



WASTED

ON

Love

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
COLLEEN CHARLES

WASTED ON LOVE

Bittersweet Echoes Trilogy: Book Three

By

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Foreword

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New subscribers receive an **EXCLUSIVE FREE BOOK** as a special gift.



Prologue

Ensley

Eighteen Years Earlier...

On the bus ride to the farm, I literally vibrate with excitement. I can't stop regaling poor Elizabeth Henderson, who got trapped in the bus seat next to me, with facts about chickens, even though I can tell she's definitely getting bored with me and just wants to talk about the Powerpuff Girls instead. Ever since I can remember, I've wanted to visit a farm. Somewhere with grass and chickens and cows and pigs who all live in a big barn together. Animals are my jam. Any and all of God's furry creatures hold a place in my heart.

When we hatched ducklings in kindergarten, they were all I thought about every day. When we were done, my teacher had to stop me from shoving one of them in my backpack and taking it home with me. All of my favorite TV shows are about animals. Every book in the school library about animals has my name on the checkout card. My bed is covered with stuffies of everything from an octopus named Theodore to an elephant named Clarissa. So, when I found out that my home economics class was taking us on a field trip to a farm, I raced home with that permission slip and almost threw it in my parents' faces. I could barely fall asleep last night. It felt like Santa was coming tomorrow and was going to take me to the place of my dreams.

As soon as we arrive, they walk us through a petting zoo first, where we get to touch some goats and sheep, and one very grumpy llama, while they teach us all about them. I didn't realize some people drank goat's milk. It sounds kinda funny. Some of the other kids didn't know that you could cut all of a sheep's hair off and that it would grow back, either, or that you could use it to make wool for sweaters and hats. I knew that already.

When they take us to watch the cows getting milked, I'm a little scared. I had always pictured them getting milked like in the picture books, where a nice old man in overalls and a hat sits on a stool with a little metal bucket and does it one by one. Here, they keep all of the cows in a row in a big room, standing between metal bars, with tubes coming out of their udders. As we all stare with rapt attention, they explain how they keep the cows calm and comfortable, and how they could never get enough milk if they did it all by hand. I guess that makes sense. We'd never have enough to go around for cereal if one guy had to do it all by himself every day. Still, they seem pretty miserable, and the whole room is so loud and scary. Waves of relief flow over me when we get to leave and move on to our lunch break.

On the way to the picnic area, I see some baby cows by the fence. I touch one of their muzzles, and it's so much warmer and scratchier than I thought it would be. They have the sweetest eyes, so dark and soulful as if they would have so much to say if they could only speak, and I wonder if Mom and Dad would let me keep a pet cow in the backyard. I think we have enough space. And I wouldn't make it get milked on a machine. I'd do it myself, just like the pictures in the books.

But then Ms. Williamson calls for me, and I have to leave the adorable calf. I fall behind a lot on field trips. I know I'm not supposed to, but sometimes everyone else moves too fast when I always want to know *more*. They have a great lunch ready for us, with sandwiches made with cheese from the farm, apple slices, and even an ice cream truck. They make their own ice cream here, using milk from the cows we just met. I get a little cup of vanilla and chocolate mixed together, and I sit down in the grass to eat it.

Before too long, I need to use the bathroom. I remember Ms. Williamson saying there's one nearby inside the barn office when Tommy Johnson asked earlier, and I'm pretty sure I can find it, so I set off by myself.

Which is how I end up getting lost.

I don't think I'm *lost* lost. I know I'm still on the farm. But I definitely haven't seen a bathroom yet or any of the other kids from my group. I feel like I've been walking forever, and my legs are getting tired. There's another building coming up that looks like a barn, and if it doesn't have a bathroom in it, I'm sure there will at least be an adult inside who can tell me where to find one and take me back to my group. Everyone here has been so nice and friendly, so I'm not too worried about getting abducted by a guy in a white van or something.

This new building seems a lot scarier than the milking building we visited, and as soon as I'm inside, I feel like I'm not supposed to be here at all, and that maybe they only showed us kids the nice parts of the farm. There are a bunch of tiny metal pens in here, with straw on the floor, and everything echoes off the tin construction like hail pelting windows. It's

so loud I can't hear myself think. Inside every pen is a calf, and they all look scared out of their minds.

A feeling of dread, accompanied by a wave of nausea, hits me straight in the gut. Spinning around, I panic. These calves aren't here to play or to be cuddled by kids who love animals. I suddenly remember an argument my mom and dad got into one time when he ordered veal parmesan at an Italian restaurant. Mom kept saying it was cruel, because they were just babies, and Dad said he didn't care because it was delicious. And now I'm realizing exactly what's going to happen to these poor, sweet baby calves. They're going to get turned into veal. I tiptoe my way over to one of the pens, as quietly as I can, and I start to try and figure out if I can open it. If I can just save one of them, I'll feel okay. I have to. I *have* to. I know Dad will be mad, but if Mom already doesn't like veal, maybe she'll help me keep it at the house, at least until we can find a sanctuary or something.

"Hey, kid!" somebody yells from behind me, and I jump. He raises a pitchfork high in the air. "You aren't supposed to be in here! It's not safe!"

I panic, and I start to run. I don't know where I'm running to, but anywhere is better than here. I can't keep looking at these poor scared calves with their big sad eyes. And they're bawling. Their screams light my ears on fire and stall my heart in my chest. I start crying just thinking about it, and the tears blur my vision, causing me to trip over my own two feet and tumble onto the grass. My elbow is scraped pretty badly, and my jeans are covered in grass stains. Mom is going to be so mad at me. She just bought these, and I'm going to get in so much trouble for wandering off again, too.

I sit up in the grass, trying to get my bearings and swiping at my eyes. But the tears blur everything. After a few minutes, I see something even worse. A whole bunch of cows are being rounded up by men with pointy black things, forcing them through these narrow rows of metal bars, almost like a maze. There are too many of them, and it's so crowded that they keep bumping into each other and the bars. All of them are so scared, their eyes huge and their bodies shaking. I know exactly what's going to happen to them all. They're going to die. This isn't just a dairy farm like we were told.

I don't know how long I sit in the grass, sobbing. I think I start screaming because somebody who works here runs up to me and is now trying to get me to calm down, stroking my hair asking me where I'm supposed to be, and telling me I shouldn't be alone out here. Somebody walks up to her and tells her about the field trip group from the local elementary school, and they take me away on a little four-wheeler and drive me back to the picnic area. Mrs. Williamson looks white as a sheet. If she's mad at me, she doesn't say. She just tells me that she's happy I'm okay and not hurt, and that I scared the dickens out of her, whatever that means.

She has me sit with her on the bus ride back to the school and tries to make me feel okay about what I saw today. But none of her explanations make any sense. I don't get why we have to eat meat. Plenty of animals don't eat meat, and they're fine. Yes, some animals eat other animals to survive, but we can just go to the grocery store or grow our own vegetables. It's not like meat is the only food we have. I don't get how anyone can raise animals, look them in the eye, and then turn them into hamburgers.

How can you eat something you cared for? Something beautiful with feelings? Something that might even have a *name*?

Every time I close my eyes, I see and hear those scared calves, and I feel like I'm going to puke. I can't be a murderer every time I sit down to a meal. I won't be anymore. I can already smell the meat cooking when I get home, and it makes me want to start crying. I can't think of it as anything other than chunks of dead Mabel and Bessie. Mom tries to ask me how the field trip went, and I talk to her about the ice cream for about ten seconds before I start crying and tell her everything that went wrong. She tells me that if I sit down and eat, I'll feel better. And to stop wandering off on field trips. So much for being mad about veal.

Then, she puts my dinner plate down in front of me, and I scream. It's steak. I push it away from me and slump my head down on the table in tears. I decide right then and there that I won't be a murderer anymore. I can't eat any more food with a face.

Never again.

Chapter One

Ensley

“I cannot believe I let you talk me into a blind date.”

Leave it to my sister to try and force me into stepping out of my comfort zone. She’s always pushing me to lighten up, loosen up, and live a little. Actually, I think it’s more because I’m the eldest sister and the only one still single. It defies logic. It defies nature. As I sit in my parked car, hugging my fringed vest around my shoulders, I wonder why some people can’t understand that a comfort zone is a place that’s comfortable. It’s literally in the name.

“The guy is an accountant. Somebody Mateo works with through his property investment business. He seems really great,” Eden insists, the phone call running through my car speakers as I sit idling in front of the restaurant. “There’s nothing offensive about accountants, right?”

An accountant. Sure. Find a boring guy for your sister who doesn’t date much. That’s really nice. For a second, I almost wish I hadn’t lorded my intelligence and status as the eldest of three girls over my sisters quite so much. I guess it’s time for payback in the form of boring blind dates.

“I don’t suppose he’s a vegan accountant?” I ask hopefully. We could’ve met at a bar or for coffee, but I chose dinner because it’s the fastest way to figure out if we’re compatible or not. I can’t be with someone who doesn’t respect my values. Might as well get all of that out of the way before either of us wastes any of our time.

“No, I don’t think so...” Eden trails off with a tone I recognize. Chagrin. I’m going to assume that she didn’t even ask. Or if she took the five seconds to do so, he said no. Either way, I’m not happy. I don’t understand why my family can’t understand how much my lifestyle means to me and stop treating it like a quirk or a diet fad. I swear my mom still thinks I’ll grow out of it, even though I haven’t touched an animal product in almost two decades. “Let me call you later. Mateo just came home.”

I slump my shoulders in my seat, ending the call with a press of a button. Since when did I become the family member who needs help? I’m normally the one doing the helping, advising, and lecturing. After huffing and puffing a bit while I think about my formerly hot-mess sister sitting inside her perfect house with her perfect fiancé while running her perfect business, I consider for a moment if I should even go inside and meet Mr. Boring or have Eden tell him I got last-minute food poisoning or something. But that feels ridiculous. I’m already here, and at the very least, it would make my sister look terrible to have me flake out at the last second.

Reluctantly, I take one last look in the mirror, making sure my eyeliner isn’t smudged and my honey-blond waves are under control before rattling off a quick driver’s seat TikTok about blind dates for my followers to see. If nothing else, I can swing this into some kind of entertaining social media saga. Then, I straighten my shoulders with a deep breath and head into the restaurant.

He’s already seated when I arrive, which feels like a good sign. I’m the sort to usually show up ten minutes early anyway, so it’s nice to see someone else take punctuality

seriously. Time is a finite resource, and it should be valued as such. My optimism vanishes the closer I get to the table, smelling him before I really get a chance to see him. A cloud of cologne hangs around the man, so dense that I can feel it coating my lungs. It smells like a nightclub in the early 2000s, and I can't decide if it is really overpriced or if it's something from a drugstore that claims to be 'inspired by' a name-brand product. Synthetic fragrances have never been my cup of tea. I struggle not to judge—live and let live and all that—but when toxic fumes assault my nostrils to the point I start sneezing, I kind of draw the line there. Trying not to show the nausea on my face, I dig in my purse for a ginger chew and let the smell and flavor of the candy center me again.

“Hi, you must be Michael.” I offer my hand for a shake, and he half-glances at it, ghosting his fingers along mine before dragging his eyes up and down my body. I feel like a used car on a lot or a hunk of brisket for sale. I'm a firm believer in gender equality, and I don't expect him to rush to pull out my chair for me. But it still doesn't feel right that he doesn't even stand to greet me, like he can't be bothered.

“And you must be Ensley,” he smirks, his smile oily and slick. “Every bit as beautiful as the name implies. Would've been a waste of the name if you turned out fat or plain-looking.”

I try not to visibly wince, focusing on the compliment and not the bizarre misogynistic grandstanding. This can still be salvageable. Maybe he's just nervous. Maybe he'll get better once there's food in his stomach. Or I'm wearing a firm pair of wine goggles. It's obvious this guy isn't the one, but we can still pass a pleasant evening for my sister's sake.

But maybe Mateo isn't as perfect as he seems. I'm finding it hard to believe he gave this guy the green light to date anyone he cares about. At this point, it seems like more of a punishment.

Pulling out my own chair, I sit and open my menu, already braced for the inevitable dinner of just a salad or three side dishes haphazardly thrown together, hoping that when the waiter says there isn't butter on them he isn't lying. The quintessential vegan experience. Before I get too far in my reading, our server appears at my elbow, trying to politely slip a wine glass and a small empty plate in between my menu and the table.

“Oh, I am so sorry. I haven't ordered anything yet,” I start with a polite smile.

“While I was waiting, I took the liberty of ordering an appetizer and some wine with our friend Travis here. Figured I'd get this show on the road.”

While he was waiting? According to the clock on the wall, I'm still early.

Michael doesn't even look up from his menu when he speaks, and I get the impression that he's in a hurry for something he thinks is happening after we eat. Something that I'm almost certain isn't going to happen, not even in his wildest dreams. While he's occupied, I take a few seconds to peruse him instead of my menu.

Michael is a man who redefines the word 'unimpressive.' Imagine a human embodiment of an Excel spreadsheet—neat, orderly, overflowing with mathematical formulas, and about as exciting as watching paint dry. He's got the kind of face that's

hard to remember five minutes after you've stopped looking at it, ruddy and dull, with the personality to match. His hair, the color of a forgotten pot of coffee, is so meticulously combed it could be used as a level. Spectacles perch precariously on his nose, magnifying the dull spark of his muddy brown eyes. His shirt, a shade of blue so pale it's nearly gray, is starched to within an inch of its life, the buttons straining against the small paunch of his belly. To be fair, he does have good posture. But then again, so does a flagpole. Michael exudes the enthusiasm of a man who's spent his life worshiping the gods of monotony and routine, and it's clear he expects everyone else to do the same.

God, it's gonna be a long night.

Travis, our waiter, offers an awkward nod in response. He can tell this isn't going well, and I'm sure there's going to be some gossip about us at the wait station tonight. Servers can spot first dates at fifty paces. "Here is your garden vegetable stuffed mushroom cap, with house-made romesco and toasted pine nut garnish."

The dish smells incredible, the roasted red pepper in the sauce breaking through the haze of fragrance funk swirling around my date. And the natural wine that Travis brings out immediately after gives me hope. My mouth starts to water in anticipation. Could it be? Is this really happening? Did Eden pick a winner for me after all?

"Are you a vegan?" I ask, peering over my menu at Michael. He grimaces, and it shatters any remaining illusions I may have had about how tonight is going to go.

“Oh, hell no. Vegans are straight-up unhinged.” He takes a massive hunk of bread from the basket at the side of the table, tearing it and swiping it through the smear of red sauce on our appetizer plate. “Do I look crazy to you? Besides, what do they even eat? Water and wheatgrass?”

I resist the urge to tell him that everything in front of him, from the wedge of sourdough in his palm to the oil and balsamic next to it, the wine in his glass, and the stuffed mushroom itself, is all totally devoid of animal products. But I guess I’ll let him keep believing we all just munch on birdseed and hamster pellets. I can confirm that between the foot he keeps shoving in his mouth and the humble pie he’s going to have to down for dessert, his meal won’t be vegan at all.

Before I can form a reasonable answer to his little outburst, my phone vibrates against the table. I’d usually be embarrassed about something like this, but I’m thankful for the reprieve this time.

“I’m sorry, this is so rude. But it’s my agent, and if she’s going to call me outside of office hours, it must be really important. When Travis comes back, can you please order me the autumn salad? Without the goat cheese?”

He wrinkles his nose at the mention of salad and shoos me away from the table with a small wave of his hand.

The call with Samantha is brief but exciting. She’s got a great sponsorship opportunity coming up for me, through a friend of a friend who knows a local tree farmer. She’s currently with that friend of a friend at a wine bar, and a bottle of prosecco deep into negotiations, so the details are a little fuzzy. But from what I can make out over the loud jazz and

her constant laughter, it sounds like a solid plan. It takes a few minutes to detach myself from the conversation. Samantha is an incredible agent but turns into an absolute earful when she drinks bubbles.

Making it back to the table, I find that Michael has already finished off the mushroom cap before I got more than a bite and a half, and our silverware has been replaced and refreshed for our entrees.

And of course, Michael is holding a steak knife like he wants to audition for the lead role on *Dexter*. Maybe we should ask Travis to lay down a layer or two of saran wrap.

I'm thankful when Travis touches up our wine, taking a few sips too many the second he leaves the table. Michael wrinkles his nose at this, too, and part of me fantasizes about reaching into the ice bucket behind him and polishing the bottle off straight from the neck. Normally, I would have bowed out gracefully after cocktails and apps on a first date this bad, but Mateo is involved, so I feel like I have to tough it out.

The opportunity for such an outburst is taken away by the arrival of our entrees. My salad looks a little plain, but sufficiently plant-based and free of animal suffering. His steak, which Travis called the Big Texan Porterhouse looks like something out of a horror film. Michael saws into it with his knife, and a river of wet fat and blood seeps out of the muscle tissue. I have to fight the urge to gag on the spot, not wanting to offend Travis more than anything else.

Michael sighs, dropping his silverware onto the sides of the plate with a soft clang, pushing the plate toward Travis.

“Travis. Pal. Friend. I asked for a steak so rare I could still hear it moo. Does this look like it’s only one step beneath gently alive?”

Travis shuffles on his feet, and I’m suddenly aware of how young he looks. He can’t be more than eighteen at most. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s still in school. Regardless, he isn’t equipped to deal with some grown man having a tantrum about the temperature of his meat.

“No, sir. But...but with the marbling of a porterhouse, Chef recommends medium, and doesn’t like to go under medium rare at most,” he stammers, glancing over his shoulder for a manager, but none is forthcoming.

“Take it back and do it right,” he growls, shoving the plate forward again so hard it almost topples from the table. An elderly woman close to us looks at me with such a pitying gaze that I feel like I’m going to melt into the floorboards. While wanting to yell out words that decry me being at all responsible for Michael and his abhorrent behavior, I poke around my salad, pushing arugula and chunks of roasted pumpkin from one side to the other with the tines of my fork all while trying to ignore Michael’s new tirade about how incompetent servers are, and how it isn’t a real job, and they shouldn’t expect to get tipped. That old chestnut that assholes use just so they can be cheap.

Rather than argue about the validity of poor Travis’s life choices and trying to remember if I have enough cash on hand to slip him some well-deserved compensation, I try to change the subject. I ask where Michael works and if he enjoys what he does for a living, and he has enough good sense to return

the question. However, when I tell him that I work in food marketing and lifestyle advertising, he then feels the need to make it all about Michael once again.

“Yeah, I know a lot about the advertising world,” he snorts. “My ex-wife was a model. For *Maxim*, if you can believe it. Such a bitch but had a body that was out of this world. Of course, it was all fake. Looked great, cost a hell of a lot, but those boobs were one hundred percent silicone and saline. Not like you. You’re not perfect, but you’re natural. It’s such a turn-on knowing you won’t squeak if I rub you the wrong way, or that nothing’s gonna fall off or pop. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had hairy armpits or a full bush. Not that I’d mind at all.”

I don’t have hairy armpits. Or anything else for that matter. And as much as I say that my body hair choices aren’t any man’s business, hearing that he would *like* them unshaven makes me want to stop at Michaels on the way home, buy some fake hair, and paste it all over my body. I don’t know how much more of this I can take. It feels like I’m on a reality show, and any minute now someone is going to come out from behind a corner with a bunch of cameras and tell me that I’ve won. I’ve lasted an hour with the worst date on earth. No one can possibly be this miserable and infuriating and be for real.

Some of my girlfriends are on Match, Bumble, and Hinge all at the same time. I wonder how they do it without losing their damn minds in the process. If Michael is the best of what comes pre-vetted, I’d rather die alone.

With cats.

Lots and lots of cats.

My hand hovers over the handle of my fork, and I wonder how much jail time I would face if I just stabbed him in the throat right now, so he'd stop talking around the food in his mouth. The lady at the next table would vouch for me. She could be a character witness. I could bring Travis in, too, and plead temporary insanity. I can't imagine having to do more than a year or two, tops. Get it down to six months for good behavior. There probably isn't a vegan option in the prison cafeteria though.

An older man, dressed in a pair of slacks and a button-down who I can only assume is a manager, shows up with a new porterhouse and a fresh side of onion strings, saving Michael from a brutal, cutlery-induced homicide. He stands beside our table, patient and stoic while my non-date cuts into the new steak and declares it, "Okay."

While Michael is distracted by his throbbing, crimson piece of cow, I take the opportunity to glance around the restaurant and try and find any possible way out of this.

Which is when I lock eyes with *him*.

Chapter Two

Jeff

“Hey, Travis.” My buddies and I have come here enough times that we not only know the waitstaff by name but can tell when they’re having a rough night. And poor Travis looks like he’s sweating through his starched shirt when he drops off my coconut shrimp at my seat at the bar. “Just how bad is the guy over at that table? God, he looks insufferable.”

I gesture with a nod toward the date that I can only describe as going apocalyptically bad. The man looks like an absolute douchebag. Hair slicked back with too much pomade, shirt unbuttoned to damn near his navel, and he keeps chewing with his mouth half-open like some kind of dog with a juicy bone. Travis might not be the most seasoned veteran, but he isn’t an idiot either and genuinely wants to do well at his job. He certainly doesn’t deserve to be treated the way that this guy has been treating him the whole night.

And I would know because I just stopped in here for a beer and a quick bite to eat, so I’ve watched the entire trainwreck implode.

“Eh. I’ve had worse.” He shrugs. “Getting the feeling that if that girl heads to the bathroom anytime soon, she’s not coming back. Going to crawl right through the window and race to the parking lot. He doesn’t deserve her. She’s gorgeous. She smells *amazing*. And she’s really nice.”

He’s right. The worst part of this whole experience is how miserable the woman sitting across from the douchebag has

looked this entire time. She's gone from uncomfortable to unfathomable to downright unsafe looking over the course of the meal. Hearing Travis confirm it flips some kind of switch inside of me. If that were my mom or my sister, I couldn't possibly sit here and let somebody treat them like shit. And this wavy-haired, cornflower blue-eyed goddess is probably somebody's sister, too.

I've been inside the Velvet Pinecone plenty of times but never witnessed anything quite like Pomade Man. This place is a gem in Frostvale's crown that takes the cozy cabin vibe and jazzes it up with a sprinkle of millionaire-lumberjack flair. The moment you step in, you're smacked in the face with the scent of garlic and oven-fresh bread. Makes you wanna stuff your pockets with the air.

Low, mood-lit ambiance, and trust me, the candles aren't hiding anything. The place is spotless, with tables decked in fresh linens. Classy enough for a wedding, chill enough for a beer with the bros.

The real kicker though, is the unexpected sophistication smack in the middle of Frostvale. Like someone plucked an upscale city diner, shook it with Minnesota charm, and plopped it right in our Hallmark haven. For all its grandeur, it won't leave your wallet light. Might just be the only joint in town where you can slurp down a soul-warming soup post-ski session and still feel like you're in some ritzy candlelit affair.

The Velvet Pinecone is just the right dash of cozy, which makes it one of my favorite places to land after a hard day.

I give the hypnotic woman's table another glance, and that's when it happens. She looks me dead in the eyes, with all

the desperation of someone drowning while begging to be thrown a lifeline. And I'm the only one nearby with any rope. Shoving a marmalade-dipped shrimp into my mouth, so I get to enjoy at least one of them while they're hot, I push my stool back from the bar and head her way. I walk just slowly enough that she can signal for me to turn away at any time, but she doesn't.

Her gaze locks with mine until I get positively lost in the azure hue of hers, and it never breaks.

The only way for this to work is if I out-asshole this guy. Sauntering up to the table, I grab a chair from nearby and swing it into position next to her, sitting on it backward, my legs spread, and my hands propped on the top of the chair back.

"Hello, gorgeous." I sound so smarmy that I startle myself. It isn't a tone of voice I knew I was capable of using and really hope never comes out of my mouth again. "I've been hoping I'd run into you."

Her date looks appalled, setting down the hunk of nearly raw beef that he has skewered on the tip of his fork. "Ensley, do you know this man?"

As my gaze lands on her frustrated expression, I make note of her beautiful and unique name. She starts to stammer out a response, but I cut in, trying to set the stage for her and make it easy for her to play along.

"Are you kidding? I know her in every sense. I mean, a woman never forgets her first, amirite?"

She laughs at this. This cute little snicker that turns into a snort. I haven't seen her genuinely smile, let alone laugh at this guy all night. Her face transforms from pretty to downright stunning. It hits me square in the heart and then square in the crotch. Score one point for me.

“Yes, you're definitely unforgettable. I mean... with your *huge* assets and all.” She picks up her wine glass, swirling the liquid around before taking a coquettish sip and batting her eyelashes. “How long has it been?”

“Too long. We could fix that. Want to join me for dessert?” I nod back toward my spot at the bar, letting her know that there is an out if she wants to take it. “There's a stool right next to me with your name on it. And if you want to, we can order one of everything on the menu and share. For old time's sake, that is.”

“Excuse me.” Her date coughs, gesturing at his plate of barely-touched food and their chilling bottle of wine, as if it should all be self-explanatory. “We're on a date.”

He can keep calling it a date all he wants, but it's still a very public execution of his character. And judging by the look on her face, she'd agree with me.

“Not for long. Ensley is special.” Reaching over, I tuck a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “And she deserves to be treated like a queen, hairy pits or not. Although, last time I saw them, they were clean as a whistle.”

She stiffens, her whole face souring. I thought the hairy pits were a point of contention earlier, but I'm realizing I may have misread that.

“I still shave,” she reminds me, with a withering glare.

“I know this,” I blurt out, not wanting her comment to derail the show we’re putting on for Pomade Man here. “You know this. Let’s leave him guessing about the carpet. What do you say? Drinks and dessert with an old friend?”

I stand from my chair, taking her date’s napkin and using it to wipe down the wet wine bottle when I pull it from the ice bucket, pouring her a hefty glass. She thanks me with an over-the-top wink of her eye, blowing me a kiss, before turning to her date with an oversized pout.

“I’m sorry. I can’t let this opportunity to catch up with an old friend pass me by. I hope you understand.”

“I’ve never been so insulted,” the man growls as he stands from his chair and storms off toward the exit.

I look at Ensley and shrug, before calling out after him, “I find that hard to believe. Happy trails, man.” Shaking my head, I laugh to myself, taking the seat he left vacant. “I thought he’d never leave.”

The woman from the table next door actually smiles and gives us both a thumbs-up.

Ensley’s eyes twinkle, a mixture of relief and mischief. “He certainly made an unforgettable exit.”

We share a chuckle, and then I realize, we haven’t even done the basics yet. “By the way, I’m Jeff. And you’re Ensley, right?”

“Right,” she replies, grinning like she’s just won the lottery or survived a horror film. “Ensley with the hairy, or not so hairy, pits.”

I laugh. “Nice to meet you, Ensley with the possibly hairy pits. You’ve got quite the taste in men.”

She rolls her eyes. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t choose him.”

“Good to know. Well, let me be your knight in flannel armor for the rest of this meal.”

She starts to giggle again, then her whole face falls with realization. “And he stuck me with the bill.”

It hadn’t even occurred to me that he left without paying. I’m sure he’s responsible for the wine in the bucket and for racking up whatever charges are piled up on their tab. Men who dress and smell like that guy love to order the most expensive thing just to make themselves look important. I know for a fact this porterhouse in front of me is the priciest cut tonight—though he didn’t spring for the crabmeat and bearnaise option. If I was treating myself, that’s what I would’ve done. Looking at it now though, it doesn’t look half-bad on its own. And other than that first cut he made in the new steak, which is still on his unused fork, the damn thing is totally untouched. My stomach rumbles in longing, my shrimp long-forgotten over on the bar top. “Well, it seems a shame to let this go to waste.”

I take a fresh fork from the unoccupied table behind us and snag a huge bite of the steak. It’s a little underdone for a cut so marbled, but it’s a quality slab of beef, no doubt about it. I cut a smaller piece off and motion it toward Ensley. “You should try this. Split the spoils of our little hustle with me.”

She grimaces, covering her mouth and nose with her hand and shaking her head. I have the same reaction to sauerkraut,

try as I might to like it, so I kind of understand. But I've never seen anyone turn their nose up at a prime cut of steak.

“You're not on a diet, are you?” My sister always seems to be dieting on and off. Sometimes she can't have carbs, sometimes she can't have fats, and sometimes she can *only* have fats. It's a mess. Something about macros. All because some magazine or TV show tells women they should always be trying to be smaller and softer and quieter, so they about disappear, they get scared of food. It's exhausting, and it makes me more than a little sad when I think of how much energy that must take away from them pursuing things that actually matter. I prefer my women with a little meat on their bones, especially in winter. “You're perfect just the way you are.”

Rolling her eyes, she purses her lips and drums her fingernails against the table. I'm not sure how complimenting her got this kind of reaction. Is there something wrong with this chair? Does sitting in this seat turn you into some kind of internet-dwelling, misogynistic goon?

“Oh, you're an expert on the female form?” she bites the question at me, taking another long sip of her wine.

“No. I just like *your* form.” I shrug, going back to work at the steak.

“Are you really going to eat his steak?” Her entire face wrinkles up at the word as if just saying it makes the inside of her mouth taste bad.

“Since I plan on paying this tab, I might as well,” I offer. “I just got done with a long day of hard work, my shrimp are getting cold at the bar, and I haven't had dinner yet.” He didn't

touch it. He didn't even eat off of the plate. And I'm using a clean fork. I don't see the issue.

"Huh." Leaning back in her chair, she pushes her empty salad bowl toward the center of the table and crosses her arms. "I did not see this coming."

My fork suspends in mid-air. "What? That you'd lose one date and gain another?"

"Something like that," she mumbles to herself, watching as Travis removes her plate and offers to wrap up the rest of the porterhouse for me. He leaves a pair of dessert menus behind for us to look over in the meantime. All of the options look good, but after her weirdness about the steak, I can guess that she's a pretty picky eater. I'm going to follow her lead on this one.

"So, what do you want for dessert? Anything on the menu, it's yours. After what you just went through, it's the least I can do."

She stares at the heavy vellum, scanning each item for a little longer than is normal. Then, she sets it down on the table with a disappointed sigh. "I think I'm going to pass this time."

Oh. *Oh*. That's not how I saw this going at all. As I realize I'm about to crash and burn in real time, I try to keep my mood up, asking Travis for the check when he comes back. Might as well go full savior, even if the mood has shifted. I know she didn't order the wine or the appetizer, and the salad is an absolute pittance compared to what his entree cost. It looks like they only charged her for two side salads in one bowl. Travis really is a nice guy. I make sure to leave him a

solid tip, knowing that he's had to put up with just as much as she has tonight.

I walk with her past the host stand and out to the parking lot. I don't think that he's capable of doing anything dark or violent, but I still didn't get good vibes from her date earlier, and I'd hate for him to seek some kind of revenge on her way out. And besides, I like her. A lot. Even if she is a little weird about food.

There's something about her, beyond her gorgeous looks, full curves, and hypnotizing gaze. She has this unassuming spark, a spirit that flashes from behind her eyes. And when she shines that smile on you? Gah.

She's authentic and obviously doesn't give two hoots about fitting into some societal mold. It's refreshing, it's enticing, it's... making my crotch roar to life for the first time in a very long time. Sure, she might be a little quirky with her food, but aren't we all a little odd in our own ways? Makes her all the more interesting. This woman standing beside me is a breath of fresh air in a world that often feels too stuffy.

When she reaches her car, she flings the door open, and I hold it as she slips inside. "Do you want to do this again sometime? I'd like to get to know you better if you're up for it. I promise not to wear too much cologne and be the perfect gentleman."

She pushes the start button on her dash with her foot on the brake. "Um... I don't think so. But I do appreciate you saving me from Michael. It *was* as bad as it looked."

A ping of rejection wounds my chest cavity as I step back. "Well, okay then. Have a great night, Ensley."

Ensley drives away the moment her headlights snap on, but I just stand there, rigid and a little bemused. I thought we had a little spark building. That we'd shared a moment in time. She seemed happy when I crashed her date. There was all the requisite big doe eyes and hair-flipping and deep sighing. She seemed to like me a little. Maybe even a lot. I can't place what I could've done wrong tonight to make her turn on me so quickly.

Whatever, I guess. You win some, you lose some. My shoulders sag just a bit as I trot back inside to Travis and my cold shrimp plate.

Women confound me. Which is why I've spent the past few years only indulging in the occasional random hook-up.

I'll ask my sister about it in the morning.

Chapter Three

Ensley

I'm curled up on the couch in my sweatpants with a pint of coconut milk ice cream, trying to forget about Michael's weird smell and the visual of Jeff—who was hot as hell before he went so easily over to the dark side—inhaling a slab of wet cow that wasn't even *his*, when Eden calls. I know before I answer that she's going to want to talk about my date tonight, which isn't anything I want to do. But I guess I owe her a dramatic recap. For a second, I regret riding her so hard when she first started dating Mateo. Payback's a bitch.

Reluctantly, I stop spooning the rapidly melting mixture into my face and answer the phone with a sigh. “Good evening, dearest sister. I'm guessing you're calling for a play-by-play from dinner. Alas, I shouldn't even be speaking to you, traitor.”

I swear I can sense her fear through the pregnant pause. “Is he there with you?”

I close my eyes, fighting the urge to hang up on her right then and there. She really thought that we'd still be hanging out by now or that I'd have taken him back to my place. Gross. More like double gross to the hundredth power. “Please. He didn't even make it past the entrees.”

“Oh?” she draws the word out, sliding her voice through an entire octave of surprised noises. “That bad, huh?”

I stab my ice cream with my spoon. “Remember the Hindenburg?”

“Yes...” She trails off, braced for one of my characteristic rants. I’ve never heard someone flinch using only their tone of voice before.

“That was a better date than my date.” I stop to correct myself, thinking about the Jeff debacle as well. “Dates.”

“You just said dates. Plural.”

“Yeah. Funny story.” I give her a brief recap. As much as my time with Jeff turned sour in the end, I have to give it to him. I needed an out, and he provided one. Maybe he wasn’t perfect—far, far from it—but he was certainly better than the first guy. At least he didn’t try to talk about how fat I was and how hot his ex-wife’s fake boobs were. Just like my sisters, I was graced with the Lorenson full bust and hips. And with that comes gravity. Actually having boobs up where they belong is something I think about every time I get out of the shower. Michael’s running commentary was a new low for me. Really put my life into perspective. “One guy scared off your guy.”

“To be fair, he’s not really *my* guy. And I’m sorry he wasn’t a gentleman. Believe me, Mateo is going to get read the riot act for that. My sister does not need to spend time with a rude, cheap Neanderthal.”

“Well, he is definitely not *my* guy,” I huff, taking an angry spoonful of ice cream, not caring if my sister has to hear me slurp. “So, for the purpose of this story...”

“He went on tour with us in Italy,” she offers half-heartedly. My sister means well, she really does. Sometimes

she just misses the mark. By a lot. Tonight will go down in the history books as one of her biggest misses. “He seemed so... nice. I swear to God, Ens, he never did anything rude or obnoxious that I saw the whole time I was with him.”

“He isn’t vegan,” I remind her. It’s not just that he isn’t vegan—I’d settle for a vegetarian at this point, probably even a pescatarian. Maybe, just maybe, I’d settle for a man who respects my values and doesn’t expect me to eat meat just because he does. And it isn’t just that Michael *eats* meat. He’s almost militant about it. And in doing so, he’s disregarding everything I view as important. He thinks vegans are crazy. Which means, he thinks the things I care about are crazy. He thinks *I’m* crazy. I don’t know how to make my family understand this any more than I have already tried. “I mean... he’s so darn far away from being vegan I wouldn’t be surprised if he pulled people’s hearts out and ate them raw like Daenerys Targaryen.”

I can practically see her eye roll telepathically. “If you limit your dating pool to single, die-hard vegans, you’ll be alone forever. Besides, most vegan men are scrawny and sickly looking. And you like those beefy, muscly lumberjack types with beards and tattoos. Just saying.”

Unwittingly, Jeff’s image pops into my brain as if Eden just described him to perfection.

Nope. Wrong. Not settling.

It’s also annoying that everyone assumes my lifestyle is a preference. Like I’m saying I’ll only date guys who are left-handed, or have brown hair, or like pineapple on their pizza. Not that I’m only willing to get close to people who agree with

me on everything. This is about what I value and how what I value isn't important to anyone else but me. I'm expected to respect everyone else's beliefs when they don't even try to respect mine.

"That's a risk I'm willing to take." If the alternative is guys like Michael, then I don't mind being alone at all. I don't need a guy if he's not going to care about what's important to me. Doesn't mean I have to be lonely. Maybe I'll get a pet pig that I save from the slaughterhouse. My followers would love that. "No more non-vegans."

"I'm just not going to set you up anymore. It's too hard."

"I'm okay with that." For a girl who spent five years without a serious relationship of her own, Eden seems awfully invested in me finding somebody. I guess that's what getting engaged recently does to your brain. With her love life finally not in shambles, she's decided it's time to focus on me, especially since I'm the oldest so in any rational world, I would have been engaged first, when I'm dead last in that particular race. "In fact, I want that in writing."

"Why do I think you're not joking?"

I uncurl my feet from underneath me. "I never joke about matters of the heart. Or environmental activism."

Having ADHD, Eden never jokes about much of anything. My family has always considered her too serious. The words 'kill' and 'joy' seem to get thrown around an awful lot. I don't see why that's a bad thing. I'd rather consider myself passionate and committed to a cause instead just like she does. I admire her.

“You’re impossible,” she groans, before using one of her favorite phrases. “Let’s focus on the positive.”

“Something positive.” I search for a silver lining while poking at the ice cream with my spoon. Then, it comes to me. “Oh, I know. I’m glad I don’t have to see him again. Bam. And just so you know, I’m sad eating a whole pint of non-dairy ice cream. Since good ol’ Michael called me fat tonight, I might as well turn it into reality.”

“He didn’t!” As stern as she’s trying to sound, I can tell she’s fighting back a laugh. At least my bitterness is amusing. “I’m going to bed... with my hot fiancé. Enjoy your sad, empty, vegan, fair-trade, natural organic cotton bed. And your non-dairy sugar high.”

“My bed is actually quite happy,” I argue. I spent a lot of money making it look really nice for my Instagram posts. The hanging fairy lights and canopy weren’t cheap. Neither were the handmade fair-trade natural organic cotton pillows she likes to poke fun at. “Thank you very much.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” Eden replies with a chuckle, “your bed is practically screaming ‘Pampered Pinterest Paradise.’ I’m just waiting for the day your fairy lights gain sentience and start demanding a raise for all their hard work. And those pillows? They’ve got better healthcare than most humans, with all that fair-trade organic cotton fluff. Very bougie.”

“And while we’re throwing around the B words, let’s not forget Bob.” A smirk tightens my lips. “Battery Operated Boyfriend, my faithful companion. He never argues, never shouts at me, and most importantly, he doesn’t dismiss my

needs. Heck, he doesn't even mind my obsession with organic cotton pillows. He's the model partner—quiet, caring, always at the ready. No, he doesn't replace the warmth of a real body or the thrill of human connection, but Bob... always *comes* through. I might just forgo male companionship forever.”

After an exasperated sigh, Eden hangs up, and as much as I like the space I've created in my bedroom, I have to admit that it would be much nicer to have someone to share it with. I'm not in love with waking up alone every morning. But the alternative is much worse. I'm patient. I can hold out. I'd rather wait and keep searching than end up with someone I loathe, just because I can't handle having extra legroom now and then, or because my sister thinks I need some guy hogging up half of the mattress every night while he snores, farts, and drools.

It would be nicer here with a pet. I think about the pig option again. I know you can have pets under forty pounds. I don't think the lease wording says anything specifically about a dog or a cat, just the size and liability for damages to the apartment and not bothering the other tenants. Maybe if it's a really small potbelly pig...

I shake my head, climbing off of the couch and heading for the aforementioned empty bed, stopping to rinse my ice cream pint out before tossing it in the trash. Having to do so drives me insane. I can't wait until someone figures out a recyclable container for these things. I guess I could start making my own ice cream. But it never tastes the same.

Once in the bedroom, the empty bed staring me directly in the face, I can't quite seem to make myself climb in it. I keep

thinking about Eden's words, and they make me feel particularly pathetic. I need something to distract myself, and work always fits the bill. Pulling out my laptop, I decide to scroll through my work email for anything new. There's something marked urgent from Samantha, which could be just the thing to take my mind off of all of this. It must be details on whatever she was trying to communicate to me earlier with varying degrees of intoxicated success.

I open the link and immediately have to admit that I love what I see. Samantha has done it again. Six weeks glamping in a yurt. Let's be real, it's not your grandma's tent. This is luxury in the lap of Mother Nature. I picture a spacious, circular structure with hardwood floors, a cozy fireplace, and yes, even a bathroom with running water. Forget roughing it, we're talking king-sized beds and eco-friendly amenities here. It's like your favorite five-star hotel decided to have a love child with the great outdoors. For the city slicker who wants to stargaze without sacrificing thread count or the nature lover who's over sleeping on a bed of pine needles, glamping in a yurt is where it's at. And six weeks of it?

Sign. Me. Up.

It's far enough from here to seem like the great outdoors but close enough that I can still get all the cell service I need to manage my social media and do some great posting. It's a small business, owned by the same family for generations. I'm not a huge fan of Christmas tree farms—the idea of growing a whole tree just to cut it down, hang plastic on it, and then chuck it out by the curb after a month doesn't sit right with me. But they have a petting zoo with baby goats and everything, so I can't imagine it's that bad. I'll have to do

more research, but I'm pretty sure there are laws about tree harvesting. Besides, Christmas is a goldmine for influencers. So much so that I'm able to make it my full-time gig. Everyone loves big holidays, and Christmas is the biggest one of all. It's like catnip for social media users.

I draft up a quick counter-offer. The yurts aren't decorated yet, and I could turn that into so much more content for my page. I could theme and build out each one and even let my followers be part of the process via my Amazon store. This could really work. And it would keep me out of my empty bed and distracted for well over a month. Eden can't blame me for not dating if I'm working out in the middle of the woods.

The whole thing is just the confidence boost that I need after tonight's disaster dates. I attack my nighttime skincare routine with a newfound vigor, having to force myself to stop smiling long enough to brush my teeth. When I climb into bed, it doesn't feel as empty as it did before. This time next week, I'll be posting updates for my followers from a yurt, playing with goats, and not thinking about my lack of a love life.

I'll be living the dream.

Chapter Four

Jeff

Waking up at dawn isn't for everyone. It's the part of farm life that drives most people away. But I've been doing it for so long that it's second nature. Sleeping past sunrise leaves me feeling unbalanced and lazy. So, by the time there's a knock on my door, I've already had my breakfast, coffee, and completed my morning chores. The cup in my hand is my second mug, the one that gets me through reading the mail, managing my bills, and dealing with the general public. All of the really nasty bits of my day.

I'm already dreading what waits behind the door when I open it. Is it an angry customer, a bill collector, or worse—a door-to-door insurance salesman? Those guys never respect the *no solicitation* sign I have at the front gate. I swing the door open, bracing myself for whatever lies behind it. And I see only empty air.

Then I hear a tiny bleat.

And I look down.

Standing so short he doesn't even come up to my knees is a kid. Knock-kneed, cold, and covered in dirt. He bleats at me again, grass hanging from between his teeth. How a baby goat managed to get up my porch steps and then knock on the door is beyond me. I take a long sip of my coffee, trying to wrap my head around things.

Then Adam Spencer pops out from the side of the door.

“Howdy neighbor,” he chirps with a small wave. “I brought you a goat.”

Rolling my eyes, I cross my arms and lean against the doorframe. Adam Spencer is an NHL player, my next-door neighbor, and since the third grade, someone I would call my best friend. If he didn't do things like try and bring me goats I didn't need before I've even had lunch.

I flick my wrist. “Cute. I already have several. No more goats.”

The goat stumbles, as if offended by my refusal, and falls on his butt on my welcome mat. Adam shakes his head, bending down and wrapping him in a towel. He must've carried him over in the thing and undressed him when he plopped him down in front of the door.

“This one's yours,” he insists, passing the bundled and bleating lump into my arms. Now that I'm holding him, he looks pretty dang familiar. The stripes of brown and slate on his brow, along with the perpetual look of confusion and floppy tongue, tell me that this is Horatio. And that he should be in the pen with his brothers and sisters. Not sitting out on my porch by himself, which is about as messed up as a soup sandwich.

“Oh. Well, that's a different story.” I head toward my truck with the wriggling bundle of goat baby in my arms, waving toward Adam with my free hand to follow me. “Where did you find him?”

“Walked right through the big gaping hole in the fence.” He points toward the flimsy fence separating his farm from mine. When I say next-door neighbor, it's more of a figure of

speech than anything else. The Spencers are technically the *next* door over. It's just a hell of a hike to get there. My truck cab door opens with a creak, and I tuck Horatio into the floor of the passenger side. He bleats at me in defiance, and it takes everything in me not to chastise him for wandering off. I have to remind myself that he won't understand a word I'm saying because he is simply a tiny, mischievous goober of a baby goat and that trying to lecture a kid in front of another human being will make me look insane.

“Do you have any good news today, Adam?”

“Hey, do you have any idea how hard it was for me to wrestle this goat away from Charlie?” Adam's son is at the age where he's more than a little obsessed with animals. If he could come sleep in my goat pen, I'm willing to bet good money that he would, goat shit and all. If I didn't know Horatio had a tendency to wander off, I'd guess that Charlie staged a jailbreak this morning and was planning on hiding the little guy in a pillow fort or under his bed.

“I appreciate your efforts. Now, I'm going to repair that fence while I regret all my life choices.”

It takes the truck more than a few tries to get started. When it finally kicks over, I lay my head on the steering wheel in defeat. Usually, things like this wouldn't get to me. They're a normal part of farm life. But something is eating at me today and leave it to Adam to pick up on it.

“What's bothering you?” He quirks his head at me.

“I don't know.” I run the gamut of things rolling around inside my brain, and the one that keeps coming back to me is Ensley's face from last night. I thought things were going well,

and then they weren't. Which leaves me to wonder if the problem is me or her or something else entirely. It's not like I haven't been rejected before, but never when there were so many signs to the contrary. I hate that it's getting to me like this. Horatio must, too, because he starts bleating again from his little bundle of towels. "I guess it's the bad date..."

"What date? You never go out on dates?" he asks, but I drive away before Adam can ask for any clarification, spitting gravel from my tires as I head toward the breach in the fence. I see him standing there, waving his arms, but he doesn't follow me. Probably has practice or something. He's always at the Caribou arena in downtown Duluth for morning skates and team meetings and games and press briefings and I could go on and on.

It's a short ride to the edge of the property and an even shorter repair. I don't know why I put it off for so long. I try to stay on top of things, but there's so much going on at any one time that things can slip through the cracks. If I had a little extra money, I'd go ahead and hire some help. But things are really tight right now, and I'm struggling to take care of basic necessities. So, I can't. It's just me and the trees, and little old Horatio here. And his half-dozen brothers and sisters.

And a cow, a horse, my laying hens, and an alpaca that my sister had to have when she was in high school and then abandoned when she took off to the big city to make her way in the world.

I drop Horatio off with the rest of the tribe, then head back to the house to finally get acquainted with the lunch that I've been angling toward since before Adam showed up. I manage

to get the sandwich on the plate, and my butt in my chair, before my phone rings. I try to ignore it, but it rings again, and against my better judgment, I check the identity of the caller. Of course, it's the one person I can't ever ignore. My sister, Laney.

“Good news!” she shouts loud enough that I have to take the phone away from my face for a second, lest she burst one of my eardrums. If I can't afford another employee, I certainly can't afford to take a day or a week off for hearing loss.

“Finally.” I breathe a sigh of relief. I've been waiting for my fortunes to turn all morning. It'll be nice to hear something positive from a friendly face. Even if that voice is running at a few decibels too high.

She practically squeals her delight. “I found an influencer to live in your yurt for six weeks.”

I blink, slowly rotating the concept around in my mind. I understand all of those words individually, I think. Maybe not yurt. But I don't follow when you string them all together. I certainly don't get how someone living on my property is good news. Especially not someone who ‘influences’ for a living, whatever that means. Frankly, I'm still fuzzy on the details of how all that even works... Sure, I'll look things up on my phone now and again, and I'll use the GPS. I don't have any social media accounts because I don't get how showing clips of your life to random strangers constitutes communication. Nor do I understand why someone like that bothering me, infringing on my privacy, and living in my yard is good news.

I take a moment, my gaze drifting around the rustic farmhouse that's been my solitary haven for years now. I don't host lavish dinner parties or throw raucous backyard barbecues. My home isn't bustling with visitors or random hookups. Rather, it's a sanctuary, a steadfast port in the storm raging in the outside world, where I can enjoy my solitude and work relentlessly to preserve the legacy of my family's tree farm.

It's what my mom and dad would want. If they were still here.

And dating? That's been more of an afterthought, something I figure I'll get around to once the dust settles, once the farm is secure. No matter how much I want to be a husband and a father, that has to wait. I've been so hell-bent on safeguarding the future of this place that there's barely been time for a passing thought about settling down, let alone the effort required to woo someone. Not that the dating scene in Frostvale is particularly lively.

And now, out of the blue, this woman. A woman who makes a living out of sharing every minute of her day with an audience I can't even begin to comprehend. She's supposed to move into my space, disrupt my rhythm, and intrude on the peace I've worked so hard to maintain? It's like finding out a groundhog has set up shop in your vegetable garden. Sure, the critter might be harmless enough, but that doesn't mean you want it burrowing into your meticulously maintained field, chomping on your carefully cultivated crop.

No, the idea of hosting a social media influencer—whatever the hell that entails—doesn't sound like good news

to me. It sounds like a hornet's nest exploding in my peaceful corner of the world.

“Um... I guess I'm not seeing how that equals good news?” I really hope my sister can answer this for me. And, upon further reflection, I'm sure I really don't know what a yurt is. “And what's a yurt? If I don't know the meaning of the word, I'm pretty sure I don't have one.”

“This is it. This is how you save the family farm. It's freakin' gold, big brother!” As much as she insists, I'm still not following her train of thought. I know the farm needs help but—*this* can't be it. “And the yurt is the whole glamping experience we're opening up, remember?”

The word itself makes me want to gag. Glamping. A combination of glam and camping—two concepts that have no business existing in the same breath, as far as I'm concerned. Camping is about leaving those sorts of things behind, about getting as close to nature as possible without all the creature comforts and intricacies of civilization. Not bringing them right with you and dropping them all in nature's backyard. But Laney showed me some figures I couldn't possibly turn down. The monetary gains are very persuasive. And other than Horatio taking a walkabout, it's space that I'm not using. If there's anything a farmer is acutely aware of other than weather patterns, it's unused space. Still, last I remember, we had left the whole idea as a potential at most. I hadn't agreed to anything. It was a thought, nothing more.

“No, I don't remember. I thought we talked about how I don't want a bunch of people wandering around the property. Think of the um... liability hazard. We can't afford an increase

in our already high insurance premiums. And how are we going to pay for it? I don't want to put something like this on the business credit card." I'm already not a fan of having strangers violating my privacy. When people come to cut their own Christmas tree and visit the petting zoo, that's a few acres away from my house. On top of that, I can't imagine the sort of people who go glamping. I don't think they're the type I want to wake up to in the morning.

"It's six yurts, get a grip, big brother. First of all, I've already handled the insurance side of it, and I secured an SBA loan at a really low interest rate that we'll be able to pay back after next season. And second of all, it's a Christmas tree farm with a petting zoo. People wander around all holiday season. I'm pretty sure you even make them hot chocolate with marshmallows. If it wasn't for *people*, you wouldn't have a business at all."

Yeah, salt of the earth people. Men who want to provide for their family's holiday by cutting down a tree with their own two hands. Women who want to spend quality time with their kids while he does it.

After a sigh I feel down to the tips of my toes, I finally have to admit she's got a point. Peak season sees a lot of foot traffic. I have people wandering around every nook and cranny of the farm. But beyond that, there isn't a whole lot going on around here. As much as I want to be alone, people are money. There aren't a lot of people to be found here outside of those three months. Having something to do that isn't necessarily tied to the holiday season would bring money the whole year round. Maybe I can be swayed. But that's a big maybe.

“So, like... six people.” If all I have to do is babysit six weirdo internet strangers, then I guess I can manage. They can’t be worse than the goats since at least they understand language and can be reasoned with. At least, I hope so. “That’s not too bad.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line. I already don’t like where this is going.

“I mean... some of them hold like... eight people.”

As someone who manages their own books, I’m not bad with numbers. I do the math instantly. I don’t like the figures that I’m left with.

“You mean I could have roughly fifty people here at any given time? People who are going to expect things from me? Who are going to cause problems for me?” If I could find a way to strangle my sister through the phone, I would. Unfortunately, the best I can do is squeeze my fingertips against my thigh through my jeans. It’s a better option than hurling my phone at the wall, but not by much. “Nope. Not happening.”

She gets quiet again. I open my mouth to protest, but then she hurls her words out at me in a blind panic.

“It’s happening. They’re being delivered tomorrow. You can thank me later.”

Talking so fast she damn near sings, she doesn’t give me the option to get a word in edgewise before ending the call.

“I will thank you in *hell!*” I hiss into the dead line, before slumping my shoulders and dropping my face into my hands. The sandwich doesn’t even look good anymore. I wonder if I

should take the lettuce and tomato off and go give them to Horatio instead. At least he seems to get me. Given the chance, I don't think he'd opt for a bunch of social media addicts to come sleep in my woods. At least, I hope not.

Chapter Five

Ensley

I spend the whole night having weird dreams about owning a pet pig. I probably shouldn't have spent the hour I was lying in bed trying to fall asleep watching TikToks posted by pig owners. I can't imagine that it did anything good for my subconscious. At the very least, it prevented me from having all kinds of nightmares about going on blind dates with carnivores who wear too much cheap cologne and have all of the tact and decorum of Andrew Tate. When I wake up, it's to an empty apartment, devoid of pets or significant others. Could be worse. I could be waking up next to Michael.

Completely and totally sexually unsatisfied.

I stumble around blearily, doing my ten minutes of meditation and positive affirmations before a hot shower and a good stretch. There's a Mason jar full of overnight oats for me in the fridge, and I carry it to my desk, alongside a cup of hot black coffee with entirely too much sugar. Nobody said vegans have to always be healthy or make good choices. I'm allowed my vices, as long as they aren't hurting any animals but myself.

I scroll through various social media feeds, seeing where the trends are situated this morning and who has been doing what. As much as it seems like I'm having fun when you look at my posts, it really is work. Influencing is a full-time job, and one that doesn't have on or off hours, or an office where I can leave my work-self behind for the day. Once the caffeine

is solidly flowing through my veins and I can feel my brain shaking off the last remnants of sleep-induced fog, I finally bring myself to open up my email again. I'm absolutely delighted by what I see.

Samantha forwarded my counteroffer to the client, and the client responded to me directly. Laney Rawlins wants me to not only come to their family farm but to stay on the property and completely build out six yurts. I can do whatever I want with them and take as long as I need. It's a dream come true. I can come up with six completely different themes, all of them furnished with sustainable and fair-trade decor and supplies. This is going to be an opportunity to partner with so many product makers and other influencers, as well as generate a mountain of content that my followers can really feel involved with.

I'm sure all that exposure will be helpful for the Rawlins farm as well—even if I'm a little iffy about the whole tree farm concept. Maybe if I gain enough traction from my followers, I can convince them to change their ways and just go with the glamping side of their operation and leave the trees alone. That sounds like too big of a dream for right now, though. I need to start at the beginning, which means I have a lot of packing and planning to do. And some gloating, now that I think about it.

I go ahead and call Eden back, leaving it on speaker so I can finish up the remnants of my breakfast and start building some idea boards for these themed yurts.

“You're never going to believe this,” I croon, barely containing my excitement as I scroll through pages and pages

of photos of fairy lights. Who knew there were so many different kinds?

“I might,” she blurts out between yawns. Eden has never been an early riser, preferring to stay in the warm comfort of her bed for as long as possible. Having a hot new fiancé there who adores her and caters to her every whim probably doesn’t hurt, either. “What’s up?”

“I’m living the dream!” Or I guess, my dream. Or the dreams of my followers. I can’t say that it’s Eden’s dream, too. Either way, I get to go live in the woods and look at petting zoo animals and not be bothered by blind dates or meat or meat-eating blind dates for six weeks. There isn’t anything about this not to love.

“You’re going to get paid to eat sustainable granola?”

“Close!” She isn’t wrong. I will most certainly be eating sustainable granola while being paid for my time. That we can all be sure of. But that’s not the point. “I’m getting paid to live in and build out yurts!”

“Yurts, huh? And where is this happening?” Another yawn, louder this time, and then I hear the ruffling of a heavy comforter as she pulls it tighter around her shoulders. Must be nice to be able to relax like that and not feel like you’re wasting your time. It would drive me insane to have not started my day yet. “Costa Rica?”

I throw celebratory fist pump into the air. “No. Right here in Northern Minnesota!”

There is a moment of confused silence from the other end of the phone before she continues. “It’s going to get really

cold.”

“I don’t care!” I insist. In reality, I hadn’t considered that. But there are portable heaters, and insulation, and hot tea, and good socks, and... and... And I’m not going to let something like the weather rain on my parade. I’ll just wear a heavier sweater. And a hat. I look cute in hats. Like the ones with pom poms. My followers will love me in a hat. “I’m so happy!”

She mumbles something about being happy for me too and needing to take a shower. Then I hear Mateo’s voice in the background, and she starts laughing and hangs up. They’re so cute, it’s disgusting. Our conversation has made me realize that this isn’t just a fun trip, but I really will be out in the woods in a fancy version of a tent, alone, as winter rapidly approaches. I’m going to need so much in terms of supplies, outside of the mountain of decor I’m going to get to shop for. I don’t have the outdoors-iest track record, and I have no idea where to begin. It’s exciting, but also vaguely terrifying.

Hours pass with me seated in front of my laptop, scrolling through video blogs of camping gear, top ten lists about sleeping bags and portable stoves, and reading about the dangers of smoke inhalation. According to Laney, the yurts will all have permanent plumbing, but it will take a while to get that installed. For the first yurt, I’ll have to improvise. Twelve different mood boards are open at any given time, and I find myself completely unable to choose between themes. Having this much freedom and latitude is great, and I wouldn’t change it for the world, but it’s daunting being totally in charge by myself. It’s a tremendous opportunity, and I don’t want to squander a single aspect. Or end up a little Ensley

popsicle in the wrong kind of sleeping bag, before I get eaten by a hungry bear.

After agonizing over my Amazon lists, I decide to pull the trigger and post an update to both my TikTok and Instagram accounts, letting my followers know that something big is on the way, involving me, a bunch of baby goats maybe wearing pajamas, some Christmas trees, and a half-dozen yurts, along with a liberal usage of the tree and goat emojis.

My stomach rumbles, and I realize I haven't had lunch yet. And that my knees are completely and totally locked into a position of hatred and fury from sitting the way I am at my computer. I should probably stand up. Besides, it's absolute torture to just sit and wait for follower interaction after making a post, so I decide to take a quick break, rummaging through my fridge for some ingredients that match enough to make a decent salad, when my phone rings again. I consider ignoring it, thinking it's just notifications from the postings until I see that it's my mom. The only person other than my agent that I really shouldn't ignore.

“What's a yurt?” Mom always tends to just charge right into the heart of the matter. I can't remember the last time she started a conversation with ‘how are you’ or even a simple and perfunctory ‘hi.’ It's always just an immediate declaration of intent, spewed out with such force and so quickly that it stops you in your tracks, before she steamrolls right into her next thought without waiting to hear your response. “And why are you living in one?”

I pause for a moment, taking the time to collect myself while I whisk together a simple lemon and olive oil dressing. I

think it's par for the course that anyone over fifty is unable to look up something on Google. "So, it's this big tent—"

"You're living in a tent!" she gasps. There's an edge of exasperation to her voice, but also a very strong sense that whatever she's assumed is happening to me is something that she's seen coming for a long time. "Why? If money is so hard, then come stay here. Both your sisters have. And I didn't think I was going to survive Eden's stay..."

She's done it again, covering so much ground so quickly that I'm not even sure where and how to start my response. True, Elwyn and Eden both recently spent their own short stints at home. And, yes, Eden did spend the majority of that time sneaking around with the son of my father's archnemesis and drove everyone to insanity in the process before dragging them all to Italy and forcing them to like each other. It was a touch dramatic, even for her. But I'm not like my sisters. I'm not leaving my apartment for good and certainly not because I have to.

"It wasn't so bad having Eden there." That's a lie. It was definitely that bad. I thought Dad was going to have a stroke and that Mom was going to go feral before turning to alcoholism via extra-large bottles of chardonnay. But bringing all of that back up is not going to help anyone right now. "And I love you, but I'm doing fine. Better than fine. Business is booming. The yurt is a choice, an opportunity. I'm being paid to do it! Don't you want me to be happy, making money by doing things that I love?"

I know for a fact my mom doesn't understand what I do for a living at all. She can't wrap her head around how posting

on social media resembles a job. I think she still thinks I'm just talking to an audience of my ten best friends and not that I've become a semi-popular voice in the larger internet vegan community. And this could be the thing that makes me one of the most revered vegan personalities around! I don't understand why Eden and my mom can't see this opportunity the way I do. They both just keep fixating on the word 'tent,' as if sleeping in something that isn't a building with four walls and a roof is the end of the world as we know it.

“Happy. Warm. Nourished.” Ah. Here comes the lecture, from my mother who thinks that a few diet books from the early eighties make her a licensed nutritionist. “You're still eating only plant-based... everything. I just don't think you're getting enough protein, Ensley. What happens when you want to become a mother? How are you going to sustain life inside you when all you eat are weeds?”

I get that the idea of her daughter subsiding on iceberg lettuce and a fistful of almonds every day is upsetting. If only she would listen when I try to explain just how far vegan foods have come in terms of variety and availability, maybe she wouldn't be so convinced I'm on the verge of starving to death. There isn't much point though. This will just circle right back to her fears that I'm going to waste away and crumble into dust, even though my ample T & A scream otherwise.

They can hear my sigh across Lake Superior. “Yes, Mom. Still a vegan.”

“How's your iron level?” Her tone can be so patronizing it makes me want to tear my hair out. I have to focus on my

breathing to not accidentally crush the tomato I'm holding into ketchup in my palm. "It seems like..."

"I'm fine, Mom," I sigh. At least she wants me to be healthy, I guess. She cares, in her own annoying little way. And it could be worse. She could not care at all. "Doc says I'm healthy as a horse. Gotta go. I'm packing up for the next six weeks."

The reality hits me as soon as I say it out loud. Six weeks! I'm not sure I've ever been this excited about anything in my life. It feels like the first time that I'm really doing something for myself and doing something for my business beyond making smoothie bowls and unboxing faux-leather boots and purses. I'm so restless about getting started that I eat the entire salad standing by my kitchen counter and don't even rinse the bowl when I toss it in the sink. There are Amazon lists to finalize and t-shirts that need to be rolled into tiny little cylinders and stuffed in my backpack. Look out Rawlins Tree Farm & Petting Zoo, here comes Ensley Lorenson to decorate your yurts and turn your business around.

Chapter Six

Jeff

No matter how much I protest, the yurts are coming anyway. Laney's just like that. Once she latches on to an idea, if she's convinced that it's a good one, there isn't any changing her mind. I could've gotten a petition drawn up, signed by a hundred thousand people and Governor Walz, and it still wouldn't have convinced her that her idea was anything other than the saving grace and last-minute miracle that Rawlins Tree Farm needed.

It's not freezing out yet, but there's a chill to the air as I lean against my truck door, standing on the edge of my property, watching the workers assemble these giant ridiculous tents that resemble the ones you used to see in circuses of yore. The plumbing guys will be here soon, and hopefully, they won't disturb the site too much when they have to dig. I can't imagine anyone paying hotel prices to stay in a tent out in the middle of my farm, but Laney insisted that these are the popular thing now. People don't go camping to rely on themselves, they go camping to have everything handled for them, just farther away from the annoyance of other people, and somewhere with good lighting and beautiful backdrops for their incessant social media updating.

I don't understand any of it. But I guess I don't have to understand it, or the people who show up, as long as they pay in the same usable currency as everyone else. I've been told the views here are pretty stellar. Still, I can't talk myself into

getting behind this. No amount of platitudes or logic is going to make me feel good about it all. I thought getting turned down by Ensley after I rescued her, and her wiggling her way into my psyche was the worst thing that was going to happen to me in a while. This is really proving me wrong. I'm just going to have to look at these stupid eyesores every single day.

Just when I'm considering driving my truck full speed into the most recently completed yurt, Adam rolls up on his four-wheeler. At first, I nervously scan his person for another four-legged escapee, but he doesn't seem to be hiding any tiny little passengers anywhere on him or the vehicle. Thank God for little victories.

"Never pegged you for a yurt man," he says on a chuckle from underneath his helmet.

My eyes narrow. "I'm not."

He arches an eyebrow, clearly asking for more of an explanation, and I exhale a long, begrudging sigh. "Laney," I grumble. "She's got this knack for tugging at my puppet strings, pulling me into her grand plans before I even realize I'm dancing."

Adam laughs again, his grin stretching wide. "Man, never thought I'd see the day when Jeff Rawlins got a row of yurts on his land. What's next? Zen meditation workshops?"

I give him a stern look. "Don't even joke about that. Because it's not that far from the truth."

"C'mon. Stop scowling like that. This isn't so bad." He nods toward the giant round objects staring back at me from fifty yards away. "They blend in. It's all good."

“Right,” I huff, kicking at a patch of dead grass by the toe of my work boots. “Until they get decorated.”

“You doing that?” Adam asks, caught between a laugh and outright disbelief. I’ve been wearing a combination of the same shirt and same jeans in a handful of different colors for the last ten years. I’m not the decorating kind of guy, and Adam knows it. If I were to decorate them, they’d certainly be functional and well-equipped, but probably not anybody’s idea of fun or anything resembling “glam.”

“No.” The reality of the situation is far worse. I had to fight the urge to drive down to the Twin Cities just to beg Laney to change her mind the second the words came out of her mouth. She might as well have told me they’re coming to light all my trees on fire and hung up. “I’ll have you know this is not my idea. My sister is letting some TikTok influencer do it as a marketing ploy. I’m not even sure I know what a TikTok influencer is. I do know I’m not gonna like it.”

“Get ready for a lot of dancing.” Adam shakes his head even as his eyes twinkle. I can’t tell if he’s joking with me or not. “At least, that’s what my wife does. Look, she’s over there making a TikTok now. There’s some new viral song and that always ends up in a dance of some sort. There’s even some WAG hashtag they can use so all the WAGs are always creating videos.”

I follow his pointing finger back to their backyard acres away, where I can barely make out Julia and Charlie doing some kind of strange kicking and hopping motion in front of her iPhone balanced on a tripod. It’s weird, and I can’t begin to explain why it’s happening, or why someone who does

whatever that is can be qualified to live in and decorate my new rental properties. Sometimes I wish I was born earlier. A lot earlier. When there was nobody out here but the trees and the wildlife, and you didn't see humans unless you drove into town on purpose.

To a time when there were covered wagons.

Adam looks at his wife, smiling with the level of pride and affection he always oozes over with when he's within a mile of her, before tilting his gaze to my own front porch. "Uh. Jeff. What's all that now?"

He means the packages. He can't possibly mean anything else. There's a veritable cityscape of cardboard on my front porch, piled high and unbalanced in strange and innovative architectures by the UPS guy, the USPS guy, the guy in the Amazon van, and the FedEx guy at several separate intervals today. It's been a nonstop arrival of boxes, an onslaught of brown rectangles and squares of different weights and dimensions.

"Got some mail today." I settle for the shortest explanation. Adam laughs at my brevity.

"Well, I can see that. A blind man could see that. Is it all for you? There not all empty?"

This is where it gets even weirder. I shake my head. "No. It's all addressed to someone or something called Vegan Vexation. I can't tell if that's a name or a business. Can you even be named Vegan? Is that a thing now? I wouldn't be surprised."

Adam laughs again, harder this time. I'm happy he finds me so amusing, even if I don't find any of this the slightest bit funny.

"I'm sure there's definitely at least one or two people walking around this country with the first name 'Vegan,' but I'm inclined to think it's a business. Especially with that nifty bit of alliteration it's got going for it."

While shifting my gaze from Julia's bizarre dancing to the package apocalypse and back again, I'm greeted by a new sight. One even more concerning than the yurts or the internet weirdness or whatever a Vegan Vexation is.

A green Chevrolet Bolt is pulling into the main drive of the property. I groan involuntarily, feeling like the whole world is against me today. Not a fucking electric car. Where the hell am I going to charge that thing? That can't be harboring anything good inside of it. I can even make out the license plate from here. Not only do I hate the entire concept of vanity plates on principle, but this one is starting to fit all of the puzzle pieces of my morning together. *VEG GRL* it reads, though I can't decide if that means "Veggie Girl" or "Vegetable Grill." Either way, my blood pressure spikes because this must be owned by this vegan character I've been so looking forward to meeting today.

Until I recognize her through the windshield.

My heart stutters and then squeezes.

My brain slows to a stop.

When it rains, it pours.

It's the tense, curves molded by the Gods, stunning girl with definitely no hairy armpits who decided out of the blue that she couldn't stand the sight of me the other night.

"Why is she here?" I ask not only Adam but the entire universe and whoever else out there might be listening. It's starting to feel like someone, somewhere, is playing a really mean joke at my expense.

My friend, who may or not be Benedict Arnold, lets out a low whistle. "She's hot. You should ask her out," he suggests, wagging an eyebrow at me. "All in the name of yurt decoration, that is."

I try to ignore his question, still cycling through the reasons that she could be showing up in my driveway today, hoping like hell it has nothing to do with these ridiculous yurts.

"I hope it's not because she needs a charge. I don't have one." And even if I did, I don't know if I'd be willing to spare it for her.

Adam looks between her and me with a concerned expression. After all, I'm behaving completely out of character. "Why do you hate her so much on sight? You're usually so nice to people."

I close my eyes, squaring my shoulders against the door of my truck and accepting full and total defeat today. "She's the *one* that I told you about from the Velvet Pinecone. The one who peeled out of the parking lot faster than Joey Logano after I asked her out on a date. She's the disaster from the other night."

And I'm guessing she's the vexing vegan, or whatever. And the girl in the yurt. And that I'm going to have a very, very rough six weeks ahead of me. Adam snorts out a laugh again, before seeing the anger radiating out of my pores.

"Ah! I'm gonna take this opportunity to leave now, then." He revs the engine of his four-wheeler a few times for good measure. "Have fun! Stay safe!"

"Yeah, great advice," I retort, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

He throws me a devilish grin, the kind you'd see on a kid who just stole the last cookie. "Sad I'm going to miss the spectacle of watching you try to navigate the choppy waters of yurt-dwelling veggie girls."

I glare at him, hating that he's finding such amusement in my misery. "I'm not navigating anything. She's just a visitor. Temporary."

Adam chuckles, the sound echoing off the surrounding trees. "Uh-huh. Tell yourself that, buddy. You're looking at her like you *don't* hate her. In my experience, women like her have a habit of becoming... well, not so temporary."

"Shut it, Adam," I snap, turning my attention back to the green electric nightmare on wheels. "The last thing I need right now is you yapping in my ear."

"Oh, by the way, remember that thing called dating? You should try it sometime," Adam calls over his shoulder before he peels away, leaving behind a cloud of dust and my mounting frustration.

“I did try,” I retort, even though his back is to me now and he probably can’t hear me. Still, I feel the need to defend myself. “With *her*. And now I’m too damn busy. Dealing with *her*.”

Even as I grumble and curse, I can’t help but cast a glance toward Ensley, who’s now walking around her car, looking utterly lost.

And utterly beautiful.

Adam’s words ring in my ears, I allow myself a few seconds to study her. But that only causes my body to tighten. So, she’s damn appealing—like a feast for my eyes. But only in an annoying, granola, out-of-place-in-my-woody-farm kind of way. And it’s been a long time since I had any kind of company other than stubborn goats and chickens, so that’s all it is. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to be a bit... friendly?

But she’s not here to make friends, she’s here to do a job. And that’s not why I’m... looking. I groan, rubbing a hand over my face.

I just need firm boundaries, that’s all.

Now I’m standing here with the impending disaster that is Ensley, her EV, and the yurts. Oh, it’s going to be a long six weeks. I can feel it in my bones.

As I ponder my sister’s choices and the mess that she’s made of my life, I have a hunch it won’t be as easy to fix as the hole in the fence.

Chapter Seven

Ensley

It wasn't a particularly taxing drive out here from my apartment, though I probably would've gotten lost without Laney's incredibly specific instructions. The turn-off for the Rawlins' Farm from the main road isn't marked very clearly, and it's something I'm going to have to get her to address if she's going to have throngs of people coming to stay out here. It would also be nice if there was some kind of central building for them to check in and out of, maybe even with a small canteen in case they forget an essential or need snacks.

I've just been aimlessly driving down the winding gravel driveway that split from the two-lane highway that brought me the rest of the way out here, hoping that I eventually see some sign of life that isn't a tree, squirrel, or bird. Not that I would mind spending my day watching squirrels or anything. But I have a car full of belongings to unload, pictures to take, and a whole lot of boxes to unbox once I get settled in. I'd like to get it all done in the most flattering daylight possible.

Eventually, the driveway leads me past a house, where the porch is covered in Amazon packages. I think it's pretty safe to assume they're mine. I can't imagine anyone else out here getting that much stuff delivered in one go. I make a note to come collect them as soon as I find this guy, Laney's older brother, who runs the place.

A few more yards and I can see the yurts being assembled. Four of them are already complete, and the last pair of eight-

person units is still being put together by a team of laborers. A pick-up truck is parked out here, with a man leaning against the door, watching the yurts get finished up. He's talking to a huge guy perched on a four-wheeler, his face obscured by a helmet, who starts up and peels off right as I park my car. If the man with the truck isn't in charge, he can at least point me to whoever it is that I should be talking to today about getting started.

I kill the engine and reach for my bag, glancing up to take in the man by the truck. And then it hits me. That stance, the way his arms are folded, the chiseled jawline that's all too familiar. My heart drops into my stomach, and a wave of heat floods my face.

Oh, no. No, no, no.

It's him.

The man from the Velvet Pinecone. The man who saved me from the worst blind date in the history of blind dates. The man I rejected and drove away from without a backward glance. And here he is, standing in the driveway of the Rawlins Christmas Tree Farm.

Because he's Jeff Rawlins.

I mean, who else could it be?

Bridge burned.

I want to sink into my seat, to disappear, to somehow rewind time and take back every decision that led me to this moment. I can feel the cringe creeping up my spine, the awkwardness so acute it's almost physical. I glance in the

rearview mirror, half-expecting to see my face glowing red like Rudolph's nose.

I should get out of the car. I should face him, apologize, explain. But my legs feel like jelly, and my mind is a whirlwind of 'What do I say?' and 'How did this happen?' and 'Why, oh why did I think rejecting him was a good idea?'

I watch as he turns, his eyes meeting mine through the windshield, and I see the recognition in his eyes. His brows furrow, and I can almost hear the gears turning in his head as he puts the pieces together.

And all I can do is sit there, trapped in my car, trapped in this moment, trapped in the most profound secondhand embarrassment I've ever felt. I've done this to myself. I've created this cringe-worthy situation, and now I have to face it.

Taking a deep breath, I try to muster the courage to open the door. But my hand is shaking, and my throat feels like it's closing up. I've never wanted to run away more in my life, but I know I can't. I have to face him. I have a job to do. A job, that until this very moment, I was really looking forward to.

And as I finally reach for the door handle, praying for strength, praying for grace, praying for a hole to open up in the earth and swallow me whole, I know that this is a moment of pure, unadulterated, face-flaming mortification that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Here goes nothing.

Jeff—also known as truck guy and date-saver, now also my yurt landlord—stands with his arms crossed, leaning against his truck as if it's a casual Tuesday afternoon and not

my personal nightmare come to life. The second I step out of my vehicle, his icy gaze lands on me, and I can feel my face instantly flare up in response.

My heart slams into my ribs as if trying to escape, the beats erratic and wild. This is like one of those awful, bizarre dreams where you find yourself naked in a crowded room, except I'm fully clothed, thank God, and the crowd is just one very large, very judgmental hot guy.

His face is all hard lines and aloofness, and I have to remind myself to breathe. He doesn't look like the man who stepped in to save me from a bad date. Instead, he looks like a man I've crossed in the worst possible way.

Images from that dinner disaster hit me like flashes of a horror movie—his obliviousness to my distress, his relentless chewing on that steak, the accusatory mooing of phantom cows in my mind. I hadn't realized how much that whole night negatively impacted my positive vibe until now, standing in front of him, my pulse pounding in my ears.

To say I feel like I've walked into the lion's den would be an understatement. It's more like I've just volunteered to put my head in the lion's mouth, the lion being a broad-shouldered, bearded man with a piercing stare that's currently making me wish a huge sinkhole would appear underneath my feet.

I try to pull myself together, to assemble some semblance of composure as I strut toward him, my strides a touch too wide, my chin probably jutting too high. While aiming for unbothered, I'm probably landing somewhere closer to deer in headlights, but I've got to work with what I've got. I can

almost hear my ego creaking under the strain of maintaining my dignity. But I'll be damned if I let him see how much his presence has rattled me.

Just seconds ago, I was looking forward to my time here, but now six weeks suddenly feels like an eternity. If this were a movie, the camera would zoom in on my face right now, capturing every mortifying nuance of my shock, horror, and growing desperation. Cue the dramatic music. Roll the credits on my sanity.

This is going to be an epic, cringe-worthy ride.

“Hi, there. Is Laney here?” I ask, hoping that she'll materialize from thin air, so I don't have to deal with Mr. Bloody Porterhouse over here.

“Laney doesn't live here,” he responds. The look on his face is so frosty I'm half expecting some snowflakes to blow off his beard hairs.

“She doesn't? Um... she hired me to live in her yurt.” I feel like that girl from *Dirty Dancing* who carried a watermelon and could only explain to anyone that she carried a watermelon because words are hard when you're surprised. When your heart's racing and you don't know why. When your body's buzzing by just standing next to a man who's all wrong for you. Although I don't know why *I* can't form a coherent explanation right now. He shouldn't be able to rattle me this badly. He is just some guy that I happened to have a weird not-a-date with. That's all.

But he's gotten to me. And even worse, he knows it.

I'm struck for a moment by how handsome he is when he's annoyed, and the thought disgusts me. I feel like I need to clean the inside of my skull and go stare at pictures of hot vegans on Instagram to reboot my brain. *Body, stop it! This man is not for you!*

He nods, a bitter smile forming on his face. "So, you're the TikTok influencer, then?"

"Oh, hell." Now that the initial shock has worn off, it's all starting to come together for me. Laney did tell me that I'd be working with her brother. A guy who was also named... Jeff. I can't blame myself for not anticipating this. It's not like it isn't one of the most common names in the country. "This must make you Jeff. *The Jeff*. Laney's brother."

"Guilty as charged." He gestures broadly with his palms, before dropping his hands to his sides. "And that's all I'm guilty of."

"What's that supposed to mean?" His tone borders on accusatory, already putting me on the defensive before we've barely said a few sentences back and forth. Before I know it, something I've been billing as one of the greatest opportunities of my life turns into something I'm beginning to dread.

"The other night. For the record, I was just trying to help," he huffs, his breath forming clouds in the chilly air in front of his lips. It serves as a reminder of how much colder it's going to get, and how quickly. I try not to think about how thin the yurt walls look from here, and instead focus on how irritating his face is. His rugged, chiseled, more-appealing-than-it-has-any-right-to-be, face. "That guy you were with was borderline abusive. I went out on a limb to save you—I mean, you never

know how aggro a guy's gonna get with a stranger even in a public place. And yet for some reason, I'm the bad guy..."

"You're welcome," I blurt out with a wave of my hand, not wanting to listen anymore to how my presence is some kind of Old Testament trial or tribulation. I don't like being compared to a plague of frogs or swarm of locusts.

"Excuse me?" Jeff scoffs incredulously. "Am I supposed to thank you for this inconvenient spectacle?"

"Yes," I huff right back. The picture that Laney had painted of the Rawlins' Farm finances was not pretty. The picture that Samantha had painted was even less flattering and far more dire. If they don't start bringing in new clientele, during the ten months out of the year that this place sits as a ghost town, then it's bye-bye Christmas, hello bank foreclosure and asset seizure. I can't imagine losing a property that's been in his family for multiple generations. This glamping rental plan is a last-ditch effort. "I'm going to save the family tree farm."

I turn away from Jeff, no longer able to look at his smug and slapable yet decidedly handsome and firm jaw and scan the parts of the property that I can see, trying to evaluate what exactly I'm dealing with here. There are a lot of trees. Like. A *lot* of trees. More trees than I've ever seen at one time. And it smells incredible. So much pine scent in the air I feel like I've died and gone to Christmas heaven. There's the old, but well-kept and charming house I passed, a small barn, a few sheds holding tractors and other heavy equipment, and some signs pointing toward a petting zoo.

And that's when I see *him*. The world's most beautiful angel. Seven pounds of bleating, stumbling white hair and two of the biggest eyes I've ever seen.

"Oh, my God," I squeal, much higher than I intended to. It's impossible to keep my composure in front of something that cute. "It's a baby goat!"

"Don't run up on it..." Jeff calls to me, but it's too late. I'm already moving as fast as my faux-fur booted feet can carry me, completely at the mercy of this tiny little thing. I fumble in my purse for my phone, trying to get a video or a photo or anything to show to my followers. But before I can get the lens to focus, he's gone stiff as a board and fallen right on top of the grass. I think my heart is going to explode from the cuteness of it all.

"You didn't mention it was a fainting goat!" Not only is he the most precious thing I've ever seen in my life, but fainting goats are crazy popular online right now. Just having him around in the background of all of my posts is going to gain me so much traction and attention. "I'm going to add pajamas to my list. We'll have this little guy dressed for success in no time. I've found my sidekick."

My mind is already swirling with ideas. Themed outfits. Little hats and headbands. The goat taste-testing some of my recipes. This is perfect. This is more than I could've imagined. Any of my old thoughts about a pet pig have vanished into thin air, replaced with tiny bleats and little clopping hooves. Jeff just stares at me like I said I'm going to get the goat his driver's license or something.

“Shouldn’t your sidekick be able to talk?” he grumbles, rubbing at his beard with his palm and frowning at the whole ordeal.

I think about it for a moment. “Are you the only human here?”

“Yes,” he sighs.

“Then no,” I insist, returning my attention to the kid in front of me. “I prefer creatures that are a little less surly.” I seem to have found a spot on his head that he enjoys having scratched, his little eyes fluttering shut at the contact.

Jeff laughs bitterly. “You’re something else, lady.”

“Does this little guy have a name?” I ask, already trying to think of Instagram account names for him. There are so many goat-related puns I could use that I might pass out from the excitement.

“No, *she* doesn’t,” Jeff huffs, shaking his head. I really wish he would lighten up for even a second. I mean, we’re talking about naming a baby goat. How much less serious can you get?

“Well, she does now. I’m naming her Miss Gigi,” I announce with the utmost confidence. It’s perfect. It’s so sophisticated of a name that it comes right back around into being fantastically silly. When I say it, the little miss herself seems to wiggle with excitement.

A look crosses Jeff’s face that I can only compare with a baby eating a lemon for the first time. “Why Miss Gigi?”

“Because Miss Piggy is taken,” I explain like it’s the most natural progression in the world. I don’t see how he’s not

following this. Even Gigi looks annoyed. “And her pajamas...”

“Let me guess... pink?” He says the name of the color like it’s the worst thing he could think of, which is rubbing me the wrong way. What’s wrong with a color? I guess pink is a bit scary when your entire wardrobe seems to consist solely of bland plaid and faded denim. I wonder when the last time he wore something fun was, or if anything in his house is a color other than taupe, gray, or navy.

“Bingo.” Gigi bleats along when I say the word, joining me in my enthusiasm. I think I’m going to expire on the spot. I definitely have a sidekick now.

“That’s my dog’s name,” Jeff deadpans.

“Seriously?”

“No.” He squints at me in exasperated disappointment. “I don’t even have a dog.”

“I guess I’m not surprised. You have zero sense of humor. I bet you’re the one man in Northern Minnesota that even dogs can’t endorse. We could never be together for that one reason alone. I’ll be going to my yurt now.” I kiss Gigi on the top of her little goat noggin before turning and striding off toward my car, leaving Jeff with his mouth hanging open.

I try to wait until I get into the driver’s seat and close the door before turning to look at him, but I can feel his heated gaze follow me the entire time I’m walking back, his eyes boring holes into the back of my head. Why he can’t stop looking at me, I’m not sure. But one thing is for certain—I’m not going to let Jeff Rawlins of the broad shoulders and zero

personality mess this up for me. The next six weeks are going to be some of the most fun and most important of my entire social media career. And I don't need some humorless, lunkhead, lumberjack-looking asshole ruining it for me.

Even if he is kinda cute.

Chapter Eight

Jeff

Well, that's definitely not the yellow brick road to yurt-ville. Ensley's expensive and worthless electric jalopy is beelining it down a trail that's more back forty than boutique accommodation. It skirts the ragged edge of our property, flirtatiously winks at the maintenance shed, and then hits the highway like a vegan on the run from a steakhouse. I use the quick walk back to my house to do the mental arithmetic. By my calculations, she's got a good seven to ten minutes of open road joyriding before the sinking realization of 'wrong way, Ensley' sets in.

Double that for her to moonwalk that Chevy Bolt right back up here. As I park, I can't help but smirk, wondering how much juice her eco-ride's got in its tank and just how much this little scenic detour's gonna guzzle down.

But I don't have nearly enough time to gloat.

I'm just reaching my front yard when Adam rolls his four-wheeler into his garage a ways down the road from me. He waves, and I hop on my Gator to trundle on over and see what he wants.

"Where was she going in such a hurry?" He pauses to take his jacket off, tossing it on a hook by the garage door. There's a fridge and freezer set out here, just like everybody has around here for their wild game and their gameday beers. Adam opens the fridge, grabs two cans of lager, and holds one

out for me. “I saw her little car peel off away from you. Which means you weren’t very good at rolling out the welcome mat.”

“Her yurt,” I reply, opening the beer. A fine mist of foam sprays when I pop the top open, coating my beard, and I wipe it away with the back of my hand.

Adam takes a long swig of his beer, face scrunched up in thought. “Aren’t they the other way?”

“Yep.” She gives off this boho-chic vibe that doesn’t exactly scream ‘nature enthusiast.’ I can’t wrap my head around how she plans to trade her influencer lifestyle for tree-hugging and campfires for an entire month. But hey, people surprise you sometimes.

“You going to tell her?” Adam starts to walk out of the garage and toward their yard, gesturing to the circle of wooden chairs around the brick fire pit I helped him build. We’ve had a lot of long nights out here and a lot of great memories.

“Nope,” I groan, my knees popping as I lower myself into one of the chairs. Farm life is definitely not making me any younger, that’s for sure. But at least I’m not like my friend who blew his knee out so badly he had to claw his way back to the ice.

Adam raises his eyebrows with a smirk, sitting down in the chair across from me and propping his feet up on the bricks. “So, I guess I don’t need to ask how it’s going.”

“She still hates me. Feeling’s mutual.” Looking into the pit at the charred remnants of our last fire, I’m struck by the realization that she probably hates bonfires, too. A waste of wood or resources or something. She just hates everything fun.

Me included. I like to think I'm fun, anyway. People tell me that I'm fun all the time.

Don't they?

Suddenly, I'm hit by a sudden wave of doubt. It feels like I've been punched in the gut by a kangaroo wearing boxing gloves. Am I... fun? I used to be, right? There were days filled with laughter and camaraderie, keggers around bonfires that lit up the night sky. But now, when I look in the mirror, I see more of a human rain cloud than a merry minstrel. Heck, lately, my idea of a wild night is balancing the books and figuring out how to save the farm from financial ruin. I've traded in laughter for ledgers and high spirits for high interest rates. No wonder I haven't been laid in... Christ, I can't even come up with a date. And what was her name again? A faceless woman floats through my consciousness, not even memorable enough to conjure. I've become as much fun as a colonoscopy. No offense to colonoscopies; at least they serve a practical purpose.

But even though I just slid into my taking accountability for my wet blanket status era, Spencer is the last person I'm gonna admit it to.

"Wish I could tell you why. You're really quite likable. Sometimes a little surly and clueless around women, but that shouldn't be a deal breaker. I mean... Jules and Sue-Ann always liked you, and that has to be good for something."

"Thanks." I take another gulp of beer. I'm not sure if that was supposed to be a compliment, a pep talk, or an insult. I think he managed to pull off all three. We sit for a few minutes

in quiet company, enjoying the sounds of the woods around us and the slight chill in the air as the sun dips lower in the sky.

Adam's never been one for long comfortable silences, and he breaks it as soon as he can't take it any longer. "So, now what?"

"Now she lives here for six weeks." I shrug. It's been at least twelve minutes by now, come to think of it. She must've made it back to the junction with the main road. She's gotta be pissed as hell. The thought puts a smile on my face. "If she can find the place."

"Plenty of time to change her mind about liking you." Adam kills the rest of his beer, crumpling the can in his fist. "If you're so inclined, that is. You know, Rawlins, you're not getting any younger."

"Oh, so you think I should turn on the old Rawlins' charm, make her fall for me, and when she finally realizes she wants to date me, I tell her it was all just a cruel joke? Then she feels the same rejection that I did?"

He stares at me in abject horror, thoroughly shocked by the suggestion. I can't say I'm not surprised myself. It's an ugly idea, and I feel terrible the second I say it. I'm too old for game playing, but this woman seems to bring out the worst in me.

"I didn't say that," he says hesitantly, trying to voice his disapproval in the kindest way he can manage. "Yikes. It's like you're turning from friend to villain right before my eyes."

"Right." I nod, already wanting to change the subject. I can't believe a girl I met a week ago already has me so rattled.

That can't be a good sign. "Bad idea. Me neither. I'm not the revenge type."

"You're the butthurt type," Adam teases, stretching out in his chair like a comfortable house cat. "I get it. You would think since us dudes experience rejection on the regular that it would get easier."

My beer is now empty too, and I gesture at the empty can in Adam's hand. He nods, and I turn to amble back toward the fridge in the garage and get us a second round. Which is when I see Adam's wife, just kind of... standing there in the yard.

"Why's Julia just standing six feet away with her back to us?"

She's holding her phone out, fixated on something on the screen, completely oblivious to everything around her. As someone who barely uses theirs, I'll never understand people's fixation with looking at the damn things all while ignoring everything that's *real*.

Adam twists his lips. "Gotta be making a TikTok. I almost wish she hadn't discovered it. She's obsessed."

As the unexpected sound of Adam's voice invades her space, she jumps like a cat confronted with a cucumber, hurriedly pocketing her phone. She tosses me a wave that's as enthusiastic as a flat tire, making me shake my head as I meander toward the beer fridge once more. Before I can relish the blissful chill of the fridge door opening, the screech of tires on gravel demands my attention. Lo and behold, the Green Machine—her snazzy electric car—whizzes past us, this time headed in the right direction. Judging by her breakneck speed, she's more than a little annoyed. I flick a glance at my watch.

Fifteen minutes. Nailed it. She definitely took the scenic route all the way to the main road before the dawning realization hit her. I can practically hear the symphony of swears she's belting out from behind the wheel.

All I can think is, that's what you get for playing *Mario Cart* with my driveway and my patience. The sweet taste of *schadenfreude* is even better than the ice-cold beer I've been denied.

"Look," Adam laughs, pointing at the green blur trundling down the road. "She figured it out."

I stare at the dust cloud she leaves in her wake, arms crossed, contemplating my next move. As much as I don't want anything to do with her, Laney did technically hire her to come work out here. I don't want to make our business look bad just because I can't be a team player. And, if I'm being honest, Laney has always kind of scared me, and I don't want to give her a reason to be mad at me.

To top it all off, I am a gentleman, and I can't abide by the idea of just leaving some girl out to flail around in the woods on my property. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't make my dad proud of me, and it wouldn't make me very proud of myself. Damn. And I was so looking forward to knocking back a few beers with my best friend and having a nice fire tonight.

"I guess I need to help her get settled in," I sigh, already wanting to kick myself for entertaining the idea of spending any more time with Ensley than is absolutely necessary. It's like I'm actively looking for punishment or something.

"Good luck with that." Adam sends me off with a wry smile, and I go shuffling off to my porch and the mountain of

boxes she's had delivered already. It takes me the better part of half an hour to get them all loaded in the back of my truck, and by the time I'm done, I really feel it in my calves and my arms. Hell, I feel it everywhere. I can't imagine what's in these things, and frankly, I don't want to know. All I know is that she's really living up to her name. And I don't mean the one her parents gave her.

The Vegan Vexation. It's nice to know that there's still some truth in advertising. I'm feeling pretty vexed as it is, and I've only been dealing with her for a few hours. I don't know how I'm going to survive the next few days, let alone six weeks. Next time I see Laney, she's going to have to listen to me vent without complaint.

Chapter Nine

Ensley

Sourpuss McGrumperton could've told me the right way to go. I wasted at least twenty minutes driving around out in the middle of nowhere, trying to find my way out to the gravel road that connects to the yurts. I didn't realize my mistake until I was all the way back to the main road—which I'm sure he anticipated the second he watched me burn rubber in the wrong direction. By the time I make it to the vehicle access to my personal yurt, I'm huffy, too hot in my winter coat, and annoyed. Not the best way to start day one of my big new project.

Parking my car next to the yurt, I take a moment to soak in the serenity that wraps around me like a warm blanket. The air is rich with the scent of pine needles and freshly cut grass—a natural elixir that seems to clear my soul with every inhale. Here, solitude isn't a lonely experience, but more like a dance with Mother Nature. I feel deeply connected to the towering trees, the expansive sky, and the very essence of life around me. In this tranquil space, I'm a small but meaningful part of something much larger and infinitely beautiful.

It's quiet, too, the sound of each snapped twig and crunch of dry grass under my boots echoing around me like a gunshot. The sun sits low on the horizon so late in the day, and it gives the sky this incredible painted look in hues of blue and pink. Grabbing the first of several bags of gear from the trunk of the car, I think that this could turn out to be a pretty perfect set-up,

ignoring the strained relationship I have with Jeff. And besides, this property is huge. How often will I even see him?

As if to answer my question, I hear the rumble of his pickup truck a hundred yards away, slowly trundling down the same winding gravel road. The sound of the truck and the little cloud of dust kicked up by its tires completely ruins the ambiance and takes me out of the moment entirely. If he wants people to enjoy the experience I'm trying to put together for them with these yurts, he's going to have to learn to have better boundaries. Those into glamping want to experience nature's glory, not diesel fuel and vehicle noise.

I lean against the yurt entrance, tightening my arms across my chest as I wait for him to park and climb out of the cab.

"I hope you don't think you can show up out of the blue all the time just because you own the place," I sigh, rubbing at my temple with my thumb. If I have to spend any more time with him today, I'm going to develop a migraine.

Jeff drops his shoulders. "I'm just showing up to deliver your packages."

All at once, most of the annoyance seeps out of me. There is nothing I love more in this world than opening things. Mom had to hide all of the Christmas presents that came in the mail from our relatives in the strangest places all over the house when I was a kid or else I would open them weeks before I was supposed to. I just don't have any restraint when something is in a box addressed to me. Peeking at the back of the truck, I'm elated to see the mountain of cardboard staring back at me.

“All of this arrived already? Yes!” I do a goofy little fist pump in the air, and Jeff is not amused, shaking his head and looking away.

I tilt my head and wonder what it would take to soften the man. Then I wonder why I would even want to.

Because he's beautiful when he smiles.

Jeff strides away to put the tailgate down and starts unloading my things, and I rush to help him. As much as I may not enjoy his company, I don't want to seem like some lazy, helpless girl either. I try to keep up with him the entire time, carrying almost as many packages as he does. I'm not insane enough to hurt myself—a few are obviously too heavy for me to attempt, and I very casually avoid them and let Jeff do the lifting for me. Toward the end, we're both winded. Which is why I'll forgive him for not paying attention to me excitedly rattling off all of the things I'm going to try to do in my unboxing video and how I'm going to set up the lighting in the yurt. Instead, he just stands with his back to the entrance, looking at all of the packages lined up inside.

“Thanks, Jeff,” I manage to say, swallowing my pride for a moment. Because hey, manners never go out of style, even if the guy gets on your last nerve.

“All of this must've cost you a fortune.” He paws at his beard, staring at my haul in a mixture of wonder and disgust. Knowing that this farm has been in his family for generations, and that it isn't doing very well, I'm sure money is hard for him to come by. Such a display of wealth on my part wouldn't be very tactful. I rush to explain myself.

“I didn’t pay for any of it. My followers bought all of this.” Reaching into my backpack, I pull out the power bank I packed and plug my laptop in, opening it up and navigating over to my wish list. “They get enjoyment out of being part of the experience.”

His eyes widen. “*They* bought all of this? For you?”

“Eh. Kind of. For the yurts, really. And to have their name and message read aloud when I open all of the packages.” I open an old TikTok thread, from the last time I did a big unboxing of meal prep gear, showing him where I made shout-outs next to photos of me with glass containers in various shapes and sizes. He stares, visibly confused, mouth slightly open and nose wrinkled.

“This is so...” he trails off, waving a hand in the air.

“Awesome?”

“Actually, I was thinking weird.”

His response throws me for a loop. I’ve been doing this for so long that none of it seems out of the ordinary to me. Before I started doing it myself, I followed others who did and watched their unboxing videos as a way to unwind. And then when I started trying to get into the influencing game, I would buy things on wish lists for more prominent accounts all the time. I don’t know. It just feels... normal. I hate the way Jeff makes me stop and question these things. It’s like he’s judging what makes me, well... *me*.

The annoyance that bubbles up gets stuffed right back down. “What’s weird about it?”

Jeff pauses for a second, searching for somewhere to begin. “Okay. How did they know what to buy?”

“I made a list. Then I made an online store. They shopped.” I switch tabs back to my wish list, scrolling through it in the hopes he will get the idea. I feel his whole body tense when he sees the bright pink dog pajamas in a size small, already predicting just who those are for. Oops. “It’s like making a wedding registry. Or a wish list for a baby shower.”

“So, you gave all of these people my address?” If his eyebrows got any closer together, they’d fuse into a single entity.

“No. Just entered it in Amazon where it stays completely safe and anonymous. Bam. They do all the rest.” I gesture at the screen, pointing to where the farm is listed as my shipping address, under the name Vegan Vexation Vacation.

He blinks in response. “Yeah, I still don’t get it.”

“I’m shocked. I literally just showed you how it all works. So... I have work to do.” I roll my eyes, closing my laptop in frustration, standing to survey the packages filling the yurt and the mattress I have yet to inflate. There’s so much to do, I have no idea where to start.

When he glances at the boxes, his expression stays suspicious. “Right. I just need to give you the safety talk before I go.”

“The yurt is perfectly safe,” I insist, more than a little defensively. He hasn’t shown any signs before, but there is always the chance that Jeff is harboring some kind of weird misogynistic ideals, thinking that the second he leaves a girl

alone, she's going to accidentally electrocute herself or light the whole place on fire. I know the type, and I'm always on the lookout for them.

He looks away in frustration, chewing on his lip. "The wildlife isn't."

"I'd hardly call a few goats wildlife." The idea that Miss Gigi and her little friends could cause any more damage than a few pieces of gnawed-on canvas or a pile of misplaced goat turds is nothing short of ridiculous. I shake my head, searching through the boxes for the one that might contain my air mattress. If nothing else, I'd like to sleep at some point tonight.

"I was referring to the bears," Jeff huffs. I freeze at the mention of them. "And lynx, wolves, coyotes, bobcats..."

My initial ire at Jeff wanting to give me a safety briefing starts to melt into genuine concern. I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me. Rationally, I knew that things lived in the woods. I just thought it was—I don't know, other woods? Different, farther, more dangerous-looking woods. Not these woods. The thought of a wolf at the front door of my yurt sends a chill down my spine. As much as I wouldn't hurt a hair on its head, I don't think a wolf would stop to think about the ethical implications of snacking on me.

"I get it. I won't leave the yurt after dark." That sounds perfectly safe. Nothing will bother me if I'm inside my nice warm yurt and not looking them in the eye or threatening their territory or whatever it is that makes bobcats get all hissy and snarly.

His sigh is deep and long. "You might have no choice."

I swallow, trying not to show any signs that I'm starting to freak out about this. I'm definitely just overreacting. I do that all the time. Jeff is probably just trying to spook me as some sort of half-assed attempt to make me suffer. "Why not?"

"The outhouse." He gestures over his shoulder with his thumb toward the door of the yurt. The look on his face telegraphs the thought that I'm an idiot who should've anticipated an outdoor poop shack as if that's the most natural thing in the world and I'm the one being ridiculous here. "The public restrooms are way too far away from this site for you to reach safely, especially at night. And the plumbing guys aren't done supplying water to these yurts yet. That being said, I thought I should show you where the outhouse is."

"Outhouse. I didn't think about that. Okay. So, I'll add a composting toilet to my lists. Tomorrow, I'll build out a cute little bathroom in this yurt and keep it more rustic than the others. That will appeal to more traditional guests. We'll fix this in no time."

"That's the spirit. Just get a bunch of random people to buy you toilets and film you using them. That's not weird at all. But for tonight..." Jeff trails off, leading me out of the yurt and down a small trail into a cluster of trees several yards away. It's a short walk, and he spends the entire time talking about bear safety. Don't look the bear in the eyes, don't run from the bear, move slowly away from the bear in a sideways or backward fashion, and so on and so forth. He keeps harping on the bear thing so hard that I'm now totally convinced he's trying to freak me out because hardly any humans ever get killed by them and bears are friend-shaped. By the time I've seen and smelled the outhouse, my eyes have glazed over, and

I'm busy thinking of things I can do to make this unboxing video more exciting and less monotonous. It's a lot of boxes to get through this time.

He makes us stop at the truck, and after a minute or two of fiddling around under the passenger seat, he pulls out a vibrant orange plastic case. Inside is a flare gun with a few cartridges, and he gives me a brief overview on how to load the gun. He also talks me through what does and doesn't constitute an emergency, and I start to get the feeling he doesn't think I can handle myself, again. That I'm some silly little girl who's going to get scared in the woods all alone and fire off a flare the second I break a nail or see a nasty bug.

"Maybe you should put bear spray on your list too," he says before turning around. "And whatever you do, if you see one, don't try to film it!"

To say I'm relieved when his truck lumbers back down the road is an understatement. I have a ton of work to get done and have wasted precious daylight trying in vain to explain to Jeff how to set up an Amazon wish list. I dive into my work, organizing the boxes and packages into groups for at least two different videos, and start the laborious process of opening things up and rotating them while I smile for the camera.

After the camera stops rolling and the day's work is done, I retreat to the sanctuary of my little personal area, ready to wash away the stress and confusion of the day. The yurt, with its glamping charm, offers a mix of rustic and luxury that's just perfect for unwinding.

I slip into comfortable pajamas and pull my hair into a loose bun, letting the natural scents of the wood and canvas

surround me. Lighting a few candles, I create a cozy ambiance, softening the ruggedness of the outdoors with a gentle glow.

Laying back on the air mattress gives me an idea. I know what the perfect ending to a day like this would be—a date with Bob. Thank God I packed him. Rummaging around, I find the little vinyl case that houses him and throw it among the cushions.

I wash my face with a gentle cleansing wipe, feeling the grime of the day slide away, and brush my teeth, savoring the simple pleasure of these nightly rituals in a place that feels both foreign and familiar.

As I pad across the yurt's floor with a bottle of body cream, ready to nestle into the plush bedding, I'm struck by a sudden realization. My date with Bob can't move forward until I deal with it. Nature's call can't be ignored, and the outhouse awaits. The romantic glamping vibe suddenly feels a lot more rustic, and I brace myself for the trek outside.

Maybe this is one of those things where I'm so stressed about potentially having to go that I've convinced myself that I need to when I really don't. But after a few minutes of trying not to think about it, it becomes all I can think about. I peek my head out of the door to the yurt. I don't hear anything—coyote, wolf, bobcat, or otherwise. The lack of animal noises is worse, somehow, the silence making it all seem even spookier. There's a brief moment where I glance around the inside of the yurt, wondering if I have a bottle or some kind of container I can use for now and just rinse it out in the morning.

But that would be letting Jeff win. I can't let some guy leave me so rattled that I end up crouched in a corner of my tent, peeing into a cup, because he wanted to have a laugh. Puffing out my chest, I grab the flare gun and a spare cartridge just in case, and head out toward the outhouse, resolute that I will *not* be peeing in my yurt tonight.

I'm a big, brave girl. I can do this.

Not ten steps out of the door, I hear a rustling in the trees. I tell myself that it's a raccoon or a possum. It could be a skunk even, for all that I know. Probably a squirrel. Never in my life did I imagine I'd be hoping to see a skunk tumble out of the woods and onto my path. But I'll take a tomato juice bath over being mauled any day.

"Please be a skunk. Please be a skunk. Please be a skunk," I whimper to myself, taking the most careful steps I possibly can toward the dark rectangular shape of the outhouse. "Get out of my woods, Pepé Le Pew!" If it's a skunk, it has to be breaking some kind of record, because the sounds of twigs and branches cracking as it moves through the woods are being made by something larger than your average skunk. A lot larger.

Oh, my God, it's not Pepé, it's Yeti! And because I let Jeff guilt me into not having my phone at the ready for filming, I can't even get proof for all humanity that Yeti exists!

I try to keep my cool for as long as possible, remembering Jeff's advice about not running away. That's definitely something easier said than done, and even though I know it's the worst possible move, the second I see the impossibly huge

brown blur emerge from between the trees, my feet are throwing my body as far away from the thing as I can get.

My heart throbs in my ears as I try to load the gun. My hands shake, and I can't see where I'm going, and I want to punch myself in the face for not loading the damn thing when I was in the yurt. Right when I click the cartridge into place and get ready to put my finger on the trigger, my toe connects with a tree root beneath my feet, and I stumble to the ground. The fabric of my thin pajama pants tears instantly, and I feel the skin split on both of my knees as little bits of dirt and twigs dig into them. I hear the bear behind me, its hot breath panting loudly as its paws slam against the ground. If it was merely curious about me before, it's angry at me now. A burst of adrenaline gets me back on my feet, and I make it the next two yards to the outhouse. Sticking my trembling hands through the crack in the door, I fire off a single flare directly into the air, then slam the door shut behind me, locking the flimsy door hook and sitting on the floor in a tiny, terrified ball.

Putting my hands over my ears, I sway back and forth as the bear rattles the tiny building until I'm almost sure it's going to topple over and I'll die a horrible, terrified death covered in God knows what.

I started this morning full of hope and ambition and am now on the floor of an outhouse, sitting over a hole full of human waste, hoping I don't get eaten by a bear on my first night in the woods. There are so many things wrong with this picture. I don't care who shows up to help me, but they better get here fast.

The moment the adrenaline calms down, pain seeps in to take its place.

#vegangetseaten

Chapter Ten

Jeff

I didn't mean to spend so much time helping Ensley out tonight. In my head, I envisioned myself showing up at the yurt and haphazardly tossing all of her packages at the front entrance and then peeling away back to the house. I found I couldn't bring myself to do it. Something about her just makes me want to be nice to her, as much as I don't want to. It might be those huge cornflower-blue eyes. It might be that thick mane of hair that falls in waves down her back. It might be the way her rare smiles sparkle like the stars on a clear, crisp night.

Being mean to her would be like kicking a puppy. It's not in my nature, and it wouldn't make my mom very proud of me. So, I stayed long enough to make sure all of her packages were inside the yurt all nice and tidy, and made sure to give her the proper safety talk. I even left her with my own personal flare gun from the truck. I certainly had my misgivings about doing so. Not only did I worry she'd use it for any old inconvenience, but I also had images swirling in my brain of a flaming yurt, or worse—a roaring fire consuming my whole crop of Douglas firs.

So when, sitting on my back porch, enjoying a finger of bourbon, that delicious fresh pine smell that always calms my frayed nerves, along with the crisp evening weather, I see the familiar orange streak crest over the tree line out by the yurts, I'm not initially inclined to panic. I stretch, swirl the honey-

colored liquid in my glass, and let out a lazy yawn. But then, I hear the screams, terrorized and blood-curdling, echoing out through the silence. I down the bourbon in one go, already hustling out toward my truck, before slamming it into reverse and barreling down the driveway. I'm strung up into a ball of nerves during the short drive over that I'm going to see the worst, and this poor girl is going to have gotten herself mauled on my property, under my supervision. No matter how annoying she may be, I'm sure she has people back home who love her.

The sound of the truck must've scared off whatever wildlife was out here, the path to the outhouse left empty and devoid of signs of life. I leave the truck running when I climb out, hoping the sound of the engine keeps whatever it was out of sight. Following the path, my foot connects with something hard on the ground, and I bend down to pick it up. It's Ensley's iPhone, and while the case protected it from any major damage, the fact that she was panicked enough to drop one of the things she cares about the most is enough to make me nervous as hell. I double my pace, all but running toward the outhouse.

Sure enough, there are four wide grooves scratched into the wood of the door, set far enough apart that they could only be made by one thing. A very angry bear. I immediately feel guilty, as if my endless litany of bear safety tips made one show up right on cue. I take a second look around my surroundings, checking for both signs of the bear and any blood or torn clothing. Satisfied that I don't see either, I take a deep breath and try to open the outhouse door.

Which is, of course, locked. I knock as gently as I can, and Ensley screams from the other side.

Then I hear a strangled sob. Then another.

And a third.

Even as my eyes widen, my stomach clenches in response to each one.

“Whoa, whoa. Hey, Ensley, you’re okay. You’re safe. Calm down.”

Then she screams again. I can’t blame her for not having it together right now, I’d probably be a little shaky too if a several hundred-pound critter just tried to make me its evening snack.

I palm the door as if she can see me trying to soothe her. “It’s just me. It’s just Jeff. Not a bear. I promise.”

“Is it gone?” she calls out shakily. “It was trying to get in. It...<sob>... it <sob>... it wanted to eat me.”

Trying the door again, I give it a little yank. “Yes. The flare and the truck scared it away. Good job using the gun, by the way.”

“Thanks,” she whimpers, the metal of the hook clinking against the door as she frees it from its lock on the wall. I back away to let the door swing open, and the sight that greets me tugs at my heart. She’s white as a sheet, her hair hanging in what looks like it was once a low bun but is now a strange knot dangling from the back of her neck. Tearstains streak down her cheeks, and her pink flannel pajama pants are covered in dirt and blood from her scraped knees. She’s still clutching the flare gun with her right hand, even though it

seems to be unloaded. She probably only took the single cartridge with her.

My heart constricts in my chest. No matter who she is—no matter what she’s done or how different we are—I just want to pull her in close until she stops looking so tragic. Until she stops quivering and gasping for breath. Until she’s able to blink away those new pools of moisture in her eyes. “Let’s, uh. Let’s get you back inside, yeah?”

I obsess about hugging her, but that feels all kinds of wrong, so I settle for an awkward pat on the shoulder before taking her hand and leading her out of the outhouse. We start maneuvering our way back to the yurt until I notice that she’s limping. Hard. I doubt the bear will come back, but I can’t possibly leave her out here alone, with no running water or heat and nothing but an air mattress to sleep on. I angle her toward the truck instead.

Opening the door for her, I let her use my shoulder for leverage to climb up into the passenger seat. It’s only after I get into the driver’s side myself and close the door that she starts to cry in earnest. Not just small tears, either. Big, ugly streams of water roll down the sides of her face and she sobs so hard she hiccups. Laney was never a big crier growing up, so I never really learned what to do when a girl starts crying in my presence. On the rare occasions that my sister lost it, I usually fixed the issue by finding whoever made her feel like that and threatening to knock the living daylights out of them. I don’t think I’d get very far in a round of fisticuffs with a bear, so that won’t work this time.

“Um. Are you—” I stop short of asking if she’s alright, because she clearly isn’t. I go in for another strained pat on the shoulder, which she doesn’t seem to even register in the middle of her hysterics. “What’s wrong?”

“I was locked in an outhouse,” she sputters, her words tumbling out in a frantic jumble, her breath shaky and wet sounding. “I mean, I was just opening packages all day, working so hard, and then I just wanted a date with Bob, maybe a glass of wine, a moment to unwind in my yurt. And then I needed to pee, and I go out, and there’s this bear, and it tried to eat me, Jeff! A bear! I was just trying to pee, and it was there, and I locked myself in, and it was trying to break down the door, and I thought my corpse would end up covered in poop. And oh, my God, I didn’t even get to pee, and now I’m here, and you’re here, and what if the bear comes back, and why did this happen, why today of all days?”

Her voice rises in pitch with each word, her fear and confusion pouring out in a stream of consciousness that’s as tangled and wild as the emotions in her eyes. It’s clear she’s in shock, her mind spinning in circles, grasping at random thoughts and ideas as she tries to make sense of what’s just happened. It’s a raw, unfiltered moment, and all I can do is hold space for her, trying to anchor her in the storm of her own panic.

But after a few minutes, my own mind starts racing.

Who the fuck is Bob?

Her run-on statement is silly enough that when she stops to think about it, a small smile creeps across her lips. Then, she laughs. It’s quite a sight, watching her laugh while her face is

smearred in streaky tears with a couple of loose twigs in her hair, and I start laughing too.

“You can use my indoor plumbing,” I offer. That’s the least I can do.

She swipes at her cheeks. “Really?”

“Yes.” I start the truck, beginning the drive back to my house before I can think about how this might be a bad idea. “And I’m going to take a look at those legs. You’re injured.”

“I don’t have the energy to argue.” She yawns, leaning her head against the window. “And you’re right. I’m injured. I guess I’m not very good out in the elements.”

Once I park in the driveway, I get out and run around the truck to help Ensley. With her arm hooked over my shoulder for support, I guide her up the front steps of the porch, keeping a keen eye on her movement. The limp that had initially worried me seems to be fading, her steps getting stronger. The adrenaline that had masked the pain must be wearing off, and the fact that she’s not wincing with each step is a positive sign. The intense bear chase likely left her with nothing more severe than a few scrapes and bruises.

After leading her inside, I leave her to rest on the couch while I go to prepare the shower. The process is strangely intimate, and I catch myself pausing a moment longer than necessary over the task of choosing a towel. As I lay out a fresh one, along with a pair of my own shorts and an old t-shirt, a strange warmth creeps into me. I push it aside, attributing it to the bizarre events of the night.

A few minutes after the door clicks shut, I know she's in there—naked, under the stream I just adjusted for her. My heart's racing like I'm in the middle of a Caribou playoff game and it's the last period with a tied score. I've got all this pent-up energy swirling through me and nowhere to channel it. All I can think about is the mist clinging to her skin, the water droplets tracing paths I've only fantasized about. And I have. Ever since I met her, I've not thought of much else. Man, I need to focus. But how the hell can I, when the woman who's been infiltrating my thoughts non-stop is bare and beautiful just a wall away?

When she finally steps out of the bathroom, the cloud of steam that follows her swirls around her like an ethereal mist. She's clad in my clothes, their size too large for her petite frame, the hem of the t-shirt reaching down mid-thigh like a dress. My throat constricts. The sight of her in my clothes stirs something deep within me, something I'm not entirely prepared to confront.

She possesses a personality that feels larger than life—passionate, relentless, and fiery. I had let that boldness paint my entire perception of her. But seeing her now, physically smaller, fragile even, adorned in my clothes, strikes a dissonant chord within me. She looks vulnerable, yet there's an endearing quality about it. An unexpected attraction forms, pulling at the edges of my senses.

And Bob? I don't like that bastard one bit. Whoever he is.

The silence in the room grows awkward and with an effort, I find my voice even though that question lingering on the end of my tongue never gets asked. "You want some wine,

Ensley?” I ask, pointing with my thumb over my shoulder toward the kitchen. “You mentioned that in the... in the truck. I have a bottle someone left here a while ago.”

Her eyes flicker with surprise, but then she nods, a slow grin spreading across her face. “You know, I could really use a glass right now.”

“Great. I’ll be right back with it. Just make yourself comfortable.” My voice is steadier than I feel, and the air between us is charged with an intensity I hadn’t anticipated.

She nods, leaning back into the cushions of the couch, the hint of a smile playing on her lips. The sight sends a shiver down my spine, unbidden and not entirely unwelcome.

Forcing my feet into motion, I excuse myself to the kitchen. Opening a cabinet that’s rarely used, I pull out a bottle of wine left over from some long-forgotten party. My hands are unsteady as I work the corkscrew. This tension, this nervousness, is uncharted territory for me. Ensley’s like a force of nature, an untamed storm that’s entered my life uninvited and turned everything upside down. I can’t deny the spark of attraction that flares every time our eyes meet, but our lives are worlds apart, as different as night and day. And yet, here we are.

When I walk back into the living room, she’s looking around the room with an unreadable expression, her eyes reflecting the soft glow of the lamplight. I hand her the wine, and as our hands touch, a jolt of electricity runs through me. The look we share is heavy, laden with an understanding that something’s happening between two utterly different souls

doing an awkward dance on the tightrope of an unlikely attraction.

Brushing away the intrusive thought that arose like a rogue wave, I beckon Ensley over to the sofa to examine her legs more closely. The scrapes seem superficial, and she's done a commendable job cleaning them. A few strategically placed Band-Aids are all she needs. When I flex her leg, a hiss escapes from between her gritted teeth.

"What's wrong?" I ask, alarmed.

"I think I might have pulled a muscle while I was running," she admits, grimacing. "It's not bad, just really sore. You know that rush of adrenaline you get during a crisis? And how it fades away, leaving nothing but pain in its wake?" Her words bring back memories of my time on the high school football team's defensive line. Brutal practices that left my calves throbbing with agony.

"Let me see if I can help." My fingers begin to gently knead at the tight muscle, employing the technique I'd mastered during those grueling football practices. To my relief, her body relaxes almost instantly, a soft moan slipping past her lips.

"Wow. You're really good at that." Her words are hushed as if carried on a sigh.

"Thanks," I respond, the words getting lost somewhere in the buzzing intimacy that surrounds us. My fingers work her tightness until the thoughts boomeranging around inside my head can't be silenced anymore. "Hey, Ensley? When you were in the truck, you mentioned a date with Bob. Um... who's Bob?"

Her eyes widen, and she chokes on nothing. “Um... nothing. I mean nobody. He’s not real.”

My lips twist. “Is he like an imaginary friend or something?”

Her voice lowers to a whisper so soft, I can barely make it out. “No. My sisters and I just call *it* Bob. It stands for battery-operated boyfriend.”

It takes a few inhales for what she’s telling me to sink in. But then I keep massaging, enjoying the silky smoothness of her pale skin. “You know what’s better than a Bob? A Jeff.”

She tugs her lower lip between her teeth and then peeks at me through those impossibly long eyelashes. “Really?”

And in that moment, something shifts between us. The tension turns electric, the connection undeniable, and I know that we’re on the brink of something new, something thrilling, something that feels a lot like destiny.

Bob may have had a date with Ensley, but Jeff’s about to take over. And I’m more than ready to make the most of it.

Slowly, almost as if moved by its own will, my hand wanders farther, pushing aside the fabric of her shorts to expose more of her thigh. The moment my fingers make contact with her skin, a small gasp breaks from her, causing me to freeze. But then her hand covers mine, encouraging me to move farther up.

“Um, Ensley...” I try to find the words, to define this undefined territory we are venturing into.

“Jeff?” she whispers, her hand still atop mine. There’s a glint in her eyes, a raw, vulnerable honesty that tugs at me.

“Are we... I mean, are you...?” I fumble for the right words, wanting to tread this path carefully. We are both on the precipice of something that could change the way we relate to each other. Or not.

“I’m saying yes to whatever you’re offering,” she says, with an edge of laughter in her voice. “This isn’t a proposal. We’re not leaping into something serious here. Let’s just chalk it up to you offering me a much-needed stress release.”

I let out a half-chuckle, the tension easing a bit. It feels safer to frame it that way. I resume the massage, my fingers moving in gentle circles, working their way higher. She sighs, the sound filling the quiet room.

“So... what would Bob do in this situation? I mean, seeing that I’m his replacement.”

A smile spreads across her lips, and for a moment she looks like my fantasy come to life. “Well, he starts by teasing me. Getting me all worked up with just his hands and words. Making my body feel things it’s never felt before.”

I tilt my head. “Bob speaks?”

“Only in my mind. But he’s really, really filthy. Can you be filthy, Jeff?”

Giving the tender skin of her thigh a little pinch, I say, “Oh. I can be filthy.”

She takes a deep breath, her voice turning low and sultry as she continues. “Well, first he takes my shorts off real nice and easy.” Mesmerized, I stare at her fingers sliding into the waistband of her shorts and tugging them down. Of course, she’s not wearing panties. I lick my lips. “And then he slowly

makes his way down to where I need it most..." Her fingers snake their way between my own, pressing against my palm as if guiding me along with her words. "He spreads my legs open so that he can have full access... and then he starts with the lightest of touches. Just barely grazing over my sensitive skin, until I moan. Until I want more from him than what he's giving me. Until all I can think about is how badly I need him inside me now."

I shiver at the thought of how it must look inside Ensley's bedroom with her elegant fingers trailing the vibrator down her body until it gets to her glistening pussy—how intense and sexy—but instead I keep focusing on the task at hand. I want to erase any thoughts of electronic devices from her pretty head from this moment on.

Bob is no longer needed. In fact, he's fired.

My fingers move faster now, following an imaginary trail up her inner thigh and onto her clit, which is already swollen with anticipation from our conversation alone. As soon as they make contact with this bundle of nerves, Ensley lets out another gasp, only this time there's no mistaking it for anything other than pleasure—pure and all-encompassing. She's drowning in it and so am I just from watching her get off on this.

I whisper, "Tell me how you want me to touch you. How you like it."

She takes a deep breath and bites her lip before she finally speaks. "I want you to tease me until I ache."

Encouraged by her words, I move down farther to her folds, taking my time to explore each new terrain, dragging

my fingers through her slick heat. Then I hiss in a breath and stop. I can't help but stare at her sweet pussy. She's so damn gorgeous like this—all splayed out before me with her huge blue eyes wide and her pupils blown with pleasure. I can't wait to taste her.

But first I'm gonna make her beg.

“Is this what you wanted, Ensley?” I ask, pressing my thumb against her swollen bundle of nerves.

“Yes, that's it,” she whispers. “Now circle it with your fingers... God, that's so, so good.” I do as she says, adding a bit of pressure as I go around her clit in slow circles. She responds with a moan and moves her hips in time with my fingers.

“Do you like it when I touch your pussy?” I whisper, increasing the pressure and speed of my circles.

“Yes,” she moans, pushing her hips against my hand. “I love looking down and seeing your big, huge hands on me. I'm so wet, Jeff.”

I keep up the pace as Ensley's breathing becomes more and more intense. I can feel her body trembling beneath my touch. And I also can't deny how much I like it.

“What else do you want, Ensley? I want to make this so good for you, babe.”

“Come up here one second,” she gasps, her voice heavy with anticipation. I move up and press my lips to hers as she wraps her arms around my neck. She pulls me closer as we kiss, her tongue exploring my mouth with a greed I quickly

match. I feel like I'll never get enough of this woman. Kissing her. Touching her.

“Next, I want you to lick me,” she whispers against my lips. “And suck my clit. Make me come, Jeff. Please.”

The ‘please’ on a breathy pant is my undoing. I groan in response, already feeling the need for her taste on my tongue.

“Oh, God,” I murmur, pressing a gentle kiss to her neck before moving down toward her sweet little pussy. Even if I went down on her all night, it probably wouldn't be enough. My dick hardens until it's almost painful, and I rub it against her skin until her breath comes out on a sigh.

As soon as my tongue takes that first tentative swipe, Ensley lets out a deep moan that sends shivers through my body. Her taste is like nothing else, and it only takes a few licks before I'm hooked—unable to stop myself from exploring every inch of her warmth with my lips and tongue.

After I slip one finger inside her, I meet her gaze. “You taste fucking amazing.”

Ensley gasps in response, her hips arching against my hand as I push my fingers farther inside her. I swirl my tongue around her clit and suck it gently, eliciting more cries of pleasure from her full lips. She's so close now, and I know she won't be able to hold back much longer.

I increase the pressure of my fingers, pushing deep into her center while continuing to lick and suck on her clit until she finally explodes in a powerful orgasm that sends her hips bucking straight into my mouth.

As she floats back down to earth, I keep gently licking and sucking at her pussy until every last bit of pleasure has been wrung out from between her legs. When I'm finished, I press a kiss to her inner thigh, enjoying the feeling of her all wrapped up in me.

"That was incredible," she says with a satisfied sigh.
"Thank you."

"Uh, Ensley..." My voice falters. "What are we doing here?"

Her response is a whisper, feathering across my skin like the softest touch. "Uh, you went down on me—amazingly well by the way—and I came all over your face." Then she's leaning in, pressing her lips to mine in a breath-stealing kiss. "We're going to be stuck out here together for six weeks. It won't hurt to get to know each other better, right? We're just two lonely people, alone in the middle of nowhere. It's natural. We could just keep each other company until I have to leave. What could be the harm in that?"

I can't believe I'm thinking it already, but there could be harm to my heart.

For a moment, I go still, stunned into silence by the swift escalation. My mind scrambles to process her words, attributing them to the leftover adrenaline from the bear encounter. It has to be. But when I manage to pull back, I see something in her eyes that halts my thoughts. She's genuine.

"Are you sure?" I ask her, a mix of confusion and excitement swirling in my gut.

Her smile is soft, her eyes holding a hint of mischief. “Jeff, I’m not declaring my love for you. Heck, I’m not even saying I like you. But I’ve had a really crappy day, when I thought it would be a great day, and you... you just saved my life. And let’s be honest, you’re hot in that burly man of the woods sort of way. So, let’s just... keep going. Before all that running from the bear makes it impossible for me to move.”

Her words hang in the air between us. I can’t help but laugh at her honesty. It’s not the most romantic proposition I’ve ever received, but there’s a refreshing frankness to it. We’re adults, after all. We can engage in a moment of passion without the complications of love. And, if I’m being honest with myself, she’s captivating. Ever since I first laid eyes on her, there’s been this undeniable pull. This could be an interesting six weeks.

“Now I have a confession to make,” I say, pressing a quick kiss to her lips.

“What?”

“The whole time I had my head between your legs, your nipples were pressing against my t-shirt. I want it off you right now.”

Ensley smiles and starts to lift the t-shirt over her head. I grab her wrists and stop her.

“Not so fast,” I say, my voice low and husky. “I want you to take it off nice and slow.”

She pauses, then slowly pulls the t-shirt up until it’s halfway off her body, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of her pale skin underneath. She’s not wearing a bra—just two

perfect mounds of soft flesh that make my heart beat faster in anticipation. I've been wanting to touch them since the moment she stepped inside this house, and now I'm finally going to get the chance.

I reach out tentatively with one hand, lightly cupping her breast in my palm as if it were a fragile piece of crystal that might break if handled too roughly. But that doesn't last long. It can't. This woman does something to me, and soon I'm squeezing and kneading them firmly with both hands as if they belong to me, pinching and tugging at her nipples until they stand out hard as ice picks against my fingers.

All I know is how much I want to worship her. I lower my mouth toward them—first licking them like sweets before sucking each nipple into my mouth in turn until they're standing out even more prominently before nipping sharply with my teeth. I want to sink every single thing I can into Ensley. My teeth. My fingers. My cock. She lets out a soft moan and throws her head back in pleasure, while I revel in the feeling of being able to bring such sensations to someone else with just a few simple touches.

Finally, I look up at her and trace a finger over her chest. "You have the most beautiful tits I've ever seen. And I don't want you to hide them anymore. They make me so hard just thinking about it. In fact..." Overcome, I take a deep breath and continue, "I'd love to..." But in the end, I stop short.

She meets my gaze with her heated one. "You'd love to what?"

My mouth ran away with me for a second there, so I shake my head. I can't believe I even *thought* it. "Nothing. It's not

important.”

Ensley slides her hand along my jaw. “Jeff, there’s nothing to be embarrassed or worried about with me. Now tell me what you’d love to do to me?”

I press my lips together, but her earnest expression loosens them back up again. “I want to come on them.”

The corners of her mouth tug upward. “No one’s ever done that to me before. But I’m totally game to try it.” Her fingers trail upward and circle her erect nipples until my mouth waters. “I mean... if the girls are your inspiration.”

“I’m feeling very inspired,” I grit out, putting my hands over hers until she groans. Then Ensley pulls me up, reaching for the hem of my t-shirt, struggling to pull it up and over my head. I stop what I’m doing to help her, tossing my shirt to the floor, and I can’t help but feel a surge of self-confidence at the way her eyes rake over my chest and stomach. Her hands find my belt, working the leather out of the buckle and then making quick work of my fly.

“Did you get like this from chopping wood or something?” she asks in awe.

I stand up, shimmying my pants down over my hips, as she sits up on the couch and stares at my impromptu strip tease with her legs tucked underneath her. The sight of her suddenly completely naked on my couch does something to me, and I let out a soft growl, bending over her and attacking her lips with my own. She slides her palm over the front of my boxer briefs, putting pressure on my visibly hard cock, and it takes everything in me not to let out some kind of embarrassing whimper. I fucking can’t wait to get inside her. Ensley’s mouth

leaves mine, placing kisses down the parts of my throat not covered by my beard, and I'm left wondering why I've never hooked up with anyone this direct before. I'm used to girls who are a little shier and more soft-spoken. This is fucking amazing. Otherworldly. Ensley's never held back her opinions in conversation, so it shouldn't be a surprise that she's this sure of herself here.

Grabbing the elastic of my waistband, she pushes my underwear down and I finish the job, shaking them down my legs and around my ankles. Angling her hips, she hooks a leg around my thigh and tugs at my cock. My knees go weak at the contact, her hand applying just enough pressure in just the right way as she squeezes down my shaft, massaging the head with her palm. I literally have not been this much of a puddle in the hands of a woman before. I'm not sure what it is about Ensley that trips every trigger, but I'm going to enjoy it and her for as long as it lasts. I don't know how long I can keep going without blowing my wad, and it looks like I won't have to worry about it. Suddenly, she's pulling my hips down with her leg and guiding me inside of her. As I slide home, I take a heartbeat to savor her tight, wet heat. She feels incredible, and I have to fight the urge to groan out her name, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much she turns me inside out.

She thrusts upward at me, gently and softly from the awkward angle beneath me on the couch, before bringing her lips to my ear. Nibbling on my earlobe and running her tongue along the shell, she whispers, "Please," with so much need in her voice that something primal in me responds. I brace my hands on the arm of the sofa behind her head, using it to keep

some of my weight off of her, before I start to thrust into her in earnest. She moans appreciatively, opening her hips wider to accommodate the change in pace, before sliding a hand between us and circling her clit. I can't look at her face, or think about it, because if I do I'm going to lose it right then and there.

Instead, I try to think about how smug she can be, the way she constantly cuts me off when I'm trying to explain things, and how she's probably secretly judgmental about my lifestyle when mine is so much simpler than hers. It still isn't enough to drown out the sounds she's making beneath me or the way her whole body starts to jerk unevenly as she nears her climax, and I find myself losing control right as she crests, my thrusts coming to me unevenly and my thighs tensing and twitching.

Another orgasm hits her hard, and I can feel it in the way her inner walls clench around me, sending wave after wave of pleasure through my body. She lets out a loud cry, her voice strangled and desperate, before she slumps back against the sofa cushions.

"Jeff," Ensley gasps, reaching up to grab my arm as if for support. "*Pull out.*"

I can barely keep my eyes open at this point, but I nod in agreement before leaving her slick heat after one final thrust. I feel my climax starting to build even as I move away from her body, ready to burst from me at any moment. With shaky hands and unsteady breath, I reach down between us and grab onto myself before aiming toward Ensley's tits with a satisfied groan escaping from my lips. The feeling is indescribable as

each rope of seed comes closer and closer together until finally it stops completely.

I marked her.

Mine.

Not willing or able to consider what the word means, I collapse against the couch next to Ensley feeling exhausted yet exhilarated at the same time.

As the pleasure wears off, I'm suddenly aware of how weird this is for both of us, and I climb off of the couch, covering myself with my boxers, not knowing if I should look her in the eyes or not. We just fucked hard and raw like animals in heat. Not that I'm sad about it. After groping for the end table and a box of Kleenex, I hand her a few. She uses the whole handful but doesn't seem fazed. Actually... she looks happy, humming to herself as she gropes for the t-shirt and pulls it back over her head. Then she stands, kissing me on the cheek.

"I really needed that after today. You're the best."

Then she wanders off to the bathroom, her pert asscheeks practically begging me to squeeze them from underneath the t-shirt, and it takes everything in me not to reach out and grab her. I wonder if this is a one-and-done or if I'll be lucky enough to get a repeat. I'd like to lick her for hours. I'd like to see her bratty mouth stuffed with my dick. I'd like to mark her as mine on that sexy ass of hers. But because of the way I was raised, from this moment forward, I need to let her lead.

Vegan Vexation, indeed.

Chapter Eleven

Ensley

I wake up to the sound of a rooster crowing.

A literal, honest-to-god rooster.

There's a split second of disorientation when I open my eyes. Instead of seeing my own bedroom, I'm looking at an unfamiliar ceiling in a wood-paneled room. This definitely isn't the air mattress in the yurt, I realize, clutching a crocheted afghan around me. And these also aren't my clothes. All of last night comes back to me in a rush. Flash. Flash. Flash. Everything from the flare gun to the outhouse to the bear to—oh, no.

Jeff.

These are Jeff's clothes. I'm wearing Jeff's clothes because I—oh, my God.

I kissed his mouth. I put my tongue in his meat-eating, crabby giant, no sense of humor mouth. And that's not even the worst of it. I told him to lick my clit. I grabbed his dick like it was a side of beef. I told him to pull out and come all over my boobs... and I liked it. All of it, every single second. And then, weakness beyond weakness, I stayed the night at his house. And I want to do it all again.

What the actual hell is wrong with me?

I've never had sex like that before. So wild. So free.

Sitting up slowly, I listen for any signs of movement in the house. Satisfied that it's silent and totally still for now, I peel back the blanket and slink away to look for my own clothes. My pajamas are neatly folded on the kitchen table. Jeff must have washed them for me while I was in the shower last night. The gesture is so touching that I don't know what to do with myself. I'm almost sorry I missed him before he left to do chores. But my desire to not have to face him so soon overrides any soft feelings I have at the moment, and I scatter to the bathroom, changing into my things before tossing his clothes into the hamper and slipping out the front door.

The farm is so pretty at sunrise that I can halfway forget the fact I almost got torn to pieces in an outdoor bathroom last night. I can't remember the last time I even saw a sunrise in such a beautiful setting. And the air smells and tastes so clean that I don't even mind hoofing it all the way back to the yurts by myself. Jeff is nowhere to be found, so only Miss Gigi and her brethren witness my walk of shame. It gives me a nice amount of time to clear my head and focus on what needs to be done for the day. That means setting up the yurt, making videos for my followers, and not dwelling on the fact that it only took twelve hours in the wilderness for me to end up back in a hot shower with some burly guy's bearded head between my legs.

And his hands all over me.

And his arms squeezing me tight.

Those were some nice arms, I have to admit.

And what he's packing down south isn't bad either.

I had initially considered making a longer video about the bear incident from last night. It would be such a gripping concept that people would have no choice but to click on it. I could even get reach outside of my usual follower base. But it occurred to me that maybe telling people there are definitely real live hungry angry bears on the property wouldn't be good for business. This is supposed to be a mutually beneficial arrangement—ample content creation for me, with bright and shiny marketing for the Rawlins family. It wouldn't be right for me to post anything that would make them look bad.

As juicy as the story is, I have to shelve the opportunity. Instead, I'll make some TikToks about the bathroom build, talking to my followers about the pros and cons of different composting toilets and all that. Due to the magic of overnight shipping, the toilet itself should show up this afternoon, but other than that, I have enough stuff here to get a good head start. I take half an hour to make sure I look presentable, but still like I spent the night in the woods and set up some good lighting. After getting my phone stationed just how I like it, I let it film while I get to the real work of putting together the bathroom, knowing I'll just speed up and cut together whatever good footage I end up with later.

After about an hour of filming, the distant rumble of a truck approaches, gradually growing louder until it's right outside the yurt. My heart skips a beat, the thudding in my chest betraying the calm facade I've been maintaining. A soft knock follows, and I find myself standing, a stretch pulling at the muscles that are still tender from the night before.

"In here," I call out, my voice surprisingly steady. I cross over to my phone to pause the recording, acutely aware of the

mixture of anticipation and apprehension coursing through me. Every part of my body seems to echo with the memories of last night. And every cell wants more.

“Hey.” Jeff’s voice is strained as he pokes his head in, his eyes meeting mine with a look that’s part embarrassment, part something else. Something deeper. He steps inside, and time seems to stand still as we stare at each other, a mutually confused silence enveloping us. Words fail us, our physical connection from the night before suddenly a chasm we don’t know how to bridge.

I’d hoped to avoid this by just leaving this morning right after he did, leaving a physical and emotional distance between us. When I didn’t come looking for him, why couldn’t he have just taken the hint?

“Hey, yourself,” I finally manage, my voice thick with unspoken questions.

“I brought you some breakfast,” he says, his voice cracking slightly. He glances away, his eyes landing on the bathroom I’ve been working on. His face is flushed, the tension in the room palpable.

The air thickens as I look at his hands, remembering their warmth on my skin. Our eyes lock, both of us swimming in a sea of confusion and desire. In this charged silence, we stand on the edge of something—undefined, yet impossible to ignore. It’s a thrilling, terrifying drop that has the capacity to break us both.

“That’s really sweet of you, but completely unnecessary. After all, I brought some food of my own.” I can’t believe he thought I came out here totally unprepared. Granted, last night

didn't make me look super competent, but I'm not silly enough to come out here just to starve. I also always tend to have food with me. It's part of the vegan lifestyle, never knowing if there will be food you can eat wherever you go. I think I've perpetually had a granola bar on my person since I was fourteen.

His eyes narrow. "I hope it's sealed in airtight containers."

"No," I answer cautiously. "Why?"

Jeff's eyebrows snap together. "Food will draw bears. Think last night. Only all the time."

I pause, thinking about last night, but definitely not about the part he meant. Shaking my head, I try to turn my focus away from the way his beard felt on my neck and how firm his hands are and try to remember instead the part where I was crying in an outhouse and wanted my mom.

"Right. Bad idea," I concur, then remember why we're having this conversation about food to begin with. "Also... about breakfast. I'm a vegan."

I brace myself for the shock, the laughter, or the bizarrely misplaced anger that usually comes with this information. Instead, he just stares at me like I told him the sky was blue and I have two arms.

"I know." He nods, blinking. "That's why it took me so long to get here. Even though I enjoy cooking, I didn't know what to make you. Everything I thought about either had eggs on it, or secret eggs in it when it got baked, or was covered in cheese. So, I made a smoothie. And then I had to make a new

one because I wasn't thinking and put yogurt in it, and then remembered that you don't eat that."

Holy shit. Now it's my turn to just stare and blink. I hadn't expected this level of care or nuance from him. The memory of our first encounter flashes in my mind, uninvited. "About the night at the Velvet Pinecone... when you tried to help me, and I ran off. I should explain. I was overwhelmed, Michael was—well, you saw. Then you grabbed his steak and started eating it, and it just threw me. I didn't have the bandwidth to deal with another guy I barely knew, even if I..."

He tilts his head to the side. "What?"

I let out a sigh before releasing the truth. "Even if I thought you were really attractive. I guess the meat-eating thing threw me."

He looks at me, really looks at me, and I see a softening in his eyes. "I get it. It was a messed-up night. Thanks for telling me though."

There's a twinge of guilt when I think about how I had initially written him off as some beefy, backwoods doofus. Not only did he make me breakfast, but he remembered not to put dairy in it. I don't even get that kind of treatment from my parents. He offers me a metal travel mug, and I take it tentatively from his hands, bringing it to my lips for a sip from the metal straw. And I have to admit, it's actually not bad.

The chill of the drink spreads through me, but it's the unexpected tenderness in his actions that truly affects me, causing a knot in my stomach and a lump in my throat. This simple gesture reaches through the barriers I've built, touching a part of me I didn't know was accessible. A part now tingling

with a mix of surprise, curiosity, and something else—something that feels suspiciously like the beginnings of affection. It's both exhilarating and terrifying, a new dimension in our relationship that I'm not sure I'm ready to explore, but one that I can't seem to ignore.

My gaze meets his and holds. "Thank you. People don't usually try this hard to accommodate me, if they try at all. This is actually good. But even better than that is your thoughtfulness."

The compliment seems to embarrass him, and he changes the subject. "I brought some more packages for you. There's a big one in the truck—I'm guessing it's the toilet. But this one seemed special."

He hands me a large brown paper envelope, tied with twine. I recognize it immediately, and squeal, tearing away the paper in a hurry. Inside is a pair of pink pet pajamas, perfect for Miss Gigi.

I don't even try to keep the thrill out of my tone. "As soon as I finish the bathroom... Miss Gigi is going to get gorgeous. Gotta make a TikTok."

Jeff looks at me in a mixture of confusion and amusement. There might even be a hint of a smile on his lips as he shakes his head at me, trying to cover a laugh with a cough. "Have fun with that. I'm not even going to pretend to know what a TikTok looks like. I gotta go. You know how it is. So many chores around the farm."

His soulful eyes hold mine for a moment longer, a spark of something unspoken lingering in their depths. Then, with a final shake of his head, he turns and starts walking away,

leaving me standing there, feeling a strange mix of connection and loss.

But then, just as I think he's gone, he suddenly stops. With a determined stomp, he turns back, strides over to me, and without a word, grabs me by the shoulders and presses a hard, insistent kiss on my lips.

It's over before I have time to react, a swift, fierce moment that leaves me breathless and stunned. Then, just as quickly, he's gone again, leaving me standing there, my fingers rising to touch my tingling lips, my mind reeling from the unexpected intensity of that kiss.

What did it mean? What does he feel? What do I feel?

I'm left with a whirlwind of emotions, a tangle of thoughts and questions that refuse to be untangled. But through it all, one thing is clear: something has changed between us. Something powerful and real.

I can still taste him on my lips, a lingering warmth that speaks of promises and possibilities, a connection that goes beyond words and explanations. I can still feel his big body pressed against me. I can still smell his fresh scent that's a potent cocktail of citrus and man. And as I stand there, lost in thought, I can't help but wonder where this is going, what's happening between us.

And if I even want it to go somewhere.

But one thing's for sure. I'm not ready to let go. Not yet. Not when for the first time in my life, a man marked me as his.

Chapter Twelve

Jeff

My excuse about the chores wasn't entirely true. Yes, I do usually have a whole hell of a lot to get done in a day. But today's load is pretty light. Nothing that can't be accomplished after lunch. When I get back to the house twenty minutes later, I'm left with not much to do but sit on the porch and drink another cup of coffee. And think about Ensley. Her skin. Her lips. Her taste. Her smell. God, what the fuck am I doing? Ruminating, that's what.

Which is when I start to notice that even though the sun is fully up, it isn't getting much warmer. There's a chill to the air that verges on biting, and I know the house was pretty drafty last night. I can't help but imagine Ensley, sitting in a frigid little tent trying to keep warm.

It's not because I care, at least I don't think I do. Last night was unexpected. Just two people responding to a brush with mortal danger in a less-than-healthy way. And hell, we're both adults. We can put one carnal lapse in judgment in the past and move on with things. But I find I can't stop worrying about her down there alone. I tell myself that it's because I'm afraid of the bad publicity and subsequent lawsuit waiting to happen if she freezes to death on my farm. No one's going to want to go glamping in a yurt that an influencer died in.

It's not because I like her at all. It's sure as hell not because I already think of her as someone I need to protect. Nope.

But even as I convince myself of these rational fears, I'm aware of a stubborn flicker deep inside, a warmth that sparks to life whenever I think of her. I crush it down, dismissing it as nothing more than common human concern. I'm not ready to admit to anything more, not even to myself. It's ridiculous, after all. She's just a girl, and I'm just a guy, and just because we enjoyed each other's bodies in the heat of the moment, there's no reason for this to be anything more than that. Right?

The best thing I can do is get her some firewood stockpiled. I'm sure I'll have to teach her how to build and maintain a fire, but she can't do any of that without fuel first. The thought of her trying to split logs makes me laugh. I've got enough of my own supply that I could share, but there's a whole mess of dead and fallen trees I've been setting aside for a day like today, putting it off until I have the time and energy to break them down into usable pieces. That way, I'm getting something done that needs doing, and helping her is just a byproduct. Makes it a little easier to swallow.

I take a brief swing into my tool shed, trying to decide how I want to tackle today. My hand lingers on the chainsaw handle. It would make quick work of the job, and I'd be done in no time and right back on my merry way. But then, I see my axe. It would feel so good to spend a few hours out in the fresh air, doing something with my hands that has meaning and purpose. Chopping wood has always been my thing, and I have the callouses to prove it. I pick it up, resting the head on my shoulder, and head over with my truck out past the fire pit to where I've been piling up those trees.

I've got a pair of leather work gloves in my glove compartment, and I slip them on as I head over to my first tree,

taking a large loose fallen branch out of the pile and starting the arduous task of splitting it down into usable pieces. I'm not sure how long I go about cutting things, but one pile shrinks as the one in the back of my truck grows. Even though it's chilly out, this is hard work, and I start to feel a sheen of sweat building on my shoulders. I take off my shirt and wipe myself down before tossing it into the back of the truck alongside the wood. I'll put it back on after I let the air kiss my skin a bit and cool me down.

I split maybe a half dozen logs before I start to get the sensation that a pair of eyes are glued to my back. Turning to search for the source, I see Ensley, leaning against the side of her yurt. She looks away quickly, trying to pretend that I didn't just catch her eye fucking me. The heat I felt just a moment ago when I lost my shirt ratchets up another notch.

I can't help the smirk that breaks across my face as I straighten up, leaving the axe embedded in the stump. "Hey!" I call, my voice laced with mischief. "Need something chopped? Or were you just enjoying the view?"

She flushes, her cheeks turning a delightful shade of pink, but she doesn't back down. "Oh, I'm just enjoying the fresh air and admiring the local wildlife." Her tone drips with feigned innocence. "You know, the birds, the trees, the shirtless lumberjacks."

I chuckle, sauntering over to where she's standing. "Well, you know what they say about lumberjacks. We're good with our hands."

Her eyes widen slightly, and I can almost hear the gears in her brain turning as she processes the innuendo. "Are you

now?” she challenges, lifting an eyebrow. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the ones who catch my eye,” I shoot back, my voice low and teasing.

We’re standing close now, close enough that I can see the way her eyes flicker down to my chest and back up to meet my gaze. The tension between us is thick and heavy, like a blanket we’re both wrapped in. Memories assault me, heightening each sense. It’s intoxicating, and I find myself leaning in just a fraction closer, drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

“Maybe I should put my shirt back on,” I murmur, my voice thick with false concern. “Wouldn’t want to distract you from your... nature watching.”

She laughs, the sound bright and clear, cutting through the tension. “Oh, I think I can handle it,” she says, her voice soft but sure. “I’m a big girl.”

“You sure are,” I agree, my eyes locked on hers. “But if you need any help handling anything *hard*, you just let me know.”

Her lips part slightly, her breath coming a little quicker, and I know that I’ve got her. The game we’re playing is dangerous and exciting, a dance on the edge of something more that has my dick thickening. But for now, we’re content to keep dancing, each of us daring the other to surrender first.

“All right, Jeff,” she finally says, her voice steady even as her eyes travel down my body, landing between my legs. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You do that,” I reply, the words a promise and a challenge all in one.

And with a final lingering glance, I turn back to my work, feeling her eyes on me the whole time. The heat between us is still there, simmering just below the surface, waiting for the moment when one of us finally gives in and lets it consume us.

But for now, I’ll keep splitting wood, and she’ll keep watching. And the game will continue.

I’m not obsessed with my looks or anything, and I’m not one of those guys who goes to the gym or worries about food choices. But I know that a life of farm living and hard work has given me a nice build, and I’m confident in the way my body looks and feels when it’s got a purpose. It feels good, having somebody appreciate that, and I give Ensley, who’s watching-not-watching, a bit of a show as I finish up, making sure to flex and stretch a little more than usual as I load the last of the logs back into the truck before heading back to the house.

I put my axe up in the shed, toss my clothes into the wash, soap off my hands and face, and change into something fresh. I’m just about to sit down and look at my new Tractor Supply catalog when there’s a knock on my front door.

“Bruh,” Adam starts, walking right past me and into my living room. “Or should I call you LumberJeff now?”

I roll my eyes, shutting the door and taking a seat back down on the sofa. “Cute. Did you think of that all on your own?”

“I didn’t think of it at all,” he tilts his head, confused, as if there’s some joke I’m not in on. “This is from Ensley.”

“Oh, you talked to Ensley?” I’m not sure when that would have happened.

“Is that a hint of jealousy?” he teases, poking at my bicep with a sly grin.

“Of course not,” I shoot back, brushing away his touch. “Why would I be jealous?”

“You thought I was *talking to* Ensley,” he explains like it’s the simplest thing in the world, using the same tone of voice that a parent uses to tell their kid that two plus two equals four. “And Ensley called you LumberJeff in the wood-cutting TikTok, by the way. Just like me, you now have your very own hashtag.”

I freeze, staring at a spot on the wall opposite me. My mouth opens, closes, and opens again. I think I can see where this is going, and I really don’t like it. Not at all. “What wood-cutting TikTok?”

Adam reaches into his pocket, pulling out his cell phone and opening the app. “Julia told me about it. She couldn’t believe you were on there. I mean... it’s not like you to be so exposed on the internet.” He angles the phone toward me and turns the volume up. There’s a piece of repetitive music I don’t recognize playing over the clip, consisting only of thirty seconds of me, shirtless, chopping wood. There’s a #LumberJeff overlaid at the bottom, next to a cartoon face of someone who looks thirsty or hot or something.

The video was posted less than an hour ago and already has over a hundred thousand views. And the comments. Holy shit. I scroll through them as Adam stares at me, his mouth curled at the corners. If that motherfucker laughs, I swear to God I'll junk punch him.

This man deflowered wood. And now I'm opening up just like a flower.

He just had to say, "Almost there," didn't he?

*"I'm not satisfied. We're gonna have to go again." Bruh!
WTF!*

My menopause is now headed in reverse. #LumberJeff

My face goes up in flames. This can't be happening. I don't know what her angle is, but I feel humiliated. Having her here suddenly feels unsafe, like I can't even exist on my own property without her turning me into something for strangers to gawk at.

Just because we fucked one time doesn't give her the right to violate my privacy. To put my shirtless, vulnerable form and my innermost thoughts out into a world filled with bullies and trolls. How dare she?

I hand the phone back to Adam, trying to hold my anger back and not lash out at him for no reason. It isn't his fault she's selfish and inconsiderate.

“Be right back.” I stand, grabbing my keys from the coffee table before heading for the front door. “I’m going to go talk to Ensley.”

“Talk? Who are you kidding? You’re totally wound up. Just try not to spank her sexy ass.” Adam laughs, making it that much harder for me not to willingly choose violence. I love the guy, I really do. But I think we all know that he married up when he snagged Julia. The man can be really dense sometimes. “See you around!”

I slam the door without answering him, storming down the porch steps and out to my truck, slamming it into gear and spitting gravel when I squeal out onto the road, ready to give Ensley a real piece of my mind.

Chapter Thirteen

Ensley

I cannot believe how quickly #LumberJeff has taken off. I hesitated to post the video in the first place since I wanted to talk to him first, but he looked straight-up yummy, and I had to strike while the iron was hot deciding I would ask for forgiveness instead of permission. I knew women would love it as a thirst trap, but I wasn't sure if it would track well with my follower base or get a lot of momentum behind it. Boy, was I wrong. The video has over a hundred thousand views already, and new followers just keep pouring in. Which means I'll have to come up with more #LumberJeff content, and fast.

Who knew women were so gullible for shirtless hotties chopping firewood with their muscles bunching as they mumbled under their breath?

You're just as gullible as they are.

Luckily, I hear his truck coming up the road now. It'll be the perfect opportunity to show him what I've done, and maybe talk him into setting up an account of his own. It can follow his chores around the farm, show him taking care of the goats, and teach people what farm life is like. And, you know, feature as much muscle-bound action as we can squeeze into each frame. It doesn't hurt that he's got a nice jaw and is pretty yoked. That tends to get people's attention.

I'm just about to run out of the yurt and right toward him, cell phone in hand, when I see the look on his face. It is definitely not happy. I've never been worried that someone is

going to scowl so hard that their teeth are in danger of shattering before.

I hold my hands in front of me in surrender.

Then I step outside. No way am I going to enclose myself in a tiny space with a man who looks like he wants to throttle me. What if I need to put some space between us?

“What happened?” I put forth the question as gently as possible, trying not to poke the bear in front of me. I’ve had enough of that for a lifetime.

“You. You happened,” he hisses through his clenched teeth. “I had this perfectly nice life...”

I have to cut him off then and there. I know damn well things haven’t been anything resembling perfect around here for years. I’ve seen the numbers.

“Perfect? You’re in danger of losing the farm. That’s what Laney said.” He rolls his eyes at the mention of his sister’s name, an impulse I understand all too well. They can certainly have a tendency to meddle. But she’s trying to help him, as am I. “And I get it. I’ve looked around. There are no cows... which I’m good with.”

I pause for a moment, shuddering as I remember the last time I went to a farm and saw cows. Things didn’t go very well that day.

“No crops, either. Just trees.”

“Of course, it’s *just trees*. It is a Christmas Tree farm.” Jeff flings his hands at the sky in frustration. “I could’ve had a great Christmas Season and turned everything around. I don’t

like it when my only sibling meddles, so I sure as shit don't need you sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

Please. I find it very hard to believe that one season could solve all of his problems. Now it's my turn to roll my eyes.

"You're kidding me. I was tricked into saving a Christmas Tree farm?" I sneer, voice dripping with sarcasm. I meant there weren't any crops for him to diversify what he's doing. It feels pretty silly to make your entire business model hinge on a product that only sells two months out of the year when you have this much land. Of course, I know it's a Christmas Tree farm. I'd have to be an absolute idiot not to see all of the giant wooden signs about Christmas Trees, or I don't know, the entire forest of Douglas firs. "I thought you grew soybeans or something."

"First of all, how would I grow soybeans in a forest?" he shoots back, actually having the gall to count out his list of grievances and rebuttals on his fingers. I cannot believe I let him touch me, let alone thought he was cute enough to put my TikTok account on the line. The one I spent years building into something special. "Secondly, you were not tricked by me. I didn't even want you here. And for good reason. You seem determined to hurt and humiliate me."

Stomping my foot, I let out an agonized shout. "I was being sarcastic! You humorless ass! And you know what else? I'm breaking my moral code to be here! To help your stupid little farm." I pause, thinking over everything he said. All of it makes sense, except for one point. "And how did I humiliate *you*?"

“The same fucking way I’m gonna humiliate you right now. You’ve got a lesson coming your way, one that you desperately need. Time to find out what it feels like to be on the other side of control.” His voice is low, almost a growl.

Rolling my lips together, I mumble, “I’m not understanding.”

With those words, Jeff undoes his belt and unzips his fly. As I watch in amazement, he looks at me with a smirk and says, “Ensley, my dick has been hard since I got in my truck this morning. And you, goddammit, you’re the cause.”

I can’t stop staring. This can’t be happening. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Get on your knees. The only way your bratty mouth is going to stop yammering is if something’s inside it. The only way your fingers are going to stop posting swill to social media is if they’re doing something more productive.”

I didn’t know Jeff Rawlins even had it in him, and I feel like I’m about to faint from shock. My clit throbs a ‘hell, yes!’ But before I can do anything else, Jeff grabs my arms and pulls me into him. His lips press against mine as he forces my head back onto his chest. Even though his body language and his words say he hates me, his kiss says something else entirely. He’s frustrated with me for sure, but there’s something else there that I can feel with every breath in my body.

My heart about hammers out of my chest as I wait to see what he’s going to do to me. Just how far he’ll take this. His strength is overwhelming, and I can feel myself being overpowered by it as he guides me down onto my knees in

front of him. My phone falls to the earth with a soft thud. With one hand still firmly gripping my shoulder, he brings the other hand up to cup the back of my head and hold me in place while he slides out of his jeans and briefs, revealing that thick, long cock.

I lick my lips as my mouth waters. I can't wait to devour him just like he did to me yesterday. And he may think he's in control of this situation. That his anger and his demands are what's leading me to blow him, but that's not it at all.

I'm going to blow his dick and his mind because that's what I want.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

Jeff leans forward slightly to give me better access to his hard, veiny erection. But before I can even begin exploring the length or texture of him with my tongue, he slides his huge hands along my jaw and starts speaking again with an authoritative voice that leaves no room for argument or hesitation from me.

“Here's what's going to happen, Ensley. You're gonna suck me off. Right fucking now. Just how I like it. And if I'm not ready to throttle you by the time you get done, maybe I'll give you a reward.”

I accept his challenge with a smile and swirl my tongue around the head of his cock, coating it with my saliva right before taking him deep into my throat. He moans and jerks. Playing coy, I maintain eye contact as I let his dick pop out of my mouth. Then I pay extra special attention to his balls, licking and cupping them. After I go back to sucking him as

deep as I can, his hands move down to grip my hair as I bob up and down on him at a slow but steady pace.

He whispers dirty things to me as I work, encouraging me further with each word. “That’s it, baby. Take me deeper. Yeah, just like that. Oh, you’re doing so, so good.”

My hand drifts between my legs, and I rub my clit in time to my movements. His breaths become more ragged as I pick up the pace, going faster and faster while gripping onto his thighs for support. He starts moving his hips in sync with me now, guiding my mouth along every inch of his length.

When he looks down and sees my hand moving, he stops.

“Are you trying to steal an orgasm, Ensley? I didn’t say you could touch yourself, though did I? Your pussy’s wet, isn’t it? And aching? I bet your little clit has a heartbeat.” At his words, he tugs on my long hair a bit until I obey.

I’ll play his little game. “But I want to. I want to touch my needy little clit while I suck on your big cock. Please?”

I peek up at him from underneath my eyelashes, knowing damn well that he’ll cave. He is right on the edge of losing it all, and he’ll let me have a reward for blowing him just right.

“Okay. But don’t come until I tell you to.” He sucks in a breath.

“Mmmm,” I hum, mouthing his swollen head. “You want me to keep going?” I ask him, holding his dick in my hand and stroking him up and down.

“I want you to suck my cock until I tell you to stop,” he says, his voice gravelly and demanding.

“And you want me to know what it’s like to be humiliated?” I ask.

“Yes,” he hisses, reaching down and twisting his fingers into my hair. “I want you to know what it’s like to feel like things are out of your control.”

I nod and nod again, responding to him with my actions as I open my mouth and take him in again. Pushing my head down, I take him as far as I can, fighting the gag reflex with every inch that goes down my throat.

I’m surprised when he pulls away, his cock leaving my mouth with a sharp popping noise.

“You’ve been a good girl, Ensley. Time for your reward.” Jeff sinks to his knees and tugs me down too, taking my leggings and panties along with gravity.

After producing a condom from his pocket, he hands it to me. “Put it on me.”

I tear open the package and unroll the latex over his erection, stroking it and squeezing it to ensure it’s good and lubed up.

“That’s a good girl. Now get on your hands and knees and let me fuck you.”

I obey, positioning myself on a bed of nearby pine needles as he gets behind me, and spreads my knees as wide as possible. It’s not much, but it’ll have to do. His hands slide along my ass cheeks, and I can feel him rubbing lube along my crack. In one swift motion, he slides his meaty thumb inside my ass, and I moan out in pleasure. I can’t believe I’m doing this. I can’t believe I’m letting Jeff do this to me.

He's totally hate fucking me right now. And I'm totally loving it.

This is the best sex I've ever had.

I can't even imagine anything better than what we are doing.

It's raw.

It's emotional.

It's *real*.

He rests the tip of his cock against my pussy, and I push back against him, taking the first few inches of him inside me.

"You're so wet for me, Ensley. Think you can take it all?"

I look back at him over my shoulder and smile. "Do it, Jeff. Fuck me. Let me come all over you."

He grunts. "Tell me how much you want my cock."

I don't answer. His thumb is still inside my ass, moving in and out at a steady pace, but it's not enough for me. I need more. I need him. I need him inside me. I need to feel him. I need to be fucked by him. And I need it now.

I need to be full.

"I want your cock, Jeff. I want your cock inside me." The words leave my mouth before I can even think about them. Before I can even really comprehend what it is I'm saying to him. My lower lip wobbles with emotion. "Please."

"Please what?" he asks, increasing the frequency and intensity of his thumb.

My back arches. "Please, fuck me. Fuck me hard, Jeff."

With that thumb doing wicked, wicked things, he finally plunges his cock inside me instead, slamming into my swollen flesh and leaving me feeling fuller than I could have imagined. This angle... it's crazy good. He is rough at first, the angry way he's fucking me is making me feel like I'm his, like I'm his property. The same way I felt when he blew his load all over my tits. And the way he's working my body over is just as passionate as the way he's talking to me.

Even though I didn't even ask for it, he's giving me what I need.

What we both need.

Even though I never even knew I needed it until this moment.

"You feel so fucking good, Ensley," he growls. "I've been trying to keep my hands off of you all day, and here we are, fucking outside on the cold, hard ground like a couple of animals."

I can't even think straight at this point. I can't hear anything but the sound of our skin slapping together as he drives himself in and out of me.

"I'm going to come inside that pussy, Ensley. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to feel me explode?"

"Yes," I whimper, barely able to hold myself up as he fucks me hard and fast. "I want it. I want you. You're dick's so big, and I feel so full. Touch my clit and make me come with you."

He reaches around with his other hand and presses on my clit, sending me spiraling over the edge. I explode, shaking

and shuddering as he continues to ram into me.

“That’s it, babe. Come for me. Come all over my cock.”

As my knees collapse, Jeff snakes an arm around my waist and holds me steady. I’m not sure how much longer I can keep his pace up. My body is in overdrive, and I’m going to break soon.

“Fuck, I’m going to come, Ensley,” he growls. “I’m going to come inside that sweet little pussy of yours.”

He pumps in and out of me a few more times before finally releasing inside of me.

I collapse onto the ground as he pulls out, our bodies wobbly and spent.

In the stillness of the woods, as we lie together on a soft layer of pine needles, I can feel Jeff’s tenderness enveloping me like a warm blanket. Even though anger drove his actions moments before, now all I sense is a profound gentleness that speaks louder than any words. His fingers trace delicate patterns on my skin, his breath warm against my ear, his eyes filled with a depth of emotion that takes my breath away. He doesn’t say he’s sorry, doesn’t utter a single word of apology, but he doesn’t need to. I know. I feel it in every touch, every lingering glance, every heartbeat that we share. This moment transcends mere words, and I realize that his actions are his apology. In his arms, I feel cherished, understood, forgiven.

“I need to get back,” he says finally, pressing a tender kiss to the top of my head. “I’d like to say this won’t happen again, Ensley. But as long as you’re here, doing whatever it is that you do, I can’t guarantee it.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” I breathe, turning to look at him. “I wouldn’t mind one bit. I’m all for enjoying each other while I’m here.”

“Good,” he says, reaching for my hand and gently pulling me up. “Whether or not you can save the farm remains to be seen. I never thought I would say this, but you are turning out to be exactly what I need though.”

I look at him and smile, my heart warming at his words.

“I’m what you need, Jeff,” I repeat the words back to him, knowing that they are true. “I’m exactly what you need.”

As we quickly dress, he says, “And for the record, I did scroll through the TikTok comments, and I *did not like* what grown women were saying about me. At least I hope they were women.”

I shake my head, opening the app and shoving my phone in his hand. “There are just as many positive comments. Look. Read. Scroll.”

He stares at me, begging with his eyes to not have to do this, and I gesture at the phone with my hand. “Seriously!”

Reluctantly, he brings his thumb to the screen and starts to scroll. I watch as several expressions dance across his face—confusion, surprise, shock, followed by a slight blush on his cheekbones and a sigh of relief.

“See? They love you. You’re a hit. People are drooling over you. And now they want to come here and rent a yurt, just to help save your farm and maybe get a glimpse of those biceps. Maybe have a chance to talk to you about Christmas trees and baby goats. I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I was trying

to help you. I know what I'm doing and I'm really good at it. If you'd just let me."

I take the phone back from his hand and slip it into my pocket, sitting down on the small step at the entrance to the yurt, hugging my knees against my chest. "It's a shame about the trees though."

"I didn't start the business," he sighs, sitting next to me. There isn't a lot of space on this step, and his thigh ends up pressed firmly against mine. He smells really good, like a mixture of pine trees, coffee, and soap. It makes him smell like Christmas morning. "I'm third generation. And we replant, if that makes you feel any better. It's not like I'm out here deforesting the region or something."

"Every season?"

"Yeah. We chop down and replant every year. It's how a tree farm works."

I roll my eyes again. We're never going to make it very far with each other if we keep flubbing basic communication like this. I don't know how to make him understand me any better than I've already tried to do.

"No, I mean the same trees. You can do that, you know." I've seen it before. It's pricier for sure, but people are willing to pay more nowadays for the peace of mind that sustainability brings. It's fashionable to care.

"I'll look into it," he offers, and it sounds genuine enough that I have hope he'll actually do it, not just an empty promise to get me to like him again.

Sitting here, looking out at all of the trees and the way the sun sits above them, listening to the sound of the birds and nothing else, I'm starting to realize that I might actually feel something for this guy. I'm not going to say that I'm falling for him yet, or anything crazy like that, but there's something so kind and honest about him. Sure, he still eats meat and isn't the most sensitive person I've ever met, but he cares about the earth in his own way. He's definitely more in tune with nature than some of the city-dwelling, rich vegans I've come across on the internet, who don't know or care where their food comes from or what the conditions are like for the people who produce it, as long as it doesn't have an animal product in it and won't make them fat. Jeff Rawlins, aka #LumberJeff, is salt of the earth in the truest sense of the phrase. And if little Miss Gigi trusts him, maybe I can too.

“Previous punishments aside, I'd like to make today up to you. That is, if you'll let me.”

“Oh?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow at me. “How so?”

“Come on. I'm going to give the people the LumberJeff introduction video they deserve.”

He's awkward on camera at first, so I just leave it running and tell him that we can edit together whatever footage he likes later and not to worry too much about getting any good concise takes right now. I make sure the lighting is flattering, make sure he doesn't have anything in his teeth and that my hair looks relatively tame, and then hit record and just sit there and talk with him. I had meant for it to be an apology for the LumberJeff video, and I explain to my followers that I had posted it without his consent or knowledge and how truly

messed up that was on my end. But it ends up morphing into something else entirely. Once he gets over his initial discomfort, he ends up being really good on camera. He's funny, well-spoken, and opinionated without being brash. We edit it into something he feels good about, that makes him look good, and lets him just talk about the farm and his passion for his business.

By the time it's ready to post, it seems like we've both forgotten about our little blow-up from this afternoon. But not what came after. At least, I haven't. When Jeff was inside me... I shiver at the memory. Which gives me another idea. Rummaging through the pile of odds and ends on my bed, I find the pink pajamas from this morning that I haven't had a chance to do anything with yet. I hold them in front of me, displaying them in all of their ridiculous glory for Jeff to see, smiling at the way it instantly makes him look grumpy again.

“Want to help me get Miss Gigi all dolled up for her adoring fans?”

Chapter Fourteen

Jeff

It's been a strange couple of days.

I'm internet famous now, for one. For a solid forty-eight hours there, #LumberJeff was everywhere. Inescapable. Adam and Julia have been insufferable about it, calling me LumberJeff at every possible opportunity. I think Julia's getting a windbreaker monogrammed for me, and I'm a little scared. Some of the guys at the feed store snickered pretty hard when I came in, and then they hid their phones. Even my Aunt Judith texted me to ask if I'd seen it. My *aunt*, who is seventy-five, teaches Sunday school, and until yesterday, I would've insisted had no idea who or what a TikTok was. So much for the anonymity of being at one with the land out in the middle of nowhere. I don't dare go into Duluth right now, preferring to stick around Hermantown and home.

And our new yurts for obvious reasons.

Miss Gigi is apparently just as famous as I am, her moment in the sun gearing up right as mine started to fade. That video that Ensley strong-armed me into, putting that poor goat into pajamas? Took off like a rocket. It even had background music to that guy from *The Office* screaming "Parkour!" Miss Gigi the Glamour Goat is even more of a hit sensation than LumberJeff was. I guess she has a broader demographic appeal. Who doesn't like a baby goat? The fainting ones are supposed to be especially popular right now because they almost got run over by UPS, according to Ensley.

I don't pretend to understand how any of these trends work, but they seem to be working in my favor, nonetheless, at least judging from the excited texts Laney's been sending with the I-told-you-so's attached. These yurts, two-thirds of which Ensley hasn't even touched yet, are booked solid. Not just the month we start using them but for the first three months. We've had to institute a waitlist, knowing full well that if anybody happens to cancel we have ample potential customers on standby ready to book.

The farm has never been this busy. Even during our best, busiest holiday seasons, we get about a hundred people a day, touring the petting zoos, buying warm ciders, hot chocolate and snacks from a local food truck, and taking home about half as many trees. The problem with trees is there's a limit to how many you can sell per household. Nobody needs more than one tree. On top of that, even if you sell people as many extra experiences as you can tack on, no one's going to be here outside of that sweet window that opens right after Halloween. The yurts solve that whole problem. During the milder months, there are so many things for visitors to enjoy. I'm nervous about having so many people here at a time, but Laney and Ensley keep assuring me that it's going to work out fine, and I'm starting to become inclined to believe them.

So far so good.

People seem to be so excited about visiting our farm that I'm even thinking about the other idea that Ensley mentioned. The reusable, replantable trees. It's more work, having to excavate the entire root ball so they can be replanted again afterward. But it's only more work in the moment. Certainly less work than spending the entire next year regrowing a tree

from scratch. Plus, you get the element of legacy. You can reserve trees per family, letting them pay an extra fee to keep getting the same tree year after year. How nice is that? A brand new tradition, letting the same tree come into your home and age alongside your kids. And for the people who want to take the cut trees, there are definitely some recycling options available. I can make this work. We can make this work.

This is a solution that should make Ensley smile that wide grin of hers that always makes my heart skip a beat.

The thought stops me in my tracks. Why on earth am I so concerned with changing my business model to make Ensley happy? I barely know her. At least not outside of the carnal way. Add that to the list of things that have been weird about the last few days. Not only am I hanging out with a vegan TikToker, I'm starting to like her. And it's not just that. I care about her. I want to see her special smiles and hear her say she's proud of how I run my farm. A farm, mind you, that's been just fine for three generations before she came into the picture. That's enough to make my head spin and make me feel more than a little ridiculous. I try to pack the thought away somewhere else while I drive down to the yurts for today. There are, of course, more packages here for me to drop off to Ensley, and I want to run my business idea by her. She also texted me earlier to tell me that she's made progress on the second yurt and wants my opinion.

I guess we can both be surprised by how much we find ourselves wanting to cater to each other. I couldn't imagine her asking for my opinion on anything, let alone how she chose to do her job, this same time last week.

Walking up to the yurt, I can hear her talking to her camera through the other side of the door, so I wait a minute, letting her find a place to pause before I knock. If I've learned anything in the past few days, it's not to interrupt her in the middle of a take. That's like interrupting a lion mid-hunt. It doesn't end well for anybody. Once I no longer hear her talking, I tap the door three times with my knuckles.

"It's me," I announce, though I'm not sure who else would show up here in the middle of the day.

"Come in!" she calls back, and I open the door. I'm stunned by what I see. The interior of the yurt looks really, really good. Not that the first one didn't. It just wasn't very *me*. I think she was going for a southwestern, desert look with the first yurt. And it looked okay. I just don't really want to stay in a sparse, desert home with cacti decorations and steer horns. Which, I'm assuming were fake anyway, given her general ethos.

She's decorated this one in a Moroccan style, with a ton of draped fabrics, dramatic curtains around the bed, velvet floor cushions scattered over an ornate rug, and a lot of pottery pieces throughout. It seems cozy and welcoming, and it makes me want to go right back home and paint my living room a nice shade of spiced orange or terracotta.

"What's up?" she asks, breaking me out of my little daydream about her decor choices. I shake the idleness off of me, handing her the several small envelopes and boxes I brought over here from the house.

"I think I found a way for you to keep your moral code. About the tree farming, I mean," I add quickly, not wanting

her to think this is some weird lead-in about our one-off hookups and making an honest woman out of her. That is definitely the last thing on my mind right now.

Oh, stifle it, Rawlins. You've been thinking of nothing besides sinking into her wet, warm heat since you did it the first time. Hence, the second time.

So, why not try for a third?

This damn woman has me tied up in knots. As I force a swallow down my suddenly dry throat, she goes back to what she was working on earlier, adjusting a string of fairy lights that she has wrapped around the edges of a coffee table.

“How’s that?”

“I ran some numbers and looked into some other farms that run things the way you suggested. I think we can do it. We can set up a recycling program for people who still want to take home cut trees and turn them into mulch and firewood here at the farm. We can charge an additional deposit on the tree and give it back to them if they dispose of the tree with us, rather than just leaving it out with their other trash the day after New Year’s.”

Ensley pauses, fiddling with a loose LED light. “So... like soda cans? Only a lot bigger?”

“You got it.”

“What about the other trees? The intact ones?”

I smile, knowing she’s going to really appreciate this next bit. “We can start a plan for replantable trees. Instead of coming all the way out to the farm and trying to lug some giant root ball home with them, we can drop them off and pick

them back up again. They can keep getting the same tree every year. Make it a tradition. That way they have to keep getting it from us. They don't have to worry about the environment. And neither do you."

Before I can register what's happening, she drops the light strand onto the table and wraps me in a tight hug. "That sounds wonderful!" God, the way she smells hits me square in the crotch. And then it rumbles to life. "I like that. A lot."

I'm not sure what to say, or what to do with myself. Ensley's forgiveness toward my little outburst turned dark romance novel seems a bit tenuous, nor has she made any indication that she's into me other than my capacity to go viral on a #LumberJeff video, and even then she was just trying to get more engagement for the farm. Outside of wanting me physically, I can't tell how she feels about me at all, and I don't want to make this weird. But that doesn't stop the fact that I want more from her. I settle for a quick pat on the upper part of her back, like the gentleman that I most certainly *was not* just a few short hours ago.

Ensley lets go of me just as quickly as she grabbed me, suddenly coming to her senses and awkwardly smoothing down her hair. She clears her throat before turning and gesturing at her handiwork over the past few days. "How do you like the new yurt?"

"This is my favorite." I plop down on one of the cushions scattered on the floor, and it's somehow even comfier than it looked. I could stay here all day. Maybe I don't need to go back to the house. I can just let little Horatio be in charge for the rest of the afternoon.

Ensley rolls her eyes, sitting on the cushion across from mine with a stretch like a housecat. “You haven’t seen the plans for the other four.”

“I don’t have to. I can’t imagine liking any of them better than this one.” I never was one for English class. I liked PE, Woodshop, and if I’m being honest, Home Ec. I know I’m not the best guy at describing things, but I try my best for her. She needs to know just how good of a job she did here. “This is opulent. This is sexy. This is...”

She tosses a small pillow at me with a playful grin, and I catch it against my chest.

“You said *sexy*.” Arching an eyebrow at me, her smile looks a little hungrier than I’d like. Maybe she wants me even more than she’s been letting on. “Enough said.”

For a second, I’m not sure where either of us are going with this. There’s a flirtation in the air that might be serious, but before we can find out, both of us seem awkward again, Ensley’s eyes darting away to a tag she still needs to remove from her cushion, and my hands feeling like they’re in the wrong place no matter where I put them.

“Right. So.” I stand up, changing the subject with a cough. “Our first guests arrive this weekend.”

“Our?” she asks with a tilt of her head, twirling her hair around her finger. I hate when she does that. It makes her look way too appealing.

“You’re here too. This is your project as much as it is mine.”

“Right.” She nods, rising from her cushion and returning to the work I interrupted. Bringing up the very quickly incoming guests has probably prompted her to get a wiggle on.

“And I wanted to celebrate,” I say. Ensley stiffens, not sure what I’m about to ask of her. “Any chance you’ll let me cook for you?”

“Maybe.” She turns to look at me, eyebrows raised in curiosity. “Will there be vegan options?”

“Yes.” I can’t believe she even needs to ask. I’ve been wanting to cook for her for days now. It’s how I show people that I care about them, as friends or otherwise. Adam and Julia have been subjected to a whole lot of barbecues, Instant Pot meals, and homemade sauces from me at regular intervals. Naturally, I’ve spent a lot of my recent waking hours scrolling through countless vegan recipe blogs. I even ordered a couple of cookbooks on a whim last night. I’m almost excited to tackle the challenge. Cooking without meat or dairy is like trying to box with one hand tied behind my back or starting a fire without a match. Looking around at the yurt itself, I feel inspired. “We could go with a Moroccan theme...”

She’s making that face at me again. The same one she made when she opened that pack of pajamas. I’m learning to fear that face.

“Any chance I can talk you into starting a channel for the farm?” Taking my hand in hers, she swings it gently back and forth, like a little kid on the playground. “We could record the cooking.”

“I don’t even know what I’d call it.” No matter how hard I refuse, I can tell I’m not going to talk her out of this. She’s

going to wear me down until I'm making muffins while Miss Gigi wears a beanie and holds a whisk in her mouth. I can see it now.

“I do,” she sings. “LumberJeff’s kitchen.”

As long as we don't have to wear matching aprons, I guess I'll live.

Chapter Fifteen

Ensley

I can't believe he's coming here. To cook me dinner—a vegan dinner—in a yurt. When I booked this gig, I was picturing myself huddled around a little portable heater, wearing two sweatshirts and huge socks, trying not to freeze to death while I ate canned beans. Sure, it would kind of suck, but I was going to make a lot of great content, possibly score some nice sponsorships, help a local business, and gain some followers. I did not think I was going to be settling into a romantic dinner with the guy from my failed blind date experiment. I also didn't think I was going to run away from a bear directly into his arms, but who could've seen that coming?

I sure as hell didn't think I was going to open my legs, drop to my knees, and then get on all fours either. And because those memories plague me nearly every waking moment, I wonder what tonight is going to bring.

I've been flitting nervously around the yurt since he left to get ready and run into town for supplies. I don't know why. He saw the yurt already and liked it. He even called it sexy. Still, I feel like I need to make everything perfect and have been straightening and re-straightening every last curtain, cushion, and rug corner for what feels like hours. I guess I could tell myself that it's to make everything look great for my followers and not that I'm trying to impress some axe-wielding lumberjack who still doesn't understand what a meme is. That's a whole lot easier to digest. Because truth be told, I feel

a bit out of his league. Like I'm just a little too weird for ultra-conservative LumberJeff who only speaks when he has something important to say.

I may have also spent a lot of time braiding my hair. It's not like there's a lot I can do to make myself look good when I'm out in the woods and far removed from a curling iron and the mountain of products I keep under my sink. But with some clever plaiting and a little coconut oil to tame down the flyaways, I can make myself look pretty, in a Viking maiden of the woods kind of way. I'm still checking myself out in a hand mirror when I hear his truck pull up again. I find myself wondering just how much fuel that thing burns in a day, and if he can't get a smaller electric cart for when he just shuttles himself and a few things around the property.

Oh, well. He just admitted today that he wants to start using rooted trees rather than cut ones. I should take that for the win that it is and not try to push things.

I rush to answer the door and am greeted by the sight of Jeff holding two heavy ceramic pots.

"Um. What are those?"

"Tagines," he says, gesturing with his head over his shoulder toward the outdoor fire pit, where he's left some very hot coals to smoke.

"God bless you?"

"Tagines. Ceramic pots. You said we were doing a Moroccan theme!"

He follows me inside, setting the two pots on the small countertop in the makeshift kitchenette, before trundling to the

truck and returning with a large brown paper bag full of groceries. “They’re North African stew pots. You put the ingredients in them, leave them over a low heat source, and then boom. Dinner. Just open the lid and eat. I brought chicken for myself, but we can do one for you with a bunch of vegetables. I was going to do lamb but that takes like four hours, and I thought it would freak you out.”

I wince. He’s absolutely right. Watching him eat meat is already a lot. The idea of watching him eat lamb after hanging out with little Miss Gigi all day would’ve sent me right over the edge. It’s just too close for comfort.

Jeff certainly wasn’t kidding when he said a bunch of vegetables. We spend what feels like ages peeling and chopping, but once that’s done, all we have to do is leave the tagines on the hot coals and hang outside by the fire pit for a while. There’s a bottle of wine in the bag too, and before I can even ask, Jeff assures me that it’s vegan.

“I had to ask the girl at the shop, just to make sure. I didn’t even know that some wine wasn’t vegan, and I thought the question seemed stupid, but the girl was really excited to tell me.” He takes two wine glasses out of the bag that must’ve come from inside his house, pouring me a glass before he serves himself. “She’s a vegan, too. There’s more of you floating around out there than I thought.”

“It’s not that weird to be vegan now!” I swirl the wine in my glass, taking a nice deep sniff. It smells like honeysuckles and white peaches. Jeff has taste. Or the shop girl does. Either way, this stuff is delicious. “We look normal. We have normal jobs. We’re not vampires or anything.”

He laughs at this, putting his feet up on the edge of the fire pit. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure you guys would be the worst vampires. What would you do? Go around draining tomatoes?”

“Would you look at that?” I add with a smile. “LumberJeff has a sense of humor after all.”

We occupy ourselves in small conversation while we wait for the tagines to cook, talking about the history of the farm and how nervous we both are about finally having other people here. The warm spices coming out of the pot smell incredible, and my stomach is rumbling before I know it. I can’t remember the last time I was excited to have a meal that I didn’t make myself. Usually, I have to take whatever options I can get and be happy they had anything at all that wasn’t soaked in animal by-products. Jeff actually took the time to find something that we both could enjoy, that wasn’t just a salad. Even if this intimate dinner is part of his non-apology tour, I have to say that I’m touched.

He tells me that he needs to get some things together. I’m assuming that means grabbing a few paper plates and a napkin or two, but when he finally lets me back into the yurt, I’m stunned. He’s set everything up on a wooden pallet he’s brought in and draped with a cloth so that it’s just the right height for the floor cushions. There’s a plate for each tagine to rest on, so it doesn’t burn through the cloth, and he’s sliced some hunks of bread with seasoned olive oil for dipping. On top of it all, he’s lit a truly fantastic amount of candles throughout the yurt. It’s stunning, and it will make a perfect video.

I run to set up my camera while he grabs the tagines from the fire and sets them down on the makeshift table, leaving the lids on so I can “unbox” them for my viewers, too. I know the idea of filming our dinner date probably makes him want to claw at the walls, but he lets me do it, and that touches my heart almost as much as the stew satisfies my stomach. It’s not just good, it’s amazing. One of the best vegan meals I’ve ever had. I make sure to profusely compliment his cooking in the footage, as well as reassure my followers that every dinner is a candlelit dinner in a yurt at the Rawlins’ Tree Farm. I don’t need them seeing this and letting their imaginations run wild with theories and speculations. I don’t need to wake up to some kind of combined hashtag of our names trending online.

“I get that the dinners are always by candlelight.” Jeff pushes a chunk of bread through the sauce left in his bowl. “But are they always followed by candlelight dancing?”

As much as I want to eat the entire bowl of stew in one sitting, I’m so stuffed that I think I could die happy right now. I lean back on my cushion, rolling my head along my shoulders and giving my neck a good stretch. “I didn’t know you were a dancer.”

“I’m not, but Adam said you have to do that on TikTok. The whole app is mainly just *dancing*. Like with as little clothes as possible. And everyone’s doing the same steps.”

I have to actually put my face in my palms to not laugh at him too hard. I don’t want to embarrass the guy. It’s not his fault his friend can be a total ass.

“You have no idea what TikTok even is, do you?”

“No,” he admits, walking over to where I’ve had my phone filming this whole time, picking it up and ending the recording. “Something about algorithms and the Chinese government. But I can’t imagine you’re allowed to keep filming what we do next.”

“Oh? And what is that?” I lift an eyebrow at him as he leans over, helping me to my feet with one of his broad, sturdy hands. “Dancing in our underwear?”

“Close. But not quite.”

Before I can make any further guesses at what he might have in mind, he kisses me. It’s softer and more tentative than he’s ever kissed me before, almost as if he’s asking permission this time. Like he’s pulled a complete one-eighty. I bring a hand to the back of his head, stroking my fingertips through his short hair and egging him further into the kiss.

“Is this for real this time?” He pulls away from me, searching my eyes. “Because I’m starting to like you and your hippy ways, and you’re starting to like me and my rustic ways. And not, you know, because your nerves are all screwed up from almost being eaten or I’m annoyed because I went viral for the first time?”

“It’s never not been real, you goof. Just because sex is inspired by strong emotions other than desire, doesn’t mean it’s not real.” I smile, giving him a small nod before returning his kiss, harder than the one he had initiated. I can feel his lips grinning against mine as I run my hand along his stomach under his shirt, letting him lead me backward toward the bed. He pushes me back onto it with a gentle hand on my chest, and

I land in the soft mountain of blankets and throw pillows I've assembled there.

“Good. Just for the record, I'm going to consider this our first time.” Crouching over me, he kisses his way down my throat, dragging his teeth along my collarbone where it pokes out over my shirt. “Last time was so rushed. I don't usually like to cut to the chase like that.”

I let out a giggle. “Is that what we're calling what you did now? Cutting to the chase?”

Even though his face is pretty much hidden in my neck, I can swear he blushes. “Am I forgiven yet?”

Twining my fingers through his hair, I whisper, “I was never angry at you. I enjoyed it as much as you did.”

He slowly unbuttons my shirt, sliding it away from my chest and shoulders. I'm happy I wore a front-clasping bra, as he reaches for that next, making quick work of the tiny piece of metal hooking it together. It's a touch cold in the yurt, and my skin erupts in goosebumps as he pushes the bra away, exposing my breasts to the air. I gasp at the sensation, and then moan as he brings his mouth to one of my nipples, making warm circles with his tongue.

Bracing himself on the bed with one hand, he slides the other down my stomach and into the waistband of my leggings. “You're so beautiful, Ensley. I don't think I've ever seen anything so stunning as you out here on my land, in this yurt, being one hundred percent completely yourself.”

My hips involuntarily arch upward to meet the contact, pushing his hand farther down. His fingers skirt past my clit,

sending a chill down my spine, before gently toying with my entrance. With this man, everything seems so vivid, so frantic, so needy, and I grip his wrist, moving his hand against me so that the tip of his finger slides in just right. He laughs at my impatience, slipping a second finger in beside the first, curling them in that perfect angle that makes my entire body go warm and cold at the same time. He presses his palm against me in lazy rough circles as he works his fingers back and forth, before returning his attention to my breast, alternating between licking and sucking in a way that makes me want to end him and yet never let him go.

I'm thankful that we haven't rented any of the other yurts out yet, because I can't seem to control the noises that I'm making. I've never babbled like this in my life, as my fists grab for the blankets for some kind of leverage. I feel like he's found some secret way of turning off my higher brain function, and I can't articulate a single word other than his name working its way out of my throat almost like a sob as the pleasure explodes. When I reach the peak, I tighten around his fingers as I tremble against him.

He kisses me softly, before standing next to the bed, undressing himself in the soft candlelight. I stare at him openly, enjoying the majestic view in front of me. I've never had sex with a guy who looks this good, in a space that looks this good, who I'm so damn in sync with physically, and I try to permanently burn as much of it into my eyeballs as possible. He shakes his head with a grin, pulling my leggings and underwear off of me before gripping my hips and dragging me toward the end of the bed. I don't realize what he's going for until it's already happening. The bed is the

perfect height. After he slides a condom on his length, all he has to do is push my legs open with his palms, and then he's sliding me down the length of his shaft. If I thought I was making too much noise before, it's nothing compared to the way I sound now. I let out a particularly throaty moan, and I watch the way his entire face scrunches up in concentration. Apparently, my appreciation does something for him. Having a bit of a lightbulb moment about it, I look him dead in the eyes.

“Oh, Jeff,” I whimper. “You feel so good.”

He closes his eyes, looking up at the ceiling and away from me. I was absolutely right.

“You are so perfect,” I groan, grabbing at one of the pillows above my head. “Please, Jeff. Don't stop.”

Something inside of him snaps, and he brings his hands to my hips, doubling his pace. I feel like I'm going to come out of my skin, already feeling a second orgasm coiling in my stomach. “I'm going to—”

The words catch in my throat, and I slam my eyes shut, riding out the waves of pleasure. He isn't far behind me, his rhythm growing more and more unsteady before he stops entirely, collapsing onto the bed next to me. We lay there for a moment, breathing heavily, before he reaches out and places a hand on my chest. Without thinking, I take the hand in mine, and place a soft kiss on the back of it, curling into his side.

Chapter Sixteen

Jeff

This is the most comfortable bed I've woken up in that I can remember. It beats the hell out of my own bed, that's for sure. I'll have to ask Ensley what kind of mattress it is. Speaking of, I'm realizing that the bed is empty, save for me. I sniff the pillow next to me and can still smell her jasmine perfume, alongside the cardamom and paprika that somehow still permeate the yurt, even though there's sunlight now streaming through the skylight onto the bed. That tagine came out fantastic, if I do say so myself. The texture of the chicken, the combination of sweetness and spice—I could go on forever. But I need to focus on the immediate issue, which is why I'm alone in bed this morning, when I certainly wasn't last night.

I roll over with a stretch, scratching my chest with my hand, and crack open an eye. Then, I almost scream.

“Good lord, Ensley. Why are you just *standing* there?”

The first thing I see this morning is Ensley, naked as the day she was born. She's next to the bed, holding a pair of tiny pink pajamas and beaming at me. To make matters worse, the tiny pink pajamas are attached to a massive pink skirt. Her eyes sparkle with what I can only assume to be mischief. Internet mischief.

“No,” I insist through a yawn. “My goat cannot have her own TikTok account. It's bad enough that you gave her a ridiculous name that's somehow stuck.”

She gasps, shooting me an exaggerated frown. “How did you know?”

“Look what you’re holding.” Sitting up against the pillows, I rub the last bits of sleep out of my eyes with the back of my hands. “Miss Gigi sized pajamas. With a skirt.”

“It’s a tutu,” she corrects me, sitting beside me on the bed and placing a hand on my chest, batting her eyelashes so hard she looks like a cartoon. A very pretty cartoon, I must add.

“On a goat.” Pajamas are one thing. A tutu is another. First, it’s just the skirt and then it’s a costume and then another costume and oh *god*, she really is going to make us wear matching chef’s hats.

“Fine,” Ensley huffs, tossing the offending garment to the end of the bed and laying her head on my shoulder. “She can share my account then. More followers for me.”

I snuggle her head closer to mine, inhaling the smell of her shampoo and feeling the warmth of her body against mine. Everything about her is almost as soft and comfortable as this bed. I could get used to this. I don’t have that many chores today, now I think about it. I could move some things around, stay here for a while.

As I lay there with Ensley in my arms, I can’t help but feel a sense of contentment wash over me. The world outside the yurt fades away, and all that matters is the softness of her skin against mine and the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she breathes.

I press a kiss to the top of her head, feeling her smile against me. “I liked waking up next to you,” I whisper, my

voice still husky with sleep.

“Me too,” she murmurs back, her fingers tracing lazy circles on my chest. “What are you thinking about?”

I hesitate for a moment, unsure if I want to put my thoughts into words. But with Ensley, part of me wants to. “Just... how peaceful this feels. How much I want to stay here with you instead of getting up to do chores. Do you think my animals will get mad if I wait just a bit longer to feed them?”

She lifts her head to look at me, her eyes soft and warm. “They’ll be okay. After all, it’s still pretty early. And I could get used to being a little lazy with you,” she says, and I feel my heart swell with affection for her. I’m not quite sure when that happened. When I softened toward her. But it has, and even though I’m not saying it out loud...

It’s there.

We’re quiet for a few moments, simply enjoying each other’s company. But soon, the desire between us starts to build again. I feel the familiar ache in my groin, and I know she must feel it too. It’s like I can’t be in the same room with this woman without touching her. And then just touching her is never enough.

Without a word, we move together, lips meeting in a soft, languid kiss. I let my hands roam over her body, memorizing every curve and dip as if I could never get enough of her.

The kiss deepens, and I can feel the intensity in my core. But I don’t want to rush this moment. I’m determined to savor every second of it.

My hands find her hips, pulling her closer until she's flush against me. The sensation is electric, like a current running through my veins that only she can provide. I worship every inch of her body with my touch, exploring every crevice until we're both trembling with desire.

We finally break away from our kiss, both of us breathless and flushed with arousal. Our eyes meet, and I can see something unspoken pass between us—a feeling that neither one of us dares to name yet but that we both know exists. A shared understanding that goes beyond words or even actions.

And so we lay there for a while longer, simply existing together in this perfect moment where nothing else matters but us and this crazy connection that burns so brightly.

Until the demands of my body take over, and I have to be inside her again. I'm finding I need Ensley like I need my next breath of air.

With a newfound urgency, I grab her hips and slide her on top of me, my hands exploring every inch of her. I can sense that she wants to take it slow, but I'm too far gone now—all I can think about is being as close to her as possible.

I reach for my discarded pants and a condom and quickly put it on, then finally slide her down onto me. The sensation is exquisite—like nothing else in the world. She moans softly as she starts to move, gentle at first but gradually gaining momentum until we are both lost in bliss.

Reaching between our bodies, I find her clit and circle it, feeling the tension build in her body as she nears the edge. I can feel every tremor, every wave of pleasure that radiates through her and then through me until we're both caught up in

it. That storm of desire that only seems to rage when we're together.

Finally, with one last shuddering gasp, she comes undone, shattering around me as the waves hit her.

My hands find their way back to her hips again and guide her faster and faster until I feel my own pleasure build up inside me.

And then suddenly it all comes crashing down—the intensity of our lovemaking pushing us both over the edge into a glorious orgasmic release that leaves us trembling every single time. I roll her over, and we collapse into each other's arms, completely spent and yet still feeling more connected than ever before.

I bring a hand to her chin, angling her face upward to bring her lips against mine, when suddenly I hear it.

A bleat.

A very tiny, very distinct bleat.

Ensley tries to cover it with a cough, but there's another one right after. I stare at her for an explanation, but none seems to be forthcoming. Ensley just looks right back at me like I'm the crazy one here.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” She shrugs her shoulders.

Another bleat.

“That sounded remarkably like Miss Gigi, but I know it can't be Miss Gigi because there isn't any reason for Miss Gigi to be in this yurt. Watching us. Having sex.”

Ensley pokes at the inside of her cheek with her tongue.
“She follows me. A lot. We’re buds.”

“Wait.” I think I’m starting to get the picture, and I’m not so sure I like where this is going. “How long has she been here?”

“She spent the night.” Ensley flashes me a nervous smile, shrinking backward into the pillows. “She does that a lot, too.”

I do some quick math on how many hours that is. And the fact that, as far as I’m aware, none of my goats are potty trained. “We can’t have goat poop in the yurts. You know that right? Tell me you know that, Ensley.”

“Of course.” She waves her hand in her air, turning away from me and slipping off of the bed, headed to find the source of the tiny little goat noises. “That’s why she’s wearing a diaper.”

“You’re making this up.” I don’t want to believe that she’s wrapped a goat in a diaper. It’s definitely plausible as far as Ensley is concerned, but I simply don’t want to know that she’s gone that far off the deep end. I mean... I *want* to want this woman. I want to like her. I want to fall for her. I might even want to love her, but she’s making that last part damn near impossible by waltzing around naked through a yurt searching for a baby goat. After finding the culprit hiding behind a side table, she scoops the girl in her arms and deposits her on the bed. Great. Now there’s goat hair on the blankets.

“See?” After sliding a robe on—thank you, God, because my crotch was already rumbling back to life—she opens the back of the pajamas, and sure enough, there’s a second swatch

of pink fabric. There's a diaper on my goat. My eyes widen into moons. This is too much to handle before breakfast. "And they're cotton! Washable. Reusable. No waste!"

"Of course." I nod sagely, leaning into the insanity of the moment. "And who's washing these so that they can be reused? Since, you know, she can poop in her pen without a diaper. And this wouldn't be a problem."

"Me," she insists, and I feel silly for even asking, as if there was anyone else to do it. "I will. I have. I don't mind. Look at that face!"

She takes Miss Gigi's mouth in her hands and snuggles her face against her own. I don't want to think about the fact that I kissed a girl whose mouth is that close to a goat's right now. So, I think about the diapers instead. Which leads me to a much bigger question.

"Wait. How are you washing the diapers?"

I watch as Ensley's mouth gets very tiny of all a sudden, and she reaches for her phone in a bid to distract me. "So, these cotton diapers come in all sorts of cool colors..."

"My washing machine," I groan. It's the only possible answer. There isn't any running water out here yet, and I doubt she'd be foolish enough to wash goat poop out into her personal supply. Which leaves only one place left. The machine she keeps coming to borrow to wash what I thought were her clothes and bedding for the yurts. "Got it. I'm going to go home now. To run bleach through the machine. And my eyeballs."

Unwrapping myself from the blankets, I rummage around for my clothes and put them on. All his talk of poop and animals lets me know that mine can't wait any longer to be cared for.

I kiss Ensley on the forehead, shaking my head and trying not to laugh, not wanting to undercut how annoyed I am at her for putting unnecessary goat poop diapers into my personal washing machine. She just sits there with the goat, showing her the pajamas and the tutu, asking her what she thinks of them, and taking a selfie together. I sigh as I pull my sweater over my head, bracing for the chill of the air outside of the yurt, and wonder how I keep finding myself drawn to this strange little psychopath.

"I'll see you later!" she calls as I hit the door, and I swear that Miss Gigi bleats goodbye at me.

Chapter Seventeen

Ensley

Taking two steps back from the mountain of throw pillows I've carefully arranged on the last of the three beds, a sense of pride washes over me. This yurt is the biggest one I've decorated so far, and possibly my best. The Moroccan one will always be my favorite, for obvious Jeff-related reasons, but I have to say, this Tuscan-themed decor has really come together. In addition to the queen-sized bed I just finished staging, there are two sets of twin bunk beds and a sleeper sofa that can pull out and sleep two comfortably. All in all, it can house eight people. The perfect yurt for a family or a girls' trip.

It felt ambitious when I started, especially with the functional kitchenette and full bath included, but I think I've really knocked this one out of the park. The best part of all is that Jeff told me the plumbing should be hooked up later today. And I know I'll get all kinds of feedback soon from Eden and Elowyn. They think they're sneaky, but I noticed they both loved the preview posts when I put them up today, and Eden even commented that she "couldn't wait to see it" when I mentioned having a fully finished tour video available this evening. It may be cheating on my part—I decorated this one specifically with her in mind. She's always loved Italy, ever since she studied abroad there and then started running private tours as her own personal business this year. Anything vaguely Italy-themed and she'll jump on it like a cat with catnip.

I lounge on the sleeper sofa for a moment, staring at the ceiling and thinking about how this month has gone. I can't believe that we're more than halfway through my contract. Not that I haven't felt it. This has been some of the most grueling work of my life. I think I've gained a pound or two in muscle mass just from lifting all of these boxes, and I've developed a permanent weird twinge in my left hand from fluffing pillows and hanging lights. It's been three weeks since the bear incident, which has thankfully been the only time I've had to even think about using the flare gun. And while every conversation with Jeff feels brand new, it also feels like I've known him for years. We're getting comfortable with each other, which isn't something I ever intended to be with anyone. Not like this, and certainly not this soon.

And the sex I'm having with that man is out of this world. Not that I would ever tell Laney this, but I consider it much like I would a yummy surprise bonus clause in the contract my agent negotiated.

I mean, we can't get enough of each other, so we do it everywhere—inside the yurt, in the hayloft, in his house when we're feeling lazy and bored, in the woods when we want to see the stars. We lay on fur blankets and stretch out like luxurious cats with Jeff's flare gun and bear spray always close by, letting our heated bodies press together as we explore each other with our hands and mouths. His strong arms hold me close as we move faster and faster toward mutual pleasure. I'm not sure which I love more—his deep, throaty moans or watching a satisfied smile spread across his face at the end of every session.

Jeff's huge axe-wielding hands are magic; they know exactly where to touch me to get me off like a rocket. After our romantic night where he cooked for me, something changed in him. He takes his time now—no matter how much I beg him for it—gradually increasing the pressure until I'm screaming his name and shuddering in blissful release beneath him. And then he collapses onto my chest, breathing heavily into my neck while I hold him close and whisper naughty little secrets into his ear that make him laugh softly against my skin.

Being out here in nature's glory, with Jeff, it's like nothing else I've ever experienced before... like being wrapped up in a warm cocoon of pure carnal pleasure with no worries about anything else in life but enjoying this moment completely.

It feels so coupley. Even though we're not.

Definitely not.

Not even close.

We're just fuck buddies who are starting to actually like each other as people.

Jeff is not my boyfriend.

Speaking of the man himself, I smell something roasting outside, and it smells *really* good. Good enough to break my train of thought and send me following the trail like a cartoon character, nose in the air and feet barely touching the ground. Jeff is outside by one of the firepits, raking coals and rearranging packets of foil. There's a portable table next to him, covered in a bevy of sealed Tupperware containers.

"What's all this?" I ask, my stomach grumbling over the sound of my words. Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure I

worked straight through lunch. There might've been a fistful of almonds in there somewhere, and a cold brew iced tea, but definitely not enough to keep my stomach happy with me.

“Tuscan feast,” Jeff answers, furrowing his brow at his phone screen as he films a couple of different angles of the fire pit. “I got two spatchcocked chickens roasting in the pit right now, alongside a mushroom assortment I picked up at the farmers market to go with some heirloom eggplants. There’s a sundried tomato pasta salad and some roasted red pepper hummus in those containers, along with a white bean and kale soup. Don’t worry. It’s fake feta on the salad. And I picked up two loaves of that rosemary sourdough you like.”

I don’t know what spatchcocked means, and I don’t think I want to, but other than that, everything sounds perfect. I’ve never had someone actually look forward to cooking for me before. Jeff says that he loves the challenge. It’s like an episode of *Chopped*—he only gets to use the foods that I let him, and he has to create something delicious out of it. And it’s cheaper than cooking with meat and cheese all of the time. I don’t think I’ll ever convert him, but it’s nice to see someone make the effort, and not just belittle my choices. The way to a vegan girl’s heart is through her stomach, after all.

“This is a lot of food,” I mumble through a mouthful of sourdough. “Who are you cooking this for? I know I’m a hungry gal, but this is a bit much, don’t you think?”

Jeff shrugs. “So? We’ll have leftovers. I have a big freezer at the house.”

I’m about to offer to snap a few shots of him manning the fire when there’s a voice behind me.

“Is there room in that big ol’ yurt for two more?”

Before I can even turn around, two long arms wrap me in a tight hug, her giggles tickling my ear. I’m stuck in an ocean of dark hair the second I wriggle around in her grasp, and I almost suffocate trying to free myself from my sister Eden. The second I do, I’m wrapped in another, smaller, and softer hug from my smaller and softer sister, Elowyn.

I look from the food to my sisters, to Jeff, and back again. Jeff looks up at the sky and then away into the tree line, refusing to meet my gaze.

“I see. A Tuscan *family* feast. You were in cahoots with the Lorenson girls this whole time. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear you thought I was homesick.”

“Cahoots? Me?” he repeats, busying himself with serving spoons for the side dishes. “I don’t even know what the word means.”

“Please, big sister,” Eden drawls, grabbing her two stuffed duffle bags and heading for the yurt. “You knew the second that you waved that Tuscan yurt under my nose that I’d be in the car and headed your way. Don’t pretend you’re surprised.”

“No. I guess not. But I am surprised you got Elowyn away from her fiancé and their little apartment. You know how much she loves to nest.” I turn to help Elowyn with her bags, which thankfully consist of only a modest rolling suitcase and a backpack. She’s always been the more toned down of the two of them. “How are things going with Weston? Oh, more importantly, how are things going with your business?”

“Weston and I are growing together every day. And business is booming. Ensley, I am totally in love with my life. Remember when I was with Jesse? God, it almost seems like it never happened.” There was a lot of drama last year between Elowyn and our parents. She was supposed to finish up pharmacy school and take over our Dad’s business. Eden and I even paid for a private tutor to help her finish her math classes. I guess none of us were ever really listening to what she wanted, and it took her moving out and meeting someone like Weston to find her voice. Now, she’s hired a second pharmacist and is running the gifting aspect of the pharmacy. My baby sister really is all grown up.

Once I get the girls’ things settled inside, and Eden finishes oohing and aahing over the decor of the yurt, taking so many selfies to put on her website for all the travelers looking to book fabulous staycations, I start to worry about her wrist, Jeff and I set about arranging a table and our little feast. Everything looks so good, other than the chicken that looks entirely too much like a chicken still and is kind of freaking me out. Jeff is polite enough to carve it away from the table, having himself and the girls plate it from the counter in the kitchenette instead of right in my face. All the other things on the table are fair game for me, and I couldn’t be happier.

He stays long enough to be polite but leaves early enough for me to get some quality time in with my sisters. He respects the fact that we’re close and that I haven’t seen them in almost a month, while I see him every single day. I step outside for a quick goodbye, and Jeff leaves me with a very chaste kiss on the cheek and a hug. Then he hops in his truck and heads back

up to the house under the guise of needing to check on the goats.

“So,” Eden asks, popping open a can of hard seltzer before offering one to me. “What’s there to do for fun around here?”

“Oh! I really want to see the other yurts,” Elowyn chimes in, talking around a mouthful of hummus. “At least, the ones that aren’t occupied. Obviously. You’ve worked so hard, I want to see them in person!”

“Okay.” I shrug. “Let’s pack some of this food up and then we can go on a little walking tour.”

Once everything is tidied and I’m wearing a warmer sweater, I take the girls to look at the two yurts that aren’t occupied, the Moroccan and the rustic farmhouse ones. The Superhero yurt has been booked out to a mom and her two sons for the weekend, who’ve been running around in the open spaces, looking around in the woods for bugs, and of course, playing with the goats. I think I heard one of the boys talking about trying to take Horatio home with him. The cute little guy just seems to have that effect on people.

The three of them are out by one of the firepits now, roasting marshmallows and looking at the stars. The smaller of the two is already starting to doze off when we get there, with a smear of marshmallow on his face.

Eden immediately talks her way into hanging out with them at the cozy firepit scene, and for a brief moment, I’m sad that I can’t join in, until Elowyn runs back to our yurt and returns with a bag of vegan marshmallows that she brought with her just in case. The gesture is so nice that I tear up a

little bit until I'm stuffing them in my face so fast that my sisters look a little concerned.

Again, it doesn't matter if my vices are good for me, as long as they aren't harming any cute furry little creatures. I'll eat the whole bag in a sitting if nobody stops me.

"Look, Mommy! I made a marshmallow rocket!" The older boy holds up a skewer with three marshmallows stacked on top of each other.

His mother, Sarah, smiles warmly. "That's wonderful, Timmy! Just be careful with that skewer."

Eden's eyes twinkle. "My sisters and I were just admiring your marshmallow craftsmanship."

Sarah looks up and smiles. "These are my sons, Timmy and Danny."

"Hi!" Timmy waves enthusiastically, while his younger brother, Danny, just nods sleepily, a sticky marshmallow trail on his cheek.

Elowyn runs up, holding a bag of vegan marshmallows. "We brought our own marshmallows, too! They're vegan!"

Timmy's eyes widen. "Vee-gan? What's that?"

I chuckle, joining the group. "I'm Ensley, by the way. And these are my sisters, Eden and Elowyn. And vegan means no animals were harmed in the making of these marshmallows. Would you like to try one?"

Timmy considers this for a moment and then nods. "Okay! As long as Horatio likes them too."

Eden laughs. “Horatio is a very discerning goat. But I think he’d approve.”

They all settle around the fire, roasting marshmallows and chatting. Sarah tells stories of her boys’ adventures in the woods, while Eden shares funny anecdotes about when we were little girls.

Then I jump in and weave some tall tales about Jeff’s goat herd.

“Did Horatio really eat a whole book once?” Timmy asks, eyes wide with fascination.

“He did.” I wink at Sarah while I pop a marshmallow into my mouth. “But it was an old gardening book, so maybe he was just looking for some salad recipes.”

Everyone laughs, and the atmosphere is warm and relaxed.

Danny, half-asleep, mumbles something about taking Horatio home. Sarah brushes a stray lock of hair from his forehead. “We’ll have to ask Ensley about that, sweetheart.”

I smile at the cute little guy. “Horatio’s quite happy here, but you can visit him anytime you like.”

Timmy looks thoughtful. “Can Horatio be our friend?”

I nod. “He already is your friend.”

We spend the next hour talking, laughing, and roasting various snacks over the firepit. The conversation flows naturally, from favorite books to childhood memories, to dreams and aspirations. The bond between the single mom and her boys is evident, their love and connection shining through every word and gesture.

As the night wears on and the fire burns low, Sarah finally gathers her sleepy boys. “Time for bed, you two. Say goodnight.”

“Goodnight!” Timmy and Danny chorus, waving to us.

“Goodnight, you brave marshmallow warriors,” Eden calls after them, her voice full of affection. My sister is going to be the best mom. I’m not sure when she and Mateo will ever get around to it with their shared love of travel, but I know it will happen one day.

Since I’m the oldest, if you would have told me that I’d be the last Lorenson sister down the aisle, I never would have believed it. And yet, here we are.

Sarah leads her boys back to their yurt, their hearts warmed by the simple joy of shared connection.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Elowyn murmurs, her eyes still on the retreating figures. “How something as simple as marshmallows can bring people together?”

Eden puts an arm around her. “It’s not just the marshmallows, El. It’s the love, the kindness, the willingness to open our hearts to others. That’s what truly connects us.”

Is that why I’m starting to have these *thoughts* about Jeff? Because I was willing to open my heart to someone who is not even close to being my type?

As I sit with my sisters, their engagement rings sparkling in the soft light, a flurry of emotions overwhelms me. I can’t shake the feeling that I’m on the brink of something, something more profound and real than I’ve ever known before.

Eden and Elowyn look so happy, and a pang of longing hits me. Is Jeff my chance at the same forever they've found? The connection between us is undeniable, filling me with both hope and confusion. Questions and doubts swirl, but something deep inside tells me this is different, something real that's taken root quickly and is filling me with longing for more.

Does our connection go beyond the physical? Do I want it to?

Whether I saw it coming or not, Jeff has awakened something in me. I'm drawn to him in a way that's both thrilling and terrifying, a connection that's growing stronger every day. And the more I'm with him, the more I find myself wanting to stay here together all wrapped up in him. Daydreaming about a future together, a future that seems both possible and impossible all at once.

The thought is both thrilling and daunting. As much as the uncertainty scares me, I can't shake the idea that despite our differences, Jeff could be my chance at love, my forever. I find myself at a crossroads, and the choice before me feels monumental.

And all I can do is hope that he's feeling the same way I am. Even if he's not my type, maybe we complement each other. Jeff might just be my perfect match.

The three of us stand together for a moment, basking in the glow of the embers and the deeper warmth of family and friendship.

Then Elowyn breaks the silence, holding up the bag of vegan marshmallows. "So, are we going to finish these, or

what? They're better than I thought they would be.”

We laugh, the sound carrying on the night breeze, a testament to the beauty of the sisterly bond and the power of a shared experience.

In the end, it's not just about marshmallows or hashtags or yurts. It's about love, trust, and the simple joy of being together. And that's something we'll carry with us long after the fire has gone out.

Before long, all the snacks on a stick are eaten, and we decide to take our night back into the yurt. Eden brought a whole bunch of polishes from her personal collection at home, in colors that she chose to go specifically with the yurt decor. I decide on a nice terracotta, partly because it reminds me of the Moroccan yurt and that night with Jeff. But I'd never tell the girls that yet. Everything between us just seems so new and unsettled. Like if I bring it out into the open, it might just evaporate as if it never existed.

“So,” Elowyn sings, already a little tipsy from her second drink, holding her nails as spread as possible so she doesn't smear anything while she pats Miss Gigi on the head. “What is the deal with LumberJeff? He looks at you in *that* way. We're both dying to know.”

Ah. Here it is. The real reason they came. This is what happens when both of your sisters get engaged within a year and a half of each other. Suddenly, they have all of this time to focus on your love life. I should never have put that poor man on TikTok.

“He doesn't look at me like anything but the annoying woman setting up his glamping business.” I start to stand up

from my cushion, trying to go find Miss Gigi's new pajamas in the hopes that it will distract them. Elowyn grabs my hand, pulling me back down. "And there's nothing to report."

"I doubt that. I see through you. You light up when he's around. The only other guy I've seen you look at like that is the old man on the nutritional yeast packets."

Before I can argue that I'm probably more excited about the nutritional yeast itself than the old man on the bag, Eden decides to add her two cents.

"She's right. And he's in so many videos. He has to be around all the time."

"I mean..." Okay. So, he's in a lot of videos. I'm trying to save his farm! And my followers really like him! That has absolutely nothing to do with how much I might enjoy his company. "We work together."

"But do you sleep together?" Eden asks coolly over a sip of her seltzer. I choke on mine in response.

Elowyn dissolves into a fit of giggles, struggling to speak between laughs. "The blushing says it all! You totally did it! With him! Spill it right now, sister!"

"No big deal," I insist, still sputtering out a few coughs. "Just a couple of times."

More like a couple times ten.

"I don't care. You like each other," Eden coos, starting to get a bit misty-eyed on my behalf, wiping at her face with the back of her hand. "You're banging it out on behalf of saving his farm. That's a good thing."

“It’s a scary thing,” I mumble into my hands, cupping them around my face.

Eden juts out a hip. “Why?”

“He respects my vegan ways,” I admit. It’s a terrifying thing to say out loud. This whole time I’ve used my veganism as a screening process, a wall between me and anyone that wants to get too close. It’s been a convenient way of staying single and not being vulnerable with anyone, letting it be the escape hatch that I need. But with Jeff, I don’t have that. In fact, I never even had to ask him to respect my belief system, he just *did*, even though he doesn’t share it. I don’t have any reason to push him away, at all. And that scares me to death.

“Even Mom doesn’t do that,” Elowyn whispers dramatically, now holding Miss Gigi full in her lap. I think she likes the goat more than she likes me.

Eden pokes me in the ribs with a long index finger. “Sounds like he could be the one.”

“We’ll see.” I down the rest of my drink with a shrug, trying to mask the uncertainty that has taken root within me.

My sisters exchange knowing glances, their eyes twinkling with mischief and excitement. They can see what’s happening, even if I’m reluctant to admit it to myself.

“Come on, Ens, don’t be so coy,” Elowyn teases, her eyes dancing with delight. “This isn’t just about saving a farm, is it?”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t quite suppress a smile. “You two are hopeless romantics. It’s just a working relationship. Nothing more.”

Eden leans in, her voice soft and sincere. “Maybe it started that way, but you can’t deny there’s something more between you two now. We can see it in your eyes, the way you talk about him, the way he looks at you in those videos. It’s beautiful, really.”

It sure didn’t start out beautiful. Maybe that’s why I’m having a hard time seeing it now.

I feel a lump in my throat, and I glance away, unable to meet their hopeful gazes. They want this for me, I realize. They want me to find the same happiness they’ve found. And deep down, a part of me wants it too.

But it’s not that simple. Life is never that simple.

“I don’t know,” I finally whisper, my voice trembling with emotion. “I just don’t know.”

The room falls into a thoughtful silence, filled only with the soft sounds of the night outside. We sit together, three sisters, each lost in our own thoughts, each grappling with our own hopes and fears.

Finally, Eden reaches over and squeezes my hand, her touch warm and reassuring. “Whatever happens, we’re here for you. Always.”

I smile, feeling a surge of gratitude and love for my sisters. They believe in me, in the possibility of something more, something real and lasting. And for the first time, I allow myself to believe it too.

With a newfound determination, I stand up, ready to face whatever comes next. “Well, enough of this emotional talk. Let’s enjoy the night and make some memories.”

They cheer, and we spend the rest of the evening laughing and talking, the earlier tension forgotten. But as I drift off to sleep that night, Jeff's face lingers in my mind.

And I can't help but wonder if my sisters are right. Maybe, just maybe, Jeff could be the one. The one who breaks down my walls, the one who makes me believe in love again.

Only time will tell. But for now, I'm willing to take some baby steps.

Chapter Eighteen

Jeff

I find myself taking longer to finish my afternoon chores than usual. I trudge through every bit of cleaning, trimming, and feeding that I have left in the day. Not that I don't want to do it. I've never minded hard work in my life, but I'm supposed to drive down to the yurts tonight and check in with Ensley again. She's finished her fifth yurt, and I'm happy for her. She's come such a long way and accomplished so much in the last month or so that she's been here. Frankly, it's been one of the nicest months of my life.

Ensley's presence has brought a warmth and vitality to my days that I never knew I was missing. We've shared chores taking care of all the farm's animals, broken bread over meals we've cooked together, and engaged in conversations that stretch long into the night. She's become more than just an internet presence trying to influence engagers to save my farm; she's woven herself into the very fabric of my life.

With every shared laugh, every knowing glance, every touch that lingers just a moment too long, I find myself falling for her, and it's a fall I never want to stop. I can't believe I ever thought I didn't like her. I think it was that I didn't want to like her—she was so different from me. But that's what makes the tapestry of life vibrant and rich. When it comes down to it, we share the same values, and that's what's important. When we wake up each morning and end each night tangled together, I know I'm hooked. Her passion,

determination, and unflinching honesty have reeled me in, and I'm not looking to get away.

But the ache of knowing she's leaving is a constant thorn in my side, a shadow that darkens even the brightest of our moments together. I see the end coming, and it terrifies me. How do you hold on to something that's slipping through your fingers? How do you cling to a dream that's fading with every passing day?

I want to tell her to stay, to beg her to make a home here with me. But I know I can't. I know she has her own path to follow, her own dreams to chase. And as much as it kills me, I have to let her go. She's too amazingly free-spirited to tie down.

But oh, how it hurts. The thought of waking up to a world without Ensley's smile, without her voice, without her touch, is a bleak one. And it's a reality I'm not sure I'm ready to face.

Once you've had the shutters thrown open in a bleak room, you never want to willingly slip back into the darkness.

Each step I take feels like I'm walking closer to an inevitable goodbye, yet it's in the quiet solitude that the weight of what I've found with Ensley really hits me—a glimpse of the deep, unified love my parents had, filling me with a mix of hope and dread. As I stand on this emotional cliff, the realization hits me like a wrecking ball. Ensley is worth every potential heartbreak. She embodies what I've been searching for all my life, making the thought of letting go unbearable, yet I can only hope to have the strength to face it if that time comes.

One more yurt after tonight, and then she doesn't have any other reasons to stay. When she first got here, it felt like I'd never see the end of her, and I was dreading having six long weeks of her bumming around my property. Now, I'm amazed at how fast the time has flown by and am instead dreading the empty quiet that will be left in her wake. Sure, there will be more tourists and campers than I can shake a stick at and loads of people will want to take a selfie with LumberJeff. None of them will be Ensley, and none of them will make me feel the way I do when she smiles at me, touches me, shivers underneath the weight of my hands.

I try not to let myself downward spiral into self-pitying paranoia while I drive out to meet her, instead letting myself be excited to see her handiwork. Every yurt she's completed so far has been nothing short of magical, and I expect no less from this one. Pulling up, I find her adjusting a welcome mat by the entrance, and we go through our usual routine of exchanging pleasantries and unloading her haul of packages for the day from the back of the truck. After a quick peck on the lips, I follow her into the yurt, arms full of boxes, I almost drop them when I pass through the door.

She's chosen an Adirondack theme, with a lot of wood, warm earth tones, and buffalo check. It looks a lot like the inside of a cabin. Or, to put it bluntly, a lot like the inside of my own house. Scratch that. *Exactly* like the inside of my own house, if my house was decorated for Christmas. There are white fairy lights strung up in various places around the yurt's interior, adding to the festive feeling, as well as a few wreaths and strands of garland.

“Well?” she chirps, flopping down onto the bed excitedly. “What do you think?”

“It’s great. You’ve obviously taken some inspiration from somebody close by. Very close by.” I lean in, kissing the top of her forehead. “Possibly in this room right now.”

She smiles, pushing me away gently. “Yes. Okay. But... why can’t we have a #LumberJeff yurt? I think we should give them all names. Kind of like the presidential suite at a hotel.”

Hmm. There’s something I’m missing. She’s got that face going again, the one that screams “internet mischief.” I’m not sure what it is. The room is decorated just the way I would do it and is set up to be a permanent Christmas theme. Obviously this is a tribute to the farm itself. There’s a really nice set of chairs that I recognize as being done by a local woodworker. The cowhide rug is definitely faux cowhide, knowing Ensley. I’m on the cusp of giving up when I notice her eyes dart to one of the wreaths. No, not just the wreath. Something hanging *on* the wreath. Multiple somethings.

It’s a laminated ornament. A small illustration on a white background, cut out and hung on a hook. The drawing is a cartoon caricature of a muscly man in a flannel, with a beard and a stern smile. It looks an awful lot like... Oh, no.

I carefully unhook one of the ornaments and bring it over to Ensley. “What’s this supposed to be?”

“These are prototypes.” She shrugs, answering and not answering the question all at the same time. “You have to tell me which ones you like.”

“There’s more than one?” I sit down on the end of the bed with a groan, dropping my head in my hands. Reaching over to the nightstand, Ensley produces a cardboard box and rummages around inside.

“There are six. Just like the yurts.” Satisfied that she’s grabbed what she was looking for, she starts to place them on the bed like a tarot reader revealing my fate. “All LumberJeff.”

“LumberJeff in a chef’s hat,” I mutter as she places the first ornament, holding my hands over my eyes, watching from behind a crack between my fingers.

“LumberJeff with a griddle,” she announces, slapping it down on the blanket.

“LumberJeff with a fire.”

“LumberJeff juggling eggs.” I don’t even know what to think of this one. I’ve never learned how to juggle. And why would I juggle eggs? Has she gone insane out here in the woods? Is this what cabin fever is?

“LumberJeff with an axe and no shirt.” Pursing my lips, I level my gaze at her. This one is drawn like a vintage pin-up, and I’m the beefcake. There’s even a heart tattoo on my arm with Miss Gigi’s name on the ribbon. I can’t let anyone else see this. If Laney or Adam ever catch wind I’ll never hear the end of it. “Ensley...”

“Fine,” she pouts, throwing her arms in the air. “But that was my favorite.”

“Of course, it was.” Shaking my head, I’m left to wonder why I find her so endearing when she’s more chaotic than a trash panda in an unsecured garbage can. Then, I notice a final

ornament in her lap that she isn't divulging to me yet. I snatch it from her, and she makes an unsuccessful grab for it before I flip it over. "And what's this? Oh, my God. Is that Miss Gigi in a tutu?"

Ensley goes very quiet for a moment, looking down into her hands as they sit folded in her lap. "Yes," she squeaks out. "But you do like the yurt, LumberJeff?"

"Don't change the subject." I have to fight the urge to laugh when I catch sight of the juggling Jeff illustration, trying to sound at least a little bit stern. "What's the point of all of this? *Is there a point to all of this?*"

"Yes, actually, if you'd let me explain. I'm starting to take back what I said about you having a sense of humor after all." She sticks her tongue out at me, rising from the bed and crossing to a wreath that she had left lying out on the table. Picking it up, she brandishes it like a weapon, shaking it in front of my face. "Look! Look at how cute it is!"

The wreath is large, accessorized with a few ribbons in the same red and black buffalo check that the yurt is, interspersed with several cartoon Jeffs. Tossing it onto the bed, she grabs another one to place in front of me. This one is definitely fake, painted a powdery pink, accentuated by rose gold ribbons and ornaments, as well as Miss Gigi in a collection of delightful poses.

"So. I was thinking that we can sell the ornaments online, for people who can't make it out to the farm. It's super easy to set up a Shopify account and attach an online store to your website. That's a great revenue stream right there and a way to get people talking. We're basically booking advertising space

in people's living rooms! On top of that, we can either sell them with the trees from here, or just include them for free, or whatever you want to do. Same with the wreaths. More advertising. Somebody goes over to their house during December, sees a smiling burly guy juggling eggs on their tree, and asks what the deal is. Then they're looking at your TikTok, my Instagram, Miss Gigi's Twitter—"

"Hang on." That last bit can't be right. There must be tinsel in my ear. "Miss Gigi has a Twitter? Is it words or just bleating? Do you make her type them out with her little hooves?"

"Don't interrupt me. I'm on a roll here." She playfully swats at my thigh with her palm. "Next thing you know, they're buying a tree or booking a yurt or *both*, all because of a little piece of plastic with a cartoon hot guy and a hashtag on it."

"I get it. I guess." I have to hand it to her. The marketing sounds airtight. Even Laney would be impressed. I'm also touched by how hard she's working at gaining business for the farm. I don't think any of this was stipulated in her contract. "But the wreaths... that seems a little outside of your comfort zone."

"They're fake. Duh." To illustrate, she picks one of the green ones up and tosses it into my lap. Upon closer inspection, it's definitely not real, but the quality is nice enough that I would never have known. I can't say the same for the princess pink Miss Gigi variety. "Totally artificial. They'll last forever. Not a big deal."

“I see where you’re coming from, but why would anyone want any of this stuff?”

Miss Gigi, I understand. Kids love her. Adults love her. Who doesn’t love a fainting goat in a tutu? She’s a real crowd-pleaser. I can’t imagine someone wanting to own a cartoon cut-out of me, let alone like me enough to hang it on their Christmas tree in their own home.

“Just trust me, okay? I know what people want. It is my entire job to know what people on the internet want.”

“Alright. Fine. You win. I’m in your capable, fast-typing, hands.” I throw my own hands in the air, fully surrendering to whatever it is she has planned. She has her internet mischief face on again, and I know that I am no match for her when she’s in this mood. Still, I want to retain some dignity in the process. “But no shirtless LumberJeff, okay? Keep the beefcake to a minimum.”

“Understood. That means I’m keeping them for myself then. All fifty of them. I’m going to lay in bed with them while I pleasure myself. Just like Donny Osmond, perhaps Bob can make a comeback.”

Before I can remark on the sheer volume of shirtless LumberJeff ornaments that Ensley is harboring somewhere on the property, she’s kissing me square on the lips, draping her arms around my shoulders and pushing me backward into the pillows, and I’m already figuring out how I’m going to move the rest of my chores to tomorrow.

“#LumberJeff at your service, woman. Why would you need to pleasure yourself? Not that I’m complaining. I mean... if you want to, I can watch. Or I can help. Your choice.”

What I really want to do is make sweet love to her like she's never leaving. To say with my body what I'm afraid to say with my words. Until I convince her that she can't be the best version of Ensley without me.

Chapter Nineteen

Ensley

My ears have grown so attuned to the sound of Jeff's truck on the gravel outside that I feel like a puppy waiting for its owner to come home. I can tell how far he is, how fast he's going, and what kind of mood he's in from the way he closes the driver's side door behind him. A month and a half of listening to someone drive up to your living space at least two times a day will do that to you. I guess it sticks better if you actually like them and get goosebumps up and down your arms every time you hear them nearby.

I guess I really do more than *like* him, which has made working on this final yurt bittersweet. On the one hand, I'm excited to go home to my apartment and to have such a large project under my belt. Who knows what other opportunities I'll get booked for after this? Especially with someone like Laney on my side. On the other hand, my home is in Frostvale. That means I will be all the way down there, and Jeff will be all the way up here, and I won't see him twice a day, or once a day, or maybe not even at all. The thought saddens me, and I find myself aimlessly sitting on the floor, staring at the ceiling of the yurt, instead of reading the assembly instructions for this composting toilet. Not that I even really need them; I've already built five of the damn things even though we have running water in all of the yurts except the first one I styled. But after all my unboxing TikToks explaining how they help the environment, most of the guests asked for the composting

toilets too. I should be able to put one together in my sleep. If that ever becomes a game show skill, I could win big.

“Mind if I interrupt whatever it is you’re doing here?” Jeff asks, coming up behind me and placing his strong hands on my shoulders. There’s a knot back there that I wasn’t aware of, and he massages it into submission with ease. I try not to melt into his hands. We still haven’t really put a label on this thing between us, and I don’t want him to think that he can just walk in and do whatever he wants, whenever he wants to.

Even though he totally can.

When I first arrived, I didn’t quite know how I would pull this off.

Now I’ve fallen in love with... this place. I don’t want to leave.

“Unlike some people, I don’t live a life of leisure,” I tease with a roll of my eyes. As much as I get done every day, at least I don’t wake up at the crack of dawn to feed goats and chop wood or whatever it is that he’s always getting all sweaty and worked up about. “I have to work, LumberJeff.”

He doesn’t respond to my teasing like he usually does. This would be the place where he tries to make fun of Instagram, without understanding how any of it actually works or cracks a joke about how sore my thumbs must be from all the “corned beef hashtagging” he says that I do.

Instead, he pushes at the corner of the rug with the toe of his work boot, hands in his pockets. “I thought you might like to see some stars with me. It’ll be dark soon.”

I can't stand to see him so vulnerable, and I relent immediately, tossing him a screwdriver. "You help me finish this toilet, and I'll take the rest of the night off."

We make quick work of the remaining odds and ends, and I make sure to get some good footage of us working together. My followers love when there's a special LumberJeff guest appearance almost as much as they love Miss Gigi. But alas, goats can't tighten screws or use wood glue. At least, not to my knowledge. Maybe we can work something out. Handy Horatio could be its own thing. That idea has potential.

Just as it's starting to get dark in earnest, we reach a good stopping point with our work, and Jeff leads me out to the truck. He drives me down a path I haven't noticed before, past the outhouse and toward a deeper part of the woods. I haven't been out here at night since the bear incident, and it makes me a little uneasy. We pull up to a large clearing in the woods, and Jeff helps me out of the cab of the truck. I must look more than a bit terrified at being out here in the dark, and he slings a comforting arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his chest. It feels goofy to admit, but I'd be lying if I said that feeling his solid pecs didn't make me feel safer and less like a potential snack for hungry wildlife.

"There's a lot of space out here," I remark, noticing the emptiness in front of us. There are at least fifty yards in each direction without trees.

"Before you freak out, there were never any trees here. It's a naturally formed clearing." He gets quiet, letting the end of his sentence trail off. Whatever it is that he wants to tell me, whatever his reasons for bringing me here tonight, he's finding

it all difficult to admit out loud. I lace my fingers between his, squeezing my palm against his, and that seems to give him the ability to keep going. “This is where my parents considered building a house. And I can protect you from any rogue bears who dare to cross our path.”

He doesn't talk about his parents often. I know they were childhood sweethearts, and that his mom died of cancer when he was almost done with high school. It's why he didn't leave the state or go to college. He wanted to help his dad with the farm and couldn't bear to leave him alone. Then his dad passed from a sudden heart attack two years later, which Jeff says was a broken heart, and he found himself stuck here for good. The farm was all he had known and all he had left to remember his parents by. He couldn't bear to sell it off.

“You could put a *huge* yurt here,” I joke warmly, pressing my head against his chest. I want him to know that his sadness isn't going to scare me away and that it's his choice to talk or not talk about it.

“I knew you'd think that,” he laughs with a shake of his head. “Mostly, I like coming up here sometimes to check out the stars. It reminds me of my folks. Of what it felt like to be young and part of a family before tragedy struck and Laney and I were left alone. It's part of the reason Adam Spencer and I are so close. He lost his parents in a horrible farming accident. So, we're neighbors, but more like brothers who are trauma bonded.”

I'm not sure what to tell him. I know that nothing in my life so far could begin to compare to the losses that he's faced. My family represents the ideal middle-American clan. All I

can do is wrap my arms around him and hold onto him as tightly as I can. The fact that he brought me here says more than enough.

After a few moments of silent companionship and running his fingers through my hair, he kisses the top of my head. “C’mon. I didn’t bring you out here just to be sad about my parents. I had fun plans, too.”

Taking me by the hand, he leads me to the back of the truck, and I gasp at what I see. He’s inflated the air mattress I was using when I first got here, and it fills almost the entire bed of the truck. The mattress itself is decked out with a mountain of blankets and pillows, and wedged in next to it is a small lantern and a cooler. Jeff folds down the tailgate and offers me a steadying hand as I kick off my boots and climb up in my socks, settling cross-legged onto the mattress.

Inside the cooler is a six-pack of chilled hard ciders, as well as a selection of vegan junk foods. There’s even a vegan jerky I’ve been dying to try, alongside the usual hummus and pita chips. Jeff’s the first person I’ve ever gotten close to who hasn’t even tried to break me of my veganism, and he apparently has no intention of ever doing so. Without even saying any words, I allow that knowledge to settle into my bones.

He curls up next to me on the mattress, rolling his eyes when I ask him to take his dirty old work boots off before he climbs up, and we lay together in the quiet in the clearing for so long that my hands start to get cold. Searching for warmth, I shove them under the hem of Jeff’s Henley. He glares at me, but only for a minute, and then starts to tell me about how his

Boy Scout troop leader showed him how to find the North Star when he was just a kid. Of course, he was a Boy Scout. I'm betting he made it all the way to Eagle, and was on the honor roll, and was in the 4-H Club, too. I'm starting to think that his only flaw is eating meat, and even then, I'm almost willing to forgive him.

Just then, while he's debating whether Ursa Minor would be an appropriate nickname for me, a tiny streak of gold streams by my field of vision. I've never seen a shooting star in real life, and it takes my breath away for just a second. I remember very suddenly that you're supposed to make a wish, so I screw my eyes shut tight. Before I can think of a good one, my brain latches onto a single thought.

I wish that this didn't have to end.

Jeff looks at me with a grin.

"I know what that face was. You made a wish, didn't you? On that star?"

"Maybe." I shrug, a slight blush creeping across my face.

"What'd you wish for?"

I can't bring myself to say it out loud. It's too vulnerable, too soon. "If I tell you, it won't come true."

"I think I might have an idea," he whispers, cupping the back of my head in his palm and bringing me in for a kiss.

Maybe no one can promise me that what we have will last forever, but we can make tonight last as long as we want. His tongue flicks across my lips, and I open my mouth to let him inside. My hands rove from his stomach to his back, dragging

my nails along his skin, and he groans against my mouth when I gently rake them up and down.

I reluctantly pull away from the kiss, my lips still tingling from the contact. For a split second, I'm lost in Jeff's warm gaze, in the sheer rightness of being in his arms. I want to forget the world, forget the ticking clock that's counting down the days until I leave.

But then reality storms in, uninvited as always.

God, what am I doing?

My heart throbs in my chest like it's desperate to escape. I'm almost at the end of my contract here. I'm leaving, and we both know it. Isn't this kiss, this next breath, sinking myself into a fleeting moment, just a one-way ticket to Heartbreak City?

Jeff groans and leans in for another kiss, and I catch that earnest glint in his eyes—a glint that twists my insides with a gut-wrenching cocktail of guilt, yearning, and something terrifyingly close to hope.

It's not fair to feel this deeply, to want something I can't have, especially when I'm on borrowed time.

Shoving that thought to the back of my mind, I force a smile as I snuggle into his neck. But even as I lose myself in the warm comfort of his arms, a part of me is already mourning what feels like an inevitable goodbye.

After a few more wistful seconds, I let my hands wander down his back, stopping to grip his ass, before settling them onto his hips. With a soft push, I turn him onto his back. Jeff pauses to look at me with a raised eyebrow and a slight smirk

before I make quick work of his belt buckle and fly. It's chilly out, so I don't take his pants all the way off, settling instead for pushing them just past his hips and onto his thighs. His boxers are tented, the fabric strained by his erection, and I press my palm against his bulge, delighting in the way his breath changes at the pressure from my hand.

Using my fingers, I pry apart the opening in the fabric and slide my hand inside. He jumps slightly at how cold my palm is as I wrap it around his length in a slow tugging rhythm. I tease him like this for some time, loving the way it makes him squirm underneath me before I slip his cock out into the air. I make eye contact, giving him my best flirtatious smile, and then I slip backward on the mattress and dip my head down, taking his head between my lips and caressing it with my tongue.

“Shit, Ensley,” he hisses, biting at his lower lip. One of his hands splays across his stomach, as the other grips at one of the blankets piled onto the air mattress. Opening my mouth wider, I slide my lips down his length, taking him into my mouth entirely, before bobbing back up and releasing him with a small pop. It's quiet here, and I know he can hear every tiny wet sound my mouth makes as I take up a consistent rhythm.

I want him to feel me.

I want him to *remember* me.

I bring my fist to his base, tightening my grip as I continue the assault with my mouth. I can tell that what I'm doing is working—a soft moan slips out of his mouth, even though he tries to stifle it with his fist. It must be working too well,

because his hand winds into the hair at the nape of my neck, gently urging me up and away from him.

He guides me up along his body, pulling me into a deep and hungry kiss as I hook a leg over his hips. His hands find the waistband of my leggings, pulling them down my legs, and I almost yelp at the sudden change in temperature on my bare skin. He huffs out a laugh, reaching for one of the blankets and throwing it over the lower half of my body while he reaches for a condom, rips it open, and slides it on. I snuggle my face into the crook of his neck for warmth, then reach between us, angling his sheathed cock into me and sliding backward onto it. I watch the pleasure flicker across his face once I've made it all the way down, resting there for a moment and enjoying the sensation of him being inside of me. Then, his face changes to pleasant surprise as I maneuver myself into a seated position, straddling his legs and bracing my hands across his chest.

I start to roll my hips against his, letting out a soft sigh at the feeling between my legs.

“You're beautiful like this, you know that?” he whispers, bringing a steadying hand to my hips. “Even prettier than all of the stars behind you.”

The compliment is so earnest that I start to blush, my gaze darting away to a nearby tree. I start to double my pace, raising and lowering myself so fervently that a slow burn starts to creep its way into my thighs. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. From the sounds of his breathing and the look on his face, I don't think it'll be very long. He places a second hand on my hips and starts to drive himself upward into me, meeting each of my strokes in kind. We're lucky that

no one else is out here—the truck bed is starting to creak underneath us, and I know that I've been giving all the woodland creatures a show.

Suddenly, his grip tightens, and his rhythm goes stilted. As I cry out and shatter all around his length, he groans out a noise that sounds enough like my name to make my heart flutter. Spent, I collapse against his chest, my legs not wanting to do much of anything else. We lay there for a moment, occasionally letting out a soft laugh between our ragged breaths, and then he excuses himself to go clean up with some wipes he has in the cab of the truck. He tucks me in, and I can already feel sleep descending on me as he climbs out of the bed. The last thing I remember before passing out for the night is his body slipping in under the blanket next to me, wrapping his arm around my waist, and nuzzling his face against my throat.

I don't know what time it is when I wake. It's light out, but just barely. Sunrise must have been a half-hour ago at most. It's warm under the blankets, but the second I bring my arm outside of the fabric, I almost shout at how cold the air is. Then I realize why I woke up. I need to pee.

I know where the outhouse is from here, and I'm able to sneak out of the blankets and into my pants without making too much noise. Jeff is sleeping far too peacefully for me to want to wake him up now. I slip over the tailgate without putting it down and wait to put my boots on until I'm a few feet from the truck. The path to the outhouse is much less intimidating during the day, but seeing the claw marks in the wood of the door still makes my stomach drop. I try not to think about how long and far apart they are, and what that

means for the size of the average bear paw, and instead check my phone.

I have a lot of notifications. Scratch that. I have a fuck ton of notifications. Either I'm being canceled, or veganism has been outlawed, or—I can't even speculate as to what would make all of my social media accounts blow up like this. Even Miss Gigi has a ton of mentions this morning. It's overwhelming at first, trying to slog through the mountain of information to find the source of the issue. I notice that I seem to be getting tagged a lot on TikTok, from one video in particular. It takes me a minute to figure out who the account belongs to. CaribouWife#9 isn't the most descriptive thing in the world, but the video is clearly taken a few feet from the fire pit in Adam's yard, which means it must be Julia's account.

I can't make out a single word being said in the video. It's shaky and taken from a few feet away, filmed over her shoulder. I'd recognize Jeff's jawline anywhere, though. I turn on the closed captioning, trying to figure out what's got everyone so riled up.

And squinting at my phone in the early hours of the morning, sitting in a stupid outhouse on a Christmas tree farm, after I just let a guy who I thought I truly cared about, who I thought I was falling for, put his tongue in my mouth and who knows where else, I have my heart completely ripped out, stomped on, and burned to ash.

I feel like I've been sucker-punched by love itself. What my eyeballs are struggling to take in reads more like a brutal wake-up call, a soul-level burn, making me question every

romantic notion I've ever had. The ache is real, and it spreads fast, searing through every part of me.

LumberJeff is a fake and a phony.

This entire time he's been playing me, trying to make me fall in love with him, just so he can rip the rug out from underneath me and publicly humiliate me as soon as I declare my feelings for him. I've never felt so used and violated in my life.

This has all been revenge for rejecting him that night in Duluth.

And how did I even reject him when *he* was some random stranger interjecting himself into my evening without invitation?

It's totally diabolical. Who does that?

Someone completely and totally unhinged.

There's a split second where I think I'm going to start crying, but then a switch flips inside of me, and I get far angrier than I am sad. Nobody gets to use me like this. Nobody gets to take my profession, my very livelihood, and turn it into a twisted game. I slam the door of the outhouse shut with a bang so loud that a small cloud of birds erupts from one of the trees along the path, flying away from me and my wrath.

I don't need this. I don't need these yurts, or this stupid farm that I just gave everything I had to save. And I certainly don't need Jeff.

Contract or no contract.

I'm going home.

Chapter Twenty

Jeff

I wake up in the back of the truck alone and experience a flash of panic, worried that Ensley may have ghosted me. I thought we were beyond that. I've never been that open or vulnerable with someone about my parents before, and the idea that she could get up and leave in the morning without so much as a goodbye after something like that doesn't sit right with me.

Then I remember how intent she was on getting her work done yesterday and how I interrupted that to drag her out on a date. That's gotta be what it is. Ensley's work always comes first, and I'm sure if I head to the yurt, I'll find her knee-deep in assembly instructions from some kind of solar-powered compost bin or something.

Pulling my Henley over my head and flattening my hair with my hands, I straighten everything in the back of the truck, securing things so they don't fall out the second I drive off, and then I rumble back down the path to Ensley's yurt. Ever since last night, everything has felt so right. I feel complete around her. She fits my life so perfectly, filling a hole I didn't even realize was there until she worked her way into it.

I would never have described myself as lonely before, but now that she's here, I don't want to go back to the way things were before. So... empty. I can't let her go back once she's done with her project. I don't care how ridiculous it makes me sound, or what kind of compromises I need to make to keep her here. Because if it's important to her, it's important to me.

I'll build a thousand cruelty-free, sustainable, fair-trade yurts if it means I get to see her every day. We've only known each other for a couple of months, but I can't deny the emotions that have blossomed and settled.

I'm falling in love with her, and I have to let her know.

I should have said it last night when I had the chance.

When I almost did.

Which is why I'm so confused when I open the door to the yurt.

Nothing about what I'm looking at makes sense. In fact, it makes so little sense that it takes my brain a full ten seconds to catch up and for my mouth to start making noises.

Unfortunately, all that comes out is a squeaky and garbled "Wha—" as she hits me clean in the chest with a throw pillow.

The yurt is in a state of disarray. No, scratch that. It's a full-scale disaster in here. Ensley is shoving things haphazardly into her duffle bag and backpack, not seeming to care what she knocks over in the process.

"I thought we talked about you barging in here," she snaps, refusing to look up at me as she struggles with the zipper on her bag. The angrier she gets, the harder it is to zip, which in turn just makes her even angrier. It's like watching a nuclear reactor approach a meltdown. "Just get the hell out please and leave me alone."

"Ensley..." The emotional whiplash is doing a number on me right now. I can't figure out what could have possibly happened between me holding her in my arms like she's the most precious thing I've ever had and this morning to elicit

this sort of reaction, short of me accidentally killing and eating a small animal in my sleep right in front of her. “This is my property.”

She sighs, slamming the palms of her hands down onto the top of her bag in a last-ditch effort to wrangle it shut. “Right. How could I forget? That’s why I’m leaving right fucking now.”

I open my mouth, then close it again, chewing on the air in an attempt to make any of this feel real or normal.

My brain does a round of cartwheels, flipping through every possible scenario where I could’ve screwed up this badly.

“The six weeks aren’t up,” I say, but it’s feeble, even to my ears. She’s not looking at me, and the way she’s avoiding eye contact is like a straight jab to my chest.

My eyes narrow as I try to read her, get a clue, anything. One minute, I’m holding her under the stars, like some cosmic alignment put us together, and the next, she can’t even stand to look at me.

Did I say something? Do something? Was it the stargazing? Too intimate? Not intimate enough? As my mind spirals out of control, I try to mask my expression, my breathing, my racing heart. My tough-guy act is real, as hollow as it feels right now.

I watch her wrestle with her bag like it’s a physical manifestation of the war raging inside her, and it cuts me. I wonder if she’s struggling like I am right now or if it is easy for her to walk away from what I thought we were building

together. Even though those thoughts tumble and roll, I'm too afraid to ask.

I know I should say something to soothe her, to bring her back to me. But what? An apology for some unknown sin? A plea for her to stay? My pride wrestles with my common sense and for once, I wish the latter would pin the former to the ground, just so I could spill my guts and tell her how much she means to me.

But all that comes out is a whisper not loud enough for her to hear, "You can't just walk out."

My body about caves in on itself. And damn it, it's not what I want to say. It's not what I mean to say. But it's all I can manage without cracking wide open and letting her see just how deeply this is affecting me. It's all I can do to hold her gaze for one more second, as if I could make her understand everything that's unsaid, everything I'm too cowardly to give a voice to, with just a look.

The tension in the air is thick enough to cut with a knife, but I feel like I'm the one being dissected, layer by layer, until all that's left is raw vulnerability. I've been played before, but this feels like a whole new level of losing, and I'm not even sure what game we're playing.

"The hell I can't!" she barks, finally wheeling around to face me. Her eyes are red-rimmed and raw, like she's spent the morning crying. "I'm done."

Something inside of me finally snaps, and I raise my voice to match hers. I would at least like the opportunity to defend myself, rather than feeling like an animal in a trap that doesn't know how it got there.

“I don’t understand! Tell me what happened. I was just on my way over here to offer to make another TikTok with you. And now you’re mad at me and I don’t even know why!”

Ensley winces at the mention of TikTok, reeling back from me as if I’ve struck her.

“Yeah, another TikTok, huh? I can’t believe you pretended not to even know what it was. Well, you sure had me fooled, didn’t you? Was this supposed to be the one where you finally finished your revenge plot? You know, told me I was a big joke and that I was disgusting to you? Canceled me on the internet? Ruined the career I spent years of blood, sweat, and tears building just because it’s something you deem beneath you?”

“What are you even talking about?” This is insane. Revenge plot? I feel like I’ve slipped into an alternate universe overnight. Somewhere there is a really evil Jeff with a curly mustache running around plotting revenge on the real Ensley, my Ensley. Not the one who keeps hurling bedding at me and looks at me like she wants to tear my eyes out.

“You’re smart,” she bellows, smacking another pillow square into my chest before she shoves past me to the other side of the yurt. “You’ll figure it out.”

I’m not making any headway here. She obviously isn’t in a listening mood, nor is she going to explain to me what it is she thinks I’ve done wrong. The only option is to back away slowly. Just like you would with an angry bear.

Standing out by the truck, it’s quiet outside, and the contrast between the peace of the outdoors and the chaos I just witnessed isn’t helping to clear my mind. Not sure what else to

do with myself, I make my way back to the house where I find an unexpected guest. Sitting among the last few Amazon packages on the porch is a tired and guilty-looking Julia. I can't imagine this is any kind of coincidence, and I don't like it one bit.

I stare at Adam's wife, her expression like a puzzle piece in this messed-up situation. A part of me wants to rip into her, demand answers. Another part wants to shut the door and forget any of this happened. But the reality sinks in, as weighty as a ton of bricks.

I'm standing here, and Ensley's walking away. Whatever this is, it's like I've lost before even knowing there was something to lose.

I grit my teeth. Anger, confusion, a touch of regret—they all swirl inside me like some toxic cocktail. My gut's tied in knots, and not the kind you can easily untangle. Shaking my head, I clench my fists. This is far from over, and whatever's happening, I'm not standing on the sidelines. Not when it comes to her.

But I don't feel like talking to Julia either.

"Jeff," she calls out to me before my feet even connect with the first porch step. Her voice is meek and apologetic. We haven't talked much one on one, most of my time is spent with Adam, so her being here alone is bizarre. "I am so, so sorry."

"For what?" She looks away when I ask the question, staring at the tips of her Ugg boots beneath her. "Do you have any idea why Ensley hates my guts all of a sudden?"

“This is all my fault. Charlie got a hold of my phone last night and posted a bunch of my TikTok drafts by accident. He also spent \$80 on Roblox and somehow managed to order about \$200 worth of stuff on Amazon. I’ve been on the phone with customer service all morning trying to get things canceled and... well, that really doesn’t matter, does it? You don’t need to hear all that,” Julia huffs, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. She looks just as broken and worn out as I feel right now. Taking her phone from her pocket, she scrolls through her feed until she finds the video she wants and shoves the phone into my hand with the screen facing me. “I’m guessing you haven’t seen this already?”

It’s a video of Adam and me out by the fire pit, and it only takes a second before the memory rushes back to me. That first day that Ensley was here, we were talking outside about how much she really grinds my gears, and we had joked about making her fall in love with me just to turn the tables on her. It was a horrible joke and not something I’d do in a million years. Definitely not something I’d ever want her to hear come out of my mouth. It was just two childhood friends blowing off steam by being real with each other. Something we’ve done ever since we were both old enough to know how. I remember now, too, the way that Julia was standing a few feet from us and filming something on her phone. I just assumed she was making a TikTok for herself, and I guess in a way she was. I’m getting really sick of people thinking they can just use other people’s lives for internet clout.

“What the hell were you doing saving this in drafts? Why would you ever post this?” I don’t want to get angry at Julia. I’ve known her for a long time and don’t want to destroy that

friendship over one bad morning, but she better have a good reason for even keeping it.

“I never intended to post it by itself. It’s been in my drafts forever. I was going to turn it into one of those cute ‘how did this turn into this’ videos and show how much y’all like each other now.” She hugs her arms around her chest and can’t seem to look me in the eye.

“That doesn’t explain why you felt comfortable filming it in the first place. I can’t stand this shit anymore. You. Ensley. Everybody. You keep filming people’s lives like they’re just props for your stupid little videos on your stupid little accounts. You manipulate situations to further your own narrative! And now, you’ve probably ruined the one good thing I’ve had going for me.” Her lip trembles like she’s going to cry, and I take a deep breath to steady myself, shoving my hands deep in my pockets. “Look. I know you didn’t mean any real harm. But I’m trying very hard to keep my cool right now. I need you to go home so I can figure things out, and maybe go salvage whatever goodwill Ensley has left for me before she tears out of here and I never see her again.”

Julia nods, swallowing hard and turning on her heel. Not that it matters. I’m too late anyway. Before she makes it down the first step, Ensley’s Chevy Bolt zooms by in a cloud of dust and gravel, driving off of the farm and possibly out of my life for good. Her back bumper takes a piece of my heart with it.

“Well, that says it all, doesn’t it, Jules? I guess when you live in a yurt, you don’t have much to pack,” I remark more to myself than to my friend, and I head inside the house, letting the screen door slam shut behind me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ensley

The last thing I wanted to see when I opened the door to my apartment was another human being sitting on my couch. I wanted to walk in the door and collapse into a pair of sweatpants and a good cry. I did not want to have to actually talk to someone. The fact that it's my sister is the only thing stopping me from kicking her out immediately.

“Why are you here?” I snap, hurling my bags onto the coffee table before throwing my jacket down next to them and kicking my shoes off.

“I didn't think you'd want shriveled-up plants,” Eden deadpans, gesturing with the misting bottle in her hand at the cluster of plants sitting in my sink as the excess water drains out of them. I had completely forgotten that I had given her a key and asked her to take care of things while I was gone. Crap. I really owe her one for that. Although, if I recall correctly, I ran enough interference for her with our parents during the whole Mateo debacle that we're probably even by now. Being sisters is really starting to feel like a lifetime of exchanging favors.

I drop down onto the couch next to her with a sigh. I've been carrying so much stress and adrenaline in my body that joints I didn't even know I had are screaming at me in pain.

“I don't,” I admit reluctantly. “I also don't want company. For obvious reasons.”

“I’m not company,” she laughs, gently pushing me on the shoulder. “I’m your sister.”

“You know what I mean,” I huff. She can be deliberately obtuse sometimes. “I’m—”

“Back early.” Eden finishes my thought, arching an eyebrow at me. Reading my facial expression, she grows visibly concerned, setting the misting bottle down on the coffee table and turning so she can face me, crossing her gangly legs on the sofa. “Why?”

“I’m sure you’ve seen it already, but here goes.” I take my phone out, angling the screen toward her, and pull up the video. The original disappeared several hours ago, shortly after I saw it, but swarms of accounts have been circulating duets and stitches since. I can’t bear to look at it again, so I focus on a corner of the ceiling instead.

“Wait.” Eden squints at the screen. “I know this video. And this isn’t the whole thing. It’s a repost taken out of context.”

“How do you know that?” I anticipated her already having seen it. I did not think that she’d know more about it than I did, considering it’s about me and the guy I’ve been sleeping with out in the woods, a couple hours’ drive from here.

“Please. I’m like the FBI and the NSA rolled into one. If it’s happened online, I can find it. You moved all the way out into the middle of nowhere, alone, and I was worried about you. Jeff lives next door to a famous NHL player whose wife is a well-known interior designer and a minor TikTok celebrity. Did you think I wouldn’t be stalking her channel in

case there was some collaboration with you? Or a background shot of you and LumberChefJeff?”

“Okay. That’s... a little intimidating.” This conversation is giving me a new healthy fear of my sister’s sleuthing abilities. I’ll have to keep that in mind going forward. Also, LumberChefJeff is a fantastic name. One I would use for marketing if I ever wanted to speak to him again. “Tell me more. What about this other video? What context am I missing?”

She scrolls over to Julia’s channel, where there are two videos from early this morning. The first is a general video directed to all of her followers, explaining that her son, Charlie, had gotten access to her phone last night and wreaked all sorts of havoc on her various accounts, publishing videos from her drafts, purchasing things on her credit card, and even sending Milo Adamski, whoever that is, a photo of his butt. She’s going to be using Face ID from now on, which seems like it’s for the best.

The other is a more extensive apology video that she’s tagged both Jeff and me in. She never meant for the video to leak without context like that. I thumb my phone and then hit play, Julia’s tragic face filling the screen.

Her eyes are red-rimmed but determined. “Ensley, I want to apologize to you, directly. I had no business filming Jeff the way I did and then saving a draft, without his—or your—consent. It was a huge breach of both your privacies, and I am so, so sorry.”

She swallows hard, gripping her hands in her lap. “I originally filmed that video to show the journey you and Jeff

were on, to eventually share how far you both had come. But that's no excuse for what I did. I should never have recorded that moment without asking Jeff for explicit permission."

Julia's eyes well up, but she blinks the tears back. "I deleted the draft as soon as I woke up and realized it had been posted, but by then, it was too late. Others had saved it and reposted it, and I couldn't stop it from spreading. I'm so sorry for any harm or stress I've caused you."

She takes a deep breath, steadying herself. "I'm begging you, Ensley, to find it in your heart to forgive me. And I'm pleading with anyone who has this video to please delete it and remove it from your accounts."

The camera then pans to Adam, who looks serious. "I echo Julia's sentiments. Jeff and I have been friends since we were kids, and he doesn't deserve this. Please, for the sake of people's privacy and common decency, delete the video."

My thumb hovers over the screen, frozen in a moment of emotional limbo. A blend of relief and skepticism swirls inside me. On one hand, Julia's words ring sincere; her regret appears genuine. But on the other, the damage is done. Trust, once fractured, leaves a scar. Yet, as I replay her apology in my mind, I find myself leaning toward forgiveness. She's owned her mistake in a way few people do. Publicly and with humility. It doesn't undo the past, but it offers a glimmer of hope for the future. Maybe, just maybe, this is a first step in mending what's been broken.

"Why would a bunch of random people repost it like that?" While Julia's reasoning was flawed, and I don't respect her decision to save that footage all this time, as a fellow

influencer, I can at least understand why she did it. All of the other accounts posting it don't even know me or Jeff at all.

“Views. Stir up a hornet's nest. Lots of selfish reasons,” Eden hypothesizes with a shrug. “Everybody wants attention nowadays because attention equals new followers and more clout. Doesn't matter who they hurt to get it.”

She's right. Anyone who's following my or Jeff's hashtags would've watched the video and given it more traction, regardless of the source. I hate this whole Pandora's Box that little Charlie Spencer opened up this morning. Now that the video is out, I can't put it away, and I have a lot of damage control to do. I wish I could go back in time to last week, when my biggest concerns were Miss Gigi chewing on my extension cords and whether the rugs I ordered matched the cabinet pulls.

First, I have to reach out to Julia. I'm not happy with her, but I certainly don't envy her right now. This faux pas could not only hurt her business, but it could look unfavorably on her husband. From the tone of her videos, she feels like crap about the whole thing. And judging from their body language during their apology tour, I'm sure that she and Adam have had a pretty gnarly fight about it too. On top of that, I know that every interaction we have or don't have is going to be analyzed over and over again by both of our fanbases. Whatever I do here is going to be very public and impact both of our online reputations. I comment on her video to let her know that there aren't any hard feelings on my end and that I don't blame her for how out of control the situation got this morning.

Once that's done, I enlist Eden's help in scripting and filming a rebuttal. I know that my followers can be a bit rabid and overly defensive of me, and I'm sure that Jeff and Laney are getting a heaping helping of cancellations and negative reviews this morning, which isn't fair to them at all. I also don't want to see all of our hard work go up in smoke.

I use the video to explain the situation. The video they see is taken out of context and incomplete. According to her apology video, the rest of the recording that Julia has reflects that Jeff never had any intentions of doing anything of the sort to me and wasn't aware that he was being filmed. Neither I nor Jeff would have ever wanted this video to see the light of day, and Julia has already removed the original from her page. I make sure they know that ultimately this isn't Julia's fault and that any versions of the video they see are being posted and shared by strangers who have no business getting involved. I don't want anyone rushing out to attack these accounts over this, but I do ask everyone to not give the videos any extra views or engagement, hoping the algorithm will eventually take over and bury them once there isn't any interest.

"Wow," Eden announces, once we've finished editing and posting the video. "You're really good at this."

"It *is* my full-time job," I remind her, stretching out on the sofa and rolling my neck along my shoulders. I didn't sleep too well in the truck bed last night, and I haven't taken a single second to relax since I first saw the video this morning. All of that is starting to catch up to me, and I feel the exhaustion settling into my bones. "No matter how much this video accomplishes, it still isn't going to fix things with Jeff. I was pretty terrible to him this morning."

“How terrible?” she asks, raising her eyebrows.

“I may have yelled, used the Lord’s name in vain, and thrown things at him.” I wince at the recollection, thinking about the sheer confusion and hurt on his face, and how vulnerable he had been with me last night. I really hope I haven’t burned that bridge for good. “A lot of things.”

“I know it feels hopeless now, but I’ve watched every single frame of footage that you two have made together, and I’ve seen you in person. From what I can tell, there’s a lot more between you than you think there is.” Throwing one of her long slender arms over my shoulder, she pulls me into a hug. I melt into her. “Besides, if anybody is willing to fight for a lost cause or a disaster, it’s the girl who went around collecting change for UNICEF every Halloween instead of candy, or who decided at ten years old she was going to single-handedly save every orangutan in Borneo, and all of the manatees in Florida, too.”

She’s right. It isn’t going to be easy, and I might not be able to undo the damage that I’ve done. But I could never respect myself again if I let Jeff walk out of my life for good. I just wish I had any idea where to begin.

“We’ll see.” I down the rest of my drink with a shrug, trying to mask the uncertainty that’s gnawing at me like a persistent itch I can’t reach.

Eden gives me a knowing look, her eyes softening with empathy. “You know, Ens, sometimes the hardest battles are the ones worth fighting for. And if Jeff really means that much to you, then he’s a battle you shouldn’t back down from.”

I look at her, struck by the weight of her words. They settle over me like a warm blanket, comforting yet heavy with truth. “You really think I have a shot at fixing this, don’t you?”

She squeezes my shoulder affectionately. “If anyone can turn a situation around, it’s you. You’ve got the heart of a lion and the spirit of a warrior. And let’s not forget, you’ve got a killer social media game,” she adds with a wink, lightening the mood. “You can control any narrative, even the ones that are offline.”

A glimmer of hope pierces through the fog of my doubts. “Thanks, Eden. I really needed to hear that.”

But I still can’t shake the image of Jeff, probably back at the farm by now, his face a mask of flabbergasted disbelief and an underlying layer of heartbreak. Damn it, the guy deserves better than someone who skedaddles at the first sign of emotional turbulence. That’s not how relationships work; you don’t just run away when things get tough. At my age, I should know better. And I like to think that I do. Not that he didn’t do anything wrong, but that being said, you stay, you talk, you argue if you have to, but you hash it out. You give the other person a chance to explain, to redeem themselves.

The irony isn’t lost on me. I, who can handle the chaos of social media and the scrutiny of thousands of followers, bolted at the first sign of real, raw emotion. What does that say about me? I’ve been so hell-bent on safeguarding my independence, my freedom, and my free-spirited *persona*, that I never considered the walls I was putting up could also be my own cage. The cage that’s now keeping me from something—

someone—who might just be worth all the vulnerability and risk.

If I'm going to turn this around, if I'm going to give this budding whatever-it-is with Jeff a fair shake, I need to face him. And myself. No more running. Because if this morning's fiasco has taught me anything, it's that running away might take you out of the situation, but it leaves you nowhere closer to a solution—or to love.

If it ends, it ends, but that won't be because I didn't give it everything I had.

“We're family,” she says softly, her gaze earnest. “We lift each other up, especially when the world tries to bring us down.”

I nod, deeply touched. For a moment, we sit there in companionable silence, each lost in our thoughts. Finally, I stand up, feeling a newfound sense of purpose. “Well, if I'm going to win Jeff back, I better get started. A social media campaign won't run itself.”

Eden chuckles, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “That's the spirit! Go get your man, girl!”

After Eden leaves, my heart feels lighter than it has all day. Yes, I messed up. Yes, he messed up. Yes, the road ahead is uncertain. But for the first time, I feel like I'm ready to face whatever comes my way. And who knows? Maybe, just maybe, I can turn this disaster into a love story for the ages.

Only time will tell. But for now, I'm willing to take the chance.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jeff

“I don’t have a lot of time,” Laney blows past me through the front door and into the living room, the bottom hem of her coat swinging open dramatically and flapping against me. It would’ve been nice if she’d called first, instead of just showing up on my porch. From the looks of it, I should consider myself lucky that she even knocked at all. “I got my assistant to move around some of my appointments today, but she only bought me a couple of hours. I’ve got about thirty minutes before I have to hit the road again. Forty-five if I drive like I mean it. And you know I always mean it.”

“Why are you here?” I run a hand through my hair, wondering if every woman in my life today has decided to go insane at the same time. Maybe they’re all in on it, and this is some massive prank they’ve decided to play on me.

“Why am I here?” She laughs desperately, crossing her arms as she flops down into one of my armchairs, slinging her feet onto the coffee table in her expensive shoes. “Why don’t you tell me what happened? Dammit, Jeff! Everything was going according to plan. We were about to have a record month with the financials. Now... this?”

“Nothing happened.” Laney is obviously here on business, and that doesn’t extend to my love life, so I’ll spare her the details of Ensley’s bizarre blowout this morning. “Why are you asking?”

“Try again,” she insists, picking at the side of her impeccably manicured nail impatiently. “*Nothing* doesn’t have half of our reservations canceling in the last four hours.”

I sit down on the sofa, resting my head in my hands. The timeline of events adds up. All of the cancellations must be because of the video. I had no idea that any of this internet drama would impact the farm. Just when I think I have a handle on how all of this works, I find myself totally lost, again. Am I being canceled? Is that what this is? Am I witnessing the cancellation of LumberJeff in real-time?

“These people are insane. Look, Lanes. Ensley and I already knew each other when she came here. I shot my shot with her, and she shot me down. Like most men, I was a little butt-hurt. So, Adam and I were just having a little complain-a-thon. I made one sarcastic comment five weeks ago and suddenly it’s taken out of context and I’m the villain.” I didn’t take the video. I didn’t post the video. Hell, I didn’t even mean what I said. It was two lifelong friends standing around, shooting the shit about women. All of this is ridiculous. “I never asked for any of this, you know. I never wanted to be an online celebrity. I live on this farm... our fucking family farm... and run it to the detriment of my own happiness because I want a peaceful, simple life!”

Laney leans forward in her chair, pushing her glasses up into her shiny brown hair and rubbing at her temples with a sigh. “What did you do?”

“I mean... nothing.” She looks at me with pursed lips, and I realize I’m not going to be able to beat around the bush with her. Not when the farm’s finances and reputation are on the

line. “But she thinks that I’ve been pursuing her to get her to like me so I can reject her on purpose, as part of some ridiculous revenge plot for god only knows what. Not only does she think that but apparently, the entire internet does too.”

She rolls her eyes and waves her hand. “Well, everything is blown sky high.”

I heave an exhale. “What do you mean?”

“Anyone with eyes and a TikTok account can see that you’re already dating,” Laney explains as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. “And at the very least, I thought you were very much in like. I thought you two were really good for each other. I thought it might go somewhere. And not because of the farm, but because I love you and only want what’s best for you.”

“In like?” I parrot the words back to her, hoping for some kind of elaboration and clarity.

Smiling, she shrugs. “You’re a little tough to read sometimes. It could be love. Maybe. *Probably.*”

So, my feelings for Ensley are that obvious, then. Laney managed to figure it out just by watching us through screens. I can only imagine what Ensley’s sisters were thinking after dinner a few weeks ago. I guess everyone figured out how I felt about her before I did. That seems to be a running theme for me.

As Laney talks, a swirl of emotions churns inside me—confusion, hesitation, but also a raw, undeniable yearning. She’s nailed it. It’s like I’ve been navigating through a fog, and

her words are the lighthouse guiding me to admit what's been staring me in the face. I've been holding back, fenced in by my own insecurities and the comfort of my routines.

Ensley's presence has tossed that comfort up in the air. She's the unmasked-for, unpredictable element that's disrupted my well-ordered life, and yet, she's also the missing puzzle piece I didn't know I was searching for. The farm, my life's work, suddenly seems incomplete without her laughter filling the air, her eyes meeting mine. As unsettling as it is comforting, I realize I don't want to go back to the way things were; I want to move forward, and I want to do it with her.

"Right." I agree, not having the energy or willpower to try and argue with her. Laney never comes all the way out here in person unless it's totally necessary. I can't imagine she'll budge on anything now that she's here. "What about Ensley?"

She chews her lip thoughtfully, a small flash of sadness dancing across her face. "To me, it looked like she was falling for you too."

I'd love to pick her brain about whatever that statement means, but as much as I care about Ensley, and as broken-hearted as I feel right now, there are far more important matters to discuss.

"I don't know how to fix the reservations," I groan, pawing at my beard. I could handle this whole incident if it only hurt my pride and my feelings. I can't take it if it hurts my wallet and the farm. That's a lot to deal with and feels distinctly unfair. There's far too much collateral damage involved.

“Don’t worry about it.” Laney waves my concern away with her hand and trills her lips. “In another month there will be a new scandal, someone else to hate. And if we stay the course with the yurts, with the amazing job Ensley did on them, we’ll have no trouble filling them again. We’ll also start on a new marketing plan. Something more concrete. Not everyone is on TikTok anyway, especially up here in Northern Minnesota. We can fill the yurts with locals until this dies down.”

It’s comforting to hear that I can still count on Laney to save my ass when the time comes. I tend to forget that just because she doesn’t live here doesn’t mean she doesn’t care about the farm just as much as I do. It’s as much a part of her as it is me—she’s just always found it too painful to live here without our parents around.

“Are you going to go after her?” my sister asks. “I know you want to.”

“Okay, you caught me,” I admit, my voice dripping with a mix of annoyance and resignation. “I like her. A lot, actually. Like, more than I’ve liked anyone in a long time. Hell, I’m pretty sure I’m falling for her. Happy?”

Her eyes brighten like she just won some sort of sisterly lottery. “That’s what I wanted to hear. But what are you going to do about it? Because if you keep acting all stoic and macho, you’re gonna lose her.”

I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. “That’s just it, Lanes. I don’t know what to do. One minute, we’re laughing and joking, and it feels like I’ve known her forever. The next, she’s posting videos of me chopping wood, making me some

internet sensation I never asked to be. And then there's the whole vegan thing."

She chuckles. "The vegan thing? When you share basic values, lifestyle choices just don't matter. Jeff, you're smarter than this. That's not what's holding you back. It's you holding yourself back."

My eyes narrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She steps closer, her voice softer. "It means, big brother, that maybe it's time you stopped hiding behind your farm, your routines, and your fear of stepping out of your comfort zone. It hurt when we lost Mom and then Dad. It hurt like hell. But that doesn't mean love isn't worth the pain. Ensley's a catalyst, something different that's come into your life. Before her, you were just existing. Living in shades of gray. Don't push her away because you're scared of living life in color."

I look at my sister, suddenly feeling very exposed, like she's peered into the deepest parts of me and laid them bare. And the truth is, she's right. I've been so busy worrying about the farm and playing it safe that I haven't given myself a chance to feel anything real in a long time. And here comes Ensley, flipping my world upside down and making me feel things I didn't even know I still could. And yeah, that terrifies me. But maybe, just maybe, it's the kind of terrifying that's worth facing.

"So, what do you suggest I do?" I finally ask, my voice tinged with vulnerability I barely recognize. I'm still not used to letting it see the light of day.

Laney grins, satisfied. "You go after her, big brother. And you don't look back."

My sigh is full body. “That sounds scary.”

My sassy sister gives me a knowing smile, her eyes shining with sisterly love and a dash of I-told-you-so. “Think about it, Jeff. You know where your heart is leading you, even if you’ve been too stubborn to follow it.” She hugs me tightly, and for a moment, I feel the weight of my hesitations lift. “I love you, you big lunkhead. Don’t mess this up. As far as only sisters-in-law go, Ensley would be first rate.” With that, she grabs her purse, gives me one last encouraging glance, and heads out the door. As I hear her car pull away, I’m left standing in my living room, alone but for the first time in a long while, feeling incredibly hopeful. Laney’s visit, short as it was, has set something into motion, and now it’s up to me to see it through.

I sit for a few minutes in the silent living room, listening to the sounds of my heater and my ceiling fan, and the weird creaking noise that the upstairs makes when the wind blows too hard. It’s too quiet here without Ensley, and far too boring. I can’t believe I lived here like this for as many years as I did. I can’t believe that I was upset when she got here and that I couldn’t wait for her to leave. Now, I could kick myself for not asking her to stay when I had the chance.

More like begging her to stay.

Want me.

Love me.

Marry me.

The walls of my home seem to close in, each tick of the clock amplifying the gaping void that Ensley left behind. It’s

like she took a part of me with her, a piece I didn't even know was missing until she filled it. My mind races, haunted by the 'what-ifs' and the 'could-have-beens.' How did I get here, caught in a whirlpool of emotions I can't navigate? For the first time in years, I feel utterly vulnerable, like a ship sailing through stormy waters without a compass. My sister's words echo in my mind, and through our family home, a haunting refrain that drowns out the silence.

Don't mess this up.

They hang heavy, like a challenge, and also a lifeline. As the evening shadows stretch across my empty living room, I feel the pull of a decision that's long overdue. If I don't act now, I risk losing the best thing that's ever waltzed into my life, holding a phone in one hand and effortlessly winning my heart with the other.

And that's a regret I'm not willing to live with.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ensley

Somewhere into my second hour of self-pity and a *Real Housewives* marathon—a pint of coconut milk ice cream and an entire sleeve of Oreos deep—I start to snap out of it. I was falling in love with Jeff. I love him, currently. The reason I know this is because my heart feels like it's been ripped out from behind my rib cage by a suction machine. And no amount of sitting around and waiting is going to help to ease the pain.

Letting the sugar rush hit full force, I stare at the television screen, paying extra special attention to a commercial for a local restaurant.

And an idea hits me.

A really good idea.

It's the perfect gesture of compromise and apology. I'm going to cook my man a steak dinner, even if it turns my stomach to do so.

Cooking Jeff a steak dinner isn't just about putting food on a plate; it's a monumental step for me. It's a sacrifice of my own beliefs, a stepping out of my comfort zone in a way that screams, *I care about you enough to put you before me*. For someone who's always used veganism as a protective shield, it's the equivalent of laying down my armor. I feel my heart swell at the thought of doing something so contrary to my nature, just to make him happy.

It's like I'm offering a part of myself, a deeply ingrained principle, on a platter—no pun intended. And in that moment, I realize how far I've come. From being a person who wouldn't even compromise on the type of milk in her coffee, to someone willing to cook meat as a peace offering. If that doesn't shout how much I'm sorry for what went down between us and how much I value him, I don't know what does. It feels terrifying and liberating at the same time, like standing on the edge of a cliff and realizing you've got wings.

It takes me less than ten minutes to brush down my flyaways and wipe the cookie crumbs from the corners of my mouth before climbing into my car and flooring it toward the closest Whole Foods. On the way, I dial my sister on my Bluetooth.

"I just left you."

My hands grip the steering wheel. "I know, but I need you again. How soon can you meet me at Whole Foods?"

Eden sighs long and hard. "I'll leave now."

When I glide into the parking lot, my sister is already there, waiting by the front door. We power walk to the meat department, before realizing that we have no idea what we're doing. I haven't touched a piece of meat in well over a decade, and as much as Eden loves to eat, she's no Julia Child. I've seen her almost set a pot of water on fire.

"We probably should've thought this through," Eden admits, poking at a package of strip steaks with her index finger. "I could go ask the guy at the meat counter..."

“No. I know exactly who to call.” I dig in my purse for my phone, dialing the one number I know will not only be able to help but will be beyond touched that I even asked.

It only rings twice before she picks up. “Mom. I need you.”

There’s a deep sigh from the other end of the line, and I can see the stress-related wrinkles forming between her eyebrows. She calls those her “daughter lines.”

“I’ll get the guest room ready,” she groans in resignation. “Damn yurts. I knew this was a bad idea.” Of course. The last two times one of us needed a favor from her, it required a daughter moving back into the guest bedroom of the house. I rush to correct her and alleviate some of her stress.

“No, Mom. It’s not what you think. I need help picking out a steak.” It’s hard enough to say the word, and I shake my head with a grimace. I have no idea how I’m going to manage to cook the thing. I just have to keep thinking of the hurt in Jeff’s eyes this morning, and the way his chest feels so good under my hands. Focus.

“You have no idea how happy this makes me,” she coos with the sort of excitement one would reserve for the announcement of incoming grandchildren. I didn’t realize she was still holding a candle for my eventual conversion back from veganism. Good grief.

My lips twist. “It’s not for me. It’s for Jeff.”

“LumberJeff? I knew something was going on between you two.” I had no idea my mom watched my TikToks, let alone theorized about my relationships. Has everyone in my

life been quietly rooting for us this entire time? Am I the last person to find out that we were in a relationship that just didn't have a label? "Where do you want to meet?"

I let her know which grocery store we're at, and she hangs up abruptly. She must blow every single yellow light along the way because she arrives faster than I thought was physically or legally possible. My very capable mother charges over to the meat department and scans the pre-cut steaks, pursing her lips and squinting, and then shakes her head mumbling something about her unborn grandchildren being on the line. Turning on her heel, she strides over to the butcher counter and has a lengthy chat with the young man behind it. There are a few tense moments where it looks like an argument might break out between them, then she laughs, as does he, and she returns triumphantly clutching a hefty brown paper package. I have no idea what just transpired, and I look at Eden for clarification. She laughs with a shrug, just as lost as I am.

"Mom, I have no idea how to cook that thing."

She stares at me over the top of her glasses with an expression of deep exasperation. "I know, honey. Trust me. I know."

Then she's pushing the cart through the store, whizzing around and tossing things into the basket with brief explanations. She gets distracted by some Chardonnays the store is featuring, and after insisting that our father never hears a word about this, maneuvers two cases into the cart, before hustling Eden and me over to the checkout. I don't even look at the total when the cashier is finished, letting my mom swipe her card and reassuring her that this secret dies with us.

We split up in the parking lot since I plan on taking my things and all of the provisions and heading straight over to the farm. Mom packs the steak and all of the necessary accessories into one of those lined bags meant to keep things cool, and handwrites all of the instructions I could possibly need, with a few doodled diagrams just to be safe. After I reassure her several times that I'll call her if anything doesn't make sense, she climbs into her car and whizzes off.

It's right when I start my car that my cell phone rings. My heart leaps into my throat as I see the caller ID.

"Hi," a female voice starts hesitantly. "This is Laney."

"Laney!" I try to sound as chipper and professional as possible. I'm not sure what, if anything, Jeff has told her this morning. Regardless of what has transpired between me and her brother, Laney still hired me to do a job and is technically my boss. "So nice to talk to you."

"I wish I could say the same. This is so awkward but... the contract."

"I'm on my way back to the farm right now," I insist, pulling out of my parking spot and heading toward the main road. My heart is pounding, the reality of the situation sinking in.

She makes a small noise of surprise. "You are?"

"I am." Idling at a red light, I sigh as I lean my head against the steering wheel. "I want to fix... everything."

"How about Jeff's heart?" Laney's tone is more concerned than accusatory, a soft reminder rather than a sharp jab. "It could use some fixing too."

I swallow hard, my voice catching. “Excuse me?”

“I just mean... if you’re planning on breaking it again, maybe it’s best to consider not going back.” Her voice is tinged with a careful blend of concern and sincerity. “No one wants that, least of all you, I’d think.”

“No,” I blurt out, tears pricking at my eyes. She isn’t someone I want as an enemy right now, or ever. If I’m going to get Jeff to trust me again, I’m going to need her to trust me too. “I want to make things right.”

“Thank goodness,” she says with a sigh and a short laugh. “I had no idea how I’d ever convince him to date again. Not that he’d have trouble finding a date now, thanks to you.”

She’s right. The thirst my followers have for LumberJeff is a little out of control sometimes. I may have created a monster on that front. Maybe we should start interviewing people before they come out to the yurts, just to make sure they aren’t coming there to steal Jeff away or take a clipping of his hair.

Because he’s mine.

“Wow. Maybe TikTok is too powerful,” I admit with a smile, but it’s a strained one. My chest feels tight, the weight of my actions pressing down on me.

Laney’s voice softens. “Ensley, do you really care about Jeff? I mean, truly care?”

I grip the steering wheel, tears threatening to spill. “More than I ever thought possible. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

A pause, and then: “Okay. Just... be gentle with him. He’s been through a lot. And he really likes you. He’s so afraid of

getting hurt. And then you left him without so much as a conversation.”

I choke back a sob. “I really like him too.”

We exchange polite goodbyes, but the conversation lingers in my mind as I drive back to Jeff. With a trunk load of steak, a mouth full of apologies, and more than a little hope in my heart, I know that I have to go back to the scene of the crime and make a different choice. For Jeff, for Laney, for me. The road ahead may be rocky, but I’m willing to face it head-on, for the chance to heal what’s been broken and to find what’s been lost.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jeff

While two of the reservations we had lined up for this weekend canceled during the shitstorm of bad press this morning, there's still one couple driving down on Friday, and I owe it to them to make sure the property is everything they were promised it would be, with or without Ensley here to run things. Besides, she was never meant to be here permanently beyond the terms of her six-week contract. That was just my own foolish wishful thinking. I need to figure out how to hold it all down without her help, even if my stomach clenches just thinking about it.

I take the truck out to the yurts, clearing some loose branches from the roadway on my way down so that the path looks neat and tidy. After circling the exterior of a few of the yurts, making sure there aren't any signs of rain leaks or animals breaking in, I double-check that the solar-powered generators that Ensley installed are still functioning and delivering power.

Everything seems okay until I get to the Adirondack yurt. The lights are on, and the door isn't closed all the way. No one is scheduled to be here this week at all. So, there's either a whole lotta goats in there getting up to who knows what, or I have squatters. I pick up a particularly large stick from the ground, not sure what I intend to do with it, and creep my way toward the door. Until I see the back end of Ensley's Bolt poking out from behind the yurt.

Slumping my shoulders, I trudge over to the yurt and knock on the door.

“Come in,” she calls, not bothering to come to the door. I’m going to need to have another safety talk with her about letting strangers into the yurt and leaving the door wide open like this. I hate that I still care about her and am busy thinking about her safety after everything that happened between us today.

I enter tentatively, prepared for an onslaught of decor items to be hurled at me again. Instead, Ensley is standing in the kitchen, reading a piece of paper with her brow furrowed.

I try to ignore how damn good it feels to see her.

Every part of me wants to close the distance between us, to feel her warmth, to inhale the scent that’s uniquely hers. Touch her. Taste her. It’s like I’m pulled by a magnetic force, but I resist, planting my feet firmly on the ground as if they’re anchored. I keep reminding myself of the wall she’s built, the distance she’s put between us. How can I touch her when it feels like miles separate us emotionally, even though she’s just a few feet away?

My heart’s a clenched fist in my chest, and I can almost hear it pounding in my ears. It’s a constant battle between what I want to do and what I should do. I should be angry, distant, mirroring her own emotional retreat. But God, just the sight of her undoes me, disarming me completely.

As I stand before my Ensley, on a precipice between hurt and hope, it’s a dizzying height. I want to reach out, to hold her, to erase anything negative that ever fell between us as if it were just lines in the sand, easily swept away. But I can’t.

So, I swallow the lump in my throat, a bitter mix of yearning and restraint, and force myself to speak. “I thought you left for good?” The words feel heavy like they’re carrying all the unspoken emotions I’m struggling to keep inside.

Her eyes dart from the kitchenette, then back to me. “Jeff, I really want to talk this whole situation out with you, but I’m planning something, and you being here is kind of ruining the surprise factor.” My heart does a funny little flip, and I shuffle on my feet awkwardly before realizing that I’m still holding the large stick in my hand, and I tuck it behind my back. “Fine. When can we get back together?”

She hesitates like she’s calculating the perfect moment. “How about you come back an hour from now?”

An hour. Sixty minutes to wonder what she’s cooking up—literally and metaphorically.

“What about neutral ground instead?” The idea of meeting her in any of the yurts right now doesn’t feel right. They all have too many memories attached, both good and bad, and I don’t think they’d put either of us in the right headspace.

“What do you have in mind?” she asks, going back to perusing her piece of paper. Whatever is written on there must be really important. I hope it isn’t about me.

“The clearing.” *Our clearing.* “One hour.”

“You got it,” she agrees, before turning back into the kitchenette.

This whole conversation hits me like a slap in the face, and for a second, I’m disoriented. This isn’t the Ensley I know—the vivacious one, the one whose presence feels like a warm

hearth. This morning, she was all bluster and steam. Now she's this distant, unaffected version, and it leaves me unsettled. It's like she's a puzzle, and all the pieces have been jumbled up. I want to give her a little shake to snap her out of this distorted haze. Instead, I'm left with this gnawing void, a silence that's louder than any argument we've ever had.

When I'm angry at her, I know what to do.

When she's angry at me, I'm completely lost like Horatio through the break in the fence.

But this is obviously all I'm going to get out of her for now. At least she's going to give me a chance to explain. In one hour. Turning on my heel, I head back out to the truck and aimlessly drive back to the house. Of course, Adam is waiting for me on my porch with something wrapped up in a towel in his arms. From the way it keeps wriggling around, I'm guessing it's another goat. I'm just about to open my mouth to chastise Horatio again when a head pokes out of the fabric, and I'm surprised to see Miss Gigi instead. It's so weird seeing her without any clothes on. Ensley really did a number on me with that one.

"Let me guess," I sigh, nodding toward the fence with my chin. I thought I had fixed it up enough after the last goat escape. Adam shakes his head with a laugh.

"No, the fence is fine. She wandered off down the road after Ensley. The second she saw her car, little Miss Thing here took off chasing after it. Charlie saw her out there, and we snagged her up for you. The kids played with her and took a lot of selfies. And now it's time to bring her home." The seriousness in his tone tells me that more than one of those

kids tried to take custody of the little lady this afternoon and that he spent a good deal of time explaining how and why that absolutely can't happen. "You look stressed. What's going on?"

"Ensley's back," I offer, knowing that those two words will explain whatever unpleasantness is going on with my facial expression. Beckoning for Adam to follow me in, I open the front door and head into the living room. He sets the bundle of towels down, Miss Gigi shaking them away indignantly.

Adam flashes me a mischievous grin. "I knew she would be."

"She's not really speaking to me. At least not like she was before," I clarify before he gets the chance to get too excited. I didn't realize he was rooting for us this hard. I guess he can join the club. "She told me to meet her in an hour."

"Maybe you need to meet her in the middle." He plops down on my sofa, kicking his shoes off and throwing his feet up on the coffee table. "Show her that she can trust you with her heart."

I almost choke on my own spit at his choice of words. "Whoa. Heart? I wouldn't go that far."

One eyebrow lifts. "Yes, you would. I saw the way you looked at that woman. You'd go all the way to the altar."

I probably still look at her that way.

"But would she leave me standing there?" The question falls out of my mouth before I have a chance to even think about what I'm saying. It's not that I'm worried about Ensley

rejecting me—the last forty-eight hours have shown that that’s a more than reasonable fear. The real shocker is that I would even imagine being there at all and that Adam of all people would be the one to highlight that for me.

“Show her how you feel,” he insists, reaching over to nudge my arm. “The water’s warm in the relationship department. It’s time for you to take the plunge.”

There’s a small tugging sensation at the bottom of my jeans, and I look down to see Miss Gigi nibbling at them with her teeth. Even she agrees, apparently. I need to get up and do something about this. I have to find a way to show Ensley how I feel and to make her believe that she can trust me.

I know just the thing, but I’ll have to haul ass if I’m going to get it all done within the hour. Cooking for her isn’t new; I’ve been doing it since before sparks flew. It’s how I first started showing her I cared before I even knew I did. I should have just enough stuff in my fridge to scoot by, and if I play my cards right, tonight’s dinner won’t be a solo act.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ensley

I think the steak is done. I'm pretty sure it's done. The small meat thermometer Mom made me take along indicates that it's ready and suitable for human consumption and won't make anyone sick. It just looks so soft and wet still. I guess that's the point. I don't know. I remember the way Jeff powered through that steak on our first almost date together, and it looked pretty raw then, so I can be pretty confident that this one will work just as well. I shake my head, trying not to think about what I'm touching as I lower the steak into a thermal box and seal it up.

With the extra hour to get everything done, I feel like I've managed the perfect non-vegan apology meal. At least, to the best of my abilities, that is. I can't believe he almost ruined the surprise by just showing up like that. But I think I held him off without giving too much away.

Glancing at my phone, I realize that the hour is almost up, and I need to leave now if I want to meet him at the clearing in time. I made sure to buy a cute picnic basket while I was out. It wouldn't feel very romantic if I showed up with the food bundled up in a grocery bag or something. I gently set the box with the steak in first, nestling it in the bottom of the basket, before following it with a neatly wrapped baked potato, a side of sour cream, cheese, and crumbled bacon, and then topping the whole thing with some cutlery and a cold beer. Taking a deep breath, I try to calm my nerves and pack up the backseat

of my car since I have more to bring than I can carry in one trip on foot. I start the short drive from the yurt to the clearing, following the same path he drove me down last night. It feels surreal, knowing that everything was so different less than twenty-four hours ago.

I manage to make it there before he does, which is what I was hoping for. It gives me time to spread out the blanket that I brought, along with a few cushions to sit on, and get some ambiance going with a pair of lanterns for lighting as dusk starts to settle on the horizon. I'm almost done adjusting everything exactly how I want it when I hear the rumble of a truck and not long after the sound of a familiar pair of work boots crunching down some twigs and dried leaves.

Turning to look, I see Jeff coming up the path at a slow walk. And he's carrying a picnic basket too. He looks from my basket to his and shakes his head with a smile.

"Great minds think alike, huh?" he asks, setting his basket down on the blanket before kicking off his shoes and taking a seat.

"I don't think my mind was so great this morning," I start with a sigh. Not so great is an understatement. I was an absolute idiot this morning.

"C'mon, Ensley," he starts, but I cut him off before he has a chance to excuse my behavior for me.

My heart's pounding like a drum solo as I sit down next to Jeff on the blanket. This is it—the moment of reckoning. Taking a deep breath, I forge ahead. "I messed up, Jeff. Royally," I say, my voice quivering on the edge of emotion I don't want to spill. "I let my fears and preconceptions cloud

what was really happening between us. So, at the first sign of trouble, I got angry, and I... I ran. And for that, I'm so, so sorry."

His arm—solid and reassuring—wraps around my shoulders, pulling me in close to his chest. God, how did I forget this feeling? The comforting weight of him, the rough texture of his flannel, the smell that's as intoxicating as a vintage wine—I've missed it all so much. It's as if my soul exhales, releasing tension I didn't even know I was holding.

He runs his fingers through my hair, gently scratching my scalp in that heavenly way that turns me into a puddle. "Ensley, I get why you reacted the way you did," he murmurs, his voice tinged with a vulnerability that strikes me to my core. "But you need to know, hurting you is the last thing I'd ever want to do. I'll admit that it stung that the first thing you thought of this morning was that I'd betrayed you. And it stung so much because I love you. I'm crazy about you, and I want to be with you. That's why I brought this—a peace offering. You're not the only one who could have made better choices. But I promise to do better in the future if you will too."

My heart swells to the point of bursting, and any remaining walls crumble into dust. As I look into his eyes, I see my future, my present, and all the apologies I never knew I needed. It's overwhelming and beautiful, like staring into the sun without getting burned. And in that moment, I know we're going to be okay. Better than okay.

We're going to be extraordinary.

He points at the basket, starting to get up to go get it, but I grab his arm and push him back down onto the blanket. I'm not going to let him drop an l-bomb on me like that and then segue into something else like it didn't happen.

"Jeff, I love you too," I whisper, before bringing my lips to his. We sit in shared silence for a moment, just breathing each other's air. But then I remember the gift that I brought him, and how it's definitely getting cold just sitting here. I jump up quickly, striding excitedly over to the basket. "Obviously. Or else how could I have made you this?"

I bring him the basket, setting it in front of him, and he gestures for me to take his. Opening it, I unpack a lidded box not unlike the one I brought for him. Inside is a wonderful-looking vegan feast—a marinated and grilled portobello mushroom cap, cauliflower mash, and a boatload of roasted veggies. I don't know how I could live without his cooking at this point in my life. It all smells so good, and the gesture is so kind that I start to tear up. Jeff looks at me in concern as I dab at my wet eyes with the back of my hand.

"Why are you upset?"

"I forgot to make you any veggies!" My plate is so perfect and so balanced that I wonder if I've totally flubbed Jeff's meal in return. I'm terrified that I didn't do any of it right, but the grin on his face when he unveils his steak tells me that I did just fine. "But I will share. That is... if you want to."

"Ensley, I want to share everything with you. Food. Partnership. Life. This is perfect." Leaning over his meal, he takes my hand in his and brushes my knuckles with a light kiss. "And you're perfect to me."

Jeff's eyes widen as he lifts the cover off the steak. He pauses, looking up at me, his gaze clouded with a mix of awe and disbelief. "I can't believe you made all this. For me?" He picks up the fork and knife, cutting into the meat with a kind of reverence. "Ensley, do you know how big of a deal this is?"

"I know," I reply, a bit nervous but mostly eager to see his reaction.

He takes his first bite, and his eyes close for a moment, savoring the flavors. "This is incredible. Like, seriously restaurant quality. This means so much to me."

"It's a peace offering," I say softly, "and a promise that I'm willing to step out of my comfort zone for us. For you."

He sets down his utensils and reaches for my hand, locking his eyes with mine. "You've just cooked me a steak, Ensley. A steak! It's not just about the food; it's about what it represents. This is huge."

"I love you enough to go against my own beliefs, even if it's just for a meal," I admit, my heart pounding in my chest.

"And I love you enough to cherish every sacrifice, every adjustment you make, because I know they're not easy." He pulls me closer for another kiss. "This right here? This is everything."

We tuck into our food, which I'm not surprised to discover is every bit as delicious as it looks. I wonder if Jeff would've been a chef if things had gone differently for him. If he had, I never would've met him and wouldn't get to have his cooking or his strong hands all to myself. Six weeks ago, I never would

have imagined wanting to share a meal with him, and now, I can't imagine myself doing anything without him by my side.

It's funny how quickly things can change.

With one breath.

One heartbeat.

I must have followed Mom's directions to the letter because he eats the entire thing before I'm halfway done. Either that, or he's just being really nice about the fact that I touched a piece of meat today. Regardless, he's satisfied, neatly putting away his boxes and plates in the basket and stretching languidly out on the blanket. As much as I've enjoyed my meal so far, I can't bear to eat another bite and do the same. He must not be as full as I am, because he's asking about dessert before I can even catch my breath.

"I'm so sorry," I apologize, snuggling up against him. "I didn't bring anything."

"I don't know. I think we can come up with something for dessert," he teases, letting his hand work its way up under my sweater, cupping my breast in his palm and massaging in a circle. I melt in his hands instantly, turning on the blanket to face him, and meeting his lips for a kiss. The sun has almost vanished from the sky, leaving streaks of pink and purple along the tree line. It's the most beautiful sunset I've ever seen, made even more breathtaking by the way that Jeff's body feels against mine. We fit so well together, so perfectly, that I can't see myself ever being with anyone else.

He works his way down my throat, dragging his teeth along my skin, until he gets to the neck of my sweater, pushing

the fabric down to plant kisses along the top of my collarbone. I feel so safe in his hands as they cup the back of my head and my ass, pulling me tight against him. Jeff's mouth moves from my neck, across my chest, and he begins to slowly pull my sweater over my head. I feel a chill run through me as the fabric slides away, but Jeff is like a furnace against me, radiating warmth. His eyes smolder as they trace the curves of my body revealed by the lingerie beneath. He reaches his hands up to cup my breasts and I melt into him.

He starts to pull away, but I grab onto his shirt, not wanting him to go. Without breaking eye contact, he brings his lips back down to mine and we share a slow kiss before he pulls away again. His hands move from my waist down to the button of my jeans and slowly slides them down over my hips until they are in a pile on the ground along with my sweater. As he drinks in the sight of me, his hands move up exploring every inch of skin exposed by the lacy lingerie beneath until finally making their way behind me to unhook my bra.

The straps slide off of each shoulder bringing with them an exquisite sensation that travels through every nerve ending in its wake as it falls away revealing even more bare skin for Jeff's eyes to explore. His arms wrap around me drawing me close so that our chests meet while his lips find their way back to mine in another drugging kiss as if nothing else exists in that moment but us two.

He shifts backward allowing space between us so that his hands can continue their journey, tracing circles toward my hips until finally resting on the waistband of my panties. His eyes meet mine and without either of us saying a word, they both speak volumes as he slides them off my hips and down

my legs. I feel so exposed, yet so safe in his arms as our bodies together become an orchestra of passion.

It's a bit nerve-wracking, having him undress me outside like this, but I know that no one ever comes here. It's our secret place, just for the two of us.

As his lips meet my skin, every touch feels like a vow, every kiss like a promise. This isn't just a moment; it's a forever kind of feeling. I've been touched before, but never like this—never with this level of emotion, like he's trying to memorize me. It's as if Jeff is savoring not just me, but us, this unique blend of yin and yang we've created. For the first time, I feel not just wanted but cherished, and the difference is as stark as night and day. It's thrilling and terrifying, but above all, it's exactly where I want to be.

The cold air forms an exciting contrast with the warmth of his mouth as he kisses every exposed part of me, treating me like the dessert that I neglected to bring him. His lips are scorching hot against my freezing stomach and thighs, kissing away the goosebumps that formed there the moment he took away my clothes. He pulls his sweater over his head, tucking it behind mine like a pillow, before returning to his assault on my person with his tongue.

Crouching between my legs, he drapes one of them over his shoulder, then descends between them, closing his mouth over my clit and running his tongue in frantic circles over my skin. Any concerns or awkwardness about being outdoors leave my mind, as do all of my manners and propriety. Everything he's doing feels so good that I can't focus on anything else. All that exists for me is the feeling of his breath

on the crease of my thighs, and the sensation of his thumbs along my hips, holding me hard enough that I squirm in his grasp and wonder if I'll bruise tomorrow.

Jeff releases his hold on one side to bring his hand lower, sucking at his finger shamelessly before sliding it inside of me. I gasp at the contact, already sensitive from the consistent work his tongue is doing, and I know it won't take much to push me over the edge. A second finger finds its way inside of me, arching up perfectly, and he tightens the circle his lips make, sucking at my flesh and making me feel as if I'm going to turn inside out and leave my body entirely. One of my hands finds its way to my mouth, trying to stifle the noises that I'm making, while the other winds into his hair, urging him on. Another moment, and then I'm seeing stars, crying out into the palm of my hand and digging my heel into his back.

In the arms of this man, I'm not just another girl; I'm the axis his world spins around. His touch isn't casual. It's deliberate, almost reverent, as if he's handling something infinitely precious. Being here with him in this way isn't just about passion, but about the level of care that makes a woman's heart swell even more than it makes her body quiver. For the first time, I understand what it's like to feel not just loved but cherished, and that is as intoxicating as it is comforting. Something about being here, all tangled up in Jeff Rawlins is like coming home, if home were a pair of strong arms and a heart that beats in tune with mine.

He continues his motions, small and gentle, letting me float back down to earth before he plants a final soft kiss on my thigh and stands. He eases his jeans and boxers down his legs, kicking them off somewhere behind him, and then kneels

between my legs. He sheathes himself with a condom from his pocket as I watch him. Sitting back on his heels, Jeff pulls me toward him, splaying my legs open with his hands.

“I love you, Ensley,” he moans, before sliding his cock inside of me in a single easy thrust. Still reeling from my own orgasm, I can’t offer much but relaxed enjoyment, letting him do whatever he wants with me in the moment. I go along with it, arching into his movements, riding along the waves of pleasurable sensations.

“I love you too,” I manage to gasp out, feeling the beginnings of a second climax coiling in my stomach.

Taking one of his huge hands, I lock his fingers with my own and squeeze them tightly, trying to let him know through my actions just how strongly I feel for him. It must work, because right as I start to be overcome by another explosive peak, he unwinds, slamming his hips against mine and letting my name out in a sigh. Once the pleasure fades, he curls up next to me, a thin sheen of sweat on his skin, and feebly pulls his sweater over us both, as if it will cover much of anything.

He kisses the side of my ear and pulls me into the curve of his body.

“That was the best steak dinner I’ve ever had in my life,” he whispers dramatically, and I dissolve into a fit of laughter. “But only because you made it with love. For me. Even when you didn’t want to.”

“Of all the meat eaters I’ve ever met,” I shoot back sleepily, trying not to take a nap half-dressed in the middle of the woods and starting to fail. “You’ve been the one with the warmest heart.”

A heart that I can feel now, my hand on his chest, and one that I vow to never break again.

Epilogue

Jeff

Actively intercepting every piece of mail or package delivered to the farm for the last few weeks has been quite a task. Ensley is very excitable when it comes to mail and looks for the USPS mail truck, FedEx, or UPS with more fervor than a feisty chihuahua. It paid off today though. I finally have the last element needed to complete my surprise. I've been talking to this jeweler online for months, trying to get the perfect ethically sourced, hand-crafted piece built for Ensley. I even measured her hand in her sleep, just to be sure I got the right fit.

I make sure the package is secure in my pants pocket, where there isn't any chance she'll find it early, before gathering her up and driving her out to our clearing under the guise of needing a second opinion on something. I guess I can't really call it a clearing anymore, since it's full. Sitting in the middle of where my parents had longed to build their dream home is a massive yurt that Ensley and I have been working on for the past year. It hasn't been easy. Ensley's had her hands full handling all of the marketing for the farm, alongside running Miss Gigi's accounts, helping me with mine, and still fielding all of her Vegan Vexation content. I've been busy enough on my own. Business at the farm has been booming, thanks to both Ensley and my sister's marketing skills. It's been no easy task converting most of our business to a replanted model either—but people seem to love it.

I've got more bookings lined up this season for replants than for cut trees, which I never expected in a million years. Not to mention all of the merchandise. There are t-shirts, mugs, ornaments, bumper stickers, water bottles. You name it. Ensley talked to Laney who talked to a friend in publishing, and now we've got two cookbooks in the pipeline as well—*LumberJeff's Meat-Eating Man in a Cruelty-Free Kitchen*, and a collection of easy snack recipes for kids, by our favorite “kid,” Miss Gigi.

Not that I'm complaining. This is the most direction I've ever felt like I've had in my life, and I couldn't do it without Ensley by my side. Every day is both a challenge and its own reward. Today, I'm hoping it will all come together.

In the whirlwind of our lives, one constant has been the unexpected but genuine friendship that's blossomed between Ensley and Julia, even after the TikTok mess that's long since forgotten. Now, it's like they've been besties for years. Our weekends often find us at one another's farms, where the four of us—Ensley, Julia, Adam, and me—spend quality time together. Whether it's the competitive yet hilarious cornhole matches, casual drinks under the stars, or simple conversations, it's a coupledness that I never knew I needed but now can't imagine being without. These moments are the cherry on top of the chaotic, fulfilling sundae that our lives have become.

My heart hammers in my chest as I take in the sight of our shared dream. God, it feels like my soul is strumming with nerves and anticipation, every beat echoing *Ensley, Ensley, Ensley*. For the first time in my life, everything feels like it's falling into place like the disjointed pieces of a puzzle finally

making a beautiful picture. It's not just about the booming business or the upcoming cookbooks; it's about waking up every morning next to her, facing each challenge head-on, and reaping the joys that come from it. She's my partner, my confidante, my love. The thought of asking her to be my forever is both exhilarating and nerve-wracking, like standing on the edge of a cliff, ready to dive into the unknown. I know it's a leap, but with her, it's one I'm more than willing to make. Today, if all goes as planned, will mark the beginning of the rest of our lives, and damn it, I can't wait another second.

Just like the clearing—our clearing—my life has come full circle.

I know my folks are looking down on me right now with smiles.

“I can't believe you need a second opinion on something.” Ensley shakes her head as she climbs out of the truck and starts to trek over to the yurt. “You've been so good at putting all of this together, and you know exactly what I like. I think we've gotten to the point where you know me better than I know myself, and that's saying something.”

“Maybe I just want flattery and attention. Did that ever occur to you?” I tease back, holding open the front door and waiting for her to take her boots off and step inside. She is about to fling another joke at me, probably about getting attention from my female followers, before her entire face changes, and she gasps.

“It's done?” she asks incredulously, wheeling around to face me. I nod, and she throws herself into my arms in a tight hug.

I told her the yurt would be finished by New Year's. We could make a huge post about it—New Year, New Yurt or something, and have a nice romantic getaway together to ring in the year. Instead, I worked every spare minute and hour that I had to ensure it would be done before Christmas. I wanted it to be my gift to her. Not my only gift, but certainly the largest one by square footage.

“All of it works?” Ensley asks, flitting over to the kitchen and turning on the tap. There's a hook-up to several huge rain collection barrels outside, allowing for a considerable amount of running water inside of the structure. We still opted for a composting toilet, in an effort to conserve a little bit. But there's something nice about being able to wash your hands indoors. Or even take a quick shower.

She runs to a lamp plugged in by the bed and turns it on and off again, squealing with delight. “How'd you get enough power out here? I only saw a small generator outside.”

“Generator is for emergencies,” I clarify, impressed that she's gotten competent enough at all of this to not only spot the generator but to recognize that one of its size couldn't power all of this. “Everything is hooked up to solar as a power source. Just like I thought you'd like.”

“And it's so warm in here,” she remarks, fiddling with the throw pillows on the bed. If there's one thing I haven't nailed down, it's the way she makes a bed. Apparently, I do it wrong every time. If that's the biggest quibble we have between us so far, I'm a happy man. “How are you heating it?”

I gesture with a nod toward the massive wood stove in the center, with a chimney that leads out of the top of the yurt. “I

think I found a way to recycle some of the trees. The rest I can just cut myself.”

Ensley arches an eyebrow at this, quirking her lips in a mischievous smile. “Oh? Getting back to those LumberJeff roots, are we?”

I laugh, bringing my arms across my chest. “Only for you. I’ll even do it shirtless if you want the full experience. But no photos, okay?”

“Fine,” she sighs with a roll of her eyes. “No photos. I still think you should do that calendar...”

“Maybe one. Just for you. No other copies.” Ensley suggested at one point that I do one of those shirtless, beefcake calendars for the farm. Maybe even get Adam involved and call up some of the other guys from his team. I told her in no uncertain terms that that would never be happening. No matter how many copies she thinks it will sell.

I’ve become an expert at respecting her boundaries, and she’s learning how to respect mine too, even when that means less social engagement.

“You still haven’t noticed the real reason I brought you out here, you know.”

Looking at her, bathed in the soft glow of the twilight, I’m struck by just how damn beautiful she is. And she’s mine. All the sass, the fire, the heart—mine. My chest tightens with a love so raw and real, it’s like a punch to the gut. Man, do I love this woman.

And I can’t wait to make it official.

She goes quiet, turning her head this way and that as she examines the interior of the yurt, then freezes when she looks directly behind her.

“It’s the giant Christmas tree and the pile of packages, isn’t it?” she deadpans, rubbing at her face with her hands.

I take a step toward her. “You’ve got it. I thought we could do some decorating and get some footage of it. You always said that people love holiday content, right?”

She grins, before tearing off toward the boxes and trying to find the best place to record from her phone. “You listened!”

Ensley makes several adjustments to the lighting, recenters the tree that I spent at least half an hour trying to place before she got here, and then runs to the bathroom to look at herself in the mirror. Satisfied that we look our best, she starts recording us decorating the tree. It would’ve been weird to me a year ago, sitting here letting a camera roll while I live my life, but I’m so used to it by now I don’t even notice anymore. Whatever my personal qualms are about social media and the whole influencer game, it’s Ensley’s thing, and it makes her happy. I’d do anything to keep her smiling for even one more day. Which is how I find myself wearing a Santa hat and being draped in garland as she laughs like a fiend.

Eventually, we find ourselves out of packages. Ensley stops recording and collapses on the couch with a satisfied sigh.

“Huh. That’s weird,” I say, pretending to examine the underside of the tree.

Her head tilts. “What?”

Reaching under the branches, I pull out a large envelope. “There’s something here. It just says *To Ensley* on it. Nothing else.”

She perks up from her spot on the small couch, trying to get a glimpse of the red and gold paper in my hand. When I don’t get any closer, she stands begrudgingly, making her way over to me and taking the envelope away. I watch as she opens it, brows furrowed, and goes to show me the contents.

Then, she looks from the object in her hand to me, and back again.

It’s an ornament I had commissioned. Another cartoon LumberJeff, this time down on one knee with a comically oversized box in his hand.

“I didn’t put that there,” I lie, my heart pounding like it’s on the last lap of a championship race. The tension is electric, like the air before a thunderstorm, and I can’t help but hold my breath. This is the moment—our moment. She’s holding the future in her hands, and hell, it’s about to change our lives in the biggest, boldest, most beautiful way possible.

Just like the ornament, I too am down one knee, though the box in my hand is a normal-sized box from a normal-sized, very real, non-cartoon jeweler. Her hands shake as she opens it, and her eyes start to mist the second she sees the ring.

Her gasp is music to my ears.

“It’s ethically sourced,” I rush to clarify, not wanting her to be distracted from the moment by worries about children in mines or some kind of animal rights abuse in jewelry-making that I wasn’t even aware existed.

“It’s beautiful,” she manages to squeak out, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

Reaching out, I thumb a single tear away from her porcelain skin. “It comes with a question.”

“I have an answer.” She nods, biting her bottom lip to keep from breaking out in an excited and overwhelmed sob.

My voice is thick with emotion. “Can I ask it first?”

She swipes at her eyes again. “Hurry!”

Taking a deep breath, I lock gazes with the love of my life and take the biggest leap of faith I’ve ever made. “Ensley, my little Vegan Vexation, will you marry me?”

Those huge cornflower blue eyes answer even before she does. “LumberJeff, I will!”

I rush to scoop her up in a hug, and she jumps into my arms, locking her legs around my waist. I have to fight not to fall backward into the tree at the sudden shift in momentum, and she kisses me so hard and fast that my head spins. I don’t think this moment could be more perfect if either of us tried. Then she pulls away, a look of consternation in her eyes.

“Oh, no. We should’ve recorded this. Our followers would’ve loved it. Well... mine, anyway. Some of yours might be a bit jealous,” she laughs, eyes streaming with happy tears.

“The camera, the gifts, Miss Gigi in her festive flannel—none of it holds a candle to you, Ensley,” I tell her, my voice thick with emotion. “You’ve become the heartbeat of this place, the soul of this farm, and the love of my life. You complete me in ways I never even knew I was incomplete.

Because of you, I can see a future that's so much brighter than anything I ever envisioned for myself."

I glance down at the ring that now graces her finger, a permanent promise that ties us together. "I can see us growing old in this very yurt, on this farm, just like my parents always dreamed of doing. I can see a family—our kids running around, learning the value of hard work and compassion, just like you teach me every day."

Just then, a well-timed bleat echoes through the yurt. Miss Gigi, as if sensing her cue, trots out from her cozy corner, sporting the green and red flannel pajamas we'd picked out for her. She's a four-legged manifestation of our quirky love story, and she fits right in.

"Does this mean she can be our flower girl?" Ensley asks, her eyes twinkling with mischief and joy.

As all the jagged pieces fall into place, the picture of our future comes into crystal-clear focus, and even our goat wants in on it. How could life get any better than this?

Tears fill her eyes, and damn if that doesn't make me even more emotional. "I can't wait for the day when I get to call you my wife, and maybe, hopefully, the mother of my children. I look at you, and I know that I'm going to end up with a life every bit as fulfilling as the one my parents had." As Miss Gigi bleats again, it's like she's punctuating my heartfelt confession. "So, yes, she can be our flower girl, as long as she promises not to snack on the bouquet."

When my sweet, beautiful Ensley's lips meet mine, it's not just a kiss; it's a pledge, a vow, an unspoken promise of endless tomorrows. A laugh bubbles up from her, infecting me

until we're both laughing, embracing, and celebrating this perfect, impossible moment.

“Who would've thought,” I murmur against her lips, “that a bad date at the Velvet Pinecone would lead to all of this? To us, to a love that feels like coming home.”

She smiles, her eyes glowing like the farm's most brilliant Christmas light, and I know that everything has come full circle. Everything is exactly as it should be. And it all started because of her, because of us.

This is what forever looks like—what it *feels* like—and it's only just beginning.

Thank you for reading *Wasted On Love*.

The Vegas Venom turn up the heat in this standalone hockey romance series from USA Today Bestselling Author Colleen Charles!

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takes my sister, leaving her precious baby
an orphan.*

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step up and adopt my niece. After all, I
already adore her.*

*I've just started to get a handle on things
when the perfect woman literally falls into
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*She's everything I ever wanted, but how can
I offer her my heart while it's still broken?*

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FLOPPER SNEAK PEEK

Vegas Venom: Book One

By

Colleen Charles

Prologue

Noah

Three years earlier...

My hands slide along the weathered paper as my eyes struggle to focus on the words. I probably should be in bed already, but this always seems to happen when I get my hands on one of the signed first edition copies of a book I want to read. This one I've read countless times already. With a sigh, I decide I'll read just one more chapter.

Even though I know how *A Brief History of Time* ends, it always blows my mind that a guy who couldn't navigate the world without the help of technological assistance could somehow sit in a wheelchair, imagine complex theories about space, time, and matter, and then prove himself to be *right*. Plenty of the guys on my team, the Vegas Venom, rely on their muscles and their dicks as their primary means of marking their places in the world—*I fuck, therefore I am*—while guys like Stephen Hawking can commune with the universe on this whole other level.

Mind-blowing.

Just as I get to my favorite passage, the bit about the theoretical anatomy of a two-dimensional dog, my phone blows up. I don't recognize the number, so I press ignore and go back to reading. A few seconds later, my phone buzzes again—the same unlisted number with a local Vegas area

code. I groan with annoyance, set my book aside, and answer the call.

“If you’re calling about my fucking warrantee or some other scam, you can lose this number—” I begin, wondering how in the hell anyone could have access to my unlisted number. As one of the top goalies in the NHL, I take my privacy and my safety more seriously than most. Anyone who’s anyone is already listed in my contacts.

“Is this Noah Abbott?” a man’s voice asks.

I roll my eyes and fumble on the side table for a holographic bookmark I got the last time I checked out the Fremont Street experience. “Speaking.”

A pause. Just long enough to cause my heart to skip a beat. “Are you Natalie Campbell’s brother?”

“Um... yes. Why are you calling?”

“Our records have you listed as her emergency contact.”

The book slips out of my hand, landing on the floor so that the pages bend inward on themselves. Under most circumstances, I would care—would think that mistreating a book like that is a prosecutable crime.

But some guy is calling me out of the blue, using the words ‘Natalie’ and ‘emergency’ in the same sentence.

And the tone of his voice? I don’t fucking like it.

“Is she okay?”

The man doesn’t answer. Instead, he says, “How quickly can you get to Desert Springs Hospital?”

I don't answer him, because I'm already shoving my phone in my pocket, grabbing my key fob and running toward my garage.

I don't remember how I get to the sterile-looking building, only that traffic seems to crawl the entire way. I want to push every single person aside and lean on the gas, but for the people of Las Vegas, it's just an ordinary day. They have jobs and appointments and grocery lists to worry about.

And with our parents both long gone, all I have is Nat.

* * *

Nobody can prepare you for the moment that you learn someone you love is gone. Poof. In the blink of an eye, the air shifts and the structure of your cells change. You are no longer the person you were just one heartbeat prior. I might have known when I arrived at the hospital and it reeked of pain, suffering... and death. I might have known when a nurse ushered me to one of those small private rooms where they break the news to those numb with terror soon to become the bereaved. I might have already known when I chose to not even disconnect the call I got earlier.

But the thing is... I didn't want to even think the thought, so I shoved that *knowing* aside.

As I sit in front of the doctor with my hands folded neatly in front of me, I don't receive his words. I don't process them either. *Car crash. Freeway. We did everything we could.* I stare at him, open-mouthed, not quite believing any of it.

Natalie—my only sister, my only close relative—who isn't even thirty years old, has left this world? It's not possible. She

just became a wife. Then she became a mother. She had her whole life ahead of her.

She's a happy, healthy, positive person who's going places. She's my sunshine and unicorns. She's my soft place to fall. She's my flesh and blood. She's the only one who truly gets me.

She's gone, Noah.

“... the other driver lost control, crossed the center line and was also killed. Since your sister was behind the wheel, and your brother-in-law was in the front seat, at the speeds they were traveling, there was nothing anyone could have done. I'm terribly sorry for your loss, Mr. Abbott.”

Nothing anyone could have done? Lost control of the car? Who the fuck does that? Some damn teenager, that's who. I can see his cocky ass in my mind's eye texting and drinking and vaping and every other thing hoodlums are doing these days while they're not paying attention to the road. Allowing myself to slide into a pit of rage for a split second, I suppress a shiver. But blaming some nameless, faceless villain isn't going to bring Nat and Steve back.

“When do I get to see her?” I ask.

The man's mouth opens, but for the first time since my arrival, *he's* the one grasping for words. “I... don't believe that's wise. Her body sustained major trauma, so we don't need you to identify it.”

Body. Like my sister is... was fucking leftovers. Like she's disposable packaging that doesn't matter anymore now that she's...

Now that she's...

Not only can I not say the word, I can't even think it.

"Christ." I press my hand over my eyes, glad that I have it in me to cry, because what I really want to do is pick this doctor up along with his fake empathy and his perfectly embroidered white coat and rattle his teeth until he takes back the horrible things he said and return my *sister* to me and not just her motherfucking body.

On the other side of the too-thin wall, a woman begins to sob. I stare at the perfectly neutral wallpaper as if my laser gaze can bore right through it. They're on the other side. The other family.

And even though I know they lost someone too, I can't even muster up a sliver of empathy for *their* loss.

Because mine is bigger. Mine is *everything*. Then again, maybe not everything. My mind clears and focuses enough to ask, "What about Vivian? Was she in the car? Did she die too?"

"She was in the back strapped into her car seat."

"Jesus Christ..." I can't take this and my knees start to shake. If I wasn't sitting down, I'd fall down. All three of them, gone, just like that. I'm alone. Couldn't the 'other driver' have picked a more private place to lose control?

The doctor searches my face. "She experienced some bruising from the belt of the car seat, but she seems alright otherwise."

I look up sharply. "Viv's alive?"

“It’s the closest thing I’ve ever seen to a miracle,” the doctor says, nodding. “We’re going to keep her for overnight observation, but she should be able to go home with you tomorrow. I thought you might want to spend the night here... with her.”

My stomach lurches, and I drop my forehead into my sweaty palms. “Viv’s alive,” I repeat the words like a mantra. Right before my niece was born, Natalie and Steve drew up wills, just in case. And none of us even had a passing thought that just in case would ever come.

As Viv’s godfather, my sister asked if I could be named as a legal guardian if something happened to them. At the time, I thought it was pretty morbid to contemplate. They were young. Healthy. Happy.

And now she’s *the body*.

With tear-filled eyes, I make arrangements to be with Viv. Once the doctor and I leave the room, my eyes scan the small waiting area. A cluster of people gather around a coffee pot. A whole family of people, at least three generations, clinging to each other and wailing out their grief. They have their own support system just by nature of DNA.

I only have myself.

“Is that the family? *The other driver’s* family?”

The doctor shifts from foot to foot. “Ah. I’m not at liberty to—”

“Forget it.” Truth be told, I don’t give a damn about them. As far as I’m concerned, every last one of them along with the distracted perpetrator can go to hell.

I take one final glance over at the weeping people on the far side of the waiting room. Do they know how much they've taken from me? From the baby who just celebrated her first birthday with balloons and a unicorn cake that she didn't eat but used instead to paint her face in rainbow colors? That baby who now waits in her hospital bed, probably crying for Mama and Dada?

My throat tightens into a knot I can't even think of swallowing past. "Can I see her now? Can I see Viv?"

The doctor nods. "I'll take you back there."

I follow him on shaking legs back to the sterile room where Vivian lays sleeping like a tiny angel. Her eyes squeeze shut and her perfect little mouth opens and closes as she dreams even through the beeping of the machines checking her vitals.

I resolve, then and there, to be everything she ever needs. Natalie and Steve were robbed of the chance to watch their little girl grow up.

But I'll do my damndest to make sure she never wants for anything—most of all love. I'll love her enough for all three of us.

Because this is Vegas—and fate just dealt me a crappy hand.

Chapter One

Noah

Three Years Later...

I walk in the door of the house and drop my gym bag onto the sofa. Our road trip went well—better than expected. One of the Riot players, Ealon Jones, scored a greasy goal on me in the first and Cole Fiorino popped it in my five-hole on a sweet powerplay breakaway during our only loss, but other than that, I kept the puck out of the Venom net. Of course, my buddies, Anders Beck and Latham Newberry, let me have it over Jones's goal, laughing and saying I had my head up my ass and a blind man could have made that save, which only stung because it was partly true. With those two and their smart mouths, I just use rolling my eyes and shrugging as self-preservation. Then I shake it off in the shower and forget about it before the next game. The most successful netminders in the NHL have their minds right.

I scan the living room and then the kitchen. "I'm home! Where are my girls?"

Silence greets me, which always sends a little shiver down my spine. My worst fear is finding out that something's happened to Viv when I'm not here to protect her. Ever since the accident, I get triggered a bit more easily than before.

Before I can get myself all worked up, however, I spot movement through the glass door at the back. All three of the

girls in question are out back, playing around by the pool.

The moment I step outside, Biscuit trots over, wagging her tail and issuing her standard greeting—one sloppy kiss. Ever since I rescued her from a local outfit who rehabs guard dogs surrendered by owners who couldn't handle them, she lets me know how happy she is to be here in this house. For some crazy reason, Biscuit's obsessed with knees and elbows, and one good slurp can leave me dripping.

I eye my dog suspiciously as she stands there—all twenty-six ferocious-looking inches of Cane Corso—entirely too pleased with herself. Even though her fangs scream danger, her eyes give her away. But that doesn't matter. I wanted a loyal, badass dog who would protect my niece in my absence just as fiercely as I would. Biscuit's barrel-chested, brindled, and has jaws that I'm pretty sure could take a man's leg off in one go if she really put her mind to it.

And if someone made even a whisper of a move to hurt Viv, it would be chompity-chomp-chomp.

With an internal chuckle, I shake my head. At the moment, she's also wearing a sparkly pink tutu and a rhinestone tiara.

“Alright, who turned the dog into a Disney princess?” I demand.

Viv looks up from whatever she's playing with in the garden. When she sees me, her face lights up. “Unkie Noah!” she calls, waving me over. “Come help with the gnomes!”

I look down at Princess Biscuit of Noahland, who wags her tail once. There's no denying it: When the queen calls, as her loyal subjects, we must obey.

If I was in charge of the house, everything would be minimalist and tidy. I'd fill the house with IKEA furniture, paint the walls white, maybe put up a few tasteful houseplants, and call it a day.

These days, however, I am but a lowly peasant who obeys the will of her royal highness, Vivian. Instead of a tidy lawn, the backyard has been transformed into a gnome playground. Gnomes of every shape and size, from small plastic lawn ornaments to solar-powered light up monstrosities occupy every available surface—my last count was fifty-six of the creepy little critters. Judging by my niece's current posture, more of them have joined the family in my absence.

Francine, the full-time nanny I've hired to keep an eye on Viv while I'm on the road, looks up from the garden. I can't tell if she's weeding or working on planting more gnomes or what, but she's definitely the reason this whole thing started. I'm pretty sure that the gnomes were her idea, and she's been enabling Viv's addiction ever since.

"Oh, hello, Noah," she calls. "I didn't hear you come in. How was your road trip?"

"And the guard dog didn't alert you." I shake my head at Biscuit, whose only response is another tail-wag. "Road trip was good. We won two out of three, and I helped out my save percentage." I crouch down beside Viv and inspect her handiwork. Sure enough, there's a new gnome, which has been graced with a dandelion crown.

"What do you think, Unkie?" Viv asks.

"I think he's nice and creepy, sweetie," I say, suppressing a shiver.

Viv stands up and plants her little fists on her hips. “Not creepy! He’s *cute*. Now say you’re sorry.”

“I’m sorry I insulted your gnome. His crown looks lovely. Did you make that yourself?”

Viv’s face pinches in annoyance. “Say sorry to the *gnome*, Unkie. That’s Samuel. And you hurted his feelings.”

I stifle a laugh and make a show of bowing to the little man. At least this isn’t one of the truly ugly ones. His hat is a cheerful yellow, and chubby apple cheeks are painted bright pink... as are the other cheeks peeking over the hem of his trousers. Why people like garden gnomes is a mystery to me, but their further obsession with gnome butt cracks and cheeks takes my confusion to a whole new level. Still, if an army of smiling secondhand exhibitionists is what it takes to make Viv happy, it’s a price I’ll gladly pay.

“I’m very sorry, Samuel,” I say with as much solemnity as I can manage. “I admire your self-expression and your dedication to defying gender norms.”

The gnome smiles back at me.

“I’m pretty sure he can see into my soul,” I whisper to Viv out of the side of my mouth.

Viv nods. “That’s because he’s a Gnome in the Gloam.”

I stare at her for a moment, then turn to Francine, who’s come over to watch this exchange. “Gnome in the Gloam.”

“Like Elf on the Shelf, but they stay outside,” Fran explains.

“And watch us from the garden?” I lift my eyebrows at her. “So now they’re voyeurs, too?”

“What’s a voo-yers?” Viv asks.

“Someone who watches you for their own perverse pleasure,” I explain, pointing to the gnome in question. “Like this guy.”

“Elves live in the house,” Fran says. “Gnomes live in the garden. Or would you rather they follow you inside?”

All three of them stare at me, waiting for my response. Either Fran has spent too much time with my four-year-old, or vice versa, because both of them seem to find this logic perfectly reasonable.

Sensing that I’m outnumbered by both bodies and estrogen, I get to my feet. “Sure. How silly of me. When I was growing up, we didn’t have these, so it’s all new to me.”

“What *did* you have?” Viv asks.

After a moment’s consideration, I tell her, “Hobbits in the closets.”

Viv’s eyes widen, and she turns to Fran. “Do *we* have those?”

Fran purses her lips and turns toward the house. “I’m not sure. We’d better check.”

“Biscuit and me’ll check my room!” Viv runs toward the back door and tugs it open. Biscuit follows on her heels, tutu bouncing and tail wagging. In her excitement, the tiara has fallen to one side, giving her a rakish look.

“I assume I’m on dinner duty tonight,” Fran says. “Seeing as it’s Tuesday.”

“If it’s not too much trouble...”

My Tuesday nights are dedicated to a local bereavement group. I’ve been going ever since the accident—at least, since I was able to convince myself that it was okay to leave Vivian for a few hours at a time. Even after I hired Francine and brought Biscuit home, I turned into a mess every time I didn’t have Viv right in front of me. Now I recognize that any work I do on myself is going to benefit her, too. That makes it easier to force myself out the door. Stepping outside my comfort zone is good for me—at least that’s what the other people in my grief group tell me.

Francine used to walk on eggshells around me, but lately she’s been more to the point. “What step are you on? You’ve been doing this for years.” She places her hands on her hips and winks at me. “Haven’t you made it through all twelve yet? Leave it to you to flunk out of AA, Noah.”

“It’s not AA, you know that. And they say that going through the *five* stages of grief is a lifelong process.” Even though Francine’s dancing eyes give away her teasing, truth be told, I’ve managed to make it pretty solidly to stage four. Most days, I manage not to be angry anymore. It doesn’t change things. Natalie’s gone. Steve’s gone. Viv’s parentless, and there’s no way to fix that. But I’m not ready for acceptance.

At least not yet.

Then there’s the shame. Because my life changed drastically when they died and I took custody of Viv and as a man in his late twenties, it’s hard not to be angry by that even

when I have no damn right to be. I'm still alive. I'm still here living my dream while two amazing people don't have that chance. So what kind of a selfish jerk does that make me? I still haven't unwound that part in all these years of half-assedly discussing my feelings.

Honestly, I hate the word acceptance. Would accepting Natalie and Steve's deaths mean that I'm okay with them being cruelly snatched from life?

How am I ever supposed to be *okay* with the fact that they died?

Fran must see that I'm not in the mood for her teasing today, and she relents. "Noah, darling, you pay me too much and I've got nothing better to do." Fran pats my shoulder. "And Vivian is a treat. Stay out as late as you want. I know how much the ladies love you. It wouldn't hurt you to get yourself out there again. You should find a nice single mom. One who loves books as much as you do."

That brings a small smile to my face. "I'm not there for the ladies. You know that." Although I can't deny that I look forward to their adoring gazes, their soothing voices, and most of all the homemade snacks they bring every week.

Francine's smile widens from sympathetic to wicked. "Oh, I'm well aware. But seeing as it's the only place you're likely to meet someone..."

"I'm not looking to bring yet another woman into my life," I remind her. "I'm already outnumbered three to one. Plus however many of these creepy gnome things identify as female."

Francine clucks her tongue. “I see your mouth moving, dear, but only nonsense is coming out. One of these days, we’re going to find you someone lovely who you won’t be able to resist. Who will complete you. I’d bet my last dollar on it.”

“I’ve already got you hovering over me. How would I even find the time for someone else? What other woman could even measure up?”

She swats at my shoulder. “You big flirt. How about instead of pretending to be interested in me, you turn on that charm for the ladies tonight and see if you meet anyone interesting?”

While I’m longing for a night of uninterrupted time in my library that’s not coming anytime soon, Viv’s second-floor window opens, and her little face appears at the screen. “Unkie Noah, what’s a Hobbit? How do I know if I’ve got one?”

“Give me a second and I’ll help you look.” I leave Francine standing there in the garden with her devious plans to set me up with some random bookish woman and realizing I better shut her down before she really gets rolling down a road leading nowhere. I used to be like most of the guys on the team, sleeping with any hot woman who showed interest. Viv doesn’t need that kind of influence, though. When I’m on the road for work, it’s one thing to indulge in a rare hook up, but all my free time should be spent here, with her. And since Nat died, I haven’t had much desire to sleep around. Women tend to want things. They tend to *ask* things. I’m adulting now. Viv’s needs come before mine.

Fran does a great job with her. She's practically become Viv's surrogate grandmother.

As for me, I'm the only real family she has left. Women will have to wait a few years until Viv's at least in first grade. For now, my quasi little family has to stick together.

* * *

I help myself to a gooey brownie, a raspberry meringue kiss, and a five-berry-and-oatmeal cookie before sitting down on one of the metal folding chairs that might collapse underneath my weight. No matter how much I shift and flex, it never quite feels comfortable. A local Mexican restaurant, *Mi Corazón es Tuyo, Pollo*, hosts our weekly meeting. The owners of what we affectionately call *Tuyo, Pollo* lost their daughter to cancer a few years ago, and even though they've reached that mythical fifth stage of grief themselves, they still agreed to make the space available for us in perpetuity.

As I nibble my meringue kiss, I'm already fantasizing about ordering some *chili rellenos* to go, popping the tab on one of the craft beers in my library minifridge—where they're safely out of Viv's curious reach—and opening my new first edition signed copy of *A Killer By Design*. I heard Anne Burgess talking about her work on a podcast a few months ago, and the woman seems like a badass. Other than Viv and hockey, filling my library with all the books I love fills my heart with what can almost be considered joy.

When I remember to feel it.

“Do you like my kisses?” The woman sitting next to me bats her eyelashes at me.

Doreen lost her father a few years ago after being his primary care provider for almost half a decade. She might not have a book out about her work, but she and most of the other women who come every week as they share in their grief with others who've experienced the same thing are badassess in their own right. Women have this innate ability to work through uncomfortable emotions and come out on the other side even stronger than when they went in and that's a trait I admire.

"They're delicious," I assure her.

She bites her lip and blushes. "You can have more. Have as many as you like."

"They're extra-sweet today," I tell her. "There's something special in there, right?"

"Lime oil." Doreen fans herself. "I thought it was time to try something new."

I'm well aware that most of the women who come to this event are single. Plenty of them are single moms just like Francine wants me to date, many of whom are grieving for their husbands. Some were lost to horrible diseases like cancer or ALS. But most of them were lost in tragic accidents like Nat and Steve. So in our grief, we also have commonality. And that sense of community makes my load to bear just a little bit lighter. Most people don't come as regularly as I do, or for anywhere near as long.

Maybe they have a stronger support system, or they're just better at getting over things than I am.

"Did you like my brownies, Noah?" Another member, Susan, leans across the circle. "I added extra chocolate chunks

this time.”

“And caramel chips.” I nod, licking my lips. “If there are some left over at the end of the night, would you mind if I took one home for my niece? She’d love these.”

There’s a collective swoon among the ladies present. Every single one of them loves the idea of a man who talks about his feelings and is open about his trauma, but more than anything, they love knowing that there are guys out there who adore their kids—even the ones who become entwined in their hearts in unconventional ways.

I get it. Every time I hear one of them gush over their son’s performance on the school basketball team, or their daughter getting her learner’s permit, or any of the other milestones that litter the day-to-day lives of their kids, my heart aches. They’re getting to experience all of the things Natalie and Steve will be missing in Viv’s life.

The reminder of what we’ve lost hurts, but it’s good to know that there are people who appreciate what they have.

“Of course you can,” Susan tells me. “Take the whole pan.”

I feel a bit of a blush landing on my cheeks. “You spoil me, Susan.”

Her eyes light up. It couldn’t be more obvious that I have a fan club in group therapy, and I don’t have anything against a little harmless flirting, but it’s never going to go beyond that. It’s not that I have anything against these women. On the contrary, I think Viv would benefit from having any one of

them in her life, but I'm still struggling with summoning any romantic feelings toward anyone.

They're not the problem. I am. When tragedy struck, something snapped inside of me. It's still broken, and I have no idea when or if it will stitch itself back together again.

I'm better off alone and completely focused on Viv.

At least for now.

There are still a few minutes before the meeting starts when Jana rushes inside, fanning herself with a book. She scoots right by the snack table and comes up to me.

"Noah," she pants, "you've *got* to read this." She thrusts a paperback under my nose. "It's going to change your life."

I squint down at the cover. "What is it?"

"*The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. It's amazing... it feels so contemporary, but it's almost a hundred years old. I'm going to talk my book club into reading it next."

I whip out my phone to look it up online, but my first search only turns up some mass-produced paperbacks. I hate buying that crap—I'd much rather get a first edition signed copy in good condition, if possible, and a new hardback if I can't.

"If it's that good, I'd like to look for a good print version..." I mumble.

"You could try checking at a local bookstore," Jana suggests. "There's this great place nearby called The Last Chapter. It's got all kinds of unusual things. Plus, the owner can track anything down. She's amazeballs. It's like she's the

guru of literature or something. She actually found me a first edition copy of *A Light in the Attic* for my daughter's birthday. Can you imagine? My kids love the Saturday story hour there."

The name rings a bell, although I've never been inside. "I think my niece goes there for that. I'll check it out. In the meantime, let me make a note of the title."

Jana grins. "Or we could just follow each other on Goodreads."

I nod. "Yeah, good idea. I can always use a recommendation."

Immediately, every other woman in the room whips out their phones. By the time the meeting starts, I've got fifteen new friends on the app.

Dating might be off the table, but I'm never going to turn down a recommendation for a good book.

Chapter Two

Molly

My eyes roll over the business calendar for The Last Chapter this month, when my laptop pings with a new email. One glance tells me everything I need to know: one, that it's from my agent, and two, that I really, really don't want to deal with it.

Not now, and maybe not ever.

Unfortunately, running away is a strategy that can only work so long before I find myself in deep trouble with a woman who's put up with my writer's block for almost a full year. My last book, *Where Did You Go?*, sold almost five million copies. Writers like Dan Brown would scoff at that number, of course... but in the niche world of picture books, it basically thrust me into rockstar status.

Not that I ever wanted to be in rockstar territory. I like to remain unseen. To stay small and inconsequential outside the confines of my store. Most of all, I just wanted to help kids deal with their grief and make something good out of a horrible tragedy.

There's only one problem with my current level of success. My publisher wants a *second* book, and I'm starting to wonder if I have another one left in me, because the first one was a total fluke.

The good news is that running away can still work for a little while. I go back to clicking around in the bookshop

calendar. Our new event series, which we're calling "Blind Date with a Book," launches this week. Once a month, we'll be holding a get-together with wine and snacks, and each meeting will focus on a different popular book from one of twelve genres. We'll select the first book from a random drawing and get together the next month to discuss it and select the next title, and so on. Our signups for the first month filled within only five days of the page going live, which feels like a good omen. Business is surprisingly good, but most of our big sales come from the unique events the store features rather than random people wandering through the door.

Readers seem to love browsing my quirky bookstore and chatting me up, more than actually purchasing books. I keep hearing that my customers' visits are more like an experience than a shopping trip. Most of my business is done with online orders asking me to find rare books—my superpower—and The Last Chapter's event nights.

I'm about to place my preorder for cheese platters and veggie trays when Mona's head pops through the door.

"Greetings, Fearless Leader," she intones, "you have a call on line one."

There *is* only one line on the work phones, but rather than pointing this out, I simply smile. "Great. Thanks. I'll take it right now." My assistant, Mona, has been going through a goth phase for the last... oh, roughly two years or so. Actually, I think it may have started earlier, but I don't remember her being quite this bleak until I took over the bookstore full-time and worked with her every day. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that she's gotten all these new piercings.

Drenched in black and ennui, Mona disappears, the door clicking behind her as I reach for the receiver. “Hello, you’ve reached The Last Chapter. Molly speaking, how can I help you?” I didn’t always pitch my voice quite so high, but since they’ve already had to deal with however Mona’s answering the phone these days, I figure that it doesn’t hurt to be extra cheerful.

“Hello, Molly. Long time no talk.”

I wince at the tone of my agent’s voice. “Hello! Angela! What a lovely surprise to hear from you.”

“If you were reading my emails, it wouldn’t be a surprise,” she retorts.

“Ah.” I glance toward the monitor and her unopened message. “Right. I’ve just been so busy...”

“Which is why I thought it would be better if we could talk voice to voice. Presumably the writer’s block won’t impact our ability to converse on the phone.” Her tone is light and teasing, but wicked steel hovers right beneath it. I suppose I deserve this, given that I’ve kept her waiting all these months. She’s been incredibly patient with me, and I’m sure the fact that I’ve ghosted her isn’t helping.

“Sorry, Angela, I just—” I pinch the bridge of my nose and press the receiver to my ear. “I’m trying, okay? The shop is taking up most of my attention now. I haven’t had the time to work on anything.”

“Be honest with me. Time isn’t the issue, is it? A picture book isn’t *that* many words. I’ll take anything, Molly. A first draft. An *outline*. Just give me something to work with.”

Words aren't the problem. Once a week, I sit down and draft a newsletter much longer than a picture book manuscript. If spilling out a wordcount was the issue, I'd be fine.

A book is more than words, though. A good one requires an idea, and ever since Uncle Arthur died and seemingly took all inspiration with him, I'm fresh out.

Is it wrong to wish something stimulating would happen to me just so I could get Angela off my back? But alas, I am frumpy and boring and the last person the Universe would think of to mess with.

I'm just so.... basic.

"I'm sorry," I mumble.

Angela relents. "Honey, you wrote one of the most highly acclaimed children's books of the decade. You've helped thousands of kids deal with loss and process grief in a healthy way. I know you have the talent. All it takes is an itty-bitty spark."

"I wrote *Where'd You Go?* because I lost someone dear to me," I explain. "If that's what it takes to ignite creativity, maybe I don't *want* to write another book. How am I supposed to follow that up?"

"You're getting in your head. Putting too much pressure on yourself." Angela's tone teeters halfway between sympathetic and exasperated. "If I'm going to keep representing you, I'm going to need something soon. You can't be a one-hit wonder. I won't allow it."

"Define soon," I squeak. I don't want to lose Angela—she's amazing, and I know that my quiet little book would

never have been anywhere near as successful as it is without her help.

“I shouldn’t have to,” Angela retorts. “Just get me something, okay, Molly?”

“Okay.”

“Promise me.”

“Yes, yes, I promise. I’ll send an outline as soon as I have one.”

Angela grumbles at the skepticism in my voice, but she must accept that I’m doing my best, because she says, “I look forward to seeing it,” and then the line clicks as she disconnects.

“I really am trying,” I mumble into the dead air. “It’s not like I’m deliberately trying to be obtuse.”

“She knows you’re trying,” says a familiar monotone voice. “That’s why she didn’t fire you as her client. She could have, you know. I’m sure your publisher is breathing down her neck with threats and warnings.”

“Mona?” I leap to my feet, dropping the receiver into the cradle and storm out to the front desk where she leans against the counter and smirks.

“Come on,” she says, “you have to know that she let you off easy.”

“What makes you think that you can listen in on my private phone calls?” I demand.

Mona shrugs and goes back to flipping through the open comic book on the desk in front of her. “You’ve been uptight

lately. I thought I could help.”

“By spying?”

Her fingers flutter to a stop mid-swipe, her black fingernail polish glowing underneath the overhead lighting. “By psychoanalyzing you. Have you considered that your writer’s block could be related to your complete lack of a healthy sex life? Creativity flows from the root chakra—in our case, the pussy.”

I bury my face in my hands and take several deep breaths to stop myself from throttling my assistant. “I’m pretty sure that isn’t the problem.”

“Maybe not,” Mona retorts, “but celibacy is rarely the solution, either.”

“Why are we even talking about this?” I ask.

“Uh, because I’m trying to help you salvage your dream career and find, like, your Zen center or whatever.” Mona licks her thumb and flips another page.

“Is that what you learned in psychology class? Do your parents know they’re paying \$17k a year for your therapy?”

Mona cracks a tight smile—sans teeth. “At least I’m using my education. You got a degree in English, a Masters in Creative Writing, and now you spend your Saturdays dressed like a princess reading books to toddlers.”

“Plenty of respectable people have made a living out of encouraging children’s love of reading.”

“Yeah?” Mona stares at me and flips again. Flip. Flip. Flip. She’s not even looking at the pages, and for sure isn’t even

trying to hide the fact that she's only listening with half an ear.
"Name one."

"Levar Burton," I say at once.

"Yeah? That guy from *Big Bang Theory*?"

I shudder at her ignorance. "Maybe if more people had read to you as a child, you'd understand."

"People did," Mona says, finally glancing up. "My mom took me to an Anarchist's Storybook Hour all the time when I was, like, two."

If I didn't know Mona's family, I'd assume that she was yanking my chain—but I do, and she's not.

"Regardless, my sex life is *fine*," I lie. Reading smutty mafia romance while playing with my bullet-vibrator counts as a sex life, right? "So save your psychoanalysis for when you become a therapist."

Mona pretends to gag. "No way. Not gonna happen."

"Isn't that the whole point of your degree?" I ask, stepping past her to rearrange the display shelf.

"You think I want to get certified to listen to people talk about their stupid problems all day?" Mona rolls her eyes and snaps her comic book shut. "*My husband is ignoring me. My mom traumatized me. My children don't like me. Boo hoo, my self-esteem is entirely dependent on how many likes I get across social media platforms, and I have no personality beyond my ability to make parodies of other people's ideas.* Boooring. I'd rather just take Zoloft as a preemptive measure. Thanks, but no thanks."

I shake my head at her cynicism. “If you hate people so much, then why work here?”

“Uh, hello.” Mona waves her arms to encompass the store. “Ninety percent of the time, there are no people here.”

She’s got a point. “Shots fired. So why don’t you work on booking better workshops so we can get more paying customers? Maybe if I didn’t have to spend all my time on the internet using my magic talents to find the rare books no one else seems to be able to come up with in order to make my business the best it can be, I’d be able to work on *my* next book.”

“I’m already on it.” Mona drops her comic book into her bag and removes another one. “I’ve sent out emails to a bunch of my classmates and posted ads on campus. There are plenty of people willing to hold workshops for free, just to get their name out there. I’m meeting up with a chick tomorrow who does, like, tarot and moon-cycle shit and stuff. She seems cool but I wanna make sure that she’s not gonna flake at the last minute before I put her in the calendar officially.”

This is why I keep Mona around. She might use more eyeliner in a day than I do in a year, and she’s nosy as all get-out, but she really does care about the bookstore. Her blasé attitude is just a cover—although some days I wish that I could get her to drop the front entirely and just be her kind, professional self *all* the time.

“Thanks, Mona. You’re a lifesaver.” I stop by the front desk to make prolonged eye contact, affecting my scariest I-might-seem-like-a-bookworm-but-I-carry-pepper-spray smile. “But stay out of my personal business.”

“If you’re blaming the bookstore for sabotaging your writing career, doesn’t that make it *business* business?” Mona arches a pierced eyebrow. “As your assistant, I’m pretty sure it’s my job to, like, *assist*. Maybe you should learn to delegate better. I’ve been organizing the workshops, taking inventory, *and* coordinating socials. Seems like that should free up a little time, doncha think?”

With friends like these, who needs enemies? Mona’s right, though, at least about the fact that if I really *wanted* to have time for my writing, I could *make* time.

As far as her advice on using sex to unwind? I respectfully agree to disagree. Sex is overrated. In my experience—which is, admittedly, limited—it’s not worth all the fuss people make over it.

More trouble than it’s worth.

I head back to my office to finish placing my order. Maybe on my lunch break I can start brainstorming ideas about what to write next, but I’m not holding my breath.

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