


SILVER
SPOON FALLS

Callum's **Hope**

NICHOLE ROSE

CALLUM'S HOPE

A CURZY GIRL AGE-GAP ROMANCE

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NICHOLE ROSE



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ABOUT THE BOOK



Finding love on St. Patrick's Day was not part of this body's assignment...

Callum

I've heard enough about the water in Silver Spoon Falls to know things:

The people here don't joke about it. And I need to stay away from it.

But the luck of the Irish clearly isn't on my side.

Because I just got hired to protect the woman who bottles and sells it.

One look at Hope Byrne has me rethinking everything.

Starting with how soon I can make her mine.

There's something magical about this curvy little goddess and her Irish spirit.

And I fully intend to break all my rules to claim her.

Hope

Thanks to the water, people in this town have always been lucky in love.

Why shouldn't others benefit too?

Giving them a little bit of hope makes me happy.
But someone is trying to destroy me and my business.
Hiring Callum Carmichael is my last chance to save it.
But I did not expect to fall for the grumpy giant.
Something about him makes my blood boil...and steam.
He's determined to knock down my walls.
I'm starting to think I want to let him.
If I survive the dangerous people determined to destroy me, anyway

If you enjoy over-the-top bodyguards, fiery heroines, and steamy romance, you'll love this age-gap curvy girl romance!

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CHAPTER ONE

Callum



"Siri, remind me to kill my cousin next time I see him."

"Adding *kill my cousin* to your schedule," my watch chirps. "Would you like to set a date and time?"

"No." I shake my head. *Jesus Christ*. "Siri, delete killing my cousin from my schedule before his wife strangles him, and I end up suspecting *uno*." Bella threatens to kill my cousin, Cormac Carmichael, at least a few times a day since they got married a year ago. I am not getting my head tangled up in the middle of it when his crazy ass finally sends her over the edge.

Cormac, known around Silver Spoon Falls as Giant, is feral. He's been that way his entire life. He's never met a type of hell he didn't like to live in. Marriage hasn't settled him down at all. He goes out of his way to rile her up just so he can settle her down again. Bella isn't exactly tame herself, but she has him wrapped around her little finger. They love each other fiercely

he ever goes missing, real talk, it'll be because she strangled him for her up the wall. His overprotective ass is bound to do it one of these days.

I drag my cell out of my pocket and dial his number.

"What's up, Callum?" His voice booms down the line on the second ring. One thing Cormac isn't is quiet. He's got one volume. Loud. "Are you lost?"

"No, I'm not lost," I growl. "I could pee across town."

He laughs. "Then why are you calling me already?"

"I'm calling to tell you that I'm never doing you another favor ever again, asshole. Every single time I do, I live long enough to regret it." He and Mischief—who he calls Mischief—are out of town with his MC for Daytona Week and then they're spending a few days in Panama City before heading home, so he asked me to babysit a new client for him. He left out the pertinent details, though.

Like the fact that our new client owns the damn magic shop downtown and I don't mean the kind where men pull rabbits out of hats. I'm talking about the one where they sell love poems and healing crystals and bottled water bottled at one of the natural springs here in town. She calls the place *Hope Springs Eternal*.

"Grizz said you just left the office ten minutes ago. How could you possibly already regret it?" Cormac laughs at me. "Your ass hasn't even been there long enough to regret it."

"Oh yeah?" I open my camera app and click a photo of the front of the client's storefront before shooting it to him. And then I immediately hit the button on the display to swap to the front-facing camera. I snap another photo. But if—this time of my middle finger—and send it too. "Check your texts."

"Mischief was right. You do need to get laid."

driving "Tell Bella to stop worrying about my sex life." I swear to God, every
ys. I come to town, the two of them gang up on me, trying to figure out why I
still single. Truth is, I'm starting to wonder myself. I always told my
id ring, make time to date eventually. But eventually never seems to come. (I
already and I run Carmichael Security, the private security firm our dads started
they were in their twenties. We've got branches in Tennessee,
California, and New York. It doesn't leave a lot of time for much else.

I did not sign up to spend the week steeped in the Silver Spoon Falls
r again, though. Everyone in town swears it's magical or something. I guess
d Bella think the town has always been prosperous and residents are lucky
ia Bike because of it. I've seen enough since I've been coming here to know that
reading the shit sparingly.

it some "You told me she had a store downtown," I mutter to Cormac when
my pictures and roars with laughter. "You didn't tell me she's the owner of
town—bottles and sells the fucking water to tourists, you asshole."

talking "You didn't ask."

ongside I growl a string of curses, which only makes him laugh again.

the place "Suck it up, buttercup," he says. "It's only a few days. Besides, that's
legit. I guess someone has taken issue with the fact that Hope recently
old you selling the water and various remedies and tinctures. They've broken in
an been home twice, and someone ran her off the road two days ago. Until
finds out who's behind the attacks, she needs protection."

the new "Hope. *Hope Springs Eternal*." I chuckle despite myself, impressed
hit the double play on words she managed to slip in there. And then I glance
r photo windshield of my truck at the little brick shop again. Crystals and germs
of every sort line the front window. The name of the shop is painted

ry timethe glass, with the word springs situated inside a rendering of a fo
why I'mWater and hearts spew from the top of it. The place seems harmless en
rself I'd "I better not regret this," I mutter to Cormac.

Cormac "You won't."

d when I snort, not so sure I believe him. He's been saying the same thing si
Texas,were kids...usually right before he got me into ten kids of shit w
parents. Honestly, I'm surprised we survived half the dumb stuff we d
s water,then.

ss they "Good luck, fucker."

in love "Later." I stab the disconnect button and shove my phone back i
o drinkpocket. After another quick look at the shop, I haul my ass out of the t
go introduce myself to Hope Byrne. The front door doesn't alarm or s
he seesbell when I open it. I make a note to fix that post haste. She needs t
ne whowhen someone is entering the shop, especially if she's in danger.

I stop just inside the door, looking around.

"Jesus," I mutter. Mandalas and calming, happy colors hang ever
alongside crystals and windchimes and shit I don't even have nam
e job isDried flowers and plants line shelves in jars, each labeled with their na
starteduses. It's all innocuous shit, things that make people feel as if they're
into hercharge of their lives, their health, and manifesting their own destin
Dillon sure there are plenty who don't see it that way though.

I wander through the shop for a full two minutes without seeing any
l by the *What the fuck?*

out the "Hello?" When no one answers, I circle around the counter, pok
nstoneshead into the back. "Hello? Miss Byrne?" I call, and then wait for an
l acrossTwenty seconds later, one still hasn't come. I place my hand on the gu

mountain. small of my back and slip down the short hallway leading into the back
ough. shop.

Pallets and boxes of water are stacked everywhere. A ceiling-high
shelves on one wall holds more supplies, each arranged into various bins
since webuckets. The east wall contains what looks like a mixing station of sorts
with my Dried plants and flowers and little jars sit on a table beside measuring
cups and a chemist set. Everything is neat and tidy, making it clear Hope put
of effort into running this place.

The middle of the room houses a giant packing station. Boxes and bins
of supplies are neatly arranged on top of folding card tables with a small
truck set up in the middle.

Let off a "Oh my gosh!" a woman cries from behind me.

So I know I turn toward the sound of her voice and my cock stands up straight.

Hope Byrne is a curvy goddess. And she's not wearing anything but
of sheer blue panties.

everywhere

comes for.

me and

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answer.

n at the

small of my back and slip down the short hallway leading into the back of the shop.

Pallets and boxes of water are stacked everywhere. A ceiling-high row of shelves on one wall holds more supplies, each arranged into various bins and buckets. The east wall contains what looks like a mixing station of some sort. Dried plants and flowers and little jars sit on a table beside measuring spoons and a chemist set. Everything is neat and tidy, making it clear Hope puts a lot of effort into running this place.

The middle of the room houses a giant packing station. Boxes and packing supplies are neatly arranged on top of folding card tables with a small tablet set up in the middle.

"Oh my gosh!" a woman cries from behind me.

I turn toward the sound of her voice and my cock stands up straight.

Hope Byrne is a curvy goddess. And she's not wearing anything but a pair of sheer blue panties.

CHAPTER TWO

Hope



I stare in shock at the sexy giant standing in the middle of my stock, staring at me like he wants to gobble me up. For a full five-count, neither of us moves. We just look at each other. His eyes climb up and down my body, lingering on my full breasts. They rake like fire down the swell of my thighs, over my wide hips, and across the hot flesh between my legs. Even though I'm wearing panties, they don't exactly hide much.

He likes what he sees. His green eyes—the palest emerald I've ever seen—darken with desire. His tongue touches his full bottom lip. I shiver under the weight of his wanton gaze, turned on even though part of my mind recognizes this isn't at all how I should be reacting to a complete stranger seeing me mostly naked. Not even one who looks like this man.

Judging by the length of his hair, he isn't currently in the military, but I think he used to be. He's got that look to him—hard stare, rigid stance for war. The man's a ride as my granny would have bluntly stated.

Until he opens his mouth anyway.

"Where the fuck are your clothes?"

His rough growl finally breaks through the fog of lust addling my mind. My heart slams against my ribcage, jarring me into action. He broke in through the back door. He's in my stockroom where he has no business being. And he's practically naked.

I shouldn't be standing here gaping. I need to protect myself.

"Get out!" I shout, grabbing the nearest thing in reach—a bottle of vodka—and launching it at him.

He snatches it out of the air like a freaking ninja, so I grab another one.

"Throw it and I'll spank your gorgeous ass," he warns me, his eyes narrowed.

I lower my arm, backing away from him. "If you came to hurt me in my stockroom, live long enough to regret it." I inch toward the back door. Kieve is sitting in a little courtyard out back, enjoying the morning sun. "I'm not alone."

"Liar. I just walked all through the store. You're the only one here."

"You sure about that?"

A flicker of hesitation crosses his face before he quickly schoons his expression. "Why the fuck are you naked in the back of your shop when your front door is unlocked, Hope?"

I don't ask how he knows my name. Everyone in Silver Spoon Falls knows everyone. Besides, my name is written across the front of my store. He opened it a few months ago.

"I didn't know the door was unlocked," I mutter under my breath, reaching behind my back for the door handle. At this point, I'm fairly sure he is here to hurt me, but he's being bossy and rude, so I'm not feeling particularly benevolent. As soon as my hand closes on the door handle, I yank it open.

"Kieve, *tar anseo!*"

Kieve barks once and then comes flying through the door like a stray brain lightning. He rushes straight for the sexy giant. My intruder jumps into my step as Kieve jumps around his feet, barking and growling like the little beast he is.

"What the fuck?"

"Told you I wasn't alone."

water— "Call him off," he growls at me.

"Not until you leave."

ne. "I'm definitely killing Cormac for this shit. He did not warn me you are eyesfucking guard dog." He bends down to scoop my Chihuahua up into his arms.

"Stad!"

), you'll Kieve, the little traitor, immediately stops going crazy and settles down with his tongue lolling out.

I gape at him and the giant, my stomach sinking. He's Callum Carnage, my new bodyguard? *Please, no.* "Cormac sent you?"

"Yep," he says, dashing my hopes all to pieces. His wild eyes roll over his shoulder. "Why don't you get dressed, and then we'll talk, Firefly?"

with the "Hope," I correct.

His lips curve upward. "Whatever you say, sweet Hope."

); knows I narrow my eyes on him. "Can you at least turn around and stop staring at me since I'm here?"

"Why? I've seen the show now." Those wild eyes rake down my face, reaching again. Heat courses through me, staining my cheeks red. "And go back to your room, Firefly. I'll be replaying it often."

icularly "Oh, my God!" I stomp toward my tote, snatch it off the hook, and flee to the privacy of the bathroom to change, which is what I was trying to do.

reak of do in the first place. I spilled coffee all over myself on my way back amorning because Kieve decided he wanted to chase a squirrel up a tree wicked He never got the memo that he isn't a guard dog. I guess he thi police academy letter got lost in the mail. He's been extra vigilar someone ran us off the road a couple of days ago. He trusts nothing one who isn't me. Except, apparently, Callum Carmichael.

I slam the bathroom door behind me, muttering under my breath ab traitor dog and Callum. The man is infuriating! And infuriatingly hot. I have ano way I'm going to survive living with this man until Dillon Arr is arms. figures out who wants to destroy me and my business!

"You don't have a choice," I mutter to myself in the mirror, unzipp ; down,tote bag to pull out the extra set of clothes I always leave here in emergencies. "Someone is trying to kill you."

nichael, The grim reminder sends a chill up my spine. I quickly yank my bra the bag and slip it on before yanking a sweater on over my head. It ver me.minute to shimmy into the jeans. I think they shrank.

"Or my hips grew," I huff, out of breath by the time I get them on. it's time to stop sneaking next door to the coffee shop for breakfas morning. The scones are addictive.

aring at I fluff my hair, shove my coffee-stained clothes into the bag to tak to wash, and then slip my feet back into my ballet flats. My cheeks ; y bodypink when I slip back out into the stockroom to face Callum.

ddamn, I find him leaning against the wall with Kieve sitting at attentior feet.

nd then "Kieve, *imigh leat*," I murmur, pointing toward the front of the shop ying to "He's well trained," Callum observes when Kieve immediately hops races toward the front of the shop.

in this I snort. "He's an adorable little terrorist is what he is."

": "Chihuahuas usually are."

nks his I drop the tote beside the packing station in the center of the room and
it sinceturn the face Callum, trying hard not to think about the fact that he's
and noseen me naked. "Um, so you're Callum Carmichael."

"And you're Hope Byrne." His eyes do a slow drift over me, his g
out myless hotter than it was when I was mostly naked. "You never did ans
There'squestion, Firefly. Why the fuck are you running around your shop nak
nstrongyour front door unlocked?"

"Okay, clearly we need to get a few things straight." I cross my
ing myhide my boobs from his gaze. "First of all, I thought the door was
case ofSecondly, I wasn't running around my shop naked. I stepped out
bathroom to grab my bag so I could change. You're the one who decid
a out ofcould just waltz right back here like you own the place—you don't,
takes away. Third, I don't work for you. You don't get to bark questions at
some hot drill sergeant and expect me to answer. This relationship w
Maybewhole lot better if you get that through your thick head now. Four
t everycalling me Firefly. My name is Hope."

He stares at me for a full ten seconds, not blinking. And then a dev
e homesmirk overtakes his face. "Firefly suits you. You burn hot enough to l
are stillthe dark, baby."

My stomach turns a somersault. Lord, he's dangerous. And that h
1 at hisidea written all over it. I'm good at giving other people hope that re
and fairytale endings exist. I stopped believing in them myself when
. ten...the same day my dad killed my mom. I don't need this man tr
up andchange my mind now.

"I'm not your baby, Callum. You're here to do a job. That's it."

"Fine. We'll do it your way," he says.

For some reason, I don't think he means it.

and then Two seconds later, he confirms my suspicion.

already "For now," he murmurs, pushing away from the wall. He stomps
me, stopping when he's so close his cologne swirls in the air arou
gaze noclouding my senses with his rich, intoxicating smell. "But just so you
wer mythe job ends as soon as your workday is over, Hope. Then, it's persona
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"Fine. We'll do it your way," he says.

For some reason, I don't think he means it.

Two seconds later, he confirms my suspicion.

"For now," he murmurs, pushing away from the wall. He stomps toward me, stopping when he's so close his cologne swirls in the air around me, clouding my senses with his rich, intoxicating smell. "But just so you know, the job ends as soon as your workday is over, Hope. Then, it's personal."

CHAPTER THREE

Callum



Hope and I don't get a chance to talk until noon. She does a surprising amount of local business. We make it to the front of the shop just in time to rescue a young woman from Kieve. Locals trickle through the door in a steady stream for the next few hours to chat, pick up cases of wine, and browse the shop for crystals, gems, herbal teas, and a myriad of tincture remedies she sells. They seem to fall into two camps: the gray-haired denizens of town and those closer to her own age.

She has to lock Kieve behind the counter. Every time someone comes in, the dog goes berserk. He's a protective little monster. When no one is around, he's chill. But as soon as someone steps through the front door, he turns into a pint-sized Cujo.

"Is he always like that?" I ask after he tries to bite an old man.

"No." Her shoulders droop. "He's been stressed out since someone ran us off the road a couple of days ago."

"He was with you?"

"He was my granny's dog before she passed," she says softly. "N follows me everywhere. I don't go anywhere without him."

"You opened the shop a few months ago?"

"Three months ago."

"When did the attacks start?"

"Two and a half months ago."

My brows slash together. I was under the impression that the attac started, but they started immediately after she set up shop. "Someone to run you out of business."

"Someone wants to kill me," she mutters. "They weren't trying to sc when they ran me off the road. They were trying to kill me."

"What makes you so sure?"

Surprising She lifts her gorgeous blue eyes to mine. "They cut my brake line time to Fear turns her gaze stark, darkening the lush green of her irises and rs in a her pupils. "Had I not hit another vehicle, my car would have plung ater, or the cliff into The Falls."

res and "Jesus." My hackles rise. I've been out to The Falls. It's a waterf r-haired plunges down into a small body of water on the outskirts of town. T

isn't necessarily high, but it's a big enough drop to seriously injure mes in, someone, especially if they careen over it in a fucking car. Whoever else is ensure she went over the edge wasn't trying to scare her. They were tr oor, he hurt her. "Do you have any idea who would want to hurt you, Firefly?"

"No," she whispers, shaking her head. "I don't have any enemies. did my granny that I know of. She died six months ago."

tried to "Any family with a grudge?"

"It was just the two of us." She swallows, busying herself with a s receipts to avoid my gaze. "Um, my mom is dead, and my dad is in pri

low, he "How long?"

"Forever."

"What were his charges?"

"It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago, and he has nothing to do with this. He's in prison and isn't getting out so it wasn't him," she mutters, refusing to look at me. "He'll never get out."

I push myself away from the wall where I've been standing and walk toward her, refusing to let her block me from her line of sight while we talk. Whatever she's ashamed of, it's not hers to carry. I step forward, placing myself directly in front of her, reaching across the counter to tip her chin.

"Look at me, Firefly."

She resists for a long moment, willful and stubborn. She's going to deny it. "I already know. A thrill goes down my spine at the thought of teaching her to submit. I'm not a Dominant. I'm not into BDSM or anything like that. But when she's in my bed—and she will be in my bed, I decided soon as I set eyes on her—she'll learn to obey. She'll learn to love it."

"Now, Hope," I demand, my voice firm.

"What?" she growls, twin spots of color turning her cheeks red. Her defiant eyes flash to mine.

"What were his charges, Firefly?"

"It doesn't matter." It's a lie. I see the pain and grief in her eyes.

"Tell me."

She hesitates and then expels a sad sigh. "Murder, okay? He killed my mom."

I rock back on my heels, shocked. I suspected her to tell me the truth, but I did not expect for her to say he murdered her mom. "How old were you, baby?"

"Ten."

I circle around the checkout counter to her, wrapping my hand around her waist to tug her toward me. Kieve lifts his head from his bone to look at me, but then decides his bone is more interesting than I am. I pull Hope toward me, still not stopping until she's pressed up against my chest.

"Thank you for telling me," I murmur, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. I stride "It's not like you gave me a choice," she complains.

"Didn't like the look on your face."

I plant "What look?"

my foot in up. "Like you had something to be ashamed of." I tuck a strand of her blonde and cinnamon hair behind her ear. "What he did is on him. The shame should be a guilt isn't your burden to carry and it doesn't reflect on you, Firefly."

"Tell that to my classmates," she snorts, slipping from my arms. I take a few feet of distance between us.

"Fuck. They were mean to her about it, probably threw it in her face to hurt her. Kids can be real assholes sometimes, especially to those who are innocent parents who do something awful. In a perfect world, children wouldn't suffer for the sins of the father, but this world is far from perfect. All too often innocent people suffer anyway. I think maybe Hope knows that better than anyone.

She's right, though. If her father is in prison for life, I doubt he's been able to visit her. He stands to gain absolutely nothing. Even if he would eventually automatically inherit her estate upon her death, he'd never see a penny of it until after he's served his life in prison for murdering her mom. Which means he's probably not our guy.

"I'm going to step out and make a few phone calls. Will you be all right by yourself for a little while, Firefly?" I watch as she fidgets around the registers, not really doing anything. She's just trying to avoid me.

not used to being close to people. Or maybe it's that she's not used to
and hers close to men. I don't know. But she's skittish, with walls built a mile hi
me and I intend to topple every one of them to the ground. I decid
ard me, approximately two minutes after meeting her. Looks like the water
fucking town claimed another victim. Or maybe it's just Hope. I don't
ahead. All I know is that her and her fiery spirit are mine.

"I'll be fine, Callum," she says. "Whoever keeps trying to get to me
does it once I leave town. I guess they don't want to risk being seen."

"I'll be right outside. I'll have Grizz pick us up lunch when he dr
t honeycameras and a bell for the door."

me and "Cameras?"

"You need security."

to put "I hired you."

I don't bother telling her that I'm not taking her money. I have a feel
e just to just piss her off. She's independent. "Eventually, you'll be on your own
se with Hope," I murmur. "You need cameras so you can see what's happen
t suffer front while you're in the back and vice versa. You'll also be able to see
en, they in the courtyard to check on him. And a bell will alert you anytime th
opens."

mind the "Fine." She throws up her hands. "Do what you want. I have a feel
ere to will anyway."

ry of it, "Probably," I agree with a smile.

eans he She narrows her eyes at me, muttering under her breath about bos
who think they're the boss of her.

right in I chuckle and duck out of the shop, pulling my phone out of my po
und by call Dillon Armstrong. Green and gold St. Patrick's Day decorations fl
e. She's the breeze all up and down the street, giving downtown a festive, buco

o being "This is Dillon," Armstrong growls on the second ring.

gh. "It's Callum," I say. Dillon knows who I am. Even though Cormac r
ed that Texas branch of Carmichael Security, I've been spending more than
in this share of time here lately. Truth be told, Silver Spoon Falls just fe
t know home. The more I'm here, the more I want to be here. Cian and Cor
twin cousins, are back in Nashville. They're more than capable of h
usually shit there.

"What's up, Callum?"

ops off "Hope Byrne," I state. "What do you know?"

"Figured I'd be hearing from you about her," he mutters. "Cormac
me you were taking her as a client."

"Started today."

"We're running through a list of the usual suspects. She's well-l
ling it'll town. No one spoke out against her business when she applied
1 again, licensing. She hasn't had any complaints about anything except he
ing outdog," he says, running down the list. "The best I can figure is the dis
e Kieve over her land but whoever wants it is trying to hide that by making i
he door the business."

"Why the land?"

ing you "The mineral rights are worth a fortune. Her grandmother was appi
multiple times to sell but refused. When she died, Hope ran off two d
oil companies and God only knows who else."

sy men "Jesus." I plaster myself against the side of the building as a young
pushing a stroller jogs by. "You think one of them would send someo
ocket to her to try to hurt her?"

utter in "Possibly. They've been pretty insistent from what she's told me,"
lic air. with a heavy sigh. "Ransom Oil has been sending their man arou

months. I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to scare her into selling. I've seen the hard up from what I've heard. But this rises beyond simply trying to make it fairer. Whoever is after her cut her brakes and rammed her car four different times. They were trying to kill her."

"Anyone get a look at the vehicle?"

"The driver of the SUV she hit swears it was an old white cargo van that didn't get a look at the driver. They fled the scene, heading out of town. I've been trying to run down every cargo van registered in the county, but there are a fucking ton of the bastards," he growls. "Romano International always sold off their used vans at the county auction every three years. They were cheap, so businesses and people in need of cheap transportation scooped them up quick."

"Fucking hell." Romano International is a massive company that probably has fifty or sixty vans in their fleet at a time. If they're auctioned off every three years, there are probably two hundred or more in the county. It'll take Dillon forever to chase them all down. "Keep it posted."

"Will do," he agrees. "I assume you'll be staying on the property with her?"

"That's the plan."

"Good. She's too goddamn stubborn to listen to reason. I tried to get her to come stay with me and Jules after the second break-in but she refused. She isn't going to be scared out of her own home. She needs someone there, though. Her nearest neighbor is as useless as tits on a fucking fucker after there's no one else for miles."

"I've got her now. She'll be fine."

Dillon hesitates and then he chuckles. "Well, goddamn. That was funny. I'm not sure if I should say congratulations or send my condolences."

They're "I'm hanging up now," I mutter, rolling my eyes. I swear to God, t
o scare in this town can smell blood in the water. As soon as some poor
ifferent catches feelings, they start their shit. And I already know it'll be all ov
by the end of the day. They gossip like high school girls. It's ge
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"I'm hanging up now," I mutter, rolling my eyes. I swear to God, the men in this town can smell blood in the water. As soon as some poor bastard catches feelings, they start their shit. And I already know it'll be all over town by the end of the day. They gossip like high school girls. It's goddamn ridiculous.

"Later, you crabby bastard."

I grunt and then hang up on him. I'm not crabby. Just haven't had a reason to smile in a while. All I've fucking done for years is work. That'll be changing though. Once Hope is mine, I plan to spend a lot less time working and a lot more time following her around like her wicked little dog.

Just as soon as I figure out who the fuck is trying to hurt her and end them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hope



"Great," I mutter, pulling into my driveway with Callum following me in his truck. Silas Wembley leans against the post on my front porch, his hands shoved into his pockets as he waits with his cowboy hat pulled low over his face.

He owns the ranch next door. I think he has a thing for me, but it's never going to happen. Ever. He's in his late fifties. And he's so friendly and pleasant about everything all the time. It's honestly exhausting. I live well enough, don't get me wrong. He's been a lot of help around here especially since Granny died. But the feelings are purely platonic.

I just don't really want to deal with him and Callum at the same time. It's already been a long day, and it's nowhere close to over. Until Dillon shows up, whoever is trying to ruin me and my business, Callum will be staying in my house. In my space. How am I supposed to resist him when he's already wreaking havoc on my brain?

Every time I look at him, my heart races, and my stomach quivers. about the fact that he saw me practically naked, and my body catches He's supposed to be here to protect me, but I think I may need protection from him because he is dangerous on a whole new level.

Kieve growls as soon as he sees Silas, making me groan. He has my neighbor.

"Behave," I warn him, pulling into the carport. "You can't just b every time he comes over, Kieve. It's rude."

Kieve gives me the side-eye, which I assume means mind my own business.

I kill the engine and collect my bag and Kieve. By the time I reach the door handle, Callum is already at my side, holding out a hand to help me get behind the door. "Give me your stuff, Firefly," he says. "I'll carry it." "I've got it." "Firefly."

I huff and reluctantly hand it over, knowing arguing won't get me anywhere. He's bossy and he's a gentleman. It's an odd combination. I reeking like it.

ke him "Who's the douche on the porch?"

d here, "Callum!" I hiss, shooting him a death glare when he says it loudly, ensure Silas hears him.

me. It's "Answer the question, baby."

catches "Silas Wembley. He's my neighbor."

ing with Callum grunts. "He come around a lot?"

then he's "Sometimes," I lie, avoiding his gaze while I shove the door closed.

"Right." He waits for me to close the door, then follows me around the side of the house toward the front porch, walking so close I practically bump into him.

I think tension radiating from him with every step.

on fire. "Howdy, neighbor." Silas jogs down the steps to meet us. He has a protective smile pasted on his face, but it doesn't quite reflect in his dark gaze.

He looks Callum over. "I didn't realize you were going to have company tonight." "Hi, Silas," I say, annoyed at the subtle chastisement in his tone, as if I did something wrong by not alerting him to my every move. "I didn't know you were coming over unannounced again."

"Presumptuous prick," Callum mutters under his breath.

Kieve barks once as if in agreement.

"Here, Firefly. Let me have him." Callum scoops him from my arms without waiting for my response. Naturally, Kieve doesn't bark or growl. He just snaps at him. He and Callum are fast friends already. They glare at each other together.

Silas stares at Kieve, the same bright smile pasted on his face. His eyes crinkle around his eyes though, making it clear he's jealous. Kieve is taken to Callum but wants nothing to do with him. Silas can be...odd. He never says anything, but he gets his feelings hurt.

"The little guy finally made a friend, huh?"

"He knows who he can trust." Callum scratches Kieve's head.

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name."

"Didn't give it," Callum mutters, making it clear what he thinks about with those three words. His gaze rolls over my neighbor and then he looks back at me. "Do you want me to start dinner, baby?"

"Baby?" Silas says. "I didn't realize you were seeing anyone, Hope."

I'm going to murder Callum Carmichael. Slowly. Right after I kiss the smirk off his face. What? No. No, I am not kissing him.

"Silas, this is Callum Carmichael. Callum, Silas Wembley."

"Carmichael. You any relation to Cormac Carmichael?" Silas asks.

"Cousin."

"Good man," Silas says. "It's nice to meet you."

"Yeah," Callum agrees without returning the sentiment. He doesn't offer his hand to shake, either. He clearly does not like Silas at all.

"Good to know she'll have someone over here to watch out for her while everything's going on," Silas says. "I know I'll sleep better at night knowing she's not out here alone and defenseless."

"Do you lose a lot of sleep thinking about her?" Callum growls.

"Oh, good grief."

"It's been a long day, Silas," I quickly interject before he can answer. "Do you need something?"

"Your labels were delivered to my house again." His smile returns, but it's more irritated than ever. "I took the box out to your shop for you like the last one."

"Again? That's the third one in a row. I don't know why the delivery service can't seem to get the address right. It's not like it isn't clearly printed on the mailbox and the house."

"Thank you," I sigh. "I'll call the carrier again tomorrow and try to get it sorted out again."

"It's not a problem."

Callum grunts.

I elbow him in the ribs this time.

"Well, I'll let you two get inside to your dinner." Silas glances from me to Callum. "If you need anything, Hope, you know where to find me."

"Thanks."

He steps around us, his boots thumping against the sidewalk as he heads back for his property. I wait until he's out of earshot to spin around to face Callum.

"Are you insane?" I whisper-hiss, glaring at him. "You can't just tell that we're dating!"

"I didn't tell him that. He assumed." He smirks at me, his emerald eyes glowing with satisfaction. "And you didn't correct the assumption, Firefly."

"You...I..."

"You don't like him."

"He's fine."

"You want to rephrase that?" Callum growls, his smirk slipping and his voice deepens.

"What?" I gape at him for a moment, not sure what the heck he's saying. "Did I say anything about, and then it dawns on me and I roll my eyes. "I mean he's fine, Callum. Jeez. I'm not attracted to him."

"Good."

"You were incredibly rude."

"Don't like him," he mutters, shrugging.

"You don't even know him!"

"I know he was waiting on your fucking porch for you. And I'm guessing it happens more often than you're going to admit. I'm also guessing the packages conveniently show up at his place a little too often too."

"That's not his fault."

"It is if he's making sure they're showing up at his place," he says. "Does he have access to your shop?"

"Because it's easier for him to put the packages in there than for me to get them out there," I mutter and then throw up a hand. "You know what? Not signing up for the Inquisition when I hired you."

"Told you already, Firefly. The job ended when your workday ended with Callum. Personal now. Someone is trying to hurt you, and right now, he's the

people likely candidate."

I gape at him for a full five count and then burst into laughter. "You'd eyes Silas is behind all of this? Good grief, Callum. You've lost your mind, Firefly." The man wouldn't hurt a fly. He's obnoxious, but he has nothing to gain here.

"Except you and your land." He tips my chin up by crooking a finger beneath it. "You think you aren't a prize worth fighting dirty to get, Lord? You're wrong. There's no limit to things I'd do to win you."

as his He means it. The truth glitters like the brightest stars in his eyes. He would wars and topple kingdoms for me. He wouldn't hesitate or regret it, talking Lord. Who is this man?

ne as a I swallow my laughter, my mouth going dry.

"The only thing I'd never do is hurt you."

"Callum," I whisper, not sure if I'm asking him to kiss me or begging not to break my heart. Both, I think. I want him with an intensity that the hell out of me. But can I take a taste of him without risking my head?

No, a little voice whispers. *You know you can't.*

ssing it Kieve squirms in his arms, demanding to be let down. He holds my hand as you he stoops, carefully placing my dog on the ground. Kieve immediately runs off to explore the front yard. He won't go far. He knows not to leave the dog.

Callum rises to his full height, his eyes still locked on mine. "We've a problem, Firefly," he murmurs, dropping my bag to the ground to tug at my hand in his arms. "If I kiss you like you're practically begging me to do right now, it won't be enough to satisfy either one of us, and we both know it."

t? I did "T-that's a problem?"

"A big fucking problem," he growls, tilting his hips to press his chest against my lower belly. "I'm trying to make you my forever, not my fling. Move slow. I don't want to fuck it up, move too fast, and lose you for good."

"Callum," I whisper, my heart beating so loud I'm sure he can hear me. Anxiety courses through me, urging me to back away, to throw up and run. I keep him at a distance. He's getting too close to dangerous territory for me. A place where happily-ever-after ends with little girls growing up and finding their own fathers. But he isn't my dad. I'm not my mom. And their story doesn't have to be ours.

I can't run scared forever. Eventually, I have to let someone in. I have to face my fears and learn to trust. I think...I think I want that person to be either Callum. Something about him calls to me. It has all day. The way he looks at me. The way he speaks to me. For the first time, I want to know what it's like to just let go of the fear and just...feel.

"Kiss me," I plead. "I won't regret it."

He spears his hand into my hair, dragging my mouth to his with a force that scares me. I feel in my bones. His lips touch mine, soft at first. Electricity crackles between us, humming to life like livewires. He feels it too. He groans and pulls me closer, his hand tightening in my hair.

His tongue flicks against my bottom lip, demanding entry. I give it to him willingly opening to him. I whimper as he sweeps inside, tangling his fingers with mine. As soon as his strokes against mine, I lose the ability to think. My legs tremble, my knees threatening to buckle.

"Fuck." He releases my hair to drag me closer to his body as my legs give out altogether. "This perfect mouth is going to ruin me."

It's already ruined me. He's ruining me with it right now.

His hands prowl down my body, gripping my ass in his palms to pull me even closer. He doesn't handle me like I'm delicate. He handles me like I'm his, holding onto me as if he's not planning to let go anytime soon. The possessive edge to his touch is the single sexiest thing I've ever experienced.

hear it. "Callum," I moan into his mouth, pleading for a taste of the forbidden
walls to He gives it to me when he breaks from my mouth to kiss a trail down
, to the chest. Right there on the sidewalk in front of the house, his mouth closes
without my right breast, and his teeth around my nipple. He bites me, shoving
his knee between my legs to grind me down on it at the same time.

I turn to putty in his arms, throwing my head back to shout his name
to the sky as lava flows through my veins in place of blood. It feels so
soon to be God, I feel like I'm flying even though my feet haven't even left the ground.
"Oh, Firefly," he groans, kissing his way back to my mouth. He rubs
his bottom lip before brushing a sweet kiss across the bite. "When I get
you, I'm going to ruin us both."

I'm pretty sure he ruined me already.

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He gives it to me when he breaks from my mouth to kiss a trail down my chest. Right there on the sidewalk in front of the house, his mouth closes over my right breast, and his teeth around my nipple. He bites me, shoving his knee between my legs to grind me down on it at the same time.

I turn to putty in his arms, throwing my head back to shout his name into the sky as lava flows through my veins in place of blood. It feels so good. God, I feel like I'm flying even though my feet haven't even left the ground.

"Oh, Firefly," he groans, kissing his way back to my mouth. He nips my bottom lip before brushing a sweet kiss across the bite. "When I get inside you, I'm going to ruin us both."

I'm pretty sure he ruined me already.

CHAPTER FIVE

Callum



After dinner, Hope leads me out to her shop to show me around. The building itself is a large metal building situated beside a natural spring on the property. The bottling machine is a massive contraption that takes up half the shop. Empty bottles hang from one end. Full bottles fill a pushcart on the other. A table with a table full of labels and shrink-wrap packaging a little farther away.

"Water is pumped in through here," she explains, pointing out the pipe running to the spring outside the building, "where it's filtered and pumped and then bottles are filled automatically before moving down the line to be labeled and packaged. All I have to do is place the bottles on the line, fill them, label, and pack." Her nose wrinkles. "And keep an eye out to make sure nothing gets jammed up. The machine gets stuck sometimes."

"You do all this by yourself?"

"Two high school students help label and pack on weekends, otherwise, yeah, it's just me and Betty here." She pats the side of the machine.

affectionately. "We do okay by ourselves."

"It's a lot of fucking work, Firefly."

"Eventually, I'll be able to hire full-time help," she says quietly. "not in the budget yet. The first three months have been amazing, but I long way to go before I'm to that point."

"Why sell the water?"

"Why not?" She shrugs. "This land has been in my family for generations. I grew up listening to my granny tell me stories about how special this land is here. I've spent most of my life listening to people in town talk about the same way. To everyone outside of Silver Spoon Falls, it's just water. But for the people here, it means something. It's hope and a connection to the future and our past. It's the thing that allowed us to survive when so many others weren't as fortunate. They believe in it because everyone needs a little property to live their lives. It's what keeps us young."

"You don't believe it."

"I don't know what I believe anymore," she whispers, looking away through her lashes with a troubled expression. "It's hard to believe in fairytales and happily-ever-after when the only example I had grown up with ended the way it did. But...I don't know. Maybe I bottle it because I don't know how to believe."

Poor little firefly. She aches to know what love feels like, but is terrified to reach for it. The memories from her past are burned into her psyche, making her hesitant to trust even her own heart. I'm going to change that. I'm going to teach her that she can trust what it's telling her. She can trust me.

Our love story won't end like her parents did. I won't ever allow anyone to hurt her, but I don't want to harm this fiery goddess. I want to worship at her feet like a king. I want to be what a king does. Worships his queen. Protects her. Defends her at all costs.

others. She doesn't know me well yet, but she will. I'm not just going to be her bodyguard. I'm going to be the reason her heart beats...the one person she trusts with every little piece of herself.

I stride toward her, tipping her chin up until her gorgeous eyes meet mine. "I'm going to make you believe, sweet Hope," I murmur before brushing my lips across hers in a soft pass. I want to deepen the kiss, take more. All I want is more of her.

She's sparked a hunger in my soul that nothing short of possessing her can satisfy. But now isn't the time for that. Baby steps. Even if it fucking kills me. And just so we're clear, it very well might kill me. My dick has never been this hard before...and it's been this hard all goddamn day.

I reluctantly pull back before I can take too much or get lost in her. It's so easy to do when she burns as hot as she does. She goes up like kindling soon as I get her in my arms. But now isn't the time. "What can I do to help?"

"You want to help?" She arches a brow at me, looking at me like I'm crazy. "I thought you said your job ended when my workday did."

"I did, but your workday clearly isn't over." I'm guessing her workday rarely ever ends if she's running this operation by herself. She probably wants to do it herself to the bone trying to do it all. Her shop may be new, but it works.

People in town love that she's selling local water. It's a huge benefit to the fact that she's made it available online means she isn't just selling through her shop. She's got online customers, businesses, and Google knows who else she has to worry about too. "Teach me how to work Betty?"

"You want to operate Betty?" "There you go again with the surprise." I turn her toward the man. "That's stepping her on the ass. Less of that. More instruction, Firefly. We've got a lot to do."

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ways, I For the next two hours, she loads bottles into the front-end of the m
and I haul full bottles off the other end. By the time we shut do
her will machine, we've amassed a mountain of full bottles, and I'm
ills me. exhausting. It's back-breaking work.

er been I'm in awe of the fact that she's been doing this shit by herself for
three months. As soon as she's mine, I'm hiring someone to help her.
. It's far no way she should be doing this alone every day. I'm three times her s
lling as my arms feel like Jell-O.

help?" "Wow." She gapes at the mountain of full bottles. "I've never got
've lost many done at a time before. Sam and Ethan are going to hate i
weekend."

orkday "Sam and Ethan?"

y works "The kids who label and package," she says, smiling over at me.
as busy you, Callum. It would have taken me all week to get this much done
it. And down."

o locals "You can thank me by taking your sexy ass in the house and soaki
d only bubble bath, Firefly." I prowl toward her before dragging her into my
etty." steal a kiss. I can't help it. Her cheeks are flushed. Tendrils of hair stic
face where she's all sweaty. She's too fucking beautiful.

achine, Her arms wind around my neck as she anchors her body to mine.
got shit her curvy ass, trying to get my fill while I can since I already know s

going to let me sleep in her bed tonight. She'll kick my ass if I even
it. But that's what I want...for her to fall asleep in her arms, her head
chest.

I'm falling hard. I didn't even stand a chance with her. She appeared
in her shop and pulled the rug out from under me. I landed flat on my
back, staring up at heaven. Didn't know it was five-foot eight with honey
brown the cinnamon hair, ocean eyes, and curves for days. But it looks like
fucking exactly where my heaven begins and ends. With her.

"Callum," she whispers against my lips, running her fingers through
the last hair at the nape of my neck. "You have to stop kissing me. You're going
to get me addicted."

"That's the plan, Firefly."

"I knew you were going to say that."

"Do you want me to slow down?"

"I...No," she says, her voice a mere scrap of sound. "Just don't let me
Please?"

"We'll fall together, Firefly." I glide my nose against hers, groaning
"Thank intimate it feels. "And when we land, you'll land in my arms. Deal?"

"Okay," she whispers, her breath sweet against my lips.

I kiss her again before reluctantly pulling back. We exit the shop together
with her hand in mine. "Tell me about the oil company that's been hounding
me about buying the property."

"How do you know about that?"

"Dillon told me."

"Of course he did," she mumbles, making me smile. She's not
annoyed with him. I just don't think she likes not being in control. She

suggest on her own for far too long. She doesn't know what it means to let her
depend on my care for. She's used to calling the shots and doing it all on her own.

"Tell me about them, Firefly."

I naked "What do you want to know? They've been after the land for year
y back, promised my granny that I wouldn't let them have it. I guess they thought
they'd be easier to convince than she was," she says with an indelicate snort.
e that's annoying little henchman quickly learned that isn't the case."

"He come around often?"

ugh the "Not since I threatened to shoot him next time he showed up out here
going to I stop walking mid-step, turning to her in surprise.

"He was giving me a headache," she mumbles, avoiding my gaze
talks in circles about profits and losses and taxes and math things that
me. And I had a cheesecake in the fridge calling my name."

"Jesus Christ." I laugh quietly. "What's his name?"

me fall. "Thomas Huntington."

"You think his company is behind the attacks?"

at how "Probably," she sighs heavily. "Others have been out here, asking
sell, but they aren't nearly as insistent as Huntington and Ransom Company
been. The really my land. Probably because their stocks are tanking. Together,
few wells they put up in the area didn't do well."

ing you "Why are they so sure yours will?"

"You mean you don't know?" She blinks wide eyes at me like a light
in the dark. "Granny and Pa struck oil on the property way back in the
when they were digging a reservoir."

t really "They never did anything with it?"

e's been Hope shakes her head. "They didn't care about the oil. Pa was a farmer
didn't want anyone out here stripping the land to mine it for oil. W

herself bedied, Granny made sure she kept her promise to him." Her eyes flash dark, her expression fierce. "I intend to keep my promise too. They can't put the oil over my dead body."

s, but I I growl at her words, getting all up in her personal space. "No one is going to hurt you to get your land, Hope," I vow, my protective instincts roaring. "Theirthe thought. If Huntington and Ransom Oil are trying to kill her to get your property, they picked the wrong woman. This one is mine. I'll destroy that fucking company myself before I let them harm her."

e." But I'm not convinced it's them, not yet. Silas Wembley was a little less than comfortable showing up here uninvited. Hope may not have noticed the way he looked at her, but I sure as fuck did. The bastard is in love with her, or thinks he is, anyway. Would he put her through all of this just to play her hero? Maybe. It wouldn't be the first time someone has done something nine shades of fucked up to try to push someone into their arms. I'll run his name and Huntington by Dillon tomorrow and see what he has to say. I'll also ask Finn Taylor, a close friend of Cormac's to look for me to Ransom Oil and Silas. If there's anything to find, Finn will find it. Silas will have nothing he can't do with a computer.

The last "Come on, Firefly." I lace my fingers through Hope's, pulling her back into the house again. "That bubble bath is calling your name."

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died, Granny made sure she kept her promise to him." Her eyes flash in the dark, her expression fierce. "I intend to keep my promise too. They can have the oil over my dead body."

I growl at her words, getting all up in her personal space. "No one is going to hurt you to get your land, Hope," I vow, my protective instincts roaring at the thought. If Huntington and Ransom Oil are trying to kill her to get her property, they picked the wrong woman. This one is mine. I'll destroy their fucking company myself before I let them harm her.

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"Come on, Firefly." I lace my fingers through Hope's, pulling her toward the house again. "That bubble bath is calling your name."

CHAPTER SIX

Callum



I'm nearly asleep when glass shatters downstairs, bringing me wide awake. I sit bolt upright in the bed, reaching for the gun I tucked in my nightstand beside me. I grab my cell with the other, shooting a quick text to Grizz.

Me: 911. Send back-up to Hope's.

I don't explain the situation. I don't have to explain. He's worked in security long enough to know that a 911 text means act now, ask questions later. He's good people.

I climb from the bed as soon as I'm done typing the text, and stride to the bedroom door, moving on silent feet. I don't turn on lights. Don't touch anything. I slip through the dark like a ghost, moving silently as I make it across the hall to Hope's bedroom.

"Don't shoot me, Firefly," I breathe into the dark when Kieve growls a warning at me, alerting me to the fact that they're already awake. I'm g

my girl was awake as soon as she heard the glass break. I'm also g
she's armed.

Hope isn't a delicate little flower. She's more than capable of taking
herself. She's a queen. But she has me now. She doesn't have to
anything alone, especially not some motherfucker breaking into her ho

"Callum?" she whispers.

"You and Kieve stay here, Firefly. I've got back-up on the way."

"You can't go out there alone." The tremor in her voice breaks my
heart. How many times has she been through this alone? Scared as h
facing it on her own? Whoever is out there better fucking pray I don
them.

"Stay here, baby. Don't make me spank your gorgeous ass," I w
awake before slipping out of the door without waiting for a response. We'll sp
ide the night arguing if I let her. She doesn't take orders. Not yet. She'
text to eventually to give up a little of that control she clings to with both han

I slip down the hall, listening for any little sound, but none come.
did the breaking glass come from? The living room? Kitchen? I don't l
personal creep down the stairs, my gun aimed low.

uestions The nightlight in the living room allows me to clear the room
before moving into the dining room. I nearly have a fucking heart
toward when my reflection appears in the reflective glass of the china cabinet.

it's need "Jesus fucking Christ," I whisper to myself before moving into the l
ny way Glass litters the floor beneath the back door where a rock was thrown t
it, but it's still locked. I carefully clear the room, checking the pan
s a soft mudroom, and the laundry room anyway.

uessing There's no one in the house.

I unlock the back door and step outside. My balls immediately thre

guessing crawl back into my body to hide. The temperature plunged in the 1
hours. Silvery storm clouds roil overhead. Wind whips through the trees
care of sending a chill wind whistling across the property. It's chilly as fuck out
handle I grit my teeth and carefully walk around the house anyway, scanning
use. intruders or any tracks. There are boot prints in the mud a few yards from
back door, but they end abruptly after a few feet. Whoever threw the rocks
it and ran. I don't think they were trying to get in. They were trying to
fuckin' her.

Well, but Well, it fucking worked. She's scared. And I'm pissed.

't catch "Callum?"

I spin around to find Hope standing at the door with a gun in her hand
her robe tied tightly around her waist. Her hair is wild, her eyes wide in
horrendous face.

ll learn "Did you find anything?"

ds. "You were supposed to wait for me, Firefly."

Where "I was worried about you," she whispers.

know. I How can I be mad when she's so fucking sweet?

"I didn't find anyone." I move toward her, my gun aimed at the ground
quickly still need to check the shop though. Can you please wait inside while
I attack that?"

"They didn't get in the shop."

kitchen. "How do you know that?"

through "There's an alarm."

try, the I back her into the kitchen before gently taking her handgun from her
placing it on the counter. I set mine beside hers before turning back toward
my heart pounding against my ribcage as my blood pressure rises. "You

eat to

ast few an alarm on the shop, but not on the house," I state, staring at her level
reetops, that what you're telling me?"

tside. "Y-yes?" She gulps.

ing for "Silas Wembley has the alarm code?"

rom the "Yes."

ock did "Where's your phone?"

o scare She pulls it from her pocket.

"Change it, Firefly. Now."

"What? Callum, I don't think—"

"You want to trust him because that's who you are," I growl, cutting
nds, her off. "But I know what's standing in front of me right now. I know v
ier palerisk to keep you to myself. And I saw the way he looked at you

Firefly. He wants you, and I don't know how far he's willing to go to g
Until I know the answer to that question, he doesn't get access to you
the house, or you. Period."

"W-what would you risk, Callum?"

"Everything," I snarl, dragging her into my arms. "I'd risk :
und. "I *everything* to keep you to myself, Hope." My mouth closes over hers, i
ile I do hot and insistent. I don't give her a chance to say anything else. I c
her, worried as fuck that he has access to her shop. Maybe I'm just a
asshole. I don't fucking know. But she's mine. I'll do whatever I have t
make sure she's safe, even if it means ensuring no one else ever gets cl

her and

to her,

ou have



ally. "Is

By the time Grizz and Dillon roll up in the driveway ten minutes later, Hope has changed the alarm code, and we've both thrown clothes on. They're waiting for us on the front porch, leaving Hope inside with Kieve, who is riled up.

"What happened?" Dillon demands, jogging up the sidewalk toward us. Grizz is hot on his heels, his expression dark.

"Someone threw a rock through the kitchen door." I scrub a hand through my hair, cursing up at the sky. Rain already falls in fat, cold droplets, a precursor to what's to come. It's supposed to rain all week. "They were here before I got downstairs. Left boot prints out back."

"Son of a bitch," Dillon growls. "You see anything?"

"Nothing. Neither did Hope. I still need to check the shop. Figured you could help me clear it."

Dillon's brows furrow. "She didn't have the alarm set?"

"Oh, she had it set. But she isn't the only one with the alarm code."

Dillon gives me a dirty look at him. "You failed to tell me that her goddamn neighbor was basically stalking her."

"Stalking her?" Dillon's eyebrows climb toward his hairline. "You're talking about Silas?"

"The fucker was standing on her front porch when we got home. Apparently, he finds a reason to stop by most days." I'm still pissed at him.

"Didn't seem thrilled when he found out that she has a man."

Dillon's lips curve into a grin. He shakes his head, chuckling. "That's harmless, Callum. He's lived next door her whole life. Aithne Walsh told me to keep an eye on Hope before she died. That's all he's doing."

"If you believe that bullshit, I've got oceanfront property in Arizona for you," I mutter. He's keeping an eye on her all right. But it's not because

grandma asked him to do it. The old bastard wants in her pants. If I'm
as later, for her—and I refuse to think about the fact that she's only twenty-four
I meet thirty-nine—then he's way too fucking old for her. Doesn't change t
up. that he wants her.

ard me. "I'll look into him," Dillon sighs, shaking his head.

I grunt my appreciation. "Look into Thomas Huntington while you'
through That's the name of the fucker Ransom Oil keeps sending around l
rops, a mutter, stomping down the steps to lead him and Grizz out to the shop
re gone can check it. "Hope ran him off the property with a shotgun last time
out here. Told him the only way they were getting the property was o
dead body."

l one of "Jesus Christ," Grizz says, laughing abruptly. "Maybe Cormac shot
her."

I shoot him a glare. He just grins at me, unperturbed.

I shoot "Just saying. She's a badass."

hbor is "A badass likely to get herself killed," Dillon mutters, his tone dar
failed to mention any of this when she filled me in about Ransom Oil."

u mean Why am I not surprised? I should spank her infuriating little a
truthfully, I expected nothing less. There's no way she was going to a
today, the sheriff that she pulled a gun on Huntington. And I'm guessing sh
about it. considered that telling him the only way they were getting the property
she were dead was like waving a flag in front of a bull. She's too go
Silas is innocent.

1 asked I unlocked the shop to check inside while Dillon and Grizz w
perimeter, checking to make sure no one fucked with anything outside
1 to sell in the new alarm code Hope set—her grandfather's birthday—and the
use her a circuit. As far as I can tell, everything is exactly like we left it.

too old And yet...and yet something feels off. I check around Betty car to my looking everything over, but find nothing. I poke through the back the factpacking supplies and the pile of bottles with the same results. There's nothing out here.

Shit, maybe I just need to own the fact that I'm a jealous asshole. I'm here at it like Silas because he wants what belongs to me, plain and simple. I'm here," I make him responsible for any of the shit going on around here.

so we

he was

over her



ould hire

Dillon and Grizz stick around long enough for Dillon to take photos door, collect the rock, and give us a report number, and then they head expect an 'I told you so' when they leave, but Hope simply walks in k. "She arms, snuggling up against my chest.

"I'm glad no one got in the shop," she whispers around a yawn. "Be ss. But expensive. I don't want anyone breaking her."

admit to "I asked Grizz to get someone out here tomorrow to install cameras e never going to put a few outside the shop and the house to help keep an / was if things. We're also going to put up motion lights." I run my hands thro oddamn hair. "I'll look into getting an alarm company out here this week to house wired up."

alk the "I can't afford all of this, Callum."

: I type "Did I say I was charging you, Firefly?"

n make

refully, "You can't just spend that kind of money on me. Are you insane
oxes ofpulls back to look at me like I've lost my mind. "Cameras and alar
nothingmotion lights cost a fortune. I know because I looked!"

Well, damn. Guess I can't tell her that they're cheap then.

I don't "I can afford them, Hope." I snort. "I could buy cameras and alar
Doesn'tmotion lights every fucking day for the next five years and still be fine

"Great," she groans. "You're rich too."

I chuckle, pressing my lips to her forehead. "Try to contain
enthusiasm there, Firefly."

She rolls her eyes at me. "I just mean, of course you're basically the
man. Well, except for the fact that you're bossy. And grumpy. And you
listen. And you're paranoid. And I think maybe you're also crazy, but t
s of theis still out on that one." She bites her lip, looking up at me. "Neve
d out. IMaybe you aren't so perfect."

I growl playfully, snatching her up into my arms.

She laughs, throwing her arms around my shoulders. "I was just kidd
tty was "No, you weren't. You were being honest." It's what I love about her

honesty. She doesn't mince words or tell me what she thinks I want t
. We'reShe tells me exactly what she thinks. A lot of women would fall a

eye onthemselves after hearing that I have money. Not Hope. She bitches abo
ugh her "I don't need your money, Callum. I don't want it. I hired you to do

get thenot to spend money on me," she frets as I carry her upstairs with
following behind.

"I'll make you a deal."

"What kind of deal?" Her eyes narrow on me. "And before y
anything, you should know that I have a shotgun in my bedroom
suggest sleeping with you in exchange for money."

"No. What the fuck?" I scowl at her. "When you sleep with me, it's not a part of any deal, Firefly. It'll be because you can't stand the thought of having me fucking you raw a second longer," I say, holding her gaze. "It won't be a transaction between us. It'll be a revelation."

"Okay," she whispers, her expression softening. "What's your deal then?"
"Sleep with me."

"*An áit thíos atá ceapaithe duit, a dhiabhal,*" she growls. I only understand about half of the fiery words as she spits them at me with her eyes sparkling off sparks, but I'm pretty sure she just told me I belong in hell. She's perfectly right, but not this time.

"I meant *sleep*, Firefly. As in sleep in the bed with me. Get your mind out of the gutter." I shake my head, smiling. Goddamn. Her temper makes my mind dick hard as a rock. I can't wait until she unleashes it on me when she's lying beneath me and at my mercy. "I'm not trying to get you naked. I just want to know where I know you'll be safe."

She eyes me suspiciously, those green eyes narrowed.

"Scout's Honor."

"If you were a Boy Scout, I'm a supermodel," she snorts, relaxing all over her arms.

"Well, damn. Guess I better get your autograph now then."

to a job,

in Kieve

you say

if you

"No. What the fuck?" I scowl at her. "When you sleep with me, it won't be as part of any deal, Firefly. It'll be because you can't stand the thought of not having me fucking you raw a second longer," I say, holding her gaze. "Sex won't be a transaction between us. It'll be a revelation."

"Okay," she whispers, her expression softening. "What's your deal then?"

"Sleep with me."

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She eyes me suspiciously, those green eyes narrowed.

"Scout's Honor."

"If you were a Boy Scout, I'm a supermodel," she snorts, relaxing in my arms.

"Well, damn. Guess I better get your autograph now then."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hope



I wake up with Callum's hard body wrapped around me, his c digging into my back. One hand splays across my chest. The other is b my legs, cupping my center in a possessive hold. As soon as my eyes open, my body temperature rises toward volcanic levels.

Callum Carmichael is in my bed.

His hand is between my thighs.

I bite my lip, trying not to moan out loud. Even though I shou wriggle. I can't help it. I want to know what it feels like for him to to where no one else ever has. I ache to know what it's like to feel his against my sex, pressing deep.

"Firefly." His voice is a gritty rasp against my ear. "Are you trying yourself into trouble this morning?"

"M-maybe."

He palms my breast, flicking one hard nipple as his teeth close aro earlobe. "Then be a fucking good girl and stay still for me," he growl

ear. "Because if you don't, I'm going to flip you onto your stomach and
my kid into you right here and now."

"Callum," I moan, a wave of heat blasting through me at his wicked

He yanks my panties to the side, running his fingers over my vulva.
"You've been grinding that gorgeous ass against me all fucking night.
Do you know how sweet you sound moaning my name in your
Firefly?"

I was moaning for him in my sleep? Oh my God. I don't remember
dreams. All I remember is him. He was everywhere, heating me like
a forge. Driving me crazy. Even in my sleep, my body reacted to him.
In my sleep, I wanted him. Even asleep...I think I'm falling for him.

What is he doing to me?

erection
between
s flutter
"Playing with my pussy," he breathes, using his thumb to part my
"And just so we're clear, this is all mine, Firefly. Every pretty little
Every drop you spill. All of it."

"Callum, please."

"Please, what?"

"Stop teasing me and claim it!" I cry, turned on, frustrated, and im
ouldn't, I
uch me
fingers
If he wants it, it's his. I'm not stopping him. I'm not telling him no. A
point to freaking yes. Just, for the love of all that's holy, make my
before the ache swallows me whole.

g to get
His teeth close around the shell of my ear, delivering a sharp bite
yanks my leg back over his hip at the same time, opening me up to him.
soon as I'm where he wants me, he delivers a little slap to my center.
hand lands against me with a wet smack.

und my
I shout his name, my hips arching toward his hand.

s in my
"Learn to give it up, Hope."

and fuck "G-give what up?"

"Control. Give it to me." His fingers dance around my folds again, s
threat. to where I need them, but not nearly close enough. He's tormenti
vet slit.refusing to give me what I want until I give him what he wants. He's g
it long.keep me right here on the edge until I cede control, willingly allowing
: sleep,slip into my soul.

I resist, not because I want to do it, but because I think he likes it
ber myfight him. He likes that I don't give him what he wants as soon as he d
retal onit. He may want control, but he wants to earn it just as much as I need
1. Evenearn it. I don't trust easily, but with this man? I could easily fall for h
into him. Already, I teeter on the edge, mere centimeters from
headfirst into something vast and terrifying.

y folds. I won't just hand him my heart. I'll give him my soul.

le inch. "Goddamn, Firefly. You drive me fucking crazy." His teeth rake do
side of my throat, his scruff abrading my sensitive skin. He slips h
beneath my shirt to roll one nipple between his fingers. "Do you w
fucking you here and now? Is that it?"

patient. "Callum." I writhe in sweet torment, pleading for mercy. My body b
ll signsI submit to him, giving him the control he craves. I don't care what he
e comeme in this moment just so long as he doesn't stop. "Please. Oh God, ple

"That's it," he croons. "Let me take care of you. You think I won't
ite. Heno, Firefly. When you're in my arms, you'll never go unsatisfied." His
im. Astouches my clit as one finger circles my opening. "Pleasing you will
ter. Hismotherfucking goal in life."

I claw at his arms as he slowly presses his thick finger inside me, g
his thumb against my clit at the same time. The dichotomy of sensa

too much. I'm full and not full enough, burning for more even as p
so close bubbles through my system, popping in my veins.

ng me, "Callum, I'm...I'm..."

going to "Fall, Firefly," he breathes against my ear, thrusting his finger in and
g him to me as his thumb grinds against my clit again and then again. "I'll catch

His lips close around the pulse hammering in my throat. His finger
when I around my nipple.

demands I shatter apart in his arms, crying his name into the room. I fall in
him to trusting him to catch me like he promised he would.

im, fall He doesn't let me down.

falling It's the closest to real magic I've ever come.

It's the closest to perfect I've ever felt.

own the
is hand
want me



ows as "Stop looking at me like that."

does to "Like what?"

ase." "Like that!" I cry, hiding my face in my hands as he smirks at me fi
t? Fuck driver's seat of his truck an hour later.

thumb His wicked laugh rolls over me, making my stomach quiver.

be my I split my fingers apart to peek at him from between them. H
wearing the same grin he's been wearing all morning. He looks like
grinding boy who got into the cookie jar. That crooked smirk is far too sexy on
tions is

pleasure "Pay attention to the road before you get us killed," I demand, pulling my hands from my face when a crack of lightning splits the sky opening up and storming like crazy. Whoever said tornadoes have a season lied. Around here, any season is tornado season if Mother Nature wills it so. I'm just praying for you." "It's been too cold for her to will it to be today. I have work to do."

as close "I'd never risk your life, Firefly." He shoots me a reproachful look.

"I know." I reach across the console of his truck to squeeze his forearm in reassurance. How can I doubt him? He wouldn't even let me go myself to work this morning because of the rain. He was worried about Kieve. "I was just teasing."

We drive in silence the rest of the way to my shop downtown. Instead of pulling into the parking lot, Callum pulls right up to the front door and hops out before circling around to my side to help me and Kieve out.

"You go in out of the rain, Firefly. I'll carry your shit inside."

It's such a small thing, but the gesture makes my heart flutter. I don't know where this man came from or how he ended up in my path. I don't think anything to deserve him. But, please God, can I keep him?

I secure a grumbling Kieve under one arm to unlock the door and hurry through out of the rain. Even though there's an awning over the door, it's not doing much good with the wind whipping rain every which way there.

My foot slips on a piece of paper that was shoved through the mail slot. I bend down to set Kieve on his feet and pick it up, not even looking at it a little before I hurry to disarm the alarm system.

him. Kieve jumps up on the door, looking out at the rain. He whines softly.

"Sorry, little guy. There's nothing I can do about it. You'll just have to stay out in here with us today," I tell him, moving to the counter to drop a

ling my and the flyer that was in the floor. Only when I lay it on the counter, I
en. It's name written across the top in a messy scrawl.

nd here, **Hope**

ying it's **You were warned but you continue to defy. Consider this your
chance to save yourself. Close up shop and stop selling the wate
your witchcraft. You won't like what comes next.**

uscular My hands shake as I read the note, bile climbing up my throat. H
ie drivesting my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Whoever is doing this
out medeserve my tears, not even angry, defiant ones.

The bell over the front door chimes. I nearly jump out of my skin.
stead of "It's raining like a motherfucker out there," Callum mutters, ar
nd then catches sight of my face. His expression turns stony. He's across the
my side in three steps. "What happened?"

I hold the letter out toward him, hating the way my hands tremble.
't know "Son of a bitch." He drops the letter, dragging me into his arms.
nk I didaren't going to get close to you, Firefly. I'll destroy anyone who
tries." Pure murder seethes in his tone, vibrating just below the surface
nd then "It's not witchcraft," I mumble. "The poems I sell with the wate
ie door, spells. They're just kitschy love poems. The crystals and gemstor
vay out remedies...all of those are things my family brought over from Irela
grandpa grew most of the flowers and herbs. My granny taught me
I slot. I mix the salves and ointments. It's herbal remedies, that's it."

ng at it "I know, baby. I know."

"I don't understand why someone is doing this. Why do they hate
y. much? I'm just trying to survive. Is that so wrong?"

to hang "Fuck no," he rasps in my ear, tilting my head back until my wate
ry keys meet his. "You don't deserve any of this, Hope. Whoever is doing

see my doing it because you deserve it. It's not because of anything you sell
shop or because of who you are. It's because of what they want from
They're trying to break you down so you have nowhere to turn except
for final them."

er and Would Silas really do all of this just because he has a thing for me?
imagine it...but maybe that's because I don't *want* to imagine it. I've
not tearshim since I was ten years old. The fact that he has a crush on me makes
doesn't skin crawl, but I never thought he was dangerous. Maybe I just didn't
though. Maybe I'm just as blind as my mom was.

Or maybe it is Thomas Huntington, trying to force me into selling my
and then If he takes my business from me, I won't have a choice but to sell. Is
shop to one trying to destroy me? Would his company go that far to get my
land? I don't know.

"They miscalculated, Firefly." Callum runs his thumb across my
lip, his expression soft. "Whoever it was thought they could scare you
fucking running to them, but you don't break easily. You don't scare easily. You
need anyone to save you. You save yourself."

He's right...but he's wrong too.

"I've always relied on myself. I didn't have a choice." I swallow the
word. Myin my throat. "My granny was diagnosed with terminal liver disease
how to was fourteen. The first few years were okay. She didn't need much help
by the time I finished high school, I took care of her more than she took
of me. There wasn't anyone else to step in and do it. We barely scraped
me so but we made it.

"Her life insurance helped ensure I wouldn't end up on the streets
ry eyesable to pay her medical bills, buy Betty, and lease the shop downtown
it isn't

in thislose it, I'll lose everything, Callum." Tears well in my eyes, spillin
m you."That's why I went to Cormac. This time, I can't save myself."

cept to "You don't have to, Hope." He cups my cheeks, collecting the te
spill down my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. "I'm right here, a
? I can'tnot going anywhere. They can't break you. I'll crawl through hell b
knownallow that to happen."

kes my I want to ask why he's willing to fight so hard for me...but I alread
t see it,the answer to that question. It's right there in his eyes, reflecting back
like stars.

ry land. He's in love with me.

s he the

family's

bottom

ou into

ou don't

ie lump

when I

elp. But

ok care

ped by,

s. I was

wn. If I

lose it, I'll lose everything, Callum." Tears well in my eyes, spilling over. "That's why I went to Cormac. This time, I can't save myself."

"You don't have to, Hope." He cups my cheeks, collecting the tears that spill down my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. "I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere. They can't break you. I'll crawl through hell before I allow that to happen."

I want to ask why he's willing to fight so hard for me...but I already know the answer to that question. It's right there in his eyes, reflecting back at me like stars.

He's in love with me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Callum



Once Hope calms down, she retreats to the stockroom to get some things done while I start going through the security camera footage to see what I can find. I also call Dillon so he can send someone over to pick up the necklace. He tells me to put it aside, stop touching it, and he'll be here to get it before noon.

I texted Finn before we left the house to ask him to look into Sienna's situation in Huntington. Since his wife is eight months pregnant, they didn't want to go to Daytona with the rest of the MC. His office isn't far from here, so he should be able to stop by this morning so we can talk. I'm still going through the security camera footage when he raps on the door.

I pause the video feed and scoop Kieve up from the floor before she can get to the door to let him in. The shop won't open for another hour, but Kieve works her ass off. She's here early every day to package orders that need to be mailed out to online customers and do the eighty other things that come with running a business.

Kieve growls at Finn when he ducks through the door into the shop, cursing when his glasses immediately fog up. He pulls them from his eyes, eyeing the little dog in my arms with a shit-eating grin.

"A Chihuahua?"

"He thinks he's a goddamn Malinois," I mutter, scratching behind his ear. "Don't try to pet him. He may try to take a finger off."

Finn chuckles, glancing around the shop. "Been wondering what time you were in here. Scarlett is fascinated by all the crystals in the window. Is your granddaughter owns the place, right?"

I don't bother to ask how he knows that. Even if this weren't Silver Falls where everyone knows everyone, Finn would know. Every governmental agency from here to Japan has tried to hire him at one time or another. He can hack his way into anything.

"Yeah, Hope." I carry Kieve across the shop and deposit him behind the counter before locking the gate. He barks at Finn once and then discovers the bone he abandoned last night and launches himself at it. "She's the reason you called you, actually."

"Figured as much. Cormac said you were taking her case while you were in Florida." He picks an amethyst geode up from a shelf, hefting it in his hand. "What's up, brother? What do you need?"

"I need you to look into a couple of people for me. Her neighbors, Wembley, and Thomas Huntington, who works for Ransom Oil. Both of them have been making nuisances of themselves."

"Ransom Oil." His expression hardens. "They're sniffing around?"

"They want her property," I confirm. "Her grandmother struck oil decades ago. I guess they caught wind of it and have been hounding her to sell. She's not interested."

e shop, "They've got a reputation." Finn sets the geode back on the shelf. His face, were run out of Midland because of the way they went about buying property from competitors. It cost them millions when it went to court.

"Did they get aggressive?"

his ears. "They got dirty," he says carefully. "Tried to compromise operation of their guys was convicted on racketeering charges."

he fuck "Jesus." I blow out a breath. "How long ago was this?"

Aithne's "Ten, fifteen years ago?" Finn rubs his jaw. "It's been a hot minute remember it because I did some work for the other company a few years ago. Spoonand came across some of the records when I was pillaging their system." Silas damngrins, his eyes dancing with humor. "I always get the good shit."

a point. "I know. That's why I need you now." I grab a pen from the pen case and use it to drag the letter across the counter for him to read. "This was the letter we found when we got here this morning. Don't touch it. Dillon needs to run the prints." "I know. That's why I need you now."

reason I He leans over the counter, his eyes scanning across the note.

Christ," he growls, his expression darkening. "Who the fuck leaves so much information in like that for a woman?"

hands. "That's exactly what I'd like to know. Dillon is doing what he can, but he's bound by the law. You aren't." I let that hang, knowing I don't need anything else. He knows exactly what I'm asking him to do. It's not that I don't have time. Hell, I doubt it'll be the last time, either. Sometimes, the only way you can protect the people who need protecting is to navigate around the law.

Hacking isn't legal. But every law enforcement agency in the country would hesitate before hauling Finn in on charges. That's the kind of leverage I need that right now. Before the motherfucker terrorizing my daughter has a chance to get close to her again.

"They "Give me a few days," Finn says without hesitation. "If there's anything upfind, I'll find it."

"

ns. One



. I only "What was Finn doing here?" Dillon asks half an hour later, stomping his backshop like he owns the place.

m." He "Shopping," I say, which is only partially a lie. He left here with a stuff for his wife. "His wife likes the crystals in the window."

cup and "You really think you can sell me that oceanfront property in A waitingdon't you?" Dillon cocks a brow at me, letting me know he isn't buy n it forbullshit. "What was he really doing here, Callum?"

"His wife likes the crystals in the window. If you hurry, I'm sure y "Jesusmake it out there in time to check his receipt."

me shit Dillon hits me with a hard look, the one they perfect in cop schoo both know you're full of shit," he growls. "How about you tell me w but he'sasked him to look into and save me the trouble of doing it myself?"

l to say "Fuck" I curse. "You just can't leave shit alone, can you? He's looki he firsteveryone on my fucking list—Silas, Huntington, and Ransom Oil."

way wehim a baleful glare. "You might want to do some digging on Rans w. while you're at it. They were run out of Midland, Texas fifteen years countrypulling shit like this."

pull he He grunts, reaching into his pocket to pull out a pair of gloves. "Let womanthe note you found this morning."

thing to I slide it across the counter toward him using the same pen from ear

"I assume you touched it?"

"So did Hope."

"Anyone else?"

"Nope."

He picks it up, scanning it. "Does she recognize the handwriting?"

"No."

into the "I'll get it to our fingerprint tech and see if he can pull anything fi

He pulls a bag from his pocket and flips it out before sliding the letter
bag of "Find anything in the security footage?"

"Yeah." I queue up the footage of the note being delivered and pla
rizona, him. An hour before someone threw a rock through her window, a teen
ing mya dark hoodie walks into frame with his head down. He slips the note t
the mail slot, then walks out of frame in almost the same place he ente

you can A few seconds later, headlights beam across the front of the buildin
small sliver of a small passenger car's fender and taillight can be se
ol. "We car is a dark color, blue or black, maybe. But the taillight is busted.

who you It's not much to go on, but it's better than nothing. A teenager dri
small passenger car with a busted taillight is a starting point.

ing into connection to whoever the fuck wrote that note.

I shoot "I'll get my guys on it." And then he frowns. "Where is Hope?"

om Oil "In the back." I sigh wearily. She's been hiding out there all mornin;
ago for to go get her to ring Finn up. As soon as she was done, she fled back
stockroom. I don't know what's going on in her head, but it's driv
me see fucking crazy. Every damn wall I knocked down yesterday feels like i
rebuilt and buttressed since she found that damn note.

She's scared and trying like hell not to let me see it.

lier. I can't miss it, though. Her fear burns like acid running through my
And there isn't a goddamn thing I can do about it beyond what I'm
doing. It doesn't feel like enough. Not even close.

"Find them, Dillon," I growl, not sure if it's a demand or a plea. "What
the fuck is behind this...I need you to help me find them."

He places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing. "We will, brother."

"Do you know what happened between her parents?" I ask after a moment
from it." glancing up at him.

inside. He jerks his chin in a nod. "Yeah, I'm familiar." His gaze runs across
face. "Why? You want to know what happened?"

ly it for "No. She'll tell me when she's ready to trust me with that part of her
rager injust need to know... Did he hurt her too?" The question that's been eating
through me ever since she told me what happened to her mom escapes in a
red. rasp. "Did he... *Fuck*. Did he try to kill her too?"

g and a "No," she whispers from behind us.

en. The I spin around to find her standing in the doorway, her face pale
fathomless eyes wide.

iving a "Firefly." I reach for her, but she evades me, stepping backward.

He's a "He didn't hurt me."

"I should go," Dillon mutters. "I'll call if I find anything. Send me
of the security footage when you can. I'll try to track the kid down."

g. I had "Will do."

k to the He beats a hasty retreat as Hope and I stare at each other in silence.

ing me "I wasn't prying."

t's been "We should go," she says at the same time.

"Go?" My brows pull down, confusion running through me. "Go
Firefly?"

y veins. "Home." She wraps her arms around herself. "I completed the already orders, and the weather is keeping everyone inside today. I'll get more in the shop at home than I will here."

However "Are you sure?"

She nods.

I hesitate for a moment and then reluctantly give in. "Let's go home now, baby. We can talk when we get there."

Across my



story. I

staring at

painful Hope tries to evade me when we get home. As soon as I pull up behind the car, she's got Kieve in her arms, trying to climb from the truck.

I throw it in park, kill the engine, and hop out, circling around to the back. Her off on the sidewalk. Rain sheets down around us, drenching us both.

Kieve shivers in her arms, cold and miserable. She looks miserable to me. Poor little firefly.

"Come on. Inside with you," I murmur, scooping them both up in my arms to carry them the rest of the way to the door.

I set her on her feet on the porch, keeping my arms around her. She unlocks the door. Droplets of water roll down her chilled skin. He clings to her body. Even with her hair plastered to her head, she's the prettiest little firefly I've ever seen.

Kieve takes off for his pile of blankets beside the sofa as soon as she crosses the threshold, burrowing in with loud complaints. No one ever

onlinehim of suffering in silence.

re done I need to make sure they have umbrellas and raincoats next time.

Hope starts in his direction and then spins to face me. "He shot her l she was planning to take me and leave," she says, her voice shaking gotten addicted to painkillers and was becoming volatile. Little things ie then,off. He locked me in my room one day while she was at work and w let me out. When she found out, she was furious. She didn't trust him v anymore, so she was planning to leave. He found out."

"Jesus."

"You asked if he hurt me. He didn't in the way you meant it." She her arms around herself, shivering. "But yeah, he hurt me, Callum. I school with two parents and came home with one in heaven and one ind herfor hell. I haven't spoken to him since that day."

I stride across the small foyer toward her, unable to keep my dist cut herthe face of her pain. She allows me to pull her into my arms, thou stands stiffly.

too. "I stopped believing in fairytales and happily-ever-afters that da whispers against my throat. "I never wanted to believe again. But...the nto mywas you."

I tip her chin up until her eyes meet mine. "What are you saying, Fir as she "You make me want to believe in forever, Callum." Her throat wo er shirteyes bottomless pools I could easily drown in and never even miss c prettiest"For the first time since I was ten, I believe in fairytales again."

"Jesus," I breathe, my voice shaking. I feather my fingers acro s we'recheeks, staring at her in awe. She's so goddamn brave. I've known s accusedwho have cracked under a tenth of the weight placed on her c shoulders, but not Hope. She carries her trauma, her fears, the c

weight of what's happening to her, and every responsibility placed with her head held high. She doesn't bow beneath the weight. She becausebreak. She soldiers on.

}. "He'd "I need you."

set him "You have me, Firefly. You'll always have me." I press my mouth wouldn'tsealing my promise with a kiss. The heat between us grows, flames e with meto life as soon as she presses those sweet curves against me.

"Then make me yours, Callum," she whispers, commanding me to g what she wants. "Make love to me."

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weight of what's happening to her, and every responsibility placed on her with her head held high. She doesn't bow beneath the weight. She doesn't break. She soldiers on.

"I need you."

"You have me, Firefly. You'll always have me." I press my mouth to hers, sealing my promise with a kiss. The heat between us grows, flames erupting to life as soon as she presses those sweet curves against me.

"Then make me yours, Callum," she whispers, commanding me to give her what she wants. "Make love to me."

Who the fuck am I to tell her no?

CHAPTER NINE

Hope



Callum sweeps me up into his arms, pressing his lips to mine as he carries me upstairs to my room. I shiver in his arms, but I'm not cold anymore. The chill left me as soon as he touched me. How can it withstand the flame of his touch? Nothing can. I melt to him, igniting all the way to my core. I want and need.

"Callum..." *I love you* is on the tip of my tongue, but the words stick in my throat, caught there by the fierce devotion in his eyes. It turns the air to emerald lush, like Ireland...the land that still beats in my blood. It beats in me too. I feel it in him, the magic. The fiery spirit. The unending capacity for good.

He's all those things.

Rain pelts the tin roof of the old farmhouse overhead as he carries me to the bedroom, each drop sounding like the discordant note of a long-forgotten song. It's captivating. Or maybe that's just the man wrapped around me, his rich scent intoxicating my senses.

"If it weren't storming, I'd put you in the shower," he murmurs, sliding down his body until I land on my feet in front of him. He runs his hands down my arms as if to warm me. "Pamper you the way you deserve."

"You already do that."

A crooked grin dances at his lips as he brushes my tangled hair away from my face. "Get used to it, Firefly. I plan to do a lot of it."

"I've never had that before," I admit, though I'm guessing he already knows how. "I might be bad at it."

He chuckles, his breath pelting my lips. "Baby, I already know you're bad at letting yourself be cared for, but that's all right. You'll learn."

"Yeah? You're going to teach me?"

"Mmhmm." He bumps his nose against mine, reaching for the hem of my shirt. "Starting right now." Even though he saw me practically naked yesterday and had his hands on my intimate places today, I still squirm when he pulls my shirt off over my head before tossing it toward the bathroom. It lands on the floor with a wet plop.

His eyes flare with heat as he dips his head, settling his lips against the hollow of my collarbone.

I groan, digging my hands into his muscular upper arms to keep myself upright as he sucks right there, licking up rain drops from my skin.

"Delicious," he breathes, reaching for the clasp of my bra. He unfastens it with nimble fingers, peeling the lace fabric from my body.

As soon as it falls to the floor, I grasp the hem of his shirt, sliding it over my head. He helps me pull it off over his head, tossing it in the forgotten direction mine went.

I run my hands down his bare chest, marveling at the way he tenses beneath my touch. He feels me just as acutely as I do him. He aches

ling me just as much as I do for him.

s hands We explore each other in silence as we strip, working together to shed wet jeans clinging to our legs. By the time we're naked, I'm a quivering

"Beautiful," he growls, stepping back to look at me.

ay from If I'm beautiful, he's transcendent, like an ancient Celtic warrior. His torso is hewn from thick, corded muscle. His stomach isn't defined but only a knowsslab. The muscles in his arms and legs stand in testament to the sheer power of this man. And his erection....

i're bad I reach out, running my fingers down his thick shaft.

"Firefly," he groans, throwing his head back.

"You're so hard." I step closer, wrapping my hand around his cock. I'm trying to, anyway. My fingers don't touch. I think that should prove intimidating to me, but it doesn't. I want to know what it's like to have his hands on me. Will it burn? Will it ache? Will he split me wide open? I want to find out.

ay head A painful laugh rattles from his lips. "Believe me, baby, I'm aware of my hardness. I've been that way since I met you. Ah, God. Squeeze just like that." He rocks his hips into my hand, writhing in ecstasy. His eyes are at half-mast, but he's riveted to the sight of my hand on his cock. "Christ, I could come just from myself watching you jack my cock, Firefly."

"Yeah?" I sink to my knees at his feet, putting myself at eye level with his erection. "And what if I do this, Callum?" I lean forward, flicking my tongue out to lick the broad head. His taste erupts on my tastebuds, satisfying my senses. It's so masculine. I groan and inch forward, wrapping my lips around him.

ie same "Ah, goddamn, Firefly." He spears his hands into my hair, his fingers tugging at the tangles. "You're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

rembles I moan around him.

for me, "Watch your teeth, baby," he groans, instructing me on what

"Hollow your cheeks and suck when you plunge down. Fuck. Yeah, just suck that." His hand tightens in my hair, his breath turning to a ragged mess. "Goddamn, you learn quick."

Pride roars through me at his praise. I press my legs together, his body between them driving me crazy as I lick and suck, exploring him in the hard that's new and exciting and far sexier than I ever imagined. He's completely in control at my mercy like this and yet...and yet somehow, he still manages to be in control as he thrusts between my lips.

I should hate it. I don't cede control or give it up to anyone. But I don't want to be in control. I want to hand it over and let him lead. I try my best to lengthen to take care of me. I fall backward into the loss of inhibition, reveling in the freedom it brings with it.

I plunge down again, taking him deeper. He hits the back of my head, choking me. For just a moment, he holds me there. My throat closes around him. My eyes water.

"I feel you choking on my cock, Hope." He rocks his hips in tiny pulses, his gaze like it more than I should.

So do I. Oh, God. So do I.

Unable to resist, I slip a hand between my legs, touching myself, trying to relieve the ache there.

Callum roars, jerking backward. The next thing I know, I'm on my back on the bed with him on top of me, my legs spread wide around his hips. He glares down at me. "You touched my pussy."

"I...I..." I break off, writhing in torment.

"No one pleases you but me, Hope," he growls, his eyes on fire. "I don't want to touch what belongs to me. Not even you." He nips my throat, capturing my hands in one of his to pin them to the bed above my head. The other

ust likedown my abdomen before slipping between my thighs to part my d pant."When this perfect cunt aches, you come to me."

"Yes!" I agree as his thumb settles against my clit. "Yes, Callum." e throb He plays with me until I'm sobbing, his eyes locked on mine, c i a waypieces of my soul. Possessing it. Or maybe it was his all along a mpletelymerely taking ownership. I don't know. But he's in there, branding eve o be thecorner with his name and his touch. And when I can't stand any more wicked torment, he pulls his hand away, kissing a hot trail down my be n him, I He rakes his teeth down my lower belly. Kisses my mound. His eye ust himas they meet mine. "Sing for me, Firefly," he breathes, lifting me tow g in themouth.

I don't sing. I drown in his arms. His tongue spears through my fold throat,find heaven. It's right here in this bed with him. It's his mouth on i aroundhands vises around my hips. His possessive growl ringing out around u He licks and sucks and bites, snarling as he eats me alive. The vit ilses. "Iagainst my core add to the pleasure wracking my body, ratcheting notch. He increases it a thousandfold when he works two fingers ins thrusting and stroking.

ying to I sob and cry, babbling his name so loud it drowns out the storm o As my orgasm nears, I fight like hell to hold it off, not wanting this oack onBut Callum knows what I'm doing. Somehow, he always sees me so cl s as he "Let go, Firefly," he demands, his voice a gritty rasp of sound. "Yo control what happens here. I do. You don't decide when you come or f long, I do. Let go."

No one "Callum," I plead, begging him to let me stay just like this. ring my "Now, Firefly." His lips seam around my clit, sucking it into his r rakesHis fingers curl up, stroking some magical spot inside.

7 folds. I scream in defiance. I scream in ecstasy. I scream in submission
break, shattering into tiny pieces for him. Wave after wave batters me
ground, unmaking me at the cellular level.

laiming I emerge on the other side gasping for breath, trembling...stronger.
nd he's "Beautiful." Callum presses his lips to mine as he settles between my
ry darknotching his erection at my entrance. "My fierce little queen."

e of his If I'm a queen, it's because he makes me feel like one.

ody. "Are you ready to be mine?"

es glow "I'm already yours, Callum."

ard his "Yeah. You are." His smile lights up every corner of the room be
surges forward, pushing into me. His expression changes from joy to

s, and I as he slips inside, stretching me. He thrusts deep, sheathing himself inside
me, his I dig my nails into his shoulders, throwing my head back to cry his

is. into the room as he tears through my virgin barrier. There's pain. But
orations beauty too. They're tied so tightly together, one fuses with the other, p
it up each stroke of his body into mine with ropes of each.

ide me, "Ah, Jesus, Firefly." His breath trembles at my lips, agony in his

"You're so fucking tight. Every time you breathe, you squeeze my cock
outside. you're trying to brand him with your name."

to end. "M-maybe I am." I drag my nails down his upper arms.

early. He presses his lips to my ear, nipping my lobe. "You don't have to
ou don't him to claim him, sweet Hope. He already belongs to you. No one e
for however touch what belongs to you." He rolls us suddenly so I'm straddling

lap with my hands planted on his chest. "Now, ride me. I want to hear
ass clapping against my thighs every time you land."

mouth. Oh, sweet Jesus.

I lift up tentatively and then slide back down, trying to work out a r

. And IHe helps guide me, using his hands on my hips to rock me against hi
e to theso much deeper this way, grinding against my cervix every time I dro
on him. The small bite of pain bleeds into pleasure, sending me reeli
another dimension.

ny legs, I learn quickly. Within moments, I'm lifting up and dropping back d
him, riding him hard. He growls encouragements, his eyes at half-ma
watches me in complete rapture.

"Such a fucking good girl." He bucks his hips to bounce me harder
at you taking this dick like you were born to fuck."

fore he "Callum." I claw at his thighs, his filthy mouth threatening to unrave
rapture "I feel your cunt fluttering, Hope. You're going to come, aren't you?

side. "Yes. God, yes," I cry, riding him hard. My ass lands against his
s namehard enough to sting as I slam myself down on him, chasing the p
: there'slooming like a wall directly ahead. I don't fight it this time. What's the
aintingHe won't let me. As soon as I try, he'll punish me for it.

"Good."

is tone. I cry out as I go flying through the air, landing face down on t
ock likeBefore my cry even ends, he's on me again, roughly shoving his way b
my legs from behind. His body covers mine, pinning me to the be
thrusts into me hard.

o brand "You're going to come just like this, Firefly," he breathes in r
lse willyanking my hips up slightly so my ass is in the air and my upper l
ling hisprostrate on the bed. "I want you to feel me all the way in your fucki
ar yourwhen I'm putting my kid in you."

I sob his name, clutching at the sheets as he pounds into me, or
wrapped in my hair. The other runs down my body, touching me every
hythm.He torments me as he fucks me, teasing me mercilessly. I writhe a

m. He's unable to move more than an inch or two because he's got me pinned down.

ng into It should frighten me. It should piss me off. But it doesn't.

everything about his weight on top of me. I love having no control. I own on being able to do nothing but take what he gives me. I love him. God as he him so much it's terrifying and not nearly terrifying enough at the same

The orgasm slams into me like a tidal wave crashing into the shore. "Look upon me beneath its might, shouting his name to the heavens. He roars back to me, falling still above me as his body jerks and wetness splashes on me. No, not wetness. Him. His erection jerks as his seed splashes against my womb.

his thighs "Perfect," he groans in my ear, kissing all over the back of my neck. I writhe in ecstasy. "Fucking perfect, Firefly."

point? I'm not sure if he's talking about me or the moment. I'm not sure it matters. In this moment, I think he's right on both counts. I feel perfect. This is perfect. It's magic...the fairytale kind.

he bed. He falls beside me, dragging me into his arms with his cock still inside. His chest heaves as he sucks in deep breaths, nuzzling his face into my neck from behind. "Never letting you go, sweet Hope. Never."

In this moment, I discover something else I lost too. *Hope*. The first threads of it bloom in my heart, growing rapidly. Somehow, I'm going to make it through this. For him, I'll find a way.

ng soul

ie hand

where.

nd sob,



med in "Get out!" I shout, marching toward the door of my shop when T

Huntington steps through the front doors late the next afternoon. "O
I love out!"

. I love "Miss Byrne." He holds his hands up in a placating gesture as Kiev
, I love barking up a storm from behind the counter. "I didn't come here to
e time. problem. I just came to talk."

shore. I "I believe she made it clear when she threatened to shoot your sc
rs mine that she wasn't interested in what you had to say." Callum steps up be
lls into with his arms crossed over his chest. He angles his body so he's p
inst my blocking me from view, protecting me with his body.

Thomas glances from me to Callum, his Good Ole' Boy smile
k as we display. It's a load of crap, of course. Thomas Huntington is nothin
bully in a suit. He may hide it behind bright white veneers and
re if it injections, but he's a thug.

ct. And If anyone is responsible for trying to destroy my business, it's h
stake my life on it. He wants my land and he'll do whatever it takes t
ide me. for his company. Just like he does to every other property owner w
y throat what he wants. There's a reason people sell to him. He hounds them

And when that doesn't work, he finds other ways to get what he wants.
: fragile Ransom Oil doesn't play fair. I doubt they even know the definition.
oing to But they picked the wrong woman this time. There are no looph
exploit to get their dirty hands on my property. It's been in my fan
generations, and Silver Spoon Falls protects its property owners spec
so companies like Ransom Oil can't come in and do what they do in
other town to run residents off. Sometimes, living in a town
millionaires and billionaires pays off.

Thomas "Hello," Thomas says to Callum, thrusting out a hand toward him, out, Thomas Huntington with Ransom Oil."

"Callum Carmichael." Callum doesn't take his hand. "I know who you're starting. You've been harassing my woman about her property for months because she's telling you she isn't interested in selling."

"So you two have discussed it."

"You mean have we discussed the fact that you've continually trespassed on her property? Yeah, we've discussed it." Callum takes a threatening step toward him. "You won't listen to her. I guess she doesn't have the appendage between her legs for a man like you to hear her, so listen on full Huntington. She said no. N-fucking-O. She isn't selling to you or anyone else." He pauses. "And just so we're clear, should anything happen to her, Botox still won't get your fucking hands on the property. Her will makes it clear that the property will go to her cousin, Dante Arakas."

Thomas's smile slides from his face. "Dante Arakas is your cousin?"
"Yes," I lie, not sure what Callum is doing, but playing along anyway. "Who has my dad's side."

Thomas nods, his expression troubled. "Well, I guess if that's the decision," he sighs heavily, reaching into his pocket to pull out another business cards he's left me. "Here's my card if you change your mind. I'll get it to Byrne."

"I won't."

Callum takes the card from him anyway, tucking it into his pocket.

We watch in silence as Thomas exits the shop.

"Dante Arakas is my cousin?" I arch a brow at him. "What are you doing now, Callum?"

"Protecting what belongs to me, Firefy." He tugs me into my arms.

m. "I'm sure the ones behind the attacks, they're a helluva lot less likely to try you if they think they'll have to fight Dante Arakas if anything happens to you. You're one woman. He's the biggest criminal in Texas. Who do you think they think they stand a better chance of talking down?"

I chew on my bottom lip, staring up at him. "What happens when I'm running to Dante to confirm your story?"

He passed "I'll call Cormac." Callum shrugs. "Dante's niece is married to his long stepbrother. He'll float the story with Dante and make sure he's on board. He might be a criminal, but he's not a bad guy. Once he knows what's happened, he'll play along." He must read the skepticism on my face because he leans in to place a kiss on my lips. "It'll be fine, Firefly. I don't need it to last forever. Just long enough for Finn and Dillon to find something."

Crystal I exhale a breath, nodding.

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"If they

are the ones behind the attacks, they're a helluva lot less likely to try to hurt you if they think they'll have to fight Dante Arakas if anything happens to you. You're one woman. He's the biggest criminal in Texas. Who do you think they think they stand a better chance of talking down?"

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I exhale a breath, nodding.

CHAPTER TEN

Callum



"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" I growl, glaring balefully at the man standing on Hope's porch with his fingers hooked into the pocket of his blue jeans like he's some goddamn real cowboy.

It's been three days since Thomas Huntington showed up at Hope's. Finn hasn't found anything yet. Neither has Dillon. But Cormac was able to get Dante Arakas on board with fucking over Ransom Oil if they're sniffing around him. Once he heard what was happening, he agreed that Hope is a cousin. I doubt Huntington has the balls to approach Dante on the off chance he does, our bases are covered.

As soon as we got home that night, Grizz and I spent half the night setting up the property and installing cameras and motion lights. Imagine my goddamn surprise when Silas Wembley waltzed onto the front porch yesterday to filch the package that was delivered.

He beat a hasty retreat back to his place with it. Hope doesn't know she hasn't seen the footage. I don't intend to show it to her, but I changed t

on her shop as soon as we got back from her store last night. I expect to find his ass waiting for her when we got home today, but I guess he's busy.

That's all right. He's here now. And Hope is occupied in the kitchen. I yank the door open to glower at him. "Can I help you?"

"Oh." Silas seems taken aback by my presence, as if he didn't see me parked in the damn driveway. He quickly plasters a smile on his face to hide the moment of surprise. "You're here again."

"Been here all week."

A split second of irritation flashes through his eyes before he schoons his expression. "Is Hope busy? I have another package for her. I was going to leave it in the shop, but my key isn't working."

"Changed the locks." I step outside, pulling the door closed behind me before Kieve realizes he's here and tries to escape. Hope told me he doesn't care for Silas. As far as I'm concerned, that tells me all I need to know about the man. "Changed the alarm code too."

"Ah. Well, if you'll just get Hope, I'll get the new information from her." he says, stepping back beside the package he left sitting on the porch.

"Yeah, that won't be happening." I lean against the door, shooting him a hard look. "Any packages left at your place can be delivered to the front porch from now on. I'll make sure they get put where they need to be."

"I see." His false smile slides from his face. "Is Hope aware of this arrangement?"

"She's the one who changed the alarm code."

"Well, then." He grits his teeth, though I think he intends to smile. "I suppose I'll get out of here and be about my business then."

"You do that," I say quietly.

ected to He eyes me for a moment as if he wants to say something and then he was against it before turning to start down the steps.

"By the way," I say before he gets halfway down the sidewalk. "I in cameras on the property the day before yesterday. Fascinating how they pick up." I let that hang in the air for a minute before I continue y truck another package from her porch or show up here again making a nuis , trying yourself, and you'll be explaining the footage to the sheriff."

"I was just trying to help her out."

"No, you weren't. You were trying to get in her fucking pants. S ools his interested. She'll never be interested. You watched her grow up, fo oing to sake. Stay away from her," I growl. "That's the only warning I'm g give you."

ind me He cowers like I just kicked him in the teeth. "Fine."

doesn't I stick around long enough to make sure he leaves and then scoop w about package and head inside. Hope may kick my ass when she finds out just did, but it had to be done. The fucker was stealing her mail just to m her," back to her. That's fucking weird no matter how you slice it.

I'm half convinced he isn't behind the attacks, though. I haven't g him aruled him out yet, but part of me thinks maybe Hope is right and he' nt doorpevy old man with a crush. Christ. I hope that's all he is. Otherwise kicked a hornet's nest.

his new "There you are," Hope says when I carry her package into the l depositing it on the counter. "Who was at the door?"

"Silas." I step up behind her at the stove, placing a kiss on the side nile. "I throat as I wrap my arms around her from behind. "He dropped o package."

"Oh." She shrinks in my arms. "Was he mad about the shop?"

decides "He stole the package from your porch yesterday, Firefly," I t
quietly.

nstalled She spins to face me, shock written all over her face. "He didn't."

v much "He did. I caught it on camera."

. "Steal Her face falls and then she groans, faceplanting into my chest. "I
ance ofsay I'm surprised, but nothing surprises me anymore. He's always bee

She lifts her head to look at me. "I still don't think he's the one trying
me though, Callum. I think he's just Silas." She scrunches up her fac
he isn'tweird that I'm relieved the carrier isn't delivering my packages to the
r fuck'splace?"

oing to "Nah, Firefly. The only thing weird here is your fucking pervert neig
"Callum."

"He watched you grow up, he's nearly forty years older than you, a
o up thebasically stalking you. It's fucking weird, Firefly. I'm just calling it lil
what Iit," I murmur, tucking her hair behind her ears.

bring it "It is weird," she mumbles.

"He won't be a problem anymore."

entirely "You threatened him, didn't you?"

s just a "I simply reminded him that mail theft is a crime and I have footage

e, I just "So you threatened him."

"Pretty much." I shrug, unrepentant. I never promised to fight
kitchen,promised to keep her safe. I'll do whatever I have to do to protect her,
it means holding that footage over that fucker's head until the day he d

e of her She shakes her head, laughing quietly.

ff your I press my lips to her forehead and then shuffle her to the side.

down and let me finish dinner, baby. Then I'm going to take you upsta
have you for dessert."

tell her "Maybe I'll have you for dessert, Callum Carmichael," she retorts with her hands on her wide hips and fire in her eyes.

"Well, shit. In that case, maybe we'll skip dinner."

want to
n odd."
to hurt
e. "Is it



is wrong"More," Hope moans, writhing against the shower wall as I pound in
running my finger in circles around her clit at the same time. "Oh
ghbor." Callum. More."

I roar her name and give her everything I have, fucking her so hard
and he's balls slap against her slippery skin with a resounding smack on every
eye I seeShe claws down my back, shouting my name with her head thrown
against the shower wall.

"Come, Firefly. Christ. I need you to fucking come." I bend myself
forward, closing my teeth around one hard nipple.

She shouts my name, exploding around me.

"I practically sob in relief as my balls give up the fight and I follow her to
the edge, locking my legs to keep from collapsing in a heap on the floor
fair. In the shower. She feels too fucking good when she's wrapped around
even if dripping all over my balls, squeezing my cock in a vise.

ies. I can't stay out of her. I fucked her after dinner last night, and again
we went to sleep. As soon as she climbed into the shower with me, I
"Go sit her again, pressing her back against the wall. She's got my dick
in her and

arts, her permanent state of arousal. Every move she makes has me ready aching like a motherfucker to feel her wrapped around me again.

I stopped falling for her days ago. I landed face-first into love, waiting for the perfect moment to tell her, hoping the sword hanging c head will disappear soon. But I'm fucking tired of waiting. Every r with her is perfect. I'm more alive with her than I've ever been. Toda Patrick's Day. If any day is fitting to tell her she has my heart, it's this any moment is perfect, it's this one. When she's wrapped around me, nto her, like a little kitten.

1, God, "*Tá mo chroí istigh ionat,*" I whisper in her ear, the same thing always tells my mom. *My heart is in you.* I nuzzle my face against her ard my listening to her little gasp of delight. "I love you, Firefly."

r thrust. "Callum," she breathes, her voice trembling. "I love you too."

n back *Jesus.* My eyes fall closed, her sweet words washing over me in a flood. They wash through me, sending a flurry of soft emotion soaring y head Peace. Hope. Joy. Reverence. Love. So much of it I can't breathe throu

I lift my head, pressing my lips to hers in a soft kiss. We stay just l for a long moment, lost in each other and the moment. At least until er over water turns ice cold. It doesn't happen little by little. It happens all at o floor of "Jesus Christ," I growl, rushing to turn the knobs off as she shriec nd me, tries to avoid the bone-chilling spray. "We're replacing the water Firefly. This one doesn't last long enough."

1 before "We've been in here for an hour, Callum."

was on "Exactly. That's not long enough." I drag her out of the shower, plu k in a towel from the rack to wrap around her as she shivers, her eyes brig happiness. "I need at least two hours of hot water to properly appreci naked and soapy."

to go, She rolls her eyes at me, quickly rubbing the towel over herself to the water. I stand with mine in my hands, enjoying the show. What I keepfucking naked and she's beautiful. I'm not *that* cold.

ver her "Your phone is ringing."

noment "What?"

y is St. "Your phone is ringing," she says again, smirking at me as she wraps a towel around her, hiding her gorgeous body from view. It's a travesty, purring "Shit." I quickly dry off and then jog toward the bedroom to grab the nightstand where I left it. Dillon's name flashes across the display my dadwith a slew of missed calls. *Fuck*. Something's wrong.

throat, I swipe to answer, striding out of the bedroom to keep Hope from whatever bad news he's about to deliver.

"What's up?"

a warm "I need you and Hope to get down to Hope's shop," he says with a high preamble. "We have a situation."

ugh it. "What kind of situation?"

ike that "We found the van that tried to drive her off the road."

the hot "Who was driving it?"

nce. "We don't know."

eks and "What do you mean you don't know?" I growl, pacing the hall. "I heater,run the fucking tags? Who is it registered to?"

"It's a stolen vehicle, Callum." He mutters a curse under his

"Someone put a brick on the gas pedal and drove it through the front of the shop before dawn this morning. It's currently sitting in the middle of the lot withstore."

ate you "Fuck."

"We need her down here." He pauses. "You need to prepare her,

sop updon't know how much everything in the shop cost, but she's loo
? She'sthousands of dollars worth of damage to the building alone."

I close my eyes, rage and defeat coursing through me in tandem.
going to break her fucking heart. No. *I'm* going to break her fuckin
because I'm the one who has to deliver the news. I'm going to find w
aps thedid this and kill them slowly.

really. "We'll be there within the hour," I tell Dillon before hanging up or
it fromstand in the hallway for a minute, trying to get my emotions under
7, alongbefore I walk back in there and tell Hope that everything she's wo
hard for is gone.

hearing The worst goddamn part about it is that I still don't know who to
Silas Wembley? Thomas Huntington? Either is just as likely as the
Both have motive. Both are shady as shit. I've pissed in both of their C
withoutthis week.

Christ. Is that why her store was destroyed? Because I poked the bea
The thought is sobering. I'm supposed to protect her, but I'm failing
every goddamn turn, I'm failing her.

"Callum?" She pokes her head out into the hallway. "Is everything o
I take a breath and turn to face her. "Come here, Firefly."
Did you The smile slides from her face. The brightness dims in her eyes. Sh
right in front of me, shrinking before my eyes. "What happenec
breath.whispers, pacing slowly toward me. "Just tell me."

t of her I pull her into my arms, wrapping them tightly around her. There's
of herway to soften the blow. She wouldn't want me to even if I could, so I
plainly. "Early this morning, someone drove a van through the front
store, Firefly. Dillon is waiting for us down there now."

man. I She flinches in my arms, the lights winking out in her eyes. Just li

king at whoever is behind this accomplishes what they've been trying to do al

They break her.

This is And for that alone, I'm going to kill them.

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whoever is behind this accomplishes what they've been trying to do all along.

They break her.

And for that alone, I'm going to kill them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hope



I walk through the destruction of my store with my arms wrapped myself, completely numb. A construction crew installed support beam wrecker service could remove the truck an hour ago. Dillon reluctantly agreed to let me inside to look around. I wish I hadn't insisted. The store is a shambles. My dreams lie in shattered, twisted ruin. Somewhere among the wreckage are centuries of remedies passed down through generations.

I'm not a healer like my granny was. I don't have a green thumb like my grandpa did. All I have is the knowledge they left me and the love I poured into this place. I can't replace most of what was here. The plants are still growing when Granny got too sick to tend to them.

It's funny. Whoever wants my land ensured the only thing I had left was the land. They took everything else when they sent that van careening through the front of my store.

I choke on a sob, trying hard to fight it back.

"Firefly." Callum reaches for me, but I take a step back. If he touches me right now, I'm going to fall apart. I can't do that here with dozens of people looking on. When I crack, I want it to be in the privacy of our home, wrapped in the shelter of his arms. Not here with half the sheriff's office and the police department looking on.

"I want to go home," I mumble.

"The insurance adjuster is on the way, baby."

"I don't care. I just want to go home."

"I can drop her off before I meet Finn to do that thing we discussed earlier," Cormac offers, stepping up beside his cousin. He's a giant, six feet tall, head and shoulders taller than everyone except Callum. He's usually loud and boisterous, but he's subdued now. "You can wait for the insurance guy around the corner." Callum looks torn.

"I'll be fine. We have cameras now." I try to smile at him, but it vanishes instantly on my face. "I'll keep Kieve close and lock the door until you get home." "Fuck." He pulls me into his arms to kiss me hard on the mouth. "Firefly, you keep the doors locked, Firefly. I'll be there as soon as the insurance adjuster is done here."

"Okay." I press my forehead to his for a brief moment and then pull away.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Cormac leads me out of the wreckage of my store toward a massive white SUV that was pulled up beside Callum's. He has to help me climb in. Even with the help of the police, my legs are too short. I have a feeling he probably has it fixed just so he has to help his wife get in when they take his truck.

We have to navigate around fire trucks and police cruisers to get out of the parking lot. The entire parking lot is still cordoned off as a crime scene.

My store is now a crime scene.

"You'll rebuild, Hope," Cormac rumbles, letting me know I said that, in the loud. "We won't let you fail. That's not how it works here. We take care of our own."

"There's nothing left to rebuild." I glance out of the window to his house, and tears in my eyes. "I can't mix the salves and ointments that require plants and flowers that were destroyed. Most of my stock was in that store."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

We drive in silence until we're nearly to my house and then Cormac looks at me again. "You know Callum was in the Army?"

"He told me. Special Forces."

"Yeah. When my girl was in danger, he's the person I trusted to get her back because he doesn't fail. The word isn't in his vocabulary. You can count on him, he comes through, no matter what." He glances over at me as I pull into my driveway. "It counts more than ever this time because you need someone more than anything ever has to him. Don't give up yet, sweetheart. He won't fail you, and he won't let you fail."

"Thank you," I whisper, my throat tight. "For everything, Cormac."

He grins at me, flashing his dimples. "Anytime. You're family. We protect our family." He jerks his chin toward the house. "Go on inside, I'll lock the doors. I'll wait until you're inside."

I nod and open the door, wiggling down from his truck. I head straight for the door, waving once I get it unlocked. Cormac waves back but doesn't move an inch until the front door closes behind me.

Kieve lifts his head from his pile of blankets to glare at me.

As soon as I hear Cormac's truck backing down the driveway, I slide

the door, wrap my arms around myself, and give into the tears I've
that outholding at bay all morning. They come in gasping sobs, wracking my
care of Kieve whines and then I hear his tiny nails tapping against the floor
runs toward me. He squeezes his way onto my lap, stretching his neck
side the lick my face.

ants and "Oh, Kieve," I whisper, holding him. "What are we going to do?"

He whines softly as if to say he doesn't know.

That makes two of us.

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the door, wrap my arms around myself, and give into the tears I've been holding at bay all morning. They come in gasping sobs, wracking my body.

Kieve whines and then I hear his tiny nails tapping against the floor as he runs toward me. He squeezes his way onto my lap, stretching his neck up to lick my face.

"Oh, Kieve," I whisper, holding him. "What are we going to do?"

He whines softly as if to say he doesn't know.

That makes two of us.



I'm still sitting in the same spot when Callum pulls into the driveway later. I carefully set Kieve on his feet and wipe my face, though there's no hiding the fact that I've been crying. Callum will see right through me. He always does.

From the very beginning, he's seen me more clearly than anyone else has. He knows me in ways no one ever has. I didn't need Cormac to tell me that Callum won't fail me. I know he won't. He'll find whoever destroyed the store. He'll make sure they pay. But it won't bring back what they took from me.

There is no breathing life back into the garden that died long before my granny did...the one my grandpa tended so carefully. All those flowers and herbs are gone. My mom helped him tend so many of those flowers. Now, one of my last connections to her is gone. It hurts a little bit like she died all over again.

I carefully climb to my feet and unlock the door before stepping out onto the porch to greet Callum. Except when I lift my head, it's not Callum parked in the driveway. And it's not Callum striding up the sidewalk toward me.

Thomas Huntington.

I take a quick step back toward the house, hoping to make it back before he sees me. It's St. Patrick's Day. Luck should be on my side once today. But it isn't.

"Miss Byrne." His hazel eyes meet mine, a grim smile on his face.

"I thought we agreed you weren't going to show up on my porch anymore, Mr. Huntington," I say, proud when my voice doesn't shake. "You need to leave."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. We need to talk."

"We have nothing to talk about."

"I know what happened to your store."

I hesitate, not sure if he means he heard what happened or if he means he knows what happened because he's responsible. "Everyone in town knows what happened because he's responsible. "Everyone in town knows what happened," I mutter. "I'm sure it's the talk of the town."

"You know that isn't what I mean."

"Then what do you mean? Did you destroy my store?" I growl.

"I had nothing to do with that," he says, holding up his hands. "I had no more mystand here and say that I'm innocent in any of the misfortunes that have befallen you lately. I regret that I was...deceived."

"Deceived?" I gape at him. God, he even talks like a good ol' boy, dancing around the point, trying to tidy it up in pretty language like that. "I can't change the fact that he and his company have been trying to kill me and your company have been trying to kill me to get my land!"

"I was trying to scare you, not hurt you, Miss Byrne. Had I known about your connection to Dante Arakas, I can assure you, I never would have been involved in this scheme." He expels a breath. "I'm trying to make it right now."

No, he isn't. He's trying to absolve himself of guilt because he thinks at least Arakas is my cousin.

"How can you possibly make this right?" I cry. "You and your company destroyed my store. You destroyed the only connection I had left to my property grandfather and my mom." My voice cracks. "How could you possibly do that?" "You that right?"

"You misunderstand," he says softly. "Ransom Oil had nothing to do with what happened to your store, Miss Byrne."

"What? What are you saying? You just told me that you guys are the
behind everything!"

"I haven't been working alone."

I gape at him, shocked silent. And then my stomach begins to
know suspicion grows, sending bile crawling up my throat. He isn't working
Of course he isn't. "Who?"

"Your neighbor, Silas Wembley."

I knew he was going to say that, but hearing it sends all the air rush
I won't of my lungs anyway. Silas is behind this? God, I should have list
at have Callum on day one. He was right all along. My neighbor isn't just a
He's a psycho.

"Why?" I ask, completely numb.

"He wanted you and the money. We wanted the land." Mr. Hunting
You the grace to look apologetic. "He thought if we teamed up, we could
what we wanted. He failed to disclose that you're related to Arakas."

"Who tried to drive me over the edge of The Falls?"

"Silas."

A small movement in my peripheral catches my attention. I glance
the back of Mr. Huntington's silver truck just in time to see Silas s
s Dante from behind it, a pistol in his hands and a sneer on his face.

"I should have known I couldn't trust you," he growls at
company Huntington, aiming the gun at him. He doesn't even flinch as he p
to my trigger.

I scream, jumping backward.

Mr. Huntington stumbles forward a step as a pool of red blooms ac
do with chest. He lists to the side, his expression contorting. And then he falls.

Silas steps over him without a second glance, training the gun on n

he onessweetheart," he says as if he didn't just shoot someone in cold blood. I didn't destroy my business and my life this morning. As if he has any call me that. "It didn't have to end this way, you know."

burn as "You're insane," I whisper, the first words that come to mind. They g alone. He is insane. How else was it supposed to end? What fantasy did he c in his mind? I'd run into his arms in search of safety, and we'd live ever after on the money Ransom Oil paid for the land? My stomach ch uing out the thought. *God*. That probably is what he thought would happen.

ened to Except Silas Wembley isn't hero material. When I needed protect a creep. was the last person I thought about. He's the man I grew up next c nothing more. That's all he's ever been to me. It's all he ever would ha to me. Now, he's a monster.

ton has "I never would have given myself to you," I snarl. "Never."

both get He laughs in my face, climbing the stairs toward me. "You think t about you, Hope? Taking you to my bed would have been a nice bor you were never the prize. You were just a means to an end. The mor the prize." He stops in front of me, his boots touching the toes of my toward flats. "One million dollars. Only an idiot walks away from cash like th step out "Then I guess I'm an idiot."

"You said it, not me."

Thomas "Some things are more important, Silas. This land has been in my ulls thefor generations. It's the only connection I have left to my family. Mon replace any of that."

"And loyalty to bones rotting in the ground can't keep you fed and ross hishe snaps. "Get inside, Hope."

"Why? So you can shoot me in the living room? No, thanks."

ae. "Hi, "I'm not going to shoot you. You're going to clear the security foota

As if he says. "And then you're going to tell the world that Thomas Hur
right to showed up here, threatening to kill you. You'll tell the world that he a
to everything. And then you're going to sell the land to me."

're true. "If I don't?"

concoct "Then I kill your boyfriend." He smiles at me, the same damning, p
happily smile he always wears. It's so patently false, I don't know how I neve
turns at before now. "And then you. The choice is yours."

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ige," he

says. "And then you're going to tell the world that Thomas Huntington showed up here, threatening to kill you. You'll tell the world that he admitted to everything. And then you're going to sell the land to me."

"If I don't?"

"Then I kill your boyfriend." He smiles at me, the same damning, pleasant smile he always wears. It's so patently false, I don't know how I never saw it before now. "And then you. The choice is yours."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Callum



"Callum."

I glance up from the paperwork the insurance adjuster left for Hop Finn striding across the parking lot toward me, a deep furrow between brows and his lips pursed. He looks worried. The fact that he's not Cormac worries me. He was supposed to go with him to have a not-so-chat with Huntington.

Fuck.

I toss the paperwork into the passenger side of my truck and jog across the parking lot toward him, meeting him halfway. "What's up?"

"I found something," he says.

"What?"

"You aren't going to like it."

"Tell me."

"Silas Wembley and Thomas Huntington have been in contact." He pulls his phone out of his pocket, glancing over his shoulder to make sure

alone. "I shouldn't have this, but I hacked into Wembley's phone records and been talking to Huntington two or three times a week for the last two and a half months."

"Jesus Christ," I breathe, my stomach sinking to my feet. "Motherfuckers are working together." Why didn't I see it before? I know. Because I wanted it to be Silas so goddamn badly it never crossed my mind that it could be both of them.

"There's more," Finn warns me. He pulls up an email chain on his phone dated yesterday.

To: cbeeson@ransomoil.org
From: thuntington@ransomoil.org
Subject: Silver Spoon Falls Property

able to see
been his
not with
too-polite

I've advised our partner that we're no longer interested in the property.
Expect trouble. Should I warn the girl?

-T

To: thuntington@ransomoil.org
From: cbeeson@ransomoil.org
Re: Silver Spoon Falls Property

cross the

Yes. Minimize blowback. You know what to do.

-Charles

"Looks like they let Silas know they were pulling out of whatever deal they made with him," Finn says. "I'm guessing because they think Arakawa is pulling the strings."
We're

ds. He's cousin. And it sounds like they were intending to warn her about him
o and at the heat off of them."

"That's what it sounds like to me too." I drag my phone from my
. "The fury pumping through my system as I dial Cormac's number.
w why. "Yo."

y mind "I need you to get back to Hope's," I growl. "Silas Wembley is our g
find him, I'm killing him."

phone, "Shit, brother. If you're asking me to stop you, you called the
motherfucker today. I might just help." Cormac blows out a breath.
checked Huntington's room. He's not here. I'll head back to Hope's."

"Meet you there."

I disconnect and dial Dillon. He's around here somewhere, but I don't
time to chase his ass down. I need to get to my girl now. She's out
erty. alone, and Silas is right next door.

"Are you heading out?" Dillon asks as soon as he answers.

"Silas Wembley was working with Thomas Huntington. Finn found
records. He also found emails from Thomas Huntington to some
Ransom about pulling out of their deal with Silas. They were going to
Hope. Finn and I are heading to her place now. Cormac is meeting us t

"Shit," Dillon growls. "I'm on my way."

"You better beat me there, Dillon," I say quietly. "If I find him before
do, I'll kill him. I don't give a fuck if you're the sheriff. You won't be
stop me."

deal they "Who the fuck says I'd try?" He hangs up on me.

s is her "Let's roll."

"I'll drive."

I toss Finn my keys without complaint, knowing he's in a better fr

to takemind to get us there than I am. I'm as liable to run us into a ditch than
get us to Hope in one piece.

pocket, I dial her number.

Pick up, Firefly. Please, pick up.

guy. If I



wrong

"I just

Dillon whips into the driveway two seconds ahead of Finn who dri
truck like he fucking stole it. I'm surprised the damn tires aren't s
n't have when we pull up. My hackles rise as soon as I see the silver truck
it there driveway.

And then my gaze lands on Thomas Huntington's body sprawled ac
sidewalk. My blood runs cold. I'm out of the truck and sprinting for t
l phone before Finn even has it in park.

one at Dillon grabs me, tackling me to the ground halfway to the house.

o warn I roar, trying to throw him off me.

here." "Callum, goddammit!"

Footsteps race toward us before Finn drops to his knees, helping Dil
ore you me in place. I fight against both of them, trying like hell to break fre
able to to Hope. If he hurt her. Ah, Christ. If he hurt her...

"Think for a minute, goddammit," Dillon barks. "If he's got her
house and you go rushing in there, you're putting her life at risk.
she's..."

"Don't you fucking say it," I snarl. "Don't say it."

ame of

I am to "Easy, brother," Finn says. "Easy."

She's alive. She has to be alive. I'd know if she weren't. Half of r would be gone. And it's not. It's still blazing bright as the sun, pulsing second, vital heartbeat inside me. He's inside with her right now, doing only knows what.

Ah, God, Firefly. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry I wasn't here.

"We have to go in. He has her in there, goddammit." I push against the door hold again, meeting their gazes. "If she were your wives, you'd go in to know you would."

ves my Dillon curses.

moking Finn releases me, holding his hands up.

in the "You aren't going in without a fucking gun," Dillon snaps, reluctantly letting me go.

ross the I climb to my feet, everything in me screaming for me to make a he door the door. But he's right. If I'm going in, the only way that bastard is out is in a body bag. That's the only way this ends. It's inevitable at this point. It was from the moment he hurt her the first time.

I'm not tame. I'm not civilized. When it comes to her, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make her mine and keep her safe. He touched what she belongs to him. He hurt her. He has to pay for that. I won't fucking rest until he does.

I stomp back to my truck, popping the glove compartment to retrieve the gun.

And if Dillon sighs in exasperation when he sees it. "Of course you have a goddamn gun in the glove compartment."

"This is Texas," Finn mutters. "Everyone has a gun in the glove compartment."

Cormac pulls into the driveway before Dillon can say anything else. He yanks the car into park and climbs out with the engine still running, looking like a soldier at attention. He spares a quick glance at the body on the ground, then looks back at God, assessing the situation, and then his eyes come to me. "What's the play?"

"We're going in."

"Fucking right we are."

"I've got backup on the way."

Cormac shoots Dillon a wicked grin. "Won't need it. He'll be here before they get here. Who's got the front and who gets the back?"

"I'll take the back with Dillon since I'm not armed," Finn says. "You can have the front. Let's do this shit."

Cormac heads for the front door without hesitation, ready to throw

His big ass is always ready. I'm right beside him, ready to get to work. Dillon mutters a curse and then he and Finn head toward the back of the house.

"You better find him quick," Cormac mutters. "We've got about a two-second head start on Dillon. After that, all bets are off."

We pound up the front steps together, not bothering to be quiet about it. There's no hiding the fact that we're here. If he's in there with Heron, he already knows we're coming in after him.

Don't let him win, Firefly. Whatever you do, don't let him win. I'm counting on you. I promise.

I try the door, surprised when it opens. The fucker didn't even have a lock on it. Either he's cocky, he's stupid, or they aren't here. A bullet goes flying into the wooden frame, splintering wood right beside my face.

So he's stupid, then. Got it.

"Shit," Cormac growls.

else. He Hope shouts my name as another gunshot rings out. Kieve barks and jogs his head off and then yelps. Oh, that motherfucker better not have hurt him quickly. I kick the door open, trying to get a visual on what's happening inside?" Blood boils when I see Hope running across the foyer with tears streaming down her face. Silas is a few feet behind her, trying to shake Kieve off. The dog has latched onto his hand.

Cormac and I burst through the door at the same time.

handed "Callum!" Hope sobs.

"Run, baby. Go."

You and She sobs again, but obeys, stumbling past me out of the house.

Silas grabs Kieve by the collar, flinging him across the room. He lands on the couch, yelping. I don't think he's hurt though. I think he's just off my girl. Blood drips from small wounds on Silas's hand as he fumbles for the end of the dropped.

I don't give him time to get his hands on it.

a sixty "You piece of shit," I roar, cracking him over the back of the head with the butt of my gun. I toss the gun aside and land a blow against his right side, and then another to his nose. Cartilage crunches beneath my fist as it blows. I hit him again, and then again, and then one final time before I let his skull fall to the floor.

coming "You're lucky you're in her home or you'd be dead right now, you motherfucker," I growl, dragging him up by the collar of the shirt to look into his eye. "That's the only reason you're still breathing right now. You get near her ever again, I'll bury you so deep no one will ever find your bones."

I toss him back to the ground, stepping away from him.

"Good man," Cormac says, clamping a hand on my shoulder as Dilan and Finn step forward to haul Silas to his feet. I never even heard them c

his little Dillon didn't even try to stop me from beating the hell out of him. G
1. I knew the fucker had it coming. "Go take care of your girl. We've g
ide. My little bitch."

earing "Kieve, *tar anseo*."

of where He inches toward me, hesitant to approach.

I squat, holding out my hand for him. "Come here, boy. I won't hurt

He whines and then darts forward allowing me to pick him up.

I carry him outside with me.

"Callum!" Hope sobs, rushing toward us.

I wrap one arm around her, dragging her up against my chest and l
ands on tight as Kieve jumps up to lick her face. She's safe. Thank fuckin
fended. She's finally safe.

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Dillon didn't even try to stop me from beating the hell out of him. Guess he knew the fucker had it coming. "Go take care of your girl. We've got this little bitch."

"Kieve, *tar anseo.*"

He inches toward me, hesitant to approach.

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I carry him outside with me.

"Callum!" Hope sobs, rushing toward us.

I wrap one arm around her, dragging her up against my chest and holding on tight as Kieve jumps up to lick her face. She's safe. Thank fucking God. She's finally safe.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hope



Two Weeks Later

"I love you." Callum reaches across the console for my hand, bringing his fingers up to his lips to press a kiss to them.

"I love you too."

"It'll be okay," he promises.

I smile at him bravely. We're going back to the store for the first time since Silas destroyed it. I haven't had the heart to go back since. After he and Thomas Huntington and tried to force me to sell the land to him, he hired someone to board up the store and took me away for a few days. I just left everything behind and went to Nashville for a week with Kiev.

I needed the change of scenery. I needed time and distance to process and deal with everything that happened. Spending time with his family was amazing. His parents are amazing. Meeting his mom was bittersweet. It reminded me of everything I've missed with my mom but made me appreciate the time I did have with her.

It also reminded me that the last of the plants may be gone, but my connection to her will always be my memories. Those aren't in the place I grew with my grandfather. They aren't in the house she grew up in and aren't in the land she played on as a little girl. Those I carry with me everywhere. So long as I carry her in my heart, she'll live on.

I needed that reminder. I think I've needed it for a long time.

I'm looking forward to making new memories with Callum's mother. She already love her. She's so sweet. She'll never replace my mom. She would even dream of trying, but it's nice to have a warm, motherly hug and a listening ear again. I've missed that so much since my mom and then Granny died.

We got back into town a few days ago, but I've been avoiding going to the store. Not because I wasn't ready to face it again, but because cleaning up is going to be a nightmare. I don't like cleaning on a good day. The store is going to be exactly like someone drove a vehicle through it. It's going to take forever to sort through everything and take stock of what is salvageable and what isn't.

But I'm ready to do it. Silas doesn't get to win. He doesn't get to take a single damn thing from me. Not my dreams, not my store, not hope. Not my life since he killed my mother. I refuse to allow him to do it. He's a monster, and monsters don't win. They die miserable, exactly like they were always supposed to die. Callum, what's in store for him.

He's facing life in prison for murder, and then about fifteen additional years. We're facing felony charges including kidnapping, burglary, three counts of attempted murder for trying to run me off the road and then trying to shoot Cornelia helped. Callum, and various other crimes. Dillon even made sure he was convicted me with stealing my mail. It's a small thing given everything else he's facing. I'm seeing that charge on the list made Callum's whole day. It made mine too.

Silas Wembley won't ever get out again. I had the option of paying

biggest charges against Ransom Oil but decided not to do it. In the end, they
wants the right thing even if they did it for the wrong reasons. And their misdeed
1. They the life of one of their employees. The world knows what they did
with the stock has plummeted.

We served them with cease-and-desist paperwork and formally treated
all representatives for the company from any of my property. It's a formal
nomination. At this point since they'll likely be out of business by the end of the year
I wouldn't Callum didn't want to take any chances.

I'm loving To be honest, neither did I. I'll sleep better at night knowing they
are protected from criminal charges if they come near me or my property.

going to the "What in the world?" I stare out the window at the packed parking
lot in front of my store, trying to process why so many people are crammed
in the small lot. Is the coffee shop having a fire sale or something? And the
people are in front of my store. "Callum," I whisper, my voice shaking. "What...
isn't it?" "People in town have been working all week, Firefly. Everyone pitched
in to take care of what insurance didn't cover, they donated. I'm still working on re-
arranging some of the plants and flowers that were destroyed, but they're being
sent in from all over the world for you." He pulls into an empty spot near the
end of the lot, turning to face me. "I know they won't replace the memo-
rials you lost, but they'll keep you in business."

additional "Callum." Tears well in my eyes as I gaze between him and
the emptied town square people repainting the front of the store. It's as if Silas never de-
nied it. Every last trace of the destruction he left behind is gone, replaced
by charged people who live here. "You did all of this for me?"

nothing but "Didn't I tell you, Firefly? There isn't a single fucking thing on this
road I wouldn't do for you." He unlatches my seatbelt, pulling me across the
aisle and pressing onto his lap. "You're my world, sweet Hope. Taking care of you is what

did the put here to do." He tips my chin up, placing a soft kiss on my lips. "It didn't do it alone. Everyone out there right now helped. Because you know how much I love you. There's something important about that water you sell."

"What did I forget?"

"It makes people fall in love," he whispers. "And everyone in this town has fallen in love with you just as hard as I did, Firefly. You aren't crying, but anymore."

I bury my face in his shoulder, sobbing.

"No crying, sweet Hope." He brushes his lips against my ear. "You have to agree to be my wife and then go out there and thank everyone. They all know how much you hate to cry in public."

I lift my head on a gasp to find him grinning at me, my favorite color in his eyes. "I see you're smiling."

"Yeah, you heard me," he says, chuckling as he reaches into his pocket. "Marry me, Firefly. And before you answer, just know that you're not allowed to say no. It's not an option."

"Says who?"

"Me." He pulls a ring out of his pocket, holding it out to me in the palm of his hand. Intricate Celtic knots surround the massive solitaire diamond set in a platinum band. It's a beautiful ring. Way too fancy for a woman like me.

I'm not holding that against him. I'm not telling him no, either.

"Well, in that case," I say, sniffing. "I guess I'll let you know later."

He growls, grabbing my hand to slip the ring onto my finger. "The answer is yes, Firefly. You're marrying me."

"Okay," I agree, wrapping my arms around his neck to pull him down for a kiss. "I guess since you're being bossy about it, I'll give you what you want."

"See? Now you're learning." His lips touch mine, setting my soul on fire.

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EPILOGUE

Callum



Five Years Later

"I told you to be quiet, Firefly," I growl, biting Hope's lip when she my name a little too loud. "If the kids hear you, I'll have to stop w doing to you."

"Don't you dare stop." She glares at me, dragging her nails down m "I will murder you, Callum."

"Then cover your mouth like a good girl and bounce on my cochl fucking told you." I lift her up and drop her down, biting my tongue from shouting her name into the dark. Fuck. She feels too good.

How is it possible that she gets even tighter every time I'm in her mystery I've been trying to solve for five years, and I still don't h answer. She still drives me out of my mind every time I get inside h let's be honest, I'm inside her at every available opportunity. Even if I drag her into the dark laundry room while the kids watch a movie living room.

I'm shameless when it comes to her, and nothing stands in my way. I allow it to. This woman is my world. She's the reason I breathe, sometimes I think she may be the air I breathe. Every single piece belongs to her.

She feels the same way about me. I see it in her eyes every time she looks at me. And fuck if that doesn't make me feel like a goddamn king. The water in this town is magic, I got the keeper of it when I found her.

Five years later, she's still magic to me. And she still brings me people who need it. Her store is thriving. Silver Spoon Falls water is in every grocery store in town and several others throughout the county. She offers it in small quantities online, alongside the herbal remedies her grandmother taught her. She has a full-time employee at the store now and two at the shop here. She's happier than she's ever been, and so am I.

"Callum," she moans again, louder than she should. There's no keeping quiet. When she's on my cock, she's loud no matter what. "Oh, God."

I drag her up and down my cock, trying to get her there before the curious little boys come bursting in to see why mommy is praying in the laundry room again. At this point, they're convinced she's Mother because I've got her praying all over the house.

Like I said, I'm shameless. I'm not sorry about it, either.

I press her back against the wall, allowing me to tilt her hips high and pound into her, angling my hips to hit her g-spot with every thrust. I cover hers, my tongue tangling with hers to muffle her cries.

She comes hard, soaking my cock with her juices.

I groan into her mouth and follow her over the edge, writhing in ecstasy. "Daddy! Keegan stole my popcorn!" Our four-year-old, Nolan shouts.

I won't "Did not!" His three-year-old brother, Keegan yells back.

2. Hell, "Did too! I sawed you!"

3. of me I bury my face in Hope's throat, chuckling. "Well, at least they let u
this time." I reluctantly slide out of her, groaning as soon as my di
e looks free. I fucking hate losing her heat. I push my cum back inside her a
. If the fix her panties before helping her step back into her shorts.

Once she's put back together, I tuck my cock back inside my pants.

agic to "Give it back right now, Keegan!" Nolan screeches.

n every "Good grief. What are they doing out there?"

he still "Judging by the sounds of it, they haven't killed each other yet." I
ies her back into my arms when she turns toward the door to go check on th
ow, and Screaming is normal around here. It's the silence that's dangerous.

they're shouting, I know it's business as usual. But when they get
ing her That's when they're up to some bullshit. It never fucking fails.

od. Oh, They usually drag Aiden along for whatever trouble they're causin
barely two, but he follows Nolan and Keegan around, picking up
e three troublemaking habit they teach him. They're exactly like their uncl
; in the were when we were kids.

Teresa I love the hell out of them.

I splay my hand across Hope's belly, nuzzling my nose against h
you give me another son this time, I'm spanking your gorgeous ass,
igher. I We need a girl around here to settle these heathens down."

My lips "Sure," she huffs. "Now you want a girl. I wanted one three kids ago

"I told you; I can't have a mini you running around without brothers
after her. I'm too fucking old to have two of you stressing me out."

tasy. "I do not stress you out."

ts. "Baby, all you do is stress me out." I smile, pulling her into a kiss

she can use that smart-ass mouth on me. She melts into me, purring
little kitten.

s finish A crash sounds from the living room.

ck slips I groan, breaking away from her lips. "And that's my cue to get my
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"They're your sons when they misbehave. They're mine when
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"They're your sons when they misbehave. They're mine when they're snuggly." She pats me on the chest and then squeezes past me out of the laundry room. "Good luck out there. I'm going to get their stuff ready for baths and bed."

"Traitor."

Her laughter floats back to me.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



If you enjoyed Callum's Hope, please consider leaving a review
I mean a lot to me!

Coming next in the Silver Spoon Falls series in Grizz's Passion, releases in May! Can't wait until then? Make sure you check out Arguments, the latest SSF book, which released on the 10th!

Next from me is The Billionaires' Club Complete Collection (with scenes)! And Dear Mr. Dad Bod, coming in April.

PS: You can grab a copy of Love at First Sight for free this month! The anthology includes 11 steamy instalove romances.

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SILVER SPOON FALLS



Welcome to Silver Spoon Falls, TX. The men here are known for h all. Except there's a shortage of eligible ladies in town to share it with determined men won't let that slow them down. Like the MC brot who calls this small-town home, their best friends, brothers, and ne will turn the town on its ear looking for their curvy soulmates in this s series of sweet and steamy instalove romances from Loni Ree, Nichol and jointly as Loni Nichole.

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Callum's Hope by Nichole Rose - March 14,
mybook.to/CallumsHope

Grizz's Passion by Loni Nichole - May 9th, 2023: mybook.to/GrizzI

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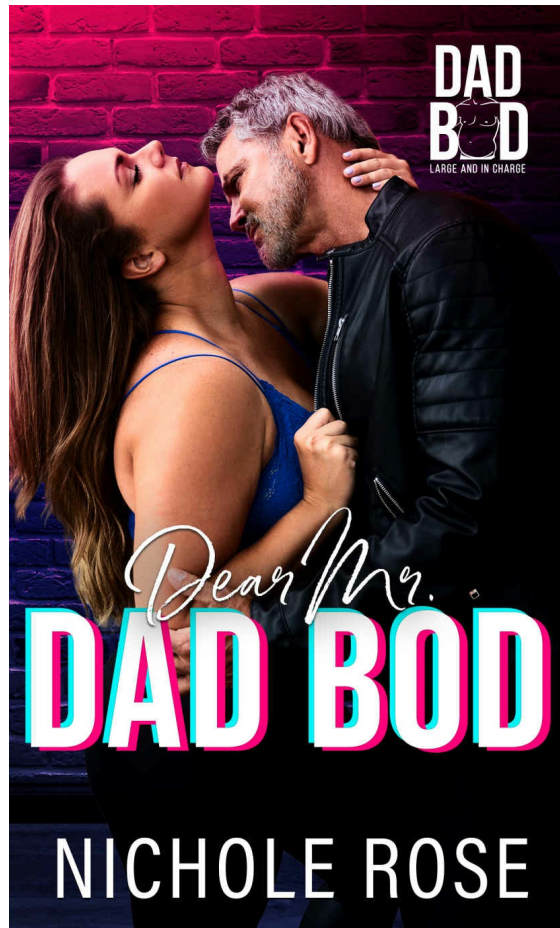
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DEAR MR. DAD BOD



Dear Mr. Dad Bod: Where do I apply to be your baby girl?

Madden Banks

Things I never thought I'd do:

Become social media's resident sexpert, Mr. Dad Bod.

Post thirst traps.

Fall head over heels for a girl half my age.

But here I am, anyway.

The whole world tunes in to ask me burning questions about them and see my dad bod in all its glory.

So it shouldn't be any surprise when they're front and center the curvy dancer of my dreams appears.

Olive Crosby has my heart trying to beat out of my chest...and I've even met her in person.

That's about to change.

This daddy is claiming his little princess, and I don't care who is watching.

Olive Crosby

Being social media's resident curvy dancer can be exhausting.

Everyone knows my name, but no one knows me.

Until the night I slip into Mr. Dad Bod's live stream to ask the question I've been dying to ask.

Now, everyone knows my secret.

And they know just who I want to fulfill my naughty fantasy.

But I didn't anticipate the whole world tuning in to watch it unfold.

Nor did I expect to fall for the mysterious Madden Banks.

He's everything I expected and so much more.

Can we really make this work, or was asking for a daddy a little too real for the world to handle?

Watch out! This silver fox and his younger curvy girl are taking your favorite social media app (and heart) by storm in this age-gap romance. If you enjoy OTT possessive older man, insta-love goodness, and scorching romance, you'll love Madden and Olive's steamy story.

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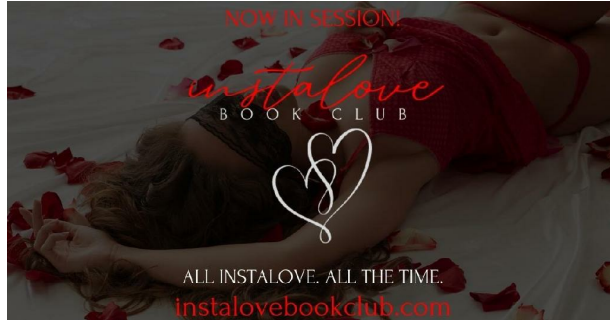
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Tempted by December

Devil's Deceit

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Easy on Me

Easy Ride

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One Night with You

Falling Hard

Model Behavior

Learning Curve

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Dillon's Heart

Razor's Flame

Ryker's Reward

Zane's Rebel

Oral Arguments

Grizz's Passion (coming soon)

ABOUT NICHOLE ROSE

Nichole Rose writes filthy, feel-good romance for curvy readers. Her feature headstrong, sassy women and the alpha males who consume them. From grumpy detectives to country boys with attitude to insta-love and the-top declarations, nothing is off-limits.

Nichole is sure to have a steamy, sweet story just right for everyone. She fully believes the world is ugly enough without trying to fit falling into a one-size-fits-all box.

When not writing, Nichole enjoys fine wine, cute shoes, and even the supernatural. She is happily married to the love of her life and is a mama to the world's most ridiculous fur-babies. She and her husband live in the Pacific Northwest.

You can learn more about Nichole and her boo at authornicholeroose.com.



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