

WRITE WHAT YOU Know

LOVE IN
CHARLOTTE OAKS



A Sweet Romantic Comedy
JESS MASTORAKOS

write what you know

A Sweet Romantic Comedy

jess mastorakos



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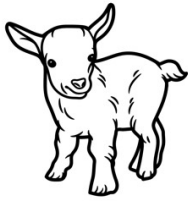
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1 /

travis

I waved goodbye to Riley and Aubree and strolled away from the small neighborhood lake. Days like these were the best. Soaking up the sunshine and my family's laughter filled me with a warmth rivaling even the sweetest Tennessee summer nights.

Without the stickiness, of course.

Tonight, we'd gather at my childhood home for a special supper since it was my last night in Charlotte Oaks. And, true to form, Momma was cooking up something good. But tonight, it was my favorite meal, likely because she hoped it'd be good enough to make me leave the military like the rest of her sons and move home.

But even though I could already imagine the taste and tantalizing aroma of her famous fried chicken, that wasn't gonna happen. I was a lifer, through and through.

My older brothers had joined up right out of high school, knowing they'd get out once they fulfilled their duty of upholding the Wilson tradition of military service. But me? I intended to stay in until they kicked me out, just like my cousin Hunter. He'd dealt with a hearty helping of pressure from his parents about that choice and managed to come out the other side just fine.

So, fried chicken or no fried chicken—I intended to do the same thing.

But as I strolled down the street toward my farewell supper, my mind kept drifting back to the woman I'd seen wandering near the lake earlier. Rumor had it, she'd been

stalking Riley, hiding in bushes and following him down Main Street like a paparazzi without a camera. She'd been causing tongues to wag all around town, and I'd seen her in action several times before today's sighting.

Yesterday, she'd been at the local coffee shop, The Caffeinated Squirrel. Right there in the corner, while my brothers and I grabbed a bagel and coffee to go. She'd tried to look interested in whatever she was doing on her laptop, but it seemed to me she was eavesdropping on our conversation and trying to be stealthy about it.

The woman was gorgeous, no doubt about it, but she wasn't my usual type. I preferred women who wore bright, bold colors with the personalities to match. My line of work was dark enough without spending time with broody women.

It irked me that no one had a clue what her deal was, though. Riley wasn't simply a family friend who was quickly becoming like a brother to me and my *actual* brothers. He was also a world-famous country star, and this mystery woman's antics had the whole town on edge.

Why couldn't anyone get a word out of her as far as her motives? Someone needed to take control—and fast. The people of Charlotte Oaks would do anything for one of their own, and I had a feeling they wouldn't allow this girl to keep poking around for info on Riley for long without doing something drastic.

I could get the truth out of her, though. I was more than capable. Besides, what was family for if not to confront a potentially dangerous predator before she—or the overprotective Charlotte Oakians—did something that put us all on the nightly news?

As luck would have it, I spotted a flash of bright blonde hair peeking out from behind a tree just a few yards away. She tried to remain out of sight, but her black clothes only made her more noticeable.

With the stealth I'd honed as a proud Marine sniper, I crept up behind her, my steps silent as a lamb as I prowled through the soft grass.

“Excuse me, miss,” I drawled softly, leaning in close enough that my breath tickled her ear. “Mind tellin’ me who you are and why you’re stalkin’ my boy Riley?”

“Wha—?” She jumped, clearly not expecting to be caught. Her icy blue eyes met mine, and I was instantly struck by their intensity. “You must be Travis,” she said, her lack of a Southern accent clueing me in that she wasn’t from around here. “I heard you were the observant one.”

“Guilty as charged,” I replied. “Now, how ’bout you tell me what exactly I’m observin’ right now? Because it looks a whole lot like somethin’ worth stoppin’.”

“Um, how about... no?”

I arched a brow. “Alright,” I said, intrigued by the challenge in her gaze. “If you won’t tell me why you’re here, how ’bout I just guess?”

She scoffed. “Trust me, you won’t be able to.”

“Careful, I’m not one to be underestimated. Let’s see... You’re a closeted country music fan, and this is your way of gettin’ close to Riley without lettin’ on that you like steel guitars more than the emo jams that would pair well with that black nail polish of yours?”

“Ha!” she laughed, a reluctant spark of amusement in her eyes. “Nope.”

“Okay, okay. I’m just gettin’ warmed up.” I chuckled, trying to come up with something more creative. “You’re a foreign spy sent to keep tabs on Riley because he knows top-secret information, and his music career is just a front for his work with the CIA?”

“Wow, you have quite the imagination,” she teased, her laughter as light and airy as a summer breeze. “But no, not a spy.”

“Fine, one last guess. You’re a time traveler from the future, and you came back to save Riley from some terrible fate.”

She grinned. "I feel like you should help me with my books. You're full of story ideas."

I opened my mouth to ask what she was talking about, but then her face turned nearly as white as her hair, and she crossed her arms over her chest. Then, before I could even blink, she brushed past me and started walking down the sidewalk with her shoulders hunched.

"Wait," I called, jogging to catch up with her. "Am I right? You here from the future?"

She seemed relieved as she shook her head. "Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not a time traveler either."

"Shoot, I thought for sure I had it that time," I replied, feigning disappointment as our steps fell into sync.

We passed Mrs. McClusky's house, and the eccentric old woman called out from her porch, "Travis, you're a sight for sore eyes! How's your momma?"

"Hey, Mrs. McClusky!" I hollered back, knowing she knew how my momma was because they were in the same book club that involved more wine than books and spoke all the time. "Momma's doin' just fine, thanks! We're all gettin' together tonight for supper to see me off."

"Come for a visit next time you're in town," Mrs. M said.

I gave her a wave. "Will do."

Mystery Girl instinctively tried to hide behind me as we continued walking, but with her bright blonde hair, she stuck out like a sore thumb. I couldn't help but chuckle at her attempt to blend in.

"Y'know," I drawled, "If you really wanna go unnoticed, you might wanna consider dyin' that hair of yours. Maybe black, to match those clothes."

She groaned. "I tried to dye it a nice, warm auburn color in high school, and it came out hot pink. If I tried black, I'd probably end up with purple or blue."

"Hey now, I bet you could pull that off," I said.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“All right,” I said, giving the woman—whose name I still hadn’t asked for—a stern look. “I need to know the truth about why you’re stalkin’ Riley. This guessin’ game isn’t cuttin’ it.”

Mystery Girl bit her lip like she was weighing her options. “It’s just... if I say it out loud, it’ll be too embarrassing. And I’m not ready for anyone to know yet.”

I raised an eyebrow as an idea crossed my mind. “How ’bout this? I’ll tell you an embarrassin’ story from my high school days, and in return, you tell me your secret. Deal?”

She hesitated for a moment before finally nodding. It was a highly skeptical nod, but a nod nonetheless. “Deal. Maybe.”

I clicked my tongue. “Deal or no deal? It’ll be a good story, I promise, and then we can swear each other to secrecy.”

“Fine. Deal.”

“Good answer,” I said, taking a deep breath. “So, back in high school, there was this dance comin’ up, and I had my eye on a girl named Jenny. Problem was, I couldn’t dance to save my life. So, I asked my *momma* to teach me.”

“Your *momma*?” she chuckled, her eyes wide with amusement.

“Yep, my *momma*,” I confirmed. “Georgia Wilson is one heck of a dancer, so I figured she could help me out. Anyway, long story short, we practiced in our livin’ room every night for a week. The big day arrived, and I was feelin’ pretty confident. But when the slow dance started, I stepped on Jenny’s toes so hard she yelped, and everyone stared at us.”

“Ouch,” she cringed, trying to stifle her laughter.

“Yep. Never lived that one down.”

“And you haven’t danced since?”

I scoffed. “Are you kiddin’? I knew right there and then I’d never let that happen again. I made Dakota help me after that. You know who Dakota is, right? From all your stalkin’?”

“The youngest Cole sister. A nurse. She grew up next to you and your brothers. Her sister, Aubree, is probably making out with Riley back at the lake right now.”

Eyeing her with more than a little suspicion, I nodded. “You’re not makin’ me feel any better about your motives, ma’am. Okay. Your turn to spill your secrets.”

“Fine. But first, you have to promise not to laugh at me,” she said seriously.

“Promise,” I replied, crossing my heart.

“Okay,” she began, taking a deep breath. “The truth is... I’ve been stalking Riley because I recently found out he’s my big brother.”

“Your what now?” I blurted out, unable to hide my shock.

“My big brother,” she repeated, her cheeks turning a shade of pink that probably resembled that hair color she’d told me about.

“How can that be?”

“Our parents put him up for a closed adoption when they were sixteen because... Well, let’s just say they couldn’t keep him, and even though they were young, they knew he needed a safe, loving family.”

“And theirs wasn’t?”

She looked down with a shudder. “Nope. But I’ve known about him my whole life, and I’ve been searching for him for what feels like a million years. I got a hit from one of those at-home DNA tests recently, and when I learned who he was... I knew I had to track him down.”

“Did ya have to do it like a stalker from a horror flick, though?”

She shot me a look. “That wasn’t exactly my plan.”

“Hmm. I don’t know. This whole thing sounds like somethin’ straight out of a movie—a horror one or not,” I said, rubbing my chin as I tried to wrap my head around her tale. “Are you sure it’s true?”

“Positive,” she insisted, her eyes welling up with emotion.

I took in the raw vulnerability in her eyes, and something inside me softened. With that one word, her passion and determination to meet Riley were clear.

And as strange as it all sounded... I believed her.

Up ahead, we stumbled upon a crowd of children and moms on the sidewalk, apparently having some kind of chalk art party. The pavement was covered in vibrant colors and imaginative drawings, turning the ordinary gray concrete into a landscape of flowers and rainbows and...

Was that a mutant squirrel?

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a regular Picasso convention,” I mused, admiring the artwork.

“Is that the coffee shop mascot?” She paused as she examined the squirrel, head tilted to the side.

Ah, not a mutant squirrel, then. Now that Mystery Girl pointed it out, I recognized the kid’s decently good attempt at drawing the mascot of The Caffeinated Squirrel. The real thing looked a little wild, too, so it wasn’t half-bad.

“You spend a lot of time at the Squirrel?” I asked with a wry grin.

“It’s a good place to people watch.”

“Too true.”

We sidestepped and shuffled through the bustling group of tiny artists, and with each step, our shoes picked up a kaleidoscope of chalky, pastel hues.

“Guess we’re leavin’ our mark on this town one step at a time,” I joked, glancing down at the trail of rainbow footprints we left in our wake.

“Har-har,” she deadpanned.

I laughed, and once we’d cleared the chalk-covered gauntlet, I decided to broach the subject of Riley’s family again. “So, does Riley have any other sisters or brothers hidin’ in the bushes, or is it just you?”

“It’s just me. And I’ve spent my whole life missing him even though I didn’t even know what he looked like or who he was.”

The emotion in her eyes tugged at my heartstrings. I was lucky to have my three older brothers and the Cole sisters next door. My childhood had been filled with laughter, adventure, and love. For reasons I didn’t understand, it bugged me to picture this woman—a woman I didn’t even know—growing up without that and yet knowing she should’ve had it.

“Bein’ an only child must’ve been lonely,” I said softly. “I can’t imagine what that’s like.”

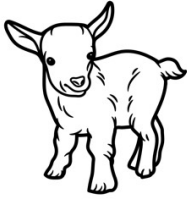
She sighed. “It was, but I always held onto the hope that one day I’d find my brother. And now that I have... I don’t know. I guess I’m just scared he doesn’t need me in his life. Hence the stalking. I’m gonna talk to him, though. I swear. I’m just working up the nerve.”

Uh-huh. And ‘workin’ up the nerve’ means lurkin’ in the bushes, watchin’ him eat dinner?” I challenged, amused.

“It was one time! I may have gotten a little carried away...” she mumbled, blushing even more.

“A little?” I teased, unable to resist.

“You’re right. It’s weird. There’s no excuse. But will you please keep my secret? Just for a bit longer?”



travis

I knew I would before I even gave it a thought. Why? No idea. But for some reason, Mystery Girl had me a little starstruck even though her brother was the famous one of the two.

But knowing I'd keep her secret and fighting the urge to mess with her were two different stories, so I rubbed my chin and pretended to think about it. "I don't know... What's in it for me?"

"My undying gratitude? Or... Um, I'll bake you cookies?" she offered hopefully.

Cute, but not what I had in mind... "Temptin', but I can think of somethin' I'd like even more than homemade cookies. And that's sayin' somethin'."

"Oh yeah? And what's that?" she asked, looking at me curiously.

Once again, I pretended to think. Okay, maybe I did have a few things to sort through this time. Namely, whether or not I was just as weird as she was for wanting to ask her out.

But what did I have to lose? She seemed harmless, despite the rumors. At least this way, if she was as dangerous as the Charlotte Oakians thought she was, I'd be taking one for the team if she murdered me instead of everybody's favorite country chart-topper.

"Have dinner with me. No spying or hiding in bushes required," I proposed, giving her my most charming grin.

"Smooth, Romeo. Real smooth," she laughed, shaking her head.

It got her attention, though. And if I wasn't mistaken, she looked downright giddy at the idea. Who knew two people who hadn't even exchanged names could get along well enough for a horror movie plot to turn into a sappy romance one?

"So what do you say? Have dinner with me, and my lips are sealed," I persisted, my heart unexpectedly pounding in my chest. Again, she wasn't my usual type, but something about her drew me in.

She sobered, eyeing me warily. "This feels a little like blackmail."

"Right, because you're such a big believer in followin' the law. Pretty sure stalkin' has a jail sentence attached to it. A fine, at the very least. One of my brothers is a cop, though, you probably already know that."

"Hush."

"I could ask him for specifics if you want."

Crossing her arms, she came to a stop. "Travis, you can't ask me to dinner."

"Pretty sure I just did."

"You don't even know my name."

"You're right," I conceded. "And that's hardly fair since you know mine. What is it?"

"Rory."

"You don't look like a Rory."

She lifted a brow. "No?"

"Nope."

"My full name is Aurora, but nobody calls me that. Maybe I don't look like an Aurora either."

I considered this, then shrugged. "I think it fits you better, actually."

She snorted. "Why's that?"

"Your hair, for one thing. It's very... bright."

“And for another thing?”

Her very *presence* for another thing. Sure, her clothes and nails might be dark, but the woman before me was all color and light.

I couldn't say that, though, could I? Shoot, why was I even thinking it?

“I'll tell you at dinner,” I said, not sure if I really would.

“Fine. It's a date. But only because now I'm curious. And you better not tell Riley—or anyone else—what I told you. I'll tell him when I'm ready.”

I smiled victoriously. “You drive a hard bargain, but deal. It'll be our little secret. Thing is, I'm leavin' tomorrow, so consider this me askin' for a rain check right off the bat. But next time I'm in town, we're goin' out.”

“Not dancing, though, right? I value my toes.”

A full, hearty laugh burst out of me, and I shook my head at the ridiculousness of this day. I'd snuck up on this girl to get to the bottom of our town's celebrity stalker problem and wound up with a date.

Who would've thought?

I wasn't sure what was more surprising, in fact. That she'd agreed to have dinner with me in exchange for keeping her secret, or that I'd even asked, and was already looking forward to our date.

Before I could give it more thought, however, a sudden blur of movement caught my eye. I turned just in time to see Gertie—or, Gertrude, as I liked to call her—barreling towards us at full speed.

The family's troublemaking Pygmy goat had a lot of hard-won nicknames due to antics just like whatever she was about to pull, but most people called her Gertie. I preferred her given name. Call me old fashioned, but she looked like a Gertrude—nosy and bossy and almost crotchety, even though I was pretty sure she was young in goat years.

It was all very *Gertrude-y*.

Whatever you wanted to call her, though, the goat sure had a knack for chaos, too. And right now, she clearly had mischief on her mind as she sped right for us.

“Look out!” I called in warning when her motives became clear.

But it was too late.

Gertrude slammed into Aurora’s legs, headbutting her thigh.

My future date shrieked in surprise, pinwheeling her arms to keep from toppling over. I reached out to steady her but only succeeded in throwing myself off balance.

The goat took that opportunity to strike again, squaring her shoulders to ram my knee. My leg buckled, and I toppled backward, arms flailing uselessly as I landed flat on my back with a heavy thud.

Dang goat knocked the wind right out of me, and I could only watch in a daze as she scampered a few feet away, mission accomplished.

“Travis! Are you okay?” Aurora asked worriedly, kneeling next to me.

I groaned, my tailbone smarting. “Yep, just peachy,” I muttered.

She pressed her lips together, unsuccessfully trying to hide her smile. “Sorry, but you just got taken out by a goat.”

“Laugh it up,” I grumbled good-naturedly, grabbing her offered hand to pull myself up. “That goat’s a menace.”

“Clearly,” Aurora giggled. “But thanks for saving me from being the one to wind up on my butt. Guess that makes you my hero.”

I dusted myself off, ego only slightly bruised. “Hero, huh? Does that mean goin’ out with me is a little less like blackmail and a little more like somethin’ you’re excited to do?”

“It certainly doesn’t hurt your case.” She smirked, then shook her head. “Thanks again for keeping this between us.”

I'm shocked I even told you. Do you have any idea how many people have asked me the same thing you did, and I didn't crack?"

"What can I say? I'm irresistible."

She pushed my shoulder.

We turned to keep walking, and then we both yelped in surprise as we faced Gertrude standing on her hind legs, blocking our path.

The mischievous goat looked up at us with an almost knowing expression, then plopped back onto all fours and turned towards home. She looked over her shoulder just once—as if she were silently urging me to follow.

"Looks like someone's tryin' to tell me to get my butt home," I told Aurora, gesturing at Gertrude. "You sure you don't wanna come with me? I'll have your back if you decide to tell Riley the truth. Make sure he believes you, and all."

She hesitated for a moment before shaking her head. "No, not yet. I'm just... I'm not ready."

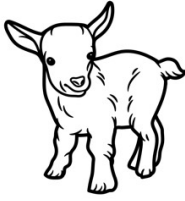
"All right," I said, understanding her apprehension. "But you should know, Riley's a good man. He'll believe you when you're ready to tell him."

"Thanks, Travis." Her eyes were filled with gratitude and a hint of sadness. "See ya next time you're in town?"

"You better."

With one final smile and a short wave, Aurora turned and went back the way we came. And like the good boy I was, I followed the dang goat.

Oddly enough, for the first time in forever, I wished I wasn't stationed on the other side of the country. Because even if my dinner with Aurora went well the next time I visited, what was the point if I couldn't be near her?



The day I'd promised Travis Wilson that I'd tell my long-lost brother the truth as soon as I was ready, I'd told myself I would do it the very next time I saw the man in question.

But... classic me: I hadn't had the nerve.

Instead, I'd regretted not going to their family dinner so I'd have Travis there for backup, and the only logical conclusion was to keep my lips zipped until he came back.

We were supposed to go on a date, so he'd have to come back eventually, right? And when he did, *then* I'd tell Riley.

Unfortunately, that wasn't at all how it turned out. The charming, well-meaning people of this town had finally had enough mystery. They'd taken matters into their own hands, causing Riley and me to have the reunion of my nightmares in a freaking *interrogation room*.

Me—the girl who'd gotten straight A's her entire life because her father always said that if an A for effort didn't result in *actual* A's, it wasn't enough effort. Such was the life of a Marine's daughter. Unsurprisingly, that also meant I'd never stepped foot in a police station until tonight.

I still couldn't believe it had happened.

The protective townspeople of Charlotte Oaks were justified in their suspicions of me... but a citizen's arrest that led to an actual arrest?

It was a little much.

And once I'd told Riley who I was, the officer who'd brought me in—AKA Travis's brother—decided we should finish our chat in a more private setting. Just in time, too. The entire town had gathered in the station's parking lot, calling for blood. I'd barely made it out of there without getting poked with one of their charming, well-meaning pitchforks.

Now, as we climbed the front steps of the Wilson family's home, I wished more than ever that I'd done this when Travis had invited me home with him.

Regrets. So many regrets.

"Judd made a fire out back," Riley said, opening the front door of the house I'd creepily stood in front of a couple of weeks ago, watching him eat dinner with his new family.

In the shadows. With my shades on, and my hood up. Until I realized it was actually really hard to see in the dark while wearing sunglasses, and I'd taken those and the hood off just as Riley looked up and spotted me through the window.

Yeah... I know. Not my proudest moment. And based on the look on Riley's face that night, I might as well have been holding that big, shiny knife from *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and wearing a *Scream* mask. Which, in hindsight, was probably why he'd literally fallen out of his chair when he saw me.

No wonder Travis hadn't been able to stop himself from teasing me about it when we'd met. I wanted to tease me, too.

I shook my head, banishing the memory. "A fire?"

Riley shrugged. "He figured it'd be the best way for us to have ourselves a little chat without the book club—aka *wine club*—ladies buttin' into our business."

Judd. In my several weeks of not-so-sneakily stalking Riley, I'd learned a fair amount about the people he spent his time with. Judd Wilson was one of two men who were apparently the closest things to father figures that Riley had.

Except... he did have a father. *My father*. Our father.

And he knew nothing about him. Yet.

Riley's new girlfriend, Aubree Cole, gave me an encouraging smile as she held her arm out so I could enter the warmly lit home. As the couple made their way toward the back door, I couldn't get my feet to move. This house was so... *nice*. Love seemed to seep out of every pore, and my throat grew tighter with every piece of cozy furniture or framed family photo my eyes took in.

I'd been searching for Riley—though I hadn't known that was his name until recently—for practically my entire life. I'd imagined him living so many different lives, but now that I stood in the reality of who he was and where he spent his time, I didn't know what to do with it.

He was so loved.

A good thing, obviously, but wow. Did I really want to complicate all that? It felt like throwing a me-shaped rock through their window, landing on the table during their Norman Rockwell-style dinner.

"You thirsty, Rory?" Riley asked, gesturing to the kitchen like it was his own.

By the looks of this place, he was likely going to offer me some sweet tea. As good as that sounded, I wasn't sure I could stomach it. "No, but thanks."

When I'd first arrived in the tiny Tennessee town of Charlotte Oaks, I'd been prepared to see him hiding away here to get some relief from celebrity life. Because *yep*, the older brother I'd spent my life trying to find was none other than *the* Riley Conrad—one of country music's biggest superstars.

It'd been the shock of a lifetime when our computer-whiz dad dug up Riley's identity after we finally got a match using one of those at-home DNA tests.

I'd always thought my brother would be a regular guy. I'd planned to show up at his door, tell him he was adopted—if he didn't already know—and then tell him all about myself and our parents so we could have the reunion I'd always dreamed of.

Finding out that he was a celebrity and how ridiculously hard it would be to show up at his door without getting tackled by his security team was a bummer, for sure.

But then I'd caught a break thanks to the tabloids and found out he was in Charlotte Oaks, and suddenly approaching him sounded a lot easier in this town than at his mansion in Nashville.

Boy, was I wrong.

New fears had sprung to life almost immediately. Like, what if he didn't know he was adopted? I'd read that his adoptive parents had died when he was twelve, but what if he hadn't known they were his *adoptive* parents, and me telling him ruined his memory of the people who'd loved him like their own?

Riley crossed the dining room with slow, hesitant steps. "Rory," he said in that tone people used when they'd clearly said something that'd gone unheard. "You all right?"

I shook my head. "Um, yeah. Sorry."

He tilted his head, lips pursed to the side. "Come on, then."

I nodded and followed him out the back door and onto the screened-in porch. Like the inside of the house, it was cozy and adorable, full of Southern charm with its country chic decor and comfy seating area.

But then my eyes widened when I took in the large yard beyond the screen, and my head jerked back, blinking a few times to figure out what I was seeing.

It was surprising enough to see that the fenced-in backyard was shared with the house next door. The Coles and Wilsons sure were close. But it wasn't the compound-like atmosphere, the twinkle lights zigzagging through the air, or the large seating area near the fire pit that had me frowning so hard I probably looked like I had a unibrow.

It was the structure that took up most of the yard along the back fence.

“It’s an obstacle course for the family goat,” Aubree said, following my confused gaze.

I nodded. “Right. Gertrude.”

“You know ol’ Gertie?” Riley asked, opening the screen door and holding it for Aubree and me as we stepped off the porch.

“I may have run into her around town,” I mumbled, picturing the pygmy goat who’d charmed me at first and then revealed herself to be quite scary. “I feel like she doesn’t like me much. She tried to bite me once.”

Riley and Aubree exchanged a worried glance, and Riley scratched his temple. “She did what, now?”

“I was... um. Well, this is awkward. One time, I was following you guys, and the goat came out of nowhere and tried to take a chunk out of my heel. She’s like a guard dog or something.”

That was true, but I left out the time she’d attempted to take me out when I was walking with Travis. I felt bad enough that I hadn’t told Riley who I was until a bunch of drama forced my hand. I didn’t want him to know Travis had known for weeks and didn’t tell him. It’d stay our little secret.

There was a long beat of silence, and then my stranger-of-a-brother met his girl’s eyes, and they both dissolved into laughter.

“I didn’t think it was all that funny,” I grumbled, but I couldn’t help but laugh a little too. “Anyway, the goat course is cool. This is a pretty awesome retreat for you, huh?”

Riley sobered, almost like it just came back to him why we were here and what was going on. I wasn’t sure how he could forget, but something warmed in my chest thinking about how easygoing he must be to lose track of the weirdness of our situation for a minute.

It made me feel like no matter how big of a mess I’d made out of everything, he wouldn’t hold it against me. And maybe, just maybe, I’d finally be able to have a relationship with the brother I’d spent my whole life wondering about.

“Let’s have a seat,” Aubree suggested.

When we were all settled in the red Adirondack chairs that circled the brick fire pit, I fisted my hands in my lap. “Um, so, where were we?”

“The police station, if the rumors are true,” a smooth feminine voice said from behind me, making me jump. “And for what it’s worth, sugar, you’re not the only one who’s been *two-by-four*-ed by Shifty and Bernice, so don’t take it too personal.”

I wasn’t sure what had me itching to smile more, the fact that Mrs. Cole’s strong Southern accent and her tray full of sweet tea seemed like something out of a country music video or the fact that she’d made what happened to me tonight sound a whole lot less scary than it actually was.

Riley straightened in his chair, and his jaw flexed. “Wait, what’s this about a two-by-four?”

Was he being...? No. He couldn’t be sitting straight as a board and looking more than a little murderous all of a sudden because he was being protective of *me*, right? He didn’t even know me.

“Oh, tell ’em, sugar. I could hardly believe my ears when the news made it through my phone line.”

I winced. “They invited me over, promising to tell me all about you,” I said to Riley after taking a deep, not-nearly-calming-enough breath. “Then, when I got there, they lured me into a closet and drilled a board over it so I couldn’t get out.”

This had Riley and Aubrey blinking at me, then each other, before falling into a fit of laughter once again.

I supposed it could be sort of funny in hindsight, especially now that I knew the couple was harmless and simply protective of my long-lost brother. But at the time, I’d been terrified.

I squirmed in my seat, and Riley cleared his throat, holding up his hand in a silent apology for laughing.

“*Sheesh*, Momma,” Aubree said, taking a glass of sweet tea off the tray her mom held in front of her. “You made it sound like they clobbered her over the head with the two-by-four instead of just usin’ it to nail a closet shut.”

Mrs. Cole winked as Riley took his glass, and then she moved the tray to me. “Oh, well, shoot. They wouldn’t go *that* far in the name of protectin’ one of their own. At least, I don’t think they would.”

I wasn’t too sure about that, but I nodded and thanked her for the drink.

If two of the town’s busybody residents wanted to trick me into a closet and lock me inside until the cavalry arrived, I couldn’t really blame them. After all, I’d spent the last few weeks stalking my brother because I was too chicken to tell him who I was. Earning the nickname *bush girl* had stung when I’d heard it through the town grapevine, but that was what happened when you literally hid in the bushes, right?

“So, you’re really Riley’s little sister, huh?” Mrs. Cole asked, tucking the empty tray under one arm and lacing her fingers together in front of her.

“I am. Rory St. John.”

“And what do you do for a livin’, Miss Rory?” she asked.

What do I do...? Oh, I see.

She wanted to know if I was after Riley’s money. Yep, these people were protective, all right.

“Momma,” Aubree warned, flaring her eyes at her mother.

“What? I’m just curious, is all.”

“It’s okay,” I said, drawing the older woman’s attention back to me. “I’m actually an author. I write rom-coms and self-publish them. But before you ask, even though I’ve written over a dozen books, they don’t sell, so I’m not famous like Riley. I make a full-time income as an assistant to a bunch of authors who are *actually* successful, which kinda sucks sometimes, but hey. It is what it is, right?”

I had no idea why I’d said all of that.

It was self-deprecating. Awkward. Hardly something that would ease her mind about me wanting his money.

But... it was true.

The couple across from me shared a surprised look, and Mrs. Cole's lips twitched with something like fond amusement. I wrapped two hands around my glass of sweet tea, sipping it while I waited for some kind of pitying response.

But instead, Aubree turned to me with a bright smile. "I'm a huge reader."

"Yeah, this girl always has her nose in a book," Riley piped in, pointing at her with the hand that wasn't still linked with hers. "Bet she'd love to read yours."

"I would, too," Mrs. Cole added.

I waved away their offers with a short laugh. "It's fine. You don't have to do that."

"We'll talk about that later. For now, I think I'll let y'all have yourselves a little chitchat before the rest of them show up lookin' for the next episode if you know what I mean," Mrs. Cole said, brows pointedly high. "I *think* Georgie's plannin' to stop the Wine Club ladies from makin' an appearance, but you know how they are."

"It was nice to meet you," I told her, mustering up a warm smile even though my insides crawled with nerves over returning to the conversation we'd started at the station. "And thanks for the tea."

"You're welcome, sugar. Oh, my, where are my manners? We didn't even meet, now, did we? Not officially, anyway, since I came in here, gun's blazin'. Gotta look out for our boy here. I'm Eleanor Cole, Aubree's momma, in case you didn't already figure that one out. My husband, Grant, and I live right there."

"Nice to meet you," I said, proud of myself for not telling her I knew all of that since I'd been watching them closely enough to figure it out.

“That’s him right there. See him tryin’ to stick his nose in without stickin’ his nose in?” Eleanor asked with a chuckle, pointing to a window of the home. Two men stood there, staring out into the night, and as soon as Eleanor waved, they let the curtain fall and slipped out of sight. “That was him and Judd Wilson, who lives here with Georgie.”

I flushed, glancing at the house directly behind us.

“It’s a little creepy, Momma,” Aubree said with another one of those flares of her eyes. “Make them quit.”

“You say creepy, I say good intentions. Besides, until about an hour ago, we all thought this sweet girl was creepy, too, didn’t we?”

My warm cheeks grew even hotter, and I sipped my tea again, avoiding Eleanor’s amused grin.

“Thanks again for the tea, Momma Cole,” Riley said, shooting her an affectionate wink that had me hating myself for causing any of them to be suspicious of me in the first place.

“Of course. Now, y’all be good. And Aubree?”

“Yes, Momma?”

“Make sure you fill me in later, sweetheart.”

As Eleanor walked back into her home—and Gertie the Goat seemed to materialize in her stead with her accusing eyes locked on me—Riley chuckled, and Aubree sighed.

But me?

My shoulders slumped, and the world seemed to close in, pressing down on my chest with enough force to wind me.

This family really cared about my brother. The only question was, did he have enough room in his life for my dad and me, too?

Just as I opened my mouth to get this hard conversation over with, the back door of the Cole house slammed against the wall as someone threw it open. I spun in my seat to find Adam Wilson—the very same cop who’d put me in that

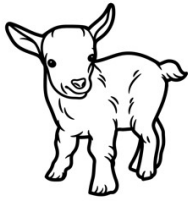
interrogation room—striding down from the porch and into the yard.

“It’s Travis,” he said evenly, his face set in the mask of a man who dealt with tough stuff for a living. But beneath that mask, I could see the fear in his eyes as he came to a stop before us.

Whatever news he’d brought with him couldn’t be good, and suddenly, my heart was in my throat.

Riley and Aubree were instantly out of their seats, and Aubree crossed to Adam in a flash. “Whoa, what do you mean? What about Travis?”

“He’s hurt,” Adam said, standing straighter. “It’s bad, and if you don’t mind, Riley, I’m gonna need you to fire up that jet.”



The sounds. The sounds were my first clue that I wasn't waking up in the right place. Nothing in my apartment would dare to rouse me from sleep with such an annoying rhythm of high-pitched beeps.

Beeps were the worst.

Something wasn't right.

Taking a deep breath, I calmed myself from the inside out like I'd done a thousand times. If I could focus while under fire, while hiding in a perch waiting for my mark, while safely getting away after the job was done... I could focus through a bit of beeping long enough to figure out where I was.

But... I knew. I just didn't want to believe it.

As much as I tried to will it to stop, the beeping persisted. As much as I ached to open my eyes, there was a weight pinning them down like I'd been blindfolded—and not in a fun way.

I just needed that sound to stop and for my eyelids to do their dang job... the other half of it, anyway. They were doing the closed thing like a couple of professionals.

But if I could look around and confirm that I wasn't in a hospital, that would be *great*.

Then again, the sounds didn't need to stop. In fact, I'd settle for the voice of Dr. Paige Walker from *Young, MD*, because that would mean I was somewhere unfamiliar after a night I didn't remember, and whoever lived here was simply watching a medical drama on TV.

A sniffle broke through the fog swirling through my mind.

A sniffle.

Which meant, not only was I mysteriously in the hospital, but there was someone sitting vigil at my dang bedside.

I didn't have to open my eyes to know it was probably my momma. Come hell or high water, if one of Georgia Wilson's boys got hurt bad enough to wake up not knowing what happened, she'd be there.

But then, as I continued to try and fail to open my heavy, good-for-nothing eyelids, I felt a small object press into my cheek.

What in the—

And there it was again, but this time, I knew for sure that object wasn't an object at all... but a dang finger.

Did someone just poke me in the cheek?

“Hello?” a quiet voice whispered.

Not my momma's quiet voice.

A child's voice.

I opened my mouth—that part of my face clearly wasn't as stubborn as the top half—and I heard a quiet gasp.

“He's *alive!*” the kid whisper-shouted loudly enough to make my head hurt.

Slowly... so dang slowly because *wow*, my eyelids were heavier than the 30-pound ammo cans we used during our Marine Corps annual fitness test... I got one eye to open just enough to make out the shape of a small child standing on a chair and leaning over my bed.

Staring right at me, close enough to head-butt.

Who was this kid, and was he trying to give me a heart attack on top of whatever landed me in here in the first place?

“Mister?” the kid whispered.

I blinked and opened both eyes, wincing from the light even though it was dim and gray.

“I thought you were dead.”

“I think that beeping means I’m not,” I said, my voice coming out rougher than sandpaper fresh off the roll.

The kid looked at the monitor next to my— *ugh. Yep. Hospital bed.*

“Guess it does,” the boy said, shrugging. “Still, you looked *super* dead.”

“Do you know why I’m here?” I asked.

The kid shook his head. “Nope. Do you know why *I’m* here?”

“In my room or in the hospital?”

He tilted his head. “Why do you talk like that?”

“Like what?” I figured he meant the scratchiness in my voice, and I didn’t quite have an answer for that. Had I been tubed? Had I been out so long I hadn’t had water for days?

“Like you’re a cowboy.”

I nodded, understanding. “Well, I’m not a cowboy. I’m a Marine. But I’m from Tennessee, and a lot of us talk like this.”

“You’re a Marine? That’s so cool. Do you shoot bad guys?”

I almost groaned at the sparkle in his eyes. Dang kids watched violent shows and played *Call of Duty* younger and younger these days. I did shoot bad guys, but that wasn’t something I’d try to make out to seem fun or exciting for this little hospital-gown-wearing kid.

Which brought me back to wondering why the heck he was in my hospital room.

“Where’s your—”

Before I could even get the words out, a woman darted past my room, then screeched to a halt and grabbed the edge of the door before launching herself inside, one hand on her chest.

The boy jumped away from me, straightening to his full height on the chair he stood on. I registered the cast on his arm and the bandage on his neck, then cringed when I realized I'd unknowingly aided a fugitive.

"Thomas Alexander Haroldson," the woman panted, throwing one stern finger into the air between them, "what are you doing in here? I was worried sick!"

"Oof, she pulled out the middle name," I mumbled.

Thomas shot me something of a smile, but it was laced with the kind of fear any kid would have when faced with his worried momma's wrath. I knew a thing or two about that. I was Southern, after all.

"I'm so sorry," his mom said, blinking at me like she just realized I was awake and witnessing this whole thing. "He's bored. I stepped outside his room to call my husband, and he must have slipped out when I had my back turned. We're just really stressed. My husband just lost his job and these medical bills are going to bury us, and— Wow, why am I saying all of this? I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, ma'am," I said with a small smile, annoyed that my voice still sounded like I'd downed a protein shake full of plexiglass. "We were just havin' a little chat. No harm done."

"I'll get him out of here so you can rest," she said, causing the boy's shoulders to slump as he hopped off the chair, ignoring her when she told him to be careful.

When his gown slipped down, I saw the bruising that probably came from his seatbelt, and it didn't take a genius to realize this kid had probably gotten in a wreck.

But as for me? I still had no idea why I was here or what was wrong with me. Until I looked down and saw one of my legs looked a heck of a lot larger than the other under the thin hospital blankets.

Dread settled into my gut like a boulder in a swimming pool, and I reached down, feeling the rigid brace covering my leg from top to bottom. *Not* good.

But hey, at least it was my left leg. I'd recently spent a small fortune on a large, Japanese-style tattoo on my right thigh. If anything had ruined the bright and shiny work of art that had taken five separate sessions to complete, I'd be pretty ticked off.

"What's your name?" the little boy asked as he paused in the doorway.

Despite the fear coursing through me over not knowing the cause of the leg injury—or if it was career-endingly bad—I let my lips twitch up for the kid. "Travis. Travis *Alexander* Wilson."

He brightened. "We have the same middle name?"

"Sounds like we do."

He grimaced when his mom called for him in a hushed tone. "Cool. Well, I'm glad you're not dead."

"Me too, kid," I said, suddenly too drained to keep wrestling with the superhuman strength of my own eyelids. "Me too."



The next time I woke up, it was to voices. I opened my eyes with much less effort to find one of my Marines speaking with a doc outside the open door. The sliding door, which—combined with everything else I could take in now that I was feeling a little more awake—had all the hallmarks of an ICU.

"But he can rehab and then come back to work, right?" Jenson, one of the sergeants in my unit, asked the doc.

"I can't make any promises," the doc replied grimly.

I cleared my throat, butting in before they could say more. I needed to hear this directly from the doc. If I had to hear secondhand that my career was over—that my *life* was over—I'd probably rip this IV out and spray them with it.

Both men turned to me, and Jenson's face went green when his eyes met mine.

"Staff Sergeant Wilson," the doctor began, stepping into the room and using the hand sanitizer by the door before ambling to my bedside, "it's good to see you awake. Do you remember anything about the accident?"

"Accident?"

For a moment, I wondered if the accident he spoke of had anything to do with the boy and his mom, but I brushed that away when I saw how dirty Jenson's uniform was and my pile of equally dirty cammies in a bag on a chair.

Then the doc crossed his arms over his shiny white coat and proceeded to detail all of my injuries—my *career-endingly* bad injuries—and it all came back to me.

Images assaulted me from every direction. Dirt and debris flying every which way. Hot air surging up my nose and into my mouth. My lungs burning like they were on fire, followed by a searing pain shooting through my legs.

Chaos.

Shouting.

...and then it all faded to black.

The routine training op had been smooth as butter right up until somebody's left hand failed to communicate with their right, and then everything went sideways in the blink of an eye.

I could hardly think past the rage swirling through me as the doctor explained what he'd done during my emergency surgery.

Go to Yuma for training, they said.

It'll be fun, they said.

Not like I had a choice, but Marines weren't supposed to be maimed while in country. How had I made it through several combat deployments relatively unscathed only to be done in by a training op in Yuma, Arizona?

When the doc was done with his dark little play-by-play, he clasped his hands and gave me a smile laced with pity. “Your family has already been notified, but would you like to call anyone now that you’re awake?”

I grimaced. Call anyone? Why? If they already knew, I didn’t need to call them just to shoot the breeze. The last thing I wanted to do was get on the horn and have a little chat about how my career was over thanks to someone’s negligence, and now I had nothing.

“No thanks.”

“I recommend you do, son,” the doctor said, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he gave me another one of those dang smiles that made me want to kick him.

If I could.

“You have a long road ahead of you, and I think some support from your family would do you good.”

I wasn’t so sure he was right, and I had another idea of something that would do me good. “Hey, doc?”

“Yes?”

“Can you send someone over from the billin’ department when you have a sec?”

He tilted his head in confusion. “Billing? Son, I’m sure the Marine Corps will cover your hospital stay if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“It’s not. I’d like to cover someone else’s if that’s all right.”

His confusion only grew, but he agreed to send them in right after he finished doing an exam on me.

I could’ve told him about the disgusting amount of money I’d stashed after hitting it big with Bitcoin back in the day, but it was more fun to watch him look at me with tiny little frowns here and there during my exam. He probably wondered how a Marine thought he could cover someone else’s hospital bills, and to be fair, if it weren’t for that well-timed investment, I wouldn’t have been able to.

But hey—at least my secret riches meant if I did get the boot from the military, I wouldn't be hurting for money.

Guess that'd be a silver lining if I ever saw one.

I spent the next little while being poked and prodded by the doc and briefed by Jenson, and then they were gone. With nothing left to do but stare at the ceiling, I wondered if the doc was right about calling someone. But, who?

My oldest brother, Everett, would be a good choice, but he was the grumpy one and a man of few words. It'd likely be a short, slightly awkward conversation where he told me to keep my chin up and stop moping.

I could call Jackson, but since he was a combat medic who was now a paramedic in our hometown, he might know too much about the science behind my injuries. What if he said there was no chance I'd recover enough to keep my career because... well... *science*? I wasn't ready to admit defeat.

That only left Adam, and I lifted my phone, decision made. Adam wouldn't let emotion trip him up, and he wouldn't bother to comment on whether or not I could fight through this pain and come out the other side as a Marine. Adam was all business, and right now, that was exactly the kind of level-headed support I needed.

He picked up after the second ring, tone brisk. "Just landed in Yuma."

I blinked. "Wait, what?"

"You didn't think we'd come out the second we heard?" He asked, his Southern drawl seeping through the phone.

"Who's we?"

"Momma's not with me if that's what you're askin'."

It was. I cleared my throat, knowing the only reason she hadn't come along was because Georgia Wilson only loved one thing more than mother-henning her boys, and that was when we took care of each other like she raised us to do.

"We're gonna see what our hotel options are, but first, while I've got a minute alone... Brother, you would not

believe what else went down tonight.”

I cringed, bracing myself. “What?”

“You know that blonde girl who was stalkin’ Riley?”

I didn’t *know* her, but right up until my whole life got flipped on its head, I’d been looking forward to my next trip to Charlotte Oaks so I could go on a date with her. We hadn’t talked since that day thanks to not exchanging numbers—*my bad*—but I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought of her pretty darn often.

Not that I’d mention that now, considering I had a feeling I already knew what Adam was about to tell me. Aurora must have finally admitted who she was to Riley, and by the sounds of it, chaos had ensued.

News about my date could wait.

If the date even happened, now. My sanity was hanging on by a thread, and my future was more uncertain than a kindergartner in the back of a high school trig class.

Besides, once again, Aurora wasn’t my type. I’d known it when I asked her out, but something had me ignoring that fact and doing it anyway. Would we even mesh? Every time I’d seen her, she was clad in black, giving off the vibe of someone who’d prefer deep talks over fancy coffee instead of bungee jumping or rock climbing for a first date.

I winced. Bungee jumping... Rock climbing... Would I ever do those things again?

I shook off the woe-as-me thinking and refocused on Adam, giving him the partial truth. “I’ve seen her around. What about her?”

“Seems the town had about enough of her snoopin’ around, askin’ about Riley. Things came to a head in a big way tonight. Long story short, she’s Riley’s little sister, and she did all that stalkin’ stuff because she was tryin’ to work up the nerve to tell him.”

I blinked, giving my head a quick shake, instantly regretting it as blinding pain lanced through my skull. I wasn’t

surprised by the news, but I didn't like hearing that the town had potentially done something drastic, just as I'd feared.

Remembering to act shocked, I gasped. But I was no actor, so it probably sounded as fake as it was. "Riley's *sister*? You're kiddin'."

"Nope."

I listened with my hand fisted in the scratchy hospital sheets while Adam told me all about Shifty and Bernice and what they'd done. As mad as I was to hear about their treatment of Aurora, I was also oddly glad for the distraction. The cause of this phone call was still hanging over my head like the blade of a guillotine, but at least my anger had a new target.

When he was done with his story, we both chuckled a bit at the town's antics. Not that I approved, of course, and Shifty and Bernice would absolutely get a piece of my mind the next time I saw them.

But then Adam must've heard the emptiness in my laughter because he blew out a long breath and quickly sobered. "Sit tight and get some rest. I'll be there in a few."

"Thanks for comin'," I croaked, clearing my throat again.

"Don't mention it."

"Hey, how'd you make it out here so fast?" I asked, frowning at the clock on the wall. "Did you catch the last flight of the night or somethin'?"

He snorted. "Took Riley's jet. Pays to have a guy with his own plane in the family. Well, sorta in the family. You know what I mean. Riley and Aubree are together now, by the way. That also happened tonight."

Despite my mood, I grinned. Those two were starting to get on my nerves with all their two-stepping around their feelings, and I was glad they'd finally pulled the trigger. "Bout time."

"No kiddin'."

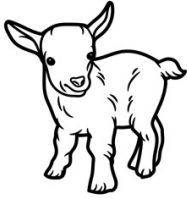
After a few more stilted pleasantries, I said goodbye to my brother and settled back into the pillows.

I hadn't thought I wanted the support the doc had spoken of, but I was wrong. It meant a lot that Adam had come out here, and that Riley had flown him out on his jet without a second thought.

My family would support me if this was the end of the Marines for me. They'd welcome me back home with open arms, hot grits, and clean sheets on the bed in my old room until I figured out what I wanted to do with my life.

But even as nice as that all sounded, it still had my stomach rolling and my heart picking up speed. I closed my eyes, waiting for Adam to show up and see me through this.

But there was only one goal on my mind as I listened to that evil beeping that told me I was alive: doing whatever it took to save my career and retire as a crusty old Marine. Mission accomplished.



aurora

“Well, I definitely didn’t think we’d be finishin’ this conversation in a hospital waitin’ room when we first sat down to talk,” Riley said in that thick Southern accent of his, scratching the back of his neck.

“None of us did,” Aubree whispered, squeezing his hand.

I glanced around the eerily quiet space. Yuma was a small town, so there was only one other family seated in the corner of the ICU’s waiting room, waiting for news about their loved one.

What was I doing here? When Adam had come outside to tell us about Travis’s injury, I’d assumed they would all leave on Riley’s jet and tell me they’d call me when they were back in Charlotte Oaks.

But, no. Instead, my brother had pointed at me and said, “We’ve got a lifetime of stuff to discuss, so you’re comin’, too. Don’t even think about tryin’ to get out of it.”

It was heartwarming and strange at the same time. Travis’s accident sounded serious. A family matter. And yet... here I was.

I felt like an intruder, but I was also so stinking grateful to be included because even though we hadn’t even gone on our date yet, I hated the thought of Travis being hurt. I wanted to be here just as much as I felt out of place.

Talk about conflicting emotions.

“I’m glad we slept on the flight instead of pickin’ up where we left off, though,” Riley said. “I have a feelin’ it’ll be a long

night.”

I worried my bottom lip between my teeth. “We could always go back to the hotel and talk in the morning if you’re still tired.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t be able to sleep now. I wanna hear how Travis is doin’ when Adam comes back. In the meantime, let’s get back to it.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“We heard Bernice and Shifty caught you tellin’ someone a bunch of stuff you found out about Riley,” Aubree said in a low tone, scrunching up her nose. “That’s why they did what they did with the closet and all. Who were you on the phone with?”

“Our dad,” I whispered, ice filling my gut as I saw the pain in Riley’s eyes at those two small words. “I’ve been keeping him updated on everything I’ve found out about you.”

“Why didn’t you just come up to me and tell me who you were?”

I blanched. “You make it sound so easy.”

“I don’t see what’s so hard about it. It would’ve been a whole lot simpler than the way it went down instead. I thought you were a fan or somethin’. If I’d known...”

“Riley, come on. If I’d approached you on the street and said, ‘Hey, there, famous country singer, I’m your little sister. Nice to meet you,’ what would you have done? Honestly.”

He looked at Aubree and blew air through his pursed lips like he was hoping she’d answer for him.

Without missing a beat, she turned to me and did just that. “I’m sure he would’ve been a little shocked, but Rory, without all of the stuff that had him so wary of you in the first place, I’m sure he would’ve heard you out. He’s a good man.”

Too bad I didn’t listen to Travis when he said that.

Riley’s lips twitched, and he kissed the back of Aubree’s hand. Whatever passed between them as their gazes locked

had my throat closing even tighter.

He looked so happy.

Sure, my presence had been a source of drama for him these last few weeks, but with Aubree? With all these kindhearted people I'd seen him bonding with? He'd clearly found happiness. And I couldn't be happier *for* him, as much as it hurt to know my parents and I weren't a part of it.

Riley leaned forward to rest his forearms on his knees. "So, you've already said our parents were teens when they had me—"

"Sixteen," I clarified, then told him the same thing I'd told Travis about the adoption place recommending they keep everything a secret because of their families. "They were so young they didn't think about how they'd feel about it later."

Riley frowned. "You said you never met your—er, *our*—grandparents, but did you ever have run-ins with the rest of them bad apples in our... family?"

I shook my head, ignoring how hard he'd seemed to work to get that last word out. "Nope. By the time they had me, our parents were totally safe from all that. Dad joined the Marines at eighteen, and he and Mom got married and left it all behind. They had me three years later."

At the mention of the Marines, Riley gazed at Aubree with nothing short of wonder in his eyes. He'd done the same thing back at the police station, the first time I'd mentioned it. But... why?

"So that makes you five years younger than me," he mused when he finally tore his gaze away from his girl. Then he rubbed a hand over his jaw, and his chest rose and fell with a few shaky breaths. "Where... um, where was I born?"

It was easy to tell him that he was from Detroit, but I was from San Diego because that was where our parents were stationed at the time. But when that statement led to him asking where our parents lived now, I paled.

Not that I had a mirror, but I could feel the blood draining from my face as I prepared to give him the harder news. But

maybe I could stall by chatting about our dad. “Um, so... Dad’s still a Marine. He’s on deployment right now, or else he’d be here with me. That’s why I’ve been keeping him updated over the phone.”

Riley’s eyes lit up. “Still a Marine, huh? He must be in over twenty years by now.”

I nodded. “Yep. He plans to stay in until they make him get out.”

“Sounds like Travis,” Aubree said with a fond smile. Then she blanched, and there was a heavy moment of silence.

Whatever had happened to Travis, I really hoped it wouldn’t stop him from staying in as long as my dad if that was what he wanted. I didn’t know him, but being Robby St. John’s daughter meant I knew the spirit of a lifer. There was a difference between them and the guys who got out after a certain number of years, satisfied with what they’d accomplished, but ready to move on. If Travis was the former, I really hoped he wouldn’t be forced to give that up.

Though, it was funny to think of him as the same kind of Marine my dad was. Between his flirty smile, the blackmail date, and his appearance, he seemed like trouble. Tattoos, a motorcycle... devastatingly good looks. The kind that not only promised a good time but also maybe a set of handcuffs.

I blushed at the thought, then shook it away, remembering the poor guy was laid up in a hospital bed through the heavy double doors behind me.

“Anyway,” I said, attempting to break through the loaded silence that’d come over the room. “Dad will be home from deployment soon, and he wants to meet you. Do you think you’d be okay with that?”

Riley stiffened, then gave me a short nod. “Yeah, I would.”

“Good.”

“You haven’t said anything about our mom,” he said quietly, studying me with such intensity I had to look away.

“She passed away six years ago. Cancer. It was a long, rough road.”

Distant beeps from beyond the doors and the shuffling of papers from the registration desk were the only sounds after that confession, and then Riley sniffed. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry you didn’t get to meet her. She was amazing.”

The utter stillness that followed sucked all the air out of my lungs, and I fidgeted with a loose thread on my sweater.

I needed to lighten this up. Fast.

I’d never been good at sitting with sad things, and that tendency even showed up in my writing. It was why I wrote romcoms, in fact. Hard stuff? Not necessary. We’re here for the girl tripping over her own two feet on her way to the trash can, right in front of the hero, her half-eaten taco salad flying out of her hands and into the billionaire’s fancy lap.

And that was how the rest of the book would go, too. Something gets heavy? Let’s throw in a calamity.

Light.

Fun.

Not sad.

I’d had enough sad, and right now, I really wished we’d had time to do this back in the Cole-Wilson yard. If we were still nestled around that fire, I’d be making a beeline for the goatstacle course to get rid of this hollowness in my chest. Maybe Gertie would’ve raced me.

“Can I ask you a question?” Riley asked.

Aubree snorted. “You and your questions.”

“Hush, you,” he said, shooting her a teasing grin like her statement was some kind of inside joke. Then he turned back to me, that grin still firmly in place. “Why do you always wear black? The point of wearin’ black is to blend in at night, but

you were followin' me around in broad daylight. Except for that night while we were eatin' dinner, of course."

I couldn't help but laugh. Had he known I was silently trying to figure out how to lighten the mood, or had he simply wanted to do the same?

"I always wear black. It's my favorite color."

"A gothic rom-com writer," he said with a chuckle. "All right, then."

I rolled my eyes, enjoying the fact that as tense as all of this was, it was also really easy to be around the brother I'd never known. It was as if no matter how awkward some of this was, there was an underlying familiarity between us that could only be due to the shared blood that coursed through our veins.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine it would feel so good. So comforting. So natural. I couldn't wait for our dad to finally meet him.

A mechanical whir sounded from behind me, and I turned in my seat to see Adam exiting through the double doors with a world-weary sigh.

We all stood, and he ambled over, running a hand through his dark-brown waves.

Adam had something of a military cut, but it was longer on top and the sides were faded much lower than the Marine Corps would've allowed. Something told me this Marine-turned-cop wasn't the kind of man who mussed his hair often, so seeing him do it now had my chest squeezing.

"How bad is it?" Aubree asked.

"He's gonna be all right," Adam replied. Then he put his hands on his hips and blew out a burst of air, shaking his head. "Well, physically, anyway. But if he thinks they're gonna let him stay in the military after this, I'm not sure how *all right* he's gonna be mentally."

Aubree stood straighter. "He has us, so he'll be fine."

Adam shrugged. "I guess we'll see. Y'all wanna head back to the hotel and get some rest? I'm gonna stick around."

“Come with us,” Aubree said with a frown. “You look like that cop from *The Walkin’ Dead*.”

“Who? Rick?”

She nodded.

Adam managed a chuckle, but it was a sad one. “If you’re tryin’ to say I look like a zombie, spoiler alert—he wasn’t one.”

“Maybe I was tryin’ to say you look as haggard as a guy who spent all night *fightin’* zombies,” she shot back.

“Gee, thanks.” He sighed. “Seriously, though. Y’all take off. Trav was out cold the whole time I was in there just now, and I want someone to be there when he wakes up.”

“You want us to stay so we can swap out with you if you need a break?” Riley asked.

“Nah. I’m good for tonight.”

I eyed Adam, then glanced at Riley to see if he bought that. Adam might not look like the walking dead, but he definitely looked dead on his feet. And it didn’t seem to have anything to do with the late hour.

“If you’re sure...” Riley said, his tone suggesting he was thinking along the same lines I was.

Adam nodded. “I am. I’ll trade ya in the mornin’.”

Riley and Aubree shared a glance before saying their goodbyes to Adam and heading for the door, but my feet wouldn’t move. I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving this waiting room.

“Rory, you comin’?” Riley asked, hesitating by the exit door.

I tugged my lips to the side. “Um, no. I think I’ll stay. You guys go get some sleep.”

Another shared glance from the World’s Cutest Couple, and then Aubree stepped towards me. “You wanna stay?”

“Yeah. Um, there’s four of us. So when Adam needs to take a break, I can sit with Travis. You know, so he’s not alone. Then you guys can do the same thing tomorrow. Makes sense to pair up, right?”

They all considered this for a moment, and then the decision seemed to be made. Riley and Aubree left, and suddenly I was alone with Adam the Zombie Fighter, neither of us sure what to say or do.

“Since you’re here...” he started, running his hand through his hair again, messing it up even more. “You mind goin’ in there and sittin’ with him so I can update our momma?”

“Not at all. Which room?”

“Seven. Third door on your left, across from the nurse’s station.”

“On it.”

Just before I made it to the double doors, he cleared his throat. “Uh, Rory?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m gonna get some coffee while I’m at it. Take a breather or two before I head back in there.”

“Take your time.” I turned to leave again, then stopped and spun on my heel when he called my name once again. “Yeah?”

He looked past me, narrowing his eyes at the doors. “If he wakes up and freaks out when he sees the town stalker in there instead of his big brother, tell him you found a new target and give him a bit of a hard time, would ya?”

I stifled a laugh. “Uh, really?”

“Really. Kid gave me a heart attack tonight.” He rubbed his chest absently, a gesture that showed his love for his brother despite the mischievous gleam in his eyes. “He deserves it.”

“Well, good to know I’m scary enough to bring on a heart attack,” I deadpanned.

Adam chuckled. “You made your bed, Miss St. John. Now you gotta sleep in it.”

I tried not to smile as I watched him walk toward the cafeteria, then finally made my way into the ICU. Adam teasing me about being a stalker was oddly heartwarming. It was the kind of treatment I imagined I’d get if I was part of their inner circle, and to be honest, it had me feeling way too cheerful for the ICU.

But then I froze in the open doorway of room seven. Travis was asleep in his hospital bed, his handsome face contorted in pain.

What was I doing? I hardly knew these people, and Adam wanting me to give his brother a hard time while he went through what would probably be the hardest thing of his life was *not* okay. When Travis woke up, the town stalker was surely the last person he’d want to see, whether he’d blackmailed her into a date or not.

And yet, as I stared at his chiseled face while he slept—like the creeper I was now well-known to be—I simply couldn’t walk away.



If I had to wake up to the sound of beeping one more time, I was gonna throw myself out of this hospital bed and low-crawl my way outta here. But at least this time, when I opened my eyes, it took a heck of a lot less effort than before.

That had to be progress, right?

Then my gaze landed on the figure seated in the chair on my right, and my breath caught in my throat. That beeping might as well have been muted with a TV clicker, and all thoughts of wanting to escape this room flew right out of my head.

What was *she* doing here?

It had to be the middle of the night. My room—and the rest of the ICU beyond it—were dark and quiet. And even though I had no idea why, Riley’s sister sat in the short chair sporting her usual all-black clothes, her head propped against the wall behind her.

Asleep.

Aurora was asleep in *my* hospital room.

I studied her for a long moment. Her eyes were closed, and her full lips were parted slightly, with her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm that told me she was deep in la-la-land. She was the picture of relaxation, despite how uncomfortable she had to be.

And... she was still beautiful.

Still not my usual type, but there was no denying her pull, and it wasn't even just her looks. There was something about her. Something I couldn't put my finger on, but felt deep in my bones. She felt familiar in a way that shouldn't be possible when I hardly knew the girl. She hardly knew me. Yet, here she was.

Why?

I cleared my throat. Maybe if I woke her up and asked her to get Adam, she could go to the fancy-for-Yuma hotel Riley had probably put them all up in and get some better sleep. There was no reason for her to get a crick in her neck on my account.

"Psst," I hissed when she slept straight through my throat-clearing.

The sound made her jump out of her chair like she'd been struck by lightning. She shot to her feet and held her palms face out, gasping for air and looking around wildly. "What? Where—"

"Mornin', sunshine. You stalkin' me instead of Riley now that your secret is out?"

Aurora's light-blue eyes flew to mine, and once again, my breath was sucked out like Legos in my momma's vacuum hose after she'd stepped on them one too many times.

"Hey," she said, running a hand through that brilliant blonde hair of hers. It almost seemed to glow in the dim light. "Sorry. I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep. What time is it?"

"Beats me. I just woke up, too."

She glanced around the room, probably looking for a clock. I had my phone in my lap and could've picked it up to find the time, but I couldn't take my eyes off the woman in front of me. I was a moth, and that bright hair and those blue eyes might as well have been a flame.

"You look like crap, little brother," Adam said, the humor in his tone laced with concern.

I dragged my gaze away from Aurora and eyed my brother as he walked in with coffee in hand. He looked just as crappy as I probably did, and not because he'd gotten blown up.

He was *worried*.

He looked tied up in the kind of knots I hadn't witnessed since the summer I rode my bike into the lake. I couldn't swim, and when Adam was done fishing my tubby-daredevil butt out of the water, he looked like he was about to throw up. I'd thought it was because it'd been a hard rescue mission, but I wasn't a kid anymore, so looking at him now with those lines on his face and that hard set of his mouth...

That was honest-to-goodness fear.

My heart rate kicked up a notch at what that might mean for my future—evidenced by a quickening of those darn beeps. “Right back at ya,” I quipped, trying for casual.

Adam tipped his chin at Aurora, who was looking between us with wide eyes. “See you've met Rory.”

“Ah, yeah. Seems like she's found a new victim.”

Aurora wrinkled her nose at me, then turned to Adam. “I didn't even have time to mess with him. He came up with that all on his own.”

I lifted a brow at my brother, who only laughed. “Not surprised. She wasn't stalkin' ya, Trav, just keepin' ya company for me.”

I watched as Adam shot her a quick grin, and something funny happened in my gut.

It couldn't be jealousy, though. Sure, I'd seen her first, but I hadn't told anyone about the day we'd met, so it wasn't like I'd called dibs. I'd merely asked her out and then failed to get her number. If she'd fallen for my brother in the meantime, and she was here because of him... Well, good for him. Good for *her*, too. My brother was a catch.

I turned to Adam again. “And where were you? Don't tell me you had somewhere more important to be than sittin' here next to your poor little bro, holdin' my hand while I slept?”

“Well, first, I was tryin’ to call Momma to give her an update, then I went for a coffee. And then, I met a nurse named Christy who looked like she needed to get off her feet for a bit.”

“So... you swept her off ’em?” I asked, hoping he’d say yes.

A man could hope, right? Because if Adam was out there flirting with nurses while Aurora was within earshot, maybe that would mean she was here with him, but not *with him, with him*.

There was a difference.

Adam gave me a bland look, and I could tell he was about to advise me to get my mind out of the gutter.

After all, Dudley Do-Right was far more likely to bring a weary, hard-working nurse a bottle of water and order her to rest than hit on her in the middle of her shift.

But before he could say anything, his phone rang, and he pulled it out of his pocket with a heavy sigh. “It’s Momma. She didn’t pick up earlier. You wanna take it?”

I glared at him.

“Didn’t think so,” he said with a chuckle. “Be right back.”

I waited for him to leave, then tilted my head as I looked from Aurora’s blonde hair to her black sweater, down the length of her tight black jeans, finally arriving at her black Doc Martin boots before finding her face again.

Then I looked away, embarrassed when she caught me staring. Normally, I was smoother than that.

These pain meds must be the good ones.

She took a step closer to the bed. “How are you holding up?”

I shrugged, not meeting her gaze. “Oh, ya know. Just wishin’ my only leg pain was from Gertrude’s head-buttin’. Had a nasty bruise there for a minute. I’d show you, but I’m pretty sure there’s new skin on that part of my leg now.”

Her face twisted up as hard as my gut did. I would've apologized for being so crude, but she reached out and squeezed my hand before I could get a word out.

I looked down at the small hand covering mine, not a clue what to say. All I knew was that the warmth shooting up my arm from her touch was nothing like the fire from the explosion, but somehow... it was just as powerful.

"Momma says hi," Adam announced as he strolled back into the room. He looked up from his phone a half-second after Aurora jerked her hand away from mine, and then he glanced between the two of us with narrowed eyes. "What?"

"What?" We asked at the same time, innocent as a pair of baby ducks.

Baby ducks? What kind of meds did they have me on, anyway?

Adam tucked his phone into his back pocket. "Never mind, then. Momma wants to know if you're plannin' to come back when you get outta here or if you'll spend more time recoverin' first."

I blinked. "Come back? As in, take leave to recover at home? I doubt they'll let me do that."

He shifted on his feet. "No, Trav. I mean... Well, that is..."

I'd never seen my brother at a loss for words before.

In fact, none of my brothers had a problem speaking their minds. Adam was the kind of guy who'd go blue in the face telling someone what he thought, though. Especially if it meant bossing them into doing whatever he considered to be "the right thing."

Having had just about enough of Adam's steely silence, even though his lips were twitching like it was taking all of his strength to keep them zipped, I held up my hands in surrender. "Say whatever it is you wanna say before you have a stroke, Adam. You wouldn't be you if you didn't try to tell someone what to do."

Adam rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his wide chest. That was another thing we all shared, and with our father, too. We were large men, and right now, Adam seemed to be taking up even more space than usual in the tiny ICU room.

No doubt about it, the man was gearing up to say something he knew I wouldn't like, and I could practically hear the resolve bubbling under his tan skin.

Well, his arms were in the sun all day, but the man could win awards with his farmer's tan. It looked like he was wearing a shirt and pants even when he wasn't.

Once again baffled by my own train of thought, I looked toward the whiteboard on the wall. Sure enough, there were notes about the pain meds they had me on. And they *were* the good ones.

That tracked. Why else would I be thinking about my brother's tan lines?

"Trav," Adam said, shifting from foot to foot. "You know you're getting med-sepped, right?"

"What did you just say?" I gritted out, staring daggers into him.

"Med-sepped?" Aurora asked in a quiet voice.

I flicked my gaze to her. I hadn't forgotten she was there—I was way too observant for that, pain meds or no pain meds. Plus, I *felt* her.

"It means medically separated," Adam answered her. "As in, from the Marine Corps."

"Right, yeah." She bobbed her head and tapped her forehead, letting out an awkward laugh. "I knew that. Dad's a Marine, and all that. Sorry, I was just... shocked."

I gritted my teeth, wishing I hadn't found her little head bob quite so dang cute. Glaring at Adam, I pushed all thoughts of that cuteness right out of my mind. "I don't *know* that I'm getting med-sepped. There's a chance I could be, but I'm

gonna work myself into the ground to make sure that doesn't happen."

Adam cocked his head. "Have you *seen* your leg?"

I winced. I hadn't seen it. Hadn't wanted to.

What did it matter what it looked like right now? The only thing that mattered was what it would look like after I rehabbed the heck out of it. My leg would look good as new in no time, no matter what it looked like now.

"You haven't, I take it?" Adam shook his head, looking down at his worn leather boots.

He'd changed out of his uniform before hopping on the flight, but uniform or no uniform, the look on Adam's face as he worked himself up to tell me stuff I had no interest in hearing was all bearer-of-bad-news-cop.

Aurora shifted on her feet, drawing my eye again. When my gaze met hers, a weird mixture of comfort and annoyance wove through my chest.

I looked away. "Aurora, can you give us a minute? I need to talk to my brother. *Alone.*"

Adam's brows lifted. Hopefully, it was due to my use of her full name and not because my tone had been rude, but she needed to leave.

Now.

There was no way I'd let her stand here distracting me as my brother told me I was too hurt, too weak, and too damaged to stay in the Marines. I needed all of my focus on him so I could shut that nonsense down in a hurry.

"Of course. Um, I'll go call Riley and Aubree. Or maybe I'll just hang out in the waiting room since they're probably sleeping by now, and—" She cut herself off when my eyes slid to her, a pretty pink blush staining her cheeks as she stooped to pick up what looked like a computer bag. She slung the black strap over her head and across her torso, gripping it with both hands at her sternum. "Sorry. Yeah. I'll let you guys talk. Didn't mean to bug you."

“You didn’t—” She left before I could finish that sentence, and I grimaced as the sliding door snicked shut behind her.

“Smooth.”

I glowered at Adam. “What is she even doin’ here? She come with you?”

“Uh, I’m gonna assume you’re askin’ if she came *with me* and not just with me.”

“Yep.” He got it. He was quick like that.

“Trav, she’s not here for me. She’s here for you.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I hardly know her.” I was perfectly willing to take her out despite hardly knowing her, but having her witness... *this?* Nah. Not so much.

He looked me over for a long minute. “Well, she came out to Yuma because Riley insisted on it—”

“And she sat at my bedside watchin’ me sleep because...?”

“Trav, I don’t know. She volunteered to sit here in case you needed anythin’ if I had to step out.”

“Isn’t that what the nurses are for?”

He scoffed. “Imagine if Dakota found out you thought she didn’t have better things to do as a nurse than fetch you water or an extra blanket. What’s that sticker on her water bottle say? ‘RN doesn’t stand for refreshments and narcotics?’”

He had me there. I spent my childhood and teen years commiserating with Dakota over how annoying it was to have older siblings, but this time, my big brother had a point. Kota would tan my hide if she heard me reduce her daily duties to nothing more than a glorified gofer.

“Can’t see why it’d be Aurora’s job,” I said, sticking to my bad attitude like a bug on flypaper.

“Like I said, she volunteered. She’s basically family now because of Riley.”

I frowned. No part of me wanted to think of Aurora like that. “Is she? She confesses to bein’ Riley’s sister—who, yeah,

I know is family even though he isn't—and suddenly *she's* family not five minutes later?"

Adam lowered his arms, inch by inch, his gaze never leaving mine. "Travis, I'm only gonna say this once. That girl has been through a lot tonight, and as far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter how she fits in or when it happened. It's what a person *does* that makes them family."

I swallowed, choosing not to admit he was right. I wasn't in the mood to accept things as they were. I was in the mood to fight. Hard.

"And I'll tell you somethin' else," he went on. "Instead of goin' back to her AirBnB in Charlotte Oaks after gettin' kidnapped by Shifty and Bernice and bein' put through the wringer by yours truly at the station, she *chose* to fly out here. She could've told Riley where to stick it when he said he wanted her to tag along, but she hasn't had many people to bend over backwards for, and it seems to me that she's eager to start doin' that with us."

Guilt threatened to surface, but I squashed it down. I fought it like the stubborn pain in the rear I seemed to turn into whenever I was with my older brothers, no matter how old I was.

It was a curse, really.

But I already knew about Aurora's family situation and the fact that she'd always yearned for someone to take care of the way we all appeared to take care of each other. Adam's reminder didn't help my mood one bit.

"And," he continued, apparently deciding he wasn't done beating me over the head with that bad attitude of mine, "she didn't simply agree to be the one to hang back with me so Riley and Aubree could get some shut-eye. It was her idea, and I'm glad she's here."

"Why?"

"Trav, lookin' at you in this dang bed has me twisted up six ways from Sunday. I know what's comin' even if you won't accept it. I've been leavin' to take a pee or get coffee or

pace the halls so I could work myself up for the conversation you're avoidin' with all this 'family' nonsense, but at least you weren't alone while I did."

I had no idea what to say.

What could I say? Nothing that wouldn't get me another bitter, topped-with-whipped-cream truth pie lobbed at my face.

And speaking of faces, another one caught my eye as it appeared at the corner of the glass separating this room from the rest of the ICU. The boy from when I first woke up was staring at me with eyes full of mischief.

What was his name again? All I remembered was that we shared a middle name. Well, that and I'd anonymously paid off his medical bills.

When the boy realized I'd spotted him, a grin appeared, and he waved with his good arm before launching into a series of funny faces with his nose pressed up against the glass.

"Nothin' to say?" Adam pressed, sensing my distraction but not turning to see what had caused it. "You've spent your whole life benefittin' from family who ain't blood, and now you have a problem with Rory lookin' out for one of our own the same way any of us would?"

Something Alexander flattened his open mouth against the glass, blowing his cheeks out at the same time as he grabbed his ears and pulled them wide.

I choked out a laugh.

Adam turned at the waist to see what was so funny, and shockingly enough, a wide smile broke out across his face, too. "Friend of yours?"

"Sorta."

Adam went over to the kid and crouched down in front of the glass, pulling something out of his back pocket as he did. I watched as the kid realized it was one of those junior officer stickers my brother always carried around.

The kid's eyes went wide, and he put a finger to his chest as if to ask if it was for him.

Adam nodded, then he slid open the door and offered it to the boy. "If you're gonna patrol these halls at night, best make it an official duty so no one looks at you funny."

With a smile as bright as a thousand suns, the boy took the sticker and slapped it onto his chest. Then he stared down at the front of his colorful hospital gown with pride. "Thanks."

"Anytime. Your momma know where you are?" Adam asked.

He tilted his head. "You must be from Tennessee."

"You some kinda psychic?"

"No, the other guy told me. After he woke up. I thought he was dead, but he wasn't. Then I asked if he was a cowboy because he talked like one, and he said he was from Tennessee."

"Right. Well, I am from Tennessee. And I'm no cowboy, but I am a cop, so I know deflection when I hear it."

"What's that?"

"I asked if your momma knew where you were."

The boy wrinkled his nose. "No, sir."

"Best go on and tell her, then. Wouldn't want her to worry, would ya?"

"*Again*," I said, winking when he looked over at me.

"No sir, I wouldn't," he told Adam. "Thanks for the badge."

Adam gave the kid a wave and waited for him to go back to his room, then he closed the sliding door and faced me with his arms crossed and his feet squared for battle.

Lucky for him, I was too tired to fight anymore.

"Adam, I get it. Aurora did a nice thing. I'll stop bein' a jerk about it. But if you think you're gonna swing this talk back to the one where you tell me my career is over, you're dead wrong. It's not over until I say it is, and that day isn't today."

Adam considered me, then strolled over to a chair and plopped down with a bone-weary sigh. “Get some sleep, Trav.”

“You’re not goin’ to the hotel?”

“No. I’m not. Because when you’re ready to talk about the reality of this situation, I’m gonna be here.” And with that, my older brother closed his eyes, ending the conversation.

For now.

He might need to sleep, but I needed to move. And yet, I couldn’t. I may not have seen my busted leg yet, but I knew it’d be a minute before I was up and walking.

Open tibia fracture. Torn muscles, ligaments, and tendons. Hypovolemic shock from all the blood loss and more stitches on both the inside *and* the outside of my leg than I’d ever be able to count.

Adam couldn’t be right, could he? No one had come by to tell me I was being medically separated from the Marines in the last however many hours, but that made sense. There was a process for that, and it didn’t involve someone from base medical showing up to this civilian ICU to ruin my day.

Until I got that news, I needed to have hope. Hope that I’d pull through this and that Adam was wrong. Just because it looked grim now didn’t mean it would stay that way.

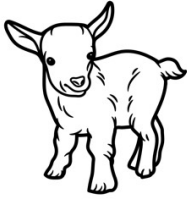
But if it did, and if my career was over and I was forced to move home to Charlotte Oaks and start over... then what?

A streak of bright light caught my eye as Aurora walked with a nurse on the opposite side of the nurse’s station, and just like that, a new train of thought left the station.

If I had to move back to Charlotte Oaks, would Aurora be there, or would she go back to wherever she came from? Would she still want to have that date with me after the way I’d acted earlier?

Not that it mattered. If I got booted, I’d have nothing to offer her. I had money, fine. But without the Marines, I wouldn’t be more than a stray dog who’d lost his way.

Best to stick with my original plan. I'd make sure my future as a Marine was just as solid as it was before I got myself blown up, even if it meant forgetting all about that date.



I wasn't even the one getting engaged, and I was still more nervous than I'd ever been in my life.

It was almost comical, really, considering it'd only been two months since I'd officially met Riley and Aubree and not much longer than that since I first laid eyes on them.

And yet, my pulse thrummed, and my palms were slick with sweat. Riley was almost done with his set at the local concert, and soon he'd execute his proposal plan with all of their friends and family in the wings.

I wasn't afraid she'd say no, of course. Their love was the stuff of romance novels. Trust me, I'd know. Of course, it was the kind of love I'd apparently never been able to show in my own books, but if I could, I'd probably sell more of them.

"How many more songs is he gonna sing?" my dad asked low in my ear, checking his rugged black tactical watch for the millionth time in two minutes.

"This is the last one," I replied. He harrumphed and crossed his arms, so I bumped his shoulder. "You nervous for him?"

Dad scoffed. "I might've just reconnected with him, but I already know he's not the type of man I need to be nervous for."

His Adam's apple bobbed as he faced the stage again, and I studied his weathered profile. His head was held high as he kept his gaze fixed on Riley, the epitome of a proud father. The crinkles around his eyes were deeper than ever, and the

eyes themselves shone like this was one of the happiest days of his life.

He'd looked the same way the day he'd come home from deployment and met Riley. I'd been an emotional wreck watching them meet on FaceTime the day after we'd returned from the hospital trip two months ago, but that was nothing compared to seeing our dad's knees buckle when he exited that airport terminal and met Riley in the flesh.

After the soggy reunion at the airport, we'd gotten Dad into the car and told him we were road-tripping to Charlotte Oaks to spend his post-deployment leave with the people Riley had come to think of as family.

Everyone loved him, of course. Even Gertie the Goat, who was very picky about people. Her internal jury was apparently still out on me, but Robby St. John was as good as they came. Honest, loyal, brave. Human enough to make mistakes but enough of a man to own up to them and try to make them right.

It was no wonder the Marine Corps had kept him around so long. He could be their poster child.

He'd actually been asked to do just that because the woman in charge of marketing thought he was handsome, and as it turned out, the whole world agreed. I'd thought women of all ages were going to have a stroke trying to decide who was hotter when the news about *the* Riley Conrad reuniting with his biological father hit the internet.

It was weird for me, obviously, but it was also pretty adorable watching the two of them send blog posts or memes back and forth where one of them was declared the winner.

Men.

Anxious for this show to end so the real one could begin, I looked over to find Travis on the very edges of our group as we watched from the wings.

My heart clenched. It meant a lot to Riley that Travis had flown out here to witness the engagement and attend the party that would follow. Even though he was still on crutches, and

even though no one knew what would happen to his career when he finished healing, he'd shown up.

We hadn't spoken since that night in the hospital, but it meant a lot to me, too. I loved that so many people would drop everything to celebrate Riley. I'd never experienced anything like it.

Over the last two months, this family and the rest of the Charlotte Oakians had shown me that not only had my dad and I given Riley a piece of his family back when we found him, but he'd given us an extended family right back.

Which was why I turned to my dad and bumped his side with my elbow, jerking my chin at Travis. "What do you think?"

Confused, he followed my gaze and then turned back to me. "Think about what?"

"Travis. Do you think they'll let him stay in?"

"Riley said his leg looked like spaghetti with meat sauce, Ror. Can't see him getting very high scores on his CFTs with all that muscle and tissue damage. Not to mention what might've happened to his joints."

I ground my teeth. If you asked me, the Marine Corps placed a little too much emphasis on those fitness tests.

My dad caught my reaction to his words, and he lifted a brow in question.

I shrugged. "Annual showings of fitness measured by ammo can lifts and push-ups and sprint times shouldn't play such a big part in whether or not you guys get to stay in. There's so much more to what you do than the physical stuff."

He nodded, then shrugged. "Honey, when the time comes for the physical stuff, we have to be ready."

True, but I still wanted to roll my eyes on Travis's behalf. He wanted to be a Marine as much as I'd wanted to find my brother. Before he'd unceremoniously kicked me out of his hospital room so he could argue with his brother without an audience, I'd seen the despair in his eyes. It didn't seem fair to

me that a training incident would put an end to his career when he could be a valuable asset to them in so many other ways.

“Haven’t the Marines ever heard of a bench? Stick him there.”

He shot me a look. “Oh, yeah. Every Marine’s dream job: Benchwarmer.”

“You know what I mean. Aren’t there IT jobs?”

“Every Marine is a rifleman first, and their individual job comes second. We’re all trained to fight and defend with the same standards. It’s part of what makes Marines, Marines.”

I thought back to all of the Marine Corps marketing I’d seen throughout my life. Their focus was on fighting to win. Their intent was to be the most ready when our nation was the least ready. They made it their mission to be able to handle anything simply by training for everything.

I got it, but that didn’t mean I had to like it. Not when Travis Wilson looked like someone had kicked his puppy when the idea of him getting medically separated came up.

I still felt like an idiot for not realizing that was what Adam had meant that night in the hospital. It just didn’t compute at the time, and asking about it had gotten me the boot even though I’d really wanted to be a fly on the wall to Travis telling his brother he was going to do whatever he could to stay in.

It was inspiring. The idea of someone like Travis not being worthy of being a Marine felt *wrong*.

Dad cut me another look. “Rory, every branch has its thing, and this is the Marines. We wouldn’t be known as elite fighting machines—warriors, through and through—if we let people hold office jobs and told them they didn’t have to meet the same physical standards as the man or woman right next to them.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I understood, but the roar of the crowd reached deafening levels as Riley said goodnight to the fans. Before I knew it, we were swept up in the rush of him coming off stage.

Riley went right into Aubree's waiting arms, and while I felt bad about Travis's situation, today was about the happy couple, not him.

So, I pushed the thoughts away and followed the herd toward Riley's dressing room full of flowers, stacked from floor to ceiling with the books he'd ordered.

It was so cute how he'd incorporated Aubree's love of reading into this moment, and he'd even asked for my help to do it. We'd spent hours pouring through the bestseller lists in her favorite genres, comparing them to the books she'd already read. With a little help from her constantly updated Goodreads bookshelf, of course.

I'd asked Riley what the end game was—where all the books would go when it was time to pack up this concert—and he'd simply shrugged in the way rich and famous people did and said he'd have them moved to their new home in Charlotte Oaks. One that he'd already broken ground on since he was so sure she'd say yes, complete with a *Beauty and the Beast*-style library that I couldn't wait to visit.

"Here we go," I whispered to my dad, clutching his arm hard enough to make him wince.

Riley's hands were over Aubree's eyes as he ushered her into the dressing room, and I heard her gasp of wonder and delight.

I crept closer to the cracked door and listened harder, waving off the snickers from the family that loved to joke about my stalking tendencies.

"Aubree Jewel Cole," Riley began, probably already down on one knee.

As much as I would've loved to eavesdrop on their big moment, Gertie wasn't having it. She wiggled her little butt between my legs and into the room, kicking the door shut behind her.

That goat was too much.

Shaking my head, I lifted my gaze and my eyes snagged on Travis. He looked over at the same moment, then started

right for me.

I gripped my dad's arm again, and he looked down at it with a wince. "Easy, kid. I need this arm to stay attached."

"Sorry."

Why is he coming over here?

I watched Travis's approach, fully aware that I should've been playing it cool instead of staring. But I couldn't help it. He was more gaunt than I'd ever seen him. In fact, his tall, broad form almost seemed weighed down, like he was a crutch-wielding marionette with his strings tied to the ground.

When he reached me, however, I spied a flicker of happiness in his deep brown eyes. "Think she'll say yes?"

I let out a short laugh as my dad shook his head with a very dad-like, "Not if she knows what's good for her."

"Can you even make jokes like that when you just met the guy?" I teased.

"Hey, I've got a lot of years of dad jokes saved up. Cut me some slack."

"My old man can't resist an opportunity for a dad joke, so I don't blame ya, sir," Travis piped in.

My father chuckled, looking around. "Speaking of your old man, I'm gonna go find him. Not like we get to watch this show, anyway."

Before he walked away, Dad looked Travis up and down, then sent me yet another one of his looks. I wasn't sure what this one was supposed to signal, but I had a feeling I'd hear about it later.

"So," I said to Travis when we were alone, "how are you feeling?"

His eyes lost a bit of their sparkle for a quick second, but then he looked at the closed door of the dressing room before scanning the crowd around us. When he turned back to me, that same happiness was back in full force. "Today's a good day. So... I don't know. I guess I'm feelin'... hopeful?"

I almost asked if he was asking me or telling me, but then it hit me like a blow that he wasn't magically cured of his worries. He felt happiness for Aubree and my brother, *despite* his own pain. His hope was brought on by their love, and the ooey-goey cuteness of this proposal.

For that reason alone, I decided that whatever happened with Travis's career, he would be okay. As long as no matter how this all turned out, some part of him could still find the good even when he was immersed in the bad.

And as someone who'd had her fair share of bad stuff only to spread joy in the form of romcoms that refused to sell, I appreciated that. "I'm glad to hear that, Travis."

"Glad to feel it. And, uh, I'm sorry about bein' rude at the hospital that night," he said, genuine remorse in his eyes. "I shouldn't have acted the way I did."

I swallowed, shaking my head in surprise. "It's fine. Don't even worry about it. You had a lot going on."

"Still, it's no excuse for makin' you feel bad when you were only there to help."

"Well, I know what it's like to lose something you love. Not in the same way, of course, but I just... I get it. It's hard."

My chest felt heavy with grief as I thought about my mom. Then Travis gave me a knowing look—he'd heard the story from Riley—and, annoyingly, my eyes welled up with tears.

Travis's expression softened in understanding. Then he looked away, dipping his chin and standing straighter like he'd made some kind of decision. "I also wanted to let ya know you're off the hook."

I blinked, totally lost. "The hook? What hook?"

"For our date. I know I acted like you didn't have a choice in the matter, but that just isn't right. You do have a choice, so I'm lettin' you know you're off the hook."

I wanted to tell him he could toss that choice in the trash where it belonged, but that would just be silly. Women haven't spent generations fighting for their rights and equality so I

could tell this swoony jerk that I wanted him to force me to let him step on my toes at the local watering hole.

A choice was a great thing. But, then... why did this feel like a bad thing?

“So, if I said I didn’t want to go on a date with you...”

“I’d be glad we got that sorted out now, instead of in the middle of sharin’ a slice of peach cobbler.”

I frowned. “There’d be peach cobbler involved?”

His shrug was easy, confident. Well, holding as much swagger as he could manage on crutches, anyway. “It’s a bit of a date go-to for me. But again, cobbler or no cobbler, I’m not tryin’ to convince you to go out with me.”

What is he doing? Is he trying to get me to call off this date?

I took a deep breath, attempting to keep my disappointment from showing on my face. Clearly, Travis was having second thoughts about taking me out, and I didn’t want to make things awkward by forcing the issue.

“Well, that’s really thoughtful of you, Travis,” I said, attempting to match his casual tone. “I appreciate you being upfront and letting me off the hook. No hard feelings at all.”

I gave him a bright smile that felt totally fake. Inside, my stomach was twisting with embarrassment that I’d read the situation so wrong. He must find me ridiculous for thinking he was actually interested.

“It’s probably for the best anyway,” I babbled, tucking my hair behind my ear self-consciously. “I mean, I’m only going to be in town a little while longer before heading back home. Wouldn’t want to start something we couldn’t finish, right?”

I let out an awkward laugh. Travis’s eyes darkened, his jaw tightening almost imperceptibly. Clearly, my rambling was only making this worse. Time to wrap it up before I really stuck my foot in my mouth.

“But hey, it was really nice of you to offer. And don’t worry, your secret about Riley is still safe with me.” I reached

out and gave his arm a friendly pat.

He scowled. “Wait, *my* secret?”

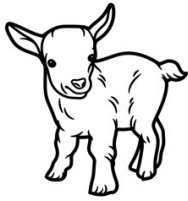
“Yeah. You knew about me before he did. I kind of figured you wouldn’t want anyone to know that, ya know?”

“Right,” he said with a single nod of understanding.

“I should get back to the... celebrating. The engagement party is probably gonna start soon. But, um, I’ll see you there. And I hope we can still be friends!” With an attempt at the most blasé wave this town had ever seen, I turned away on shaky legs before Travis could respond.

I didn’t dare to look back, and my heart sank with every step. I thought we’d had a real connection, but apparently, I was wrong. The only thing to do now was to try to preserve a little dignity.

Letting Travis off the hook felt like swallowing a bitter pill, but it was obviously the right choice. Wasn’t it?



The twinkle lights cast a warm glow across the large shared backyard behind the Cole and Wilson houses. The Adirondack chairs surrounding the crackling fire were filled with happy guests. Lightning bugs danced among the shadows, creating a magical atmosphere for Riley and Aubree's engagement party.

I could almost see this scene being written in a book. The heroine would be standing on the porch of the family's home—much like I was at this very moment—observing the scene with a wistful sigh.

Again, much like me. I couldn't help it. The air was filled with laughter and the sweet aroma of barbecue as friends and family gathered to celebrate the obvious love between the newly engaged couple. If that didn't cause a person to let out a wistful sigh or two, they were probably a robot.

Or... a broody guy named Travis who had apparently decided to get back to his bad mood in the time it took for us to get here from the concert.

Everyone else chatted away like they didn't have a care in the world. And why should they? Love was in the air, and it smelled a whole lot like brisket, fried pickles, and sweet tea. Add in the soothing sounds of crickets serenading us from the surrounding woods, and it was total comfort and joy.

So, what was his deal?

Ugh, no.

I needed to stop obsessing over Travis. Clearly, he wasn't into me like that, even if he was beyond cute with those

soulful brown eyes. I was only setting myself up for more disappointment if I kept hoping he'd suddenly change his mind.

It was time to direct my energy elsewhere. And hello—I already had the perfect dating option right under my nose. My long-time friend, Chip, was a great guy, and we'd always had fun together.

Who said a romantic relationship had to originate from some immediate spark? The best ones grew out of friendship, and ours was an awesome one. Chip was loyal and funny, and he got me. We liked the same books, TV shows, and podcasts. We were comfortable being ourselves around each other. That was way more important than being dazzled by muscles and dimples.

Maybe if I started thinking of Chip as boyfriend material instead of just a buddy, those attracted feelings would follow. He was a total catch—I'd have to be blind not to see that. And it made sense to nurture an existing connection instead of chasing after someone who wasn't emotionally available, like Travis. I didn't want to be "that girl" pathetically pining after a guy who'd already rejected me.

And I knew that because I'd written a heroine like that once, and man, oh man. That girl had been absolutely *roasted* in the reviews for that book. Technically, it was me being roasted since Helena Balderdash was my brainchild and I made her the "annoying doormat" the readers thought she was, but still.

Besides, Chip had made it clear he cared about me. He was always there to listen and knew how to make me smile. Maybe it was time I realized he could be so much more than a friend. I probably owed it to myself—and him—to try. I didn't want to miss out on something that could turn into true love just because I was stuck on a guy who wasn't interested.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and as if the universe was trying to tell me I was onto something, Chip's name appeared on my screen. I smiled down at the phone, secure with my *choice* to put Travis out of my mind and focus on Chip.

Chipper: How was the proposal?

Me: She said yes!

Chipper: I'm glad. That would've been awkward.

I snorted, the way I had his name saved in my phone made this whole thing seem even smarter. We even had nicknames for each other. I didn't particularly love his nickname for me, but hey. At least I didn't have to see it when we texted since I was on my own phone.

Taking a seat on the porch steps I'd been descending, I bit my lip. This could work. Friends-to-lovers was one of the most common romance tropes that ever troped, and it was time I tried to get that ball rolling.

Me: Hey, the wedding is in a few months. Wanna be my date?

I held my breath as I sent a gif of a man with a big nose and a mole, wagging his eyebrows in a goofy way. Then his reply came through, and that breath I'd been holding came out on a wave of disappointment.

Chipper: As friends, right?

So much for friends-to-lovers.

Shaking my head, I straightened my spine. There was still hope. The magic could still happen. *At* the wedding, not after a hastily delivered text invite. Maybe he just needed to see me all dolled up instead of in my usual sweats for movie night to picture this as something more.

Me: Of course!

Chipper: Great. I'd love to.

Me: Great. I love that you'd love to.

I groaned out loud as my thumb sent that message before my brain fully processed what I'd written. No wonder my

books didn't sell.

“Whatcha doin’ sittin’ over here all by yourself?” Riley asked as he took a seat next to me on the top stair. “Not a big fan of parties?”

I frowned, tilting my head. “You know, maybe I’m not. I’ve never really thought about it.”

Riley chuckled, giving me a knowing look. “Lemme guess: you just sit off to the side and watch people. No, wait, you blend into the shadows and watch people.”

I bumped his shoulder with mine, ready to give him some retort about how he was the only one I’d ever tried—and failed—to blend into the shadows so I could watch. It wasn’t like I was a regular, full-time, benefitted stalker with a 401(k). It was just that watching scenes play out in real life gave me great inspiration for my books. And when I was the one interacting, I couldn’t focus on the conversation and write prose in my head at the same time.

That wasn’t weird, was it?

But before I could say any of that, Georgie’s hushed tone carried outside from where she stood with Judd just inside the screen door behind us. Riley and I looked over our shoulders.

“You should’ve seen the way that boy looked at me when I told him I cleaned his room from top to bottom so it’d be ready for him, Judd,” she said, her voice breaking a little in the middle. “It was like I was offerin’ him a shiny new prison cell instead of lettin’ him know he’d have someplace to go if all this business with his leg went sour. Darn near broke my heart to see him lookin’ at me like that, as if movin’ home was about as excitin’ as an enema.”

Riley smothered a chuckle with a swipe of his big hand over his mouth, shaking his head as we turned back toward the party. “Poor Georgie.”

“No kidding.”

Judd’s soothing reply was muffled—likely because he’d said whatever it was against his wife’s shoulder—and a pang of sadness washed over me. I hadn’t spent much time around

couples my parents' age since my mom died, but watching Judd and Georgie over these last few months, as well as the Coles next door, had been more than a little rough.

Whether it was when I was creepily stalking them or being welcomed into their homes with open arms, watching them offer each other so much tender support or shoot silly banter back and forth always made me think of my own parents. You'd have to be totally out of touch with reality not to see how much they loved each other.

I missed that.

"Truth is, he might need to move into his old room soon, no matter how much his momma drives him nuts with her underwear foldin'," Riley said in a low tone, tipping his chin in Travis's direction.

I cracked a smile at the joke, but my heart skipped a beat. It shouldn't have, of course. I didn't even live in Charlotte Oaks. I was just a regular visitor now that I was trying to make up for lost time with Riley. But the thought of Travis being here every time I came to town was strangely exhilarating.

Nope. Nope. Nope. We're focusing on Chip now, remember?

"Aunt Rory, Uncle Riley!" Phoebe squealed as she skipped up to us in the most adorable pink tutu dress I'd ever seen.

I grinned at the spunky ballerina. Jackson and Bailey Wilson must be seriously good parents because Phoebe was hands-down the sweetest kid I'd ever met in my entire life.

The couple had been made her guardians after her parents had passed away, and they hadn't even been a couple at the time. But they'd clearly made it work, and since I knew something about losing a parent, it warmed my heart to see how well-adjusted Phoebe seemed to be. And now that Bailey was pregnant and Phoebe would get to be a big sister, I had a feeling life would only get brighter for her despite the darkness she'd had to face.

"What's up, buttercup?" Riley asked.

"Have you guys seen Gertie? I lost her!"

“I’m sure she’s around here somewhere,” I replied.

“Have you checked my jet?” Riley asked, his lips curving up in a wry smile.

Phoebe put her hands on her hips. “She only snuck onto your jet so she could keep an eye on you and Aunt Aubree. So if you’re here, she’s probably not there.”

Riley stood from the porch. “Fair point, lil lady. Come on, I’ll help you look for the old girl.”

I chuckled as Riley and Phoebe headed off to find the animal. There were plenty of spots hidden from the twinkle lights where she could be hiding, and I scanned the backyard for any sign of the mischievous pygmy goat.

“Rory, honey, you’ve gotta try these fried green tomatoes,” Georgie insisted, apparently having finished getting consoled by her husband. She came down from the porch and stood in front of me, holding a plate full of Southern goodness right under my nose.

I couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. “Sure. Though, I’m kinda having *Green Eggs and Ham* flashbacks right now.”

As strange as the idea of a fried tomato was—a green one, no less—I relented, grabbing one and popping it into my mouth. Truth be told, they were pretty good. Just as I was about to swallow the bite so I could tell her as much, I spotted Gertie scaling a wall on the homemade obstacle course, having the time of her life.

At least that mystery was solved.

Someone called out from around the fire for Georgie to bring over the tomatoes. After offering her a quick, “Thanks, these are delicious,” I watched her prance away like the proud chef she was.

I got up and moved toward my dad and Paisley, figuring it might be time to actually join the party instead of thinking of how I’d describe the amber glow from the fire reflecting on the smiling faces surrounding it.

They were engaged in some kind of conversation that had Paisley using her arms to emphasize her point, and my dad had one hand on his beer and the other covering his mouth to hide his laugh.

“What’s going on here?” I asked, joining in with their giggles even though I had no idea what the topic was.

“Oh, I was just tellin’ your dad about the way Riley fell out of his chair when he saw you lookin’ through the window durin’ supper that night,” Paisley replied.

My cheeks flamed. “Lovely.”

“I knew I should’ve encouraged you to be a Recon Marine, Ror. You would’ve been so good at it.”

I stuck my tongue out at my dad, knowing he never would have done such a thing.

His little girl, a Recon Marine? A Marine in general? Not Robby St. John. And it totally wasn’t lost on me growing up that he quietly wished he’d been able to keep his son so he could’ve raised him to follow in his booted footsteps. I hadn’t necessarily been jealous of that fact, but there were times when it chafed a little, not gonna lie.

Georgie called out to no one in particular in her thick Southern accent, “Y’all better save some room for dessert!” before heading toward the house with her now-empty tray of fried green tomatoes. “We’ve got pecan pie and peach cobbler comin’ up here soon!”

I fought a wince at the mention of peach cobbler. And sure enough, when I automatically turned toward Travis, I found him glancing my way at the exact same time.

Then we both looked away.

Peachy.

“Save some for me, Georgie!” Paisley called, grinning as she sipped her mint julep.

“Darlin’, you know I always do.” Georgie shot a sassy smile at her before disappearing into the house.

Fried green tomatoes may have been mildly alarming, but peach cobbler was right up my alley. If I couldn't share some with Travis on our date, at least I'd get to try it here, right?

"Rory, how are your book sales doin'?" Paisley asked, pulling me back to the present moment.

I turned to her, glad to see that my dad had meandered over to the fire and taken up a conversation with the others. My book sales were embarrassing in general, no doubt, but talking about the dismal return on all of the time and money I'd spent on them in front of my World's Greatest Marine dad?

No, thank you.

"Uh, well, I just had a new release, and it... flopped," I admitted with a sigh, trying not to let the disappointment show. "Maybe I'm just not cut out for this."

"Aw, sweetie, don't say that," Paisley encouraged. Her Southern drawl—one that was more subtle and slightly less sweet-tea-flavored than Georgie's—dripped with sympathy. "You've got more stories in you. I know it."

"Thanks, Paisley," I replied half-heartedly. I couldn't help but hope she was right, but even if she were, would those stories even sell?

"Hey, now, don't you go givin' up on yourself," Riley cut in as he approached, apparently just in time to have heard my humiliating admission. "You've got more talent in your little pinky than most folks have in their whole body. You'll bounce back, I'm sure of it."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Exactly how many of my books have you read, Riley?"

He shrugged. "One or two."

Dropping my arms, I gaped at him. "Really?"

"Well, no, but Aubree gave me a play-by-play since she's been readin' 'em."

"Then how would you know if I'm talented?"

He puffed up his chest. “Because you’re related to me, obviously.”

His music manager shook her short, nearly-black hair and let out a laugh. “He’s so modest.”

“And humble,” I added, laughing as I caught sight of Gertie leaping from one obstacle to another with surprising grace. Phoebe was hot on her heels, party dress and all.

“Yeah, yeah,” Riley said. “I’m just sayin’ you can’t give up just because you haven’t written a bestseller yet. You know how many songs I wrote before I had a hit single?”

I cocked my head. “Uh, didn’t you get a hit single right after you won that singing show?”

“I did, but I didn’t write it. It took a lot of mediocre songwriting before my chart-toppers were penned by my own hand. You’ll get there.”

“You know what they say: ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again,’” Paisley chimed in.

“Thanks,” I said, offering them a small smile.

But deep down, I couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe my dream of becoming a successful author was slipping through my fingers like the sands of an hourglass.

“Ah, shoot!” Paisley exclaimed suddenly, looking at the time on the tablet that seemed to go with her wherever she went. “I gotta jet, y’all. Big meeting on Zoom tomorrow, and I don’t want oversized luggage under my eyes in the mornin’.”

“That’s what filters are for,” I teased.

“Good point. Y’all have fun.” She waved, disappearing into the night.

Then I noticed Travis slipping away from the party without so much as a goodbye to any of his family members.

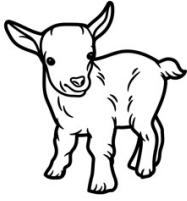
Wait, was that a coincidence? Him leaving right after Paisley? Maybe he was into her, and he wanted to ask her out or something. Maybe that was why he’d let me off the hook.

My heart sank at the thought, but I quickly decided it was none of my business. Why would it matter if he was interested in Paisley? Or, more importantly, how could he not be? She was gorgeous and successful, and so put-together she reminded me of a heroine I once created who literally got everything she wanted and never had a bad day.

No one liked her much either, for the record. But she was better than the doormat girl.

Either way, with everything Travis Wilson was going through, someone as put-together as Paisley would probably be good for him.

Besides... I had Chip. Right?



“I shouldn’t be here,” I muttered, staring up at The Proud Oak.

My entire family was inside the small-town bar—such a stereotypical honky tonk with its wooden exterior, neon signs, and strings of light over the large patio that it looked like it belonged on a movie set.

Specifically, that Reese Witherspoon flick from the 2000s that Dakota used to make me watch. The one where the lady brought her baby into the bar, causing several girls I’d gone to high school with to take that as a cue that it’d be an okay thing to do.

A snort made me jump, but when I looked around, there was no one there.

Until I looked down, that is.

Gertrude glared up at me from about a foot off the ground.

“What?” I asked—because talking to a pygmy goat was perfectly acceptable behavior within Charlotte Oaks’ town limits. “You agree, don’t you?”

Gertrude blinked up at me, and if she had two legs and a hip to jut out to the side, I was sure she’d be foot-tappin’ with her arms crossed. Probably saying something about me having the lights on with nobody home, too.

Did old-ladyish goats have Southern accents if they were raised in the South? Because if this one could talk, I’d bet she’d sound a lot like my momma.

“That’s what I thought,” I grumbled, adjusting my position against my motorcycle and turning back to the bar. But Gertrude let out another snort, and I looked down at her again. “What?”

No, she didn’t reply. Not with words anyway, but I could’ve sworn she frowned at me and jerked her pointy little snout toward the bar as if to say, “*Of course you should be here, Travis Alexander Wilson. Now, get inside and celebrate with your family before I knock you upside the head.*”

Like I said, if the old girl could talk, she’d sound like my momma.

I sighed as I returned my gaze to The Proud Oak. Inside that bar, they really were celebrating—in a big way—and it was exactly what they should’ve been doing.

They were laughing. Dancing. Happy-go-luckying to their hearts’ content because Riley Conrad and Aubree Cole getting together had been years in the making, and it was their wedding day. It was a happy day.

And yet, just like I had during their engagement party a couple of months ago, I lurked on the fringes, not ready to join them. Instead, I stood outside with my hands in the pockets of my slacks and leaned against my motorcycle in the dark, about as far from happy as a person could get.

I thought back to that night under the stars in the Cole-Wilson backyard. I’d been in a great mood during the proposal itself. I was hopeful that my leg was healing well and that I’d crush any tests the Marine Corps put me through so I could stay one of the few and proud.

But since there was no guarantee that would happen, I’d decided to do the right thing and offer Aurora an out. And as bummed as I was to have my suspicions confirmed that she wouldn’t want me now that my future was so up-in-the-air, I couldn’t blame her. Especially now that I was officially med-sepped. She’d been right to nip this thing in the bud.

So, I’d left the party without a word to anyone, and now, I was home for good with my tail between my no-longer-

perfectly-formed legs.

Yeah, I said it. Before that explosion made a mess of my flesh and bone and muscle, I'd had some dang good legs. Runner's legs. Legs made for short swim trunks, not long ones, if you know what I mean. But not anymore. Now, one leg was scarred just enough to make me look a little awesome, and the other looked like it'd had a fight with the business end of a weed whacker.

I was a freak.

But hey, at least short shorts weren't appropriate wedding attire, and now, my jeans covered the mess. Yet, even though my scary leg wasn't visible to the world, *I* knew what it looked like. I knew what it meant and what it'd cost me.

"I can't go in there, Gertrude," I whispered into the dark.

"Why the heck not?"

I jumped at the gruff voice from behind me, and then my shoulders relaxed when I realized it was my old man. "You *know* why not."

"I know that even if your life *had* turned out the way you planned, you'd still be here tonight, or you'd risk one heck of a butt kickin' from your momma."

Fighting a smirk, I shook my head. Of course I'd be here whether or not my life turned out the way I'd planned. But if it'd turned out the way I'd planned, I wouldn't be outside. I'd be right in the middle of that Proud Oak dance floor, enjoying my leave while at the same time looking forward to getting back to my real life when it was over.

Don't get me wrong, Charlotte Oaks would always be my home. But my life in the military? The career I'd built with not only my own two hands but with the blood, sweat, and tears of a man who knew he was made for more than whatever I could do in this tiny town? I missed it like a phantom limb, and I didn't know who I was without it.

"It'll get easier, Trav," my dad said, moving to stand beside me. He didn't look at me, just stared up at the bar,

mirroring my pose with his hands in his pockets and his head tilted to the side.

“How do you know?”

“Everythin’ does, one way or another. You just gotta give it time.”

I couldn’t fight the snort, even knowing I sounded a whole lot like the pygmy goat who still stared up at me with those judgy little eyes of hers, still wearing the pink dress she’d donned at the wedding.

Because, yeah, in this family, the pet goat was not only dolled up for a wedding but had also carried the rings down the aisle.

Not weird at all.

My father slid his gaze to me and let out a long sigh. “Poutin’ won’t help, son.”

“I’m not poutin’,” I said, fully aware that denying it only made me sound like more of a pouty child.

Dang it.

He smirked, then turned back to the bar. “You know why Rome wasn’t built in a day?”

I blinked at him, figuring he wasn’t really looking for an answer. My dad loved rhetorical questions about as much as he loved colorful Southern sayings.

“Because it was hard,” he said with a pointed look. “Buildin’ up a whole city like that, with all them plans, and systems, and *shoot*—have you ever seen photos of the public outhouses they used back then?”

“Uh, no. Can’t say I have.”

“Saw somethin’ about it on the History Channel the other day. Those latrines were somethin’ else, lemme tell ya. Everyone went into one rectangular room and sat next to each other—close as we are right now—while they did their business. No privacy, whatsoever. Probably talkin’ about politics or poetry or some such thing while they did it, too. But

that don't have anythin' to do with the point I'm tryin' to make."

I chuckled, grateful that his tangent hadn't meant the latrine—or its contents—were supposed to be a metaphor for my life.

"My point is, it was a well-thought-out thing, Rome, and a lot went into it. Nothin' worth havin' comes easy. And I'll tell you somethin' else too," he said, pausing for dramatic effect.

I waited, as did Gertrude.

"A bull without horns is still smart," he finally said, tapping his temple like a bonafide mic drop.

I lifted a brow as he looked expectantly at me as if waiting for me to put the pieces of this convoluted puzzle together and spring into some kind of action.

"You know what I mean?" he prompted after a long silence.

"Um... Sorry, pops, you gotta gimme a little more than that."

He sighed and turned toward me, crossing his arms over his wide chest. My old man oozed all the grit and wisdom of a person who'd come from nothing and created a life he loved. I wasn't much smaller than him now that I was a man of nearly thirty, but the way he loomed over me made me feel like even more of a child than the pouting had.

"So, you're not what you used to be," he said, waving a calloused hand. "You lost somethin' you thought made you who you were, but Travis, whether you're an Active Duty Marine or a wounded vet—"

"If you say somethin' like 'once a Marine, always a Marine'—" I cut in with a dry tone, but I snapped my mouth shut when my dad scowled like Chesty the Bulldog himself.

"As true as that is, it wasn't what I was gonna say, smart aleck. I was gonna say you are who you are, with or without the title or the job. A bull without horns is still smart—meanin' I can cut off your horns, but that don't mean it

wouldn't be lethal if you decided to ram that thick skull of yours into my sternum."

Gertrude sat down on her haunches, apparently taking his side.

I had no plans to ram my thick skull into my dad's sternum, but I sort of understood what he was saying. Whether or not I believed him was a different matter, but I nodded like I did.

"Now, quit sittin' out here feelin' sorry for yourself and get your butt inside. Your momma's probably already lookin' for you, and if she comes out here and sees you mopin' in the dark, you're gonna get a heck of a lot more than a pep talk from her."

"Was that what this was? A pep talk?" I asked with a short laugh.

"Darn tootin'. Now come on, son, let's go celebrate Riley and Aubree. Plus, you can't tell me you didn't notice how many beautiful women made it onto Riley's side of the guest list."

I'd risen from my seat on my bike, but the step I'd been about to take faltered. "Uh..."

"What? Riley runs in a circle plumb full of beautiful people, and those backup singers and the ladies on his team who rated an invite to this shindig? *Shew-y*. If I were a single man, back home after gettin' out of the Marines? I'd be in there askin' a few of them to dance, not sittin' here feelin' sorry for myself."

"Right." Then a thought occurred to me, and I frowned as I fell into step beside my dad and Gertrude the Gussied-Up Goat. "Wait, what were you doin' out here, anyway?"

He pulled an envelope out of his back pocket. "Had to fetch this from the truck. Your momma and I got a little somethin' for the happy couple, and I wanted to give it to them here instead of puttin' it in that box at the ceremony."

I held the door for him with a genuine smile, the music and chatter from inside the bar filling the quiet night with the

sounds of wedding cheer. If my parents' gifts for two of my older brothers were any indication of what was inside that envelope, I knew there was a hefty sum of money in there.

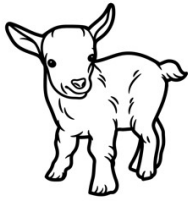
My dad had taken my advice back when Bitcoin was just getting hot, and he'd done what I did and made what skeptics referred to as a foolishly large investment. Other than paying the medical bills for that kid in Yuma, I hadn't touched my earnings. I had everything I needed with my military pay. But my dad used his for two things: rainy day cash and gifting a nest egg to a Wilson or a Cole on their wedding day.

Riley didn't need the money, obviously, since he was a multi-platinum-selling recording artist and had buckets upon buckets of his own. But it was a matter of principle for Judd Wilson, and Riley wouldn't dare refuse the gesture.

"I'm sure they'll be grateful," I called over the music as we stepped inside.

"Never know when they might need it. Anyway, try to have fun tonight," Dad said, patting me on the shoulder. "You can get back to broodin' tomorrow, ya hear?"

I nodded, watching as he made his way through the crowd and into my mamma's waiting arms.



10 /

travis

I'd been trying to have fun, I swear it. But despite the beer I'd knocked back in record time, I still couldn't bring myself to do more than linger on the fringes of the festivities.

As my gaze zipped over the room from my spot against the wall, I took in every detail in that practiced way I'd probably never unlearn. It had only taken me a few seconds to realize my old man was right about one thing: there was no shortage of beautiful women sipping pretty in The Proud Oak tonight.

Some were guests of Riley's from his fancy celebrity life, others were the same women I'd grown up with. A few ex-girlfriends from high school, but most were women I'd flirted with but had never dated because I'd left home at eighteen and hadn't come back often enough for that kind of thing.

But then a beam of light from the disco ball reflected off the bright-as-the-sun hair of one woman in particular, and once I had her in my sights, I couldn't look away.

For ten whole minutes.

Yep, for the last ten minutes, I'd been doing nothing but leaning against a wooden pillar, drinking a beer, and watching her.

Who was the creepy stalker now?

But *Aurora-Not-Rory* St. John wasn't just a random beautiful female invited to Riley and Aubree's wedding. Tonight, surrounded by a sea of beautiful people... she was *gorgeous*. Grinning from ear to ear, her head tipped back as she spoke with the man she was dancing with. A man I didn't

recognize but figured was probably her date for the evening because a woman like her sure wouldn't come to a wedding alone.

I looked down at my hand, surprised to see it clenched into a fist a my side. What in the world? I focused on relaxing it, shaking it out as if it had a mind of its own and I was trying to give it a piece of mine.

"She's come a long way, hasn't she?" Paisley asked from my side.

Her sudden appearance might've startled someone less observant, but I'd seen her approach out of the corner of my eye. If I had a dollar for every time one of the guys I served with tried to sneak up on me and failed... Well, I'd have enough for a couple of six-packs. Fancy craft beer, not the cheap stuff.

"Who?" I asked.

Paisley stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me, facing the dance floor. "As if you don't know," she shot back with a light chuckle. "Have you heard about the movie?"

"What movie?"

"The one the town wants me to pitch to *'one of them highfalutin Hollywood folks.'*"

This had my attention. I shifted so my back was against the pillar, facing her. "Come again?"

"They asked me to pitch a movie idea to someone in Hollywood. Bernice and Shifty are spearheadin' it. They're hopin' for a pretty big payday."

I blinked. I shouldn't have been surprised it'd come to this. People in our small town had all kinds of theories about why Aurora was following Riley around, so if they wanted to rake in some money from all that time spent thinking about it, good for them.

A few months ago, you couldn't go anywhere in this town without hearing a new rumor about Riley's infamous stalker. While getting coffee on Main Street, two high schoolers in line

had said she was a deranged ex-girlfriend Riley was pretending not to know.

After one of Phoebe's ballet lessons—which I'd picked her up from because I'm trying to win the title of Best Uncle Ever—a couple of dance moms said Aurora was a fan Riley had refused to sign an autograph for, and she was here for revenge.

And in the hardware store, I'd overheard Bob Garrett and old Mrs. McClusky figuring she was a hired hit-woman, planning to take Riley out on behalf of one of this year's other Grammy nominees. Which, they'd said, would make sense because how else would the competition make sure he didn't go home with the gold for the millionth time?

But no one had known the truth, and the longer that went on, the wilder their guesses got. The folks in this town didn't have much better to do than make a mountain out of every molehill they came across, and by the time Bernice and Shifty made their citizen's arrest, pitchforks were gleaming all over town.

"A movie, huh?" I asked Paisley, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"Yep."

"How true-to-life are we talkin' here?"

"Well, it starts with a famous actor hidin' out from the paparazzi in a small town called *Cassandra Birch*," she said, the play on our town's name uttered with her brows lifted sky-high.

"That sounds like an eighties supermodel, not a town."

She snorted. "Sure does. Anyway, the famous actor is hidin' from the paps because he had a really bad public breakup, and he's lookin' for some peace and quiet in a cute little town full of charmin', hardworkin' people. But then—" —*dramatic pause*— "—a blonde stranger comes to town and starts stalkin' him."

"You don't say."

"Oh, I do."

“Then what?”

“Then, they find out that the blonde stranger is actually a private investigator hired by the actor’s ex to dig up dirt on him.”

I hung my head, then shook it. “Sounds like a real masterpiece.”

“Oh, Oscar-worthy,” Paisley said. “Then the actor and the private investigator fall in love, but the ex who hired the PI doesn’t like that, so she comes to town to kill them both.”

I balked. “Whoa. That escalated quickly. Shifty and Bernice came up with that?”

“With a little help from a few dozen Charlotte Oakians who watch too many crime dramas. They even had a special meeting at the town hall to plot it out.”

I had a feeling those few dozen Charlotte Oakians were also getting together to decide who should play them in the made-for-TV movie, and I’d wager Shifty had his heart set on Bruce Willis.

I cleared my throat. “They came up with that *before* they found out the stalker was Riley’s sister, right? Considerin’ that whole fallin’ in love thing.”

“Yes. They’d been comin’ up with stories from the start to explain what Rory was doin’ here, but I guess that one had the biggest potential for Hollywood success.”

“And they figured you’d be the best person to tell their idea to since you’re a... music manager?”

She gave her short bob a boastful flip. “They know I have connections. Anyway, quit standin’ here like a wallflower and ask the woman to dance. You know you wanna.”

“Don’t you have someone else’s life to manage, Ms. Highfalutin?”

She tapped her manicured nail on her trusty tablet, then grinned. “Now that you mention it, I do have some emails I could send while Riley’s too distracted to tell me to quit workin’ at his weddin’. See ya.”

I chuckled as she slipped through the crowd, then shook my head as I returned my full attention to the dance floor.

A movie. This town was something else.

If you asked me, the idea Bernice and Shifty pitched to Paisley wasn't nearly as interesting as the truth. A long-lost sister finding out the brother she'd spent half her life looking for was actually one of the most famous men in the world? Now *that* was a story.

And yet, even after the people of Charlotte Oaks found out the truth, some still worried in that everyone's-got-everyone's-back kinda way. They thought Aurora was a gold digger, looking for a way to latch onto Riley's fame and fortune. Others whispered that she was mentally unstable, dangerous maybe.

But as I watched her twirl around the dance floor with her date, she squealed as her brother reached over and poked her in the side, and her laugh rang like a bell.

I couldn't see anything about her that signaled darkness. The way she moved was mesmerizing, fluid, and graceful. She was in her own happy little world, blissfully unaware of the eyes watching her.

And I didn't just mean myself. Curious Charlotte Oakians and random celebrity guests kept looking over at her with interest, hopefully because they saw the light in her that drew me in, and not because they were gossiping about her connection to Riley.

Her dress was a soft, flowing thing—not black, for once. It was a wedding, after all, and she'd been a bridesmaid. The dark purple fabric shimmered as she spun in the colored lights of the bar, and then... her gaze met mine.

My heart stuttered in my chest and I looked away, chugging my beer like it was a lifeline.

What was wrong with me? I was a grown man, not some rabid teenager. I'd built a successful career and gotten myself a nice apartment, and in my entire adult life, I'd never felt this awkward when faced with the sight of a pretty lady.

“Travis!” Shaking me from my daze, two delicate hands pressed against my chest.

I looked down at the five-foot-tall brunette, swallowing back a sigh. “Oh, hey, Pauline.”

“I heard you were back in town! It’s *so* good to see you!”

“Good to see you too,” I replied, forcing a smile.

Pauline was a nice girl in high school, but she was always a little too forward for my taste. When she smiled, it reminded me of that old meme of the girl who looked like she was fixing to marry you and have your kids and never let you go until death did you part—even if your death was her own doing.

But Pauline was all grown up now, and even though her eyes still held a hint of that same, off-her-rocker gleam, it was a little more subdued.

“How’s your leg? Can you still dance?” she asked, all but purring.

It was an innocent enough question, but I still worked to keep my back from straightening with annoyance.

Could I still dance? Sure, I could. But since my career-ending injury had healed up enough for the two-step but not enough to result in anything but a medical discharge from the Marines, it didn’t feel like much of a win.

“Of course, he can dance,” a chipper voice replied from Pauline’s left. “But he promised he’d only dance with me tonight, so you’re out of luck, honey.”

I tucked my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing as Pauline made an array of awkward facial expressions before stalking angrily away.

Then, I turned to the bride’s little sister—one of my oldest friends—and lifted a brow.

“What?” Dakota asked with a shrug. “She gets on my nerves.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We don’t really have to dance, by the way. I just didn’t think you’d wanna dance with *her*.”

“Uh-huh.”

Dakota studied me for a moment, then promptly crossed her arms over her chest.

Oh, boy. I knew that look.

She was a little thing, and she was generally a ball of fun. That sassy attitude and her endless vault of practical jokes made her the best honorary little sister *slash* partner-in-crime a guy could ask for while growing up with three older brothers constantly ragging on him.

But when Dakota put on that stern face that practically screamed, *I’m a nurse and I could kill you just as quick as save your life*, grown men shuddered.

“Travis Alexander Wilson,” she said, not quite sounding like my momma, but managing to make me just as nervous. “You don’t look like you’re havin’ much fun.”

“You’re the one who just stopped me from dancin’.”

She didn’t even blink. “Uh, yeah, with someone you didn’t even wanna dance with.”

My eyes drifted over the top of Dakota’s head and landed on Aurora St. John again. She was laughing at something her date had said, but there was something... strange about it.

It was like she was trying to force the laugh out—and not for *his* benefit. Like she wished more than anything she found whatever he’d said funny, and was disappointed she hadn’t.

Dakota looked over her shoulder to follow my gaze, then turned back to me with a sly grin. “But you *do* wanna dance with *her*, huh?”

“Who?” I asked, annoyed that I was being accused of this twice in as many minutes.

My gaze was still locked on Aurora and the stiff-as-a-board guy who held her like he had no idea where to put his hands. He looked like he’d just stepped off the pages of a

cheesy magazine spread from one of those stores that had the word *banana* in the name.

Sure, tonight he wore a white button-down with pressed khaki slacks, which was pretty standard for a wedding, but I'd bet my motorcycle he usually paired those boat shoes of his with patterned chino shorts and a pink polo with a popped collar.

"Rory," Dakota said with a chuckle. "They're not datin', you know. Rory and Chip, I mean."

I barked out a laugh. "His name is *not* Chip."

"Sure it is. Fits, dontcha think?"

It couldn't be more perfect. He looked like a chip. Not a hearty one with ridges that made for good veggie-dip-dipping, but the thin and crispy ones. The ones that lacked substance and made your hands all greasy.

I kinda wanted to step on him.

"He is her date, though, right?" I asked.

She shrugged. "She said they're just friends, but yeah. If you went over there and asked to cut in, would it loosen you up so you'd have some fun tonight? I'll sic your momma on you otherwise, and I know you don't want that."

I glared at her. "You wouldn't."

"I would."

"Some Bonnie to my Clyde."

Pain lanced over Dakota's features, and the teasing light in her eyes disappeared faster than I could blink. Pity replaced it, and my back went up automatically.

"Travis, it's just... ever since you showed up you've been so... I don't know. I don't have the right words to say about the way things went down, but I wish I did. I wish I could say somethin' that would make it better, but I can't. No one can."

"Is *that* supposed to make it better?" I asked with a short laugh.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? But—”

“Before you finish that sentence, remember that a sorry with a but ain’t a sorry. And you have nothin’ to apologize for. You care. I appreciate it.”

She pulled her lips to the side. “Promise?”

“Promise. Now, will you agree not to send Momma over here to give me a verbal smackdown if I ask Aurora to dance?”

“*Aurora*, huh?” Dakota asked, hands on the hips of her own dark purple bridesmaid’s dress, a mischievous light in her eyes.

“It’s her name.”

“Really?”

I shrugged. “Yep.”

“It’s pretty.”

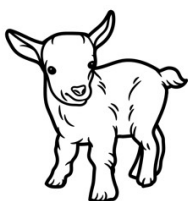
“Agreed.”

Dakota studied me, then looked over her shoulder at the woman in question. “You might wanna wait for a slow song. You don’t want that busted leg to let ya down.”

I slid my eyes away from Aurora’s profile, narrowing them as they fixed on Dakota. Her own eyes were wide, innocent saucers, complete with a slow blink.

“Too soon?” she asked.

“Too soon.”



“Ah, no way! They’re playing one of Laney’s!” I said, grinning at Chip as he shifted his two-handed hold on my waist.

You know, in that spot where boys placed their hands at middle-school dances, with flat palms and straight arms, keeping two feet of space between their bodies and their dance partners.

Chip smiled, following my gaze as I turned to find Laney in the crowded bar, the guests erupting into cheers as she took a bow from where she stood by the cake table with Everett.

It really was a great song. I’d always been a fan of country music for reasons I didn’t understand since I was a Southern California girl by birth. And though a lot of Laney’s biggest hits were more pop-country than I usually preferred, this one was different. You could practically hear the cowbells and banjos moseying in the background.

Maybe it was the hope in the song that had my chest aching. It was a classic ‘will-they-or-won’t-they’ ballad, with passionate lyrics about two people dancing around their long-held feelings for each other.

The kind of song that made me extra aware of the gap between Chip and me on the dance floor. I could line up the entire *Outlander* series—the paperbacks, anyway—between our chests and still have room to breathe.

As Everett pressed a tender kiss to Laney’s temple, I wished for the hundredth time that night that Chip would look at me the way Everett looked at Laney. I’d put extra effort into

getting ready, hoping that having Chip as my wedding date would finally push us out of the friend zone.

So far, no such luck.

I couldn't help but let out an exaggerated sigh as Laney and Everett began to dance to her song. *Their* song, really, as he was the subject of it. Those two were living out my dream love life, right before my eyes.

For that matter, so were several other couples in this room. Bailey and Jackson, who made the perfect little tripod with Phoebe, danced a few feet away with megawatt smiles on their faces.

The bride and groom hadn't stopped smiling all day, so much so that I'd wondered on more than one occasion if they'd even get to enjoy their honeymoon at this rate. They'd probably spend the whole time icing their sore cheeks and applying Carmex to their overly stretched lips.

Even the parents were displaying signs and symptoms of catching the love bug. Judd and Georgie made a private toast in the corner as they surveyed the scene, and Grant and Eleanor couldn't look more at peace if they tried. It was their daughter's wedding day, and Aubree was practically glowing under her new husband's attention.

This song came out a few years ago, and I'd never forget how I felt while watching the music video. I'd thought Laney was channeling her love for the equally famous and—I'm embarrassed to admit this, now—extremely handsome country heartthrob, Riley Conrad.

I'd watched Laney in the video, strumming her guitar ever so gently to a sweet, syrupy ballad for all the hopeless romantics of the world. As she sang about holding hands by the lake where she had her first kiss, all I could think about was that my own love life was more like a love *void*.

It made me want to adopt a whole litter of cats just to make sure I wasn't alone when I was old and gray. Or even switch tactics and marry a pizza—that seemed like a more attainable relationship goal for me than an actual human boyfriend. At

least a pizza would never leave me feeling cold and lonely during a Laney Cole song.

Perhaps all of that would change tonight, though. Perhaps my plan with Chip would work, and just like in fiction, my friend would become my everything.

But as we continued to stiffly shuffle from side to side as the song went on, Laney's lyrics started to make me feel a little sad. As she sang about sitting on a tire swing, pining over the boy she'd always loved, I pictured myself swaying in the summer breeze all lonely-like, with no hope at all.

Yuck.

That wasn't what I was supposed to be feeling while dancing with Chip. Maybe we just needed to chat. There was a reason we were friends. We talked. We laughed. We joked. Introducing some conversation would totally fix this uneasy feeling in my gut.

"Did you know Laney wrote this song about Everett?" I asked my date as we moved to the slow melody that filled the air.

"Aren't all of her songs about Everett?" Chip countered with a teasing smile.

Not the flirty kind of teasing, though. Just your average, friendly stuff.

Sad face.

"Well, yeah. I guess so. But she wrote this song years ago before they were back together, so it's extra sweet. It makes me wonder if he ever heard her songs on the radio and knew they were about him. You know? Like did he hear these lyrics and think, 'oh, crap, this girl still loves me!'"

"Actually," a voice cut in, making me jump as I looked up to find Travis standing beside us, "every time one of Laney's songs came on the radio, Everett changed the station."

"He—He did?" I stammered, suddenly breathless.

"Yep. Seemed he didn't want to wonder whether or not Laney still loved him or if all her songs were about your

brother.”

I laughed, but Chip missed a step, causing him to bring his big foot down right on my toe. “Ow!”

“Sorry,” Chip said with a wince.

“Mind if I cut in?” Travis asked, keeping his focus on my dance partner as he held a hand out to me. “That’s the third time I’ve seen you do that.”

My stomach flipped at the notion that Travis was watching us closely enough to have caught three of the five times Chip had stepped on my toes tonight.

Then it flipped again as I realized what else he’d said.

He wanted to cut in?

As in, he wanted Chip to get lost and wanted to take his place? For this dance, of course. Nothing more. But still. That was... interesting.

Chip would say no, though, wouldn’t he? I mean, if I were a guy, and I liked a girl, I wouldn’t want to let some other guy cut in on our dancing time. Especially not if said other guy had insulted my dancing skills in the next breath.

“Sure, yeah,” Chip said, and to my utter horror, his face actually brightened like this was the best news he’d heard all day.

Crap. What did that mean?

“That is, if that’s okay with you, Rore-bore?” Chip asked me, polite concern lining his features.

I glanced at Travis, who mouthed, “*Rore-bore?*”

“Um, yeah, it’s fine,” I told Chip, ignoring the humor I’d spied dancing behind Travis’s eyes before I’d looked away.

Chip dropped my waist like it was a human-shaped hot potato, and before I could even blink, he was making a beeline for a girl in the corner with sandy-brown hair and a pale pink dress that washed her out.

Ew, don’t be a mean girl. Sorry, Sandy.

“Are you gonna tell me why he just called you ‘*Rore-bore*’?” Travis asked when we were alone.

“No.”

He shrugged. “Fine. Wanna dance?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? I’ve heard you’re not much better about stepping on toes.”

“I told you I fixed that problem,” he replied, holding out his hand. “Come on. Dance with me.”

With an awkward nod, I let Travis take me in his arms. Goosebumps appeared on my skin as he wound my arm around one broad shoulder, taking my free hand in his. He settled his other hand on my lower back, causing heat to surge through me like a tidal wave.

Unlike Chip’s, Travis’s hold on me was perfect. Strong, yet tender. And even though I had chills and there was barely enough room for one Outlander paperback between us, let alone the whole set, I found myself able to breathe a lot easier than I likely should’ve.

In my books, whenever the hero and heroine were close like this, I made sure one or both of them were having trouble getting air. Like a full-on asthma attack, their palpable connection would close up their airways and throw them into 911-worthy respiratory distress.

So... why was I breathing so freely? Why was I so comfortable in Travis’s arms?

I started to internally compare this ease in my chest to the awkwardness—and toe pain—brought on by dancing with Chip, but then Travis stepped back to twirl me.

Twirl. Me.

Now, *that* had my breath hitching.

“You look beautiful in purple,” Travis said when he returned our bodies to their former closeness. “I’m used to seein’ you in all black.”

His compliment, paired with that deep, Southern-accented voice, warmed my insides and made me blush. “Thank you.”

Looking down at the dark purple bridesmaid dress I’d gotten to wear tonight, I smiled to myself. Even though my efforts were apparently wasted when it came to impressing Chip with my appearance tonight, at least *someone* appreciated the final product.

I still couldn’t believe Riley and Aubree had even asked me to be in the wedding. I’d only just become a part of their lives, and yet, these last four months or so had been a whirlwind of one special moment after another. Birthday parties, baby showers for Laney and Bailey, and even simple family-friendly afternoons, like a picnic in town square with live music—including Laney and Riley singing a forced-by-the-whole-town duet.

And now, here I was, wearing a dress that matched the ones worn by the Cole sisters, the same color as the ties on every Wilson brother. Except this one, that is. Travis had apparently decided to ditch it.

Realizing I probably should’ve complimented him in return, I let my gaze drift from my dress to his outfit. What I could see of it anyway, thanks to this decidedly non-middle-school-like closeness.

He’d changed out of his slacks and into jeans and his motorcycle boots between the ceremony and the reception. He still had on his black button-down shirt, giving the whole thing an elevated look, but it also meant he wore what he always wore: black on top, denim on bottom.

Yet, somehow—and maybe it was just because of the colorful disco ball overhead that made everyone look fun and happy—he looked even more handsome than usual.

Which, of course, meant my delayed, “You clean up pretty well yourself,” came out sounding a little froggy and odd.

Charming, Rore-Bore. Really charming.

I felt his hand twitch against the small of my back, as if he intended to move it, and then thought better of it. I could’ve

sworn he'd been about to do something swoony like rub my back, but then I reminded myself he'd just been in an explosion that resulted in lots of nerve, muscle, and tissue damage.

Maybe he'd developed a hand twitch. Who knew?

Whatever his hand-twitch intentions were, it seemed neither of us intended to say anything for a long moment. Instead, we simply continued to dance as the first slow song faded into another, locked in a strangely peaceful, wordless conversation.

Until Gertie the Goat burst between us in all her hooved-furball glory, of course. My heart lurched as Travis teetered precariously between his good leg and his bad one, nearly tumbling over in surprise.

I reached out to steady him, startling a laugh from both of us when I grabbed hold of his arm with more force than necessary and sent him crashing into me. The move gave him some kind of control over his footing, though, and then it was his turn to keep *me* from falling as he enveloped me in a firm squeeze.

An involuntary chuckle escaped my lips as I felt his arms flex under my hands, and when his gaze met mine, amusement danced in his deep-brown eyes.

"Why does that keep happenin' to us?" he asked, our faces so close I could feel his breath on my lips.

"Because Gertie's a menace?" I replied.

"Watch out!" Phoebe yelled, dashing by in pursuit of Gertie.

The swish of her dark purple skirt was the only point of contact, thank goodness, and Travis released his hold on me when it was clear neither of us was in danger of falling that time.

He cleared his throat, then rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. Something about the flush staining his cheeks had me averting my eyes before I got carried away making something out of nothing.

Hashtag romance writer struggles.

I caught sight of Bailey gaping at her daughter, eyes wide with disapproval as the ballerina-turned-goat-herder continued to chase Gertie around the dance floor.

Jackson stopped dancing and let go of his wife, placing his hands on his hips. “Phoebe! Quit horsin’ around with that dang goat before one of you gets hurt!”

“Good thing Bailey and Jackson are paramedics,” Travis said with a grin. “I don’t think those two have plans to quit horsin’ around anytime soon.”

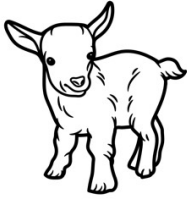
We both burst into laughter as we watched Phoebe and Gertie chase each other around the dance floor, joyous chaos filling the room. I snuck a peek at Travis out of the corner of my eye, his lips still curled in an amused grin.

But beneath the quiet laughter was a strange tension that seemed to have rooted itself between the two of us ever since he’d let me off the hook, causing me to shift my eyes around the room in search of Chip.

He was my date, after all.

But, okay, if my good buddy Chip—the very man who’d just embarrassed the heck out of me by using that awful nickname in front of Travis—replaced me with some other wedding guest, I probably wouldn’t be too bummed.

Travis followed my gaze, straightening to his full height when his eyes landed on my potential friend-to-more. “Are you two uh... dating?”

**aurora**

“No,” I replied quickly, my stomach fluttering. Why, I wasn’t sure, but I would’ve killed for a ginger ale at that moment. “Chip and I are just friends.”

Did I want it to be more? Yep.

Did I fret over my appearance so much earlier that I poked myself in the eyeball no less than three times even though I was actually pretty dang good at putting on mascara? Yes.

But did Travis need to know any of that? *Nope.*

He gave me a nod in reply, but was there a hint of relief sneaking around behind those big, brown eyes of his?

Doubtful. After all, he’d been the one to suggest we call off our date, right? Not in so many words, but the intention was there.

But then, almost in answer to my question, Travis stepped closer to me. “Come here.”

I gulped. It was super cute. Very smooth. Then I nodded and stepped back into his arms, avoiding the urge to sniff him. The man already thought of me as a bit of a freak considering my awkward entrance into his family’s life. Sniffing him wouldn’t exactly change that for me.

The second slow song we’d been dancing to before Gertie and Phoebe had nearly toppled us was already wrapping up, and I wrinkled my nose, conflicted. I couldn’t tell whether I wanted the next one to be slow so he could keep holding me like this, or fast so I could see if he had some Footloose-style moves to go with his rebel without a cause vibes.

Well, if his leg was up for it.

Concern for him lanced through me, but I had a feeling Travis wasn't in the mood to answer the same question he'd likely been getting all night. When I lost my mom, I appreciated the care and concern people showed me, but I hated always having to tell them whether or not I was okay. If I weren't, they'd know, right?

It wasn't the same thing as losing your career following a freak accident, but knowing his pain on any level sort of made me feel like we had something in common. Something neither of us would want to have in common with anyone else, but it was there, nonetheless.

I settled my cheek onto his shoulder and gave myself permission to breathe him in. Just a little. Very subtly.

After all, the man was cute, I was dressed up and grateful for a dance partner who didn't step on my toes. None of this had to mean anything more than that.

He sighed contentedly, and my earlier suspicion was confirmed. Travis didn't need me to ask him if he was okay. He needed me to let him keep *being* okay.

As for me? I was more than okay. As we slowly swayed to the music, his hand was warm in mine as his thumb made smooth circles against the back of it. His steps were sure and perfectly timed, and he smelled like what I imagined heaven smelled like.

Ya know, if heaven were filled with hot Marines with tattoos.

More specifically, hot, tattooed Marines with one single, sexy dimple on one single, sexy cheek.

Even more specifically because I had a tendency to get carried away: hot, tattooed, half-dimpled Marines with really sweet moms who force-fed their loved ones their amazing, Southern cooking.

Phew. Yeah. Heaven.

Wait.

What was I doing? Travis hadn't wanted to go on our date. I'd vowed to put him out of my mind and focus on Chip. What kind of jerk started the night thinking she was destined to be with one guy only to end it by thinking of another as her personal idea of heaven?

If I ever wrote a female main character like that, my readers—all seventeen of them—would probably leave me for good. Talk about a wishy-washy heroine.

“Um, well, Chip and I are friends, *right now*,” I amended, clearing my throat when the words tickled the back of it like tiny, dance-ruining bugs, “but maybe someday it'll be more.”

Travis, who'd seemed pretty dang at peace until that brilliant statement, leaned back so he could frown down at me. “You think so?”

Why did he look like he didn't believe me?

“Yeah. You know, like in books. Movies too, I guess, if you're not much of a reader.”

“Hmm.”

That was all I got? Hmm?

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

I shrugged. “Are you much of a reader?”

“Nope.”

The way he'd enunciated the *p* had me lifting my brows, but I simply shrugged again. “To each their own.”

One corner of his lips quirked up, but he didn't say anything as we continued to dance.

Sick of the silent stare-off, I shook my head and plowed on. “Well, you don't have to read a lot of books to know what I'm saying is true. Friends-to-lovers is a thing. It happens all the time.”

Travis shook his head with a sly smile on his face. “Maybe so. But I don't see it happenin' for you and Chip.”

I yearned to ask him why not, but something in my chest had a vice grip on the question.

Instead, I went for a different question. One that was totally none of my business, and yet, had been itching to come out ever since Riley and Aubree's engagement party.

"Are you interested in Paisley?" I asked, searching his eyes for a clue about his answer.

"Nope," he replied a little too quickly, and with more of that extra-heavy *p*-pronouncing. "She's not my type."

Were we talking about the same woman? Paisley was probably everyone's type. She was kind, smart, funny, and one of the most genuine people I'd ever met. Plus, she had great taste in basically everything, a successful career, and could pretty much fix any problem, any time, anywhere.

Oh, yeah, and she was freaking gorgeous.

Even Adam, who didn't really seem to like her for unknown reasons, couldn't help but break his neck when she walked by in those form-fitting pantsuits she wore.

I raised an eyebrow at my dance partner. "If Paisley's not your type, what is?"

He opened his mouth to reply, then paused, cocking his head to the side. "Hmm. Well, I used to think I knew," he mused, "but lately I'm thinkin' I'm not so sure anymore."

We stared at each other again as the final strains of strange hipster music faded away, the tension thick between us. I almost grinned when "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" came over the speakers since it was one of my favorite songs, but I was too distracted.

What had just happened? Did Travis say that because he'd jumped the gun when he told me that Paisley wasn't his type, and now thought better of it?

Or...

Before I could even finish that pointless thought, we heard another one of Phoebe's frantic shouts of Gertie's name.

My eyes widened as Travis spun us so we could see what the commotion was, just in time to see the mischievous goat leaping from the polished bar top and right toward the cake table.

All at once, Phoebe lunged, someone—no, *several* someones—screamed, and the goat let out a battle cry of a bleat as she sailed through the air.

Phoebe tried to grab her, and she'd given it a good shot. But she missed her target and slammed right onto the end of the table. Phoebe's crash-landing caused the attempted cake-eater to jump ship in fear for her life, and the cake?

Well, there was no hope for the cake.

The entire wedding watched as Phoebe's hard fall buckled the rickety legs of The Proud Oak's ancient party table, launching the elaborate wedding cake in a perfect St. Louis arch through the air.

And down it fell.

Down, down, down, narrowly missing the lithe, little goat, coating poor Chip in red velvet and cream cheese as it smashed onto the hardwood like a grenade.

The bar went dead silent, save for the raucous sound of the devil's fiddle, of course.

But there was no movement or dancing beyond Gertie's oddly-in-tune hopping as she scavenged the cakey carnage like a four-legged vulture.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing as Phoebe sprang to her feet to begin picking up the pieces of her cake disaster, but it was pointless. No one would have heard my laughter over the sound of their own.

By the time Jackson and Bailey made it through the crowd to hug and help their daughter, everyone was practically in tears. And when a bar employee came over to shoo them away so they could get cleaned up, I turned back to Travis.

He looked... *pleased*.

I glanced behind me to see what he was looking at, groaning when I realized it was Chip. Turning back at Travis, I cringed as I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. “I should probably help Chip get cleaned up. He probably wants to go back to his hotel to change, but—”

“No problem,” he said, a glint in his eye that I couldn’t quite decipher. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

I frowned. “Uh, yeah. Guess so.”

“It’s a shame, really,” Travis drawled with a wry grin.

“What?” I squeaked.

“The cake. Been lookin’ forward to gettin’ a taste of it all night.”

A million thoughts swirled through my mind as I did the absolute worst thing I could’ve done at that moment.

I looked at his lips.

And his one dang dimple, because how could I not when it was right there, on display, paired with a smile that probably broke laws just by existing?

Even worse, he caught me looking at his lips *slash* dimple, and his smile grew wider, the dimple growing *dimplier*.

Yep, I was a freak, and it was time to leave.

“Thanks for the dance,” I said, not waiting for a reply as I dashed over to the cake-covered man I was supposed to be acting like a nervous weirdo in front of.

That was love, right? Being a nervous weirdo. Not being able to breathe when he was close. The stuff I wrote romance novels about!

It was just too bad that the second I stepped into Chip’s orbit and got a whiff of his probably Abercrombie cologne paired with red velvet, I flinched.

If Travis had been covered in cake, I wouldn’t want to flinch.

I’d want to—

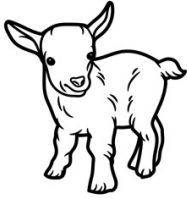
“Can we get out of here, please?” Chip asked, breaking me from a highly inappropriate train of thought. “I was already bored out of my mind, and now I’m just mad.”

I nodded, flinching again when he stormed past me, bits of cake trailing in his wake.

Figuring I should probably catch my dad’s eye to let him know I was leaving, I scanned the crowd. But it was Travis’s warm brown eyes that met my blue ones, and if eyes could laugh, his were rolling.

I wouldn’t even look at his mouth to see if it matched, though. I just turned on my heel and left.

Who only had one dimple, anyway?



aurora

The morning sun peeked through the windows of The Caffeinated Squirrel, casting a golden glow on the worn wooden floorboards. I glanced around the cozy small-town coffee shop and sighed. With its mismatched chairs, tables made from repurposed barn doors, and eclectic wall art featuring paintings of squirrels in various caffeinated poses, it was the perfect place to nurse my post-wedding hangover.

And to be clear, I wasn't hungover from drinking too much. I was hungover from the smell of red velvet cake that I still couldn't get out of my nose after walking Chip back to his room at the Charlotte Oaks B&B to help him get cleaned up.

I loved red velvet cake just as much as the next girl, but not like *that*.

All in all, it was a rough end to the night. Chip's crappy mood might've had something to do with that, or maybe it was his overpowering cologne that had turned sickly sweet and yet oddly sour when mixed with wedding cake. It could've also been the fact that dancing with Travis had somehow ruined what I'd thought was a great plan to take things to the next level with my friend.

Either way, I felt like I'd drunk enough last night to fill the classic, small-town water tower visible from the cafe's window, and I needed coffee. Now.

"Rory, your usual?" asked Sadie, the bubbly barista with pink-streaked hair and a penchant for knitting cat sweaters during her breaks.

Sadie was one of the only people in this town who'd given me the benefit of the doubt back when I was stalking Riley. She was friendly and sweet, so I'd come in here often to enjoy a chai latte and a bagel, hoping to overhear some dirt about my brother.

"Yep, thanks, Sadie," I replied, rubbing my temples and wishing I'd had the foresight to drink more water last night.

I snagged the last available table, which just happened to be next to the trash can and the counter holding the cream and sugar.

How fitting.

According to the reviews I'd read this morning, my latest book release seemed to be destined for the landfill. Maybe I should just throw my whole career in there and be done with it.

"Here you go, Rory," Sadie said as she set down my bagel and the large chai, complete with a little squirrel artfully crafted into the creamy foam. "Hope this helps."

"Thanks." I took a tentative sip and grimaced as it singed my tongue.

I pulled out my laptop, opening it up to reread those dreadful reviews—the epitome of a bad idea.

One particularly harsh critique stood out:

If you want to read about a couple with no chemistry, nothing in common, nothing complimentary even if they were opposites, and nothing interesting about them... pick up this book. St. John's latest novel is as bland and unappetizing as cold, day-old coffee. Oh, and despite being billed as a rom-com, it's not funny.

I tried not to let the words sting. I tried really, *really* hard. But how could I not take that personally?

I took another sip of my chai, determined not to let these bad reviews ruin this amazing latte. It was the little things in life that mattered most, right?

Besides, there was plenty to distract me in The Caffeinated Squirrel—like quirky locals who seemed to have stepped straight out of a sitcom script. Namely, Mrs. Abernathy, with her ever-present knitting needles and a ball of yarn that never seemed to run out. She sat at the counter so she could chat about needle gauges with Sadie, and their light, unbothered conversation had me wondering if I should take up knitting instead of writing.

Maybe I could sell scarves. Scarves didn't have to be funny.

Just as I was about to dive back into my pity party, the door swung open, and in walked Jackson and Travis, followed by Phoebe and Gertie. I offered them a weak smile and cautious wave, hoping they wouldn't come over and ask me what I was doing. I really didn't want to admit that I was enjoying a hot beverage while wallowing in self-pity.

Unfortunately, even though Jackson, his daughter, and her goat got right into line, Travis made his way over to me with a swagger that shouldn't have been so appealing, considering my bad mood.

“Aurora,” Travis drawled, his use of my full name sending a shiver down my spine. “How ya holdin’ up this mornin’? Did your *friend* get all the red velvet out of his pretty boat shoes?”

“No, he had to throw them away,” I replied with a wry smile, feeling slightly guilty for not feeling worse about that.

But honestly, the man had spent the entire time he was washing up talking smack about The Proud Oak as if the down-home setting was super beneath him. How had I not noticed how stuck-up he was before?

“How are you?” I asked, closing the lid of my laptop before he saw the cause of my bad morning.

“Can't complain,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “Well, other than wakin’ up to Gertie tryin’ to eat my boots. That was a real treat.”

“Guess she has a taste for expensive leather,” I joked, eyeing the well-worn motorcycle boots on Travis’s feet.

“Could be,” he agreed, chuckling softly.

“Oh, looks like it’s almost your turn,” I said, gesturing vaguely toward the counter. “I’ve got some, uh, work to do.”

“Sure thing.”

Travis had drawn out the two words with confusion lacing his tone. But then he ambled away without commenting on my rude dismissal of him, and I watched out of the corner of my eye as he joined Jackson and Phoebe at the counter.

“Okay, Rory,” I muttered under my breath, returning my attention to my work. “Time to get serious. Maybe you don’t have to quit. Maybe you can take these reviews as guides for improvement so you don’t write trash. And *maybe* you should quit talking to yourself.”

But the words on the screen seemed to blur together, and I found myself distracted by the soft murmur of conversation between Travis, Jackson, and Phoebe. It was hard not to be curious about what they were talking about, especially since it seemed like they were trying to keep their voices down.

Did they somehow know what I was over here agonizing about? Were they discussing my latest literary flop?

No, they wouldn’t do that. They were nice. Nice people didn’t make other people wanna quit their dream jobs and knit scarves for a living.

And speaking of nice... as Travis brought his coffee to the counter behind me, I couldn’t help but remember Travis’s compliment on my purple dress last night at the wedding. It was short and sweet... but it was more than I’d gotten from Chip.

Feeling even saltier, I avoided Travis’s gaze, losing myself in the fascinating spectacle of a man attempting to construct an elaborate coffee cup pyramid on his table by the front window. But then Travis lurched forward, having stepped on a discarded lid and causing his wounded leg to buckle. He

bumped into my table, and my glorious chai latte sloshed all over my laptop.

“Ow! Dang it!” he exclaimed, wincing in pain first and then alarm as he saw me frantically mopping up my keyboard. “I’m sorry—”

“It’s totally fine,” I said, still focusing on the mess. “It’s a sign that I don’t need this thing anymore.”

Without waiting for an invitation, Travis slid into the chair across from me and motioned toward my laptop. “Um, unless you’re gonna start writin’ your books by hand, I’m pretty sure you do. I’ll buy you another one if it’s ruined. I’m good for it, I promise.”

“Ha, probably not necessary, but thanks,” I snorted, feeling deflated. “What’s the point of writing books—by hand or otherwise—if no one likes them?”

“Rory, don’t say that,” Travis chided gently, sipping his coffee and using his free hand to rub his injured leg. “I’m sure your books are great.”

“Not according to the reviews.”

“Pshh. You can’t let a few bad reviews get you down.”

I blinked slowly, nodding like I wouldn’t. But there were only a “few bad reviews” because the books didn’t sell, and there weren’t any good ones to make up for the bad.

“Look,” Travis said, leaning in. “I don’t know much about bein’ an author or sellin’ books, but didn’t I hear that you market books for other authors? Why can’t you apply those tactics to your own books?”

“Because apparently, even with all the marketing tricks in the world, my books simply aren’t good enough,” I grumbled, feeling the weight of my failures pressing down on me.

Normally, I wasn’t so candid about my feelings regarding my writing career, but ever since the people in this town had learned my identity and welcomed me into their community with open arms, a lot of my shields had started to fall.

Sure, I sounded like a bit of a whiner, but if the shoe fit...

“Aurora, you gotta believe in yourself and your writin’,” Travis insisted, his Southern drawl turning my name into a slow, sweet melody. “Do you love to write?”

I nodded without hesitation. My heart swelled with passion for the craft—my fingers tingling at the thought of opening my laptop and typing up fun, lighthearted stories from the depths of my imagination.

As long as my keyboard still worked, of course.

“Then don’t quit,” Travis said firmly, his eyes locking onto mine. “If you love somethin’, you gotta fight for it.”

My breath hitched as I absorbed his words, feeling a mix of gratitude and disbelief. Could it really be that simple? Just keep fighting for what I loved?

“Look,” Travis continued, shifting in his seat. “I loved bein’ a Marine, and now I can’t do that anymore, and it kills me. Gettin’ to do what you love is huge. I can’t. But *you* can, so you should.”

Hearing the pain in his voice, my heart went out to him. Here he was, trying to encourage me despite facing his own struggles. Swallowing hard, I offered him a small, sincere smile. “You’re right, Travis. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Phoebe stole my attention for a second by pirouetting in the center of the cafe—much to the delight of the patrons.

“Hey,” I said, turning back to Travis when she took her seat again. “You’re pretty wise for a guy who lives off peach cobbler and motorcycle rides.”

He chuckled, revealing that one-dimpled grin I found so enticing. “What can I say? I’ve got layers.”

“Like an onion?” I quipped, smirking as I referenced one of my favorite childhood movies.

“Exactly like an onion,” he agreed, laughing along with me.

Our quiet laughter blended with the cacophony of the coffee shop, and at that moment, surrounded by the quirky townspeople of Charlotte Oaks, I felt a small flicker of hope rekindle within me. Maybe, just maybe, things could get better—as long as I didn't give up on what I loved. I had no idea how to turn this capsized boat right-side-up, but I was more willing to try than before he'd come along, so I'd call that a win.

“Travis,” I said, tilting my head to the side as I studied him. “You're good at giving advice, but what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Well... It's just... You may not be a Marine anymore, but you've still got your whole life ahead of you.”

He smirked. “Well, sure. But it's figurin' out what to do with it that's givin' me trouble.”

“What hobbies do you have that you could turn into a new career? That's how I got started with my writing business.”

His eyes flicked away from mine as if he were searching for an answer within the eclectic, mismatched decor of The Caffeinated Squirrel.

I leaned in, eager to hear his response, but then Gertie leaped onto our table and dove straight for my bagel, chomping down on it with gusto.

“Hey!” I protested, snatching the bagel from Gertie's greedy little mouth. “That was my breakfast!”

“Sorry 'bout that,” Jackson said, casually strolling over and scooping up the goat like she was a runaway football. “Can't take my eyes off this kid for a second.”

“Clearly,” I muttered with a short laugh, watching Jackson return to his and Phoebe's table with Gertie tucked under his arm.

It was hard not to smile at the absurdity of it all—a goat running rampant in a coffee shop, noshing on bagels like a carb-crazed maniac.

Only in Charlotte Oaks.

“Anyway,” I said, turning my focus back to Travis as I scraped veggie cream cheese onto the unmarred half of my bagel. “What were we talking about before Gertie so rudely interrupted us? Again.”

Travis cleared his throat, his gaze flickering back to mine. “Uh, nothin’ major. Just whatever I’m gonna do with the rest of my life.”

“Yes, yes. That little thing.” I grinned at him. “What do you do for fun?”

“Well, to be honest, I don’t do much in the way of hobbies,” he admitted, his tone sheepish. “Bein’ a good shot doesn’t translate into much outside of the military or law enforcement, and we already know I’m not fit for duty as a cop.”

“Travis, I know every Marine is a rifleman, but you all have specific jobs on top of being a good shot. What was your MOS?”

Travis shifted uneasily, and I knew right away that whatever his military occupational specialty was, it was one of those jobs that made Marines want to lie when asked about it when asked by civilians.

“I was a sniper,” he said in a low tone, and even though plenty of kids played wartime video games and dreamed of growing up to hold that very job, there wasn’t a hint of bragging in Travis’s voice or expression.

He looked... solemn.

My eyes widened automatically, but I shook off my surprise and let out a little laugh. “No wonder.”

His lips quirked. “No wonder what?”

“No wonder you have such good observation skills. Focus, too. Those are good skills to have.”

Travis grinned ruefully. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

My mind automatically raced with ideas for a new story. A romance novel featuring a sassy Southern belle and a rugged

Marine sniper with a heart of gold? It was practically writing itself in my head.

Not well, no doubt, but still.

Travis leaned back in his chair, his hands running through his short hair as he thought for a moment. “Unless there’s a gun club in Charlotte Oaks I don’t know about, that pretty much takes out usin’ my shootin’ skills as a career, but hey, at least I’m focused and observant.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest that he open a gun club, but as a struggling business owner myself, I knew firsthand how hard it was to run your own business and turn all that time and effort into a profit. It *could* be just the challenge he needed, but it could also be a disaster for his confidence.

Besides, opening a brick-and-mortar business required a ton of capital. Since he’d been medically separated from the military, he probably got his full salary plus a decent amount of disability pay, but I doubted he had enough liquid assets to open a business like that, right?

“You could go to college,” I suggested, taking a bite of my bagel and relishing in the chewy, carb-laden goodness. When Travis stared at me in open-mouthed horror, I looked between him and the bagel, speaking around a mouthful. “This isn’t the side Gertie slobbered on.”

He grinned. “*Phew*, I was worried there for a minute. But no, college isn’t for me.”

“Why not? You have the GI Bill. That’ll pay for all your schooling, and since you’re good at giving advice and you’re so perceptive, maybe you could go to school to be a therapist.”

Travis let out a bark of laughter. “Me, a therapist? Highly doubt that would go over well.”

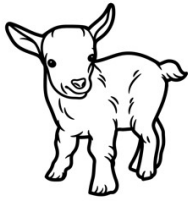
“Why not?” I asked again. “You listen well, and you give good advice. The perceptiveness and focus would help, too, I bet.”

Travis let out a sigh, his eyes distant as if he were lost in thought. “I dunno, Rory. I feel like my past is too... dark for

me to be someone's therapist. I should see a therapist, not *be* one."

After checking to ensure I didn't have any cream cheese or bagel crumbs on my palm, I reached across the table and laid my hand over Travis's. I started to offer him some encouraging words, but then the bell above the door chimed, and my dad walked in.

And when his eyes locked on us, I pulled my hand back from Travis's and dropped it into my lap. Robby St. John *did not* look happy.

**travis**

I turned to see what had Aurora suddenly looking so jumpy, and my eyebrows lifted when I saw her dad, Robby, striding right for us with a way-too-tight smile on his stern face.

“Morning, Rory. Travis,” he greeted us, his chest rising as he sucked in a deep breath through his nose.

“Morning, Dad,” Rory replied, her voice wary. “Did you have fun at the wedding last night?”

Robby tucked his hands into the pockets of his crisp blue jeans, sighing. “Yeah, but I have to say, I’m too old to stay up and party that late. I try to reserve that kind of fun for the birthday.”

I chuckled, knowing full well he wasn’t talking about his own birthday. Without fail, Marines past and present gathered on November tenth and let their hair down like it was 1999.

As Aurora and her dad chatted about one ball they’d attended with her as his guest, memories flew through my brain as I thought about the event I’d be left out of for the rest of my life.

Wearing my dress blues while my date—if I brought one—looked fine as all get-out in a flowing, formal gown. We’d watch the motivational video put out by the commandant of the Marine Corps, and it’d remind us all what we fought for and why we’d joined in the first place. And lemme tell you, that video made even the saltiest Marines grateful to be one of the few and the proud.

Then we'd plow through a dinner of too many courses than most had the patience for, then dance in the hotel ballroom until we changed into our civvies and hit the town. From there, we'd rest and recover over a long weekend, thanks to the birthday's proximity to Veteran's Day.

Good times.

I absently rubbed my chest. Robby St. John had probably gone to balls held by units that weren't even his own as an honorary guest. I could still remember listening to a speech at my first ball that'd motivated me so hard that my military haircut magically got even higher and tighter. I'd dreamed of one day standing at the podium in all my decorated Marine glory, doing the same thing for some other young Marine who was fresh out of boot camp.

But that would never happen now. Instead of wearing my blues at a ball from now on, I'd celebrate the birthday from my barstool with my dad and brothers at The Proud Oak.

At least they had a faded, wooden podium for karaoke night. Maybe I could get them to wheel it out this November tenth. Maybe I'd even wear my blues and tell stories from the good ol' days.

Okay, not really. But it was a fun thought.

"Rory," Robby said, the calculation in his tone breaking me from my thoughts, "the girl gang is over at the Wilson's house, cooking with the moms this morning. They'd love for you to join them."

Inwardly, I laughed. Laney, Bailey, Dakota, and Paisley seemed inseparable these days. Aubree, too, but she had a good excuse for being absent on account of her leaving for her honeymoon this morning. And if you heard my momma tell it, Aurora seemed to be sliding into their group like she'd always been there.

Aurora's head tilted to the side at her dad's words. "Oh, really?"

"Yep. Why don't you grab Chip and head over there?"

She shot me an apologetic look before nodding and closing her laptop. “Okay, sure. Sounds fun.”

“Excellent,” Robby said brightly.

Too brightly, and my Spidey-senses alerted me that something more was going on here.

“And remind him about dinner tonight,” Robby said. “You, me, and Chip—Proud Oak at seven. I wish Riley and his bride could join us, but it seems they’d rather be on their honeymoon.”

Instead of laughing at her dad’s joke, Aurora cringed. “Actually, Momma Cole invited the three of us to have dinner at the Wilson’s tonight. They wanna get together one last time before we leave town tomorrow.”

Now, I was the one who felt like cringing. I didn’t want her to leave. I knew she didn’t live in Charlotte Oaks, but up until the day before yesterday, neither had I. It was hard to remember she and her old man lived a state away.

Robby nodded. “I suppose that’ll be all right. Makes sense for you guys to head over there and help them cook, then, since we’ll be eating the food. I’ll see you over there in a bit?”

“Sure thing, Dad,” Aurora replied. Then she slowly gathered her things, her unease evident. She kept darting glances between me and her father, likely because neither of us was making moves like we were fixing to leave.

Robby remained in the same position, hands in his pockets, cool as a cucumber, even though I had a feeling that as soon as his daughter was gone, we’d be having ourselves a little *conversation*.

I remained seated, sipping my coffee, waiting for the inevitable. I tried to catch Aurora’s eye to let her know whatever she was worried about wasn’t a big deal. I could handle the protective dad spiel. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d gotten it, and it likely wouldn’t be the last.

Finally, Rory stood up and shrugged at her dad. “You staying for coffee?”

“Sure am. I didn’t come in here expecting...” His words trailed off as he glanced my way, then he looked down at the brilliant blonde he clearly loved with his whole, stone-cold heart. “I didn’t know you’d be here. This was just a happy coincidence. I’ll see ya later, though.”

“Okay.” She turned to me. “Are you coming to dinner later? At your parents’ house?”

“*His* house, too, right?” Robby interjected before I could reply. “You’re back in your old room, right, Travis?”

His tone was casual, but I knew what he was saying without explicitly saying it. Something akin to *my, how the mighty have fallen*.

“Yep.”

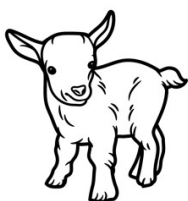
“Cool,” Aurora said. “Well, see you later, Travis.”

Her farewell held a strange finality that made my spine stiffen, but I simply nodded and gave her a soft smile. “Bye, Aurora.”

She turned and walked away, and I tried not to watch her go. I really did. But then I was glad I’d failed. Otherwise, I would’ve missed the way she looked back at me when she reached the door.

Her eyes were full of uncertainty, so I gave her a little nod, hoping to reassure her. And then she was gone.

I stared after her for a brief second, knowing without needing to look that Robby had settled himself into Aurora’s empty chair.



“Saw you dancing with Rory last night at the wedding,” Robby began without preamble.

I shifted so my attention was fully on him, taking another sip of my coffee. “I couldn’t let her friend keep steppin’ on her toes. Didn’t seem like a gentlemanly thing to do.”

Despite what we both knew was happening here, Robby’s lips twitched like he was holding in a laugh. But he was still looking at me with all the seriousness of the grim reaper come to lay down the hammer.

Er, scythe, as it were.

“So, you danced last night—a few times. And you’re here for coffee this morning.”

I nodded. “S’pose so.”

He mirrored my nod, taking my measure. “You know what? Let’s take a walk. I don’t need coffee, after all.”

I’d planned to meet Adam in his office after this, so taking a walk was just fine with me. Besides, even though I’d never let it show to this guy, my leg was killing me. I’d been sitting still for way too long, and all that damaged muscle and sinew tingled in protest.

“Sure. Mind walkin’ with me to the police station? I’m supposed to meet my brother there.”

He chuckled. “You in trouble?”

“Guess I’ll find out. I’m not sure what he wants with me.”

I followed Aurora's dad out of the busy coffee shop, pain shooting through my leg like a flaming arrow. But I put on a brave face as I stepped onto the sidewalk, unwilling to look weak in front of the long-time Marine. Especially not when he was about to give me the "stay away from my daughter" talk.

How far would he take this thing? Would he toss out some threats of bodily injury? Because, man, if so, it wouldn't be much of a threat.

At this point, I was half-ready to tell the guy to put me out of my misery. Months out from the accident, my jeans *still* felt like sandpaper against my not-fully-healed skin. Even the basic task of showering was still excruciating unless I kept the water at just the right temperature. That mangled skin insisted on growing back at a snail's pace, and I was ready to be done with it all.

We strolled down the brick sidewalks of Main Street past the quirky antique stores, bakeries, and eateries, all busier than usual, thanks to the out-of-town wedding guests exploring the local haunts.

"I get the feeling you already know what I wanted to pick your brain about," Robby commented as we passed a couple of guys strumming guitars while a toddler shot out of nowhere with a dollar bill for them, his dad rushing after him.

I frowned, tucking my hands in my pockets to mirror Robby's pose. "No, sir. I thought I knew what might be on your mind... but I'm not sure why you'd wanna pick *my* brain."

Robby chuckled as we walked by a bakery, the smell of fresh pastries wafting out. "I wanted to ask about your plans, son. I've heard things here and there since your accident, but I like to get my info straight from the horse's mouth."

"Same here," I replied, catching his stern glance my way before he looked ahead again.

"Good. So, what are your plans now that you're back in town?" he asked.

I did my best to walk normally and not hobble. “I’m still trying to figure that out.” When he lifted a brow, I shrugged. “I’m a big fan of honesty, so I was hopin’ you were, too.”

He shook his head, but at least he was smiling.

Sort of.

We stepped around a group consisting of two celebrities I recognized from the singing show that’d made Riley famous, their managers, and what I assumed were their bodyguards. Unless, of course, the singers regularly hung out with the kinda guys whose Sunday brunch look was better suited for an MMA charity banquet.

Just before we reached the police station, Robby stopped and turned to face me, his expression serious. “Travis, as someone who’s been in the Marine Corps for nearly thirty years, I’ve seen a lot of good men fall apart when they get out.”

I nodded, bracing myself for whatever came next. Maybe this conversation wasn’t about Aurora. Was he getting ready to volunteer to be something of a post-military guidance counselor for me?

“Many in your position can’t cope with the transition to civilian life,” he continued. “Especially if they were forced to leave the safety net they’d always known due to things beyond their control. When that happens, I’ve seen great Marines change into people I don’t even recognize. They turn to bad habits to fill the void.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I kept silent. I had a feeling I shouldn’t tell him that since he barely knew me, there wasn’t much of a chance I’d turn into someone he didn’t recognize.

He sighed, shaking his head. “Too many promising young men in your position have wound up on the streets—or worse.”

His words sent a chill down my spine. “With respect, sir, I don’t plan to let that happen to me.”

“Hmm.” He studied me with a critical eye. “And yet, you stand here as a man with no plan for the future.”

I fought hard not to bristle at his words. “Maybe I don’t have a plan right this minute, but I’m on my way to figurin’ one out.”

Robby nodded once, then jerked his chin toward the police station, and we resumed our walk. “I hope that’s true, son. But Aurora’s a bright girl. She’s struggling to find her own way, and I can’t have her hurt if you veer down the wrong road and take her with you.”

“Sir, I’m not sure what you think is goin’ on between Aurora and me, but—”

“Whatever it is, you should take a step back from it. That’s all I’m saying. You don’t have much to offer her right now. No stability, no career. She needs someone who has it all figured out so she has room to focus on her own future, and that’s not you. You’ll hold her back, and I think you know it.”

His words cut deep. Was *Chip* the kind of man he’d rather see his daughter with? I’d drag Aurora down, and yet Robby seemed to welcome *that* clown into their lives with open arms?

This conversation was mostly pointless, though, since Aurora had been fine with not going on our date when I’d given her the chance to jump ship. But I understood his need to protect her from unnecessary pain. I’d do the same in his boots. Heck, I’d do the same in my own... and for some unknown reason, I needed him to know that.

“I appreciate where you’re comin’ from, sir,” I said diplomatically. “And I know I’ve got some figurin’ out to do. But whether or not this conversation needs to happen—considerin’ there’s nothin’ goin’ on between your daughter and me—I’d never intentionally hurt her.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“First, ’cause I’m not someone who would. But, more importantly, she’s... Well, both of y’all are family now.” I kept

my voice even and respectful, but his paternal instinct to protect Aurora still rolled off him in waves.

“We are, huh?”

I gave him a sheepish shrug. “I mean, not the kinda family that’d make this even more awkward than it already is, but y’all are on a short list of people I’d do the opposite of hurtin’. I’d do whatever I could to help your daughter, sir, so the last thing you need to worry about is me hurtin’ her.”

“Just like that, huh?” He crossed his arms over his chest as he stopped and faced me again, this time because we’d finally arrived at our final destination.

We stood in a silent standoff in front of the old brick building covered in ivy that housed my brother and the rest of the COPD. Charlotte Oaks Police Department that is, not the sickness that often required medical attention from my *other* brother, the paramedic, and his paramedic wife.

And speaking of my cop-brother, I could almost feel Adam’s gaze on us from inside his lair, no doubt watching our exchange through the window. Surely, he’d want a full debriefing of this conversation the second I stepped inside.

Robby’s expression had a hint of humor as he continued to assess me and my motives, but he had a decent hold on it. “Rory’s long-lost brother marries your next-door neighbor, and suddenly that makes her *family*?”

“Yes, sir.”

He cocked his head to the side like he didn’t believe me, but I didn’t move an inch under his scrutiny. I knew the history here. Riley had told me all about how his biological parents had grown up in a rough place with even rougher people, and something told me this man had spent his entire life trying to do his best in a world where he didn’t trust anyone.

Sure, he trusted his wife and daughter, but his wife was gone, and his daughter? Well, he was just making sure he didn’t lose her too. I couldn’t blame the man for all this protective-parent stuff when I thought about it like that.

Maybe Aurora was onto something when she called me perceptive. I wasn't about to sign myself up for therapist classes—whatever those would be—but I was glad to have the skill if it meant I could pick up what the man across from me was putting down.

But, fine. If it took Robby St. John a hot minute to see that this town protected its own at all costs and that the Coles and Wilsons took that about a million steps further...

Shoot. He could take all the time he needed.

Finally, the older man nodded slowly. "I believe your intentions are good where Rory's concerned. But there's nothing I wouldn't do or say to protect her. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. Message received, loud and clear.

"And if what you said about us being like family is true, if you need help getting on your feet, don't be too proud to ask," he added gruffly. "Just do me a favor and keep things strictly friendly between you two. At least until you figure out a way to keep yourself off the streets."

"I understand. And thanks for the offer to help, sir, but I'm sure I'll be just fine."

Lies.

I wasn't sure.

Or, at least, I hadn't been until about five minutes ago. But maybe this conversation was just what I needed to get my butt in gear. Not because I wanted to be worthy of Aurora but because I refused to end up like one of those men Robby had spoken about. I refused to wind up on the streets simply because I'd been dealt a bad hand.

I didn't know if Robby picked up on the determination brewing inside me, but he seemed convinced enough to give me a parting nod, then continued down Main Street toward my neighborhood.

With a heavy sigh, I rolled my neck and faced the Rocky-style steps that led to the station. Fine, there weren't that many steps. That'd be absurd in a town like this. But that was how it

felt as I trudged my way up to the door, and when I entered the station, I was plumb out of air.

“What was that all about?” Adam asked the second he saw me.

I squared my shoulders, working hard to even out my ragged breathing. “Adam, I need a plan.”

The porch swing creaked gently as we sat there, the fading sunlight casting long shadows across my family’s front yard. I was trying my best not to look too enamored with Aurora, especially knowing her dad had just run out for a bag of ice and would return any moment, ready to kick my butt down the street if he sensed I wasn’t heeding his advice.

But I couldn’t help it. I’d shown up for dinner after trying and failing to come up with a plan for my life with my older brother at the station, and Aurora was out here on the swing with her laptop, looking too tempting to resist.

So, here I was, swinging in peaceful silence with her while she typed away on her laptop with a frown wrinkling her brow and tiny noises of exasperation as she smashed the delete button repeatedly, taking an ax to whatever she’d just written.

It was adorable.

“Tell me somethin’ embarrassin’ from high school,” I said, hoping whatever she told me would help me not be so insanely attracted to her.

“No.”

I tucked my hands into my pits, giving her my best impression of a chicken while trying not to elbow her in the jaw.

She glared ferociously at me, jutting out her chin. “Are you flapping? You’re flapping at me right now?”

“If the chicken fits.”

She sighed, rolling her eyes. “Fine. One time, I tripped in the cafeteria and spilled my tray. It was spaghetti day.”

“Ah, come on, that’s not embarrassin’.”

She shrugged. “I was embarrassed.”

I leaned in closer, my eyes meeting hers. “The only reason you’d be embarrassed for that is if you cared what they thought about you.”

She looked away, and for a moment, the porch was filled with a heavy silence.

I tilted my head, studying her profile. “Hmm. Is this all a front? Are you not as bad to the bone as you try to look?”

“Excuse me?” Her eyes snapped back to mine.

“Is this all-black, Doc Martin-wearin’, tough cookie appearance of yours a front?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I sniffed the air dramatically. “Wait, what’s that smell? Is that... oh my lanta, is that Eau de High School Cheerleader I smell? I knew you were too bubbly and cute for the goth look.”

She crossed her arms, clearly unamused. “Uh, no.”

“No? Your school didn’t have cheerleaders? Was it the dance team? That’s the same thing for schools with no cheer team.”

She smirked. “It’s not Eau de High School Cheerleader. It’s Essence of Cheer Captain.”

I threw my hands up in the air, laughing. “Knew it.”

“But I’m not too bubbly for all black. It’s my favorite color. Black like my soul. I’m broody, and you can’t put me in a box because I’m a squiggly line.”

I raised an eyebrow, captivated.

She frowned. “What? I am.”

“Tell me one thing that makes you a ‘complicated squiggly line.’”

She paused and stared me down a second, then seemed ready to give in. “Fine,” she huffed out. “In high school, I may

have been the cheer captain, and I may have run with the popular crowd, but it always kinda felt like I was chasing them.”

I made a buzzer noise with my mouth. “Eh, wrong. Haven’t you ever heard of the human urge to belong? Imposter syndrome?”

“The what?”

I leaned in, my eyes locked onto hers. “If you ran around with the popular crowd, that means you were popular. Trust me. They don’t let people run around with them who don’t fit the mold, whether right next to ’em *or* chasin’ after ’em. It only felt like that to you because you had such a strong desire to belong.”

She blinked, her eyes wide as if she was processing a new revelation.

“And imposters don’t feel imposter syndrome because they don’t know what it means to be whatever it is they’re posing as, and since you did, that means you belonged there. If you were an imposter, you wouldn’t know whether you belonged or not. You’d just be playactin’.”

She gaped at me, giving her head a quick shake. “Travis. Stop. My head is spinning.”

I rubbed my knuckles on my jacket. “Sometimes I have that effect on people.”

“You know,” she said, eyeing me from head to toe as I sat smugly beside her, “I’m not the only one who looks different on the outside than I might be on the inside.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, you look like a motorcycle-riding rebel, but you were a model Marine.”

I leaned back, my arms stretching out along the back of the swing. “Well, I’ve been a motorcycle-ridin’ rebel for longer than I was a Marine. Think of me as a law-abidin’ version of Jax Teller. But... ya know, clean-shaven and with darker hair.”

“Shorter, too. Your hair, I mean.”

I slid her a look.

She smirked. “Fine. Well, for a Marine, you’re pretty smart. I bet you don’t even eat crayons.”

My eyes went wide, my nostrils flaring. “Give me your phone. I’m gonna call your daddy and tell him what you just said.”

“You wouldn’t.” She held it away from me, looking downright terrified.

“Oh, I would.”

I lunged for the phone, and she squealed with laughter as she tried to keep it away from me without letting her laptop teeter to the ground.

“Travis!”

“You made a crayon joke to a Marine! And your dad’s in Intelligence! He’d flip!”

She cackled as we continued to struggle for the phone. “I was kidding!”

But then, just as I was about to be driven mad by the intoxicating scent and feel of her, she froze, our faces inches apart. “Wait, you think I’m cute?” she asked, her voice soft as a feather.

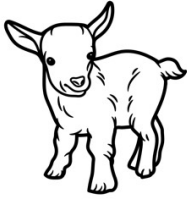
“Um, what?”

“You said—”

Just then, her phone rang, shattering the moment like a rock through a window. We both looked at the screen wedged between us. In the space where both of our hands covered the screen, we saw her dad’s name.

I was the one who let go like she’d burned me and then made quick work of escaping under the guise of needing to set the table. But as I opened the front door and was hit with the scent of Momma’s corn bread and chili, I couldn’t help but think that the real meal had been the conversation we’d just had.

And, *yep*. Warning from her dad aside... I was hungry for more.

**aurora**

“Are you expecting anyone else to join us?” My dad asked Georgie, nodding toward the empty seat on his left.

Georgie chuckled. “Oh, no, sugar. That’s Gertie’s spot. She’s around here somewhere. Comes and goes as she pleases.”

I shared a look with Chip. The goat got a seat at the family dinner table?

Dad smothered a laugh, nodding stoically instead. “Right. Well, I’m looking forward to sharing a meal with her.”

“Thanks again for having us over for dinner,” Chip said to Georgie in an effort to steer us away from Gertie and her chair, one hand on his flat stomach. “I’m so full, but I also want seconds.”

“Real men get seconds,” Travis said under his breath from the seat on my right.

Thank goodness I was the only one who’d heard him.

Ignoring Travis, I playfully bumped Chip’s arm. “Save some room for dessert. Maybe we can go for ice cream after this.”

“Ooh! I wanna go!” Phoebe squealed.

“Oh, um, I was thinking it could be just Chip and me tonight,” I replied, leaning forward so I could see her around Travis.

Chip made a humming sound from my other side. “You know, we’re leaving pretty early. I think I’d rather just go back

to the room and pack. But you should still go with Phoebe.”

I tried not to let my disappointment show, but it was hard while also attempting to ignore the shaking of Travis’s shoulders as he tried to stifle his silent laughter.

“Who turns down an ice cream date with a pretty girl?” he asked, once again low enough so he couldn’t be heard by the rest of the family.

I intentionally dropped my napkin so I could lean down to pick it up, hiding my whispered reply. “Someone responsible enough not to stay out late when he’s got a long drive tomorrow.”

“Uh-huh.”

The conversation shifted to Phoebe’s upcoming dance recital, and her squeal of delight broke the glare-off between Travis and me, nearly piercing my ears.

“I can’t wait for Wednesday night!” Phoebe preened, tossing her long hair over her shoulder. She was trying to look sophisticated, and while she often succeeded during a performance, her giggles gave her away tonight. “I’ve been practicing the routine everywhere I go.”

“We know,” several of her uncles and both grandfathers said.

“Hush, y’all,” Georgie chimed in. “Just because our girl here has been commandeering customers in every store on Main Street for an impromptu performance—”

“With scoring cards!” Phoebe cut in.

“Right, *with* scoring cards,” Georgie amended, “doesn’t mean any of you can give her any lip.”

“Ooh! Wanna see it right now and score me?”

There was a beat of hesitation, and then everyone at the table nodded enthusiastically and told her to go for it.

Suddenly, our family dinner turned into dinner with a show, and I didn’t miss the twinkle in my dad’s eyes throughout Phoebe’s routine. It was probably the fifth time

he'd seen it, and he'd only been in town for a few days, but he looked way more lovingly patient than anyone in his command had likely ever seen him.

"Your recital is going to be amazing, sweetheart," Bailey assured her daughter after the routine.

Dinner resumed, and Momma Cole passed around a plate piled high with buttery cornbread. The aroma wafted through the dining room, mingling with the scent of Georgie's chili.

"I wish I could stay longer so I could be there for the real thing," I told Phoebe, feeling a pang of genuine regret. "Hopefully, I'll catch the next one."

My heart ached at the thought of leaving Charlotte Oaks, the town where my brother was building his house and where my dad and I had finally gotten a taste of what having a big family would be like. I wished I lived here too so I could be closer to everyone.

Closer to... Travis.

I quickly shoved that thought away. After all, he didn't seem the least bit interested in dating me despite him cutting in on my dance with Chip last night. He only did that to save me from getting stepped on by my date. That gave off friendly vibes, right?

As the conversation carried on around us, Travis leaned over from my right, his Southern drawl barely above a whisper. "Why don't you stay for the recital? You can work from anywhere, right?" He gestured toward the rest of the family, then raised his voice. "Momma Cole would be happy to let you stay at her place, so you don't have to keep payin' for a room in town. Isn't that right, Momma Cole?"

My heart skipped a beat, and I tried not to read too much into his suggestion. Was he asking me to go to Phoebe's recital as his date? Or was it just a friendly offer? Either way, I couldn't help the excitement that simmered inside me.

"Sure thing, sugar," Momma Cole replied from the other end of the long table. "We'd love to have you. Laney's room

suits you just as much as her new, fancy mansion down the road suits her.”

Laney sat up straighter. “It only suits me so well because Everett built it with me in mind, not because it’s a fancy mansion.”

Everett winked at his wife. “You keep tellin’ yourself that. You love fancy stuff.”

“I love you, and you’re a mechanic.”

He frowned. “You sayin’ I’m not fancy?”

“Yes,” several voices replied, making us all chuckle.

“Anyway, are you sure, Momma Cole?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. “I don’t want to impose.”

“Honey, bite your tongue,” Georgie scolded. “We’d never think such a thing. You’re welcome in either of our homes anytime you want.”

My dad shifted in his seat across from me, giving me a look that plainly showed his disapproval.

I ignored him.

Besides, Riley and Aubree would be home from their honeymoon that day, so staying in town longer meant more time with my brother.

The couple had only taken a quick trip to St. Thomas for their official getaway because his job in music and hers as a flight attendant on his private jet had them away from home often enough.

“That’s... that’s really sweet of you all. Thank you. Maybe I will stay a little longer.”

“Then it’s settled.” Travis grinned, his dimple making my heart race even faster.

“Settled,” I echoed, feeling the warmth of his smile seep into my soul.

“Rory,” my dad cautioned from across the table, “you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked, channeling my inner angsty teenager. “I’d love to see Phoebe’s recital.”

“Really?” Phoebe’s eyes lit up like sparklers on the Fourth of July. “You really wanna see me dance?”

“Absolutely.”

Dad rolled his eyes, and I couldn’t help but feel satisfied with my decision. What possible reason could he have for not wanting me to stay? It better not have anything to do with the way he’d hung back at the coffee shop with Travis earlier. We still hadn’t had a chance to discuss that whole thing, but I really wanted to be wrong about what I figured it was about.

“Rory, your dad might be onto something,” Chip chimed in, his perfectly styled hair not moving an inch as he turned toward me. “What about your book?”

My face heated. Despite Travis’s encouragement at the coffee shop, I still wasn’t convinced I should keep writing. After our conversation had drifted from my career to his, I wondered if my day job of helping other people pursue their dreams might be a better thing to focus on than my own.

“Actually, I’ve decided to focus on marketing other people’s books for a while.” I tried to sound confident in that decision, but my voice didn’t really match.

“Really?” Chip asked.

I wished he sounded shocked or outraged the way Travis had, but unfortunately, he sounded almost relieved by it.

Chip must’ve realized that, however, because he cleared his throat and picked at his food with a shrug. “I mean, sure, if that’s what you want to do, I think that makes sense considering... how much you’re struggling. But, you know, I still think you’re a great writer.”

“Thanks,” I said, forcing a smile.

But I could tell he didn’t really mean it, and his words were like a paper-thin Band-Aid on the wound of my bruised ego.

“Excuse me.” I pushed back from the table, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. “I need something from the kitchen.”

I made my way across the maroon carpet, taking in the family photos adorning the walls, chronicling generations of Wilsons. It felt like they were all watching me, judging me for not being able to write the next great American novel.

But there, between a framed photo of the beloved Cole-Wilson goat and Adam’s high school graduation photo, one picture had my breath catching in my throat.

I studied the photo of a grinning young Travis, heart squeezing with longing. He swung from a rope tree, and I could practically hear the excited shouts of his brothers and the Cole sisters, who were all scattered in the background. He looked so happy and carefree under his family’s watchful, loving eyes.

What must that feel like, being surrounded by so much support? My parents were always there, but nothing like the tight-knit group Travis had.

Maybe if I’d grown up enveloped by a web of unconditional love, I wouldn’t be so terrible at writing about relationships. I could have chatted with the girls about their love lives. I could have observed complicated and glorious interactions from the inside instead of guessing about people’s feelings from afar.

And I wouldn’t doubt myself so much now, either. With a chorus of voices cheering me on, I would’ve developed the confidence to pursue my dreams, undeterred by rejection like they all did. Or, at least, they appeared to.

Instead, even Chip seemed relieved when I’d mentioned giving up. He’d been relieved I would no longer be burdened by my efforts. Not to mention how much it stung knowing my super successful dad wanted me to find more stable footing, too.

I didn’t want to give up, but if I didn’t... Well, I had no foundation to fall back on. No safety net to catch me if I failed

again. Just the frayed edges of my own fraying hopes. I had a feeling I'd fall right through them at this point.

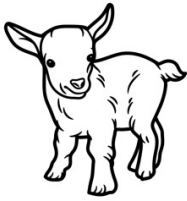
The longer I studied Travis's carefree grin, the more acute my loneliness became. I yearned for someone to believe in me that way. Someone like the boy Travis used to be. Sure, grown-up Travis had encouraged me not to give up, but had he only been thinking about how much he wished he could continue living out his own dream? It couldn't have been all for my benefit, could it?

With a heavy sigh, I entered the kitchen. But then I took a deep breath in, inhaling the lingering scent of chili and cornbread, finding it way more calming than I should've.

"Aurora," Travis said softly from behind me.

"Travis!" I gasped, my heart racing. "You've *got* to stop doing that."

"Sorry," he said with a short laugh, leaning against the counter. "But I had to come in here to tell you not to listen to your *friend* out there. Remember what I told you at the coffee shop—never give up on what you love."

**aurora**

“It’s not that easy,” I muttered, looking away and tapping my foot. “Most reviewers think my characters lack chemistry, and when you write romance, that’s kind of hard to get around.”

He raised an eyebrow, his voice laced with amusement. “Well, doesn’t surprise me, considerin’ there’s nothin’ but friendship between you and Chip and you’re still tryin’ to turn it into somethin’ more.”

“You don’t think Chip and I have chemistry?” I challenged.

“Nope,” he replied, crossing his arms. “Face it, Aurora, your conversations with Chip don’t sound like conversations between people who are destined for romance.”

I lifted my chin. “Not true.”

“Very true. As if the ice cream thing wasn’t bad enough, what about the hikin’ thing?”

I leaned back against the counter opposite his, remembering the moment from the beginning of dinner tonight. “What about it? I asked him if he wanted to go, and he said he usually went hiking for alone time. That doesn’t say anything about us as a couple. It just says he likes to hike for alone time.”

“If a girl I liked asked me to hike with her, I’d hike with her. There’s plenty of ways to get alone time, but that’s not the goal when you’re interested in someone.”

He had a point, but I didn’t relent. Outwardly, anyway. But I gripped the counter on either side of my hips, annoyed to

find my hands shaking with nerves.

What was that about?

He pressed on. “Did anythin’ happen between you two when you went back to his hotel room to help him get cleaned up last night?”

I gaped at him. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“I don’t see how nothin’ would’ve happened if y’all were headin’ down that road.”

My only response was a slow blink.

“I’m not sayin’ you’d have to cross any lines you weren’t ready to cross, but come on. Was his shirt off?”

“It would’ve been hard for me to wash out the red food coloring in the sink if he was still wearing it.”

“Right. So, you were washing his shirt in the sink... and he was doin’ what?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe cleaning his shoes? Changing his pants in the other room? Why?”

“Because if a shirtless man were into you, he would’ve been right next to you in that bathroom, makin’ sure you knew exactly what he was doin’ while you were busy at the sink.”

I gulped, a lump forming in my throat. Time to turn this around. “How do you know? Is that what you would’ve been doing? Flexing in the mirror like a cheese ball so the girl would notice your big muscles?”

“You think I have big muscles?”

“Not the point,” I huffed, feeling a blush creeping up my neck.

His lips were turned up in an amused smile, but his head was tilted, his eyes assessing me carefully. “If it were a book, how would you write that scene?”

I shifted nervously. “Um, well, I write romcoms. So, yeah, I’d probably have the guy flexing in the mirror to make her

laugh.”

He nodded pensively. “Where would the chemistry come in?”

“A sense of humor is very sexy.”

“So is a guy with big muscles comin’ up behind the girl while she’s washin’ his shirt,” he said, advancing on me with movements as smooth as molten chocolate, “and then leanin’ in close enough for her to feel his breath on her ear when he whispers his thanks.”

Another gulp. More fidgeting. What was he doing?

He closed the distance between us with a swagger that was as easy as it was enticing, his eyes burning into mine. “And trust me, even if nothin’ happened beyond that little bit of closeness that night, she would’ve known exactly where he stood.”

“Literally?” I squeaked. “Ya know, because he’s like... right behind her?”

Travis nodded, the space between us thick with electricity. “Literally and figuratively. She’d know where he stood with *her*.”

Just as I was about to do something dumb—like... oh, I don’t know, lunge forward and kiss the man?—he reached around me and plucked a morsel of cornbread off the pan on the stove and popped it into his mouth.

“Can’t fake chemistry, Aurora,” he said through the mouthful, humor dancing in his eyes as he backed up to his side of the kitchen again. “And if you think you and Chip have it, maybe that’s why your books aren’t sellin’.”

“Alright, Mr. Expert,” I said, trying to come back to my senses after having my brain scrambled. “How about you co-write with me? You’re looking for a new job, right? I’ll write the book, and you go through and make it better.”

His face scrunched up like that was the worst idea he’d ever heard, and he shook his head. “No, ma’am. I’m no writer.

But I do think there's a way we can help each other with our career issues if you're willin' to make a little deal."

Intrigued, I nodded. "Another deal, huh? Do tell."

"All right," he began, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "You help me brainstorm what I could do for a livin' now that I'm out of the military. Use that big business brain of yours to help me navigate a terrain I don't think I was ever trained for as a Marine. And, in exchange, I'll help you learn about real chemistry so you can write it yourself."

I frowned, unsure whether this was a good idea or not. If Travis helping me learn about real chemistry looked anything like that little performance he'd just put on, I wasn't sure I'd have the brain cells to retain much for writing purposes.

"Trust me," he said when I didn't speak, his voice low and confident. "I can prove it to you right now. Pull up one of your books on your phone."

My eyes went wide, and I awkwardly twirled the end of my hair, not sure what to do with my hands. I couldn't let him pick my words apart like those reviewers had, could I?

"Travis—"

"Aurora," he drawled, giving me a pointed look. "Trust me."

"Fine," I said with a sigh, pulling out my phone and opening an ebook. As I gave it to him with a trembling hand, I couldn't shake the feeling that agreeing to this might've been both the best and worst decision of my life.

Travis stared at my phone screen, his brows furrowed. I could see the gears turning in his head as he tried to make sense of the words on the page.

Was it that bad? Confusing prose? Rambling dialogue?

With pursed lips, he handed the phone back to me. "I can't make heads or tails of it," he admitted. "Read me a scene that's supposed to have chemistry between the characters."

"Me?" I asked, incredulous. "Why do I have to read it to you? That would be embarrassing! Besides, if it's so bad you

can't make sense of it, maybe I really should quit."

Travis hung his head. "It's not that. I gotta come clean about somethin'," he said, looking up at me like he'd just bitten into a sour lemon.

I frowned. "What's up?"

Travis let out a long sigh. "Look, this might come as a shock, but I've never actually read a book cover-to-cover."

Blinking, I studied him. "Are you serious?"

He nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah. Words on a page? They're like a giant puzzle, and someone's thrown away half the pieces."

I felt my heart soften. His struggle with reading was a vulnerable piece of him, yet there was no shame on his face as he told me about it. He wore it like an emblem, not a scar.

"Anyway, that's why I wanna find a career that doesn't need me to go to college," he said with a shrug. "I can do a lot of things well, but hittin' the books isn't much fun for me. But that's where you come in, right? Helpin' me figure out what to do?"

"Yeah. Definitely," I replied, surprised once again by his honesty.

"So, read me somethin' from here so we can get started with your end of this deal?"

Travis had always seemed so confident and self-assured; hearing him admit to a weakness was strange. But there was something endearing about this newfound vulnerability, and I found myself agreeing to his request. "Okay. But only because you're being so open and honest with me."

"Fair enough," he said, flashing me a lopsided grin.

I scrolled through my ebook. Then, clearing my throat, I began to read aloud, trying to ignore the heat rising in my cheeks.

"In the moonlit garden," I read, "Daisy felt her heart race as Charlie moved closer. He had a smoldering look in his eyes."

It screamed, ‘I want you.’ And as if by magnetic force, their lips were nearly touching.”

I paused for a brief second, flicking my eyes toward Travis to gauge his reaction.

He tucked his lips between his teeth. “You want a note on that part before you go on?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “If you have one.”

“A look that screamed, ‘I want you’? How exactly does that look? Can you show me?”

I glared at him.

He studied me. “That’s what it looks like? Gotta say... I’m not feelin’ it.”

“Are you just messing with me, or is this supposed to be a writing tip?”

“It’s a writin’ tip. Describe the look he’s givin’ her. Don’t just tell me what it screamed.”

“How do I do that?”

He blew a breath through pursed lips, then nodded. “This is for demonstration purposes only, all right? I’m gonna look at you like I think you want that guy to look at Daisy, and I want you to tell me what you see.”

I stood up straighter, only managing a short nod of my own. Then I actually gasped when he did his thing, as if his *demonstration* sucked the air right out of me.

“Tell me how you’d write this,” he said, still holding my gaze and maintaining that oh-so-swoony look.

I swallowed hard, my next words coming out as quickly as if I’d been typing them into my manuscript. “His gaze on Daisy shifted, becoming something completely different—more intense, focused, as though everything in the room had suddenly blurred into insignificance. It was as if a veil lifted, revealing a raw, unguarded yearning. His eyes, usually so casual, transformed into smoldering embers, locking onto Daisy’s with a magnetic force.”

“Good,” he murmured. “Keep goin’.”

“His eyes spoke to her—a silent conversation that went straight to her soul,” I said softly. “His pupils dilated as if trying to capture more of her into his field of vision, and the casual humor that usually played around the corners of his mouth gave way to a softer, more serious line.”

“Can you see my pupils from here?” he teased.

“His whole posture had changed,” I went on, totally on a roll. “Gone were the relaxed shoulders and easygoing grin, replaced by a stance that was almost primed for battle. Even his breathing seemed to slow, as if each breath he took was an act of will to maintain his composure.”

Travis’s Adam’s apple bobbed, but he didn’t interrupt me again. He seemed to get that he’d unlocked a writer living inside me that I hadn’t known existed and was giving her the space to do her thing.

“It was the sort of look that made a woman feel seen—truly seen—and not just for her physical attributes,” I continued. “It was a look that asked for nothing but offered so much. It was a promise and an invitation. And in that fleeting moment, wrapped in his gaze, it was as if I—um, *Daisy*—was the only woman in the world—and the only one Charlie would ever want.”

There was a long beat of silence, and then Travis grinned and began slow-clapping, pushing off the counter to step toward me. “Now, *that* was some good writing.”

“I’ve never written anything like that in my life.”

“Maybe you should start. Bet people would buy your books if you did.”

He was teasing again, but he was right. Only...

“Travis, it wasn’t funny.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I write romantic comedies. That wasn’t funny at all.”

“I might not be a reader, but even romantic comedy movies have moments that aren’t funny. Don’t mess up your chemistry by tryin’ to make people laugh when they don’t need to.”

I nodded, processing that. “It’s just... everything needs to be light and funny. That’s the whole point. People’s lives are dark enough. I want them to laugh when they read my books so they don’t have to think about the things they’ve lost or the messed up stuff from their past that they can’t forget. Ya know?”

“I do. You know I do. But don’t get hung up on that.”

I groaned, threading my hands through my hair.

“Hey, this was a step in the right direction,” he said. “We’ll keep goin’, and we’ll figure out a good balance between funny and... whatever else it should be. Together, all right?”

“Why are you so good at this?” I asked, eyeing him warily.

“I’m not doin’ a thing, Aurora. It wasn’t me who spouted all that stuff about pupils dilatin’ and posture primed for battle. That was all you.”

A jolt of excitement raced through me at his sudden nearness. Had he closed the distance between us, or had I?

I wasn’t leaning against the counter anymore, so I guessed I had my answer.

Then it was as if someone had flipped a switch, and I was hyper-aware of every sensation—the heat radiating from his body, the scent of his cologne mixed with the lingering aroma of Southern cooking, the sound of our breathing in the quiet kitchen.

“Travis,” I whispered, unable to resist leaning closer to him.

“Aurora,” he murmured, mirroring my movements until our faces were mere inches apart.

If one of us closed the remaining distance, there would be no turning back. But then, just as our lips were about to meet,

a burst of laughter erupted from the dining room, startling us both.

We jumped apart, eyes wide with surprise.

“Uh, we should... Um...” Travis stammered, suddenly awkward and flustered.

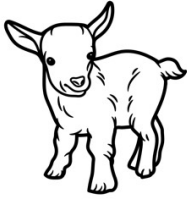
“Right,” I agreed, my heart still racing from the near-kiss. “We can go through more of my book tomorrow. Talk about how I can improve as a writer.”

“Sure,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “And we can talk about my career, too.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I replied, trying to sound unaffected despite the whirlwind of emotions coursing through me.

“All right then,” Travis said, backing out of the kitchen. “I’ll, uh, see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I echoed, watching him disappear.

**travis**

I padded into the kitchen, still rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, finding a note from Momma on the counter.

I picked it up, already grinning.

Travis, there's a plate of your favorite breakfast in the fridge. Just follow the instructions to reheat it. Eleanor and I went antiquing with Bernice.

P.S. We need to have a little chat about Rory later.

“Sure thing, Momma,” I muttered as I opened the fridge and pulled out the plate of biscuits, gravy, eggs, and bacon.

I heated it up in the microwave, my mind wandering back to Aurora and me in this very kitchen last night. Robby had made himself all-too-clear about me staying away from his daughter, so it didn't sit well to think of my momma trying to push us together when the only thing we had going for us was that chemistry Aurora was trying so hard to write.

When I was finished with my breakfast, I made my way out the front door. The morning sun warmed the streets of Charlotte Oaks, and I smiled as I strolled over to the familiar Cole house, feeling the heat already beginning to rise in the air. The usually lively neighborhood was quiet and peaceful.

I let myself in without knocking, finding Aurora in the living room with her eyes glued to a rom-com playing on the

TV. She was so engrossed in the movie that she didn't even hear me come in. I watched her watch the movie for a second, then noticed something that demonstrated some serious chemistry between the characters.

Placing both hands on the back of the couch, I leaned down and spoke right in her ear. "Did ya see that?"

Her neck and shoulder instantly broke out in goosebumps, and I felt a little thrill at the reaction I'd caused.

She spun around, startled. "Travis! I told you to stop that!"

"Aw, come on now," I defended myself, grinning. "I'm not doin' it on purpose."

"Right," she shot back, smirking.

I guided her attention back to the movie. "Did ya see what happened before I snuck up on ya?"

She narrowed her eyes, then shook her head. "I guess. I don't know. What?"

"See, the best part of that press junket scene in *Notting Hill* is how they're both stayin' in character, but everythin' they say has a double meaning," I explained, leaning my elbows on the back of the couch.

Aurora turned her gaze back to the screen. "Yeah, like they understand each other on a deeper level."

"Yep. If you did somethin' like that with your characters, it'd show they're on the same page without needin' to say it outright," I suggested, feeling pretty proud of myself.

Aurora's eyes crinkled around the edges as she smiled. "That's actually a great idea, Travis. But why do you know this movie? I wouldn't have pegged you for a *Notting Hill* fan."

"Dakota's fault. She made me watch all kinds of cheesy movies with her when we were growin' up."

She chuckled. "Got it. Well, today, we should focus on you. You've helped me a lot, but we haven't even talked about your stuff."

I bowed my head in agreement, trying to ignore the sudden pit in my stomach.

Was I ready for this? I looked around the familiar scenery of the Cole's living room, hoping for a distraction. Gertrude was curled in a ball in the corner, knocked out, not a care in the world.

Lucky goat.

Then, a thought struck me. "Hey, wanna go for a ride on my bike? I know a spot by the lake that helps me think."

"Is it the same spot from the day we met?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"Nah, it's on the other side," I replied. "Or else we'd just walk."

"Right, because you'd pass up an opportunity to show off your precious motorcycle," she teased.

"Hey now," I said with a wink, leaning in, "I don't need to get a girl on the back of my bike to show it off. Her known' I have one is good enough."

Aurora laughed, shaking her head as we stepped outside. Gertrude hopped up and followed us, determined to be part of our adventure. Too bad her tiny little legs couldn't carry her fast enough to keep up.

"Ready?" I asked Aurora, holding out a helmet for her.

"Born ready," she replied with a mostly convincing grin, taking the helmet and hopping on behind me.

We rode through the neighborhood, and I breathed in the scent of home—BBQ smoke, flowers, and fresh laundry. We passed Mrs. Thompson tending to her rose bushes and old Mr. Jenkins strumming his guitar.

Aurora's arms were wrapped around my waist, and her body against my back was a comforting warmth that made me forget about my worries. I could see myself taking much longer trips than this one with her nestled up against me, and I didn't even care what the destination would be.

“Almost there,” I informed her as we neared the other side of the lake.

The journey on the bike had been quick, but it truly wasn't to show off. My leg wasn't up for the walk, and man, I missed the days when I could run miles without a second thought.

We pulled up to a gravelly area near the water's edge and parked in the shade of an old oak tree. I helped Aurora down, my boots crunching on the ground.

“Is this the same spot where that photo from your family's home was taken?” She asked.

“Yep, sure is,” I confirmed, my eyes landing on the tree limb where the rope used to hang. “Wish we still had that rope swing, though. It got old and frayed. Tragedy waitin' to happen.”

Aurora looked at me, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. “Why don't you put up a new one?”

“Ah, I don't want to be the center of any drama with the town,” I replied, chuckling.

She smirked, looking out at the lake. “This place is beautiful, Travis.”

“It's my sanctuary. Helps me escape, even if just for a little while.”

We stood there for a moment, just taking in the peacefulness of the lake, the sound of water lapping against the shore, and birds singing their sweet melodies. I could tell by how Aurora looked at it all that she appreciated this spot just as much as I did.

Shaking my head, I pulled a blanket from the saddle bag on my bike and spread it over the grass, taking a seat and stretching out my wounded leg. But instead of sitting with me, Aurora settled onto a nearby bench, opening her laptop.

“Why'd you bring your laptop out here?” I asked.

“I always have it with me.”

“Like brother like sister.”

She lifted an eyebrow.

“Riley brings that dang guitar with him everywhere he goes,” I explained with a shrug. “Y’all must have that in your genes or somethin’.”

“Oh. Right. Well, if I’m gonna help you, I need my good friend, Google,” she replied with a grin. “Besides, Riley’s onto something with bringing his guitar everywhere he goes. You never know when inspiration might strike.”

“Fair enough,” I said, chuckling at her determination. But while we were on the subject of her brother, there was something that’d been eating at me and I had to get to the bottom of it.

“Why’d you do it?” I asked, belatedly realizing she had no idea where my train of thought had taken me.

She looked up, her fingers pausing mid-air over the keyboard. “Do what?”

I propped myself up on one elbow, feeling the itch of the blanket against my skin. “Why’d you stalk Riley from afar instead of telling him who you were? You’re not quiet and shy. You’re not the most confident person I’ve ever met, but you’re sure not the least confident person I’ve ever met.”

Aurora chuckled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Gee, thanks for all that.”

I sat up, leaning forward. “Just tell me why.”

She sighed, her eyes drifting back to the screen before meeting mine again. “Maybe because there’s a reason I’m not the most confident person you’ve ever met.”

I tilted my head, curious. “And what reason is that?”

“Because most people don’t really like that in a person.”

I shrugged. “If you were really confident, what they think wouldn’t matter to you.”

“True.” She looked down, contemplating. “But maybe what they really don’t like is an imposter.”

I shook my head, smiling at her. “Also true. But you’re no imposter.”

“Aren’t I? I’m a writer with no readers.”

I chuckled as her eyes searched mine, deciding to pull out one of my dad’s whacky sayings just to lighten the mood. “A tree is still a tree even when a bear isn’t scratching on it.”

She shivered involuntarily, her nose wrinkling up. “I really don’t want to be the tree in that scenario.”

“You don’t wanna smell like a bear?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Not particularly.”

I leaned back, my hands digging into the soft earth beneath the blanket. “Well, we’re gettin’ off track. I still don’t see why you couldn’t just walk up to Riley and tell him who you were. It doesn’t seem to mesh with the girl I’ve been gettin’ to know lately.”

She sighed heavily, almost like she was gearing up for something big. “One time, I went on a job interview. High school. Pizza place. The girl behind the counter was so pretty, and she had these double buns.” She demonstrated, holding her hands like claws over her head, one on each side. “Anyway, the buns were cute—a style I’ve never been able to do without making them look super uneven, by the way—and her style was cute. She had a warm smile and she had tattoos and a nose ring.”

“You like tattoos?” I cut in, my interest piqued.

She ignored me, continuing her story. “I just kept staring at her and thinking, if I get hired, I really want us to be best friends.”

“Creepy.”

“Yeah, she thought so too.”

I sat up straighter. “Wait, so you told her that?”

She nodded.

“Wow.”

“I only told her because she flat out asked me why I was staring at her.”

Blinking, I repeated the same question. “And you told her all that?”

“Sure did.”

“And did you wind up being friends?”

She shook her head, a wistful smile on her lips. “No. I didn’t get the job. But I also couldn’t eat at that pizza place ever again because she looked at me like I was a total freak for what I’d told her. So, yeah, long story *long*, that’s why I didn’t go right up to Riley and tell him who I was.”

I looked at her, really looked at her, and felt something stir inside me. “Aurora, anyone would be lucky to have you as a friend, and I guarantee your brother feels like he hit the lottery now that you’re here.”

And if I were being honest with myself, he wasn’t the only one.

We sat there staring at each other for a long moment, and then she seemed to shake off the entire conversation like a musty old jacket.

“Alright, let’s hear some of your ideas,” Aurora said, tapping away at her keyboard. Despite that vulnerability she’d just gifted me, I could tell she was eager to help me figure out what to do with my life.

The fact that she cared so much made my heart swell, and as we sat there, sharing thoughts and bouncing ideas off each other, I loved watching the way her eyes lit up when we stumbled on something that sparked her interest. She had this way of making anything seem exciting, even the most mundane topics.

Unless it was wishful thinking on my part, it felt like our unspoken chemistry grew stronger with every moment we spent together. And as we continued to work, the sun moved high into the sky, casting a glare of bright light across the water. It was mesmerizing, but not as much as the woman on the bench.

“I appreciate you bein’ so thorough,” I told her, watching as she continued to type away on her laptop. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Practice makes perfect,” she replied with a small smile, not looking up from her screen. “It’s just a matter of knowing the goal—which, for you, is the perfect career—even if you don’t know the specifics yet.”

She went on to explain some ways she helped authors sell their books, and even though I didn’t know a thing about that world, she had a way of making even the most long-winded explanations sound inviting. Sexy, even. And suddenly, I wished we were sitting a whole lot closer, even if it meant simply continuing to hear about her arsenal of research tactics.

My heart raced, but I kept myself in check. “So,” I said, clearing my throat and trying to refocus. “When I was younger, one thing that helped me burn off some energy was the punchin’ bag we used to have on the back porch. My brothers and I would spend hours beatin’ the tar out of it.”

“See, that’s interesting,” Aurora said, her eyes lighting up. “What if you opened a boxing gym?”

A light breeze rustled the leaves overhead, almost like she’d breathed new life into my future. “You know, I kinda like that,” I said, mulling over the idea. “It could give those kids an outlet like it did for me.”

“Exactly!” Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she leaned forward on the bench, her laptop balanced precariously on her knees. “It’s perfect for you, Travis. You can channel your love for fitness and passion for helping others into something really meaningful.”

“All right. Let’s do it. Let’s open up a gym.”

Aurora beamed, then furrowed her brow as her fingers began tapping away at the keyboard again. “Now, we just need to figure out how you’ll finance the startup costs...”

“Ah, about that...” I scratched my jaw. “I invested in Bitcoin before it was a big thing, and let’s just say it paid off.”

“Are you serious?” Rory asked, her eyes widening in surprise. “Well, that takes care of that, then. This is gonna be so great. I can feel it.”

“Me too,” I agreed, a spark lighting in my chest. “You’re really somethin’ else, you know that?”

She flushed a pretty shade of pink and ducked her head, hair fallin’ over her face like a curtain. “Hey, it’s what I do,” she replied with a smirk, tucking a strand of her bright blonde hair behind her ear. “So, we should start by figuring out where to set up the gym and what equipment you’ll need.”

“Sounds like a good first step to me,” I agreed.

But before we could dive into the details, gravel crunched as my older brother’s cop car pulled up next to my bike. I watched as he climbed out, looking stern as he approached us with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Heard there might be trouble out here.”

Aurora snorted. “Not this again.”

I shook my head at my brother. “Nah. We’re not causin’ trouble. *Yet.*”

“Is that right?”

“Actually,” Aurora chimed in, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “We were brainstorming ideas for Travis’s new boxing gym. He wants to help keep the teens in Charlotte Oaks *out* of trouble.”

Adam’s brows shot up in surprise, and he scratched at his stubble. “Gotta admit, that sounds like somethin’ this town could really use.”

I grinned. “It was all her idea.”

“Well, whoever’s idea it was, count me in,” Adam declared. “Maybe we could have the teens learn from some of the officers, too. We could come down there for community outreach and all that.”

“Yeah, that’d be perfect,” I said, picturing it already.

Adam nodded in approval. “Sounds like we’ve got ourselves a project. But I’ll let y’all get back to it. I’ve gotta go keep an eye out for *actual* troublemakers.”

“Hey, Adam,” Rory cut in, glancing down at her laptop with a frown, “I forgot to charge my laptop, and it’s dying on me, so I should head back to the Cole house to put together a business plan for Travis. Mind giving me a ride?”

“Sure,” Adam agreed, motioning towards his cruiser.

“But not in the back, right? I really don’t wanna be seen in the back of a cop car,” she hedged, biting her lip.

“Who said anythin’ about the back?” Adam chuckled, tossing her a wink. “You can sit up front with me.”

“Deal,” Aurora agreed, smirking as she closed her laptop and started gathering her things.

A twinge of jealousy shot through me, but then I remembered we’d made some real progress today. And now that I had a plan, maybe, just maybe, there was hope for us yet.

“Thanks again,” I said as Aurora slung her bag over her shoulder.

“Anytime. See ya later!”

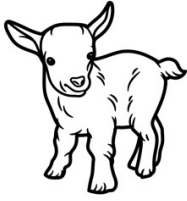
I watched them drive away with a shake of my head. Maybe Aurora’s dad would rather see her with someone like Adam, with his life together and a respectable job in law enforcement, but I didn’t care. My new boxing gym already had me feeling better about myself, and whether or not there was a future for Aurora and me, it was something worth being proud of.

“Gertrude,” I deadpanned as the slow-moving goat finally wandered over. “Sure took you long enough.”

She shot me a look that I swore had claws. But not even the goat—or the fact that I’d probably give her a ride home in my saddle bag out of pity later—could ruin my mood.

Finally, I knew I was exactly where I needed to be. Aurora’s enthusiasm had been infectious, and I felt optimistic

for the first time in a long while. My leg might be a setback, but it wouldn't define me. Not anymore.

**aurora**

I walked into The Oak Oven, a quirky bakery that sold the most delicious pastries I'd ever had in my life. The walls were adorned with vintage baking tools, and the air smelled like a heavenly mix of cinnamon and vanilla. The counter was a mosaic of colorful tiles, and behind it stood a woman with a smile as warm as the freshly baked muffins on display.

"Mornin', y'all!" she greeted, her Southern accent wrapping around us like a cozy blanket.

"Morning," Travis and I chimed in unison.

We took a seat at a corner table, a perfect vantage point for people-watching. Travis looked different today—more relaxed, like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

I thought it might have a lot to do with us coming up with the plan for his new boxing gym, but I wouldn't take all the credit. The second the suggestion was out of my mouth yesterday, I saw the change in him. I saw his wheels turning as he imagined a new future for himself, and he deserved credit for that.

Plenty of people preferred to wallow instead of picking themselves up when they got knocked down. But based on how refreshed Travis looked this morning? It seemed he wasn't one of them.

"So, I stayed up all night working on this," I said, pulling out my laptop so I could show him his shiny new business plan. "It's got everything from startup costs to marketing strategies."

“All night? What—” His words cut off when I turned the screen toward him, then his eyes widened as he scrolled through the colorful pages. “Wow. You really went all out.”

“Hey, a deal’s a deal. You help me with my writing; I help you with your new beginning.”

He chuckled. “Well, speaking of writing, let’s table this and work on that. It’s gonna take me a minute to get through it all, and I’ll do it later if you’ll email me a copy.”

“I may or may not have made it presentation-style and recorded myself reading it to you,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “I’m sorry if I overstepped, but I’ve done that for clients before when they didn’t have time for a Zoom call, and—”

Travis leaned forward, pressing a finger to my lips to stop the flow of words. “Aurora, stop talkin’.”

“M’kay,” I mumbled around his finger.

He grinned, leaning back again, but I swore I could still feel the press of his finger against my mouth. “You didn’t overstep. You went above and beyond. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Um, so yeah. I’ll send you that now, and you can let me know what you think when you’re done watching it.”

“Sounds good.” He clapped his hands together, rubbing them up and down. “Now, chemistry lessons. The professor is in.”

I raised an eyebrow. “First, really?” I paused, laughing with him. “Second, you’re going to teach me about chemistry in a bakery? With all these people around?”

“Absolutely. Chemistry is everywhere, and spoiler alert, usually involves people. Watch this, and take notes.”

I opened my mouth to ask him what the heck he was about to do, but Travis got up and sauntered over to the counter.

Looking up with an exasperated sigh, I studied the chandelier made entirely of wooden spoons dangling from the ceiling. *What have I gotten myself into?*

But I still turned my gaze to Travis and watched, just as instructed.

He leaned over the counter, just enough to invade the shop worker's personal space but not enough to be creepy. I could tell because her eyes lit up when he flashed that one-dimpled smile of his.

Still watching them, I typed, "*Lean in, but not too much to make it weird*" into the notes app on my laptop.

Travis's posture was relaxed but confident as he nodded toward the chalkboard menu over the woman's head. "Excuse me, ma'am. What would you recommend for a guy with a *serious* sweet tooth?"

My eyes narrowed when she reached up and touched her hair, giggling at his words.

I fought an eye roll. *Yes, he's so funny. Asking for sweets in a bakery. Hilarious.*

But then I realized that was probably the point, and I made a note about it on my laptop.

"Um, pretty much everythin' in here is sweet," she replied, still twirling her hair.

"Well, yeah, I figured as much. But certain things taste sweeter than others, don't you think?" Travis asked, and even though I couldn't see his face from my position, I practically felt the shockwaves from his wink from here.

The woman blushed, confirming my suspicions, and the air between them seemed thick with tension. The good kind, of course. The kind that made you want to know what would happen next. In fact, I didn't even *want* anything to happen next, and yet, I still somehow found myself rooting for them.

Strange.

In my notebook, I typed, "*Never underestimate the power of a well-timed wink.*"

Then I turned back to the show, watching intently. The woman leaned forward slightly, resting her hands on the counter between them.

Ah, more leaning. Maybe it's a universal sign of interest. I took a note on it.

“Well, our pecan pie is definitely somethin’ special, if I do say so myself,” she purred, her sultry voice somehow also tinged with a playful note.

It was unique, the way she’d done that, so I wrote that down, too.

“Is that right?” Travis leaned in—*again*—his eyes completely ensnaring her, like they were the only thing in the room.

Until the woman’s eyes flicked down to his lips for a fraction of a second before meeting his gaze again, and suddenly I realized this demonstration was nowhere near as fun as the one in the kitchen.

Wait.

It may not be as fun, but I couldn’t deny that I picked up on things I wouldn’t have been able to see when I was the one doing them. Not with his eyes and lips and dimple distracting me, anyway. Another note jotted down in my digital notebook: *“Make the characters look at the other person’s lips when they’re thinking about kissing them.”*

“Been there,” I muttered to myself.

They exchanged a few more words—things that sounded like they were supposed to be referring to baked goods but also possibly not—and I took notes at a feverish pace.

“Well, you’ve convinced me. I’m usually more of a peach cobbler kinda guy, but that pecan pie sounds too irresistible to pass up,” Travis finally said, his voice dropping to a softer, more intimate tone.

I almost groaned out loud. On the one hand, I was grateful this charade was ending, but on the other, I was actually learning some good stuff and I was excited to put my newfound knowledge into practice.

In my book, obviously.

The woman's smile widened, and she turned to get the pie, her movements a bit more animated than before. She was clearly affected by him, and it was fascinating to see how a few simple exchanges could create such palpable chemistry.

As he returned to our table, pie in hand, I couldn't help but laugh. "That was the most shameless flirting I've ever seen."

"But you got a lot out of it, right?"

I choked out another laugh, tilting my screen towards him. "Uh, yeah. Tons. Thanks, teach."

"My pleasure," he replied through a mouthful of pie.

"So, how is it?"

He checked to see if the woman was watching him, and when he saw that she was, he grinned and gave her a goofy thumbs-up. But to me, he flared his eyes and said quietly, "Not as good as the cobbler would've been."

"Pfft, it smells amazing. You just need to broaden your horizons a bit."

He paused with the fork halfway to his mouth. "Oh, trust me, I am."

His voice reminded me of warm waves against smooth rocks, soft but powerful. And just like that poor woman behind the counter, suddenly I was the one ensnared by his gaze. It was almost physical it was so intense, and my skin heated, giving me the urge to run my hands over my arms to cool off.

"Anyway, tell me," he said, breaking the moment and taking another bite, "what'd you learn from all that?"

I chuckled, drumming my fingers on the table. "Um, I took notes about the way you both leaned in, the eye contact, the subtle change in voice tone. It was great. Like watching a master class in Chemistry 101. In fact," I said, tapping my chin thoughtfully, "there's a scene in my last book where the characters are at a coffee shop, and I could've used some of that to show their chemistry."

"What'd you do instead?"

“To show their chemistry? Oh, ya know, I just said they had it. Like, straight up, ‘They had amazing chemistry,’ or something like that.”

Travis blinked. “Yeah, well, one thing I learned in the Marines that translates to life out here is that you don’t know what you don’t know. Ya know?”

“Um... sure.”

“So, when you do know, next time, that’s what you do.”

My head spun. “Right. Well, thanks for helping me learn it all. Even if you did go up there and get yourself some pie without getting me any.”

At this, he let his head fall back with a laugh. “Oh, yeah, I’m sure askin’ for two slices of pie after all that would’ve gone over *real* well. Besides, I just figured we could share this one. Want some?”

I shook my head. “Meh, I’ll hold out for peach cobbler.”

His eyes twinkled. Then he leaned back in his chair and studied me with a curious gaze. “We talked about it being okay if you don’t know what you don’t know, but I gotta ask, why don’t you seem to know... well, anythin’ about all this? Didn’t any of your past relationships have that spark?”

I hesitated, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. “Uh, sure. I’ve had my share of... experiences.”

“*Experiences?*” He raised an eyebrow. “That’s mighty vague.”

I chuckled nervously. “Well, I’m a woman of mystery.”

He leaned in—*uh oh*—and his eyes locked onto mine. “How ‘bout a deal? I’ll tell you about my past relationships if you tell me about yours. Fair’s fair.”

I laughed. “You and your deals. What are you, a used car salesman?”

He grinned. “Nah, just a guy who sees the value of a good trade.”

I sighed, relenting. “Fine, deal.”

He cleared his throat, getting into storytelling mode. “So, I took this one woman to the Marine Corps Birthday Ball a few years back. Man, we danced like we’d been doing it for years, and the conversation flowed like a river. See what I did there? Described it. Anyway, it was like we were the only two people in the room, and I was bummed when things fizzled out not long after.”

“*“The conversation flowed like a river,”*” I said aloud as I typed it into my notes app. “Good one. Do you have an example of bad chemistry, or do you just have good chemistry with every woman you meet?”

He snorted. “Hardly. No one has good chemistry with everyone. Take you and Chip, for example.”

I let out a huff, staring at him through narrowed eyes. “Funny.”

Chuckling, he shrugged. “I took another woman to the Ball the followin’ year. It was like dancin’ with a broomstick, and our conversation was about as excitin’ as watchin’ paint dry. I knew right then and there that it wasn’t gonna work.”

I nodded, still typing. “Good to know. Good to know.”

“Uh-huh. So,” he said, leaning in expectantly, “your turn.”

I looked up, meeting his gaze, then quickly shifted the topic. “Are you sad you won’t be going to the Marine Corps Ball anymore, now that you’re out?”

For a moment, his eyes softened, and he looked away. “Yeah, I am, actually. Always dreamed of being one of those old Marines, you know? The honorary guests with a chest full of ribbons and a lifetime of stories to share.”

I watched him, taking in this side of Travis—the vulnerable side that he seemed oddly comfortable letting me see.

An idea flickered in my mind, something that could maybe give him a piece of that dream back. I made a mental note to ask my dad about it later, keeping the idea tucked away like a secret treasure.

But for now, I simply murmured, “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, nothin’ I can do about it now, right? And I’ve got a knew plan, thanks to you, so I’m gonna be just fine.”

“I can already tell you feel better.”

He tilted his head. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. You look... different this morning.”

The corners of his mouth tipped up. “Different, huh? Can you describe it for me?”

“Travis.”

“What? What are we doin’ here if not givin’ you some practice with this stuff. How would you write it?”

I put my elbows on the table and threaded my fingers through my hair, staring down at the table. I tried to picture the words on the screen as I spoke. “This is not about you... but I’d probably write something like... *‘He had a new glow about him. It was like someone flipped a switch and replaced the dim, energy-saving bulb with a full-wattage one. The shadows that used to live under his eyes like unwanted houseguests were no longer there. It was as if he’d finally found the missing piece to a puzzle he’d been working on for ages, and she had to admit, she found this newfound confidence of his incredibly attractive.’*”

I couldn’t look up right away when I finished, but Travis let out a low whistle, and I had to face him to see what it might mean.

“Aurora St. John, I do believe I’m not needed anymore.”

I rolled my eyes.

“One thing though... did I really have big ol’ shadows under my eyes? Was I pretty haggard, then? Be honest. How bad was it?”

“It wasn’t about you,” I said through my teeth.

“Sure, sure.”

As I closed my laptop, my eyes caught a colorful flyer pinned to a cork bulletin board near the bakery's entrance. It was an announcement for Phoebe's upcoming dance recital. I hesitated, then looked at Travis.

"Can I ask you an awkward question?" I ventured.

He chuckled. "You can try."

I took a deep breath. "When you invited me to stay in town longer for Phoebe's recital, was that... um, by any chance, you asking me out on a date?"

He burst into laughter, and my heart sank. Had I misread everything?

"Why in the world would you think I was askin' you out on a date?" he asked, his shoulders still shaking.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I had no idea what to say.

His laughter faded, and he leaned in, locking eyes with me in that dumb, flirty way of his. "Aurora, when I asked you to the recital, it was because I could see you wanted to be part of that big family event."

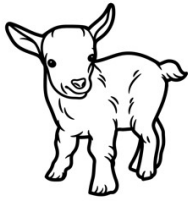
"Oh."

He held up a hand. "But lemme be clear: when I asked you out the first time, you knew it was a date. So if I ever do it again, there won't be any room for confusion then, either."

His tone, the intensity in his eyes, and the way he still leaned close like he didn't even have a choice sent a shiver down my spine. My heart pounded in my chest, and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

The cinnamon-roll and pie scented air between us was charged—even more than whatever had been between him and the pie lady, *if I do say so myself*.

It was full of unsaid words and possibilities, and as he went back to his pie without another word, I found myself both eager and terrified to turn the page to our next chapter.



“Hey, stranger,” Riley greeted me when I found the row where the family was seated for Phoebe’s recital.

The auditorium off Main Street was cozy, its walls adorned with vintage posters of past performances and twinkling fairy lights. When the venue wasn’t hosting a recital for the recently renamed dance studio where Phoebe spent half her life, the auditorium was also the setting for various other popular events in the town.

The weekend I’d left Charlotte Oaks to follow Riley to the concert in South Carolina, there’d been an Air Guitar Symphony that I was oddly curious about and bummed to have missed.

Coming up for Halloween, there’d be Haunted Bingo, where everyone would dress as a ghostly version of a famous Southern figure. Mrs. McClusky invited me when I bumped into her at The Squirrel last week, and I couldn’t wait. I wasn’t sure which famous figure I’d dress up as, but I was leaning toward Reese Witherspoon’s character from *Sweet Home Alabama*.

What? No one said it had to be a famous *nonfictional* character.

One performance I knew I wouldn’t attend was the high school’s annual Mullets and Mustaches Jamboree. During this beauty pageant-like event, the high schoolers would compete against the teachers to raise money for the school, and since most high school boys didn’t grow mustaches very well, they were obviously the ones rocking the mullets.

I still couldn't believe that hairstyle had made a comeback, but I was even more surprised that the Charlotte Oakians would actually pay money to vote on whether a tenth grader's mullet was more impressive than his anatomy teacher's 'stache.

I heard Travis's voice in my head as I thought, *Only in Charlotte Oaks.*

Tonight, however, was everyone's cup of tea. The atmosphere was buzzing with excitement, the air thick with the scent of fresh popcorn and anticipation.

I sat in the empty seat on Riley's right, his eyes twinkling as he held his new wife's hand, feeling right at home in the row reserved for the Coles, Wilsons, and the newly-minted Conrads.

"Hey, yourself," I replied. I waved to the rest of the family, eyes scanning their faces for Travis and coming up empty before I focused on my brother and his new wife again. "How was the honeymoon?"

Aubree, glowing and more relaxed than I'd ever seen her, leaned over Riley to chime in. "It was like a dream. We didn't wanna come back."

"But we couldn't miss Phoebe's big day," Riley added, his arm casually draped over Aubree's shoulders.

"Of course not," I agreed, my eyes drifting over to where Jackson and Bailey were seated next to Aubree. "You guys must be so proud. Phoebe's worked so hard for this."

"All day and night." Jackson grinned, clearly excited but trying to play it cool.

I chuckled. "Thank you for letting me be here for this. It means a lot to me."

Before they could reply, a snort sounded from my other side, making me jump. I turned to find Travis settling into the empty seat next to me, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Of course they'd let you come," he whispered, leaning closer as the lights began to dim. "You're one of us now. Get

used to it.”

I fought the urge to squirm in my seat as the curtain rose, and then the stage came alive with a burst of color and movement. Phoebe was front and center, her tiny frame adorned in a sparkly tutu that shimmered under the stage lights.

She was a pint-sized vision of grace, her every move perfectly in sync with the upbeat music. The audience was captivated, but none more so than her proud parents on the other side of the newlyweds. They looked so proud I thought they might burst.

As I watched the whimsical show, my eyes kept drifting to my right, where Travis sat. His profile was illuminated by the soft glow of the stage lights, casting him in a warm, almost ethereal light. His eyes were focused intently on the performance, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was equally aware of me, of the space between us that seemed to crackle with something I couldn't name.

His hand rested casually on his thigh, fingers tapping lightly to the rhythm of the music. It was as if he was sending out a Morse code message, and I was desperately trying to decipher it.

Tap, tap, tap. Aurora, I love sitting next to you. Tap, tap.

Or something like that.

Was he as aware of me as I was of him? Did he feel this pull that seemed to draw us closer despite our best efforts to maintain a respectful distance?

My arm had a mind of its own, and I sucked in a breath as I felt it inch a little to the right on my lap, my hand flipping palm up in a silent invitation.

My eyes were glued to the stage, but I held my breath, waiting. Hoping.

What am I doing?

Then I felt it—his fingers lightly tracing the lines of my palm, a touch so soft it was almost a whisper. My heart

skipped a beat, and a shiver ran down my spine. It was as if he'd touched a live wire, sending a jolt of electricity through my entire body.

Then, just as our fingers were about to intertwine, a burst of chuckles and applause erupted from the crowd around us. Phoebe's character—a country version of the fairy from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—had just pulled a prank, delighting them all. The spell between Travis and me was broken, and we pulled our hands back as if we'd been caught in the cookie jar.

I joined in the applause, glancing over at Travis. He was also clapping, and a small smile played on his lips.

As the performance continued, we didn't touch hands again, but my thoughts kept drifting back to that fleeting connection. Had he really only invited me here because he knew how much it would mean to me to be here for Phoebe's big moment? Or was there another reason?

But when the curtain went down, and the lights came on for intermission, Travis jumped out of his seat like the theater was on fire and zig-zagged his way through the crowd.

I, however, waited for the rest of the family, shuffling our way out of the auditorium and into the lobby. It was a charming blend of old-world elegance and small-town quirkiness. Gilded moldings framed walls adorned with local art and a chandelier made of mason jars dangled from the ceiling.

The townspeople milled about, their conversations a mix of southern drawls and laughter. We passed a woman in a floral dress passionately discussing the merits of organic chicken feed while a man in what were likely his *good* overalls nodded, seemingly more interested in the cheese platter at the refreshment table.

I leaned against a wall, my eyes scanning the crowd for familiar faces. Okay, maybe *one* familiar face in particular. But then my phone buzzed, and I glanced down to see a text from Chip.

Chipper: Glad you stayed for the recital?

I replied that I was, and then I tugged my lips to the side, my thumb hovering over the screen. Before I let myself get carried away with whatever was brewing between Travis and me, I needed to figure out my feelings for Chip.

Or, perhaps more importantly, because Travis was sure I was seeing sparks where there was only a dry twig, I needed to figure out Chip's feelings for me.

Me: Do you think there's any romantic chemistry between us? Could we ever be more than friends?

My heart pounded as the three-dot bubble appeared and then disappeared. Finally, his response came through.

Chipper: Rore-bore, you're an amazing friend, but I don't see us as anything more. Hope that doesn't ruin our friendship. Hope this doesn't ruin our friendship.

Oddly enough, relief washed over me instead of rejection. At least I wouldn't have to deal with a Twilight-style love triangle.

But then, who would be Jacob, and who would be Edward in that scenario? Jacob had the motorcycle and the tattoos, so I guessed that answered that question. And really, Bella *did* seem to have more chemistry with the wolf than the well-dressed and polished vampire.

"Why you standin' all alone over here?" Riley's voice broke into my thoughts as he approached with a plastic cup of teal punch in his hand.

I shrugged, tucking my phone away without replying to my *forever friend*. "Oh, you know, just confirming that Travis was right about there being zero chemistry between Chip and me."

Riley chuckled. "Did you think there was? I could've told you that myself. It was pretty obvious at the weddin'."

I sighed. “Why was it so obvious to everyone but me?”

“Cause you’re too busy thinkin’ about romance to really know the feel of it when it comes along?” He took a sip of his punch.

I rolled my eyes. “That, or it’s because I’ve never had a boyfriend and wouldn’t even know what I was supposed to be feeling.”

Riley almost choked on his punch. “Wait, what? Never?”

I felt my cheeks heat up. “Nope. Never been kissed either.”

He winced a little, then grinned. “Well, that explains a lot when it comes to the book sales and stuff. Maybe you just need some real-life experience to write about.”

“Are you suggesting I go out and kiss random strangers for the sake of my art?”

He laughed. “No, but stop overthinkin’ it. Let life happen a bit, and maybe you’ll get inspired.”

It occurred to me how silly it was that I hadn’t yet gone to my brother for advice about writing romance. Sure, he didn’t write romantic comedy novels, but he wrote chart-topping love songs packed with feeling and emotion. In the country music world, that meant he wrote *stories* set to music.

I was about to pick his brain, but then Phoebe burst into the lobby, her eyes wide and her tutu bouncing with each hurried step. “Gertie’s missing! I snuck her backstage for good luck, and now she’s gone! She must’ve slipped out the stage door!”

Riley and I stepped over to the loose circle of family members, and Jackson and Bailey exchanged a look that was a mixture of exasperation and amusement.

Jackson sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Sunshine, why would you bring a goat backstage?”

Adam, ever the problem-solver, chimed in. “Don’t worry, darlin’. I’ll tell my patrol guys to keep an eye out for her.”

Phoebe's face fell. "But what if she's scared? Or what if she eats someone's garden?"

Travis, who'd been lingering on the edges of this little family meeting, stepped forward. "Want me to go look for her, Pheeb?"

"Suck up," Everett said through a fake cough into his fist. The Wilson men were vicious competitors when it came to being Phoebe's favorite uncle.

Phoebe nodded vigorously. "Yes, please! I'd die if anything happened to her while I was dancing. It would ruin ballet for me. Forever. I'd never be able to dance again!"

Bailey's eyes widened. "Yikes, can't have that. But, Pheeb, Gertie runs this town like she's the mayor. Nothing's gonna happen to her."

The tiny ballerina crossed her arms and jutted her tutu-clad hip to the side. "But what if something *did* happen?"

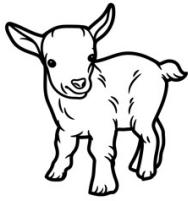
"It's all right," Travis said with a shrug. "Y'all go back in there and enjoy the show, and I'll find Gertrude the Gallivantin'."

Phoebe lunged forward and wrapped her arms around Travis's waist, telling him he was the best uncle ever. Which, of course, made Everett, Adam, *and* Riley roll their eyes as Travis shot them a wink over her head.

Then Phoebe pranced back into the theater for Act Two, and the lights of the lobby flickered on and off to tell the crowd to take their seats. But as I turned toward the auditorium and began to file in, I was suddenly pulled away by a tug on my belt loop.

"Wha—" I stumbled, crashing right into Travis, his finger still hooked on the loop, a mischievous glint in his deep brown eyes. "What are you—"

"You up for a goat hunt?"



aurora

We stepped out into the quiet streets of Charlotte Oaks, the atmosphere thick with suspense and the scent of impending rain. Travis led the way, his eyes scanning the surroundings like a seasoned tracker.

We passed The Caffeinated Squirrel, its windows dark but still exuding a cozy allure. The Oak Oven was next, its closed sign hanging like a promise for another day.

“Where would a goat go?” I mused aloud.

“To eat,” Travis said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Let’s check The Mason Jar first. Their garden is a goat’s dream.”

We arrived at the quaint diner, dark and quiet at this time of night since they were only open for breakfast and lunch. Travis crept toward the garden, then froze. “Do you hear that?”

I strained my ears. “Is that... bleating?”

We broke into a run, following the sound like two detectives hot on a trail. We rounded the corner, stopping dead in our tracks. The garden was intact, but a trail of chewed-up flowers led away from it.

“She’s been here, all right,” Travis said.

We followed the trail of petals, our footsteps quickening as the bleating grew louder. It led us to the town square, where the fountain stood as a centerpiece.

The streets of Charlotte Oaks were eerily empty, a stark contrast to the lively theater we'd just left. The only sounds were the rhythmic cadence of our footsteps on the cobblestone path through the grassy town square.

“Let's make use of this time since you only stayed in town long enough for the recital,” he said, scanning his surroundings.

I felt a pang of sadness at that thought, then frowned. “Well, wait, if I'm supposed to help you with opening your gym, I'll probably need to stay longer, right?”

“Up to you, I suppose. Depends on how much help we both need.”

I needed a lot.

But I shrugged as if it were no big deal. “I'll keep you posted. What did you want to talk about? The gym stuff?”

“Nah. I'll look for the goat, you pull out your phone and read me some more stuff from your books.”

“Seriously? Now? I'm supposed to be helping you look for Gertie.”

He shot me a wry smile. “You really think I need your help findin' that furball in a town as small as this? Sniper, remember? Now, come on. Be my audiobook while I'm goat huntin'.”

I gave in with an exasperated sigh, reading him the first chapter I found as we strolled in the dark. It hadn't been easy to read and walk, but he'd only had to reach out and keep me from falling a handful of times as the cracks in the cobblestone jumped up to trip me.

The night was quiet, almost eerily so when I finished reading, waiting for him to give me his feedback. The glow from the street lamps cast long shadows, making the quaint square look like a scene from a mystery novel.

“Well, for one thing, you gotta fix some major fails at flirtin',” Travis said, breaking the silence.

“What?” I asked, my eyes scanning the dark corners of the square for any sign of Gertie.

“You’ve got him tellin’ her she looks like a dragon when she first wakes up.”

“She’s the one who described herself like that to *him*. He just agrees with her,” I defended myself.

“Same thing.”

“No way! It becomes like a funny thing for them. He even buys her a dragon egg for Christmas.”

Travis shook his head, clearly not convinced. “I’m not buyin’ it. There’s no way that scene involves a man who is passionately in love with his woman.”

I sniffed. “Well, I thought it was cute. Like how when she wakes up on that camping trip, and he sees her coming out of her tent, and he’s like, ‘wow, you really do look like a dragon in the morning. But a *cute* dragon.’ Now it’s their thing. A love for dragons.”

As I spoke, Travis stopped walking and took a few steps closer to me, closing the distance between us until we were only a few inches apart. The air seemed to thicken, and I felt my heart rate pick up.

He leveled me with his stare. “I’m stickin’ to my guns on this one, Aurora. Because if she’d come out of her tent lookin’ like a dragon, but you had that man drop what he was doing, walk up to her—“

“Kinda like... um...” I stammered, suddenly very aware of how close he was, and gestured to the small space between us. “Kinda like this?”

“Yep, like this,” he said softly, then caused me to gasp as he gently took my face in his hands. “If he came close, took her face in his hands, and said, ‘Sweetheart, I don’t ever wanna hear you call yourself a dragon again. Because if this is what you look like in the mornin’, I’d go to bed happy every night for the rest of my life if I knew this was what I’d see when I woke up.’”

I was speechless, caught in the intensity of his gaze. My characters were forgotten, Gertie was forgotten... Everything was forgotten except the man standing in front of me.

“But, I’m no writer, so maybe he’d just kiss her. Actions speak louder than words, right?” His voice was a low murmur, and I felt them deep in my soul.

For a moment, I was frozen in his hold, wondering if he’d dare to act out that last part, too. But just as quickly as the moment had arrived, it passed, and we seemed to remember at the same time why we were out here in the first place.

“We should keep looking for Gertie,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Yeah,” he agreed, releasing my face and taking a step back. “Let’s keep lookin’.”

As we resumed our search, walking side by side but worlds apart, I couldn’t help but think that sometimes fiction paled in comparison to real life.

And as for dragons and love, well, maybe Travis had a point. Maybe love wasn’t about finding someone who saw your flaws as cute quirks but finding someone who made you forget they were flaws in the first place.

“So, were you textin’ your buddy Chip durin’ the intermission?” Travis finally broke the silence, his voice tinged with something I couldn’t quite place.

“How did you know?”

He chuckled softly and tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “You get this look... It’s like, I can tell you wished you felt more than you do or somethin’. Saw it the night of the weddin’ too.”

“How observant.”

He smirked. “Always.”

I shrugged, my heart pounding from the adrenaline of our goat-hunt-turned-confessional. “Turns out there’s nothing there. I decided to flat-out ask him if he thought we had romantic chemistry, and he said no.”

He hummed, and it was a low, throaty sound that sent shivers down my spine. “Hope he wasn’t too harsh about it.”

“He was perfectly nice.”

“Well, that’s good. Though, I’m not sure why you had to ask him for confirmation. You didn’t believe me when I said it was obvious?”

I felt a flare of irritation as we scanned the town square for the runaway goat. “Why does everyone keep saying that? I’ve never had a boyfriend, okay? I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Travis stopped walking so abruptly that I almost bumped into him. He turned to face me, his eyes searching mine as if he were trying to read some hidden message there. “You’ve never had a boyfriend?”

“No,” I snapped, suddenly defensive. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Well, I don’t see why it matters.”

“It changes things,” he said, his voice dropping an octave, making the air around us feel even heavier, despite the November night chill.

“How?”

“Because all this time, I thought you knew somethin’ about romance, but you just needed a little help showin’ it in your books instead of tellin’ it.”

I huffed out a breath. “You lost me.”

“Aurora, I would’ve encouraged you to find your own chemistry instead of showin’ you examples of body language and random flirtin’.”

I laughed, but it was a hollow sound. “Oh, yeah? So, what, you’d wanna watch me flirt with other guys for writing research?”

His eyes darkened. “No. That’s the last thing I’d want.”

“Then what do you want, Travis?” My voice was a whisper, but it carried in the still night air.

“Why haven’t you ever had a boyfriend?” he shot back, almost as if he was annoyed by the fact.

I threw my hands up and then let them fall against my thighs with a smack. “My dad was a Marine, okay? A very protective one. He scared away anyone who even looked my way in high school.”

Despite the circumstances, my mind flashed to Twilight again, imagining Bella’s dad at the table, cleaning his shotgun. Yep. My dad had totally pulled moves like that when I was sixteen.

“Well, that doesn’t surprise me one bit,” Travis muttered under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” he said, but his eyes were locked onto mine. “It’s just... You should’ve told me. I sat there tellin’ you to write what you know, but how can you write what you know if you don’t know anythin’ about how any of it feels?”

The intensity in his eyes was almost too much to bear, and for a moment, I felt laid bare, as if he could see right through me.

“I’ve read a ton of romance books, Travis. I thought I knew enough to write about it,” I retorted, my voice tinged with bitterness.

He shook his head, his eyes never leaving mine. “Readin’ about it isn’t the same as knowin’ the feelin’ of it, Rory.”

“Now you just sound like Riley. He said the same thing when I told him all this during the intermission.” I sighed, my shoulders slumping a little. I crossed my arms over my chest, staring into the night. “Guess now I know why my kissing scenes get trashed so much in the reviews.”

Travis made a strangled noise. “Wait, are you saying you’ve never been *kissed* either?”

I looked away, suddenly finding the cobblestones beneath my feet incredibly interesting. “No, I haven’t.”

“That doesn’t seem possible,” he said, his voice dripping with disbelief. He took a deep breath as if bracing himself for something. “Why would you even want to write this stuff if you’ve never even experienced any of it?”

I felt my eyes sting, and I blinked back the tears. “Because when life is dark, people want light, Travis. I might not have been in a relationship or been kissed before, but I’m not stupid. I know that the power of love can make sad things better. And if I couldn’t have it for myself while I grieved over losing my mom, I figured I’d write about it instead.”

For a moment, he just stood there, staring at me so intensely it felt like he was peering into my soul. Then, slowly, his expression softened. “Aurora, I—”

“If you’re about to suggest I go around kissing people for the experience, I swear, I’ll kick you,” I snapped, my patience wearing thin.

His eyes blazed, and he shook his head vehemently. “That’s not what I was gonna say.”

“Then what were you gonna say?” I demanded.

He groaned, running a hand through his hair. “Look, from what you’ve told me about your books, it seems like you avoid puttin’ anythin’ real or dark into them. You’re tryin’ too hard to make them all sunshine and rainbows, and that might be a big part of the problem.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “No one wants to read about characters who are struggling if they’re struggling themselves. I sure didn’t want to write about that while I was struggling.”

“Look, ya gotta understand somethin’. Even in the romcoms Dakota used to make me watch, everyone had their struggles. Take that diary one. Bridget’s battlin’ with her self-esteem from the very beginnin’.”

I blinked, surprised by his insight.

He took a step closer, narrowing the space between us. “Or what about one with Deadpool and the chick from Speed? The green card marriage one? That lady was facin’ deportation, and the guy was doin’ her a serious favor by agreein’ to help her out, but she had so many walls around her heart she treated him like dirt until she worked through her issues.”

“You’re right,” I admitted softly. “Sandra was a bit of an unlikable heroine in that one.”

Another step closer, and I could feel the warmth radiating off him. “And don’t forget about ‘Legally Blonde.’ Girl had to prove she was more than just a pretty face in a world that didn’t take her seriously, and even though it was funny to watch her do it, she was havin’ a rough time of it, wouldn’t ya say?”

I looked up into his eyes, feeling the charge between us intensify. “Are you sure you don’t want to be a therapist?”

He was now so close I could feel his breath on my face. “Very funny. In real life and in fiction, people have problems. Dark things happen.” He paused, his eyes searching mine as if he were trying to make sure I was really hearing him.

I nodded, my throat suddenly dry. “I get that.”

He took another step, invading my space. “Remember the characters you told me about? The ones folks didn’t like ‘cause they were too perfect?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure he could hear it.

“Well, nobody’s perfect. You’re far from it, and heck, so am I.” His voice softened, but the intensity in his eyes didn’t wane. “But that darkness, those struggles, they shouldn’t be glossed over or ignored.”

I felt a shiver run down my spine, his words resonating deep within me.

He leaned in, his lips almost touching my ear as he spoke. “In fact, if I were to kiss you right now, the fact that both of our lives are messy and confusin’ would only make it better.”

I could only gulp.

“And I’ll tell you somethin’ else, too,” he continued. “If I were to kiss you right now, as a man whose leg and dreams were recently torn to shreds, fightin’ that darkness every day, it’d be even better for me, too.”

His words hit me like a freight train, but just like when we danced at my brother’s wedding, I found myself breathing easily. The air between us was thick with tension, and I was hyper-aware of every inch of space that separated us, but I was in no danger of having an asthma attack. It was like we were meant to share the same air, and no part of me struggled against his nearness.

But then he leaned in closer, so close that his lips brushed against mine as he spoke, sending a shiver down my spine. “And if you were to have your first kiss right now, in this dark town square in the middle of a conversation like this one, it’d feel like a blast of light. And that right there is why it’s important not to brush the dark stuff under the rug. It makes the light even brighter, Aurora.”

The world seemed to stop, and for a moment, all I could focus on was the warmth of his breath mingling with mine, the sincerity in his voice, and the undeniable truth in his words.

“Travis?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

“Yeah?”

“Why do you call me Aurora instead of Rory?”

He paused, his eyes searching mine as if he were choosing his words carefully. “Well, Aurora means ‘dawn,’ right? From the moment I met you, I knew it fit. And you deserve to be called by the name your parents gave you. You were the light in their dark.”

My heart swelled at his words. It was as if he’d reached into the deepest parts of me and illuminated them with his sincerity.

“And ever since my accident,” he went on, vulnerability in his eyes and his tone, “you’ve been the light in my dark, too.”

The air between us was charged, electric, and I felt like I was standing on the edge of something monumental. His words weren't just sweet; they were raw and real, and they struck a chord deep within me. Every word we'd exchanged, every look we'd shared, had built up to this moment.

"Travis?" My voice barely rose above a whisper, as if speaking any louder might shatter the fragile atmosphere.

"Yeah?" His eyes locked onto mine, so intense and full of unspoken emotion that it took my breath away.

"Are you gonna kiss me or not?"

The corner of his mouth twitched up, a barely-there smile that instantly dissolved the tension, making me feel as if I'd just been lifted off my feet. "That depends, are you learnin' anythin' from all this build-up that'll help you with your books?"

I gaped at him, incredulous. He'd dragged all of that out just because of our deal?

Then again, he wasn't exactly wrong to do it. I had a feeling I'd remember this exchange in sharp enough detail to write some seriously good prose, despite the fact that I usually had a hard time putting my own interactions on paper.

But that was something I'd focus on later because right now, all I wanted was to feel that light he'd so swoonily described.

"Travis, just do it already!" I huffed, my lips practically tingling in anticipation.

His soft laugh broke the tension, and he finally leaned in, my stomach somersaulting in response. The last thing I saw before my eyes fluttered closed was the smile still painted on his full lips, and then—those lips met mine, and the world fell away.

All I could feel was the sensation of his mouth on mine, warm and insistent. His hands cupped my face, and it was as if he was pouring every unspoken emotion, every hidden desire, into that single, soul-searing kiss.

My *first* kiss.

I felt like I was drowning and being saved all at once, lost in a whirlpool of sensations that left me breathless and aching for more.

It didn't even register that I had no idea what I was doing, though. Travis was totally in charge of this kiss, and he angled my face as he traced the seam of my lips, a silent request to deepen the kiss—one that I eagerly granted.

A bolt of electricity shot through me, igniting a fire that I never knew existed. I clung to him, my hands gripping the fabric of his shirt as if it were a lifeline.

As we finally pulled back, our breaths ragged and eyes locked, I could see the same stunned expression mirrored on his face that was surely on mine. For a moment, neither of us said a word, still caught up in what would probably go down as the best first kiss anyone on the planet had ever had.

“Is it always like that?” I asked, my voice a hushed, shaky whisper.

He shook his head. “Kissin’? No. Not by a mile. That was... somethin’.”

I cringed. “In a bad way?”

“No,” he said with a chuckle. “In a very, very good way. In fact, I was thinkin’ maybe we could do it again.”

Without another word, Travis closed the distance between us and captured my lips once again. But then, a sudden, jarring bleat shattered the moment.

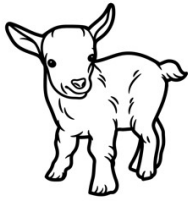
We broke apart, our eyes meeting in a mix of surprise before we looked around for the source of the interruption. There, peeking out from behind the fountain, was Gertie, looking as innocent as a not-at-all-innocent little goat could.

“I’m really startin’ to hate that dang goat,” Travis muttered, his voice laced with frustration.

But his eyes, those stormy, intense eyes, told a different story when he looked my way again. They were filled with a

promise, a silent vow that left me both exhilarated and terrified.

And just like that, I knew. Whatever this was, it was only the beginning.



The air was thick with the smell of barbecue as we walked into the town square, a place usually so familiar but now transformed into a spectacle. At the center of it all was the fountain featuring a possum in a top hat, a statue that always made me chuckle. Legend had it that a possum had crashed the first-ever town meeting, and folks decided it was a sign.

Only in Charlotte Oaks.

“Y’all better appreciate this,” Jackson said, handing out tickets like he was doling out gold bars. “I paid for everyone, so no complaints. Just sit back and enjoy some quality family time.”

Adam snorted. “What, no invite for Riley?”

“He’s off in Nashville, probably buyin’ curtains or somethin’ for the house he’s buildin’ with Aubree,” Jackson replied.

“He’s already settin’ the gold standard for husbandhood,” Everett said with a shake of his head. “Gonna make the rest of us look bad.”

Jackson smirked. “Hah. You better get ready, brother. With this new baby on the way, I’m gonna set the gold standard for *fatherhood*.”

Everett chuckled, “You wish. My kid’s gonna be the one to watch. Already got the nursery decked out in camo.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, Jackson’s got a leg up on you, Everett. He’s been killin’ it in the dad department with Phoebe for years now.”

Jackson nodded. “That’s right. Raisin’ Phoebe has been the real deal, not just practice. She’s as much my daughter as any child could be, and look how good she’s turnin’ out?”

Everett rolled his eyes, “Real deal or not, it’s not fair you’ve had a head start.”

My brothers continued their banter, and my eyes wandered over the crowd. That’s when I spotted her—Gertrude, the elusive goat, sneaking her way into the food tent. She was nibbling on a tray of cornbread like she’d bought a VIP ticket to the event. I shook my head, chuckling to myself. Of all the things to catch my eye, it had to be our resident four-legged troublemaker.

The show went on, and as entertaining as it was, my mind kept drifting back to last night—to that life-altering kiss with Rory. Her *first* kiss. Just the memory of her lips on mine both thrilled and tormented me.

Could I talk to my brothers about it, though? Would they understand what had me so mixed up about it?

The music kicked in, a lively country tune, and the six men behind their grills started their synchronized dance. They were flipping racks of ribs, basting pulled pork, and twirling tongs over sizzling briskets. Even Shifty was keeping up, looking like a pro as he juggled bottles of homemade barbecue sauce and dry rubs.

The scent of hickory smoke invaded my nostrils, mingling with the mouthwatering aroma of the meats. The crowd erupted into cheers and laughter, but my stomach grumbled, reminding me I’d been too worked up about that kiss to eat breakfast this morning.

As the Synchronized BBQ show continued, Shifty flipped a rack of ribs in perfect harmony with the other grillmasters, all while “Sweet Home Alabama” blared from the speakers. The crowd erupted in cheers, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Would you look at Shifty go,” Adam said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Man’s full of surprises.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I muttered, my thoughts still a tangled mess.

“You’ve been strangely quiet,” Jackson observed, nudging me with his elbow. “What’s eatin’ you?”

“Yeah, you got somethin’ on your mind, Travis?” Everett chimed in, sensing my hesitation. “Or do we have to settle this the old-fashioned way with a good ol’ brawl?”

We all laughed, but I knew the moment of truth was fast approaching. I needed advice, and who better to give it than the men who knew me best? But as I opened my mouth to speak, I hesitated.

How did I tell my brothers that I might’ve made a huge mistake, taking something precious and irreplaceable from someone I cared about when the timing was terrible?

Not that I hadn’t loved every second of that kiss. That kiss was something else. I’d had my fair share of kisses, but nothing—and I mean nothing—had ever felt quite like that. It was like catching a big ol’ fish after hours of waiting, only to realize you’ve actually hooked a mermaid.

Yeah, *that* magical.

Holding her in my arms felt like finding that missing piece to a puzzle you didn’t even know you were trying to solve. And her lips? Man, it was like tasting sweet tea for the first time, realizing you’ve been drinking unsweetened swill your whole life.

The whole thing was the kind of moment that had me half-expecting Riley and Laney to pop up from behind the bushes and start singing a country ballad to narrate our love story.

I’d wanted time to stop.

If I could’ve, I would’ve trapped that moment in a mason jar, poked holes in the lid, and kept it on my nightstand forever.

But time hadn’t stopped, and by the time we’d brought Gertrude back to the theater so Phoebe wouldn’t fret about her good luck charm going missing, I’d come back to my senses

and realized that one amazing kiss—or two, but who was counting?—didn't change the fact that I had a lot to figure out before I let it happen again.

I took a deep breath, my eyes drifting to the grillmasters who were now basting their meats in a dance of brushes and sauce. "Somethin' happened last night."

Jackson leaned in, his eyes full of interest. "Oh, yeah? Don't keep us in suspense, man."

"I kissed Aurora," I blurted out.

Adam grinned. "Well, all right, then. Why the long face?"

"It was her first kiss," I said, my voice flecked with guilt.

Everett looked puzzled. "And that's got you lookin' mopey because...?"

"I feel like it should've been with someone she's in a relationship with or someone who has his stuff together. Not... me."

Jackson shook his head. "Travis, you're overthinkin' it. There are worse people to have a first kiss with than a lady-killer like you."

He'd obviously been aiming to lighten me up with that, but it didn't work.

"Yeah, but her dad doesn't think I'm good enough for her," I admitted, watching as Shifty and the guys executed a flawless synchronized lid-closing maneuver. "Makes me wonder if she thinks the same."

Adam clapped me on the shoulder. "Listen, you're openin' that gym. You've got a good plan, thanks to that girl, and I can tell you're lovin' where it's all goin'. You're on your way, man."

"Yeah, but small businesses fail all the time. What if I can't make it work?"

Everett snorted. "Well, if you go in thinkin' like that, you're already beat."

Jackson nodded. “You’ve got more grit than anyone I know. If anyone can make it work, it’s you.”

I looked at my brothers, their faces earnest and encouraging. It was a rare moment of sincerity amid our usual banter and brawls.

“So what are you gonna do about Rory?” Adam asked as the crowd erupted into applause. The grillmasters were taking their bows, and the smell of BBQ filled the air, making my stomach growl.

I hesitated, my eyes drifting from one brother to the next. “I’m not gonna do anything, not until the gym opens, and I’m sure it’s not gonna blow up in my face.”

Jackson raised an eyebrow. “You’re puttin’ your love life on hold for a business venture?”

“It’s not just a business venture,” I said, my tone heavy with the weight of my worries. “This is new territory. My career used to be laid out in simple terms. Startin’ a business is scarier than steppin’ off a cliff blindfolded.”

Everett nodded, understanding filling his eyes. “I get it, man. Even runnin’ Dad’s shop is scary, and it’s a family heirloom. Makes sense you’d wanna get on solid ground before bringin’ someone into your life.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Aurora deserves the best, and right now, I can’t see ‘the best’ bein’ me. She’s never even been in a relationship before. I don’t want to add that kind of pressure to an already off-kilter situation.”

Adam clapped me on the shoulder. “You’re a good man, Travis. But you can’t let fear hold you back from somethin’ that could be good for both of you.”

As the crowd began to disperse, heading toward the buffet tables laden with the fruits of the grillmasters’ labor, I felt a mix of relief and apprehension. My brothers understood, but the question remained: When the time came, would I be brave enough to take that step? For now, all I could do was focus on the boxing gym and hope that when the dust settled, Aurora would still be here.

That night, I sat on the edge of my childhood bed, staring at the walls plastered with remnants of my teenage years—posters of boxing legends, faded photos of high school football games, and a Marine Corps flag that had once been the epitome of my dreams. Everything was in its place, just like it always had been. The room was a time capsule, and for a moment, it felt like the walls—and the memories from my past—were closing in on me.

My brothers' words from the BBQ event echoed in my mind. "You've got more grit than anyone I know. If anyone can make it work, it's you," Jackson had said.

But did I have enough grit to make it through this new chapter of my life and come out the other side unscathed? Well, not any more scathed than I already was, I supposed.

And what about Aurora?

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, snapping me out of my thoughts. The screen lit up with a video call from Hunter, my cousin, and a fellow Marine—or at least, he still was one.

"Hey, Hunter," I greeted as I accepted the call.

"Travis! How's it going, man?" Hunter's face filled the screen, his eyes bright and his grin infectious.

"I'm hanging in there. How about you? How's Nora and the kids?"

"We're all good, man. Busy as always. Listen, Mom told me about your boxing gym. That's awesome, congrats!"

"Thanks," I said, forcing a smile. I'd always looked up to Hunter, vowing to work just as hard as he had to ensure a lifelong military career. And yet, here I was.

I'd had a goal, and I'd failed.

"So, how are you really doing?" Hunter's tone shifted, his eyes searching mine through the screen. "I know how much you wanted to make a career out of the military."

I sighed, my shoulders slumping. “It was tough, man. Really tough. But I had some help comin’ to terms with it. And she helped me come up with the idea for the gym, and that helped a lot with findin’ somethin’ to focus on that wasn’t what I lost.”

Hunter’s eyebrows shot up. “She, huh? Who is this mysterious helper?”

I paused, picturing Aurora so vividly it was like she was right in front of me. “She’s a family friend’s sister. But both our lives are complicated right now. It’s not the right time for whatever you’re thinkin’.”

Which, of course, was exactly what I was thinking about. Wanting. Craving.

Hunter nodded, his eyes thoughtful. “You know, sometimes timing is everything. You’ve been through a lot, Trav. If you need time to build a new life before diving into a relationship, take it.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.”

We spent a few more minutes catching up on his family and life in general. Hunter was doing well, still loving the Marine life, and his kids were growing like weeds. Nora was still a Marine like him, but she was also thinking about using tuition assistance to get a degree online.

It was good to hear that my cousin—one I’d always felt connected to even though his family had lived in the Midwest when we were growing up—was out there living his best life.

Even if I couldn’t.

After we said our goodbyes and ended the call, I sat back, my mind a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

Hunter was right, and partially, so were my brothers, even though they’d also cautioned me against acting in fear. But I really had been through a lot, and maybe I did need time to find my footing again.

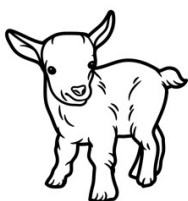
Though, as I looked around my old room, at the dreams of a young man who thought he had his life all figured out, I

couldn't help but wonder—what if the best plans were the ones you never saw coming?

And what if being with Aurora was one of them?

I shook my head, pushing the thought away. For now, I had a boxing gym to focus on and a new chapter to begin. But as I turned off the light and lay down, the last thought that crossed my mind was a pair of bright blue eyes that seemed to see right through me. Eyes that seemed to be able to see into a future that was as uncertain as it was exciting.

And for the first time in a long time, that uncertainty didn't scare me.



Two weeks had passed since that kiss with Aurora that had me wishing time could stand still.

I ran a hand through my hair, a nervous habit I'd picked up. We hadn't talked about it. Hadn't even brushed against the topic. I'd made up my mind not to go there again, not till I had my life in some semblance of order. But the fact that she hadn't brought it up either had me wondering.

Was it not as earth-shattering for her as it was for me?

I looked down at my boots, scuffing them against the unfinished floor. Or maybe she'd taken her dad's words to heart, deciding I wasn't up to snuff for anything more than a first kiss.

Either way, I was sticking to my guns. The timing wasn't right, no matter how much I wished otherwise.

We were standing in the future home of my boxing gym, a prime spot on Main Street that Aurora had helped me secure. But money talks, too, and mine had shouted loud enough to get the owner's attention. I looked around the empty space, my heart pounding with anticipation. Contractors were due any day now, and if all went as planned, I'd be opening doors come mid-November.

"So, about marketing," Aurora started, her eyes scanning the empty space as if she could already see it filled with punching bags and treadmills. "You watched the presentation with the plan I laid out for that, right? What did you think?"

“Yeah, I watched it.” I chuckled, my eyes catching a glint of afternoon sunlight filtering through the windows. “Aurora, I can barely handle my own Instagram. Could I just pay you to be my marketing guru?”

She looked hesitant, shifting from foot to foot. “You want to pay me?”

“Why not? You’re good at it, and you know I need the help.”

She grinned, her eyes sparkling like they held a secret. “Well, if you’re gonna twist my arm about it.”

I laughed, my chest feeling lighter than it had in days. “Consider it twisted.”

“Are you paying me in free boxing lessons?” Aurora asked, her eyebrows arching in that way that always caught my attention.

“Nah, I’ll pay you your goin’ rate. Fair’s fair,” I said, trying to keep things professional.

She looked a bit taken aback. “Oh. Well, I usually offer a friends and family discount.”

I waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry ‘bout that. You deserve to be paid for your time, full price.”

For a moment, her expression shifted, looking a bit confused and maybe even a touch hurt.

I clenched my jaw, hoping I hadn’t given her the impression that we weren’t close enough for friends and family rates, but I kept that thought to myself.

“Um, okay,” she finally said, her smile returning, but it was nowhere near as real as I would’ve liked. “I’ll draw up some plans and package options for us to go over.”

“I’ll probably just go for the biggest and baddest package you’ve got, so feel free to start with that and let me know how much I owe you,” I told her, aiming to keep the atmosphere light.

She smirked. “You got it, boss.”

And that was that. Another deal sealed, another layer of complexity added to whatever this thing between us was. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was navigating a minefield, but for now, it was a path I was willing to take.

"Can't wait for the contractors to start working on this place. It's gonna be something special," Aurora said, looking around the empty space that would soon be my gym.

"Me neither," I agreed. "But enough about me. How 'bout we head over to The Crispy Crust and work on your writin'?"

She grinned. "Thought you'd never ask."

We stepped out into the bright sunshine, strolling down Main Street toward the pizzeria. "You know, I've actually started a new book," she said, her eyes lighting up with giddy excitement. "And so far, all of your advice has been really helpful."

"Hey, that's great to hear. You told me that last flop had you in a rut, so startin' somethin' new is a big deal."

"Thanks, Travis. It really is."

As we meandered along, the sun cast a warm glow on the quaint storefronts, and a flash of light hitting something shiny—a fancy purse, it turned out—had me noticing Paisley a few yards ahead.

Her posture was tense, her free hand clenched into a fist as she talked on the phone. Her face was a mask of frustration and sadness, and I couldn't help but wonder what was going on.

Was it something to do with Riley or Laney's music career? Or was it something more personal?

"...this is the last time. I mean it," she said, her voice tinged with finality as she ended the call.

She turned to walk away, nearly smacking right into us. Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she quickly masked it with a smile that didn't do a thing to ease my mind.

"Oh, hey, Travis. Hey, Ror. Didn't see you there," she said, her voice a little too chipper.

“You okay, Pais?” I asked, concern lacing my voice.

She laughed nervously, wiping away a stray tear. “Oh, it’s just some drama with Riley’s upcomin’ tour. Nothin’ I can’t handle.”

Aurora and I exchanged a glance. Neither of us was buying it, but we both knew better than to pry.

“Well, if you need anything, you know where to find us,” Aurora offered.

“Thanks, y’all. I appreciate it,” Paisley said, her voice softening for a moment. Then, as if flipping a switch, she was back to her managerial self. “I’ve gotta run. Lots to do, you know how it is.”

With that, she hurried away, her heels clicking against the sidewalk, leaving a trail of unease in her wake.

Aurora turned to me, her eyes searching mine. “Do you believe any of that?”

I shook my head. “Not for a second. But it’s her business, whatever it is. I just hope she’s all right.”

“Me too,” Aurora agreed, her tone heavy with worry.

We stood there for a moment, the weight of the encounter hanging in the air before I decided to shift gears.

But it wasn’t lost on me that whatever we’d just witnessed was a clear-as-day reminder that life was complicated, messy, and utterly unpredictable. It made me feel like I should probably take the hint that I wasn’t the only one feeling that way in this town.

“So, what’s this new book about?” I asked.

Aurora grinned, clearly excited to get back to that particular topic. “It’s about this librarian who’s an absolute bookworm, right? She loves her job, but she’s always dreamed of having the perfect reading nook at home. Enter this carpenter guy who frequents her library for woodworking books.”

“Woodworking books?” I cut in. “Hasn’t this guy ever heard of YouTube?”

She scowled. “Travis.”

“Sorry. Carry on.”

“So, they strike a deal: he’ll build her the reading nook of her dreams, and in return, she’ll help him set up a community workshop for kids interested in carpentry. She’s got connections with the local schools and knows how to write grants, so it’s a win-win.”

I couldn’t help but smile. The story felt familiar—two people entering a business arrangement to solve their individual problems, only to find themselves tangled up in feelings they hadn’t planned on. I didn’t say it out loud, but the similarities weren’t lost on me.

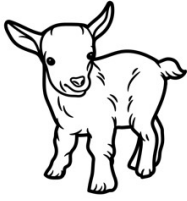
“Will you read me what you’ve got so far?” I asked.

She looked up, her eyes narrowing playfully. “Is this so you can pick it apart, or do you actually think you’d enjoy it?”

“Both,” I said, grinning back at her. And as we walked, I found myself wondering how her story would end and whether it might offer any clues about where we were headed.

We reached The Crispy Crust, and I held the door open for her. As she walked past me, I was hit by a wave of her scent, mixing with the aroma of freshly baked pizza that wafted out from the shop.

I honestly couldn’t tell what had me feeling more hungry—the promise of a hearty meal or the woman who’d just walked by me.



Things I've learned from a man who kisses as thoroughly as he confuses his victims:

The Art of the First Touch

- What I wrote: "His fingers lightly grazed her arm, as if he were afraid she might break."
- Travis's advice: "Darlin', if a guy's touchin' you like you're made of glass, he's either never touched a woman before, or he's not sure he even wants to touch you. Make it mean somethin'. Like he can't help but touch her 'cause he's drawn to her."
- Real-life confusion: He does this to me!

The Eye Contact Game

- What I wrote: "Their eyes met across the room, and she quickly looked away."
- Travis's advice: "Eye contact's where the magic starts, remember? If she's lookin' away, how's he gonna know she's interested? Let 'em lock eyes and feel that spark. And don't just say it, make the reader feel it, too."
- Real-life confusion: All. The. Eye. Contact. All of it.

The Failed Attempt at Flirting

- What I wrote: “So, do you come here often?”
- Travis’s advice: “Oh, brother. That’s as cliché as it gets. How ‘bout somethin’ that shows he’s actually payin’ attention to her? Like, ‘I noticed you’re drinkin’ bourbon. A woman after my own heart.’”
- Real-life confusion: What, like how we both love sweet tea? Well, maybe not. There’s not much else to drink around here.

The Awkward Silence

- What I wrote: “They sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.”
- Travis’s advice: “Silence ain’t always bad, but make it charged. Like they’re both thinkin’ about the same thing but neither wants to say it. Makes the reader itch to know what’s goin’ on in their heads.”
- Real-life confusion: Does he mean like how I’m always itching to know what’s going on in *his* head every time this happens with us?

The Unromantic Setting

- What I wrote: “They found themselves alone in the laundry room.”
- Travis’s advice: “A laundry room? Really? Unless they’re gonna start throwin’ clothes off, pick somewhere that sets the mood. Like a cozy corner in a dimly lit bar.”
- Real-life confusion: Not even gonna go here.

The Lame Compliment

- What I wrote: “You look nice.”
- Travis’s advice: “Nice is what you say about someone’s grandma. Try somethin’ that’ll make her knees weak. Like, ‘You’re so beautiful, you make me forget my own name.’”
- Real-life confusion: Or maybe I can quote that time he called me cool and edgy? Wait, no. Bad example.

The Zero Chemistry Kiss

- What I wrote: “Their lips met, and she felt... nothing.”
- Travis’s advice: “If she’s feelin’ nothin’, you’re doin’ it wrong. A kiss should be the kinda thing that makes ‘em forget about every other kiss they’ve ever had. Make it memorable, darlin’.”
- Real-life confusion: Don’t even get me started.

The Uninspired Date Idea

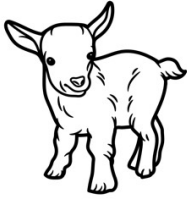
- What I wrote: “He took her to a fast-food restaurant for their first date.”
- Travis’s advice: “Unless they’re both broke college students or it’s some kinda inside joke, aim higher. First impressions matter. How ‘bout a sunset picnic or a night of dancin’?”
- Real-life confusion: Or stargazing so we could examine the art of the perfect setting for romance, like we did last night?

The Non-Commitment

- What I wrote: “Maybe we can hang out sometime.”
- Travis’s advice: “Sometime? That’s as non-committal as it gets. If he’s into her, he should be lockin’ down plans. Like, ‘Can I take you out this Friday?’”
- Real-life confusion: As in, him making sure I wake up to a text from him every morning with the time and place to meet him to work. Yep, makes sense.

The Forgettable Goodbye

- What I wrote: “See you later.”
- Travis’s advice: “End it on a note that leaves her wantin’ more. Somethin’ like, ‘I can’t wait to see you again,’ works wonders.”
- Real-life confusion: ...as if he’s never said this.

**aurora**

Six weeks. That was how long I'd been staying at the Cole house in Charlotte Oaks, working on my book and helping Travis with his boxing gym. It was early November now, and the gym was set to open next week. The air was crisp, leaves were turning, and I was... confused.

Travis and I had shared a kiss—a kiss that had been playing on a loop in my mind ever since that night. But we'd never talked about it.

Not once.

And whose fault was that? Mine, mostly. I'd had plenty of opportunities to bring it up, to ask what it meant for us, but I chickened out every single time.

As I sat at my makeshift desk, staring at the blinking cursor on my laptop, my thoughts drifted to Gertie and her attempts at matchmaking. At first, I'd thought her antics were coincidental, but now I wasn't so sure.

Take “The Nudge,” for instance. One day a week after *The Kiss of all Kisses*, Travis and I were carrying a heavy punching bag into the gym when Gertie decided it was the perfect time to headbutt me from behind. I stumbled forward, right into Travis. Our faces were inches apart, and for a moment, I thought he might kiss me again.

But, no.

He'd just chuckled and said, “Looks like Gertie's got your back, as usual.”

And don't even get me started on "The Attention-Grabber." A few weeks ago, Travis and I were in the middle of a heated discussion about gym membership fees when Gertie started doing somersaults in the space between us.

Yes, somersaults.

I didn't even know goats could do that, even Pygmy goats who seemed capable of doing anything. We'd both burst into laughter, and the tension evaporated like morning mist, as if she were a human kid trying to keep her parents from bickering.

Oh, and yesterday? There was the "Sudden Illness." Gertie started limping, and Travis and I spent hours trying to figure out what was wrong. We'd even Googled "goat illnesses," which is a rabbit hole you do not want to go down, trust me.

Turns out, she was fine. The limp miraculously disappeared, as if she'd wanted us to work together and communicate, forgetting all about our complicated feelings for each other.

Which we had.

As I sat there, pondering the absurdity of attributing romantic intentions to a goat, I couldn't help but wonder: Was Gertie onto something?

Were all these "coincidences" a sign that Travis and I should be together, or was I reading too much into the actions of a farm animal?

Either way, something had to give. The gym was opening soon, and I couldn't keep floating in limbo. I had to talk to Travis so I could find out what that six-weeks-too-long-ago kiss meant. And maybe, just maybe, I'd let Gertie take the credit for pushing us together if it turned out it had meant as much to him as it'd meant to me.

A knock on my bedroom door pulled me from my reverie.

"Come in," I called, expecting to see Dakota. She'd been checking up on me a lot lately since her room was right next to the one I occupied, and she knew how much time I'd been spending holed away in here, writing.

The door swung open, and not only did Dakota walk in, but Laney, Aubree, and Paisley were with her. And *man*, they all looked absolutely fantastic. Dressed up for a night on the town—which meant casual but cute. We were in Charlotte Oaks, after all.

“What’s going on? Is this an intervention?” I asked, half-joking.

“Nope, it’s an invitation,” Dakota announced, with a saucy pat of her freshly-curled brown hair. “You’ve been all-work-and-no-play for way too long, either workin’ on your book or helpin’ Travis with the gym. You need some fun, girl!”

Before I could respond, Aubree made a beeline for my laptop. “Mind if I read what you’re workin’ on?”

“Uh, sure,” I said, my heart pounding as I watched her eyes scan the screen.

After a few minutes, she straightened up and looked at me, her eyes shining. “Aurora, this is incredible. The tension, the dialogue, the chemistry—it’s all so real!”

I blushed, flattered. “Well, I owe a lot of it to Travis. He’s been helping me understand chemistry better.”

The girls exchanged glances. “Do tell,” Laney urged, her eyes bright and shining.

I chuckled. “Okay, so we made a deal the weekend of the wedding. He’d help me with my book, and I’d help him with the gym.”

“Wait, what kind of help?” Dakota asked with a frown. “How could he possibly help you write romance novels? I say this with love, but the man doesn’t read.”

Dakota would obviously know about Travis’s struggles with reading, and she really had said it with love. But I’d quickly learned that Travis hadn’t needed to *read* my books to help me with them.

“He’s helping me understand how to write them better. Like, once he took me to one of the art fairs in town square. We were standing in front of this painting, and he pointed out

a couple nearby who were clearly into each other but too shy to make a move. He explained how their body language told a story that they weren't brave enough to admit to each other. It was like watching a live version of the 'will they, won't they' trope."

"Aww," Paisley cooed. "I can definitely see how that would help!"

I told them a few more examples because once the door was unlocked, my mind couldn't stop trying to relive the events of the last six weeks.

"But the best was the stargazing," I said, my voice softening at the final example I prepared to give them. "He took me to this open field—which we'd driven to on his motorcycle, of course—and laid out a blanket. Then, we just looked at the stars. He had me describe the scene to him like I'd write it in a book, and he said sometimes the most romantic moments are the quiet ones, where you don't need words to feel connected."

"Aww," they sighed collectively, their eyes dreamy.

As I sat there, surrounded by the Cole sisters and their amusing reactions to these stories, Travis's insights into chemistry and body language continued to amaze me.

At first, it'd seemed odd that a former military sniper would have such a grasp on the ins and outs of romantic tension. But it'd quickly clicked that his job would've required an exceptional ability to read people. He could interpret the subtlest shifts in body language as potential cues to intent, and that skill, honed in high-stakes situations, made him the perfect person to apply it to the art of romance in my novels.

That thought made me smile. As unexpected as it was, I was incredibly grateful for how his unique skill set was improving my writing. Even the most bookish woman I'd ever met had thought so, and that had to count for something, right?

Aubree broke the silence then, as if she were reading my mind as well as she read books. "Well, I have to say, the

kissing scene I just read is one of the best I've ever come across. Did Travis help with that too?"

I opened my mouth as she lifted her brows, but no words came out. The question hung in the air, heavy with implication. "Oh, um, sure. Descriptions and stuff. Showing, not telling."

Laney leaned forward, her eyes lit with curiosity. "Right, well, how's everything going with the gym? Your end of the deal was to help him get it started?"

The change in subject put me totally at ease, and I smiled widely. "Yes, and it's going to be amazing. Travis has put so much work into it, and I'm really proud of him."

I thought back to the moment I'd presented Travis with the business plan. I'd recorded myself explaining each section, knowing that his struggles with reading could make it difficult for him to fully grasp it otherwise. The look of gratitude in his eyes when he realized what I'd done was something I'd never forget.

That memory led me to another—my conversation with my dad last week. I'd filled him in on the progress of the gym, and for the first time, I'd heard a note of genuine pride in his voice when he spoke about Travis and all the progress he was making.

"He's really doing it, huh?" Dad had said. "That's impressive, Aurora. You make sure to tell him I said so."

His words of praise didn't take the sting out of finding out that he'd approached Travis about keeping things friendly between us, but it was a start.

Travis didn't strike me as the kind of guy who would let my dad tell him not to date me, but maybe that was why we hadn't spoken about the kiss.

Dakota's eyes narrowed as she studied me. "I'm glad you're excited about it all, but honestly, you seem a little down, Rory. What are you not tellin' us?"

I hesitated, biting my lip. Whatever. I'd kept the kiss a secret for all this time, and since I couldn't even have a

conversation about exciting stuff without my inner turmoil bringing me down, I figured it was time to have a little girl talk.

“Well, Travis and I... we kissed,” I admitted. “The night of the recital.”

The room erupted in a chorus of excited squeals, but Dakota’s eyes stayed locked on mine. “And?”

“And... we haven’t talked about it since,” I admitted, feeling a knot tighten in my stomach. “And it definitely hasn’t happened again, even though at the time, he seemed like he’d want it to happen, like, all the time.”

Laney, Aubree, and Paisley snickered at that, but Dakota leaned back, her eyes thoughtful. “Look, I’ve always been close to Travis, and let me tell you a little somethin’ worth knowin’ about him. He’s the kinda guy who wants to make sure he succeeds at everything he does, so if he’s holdin’ back, it’s probably because he doesn’t wanna fail.”

Her words hung in the air, and I considered them carefully. Was that why Travis had been so distant? Was he afraid of failing in a relationship with me?

What was there to fail at? We had chemistry—and at this point, I knew enough to know that—and we had a genuine connection. Or at least, I felt like we did.

The room fell silent, and my thoughts spun in circles. Was it that genuine connection that had me so convinced we wouldn’t fail if we gave this a shot? Because it would really stink if it was simply because I had no experience in relationships, making me naive about what could go wrong.

My internal questions lingered, unanswered, as I looked around at the faces of the women who’d become like sisters to me lately. But Paisley clapped her hands together, breaking the thoughtful silence. “Well, if I’ve ever heard a reason for a girls’ night, that’s it. Rory, you need some listenin’ ears, a little advice, and then a whole lot of fun to take your mind off things.”

I chuckled, the tension in my shoulders slightly dissipating. “You’re probably right.”

“Pais is right. Get out of those sweats, girl,” Laney ordered me, gesturing at my comfy but not exactly night-out-worthy outfit. “We’ll wait for you downstairs.”

“And don’t worry,” Aubree chimed in, though her tone was always more reserved than the others. “We’ve got plenty of time to dissect every detail of this Travis situation.”

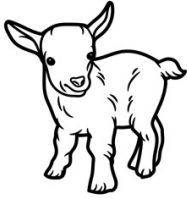
I smiled, grateful for the support and distraction. “Alright, give me a few minutes to change.”

“Wait,” I said as they turned to go, “where’s Bailey? Is she coming?”

Paisley hooked a thumb over her shoulder. “Bailey’s already at The Proud Oak. She was starvin’, so she went straight there, grabbed us a table, and ordered herself some appetizers. Which is great since it’ll be packed tonight.”

“And if you don’t hurry up and change, I’m gonna join my fellow baby mama and leave without you,” Laney said with a wink.

As they filed out of the room, chattering excitedly, a sense of warmth and belonging swept over me. Whatever happened with Travis, I knew I had a circle of women who had my back. A circle of friends who were more like family... for the first time in my life. And right now, that felt like everything.

**aurora**

I sat at the kitchen table, my eyes locked onto the blinking cursor on my laptop screen. It was as if it were mocking me. Not because my writing wasn't going well—in fact, it was going so well I was currently working on the epilogue for the book, and tomorrow, I'd begin the editing process.

No, what had me staring at the screen without the focus to keep going was that I had something seriously important to talk to my dad about, and I was chickening out, just like I had when I'd been stalking Riley instead of telling him who I was.

And it was a shame because Dad was back in town for another visit with Riley, and at any moment, the Cole family's kitchen would be flooded with people, stealing my opportunity for a moment alone with him.

Dad stood at the counter with his back to me, pouring himself a cup of coffee. The aroma filled the room, but it couldn't cut through the tension that had been hanging in the air since he'd arrived for a day with the family.

"I don't hear any typing," he said. "Cat got your words?"

I snorted. "No. I'm a little distracted."

He harrumphed, taking a seat at the table across from me. "Well, get focused."

Such a typical Marine thing to say.

I sighed. "Dad, can I talk to you about something?"

He nodded, all of that focus right on me. "Of course, what's on your mind?"

I have a favor to ask,” I began cautiously. “I know it’s super short notice because the ball is next week, but would you consider inviting Travis as the honorary guest?”

Dad chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief. “You won’t believe this, but the guy we originally invited just canceled on us.”

Sitting up, it took all of my willpower not to shoot out of my chair and do a happy dance. “He did?”

“Yeah, don’t look so excited. We’ve been scrambling to find a replacement, but I didn’t say yes to that replacement being Travis.”

I swallowed, pulling myself together. “Right. Um, why’d he cancel?”

Humor graced Dad’s face again as he sipped his coffee. “He’s the CEO of his own company and booked what he thought was a team-building retreat. Turns out, it’s a ‘Survivor’-style lost-in-the-wilderness experience. He doesn’t think his team will get their act together in time to make it back to the U.S. for the ball.”

I burst into laughter. “Oh my gosh, that’s hilarious! A CEO lost in the wilderness with his team? That’s a reality show I’d watch. I can just imagine him trying to lead a board meeting over a campfire, all of his employees too busy fighting over marshmallows and sticks to listen to him.”

“You always could make anything into a story idea,” he mused, winking at me. “Anyway, the guy said he thought it was a luxury retreat. Didn’t read the fine print, I guess.”

“If you hear how it turned out, will you let me know?” I asked.

“Sure. Or, you could just write a book with that as the plot and come up with your own story. Might be better.” We laughed together at that, and then he checked his watch, almost as if he also sensed that our time for this conversation was almost up. “So, you’re saying you want Travis to be the honorary guest, huh?”

And there it was. We'd circled back to the moment of truth. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying, Dad."

"Do you have feelings for him?"

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. "That's not what this is about, Dad."

He set his coffee cup down and studied me intently. "It probably has a lot to do with it, considering you're asking me to extend such a significant invitation to him."

I squirmed in my seat, feeling the weight of his scrutiny just like when I was a kid, and we were discussing a less-than-perfect grade on an assignment or the reason my room wasn't as clean as it could've been. The man could always see through my excuses to the real issue. In those examples, though, my excuses were just trying to cover up being a lazy kid. In this case, it was a little more serious.

"I thought there might be something more than friendship between us a while ago," I said, pausing to gauge his reaction. His eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't say anything, so I continued. "But now, I'm not so sure. Either way, this isn't about my feelings or his feelings."

Dad seemed to relax a bit, but he was still watching me closely. "Then what's it about?"

"It's about Travis. It's about the kind of Marine he was and will always be. He's been through a lot, and I think his experiences and the lessons he's learned could be really inspiring for others."

Dad's expression softened, and he looked away. It was almost like my words had... moved him? No, that couldn't be, right?

"Plus," I rushed on, eager for him to put me out of my misery and give me an answer, "being an honorary guest at a ball has always been a dream of his. He thought he'd do it after retiring in his forties or fifties, but what if he could do it now? And whether or not something romantic is happening between us, I want that dream to come true for him, even if the bigger dream fell apart."

Dad looked thoughtful, almost as if he were considering my sincerity. Finally, he nodded. “Travis is a good man, and he’s been through a lot. He could have something valuable to share.”

It was a sweet sentiment, but it wasn’t a yes. It was just an agreement with what I’d already said.

But before I could ask him for clarification, he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. “Rory, I want you to know something. I’m not going to apologize for asking Travis to take a step back from you all those weeks ago.”

I blinked, surprised by the sudden shift in conversation. “Okay, why’s that?”

“Because whether he did it for you or for himself, he’s really turned his life around. He’s put a lot of work into that gym, and I have no doubt it’s going to be successful. I’ve gotta say, I’m proud of him.”

I felt a warm glow spread through me. “I’m really proud of the work Travis has done, too, Dad.”

He smiled, tipping his chin towards me. “And I’m proud of the work you’ve done.”

I tilted my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed how much more confident you’ve become about your writing lately,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “When I came in here this morning, you weren’t sitting there staring at the screen with a big frown on your face, wondering if your writing was any good. You seemed like you knew it was. You were writing with a smile on your face, and it was a beautiful sight to see.”

My cheeks heated, and I was touched that he’d not only noticed that I was taking joy in my writing, but he seemed like he’d lost his recent desire to convince me to give it up. “I didn’t realize you’d noticed that.”

“I notice more than you think,” he said, grinning. “And it’s not just your writing. I’m also proud of the work you’ve done for Travis’s gym. All the marketing for that place has your name written all over it.”

My heart swelled at his words. “Thanks, Dad. That means a lot to me.”

He nodded, looking pleased. “Well, it’s true. You’ve both done great work, and I think it’s time to acknowledge that. Travis will be the honorary guest at the ball.”

I beamed at him, feeling a mixture of relief and happiness. “Thank you, Dad. You won’t regret it, and neither will he.”

Just as I was about to dive back into my writing, inspired by the good deed I was doing, my phone buzzed on the table. It was a text from Dakota asking me to meet her at the café down the street. I grabbed my phone and stood up.

“I’ve got to go, Dad. Dakota wants to meet up.”

He nodded. “Alright, sweetheart. We’ll talk more about the ball later.”

I was halfway to The Caffeinated Squirrel when I saw Travis and his brother Adam sitting outside, engrossed in a serious conversation. Curiosity got the better of me, and I slowed down, ducking behind an ivy-covered lattice and pretending to be busy on my phone while I eavesdropped.

“Momma’s got it all wrong,” Travis was saying. “It’s not cute. That goat’s moonlightin’ as Cupid when Aurora’s around. Makes me wanna ship her off to a pettin’ zoo.”

I froze, but Adam laughed. “Hey, if you ask your other brothers and Riley, Gertie’s no stranger to playin’ Cupid.”

Travis shook his head. “It might have worked out for them, but for me? Nah, it’s gettin’ on my nerves. I don’t need a goat buttin’ into my love life. Makes me feel like I’m not in control of my own decisions, ya know?”

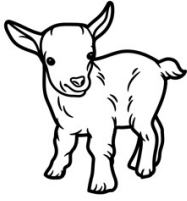
My heart sank, and I couldn’t bear to stick around to hear more of the conversation. All the warm feelings from my conversation with Dad had evaporated in an instant, and I felt like a fool.

I’d been honest with my dad about wanting Travis to get a piece of his dream regardless of my feelings, but a small part of me still wanted to shrivel up and die over the thought of

planning grand gestures for a man who thought Gertie's efforts were annoying.

I'd thought it was cute, and apparently, so had Georgie. Too bad Travis didn't agree.

I shook off the feeling of disappointment and walked toward the Squirrel, my black boots thumping against the pavement. I needed advice, and Dakota was just the person to give it.



travis

I was deep in a dream, the kind where everything feels so real you're not sure if you're asleep or awake. Just as I was about to discover the secret behind some mysterious door, a splash of cold water hit my face. I jolted upright, sputtering and wiping my eyes.

“Dakota! What is wrong with you?” I growled, staring at the toddler disguised as a full-grown woman standing at the foot of my bed with an empty glass in her hands.

“Mornin’, sunshine,” she chirped. Her smile had knives where her teeth used to be, and she tilted her head when I leaned away from her. “Remember this little wake-up call from our childhood?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I grumbled, tossing my wet pillow to the floor. “What’s got you so riled up that you had to bring that back?”

Dakota’s expression shifted, becoming even deadlier. “We need to talk about Rory.”

I sighed, rubbing my wet temples. “What about her?”

Dakota crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing. “You haven’t been treatin’ her right, Travis. And Rory’s my friend, and I care about her, so if you hurt her—”

“I care about her, too, Kota, and I haven’t done a thing to hurt her,” I interrupted, defensive.

Dakota raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Because she overheard you talkin’ to Adam on the way to meet me for coffee yesterday.”

I hadn't said anything to Adam that should have Dakota this mad at me, so I frowned, replaying the conversation as best as I could, given the way I'd been ripped from that weird dream.

"The stuff about Gertie," she hinted, obviously not willing to wait for me to figure it out myself.

"Wait, she heard what I said about Gertie pushin' us together?"

"Yes. And it hurt her, Travis. Badly."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, then stood to face her. "Look, I meant what I said about that dang goat stickin' her nose where it doesn't belong."

"Nice!"

Holding up a hand, I stopped her before she could rip me another new one. "Hey, I would've said it to Aurora's face if she'd been at that table. It's not wrong for me to want to make a move on her when I'm good and ready, not when some goat decides to play matchmaker."

A snort echoed from the hallway, and we both turned to see Gertie peeking her head around the corner.

I glared at the subject of our debate, but Dakota laughed, the tension in the room breaking for a moment. "See? Even Gertie disapproves of your dumb logic."

"Well, Gertrude over there is gonna have to deal with it 'cause it's how I feel."

Dakota's expression turned serious. "What about how Rory feels?"

I didn't have an answer for that, and Gertrude stared at me just as intently as Dakota did.

"Are you going to make a move on her or not?"

I hesitated again, my mind racing.

Dakota leaned in, her eyes locked onto mine. "It's time, Travis. The gym's about to open, life's movin' fast, and you're

gonna lose her if you wait too long before goin' after what you both clearly want.”

I looked at her, really looked, and saw the love and concern in her eyes. For me, for Aurora, for the happiness she knew we could have if I'd just get out of my own dang way.

“You're right,” I said finally.

Dakota smiled, satisfied. “Of course I am. Have you met me? Now, get your butt in the shower and go get your girl.”



Twenty minutes later, I bolted out of my house, still reeling from Dakota's wake-up call—both the literal splash of water and the figurative splash of truth. My first instinct was to check for her at the Cole house next door. And when she answered, I planned to bring her over to our porch to the cozy swing, and we'd have ourselves a good old-fashioned sit down about this whole thing.

I jogged over and knocked on the door. No answer. Not even Dakota was around, which was odd, considering she'd just drenched me in reality not too long ago.

Grant Cole was likely working, but maybe the rest of them had all gone into town? Robby was still here visiting, so maybe it'd been a family affair.

Shaking my head, I raced back to my place and grabbed my keys off the hook, then fired up my motorcycle, roaring down the street.

Well, the bike was loud, but I wouldn't dare speed in this town, knowing it could be Adam who pulled me over. I'd never survive.

My first stop was The Caffeinated Squirrel. I parked out front and walked in, the bell above the door jingling. The aroma of coffee was there, but sadly, as far as I could tell, Aurora wasn't. Neither was the rest of the family, so I wouldn't be able to ask them where she'd run off to.

Also... something was off. Sandy, the usual barista, was sitting on the wrong side of the counter, knitting a scarf with Mrs. Abernathy. Her apron was on the back of her stool, and she looked like any other customer relaxing amongst the odd decor.

“Who’s makin’ the coffee while you’re makin’ a sweater?” I joked on my approach.

Sandy looked up and giggled. “I’m takin’ five, sugar. Anyone who wants coffee can make it themselves.”

I looked at the espresso machine, wondering if she was serious. I’d never seen anyone but Sandy or one of the other baristas behind that counter, but I brushed the thought aside as I refocused on my mission. “Seen Aurora today?”

“Nope, no Aurora sightings,” Sandy said, returning to her knitting with a knowing smile.

I thanked her, and then, as I turned to leave, Mrs. Abernathy piped up. “Travis Wilson, it’s colder than a polar bear’s toenails out there. Wanna buy this pretty scarf I finished? It’d be perfect for motorcycle rides.”

I looked down at the scarf, amused by how she’d said the last sentence in a sing-song tone to close her deal. But no matter how convincing she was with her words, that scarf was a kaleidoscope of clashing colors and patterns, reminding me of what it’d look like if a rainbow threw up on a zebra.

“Ooh, uh, temptin’, Mrs. A,” I hedged, scratching the back of my neck, “but it’s not really my style.”

“My fixed income doesn’t cover both food and yarn,” she explained, taking in my black sweater, the leather jacket over it, my jeans, and finally, my motorcycle boots. When her gaze returned to my face, she lowered her chin and peered at me over the top of the glasses perched on her nose. “It might not go with the Fonzie look you’re so keen on, but I have to sell these beauties to keep knittin’ more of them.”

Feeling a pang of guilt—and yeah, more amusement, because Fonzie?—I pulled out a hundred dollar bill from my

wallet, not even bothering to ask how much she wanted for the scarf. The old lady deserved a tip for that solid burn.

“I’ll take it,” I said, handing her the folded bill and grabbing the ghastly scarf, making a run for it. Behind me, I heard gasps of shock and glee as the door swung shut.

Next, I headed to The Oak Oven, hoping to find Aurora and the family hanging out in the quirky bakery, noshing on mouth-watering pastries.

The smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls and nutmeg filled the air as I burst in, and I scanned the room, my eyes darting past the antique furniture and walls adorned with vintage baking tools.

Once again, no Aurora.

I turned to the counter, hoping the same woman I’d flirted with wasn’t working today. To my relief, it was Jimmy, the owner’s son.

“Hey, you seen Aurora?” I asked him.

He looked up from arranging a tray of croissants. “Nah, man, haven’t seen her. But if you find her, come back around. First pastry’s on the house.”

“Thanks,” I said, my heart sinking a little more with each failed attempt to find her.

As I revved my motorcycle away from The Oak Oven, a wild thought crossed my mind. What if Aurora got herself arrested again? It wouldn’t be the first time.

I headed that way. Adam might be at the station, and even if Aurora wasn’t there, one of the other cops might know where she was. It was a long shot, but at this point, I was willing to try anything.

I pulled up to the small brick building, striding past the American flag out front—positioned next to the one with our town’s famous possum on it—and shot up the once-difficult stairs with ease. When I burst through the front door, breathing easily this time, the urgency in my steps turned quite a few heads.

“Adam, you around?” I called out, scanning the room. It was filled with desks cluttered with paperwork and coffee mugs boasting phrases like ‘World’s Okayest Cop.’

My brother came out of his office in the back, holding a stack of papers, his eyes narrowing as they met mine. “Travis, where’s the fire? You look like one of our K9 officers on a manhunt.”

“Have you seen Aurora? Is she here?” I asked, ignoring his attempt at humor.

Adam chuckled. “Okay, so you’re on a woman hunt. What, you think she’s turned into a jailbird now?”

I groaned, running out of patience. “Man, have you seen her or not?”

“No, she’s not here, and as far as I know, she’s not out causin’ trouble—well, not the kind that would get her arrested, anyway.”

“Great,” I muttered, my frustration mounting. “If you see her, tell her I’m lookin’ for her, okay?”

Adam saluted sarcastically. “Will do, Officer Riggs.”

I rolled my eyes. He wanted to make a Lethal Weapon joke? I’d show him a lethal weapon.

“I’m outta here,” I said, turning on my heel and storming out, my boots pounding against the linoleum floor.

I’d make one last stop before I’d have to admit defeat: the Cole house. Again. Maybe I’d just missed her, or she hadn’t heard the door before.

But as I pulled up, Momma Cole was on the porch, watering her plants. Before I could even open my mouth, she said, “She ain’t here, Travis.”

“How’d you know I was gonna ask about Aurora?” I asked.

Momma Cole chuckled. “Word travels fast in this town, and the word is, you’ve been runnin’ around like a chicken with its head cut off lookin’ for her all mornin’.”

“Any idea where she is?” I asked, my heart pounding in anticipation.

Momma Cole paused, setting down her watering can. “Sure I should tell you? She’s been a little down since yesterday mornin’. You wouldn’t have anythin’ to do with that, would ya?”

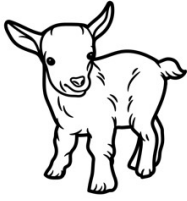
“Momma Cole,” I pleaded, holding out my hands, “it’s me. You don’t have to play the protective card when it’s me askin’.”

“Well, sweetheart, I’m not too sure about that right now. And I’ll tell ya, her daddy didn’t seem very pleased by how sad she seemed, either. Doesn’t bode well for you, dear.”

I hung my head.

“All right, all right. Don’t pout. I heard someone saw her down by the lake, where that old death trap of a rope swing used to hang.”

My heart leaped. “Thanks, Momma Cole. You’re the best,” I said, grinning and already turning my bike toward the lake.

**travis**

The engine roared beneath me as I sped down the winding road, each turn taking me closer to Aurora—and to whatever future we might still have. When I reached the lake, I killed the engine and listened. The world was silent except for the distant lapping of water against the shore.

And then I saw her. Aurora was sitting on a large rock, her knees pulled up to her chest, staring out at the water. For a moment, I just watched her, taking in the way the sunlight danced in her hair, the way she hugged her knees as if trying to hold herself together.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I walked over. It was time to face the music, whatever tune it played. I strode up to Aurora, my boots crunching on the gravelly shore of the lake. The midday sun was high in the sky, casting its warm glow over the water and the trees.

I didn't know if she was so lost in thought she hadn't heard my approach or if she thought whoever it was would just come up and sit beside her, but without a word, I scooped her up into my arms and pressed my lips firmly against hers. The chill in the air only made the heat between us intensify.

As I kissed her, I was acutely aware of the feel of her body against my torso, the softness of her curves, and the taste of her lips. Cradling her in this way and being able to lift her without my leg giving me even an ounce of trouble made the whole thing even better. It was like coming home after a long journey and finding the one place where I could finally breathe again.

Aurora let out a small gasp as she wrapped her arms tightly around my neck, pulling me in closer. We were lost in the moment, exploring each other with both tenderness and hunger.

I didn't want this moment to end; I wanted to stay here forever, lost in Aurora. But eventually, we pulled back, resting our foreheads together with our chests heaving.

"Aurora," I rasped, clearing my throat before trying to speak again. "I don't need a matchmakin' goat to make me do that when I wanna do it."

She laughed, the sound as refreshing as the lake breeze. "Well, it's about time, Travis."

"I'm sorry you overheard what I said to Adam," I said, my tone turning serious. "I meant it, but I get why hearing it like that would be hard. I had my reasons for holding back, though. I wasn't going to let some goat—or anyone else for that matter—bully me into upping my timeline before I felt it was the right time."

She looked at me, her eyes searching. "Is it the right time now?"

I hesitated, my heart pounding in my chest. "I honestly have no idea. But what I do know is that I couldn't stand to hold off so long that it meant I'd lose you."

Her eyes widened at my admission, and for a moment, she seemed to hold her breath as if she were absorbing the weight of my words. Then her shoulders relaxed, and the tension that had been building between us seemed to dissipate, replaced by something softer, warmer. Seeing that change, that subtle acceptance in her posture, filled me with a sense of relief and hope I hadn't realized I'd been craving.

"Thank you for apologizing," she said, her eyes meeting mine. "But just so you know, I'm not letting you go another six weeks without letting me know where we stand."

"I don't plan on waiting six weeks between kisses again," I said, grinning. "You'll know exactly where I stand because it'll be right next to you as often as possible."

“So, we’re in a relationship?” she asked, her eyes searching mine for confirmation.

“Yes, we are,” I said, then added with a chuckle, “I’m actually grateful you don’t have anything to compare it to. Takes the pressure off a bit.”

She laughed. “Too bad you didn’t think of it that way weeks ago. We could’ve been together all this time.”

I shook my head. “Concentrating on our goals together, but not together, was one of the best times I’ve had in my life. And that includes some of my favorite experiences in the military.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes widening.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Though being with you now might just eclipse that.” I leaned in and kissed her again, keeping it brief but meaningful.

Pulling back, I looked into her eyes once more. “Will you go to the ball with me?”

She pretended to ponder, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Hmm... I’ll have to check my calendar...”

In a swift motion, I pretended to swing her toward the lake, spinning her instead. She let out a high-pitched squeal, her arms flailing in the air as if she were trying to fly for safety before they wrapped around my neck.

For a split second, I actually considered going through with it—tossing her into the lake and jumping in after her. The thought of us splashing around, laughing and shivering, seemed like the kind of spontaneous fun that would make for a great story later on.

But then I remembered the chill of the water. The lake probably wouldn’t feel near as good as it had a few months ago, and we’d probably end up more like ice cubes than a couple taking a romantic dip. I pulled her back toward me, her eyes wide and her breaths shallow from the adrenaline.

She squealed, swatting my chest. “You have to wait until my dad invites you officially before you can invite a date!”

“Fine, but once he asks me, you’re comin’,” I said, my voice tinged with playful authority.

“Is that an order?” she teased, her eyes twinkling.

“Yes,” I grinned. “And, you can even go on a shoppin’ spree with the girls—in Nashville, of course, not here—and the dress and all that can be on me.”

She frowned. “What, like, *Pretty Woman* style?”

We both cringed as we realized how little our situation had to do with the relationship between the characters in that old romcom, shaking our heads in unison and laughing our way into yet another kiss.

And yeah, ‘right time’ or not, I didn’t care.



I killed the engine of my motorcycle, the gravel crunching under the tires as we came to a stop. The South Carolina night sky was a tapestry of twinkling stars, and the moon was a glowing crescent. I glanced over at Aurora, radiant in her gown. It was a masterpiece of black silk—of course it was black—that hugged her curves and flowed down to the ground like a waterfall.

I hadn’t been able to keep my eyes off her all night.

“Where are we?” she asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“A little place Zac Miller told me about,” I said, dismounting from the bike. “Remember him? He was the Marine we met in line to get in, and he had his wife and son with him?”

She nodded, placing her helmet on my seat. “Yeah, but he told you about this place? When?”

“Later, when you were in the bathroom with his wife. Layla, right?” I paused, and she nodded again. “He said it’s where he liked to bring Layla for dates whenever they were in Beaufort. Guess they live in some smaller town nearby?”

Anyway, I figured we could forgo the usual night out on the town with the Marines since we don't hardly know them and have ourselves a stargazin' date of our own."

She shook her head in wonder. "Wow. You're really good at this relationship stuff, aren't you?"

I leaned in, giving her a look. "How would you know?"

She pushed my arm, throwing her head back with a laugh. Then I extended my hand to help her off the bike, and she took it, her heels sinking into the soft ground as she stepped down.

Once again, I couldn't help but admire how the dress emphasized her beauty, making her look like a goddess under the starlit sky.

"You really clean up nice, Staff Sergeant Wilson," she teased, her eyes scanning me from head to toe.

I felt a little self-conscious, especially since she'd used my rank, but I was also proud. The dress blues were designed to impress, and judging by her reaction, they were doing their job.

"You're one to talk," I shot back. "Especially in that dress. Money well spent, I'd say."

She laughed softly. "Yeah, about that. Now that your secret millionaire status is out, it's nice not to have to worry about splurging a little."

"Anything for you," I said, leading her by the hand toward a small clearing surrounded by tall pine trees. I'd brought the blanket from my saddle bag, and I spread it out on the ground at our feet when we'd chosen the right spot.

We lay down next to each other, staring up at the sky. It was a sea of stars, each one twinkling as if winking at us.

"Wow, it's beautiful," she said, her voice tinged with awe.

"Not as beautiful as you," I found myself saying. It was cheesy, but the way she looked at me told me she didn't mind.

Then she laughed, and the sound made my heart do a little flip. "You're really laying it on thick tonight, aren't you?"

“Can you blame me?” I whispered, turning my head so I could look at her profile. “When I’m with you, everything just feels... right. Now that I’ve finally stopped worryin’ about it not bein’ the right time and all that.”

She looked at me, her eyes searching my face. I thought she’d laugh at my reference, but maybe it was too soon.

Instead, she sighed wistfully. “Your speech at the ball was really inspiring, Travis. You had everyone hanging on your every word.”

I chuckled, “Well, I’ve always had a way with words, just not usually in front of a crowd that big.”

I thought back to the ball, standing at that podium in my dress blues, looking out at a sea of faces. I’d started off by telling them how I’d always known what I wanted to be—a lifelong Marine. Man, the room had erupted with whoops and hollers at that. But I’d used that moment to drop a little wisdom, telling them to have a backup plan. Or, at least, be open to one. Life had a funny way of throwing curveballs, and you had to be ready to swing.

I’d caught Aurora’s eye right then, giving her a wink from the stage. The way I’d seen her cheeks flush, even from that distance, had added a little extra swagger to my speech.

Which was good because next came the hard part—talking about the incident. Marines loved a good war story, and mine was as gritty as they came. I’d locked eyes with some of the younger guys in the room, seeing myself in their eager faces.

They’d wanted the glory, the ribbons, and maybe even some of the scars I carried. But they hadn’t wanted the lost dreams. I could see it clear as day; they did not wanna be me in that way.

But I wasn’t about to leave them hanging on a downer. I’d turned the story around, talking about the boxing gym. How it had given me a new purpose, a new fight to win.

I’d looked out at those faces and told them that if life ever sucker-punched them like it did me, I hoped they had folks in their corner to help them find the light in the darkness.

And I'd meant every word, thinking of—and looking straight at—Aurora as I said it.

Now, as I lay there next to the woman who had helped me find my new path, I felt a swell of pride mixed with gratitude. I was thankful for the chance to share my story, thankful to Aurora and her dad for making it happen, and hopeful for whatever the future had in store.

Maybe reading my thoughts, or maybe just because she wanted to, Aurora's eyes softened, and she leaned in. Our lips met in a kiss that was as gentle as it was meaningful. When we pulled apart, we were both smiling.

“Look,” she said, pointing upwards.

A shooting star streaked across the sky, its brief life ending in a blaze of glory.

“Make a wish,” I whispered.

“I don't know what to wish for,” she said.

“Well, shoot, it could be anythin'. Don't forget about that money in the bank.”

I'd only said it to make her laugh. She'd gotten to know me well enough over the last six weeks to know I wasn't serious.

But Aurora looked up at me, her eyes a darker blue than usual in this light. “Okay, I know you and your dad made your money from Bitcoin, but you never told me the details. How did that all happen?”

I chuckled, “Ah, you're curious about how a couple of good ol' boys stumbled into a gold mine?”

She nodded, laughing. “Something like that.”

“Well, we didn't know much about what we'd just fallen into when the windfall came, to be honest. So, we hooked up with a financial advisor, and let me tell you, that man could've been speakin' Martian in that meetin', and it would've made about as much sense.”

She chuckled. "I can just picture you and your dad nodding along, pretending to get it."

"Spot on. But we took the man's advice, and it paid off. We diversified, which is just a fancy way of sayin' we didn't put all our eggs in one basket. Got into land, some local businesses, and even cows."

"Cows? Really?"

"Yep, cows. Don't ask." I smiled, facing the stars again. "We also set up an 'emergency fund,' which is basically money we don't touch unless the sky's fallin'. So far, it hasn't, so those accounts have built up a lot of interest in the meantime."

"That's really smart. Do you ever use any of it for fun things?"

"Dad only uses his for emergencies and weddin' presents. I never used to touch mine much, but after the accident, I've been a bit more liberal with it. Not for me, mind you, but for things that matter."

Aurora kept her eyes on the sky. "Really? Like what?"

I thought about the boy in the hospital. Something Alexander. I'd helped his family without a second thought, not for praise or recognition, but because it was the right thing to do. I didn't feel the need to share that with Aurora, though. Some things were better left unsaid.

But I had to give her something.

I shrugged. "Oh, you know, just things that make a difference. Like givin' Mrs. Abernathy a hundred bucks for a scarf that's currently hidin' in my saddle bag. The thing is atrocious, lemme tell ya, but she deserves it."

Aurora burst into laughter. "You're something else, Travis Wilson."

I let her statement hang, and we continued to stargaze in silence for a little while. We weren't even touching, but I could feel the weight of her importance to me as if she were sprawled across me, smothering me with all that blonde hair of

hers. It was bigger than usual, thanks to the stylist she'd gone to before the ball.

And suddenly, I found myself wanting to see her hair in every way she'd ever wear it for the rest of her life, and I kinda wanted to make sure she knew it.

"Hey, Aurora," I began, turning my head to look at her again, "you ever hear that saying about how when you know, you know?"

She chuckled, "You mean that cliché people use when they're trying to justify making a huge life decision after like, five minutes?"

"Yeah, that's the one," I grinned.

She propped herself up on one elbow, looking down at me. "Why? You planning on buying a new motorcycle without test-driving it first?"

"Nah, I'm pretty fond of the one I've got," I said, my eyes meeting hers. "But I am thinking about saying something pretty dang important without a whole lot of... test driving, so to speak."

Aurora's eyes widened a bit, but she played it cool. "Oh? Do tell."

I sat up, facing her. "Look, we've known each other for what, two months? And we've been more than friends for less than a week. But from the moment I met you, I knew there was somethin' about you I needed in my life."

She raised an eyebrow, "Right. The light to your dark and all that."

"Hence why I made sure to wheel-and-deal my way into a date with you."

"Also known as blackmail."

"Exactly," I said, nodding enthusiastically. "See? You get me."

She laughed, shaking her head. "You're ridiculous, you know that?"

“Ridiculously in love with you,” I shot back, my eyes locked onto hers.

For a moment, she just looked at me, and then her face broke into the biggest, most beautiful smile I’d ever seen. “Well, you sure know how to make a girl’s heart race, I’ll give you that.”

“Will you also give me a reply that involves you sayin’ it back?” I asked, trying to keep the atmosphere light even though my heart was pounding like a drum.

She leaned in, her lips almost touching mine. “Okay, then, yes. I love you.”

My entire body came alive, and just as I was about to kiss her to seal those words, she frowned, leaning back. Then she put her finger on her chin and hummed. “Take that with a grain of salt, though. After all, you’re my first boyfriend. I might not have any idea what I’m talking about.”

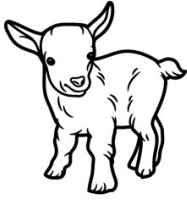
I glared at her, shaking my head as she sat back and cackled at herself.

“What?” she asked through her laughter. “That was funny, and you know it.”

“Hilarious,” I deadpanned. “Do you love me or not? I refuse to believe that with all my lessons, you wouldn’t know it when it was sittin’ right in front of ya.”

She leaned in again, and something told me she was doing it on purpose, referencing the lessons with her actions. “Why don’t you kiss me and find out?”

So, I did. And let me tell you, no test drive in the world could’ve prepared me for that.

**aurora**

I woke up feeling like I was floating on air, the memories of the past two nights playing like a romantic movie in my head. The ball had been magical, and the time Travis and I spent wandering around Beaufort the next day was the cherry on top.

We'd stayed the night in an adorable bed and breakfast, explored the historic district, and admired the antebellum homes. The long motorcycle ride back to Charlotte Oaks had been the perfect ending to a perfect trip.

As I made my way downstairs, the aroma of coffee and bacon greeted me. Momma Cole, Georgie, Aubree, Dakota, and Paisley were all in the kitchen, each absorbed in their morning routines.

"Mornin', Rory," Momma Cole greeted me, her Southern accent as comforting as the smell of her cooking. "You're lookin' like the cat that got the cream."

I chuckled, taking a seat at the kitchen island. "Morning, everyone. It's been an incredible couple of days."

Georgie, sipping her coffee, looked up and smiled. "Well, don't keep us in suspense. How was y'all's trip to South Carolina?"

"It was beautiful," I gushed. "The historic homes, the river, the atmosphere—it was like stepping back in time. Oh, and the ball. The ball was everything."

Aubree grinned, stirring her coffee. "You're sure doin' a lot of tellin' instead of showin'. Do we need to get Travis over here to help with your descriptions?"

“Shoot, that lazy bones is probably still sleepin’,” his mom said with a good-natured scoff. “I heard him up at all hours last night, movin’ around the house like a restless spirit or some such thing. Either that, or it was Gertie.”

Dakota, dressed in her scrubs and ready to head out, leaned against the counter and shook her head. “Nope. Gertie slept with Phoebe last night. She and Bailey dropped the ol’ girl off on their way to school this mornin’. Must’ve been Travis you heard.”

Paisley, who was multitasking as usual, looked up from her tablet. “Up late worried about the opening, you think?”

The big opening night for The Floating Butterfly—the gym named by a certain adorable ballerina who’d once done a school report on Mohammed Ali—was approaching quickly. It’d been hard for Travis to leave town for the ball with it coming up so soon, but he’d worked overtime to make sure it was ready so he could make the trip happen, and watching his work-ethic during our first official week as a couple had been totally swoony.

But... sure. Maybe he was a little nervous, no matter how much he’d prepared.

“He shouldn’t be worried at all,” Georgie insisted, waving the hand that wasn’t holding her coffee. Still, it almost spilled from the force of her movements, right over the edge of her mug that read, “My Favorite Son Gave Me This Mug.”

“I’m sure it’ll be great,” Aubree said with a small smile. “Y’all did everythin’ you could, and now all that’s left is a few more loose ends before the big party, right?”

“Right,” I confirmed.

“Let’s get back to the personal stuff, shall we?” Momma Cole cut in, flicking her egg-coated spatula at us and sending a yellow morsel sailing across the room. Gertie dove for it, making us all laugh.

Aubree patted my hand. “It really did sound romantic. I was just kiddin’ about callin’ Trav over here.”

“So, are y’all finally official now?” Dakota asked.

I nodded, my cheeks warming. “Yes, we are. It’s actually been almost a week now, but we’ve been keeping things pretty low key.”

Paisley snorted. “That’s hard to do in this town. Looks like you’ve still got some mystery up your sleeve, bush girl.”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands, but Georgie rubbed my upper back. “Well, it’s about time. The whole town’s been waitin’ for it for a while now. Especially after that day he went cruisin’ through town tryin’ to track you down.”

Just then, Gertie decided to vie for our attention. She hopped onto the counter and pranced over to the bacon, then jumped to her usual perch atop the fridge when Momma Cole shoed her away.

Not before the gutsy goat made off with a piece of bacon, though. She was way too good.

“That goat,” Momma Cole said, shaking her head but smiling nonetheless.

“So, what’s next for you and my youngest son?” Georgie asked, getting up to refill her coffee mug.

I looked around at these wonderful women who had become like family to me. “I think I’m going to stay here in Charlotte Oaks. I’ve never felt more at home.”

The room erupted in cheers, and even Gertie seemed to approve, letting out a celebratory bleat from her new vantage point on the fridge.

Momma Cole wiped her hands on a towel and came over to hug me. “Well, darlin’, you’re welcome to stay as long as you like. Especially now that my girls are droppin’ like flies. This house is gonna be empty before I know it.”

I hugged her back, my eyes misting over. “Thank you, Momma Cole. I can’t think of any place I’d rather be.”

“Well, until my Travis pops the question, and then she’ll move out, too,” Georgie said, lifting her mug in a salute of sorts before taking a gleeful sip. “Then we’ll have more grandbabies on the way.”

“Whoa, slow down, Georgie,” Dakota said with her eyes wide. “We’re talkin’ about the guy who took six weeks to tell the girl how he felt about her, and that was after he’d already kissed her once. They probably won’t be gettin’ married and givin’ you grandbabies in this century.”

The color that had drained from my face at Georgie’s statement returned in excess, and my cheeks grew hot. Travis had rushed into saying he loved me because he just knew. What if that meant he’d do the same with a proposal? And marriage? And the prospect of kids?

Was I ready for all that? He was my first boyfriend, for crying out loud!

But then my phone buzzed with a text from him, and whatever worries I’d had melted away like snow on the first warm day of spring.

Travis: Morning, beautiful. Meet me outside in twenty?

I typed my reply—which, of course, was an enthusiastic yes—then scarfed down the breakfast prepared for me by one of the women who’d quickly started feeling like another mom to me. I’d need all of my energy for another day of chemistry lessons with Travis.

Especially now that kissing was involved.



The atmosphere in The Floating Butterfly was electric. The gym was buzzing with people from all walks of life in Charlotte Oaks, and the energy was palpable. The walls were adorned with a mix of rustic wood and modern metal accents, giving the space a rugged yet inviting feel. A Marine Corps flag hung proudly next to an American flag, a nod to Travis’s past and a symbol of the discipline he planned to bring to the gym.

I stood next to Travis, who was nervously adjusting the collar of his shirt. “You okay?” I asked, giving his hand a

reassuring squeeze.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with a mix of excitement and apprehension. “Yeah, just can’t believe it’s finally happening, you know?”

Before I could respond, the door swung open, and in walked my dad, wearing a rare smile. He made his way through the crowd, nodding at familiar faces until he reached us. He extended his hand to Travis. “Congratulations, son. This is quite the establishment you’ve got here.”

Travis shook his hand firmly, visibly relieved. “Thank you, sir. Means a lot.”

Gertie trotted in, her hooves clacking on the polished concrete floor, stealing my attention. She made a beeline for the snack table, where she proceeded to knock over a bowl of pretzels. Momma Cole sighed but couldn’t hide her smile as she went to clean up the mess.

“Lord, that goat,” Georgie said, shaking her head but chuckling. “She’s got more personality than half the folks in this town.”

Paisley, impeccably dressed as always, was busy capturing the event on her tablet. “This is social media gold,” she declared, snapping photos of Gertie’s antics.

Aubree and Dakota were mingling with the crowd, their laughter filling the air. Adam and the rest of the Cole-Wilson clan were huddled near the boxing ring, deep in conversation, probably about some family business or another.

The room was filled with love and support, and it was overwhelming in the best way possible. I felt Travis’s arm wrap around my waist, pulling me closer to him.

“Look at this,” he said softly, his Southern drawl melting my heart all over again. “We did it. You and me.”

I looked up at him, my eyes meeting his. “We did, but this is your dream, Travis. A new one, but just as important to you, and you made it happen.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not backin’ down from sharin’ the credit with you. *We* made it happen. I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

I felt my cheeks flush at his words, but before I could reply, Travis spotted a teen boy lingering nearby, his eyes wide with curiosity.

“Hey there, you interested in boxin’?” Travis asked, and we drifted the few steps over to him.

The boy nodded, seeming shy enough that was grateful we’d approached him so slowly. He looked ready to spook.

“Yeah, I’ve always wanted to try it but never knew where to go,” he told Travis, who grinned, clearly in his element.

“Well, you’re in the right place. See that heavy bag over there? It’s filled with a special blend of fibers, sand, and sifted grains to give you the perfect resistance for both punchin’ and kickin’. And these gloves,” he picked up a pair from a nearby rack, “are top-of-the-line, designed for both protection and power.”

Adam, overhearing the conversation, chimed in. “And you’re gonna love our youth program. The police department and the gym are teamin’ up with the local schools to offer after-school trainin’. You won’t wanna miss it.”

Paisley looked up from her tablet, eyebrows raised. “You, involved in a youth program? How wholesome. What’s next, you gonna take up knittin’?”

Adam shot her a glare, his eyes narrowing. “I might just do that, Paisley. Maybe I’ll knit you a muzzle.”

Paisley smirked, not missing a beat as she gestured to her mouth. “As if you could silence this.”

Their eyes locked in a heated stare, and for a moment, I wondered what the deal was between those two. Was it just your average tension between two workaholics, or was it something more?

Either way, it added a layer of intrigue to the evening. But I quickly forgot about it when I saw how the teen’s eyes

widened as Travis explained more about the after-school program.

I watched as Travis's chest swelled with pride, and it made my own chest tight to see him doing his thing. This was a small moment, one I was sure would be the first of many, but it spoke volumes about the kind of place The Floating Butterfly was destined to become for this community.

Just then, Gertie decided to leap into the ring, her hooves dancing on the canvas as if she were the main event. The crowd erupted into laughter, and even Travis couldn't help but chuckle.

"Looks like Gertie wants to take up boxin'," he said with amusement all over his handsome face.

"Or she's just stealing the spotlight, as usual," I replied.

Travis looked around the room, his eyes finally settling back on me. "You know, I was nervous about tonight and this new chapter in my life. But standin' here, with you, with our families, with all these Charlotte Oakians who showed up to support the openin'... I've never been more certain about anythin'."

I felt a lump form in my throat, touched by his sincerity. "I feel the same way, Travis. We've both found our new paths, and I can't wait to see where they lead us."

He leaned down, his lips meeting mine in a sweet, lingering kiss that made my heart swell with love and my stomach flutter with excitement.

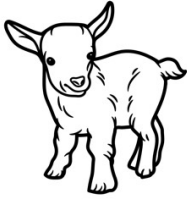
As we pulled apart, the room broke into applause, led by Georgie, who was already planning our engagement party in her head, I was sure.

"Looks like we've got an audience," Travis said a little sheepishly.

I grinned, happy to be the focus of their attention if this was the subject. It was much better than being called "bush girl," as I'd been so lovingly reminded of this morning.

“Well,” I said, “they’re going to have to get used to us. Because I’m pretty sure we’ve both figured out this place is home now, right?”

Travis nodded, surprise lighting his features. “Right.”



30 /

travis

The moment Aurora walked into the Cole-Wilson backyard, her eyes widened like a kid on Christmas morning. “Oh my God, Travis, is this for me?” Her voice held both disbelief and awe, and it made every second of preparation worth it.

I grinned, pulling her into my arms. “Surprise! You didn’t think I’d let your book launch go by without a celebration, did you?”

She looked around, her eyes shining brighter than the twinkle lights above us. They were a regular feature of the yard, so I couldn’t take credit for the mood they set, but there were plenty of other decorations I could take credit for. For example, the framed photos of her book cover, and the giant easels showing off some of the early reviews her book had received.

She thanked me profusely, but then her eyes snagged on Chip. “Wow, you even invited Chip.”

“Yep. He’s a good friend, right? But, listen, he brought a date that he actually has chemistry with, so don’t get any ideas.”

She closed her eyes, sighing deeply. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Are you ever gonna tell me why he calls you ‘Rore-Bore’? I gotta admit, the suspense is killin’ me.”

“Seems pretty obvious, right? The girl who’s never had a boyfriend and never been kissed, spends all her time writing or

watching other people have relationships instead of having her own? No wonder he didn't think we had chemistry."

I scowled. "Uh, yeah, no. I'm gonna go tell him that nickname is officially retired. You're anythin' but borin', and besides, you're not that person anymore. You don't know what you don't know until you know it, right?"

"Don't start with all that, my head is already spinning," she said, holding up a finger between us. Then she gazed around the yard again with a megawatt smile. "This is amazing. Thank you so much. Again."

I leaned in, whispering in her ear, "You deserve it. You wanted to make people happy with your book, and you did, but without ignorin' the bad stuff they're also facin'. It's great."

She blushed, her cheeks turning a lovely shade of pink that made my heart race. "You sound like you read it, but I know you didn't other than what I read to you while I was drafting it. You can't know how it all wrapped up unless you're just saying that because you clearly read the reviews?"

I pulled back, brows furrowed in offense. "Hey, now, don't underestimate me. I may struggle with readin', but I'm a master at tellin' my Alexa what to do."

"Uh, what does Alexa have to do with this?"

"I bought the ebook on my Kindle and I had Alexa read me every word, in order this time. All that work we did durin' the writin' process had me a little confused on the sequence of events."

She gasped, clearly amused. "You had Alexa read it to you? You suffered through hours of listening to a robot reading my book? I highly doubt she got the inflections or the comedic timing right, and—"

I stopped the flow of words with a kiss. "Hush. If the writin' is good enough, it's easy to forget it's a robot readin' it. And yours was definitely good enough. Besides, don't knock it til you try it. That ol' girl isn't half as bad at readin' as I am."

She shook her head. “Hah hah. Well, thanks for caring enough to want to read the finished product.”

“I’m so proud of you, Aurora.”

Her eyes softened, and she nodded. “Thank you. And don’t worry, all of my future books will be audiobooks, I promise. I’ll probably be able to afford it now.”

“Temptin’, but I’d still prefer it if you read them to me. Maybe at our spot by the lake?” I paused, taking a deep breath before adding, “Especially since you’re a permanent Charlotte Oakian, now.”

“I can’t think of any town I’d rather belong to.”

We shared a sweet, parting kiss before Aurora was dragged away to sign some books, and as she mingled with the guests, I took a moment to soak in the party atmosphere.

The fire pit crackled, casting a warm glow on the faces of our friends and family. I’d set up a table with a spread of her favorite foods—including some that the characters in her book had eaten on one of their dates—and another table held copies of her book, which people were eagerly picking up.

Even the obstacle course for Gertie was a hit, especially among the kids who tried to mimic the goat’s athletic prowess but mostly ended up in giggling heaps on the grass.

I spotted Robby standing near the fire pit, a glass of bourbon in hand. Riley was next to him, both men deep in conversation. Taking a breath to steady myself, I walked over.

“Mind if I join y’all?”

Robby looked up, his eyes meeting mine. “Of course, Travis.”

“Somethin’ up?” Riley asked, lifting a brow. “You look like you just swallowed your tongue.”

I took a swig of my beer to stall, and Robby noticed, frowning at me. “What’s on your mind?”

Riley must have finally remembered what I’d already asked him about. Last week, in fact. He gave me a nod, his

eyes darting between his dad and me, registering the gravity of the moment.

I cleared my throat, my palms sweaty despite the cool evening air. “Sir, I’ve come to realize that your daughter means the world to me.”

Robby hung his head. Looked like he registered some gravity of his own.

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone,” I went on, “and I wanna spend the rest of my life makin’ Aurora as happy as she makes me.”

“Spit it out,” Riley hissed through his teeth. “I’m growin’ facial hair over here.”

I shot him a glare, not sure if I was grateful he’d made his old man smile, or annoyed enough to kick him. “I’m planning to propose to Aurora, sir, and I’d like your blessin’ if you’re willin’ to give it to me.”

The air seemed to thicken, the tension right along with it. Robby’s eyes narrowed on me, studying me as if trying to read my soul like it was a copy of his daughter’s new release.

I felt like a specimen under a microscope, and for a moment, I worried that despite everything—despite how I’d worked to better myself, not just for Aurora but for me—he might still say no.

Riley looked like he was about to burst. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his eyes wide and pleading as they bored into his dad, then met mine. It was as if he was mentally willing Robby to say yes while at the same time trying to encourage me not to take it too hard if he didn’t.

The sight of his convoluted pleas was both endearing and nerve-wracking.

Finally, Robby spoke. “You’re asking for my daughter’s hand in marriage. That’s not a small thing, Travis.”

“No, sir, it’s not,” I agreed, my voice tinged with nervousness. “It’s the biggest decision I’ve ever made, and I don’t make it lightly.”

Riley let out a barely audible sigh, his shoulders dropping a fraction as if releasing some of the tension that had built up.

Was that a good response, then?

Robby took a sip of his bourbon, setting the glass down on a nearby table. “Well, I can’t deny you’ve proven yourself to be a great man, Travis. You make her happy, and that’s all a father can ask for.”

“So...” Riley prompted, waving his beer between us.

“So,” Robby said to me, amusement all over his tanned face, “yes, Trav. You have my blessing.”

Relief washed over me like a tidal wave, so powerful it almost knocked me off my feet. I extended my hand, and Robby shook it firmly, sealing the pact between us.

Riley, unable to contain himself any longer, let out a whoop of joy, startling some of the nearby guests. “Phew! Yeah! That’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

Robby chuckled, shaking his head at his son’s exuberance. “You might want to keep it down, Riley. We don’t want to give it away before Travis has a chance to do the thing.”

Riley grinned, unabashed. “Sorry. I’m just happy for ‘em, you know?”

“I know, son. So am I.”

I thanked them both, then turned to leave, not willing to stick around long enough to say something that’d make Robby change his mind. My own dad made a point to catch my eye from across the yard, and my stomach clenched as he lifted his beer in a wordless salute.

It never failed. Just like when I was a kid, my old man always knew what I was up to.

I smiled at him, then nearly choked with laughter when he put down his beer and used his fingers to make horns on the top of his head, reminding me of that whacky saying about a bull.

Robby suddenly put a hand on my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks and leaning close to speak low in my ear. “You’re not planning on doing this tonight, are you? During her launch party?”

I shook my head, meeting his gaze squarely. “No, sir. Tonight’s her night. I wouldn’t dream of stealin’ her thunder like that.”

Robby nodded, his eyes softening for just a moment. “Good man,” he said.

Then he walked away.

And as I watched him go, a sense of peace settled over me. I was one step closer to making Aurora my wife, and knowing I had her family’s blessing made that future seem all the more bright.

Later, once the sun went down, the air was too chilly for even the fire pit to touch, and most of the guests had left, I found Aurora again.

She mingled with the family in the warmth of the house, and for a long minute, I simply watched her. Yep, I was the new stalker in these parts because ever since the night of her brother’s wedding all those months ago, watching Aurora do anything was pretty much my favorite pastime. I’d even gotten rid of my TV.

Okay, not really. But still.

Tonight, she was glowing, literally and figuratively, as she sipped on her hot chocolate in the warm lights of the kitchen. She spotted me and came into the dining room to join me, her lips turned up in a bashful smile.

“Thank you again for this, Travis,” she said, her voice sincere. “And for everything else. Your support means the world to me.”

I took her hand, squeezing it gently. “It was all part of our deal, right? We both set out to achieve somethin’, and look at us now.”

She nodded, swallowing hard. “Does that mean we’re both off the hook now?”

I chuckled. “I don’t know about bein’ off the hook, but I do see a bright future with these books. Your marketing skills finally have a product worthy of them.”

She rolled her eyes and poked me in the side, then her expression turned thoughtful. “You know, I looked at my royalties dashboard this morning, and for a second, I thought it was set for the whole month, not just today. The numbers were that good.”

I felt a surge of pride for her. “Trust me, those numbers are only gonna go up. And when they do, I’m hookin’ you up with my Martian financial planner.”

Her eyes widened, and she laughed. “Wow, we’re talking financial planners now? Alien or human, I can’t even fathom it.”

I pulled her close, my arms wrapping around her waist. “Well, ya better start. It’s a lot easier to manage money with help than without it, lemme tell ya.”

“Whatever. I’m just happy about those reviews from the early readers. They went on and on about the chemistry, and I have you to thank for that. Don’t ever stop showing me how to write good chemistry, okay?”

“What about the kissin’ scenes? You still gonna need help with those, too?”

She widened her eyes and nodded seriously. “Oh, for sure. I’ll take all the help with those I can get. Forever. Just think of me as your permanent student, and you can’t retire unless I do.”

I scratched my chin. “Hmm, I think I’ll need somethin’ in return if I’m gonna make that deal. Forever’s a long time.”

“Okay. Name it.”

I slid my arm around her waist, tucking her firmly against my side. I needed every point of contact she’d give me. Every bit of pressure and comfort, like a weighted vest that would

smother the old hurt I'd struggled so hard to bury from the world.

But I couldn't hide it from her. She'd seen it, and she'd helped me through it.

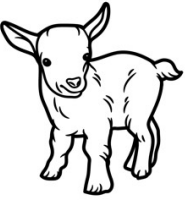
“Ooh, I don't know. That's a lot of pressure. I don't wanna ask for the wrong thing just because you're puttin' me on the spot. Tell you what—I'll let you know when I've come up with somethin' worth such a big trade.”

“You were a used car salesman in another life, I swear.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I slung an arm around her shoulders, then tugged her in so I could kiss her temple. I didn't know if she bought that whole charade, but one thing was clear: With our friends and family surrounding us and Gertie causing trouble in the background, I knew exactly what I planned to ask for.

And it'd be the best deal we'd ever made.



epilogue - aurora

He asked. I said yes. The end.

Shoot. There I go, telling and not showing again. I thought I'd gotten past that.

Let's try this again:

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the lake. Travis led me to our special spot, the place where we'd shared so many meaningful conversations and stolen kisses. The air was crisp, and the scent of pine filled my lungs as I took in the beauty of the setting sun.

"Remember the first time we came here?" Travis asked, his eyes not simply meeting mine but piercing me, drinking me in like he'd never get used to how good we had it.

"How could I forget?" I replied. "You were freaking out about your future plans so much you tripped over that tree root while we were brainstorming."

He snickered. "Well, I've got somethin' to tell you, but I've been gettin' my ducks in a row so I could get to sayin' it."

I raised an eyebrow, my gaze flicking around the glassy surface of the lake. "Ducks? Not actual ducks, right? Gertie is pretty much the only farm-animal family pet we can handle around here."

Laughing, he took my hands in his. "You remember that bargain you suggested during your book launch party?"

I blinked, surprised. "You remember that? I thought you'd forgotten."

Travis shook his head. "I never forget the promise of a good deal. I was just... well, like I said, gettin' my ducks in a row."

"You're sure these aren't real ducks, right?" I looked around wildly, scared he was working up to showing me something that would surely freak me out.

But when I turned around, he'd dropped to one knee and pulled out a small velvet box. My heart leapt into my throat. "Travis..."

"Aurora St. John," he began, then opened the box, practically blinding me with the size of the stunning ring it held.

"Travis," I said again, cutting him off just as he was about to say more. I looked up. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but the sky is not falling, and this ring is definitely too big—"

He was on his feet in a flash, wrapping his arms around my middle and kissing me. Then he pulled back and blinked at me. "Would you mind lettin' me finish? I've got this whole thing worked out, and you're messin' with my flow."

"Your flow, huh?" I teased as he set me on my feet again.

He started to lower himself to one knee again, but I hugged him, keeping him right where I wanted him: holding me.

"Go on. I'll be quiet, I promise." I rested my chin on his broad chest and looked up at him, pulling my lips into a tight line to emphasize my point.

He tightened his hold on me and then kissed my forehead. "Fine, now, if you want me to keep showin' you how to write chemistry and giving you enough kisses to write the best ones that've ever been written," he began, pausing with his brows up in warning, making sure I didn't butt in again. When I didn't, he went on. "All you gotta do is agree to marry me."

I laughed through my tears, then buried my soggy face in his chest. "Are you blackmailing me into marriage?"

He laughed, so he must have understood my muffled words. Then he reached down and used a finger under my chin to draw my face up once again. "I sure am, and I'm not even sorry about it."

"Then you have yourself a deal," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

His face exploded with a smile like the sun. "Is that a yes?"

I nodded, not understanding why he'd needed to shout about it. "Yep. It's a thousand times, yes."

As if on cue, our family and friends popped up from behind the trees and bushes where they'd been hiding. They rushed toward us, their faces lit with joy. Travis barely had time to slip the massive engagement ring on my finger before chaos descended upon us.

Georgie was the first to pull me into a tight hug. "Now, hurry up with those grandbabies," she said, her eyes twinkling and her smile devilish.

"Momma!" Travis, Adam, Everett, and Jackson playfully scolded her in unison.

Georgie smiled, her eyes meeting mine again. Only this time, I could feel the soothing warmth of her love, like she was trying to shoot it at me through her eyeballs. "Welcome to the family, Aurora. Your momma is surely smiling down on you right now, and since she can't be here for everythin' else you're gonna experience in your amazin' life, just know... I'm here. We're all here, and we always will be."

I felt a lump form in my throat, nearly strangling me with its size.

Riley gave me a sad smile and nod over Georgie's shoulder, and after I'd hugged my future mother-in-law again, I went to him and hugged him fiercely. "I'm so glad I found you."

"I'm glad you found me too, little sis. Wish you wouldn't be—"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, shoving him off me with a laugh. "You wish I wouldn't have stalked you for months. Blah, blah, blah."

"Come here, you," my dad said, pulling me away from more teasing from my big brother. He congratulated me and then Travis with even more of that throat-closing warmth.

Just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore and I was about to cry myself into a puddle the size of the lake, Travis

wrapped an arm around me from the side, whispering in my ear. “Time for your engagement present.”

Goosebumps broke out along my neck, where his breath skated over it, and I shivered as I looked around. “Engagement present?”

“Yep. It’s a little unconventional, but then again, this being blackmail and all, so are we. Right?”

“Right.” I kissed his cheek, eager for whatever it was he’d gotten me. “What is it?”

At Travis’s signal, Phoebe walked over and handed me a painting. It was breathtaking—for a painting done by a preteen whose main art form was dance, of course. But I’d treasure it forever, maybe even writing while staring at the vivid depiction of the aurora borealis, complete with a couple holding hands in the foreground.

“This is beautiful, Travis. Commissioning such a work of art is a perfect engagement present.”

He shook his head, winking at Phoebe. “That’s not the present. Pheebs just really wanted to be part of this.”

Everyone laughed, and then Jackson handed Gertie an envelope. She clasped it in her mouth, trotting over and delivering it to me like a twenty-five-pound, furry mail carrier.

I took it, then tore it open, shrieking when I found first-class plane tickets to Iceland. Behind them, there was a photo of the glass hut we’d spend the night in while sleeping under the aurora borealis in real life.

“I can’t believe this!” I exclaimed, ecstatic. “When are we going?”

“In six months,” Travis said, grinning. “So you better hurry up and find a venue for our weddin’ and get all the stuff planned because I really was hopin’ this could be our honeymoon.”

“I’d marry you right here,” I said, gesturing to the lake, “and you can just tell me the date and time, and I’ll be there.”

“Deal.”

I laughed, then held up a hand. “Oh, unless I have a book release, of course. My readers would be very sad if I couldn’t do a livestream release party. They love me now, ya know.”

“And I love you, too.”

“And I love you.”

From the background, Adam cleared his throat, piping in to put a stop to our public display of mushiness. “Hey, James Dean, don’t worry about the gym; I’ll take care of business while y’all are away.”

Paisley shook her head, causing Adam to glare at her.

Travis and I exchanged puzzled glances.

“What’s with them?” he asked in a voice so low only I could hear.

“I don’t know, but they’re getting worse. Wonder if something happened...” I mused.

He shrugged. “You know what? Who knows, and right now, I don’t care.”

And with that, he pulled me close and sealed our future with a kiss, effectively ending this chapter of our lives and beginning a new one. And I had no intention of stressing over the plot, or the setting, or even the characters that would come and go throughout it.

All I knew was that it’d be filled with endless possibilities... and countless chemistry-filled kisses to write about.



Thank you for reading Travis and Aurora’s story! Up next, it’s Adam and Paisley’s love story!

As the series continues, you’ll see more of the whole crew as the rest of the Cole sisters and Wilson boys find love in Charlotte Oaks.

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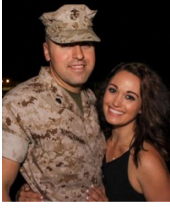
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about the author



Jess Mastorakos writes clean military romance books that feature heroes with heart and the strong women they love. She is a proud Marine wife and mama of four. She loves her coffee in a glitter tumbler and planning with an erasable pen.



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