

TACCO BOU LOVE



A SPICY ROMANTIC COMEDY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LILY KATE

Acknowledgments

To **Virginia** for her sharp proofreading eyes.

To all of you, **readers**—beta readers, ARC readers, bloggers,
and the entire book community—you're all fabulous!

To my very **best of friends**... you know who you are!

To my **family**, I love you!

Taco Bout Love

Lily Kate

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

TACO BOUT LOVE

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Blurb](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Flower Girl Blurb](#)

This book is dedicated to my other half.

And to my best friend.

Thank you both for encouraging me to write books I love.



Blurb

My name is Lucas Donovan, and I'm a sucker for a great taco.

No, that's not an innuendo, though I do like my women like I like my tacos: extra spicy. So when a brand new food truck rolls into our sleepy little town of Fantasie, Maine, I know I'm in trouble. I just don't know how much trouble.

Things go downhill fast when I meet Chloe Brown, the sizzling hot and super sassy owner of **Taco Bout Love** who is as extra as guac. Then out of the blue, Chloe plops her huge purple eyesore of a truck in *my* designated parking spot. I'm sorely tempted to have her truck towed, and her right along with it.

Unfortunately, Chloe's as fierce as a ghost pepper, and she's not going down without a fight. Before I know it, the only thing I'm certain of is that this woman drives me crazy... in the best way possible. What's more is that I'm beginning to think I just might miss her when she's gone.

Suddenly, I can't seem to keep my hands off Chloe Brown... or her tacos.

Chapter 1

C *hloe*

Fat raindrops dripped down my windshield as chilly April showers ushered in bunches of bright May flowers. But today, there were no flowers in sight—just the sleepy stretch of town before me with a peeling sign that promised big things.

FANTASIE, MAINE, declared the sign. The faded image of a rainbow was imprinted behind the text. Beneath the block lettering was a handwritten scrawl that stated: *Fantasie: Where dreams come true.*

I wasn't sure any of my dreams would be coming true in Fantasie, but it was a pit stop on my way to a new life. A place where nobody knew me, a place I could focus on getting my new business off the ground, a place I could fade into anonymity and forget about the dumpster fire I'd left behind with my previous life.

My old truck spluttered and burped on sagging wheels as I rolled toward Fantasie in my newly purchased, oversized purple truck. Up ahead, a thick tunnel of greenery, jungle-like in its knotted foliage, loomed ahead, ready to swallow me whole. I crossed my fingers and closed my eyes as I entered the stretch of darkness, praying I'd make it through to the other side without losing my engine.

A sigh of relief escaped me as my vehicle rolled on through, wheezing the entire way, in deep need of an industrial-sized inhaler—or a new engine, really. I desperately needed to get this piece of junk fixed up the second I made it into town.

I mumbled a *thank-you* to the vehicle gods when I saw the road ahead sloped downhill into the city limits. If nothing else, I could roll on into my new home at this point using nothing but gravity, leaving my beloved purple truck to fart old gas and drop a few nuts and bolts along the way.

My relief was short-lived. A yelp crossed my lips at the sight of a woman wandering straight down the center of the road toward me, weaving in and out of the yellow lines. She wore a billowing white dress and was clamping a straw hat onto her head despite its best efforts to blow off in the wind. Her other arm was crooked to cradle a wicker basket piled high with garden greens and fresh herbs.

Slamming on the brakes, I careened to a stop just inches from the front of the woman's kneecaps. She hadn't been visible as I'd come out from the tree-tunnel around a bend, and it was just lucky I hadn't chosen that moment to change the song on my *Girls Jam* Spotify playlist or, God forbid, sneeze, itch my eyebrow, or eat one of my road trip beef jerky sticks that I loved so much.

My heart pounded in my chest as the woman before me merely paused for a moment, as if my almost slamming into her kneecaps with a massive truck was nothing but a frivolity. Then she swished her dress ever so nonchalantly before stepping around the front headlight and making her way toward the driver's side door. I reached for my purse and fumbled for my pepper spray as she approached the window.

Flustered, I found a string of old CVS receipts that could circumnavigate the world three times, more old tampons than any woman of childbearing age could ever need, and three old Tic Tacs. I did not find my pepper spray. I was hyperventilating by the time her face popped up behind the glass.

Not being prepared for a mugging was a sin by New York Woman standards. I knew better than this. I knew to be prepared. I'd walked down dark alleys late at night by myself before. I'd gotten myself home from the bar at three a.m. I'd fended off unwanted advances from unwanted men. And here I was, ready to meet my maker, in a godforsaken town called Fantasie.

The woman rapped on my window. She gave an enthusiastic wave and gestured for me to lower the glass. I frowned. She sure was pretty for a psychopath who was probably out to kill me. Who else would be walking down the

road at dusk on a rainy day in a white gown? It was the stuff thriller novels were made of.

Reluctantly, I inched my window down a half a centimeter. “Yes?”

“Hi, honey. Welcome to town.”

I didn’t know many women who addressed their serial killer prey as *honey*. But maybe that was her schtick. An herb-garden-gathering, pretty-dress-loving, very-brutal murderer.

I kept my fingers circling the steering wheel tightly. “How do you know I’m new to town?”

The woman cocked her head slightly. “Aren’t you?”

“Well, yes, but...” I hesitated, changing my tune, wondering if *she* was the lost one. “Do you need help?”

She let out a tinkling laugh. Even up close, it was hard to determine the woman’s age. She had microscopic wrinkles around her eyes and laugh lines at her cheeks that spoke of true happiness, but her skin was as flawless as a child’s. Her hair was tucked up in her bonnet, but wispy strands around her cheeks made me think she was a joyful shade of blond. Her blue eyes would match the sky on a lovely afternoon. She could’ve been twenty-two or fifty-two.

“I just wanted to welcome you to your new home. If there’s anything you need, just give a holler.”

“Oh, I’m not settling here. Just passing through.”

“Sure you are.” She winked. “Send Lily my regards. And when you get to the stoplight, take things extra slow. Sheriff DiMaggio woke up on the wrong side of the bed today, and he’s hankering to pull someone over.”

“Um...” I glanced down at my hands, still processing the unexpected welcome. By the time I looked back up, the woman was sashaying off down the center of the road, wobbling her way between the yellow lines on the slick black asphalt.

“What’s your name?” I called after her, but she’d already rounded the bend. If she’d heard me, she didn’t give any

indication.

“Okay,” I muttered to myself. “Totally normal. Totally normal.”

I was a New Yorker through and through. I wore black like it was a second skin. This was nothing. This was totally cool.

Cautiously, I stepped on the gas, half expecting someone else to jump out of the bushes at me and let me know it'd all been a joke. When nothing of the sort happened, I cruised into town, focused on just making it to the bed and breakfast where I'd booked a few nights stay so I could repair my stupid truck and figure out my next steps.

I caught sight of the stoplight up ahead and sped up to make the yellow light. As I crossed the threshold, I glanced to my right and saw the cop car. As my truck flew across the intersection, I saw a grumpy looking face behind the wheel of the cruiser and recalled the mystery woman's warning that one Sheriff DiMaggio was looking to pull someone over.

“Oh, crapola,” I muttered as the lights started flashing.

I had the fleeting thought that maybe I could just gun it and fly right through this town, not stopping within its weirdo boundaries as I'd planned. However, not only would that be completely illegal, but I would probably find myself stalled out two blocks over and in need of a tow from the very cop chasing me. Reluctantly, I slowed to a stop and pulled out my license.

The reportedly grumpy policeman stopped behind me and approached my window. I handed my documents over. The cop was so handsome it was frustratingly unfair. Tall, dark hair flopping over his forehead, broad shoulders. I swallowed and focused on my steering wheel.

“New to town?” he said gruffly.

“Yep,” I said. “Was I speeding or something?”

“Or something.”

“Something like what, exactly?”

His brows knitted together. “The light was red when you went through the intersection.”

“It was yellow,” I corrected. “I was fully into the intersection before the light changed to red. Look, I goofed—I should’ve slowed instead of sped up. I’m sorry. But you don’t have to take out your frustration on me.”

“Take my frustration out on you?” His hands stilled. “What are you talking about?”

“I met a woman—white dress, garden basket, sun hat—who told me you woke up on the wrong side of the bed?” I cringed as I spoke. Even I knew I sounded like an idiot.

“You met Clarice.”

“Is that her name? She didn’t introduce herself.”

Without warning, another woman appeared at the front door of my car. She wore a pretty dress, a pink-striped pinafore apron that flowed over a slim figure. She elbowed the cop out of the way.

“Hi, I’m Josie.” The woman reached through the open window to shake my hand. “Clarice said you’d be coming. Welcome to Fantasie.”

“Hi,” I said, shaking her hand. “Clarice said I’d be coming?”

“Not *you* specifically.” Josie straightened and rolled her eyes. Several bouquets of flowers wrapped in brown parchment paper spilled out of her arms. “You know how Clarice talks, all dramatic and vague and whatnot. She just said someone would be joining us. I brought you some flowers.”

Without hesitation, she shoved a gorgeous display of double tulips that looked more like a rose-peony hybrid through the window. “And this set is for Lily. Do you mind dropping it off for me?”

Another bouquet of tulips, these white, popped into my hands. Feeling bewildered, I set both bunches on the seat next

to me. “You’re the second person to mention Lily. I don’t know a Lily.”

“You will soon.” Josie swiveled to face the cop, who had all but frozen with my documents in his hand. “And you—” she poked his chest. Hard. “Back off, you big, stubborn bully.”

The cop’s eyes flashed. “What the hell are you doing, Josie? Since when are you on the welcoming committee?”

“Screw you, Finn. Just because you woke up on the wrong side of the bed, doesn’t mean you have to pull people over.”

“Who the fuck is walking around Fantasie telling people I woke up on the wrong side of the bed?”

All three of us, Finn included, said at the very same time, “Clarice.”

Finn rolled his eyes. “I’m doing my job, Josie.”

The pretty flower slinger shook her finger at him. “Your job isn’t to intimidate nice young women moving to our town.”

“I’m not moving here,” I said quickly. “Just passing through.”

“That’s not what Clarice said,” Josie told me, though her gaze was locked on Finn’s. “If you don’t let my new friend go, then I’m going to rat you out to your grandmother for bad behavior.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, Finn paled a few shades. Which was comical, considering the fact that Finn was a strapping, unfortunately handsome, thirty-something, well-built man, and I had to imagine his grandmother was... *not*.

Finn handed my documents back to me. “I’m going to let you off with a warning today, Miss Brown. Next time, you won’t be so lucky.”

Then he huffed back to his cop car, and I was left alone with my guardian angel. I told her so.

“Guardian angel, yeah right. I’m more like the little devil on your shoulder.” Josie winked at me. “I’d be happy to help

you make some bad decisions tonight. What do you say to dirty martinis at The Cow Tipper tonight?”

“The what?”

“The bar. There are only two drinking establishments in town. Just look for the massive cow sign.”

“Well, I should probably get settled, and—”

“Look, you’re going to need to know the ins and outs of Fantasie,” she said. “Who to avoid and whose ass to kiss. Also, judging by the way your weird old truck’s kinda riding lopsided, you’re gonna need some repairs, and I can hook you up with Noah Donovan. He’s the best in the business. Plus, you’re gonna need to eat dinner, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Great. I’ll see you in a couple of hours. We can do a late dinner, or you can drink and I’ll eat if you prefer. I’ve got a few more flower deliveries before it’s chow time. So, *ciao*.”

For the second time in the last ten minutes, someone disappeared from my window before I could properly end the conversation. I debated hollering after her, but I decided against it because, apparently, I’d be seeing her in a couple of hours anyway. She hadn’t even said a specific time. So, I supposed I’d just show up to the massive cow sign?

Cautiously, under the watchful eye of the cop named Finn, I started my truck and inched it forward, praying he didn’t notice that my left blinker wasn’t working and my brake lights only flashed half the time.

If Finn noticed, he didn’t pull me over again, but that probably had more to do with him not wanting to risk the wrath of Josie or his grandmother. Just then, my truck’s check engine light blinked on, and I knew I was on the final legs of my journey. I guided my truck into the first parking lot I could find and let it drift into the closest spot. With a final, exhausted clunk, my engine shut down. Whoever Noah Donovan the mechanic was, he would have his work cut out for him because my vehicle was *done*.

Hopping down, I made my way around to the passenger's side and retrieved the single suitcase I'd packed to start a new life and hauled it out with a couple of tugs. I was still dressed for New York in a black skirt and white blouse with high heels. The last remnants of my former life that would be ditched just as soon as I had time to find some new attire.

I glanced up, wrinkling my nose when I saw that my truck had landed in a designated parking spot. Someone *else's* designated parking spot. And judging by the name and title on the sign where I'd parked, that parking spot belonged to someone important.

LUCAS DONOVAN, CEO, specifically.

Fortunately, it was a Friday night, and surely no CEO would be working late on a Friday night in a strange little town. The spot was abandoned, so I was pretty sure I had until Monday to find this Noah person to help me get a working vehicle again. Hopefully CEO Lucas was a forgiving guy.

Sliding out the handle of my suitcase, I tugged it with a couple more thumps toward me as I pulled up my GPS and typed in the address for the B&B that would be my home for the next few days. Then I lugged my tulips in the other arm and set off down the street, wondering where in the hell I'd find a woman named Lily.

Chapter 2

Lucas

“What the fuck is that?” I squinted out my office window at *my* designated parking spot. “Trevor, are we expecting company?”

“Uh, no, sir.” Trevor tucked a long strand of hair behind his ear and wiggled uncomfortably in his ill-fitting suit. “And sir, I don’t know *what the fuck* that is. But I’m happy to investigate.”

My assistant leapt to attention and headed out of my office, but I raised a hand to stop him before he could interrupt whatever shitshow had rolled into my parking spot.

“How does that hunk of metal run?” I wondered, rubbing my hand across my forehead. “I don’t understand. Like, the physics of it. I don’t get it.”

Trevor just shook his head, his lips parted in surprise. His eyes darted nervously between me and the truck, as if he was worried how I was going to react. The way he was acting it was like I was the boss from hell. I was pretty sure I wasn’t, but I could be wrong.

“I can call your family members, sir, and have this monstrosity towed.”

“My family members?” I echoed.

“Well, your cousin, Sheriff DiMaggio, could write her a ticket for parking in your spot. Or maybe Noah could tow her back to the shop for you.”

I kept my hand raised. “I want to see what she does. Go order us some food, will you?”

“Pizza My Heart?”

“What?” I glanced at Trevor, worried he’d noticed my visceral reaction to the stunning woman who’d confiscated my parking spot.

“Would you like pizza tonight? Rocky DiMaggio’s running a special on the pepperoni—”

“Sure, whatever. Get a couple.” I forked over my credit card without taking my eyes off the woman in my parking spot. “Take your time. I’ll handle this situation.”

As soon as Trevor was out of the room, I adjusted the situation that was happening in my pants. The woman who’d parked in my spot had climbed out of the truck and yanked open the passenger’s side door, a door that looked like it was about to fall off its rusted hinges, and bent over to beat on the handle of her suitcase.

Her bending over had provided me with a fantastic view of a fantastic ass. She wore a hip hugging skirt in black that left just about nothing to the imagination. And whatever she *had* left to the imagination had been blown wide open when she’d reached down to fiddle with the pair of sky high heels she wore for some ridiculous reason in our ridiculous town. In doing so, she’d given me a free show that involved red lace panties and some pretty amazing curves.

There was no reason to wear sky high heels in Fantasie. The Cow Tipper wasn’t exactly known for its dress code. Hairy Harry was known to show up sunburnt and drunk for dinner in his Speedo three days out of the week in the summer months. Not that I didn’t appreciate a pair of high heels when worn right, and the woman teetering away from me was definitely wearing them right.

As she began stomping away from my parking space, I stood from behind my desk and took a minute. I couldn’t exactly head outside and confront the woman with a hard-on. I could picture that conversation. *Hello, nice to meet you. I obviously find you attractive, now get the hell out of my parking spot.*

I took a few deep breaths and told myself it was time to get laid. I needed to head out to a neighboring town one of these days, meet a nice, uncomplicated woman. Spend a few nights with her before we went our separate ways. It’d been too long

since I'd had any action—way too long. It was starting to affect my mental health.

The woman had reached the sidewalk by now, and I blazed out of the building, chasing her down, not entirely sure why I felt compelled to be near her. I didn't need my parking spot all that bad. But something about this woman had captured my interest, and stubborn bastard that I was, I wanted to know more.

“Hey,” I called after her. “Hey, excuse me.”

The woman glanced behind her, then faltered a tiny amount, then stomped forward faster away from me. I actually broke into a light jog to catch up to her.

“I couldn't help but notice that you parked in my spot. What the hell is that thing, anyway?”

Finally, the woman I'd been chasing after like a madman stopped and turned to face me. She turned a set of the most mesmerizing green eyes on me. Her full lips parted as our gazes met, and I had to wonder if she felt the same jolt I did the moment I laid eyes on her, the moment I well and truly saw her for the first time.

The woman was petite and thin and had the stuffy air of a New Yorker. The heels on her feet barely brought her height up to my shoulder. Her white-blond hair rolled down her back in gentle waves with a tinge of gold highlights laced through. The rain had stopped a couple of minutes ago, and the clouds parted to let the sunlight play with her wispy strands. My fingers itched to reach out and smooth down the curly cues near her forehead.

“What *thing* are you talking about?” Her voice was smooth and enticing.

The woman was entirely enchanting. Her blouse was one of those button-up masterpieces, and the buttons gaped just so that with my significant height advantage, I was allowed a peek down her shirt at breasts that took all the blood from my head and delivered it straight to another part of my body. I shoved my hands in my pockets and hoped she didn't notice.

“The purple metal bucket that thumped into my parking spot a few minutes ago.”

The slight intake of breath caused her lips to part further, and it was all I could do to tear my eyes from her mouth. My mind was going to dirty places, and I didn't even know her name. I just knew I wanted her to know *my* name. Really, really well.

“It's my vehicle.” Her soft eyes flashed, and she came alive. Her back straightened, she stood up taller, her lips thinned as she studied me. “And that's very offensive. I just bought my new baby, and I don't appreciate you making fun of it.”

“I'm just stating the obvious.”

“Then allow me to state the obvious. You're a jerk.”

She turned and stomped off. I was left staring after her with an erection and a pinch of regret.

“Wait a second,” I said. “I didn't catch your name.”

“Good,” she said. “You don't need to know it anyway.”

I took a few steps after her. “You're in my parking spot. I could have you towed.”

Her gaze slid over me, puzzling the pieces together. “You're Lucas Donovan, CEO.”

Instead of appearing impressed with the title, she seemed significantly less than impressed. Almost disappointed.

“Believe it or not, that's me.”

“I'll have my truck out of there by Monday.” She turned, unfazed, and kept marching onward. “Sorry about the inconvenience, but you weren't exactly using the spot.”

“I could have you towed. Or ticketed.”

“Yeah, well...” She paused again, her shoulders drooping. “I can't move it, okay? It needs a little TLC—”

“A *little*?”

Her eyes blazed. I raised my hands and shrugged. It was the truth, and I wasn't one to mince words.

"Do you need your spot before Monday morning?" she shot back.

"No."

"Good. Then, it shouldn't be a problem. Bye."

"What's your name?"

"None of your business."

"See you then, None of Your Business. Can I help you carry your suitcase to wherever it is you're hiking to in stilettos?"

She raised a middle-finger salute toward me as she continued marching down the road. I took that to be a no. I waited for a long moment, watching her go. A few steps later, a couple of tulips tipped out of her bouquet, and one of the wheels popped off her suitcase. She let out a grunt of frustration that had me twitching in all the wrong places again. As if the gods were conspiring against her, the clouds opened up and the raindrops resumed their incessant pelting.

I took a few paces closer to her. It physically pained me to notice that her white shirt was glued to her body. There really wasn't a whole lot left to the imagination, which was just fine because she was the stuff fantasies were made of anyway. I didn't need to daydream when the real thing was in front of me. I knelt and retrieved her belongings.

"Let me carry your suitcase. You don't have to talk to me." I had already swept her busted suitcase into my arms before she had the opportunity to refuse.

She knelt, retrieved her tulips, and tucked them back into the parchment paper. Without glancing at me, she turned her nose up and huffed forward. I was pretty sure I knew where she was headed. There was only one place the newcomers in town went, and that was to the B&B. Most people who stopped in Fantasie were just passing through. I assumed she was just doing the same.

It was that very thought that got my blood sizzling. Maybe she was just passing through. Maybe, if she'd felt the same thing I'd felt, we could have a little fun together before she moved on. I had to admit, the thought was appealing, if I didn't think about the moving on part. I had a feeling this wasn't a woman that a man could forget easily.

"I see you met Josie," I said, giving a nod to her flower-full arms. "She's a good egg."

"I'm not sure that says much coming from you."

"I just said your car needed work. It's a fact."

"You offended my pride and joy before asking my name."

"I did ask your name. After," I admitted. "And I still didn't get it. Unless you prefer to be referred to as Ms. None of Your Business."

"Yeah, that suits me."

She made no effort to actually give me her name, so I tried again. "What brings you to town?"

She arched her eyebrow.

"Let me guess," I said, "None of Your Business."

"You're catching on, Einstein."

We walked on in silence. When we reached the bed and breakfast, I pulled the door open for her before she had stopped walking.

"How'd you know I was coming here?" she muttered. "Is everyone in this town psychic?"

"I see you met Clarice," I said. "And no, there's just one inn in the entire town, so my excellent skills of deduction and your loud stomping led me to make a reasonable guess where you were headed."

She licked her lips. I grimaced as her shirt gaped and glanced away. As long as this woman stayed in Fantasie, I was in trouble. Big, big trouble.

Chapter 3

C *hloe*

“Hello, oh, hello!” A middle-aged woman scurried out from behind the desk of the little bed and breakfast. “Welcome to town. You must be exhausted. Don’t worry, I have a hot meal waiting for you.”

I blinked, thinking it was getting pretty old how everyone seemed to know my business before I’d even arrived. It was also getting old standing next to this smoking hot hunk of an asshole who had a problem with my beloved purple truck. Sure, I’d parked in his spot, but that didn’t give him permission to insult my new business venture.

“I’m Lily,” the woman said, extending a hand for the tulips. “That must be my order from Josie.”

“Lily.” The name formed on my lips as things made sense. “Yes, these are for you.”

As I handed over the white bouquet, I felt a wave of relief. People in this town didn’t have the magical gift of foresight. They had just correctly deduced that the newcomer in town would be going straight to the only place to stay within a fifty-mile radius. I gave a laugh of relief that drew gazes from both Lily and Lucas.

I quickly cleared my throat and reached for my suitcase. “I can take that now. Uh, thanks for your help.”

Lucas handed my suitcase over without setting it down, probably because it was missing a quarter of its wheels. As he placed it in my arms, our hands touched, and I felt my stomach quiver involuntarily.

While I’d figured out the logical explanation for both Clarice and Josie’s supposed psychic powers, I hadn’t figured out how Fantasie seemed to have an inordinate number of hot guys. My batting average so far was one hundred percent

between the dark-haired, grumpy cop and the jerk of a CEO who'd promenaded me to my destination.

"Thanks for accommodating my last-minute reservation," I said. "Sorry I don't know exactly how long I'll be staying, but ___"

"You are welcome to stay as long as you need." Lily took a few steps toward me. She removed the suitcase from my hand and shoved it back into Lucas's arms. "Put this upstairs in the garden room."

Apparently, we were playing hot potato with all my belongings in the world. Lucas gave me a glance and took the suitcase, then marched up the staircase that split the lobby in two. He disappeared to the right. I took a deep breath in his absence. I hadn't been able to breathe properly since I'd laid eyes on him. The man was something else.

While Sheriff Finn had been hot in a brooding, grumpy sort of way, Lucas was next level simmering. He did something to my blood that I hadn't experienced in a long, long time. I shivered just thinking about it, as if his absence left me feeling chilled.

"You poor thing, you're sopping wet. Surely you want to get into some new clothes before we have dinner. Let me give you a quick tour on the way to your room so you can have a nice warm shower, or better yet, a relaxing soak in the tub." Lily's hand came to rest on my shoulder. "I've just got in all new soaps from Millicent, and they're fantastic. Everything's organically grown locally, and she makes them by hand. You're going to lose your mind."

My mind was already lost, I realized, as Lucas reappeared at the top of the stairs. I'd been in the middle of admiring the quaint bed and breakfast that felt as welcoming as an old favorite sweater, and he'd stolen the show once again.

The reported CEO was tall, easily over six feet, and made me feel like a tiny elf, even in my tallest heels. His shoulders were broader than a pencil-pusher's shoulders had any right to be. The man probably sat behind a desk all day. So how did he look like he worked construction?

Seeing as it was late on a Friday night, I was unsurprised that he'd abandoned whatever suit jacket he'd been wearing during the day, leaving only a white shirt that was now cuffed up to his elbows. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his slacks, and I couldn't help my gaze being drawn to the money shot in his trousers.

I quickly looked away, pretending to be deeply invested in the delicate chandelier Lily was currently pointing out to me. But my glance snuck back to him, admiring the set line of a strong jaw, the dark hair that had been neatly combed into place when I'd met him but was now ruffled by the rain. His shirt was too clingy because of the dampness, and I was well aware that my own nipples were probably on display thanks to the gold medal I'd won at our accidental wet T-shirt contest.

As if he'd read my mind, I saw his gaze drop to my chest. My bra definitely wasn't thick enough to hide the interest of my nipples. I abruptly set my bouquet from Josie down and crossed my arms over my chest to hide the show. I was pretty sure I caught a smirk from him, as if he knew exactly what was going through my mind, as if we were both in on this sexy little game we were playing.

"I never introduced myself," I said, accidentally interrupting Lily as she detailed a pretty stained-glass window that allowed in fractured rays of colorful light. "I'm—"

"None of Your Business." Lucas jogged down the steps. "That's how she introduced herself to me."

"My birth certificate says my name is Chloe," I said to Lily. "That's what you can call me. To him, it's still None of Your Business."

Lily let out a laugh, and her glance slid between us, a tad more interested than it should have been at our interaction. "I sense there's a story there, but I'm going to take a cue and pretend I don't know that."

With Lucas now standing plenty far away from me, I quickly gathered up my tulips again and held them strategically in front of my breasts. Dutifully, I followed Lily as she led me on a brief tour of the place, and even I had to

admit I could appreciate the charm of the old Victorian, even though I was more of a high-rise condo sort of gal. Or at least, I had been in my previous life—the life I was dead set on abandoning.

The bed and breakfast really was an enchanting little home that felt like a true escape from everything I was running from in New York. The exterior itself had pastel pink siding with brilliant white shutters and window boxes piled with bulb plants in full, magnificent display despite the chilly spring temps. Tulips, hyacinth, and allium bloomed along the front walkway. A lilac bush next to the house was puckering with buds.

The interior of the house had been lovingly remodeled to respect the home's original features while making it usefully modern and neat as a pin. The refurbished staircase splitting the center of the home gleamed with its newer railings, while the lobby was papered with a floral wallpaper that would be laughable in New York but felt just right for Fantasie. A little front desk perched off to one side, and it looked lovingly worn, as if it, too, was an original to the house. There was no computer behind the desk, just a little logbook, as if Lily managed to run her B&B with analog methods.

“It's beautiful,” I said. “How long have you been running this place?”

“It's a family business,” she said. “My grandmother left it to me when she passed. It's been handed down by the women in my family for as long as I can remember. It's all I ever wanted to do—have a family and run Fantasie Inn.”

“You must have put a lot of work into it.”

Lily's eyes sparkled. “I mostly pointed and gave instructions. My sons helped me with the actual renovations.”

“It must be handy to have, well, handy sons.” I flashed a warm smile on her. “I can barely tell you the right end of a screwdriver. Though I admit I was proud when I figured out how to fill the tires on my truck up with air last week.”

“You wouldn’t know it looking at your vehicle,” Lucas muttered.

“Now, now, kids,” Lily said amicably, as if years of having sons had hardened her to spats of bickering. “Let’s let this poor young woman have a bath and dinner. Here’s the dining room, darling. Join us when you’re done. Towels are hanging up in the bathroom.”



I LET OUT A LONG, LUXURIOUS sigh as I slid under the water for one final time before forcing myself out of the claw-footed beauty of a tub that sat before a window with a view of a nearby river out back.

I was reluctant to drag myself out of the bathtub, but the way Lily had made it sound was that she'd prepared a dinner for me, and I didn't want to make her wait. It was getting late, and I was sure she had better things to do than sit around and cater to me.

Dragging myself dripping onto the bathmat, I toweled off with the lush, thick fabric, reveling in the scent of the handmade soaps that had made it feel like I was at an upscale spa in New York instead of a teeny tiny town in Maine.

Thinking ahead to my drinks date with Josie, I opted for a thin-strapped black dress that was as simple as it came. The cotton-like fabric could be dressed up or down but in and of itself wasn't fancy. It clung to my body while still leaving room for an extra serving of dessert.

I opted to keep things casual but chic with a studded faux-leather jacket and chunky black-heeled boots. My legs were bare, but as a New Yorker having just braved the worst of winter, these chilly spring days were downright tropical.

I added simple mascara and one swipe of lip gloss, twisted my still-wet hair into a messy top knot, and figured that was about as good as it was getting in five minutes. Then I took the stairs quickly, holding onto the rails so I didn't faceplant on my way down.

As I skidded onto the main floor, I was surprised by the silence that greeted me. I stilled for a moment, then heard rustling sounds from where Lily had pointed out a kitchen. I followed my nose to what smelled like marinara sauce simmering with lots of basil and garlic.

I pushed open the old, heavy swinging door that was probably an original to the house. On the other side, I found myself in a fully remodeled kitchen, the new decor mixing

seamlessly with the old wood. The room was cozy, warm, embraced by the yellow tones and airy blues.

A small breakfast nook sat in the corner surrounded by fluttering gauze curtains open to a light breeze. The smell of pasta sauce mixed with the trickle of raindrops from beyond the open window to create the homiest atmosphere I'd experienced in a long, long time.

It immediately, viscerally, took me back to nights with my mom, those warm, rainy nights when we'd take our little bowls of pasta onto the porch during those Midwest storms and giggle and gossip as the lightning jolted and the thunder rumbled. We'd end the nights with homemade hot chocolate topped with buckets of marshmallows. The reminders of home made me ache because after all, *this* was what home felt like.

A home, I quickly corrected, not *my home*. It was dangerous to get too comfortable. This was not my home. It would never be my home, and it didn't help to pretend when I knew full well it wouldn't last. It would just break my heart all over again.

"Don't you look gorgeous." Lily looked up at me. "You're going to steal the show, sweetie. We're not fancy around here. Half the time, I'm in my pajamas by the time I'm serving dinner."

"I don't believe that one bit," I said with a grin. "What can I help with?"

"I'm glad you asked because I've got you set up to slice tomatoes for the salad there." Lily directed with a sauce-splattered spoon in the direction of the large center island.

I set to work slicing tomatoes, grateful for something familiar to do with my hands. It was easy to zone out doing something I loved, something familiar to me. Working with food had always been such a pleasure. It was why I'd done it all along, after all. Why I'd moved to New York, taken the chance with Paul, opened up a restaurant we could finally call our own.

I stopped abruptly. I refused to think about Paul, and especially not here and now, in a brief moment of comfortable happiness. He was in the rearview mirror of my shitty purple truck for a reason, and thinking about him now did no good.

“You know your way around a knife.” Lily spoke kindly, softly, as if she understood I didn’t want to be bothered by deep conversation.

It was pleasant, the way the words rolled off her tongue, the way she didn’t even turn to look at me. The rhythmic motion of her stirring the pasta sauce was soothing. It felt like a normal, inane conversation. The only kind of conversation I was capable of having these days.

“I like to work with my hands. I like food.” I deftly scraped the knife against the cutting board and gathered all the tomatoes together, dropping them gently on top of the leafy greens in a gigantic wooden salad bowl.

“I can tell. Is that what you did back in New York?”

My hands stilled as I reached for the scallions. “New York?”

“You look like a New Yorker. The black dress, the heels, the whole thing. We don’t really dress like that here. But we get enough New Yorkers passing through that I can recognize y’all by now.”

I returned to my slicing and dicing, relaxing, reminding myself that I didn’t need to be on edge around here. Nobody knew me. “Yes, I worked in a restaurant back home.”

“Lovely. What sort of food?”

“Not this sort.” I gave a smile as I set my knife down to sprinkle the scallions on the salad. Then I crept over to the stove and took a peek. “I’ve never smelled a pasta sauce recipe like that.”

“It’s been passed down for years in the DiMaggio family. I don’t think it’s ever actually been written down.”

“I’ve figured out some of the ingredients. Basil, salt and pepper, sauteed garlic. I spy some oregano, but there’s

something else..." I hesitated, took another sniff, but I couldn't tell what I was missing. "Truffle oil?"

Lily inclined her head to let me know I was correct, but her eyes were twinkling. She raised the spoon and let it drift toward me. I leaned forward without thinking and took a taste. I blinked in surprise.

"Sugar?"

Lily let out a tinkling laugh as she dropped the dirtied spoon into the sink. "Brava, sweet girl. A pinch of sugar, and don't forget a whole heap of DiMaggio love."

"DiMaggio," I said. "Does that mean you're related to the cop I met earlier today?"

She sighed. "It's a shame you met our Finn today. He was having a crabby afternoon."

"You could say I had a bit of a run-in with the law."

"I should've known. Clarice warned me. Oh well." She clapped her hands onto her apron. "Did he give you a ticket?"

"No. A woman named Josie helped me out with that."

More twinkling of the eyes. "Good. Well, yes. He's my nephew. My last name isn't DiMaggio anymore since I married, but my brother is Finn's dad. Fun fact, Finn's got seven brothers."

"Seven brothers?" I just about choked. "There are eight boys in the DiMaggio family? Their poor mother."

"She's a saint, I'll give you that."

"No kidding."

"Let me give you a word of advice as you're settling in around here." Lily paused, rested a hand on her hip. "The DiMaggio clan in Fantasie is one big, sloppy, Italian mess that'll drive you completely nuts. But we're loyal and a helluva lot of fun. We talk too loud, we argue too much, and we love way too hard. It's the curse of our family, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

We continued working in the kitchen, Lily humming quietly to herself as if the conversation was complete as far as she was concerned. I couldn't help but watch her while I sliced red onions on the oversized marble island.

Lily had graying hair tucked into a perky little ponytail at the nape of her neck. She wore a flowing white dress that brushed at the tops of bare feet and a threadbare old apron around her waist.

As far as I could tell, she wore no makeup, yet she was as stunning as any New York model I'd ever stumbled across in my restaurant. Her laugh lines were distinct, her smile quick, her eyes peaceful. Even her shoulders held a quiet confidence that brimmed with happiness. I felt a pang in my heart as I wondered what it would take to achieve a peacefulness like Lily's, one that radiated across the kitchen.

I was so lost in my thoughts of Lily and her charmed existence that I didn't notice the moment he walked into the room. Big, brooding Lucas with a frown on his face. I felt it, though, the moment his eyes landed on me.

I sucked in a breath, as if all the air had vanished from the room. His eyes on my body were like lasers, and as I turned to find him staring at me with a touch of approval in his gaze, my stomach flip flopped.

"Ouch, dammit!" I dropped the knife and raised my hand to my mouth.

"Are you okay?" Lily looked up from the stove, startled, but by the time the words had left her mouth, Lucas was already at my side.

Lucas reached for my hand, his own much larger than mine. He turned my palm over and looked at the cut dripping blood onto the marble countertop.

"What a klutz," I said. "I was being careless. It's nothing. I'll just get—"

"Let me." Lucas reached for a white linen cloth hanging on the stove and wrapped it around my injury.

I looked up at him, the pain of the cut fading as I looked into his eyes. They were the most beautiful gray color, not slate, not steel, really just an indescribable kaleidoscope of gray and green and blue all mixed together and dotted with a flourish. There wasn't a color on earth that did his eyes justice.

His hands dwarfed mine as he pressed firmly on my cut to stem the bleeding, his eyes never leaving mine. His hands felt warm, firm, strong. I was reluctant to pull mine away from his grasp, even when I remembered that we weren't the only people in the room.

It was the slight throat clear from Lily that eventually sparked our separation. I took a step back, tugging the bloodied cloth from Lucas.

"Stupid," I muttered, not sure if I was talking about the wound or the way I was acting around him. "I know about knife safety."

"It's understandable. I can't help I'm distracting." Lucas had the gall to wink while I was still bleeding.

"Why are you even still here?" I snapped.

I heard a snicker from Lily as she quickly turned back to the stove.

"I'm here for dinner," he clarified.

"But you're not a guest at the inn," I said. "Lily said dinner was for..."

I hesitated. She hadn't really said who dinner was for. Now that I looked at the center island, I realized that it was real stupidity on my part for not realizing that I was helping prepare food for a small army.

Cautiously, I raised my line of sight to Lily. "I didn't realize you were feeding the Fantasie calvary."

Another laugh from Lily. "I like that. I'm going to start referring to the gaggle of boys we've got here as the calvary. They sure eat like it. As to your question, well, I'm never sure who will show up for dinner, but it's pretty much an open, standing invitation for Friday night dinner."

“To the DiMaggios?” I asked.

“To the town of Fantasie,” Lily said mildly. “I just make a bunch of food and usually it gets eaten. I don’t worry too much about the details. When there are over twenty cousins within a thirty-mile radius, I start losing track.”

“So are you here as a citizen of Fantasie?” I asked Lucas. “Or are you somehow related to this lovely woman?”

Lucas looked amused. “Sure.”

“I didn’t know you’d be coming tonight, honey.” Lily eyed Lucas. “I thought you said you had a big case.”

“Nope,” Lucas said shortly, scratching at his forehead as if irritated. “I was planning to come all along.”

“You asked me to save you some leftovers.”

“Well, I guess I changed my mind then,” Lucas said, clipped.

At that moment, his phone rang, sparing him from further embarrassment. He stepped away slightly, exposing his forearms as he slid his cell out of his pocket. I noticed wiry, strong muscles. The peep of a tattoo just below his elbow. The hint of ink on his tanned skin had me curious. Lucas seemed like a suit and tie sort of CEO. The tattoo didn’t fit my image of him, nor did his living in a town the size of a postage stamp. I couldn’t quite figure out this man, and those details were picking away at me.

“What?” Lucas barked into his phone.

I took the bandage that Lily held out to me and carefully applied it to my hand, pretending that I couldn’t hear the phone conversation happening a foot away from me.

“I don’t care what you do with them,” Lucas grumbled. “Take them home. Eat them. Pizza tastes fine cold last I checked.”

A beat.

“We’ll finish it up tomorrow morning.” Another beat. “I *said* let’s bag it for tonight. I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Was that Trevor?” Lily asked idly as Lucas slipped the phone back into his pocket.

His gaze at Lily signaled she’d guessed correctly. My eyes followed his every movement. His pants were perfectly fitted to strong, lean legs. The man didn’t look like he sat behind a desk. I averted my eyes before I chopped off my thumb as I resumed my task.

“Funny, you ordered pizza for tonight,” Lily mused, “considering you were planning to stop over here for dinner.”

“Okay, Mom, enough with the—”

“Mom?” I held the knife pointed straight out at Lucas. He eyed it skeptically as I gave it a little wave toward Lily. “Did you just call her *mom*?”

Lucas licked his lips. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“But I thought...” I hesitated, calculating, then it all clicked for me. I spoke to Lily. “DiMaggio is your maiden name. Your married name must be Donovan.”

Lily gave me an affectionate twitch of her nose.

“That’s impossible,” I muttered.

“What’s impossible?” Lucas asked.

“She’s so nice, and you’re so...” I hesitated and shrugged. “You’re *you*.”

Lily burst into laughter. “I like this one. She’s perceptive. And honest.”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “I’ll get the door.”

A second later, there was a knock on the door. Lucas had already disappeared and was pulling it open.

“How did he...” I hesitated.

“It’s Noah. Everyone from a million miles away can hear his motorcycle.”

“And Noah is...”

“My other son. There are three of ’em, but the third doesn’t live around here.”

“Hey, Ma,” called a new voice.

The swinging door flew open and in walked two equally large, incredibly handsome men. Noah appeared first. He was broader and generally sturdier than Lucas, though Lucas had him by a few inches in height. Noah had Lucas by a few tattoos. Full sleeves ran down Noah’s arms beneath a simple white T-shirt that he’d paired with black jeans. He held a motorcycle helmet dangling from one hand.

“Smell’s great, Ma.” Noah barreled into the room and wrapped his mother in a monster embrace. “You made my favorite sauce.”

“It’s the only sauce I’ve made in my fifty years of spinning spoons around pots,” Lily said, her voice muffled against her son’s expansive chest.

Noah planted a loud, smacking kiss on his mother’s cheek, then reached over and swiped the clean spoon from her grasp. He dipped it into the pot on the stove and helped himself to a taste.

“Noah. I just washed that spoon!” Lily flicked a towel at her son’s arm, but he didn’t flinch. She was smiling as she retrieved the spoon from his grasp and carried it back to the sink where she rinsed it again.

“And who are...” Noah spun around to face me. His eyes widened, as if he hadn’t truly seen me as he’d entered the room. “Holy shit.”

I flashed an awkward smile in his direction. I could feel disapproval radiating off Lucas.

“Chloe,” I said, extending a hand. I realized I’d extended the hand with the cut on it, and my bandage was looking a little gross, so I quickly retracted my hand. “Sorry. Knife incident.”

“Happens. Want me to take a look?” Noah asked. “I fix things for a living.”

“Cars,” Lucas growled. “You fix *cars*, asshole.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “I understand how the human body works, brother.”

“I’m fine.” I raised my hands in a display of peace. “It’s nice to meet you. You must be the nice brother.”

“I also happened to get the smarts,” Noah confirmed. He thwaked his brother on the back. “So are you married or should I propose now?”

It was my turn to laugh. Lucas was an entire mood in the corner, brooding and hulking and angry at apparently anything that made me smile.

The front door creaked open again. “Hey, Aunt Lily, I brought company.” Another male voice rang out. “Hope you’ve got enough food.”

“Time to eat,” Lily declared. “Start marching, people.”

Her boys quickly fell in line, grabbing platters of food and carrying them out to the table in the dining room like a well-rehearsed routine. I now understood why the dining room table, a slab of wood longer than most boats, could seat the entire Manchester United soccer team.

As Noah swept the garlic bread off the center island with a sly little grin in my direction, I pulled Lily aside in the kitchen and stole a moment alone with her.

“I sort of feel like I’m interrupting something,” I confessed. “A family dinner. I don’t know, maybe it’s better if I just take off. I was supposed to meet Josie-the-flower-girl for drinks and a bite to eat anyway, and—”

“Sit down,” Lily said, and that was that.

I found my way to the table and selected a seat that was directly across from Lucas. Noah found his way to the seat on my right. Most of the rest of the seats at the farmhouse style table were already taken. It seemed the guests had multiplied exponentially.

It was also easy to tell who belonged to the DiMaggio clan, and who did not. The DiMaggio men were big and broad, dark-haired and came from an unfair gene pool that was filled

to the brim with “good-looking” as the dominant genetic marker. There were different shades of eye colors and different heights, different smiles, different demeanors. But it was just as Lily had described: one big, sloppy bunch of handsome, surly guys.

Arranged artistically between the DiMaggios were an eclectic array of the Fantasie community members. Clarice, the possible-psychic, sat a few seats down from me. The brim of her hat was so wide she kept hitting an annoyed looking Sheriff Finn with the tip of it as she reached to butter her bread. I looked for Josie, but apparently she had learned her lesson to avoid the Fantasie Inn on Friday nights.

“Oh, my God, you smell freaking amazing.” A woman leaned in and sniffed my hair as an introduction. “Is that sandalwood and jute? A hint of jasmine? Maybe a pinch of sea salt?”

I turned to find a smiling young woman with frilly red hair fanning her face.

“Where on earth did you get your shampoo?” Her cheeks were adorably round and she had a Milky Way of freckles spanning her nose.

“Actually, it’s a local—” I stopped, catching onto the teasing gleam in her eye. “You must be Millicent.”

“Millie,” she said. Then she turned to Noah. “Shove off, you big oaf, I want to sit next to the new girl.”

“No,” Noah said shortly.

From across the table, Lucas coughed and looked murderous.

“Fine,” Millie revised. “Then Nick, *you* move.”

One of the large DiMaggios to my left stood, grabbed half a loaf of garlic bread, dropped it on his plate, and shuffled down a few seats, completely unfazed by the demand. Millie plopped next to me on my left.

“I saw your shitshow of a truck,” Millie said good-naturedly. “Let me introduce you to Noah. You’re going to

hook a girl up with some repairs, aren't you?"

"She doesn't need repairs," Lucas snarled from across the table. "She's not sticking around."

"Have you seen this poor woman's vehicle?" Millie asked. "The door's about to fall off, and I heard the thing rolling into town from the farm."

"I'd be happy to help you out," Noah said. "Although I admit, I'll have my work cut out for me if they're talking about the vehicle I saw outside the law firm."

"The purple eyesore in my parking spot," Lucas said. "Yeah, that's it."

"It's not an eyesore," I said. "It's got a lot of potential."

"There is a lot of potential," Noah agreed. "Let's grab a coffee tomorrow morning, and we can talk shop on the sort of repairs you're wanting done. With my help, she'll be a beaut in no time."

"Wow, that would be great," I said. "I admit, I'm sort of on a budget, but—"

"We'll work something out." Noah grinned at me. Before I could respond, he winced and muttered *fuck* under his breath.

"Keep your feet to yourself." Lily slapped Lucas's head as she walked by him without pausing for a beat. "Stop kicking your brother at dinner."

"Seriously," Millie said, glaring across the table at Lucas. "You've been playing footsie with me since I sat down, and that last thump of your big freaking foot breezed my shin. I bruise like a peach."

Dinner commenced soon after with piles of hungry guys descending on the food like vultures. I felt compelled to sort of wait around for my turn to dish myself some grub, but apparently that was the wrong choice.

"Here, hon. Take my plate." Millie handed over a piping hot platter of spaghetti and meatballs. Then she threw a sharp jab at the DiMaggio to her left. "Leave us some bread, Nick. I'm going to tell your grandmother on you if you lay one more

finger on it before I get a slice. You already swallowed half the loaf whole.”

I studied the man called Nick intently, realizing that he’d paled the slightest amount too. Apparently if I needed to threaten a man with DiMaggio blood in his veins, I just had to bring his grandmother into the conversation, and that would solve a lot of problems.

Dinner flew by as Millie chatted happily in my ear as a thousand conversations rolled around us. It was almost too much for my senses, all of the food and conversation and looks and touches happening at this dinner table. I felt overloaded, almost suffocated, but in the best way possible.

My head felt like it was on a swivel as I looked this way and that, trying my best to keep up with the smattering of conversations that flew over my head like a football being tossed around. None of it seemed to bother Millie. She just kept on chatting happily and buttering her garlic bread and slurping up her noodles as if this giant mess of a family was completely normal to her.

It was anything but normal to me. And what was worse was that I didn’t hate it either.

“Oh, no,” I said, glancing at my watch. “I promised I would meet Josie at the bar. I think I have to get going.”

“Go on,” Millie said. “Do you want me to walk you there? Not for safety or anything, but for some company?”

“I think a little walk and fresh air will do me some good.” Then I added, “And a moment of quiet.”

Millie gave me a sweet smile. Her posture softened toward me. “It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it? But you get used to it. Before you know it, you won’t want to live without it.”

Before I could ask Millie exactly what she meant, I felt a thin hand on my shoulder.

“Give this to Josie, will you?” Lily said kindly, handing me a bag. “That poor woman is looking too skinny. It’s been too long since she’s made a Friday night dinner.”

“Are you sure I can’t help you clean up?” I asked. “I don’t mean to eat and run.”

“There are plenty of hands to help with dishes. Go on. We’ll see you in the morning.” Lily patted my shoulder and ushered me off.

I stood, feeling both watched and invisible at once. People chatted around me without pause. But from across the table, I felt a set of eyes fixed on me like the beam from a lighthouse. A very frowny lighthouse.

Slipping quietly out of the dining room, I made my way into the front lobby. I tugged my jacket tighter around me, debated the merits of hunting around for a complimentary umbrella, and quickly decided against it. I already had my hands full with the doggie bag full of food I needed to deliver to Josie. Plus, it wasn’t currently raining outside.

As I pulled the heavy front door open, a rustling from behind me drew my attention. It seemed two big boys were trying to fit through a too-small doorway at the same time. Noah won out by half a step and entered the lobby first, closely followed by Lucas.

“Let me walk you out,” Noah said. “I thought we could—”

“Shut up, asshole,” Lucas said. “She’s my responsibility.”

“But—”

“I’ll tell Grandma DiMaggio the truth about what happened to her favorite teacup.” Lucas frowned at him.

Noah paled slightly, in the same way two of his cousins had before him. He quickly pulled it together, though, and gave me a salute. “I’ll see you tomorrow then, Chloe. Coffee shop at nine?”

I smiled back. With extra teeth showing, just so Lucas would notice. “It’s a date. Thanks, Noah.”

As I pulled the door open further, I turned my attention away from the brothers for one second, and in that moment I heard another scuffle behind me. By the time I turned around, Noah was peeling himself off the wall and scowling at Lucas.

Lucas stared straight ahead, feigning innocence as his brother headed back to the dining room table in a clear defeat.

Lucas's hand rested against my lower back as he propelled me toward the door. "We're going now."

Chapter 4

Lucas

I shoved my hands in my pockets as we stepped outside, feeling a tad bereft after removing my touch from Chloe's leather jacket. I closed the door behind her, noting that she didn't pause to wait for me. She was halfway to the front gate of my mother's inn by the time I caught up to her.

We walked in silence for a few moments. She paused for a half a second when she reached the sidewalk, probably because she had no clue where she was going. But the woman was too stubborn to pull out Google or ask me for directions, so she turned left. She was dead wrong, but I wasn't about to tell her. I meandered casually next to her down the street.

"I don't need an escort." Her boots jangled as she stomped down the sidewalk.

A light scent of garlic and basil gently curled up from the bag in her arms. It reminded me that I'd almost completely forgotten to eat any real food at dinner. I'd been too distracted. Maybe I should've had Trevor leave a pizza in the office fridge after all.

"I needed an evening stroll," I said. "And you have no clue where you're headed."

"I do too. The Cow Tipper."

"Naturally. What'd you think of dinner?"

She considered. Glanced at me. "It was loud."

I felt my lips curve up in a little smile. "Nobody ever accused us of being quiet."

"I could go for some peace and quiet right now."

"Noted."

We walked next to each other in silence for some time. I was wondering how long she was going to walk due south

before she broke down and asked for directions.

“Is it always like that?” she asked, quieter. “I mean at dinner. Loud and chaotic.”

“I guess so. I never thought about it that way. It’s how we grew up, so to us, I guess it’s just normal.”

“It must be nice.”

“The eardrum splitting decibel of chatter or the chaos of that many people in one room?”

She gave a half smile. “All of it, I guess. The big family. Lots of people to talk with, eat with, celebrate with.”

“I suppose. But it’s a double-edged sword. I guess you missed my brother hip checking me on the way out the door. And you definitely weren’t there when my brother tried to drown me in the community pool after he found out I took his car for a joy ride when we were seventeen. Or the time my other brother framed me for breaking the kitchen window with a baseball.”

“Your poor mother.”

I gave a laugh at her astute observation. “Lily Donovan can hold her own. But, yes, we had our rebellious times. We’ve probably given her a headache or two.”

“You keep each other’s secrets, though. You and your brothers.” She looked at me carefully, her chin tipped up and those soft lips locked in a sweet pout. I must’ve been looking dumbly at her because she continued. “The bit about your grandmother’s teacup?”

“We’ve got each other’s backs when it really matters.” I shut up quickly because that was about as sappy as I ever got, and I wasn’t ready to be sappy in front of Chloe. “I mean, sometimes.”

“I need to meet this grandmother everyone keeps speaking of.”

“Grandma DiMaggio is...” I hesitated, trying to find the right words. *Terrifying? Iconic?* When I failed to find a suitable description, I said just that. “She’s indescribable. It’s

probably best if you leave her off your tourism list while you're in Fantasie. How long are you staying?"

"Just long enough to get my affairs in order."

"Affairs?"

She seemed hesitant to say more, but a few moments of walking in silence seemed to cure her of any hesitancy. "I want to get my own business off the ground. That, and I need a fresh start."

I noticed that she didn't say she wanted a fresh start. She said she *needed* one. There it was again, the stubborn set of her jaw, the streak of determination in her eyes. There was more to Chloe, and I couldn't help the itch I was feeling to scratch beneath the surface and find out what made her tick.

After living my entire life in Fantasie, I knew everyone and their business. There was no such thing as mystery to me. Except for this tempting new surprise that came in a bombshell of a woman. And I was tempted, all right.

"You're from New York?" I wondered aloud.

"Not originally. That was my last stop."

"What'd you do there?"

"I worked in a restaurant."

I raised my eyebrows. "I knew that wasn't the first time you'd chopped a tomato."

"Sliced. You slice a tomato." She rewarded me with a tiny smile. "And no, I came up through the ranks. Hard work, long hours, never enough pay."

"How'd you pick Fantasie?"

"Pointed my finger at the map with a blindfold on."

I didn't entirely believe her, but maybe that was just me projecting. It sort of boggled my mind to think of someone picking up and starting over again, just like that. To have the freedom to do something so spontaneous was a concept I'd never truly considered.

“Must be nice,” I managed.

“Nice?”

“I mean, nice not to have any obligations. Just pick up and go where the wind takes you.”

“Sure. In theory.”

“Am I wrong?”

She crossed her arms around the doggie bag and hugged the spaghetti to her chest. A light drizzle was starting to fall from the sky again. She shrugged deeper into her jacket. I should’ve grabbed the damn umbrella. It would’ve given me an excuse to sidle up next to her under the premise of being a gentleman.

“Spoken by a man who’s never left his hometown,” she jabbed, then waited to see if she was right.

“Busted. Is it that obvious?”

Her eyelashes fluttered a little as she sized me up. “You’re the CEO of some company, in a town where everybody knows you. Your mother hosts Thanksgiving dinner for misfits and DiMaggios every Friday night. Yeah, I’m guessing your roots are here.”

I gave a shoulder shrug to acknowledge her point. A roll of thunder cruised over us lazily, followed a moment later by a patch of lightning skittering across the sky. I took mercy on her and reached out, hooking a finger onto her slender wrist until my entire hand encircled her tiny arm.

She spun toward me, her breath coming in short bursts as she curled instinctively against my chest. Our mouths were inches apart, her sweet pout begging for me to claim it. And damned if I didn’t want to. We held there, our gazes locked on one another’s as the clouds opened and began to dump on us in earnest.

Then she moved, leaning inward ever so slightly, her eyelids closing for the briefest of seconds, and all I had to do was close the distance. I was already hard, and I hadn’t even touched the woman’s bare skin.

“It’s this way,” I said hoarsely.

“What?” Her eyes flashed open, and the spell between us shattered.

I cursed myself for my self-control. I wasn’t one to brag about my qualities, but self-control was something I possessed in spades. Too much, my mother had always said. She’d been trying to get me to loosen up since I’d been learning to walk. It just wasn’t in my blood. Tonight was proof of that.

“The bar,” I grumbled, feeling all sorts of surly. “It’s the other way.”

“I’ve been walking the wrong way the entire time?” Raindrops dotted her eyelashes, giving the impression of liquid gems on her mascara. “And you let me keep going?”

“You didn’t seem keen on asking for directions.”

She reached out and gave my shoulder a swat. “So rude. Now I look like an idiot.”

“*Now?*”

She looked miffed, like she was about to retort, then she just looked up at the inky sky where thunder cracked and fat drops poured, and she laughed. A real, deep belly laugh.

For a moment, I was concerned. A little worried she was going through some sort of psychotic break. Nobody had ever accused me of being funny. Grumpy, strict, loyal, serious, sure. Hilarious? Not so much.

Then she looked at me, rain streaming down her face, soaking through her little mini dress, and I saw genuine laughter in her eyes. Something deep in me, some visceral instinct, wanted more of it. I wanted to grab her, to press my mouth to hers, to make sure she never lost that smile again, whatever the cost.

Eventually she reached for my arm, hooked hers through mine, and marched me down the street like some Bridgerton promenade. I hoped Millie was still at dinner because that woman liked to fuel the gossips of Fantasie more than anyone

else in town, and if she caught me and Chloe sashaying arm in arm, I could only imagine how fast the rumors would spread.

But I couldn't bring myself to care about what anyone else might think of the pair of us. All I could seem to focus on was Chloe Brown and the way her hip hugging dress clung to her even tighter now that it was wet. Her legs, bare from mid-thigh down, were slick. I wanted to run my hands down her legs first, then maybe get a taste of her bare skin before—

“Watch it!” Chloe yanked me back from the edge of the sidewalk.

I'd been about to wander straight into the street without looking where I was going. A half a second later, Billy Burton whipped by in his enormous red truck. He'd gone out of the way to curl into a nearby puddle with his clown-like oversized wheels. He sent up a deluge of rainwater from the street over Chloe and me like a tidal wave. Any part of us that wasn't already wet was now soaked through.

“Dick,” I hollered after him.

Chloe gave him a nice middle-fingered salute with her free hand.

“Nice guy, huh?” Chloe tried to pat down the front of her skirt, but there was nothing respectable about her outfit at this point.

Her nipples were outlined in her black dress with such vigor I doubted there was any sort of bra thing happening there. I tried not to stare. I mostly failed.

“Cold?” I asked, wishing I had a jacket to offer her.

Her gaze was scorching. “I know you're staring.”

“Baby, those things are like spotlights. Any living man would find it hard not to take a peek.”

She curled her leather jacket back around her and stormed into the street, her boots sloshing through the puddles. She'd apparently given up on trying to stay dry. “You're welcome.”

“Welcome?”

“I saved your life,” she said. “That idiot would’ve run you down. You were too busy staring at my legs.”

I took a few steps forward. “I sort of hoped you hadn’t noticed.”

“I do have eyes, you know.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just, people like you aren’t common around here.”

“People like me?”

We reached the other side of the street, and I reached for her, rested a hand on her shoulder, and gently turned her to face me. This time I gave her the opportunity to leave. To tell me to screw off, to stomp away from me, to tell me I had overstepped my bounds.

Hell, I *wanted* her to tell me to take a hike. I needed her to tell me to stay away from her because with every second I spent this close to her was torture, and my honor and good manners only went so far.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, softer, when it was clear she was prepared to hear me out. “You’re so fucking beautiful. I shouldn’t have stared, but I couldn’t help it.”

Her lips parted. She backed against the brick exterior of Jerry’s Grocery. It seemed like she needed the wall to physically hold her up. I rested a hand against the wet brick, boxing her in, leaving plenty of space between us in case she changed her mind about being here with me.

“I didn’t mean to stare. Honestly. It’s just been a long time since...” I raked a hand through my damn hair. This confession wasn’t doing much of anything except making me look pathetic. “Look, I’m a dick. I’m sorry. And thanks for saving my life. Now if I can finish walking you to the bar, I promise to give you the correct directions, and I won’t take another look at your chest or your legs.”

“I forgive you.” She ran her tongue over her teeth. “It’s just that I know guys like you. This is a bad idea.”

“Guys like me?”

“It’s obvious. You’re hard working. You love your family. You’re probably a good person.”

“You do realize I just stared at your chest, right?”

“A mostly good person,” she amended amicably. “Anyway, I already forgave you. Now, we should get going before Josie sends out the search party for us. I’m sure most of the women in this town would give a kidney to see you soaking wet.”

Her compliment wasn’t lost on me, but the problem was that I wasn’t interested in any woman in this town. Except one, and she didn’t belong here. Chloe had made it abundantly clear that she was just passing by.

As the only woman in town I was interested in slithered out from between my arms and strolled ahead of me down the street, I felt an emptiness settle into my chest. I wanted her to be near me again. I wanted her to loop her arm through mine. I wanted to see those lips part for me again.

We passed Fantasie Inn, and Chloe’s eye roll wasn’t lost on me as we passed my mother’s home.

“I can’t believe you let me walk that far,” she said. “You could’ve just turned me around or something.”

“I don’t trust myself to touch you,” I said lightly, dangerously.

Chloe shut up real fast. The blush on her cheeks told me she understood.

At that moment, unfortunately, the door to my mother’s inn opened. Sure enough, the one woman in the world who I didn’t want to see appeared on the front steps, skipping down, a yellow umbrella flapped open to fight off the rain. Millie looked up, her eyes widening as she caught sight of me and Chloe standing a little too close together. Then she gave a little finger wave and scurried off in the opposite direction. I groaned.

“What?” Chloe asked. “I thought Millie was nice.”

“She fools you with those doe eyes and freckles. She’s the biggest gossip in town. Everybody’s going to think we’re dating by tomorrow.”

“I don’t really care what anyone thinks about me. Nobody knows me here.”

“They will soon enough.”

“Doesn’t bother me.”

“Because you’re leaving?”

“No,” she said. “It just...doesn’t. I’ve never cared what anybody thought about me.”

“Why?” I asked, then added, “How?”

“Always marched to the beat of my own drum.”

It was starting to add up. Her sudden move to the middle of nowhere. Her lack of care about what anyone else thought. The woman was my polar opposite.

Chloe was confident and spontaneous. I was boring and dependable. I’d grown up in town, then I’d stayed when my father passed away so that I could take over his law practice. I was the oldest son, and my father had drilled it into me that it was my responsibility to provide for the loved ones in my life. The day I stopped being dependable was the day I stopped being Lucas Donovan.

“You should try it sometime,” she mused. “Not caring about others so much. It’s nice.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Figured. Can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” She winked.

I had every urge to reach out and toss her over my shoulder until she begged for me to set her down, preferably on a nice warm bed somewhere private and out of the rain, but instead we came upon a gigantic cow.

“Here it is,” I said dully. “The Cow Tipper.”

Chloe took one look at the massive statue of a cow that graced Fantasie’s main drag and burst into happy laughs again.

It was addictive, the sound of her joy. A man could start to crave it.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye.” She stared directly at me. “Thanks for the infallible directions and for being such a gentleman as you escorted me around town.”

“Thanks for saving my life from the bastard Burton. I owe you one.”

“Don’t worry.” She gave a playful little curtsy that got my blood roiling. “I’ll collect on it.”

I opened the door for her and let her inside. I waved to Jack DiMaggio, the bartender and my oldest cousin, and declined his shouted offer of a beer on the house. I didn’t want to hear what Jack had to say about the massive erection straining at the front of my pants or my ridiculous soaked shirt that made me feel like fucking Fabio.

“You sure you don’t want to come back to the inn and...” I swallowed. “Change? Out of your wet clothes I mean.”

Chloe gave me a wink. “Your offer to get naked is going to have to wait until another time.”

Chapter 5

C *hloe*

It was a relief when the door to The Cow Tipper swung shut and spliced the tension between me and the oldest Donovan brother. I wasn't sure what the hell had happened on my walk around town with Lucas, but it wasn't good. I didn't need complications right now. I couldn't afford complications. And Lucas Donovan was a big, solid, handsome, tempting complication.

I made my way into the bar and glanced around for Josie. I spotted her pretty head a moment later at the bar. She spun around on her stool and waved to me, gesturing for me to join her. I headed toward the counter, noting the tall, handsome bartender who I'd bet my bottom dollar was the offspring of Grandma DiMaggio.

"Let me guess," I said with a sigh, easing onto my stool. "You're a DiMaggio?"

"I see our reputation precedes me." Jack gave me faux-bedroom eyes and extended a hand. "I hope my cousin didn't spoil your mind with lies."

I gave his hand a shake. "Let's just say I need a drink. A big one."

"Extra dirty martini," Josie instructed. "Grey Goose. Thirteen olives."

"Thirteen olives sounds a little excessive," I said as Jack disappeared from the counter to grab our drinks. "I think I'm good with about three."

"The other ten are for me. I didn't get a chance to eat dinner yet." Josie grinned. "Long day at the farm."

"Oh, this is for you!" Excitedly, I remembered the paper bag of food that Lily had packed for Josie. "Lily thought you might be hungry. And I'm also now apparently a delivery girl for Fantasie."

The sack lunch had survived a downpour, a mile long walk in heeled boots, and several just-missed kisses. The bag drooped sadly, melting a little toward the counter. I hurriedly set it down before a puddle of marinara sauce dripped through onto the spit-shined counter.

“I had my fingers crossed.” Josie pulled the bag toward her. “Though you’d suck as a delivery person. This bag is in shambles. You’re lucky I believe in tipping generously. Drinks are on me.”

“Yeah, right.” Jack returned with two martinis and one gigantic mug full of olives. “She’s only offering because I owe her a couple of drinks after our bet last week.”

“Bet?”

“Not important,” Josie said quickly. “Anyway, I see you survived a Lily Donovan dinner. Tell me all about it while I shove food down my throat.”

I quickly filled her in, emphasizing my surprise at the sheer size of the sprawling family and the extent of the managed chaos. While I spoke, Josie ripped open the top of a Tupperware container and accepted a fork from Jack all in one move. She swirled noodles and popped a bite into her mouth.

“Why weren’t you there?” I asked. “It seemed like just about everyone in town was there.”

“Oh, reasons. I was working.” But Josie didn’t meet my eyes, and I could smell a white lie a mile away. I just wasn’t sure why she was fibbing. “So what do you think of Lucas? Looks pretty good in a wet shirt, huh?”

The way she said it was like a fact, as if she wasn’t truly impressed. That was when it dawned on me. “Finn. That’s the reason you’re staying away from the DiMaggio family get togethers. What’s between the two of you, anyway?”

“We’re not here to talk about me. How long are you staying in town? Why here? Where did you come from?”

“I came from Ohio by way of a decade in New York. I don’t know how long I’m staying. As to why here, I’ll be honest, it was sort of a business decision.”

“What sort of business?”

“A food truck. I’m a chef. I was a chef,” I said. “It’s complicated.”

“How is being a chef complicated? You cook food, someone else eats it. Or am I missing something?”

She was missing a decade full of somethings. Somethings I didn’t want to get into just yet.

“Let’s just say that’s exactly why I’m here. I want to uncomplicate things and get back to making food for people to eat.” I shrugged, took a sip of a martini that just about knocked my studded boots right off my feet. “This is one strong martini.”

“I thought you were a New Yorker. Don’t New Yorkers live on martinis?”

“I mean, this is pretty much vodka with an olive dropped on top.”

“Are you complaining?”

I took another drink without complaint. The alcohol went down smoothly. It was starting to warm me up from the inside, and I was suddenly forgetting all about the fact that I was soaked. I shrugged off my leather jacket and hung it over the back of my chair.

The vodka also helped to loosen my tongue, and I was starting to think that maybe it had been too long since I’d confided in someone. Josie seemed like a good candidate. Earnest, chipper, and someone I had no plans to get attached to.

Josie waited patiently, as if she knew exactly what was going on in my mind. In the time since I’d seen her earlier in the day, she’d consolidated her hair into two long braids. A few miniscule flowers were tucked into her locks. She’d changed out of her pinafore apron dress into jeans and a slim-fitting tank top. She looked lithe and sturdy, thin but muscled. Like a woman who knew how to work hard, and judging by her comments about spending the day on the farm, I’ll bet she did.

“You’ve got great arms,” I said. “You would kick my ass in an arm-wrestling match.”

“Yep,” she said. “Now stop changing the subject and talk to me about food.”

Speaking of food, I paused a moment to thoroughly admire the way Josie could put away a plate of food. The thin, spindly woman had an appetite as large as any of the DiMaggio men.

“I always knew I wanted to be a chef of some sort,” I admitted. “I have always loved feeding people. When I was little, my mom worked three jobs—”

“Why?”

Her question stopped me in my tracks. “Because she had to. I mean, we needed money.”

“I understand how jobs work,” Josie said around a mouthful of meatballs. “Where was your dad?”

“Not around.” I appreciated Josie’s bluntness. She didn’t waste time on small talk. “My mom was a single mom. It was just me and her for as long as I can remember. She never did get her college degree, so she picked up whatever jobs she could to make ends meet, usually two or three at a time. Waitressing at night, stocking shelves at Walgreens by day, things like that. We usually only had an hour together when she’d work a schedule like that, and she always appreciated when I’d have dinner ready for her.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“It’s not like she expected it,” I added. “Once, on Mother’s Day, I popped a pizza in the oven and poured her a glass of wine. I had it all set out when she came home. The second she saw it, she burst into tears. Her gratitude made such an impact on me I did it again the next day. Then the next one. Whenever I could, really.”

Josie took another twirl of spaghetti, but she didn’t eat it. She rested her chin on her hand and watched me, waiting.

“Admittedly, my first attempts were pretty awful. Crackers and cheese, maybe a tuna sandwich. As I got older, I started to

experiment with different stuff. I started to look forward to the time we had together. It was always *our* time. And food just became an integral part of that.”

“Sharing a meal together is about the food, but it’s also not.” Josie’s eyes held understanding. “The food brings us together, but then it’s about the time we have with each other. Enjoying each other’s company.”

“Yeah, exactly. We’d sit down, no phones, no computers, no homework, no distractions. We’d just talk and eat. Then she’d take off, and I’d clean up, do my homework, and go to bed. She’d usually be gone by the time I got up the next morning.”

“I’m sorry.” Josie’s face reflected sympathy. “Your mom sounds like an incredible woman.”

“She was.”

“Was.”

“Was,” I confirmed, looking down at my drink. It was decidedly close to empty.

Josie simply reached out and squeezed my hand. Then she gestured for Jack to top up my drink. He did so without interfering in our conversation and was gone as quickly as he’d arrived.

“Fast forward in your story to New York,” Josie instructed. “I want to hear more about food.”

I gave her a grateful smile. “My mom worked hard so I could get a college degree. I was the first person in my family to graduate, and I owe it all to her. I never wanted to let her down, you know?”

“You didn’t. I’m sure of it.”

“I moved to New York with someone. A man. We opened a business together.”

“He Who Shall Not Be Named?”

“Essentially. Except his name is Paul.”

“Okay, then. Voldemort Paul. You guys opened up a restaurant together?”

“We did. To make a long story short, as time went on, we developed different ideas as to the sort of business we wanted to run. We were on the same page for a while, and then he got swept up in all of it.”

“Swept up in what?” Josie flicked her fork, diving back into the noodles. “I’m a country girl, through and through. Never been to the city, don’t care to go. The only big apples I care about are the ones in my orchard.”

I grinned. “Smart woman.”

Josie ripped off a hunk of bread. “Connect the dots for me, sister. I’m hanging on by a thread here. The anticipation is killing me.”

“Paul liked the finer things in life. He moved us into an apartment we couldn’t afford near Central Park. He started serving smaller meals and charging higher prices. He put down money on a lease for a new place with a fancier zip code without asking me. The decor changed from comfy and family-friendly to dangling chandeliers and sparkler candles. He started appealing to food bloggers, critics, and celebrity clientele. That’s what he was after. Fame, money, a good review.”

“And you?”

“I just wanted to make good food and serve good people. I’ve never cared much what people think of me, not in the way he did. I care if people feel I’m a good person. I don’t give a crap if my business appears in a magazine.”

“So you’re going to start a business here? A restaurant?”

“A food truck.” I shrugged. “I sort of left New York without much capital.”

“There’s a longer story there.”

“There is, but not one we have time for tonight.”

“Code for you need a lot more martinis before you’re gonna spill the tea on Paul.”

“I’m gonna need about fifty-four olives before we get there, according to my calculations.”

“I have room for dessert,” Josie offered hopefully. She must have read my face correctly because she quickly added, “Okay, we’ll save Paul for a different night. Talk to me about this purple eyesore that’s been camping out in Lucas’s parking spot.”

Before I could get into the nitty gritty details of my new business venture—the stuff I was *actually* excited to talk about—I felt a scratchy sort of material being draped over my shoulders. A moment later, a woman who couldn’t have reached five feet tall shuffled around in front of me and clasped the fabric together over my chest with a gaudy broach.

“There you are, dear.” The woman looked up and patted my shoulder with a big smile. “I wouldn’t want you to catch a chill.”

“Uh—” I glanced down and found some sort of crocheted, colorful shawl over my shoulders. “Thanks?”

“I’m Ruby. I run Fantasie Quilters. We make quilts for people who need them.”

“Oh, but this isn’t a quilt.” My fingers toyed with the rough edges. “Unless I’m completely clueless.”

“Oh, I don’t know how to quilt.” Ruby pushed oversized Harry Potter style glasses in a shade of bright pink up her nose. “I prefer to crochet.”

“Naturally.” I cleared my throat. “And what’s the occasion?”

“Oh, indecent exposure, dear.” Ruby blinked owlishly from behind her glasses. “I could see your nipples from across the room, honey. They practically have their own radio frequency. Now look, I am all for a woman’s right to wear whatever you want. Hell, I threw out my bras when I turned eighty-four, but Hairy Harry over there has been staring, and that man does not need a free show. I’m trying to help you out.”

I took a glimpse at the man referred to as Hairy Harry. He was as bald as a doorknob. But Ruby wasn't wrong. He raised a drink in my direction when he caught my gaze.

"Ew," I said.

"Just wait until you see him in a Speedo." Ruby patted me gently on the shoulder. "Enjoy your cocktails, honey. Next round's on me, Jack. Add it to my tab."

"You know, Ruby, you've gotta actually pay your tab before you die," Jack hollered after her as she disappeared from my shoulder.

Ruby flicked him off, tottering away to join a small circle of knitters or quilters or crocheters working furiously in the corner of the bar by a huge, stone fireplace.

The bar itself felt old school and cozy. If I pretended everyone had an accent, I could've believed I'd been transported to a little pub in Ireland where everyone knew everyone else. Exposed wood beams met overhead. The stone from around the fireplace spilled out to line one entire wall. All the wood on the counter and barstools was knotted and gleaming and a little mismatched.

The Friday night crowd at The Cow Tipper was an eclectic mix of people. Some older than Ruby, some that looked barely old enough to legally drink. Some women and men were dressed like they'd come straight from a corporate day job while others wore overalls and looked like they'd been sitting on a tractor since dawn. Everyone chatted easily with one another, conversation flowing between the tables as if there wasn't any such a thing as private business in this town.

"What about you?" I shifted in my seat and found the crocheted blanket over my shoulders fairly comforting. I tugged it tighter and was pleased to see it had worked. Hairy Harry's gaze had averted to a big pile of French fries that'd been dropped at his table. "You never fancied a trip to the city?"

"No," Josie said shortly.

Again, I had my doubts that she was telling me the whole truth. But it seemed like the martinis hadn't loosened Josie's tongue as much as it had mine. I munched on an olive in hopes it would help clear my head a smidge.

"Do you just walk down the street then and spend your days delivering flowers?"

"Mostly." Josie's face split into a smile. "Sort of what I'd always wanted to do."

Josie was the most adorable person I'd met in a long time. So genuine and refreshing. Her face was mostly free of makeup, and I envied how she could pull it off. I nodded for her to go on.

"I never was the type to want to do big things. I had a sister who did that for me." She glanced down, and I could see the tension between Josie and this unnamed sister from a mile away. "Anyway, my dream's only ever been to make people happy by making their lives a little more beautiful. Not all that different from you, really. Just different ways of expressing it."

"Flowers do brighten a person's day."

"I've always loved plants. I've been planting seeds since I could stand long enough to poke holes in the dirt. For my fifth birthday I asked for a rototiller."

I cracked up. "Did you get it?"

She wrinkled her nose. "My parents said it was too dangerous. They did give me my own tilled plot of land to run however I wanted. Which made me the happiest kid in Fantasie for sure."

"That's adorable."

"I started my business acumen with a very competitive lemonade stand that same summer. Things, you know, took off from there. I started growing tulips to be ready by Mother's Day. I planted a cluster of peony bushes and did special deliveries in June. Then sunflowers, dahlias, you name it. A family friend asked me to make her wedding bouquet when I was fifteen. Ever since then, I just went with what was working."

“That’s pretty incredible.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it incredible. I fell into it.”

“You worked for it,” I corrected. “A kid who asks for a rototiller for a gift and starts a lemonade stand by the time she’s five is an entrepreneur.”

“Yeah.” Josie seemed a little deflated by my analysis and turned her attention to fiddle with the olives in her empty glass.

“Hey, if you ever want to talk, I’m a great listener.” I gave her hand a gentle squeeze and a little smile, feeling like I’d stumbled upon a treasure trove of secrets she didn’t want to expose. I waved Jack over and ordered another round, freeing Josie from the obligation of replying.

By the time our next round of drinks were poured, Josie had returned to her chipper self and we were back to light chit chat over the next course of blue cheese stuffed olives pretending to be martinis.

“I don’t want to pry,” I said. “But I am going to pry. What’s this business between you and Finn?”

“I’ll tell you when you spill what happened between you and Lucas Donovan.”

I just about choked. “What?”

“Why’d he show up here tonight in a drenched shirt looking like he wanted to eat you for lunch?”

I raised my glass and clinked it to hers. “Truce?”

She laughed, clinked mine back. “Truce.”

Chapter 6

Lucas

I yanked open the fridge in the office and stared at three boxes of untouched pizza Trevor had left behind. What should've been my dinner last night had turned into my breakfast this morning. I reached for a slice and took a bite as I turned away from the fridge.

The office building for Donovan & Associates was a small, modest brick building right on Main Street. It was the most corporate looking building of any in Fantasie, but that wasn't saying a whole lot.

My grandfather had established the law offices almost a century ago. My father had taken over. Then me. The natural order of things.

When I'd taken over, I'd completely gutted the building. My brothers and I had rebuilt it from the bones, creating a more modern, functional space with throwbacks to the original. We'd refurbished the sturdy old bookshelves in the conference room. They didn't make bookshelves like that anymore. We'd kept some of the art that had been on the walls. We'd kept the one houseplant named Eleanor that'd been in the process of dying for sixty plus years.

Aside from those original items, we'd scrapped the cramped, cave-like quarters in favor of a more open floor plan. The front lobby bled into a small kitchenette off to one side. My office was front and center with a window view out to main street. Large windows let in generous amounts of sunlight. Normally my office space was calming. I'd been able to finish it just the way I'd wanted it. It was neat, organized, simple. People in the office listened to me.

My grandfather had established this law practice as a way to help the people of our community. He'd done whatever needed doing—marriages and divorces, wills, business contracts, real estate. It didn't matter who could or couldn't

afford legal services, my grandfather had helped whoever walked through those front doors. My father had continued on with the trend. It was my turn now, and I was doing my damndest to make sure I didn't let a long line of Donovan men down.

It was rare for me to be in the office at 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning. I'd even beat my assistant in. But I'd promised the Kleins that I'd have their paperwork done by this weekend, and I'd intended to do it late last night. Then Chloe Brown had walked into my life. Or rather, her weird purple truck had thumped into my parking spot.

I stretched my legs out behind my desk and tore through the slice of pizza without tasting it. I was in a foul mood this morning, and I wasn't completely sure why. Maybe it was because I was behind on work. I hated nothing more than not meeting my deadlines. I was a man of my word.

Or maybe it was because I knew that Chloe Brown had a date with my brother this morning to discuss the logistics of fixing the pile of rusty nuts and bolts held together by peeling purple paint out front.

I didn't hear Trevor knock on my office door. The door was partially open, and when he stepped through, it startled me.

"You're late," I grumbled, wiping my hands on a napkin. "We've got work to do."

"Sorry. I stopped by the cafe to grab a couple of coffees."

Trevor was tall and skinny with long hair. He was currently going to community college in a nearby town with hopes to become a lawyer. I'd agreed to hire him as part time help around here to help him get his bearings.

I cleared my throat, feeling a pinch of guilt at the look on Trevor's face. I reached for the black coffee and muttered a gruff, "Thanks," then gestured for him to sit down.

"Okay, what do you have for me?" I asked, trying to sound nicer.

“I stayed late last night, Mr. Donovan. I put together these documents for you. Thought it might give you a head start this morning.”

I took a look at Trevor’s proffered stack of papers and raised my eyebrows. It took me a few minutes of skimming through before I determined it was actually good work, especially for an inexperienced kid. I nodded to him, which I hoped showed him my appreciation. He sank into a chair looking relieved.

“Mr. Klein’s not going to be happy about the settlement terms,” Trevor offered shyly. “He’s not making out well in the divorce.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t have been a dick.”

I held my tongue on what I really wanted to say about Carl Klein. The guy wasn’t from around here, but he’d married Hannah Morgan, who was. He’d moved into Hannah’s house, spent Hannah’s money, drank Hannah’s booze, and screwed up Hannah’s credit. He’d also gotten her pregnant and didn’t seem keen on helping out with the kid all that much.

In addition, there were signs that made me suspect Carl had gotten physical with Hannah, but I had no proof. I’d delicately tried to ask her, but she’d denied it. She hadn’t pressed charges. All I knew was that Carl liked his beer and he had a temper. The two didn’t often pair well together, especially in an already strained relationship.

So when Hannah had come to me asking quietly about filing for divorce, I’d taken the case happily—no charge. I was going to get her and her kid as much as I possibly could out of the crappy deck of cards she’d been dealt in a husband. She deserved it. And helping out those who couldn’t help themselves was the message my father had pounded into my head about Donovan & Associates, our motto, per se.

“Look, today I need to…” I trailed off as I caught a glimpse of movement out the front window of my office.

Chloe Brown was strolling her way down Main Street looking like a little slice of heaven. She wore a yellow mini

dress with a skirt that twirled and sailed in the wind. She had a sunhat pressed to her head that looked vaguely familiar. Oversized black sunglasses hid her eyes. Absolutely nothing hid her legs, and that was a real travesty, considering every man in Fantasie could see them, and that made me downright annoyed.

“Uh, Mr. Donovan?” Trevor’s voice dragged me back to the room.

“Good work,” I huffed and threw the stack down. “Get Finn in here and talk to him about a restraining order for Carl. Nothing official yet though. I want to find out what we can do to keep Carl away from Hannah and her kid when word gets out she’s filing for divorce. On the down low,” I reiterated. “Do you hear me?”

“Understood. Down low.”

“I’m going to go get a coffee. I’ll be right back.”

Trevor stared at me. Then he stared at the fresh coffee on my desk.

“It’s cold,” I muttered.

Trevor didn’t believe me. I didn’t explain. That was the nice part about being the boss—I didn’t owe anyone else anything except a paycheck.

I stomped out of the office, past Eleanor the office mascot and ailing houseplant, and pushed open the front doors. Sunshine hit my shoulders in a fantastic and unexpected burst of spring.

I was half a block away from catching up with Chloe when Mrs. Nimpty caught up to me on the street. She was best buds with Ruby and thought the world revolved around their quilting society.

“Hi, honey.” Mrs. Nimpty tapped me on my shoulder with long pink talons. “Excuse me. Yes, you, Lucas—don’t speed up away from me now, young man. I was hoping you’d had time to review my memo.”

“You mean the Post-it note you stuck on my windshield?”

“I wrote *Official Memo* across the top.”

“I noticed.”

“So?” She blinked rapidly. “Did you review it?”

“I don’t have the power to add a law that creates a holiday for knitting.”

“Quilting,” she said. “I would like Fantasie to officially recognize National Quilter’s Day. And perhaps declare it a day that nobody is to work.”

“You’ve been retired for four decades. Why do you care when people work?”

“Four and a half decades now, thank you. I’m looking out for the next generation.”

I took a deep breath, searching for any sight of the walking slice of sunshine that was Chloe Brown. I exhaled sharply noting that she had slipped out of sight and probably into the pincers of my devilish brother.

“I’m really sorry, but I’ve got to be somewhere.” I made to sidestep Mrs. Nimpty, but for a woman in her nineties, she was decidedly nimble and blocked me.

“Agree to look into it.” She crossed bony arms over her chest. “Maybe give the mayor a little nudge.”

Talking to mayor and asshole extraordinaire Billy Burton was the least desirable thing on my agenda. But catching up with Chloe Brown was the first thing on my agenda, and it seemed like the two were now directly linked.

“Fine. I’ll talk to Burton about it, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Great!” Mrs. Nimpty patted my shoulder. “That wasn’t so hard, was it, munchkin?”

I didn’t know anyone aside from Mrs. Nimpty who would dare to call a 6’4” male a munchkin while she was eighty pounds soaking wet and barely topping the charts at a whole five feet, but she pulled it off.

Fortunately, she let me pass, and I steered right around the curly ringlets on top of her head and headed for The Bean Counter, the only café of note within fifty miles of Fantasie. By the time I reached the front doors, I was well and truly worked up thinking about my brother's date with Chloe.

It was possibly unfair to call my brother Noah a playboy. Or a devil. He dated women, sure. He had a way with the opposite sex, nobody could deny that, but he wasn't a prick about it. Which was exactly why I didn't want him around Chloe.

I strode into the café without a backwards glance and found myself face to face with Chuck, the owner of the place. Chuck was Mrs. Nimpty's long-time secret lover that was not very secret. He was in his eighties and an ex-biker with full tattoo sleeves. He was nearly as round as he was tall and his handlebar mustache was the stuff of legends. He folded arms over a thick chest, blocking my way inside.

"What's happening, Lucas?" he said gruffly from beneath that legendary mustache.

"Just looking for my brother," I said. "He said he'd be here this morning."

"I know." That mustache twitched forebodingly. "He told me you might come stomping in here. He also mentioned that he wanted some privacy."

"This is a coffee shop, not Noah's personal office, and you're not his assistant."

This time the mustache quivered.

I studied him closer and murmured conspiratorially, as if we were meeting for a drug deal. "What if I order a round of coffees for the office?"

"Trevor already bought you a coffee." Chuck's brows pulled together. "I'm onto you, Donovan. What're you boys up to today?"

"Uh—"

That was when I saw her. It was also when my tongue ceased to function and words refused to come out of my mouth. A mirage in sunflower yellow so pretty I couldn't believe she was real, Chloe stood at the counter waiting for her beverage, her beautiful legs on full display. My eyes couldn't help but trail up her calves, over her knees, up the thighs, to the tips of a gauzy dress ready to be tugged over her hips.

"Stop lickin' your chops, you animal." Chuck was trying to hide a smile. "I get it now. It's about a girl. Leave her alone. Your brother got to her first."

"She's not a piece of cake," I snarled. "And anyway, that's not true. I met her first."

"Are you staking your claim?"

"Shut up, Chuck."

"Mind your elders."

"I'll buy a quiche, three breakfast sandwiches, and a latte if you move out of my way."

Chuck scratched at his thick head of hair. "In that case, I'll get your tab."

Fortunately, I had Chuck's number, and I knew he could be persuaded to do a helluva lot with a credit card. I handed mine over, thinking I was buying a heck of a lot of food I didn't want just to get a few minutes of time alone with this woman.

By the time I'd settled my tab with Chuck, Chloe was seated at a table in the corner across from my brother. Noah gave me a brilliant, toothy grin from behind a frothy cappuccino. I itched my nose with my middle finger in his direction, dropping said digit the second Chloe turned to face me.

Her face paled a few degrees when she saw me. It gave me a wave of satisfaction to see that she felt some sort of way about me. I wasn't sure if she was happy or sad to see me, but it was something, and something was better than casual indifference.

With a bag of food tucked under one arm and a giant latte in the other—because Chuck never missed the opportunity to upsell a client—I brushed through the other Saturday morning patrons to the table my brother shared with Chloe.

Despite my morning grumpiness, The Bean Counter was actually a very pleasant town staple. An airy coffee shop located on Main, Chuck had kept the original brick exterior of the building just like I'd done with the law office when I'd gutted the place. He'd gone for a log cabin feel with lots of exposed lumber and lofted ceilings. Art from local artists hung on the walls, everything from professional looking photography to drawings from the kids in the kindergarten class down the street. Soft, upbeat music thrummed in the background.

“Fancy seeing you here.” Noah took another sip from the massive mug in front of him. “If you’ll excuse us, Chloe and I have some business to discuss.”

“Business,” I said in disbelief. “Yeah, I’m just here to verify that’s actually what’s happening.”

“I didn’t realize it was any of your business,” Noah said. “So, scram.”

I shifted, the bag of food crinkling in my hands. Annoyed, I set it on the table. “I’m just looking out for our newest resident.”

Chloe held up her hands. “I’m right here. I can speak for myself.”

“Fancy an escort for your meeting?” I asked. “I’d be happy to make sure my brother behaves.”

Her eyes flashed. “I can handle myself, thanks.”

“Okay, then.” I hesitated, stuck on what to say next. I hadn’t really thought this conversation through. I took a pull of my latte and scorched the roof of my mouth with what felt like a plume of flames. I cursed and dropped the cup from my lips.

Chloe’s eyes twinkled as she studied me, and it was everything I could do not to stare back at her. Her eyes were

the color of hopeful spring buds, a pretty, bright green. She was a breath of fresh air.

“Nice day.” I looked outside.

“Get out of here,” Noah said. “We’re working, and you look stupid.”

Chloe hid a snicker, but it was a good-natured one. Her hand pressed over her mouth as if that would hide the radiance from her smile. I was so enamored by her that I completely forgot the retort I’d prepared for my brother.

“Well, if this meeting is just business,” I said, turning to Noah, “then I suggest you get to it. I expect that truck to be out of my parking spot by noon, or else I’m calling to have it towed.”

“You wouldn’t,” Chloe said. “Come on, that’s just mean.”

“Noah should be able to help you out,” I said evenly. “I’ll see the two of you later.”

I was halfway back to my office building before I remembered that I’d left the quiche and breakfast sandwiches on the table. There was no way I was going back to retrieve them at this point. Noah was right. I had looked stupid. Unfortunately, I was having a hard time playing it cool anytime Chloe was within three feet of me. And now I’d just donated lunch to their date.

Back at the office, I forced myself to look at the stack of files that Trevor had placed on my desk. I had to be at the top of my game for the Klein case. Hannah deserved it. She had a nine-month-old baby boy, Mason. Carl was rotten to his core and spelled major trouble. I was dead determined to facilitate this divorce as quickly and safely as possible.

Even so, even with the pressure of work that meant a lot to me, it was next to impossible to fully concentrate. I had one eye on the clock and the other eye on the sidewalk, wondering what the hell was taking so long on my brother’s date with Chloe. If they were discussing repairs to her truck, they should’ve been done in five minutes. But as I looked at the

clock, I noted it was getting dangerously close to noon, and I'd seen neither hide nor tail of my brother and Chloe.

As the second hand ticked around, teasing me by inching the hour hand closer and closer to twelve, I begrudgingly picked up the phone. I didn't *want* to have Chloe's truck towed. The purple monster was growing on me already, a little splash of color in the otherwise bland parking lot. But I'd warned Noah, and more importantly, I figured if Chloe saw a tow truck headed for her beloved piece of crap, she'd hightail it out of the meeting with my brother to stop the tow.

Was I petty enough to call a tow truck just to interrupt my brother's date with the first woman to take my breath away in years? Hell yes, I was.

I sat back, waiting for Morty, the tow guy from one town over, to haul ass over here. I'd promised him three hundred bucks cash just to drive around the block a few times and head home. Just enough to startle Chloe from my brother's clutches. Dick move? Maybe. For a good cause? I thought so.

Nobody ever got the woman of their dreams by sitting around and doing nothing. I wasn't sure Chloe was the woman for me, but I was sure as shit that I hadn't been this interested in a woman in a long, long time, and for me she was worth the risk to find out.

Chapter 7

C *hloe*

“A taco truck.” Noah repeated my words and stared back at me. He waited a long moment for the punchline. Then, “Oh. So, you’re not kidding.”

I shook my head. “A taco truck. With a twist.”

“A twist?”

“Dessert tacos,” I said. “You know, ice cream, Nutella, crepes, waffle cones, delicious fillings. Everything that tastes good.”

“Why the hell don’t you just start a regular taco truck?”

“Because I don’t want to. I like dessert. Plus, it’s my business, and frankly, if I’m hiring you, then you should be listening to me.”

Noah licked his lips and sat back in his seat, an interested gleam in his eye. I knew the gleam had nothing to do with me. I thought it was pretty clear for both me and Noah that there wasn’t anything between us. He was handsome, sure. You could stick him in a magazine and women would line up for a peek at his muscular arms, those tattoos, the tanned face. He was confident and attractive and kind, and under any other circumstances, I might have been tempted to find out more.

Unfortunately, Lucas Donovan had ruined that for me with a single touch. The current that had jolted between us last night had left me sizzling with electricity long into the darkness of the early morning hours. I’d stayed awake, staring at the ceiling in the most comfortable bed in the universe, because I simply couldn’t fall asleep. It had been his face, his touch, the feel of him near me that had been impossible to banish from my dreams—waking or sleeping.

“Well, I guess that’s as good a reason as any.” Noah looked at the bag of food his brother had dropped on the table. “You hungry?”

“I could eat.”

Noah ripped open the bag. He grinned, then hollered, “Chuck, you asshole. You ripped my brother off bigtime. Nice work.”

Chuck gave him the thumbs up. “Just doing what I do best. He was willing to spend a pretty penny just to see you, Miss Chloe. Whatever that’s worth.”

I felt my cheeks flush and looked down.

Noah spared me any ribbing and peeked into the bag again. “Guess this leaves us with one and a half breakfast sandwiches each and a quiche to split.”

I happily reached for a sandwich and dug in while Noah peeled the lid off the quiche and started eating directly from the pie tin with his fork.

“I can help you,” Noah said around a cheesy mouthful. “I’ve never done this sort of reno before, but I’ve worked on cars and houses and kitchens, and that’s all the stuff you need to make your thing work. Why don’t you start by telling me what your dream is? We’ll start there.”

“I’m afraid we can’t skip straight to my dream for this project because I won’t be able to afford that anytime soon. I’m going to need to do the bare minimums to get the truck functioning first, and then I’ll have to go from there.”

“What’s your budget?”

I eyed him.

“Come on.” Noah gave me a placating stare. “Ask anyone around here for a reference. There’s not a person in Fantasie I haven’t worked for at one point or another. I know my stuff. You’re hiring me, so let’s cut the bullshit and get to work.”

“You make a compelling case.” I sighed. “My budget is embarrassing. I only have a couple of grand. I had some issues at home that took a lot of my funds. It’s literally all I can spare right now.”

“I figured.” He took a huge bite of a breakfast sandwich. “A beautiful woman like you doesn’t go rattling into a new

town with an axle that's about to bust at any second for funsies. I figured something went down. Don't worry, I won't ask you about it."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

"Unlike my brother, I believe in your privacy," Noah explained. "You don't have to tell me shit. Except your budget because that does affect me if you'll let it."

"Consider yourself hired."

Noah gave a little wink. "I knew I liked you."

"Realistically, I have about four grand in cash that I can use, give or take. I'm going to need to keep a little on hand for things like new clothes and food and paying to stay at your mom's place."

Noah waved a hand. "Don't worry about that. I'm pretty sure my mom will let you pay her back."

I shook my head. "No. Absolutely not. I'm not owing anyone anything."

"Sugar, then you're going to need to win the lotto because four grand is not going to be enough to get you where you need to be. There are actual mechanical issues with your truck that are catastrophic."

"I know."

"Then we need to talk about gutting the interior and outfitting you with the sort of things you need to run your little sweet taco hut."

"My sweet taco hut?"

"I mean..." He shrugged. "Isn't it?"

"I mean, okay. But it has a name. Taco Bout Love."

He grinned. "Even better. That definitely can't be misconstrued."

I rolled my eyes.

"Back to the budget, I haven't even touched on the exterior paint and all the extra bells and whistles you could probably

use.”

I winced. “Maybe I can do some of it myself?”

“I love your confidence, babe, but no.”

“So what do you propose?”

Noah let out a low whistle. “I think we can work something out.”

“I’m not interested in any weird sort of arrangements.”

“Me neither. I’m interested in your business.”

“Huh?”

“You seem level-headed and intelligent. I’m pretty sure your business is going to do great. What if I do some of the work like a business loan? I’ll charge you a fair price but it won’t come due until you’ve started rolling in the profits.”

“You can’t possibly trust someone you met one day ago like that.”

“Sure I can,” he argued. “It’s up to me who I trust. I picked you, like it or not.”

“I mean, okay. But still, I am not going to owe anyone money.”

“You can put down a deposit. You are aware of how loans work? It’s not charity. You will be paying me back.”

“Yeah, but that’s not enough.”

“It’s either me or the bank, and I am a lot more agreeable than the bank. Faster, too, and if you are running that low on funds, I don’t see another option.”

I hated that he was right. “I was planning to find some sort of a job to help make ends meet in the meantime,” I said. “I’m just not sure what yet.”

“I can ask Jack DiMaggio if he’s got some openings at the bar. He might take you on as a server. I know he’s full now, but in the summer he opens up a patio and might be looking for help.”

“That’s sweet of you, but I can handle myself. You’re already helping me out a lot, so let’s just focus on the truck repairs.”

“Whatever you say, boss. Now, let’s talk nuts and bolts. Tell me your absolute dream set up, and I’ll tell you what we can do with your budget and a little business loan. Dream big, because I can work magic like you wouldn’t believe.”

I really didn’t want to owe anyone anything, but I would be stupid to turn down help. Plus, Noah seemed trustworthy and truly prepared to help. Maybe, just maybe, if we approached this situation with a very business-like mindset, with ironclad contracts to boot, it could work.

So, I opened up to him, and I told him everything. At least, everything that I needed in the truck. I told him about the pretty purple and periwinkle blue colored theme I had in mind. I pulled up the sort of equipment I’d need to order online, including the dream pink freezer I’d been eyeing. I waited while he jotted down notes, his eyebrows knitted together in concentration.

When I finished, he suggested that we take a walk over to the truck so he could take a peek under the hood and see what sort of damage I was looking at as to the actual mechanical repairs. I wasn’t thrilled with the idea of learning the right number of zeros it’d take me to get going, but I’d have to face the music sooner or later.

I was cautiously optimistic, however, that I was finally making progress on something that was mine. Just mine. Something that nobody else could take away or distort or ruin. I was going to guard my fragile little dream with every ounce of strength I could muster.

“I think we’re getting somewhere,” Noah said, holding out his hand as we prepared to pack up our lunch from the café and head over to my truck. “We can shake on it and call it good.”

“I would feel more comfortable having a lawyer draw up an agreement.”

“Then you’re going to have to talk to my brother because he’s the best lawyer in town.”

“You mean Lucas?”

“Unfortunately, that’s the brother I’m referencing.”

I debated. “I can have my lawyers in New York draw something up.”

“Honey, you don’t have enough cash to get a New York lawyer on the phone. You’re better off buying a new alternator. Plus, Lucas does free shit for people all the time. It’s sort of his thing. People just leave Post-it notes on his car with favors they need done.”

That image of Lucas gave me pause. Lucas had given me the impression of being many things, but I hadn’t considered *having a generous soft spot* might be one of his hidden talents.

“Don’t read into it too much,” Noah said, watching my face. “He’s still an asshole.”

I grinned, about to reply when I caught sight of an old rust bucket that was louder than my backfiring truck as it drove past the window of the café. At first, I didn’t think twice about the tow truck as it rattled down Main, threatening eardrums and parked cars alike. Then I glanced down at my phone and saw the time had just ticked over to noon. I hadn’t realized that my chat with Noah had gone on for literal hours as we’d pored over the costs of doing business together.

“That idiot is going to have me towed!” I leapt up from the table. “I can’t believe it. Your brother is a primo jackass.”

“You’re not wrong.” Noah folded tattooed arms over his chest. “I gotta say, though, this one surprises me. I thought it was an empty threat. Then again, I guess I shouldn’t be shocked. The man doesn’t know the definition of flexibility.”

I was already halfway through the front door of the café, barreling out like the devil was chasing me. As an afterthought, I whirled around and lifted the third cup of coffee that Chuck had dropped off for me.

“Can I bring your mug back later?” I called out in the general direction of the bar. “I’m going to need some caffeine to face this bastard.”

Chuck threw his head back and laughed. “It’s yours, honey.”

An entire group of older women sat in the corner with frowns on their faces at my outburst. Except for Ruby. Ruby was grinning from ear to ear as her hands moved, knitting something that looked like a scarf for an elephant. Probably the Knitting Society, or Quilting Club, or whatever they called themselves.

“Sorry,” I said, raising my cup in a salute to the group of old ladies. Then to Noah, I called, “I’ll talk to you later.”

Noah was staring out the window, an amused twist to his lips, as if looking forward to whatever was about to happen. “Good luck, sugar.”

Sloshing a little bit of coffee onto my feet, I cursed Lucas Donovan as I made my way down Main Street. I paused for a slurp of coffee at the only stoplight in town. Then I started crossing the street. A car next to me slowed to a crawl. When I glanced over and saw a familiar face in the window, another dose of coffee dribbled onto my legs.

“Hey, Officer,” I said weakly to Finn DiMaggio. “I’m definitely not jaywalking. Or crossing on a red or whatever. Please, please don’t give me a ticket. My car’s about to be towed, and I can’t afford it.”

The handsome sheriff studied me. “Maybe you shouldn’t have parked in a spot that wasn’t yours to park in.”

I rolled my eyes. “You are really grumpy, you know that?”

“I’ve been told,” he said dryly. Then he gave a tiny smile. “Hop in. You’re gonna burn your legs if you keep dumping coffee on them like that.”

It took me too long to figure out how to open the door, so Finn reached over and opened the damn thing for me. I slid inside and gave him a huge smile.

“You’re not so bad,” I said. “Actually, I think you have an unfair reputation.”

“You just called me grumpy.”

“I’m pretty fickle with my accusations.” I flashed him my pearly whites. “I should, uh, probably buckle up, huh?”

He raised his eyebrows. “It’s three blocks. I think you’ll be safe. It’s those heels I was worried about. Doctor DiMaggio’s on vacation this week, and I’m supposed to stop people from breakin’ their necks, whatever that means.”

“There’s a Doctor DiMaggio, too? Wait, don’t tell me. I don’t need to know about more of you. And yes, the shoes are somewhat impractical. I haven’t had a chance to go shopping since I left New York.”

“You’re not gonna find any fancy clothes around here.”

“That’s the point.”

He nodded, gave me another appraising look, and shut his mouth. Maybe I could get used to Finn despite our tenuous first meeting.

“So, what’s the deal with you and Josie?” I asked. “It seemed like—”

“Isn’t your car getting towed?”

“Right. I’ll be quiet.”

Finn pulled into the parking lot. My purple truck was parked right where it’d come to rest. A massive green tow truck with more rust than paint sat next to it. A guy who wore low riding jeans and absolutely no clothes above his waist scratched at a chest full of hair and chomped on a lollipop as if waiting for me to arrive.

I hopped out of the police cruiser just as soon as the wheels stopped turning and thanked Finn for the ride. Finn didn’t make any sign of leaving. He just reversed into a parking spot and rolled his window down as if ready to watch a show.

“Hey, who are you? This your...” The half-naked man studied my vehicle as if searching for a fitting term. “Your *thing?*”

“Yes, it’s my truck. I’m planning to move it.”

“Planning to move it? You’re not supposed to park here in the first place, lady.”

“Right, but do you have to tow me?” I gestured around me to where there was an entire empty parking lot. Not to mention the miles and miles of street shoulders where free parking was readily available. Not to mention all the freaking cornfields and pastures that sprawled in every direction. There was literally one million places to park a car. I told the man that.

“Look, I’m just Morty. I do what I’m told, and I was asked to come here and—”

“Morty.” The low, deep voice drew my gaze away from the tow guy. “Thanks for coming by.”

“You’re an asshole.” I stomped right up to Lucas and poked him in the chest with the hand not clutching my now-empty coffee cup. “You don’t even drive a car to work! Why do you need a designated parking spot?”

Lucas looked like a delicacy in his Saturday casual attire. He’d opted for well-fitting jeans that curled around him in a sinfully unfair way. His T-shirt was a V-neck that showed off a body I’d never seen on a lawyer before. He looked like he did hard labor for a career. It was unfortunate his personality was so disagreeable because his body was *not*.

“It’s the rules,” he said finally. “I like rules. If we don’t have rules, we have chaos.”

I gave the hardest eyeroll of my life. “Dude. I could push my car one spot over and it would be fine.”

“Go ahead.” He gave a little one shouldered shrug. “Start pushing, then.”

I didn’t feel like looking like an idiot. Plus, my heels would definitely break. I wasn’t even sure my shifter would work to get the truck in neutral.

“In theory.” I hissed. “I’ll have it moved by Monday morning. I was hammering out the details with your brother when this guy drove by, and I had to book it down the street to save my vehicle. Speaking of, who is this guy?”

“Morty,” said Lucas and Morty at the same time.

“Where’s your damn shirt, Morty?” Lucas asked. “You know you’re supposed to wear a shirt on the job.”

“It’s the first seventy-degree day we’ve had all year.” Morty scratched at his chest again. “I’m celebrating. It’s nice to feel the sun on this bod.”

I barely held back a little groan. Lucas looked a little sick.

Unbeknownst to me, a small crowd had begun to gather on the sidewalk during our dispute. Among the members of the crowd were the knitting committee, Chuck, and Noah. The look of amusement on Noah’s face was visible from thirty feet away. Noah walked right up to Finn’s squad car and pulled the door open. He handed over a breakfast sandwich to Finn, and the two guys chowed down with their eyes fixed on me and Lucas like they were at the drive-in theater munching on a bag of popcorn.

“So, am I towing this piece of shit or what?” Morty’s words were garbled around his lollipop. “I left hamburgers on the grill, and I need to get back before they’re burnt to a crisp.”

I started another round of pleas for the guys to leave my truck right where it’d crapped out, but someone interrupted me first.

“Lucas Donovan, are you out of your mind?” Lily Donovan hurried up the path. “Do not tow my guests away. That is bad for business. Not to mention, very rude.”

Lucas spared a quick glance at his mother, then he fixed his gaze back on me. It was piercing. I couldn’t figure out if I liked it or hated it.

I gave Lily a grateful smile. Lucas scowled.

A response played around his lips, but before he had the chance to say it, we were interrupted again. This time by the four-foot-something goddess of a woman Ruby. She pulled another crocheted shawl from the bag around her shoulders like she was Mary Poppins and tucked it around Morty.

“Oh, I don’t need that, Miz Ruby.” Morty sweetly patted her head. “I’m just fine.”

“I know you are, honey.” Ruby smiled kindly at him. “It’s not for you. It’s for the rest of us. You don’t want another ticket from Finn, something about indecent exposure, do you?”

Morty pulled his shawl tighter. He glanced over at the cop car and pasted a scowl on his face as he surveyed Sheriff Finn. Then Morty shuffled back to his truck.

“I’m out of here,” Morty said. “This isn’t worth a batch of charred burgers. You owe me, Donovan. Throw in some brats, too.”

Lucas gave him a barely perceptible nod. All conversation halted as Morty fired up his truck at a frightening decibel. We waited, most of us patiently, for him to get far enough away that we could resume speaking at a normal volume.

Lucas cleared his throat and glared at the cop car. Finn started the engine, then flipped on his siren and cruised away with Noah in the passenger seat. The rest of the crowd slowly dispersed except for Lily Donovan, her son, and me.

“You owe Chloe.” Lily poked a finger into the big, male chest I’d been poking not five minutes before. “She’s allowed to ask you for one favor because you acted like a toddler today. Whatever she requests, you do it. Or Grandma DiMaggio hears about it.”

Lucas’s jaw worked overtime. I felt a little thrill in my stomach. I wasn’t sure if it was the fact I’d wiggled out of owing a couple of hundred bucks for a stupid tow or if the thought of having Lucas Donovan owe me one tickled my fancy. I licked my lips, trying to think of how to use my newfound power wisely.

As if reading my mind, Lily smiled at me, leaned in, and whispered, “Make it count, honey.”

“There you are!” Josie pulled over to the side of the road in a hot pink convertible VW bug. “I heard you got arrested, Chloe.”

“What? No.” I thought quickly, then realized she’d been alerted to my ride with Finn. “No, Sheriff DiMaggio was actually helping me out this time.”

“Thank God. I thought I was going to have to rescue you again.” Josie took a look at the three of us and correctly realized there was tension. “Unless you’d like me to rescue you now from the daggers Lucas is shooting at you?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed,” I admitted.

“Right, hop in.” Josie gestured to her front seat. “See ya, Donovan. And stop drooling over her legs.”

The back of Josie’s convertible was completely loaded up with stacks and stacks of blooming rose bushes, the flowers dripping over the sides, the petals flapping gently in the wind.

“Come on, girlfriend,” Josie insisted as I settled into place. “I’ve got plans for you.”

Chapter 8

Lucas

“God, you’re brilliant.” Noah let himself into my office and plopped down across from me. “Your genius is really something incredible.”

I grunted back at him.

“How’d your *great* plan work out for you?” Noah stretched his arms behind his head and leaned back in his chair like he was ready to take a nap despite the amused smirk on his lips. “I called Morty to see what went down between the two of you. Morty said you paid him three hundred bucks to drive around the block a couple of times to spook Chloe. Posturing, much?”

“Just trying to help out the new girl in town before you get your paws all over her.”

“There’s no such thing as dibs, first off. Second, you’re a dick. We were talking business.”

“I don’t want you talking anything with her.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t take anything seriously.” I was in a foul mood. “Chloe’s not sticking around town. She’s said so a couple of times. So don’t mess with her. Let her go.”

“What are you, her knight in shining armor? She’s a smart woman. She can take care of herself and talk to whoever the hell she wants.”

“Why are you here?”

“I need you to look at something.”

“For you? Fuck no.”

Noah shook his head. “Not for me. It’s for her.”

I knew who he was talking about without him saying her name. I glanced at the couple of pages of looseleaf paper that

he tossed down on my desk. On the paper were scribbled notes. If I squinted, they just about looked like they were written in English.

“Did you even graduate high school?” I picked up the top page and tried to read his handwriting. “What do you want me to do with this?”

“Make it look legal. Type it up, put it on some fancy-ass paper. The thick kind that feels nice between your fingers. Something that’ll impress a New Yorker.”

I expelled a breath. “You want me to help you get closer to the woman I just told you to stay away from?”

“No, I want you to help me make some sort of contract that she’ll feel comfortable with. I’m going to be doing the work on her truck, and she wouldn’t sign off on a handshake. She wants a legal, binding agreement to make sure things are fair.”

“Smart woman,” I mumbled. “Though that doesn’t explain why she’d work with the likes of you.”

“Because I’m the best in the business.”

“You still haven’t explained why I should do this for you.”

“If you ever want free car maintenance ever again, you’ll do it for me, and you’ll do it pro-boner.” He gave me a lascivious wink.

I rolled my eyes at him, but he had a point. I always did the legal work for the family. Wills, deeds, taxes, the whole shebang. Noah took care of the family cars. It was not a deal I was eager to renege on, seeing as he was the best mechanic in the state. And, might I repeat, *free*.

“I’ll have you something by tomorrow,” I said finally. “But I ain’t doing this for you.”

“Great. I’ll look forward to seeing it tonight.” Noah stood up and rapped his knuckles on my desk on the way out. He paused at the door. “If you think the way to this woman’s heart is being all gruff and grumpy, you’ve got it wrong. She’s a nice girl, Lucas. You’re the one who should be worried about fucking it up. Not me.”

With that tasty morsel of advice, Noah took his leave of my office. Trevor appeared at my door, nervous as a mouse, as soon as my brother had left.

“I’m so sorry, sir—”

“Trevor.”

“Yes?”

“Use my damn name.”

“Er, right, uh...” He swallowed hard. “Mr. Donovan?”

“Try again.”

“Lucas.”

“Bingo.” I handed over the looseleaf. “See if you can read this mess. Type something up, make it look decent, and I’ll handle it from there.”

“You got it, sir. Lucas, sir.”

I let it slide as Trevor left the room. Then I glanced out the window and wondered where in the world Josie had kidnapped Chloe Brown to this time.

Chapter 9

C *hloe*

“You’re gonna want to put these on when we get home. I keep an extra pair in the trunk just in case.”

I glanced down at the bundle of fabric Josie had tossed my way. I wasn’t entirely sure the garment I was holding was clean, let alone an actual item of clothing. It’d been a while since I’d gotten clothes from anywhere but Nordstrom. My old life had sort of required it. My new life, well, I wasn’t sure what my new life required just yet, but it wasn’t stilettos.

“In case of what?” I shook out the item Josie had tossed my way and discovered it was an oversized pair of denim overalls. They were worn with a few holes in the knees, not in the *casually distressed H&M* sort of way but in the *someone had used these in an actual field with actual cows* sort of way.

“They’re washed and clean.” Josie ignored my question. She must have seen me eyeing the pants with skepticism. “At least, they’re as clean as they need to be for where we’re going. They’re not gonna kill you.”

“But I—” I glanced down at my dress.

“I can give you a tank top if you need. Don’t worry, nobody’s gonna see you. Daisy Bell doesn’t care what you’re wearing.”

“Daisy—”

“The cow,” Josie interrupted. “Hurry up.”

Josie had kidnapped me in her cute little VW convertible and dragged me across town to the first driveway at the edge of city limits. I’d passed it on my way in yesterday, but I’d also been so busy trying to make it into town without stalling out that I hadn’t been paying close attention to my surroundings.

This time around, I was able to enjoy the views a whole lot more. There was a little mailbox at the end of Josie’s driveway

planted amid spring bulbs currently bursting in a spray of pretty colors. The crab apple trees were budding, on the cusp of bursting to life into millions of tiny pink blooms.

Josie had taken the turn at a high clip, ignoring the spitting of dirt and rock as her pink little car raced over the unpaved ground toward a house in the distance. She parked in a large patch of gravel, then led me up the front walk to her little cottage.

Her home couldn't have been more than 1500 square feet split between two levels, but every square foot was adorable, I noted, as she gave me a brief tour of the inside. The house itself had a sharp white exterior and hanging baskets filled with pansies and lobelia and a little white flower I'd never seen before spilling over the edges. White shutters completed the farm feel of the place.

But her home wasn't TJ Maxx farm style with quaint little signs shouting about fresh eggs and springs of herbs. It was a legit *there's a cow in my backyard* type of hobby farm. As I shrugged out of my dress and slipped into the overalls in the privacy of Josie's bathroom, I peeped out the window and caught sight of two enormous eyes looking back at me. Judging by the deep *moo* that followed, the animal with the primo view into the bathroom was likely Daisy Bell.

Wearing nothing but a lacy thong and a matching, thin bra under the overalls and tank Josie had given me, I presented myself to Josie as I exited the bathroom. She slapped a wide-brimmed hat on my head and threw some sunscreen my way. There was a nod of approval and not much else.

I lathered up and followed her outside. We sidestepped an array of cats and dogs that were either Josie's pets or just very friendly to her. We made our way toward her backyard in a funny little conga line of two humans and a menagerie of animals traipsing behind us.

Josie's hair tumbled down her back in a long braid. My skin was the pasty pale of a New Yorker who'd been hibernating inside all winter and emerging from my tiny apartment only to pick up bagels and Chinese food. Her skin

was already tanned and beautiful, the highlights in her hair probably natural from the sun, her arms strong and lean with useful muscle. I felt like a scrawny pale shrimp next to Josie.

Josie handed me a wicker basket that looked like it could hold a small horse. By the time Josie pulled up to a stop, I was already a little out of breath. And equally embarrassed.

“I could use some help harvesting the tulips,” Josie said. “Are you up for the job?”

I was too busy staring ahead to respond. Before us stretched acres and acres of open space spattered in the distance by a deep emerald tree line. Closer to us were the bones of a greenhouse not in use. Next to it were rows and rows of the most colorful array of tulips I’d ever seen.

“It’s gorgeous,” I said. “I always thought tulips just came from the flower stand on 54th.”

She grinned. “Just wait until peony season. And you are gonna love my rose garden. I won’t get you started on how good the homegrown food here actually tastes.”

Then she went ahead and showed me how to select which tulips were ready for picking, how to gently lay them out in my basket, how to make my way down the rows quickly and efficiently. Before I knew it, we were both working next to one another in companionable silence.

We worked and worked with only the sound of the bees zipping by us and the occasional bleat from the goat out back. Daisy wandered at the edge of her enclosure and watched us while chomping on some grass. A kitty made herself comfortable in the hat that had fallen off my head and onto the ground.

I hadn’t felt this alive in years. Using my body, working with my hands, feeling the sun beat on my face. Not through the thick smog of the city or through one of the novelty strolls I’d take through Central Park a few times a year just to say I was ‘outdoorsy’ and ‘athletic’ on my LinkedIn profile.

“I hope you don’t think we’re done.” Josie straightened and gave me a big smile. She worked at about three times my

pace and hadn't broken a sweat. "It's not even snack time yet."

I expelled a breath. "I don't think I'm cut out to be a farmer."

"Don't expect any sympathy from me, Fancy Chef. Get to work. We're on a deadline."

"What sort of deadline?"

"The deadline of needing to make enough money to feed all these filthy animals." She winked at me. "This is my peak season. I've gotta make ends meet now to get through the winter."

I returned to work, wishing I was in shape enough to carry on a conversation while I worked, but the truth of the matter was that I wasn't. Sure, I'd spent years working on my feet in a kitchen, but this was different. Also, it was sweltering outside. Wasn't it sweltering? I felt like I was working in some sort of sweatsuit.

My arms were smeared with mud that had started as a fine coating of dust and had liquified thanks to my perspiration. I was just starting to feel like a real, bona fide farm girl when Josie threw me a bone and called for a lunch break.

"Check it out!" I squealed with delight as Josie threw a pile of tulips against her shoulder and marched toward me, the flowers flopping in time with her stride, one streak of dirt beneath her eye like a rugged football player.

"What?"

"Here!" I pointed to my knee. "I got a new hole in the denim from all my hard work."

Her face split into a grin. "Congratulations, Fancy Chef. You're the real deal now."

"What's to eat? I'm freaking hungry."

"I ordered food for a late lunch, early dinner. It'll be here any minute—Chuck'll bring it by. We've got lavender iced lattes, poke bowls, and matcha gelato for dessert."

"That sounds delicious. And surprisingly upscale."

“I work on a farm. I’m not an uncivilized mongrel.” She winked at me again. “Plus, I’ve got Fancy Chef working on the farm today. I try to cater to your uppity needs.”

“I’m not uppity,” I argued. “Well, I never used to be. I guess there’s a chance I’ve gone soft.”

We paused in our conversation while Josie went forward to collect the food from Chuck. Chuck was driving a hearse that’d been painted yellow as a delivery truck. Josie chatted with him through the window for a few moments, good-naturedly, as if there was nothing weird about Chuck delivering food in a hearse.

Josie handed over the money for our food and a ginormous bouquet of tulips to go with it. “For Mrs. Nimpty,” she declared. “These are her favorite.”

“Aw, Josie, you’re a doll.” Chuck gave her a salute. “Thanks, hon. You two gals have a goodnight, now.”

“Let’s eat.” Josie turned back toward me.

“We’re not going to discuss his car?”

“What about it?” She shrugged. “He got it for a steal from Noah. Noah got it for free and fixed it up real nice. There’s plenty of space in the back for food deliveries for when Chuck gets bigger catering orders.”

“Or plenty of space for a body.”

“Sure, but it’s not like Chuck uses it for that.”

I was a little alarmed at the casualness she used to discuss the moving and disposal of dead bodies, but frankly, I was too hungry to argue about it. However, Josie mistook my lack of response for skepticism.

“Look, it’s fine,” she insisted, waving after the hearse—tulips popping out the passenger side window. “Noah changed the carpet out. The whole thing was gutted. I’m pretty sure there are no dead guy germs left in there.”

“*Pretty sure* is gonna have to do it for me.” I reached for a latte and took a slurp. “I’m starved.”

Sitting side by side on the creaky front steps of Josie's farmhouse, eating in silence, sipping an absolute slice of heaven that was the lavender latte, I realized that this was the most content I'd been in a long, long time.

Not necessarily giddy-happy, but content. In a way, it was nicer than being giddy-happy. Giddiness required extreme highs, which were often followed by extreme lows. I'd had enough highs and lows in my recent life that I didn't crave the thrills enough to work my way through the depths of the lows. What I craved now was an even keel. Routine. Sitting here, working outdoors, owing nothing to anyone.

Josie was plowing through her food. "Tell me how you got uppity."

"I'm not uppity," I said, then corrected again. "Okay, maybe I am, but it's not my fault. Living in New York and working in the restaurant industry gives a girl a certain attitude whether you want it to or not."

"Why's that?"

"I moved to New York with Paul. We have sort of always known each other. He was my neighbor growing up, and we were pals first. We were both loners in school, so we started hanging out because of sheer proximity. That, and we both liked food."

"I see."

"He'd come over on the nights I'd make dinner for my mom, and we'd cook together. We had a great time. We'd make up recipes..." I paused to reminisce quietly for a long moment, feeling the push and pull of emotions that cropped up when speaking of Paul.

We'd had so many good times together, which made the harder times feel that much harder. The problem was that all the good times were so long ago. There hadn't been a lot of good times recently.

"It was our thing," I continued. "We always liked cooking together. Sometimes he'd stay and eat with me and my mom. His mom wasn't around much either."

“Life gets complicated when you’ve known a person your whole life.”

I wondered if she was speaking about Finn, but instead of pressing, I simply agreed with her. “He moved in next door when we were three. He was a fixture in my life forever.”

I poked around at the rice in the bottom of my dish. The poke bowl was completely delicious, as good as anything I’d had in New York. My stomach growled, and I forced in another bite of food—more for sustenance than taste.

“Fast forward to prom,” I said. “We went to the dance as friends, and all was great until the end of the night when he asked to kiss me.”

“Usually that’s when the going gets good.” Josie leaned against me, and the weight of her was an encouragement to continue.

“That’s the problem. It was good. Or, as good as I thought kissing should be, but he was my first.” I stared out over the fields, at nothing in particular. “I guess Paul and I started dating that night. It felt like I never really had any say in the matter. It felt like everyone expected us to get together. We were practically inseparable anyway, so it just felt like the next step.”

“Did y’all get married?”

I winced.

“Pain point,” Josie said. “Noted.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s in the past. We never got married, but only because he didn’t want to. Over the years, I mostly convinced myself that it didn’t matter. That it was just a piece of paper.”

“You want to get married,” she observed. “Or you wanted to.”

“I did back then. I had always wanted a marriage, a family, everything that came with it. After seeing my mom’s life broken up, how hard she had to struggle being alone, I guess... I admired her, but I didn’t want that life for myself.”

Josie took a sip and nodded. “Sure. Let’s keep talking but break out that gelato before it’s a puddle.”

We each took a spoon and ate the dusty green matcha gelato together, enjoying the velvety taste as it melted on our tongues. For the first time in a long while, I wasn’t thinking of the calories going in versus the calories going out. I was just enjoying food how it was meant to be enjoyed. The thing that had gotten me into cooking all those years ago. Eating food, sharing it with good company.

I looked over at Josie as she stared sagely into the distance, seemingly unbothered by anything. In that moment, I longed for her life, the simplicity of it, the way she knew exactly who she wanted to be.

“I admire what you’ve done here,” I said, gesturing to her property, the flower fields and the animals lounging around the yard. “I envy your life, in a way. Not this life specifically. Just how you seem like you just know what you want and go do it.”

“Don’t you?” Her eyes flashed, something darker and indiscernible, and I knew in that moment that all was not as sunny and flowery as it looked. “Why’d you move to New York with him if you didn’t want to be with him?”

“I thought we had something really special. Maybe we did have something special at one time; I’m not even sure anymore. All I knew was that being with him was easier than being without him. It was all I’d ever known. He was stable, dependable, everything I thought I wanted in a man.”

“It’s easy to get used to something. Or someone.”

I nodded. “I thought he might eventually change his mind about getting married, but he never did—not while we were together, at least. One of the main reasons I stuck with him is that he told me he wanted a family. He did want one—*does* want one.”

“So, you two were gonna have a kid together at some point?”

“Yep.”

Her gaze flashed up at my short answer. “Found another pain point?”

“Must you narrate our entire conversation?” I tried not to sound irritated. I wasn’t irritated at her. I was mostly annoyed with myself during the recounting of the story because of all the years I’d wasted doing what Paul wanted and forgetting entirely about what I’d wanted.

Josie handed over the last of the gelato. I drank it straight from the tin without shame. When I finished, Josie tipped her head toward the field.

“I’d love to sit and chat all day, but we’ve got work to do. I’ve got bills to pay, mouths to feed, and you’ve got more holes to make in those jeans.”

Like that, our lunch break was over. The food in my belly gave me new strength, combined with the jolt from the latte’s caffeine and the sugar from the gelato. Josie seemed to have completely dropped our conversation. I appreciated that trait in her, that she knew when to pry and when to let things go.

“Holy shit, it’s hot.” I stopped. “It is April, isn’t it?”

“It is unseasonably hot, I’ll give you that. But I love it. Nothing like summer.”

“I’m weak.” I plopped on the ground, noting that the sun had already peaked in the sky and was starting its journey downward. “I’m not made of the same stuff you are.”

“C’mon, Fancy Chef, a couple more rows, then I’ve got a treat for you.”

We cleaned up and made our way back to the fields. This time, I needed no instructions. We fell into a little dance, a peaceful routine of testing flowers and cutting stems and carrying bushels of bouquets back to the house. We worked until the food in our bellies was a distant memory, and the sun was a pinkish tinge on the horizon, and the buzz of mosquitos was starting to threaten our bare arms.

“That’s a wrap for today.” Josie straightened, nodded back toward the house.

I followed her, my arms full of flowers and dirt, and dropped the last of my bouquets into one of the huge galvanized metal tubs in the shaded alcove off the side of Josie's house. As I stepped back and surveyed the rainbow of flowers, I felt a little swell of pride that I'd helped to put it there. An honest to goodness hard day's work on the farm. If only Paul could see me now, he'd never believe it. I hardly believed it.

“All right, girlfriend.” Josie turned to me and crossed her arms over her chest, her cheeks flushed from the day's labor. “Now comes the fun part. Let's get naked.”

Chapter 10

Lucas

It had taken me all day to track down Chloe's whereabouts, and that was a very rare thing in Fantasie. Here, whispers traveled along the grapevine like it was their job. It was almost as if someone had instructed everyone not to tell me anything about Chloe. Someone like my mother maybe, a little revenge from her after the stupid tow truck incident.

I headed into The Bean Counter for the second time that day determined to find answers as the sun began to set. "I know those girls need food," I said to Chuck as a greeting. "You're the only one Josie would trust to deliver food to the Fancy Chef. Where are they?"

Chuck stood behind the counter. "I've got chef and foodie confidentiality."

"There's no such thing."

"Is too."

I stared blankly at him. "I'm a lawyer. I know what I'm talking about."

"And I'm not stupid." Chuck crossed his arms over a thick, beefy chest. "I think it's best if you leave those girls alone."

"I just want to check on them. Plus..." I held up a sheaf of paper. "I have legal business with Chloe."

"What sort of legal business?" Chuck crooked an eyebrow. "You're not suing her for parking in your spot, are you? If you are, I'll testify that you're a gigantic asshole. So will your mother. Judge Henderson will rule in our favor."

I rolled my eyes. "I did a favor for Chloe. It's a contract that she asked for."

"About what?"

“We’re circling back to that little confidentiality issue.” I fibbed. “She’s a client. I can’t discuss it.”

Chuck expelled a breath. “I guess if she wants to work with you, that’s her thing. But information doesn’t come free.”

I glanced down and jabbed a finger at the bakery counter, choosing a pastry at random.

“It doesn’t come cheap, either.” Chuck stuck out his lower lip in a pout.

I jabbed my finger around sporadically and muttered, ‘one of them’ a couple of times.

“I know you’re loaded, Donovan. Don’t be cheap.”

“What the hell’s it gonna take, Chuck?”

“It’s gonna take this leftover quiche that’s gonna spoil by tomorrow, all the day old croissants I’ve got left, and it’d be great if you could throw in a decaf coffee so I don’t gotta toss the rest of the pot out.”

I sighed and pulled out my credit card. “Yes.”

“You’re an idiot.” Chuck rang me up and swiped my card. “They’re out at the farm.”

“Both of ’em?” I couldn’t help my surprise. “Even Chloe? Why’s she at the farm?”

“That’s who you’re asking about, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but I just assumed—”

“That Fancy Chef can’t hold her own?” Chuck nodded at a cheerful bouquet of tulips nodding their heads happily on the countertop next to the register. “She was helping Josie with the tulip harvest.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. If I’d thought to check the farm, I could’ve saved myself from spoiled quiche, decaf coffee, and stale croissants. I’d just never thought that a woman in heels as high as Chloe’s would know anything about hard labor.

“Shouldn’t have underestimated her.” Chuck handed over a bag with all my almost-dry and crumbling goodies. “I’m robbin’ ya blind, Donovan. It’s a little pathetic.”

I took the bag of old food and made my way out to Josie’s place. I’d driven by the farm once but hadn’t seen hide nor tail of anyone. I’d just assumed Josie had kidnapped Chloe to a nearby town for a day at the spa or shopping. It seemed more like her style, with her high heels and lacy, well, the lacy underthings I wasn’t supposed to have seen. Yet.

As I pulled into the driveway in my truck, I was suddenly grateful for Noah’s insistence that I help him out with the little legal issue between him and Chloe. The stack of papers on the seat next to me gave me the perfect excuse to see Chloe again without seeming like a complete nutcase. Or a stalker.

I parked out front behind Josie’s pink bug, noting the array of rose bushes still in the back of the vehicle. She’d parked behind an overhang, so I hadn’t been able to see it from the road the first time around.

I tucked the papers under one arm and made my way up to the front door. I knocked a couple times, and the door just fell right open. I cursed under my breath. I wasn’t the only one who’d told Josie to lock her damn door. I knew Finn harped on her about it all the time. I’d heard rumors that every time he was on duty he swung by her place and locked the joint up as part of his job responsibilities.

I tried to stay far and clear from the ever-changing relationship between my cousin and Josie. The two had a convoluted history, and I couldn’t keep up with their breaking news. I had my own shit to unravel, and I wasn’t doing a great job of that, as evidenced by my hauling ass around town after the new girl like a lovesick puppy.

I stomped through to the farmhouse kitchen and hollered out for the girls, but there was no answer. My voice echoed through the dollhouse-sized space and I plowed right through to the backyard, hoping to find them on the patio.

I gave a gruff nod of greeting to Daisy, who gave me a lazy, half-lidded stare as she munched some grass. A couple of

the free roaming animals came up to me, and I doled out the usual behind-the-ear scratches for the pups and kittens that Josie seemed to collect like an eclectic bouquet of weeds and wildflowers.

One of the kittens, however, seemed to latch on to me. She leapt onto my shoulder, and even my sternest scowl didn't seem to scare her off. So, I left her there on my shoulder as I followed the sound of shrieks in the distance. I knew instantly from the sounds of their laughter where Josie had taken the new girl.

I followed the tree line to the south side of Josie's farm. I passed by the fields where she'd soon be planting veggies and gourds and pumpkins, past the little orchard that Josie had been nurturing for the past few years, and through the little evergreens that would eventually become a Christmas tree farm when they reached maturity.

I reached the cusp of the forest that eventually gave way to sloping hills. I wove my way through the tightly knitted oaks and evergreens, documents and kitten in tow, toward the small natural lake on Josie's property. I knew exactly how to steer my way through the densely weeded land—we'd spent a lot of time at this lake growing up. Me and every other kid in town.

As I picked my way off the path and turned right, the lake slid into view. I was treated to an enchantingly beautiful sight before me, a lake where the water was nearly crystal clear and the river stones at the bottom were visible in different shades of burgundy and gray and black. A few fallen trees near the water's edge were perfect places to climb and dangle feet over the water. Over one of the fallen logs was an old swing that'd been on the property for decades, well before Josie owned the place. We'd tried to encourage her to change it out over the years for safety reasons, but she'd refused, preferring a vintage feel to some new shiny thing.

I came upon a birch and leaned against the skinny trunk, the new spring foliage providing a light, delicate cover for me as I caught a glimpse of the two women before me. And what a joyful glimpse it was.

Josie, the little daredevil that she was, dove off the highest log and into the deepest part of the lake. She emerged, spitting water out in a little stream, beaming up at Chloe.

“Your turn,” she shouted. “Come on, Fancy Chef. Give it a whirl.”

“What if I crack my head open?” Chloe hollered back. “I’m not sure it’s safe. There are no lifeguards on duty.”

“Shut up and jump,” Josie said, egging her on. “Live a little, babe.”

I couldn’t hide my grin. I was so focused on Chloe’s face, and the touch of joy there, that it took me a lot longer than it should have to notice what she was wearing. Or not wearing.

I felt an instant twitch in my cock when I took my first real look at Chloe, noting the fine underpants that she was using in lieu of a bathing suit. The breath left my body with a violent jolt as I studied the lacy edges, the sheerness to the fabric. I turned away, glancing at my feet, cursing my body’s physical reaction to Chloe.

When I’d gotten ahold of myself, I gradually chanced another glance back at the woman who’d thrown my world upside down. She was balanced on the edge of the log, up on her tiptoes, her hair cascading over her shoulders.

Bits of dirt were smudged up and down her arms, and there was a rosiness to her cheeks, the sort of rosy from being outside all day long in the fresh air. Her knees were scuffed up, but her eyes were bright, even from a distance.

I leaned against the tree, feeling a surge of happiness that I hadn’t experienced in a long, long time—one that had nothing to do with the goddess-like nature of her body and everything to do with the expression on her face. The joy there, the sheer bliss, sent an inexplicable shock to my system that I wasn’t prepared for. She looked almost childlike in her joy as she teetered on the edge of jumping off the log and plunging toward the lake below.

Josie continued her catcalls, splashing up at Chloe from the water below.

“Fine, fine! I’ll do it. Leave me alone,” she squealed, then scrunched up her eyes. “Oh, my God. Here goes nothing.”

Then, without warning, Chloe lurched back, sprang forward, and leaped. As she fell through the air, she reached her hands high, kept her eyes clamped shut, and hit the water with a wild yelp. I held my breath until I saw those pretty locks pop back up.

The sight of her splitting the water as her head bobbed to the surface took my breath away for a second time. The tachyarrhythmia my heartbeat was experiencing couldn’t be healthy. I was going to need a fucking physical if this kept up.

I watched as Chloe shook the water from her hair, grinning like a happy, wet puppy. Water droplets clung to her eyelashes, sparkling even from a distance. Her cheeks were as pink as the tulips she’d spent the day collecting. And that lace...

Suddenly, I had to avert my eyes again. There was no way I could walk up now and deliver legal documents with a hard-on. That certainly had to break some client lawyer rules, right? They didn’t teach that shit in law school.

Any innocent thoughts I’d been having about her disappeared then and there as she rose to stand in the shallow end of the lake. Rivulets of water slid down her body, sparkling like magic. Her skin was pale, delicate. Despite her thin frame, the curves on her were something else. I swallowed hard. Everything was hard right now.

“Come out and show yourself, perv.”

My gaze jerked back to the pond. I cursed under my breath. Josie must have spotted me. She spared me no embarrassment. What a friend she was, I thought sarcastically.

I stumbled forward, tripping over a stupid vine, just about face-planting right into the lake myself. Fortunately, I was able to grab a branch and steady myself. The kitten leapt off my shoulder and onto the tree, mewing at me like I’d ejected her from my shoulder on purpose.

“You.” Chloe spit out a mouthful of water, sinking back into the lake. “What are you doing here?”

“You,” I said back. “I was looking for you.”

“Oh really?” Josie flopped onto her back and floated around. “What could you possibly need from us?”

I raised my hand, the papers flapping against a little breeze. “Legal documents.”

Josie flapped her arms and floated around some more. “What kind of shitty lawyer delivers papers to two half-naked girls?”

“The kind who works pro boner.” I cleared my throat. Fucking Noah. “Pro bono.”

Josie stood, cracking up. “You are a perv.”

“I’m just going to leave these here.” I leaned forward, set the papers down, and placed a rock on top so they didn’t blow away. The kitten stubbornly returned to my shoulder as I straightened. “Noah asked me to draw these up. Chloe should know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m right here,” Chloe said. “You can speak directly to me.”

“Really?” I rasped. “Because Josie’s acting like your damn bodyguard.”

“I’m armed and dangerous.” Josie lazily flicked a fly off her shoulder. “So watch it, Donovan.”

A moment later, there was a rustle in the woods behind me, and I startled so violently the cat leapt off my shoulder again, only to return seconds later and give me an annoyed bat at my earlobe.

“What the hell are you doing creeping up on us?” I growled as Sheriff Finn made his appearance known. “You perv.”

“You should talk,” Chloe said. “You were the one spying on us. Finn’s probably here to arrest you. Right, Finn?”

Finn, however, seemed to experience a similar out of body sort of experience as I had, except his eyes were locked on Josie instead of Chloe. Josie was still drifting around the lake

on her back without a care in the world. I gave Finn a moment of quiet admiration before I cleared my throat and snapped him out of his reverie. And also spared him from a drool spot on his shirt.

“I got a call,” Finn said gruffly. “About some hooligans in these parts.”

“Let me guess,” I said dryly, “Mrs. Nimpty.”

Finn nodded. He wore his uniform, but this evening, he had a strange addition to it: one crocheted blanket flung over his shoulder.

I nodded to the addition. “When did you become a part of the Quilting Committee?”

He groaned. “Clarice gave me these. She’d picked up some extras from Ruby the other day thinking that someone was gonna need to be covered up.” Finn nodded ahead. “I guess, technically, she wasn’t wrong.”

“We can hear you guys talking about us.” Josie sat up in the water and glanced at us. “Oh, look, it’s Perv #2.”

“I’m on duty,” Finn said defensively. “I got phone calls about noise violations and naked women.”

Josie rose to flaunt her figure. She pointed at the skimpy triangles that covered her chest and the thong she was wearing below. I didn’t stare at her, but Finn sure as hell did. They were in some sort of private confrontation, and I didn’t want any part of it.

“I’ve got clothes on,” Josie said slowly, pointing to her sheer bra. “Obviously you can see that since you’re staring directly at my nips. Not to mention, this is my private property. We can do what we want here.”

While we were having this riveting discussion over Finn’s duties and Mrs. Nimpty’s snooping abilities, Chloe had made her way out of the water and walked toward me. Or rather, toward where I’d left the papers. Which was only a foot or so away from where I stood now. Our new proximity didn’t help my mental state.

As she bent to retrieve the paperwork, water dripped down her hair, over her milky skin, down her back. She seemed oblivious to the fact that she was nearly nude before me. Her flimsy undergarments did absolutely nothing to hide her perfect figure. I could see the rosy outline of those beautiful peaks of her breasts. The lacy underwear that hugged her hips curved over the most incredible ass I'd ever seen.

This time, Finn cleared his throat to spare me. I blinked and tried to regain my vision. I was pretty sure I'd been seeing stars. Then Chloe looked up at me and gave me a smile, the tiniest little smile, as if she knew exactly what she'd been doing to me. Then it was gone as quickly as it'd arrived, and I was left not only wanting more, but wondering if I'd imagined the entire thing.

She raised the bunch of papers and gave it a little thwack against her other palm. "Thanks for these, Mr. Donovan."

"Any—" I cleared my throat again since my mouth had gone dry. I tried again. "Anytime."

She turned to leave, and something in me couldn't quite let her go.

"Chloe, can I speak to you for a minute?" I called after her.

She turned halfway and cocked her head to the side. As if deciding she had nothing to lose, she raised one slender shoulder. "Fine."

While I'd been focused on Chloe, Finn and Josie were getting into it at the water's edge. Finn was brandishing the blanket from Ruby like it was a set of handcuffs and hollering at Josie to get out of the lake. Josie kept ducking her head under water so she couldn't hear him shouting.

"What's with those two?" Chloe's soft voice tickled my skin as she stepped over a log. She caught my gaze watching them.

"Long story," I said. "They're fated mates, they just don't know it yet."

"I mean, I got that much. I'm not blind." She grinned at me. "So why aren't they together yet?"

“Not my story to tell.”

Chloe turned to face me, and the heart palpitations returned. We had relative privacy here, with a fat evergreen blocking most of the direct lines of sight to the two arguing lovebirds in the distance. Chloe stood dripping wet, clutching legal documents, not two feet from me. I could reach out to touch her, lay a hand on her arm, stroke a thumb down her cheek.

And yet, I couldn't. Because I didn't know her. Not only was she a stranger, but she wasn't sticking around—she'd already told me as much. I didn't have time to date around for fun. I knew what I wanted. Chloe wasn't it, as much as my body was telling me otherwise.

A breeze skittered through the trees, and Chloe shivered. She took a step, carefully picking her way barefoot through the underbrush. As she stepped, however, she landed on something sharp, and she yelped.

Instinctively I reached for her as she tumbled forward. I caught her before she could fall, but it wasn't quite enough. Her hands reached out and pressed against my chest. I suddenly wished my damn shirt would incinerate so I could feel her hands on my bare skin.

I heard her quick intake of breath. In that moment, I felt a brush of relief. A validation that it wasn't just me experiencing this crazy attraction.

She looked up, her eyes wide and trusting, and I wanted to claim her then and there so the rest of the damn town knew to stay away. I wanted to press my lips to hers, to tell her that whatever she was running from was as good as gone. That I'd protect her, make her mine, ease the worry that flitted across those emerald gems—at least for as long as she'd have me.

Then she pulled back, standing on her own but remaining close. As if this little cocoon around us would be severed the minute we parted ways. As if we could keep whatever was between us, a touch of magic in an otherwise gravely dull reality, alive for just a moment longer.

“I’m not a perv,” I finally said. “I swear.”

“I know.” Her eyes twinkled. She held up the papers. “Thanks for this.”

“You’re opening up your own business. A taco truck.”

She licked her lips. “I guess the cat’s out of the bag.”

“Do you need help?”

I wasn’t even sure why I asked. I knew nothing about trucks. Or tacos. Except that I liked them.

“No,” she said softly, but the word was firm, weighted. “I need to do this on my own.”

“Do you feel this, too?” I reached for her hand and clasped it loosely in mine. “I can’t figure out what’s happening between us.”

Her eyes seemed to get a little glassy as she looked at her hand in mine but didn’t pull away. She gave the tiniest of squeezes, then pulled it back at the last second, as if thinking better of whatever she’d been about to say.

“We can’t do this,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Chloe—”

She turned up a pout at me. “By the way, I’m still pissed at you. You tried to have my truck towed today.”

“I thought maybe this would be a peace offering.” I nodded at the papers in her hand.

“You mean, the fact that your brother probably strong-armed you into writing up a contract so he could get my business? Hardly pro bono, I’d think.”

I scratched at my hair. She had a point.

“Let me make it up to you,” I offered. I had no clue where I was taking this conversation, but I couldn’t seem to shut myself up either. “Tell me how to make it up to you, and I’ll do it.”

“You don’t have to make anything up to me. We don’t have to be friends.”

“We don’t have to, but I’d like the opportunity to prove to you that I’m not a shitty person. Or a perv.”

She licked her lips, and the movement was so sensual I had to pause a minute to let the blood flow back into my head.

Chloe hesitated, then, “It’s hard to take you seriously when you’ve got a cat on your shoulder.”

“What?” I said.

“The cat.” She reached up and cooed, giving the kitten a little scratch on the chin. “Oh, you’re so cute. So, so cute, little kitty.”

Standing still, not visibly reacting to the view that was directly in front of me, was an effort worthy of an Oscar. She leaned forward, pouting those lips, giving me a primo view of her cleavage. Pretending I wasn’t interested, pretending I wasn’t wishing that she was speaking to me and not the cat, took a Herculean effort.

I sighed. I was jealous of a fucking cat. How the mighty had fallen.

“Name your price,” I grunted out. “Let me show you that the town of Fantasie isn’t filled with dicks.”

“I don’t think the town is filled with dicks. Just one asshole who tows people’s trucks for fun.”

“Fine,” I said. “Then I guess I’ll see you around.”

I was about to step back when she moved her hand from the kitten to my wrist. She clasped her fingers around my arm, sending a plume of fire racing to my elbow.

“Help me taste test some flavors prior to launch. Help me out during opening week.”

“Huh?” I blinked, not comprehending, probably because of the short circuit happening in my brain. “I have a job.”

“No shit, Sherlock. I mean help me out. I’m broke already, and I’m gonna be more broke once I hand over my last pennies to your brother to get my truck up and running. I’m gonna need a helping hand once I get things going. And about

the taste test—I'm always trying out new recipes, and I need people who aren't myself to sample them.”

“I see.”

“I would ask Josie,” Chloe said, a bit reluctantly, “but I know this is her busy season, and she does all her market stuff for the flowers on the weekend. I can't ask her to give up time to help me, even though I bet she'd do it.”

“Of course she'd do it. She's a good egg.”

“Then prove to me you're not a bad egg and help me out on launch week. I talked to Noah, and he thinks if we get moving, I can be up and running in two months. It might not be pretty, but it'll be something, and at least I can start making an income so I can put more money back into the truck.”

“Fine.”

“Fine what?”

“I'll be your lackey. Tell me when and where, and I'll do it. Plus, I'll taste anything you put in front of me and give you my honest opinion.”

She looked shocked. “Really?”

“I didn't volunteer to make it up to you as a symbolic thing. I meant it.”

“Well, then, we'll see, won't we?”

She flashed those pearly whites at me, then let go of my arm, and I felt it as sternly as if someone had dumped water over my head. Without another word, she picked her way back to the water's edge, moving more nimbly than I'd expect for a woman hailing from the concrete jungle.

I hung around a moment longer while Chloe made her way back to the fallen tree that was lofted over the water. She danced to the edge, did a little spin. Teasing, playful.

“Wait!” I called out, but she wasn't listening.

I saw the moment she slipped before Chloe even knew what was happening. The papers flew out of her hand, and she

lost her footing, tumbling toward an edge of the pond that was far too shallow for someone to be jumping into.

At my cry, Finn and Josie stopped their bickering for long enough to look at me. They followed my gaze, swiveling their heads almost comically in unison. They saw the moment Chloe hit the water. I saw the moment her head bounced off a slick log, half obscured by the water. And in that moment my heart stopped.

Chapter 11

C *hloe* The beep and buzz of machines sent a piercing jolt through my head. I groaned, tried to move, felt things tugging at me. I groaned again, a dryness in my throat, a hoarseness that I couldn't explain. It felt like I'd swallowed sandpaper.

Then a great wind blew in my face, and I blinked my eyes open. Someone was leaning close. Big, handsome eyes. Big, concerned pout. Big, concerned breaths pumping directly into my face like an incessant heater.

"Stop that," I muttered.

"She's awake!" the husky, male voice rasped. Then, softer, more relieved, "She's awake."

"You're breathing in my face," I grunted. "Stop it."

"What?" The big, burly mouth turned back to me. "Stop what?"

"You're breathing right in my face. I don't like it."

Immediately the face backed up, and I realized I must have conked my head a lot harder than I'd realized because the person standing before me was the same man who'd been the bane of my existence for the two whole days I'd been in Fantasie.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Lucas, my voice coming out scratchy but functional.

I raised a hand, gently touched my head, and felt a big wad of gauze where there should have been hair. I remembered fluctuating in and out of consciousness for God knew how long. There were lots of voices, a car ride, some pain, and then... not a whole lot of cohesive memories.

"What happened?" I croaked.

“You don’t remember anything?” Lucas’s eyes widened. “Do you remember me? Do you know who I am?”

It was almost cute, the tinge of fear in his voice, as if I’d forgotten him. I wondered for a fleeting moment why it mattered if I remembered him or not. To conserve my energy, I didn’t bother to ask, and instead repositioned myself on the pillow.

“You lost your memory?” Lucas pressed. “I always thought amnesia was fictional. You know, sort of soap opera-y.”

“Of course I know who you are,” I snapped. “You’re the annoying asshole who tried to have my truck towed. I don’t forget things like that easily.”

He blew out another breath. Then, as if seeming to remember his breathing on my face was what had already annoyed me in the first place, he directed his breath over his shoulder. It was so overly considerate it made me laugh. Which caused a little pain, but it was worth it to see the relief that washed over his face as he registered the sound of my laughter.

“Don’t think I forgot about your offer to help me out, either,” I said. “You’re not off the hook for helping me out at Taco Bout Love when I open.”

“Taco Bout Love?”

“My food truck,” I said. “Obviously.”

Lucas threw his head back and let out a long, deep laugh. It came straight from the heart and bordered with a tinge of hysteria, as if he’d been holding a lot of emotion and stress inside, and it had finally received an appropriate outlet through which to vent.

“I’m a man of my word,” he said finally. “I’m really happy to see you’re awake. I thought...”

I took a shaky breath. I remembered walking to the edge of the fallen log perched above the swimming hole, pretending to be way more confident than I’d felt. In reality, my interactions seconds before with Lucas had left me frazzled and off-kilter.

We'd shared a touch, and it'd tilted the way I viewed the world. The current that had sizzled between us, the way he looked at me, as if I was a precious doll that he wanted to tuck beneath his arm for safekeeping. The way he'd walked around proudly with a tiny kitten on his shoulder like she was his prized possession, revealed a more tender heart than I'd anticipated.

"What happened to the cat?" I blurted.

Worry crossed his eyes again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"The cat on your shoulder. Back at the lake."

"Oh. That cat." He blew out another breath. His fiftieth in the last couple of minutes. "She's at Josie's."

"Oh, good."

A conflicted expression appeared on his face. "You're in the hospital, and you're worried about the cat?"

"She's a cutie."

"Sure is," he mumbled. "You are going to be the death of me."

"You're going to be the death of me," I retorted. "If it weren't for you—"

I cut myself off. I didn't want to share that the reason I'd been on that log in the first place was because of him. As much as it hurt my pride, I wasn't stupid. I felt something for him. I liked the way he looked at me—craved it, even. It'd been a long time since someone had looked at me like that, and I hadn't wanted it to end.

I *knew* he'd been taking in the view of me half-naked as I'd tottered out onto that log. I wasn't sure what had come over me, prancing around like that. I wasn't the sort of girl who went skinny dipping; I was the sort of girl who threw on a T-shirt immediately after sex so I didn't have to walk around the apartment naked.

It was as if a spell had descended over that little lake, a magical slice of life separate from the rest of the world, and I'd been able to become someone else for a moment. Someone

who was confident in their body, someone men desired, someone seen. Not a girl who faded into the background, who lived to serve others, who had put herself last for too long. I'd wanted something, and I'd tried to go after it. Lucas.

All my efforts had gotten me was a knot on the head. I'd literally fallen off a log because I'd been so distracted by a man. The only thing that had been on my agenda when I'd set off from New York was to take care of myself—and only myself. Two days into *the new me* schtick, and I was already crumbling on my resolve. Apparently, I needed to erect a new set of walls, stat, before Lucas Donovan ruined me.

“Do you think I could get another copy of that contract?” I asked. “My other one's a little soggy.”

“You're something else.” Lucas rubbed a hand over his forehead, aggravated. “Just fucking rest for a few minutes, will you? We can figure everything else out later.”

At that moment, a doctor came in—which was all well and good because I didn't want to process what Lucas meant by the whole *we* thing. Unfortunately, this doctor had the expression of a DiMaggio. Dark, floppy hair, bedroom eyes, handsome, sturdy stature.

“I'm Dr. DiMaggio,” he said. “Welcome to Fantasie.”

I let out another loud groan. Lucas looked at me with panic in his eyes, and I realized he'd mistaken my sound for one of pain.

“Not another one of you,” I said. “Is this entire town DiMaggios?”

“About fifty percent,” the doctor said without missing a beat. “I take it you've been introduced to our family.”

“She had dinner at Mom's last night,” Lucas said.

Dr. DiMaggio winced. “Ouch. No wonder you're in here with head trauma.”

I barked a laugh, already liking this Doctor DiMaggio quite a lot. It didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes either. Lucas looked relieved for a moment at the sound of my

laughter, a relief that quickly faded to annoyance as he stared daggers at his cousin, the source of my smile.

“In all seriousness, I’m Matt, aka *The Doc*, seeing as I’m the only doctor in Fantasie.” Dr. DiMaggio leaned in, checking my eyes with his tiny flashlight. “You’re at a hospital in the town next door since Fantasie isn’t big enough to have the equipment I needed to check you out.”

“I don’t really understand why I’m at a hospital,” I admitted. “It was just a little tumble.”

Lucas started to speak, but Dr. DiMaggio cut him off. “A little more than a small tumble according to the rumors. Normally, I practice out of my small clinic in town, but I wanted to get some imaging done, so I had Lucas bring you here like I said.”

“*You* brought me...” I glanced at Lucas.

I hadn’t put it together that he was the one who had actually transported me. I should’ve put it together. After all, he was the one standing over my bed. Naturally he hadn’t come just to visit me. He’d probably just been the closest one to me when I’d fallen, the one most capable of carrying the dead weight of an unconscious full-grown woman.

Feeling uneasy, I glanced down. I had a hospital gown over me now, and I nervously raised the top and peeked underneath to see what the status of my nakedness was at currently.

“The nurses helped you out of your undergarments and into the gown,” Dr. DiMaggio said without batting an eye. “You were soaked through.”

Still, the thought of Lucas dragging my practically naked form through the forest, throwing me in his car, and hauling me post-skinny dip into the hospital was mortifying. Tongues would be wagging if they weren’t already.

“Don’t.” Lucas spoke, his gaze on me.

It was just a word, but I understood. He reached out for me, grabbed my hand, gave it a squeeze.

“I’m sorry you had to do that,” I said. “How horribly awkward.”

Something flashed through his eyes that told me awkward wasn’t quite the word he’d have used, but I looked away so I could pretend to have missed it.

“Nothing awkward about it.” Dr. DiMaggio listened to my heart. “You’re hardly the first naked person we’ve treated.”

I closed my eyes in embarrassment.

“I’m joking, I’m joking.” The doctor winked as he straightened. “Everything sounds good so far. I’m going to go grab your images and take a look, and I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared, leaving me and Lucas alone. It was really the first time we’d been alone since my first night in town when we’d shared a supercharged evening walk. So much had transpired since then.

“Thanks for bringing me to the hospital,” I said. “I appreciate it. I’m sorry to have been such a burden.”

“You weren’t a burden.”

“A little bit. I mean, you probably had to carry me through the woods.”

“You don’t weigh anything.” His voice was low, gravelly. “I’m just glad you’re okay. For a minute there, I really thought you might not wake up.”

“Why did that scare you?” The question slipped from my lips before I could stop it. I quickly added, “I mean, that was a stupid question. Ignore it.”

Fortunately, the doctor returned just then. He held a clipboard in front of him. His expression was completely unreadable.

“So?” I asked. “Am I okay?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” Dr. DiMaggio nodded at Lucas standing next to him. “If you need me to report that you most definitely have amnesia and can’t remember the asshole standing next to me, blink twice.”

“I’m standing right here,” Lucas said.

I focused on controlling my blinking. It was incredibly hard not to blink now that I’d been told to blink.

Dr. DiMaggio gave me a broad smile, which he shared with his cousin. “You look great, Chloe. Nothing I’m worried about long term. But I can seriously write you a note about amnesia if you’d prefer Lucas to believe you don’t remember him.”

“I see you have the famous DiMaggio sense of humor,” I said dryly. “At least I get it, which is good news for my head.”

Lucas gave the doctor a scathing look. Then he shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels.

“On a serious note, I think it’s safe to say you have a concussion, relatively minor considering the impact. You were pretty lucky in my opinion,” the doctor said, dropping the teasing tone. “Do you have someone you can stay with for a few days, just to be on the safe side?”

I opened my mouth to speak, then faltered. I felt my eyes go wide as I looked down and picked at my sheets.

“Yes, she does,” Lucas said before I could speak. “She’s staying with me.”

“No, I’m not. I have someone I can stay with,” I lied. “You’ve done plenty already.”

“You’re lying,” he said shortly. “You’re staying with me. I have an entire mother-in-law suite over the garage with a separate entrance. You can lock me out if you want.”

Dr. DiMaggio raised a finger. “Let me point out that if she locks the door on you, that would defeat the purpose of her staying with you.”

“I have a fucking key,” Lucas said to the doctor. “I’m just saying, if she needs her privacy, I’ll knock first.”

“I can take care of myself,” I interrupted. “I’m staying at the inn. I’m sure your mom won’t mind knocking on my door once a day to make sure I’m alive.”

“You’ll stay with me,” Lucas said. “It’s not an imposition.”

“But—”

“You’re broke, and you need money for your car repairs,” Lucas said. “If you stay in my guest suite for a week, that’ll save you some money on rent that you can funnel into your business. Plus, you won’t be bothering my mother. I know you’d hate to be a burden,” he said wryly.

Dr. DiMaggio sucked in his breath and took a step back. “I’m going to leave the two of you to hash this out, but first, I want to speak with you privately, Ms. Brown.”

Lucas didn’t make a move to leave my side.

“Get the fuck out, Lucas,” Dr. DiMaggio said.

Lucas muttered something about his cousin’s bedside manner, but he respected the doctor’s wishes. He stalled at the door before finally closing it behind him.

Dr. DiMaggio took a seat on the chair next to the bed and sat back, looking relaxed. If it weren’t for the white coat and scrubs, he could’ve been any good-looking guy heading out to a sports bar for drinks this evening. Instead, he’d probably been called in specially to take a look at my head. Freaking embarrassing.

“You’re going to be just fine.” Dr. DiMaggio’s eyes rested on me. “I’m going to tell you again that I think you’re lucky. Still, with head injuries, you can never be too safe. If you get dizzy, or start blacking out, or experience anything else weird, I want you to give me a call, and we’ll run a few more tests just to be safe.”

“I will. Thanks for everything. I hope I didn’t interrupt your night too much.”

He winked. “Lucas threatened to kill me if I didn’t beat him here, so...”

“Are you serious?”

“Relax, it’s how he operates. I would’ve been here anyway. Like I said, I’m pretty much the only doc in Fantasie.”

“Well, thanks, anyway.”

“No problem. Can I take off my doc hat for a minute?”

“Uh, sure.”

Dr. DiMaggio looked closer at me. “Lucas is a good egg. I know my word doesn’t mean anything to you since we just met, but I’d stake my medical license on it. I do know that despite his grumpy demeanor, if he’s offering to lend a hand, it’s coming from a good place. He just wants to help.”

“I know. But I’m not his responsibility.”

“Responsibility is Lucas’s middle name. He loves it.”

The nugget of truth there gave me pause for a minute. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

“Trust me, he wouldn’t offer if he didn’t want to help.” The doctor stood. “On the other hand, I want you to feel safe and comfortable first and foremost. So if you want, I can give my Aunt Lily a call and have her check in on you a few times a day to ease my mind. I’m sure she’d give you a break on the price to stay longer if that’s of concern.”

“No, please don’t.”

“She won’t mind. Anyone staying in her inn is family as long as they’re there. It’s sort of her M.O.”

“But—”

“Either way, I want you to rest.” The doc pointed at me with a pencil, and I knew this was the doctor talking again, not his personal side. “And call me if anything worries you. Otherwise, I’m gonna sic Lucas on you.”

I gave a faux shudder that made Matt DiMaggio break out in a laugh. He reached for the door and opened it. Lucas was waiting on the other side, leaning on the wall across the hall as if he were trying to take it down with his elbow. He had that look on his face again, the one that made him look very unhappy at the fact that the doctor and I were having a good time without him.

As Dr. DiMaggio headed down the hallway, Lucas stepped back into the room. He watched me languidly, as if he had nothing better to do on a Saturday night. I studied him back, playing with the frayed corner of my sheet again.

His face had changed since before my fall. Gone was the stern, watchful look of the calculating lawyer. In its place was something else, something softer, more worried. More human.

“So did you decide?” he asked gruffly.

“Decide?” I parroted.

“What are you going to do?”

“I didn’t know I had a choice.” I raised an eyebrow. “You sort of seemed like you were about to kidnap me.”

“I realize that.” He wrinkled his nose. “I am used to being in charge, and when I’m stressed, sometimes that side of me just comes out. I start giving orders.”

“Aw, cute. You were worried.”

His hands returned to his pockets. “The doc said you needed help for the next few days. Is there someone in your life you can call?”

The way he asked the question, gently and with vulnerability, killed my retort on the spot. It seemed he was asking two-fold, both wondering if there was someone in my life important enough to be my emergency contact and wondering if he’d need to help.

“I can take care of myself.”

“I understand that,” he said, “but it’s not a crime to ask for help.”

“You don’t understand. I *need* to take care of myself right now.”

“Fine. Then take care of yourself in my house.”

“That sounds like a bad idea.”

“Why?” He threw a hand up. “Why is it a bad idea?”

“Because it would put me close to you, and I don’t like the idea of that.”

Lucas licked his lower lip in thought, his eyes taking on a pained look. “I realize you don’t have any reason to trust me, but for what it’s worth, I would never—”

“I’m not worried about you misbehaving in that way,” I said quickly. “I trust you.”

“You do?”

“Weirdly enough, yes. It’s just that I don’t want to rely on anyone else right now. I am here because I want to take care of myself, and only myself, and if I can’t do that, then I literally have nothing left.”

“I’m trying really hard not to throw you over my shoulder and carry you home.” Lucas looked pissed. “This is nonsense. Accepting a helping hand does not make you any less capable of taking care of yourself. You could literally die if you don’t take the doctor’s advice.”

“Aren’t you a ray of sunshine.”

“It’s the truth. Why can’t you just accept that I want to fucking help you?”

“Because that’s always how it starts!” I threw my hands up. “Then the next thing you know, it’s this whole thing, and you’re taking over my life and warping it so I don’t even know who the hell I am anymore.”

I was breathing heavily, tears smarting my eyes. It was just too much. I was only two days into my new adventure, and I was already in need of help. Not to mention the fact that my guardian angel had apparently decided it would be hilarious to place a freaking hot, responsible, obviously family-oriented, probably very kind human in my path offering to help. Tempting, tempting.

“I’ll give you the key to the place. All the keys,” he said, calmly, trying to appeal to my logical side. “If you say you trust me, then I’m going to trust you to open the door when I knock to check on you. Or at least holler out that you’re okay.”

“And if I don’t?”

His eyes twinkled a little. “I’ll break the damn door down.”

“I guess I’d at least have some advanced warning then.”

“You know it’s a good deal. You’ll save some money you can put into your business. You won’t worry my mother by making her check on you at all hours of the day.”

“Oh, now that’s just cruel.”

“You’d be a burden to her, but you won’t be a burden to me. I’m just a lonely old bachelor with nobody to look after but myself.”

“That’s not true,” I said without thinking. “You look after everyone. You’re helping me, you helped Noah, and from what I hear, you help out just about everyone in town who sticks a Post-it note on your car.”

His lips twitched.

“Yes,” I said, “I heard about that.”

“Word travels quick here.” He didn’t sound depressed about it so much as resigned.

“So do you think...” I gestured between the two of us. “If word travels quick, people are onto us?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “People are already talking.”

“Can you imagine how much they’ll be talking when I move in with you?”

Finally, a real grin split his face wide open. “I’m glad you’ve come to see reason. Now let’s get out of here and give people a real reason to talk.”

Chapter 12

Lucas

I'd never been self-conscious about my house before. Not until now.

As we trucked past the little garden I'd mostly forgotten about at the end of my driveway, I realized my house suddenly seemed a little sparse, a little bare for someone so overflowing with personality. Despite the fact that my house was a reasonable five-bedroom abode, it somehow felt too small to contain Chloe.

The air evacuated the premises the second I parked my truck outside of the garage. I made my way around and helped Chloe get out of the car, although *tried* to help would be a better way to phrase it. She'd already hopped out by herself and swatted me away when I offered her my arm for balance.

I had half a mind to just pick her up and carry her to her room when she took a little stumble on the driveway, but that seemed a little too honeymoon-ish for the occasion, and also, I was pretty sure she would knee me in the nuts. Judging by the spunk in Chloe's personality, she wouldn't go easy on me just because I'd helped her get to the hospital.

I led the way to the entrance of the mother-in-law suite over the garage that'd come with the house. The previous owners, Jan and Jon Betty, had raised nine kids in this house and had often hosted family from out of town. When Jan had handed over the keys, she'd tearfully told me that she was happy their family home was going to a good cause, and that she was relieved to know the home would soon be hearing the pitter patter of children's feet once again.

Apparently, she wasn't as talented a psychic as Clarice claimed to be because Jan's visions for my future were not even close to coming true. One usually needed a partner to have kids, and a serious partner hadn't been on the horizon for me in a long, long time.

Watching Chloe climb the stairs to the second-floor entrance, however, had me rethinking everything. Which was insanely ridiculous.

“It’s nothing fancy,” I said apologetically as I turned the key in the lock. “I’m sure it’s nothing compared to what you’re used to in New York.”

I pushed the door open for her, then dropped the keys into her palm. Chloe was already busy sizing up the room with her lips parted. It was hard for me to determine if she was reveling in happiness or disappointment.

“This is perfect.” Chloe glanced down, looked at the keys in her hand as if just now registering they were there. Then she handed one back to me and said, “You can keep the spare.”

I took it back, tucked it into my pocket, swallowing the dryness in my throat. I pushed forward and showed her into the room.

Obviously, my mother had already gotten wind of the emergency. Lily Donovan must have blitzed over here the second word reached her through the grapevine and set up shop for my guest. There were clean sheets with some sort of welcoming floral pattern on them that looked like wallpaper. A note sat on the bedside table along with a platter of food hidden by its silver cover. Josie had made her mark on the room, too. A vase—no, a massive galvanized bucket—of tulips sat on the other nightstand with a rainbow of blooms spilling out in every direction.

My mother had turned on the fairy-type bulb lights she’d insisted on hanging when I moved in. It looked a little bit like a treehouse in here, albeit a cozy one. I took another glance over at Chloe.

“What do you think, Fancy Chef?”

“What’s with the nickname?”

I shrugged. “People don’t know much about you. I guess they clung onto the little bit they did know. You cooked, and you dress nice.”

“I’m not fancy.”

“You lived in New York and wear heels. You’re fancy.”

My analysis seemed to rub her the wrong way a bit. She gritted her teeth, then, fortunately, she let it drop when she noticed the pile of luggage in the corner.

“I can’t believe your mom brought my things over,” she said. “I show up here, and I’m nothing but trouble. Everyone here must think I’m a mess.”

“If the shoe fits.”

She whipped her head to face me, but her gaze softened when she saw I was joking.

“Thanks for letting me stay here. It’s beautiful.”

I raised a shoulder. “We have my mother to thank for that.”

“The welcoming committee moves fast.”

I snatched up another note off the nightstand and saw it was from Ruby. I passed it to Chloe.

“Dear Chloe,” she read aloud, “I gave you the shawl for a reason. Do you need a new one? I heard you walked into the hospital buck naked. Good on you, honey. But really, you’ll catch a chill. I’ll set the girls to working on a poncho for your next nude adventure.”

Chloe looked up at me. Her face was pained. I shrugged.

“I can only imagine the legal issues you encounter in this town,” she mused. Sauntering over to the nightstand, she lifted the lid on the food platter. “Homemade manicotti from your mother?”

“Family favorite.”

She rolled her eyes in what I could only call an expression of ecstasy. It did weird things to me. I looked away, reminding myself that not only was she off-limits for logistical reasons, but she was injured. It didn’t mean the naughty thoughts weren’t there, but it sure as hell meant I couldn’t act on them.

“I guess I’ll leave you to get settled then,” I said, feeling like social etiquette dictated I leave right about now, even

though every urge in my body was screaming at me to stay put. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“I’m fine, you big, paranoid protector.”

I cocked my head to the side. It felt like a backhanded compliment.

“I just mean, you know, you swooped in and hauled me out of the jungle like some GI Joe,” she said, waving her hands. “That’s all I meant.”

“Paranoid?”

“You’ve asked me nine million times if I’m okay. I’m fine.”

I gave a laugh. “Only someone from New York would call Josie’s property a jungle.”

“There were trees. Water. Maybe a snake.”

I turned away before she could see the shit-eating grin broadening my face. I left the room, closing the door quietly behind me, hating to leave her alone. But I’d promised.

I went downstairs and bumbled around, doing a lot of nothing and watching the minutes tick by. They ticked by for thirty whole minutes, and I was just debating heading up to check on my guest when a voice startled me.

“How’s she settling in?”

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I hadn’t heard my mother come through the front door. She had a tendency to do that, show up unannounced and let herself in. It didn’t bother me. She was the sort of mother who respected her son’s boundaries and didn’t abuse them. At the risk of sounding like a mama’s boy, I’d do just about anything for Lily Donovan.

I reached in the fridge and grabbed a beer, a local brew from the boys on the other end of town. I cracked it open, offering my mother one with a tilt of the bottle. She shook her head.

“She seems to be doing fine. She hates when I ask her if she’s okay. But what the hell am I supposed to do?” I took a

long drag of the ice cold beer. “She’s my responsibility now. I’ve got to check on her.”

My mother’s eyes faded with some emotion I didn’t really want to discuss. I was already feeling tense and wired, and one appropriately placed question could break open my carefully guarded walls like a truckload of C-4. I was counting on those guards for a lot of reasons, mostly to keep my distance from the woman now living on my property.

“Actually, I will take a beer.”

My mother surprised me with the admission. She wasn’t a big drinker. A glass of wine at Friday night dinner, that sort of thing. I assumed this meant she wanted to have a discussion. Reluctantly I opened the fridge, pulled out a beer, and popped off the top for her.

My mother hopped onto the counter with the ease of someone half her age. As she swung her legs off the edge and tipped her beer back, I had the distinct impression she looked like someone going on thirty. If not for the gray hair, the laugh lines, the fact that she was my mother, I’d have never guessed her real age.

“Honey, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something for a while.”

I groaned.

“I’m just a little worried about how many responsibilities you carry on your shoulders.”

I shrugged said shoulders. “It’s not a burden. It’s just life.”

Her gaze softened. “When we lost your dad, you took over as man of the house. Sweetie, you hadn’t even graduated college. You shouldn’t have had to do that. You should’ve been focused on your law degree and having a good time with your friends.”

My voice was growly as it came out. “He asked me to do it.”

“I know, but I don’t think he meant for it to go this far, for this long. Everyone in our family is grown. We can all fend for

ourselves.”

“I’m not fending for anyone else.”

She gave me a look that said she didn’t believe me. “You went to law school and took over your dad’s firm. You give all your car business to Noah when I know you could do it yourself. You sent Carter money when he needed it. And me, honey, I can’t name the number of things you do for me.”

“You’re my mom. It’s polite to help out your own mother.”

“I know, but I think helping to remodel an entire inn without allowing me to pay you a dime is a little more than, say, mowing my lawn once in a while or putting up the occasional shelf.”

“I wasn’t doing anything else.”

She gave a sparse laugh. “It’s not just us, either, honey. Trevor, bless his soul, was the least qualified candidate for the assistant job, and yet you hired him.”

I studied my bottle of beer, wondering how it’d gone so empty. I debated another one.

“Someone needed to give the kid a chance,” I said stubbornly. “He’s a local kid. I like to hire local.”

“And it had nothing to do with the fact that his mom’s got some expensive medical bills right now, and you know that every cent you’re paying him is going to help her out? Yes, I heard about the mid-year bonus you gave him. There’s no such thing as a mid-year bonus, Lucas.”

I grunted. I decided that a second beer was a fan-fucking-tastic idea and helped myself.

“All I’m saying is that you’ve earned the right to take some time for yourself,” my mother argued. “To pursue something for no other reason than the fact that it brings joy and pleasure to your life.”

“I don’t have hobbies.”

“I didn’t mean it had to be a *thing*.”

I rolled my eyes. “Is this your annual *I need to find a partner* chat? It’s coming a little early. Usually you wait to get teary-eyed until the holiday season.”

“We can’t predict everything,” she said cryptically. “I’m just saying to not be afraid. You have always had this idea that you had to be what we needed you to be. Do you even want to be a lawyer?”

“Kinda late for that, Mom. This town would fall apart if I wasn’t holding it together at the seams.”

My outburst surprised me. I blamed it on the fact that the second beer had been half-sucked down at record speed. I hadn’t eaten much today, and my adrenaline had been kicked into high gear for the last couple of hours. Now I’d been ambushed by my mother. The culmination of it all was making me lightheaded.

She didn’t say another word. She hopped off the counter with the spriteness of a fairy and clinked her beer bottle against mine. She tossed it in the recycling, then headed for the door. At the last second, she paused, turned back.

“Maybe it’s time to let this town sink or swim on its own.”

“It’s not that easy, Ma.”

The door was already slamming shut as I called after her. Lily Donovan ended a conversation when she wanted it to end. She’d had to learn how to squelch arguments like a champ raising me and my brothers. The skill had never abandoned her even though we were all grown men now.

I grumbled about the kitchen, turning on the stove to make macaroni and cheese before I realized my mother had stocked the fridge with an extra tray of manicotti just for me. I pulled it out, shoved it in the microwave, and nuked it.

Let this town sink or swim my ass, I thought.

It was my job to hold it together, just like my father had done before me. He’d been one of the most beloved men in town. Marty Donovan, lawyer, family man, and overall jolly guy. I wasn’t like him. I was serious, grumbly, and currently without a family—at least, a family of my own.

The only thing I had in common with Marty Donovan was a sharp legal mind, and I'd capitalized on it. I *had* to capitalize on it. He'd been a great man, and I'd wanted more than anything to step into his shoes in the only way I knew how—helping people by way of the law.

Without my practice, nobody in this town would have a functioning business license. We'd have had a Walmart placed in our city center if I hadn't found a little loophole with zoning rules three years back. I wasn't a hero by any means. I wasn't even a good guy. I just did what I had to do. If I didn't take on the responsibility, who would?

Feeling a bit crusty at my mother's lecture, I grabbed another beer and looked at the clock, thankful to realize that forty-two minutes had passed since I'd left Chloe upstairs. It was time for another check to make sure she was alive. I could already tell it was going to become my favorite part of the day.

Chapter 13

C *hloe*

The rap on my door was loud and annoying. Mostly annoying because I was halfway into my pajamas and mostly naked.

“I’m alive,” I hollered back. “You can leave, Lucas.”

“I have something for you.”

I blew out a frustrated huff, but it was mostly for show. Really, I’d felt the giant oaf’s absence the moment he’d left like a wound in my side. And really, he was less oaf-ish than I wanted to admit. As much as it was annoying having to forfeit my personal space, I had to admit it was sweet that Lucas Donovan had voluntarily taken on the job as my caretaker in the absence of anyone else to complete it.

I understood that Lucas was the sort of guy who reveled in the having-of-responsibility, but still. He hadn’t *had* to do it. Lord knows Paul would’ve set me up on the couch in front of Netflix and run back to the restaurant if this had happened back in New York. And that would’ve been *if* he would’ve taken the time to come to the hospital in the first place.

Unfortunately, my current pajama situation was a thin, lace, white cotton nighty I’d brought from New York. When I’d left the city, I’d packed up everything I’d cared about and could fit into the car. The rest had been sold or donated.

This particular outfit was one that I’d kept because I’d bought it for myself. Mostly because Paul had told me to buy myself something for Christmas and put it on his card as a gift. I hadn’t put it on his card, of course. I’d put it on my own damn card, though I wasn’t sure he’d noticed. It was sexy and made me feel nice, and was more for me than anyone else. I hadn’t been able to get rid of it just yet.

I didn’t have time to slip on a bra, so instead, I reached for Ruby’s shawl that was hooked over my suitcase and wrapped

it around my shoulders before pulling the door open.

Lucas stood on the other side holding a wooden serving tray. His gaze had wandered out over his front yard as he stood on the outdoor landing, but at the sound of the door creak, his gaze shot to me. He did a double take when he saw me, and the tray jerked in his hands. A glass beer bottle fell off the side of the railing at the motion and landed in a splash of noisy shards below.

“Fuck,” he said casually, looking over the edge. “I guess I’ll clean that up later.”

“I, uh...” I paused. “Want some help cleaning it up?”

“No, you have to rest, and I don’t really need another beer. I was going to bring you a beer, but then I thought the doc would kill me because you’re not supposed to drink alcohol with a head injury, right? I Googled it, and then I just figured we could be safe with root beer.”

He seemed a little nervous standing there, and it melted me a little bit. The shawl slipped from my shoulders as I reached for the bottle of root beer on his tray. He jerked the tray again on accident as his gaze slid downward, and the second bottle—my root beer—fell over the railing. It also shattered into a zillion pieces.

“Shit,” he said, looking over the ledge.

I couldn’t hide a smile. “You’ve never been a server, huh?”

He shook his head.

“Your mom stocked the mini fridge in here, so I’ve got you covered. I haven’t eaten yet. Want to, I don’t know, come in?” I paused. “Is that rude of me to invite you into your own house?”

“As long as you stay here, this place is yours. The suite, I mean. So, yes, thanks. I’ll take a soda. It’s a nice night if you want to check out the patio.”

“Perfect.”

I led the way to the slightly-oversized Juliette balcony. The space wasn’t huge, but it was just the right size for a Parisian-

style café seating set. A wisteria vine had grown up and over the railing, and I suspected it would be absolutely stunning when the purple blooms emerged.

For now, pots of begonias had been placed in the corners and the floppy flowers spilled over the edges. As a chef, I appreciated the small railing planter that contained healthy little herb plants. Mint, cilantro, lavender, and more. I could smell a citrusy basil as the wind tickled new green leaves.

Lucas and I sat across the table from one another. I'd fetched two bottles of root beer from the fridge and passed him one. We each sat, staring off at the last legs of sunlight fading beyond the horizon. The sky had an orange-pink-purple glow that no photograph could ever do justice.

"You can have a real beer if you want," I said, glancing over, finding the image of him sipping a root beer, looking vastly oversized in the tiny metal chair, equal parts comical and sweet. "I won't be offended."

"I'm good."

We sat together for as long as I could manage before the smell of the manicotti had my stomach grumbling. I reached over and helped myself to a little plate. I took a bite, moaned in appreciation. Lucas looked the other way, as if allowing me the privacy to eat in peace.

"You can have some," I said, a bit regretfully. "Maybe you should, or I'll put away the whole thing by myself."

"I already ate." He bit off the phrase, speaking shortly, as if he was in some sort of discomfort.

It was probably the chair, I reasoned. That, and the fact that he'd been mostly avoiding looking my way since we sat down. Maybe he felt weird being around me in my pajamas. But what the hell was I supposed to wear to bed? I hadn't been expecting company.

"Don't tell your mother." I reached over to the herb planter and pinched off some fresh basil and oregano. I sprinkled it on top of my dish. I took a bite, bliss.

"You eat like it's an Olympic sport," he growled.

Lucas's voice jarred me out of my little slice of heaven here in Fantasie. I vaguely wondered how long I'd been knocked out of the present, silently savoring my dish. Lucas's eyes were fixed on me, and he looked hungry in all sorts of ways.

"Are you sure you don't want a bite?" It had always been in my blood to feed people. I couldn't not do it. Which was how I found myself scooping a bite onto my fork and extending it for him to taste. "Try it with the fresh herbs."

He paused for a moment, then leaned forward and carefully parted his lips. I tried not to hold my breath as he leaned in, inches from me, and took the food from my utensil.

His eyes widened, and a flutter in my stomach appeared. I did love feeding people, all people, but there was a little extra bonus in seeing Lucas's approval. Maybe it was because he was such a grouch that I knew he wouldn't lie about liking something just to avoid hurting my feelings.

"That's something," he said. "Whatever you did to it makes a difference."

"I hope your mom's not going to think I don't like—"

"My mom's not going to find out, first of all. Second of all, she's not fragile. She raised us. Not to mention, she's a big fan of family and collaboration. She loves when people take something from the family, change it, make it their own. She'd love that you're adding to her cooking."

"Like your business?" I blurted. When Lucas shot me a suspecting glance, I set my fork down and made a funny face. "I Googled you when I was getting changed at the hospital."

He stared back at me.

"Come on. If I'm going to stay in a stranger's place, I have a right to know if they've been accused of being a serial killer."

"I suppose." Lucas sounded mystified. "What'd you find?"

"Not much. Serial killer status was undetermined."

He gave a short laugh. “Good thing the internet is the most trustworthy source of news on the planet.”

“You haven’t Googled me?”

He hesitated. “Should I have?”

“No. Just...” I shrugged, wondering why I felt a touch disappointed.

After all, I’d been lying. I’d Googled him twice. The first time was last night after our stroll together. Something about Lucas had driven me to want to know more about this mystery man who had suddenly started appearing in my fantasies. Then I’d also done some serial killer searching about him at the hospital. So far, so good.

“I did learn that you inherited your company from your dad.”

“Yes, I did.”

He looked at me, and I had the feeling he was staring straight through me, focusing on something in his past rather than his present. I waited, giving him as much time as he needed.

“My dad was a great guy,” he said finally. “Charismatic, well-loved, helped everyone. I don’t know. He left big shoes to fill.”

“Why do you need to fill his shoes?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you make your own footprints? Different, unique. Similar, obviously, because the two of you are related, but your own.”

“I tried.” Lucas scrubbed a hand over the five o’clock shadow on his strong jawline. “I’m not sure if I succeeded. When I graduated law school, my mom turned over the keys to the building for me as my graduation gift. I got the practice, the establishment, the name on the door. I don’t know. It felt like I got the job because I was bred for it, not because I earned it.”

“That’s bullshit. Not everyone can just waltz through law school. Not to mention the fact that you seem to be good at your job.”

“How do you know? It’s not like you got a chance to look at your contract before you took it swimming with you.”

“I read your reviews. People are thrilled with you. 4.9 stars on Yelp.”

He cracked a small smile.

“And the only one star was from some idiot named Billy Burton who I Googled. Turns out he’s the mayor, and he drives that dumb truck that almost ran us over last night. He’s an idiot,” I decided. “He probably doesn’t know what’s good for him anyway.”

His eyes softened as he glanced my way. I wondered if I’d exposed too much, the lengths I’d gone to in order to prove that Lucas Donovan was, in fact, a decent human being. At least according to Yelp and not according to the tingling in my lady bits. The two were completely unrelated.

“Billy Burton one starred me after I didn’t fight a parking ticket for him.”

“Oh,” I said. “I guess you have a thing against people parking in the wrong spaces.”

A smile quirked his lips before his face turned decidedly more grim. “I have a problem with it when someone parks in a handicapped spot and accidentally backs into an old lady getting out of it.”

“Oh,” I breathed. “That’s bad.”

“The woman is fine. The old lady was Ruby, and the woman’s got nine lives, but still. I wasn’t going to get Burton out of that one.”

“I’d wear that one star on Yelp with pride.”

He nodded, looking somewhat satisfied. Then we lapsed into silence again, sipping our root beers, looking out at the night. I shrugged my shawl tighter around my body, well aware that the chill in the air was rippling goosebumps over

my skin. It was also doing funny things to my nipples. But I figured that was the least of my worries since it was hardly the first time Lucas had seen them at this point.

“How’s your head?” he asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

He nodded toward where the bandage was still wrapped around my head.

I remembered the reason I was here in the first place. “Oh, I feel fine. You’re a good distraction.”

He made a low noise in his throat. Suddenly the breeze didn’t feel so chilly. A heatwave seemed to cascade over my shoulders. To distract myself, I rose, offered him another root beer.

“You look cold. Let me make you a cup of coffee,” he said. “Or tea.”

I gave him a wry smile. “I’m from New York. I don’t even know what tea is.”

“Decaf coffee, then. I need you to be able to get some rest.”

“Fine,” I amended. “Decaf.”

While Lucas disappeared inside and fiddled with the coffee machine in my new digs, I took a deep breath. I knew I should feel guilty about encroaching on this man’s time. He was, after all, practically a stranger. Yet I hated to use the word stranger on him because I didn’t like the idea of not knowing him at all. Somehow, I felt like I knew him on some level, and I wanted to know him even more. We were wading into dangerous territory, and I couldn’t pull myself back from the ledge.

Lucas returned with two sturdy, white diner mugs of coffee and handed one to me. I cupped my hands around the warmth and cozied into my shawl. I was pretty sure in this moment, Fantasie was living up to its name. A lovely evening, a handsome stranger, a warm cup of coffee, and a belly full of manicotti. It sure as hell was the stuff dreams were made of.

“Sometimes you say you’re from New York, other times you make it a point to let people know you’re not from New York.” Lucas was looking onto the horizon, avoiding eye contact. “So which is it?”

“I’m not from New York, but I lived there long enough for a certain lifestyle to rub off on me.”

“You seemed to get offended when I called you Fancy Chef.”

I bristled again. “You don’t know anything about me. Why wouldn’t I get upset about people making uninformed opinions about me?”

“Because you’re here, making a wave in our small town, and people want to know more about you. They’re curious.” He turned to look at me. “You’re intriguing. I want to get to know more about you.”

I licked my lips. “I grew up in Ohio, small-ish town. I moved out to New York after high school, got my degree, opened up a restaurant with a... friend. Things fell apart, here I am.”

“You say that like it’s you in a nutshell.”

“It is.”

“No,” he argued gently. “That is a list of a few things you’ve done in your life. It’s nothing to do with you.”

“It is. It’s connected.”

“I don’t think—”

“It is,” I insisted. “Because when I moved to New York, I started to follow someone else’s dream. I was living a life that someone else imagined for me, and it took over everything else. So, yes. What I did became who I was.”

“The real you is still here, underneath it all. Even if it got covered up by some other shitty person.”

“You don’t know anything about other people in my life.”

“You’re right, I don’t know anything about this guy,” Lucas interrupted. “But I already don’t like him. And I have

the right to call him a shitty person if I want to because first of all, freedom of speech. And second of all, if he couldn't see the incredible person you are by yourself, and let that shine through, then it's just a damn fact."

There was a long, slow pause after. A small smile twitched at my lips because it felt sort of nice to hear someone call Paul a shitty person. It was petty as all get out, but I'd spent so many years catering to his wishes and bending to his will, that I'd practically forgotten how to have my own opinion. It was refreshing to hear Lucas speak, someone whose opinions seemed staunch and steadfast and easy to come by. I wanted a pinch of that in my life.

"I mean, I know I don't know you that well, but I do like you from what little I know." At my lack of response, Lucas backpedaled as if he'd overstepped. "You're funny, you're strong-willed, you're clever and, yes, beautiful. I just don't understand why any guy would throw that away. Hence my conclusion that he's an idiot."

"You said a shitty person."

"A shitty idiot?"

I grinned. "Okay, okay. He's not a bad guy. It was my fault."

Lucas was already shaking his head.

"It was partially my fault," I amended. "I am a people-pleaser to a certain degree. I like to make people happy. I prefer to avoid conflict. I'm happy when there's peace. I just want to do my thing and avoid drama."

"So this clown came in and took a perfect part of your personality and warped it to suit his needs. I stand by my original analysis. You must have really loved him."

His words were like a knife to my gut. I wasn't sure where they'd come from or why they affected me so much. I felt myself turning prickly. "What makes you say that?"

"To have sacrificed everything that you wanted, *your* hopes and dreams that were just as valid as his, to prop him up. I don't know the inner workings of what the two of you

had, but I'm guessing you're a fine chef. If the two of you were operating a business together, you should've been an equal partner at the very least, if not the whole damn CEO."

I felt my eyes prick with tears. Not because I was sad, not even because I was angry. I'd been through all of those emotions over the last decade of pushing and pulling with Paul. By the time I'd left him, I was mostly numb to it all. I had no emotions left to feel. Nothing had surprised me anymore.

No, the reason I was feeling emotional had to be because these very words, words coming from a complete and utter nobody in a random town, were the words I'd been longing to hear from the man I'd loved practically my whole life. Or thought I'd loved. I was realizing now that it wasn't as much love as I'd thought. Compatibility and comfort would have been a better way to describe our relationship. Easy, safe. Familiar.

Now here were the words I'd longed to hear for years and years, spoken to me on the second night of meeting this man.

"It's not that simple." I toyed with the hem of my nightie. It had slid up to mid-thigh. "What happened between me and Paul, it's a whole thing. We grew up next to each other, we knew one another when we were kids. We moved to New York together. Started a business together. It just evolved over time. Little things at first. Him wanting to make subtle changes to the business, then bigger things. Then him taking over, then him starting to just *forget* to ask my opinion about huge decisions."

Lucas sipped his coffee in silence. I didn't dare look at his face for fear it would make me crumble. On one hand, I wanted to crumble and fall apart, I wanted to test him to see if he'd be brave enough to pick up the pieces, or if he'd let me shatter like Paul had.

On the other hand, this was my fresh start. My attempt to reinvent myself for me—the person I really wanted to be. A person I was proud of. A person who lived by my values and no one else's.

“I’m not stupid,” I said.

“I never said you were,” Lucas said quickly. “If I said anything to make you think that, I’m sorry. That was the opposite of what I was trying to prove.”

“No, no. I mean even in the past, I wasn’t a complete idiot. I am a strong woman. I knew what I wanted. But these changes happened slowly. Little things. It wasn’t like he just started controlling me overnight. Nothing ever snapped. He was never, I don’t know, abusive or anything.”

“Just because someone isn’t abusive doesn’t mean the relationship is the right one for you.”

“I know that,” I retorted.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I am sorry. For it all.”

“No, I’m sorry.” I picked up my coffee cup from the table and welcomed the fragrant swirl of heat as I brought it to my lips. “I shouldn’t be short with you. It’s just, I haven’t really talked about this stuff with anyone yet. It’s a little raw. I don’t mean to take it out on you.”

“I can handle it.”

More rapid blinks. My freaking eyes were starting to feel a good rain shower coming on, and I was doing my best to dam it up.

“Why couldn’t *he* say stuff like that?” My voice cracked as the words tumbled out. “That’s all I wanted him to say. I wanted him to help me hold the pieces together, and he couldn’t even do that. I wanted him to see me for me. That’s it. That’s all. I never thought that was asking too much.”

“It wasn’t. It’s not.”

I barreled on. “If he’d have done that much, if he’d just tried to keep me for even a second, I would’ve stayed. Now I just feel so stupid that I fought so hard for so long for someone who didn’t give a damn if I stayed or left in the first place.”

The tears were coming down my cheeks. I didn’t realize I was crying. I wouldn’t even have called it crying. Just a little leaky emotions, really, seeping out of me. Could anyone blame

a girl? I'd just upended my entire life, sold all my possessions, and hopped into a crappy car to traipse into the middle of nowhere. Then I'd banged my head on a rock and gone unconscious.

It was a craptastic deck of cards I'd been dealt in the last few weeks, and it was all seeping out of me now because of one kind stranger's words.

"Just shut up, will you?" I said to Lucas, even though he hadn't said a word. "I never cry. I hate that you're seeing me crying."

It took two swift movements for Lucas to set his coffee down and to fold his large frame before me on the tiny balcony. He knelt on one knee, raised his hand, and tipped my chin up to face him. The strings that tied the two of us together were tenuous, fragile little things that could snap with an errant breeze from the dirt road.

But I latched onto it, needily, hungrily, desiring him to be here for me. To be on my team for just another moment. To prove that I was worthy of being something to someone. That I wasn't completely alone in this universe.

"You are so fucking gorgeous." He raised a thumb, stroked it over my damp cheeks. "I mean on the inside, the outside, even that sassy little mouth of yours."

I gave a choked up laugh. "Thanks, I guess."

He looked pleased to see the smile on my lips, and he held us there, together, for a long moment. He looked at my lips, as if debating their sassiness content and if it was worth trying to kiss or not. Before I knew it, he was leaning in, and I was leaning in, and then his hand slid up to knot through my hair, and I winced as his thumb grazed over my bandage.

"Oh, fuck." He jerked back, looking like he'd broken a china doll in a high-end store. "I'm so sorry. I should never have—are you okay? Should I call the doc?"

"Oh my God," I mumbled. "I'm fine. Just relax."

Unfortunately, Lucas had already made it back to his seat. He looked like he was ready to fit himself with a straightjacket

so he couldn't touch me. It was sweet, how much the thought of him hurting me had him terrified. Nobody had ever cared so much about how I felt before. How depressing that I was comparing five minutes of meeting this guy to a lifetime of a relationship with Paul, and realizing that I'd never for a second felt this way with my ex. What a waste of time and effort and energy.

"You giant oaf, stop moping around." I gave Lucas a shy sideways grin. "I only winced because you kneeled on my foot. It had nothing to do with my head."

Lucas looked down, saw where my foot had been on the patio, and looked mystified. Then a flush appeared on his cheeks.

"Did I break your toes?" he asked.

"I'm fine!"

He threw his head back and laughed. I laughed. We both laughed, and I wiped away the rest of my tears, and even though the kiss had been ruined, we'd gained something even more important from it. A moment of companionship, a real conversation, a relaxed touch to the evening that I hadn't felt in years.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"Stop it," I said. "I had a nice time tonight."

He paused, as if waiting for more. Then he seemed to interpret my statement as closure for the evening. I didn't want the evening to end, but I couldn't seem to bring myself to argue as he helped me to stand.

"Let's get you into bed. You need some rest," he said, almost cheerfully. "For both your head and your poor little toes."

Still grinning, I let Lucas help me into bed as if I actually needed the assistance. He pattered about sort of tucking me in but not really understanding how to tuck anyone in, and it was sweet. By the time he'd shoved the sheets into the edges, it was like I was the one wearing a straightjacket. I could hardly move my arms, but damned if I'd let him know.

He hesitated on his way out, as if unsure whether to plop a goodnight kiss on my head or leave the room with a salute. He settled on an awkward in between, giving me a little wave as he closed the door behind himself. I heard him turn the lock with the key he'd held onto.

Then, to my surprise, I realized I was dead tired. I needed to get out of bed to brush my teeth, but first, I needed to close my eyes for just a moment.

Chapter 14

Lucas

The crunch of footsteps in the driveway had me shooting out of bed. I had been awake. At three a.m., I still couldn't catch a wink of sleep. I'd knocked on the door once per hour to check on Chloe.

The first time, she'd sleepily hollered that she was fine, that she was sleeping, and to leave her the hell alone. The next few times, I'd just unlocked the door and poked my head through. I'd watched her chest rise and fall a few times from a distance, and then closed the door and locked it again. I felt bad breaching her privacy, but I wanted her to get some sleep. I also didn't want her to die. So, I figured down the line, she might thank me for the intrusion.

I threw my front door open and jogged out onto the driveway to find a petite woman standing there, braid dragging down her back, dressed in a set of silky black pajamas. I groaned.

"What the hell are you doing here, Josie?"

Josie paused, glanced my way like a deer in headlights, then went at ease when she saw it was me. She was clutching a handful of something. As she relaxed her fingers, I saw a small handful of pebbles dribbling out from her grasp.

"Were you about to throw rocks at Chloe's window?"

"Shut up and don't judge me," she said. "It's more fun this way."

"She has a door, you know."

Josie rolled her eyes. "Learn a romance trick or two, Donovan. You'll have more fun."

I grunted. "Come back in the morning."

"I did," she said. "I wanted to see her at the hospital, and you kicked everyone out of the room so she could rest. You

told me to come back in the morning.” Josie gave an exaggerated check of a watch on her wrist that didn’t exist. “It’s after midnight.”

“She’s sleeping.”

“Aw, and I suppose you tucked her in then?”

When I didn’t answer, Josie’s eyes lit up. “Lucas Donovan, don’t tell me you took advantage—”

“I’m checking on her damn breathing,” I said. “That’s it. That’s my job.”

“Sure, sure. More responsibilities. How very Lucas Donovan of you.”

I let the barbed comment drop. “Come back tomorrow. At a normal hour.”

“You don’t understand. It’s my fault she hit her head. She could’ve almost died, and it’s my fault. I asked her to help with the tulips. I invited her down to the lake. I encouraged her to jump in. I have to see her.”

“Tomorrow,” I said.

“What are you, her bodyguard?”

I moved myself in front of the staircase to make a point. We stared each other down in silence. A moment later, our standoff was interrupted by some blue and red lights flashing down the driveway. Fortunately, Finn had had the foresight to keep his siren off, but the lights lit up the entire damn driveway like a rave.

“Shut that off,” I said to Finn as he rolled to a stop in his squad car with the windows down. “She’s sleeping.”

“Oh, hell, it’s Sheriff Grumpy. What are you doing here?” Josie asked. “Are you following me again?”

“Mrs. Nimpty called,” Finn said, his voice groggy with sleep. “She said a suspicious car was cruising through town with the headlights off.”

“I have an appointment with Noah to get my headlights fixed this week,” Josie said, exasperated. “Plus, you didn’t

catch me in the act, so don't you dare even think about getting that annoying pencil out to write a ticket."

Finn rolled his eyes. The two rolled their eyes at one another more than was healthy. I worried for their collective eyesight.

"What in the world is going on out here?" A new voice interrupted the impromptu and very unwelcome party in my driveway. A voice that made my heart thump a little faster.

In the mix of the Finn-Josie feud, I'd missed the sound of the balcony door opening overhead. I turned up and felt the breath vanish from my body at the vision in white above.

Chloe leaned out over the gnarled wisteria vine. She was framed by colorful flower pots my mother had plopped there when spring rolled around. Chloe was backlit by a magical glow from the moon. The bandage around her head gave my stomach an odd pinching sensation.

But it was the woman herself who stole the show above all else. Chloe's milky white skin was touched by the moonlight in a way that made her seem ethereal, almost otherworldly. Her hair tripped over her shoulders and fell in loose waves around her face. The little nightgown thing she'd worn to bed fitted delicately to her curves, so delicately that I had half a mind to throw Finn back in his squad car and shot put him to the next town over so he couldn't see what I was seeing.

Fortunately, Finn had his own battle to fight, and his eyes were locked on the feisty flower girl in front of him, dressed in her own silky pajamas. Josie, however, had turned away from Finn and gave a bright wave at Chloe.

"Oh, good," Josie hollered. "You're alive. I had to come see for myself after this hard-headed idiot kicked me out of the hospital."

"You kicked her out of the hospital?" Chloe called down to me, those perfect lips such a distraction that it took everything in me to properly digest the words coming out of them. "Why would you do that?"

“Lucas wanted to take care of you,” Josie hollered back. “He told everyone else they could visit you tomorrow. I took him at his word. It’s after midnight, so technically it’s tomorrow.”

“She needed rest in the hospital is why I kicked everyone out.” I bit off the explanation. “Just like she needs rest now. The two of you need to take your little argument elsewhere.”

“You can come up,” Chloe said to Josie. “I’m awake now.”

“You heard the girl.” Josie tapped my shoulder. “Move, meanie.”

I didn’t move.

“Plus,” Josie lowered her voice so only I could hear it, “I know you haven’t slept a freaking wink since she moved in this evening, and I’m here to give you a break, so don’t fight me on this. Get a few hours of rest while you can, and I’ll make sure she doesn’t die on your watch. Tit for tat.”

When I still didn’t move, Chloe sighed above me. “It’s fine, Lucas. It’s not like I have anything to do tomorrow, anyway. I can sleep all day if I want.”

Gruffly, I moved to the side. I had no choice but to allow it. After all, I’d deigned the guest house to be Chloe’s and hers alone, so if she wanted to invite people in at all hours of the night, it was her decision to make.

Chloe disappeared and opened the door to her little apartment. Josie scampered up, then popped out to the Juliette balcony. She gave a finger-wave to Finn. “Be gone, Sheriff Grumps. I’m not gonna leave until it’s daylight so you can’t tag me for my dumb headlights.”

Finn gave a deep sigh. I gave a deep sigh next to him.

“Well, good luck,” he said, rubbing sleep out of his eyes as he turned to me. “I don’t envy your houseguests.”

He nodded toward both women, now sitting on the balcony together and sipping sparkling waters like it was happy hour, not three o’clock in the damn morning. But even as the words left Finn’s mouth, I saw his jaw go firm, and he gave another

glance at the woman in black. My gaze went to the woman in white.

Then, as if we both realized it at the same time, we parted ways.

“Call me if Josie leaves, will you?” Finn grumbled. “She can’t see a thing when she’s driving. Last time her headlights went out she stuck fucking flashlights to the front of her car with duct tape.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal, Sheriff.”

Then I let myself into my house and cracked my window open as I climbed into bed. I was exhausted. The woman took a lot out of me, and I’d barely slept a wink since Chloe had arrived in town forty-eight hours ago.

As my head hit the pillow, I welcomed the sound of her gentle voice murmuring in the night. And finally, knowing that she was safe and in the company of good people, I closed my eyes and drifted off to the sound of happy conversation happening on the balcony outside. It was the first time my house had felt like a home in a long, long time.

Chapter 15

C *hloe*

We waited until the boys had dispersed. Once I was sure that Lucas was safely in his own home, unable to hear the sounds of conversation on my cute new patio, I settled back onto the little metal chair next to Josie, wrapping a thick blanket around my knees.

Josie sat next to me. She'd peeled the comforter off the bed to wrap around her shoulders. She'd also busted out a small bottle of prosecco. She popped the lid and drank straight from it.

"It's been ages since I've been here," she said, kicking back in her chair and stretching her bare legs forward, resting her toes on the edge of the railing. "The last time I was here was for a party that one of the Betty kids threw. I was in high school."

"You're born and raised in Fantasie, then?"

"Yep."

"You know everyone around here?"

"Some more than I'd like. Actually, a lot more than I'd like."

I gave her a sideways glance. "Hairy Harry tops that list?"

She grinned over her bottle. "You learn quick, Sis."

"How long have you and Finn been a thing?"

"We're not a thing."

"I can smell your bullshit from a mile away."

Josie hesitated, took a few more sips of her prosecco, then cleared her throat. "Okay, I'll confess. That party I mentioned, the last time I was here? Yeah, I spent most of that night learning how to play tonsil hockey with Finn."

"And was it good?"

She raised her eyebrows. “Honey, rumor on the street is that the whole DiMaggio clan was born with excellent kissing genes. You haven’t tested it out with your Donovan?”

“My Donovan?” I tried the words on for size. “Lucas and I are not any sort of thing. I’m not even sure he likes me.”

“The man can’t take his eyes off you.”

“It’s just physical, then,” I said. “I’ve only been in town two days. It can’t be anything more.”

“He’s taking care of you. He moved you right on into his humble abode.”

“Extenuating circumstances,” I argued. “It doesn’t mean anything. I’ll move back out just as soon as I get the okay from the doc.”

“You might want to consider taking Your Donovan for a test drive before you move out.” Josie bobbed her shoulders playfully. “Maybe the two of you will just be so magnetically attracted to one another that you’ll decide you don’t want to leave.”

“Impossible. That’s not in the plans.”

“You know who laughs at plans?”

“I admit that not a lot of my plans have gone as I’d thought they would.” I felt a touch of the cheery banter fade away as we veered back into personal territory. “But that’s fine. It got me here, standing on my own two feet, making my own future. That’s where I want to be.”

“Amen, girlfriend.” Josie raised her prosecco, downed the rest of it.

We sat in amicable silence for a long while, watching the stars twinkle above us. It felt like we were having some sort of pajama party, two girlfriends hanging out on the roof, watching as the moon inched its way across the sky. It was unexpected and nice. It was a moment I knew I’d remember forever, and the moment wasn’t even finished. I didn’t want it to end.

“Why’s his house so big?” I asked finally.

“Hm?”

Josie’s eyes had fluttered shut without my noticing. She sleepily jerked into a sitting position.

“Sorry,” I said. “We can go to bed. It’s late.”

“No, no. The prosecco hit me like a brick. I didn’t eat much tonight, and you know, we were working all day outside. What’s big?”

“The house.” I gestured to the dusty driveway that stretched under the moonlight. “I didn’t see the main place, but it’s got to have, what, four or five bedrooms? Plus a suite over the garage? It just seems excessive for a single man. In New York, families of four are shoved into two-bedroom apartments if they’re lucky. Maybe I’m just out of touch with reality, but this doesn’t seem like a traditional bachelor pad.”

“You’re totally out of touch with reality, Fancy Chef.”

“Ha-ha.”

“Lucas is a practical guy. He wants a family, so when he bought a house, he bought one he wouldn’t have to move from. I mean, he could have a softball team and be fine. The Betty family, the gang who owned this place before him, raised nine kids under this roof.”

“I see.”

“I’ve always thought he bought this house for that reason. To, sort of, keep it in the family.”

“What do you mean?”

Josie paused. “I mean the Fantasie family. Rumor on the street when Jon and Jan were going to sell was that a big developer was sniffing around and offering them a substantial cash deal. The developer wanted to stuff a bunch of cookie cutter condos on the property. Lucas was working on fighting it legally, but from what it sounded like, he couldn’t stop them from doing it.”

“Ah.”

“The Betty family didn’t want to sell to them, but they needed money for their retirement. Nine kids and all, ain’t cheap. They were looking to move, and nobody was looking to buy. It put them in a predicament.”

“It’s understandable.”

“Nobody knows how close they got to selling to the developer,” Josie said, “but I heard it was pretty damn close to a done deal. At the eleventh hour, Lucas stepped up and bought it himself. All cash offer from what I hear. The Betty family gave him a break on the price because they wanted it to remain with a local.”

“That sounds just like Lucas.” I startled myself with the statement. “I mean, from the little I’ve seen of him.”

“Nah, you’re right about that. Lucas is a practical guy, and it was a good deal at the end of the day. He was able to buy a great house, on a great property, and spare this town some ugly condos while he was doing it. Now all he needs is the right partner.”

She wagged her eyebrows at me which was probably her version of playful teasing. However, it only made me feel sick to my stomach. Every word she spoke just inched an old rusty nail deeper into the wound that had been there for years.

“I’m sure he’ll find someone,” I choked out. “When the time’s right.”

“Come on, everyone can see the way he looks at you. You’re really not interested?”

“You should talk, Ms. Tonsil Hockey with the Sheriff.”

“Finn and I have issues,” she said. “It’s not that we didn’t try in the past; it’s that it didn’t work. At least we *tried*.”

“Look, Lucas and I are both in our thirties. We’ve been around the block. He knows what he wants, and I know what I want. We don’t want the same things.”

“But—”

“Trust me,” I interrupted. “We don’t want the same things.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry.” She looked over at me, as if wondering what sort of nerve she’d hit but having the sense not to ask.

“Let’s get to bed,” I suggested. “I’m tired. This head thing is giving me, well, a headache.”

“Of course.” Josie shuffled into a sitting position. “I was hoping I could crash on your couch. Finn is gonna pull me over if I so much as turn the key in my car. Stupid headlights conked out again.”

I stared her down. “This has nothing to do with you being on babysitting duty so Lucas can sleep?”

“Nothing gets by you, Fancy Chef. Let’s face it. Better me dozing on your couch than Lucas yelling through the door every twenty minutes. Spare the poor man and give him a few hours of shut-eye.”

I shuffled into the room and hated that her argument made sense in some odd, twisted reality. The warped reality that belonged to Fantasie where everybody knew everything about everybody. And where an alarming number of people went out of their way to help strangers.

“What is it with this place?” I asked, redressing the bed with the comforter Josie had borrowed. “Why is everyone watching over me? I’m nobody to you guys. I literally rolled into town yesterday.”

“Get over yourself, Fancy Chef. You’re one of us now, and we’re not gonna let you die on our watch if we can help it.”

I gave a little smile as I slid under the covers. I hadn’t felt sleepy out on the deck, but the second I got onto the mattress, my eyes felt like sandbags. The bed was just so comfortable, and I was just so tired.

“I’m sorry about that, by the way,” Josie said. “I felt really bad about working you so hard all day, and then taking you out to the stupid watering hole. It feels like this was all my fault. You didn’t even want to get in, and I nagged you until you did.”

“Don’t start. It’s not your fault.”

“In a way, it is—”

“Shut up,” I instructed her. “It’s not your fault. Look, even knowing the outcome, I’d do it all over again. This was the best day I’ve had in a long, long time.”

If Josie knew how much emotion was hiding behind my words, she didn’t show it. Instead, she flipped on the small TV mounted against the wall and turned on the first rom com in the list as she scrolled through.

“Do you mind?” she asked. “I like to sleep with the TV on.”

“By all means.”

I settled in as Josie tried to get herself comfortable on the tiny sofa near the refrigerator. She kept shuffling around, her legs about three times too large for the couch, as the beginning credits rolled. I watched, amused.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I patted the spare pillow next to me. “This bed is huge. There’s room for you here if you want.”

“Oh, thank God. I thought you’d never ask.”

Josie grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and planted it on the nightstand. Then she hopped into the bed next to me and pulled the covers up to her chest. She grabbed the remote, turned the volume up a few notches, and glanced my way with a smile. I sank lower into the bed, feeling more content than I’d felt in a long time.

I closed my eyes as she flipped the lights off. The sound of laughter from the movie filtered over me. Josie’s soft breathing was a reminder that I’d found a friend. The cool breeze from the outside reminded me that I was somewhere new, somewhere unexpected and intriguing.

But as I drifted off to sleep, my only thoughts were of the man sleeping in the attached house. A man who I was attracted to for inexplicable reasons, a man who was showing me that he was kind beyond measure. A man who I could never ever allow myself to fall in love with.

Chapter 16

C *hloe* “What the hell, Josie?”

The booming voice woke me with a jolt. I sat up and winced as the motion sent a splitting pain down the base of my skull. I stilled, letting the pain pass.

“What are you doing, barging in here, Lucas?” Josie pulled the covers up to her chest and stared over the foot of the bed at the tall Donovan. “You’re popping your head where you don’t belong.”

“You didn’t answer your cell. Or the last three texts I sent.” Lucas raised his phone and gave it a wiggle. “I warned Chloe that I was gonna break the door down if I didn’t hear from her, so I’m just making good on my promise.”

Lucas nodded toward me, then paused at the expression on my face. My grimace must’ve been worse than I’d thought because he rapidly paled.

“I’m sorry,” Lucas muttered. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I just thought, when Josie didn’t respond I figured she’d dozed off, and that meant nobody had been looking after you, and I panicked.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Completely fine. Don’t give her a hard time. She was just trying to help.”

Josie glanced guiltily over at me. “I’m sorry, Fancy Chef. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I think it was the prosecco.”

Lucas stared at her. “Are you kidding me?”

“Relax, Lucas,” I said. “I’m alive. We’re fine. Take a chill pill and let us get dressed. Maybe find us a decent cup of coffee. Then we can hash out anything you’d like to discuss in a more civilized manner.”

Lucas blew out a slow breath. “Nothing left to hash out. There’s coffee downstairs. And breakfast. Come down when

you're dressed. Do you need..." He glanced at me. "Do you need help with anything?"

I threw a pillow at him. Lucas got the message and closed the door.

"I really am sorry," Josie said. "I'm a crappy friend for dozing off like that."

"Don't even start. Head injury aside, yesterday was exactly what I needed. Fresh air, good company, and a new lease on life. It was sweet of you to come over and check on me in the first place."

She looked a bit relieved. "Good. Then let's grab some breakfast. I'm starved."

We took turns in the bathroom to pull ourselves together. Since Josie only had pajamas, I gave her an extra sweatshirt and shorts of mine to throw on. I slid into a pinafore apron dress—in a New York black, obviously—with big pockets and a bigger price tag. It was the sort of thing that said cottage-core-from-Nordstrom.

The real cottage core, I thought dryly, were the dirtied overalls on loan to me from Josie. Which reminded me that I really needed to get out and do some shopping for an updated wardrobe. My Manhattan style was really out of touch here in Fantasie.

We made our way down to the kitchen. I was shocked that Lucas had thought to cook us breakfast. I was even more shocked when I realized that Lucas hadn't cooked at all, and it was another woman making his kitchen her own.

"Good morning, girls," Lily Donovan said. "I have always dreamed of this day, making breakfast for a couple of girls. Instead, I got three boys." She winked up at her son. Lily looked tiny next to Lucas, rising barely to his shoulder.

Lucas grunted, but the way he looked down at his mother was with a tenderness that just about broke my heart. The man might come off as a cutthroat lawyer, but the more time I spent with him, the more I was beginning to see the complicated

threads that wove together into the colorful, elegant tapestry that was Lucas Donovan.

He looked good this morning, freshly showered and dressed in a suit. I wondered if he had meetings at the office despite the fact it was still the weekend. His hair was combed, and he smelled fresh, woody, and I sort of wanted to nestle my face against his chest and simply rest there, inhaling the pleasantness of him.

Lily slid plates of food toward me and Josie. Josie barely squeaked out a thank you before she attacked the scrambled eggs with gusto. I was a little more reserved, accepting a black coffee from Lucas in a sturdy diner mug. Our hands touched, our gazes met, and I looked away quickly. After the information I'd learned last night, I had to be more careful than ever around him. It seemed unfair—the more I learned about him, the more I liked him. And the more I was certain we couldn't be together.

“Are you comfortable staying with my son?” Lily slid onto a seat at one end of the counter and studied me. “I hope you didn't feel pushed to move out of the inn. I always have room for you, and I wouldn't have minded checking on you. I heard about my nephew's orders.”

It took me a minute to piece together the family connection before it sank in. Of course Doc DiMaggio was Lily's nephew. Lily Donovan had ties to everyone in Fantasie.

“I don't need anyone checking on me at this point. But, to answer your question, yes. Your son was very hospitable,” I said, not making eye contact with Lucas.

“Yes, he's good at watching out for the people he cares about.” Lily spoke swiftly, as if she didn't want to be interrupted or corrected. Yet she spoke carefully, definitively, as if proving a point.

“Chloe Googled me to make sure I wasn't a serial killer,” Lucas grumbled.

“That's very logical,” Lily said amiably. She flashed a smile at me. “You don't have to worry, dear. Lucas doesn't

even have a big enough freezer to store a corpse in. And Mrs. Nimpty is too much of a busy body to let anyone get away with murder. She'd be able to sniff out a dead body in five minutes."

"By then it'd be too late though, no?" Josie said matter of factly through a mouthful of very cheesy eggs. "I mean, Chloe would already be dead, even if she wasn't in a freezer."

"I'm just saying that Lucas wouldn't be the one to kill her," Lily argued back. "If anything, it would be one of those ladies from the True Crime Club. They know how to kill people and get away with it."

"That's a valid possibility," Josie agreed. "Then again, Ruby's blankets are so sturdy you could probably wrap a body in one and bury it and it'd be in-discoverable."

"That's not a word," Lucas grumpily chimed in. "And of course it would be discovered by animals. Ruby's blankets have fucking holes in them."

"Language," Lily said kindly.

I sat, open mouthed, staring at them. People in this town were a little bit nuts, I decided. I had been veering toward thinking that they were nuts in a very lovable, quirky sort of way. But the latest conversation on dead bodies gave me a touch of concern.

"They're all hooked on some new podcast," Lucas explained quietly. "Nobody's going to kill you."

"Um, gee. Thanks," I said. "How very kind of y'all."

Lucas's lips twitched into a little smile. "Want some food?"

"I usually just do coffee for breakfast." Even as I spoke, my stomach growled. I couldn't remember the last time I'd woken up actually ravenous. A nonfat latte normally got me through until lunch, especially as busy as I'd been at the restaurant.

"Girl, you need to eat. All that work you did in the field yesterday." Josie pushed a plate of food closer to me. "And

don't think I'm letting you off easy just because you bonked your head. I'm gonna need you back in the fields for peony season which is just around the corner."

"Josie," Lucas said sharply. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Lucas," Lily said. "Don't coddle the girl. Chloe is a grown woman capable of making her own decisions."

Lucas threw a hand into his hair, flustered. "I'm not fit to be shoved in a small house with so many women. I'm going to the office."

"It's the weekend," I said.

"I have things to do," he said. "And I need some space."

"Love you," Lily said.

"Adios," Josie said without looking up from shoveling a sausage into her mouth.

"Um, bye," I said. "And thank you."

Lucas's eyes rested on me for a long moment as he headed toward the door. Finally, he inclined his head toward me in acknowledgement, as if there was so much more he wanted to say... just not in front of his mother and my new BFF.

He finally announced, "Have a good day, Fancy Chef."

Then he was gone. The second the door closed, I felt like I missed him. I felt like we'd been robbed of some private time together. I appreciated Lily's cooking and Josie's company, but a part of me longed for five minutes of quiet with Lucas. For some reason, I suspected it was just the sort of healing that I needed to start feeling more like myself.

Chapter 17

L^{*ucas*}

I loved my mother more than life itself. I loved Josie like a sister. But damn those women for stealing the morning I'd been anticipating with Chloe. I'd been looking forward to having a cup of coffee together with her in a relatively quiet house this morning. Instead, it'd been packed full of women discussing death and decay in Ruby's crocheted blankets. Talk about a buzzkill.

What was even worse was that it hadn't been a total buzzkill. Thanks to years of practice, I'd been able to tune out most of the conversation that'd been bouncing around the breakfast table in favor of studying the woman who'd landed in my kitchen like a meteorite. Chloe had stolen the show, crashing into my world and burning it up faster than I could fathom.

She'd looked sweet and innocent in her sweeping black dress, a little too pale, a little red-eyed from lack of sleep. And that wince, when I'd barged into her room this morning in a state of panic, expecting the worst. That Josie had fallen asleep and something had happened to Chloe. I hadn't been able to control the primal urge I'd felt to rush in and make sure she was breathing.

In doing so, I had caused her pain. I winced myself, just thinking about it. Wishing I'd had the foresight to move slower, more careful. I never wanted to be a source of Chloe's pain.

Cursing under my breath, I let myself into the office. Trevor was already there. So was Finn. Another group of people I didn't want to see. Christ, I just wanted a moment of quiet to quell the thoughts swirling around in my head.

"What is it?" I barked to my assistant and the sheriff.

I sat behind my desk and accepted a latte from Trevor, mostly because the kid tried so hard to get things right. I got

the feeling if I told him I didn't need more coffee it'd crush his morning. The kid needed to toughen up, but I didn't have it in me today to be that person.

Finn sipped his own latte from The Bean Counter. "Is Josie still at your place?"

"Call her your damn self. I'm not your girlfriend's keeper."

"I don't want to talk to her."

I just rolled my eyes. "You guys need to go to therapy."

"No, we need..." Finn hesitated, then, slightly resigned. "There is no *we*."

"Right. Whatever floats your boat, Sheriff. What else brings you here this morning?"

"Trevor and I were just talking about the restraining order you want in place against Carl when Hannah tells him about the divorce." The light went out of Finn's eyes. He was focused on business now, which was much appreciated.

I nodded and sipped my latte, suddenly grateful for the jolt of energy. I'd need a lot of lattes to get through a day that was going to be spent dealing with the scum of Fantasie.

"I can't do much legally right now," Finn said. "Hannah's never pressed charges. We don't have any evidence we can use against Carl."

"That's a load," I retorted. "You know there's shit happening behind closed doors. Are you telling me you don't believe Hannah?"

"Of course I believe her. We all know Carl's a bastard. That's not up for debate." Finn raised his hands to slow my roll. "I'm just saying that legally I don't know what you want me to do. She won't say a word against him. I can't force her to."

"She's fucking terrified of him," I growled. "That's why she hasn't come forward. I'm trying to get her protected *before* something goes wrong. Her and her kid."

“I realize that. I’m just saying, my hands are tied,” Finn said. “She’s never come into the hospital, she’s never called the cops, she’s never... You see where I’m going with this? Yes, I believe her, but I also need something concrete.”

“Hannah’s not going to do anything now.” I shook my head. “I already tried to convince her, but she’s too afraid. I told her we’d protect her, but she’s not coming forward.”

“I don’t know what I can do, Lucas.”

“If it gets to the point where she’s in the hospital, it’s gonna be too late,” I said. “We have to do something now.”

“The best I can do is to drive by her house a couple of times, keep an eye out. I’ll talk to the neighbors,” Finn said. “I know the Camdens, and they’re good people. I’ll have them give me a call if they hear or see anything.”

“Thanks,” I grunted. “Doesn’t feel like enough.”

Finn shook his head. “Never does. Look, keep at it. I’ll do what I can. When’s he gonna find out she’s filing?”

“Not sure yet, but I want to get as much in order as I can before the cat’s out of the bag.”

Finn nodded. “I’ll have a talk with Hannah if I can reach her privately, too. Maybe I can get through to her.”

“Whatever you have to do.”

As Finn left, the warm and fuzzy mood I’d been feeling after my night spent chatting with Chloe had rapidly disintegrated. It went further into the shitter when my other least favorite person in Fantasie blazed into my office.

“What the hell is this I’m hearing about a quilter’s day?” Billy Burton plopped uninvited into the chair across from me. “That ain’t happening.”

“Good to see you, Burton,” I said dryly. “Especially after you just about ran me over a couple of nights ago.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Just welcoming the new girl to town.”

“Uh huh. You keep your hands and eyes off her, you understand?”

“Oh-la-la. Romance a brewin’?” Burton gave a dramatic sigh. “I guess she hasn’t figured out that you’re a primo asshole, huh?”

I swallowed, not willing to engage with him. The man had basically been grandfathered in as mayor and was allowed to have the job mostly because nobody else wanted it. Unfortunately, I had to deal with him from time to time, and every interaction with him stuck in my craw more than the last.

“Come on, give Ruby her day in the spotlight,” I said, thinking of the Post-it that’d been taped to my car. “It doesn’t hurt you any to let her have some trussed up holiday for her club.”

“Actually, it is a little painful.” Burton shrugged. “But more importantly, I don’t want people to start thinking that you’re God and can just do whatever the hell you want. So, no. There will be no quilter’s holiday.”

“I hardly think that my asking you if we can recognize some random day with a little sign is playing God, but okay,” I said. “Look at it this way. Declaring it some local holiday could actually draw more business into the city. You could have some crafty shit at the farmer’s market or whatever. Sell fabric—I don’t know. It could be an opportunity.”

“Nah, I’ll pass.” Burton rose. “What’s the new girl’s deal, anyway? What’s she doing here?”

“None of your business.”

“Uh huh. Well, I’ll leave that up to her. As the mayor of this town, I should probably swing by and welcome her to Fantasie. She’s staying at your place, right?” He grinned and gave me a salute on the way out of the door. “See you later, Donovan.”

“He’s a piece of shit,” I muttered to Trevor the second Burton walked out of the room.

“Why don’t you run for mayor, sir?” Trevor asked.
“Everyone would vote for you. I’d vote for you. You know more about law than he ever will. Plus, he’s mean.”

I glanced at Trevor. “He’s mean?”

Trevor looked sheepish. He squirmed. “Well, he is. Mean *and* rude.”

“If that isn’t the daintiest insult I’ve ever heard,” I said.
“Anyway, all politicians are full of shit. Do you think I’m full of shit, Trevor?”

“No, sir.”

“Then I’d make a crappy mayor.”

“You’d make a good mayor because, excuse my language, you’re not full of shit.”

“I’m fine as is,” I said. “I don’t need any more responsibilities on my plate. People seem to think they can leave notes on my car, and I can just snap my fingers and make things happen.”

“They don’t think that for no reason at all.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying you do get things done.” Trevor shrugged. “I know it’s not my place, but people do trust you. They trust you to have the good of the town at heart.”

“Someone else can do that job,” I said. “I’ve got my hands full. Have you talked to Hannah yet today?”

“No.”

“I’ll do it,” I said. “What else do we have on the agenda?”

“You’ve got a couple of new business proposals to look over, Agatha Beaner wants you to revise her will—”

“Again?”

Trevor nodded.

I harrumphed. “This is the third time in two weeks.”

“She’s got the sniffles,” Trevor said. “She’s worried she’s going to die and is panicking.”

“She’s forty-two and healthy.”

He just shrugged. I sighed louder.

Then I sent Trevor out of the room to get started on some admin junk. I picked up the phone and dialed Hannah.

“Hey, how are you guys doing?” I asked once I’d identified myself. “Is Carl there?”

“Yeah, but he’s passed out on the couch. He only got home an hour ago.”

It pained me to hear how she spoke in hurried whispers, obviously on edge in her own home. The baby gave a squawk on the other end of the line.

“I was talking to Finn this morning,” I said. “If you could just come forward with something, I know—”

“We discussed this,” Hannah said shortly. “I just want to file for divorce and get out of here. I want us to stay focused on that. Everything else I can handle. I don’t want the police involved. You promised, Lucas.”

“I’m just worried—”

“I don’t need you to worry, I need you to be my lawyer,” she said firmly. Then, more kindly, “I appreciate what you’re doing for us, I really do. But I’ve looked out for myself for a long time, and I don’t need anyone else to do it for me.”

I heaved a big sigh. “When would you like to do it?”

“Sometime soon. My next paycheck is supposed to hit tomorrow, and when that comes through, I’ll be able to hole up somewhere he can’t find me for a bit. Just in case.”

“If you need money, I can help you out.”

“I’m not taking your money, Lucas. You’re already working my case for practically free.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is too, and you know it. Crap, he’s waking up. I’ve gotta go drop Mason off and get to work. Don’t call here again if you can help it. He’s already getting suspicious. I’ll come to you.”

Before I could argue, Hannah had hung up on me. I leaned back in my chair and pressed my hands to my eyes. Yes, it was going to be a long damn day, and it was only Sunday. The work week hadn’t even officially started yet.

Chapter 18

Lucas

I'd predicted the day would be a long one, and I hadn't been wrong.

Seeing as it was the weekend, I sent Trevor home around lunchtime and wrapped up myself a couple of hours later. I'd texted Josie throughout the day to check in on the situation at home. She'd volunteered to spend the day hanging out with Chloe at my place. I knew she'd done it both so I could spend some guilt-free time at the office *and* because the two were becoming fast friends.

I appreciated Josie's lending a helping hand, but I had to get home and relieve her. Her tulips weren't going to pick themselves, and her season was a short one. She literally couldn't afford to spend time away from her fields, not right now.

Sure enough, I found Josie with one foot in her car the second I arrived home.

"Your shift, Boss," Josie said with a wink. "Have fun with my girl. Be nice, or I'm going to hear about it."

As I made my way into the house, I found Chloe in the kitchen in the same spot I'd left her, though I was under no impression she'd been there all day. It was almost as if she'd moved there to wait for my arrival. The smell of food permeated the kitchen. A plate, still steaming, sat in waiting. I was so ravenous the sight of it just about brought me to my knees.

I hadn't eaten much all day since the latte Trevor had picked up for me. I'd wanted to capitalize on my time away and focus on my work. Not to mention, the more I'd focused on the tasks at hand, the less time I'd had to think about Chloe. It hadn't entirely worked, but it had helped a little, and Lord knew I needed all the assistance in the world to keep Chloe off my mind.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Chloe said quickly. “I didn’t cook this just for you. I merely scavenged in your kitchen from some leftovers and put it together.”

“My mother must have stocked me pretty good because the last time I opened that door it was practically empty.” I nodded to the fridge. “Are you hungry?”

“I ate with Josie. She’s been throwing food at me all day. But I’d be happy to sit with you.”

I reached into the fridge for a beer, then started to put it back.

“Go ahead,” Chloe said. “I’ll join you one of these days. I’m afraid if I have a beer today, I’m going to fall asleep in about five minutes. Between the adrenaline wearing off and my midnight visitor I’m wiped.”

“You don’t have to sit with me. Why don’t you go on up and rest.”

“No, I want to.” Chloe’s cheeks pinkened a little.

We were really doing this, then. Sitting down together. Sharing a meal—or sort of, if my eating in front of her counted as sharing a meal. But I could hardly hold back, and she didn’t seem to care, so I went ahead. It was weird, finding a hot and ready dinner prepared just for me on the table when I got home. It didn’t fit with my routine. It was even weirder that I liked it.

“How was your day?” Chloe cupped a mug of tea and dragged it closer to her.

We sat next to one another on barstools at the counter. My dinner table had been left behind from the Betty family and sat about fourteen people. It would’ve drowned the two of us. Not to mention the little fact that I liked being close to her, so the counter it was.

“It was...” I sighed. “Long.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t seem surprised I went into the office.” I glanced over at her. “It being a Sunday and all.”

“I worked in the restaurant industry. I wouldn’t know a normal hour if it looked me in the face.”

I gave a laugh. “What sort of food do you make, Fancy Chef?”

Chloe shifted in her seat. “It changed over time. We started out wanting to serve classics. Recipes we’d perfected over the years together, comfort foods, favorites. The sort of food people look forward to on a tough day.”

I nodded through a mouthful of my mother’s pasta. “I get it.”

“That’s where we started anyway. It was where I wanted to end up too, but that didn’t happen. Paul had a different idea.”

“Did the two of you start dating before or after you moved to New York together to start the restaurant?”

“Before,” I said. “You know, I never thought about it, but I’m not technically sure when we would’ve been officially called boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just mean I barely remember going from childhood friends to an adult relationship. It just sort of happened. It was expected of us.”

Whenever Chloe spoke of Paul the pit in my stomach grew a little bit bigger. It was starting to feel like a rock, a small boulder weighing me down. It pissed me off to know this woman had been with someone in her life for so long, even though I’d already known about Paul. He’d been a huge part of her past and someone stupid enough to let her go.

“What happened between you guys?” I asked. “I mean, I get that you’re broken up. But was it so bad you had to leave the entire state?”

“It’s complicated.”

I waved my fork. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She dunked her teabag, a nervous tic. “Like I said, we had different ideas about where the business was going.”

“It has to be hard to work with someone you’re dating.”

“Yes and no. When we were on the same page, it was easy. We were in sync. We’d spent so much time growing up together that it was like we knew what was happening in the other person’s head. We grew up neighbors, played together when we were young, running over to each other’s houses almost like cousins. Then we hit middle school and he realized I had boobs, and I realized he was a boy, and, you know, things progressed. That’s sort of the way I’d sum up our whole relationship.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean things progressed?”

She considered. “Well, our kiddie friendship turned into a very early dating thing, but I’m not sure he ever asked if I wanted to date him, like I said before. I guess we both just sort of assumed.”

I still stared at her, dumbfounded.

“We were like two trees that start out separate, and then grow together, our trunks intertwining. We spent so much time together, everyone just assumed we’d stay together. I guess I forgot that I actually had a say in the matter. By the time I realized that I hadn’t grown in the way I’d wanted to grow at all, it was too late. I was stuck.”

“Something must have happened to push you over the edge, to get you to finally leave.”

“There was an event. More like an accumulation of a couple of events,” she said, her voice taking on a flat tone. “I don’t really want to talk about it right now.”

“No pressure. Just making conversation.” I hesitated, then decided to go out on a limb. “You know, Chloe, I’d be happy to take a look into the legal stuff behind your separation from Paul.”

“There’s nothing to look at. We weren’t married.”

“But the restaurant, you must own some stake in it.”

“Yes.” She fiddled with her shirt. “But less than you’d think. I was letting Paul buy me out over the years when I needed... Well, I needed some extra money for medical procedures. He’d buy out my share little by little. I wasn’t left with a whole lot by the end of it.”

I sucked on my teeth, reining in what I wanted to say about the man. “Okay, but still. I’m not trying to encroach on your private business, I’m just trying to help.”

“Look, matters in New York are closed. Paul bought me out the rest of the way when I left. I put the money toward my truck. Paid off the rest of my school loans. I’m debt-free and broke, and I’m pretty happy about it, so if we can please change the subject I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course. Tell me more about the actual restaurant. What *you* wanted it to be.”

Her eyes got dreamy. “I only ever wanted to feed people tasty comfort food. I wanted the atmosphere to be a place where people could gather easily, happily, where people could come as they were. Family, kids, whatever. It was pretty much the opposite of what Paul wanted. He wanted big waiting lists, hard to get reservations, bottle service.”

“Why tacos?”

“What’s more fun than a taco?” Chloe’s eyes sparkled at the mention of her new business venture. “But I don’t make just any old taco. I’ve got a twist that’s gonna blow your mind.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Lawyer-client privilege?” I reached for a folder and slid a document her way. “I reprinted your contract with Noah. This one is completely dry and ready for a signature.”

“Oh, thank you. Does this mean he can start work? And I can finally get the truck out of your parking spot?”

I wrinkled my nose. “It’s already out of my spot. I called a tow truck today for you.”

“I’m sorry. Was it that much of a bother that you had to move it for me?”

I blinked at the misunderstanding. “I wasn’t doing it to get it out of my spot. I was trying to get it to the shop so Noah could start work. I was trying to be helpful.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. I’ll pay you back.”

“Consider it my welcome-to-town gift.”

“I thought that was the whole *rescuing me from the forest and putting me up at your place* thing?”

“That’s not a gift. That’s just a neighborhood guy doing the right thing.”

“Uh huh.”

Chloe didn’t sound convinced. She did sound tired. I put my half-finished plate of food in the fridge and took the document from under her hands and shoved it back in the folder for later.

“We can deal with all this tomorrow. There’s a game on tonight if you’re not in a rush to get upstairs. Or I could throw on a movie or whatever?”

I wasn’t sure how we’d gone from sharing a meal to my proposing a movie night, but it was happening before my eyes. I wasn’t sure my brain had actually given the marching orders to green light the idea. It seemed like my big fat mouth was just running away from me.

“I’d like that,” she said. “But you can’t penalize me if I doze off.”

“I’ll only start judging your dozing when your head’s all healed up.”

She grinned. “Deal.”

We parted ways so I could get out of my work clothes and into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Then I made my way to the living room to find Chloe already at home on my oversized sectional. The image of her lying there, long, naked legs

stretched out over my ginormous ottoman, made the zipper of my pants go tight.

I studied her from the doorway, the way the straps of that thin cotton dress slid over her skin—skin that now had a slight glow to it after working in the fields all day. The swell of her breasts, the way her dress rode up to mid-thigh, the peaceful look on her face had me thinking about all the ways I'd like to touch her. To run my hands up her calf, past her inner thigh, and jerk that dress up over her waist. The couch was big enough for both of us. It was practically a bed.

I must have made a noise in my throat because I caught her attention. Flustered, I went to the fridge for another beer and returned with drinks and a blanket. I'd brought her a sparkling water that she thanked me for with a devilish grin that didn't help the hard-on I'd been battling back for the last five minutes.

It felt awkward sitting on opposite ends of the sofa, so over the first few minutes of the game, we casually both inched our way toward the middle. I tossed a blanket over her, and she returned the favor by twitching a bit of it over my feet. We sat next to each other as I flicked the volume up. I'd been planning to watch the game all day, but now that we were here, I couldn't even remember what sport I was supposed to be watching. Hopefully turning the volume up to blaring would distract me from the thoughts that were swarming my brain about getting Chloe naked.

No luck.

Chloe smelled like sunshine and sugar, and the heat of her next to me was intoxicating. When she turned her head and her hair brushed over my arm, it sent a zip of energy down my spine. When she shifted forward to grab her drink, she accidentally rested a hand on my leg, and it was everything I could do not to flip her over right then and there.

But Chloe didn't seem to be feeling the same sort of electric shock that was radiating through every bone in my body, so I took a gulp of my beer and flicked across a few channels during a commercial break. I hunkered down,

racking my brain for a topic of conversation that didn't involve me asking her if she wanted to head into the bedroom.

Fortunately for me, Chloe took care of the topic change when she uttered a soft snore. A second later, her head tilted back onto my shoulder, her hair washing over my arm in a delicate curtain. I tried my best to hold back, to keep my spine stiff and sit carefully upright, but it was impossible.

The woman was setting my very skin on fire, and I knew this would be the stuff that fueled my fantasies when I was in the shower, alone, wishing I had the smell of her still lingering on me. I looked down at her sweet face, wishing I could bury my lips against her neck, work my way down, wake her with gentle kisses between her thighs.

But I heaved a huge sigh, knowing she wasn't mine to have. In lieu of my more devilish desires, I finally allowed myself to succumb to a smaller temptation. I let my head fall until my cheek rested against her forehead, and I settled into the couch to the tune of her gentle, rhythmic breaths.

Chapter 19

C *hloe*

I wasn't sure when living with Lucas had become routine. Maybe sometime between the first and the second week, when neither of us could pretend that I was really there because I couldn't fend for myself anymore. Or maybe between the second and the third week when eating dinner together had become the norm, rather than the other way around?

All I knew was that my life was starting to feel normal again, and I wasn't sure when it had happened or what to do about it. I couldn't stay in Lucas's house forever. Yet I was more reluctant to leave than ever.

Noah kept me updated every few days about the tasks he was knocking off when it came to my truck repairs, and to be honest, I wasn't all that concerned about getting my baby back. Sure, I needed to start earning some money at some point, and yes, the idea of opening my very own business was thrilling when I took the time to really think about it. But it still felt so far off, like a distant dream, and it hadn't hit me things were real yet.

Not to mention, once my truck came back shiny and ready for business, it was time for me to start facing reality. No more bumming around the farm with Josie whenever I wished, selling flowers at the farm stand just because I had free time. No more excuses to stay in Lucas's private suite. No reason to not be working hard and fast. My life as it was now, a life that was feeling deliciously normal, would kickstart in a whole new way, and I wasn't sure what that would mean for me in terms of moving on.

"How's it going so far?" Josie waved in my face. "Yo. Earth to Chloe. You there?"

I shook my head. "Oh, yeah. What?"

"I asked how it's going."

I glanced down at the little farm stand where Josie and I had been selling her flowers for the last couple of weeks. She refused to let me get back out in the field just yet, seeing how the last time I'd helped her out I'd ended the day with a concussion. However, I'd convinced her to let me sit behind her glorified lemonade stand to hock her beautiful flowers on the argument that she'd be doing me a favor by preventing me from dying of boredom.

“Oh, great!” I leapt to my feet and made my way around the front of the little wooden stand. The front had been outfitted with a wall of galvanized buckets that held all sorts of bundles of tulips. Sorted by color, by bouquet, by style. It was pure pleasure to look at all day long.

I gestured to the bottom row. “These are all sold. Ruby ordered three bouquets for the Fantasie Quilter’s luncheon tomorrow, but I told her I could drop them off after work tonight. Mrs. Nimpty wants me to deliver a set of flowers anonymously to Chuck at The Bean Counter. This bouquet is earmarked for Millie, but she texted me she’s going to be late picking it up because her grandmother called, and we all know that’s an hour-long ordeal.”

Josie was grinning at me, so I continued.

“I’ll bring Lily’s flowers home with me because I have no doubt she’ll pop by Lucas’s tonight—she does at least three times a week—and she can pick it up there. These bunches...” I gestured toward the second row. “These are all your business orders. Pizza My Heart wants in on these tulips, and that new boutique ordered my favorite bunch of all.”

Josie was really grinning now. It was sort of annoying, as if she was in on a secret that she didn’t want to share.

“What’s up with your face?” I asked like only best friends can. “You’ve got that weird smile thing happening again.”

“You’re a freaking local now, girlie.”

“Huh?”

“Listen to you. You know everyone and their mother. Literally.”

“I mean, I was just sitting behind a stand all week,” I said. “You pick up more than you’d think.”

“Oh, don’t I know it. You have become the Queen Bee of gossip central. Come on, you talked more with the townsfolk this week than I did.”

“I guess so. Even though I didn’t know anyone used the word *townsfolk* anymore, Shakespeare.”

“You’re one of us now, sorry.”

“I guess I have you to thank.”

“Speaking of...” Josie plopped the tulips from her wicker basket into the top row of the stand. “This is it for today. We just got an order in from the Rusty Rose to buy whatever we have left. Tulip season is officially over.”

“You’re kidding me.”

She shook her head. “Are you up for a celebratory drink?”

“Actually, I have to get back. I told Lucas I’d have dinner ready tonight. I’m trying out a new lasagna recipe on him, and for dessert, I’m forcing him to try my Ube ice cream. So...” I paused. “Wow. I didn’t realize how that sounded out loud.”

“I’m just gonna say this, and I mean it kindly.” Josie paused for dramatic effect. “If Lucas can get the milk without buying the cow...”

I rolled my eyes. “Lucas hasn’t gotten any milk, if we’re talking in metaphors.”

Her lips parted. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“He hasn’t...” She made a crude gesture that involved a pointer finger on one hand and an okay gesture on the other.

I shook my head.

“Not even...” Another gesture I’d never seen before but could guess its meaning.

“Nothing, not even a kiss.” I averted my eyes from hers. “It’s not—we’re not—like that. Lucas is just a kind neighbor

helping the new girl out.”

“Uh huh.” She obviously wasn’t convinced. “What’s really going on?”

What was really going on was that I wasn’t sure if Lucas even saw me in a romantic light. There’d been one day a few weeks back, the night after I’d come home from the hospital, when we’d snuggled up on the couch together to watch some game on TV. I’d thought something might happen. Then I’d fallen asleep.

Since then, we’d played this game of spending time together without actually touching. As if we were cursed, and if we ever actually touched, we’d be unable to keep our hands off of one another. It’d been nearly a month of shared looks, skirted arm-brushes, little side steps that kept us just close enough together while remaining just safely enough apart.

“I don’t think he sees me like that,” I said finally. “Which is fine, I’m not disappointed or anything. Just stating facts. It’s better this way, anyway. We wouldn’t be good for each other.”

“Thou doth protest too much and whatever. I don’t buy it.”

“He does act like I’m a porcelain doll.” I rapped my knuckles gently against my skull. “I’m all good up here. The doc checked me out and said I’m fine, but it’s like Lucas wants to handle me with kid gloves.”

“Tell him to take the damn gloves off so the two of you can get whatever’s between you out of your system.”

“There’s nothing between us.”

“Then why’d you reject my offer of a celebratory drink tonight to go home and make Lucas Donovan dinner?”

I ran my tongue over my teeth. “I see your point. Let me figure things out tonight, and I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow. And on that note, get ready for peony season. Because if Doc DiMaggio gave you the green light, then I need your help. Assuming you don’t have anything better to do.”

“Ouch.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Thanks for your help.” Josie fished around in her gardening apron and pulled out a check. She handed it over. “I appreciate it.”

I waved my hands without looking at the amount on it. “I’m not accepting that.”

“You have to. You helped me harvest tulips, and then you sat behind this counter for a couple weeks straight. It’s yours. I didn’t track your hours, so I guesstimated and tried to make it fair. If you’ve got a problem with it, take it up with HR.”

“Who’s HR?”

“Me.”

“I’ve got a problem.” I handed the check back. “I’m not taking it.”

She hesitated, then shrugged. “Fine. Whatever you say, but you’re letting me pay you for peony season, or else you’re not helping me out.”

“Fine. We can agree on a minimal fee. I’m not doing it to make money.”

She barked a laugh. “I know. It’s not like you’re raking in millions over here.” Hesitating, her gaze met mine. “Of all the crazy towns in the world, Chloe Brown, I’m glad you wandered into mine.”

“Me too.”

“Now get out of here.” She swatted gently at me to get up from my perch. “Go home, see your man. I’ll see you bright and early on Friday so we can get started snipping those peonies. Lilacs will be ready soon too, my personal favorite. The Rusty Rose already pre-ordered a huge bouquet.”

I gave her a salute, then I started the stroll toward home. Or rather, Lucas Donovan’s home. At some point over the last almost-month, I’d started referring to it as my home. I shifted uncomfortably after Josie’s inquisition. I wasn’t sure exactly what it all meant, but I knew I needed to get to the bottom of it. Josie had a point.

Tonight, I'd make my break with Lucas. We both needed time and space from one another in order to think clearly. The longer I stayed in his home, the blurrier the line became. The longer I stayed, the less I trusted myself to keep thinking logically, and I needed to keep my heart and Lucas's from getting entangled before it was too late.

Chapter 20

L^{*ucas*} “Is Hannah here?”

I stood outside of Hannah and Carl Lansing’s home on the outskirts of town. She lived in a little house that couldn’t have been more than twelve hundred square feet. The place was in clear need of repair, but a newly planted burst of daisies in a terracotta pot and a well-swept front walk showed signs of hope. Signs that Hannah was trying to keep this place a home for her and her kid.

“Who’re you?” Carl squinted at me.

“I’m Lucas,” I said. “Lucas Donovan. We’ve met... Several times.”

Hannah’s husband scratched at his chest hair. He hadn’t bothered to put on a shirt to open the door, and his flannel pants sagged dangerously low at his waistline. The piece of shit smelled like rail drinks.

“Whad’ya want with Hannah?”

At seven p.m., his words were already slurred. I wasn’t sure if he was coming or going from the bar. Or, more likely, the comings and goings just rolled into one continuous cycle. I tried to peek around him.

“Whad’ya want with my wife?” He sounded a little snarly, giving no sign he recognized me whatsoever, even though we’d run into each other several times in town. “Are you the one she’s been cheatin’ on me with?”

“What? No. I’m an inspector.” I tapped the clipboard at my side. It technically held the divorce papers that I was hoping to get Hannah to sign, but I was pretty sure Carl’s eyes were so fucking crossed he wouldn’t be able to read the pages if they were right in front of him. “She called my company to see if your roof was covered by hail insurance after that storm we had last month.”

“Bullshit. I already tried to get a new roof outta that, and they denied me. Assholes.” Carl ran a hand through hair that needed a cut, taking a closer look at me. “You’re lying to me.”

“Just listen, Carl—”

“No, you listen to me,” he snapped. “I know you’re here checking in on my wife. Get your grubby hands off her, asshole.”

Without warning, Carl wound up and took a swing at me. I had to give him credit where it was due—the man would’ve laid a good one on me if I hadn’t ducked out of the way fast enough. It would’ve been a good enough uppercut to have me seeing stars. Fortunately, I had over thirty years of experience getting swung at by two brothers and eight cousins, and most of the time, they hadn’t been drunk idiots.

I easily evaded his second swing too, but it was getting annoying. This time, I caught his arm as he sailed past me off the front steps. I yanked him to his feet and slammed him up against the front wall, not all that sad when his head cracked off the siding. He sniffed, spit at me.

“This is assault,” he said. “I’m willing to bet you’re not even an insurance adjuster.”

“We’re still talking about that?” I murmured, thinking he must’ve been even drunker than I’d first thought. “I’ll tell you what, pal. Tell me where Hannah is, and I’ll leave without calling the cops.”

“Calling the cops on me? You broke into my—”

“Lucas!” Hannah appeared in the doorway. “What are you doing here?”

I stepped back in surprise, letting Carl slump against the edge of the house.

“Hannah. You’re okay.” I scanned her up and down. I was pretty sure there was a bruise fading on her forehead, and I instantly understood why she hadn’t shown for our last appointment.

As if she knew exactly what was going through my mind, she expertly fiddled with her hair so that it covered the bruise. It obviously wasn't the first time she'd done that.

My heart broke when a moment later, a baby appeared, crawling to her side, pulling up at her leg. She swooped down, picked up the little one, and propped him on her hip. Her eyes shot daggers at me.

"Ha." Carl looked between us. "I knew you wasn't an insurance adjuster. She knows you. The two of you are screwin' behind my back. Next time I see you on my property, you're not walking off it alive."

"Of course he's an insurance adjuster, Carl." Hannah nailed her husband with a look. "If you hadn't been at the bar all day, you'd have been here when he came to inspect the roof earlier. We're getting a full replacement. Or at least we were until you went and took a swing at him."

Carl looked between us. I held up the clipboard as if it was evidence. Hannah's eyes narrowed. Carl's widened.

"But our roof's expensive," he said. "You're covering everything?"

"Everything," I said. "Well, we were going to, but I'm not sure my company will want to work with the two of you after this interaction."

"Who'd you say you work for?" Carl glanced at me, rubbed bleary eyes.

"Donovan & Associates," I said. "You can call and talk to my boss whenever you want, check me out. Like she said, I was here earlier, up on your roof. Just bringing the paperwork back."

"Let me see those papers," Carl said. "I want to make sure you're not trying to hoodwink us. You insurance companies are one big scam."

I pulled the clipboard to my chest. "Sorry, I'm going to file a complaint with my company. It'll be up to my boss if he wants to send someone else out. I won't be coming back."

“Look what you did.” Hannah shook her head at her husband. “You cost us twenty grand for a new roof. Find somewhere else to sleep tonight, Carl.”

Then Hannah slammed the door in both of our faces.

“Wait a minute, now,” Carl said.

I was already walking away from the house. I raised my clipboard in a salute without looking back as I climbed into my car and drove back to the office.

I popped inside the front doors and shouted for Trevor. He appeared, nervously straightening his shirt, and stood before me like a soldier at attention.

“Relax,” I told him. Then, “If anyone calls the company line for the next few days and you don’t recognize them, Donovan & Associates is a roofing insurance company, all right?”

“What? That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Just go with it.”

“Uh, yessir.”

Trevor waited. I waited. We stared at each other.

“I took the liberty of ordering us dinner,” Trevor said finally, when he realized I wasn’t going to expand on my instructions further. “I figured you’d want to get ahead on the Marquis bid. Then there’s the Kensingtons who wanted you to check out their housing contract. They’re hoping to get a bid in tonight, but the contingencies—”

“You can handle the housing contract, yeah?”

“By myself?”

“I’ll tell you what. You do the best you can and send it to me when you’re done. I’ll check it over and sign off on it.”

“But—”

“I’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Oh-kay.” Trevor drew it out. “Would you at least like to take your dinner with you?”

“Take it home. Surprise your mom.”

“Thanks, sir.”

“Trevor.”

He blinked at me. “Thanks, Lucas.”

“I’ll check my inbox later for the Kensington thing. The rest can wait until morning.”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever uttered those words before when it came to my business, and Trevor’s shock and awe was not lost on me. Truth was, I’d never had somewhere I’d considered more important to be than the office. Past girlfriends, family dinners, social obligations—nada. Until now.

I swung by the Chinese place on the outskirts of town on my way home. I’d already put in an order for dinner to take home. Chloe had mentioned something about making dinner, but I’d instructed her not to. I didn’t want her to feel like she had to cook for me because she was staying at my house. She rarely listened.

Before I’d left for the office this morning, I’d even locked the doors to my home in an effort to try and keep Chloe out of the kitchen and in her own suite. Over the last few weeks, she’d taken to preparing dinner for both of us when she was done helping out Josie at her stand. I’d warned her I didn’t want to put her out, but it didn’t seem to matter.

All the woman did was take care of other people. I’d locked the doors once before on her, but she’d just climbed through the open window and prepared shrimp and salad. She was something else.

Ironically, even though I’d told Trevor I had somewhere to be, that wasn’t entirely true. Our private dinner parties weren’t exactly set in stone. The whole process had just become our new normal since she’d moved in. It was a routine I liked. A routine I wasn’t going to screw up because of some damn housing contract. The Kensingtons bid on a house every other week. They were never going to buy anything. It could wait.

I parked outside of the house and made my way to the front door. It was locked, just as I’d left it. I twisted my key

and let myself in, calling out a hello just in case Chloe had slipped in through the doggie door or something equally ridiculous to make noodles for us.

Silence echoed back to me, and I instantly regretted having locked the front door in an effort to keep Chloe out. I wasn't used to having an empty house anymore. I didn't like it.

I tossed the food on the table and started for the front door so I could head upstairs to collect Chloe from her suite, as we now jokingly called it. But something caught my eye. A slip of paper on the kitchen table.

I made my way over to it, my heart sinking before I was close enough to make out the words. I had to read the note a few times before it sank in.

Dear Lucas,

Thanks so much for letting me use "the suite." It means more to me than you could ever know. I can't exactly pay you the going rental rates, but please accept this token of my gratitude. Plus a lifetime of complimentary tacos, you know, when I'm up and running.

Taco Bout Love,

Chloe

Underneath was an envelope. I pulled it out and found a pile of cash tucked inside. I blinked and shook my head, annoyed beyond belief.

"Fuck."

I took a step back, rubbed my forehead, forced the logical part of my brain to think for a minute despite the flurry of panic in my chest. I never should've locked the damn door. I'd tried to do it to be nice, to tell her she didn't have to cook, but we all knew the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

Then again, she'd obviously made it into the kitchen to leave me the note. I glanced toward the kitchen window. The shade was flapping in the breeze. She'd climbed through the damned thing again.

Fortunately, the lawyer half of my brain kicked into gear and made an easy deduction. The woman didn't have a car or a lot of money or much advance notice. There were only a couple of places she could be, and I had a feeling I knew the winning option.

Five minutes later, armed with an envelope of cash I didn't need and a bag of food my stomach desperately wanted, I arrived outside of the Fantasie Inn. I ran headfirst into my mother on the front steps. She was bustling on her way out the door.

"Chloe's making phone calls in the lobby looking for a place to stay tonight." My mother's eyebrows were a little too innocently raised as she stared me down. "Unfortunately, my inn is full. I don't have a room available at this time, so I told Chloe she's going to have to find an alternate place to stay for a couple of days until I have a room open up."

I glanced at the parking lot which was empty. I glanced back at my mother who suddenly wanted nothing to do with eye contact. Damned if her inn wasn't completely empty.

"I've got a dental cleaning," my mother called over her shoulder as she rushed off down the front stairs, despite the fact that it was 7 p.m.

"You're full of it," I hollered after her.

"You're welcome," she hollered right back.

I stalked inside the inn. Chloe looked up, her phone perched in her hands, her eyes going wide as headlights the second she saw me. "Lucas."

I marched right up to her and waited until she stood. "Are we doing this here or at my place?"

"Doing what?"

I handed over the envelope of cash.

"That's for you," she said. "I didn't—"

"My place, then." I grabbed her suitcase right out from beneath her and threw it over my shoulder. I stomped outside and tossed it in the trunk along with the Chinese food.

I marched right back inside and found her standing in the same place I'd left her. She was clinging to the envelope of cash like it contained the first tooth she'd lost, and she was ready to stuff it under her pillow for the tooth fairy to collect and make all her dreams come true.

"Don't make me throw you over my shoulder like your suitcase," I said. "Because that dress you've got on is pretty damn short, and I might not be able to keep my hands to myself if we go there."

Chloe leapt forward like she'd been bitten on the ass. She scurried ahead of me out the front door, shooting me a complex and very confusing look that both worried me and turned me on. En route, she slapped the envelope of cash against my chest until I had no choice but to grab it from her, leaving me with the envelope like we were in the middle of another round of hot potato.

I peeled the stupid wad of cash from my chest and shoved it in my pocket. I had bigger things to deal with now.

She was in the passenger seat by the time I reached the car. I climbed in and began cruising toward my home. However, I decided on a detour mid-route.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked when it became clear I'd changed direction.

"I don't know," I said. "I need to clear my head a little bit."

"Why?"

I glanced at her. She glanced back at me. Damn if she didn't look incredible. Over the last three weeks, she'd been doing a lot of healing, and I suspected some of it had nothing to do with her head wound.

Her gauze had come off, and she'd opted to leave her hair down with a thin headband to keep it out of her face. I'd started to really love the uniform she'd taken on in the way of a dirty pair of overalls and a thin tank top underneath when she helped out Josie. Her skin had adopted a healthy glow from spending so much time outside, and her smile had grown quicker, brighter. If only it'd had something to do with me.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I parked on the edge of town, at an overlook that peeked out over Rum River, the picturesque river that snaked around town. “Why’d you leave like that?”

“I didn’t leave like anything. It’s not like I tried to steal from you or something. I left you money.”

“That’s part of the problem. You don’t owe me anything.”

“I do, though. I mean, you let me stay with you, and—”

“Because I liked it. I like you, Fancy Chef, and it’s got nothing to do with you cooking for me or paying rent or anything else. I like you being around. That’s all.”

Her lips parted and looked so damn delectable. I felt my pants getting tight as I glanced in her direction, wanting to pull her onto my lap. She’d traded her worn overalls for a gauzy white dress tonight, and she looked like a vision. The thought of the lace panties she probably wore underneath had me wishing she’d put up a little more of a fight at the inn so I could’ve tossed her over my shoulder like I’d threatened and made good on my word about getting handsy with her unmentionables.

“That’s all?” Chloe’s eyes flashed with a challenge. “You just like me *hanging* around? Is that all this is?”

“What’s happening between us?” I asked. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I wouldn’t think it would be all that hard to figure out, Lucas.” Chloe bit down on her lip as she glanced out the window. “We’ve been playing house for three weeks now, dancing around the fact that neither of us has talked about me moving out. It’s confusing, and I’m not interested in just *hanging around* anymore because I’ve done that already for a man who never deserved it. He never wanted me. Quite frankly, I’m not sure what it is that you want from me, either.”

“I didn’t make a move these last few weeks because I wasn’t sure you wanted me to,” I argued. “The whole reason you were staying with me was because you were injured and needed someone you could trust to help you. What sort of

bastard would I be if I tried to take advantage of you when you were vulnerable?”

“I’m fine!” Chloe threw her hands up in exasperation. “I have been fine for weeks. I’ve told you that, but it’s like you don’t believe me. I thought that maybe if I moved out it would help both of us see the situation more clearly. Like the fact that I. Am. Fine.”

I quietly contemplated Chloe’s words. Then before I could stop myself, I reached across the console and gently gripped her chin in my hand. I guided her toward me, giving her the opportunity to protest. Instead, her eyelashes fluttered shut, and she tilted toward me, a sunflower finding her sunshine.

“I want you so damn bad, Chloe,” I murmured. “The only reason I haven’t taken you already is because when I do have you, I want you to choose it.”

“My God, Lucas. I’ve been ready for weeks. I’ve been desperate to know if you were feeling the same way about me I was feeling about you.”

My lips pressed against hers with the confirmation that she felt just as needy toward me as I felt toward her. Chloe tasted like cotton candy and sea breeze, more delightful than anything I could’ve envisioned. I parted her lips with my tongue and delved deeper, sinking into her. When she breathed against me, I was harder than I’d ever been in my life.

I reached another hand up, wrapped it into her hair, then stilled.

“Shit,” I said. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have touched so close to where—”

“It doesn’t hurt,” she said, her eyes flashing. “I’m completely healed, and if you say one more word about me being vulnerable, I’ll elbow you where it hurts.”

A laugh escaped at the sheer unexpectedness of her teasing threat. It had taken me a while, but I was finally getting the picture loud and clear. She was *fine*. Things were better than fine because now we both understood the situation.

I wanted Chloe. She wanted me. End of story.

“Come here, baby,” I murmured. “I can’t wait a second longer to have you.”

I reached for her, tugged her across the center console onto my lap. She helped me along, scrambling over the shifter to perch right on my cock. I groaned as my hands came to rest on her hips.

I flicked her dress over my hands and let my fingers glide up her thighs. She shuddered when my fingers reached her lace panties. I let my touch wrap around so I cradled her perfect ass in my hands and wished my suit would just vanish so there was no more barrier between us.

“I’ve wanted you for so damn long,” I confessed.

“We’ve only known each other for a few weeks.”

“It’s been a long few weeks.” I pressed her firmly against me, letting her feel my swollen shaft.

She threw her head back, grinding her hips against me. I gritted my teeth together. If she kept up like this, I wouldn’t even last until I got my damn pants off.

“I should probably take you home,” I groaned. “You deserve a bed. This isn’t how I imagined our first time.”

“Shut up,” she said again, and crushed her lips to mine. “You finally made your move, and you can’t take it back, Lucas.”

Another laugh from me, but this time it was layered with an overwhelming cascade of sexiness. I clasped Chloe to me, feeling her heart pound against my chest. Her skin was soft, supple, every touch from her skin sending zips of electricity straight to my dick.

“You sure you don’t want me to drive you home?” I rasped against her neck. “Do this the right way?”

“Lucas, do you want me or not?” Chloe paused, her eyes staring into mine, desperate and needy.

“No,” I exhaled. “No, I don’t want you. I fucking need you, Chloe.”

“Then don’t stop. Understand?”

“I don’t have anything,” I said, fumbling. “I didn’t take you here to have sex with you.”

“I’m clean and on the pill,” she promised. “It’s fine. We don’t need a condom if you’re okay with it.”

“I’m clean too. I swear.”

“I trust you,” she breathed. “Now for Pete’s sake, get busy.”

I gave another guttural laugh that bubbled up from somewhere deep within me, and I took that as full permission to have my way with Chloe Brown. I stretched her panties, testing them, ready to rip the fucking things right off. I pulled, yanked, but they were made of titanium or diamonds or some other seriously strong shit.

“I don’t buy cheap panties,” she huffed, roughly unbuttoning my shirt and pushing it out of her way. “Move them to the side already.”

I took my time following her orders, running my fingers over the soft fabric that covered her core, feeling the wetness soaking through them already. Damn if she didn’t want me as much as I wanted her.

I pushed her fucking expensive panties to one side, slipping one finger into her wetness. I stroked a finger along her folds, relishing as she let loose a full body shiver against me. Pressing one finger back inside, then another, I paused as she settled on me, gasping as I waited, holding her captive.

Then I moved, fucking her with my fingers, painstakingly slow, until her fingernails dug into my back, and she began bucking her hips over me, demanding more.

“No,” she said, leaning back, a sob escaping her. “Not the first time. I want to come together. You touching me feels too good.”

I cursed, then yanked at my pants, tugging them open. She helped me shove my boxers out of the way, and then she

returned to my lap, balancing over the head of my cock. It was glistening already, twitching for her.

I was about to ask her if she was sure, if she truly wanted this and everything it entailed, but I saw the answer for myself in her eyes. Her look was pleading, hungry, needy.

In that moment, I felt a true revulsion for her ex. I could see it in her eyes that above all, she needed to be wanted. To be desperately, madly, viciously wanted above all else. She didn't need to be flattered with rose petals and a beautifully made-up bed. She needed to be *desired*. And hell if I didn't desire her more than my next breath.

I stilled the question on my lips and prayed to the high heavens that I could give her what she needed. To make her feel that she was everything right in this world, and that I was the one lucky enough to be with her, at least for the here and now.

I gripped her hips and pulled her onto my cock like our worlds depended on it. A sob slipped through her gorgeous lips as she involuntarily snapped forward, nipping at my shoulder, her fingers wrecking my back as she gripped me.

I felt her shudder around me as I held her, as I felt her warmth around me, as I began to move deep within her. Maybe it was lucky we'd driven to the middle of nowhere and I hadn't thought to bring a condom because all I knew was that I needed to feel her, raw and vulnerable. I needed for there to be nothing separating us, and I could tell she needed it too. I needed to make her come, to wreck her mind so she would forget everything she was running from. I needed her to feel every inch of me as I poured myself inside of her.

Chloe's hips moved, and she rode me then, her eyes closed, her teeth biting down on my shoulder. Her fingers dug into my back, and it took everything in me to hold back. When I felt her inner walls begin to quiver, tighten, I took control once more and grasped her hips, slamming her down against me. I pounded up and into her, letting go of any self-restraint as my mind went blank.

All I could do was watch her, watch the second her eyes widened, the second she bucked forward, cradling her head against my shoulder while letting out a gut-wrenching cry. Then, as if I wasn't already in another realm, she murmured my name, and it put me over the edge. Only then did I let myself go as we crashed into one another, releasing into a million puzzle pieces destined to be fitted back together.

Chapter 21

C *hloe*

I stood in the shower at home, letting the water run over my shoulders as I considered the events of the evening.

I thought I'd had sex before, but I wasn't so sure anymore. Sex with Paul had never done the sort of things to me that sex with Lucas Donovan had done. My mind felt like it was still sizzling, a firecracker fizzling long after it'd been set off.

Maybe whatever I'd been doing with Paul hadn't been sex at all. Maybe it'd been some sort of relationship obligation. What I'd done with Lucas hadn't been an obligation in any sense of the word. It had been mesmerizing, earth shattering and, most importantly, passionate.

I stepped out of the shower and got dressed in a set of silky black pajamas. They were sexy enough without being an obvious cry for more of whatever I'd just gotten from Lucas. But on the off chance he was up for another round before we called it quits, I decided to skip the undies this time around to make things easier.

Glancing in the mirror, I tugged a brush through my hair and grinned at the memory of Lucas trying to subtly rip my underwear off in the car and failing. It had been cute. Sexy, but cute, and that was one of the things I loved about being with Lucas. With him, life wasn't *one* thing. It wasn't *just* sexy or *just* practical or *just* funny or *just* serious. It was everything. He could make me laugh while turning me on. He could care for me while making me feel wanted. He could be serious while letting me know that I meant something to him.

And damned if I wasn't starting to fall in love with the idea of him. Here I was, playing house with him, keeping a secret that would ruin any hope of a future between us. My stomach flipped over. I wasn't sure I'd ever gone from such a high to such a low in so little time.

I hurried downstairs looking for a snack and Lucas, probably in that order. Apparently sex with a little zip in it actually made a girl ravenous. I found the front door unlocked and a damp-haired Lucas standing behind his kitchen counter with a plate of food in front of him.

He gave me a sheepish grin. “Look, I’m no Fancy Chef, but I did what I could. I believe this is called a charcuterie board? I don’t know, I Googled while you were in the shower and used what I had.”

I glanced down at a paper plate that had some saltine crackers, beef sticks, and sliced American cheese on it, still in the cheap plastic wrapper. I couldn’t keep my lips from twitching into a smile.

I threw him a softball. “I thought I smelled Chinese food somewhere? I was planning to make lasagna, but then...”

“Then you ran away.”

“Right.”

“Sorry about the takeout. I wish I had something nicer for you.” Lucas went to the fridge and yanked the door open. “I really would’ve liked to take you to dinner first or something.”

“Contrary to my nickname,” I said, “I’m not actually all that fancy. I fully appreciate the effort that went into your charcuterie board, but I’m hungrier than a couple of beef sticks. No offense.”

“None taken. I’m relieved.”

Lucas pulled down a couple of plates and the takeout bag from the fridge, then jerked his head toward the back door. He had a patio with a dining table set that was too large for two people. It reminded me of the difficult conversation I owed him.

I grabbed a selection of drinks from the fridge and followed him outside. “Let me show you something,” I said, setting the drinks on the table. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Lucas pulled two chairs out from the table and watched while I made my way over to an outlet and plugged in a

dangling cord. Instantly, the fairy lights I'd draped across the pergola lit the space into a twinkling cocoon. Lucas's eyes brightened as he turned his gaze back on me.

"You did this?"

"Sorry?" I said, trying to interpret his gaze. "I know it's not my house, but I've been coming out here a couple of nights before you get home from work, and I just thought—"

"It's perfect."

"Oh, good." Relief washed over me. "I didn't want you to think I was encroaching on your territory."

He gestured for me to sit first. When I did, he sat next to me. His chair scraped against the ground as he scooted over to me. Lucas handed over a pair of chopsticks and we both fiddled with our food for a moment.

"I like you encroaching on my territory." The new lights shimmered off Lucas's complex eyes as he studied me. "I was surprised when you weren't here today when I got home from work. I thought maybe because I locked the door I scared you off."

I took a bite of noodles. "You say that as if a locked door has kept me out before."

He barked a laugh. "Touché, Fancy Chef."

We ate in amicable silence for a few minutes. Apparently I wasn't the only one who'd gotten hungry from our little tryst in the car.

"I wanted you to be here." Lucas's voice rumbled. "I like you being here, Chloe. What do you feel about, I don't know, moving into the main house in light of the recent circumstances?"

The honesty with which he spoke, the vulnerability with which he held my gaze made me weak. I knew it took guts for him to ask. It was a risk, a big risk for both of us. I set my chopsticks down.

"I can't, Lucas."

“But—”

“I really like being around you, too,” I said. “That’s the problem. This isn’t my home. I don’t plan on sticking around here long-term.”

“You might change your mind.”

“I might not.”

“Isn’t it for me to decide if I’m willing to take that risk?”

“Yes and no. There’re two of us in this relationship. Whatever sort of relationship it is. I like you a lot. I respect you. I can’t bear the thought of hurting you.”

Lucas had long since discarded his chopsticks too. He leaned over, pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Stop worrying about me. Worry about what you want for once.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re taking care of everyone else. What do you want, Chloe?”

Reaching for a bottle opener, I cracked open a beer I’d pulled from the fridge. I did the same for Lucas. As we each took a sip, I considered his question.

“I want to take care of myself,” I said finally. “I’m sorry. But that doesn’t involve anyone else. Not right now.”

Lucas nodded. Swallowed a gulp of beer. “What was tonight about then?”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Stop apologizing. I initiated. I wanted you more than I wanted to live, Chloe. You’re giving me mixed signals, and I’m trying to figure out where we stand.”

I stood. “I’m sorry, Lucas. I really like you. I shouldn’t have done that. We should never have gone so far. I’m going to go stay with Josie for a few days. I need to clear my head.”

I left the table then, no longer hungry, and fled through the house. I took the staircase to my suite two at a time and

barreled through the door, feeling the tears start down my cheeks as I threw myself onto the bed.

I'd spent so long catering to someone else's wants and wishes that I was having a hard time figuring out what my own desires were now. I wanted to be independent, yes. I also wanted Lucas. I knew I couldn't give Lucas the future that he wanted, though, so that wasn't an option. It was a swirly mess in my head.

A knock sounded on the door. I let him know it was open.

Lucas entered the room. He leaned against the doorframe, a big, hulking figure that made me feel small as I hunkered down on my bed. Or rather, his bed, though I'd taken to thinking it was mine.

"Can I come in?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah."

He entered the room and sat next to me on the bed. He reached for my hand and dragged me into a seated position. He tucked me under his arm, and I felt like a little bird being protected against a storm. As long as I was tucked under his wing, I would be safe.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked, softer still. "Or should I give you some space?"

The way he asked the question, as if he really cared about me and what I thought, broke the floodgates holding my emotions back. Tears cascaded silently down my face. He didn't try to wipe them, didn't shy away from my emotional outburst, didn't say anything at all. He just held me and let me lean against him.

Finally, I sniffed, pulled back so I could meet his gaze. "I see you, Lucas. I see the way you carry the burdens of your entire family on your shoulders. I see this house, a massive space that's meant for a family, a big family as messy and lovable as the one you grew up in. I talked to your friends, and I think I understand who you are and what you want for the future."

"What are you talking about?"

“A family, Lucas. A family.”

He gave a one-shouldered shrug, mystified. “Okay, so?”

“So you admit it. You’d like a family?”

“Someday, but not today. Not tomorrow. I mean, that’s something we could figure out down the line. There are a lot of steps between tonight and a family.”

“Sometimes there are, and sometimes there aren’t,” I said. “I probably can’t have kids, Lucas. That’s one of the reasons I’m so financially wrecked. Paul and I tried several rounds of IVF. But because he said it was more of my dream than his, he said the money should come from me. So I used most of my savings to pay for fertility treatments. I even let him buy out some of my shares of the restaurant to make ends meet.”

“You do know he is the biggest dick in the world?”

I winced. “In retrospect. But he always had an explanation for everything. Like that he was focusing on the restaurant with his cash, and that would support our family in the future. Yes, I realize I was dumb for believing him.”

“You are not dumb. Not even close.” Lucas blew out a raging slow breath. “But I cannot comment on how much of a bastard he is right now because it would get me all worked up, and I want my focus to be on you, not on him.”

“Lucas—”

“Okay, maybe you can’t have kids. So what?”

“You don’t understand.” I distanced myself from him, pulled my hands into my own lap, needing to keep space between us so I didn’t cling to him for strength. “Paul and I tried for years. Eight years, on and off. The last couple of years we did IVF, like I said, at my insistence.”

“And expense.”

“I would’ve spent every penny I earned to have a baby. And the process *did* work. I got pregnant about eight months ago.” I paused. “I miscarried the baby early, about six weeks. I was so hopeful that after all that time, that at least I *could* get

pregnant. I was over the moon. And then to go from such a high to such a low...”

He reached for my hand, clasped it in his. “I’m so sorry, Chloe. I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say. There’s not an easy explanation for why it was so difficult for me to get pregnant. The medical team was optimistic that we could keep trying, that it was a good sign my body let me get pregnant this last time, but Paul had had enough. That’s when I went on birth control because I just didn’t see a point in feeling like I had hope anymore.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“You’re not understanding the point. This conversation isn’t to pity me. I’ve come to terms with my future, but you... You want a family. I can’t have one. I just don’t think it’s a good idea to get our lives any more intertwined than they already are knowing our futures don’t line up.”

“Chloe—”

“I already went through this once. Paul and I wanted a family too.”

“It doesn’t sound like Paul wanted a family. He wanted the restaurant to be his baby, and he wanted you to stick around and support him. So he strung you along, giving you little crumbs of hope, halfheartedly going along with your plan to have kids so you wouldn’t leave him.”

“I guess, maybe. He said he wanted kids, but I suppose I see your point.” I swallowed hard. “He wasn’t all that upset when I had a miscarriage. I just wanted a baby so badly that I guess I couldn’t see that he never really shared that dream with me.”

“I know I said I wouldn’t comment on him again, but... Fuck.” He shook his head, his fingers clenching and unclenching. “That’s not a relationship, Chloe. He doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as you.”

“He was all I had. It’s what I was used to after my mom died. I think I sort of clung to him because he knew her. We

had shared memories of a time I treasured. The time with my mom.”

“You deserve so much more.”

“I hope so.” I dropped my gaze. “I’m trying to figure out what I want. And what I deserve. I just know that I don’t want to hurt you, so I think it’s best if we keep our distance.”

“I disagree.”

“You are still not understanding—”

“No, *you’re* not understanding,” he fired back. “Listen to me, Chloe.”

I looked up at him, feeling exhausted from the confession. I’d never intended to get to the place where we’d have this conversation. I hadn’t intended to like Lucas so much. Yet here we were.

“Families come in all shapes and sizes. A family could be the two of us. It could be the two of us and a dog. If we really wanted kids, we could always try on our own, or pursue something else—adoption or whatever. This isn’t something that has to be decided today.”

“Yeah, but still.”

“There are no buts. The man who let you go is a damn fool. Marriage or not, he is a bastard who didn’t deserve five minutes of your attention let alone five years. The sooner you can put him behind you, the better.”

“I am putting him behind me, but I’m learning from my mistakes. I’m sorry, Lucas, but I had so little influence in my own relationship for the last decade, I just can’t let that happen again. I need to be in charge of my own life and my own choices for a while, and that’s really hard for me to do when I’m in a relationship. Especially a new relationship I’m very excited about.”

I turned away from him, let my attention drift to the bedspread. I tugged at a loose string, feeling completely empty, absolutely drained. I knew I was having the right conversation, but it felt so very wrong.

When I felt Lucas's touch, it was on my thigh. He'd put his hands, large and warm, on my legs but it wasn't sexual, it was tender. He moved to kneel in front of me, demanding I look him in the eyes.

"Chloe, I'm falling in love with you." Lucas's thumbs massaged over my skin, warming me, sending tingles to my lady parts despite the intensity of the moment. "I realize the future is uncertain for you in terms of where you want to be and what you want to do. If you don't want to be with me for some reason, say it now, and I'll respect you."

"It's not that I don't want to be with you."

"Good," he interrupted. "I understand you might not be able to have children. I can't possibly understand the world of pain you've been in trying to make your family, and especially in losing your baby. But I can try to be there for you."

My eyelashes were wet with tears.

"Still, that's never going to be a reason that I can't be with you." Lucas's voice was gruff. "Sure, we don't know if you're going to stay in town. We don't know if your business will boom or bust. We don't know a lot of things. So fucking what?"

I gave a little smile, but it didn't feel completely genuine. "Your mom has made comments about you wanting a family. Josie, too. It seems like everyone knows."

"Every damn person in this town likes to tell me what I'm supposed to be doing, who I'm supposed to be helping, and which responsibilities fall on my shoulders. I don't usually mind. But now, I'm starting to. If it hurts you, I mind."

"I don't want to deprive you of your dreams."

"You're not. You never will."

"What if you change your mind?"

"I'm not going to change my mind," Lucas said. "I don't expect you to trust me on that just yet. I don't know how you could after what you've been through. But I plan on showing you if you'll let me try."

“What if I want this?” My voice belied my brain. “What if I want to try?”

“Then let yourself.”

I pressed my hands to his face, pulled him toward me so that we were inches apart. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

I excused myself for a moment and headed to the bathroom. I took a deep breath as I ran a toothbrush through my mouth and stared at myself in the mirror. Every logical thought in my brain was telling me that I shouldn’t be inviting Lucas into my room, my bed, my heart. Every one of my instincts told me this was exactly where we needed to be tonight. Together.

I rinsed my mouth, thinking that Lucas deserved the world. And if I couldn’t give him that, wouldn’t the right thing to do be to walk away? To protect Lucas from falling in love with *me*?

But all my resolve crumpled the second I pushed the door open and found Lucas sitting there on the edge of my bed. He was perched there, his hands between his knees, toying with his fingers. When he glanced up, there was uncertainty and hope intertwined in his gaze, and it just about broke me. He was waiting for me to give him the permission needed, and I knew I couldn’t give it now. He was a good person. But I wasn’t ready for any person, good or not, and that was the issue.

“I can’t,” I whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Can’t?”

“I can’t climb into bed with you unless you promise me something.”

“Anything.” He stood, keeping his distance, his face unreadable.

“If we do this...” I gestured to the bed. “If we have sex, you can’t have any expectations. I don’t want to lead you on.”

“You won’t. I’m a big boy, Chloe.”

Lucas crossed the room, rested his big hands on my shoulders. He cupped me firmly, his fingers splayed wide, making me feel like he could wrap me up into his palm if he so wanted. He pulled me against him and ran hungry fingers through my hair.

“I’ll tell you what.” His voice was a vibration against me. “Let’s let things play out. I promise to have no expectations. You have to promise to be open to more if things go that way.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. I’m trying to compromise, Fancy Chef.”

“I don’t think I can walk away from you right now.”

“Then say yes.”

Lucas reached down and hooked his hands around my ass, lifting me so my legs had no choice but to hook around his waist. I could feel him, hard already, his erection pressed against me.

I knew how he felt inside me, and I was weak just thinking about him fucking me again. Slower this time, more patient, with all the time in the world. Heat shot south, a heaviness settling between my legs that was turning into an ache.

“Yes.” The moment I parted my lips, his were already devouring me.

It was the permission he’d needed, the permission he knew I’d give him because it was obvious both of us felt this thing zipping between us, this passion that was an entity in and of itself. When he’d said earlier he’d needed me as much as he’d needed to breathe, I understood. I was there now.

“I need you to fuck me.” I nipped his neck, trying to keep the focus on the physical. That was his promise. Our promise. “Now, Lucas.”

“Patience.” He spun me around, took a few steps until he’d backed me against the wall. “We’ve got time.”

“I just want you inside me.”

He didn't respond to my simpering. His hands traveled up under my silky black shorts, and he cursed as his hands cupped bare ass.

"You knew we'd be doing this," he said. "Shit. No pesky panties this time."

I couldn't help a little laugh. "You had some issues with them last time, so I thought—"

He cut me off, punishing me with his fingers as they slammed into me.

"You're already dripping for me." Lucas groaned, his head dipping into the nape of my neck. His breath coursed down my shoulder, my back, sending goosebumps skittering across my skin. "We were supposed to take our time, but hell if I can go slow."

"Good." I nuzzled him. "Maybe now you'll get inside me already."

"You can try as hard as you want to convince yourself this is just about sex." Lucas slipped another finger inside my channel, pumped until I couldn't breathe. "But I'm going to convince you otherwise."

He'd finger banged the words right out of me. I had no energy left for arguing. My arms felt limp, my legs were verging on boneless.

"Good, that's better," he said. "I'm glad you see my point."

Lucas peeled me off him, then yanked my shorts down. He tugged the shirt over my head so fast he almost snapped the spaghetti straps on it. I eyed him dangerously.

"You break it, you buy it," I warned him. "That's Balmain."

"I'll buy you lingerie all damn day, so long as it means I get to take it off of you." Lucas grabbed my hand, tugged me toward the bed. "I want to see you, taste you. Lay down for me."

"No." I shook my head. "I want it fast. Rough. I liked being up against the wall."

Lucas did a double take, rubbed his forehead. “If this is just about sex—”

“This isn’t just about sex.” I threw my hands up in the air, naked as the day I was born. I felt exposed, vulnerable, both physically and emotionally as my eyes smarted with tears. “This is about someone fucking me like they want me, Lucas, not because they have to.”

His gaze simmered, lava on the verge of overflowing. When he spoke, it was murderous. “What are you talking about?”

“You. Us. This. I’ve never...” I shook my head. “It always felt like a chore before. An obligation.”

“What is wrong with that man?” Lucas’s eyes flashed with disbelief. “I will make you forget he ever existed.”

I stood, in nothing but my skin, trembling. I’d never voiced what I’d wanted before. With Paul, sex had been something we did now and again because that was what couples were supposed to do. He was more interested in the business. I was more interested in having a baby. Mechanical would’ve been one way to say it. Plus, we’d been together for so long.

With Lucas, everything was so new. Every touch both foreign and familiar. Every stroke igniting new sensations my body hadn’t yet figured out how to process. All I knew was that I needed to feel him inside me, stretching me, filling me with his maleness.

“Chloe...” He blew out a huge breath as a complicated look crossed over his features. Then he snapped, the light flickering into an inferno in his eyes, a low growl coming from somewhere deep inside him as he shed his clothes. He stood, just as naked, his impressive erection a sword. He stormed toward me like a pirate ready to claim his bounty.

He jerked me upward, my legs slithering around his waist like a vine, needing him for support. We slammed into the wall together, the light fixture next to us giving a delicious rattle as his arm extended like a stabilizer against the sheetrock. He cradled my head to him, always cautious, always careful. Just

dangerous enough to get my blood pumping, just tender enough to melt my walls.

I felt his smooth dome pressing against my entrance, teasing. He leaned his head down, tasted my mouth, long, slow, lingering kisses. My hands pulled him to me, inching downward, reaching to touch him.

When my fingers clasped around his length, he shuddered against me like it was all he could do not to come then and there. I ran my hands up and down the weighty shaft, feeling powerful as he seemed paralyzed against me. He couldn't move, couldn't push into me, couldn't even kiss me back. He just held me there, savoring the feel of my fingers on him, his jaw working as he ground his teeth together.

After a few strokes, he seemed to snap out of his trance. "Can I—"

"Yes," I gasped. "Please."

Still holding the wall with one hand, he held the weight of me against him like I weighed nothing. Then he pressed both of his hands to my hips, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my back as his thumbs curved around my belly. He paused there, teetering on the brink of entering me, his jawline hard. He was looking at me, I could feel it. I pressed my face against him.

"Damn it, Chloe. Look at me."

My eyes, damp with need, obeyed his command. There was nothing else I could do. I was pliant in his hands, clay that needed molding. When our gazes locked, he held me there, studying every detail of my face like it was an art installation.

It happened without warning, the moment his willpower collapsed. I saw him take a breath, his cock twitched, and then he speared into me, dragging an animal-like cry from my lips as he filled me fully, completely, stretched me until it was painful.

He didn't stop there. He jerked, grunted, as if it was everything he could do not to pour his seed into me then and there. He withdrew some, pulsed gently a few times, then

yanked my hips downward so he was sheathed fully in my folds. His hands were fisting my ass as he pounded into me once, twice, and then he was thrusting into me like the world was going to end, and all I could do was hold onto his shoulders and hope I survived. He spread me wide, leaned me against the wall, and pushed into me over and over until I was sure he was going to obliterate my mind.

“I can’t—” Lucas slid out of me.

I felt his absence in my sex like my heart was being ripped out of my chest. I nearly wept with how close I’d been, how close we’d been together. I tried to form the words, but I couldn’t do anything but cling to him as he held me against him, his thick cock pulsing against my folds. I could feel how much he wanted me, so why the hell had he stopped?

I had my answer one second later. With another one of his now-signature grunts, he stomped back across the room and threw me onto the bed. My hair spread on the comforter like a messy halo. I didn’t have the energy to cover myself up. I lay there, naked, spread before him like a delicacy.

“I need to taste you.” Lucas dropped to his knees before the bed.

He yanked my legs forward, dragging me along the bedspread until my legs were wrapped around his neck, dangling down his back, and his mouth was on my sex. He nuzzled in, inhaling the scent of me. My fingers dug into his hair, holding on like it was a rollercoaster going off the rails.

His tongue slipped into me, caressed, tasted. He groaned like he was having the best meal of his life, then pulled me toward him for more. He stroked, licked, savored, until I was begging him to stop so I could feel him in me once more.

Finally he seemed to register my whimpered demand, and he rocked back on his heels. Without pausing for a breath, he leaned over me and pinned me against the bed. His arms, rippled with muscles, tensed next to me.

I reached for him, ran my hands over his slick cock. He pressed a hard kiss to me, and I tasted the light scent of my

pleasure on his lips. He pushed into me then, slowly this time. Easing in, inch by inch, and I realized this was the way he'd wanted to do things all along. The wall-banging, the car sex—that had all been for me. This, the tender, slow, savory moment—*this* was for him.

And I owed it to him to let him have it. He'd already delivered what I'd needed a million times over. So I wrapped my legs around his back and squeezed my thighs, pulling him closer with more patience than I thought I possessed. I closed my eyes, letting myself feel every centimeter that he filled me with his bareness.

He sighed against me as I held him close, pressed my body against his, his eyes closed as he continued to fill me, slower, slower, until I felt him exhale the breath he'd been holding for what felt like an eternity.

“Hey.” I blinked up at him, shaking, as I raised a hand and cupped his chin in my hand. “Open your eyes.”

He listened to me immediately, and I was rewarded with a view into the most stunning eyes I'd ever seen. They were hazy with need, dilated with desire.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “For everything.”

“God.” He shook his head, pressed himself fully into me, let his length sit in my channel as we held one another like the world itself might shatter if we let go. “How can you think this is about sex?”

“I—” I bit my lip, hard.

I already knew this wasn't about sex. But it was supposed to be. I wanted it to be. I didn't want to think about the alternative.

But I was forced to think about it as he claimed me then with his mouth, pressing a kiss to me that swirled with lust and heart. He plunged into me, long, hard strokes, pillaging, taking, marking me as his. He paused only to knead my breast with one hand, to take a nipple in his mouth and suckle the tender bud.

Then he peeled me back off the bed, leaving me a bundle of tingling nerves and heady desire. My blood pounded hot. My head was thick with lust.

“Now you’re going to come for me, baby,” Lucas said, lifting me back around him, “and I’m going to come inside of you. I want to hear you say my name again.”

I encircled him until we were wound so tightly it was hard to know where one of us ended and the other began. He slammed me once more onto his cock, my back against the wall, and he didn’t stop thrusting into me until my eyes closed.

“Look at me,” he growled. “I want to watch you.”

I opened my eyes as he held me against him, watching me, and I knew it wasn’t lust then. There was more, a connection, a friendship, a relationship... I was falling head over heels in love with the man. That knowledge, the look in his eyes, was all it took.

“Fuck,” he said, “say my name.”

And as he pounded into me one final time, I threw my head back and let his name spill from my lips as darkness crowded the edges of my consciousness and fireworks swirled and spiraled into glittering shards.

“Lucas,” I sobbed. “Oh, God, Lucas.”

He shuddered, buried himself so deep inside of me that I felt every sensation as he pulsed his hot seed into me in a climax that felt like it lasted months, years, eternity.

My body trembled as his huge hands held me, draped me over him, letting me come down from whatever cloud I’d been on. In his arms, I turned into a limp noodle, unable to move.

“Oh my God,” I whimpered as he brought me to the bed and laid me out. “I think I love you, Lucas Donovan. That changed my life.”

Lucas stilled as he stood, studying me, his cock still half-hard. It twitched at my words.

“Don’t say that unless you mean it, or you’re not getting any sleep tonight.”

“Don’t say what?” I tried to sit up and failed, so I settled for propping myself up against a pillow as I replayed my slurred, nonsensical, sex-drenched words in my head.

I love you.

“That was so stupid of me to say,” I blurted out, as it hit me. “I’m so sorry, I was practically in a sex coma, and I don’t think I’m, uh, legally responsible for the words I say when I’m under the influence of sex? I don’t know. You’re the damn lawyer, you tell me.”

Lucas was standing at the doorway to the bathroom, an amused smile playing at his lips. Judging by the state of his sword pointing back in my direction, he was pleased with his performance and ready for more. I swallowed.

“I told you, babe.” He gave a shake of his head as he stepped into the bathroom. “This has never been about sex.”

Then he shut the door behind him, and I collapsed back onto the bed, wondering what in the hell I’d gotten myself into.

Chapter 22

Lucas

I was loath to leave Chloe the next morning. The way she slept was like magic, sweet and peaceful, an air of innocence around her that drew me close. The vulnerability on her face made me anxious to keep close, to protect her. I wanted nothing more than to keep her safe beside me for an eternity.

The way she'd gone from a stranger to a woman I was falling in love with in such a short period of time was shocking, not least of all to me. But I'd spent my entire life chasing after other people's dreams, following their visions for what a perfect life looked like for me. Chloe was the first thing I wanted for myself in my entire life, and I'd be damned if anyone sabotaged that—including her.

I raised a hand, stroked it gently down the side of Chloe's face, my thumb trailing down her cheek where tears had fallen the night before. As I'd been inside her. The memory of making love with Chloe had me instantly hard, and if she wasn't sleeping so peacefully—if I didn't have somewhere to be—I would've climbed back in bed and woken her with intimate kisses. But she needed her rest, and I had promised my brother I'd help him out.

After a quick shower and some food shoveled down my throat, I hopped in the car and headed for Noah's garage. His shop was located on his several-acre property. He'd bought a huge swatch of land as soon as he could afford it and had started his business immediately.

At first things had been slow, and his only advertising had been word of mouth. His circle of customers had been small—friends, family, neighbors. As he'd grown, he'd invested back into his business, and now he had a full-on shop with a clientele that kept him booked often months out.

“Oh, shit.” Noah greeted me with a wry smile. “Mornin’ to you.”

I looked up, confused, one foot still in the truck. “Huh?”

His grin grew wider. “It finally happened, huh?”

I roughed a hand through my hair. I’d thrown on workout shorts and the same threadbare shirt I’d been wearing every morning for the past month when I’ve met my brother at the crack of dawn. “What are you talking about?”

“You had sex.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“How was it?”

“You’re an asshole,” I reiterated. “What are we doing today?”

“Did you tell her you’ve been coming around here to help me yet?” Noah asked. “Is that what changed? Then Chloe was so overwhelmed with gratitude that you’ve been helping out with her truck that she decided to have her way with you?”

“I didn’t think you could become any more of a dick.” I stomped toward the garage. “Do you want my help or not?”

Noah handed over a wrench as I passed by him. “I can’t get the damn freezer in by myself. I need a hand loading it in. Unless you’re too exhausted from last night.”

Noah and I set to working in the smooth, easy fashion we’d had going since we were kids, even though it’d been a hot minute since I’d worked on a project with either of my brothers. I’d been so wrapped up in running my dad’s business that I hadn’t had time for extraneous activities. Except for the restoration of my mother’s inn, but that hardly counted. She was our mother for God’s sake. Of course we were going to come together to make that happen for her.

“It’s gonna be weird when Chloe finds out you’ve been here every morning since she moved in.” Noah slid out from inside the truck where we’d just finished installing some of the hardware Chloe would need to get started. “Why don’t you tell her what you’re up to?”

“It’s none of your business. Did you tell her that you’re booked out for months, and yet you had the time to squeeze her into your schedule?”

Noah scoffed. “She’s paying me. It’s a business relationship. What’re you getting out of this?” He paused. “Besides sex.”

“Fuck you. That’s not how things went.”

“Obviously. Because you didn’t tell her you’re helping out.” Noah nodded his head and led me into his garage. “So she must just like you for being you? Except that doesn’t compute.”

I followed him, feeling prickly and gruff, already missing the smell of Chloe. I’d breathed her in all night, and now that she was away from me, I felt it like a spear in my side.

Noah’s garage was meticulously organized. A black and white checkered floor spanned the bottom of the office area. A few neon signs were strategically mounted on the wall above upscale leather furniture. The lobby was sleek and minimal, with the main decoration being the expensive coffee machine that sat behind a desk.

Noah’s shop was hands down the nicest place in town to get a coffee, The Bean Counter included. Chuck would tell you so himself. There was the faint smell of grease and hard work that floated in the air, not an unappealing scent. It felt homey and comfortable and welcoming. Subtly expensive and very Noah.

Noah pulled a couple shots of espresso from his machine and added frothed milk. It cracked me up that my tattooed, grease-monkey brother had a thing for fancy coffee.

“Pansy,” I said as he handed over my frilly latte.

“I don’t see you turning it down.” Noah sat behind his desk. “So what’s really happening?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Chloe and I got together. That’s all. She doesn’t think she wants a future with me.”

“But you want a future with her.”

“Have you seen her?” I asked. “Have you spoken to her? Of course I want to be with her. She’s a fucking goddess.”

“Touché. But there’s the issue of her not wanting to be with you.”

“That’s not the issue,” I said sharply. “She doesn’t know if she’ll be staying in town. She wants some time to herself. Her idiot ex-boyfriend did a number on her—mentally, emotionally, and more.”

“So be patient.” Noah shrugged. “What’s the rush?”

The rush was that I feared losing her. I’d marry the woman tomorrow if she’d agree to it. I was not a risk taker by nature, but I was willing to make the leap for the right cause. She was the right cause. Unfortunately, I just didn’t know how to get her there. I didn’t even know if she even wanted to get there. That was the part that fucking hurt.

“Okay, forget it.” Noah let the subject drop, and I could’ve kissed him with relief for not pressing further. “When can I tell her that opening day is two weeks away?”

“Two weeks?” I echoed.

Noah shrugged again. “You’ve been here at five a.m. every day for the better part of a month. The two of us can get a shit ton done when we’re up at the butt crack of dawn. By the way, this is earning me free legal services for life.”

“You already have that, idiot.”

“You’re right.” He tapped his cappuccino. “I should think bigger.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let me tell her we’re getting close to completion. I just have to figure out how to do it.”

“Fine.” Noah shifted to his feet. “Just so long as you tell her soon. She deserves to know we’re about a month ahead of schedule. Opening day can be two weeks away if we all keep up this hustle, and she’s gonna want to prepare.”

“I know.”

“I mean, the woman’s been shoving ice cream samples down everyone’s throat for weeks now,” Noah pointed out. “She brought seven—*seven*—pints of ice cream to mom’s dinner last week and forced everyone to vote anonymously on their favorites. The woman’s chomping at the bit to get going.”

“I’ll tell her,” I promised. “Soon.”

“Keep me posted.” Noah peered at his wrist, at an invisible watch. “Now, get outta here. Isn’t it time for you to head home and pretend you’re just waking up so the love of your life doesn’t know you’ve been sneaking out to Taco Bout Love?”



I WAS JUST TOWELING off after my second shower of the day, thanks to a sweaty session with Noah, when I found Chloe in the kitchen. The sight of her in my space, standing over the stove wearing nothing but some fancy ass short robe with frills on it, took the wind right out of me. I felt like I'd been sucker punched in the gut, a double whammy, one fist desire and the other vulnerability. The combo very nearly bowled me over.

I must have made an actual sound in my throat because Chloe turned around to glance at me, and it was that look, that moment in time, when I could pinpoint with certainty that I was no longer falling in love with her. I was damn well fully in love with her.

Her hair slid over the side of her face, moving like water as she turned her head. Her face was free of makeup, her smile shy but true. A warmth radiated from her gaze as she studied me, and I knew I'd never in my life find another woman who looked at me like that.

I crossed the kitchen swiftly and wrapped her in my arms. I hadn't intended to start anything here, now, knowing I had to be at the office soon. But I was dressed in only my boxers, a towel in my hand that I'd been using to dry my hair. The towel dropped to the ground, and my boxers did absolutely nothing to hide my massive desire for her.

She moaned as she melded against me, and my cock strained at the flimsy material covering it. One of my hands came up, slid inside the opening of her robe, massaged a perfect handful of her breast. I couldn't take my mouth off her, our tongues weaving an expert dance as if we were old pros and not first-time lovers.

"God." I lifted her onto the counter and let my arms fall behind her in a loose embrace around her lower back. "You make me insatiable."

She raised one thin shoulder. Her robe slipped down, draping off, showing her bare skin. I couldn't resist a nip at a

collarbone that looked like dessert. I'd never in my life thought collarbones were sexy until this very moment.

"I came in here to make you a coffee," I admitted. "But I can't even think about coffee right now."

"I found your French press. Coffee's already made." She bobbed those bare shoulders up and down some more.

I raised a hand, flicked the tie of her robe open, and studied the incredible figure before me. She was a goddess, the dusty rose frills of her robe framing an exquisite portrait. I lowered my head, took one of her breasts in my mouth, teased the bud until Chloe threw her head back and whimpered.

"I have to get to the office. I have meetings." In direct contrast to my protests, I lowered myself to my knees before her, slid her to the edge of the counter.

I started in with kisses down her bare, milky white stomach. A couple of freckles formed a constellation on her skin, one I'd like to gaze at forever. A kiss near her belly button. Near her hip. She squirmed the lower I moved. When I reached between her thighs, I found her already wet for me. Her underwear was worthless, and I stripped it off, leaving it to drop on the floor like a discarded napkin.

Finally, I parted her pretty slit and slid my tongue into her, tasting her, thinking I'd like to have her for breakfast every day for the rest of my life. When she mewed her appreciation, it only turned me on more. I was going to fucking explode right here and now. I'd have been embarrassed about how eager I was if I didn't need her so damn much.

Her fingers fisted my hair, hard, tugging at the wet strands. I loved it. The roughness, the way she yelped and pulled at me with abandon. I pressed my face into her, overwhelmed by her smell, reluctant to ever leave this cocoon we'd created.

"I want you inside me," she said. "Now."

"No," I said. "I want to make you come for me. Just you."

"But—"

"This is about you," I commanded. "Full stop."

She tried to bite out another argument, but I delved into her, deeper, squeezed her ass so she was thrown backward onto the counter, and then I stroked, sucked, licked until I could feel her inner walls quivering. I doubled down, sliding a finger into her, then another, until I felt her sweet muscles clench around me as I pumped in and out of her, harder, faster, rough, pounding into her softness until she shouted my name before collapsing into a heap on the counter.

Lazily, I trailed my fingers over her bare stomach, then stood and pulled her toward me. I relished the little snuggle she gave me as she leaned her head against my shoulder, her arms draping loosely over me, the heat from her skin—damp with sweat and sex—washing onto my freshly showered skin.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, limply, making no effort to pull away. “And you just showered.”

“I don’t mind.” I stroked her hair. “I want to smell like you all day.”

“A badge of honor, huh?” Her fingers made gentle roads down my arm as she lightly ran her nails over me, the light tickle sending tremors straight to my cock. She noticed me twitching against her. Her eyes widened, and she said, “*Oh.*”

I stilled her, grasped her head, pulled her firmly to my chest. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Let me return the favor.”

“No such thing. This was about you. No favors. I enjoyed it as much as you did.”

She fought off the embrace, pulling back just enough so that her knees were at my waist. She studied my erection for a long moment, more curious than anything else. “I’ve never had this happen before.”

“What?” I asked in disbelief. “An orgasm? But last night, I’m pretty sure it happened.”

I didn’t want to toot my own fucking horn, but she’d come on my cock last night. That was for damn sure.

“I mean, *just* me.” She licked her lips. “You know, with oral sex, and no expectation to return the favor. I can count the number of times on one hand that I’ve ever experienced, you know, anything like that.”

“The orgasm?” I asked, still in disbelief. “Or are you telling me your dickhead ex never wanted to taste you?”

She cringed at my bluntness. I hadn’t intended it to sound so crass, but I was pretty shaken. I felt my fingers clenching and unclenching.

“And you were going to marry the guy?” I pinched my forehead. “For fuck’s sake, Chloe. Why didn’t you ditch him years ago?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “I’m sorry, Lucas,” she said, a flicker of hurt passing across her face. “But I don’t need a lecture. You don’t think I’m beating myself up enough for all those years lost?”

“Jesus, I’m sorry. That wasn’t what I meant.” I reached for her, needing to touch her, needing her to understand. “I’d never blame you for his actions. I just...” I searched for the words. “I’m literally speechless. I do not understand this man on a fundamental level. To have you within his grasp, and to let you go...”

She blew out a slow breath. “I mean, it’s mostly my fault —”

“Stop.” I interrupted her with a kiss. Then I shook my head. “Don’t apologize. You know, selfishly, maybe it all worked out that you tried so hard to be with him. If you hadn’t, if you’d ditched him years ago like he deserved, then some other man would’ve stepped in and swooped you up in a heartbeat, and I’d be fucking lost.”

A little smile quirked her lips up. “Oh, you’d have found someone too.”

I shook my head. “I’ve spent a lifetime in this town, and I wasn’t finding anyone. The best I could’ve done is settled for companionship. What I have with you, this isn’t

companionship. It's—" I felt my throat go dry, scratchy with the truth. "I love you, Chloe."

"Don't." She shook her head, worry clouding her pretty features. "That's not in our deal. You can't say things like that."

"I sure as hell can. Your deal is to be open to something. My deal is to not have any expectations." My lips trailed a line on her forehead. "This is me, not expecting anything from you, but telling you exactly how I feel."

"But what if..." She hesitated.

"You don't have to say it back. Ever." I met her gaze to punctuate my point. "If you don't feel it, you don't feel it. That's my problem, not yours."

"I care about you."

"I know you do. I care about you too."

She nodded, then her eyes narrowed as if she was going to say something truly revolutionary. I held my breath.

"Is that grease?" She leaned forward and scrubbed at a spot over my eyebrow. She pulled her hand back, licked her thumb, and scrubbed again.

I was once again speechless. When she finally caught on to my shocked state, she seemed to realize what had happened.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking. You were saying..." She gave a sheepish grin as she looked up at me. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

I leaned my head back and felt a deep laugh bubbling up from my chest. She joined in, laughing until she collapsed against me. My hands tangled in her hair. Her fingers caressed my back. I never wanted to move another muscle. If I could freeze frame a perfect moment, this would be it.

"But seriously," she said, "it wasn't there last night. And you did just shower. So what gives?"

"How about that cup of coffee?" said. "And then we'll talk."

“Oh, God. This sounds serious.”

“It’s not.”

“Good.” She hopped down, grabbed a pack of Lysol wipes from the counter. She gave me the cutest grin, her nose wrinkling. “I’ll just, uh, sanitize before we have our caffeine, huh?”

Chapter 23

C *hloe*

“I’m sorry. What?” I blinked at Lucas. The two of us were seated outside on his patio, a French press and two cups between us. The morning was a lovely, sunny one that promised summer was well and truly bearing down on us.

“When is my truck going to be ready?”

After a quick kitchen cleanup, I’d popped upstairs to change into some more sturdy clothing. As much as I wouldn’t mind dragging Lucas into bed with me all day long, he’d wanted to talk, and I thought it best if we focused on actual conversation. That would probably be helped by jean shorts and a tank top instead of lingerie.

“Two weeks if we keep hustling,” he said. “I mean, that’s what Noah told me. I’m just relaying the information.”

“Why are you relaying the information?” I pulled my coffee cup toward me and took a fortifying sip. “I’ve been talking to Noah almost every day. He could’ve just told me repairs were moving faster than expected.”

Lucas didn’t look thrilled at my comment about talking to his brother daily, but the man didn’t have anything to worry about. I couldn’t imagine looking at another person the way I looked at Lucas. Noah was nice and all, and that whole DiMaggio clan of guys was good looking, but nobody held a candle to my Lucas.

My Lucas.

Dammit. I needed to rein in my thoughts before they took up a permanent residence in my brain. I wasn’t ready to put down roots here just yet. Fantasie had always been a stopping point for me, a brief hiatus while I gathered myself.

“I stopped by this morning. Noah needed some help loading the freezer and some other things into the truck, so I

offered to do it.” Lucas’s voice was gravelly, as if he were almost embarrassed by the admission. “It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” I blinked at him. “That’s so kind of you. I mean, I’m sure Noah’s not paying you. Not to mention the fact that you, oh, I don’t know... Sexed me into oblivion last night, then peeled yourself out of bed this morning to do hunky man stuff for me before dawn.”

“Hunky man stuff?” Lucas crooked an eyebrow, a smile playing at his lips.

I flexed my imaginary muscles. “I mean, there’s no way I can lift a freezer on a good day. I’m lucky I can lift a coffee cup to my lips with how Jell-O my limbs are this morning.”

“I’ve never heard Jell-O used in a sexual context before, but I’m a fan.”

“Yeah, thanks a lot for that. I have to invent new words for the way you make me feel.”

He grunted, a positive sound, and looked away. Maybe embarrassed, maybe proud, it was hard to tell. Maybe a combination. I reached over, rested a hand on his, needing to be closer than we were. The chair raked the rough patio as I scooted closer to him.

“Thank you for everything. No matter what happens here,” I started, “you really did change my life. For the better.”

Lucas’s jaw worked. I could tell he didn’t like the *no matter what happens here* clause of my statement. But I couldn’t offer him more, so I looked down, raised my coffee cup again, and toyed with the handle.

“Hey, don’t pull away.” Lucas spoke softly. “I mean it. I don’t expect anything from you, so don’t go pulling back now. Just be yourself. That’s all. If you feel something, great. If you don’t, then don’t feel guilty about it. Promise?”

I nodded, let the coffee slip onto my tongue, down my throat. It warmed me, fueled me. I was completely famished, but the gooey warm feelings in my belly from last night were keeping me sustained.

“So two weeks, huh?” I asked. “Two weeks until go time for Taco Bout Love?”

“Two weeks.”

“That doesn’t seem right. When Noah and I agreed on the project, he quoted me two months at a minimum to get the work done. Maybe more. He didn’t say as much, but I got the impression he was taking on this project in his spare time. You know, working on it in pieces, not dedicating full days to it.”

“I guess he’s had some help. Maybe things moved faster than he thought. I dunno.” Lucas was sort of mumbling. His voice grew stronger as he looked at me. “Either way, I popped over there this morning, helped him with the hardware, and I’ve got to tell you, Fancy Chef, it’s looking good.”

“I’m about to run a dessert taco truck.” I grinned at him. “I think you can drop the Fancy Chef title now.”

“I dunno. A food truck in Fantasie? That’s pretty novel. Very *Fancy Chef* if you ask me. Why dessert anyway? Why fuck-up a perfectly good taco with ice cream?”

“Excuse me?” I gave him a mock-horrified expression. “What the hell do you have against dairy, Mr. Donovan?”

“I’ve got nothing against dairy, I’m just saying, I’m a meat kinda guy. You know, taco sauce, guacamole, the whole shebang.”

“And I’m a sweets kinda gal,” I retorted. “I take offense to rigid guidelines about what you assume it means to be a taco.”

Lucas threw up his hands, enjoyment at our bantering evident on his face. “Then prove me wrong, Fancy Chef. I’m prepared to keep an open mind. I’m just saying, I’m a creature of habit. I’m a man who likes a standard taco. If you’re going to go and flip my life around by adding ice cream and—wait a minute—what the hell do you use for a shell?”

“Sort of like a crepe,” I said. “I made up my own recipe. I’ll also offer a waffle cone type shell for those who prefer crunchy.”

“Jesus. I never thought I’d see the day that even traditional tacos go out of style.”

“They haven’t gone out of style. It’s how I was creative.”

“Huh?”

I swallowed, wishing that I wasn’t so directly linked to Paul in every aspect of my life. But the truth was that I was linked to him, or at least my past was, and there was no escaping it. In an echo of what Lucas had said earlier, in a way, maybe it was lucky I’d linked my train to Paul’s for so long. While there’d been a lot of pain associated with my previous relationship, there’d been a lot of learning, too. It had led me here, and wasn’t I happier than I’d ever been?

“You know I told you that Paul wanted to take our restaurant in a new direction,” I said.

Lucas bristled at the mention of his name. His knuckles whitened as he clutched his coffee mug. “I recall.”

“Well, believe it or not, I did fight him on it. I didn’t just roll over and give in to everything.” I sounded more defensive than I’d intended, but it was important for me to tell Lucas the whole truth. I wanted him to understand, as much as he could, who I was. Where I was coming from. The whole package that was Chloe Brown. I raised a hand to stop him from interrupting. “I didn’t win this argument.”

“Honey, a relationship isn’t about winning and losing.”

“I understand that. And I can see everything wrong about it now. Paul was willing to fight to the death for his precious restaurant. I was willing to fight to the death for our relationship. That was the crux of the matter. Our priorities weren’t aligned.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks.”

I tilted my head slightly, acknowledging the truth to his point, but for the first time in a long while, I didn’t feel all that much of anything toward Paul. Not pain, regret, or frustration. It was really truly starting to feel like the past, like it was an old lesson learned, not an excruciating new wound. It was

refreshing to be able to speak of it without it being accompanied by a crumbling sense of loss.

“I had a sticking point,” I admitted. “I wanted to have a part of the restaurant that felt like mine. I think Paul knew I wasn’t going to give in completely, and if he didn’t want me to ditch him entirely, he had to cave and give me something. He gave me the dessert menu.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The dessert menu. That was all mine. To have and to hold, yada yada.” I winked, smiling. “So dessert became my thing. I let Paul take the lead on the main restaurant, the stupid new dishes, the publicity, the what have you. Meanwhile, I had carte blanche on the dessert menu, so it was the place I funneled my creativity.”

“And this is the origin story of your dessert taco?”

I rolled my eyes, but I was loving the pleasant needling from Lucas. He was the first person who had cared enough to listen to me in a long time. To ask questions about me. To playfully pick at me while an undercurrent of genuine interest rolled through the background like the thrum of a pleasant, unintelligible country song.

“I guess you could say so. I mean, I didn’t invent the concept, obviously. But I’ve always loved creating my own recipes, ever since I was a little girl cooking for my mom. She was always my biggest fan.”

“What’d she think of Paul?”

“When we were little, she thought our friendship was cute.” I shrugged. “As we grew older, I don’t think it was Paul that she liked so much as the stability and the support that he was promising me.”

“I see.”

“I think that’s another reason I stuck around with Paul for so long; he was a link to my mother, to my childhood, and there was a factor of nostalgia with him. After she died, I had the realization that no future partner of mine would ever know

her. I think that depressed me some to think about leaving that connection I had between her and Paul.”

“I understand. I felt the same way after my dad’s death about women I dated.”

“It’s hard.” I let out a shaky breath. “On top of that, my mom never achieved a real sense of stability in her own life. She never had the support of a partner. So I think she saw my relationship with Paul as a sign of success that she’d never managed to achieve for herself, and I found that hard to let go of.”

“Your mother sounds like a great woman.”

“As is yours.”

“I wish I could meet your mother.” Lucas’s eyes landed on me. “I can tell how much you love her. You must miss her.”

“Terribly.”

A wince went through his eyes. “I’m so sorry. You’ve lost so much.”

I shrugged. “I think she’d be proud of me, of where I’m headed.”

His voice cracked. “I can confirm. Damned proud.”

Before tears leaked from my eyes, I opted to return our conversation to the subject of food. For safety measures, obviously. I needed to protect my already tender heart from falling more and more in love with this man who I wasn’t sure had a future with me, despite what he said. I’d heard words before. I wasn’t making that mistake again. I needed to see action.

“Anyway, I just tried to have fun with the restaurant’s dessert menu. I did all sorts of fancy cake pops. I created original ice cream flavors. I created cookie recipes to match those ice cream flavors and sandwiched them together. And, yes, I created the dessert taco. It was one of the most beloved items on our menu.”

“Well, the jury’s still out if I’m gonna be a convert, but like I said, I’ll keep an open mind.”

“You’re a tough nut to crack, Donovan.”

“I’m just loyal to a good taco.”

I barked a laugh. His eyes crinkled.

“No innuendo,” he said. “But I guess, if we’re going there...”

“We’re not,” I said, still laughing. “Anyway, it really pissed Paul off.”

“Your success?”

I nodded. “My homemade olive oil gelato got a write up by this super famous blogger. Paul was livid.”

“I don’t understand. It was still partially *his* restaurant getting the review, right?”

“Yeah, but that didn’t matter to him. He wanted to be *the* creative genius. He’d been trying to suck up to this big blogger for months. Meanwhile, I just sort of did my own thing in the kitchen. I had two staff under me. He had fifty. Then he sees the write up by that same blogger he’d been brownnosing, but instead of his fancy food, it’s my little homemade creation that was featured? He flew off the handle and didn’t come home for two days.”

Lucas was shaking his head. I didn’t want to get into the nitty gritty details of my relationship with Paul any more than I already had, so I let it drop.

“We started getting requests for our restaurant to open earlier in the day for dessert specials. You know, like a take-out window open to the public where people could come up and just order ice cream or cookies without a meal—”

“Or tacos without fucking guacamole—”

“Or that,” I said. “Paul shut down the idea.”

“It would’ve made you guys money.”

“A lot of money,” I said. “I ran the numbers. He said no. That moment was when I knew I had to leave. It was the final straw.”

“Fucking tacos.” Lucas shook his head, mystified. “I’ve never appreciated a taco as much as I do now.”

“Why?”

“That was your breaking point, wasn’t it?” Lucas pressed his lips together. “I’m assuming you realized that he’d never look at you like an equal. That was it, wasn’t it?”

I was impressed with how closely he’d been listening. I wasn’t used to anyone listening to me so intently, to understanding things I was thinking without me having to say them. If Paul had ever taken the time to listen to me, things tended to go in one ear and out the other as he was typing a message on his phone. It was almost unnerving the way Lucas didn’t seem to miss a beat, a nuance.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “That was a couple of months back. I didn’t leave right then and there, but that was when I knew it was over.”

He nodded. Glanced down, the playfulness over.

“I tried to half-ass the relationship for a few more months, but the fight in me was gone. I sort of started preparing for my exit strategy. All the money I had ever saved had been previously funneled into IVF treatments. I only had about ten grand to my name, the amount left from Paul buying me out of the restaurant.”

“You bought that purple thing.”

“My baby.”

“And drove here?” Lucas asked. “Why here?”

“It’s Fantasie.” I shrugged. “Even your freaking town sign promises that dreams come true in this place.”

“And?” Lucas looked at me, carefully calculating, hopefulness zapping the energy from me. “Have they?”

“It’s still early.” I felt a flush creeping up my cheeks. “But I’d say it’s made a good dent in things so far.”

Lucas leaned in, pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Well, I might not be a convert to frozen tacos just yet, but I do believe

in you, so give me marching orders, boss.”

“What?”

Lucas grinned, his bright, shiny, lovely attention exclusively on me. “We’ve got T minus two weeks until it’s go time, and I’m gonna assume you need some help to get things going. I do owe you one, don’t I?”

“Technically I owe you one after this morning.” I flushed a brighter shade of red. I wasn’t used to talking about sex so overtly. I didn’t hate it.

He barked a laugh. “I’ll collect. But as much as I want to flip you around and fuck you over this table, in the great outdoors, I do have to get to the office. But my priority is to help you get your dreams achieved, so apparently, now I’m your taco protégé. Your sous chef. Whatever the hell you want to call it.”

“Well, I could use some help.”

“Give me a list, honey.”

I stood. Lucas groaned.

“Don’t you own a parka or something?” he muttered. “I can’t go into the office like this.”

Lucas had changed into a suit. His problem was straining against his zipper.

“If you need to get it out of your system,” I offered, “I could slip out of this, and we—”

“Don’t you dare finish that damn sentence, or I’m going to get you naked.” Lucas pressed a kiss to my head. “I love you, and I can’t wait to come home to you tonight.”

Then he slapped my ass so hard I yelped and leaped toward the door, giggling as the place his palm had touched my jean shorts smarted deliciously with promise of what was to come. As I sauntered inside, giving my hips a little extra punch just to drive home the tempting offer of dragging him back to bed, I realized I didn’t even hate the way he’d casually thrown out that elusive L-word.

“Thanks, *honey*,” I said back, dosing him with sarcasm.

Then I grabbed a notepad and pen, and I leaned over the counter, purposefully sticking my ass out at an enticing angle. The way I leaned over, I knew my high waisted shorts would sneak up over my bum. Judging by Lucas’s groan, he was appreciative of the view.

I was still jotting down my honey-do list when I felt his shaft pressed against me. The man was harder than sin. Despite the fact he’d brought me to orgasm with his mouth barely a half hour before, my current set of panties was already soaked through all over again.

“Fuck it,” he muttered. “My meetings can wait.”

Lucas grabbed my hips and pounded them against his cock. Despite layers of fabric and denim between us, I could feel every inch of him. I was ready for him, desperate to be speared by him, to feel him stretching my channel with his oversized length.

He was just unzipping my jeans when his phone rang. He moved to silence it, then did a double take at the name. He cursed. Tugged my zipper back up.

“Sorry, babe. One second.” Lucas pressed the phone to his ear and growled a greeting. His face paled. “Yeah, sure, I’ll be right there.”

“Everything okay?” I sensed the mood of the moment had changed.

“Yeah, fine,” he said, but I didn’t totally believe him. “Unfortunately, my work can’t wait today. Is that ready for me?”

“What?”

His eyes glimmered with a trace of amusement again as he nodded over my shoulder. “Your list.”

“Oh, yeah, uh, sure.”

Lucas reached over me, letting my breasts graze against him. He stilled, tempted, but settled for a deep kiss. Then he plucked the list off the counter and studied it.

“Number One on your list is...” He glanced at me, skeptical. “Sex?”

I shrugged, embarrassed. “So I mixed business with pleasure. I figure if we’re doing this thing, we might as well, you know, enjoy it?”

He grinned again. “Number Two. Heavy cream. Is that an innuendo?”

“No, no. I actually need that,” I said, tapping the paper in his hands. “That’s a legit ingredient. I make my own ice cream.”

“Uh huh. I don’t believe you, seeing as it’s bookended by item number three, which is also sex.”

“Okay, okay, every other item on that list is a real ingredient.” I clasped my hands before me. “It was hard to think with you pressed up against me.”

“Too busy thinking of my cock in you?”

I swallowed hard. “I mean, if you want to put it that way.”

He wrapped his arm around me, pulled me to him. “I’ll see you tonight. If you’re waiting for me here in the kitchen, you’d better keep those Lysol wipes handy.”

Chapter 24

C *hloe*

It was exactly thirteen days later that I stood with Noah, surveying my shiny truck, trying to peel my jaw off the floor. “You did all this?”

Noah gave an easy shrug. “I had help.”

“So you say, but every time I’ve been here, it’s been you slaving over this car by your lonesome.”

An expression crossed his face that had me curious, as if he wasn’t telling me something. Then again, it wasn’t really any of my business how he ran his shop so long as he got the job done. And get the job done, he had.

“This is better than anything I’d ever dreamed.” I took slow circles around the transformed vehicle. “Really, Noah, you outdid yourself.”

He gave a small smile but remained quiet, simply extending his hand toward me and dangling a set of keys. I reached out, snatched them, and unlocked my updated vehicle slash business.

Noah had followed the guidelines we’d laid out in the coffee shop weeks ago to a T, and then some. The truck sparkled with a fresh coat of pretty purple paint. The mechanical stuff had all been fixed, and when Noah started her up to show me, she purred like a kitten. The best part of all, the part that made everything real, was the sign he’d hung on the exterior that read **TACO BOUT LOVE**—the first real sign for my fledgling company.

I popped open the back and hopped inside, running fingertips along the stainless steel surfaces. There were freezers to store ice cream, a cooking surface to make my crepes, and a waffle press. Storage for fixings and condiments. A tablet setup with a credit card reader. Things I hadn’t even

thought of yet. Things that made this moment really, really real.

As much as I'd dreamed of the day I could actually open my doors to the public, I'd never actually imagined it happening. So much of my life had been tied to another person. My wagon hitched to Paul's. But now I had this truck, and it was mine and mine alone. The wins and the losses, successes and failure. The profits and expenses. I freaking loved it.

I blinked a few times, rapidly trying to clear the smarting sensation from my eyes before turning back to face Noah. I was only mildly successful. I ran a hand over my eyes as I stepped out of the truck.

"Thank you." Even if I'd wiped the tears from my eyes, the scruffy sound of my voice gave away the influx of emotions coursing through me. "This means so much to me."

"Hey. Don't cry." Noah took a few steps toward me. He opened his arms, pulled me in for a hug. He ruffled my hair with the affection of a big brother. I rested there for a moment, my chest heaving, before I pulled myself back and nodded, tears running down my face.

"I've dreamed of this moment for a long time."

"You like it?" Noah seemed suddenly uncertain, as if the pressure of pleasing me weighed heavy on him. "This is just the preliminary walk-through, you know. I can still make updates. I'm not completely done with some of the details."

"It's perfect."

"Like I said, I'll need a few more days to finish everything up. Let's see, it's Friday today. I think we can do the final walk-through next Thursday. That would let you open up for business a week from today if you want."

"A week from today." My throat went dry. "I'm not prepared."

"Sure you are. I've gained fifteen pounds in the last two weeks with all the ice cream tubs you've dropped off for me to

sample. People are gonna love you. You got your business license and permits ready to go, yeah?”

“Business license and permits,” I repeated dumbly.

Of course I knew about business licenses and permits. I had started looking into it a few weeks back, and then other things had happened. Mostly Lucas. And sex. Sex with Lucas had been a pretty hefty distraction from the fundamentals of daily life over the last couple of weeks. Sex at night, in the morning, on lunch breaks. In the shower, in my room, on the patio out back. We hadn’t been able to keep our hands off one another.

Then there’d been peony season with Josie. I’d been on her farm at the crack of dawn helping to harvest flowers, package bouquets, and deliver drop offs. I took a few shifts at the farm stand. The work was enjoyable and the companionship with Josie fabulous. It hadn’t been a hardship to volunteer my time to a worthy cause of helping out a friend. That’s what she was, after all: a friend.

“I’m sure it’s not a huge deal.” Noah bobbed his shoulders again, backtracking. “Things tend to move pretty fast here. Your boyfriend can help you out, I’m sure.”

“My boyfriend.” I tried on the words for size. I hadn’t called Lucas my boyfriend yet.

As far as I knew, we were still operating under the original agreement for our relationship, primarily that we weren’t going to get into anything serious. That he wouldn’t let himself wish for more. That I wouldn’t shut us down.

I shrugged off the sense of foreboding that came with the ease that Noah used the term boyfriend. He’d said it as if it was obvious, as if he didn’t give two shakes about it one way or another, as if it was just an accepted part of life in Fantasie these days. That was what scared me. That somehow, I’d slipped into a relationship—once again—without having much say in the matter.

“I mean, y’all live together, right?” Noah said.

“I live in Lucas’s guest house,” I corrected. “I’m not living *with* him.”

“Pot-*ay*-to, pot-*ah*-to.”

“Uh huh,” I said. “Sure. Well, thanks for this, Noah. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the work. You’re incredible at what you do.”

He gave me a salute. “Happy to help.”

“I’m terrified to ask, but I’m going to need to know the final bill.” I stepped toward the truck and studied every intricate detail. The signage, the slick setup, the polished and professional state of the whole thing. “You’ve gone so far above and beyond that I am afraid I’m going to be bankrupted.”

“You’re paid in full, sweet cheeks.”

“I gave you the final payment for what we initially talked about.” I crossed my arms, swiveled to face him. “I’m not stupid. That freezer in there is a serious upgrade from what we budgeted for. I didn’t have anything about a tablet setup in our agreement. I definitely know we hadn’t talked about a sign. You were supposed to touch up the exterior paint, not give it an entire new paint job.”

“We’re good. Everything’s paid for.”

“Why are you being weird about this?” I watched as Noah scratched at his thick hair and didn’t meet my eyes. “We have a legal, binding contract. Ask your brother. I am paying you for the work you did. End of the story.”

“I said it’s been paid for.”

“I know how to do basic math. I didn’t give you enough to cover all of *this*.”

“I didn’t say you did,” he repeated, speaking slowly as if hoping it would help me understand. “I *said* the job’s paid for.”

I could feel my eyebrows knitting together as I dissected his words. “Are you telling me someone else paid for it?”

“Not my business. I got monies for the work done. That’s all I’m allowed to say.”

I took a step toward him. I was wearing my worn overalls, tank top, and filthy tennis shoes because I was planning to head straight into the field to help Josie after this, and I certainly wasn’t trying to impress her.

Noah looked at me like I was about to eat him alive. I poked a finger into his chest and tapped it a few times, hard.

“Who gave you money?” I asked. “If you don’t tell me, I’m going to tell your grandma on you.”

“You don’t know Grandma DiMaggio.”

“You think I’m scared of her? I spent a decade in New York. I’m not scared of anyone. Was it Lucas?”

He licked his lips, sized me up. He obviously decided that I wasn’t kidding. “It’s not just one person.”

“Huh?”

“I said—”

“I know what you said, but it doesn’t make sense. I barely know anyone in this town. So how could anyone else have chipped in? And why?”

Noah waited a long beat. “Look, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’m a little bit afraid of you. So, here goes nothing. Lucas contributed to the fund. He said something about it being a donation to the town because we needed a taco truck or some fucking bullshit. Really, he loves you, that’s about the long and short of it.”

I gulped at the way Noah was throwing around the words love and boyfriend. So much commitment in the span of five minutes. I forced myself to move forward with my inquisition. “Who else?”

“Well, Josie. She said you haven’t been taking any money for helping her out at the farm. She calculated the hours you worked and a fair wage for it, and gave the money to me for upgrades. She bought your tablet, the sign, and some of the shiny stuff inside.”

“Anyone else?” I asked, feeling a mix of cold and warm in my belly. Icy blood because I wasn’t used to accepting help from anyone else. Warmth in my stomach because of the selflessness of my new friends.

“Ruby wanted to pay for an oil change and some mechanical fixes. She said otherwise she’d go deaf from you rattling around town. Clarice threw in a few bucks for an upgraded ice cream machine. Chuck and The Bean Counter donated some equipment from the cafe that was barely used and fit really well in the truck. You’d never know it was secondhand.”

I blinked. Added some sarcasm. “Is that all?”

“Lily threw in some money for the decorations. The doc threw in some money for safe equipment—”

“Doctor DiMaggio? The one who fixed my head?”

Noah nodded. “He said nicer equipment would make his job easier, so you wouldn’t hurt yourself. Or some bullshit,” he added again at the end. “What you’re not getting is that people just want to help you.”

“The paint job?” I asked. “I know that can’t have been cheap.”

“A gift.”

“From?” I waited, and when a response didn’t come, I turned to look at Noah. “You.”

“You paid me enough money, I thought it could be a welcome home present.”

“A welcome home present,” I echoed. I felt the start of guilt creeping into the pit of my stomach. I shook my head. “I can’t accept any of this.”

“Any of what? The money? The repairs? Hate to break it to you, honey, but it’s all done. It’s paid for. Checks are cashed, equipment purchased. There’s no renegeing on our deal now. You’re the one who wanted to put it into legal terms. It’s written down by lawyer extraordinaire Lucas Donovan himself.”

“Yes, but none of this is part of the agreement.”

“Why are you panicking?”

I hated how quickly Noah correctly diagnosed my emotional reaction to the reveal of my new truck. The moment should have been filled with joy and a sense of achievement, and it had been, really. But it was clouded by a sense of guilt—the fear that I would be disappointing everyone who had come to call themselves a friend over the last few weeks.

“It’s this!” I raised my hands, unable to keep it in anymore. “Everything you’ve been saying today. That Lucas is my boyfriend. That he loves me. That this is my home.”

“Okay.” Noah crossed thick arms over a broad chest. “Which part of that isn’t true?”

“All of it—” I started, then cut myself off. “Okay, some of it is true.”

Noah nodded slowly, letting me think for myself.

“I admit Lucas does care for me.” I didn’t want to share that he had told me he loved me just yet. It felt too personal, too private. “I’m living at his place, but we’re not really putting titles on anything yet.”

“I mean, y’all are sleeping together, eating together, living together. Everyone in this damn town knows if they were to touch you they’d be decked into the next town over by Lucas’s fist. So, call it what you want, but y’all are something. You’re spoken for, let’s put it that way.”

I was spoken for. I liked that more than I wanted to. It felt like a warm hug, an embrace of safety. A promise that I knew Lucas would never break, and that sort of stability had a way of turning me on, of melting my heart in a way I’d never experienced before.

“This place being my home,” I said. “I am not convinced it is, yet.”

“Clarice thinks otherwise.”

“Clarice doesn’t know everything.”

“Maybe not, but she’s usually right when she does know something.”

I scoffed. “Even I don’t know where my new home is going to be, so I find it highly unlikely she’d know. But that’s beside the point. This is the problem. Everyone is telling me what’s happening to me, and that’s the last thing I wanted. I want to make decisions for myself, not fall into the trappings of a life I never wanted in the first place.”

Noah’s eyebrows shot up. By the time I’d wrapped up, my statement had become loud, my arms expressive, my tone accusatory. I sucked my teeth as I took a physical step back and relented.

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean to burden you with this. It just, I don’t know, everything has built up. It just came out of me.”

“I’m fine. I don’t mind. You’ve obviously got a lot on your mind.”

“And nobody to discuss it with. I mean, I have Lucas, and he’s wonderful. But I can hardly discuss him with, well, him.”

“I beg to differ. I think discussing Lucas with Lucas is a great idea. I mean, he’s part of the relationship, too. Don’t you think he deserves to know what’s going on in your head?”

“While that’s true, I have been up front with him. I explained to him that I wasn’t seeking anything serious. Nothing permanent. From a relationship to a homebase.”

“Great. Good. Then you guys are both on the same page.” Noah gazed over my expression. “Yet you’re still conflicted.”

“What are you, my therapist?”

“A concerned citizen? A friend? I don’t know. You seem to have an issue putting titles on things, so just call me Noah. I’m a simple guy. I don’t need a label.”

That made me laugh, and it relaxed me somewhat. “Thanks. I appreciate that. The thing is, I do care about your brother. But my past relationship sort of happened to me. I didn’t have much control in my life. Now I feel like I’m

spiraling out of control again, and frankly, I don't know what to do about it. It's not like I want to pull away from Lucas, but I don't know how we're supposed to keep our distance when we love each other."

I blinked. Noah blinked. We both stood there in silence.

"I can pretend I didn't hear that if you want," Noah offered.

"I'd appreciate that," I said quickly. "I just meant... I mean..."

"I understand." He spared me. "Let me tell you something, Chloe. I've known my brother since the day I came out of the womb. He's a good man. A solid, stable man. He might be bossy when it comes to his work. He might be stubborn when it comes to doing the right thing. He might even be an asshole if he believes in what he's standing up for. One thing he's not is controlling of the people he loves."

I swallowed. "Yeah, I can see that."

"If he loves you, which everyone and their mother can see that he does, he's not going to ever try to control you or lead you in a direction you don't want to go in. Think of him like a trellis."

"A trellis?"

"Lucas is the trellis for the entire Donovan family, and most of the DiMaggio gang as well. Fucking sturdy as hell. He's the constant in our family. He's been there since the beginning. He lets anyone plant themselves around him, intertwine their lives with his, and he's going to support them all. Vines might keep climbing up him, but he isn't going anywhere. All Lucas wants to do is help people."

"I can see that."

"I'm running out of these damn gardening analogies, but suffice to say he's the one who helps others grow around him. He helps *others* reach for the sunlight, and all that shit. He's happy to see people blossoming around him. He's never been the one to try and be in the spotlight. He does the stuff nobody

else wants to do. He took on our dad's company. He hired that kid to work for him who can barely tie his shoes—”

“Trevor?”

“That's the one. His mom's sick, and Lucas sends the kid home with food three days a week. Pays him a handsome salary for shuffling papers around the office. Really tries to teach him, give the kid a leg up for the future.”

“I didn't know,” I whispered.

“You don't know a lot about Lucas because he won't tell you.” Something flashed across Noah's eyes, but he let it pass. As if he wanted to spill the beans on something else Lucas was involved in but couldn't because of some brotherly code.

“What are you thinking?” I pressed. “There's something you want to tell me.”

“It's Lucas's place to tell you. I'm just saying, if you're worried about life happening to you, that's not what you're going to get with my brother. He'll be the rock you've always wanted. If you decide to leave town, he's not going to stop you. He might fight like hell to keep you here, but at the end of the day, he's going to let you do whatever makes you happy.”

My stomach felt empty inside. “Now I just feel like a dick.”

“No, no.” Noah quickly shook his head. “I'm just giving you my perspective, a brother's perspective. As much as I needle Lucas for being a stick in the mud, he's the support that's held this family together since our dad passed. Consider this my penance. You know, saying nice shit about him. It happens once in a blue moon. Don't tell him I told you any of this.”

I grinned. “Your secret's safe with me.”

“Taking a step back, looking at it from your lens, I get it. You really should look out for yourself. Lucas doesn't want to be with someone just because they feel guilty about leaving.” Noah's eyes were serious. “He deserves to be with someone who's with him because they fucking can't live without him.”

I licked my lips. “That’s from my side?”

“Yeah, I got a little sidetracked there. Sorry. You do what you have to do, and we’ll all respect it. I’m just giving you the two cents you didn’t ask for because I think it’d be a shame if you left town because you were afraid of what Lucas could or couldn’t give you. Ask the man for the moon, and he’ll deliver it. That’s all. I’m done. When you see Lucas tell him he’s an ass and still owes me lunch from our deal.”

Another laugh bubbled up in my throat. I charged Noah and gave him another hug. Noah stood stiffly for a moment, then returned the hug, melting like a gummy bear against me.

My heart thumped, and I knew somewhere deep down that this was what I’d always wanted. This had always been my dream. Family. People who cared about me. People who didn’t look at me like an inconvenience, a piece of their life they could live without. I’d found it here. I wanted more of it, terrifying or not.

“Thanks for everything.” I sniffled, stepped back. “And thanks for the work on the truck too.”

Noah laughed, ruffled my hair again. “Anytime, hon. I’ll finish this baby up and get her ready for your final walk-through in a week. I hope I’m first in line for a taco.”

“On the house,” I said. “A lifetime supply.”

He grinned at me. “Can I get that in writing, Lucas Donovan style?”

Chapter 25

C *hloe*

When I made it to Lucas's office, I felt buoyant, like a realization had clicked into place, and it was finally setting some of my stress and anxiety free. Noah's words had tipped me over the edge of understanding, sure, but it was more than that. Over the last few weeks, Lucas had been proving himself to me over and over again, and I couldn't ignore it any longer.

And it was more than just Lucas. The town itself was starting to grow on me. The quiriness of Fantasie and the people who inhabited it were working their way into my heart, slowly but surely. The friendships I'd made here felt more real than anything I'd experienced in a decade of befriending humans in New York.

As I pushed open the doors of Donovan & Associates, I found Trevor behind the front desk. The bit Noah had told me about Trevor, about his ailing mother, rang in the back of my head. I'd have never known Lucas had hired him as a sort of favor because *that* was the sort of man Lucas was. The sort of man behind the scenes, helping people out, never asking for recognition. The exact opposite sort of man that Paul had been—a man who had sought praise at the expense of our relationship. My throat felt tight.

"Hi, Trevor," I said. "How's your mom?"

The young man did a double take at me, long-ish hair flipping around his face. Then he gave a soft smile. "She's having a good day today, thanks for asking."

Trevor didn't seem alarmed at my asking about his personal business. In fact, he seemed grateful I'd cared enough to remember. He seemed familiar with me, used to me, as if I was a staple in this town. Like *of course* I knew about his mother because I lived here.

“I’m really glad to hear that,” I said. “If you ever need anything, help or whatever, I’m usually around.”

“Thanks, Chloe. That means a lot. I’ll be sure to let her know you offered.”

I nodded again, then I turned on a heel and marched toward Lucas’s office. I had one hand on the door when Trevor called out, but by then, it was too late.

I was already stepping into Lucas’s office. The moment I laid eyes on him behind the desk, I blurted, “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Lucas stilled, looked up at me. Then he carefully lowered his cell phone, which I hadn’t seen him holding. After a brief pause, he spoke directly into the speaker. “I’m going to need to call you back.”

I gulped as he disconnected his call abruptly.

“Um, sorry,” I said. “I didn’t realize you were on the phone. I guess Trevor was trying to tell me that, but I barged in anyway.”

“No, it’s fine.” Lucas stood. “Did I hear you right?”

“Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know.”

Lucas’s eyes darkened. “Maybe you need to repeat what you said so I can be sure. So we can both be sure.”

I kicked the door shut behind me. My chest felt constricted as I faced Lucas. He’d been moving toward me, stopping only when he was within kissing distance. Well within the danger zone, the zone in which Lucas Donovan made my brain start to glitch.

“I-I think I love you.” I expelled a hard breath. “I mean, I feel like I *know* I love you.”

“I love you right back.” Lucas closed the distance between us, pulled me to him, and crushed his lips to mine.

“Christ, I’ve been dreaming about hearing you say those words.”

“I know it’s fast.”

“It’s not fast,” Lucas argued. “I’ve been waiting my whole life for you.”

“But—”

“I’m a man who knows what I want. I’m not going to let you slip through my fingers if I have any say in the matter.”

“But—”

“We’ve spent practically all our waking moments together since we met. For all intents and purposes, we’re living together. We eat together. Fuck, you took the garbage out last night, sweetie. I’ve seen every inch of you naked. I want to marry you.”

“What?” I gaped at him.

“I don’t need to spend another second without making sure everyone in this town knows you’re mine.”

“According to Noah,” I said with a gentle smile, “people are already aware.”

“Then let’s make it official. We can pick out a ring tonight.”

My pulse skyrocketed. “No, Lucas. You didn’t hear me out. I don’t want to get married.”

We were still wrapped in an embrace, but as the words came out of my mouth, Lucas’s eyes flashed. His grip on me loosened slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’m not ready to get married. I—well, frankly, you didn’t even ask me.”

“You just said you love me.” He raised two fingers. “Twice. I made you repeat it so I could be damn sure I heard you correctly.”

“I do love you.” I stepped back further, trying to get some clarity in my head. I pressed my hands to my heart. “But I’m not ready for marriage.”

“What’s missing?”

“Nothing! Why aren’t you getting this? I just need time.”

“Okay, okay.” Lucas raised his hands. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to pressure you. I’m just trying to understand.”

“Look, I heard you. You’re a man who knows what he wants.” My lips quivered. “I’m not that confident in myself yet. You’re lucky, Lucas, you’ve never been crushed like I have in a relationship. You don’t understand what it’s like to have your identity so tied to someone else you forget who you are. I still don’t really know who I am. I’m working on it, but I’m not there yet.”

“I understand,” he said softly. “I know exactly what it means to live a life that other people tell you to live.”

I licked my lips. “I suppose maybe you do.”

“Look, if time is what you need, time is what you’ll get. But I will ask you to marry me again. If that’s okay with you.”

I gave him a flimsy smile. “I think I’d like that. Someday.”

“Maybe we can work out some sort of tell.” Lucas’s face looked hopeful. “I don’t want to pester you about it. I figure you’ll know when you’re ready, but I’d like a nudge so I don’t sit around for no reason. Because I don’t want to wait. What do you say?”

“Do you mean a code word? Like banana or something?”

He hesitated, then barked a laugh. “Preferably a word that gets used less than banana. I don’t want you to offer me a banana split trying to be your sweet self, and then I walk out the damn door to buy a ring when you just wanted to feed me a sundae.”

“Okay, so... kumquat?”

“What the fuck, Chloe? What is it with you and fruit code words?”

By this time, we were both rolling with laughter. I stumbled forward against him, claspng onto his thick arms for balance.

Swiping at my eyes, I peered up at my hunk of a boyfriend. “So *not* rambutan?”

“What the hell’s a rambutan? No. Something that can’t be misinterpreted.”

I blinked, let the lingering giggles subside, then leaned into his chest. He seemed so tall today, so large, so protective. I snuggled deeper into his arms for a moment, took a breath of his sharp, woody scent.

Then I pressed my lips to his ear. “How about I tell you that I can’t wait to spend forever with you?”

Lucas’s hands slid around my back. He pulled me to him, and I felt the hardness of him against my lady bits. My panties were already getting damp just feeling how turned on he was.

“Do you feel that?” he muttered to me. “How hard the thought of spending forever with you makes my cock?”

“I wish you didn’t have windows in here,” I muttered. “Or I’d, you know, ask about a little celebration.”

Lucas picked me up, my legs cinching around his waist. He gave a little shift so that his erection perched at my entrance despite multiple layers of clothes. When I ground against him, he groaned. “Shit.”

“I know,” I murmured. “I don’t think I can wait until tonight.”

“Lunch, then,” he growled.

“I can’t. I’m helping Josie.”

“Lunch,” he repeated. “I’ll pick you up from the farm. God help us all if you say you can’t be there.”

I grinned, pressed my mouth to his, rubbed myself against his strained pants. “I’ll be there.”

A knock sounded on the door. Reluctantly, Lucas lowered me to the floor. I straightened my clothes and tried to fight off the blush on my cheeks.

“What?” Lucas barked through the door.

“Your next appointment is here,” Trevor called through the wood paneling. “I told them you’re running behind, but...”

“Five minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lucas rolled his eyes. When I looked at him questioningly, he shook his head.

“The kid won’t use my first name. Nobody around here goes by sir, least of all me.”

“He’s just trying to be respectful,” I said. “I’m sure he appreciates what you’ve done for him.”

Lucas’s eyes landed on me, calculating. “What do you mean? I hired him. He works for me.”

I raised my eyebrows. “It had nothing to do with helping a local kid find a job? Or help fund his mom’s treatments?”

“The kid needed some experience,” Lucas grunted. “I like to hire locals.”

“Uh huh, softie.”

“Don’t go telling anyone that baloney. I’m going to fucking murder Noah.”

I laughed, then tucked my hands around his waist from behind. I raised onto my tip toes to whisper in his ear.

“I know your tough guy act is just an act. Spoiler alert...” I nipped his ear in a slow kiss. “I like it.”

“With you carrying on like this, I’m not gonna make it to lunch.”

“Okay, then I’ll let you off easy.” I gave us both some breathing space. “But only because I know you’re crunched for time, and I actually do have a little legal issue.”

“What’d you do now?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Why do you think I’m in trouble?”

“You *are* trouble, Chloe.”

“Well, technically, it’s a spot of difficulty, but it’s your fault.”

He shot me a disbelieving expression. “Is that right?”

“You sexed me too much.”

“Yeah.” Lucas scratched at his five o’clock shadow and looked appeased. “On second thought, I’ll take the credit for that one.”

“I forgot to finish filing everything for my business license and permits. I started right when I got here. I was on top of it, and then the work went a lot faster, and I got that head injury, and I started working for Josie...”

“And then there was the sexing.”

“The sexing,” I acknowledged. “Yeah, that was part of it.”

Lucas was already circling his way behind the desk. He sat in his chair, rifled through a few drawers. Finally, he pulled out a folder and slid it onto the table. “This license and permits?”

I stepped forward, lifted the folder, and peeked inside. A lot of legalese covered those pages. I noted a few red stamps that said *Approved*. Some business documents and a permit with a sticky note on it that instructed it be hung in my window.

“What is this, Lucas?” I asked quietly. “I don’t understand.”

“You left the unfinished paperwork on the counter one night. I took a peek and saw they were almost done. I thought I’d just get them filed for you in case, you know...” He gave a faux-bashful shrug. “In case the sexin’ was too much.”

I smacked him on the arm with the folder full of papers. “Oh my God. You didn’t, Lucas. So this is all ready to go?”

“You’re ready for business, babe.”

“Are you serious?”

“Do I joke about legal matters?” He gave a shake of his head. “Everything you need to run Taco Bout Love is right there. You can look through it. Get your signage posted and you’re golden.”

“I don’t know how I can ever thank you.” I shook my head, mystified. “I’ve been beating myself up for not following through on this. It’s my own fault. Plus, I let myself get distracted by a man—which is what I told myself I wouldn’t do—and I thought I’d lost a couple months of work getting myself so behind. Yet here it’s *because* of you that I’m ready to go sooner than I ever thought possible.”

He deflected the praise. “It helps that I can push things through a little faster. I know the ropes around here.”

“It helps because you took the initiative to do it yourself. Otherwise, they’d still be sitting on the counter.”

“I was hoping you didn’t think I overstepped. But I figured it was better to be prepared, and if you were upset, I could rip this shit to pieces and let you file for yourself.”

My eyes smarted. “I really do love you. And not because you did this for me. I mean, partially because you did, but not because of the monetary aspect or anything. Just because you literally cared enough to do it.”

Lucas rose from behind his desk. He came around, sat on the edge of the desk, and pulled me between his legs. My hands fell to rest on his thighs. His hand came up, cradled my chin, demanded I look at him.

“I know your ex-boyfriend fucked up your relationship and that had a big effect on you. He screwed up badly, and the things I’d like to do to him for hurting you...” Lucas shuddered, shook his head, let it go. “That’s on him, Chloe. I know you’ll need some time to heal, but that’s what I’m here for. To help you. To be patient. To be whatever you need, when you need it. You need me to sock your ex in the face? I’m there. You need me to never mention his name again and give you five years to regain your self-confidence? I’m there.”

I shivered, leaned into him. “I don’t know what I did to deserve this.”

“You’ve always deserved this. Some asshole just took advantage of the angel you are, and that’s a damn shame. But I’m trying not to be too pissed at him because that’s the road

that got you to me, and I'm never going to be sorry you landed in my arms."

I licked my lips. "A part of me feels like I should be annoyed that you did this without telling me. That it was overstepping your boundaries."

"I thought you might feel that way. It was a risk."

"But I can't bring myself to feel annoyed," I admitted. "It was so selfless of you. You didn't do it for yourself, so no matter how much I want to be on my own, I'm happy you did it. I appreciate the help."

"I want to show you what a true partnership can be. I don't need to be your official business partner in order to want to help you, Chloe. Because I'm your partner in life, I want to help you achieve your dreams *just because*. A happy Chloe makes me a happy man."

"If this situation were back in New York, Paul wouldn't have done this for me," I said. "He'd have sat back purposefully and blamed me when we had to push back the opening."

Lucas raised a hand, toyed with a strand of hair that'd worked its way loose around my cheek. "That's not love. That's bullshit. I love you. I'll never not want what's best for you. If you need some more time for me to show you that, I'm in. I'll prove it for as long as you need."

"Thank you, Lucas. Thank you for everything." I leaned in, my lips softly dancing over his. I could feel him hard against me—his abs, his arms, his erection. He was hard all over, and I was mush against him.

The low growl that escaped as his tongue slipped between my lips, claiming me as his, marking me, ruining me for any other man, was primal. I wanted him inside me, urgently, not because I was turned on, not because he was the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on, but because he was a continuation of me. He'd spent the last couple of weeks earning my trust, day by day. Cementing himself as a rock in

my life. Supporting me, propping me up so I could grow. Noah's trellis theory weighed in the back of my mind.

"I want you to be my trellis," I said, pulling back.

"What the fuck?" he said again. "I cannot keep up with the way your mind works sometimes."

Grinning, we parted as Trevor knocked again on the door. Lucas ran a hand through his hair.

"I hate to break up the party," Lucas grunted, "but—"

"I've got to go anyway." I raised the folder stuffed with legal papers. The only time a legal document had helped me to fall in love with someone. "I've got some work to do if I'm going to be ready for next weekend."

Chapter 26

L^{*ucas*} “Are you ready?”

I rolled over in bed and pulled my darling Chloe closer to me. I kissed her neck, knotted my fingers in her hair, pulled her head back toward me while pressing my already-hard cock against her bare backside.

She let out a sleepy, happy groan. “Ready for what? We just had sex, like two hours ago, Lucas.”

I gave a soft laugh against her neck. Inhaled deeply. “I meant for the day. Your big day. Taco Bout Love’s opening day.”

She stiffened against me, realization shifting her from the fogginess of a cozy, quiet morning into the reality of the day that lay ahead. “Holy guacamole. I can’t believe it’s actually happening.”

“You seem nervous. Maybe I can help you relax?”

“Tempting as your offer feels against my butt, I need to get going.”

“You can spare five minutes.”

“Since when has anything ever taken you five minutes?” Despite her spoken resistance, she rolled over to face me. She was wearing some sort of skimpy dress, but it was mostly for show since I’d already fucked her in it last night. Then early this morning. Chloe hadn’t bothered to put her panties back on. I bit out a sigh as she threw a naked leg over me, teased me with a little naked shimmy against me.

“You’re playing with fire.” I hissed. “I hope you know what you’re doing to me.”

“I hope you know what you do to me. Touch me and find out.” She grinned, nuzzled against my neck. I couldn’t breathe.

“I suppose I have five minutes. But you’re gonna need to be quick. Can you promise me that?”

“Baby, I’m about to come right now with the way you’re teasing my cock. But since you asked...” I slid a finger inside of her. Two. I just about exploded then and there. She was already dripping for me. “Yeah, that’s not gonna be an issue.”

Her hand reached down, fisted my erection. She ran her hand teasingly down my shaft, and I sucked in air like a dying man. She knew exactly how to touch me, exactly how firm, how fast. Her soft fingers moved over me like she was a one-woman orchestra playing her masterpiece.

With a surprising burst of alertness, Chloe focused her strength on getting me to lie flat on my back. She perched herself on top of me, teasing me, hovering over my dick.

Then she playfully slid lower, trailing kisses over my abs, to the ticklish spot on my side, the spot that never failed to make me squirm while her eyes gleamed with an evil relish, until she finally, blissfully, took my smooth dome in her mouth. I couldn’t hold back a sigh. Angels were singing somewhere, I was sure of it.

“I hate to say this, but you won’t need five minutes at this rate, and I need to be inside you. I want to fill you. I need to fuck you now.”

Chloe was already breathless, her eyes hazy with the same need I felt deep in my chest. I gripped her by the hips and jerked her upward. Then I plunged her down without warning. Rough, hard, impaling her as deeply as possible.

“God, you’re stretching me.” She leaned forward, a hiccup of bliss escaping her lips as she let out a sob. “I need more. Rough. I need you to make me forget about how nervous I am.”

I moved within her, pulsing my cock into her until I bottomed out, and then some. I couldn’t hold myself back, taking her, filling her, feeling her bare sex on my shaft.

Her head rolled back as we fucked, her breasts bouncing before me. I fisted a handful of her soft flesh, and the image of

her on top of me forced me to pull out every single trick in the damn playbook to not explode into her sweet channel right then and there.

She bucked, her inner walls starting to quiver. I kneaded her ass as she rode me, taking over, controlling every pulse like she was a sex goddess.

“You feel so good,” I said. “I can’t—”

“Lucas,” she moaned. “Lucas, God, I love you.”

The moment she uttered the words, I lost control. I turned into an animal, my hands claiming her thin hips, digging into her waist so hard it’d leave my markings on her body.

“You’re mine,” I grunted, as I spilled myself into her. “Mine.”

She rode me until the ends of the earth then, forcing both of our climaxes to last for what felt like an eternity. She drove us both home, fast, furious, as we rocked against one another like the world was going to end.

When the last waves rolled over us, Chloe finally gave in, collapsing against me. Still inside her, I curled her to me, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and tugged her hair so she was looking at me.

“I love you.”

She heaved out a huge breath. “I love you, too.”

We rested there, breathing heavily, the aftereffects of our climax pulsing around us, electrifying the room. It was perfection.

“Thanks for that, by the way,” she eventually said, trying to sound casual as she rolled off me. “I do feel a lot less stressed now.”

“Happy to be of assistance.”

Chloe grinned. “I’m going to hop in the shower.”

“Need a partner?”

“Only to hold me up. My legs are too wobbly to support myself.”

“I’ll be your damn trellis, even though I still don’t know what the hell that means.”

She burst out laughing, shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. Just show up at 1 p.m., please. I’d like you to be my first customer. Honorary, of course.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else. You sure you don’t want me to come by sooner? I could help you out. Sous chef promise and all that.”

“I’ll take you up on that sometime,” Chloe promised. “But today, I need to do this by myself.”

I threw my legs off the edge of the bed. “I’m proud of you. You’re going to do great.”

“I hope so.” Her eyes clouded with concern. “I’m worried people won’t like it, but I guess we won’t know until we try.”

“Babe, you’ve force fed everyone in this town so many ice cream samples over the last two weeks that I don’t think it’s a stretch to tell you how much everyone’s gonna love it. I had people showing up at my office asking how they could buy a pint from you, and you weren’t even open.”

She licked her lips. “Well, I suppose it’s do or die today.”

“Everyone’s gonna Taco Bout Love.”

“That’s a horrible pun. It’s like a dad joke, and you’re not even a dad—” She stopped herself, her eyes darkening. “I, uh, I need to get in the shower.”

As Chloe scurried into the bathroom, it took me a minute to piece together what had just happened. The joke, the dad thing, and then it hit me. She’d referenced me being a dad, and that had brought up the whole kid thing. It was obviously still a sensitive topic for Chloe, even though I’d tried my best to assure her it didn’t need to be one.

As I shrugged into some boxers and went to make coffee, I felt a chill go through my spine that had nothing to do with the

open windows letting in the cool morning air. I didn't like the brief glimpse of fear in Chloe's eyes.

I knew she loved me. She knew I loved her. But that didn't mean she wouldn't get skittered with how close we were getting, how fast we were moving, thanks to her douchebag ex.

As I prepared to support the woman I loved on one of the biggest days of her life so far, I couldn't kick the sense of foreboding in my stomach.

Something about that look in Chloe's eyes had reminded me that she wasn't mine, not yet. I'd forgotten that, despite how honest she'd been. Despite her arguments that she didn't want to get married. I'd been able to overlook it all not because I didn't believe her, but because I knew her well enough to know she loved me with her whole heart and soul. And if two people who loved each other with their whole hearts and souls didn't end up married, then who the fuck did?

With another sigh and a second attempt to shake off the anxiety in my spine that something had spooked Chloe, I pulled on my pants. I shoved a ball cap on my head in an effort to look less like a lawyer and more like my girlfriend's number one fan, and I prayed that Chloe Brown would trust me to take care of her in this life and the next.

Then, chucking my weighty thoughts into the abyss—at least for now—I focused on what I could control, and that was being the man that Chloe Brown needed me to be. Today, that was a man who stood by her side; her biggest cheerleader and number one fan; a man who hovered in the background while she worked her magic and took center stage.

I set to cracking eggs into a pan, adding some bacon and sausage and some leftover rolls from our last family dinner. I prepared the heartiest breakfast I could manage, and I was rewarded when Chloe got out of the shower and smiled like it was Christmas morning.

“This is incredible,” she said inhaling the food like it was oxygen. “You can be my sous chef anytime you'd like.”

I kissed Chloe on the forehead as she finished shoveling down her food. “Now get out of here. Clean-up’s on me.”

“But—”

“Go.” I pointed sternly toward the door. “Or risk me trying to take a peek down that very sexy shirt you’re wearing.”

To cement my threat, I gave Chloe a tap on the rump that was firm enough to have her squealing in glee on her way to the door. Once there, she turned to face me, hovering in the entrance.

“Thanks for everything, Lucas,” she said softly. “I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

Then she was gone before I could respond, and I was left alone with the dishes. As I scrubbed plates and watched Chloe take off down the path, I could only hope that the nervous grip around my heart was just a precaution to warn me about how much I loved that woman, and how much it’d hurt if she left... and not the sense of foreboding I suspected it might be.

Chapter 27

C *hloe*

I rolled up the sleeves of my shirt, unlocked the door to my shiny new baby, and reflected on just how far things had come since these wheels had rolled into town nearly two months before. Or technically the previous wheels, since Noah had thrown on a new set for me.

In some ways, the truck was symbolic of my life. When I'd arrived here, I'd been myself—Chloe Brown—but a bit damaged. Falling apart in some areas, in need of a fresh coat of paint, desperate for some upgrades to my personal life.

As I studied Taco Bout Love, I was happy to see that she was the same vehicle she'd been all along. She still wore a purple coat of paint; it had just been given a makeover. The upgrades inside hadn't changed anything on the outside, but it sure made for a more pleasant driving experience. Getting my dessert truck going had been a labor of love, and not on my part alone. The number of people who had donated money, time, and assistance to support the process brought tears to my eyes.

Climbing into my truck, I hummed a little ditty as I prepped for opening day. I started the ice cream maker and dumped in a pre-prepared mix of my homemade vanilla recipe. I checked the freezer storage to make sure the batches I'd made over the last week were good to go. I whipped up a couple of crepes to get the crappy ones out of the way in lieu of the pretty ones I'd need to serve my customers.

Like my truck, I, too, had gone through a bit of an internal and external makeover since arriving in Fantasie. Today I wore flat, practical white sneakers with my cleanest pair of hand-me-down overalls from Josie. I hadn't felt the need to wear black and dress in heels to celebrate the grand opening of Taco Bout Love.

As I scooped one batch of ice cream into a container, I felt stronger than I had in years. My arms and face were tanned. I had gained a couple of pounds, but it was all muscle. You could actually see that I had something resembling a bicep, albeit a very small one.

I'd been eating good food, most of it grown on Josie's farm or cooked in Chuck's café. I had given up subsisting on sushi and lattes, mostly because the only person with a stomach strong enough to eat the sushi served in Fantasie was Hairy Harry.

I knew the names of the people who lived near me. Or rather, near Josie and Lucas. I'd lived decades in New York without knowing my neighbors' names, let alone their schedules, coffee orders, and the names of their grandchildren—all of which I knew here.

“Good morning, honey.”

I swiveled around, startled, having spent the first hour in my taco truck lost in a heady mix of pleasant reflection and intense focus on making sure everything was in correct working order.

“Hi, Lily.” I relaxed, finding Lucas's mother standing at the doorway to the truck. The window wasn't open yet. “Taco Bout Love doesn't actually open for two hours yet. I'm just getting things ready.”

“I just wanted to volunteer a hand if you needed anything.”

“Thank you,” I said. “That's so kind of you. But you, Lucas, everyone in Fantasie have given me so much. I think I'm all set.”

“Well, I can't wait to hop in line. I think I might have to camp out now to get a spot with how much everyone is anticipating today's grand opening.”

“Oh, now you're just making me blush.”

“It's true.” She peered inside, approval on her face. “We haven't had anything this exciting happening in Fantasie since Millie opened her fragrance boutique, and she was able to quit

her nanny job in the first three hours of the store opening because people were so thrilled.”

“That’s quite impressive.”

“We here in Fantasie like to support our own,” Lily said mildly. She rested a hand against the polished door. “Speaking of, do you have any idea how long you’ll be around?”

“Around?”

“Here. In Fantasie.” Lily cleared her throat. “I just noticed you haven’t mentioned anything about leaving lately during our family dinners.”

Our family dinners. We take care of our own. I hadn’t missed the way Lily was speaking as if I was already part of the family. A sensation of hope bloomed within me that hadn’t been there before, possibly ever.

Maybe it wasn’t so crazy to think that what I was experiencing was real. My love for Lucas. My love for this town and its nutty inhabitants. My new business that may or may not be a success here.

“I’m honestly not sure.” I bit down on my lip. “As Lucas’s mom, I’m sure that’s not what you want to hear.”

Lily gave me a gentle smile. “My son is strong. I love him, I care for him, I’d die for him. But that man can take care of himself.”

“Right.”

“He’s capable of making his own decisions. Of choosing who he loves and who he lets in.”

“I don’t intend to hurt him.”

“I know that. I understand you love him.” Lily’s face took on a pensive expression. “Unfortunately, that is the very reason why you *could* hurt him. Because you love him so, and he loves you, and you don’t want to hurt him. That does always make things more difficult.”

I cleared my throat. “I was up front with him.”

“I realize that. You’re very honest.”

It sounded sort of like a compliment and sort of not, but I let it slide. “Like you said, I do care for your son. I wanted him to know what he was getting into when we started...” I swallowed. “A relationship of sorts. I come with baggage.”

“Don’t we all.”

“He doesn’t,” I offered. “He’s perfect.”

A smile flitted on her lips. “You didn’t answer my question. Why would you leave when everyone you love is here?”

I paused, feeling something twist in my gut. “It’s complicated.”

“Is it?” Lily asked as if she was genuinely curious, but it seemed mostly rhetorical. “I’m actually not sure there’s anything simpler.”

“I’m just starting a new business, getting on my feet...” I cursed under my breath as I noticed my batch of mint ice cream was starting to overflow. “Sorry, I’m trying to focus here. Maybe we could continue this conversation later?”

“Oh, dear, there’s no need.” Lily flashed a brilliant smile. “I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. I just want you to know, if there’s anything we can do to convince you that setting down roots isn’t so bad after all, let us know.”

“I will,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

“Now, let’s get back to business. These are for you.” Lily reached down and plucked something off the ground, just out of sight. “Congratulations, darling. You deserve all the success you have today and more. We are all glad you chose Fantasie to be your new home, however temporary.” Lily practically staggered under the weight of a huge terracotta pot filled with blooming dwarf sunflowers. “Where would you like them?”

“Wow, these are beautiful.” I hopped down, relieved her of the pot, and positioned it in front of the truck’s window so people would see the blooms as they approached to order.

“I planted them, grew them myself in the inn’s garden,” Lily said. “They remind me of you. All dark and New York-

ish on the inside.” She pointed at the large black interior circle. Then she winked at me, moved her fingers over the petals. “But when you let your hair down, you’re pretty bright and magnificent, don’t you know.”

Then she leaned in, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and turned—hurrying away in her sweeping white dress—before I could say another word.

I’d barely shaken off my interaction with Lucas’s mother and hopped back in the truck before another voice nearly gave me a heart attack. I turned and found another friend there.

“Josie,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“I brought you something.” Josie grinned at me, tucked her braided hair behind her back. She was weirdly out of breath. “Hang on a second.”

I paused what I was doing, holding my spatula like a sword as I glanced out the open door. “What in the world? Where did you go?”

A moment later, Josie huffed back into sight pushing an old, rusty red wheelbarrow. It was full to bursting with flowers. Dahlias, the last of the peonies, some special tulips whose bulbs I knew she’d chilled and grown separate from the ones in the ground. There were floppy snapdragons and loopy lupines. Daisies. Korean lilacs.

“Holy moly,” I said. “That’s got to be, like, five hundred dollars worth of flowers.”

“Happy opening day!” Josie threw her arms in the air above her. “Can I help you decorate your cart?”

“I mean, how can I say no to that?”

“Exactly.” Josie flew into the truck and kissed me on the cheeks, just like Lily had done. Very European for a town in which ninety-nine percent of its citizens had never left the county lines, let alone traveled across the Atlantic.

But more interesting to me was Josie’s enthusiasm. She seemed happier about my business’s launch than I felt myself. I had never met another person, not Paul, not my New York

business acquaintances—nobody—who could be so happy for another person. It was overflowing from her. She radiated good intentions and friendship and happiness. It almost made me want to weep with gratitude.

I waved at the wheelbarrow. “They’re magnificent. Thank you.”

“It’s not opening day without a ridiculous number of florals.” Josie had already set to work sorting through the various stems, plucking blooms willy-nilly. “I’ve got a couple of buds coming to help me out. No pun intended.”

“Huh?”

She tilted her head and gestured to a figure approaching behind her. “This idiot, for one.”

“Nice to see you too.” Sheriff Finn glared back at Josie. He nodded toward a huge box in his arms. “Here you go, Princess.”

“Oh, shut up,” Josie retorted without bothering to look at her nemesis. “Hook it on to the truck already.”

I glanced in confusion between them. There’d been tension between Finn and Josie since I’d met them on my first day in town, but this was something new. They seemed downright hostile.

I watched as Finn lifted the box over his shoulder and eyed it, lining the long, rectangular edges up with the front of the truck. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and shorts. It was already warm outside, and the day only promised to get hotter. I realized Finn had brought a window box to affix to the side of my truck.

I looked back at Josie and found her refusing to look at Finn’s face but taking liberties in staring at his arms. It was objectively a nice set of arms. Muscular, toned, sturdy. I didn’t blame her. He had nothing on Lucas, but as already established, the DiMaggios had been blessed with good, quite muscular, genetics.

I pulled Josie into the cart. “What’s going on with the two of you?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. Too quickly. “I mean, nothing more than usual.”

“Uh huh.”

“What?” She didn’t look me in my eyes. She was too busy pulling a wisteria bloom from the pile and dangling the purple monster in front of her face. “This is just gorgeous.”

“Stop dodging. You stare at his arms like they’re deep-fried chicken wings, but you won’t look him in the eye. And you refer to him as *the idiot* more often than not.”

“Because he is an idiot,” she muttered under her breath. Then she finally looked up. “I’m allowed to look at his arms if I want. I’m a single woman.”

“Trust me, I’m aware. Finn’s aware, too.”

She harrumphed. “Today is about you.”

Still wondering what had gone on between my friend and the sheriff, I turned my attention back toward the timer that was going off, signaling another round of waffle cones were done and needed folding. I put everything else aside and focused on the rest of my tasks. I was due to open in T minus one hour.

Over the course of the next hour, I had more people stop by the truck than I could count. Finn called two of his brothers to stop by and help screw on the window box. It took three DiMaggios and one pissed off Josie to wiggle it into place and secure it. Then Josie set to work arranging the blossoms so they spilled out of the tub.

Ruby stopped by next. She’d knitted a stack of beer cozies that could wrap around the soft drinks I had for sale.

“First twenty customers get one free,” Ruby suggested, patting my hand. “Otherwise, charge five bucks each for them and pocket the cash.”

Chuck from The Bean Counter came by and brought a vat of coffee for me to set out on a table out front. A freebie to entice people to stop by.

“You should see the turnout this town gets when someone mentions free coffee,” Chuck said under his breath. “I once ran a two for one special and had to send my intern to buy more coffee beans from the next town over because we ran out.”

The series of visitors continued until there was such a crowd around my little taco truck that there wasn't any room for an actual line. While I appreciated the support and generosity of all my newfound friends, I would need actual paying customers to sustain my business.

When I saw Lucas's head bob in the crowd, my heart did a flip flop. My stomach churned, a mixture of nerves and excitement. Both for the business and to see the man I loved. To have both things in the same place at the same time—it was more than I'd ever dreamed.

When Lucas broke through the crowd, I noted he held something in his arms. A big, giant roll of...*tape*? I squinted, then realized what he held was actually a ribbon. A big, honkin' roll of yellow ribbon that matched the accent on my truck. He winked when he saw me staring, then barked an order at Noah to catch the other side of the roll.

The two brothers spread the ribbon across the front of my truck. Then Ruby appeared with an oversized set of shears, compliments of the Fantasie Quilter's, and handed them over. My body jolted with anticipation, the approaching deadline of my grand opening time ticking closer, minute by minute, until we were just under the five-minute warning.

Lucas popped his head in the door. “Can I help you with anything else?”

I shook my head. “I am as ready as I can get. Thank you.”

“I think people are ready to go.”

I shook off whatever nerves I could and forced my feet to march in front of the truck. I felt like a three-hour-old fawn with my knees knocking together. As I accepted the gigantic scissors, I found my throat going scratchy just as someone yelled, “Speech!”

“I—” I shrugged, felt my eyes tearing, and just nodded. “Thanks,” I rasped. “To everyone.”

Then I snipped the ribbon and a loud cheer rose from the crowd. Brushing a hand against my cheek, I hurried back into the truck before I burst into tears. Then I waited anxiously for someone—anyone—to step up and order something. One freaking item. A free coffee. I’d take any customer at this point.

Then the sea of faces parted and Lucas stepped up first. “I’d like a taco, please. Owner’s choice. I’m buying for the next ten people in line.”

I leaned forward, hissed. “You don’t have to do that.”

“He sure does.” Noah elbowed a pissed off Doctor DiMaggio out of the way to get in line behind Lucas. “I’m gonna take three. Of whatever you recommend.”

“I’d like a couple.” Doc DiMaggio winced as he touched his ribs where Noah had elbowed him. “Put mine on Noah’s tab.”

The line exploded then as people shuffled to get into place. It only took about ten minutes before I caved and accepted Josie’s offer of help to work the register. I had anticipated three people to show up, including Lucas and Josie. As I glanced out at the ocean of waiting heads on the deliciously warm summer day, I felt my throat starting to close up. I couldn’t think of three people in town who weren’t here.

“You’re a hit,” Josie murmured as she flicked her fingers over the cash register. “This is pretty incredible.”

“Oh, come on,” I muttered back, scooping ice cream into a still-warm crepe. “People are just curious. It will have to take more than one day of decent sales to sustain a business.”

“I don’t think you get it. People are desperate for something new. I think you’ve got a winner here. Just think, you can expand, too. Hot chocolates in the winter. You could travel around for festivals in nearby towns. Who knows? Maybe someone will write you up in a blog and people will

want to franchise Taco Bout Love. Either way, I think you're golden, girlfriend."

"I don't need any of that," I said. "As long as I can serve food, pay my bills, and make people happy, then I'm happy."

Chapter 28

Lucas

I stood off to the side, feeling like a drunken penguin with my chest all puffed out in pride at the fact that the gorgeous woman, the brains behind the newest business in Fantasie, was mine. She belonged to me. And if I had anything to say about it, it would be forever.

It was thrilling to watch Chloe in her element. I wondered, not for the first time, how someone could have stifled this beautiful, ambitious woman. It was clear she was in her comfort zone, thriving at creating the absolute best product she could. Every time one of her customers took a bite, gave her an approving nod, she beamed like a beacon out at sea, her face radiating light and hope and happiness.

I wanted to wrap her in my arms and take her home. To show her how proud I was of her. But I couldn't, wouldn't interfere, because this was where she needed to be. Flexing her newfound freedom, gaining her confidence back, understanding that she had everything to offer, and that anyone who couldn't appreciate her in her entirety wasn't worth his salt.

“I hoped I'd find you here.”

The small voice near my shoulder startled me. The air of anxiety in Hannah's voice set me immediately on edge. It didn't fit here, not in this crowd where everyone and their mother—quite literally—was slurping on ice cream cones, chattering about nonsense, and enjoying the sunlight as it radiated warmth onto our shoulders.

Women were dressed in sundresses. I spotted at least three rainbow colored tutus on little girls. A couple of boys were already shirtless and spraying super soakers at one another. It felt like the Fourth of July without the pressure of a holiday. It was bliss, and it was all because of Chloe. I hoped she

understood the amount of happiness she'd brought to Fantasia today.

However, the look in Hannah's eyes told me she wasn't having any of it. I wiped my hands on a napkin, then chucked it into a garbage can. I felt my fists clench as I noted a bruise below her eye. She had the baby on her hip, and he was sucking his thumb, leaned against her shoulder, his eyes half closed as he drifted between wakefulness and sleep.

"What is it?" I asked gruffly, resting a couple of fingers gently on her other shoulder and steering her away from the crowd. "What's wrong?"

We stopped moving only once we'd walked close to my office building, away from the crowd. I ushered her into the shadows, trying to keep the baby out of the midday sun. Hannah had on yoga pants and a tank top. She'd smushed a baseball cap over her dark hair, obviously trying to hide the marks on her face. Up close, however, it was useless. I could see every tinge of purple, every wash of yellow. A touch of green. It made me sick.

"He hit you," I said, when she didn't offer an explanation. Then, pushing tenderly, hoping it wouldn't spook her, I added, "Again."

She bit her lip, looked nervously down. Then, still twitchy, she nodded.

"What's different this time?"

"I'm that easy to read, huh?" She scoffed, looked down. "I'm an idiot."

"No. Not at all. Talk to me, Hannah. You know I'm here for you. And I won't say a thing to anyone. You're my client."

Her eyebrows knitted together. "I need you to serve the divorce papers today. I'm leaving. For good."

"What happened?"

"I think it's obvious." She pulled the hat off her head, exposing a deeper bruise than I'd been able to see in the shadows. "But this time, it wasn't just about me. He said he

wanted the baby. I refuse to let my baby spend even a minute with him alone. I want sole custody, and I want it now.”

“I can get that for you,” I promised. “But I’m going to need to sit down with you and get some more information. Do you have somewhere safe you can stay? We both know Carl’s not going to be happy when he sees the papers.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m just worried he’ll come after you.”

I gave a little snort. “I’m not worried about myself. I’m worried about you and the baby.”

“I—” She hesitated. “He has guns, Lucas.”

“The man’s too drunk to shoot straight,” I said, trying to appear calmer than I felt. “Not to mention, I’m related to the sheriff. I’ll be fine. Talk to me about your plans. Where are you going?”

“I don’t have a lot of money. I’m waiting to hear back from a friend who moved to Vermont a few years ago to see if she has space, but—”

“You’ll stay with me then.”

“What?” She blinked, looked at him. “No way, Lucas. You’re already charging me pennies to handle my case. I know I’m robbing you blind. I’m already putting your life in danger. That’s not an option.”

“Not *with* me, with me,” I corrected. “I’ve got a suite above the garage. It’s private with locking doors. Plenty of space for you and the baby. I’m sure my mom has a crib or something she can bring over. You’ll have your own shower, everything. I’ll give you all the keys I have so you’re the only one able to get in or out. I’ve got one set for you now, and I’ll just have to grab the other one and I’ll drop it off for you later.”

“I couldn’t possibly.”

“Go there now.” I fished my key out of my pocket. I’d get Chloe’s when I had the chance. “I’ll be there in a few minutes. I’ve got to clear out a couple of things, but it’ll take me all of five minutes. You’ll be safe there.”

She tried to argue, but I pressed the keys into her hand.

“Don’t do it for yourself,” I said gruffly. “Do it for Mason.”

On impulse, I reached out, gently stroked the strand of hair that flopped onto the baby’s forehead. It made something inside my heart pinch. So helpless, so hopeful, so pure.

Hannah watched the motion, studied the baby as his lips puckered and he took sweet, desperate little slurps on his thumb. Turning back to me, her face had changed. There was resolve in her eyes as she took the keys.

“One night,” she said. “Just so I can sort everything out. I’m leaving in the morning.”

“If you can prove to me that you have a safe place to go, I’ll let you walk out the front door without any more questions asked.”

“And if I don’t?” There was a flash in her eyes, a challenge. “Are you going to hold me hostage?”

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Not every man is a piece of shit, Hannah. You’re free to go anytime. You know that. But I think you’re smart enough to know that you and the baby are going to be in danger if you’re close enough to him. I just want you to know you’re welcome as long as you need to stay. Nothing’s going to happen to you at my place.”

Her eyes filled with tears, but she didn’t let them fall. God, this woman was strong. Strong for her baby, strong for herself. It made me even more pissed at the man who was throwing this beautiful family away—and for what? Nothing. That was what.

“I’ve got a few things to take care of,” I said. “I’ll stop by the office, pick up a few things for you guys. Make a list of what you need, and I’ll take care of it—food for the baby, whatever, and I’ll bring it over. I want you guys off the streets as much as possible. Once I’m sure you’re situated, I’ll drop off the paperwork with Carl, and we’ll go from there.”

The words *thank you* slipped from her lips, more of a mirage than anything else. Barely audible, barely apparent. It

raced through my heart.

“Can you get there okay?” I pressed.

She nodded. “I’ll see you.”

I was hesitant to leave her, but the truth was that I did need to take care of a few things. Not only that, but she’d been on her own for the past couple of weeks around Carl. Technically, nothing had changed yet. I tried to convince myself that this badass woman could get herself safely to my place without an escort. The real trouble would be once Carl realized that his wife was really, truly planning to get gone. For good.

Since I was by my office, I stopped in first and pulled out the Lansing paperwork I’d had ready for weeks. I sat, skimmed it over, double checked every *i* was dotted and *t* crossed. I already knew it was, but I couldn’t afford any mistakes.

The baby’s eyes were burned into my brain, these big, blue masterpieces snuggled against his mother’s skin like she was his oxygen. I couldn’t let anything happen to her—not only for her sake, but for the child’s. A chill skittered down my spine.

I called for Trevor, then quickly realized I’d cut him loose to go to the event. I’d even given him a hundred-dollar bill and told him to buy as many tacos for as many people as he could. Then swore him to secrecy, and he’d looked at me like I’d given him top level security clearance.

I popped out of my office with the documents tucked under my arm. They felt like a lead weight holding me down, tearing me away from the festivities. Somewhere, a mariachi band had started playing outside. I wasn’t sure if they realized that the sort of tacos Chloe was serving had nothing to do with guacamole, but hey, it added to the festive spirit. This town was nothing if not festive. Fantasie people loved any excuse to celebrate.

Up until half an hour ago, I would’ve been the one leading the pack. Cracking open a beer with my brothers and cousins, cheering on my girlfriend, savoring in this little slice of pure heaven.

I didn't begrudge Hannah for a second. She deserved freedom from her crappy husband. She deserved safety. The baby deserved the world. I was relieved she had come to me and finally meant it. But there was a push and pull of emotions with it. Fear mixed with relief. Hope mixed with sadness. Anticipation mixed with urgency.

I made my way back to the taco truck in hopes of catching Chloe's attention for a minute. I should've known better. The purple truck that'd originally been an eyesore in my parking spot was now the focal point of this town's attention. Josie had wrapped a bandana around her hair and was perspiring slightly, her fingers flying over the register. Chloe was a tornado of productivity, somehow managing to flash smiles and offer up conversation to every single one of her guests.

Yep, I thought to myself, *she was a smash hit*. Taco Bout Love wasn't going anywhere. Or so I hoped. I said a silent prayer that she'd make enough in sales from today only that it would convince her to stick around for a while. That, plus, of course, the sex incentive.

I was jostled out of the way.

Billy Burton threw an elbow at my ribs. "You already got your taco, Donovan. Get to the back of the line."

I took a step back and figured that Chloe wouldn't miss me disappearing for an hour. The line wrapped down Main Street and circled the café. She wouldn't have a chance to breathe until the afternoon sun began to wane if my calculations were correct. Plenty of time to take care of business for Hannah and still be back in time to help with cleanup for the day and plant a congratulatory kiss on Chloe's forehead. I could explain everything to her then, once she'd had a chance to wind down, in the privacy of our home.

Our home.

As I spun on a heel and headed back to the house, anxious to make sure Hannah had made it and was comfortable, I realized I liked the sound of that a little too much. I also realized that I hadn't technically asked Chloe how she felt

about me moving her into the main house to make room for Hannah.

A part of me prickled with excitement. Of course the situation was a somber one, but it was a good excuse to finally move Chloe's bags into my room. She'd refused, mostly on principle, even though she'd taken to spending most of her time with me. Going to bed with me. Dining with me. Showering with me.

I felt like I knew Chloe well enough now to say for certain that she wouldn't mind moving out of the loft for the sake of Hannah and the baby. Chloe had been born helping people. She wouldn't blink an eye; I felt confident she'd agree with my decision and took solace in that.

I ran into my mother, who had a crepe with ice cream dripping down her wrist. She licked her arm and gave me a childish grin.

"That woman is a keeper, Lucas." She winked. "If you don't marry her, I just might. I haven't had ice cream that tastes like this in... Well, forever."

"Trust me, I'm working on it."

My mother's eyes widened. "You really mean that."

It had slipped out without me intending to share the truth with my mother so soon. But that was how earnest I was in my intentions with Chloe. It even burst through my subconscious when I was distracted.

"Skip the lecture now, please. And don't get your hopes up." I dropped my voice lower. "I need something from you, and you can't ask any questions."

"Anything," Lily Donovan said, at immediate attention.

She'd always done that for me, for us boys. When I'd called her some years ago, obviously drunk at a party when I was in high school, she'd picked me up without question. No lecture, just a kiss on the forehead, a gentle, *thank you for calling me*. The look in her eyes had been enough to keep me from touching another beer until I was twenty-one.

Disappointing my mother was one of the things I never wanted to do again.

“I need a crib and some baby things,” I said. “Delivered to my house. Discreetly if possible.”

“Of course. Age of the baby?”

“He’s...” I thought a minute. I measured out with my hands about the size of a foot long sandwich. Maybe two. My mother watched me, wincing as I tried to measure out the size of Hannah’s son. “This big?”

She stared blankly at me.

“He’s almost one,” I said finally, hopelessly.

My mother gave me a kind smile. “I’ll have everything there in an hour.”

“Thanks. And like I said, not a word. To anyone.”

“Understood.”

My mother’s word was gold. I didn’t look back at her as I left her standing outside of the now-raucous crowd. I could trust her implicitly, and she’d just cut down my shopping time for Hannah, so I could head home. As soon as my mother dropped off the supplies and I was sure Hannah was safely locked into my home, I would get the papers to Carl.

On the way home, I made one final call to Finn. As he answered, I could hear cheering and a mariachi band in the background.

“Where are you, dude?” Finn asked. “Your girlfriend’s impressed the whole town. There’s no way she’s leaving now. At least, not without half the town holding onto her bumper as she tries to drive away.”

“Remember the issue I talked to you about the other day?”

Finn sobered. “What’s Carl done now?”

“Hannah’s on her way to my place. I’m delivering the papers today. This afternoon.”

“Understood,” Finn said quickly. “Whatever you need, I’m there. In seconds.”

Then I hung up, turned the celebrations in my rearview mirror, and drove home—hoping against hope that I was overpreparing and worrying for nothing. But deep down, I knew Carl’s type. I’d looked him dead in the eyes, and I knew trouble was on the horizon.

Chapter 29

C *hloe*

“Have you seen him lately?” I asked, wiping down the last of the stove. “I mean, it’s been a long day, so I’m sure he got bored and needed a break from the crowd.”

Josie looked over at me. She’d whipped her hair into a cute messy bun and fastened a handkerchief stylishly around her head. I’d look like a clown if I’d done the same thing, yet she made it look so chic and retro all at once.

“Lucas? No, I haven’t seen him. But I’m sure he’s around somewhere. You know him,” Josie said, counting cash from the register. “Everyone always wants a piece of him. He’s probably fending off new law propositions from Betsy Turner. Millie’s also been very persistent about wanting a new storefront. I’m sure he’s cornered somewhere nearby trying to fight his way back into your loving embrace.”

I kept working, glad I had something to do with my hands. It *had* been a long day. A long, wildly successful, incredibly rewarding, wholeheartedly exhausting day. I was overwhelmed. With gratitude, with the success of it all, with the high standard opening day had set. Would it last? Had everyone turned out just for the novelty of it? Was this a sustainable business model?

“Stop worrying and just celebrate. Today of all days, you deserve to celebrate.” Josie gave a soft smile in my direction. “You did all this, chica. By yourself. You made your own recipes. You fixed up a piece of junk truck and turned it into a freaking restaurant. You got the paperwork in order, everything. It’s incredible. And it was a hit.”

“I had a lot of help.”

“Sure, but it wouldn’t have happened without you,” Josie argued. “So stop being modest and split this bottle of bubbly with me.”

Josie pulled out a small bottle of prosecco she must've tucked into my little fridge unnoticed. It was pink and sparkling, and just enough for two glasses. She poured it for us, clinked mine with hers, and at the first zip of chilled carbonation, my spirits rose.

"This is really good," I admitted, "and it was a great day. I can't believe the support of this town."

"Small towns aren't so bad. I mean, we've got our problems, but we've got our positives too."

"Do you ever think about moving?"

"No." Josie smacked her lips. "I love it here. What about you? Now that you're Queen of the Taco Truck, are you going to stick around?"

"We'll see." I shuffled the rest of the ingredients back into their storage slots. "It's too early to know for sure."

"Uh huh. Well, you'd better decide before Lucas proposes."

My neck snapped up. "What? Did he say something to you?"

She blew a playful raspberry. "He doesn't need to. His eyes say everything."

"I told him not to rush anything—"

"Let's not deal with it tonight. Today's about you. Whatever the hell you want. To stay here in Fantasie, to go back to New York, whatever. I'm proud of you, sister."

We clinked glasses again, then downed our prosecco. It went directly to my head as I realized I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Plus, the day had been a warm one, hot and sticky, perfect for ice cream tacos. I felt plucky and much happier as the bubbly slipped into my bloodstream and added a bounce to my step.

"There's the woman of the hour." Lucas's voice broke through the fuzziness as he poked his head into the back of the truck.

There wasn't enough space in the truck for all three of us. Lucas himself would barely fit, certainly not with Josie and I already crammed in here. I made my way toward him, threw my arms around his neck.

"Where'd you go?" I nuzzled into his neck. My day was now complete as he pressed a kiss to my forehead. "You disappeared for a while."

"Just some outstanding business." His voice was gruff, his hands possessive on my waist. "I hated to leave, but I'll give you the rundown once we get home. For now, put me to work, boss. I want to help you finish up here so we can continue the celebration at home."

"That's my cue to go." Josie squished past us. "Donovan, have you seen Finn around? I wanted to speak with him before he left."

"He, uh—" Lucas scratched at his head. "Something came up. He took off, not totally sure what he's up to."

"Oh." Josie frowned. "That's weird since we had plans to talk. I guess he's pulling the same shit he usually does. Disappearing on me."

"It's not that," Lucas said hurriedly. "He had to do something important. I'm sure he'll explain later, when he can."

Josie shot him a confused glance. "You're a bad liar, Donovan. I know you know what he's up to. You're lucky my beef is with Finn and not you." Josie shot me a salute. "Congratulations, Chloe. Have a great night."

With a little wiggle of her eyebrows, she disappeared from the truck. I studied Lucas, but he just shook his head. I took that to mean I'd get the down low at home on whatever secret he was hiding, like he'd promised. *At home*, I thought, as I handed him a towel and set him to drying some dishes. I liked the sound of it. Too much.



“THERE *is* something I needed to tell you.”

Lucas looked over at me, his eyes glistening under the moonlight. By the time we’d finished cleaning up Taco Bout Love and headed home, it was late. Close to midnight late.

The entire cleanup session, Lucas had seemed a little jumpy. He’d been on his phone far more than usual. He’d been cagey about Finn’s disappearance. Even though Lucas had treated me to the now-familiar tender forehead kisses and playful boob-squeezes while we’d been washing dishes, I’d known something was off. I’d known it as if it were true of myself.

His mood affected mine, no matter how much I wanted to pretend it didn’t. I didn’t *want* to be dependent on anyone else, and yet here we were. I was distracted by Lucas’s issues on what should have been a very happy day of my life, and it was a struggle fighting back the little voices in my head telling me it was time to flee.

I parked my taco truck outside of Lucas’s home, front and center in his driveway. The irony was not lost on me that our first interaction had been him pissed about the purple blob in his parking space. Now here he was, offering his entire driveway to my shiny new truck, not to mention his entire home, as well as his heart.

I moved closer to be within arm’s reach. Standing too far apart felt awkward, unnatural. “What is it, Lucas?”

“We have company tonight.” His voice was low, husky and serious. “I’m sorry I couldn’t give you details earlier, but everything happened quickly, and I didn’t want to distract you.”

“You could’ve come to me,” I offered. “I would’ve dropped everything if you needed help.”

Something seemed to break in Lucas’s eyes then, and his tension dissolved into tenderness. He pulled me to him, all of my softness lining up with his hardness. His chin rested on my head for a long moment as we stood there in an embrace. I

wanted him to tip his chin down and secure his lips to mine, to promise me there was nothing wrong between us. Nothing that couldn't be fixed by the bond we'd been forging day by day, week by week, but it didn't happen.

"I offered up your suite to a woman named Hannah and her baby," he said finally. "I can't get into the details—legally. But she needs to be here for safety reasons."

"Of course," I said. "Is there anything I can do to help? I can move back to the inn, or—"

"I put your bags in my room."

The way Lucas said it was with finality. Like he'd moved my bags into his room, and there they'd stay. As if I'd have to slay dragons to get them back.

His eyes were hard marbles as they looked down at me, and for a moment, I didn't recognize him. It was then I recognized this darkness, the unfamiliarity in his gaze, as stress. Whatever was happening tonight was serious.

"Sure. Thanks," I said. "We can figure out things later in terms of where I'll stay."

"There's nothing to figure out. You'll stay with me."

The last part of his statement was unspoken. *Until when?* Until the ending that would inevitably come? Who would be the one to write off our relationship first? Would he get sick of me refusing to marry him? Would I get the itch to move on from this town, this life, before it became a very part of my DNA?

I let out a shuddering breath and started to speak, but it was interrupted by the cry of a baby. The sound warmed and chilled me at once. I'd always loved children, and the fact that I'd struggled to have my own didn't take that away from me. If anything, I'd learned how precious of a gift children truly could be, and I enjoyed being around them.

"Do you think I could say hi to our guests?" I asked with uncertainty. "I understand if the answer is no. But maybe there's something I could do to help."

Lucas considered my request, stroking my bare shoulder the whole time. He showed no surprise at my request, as if he'd been expecting it.

"I'll ask her," he said. "It's generous of you to offer, but I have to respect her wishes."

"I understand. I'll go inside and shower quickly. I'm a grease ball anyway after cooking all day. She can think about it. And please let her know that *no* is a perfectly acceptable answer."

Lucas swept me to him then, hard, fast, his lips crushing mine. His arms wrapped around me, tightening with the resolve of a boa constrictor, as if he'd die before letting me go. As if something I'd said, or something I'd done, had tipped him over the edge and caused a dam to burst.

I kissed him back like the world was dissolving around me. Nothing else made sense, at least not for those few breaths. I didn't know why there was a mystery woman in Lucas's suite. I had no clue what my future was going to look like. I didn't know where I belonged. The only thing that made sense was Lucas and me, wrapped around one another, and for now that was all I needed.

I headed to the shower, took my time rinsing off. I soaped up my hair twice to rid myself of the sugar-butter-heavy-cream scent. My heart swelled as I processed the success of Taco Bout Love's opening day, and I imagined this was what the Grinch felt like as his heart grew three times its size. How could I leave Fantasie now? How could I stay?

Reluctantly, I pulled myself out of Lucas's shower. I wandered into his bedroom, realizing I had no clue where he'd put my belongings. Shyly, I made my way into his closet. It was then I realized he'd cleared out a couple of drawers and added some extra hangers. My bag was plopped in front of the empty drawers, the intention obvious. His thoughtfulness melted me.

I threw some clothes into the drawers then pulled on some more-respectable pajamas. A Victoria's Secret T-shirt dress

and fuzzy slippers that were comfortable yet modest, seeing as we had company.

Once dressed, I followed my nose and found a pot of coffee on the counter. Lucas stood next to it.

“It’s decaf,” he said, pushing a cup toward me. “I thought you might want to relax after your day. I also thought you might be hungry, so I made pancakes.”

“That sounds perfect.” I bypassed a plate and a fork, in lieu of picking up a pancake and munching on it like I might a large potato chip. “I am beyond starving.”

He grinned. “I was just going to bring a plate upstairs for our guests. Would you like to join me? Hannah said it would be fine.”

“You’re sure? You didn’t coerce her into saying that?”

He gave a laugh. “Hannah’s like you. Strong, independent. I couldn’t make her do anything she didn’t want to do.”

“I like her already.”

I grabbed a couple of mugs and the pot of coffee. Lucas grabbed the stack of steaming pancakes. We made our way to the room I’d recently called home. It wasn’t lost on me that I’d now officially moved in with Lucas. Drawers, hangers, shared bed—everything. I pushed away the uneasy feeling to deal with later.

Lucas knocked on the door, waited for a minute, knocked again and then called out.

“Hannah, it’s me. I’ve brought Chloe, too,” he added.

Another minute. I heard a lock sliding open on the other side of the door, then a tentative eye peeked through the crack. The woman on the other side of the door visibly exhaled as she pulled it the rest of the way open.

“Any word from him?” Hannah asked without preface. She spoke urgently, nervous.

“Nothing yet,” Lucas said. “But I have Finn keeping an eye on him. He hasn’t left the house.”

Ding, ding, ding. Alarm bells in my brain went off. Now I realized why he'd been cagey about Finn's whereabouts. Finn was wrapped up in this situation too, whatever was going on with Hannah. I sensed danger. Uncertainty. And, as Lucas had observed, resolve.

Hannah's face was pretty, though her eyes were stressed and she wore no makeup, leaving the light bruise that was melding into a painful shade of green high on her cheek visible. Her reddish hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. She was thin, wiry. She wore a nursing tank and yoga pants that exposed a slim figure.

From behind her, the baby I'd heard earlier cooed a happy giggle. I peeked around the woman and saw a playpen that hadn't been there this morning.

"Come on in." Hannah waved at us. "It's nice to meet you. You must be Chloe."

"And you must be Hannah." I extended a hand and shook hers. Her grip was firm, but her fingers were cold, a little shaky. "Thanks for letting me pop up to say hi. I heard your little guy from outside and couldn't resist a peek. I'm a sucker for babies."

"He's hardly a baby anymore." Hannah gave me a faux pout. "I mean, of course he's *my* baby, but he feels so big. He's showing signs of wanting to walk."

"That's early, isn't it?" I stepped into the room, following Hannah, leaving Lucas to stare after us as I caught sight of a red-cheeked little cherub. "He can't be more than nine months, right?"

She gave me an approving smile. "He turned nine months a week ago. He's small for his age. But feisty. Aren't you, little man?"

As Hannah reached down to scoop her little man up, nuzzling him with affection, I took stock of the quick overhaul the room had undergone. New sheets and comforter on the bed. Fresh snacks, including baby friendly ones, sat on the

small tray that had formerly held a bottle of wine. A crib took the place of a small table that had since disappeared.

Someone—my guess was Lily—had transformed this place in a matter of hours. It felt cozy, homey, like a family lived here. A small family, but a family nonetheless.

I glanced over at Lucas and saw him watching me, a half smile on his face. Cautiously watching, cautiously glancing over his shoulder every couple of minutes despite having closed and locked the door. Checking his phone.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here,” Hannah said, her eyes glancing furtively at Lucas. “Me and Mason. If I know Lucas, he wouldn’t have told you anything out of respect for my privacy.”

“You don’t owe me any explanations,” I interrupted quickly. “I just asked Lucas if I could pop up and offer a hand. That’s it.”

“That’s real sweet of you.” Hannah didn’t look at me. She was focused on Mason who she had set on the ground. He pulled himself to his feet and gripped her fingers, taking wobbly steps with the help of his mother. “Y’all have already given me more than I could’ve asked for. Like I told Lucas, we’ll be out of here tomorrow.”

I squatted, made a face at the baby. “It’s Mason, you said?”

She nodded, smiling. It was the only time when her worry lines relaxed, when she looked at peace. I could tell her little boy was her entire world.

“I’m sure you’re tired, and I know kids are a lot of work,” I said. “Would you like me to watch him for a few minutes while you grab a shower or a bite to eat?”

“You have kids?”

“No, but I’ve got a lot of friends that do, and I see how hard it can be to get a minute alone.”

“Oh, I don’t need help. I’ve been doing this mom thing on my own for a long time now.” Hannah’s brows furrowed. “For

all intents and purposes. Mason has a dad, just not a good one.”

“I see.”

“Lucas is helping me out of a difficult relationship.” Hannah bit out the last words as if she wanted to say something else but was being kind in front of her son. “That’s why I’m here. Lucas delivered divorce papers to my husband today, and I’m—well, no sense mincing words, I guess. I’m hiding out here while getting my shit—sorry, *stuff* in order to get out of town tomorrow.”

“There’s no rush,” I said, squatting, then crossing my legs under me as I sat on the floor. “If it’s safe for you to be here, you should stay as long as you need.”

Mason took a few tentative crawls toward me, then turned back to his mom.

“Mason doesn’t really go to anybody but me. He’s a little clingy,” Hannah said, sounding apologetic. “It’s not you.”

“Oh, I understand,” I said softly. “What do you think, buddy? Can we give mama a little break?”

Mason took a few cautious crawls my way. He paused, reached one of those chubby fists out and patted my leg sweetly, as if testing to see what would happen. Hannah practically held her breath as he pulled himself up another couple of inches onto my lap. He gave me a hairbrush he’d been playing with.

“I’m speechless,” Hannah finally said as Mason petted my leg like he might a puppy. “He doesn’t go to *anyone*. He must really like you.”

“I’ll take it.” I gave a little tickle to Mason’s tummy. Another giggle. “I could just eat you up, buttercup.”

“So is it too late to take you up on the offer of that shower?” Hannah looked between us. “I swear, I’ll be so fast he won’t even notice I’m gone.”

“We’ll both be here the whole time,” Lucas said, his eyes meeting Hannah’s with an unspoken agreement. “He won’t

leave my sight. I swear it.”

Hannah looked uncertain, then finally nodded. She headed into the bathroom and immediately poked her head back out. “There are puffs on the counter there that he can eat. His sippy cup is over there. The rest of his bottle is in the fridge.”

I ushered her off again, then returned to giving Mason my full attention. I was vaguely aware of Lucas in the background. He alternated from a standing position near the door and a sitting position on the balcony, always scanning the front yard like a sentry.

Fifteen minutes later, Hannah emerged from the bathroom looking genuinely refreshed—pink-cheeked, smiling, hair wet but combed neatly. Mason had found a fuzzy blanket and was having the time of his life playing peekaboo with me.

“Let’s show mama how we practiced walking,” I said in an exaggerated declaration to Mason. “Come on over, Lucas. Stop pacing and stand there for a minute.”

I helped Mason to his feet, then tossed the hairbrush he’d grown rather fond of to Lucas. Lucas caught it, waved it around like a microphone he’d been given on karaoke night that he didn’t really want. But his eyes were on Mason, and his smile was encouraging as he held out his large, safe hands.

Mason screeched like a tiny dinosaur, then took one step forward, two steps. He tottered, managed a third step before Lucas scooped him up in his arms and rewarded the baby with his hairbrush. Mason grinned, obviously pleased with himself, and sucked on the hairbrush for a minute before he realized he wasn’t in his mom’s arms.

Then Mason laid eyes on his mother and reached for her, wiggling out of Lucas’s grasp. Hannah took her baby to her chest, beaming with pride, and gave him a big cuddle.

“You are the handsomest, sweetest little walker on the face of the earth!” Hannah lifted her son above her head and was rewarded with a fit of contagious laughter. “I am so proud of you.” She turned to us. “I can’t believe the two of you got him to take his first steps.”

“It was all Mason,” Lucas said gruffly. “And Chloe. I just held the hairbrush.”

“Well, the two of you are going to make the best parents a kid could dream of having,” Hannah said as she settled Mason against her hip. She blinked, shook her head, pushing back tears yet again. “It should be his daddy here, watching his first steps. Instead...”

I looked down. Lucas folded his arms, and I could see his knuckles going white as he gripped his own arms. He turned sentry on the balcony again, probably so his anger at Mason’s deadbeat father wouldn’t upset Hannah further.

“You’re absolutely right,” I promised her. “It should be him, and I’m truly sorry it’s not. But just remember that you’re not alone, no matter what. We’re here to help if you need anything. Please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Hannah nodded, about to say something, when Lucas cursed under his breath. His phone jumped in his pocket at the same time headlights turned down his driveway.

“Yeah?” Lucas answered. He cursed again. “Yeah, I see him. Thanks, Finn. I’ll handle it. I want you to be the last resort.”

Hannah was already tense as Lucas hung up the phone. “He’s here?”

“Sure is,” Lucas growled. “Finn said he thought Carl was going to the bar, which was why he didn’t call sooner. Then he changed course and came here. You stay here. I’ll take care of it. Finn’s a minute away if I need him, but I don’t want to involve him unless I have to.”

“Be careful,” Hannah said. “Do you want me to... I don’t know, try to talk to Carl?”

“You stay here,” he instructed her. “Do not open the door until you hear my voice. Got it?”

“I’ll stay with her,” I said quickly. “If you’d like.”

Lucas’s eyes met mine. “That would be good.”

I gave a nod, then Lucas was off, jogging down the stairs. I locked the door behind him. A part of me wanted to watch what was happening outside, but I resisted the urge. Hannah, and most certainly Mason, didn't need to hear what was going on. I closed the balcony doors, switched on the television, and suggested we watch a show. Hannah agreed to not-watch TV with me.

Raised voices sounded outside a few minutes later. We both ignored them.

"It's him, you know." Hannah sat on the floor. Mason sat between her legs, quietly playing with a toy. "My husband. I guess ex-husband now, or almost. I should get used to saying that."

"Lucas will be fine out there." I felt like I was reassuring her as much as myself. "He knows what he's dealing with."

"I know he will, but he shouldn't have to be out there. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I was stupid. I probably would've left Carl already, but we had Mason, and I always wanted my son to grow up in a family. A real family, you know. Two parents, a house, everything. Even though the house was barely more than a trailer, at least it was ours, you know?"

"You're not stupid for wanting that," I whispered. "How could you be stupid for falling in love with a man when it gave you the best thing you have in your life?"

Hannah's eyes fell to Mason, tears pooled then rolled slowly down her cheek. "He's the only thing that keeps me going some days. The way he looks at me, like I'm the only person in the world, makes me think there's more worth living for."

"Of course there is, honey. Of course there is. None of this is your fault. You were just trying to make things work."

"I know, but it's hard when people like y'all make things look so easy."

My head shot up as I glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"You and Lucas. The two of y'all are just, *ugh*, everything. You're beautiful people on the outside. You're the nicest on

the inside. You help people you've never met, like me. Lucas is a freaking lawyer. You're the Fancy Chef. Y'all are basically already great parents, and you don't even have kids yet."

"I probably can't have kids," I said flatly, wrapping my arms around my legs.

It felt uncomfortable to be so vulnerable, to lay out my biggest brokenness to a perfect stranger. But it just spilled out of me as if it was the missing puzzle piece.

She blinked at me. "You mean you don't want—"

"I struggle to get pregnant," I said. "I've tried. With my ex. Even when IVF got me pregnant, I had an early miscarriage. It's starting to seem like it's not meant to be for me. So, whatever you might think about how perfect someone else's life looks, just remember, it's not real. Everyone has their own problems."

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry. I'm such a bitch. Everything I said—God, I'm so embarrassed."

"You didn't know. You couldn't have, but that's the point. You don't know what other people are struggling with." I looked down at my toes. "I know your life sucks right now, and I'm sorry that your ex has put you in this position. It's not fair. But things will get better. You do have good things in your life. Mason is a blessing that came from a difficult situation. He is your rainbow. You know, I'd have given anything to have had a baby with my ex. Even if we didn't last."

It felt emptying to say it aloud, almost like an orchestra had finished playing, leaving a poignant silence behind, almost reverent in the quiet.

"I feel bad saying that, in a way." I picked at the carpet. "I don't mean it like I was using my ex to get a child. I just mean that I wanted to have a baby with him more than anything, and even though we didn't have a baby, it didn't make splitting up any easier. It feels like I walked away with nothing after giving him half of my life."

Hannah pursed her lips, watching me.

“Sure, logistically leaving him was a lot simpler,” I added. “I could pretty much pick up and leave. But that didn’t make what I was feeling emotionally any easier. You say that you feel like a failure because you couldn’t make your relationship work. You couldn’t build the family you wanted. Well, I couldn’t either.”

“That’s not your fault,” Hannah murmured. “You can’t help what your body can or can’t do.”

“Right. But the long and short of it is that neither of us are living the life we’d planned out in our head. My ex is now free to go on and try a new version of me to create the family I wanted with him.”

“That sucks.” Hannah’s gaze landed on Mason with a new tenderness. “I’m really sorry.”

“Oh, it’s fine now. I’m here. I’m surviving. I’m better off without him.”

And I knew, firmly in my heart, that I believed that now. The sharp sting had begun to fade when I spoke of Paul. It was more of a cloudy haze now, the memory of an almost-forgotten storm.

“I didn’t tell you any of this because I wanted sympathy,” I said quickly. “I just wanted to share that while I can’t understand exactly how you’re feeling, on some level, I do understand the loss you’re going through. I’m also here to tell you that things get better.”

Hannah leaned over, reached for my hand, gave it a squeeze. “I don’t know what I can say. But thank you. And I’m sorry.”

I squeezed her hand back, then we sat, pretending to watch the TV while the voices outside continued arguing. Finally, a car door slammed, and we held our breath. The knock came a minute later, then Lucas’s voice calling to let us know it was okay to open up.

“Carl is officially gone,” Lucas said, stepping into the room. “If you want my best guess, he’s headed to the bar.”

Finn's gonna cruise by once an hour for the rest of the night to make sure his car doesn't move. You're safe now."

"Thank you, both of you." Hannah looked at Lucas then me, her gaze lingering on mine with a deeper sense of appreciation. "Now, you two get out of here. I'm sure you've got some celebrating to do after the big day you had out there. You were the talk of the town, Ms. Brown."

"We'll be here all night," Lucas said, grasping for my hand. "I've got security cameras and alarms set up. But if you do need anything, call my number, call 911. Don't unlock the door for anyone but me."

"I understand." Hannah lifted Mason, kissed his cheek, and smiled as he sleepily snuggled against her. "Thank you for saving my life, Lucas."

"You did that." Lucas brushed a hand through his hair and looked away. "You're the brave one. I just handled the paperwork."

"And the brute force." I gave him a little hip check. "Let's let them get some sleep."

Lucas and I left Hannah. He waited until she locked the door, then he double checked it was sturdy. We finally headed downstairs with his hand on the small of my back. We didn't speak until we were in his house, alone, tucked into *our* bedroom.

"I want you," he said, his eyes dark as they studied me.

"I love you," I blurted back.

"Fuck, Chloe," he hissed, pulling me to his chest. "I love you, too."

Chapter 30

C *hloe*

It was a rare day I woke up before Lucas. Maybe it was all the sex haze that was currently making my brain a little loopy. Maybe it was the excitement still rattling around my bones from the success of Taco Bout Love. Or maybe, just maybe, it was because my heart was full and my head was conflicted about it.

I pulled Lucas's log of an arm off my chest and slipped out from underneath his embrace. He was like a radiator, my source of heat all through the night. As I padded across the floor in bare feet, I welcomed the coolness of the fresh morning air.

The sun was just beginning to peak up beyond the horizon. I shuffled around the kitchen feeling as comfortable as I ever had in the New York apartment I'd shared with Paul. It was technically my first morning waking up after having moved in, however temporarily, with Lucas. I set a pot of coffee to brew and took pleasure in the chirp as it started spitting hot water through the ground beans.

When it finished, I filled a mug with hot caffeine juice and shrugged a robe over my shoulders. Quietly, I pushed open the front door and stepped out into the delicious morning air.

The silence spread across the fields like a calm blanket, dampening the sounds around me. A few birds squawked. A breeze rattled the leaves on a nearby tree. The bluish sky was tinged with pink and made a beautiful watercolor in the distance.

I glanced up at the suite, saw no signs of movement there, no sounds of a baby's fussiness. The driveway was empty. I decided to take a short walk down to the garden at the end of the drive. The garden had been there when I'd come to stay with Lucas, though Lucas had mostly forgotten he'd planted anything in there at all.

Over the last few weeks, I'd taken it upon myself to have a gander through the overgrown mess every few days and scavenge what I could find. After living in New York for so many years, it was still a novelty that people out here actually grew things and ate them. The thought of rifling through some leaves to find a fat zucchini was an odd sort of thrilling for this former city mouse.

I pushed open the creaky old gate and grabbed the wicker basket I'd left hanging on a rusted old shepherd's hook. This morning was my lucky day. As I stepped through dewy leaves that left little trails of moisture on my legs, I uncovered a bunch of basil, an eggplant the bunnies had half-eaten, and a robust red tomato. I surveyed my haul happily, thinking about omelets with fresh basil and tomatoes, as I finished my last sip of coffee.

I was just about to head back when I heard it. The creak of the gate. The rustle of grass.

"Hello?" I called out. "Lucas?"

I strained to look in the direction of the noise, but I couldn't see a thing over the stalks of corn that had begun to shoot for the skies. A metallic click sounded behind me before I could uncover the source of the noise. I spun around, shocked to find a man I'd never seen before standing in front of me. Holding a gun.

"Oh, crap." I dropped my basket. The tomatoes rolled in every direction. The eggplant landed on my foot. "Who are you? What do you want? I'll give you anything you want. I don't even live here."

"You can't give me what I want." The man's face twisted up in a snarl. "That bastard took something that's mine. So I'm taking what's his."

It took me too long to piece together what was happening, but finally, the coffee kicked in and things began falling into place. "You're him—Carl. Hannah's ex."

"Ex-bullshit. I'm her husband. She's holding my kid hostage. You're going to help me get them back."

I licked my lips, studied the gun. “I’m not armed.”

“I can see that.” His eyes flicked salaciously over my body and the flimsy pajamas. “I was counting on that. Get in the car. I parked it just behind those trees.”

“But—”

“I’ll fucking shoot you.”

Even from here, I could smell the sickening concoction of beer and gin on his breath. The combination made my stomach roil. For a guy who was drunk, he was holding the gun too steady for my liking.

“And then, after I shoot you, I’ll still go after my kid,” Carl said. “So the only thing that changes here is if you get a bullet hole in you or not. I don’t think Lucas would like seeing you get a bullet hole.”

“Lucas?” I tried to play things cool. “We’re not in a relationship. I’m just staying at his house because he was nice enough to offer it. Although, *I’d* be pretty sad about a bullet hole in my body, so there’s that.”

“Move.”

Carl wasn’t in a chatty mood. He also wasn’t buying my *I’m-not-in-love-with-Lucas* schtick. Really, nobody in this town had ever bought it. I wasn’t sure why I was still trying.

“Get in the car, Princess. This is the last time I’m telling you before I let my friend here do the talking.”

Carl glanced too lovingly at the weapon in his hands. I turned, switching on the survival part of my brain. I glanced around, looking for anything I could use as a weapon. There were a set of broken shears by the other side of the fence, but short of making a break for it, there was no way I could grab them without his noticing.

Making a break for it wasn’t an option, either. It was a good quarter-mile or more down the driveway back to the house. I had the distinct feeling that if I so much as began shouting, Carl wouldn’t let me finish.

I nodded and started walking. Once we reached the trees he'd pointed out, I found a van waiting. Pale blue, mostly rusty, not in great shape. Carl instructed me to get into the passenger seat. Once I did, he tied my hands together with rope, then my ankles. He made his way around, hopped in the driver's seat, and then started the car up.

He pulled out onto the road and started driving toward the outskirts of town. Not a soul had seen us. I felt my heart sinking.

"What's your plan?" I asked him. "With me, I mean. You have to know that they're going to come after you. The police were already watching you."

"I'm not a dipshit." Carl glanced sideways at me. "I knew Finn was watching me. Why'd you think I left my car at the bar and hitched a ride with him home? I wasn't that drunk, but I let him think I was."

"Then whose car is this? Stolen?"

He didn't answer. I figured that was answer enough.

I considered my options. My phone was on the kitchen table. I didn't have anything on me that could be used for a weapon, unless lingerie counted, which was unlikely.

"So what—" I started to say, but the next thing I saw was the butt of Carl's gun as it came toward me at full force. One thunk on my forehead, then darkness.

Chapter 31

Lucas

I rolled over in bed, feeling the pinch of disappointment when an emptiness stretched out next to me on the bed instead of the soft warmth I'd fallen asleep next to. Though sleep was a relative term, considering I'd basically been up half the night either having sex with Chloe or thinking about having sex with Chloe.

I loved sharing my bed with the woman, but damned if I'd ever been so tired in my life. Between the early mornings I'd been working on the truck with Noah to the late nights between the sheets with Chloe, I was pretty sure my blood was mostly caffeine at this point.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee wound its way from the kitchen into the bedroom which helped to rouse me from my slumber. I headed to the bathroom, did a quick wash up, then made my way to the kitchen.

"Chloe?" I scratched at my chest as I surveyed the empty space. I was still too sleepy and too confused to make sense of the quiet. "Babe, where are you?"

Chloe's phone was on the counter which meant she probably hadn't gotten far. The coffee pot light was still on which meant it'd been brewed very recently. I took a moment, poured myself the tallest mug I could find, then headed onto the back patio. It wouldn't be the first time I'd found her outside as the sun rose, wandering my property as if she was just rediscovering her roots with nature. I took a deep drag of black coffee, feeling the much needed jolt as it hit my belly.

It only took a quick sweep of my gaze to figure that Chloe wasn't in the backyard either. I headed toward the front of the house and found the door unlocked, which told me I was probably hot on Chloe's tail. New Yorker that she was, she never left the door unlocked for long. I smiled as I saw dusty

footprints headed toward the garden she'd recently adopted as her own.

I strolled down my driveway in nothing but shorts and a bare chest and my mug. This was how I liked my mornings. Lazy, slow, sleepy. Filled with hot coffee and hot sex. Not necessarily in that order. Strolling my property to find the woman of my dreams.

I could already picture the smile that would spread across her face when she looked up at me and saw me coming. I'd gotten used to that smile, the way her face lit up when I walked into a room.

I didn't take a single one of those smiles for granted. I took them as small little miracles that made my everyday life incredible. The fact she reserved those pure, private looks for me, and only me, made it special. I fucking loved it. I loved her. If only she'd let me whisk her off her feet and marry her already. I wanted her to be mine.

"Hey, Chloe," I called as I approached the garden. The gate hung open on its hinges. "Where are you, babe?"

I could picture her already, rising from a crouch over some zucchini bush or tomato plant, her arms already dirt-streaked from hunting around for ripe veggies. The tanned skin of her face as she'd grin at me, tickled pink by the concept of a garden. It was adorable watching how quickly she'd gone from dressed-in-black New Yorker to sun-drenched country girl. Though she hadn't given up the lingerie entirely, and I respected that a whole damn lot too. Selfishly.

"Chloe, I brought you a coffee refresh." I held up the mug. "Where'd you go?"

I stepped into the garden and instantly froze. The mug fell from my hand. Coffee splashed up my leg, and I barely felt the heat of it on my skin. The mug landed on a hard patch of dirt with a rock protruding, and it shattered.

There, on the ground next to the broken mug, was the basket Chloe always used to gather the produce she found. Tucked inside of it were a few sprigs of basil. Ripe tomatoes

had rolled out of the basket onto nearby grass. An eggplant sat dislodged some ways off. The problem was that this wasn't natural. This wasn't how things should be. This was wrong. Something was wrong.

Alarm bells blared in the back of my head. I cursed under my breath, gave one last shout for Chloe, already knowing there wouldn't be an answer. I was jogging back down the dirt driveway and kicking up sand as I sprinted back to the house. I made my way up the stairs to the suite two at a time and pounded on the door, out of breath.

"Coming, coming," came a frightened sound from the inside. "Who's there? Lucas? Is that you?"

"It's me." I leaned against the door. "You all right? Mason okay?"

"We're fine. What's wrong?" Hannah opened the door a hair, studied me, then pulled it all the way open. "What's wrong?"

Mason perched on her hip. The flood of relief that hit me as I saw them both with my own two eyes, untouched, looking tousled and confused as if woken from sleep. Safe.

"I can't find Chloe," I said, as my side felt like it had split in two. Not from being out of shape, but from knowing a piece of me was in danger. "It looks like she went out to the garden this morning, not long ago, and then..."

"You think..." Her face paled. "Carl? But he wouldn't... What's Chloe to him? He's never even met her."

I looked at Hannah. She paled a shade deeper. We both knew he would. We'd both known it. It was the reason we'd taken so many precautions to keep Hannah safe.

"I've got a call to make," I said. "I need you to stay here. Lock the door. Don't open up until I announce myself. Understand?"

"No, this is my fault. I want to help," Hannah protested. "Oh, God. I'm so sorry. What do you think he's done? Why would he care about Chloe?"

My mind had been working in the background, and I'd begun putting the pieces together. Carl was a piece of shit that wasn't all that hard to figure out.

"He sees my helping you as me taking something he loved away," I said. "He's doing the same to me."

"He didn't love me."

"Maybe, but he sure as hell thought you and the baby belonged to him." My gaze landed on Hannah. "You don't, but Carl's not thinking straight. Now lock the damn door and sit tight. If you leave, that'll only make things harder for me. Understand?"

Fear registered in Hannah's eyes, and I could see that she finally understood. She nodded, shut the door without another word, and I heard the deadbolt slide shut. I double checked the door as I dialed Finn. I disconnected the call on the second ring because it was rendered unnecessary.

I jogged down the steps as Finn's cruiser whizzed down the driveway, spitting out gravel and dust behind it. I met him as he jumped out of the car.

"I can't find Carl." Finn was shaking his head. "The bastard fooled me. He stayed at the bar late last night. I ended up giving the idiot a ride home and throwing him onto his couch myself. He left his car at the bar. Once he was home, I went to my place for a few hours of shut-eye. I had Mack check things out for me once an hour. Carl's car never moved."

"Let me guess," I growled. "Carl's car didn't move, but he did."

"We just got a report from Hairy Harry that his mom's minivan was stolen," Finn said. "She called Harry in a panic this morning, then he called me, and I figured it out. She lives just down the road from Carl. He stole it, took off in it."

"Shit, Finn."

"I went to his house. Carl's not there. His car's still at the bar. I thought for sure he'd be passed out until at least nine this morning. Is Hannah okay?"

“He’s got Chloe.”

“Huh?”

“Chloe,” I barked. “Carl took her. She went out to the garden this morning. I can’t find her anywhere. Phone’s still here. He took her.”

“You’re sure she didn’t just—”

“Fuck you,” I said. “She’s gone, and she’s in trouble.”

“Any ideas where he might’ve taken her?”

I tugged a hand through my hair. “If I know Carl, he’ll make contact sooner rather than later. He wants his family back. He’s a wild card now with nothing to lose.”

“I’ve got police three towns over looking for the stolen car, but chances are Carl’s gonna know we’re looking for it.” Finn raised his shoulders. “If he has half a brain, he’ll either have stashed the car already, or he’ll have switched it out for something new.”

A whirlwind of footsteps startled me from my conversation with Finn. I turned to find Hannah rushing down the stairs, Mason still attached to her hip. She skidded to a stop before me.

“I told you to stay in the room,” I snarled. “I can’t look out for you while I’m looking for Chloe.”

“I know where she is,” Hannah gasped. “I’m sorry, but I know where he took her.”

Finn looked at me. I fixed my gaze on hers. “How could you know that?”

“There’s this property on the edge of town that he’s been admiring ever since we got together. It’s completely deserted. It’s something like a ten-acre parcel of land with a few outbuildings still standing. He always said he’d buy it if he could ever scrape the money together. It makes sense, right? He wouldn’t have far to go, he’d have privacy, and if he wanted something...” She shifted Mason to her other hip. “Well, he’d have to be relatively close by to get it. Wouldn’t he?”

“I know the place you’re talking about,” I said. “Right by where the Rum River winds around the sunflower fields?”

“That’s the place.” Hannah nodded. “It’s got to be.”

“Now—”

“Now I’m going back upstairs to lock myself in the room.” She retreated slowly. “I’m sorry. Good luck.”

“Hannah.” I waited while she paused, glanced at me. “Thanks.”

She gave a succinct nod then turned and essentially fled up the stairs into the suite. I turned back to face Finn.

“I’m going,” I said, already spinning on a heel and walking to the house to grab my keys.

“Let me call for backup,” Finn said. “It’ll take five minutes.”

“I don’t have five fucking minutes. I’m going. Call for your backup if you want.”

Finn had fallen into step behind me and reached out, yanking on my arm. “Get in the damn car, Donovan. I’m driving, and I’ll call for backup on the way.”



I HAD TO GIVE FINN credit. He said he'd fly, and he did. I'd never seen anyone drive so fast out of town, but he drove like the road was burning up behind him, and I had a newfound respect for my cousin.

We reached the property in eight minutes. Eight minutes too long.

"Why don't you wait here for backup," I suggested as he pulled off to the side of the road. "I don't want to get you in trouble."

"Fuck you too."

I didn't argue as Finn got out beside me. We'd left the car tucked off the side of the road at the beginning of the driveway. The two of us didn't need to speak as we made our way down the overgrown, weedy driveway to where I knew a few outbuildings sat abandoned.

I paused, reached out a hand, and stilled Finn. I nodded up ahead to where a dusty blue minivan sat tucked between a couple of pine trees. Finn's eyes narrowed. He looked at his watch, gave me a five minutes signal. Five minutes until backup arrived. Yet I couldn't wait that long. Lord only knew what Carl was doing to her in there, and I'd die before letting Chloe spend another minute in that man's presence.

"What's your plan?" Finn asked. "Because I know you ain't listening to reason, so spill."

"I haven't thought that far ahead," I said. "Bust in through the front door?"

"He's probably armed," Finn said. "I think that's a stupid idea."

"I'll go in through the window. You go in through the door?"

"Stupid. But slightly less stupid."

"I'm running low on options."

“You go around and wait at that door on the side. I’ll go through the front, kick it open, draw any potential fire my way. I’ve got a gun and a vest, so don’t fight me on it. Then you go in the side door and get your girl.”

“I don’t hate it.”

“Good. Let’s move.”

I didn’t have much time to think about actual logistics. I hated to put my cousin’s life in danger, but he was a cop, and in theory, this was what he’d been trained to do. There was going to be some level of risk no matter what, and listening to the professional seemed to be the best thing I could do to help Chloe, which was my sole focus.

We parted ways. The building that Carl had chosen looked like a forgotten log cabin. The windows were so dusty it was impossible to see through them. Landscaping consisted of scratchy weeds and overgrown wild berry bushes. I doubted anything resembling plumbing or electricity was functioning inside. There was a slight flicker of light, a flash now and again, that could be a flashlight or lantern of some sort.

I held my breath as I approached the side door. I took off the shirt Finn had handed me in his car, an extra from a gym bag in the back, and wrapped it around my arm. Then I gave the go-ahead gesture to Finn.

Finn crept forward. I poised to move. When he kicked open the front door and hollered that the police had arrived, I stopped functioning like a normal human and went on autopilot.

I slammed my wrapped fist through the window on the back door. In seconds, I had my hand through, barely feeling the jagged fingers of the glass digging into the unprotected parts of my flesh.

I cursed as I fiddled with the lock; it was stuck from years of unuse. Finally, I gave the whole knob a massive boot with my shoe, and the entire door crumpled in half.

Then I was inside, sizing up the scene. Chloe sat in a chair, eyes wide, hands secured behind her, a handkerchief tied

around her mouth. Finn was at the front door, gun drawn. I'd made a commotion coming in, and as I crashed into the cabin, I saw the metallic glint of the gun as it slid in my direction.

I dove toward Chloe just as the spit of the gun sent a bullet in my direction. A second later, another shot was fired, but I was too focused on my task to tell who'd fired it.

I reached Chloe just as a cry went up from the other end of the room. I shifted my eyes for a mere second, just long enough to make sure it was Carl who'd been immobilized by the second shot and not Finn. A split second was all I'd needed to see that Carl was down, and the sheriff was not.

I felt my heart in my throat as I saw the welt on Chloe's head. It was bruising already, and the skin was cracked, a bit of blood trickling down. I couldn't catch my breath as I untied her, my fingers trembling, and let her fall against me. I caught her, held her, running my hands through her hair over and over again, listening to the sound of her breathing like it was the only thing keeping me alive.

I had no clue how much time had passed before I realized Chloe's hair was sticky with blood. My stomach flipped over.

"Oh my God, you're hurt. You're hurt." I pulled her back and tried to size up the extent of her injuries. "We need to get you to the—"

"Lucas," Chloe sobbed, crashing back onto my shoulder. "It's not my blood. It's from you. You're the one who's hurt."

I glanced down, saw my entire forearm streaked with blood. My fist looked like it had been dipped in a pool of red paint, and I'd been matting it into Chloe's hair. I expelled a breath that felt sharp, jagged.

"I'm okay, Lucas. I'm okay. I'm not hurt," Chloe said. "I'm fine. But I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"Shh." I hushed her and held her to me. "This is not your fault."

Sometime between Finn leveling Carl and my getting Chloe untied, backup had arrived. Considering the police department of Fantasie was pretty freaking small, backup was

a much exaggerated term. I imagined Finn had called in reinforcements from the nearby cities, but it'd take them a while to get here. For now, it was just us.

“Lucas.” Chloe pressed her lips to my ear. “I just want one thing.”

“What’s that? Anything.”

She nuzzled into me, her tears dampening my cheeks. “I want to love you forever.”

“Of course, honey, I’m not going anywhere.” I paused, stroked a hand through her hair again, then did a double take. “Do you mean—is that your code word?”

She smiled, gave a somewhat hysterical laugh. “Would it be clearer if I said kumquat?”

I burst out laughing in my own hysterical way. Massive relief flooded through me. Chloe was okay. Her humor was intact. And she wanted to marry me.

My weird laugh drew some curious stares from the police guys, Finn included. I picked up my future bride and held her there, blood dripping down my arms, spattering the floor.

“You’re not just saying that because you’re concussed?” I asked her. “You want to marry me?”

“All I could think about when he had me tied up was that I’d been too afraid to tell you the truth, and the truth is that I want to be here, in Fantasie, with you.” Her lips parted, her eyes raw and vulnerable. “I swore to myself that if I got out alive, the first thing I’d do was marry you.”

“Well, shit,” I said. “Where’s a judge?”

Finn was in the middle of cuffing Carl. Apparently the bastard had survived the gunshot wound to his shoulder. He was mumbling something under his breath. Finn paused in his recitation of the Miranda rights to look over at me.

“Where are you going, Donovan?” Finn called out. “You know Chloe needs medical attention, right? Not to mention we’re gonna need some statements from you both.”

“I’ve got a woman to marry.” I pressed a kiss to Chloe’s mouth. “The rest can wait.”

“While I admire your gusto,” Finn said dryly, “the rest, in fact, cannot wait.”

I blew out a big sigh of frustration, tucked Chloe under my arm, and prepared for the barrage of red tape that lay ahead. First up was my cousin, Dr. DiMaggio, who I’d seen quite enough of lately. He arrived on the scene about half an hour after it’d been secured.

“My favorite lovebirds,” Doc DiMaggio said dryly. “Chloe, I thought I told you to stop hitting your head on stuff, yeah?”

I growled nonsensical ramblings to my cousin while he peered into Chloe’s eyes and asked her a series of questions and generally proceeded to ignore me while I bled next to her. After assuring Chloe she’d be fine, he turned to me.

“You’re bleeding,” Matt said. “Look at that.”

“They gave you a medical license?” I snipped. “Thanks for the diagnosis, Doc.”

“I wouldn’t be talking about intelligence if I were you,” Matt said good-naturedly as he took my injured arm in his gloved hands. “Why’d you put your fist through the window if you were gonna kick down the damn door?”

It was my turn to mostly ignore him while he finished dressing my arm, letting me know that I, too, would survive. Then Matt gleefully made a crack about what Grandma DiMaggio would say when she heard about this, and that shut me up pretty quick.

While we’d been talking with police and getting sized up by the doctor, Carl had been hauled off with promises that he’d be put behind bars for a long time. Hannah and her son would be free to continue their lives here in Fantasie, safely divorced from Carl.

Finally, when the cops had given us the A-okay to leave what felt like an eternity and one zillion statements later, Finn dropped us back at my place as the late afternoon sun was

waning. Hannah padded down from the suite the second she saw us arrive home. She paled at the sight of us. Chloe quickly reassured her that we were fine, that she'd be fine, that Mason would be fine. We would all be fine.

Amid Hannah's profuse thanks, I begged off, citing the need for me and Chloe to rest. Really, what I needed was time alone with Chloe. When the two of us finally made our way into the house, the silence of the empty place greeting us, I breathed my first sigh of relief all day.

"We're home," I announced. "And I'm officially never letting you out of my sight again."

She brushed a stray hair out of her eyes. "That's a little excessive."

"Are you telling me that I'm not allowed to keep you locked in this house for the foreseeable future?"

Chloe moved closer, wrapped her arms around my neck. "I could get onboard with that for a couple of weeks. What say you?"

"Let's start there." My lips came down on Chloe's as her tongue teased between my lips. "God, I was so worried about you."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't do that. Enough apologies for other men."

She audibly swallowed said apology and nodded. "What I said back there, in the cabin—"

"Kumquat?"

Chloe let out a smile. "Yes, that. It was in the heat of the moment. I don't want you to think—"

I licked my lips, feeling that pit in my stomach grow. "Are you saying you didn't mean it?"

"I'm saying I *did* mean it," she murmured. "But I don't want to scare you away. If you're not ready, I'd understand. I think we should probably take some time to think about this."

I picked her up, plopped her right on the damn counter, and spread her knees wide. I stepped between them, finally feeling like I was home. I held her until her head drooped to my shoulder and her arms clung to my back, and I was convinced she was as much a part of me as I was of her.

“You’re mine forever and ever, Chloe Brown,” I said gruffly. “Until the day I die, and then some.”

EPILOGUE

C *hloe*

“I can’t believe we’re here.” I squeezed Lucas’s hands. “And I cannot believe you kept the destination a secret from me. I thought for sure you’d have picked somewhere like Fiji.”

Lucas and I married just a few months after our engagement in a Christmas ceremony at Josie’s farm. She’d turned one of her old barns into an enchanted vision complete with fairy lights and floral arrangements on every surface. Dessert had been food from Taco Bout Love. Dinner had been catered by Chuck. It’d been a celebration of our love, but also of our new home and everyone who came with it.

We’d wanted the wedding to be a small, intimate ceremony, but the guest list had grown exponentially to include most of the town of Fantasie. Eventually Lucas and I had just given up on controlling who got invitations, and we’d let Lily and Josie handle most of the festivity planning. I’d just shown up, as had Lucas, and we’d gotten hitched—which was all we’d ever wanted to do in the first place.

Then we’d flown away from the fresh snowfall for what I had thought would be a tropical honeymoon. Lucas had planned the whole thing, hiding the secret like it was government information. I hadn’t even been allowed to pack my own bags.

“I hope you’re not disappointed.” Lucas pressed a kiss to my head as the cab drove us down an even snowier road than the ones we’d left behind in Fantasie. “But it’s just not Christmas and New Year’s without snow. Plus, I mostly wanted you all to myself for a week. No pesky tourist destinations. Just you, me, and a fire in the hearth.”

“I’m fine with this.” I snuggled up next to Lucas in the back of the cab as we wound our way through the background

of some small Canadian town. “As long as I’m next to you, I’m good.”

The cabbie pulled up in front of a yard that spread before us like a sparkling oasis. Rising from the center of it like a mirage was an A-frame style cabin with big, shiny windows that I was sure would spill winter light before the cozy fireplace visible from outside.

We made our way inside. The fire in the hearth, as promised, was already lit. There was a gift basket on the counter complete with a bottle of wine and a note from the owner of the home bidding us a happy honeymoon.

“I know the guy,” Lucas said, reaching for the bottle of wine. “I did some legal work for him. His business took off. This is one of his three homes.”

“Not too shabby,” I acknowledged.

The place was as far from shabby as one could get. The interior was all exposed beams and winter sunlight. The fire roared, a real fire, giving off the festive scent of burning wood, the sound of crackling flames. A fuzzy rug spread before it, and on it sat a couch large enough to fit a baseball team.

“Wine?” Lucas held up two glasses, already poured.

It was late, after nine p.m. A part of me wanted to get to sleep so I could be rested for the rest of our trip. The larger part of me realized that I had nothing to do and nowhere to be for a week except here in Lucas’s arms, snuggled up as we rang in our first New Year’s as newlyweds.

We both eased onto the couch, sipping the rich cabernet. Lucas pulled my feet into his lap. We both expelled a huge breath at the same time, then grinned as we relaxed into the sofa.

“I’m glad to be done with the wedding rigamarole,” I said. “I’m happy to be married, don’t get me wrong. But it felt like the party was as much for everyone else as it was for us.”

“Have you met the people of Fantasie?” Lucas drawled lazily. “Because they’ll take any excuse to have a celebration. We never stood a chance of having an intimate ceremony.”

We enjoyed the silence of our remote escape for a long moment. Lucas tugged off the thick, cozy socks which I'd worn from Maine, assuming I'd have to take them off when we reached our tropical destination. This, somehow, was so much better. He pulled my feet into his lap and began to rub them, gentle but firm, and it made my eyes just about roll back into my head.

"Before we kick off our vacation, there are a few things I want to talk to you about," Lucas said, still massaging his hands over my feet. "If that's okay."

"Sure." I tried to focus, but it was difficult. I could feel my eyes wanting to close with the delicious concoction of wine, foot massage, roaring fire, and cozy couch.

Lucas gave a short laugh, as if he could read my mind. "I have to confess something. One week was not enough with you. Also, I thought you might be disappointed that I picked a honeymoon destination with snow."

"Are you kidding? It's perfect."

"Well, hopefully it will be more perfect to know that after New Year's, we actually have a flight to Fiji."

"You're kidding me."

"Actually, I'm not."

"But I only got Josie to watch my business for one week, and what about—"

"I took care of it." Lucas's hands ran down my legs in gentle strokes. "Josie and Millie are going to take care of Taco Bout Love while you're gone. Yes, even the Fantasie Quilter's party you're catering. Trevor's watching the law firm in case of fires. We're all golden. Two weeks in bliss—one snowy, one on an island. Because let's face it, I do want to see my hot new wife in a bikini."

I grinned at him. "Lucas Donovan, you have outdone yourself."

"Only the best for Mrs. Donovan."

I tucked my feet under me, crawled toward him on the couch, and planted a bit of a sloppy kiss on his lips. After a dinner of airline crackers, the wine had gone straight to my head. I situated myself on his lap, setting my empty glass on the table next to him. Lucas's glass was also empty. His eyes smoldered as I straddled him. As I lowered myself onto his jeans, I could feel him hard beneath me.

"Say it again," I murmured, touching my lips to his neck.

"Mrs. Donovan," he mumbled, fisting my hair in his hand. "Fuck, that sounds good."

"I really, really like it." I pressed a long, hard, slow kiss onto his lips. I was warm, happy, cozy, and a little tipsy. It was perfect. "What else did you want to talk about?"

"Uh—" Lucas reached down, adjusted himself as if he'd forgotten it entirely.

"Do I need to give you some space to think?" I asked, threatening to back away.

"No," he rasped, pulling me tighter to him. "I was just going to say that I've been doing some research. Not to pressure you, but just to be prepared. We haven't spoken much lately about what we want for the future. You know, in terms of expanding our family or not."

I licked at my lips, hesitant, a twinge nervous.

"I want you to know the choice is yours." Lucas clasped my chin. "If you want to try for babies, God, I'd love nothing more than to go for it. If you don't want any kids, just say the word, and I'll never ask you again. Or, if you want to adopt, I found a few agencies that I've been vetting. I'm sure you want some time to think about it, but I just wanted to reiterate how much I love you. How much of this choice is yours."

I swallowed hard. The thought he'd put into having what could've been a difficult conversation, the way he'd handled it so delicately, gifting all the power to me, was why I'd married the man. I told him as much.

"You are the only thing I want," Lucas murmured, tucking hair behind my ear. "Your happiness is my priority. The

decision is in your hands. I won't mention it again until you bring it up."

I squinted my eyes at him. "So you're saying we need another code word?"

He barked a laugh. "Fucking kumquats."

"I'm just saying. I can work kumquat into just about any conversation at this point."

Shaking his head, still grinning, he gave a nod. "Kumquat it is."

I looked into his eyes. "Then, kumquat."

"Huh?"

"I'm not scared to have this conversation with you," I said. "I'm thrilled at the idea of doing life with you, the good and the bad. These conversations don't scare me. Not anymore."

"Good. That's all I've ever wanted, for you to feel safe with me."

"I do, Lucas. I do. Now, since you brought it up, what do you think about me going off birth control and just seeing what happens?"

He squinted back at me. "Are you saying?"

"I don't know if I can have kids. It's a huge if," I said. "But the doctors seemed optimistic that I was able to get pregnant the last time. Maybe, I don't know, maybe it will work out."

"God. Yes. Please."

"Actually, I didn't take my pill today, so—"

"So you're saying we should start now?" Lucas was already pulling my pants down. "Babe, I can't—"

Lucas managed to get off my leggings. He'd—once again—tried to yank off the thin strip of already-damp lace that was covering my folds. He once again failed to rip my undies.

"I didn't buy crappy panties for our honeymoon," I said. "Push them to the side, Mr. Donovan."

He cursed again, pushed them to the side, then slid his fingers in me. He pulsed his finger, slipped in a second, pulsed again until my fingernails were gripping his shoulders as I clung to him.

“No, I want you,” I gasped, feeling woozy with need. “I can’t wait. I don’t want to. We’ll have plenty of time to do things slowly, but this time—”

“You’re right, baby.” Lucas lifted me just enough to pull his jeans down and let himself loose. He stood at attention, the head of his cock wet. “Are you ready for me?”

I didn’t need to answer him. All I needed to do was drop down over him so the tip of him was pressed against me.

“That’s a yes,” he groaned. “You’re so sexy, Chloe. I can’t believe you’re my wife. Not to mention, knowing I might get you pregnant makes me so fucking hard.”

His hands gripped my hips. I leaned into him, his name slipping from my lips as my nails dug into his shoulder. I rode him hard, fast, and this time, when he poured into me, I let a sob loose on his shoulder.

“You’re mine, Mrs. Donovan.”

Lucas pulled me to him as I shuddered, lay against him, my safe haven. I knew, perfectly and truly, that for as long as I lived, that in fact, all my dreams had come true in Fantasie.

THE END



Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Chloe and Lucas's story!

The next book in the series is already available for order on Amazon—it is called *Flower Girl*, and it follows the story of Noah Donovan and his love interest!

Link to order: [HERE](#)

Coming this fall will be Josie and Finn's story, also set in Fantasie. Sign up for my newsletter at LilyKateAuthor.com or find me on Facebook for more information on releases, cover reveals, ARC opportunities and more!

Read on for the blurb of *Flower Girl*...





Flower Girl Blurb

I've never been on great terms with my sister, but things definitely hit rock bottom when she asked me to be the flower girl in her wedding. Keep in mind, I'm thirty-one. I've got a 401k, an apartment in New York, and a decent amount of cleavage with the right push-up bra. I am not exactly flower girl material.

The only thing worse than getting asked to be the flower girl in my sister's wedding is coming face to face with my older brother's best friend while I'm decked out in twenty-five pounds of chiffon. Of course Noah Donovan is looking like an actual god while I'm looking like Tinkerbell chewed me up and spit me out with pleasure. Of course he's in the wedding party, and not as the ring bearer. Of course that standoffish, beautiful man has the guts to wink at me while I walk down the aisle performing the duties of a three-year-old.

I'm only in town for the wedding for a week. Nothing bad happens in a week. Not really.

Except I'm wrong. Apparently I can make plenty of bad choices in seven days, and sleeping with Noah Donovan tops the list.

But can things really be that bad if I'm desperate for more? As it turns out, nights with Noah Donovan are downright delicious. And the mornings, to my great surprise, turn out to be even better. So when our little agreement to sleep with one another to get the attraction out of our system falls apart, could it be possible we're left with something real?



Lastly, if you happened to enjoy the story and can spare five minutes out of your day, honest reviews at the retailer of your choice are always welcome and appreciated.

Thank you so much in advance!



Stay tuned for more books coming very soon!