

A man and a woman are lying on their backs on a plaid blanket on the floor. The man is on the left, wearing a blue and white striped shirt and glasses. The woman is on the right, wearing a pink shirt and a necklace. They are both looking up. In the background, there is a guitar on the left and a turntable on the right. The overall scene is lit with warm, golden light.

TURKEY

IN

Tennessee

TORI ROSS

*Turkey in Tennessee*

**Tori Ross**

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All main characters are age 18+

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This is for anyone that wets their pants any time they sneeze and would certainly wet their pants on a bumpy flight. You're my people. Chin up.

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## *Chili Miss*



“**H**as anyone ever told you that you have a shitty attitude, young lady?” the man in front of me asks, pointing a finger in my face. He holds up his container of chili and flings some of the rust-colored fluid off the rim at me. A drop hits my cheek, and I think of saving it for a later snack, but that would be weird. I’m certainly not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me wipe it off my face now.

The man’s nostrils flare over his graying mustache, and I’m so stoned I can’t look away from his nose. My eyes widen, and I stare at the tiny nose hairs moving with the man’s breath. In. Out. In. Out. They’re like leaves blowing in the wind. Fascinating. When I finally blink and look away from his nostrils, I look around for my coworkers. I must have lost track of time because my coworkers seem to be standing in different spots than they were when the conversation started. Inhaling, complete calm comes over me. It’s just another angry customer, angry at me about something I didn’t do.

I shrug. “My mother says that at least three times a day.”

“Well, she’s right. Your attitude sucks.”

I tilt my head to the side and squint, trying to recognize the man. “Do you know Dottie Calvert? Are you friends with her from bowling league?”

“I don’t know your damn mother, but if she’s anything like you, she’s an incompetent piece of crap that screwed up my order. I said no beans. No beans, dammit!”

When dealing with angry customers, I’ve found it’s best not to show signs of fear. They’re like bees, and I’m convinced they can smell your pit sweat. I pull out the cash to cover the man’s chili from the register and hand it to him with a smile, holding out my other hand for him to hand me the chili with the offending beans.

He takes the money but doesn’t otherwise move. He’s frozen in anger and practically panting. I hope he’s not having some kind of heart issue.

I should do something to help. He’ll probably ask to talk to Rex next. “I apologize about the beans. My goal is to make your chili experience a pleasant one. But if it can’t be pleasant, we’d love to hear about it.” I reach under the counter and pull out a stack of white paper. “Would you like to fill out a survey about your experience today?”

“Fuck you!” he yells, tossing the leaking Styrofoam container near my head. I don’t duck or move, and I’m mildly surprised that a man that looks like he was athletic in his youth has such bad aim. The container wizzes so close to my ear that I smell the extra hot sauce the man requested as an add-on.

The Styrofoam container explodes against the wall behind me, and orange chili slides down the menu board. Somewhere across the restaurant, my coworker on cleaning duty breathes out something that sounds like, “She didn’t even flinch. Balls as big as canons on that crazy bitch.”

That’s me. I’m just chill as fuck, and not much rattles me. Never has. I have eight siblings for Christ’s sake.

“Your entire generation is an embarrassment to the human race,” the man grunts, gritting his teeth. I stare at his mustache, watching it twitch and wondering if his teeth will break.

“That’s ridiculous, sir. You couldn’t have possibly met everyone in my generation.” I chuckle and wave the next person in line forward. They step around the man like they can’t be fucked with this guy either. A woman around my age with a nose ring looks up at the menu board and then looks at the man like he needs to stand aside so she can order. Like he’s a shit stain on her day.

God bless the good customers.

“This is the last time I come here, young lady,” he says, backing away from the counter and inching toward the door. He’s obviously one that will yell right before he leaves so he can have the last word. “All my friends will hear of this!”

He slams out the door, and the bell that jingles when a customer comes in falls to the floor, rolling under the tray cleanup station. I watch the bell roll until it’s out of sight and lament that Rex will probably make me get a broom and see if I can fish it out from under the trash cans later.



If I remember.

I paste a calm smile on my face and adjust my red Chili Shack visor over my long, dirty blond hair. “Hi. Welcome to Chili Shack. How can I pleasure you today?”

Avery, my coworker and crowned work spouse, snickers from somewhere behind me. She laughs every time I ask someone how I can pleasure them. It’s my own brand of greeting, meant to troll the pearl clutchers of Alton that come in with their husbands. Rex told me I need to say something like, “I aim to please,” when someone tells me thank you. I put my own spin on it, though, preferring to offer to pleasure them before they can thank me. Rex has never complained, but it makes Avery laugh when she comes close enough to the registers to hear it.

I flip her off behind my back. It’s her fault for the bad customer anyway. I love her to death, but she’s from a wealthy family down south. This is her first job, and I can’t think of one thing she hasn’t fucked up, including dishes. Who fucks up dishes? She fucked up that guy’s order, but it wasn’t the first time. I once had to use an EpiPen to save a customer that’s allergic to onions because she put onions in his order.

It’s beside the point to question why someone that’s allergic to onions would come to a chili place. As my mother would say, Avery couldn’t pour piss out of a boot if the directions were written on the heel.

She grabs my middle finger and playfully twists it as she walks by. It’s kind of our thing.

I take the nice woman's order and smile that the long lunch hour is over, and I can finally go into the kitchen and grab some cornbread and bean-filled chili for my lunch. As soon as I get back there, Avery laughs. "You still have chili on your face from that guy."

"He had a soft arm, huh? I guess I have to go clean that up," I mumble, grabbing a few paper towels and wiping my entire face, not just the chili. It gets hot in here, and I always sweat under my visor.

While I wipe, I check out my friend. Something's off with her today. Even though she's obnoxious, she's not as obnoxious as usual. We usually sing and laugh our way through the shift. There's been no singing today and very little laughter. For the first time since our shift started, I notice bags under her eyes. She didn't put makeup on today, and that's saying something for a girl that once won a Little Miss Tennessee pageant at the state fair.

I throw the paper towel in the trash and walk over to Avery. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" she asks, but she doesn't meet my eyes.

"You've been weird since shift started. Is it something with school?"

Avery shrugs. It's usually something with school. She got a scholarship to nearby Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville, but her parents wanted her to go somewhere

more prominent. Avery, always the rebel of her family, wanted to be out from under their thumb and make her own way.

As Avery describes it, they're your typical wealthy family where appearances count every Friday night at the country club. She always wanted away from them to make her own decisions. When she told her father she was coming to Illinois for a full scholarship, he cut her off because it wasn't Harvard, Stanford, or even Ole Miss. When she told her mother she was going to a school without an Omega chapter, *she* cut Avery off.

Her parents much prefer her older brother. Prescott sounds like he wears a cardigan tied around his neck and shined loafers. She's always said he's a kiss-ass and likes to do things like count his allowance over and over and watch financial news shows. While she wanted to stream podcasts on romance books and punk bands, he chose hedge fund and market shows.

Guess which sibling her parents sided with.

If Avery is telling the truth, and I have no reason to doubt she is, her parents disapprove of every step she takes. That's how Avery ended up with the job at Chili Shack and a full scholarship she desperately clings to. She's responsible at school. Hell, she's more responsible than I was during my short stint at the local junior college. I quit, and I've been floundering, ever since. By floundering, I mean I'm twenty-three and still live in my childhood bedroom, have no degree, work at a chili place, and smoke more weed than I should.

“Not a school thing. It’s family.”

“What’d they do this time?” I ask, spooning myself a cup of vegetarian chili and waving the steam away. “Report your car stolen?”

“Not yet,” she laughs. “But only because I bought my Honda myself. Dad wanted to buy the BMW, but I knew he’d hold it over me or, you know, report it stolen.”

She takes her phone out of her standard Chili Shack apron and taps something before turning it to show me. “Mom texted and wants me to come home for Thanksgiving. It’s the first holiday they invited me home for since I left for school last year.”

Avery went home with me for Thanksgiving dinner last year during her freshman year. Even though she’s a few years younger than me, I couldn’t just leave her to the dorm food with the international students that don’t go home for the holidays. My mother would also kill me if I let a friend be alone for a major holiday. Sure, I was worried about what Avery would think of my very large and extremely loud family gathered around an old dining room table and then playing a game of touch football in the yard before ending the day with rousing games of *Clue*. But Avery smiled and laughed through it until even my dad, an old grouch if I ever saw one, liked her. She ate four slices of my mother’s pumpkin pie and asked for the recipe to the cranberry conserve.

“Are you going to go?” I ask, blowing on my food. “You can always come home with me again. Mom would love to

host you. Regi's bringing Craig, and Samantha's bringing Cooper. We'll have more people for football." I get my fingers out and count. "Actually, we won't. Cora's staying in Seattle with Eric's family, and Ava's going to the Arctic Circle or some shit. We need you for touch football."

She looks at her phone. "I feel like this could be the point when I work things out with them, you know? But I can't go by myself, and Drew's going home to New Mexico. We've only been together a couple months, and I don't think he'd even go if I asked. It's too soon."

She sits on a nearby stool and takes her visor off, shaking out her dark hair. I cringe and eye the nearby chili pots. All we need is a bunch of hair in them and more peeved customers. "Is there a friend you can go with? Someone else alone for the holidays? What happened to that girl from Dubai that is stuck on campus for holidays?"

Avery squints. "I adore her, but I don't think that's a good idea."

I nod, chewing the inside of my cheek and trying to focus on the problem at hand. It's hard when you smoked up out back by the trash bins before your shift. "I guess I could come with you. Unless they'll think we're like together or something..." I trail off and smile at the thought of Avery's conservative parents being horrified by the suggestion their daughter may be a lesbian. "But that could be fun, too. We could really play into that."

“My parents would close the door in our faces, and then we’d be stuck in the middle of Tennessee.”

“How far are they from Nashville?” I ask, suddenly wondering if I’ll finally be able to go out in Nashville. I’ve heard it’s fun. Surely, Avery can find a fake ID so she can go with me.

“An hour. But my dad likes the quiet of being in the boonies and has seventy head of cattle.”

“Head of what?”

“Cows. You know...beef.”

“Your parents don’t strike me as farmers.”

“I’d classify them more as pretentious ranchers that just want to stick it to the vegans.”

I tap my foot on the floor and ponder the opportunity. I don’t get out much. My family never traveled because of the monetary problem of taking eleven people on vacation. Road trips were out due to bathroom logistics. I never even saw an airport until we dropped Cora off for her trip to Hawaii. This could be an opportunity to visit a new place. Be a tourist. Have a fun night out in Nashville. I could learn how to milk a steer or something.

“Is a steer a male or a female?” I ask, completely off -topic. I don’t blink at the stupidity of my question. Avery’s used to me asking ridiculous questions when I’m high, so she doesn’t judge.

“Male.”

“Well, that leaves milking one out,” I mumble under my breath.

“Will you go with me?” Avery asks. She bounces on her toes a little and claps her hands quietly, a smile on her face. “It would solve the problem of going alone, and as long as you don’t tell them you’re a pescatarian and smoke up in the house, you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know, Avery. I don’t even think weed is legal in Tennessee. I should stay in Illinois.”

“Can’t you not smoke up for a long weekend? Please!” she begs.

I tap my toe and look around the kitchen. I give the front of house a quick glance to make sure there isn’t a line out the door and think. Points for Nashville and trying something new. What do I have to lose? A couple of shifts here? There are worse things in life.

I take a deep breath and pinch my nose. “My mother will be pissed I’m not at home for Thanksgiving, but I’ll come with you,” I say, holding up my hand. “Just don’t make me jerk off a steer.”

## *Flight Mishaps*



“**W**hy aren’t we flying out of Lambert?” I ask, hauling my duffle bag over my shoulder.

I’ve never had a reason for luggage, so I guess my high school thespian society branded duffle bag will have to do. Part of me is concerned that Avery’s butler will ask for my luggage, and I’ll have to swing this old thing at him, complete with old gym sock smell.

Does Avery have a butler? I make a mental note to ask her once we’re on our plane.

“The flight was cheaper out of the smaller airport and at two in the morning. The plane is smaller and will take longer, but Mom and Dad invited me without a promise of paying for my ticket.”

Personally, I’m surprised we didn’t drive. Avery said she didn’t want to be stuck in a car for five hours there and five hours back. I get it, but it’d also be fun to do a road trip. It seems more of a pain in the ass to go through the airport hassle



and have to rely on Uber rides or Avery's parents to get around while we're there.

I'm not in charge, though. It's a character flaw. I'm always content to kind of stand around and take in my surroundings while other people tell me to get in line.

"This isn't a cargo plane situation, is it?" I ask, just as a small plane the size of a large SUV pulls up to the gate.

Avery and I both glance at the airplane, and it's very clear that this is a cargo plane situation. We'll be lucky if we don't have to crank the propellor before takeoff, and we'll be lucky to have a seat bolted to the floor. I frown, looking for signs of duct tape holding the entire thing together.

Avery and I look around the gate area as the airport worker announces our flight. I'm not sure who he's announcing to. Avery and I are standing right in front of him, and there are no other passengers around. In fact, we're the only people in the entire airport other than the custodian currently sweeping the floor. There aren't even any food areas here. From the way my sisters talk, half the airport fun is paying twenty bucks for a small glass of wine.

"I'll take your bag, ma'am," the gate attendant says. He puts a hand on the handles of my duffle bag and smiles. I'm not sure I should trust a strange man with a bag of my personal items. My mind flicks to my pink vibrator with the butterfly attachment, and I hesitate, holding the bag to my chest. "It'll be fine, ma'am."

"Can't I carry on a bag?"

“Not on our planes. There are no overhead bins. All luggage needs to go in the bottom of the plane and must be weighed prior to takeoff.”

“Weighed?” Avery asks, reluctantly handing over her own Louis Vuitton luggage, a gift from her grandmother for high school graduation.

“Yes, we need an exact weight for luggage so we know how much fuel to use.” The man looks us both up and down. When he gets to my boobs, he raises an eyebrow, and I instinctually cross my arms. “Incidentally, how much do you ladies think you weigh? A buck thirty each?”

“Do you need our weights?” Avery asks. She turns around in a circle like she’s looking for a hidden camera. “I’ve never been weighed at an airport like I’m produce.”

The man shrugs and pushes our bags behind him in a corner of the tarmac. As he moves, I catch a whiff of the familiar smell. It’s familiar because it surrounds me all the time. A quick look at the guy’s eyes confirms this guy is high as a fucking kite.

“Come on.” Avery nudges me down the stairs out to the tarmac. I grip my cross-body purse in front of me. Like hell stoner dude is going to have me check this.

I follow Avery up the wobbly folding steps to the plane and duck as I enter the plane. I’m not a tall person, but I have to crouch in the entryway.

“Hi, I’m Justine,” the flight attendant, a young woman around my age with a mohawk, says as she directs us a few inches away from where we’re standing toward the plane’s seats.

To say that I’m disappointed about the accommodations of my first airplane ride is an understatement. The cockpit is up front with a door over the bathroom-sized part of the plane. There’s something blocking the door that looks like the locking device my mother had for her steering wheel when I was a kid. That little door bar is like having a non-peeing area in a swimming pool since the pilot waves at us when we come in.

I wave back. “Uh, do we just sit anywhere?” I ask Justine, nodding at the school bus-like seats on either side of a small aisle. At least they have seat belts.

“Let’s see...” Justine looks Avery up and down. “You over here,” she says, pointing to Avery. “You go back there in the back.”

“Wait. We can’t even sit together?”

“You’re the only passengers. We have to distribute the weight evenly. I need her in the middle on that side. I need you in the back on the other side.”

Avery and I look at each other with wide eyes and go to our assigned seats. What am I going to do? Whine about it when weight must be important to getting somewhere safely? I sit, buckle my seat belt, and hold my purse to my chest to comfort

me. It would be nice to hold someone's hand for a scary first plane ride.

“Ma'am?” I ask, flopping into my seat. “I thought planes had bathrooms.”

“Too small,” she grunts and starts to say something else. The pilot fiddles with the speaker up front and says something to the tower.

Shit. I just need to relax and breathe. Sure, I didn't go to the bathroom in the airport, but it's a shorter flight. I'm not a baby. As far as the plane itself, Ava does this all the time in Alaska. They don't drive over the large terrain up there. A lot of moving around is done on small puddle jumpers. I can do this.

I grip the back of the seat in front of me as the engine starts up. At least, I think it's the engine. It may be that hand crank. Either way, we move down the small runway and lift off.

Nope. We're back down.

We lift off.

Nope. Back down.

I've seen a lot of movies, but none of them show planes bouncing down the runway.

The pilot guns the engine, and we lift again as my nails dig into the blue plastic in front of me.

We stay up this time, and Avery looks back at me with a smile as static comes through the speakers. “This is Captain Ben. Thank you for flying with us this early morning. I'll be

getting you to Nashville about 3:30 in the morning, so we'll be on time. That's the good news."

Avery and I look at each other again. She leans forward in her seat. "What's the bad news?" Avery yells over the engine.

"Well, I'm glad you asked that, young lady. We'll have a little bit of choppy air on the way there."

"How choppy?"

"Let's just say, I hope you ladies are buckled. Keep your seatbelts buckled the entire way. Nothing to worry about, though. Turbulence is just air, and it happens all the time."

We level out in the air, and I relax a little. Even if it gets choppy later, what am I going to do? Demand to be taken back to the airport? Ask to get let off in a field over Kentucky?

Avery turns around in her seat as much as she can, and we talk back and forth as well as we can with the engine noise. I get about half of what she says, and she nods in random places when I talk, so I know she can't hear me either.

About twenty minutes into the flight, the first jolt hits.

Minor. Nothing to worry about. Avery and I look at each other and shrug. This isn't so bad.

Ten minutes later, another jolt hits so hard that my face hits the back of the seat in front of me...hard. I come off the plastic, rubbing my nose as tears well up in my eyes. Avery cusses. To make matters worse, the pilot cusses.

You should never hear the pilot cuss.

In the jumpseat, Justine pastes a smile on her face, but it's the type of smile Miss America has during the swimsuit competition. It's a smile that says this is all fake as shit, and the person smiling would rather be anywhere but here. Her knuckles turn white as she grips the bottom of the seat, and that's all the indication I need to panic.

I hyperventilate as my chest feels like it's caving in. Jesus, this is how I'm going to go. I always thought I'd go at Coachella in the arms of some guy named Moonbeam as we trip balls and make love. Nope. I'm going to crash into a field in Kentucky on Thanksgiving. What will my mother think? Will this be the greatest "told you so" in Dottie Calvert history?

I'll never see most of my sisters or Ryan get married. I'll never meet my niece or nephew that I know Cora's pregnant with, even if my mother doesn't know yet. I'll never meet any of my nieces or nephews. I'll be the dead aunt that nobody remembers.

I breathe through my nose, trying to catch my breath as the airplane jumps around so much that my vision blurs. Somewhere, I hear Avery crying. Justine, the flight attendant that should always be calm right up to the end, is chanting the Lord's Prayer.

This must be the end.

The plane bounces around like a ragdoll until a huge bump hits so hard that it knocks the wind out of me. Panic sets in,

and I realize my seat is wet. Dear God, is it raining and the turbulence knocked a hole in the plane?

It's only when the plane stops bouncing violently and a voice comes over the speaker that we're over the worst of the storm that I realize the big bounce forced the seatbelt against my bladder.

I've pissed myself.

The plane rocks and sways all the way to Nashville, and when the plane finally lands with more bouncing, Avery uses the barf bag.

"Really? You didn't barf until we landed?"

"It's relief and the realization we could have died!" she yells back, tears running down her face.

"Well, now that was an adventure to tell your grandchildren about!" Justine says, clapping her hands and unbuckling her seat belt.

When we grind to a stop, Avery runs to the door and impatiently waits for Justine to open the hatch while I do my best to mop up my seat with my jeans. They're already soaking wet. No use leaving a puddle on top of everything.

I clutch my purse, wipe my face, and walk past Justine like I don't smell like pee and didn't just empty my bladder in her workplace.

"What's wrong?" Avery asks as soon as my feet hit the ground. She's just getting off of all fours. Apparently, she kissed the ground when she got off the plane.

“I, uh, you have to promise not to laugh at me.”

“OK...What’s wrong?”

“I was scared, and the seatbelt hit against my bladder hard with some of the turbulence. I accidentally peed myself,” I whisper.

“Oh, Lord.”

“I need to change my pants,” I say, my face burning with shame. I haven’t soiled myself since that time Lily tickled me when I was eight. “Let’s get our stuff.”

“It’s OK, Peyton. It was scary as fuck. I thought I was going to die. We can take the bus back or something. I don’t want to do this again, either.”

“Let me just change my pants. I’ll be fine. Just don’t tell anyone it happened. Don’t you dare tell my sisters that I pissed my pants on my first plane ride.”

Avery shakes her head, a serious look on her face. She’s a good friend. Anyone else would be cackling and rolling in the aisle at their friend peeing their pants during turbulence.

We hurry around to the baggage side of the plane as the pilot steps off, whistling like we didn’t almost die. Thankfully, Avery steps in front of me. The pilot will probably figure out what happened if he notices the wet seat, but I don’t want him to see me with wet jeans.

“What do you girls need?” he asks.

“Our bags,” Avery deadpans.



Pilot Ben shakes his head. “They didn’t give me bags for you.”

The concrete under me falls away like I’m in a runaway elevator. “Excuse me?”

“They didn’t have bags for you. Did you give them to the gate agent?”

“Yes, we gave them to the stoned gate agent. He probably forgot to load them!” I yell, stepping out from behind Avery. “Are you shitting us?”

“Nope. Not shitting you. You can talk to our customer service counter and get your bags shipped on the next flight our airline does, but it won’t be until much later today.”

He turns and walks away without an apology, and the only thing Avery and I can do is follow him into the airport terminal. It’s Thanksgiving morning. Shops are closed. Even the airport shops that would be open later in the day are currently closed because it’s 3:30 in the morning.

Avery and I have no clothing to our names, but at least Avery has dry pants.

Avery must read my mind because she reaches back and grabs my hand. “It’s fine. Let’s report our stuff lost. There shouldn’t be a line this time of night. We can grab some paper towels for the Uber ride and wash your stuff when we get to my house. At least we have our phones, IDs, and credit cards.”

“What am I going to do while it’s washing and drying and your family is up? Walk around naked? Do you have a robe?”

“Well, no. All my stuff is in Illinois.”

“Does your Mom have something I can wear?”

Avery cringes. Either she doesn't want me to wear her mother's expensive pants, or there's another issue. “My mother is a size zero.”

I sigh. I'm a size eight and love my strong legs and thighs, but I won't get both legs into a zero. “Lord Christ on a cracker. What am I going to do?”

She pats me on the shoulder and walks me into the first women's restroom we see in the gate area. She pulls paper towels out of the dispenser while I go empty what's left in my bladder. We're probably going to get a bad rating for pee smell in the Uber, but it can't be helped. I put my head in my hands and sob on the toilet. How the hell did I end up with no clean pants or underwear on a non-shopping holiday at my friend's family's house?

“There's another option,” she says. I look through the crack of the stall and blink. “You can borrow my brother's underwear and sweatpants.”

“His underwear?”

“Yeah. They're something he can throw away and won't miss. Would you let a stranger wear your pants without underwear?”

“Good point,” I mumble.

Jesus Christ. I'm meant to be enjoying food and a new place today. Instead, I'm borrowing a strange man's underwear

because I pissed myself on an airplane.

“Think he’ll let me borrow them?” I ask. Maybe this guy is stuck up and awful. Everything Avery’s told me about him tells me he won’t be bothered with even looking at me.

Avery hesitates. “We can ask. At the very least, he can be bribed.”

## *GloryHole Man Panties*



“**T**his is ridiculous and horrifying. Holy shit, I sound like my mother. Make me stop,” I whisper to Avery and clutch my purse over the front of my pants. It doesn’t cover much. At least the wet stain is starting to dry after an hour Uber ride. I can only imagine what the Uber driver thought about the smell wafting from the back.

“Would you rather wake up my brother while you’re wrapped in a towel?”

“No, I would not,” I deadpan.

Avery raises her fist to knock on the beautiful mahogany door in front of us. Avery’s whole house is beautiful. If my pants weren’t wet, and I wasn’t so miserable, I’d demand a tour, even in the wee hours of the morning. As it is, she hustled me right up the curved staircase with plush rugs and a chandelier the size of my childhood home overhead, and I couldn’t get a good look at anything. It’s still dark outside, so I didn’t get the full view of the ranch grounds, but a short nap and some dry pants will put me in the mood to explore later.

Maybe I'll get out and milk a cow or something.

Avery sighs and knocks twice on the bedroom door. There's a ruffling sound inside and then more silence. She knocks again.

This time, footsteps that sound like canons stomp to the door and fling the door open so hard that both Avery and I jump back against the wall behind us.

I certainly wasn't expecting...him.

I stare at the man in front of me as Avery launches into words that sound garbled. My entire brain is garbled because I've never seen a man like this anywhere near my hometown as he rubs his eyes and then runs a hand through his bed-tousled hair. Holy fuck, would that be what his hair is like if I fucked him until Christmas?

His brown hair sticks up in several directions, and he squints so I can't tell what color his eyes are. But I'm not looking at his eyes because his red plaid pajama pants sit low on his hips so I can see a small amount of hair above his groin, and I get a glimpse of every muscle that exists on a man.

He didn't get this body from playing polo, that's for sure. This is a man that runs, lifts, and swims. There's not an ounce of fat on him. When I finally lift my eyes from his stomach, chest, and biceps, I focus on his lips – the full, delectable lips that couldn't be softer and more supple if he used Bonnie Bell Lip Smacker.

“Fuck. Avery?” Damn, even his voice is sexy.

“Yes, it’s me. We need your help. Don’t make me explain again.”

I guess she explained while I was checking out her brother, but it’s apparent he also missed the explanation as he tries to wake up. He blinks, and that’s when he notices me.

His eyes focus, and he puts his arms on the doorframe as if to catch himself. His biceps flex as he holds the frame. He tilts his head to the side and blinks again like he’s making sure I’m real.

“Who are you?”

Avery grunts next to me. “I just told you. This is Peyton. She’s my friend from work in Illinois and my guest for the weekend. We had a little incident, and we need your underwear.”

He startles and starts to laugh. “My underwear? Is this an emergency sorority activity or something?” he asks, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “If you can’t find any men of your own and need to borrow your brother’s shorts, that’s a new level of sad, little sister.”

“I peed my pants.” Great. My mouth decided to move, and I really wish it had come up with something else for the first words I speak to him. I close my eyes and cringe.

“I suggest diapers then,” Prescott says, taking a step back from me as he inhales. “Jesus, you did pee yourself.” He waves his hand in front of his face and looks at me like I’m an

insect. That's fine because I want to crawl under the flooring like one.

“It wasn't like Peyton can't hold her bladder. We had an issue on the plane.” Avery's a good friend for defending me. I make a mental note to defend her for something the first chance I get.

I take a deep breath, readying myself to talk to the gorgeous sex god in front of me. “Look, bro.” He squints at me like he's never been called that. Actually, he probably hasn't. He looks me up and down for the first time, taking in my bohemian orange peasant top and homemade necklace I made once while I was tripping acid. I fidget with it when I see him notice it, wondering if I should have left it at home. “There was no bathroom on the plane, and then the plane hit really bad turbulence. It was so bad that it pushed the seat belt against my full bladder.”

“It was also really scary,” Avery whispers. “I nearly peed myself, and I threw up because we almost died.”

Silence hangs between all three of us. Prescott's mouth opens like he wants to say something, but he closes it.

Someone has to talk. I look between Avery and Prescott and curse myself that I have to explain this to the hottest guy I've ever seen. “I need to wash my pants, and the airline lost our luggage. I was hoping to borrow some sweats or something from you, and your sister pointed out that you probably wouldn't want to loan me pants without me wearing underwear. Which is probably a solid idea since I'm finishing

my period.” I pause and bite my lip. “You know what? Let’s just forget I said that because I didn’t think this entire conversation could get worse, and here I went and surprised us all by making it worse.”

More silence.

“I’m Peyton,” I say, holding out my hand. “And I’m hell on wheels.”

He takes my hand and then drops it almost immediately like I burned his skin. He inhales and blows it out while he pinches his nose like my mother does when I give her a headache.

I’ve given my mother a million headaches, so I know what that looks like.

He turns and waves for me to follow him, and I walk behind him into his dark room. I can’t see much since the lights are off, but there’s moonlight coming through the window enough for me to see his broad shoulders and perfectly-cut back muscles.

He leads me to a large dresser that probably costs more than my first car. “Here,” he grunts, handing me a pair of sweatpants. He opens another drawer, and I see the flash of white in the moonlight. The whiteness is like neon in the clubs I go to in St. Louis when my coworkers want to party. There may as well be glowsticks attached the way they show up in the darkness.

“Tightie whities? You wear these?”

He turns to me and scoffs. “What’s wrong with briefs?”



“Nothing,” I mumble. “I just thought only men over sixty wear these.” I hold up the pair he gives me, inspecting it like I’m judging a piglet at the county fair.

“I am most certainly not over sixty, and I wear them. They’re comfortable and allow me to focus on my work without my testicles being uncomfortable.”

“Did you just say testicles instead of balls?”

“Where are you from again?” he asks.

“Illinois.”

He blows out a sigh and utters something that sounds like, “Unbelievable.” I can’t be sure because I’m still looking at the underwear in my hand like it’s a cobra.

“What are these pouches for? I’ve never understood them.” I don’t know why I ask. I certainly don’t know why I stick my hand in the pouch and wave. If I want to know the answer, I should ask Ryan or my brothers-in-law, Eric or Maddox, when they come to visit with my sisters. They certainly wouldn’t look at me like this guy is looking at me right now.

“It’s for taking a piss. We just pull our – you know – out of the pouch and go.”

My mouth drops open. “All this time! It’s a handy dick hole. Wow! You don’t even have to pull your pants down? It’s like the glory hole of underwear.”

“This isn’t happening.” He looks around his room in confusion. “It’s not almost five in the morning, and I’m not explaining ease of urination and male underwear to a woman

from a Illinois who's soaked with her own piss. I'm dreaming." He looks beyond me and points at Avery. "Are you really here? Am I dreaming that?"

"Really here, big brother. And you're really talking about underwear dick holes with my best friend." Avery steps forward and grabs my wrist. "Come on, Peyton. Let's go get your clothes in the wash, and I'll show you to the guest room so you can get a few hours of sleep. Let's leave Prescott to go back to sleep and wish this was all a figment of his imagination."

"I don't think I'll be able to get her out of my mind," he mutters as Avery pulls me toward the door.

"Thanks for the man panties," I call over my shoulder. "Want me to throw them away when I'm done with them? I'm sure you have more, right?"

Prescott walks back to the bed as Avery shuts the door, but I'm pretty sure I hear, "I don't know if I should wear them or burn them."

## *Helpful Milking*



I wish I could live here. Well, without the uptight people already living in the place, that is.

I sip a large to-go container of coffee that Avery's chef handed me when I went into the kitchen as I walk out of the house into the midday sun. I've wandered around the house and grounds for hours since my three-hour nap, and my eyes hurt from how much they've bugged out of my head at the size of this place.

Avery grew up on the set of *Dallas* but without the oil fields.

I haven't even seen anyone except for the staff. I went into Avery's room to wake her, but she grunted and threw a pillow at me, so I decided to explore on my own. So far, I've slid down the huge banister twice while whooping loud enough to wake the dead, and I've met the head housekeeper, the chef, and the butler. I shook the butler's hand and said I was happy to finally meet him. I knew they had a damn butler.

The cool November air hits my lungs as soon as I leave the house. In the light of day, the long white house looks almost presidential. Not a roof shingle is out of place. The shutters aren't hanging by a thread, and the bushes in front of the walkway are neatly trimmed.

As I walk around the side of the house, I spot a large red barn that's so stereotypical of a farm that a laugh sputters from my chest. I may as well investigate, check out the cows, or muck some stalls or something. Avery's parents are being really kind to let me stay for the weekend, I should do some farm chores or something to show them I have a good work ethic. I may be chill, but I've never been lazy, always having a job of some sort. I should prove that I'm not just here to eat their food later tonight.

I step into the barn and notice it's clean. Too clean. The floors are spotless, and a buffing machine sits unplugged next to an empty horse stall with tables in it. I expected horses. Horse poop. Hay everywhere. Pigeons shitting from the rafters. As it is, it looks like they're getting ready for a party.

A faraway mooing sound comes from the back of the barn, and I walk through the barn, around the side, and come face to face with a cow that's wandered back up to the barn. I squint into the sunlight and put my hand up to my face to look out at the pasture, shielding my eyes. Cows graze over the brown hills. I'm sure these hills are bright, beautiful, and green in the summer. This cow must have wandered up here for petting.

"Are you lost little cow?" I ask, stepping toward it.

It looks like it's trying to get into the barn. I'm sure I shouldn't let it into the place if someone is cleaning and getting ready for a party. Looking around, I see a white building with metal fencing around it. That must be where the cows are kept. I should lead it over there.

Another idea forms in my mind. If I milk this cow and take a bucket of nice warm milk into the chef, the kitchen staff can heat it and serve it with dinner tonight. It can be my contribution. My mother always tells me I should contribute to a meal when I'm invited to a nice dinner. This is my chance. It's my only chance since I don't have my luggage and the shops are closed.

I find some buckets near the door and blow inside of them, thinking they're dusty. A cloud of dirt puffs around my face, and I cough and wave the dust away. There. Clean as a whistle.

"What are you doing here?" a voice says behind me, startling me and causing me to drop the bucket. It rolls across the ground with a loud clanging sound, and I turn to find Prescott with a scowl on his face and hands on his hips.

My mouth opens a little as I take him in. Dark dress pants. White dress shirt with a red tie at his neck. Shined black shoes I bet I could see my face in. Completely out of place in a barn.

We stare at each other for a moment, and he sighs. "I know you talk. I heard words come out of your mouth like vomit last night."

I shake myself a bit and wipe my sweaty hands on my jeans. “Um, I was going to help out a little around here. You know? Earn my keep.”

He looks at the cow behind me, furrows his brow, and looks back at me. “Were you going to milk that cow?”

“I was going to try it. My mother says you should try something new every day, so this was going to be my new thing today.”

“Was wearing my underwear not enough of a new thing for you, Hell on Wheels?”

I pause at the nickname and marvel that I like it. It suits me. “Do you think that’s the first time I’ve worn a man’s underwear?” I chuckle. “What part of our relationship together in the last few hours gave you that idea?”

“Silly me,” he deadpans. His eyes darken, though. He can’t be jealous.

“Although, it’s my first pair of white briefs. I’m more of a boxer short borrower. And yes, I was going to milk the cow.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I got here when I did.”

“Why?” I ask, putting my hands on my hips and setting my face into a rigid expression. “Do you not think I can do it?”

“No, it’s just that it takes a delicate touch, or you can irritate the cow. Have you ever seen an irritated cow? We also have staff for that, and that cow has already been hooked to the milking machine this morning.” He nods toward the white

building across the field, and I should have known they probably have a high-tech dairy operation in there.

“This is my first up-close cow.”

Is that a smile creasing the corners of his mouth? He quickly rolls his lips together to fight it and takes two steps toward me.

“Would you like me to show you?”

“I thought you had people for that. Don’t tell me you’ve milked cows at dawn.”

He sniffs and goes over to the wall where he grabs a small stool off a hook. He silently places the stool on the right side of the cow and waves me over. “My father thought we should at least know the basics. I was also grounded the summer I was ten, so he made me go with the staff to do chores with the orders to make me do it by hand.”

“What did you do to get in trouble?”

“Excuse me?” he asks, tilting his head like I asked him what his favorite sexual position is or another personal question.

I clear my throat. “Did you break a window with your baseball? Get in a fight? Do something mean to Avery?”

Prescott sniffs and looks at me down his nose. “I was mad at my father for not buying me a book. So mad that I retaliated.”

“What book? *Peter Pan* by chance? *Pippi Longstocking*? I read that when I was ten.”

“*The Big Short* by Michael Lewis.”

I blink twice, trying to understand what normal ten-year-old would want to read a business book.

“Anyway, Dad said I wasn’t ready for it yet and should start with *More Money Than God*, and I was angry about it. So angry that I got into his email and had his broker sell his Caterpillar shares out from under him.” Prescott smiles at me like I should find this humorous instead of puzzling. His smile is nice, though. It’s the first time I’ve seen him smile, and my eyes focus on the perfect curve of his lips. “I was a squirrely chap.”

“How did your parents ever get control of someone so wild?”

Prescott gestures to the stool, and I sit down, a cow’s flank a few inches from my face and Prescott behind me.

He squats into a position behind me, and I freeze, nervous because something smells amazing, and I’m pretty sure the cow in front of me didn’t bathe with cedar soap or use a dab of cologne this morning. I even smell mint from his toothpaste. Or maybe it’s his shaving cream.

He wraps his arms around me and grasps my hands. “It worked out in the end, though. Caterpillar actually had a bad month later, and my dad didn’t lose anything. He bought the shares back at a lower price. We all had a good laugh about it.”

“Hysterical. How do you get anything done with so much comedy around here?”



He ignores my sarcasm and firmly grips my hands. His hands are warm, and my fingers twitch to swipe my thumb over his skin to see if it's soft. That would be wrong, though. This is my friend's brother for Pete's sake. Not only that, but this guy has a stick up his butt and obviously doesn't like me. Who would like someone that woke them up to borrow their underwear?

He moves my hands to the cow's udders. "You need to start at the top with a squeezing grip and pull down. Firm. Like this." He places my hands in position and closes my thumb and index finger around an udder. He then places the rest of my fingers in position.

I grimace as he makes me squeeze around the cow's udder. "This seems like it hurts."

"You're not hurting it. Just don't make a hard fist."

His breath hits the back of my neck, moving my hair. It's all I can do not to put my head back on his shoulder and let him place a kiss on my collarbone.

Must. Focus. On. Milking. Cow.

"There you go. You did it," he says as a squirt of milk hits the bucket under the cow.

I look at the cow, checking for signs of distress at me squeezing harder than I think is necessary, and the cow lazily waves its tail and continues chewing whatever it's eating. I let out a breath because I'm not hurting it. "I'm doing this. Look at me milking this cow."

He chuckles, and I feel the smile near my face. My jaw burns because he's so close. He just needs to lean over an inch and we'd be touching.

Did he just sniff my hair?

And why does it feel so sexual? "Here. Keep going," he breathes, moving my hands back up the udder and moving it down until the milk comes out the tip.

Then I realize why this feels awkward. Holy fuck. This is just like the time Bryan McCormick taught me how to give him a hand job.

I blush at the thought of it, and I know Prescott is thinking about the movement too. I move my concentration to my own body, and I feel something hard and absolutely ginormous at my back. I freeze, and he clears his throat. He stands and walks away from me quickly, probably hiding a tent in his pants.

"You aren't going to stay and help me get milk for dinner tonight?" I ask, knowing damn well why he's walking away from me. Now I'm just trolling him.

He pauses with his arm on the barn frame. He's silent so I can hear the birds and the milk hitting the bucket under me as I continue moving my hands over the udders like he showed me.

Turn around. Turn around.

He pats the frame and shakes his head. "I think you have the hang of it. I'll see you at dinner at six, Hell on Wheels" he says, walking away. "Oh, and the airline called. That's why I

came to look for you. Your luggage is on the way. They were able to get it out earlier on a partner airline.”

## *Stuff Your Turkey*



“It feels good to have my own clothes back,” I say, fussing over my outfit as I check myself out in Avery’s full-length mirror.

Avery ignores me over the running hairdryer in her adjoining bathroom. It feels good to have a shower and a pair of my own clean underwear on my ass. I turn in the mirror again, fussing with my brown thigh-length skirt with fringe down to my knees. Is it not dressy enough for a Rausch Thanksgiving? Should I have commissioned a formal gown? Bought a diamond tiara?

Fuck it. I turn in a circle, admiring the way the fringe that hangs down to my knees twirls as I move. I’ve always loved this skirt, even if Clara says it reminds her of an outfit her Western Barbie had.

I run my hands over the pink peasant blouse with a tie at the chest, pulling it over my white tank top. If I don’t wear the tank, my bra shows. I know that would be a definite party foul in this house.

I slide into brown ankle boots and pull my hair up into a ponytail, leaving a few strands down to frame my face. I don't usually wear a lot of makeup, but the idea of seeing Prescott again makes me dab extra mascara on my lashes, swipe an extra brush of blush on my face, and glide darker lipstick over my lips. I'm not trying to impress him or anything, but I'd like him to see me at my best.

He's certainly seen me at my worst. I mean, the guy has seen me covered in my own pee when I asked to borrow his briefs and has seen me milk a cow. Not exactly impressive.

Something about the idea of seeing him at dinner appeals to me. Sure, we have nothing in common, and he acts like an arrogant prat. But I don't want him to look down on me.

That'll be hard. The way Avery says it, the Rausch family looks down on everyone.

The hairdryer shuts off, and Avery sticks her head around the doorframe. "You ready to enjoy your first Rausch family dinner?"

I give myself one more glance in the mirror. "Ready as I'll ever be. Is there anything I shouldn't mention at dinner?"

"Avoid anything political. And don't tell them you're a pescatarian. Take some turkey and just hide it under other food."

I've never eaten at Buckingham Palace, but I can imagine it's the same as eating at the Rausch's ranch. Everyone eats at a long table, but there's no passing here. The cousins, aunts,

uncles, and family business contacts wait to be served by catering staff. I try to pass the rolls to Avery, and a man grabs the basket out of my hands before going down the line and offering each person a roll.

Huh? Seems like a waste of time to me.

“Turkey, ma’am?” a caterer in a white dress shirt, black bowtie, and black pants asks.

“One small piece,” I say, trying not to wrinkle my nose. I don’t eat poultry, pork, or beef. Only fish. But I’ll do what Avery said and put it under the peas and carrots I also won’t eat.

I’ll die before I eat a pea.

When the mashed potatoes caterer comes by, I make a rolling motion with my hand, indicating that I want them to keep plopping spoonfuls onto my plate. Prescott sits across from me and looks away from the mound on my plate like it disgusts him.

Snob.

“You don’t like mashed potatoes?” I ask across the table.

He flinches at my question. “I do. Moderation is key for everything.”

“Why don’t you just do what you enjoy? I like mashed potatoes. I want a lot. It’s not like I do this every day. It’s Thanksgiving. What’s wrong with asking for what you want and being who you want to be? What’s wrong with enjoying a holiday?”

He shakes his head at me as he stiffly tells the caterer with the sweet potatoes to give him half a sweet potato. When the same caterer comes by my plate a few minutes later, I ask for two sweet potatoes and all the marshmallow fluff from the side of the pan. The man looks at me and then runs the serving spoon against the side of the dish, filling my plate with browned marshmallows.

Shoving a hunk of marshmallow into my mouth, I chew as Preston watches. I even make a show of fluttering my eyes and swooning at the taste.

“You’re a fascinating creature, Ms....? What did you say your last name is?”

“Calvert. Last name is Calvert.”

Avery’s mother, Frances, overhears. “Is that of the Philadelphia Calverts?” she asks, smiling.

“No. Alton, Illinois.”

“Ah,” she says, her smile drooping. “One of your friends from school, Avery?”

Avery lifts her head. Come to think of it, this may be the first time she’s looked up all dinner. Only a few pieces of turkey and a small spoonful of dressing line her plate, and I pick up the olive and cheese plate in front of me to entice her to eat more. No use coming all this way to Thanksgiving dinner if you’re not going to enjoy it.

She waves the plate away. “Peyton and I work together.”

Frances's hand flutters to her chest and forks drop onto expensive plates. "Work? You didn't tell me you have a job. You're on scholarship. Why would you need to work?"

Avery smiles as the entire table looks at her in silence. "Here we go," she says under her breath. She straightens and finally stabs a piece of turkey, chewing and swallowing before she answers. "Scholarship pays for tuition and books with a small stipend for my dorm room. It doesn't pay for my full room and board, laundry quarters, bus passes, and gas, Mother."

Frances looks at Avery's father, Prescott Rausch the Second, at the end of the table. The man rolls his eyes like he expects his daughter to be annoyingly different. "A woman of your standing should not work. We raised you to be educated so you could educate your children. You have a trust fund ready for you at twenty-five, Avery. There's no need for this. I'll arrange an allowance if you insist on doing laundry in a public laundromat," her father scolds.

Avery sniffs. "What about life skills, Dad? I need to know how to do things. I already fuck up my job enough as it is because I never learned how to do certain chores. We always had staff wandering behind us and cleaning up our mess."

I swallow my food. I feel bad for ribbing Avery when she fucked up the dishes at work now. When I look across the table, Prescott watches me, his face red. Did Avery's remark about job skills and knowing how to do certain things hit home?



This is horrible. How can a family dislike their child's decisions so much? Say what you want about Dottie Calvert, but if I told her I was enrolling in clown college and fell in love with a couple that I met on the local commune, she'd wish me luck and support me every step of my clown career and throuplehood. After an initial freakout, that is.

I've never seen parents so insistent that their way is the correct one and only way. I pat Avery's leg under the table, silently telling her that I support her.

"What exactly is this...job?" Frances waves her hand like she's fanning an insect.

"Is everyone excited for the barn dance later tonight?" Prescott interrupts across from me, looking left and right down the table at his parents. He nudges the cousin next to him like he wants him to respond. The cousin just ignores him, shoveling broccoli casserole into his mouth.

Is he changing the subject to help his sister? Maybe he's not as awful as I thought. Sure, he's sitting over there in his dress clothes from earlier and has thrown a jacket over his dress shirt, complete with leather patches on the elbows, but just because he looks like a philosophy professor doesn't mean he's a total asshole.

"I've never been to a dance in a barn," I say, stuffing two olives in my mouth and humming around the salty taste. "It's nice you do these. Is this an annual event?"

Everyone at the table ignores our conversation. Avery slams her hand down on the table, startling me and stopping me from

asking if the Rauschs have any extra straw hats I can borrow. One wears a straw hat to a barn dance, right? Even Avery's grandmother sniffs and glares at Avery for the outburst.

"I have a job. Deal with it! I see you looking at me like I'm a snake in the grass, Grammy Rausch. I know women didn't work when you were my age, but they do now. I need to be able to make my way if the marriage you're all so insistent I have later on doesn't work out. It's just common sense. I can also do more for the world than pump out kids and help them with their math."

Frances drops her head. Does she agree? Disagree? Something in her eyes flashes like she understands Avery's point, but I ignore it.

Avery's grandmother lifts a crooked finger and points it at Avery. "Young ladies should depend on their husbands for guidance and direction. Your grandfather worked hard to make sure four generations of this family can afford staff for day-to-day issues. The only thing you need to learn is the names in the charity circles and committees you'll be on."

Avery lowers her head to the table and bangs on it, causing the glassware to clink.

I should do something here to help Avery. If I can take the focus off her, where it's obviously been all her life, maybe I can salvage her trip and help her relationship with her family.

"You know who I wish we could hear more from?" Everyone looks at me for a moment. The room goes silent in anticipation of what I'll say. I don't even get this kind of full

attention at my own home. Even Avery wipes a fresh tear off her cheek and raises her head. “Barack Obama. We could really use his voice again right now in this country.”

Silverware falls to the dishes again and Avery’s grandmother drops her water goblet onto her plate with a gasp like I unleashed a torrent of cuss words or just dropped my pants and took a shit in the mashed potatoes. Prescott looks at me with wide eyes, and I wonder if he’s worried I’ll be taken out to the barn and crucified on the rafters by the cousins.

I shrug, smile, and dig back into my potatoes as Avery squeezes my leg under the table. “Thanks,” she whispers so low only I can hear.

“I don’t give a shit about either side of politics. I just thought you needed them to hate someone more than you.”

“I think that did it.”

We eat in silence for the next few minutes, and Prescott drinks his wine with a thoughtful look. He looks up and down the table, eyeing the cousins, aunts, and uncles lining the perimeter, and shrugs as if lost in thought. If I had to guess, he’s thinking that he’s never seen someone totally shut up his family with one sentence.

It was the closer. I dropped the mic.

Personally, I shovel as much food as I can into my mouth and ask for two slices of pie when the caterer comes around. Extra whipped cream. No shame here.

By coffee, Prescott smiles over his cup at me, and I can't help but smile back.

"Peyton, will you go to church with us on Sunday?" Frances asks, getting up from the table and daintily wiping her mouth on a lace napkin. Grammy Rausch squints at me. After my earlier comment, I'm sure Frances is just being hospitable.

"I-uh. Well..." My voice trails off because I'm not sure how to answer. I already brought up politics. I really shouldn't go there with religion. Prescott looks at me, tilting his head as if interested in my answer. "I..."

"Peyton worships Satan!" Avery grunts through gritted teeth, getting up from her own seat and leaving her half-eaten pie. She sets her face in a grim line and raises her chin, clearly challenging her mother. "We're sacrificing a goat on Sunday morning. Virgin. It has to be a virgin goat. We won't make church."

Avery stalks from the room, and I look around at the stunned faces. The air has been sucked from the room and Grammy Rausch wrinkles her nose like she expects me to sacrifice an untouched goat on the table. My hands start to sweat, and the back of my neck feels hot and wet.

I clear my throat and find Prescott's eyes. They look... amused. Even more perplexing, Frances bites her lip like she's trying not to laugh at the gasps and mutters around the table. These people can't possibly think I really worship Satan.

If that's the worst thing they can think of, maybe this is my chance. I have one chance to tell them who I am. Here's my

time to rebuke Satanism and still make all my other flaws look good in comparison.

I sputter a laugh that comes out more as a snort. “She’s kidding.” I wave my hand, poo-pooing my fake religion and getting up from my own seat. “However, I am a pescatarian. Don’t confuse that with Presbyterian. Pescatarians don’t eat beef or poultry. We eat fish, though. I shoved the turkey under the peas on my plate. I don’t eat those either. I’m also an agnostic junior college dropout who works at a fast-food chili joint. Oh yeah, that’s what Avery and I do. We make chili and put it into Styrofoam cups. We get paid for it, even though we hate how bad the Styrofoam is for the environment. We’re trying to get our boss to buy compostable paper cups.”

Crickets.

Open-mouthed stares.

Avery’s father growls, but even he goes silent when I bend over and lick the whipped cream off my pie saucer before putting it back down in the place setting. No use wasting it. “Darn good pie,” I mumble.

Frances runs her fingers over the pearls around her neck as I look at Prescott again. Our eyes meet, and my breath temporarily goes out of my body. His eyes are dark as he stares at me, and I focus on not tripping over my feet as I move away from the table. He may have just eaten, but he looks like he wants to eat...me. My chest boils with heat, and my underwear feels wet. What would it be like to have his

mouth on me? Then again, would he recite the stock report as he thrusts into a woman?

I need to get out of here.

Everyone stares, so I talk. I always babble when people stare at me. “No devil worship here.” I place my hands on my hips and look around, nodding. “Lots of weed, though. I grow my own, but don’t tell my mother. I told her it was a kind of marigold plant.” I chuckle and make finger guns as I back out of the dining room in the direction Avery just walked. “Anyway, see you all in a little bit at the barn dance, right?”

Their eyes follow me out of the room like I’m a side-show circus act.

All but one pair, that is. One pair of eyes looks at me with appreciation and downright lust.

I spin on my boots, and laughter bubbles from my throat as I walk from the room.

## *Yee Hlaw*



**A**very isn't in her room when I go to ask if my outfit for the barn dance is acceptable. I've never been to one, but my sister, Ava, went to a couple in college. She went to college in Alabama. Surely, all barn dances in the southern part of the country are the same, right? Memories of her talking about flannel shirts, straw hats, and leather botas emblazoned with fraternity letters swirl in my brain.

I don't carry around a bota or have a straw hat with me, but I do have a pair of bib overalls and a Willie Nelson t-shirt. I have bands for my hair and did two quick braids on each side of my head. I even dotted my face with eyeliner, creating several fake brown freckles across my nose.

Perfect.

Country music performed by a local band carries through the barn walls so I can hear it as soon as I leave the main house. Everyone must already be there.

As soon as I open the door, I realize I've made a terrible mistake.

What the hell kind of barn dance is this?

Avery smiles as soon as I walk in. A quick look at her, and I can see she's been knee-deep in the punch bowl since after dinner. Her face is flushed, her eyes droop, and she's wearing her same dinner clothes.

Everyone else is too. The cousins are all in dress pants. My eye catches one of Avery's female cousins, and even I notice how her corduroy pants stick out from the rest of the family and town friends that were invited. How badly do I stick out in bib overalls and braids?

Waiters in tuxedos crisscross the room with trays of champagne and something that looks like salmon puffs. Diamond earrings glisten in the lights from the stage, and I'm reminded of high school prom or my father's work holiday parties. Even the band playing country music is in dress slacks and has tamed their hair with pomade.

The music stops as the band gets ready for a break, and the barn is silent as people stare.

Prescott comes out of a small area to the side that must be a restroom and walks across the floor toward the table with punch and small dessert options. When he registers the silence, he stops short and turns to look at what everyone is staring at.

"Holy fucking hell!" he says, just saying what everyone is probably thinking.



Only Avery grabs her stomach and slinks to the floor, laughing. This has to be the most embarrassing moment of my life. The way Prescott looks at me, with laughter in his eyes, makes me want to crawl under the barn floorboards and disappear. This is worse than asking him for his underwear or Avery telling her family I worship Satan. Hell, this is worse than the time in high school when I didn't have any clean underwear, wore a skirt to school, and then fell down the stairs in front of my history teacher.

Prescott bites his lip, holding in laughter, and I straighten. I will not be laughed at by someone whose idea of danger is buying Netflix stock. I will not give in to this. I'm a Calvert, and Calverts cannot be beaten with simple laughter at us wearing the wrong clothes at an event.

This is a barn dance, and I'm going to make it a barn dance, including dressing in what I feel comfortable in. Who the fuck dresses for a barn dance like it's the annual Daughters of the American Revolution gala?

Frances clutches the pearls around her neck. Normally, I'd think this hilarious since she's being a quintessential pearl clutcher. The laugh never comes. She looks me up and down, cringing at my bib overalls and drawing in a deep breath when she gets to my Converse.

"I thought you said this was a barn dance?" I ask, my eyes darting around the crowd. A few people from town give me sympathetic looks.

“It’s an event *in* the barn,” Prescott says, drawing out each word in case I’m too stupid to understand. “It’s not a casting call for *Hee Haw*.”

Oh, fuck that. My love for syndicated *Hee Haw* will not be shamed.

I bite my lip and shake my head, plastering my face into cool condescension that he dares to insult a cultural icon. “What a great show. Classic television for its thirty-year run, Prescott. I’m so glad to hear someone appreciate it. My mother was a big fan.” I smile and look over his shoulder like I can’t be fucked with him. It takes everything I have to stay cool when I really want to squeeze out tears and run screaming from the barn.

A strange look crosses Prescott’s mother’s face. Her brow furrows, but it’s not a glare. It’s a sad-eyed look. Maybe, just maybe, she’s remembering her first days in her husband’s family. Her mouth opens like she wants to say something, but I turn away. I’m not going to embarrass any of us further. I’m obviously not good enough for this entire family, except for Avery.

I clap my hands and look around. “Well, I’m obviously underdressed, but what else happens at this point? Do we square dance? Oh, that would be fun,” I say, reaching out and grabbing Frances’s arm. “Is there a square dance caller in the area?”

“Well, I never thought of that,” she says, looking around. She even pats my hand that’s still on her arm. “Wouldn’t that

be a lovely idea for next year? Prescott, wouldn't that be thrilling?"

"You want me to square dance?" Prescott asks.

Even I see her little eye roll before she's interrupted by a band member, pulling her away from the conversation to ask about her preference for the next set.

Only Prescott stays around me, everyone else suddenly finding someone else to look at. "You've never done it?" I ask him. "We can do it right now. I'll teach you. I was the most sought-after promenade partner in my college physical education class I had to take."

"Your college taught square dancing?"

"Yours didn't? Where did you go to college?"

"Princeton," he says, straightening with the pride of even saying the word. "Where did you attend?"

"Lewis and Clark Community College. It was some kind of dancing through different cultures class. Lots of fun, and we even did Bollywood. The only class I liked, now that I think about it. It was taught by a former nun who has her own hula hoop fitness business now."

"Your town sounds fascinating, Hell on Wheels. Truly."

"You have no idea. So how about it? Square dancing?"

"We don't have a caller," he scoffs and takes a long swig of champagne before placing the empty glass on a passing waiter's tray.

“This is Tennessee. It’s like having a heart attack outside the hospital and calling for a doctor. Surely, someone here can call,” I say, looking around.

“The band may not know any square dance songs.”

I cross my arms and tap my toe. “You know, I’m sensing a theme with you, Rausch.”

“What’s that?” he asks, his lips tilting up at the corner in a smirk, surely interested in what I see in him.

“You’ll do anything to find an excuse not to do something out of your box. Have you ever tried anything new or out of the norm?”

“I let a pescatarian Satan worshipper borrow my underwear just because she’s pretty.” He says it with such a straight face that it takes a moment for my brain to piece together the compliment.

My heart skips a beat. Prescott thinks I’m pretty? I think he’s pretty and cut like a line of cocaine, but to hear him say I’m pretty makes me lose my breath for a split second.

“Touché,” I deadpan. Stay cool. Stay cool.

“And I don’t look for excuses.”

“You look for any excuse you can to be boring. I don’t even know you that well, and I can tell you’ve probably never done anything spontaneous or just because you wanted to do it. I can tell by the look in your eyes that you want to do things. You just don’t have the balls.”

“Well, from what I know of you, you have the opposite problem. You’re impetuous and don’t think through things before jumping. It’s dangerous.”

“Yes, I should definitely have taken out more life insurance before I came here in case of an impromptu square dance.” I grab a salmon puff from another passing waiter and push it into my mouth. “Whatever will my mother think if I die in a tragic do-si-do accident?”

He’s exhausting, but he’s also hot when I get under his skin. His pupils dilate like he’s aroused, but I chalk it up to anger at being called out over his lack of spontaneous square dancing. His chest lifts with each breath like he’s keeping himself from panting like a dog. His hands flex at his sides like he wants to either punch me or grab a fistful of braid and bend me over the punch table.

The latter would be fun. Not going to lie. Then again, does he fuck with socks on? I can’t have sex with anyone so uptight they don’t take their socks off.

“Do you ever take your socks off?” I ask, the words leaving my mouth before I can control them.

“What?” he asks, shaking his head.

“Nothing. Well, let’s do this.” I wipe my hands on the front of my bibs like I’ve never heard of a napkin and grab his hand in my own, trying not to swoon at how warm it feels against my skin. His hand is surprisingly strong for a guy that trades stocks and probably sits in a bare office all day. Maybe it was all the cow milking and tractor driving when he was a kid.

“Where are we going?” he asks as I lead him toward the stage. “This is insane.”

“I’m a pescatarian Satanist. I can’t be trusted with sanity,” I laugh back at him as we weave through the crowd of cousins and neighbors.

People part as we come through, probably still shocked at my outfit. The band is setting up again, placing drinks on top of speakers and chatting jovially as Prescott and I approach the stage. When I glance back at Prescott, a wry smirk sits on his face as his eyes dart from left to right, obviously worried about what people will think. He must not like the spotlight.

I live for this shit.

I walk Prescott up the three steps to the makeshift stage, and the band leader walks over to us with a confused look. “Did you have a request?”

“Do you know any square dance songs?”

The man looks about my age. He looks at the rafters and bites his thin bottom lip, probably trying to remember if he has anything that can pass for square dance in his musical arsenal. He turns around and mumbles something to his drummer who shrugs.

“Fine. Do you know *Cotton Eye Joe* by chance?” I ask, desperate. It’s a little unorthodox, but we can call to that.

The band leader smiles and nods, and I approach the microphone, adjusting it to my height so I can speak. The entire crowd turns to me as I clear my throat.

From the rafters on the other side of the barn, a spotlight flashes on Prescott and me, and I hold my hand up to shield my eyes. Prescott stays glued to my side like I'll protect him from the square dance mosh pit I'm about to create.

I tap the microphone once to make sure it's working. "Hello, everyone. My name is Peyton Calvert, and I'm here because Avery and I work together back home in Illinois. Well, my home, that is. Back home in Illinois, we do barn dances a little differently, so I apologize for my outfit. But I'd like to arrange a song that will liven up the place a little tonight. Bear with me."

Every eye is on me. From the third row of people in front of the stage, Frances smiles at me and gives me a thumbs-up. Her husband glares next to her.

"With that said, is there a square dance caller in the house?"

Silence. Seconds tick by, and my palms sweat. Maybe Tennessee isn't as full of callers as I thought.

"Oh, come on, Harold. It'll be fun," a woman says from the back of the room. She looks at a man of about seventy with a bald head and wire-framed glasses wearing a golf shirt and pleated pants. It'd be better if he was wearing a bolo tie, but beggars can't be choosers. "You haven't called in years. You can do it."

I point at Harold. "That's right! Come on up, Harold. Give us a standard call while the band fires up a song for us."

Harold weaves through the crowd as the band warms up and practices the riffs for *Cotton Eye Joe* behind me. Someone in the front row mumbles, “Are you shitting me right now?”

I clear my throat and point to the person that said it. “I am not shitting you. Let’s do this everyone.”

I step away from the microphone to silence until I get two steps away. Then, applause and cheers go up so suddenly that I startle. People whistle. The crowd hoots. One elderly woman grabs my shoulders and says something I can’t understand as soon as I step off the stage. People pat Prescott on the back because I’m with him, and he grabs my hand again to stay with me as the townspeople and neighbors say things like, “Now it’s a party.”

The first notes of the music come on and Harold quickly calls for positions in a Southern Mountain dance. This is a new style of square dance to me, but there’s no backing out now.

I grab Prescott’s hand in one hand and Frances’s hand in another, getting into the circle position with the rest of the room. Some people sit out, sipping their drinks and watching, but every mouth is smiling.

Everyone except Prescott’s father, that is. He grips Frances’s other hand and keeps his eyes on the floor, clearly miffed that his party is disrupted.

The band starts the music for *Cotton Eye Joe*, but there are no lyrics. The caller has the microphone.



Harold dabs sweat from his forehead and clears his throat.  
“Everyone circle left now, ya’ll!”

We all move in a circle, and we move faster than I thought. The younger cousins in the group move quickly, dragging everyone at their pace. Prescott and I both skip to keep up, and I laugh at Prescott skipping. I doubt he’s ever skipped.

“Circle right!”

We all pitch to the other side, and I bump into Prescott as he makes the switch to the right while I still go left. Our heads butt, but we keep going, both of us laughing at our terrible square dance skills.

“Four steps in. Four steps out.”

The entire circle keeps time to the beat and walks four steps in, gives a whoop, and takes four steps back.

I’m not the only one laughing. One middle-aged woman with big hair who’s obviously had too much champagne falls on the floor laughing. Her friend tries to drag her along, causing the woman’s pantyhose to run. I guess that’s what you get for still wearing pantyhose and wearing them to a barn dance.

“Promenade!” Harold calls along with some other instructions about how to promenade.

I cross my hands over each other and reach for Prescott. I have to show him how to set his hands, but I grip them, and we start around the circle, practically moving at a run as Harold calls more instructions that some people listen to.

Some people don't listen at all. People run into others as some people spin in the promenade, obviously more advanced at this and paying better attention.

I focus on moving Prescott forward and looking at him. His eyes are on me, not on anyone around us. He laughs with me. He laughs at his parents in front of us. Even sour Prescott the Second grins a little when he thinks we can't see.

Harold calls for a pass through and Prescott and I get separated as we go under the arms of the people in the opposite part of the circle. Harold, of course, picks this time to call a line up where the circle creates a new circle inside itself. I'm left holding two strange hands as my eyes follow Prescott across the room.

His eyes don't leave mine, even when I end up with a new partner, a woman with a walker still giving it hell, a broad smile on her face. I do-si-do with her and promenade as best we can as the song ends. Someone in the back of the bar hollers to replay it, and the band plays it on loop for at least fifteen minutes.

The air becomes stifled with the hot, sweaty bodies. Harold's golf shirt has pit stains. The wait staff starts handing out water instead of champagne, and my bibs are wet with sweat. The calls increasingly call for Prescott and me to have different partners or separate if we do end up together for a few calls. If I didn't know better, I'd think Harold didn't want me anywhere near Prescott.

I'm hot, tired, and tired of dancing with everyone but him. I need to get out of here and get some air.

I need to get out of here and decompress after getting lost in an uppity Princeton boy's eyes.

## *Trampoline Trampiness*



**T**he cool air hits my lungs like a punch to the chest. It's glorious, and I watch my breath curl when I exhale. It's hot as hell inside with the dancing townsfolk, but I shiver in the night air as I walk away from the loud barn where hooting and hollering continue. The band has switched to a different song, but Harold is still calling from the podium.

I'm glad I could get the party started for everyone.

I walk around the barn and chuckle at the sight I missed on my exploration this morning. A trampoline! Sure, it looks old, like Prescott and Avery once loved it to death, and it's been kept as a shrine to their childhood. The elements have faded it over time, and I lean over the barrier to bounce my hands on it, testing its sturdiness.

When I'm convinced it's still relatively safe, I chuckle and somersault myself onto it, remembering how my parents got us a trampoline for Christmas one year. It lasted a whole six months until Lila broke her arm. Dad took it down after that.

I jump a little, enjoying the feel of it. The freedom. But trampolines are very different as an adult.

I drop on my back in the middle of the mat and pull my secret, emergency joint from the small pocket at the front of my bib overalls.

As soon as I light it and exhale, I feel more relaxed. Less stressed about a certain boy I'd never normally consider talking to much less consider sneaking into his room for a midnight romp.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I've spent a good chunk of my life protesting the kinds of things he lives for. Literally. Once a week, the commune organizes a protest against some organization, and Prescott probably owns their stock.

I exhale smoke and stare up at the stars. It sure is pretty down here, though.

"I'm sorry about the *Hee Haw* comment," a voice says behind me.

I hide my joint at my side and look up in panic. I don't think Prescott would rat me out for getting high in his yard, but I'm fucked if his parents are with him.

"What do you want?" I ask, relaxing when I realize he's alone.

"I wanted to check on you," he says, climbing onto the trampoline. "They're still square dancing in there. I don't think I've ever seen Grammy Rausch dancing. Ever. She's even smiling."

I wasn't expecting him to know how to climb on the trampoline, but damn his arms look good flexing in his shirt as he pulls himself up. He was a child once, though. This was his trampoline. His and Avery's. It's hard to imagine him a carefree child, jumping and flipping without a care in the world. He must have been that way once.

After all, we all grow up. Some of us are just slower than others.

I pull the joint up to my lips, inhale, and blow the smoke toward the starry sky, refusing to look in his direction. "I'm glad I could liven up the party."

He settles next to me on the trampoline. "Can I have a hit of that?" he asks. "Did I ask that correctly?"

I turn my head and startle at how close his face is to mine. He's a foot away, and I'm close enough to see his lengthening stubble and the flecks of gold in his eyes. "It's too much in one night to teach you to square dance and smoke a joint."

"I've smoked it before at Princeton."

"They have weed at Princeton?"

He laughs and looks boyish while he does it. His eyes crinkle up all cute. My heart clenches at how much I like to see him smile. "Of course," he chuckles.

I place the joint between my lips and let it sit there. "It just seems like more of a cocaine school."

"There's that too. I've never touched that, but I smoked weed once."

I hand him the joint, and he inhales, coughing a little when the exhale gets caught in his throat. I don't laugh at him, but I accept the joint as he passes it back to me.

"Why do you work at the chili place?" he asks.

"That's very to the point, huh?"

"Sorry," he says with a shake of his head. He glances up at the stars and cringes. "I'm just curious. You seem like you should have a really fun career."

"Circus clown?"

"Preschool teacher," he says, and I sputter my inhale. "I can see you as a preschool teacher. I could see you making macaroni necklaces and playing parachute games with the kids all day."

"I want to be an ultrasound tech."

It just comes out. I don't know why I tell him that. I haven't told anyone I've been thinking of quitting Chili Shack and going back to Lewis and Clark Community College to get certified as an ultrasound technician.

Peyton Calvert...with a job that doesn't require beans. A job where I'd wake up at a decent hour every morning and do something good for the world. No more hanging out at the commune where a guy named Laser is teaching me to play guitar. No more schlepping off to my job making chili when most people are getting home from work and coming in at two in the morning smelling like tomato paste.

Actually, my family will miss the leftovers. Maybe I should stay put.

“Something tells me that you’d be good no matter what you choose to do,” Prescott says, pinching the joint from between my lips and taking another drag. He places the joint right back between my lips when he’s done.

“Don’t tell anyone. It’s something I don’t tell people. It’s a big secret.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Why is it a secret?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t seem like it needs to be. It’s a good thing, right?”

I shrug. “I know you may not understand, you being the golden boy of your family and all. I’m kind of the Avery of my family and multiply that by ten. I fuck up everything, and I’ve always been kind of a screwup. I wander from thing to thing. Chili Shack is the longest I’ve stayed with something, and that’s because it’s easy, and I get free vegetarian chili. Fuck, I even drop the cans on the ground and take the dented bean cans home for breakfast. I’ve never done hard before. I’ve never had to. I recently learned to play guitar but haven’t played in front of a large group because I’m too much of a chicken shit to put myself out there.”

“Are you the youngest child by chance?” he asks.

“Nope.”

“Hmm. Surprising.”



“Why do you say that?” I ask.

“Younger children are usually more laid back. Not type A personalities. They find it harder to pin down a career or settle a family.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. I have a younger sister and a younger brother. Twins.”

“Are you the oldest?”

“Not by a long shot, bro. I have eight siblings. Seven sisters and one brother. I have a lot of older sisters. I’m pretty sure my father lost count of his children by the time I was even born.”

“Damn! Your parents were also hippies, huh?”

I curl up and laugh as I exhale smoke. “That’s funny.”

“I just thought...free love, you know?”

“My parents were married two years before my oldest sibling, Samantha, was born. Each child was planned. My mother just liked kids, and they could always afford medical care, braces, food, and clothes. We didn’t live in a house like yours, but they were always able to take care of us. Having that many kids made Mom happy. She likes to fuss. I think she misses us all being little and can’t wait to fuss over grandchildren.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Prescott whispers. “About the ultrasound thing.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“What if I told you a secret? Something nobody knows about me. That way, if I tell your secret, you could tell mine.”

“That sounds interesting. OK. Lay it on me.” I prop myself on my elbow, and my hair hangs down between us. Idly, he reaches out his index finger and strokes one of my braids before pulling away like it burns him.

He rolls on his back and blows out a sigh. “I had a vasectomy.”

Did I hear that right?

“A vasectomy?” I whisper, still wrapping my head around it. The only person I know that’s had a vasectomy is my dad after he finally got a son.

“Yep. The big snip. The closer.”

“Can I ask why?”

He looks behind him like he expects Prescott the Second to come out of the barn and demand to know why his son’s semen doesn’t work properly. “I don’t want kids. There. I said it. Judge me as you like.”

I lie back onto the trampoline again, and the structure jiggles with the movement. “I don’t want kids, either.”

“You don’t? I’ve never met anyone else our age that says they don’t want kids. I’ve read about it but never met anyone else personally. It’s not a thing down here so much. Maybe it’s prevalent in bigger cities, but not here. Even at Princeton, I never met anyone that thought like me. At least, the people I hung out with wanted kids. Why don’t you want them?”

“I don’t need a reason. If you’re demanding one, it’s because I don’t see the need when it’s not important to me. Kids aren’t a vanity project. You don’t have them just because that’s the way it’s always been done. They’re expensive. The world is crazy. We have an environmental problem. It’s not like I have to even keep the family line going. My sister, Cora, just found out she’s pregnant. She swore me to secrecy, so I can’t believe I’m telling you. I’ll have a niece or nephew to spoil soon, and my other sisters will probably have kids. They all want kids, and I can’t imagine Ava and Maddox will wait too long.”

“What about your brother?”

I snort a little. “Well, let’s just say my mother has a shock coming from there. I’m pretty sure Ryan likes guys.”

“Your parents wouldn’t support him?”

“They absolutely would. Mom would probably even get one of those rainbow shirts and go to the parade in St. Louis they have every June. I just don’t think Ryan has completely come to terms with it yet, and it’s his show. He’ll tell other people when he’s ready. He only told me he likes a guy on his amateur hockey team because I was stoned at the time. I think he just wanted to tell someone and thought I’d forget. But no, I don’t think he’ll have kids.”

“There are surrogates and new technologies for that,” he says with a grin, facing me again. “He can still have one.”

“You’re right. I should know better and remember that. Incidentally, why don’t you want them?”

He shrugs. “I’m like you. I’ve never wanted to be a father. If I told people, they’d probably just blame having a cold father and tell me to get therapy. I mean, my father’s an asshole. I know that. I don’t think it’s the reason I don’t want kids, though. I just...don’t. I wasn’t raised to be a warm person. I was raised to be like my dad, and I don’t want to be like my dad. I don’t want to be a father like him, and it’s all I know. Don’t tell anyone I said that.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. I get it.”

“I’ve never met anyone like you, Peyton Calvert,” he says. Did he move closer to me? “We see the world very differently.”

“Yeah, you see it through dollar signs and fear. I see it through rose-colored glasses. You’re not as big of an asshole as I thought, though.”

OK, he’s definitely moving closer. I can smell the champagne on his lips and feel the warmth from his skin. If I lean forward an inch or so, he’ll get the hint and lean forward. We’ll kiss, and then I’ll be sucked down the rabbit hole I came out here to avoid.

I turn my head and look back up at the sky as I wet my fingers with spit and pinch out the end of the joint. It’s probably just the marijuana kicking in that’s making him talk freely and move closer to me. It certainly can’t be that he wants to hold my hand.

Because he is holding my hand. He grips it between his fingers and trails his thumb over my skin. I look down at our

hands, tilting my head like I'm trying to understand.

“I had a lot of fun tonight, and I'm glad you came this year. I may not agree with you on everything or even understand you, Hell on Wheels, but you've livened this weekend up. It's always been crystal goblets and small talk about interest rates and cattle prices. I got something very different this weekend. Can we hang out again?”

I pull my hand away, and he frowns. I want to kick myself that I pulled away from him. His hand feels nice when I hold it, and he smells good. He probably kisses all nice too. God damn me. Why did I pull away?

Because I can't take him home in my duffle bag. What future do we have? Am I going to play guitar for him on the porch and bring him to the commune for chicken egg day? Take him peach picking in the summer and apple picking in the fall? He's stocks, bonds, and tight ties. I'm long skirts and protests in front of the courthouse.

“Avery and I are going out in Nashville tomorrow,” I say, sitting up and scooting to the other side of the trampoline so I won't have to climb over him.

“Can I come?”

“Uh, I think it's like a girls' night or something.”

I swing myself down from the trampoline and look back at him. He bites his lip and looks sad. Jeesh. He may be a stuffed suit, but I didn't mean to hurt his feelings.

“Well, maybe we can hang out sometime Saturday or Sunday,” he suggests.

I look back at the barn where a line of people call out goodbyes and wave to friends as they walk to their cars. I wipe my hands together, brushing the dirt off them. “I’m sure I’ll see you around, Prescott.”

“Good night, Hell on Wheels.”

## *Honky Tonk*



“Well, this is fucking insane,” I yell in Avery’s ear over the loud music thumping through the small bar. I’m still not sure she hears me, though, as she’s busy smiling at the bouncer. He looks at her fake ID, chuckles, and waves her through. At least I don’t have to worry about fake IDs anymore.

“If it’s too loud, you’re too old,” Avery says. I guess she did hear me. “Do you want to go back to the house and play *Monopoly* with my parents?”

“Here is good,” I chuckle. “What’s going on in there, anyway?” The place is loud with chants, country music, and cheers every thirty seconds.

Avery and I push through the cover charge line, get our hand stamps, and follow the crowd to the main bar area where waitresses in short shorts and crop tops carry trays. One waitress carries more than twenty bottles of beer on a single tray, deftly dodging the crowd. Another waitress carries test tube-like vials full of red liquid which are obviously some

kind of shots. Dollar bills are everywhere – waved through the air and sticking out of the wait staff waistbands. Women laugh and stare at groups of men. Men chuckle and smile back at the women like they're at a middle school dance. Oddly, not one person walks over and talks to the person they smile and laugh at.

Avery looks around the room and heads to the beer trough, a large metal bathtub-like object full of beer and ice. She yells something to the woman working the beer station, and the woman uses a bottle opener to crack open two beers for us.

“What’s going on here tonight?” I yell to the woman working the trough.

She jerks her head back toward a long hallway at the back of the main bar area. This place has another room. “Bull night,” the woman grunts, turning her attention to the customers behind us. “Winner gets a thousand bucks.”

“Avery, do not tell me there are bulls here. Are we supposed to run with them?” I grip her shirt in fear. I knew this place was different from where I grew up, but I didn’t think it would be scary different. What the fuck did I get myself into?

Avery pulls my fingers off the hem of her shirt. “Relax. It’s a mechanical bull.”

“Wait, you ride it and get money? That sounds easy.”

She takes a swig of her drink and sputters a little. “You think it’s easy? Have you ever ridden a mechanical bull, Peyton?”



“No, I have not. Is it hard?”

“Fuck, yes, it’s hard. You can only hold on with one hand. That’s the rule. If a second hand touches, you’re out. Your thighs and sheer will to live are the only things you can use to hang on once it gets bucking. It looks easy at first until they turn up the speed. Lots of broken bones and crying drunk women on bull night.”

Before we can walk to the other room, there’s a light tap on my shoulder. Turning around, I blink twice to be sure what I’m seeing. Avery lets out a long groan and puts her hands on her hips. “Prescott?” I ask.

“Did you follow us?” Avery asks, obviously annoyed. “If we wanted you out with us, we would have invited you. What did you do? Track my phone like a stalker?”

“Relax,” he says, looking at Avery more than at me. In fact, since he tapped on my shoulder, it seems like he’s going out of his way not to look at me. He nods to the guy at his side – a guy that actually *does* have a butter yellow sweater tied around his shoulders and looks like he just got done with high tea at the country club. “This is Jacob. He’s a fellow Sigma from Princeton. We’re out on the town.” Prescott looks at me and squints. “Guys night.”

I stick out my hand and wait for Jacob to shake it. When he does, his skin is cold and clammy. When I let go, I discreetly run my hand down the back of my jeans to dry it off. “Nice to meet you.”

Jacob nods and looks behind me, ogling the waitress with a low-cut top. Nice. He smells of old money, but the belly paunch and leather loafers aren't going to win him points in here where a quick look around shows me that blue jeans, big belt buckles, and boots are the standard male outfit.

I look Prescott up and down. At least he got the memo about not wearing pleated pants. His jeans are dark and neat. He doesn't have a large belt buckle or cowboy boots, but he's wearing standard work boots and a black sweater cut nicely around his biceps. He doesn't look like the guys in here, but nobody will fuck with him for it. It's nice to see him without a tie.

"Peyton was just going to ride the bull. Want to watch?" Avery winks at me as soon as the words leave her mouth.

"Oh, I don't know." I bite my lip and cringe. "I don't know how, and you said it's dangerous."

Avery pulls me toward the hallway and the room with the mechanical bull. Prescott and Jacob follow with their beers, probably nosy. I'm sure it's not because Prescott wants to see me ride...something.

Then again, the idea of him watching me if I get on the mechanical bull does something to my panties. Heat blossoms in my core, and my nipples feel constricted in my bra. At least I wore a bra tonight. I don't usually, but if I'm going to ride a mechanical bull, I don't want my tits to flop everywhere. All I need is the DJ up in the DJ loft to give me the nickname of Ole Floppy Tit which would be chanted through the crowd.

“My friend wants to sign up,” Avery says, talking to the registration guy before I know what’s happening. “Is there a line? This is Peyton.”

“Only two ahead of you, love,” he says to me in a bored voice. “You made it just in time to register. Record for the night is forty-eight seconds. Beat that and take home the pot.”

“I don’t know if I should.”

“Come on, Peyton. Do it,” Prescott says. “If you do it, I’ll buy you a drink.”

An evil idea forms in my mind. It’s like I have the devil on one shoulder and an angel on another. Too bad the devil on my shoulder has usually won in the past and is looking like the favorite tonight, too. “Only if you do it with me.”

“No doubles,” the man says, idly chomping on gum.

“He’ll go after me. Prescott Rausch the Third is his name.”

“That sounds a tad douche-y, mate,” the guy says. He pencils something into the lineup clipboard and holds it so we can’t see it.

“No way,” Prescott says, and the man with the clipboard scratches through something. “I can’t get on that thing.”

“Yes,” I respond.

The man shrugs and writes something on the form.

“Fuck no,” Prescott says.

The man scratches something out.

“Fuck yes.”

The man blows out a breath and writes in Prescott's name.

"I'm not dressed for a mechanical bull," Prescott says.

"Neither am I. You're scared and making excuses again."

He snorts a little and puts his hands on his hips. "I'm not fucking scared. You're scared."

"That's different. I can admit I'm scared, but I'm going to do it anyway. You won't admit to being scared, so you look like an asshole. Just admit you're scared. But if you want to buy me a drink, you need to ride the bull."

Prescott bites his lip, and I half expect him to tell me he isn't going to buy me that drink after all. That would be the sensible thing to do for a man that doesn't want to ride a bull to impress a girl that he has no future with.

Surprisingly, Prescott takes a deep breath, clenches his fists at his side, and flexes his chiseled jaw. "Alright, if that's the way it has to be. One beer for you, and a bull ride for me. Happy now?"

The man at the registration table throws the clipboard down on the table in a huff and looks behind him where a blond woman stumbles away from the mechanical bull. She clutches her arm and sobs as her friends, a bachelorette party from the looks of it, surround her and hustle her off the mats that are strewn around the diameter of the bull to catch flying patrons.

"Am I next?"

"Yep. Remember, forty-eight seconds is the time to beat."

I hurdle the barrier and step onto the mats, sinking into the thick pads. Walking through them is like trying to walk in deep snow, but I make it to the mechanical bull with fear in my stomach. I feel Prescott's eyes on the back of my neck. I'm sure Jacob and Avery are watching me with interest, but it's only Prescott's gaze that burns me. What the fuck is wrong with me that he gets to me like this?

And he wants to buy me a drink. I've had a lot of drinks bought for me by men in my life, but I've never been this excited about one.

I need to focus on the damn bull. Maybe if I treat it like a real bull, I'll do better. Can't hurt, right?

I stoop and run my hands over the bull material. Sure, the bull doesn't have a head. It's probably a safety issue to not have a head on the thing in case someone gets thrown hard, but it's still weird. "There, girl," I whisper, petting the side of the bull like I petted the cow yesterday. Laughter bubbles through the crowd, but I ignore it.

"You going to make love to it, sweetheart?" a man yells from the crowd, and his buddies around him laugh.

I flip the guy off, pull my hair up into a ponytail, and grab the pommel as I swing my leg over the bull. I flex my ass cheeks and move side to side, getting used to the feel of sitting on a fake piece of cattle that's probably wood, hard plastic, and some type of felt, judging by the scratchy exterior. It's harder on my thighs than I thought. Contrary to popular belief,

I'm not used to having something this thick between my legs while my thighs are spread so wide.

I glance over to Prescott and Avery. Avery has her hands balled into fists under her chin and bounces on her toes. Prescott smiles a wry grin and winks at me before giving me an encouraging nod.

"Give a thumbs up when you're ready, little lady," the DJ instructs from the raised booth above me and to my right. I look over to the booth and shield my eyes with my free hand as the spotlight shines in my face.

Better get this over with. I take a deep breath, blow it out, clench my thighs like I'm holding on for dear life, and give a thumbs up.

The bull rocks slightly under me, and I focus on getting the movement down. I know I only have a few seconds before the DJ jacks up the speed. I rock into the bull and steal another glance at Prescott.

Maybe it's the movement of my hips or the way I ride it, but his eyes flutter, and he mouths, "Damn."

Avery whoops, and I blush, knowing I look like I do when I ride a dick. Slow. Back and forth with leisure.

The DJ speeds up the bull, and I hold tight to the pommel. From watching westerns with my dad, I know riding horses is all in the legs and thighs. It's also in the core. Other riders probably think if they hold onto the handle with all their might, they won't get bucked. I may hold on a little tighter, but

I hold on so tight with my thighs that my toes curl in my Converse.

Fuck this bullshit. I'm the reigning squat champion of the Alton High School physical education program. If I can hold a squat for eighteen minutes, I can clench my thighs around this hunk of wood for another forty seconds.

I squeeze my abdominal muscles, willing myself in place and imagining a pole from the top of my head through the middle of the bull. Thank fuck for all those planks and yoga classes at the commune.

The DJ speeds up the bull, and the crowd goes wild as I throw my arm in the air like I'm a real cowgirl and smile. I got this.

The clock clicks to twenty-five seconds, and the DJ jacks up the speed to the point where I can't see much. I rock with the bull as it starts to not only rock but spin in a circle. I force my hand in the air, even though my instinct is to lean forward and hug the fake beast. I'd get disqualified. I hang on. My vision blurs and little flecks of light move in front of my eyes. My neck bobs, and I force it still, but it'll hurt tomorrow.

Maybe I can get Prescott to rub it.

My thighs slip, and I take my thoughts away from Prescott and his hands to focus on my thighs. Ten more seconds.

The crowd chants my name, but I can't see them. Everything is a blur as the bull spins faster. Soon, they count, and I hear them count up to forty-five. Three more seconds.

When I get there, the crowd erupts, and I try to signal to slow the bull down, but it's no use. Nobody knows what I'm trying to signal because my free arm moves wildly with the bucking. There's only one way off this shit show.

I pitch to the left and let go of the pommel, expecting to roll.

I roll...and roll. I hit the mats and roll several feet before stopping and attempting to get on my knees. The crowd is still going crazy, and Avery is at my side in moments, patting me on the back as my stomach roils from being bucked in a circle.

"I'm going to throw up."

"Breathe," a male voice says. It's soothing, and masculine hands circle my back. "Jacob, go get ice for her neck."

How does Prescott know just what I need when I need it?

Another minute passes, and a metal container used for beer buckets is in front of me, and a cold cloth is pressed to my neck. Warm hands run over my back, and I hope it's Prescott who's massaging me. I don't know if I'd like it if it was Jacob, but fuck...those hands feel nice.

"Next up is Prescott Rausch the Third," the DJ yells through the microphone. The crowd doesn't applaud. In fact, you could hear a pin drop. "Give him a hand and let's see if he can beat fifty-one seconds!"

"What kind of douchey name is that?" a man with a cowboy hat yells from the front row. "His name may as well be Trust Fund."



I still can't move, so Jacob grabs my ankles, and Avery grabs under my arms. Together, they drag me off the mats and away from Prescott. As miserable as I feel after actually beating the bull, Prescott looks worse. His already pale skin gleams like a ghost in the spotlight. He wipes his hand on his pants, and a drop of sweat drips from his temple.

This guy must really want to buy me a drink.

Prescott ignores the taunts from the front row and climbs awkwardly onto the bull, even giving it a little kick like he's a child taking a ride on a plastic horse in the supermarket. My siblings and I used to fight over who would ride the plastic horse first, but something tells me Prescott and Avery were never allowed on anything you could ride at a supermarket, if they were allowed in a supermarket at all.

Before the bull starts, Prescott looks over at me and finds my eyes. He stares at me without blinking as the crowd starts chanting, "Trust Fund. Trust Fund." In contrast, another part of the crowd must really hate Prescott because they start chanting for the bull.

Avery, Jacob, and I go nuts. Well, as much as I can go nuts with my head still parked over a metal beer bucket. Jacob hops up and down screaming in a perfect soprano pitch.

The bull starts, and Prescott rocks into it like I did at first. His face reddens, and he stares at the pommel as the bull moves faster. The room has stopped spinning for me, and I get to my feet, clapping. I'll clap for him until forty seconds. After that, I want to win my money.

The bull rocks faster. Twenty seconds pass.

The bull speeds up, and it happens so fast that I blink and miss Prescott being thrown into the air like a special effect dummy from a low-budget movie. He lands on his face with his ass in the air. Even worse, his pants tear with a loud ripping sound I can hear from where I'm standing. He stays still, not covering his underwear.

The crowd goes silent except for the asshole in the front row. "Dude, I think Trust Fund died!"

Avery and I move fast to him while Jacob stands back, frozen. When we reach Prescott, we roll him over. Thankfully, he blinks and rubs his face, probably checking for a bloody nose. Avery sits back on her heels and blows out a sigh of relief that he's not hurt.

Tenderly, I push his sweaty hair back from his face, and he leans into my palm. "You ripped your pants."

"Is my underwear on blast to everyone?"

"Yep. Are you OK?"

He nods but doesn't get a chance to respond. The crowd chants my name as the registration guy appears in front of me with a stack of hundred-dollar bills. He counts them out, the crowd counting along with him.

Prescott gets off the floor and wipes his pants. "Looks like drinks are on me," I say.

"No," he deadpans. "I won't allow it. You said I could buy you a drink if I rode the bull. Well, I rode it."

He walks to me and pushes his forehead to mine. There's no shame that his tightie whities are flapping in the breeze. He doesn't care that we're a foot from his sister or that he just got thrown from a bucking mechanical bull and got beat by a woman a foot shorter than him.

He grips my hair in one hand, cups my cheek in the other, and breathes inches from me. Pants, actually.

Avery gasps next to me, and the crowd gasps along with her. We stay there, breathing in each other for what feels like hours. A drop of sweat drips down his neck, and I don't know what comes over me when I dart my tongue out and lick the sweat drop on his neck, up his jaw, and then to the back of his ear.

The crowd chants, "Kiss her. Kiss her." Another segment chants, "Trust Fund!"

He smiles an evil smile before bringing his lips to mine in front of God, Jesus, Avery, and a bar full of drunk cowboys. He grips my hair and leans me back a little in a half-dip move while his tongue explores my mouth. I taste the beer on his tongue, and I kiss him hungrily like that beer taste will only get better the more I kiss him.

"What the fuck?" Avery mutters next to me, hands on her hips and looking away in embarrassment.

Prescott and I pull apart, and he kisses my nose. "I totally followed you here, Hell on Wheels. You're just too much fun. You're like a book I can't put down, and I have to find out

what happens next when I'm around you." He smiles and looks around. "And I'm going to buy all your drinks tonight."

## *Useless and Uselesser*



“Let me get this straight,” Prescott’s father says from the end of the table. “You ripped your pants like some type of trailer trash and rode a mechanical bull in a honky tonk.” He waves off the tuxedoed waiter next to him, and the waiter approaches my dinner plate. I nod, and the man gives me the best pork steak on the platter. He winks at me when I smile. The waiter is my kind of people.

Prescott sits across from me, digging into his own broccoli casserole with bacon and roasted potatoes. He drops his steak knife and inhales through his nose. “I wouldn’t say trailer trash, Dad. We went out in Nashville and had fun. What’s the big deal?”

Next to me, Avery slinks down in her seat. “Somehow, this will be about me. Watch. He’s going to bring me into this.” Her words are barely above a whisper, and I pat her leg again under the white tablecloth that Avery’s mother brought back from Venice.

I've been patting her leg at dinner a lot this weekend. Avery wasn't lying when she said her parents are hard on her for her life choices. I've seen the glares at breakfast when her hair is still tousled from a night's sleep. I've seen their grins when Prescott comes down in a dress shirt and tie for breakfast. Apparently, in this house, bacon is a formal affair.

The maid was given orders to not let my duffle bag or Avery's backpack appear in the foyer. All of our belongings must stay in the guest room or in the laundry room if being cleaned. Frances is nice enough to me, but Prescott the Second looks at me like I'm gum on the bottom of his shoe.

I chalk it up to Frances thinking that I'll leave soon enough, and she'll only have to deal with me for the weekend. But something about Prescott the Second makes me think he knows that I like his son, and he's afraid I'll be around more often.

His son also has his shoe off under the table and is rubbing my shin with his foot.

Prescott the Second bangs on the table, and I jump, startled. Prescott stops playing with my shin. Avery gasps, and Prescott tilts his head to the side, looking at his father like he's a NASA rocket piece he found in the yard. It's safe to say that Prescott isn't used to being on his father's bad side.

"Why are you so mad?" Prescott asks.

"I expect it from that one," Prescott's father says, grinding his teeth and pointing at Avery. "I don't expect it from my son who makes good choices. You could screw up your career

choices if you play around like that. Don't you want to get a job at a Nashville firm now that you're done with school?"

"When did we make that agreement?" Prescott spits, and I stop eating. I've never heard him talk back before. Granted, I've known him for three days, but he's been the dutiful son in that time. I get the impression he doesn't make waves. Even Avery inhales sharply next to me. Frances stops chewing and tells the wait staff to leave, not wanting an audience.

Should I get up? I'm not family. I should go eat in the kitchen with the staff. Tentatively, I get up and grab my plate.

"Where are you going?" Prescott asks, suddenly noticing my movement.

"I thought I'd leave you all to this discussion. This seems like a family thing."

"Stay. Don't leave me," Avery says practically into my back. She pulls on my arm, and I plop back into my seat, rattling my dish as it hits the table.

"I think that's a good idea. Leave, Ms. Calvert," Prescott the Second says, not looking at me.

"I want her here," Prescott says across from me.

I look at Frances, and she shrugs. I take a drink of my water and stare at my plate.

"How dare you call me trailer trash for going out in the city? If you don't like Avery and me going to honky tonks, why do we live so close to Nashville?"

“Son, I did not pick this spot of land to build on because I thought you and your useless sister would want to go out and ride mechanical bulls like common whores.”

Now would be a really bad time to mention I won the common whore contest, so I sit and think about anything but the conversation around me. Guitar chords. That’s it. I’ll think about mundane finger positions. I haven’t practiced for a few weeks, but it’s a good time to think about it. I think about the recipe for vegetarian chili at Chili Shack and recite it in my head. Anything to stop the burning tears in my eyes for Avery.

I grip my napkin, balling it into a fist. She may make a lot of mistakes at work, but she’s never useless. I bite down on my tongue until I taste metal.

Next to me, Avery’s chest heaves with the sobs she tries to control. When I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, a tear runs down her face.

That’s it. I can’t take it any longer. I reach over and wrap my arm around her. “You are never useless,” I whisper.

“Prescott,” Frances chides at the end of the table. Shit. She doesn’t seem like the kind to cross her husband.

Prescott the Second holds up his hand. “I won’t hear of it, Frances. We invited Avery home after she defied us. She brought home a hippie friend who obviously has no moral compass, and she has our son out at dive bars and making a fool of himself in public. It’s gone far enough. If she’s going to behave like this under our roof and encourage her brother to behave like that, I won’t have her back for Christmas.”



“Damn you, Dad. I’m a grown man, and I’m not as useless as Avery!”

My head jerks up, and I meet Prescott’s eyes. What the hell did he just say?

Before I can fix my eyes into a scowl, gasp, or ask what he’s thinking, Avery gets up and bolts for the dining room door. She runs so fast that her hair flies behind her. Frances startles as Avery runs past her at high speed.

“Avery!” Prescott calls, getting up from his seat.

“Sit the hell down,” I yell. “Haven’t you all done enough?” I throw my napkin on my chair as I get up from my seat. My silverware clanks as I bump the table. “You should all be ashamed of yourselves.”

I point at Frances. “I know you love your daughter. I can see it on your face. I see how you hate what your husband says to her. Why don’t you stick up for her? Any mother would! My mother would have clawed someone’s eyes out by now.”

I whirl to face Prescott across from me. “And you...you should support your sister because she’s the only one you have. I have seven sisters and a brother. If any of them were hit by a beer truck and died, I’d miss them. But I wouldn’t be alone in the world after that. I have more siblings. She’s your one and only. Act like a fucking big brother and stop allowing the world to put her down!”

Prescott puts his hands up like he’s being robbed, his eyes wide. “I do stick up for her!”

“You just agreed with your father that she’s useless!”

“It came out wrong.”

“Man up and be who you want and stand up for your sister being who she is.”

I turn to Prescott the Second. He sits red-faced at the end of the table, a shocked look on his face that someone dares insult his family or contradicts him in his house. I put my hands on my hips and square my shoulders back. “A father protects his family. That means physically and emotionally. Charlie Calvert taught me that.” I point a finger at him, and it’s probably the first time anyone has pointed a finger in his direction. “I don’t even have words for how you treat your daughter, to say nothing of how you treat your son.”

Avery’s father flinches like I slapped him. “How do I treat my son?”

“Like you expect him to be just like you and he’ll get your wrath like Avery does if he’s not.” He doesn’t say anything so my mouth keeps moving. “I may be a worthless hippie to you, but I think you’re stuffy, awful, and you treat your family like shit, something even I would never do. You know what? I don’t like you. There. I said it. I haven’t seen one redeeming quality in you since I walked into this house. You act like you’re sad and bitter toward the world.”

I look at the remaining Rausch family members at the table. “Your daughter is kind, and she is smart. She does well at school. Instead of being ashamed because she didn’t go to Stanford or Cornell, maybe you should be proud that you

raised a daughter independent enough to want to stand on her own two feet. She's proud of that scholarship. Do you know why?" Silence fills the room as they wait for me to answer my own question. Frances stares at her plate, blinking back tears. "She's proud because she didn't have to use Daddy's name to get into a school. She didn't have to have Daddy write a big check to get her a scholarship. She got it on her merit. She gets great grades and will be a shoo-in for the master's program at Kansas State she wants. I bet she didn't tell you that, huh? Well, I wouldn't tell you assholes anything either." I look at Prescott. "She probably didn't tell you because she's tired of being one-upped for everything she does."

I spin on my heels and walk to the door Avery just ran out of. "I'm going to go find your daughter now. I'm going to tell her how wonderful she is. Someone should."

I'm in the entryway to the house when I hear footsteps behind me. Turning, I see Prescott and Frances walking toward me. Frances takes two steps for every one of her son's, trying to keep up with his long strides.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm coming with you to find Avery," Prescott says, his jaw set.

"I'm coming too," Frances says. "You're absolutely right, Peyton. I need to stand up to my husband and defend Avery. I may not agree with her life choices and the way she lives her life, but she's never done anything to bring shame to this family."

Prescott looks out the nearby window. “Mom, you’re not going out there. It’s pouring,” he says, gesturing to the window where it’s pitch black. Rain splatters the windowpane. How did I not notice there’s a hell storm happening outside? “Peyton shouldn’t go either. I’ll get her.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I’m not one of your little princesses you probably date, and I’m not going to do everything you say. You’re the reason any of us have to go out there after her. Do you think I’m going to let you go after her and say even more insensitive bullshit to her?”

“I want to go,” Frances says.

“No,” I say. I nail her with a glare, and she shrinks in front of me. “Stay here and handle your husband because someone needs to. I’ll get her.”

I brace myself as I open the door. I know I’ll be soaked to the bone as soon as I walk ten feet, but I have to go out. I bolt through the rain, sprinting toward the barn. If someone is going to run away during a thunderstorm, they’d probably go to the barn to be away from the family but safe from the weather.

I’m halfway to the barn when I feel Prescott’s hand on my arm. “Peyton, stop!”

I spin and gawk at Prescott as water runs down his face. His hair is wet, and he blows rain off his lips as the drops try to roll into his mouth. He blinks water off his eyelashes. His shirt is soaked, and I can see every muscular line under the wet fabric. I’ve seen him without a shirt before, but the sight of

him in the male equivalent of a wet t-shirt contest makes my heart skip a beat. Water drips from the triangle at the bottom of his tie.

I shake my head, trying to banish thoughts of peeling his shirt off him and talking him into getting rid of his wet clothes. “Go, Prescott.”

“I’m going to help you. I’m going to help you because you’re right, Peyton. We treat her like a dog we don’t like but keep around for hunting or something. I shouldn’t have said what I did. It just came out. I didn’t mean to imply my sister’s useless.”

“I don’t understand you!” I yell, shaking my head as a roll of thunder rumbles closer than I’d like. My eyes flick to the sky to check for nearby lightning and then move back to Prescott. “Why do you think everyone and everything is beneath you?”

“Because I’ve been told that my whole life by...by him,” Prescott says, jerking his thumb back at the house. “After so many years, I stopped questioning it. I stopped questioning it until Avery went to school and started doing what she wanted.”

“What do *you* want to do Prescott?” I ask, jabbing my finger into his chest. It’s everything I can do not to drag my finger down the center line of his chest and undo his pants right here, but I move my hand away before I drop to my knees in the mud.

“I want to move away from my father. I had almost worked up the balls to leave, but then Avery left. I didn’t want to leave Mom then.”

“Who do you want to be?”

He pauses and blinks. When he speaks, he lowers his voice until I can barely hear him over the rain hammering the ground and my skin. “I want to be someone that grabs life by the balls. Someone like you.”

“What? Don’t put this on me because you can’t stand up to Daddy and do what you want. Don’t make me into your magical wizard of fun. I’m not a new toy to play with.”

I spin around to walk away because I can’t look at him. He’s infuriating and sexy all at the same time, and I don’t trust my own feelings. My emotions are in a tightly wound ball with concern for Avery, concern that my duffle bag will be out on the front lawn in the rain by the time I find her, and concern that Prescott won’t like me.

I’m even more concerned he will. What would I do with a guy like him long term?

He hooks his arm around my waist and buries his face in my neck as I freeze. I hover an inch off the ground as he picks me up a little, and my legs flail for a moment, getting used to the sensation. His forehead is against my jaw and he breathes against me. Pants, really. We stay like that for moments as rain pours onto us and the sky rumbles so loud that I feel it in my chest.

He clears his throat and kisses my collarbone. “I knew you were a pistol when I saw you. Who borrows someone’s underwear, for fuck’s sake? But when I found you milking that cow the next morning, I knew you were someone that does what she wants when she wants to do it. I’m fascinated.” He pauses and blows out a long sigh that tickles my neck. “I’m utterly fucked for you, Peyton Calvert. How you managed to do that in a long weekend, I’ll never know, but you did it. You fucked me for all the country club women I know. You fucked me for all the girls I knew from Princeton that I didn’t find the least bit interesting. I’m fucked. I’m fucked because I want to know every single thing about you right down to your shoe size, and I have never, in my entire life, wanted to know anything about another human being the way I want to know everything about you.”

I take gulping breaths and breathe in the scent of rain, mud, and that scent that I’ve come to associate with him. At the same time I catch my breath, I see a small flicker of light in the dairy barn. It’s small, but it’s probably Avery’s phone light.

Nodding forward, I ignore Prescott’s words. I’m still mad at him and don’t know what to say, so I gesture to the dairy barn. “Your sister’s in there.”

He puts me down gently, and my body misses him as I wobble in the mud puddle forming under my feet. A chill moves up my body, and I shiver.

He sniffs and rubs his hands down his face. “You go inside and warm up. I’ll talk to her.”

“I should go. You’ll make it worse.”

He reaches for my hand and squeezes it. “I think this talk is a long time coming. I think it’s time my sister and I form an alliance of sorts. Maybe it’s also time to tell her that I’m proud of her. You just go in. You don’t need to be out in this.”

“Don’t you dare go in there and say something douchey and patronizing. You’ll deal with me.”

He holds his hands up and smirks. “Yes, ma’am. I do not want to deal with Hell on Wheels.”

“Your dad will probably kick me out with my stuff anyway.”

Prescott chuckles and shakes his head. “Not if my mother has anything to say about it.”



## *Bow Chicka Wah Wah*



I shiver under the covers in the guest room. The bed is cozy, and I'm thankful I'm not sleeping in the barn tonight, but even a warm shower and fresh pajamas couldn't erase the chill from my bones. Being out in a November thunderstorm isn't a good way to stay warm.

My clothes dry on the radiator in the bathroom because I didn't want to risk walking to the laundry room and running into Frances or Prescott the Second. I haven't seen them since I walked back into the house. Distant doors shut when I was getting into the shower, and I assume that was Prescott bringing Avery back to the house. I stayed away so the Rauschs could resolve this as a family.

Who knows what will happen between Avery and her parents now? Something tells me that Frances will make sure her daughter is treated a little better.

My duffle is packed and ready for tomorrow. Even if I have to ride the pants-pisser plane back home, I want to go home so badly it hurts. I miss my mother. I miss my father more than

anything. I realize that I have a wonderful family, complete with siblings I love enough to donate a kidney to, and that doesn't happen in all families. There isn't some magic thread that holds families together if you don't nurture those relationships. Looking back on my childhood, Dottie Calvert made sure we all loved each other and had experiences that bonded us enough so that I'd punch someone out if they insulted any of my siblings.

At the end of the day, I'm glad I came this weekend. I appreciate my family, and I will never act like I don't again.

I also met *him*.

Fuck, Prescott looked so good in his wet shirt with drops of water dripping from his hair. I wanted to open my mouth and drink those drops as they came off his body.

There is so much wrong with me.

My hand drags down my chest, and my nipples stand at attention at the movement and the thought of Prescott. His mouth on my nipple. His mouth...other places. Am I doomed to rub myself to thoughts of him forever?

Huffing, I throw the covers aside and let the cold air hit my legs and arms. I should have brought more than a little tank top and pajama shorts to sleep in, but they're comfortable. They're also easy to take off if I want to enjoy myself with the vibrator in my duffle bag.

I dig through the bag and pull out the purple dildo with the attached vibrating forest animal. I affectionately call it Bob,

the letters standing for battery-operated boyfriend, and I smile as I check to make sure it still has a good charge. This will have to do tonight. I'd rather it be Prescott's tongue, but beggars can't be choosers.

I get back into bed, pull my pajama shorts down to my ankles, and spread my legs a little. "Mmm, Bob, you dirty man whore. Time for a little fun."

Flicking the vibrator on, I settle the rabbit – or whatever it is – onto my clit and run my hand under my tank top to tease a nipple. I swivel my hips around in a circle until I find the right pressure. "Fuck that feels good, Bob."

I close my eyes, wishing Prescott was bending over me, and push the dildo part of the toy into my sopping wet pussy while still keeping the forest animal at my clit. The toy pulses, fucking me as I clench my legs together so it stays in place while I cup both breasts.

Riding the cock, I open my mouth a little just as a soft knock sounds at the door.

My fingers fumble for the off switch on the toy, but I only make the dildo pump faster. Pulling it out of me, it's soaked with my wetness, but it hums loudly for a few seconds until I shut it off.

"Um, who is it?" I ask, my voice shaking. Please don't let it be Frances. Please.

"It's Prescott."

"Which one?"

“The one that loaned you his man panties,” he chuckles on the other side of the door.

I tuck the toy under one of the pillows and hastily pull up my pajama shorts. My legs tremble a little when I put my feet on the floor since I was so close to coming on my vibrator. I hold on to a guest chair and the bedpost as I walk to the door, flinging it open to find a dry Prescott in plaid pajama pants and nothing else.

Fuck those abs. My eyes stare at them for a moment before I blink and look at his face. “What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?”

I step aside, and he comes into the room. It’s weird having him in my personal space for the weekend, the place where I was just masturbating and thinking of him. He walks in front of me, and I stare at his back muscles as they move with his strides.

“I’ve been thinking about the best way to apologize to you and talk to you at the same time,” he says, running his hand against the back of his neck like he’s shy. “I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he says, sitting on my bed.

“Interrupt? What would you interrupt?”

“You using your vibrator.”

Oh. My. God.

I shake my head and wave my hand. “What are you talking about? That’s ridiculous. Who brings a vibrator when they’re a guest in someone’s home?”

“Hell on Wheels.”

“Why would you think I even own a vibrator?”

“You either own a vibrator, or there’s someone running around with a chainsaw this time of night. They make quieter ones.”

I bite my lip. Do I deny it? Own it? There’s a look on his face, though. Lust? Want? It’s better I just own up to it and drive him crazy with the idea of me masturbating down the hall from him.

“You got me. Um, did anyone else hear it?”

“I don’t think anyone else is outside your door, pacing and thinking of ways to ask to come in so I can get in on the action.”

Heat moves up my body and right back down to my feet, fixing me in place as I think about what he just said. “You mentioned something about apologizing. Do you mean for what happened with Avery?”

“Yes, and I want to apologize,” he says, turning to look in the pillows and sheets. He reaches under the covers and looks on the end table until he finds my still-wet vibrator under the pillow. “And I think I want to team up with this fine piece of machinery to apologize properly.”

“P-properly?” I stammer.

“It’s my turn to apologize and treat another person right for once. That is, if you’re so inclined to let me apologize. May I?”

He moves his eyes to the sex toy, not waiting for my answer. “What’s this thing on it?” he asks, flicking the forest creature that was buzzing against my clit only a minute ago.

“That rubs the clit while the other part...you know?” I wave my hands in the air at nothing because I don’t know what to do with them.

“Fucks you?”

I put my hands on my hips and straighten my shoulders in an effort to appear confident and like a hot, wealthy guy asks to tag team me with a sex toy every Saturday night. “You have a filthy mouth, Prescott Rausch the Third.”

He smiles a crooked grin like a comma forming on his face. His eyes darken, and he licks his lips. “Yes, I do, Peyton Calvert. Want to see it get downright foul? I bet I could lick your slit and show this toy how it’s done.”

An out-of-character whimper comes out of my mouth. Very few people have left me speechless, but he somehow managed it.

He pulls the covers back and pats the sheets. “Why don’t you show me how this dick part works while I take care of apologizing? Come here.”

I obey, climbing into the bed and pulling the covers over me before I can talk myself out of it. He laughs and pulls them off again as he hooks his fingers into my pajama shorts and pulls the shorts and wet panties down in one movement.

He holds up the toy again. “Have you ever turned it around?”

“Have I ever fucked the handle?”

“No...” he trails off, looking at the toy again. He bites his lip. “Have you ever put the dildo in and let the little animal thing rub your asshole?”

“Are all Princeton men this freaky? If so, I really should have applied myself more when I was younger. Is it too late to join the Ivy League?”

He laughs and leans over me. His lips meet mine, and I wrap my arms around his neck, melting into his lips as we kiss hungrily, savoring the taste of each other. Our tongues dance as he explores my mouth. When he finally pulls his lips away from my mouth, his kisses trail down my neck until he meets my collarbone. He nips at my tank top straps and pulls one of the straps down to my bicep with his teeth. I gasp when he pulls both straps further down my body with his hands, exposing my nipples to him.

“Mmm,” he purrs. He plants a kiss on my nipple and my entire body quivers. “You’re so much more beautiful than I imagined, Hell on Wheels.”

He nudges my legs apart and turns the toy on. “Do I need to lube this up and get it ready?” he asks.

“I’m wet as fuck. I think it’s fine.”

Gently, he positions the tip of the dildo at my entrance. “Look at me while I slide this into you,” he whispers, dropping

kisses on my breasts and down my stomach. I grip his hair as he smiles against my skin as he works his way down.

He inches the toy into me, but he makes good on his backward comment. He flicks the attachment on, and vibrations beat against my asshole, causing me to arch off the mattress and buck into his chest.

“Patience, Hell on Wheels. I’ll get there. I’ll let you get used to this first.”

I grit my teeth and take heaving sobs that threaten to rip my chest apart. I really should have switched that thing around before. “You’re driving me insane.”

“Like you’ve driven me insane all weekend with your mouth? I bet that mouth is good for other things than witty banter.”

“I think you need to work *your* mouth, Princeton.”

He looks up at me and smiles. His hair is already mussed, and he licks his lips before moving down...down...down.

He smiles at me one last time, looks at my clit, and drops a spot of drool on it. “This probably needs a little something to get it ready, huh?”

Not really. My clit throbs, begging for attention as he turns on the pumping switch for the dildo. His lips close over my clit, and I buck into his face this time, completely unashamed as he hits every single pleasure spot on my body. His hand that isn’t holding the toy rubs a breast, moves down to my



stomach, and wanders back up to a breast, swiping a nipple every time he goes past.

Dear God, I'm going to die from pleasure. How is the coroner going to explain this to my mother? Sure, my sisters will laugh and say that they saw it coming, but those bitches will even put it in the obituary that I died while getting eaten out and fucked with a sex toy.

He sucks. He licks. He humps the bedspread as he feasts on me, his own want overwhelming him. It only takes a couple minutes of the toy and his tongue before my body stiffens, my orgasm imminent. I run my hands to the nape of his neck, feeling the heat of his body. I need to feel all of him. I want every part of his skin on me. I want that gorgeous chest against mine.

But not before he finishes me with his mouth.

I rock into him as he groans each time I flinch with pleasure. The sound of his groans, this man who has everything and just wants me to come on his face right now, pushes me over the edge, and I shatter around him. My thighs squeeze his ears, and the movement makes him laugh. He chuckles into my clit but never stops licking, nuzzling, and sucking.

The room spins for what seems like hours until every tremble is finished. I pant and pull at his shoulders. I want him up now. I couldn't get him down there fast enough, but now I want all of him on me. I want his weight on me.

And someone get this piece of silicone out of his spot.

“Want something, Calvert?” he asks, reading my mind. He moves up my body until our lips meet. I taste myself as he pushes his pajama pants down. I help by using my feet, frantically trying to help him get the damn fabric away from us. “Someone’s eager for me.”

“Shut up and fuck me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

He pulls the toy out of me and slowly replaces it with the real thing, sliding into me inch by inch. He sighs when he’s all the way and begins pumping deep, wild with need, and I don’t miss the toy that we just there. Prescott moves above me, grunting and gripping my hips in a way you just can’t buy in stores.

His eyes flutter above me as he thrusts into me, slowly at first. I wrap my legs around him, humping against him and frantic to meet his thrusts. He buries his face in my neck and sighs. Sweat forms on his naked back after a couple of minutes, and I run my hands through it, moving the wetness up and down his spine. I revel in it because it’s for me, earned by fucking *me*.

“So perfect. How did you get me so crazy for you in just a few days?” he whispers.

“I’m gifted.” The words are choppy as they leave my mouth. He fucks me so hard that my words sound garbled.

I arch my back, throw my head back, and wrap my legs around him tighter as he braces himself with a hand on the

headboard. His back tightens under my ankles, and I urge him on, kissing his shoulders and telling him how I've never been fucked like this.

Because I haven't. I've never fucked this wild. This uninhibited. I don't have a care in the world.

He bucks into me one last time and goes still as his cock throbs between my legs. He places small kisses all over my face and neck, and I keep my legs wrapped around him until his whisper kisses and words calling me beautiful, mesmerizing, and like no other woman he's ever met lull me to sleep.

## *Goodbyes and Kind Gestures*



“**T**his sucks,” I say to the silence in my room, throwing a sweatshirt into my duffle bag without folding it. My mother would be appalled, but it would probably be the least appalling thing to her that I’ve done this weekend.

Using a sex toy with my friend’s brother comes to mind.

I came with Avery to get out of town for a few days and see Nashville. I did that. I also had a great time with a guy that I wouldn’t have given the time of day to if I saw him walking down the street. Sure, I would have admired his looks, but I would have kept walking, especially if he was on the other side of a protest. A tear trickles down my face at the unfairness of a five-hour drive separating us after I leave this morning.

Avery knocks on the doorframe. “You all packed and ready for our pee pants flight?”

“A girl pisses herself one time, and it never dies. Will it forever be referred to as a pee pants flight?”

“Absolutely. You’ll never live that one down. And I also intend to rub it in your face that you hooked up with my brother.”

“What do you mean we hooked up? Kissing him in a bar doesn’t mean anything.” A blush moves up my neck. Shit.

“I have the room next door, Peyton. I assume you weren’t jumping on the bed and knocking the headboard into the wall at one in the morning...and then again at six.”

“I just felt like jumping on the bed. I couldn’t sleep and needed to get the blood pumping, you know?”

“Sure.” She laughs and picks up my duffle bag. “Let’s never speak of it again. I’m disgusted at the thought of my brother getting some from my friend. Let’s just leave.”

I glance at the bed one last time as I leave the room, the bed where Prescott and I had sex last night and again this morning after I woke up with his body curled around mine like a parenthesis. Have I ever felt so warm? So protected? If I have, I can’t remember.

I also can’t remember the last time I got hit from behind twice before breakfast. I rub my hips where his fingers dug into my skin, leaving bruises that’ll last a few days.

I follow Avery from the room, down the stairs, and out of the house. Should I knock on Prescott’s door? He knows what time we’re leaving, but he’s nowhere in sight. He’s not at the bottom of the staircase, outside on the porch, or even at the Uber taking us to the airport. Did he forget? Go off to shower

my scent off him and shrug? Does he not care that I'm leaving?

I could get his phone number from Avery, but I don't want to be the one that initiates this. If he can't even come to say goodbye to me after we shared a night together, I'm not going to call him first. My stomach roils with thoughts of what we did last night and this morning. The things he moaned into my ear when he came.

I'm quiet the entire way to the airport as I work my fingers against my clothing in frustration. Why wouldn't he say goodbye? I answer Avery's questions about what I'm going to do with the thousand bucks I won from the mechanical bull contest by giving her a bullshit answer that's more of what she expects from Peyton Calvert. In truth, I have other plans for that money.

The Uber lets us off at the airport, and I take deep breaths as the driver gets our bags out of the trunk. Another scary plane ride home. I should use the contest money to rent a car or upgrade our tickets to a normal plane.

As we grab our bags and head into the terminal, a familiar voice stops us in our tracks, and both Avery and I turn slowly toward the sound. My heart pounds in my chest, and my hands start to sweat.

There he is.

Prescott sits on a bench like he's been there all night. He's reading *The New York Times* and holding a paper cup of coffee from a coffee company that looks too pricey for my Chili

Shack salary. He's wearing his usual dress pants, dress shirt, and green tie. I'll probably never get him to change that, but I love seeing him in pajama pants slung low over those hips.

How long has he been here?

"What are you doing here?" Avery and I ask in unison.

Prescott stands and folds the paper, takes a sip of coffee, and smiles. "You girls were having breakfast, and I decided to do something nice for you." He leans forward and drops his voice, staring at me. "I wouldn't want you to pee your pants again. The thought of you borrowing another man's underwear put me into a tailspin."

"Well, we're going home, so I'd have my own underwear to change into," I deadpan, not getting that he's obviously done something nice for us.

He reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out two pieces of paper, handing one to each of us. "A real plane. I left the house before you to get you on something a little safer."

I gape at the Southwest boarding pass and almost pee my pants with relief this time. No puddle jumping, off-brand airline. A real plane. With bathrooms. It probably has a pilot that isn't in charge of luggage. The flight leaves in forty-five minutes, so we don't even have to rush or wait around for it. It's like winning the airport lottery.

Avery smiles and mumbles a thank you, but I don't say a word. I drop my duffle bag, walk slowly to him, and throw my arms around him. I let him pull me as close as humanly

possible, and I let him bury his face in my hair. I inhale him, breathing in everything I can to commit it to memory. “You did this for me?”

“Mostly you. I also felt bad my baby sister had to ride on that plane with someone in danger of peeing everywhere.”

I laugh against his shoulder, and he holds me so close that it’s hard to breathe properly through the laugh. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to. You gave me a weekend to remember. In fact, I can’t ever remember having as much fun as I did this weekend.”

I pull away from him and step back. “Lies,” I say. “Are you telling me that you’ve never had a similar weekend while at Princeton? I call bullshit.”

“You saved the weekend, Peyton,” he says, tucking a chunk of hair that’s escaped my ponytail behind my ear.

“I don’t know if I’d say that.”

“Let’s recap, shall we? You gave us a Thanksgiving dinner we won’t forget, pretty much saved my mother’s annual barn dance from mind-numbing boredom, showed Nashville how a girl from Illinois rides a bull, and held a mirror up to my family to show us how badly we treat my sister. Even if I didn’t remember any of it, Grammy Rausch won’t ever let us forget the Satan worshipper that Avery brought to Thanksgiving. You can count on that.” He sniffs and raises his eyebrows. “And you kind of rocked my world last night.”



“Ew,” Avery complains a few feet from us. She turns and walks toward the security checkpoint, shaking her head.

I turn back to Prescott. “I even milked that cow.”

“You milked a lot more than that cow, sweetheart.”

A laugh bubbles out of my chest. “I sure fucking did.”

Prescott smiles, but it’s a sad smile. It doesn’t move to his eyes. “My mom and dad are different this morning. You did that. You’re the kick in the ass we needed to get our shit together. Who knew that you were exactly what we needed just when we needed it. I’ll always be glad that Avery brought you. Even if I never get to see you again, I’ll always remember this weekend. But I hope I get to see you again.”

“You want to see me again? Really?”

“Do you want to see *me* again?” he asks, sudden fear flashing in his eyes.

I look around the airport entry area and act like I’m thinking. Let Mr. Junior Executive sweat a little. I move my head to the side and crinkle my nose like I’m weighing the pros and cons. His face reddens with what I hope is panic, and he runs his hand up the back of his neck as he blows out a breath.

I straighten and pull my shoulders back. “Prescott Rausch the Third, of course, I want to see you again. Do you think I let just anyone hold a vibrating forest animal to my asshole?”

He clutches his chest like he’s checking to make sure his heart is still there. “I was worried for a second there. I thought

that last night meant more to me than it did to you.”

“It meant a lot to me, Prescott. You didn’t imagine any of it.”

“And there better not be another man holding that forest animal to your butt.”

I bite my lip, look up at him, and place a kiss on the tip of his chin.

He moves closer to me, leans down, and pushes his forehead onto mine. “What are you going to do when you get home?”

I close my eyes and breathe out. “I think it’s time to grow up a bit. I think I’ll go back to community college for the winter semester and try this time. I’m going to use the money from the mechanical bull to pay for books and fees. I’m also going to dust off my guitar and see if I can get small gigs around Alton. Maybe one of the wineries in Grafton will hire me for Sunday afternoon music or something. But I want to play for people. I kind of liked being on stage the other night, even if it was for a minute. I’ll still work at Chili Shack, but I’m going to cut back on my hours and start getting my shit together. Maybe even smoke less weed.”

“Make sure you stay interesting.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will change no matter what I do. Thanks for giving me a kick in the butt too.”

“Me?” he asks.

I shrug. “I got to see how other people live. Sure, my family likes to tease me for being flighty and spaced out most of the time, but it gets old. You liked me for me. I wasn’t as spaced out this weekend. I was fun and tried new things. I’ve never done that before. It was a good experience. I think I need to try some other new things like being a tad more responsible. It’s time.”

“Can I visit you? I’ve never been to St. Louis and would love to see the touristy stuff. Maybe we can spend a weekend together? I’d love to see you play. Hell, I’d like to sit around and stare at each other if that’s what you want to do. Restaurants. Parking lots. Your kitchen. Wherever you want to sit and stare at each other, I’ll be there.”

“There will be no staring. I will, however, make sure the forest creature toy is fully charged.”

I barely get the words out and his lips are on mine. Warm. Now familiar. I feel the heat of his body through our clothes, and he searches my mouth with his tongue as people walk past us, tight smiles on their lips. A passing child points and makes a gagging sound. I ignore it and cup Prescott’s cheeks, reveling in the feel of his skin.

When we break apart, he nods and kisses my forehead. I pick up my old duffle bag and back away from him toward the security checkpoint, and I keep my eyes on him until I have to round a corner to get to my flight.

## *Four Months Later...*



“Fancy meeting you here,” Prescott says, walking to me and holding a lemon shakeup, my first of the spring. It’s not warm yet, but you can’t go to the zoo without a lemon shakeup. Everyone knows that.

I’m nervous and needed to burn off some steam. I couldn’t sit around my house and worry about the interview. He’s already had three rounds of talks for this firm, and he’s been in the meeting for three hours. I had to get out of the house. Run a marathon. Go to one of those anger smash rooms. Something.

I take the drink and turn back to look at the puffins in their outside area outside the penguin enclosure. If there’s one thing St. Louis does well, it’s the penguin and puffin area at their zoo. It’s one of my favorite places to go in St. Louis, and I pull my scarf tight around my neck, ready to walk into the cold penguin house. Prescott’s hand is on my lower back as he looks at the puffins and bites his lip.

I clear my throat. “How did it go?” I close my eyes, waiting for the answer.

He leans closer and nuzzles my jaw. “I got it,” he whispers next to my ear.

I almost drop my drink when I turn to him and throw my arms around him. In fact, I think I slosh a little lemon shakeup on his back. “Are you fucking with me right now, Prescott? Because if you’re fucking with me, I’ll fucking kill you.”

He chuckles and wraps his arms around me. People walking into the penguin enclosure stare at us as they walk by. One woman asks her partner if I just got engaged. I can see how she’d think that. I bounce on my toes and hug the man I love at the penguin enclosure. It probably does look like Prescott just asked me to marry him.

Elation fills my heart to bursting. No more driving five hours each way on long weekends to steal a day or two with each other. No more late-night phone calls where we rub off for each other while wishing we could be rubbing each other in person. No more me trying to get through the week at school or work without going insane with not being able to see him that night.

I can see him every night now. I can see him in the mornings. Hell, we can have nooners if so inclined.

I pull away from him. “What’s the package?”

He laughs and traces his index finger down my nose. “Nosy.”

“I want to make sure they’re treating you right. Do I need to take over negotiations?”

“I wouldn’t do that to them. But because you’re on a need-to-know basis, I get \$256,000 to start, health benefits, and use of a car service when entertaining clients. They’ll also move my two boxes of stuff for me and pay the deposit for my new apartment.”

“Wow, they must really want you,” I say, sliding my hands down his chest.

“A lot of that going around.” He kisses my cheek. “They were persistent and so was a woman I quite like.”

My heart pounds out of my chest that we can finally move our relationship past weekends and holidays. Some of the heart palpitations are from joy. There’s also fear mixed in. Can we have a relationship when it’s an everyday thing?

“What does Frances think about her son moving five hours away to be with the pescatarian?”

“Not nearly as upset as Grammy Rausch is that you still exist in the world, but they’ll both get over it. She’s relieved that Avery will have family closer now. When she has to visit her kids, she doesn’t have to fly or drive two different directions. If I have to move away, at least I’m moving near Avery.”

“Are we going to talk about how your father feels about it?”

He cringes. “I’m no longer asking his opinion on things, and I’m not taking his opinion under advisement. He’ll get over it.

And if he doesn't, well, he can live with it. I'm not under his thumb, and I no longer care what he thinks about my life choices."

I pull away from him, take his cold hand into my own warm hand with my fingerless gloves, and pull him toward the entrance to the penguin house. "What next then? What do you need from me with moving?"

"I need you to help me find an apartment we both like."

I stop dead in my tracks. A child behind me runs straight into my back, grunts, and walks around me while giving me a dirty look for stopping suddenly. "What do you mean by that?" I ask.

He laughs. "Jesus, Peyton. You didn't think I was going to move here and not include you in the living arrangements?"

I look down at the asphalt. "I didn't want to assume. Honestly, I guess I always figured no man would ever want to live with me. I'm not exactly your typical roommate."

He steps forward and tilts my chin to look at him. "If it freaks you out, we can slow down and date like a normal couple the first few months to make sure it works. We already know we get along physically, and we have fun when we're together, but I understand stalling a little. I want you to move in with me eventually, though. Can you live on this side of the river?"

"Move away from my mother to live with a man I'm not married to? She'll shit. Then again, Cora did it, and Regi just

moved in with Craig on this side of the river. She's probably numb."

"If Frances Rausch can deal with it, Dottie Calvert can deal with it."

"I'm more scared of my own mother."

"Aren't we all scared of our own mothers?" he chuckles. Turning, he threads my hands through his arm, and I lean my head on his shoulder. "But I want you to live with me when you're comfortable, Peyton. That means I want your opinion on my living arrangements. I'll rent at first until I find an area I want to buy in, but I'm all yours now."

We walk through the sliding doors of the zoo enclosure and smooch together as we adjust to the cold air and the loud squawking noise of the penguins. "Did you know that between sixty and ninety percent of penguins mate for life?" I ask.

"That seems better than the human average."

I look up at him, trying really hard not to bat my eyes. "I hope we're like penguins."

"Well, if your sisters are any indication, we have a good shot. They're all with their husbands and boyfriends still. I hear big congrats are in order for Samantha and Cooper. When are they thinking?"

"They want a fall wedding. Did you see that on Instagram?"

"Yep. I followed all your siblings. Cora looks like she's ready to get that baby out of her."



I stop in front of an informational sign about the species in a water enclosure. “I may not be as easy to live with as my sisters. They’re not as...eccentric.”

He wraps his arms around me from behind and lifts my hair, kissing my neck. The gesture helps my heart resume a relaxed thumping I just don’t feel when he’s not around. When I’m away from him, my heart doesn’t work at all.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Hell on Wheels.”

THE END

Thanks for reading *Turkey in Tennessee*. Reviews are so important to indie authors. Please leave a star rating or review on your reading platform. If you’ve stuck with this series since *Head Over Heels in Hawaii*, thank you! I will have more for you in 2024.

To be one of the first to know when I have a new release, sign up for my newsletter here or follow me on Instagram or Facebook at @authortoriross. I’m also on Tik Tok at @author\_toriross.

Titles by Tori Ross-

*The Cuffing Season Contract*

*Contact High*

*The Panty Plot*

*Rocks*

*Winning the Witch*

*The Flower Festival Fling*

*All I Wank for Christmas*

*Hot Sauce Blues: A Romance Short*

*The Traveling Calvert Sisters (Romantic Comedy novellas):*

*Head Over Heels in Hawaii*

*Loved in Las Vegas*

*Christmas on the Cruise Ship*

*Out of Luck in the Outback*

*Turkey in Tennessee*

More coming soon!

## *Acknowledgements*

This is my fifth book of *The Traveling Calvert Sisters* series. So many of you have been with me all along the way. Thank you for that. I appreciate every single one of you, and you keep me going. There are three more sisters to write, and you'll get those in 2024 and early 2025.

Thank you to my husband for always doing stupid shit like editing my podcast and telling me I'm actually funny when I don't feel like I'm funny. Thanks to my kids who tell me they're proud of me, even though Mom writes books with dirty shenanigans.

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I haven't been at my writing group, Shut Up and Write St. Louis, for months, but I do wish my schedule would allow me to come back. Keep writing.

And to my readers...keep reading.

## *About the Author*

Tori Ross is the bestselling and award-winning author of steamy contemporary romance and romantic comedy. Her book, *The Cuffing Season Contract*, won the National Indie Excellence Award for romantic comedy, and she's written several shorts, novellas, full-length books and serials. When she's not writing, she runs a podcast called *Sitting Here Reading Corn with Tori Ross* and plays pickleball to get out of the house. She lives with her family and a hyper dog that needs extensive training.