace. It is its own kind of magic.”

She nodded with a dreamy stare, touching my face. “I agree. It's something intense and true.”

I studied her stunning green eyes framed in curled lashes. She was a little nervous but putting on a brave face. I couldn't blame her. I brought her closer for a kiss, our hands caressing each other's faces, our lips gliding.

She pulled back before we could get carried away. Instead, she reached for a stone on top of her dresser. It was pale pink and glossy in an oval shape, about the size of her thumb. “This is morganite. It's the stone of unconditional love and divine unions. It helps foster innocence and healing while softening the ego. It brings

blessings of love and peace.” She stepped closer to me, pressing her lips to the stone.

When she handed me the crystal, I mimicked her and returned it. She tucked it between the pillows, then turned her attention to a red candle in a brushed bronze holder on her dresser. She had rolled it in oil and herbs and carved symbols on its surface in preparation for tonight. The wick lit immediately, the flame steady and straight. She tilted her head back and forth, inspecting it with a pleased pout. I watched on, feeling hypnotized. She was in her element, serene and sure.

Her voice came out sultry. “We have a couple of hours with this flame. Towards the end, I need to take over, but until then,” a smile spread on her face, “we can just enjoy each other.”

I untied her robe, letting her body peek through. She breathed in as my hand brushed one side, exposing a breast and a hip, then the other, her pale skin framed by black satin. “You’re so beautiful, *magissa*.” I kissed her collarbone and heart before pulling her onto my lap. Her warmth radiated as she straddled me, contrasted by her cool breasts and satin grazing my chest.

She wrapped her arms around my neck, “What does that word even mean?”

“It means witch.”

Her smile pulled to one side. “I like it.” Her eyes searched mine as she pressed herself even closer. “What about that other word you said often? It starts with an S.” Her lashes lowered, watching my mouth.

“*Se agapo*.”

She smiled, “Yeah, that’s the one. Say it again.” Her fingers traced my lips.

We sounded it out slowly together. “Sah-gah-poh.”

“What does it mean?” she asked.

“I love you.”

Her eyebrows pinched together. “But you said it on Litha.”

“I said it then and meant it.” I cupped her face. “And I mean it still.”

She took in a savoring breath, eyes twinkling as they roamed mine. From there, we kissed, swinging together. I tore the robe off her, its silky fabric pooling at my feet as I kissed her breasts, loving how she arched her back.

She let out a little grunt of impatience as I rolled her to rest on the bed so I could rid myself of underwear, wanting to be naked with her. As I undressed, her eyes widened, which did wonders for my ego.

“Do you trust me?” I asked her.

She only nodded, squirming on the bed in anticipation.

“Good, close your eyes.”

As she did, I took her arms, resting them above her head on the pillow. From there, I quietly plucked one of the peacock feathers from her vase. It was as long as my forearm. I ran it through my hand, smoothing it out before gently placing its tip on Rosie’s sternum. She flinched on reflex, then relaxed, realizing it was soft. I continued to drag it to her navel as a smile spread across her lips. With her smile spreading, so did her legs.

She let out a pleased hum while the feather traveled lower over her hip bones, swirling each before committing to one leg. When I skimmed her inner thighs, she squirmed, trying to get it closer to her center. Not letting her off that easy, I traveled up her curves, along her hip, into the notch of her waist. Nearing her breasts, I went even slower on the edges. She wiggled more, wanting the feather to touch her nipples. It didn’t.

“You look so gorgeous, baby,” I said. She was silent, lost in how the feather tickled the sensitive backs of her arms and palms. “Tell me how lucky I am.”

“You’re so—” she shrank as I trailed the feather on her neck. Regaining composure, she committed with a breathy tone. “You’re so lucky to have me.”

“Go on.”

“You’re so lucky to have me here naked, wanting you.”

That was more for her than me, but damn, it sounded good.

She continued, eyes still closed, “And I’m so lucky to have you here, doing this to my body. I know it’s just the star —” her breath hitched when the feather finally brushed her nipple. She swallowed hard, writhing. “Just the start.”

I moved on to the other nipple. “Mmhmm, you’re right about that,” I agreed, idly sliding between each breast. I leaned down to swirl, suck, and flick the flesh, only to replace my mouth with the feather when she twisted towards me. Then, without notice, I swiped the feather against the seam of her pussy.

She licked her lips, opening her eyes. I did it again before picking up her leg while I kneeled on the bed. Holding her ankle, I rested it on my shoulder and teased down her leg with the feather. A vulnerable little whimper escaped her as I replaced it with my mouth when I settled between her legs. “I want you.”

“Then have me,” she replied, tickling my back with the feather while bending her legs to give me more access. From there, I undid her the way I knew she liked most. Her smooth walls clamped around my fingers as I licked her. Her mouth hung with silent cries.

“Let it crash, my love,” I urged quietly as her breaths continued to hitch. I pushed her legs closer to intensify everything right before she fell apart.

“I am so fucking wet, I can feel it,” she said, hands searching.

I grabbed her robe, putting it under her. “I love it. You’re such a pretty little mess for me.”

Before she could argue or feel embarrassed, I went in for a round two, leaving her shuddering moments after.

As she recovered, she rolled me on my back and kissed down my body. Bracing herself over me, her tattooed fingers wrapped around my penis and pumped. In the candlelight, my senses got hazy, only tuning into the hypnotic hum of her

mouth rhythmically gliding up and down my cock, her lashes fluttering before her gaze pinned me. Reveling in how she so desperately wanted to make me fall apart and how I did, my creamy load covering the runes on her fingers.

Afterward, we rested facing each other, discussing what we liked about each other's bodies, running our hands over each part we complimented. We told each other secrets, confessions, and jokes. It was like a little sphere of solitude we existed in—remembering what we were fighting for and what we almost lost.

The mood shifted from candid to carnal as she hitched her leg over my hip, her body swaying towards mine. My length ridged against her center, searching, eager to bury. She pulled back her hips and coated my shaft, revealing her readiness. I pushed myself against her even more, creating a slick noise between us, audible evidence of what we were doing to each other. She gasped as I rolled on my back, grasping her waist to take her with me. Her soft thighs spread as my fingers traced the dagger and roses on her thigh.

She bent forward and kissed me, her nipples skimming my ribs. "Let me see you," I said, lovingly pushing her to sit back up.

The golden light of the flame ran up her body beautifully, mixed with the blueish slant of moonlight pouring down from the window. Her skin was flawless, a stunning mix of smooth paleness with gorgeous tattoos. I reached up in awe, tracing some of her ink before grasping one of her breasts. They were perfectly proportioned to her body, natural with a softness I would never tire of. She watched me drink her in while she ran her nails down my chest.

"What?" she whispered.

"You're so gorgeous. Always. But now, in this light, you're damn near taking my breath away."

She leaned down, nuzzling my neck. "I was about to say the same thing. You look so handsome. Seeing the candlelight shining on your chest and abs makes my pussy flutter." She chuckled at her sentiment.

Something so innocent but blunt ripped me back into my horny haze. “Oh, does it?” I asked as she lifted herself from my neck, settling her weight more across my lap, letting my cock separate her lips while she settled her clit on my shaft before she moved her hips. I held them, helping her motion. I stared at how she glided up and down my dick, separating herself but not letting it inside her.

“Show me more of you,” I nodded, urging her to pull up from me. She did, lifting herself from where she kneeled, tilting her hips so more of her core was exposed to me. Transfixed, mesmerized in lust, I couldn’t look away. “Mmm, yeah, show me your pretty pussy.” She bit her lip, clearly liking my hungry praise, and reached down to trail her fingers across her mound. I urged more, “Spread that pretty pussy for me.” Both of us now breathing heavily, she separated herself with her middle and ring finger. It was pink, glistening in the dim light. As she spread her pussy, it dripped on my cock.

“Do you like this? How it’s all wet for you?” she murmured.

“Mmm,” I nodded. “Touch yourself,” I commanded, still mesmerized. “Spread yourself for me again.”

She did, this time rubbing it against me purposefully before dipping her middle finger inside herself. I clenched my jaw, wanting just to watch her touch herself while also wanting to bury my cock inside her. She made the decision harder as she delved her finger again, rocking her body against her hand, forcing it deeper within her. Her knuckles dragged against my nuts with her motion, making them ache for relief.

She freed her hand. I grabbed it, and we pumped my shaft together, slicking it up. I traced a smooth path through her pussy with my cock before pushing it into her, causing a gasp to escape her.

“Oh my god, baby,” she wound her hips.

“Do you feel my bare cock deep inside you?” I asked, feeling the tug of our perfect fit.

She nodded with a ragged breath of desperation.

“Do you want me to fill you? To fill that pretty pussy with what only I can give you?” I dragged my dick just right, making her feel every inch of me.

“Yeah,” she breathed. “I want all of you.” She put her hands over where mine held her hips, and we rolled together, maintaining eye contact. Her heat felt even more scorching bare.

I wanted to turn her over so badly, but I could sense she wanted control over this. This blessing needed to be on her terms. Slowing down and grinding deeper, she threw her head back in moans like I had never heard come from her. With it, the flame danced to my right on the dresser. Its fire licking higher and higher from where it melted in the dish, pooling in layers of crimson.

The moonlight poured in from the sky above her, her body moving like the flame beside us. I worried each kiss, each graze, potentially brought her closer to death. Each stolen moment with me could be her last, and loving me could kill her.

I grasped her hips tighter in concern, fighting my orgasm and living one breath to the next. Rosie continued to undulate on me, her eyes closed and face cast to the ceiling while she whispered something, an incantation or spell. A pink flush radiated on her neck and collarbone. With the spread on her skin, the fire grew more, almost reaching the peacock feathers arching over in the vase.

The blaze caught her attention, setting her eyes magnetic and hungry. Her breasts heaved, her hips rocked, her hair swung, and her slick heat glided. I could feel a vortex surrounding us, funneling from me to her.

I knew we were entering some trance. Trying to be helpful, I put a hand over her heart and murmured, “You know what to do.”

Her delicate hand picked up a jar no bigger than a saltshaker with a wide corked lid. It looked like honey with something else in it, more granular. She dipped two fingers in and brought them coated up to my mouth. I sucked them dry,

holding her wrist. The flavors of cinnamon, clove, and other spices tingled my tastebuds, along with the sweetness of honey.

“Keep it in your mouth,” she instructed.

She offered the jar, urging me to do the same. I fought a groan as she held my two fingers and sucked them dry, then lowered and sloshed the spiced honey between our mouths in a French kiss. It felt debaucherously forbidden and ancient and a little too fucking good.

“Now take it in,” she whispered. We swallowed, and she licked my lips clean before pulling up.

“You’re cherished, Carson.” The candle popped beside us. “You protect anyone who loves you. They’re never harmed. Anyone who loves you is blessed.”

The air grew hot, and all my senses bristled, urging me to surrender as the line between our bodies and spirits blurred, primal knowledge taking over. I was aware of my lover and something else familiar I couldn’t pinpoint.

Her hips shifted in a fluid motion, spinning her sensual spell. I watched as her body controlled the flame, mirroring how it swayed and rolled in the night. She clenched tight around me as she cried out before an orgasm shook through her, mine following shortly after. As my orgasmic offering mixed with her velvety heat, she closed her eyes and hummed. It was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire fucking life. Like her body was craving every single drop, every single sensation.

She kept my cock in her body but pulled up slightly to dab where we joined, only to lean forward to extinguish the flame with her cum coated fingertips. My mouth parted, watching it while we breathed heavily and looked at each other astonished before she collapsed on me.

“Baby,” she panted, “baby, that felt so good.”

“So good. I can’t—”

I simply couldn’t. I couldn’t talk, couldn’t think, or even move. All the sex and magic stunned me. I held her, powerless

to do much else while my dick throbbed inside her, settling down from coming hard. I touched her hair and kissed her shoulder, feeling her heart thump. She pulled from me and nestled to my side, her soft curls splaying my chest.

Realization hit me like a freight train. “I think I had a premonition about what we just did.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, sounding jilted.

“I had this dream that I was eating you out, and then—”

She shot up to look at me, “You were gazing up at me from between my legs. And then I was stroking you.”

“And then I was holding you in my arms. But I had that same dream before. It was a glimpse of what we just did, breaking the curse.”

Her brows knit together. “Me too. The night I sent that selfie in the tub. When you marked me.”

“Wait, you’re telling me you had that same dream the same night?”

“Yes, it was so vivid. I woke up thinking you were with me in my loft.”

“I had the same dream again, for a second time, when I ended things. It’s what warned me that the curse might kill you.”

My joints locked up, freezing me in place with how eerie all this was as I held my breath. Maybe Rosie was used to this mystical stuff, but I wasn’t.

Her face pulled in confusion. “Wait, the dream we shared was the same dream you had of me dying? How?”

“The night I had it the second time, after Tilly’s when you were drunk, it was different. Towards the end, your body started burning me, and your hair became flames. I could smell something on fire. I heard this wrenching cry as we fell together, and then you burst into flames. It was horrifying.”

She settled back down on my chest, pensive with my confession. Finally, she whispered, “Well, it’s all over now.”

We broke it. The fact that we both picked up on the moment proves there was a soul tie. You know? Like we were both meant to experience this.” I felt her smile. “Baby, it’s all over. You’re blessed. We did it. You listened to your dream and changed the course.”

I held her chin so she would look at me in the darkened room. “Thank you, my love.” I brought her leg over mine, feeling her drip on my thigh. I fucking loved that she was filled with me. It ripped me back to being a single-minded man. “Rosie, sugar and lust,” I said, gliding my fingers through her creamy pussy. It was a mix of us, what we did together.

With a wicked glint in her eyes, she said, “I’m hungry for more.”

I rolled her back on the bed, loving her giggle. And for the rest of the night, it was her and I, between the sheets, making our own kind of magic. And for the first time in over a decade—I felt free.”

Chapter Thirty-Four



The entire town of Pine Bluff was at Summerfest. I stayed back to cover the store, not wanting to risk getting a sunburn. I didn't mind staying at the store catching up on admin stuff with my laptop at the coffee bar. Occasionally, people would stop in for our beloved lavender lemonade we called Pixie Punch.

A little after 2 o'clock, my favorite customer, Otto, slinked in, clutching a yellowed Tom Clancy novel he bought from Viviane. He wore jorts, jean shorts, and a Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt with a bald eagle. Matching his shirt, he had an old eagle tattoo on his arm I'd love to touch up for him.

"Hey, hon," he said.

"Hey Otto, are you going to behave?"

"Do you mean, am I going to order some of your faerie farts to drink?"

"You know I can't make you a Red Eye. There's too much caffeine. Dr. MacGregor warned me you're on statins for your blood pressure. I don't want to kill you! When we said we had killer coffee, we didn't mean it literally."

Otto batted the air with his crusty novel. "What about a Shit Weasel?"

The Shit Weasel was more popular than our Pixie Punch. It was an iced coffee with secret sauce, which was code for schnapps. The girls had lots of regulars pouring their own

booze, so they kept a bottle behind the counter to appease them.

“I can’t do a Shit Weasel, but I can do a refreshing iced peach tea? Maybe frozen hot chocolate?” I bartered.

Carson entered the shop over Otto’s shoulder.

“Frozen hot chocolate? What kind of witchcraft is that?” Otto asked.

“How ‘bout I make it for you, and you see for yourself.”

He studied the menu wearily. I could tell I was about to lose him, and I didn’t want him to go to a gas station and have a heart attack. I sweetened the deal and added, “I will put some secret sauce in it.”

He glowered at the menu, then at my cleavage. It jiggled with how I shifted my weight from foot to foot. Then he grumbled an affirmative noise.

While I made his drink, I let him give me the run down about Summerfest. I guess a cover band was playing Elvis one moment and Van Halen the next. He wanted them to ‘pick a fucking theme.’

Carson walked up to my counter when he left, loving my torture. “I’d like to order The *Valakas*.”

I fought a smile.

“I miss the Dirty Reno,” he teased, glancing to ensure Otto left. “*Magissa*, we’ve been together for months. When are you going to change it back?”

“In my defense, you deserved it.”

He chewed the inside of his cheek and fiddled with my beaded bracelets. “You might want to keep that name a bit longer. I have good news and bad news.”

“Hit me.”

“Good news, it’s top-secret info, but Harley is proposing to Kaylee in a matter of days.”

I squealed and covered my mouth. “Shut up! That’s so cute!”

“Bad news, I don’t think we should steal their thunder.” He cringed.

“Carson!” I flung my rag down in outrage.

“I have no control over this! And in my defense, you’re the one who didn’t want to say something back in June.”

I gritted back a growl.

He held up his hands and said, “Nice kitty.”

My nostrils flared. “I had my reasons.”

“But we could’ve told Kaylee and Harley.”

“I wasn’t ready.”

He blinked wearily. “Well, waiting had a cost.”

“You’re saying since I wanted to keep this private and go at my own pace, I’m now suffering the consequences?” I made his drink to distract myself. With my back to him, I grumbled, “We broke the curse a week ago.”

“But that’s just it. We’re safe. What’s a couple of weeks? Put yourself in Kaylee’s shoes.”

I scoffed. “I am sick of thinking of Kaylee! And molding my life around her! And scuttling around so she doesn’t know.”

“Scuttling?” he said incredulously.

“Don’t change the subject!” I slid the cup across the counter with a scowl.

“Rosie, baby, I’m so sorry. It’s just a matter of timing.”

“I’m scared it’s going to be awkward now. I don’t know how to break it to Kaylee now that it’s gone on for so long. But we can’t keep living like this. Don’t you want your mom to know about us? What is going to become of us in six months? More secret cabin rendezvous? Kisses in dark hallways, hiding my car in your garage? Don’t you want everyone to know already?”

“I do. More than anything. Please, don’t cry.”

I sniffled, angry at my traitor tears, feeling like a dumbass. He walked around the counter and held my face. More tears flowed, and I felt so naive. I should’ve known sneaking around wouldn’t be fun forever. What turned out hot and naughty was now just stressful and shameful.

Did I want to have my cake and eat it, too? Sure. But after everything I’d been through, I reasoned it wasn’t selfish of me. It had only been a matter of weeks in the grand scheme of things, but it was my whole world. And Carson was such a welcomed piece of my journey now. I didn’t want to hide our love away.

Over Carson’s shoulder, I saw Noah walking towards the door. I pushed him away, wiping my tears. Frowning, he grabbed the cup, unable to find an excuse to look casual.

“Please go,” I whispered.

Noah walked in, glancing at Carson leaving and then at me. “Hey, Rosie.”

“Hey, Noah!” I said, forcing a bubbly tone with a final sniffle.

“Is Zay here?”

“Nope, she’s at Summerfest with Kaylee.”

Noah glanced towards Kouris Hardware as Carson entered his store. “Did he make you cry? People say he’s a grouch. If he did something—”

“Oh! No, Otto was here right before him. He told me a sad story about hitting a deer with his semi-truck.” That part was true, but he told me that story weeks ago. I was lying once more for Carson.

Noah’s kind eyes studied mine. “Okay. You take care. I need to head back to the ranger station, but if you see Zay, let her know I was looking for her.” Azalea was an earthy luddite who refused to keep track of a cell phone, so we all played messenger for her.

After Noah left, I walked closer to our front windows, dusting our faerie garden and watering the plants. I looked up to see Carson working near the front windows of his store. We stared at each other for a loaded moment, sadness spreading.

So close, yet so far away.



I squeezed the most out of the late summer nights. They were spent wrapped up in Carson's arms or sheets or on his boat.

We spent nights nude, drawing each other in different poses to encourage my reintroduction into making art. To make me laugh, Carson positioned different things in front of his dick, like a wine bottle or baseball bat, but I drew it anyway. I had every vein and inch memorized by now. It was one of my favorite things about life. You couldn't blame a girl.

He'd surprise me with random little gifts to make my time at his cabin cozier. First, it was sage-colored booty shorts and a tank top he disguised as pajamas. I wore them around his cabin without a bra to make him happy. Then, one day, a satin pillowcase appeared in his bed. He knew I used one at my place to protect my curls.

The truth was the cabin was getting harder and harder to leave. One evening, I found him holding Kiszka to his chest as they napped on the couch. His deep breaths moved Kizzy's fur in little puffs. With his face softened in sleep, I could see the young man he was.

A man who had so much taken from him.

A man who maintained his family's legacy when no one else would.

A man who asked for nothing but gave everything he had.

The only thing I had ever really given Carson was the blessing. Tears stung my eyes as my love and guilt poured over me. At that moment, I knew it was worth it if helping him came at the cost of lying to everyone.

I sniffled, squaring my shoulders and snapping a photo of how cute they were. But before I could save it as my lock screen, I realized it would blow my secret, and tears came for a different reason.

When I wasn't at the cabin, I was trying not to lose my shit at work. We were so busy, and I was feeling the brunt of it. With autumn and fall colors creeping in, a new onslaught of tourists visited for pumpkin spice lattes.

With Kaylee teaching yoga at the community center, selling pottery at the farmers' market, and opening an additional drive-thru coffee shack, I oversaw everything at the brick-and-mortar location. The stress of hiding my relationship with Carson and managing my business wore down my body, something I hadn't experienced since my burnout at Rise-N-Grind in Boston. Having Moose around the shop helped with stress relief, but some days, I'd come home wanting to cry or collapse.

Kaylee came bouncing in early September with a gorgeous rock on her finger. I was genuinely happy for her and tackled her to the ground with girlish squeals before Azalea joined us.

Later in the month, I arrived at her engagement party alone. It was in Markos and Maxine's backyard, with half the town. The vibe was casual, so I wore my black leather motorcycle jacket and black boots with velvet roses embroidered on the ankles. My mom sent them as an early birthday present. My hair was down in curls, and I put on a dark red lip since it was autumn, and I felt I could rock it.

I knew, being the hunter he was, Carson clocked me before I found him in the crowd, but when I did, my entire body buzzed as he dashed a look at me and licked his lips. His muscular shoulders were shrouded in a green flannel, and his

beard traveled to a knit beanie hat. As Poe would say, he looked like a lumbersnack.

Standing beside Bear with a beer, he angled his head toward the forest. I slowly shook mine. I already fucked him at one of Kaylee's parties, and it would be rude to do it again. Plus, we were at his parent's house. With my refusal, he cocked an eyebrow and tipped his beer to his lips.

I flipped my hair over my shoulder and turned to focus on Azalea. Eventually, Noah came to talk to her, then Dane floated over. I hadn't spoken much to Dane since the solstice bash. He came in for coffee several times a week, usually with various tourists warming his bed, so I didn't feel bad for ghosting him. Carson was right about him.

Before he could launch into small talk, a cackle snapped the air. It was Kaylee arriving with another woman. She looked like a pixie with hot pink hair, a swoop nose, and a tiny frame. They both swatted at each other, trying to sober from laughter. She pinched Kaylee's butt, which made her laugh even more before she made her way to Harley's arms.

Dane's eyes lit up, then squinted in desire. "Who is that?" he asked in awe.

Azalea chimed in, "That's Maisie. She's Kaylee's bestie from Texas. She's super cool."

Noah chuckled, patting Dane on the shoulder as he walked towards her, like a moth to a flame.

After a couple of hours, my back hurt after standing all day at work and then at the party. I escaped the crowd, going to the side of the cabin for a quieter place to sit. The wrap-around porch faced the forest and had a nice, empty rocking chair. I plopped down, rocking myself into a trance while staring at the trees. They began to rustle, and Dane stumbled out, fixing his belt with a red face.

"Hey Rose, what are you doing way over here?"

"Resting."

He snorted, getting closer to the porch. "You're in a friendly mood." A hard look washed his face. "We can cut the

shit. I know you like Carson.”

I stopped rocking. “Why would you say that?”

“You ghosted me after the solstice party, so I started thinking about how he acted when he barged in on my tattoo and interrupted our date by cutting the power. I didn’t want to believe it.” He shrugged with an arrogant smile. “Then I got distracted with people who *actually* wanted to date me, so I didn’t think about it much until now.”

I blinked drowsily, unable to deny it, not willing to lie anymore. I’d almost be relieved if he ran screaming through the engagement party about it. I drew in a deep sigh, sitting up straighter in the chair. “You’re right. I love him. We’ve been secretly together for months, keeping things private. My feelings for you couldn’t progress because of how I felt about him.”

“He’s cursed. He killed my sister.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. I am. But it sounds like she was struggling with sobriety. Carson didn’t make her drink or drive. I heard all about it. He was playing at an away game, and she was driving to see him, then crashed.”

“Since you know everything, do you know about Whitney?”

Feeling defensive, I stood up from my chair. On the porch, I was at eye level with Dane, who stood in the yard, the railing between us. “Accidents happen. It doesn’t mean he doesn’t deserve happiness. He didn’t kill them. And it’s cruel that you blame Whitney’s death on Carson but not Harley. Seems pretty fucking unfair.”

“He has a track record. We all call him Cursed Carson behind his back. Kissing him is like kissing your grave.”

“That sounds like bullying. I don’t like bullies. It would be a shame if you pushed him to do something more than master stoicism.”

“Well, darlin’, I don’t like liars. I take it Kaylee and Harley don’t know?”

“We are waiting for the dust to settle. We didn’t want to steal their moment with our news. I’d appreciate your support or, at the very least, your discretion.”

He shoved his blackened hands in his pockets with a grunt. “Discretion? Is that a fancy word for ‘Hey, I’m fucking your best friend’s brother. Can you do me a solid and not tell anyone?’”

My leather jacket creaked as I crossed my arms. “Yeah, it’s also the word I will use when I refrain from telling Kaylee you fucked Maisie in the woods during her engagement party.”

Dane’s eyes widened for a second before he sucked in a breath. He didn’t try to lie. He’s an honest man; I’ll give him that.

Bracing myself on the railing, I leaned forward, adding, “I know that’s what you were doing. Why else would you be in the forest? Girl talk is real and wicked. I will gladly ruin any future chances with Maisie if you fuck this up for me. I’m sure you already have a scheme on how to fuck her again at the wedding next May.”

His eyes shifted to the side before he snorted. “Where the hell do you come up with these things?”

I gritted my jaw. “Tell me I’m wrong.” He swallowed hard, so I continued, “I will tell her cute pixie-ass that you fuck anything with a pussy and a pulse. Carson isn’t the only one around here with a reputation.”

Dane shifted his weight, turning to leave. “Fine. But it’s your funeral. You know, Rose, you’re not the girl I thought you were.”

“My name is Rosie, not Rose. And you’re right. I’m not a girl who fell for your bullshit. Leave me alone and keep my man’s name out of your fucking mouth.”

Chapter Thirty-Five



Me: How late are you working tonight?

Roisin: Who knows! This stupid report isn't updating, and I can't close it without saving the data. Dani just left. If you want to sneak in through the back door, you're welcome to keep me company.

I decided not to make a joke about the back door comment. She brought me into the office with a kiss. I was so fucking hungry and addicted to my woman. That witchy pussy hits differently. Loving a woman in her power was the greatest gift. I enjoyed being intimate with her before, but everything before sex magic paled in comparison. Now, we had an even deeper instinctual bond.

Her computer dinged, causing her to jerk out of our kiss in frustration. She bent over, grumbling at her laptop. "This fucking rat bastard of a Dell. A Dellhole!" She flipped it off, which made me chuckle.

I leaned over, inspecting it myself. "Wait, try refreshing this part, saving it, and then refreshing that whole column."

Her long nails tapped on the laptop's mouse pad. "Wait like this?" The entire form went blank with my suggestion, causing her to reel back in horror. "Carson!" She looked up at me in exasperation.

“I thought it would work.”

She muttered something about male logic and kept tapping on it like a spastic squirrel. The data populated again, allowing her to save the report.

While the status bar filled, I held her to me, kissing her neck until she rubbed her butt against my groin. I whispered in her ear, “Remember how I warned you I was going to fuck you senseless at work someday?”

“Vaguely,” she giggled, reaching behind to drag her nails over my neck and scalp.

“I want to bend you over this desk.”

“Right here?” she whispered, undoing her pants.

“Yes,” I hissed, grasping her breast over her shirt. With my other arm, I caged her to me, my fingers finding her clit. My cock swelled as she pooled against my hand, her pussy coating my fingers while she eagerly glided against them. I held her there, letting her melt in my arms while I undid her, whispering nasty things in Greek. The brush of my beard and words inflamed her neck with a tell-tale blush of lust.

“Now, please, fill me up now,” she pleaded, bracing herself on the desk as I unzipped my pants.

I all but growled as her warmth swallowed up my dick. I had to hitch her on her tippy toes because of our height differences.

“Baby!” She giggled, almost falling over on the desk without a sense of balance. She braced again as I held her hips up, plunging into her.

She gave me a desperate look over her shoulder, lost in the heat of it all. Freeing one hand, I stroked her jaw. She bit my thumb gently, keeping it between her front teeth, letting air from her little gasps pass my hand as she moved with me.

Rocking forward with each thrust, her voice quaked, “I can’t. I’m going to come. It’s so intense,” she warned.

Suddenly, loud footsteps and laughter filled the hallway outside the office. I looked over right in time to see Kaylee’s

eyes wide as saucers while she shrieked to cover her mouth. She turned to walk away, only to run into Harley's chest. The scream made Rosie jump and clench, painfully squeezing my dick. My vision went spotty with shock and pain.

I pulled out of her with a wince while everyone clamored to get out of the situation. Rosie collapsed on the desk with a whimper, either violently ripped from her orgasm or publicly coming against her will. Both options were fucking terrible.

Harley and Kaylee scrambled in the hallway, running into each other like bumper cars, trying to decide which way to turn.

“What the fuck, bro!” his voice boomed while storming out the back door.

Rosie remained melting on the desk, bare ass and panting.

Kaylee threw her head back in a cackle, “At least it was a different position this time!” She walked away, and another laugh erupted with a distant yell, “They're definitely brothers with that huge Kouris cock!!” Her cackles disappeared with the door finally shutting.

What hell dimension of humiliation did we fall into?

The next few moments were a blur of getting our shit together. I exited the bathroom while drying my hands, meeting Rosie in the hallway. “Are you okay?” I squeezed her shoulder with worry.

Before she could answer, Harley and Kaylee charged in. Kaylee looked jovial, Harley not so much. He gritted his jaw, “How long?”

“How long what?” I shot back.

Kaylee tried to keep Harley from me in the hallway, ushering him backward into the café by pushing his chest.

“How long have you two been fucking right under our noses?” He scowled, looking between us.

I followed them into the café, Rosie holding my hand in solidarity. “We don't have to answer to you,” I said.

“Why did you pick the one girl in town tied directly to Kaylee? If you hurt her, you’ll hurt Kaylee, too. Did you ever think of that?” Harley argued.

I scowled at him. “This isn’t an attack on Kaylee! You’re so wrapped up in your bullshit that you couldn’t stop to think for one second that someone else has a life!”

Kaylee’s voice cut through, “Hey now, let’s all take a breath. Rosie, girl, what the hell is going on?”

Rosie gulped and looked up at me and back to them. “We hit it off while he painted the mural, but nothing happened until the solstice. We planned on telling you, but then you got engaged, and we didn’t want to steal your moment. It was so new it felt like we needed to protect it. I’m sorry you found out this way. And Harley, he loves you so much. He didn’t—”

“Bullshit!” Now pointing at me, he continued, “If you respected me as a brother, man to man, you wouldn’t keep lying like this.”

“I didn’t lie! I kept it private because it was none of your goddamn business!”

Harley let out a dark chuckle, his face contorting. “Like how you thought Whitney was none of my business? How it was none of my business when the whole town thought I was the bad guy because you dated her first?”

I stepped closer to Harley, each girl now pushing at our chests. “I am not going to sit here and explain myself to you. You had nothing ironclad with Whit. I was going to marry that girl! You fucking asshole!”

He looked at Rosie. “Did he tell you he fucked my girlfriend?”

“Harley!” Kaylee scolded.

His voice got louder, “Did he tell you how we both fucked Whitney, but I had to find her gruesomely contorted body after she fell off a cliff? How I carried her mangled remains back into civilization only to find out my miserable asshole of a brother was fucking her too?”

My ears rang like a freight train was in my head. A dark truth I had held for so long escaped me in a brutal mocking scream, “She died pregnant with my child!”

Rosie and Kaylee both gasped and reeled away from us. And just like that, my truth bomb exploded in the world around me. Silence filled the coffee shop, but the ringing continued in my ears.

“Whit had my baby inside her when she fell!” I bellowed again.

Harley froze, staring at me. The faintest sound scraped his lips, “No.”

“Yes,” I hissed. “Yes, you self-righteous prick! Ever think of that?” My voice boomed from the bricks, the echo cruel and sharp.

“No!” He blinked in disbelief, his chest puffing to catch his breath. “There’s no way.”

Tears blurred my eyes. “It wasn’t just her I lost that day.”

The world around me halted and tilted to one side, disjointed and abnormal. I watched everything click into place in my brother’s mind.

Not a single soul knew. Not Bear, not Viv, not Rosie. My throat was tight with the truth. “So yeah, you might’ve lost a girlfriend. But I lost everything—the woman I loved, a baby we both wanted, my brother, my reputation. All of it was ripped from me in a single moment. I was never going to burden you with the truth, but if you’re going to be like this and shame me for any *shred* of happiness, you deserve to know. Whit died pregnant with our baby.”

I walked away, but Harley’s hand on my chest stopped me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would it have changed anything?”

He stepped back and scoffed. “Of course.”

“Yeah, I don’t believe that.” I looked at Rosie, who stepped towards me in concern. Claspng her shoulders, I whispered, “I didn’t tell you because it didn’t feel like the right time.

Whitney and I were trying to be careful, but one drunk night camping changed everything.”

I glanced at Harley, “It happened before you moved back, so I knew it was mine. We didn’t know until—listen, it was her decision on what to do—her body, her choice. But she wanted to be a mom. I wanted to build a life with her. Even though she wanted to go back to Georgia.”

Rosie gnawed at her bottom lip. “I’m so sorry, Carson.” Unshed tears rimmed her eyes as she squeezed my arm. “I’m so sorry.”

Everyone was focused on me, making me more uncomfortable with their pity. I cleared my throat, “Listen, I need space from all of you. I can’t do this. My secrets are all out. I love Rosie, and you’ll have to deal with it.” I kissed her forehead before turning to walk away.

Kaylee blocked me with a silent hug. I patted her back and moved past her, bolting to the door. Tears finally burst down my cheeks as the crisp autumn air hit me. I swiped my face and booked it, getting Kiszka from my store.

I drove to the top of my favorite bluff that overlooked our small town and sat down on the ground. Kiszka kept me company, laying his weight on my lap in his healing way.

I felt him coming before he parked. I saw the flash of headlights, too white in the night. The truck door slammed, followed by the distinct rhythm of his walk. His mass settled next to mine, unspoken and steady. A paw stroked Kizzy’s tail.

After a couple of minutes, I turned to look at him. “Hi, Bear.”

“Hello.”

“Who sent you?”

“Rosie.”

“I wanted to tell you.”

“No, you didn’t,” he stated, oversimplifying things.

“I just didn’t—”

“You didn’t. That’s okay. I figured.”

“How did you know?” I asked.

“You’ve always wanted to be a dad. I figured having that opportunity taken from you would hurt. Nothing hurt you as much as Whitney, so...” he shrugged. “I figured it was something like that.”

“Yep. That sums it up.” My voice quivered with emotion, but I was grateful Bear’s calming energy was trapping me, almost pulling me down to reality.

He put an arm around my shoulders, bringing me in close as he grunted in consideration, “I have one question for you, though.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you love Rosie?”

“Yes.” I turned to look at him in the darkness, feeling my lips pull to the side with too much emotion. “Yeah, I love her a lot. More than I did with Jamie. More than I did with Whitney. I loved the idea of Jamie, the whole hometown sweetheart sort of thing. It seemed like the perfect story. But we were too young. I loved Whitney, but I could sense she didn’t have my back. Now I know why. But with Rosie, the girl would burn down the world for me. I would do the same for her.”

He chuckled, “And she doesn’t put up with your bullshit. I like that about her. She isn’t afraid to challenge your grouchy ass.”

I smiled, wiping my face. “Exactly. She’s the one I want.”

“How long have you known?”

“There was a moment with her in June. I was drawing a picture of her, and this feeling washed over me. I knew it was something different. It felt like a moment I was supposed to experience like I was born to be in that glitch of time with her, a checkpoint for my soul. I was born to love her. To fight for her.”

Bear hummed deep in thought, and I could hear the smile spreading on his lips.

I continued, “When I’m with her, I feel calm but anxious. I want time to freeze so I can memorize all the moments with her I can. But I also want it to speed past to see what’s next. I feel alive when I’m beside her. It’s a deep love like I was meant to find her.”

“And you did. Now what?”

“I might have ruined things with Harley again. And maybe I broke Rosie’s trust. But I have to believe I can fix this somehow. There is enough love there. We can rebuild.”

He nodded and hummed once more in approval. “Yep. Rebuild.”

Chapter Thirty-Six



I didn't think Kaylee would walk in on me having sex... again.

In a coffee shop...again.

With a guy she knew but didn't know *I* knew that intimately...again.

I also never realized the man I loved was a ticking timebomb of shocking news. On some level, I think he wanted me to be angry at him. Maybe it would be easier to fight than to be vulnerable. But I wasn't mad. We covered enough heavy stuff over the past couple of months. I was impressed he protected Whitney's privacy, even in death.

In the aftermath, Kaylee and I stood silently, watching Harley pace the sidewalk in anguish.

Her icy eyes bore into mine. "What was the fucking point?" she spat.

"What do you mean?"

She popped out a hip with an exasperated fling of her arm. "What was it all for if a man *still* came between us? What was the point?"

I stepped closer to her. "You got to move on, Kaylee. You found someone new. You got this beautiful life handed to you, and what was I left with? The same shitty barista job and a drafty loft?"

Her lips pursed thin. “I think you forget I was stalked and assaulted by Tyler.”

“You were gone when his new bitch chucked a latte at me! Besides, I’m sick of squeezing around your perfect little life.”

“I’m trying to carve out a good life here in Pine Bluff. You can’t hate me for it!”

Tears stung my eyes as the truth rolled up my throat. “But I do hate you for it! I was the girlfriend,” I shoved my finger at her, “you were just the fucking bet!”

She gasped, rearing back.

“You got everything! You got to run away from what happened with Tyler. You got to prance into a great guy’s arms right after, and then you ran from him, and he *still* chased your ass. And what did I get? Hmm?” I tilted my head, walking closer to her. “I got nothing.”

Her nostrils flared with a disdainful snort. “Then why did you befriend me? Why did you open Silver Springs with me?”

“Because I felt guilty. I so badly wanted to be as good as you. If I had caught my boyfriend with another woman, I would’ve hated her. I would’ve never sought her out. What you did made me feel like I needed to be as good as you. All perfect and kind and understanding. But I’m not!”

She rolled her eyes at my confession.

Venom was now in my gaze and tone as I continued, “And for months, I’ve had to sit here and watch you two. I’ve denied myself from being with Carson. I can’t win either way. So, you know what, fuck this, and fuck you!”

I walked out the back door with a manic chuckle. A flood light greener than it was white lit the back parking lot. Behind me, I heard a low voice. “Rosie girl...”

Viviane was smoking a joint on a bench behind her store. She wore a flowy white dress with a thick hunter-green cardigan with white stars on the breast. Jingly anklets rang when she crossed her skinny legs.

“Viviane, what are you doing here so late?”

“Inventory, it’s a bitch.” She puffed out thick smoke and offered me a drag, but I declined. I’m worthless when I’m high. Viv and I exchanged a gauging look before she continued, her voice trembling with age and the daintiest smoker’s cough. “I’m going to guess they found you knocking boots with how you just stormed out of there.”

“Yep. They walked in with Carson bending me over the desk.”

She let out an amused laugh and blew rings with the smoke. “Good for you. You go find your man, and I will hold down the other two for a smutty summit.”

“A smutty summit?” I asked, trying not to laugh, wanting to keep my righteous anger.

She flicked ash in a flowerpot of colorful chrysanthemums. “Yep, a peace talk after being found with your panties around your ankles. You need a mediator; I am stoned to the bone and nosy as fuck. I’m just the girl for the job.”

She got to her feet, which were bare as always, and opened her back door. Over her shoulder, she added, “Oh, and be a doll and get me Cheez-its and a Mountain Dew. I’m going to get some wicked munchies in a bit.”

Then I fetched snacks and my lumbersnack to talk about my recent indiscretions.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



I drove back to town with too many thoughts in my head. I saw the lights were on at Silver Springs, so I pulled up front. Before I could even knock, Rosie opened the door with her eyebrows pulled together in a way I had never seen before.

“You came back,” she whispered.

“You never left,” I held her face to sweep a thankful kiss across her lips.

“I’m so sorry everything happened with Whitney, and now I’ve put you in this situation with your brother. You were right. We should’ve told him.” Her lips scrunched to her nose in discomfort. “I feel awful. How can I make this better?”

“Nothing, you did nothing wrong. I will talk to my brother. We will figure this out.”

She looked behind her shoulder towards the crystal side of the shop. “He’s still here with Kaylee. I caught Viv smoking in the back, and she will be our mediator.”

I fought a chuckle. “Did you get her Cheez-its?”

Rosie’s face softened. “Yes, I just got back from Pine Mart. I was about to go find you.”

She ushered me into the small room that served as a divination space for Kaylee. In March, before Rosie even got here, I helped Harley build the benches for the room. Now, it seemed like a lifetime ago.

A small chandelier and candles on the table lit the space. Silky drapes hung from the middle of the ceiling like a circus tent, creating a cocoon. Kaylee and Harley sat on one side of the horseshoe-shaped booth. Their body language was anxious but not threatening. Viv sat at the arch of the table. Sliding onto the bench with Rosie, I was across from Harley.

Viv poured Mountain Dew into a titty mug that Kaylee had made her. Then she clutched the box of Cheez-Its to her chest and shoved a hand deep inside for one final crunch. Brushing off the crumbs, she straightened her sweater and cleared her throat. “Welcome to the first annual Smutty Summit. You four are here to talk it out and come to an understanding. I don’t want anyone talking over one another and no name-calling. We are going to rehash this one more time, and then you two,” she pointed between Harley and me, “need to move on because you have wonderful women in your life.”

All our heads bobbed with a nod. Viv’s gaze fixed on Kaylee to her right, silently pressuring her to talk. It worked. “And I’ve had hard talks with Rosie and Harley, so I know this can be civil and healing if we commit to understanding one another.”

“I agree,” Harley said, looking right at me.

“I agree,” Rosie and I echoed in unison. I scooted her closer, my arm around her lower back, her hip filling my hand. I needed her warmth; everything felt so cold.

Kaylee cracked a smile, reaching for the teapot. “Who says growing up on a hippie commune wouldn’t be useful? This peace talk is already going great.”

Rosie jumped in, “This is jasmine flower tea. We are all going to share it as a symbol of unity. And here is a chunk of blue calcite. It works with your throat chakra and helps you stay calm and communicate clearly.” She handed us each a stone about two inches long, shaped like a puffy heart. Its sky-blue surface was shiny in the candlelight.

Both girls looked between us nervously, like we would throw a fit. Harley chuckled, “We grew up with a therapist for a mom who had a Talking Stick we used to beat each other

with. This isn't new to us. The tea is a nice touch, though." He raised his mug shaped like a cauldron, urging us to toast.

Viv took the reins back, holding up her titty mug. "To spilling the tea."

We all took a sip. Viv went on, "Wonderful. Carson, I'd love to hear about your experience with Whitney. Not your side, because there is no side to take, but rather just your experience."

I cleared my throat and turned the stone over in my left hand, gazing at it. "All this went down three years ago. Bear's ex-wife, Kenzie, was friends with Whit. That's how I met her. We started dating in March. By the time summer was in full swing, we were exclusive, or so I thought. I didn't introduce her to my family because she didn't know if she was staying past the summer season, and I didn't want her to feel crowded. The summer went on, and we fell in love. Then she told me she was pregnant in late August, so our plans shifted."

Viv's eyebrows lifted with the news of the baby. Bear and her now knowing was freeing but scary. I took a sip of tea as Rosie squeezed my thigh affectionately.

"Like I said, it was her body, her choice. I wasn't going to drop my support. We both laid down and made that baby. We were waiting to tell our families, but one day, I was fishing and saw Bear approaching me in his boat. By his face, I knew it was bad news."

I stared ahead at the candle on the table, lost in my memories. "Whit had been acting different. I figured it was the pregnancy, but she seemed stressed, almost frantic the days prior. I thought maybe she had packed up and left without saying goodbye. But Bear told me she had fallen while rock climbing with Kenzie." My gaze shifted to Harley, "And that my brother had found her dead body."

He held my gaze, his whiskey-colored eyes neither mean nor kind, just present in the moment. Rosie squeezed my thigh once more, urging me not to get lost. "The coroner's office needed her I.D., so Kenzie searched for it in her car and found

her phone that had selfies with Harley and some notes he had written to her.”

Harley ran his tongue across his teeth in discomfort while he dashed a look at Kaylee, who nodded in agreement. Apparently, she had heard this part.

“The whole town was gossiping, saying they saw me with her at this place but saw Harley with her at another place. I don’t know why no one told us.”

Harley lowered his chin, urging me to finish the story. “Shortly after, I found him and Dane having a beer at Tilly’s. Just looking at his face made me want to kill him. I tackled him off the stool, and we brawled, and it took like half the tavern of men to pull us apart. Our mother was horrified we behaved this way. Violence isn’t the answer, but violence saved Kaylee’s ass, so…” I trailed off.

She chimed in, “No judgment here. You didn’t throw punches tonight, so that’s progress.”

Viv took a sip and stared at me. “I’m sorry for your loss. I didn’t know she was pregnant. I get it now.” We shared a loaded moment with things unsaid like old friends could. Breaking our reverie, she turned to my brother. “I’d like to hear from Harley now.”

He sat up straight, sucking in a deep breath. “I dated her the summer I moved back. We didn’t tell anyone because we worked as rangers together. Since she was a seasonal employee, I will admit I didn’t plan a future with her, but I cared about her. We hung out when we could, hiking or climbing. We avoided crowds because we were so sick of tourists, so it was low-key, but we hooked up a lot.” He glanced at me, rubbing his hair roughly with one hand. We had never discussed what had happened. A bitter tang erupted in my mouth as the visual of my brother pumping into her seared my imagination.

He squinted and twirled his stone around on the table. “I got the call and found her.” He swallowed hard and went on looking at Rosie, “I’ve seen a lot of dead people as a ranger, like people half eaten by wild animals or what’s left over from

someone taking their own life, but I promise you, Whitney's body was truly haunting. It is hard to care for someone, to be intimate with them, and then feel them cold in your arms."

She reached to cover his hand on the table with hers. "I am so sorry you had to find her." She placed her other hand on mine. "And I am so sorry you lost so much in silence."

I could feel her energy permeating me, warm and slow. And as much as I didn't want to admit it, I could feel Harley's. It was subtle, but it was as if Rosie was a bridge to my brother. Kaylee placed her hand on top of his and Rosie's, amping up the feeling even more. I let the concoction seep into my body.

I eyed my baby brother. "I believe that you didn't know I was dating her. And that Whit made some hurtful choices and was battling something we will never understand."

"I believe that you didn't know, either. That your grief runs deeper than I realized. And this happened because we weren't in a good place and didn't talk."

I nodded, "If we take away anything from this, we have to keep talking, even if it hurts."

Harley's brow pinched together, his eyes pleading. "Yes, even if it hurts."

At that moment, he wasn't the asshole who ruined my life. He was my baby brother who caught frogs to show me and the lanky teenager who got all my hand-me-down clothes. I could see past the part of him that hurt me, and in its place was the man he was today. At this very moment, he pushed past hard news and tried to understand my struggle. That alone made me feel safer than ever before.

The women held us a moment longer before releasing the current of energy.

"Everyone, deep breath," Viv prompted before she went on. "Now I'd like to say I am fully aware of how hard both Rosie and Carson have fought their desire to be together. They knew it could complicate things. They both love you very much, but they also love each other."

Rosie and I looked at each other, my arm still around her. She tugged my beard, and I gave her a quick peck without thinking. They all smiled at us. Aside from Bear, no one had seen us affectionate with one another.

“I’m not mad about it. I just felt lied to,” Harley said.

Kaylee nodded, “I knew something was up. I had a vision of you with some guy. You were in a lake, but it was super dark. All I could see was a flash of some crystal necklace on his chest and your little tattooed hands holding his shoulders. I thought for sure it was Dane.”

Rosie let out a pleased little giggle and pulled the necklace out from under my shirt. Everyone’s eyes grew wide. “It’s been on his neck since April.” She flashed Viv a smug smile.

Harley’s eyes bounced between me and her. “Your dress was all muddy the night of Kaylee’s birthday. I knew you didn’t fall. That was from fucking.” He pointed, “You fucked her in my forest?”

“Our forest,” I corrected. “My cabin is on the other side of the lake.”

Viv cackled and clapped with glee. “Oh, Rosie! Good for you!”

Kaylee giggled, “On Litha? Girl! That’s one way to celebrate!”

“It was very sudden; I don’t think you want the details,” Rosie hesitated. “You just need to know that we’re happy. This isn’t something casual for us. We were going to tell you as soon as it felt right.”

I was glad she omitted details of our story and the blessing. That was our private life. Too much of our story was tangled with theirs. It made me love her even more that she guarded my privacy.

Kaylee smiled. “You guys are adorable together. I’m not going to lie.”

Harley nodded in agreement. “Mom is going to lose her shit.”

Kaylee gnawed at her bottom lip, “But it’s awkward because I didn’t realize you harbored so much resentment for me.”

“Neither did I,” Rosie said.

Viv cleared her throat. “I think now that it’s out in the open, you two ladies can keep discussing it. You became friends under very unusual circumstances, and it makes sense that things are still clunky.”

Rosie sighed, “But I don’t want you to think I have it out for you. I had to fight for my happiness, too. I’m sorry I hurt you in the process.”

Kaylee fidgeted with her engagement ring. “I could’ve been more aware of how I was throwing our relationship in your face. I was so insistent on you dating Dane.” She cast a guilty glance at me. “And I remember the first week you lived here, you mentioned Carson was cute, and I told you he was a grump. I’m sure that didn’t help.”

Rosie patted my chest. “But he’s my grump now,” she said lightheartedly.

Harley added, “And we weren’t upset that it was you two together. We were upset that we didn’t know about it. Not that you need our approval, but you have it. We’re happy for you.”

I cleared my throat. “Thank you. We will get around to telling everyone ourselves. But let us break the news.”

“Make sense. It’s your news to share,” Kaylee added.

We all agreed to that.

“I am so proud of you all. What a great smutty summit,” Viv said.

“Well...to Kouris cock,” Rosie said, lifting her mug, making Kaylee giggle.

“And to wet witches,” I added, looking at my brother, who wiggled his eyebrows.

We drank in a newfound truce and parted ways, thanking Viv. The bear hug I got from my brother made a lump of

emotion stick in my throat. I was exposed but newly freed as I walked back to my store, holding Rosie's hand, not caring who saw it.

"I'm here for you, babe. I told Kaylee I needed a day off tomorrow. If you don't want to be alone tonight—"

"I like the sound of that. Why don't you pack a bag, and we can hide out at the cabin."

She got on her tippy toes for a kiss. "All in?" she whispered with doe eyes.

"All in."

The drive home was quiet. Once we got to the bedroom, I fetched a bottle of melatonin gummies from my bedside table. "Rosie, I love you very much, but I have a vulnerability hangover, and I'm fucking tired. I spend every waking moment doing the two things I know I'm good at—working or worshiping you." She chuckled at how blunt I was being. I was rummy with exhaustion. "How 'bout we pop two of these and get some real sleep?"

"True romance," she teased, walking closer to me. "You gave me the D. Now let's get some Z." She fought a giggle, opening her mouth to stick out her little tongue. I plopped two gummies and sealed the deposit with a kiss.

Rosie played with my hair and tickled my back as I used her boobs as the perfect pillow. "It's all over, Carson. We're free. You can live your life now."

"Thank you for loving me."

"Thank you for loving me," she echoed. "I think we started some serious healing tonight."

"Tomorrow will be better." We shared sleepy smiles before drifting off.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Carson and I spent the day after the smutty summit in a bubble of bliss. It was an unspoken truth that we craved more time together before the rest of the world knew. There were no talks of when or how to tell people.

With our melatonin-induced coma, we slept until noon. Since we were both early risers for work, that was disorienting enough. With the added hangover of too much sleep, we shuffled around in a lovey-dovey daze, too tired to go for a run or drive. Instead, we lounged around, cuddling or eating, talking or drawing, playing with Kiszka, and breaking out in the occasional drunken dance when a good song came on. I had an entire playlist titled Carson's Cabin that I made over the months we had been dating. It was an audible map of our love story.

When the night crept in, we had the genius idea of dragging the mattress from his guest room in front of the fireplace and then covering it with fuzzy fur blankets and quilts. It became a cozy nest I didn't want to leave. We had everything we needed right there with the flames.

Eventually, we both found ourselves naked under the furs. Carson laid on his side, propping his head up with his arm while he turned to look at me and the hearth. I was lying flat on my back, loving the warmth of my man and the fire. I traced lazy lines through his chest hair and over the necklace I gave him. The crystal gleamed in the firelight and radiated good energy.

He pushed the blanket below my hips, his hand roaming from my throat to my pussy, then down my thighs, only to travel back up. His hungry eyes followed his path each time, and his touch still made me shiver, even with how much we'd been making love lately.

He draped over me, our legs entwined. "I love you like this, all soft and warm." He nuzzled between my breasts and kissed each one. "I just want you like this forever. Nothing between us."

"Deal," I wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him closer.

"How can you be so sure?" he whispered with a slow blink of his long lashes.

"What do you mean?"

"I just worry you'll get sick of Pine Bluff. I never want you to resent me for having to live here because of my store."

"I love it here. It's so calm. I came here for healing and found it alone, but I also found it with you." I fixed my gaze on the blaze reflecting in his honeyed hazel eyes, hoping to relay my sincerity. "Baby, you did that for me. You showed me it's okay to accept help and have people watching out for me. I needed that so badly. I was in survival mode, and you helped me out of it."

He licked his lips, gathering his thoughts. "All I have are traditions and obligations. How could that be enticing?"

"Because I never had any of that. No safety net, no normalcy. My mom did her best, but I didn't have a big family around me. No legacy, no memories except with her. It's hard to admit, but it was lonely sometimes."

"I'm sorry," he frowned for a second before he brushed a tendril off my forehead. "You know, you showed me things too. You helped me realize I'm not damaged because of the bad shit in my past. And you listened to me better than anyone ever has."

"Kiss me," I whispered, needing to feel his love instead of hearing it. He slanted his mouth over mine, weaving his hand

through my curls. I lost myself in the kiss with his taste and his muscular pecs scraping my tender nipples. I wiggled closer, a dull ache forming that only he could remedy.

He rolled himself fully over me, the veins on his arms bulging slightly in the firelight as his hip muscles flexed, settling between my legs. He nipped at my tummy, then a boob, before whispering, “I told you I’d have you all flushed and fucked properly in this cabin if you’d just let your guard down.”

I kissed along the long line of his shoulder. “Go on,” I teased, my giggle becoming a gasp as he rocked his hips, sliding up between my pussy lips. I couldn’t help but push at his shoulders to look down at his groin. I loved how right above the root of his cock had the most delicious mix of taut muscles, veins, and hair.

“Mm, my greedy girl wants to watch,” his gravelly voice covered me, as he bent my leg closest to the fire, so my knee was by my chest. With my core exposed, he ran his length up through my pussy, slicking it.

I shuddered. “God, that’s so fucking hot.”

He pulled back, doing it again, trailing my clit with every inch, every vein. With each pass, the crown glistened more and more.

I hooked my leg around his body, my heel digging into a firm cheek. With one hand, he brushed his cock against me, sliding inside without pretense. We both groaned. That feeling alone was so good. So fucking good.

From there, he held me close, our chests pressed as we moved together in sweet kisses that morphed into intense eye contact. It was the most intimate moment of my life with him deep inside me while also seeing deep inside my soul. His thumb brushed my cheek while he stared. I brought my hand to the same place on his face, his scruff rough against my palm.

His face twitched as he swallowed hard. I nodded, sharing the same unsaid sentiment. This was making love. We were

desperately, deeply in love.

Two souls, two bodies, but one undeniable connection. A cosmic contract.

“Baby, I love you,” he said, eyes searching.

“I love you, too.”

From there, we moved together in the night, just him and I.

Flesh and breath, and utter bliss.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Time with Rosie was the perfect balm for my soul after the draining, smutty summit. Begrudgingly, I had to return to work and the real world.

I was on edge the entire morning. My run didn't clear my mind. My coffee didn't wake me up. But besides that, something was off...I could sense it. A charged thickness clung to the air, like right before a thunderstorm. I chalked it up to being emotionally exhausted.

Then it was undeniable, like a cat scratch at the back of my neck.

I could feel Rosie across the street, and something was wrong. An incessant knot deep in my guts kept twisting, paired with all the hairs on my body standing up and a buzzing in my ears. I left my office to find Kizzy pacing back and forth in front of the windows, low whines squeaking in his throat.

I couldn't continue like this. Something was wrong with my woman.

It was a bright October day with tourists lining Main Street and packing the coffee shop. I was taller than everyone else, so it was easy to scan the room. When I didn't see the tell-tale auburn gloss of hair bobbing around, my ears hummed even louder.

I waded through people to get to the front counter to ask Dani if she had seen Rosie. She was taking an order, so she shot me an annoyed look and shook her head. I went to

Kaylee's side of the shop and spotted her laughing with a group of middle-aged women. I couldn't get past a crowded aisle of people hunched over, staring at jewelry and making crystal singing bowls ring annoyingly in the air.

"Kaylee!" I semi-yelled to get her attention. "Where's Rosie?"

Kaylee shrugged and pointed to the wall they shared. "Isn't she at the bar?"

I shook my head, my stomach constricting tighter. I damn near manhandled some people to get out of the crystal shop. Once in the café, all shreds of my patience frayed. I pushed past people standing in line to order and went to her empty office. The women's restroom was empty. Before I could even search the men's, the door opened with an old guy exiting, ruling out her presence.

I ignored worried looks from Dani and Azalea as I darted into the walk-in refrigerator, my reality freezing in pure horror.

Rosie lay contorted on the ground with a puddle of crimson seeping out between her legs, staining her tights and dress. I blinked hard as I got to my knees, hoping my vision would clear to a different sight. When I lifted her, she was limp and blazing hot to the touch.

"Help!" I bellowed, knowing no one could hear me over the clamor of the busy shop.

As I lifted her on my lap, blood dripped down my thigh, warm and too fresh. Her weight, which was so easy for me to hold before, was different, heavy with unconsciousness. "Rosie, baby, wake up." I pushed my lips against her throat and forehead, hoping it was a simple fix like she passed out and forgot to put a tampon in.

I shook her in my arms, fighting to ignore the sickening slump of her neck that made her head bob back over my forearm. Her eyes didn't open. Her breathing didn't change.

I stood, picking her up like a bride, blood trickling against me. Walking out of the refrigerator, I knew I was only in there

for mere seconds, but it felt like an eternity. I had passed the threshold of terror with the love of my life lifeless in my arms.

Azalea and Dani took one look at me and scrambled.

“What did you do to her?” Dani cried.

“Nothing!” I hissed. “Call 911! Get out of my way!” I roared, maneuvering around the counter.

Azalea tried her best to clear the crowd as I shoved past people who saw the blood now dripping down my arms. People gasped, leaning away from me. Edging closer to the thick of the crowd, I hollered again, “Someone call 911. We need Life Flight!” People parted like a sea of stupidity, and Rosie’s boots clobbered those who didn’t.

Someone held open the door for me with a phone to their ear. I was torn between walking to my truck or waiting in the street. The clinic in town where my sister was a nurse wouldn’t be able to handle this. On some level, I knew that. I also knew the next decent hospital was four towns over.

Stumbling out of Silver Springs, some part of my brain saw patrons using the small patio tables. Another part of my brain walked up to them and plunked Rosie right next to their lattes, jostling everything to spill over. They hovered around, some lady screaming. I was in a waking nightmare with no one helping me.

I shucked off her boots, grabbing her tights and yanking them off. The fabric was drenched, heavy with blood. I slapped it on the table, my vision getting spotty. I bit back a sob, terrified I was about to watch Rosie die on the street between our shops, too soon before I could fully love her.

Kaylee came running out, holding her phone near my face. “They need us to get to a place they can land!”

I stammered, “She’s bleeding out. I don’t know what to do. She’s bleeding out.”

The dispatch lady’s voice drifted in my mind, “Put pressure on it, firm pressure. Don’t touch her torso. Just press between her legs with something besides your hand.”

I spotted the chair with someone's tan jacket draped across the back. I wadded it up and put it under her dress against her center. More blood seeped into the tan jacket, crawling closer to my hand. "There's so much blood. It's not stopping."

"Just put pressure on it. We are confirming pick up location," the dispatch instructed. "Is she clammy?"

"Yes. She's scorching hot to the touch. It's like a full-on feverburn. She's so hot I don't know what the fuck to do. She can't die!"

To my left, Officer Boyd charged towards me. "Get away from her!" he shouted, trying to haul me away.

A frustrated scream ripped through my throat as I shoved him away with my bloody hands. He staggered backward, trying to get his footing. The next moments were a blur. Coming out of the post office, Dane ran to shove Boyd back again, screaming something at him before opening his truck door for us.

I crawled in, holding Rosie. Kaylee went along with us, sitting in the passenger seat and coordinating the pickup for Life Flight. Dane reversed the truck, not waiting for traffic, getting a long honk from the person behind us. He flipped them off, driving like a mobster out of town as I clutched Rosie, trying to brace her from the chaotic ride. Her body blazed in my arms, the feverburn overtaking her.

Her breathing quickened, panting almost like she had just run a marathon as she shivered in my arms. Behind her cracked eyelids, her eyes were rolled in the back of her head, too white and unnerving. I cradled her and held her face, hating how unresponsive she was.

Kissing her forehead, I whispered so the other two couldn't hear, "Roisin, this isn't how it ends...this isn't how you will go out. You need to fight; you need to stay here. We have so much more we need to do together."

Tears spilled out of my eyes, soaking her hair. I continued, "I want to marry you. I want to love you. I want to watch a million sunsets on the lake with you and take you to

Hawaii and more concerts. And drink your foofy coffee and paint how beautiful you are. I want to put as many babies in you as you want.” A sad laugh escaped me, knowing she would’ve rolled her eyes at the last part if she was awake. My tortured chuckle morphed into sobs as I clutched her closer, sensing it was my final moment with her. The blessing didn’t work. My curse got to her. I did this.

Her breathing was so quick it was distressing to watch. She looked possessed, fighting for a lungful. I buried my face in her neck, unable to watch.

My voice creaked, “Rosie, don’t go...don’t go...we’re all in, remember? All in. Don’t go...don’t go...”

I tried to memorize how she felt in my arms, how wild and witchy her scent was, and how soft her curls were against my face. I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing I could go back in time and somehow save her. I did this. I did this to her.

A hand grasped my arm. It was Dane holding the door open for me. We had pulled over in a local park, and the helicopter for Life Flight had landed, the blades of grass swishing with the strong gusts of wind. I pulled Rosie from the back seat, the dampness of the blood on both of us.

The next thing I knew, she was on the stretcher while they loaded her in the helicopter, the medics quickly at work. The sound of the beating propeller echoed in my ears, matching the drumming of my heart.

“Could this be a miscarriage?” a guy medic asked.

“No, she’s on birth control.” I looked at her bloody inner thighs on the stretcher, nauseous with the realization. “Could this be her IUD?” I gulped hard, suddenly too hot and sick.

“We will update you at the hospital.”

Everything blurred as the helicopter took off, and someone pushed me back to the truck. Closer to town, I realized Kaylee was glancing back at me, her pale eyes steely and concerned, rimmed red from crying.

I squeezed Dane’s shoulder from where I sat in the back seat. “Thank you.”

He shook his head and murmured, “Don’t thank me. I can drive you to the hospital, but you should change your clothes first.”

I looked down at my lap, dark with Rosie’s blood, and swallowed hard. Once we pulled up to the back of my store, I saw Bear parking and Harley leaning against his work truck. Both of their faces were like Kaylee’s—stony and concerned. Harley walked towards me and Kaylee, hugging us both.

Letting go of them, I eyed Bear. “Hey man, I’m going to drive you,” he said, handing me some of his workout clothes that I changed into in the parking lot, not caring who saw me or that I left my bloodied ones on the pavement.

The road passed on and on. I stared ahead, and the puke threatening to rise in my throat finally won, and I had to punch Bear to pull over. Hurling in the forest, I had flashbacks of Rosie’s limp body, the distinct burn of her fever against my cheek, and how I might’ve killed the woman I loved.

On all fours, I stared down at the forest floor covered in my puke. The dream raced in my mind. Then memories coiled like seeing her smile for the first time, her white dress trailing behind her as she ran in the forest on Litha, her eyes on my skin as she painted.

It was too much to process, so my body revolted again in more puke. I killed Rosie. I did this. I was so greedy to love her, to think I could get away with it. I also vowed that if my curse took another life, I would return to this forest to end my own. I couldn’t keep hurting people.

But I had to get to her; I had to push it aside until I could see her again, even if it was only her body. Hopping back into the truck, Bear handed me gum and water. I pushed the air controls high and shut off the radio.

“She will be okay,” he said after a while.

“We don’t know that.”

“I know. But you love her. She’s your girl. With everything you’ve been through, it won’t end like this.”

My face pulled into a miserable scowl to hide my sob. “I can’t lose her.”

Bear knew more than anyone how traumatizing this was for me. After each woman passed away, he found me on the bluff and talked me through the grief night after night when I couldn’t sleep.

Time got foggy stretched too thin while also sinking. I ended up at the hospital staring at the wall in the waiting room, wondering why they chose the yellow tile they did. It was too bright and cheery for such a sad place.

The space was too quiet and empty when I called Rosie’s mom. My words echoed, forcing me to hear the harsh news twice. I gritted my teeth, trying not to lose it while she sobbed, ‘Not my baby!’

After that phone call, things lurched to a standstill. Hours and hours stacked up, and with it, the awareness of what I risked consumed me. I should have listened to the damn dream. My selfishness hurt Rosie. I found someone so magical and wonderful and snuffed the light out of her.

I wasn’t cursed. I *was* the curse. And my cursed love killed Rosie.

The Phoenix

Chapter Forty



It was so cold where I was. Cold and dark. I was on top of a pile of prickling needles in a dark room. My bones were brittle and stiff as a dull ache radiated through me. People were talking, but they sounded so far away, muffled. I wanted to tell them I needed help, but my mouth wouldn't move.

Then warmth seeped into me, like the sun coming out on a cloudy day, radiating light. A swaying sensation filled me with the crash of waves in the distance. I opened my eyes enough to see I was on Carson's chest, lakeside in our hammock. I couldn't look at his face, only his chest. It was as if something was stopping me. He held my hand, kissing my ring finger tattoo.

His familiar voice rumbled, "You need to come back now, Rosie."

I nuzzled his chest, not wanting to move.

Then, another voice filled my head. It was my own. It started as a whisper that I couldn't decipher. I looked up from his chest to see an apparition of myself walking out of the lake, the edges of my naked body and hair on fire. She glided closer, her eyes glazed in all white, pinning me with shock as the chant clarified in my brain. Her mouth didn't move, but I heard her nonetheless. Each syllable churned into a thunderous chant.

"The feverburn has ended."

I sucked in a breath, clinging to Carson.

It came even louder. “The feverburn has ended.” She reached a fiery hand to touch me, and I jolted awake.

The sound of beeping poked the air. My throat was raw and dry. I squinted in the dark room, realizing I was in a hospital bed. How did I get here? I blinked as more details registered in my brain. I was warm, so warm I was sick to my stomach. I had an oxygen tube under my nose. I wanted to pull it off, but raising my hand took too much effort. I felt drunk.

To my left, Carson was asleep in a chair, leaning against a wall. I braced myself on my elbows, trying to sit up, realizing I couldn’t. My whole body was too heavy. My voice came out slow, “Carson.” I took a dry gulp and scraped his name out again, this time as loud as I could muster. “Caaarson.”

His eyes shot open as he set up in a fluster. His handsome face hovered over mine, his hand brushing my cheek, grazing over the oxygen tube. “Rosie,” his face broke as he swallowed hard, searching my eyes. “Hi, baby, I’m here with you. You’re okay.” He kissed my forehead.

“W-what?” I croaked.

“Your IUD hurt you. You passed out at work, and I found you. You’ve been out of it for a while.”

I blinked hard, my eyelids rough like sandpaper. He leaned down and kissed my dry lips while holding my hand. “It hurts,” I whispered, a sting spreading in my head and a dull ache in my abdomen. I licked my lips, trying to wet my mouth.

He paged a nurse, never releasing my hand. I got a giant mug of water, more meds, and fewer blankets to cool off. I dipped back into a dull sleep. It wasn’t like in the movies. There weren’t any long discussions or dramatic doctors explaining I had amnesia, only bleak, numb nothingness.

I woke up again. Carson was sitting by the bed, watching me. The slanted sunbeam through the window lit his honey-sage eyes as dark shadows hung below them and stray stubble speckled around his beard. I had never seen him this weary.

He kissed my hand and squeezed it. “Hey baby,” his low voice murmured.

“Hi,” I squeezed his hand back. This time, I sat up and drank by myself. After acclimating to being awake, I stopped him from paging a nurse. “Wait, talk to me.” I blinked slowly, willing myself to sober. “My IUD?”

“Yeah, your IUD dislodged and tore through your uterus. You almost bled out in the fridge at work. You went septic.” His eyes got glossy with unshed tears. “I’m so sorry I did this to you.”

I grasped his hand again. “You didn’t. There is no way you could have. Did they? Did I have a hysterectomy? Did they take out my uterus?” I stuttered.

He shook his head. “No, they were able to avoid it. But it traveled to your liver.”

My vision tunneled, and I could hear my heartbeat whoosh in my ears.

“Rosie?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m just...wow...”

“But it’s okay. You’re okay. The doctors got you stable. We’ve got you. You’re so strong.” He kissed my hand.

A doctor came in to talk. She had gray hair that hung in a blunt bob and wore clogs with fireworks printed on the glossy surface. Her energy was contained, calculated in a professional way I couldn’t read, but her navy eyes set on me in careful consideration. She introduced herself as Dr. Samantha Rasmussen, the woman who saved my life.

After checking my vitals and chart, she rested a cold hand on my forearm. “As you know, IUDs are inserted in the vagina, then through the cervix, and stay in the uterus as birth control. Sometimes, these devices perforate, which means the IUD will tear through the wall of your uterus and make its way to other parts of your body. In your case, once it tore through your uterine wall, it nicked a uterine artery, causing acute bleeding. The IUD then lacerated your liver and embedded in it.”

I nodded for her to continue.

“You went septic, and you had substantial blood loss, but we were able to stabilize you. You’re still being treated for infection, and we will need you to come back for follow-ups regarding your liver.”

“Why did it dislodge? It just happens?” I asked.

“It’s hard to pinpoint the cause, but IUDs have a risk for migration since they’re a foreign object in your body. Usually, the body absorbs the IUD in fatty tissues, but in your case, it went somewhere more dangerous.”

Her gaze shifted to Carson, knowing he had something to say. He cleared his throat, “I know the IUD never poked me because it was inside her uterus, but I swear I felt the strings attached to it once. I feel responsible.”

Dr. Rasmussen tilted her head, “It’s not uncommon to feel your partner’s strings in certain sexual positions, but this would’ve happened regardless of whether you felt them. You didn’t do this. If anything, you saved her life.”

“I feel responsible,” he repeated.

She nodded patiently. “I’ve heard this from other patient’s partners, but I assure you that intercourse didn’t cause the perforation. Birth control is so commonplace in our society we forget there’s always a risk. Rosie was, unfortunately, an outlier.”

I turned to Carson, giving him my full attention. “You didn’t do this. Thank you for finding me, honey.” He gave me a sad stare. Picking my battles, I turned back to the doctor. “Will I still be able to have babies?”

She squinted, “I can’t say definitively, but this shouldn’t impact future fertility or pregnancies. Some patients have punctures that are completely asymptomatic. Your case was emergent due to the blood loss and septic shock.”

“So, babies are possible?” I asked, feeling stupid.

“Yes,” she affirmed, her eyes crinkling with a polite smile.

I looked over at Carson, grateful to see his expectant eyes. He wanted babies, too, which made me happy in such a sad

situation.

As the doctor left, I stared at Carson, trying to clump together enough sense in my brain to convey my feelings. I patted the empty spot near my legs on the bed, wanting him closer.

As he sat down, pulling at the neck of his shirt, he said, "I'm so sorry my curse put you in this situation."

"Baby, you didn't."

"I did. First the fire, now this. What's next?"

"I know it's over. I had this vision, this dream. Listen, you're not cursed." I waved to him to help me sit up more. I sucked in a deep breath, gathering myself. "You're not cursed. You have a strong sense of intuition. You're psychic as fuck."

"That's Kaylee, not me. I'm not psychic."

"What if your dreams predict what's going to happen? What if you're intuitive and never knew mystical stuff like this was real until you talked to someone like me?"

His body and gaze froze.

I continued, "You have dreams to save the women you love. I'm not sure why things didn't work with Jamie and Whitney, and honestly, I feel immense guilt that I'm here today and they're not. But you didn't know it, but now you do. You saved me. You were aware of the possible tragedy, and we built on our spiritual connection with the blessing. We even had a shared dream of that exact moment. That wasn't random."

His eyebrows gathered, "When you collapsed, I felt you across the street. I could sense something was wrong."

"Exactly. Since we met, you said you had an instinct to watch out for me. What if this was it, Carson? What if you were supposed to sense I needed help at that moment? This was never a curse. It was a blessing." I felt tears brim my eyes as an emotional concoction filled my body: the sourness of guilt, the weightlessness of luck, and the sweetness of

gratitude. Defensive tears spilled over, “We were never cursed.”

His voice came out thick, “I’ll have to take your word for it.” He leaned forward to kiss my forehead. “All I know is you’ve been my greatest blessing, Rosie. I love you so much, and I’m glad you’re okay. You’re so strong and resilient. I hope you’re safe now, and we can put all this behind us.” He squeezed my arm, looking me over.

“I take it the town got the memo we’re together?” I asked, sniffing.

He fought a chuckle by licking his lips. “Yeah, word traveled fast.” His gaze was unfocused for a moment, a dullness drifting over him. “I hauled you out of Silver Springs for the whole town to see. Given my reaction, I’m guessing it was obvious. I got some weird phone calls. My family is thrilled but worried about you.”

“We will tell them everything.”

“Not everything,” he said, tucking some hair behind my ear. “I still want to hang on to parts of our story, keep things for us.”

I pulled him in for a quick kiss. “I like the way you think. All in?”

His face twitched with a small smile. “All in.”

Later that day, I sent Carson home to rest. I could tell he was exhausted, and the nurses mentioned he had barely left my side. Kaylee and Harley came to visit first. She brought me a chunk of moss agate crystal, which helps with tissue repair and deep healing. She also snuck me an iced coffee and showed me videos of their dogs to distract me with cuteness.

Harley slid a cool rustic mason jar of sunflowers on my table and hugged me. Aside from Carson, he had seen me at some of my lowest points in life recently and still treated me with respect. In the past, most of my friend’s boyfriends treated women like silly little things they needed to wrangle or tolerate. That wasn’t the case with the Kouris brothers.

I conked out shortly after they left because of the pain meds. My mom woke me up by accident with her phone ringing. Once I was awake, she damn near crawled into bed with me, clutching me to her while we both cried. After blubbering together, I sent her down to get herself a coffee.

She ran into Maxine by the gift shop. Through a process of elimination, they realized who each other was. It was heartwarming seeing both of our moms together and getting along so well. When Maxine leaned in to hug me, I started crying again. But she didn't break the hug first; she let me, and I loved that about her.

After asking how I was, Maxine set to business. Bangles clacked down her arm as she held up a pointer finger. "Let's get the obvious out of the way. It's maddening as women that we deal with the brunt of birth control in our relationships. I mean, dear god, man will visit the moon, but heaven forbid someone experiments on their balls."

"It's patriarchal bullshit," my mom and I said in unison.

Maxine's eyes bounced between us as she pulled up a chair. "I knew I liked you two. Okay, Rosie, my dear. This is so scary. I want you to know whatever you're feeling is valid."

"I'm fine. But I didn't want you to find out this way. I'm sorry we kept this from you," I sniffled. "I don't want you to think I was ashamed of your son."

"Oh, sweetie, don't apologize! You have nothing to be sorry for," she said, patting my legs. "Both of my boys are so damn secretive. I get it. Dating in a small town is hard. I was visiting from Canada when I met their father. I had just finished university and was doing some soul-searching, so I rented this little cottage on the lake. I needed light bulbs, so I went into the hardware store, and the rest was history." Her cheeks flushed with a wistful smile. "We sneaked around the whole summer. When I packed my car to leave, Markos laid in the middle of the road to stop me."

My mom and I smiled at Maxine, loving her story.

She blinked away her reverie, "So I get it. I really do."

I sucked in a shaky breath. “With everything that happened with Carson in the past and what happened between Kaylee and me, we just wanted to keep things private until we were ready,” I wiped away more tears from my hot, swollen eyes. “It all came crashing down at once.”

It was heart-wrenching to know a man I loved was hated. And waking up in a hospital bed, knowing I could’ve died from something like birth control, was scarier than shit. It made me feel helpless even though I was fighting for what I wanted. Even before my accident, I had to put on a brave face at the Smutty Summit, and before that, when I moved to Pine Bluff. Now pushed to my breaking point, I, well...broke.

Tears created itchy paths down my cheeks. It was cathartic. My mom rubbed my back after handing me a tissue. “Honey, you need to give yourself some credit. You didn’t do anything wrong. You’ve been through a lot. New town, new business, a complicated relationship.”

Maxine nodded, “When I heard you were moving up here with Kaylee, I thought you were a better woman than I’d ever be. Keeping your dating life personal is understandable. Your private life is private.”

“Are you saying that as a therapist or a mom?”

She grinned, her funky glasses lifting her shaggy bangs. “Both.” That made all of us chuckle.

A nurse came in to check my vitals, interrupting our therapy session. After that, I told them the PG version of the story, only revealing the crucial parts and omitting some raunchy details. Talking about Carson put a smile on my face. It was one of the first times I could do it so openly.

“Aside from being such a gentleman, he’s so handsome,” my mom said in wonderment, then patted Maxine’s arm. “You sure make some pretty babies, lady!”

“I could say the same. When I met Rosie earlier this year, I was blown away by how gorgeous she was. Look at that hair, those eyes. Every time I see her, she is kind and easygoing. Just good-natured, you can tell.” She winked at me before

turning to my mom. “All my kids have found beautiful, strong women; I couldn’t be happier.”

We all shared a smile, knowing this was the start of something permanent.



It bummed me out they didn’t keep the IUD they pulled from my liver. I wanted to wear it as an earring. I knew that would be a deranged request, but it felt like a missed opportunity. Nonetheless, I was happy to leave the hospital.

Carson still treated me like a porcelain doll, trying to find anything off or out of the ordinary. After parking his truck at the cabin, he carried me in like a bride. I thought about fighting him on it, but I figured the guy had been through enough. Instead, I wrapped my arms around his neck, breathing in his beard oil, basking in his protective energy.

He helped me shower and got me all settled on the couch with Kiszka, who sniffed my torso but knew not to howl. He was such a good boy when he needed to be. In one of the rooms, I could see my rose dresser. I pointed to it in confusion.

He handed me a glass of water with a set jaw, “I don’t want you anywhere that’s not near me.”

“Okay?”

“You’re living here,” he said, turning to make his way to the kitchen.

Rushing to swallow my water, I squeaked out, “What?”

“You’re. Living. Here.” He looked over his shoulder and cocked an eyebrow.

My stomach flipped, but I fought the lust. “We didn’t even discuss it!”

“We don’t have to. You’ve always been welcome here. Even before all this happened, you knew that. I gave you a key months ago.” I stared at him, not knowing if this was super annoying or fucking hot. A gravelly laugh escaped him as he knelt on the couch, wrapping me in his arms before kissing my head. “Woman, stop being so damn stubborn and let me love you.”

“But we hadn’t even told anyone about us,” I said to his back as he returned to the kitchen.

“It happened too quickly, out of order, just like everything else happens with us, my love.” He put some bread in a toaster, then pointed to the couch with a butter knife, urging me to rest.

“You can’t just boss me around and feed me like some Capricorn.”

“Capdaddy,” he snorted at his joke, cutting into an avocado. “I can, and I will. You like it.”

I spent the rest of the day on the couch with Kizzy. His floofy body next to me made me feel instantly better. He wedged his snout between my back and the sofa as we napped.

The doorbell rang, waking me up. I looked over the couch to see a little puff of hair shuffling through the cabin. “Viviane!”

“Rosie! My sweet girl, I was so worried about you!” She plunked on the couch next to me with a big hug. Carson looked at us adoringly and whistled for Kiszka as he went outside.

“Here are some books for you while you’re taking it easy. And this Tupperware has some brownies that will help get some meat back on your bones. Some have weed in them.”

I eyed the container. “How do I know which ones?”

She gleefully shrugged. “Oh, no clue! Sometimes, the best things in life need to be kept a secret.” She winked at me.

“Is that an old Buddhist saying I should familiarize myself with?” I teased.

She opened her mouth, clearly amused. “Consider it a good exercise in accepting what the universe hands you. Speaking of, you’ve been quite a busy gal. Pine Bluff has handed your ass to you, hasn’t it, my little rose? First, the fire, then getting caught, and now your medical ordeal. Goodness me! My tits are tired just thinking about it!”

“It was a lot to handle, that’s for sure. But I wanted to thank you.”

“For what?” she asked, raising her denim eyebrows.

“For telling me about the lake. You said I’d find answers there.” I studied Carson playing fetch with Kiszka. “I certainly did.”

Viviane followed my gaze, her face creasing in even more wrinkles with a pleased smile. “Truly tremendous,” she whispered. “This past Yule, on the winter solstice, I prayed that some strong women would come to this valley and love some of these men. Dating here is so hard. Maine is full of old geezers. We needed more life and potential in this valley. When Kaylee crashed a month later, my prayers were answered. Then, around the spring equinox, you came.”

“Wait, you summoned Kaylee and I?”

Her azure eyes flitted back to mine. “Someone has to keep the magic going in this place after I’m gone.”

I reached for her hand in concern. “You’re not going to leave us, are you?” How could I politely ask a granny if she was about to croak?

“I mean, eventually, yes. Death is life’s only promise, aside from taxes. But no, I don’t plan on dying anytime soon.”

We both smiled in relief.

Suddenly, my instincts pushed me to slow down and really gather the details around me. The sunset in the kitchen windows lit the cabin in a warm light. Long beams cast on the river rocks of the fireplace as illuminated dust motes swirled

in the air. The room got warmer while Viv stared at me, a distinct hum filling my ears. Suddenly, her little hand rested low on my womb. It was too low to be polite, damn near touching my mound over my leggings and sweater. Her voice was deeper now. Mixed with the ringing in my ears, it was powerful and steady. “You are safe. You can go on just loving him now, do you understand?”

The buzzing intensified as I bobbed my head. “Yes, I understand.”

She kept her hand on me. “You’re a fierce woman, Rosie. And I want to thank you for what you did for Carson.” She dodged a look at him and back at me. “Because you did do it for him, it is over. He is...”

“Free?” I whispered.

It was her turn to nod.

“You know, he freed me too.”

She licked her pink lipstick-stained lips. “Yes, I imagine he has. In his own way.”

A loud ringtone pierced our reverie, making me jump. It was, ironically, the song “Patience” by Guns-n-Roses. Anyone listening to it bleat out while she took two minutes to fish it out of her purse needed patience. She tapped the gold iPhone only to yell into it on speakerphone. Her husband was outside, ready to pick her up.

Getting up to leave, she observed the crimson outline of my tits and tummy on the wall. Since our naked art lessons, Carson refused to paint over it, claiming it was his best work yet.

“This all you, girl?” she pointed to it with a tiny arthritic hand.

“Yep,” I said with a smile.

She studied it longer. “Good for you.”

Before she left, she pointed to the sketchy brownies. I recited the mantra for her, “Sometimes the best things in life

need to be kept a secret.” She held up a pointer finger in approval and left without another word.

With Carson still outside, I schlepped to the spare room with my stuff in it. I had secretly wanted to move into his cabin for a long time and was giddy that he took the initiative. Tyler mentioned moving in together but never made a real effort. My mom’s sage wisdom came to mind, ‘if he wanted to, he would.’

Digging through some of my stuff, I found my Bog Witch cardigan and my favorite fuzzy socks. Something round caught my eye: the stained-glass rose Viviane had given me months ago. A realization bloomed in my mind.

I asked Carson to help me bring it upstairs. I watched him stand with it, confusion crumpling his face. I pointed to the round window above his bed, urging him to slide the frame inside. A circle within a circle, hardly a sliver to spare. Like us, it was a perfect fit.

With the sun setting on the opposite side of the cabin, it was lit up almost like a spotlight. A grin split his face while he shook his head. “I can’t believe it.”

“It’s like it was always meant to be there,” I said, wrapping my arms around his waist.

It was too soon for sex, but I craved having him close. He could sense that, so we slowly undressed each other without a word and then settled on the bed. He hovered over me, kissing every inch of my naked body, peppering on extra kisses around my branding and the new scars from my accident. His mouth drifted back to mine while he rolled to his side, allowing us to lay chest to chest. I held the short hairs on his chin and looked into the gorgeous eyes I loved so much. “Carson, I want to thank you for saving my life. Not just with the accident but also by showing me unconditional love. You never gave up on me.”

“You never gave up on me either,” he countered.

I brushed my fingers along his wide collarbone. “I have to believe there was a reason for it all. Something bigger than us.

I was meant to find Kaylee; she was supposed to find Harley. That led me to you. I could help you break the curse, and you could find me when I needed you most.”

“I agree, but a part of me feels guilty that the curse got to you, and that’s why you collapsed.”

“Maybe it did. Or it would have happened regardless, and we’re just superstitious as fuck.” We both chuckled. I licked my lips, sobering, “While unconscious, I had this dream. We were in the hammock together, and you told me to come back, but I fought it. I wanted to keep snuggling with you. Then, it was like watching my higher self walk out of the lake on fire. She told me the feverburn had ended. Then I woke up.”

Carson blinked quickly, sitting up more. “Wait, feverburn?”

“Yeah, it’s a weird word. I think I made it up.” I scrunched my lips to my nose in consideration.

“I said the same word and kept using it. People corrected me, insisting it wasn’t a word.” We both smiled. His eyes glowed with intensity as he cupped the side of my face. “Wow, *magissa*, we are on the same wavelength.”

“We are, and I love it.” I nuzzled his nose before kissing him, urging him to lay back down. “But we got through it together, as a couple. I survived.”

“If you hadn’t. I was going to go to the forest and end it.”

I put a hand over his heart. “I’m glad it didn’t come to that.” We stared into each other’s eyes, words simply not enough. A strong surge of passion rose and fell in my body. Sucking in a deep breath, I asked, “Where do we go from here?”

“I know this town has been hard on you, but will you stay in Pine Bluff?”

I scooted even closer. And with a silly voice, I said, “Yes.” He already knew my answer.

“Will you spend the rest of your life with me?”

I scooted even closer. “Yes.”

He fought a smile with my lighthearted responses. “When the time is right, will you help me fill our lives, and this cabin will little Greeks?”

“They’d only be a quarter,” I corrected.

“Yeah, but they’d be all me and you. That’s the best part.”

“I agree. And yes, I’d love to. Our kids are going to have our cute butts and green eyes. I can’t wait.”

He wrapped an arm around me, grabbing a handful of ass as he swooped me in even closer. “You’re going to be my mountain mama.”

I snorted, “John Denver, eat your heart out!” before he lowered his lips to mine.

We were lying in the hammock a couple of days later. It was a peaceful Sunday, with crisp October air. Carson’s warm chest and the gentle waves put me right to sleep. I needed all the healing I could get from my accident, and on some level, I knew Carson liked holding space for restful moments for me. He was my strong and steady.

A ruff from Kiszka woke me up. He tended to curl up underneath our hammock, sticking close to us. Pulling up, I caught Carson’s eyes already fixed on me.

“You know I love you, right?” he asked.

“Yes. I love you, too.” Why was he acting so nervous? His hands brushed my shoulders, moving some of my hair off my forehead before kissing it. The sun was about to set, blasting the sky with an amber glow. Carson untangled me, standing up from the hammock and helping me out of it as well.

His hand moved to his pocket as he got down on one knee. My whole world slowed, my senses barely noticing birdsong far off in the forest, Kizzy’s snoot pressing into my thigh, and the sunset lighting up my lover’s hazel eyes.

“Roisin Hayes, will you marry me?” With his question, he opened a small wooden box with a sparkly ring inside.

“Yes,” I said, bursting into tears. “Yes! Absolutely!” I covered my face with my hands as he hugged me. My whole

body shook with both sobs and overwhelmed giggles. After a few moments and some kisses, I asked, “How long have you been planning that?”

“Oh, I got the ring while we were in Boston. Remember when I left to get us breakfast the next morning? I had it all set and made. Just needed to swing by to pick it up from the jeweler.”

My eyes flitted to the ring in the box, then back to him. “No way!”

“Yeah, I wanted to meet your mom again before I asked you. Talk it over, and make sure she was okay with me proposing to her baby. You’re your own woman, but her blessing was important to me.” He slid the ring on my finger. We both stared at the marquise-cut pinkish stone surrounded by a halo of diamonds on a gold band. It was a unique and unexpected choice I instantly fell in love with. I adored how it looked on my hand alongside my signature dark nails and ginger complexion. “It’s even morganite,” he added.

“Wait, this was before we broke the curse. How did you know? We both picked morganite?”

He cradled my face with a stunning grin. “What can I say, *magissa*? We are connected.”

Chapter Forty-One



After Rosie spent a couple of days healing up at home, we attended the harvest festival in the town square. Rosie hadn't been to town or work since the incident, and I knew she was nervous about seeing everyone again.

The festival was like a nighttime farmers' market with a small stage for a cover band. Lots of twinkly lights and fall foliage filled the event with warm colors. It was a good turnout, with hundreds of Pine Bluffians shuffling about eating, perusing, dancing, and laughing.

Rosie looked like an autumn queen, her red hair flowing and a cozy brown sweater keeping her warm. I felt like a typical Mainer in my flannel and beanie beside her. Several familiar faces gawked at Rosie and me, walking around hand-in-hand, her engagement ring sparkling.

Waiting for the band to finish a song, I squeezed her hand, releasing it to charge right for the stage. I scowled at the singer while taking the mic out of his hands. From there, I felt emboldened and slightly unhinged.

"Hey, everyone. Um...I know you all hate me and think I'm cursed. But I wanted you to know that I love this woman." I gestured to Rosie, who stared at me with her jaw hanging open.

"He speaks!" Officer Boyd heckled.

"Shut the fuck up!" Bear boomed. "Go on, Carson."

“Yeah, I speak and will talk a lot more now. I’ve felt unwelcome around here and let this cursed reputation hold me back from happiness for too long. I’m done with it. You don’t have to like me, but you have to tolerate me because I live here too, dammit.”

“Tell ‘em, Carson!” Harley yelled. Several people whooped in support.

“I love Rosie. We’re engaged. And you guys might think I’m an asshole, but she doesn’t. I don’t want any of you giving her shit for loving me.”

“He’s right!” a man yelled. I squinted at the crowd, trying to find who said it. Dane climbed on top of a picnic table, standing above the crowd with arms outstretched. “Car-bro, I’m sorry for telling everyone you’re cursed. I was wrong. And not to pull the orphan card, but I went through a lot and totally took it out on you. Sorry for being a douche and ruining your life.” His tone was overly casual and borderline funny. “You and Rosie are cute together. I’m glad she makes your crabby ass happy.”

I held back a chuckle at how bizarre this moment was. “Thanks, man. I appreciate that.” He helped me when Rosie collapsed. He was already forgiven in my book.

Hank cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “I knew you two were messing around for months. I’m happy for you, Carsyboy! You got yourself a good witchy woman!”

“You knew?” I shrieked. Rosie’s hands flew to cover her mouth.

Skyler said, “Yeah, dude, I thought it was Kiszka crying out, but it turns out it was Rosie.”

The entire crowd murmured with laughter as Rosie covered her beet-red face.

Someone yelled, “I saw you two dancing behind your store one night!”

Someone else added, “I thought I saw you two sucking face in Boston!”

It was Otto's turn, "She was talking about you when I was at Viv's store. I was in the basement but heard everything. The little gal makes great coffee, so I kept her secret so she wouldn't move away."

"We love Rosie!" someone yelled.

I clutched the mic, feeling like a fool. "You all knew?!"

Several heads bobbed in the crowd.

Frankie hollered, "Carson, no one hates you! It was all in your head!"

"Yeah, let that shit go!" Kaylee added.

The crowd rippled again with affirmative nods.

Otto hollered once more, "Thought you were just heartbroken, kid. We're all rooting for you!"

The town erupted in clapping, chanting, "Carson! Carson!"

"Okay...well...cool. Don't mention this ever again!" I handed the mic back, and then, on second thought, I brought it back to my mouth. "Rosie, I love you, and I'm sorry you have to deal with this crazy ass town." That made everyone chuckle and clap even harder.

She tried to yell over the applause, but Kaylee and Azalea tackled her to see her engagement ring before she could.

Rolling with how well tonight went, I carried out my plan. I texted the group chat, then waded through the crowd towards my woman. For the next hour, I was pitched from conversation to conversation, all about how happy people were for me and how much they loved Rosie. I got numerous slaps on the back and well wishes. I wasn't used to this much human interaction. I was high on happiness, filled up, in a good way.

"Sorry," I said bashfully, finally reaching Rosie.

"Don't be," she giggled, tilting her chin for a kiss.

I held her to me protectively in the crowd, whispering in her ear, "I need you to follow me."

Chapter Forty-Two



“Surprise!” the crew yelled. My jaw dropped, looking at Harley and Kaylee, Frankie and Meg, Maxine and Markos, Noah, Azalea, and Dane.

“What is this?” I asked, looking around at my empty loft. I eyed the black upholstered chair before people parted, revealing a mural on the brick wall opposite the vintage one for the store. The discolored brick now had a phoenix from floor to ceiling. The flames of its tail swooped to cradle a red rose, along with a painted scroll that read *Pricked by a Rose Ink*.

“Stop!” I said, looking at Carson before I crumbled into sobs. “Are you for real?”

He wrapped me in his arms, resting his chin on my head. “Yes, I’m for real. It would be best if you tattooed again. Even if it’s just for fun.”

I sniffled, pulling up from his chest to look at the mural again. Kaylee walked closer, upturning the vase she made when apologizing to me for the whole Tyler shitshow. It survived the fire, and the quote on the bottom still clearly read, *the only prick you should tolerate is a thorn from a rose*. She held it between us, both our eyes cast downwards.

“This quote popped into my head when I made this for you. Now I know why. I had no clue you were a tattoo artist, and your studio in Boston was named *Pricked by a Rose*.” She blinked slowly, pleased with the synchronicity.

I sniffled, “Yeah, you’re psychic as fuck.”

Everyone chuckled at that as we smiled at each other, eyes glistening. We were meant to be friends; we still had so much love, even after all this turmoil. Without saying a word, she smiled deeper, affirming the sentiment.

She continued, “My friend Maisie did some sleuthing for me and found your portfolio and several magazine articles you were in. Your work is incredible. We all agree. You need to share your gift with the world again.”

“My buddy back in Boston recommended this chair and all this,” Dane gestured to the supplies they had set up.

“Thank you, Dane,” I dabbed at my eyes. “It’s perfect.” I hadn’t talked to him since the engagement party, but I heard he drove the getaway car when I collapsed. I was glad no apology was necessary and that we moved on.

Carson gestured to the room, “Everything has been arriving at the store for weeks. Before you got home from the hospital, I put everything into place, like moving you out and painting the mural when possible. I even broke down and asked for help.” That last part made his family snicker.

Markos added, “If he’s going to have a work-life balance, he needs to hire someone to help, even if it’s not Harley. Hold him to it.”

Harley nodded, “Break tradition but keep the store going. It’s what’s best.”

Maxine walked closer, grabbing my hands and glancing at my engagement ring. “I am so glad you’re here with us. I couldn’t be happier.” She pulled me in for a quick hug.

Frankie cleared her throat, “This place is yours. We will make it all official. I want you to have the space.”

“Thank you, but that’s too generous.”

“We have one condition!” Meg interjected, her eyebrows shooting up over her glasses.

Frankie bobbed her head in agreement, “That’s right. Please don’t keep big secrets from us. We’re your family now,

and we all love you. Oh, and we want free tattoos for life.” Her face lifted in a mischievous smile.

“Deal! Thank you.” I looked around at everyone. “For everything. I never had a big family, so this feels nice. Even if I’m scared shitless to start tattooing again.”

I walked around, checking out the rest of the loft while they chattered. They hung some posters of full-back pieces I had done for clients. They must’ve found them when they moved my stuff. I wasn’t mad. If anything, I felt cherished.

Dane, Azalea, and Noah came over to hug me, excusing themselves to go back to the festival. Meg and Frankie shortly after.

Carson chatted up Harley, Maxine, and Kaylee as Markos came and stood by me in front of the mural. He was calm and kind, like his sons. “You know, Rosie, I knew the second I saw you that you were the woman for Carson.”

I turned my head to catch a sheepish grin spread on his face. “You did?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to impose, but I could see it. Sometimes, I have a sense of things, a knowing. You’re, hmmm,” he pursed his lips in consideration, “you’re a breath of fresh air in his life and even in this building, this town. We needed you, and I’m glad you’re staying.” He pulled me in for a side hug.

“Thank you, me too.”

Everyone else cleared out, leaving Carson and me alone. He cleared his throat. “I have a tattoo I’d like.”

I was a little shocked. He never acted interested in body art. “What did you have in mind?”

He grabbed my hand, brushing a thumb and a kiss across the rune on my ring finger. “Can we match?”

“They say matching tattoos are a curse to a relationship,” I jested.

He cracked a smile, rolling his eyes. “Been there. Done that.”

I yanked him to the chair, setting to work. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait until after the wedding? I might be out of practice.”

“Now is good. As we’ve always said, everything with us feels good, just out of order.”

He wiggled his eyebrows as I snapped on my gloves. “Kinda like how the town had zero clue we were close until you were hauling my bloody body out of Silver Springs.”

“Or how we thought we were being sneaky, but some people knew,” he said, shaking his head. He looked lighter already. More youthful and upbeat. I loved seeing the weight lifted.

“Note to self; we suck at being subtle. It will make for one hell of a story someday,” I said, starting up the tattoo gun.

“Yep, I love our story.”



After finishing his tattoo, we went home to our cabin to celebrate, forgoing the rest of the harvest festival. Even if we were public, Carson was private, and I adored that about him.

As I left the bathroom, I noticed he lit candles and put extra cozy blankets on the bed. He lay there, his glorious naked body sprawled out, waiting for me, his faint abs moving with his breath. He put his arms behind his head as I crawled into the furs with a greedy giggle.

“Are you ready for the real afterparty?” he asked smugly.

All I could do was glide my body up his and straddle him. My eyes flashed to the stained-glass roses above our bed, indicating I was always supposed to be here. Without even knowing me, he held a space for me in the past. He created

this life to share with someone, and if the cost was a silly curse or misunderstood reputation, it was well worth the fight. His love was worth it all.

“Yes, I am ready.”

He responded by playfully rolling us, pressing me on my back. He settled his hips between my legs, looking like a fucking wild god while he braced himself to lean down to kiss me, nuzzling my neck before he whispered, “But how will I know if you still like me now that everyone knows? Now that I’m not your dirty little secret with an even dirtier mouth.”

I shoved his chest before stroking his length. “Stop being such a moody booty and get this cock in me.” I giggled, reaching down to wet my fingers in my pussy before bringing them back up to stroke him. There was a possessive flash in his eyes before he covered me—every kiss, every thrust, every whisper pulling me back into him.

We were careful since I wasn’t on birth control. Still, it felt amazing to make love to Carson with no worries, nothing looming over us.

It was just him and I, no longer hiding. And I felt so seen.

Chapter Forty-Three



I walked into Silver Springs with a tightness in my chest. I hadn't been there since the incident, but I knew I needed to get back. It was busy, but the girls still went out of their way to hug me when they saw me. It was nice to help some of my favorite customers like Otto, and I had several people already asking for tattoos.

After closing, I asked Kaylee to stay to chat. She looked around the shop with a smile. "Hey, remember when some asshole cheated on us, so we moved here and fell in love. And now we have a super successful business and two hot pieces of ass?"

"Cute Greek boys!" I added with a gleeful nod.

In unison, we parroted, "The Greek makes ya weak!" It was our new inside joke.

Sobering, I said, "I wanted to thank you, Kaylee."

She looked at me with a shine in her eyes. "For what?"

"For being a girl's girl and befriending me after the affair when you didn't have to. For helping me settle here and not hating me for keeping things between Carson and me private."

"I wasn't the greatest friend to you, though, Ro. I was so wrapped up in love and my new life here."

"You always tried to include me, and I had my guard up."

She scrunched her nose at my truth. “I hope the worst of it is behind us. I get the feeling it is.”

“From a scorned sisterhood to sisters-in-law,” I smiled.

“I did not have that on my bingo card, but I like it.” She squinted at me in consideration. “Rosie Kouris. Has a nice ring to it.”

“Kaylee Kouris? That’s adorable.”

“I don’t know if I should hyphenate to Waters-Kouris. That always seems like a pain in the ass, but all of this feels very anti-feminist.”

“Hey now, don’t get critical of your role in life. We’re helping out the community, and we own a business. We can make whatever choices we want and have our own lives. Plus, our current last names are from other men, so what difference does it make?”

She tilted her head in consideration. “True.”

“Speaking of men and the troubles that go along with them,” I grabbed her hand and led her back to the bathrooms, where the sun filtered through the back door, lighting up the hallway. “Are you ready to take him down?” I asked, gesturing to Tyler’s photo.

It was the size of a poster, now surrounded by a wall of other douchey selfies of other cheaters. Kaylee let out a deep sigh. “Yeah, I guess we better. I rarely even think of him. We can’t keep playing the scorned card if we’re both healed and happily in love.”

“But we can still hold space for other women.” I dodged into the office, returning with a frame. “I was thinking we could go back to basics.”

Kaylee flipped over the frame. “Ohmagawsh, Rosie! I’m gonna start ugly crying!”

The framed picture was of a photograph Azalea snapped for us this summer. We were on the dock at Kaylee’s cabin, standing hip to hip, our arms around each other’s waist as we shared a laugh. We hung it on the blank wall across from the

shrine and tore down Tyler, clearing more room for other cheaters.

We burned the Tyler poster in the back parking lot in a fire-safe container we had for other ceremonies. In the dusky light, the flames eating at the photo's edges signaled the end of an era. Too many mixed emotions created a knot in my throat, and Kaylee was unusually quiet.

Looking up from the ashes, I tried to swallow the knot. "I'm glad we did this."

She glanced up at the crescent moon. "I'm glad, too."

We met the guys across the street for a date. Kaylee and I walked in a row between them, their arms around us. The men laughed about something, throwing their heads back in boyish laughter. I looked to my left, only to see Viviane in the window of her bookstore. A mischievous smile carved her face, deepening when she met my gaze. I gave her a subtle nod that she returned while holding up her mug as if in a silent toast before turning away from the window.

Sitting in the booth at Yeti's, several people turned their heads to see all four of us together. Smiles and murmurs flitted amongst the townies, and it was back to normal. Our first double date went off without a hitch. Kaylee and Harley were funny, and the men reminiscing was entertaining. More than anything, I liked my mountain man's arm around me. And how his eyes swept over my face before crinkling with a knowing smile.

This was how life was supposed to be. This was what I wanted all along.

Chapter Forty-Four



Rosie recovered by late winter and was feeling great. Her tattooing business was steadily gaining traction, and she finally agreed to let me put an old-fashioned wooden sign on the corner of the building with an arrow to the back indicating her entrance. I shut my office door more often, and with additional help at the store, I wasn't always there. My dad was right. It was a two-person job. With the assistance, I increased my profits and was less stressed, even though I didn't want to admit it.

Rosie and I married the following April, a couple of weeks before Kaylee and Harley did in May. They were having a small ceremony, but more people were flying in from out of town, whereas ours was intimate, with only the essential people in a clearing of the woods by our cabin.

Rosie was a breathtaking bride. She wore a stunning black dress that looked straight out of some faerie tale with a flower crown of real black roses. With her long fiery hair, it was breathtaking and unique. I wore all black, choosing a vest instead of a suit jacket. Rosie said I looked like a lumbersnack, whatever that meant.

Her mom walked her down the aisle. Kiszka was our ring bearer, and Viv officiated the handfasting. Harley and Bear were my groomsmen. Kaylee and Frankie were bridesmaids. My mom blubbered the whole time. We took the small party back to our cabin, where we had sushi catered. Our first dance was to "You're The One" by Greta Van Fleet. We swayed

together in drunken happiness, unable to stop staring at each other.

I surprised her with a trip to Hawaii for our honeymoon. She ugly cried, as Kaylee would say. On the first night in Maui, while watching the sunset together on the beach, she looked up at me and asked, ‘Do you want to go make a baby now?’

All I could do was chuckle and carry her back to our bed. I loved how she smiled while straddling me as I pushed her white sundress off her. How she giggled when I untied her bikini with my teeth. And when my cock slipped into her heat, her eyes fluttered before she braced herself to roll against me.

The summer sprawled out in a hazy daze, and even though she wasn’t visibly showing, I could tell her soft little body grew with our child. We spent nights swinging in the hammock together, watching the sunset. Kiszka was extra protective of her, already practicing his howling lullabies. Finally, I had a little pack and family to call my own.

Everything we went through was worth it.

Our rocky start and the early days of flirting in secret.

The time apart, pretending we were enemies.

The moonlit confessions in our lake, then the chase through the wild forest on Litha.

The curse and the feverburn.

Everything brought me to her. She heard me when no one else was trying to listen. She fought for me when I didn’t even know I needed help. She was my little firecracker. My favorite bog witch. And most importantly, my biggest blessing.

Chapter Forty-Five



I watched the sunset on the lake, remembering how I had collapsed at work a year ago with no one knowing how much I loved Carson. Now, I was happily married and pregnant. Most of all, I was thriving. I found my family, and my creativity was blossoming slowly and earnestly. I felt strong like I had a purpose. I was in charge of my life and working on letting people help me to make it easier. And I created a safe space for other women.

I had learned so much here in Pine Bluff. I first moved here for a fresh start, to find the courage to forge my path after so much was taken from me. I am proud that even in my darkest days, I had enough fight in me to want more for myself. And now that I have found it, I am so glad I fought for it.

Carson fought for me, too. He saw me in a way no one else did. Day by day, our bond grew deeper and more intimate. Even now, I felt him before I heard him. I leaned against my favorite pine tree on our property. The waves from the lake were steady, and I could catch his footsteps between each lap. Saying nothing, he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, resting his hands on my tiny bump. His beard bristled my temple as he planted a kiss.

“Hey baby,” I said, already feeling sleepy knowing I was safe in his arms.

“How are you feeling, my love?”

“My back hurts a little. Other than that, I’m okay. How about you?”

“I’m good. Glad to be home.” I turned my head for a kiss, loving how he rubbed my belly. Since finding out I was pregnant, he tackled several projects in preparation, like making a wooden crib for the baby.

“You know how I’ve been in cahoots with Dr. MacGregor?” I asked.

“Yeah, how you’re refusing some people caffeine if he tells you they shouldn’t drink it?”

“Exactly. It finally paid off. I was worried about the baby, so I visited his office today to ease my concerns. They said it was right on the border if they could do an ultrasound. I think he felt guilty because he did one anyway.” I reached inside the pocket of my Bog Witch sweater and craned my neck to look up at my husband. “Did I ever tell you twins run in my family?”

Excitement, adoration, and shock stamped his features. His eyes glistened as he swallowed hard. “No. Are we...”

I held up the sonogram for both of our brimming eyes to see.

“You’ll have to change your sign back to Kouris & Sons Hardware.”

Reviews are immensely helpful to me as an indie author. Please consider leaving a review to help this book find other readers, such as yourself.

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Our time in Pine Bluff is not over. Keep an eye out for the third book in the series, coming 2024.

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About the Author

Maggie Maren is a lifelong weirdo and misunderstood mystic. Combining her deep love for nature and romance, she enjoys playing mountain man matchmaker. Her stories transport readers to cozy cabins and the great outdoors, where kooky characters find love.

While earning her English literature degree, she worked as a bookseller, because clearly temperance isn't her strong suit. Her curious ways have led her to some interesting forays as a librarian, professional tarot reader, crystal merchant, and some dark ages in corporate America.

When she isn't scowling at her laptop writing, she is usually reading. If she isn't reading, she is either dancing, sipping iced coffee, yipping at the moon, adventuring with her own mountain man, or ugly crying over a majestic sunset. She loves to hear from her readers, preferably in the form of a haiku, but hey no pressure.

To stay connected, visit her at MaggieMaren.com