



GRIMM COUNTY

Grumpy

A GRIMM COUNTY LAWMEN NOVEL

CORADAY

Grimm County Grump

**A Grumpy Sunshine Small Town
Romance**

Cora Day

Shoe Heel Creek Publishing

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CONTENT WARNING: This work includes themes which may upset some readers such as a history of parental abuse, a stalker/psycho ex, domestic violence, death of a parent (past), kidnapping, and a sad goodbye to an older farm animal. This book does contain open door intimacy and salty language.

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Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Epilogue

End Credits

About the Author

Prologue

P^{ast} A rustling in the nearby leaves caused ten-year-old Nicky to look up from his project. Setting down his paintbrush, he closed the lids to his paints so nothing would spill if the wind picked up again. He wandered over to where he had heard the noise under the oak tree. After a moment's pause, he heard the rustling again. Squatting down, he brushed the leaves away, uncovering a bird with a missing leg.

Probably from Mrs. Fletcher's nasty cat.

Nicky picked up the bird and whispered, "Don't worry, little guy. I'll take care of you."

At just that moment, the front door of his house burst open, and his father stumbled down the porch stairs.

"Nicky!" he shouted. "Where are you, you worthless little shit?"

Nicky's heart sped up, and he hid the bird behind his back. "Over here! I was just—"

“Enough! When I ask you a question, I need one word. God, I swear you are messed up in the head. I told your mother something was wrong with you.” His father staggered over the walkway as he headed toward the car, coming perilously close to Nicky’s painting.

Nicky froze, torn between safeguarding the painting he had worked on the entire morning and the broken bird behind him. He closed his eyes to think, but a loud crash told him a decision was no longer needed.

Nicky opened his eyes. The canvas was on the ground, and his water jar was broken. Fortunately, his paints were closed up tight, but the dirty water spilled all over his canvas meant his work was ruined. His eyes welled with tears as his mother walked outside.

She looked over at her husband and the canvas on the ground, then at her son. Her eyes softened as understanding bloomed across her face, and she mouthed, “*I’m sorry,*” to her little boy. “Come on, Rich, let’s get in the car and leave this to Nicky.”

Nicky knew his mom wasn’t trying to make him do more work. She was trying to protect him from his father. They’d been through this before. She would distract his dad with a trip to the store that sold his favorite drinks, and all would be forgotten by the time they returned. If only Nicky could remember the one-word rule. Then his dad wouldn’t get so angry, and they wouldn’t have to drive away.

He watched as his parents' car backed out of the driveway and turned up the street. When he was sure they were gone, he raced into the house to find a shoe box. The bird needed a nice home, somewhere it could be safe while recovering. After filling the box with grass and a few sticks, he set out to collect some worms.

Once the box looked like a proper home, he settled the bird inside and cleaned up the mess his father had made. The glass fragments from the jar were sharp and could hurt someone if left in the yard. Nicky couldn't let that happen. After ensuring all the shards were safely in the trash can, he turned his attention to the ruined painting. The canvas was still in good shape, no rips or tears that he could see. Once it dried, he could paint over it.

Nicky looked down at his Spiderman watch. It had been over an hour. Usually, his parents weren't gone longer than twenty minutes. He was glad for it, though, since that gave him more time to spend with Birdie.

"What's it like to fly, Birdie? I wish I had wings so I could fly to the tops of the trees. Do you ever wish you had arms?" Nicky sat down in the patchy grass next to Birdie's box. He leaned back and looked up at the clouds, trying to guess the shapes.

"Do you have a favorite food? Is it worms? Mine is pizza. I can let you try it sometime. I'm sure it's better than worms." He placed a hand over his stomach, the thought of pizza reminding him it was dinner time.

“Do birds get bored? My mom says a smart person is never truly bored because they can always think of something else to do. I guess I’m not very smart. With such a small brain, you’re probably not very smart either. That’s okay. We can be bored together.” Nicky picked up a stick and doodled in the dirt.

“What’s your best friend’s name? I don’t have a best friend yet. Maybe we can be best friends with each other.” Nicky thought about his favorite TV show with the Kratt brothers. They had lots of animal friends. Maybe if he started now, he could have his own animal TV show like Martin and Chris.

After two more hours passed, Nicky wondered if something was wrong.

His eyes narrowed as he stared at Mrs. Fletcher’s house across the street. She looked after him on days when school was out and his parents had to work. Should he ask her for help? Could he leave Birdie alone for a few minutes?

Before he could make up his mind, a sheriff’s car pulled into his driveway. He waited silently on the porch while Sheriff Andrews got out of his car. He knew the sheriff from the other times he’d visited their house when the neighbors had called about his parents’ arguments.

Another vehicle pulled in behind the sheriff’s. It was a huge pickup truck with mud on the sides. It looked like whoever drove that truck used it for the things a truck was meant for, not to look pretty around town and haul groceries.

An older couple with gray hair stepped out of the truck and waited.

Sheriff Andrews walked up to Nicky and crouched down to eye level. “Son, I’m sorry to tell you this, but your parents were in a car accident. They won’t be coming home.”

Nicky’s eyes widened as he looked at the sheriff. Something squeezed his heart, and he wondered if that was his mom saying goodbye.

The sheriff gestured toward the couple. “These are your grandparents, your mom’s mom and dad. They are so sad about their daughter, but they’re eager to meet with you. You’ll be living with them now, on their farm.”

Nicky looked over at the shoebox. “Only if I can bring Birdie.”

Chapter 1

P^{resent} Rose grabbed her neon pink, heavy-duty gloves and donned her bedazzled safety goggles, then added her purple pleather apron for good measure. With precision that would make a heart surgeon jealous, she measured out the correct portion of lye. Working with lye could get dangerous if you weren't paying attention, and the last thing Rose wanted was to give herself a chemical burn while making soap. Somehow, she didn't think that would be a good image for her brand.

With the lye measured, she added it to the frozen goat milk and stirred. The temperature of the lye would escalate quickly. If she wanted to avoid curdled goat milk, an ice bath and frozen milk was key. But it wasn't an instant process, so she had some time to kill while she stirred.

Rose looked up at the television. A new episode of *Grimm County Lawmen* was starting. When her dad had told her he was catering for their production crew, she'd never heard of the reality TV series. She'd immediately streamed an episode,

and that had been all it took to get hooked. The show centered around a small-town sheriff's office in Grimm County, North Carolina. As entertaining as it was to watch people get arrested, the real draw was the four extremely attractive deputies. One guy was so good-looking that she swore he was really an underwear model.

Seeing the show reminded Rose that she hadn't spoken to her dad in a few days.

"Alexa, call my dad," she told her smart speaker. After a few rings, she heard her father pick up. "Papa, how are you?"

"Rose! *Ma chouchoute!* It has been too long," her father breathlessly answered, his French accent light. "I cannot talk long. I am on set, delivering to the heathens. Though, I do not know why. They never appreciate the masterpieces I create."

Rose smiled as she thought of her slight father in his classic French chef uniform delivering trays of food to the rough and tough deputies.

"Because, Papa, this is your dream. The restaurant you have talked about since I was a little girl is finally open, and that TV show places a huge order twice a week." Rose continued to stir while looking over at the coconut oil on the double boiler. With her free hand, she lifted the bowl of now liquid oil and set it to the side to cool. "Once people get used to your restaurant and start coming in regularly, you can stop catering for the crew. Until then, you've got to suck it up."

"Oh, Rose! Do not let such ugly words come from your mouth. But you are right. I can endure this momentary blip in

my ... Oh! Hold on one moment.”

Rose heard a muffled noise, and then her father’s voice arguing with someone.

“A ‘thank you’ would be nice!”

She sent up a silent prayer for whoever was on the receiving end of her dad’s latest rant. Louis Lyon walked a fine line between passionate chef and overbearing zealot when it came to his food.

“Rose,” he returned to the call. “Have you thought any more about joining me down here? With your mother gone, it is better that we stick together, no? You will love the weather here, and the people are so charming.”

Rose laughed. Her goat milk now melted, she pulled it from the ice bath. “Are you sure about that? They don’t sound too charming from this end.” There was a long pause. At first, she thought they’d been disconnected, but then she heard her father’s slow, deep breaths.

Uh oh. She knew what that meant ...

“You have the manners of a pig! You do not deserve my food!” her father’s voice roared across the phone.

“Papa, who are you yelling at? He sounds awful.”

“*Oui, Rose. C’est une bete!*” Once her dad started speaking full sentences in French, she knew she had to act quickly to change the subject. She was not fluent enough to follow along when his rants switched over. And if he was calling someone a beast, he was gearing up for a big one.

“So, tell me more about the weather. It’s thirty-six degrees up here, with another wintry mix on the way. What’s it like in North Carolina?”

If she was to judge by her father’s sudden bark of laughter, she could assume the topic was successfully changed.

She added olive oil to the coconut oil, then set the digital thermometer in the mixture. After confirming the oils and the lye mixture were both at the correct temperatures, she poured them together. She told Alexa to increase the volume of her call and switched on the immersion blender.

“Oh, Rose, you poor thing. It is a nice sixty-five, and we have had no snow at all this winter. Next month, it will be in the seventies.”

“That sounds like heaven.” She looked outside at the snow still on the ground. Most days, she didn’t bother to walk to the mailbox because it was so cold. She was lucky that her work could be done from home. She only had to leave a few times a week to get supplies and mail out her orders.

“How are things with the ex?” Her father’s tone turned gentle. “He is leaving you alone now, yes?”

“I haven’t seen him in weeks.” Her voice faltered, and her father didn’t miss it.

“That is good, but is he leaving you alone?”

She hated to lie to her dad, but she also didn’t want to burden him with the truth—that she had ten missed calls today alone, and things inside her home had started to disappear. She

couldn't prove it had been Gavin, and the police were no help at all without something more serious for proof. As much as she would have liked police help, she hoped it never got serious enough.

“I've got to get this soap into the molds, so I'd better run. I'll call you later, okay? *Je t'aime.*”

“*Je t'aime*, Rose.”

Rose sighed as she ended the call.

Gavin was a college quarterback turned bank manager. Most women thought he was a great catch, and initially, Rose had been flattered by his attention. They'd met at an art gallery fundraiser. She was there to look at the art; he was there to look like a generous donor. After the fundraiser, he pursued her relentlessly.

It had been nice to have someone to hang out with, especially with her parents gone. They'd moved to North Carolina so her mom could get cancer treatments at Duke University Hospital. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to save her life, but her father decided he liked the North Carolina weather better and stayed there to start over.

After a while, Rose realized Gavin wasn't really interested in her. He enjoyed having someone on his arm for company functions and dinners with the Chamber of Commerce. She had been more than happy to accompany him, but he wouldn't do the same for her. He never wanted to hear about her art or soap-making. She mentioned it to his colleagues at a dinner

once, and her thigh wore a bruise for a week from where he pinched her under the table.

His marriage proposal had been the final straw. She knew they were close to the end and thought he did too. She'd thrown hints for weeks, turning down dinners and not initiating phone calls. When he dragged her to the middle of the bank lobby and proposed in front of all the customers and employees, to say she was shocked was an understatement. She probably shouldn't have rejected him so publicly, but that was his fault for proposing like that in the first place.

Gavin had taken it in stride at the time, but she now knew that was because he was in denial. Apparently, the man had never been rejected before. It only took a few weeks before strange things started happening.

Sighing again, Rose returned her focus to the soap mixture in front of her. With a few drops of color and essential oils, she was ready to pour the soap into the molds and sprinkle on the dried rose petals for her signature Rose Relief bar.

She could separate her soap-making life into BGM and AGM—before goat milk and after goat milk. That was the game changer. One of her fellow vendors at the local farmer's market had been left with one bottle of the milk at the end of the day. Eager to support another small business, she'd bought it and decided to try it in her next batch of soap.

The bars of soap she'd made with the goat milk had made her skin feel softer than it had in years. The lather had been richer with smaller, more plentiful bubbles, and she knew her

customers would love it. Combining the new goat milk recipe with her essential oils had proved to be the magic recipe that had launched her business to the next level. Rose's Soap Box had turned a profit for the first time that year, and she'd been growing ever since. She primarily sold the soap in person at farmer's markets and festivals all over Maine, but she was also generating a fair amount of business online through her website. She hoped to offer a soap making class once she found a space to host it.

As she placed her molds on the shelf to cure, she heard a knock on the door.

"Just a minute!" Her grocery delivery was due today, and for braving the cold, she always gave the driver a bar of homemade soap. "I've got a new one for you today with strawberry and ..."

Her voice trailed off as she opened the door to find no one standing there. Scanning the porch to find out what caused the knocking, she gasped.

Instead of a neat carton of groceries, the framed drawing of her mother lay in front of her door, the glass shattered. Poured over the broken image was a red and sticky liquid, which she hoped wasn't blood.

Rose had drawn the likeness of her mother before she died. The picture had been displayed next to her mom's casket at her funeral. It was also one of the items that had gone missing from her home.

Gavin knew how much that drawing meant to her. It had taken her weeks to get perfect. She'd worked on the drawing

nonstop until it was finished, refusing to leave the house or do anything else. He had gotten so angry with her when she'd canceled one of their dates to work on it. Surely, this was no coincidence.

Rose's hands shook as she watched the blood-like liquid drip through the slats on her wooden porch. Her heart sped up as a fresh wave of fear washed over her. Before now, his antics had been annoying but not scary. This was something different.

She backed into her house and locked the front door. She turned around and leaned against the wall, eyes darting around the room looking for any evidence of Gavin's presence. Her gaze fell to the television as the episode of *Grimm County Lawmen* drew to a close. The too-handsome Sheriff Christian Andrews was delivering his signature send-off.

"Criminals never win in Grimm. If you're in trouble, need help, or just looking for a safe haven, come find us here in Grimm County, North Carolina. As the top lawman, it'll be my pleasure to protect and serve you."

Could the answer be that easy?

She'd watched the show enough to know there were four very capable deputies in the Grimm County Sheriff's Office. Maybe the issue up here was that the cops were too busy to pursue a problem like hers. In a small town, she might get more help. With her father working on set, she could probably tag along with him one day and meet them. And that was *if* Gavin followed her. She knew he was upset that they weren't

together, but was he sixteen-hours-and-six-states-away angry?
Surely not.

She pulled out her phone and texted her landlord. Then, she
texted her father.

Rose: I'm coming, Papa. See you in sixty days.

Chapter 2

Nick stood with his hands on his hips, looking up at the midday sky. A woman leaned in close to his chest.

“Check one, two, check, check. Okay, everybody, mic is good. Now, Beast, please be more careful with the mic—” The woman paused as Nick lowered his gaze and gave her an icy glare. She took the hint and scampered off to wherever the rest of the annoying crew members went when they weren’t standing in his face.

Jonathan, back again as director for the third season of *Grimm County Lawmen*, called out from behind him. “Beast! Remember to explain what you’re doing as you do it. Think of the camera like a new recruit—someone with no idea what’s going on. Someone who needs to understand what you’re doing and why you’re doing it that way.”

Nick looked around for the camera. There were three. *Great*. Three cameras meant a full segment on him. If it was just one camera, then it was B-roll footage. They filmed him from a distance and didn’t expect him to say anything, which was his

preference. But when there were three cameras, he was in for one of his five contractually obligated storylines.

He ran through the math again to make sure he hadn't miscounted. He did this every time he had to film, hoping one day the math would change. Each season of *Grimm County Lawmen* contained eight episodes. There were three interwoven storylines per episode, featuring a different deputy. Eight times three was twenty-four. As sheriff, Christian was always one of the three storylines. That left ... sixteen. Al had taken six, and Nick and Hunter each had five.

He'd already tried to away one of his storylines to Al. The rookie was a former model who only joined the sheriff's office to be on the show, but the producers nixed it. As the oldest deputy at thirty-seven, Nick was a fan-favorite for the forty-five-and-above female demographic.

Maybe he could talk to Jeannie, who was still working as Al's agent. If she made enough stink demanding Al get another storyline, they might be more willing to take one of his. But that would require a longer conversation than he preferred to have.

"And we're rolling!"

Nick's jaw clenched, but at least this meant he could finally do his job. They were at Susie's Bar, where some patrons were acting drunk and disorderly during the lunch rush. He knew it must be serious because Susie kept a baseball bat behind the bar and usually handled problems on her own. When the

baseball bat wasn't enough of a deterrent, she swapped it out for a shotgun.

He opened the door and saw Susie standing on top of the bar with her shotgun. Nick cracked his knuckles and smiled. Just what he needed. Broken bottles and overturned meals littered the floor of the bar. Luckily, Susie's menu consisted mainly of fried food in plastic baskets, but still. Several customers were brawling—some locals he knew and a few tourists he didn't. He studied the scene for a few minutes before zeroing in on the three main offenders. Definitely tourists with their bleached hair, bright polo shirts, and penny loafer shoes.

The largest of the three guys pulled his fist back, getting ready to smash into one of Susie's regulars. Nick stepped into the fray and caught the guy's fist in his hand before he connected.

“Hey! What the fuck, man?” The offender pulled his arm back and shook out his hand. “That hurt, asshole!”

This caught the attention of his two pals. Full of liquid courage, they yelled obscenities and made their way toward Nick. The one in the yellow polo jumped in the air to come at him from behind, but Nick easily avoided the attack with one large step to the left. The drunk guy crashed onto a table instead as the locals cheered.

By this time, three camera operators had entered the bar and were shooting the melee from different angles.

“No fucking way!” The first guy's hand was apparently feeling better, and he walked up to Nick, ready to throw

another punch.

Nick looked at one of the cameras and shook his head, then looked back at the guy he was about to knock out. “Don’t,” he said. He might have offered a few more words of advice, but this guy wasn’t listening.

He swung his arm to Nick’s face, but before the punch could connect, Nick clocked him first, knocking him out cold with one hit.

Nick shrugged at the camera. “Warned him.”

The bar was quieter now, with one guy out cold and the other guy still on the ground, groaning and rolling back and forth on the bits of broken table. The locals were all at the bar, getting refills from Susie. They’d known as soon as Beast arrived, the brawl would be over in minutes. But there was one more troublemaker left.

Nick stilled, his blue eyes scanning every inch of the bar, searching for the last offender. His body tensed as he caught movement in the back corner. The sound of glass breaking echoed.

Here we go.

The third dimwit emerged from the corner with a broken beer bottle in hand.

Nick offered the camera a feral grin. He turned back to last guy and said, “Okay,” then gave him a chin lift. Nick squatted down and spread his arms out as the guy ran straight for him. It was almost too easy. As soon as the guy reached him, Nick

pushed up and launched the third drunk into the air with a loud roar. The drunk flew several feet before crashing into a table and chairs. The table didn't break this time, but it was covered in several orders of chili cheese fries. Somebody was going to need a new polo.

The bar regulars clapped. Nick had to admit it had been an impressive display, but the drunks made it easy.

“Free round of chili fries if we can get this place back in order in fifteen minutes!” Susie called from the bar.

The bar erupted in cheers as the customers began cleaning up.

“Susie,” Nick said to the bar owner. “Call Mateo,” and he motioned to the groaning men on the floor.

“Oh, come on, Nick, you didn't hit them that hard. Let Mateo deal with real emergencies.”

Mateo was one of the local EMTs, and while he wasn't the only one, he did seem to respond to more calls than any of the others.

Susie grabbed three pitchers and set them on the bar. She filled each one with ice water. With a wide grin, she carried the pitchers over to the drunks and dumped a pitcher over each one's head. They all had the same response, which was to sputter, jump up, and cuss.

“See? No need for Mateo.”

Nick looked at Susie and shrugged. Whatever worked.

Now that everyone was coherent, Nick arrested the three friends. They argued the entire walk to the patrol car, which was fine with Nick. The more of a scene they made, the happier the director was and the less he relied on Nick to speak.

“Nice work!” Jonathan walked up to Nick and patted his back. “The way you kept looking into the camera, Beast. I gotta say, I almost cried. You were born for this. Once we get to the station, I’ll need you to do the confessional and sign-off, and then we’re all good.

“Nope.”

“We’ve talked about this. The viewers want to hear you talk about your arrest. They want to know what goes on inside that head of yours—what you were thinking while you knocked those guys out and what you’re thinking after.”

“Nope.”

“Fuck it. Fine. But at least do that tagline. It’s season three. It’s time we give Christian a break and let someone else say it.”

“Al.”

“No, not Al. You are the chief deputy. The number-two guy. If anyone else does the tagline, it should be you.”

“Nope.”

“Well, I insist,” Jonathan stated, trying to sound authoritative, but Nick didn’t care. Nothing about the reality show mattered to Nick, other than the fact that they paid the

office of the sheriff enough money to hire more deputies, order new equipment, and open a CSI lab.

Before the show, it'd been just Christian and Nick. They'd needed more deputies to keep up with the seasonal tourist population and a crime lab to process cases faster. Christian had tried to get the money from the County government, but they just didn't have it. So Nick put up with filming as a means to an end, but he refused to do more than the bare minimum.

“Not in my contract.”

Jonathan let out a deep breath. It wasn't the first time they'd had this argument, and it always ended the same way. “You know, you really are popular with the fans. If you'd just open up a little, maybe do a segment at your house, I'm sure ...”

Nick walked away and got into his patrol car. Whatever else Jonathan had to say, Nick wasn't listening. There was no way he'd ever let them near his home. He had too much to protect.

Nick pulled into his driveway a few hours later. He traveled the half mile through the thick woods and parked in the space between his two-story farmhouse and barn. A genuine smile crossed his lips as he heard the yapping of his best buddy, Cassidy. He opened the door, and the sweet three-legged chihuahua mix jumped in his lap. She placed her two front paws on his shoulders and licked his face all over.

He laughed and carried her as he got out of the car. “Okay, sweet girl, that’s enough. Daddy’s home.” He snuggled her right back, giving her a kiss on the head. “Let’s check on the kids.”

With Cassidy safely tucked under one arm, Nick walked behind the house to a large, enclosed corral that held ten Nigerian dwarf goats. Currently, he had seven adults and three kids. Soon, there would be four kids.

Cassidy jumped out of his arms to chase after the kids. The little dog had no fear.

Nick walked over to a very pregnant Sadie. He reached down and gave her a good rub.

“How are you holding up, mama?” He rubbed her belly for a few moments until he felt the kid inside give a hefty kick. “Nice! You’ve got another healthy babe on the way. Make sure you eat and drink plenty.” Sadie blinked and nuzzled her head under Nick’s hand, demanding a scratch. “Okay, mama, whatever you want.”

Sadie should have been past the age of breeding, but you couldn’t stop nature from taking its course. He was worried for her, but she was a strong doe. He just hoped she was strong enough for this.

After changing the water in their trough and setting out fresh food, Nick had one more stop to make. “Cassidy! Time to feed the chickens.”

His three-legged helper abandoned the goats and fell in next to him as he walked to the chicken coop. Cassidy would have loved to chase the chickens too, but they were more fragile than the goats—and a lot meaner. To keep everyone safe, he scooped Cassidy up with one arm and, with the other, grabbed a handful of grain. His hens lived in a comfortable multi-level hen house, but when it was feeding time, they abandoned their nests and made their way out into the yard. A short fence kept the hens from running away too far—and usually kept Cassidy out.

He clucked to his chickens as he tossed out the grain.

“Don’t be greedy, Meg! You know you have to share. Beth, get on in there. Amy! Jo! That’s it. Eat up, girls!”

While the hens were busy with their dinner, Beast walked inside the coop. He set Cassidy down and retrieved the eggs. Ten hens lived in his coop, and he was often overwhelmed with eggs. Even taking a couple dozen to the Lawful Entry Bed and Breakfast each week wasn’t enough to keep up with the supply.

If he could stomach it, he might consider selling eggs at the farmer’s market, but that would require interacting with people. Which he hated. And then everyone would know about his farm, and that was one of his closely guarded secrets. Most of the locals knew, of course, because they’d known his grandparents. But the new folks didn’t, and the female superfans, aka Grimbos, and the other tourists definitely didn’t.

The farm was the first place he'd been allowed to be himself. His grandparents had encouraged his gentle side, unlike his father who had made fun of him at every turn. They hadn't found his concern for animals to be a show of weakness, but rather valued that trait in him and put it to good use. But the rejection of his father never quite left him, and because of that, Nick kept this part of himself hidden. If word got out about the farm, the tourists would show up, and it would end up on those stupid websites that Al and Jeannie paid so much attention to. He was fine if the world thought he was a grumpy bastard because they also thought he was strong and fierce. If they knew he spent his evenings cuddling a three-legged chihuahua, he'd become a laughingstock.

With his basket of eggs filled, he called out to Cassidy and made his way to the house. There was leftover soup he could reheat for dinner. He wasn't exactly lonely, not when surrounded by so many animals, but he did occasionally wonder if maybe his grandma had been right when she said everyone needed someone.

Maybe it was time.

As he reached the front of the house, he caught his reflection in the storm door. With his six-foot-five frame, two-hundred-and-eighty-pound body, and thick beard, he looked every bit of his nickname. Combined with his grumpy personality, he wondered if there was a woman out there who could learn to love this beast.

Chapter 3

Two months later

Rose stepped back to admire her set up. This was her first time selling at the Grimm County Sunset Market, and she needed everything to be perfect. Her white canopy served two purposes: to protect her precious soap from the scorching sun and to keep her from getting a sunburn. The Rose's Soap Box sign hung in the back. Rose loved the logo she'd designed. How could she not? It had a baby goat playing with bubbles.

A table was set up on each side of the tent. Experience had taught her that people liked to pick up and smell each bar of soap, and that meant her customers spent a lot of time under her tent. With the right layout, she could provide enough space for everyone to have room to linger and sniff at their leisure.

The aromatherapy soaps were on the right. These soaps included essential oils for specific effects, like eucalyptus for a cold or lemon and bergamot for an energy boost. The soaps on the left were more fun. Like the Mocha Dream bar that smelled like chocolate and contained coffee grounds for

exfoliation. Or the Lemon Poppyseed Muffin bar that smelled like lemons and had poppy seeds.

“Girl, I’m glad that mocha soap is not next to my tent because I would be licking that bar by the end of the day.”

Rose hit the jackpot with her neighbor vendor. Jen made jewelry out of art. Like, she literally painted canvases, cut them down, and made earrings out of them. Rose had already bought three pairs and wouldn’t be able to leave without a few more. She had her eye on another pair, where Jen had painted waves on wooden guitar pics. It only made sense for Rose to have some ocean-themed jewelry since she now lived at the beach. As much as she hoped to be placed next to Jen at each of the weekly markets, it would be hard to turn a profit next to so much temptation.

“It’s only fair since I’ll be covered in your jewelry within the next hour.” Rose laughed. “What can I expect from the crowd today? You seem to know your way around here.”

“Oh, yeah. I rotate between a few markets across the state, but I try to set up here at least once a month. This market pulls in a lot of tourists from across the country because of the reality show. If you sell online, this is a great one to expand your customer base.”

Jen looked up, distracted by something at the other end of the field. She sighed and shook her head. “And the eye candy isn’t bad, either.”

Rose followed Jen’s gaze and recognized one of the deputies from *Grimm County Lawmen*. He was the size of an NFL

linebacker, which meant he must be Beast. “Are they filming today?” she asked her new friend.

“Nah, I don’t see any of the five million crew members.” Jen looked around the field. “A deputy usually walks around for security. Every once in a while, you’ll get a tourist who goes for the five-finger discount. Having a deputy helps keep that to a minimum. And they make sure Mr. Bill keeps his clothes on.”

Rose blinked. “Who’s Mr. Bill?”

“You’ve seen the show, right?”

“About half of the episodes, I think.”

“Have you seen the ones with Naked Old Guy?”

“No, and I’m not sure that is a bad thing.”

Jen laughed. “Mr. Bill makes it into one episode per season. His daughter runs Susie’s Bar. Occasionally, he comes here to shop. Usually with clothes on, but sometimes not.”

Rose laughed and shook her head. “Well, if Mr. Bill comes today, I’m sure he’ll be fully clothed with that deputy here. Geez, I thought Beast looked big on TV, but in real life, he is enormous. I can’t imagine anyone would want to go up against him.”

And gorgeous. He had dark brown hair and a thick, trim beard with a touch of gray creeping in. But it was his eyes that really sucked her in—bright blue like the sky on a cloudless day.

“Girl, you got that right. All four of the deputies are solid and would die to protect the town, but that guy?” She nodded in his direction. “Let’s just say there’s a reason they call him Beast.”

At that point, the attendees began pouring in, and the ladies were too busy to chat. Rose watched Beast walk past her booth a few times as he made his rounds between the rows of vendors. It didn’t matter how thick the crowd was—they always parted when he came through. Whether it was from respect, or what she suspected was fear, it was clear that Beast was not a man to be messed with.

Hardly anyone spoke to him, and if they did, she never heard him speak back. He was intimidating, scary, and didn’t try to make friends with anyone. And that was exactly the type of lawman Rose wanted on her side. If Gavin ever made his way down here, he’d be scared shitless of this guy. And even better, there was no way Gavin could charm this deputy to his side.

As the market neared closing, the crowd thinned out. Rose decided it was time to make her move. She grabbed a bar of her Rose Relief Soap. It was shaped in an oval with the impression of a long stem rose on the top. The rose and geranium oil were known to have a calming effect on those who used them. Such a quiet man might be a little wound up after a day spent around so many people. She needed an excuse to get on his radar, and really, who didn’t like free soap?

As he drew near, she knew her time had come. She called out to Jen to watch her booth. After following his movements for the last four hours, she should have realized the flaw in her plan much sooner. He was so used to people moving out of his way that he didn't slow down when she marched in his direction. And he certainly didn't stop when she stood directly in front of him. What finally made him stop was the woman sprawled on the ground in front of him, heaving as if she'd been hit by a truck.

Nick glanced at his watch and relaxed his shoulders. *Almost finished.* Festival duty tended to be a bore. He walked laps around the festival, keeping an eye out for shoplifters, troublemakers, and the occasional naked old guy. Today's festival had been fairly quiet. A couple of teenagers acting on a dare almost nicked a seashell sculpture, but all it took was a stern look to make them reconsider.

Nick took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. The festival closed at one o'clock. By that time of day, it was too hot and everyone would rather be at the beach. Not Nick, though. He'd rather be on his farm. With Sadie's delivery near, he got twitchy when he was away too long.

Fortunately, he'd be off duty as soon as the festival ended. He would be glad to finish dealing with people for the day. Not that he actually spoke to any of the people he saw. The crowd parted for him like Moses parting the Red Sea, but that worked for him. The less talking, the better.

The crowd was lighter at this time, everyone knowing the festival was about to close. Out of the periphery of his vision he noticed someone closing in, but he didn't slow down. They would move. They always did. No one wanted to chance an encounter with Beast.

Nick looked down at his watch again, watching the seconds tick by, when something rammed into his chest.

Nick took a few steps back and shook his head in surprise. Splayed on the ground in front of him was a woman. A woman who had run smack into him. Nick rubbed his beard with his hand as he looked down at her. She was sitting on the ground with her legs open and knees bent. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth dropped open in an “O” as she looked up at him, her brown ponytail still swinging from the momentum of falling.

She was wearing a tight tank top that said, “Got Goats?” directly over her ample breasts. For the first time, he wanted to tell a stranger about his farm. Maybe she wanted to come over and pet his goats, and after that, she could pet his ... Nick shook his head. The woman was stunning. And still on the ground, knocked down by his big stupid self.

Coming out of his stupor, he lowered his hand to help her stand up. She was tall, probably five foot seven, but still shorter than his six foot five. Her eyes were green, and he found himself momentarily distracted from her tits as he stared into their depths.

“You okay?” he huffed.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Not the first time I’ve fallen on my butt in front of a crowd,” she said with a smile, getting back on her feet. She dusted herself off with her hands. She craned her neck as she tried to look down behind her. “Did I miss anything?” she asked, turning around.

Since she asked so nicely, Nick took a moment to study her ass in her denim cut-offs.

“You look good,” he answered. And she did. Very good.

She spun back around to face him. “I’m Rose,” she said, introducing herself.

Nick looked at her outstretched hand. It had been a long time since anyone had approached him like this. Most people avoided him like the plague, which was his preference.

He clasped his large hand around her smaller one and shook, feeling a shock of electricity shoot through his skin.

What the fuck was that?

He grunted.

She looked up at him expectantly, but when he didn’t say anything, she continued, “It’s nice to meet you. I’ve been watching you all day.” Nick raised an eyebrow. “Not in a creepy way! I’m a vendor. That’s my booth over there.” She pointed to a booth in the next row with a giant sign that read *Rose’s Soap Box*. “I’ve seen you walk past a bunch of times. It’s nice to have a deputy here, just in case. Anyway, I wanted to say thanks and give you this.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small object.

“Soap?” Nick’s eyes furrowed. Did he smell? Was she trying to tell him something?

“Well, it’s not just any soap. That’s my Rose Relief bar, infused with rose essence and geranium oil to relax your mind and body. And it’s made with goat milk, so it’s extra bubbly

and great for your skin. I thought it might be nice for you after spending all morning here.”

Nick blinked, looking left and right. Was this a prank? Maybe someone had dared her to approach him, but he didn't see anyone giggling in the shadows. He ought to refuse the gift. He may not know what the joke was, but he didn't want to be the butt of it. Curiosity got the better of him, however, and he picked up the bar from her hand, taking care not to touch her skin. His grandmother used to make soap with goat milk, but it didn't look or smell like the bar Rose had handed him. This soap actually smelled nice, like sunshine and roses. And it looked like a work of art.

He raised his gaze back to Rose and gave her a chin lift. “Thanks.” She continued to stare at him. Did she expect him to say something else? What else was there to say? “Uh, very pretty.”

Her emerald eyes lit up, and a genuine smile crossed her lips. His heart warmed. He'd done that. His words had made her happy.

“Okay, well, I guess I'll see you around, Beast.” She turned and walked away.

Nick tilted his head to watch as she sauntered back to her booth, hips swaying from side to side. The front of his pants tightened. He shook his head and looked away before he could embarrass himself. If the other deputies heard he got a hard-on at the Sunset Market, he'd never hear the end of it.

He looked down at the gift in his hand. He hadn't been lying before. For a bar of soap, it was beautiful. The red and white pattern made his fingers itch for his paints. He imagined a scene with a tall, curvy woman silhouetted by a swirling sunset. He carefully placed the soap in the side pocket of his cargo pants. With the market now closed, he could head back home and check on Sadie. And maybe take a shower with his new soap.

Chapter 4

Where was she?

Gavin tore through the empty living room, devoid of any personal effects. The couch lay on its side from where he'd kicked it. He spun the baseball bat in his hands a few times before slamming it into the underside of the couch.

Did that bitch think she could humiliate me in front of the whole town? Every man here wants to be me. And every woman wants to be with me. She's lucky I chose her. She was nothing before me. Just some weird, artsy bitch.

With the couch in pieces, he moved into the bedroom. Everything was gone except for the stripped bed and dresser. He set the baseball bat on top of the dresser and pulled out the drawers. Each one was empty.

Damn it!

He grabbed the baseball bat and slammed it into the mirror.

He looked at his face, now multiplied in the various cracks. He knew he was handsome, but looking at the dozen or so

images staring back at him, it was almost more than he could handle. His cock rose as he reached inside his pants.

She didn't want to leave me. She just got overwhelmed. Of course she did. How could she not, when in front of a god?

He continued to stroke his dick as he looked at his many faces.

In his mind, he could hear her calling his name. *“Gavin, I need you. Gavin, come and find me. Gavin, I'm waiting for you.”*

His balls tightened, and he grunted as his cum painted the dresser.

Don't worry, Rose. I'll find you.

Chapter 5

The smell of freshly baked bread greeted Rose when she opened the back door to her father's restaurant on Tuesday morning. Louis stood behind a large table slicing pieces of *cake salé*. Two trays were already covered with the savory bread. It was a great choice for the *Grimm County Lawmen* set.

With *cake salé*, the fillings were baked into the bread, making it easy to eat. The bread also held up longer than a regular sandwich, since there weren't any condiments to make it soggy. Her favorite, salmon and dill, filled one tray while another was loaded with ham and gruyere. Her father was slicing a vegetarian loaf with olives and roasted red peppers.

"They are going to love this, Papa. You've really outdone yourself."

Louis's eyes softened as he looked up from his loaf. "*Merci*, Rose. If the brute wants to eat like a caveman, I will make something even the least mannered man can eat with elegance."

Rose laughed. “Are you still having trouble with that guy?”

“*Une bete? Oui*, but I do not see him every time. Only when they are filming his scenes. Maybe he will skip lunch today.”

“Well, hopefully not since you made this just for him.”

Louis scoffed.

“Why don’t you finish slicing those last loaves, and I’ll load the platters into the van?”

“Bless you, dear. And do not forget fruit in the refrigerator.”

The atmosphere at the Grimm County Sheriff’s Office was busy. Rose followed behind her father, carrying trays of *cake salé* stacked so high she could barely see over the top. She narrowly avoided disaster by sidestepping when a guy with a boom microphone raced in front of her.

“Hey, watch it!” she called out, but he was already on the other side of the room.

“Over here, Rose!” her father called from a long table covered in a white cloth.

She set the trays down and shook out her arms, grateful for the years of yoga that toned her muscles and kept her from dropping the trays.

“You get the rest of the food while I make everything beautiful.”

Rose opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. Her father needed help—that much was obvious. The van was loaded with eight trays of bread, four bowls of mixed fruit, plus drinks, plates, and utensils. How her father managed to do this solo, she had no idea. Surely, there was someone in this town he could hire to help with catering? Or, knowing her father, he had hired someone and insulted them until they quit.

“Okay, Papa. I’ll be back.”

Twenty minutes later, Rose had unloaded everything from the van. Her father danced around the table, making sure everything looked as elegant as possible. Small flower vases were placed between each of the trays to add color to the table. Instead of pitchers of plain water, he’d added cucumbers to flavor the water and tied a ribbon around each pitcher.

She’d attended plenty of catered events with Gavin. Usually, the utensils had been tossed in a basket, and that was if they hadn’t been the prepackaged plastic kind. Her father was using real silverware wrapped in a cloth napkin. His little touches elevated the ambiance of the meal, but did the reality show crew really care? Or did they want to grab something and go? The spread looked more like something you’d see at a wedding reception, not a sheriff’s office. Hopefully, the extra effort paid off. Maybe someone would decide to try out the restaurant for a date night.

Her work finished, Rose found a chair in the corner. The crew buzzed around the room, and she soon realized that filming a reality show was pretty boring. She had hoped to

introduce herself to the remaining three deputies but had yet to see any of the stars. Mostly, folks were pointing cameras in different directions and messing with lights.

Sighing, Rose pulled out her e-reader and settled in to continue with her latest romance, *Secret Baby with My Brother's Grumpy Best Friend*. It didn't take long for her to tune out the room completely and fall back into the story of Belinda and Blake. Blake was groveling, which was her favorite part. Gavin had never learned to grovel.

The sound of a toilet flushing interrupted her thoughts. She pulled her phone from her pocket. *Speak of the devil*. She'd changed the ring and text tone for Gavin to a flushing toilet because he was a piece of shit. Her fingers traced the shape to unlock her phone. Opening the text, Rose's mouth dropped open.

A dick pic? Seriously? What a freak. She shook her head and deleted the picture. The man had nothing to be bragging about in that area. If anything, the picture was a reminder of why she was better off without him. Maybe if she shared that picture with the ladies back home, they'd stop chasing him. She giggled. Now fully pulled out of her book, she looked around the room for her father. An hour had passed, so surely they could pack up soon and head back.

She spotted him across the room, and her heart caught in her chest. His arms were flailing in the air, and he was speaking in rapid French. She quickly jumped up to intercede. He needed

this contract, and going off on the clients was a good way to lose it.

“Papa! What’s wrong?” she asked.

“It is the beast! He is what is wrong!” her father shouted.

Rose had been so focused on her father that she hadn’t paid any attention to the person he was yelling at. Turning to look at the man across from him, she wondered how she’d missed him. It was the giant mountain of a man she’d stumbled into at the Sunset Market. The man she’d hoped to befriend in the event her ex came creeping. Beast, the big hot deputy, was also the beast her father couldn’t get along with? How had she not put that together before now? But this was good—maybe she could smooth things over.

“Beast, pleasure to see you again. I didn’t realize you knew my father.”

“Father? Impossible,” Beast huffed.

Rose snorted. “Well, if my mom was still here, I’m sure she’d disagree. Why is Papa shouting?”

Beast didn’t answer. He looked at Louis, then looked down at his plate piled high with *cake salé*.

“Look at how he piles the food, Rose. *Cake salé* must be appreciated, savored. This ogre is piling them on his plate like cheap tarts. He probably will not even taste the flavors as he inhales them like a vacuum cleaner!” Her father’s voice rose louder and louder until he was screaming the last words.

“Enough!” Beast shouted back. “Jonathan!” he called out, and the man Rose had noticed bossing others around came running over. Beast pointed at Louis and repeated, “Enough.”

“Aw, come on, man, this is the classiest food in this backward town. And he has the best vegetarian options. If we get rid of him, I’ll have to live off cheese pizza and French fries.”

Beast sighed and lowered his hand.

“Wait a second ...” Jonathan grabbed Beast’s hand and looked more closely, his eyes widening in surprise.

Rose looked over at her father, who had calmed down and was now looking anywhere but at the scene in front of them. Rose’s eyes narrowed, and she noticed he held a wooden spoon in his hand.

Oh, hell.

Rose looked back at Beast’s knuckles and had a sinking feeling she knew exactly what had happened. The same thing that had happened to her about a million times growing up.

“He hit you with a wooden spoon?” Jonathan asked, looking back at Beast, then over at Louis. “Damn. I’m gonna miss this food.”

“My food must be respected. I was trying to help him remember for next time.” Louis shrugged but had the decency to look sheepish.

“Papa,” Rose warned.

“Mr. Lyon, we have a zero-tolerance policy for violence on set. I love your food, but we can’t have our employees fearing for their safety. Nick, what can we do to help you feel safe again?”

Rose rolled her eyes. Seeing as how Beast was at least a foot and a half taller and probably a hundred pounds heavier than her dad, there was no way he was afraid.

“No taping?”

Jonathan nodded. “Absolutely, Nick. You’ve had a trauma. We’ll stop for today and film somebody else.” He looked over at Louis. “And unfortunately, you can’t come back. We need this to be a safe space for our staff.”

Rose looked over at her father as his face crumbled. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Looking up and down the table at the feast he had laid out, he nodded. Rose’s heart broke. He should not have hit someone with a wooden spoon, obviously, but to lose his dream over it? She couldn’t let that happen.

“What if I do it?” she asked, a little too loudly.

Jonathon jumped at the interruption and looked at her for the first time.

“Where did you come from?”

“Maine?” she answered.

“Sweet. I heard weed is legal there.”

“Uh, yeah. Anyway, if I bring the food instead of my dad, would that work?”

Beast made a noise. A grunt if she had to name it, but it was hard to tell.

“Something you want to say?” she asked, eyebrow raised. Her dad was in the wrong, but there was no way Gigantor was afraid of him. This asshole was trying to get her dad fired.

“You want to,” Beast paused as if saying more than a few words took extra effort, “take his place?”

“Yes, I’ll bring breakfast and lunch twice a week, like he does.” She turned to look at Jonathan. “Will that work?”

“As long as your dad stays away, yeah, I think so.” He smiled. “This is great. I’m lactose intolerant, and cheese pizza was going to cause some issues.”

Rose looked at her father, whose head was still bowed in shame. She walked over to him and wrapped her arm around his shoulder. “It’s okay, Papa. I came here to help.”

“But when will you make your soap? And your drawings?”

“This is only a few days a week. Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to help.” She continued to rub her father’s shoulders, but her eyes were focused on Beast. When his eyes met hers, she gave him a stare that would melt all the glaciers in Antarctica.

Making friends with him should have be a good insurance policy in case Mr. Dick Pic came to town. Clearly, she’d

picked the wrong deputy. This guy was as much of an asshole as Gavin.

“How much longer does filming last?” she asked.

“A few more weeks,” Jonathan answered.

“Thank God.” She glared at Beast.

Fortunately, he had the good sense to look down and walk away.

Chapter 6

The following Thursday, Nick stepped into the office with much more excitement than usual, especially for a taping day. Did it have something to do with the beautiful woman he'd met at the market? Maybe. He reached into his pocket and wrapped his hand around the bar of soap, his thumb rubbing the raised rose imprint. If he were a normal person, the soap would be sitting in his shower. Or the guest bathroom, where his grandmother had kept the fancy soaps.

He couldn't remember the last time someone had given him a gift. Marina, Christian's fiancée, baked him cupcakes from time to time. Unfortunately, those were more of a punishment than a gift, bless her heart. His body shuddered as he remembered the licorice and mint flavored creation she'd left on his desk for his birthday.

Sometimes, he felt a spike of jealousy as he watched Christian and Marina together, knowing he'd never find a love like that. Thanks to her baking, he was able to push those feelings aside most of the time.

Rose's gift had been unexpected. He'd noticed her working at her booth, greeting customers with a beautiful smile. She was a ray of sunshine, too bright and cheery for a guy like him. That thick, gorgeous body though—now, that was perfect for him. Most of the Grimbos that tried to get his attention were skinny twigs, women that would break under his full strength. But Rose, she had curves. He could bend her over, grab those hips, and pound into her for days.

When she'd walked up to him—walked *into* him—it'd been like divine intervention. Then she'd spoken to him, given him a gift even, and he'd hoped she wouldn't see him as the beast everyone else did. That fantasy had lasted all of three days until a wooden spoon ruined everything.

The rap on his knuckles was nothing but an annoyance. At this point, Nick did stuff just to mess with the French chef. The days were long—especially days of filming—and sometimes, the only joy he found in a day was riling up the old man. The wooden spoon was over the top, though, and that was why he'd said, "Enough." But then Jonathan had come over, and Nick saw his chance to get out of taping. He hadn't meant to get the guy fired. And when Rose had offered to take her father's place... Well, that was another opportunity he couldn't have passed up.

Nick quickly located the catering table. It was covered in basic sandwiches, none of the fancy shit Louis usually brought, and Nick secretly enjoyed. His life had been so rough around the edges, he actually appreciated experiencing the

finer things. If only the asshole wouldn't treat him like a street rat every time.

Al had finished one sandwich and was going back for another. They must taste as good as everything else Louis brought, even if they didn't look that way.

Rose sat in the corner, eyes focused on an e-reader. *Must not be a Grimbo*. Otherwise, she'd be trying to get on camera or hanging off the deputies. Rose seemed completely unimpressed.

Like a moth to a flame, he found himself walking toward her. He'd thought of little else since Tuesday, his heart racing as he anticipated their next meeting. His mind blanked as he tried to think of something to say to her. She was wearing another tank top, this time with the words "FuhGOATaboutit" across her chest. Standing over her, he could see straight into her full cleavage. The blood rushed to his cock as he cleared his throat.

"Food looks nice," he mumbled, cringing. Probably a bad idea to mention the food. God, how he hated small talk.

She looked up from her book with a smile. The second she recognized it was him, her eyes narrowed and her mouth formed a tight thin line. She grunted and lifted her chin.

Nick smirked. That was usually his line. This was going well. They were having a conversation. Now it was his turn again. "No flowers?"

She sat up straight and set down her e-reader. She folded her arms over her chest, which only served to push her breasts up. One more inch, and they would spill out of her top.

“Are you kidding me right now?”

Uh oh. That didn't sound good.

“You harass my dad for weeks about his food and ‘fancy shit’,” she started, using air quotes, “and now you want to complain about the lack of table decorations?”

Whether it was from the shock of her unexpected hostility or the view of her incredible tits, he couldn't think of anything to say.

“Yep.”

“Asshole.” She rolled her eyes and flopped back in her seat. She turned her book back on and refused to look at him.

Nick blinked. *What the hell just happened?* No one ever dismissed him like that. Feared and avoided him, yes. But dismissed him? With attitude? Never. Especially women. He wasn't the man-whore that Al was, but when he took the time to approach a woman, he'd never been turned away.

“Beast!” Turning his head, Nick looked to see Al calling him over. “We've got a scene together after lunch. Let's talk it through.”

Now, it was Nick's turn to roll his eyes. With one final glance at Rose, he turned away and walked toward Al.

“Let’s Grimm out!” Al stared into the camera with his signature smolder.

“No,” Nick replied.

“What, you don’t like it?” Al’s head reared back, and his eyes widened.

“No.”

“Aw, come on, man, we need a snazzy tagline. Christian gets to say, ‘Pleasure and serve.’ We’ve got to have something.”

Was he whining?

“Not that. It’s stupid.” Nick looked over at Jonathan, hoping he wouldn’t agree with Al.

“Sorry, Al, I’m with Beast on this one. I like the idea of a tagline for you, something the ladies can put on t-shirts. But ‘Grimm Out’ makes no sense. Come on, let’s take twenty and brainstorm.”

“Awesome. I’ve got some other ideas! After an arrest, I can look at the camera and say, ‘You’ve just been Grimmed.’” Al’s voice trailed off as he and Jonathan walked over to the writer’s table. Al still hadn’t recovered from being passed over as a judge for some beauty pageant in Las Vegas. He was always looking for ways to get more famous. Nick couldn’t imagine wanting any more attention than he already had from the show.

Nick sat down at his desk. He leaned back in his chair and pulled out a worn copy of *Gulliver’s Travels* from his drawer. Days with taping could be long with a lot of downtime, especially if there weren’t any calls to go on. To help stay

awake, Nick kept a stack of books in his desk from the used bookstore around the corner.

He looked at the clock. It was almost time for Rose to pack up the food. Her father was usually gone by one-thirty. He had less than an hour to come up with something to say. Maybe he should ask her about the book she was reading. He could pick up a copy on his way home and he'd have something to talk with her about tomorrow. Realizing he'd been staring at the same page for five minutes, he flipped to the next page.

His eyes darted around the room to see if anyone was watching and jumped when he saw Rose standing directly in front of him. How had he not seen her?

“So, the beast can read, I see.” The venom in her voice made him wince.

“Yeah.”

“Interesting.” With that, she flipped around and walked out the main door.

Nick sighed. He reached into his pocket and rubbed his thumb along the soap as he smelled her lingering sunshine and rose scent. He should have known better. She probably only gave him the bar because it was hot and he smelled. Not because she had any kind feelings toward him. He wasn't the type of guy that inspired *kind* anything.

“Nick! Come over here. I think we've got it!” Al called from the writer's table.

Setting the book back inside his desk drawer, Nick heaved himself up and lumbered across the room.

He crossed his arms across his chest and planted his feet. With a raised eyebrow, he waited for Al to continue.

“Okay, so at the end of our episodes, instead of Christian reciting his tagline, we get to say, ‘If you need help, call on a Grimm County Lawman to get your happily ever after.’ That’s good, right?”

“For a sex hotline.” Nick shook his head. “Not saying that.”

“Fine, we’ll keep working. But I’m putting that on my social media.” Al pulled out his phone and began texting, most likely to Jeannie. Jeannie’s brother had been a juvenile delinquent with Al. Nick had caught the pair shoplifting a few times but usually let them go because they were just trying to eat.

Unfortunately, where Al had grown out of it, Jeannie’s brother had ended up doing time. Al had been looking after her, and when he’d started with the sheriff’s office, he had declared that she was his agent. Together, they were building a brand—whatever that meant—with the goal of getting them both out of this town. Nick knew they were close friends, but their recent stolen glances made him wonder if something else was going on. Although knowing those two, Jeannie would be too stubborn and Al too stupid to do anything about it.

Jonathan walked over and placed his hands on both of their shoulders. “Great work today, but Camera One is malfunctioning, so we’re going to stop taping for now.”

A weight loosened around Nick's chest.

“Don't look so happy, big guy. I've still got three more episodes with you.”

Nick groaned and grabbed his stuff from his desk. It was supposed to be his day off. The only reason he'd come in was because of the scene they needed him to shoot with Al. And maybe for a chance to see Rose.

As he prepared to leave, he glanced at the catering table one last time. Rose was sitting next to the table instead of her usual spot in the corner. She was reading an actual book instead of the e-reader. Had she walked to the bookstore to pick up *Gulliver's Travels* so they would have something to talk about, like he'd planned to do?

Heart pounding, he moved closer so that he could read the title of her book. His eyes drifted down to the cover, and he sucked in a breath. She was reading *How to Make Friends and Influence People*.

She looked up with a smirk, not the sweet smile he was expecting. She raised her eyebrow and cocked her head to the side. He blinked several times, the realization hitting him. She was taunting him. With a book.

His cock twitched at the challenge. A war of words without having to speak? The woman didn't have a clue what she'd started. After all, he was the guy that had named his chickens after the characters in *Little Women*.

Game on, Rose.

Chapter 7

Rose parked the catering van in front of the sheriff's office. With a deep sigh, she hopped out of the vehicle and carefully opened the hatch. It was a wonder the trays of pastries didn't burst out. Her father had outdone himself, overcompensating for his ridiculous behavior.

Four weeks, she reminded herself. This was only for four weeks. And it wasn't like she had much else to do. The supply of goat milk she'd brought from Maine was running out, so as much as she'd like to be home making soap, right now, she couldn't.

She stacked two trays and began the first of many trips back and forth to get breakfast set up. Setting the trays on the table, she decided this was going to take way too long. Three trays would speed things along, although four trays would be even better. She could handle four trays. They were just pastries, so they weren't that heavy.

Feeling a little like Wonder Woman, Rose grabbed four trays from the van and made her way back inside. What she hadn't

factored in was how tall a stack of four trays would be. Her vision was completely blocked, and she questioned the efficiency of her plan if she tripped and dumped the pastries on the ground.

Her pace slowed, but she made it to the building without incident. Her excitement was short-lived, however, as she realized her next problem. How was she going to open the door?

“Crap sandwich,” she said, wondering if anyone would notice if she put the trays on the ground for a quick second.

“Not eating crap sandwiches,” a deep voice rumbled behind her.

Rose squeaked and jumped, shifting the delicate balance of the trays. “Oh, no, no, no!” While her life flashed before her eyes, along with visions of her father’s wooden spoon, two hands reached out and steadied the trays.

“Let me help,” Beast offered.

“You didn’t have to scare me!”

“Didn’t mean to.” He tugged on the bottom tray, and Rose let them go.

“Well, if you want to help, fine. It’s the least you can do at this point.” She opened the door and followed him to the food table.

“Got more?” he asked after he set the trays down.

“Yeah, enough for probably five more trips. I don’t know how Papa managed this by himself.”

“Used to have a helper.”

“Yeah, he said Howie quit.”

“Wooden spoon?”

“God, I hope not. He’s going to get sued one of these days.”

“I can help,” he repeated.

Rose opened her mouth to decline but closed it again. It was his fault she was doing this on her own, so it was only right that he should help. “I would appreciate that, thanks.”

With Beast’s help, they unloaded the van in record time. Once everything was on the table, he nodded and walked off.

Rose got to work opening the trays and setting out the plates, napkins, and coffee. She also brought orange juice and tea, even though everyone just wanted the coffee.

The breakfast table was laid out beautifully—with flowers this time—and Rose finally had a chance to sit down. She pulled out her book and snickered, remembering Beast’s face when he’d seen the book. She read another chapter, then set it to the side.

Her eyes wandered around the room, ultimately landing on Beast. He was reading at his desk and eating a pastry. She squinted her eyes, but she couldn’t read the title from where she sat. Was he still reading *Gulliver’s Travels*? Or had he moved on to something else?

She'd never admit it out loud, but after she'd left Thursday, she had downloaded *Gulliver's Travels* and read it over the weekend. Telling herself that she was just doing her job and needed to pick up his now empty plate, she walked over to his desk. When she finally got close enough to read the cover, she gasped out loud.

He raised his eyes from the book and cocked his head to the side. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish. The infuriating man was reading *The Taming of the Shrew*. Was he referring to her? Was she the shrew? But she couldn't say anything because that would mean admitting she'd picked up *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to insult him. Well, fine. He could take care of his damn plate.

Nick snickered. Well, on the inside, he snickered. He enjoyed teasing Rose. He hoped this wouldn't be the last book in their argument, and based on her reaction, it wouldn't be.

The sheriff walked into the office, a huge smile on his face. Christian was always smiling these days.

“Good morning, Nick.”

Nick lifted his chin.

“Heard you got beat up by Louis and couldn't tape.”

Nick gave Christian a rare grin and nodded. He rubbed his hand over his heart and nodded. “So traumatic.”

“Look, I get why you played it up. Any excuse not to tape is a good one. But I'm telling you now, if we'd lost the food from Louis's restaurant, I would have given you a real beating.”

Nick's eyes furrowed, and he drew his head back.

“Yeah, old man. I would totally kick your ass for depriving me of French cuisine. Marina grew up eating all that fancy stuff. Louis was tutoring me so I wouldn't be such a bumpkin.”

Nick rolled his eyes. Louis probably ate that shit up. He must have loved having someone ask him about the food. Nick had

wanted to ask some things, but he never got the words out. Instead, he'd ordered a couple of French cookbooks and read through them at home. He'd tried making *croque monsieur*, a fancy version of a ham and cheese sandwich, but it didn't turn out the same.

“And heads up, Marina is coming by later with cupcakes.”

Hunter, their CSI tech, happened to be walking by at that moment.

“And what time would that be,” Hunter asked. He tried to look casual, but his quick look at Nick gave him away.

“Do you have somewhere to be, Hunter?”

“Um, probably? I'm a busy guy, you know.”

“She's coming at noon. So now you know. And now I know that you know. So, if you aren't here at noon, I'll know you left on purpose. Which is your choice, of course. No one is forcing you to be here. But just an FYI, I'm still working on next month's schedule. I haven't put in the night shifts yet.”

“Aw, come on, Christian. I have a delicate stomach.”

“What's Hunter whining about today?” Al walked up to the group, taking in a mouthful of croissant.

Nick looked at him. “Marina's bringing cupcakes.”

“Oh, how fun! I gotta say, I wasn't a huge fan of the spinach and matcha ones, but I appreciate her creativity. And the fans think she's awesome. I wouldn't be surprised if Jeannie got her a cooking show.”

Marina had arrived in town a few months ago. She'd come to hide from her mafia father and ended up engaged to the county sheriff. She was also an incredible singer. Jeannie and Al had posted a video of her first karaoke night, and it'd gone viral. Jeannie had become her agent too, and now Marina was becoming a celebrity in her own right.

Not that any of that mattered to Nick. He'd eat one of her cupcakes because she was a sweetheart, but he'd keep a napkin close in case he got the chance to spit it out.

The film crew took more B-roll footage of the four deputies hanging out in the office. Nick tried to stay back as much as possible, but apparently, the lone brooding male was in high demand. Trying to stay solo wasn't helping.

He continued reading *The Taming of the Shrew*. Maybe Shakespeare could give him some tips. Rose had left earlier to pick up the lunch order and was setting it up now. Had she visited the bookstore while she was gone? He hoped so. He'd never had an inside joke with someone before. Of course, this was more of an inside fight than a joke, but he liked having something that was just between the two of them.

"Christian!" Marina strolled through the office, setting her tray of cupcakes on one of the empty desks. Although they'd seen each other a few hours ago, Christian swept Marina into his arms as if they'd been apart for days.

A tightness formed in Nick's chest as he watched the pair. When Marina finally came up for air, she looked around the room.

"Nick!" She ran over and gave him a hug. "How's Sadie?"

"Good."

"Awesome! Let me know when I can visit, okay? I'd love to see her and the baby when it's born."

"Will do."

Marina moved on to Al and Hunter, giving out more hugs. Some people were born huggers. Nick was not one of those people. Or maybe he was, and his father stomped it out of him. Literally.

"Where's Louis? I want to see what he brought for lunch today."

Al snorted. "Well, Nick was afraid of Louis and his wooden spoon and got him fired. Luckily, his daughter Rose stepped in for him so we still get his amazing food, but without all the yelling in French."

"Nick! You didn't! That man is half your size." Her eyes traveled up and down. "Maybe a third."

Hunter laughed. "Marina, clearly you were never beaten with a wooden spoon as a kid. That shit hurts. My mom kept one in her purse and would not hesitate to use it on me or my sisters no matter where we were. She almost drew blood at the grocery store once. But that was the last time I threw an egg at my sister in the dairy case, so it is effective."

“Wow. That’s a lot to unpack.” Marina transferred her cupcakes from the tray to the food table.

“Darling,” Al began, “if you think that’s something, let me tell you about the time my mom—“

“And look at the time. We need to eat lunch and head on out,” Christian said, interrupting Al before he could get too far into his junkie mom’s antics.

The deputies and Marina joined the line at the food table. The flowers were back. Nick smiled. Were they for him? The table was filled with platters of *croque madame*, which was quickly becoming his favorite way to eat an egg.

Rose was sitting near the table, close enough to jump in if something ran out but far enough away that she wasn’t expected to serve. And she was reading. He couldn’t make out the book title, but he could tell by the color that it wasn’t the same one as before.

“Holy shit, are you smiling?” Al asked. He touched a hand to Nick’s forehead to test his temperature. “You okay, man? I thought you didn’t like this food.”

Nick shrugged. “It’s okay.”

Al furrowed his brows. “Then, what’s got you smiling?” He looked around the room until his eyes settled on Rose.

“Seriously, Nick?” Al lowered his voice to a whisper. “You got her dad fired. That’s gonna be a tough hill to climb.”

Nick shrugged again, but couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

“Son of a bitch. Never thought I’d see the day.” Al patted Nick on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll get Jeannie on it. She’s a fucking miracle worker when it comes to this shit.”

Nick opened his mouth to tell Al no, but it was too late. He’d filled up his plate and raced off to text Jeannie. Oh, well.

Al might not have any sense, but Jeannie did. Nick had known Jeannie since she was a teenager and had dreams of being a veterinarian. The cooperative extension office had sent her to his farm to get experience with animals. It hadn’t taken more than a few days of shoveling manure and cleaning pens for her to realize a career with animals wasn’t for her.

Once he’d realized who her brother was, he’d kept in touch with the young teen. She’d come back often just to hang out with the goats and chickens. Knowing how Al had looked after Jeannie when her brother was sent to prison was why he’d fought for Al to be hired as a deputy, despite his history.

A gagging sound from the side of the room shook Nick from his thoughts. *Oh, fuck.* The noise was coming from Rose, and she was holding one of Marina’s cupcakes.

“What in the holy hell is this?” she asked, and the room went eerily silent.

Marina walked over with her hands on her hips. “It’s a cupcake. Obviously.”

“Is it, though? I get that it looks like a cupcake, but it doesn’t taste like one.” She stuck out her tongue and pinched something off with her fingers. Her face contorted into an

unreadable expression. “That’s either onion or a piece of plastic, and I’m honestly not sure what I’m hoping for.” She flicked the offending piece into the trash can.

“Now, you’re just being silly. That’s an onion, of course.”

“Of course? Why would there be onions in a cupcake?”

“Because it’s a sour cream and onion cupcake.” Marina drew the words out as if Rose didn’t understand English.

“Sour cream and onion? Babe. That’s a potato chip, not a cupcake.”

“Savory cupcakes are all the rage. I’m just following the latest trend. Besides, Christian loves those chips.”

“And where is this trending exactly? Guantanamo Bay?”

Nick winced as he looked at the other deputies. Hunter’s hand covered his mouth as if he was getting nauseous just from the discussion of onions in a cupcake. Al was silently laughing with his phone raised, no doubt facetimeing with Jeannie so she wouldn’t miss out on the fun. Christian grabbed a cupcake from the tray and walked between the two ladies.

“I think they taste amazing, princess.” He took a giant bite and closed his eyes. “Mmm! Delicious,” he said, though his pinched expression showed the cupcake was anything but.

“Guantanamo Bay? Like, the place where they torture terrorists?” Marina asked.

“Yeah. Honestly, they look pretty good, but that taste is something else.”

“Huh. Thanks for letting me know. Christian, did you hear what she said? My cupcakes could be used as a torture device. She’s related to Louis, which means she’s at least part French, so she totally knows what she’s talking about.” Marina squealed as she pulled out her phone. “I’m going to text the recipe to Sofia!”

Nick barked out a laugh. *Jesus Christ*. Sofia was a mafia queen who had helped Marina escape her mob boss father. Shaking his head, he looked up to see all eyes on him.

“Nick, did you just laugh?” Christian asked.

Nick scratched his head and looked away.

“Damn. That’s got to be what, the third time in fifteen years?”

Nick didn’t want to answer, so he gave Christian the middle finger instead. Christian just laughed. Nick looked over at Hunter, who was off to the side, fanning himself with a paper plate. How that man could deal with dead bodies but not questionable food was beyond him. Al was talking animatedly into his phone, no doubt dissecting the last few minutes with Jeannie.

Turning back to Rose, she was now chatting with Marina. Maybe they would become friends. If they did, Rose might come to the ridiculous watch parties he was required to attend. Or maybe she liked karaoke. Nick hated karaoke nights, but he would go if it meant being near her.

He continued to watch as Rose sat back down and pulled out her book. He was now close enough to read the title. He raised his hand to his mouth to stifle another laugh. This woman.

She gave him a quick peek over the top of the book before covering her face completely with *The Idiot*.

Chapter 8

The familiar aroma of kettle corn permeated the air. Rose closed her eyes and took a deep sniff, enjoying the sweet and salty goodness. Her booth was all set for another Saturday of selling soap at the Sunset Market. Before leaving Maine, she'd created a few beach themed bars that had sold out at last week's market. She'd made several more batches last night, but she was now completely out of goat milk. If she didn't find some soon, she'd be in real trouble. As it was, she'd barely get her online orders filled after today. But that was a tomorrow problem.

Rose hung up her sign and waited for the customers to arrive. Right at ten o'clock, the throng of people poured in.

"There she is!" An older woman with her gray hair twisted in a high bun rushed over to her booth. "Marina!" she called out. "This is the lady I was telling you about. The one with the magic soap bubbles."

"Magic soap bubbles? That sounds exciting."

Rose's eyes widened as she recognized the cupcake baker from the sheriff's office.

"Hello again." Marina smiled. "Aunt June, this is Chef Louis's daughter, Rose."

"Marina." June pointed to the sign that read Rose's Soap Box. "I know her name. I'm introducing you, remember?"

Marina laughed and looked back at Rose. "I don't know if you remember me, but we met"

"Oh, I remember," Rose said. "I don't think I'll ever forget the lady who baked sour cream and onion cupcakes."

June winced. "I swear, I only taught her to make vanilla cupcakes. The rest, she picked up on her own."

"Don't be modest, Aunt June. I wouldn't be where I am today without your lessons. Now, where did Jeannie get to? Probably with the kettle corn guy." Marina craned her neck to look through the crowd.

"She'll be here soon enough. We need to pick out our soap before Rose sells out."

"Good call. Tell me more about the magic soap bubbles."

"It's goat milk," Rose replied as a perky young blonde with a high pony tail walked up to the table.

"Ew, where? I don't mind the cheese, but I'm not drinking it," the new arrival stated.

"No, it's in the soap. That's why the soap is so sudsy and the reason it leaves your skin extra soft. It comes from the higher

fat content. I'm Rose," she finished.

"I'm Jeannie," she said with a smile. "Rose, Rose, Rose. Why does that name sound familiar?"

"Al might have mentioned her." Marina picked up a blue and white bar and sniffed. "She's Chef Louis's daughter and took over catering at the station after he beat up Nick."

Jeannie snorted a laugh. "Oooh, right. I heard all about that. As if anyone could beat that guy up."

"Right?" Rose answered. "The man, or should I say, the beast, is about three times the size of my dad. He could probably throw my dad across the room with a flick of his wrist," she huffed in frustration. "Anyway, if you ladies are interested in soap, I've got my full collection here, plus a few new ones. The green ones have rosemary and sage, so they're great in the morning to help you wake up. But if you are more into a relaxing bath in the evening, then the purple ones have lavender."

Jeannie stepped over to the tables and began sniffing soap. The beige and white swirl bar caught her eye, and she sniffed. "Sandalwood?" she guessed.

"Yes, with a bit of vanilla."

"What do you call it?"

"Uh, the brown one? It's one of the new scents, so it doesn't have a name."

"That's perfect. The colors match the guys' uniforms, and the scent is super manly. I think you should call it The

Lawman. Trust me, you do that, and it will become your best-seller. Ms. June, you could stock the bars at the B&B. It would fit in with the theme.”

“That’s a great idea.” June turned away from the soap to look at Rose. “I run the Lawful Entry Bed and Breakfast. It’s a particular favorite of the Grimbos. As Christian’s aunt, I have a lot of baby pictures that always get me top reviews.”

“What are Grimbos?” Rose asked.

Jeannie held the soap next to Rose’s sign and snapped a picture, then tapped on her phone. “Grimbos are the horny female fans of the show. I’m sure you’ll run into them now that taping has started back up. Do you have any socials I can tag in a post?”

“Yeah, they’re listed here.” Rose pointed to a smaller sign on her table. “Are you posting right now? Let me grab my phone so I can share it.” She pulled out her phone and noticed a new text message from Gavin. Rolling her eyes, she opened it up and gagged.

“That sorry mother—”

“What is it, dear?” June asked.

“Ugh, it’s nothing. Just more dick pics from an ex. I swear, I don’t know why he keeps sending them. Obviously, I’m not interested since I moved six states away.”

“Yikes!” Marina peered over Rose’s shoulder to look at the phone. “You should block him.”

“I could, but won’t he just get another phone and send more pictures? At least this way, I know it’s from him before I open it.”

“Have you thought about getting a new number?” Jeannie asked.

“I have, but my business is wrapped up in this one. I don’t want to go through the hassle of changing it because of him.”

“Yeah, I get it. You’re hoping if you ignore the messages, he’ll eventually give up.” Marina shook her head. “Good luck with that.”

Rose sensed there was a story there but didn’t want to pry.

“I have a better idea.” Jeannie leaned over to look at the phone and winced. “Send him a dick pic of an even bigger dick. That should shut him up. I’ve got a few on my phone I can send you.”

All three ladies turned to look at Jeannie.

“What? Al gets them, not me. I just manage his accounts. Y’all forget he was modeling underwear in catalogs before he became a deputy. He’s got some crazy fans out there. I’ve got tit and pussy pics too, but those would probably encourage your ex.”

Rose laughed. “You know what, let’s do it. Maybe that’s the push he needs to finally leave me alone.”

The ladies crowded around Jeannie as she scrolled through a dozen different dicks.

“Oh my, I might need to sit down.” Aunt June stepped back, fanning herself.

“Here’s a good one.” Jeannie texted the picture to Rose.

“How’s this sound? ‘No, thanks. I’m good,’” she spoke aloud, as she tapped the message on her phone. “Actually, I think I’ll wait a few days to send it. Let him stew for a bit.” With Gavin taken care of, the ladies returned to shopping.

“We’ve put a hurting on your stock,” Jeannie said, looking at all the bars they’d selected. “I hope you have time to make more.”

“I have some curing now that are almost ready, so I’ll be good for a few more weeks. Although losing two days a week to do the catering for my dad has put a crimp in things. But the real problem isn’t so much time as it is supply. I’ve run out of the goat milk I brought down from Maine and haven’t been able to find another source yet.”

Jeannie coughed. “You need some goat milk? Like, from a farm?”

“Ideally, yes. I could get it at the grocery store, but it’s better if I get it fresh and without any additives.”

A spark flashed in Jeannie’s eyes, but it disappeared so quickly Rose must have imagined it.

“There’s a farm at the edge of the county line, and they have a bunch of goats. Super friendly place, but a little off the grid. It’s best if you just show up. I’ll text you the address.”

Marina elbowed Jeannie and gave her a look, which Jeannie returned with another look. They seemed to be having some kind of silent conversation, but Rose was clueless. Surely, they weren't having a fight over goat milk.

“Everything okay?” Rose asked.

“Absolutely. Just promise to check out that farm sometime.”

“Oh, I will. I could make soap without goat milk if I had to, but it's part of my brand now.”

Aunt June nodded. “Goat milk is your magic ingredient. It would be a sin to make the soap any other way. In fact, you should probably go to that farm tomorrow. Maybe even today, on your way home.” That earned June a sharp stare from Marina, but Rose shrugged it off. Maybe Marina wanted all the goat milk for her cupcakes.

“Let's get you ladies rung up.”

Chapter 9

Nick sat at his desk, anticipation growing each time the door opened. He was a few chapters into *A Little Princess*. Nick had a feeling Rose wouldn't appreciate being called a princess any more than a shrew. With a grin, he stared at the door, willing her to walk through.

Unfortunately, the next person to walk through was Al. With a huff, he returned to his reading.

“Too late, big man. I saw you turn that smile upside down. Which means you were hoping I was somebody else. Maybe a curvy brunette with a great rack and tray full of—”

Nick growled. “Don't talk about her like that.”

Al raised his hands and laughed. “You've got it bad.”

“Got what bad?” Hunter walked over to the guys and yawned as he raised his arms in the air. “And where's breakfast? I was hoping to grab something before I went home. I'm so ready to be off overnights. Did Sadie have the kid?”

“No. Food’ll be here soon,” Nick grunted.

“And how do you know?” Al asked. “Maybe she’s blowing off today like a good millennial.”

“Doing this for her father. She won’t let him down.”

Hunter looked at Nick and rubbed his eyes. “Did I fall asleep in my lab? This must be a dream.”

Al grinned. “Nah, man, it’s like I was saying. Beast’s got it bad for Rose.”

“For who?”

“Rose. The caterer.”

“The one with the nice rack?”

“Shut it!” Nick shouted as the door opened and Rose raced in, pulling a wagon behind her.

“Sorry I’m late! I got caught up with something and lost track of time.”

She quickly unloaded her cart and ran back outside to grab the rest. The cart made her work more efficient, but Nick was sorry she wouldn’t need his help anymore.

“Hey, Beast,” Hunter began, stifling a yawn. “What are you even doing here? You’re on nights now.”

Nick cleared his throat. “Free breakfast.” He shrugged, hoping he looked nonchalant.

Al patted him on the back. “Don’t worry, brother,” he whispered. “Jeannie’s got something in the works.”

Nick groaned. Was he that obvious? He shouldn't have come in today. He should have stayed home to watch Sadie, who was showing signs of birthing any day now. He'd even asked Hunter to cover two extra nights for him because he was certain Sadie would give birth. Or at the very least, he should be sleeping in since he wouldn't be sleeping that night. But he couldn't help himself. He had to see Rose and continue their book war.

When she finished setting up, Al and Hunter rushed the table. Rose flopped down into her usual seat in the corner. Looking over, she caught Nick's eye. Careful not to smile, he raised the book to cover his face and pretended to read *A Little Princess*.

Hearing her yelp from across the room, he knew his work was done. Grabbing a muffin as he walked past her, he bent down and said, "Working nights. See you in a week."

"A whole week to find my next book? You should be worried."

"Looking forward to it, sunshine." With that, he walked out the door.

Chapter 10

It was Wednesday, which meant no catering. *Thank heavens.* When Rose had stepped up to help her father with the *Grimm County Lawmen* deliveries, she had underestimated the amount of time it would take. With breakfast and lunch, and the back and forth in between, the catering gig sucked up at least eight hours of her day. And though she usually had the van back to the restaurant and unloaded by three in the afternoon, she was too tired to do much else after that.

But today was Wednesday, her day off from catering. To get everything set up to make soap on Friday, her next day off, she needed to find goat milk today. She planned to start with the farm Jeannie had told her about. If that didn't work out, she had a few more addresses outside of the county. Those would be a longer drive, so she hoped Jeannie's lead paid off. Given the time crunch she was now on due to her dad's temper and Beast's assholery, she really hoped the local farm would work out.

She yawned as she looked at the display in her car. Eight o'clock would normally be too early to visit someone, especially unannounced, but this was a farm. They probably woke up at the crack of dawn each day to feed the animals. Plus, she had a flicker of hope that if she was able to get the goat milk early enough, she could make at least one batch today.

When her GPS announced her arrival, Rose noticed a large sign saying, "Beast of Burden Farm."

Interesting name.

She parked in front of a two-story house. It was exactly what she'd pictured a farmhouse to be. She walked up the large front porch, her body itching to take a seat in one of the rocking chairs. How nice it must be to sit there in the evenings and relax. She knocked on the door, and a few moments passed before she heard loud barking and what sounded like a small elephant running through the house. Before she could react, a blur of fur flew out of the small doggy door and slammed into her legs.

"Oh my! Aren't you precious?" Rose cooed, picking up the three-legged dog. She snuggled in close, only to notice a dog tag on the collar. "Cassidy. What a pretty name for a pretty girl. Are your parents home?"

Rose imagined not since no human had come to the door. There was an old pickup truck out front, so it was possible that someone was home, just not in the house.

She decided to write a note and leave it on the door. She was heading back to the car for pen and paper when she heard the most awful noise. She froze, heart thumping in her chest. A man was shouting, and someone else was yelling as if they were dying.

“Cassidy!” she hissed. “Keep still!” The little dog wiggled in her arms so violently that Rose had no choice but to put her down. As soon as her three paws hit the ground, she took off toward the barn where the noise was coming from.

“Well, fuck.” As much as she wanted to get in her car and drive away as fast as she could, her heart wouldn’t let her leave Cassidy to a potentially gruesome death.

Looking around, she found an old metal rake leaning against a tree. She picked it up and held it out in front of her like a weapon. She shook her head. What was she going to do? Threaten them with tetanus?

“I am woman, hear me roar,” she whispered to herself as she walked through the large opening of the barn. “I’ve called the cops! You better run while you still can!” she shouted, waving the rake back and forth. She was bluffing, of course, because calling the cops would have been the smart thing to do.

“Fuck off!” came the response.

That sounds familiar.

Rose crept through the barn with slow, soft steps. Light poured in through the open doors and stalls, so there would be no hiding in the shadows. She walked toward the noises, using

the stacked hay bales as cover. She heard another scream, but this time, it didn't sound like a person—it sounded like an animal. Peeking around the last hay bale, Rose came across the last thing she expected to see today, or any day really.

Beast was kneeling next to a pregnant goat, with Cassidy in his lap licking him all over his face.

“Uh, hey there. How's it going?” Rose lowered the rake and slowly moved it behind her back. This was definitely ranking in her top ten most awkward moments.

“The fuck are you doing here?” Beast sounded angry. Angrier than he'd been with her dad, and angrier than she'd ever heard him on TV.

“I, uh, was hoping to buy some goat milk?” She kept her eyes on the angry giant while she slowly backed away. “Jeannie said— Holy shit! Are you ... your hands ... they're inside her ...” Rose instinctively squeezed her thighs together. “Oh my lord.” She let go of the rake and bent over, resting her hands on her hips as she tried to control the stars in her vision.

“The kid is stuck. Not coming out on its own.” The pain in his voice was enough to snap Rose out of her initial shock.

“How can I help?” a soft voice asked. A voice he recognized.

Nick looked up again, moving his head away from Cassidy’s kisses.

“Rose?”

“Uh, surprise?” She held up her hands and shook them.

Nick blinked. He didn’t know how or why she was on his farm, but he wouldn’t worry about that now. Sadie was in trouble, and he couldn’t turn away an extra set of hands.

“Grab Cassidy and put her in the stall on the left. It’s empty, and that will keep her out of the way.” He turned his head back and gave her a quick kiss. “Sorry, sweet girl, but you’ve got to sit this one out.”

Rose walked over and picked up the little dog. “Come on, Cassidy. I’m going to put you right over here while your daddy is busy. Then, we’ll come and get you, okay?”

Nick reached inside Sadie feeling for the kid that was stuck. With the next contraction, he could move the kid into a better position. He heard Rose’s footsteps behind him.

“What else?”

“Grab the blue puppy pad and place it near Sadie’s head.”

Sadie bleated again, this time louder than before.

Closing his eyes, he tried to visualize what he was feeling. An ear, a nose, a tiny hoof. Before the contraction ended, he was able to maneuver the kid into a better position.

“You are doing so great, mama.” Rose knelt by Sadie, patting the goat on the head. That wasn’t a good sign. In Sadie’s previous births, she didn’t want any person near her. The fact that she was allowing two people to be so close meant the poor goat was losing energy. He needed to get the baby out with the next contraction, or they might not get another chance.

Nick blinked away the tears that threatened to come. *Not yet.* They sat in silence until Sadie bleated again.

“Alright, girl, this is it.” As the contraction hit, Nick tugged on the kid, and within seconds, the baby was out.

“You did it, Sadie! You have a boy!” he praised.

He carefully placed the new arrival on the pad. The umbilical cord still connected the baby to the afterbirth, which would come out next.

“Rose, can you look in that brown satchel for some dental floss?”

If she thought it was a strange request, she didn’t say anything, which was nice. Marina would have asked him a million questions, quoting every nature show she’d ever seen. He liked that Rose was letting him focus on what he needed to do.

“Found it!” she called out.

“Hold on to it for now.”

“Should we do anything for the baby?”

“Just give him a minute to get oriented,” Nick said as Sadie had her final contraction and passed the afterbirth. He checked it over, looking for any tears which would mean that part of the placenta was still inside. That usually required a call to the vet, although given her already weakened state, he was afraid it wouldn’t matter one way or another.

“Uh, Beast? Should the baby be making those sounds?”

“Fuck!”

Nick had been so focused on losing Sadie, he hadn’t been listening to the kid. But Rose was right. He was gasping, likely having swallowed some of the birthing fluid on his way out.

Nick scrambled over to the kid and lifted him up by his hind legs. He swung the kid back and forth like a pendulum.

“Oh, shit,” Rose mumbled, eyes wide as saucers.

Nick understood her dismay. The action looked barbaric, but it cleared the airways.

“Floss,” he demanded.

He set the baby goat down, who was no longer gasping. Using the floss, he tied off the umbilical cord. He looked back over at Sadie, who was laying down now, her breathing shallow.

“Rose, need you to wipe the kid down. Sadie can’t do it. And can you take him to the other side of the barn?” Nick hated to

admit it, but he didn't want to look at the kid right now, not while Sadie was dying.

Rose nodded. "Of course." She wrapped the newborn in a towel and picked him up. Before they left, she bent over and placed him in front of Sadie. "Say hi to your mama." She patted Sadie on the head and walked to the other side of the barn.

Nick turned back to Sadie, knowing there was nothing he could do. The vet had warned him that the pregnancy likely wouldn't end well for her and to expect this outcome. It still hurt, though. He sat down and put Sadie's head in his lap. He stroked her head, whispering stories.

Sadie had been with him for thirteen years. This wasn't the first goat that had passed since he'd been farming. Hell, he'd been through several animal deaths since he moved to the farm as a kid. That was part of farm life.

But Sadie was special. She'd been born early and was rejected by her mother. Nick had had to rear her, which meant being together almost all day and night. His grandmother had been around to help back then, but it was still mostly him. He'd even made Sadie a little crib so she could sleep in his room. And not that he'd ever admit it, but he also let her sleep in the bed with him at times. With her lastborn, it looked like history would repeat itself.

The tiny goat wiggled in her arms. Rose had cleaned him off as best she could, trying not to gag the whole time. She should probably be all mature and adult about the whole thing, but whatever. It was gross. Aside from a hamster having babies in her tenth grade biology class, she didn't have much experience with live birth.

She scratched his head. "It's a good think you're so cute." Even though she used goat milk in her soap, she'd never spent much time around them. She just picked up the milk from her supplier and kept going. Now, she wondered if that had been a mistake. If all goat babies were as cute as this guy, she'd been missing out.

He bleated again, and Rose looked around for Beast. He was still with the mother, but didn't the baby need to nurse soon? That was how it worked with human babies, so it was probably even more of a thing with animals.

"Beast? I think the little guy is hungry. Is the mama ready for him?"

There was a long silence, followed by heavy boot steps that grew louder as they came closer. A dark shadow cast over where she sat with the little goat. With a heavy sigh, Beast squatted down in front of her. His hand reached over and softly caressed the goat's head.

"Welcome to the farm, little guy."

Rose looked up, catching the sadness in his tone. Her heart seized at his bloodshot eyes and wet lashes.

“Sadie?” she asked, hopeful her assumption was wrong.

He shook his head.

“Oh no.” She reached out and squeezed Beast’s arm. “I’m so sorry. I’m sure you did everything you could.”

He snorted. “If that were true, she’d be here nursing her kid.”

“No. It was her time, and you stayed with her until the end. A peaceful passing is always a blessing,” Rose repeated the phrase that had brought her comfort after her mother’s death. And even though they were now talking about a goat, it was clear to Rose that Beast was devoted to her. For a man who didn’t seem attached to much at all, she had a feeling the loss of Sadie hurt him as much as losing a family member.

Beast closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then nodded. “Thanks. You good with him? Need to bury Sadie.” He crooked his finger and scratched behind the kid’s ears. His eyes softened as a bit of the tension left his face.

Rose bit her lip. Damn, he was a good-looking man, especially up close.

Mind out of the gutter, Rose.

“Yeah, all good. But I think he needs something to eat.”

Beast rubbed a hand over his face, stroking his beard with sigh. “Got a bottle in the fridge.” He jerked his head in the direction of the house. “Heat up some water in a pot, then put the bottle in the water to warm the milk.”

“Like a double boiler?” Rose asked.

Beast shrugged. “Sure.”

“Okay, no problem.” She stood up, nuzzling the little goat in her arms. “We got this, right, little fella?” She stood up and walked toward the house.

Beast cleared his throat. “Rose?”

She stopped and turned her head back. “Yeah?”

“Name’s Nick. And thanks.”

Rose broke into a giant smile. “You’re welcome, Nick. Take your time with Sadie. I’m happy to hang out with this cutie-pie.” She walked out of the barn, ready to play house with a baby goat. She chuckled to herself. What a bizarre day this was turning out to be, and it wasn’t even lunchtime.

Chapter 11

“**W**ith these investments, your business will expand threefold by the end of the year. But I can’t wait forever. I need your answer within twenty-four hours, otherwise I’ll have to offer this opportunity to someone else.” The men surrounding the conference table nodded, already taking out their phones to make the necessary calls.

Gavin stalked out the room, confident his proposal had won them over. They would make the investment. They always did. And he’d take their money and move it to an offshore account, like he had with the eight businesses before.

It was too easy. All he had to do was fake a few quarterly reports, and these idiots couldn’t stop themselves from handing over their money. He was halfway down the hall to his office when he heard the special ringtone on his phone.

Rose. Finally.

He smirked. The bitch hadn’t answered any of his calls or texts. He’d finally sent what he knew she wanted. Pictures of

his dick. That whore couldn't keep herself off him when they were together.

He locked the door to his office and sat at his desk, pulling out his already hard dick. She'd been hiding from him for too long, and he couldn't wait to look at her pussy pic.

He was already stroking his cock when he opened the text, licking his lips in anticipation of seeing her fingers playing with her—

Fucking bitch!

She sent him a picture of another man's dick! And the message said, "No, thanks!" He squeezed himself as he stroked, imagining he was squeezing her throat instead.

She thought she could play him for the fool? Did she honestly think she could fuck around with someone when she belonged to him?

He turned on the video of his phone and filmed himself as he imagined her face contorting while he choked the life out of her. His smiled as he envisioned his cum covering her face while she gasped for breath.

Soon, Rose. Very soon.

Chapter 12

When Nick finally walked inside the house, he found Rose in the kitchen. She was typing on her phone, and supplies for making sandwiches were spread over his counter. She slipped the phone into her back pocket as he and Cassidy entered the kitchen.

“Oh, hey! I hope you don’t mind. I started working on lunch. I know it’s a little early, but I wasn’t sure if you’d eaten yet. You worked last night, right?” She waved a butter knife at him, gesturing at his uniform.

Nick struggled to find the words to respond. There hadn’t been a woman in his kitchen since his grandmother. And now Rose was here, wearing one of the frilly aprons he’d never taken off the hook on the back of the door. She fit in his kitchen as if she’d been cooking there for years.

Finally, he nodded, looking around. “Yeah. Where’s the kid?”

“Taking a nap.” She pointed to a laundry basket on the opposite side of the kitchen, where she’d made a little bed with towels. “I pulled up a couple videos on my phone about hand-nursing goats. They said to feed him ten percent of his body weight in milk. I weighed him on the bathroom scale. At two pounds, that’s three ounces of milk. He took in about two ounces on our first try. We’ll need to get a little more in him, but the poor guy fell asleep. I figured it was okay for him to rest a bit. Being born is hard work.” She was smiling as she spoke, but her smile slowly faded as Nick continued to stare at her, not saying anything. “Um, I hope that was okay?” she asked, uncertainty creeping into her voice. “Beast?” She cleared her throat. “Nick?”

Nick cleared his throat. “Yeah. All good. Need a shower.” He unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it off to reveal a white undershirt. His uniform was covered in afterbirth and dirt from burying Sadie. He wished for a giant bonfire, where he could burn everything from this shitty morning. The stains probably wouldn’t come out, and he didn’t want the reminder they would leave.

The laundry room was on the opposite side of the kitchen. He walked over while unbuckling his belt. If he burned every article of clothing that got stained on the farm, he’d need to buy new clothes all the time. His grandparents taught him not to be wasteful. Sighing, he untied his boots and kicked them to the side. He unzipped his pants and pulled them down, standing in his boxers while he tossed the clothes into the

washing machine. His hands reached behind him and lifted up his undershirt.

He heard a squeak behind him and turned around.

“Fuck. Sorry. I, uh,” *Shit*. He couldn’t believe he’d forgotten she was there that fast. It must be the fact that he hadn’t slept in twenty-four hours.

“Oh, don’t stop.” Rose grinned. “Let me just ...” She pulled over a stool and sat down. She lifted her plate and motioned to him. “You may continue.” Her eyes danced as she took a bite of her sandwich.

Something bubbled in his stomach, which made its way up his chest and came out of his mouth. Laughter. He was laughing. Hard. So hard he had to bend over and hold his stomach. God, it felt good.

Rose laughed too. “Stop, you’re going to make me choke!”

When they finally settled down a few minutes later, they were both gasping for air.

Nick peeled off his undershirt and used it to wipe the tears from his eyes. “Thanks, Rose. Back in a few.”

“Oh, yeah, fine. We’ll be here.” He heard the disappointment in her voice.

Had she wanted him to strip all the way? He chuckled as he shook his head. He didn’t know much about this woman who’d dropped into his life, but he definitely wanted to know more.

“Something for the road?” she asked, handing him a plate.

His stomach growled as he eyed the ham and cheese sandwich, reminding him he hadn’t eaten since sometime the evening before.

Nick trudged up the stairs, inhaling the sandwich and chips as he went. After a quick shower, he was a new man. He unwrapped the towel from around his waist and ran it through his hair and beard.

It had been a long night. Most times, the night shift was the easy shift aside from having to stay awake all night. In a small community like Grimm County, nothing was open twenty-four hours. Most of their residents spent their nights at home, asleep in their beds. But other times, like last night, it was nonstop nonsense.

A couple of high school seniors had tried to bring back the senior prank and TP the trees at their principal’s house. Ms. Johnson had called to file a missing person’s report on her son, who was in college at Appalachian State. Her son wasn’t missing—he was being a regular college kid who wanted to party and not call his mom.

Nick’s eyelids grew heavy. He could lie down for a second. Rose was watching the kid. Ten minutes wouldn’t hurt anything ...

Rose checked the clock for the third time. Nick had been “taking a shower” for an hour. Surely, he must have withered into a prune by now. Her breath quickened as she considered what else he might be doing to warrant an hour-long shower.

His laundry room strip tease had been quite the show. Her core clenched when she thought back to his broad chest, six pack abs, and the well-defined V disappearing into his boxers. She could pretend she hadn’t been perving and hadn’t tried to determine what was hiding underneath those boxers, but what was the point? She’d caught him staring at her tits plenty of times, so actually, she was entitled to a little ogling.

The sound of chickens and goats filtered through the window. For the last thirty minutes, the sounds had grown louder and more frantic. If she had to guess, they were hungry. She’d seen enough movies to know farm animals usually got fed in the mornings and the evenings. Nick had probably gotten so busy with Sadie when he came home from his shift that he’d forgotten to feed the other animals.

“Should we go check on him, Jasper?” The goat blinked back at her in response. He was the cutest thing she’d ever seen. No one had ever called her maternal, but if having a baby was like this, she could see the appeal.

The racket from outside grew louder.

“Maybe he can’t hear it. Maybe he’s meditating and in such a Zen state that he can’t hear his starving herd begging for food.”

Decision made, she picked up Jasper and headed to the second floor. There were four rooms at the top of the stairs.

“Eeny meeny mighty hoe.” The door to the room she landed on was slightly ajar and seemed as good of a place to start as any. Tapping lightly on the door, she called out, “Nick! Are you okay? Your animals are getting kind of restless outside.” Hearing no response, she knocked again, this time with a little more force.

The door pushed open, and Rose gasped.

“Shit! Don’t look Jasper!” Rose covered the goat’s eyes with her free hand but had a hard time turning hers away. Nick lay spread eagle across his bed, naked as the day he was born. A towel was bunched up at his side, which might have been covering his junk at some point, but was doing nothing at the moment. Tilting her head to the side, she reconsidered. Nope, that towel wasn’t big enough. The man was packing some serious heat.

And now she had a dilemma. If she woke him up, he’d know she saw him naked and she might die of embarrassment. If she let him sleep, his animals would starve, and that would probably be worse. No, it would definitely be worse. But he had been dead on his feet when he’d left the kitchen, and now he looked so peaceful sleeping.

She tossed a blanket over his body and squared her shoulders.

I survived winters in Maine, for fuck's sake. I can be a pioneer farm woman for one day.

“Beast!” He heard someone calling his name, but the voice sounded far away. “Nick! It’s time to wake up.” He groaned and covered his head with a pillow. “Okay, but remember, I tried the easy way first.”

Something cold, wet, and hard pinged off his chest.

The fuck?

Several more of the objects assaulted his body, and he bolted upright. He searched the bed frantically, and saw that he was covered in ... ice cubes?

“Aw, there we go, Jasper. The beast is stirring!”

“Maaa!” A kid’s bleating echoed in the room.

Who was talking? And why was there a goat in his room? Did he leave the fence open? And the front door?

His mind slowly cleared as he remembered the events of the morning. He’d come home from an overnight shift to find Sadie in labor and struggling. Then, Rose had showed up out of nowhere and ...

“Fuck!” His eyes frantically searched the room before finding Rose holding the little black and white newborn. Her head was turned to the right, so she wasn’t looking directly at him.

He blinked again, noting the room was dimmer than when he’d laid down. How long had he slept? He rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“What time is it?” Uneven paws rushed on the floor next to him before Cassidy jumped onto his bed. He tried unsuccessfully to push her away as she attempted to lick him awake.

“Five o’clock,” Rose answered, still looking in the opposite direction. “I called Jeannie. She told me the evening shift starts at seven, so I didn’t think you should sleep any later. I’ve got some spaghetti and meatballs ready downstairs if you want to eat before you go to work.”

“You ... what?” Had she stayed in his house all day? While he slept upstairs?

She laughed. “It’s Italian, not French, so I figured you would eat it. There’s coffee too. I think you need some.” She looked down at the goat. “Don’t you think so, Jasper? The big old Beast needs his caffeine to be human again.”

Nick nodded. Yawning, he scratched his chest, then realized the reason she was looking in the other direction. “Need to put on some clothes.” His bottom half was covered by a blanket, but he was naked underneath.

“Uh, maybe just some pants.”

“Say, what?”

He could hear the smile in her voice as she answered, “You need some bonding time with Jasper before you go. That way, he can get used to your scent.” She closed her eyes and walked toward the bed, holding the goat out to him.

“My shirts smell like me.”

“The internet says skin to skin is best, especially since you are going to be gone all night on shift.” She was trying to sound nonchalant, but he noticed the flush of her cheeks and the way she bit her lower lip. It almost seemed like she didn’t want him to put on a shirt.

Well, far be it from him to disappoint the lady. “Good idea. I’ll grab some sweats, and we’ll be down in a sec.”

Rose turned around and hurried out the door. “Come on, Cassidy, let’s give Daddy some privacy.”

Daddy. Was it fucked up that he liked the way she called him Daddy? *Probably a little.*

He placed Jasper—*Jasper?*—on the bed. “Stay there, buddy.”

He walked over to his dresser and pulled out a pair of gray sweatpants, not bothering with his boxers.

Nick walked downstairs, wondering if he was still dreaming. He should be horrified that someone, a virtual stranger, had been in his home all day while he lay in the bed naked upstairs. But it didn’t bother him. In fact, it felt as natural as breathing.

Rose felt Nick's eyes on her as he entered the kitchen. Did he like what he saw?

And what would that be? she wondered. A glorified burglar, who spent the day in his house, cooking his food?

She made her way over to the coffeepot and poured him a mug, adding cream but no sugar as she'd seen him make it on her catering days. She placed the mug in front of him, then moved to the stove to make a plate of spaghetti and meatballs.

"I hope you don't mind that I raided your pantry. I considered running home to get something, but I didn't want to leave Jasper and thought it might be too soon for him to travel."

"Jasper?" he asked, looking down at the goat.

"Yeah, I couldn't keep calling him goat baby. Unless you had another name in mind?" Maybe he was some kind of pedigree goat that had a string of names like those fancy dogs.

"No. Jasper's good." He took a long swallow of coffee before pulling it away and looking at the mug in surprise.

"Part of my new job is knowing what the client likes to eat and drink," she said with a wink. "Now, eat up. You don't have much time before you need to go in."

“Shit,” he swore. “Too late to call out.”

“Why would you call out? Are you sick?” He didn’t look sick. He looked incredibly fit if she had to guess by looking at him. And judging by the wetness in her panties, she was looking. Although, her particular area of focus was on that shape outlined along his leg. Whoever invented gray sweatpants deserved a medal.

“Can’t leave Jasper alone. Needs to be fed every couple hours.”

“Well, about that. Jasper and I are pretty much bonded. Aren’t we, little fella?” she cooed, reaching over to scratch behind his ears. “I don’t mind staying over to keep an eye on him. I’ve done extensive research all day, so I think we’ll be fine.”

Rose held her breath. As the day wore on, she’d planned this conversation, and she needed to see it through. Gavin’s texts were getting more disturbing. And even though she knew he was in Maine, the thought of him kept her awake at night. Nick’s house was in the middle of nowhere, and she couldn’t explain it, but she felt safe here. She didn’t want to go back to her isolated rental.

Nick stopped shoveling the spaghetti in his mouth and looked up. “You. Want to sleep. In my house?”

“You know, when you say it like that, you make it seem weird.” Rose crossed her arms over her chest, knowing from their previous encounters that he liked the way the position

pushed her breasts up. Distraction might be the key to this. “I’m offering to be your overnight nanny.”

Nick blinked. “You want to be my nanny?”

“Dude. Stop making everything I say seem weird. You have a kid now.” She waggled her eyebrows at the joke. “And your *kid* can’t be left alone at night while you work. You need a night nanny, and I’m volunteering. You can pay me in goat milk, so it’s a win-win.” Rose hoped her explanations sounded plausible. It should since it was the truth. It just wasn’t the whole truth.

“You want to sleep in my house so you can drink goat milk?” He ran his hand through his hair and sighed.

Rose reached for the coffeepot and refilled his mug. Poor guy was struggling.

“The whole reason I showed up today was to buy goat milk. I make soap, and goat milk is my key ingredient. It’s what makes my soap special and why people come back for more. I’m sure you noticed how it forms more suds than a regular bar and leaves your skin feeling extra soft.”

“Uh, yeah.” Nick started at his mug, suddenly very interested in his coffee.

Rose winced. Clearly, he hadn’t used the soap she gave him. She took a deep breath and stiffened her spine.

“I’ve run out of the supply I brought from Maine, and when I asked around, Jeannie said this farm had goats. Although, she

conveniently left out the part that it was your farm.” Rose rolled her eyes.

Nick stood up, the chair screeching across the floor as he pushed it behind him. “Need to feed the—”

“Chickens and goats? Already done. Jeannie talked me through it. She said she used to hang out here as a teenager. They were making so much noise I was afraid they would wake you up, but once they got some food, they quieted right down. But back to the milk ...”

“Should have woken me up.”

Rose’s face flushed as the temperature of the room increased by ten degrees.

Nick’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

Rose cleared her throat and looked up at the ceiling. “I went upstairs to wake you, but you didn’t move when I called your name.”

“Got plenty of wooden spoons.” He nodded toward the kitchen drawers. “Could have hit me with one.”

Rose laughed, her embarrassment fading away. “Maybe next time. Or maybe not. I wasn’t sure if I should get that close since you were ...” She trailed off as she waved her hand in the air.

“I was what?”

Rose sighed. “Naked. Arms and legs spread out like a starfish, bare-ass naked. I had to cover Jasper’s eyes. I was

worried that python of yours might scare him. The Internet said goats are scared of snakes.”

Nick choked on his spaghetti. When his coughs finally subsided, he muttered out a quiet, “Sorry.”

“Seriously, though, you were completely worn out. I had nothing else to do, so I let you sleep. Until I have more goat milk, I can’t make soap. And since I’m stuck catering, even if I had the milk, I couldn’t do anything right now anyway.”

“Sorry,” he repeated.

“It’s not all your fault. Papa shouldn’t have hit you with the spoon. He’s taking anger management classes now. He should be finished in another week or so, and Jonathan said he can come back on set after.”

“Sure you don’t mind staying?”

“Absolutely not. In fact, this little guy is so cute I might stick him in my purse and steal him if you don’t let me stay.”

Rose’s body flooded with relief. How she’d convinced the reclusive beast to let her stay at his house was anyone’s guess, but she was grateful for it. She looked down at her chest. *Nice work, girls.*

Nick stood and walked to the sink. He washed his plate and fork and set them in the drying rack. Turning around to look at Rose, he scratched his hand over his beard.

“Okay. Thanks. Gotta change.” He moved toward the stairs.

“Wait, that’s it? Aren’t you going to ask me any questions? I’m a strange woman in your house looking after your baby goat.”

Nick turned and looked at her, shrugging. “Could have done a lot while I was passed out. You didn’t.” He took a step toward the stairs, then stopped again. “You can go anywhere you want on the farm, but stay out of the gray shed on the western side of the property.”

“What’s in the gray shed?”

“It’s forbidden,” Nick growled.

“Forbidden?” This guy really needed to talk more, so he could work on his word choices. “You mean, like, condemned or something?”

“Just stay out of the gray shed.”

“Whatever you say, *Beast*. I’m sure my hands will be full with Jasper. And you’ll give me goat milk?” She didn’t want to appear greedy, but she needed that milk.

“Got a freezer full of it. Take all you need.”

“Thanks. You know, if you keep me stocked in goat milk and let me love up on this baby goat, I might never leave.”

Chapter 13

Nick sat in his truck and stared at the door to the sheriff's office. He'd hoped tonight would be less eventful than the previous. His heart still ached for Sadie, and he wasn't in the mood to tolerate fools. Much to his dismay, the parking lot was full of cars, meaning Jonathan and the crew were there.

Great. Another taping session.

"Beast, don't look so glum!" Jonathan said as Nick entered the building. "You knew we'd have to make up that canceled taping sometime. Speaking of, I spoke to Louis. He started an anger management class, and it seems to be helping. He showed me some of the techniques, like breathing and using his words. If he finishes the class, how would you feel about letting him back on set? Rose is a great substitute, but she doesn't have her dad's flair."

Nick growled. Rose had flair. Lots of it. Whatever flair was.

"Not that we'd ever compromise your safety for flair," Jonathan said hurriedly, misunderstanding Nick's aggression.

“It’s your call, man. If you don’t want him back, he won’t come back, regardless of this class. Rose seems like a pretty dedicated girl. I’m sure she’ll keep up with the catering so we won’t miss out on the good food.” He looked at Nick, then added, “Not that the food is the most important concern here.”

Nick frowned as he picked up a file and flipped through the pages without reading them. Louis coming back meant Rose wouldn’t cater on set anymore, and having her around made taping almost worth it. He hated that he was missing her shifts this week because he was on nights. Even though she was currently at his house, she was only there because he wasn’t. And as soon as Jasper was a little older, there wouldn’t be any excuse for her to stick around, other than to pick up goat milk.

If he said he was okay with Louis coming back, he’d miss out on any future time to spend with Rose. But if he said he wasn’t okay with Louis coming back, well ... One, he would be lying, and two, Rose would go back to hating him. They were just getting friendly again. He needed to trust that if he treated her right and kept his temper in check, he would see her regardless of the goat or the catering. Hopefully, because they were fucking.

Nick groaned. He could not get her tits out of his mind, and this was not the right time.

“Louis can come back.”

“Awesome. I’ll stop by his restaurant and find out when his classes finish. Now, about tonight—we’re going to need to do some confessionals between calls.”

“Nope.”

“Nick, you can’t keep putting these off. I hate to pull this card, but your contract requires that you give us one confessional per episode. We’re already behind, so you need to do three tonight to catch up.”

“Fuck that. One.”

“No, three. It has to be three.”

Nick didn’t say anything else. He had signed the contract. He knew what he was required to do and what he could get out of. Confessionals were in there. But there wasn’t any stipulation on length.

Nick leaned against the trunk of his patrol car as the crew set up. If he had to do a confessional, he much preferred to be outside where he felt less caged in. Talking was his least favorite activity.

“You know the drill, Beast. I’ll ask you questions to get you talking, but my voice won’t be part of the final shot, so you’ll need to repeat the question in your answer.”

Nick nodded, folding his hands over his chest.

“Going back to the night of the bar fight, how did it feel knocking those guys around?”

Nick looked at Jonathan and shook his head.

Jonathan sighed. “Fine. Tell us about the night of the bar fight.”

“College kids acting like idiots. Happens sometimes.” Nick offered a rare grin. “But it won’t happen again,” he said while massaging a fist.

“Damn! That was excellent! You really do pack a lot into a few words. Some of the feedback from previous seasons was that the viewers want to know more about you.” Nick started to argue, but Jonathan held up his hand. “I know, I know. But can you tell us why you became a deputy? Or why you keep doing it?”

With a deep sigh, Nick began, “Became a deputy because of Christian’s dad. He was sheriff before Christian. Said I was so big I could scare people straight just standing there. Didn’t have any other plans, so I went with it.”

Nick’s heart weighed heavy in his chest. Shep had become a steady presence in his life after introducing him to his grandparents. Nick had been the first on the scene when Shep was killed on duty. It ranked as one of the worst days of his life.

“What did your parents think?”

Nick glared at the camera.

“Fine. I had to try. Have you ever thought of doing something else?”

As a kid, Nick had wanted to be a painter or a veterinarian. His dad would never have allowed either, but his grandparents

would have supported anything he wanted to do. And although he had their support, he couldn't imagine putting himself out in the world like that.

When Shep had talked to him about the sheriff's office, it seemed like a good fit. No one would think twice about a kid his size going into law enforcement. He had also liked the idea of helping people, especially kids, the way Shep had helped him.

"Nothing else I'd rather do. Like helping people. Keeping the town safe."

"And what does your wife, or girlfriend, think about that?"

Nick's eyes narrowed.

"Just doing my job, man. A few more questions—" Jonathan was cut off by the sound of Nick's radio, alerting him to a new call.

Thank fuck.

The rest of the night passed quickly. There was a fender bender on Atlantic Boulevard. Someone set off illegal fireworks on the beach. On his way home, Nick pulled over some Yankee tourist speeding in his Porsche. That guy had been a complete tool and tried to offer Nick two hundred dollars to forget the ticket.

Pulling into his drive, a sense of calm spread over him. Coming home always did that for him. Although today, it was a little different because it wasn't just his animals that he was looking forward to seeing. Rose was inside.

He'd asked Al to relieve him a little early that morning since he knew Rose needed to leave his house to set up the catering. Maybe Louis could finish his classes sooner, and he could have Rose all to himself at his home instead of sharing her with the station.

He walked inside to a dark house. She must still be asleep. He trudged upstairs and checked the guest bedrooms but didn't see her. He was about to go back downstairs and check the couch when he heard a rustling from his bedroom. Surely, she wasn't—

Nick opened his bedroom door to find Rose laid out in his bed, hair splayed across the pillows with his blanket tucked under her chin. There was a book on his bedside table. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. He shook his head. That was a good one. Jasper was in the hamper on top of the bed next to her. It was a strange sight but one that created a stirring in his soul. He cleared his throat.

“Rose!” he called out. He tried to be gentle, but it came out more like a bark.

“Present!” Rose bolted upright, looking around and blinking rapidly. Her eyes fell on the goat, and she let out a soft laugh. “Oh, right. Thanks for waking me up,” she said through a yawn. “I was having that dream where I was back in school and it was final exams, but I never went to class. Like, I forgot I had it or couldn't find the room or something. I'm supposed to take the exam and pass when I never did any homework along the way.” She shuddered. “I hate that dream.”

“Did that happen to you?”

“No way. I always went to class. And did my homework.”

“Then, why the dream?”

“Stress, apparently. Or at least, that’s what the dream interpretation website told me.”

“Stress? About what?”

Rose’s demeanor darkened. “Stuff.”

Stuff. Like her dad being fired and her having to take over his workload. Probably best if he changed the subject.

“How’s Jasper?”

Rose’s face brightened again. “Oh, this little love bug? He’s great!” She pulled the covers away and lifted Jasper from the laundry basket. Now standing in front of him, Nick noticed she was wearing one of his shirts like a pajama dress. His eyes traveled down to her bare legs. She looked good in his clothes. Too good. Was she wearing anything underneath? His dick pressed against his zipper. He tried to raise his gaze back to her emerald eyes but slowed at her pebbled nipples. She really was trying to kill him.

“Why are you in here? Got two guest rooms.” Which he planned to lock once she left, so she’d be forced to stay in his room every night.

“Jasper liked it better in here. He wanted to be where he could smell you better.”

“Jasper wanted?”

“Yup.” Rose nodded and looked up at the ceiling. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“Jasper want you to wear my shirt too?”

“As a matter of fact, he did. He thinks you smell really nice.” Rose tugged at her bottom lip as the side of her mouth quivered. This woman.

Nick stepped closer and leaned down, pausing at the crook of her neck. He inhaled deeply, causing his cock to strain even harder.

“Well, I like the way you smell.”

Rose breathed in sharply. He slowly moved up from her neck, letting the scruff of his beard tickle her cheek as he made his way to her lips. “Rose,” he breathed, his forehead resting against hers, their lips barely an inch apart.

“Yes?” she whispered, her breaths coming in shallow pants.

He reached his hand behind her head and ran his fingers through her hair. He pulled her close, their lips meeting with the gentlest of touches, and—

“Maaa!”

“Ahh!” Rose screamed as they heard a spray of liquid hitting the floor. She held the goat out, but it was too late. Her eyes wide, she looked at Nick, then at her wet shirt. Before she could say anything, black pellets fell out of Jasper’s back end. “Fucking hell!” Rose called out as Jasper’s poop rained down on her feet.

Nick's shoulders shook with silent amusement.

"Laugh all you want, big guy. It's your shirt he just pissed all over."

The laughter Nick had tried to keep inside burst out.

"Hand him over," Nick said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I'll take him outside, let him run around while I catch up on some reading."

Rose's nose twitched as she smoothed her lips into a thin line. He could tell she didn't want to ask, but the curiosity finally got to her. "What book are you reading today?"

He leaned in close, placing his lips next to her ear, and whispered, "*Great Expectations*." Her body shivered, causing his cock to get even harder. "And don't forget it's Thursday."

"Shit!" Rose yelped and jumped back. "I've got to go! Shoo!" she said, pushing him and Jasper out the door.

Nick chuckled as he walked down the stairs. "Not bad, little guy. You did good getting her in the bed, but maybe work on the cock-blocking." As he passed through the living room, his eyes caught on one of his large sketchpads lying next to the couch.

Did Rose go through his things? Panic surged through him at the thought of her going through his art shed, the one place he had forbidden her from entering. But as he looked closer, he realized that it wasn't his sketch pad at all. But if it wasn't his, was it hers? Was she an artist too?

Knowing it was completely hypocritical, he opened her sketchpad and flipped through the pages to the most recently used one. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at a portrait of him with his sweet Sadie. She'd sketched the two of them in pencil, Nick patting Sadie's head as she nuzzled in close. That was it. He was officially done for. Rose was it for him, but how could he make her see that?

Chapter 14

Rose hurried home to take a quick shower and put on a fresh pair of clothes. Her dad was waiting outside when she pulled up to the restaurant.

“You are late, Rose.”

Her eyes scanned his hands for a wooden spoon. Seeing nothing, she breathed a sigh of relief. “Sorry, Papa. I was—” She stopped. She couldn’t tell her father what she was really doing. “I overslept.” It was technically true.

Louis nodded. “It happens. I already packed everything. We just need to load you up. You should still make it on time.”

“Okay, who are you, and what have you done with Papa?” Rose asked.

Louis laughed. “*Ma chouchoute*, I am a new leaf. With the class and sunrise beach yoga with Jonathan, tiny things do not upset me anymore.”

Rose could think of one thing that might upset him, but she was twenty-seven years old and her father did not need to

know where she spent her night.

“That’s great, Papa. Sounds like you’ll be back on set in no time.” The idea should have made her happy, but instead, she felt a pang of disappointment.

What is that about?

Without Nick on set, the day crept by. Rose tried returning to the romance book on her e-reader, but Blake and Belinda couldn't hold her attention. Instead, she downloaded books on farms, goats, and chickens. She'd never once fantasized about being a farmer, but now she was setting up a Zillow alert for farmland. Maybe she would get a cow and learn to churn butter. Unless ... Was goat butter a thing?

After serving an uneventful breakfast and lunch, Rose returned to her house to pack for another evening at Nick's farm. Now that she had access to goat milk, she needed to spend several days restocking. She grabbed her tub of soap supplies, then added more clothes to her bag. Surely, Nick wouldn't mind if she became a live-in nanny for a few days? Just until she was caught up. It was his fault she was behind, after all.

She also stopped by Wal-Mart. Nick might not agree, but after the morning's incident, Jasper needed to wear diapers in the house. After a few minutes in the baby section, her ovaries took charge of her brain. She ended up with three hundred dollars' worth of baby supplies.

She arrived at Nick's farm right at five o'clock, even though he didn't need to leave until six-thirty. They needed the extra

time together to exchange information about Jasper. It had nothing to do with her hoping to finish that kiss.

The sound of uneven paws greeted her as she opened her car door. Before she could step out, Cassidy jumped into her lap and peppered her face with kisses. “Oh, sweet girl, I missed you too.” Rose stroked the little dog’s back.

“Cassidy!” Nick shouted as he stepped out the front door. “Let her get out of the car first!”

Rose laughed as she stepped out of the car and set Cassidy on the ground. “She’s fine. I don’t mind being greeted with big sloppy kisses.”

“Good to know,” Nick said with a smirk as he stepped off the porch.

“Oh, I didn’t mean ... I was talking about the dog.” Rose’s core clinched as she watched the giant of a man stalk toward her. He wore jeans and a tight blue t-shirt, the color matching his eyes. Rose backed up against her car as he stood directly in front of her.

“Are you saying you don’t like to be greeted with big sloppy kisses?” he asked, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“I ... uh ...” She struggled to come up with a coherent response as he leaned in closer. She held her breath as she stared into his swirling blue eyes.

“How about soft,” —he brushed over her lips— “gentle,” —he pecked again— “kisses?” He leaned back and smiled down at her.

“Those are good.” Reaching her arms around his neck, she pulled him to her. “But these are better.”

Rose kissed him hard, slipping her tongue into his mouth and letting it dance with his. She lost track of time as they stood by her car, exploring each other. His hardness pressed into her, and she was ready to forget everything and strip down in the driveway. Unfortunately, someone had other plans.

“Maaa!” The sound of a baby goat brought her back to reality.

Her hands lowered to Nick’s chest, and she reluctantly pushed him back.

“Jasper,” she panted, licking the taste of Nick from her lips.

“Fuck.” He rested his forehead on hers, appearing every bit as affected by their kiss as she was. “I’ll lock him up in the barn.”

“Nick!” Rose swatted his chest. “You’ll do no such thing. Besides, we shouldn’t start something we can’t finish. You’ve got to go to work.”

He took a step back and rubbed his hand through his beard. “Right. First time we do this, won’t be stopping for days.”

Rose let out a noise that sounded like a whimper. She swallowed, attempting to regain her composure. “You sound pretty confident.”

“I am, sunshine. You’ll see.”

Jasper stumbled into Rose's legs, and she reached down to pick him up, grateful for the distraction. Any more talk from Nick, and she'd need to change her panties. She popped the trunk and grabbed her duffle bag. Looking at Nick, she asked, "Would you mind grabbing the rest of that?"

Nick looked at the full trunk and looked back at her. "The fuck is all this?"

Rose laughed. "I picked up some essentials for Jasper. Maybe set them in one of the spare bedrooms, and I'll go through it all later. That tub is full of my soap-making supplies. I need to restock and didn't want to wait, especially since I'll be at the market all day Saturday."

She paused, hoping this notoriously private man would agree to her plan. The previous night's sleep was the best she'd had in weeks, maybe even months. She hadn't realized how much Gavin's texts were affecting her. Sleeping in Nick's bed last night, even though he wasn't even in the house, made her feel protected in a way she hadn't in a long time. But she couldn't tell him that. She'd feed off his guilt in firing her dad and make it about her soap.

"I was hoping I could get started tonight, then stick around during the day Friday to keep at it instead of going back home. It would save me a lot of time to stay in one place."

"Whatever you want. I'll be asleep."

"Well, in that case, would you mind if I stayed over until Sunday?"

Nick froze.

Shit. That was too much at once.

“You. Want to live here? In my house. Until Sunday?” His words were slow and deliberate.

“Yeah?” Her voice came out irritatingly high. She coughed and tried again. “I mean, yes. Just until Sunday, when you finish the overnight shift.”

Nick nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay? So, we’re good here?” Rose hurried to catch up with his long strides as he walked toward the farmhouse. “I’ll stay through Sunday, then you get your farm back to yourself, just like before.” *Unless I can come up with another excuse to stay.*

Nick’s eyes lowered, and he nodded. “Get inside. Food’s ready.”

“You cooked dinner?”

He laughed. “Didn’t get this size by skipping meals.”

She smiled, relieved to have a safe hideaway for the next few days. “No, I guess you didn’t.”

Rose walked into the house and gasped. Baked chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, gravy, and a salad were laid out in a massive spread on the kitchen table.

“Wow. That’s a lot of food.”

Nick shrugged. No surprise there. He was probably out of his allotment of words for the day.

The meal proved to be delicious, adding another point in his favor. Sexy man, liked to read, loved animals, and now it turned out that he was excellent cook.

“Why soap?” The rocky gravel of his voice broke the silence.

“Because it kills germs?”

Nick snorted. “No. You make it. Why?”

“Ah. Got it. You know, when you start a conversation out of the blue, a little context is helpful. For example,” Rose lowered her voice. ““You are clearly a woman of many talents who could do anything she wanted. What led you to open a soap-making business?””

His beard moved slightly, hiding a smirk underneath.

“Well, Nick, since you’re interested,” Rose continued in her normal voice, “I started because of my mother.” Her breath caught as a wave of pain passed over her. She pushed it back down and continued. “She had cancer. The treatments were brutal, and I felt helpless to do anything for her. I studied up on aromatherapy, and we started using essential oils to help with relaxation, pain, and energy. The medicine was also making her skin more sensitive, so I looked into homemade soaps. At that point, combining the two made sense. I’d been selling my art for a while, but when I added the soap to my website, it took off until I was selling more soap than art. It helped to have something to keep my mind off things, especially after she and Papa moved down here to get treatments from Duke.”

“Sorry about your mom.”

“Thanks. She was in a lot of pain. It’s better that she’s not suffering. I just wish she’d never had it to begin with.”

“Why Grimm?”

Rose raised an eyebrow.

Nick smiled. A real, honest to goodness smile. With teeth!

“Rose. You said your parents were at Duke for treatment. That’s a few hours away. How did you end up in Grimm County?”

“Jesus, Nick. Subject, verb, and predicate?” She fanned herself. “Warn a girl next time.”

He laughed a full belly-aching laugh.

“I knew you could do it,” she continued. “I’ve heard you speak to the animals in full sentences. It was only matter of time before you applied that to humans.” Nick scowled, and she laughed. “Okay, I won’t push my luck. After spending a winter here with two inches of snow instead of eighty, Papa decided North Carolina was it for him. But he wanted new memories, so he came to the beach and used Mom’s life insurance money to open his dream restaurant. And like the good daughter I am, I followed him down here.”

She conveniently left out the part about the crazy ex that forced her hand, but that wasn’t relevant at the moment. “What about you? How did you end up with a farm?”

“Grandparents.”

When he didn't continue, Rose repeated, "Grandparents and ...". She motioned with her hand to keep going.

"Inheritance." Nick stood up and walked his dishes to the sink.

Rose sighed. She wasn't getting anything else out of him tonight. But the way he'd asked about her, at least she knew he was interested. He didn't do small talk. She knew if he asked a question, it was because he wanted to know the answer.

"When did Jasper eat last?" Rose asked.

"Two hours."

"Did he get all his ounces?"

"Yep."

"Anything else?"

"Don't let him piss on my clothes."

Rose laughed. "Oh, I brought a solution for that."

Chapter 15

The next couple of days passed quickly. Rose spent most of the day Friday making soap while Nick slept. Jasper was getting more independent, but still needed to be bottle fed. She couldn't believe he was only a few days old. On Saturday, Rose returned to the Sunset Market. She had planned to add a few sketches to her booth since she was lacking in soap, but her sketchbook had gone missing. Most likely, it was back at her rental house. Luckily, it all worked out.

Jeannie stopped by her booth early on and saw that Rose was low on supplies. Jeannie then proceeded to reorganize Rose's entire set up. Instead of looking sad, her booth looked so popular that several bars were sold out. Jeannie even made little signs to set next to each sold out area with QR codes that linked directly to Rose's website. It was genius. Not only did she still make sales despite not having a lot of product, she now had a ton of new customer email addresses to add to her newsletter.

"I can't believe you have a portable printer in your car."

“It would be weird if I was someone else. But Al does a lot of autographs, and he prefers to sign on his picture instead of a random napkin, so it comes in handy.”

“That’s pretty dedicated. Are you and Al ...” Rose trailed off.

“Are me and Al what?” Jeannie’s eyes narrowed.

“You know? Bumping uglies. Hiding the sausage.”

“Girl, please. That boy likes his ladies fast, cheap, and easy. I am none of those. But I blame his crackwhore of a mother. Poor guy wouldn’t know a healthy relationship if it bit him in the ass.”

“And would you like to?”

“Like to what?”

“Bite him in the ass?” Rose asked.

Jeannie laughed, but turned away and became way too interested in one of the soaps. After a minute, she turned back. “I like you, Rose. You are alright in my book. Have you heard anything else from your ex since the dick pic?”

“Only a few ‘when are you coming back’ texts, but no more dick pics. I think it worked.”

“Awesome. Just know there are always more where that came from if you need it.”

After the market, Rose took a quick trip down to the beach. She’d been so busy since she’d arrived in Grimm County that

she'd barely had time to enjoy the scenery. And what was the point of living on the coast if you never went to the beach?

Of course, that meant Rose had to return to the rental house to change into her swimsuit. The empty house wasn't nearly as unsettling during the daytime. And it turned out to be a good thing that she did go back because she'd forgotten to lock the front door. Thank goodness she lived in a small town with a great sheriff's office, otherwise she'd be worried about a break-in.

After laying out on the beach and cooling off in the waves, Rose headed back to Nick's farm. She didn't bother to change into regular clothes, figuring it'd be easier to head straight to his place and change into her PJs.

Arriving at the farm, she walked around and found Nick milking Ginger, one of the goats. "Do you think you could teach me to do that? That would be so cool to harvest the milk that I use in my soap. Wait, harvest probably isn't the right word. But what do you say? Milk the milk ..." Rose trailed off when Nick turned around and looked at her. No, not Nick. This man was all Beast.

His eyes darkened as he stood up and wiped his hands on a towel, never taking his eyes off her.

"The fuck are you wearing, sunshine?" he growled.

Rose stood still, unable to move as the heat of his gaze washed over her. "I went to the beach." Maybe she should have changed out of the bright red bikini after all. The halter top pushed her breasts up into a bosom that would make those

historical regency ladies jealous. The bottoms weren't exactly full coverage, but she had way less ass hanging out than most current styles allowed. She wore a coverup, but it was crocheted and full of holes that actually didn't cover anything. "I'll go change," she muttered.

"Don't." Quicker than a man his size should be capable of, he crossed the distance between them and pulled her close. "Who saw you in this?"

"I don't know. The people on the beach."

"What people?" he asked, tossing his towel on the hay bales. He placed his hands on her shoulders, pushing the cover-up down her arms and onto the ground. He reached behind her neck and untied the bow, freeing her breasts from her top.

"Nick!" she gasped.

"Killing me, Rose. No more bikinis around people." He palmed her breasts, stroking her nipples to hard peaks.

"You are such a caveman." And she loved every bit of it. His over-the-top protector vibe wasn't only what she needed, it was what she wanted.

"Not a caveman, Rose. Never forget I am a beast." In a swift motion, he lifted her up on the towel he'd left on the double-stacked hay bale. With a feral grin, he latched onto one breast while he continued to rub the other.

"Oh god," she moaned. He switched breasts and sucked until her bikini bottom felt wetter than it had when she'd gotten out of the ocean.

He released her breast and ran his beard over her wet flesh, nuzzling his face against her heaving chest.

“Beast!” she called out as his hand inched toward her waist. “Yes, please,” she panted. She opened her legs wider, wrapping one around his waist to grant him easier access. As his fingers dipped into her bikini bottom, the sound of a mini stampede exploded in the barn.

“Dammit!” Nick yelled, stepping back as ten goats invaded their space, led by one little mischievous Jasper, bleating as he led the charge. “That’s it! No dinner for you.”

“Maaa!”

Rose hopped off the hay bale, careful not to trip over any goats and adjusted her bathing suit. “I think ...” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. “I think I’ll go change. And you should probably go anyway. It’s almost six thirty.”

“We will finish this, Rose,” he growled, adjusting his cock in his pants.

Rose licked her lips and grinned. “Looking forward to it, Beast.”

The parking lot of the sheriff's office was full. Again. Did these people ever sleep?

"Taped last night," Nick growled at Jonathan.

"That is correct. And tonight, we're taping again," Jonathan said. "That's how filming a reality show works. Not every night gives us enough for a segment."

Nick glared as Jonathan shrugged. After three seasons, the director was mostly immune to Nick's personality.

"How much longer?"

"For filming? Another week or two. But less if I get enough good footage." He stared pointedly at Nick.

"Fine." He reached into his pocket and found the bar of Rose's soap. He rubbed the now familiar groove, feeling a little less combative as he did.

Nick sat at his desk chair and pretended to work on the computer. Another thing he hated. He missed paper files. One of the first things Christian had changed when he became Sheriff was to move to an online system. While Nick understood the benefits, he missed the days of simply opening a file drawer and pulling out the information he needed. Now, it took him ten minutes to navigate different screens and enter three different passwords. And some days, like today, he

hadn't even gotten the computer open before a new call came in.

Nick tried to sneak out of the office before anyone noticed, but of course, that was impossible. The address was familiar. He knew the situation they'd be arriving at, and he didn't want cameras. Unfortunately, Christian had signed a deal with the devil, and there was nothing Nick could do to stop it.

Arriving at the address, he reached into the backseat of his patrol car and grabbed his Sheriff cap. He exited the car while the film crew scrambled to get set up. *Fuck*. This could get nasty.

Nick raised a hand to knock on the door, but before he could, the door was opened by a small seven-year-old boy.

"Freddie." Nick squatted down so as not to tower over the boy. "You okay?"

Sniffling, Freddie nodded.

"Got the stupid cameras with me tonight." Nick nodded toward the film crew that was setting up. "Wear this," he said, placing the cap on Freddie's head. "Will keep your face off the TV."

"I think I'd like to be on a television show, Mr. Beast."

"Not this one, buddy. Now, stay on the porch while I find your dad." Nick walked into the house and found Freddie's father, Clyde, drinking a beer at the kitchen table. "Got a call about a domestic issue."

“Must be the wrong house. As you can tell, it’s quiet as a mouse here.”

“Where’s Melissa?”

“Asleep.”

“Go get her.”

“No.”

Nick walked over to Clyde and yanked the beer from his grasp. Nick crushed the can in his hand, not moving while the beer spilled onto the floor.

“Get her, or your head is next.”

“Hey! Did you get that on tape? He’s threatening me!”

Nick looked back at the camera operator who had sneaked in behind him.

“Sorry.” The operator shrugged. “I pushed the wrong button. It wasn’t running.”

Nick grabbed Clyde by the shoulder and pulled him out of his chair.

“Melissa. Now.”

Clyde disappeared and came back a few minutes later with Melissa. Despite her face being red from crying, there was no mistaking the bruise forming on her jaw.

“Clyde do that?”

“No. I fell.”

“Melissa.” Nick sighed. “Can’t help you if you lie.”

“I’m not lying.”

Freddie walked into the kitchen, still wearing Nick’s cap on his head.

“Yes, you are, Mommy. It’s okay if you’re afraid. I am too, but Mr. Beast will help us.” Freddie turned to Nick. “I saw Daddy hit Mommy.”

“Shut up, you stupid kid!” Clyde yelled, but he didn’t move from his place across the room.

Nick closed his eyes, the pounding in his ears growing louder.

“He ever hurt you like that, Freddie?”

“No, sir.”

Thank fuck. Nick was having a hard enough time keeping it together as it was. He looked back at Melissa. “You going to leave it up to the kid to testify?”

Melissa looked down. “No,” she whispered.

“Know it’s hard, Melissa, but you can do this. Let Freddie see you stand up to him,” Nick said.

Melissa cleared her throat and, in a loud voice, announced, “I didn’t fall. Clyde hit me. I want to press charges.”

“You bitch!” Clyde charged after her, but Nick held out an arm and clotheslined him to the ground. As Clyde gasped for air, Nick put on the handcuffs and read him his rights.

Once Clyde was secured in the back of the patrol car, Nick returned to the kitchen.

“You did good, Melissa.” He reached into his wallet and pulled out a card for the local women’s crisis center. “Call this number. They’ll help you start a life away from Clyde.”

Melissa shook her head. “I don’t know...”

“Melissa, you can do this. Nothing stronger than a mother’s love. Use that strength to build a better life for the two of you.”

Melissa steeled her features and nodded. “Thanks, Deputy.”

Nick turned around and looked at Freddie. “You good, kid?”

“Yeah, Mr. Beast.” He reached up to take off the hat, but Nick shook his head. “Keep it. Maybe you’ll join us in a few years.”

“That would be awesome! I want to help people just like you do.”

Nick didn’t feel like he was helping anyone. What he needed to do was beat Clyde to a bloody pulp and toss him into the ocean for the sharks to devour. Instead, he had to hope that Melissa would follow through on testifying and move Freddie away from Clyde—something his own mother never did.

Nick returned to the office where, fortunately, the rest of the night remained quiet.

Chapter 16

*S*o, that bitch thought she could hide from me? Me?
He picked up the framed picture of Rose from his bedside table and threw it against the wall.

Fucking cunt.

I know where you are now.

You did that on purpose, didn't you?

Tagged yourself in that fucking hippie market photo so I'd come and get you.

His eyes returned to the image on laptop. Rose's smile lit up the screen while she held a bar of that stupid fucking soap. But he saw what no one else did. That gleam in her eye that called out to him. The way her head cocked to the side, teasing him to find her.

Like I don't have better things to do than haul your sorry ass back home.

He grabbed a duffle bag from the back of his closet. Walking to his dresser, he ripped open the drawers and shoved clothes into his bag, paying no attention to what he selected.

But I'll do it.

I'll play your game, Rose.

And when I win, I get to claim my prize.

My ring on your finger, making you mine forever.

Soon, Rose. Very soon.

Chapter 17

“**M**^{aaa!}”
Rose awoke to the familiar sound of bleating on Sunday morning. She snuggled under the covers, knowing this would be her last morning waking up in Nick’s bed. Or maybe not, if the interlude in the barn was any indication. She might not wake up here as Jasper’s nanny, but maybe she’d wake up as Nick’s lover. Her body tingled in anticipation of the things she’d like to do in that bed.

Unfortunately, the smell of urine brought her out of the fantasy and into the present as Jasper continued to try and wake her.

“Yeah, yeah, little buddy. Let’s get you changed and eat some breakfast.”

She grabbed the hamper from the bed and trudged downstairs. She’d learned how to set the automatic timer on the coffeemaker earlier in the week. All she had to do was pour her cup and warm up Jasper’s bottle. Then, she could

feed him while her bread toasted. “We have a good system in place. I’m going to miss you, little guy.”

After he finished his bottle, she set Jasper on the floor to run around while she dumped the towels from his hamper into the washing machine. She washed her hands and added butter and jelly to her toast. By the time she finished, several minutes had passed, and Jasper was being too quiet.

“Crap! Jasper! Where are you?”

She searched the rooms downstairs but couldn’t find him. Panic setting in, she imagined all the little places he could have gotten himself stuck, when her eyes fell on Cassidy’s doggy door. The goat was too smart for his own good. She’d have to let Nick know he needed to get a cover for the little door.

She walked out of the back door and continued to call his name. The goat corral seemed to be the most obvious place, but he wasn’t there playing with the other goats. Moving to the main barn, she searched all the stalls but couldn’t find him. Heading into a full-blown panic, she checked each shed and still nothing.

The only building left was the gray shed, the one Nick had specifically told her to stay out of. But where else could Jasper be? And surely, Jasper’s safety took priority over whatever Nick was hiding in the gray shed. What could be so bad? Dead bodies? Was he secretly a Dexter-style serial killer?

Shaking her head, she headed for the gray shed.

Probably just a collection of vintage Playboys.

Finding the door slightly ajar, she pushed it open the rest of the way and gasped. Sunlight streamed in from the skylights, bathing the interior in a warm glow. Painted canvases covered the walls, some with beach sunsets and others with the farm life she'd become so familiar with. A table was covered in tubes of paint and brushes and other tools of the trade. There were also several works in progress covering easels scattered throughout the room.

Just when she thought she couldn't fall any harder for this man, he had to go and put an art studio in his backyard. Rubbing her hand over her heart, she walked over to the easels. *Holy shit.*

On Wednesday, while Jasper and Nick were napping, she'd gotten bored and grabbed a sketch book from her car. As her brain worked through the emotions of the day, she'd found herself sketching a picture of Nick and Sadie. He clearly loved his animals. Rose had easily found pictures of Sadie to make a close likeness. She'd been in such a hurry that morning that she forgot to grab the book on her way out. And now, her drawing was hanging on an easel, but it wasn't just her drawing anymore.

Instead of her black and white pencil sketch, there was now color. Someone—*Nick?*—had used watercolors to bring life to the drawing. But the pain was there too, where the paint dripped down the paper like tears. Her art had never come to life like that before.

Tears filled her eyes as she moved to the next easel that held a sketch she'd drawn of Marina holding her disgusting cupcake. The colors he'd added brought a vibrancy to the drawing that wasn't there before. Another easel displayed a sketch of her father, wielding his wooden spoon. She laughed at the red cheeks Nick had added.

Her heart thudded in her chest as she walked to the remaining three easels of their combined art. Rough as he may seem on the outside, on the inside, he was full of passion and heart.

A loud bang shook her from her revelry. Startled, she looked toward the door and saw Nick standing there like a raging bull.

“What are you doing here?” Nick barked.

“Oh!” Rose yelped. “I was looking for Jasper. He got through the doggy door, and I couldn't find him.”

“Didn't I tell you to stay out of the gray shed?”

“Yes, but I couldn't find him. This was the only place I hadn't looked.”

“Get. Out.” His voice was deep and menacing.

“Nick, why are you so angry? Your work is incredible. What you've done to my sketches is—“

“I said GET OUT!” Nick bellowed loud enough that she would have sworn the easels rattled.

The tears that had threatened to fall earlier were now dropping in full force. There was no man in him after all. Just

beast.

“Well, fuck you, Beast. I’m out. Today was my last day anyway. And you know what? You can tell Jonathan to stick this week’s catering order up his ass because I’m done with that too. Or better yet, he can stick the catering order up *your* ass.”

With that, Rose rushed past Nick before her heart broke any further.

Nick staggered back against the wall of the shed, holding his head in his hands. He was vaguely aware of the sound of her car peeling out of the driveway. The buzzing in his ears grew louder while his mind replayed his father’s voice.

Art is for sissies.

Put your scribbling away and man up.

What a fucking disappointment.

His mind replayed his father destroying his paints, throwing his toys, and chasing his mother until it became too much for him. He turned around and slammed his fist into wall, leaving a large dent in the metal. His body stilled, the voice in his head drowned out by the heaving of his breath.

“Maaa!”

“Jasper?” Blinking, Nick shook his head to clear the fog.

He turned around to see the little goat emerge from under one of the tables.

“What are you doing here? Where’s Rose?” Looking around the shed, his eyes landed on the easels of Rose’s sketches that he’d been painting. His heart froze as his mind finally caught up to what happened.

“ROSE!” he shouted. Scooping up Jasper with one hand, he ran back to the house, calling her name. But it was too late. He stood in front of his house, staring at the empty space where her car used to be. He sank to his knees as he realized what he had done. The beast had won.

Chapter 18

Rose drove through town, forcing herself to slow down as the tears blurred her vision. “Asshole!” she shouted inside her car. “What the fuck is his stupid fucking problem? I should be the one who is upset! He stole my sketches and painted all over them!” But when she thought back to the art he’d created using her sketches, her heart broke all over again. They were stunning. Why was he upset that she’d found them? Something was wrong with the man, clearly.

She looked up to see she had pulled into the alley behind her dad’s restaurant. Rose rubbed her hand over her chest. *Thanks for the nudge, Mom.* A hug from her dad would make everything better.

Walking inside the restaurant, Rose’s mouth dropped open. Almost all the tables were occupied by bikers. The last time she’d visited during brunch, there’d been only a handful of families dining.

Rose smirked. Forget the hug from her dad; a room full of big, burly men was exactly what she needed right now. As she

walked past the bikers, she noticed the back of each vest had a skeleton and the words “Grimm’s Reapers.”

“Papa!” she called out as she reached the kitchen.

Louis was rushing around, checking tickets and adjusting orders. “Rose! *Ma chouchoute!* Come and give me a hand.”

“Of course, Papa. I can’t believe how many people are out there. Where did they come from?”

“Those are my friends.”

“You have friends?” Rose teased as she matched tickets to plates and passed them over to the servers.

“I do now. These are my new friends from my anger management class. It seems that hitting the deputy gave me a bit of...what did they call it? Street cred.”

Rose laughed. “Hey, whatever fills the restaurant.”

She worked with her father until the restaurant closed several hours later. They were busy enough that she didn’t have a chance to think about Beast. At least, not until her father brought him up.

“Rose, tell me why you came here tonight. I know it was not to help me serve the Reapers.”

“The Reapers? Do you hang out with them now?”

“Do not change the subject, Rose. I know something is bothering you.”

“Fine,” she huffed. She explained to her father everything about her stay at Nick’s farm, from the birth of Jasper to his

epic blow up.

“Ahh.”

“Ahh?”

“Yes, ahh.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means ‘ahh’. I understand him now.”

“Are you kidding me?” Rose shook her head.

“Your beastly friend’s reaction was disproportionate to the situation. Something else was going on inside him. But because he lacks the tools to properly manage his anger—tools which I now possess, by the way—he yelled at you.”

“That’s a poor excuse for the way he spoke to me,” Rose huffed.

“Not an excuse. There is nothing that can excuse his behavior, just as there was nothing I could say to excuse the spoon incident. But there is always an explanation.”

“Okay. What was the explanation for the wooden spoon?”

Louis sighed. “Grief. Fear. I used your mother’s life insurance on this business. If it fails, I fail her. Her memory. I tried to make everything perfect and French, and your beast came and disrespected everything the food was about. In my mind, he was disrespecting your mother. So, I hit him with a spoon.”

Rose thought for a minute. “If he was disrespecting Mom, I would agree with the spoon. But the way he picks up the food

or sets it on his plate has nothing to do with her.”

“Yes, I see that *now*. But not before.”

“Well, what does that mean in my situation?”

“The beast was yelling at you, but not because you went into his shed.”

“Pretty sure that is exactly why he was yelling, Papa.”

“No one gets that angry about opening a door to a shed. There is some reason why he wants to keep that hidden.” Louis paused. “You said his art was good?”

“Better than good. It’s incredible.”

“Then, why does he hide it?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you feel about your art? Like the piece you made for your mother’s funeral.”

Rose’s heart stopped. She hadn’t told her dad that Gavin had covered it in blood.

“Like I drew a part of my soul on canvas.”

“Maybe it is the same for him, and he wasn’t ready to share his soul.”

“I don’t know, Papa. You should see the way he is with his animals. And Cassidy. Knowing him from the sheriff’s station, would you ever suspect he has a three-legged chihuahua that jumps in his car and kisses his face when he comes home? The way he is with those animals, he definitely shares his heart and soul.”

“To the animals, Rose. Not to people.”

She pondered the conversation with her father during the car ride home. Nick’s reaction had been completely over the top and hurtful. As Beast, she wasn’t surprised. But the Nick she had gotten to know over the last few weeks would never lash out at her or deliberately try to hurt her.

Maybe her father was right, and there was something else going on with him. And that only made her worry for him. *Ugh. Of course I’m worried about his feelings after he trampled all over mine.* If she’d been kidnapped, she would worry about Stockholm Syndrome. But no, staying at his place, in his bed, was all her idea.

By the time Rose arrived home, she’d decided to spend the rest of the evening in bed with a pint of ice cream and a good movie. In a few days, she’d make up an excuse to go to his place. If nothing else, her soap was still there. After a few days to cool off, maybe they could have a conversation like adults and move past the incident. After he sufficiently groveled, of course.

He showed such patience with his animals. Even when she’d seen him break up fights on TV, he never lost his cool. Something else was bothering him. And as much as she hated to admit it, she cared about the big lug.

Rose arrived at the house to find the front door unlocked—again. The first time, she’d brushed it off, but there was no way she’d forgotten to lock it again.

Her hand hesitated on the doorknob. Should she continue? Or call the sheriff's office? Nick wasn't on duty, so it wouldn't be awkward to call in for help. Standing quietly, she listened for any sign that someone might be inside. Hearing nothing and armed with a flower pot from the front porch, she slowly pushed the door open.

Rose gasped as she took in the living room. A white lace negligee and panty set was draped on her coffee table. Next to it was a single red rose and a white card with gold embossing. Picking up the card, she read the words, "Save the date," on the front with the silhouette image of a bride and groom. Hands shaking, she flipped open the card, only to find the word, "Soon," scrawled in Gavin's handwriting with a large "G" at the bottom.

Rose turned and quickly scanned the room, half expecting Gavin to jump out of the corner. *Fuck!* The shaking from her hands moved to her entire body as the reality sunk in. Gavin had been there. In her house. He wasn't in Maine anymore. He was in Grimm County. And he was planning their wedding. For the second time that day, tears flooded her eyes as she raced back to her car.

Hopefully, Nick was over whatever bug had crawled up his ass earlier, or maybe they could table it for another day. There was only one place she'd feel safe tonight, and that was wrapped in her beast's big, strong arms.

Nick sat reading on his grandfather's plaid recliner with Cassidy in his lap and Jasper resting quietly on a nest of towels next to his chair. He struggled to turn the pages, the weight of his shame and regret sitting heavily on him. Sensing her owner's despair, Cassidy walked her front legs up Nick's chest, pushing him until he lifted her high enough to nuzzle against his neck.

"I sent her away, sweet girl. I don't deserve your snuggles."

Cassidy sniffed loudly and wagged her stub of a tail.

After several hours of shoveling manure and chopping wood he wouldn't need for another nine months, Nick was able to shake the ghost of his father from his mind. But that just left him with Rose, and there was nothing he could do to erase the look on her face when he'd lost it on her.

What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he act like everyone else and use his words? Even the preschool kids knew how to do that.

God, the way she'd looked at him—that mixture of fear, hurt, and disgust. He groaned and laid his head back against the chair, staring up at the ceiling. He might have stayed like that for the rest of the night if not for a loud banging on the front door.

"The fuck is that, Cassidy?" he asked as the dog yipped. Lifting her off his chest, he set her on the ground and dropped his book on the chair. "Stay with Jasper."

The knocking grew more frantic as he closed the distance.

“Coming!” he shouted. Whoever it was must have heard him because the knocking stopped.

He paused as his hand gripped the doorknob. His eyes wandered to the stairs, drifting up toward his bedroom, where his service revolver lay in the drawer of his bedside table. *It's not as if the night can get any worse.* Shaking his head, he opened the front door and stepped outside.

“Ro—” he choked out, unable to finish saying her name before she flung herself into his arms.

“Nick!” Her breathing was heavy, and her body was shaking all over.

“Rose. Sunshine. What’s wrong?” He tried to pull back to see her face, but she held on tighter.

“Please. I need to stay here tonight. I can’t go home.”

Terror raced through his system.

“Rose, did someone hurt you?” He waited for a response. “Rose! Look at me. Are. You. Hurt?”

Slowly, her grip loosened, and her head turned up to his. Her breathing slowed to less of a panic. “No.”

Thank fuck.

“I just ... I need you tonight. Is that okay? Only for tonight. Tomorrow, you can go back to hating me or—”

Nick cut her off before she could continue. “Don’t hate you, Rose.” He brushed the hair off her face, drowning in the depths of her emerald eyes. “Could never hate you.”

“So, I can stay?” She blinked up at him, her lashes wet from her tears.

The uncertainty in her voice squeezed his chest like a vice to his heart. He’d done that to her. He’d made her feel unwelcome.

“Of course, sunshine. Whatever you need, I’ll give it to you. Always.”

“*Whatever* I need?” Rose raised a hand to cup his jaw.

He groaned at her soft touch. He lowered his head and breathed in her scent of sunshine and roses. His cock raised in his shorts, but he resisted the urge to pull her tighter against him.

“Tell me what you need,” he whispered in her ear. He grinned at the shiver that ran through her body.

“You.” She was panting again, but the hungry look in her eyes told him it hadn’t been caused by fear or panic this time. “Tonight, I just need you.”

They pulled back and stared into each other’s eyes for a fraction of a second before their lips collided in a frantic explosion of lust and desire.

“Need you now,” Rose gasped as she wrenched her arms from his neck and tore off her shirt.

He spun her around, pushing her back against the wall next to the front door. She kicked off her flip flops as she unzipped her pants and pulled them off, leaving only her bra and panties.

Nick stood back and drank in her luscious curves. “Beautiful.”

Rose shook her head. “Admire me later. Fuck me now.”

At another time, Nick might have laughed at her impatience. But his dick was so hard that her dirty words almost made him come on the spot.

He pulled his thick cock out of his shorts and stroked himself as Rose removed the last of her clothing. He continued to pump himself while he stared at her plump breasts, her rosy nipples beading like—

“Enough staring!” Rose wrapped her arms around Nick’s shoulders and lifted one leg around his waist to bring him close. “Are you going to make me beg?”

“Not tonight, sunshine.” He reached between them and slid a finger into her welcoming heat. “You’re so fucking wet.” He added a second finger, his aching dick leaking in protest as he prepared her to take his full length. He kissed her hard, and she moaned into his mouth, riding his fingers.

“Now, Nick!”

He pulled his fingers away from her and raised them to his lips. Licking them clean, he smiled. “Not Nick. Beast.” He sank to his knees and lifted her leg over his shoulder. “Mine,” he growled as he thrust his face between her thighs and devoured her sweet warmth like it was his sole mission in life.

“I don’t care what you call yourself, as long as you ... Oh god,” she moaned as he drove his tongue into her folds. Nick

could feel her getting close, and pulled back, stopping to give her clit one last kiss before standing back up. He needed her right on the edge before he entered her because he wouldn't be able to last long once he got inside.

“You taste so good, baby. Like drinking drops of pure golden sunshine.”

“Beast,” she whined. “Stop messing around.” She grabbed onto his shoulders and hoisted herself up, wrapping her legs around him.

Nick smirked as he lined up his cock against her entrance. Pushing her into the wall, he ran his leaking tip up and down her slit.

“Is this what you need, baby? You need your pussy to be filled with my giant dick?”

“Yes! I'm naked on your front porch. I'm not sure how much more clear I can—”

He cut her off with a kiss and slammed his raging erection into her. She was so slick and ready that his cock glided in all the way to the hilt.

Rose groaned in relief. “Finally.”

Nick chuckled. “Not over yet, sunshine.” He took her fast and hard against the side of his house, slamming into her again and again. The cries of her passion echoed across the farm. She tightened against him, squeezing his cock in the best possible way. He needed her to come. His cock was ready to

explode. Reaching down, he rubbed a finger against her nub.
“Come for me, Rose. No more waiting.”

Rose’s nails raked down his back, the pain adding to his pleasure. He pushed his finger harder, driving her closer to orgasm. Her walls fluttered as she sucked in a deep breath. With a shout, she reached the brink and he watched as waves of pleasure washed over her. The site was so erotic that Nick couldn’t hold back any longer. His cock burst inside her, bathing her womb in his cum. They both panted heavily as they came down from their high.

“Rose, you okay?”

“Mmm,” was all she could manage.

Nick backed away, gently pulling out of her. “Ahh, fuck,” he said, watching the evidence of their lovemaking drip down her leg. He resisted the urge to scoop it up and push it back inside her.

“What?” she mumbled.

“No condom. I’m clean. Always glove up. Wasn’t thinking when I answered the door.”

Rose laughed. “What? You didn’t expect to open the door and have sex on your front porch? That’s actually a good thing. I’m clean too, so we’re fine.”

“That’s not the only issue, Rose.”

“What? Oh. Right. No worries there, I’m on the pill.”

Why did that disappoint him? Why did the thought of Rose's belly growing large with his baby give him such a feeling of satisfaction?

"Let's get inside," he said to avoid thinking further about a pregnant Rose.

"Yeah, I could use a drink before round two."

This woman.

Chapter 19

The sun's rays splashed through the curtains, bathing the woman laying on Nick's chest in golden hues.

"Good morning, sunshine."

Rose groaned, burying her face into the crook of his neck. "No. I need more sleep." She tightened the arm that was wrapped around his broad chest and wrapped one leg over his.

This is it. This is how I want to wake up every morning for the rest of my life.

Nick brushed his lips against the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her. "Maybe I can convince you." He lowered the hand that had been stroking her side down her body, slowly coming to rest against her bare ass. With a gentle squeeze, he whispered, "Are you sure you want to go back to sleep?"

Moaning, Rose backed her hips up just slightly. Nick slipped a finger into her center.

“Fuck, Rose,” he growled. “You’re already wet. Is this why you wanted to go back to sleep? You were dreaming about my big cock?”

“Maybe. But you woke me up before I finished the dream.”

“I’ll help you finish, baby.” He pulled his hand from her core while she moved to straddle him. Reaching down, she grabbed his cock and guided him into her slick folds. Nick stared in awe as she moaned in pleasure, eyes closed, teeth tugging on her lower lip as she took him in all the way.

“Beast,” she drew out his name in such a low, husky tone.

He fought the urge to flip her onto her back and slam into her so hard the bed would break. But that urge was outweighed by the anticipation of Rose riding his cock, breasts bouncing to the beat of their rhythm.

She placed her hands on his pecs and looked into his eyes. She squeezed her inner walls, causing him to call out, “Fuck, woman!” She lowered her head to his, her long hair acting like a curtain caging them in. She kissed him hard on the lips, then pulled back.

“Rose,” he warned. “You’ve got ten seconds, and then I’m —”

Laughing, the minx winked, and finally—finally—rocked her hips. Her hands dug into his shoulders as she rode him. He grinned, hoping she was adding more scratches to the damage she’d left on his body last night.

“I’m already so close, Beast.” Nick’s eyes widened as he watched Rose bring one hand from his shoulder down to her clit. “Just need a little bit of ...” She groaned out as her body exploded with bliss. Moving his hands to her hips, he thrust up into her, not needing much more before he lost all control.

Exhausted, Rose collapsed against his chest. “I suppose that is a good reason to wake up,” she whispered.

“Yeah, sunshine. Never want to wake up any other way again.”

Rose’s body stiffened, and he heard her breath hitch.

Fuck.

“Rose. About yesterday. In the shed.” He stroked her hair as he tried to keep his breathing measured.

“Yeah, about that.” Rose coughed. “Maybe I should climb off your dick first.”

Nick laughed, feeling the tension leave his body. This was what she did for him. She brought light to his dark, peace to his torment.

“Father was an asshole,” he started. “I liked animals. He said that was women’s shit. I liked to paint. He called me a sissy.” He took a deep breath. “Before he died, he had a big outburst while I was painting. I thought he was passed out and it would be a safe time to paint. I was wrong. Or he woke up. Mom tried to distract him by taking him out to the liquor store, and they died on the way in a car crash.”

“Oh, Nick,” Rose said, reaching out to grab his hand.

“That’s why I am this way. Why I don’t like to talk to people. Why I don’t want anyone to know about the art.” He stroked his beard with his free hand. “Yesterday, I had a call. The dad was just like mine, and there was a boy, and I don’t know.”

“It was like seeing your childhood all over again?”

“Yeah. I came home with his voice in my head. Saw you in the shed, surrounded by my paintings, and I lost it. I’m sorry, Rose.” He reached over and pulled her close. “So fucking sorry,” he mumbled into her hair.

Rose pulled back and gave him a small smile. “That makes more sense. You got triggered at work, came home, and it all blew up when you saw me in the shed. Thank you for sharing that with me. But, Nick, even though I get it, you’re going to need to get a handle on that with some therapy or medication or something. I just got out of a relationship where my ex turned out to be ... unpredictable. I won’t go through that again.”

“He hurt you?” he growled.

“No, nothing like that. And we aren’t talking about him right now. We’re talking about you.”

“I’m sorry, Rose.” The shame settled in him like a weight. “Never wanted to be like that to you.”

“Papa finished his anger management classes and will be back catering soon. Maybe you can ask him about it. He’s all peace and love now, so something worked. Is your dad why

you don't talk to people but have full-on conversations with all the animals around here?"

Smiling, Nick nodded. "They don't talk back. No need to worry what they think or might say."

"And speaking of the animals ..."

"Need to go feed them."

“They are impatient this morning,” Rose said as she walked toward the front door.

“They can wait a few more minutes,” he said as his lips met hers for a slow and gentle kiss. She threaded her fingers through his hair, wanting the kiss to last, but the cacophony of bleating, clucking, and barking outside proved too much. “Cock-blockers. All of them,” Nick muttered.

Rose giggled, hating to pull away but knowing she had to. “It’ll be okay. Neither of us has to work today. We’ll get them fed and set Jasper up in his playpen. Then, we can spend the rest of the morning in bed.” She stepped backward and stumbled over the plaid recliner. Something poked her back and she reached behind her, finding a book.

“Nick.” She gasped as she read the cover. “Were you reading *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus?*”

Nick shrugged sheepishly. “I’m trying.”

“Come here, my sweet beast.” She crawled out of the chair and wrapped her arms around his chest. He hugged her tight and planted a kiss on top of her head before letting her go again.

“Hey, Rose,” Nick started, causing her to pause with her hand on the doorknob. “Forgot to ask. What happened last

night?”

Rose lifted an eyebrow.

“Before that. You came back. You were upset. Why?”

Rose felt the blood drain from her face. *Shit*. In her post-coital bliss, she’d forgotten all about the reason she came over last night. And now that they’d spent the night making love, Gavin was the last thing she wanted to discuss with Nick. But if Gavin was in town and in her house, she needed to get law enforcement involved. And that was the whole reason she’d tried to befriend Nick in the first place.

She turned the knob to the door and pulled it open. “Right, about that. Remember earlier when I mentioned having an ex —” But before she could finish her sentence, several voices shouted at once.

“Beast! Have you always lived on a farm?”

“Beast! How do you take care of these animals and work full-time for the sheriff?”

“Beast! Is this your girlfriend? Have you painted a picture of her?”

Rose’s mouth fell open as she looked back at Nick. He stood frozen in the doorway, blinking at the scene before him.

Two people stood in the yard in front of the steps, clicking their large cameras at Rose and Nick. Several other people held up their phones, likely recording the entire exchange.

Rose looked back and forth between Nick and the reporters, wondering what had happened. As she struggled to come up with a response, since Nick clearly was not going to say anything, a car horn blared through the noise.

A blue Jetta raced down the driveway and slammed its brakes just before crashing into the throng of people.

“Holy shit,” Rose whispered.

“That’s enough, boys,” Jeannie hopped out of the vehicle, wearing a tight, low-cut crop top and tiny shorts. The men’s attention quickly shifted focus, allowing Rose to take a peek at Nick. His face was ashen, and his breathing was coming out in shallow pants.

“Nick, baby. You need to sit down,” she said guiding him to one of the rocking chairs.

“Any conversations with Chief Deputy Nick will go through me, Jeannie Knight. You want to talk to him, you come to me. You want a comment, the only way you will get one is from me.” She walked through the group, pausing in front of each reporter to ask their name and employer. “Uh oh!” she said, voice dripping with sweetness. “I dropped my phone.” Jeannie bent over, allowing the men to gaze at her ass, keeping their attention away from Nick and Rose.

Rose caught her eye as she raised back up, and Jeanne rolled her eyes and smirked.

“That’s enough, boys. I’ve got a meeting with my client, so you all need to leave. Who wants my card?” she asked,

reaching inside her cleavage to pull out a stack of business cards.

“Me! Me!” they all shouted, wrestling amongst each other to grab a card. Laughing, she said, “No need to fight! Once you’ve got my number, you’ll be able to reach out anytime you want. But not today because we’ve got other things planned.”

As the reporters pulled out of the driveway, Jeannie bounded up the steps.

“Okay, y’all. We’ve got a real shitstorm on our hands. I tried calling to warn you, but no one answered, so I got over here as soon as I could.”

Nick turned to Jeannie. “How the fuck did this happen, J?”

Jeannie looked at Rose, then Nick, then back to Rose. “Umm ...”

“What?” Rose asked, feeling a wave of trepidation wash over her.

“You don’t know?” Jeannie asked her.

“No, I have no idea. Everything was fine yesterday. Then today, these people were here.”

“Right. I figured as much.” Jeannie nodded. “When I woke up this morning, my phone had blown up. Like blown the fuck up. Nick, a bunch of pictures of you on the farm were blasted all over social media. As *Grimm County Lawmen’s* most reclusive deputy, they went viral faster than Al singing in drag.”

“What kind of pictures?” Rose asked, dreading the response.

“Well, not naked ones, so I guess that’s a silver lining. Pictures of Nick on the farm with the animals. Looking smoking hot, I might add, which is probably why everything blew up like it did. Some posts included the address to the farm. That’s how the reporters ended up here.”

“Reporter mentioned art.”

Jeannie reached over and squeezed Nick’s shoulder. “Yeah, big guy. There were pictures from inside the shed too.”

Rose tried to ignore the jealousy that flared up inside. She knew Jeannie wasn’t interested in Nick, but the fact that she knew about the shed? That stung.

“Let me see,” Nick demanded.

“You know, that’s not important. We need to focus on getting you some bigger gates, some no trespassing signs, making sure everyone knows to call me instead of you ...”

“Jeannie ...” Nick growled.

She shot Rose a sad shrug. “Sorry,” she whispered and handed her phone over to Nick. Slowly, he flipped through the images on her phone, breathing in and out as his face grew redder.

“You,” he said, looking straight at Rose.

“Me?” Rose squawked.

“You. You did this.”

“Did what?” *What on earth was he talking about?* Nick thrust the phone into her hand.

“Get out.”

Rose’s blood heated. *Not this shit again.*

“Nick, I know you’ve got issues, but I told you, I won’t put up with this bull—” Rose’s threat died off as she looked at the images on the phone. It was her social media account for Rose’s Soap Box. Right there in color, with her profile pic, were a series of posts.

“My latest soap scent, the Lawmen, uses goat milk from fan favorite Chief Deputy Nick! Did you know he runs a farm with goats and chickens? Love hanging out here with him!”

There were several along those lines, and then the worst of all:

“Beastly deputy by day, gentle painter by night! Check out the gorgeous art created by Chief Deputy Nick AKA Beast!”

Underneath the post was a picture of one of his paintings.

Rose handed the phone back to Jeannie, unable to look at any more posts.

“That what you did before coming back last night?”

“What? No! Nick! I had nothing to do with this!”

“Just get out. Don’t come back. Ever.”

Tears ran down Rose’s cheeks. “It wasn’t me! I would never, Nick, please, I—” Rose was interrupted by the arrival of a white convertible, top down and filled with women.

“Get them out of here, J,” Nick growled.

Nick walked inside and slammed the door.

“Fucking Grimbos,” Jeannie muttered.

“Jeannie, you believe me, right?”

Jeannie put an arm around Rose’s shoulders. “Of course, girl. People get hacked all the time. Like, all the fucking time. If you say you didn’t do it, I believe you.”

A small amount of relief flooded through Rose’s system.

“But then the question becomes, who hacked you? It’s kinda fucked up because in order to get those pics, especially the ones in the art shed, they had to be on the property. I’ll close the gate and call Al once I’m done here. We need to figure out who’s responsible. Nick may be too messed up to see it right now, but some nefarious fucker has been trespassing.”

Jeannie reached around and gave Rose a full hug. “Don’t worry, hon. Hunter is great at figuring out this type of stuff. We’ll get Nick to see reason. Try to be patient and don’t give up on him. I’ve never seen him smile as much as he has in the

past few weeks. You're good for him. We won't let him screw this up."

With that, Jeannie ushered Rose into her car and went over to square off with the Grimbos.

Fortunately, Rose had left everything in her car when she'd arrived, so she didn't need to go back in the house for her purse. At least one thing was going right this morning. She pulled out of the driveway, wondering if she should call Hunter. He didn't need to do any high-tech searching because she knew exactly who'd hacked her account and trespassed on the farm.

Fucking Gavin.

Chapter 20

Nick slowly rocked on the front porch, trying to quiet Jasper as they watched the rain fall. The dreariness of the evening seemed to compound his already morose state. It had been four days. Four fucking days since his quiet, private life had blown up all to hell.

It was bad enough that reporters or bloggers or whatever the fuck they called themselves kept approaching him. They wanted to know about his life, his farm, his art. Jeannie did her best to handle everything for him, thank God. He would have left the state if it wasn't for her.

She'd explained that the reason everyone was so crazy to know about him was because he was so private. By her reasoning, if he gave a few interviews and posted a few pictures, he would become boring and they would leave. Nick refused to do anything on camera but allowed Jeannie to answer questions and send pictures.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much she could do about the Grimbos, and their weird shit was starting to bother him. On

Tuesday, his patrol car was plastered with pictures of naked women while it was parked in the station lot. The entire film crew had been out with Christian, so there was no one around to see who did it. Al thought it was funny as hell, of course.

On Wednesday, someone had stolen his sheets and placed a bouquet of red roses on his bare bed. That was freaky as fuck, and he ended up sleeping in the guest bedroom—after checking all the windows and adding a padlock to the front gate.

The worst part, though, the absolute worst part of all this, was how much he missed Rose. Nick rocked faster as if trying to keep in time with the racing of his heart. How could she have betrayed him like this? Yes, he'd yelled at her and told her to get out of his shed. That had been wrong. But to post all those pictures and his address, and then come over and fuck him? That was twisted and didn't seem like her at all. But she had been upset when she came back. Had that been guilt? Fuck, he didn't know what to think.

“Maaa.” Jasper looked up at Nick and cocked his head as if he knew Nick was thinking about Rose. The goat missed her and would not shut up about it. He was a stubborn little thing and refused to eat half the time. So, on top of everything else, he had a loud, hangry baby goat who missed his mom.

The loud shrill of his phone interrupted his thoughts.

“Yo,” Nick answered the phone.

“Hey, big guy!” Jeannie called out. Jasper seemed to bleat even louder on hearing a female voice. “I've got a great idea.

It's watch party night at Susie's. The other three guys are here, plus me and Marina. You should be too, and we'll post a few pics. Your fans will get the pictures they need from tonight and leave you alone for a few days."

Jasper bleated even louder, giving him an idea.

"You and Marina there?"

"Yeah, that's what I said. Are you even listening?"

"On my way."

"Really?" Jeannie's surprise was clear even through the noise of the bar and the goat.

"Yeah." Nick hung up and looked down at Jasper. "Let's go check out that baby gear your mom bought. We're going on a field trip."

About an hour later, Nick arrived at Susie's Bar, wearing a sheriff's ball cap and a plaid shirt. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, which he was grateful for as he struggled to return the baby stroller to its regular position. All he had to do was push a button to make it collapse and lay down into his truck bed. But that same button didn't work as easily to expand the stroller. He should have paid attention when Rose had offered to show him.

"Motherfucking piece of shit," he muttered, holding down the button and shaking the contraption.

“Beast!” Mr. Bill, AKA Naked Old Guy, walked up to him carrying a giant umbrella. He wasn’t naked tonight—his daughter Susie wouldn’t allow him in the bar without clothes. Instead, he was wearing gold satin pajama shorts with a matching satin tank top.

“You know how to work this thing?” Nick asked.

“Hell no. Why would you think that?”

“You have kids.”

“Yeah, but they ain’t been in strollers for over forty years. How about you pull that end, and I’ll pull this end while you push that big button, and we’ll see what happens?”

After lots of tugging, pulling, and grunting, the stroller finally stretched out and locked into place.

“Thanks, Mr. Bill.”

“You got it.” Bill looked back at the truck. “You got a kid in there?”

“Yeah,” Nick grunted, reaching in to pick up Jasper and his towels.

“Well, damn. Now, there’s something you don’t see every day. You trying to get lucky tonight? I’ve heard of guys using kids and puppies for that, but this’ll be the first time I see someone use a goat.” He reached down to pet Jasper. “You are cute, though, so it might work.” Jasper bleated a response. “And noisy. You got something you can give him to shut him up? With all that racket, he’s more likely to cock-block you than be good pussy bait.”

“Jesus, Bill!” Nick swore.

“What?” Bill threw his free hand up in the air and stepped back. “You’re the one who brought a goat to a bar to pick up women.”

“Not why I brought him,” Nick growled.

“Well, what other reason could there be?”

“Misses the lady that used to take care of him. Won’t shut up. Won’t eat. Trying to see if one of the girls can calm him down,” Nick said, nodding toward the bar.

Bill scrunched up his nose. “What happened to the lady that took care of him? She die or something?”

“No! Fuck.” Nick tried to calm his voice. “Kicked her out.”

“You fired your goat’s babysitter? That can’t be smart. I imagine that’s a hard job to fill.”

“Not fired. She wasn’t paid.”

“Wait, you had a lady looking after your goat for free, and you kicked her out? Told her to leave?” Bill shook his head. “I swear, it’s a wonder this town isn’t overrun with criminals. You deputies are dumb as rocks.”

Nick pushed the stroller toward the door, leaving Bill in the parking lot.

“Hey! Don’t shoot the messenger!” Bill shouted as he hurried to keep up. “Seems to me that a woman willing to spend time with a goat is an unusual woman, and you

shouldn't be kicking her out for no good reason. I'll bet she was hot too." He shook his head. "Dumb ass."

"Had a good reason," Nick mumbled, trying not to think of how hot she was and focus on the social media posts that ruined his quiet life instead. He opened the door and pushed Jasper inside.

The bar was crowded with fans and locals, but fortunately, the show credits were rolling. Most of the crowd would be headed out soon. Although, it was loud enough that it helped to drown out Jasper's noise. Nick tightened his grip on the handle and pushed the stroller through the throng of people, trying to not to get Jasper splashed with beer. Finding the table with his friends, he moved an empty chair to the side and set the stroller in its place.

"Oh my god, Nick!" Marina exclaimed. "You have a baby? In a bar?" She squeezed Christian's arm. "This is so exciting! I've always wanted to say that!"

Jeannie laughed. "I love that movie! But girl, that is not a baby. Although technically, it is a kid."

At that moment, Jasper reached his front hooves over the edge of the stroller.

"Woah," whispered Marina. Her eyes blinked. And blinked again. She looked around the table, then back to the stroller. "Rose isn't short for Rosemary, is it?"

Jeannie laughed again. "Marina, you are too much. But don't worry, you're in the Bible Belt now. That *Rosemary's Baby*

type of shit doesn't happen here." Wiping the tears from her eyes, she turned to Nick, ignoring Marina's pale face. "Speaking of, have you spoken to Rose since Sunday?"

"No. And he misses her." He pointed at Jasper, who at this point had pushed up on his spindly hind legs and was looking around the bar. "Brought him so you and Marina could give him some feminine love. Needs to eat and shut the hell up."

Al reached over and put his arm on the back of Jeannie's chair, joining the conversation. "Needs to eat and shut the hell up? Who? You or the goat?" he snickered.

"Fuck you," Nick answered.

"There you go again. Using your words instead of grunting. She's good for you, man."

Nick shook his head. There were many things he wanted to say to Al, but he kept his mouth shut, not wanting to prove him right.

Hunter leaned over to grab a handful of peanuts from the bowl in the middle of the table. He was on duty, so he was drinking sweet tea instead of beer. "Social media accounts get hacked all the time, you know? Rose hasn't returned my calls, so I haven't been able to look into who hacked her. But—ah—ahhh—CHOO!"

"Bless you," Marina and Jeannie said in unison.

"Thanks. I think that's my cue to head out. If I stay around that goat any longer, I'll be suffering the rest of the night."

“Sorry,” Nick said. He’d forgotten Hunter was allergic to most things with fur.

“It’s fine. Worth it even to see you get out of the house.”

Nick grunted.

Al smiled. “And he’s back. Let’s get you a beer.” Nick drank several beers while the girls tried to appease Jasper, but he wasn’t having it. *I know, buddy. Nobody can replace Rose.*

With the watch party over, the night had shifted into karaoke. Some good, most bad. Nick was about to call it a night when he realized the people he thought were his friends were, in fact, his worst enemies.

“Rose! Over here!” Jeannie shouted, waving her hand in the air and looking toward the door.

“Fuck this.” Nick reached over and downed the two shots in front of Al and walked away from the table.

“Rose!” She heard her name called from the opposite end of Susie’s. Nick’s friends sat a table, next to a stroller. She didn’t remember any of his friends having a baby. Wait, surely, that wasn’t ...

“You got here just in time,” Jeannie said excitedly. “Nick is about to sing! He’s NEVER done that before. Like never fucking ever. Right, Christian?”

Christian looked over from across the table where Marina was sitting on his lap. “Never. Make sure your record it because it’ll never happen again.”

“Oh, you know I will. But the video is just for us. Something we can play at the Christmas party.”

Rose peaked inside the stroller. “Why is Jasper here?” she asked.

Marina snorted. “Because he misses you and won’t give Nick a minute’s worth of peace. He thought Jeannie and I could give him some womanly attention.”

Rose smiled. *I miss you too, little guy.* She picked Jasper up and settled him in her lap, grabbing the full bottle from the cup holder. Maybe they could work out some kind of custody agreement, although she wasn’t sure how her dad would feel

about having a pet goat. She'd been staying at his house since she was afraid to be alone while Gavin was sneaking around.

Jasper's greedy suckling noises were drowned out by guitar music strumming from the karaoke stage. Rose looked up to see Nick grab the microphone. A loud squeal had everyone in the bar wincing.

"Sorry." His words had a slight slur as he cleared his throat and sang "Wasted on You" by Morgan Wallen.

"Ahh, fuck," Al said and looked at Rose. He reached over and squeezed her shoulder, eyes full of sympathy. "I'm sure he doesn't mean it like it sounds."

"Christian! Did you know he could sing like that?" Marina asked.

"No, princess, how would I? He barely talks. I sure as hell never heard him sing."

Nick's voice had that sexy, gravelly tone that was popular on the radio. The tone that said this guy was 100% man. A man who could be dropped in the middle of the forest and survive with no problem. A man that would catch dinner with his bare hands and build a shelter with nothing but a pocket knife and the trees around him. Rose fought the urge to fan herself.

"Uh, so, Rose, this is kind of amazing. I've lived here forever and had a crush on him when I was thirteen—" Jeannie began.

"You what?" Al shouted, sitting up straight. "You never told me that, Jeannie."

“Dude. Why would I? Besides, that was before I went to his farm. Nothing ruins a crush faster than shoveling shit together. Maybe you should try that with some of the Grimbos.”

Al looked down sheepishly.

“Anyway, that man has never done anything remotely like this before. I know he’s singing about all the time he’s wasted on you, which is probably pissing you off, but—”

“It’s not pissing me off,” Rose answered.

“I’m sure it’s just his way of— Wait, what did you say?”

“I said it’s not pissing me off. That growly shit he’s doing up there is hot as fuck.”

“Yeah, it is!” Marina shouted. Christian shot her a look, and she shrugged and took a sip of her drink while her eyes darted around the room.

“And I get why he’s angry. I’m pretty sure I know what happened with that social media mess. If I’m right, this whole thing is kind of my fault, even if I didn’t make the posts. I’d explain it to him, but he has the emotional range of a ... a ...” She looked over at the stroller and set a now sleeping Jasper inside. “Of a goat.”

Jeannie nodded sagely. “Well, girl, you play your cards right tonight, and if nothing else, you’ll get a good hate fucking out of it.”

“Totally,” Marina agreed. “You might not even make it out of the bar.”

Rose licked her lips and cocked her head to the side. “I could get down with that. What do you suggest?”

Christian groaned. “I do not need to be hearing this.”

“Can you sing?” Marina asked. “‘Fever’ is a classic seduction song for karaoke.”

“Definitely not. We’d be better off sending Jasper up there.”

“Yikes,” Jeannie said, scrunching her nose. “What about dancing? Maybe Marina or Al could sing while you shake your ass?”

“Yeah, that could work. What song?”

The table was silent while they all thought of a song that would work.

“Oh, I got it!” Marina said, clapping her hands. “‘Lady Marmalade!’”

“Princess,” Christian growled, “you are not singing that song in a room full of men.”

“Oh, Christian, don’t be a prude! I am a professional singer. And besides, *that* part is in French, and Rose can sing that.”

Al’s forehead wrinkled as he looked up at Nick on stage, shouting the final words of his angry song. Christian was whispering in Marina’s ear while she blushed a deep red.

“Fucking hell, Jeannie. You better make sure Susie’s got the supply room unlocked. Not sure who’s going to be using it, but it won’t be empty soon.”

Jeannie snickered. “No worries, friend. I checked it earlier. All clear.”

Al’s head whipped over to look Jeannie in the eye. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I’m your wing girl, remember? Didn’t you say that was part of my job, to help you get laid ‘whenever, wherever, and with whoever’?” Jeannie asked bitterly.

“That was *before*,” Al mumbled so softly Rose almost missed it.

Al scowled and turned back to Rose and Marina. “Y’all better go before someone jumps ahead of you.” Jeannie flipped him the bird and scooted her chair away from him.

There was definitely something going on between those two, whether they admitted it or not. Rose stood up to walk toward the stage when Jeannie stopped her. “Here, you need to wear this. For the dancing.” Jeannie slipped off her rainbow tutu and handed it to her.

With a huge grin, Rose slipped on the tutu. “Do you always wear a tutu in a bar?”

Jeannie shrugged. “When the mood strikes.”

“Are you live-streaming this?”

“Of course. Marina is going to freaking kill this song. Unless you don’t want me to,” Jeannie added hurriedly.

“No, go for it. Let’s give the Grimbos something else to watch.” Rose passed Nick as he walked back to the table, a

look of shock on his face.

“Hey, Beast. Nice song.” She smirked. She placed a hand on his chest and lifted up on her tip toes to whisper in his ear. “Make sure you grab a good seat.”

She heard the intake of his breath and knew he was as affected by their closeness as she was.

The music of the song played from the speakers as the words scrolled across the screen. Jeannie was right. Marina was killing it. She started the song low and sultry, then powered through the riffs and runs. For her part, Rose pranced around the stage, shaking her ass and rubbing her hands suggestively over her curvy body. Rose sang her lines in French, always looking directly at Nick as she sang the words that translated to “Will you sleep with me?”

Rose and Marina finished the song to roaring applause. Although, it was likely more for Marina’s incredible singing and less for Rose’s suggestive dancing. Rose was so lost in the moment that she’d temporarily forgotten what had made her get up on stage in the first place. But the Neanderthal thundering his way toward the stage quickly reminded her.

The look on Nick’s face could have been mistaken for rage, but Rose knew it for what it was—pure lust. And she was all for it.

He marched on stage, leaned over, and lifted her up in a fireman’s carry on his shoulder. “We’re leaving. Now,” he barked.

“Don’t forget Jasper!” she called out. He walked past the table with his friends and reached out for the stroller. Pushing it with one hand, he kept his other hand on her ass.

“Goodnight, assholes!” he shouted.

Rose laughed as she hung upside down against Nick’s back, not missing Christian leading Marina to a dark hallway.

Nick plowed through the crowd and didn’t stop until they were outside in front of his truck. “Get in. You drive,” he demanded, setting her down on her feet.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Your place. It’s closer.”

“And what are we going to do there?” she teased.

“We’re going to fuck until you can’t walk straight. I’m gonna slam my cock into your pussy so hard you’ll feel me for the rest of the week. And you damn sure won’t be able to dance like that in a room full of men ever again. Got me?”

“Yep.” Rose’s panties were so wet she was afraid she needed to sit on a towel. Tonight, there would be hot steamy hate sex. In the morning, they’d move into slow and sensual make-up sex. Then, they could talk like adults and put this bullshit behind them. Or they’d just have hate sex. From the way her clit was vibrating, she might be okay with a few nights of that before they moved into sweet make-up sex.

“Hand over the keys, Beast.”

Chapter 21

Rose pulled Nick's massive truck into the driveway of her rental house. She could have insisted they take her car, but there was something about how Nick trusted her to drive his truck that she didn't want to ignore. And looking at him, cradling Jasper as she drove, was enough to send her ovaries into overdrive.

She needed to insist on using a condom tonight. While it was true that she was on birth control, she might have left out the fact that she'd missed a few pills lately. Like the first night she'd stayed at his place. She'd gone to his farm for goat milk and ended up staying the night, so of course she didn't have her pill pack with her. And then there was Sunday night when she'd run back to his place after realizing Gavin had been in her house. Maybe she needed to switch to the shot.

But it was probably fine. Some of her roommates in college had missed pills all the time with no issue. Although, none of them had dated a man like Nick. He was so manly he could probably impregnate half the state with one drop of sperm. A

vision of Nick rubbing her large pregnant belly filled her mind. Damn. That should not turn her on. Must be some kind of Darwin evolutionary thing.

Nick carried Jasper to the front steps and waited for Rose to unlock the door. She hesitated, scenes from her last visit flashing through her mind. Had Gavin left something else for her to find? Could he be in there now?

“Hamper. Now,” Nick demanded.

Fuck. All thoughts of Gavin vanished. Rose pushed the door open and ran to her room. Dirty clothes flew across the room as she emptied her laundry basket. After adding a few towels, she returned to the living room. Gingerly, Nick placed Jasper inside without waking him.

“Quietest he’s been in days,” Nick said.

“Oh no, was he sick?” Rose asked.

Nick’s head snapped up. “No,” he growled stalking in her direction. “Not sick. Sad. His mama left him.” He backed her up against the wall, caging her in with one hand pressed over her head.

Rose sighed, trying to calm her raging libido. Did they have to do this now? “Nick—” she started to explain.

“On your knees.”

Oh, shit.

“Did me wrong, Rose.” The heat in Nick’s eyes was enough to set her on fire.

“About that. Technically, it wasn’t—”

“Shaking your ass on stage. Don’t want anyone to see you that way. Already told you.”

“Oh, that. Well, pretty sure we aren’t together. You kicked me out of your house. Twice.” Rose sighed. She did not want to fight. Unless it was going to lead to—

“Are you talking back?” With his one free hand, he unbuckled his belt.

Rose’s core tightened. “Nope, not talking back.” She shook her head and licked her lips, enjoying the sight of him removing his belt.

“Then, why are you still standing?”

Jesus. Her body was on raging. They needed to have a conversation, but that could wait. She rested her hands on his thighs as she sank to her knees. Her hands crept to his front, ready to unzip his pants and get to the good part. Before she made it to his zipper, her hand felt something hard in his pocket. *What the hell?*

“Do you have a rock in your pocket?”

“No. Keep going.” He looked down at her, his eyes searing over her body with hunger.

“Come on, what is it?” She cursed her curious nature, but she had to look. She always had to look. She reached into his pocket and pulled out the object. “Nick,” she breathed as she looked at the pink and white oval object in her hand. “This is my soap.” Her fingers traced a well-defined groove, one that

had not been there originally. The signature rose imprint that identified the bar as her Rose Relief Soap was almost worn off. She could imagine Nick holding the soap in his pocket while his thumb rubbed the rose design. She lifted her eyes to his. “Why are you carrying my soap in your pocket?”

“Because you gave it to me.”

“And how long have you been carrying my soap in your pocket?”

Nick shrugged. “Since that day.”

“The day I gave it to you? That was weeks ago.”

“Yeah.”

“But why? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Don’t get a lot of gifts, especially not ones that smell like the most beautiful woman in town. Sunshine and roses.” He stroked her hair with his hand. “That soap was my piece of you. A piece I could always carry with me. Wasn’t sure I’d ever get more of you. If I deserved more. I’m not an easy man, Rose. But your light leads me to a better place.”

“You’re telling me that you’ve been carrying the soap I made, the soap I gave you at the market when we plowed into each other, inside your pocket this whole time? And you, like, rub it when you need comfort and sniff it when you miss me?”

Nick rubbed the back of his neck and smiled sheepishly. “Yeah.”

Rose let out a deep breath. “Nick, this was going to be epic before, but after what you just said ... I’m about to suck the skin off this dick.”

Nick's arms stretched out across his bed, knocking into the headboard behind him. "Ow! Fuck!" His feet were also hanging off the bed, which was odd because he had a California king, and even his tall body didn't fall off it.

He shot up, finally realizing he was not in his bed. Looking around the room he was in, nothing was familiar. *Fuck. Was I roofied by a Grimbo?* A familiar noise filtered into the room.

"Maaa!"

"Chill, Jasper! I've got your milk. Don't be so greedy."

Rose. Memories of the previous night flooded his mind as he remembered seeing her on stage during Marina's karaoke. He'd barely kept it together when she was rolling her hips with her ass pushed out toward the audience. But once she'd started rubbing her hands over her tits, pushing them together so that they almost spilled out of her "Soap it Up" tank top, he'd almost yanked her off the stage right then.

Al had told him to wait and let her finish while he fervently explained hacking, which was something Nick had refused to listen to up to that point. Nick hadn't wanted to listen then, either, but Al had him trapped, knowing there was no way he'd leave while Rose was on stage. Al had told him social

media used email addresses as usernames. Anyone who knew her email could have set about guessing her password. Once that was done, the person could have logged into her accounts and pretended to be her.

“And?” Nick had asked, not ready to let go of his anger just yet.

“*And* there’s some asshole motherfucker out there messing with Rose. When I got hacked, they posted memes for hair loss products. If it was some rando hack, they would have done the same to Rose. But they didn’t. They used her account to target you, meaning they knew you two were spending time together. And how many people knew that? I know I haven’t been a deputy as long as you have, but that sounds like an asshole motherfucker to me.”

But then the song had finished, and Nick was done. Done with the bar. Done with his so called friends. Done being apart from Rose. He’d grabbed her, caveman style, took her home, and ... *Holy fuck.*

Visions of Rose on her knees brought his morning wood to full attention. He stepped out of bed and followed the aroma of coffee into her kitchen, surprised to see a couple boxes of cereal set out with a jug of milk.

“What, no crepes?” he asked, feeling a little disappointed.

“I heard you don’t like that fancy shit,” Rose teased.

“Woman,” Nick warned.

She shrugged. “You’ve got to work a lot harder to get crepes, Beast. In fact, I’m pretty sure this morning, you should be making me breakfast.”

“Something else I want to eat for breakfast,” he said, reaching to pull her close.

Laughing, she inched toward him. “Oh yeah? And what might that be?”

Before he could answer, they were interrupted by a loud crash, followed by a car alarm.

“The fuck?”

They rushed outside to find the driver's side window of Nick's truck shattered and the alarm blaring. Rose pushed the button on his keys to stop the noise, having grabbed them on her way outside. Fear caught in her throat. The word WHORE had been painted across the hood.

Nick stood frozen, staring at his truck. He looked from Rose to his truck and back to Rose again. "Grimbos didn't do that."

Rose shook her head. "No, that wasn't a Grimbo," she whispered.

"Who was it, Rose?"

She shook her head again as tears pooled in her eyes. She blinked rapidly and cleared her throat. "I'm going to run inside and grab the broom to clean up all this—"

"Sunshine," Nick warned. "Not gonna ask again."

She rubbed the back of her neck as she tried to control her breathing. "Fine. Fuck it. It was my ex, Gavin."

Nick's eyes bored into Rose, not allowing her to get away with her minimal explanation.

She swallowed hard. "We dated for a while. I was lonely, I guess, after my parents moved away. He was someone to hang out with, a reason to get out of the house. But apparently, the

relationship meant a lot more to him than it did to me. When he proposed—”

“PROPOSED?” Nick shouted.

“Yeah, proposed.” She crossed her arms, annoyance now taking over her fear. “Turns out, some people actually want to keep me around, instead of shouting ‘get out’ every five minutes.”

Nick’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “Continue.”

Rose smirked, knowing she’d won that round. “When he proposed in front of half the town, and I told him no, he ...” She paused, trying to think of a way to describe his reaction without making it sound so awful. “He didn’t take it well.”

“What. Did. He. Do?” Nick’s body was almost vibrating at this point. The whole alpha male vibe he was throwing off was lighting fireworks in her core.

Not the right time, Rose.

“At first, nothing. Telling him no ended the relationship. No more calls, dates, contact of any kind. Which was fine. I wanted it to be over. But then he started calling and texting nonstop, which I ignored. After a couple of weeks, I noticed weird things. Some of the stuff in my house was in the wrong place or missing altogether. The last straw was when my mother’s portrait disappeared. I had drawn it for her funeral. When it went missing, I knew something was up because I never moved it. It showed up on my porch one morning, busted up and covered in some kind of, I don’t know, pig’s

blood. Or fake blood? Or fruit punch mixed with ketchup? Who knows. I put in my sixty-day notice with the landlord the same day. Then, I packed my shit and headed down here to my dad. I thought things would stop. I mean, North Carolina is pretty far from Maine.”

“You seen him around?”

“No. He sent me a few texts. I ignored them for the most part.” Rose nibbled her bottom lip and looked away. Probably best to leave out the dick pics. “But a couple of days ago, I realized he’d been in my house.”

“In your fucking house? And you didn’t say anything?”

Jesus. Rose licked her lips. She shouldn’t be turned on right now. “I was going to. I went to your house, but then we, uh ...” She trailed off.

“Sunday night?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why you were so upset?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “And I’m pretty sure he’s the one that hacked the accounts and posted all that stuff about you. I guess he’s been here, watching me like a creeper.” She shivered as she looked around the yard, checking for any signs that he might be near.

Nick reached over and pulled Rose into him, wrapping his arms around her in a protective cocoon.

“Sorry. Should have listened. I was an asshole.”

She took a deep breath, burrowing into his arms and taking comfort in his masculine warmth. “I missed being at the farm,” she admitted.

He tightened his embrace, raising one hand to stroke her back. “Missed having you there.”

As much as she would have liked to stay like that forever, it was time to face the problem at hand. Dropping her arms, she wiggled out of his hold and took a step back. “What do we do now?” she asked, immediately feeling the loss of him.

“Pack up your shit. We’re leaving.”

Nick took Rose to Christian's house, confident she'd be safe with Marina while the deputies assembled at the station. The security at Christian's house rivaled Fort Knox. As the sheriff, he had to leave Marina at all hours of the day, and there was no way he could focus on work if he was worried about his fiancée home alone. He had locks on top of locks, along with cameras, alarms, and twenty-four-hour monitoring. But most importantly, his backyard was surrounded by a twelve-foot privacy fence.

Nick would have brought Rose to the station with him, but now that Jasper was eating again, that goat needed to be outside.

Entering the station, he was relieved to see Christian, Al, and Hunter already there. He'd also phoned Jeannie to see if she could help with the social media hack, knowing now that it was Rose's ex behind it.

Fortunately, the film crew had a few days off. Jonathan decided they needed a retreat to recenter or some shit before they filmed the last episode.

Nick quickly brought everyone up to speed. The guys were stunned speechless. Although, whether it was because he'd

talked nonstop for five minutes or because of the situation, he wasn't sure.

It was Jeannie who finally broke the silence. "So, dick pic guy was, in fact, a dick. Figures."

"Say what now?" Nick asked her.

"Which part? Dick pic guy was a dick. That's pretty self-explanatory."

Hunter looked up from his laptop. "Who said anything about dick pics?"

"He did," Jeannie said, pointing at Nick. Seeing the blank stares of the deputies, she rolled her eyes. "The texts her ex sent her weren't, like, messages about how he missed her. They were pictures of his dick. We tried helping by sending her one of Al's dick pics—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Nick grabbed Al up from his chair and slammed him against the wall.

"You sent my woman a picture of your dick?" he roared.

"No, of course not! JEANINE!" Al shouted.

"Geez, Beast, calm the fuck down. And you too, Al. No need for full names." Jeannie ruffled her shoulders and continued. "I *said* we sent one of Al's dick pics. As in a picture of a dick owned by Al. Not a picture of Al's actual dick."

"Huh," Christian remarked, completely unconcerned that his chief deputy had another of his deputies pinned against the wall. "Whose dick was it?"

“Hell if I know,” Jeannie answered with a shrug.

“Al has pictures of random dicks?” Christian’s eyes widened as he turned to look at Al. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he amended quickly. “Assuming of course that they were taken with the person’s consent. I just didn’t realize—”

“For God’s sake, Jeanine! Fix this!” Al called out.

Jeannie’s eyes narrowed as she focused her attention on Al. She moved closer to where he was pinned against the wall, leaning in until her face was inches from his. “Call me Jeanine one more time, *Aloysius*,” she said in a low, menacing tone. “See what happens.” She spun around, her ponytail whipping against his face.

“Fuuuck,” Al whispered. “Uh, Nick? You’re probably gonna want to step back.”

“Why?” Nick grumbled, looking down at Al. He watched as Al licked his lips, his hungry eyes staring as Jeannie sauntered back across the room. “Oh, goddammit,” Nick muttered, dropping his arms from Al’s chest and taking a large step back.

Al smiled and shrugged while he adjusted his pants. “Shit was hot, man.”

Shaking his head, Nick turned to look over at Jeannie now settled back on the other side of the room. “You. Explain the dicks.”

Jeannie rolled her eyes for probably the hundredth time that day. “Okay, so her ex was texting her dick pics. She wasn’t

interested. Obvi. So, Marina, Ms. June, and I—”

“Wait,” Christian interrupted. “My Aunt June is a part of this story?”

“Yeah, Christian. Old, not dead. Anyway,” she huffed, “we thought a good way to shut him up would be to send a picture of a bigger dick—which was not that difficult.” Jeannie snorted. “Al gets dozens of dick, tit, and pussy pics sent to him all the time. I grabbed one of those, sent it to Rose, and she sent that to the ex. Okay? Everybody chill now?” She glanced around the room. “Damn. Y’all seriously need a female deputy in here to cut the testosterone. Hunter, any of your sisters want to be a deputy?”

Hunter held up his hands. “Leave me out of this.”

“Let’s focus. We know Rose’s ex, Gavin, has been stalking her for a while,” Christian began, taking charge of the conversation. “She moves down here, and he stalks her from a distance. Then, he thinks she’s moving on with a new guy,” — he glared at Jeannie who, not surprisingly, rolled her eyes— “which causes him to escalate and find her in person. Once he gets here, he sees her with Nick. Gavin tries to break them up with social media, and when that doesn’t work, he escalates again with violence to Nick’s car. But this is good because the more upset he gets, the more easily he’ll make a mistake. Since we know he’s close, we can patrol through town. Hunter can sit with Rose at the farm and work from his computer, trying to dig up information on where this guy might be

staying. All other cases go on the back burner until we find this sicko, got it?”

Nick nodded. It was time to let the beast out to play.

Chapter 22

Rose spent the day with Marina while the guys did their thing. Whatever that meant. They had a great time sitting on the porch, drinking mimosas and watching Jasper run around. By the time she left, Marina was searching animal rescue websites for a new pet. She got really excited when she found a big fluffy cat from Maine at the local shelter. Marina decided it was fate since Rose was also from Maine. Poor Christian. Marina was awesome, but she was also a little on the quirky side. There's no telling what kind of pet they would end up with.

Nick picked up Rose and Jasper, and returned them to the farm. They needed to feed the other animals. Hunter was going to stay over while Nick went back into town to keep looking for Gavin.

“You're not worried about me spending the night in a house with another man?” Not that Rose was interested in anyone but Nick, but he'd been so over the top since grabbing her off stage, she was surprised this didn't bother him.

“Al, maybe, but not Hunter. When he’s on that computer, there’s not a pair of tits in the world that could distract him.” Nick looked at Rose and grinned. “Not even tits as glorious as yours.” He pulled her close and kissed her hard.

Pulling back for air, Rose panted, “Last time I was here, you kicked me out. I’m not sure I feel welcome here anymore.” She smirked as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Oh yeah, sunshine? You want me to give this little pussy a welcome home party?” His hand dipped into her shorts, fingers slowly inching their way beneath her panties.

Rose moaned loudly as he reached her clit. “Yes,” she breathed, thrusting her hips against his hand. “Remind her that she belongs here.”

“You want me to finger-fuck you in our kitchen?” The growl of his voice sent shivers through her spine that almost made her come on the spot.

She moaned.

“You like that baby? You like getting off in our kitchen? In our house?” Nick placed his mouth right next to Rose’s ear. “Well, get used to it, because after I finish with this pretty pussy, she’ll never want to leave.”

Her body shook as his voice vibrated through her body.

“You like it when I whisper all the things I want to do to your sweet cunt, all the ways I plan to fill you up with my—”

Rose’s scream drowned out the rest of his words as her body trembled with release.

“Fuck, Rose. Your pussy is squeezing my fingers like it wants to milk them dry.” Grinning, he slowly removed his fingers from inside her. “Don’t worry, little Rosie. Daddy will fill you up real good tonight.”

“Nick,” she groaned, her body lighting up as if she hadn’t just had a full-body orgasm ten seconds ago. “You need to leave or else Hunter’s going to walk in on something he doesn’t need to see.”

“Yeah, he’s probably tired of waiting outside.”

“He’s outside?”

“Yeah, he texted before you attacked me.”

“I did not attack you!” she exclaimed.

“Whatever you say, sunshine. Told him to wait in the car so I could say goodbye.”

“Nick! How am I supposed to look him in the eye now?”

“Fine with me if you don’t. Take care of Jasper. If Hunter tells you to do something, do it. Save questions for later. Got it?”

“Do you think Gavin will come here?” she asked, her nerves spiking as Nick walked away from her.

“No. But he’s been here before. He had pictures of the farm. Just need you to be careful.” Nick stepped back and darted his eyes around the room.

Rose wondered if there was something he was leaving out, but she let it go, not wanting to spoil their final minutes.

“Nick?” she called out as he opened the front door.

He turned to look at her. Her breath caught as she drank in his image. The setting sun filled the sky with hues of orange and red, creating a silhouette of his body that looked like something out of a western movie. She wanted to draw him that way and let him paint it. Her heart bloomed with a flood of emotion, drowning her senses and leaving her speechless.

She stood there, blinking, until finally Nick asked, “Yeah?”

“Oh, um, just ... Be careful.”

“Always, sunshine. Only person who needs to be worried tonight is Gavin.” With that, he stalked out of the door, leaving Rose in a puddle of emotions and Jasper bleating his goodbye.

Hunter proved to be a great guest. Or bodyguard. Or whatever. He worked quietly at his computer, typing and asking questions about Gavin periodically. Rose learned Gavin had sold his car, but there was no record of a new car purchase. That meant he'd probably used the cash to buy a new car with fake paperwork that couldn't be traced.

But Hunter assured her that didn't matter. Their town was small. There weren't many places Gavin could hide if he wanted to stay close. Being tourist season, it wasn't unusual to have new people walking around. They were going to have to wait for him to make a mistake. Which he would.

"They always do," Hunter assured her.

After a few hours, though, Rose had to kick him out. He was sneezing so much that he couldn't stare at the screen long enough to get anything done. His eyes were red, and when he wasn't sneezing, he was trying to rub them off his face.

"Do you need some more allergy medicine?" Rose asked.

"No, took that before I came over. I think the dog and the goat in the house, combined with—ACHOO—whatever farm dander is in the air is too much for one pill."

"It's late, and I'm going to sleep. If I lock up and promise not to get out of bed until Nick gets home, will you go outside

and sit in your car? We both know I'm perfectly safe inside the house."

Hunter glanced around the room, pausing to watch as Cassidy tried to wrestle Jasper's diaper off. "Yeah, I think that'll work as long as you're going to bed. I'll double check all the doors and windows before I leave." Hunter sighed. "I'm sorry, Rose. The longer I stay inside with your pets, the worse—ACHOO—it's going to get."

She handed him a box of tissues and ushered him toward the front door. "Go, clear your head. Or lungs. Or whatever. We'll be perfectly safe." She looked down at the little goat who had finally gotten free of Cassidy. "We promise to stay inside and not get into any trouble. Right, Jasper?"

"Maaa!" Jasper bleated, then dropped a load of goat pellets on the floor.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Nick shouted from inside his patrol car. They had gone to every B&B, motel, hotel, and resort with pictures of Gavin, and no one had recognized him. He was sure Gavin was staying in town somewhere, but there wasn’t much else he could do. Tomorrow, they would check the private rentals, but those were harder because they didn’t have a front desk and not all of them were registered with the county office.

Nick pulled into his driveway, stepping out to unlock the gate. He left it open since Hunter would be leaving in a few minutes. As he pulled closer to his house, he realized Hunter might be leaving even sooner since he was sitting in his car instead of inside the house.

The fuck? Nick jumped out of his car and stomped over to Hunter, arm raised and ready to bang on his window when he heard a loud blowing noise coming from Hunter’s car. As he got close enough to see inside, he noticed that the passenger’s seat and floorboard were covered in tissues.

“*ACHOO!* Stinking motherfucking farm beasts!” Hunter shouted. Taking a step back, Nick raised his boot to tap on Hunter’s door. Looking up, Hunter cheered. “Finally!”

“The fuck is wrong with you? You got the flu?” Nick asked, backing away as Hunter opened his door and stepped outside.

“No, it’s my allergies. I dosed up before I came over, but clearly not enough. Rose locked up and went to bed. I’ve been sitting out here keeping an eye on things to get away from the dog and the goat. I’ve already made an appointment to get some allergy shots from my doc tomorrow. I’ll be good to come back in the evening if this thing drags out. But tonight, it’s killing me.” Nick took another step back as Hunter reached inside his pocket and pulled out a small vial of eye drops.

“Okay then.” Nick’s anger vanished. The poor guy looked so miserable outside, Nick couldn’t imagine how bad he’d been inside the house.

“You guys have any luck tracking down the guy that bought the Porsche?” Hunter asked, eyes blinking as the eye drop solution ran down his cheeks.

Nick’s heart dropped. “Porsche?”

“The Porsche that Gavin drove down here, then sold for cash? Figured it was possible the buyer might have a lead on what Gavin drove off in after the sale. But maybe Al was looking into—”

“Fuck!” Nick shouted, slamming his hand on the roof of Hunter’s patrol car. “Didn’t know it was a Porsche. Pulled over some yuppie asshole in a Porsche last week. Tried to bribe me out of a ticket. Fuck!”

“Hey, calm down. You couldn’t have known. Do you remember where you stopped him?”

Nick ran his fingers through his hair. “On my way home. On the backroads heading to the other side of the property. Thought he’d gotten lost out here, being from out of state. But maybe he wasn’t lost, maybe ... I gotta check on Rose.”

Nick raced into the house, barely taking the time to unlock the door. “Rose?” he called out. Hearing no response, he raced up the stairs to their room. *Their* room—it hadn’t been just his room since the first night she’d slept in his bed. Nick rubbed his hand over his heart. Rose was it for him, and he wanted her to move into *their* house permanently. He just needed to get rid of this psycho first.

He opened the bedroom door and called her name again, “Rose, I’m back.” The room was quiet. Too quiet. Rose was not in the bed, and Jasper was not in his hamper. “FUCK!” he shouted and ran through the rest of the house, calling her name. When he made it back downstairs, Hunter was opening the front door.

“What’s going on? I heard you shouting from outside.”

“She’s not here!” Nick bellowed.

“What do you mean, she’s not here? I’ve been outside the whole time. No one has come in or out.”

Nick looked frantically around the room, Cassidy finally waking up and hobbling over to him. “Where did they go, girl?” he asked, reaching down to pick her up. Cassidy wiggled to get down, then ran over to her doggy door to go outside and relieve herself. Nick’s eyes settled on the door. During the shed incident—he still couldn’t think about it

without cringing—Rose tried to tell him something about Jasper escaping through Cassidy’s door.

“Fuck!” he yelled and ran over to the back door, finding it unlocked.

“What are you thinking?” Hunter asked.

“This door locked when you left?”

“Yes. Every window and door was locked, and Rose was upstairs.”

“Not broken, so Rose must have unlocked it.” He pointed down to the doggy door. “Only reason Rose would have left is Jasper. Little fucker’s been sneaking out Cassidy’s door. He ran out. She chased him.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. No need to panic yet. They’re probably out back.”

The two deputies ran into the backyard, calling Rose’s name to no avail. They moved toward the edge of the woods, calling louder.

“It still doesn’t mean he has her, Nick. She could still be looking for ...” Hunter trailed off. “Ah, shit.”

Nick watched in horror as Hunter reached down and picked up several long stem red roses and a flip-flop from the forest floor.

“Call it in. Tell Al to load up the ATVs. Wait for the guys. I’m going to find her.”

As much as Nick hated the reality show, he might have to change his tune. With this season's reality show money, Christian had purchased two all-terrain vehicles and a trailer to haul them. If those ATVs helped save Rose, Nick would do every confessional they asked and never complain about taping again.

Hunter looked like he wanted to say something, but the look on Nick's face made him stop. "Yeah. Fine. Just keep your phone with you, and I'll send the guys to your location when they get here."

Nick's brow furrowed as he looked at Hunter.

"Yeah, I can track a phone. But so can all the kids these days. Now, go find your girl."

Needing no more prodding, Nick took off to the edge of the woods, looking for any clue he could follow to find out where that freak had taken his woman.

“Jasper! Do not go through that door! I’m warning you ... You go through that door, and you’ll be moving outside with the other goats!”

Rose groaned as the little goat pushed his way through Cassidy’s doggy door and disappeared into the backyard.

Well, shit.

She promised Hunter she wouldn’t leave the house, but she couldn’t leave Jasper outside by himself. He was too mischievous for that, plus there was probably a coyote or something out there that might eat him for dinner.

Rose put on her flip-flops and told herself she’d only be outside for two minutes. Long enough to grab the knucklehead and get him back in the house. Once he was settled, she’d get some cardboard and block the doggy door. That little door had caused way too much trouble. Cassidy could let her know when she needed to go out.

By the time she made it outside, Jasper had run all the way to the edge of the woods.

“You sneaky little thing! I am talking to your daddy tonight about getting you in the pen with the other goats.” Rose quickly crossed the distance to the little troublemaker, but as

soon as she reached him, he took off and ran farther into the woods. “Jasper!” she shouted again, taking another step into the dark as he darted away. “You are sleeping in the barn tonight!” Before she could get close to him, thick arms grabbed her from behind, one around her waist and one covering her mouth with a cloth.

“Rose, my love. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Rose’s blood turned to ice. She knew that voice. She jerked against her assailant, trying to throw elbows, but he held her tight, forcing her to inhale the sickly sweet odor of the cloth. As she let out a muffled scream, her world faded to black.

Chapter 23

“Don’t worry, sunshine, I’m coming,” Nick whispered as he hurried through the woods, looking for broken sticks and other signs he could track. He’d only seen a few so far, but it was enough to know he was headed in the right direction.

His land was seventy-five acres. He had explored the woods many times as a kid, playing in the abandoned tobacco barns. He could have sold some of the acreage since he only used ten for his house and the farm, but he liked knowing that no one could move in next to him. He should have mapped the land and walked it regularly to check for trespassers and squatters. How long had Gavin been hiding out there, using his own property as a base to stalk Rose?

After walking several minutes and seeing no new signs, Nick stopped. He needed something to prove he was heading in the right direction. The thought of her spending any more time with that freak had him on edge. Hunter had been in his car for an hour. Gavin had plenty of time to—

Nick shook his head. He couldn't go there. He needed to focus on finding Rose first. He stood completely still, shining the beam of his flashlight against the forest floor as he searched. He roared into the night, his frustration echoing off the trees when he heard a familiar noise.

“Maaa!” The soft sound of a goat echoed through the woods.

Jasper!

Nick stilled, not daring to move until he heard the sound again.

“Maaa.”

Nick turned left and ran through the woods toward Jasper's call.

Rose blinked, her mind thick as she tried to figure out where she was. It was dark, but there was an old hurricane lantern on the floor, casting a soft yellow glow across the room. She was seated on a cold dirt floor, propped up in a corner with her legs bound in front of her and her hands tied behind her back. Jasper was somewhere. She couldn't see him, but she heard his bleating, so she knew he was nearby.

“Hello?” she rasped. “Anybody there?” Her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting while she searched her surroundings. A pile of blankets lay bunched in the corner along with empty food wrappers and crushed energy drink cans. Pictures and scraps of paper were tacked on the walls around the makeshift bed, but she couldn't make out what was on them. Had someone been living here? Wherever *here* was.

Moonlight shone through gaping holes in the roof. It was a little larger than Nick's art studio, but much, much older. Uneven wooden planks served as walls, looking as though they were made by hand. Maybe it was some kind of old barn or equipment shed?

“Ah, you're finally awake, my love. I was worried you'd be out all night.” A figure slowly emerged from the shadows.

“Gavin?” she whispered.

“Of course. Who else would it be?”

Rose shivered. It was Gavin alright, but he was no longer the sophisticated banker she'd dated. His eyes were bloodshot, and his hair fell in long, greasy clumps across his face. His button-down shirt and dress slacks were dirty and wrinkled as if he'd been sleeping in them. The Gavin she knew had been meticulous about his appearance. This Gavin was ... unhinged.

“Why did you bring me here?” she asked, trying to keep the tremor from her voice.

“Why? Why indeed, Rose?” His voice turned hard. “Why did you leave home without telling me? Why did I have to come down here and collect you? Why have you been cheating on me with that oaf? So many questions you need to answer. And so many punishments you have earned.”

“Gavin,” she began, hoping there was still a chance to reason with him. “We broke up, remember? We weren't together when I left. I didn't need to tell you anything. And since we're not together, I can't possibly be cheating on you.”

Gavin sucked in a breath, and his hands shook. “Stop lying, Rose!” he shouted, spittle spraying from his mouth. He backed away and paced the floor, raking his hands through his hair. “I don't want to hurt you, but I don't know any other way to train you.”

“Train me?” she gasped.

“To be my wife,” he sneered. “My lawfully wedded wife. Doesn’t that sound beautiful? Lawfully wedded wife.”

Tears streaked down her face as he continued to repeat the words, which seemed to have an almost calming effect on him. She tested the restraints on her wrists. They were tight but soft, making her wonder if he’d ripped up an old sheet. If that was the case, maybe she could find something sharp to snag them with. While Gavin mumbled to himself and paced, Rose felt around until she found a nail poking through one of the wooden planks at her back.

It didn’t take long before her hands were free. She kept them behind her, wanting to hide her advantage until the right moment.

“We don’t have much time, Rose. Now that you’re finally awake, we can leave. You’ve gained quite a bit of weight down here. I couldn’t carry you all the way to my car. You’re going to need to lose that when we get back.”

Motherfucker.

“People back home are asking questions. I had to plan the wedding without you. They kept asking why you weren’t involved in the decisions. I told them you wanted everything to be a surprise.” He stopped his pacing and looked at her. “Well, Rose?” he asked as he walked over to where she sat on the floor and bent down to eye level. “Are you surprised?”

“Yes,” she answered honestly. “Very.”

He reached his hand up and stroked her hair. “We had some good times together. Don’t you remember?” With his other hand, he reached down to palm the front of his jeans. “It can be that way again.”

Rose’s heart echoed in her chest, and her resolve hardened.

Not today, Satan.

Nick continued in the direction he'd last heard Jasper, swearing as drops of rain fell on his face. Not only would the rain wash away any tracks, but it would also drown out the sound Jasper's bleating.

The sound of his feet thundering against the forest floor echoed loudly as he picked up his pace, no longer trying to stay quiet. He was running out of time. Finally, he spotted something that did not belong in his woods—a light.

“Gotcha.”

Nick ran faster, his eyes making out one of the old barns. He reached for the gun in his tactical belt when a scream wrenched through the air.

Hang on, Rose. I'm almost there.

With Gavin distracted by her hair and his hard-on—*fucking creep*—Rose drew in her knees and kicked out at him with all her might.

“You bitch!” Gavin shouted, tumbling backward and crashing into the lamp, breaking the glass and spilling the oil

over the floor and bedding. Rose untied her feet with her free hands and jumped up. Her legs spiked with pain as they protested being stuck in the same position for so long. Rose flung the rags from her bindings away, watching as they landed in the open flame of the broken lamp.

She reached the doorway, hoping to find Jasper and lose Gavin in the woods while she waited for Nick to find her—because she knew he would. She just needed to find a safe place to hide, and Nick would turn the woods over until he found her.

Before she crossed the threshold, pain wrenched through her scalp as Gavin grabbed her by the hair. Rose's feet slipped, and she fell to the ground while Gavin pulled her back into the smoking barn.

“No more running, Rose! You will be my wife!”

“Never!” Rose clawed at the arm that pulled her hair as she flailed her legs around, struggling to get free.

“I didn't want to do this, but I will drug you again, Rose, if that's what it takes to get you home. Just get over here where I've got my—”

Her foot caught in a hole in the floorboards and twisted. Her pained scream echoed into the night.

And that's when she heard it. A loud, bellowing sound like a wild animal, finally allowed free after a lifetime in a cage.

“Nick!” she screamed. “I'm in here!”

Releasing his grip on her hair, Gavin walked to the door. He turned to look at Rose. “You’re mine. *Mine!* Not his.” The glint of a knife reflected off the flames now growing inside the barn.

“Nick, watch out! He has a—” Her warning was cut off by giant blur crashing into Gavin and knocking him to the ground. If she didn’t know better, she’d have thought Gavin had been attacked by a bear. But this was no bear. This was her beast.

They rolled back and forth across the floor. Rose looked to see where Gavin held the knife, but he must have dropped it when he’d been knocked down. Nick gained the upper hand and soon had Gavin pinned to the ground. Keeping Gavin locked in place with his knees, Nick pummeled Gavin’s face, unleashing all of his pent up fury and fear. Rose pulled herself up and hobbled over to where Nick was beating her stalker to death.

“Nick! That’s enough!” she shouted.

He continued to rain punches until she reached over and grabbed one of his arms as he reared back for another hit.

“Beast!” she shouted.

He looked at her, his face full of rage.

“Beast, Nick, baby. It’s over.” She took his face in her hands and looked into his eyes. “It’s over. Come back to me, Nick. Help me find Jasper and take me home.”

Nick's face softened, and she watched her gentle giant return.

"Let's get out of here."

Rose coughed as the smoke filled the barn.

She wrapped her arm around Nick's shoulders for support, and together, they stepped outside as the flames licked the walls behind them. Her ankle was throbbing, but she wanted to put as much distance between herself and that barn as possible. They'd only made it about ten steps when Jasper ran up to them, bleating and running in circles.

Rose let go of Nick to bend down and pick up Jasper. "There you are, you little troublemaker."

With a loud groan, Nick stumbled a few steps and fell to his knees.

"Nick!" Rose quickly put Jasper back down. "What's wrong?"

Nick didn't speak, just sat down the rest of the way and leaned against a tree.

"Nick! You're scaring me." Rose thought she had been scared when she'd woken up to find Gavin had taken her, but that was nothing compared to the fear that raced through her now.

Nick's face was ashen, and his breathing was shallow. She was no nurse, but she knew this was bad.

Nick laughed softly. “Lucky bastard got a cheap shot,” he panted.

“What are you talking about?” Rose asked, her gut sinking. She looked down to see that Nick was holding his side, where the handle of a knife was sticking out.

“Oh my god! He stabbed you? Why didn’t you say anything? Where’s everyone else? Are they on their way?” She continued to panic as she applied pressure to the area around the stab wound. He was bleeding, but not a crazy amount. That had to be a good thing, right?

“Should be here soon. Either from following Hunter’s phone tracker shit or because of that fucking bonfire behind you.”

“The what?” Rose asked as she turned toward the building that was now covered in flames.

“Damn. That went up fast,” she muttered.

“Yeah, sunshine. Nice work. He hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Not fine, Rose. Heard you scream.”

Rose sighed. “Compared to a stab wound, I’m fine. He pulled my hair, then my foot got twisted in a hole in the floor. But that’s it. He wanted to drug me and take me back home for our wedding.” She shivered.

Nick reached an arm around her shoulders, weakly pulling her to his side. “He can’t hurt you anymore. You’re safe now.”

He smiled. "I'd do anything to keep you safe. Risk anything. Sacrifice anything."

"Nick, stop talking like that. The guys will be here any minute, and we'll get you out of here and to the hospital."

"Rose, it's okay. Who knows... Maybe it's better this way." His eyes fluttered as his breathing slowed. "I'm a big grumpy beast, and you are the brightest sunshine in the world. I'm just happy I got to know you. You made me a better man. My own personal sunshine."

"Nick, no, don't do this to me! Please, Nick!" Rose flung her body over his, crying into his chest as the rain began to pour down and the fire died out. "You can't leave me. I love you. I love my sweet and gentle Nick, and I love my rough and grumpy Beast. I love all of you." Rose's sobs echoed into the night as loud buzz of ATVs drew close.

Chapter 24

“**H**e likes bacon. He likes coffee. He likes blueberries. Therefore, he will want my bacon-coffee-blueberry cupcakes when he wakes up. Seriously, Louis, for a chef, you really don’t know anything about flavors.”

Nick was trying hard to pretend to be asleep, but if these two kept at it, he wasn’t sure he could keep from laughing much longer.

“Marina, all due respect to your ...” Louis paused.

In Nick’s experience, a long pause meant a French rant was soon to follow. Nick opened one eye, not wanting to miss the show.

“... creations ...”

Nick heard a loud sigh of relief. He looked over to see Rose watching her father and Marina go at it. She caught his eye and winked.

“... but, no one would choose to eat them when they can have *mille-feuille*.”

Nick silently groaned. He loved Marina, but she better not get in the way of his *mille-feuille*.

“I see.”

Louis sighed. “Yes, Marina. I am sorry but ...”

“No, don’t apologize, this is great! You’re saying I’m second place to that that Napoleon-looking thing. And since you only brought those for Nick, that means I’m first place everywhere else.” Marina reached over and gave Louis a light punch in the shoulder. “I’ll be back. I’m going to find my people!” She grabbed her cupcake tote and raced out of the room.

Unable to pretend any longer, Nick’s laughter rumbled through the room.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Rose said, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

“Morning, sunshine,” he answered.

“*Bonjour, bete,*” Louis said.

“*Bonjour,* spoonman.”

“Yes, Papa. He loved the *pot-au-feu*. You’ll have to bring more tomorrow because I don’t think there’ll be any leftovers when he’s finished.” Nick heard Rose pause on the phone, her father likely giving her a list of other dishes he wanted to bring.

After Rose’s escape from her psycho stalker, the two men in her life had come to an understanding. Her father had accepted Nick’s rough edges, and Nick had admitted he secretly liked Louis’s fancy ways.

Although Nick had lost some blood during the stabbing, and Gavin had missed all the major organs, the main issue had been shock. Once the deputies got him out of the woods and into an ambulance, that was taken care of, and the next big hurdle was infection. Being stabbed by a dirty knife in the middle of the woods opened a person up to a lot of germs, but he was out of the hospital in less than two weeks.

“Sunshine, I thought you wanted to watch this,” he called out, not wanting Rose to miss the next part of the show.

“Coming!” she called, bringing a plastic bag as she sat down next to him on the couch. “Sorry, sometimes Papa is impossible to get off the phone. You should have paused it for me.” They were watching an advanced copy of one of the upcoming episodes of *Grimm County Lawmen*. Ordinarily,

Nick couldn't give a fuck what they showed on TV, but with this one, he wanted to make sure Rose saw it first.

Nick smiled and drew her close to him on the couch. "Doesn't get good until the end."

The scene changed from the downtown station to Nick's farm.

"Nick! When did you film this?"

"You aren't with me every second of the day, sunshine."

"Wow. I had no idea you were so sneaky."

"Don't you want to hear what I have to say?"

Rose rolled her eyes and made a motion to zip her lips.

"And this is my farm," the television Nick announced. "Live here with my wife, Rose."

The cameras followed Nick as he took them on a tour of the goats and chickens, but Rose wasn't paying attention anymore.

"Your what?" she whispered, turning to face him.

He reached over and grabbed her hands in his as he got down on one knee. "I love you, Rose. Not a man of many words, but those are the ones that count the most. I love you. Heard that you love me too, the good and the grumpy."

She nodded, a giant smile on her face. "I do," she laughed. "Heaven knows why, but I do."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. "Will you marry me, Rose? Be my sunshine always?"

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes!” She threw her arms around him and kissed him. After a few moments of happy bliss, she jolted back up. “Can they still make changes to that episode?”

“Why? You said yes. Gonna be my wife. No takebacks.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it. It’s just, that ... actually ...” She reached into the plastic bag and pulled out a large book. “You’re not going to be living with just your wife on the farm anymore.” Rose held up a copy of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.

“Say what now?”

Epilogue

Hunter walked through the throngs of people at the Sunset Market. He scanned the crowd for suspicious activity but didn't expect to see any. The deputies' appearances at these markets were more about community networking than actual policing, but occasionally, someone did try to shoplift a pair of earrings or back into a parked car.

He made his way to Rose's Soap Box, shaking his head at the sight of his good friend, Nick. He was wearing a t-shirt that read, "I GOAT you ...," which matched Rose's shirt that said, "... babe." *Oh, how the mighty have fallen.* Rose was talking to a dark-haired woman. Hunter didn't recognize her from the back, but he was pretty sure he'd recognize her plump little ass if he ever saw it again.

"Thanks for bringing Jasper to school last week. The kids haven't stopped talking about him. Do you offer farm tours? I'm planning to take the PreK class on a tour in the Spring but haven't figured out where yet," the woman asked.

“We’d love that. Wouldn’t we, darling?” Rose turned to look up at Nick, batting her eyelashes with a sly grin.

“Yep.” Nick bent down and kissed Rose on the lips.

Hunter groaned. He barely recognized Nick these days. Pretty soon, they’d need to change his nickname from Beast to Fluffy.

“Wonderful! I’ll talk with the director and be in touch. See you guys later.”

Hunter sighed as he watched the woman saunter off to the next booth.

“Hunter!” Nick shifted his gaze from Rose and finally realized Hunter was nearby. “For your mom.” He handed Hunter a carton of eggs.

“Thanks, man.”

“Long time no see, Hunter!” Rose moved from behind her table and wrapped him in a big hug.

He hugged Rose back awkwardly. He still felt guilty for his part in her kidnapping. *Fucking allergies*. But looking at her now, with the small baby bump and bright smile on her face, you’d never know what she’d endured just a few short months ago.

“Have you heard? We’re starting goat yoga at the farm. Be sure to tell your sisters. I’ve seen them a couple times at the studio downtown. I bet they’d be into it.”

“Seriously?” Hunter looked over at Nick. “You’re letting people come to your farm? On purpose?”

Nick shrugged and looked at Rose. “Yep.”

“We’re also working on field trips, and I’m going to start a soap-making class.”

“Brother.” Hunter reached out and grabbed Nick’s shoulder. “I am officially changing your nickname to Fluffy.” Nick growled, and Hunter smiled. “I knew you were still in there somewhere.”

He felt a buzz in his pocket and pulled out his phone. As he did, he heard pings going off across the market as everyone pulled out their phones. He looked down and saw the alert.

Breaking news: Senator Jim White, majority leader and senior senator from North Carolina, has died. Cause of death unknown.

Good riddance. Before he was a CSI tech, Hunter had been a chemist with a startup pharmaceutical company. They’d been on the verge of a major breakthrough in PTSD research using MDMA, more commonly known as ecstasy, when the senator had stepped in and pulled their funding. The startup had folded, and all their research was trashed. Hunter would forever be grateful for Christian calling when he did and offering him a different path, away from the whims of politicians and reelection campaigns.

“Fuck,” Nick said, looking over the crowd.

“You better go help her, babe. Hunter can help me pack up.”

Hunter nodded. “Of course, anything you need, Rose.”

He watched as Nick barreled through the crowd. Okay, so maybe some things would never change. He made his way straight to the dark-haired woman, where a crowd had formed around her.

“What’s going on?” Hunter asked.

“You don’t know? Aren’t you from here?”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “Humor me.”

“That’s Snow.”

Hunter gave Rose a blank look.

She rolled her eyes. “Snow *White*. The Senator’s daughter.”

Ah, fuck. Hunter might have hated the guy, but he wouldn’t wish losing a father on anyone. “Doesn’t she live in DC?”

“She did, but she moved back here a few months ago to teach PreK. Poor thing. I’ll have to drop by later. It’s bad enough to deal with the shock of losing a parent, but to do it in front of the world ...” Rose trailed off.

The crowd surrounding Nick and Snow had almost tripled in size. It was as though every person at the market stopped what they were doing to be near her. And most had their phones out taking pictures. Hunter hadn’t seen anyone hounded like that since the governor had hosted a press conference at his old startup. “I better go—“

“Back the fuck up! Now! And show some damn respect!” Nick shouted loud enough for all the creatures on land and sea to hear. The people in the crowd immediately stepped back and lowered their phones. Hunter heard murmurings of, “Sorry, Snow,” as Nick guided her to the parking lot.

“Jesus! That was insane. Are all senators’ kids that popular?” Hunter asked.

Rose shook her head. “I doubt it. Probably just the ones with ten million social media followers.”

Hunter blinked. “Ten million? Seriously?”

“Yeah. Here, watch this.”

Rose pulled out her phone and pushed a button. “Siri.” She waited a second and tried again. “SIRI. Who is the fairest of them all?”

Hunter’s eyes widened. *No fucking way.*

Rose winked, and the robotic voice of her phone answered, “The Fairest of Them All is a brand of social media accounts managed by Sonora White, also known as Snow White, daughter of US senator, Jim White. Senator White has served six terms in the US Senate and was widowed for twenty years until he recently remarried ...”

Hunter and Snow's story continues in *Grimm County Chemistry*, coming Winter 2024.

Marina and Christian's story, *Grimm County Haven*, is available now on Amazon.

If you enjoyed reading Nick and Rose's story, please consider leaving a rating and/or review. It makes a huge difference by helping my book show up for readers. Thank you!

End Credits

To set the mood as these final credits roll, tell your smart speaker to play “Unconditionally” by Katy Perry—Nick and Rose’s love song.

Thank you to Jennifer McRae for helping me bring the Sunset Market to life. Check out her one-of-a-kind jewelry that was the inspiration for Rose’s fellow vendor at McRae Design.

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About the Author

Cora Day is an avid romance reader turned writer. She lived her own happily ever after when she found her husband on the other side of the world while serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer. They reside in North Carolina with their three kids. When she's not reading, writing, or at her day job, she can be found staring at a never-ending pile of laundry.

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