



BEAN FLICKER

QUIRKY
CURVES 

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEGAN WADE

BEAN FLICKER

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Quirky Curves, book 1

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REGINA

Why I thought the entire contents of my two-bedroom apartment would fit inside a tiny cottage in the country is beyond me. My living area currently looks like a hay-bale maze, and I seriously have to do some contortion-type gymnastics just to get from the kitchen to my bedroom--the *only* room in the house that isn't piled high with moving boxes—with my glass of wine and plate of cookies intact. The moment I bump the door closed with my butt, I pause and breathe a sigh of relief. In here, with the bed made and my furniture in place, I can pretend I don't have a mountain of unpacking to do on the other side of that door come morning.

Moving sucks.

And the reason for my move sucks even harder.

But at least I have the brilliant escapism of books to help distract me. They've been a literal lifesaver these last few months as I've packed up my life and moved away from everything I've ever known. A bold choice, I know. But I simply couldn't stay in the city a moment longer than I had to. Too much water under that bridge. So much, in fact, that I needed to burn that bridge to the ground.

Setting my wine and plate on the nightstand, I pull the elastic from my messy bun and let my chestnut hair fall loose around my shoulders, sighing with relief as I rub my scalp and feel some of the tension leave my body. Then I plump up my pillows and get myself comfortable before I do the most decadent part of this self-care ritual, I pick up my copy of 'Pucking Gorgeous' by Saffron Spark. It's an ice hockey romance featuring one of my favorite plus-sized models, Marsha 'Marshmallow' Foster on the cover, along with her now-husband Carter Reeves. At twenty-nine, I've given up on finding love in the real world but knowing these two met and fell in love on this very photo shoot gives me hope that there are more curvy girls out there finding men who love them for who they are, and not who they could become if they 'just put their mind to it'.

But that's enough about me, my interest right now is on this curvy heroine and her hockey star hero who wants nothing more than to claim her as his own. And claim her he will, because if there's one thing a good spicy romance novel gives us, it's a heck of a lot of 'claiming' until the inevitable happily ever after wraps it all up in a tidy little bow. *So much better than real life.*

Sipping at my wine, I rapidly turn the pages as the tension builds between the main characters. It's getting so hot that I feel the need to open a window before I return to the bed and continue reading until I...er... decide to join in.

Don't judge me here. I'm alone in the middle of nowhere and a girl has needs.

With my glass now safely on my nightstand, I slide my hand into my pajama shorts and find myself as turned on as the heroine. So while the hero takes care of *her* needs, I'm busily taking care of my own, reading one handed as we both get closer and closer until...

Baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

My hand stills between my legs.

Baaaaaaaa!

Skin hot, and throat dry from all that gasping, I turn slowly toward the sound, a shriek leaving my body when I find a *goddamn sheep* sticking its head through my open window and *bleating at me*.

"Get out!" Reflexively, I throw my book out the window, only to hear a subtle, *oof*, in response.

Last I checked, sheep don't make *oof* noises.

Which is precisely when I lock eyes with the *most handsomely rugged*

man on this planet and scream even louder, my arms and legs flailing as I jump up, knock over my wine and cookies then rush over to the window and pull it closed, tugging the curtain across it and clutching it tight while I try not to hyperventilate.

Oh my god! Oh my god! I can't believe he just saw that. I'm going to have to move again!

"I'm from the property next door. I was just collecting our stray sheep, and I didn't see a thing," the now-muffled voice on the other side of the window says.

"That's a lie," I call back, dying inside because denying he saw means he *definitely* saw.

"You're right." He chuckles, and it's this deep rich sound that I wish I could hear under any other circumstance. "I just didn't want to embarrass you."

"A little late for that."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with a little bean flicking. In fact, it's a healthy expression of—"

"Can you maybe just leave so we can forget this ever happened? That might be better than rehashing it."

There's a short pause, then a, "Oh, I'm never gonna forget, flick. That little show was the highlight of my day. Maybe my year." He chuckles again, and the indignation mixed with my embarrassment makes my ears burn hot.

"Who the hell says that to someone they don't even know?" I snap, tugging the curtains open. My mouth drops open when I find all six-foot-four of him standing with my book in his hands while he studies the cover. I open the window. "Give that back."

His mirthful eyes, blue as the summer sky, land on mine as he gives me a dimpled grin. "You threw it at me. It's mine," he says, tucking the novel into the back pocket of his jeans. "Think I might head home and see if the story is as good as it appeared."

My face feels like it's on fire. "There is something seriously wrong with you."

"Maybe," he says, backing away from my window with the sheep dutifully following along. "But I have a hunch that once I read this, I'll be feeling very, *very* right." He pulls out the book and waves it in the air as he turns his back to me. "See you round, neighbor. I'll return this when I'm done with it."

My mouth flaps open and shut before I bluster out, "Those pages had better not be stuck together when you do!"

All that does is earn me a deep belly laugh that echoes through the open air as he walks off and leaves me to contend with my embarrassment alone. I can't believe I just masturbated in front of my hot neighbor.

And what's worse, I didn't even finish.

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JOSH

The sun is low in the sky by the time I finish repairing the fence where our wayward sheep got through. My muscles are aching, but I can't help but grin to myself as I replay the events of this afternoon in my head. *What a way to meet my new neighbor.*

Cedarwood Valley is a sleepy little farming community where nothing much really happens outside the daily grind. There are maybe two thousand residents, and everyone knows everyone else's business, so it's unusual for anything to go by unnoticed. The rumor mill in this town is supreme, and I'm shocked they managed to miss a new resident moving into our midst. But my god, am I glad that they did. Finding her the way I did will stay with me forever.

Normally when I go on a hunt for a missing sheep, the best-case scenario is finding it safe and unharmed so I can return it to the herd without any vet bills. What I found today has completely changed up my expectations. I didn't even know I had a new neighbor moving in, so the last thing I thought I'd find there was a cute as fuck brunette taking care of herself with the window open.

I know it was wrong of me to stand there and watch, but once I saw her, you couldn't have paid me to look away from that curvy goddess as she writhed on that bed to the pleasure of her own hand. The only thing I'm truly regretful for is that damn sheep bleating and interrupting her before she finished. Now *that* would have been a sight to see.

I straighten up and stretch my aching back as I hiss through my teeth at the memory. *She was so close...*

Setting my tools down, my eyes flick to the book she was reading. There's some muscular guy getting real cozy with a curvy hottie on the cover, and I can't help but picture myself and my new neighbor in that exact position. I should probably feel like a dirty fuck, or a peeping tom—or whatever name you want to call it—but I don't. All I feel is intrigued. I want to know more about her.

My dick twitches at the thought, and I close my eyes, remembering the look on her face while she touched herself. To say that I've been hard since I caught sight of her would be an understatement. I've actually considered jacking off in the middle of the paddock just to give myself some relief. But I'm not about to risk getting caught with my dick in my hand and a bunch of sheep nearby. The rumors that'd go around town would be endless. I'd never live it down.

Besides, the only way I'm interested in getting off right now is *with* my new neighbor. There hasn't been a single woman to spark my interest in...I can't remember how long. And while yes, it was the show that drew me in, it was her body and beauty that made me stay. Those green eyes of hers and the cherubic shape of her face are going to haunt my dreams—along with that spunk of hers too. I might not know much about her, but they say you can learn a lot about a person based on what they read. And since I have her book, I'm pretty much set.

Picking up the novel, I set my ass on the lush grass underfoot and flick through the pages. I've never been much of a reader unless that book had something to do with my work, but whenever I did pick up fiction, it was always some crime thriller or military focused. Romance has never piqued my interest—until I found my neighbor so 'engrossed' in one, that is. And I guess I fell into the trap that most guys do where the romance genre is concerned. I saw it as unrealistic and lacking substance, something only teenage girls and bored and lonely housewives in unhappy marriages read. But after what I witnessed today, I'm willing to revisit my obviously ill-

informed opinion.

Flipping the book over, I read the blurb on the back cover. It's what one would expect from a book like this—hockey star is an asshole who sleeps around, but when he meets the woman of his dreams his whole outlook on life changes and his soul focus becomes her. But does she want him?

I smile to myself. It all seems so Hallmark, so over the top and unrealistic. I'd never consider reading this on the cover and description alone, but the more I consider it, the more I appreciate the beauty of the romance genre. And better still, I'm starting to realize that the pages within hold the key all men have been searching for since the dawn of time. This book right here contains the inner workings of the female mind. It's like I've found the holy grail.

"It's a manual on how to turn a woman on," I say in amazement, pulling back the front cover and starting to read...

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REGINA

After barely sleeping a wink from replaying my embarrassment and researching where I can buy a cabin hidden in the deep, dark woods so I can become a mountain-dwelling hermit for the rest of my days, I put in a call to my best friend who's back in the city. I've been doing my best to keep the conversation neutral, but she knows me too well and can sense that something more than just moving boxes and unpacking has happened.

"Spill," Mariah commands. "You know you can't hide anything from me, and even though I can't see your face, I can hear the way your mouth is twitching over the phone."

I press my finger against the corner of my mouth like it'll somehow hide my tell. "How can you possibly hear that?"

"I can't, but the fact you're questioning it means there is something. Come on, Reggie, tell me what's on your mind. Country life not what you thought it'd be?"

"Well," I start, biting my lip as I take a deep breath and steel myself for this conversation. "I met my neighbor yesterday."

"OK."

"Well, technically, I met his sheep first."

She giggles. "That's about as country as it gets."

"Yes. But it's not so much the sheep bleating through my window as it is what I was doing when the sheep bleated through my window."

"Oh god. Did some stuffy old farmer see you naked?"

"Worse. And he's not stuffy. Or old."

"What's worse than being nak—Oh my god. Were you reading one-handed?" The last part comes out in a hushed whisper, and I immediately put my hand to my face in shame.

"Mm-hmm," I squeak. "It was that Saffron Spark book you gave me before I left. And you know how hot it is."

"Ohmigawd! What were you doing reading like that with your window open?"

"I didn't think anyone would see me! I'm in the middle of nowhere."

"And what did he do?"

We continue talking in a high-pitched back and forth whisper as I detail my reaction and the cheek of the man who caught me. Mariah makes shocked noises and asks questions while she suffers from second-hand embarrassment, and when I get to the part where he pocketed my novel and left, she lets out a gasp and then starts to giggle.

"If this had happened to any one of our friends, I'd never believe it. But with you..." Her giggle turns into a deep throaty laugh, and I have to admit that I'm starting to see the funny side to it too.

"I'm mortified, Mariah. I'm going to have to move again."

"Oh, come on, Reggie. You can't upend your life again just because some hot guy caught you doing a little self-fondling while reading erotic romance."

A smile takes over my lips. "I never said he was hot."

"You didn't have to. I could tell by the way you described him—chocolate brown hair, ocean-blue eyes, tall and broad." She lists off his assets with a throaty drawl. "And I think we've both read enough romance novels to know that a man with the balls to take your book and tell you he enjoyed the show is no ugly duckling. And since he's a farmer, I'm guessing he's the strong and virile type. He's probably been waiting for a little filly like you to come wandering into his life, and here you are. Meet-cute achieved."

"Except this isn't a romance novel, and we're not going to end up together. For all I know, he's a creeper who purposefully goes around looking in women's windows and pretends he lost his sheep as a cover."

"That sounds pretty risky. Besides, creepers aren't hot."

"I never said he was hot!" I repeat, laughing now.

"I don't hear you saying he's *not* hot."

I bite my lip as I try to fight a smile, remembering the way he looked at me with those intense blue eyes of his. He was the vision of masculine perfection—strongly built but not overly muscular, a straight nose that flared slightly at the tip, and shiny brown hair that curled ever so slightly on his forehead. But it was his cheeky, dimpled grin that really got me. He seemed so playful yet determined all at once. It was a look I'd never seen before, and despite my absolute humiliation over the situation, I could feel myself getting lost in him almost instantly.

"OK, fine," I admit finally. "He's hot."

Mariah lets out a throaty giggle. "I knew it! I knew it! So, what are you going to do now? Are you going to see him again?"

I groan as my face heats up once more at the thought of what happened. "I don't know if I can," I admit sheepishly. "This isn't a book plot where that was our beginning, and all that's left is for us to fall into each other and race toward our happily ever after."

"But what if it is?" Mariah says, her voice soft and dreamy sounding. "What if you and this sexy, cocky farmer are meant to be, and what comes next is the thing that makes everything you've been through worth it?"

"Mariah," I start with a sigh, but she stops me.

"I mean it, Reg. What if this really is your meet-cute? He could be the guy who licks your wounds—and other places—before you go riding off into the sunset together. This embarrassment will just be a funny story you tell at parties."

I let out a bark of laughter. "The story of the bean flicker?"

"Hey, I'd read it."

"This is silly. I've tried living my happily ever after before, and all it got me was left at the altar. I've had enough embarrassment and disappointment to last me a lifetime. I just...I don't think I'm ready to put myself out there again. Hot farmer or not."

"I get it," she says softly. "But you can't let that asshole of an ex ruin your views on love for the rest of your life. And hey, it doesn't even have to be love. Maybe that hot farmer guy will just be an amazing bang, help you get your mojo back."

"Maybe," I admit, looking out the window in the direction he left in

yesterday. "He did have a bit of a swagger about him."

Mariah lets out a laugh. "There you go. There's hope for you yet, my friend."

"Let's just hold off on making any further judgements until we see what condition he returns my book in. If there are dog ears, or he breaks that spine..."

"Say no more. Those there are deal breakers no matter how hot a guy is."

"Exactly."

There's a short pause where I swear I can hear her smiling. "I'm glad you're finally doing OK again, Reggie. He didn't deserve you," she murmurs, making my eyes prick with emotion as I nod and try to keep the lump from forming in my throat.

"I should get back to unpacking," I say, adding on a quick goodbye before disconnecting and blinking back the threatening tears. I've already cried enough over my failed wedding to last me a lifetime. I refuse to shed anymore.

JOSH

*H*aving stayed up most of the night reading, I'm running on about three hours of sleep when I approach my new neighbor's house to return her book. There hasn't been anyone living in this cottage since the last occupant, an elderly woman named Odette, passed away in her sleep about five years ago. I don't know if that's what kept would-be buyers at bay, or if it's just that Cedarwood Valley is so far off the beaten track that most people don't even know it exists. Either way, I'm glad someone has finally moved in. It's nice to have another human being around who isn't my sister or a farmhand.

Climbing the steps of the small cottage, I clear my throat before I raise a hand and knock on the door. After a few moments, my neighbor appears, peeking through the lace curtains that cover the arched window inlaid at the top of the wooden door. Her eyes go wide.

"No thank you," she says, ducking behind the curtains again.

I grin to myself, my grip tightening on the book as I hold it up for her to see. "Don't you want your book back?"

She opens the door with a jerk and snatches the book out of my hand.

"Did you read it?" she asks, fanning the pages as she inspects the book's condition.

"I did," I say, allowing my eyes to drink in the full figure of the woman before me. While I thoroughly enjoyed our impromptu meeting yesterday, I'm still just as taken by her today. She's wearing a fitted blue tank with an open button-down tied at the waist, along with a pair of black yoga pants and a red polka-dot scarf that's covering her pulled back chocolate-colored hair. On her face, there isn't a scrap of makeup, and her feet are bare save for the bright pink nail polish. I can imagine coming home after a long day in the fields to this, picking her up and—

"Already?" Her doubting tone cuts through my thoughts before they turn lewd.

"Well, you made it look so good..."

She rolls her eyes, and I can't help the way my mouth kicks up at the side. "I'm never living that down, am I?"

"Not a chance, flick."

"It's Reggie, by the way. Well, Regina, actually. But my friends call me Reggie—or Reg. Either one. Just don't call me Gina. I hate that."

"Got it." My brow goes up. "So...we're friends now, are we?"

She places a hand on her hip and looks me up and down. I can tell she's taking in my farmer's attire—jeans, plaid shirt, and mud boots—with a critical eye. "You tell me, farm boy. You're the one knocking on *my* door."

I laugh. "That I am. And you know, I suppose I wouldn't mind bein' friends. If you can recommend another book for me, of course. I've never read romance before, but between you and me, I really liked that one."

"Really?" She pulls her head back in surprise. "I'm happy to hear that—as long as you don't tell me what happens, because I was only a little over halfway when you took off with it."

I can't keep the smirk from my face at that admission. "Let me guess, you got to the part in the locker-room showers?"

Her cheeks flush pink, and I know I'm right.

"How about, never you mind? You stay right there, and I'm gonna go get you another book to read," she says, clutching her copy of *Pucking Gorgeous* to her chest as she turns and disappears further into the cottage.

I wait on the front stoop since I haven't been invited to follow. Plus, I've been out in the fields all day and don't want to track mud inside.

"You're lucky I just finished unpacking my bookshelves," she says when

she returns, a different book with similar branding in her hand. "This one is by the same author, but it's the book before the one you read."

"It's a series?"

"Yes. But they're standalones that are connected by the guys on the hockey team. It doesn't matter if you don't read them in order." She holds it out to me, and I read the title, *Pucked All Night*.

"Thank you," I say, reaching out to take it from her but finding that she pulls it away.

"Just make sure you bring it back in perfect condition. Same rules as the last time."

"No sticky pages. Got it, " I say, giving her a cheeky grin as a pleasant jolt courses through my body when I take the book, and her fingers brush briefly against mine. She sucks in a breath and quickly pulls away. *There's just something about this woman...*

We stand there for moment longer, not saying anything as I run my thumb over the raised text on the front cover and wonder what kind of story I'm going to find inside. Another hockey one, obviously. But what are the characters going to be like? In the last one, the heroine was filled with hidden insecurities that she covered with outspoken bravado. And the hero was so afraid of commitment due to his upbringing that he struggled to trust anyone could see past his sporting fame to the man he truly was beneath it all. I went in expecting to possibly get my rocks off, but in the end, I got a well-rounded story. I was both moved and longing for more. I'm never reading another war story again.

Finally, Reggie breaks the silence with a soft chuckle and a shake of her head. "You know this is kinda nuts, right?"

My eyes fly up to meet hers. "Neighbors lending books to each other?"

"Sure. That's all that's going on here." She laughs and looks to the side, like she can't make eye contact right now. "I seriously contemplated just calling the moving company to come and take my stuff back to the city last night."

"Why? Because your neighbor saw you ringing the devil's doorbell?"

"What the hell did you call it?" She laughs again and looks at me like I'm slightly crazy—which maybe I am.

"You know, flicking the bean, a ménage à moi, paddling the pink canoe, jilling off, orbiting ve—"

"OK!" She holds up her hand for me to stop, still laughing though, so

that's a win. "I get it. You know a lot of euphemisms for female masturbation."

"One can get pretty creative while spendin' hours out in the fields dealing with farm work."

"I bet." She smiles and looks down at her hands. "I should probably get back to unpacking."

"And I should get back to the herd. Thanks again for the loan." I lift the book as I give her a half-smile before I turn to leave. "I'll get it back to you soon. See you around, flick."

"Yeah. See you around, farm boy."

"Hey, Reggie." I stop a few feet away from her cottage and turn back around before she fully shuts the door. "I'm glad you decided to stay."

She presses her lips into a soft smile. "Enjoy your book."

"Josh," I say.

"What?"

"Josh. That's my name. Josh Oliver."

"Oh, OK." She laughs. "Enjoy your book, Josh Oliver."

I hold my hand up to signal goodbye as I head down her front path and out the front gate, a smile on my face because meeting her is the most fun I've had in years. I can't wait to get home and read this book, just so I can come back tomorrow and ask for another.

REGINA

I lock the door and lean against it, making sure Josh is well out of sight before I finally let out a deep breath. What in the world was that? I suppose he was trying to be friendly, but my heart had leapt into my throat when he appeared at my door like that. Despite Mariah's urgings to keep an open mind where my sheep-farming neighbor is concerned, I'd kind of hoped I could keep my head down for a week or two years and he'd just forget I even existed. Then I could continue on with the quiet hermit life I'd envisioned for myself when I bought this place. But no, he actually went and *read* the book and returned it looking for another one.

I don't know if I'm impressed by his reading speed or creeped out that our encounter is what made him decide to read romance in the first place. Or...am I...turned on?

With a heavy sigh, I set my copy of *Pucking Gorgeous* on the kitchen counter and press my palms against my cheeks. If any other man reacted as overtly cocky as he did after catching me in such a compromising position, I'd probably be horrified. But the fact is, my new neighbor is a little too attractive for his own good. I can't help but feel drawn to him despite myself.

I also can't deny that I get a little thrill thinking back to what might have happened had that sheep kept its bleating mouth shut.

Giggling at myself, I shake my head to clean up my thoughts. I came to Cedarwood Valley to let go of my past and find peace in a solitary life. A hot farmer for a neighbor who seems somewhat interested in me is the very last thing I saw as a part of my new small-town life. But here I am on day two and Josh Oliver, with his sky-blue eyes and easy-going smile, is making it hard to remember the reasons I chose to embrace my singledom and move to such a secluded area in the first place. And while his interest in me seems highly motivated by the head hanging between his legs, having a gorgeous guy like him to flirt with might be the thing that helps me start to feel good about myself after feeling so low and cast aside.

Cast aside...

This is the thing about a painful past, you can run as much as you like, move hours away to a tiny cottage in a farming town, and the tiniest little thought can toss your mind right back to the worst moment of your life. For me, it was standing at the altar after my ex uttered the four most heart-wrenching words I've ever heard, 'I can't do this.'

Emotion tightens in my chest, and I push the book onto the floor as my brain replays the devastation I felt when watching him walk out of the church and loudly tell everyone the wedding is off. When I asked him later why he'd do something so cruel, all he'd said was, 'He just wasn't feeling it.' And thank god he said that shitty excuse over the phone, because I'd have been arrested if we'd had that conversation face to face. How can a man decide he's 'not feeling it' after dating somebody for two years? The mind boggles. But in the end, I'm glad I found out before we said 'I do'.

Letting out a slow breath, I look down to the book on my floor, instantly regretting my outburst. Then I crouch down and pick the book back up again, running my hand over its cover, checking for any damage I may have caused. It's not the romance genre's fault he humiliated me like that. No true hero would ever treat his woman that way. I shouldn't take my disappointment over my failed wedding out on a defenseless paperback.

I quickly shake away my shitty thoughts, contemplate drinking the last of my bottle of wine, then wipe at my eyes before returning to my unpacking. My ex may have left me standing there, but that was months ago now, and I'm not going to keep sitting around letting his actions affect me. I'm ready to start my life anew.

And maybe, just maybe, I could be persuaded into letting a book-loving farm boy into it too.

Maybe...

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JOSH

When I woke up this morning, there was a book on my face and my light was still on. After my marathon reading session the night before, I guess my exhaustion got the better of me. Which is why I'm currently sitting on the tractor inside the barn, hiding out because I want to get this book finished so I can take it back to Reggie and get another. And if I'm lucky, she might even talk to me for more than a minute too.

Even though I've only met her twice and had a legitimate conversation with her once, I can already tell my new neighbor is guarded. There's something about her body language, something in her eyes and the tension in her breath. I notice it all, and when I find out who's responsible for that hurt, I'm gonna hunt them down and make sure they never darken her door again. It's hard to explain *why* I feel the need to do that, but there's just something about Reggie that's already burrowed deep under my skin. And it's not just because I already have intimate knowledge of her. It's because there's something about her. Something that's caused a spark in me I've never felt before. I want her to be mine, and I'm willing to fight the demons in her past to earn my place by her side.

And maybe that's why I'm enjoying these romance novels so much. The men in these books behave exactly the way a man should with his woman. They treat her like a queen, keep her safe and protect her from everyone and everything. They will burn the world down in her honor, but above all else, they're vulnerable with her in a way they aren't with anyone else.

It's the way I've always envisioned loving and settling down with someone would be like. It's like these books are giving me the permission I need to be the man I want to be. All that macho bullshit should stay in the locker room or at the bar with the boys. When you're with your woman, letting her see into your soul is the privilege that being in love honors you with. I don't understand wanting it any other way.

With my eyes glued to the page, I'm twisting at the button, two below my collar, while reading a tension-filled moment that I'm sure will lead to this trouble-plagued couple figuring out their shit when the door opens, and I startle so much that I almost toss the book in the air. *Almost.*

"There you are!" my sister, Kymberly, calls out as she stomps along the concrete ground toward where I've parked my butt *and* the tractor. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"Looks like you found me," I say, sliding my finger inside the book to keep my page, but turning it so she can't see the cover. "What can I do for you, Kym?"

"Feed truck came in and made a delivery, but the guys who counted it keep comin' up wrong." She brushes her light blonde curls away from her face and sighs. "Can you come over and help me do a recount, please? Those guys have tried four times already, and they're drivin' me crazy."

With a chuckle, I hop down from the tractor and tuck my book into my back pocket. "Lead the way."

"I don't know what you're doin' in here hidin' away from work," she mutters, falling into step beside me as we head outside, our feet sucking into the mud after an unusually wet month. "You know those guys you hired for help barely have a full brain between them."

"That's not true," I say, struggling not to laugh. "They're just not so great at math. They get distracted."

"You do know countin' sheep is literally part of their job."

"Yeah, but I gave them one of those hand-held clickers for that. Makes it a heck of a lot easier."

"That's a relief," she breathes, adjusting the baseball cap on her head so

her curls aren't in her face so much. "I'd hate to think of them missing one and leavin' it out in the elements all night long. Oh, and don't think I didn't see you wasting time by readin' up on that tractor. What is this, anyway?" She stops abruptly, pulling the book from my pocket before I even get the chance to stop her.

"Hey, give that back!"

Gleefully, she skips away from me with the book held in the air. "Josh Oliver! I never thought I'd see the day you were skiving off your work duties to read a *romance* book." She giggles to herself as she stops and studies the cover. I take that as an opportunity to snatch it back.

"For the record, I wasn't wastin' time because I've finished my chores. But in defense of my reading choices, I'll have you know that the romance genre is *the* best-selling genre by far. Everyone should be reading it."

"Oh, I agree," she says, placing her hand on her chest whole heartedly. "I love me a good romance. I just never thought I'd see the day when my big brother was hiding out in the barn reading one. A dirty one at that. I know who Saffron Spark is."

I laugh and slide the book back into my pocket. "Our new neighbor threw one at me, so I decided to see what it was about. Turns out, I really like it, so I borrowed another."

"Wait up. You'll need to reverse a little there. Our *new neighbor* threw a book at you?"

I explain how I startled Reggie when one of our sheep strayed onto her land—leaving out the self-pleasure details, of course—and how she threw a book out the window and I took it home. She's smiling by the end of it.

"She sounds like she has a bit of spunk. I think you like her," she singsongs, nudging into me with her elbow. "I'll bet she just *happens* to be real pretty too."

Giving her a smirk, I bounce a shoulder. "I haven't really noticed, and if I had, I wouldn't be tellin' my little sister about it." I reach up and tug the peak of her hat so it's covering her eyes and she yelps. "Now, come on. Let's get that feed count sorted so we can both be done with work for the day."

"You are no fun, Joshua," she says, trying to get her hat sitting comfy on her head again. "Finally, you're showing interest in something other than the farm and you won't even talk about it with me."

"Maybe I just really want to get back to reading my book."

Kym rolls her eyes but follows me up to the feed house without any more

questions, while I try to ignore the curiosity burning inside me over what happens next between this couple and if they ever make it past their problems. Or maybe I just really want to go and visit Reggie...

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REGINA

Pouring myself a second glass of wine, I check the clock for the thousandth time before heading over to the couch and sitting down.

I've been trying to finish reading the book Josh returned yesterday, but the idea of seeing him again has really done a number on my concentration. I think I've read the same page about five times already, and I have no idea what's going on.

Setting the book aside, I sip at my wine and scroll through my phone, trying to decide if I should just call it a night since I've been on my feet all day. I've unpacked as much as I can possibly fit in this cottage and stored the rest of it ceiling high in the spare room that was supposed to be my office. But I can't see any way around it. Until I can get a storage unit or something, I'll just have to work at the kitchen table with my laptop and drawing tablet.

Sighing, I pick up my glass and take a long pull of the fruity wine, noting the way my eyes stray to the front door like I'm some desperate schoolgirl hoping the hot boy in class got her note saying she had a crush on him and that he might call at any minute. Except I'm not a schoolgirl, and while Josh is hot, he isn't a boy—he's a farmer with responsibilities—so, I don't know

why I'm sitting here expecting him to show up asking for another book the same way he did yesterday. I mean, it's not like we had an agreed upon date or anything.

But why is it I feel so put out?

After scrolling social media for a few more wasted minutes, I decide watching a little mindless TV is in order. I have a habit of turning on movies then falling asleep ten minutes in, so it just might be the salve my overactive imagination needs to stop me from thinking incessantly about farmer Josh.

I'm trying to decide between watching a rom-com versus a gritty crime drama when there's a knock on my door. I startle then stand up, trying to calm the excited thrumming of my nerves as I walk across my living area.

He's just a guy. He's just a guy, I keep reminding myself as I take a minute to check my hair isn't messy before I open the door.

"Farm boy," I say with a smile and a somewhat sultry voice that I'm going to blame on the glass and a half of wine I've had.

"Flick." He smirks and looks past me into the cottage like he's waiting for me to invite him in.

"I've got wine if you want to stop me from drinking the whole bottle alone and regretting it tomorrow."

His brow kicks up. "Wouldn't want that now, would we?"

I step aside to let him in, heading straight into the kitchen to get a second glass for him. He immediately walks over to my couch and picks up the book I'm reading and smiles like he's meeting with an old friend.

"Here you go. I hope white is OK. It's all I have," I say, moving over to him.

He sets the book back down to meet my eyes. "Anything you've got is fine by me. I'm just happy to be done with work for the day. Today did not go as expected."

"Lose another sheep and find another neighbor in a compromising position?" I ask, looking at him over my glass as I settle into the couch and take a sip.

He chuckles and makes himself comfortable right next to me as he removes his backward baseball cap and sets it on the table beside him.

"I'd hope not. None of my other neighbors are as easy on the eye as you, Reggie."

My cheeks heat. Every word from this man's mouth is just somehow coated with sugar and I keep eating it up like it's candy. His presence fills the

room and being this close to him has me feeling giddy. *I don't even know him!*

I can't help but let my eyes drop try and hide my blush, but all I manage to do is take note of how his strong thighs strain against the denim of his jeans. *Oh my.* My heart races as I force my eyes back up and find him watching me like he knows exactly what's going through my mind. And from the twinkling of mischief in his sky-blue eyes, I doubt he'd be half wrong.

"A ewe got caught in the mud," he says, breaking whatever tension was building between us.

"Huh?" My brain is so busy thinking of dirty things that *don't* involve mud that it takes me a moment to catch on. "Oh! One of your sheep got stuck! Is she OK?"

"She'll be fine, but my sister is currently insisting I let a couple of the farm hands go. I hate firing people."

"Was it their fault the sheep got stuck?"

"They aren't so great with numbers, so if they'd counted properly when they moved the sheep back into the barn, she wouldn't have been out there alone."

"Your sister might have a point then."

"She does, but..." Instead of finishing, he sighs then shakes his head as if the action clears his thoughts. "I didn't come here to complain about work."

I roll my lips to fight a smile. "What did you come here for?"

Taking a sip of his wine first, he sets the glass back down before again meeting my eyes, suddenly looking very serious. "There's somethin' I need to tell you..."

"Yes?"

"The ewe isn't the only thing that got stuck in the mud today."

"What do you mean?"

"The book you loaned me. It was in my pocket and it fell and...well, now it's ruined."

My hand lifts to my mouth as I gasp.

"I know. I know. I've committed the cardinal sin of sticky pages. But I promise you I'll replace it new, and I wouldn't blame you if you never wanted to lend me a book again. But if you ever do, I assure you I won't take it out in the field with me. I'm so sorry, Reggie. I made a promise to you, and I didn't keep it. That's not the kind of man I am."

Something about the softness of his voice and the pleading in his eyes

shifts my reaction from shock to understanding. He seems so contrite that I feel like I have no other option but to forgive him.

"It's OK, Josh," I say, placing my hand over his where it rests on the couch between us. "Really. I know accidents happen. It's not like you willingly threw my favorite book into the mud."

"I definitely didn't," he says, a relieved chuckle leaving him as he gives my fingers a gentle squeeze. I suck in my breath, my eyes dropping to where our hands are still joined, and the only thing I can think about is how good it feels to have the heat of his skin pressed against mine.

"Josh." His name comes out in a whisper, and I don't know what it is about him, but the air is suddenly thick with something else entirely. Something that has me wondering why I ever thought coming here to live out my life alone was the only way forward for me.

Josh leans in, his lips as close to mine as they can get without actually touching. "Yes, Reggie?" he asks, his breath fanning my lips, sending shivers up my spine.

I stop breathing completely, closing my eyes and wondering how on earth I got myself in this position. Half of me is screaming for him to close the distance and kiss me, and the other half is flashing red lights and warning bells. I came out here to be alone and heal. What's happening right now is the very opposite of that.

"I..." I start, forcing my eyes to open and my lungs to inhale. "I...I want to know what you thought of the book." Scooting away from him slightly, I clear my throat and break the connection, sitting up and retrieving my wine glass from the table.

He frowns. "The book?"

Lifting the glass to my lips, I take a big, calming mouthful. "You know, the book you dropped in the mud? Where did you get up to? And what did you think?"

A slow smile crosses his features as he angles himself toward me, knee up on the couch as he returns to his wine and sips. "I was only a few chapters away from finishing. It was the big game and he had to decide if he was going to play or throw it away and get his ass to the airport to stop her getting on that plane."

Instantly, the scene pops into my head. I love a good reunion scene. "And what do you think he chooses?"

"There is no choice. He chooses her," he whispers, looking at me in a way

that makes me feel like he's the one doing the choosing, and I'm the obvious choice. It makes my heart stutter in my chest. "Any man worth his weight knows that when the perfect woman crashes into your life, there's nothing more valuable than earning and keepin' her love. He'd go to the ends of the earth for her."

"Even if it took him a while to realize that," I whisper in return, my voice almost a sigh as I take in the intensity of his gaze.

"That's the only part I didn't like. If I found the other half to my whole, there's no way I'd push her away the way he did."

"No? What would you do instead?"

"Anything and everything in my power to win her over and keep her, *claim her.*"

My core tightens and my cheeks flush. "I know what you're doing here, Josh, and as much as I appreciate the attention of someone as ridiculously handsome as you, I have to be truthful and tell you I don't know that I'm relationship material right now." Even as the words tumble out of my mouth in a rush, my brain is screaming at me to shut up. No single woman in her right mind would push a gorgeous man who's openly into them away. But maybe I'm just not in my right mind.

"I like the part where you called me ridiculously handsome," he says, lifting his glass to take a gulp. "But the rest, I could do without." He shifts slightly in his seat as he meets my eyes. "Do you really think that you have to be relationship material to find one worth having?"

I press my lips together, unsure of what to say when I already feel so unsure of myself around this man. He overwhelms me in the best of ways, but he also frightens me with his intensity. I could see myself completely falling into him, and I'm not sure I'm ready to let go of myself like that again. Not so soon after my failed wedding.

"You sound like my best friend," I force out eventually. "She's always telling me to keep an open mind and let the universe guide me."

"Then I'm in good company. Because from where I'm sittin', beautiful women with a quick wit and a love of books don't walk into my life too often. But that's kind of the point of life, isn't it? Things happen when you least expect them to. And sometimes whether you're ready or not, you just have to grab on tight and hold on. Maybe it'll work out. Maybe it won't. But it's the regrettin' that'll kill you. That thought in your mind that nags when you're trying to sleep, telling you what a fool you were to let something that could

be amazin' slip away."

"Are you calling me a fool, farm boy?"

He grins and shakes his head. "No, flick. I'm just making my intentions clear. You may not be ready for me yet, but I'm ready for you. So no matter how hard you push me, I won't walk away. I won't let you get on the plane." He picks up the book I was reading and holds it up to me to illustrate his next point. "And I won't ever let you think you aren't the only woman in my life."

Gasping, I snatch the book from his grip. "What does that mean? Are you talking about *this* book? Is there other woman drama?" I say, flicking through the book and finding the offending scene a few chapters away.

Josh winces. "I really thought you'd have read past that point by now."

I bat him gently with the now-closed book. "I've had a lot on my mind, OK?"

He catches my hand and holds it in his. "As long as I was one of those things, then I can leave here tonight a happy man."

My eyes meet his, and it's impossible to look away. "Yes. OK? Yes, you were a big part of that."

A slow smile curves his kissable lips. "I'm going to fight for you. I don't know what it is that's caused you to build up your walls, but I'm going to be the man who tears them down brick by brick and dedicates his life to making you feel whole."

I couldn't hide the smile that takes over if I tried. "Two romance novels, and suddenly this man is talking like a born hero."

"Maybe," he says, standing up and picking up his hat. "Or maybe I just know what I want. And what I want is you." He leans down and places a gentle kiss on my forehead, my cheeks flaming as I look up into his eyes when he straightens again. "I'll see you soon, flick. And I expect that when I come back, I'll have a chance to prove to you that I'm not like any other guy you've ever met."

He winks at me and turns to go, leaving me alone in the cabin and with the continuing thought that I may have finally found the one who can help me heal my broken heart.

He already is unlike any other guy I've met...

JOSH

*R*egina and I have been meeting up almost every other day for a month, and our conversations have gone from light and humorous to something a bit more special. The way she looks at me with those incredible eyes makes my heart skip a beat, and I can feel myself being pulled in closer. I want her to be mine more than ever.

Our talks range from books to music to work and childhood memories. I've learned that she's a freelance digital artist, an only child, and a woman who dreams of a world filled with joy and wonder. I find myself eagerly looking forward to our next meeting. I want to know everything about her. Her joy, her pain, and everything in between.

The more we talk and share, the more I feel like those walls of hers are starting to crumble. I still don't know much about the reason behind her move out to Cedarwood Valley, but from what I've gleaned so far, it had something to do with the breakdown of a relationship. As much as I'm relieved no man has snatched her up and made her his before the fates decided on our meeting, I'm still going to hunt any ass wipe who hurt her down and give them a swift kick in the nuts. They have no idea what they've missed out on.

But their loss is my gain, and with every passing day our already flirtatious friendship moves closer and closer to becoming something more, something permanent. Once I have Regina in my arms and in my bed, there'll be no turning back. This woman is my future. I'm certain of it.

"Earth to Joshua. Come in, Joshua!" Kymberly says, snapping me from my lovesick thoughts as she waves her hand in front of my face.

"Did you say something?" I ask, immediately returning to my meal—a bowl of mutton stew and homemade biscuits—like I was just on pause and my sister pressed play.

"I've been talking to you for a solid ten minutes without any response."

"I'm sorry, Kym. I'm listening now."

She sighs. "It was mostly just town gossip. But the last part was me telling you I'm heading *into* town. You need anything?"

"Where are you going while you're there?"

"I'm pickin' up the grocery order and the mail. Got a call there's a big box from Amazon that's in their way. What did you order? Because it wasn't me this time."

"Books." I shoot up from my seat and take my bowl to the sink. "I'll pick it up."

"Books, huh?" A smirk takes over my sister's face as she waggles her brows. "And would they happen to be of the romance variety?"

I grab my hat and place it on my head. "Maybe."

"You know, if you keep up this pattern of reading every waking moment, people are gonna look closer and start asking questions."

"Ain't nothin' wrong with reading."

"I know that. But you know what this town is like. The gossips are already curious enough about our newcomer, so they'll eventually get wind of your little book club and the next thing you know—"

"I don't care about the town, Kym. I'm thirty-nine now, and for once in my life I'm actually doing something that's just for myself. I'm even *enjoying* myself. I'm also enjoying Reggie's company. And if I had it my way, I'd see a heck of a lot more of her. So they can say what they want. I'm not changin'."

She looks at me for a long moment, her smirk turning into a pleasant smile. "You really do like her, huh?"

"I do," I admit, pulling my keys from the hook by the door. "She's..." I pause as I try to find the right word, but it ends up being the simplest one that

fits. "She's amazin'."

"I'm happy you've found someone who makes you smile like that, big bro. But I have to ask—since I haven't met her yet—does our new neighbor feel the same way about you?"

I give her a half smile as I place my hand on the door and pull. "I hope so."

"Then I can't wait to meet her. Maybe you should invite her to dinner one night?"

"I'll do that... When she's mine," I say, heading out to my truck before my sister can ask any further questions.

I can feel her smile follow me out as I think of the future I want with Regina. Most people would tell me I'm getting ahead of myself, but I just know in my heart of hearts that this woman is the one for me. I just have to be patient and wait for her to come around. And I have a feeling that once she sees what's in that box, I'll be one step closer to winning her heart and proving to her that I'm the one she's been waiting for too.

REGINA

After a long day dealing with indecisive clients, I put my digital pen down and head outside with a mug of tea, a fluffy blanket and my latest read. The night is cool and the sun is just starting to set, providing me with a beautiful light show as I unwind on my comfy porch seat.

The stress of the day slowly seeps away, and it isn't until a familiar looking truck pulls into my driveway that I look up and set my book aside.

"What have you got there?" I ask, unable to hide my curiosity when Josh steps onto my front porch with a large box in his arms. His eyes sparkle with excitement as he kneels and sets it on the ground in front of me, looking up with a mischievous grin.

"A surprise," he says, waving me closer.

I don't need to be asked twice, and I'm quickly kneeling on the wooden porch beside him. "A surprise for me?"

"Primarily." He holds my gaze as he pulls open the box and I look inside, finding a trove of romance novels.

My mouth drops open in shock. "Josh...you got me books?"

"That's not all," he says, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a

padded envelope.

I take it and turn it over in my hand, my heart beating thunderously as I reach inside and slide out a tissue wrapped book with a sticker logo in the center I'd know anywhere. "Saffron Spark?"

He grins wider. "It's to replace the one I ruined. I wanted to get you something special, something you'll enjoy. So I got it direct from the author so she'd sign it."

"You contacted Saffron Spark for me?"

"Of course. I'd do anything for you, flick."

Tearing the tissue open carefully, I slide the paperback free and open the front cover, tears coming to my eyes as I read the author's words written just for me, '*Dearest Reggie, I pucking love my readers! Saffron Spark xxx*'

"I love it," I sigh, hugging the book to my chest. "Thank you, Josh."

"You're very welcome," he says warmly, his hands on either side of the almost-overflowing box. "And this here is technically a gift for the both of us. I figured you could use a few new titles since we've almost read your entire bookshelf. So, I searched through Amazon and got two of everything that looked good so we can buddy read."

I'm speechless. Never in my life has a man gone out of his way to get me something so thoughtful. But that's Josh, and in the short time I've known him, he's proven time and time again that he's nothing like any other guy I've ever met.

He's special, and I'm beginning to see that he just might be the one man I can trust with my fragile and broken heart.

"I don't know what to say," I practically whisper, my throat feeling tight with emotion as I watch him pull book after book from the box.

"You don't have to say anything. Spending time talking to you is enough," he says, glancing up at me with a heartfelt smile that has me aching all over. I act without thinking.

"You amaze me," I gasp, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my lips to his.

He freezes in surprise for a moment, and then his arms wrap around me in return, and he deepens the kiss, tongue seeking entry and gliding against mine in a powerful, dominant yet sensual way. I'm lost; lost in the feelings of excitement and desire rushing through my body with each languid stroke, each exploratory taste, each desire-filled murmur as his hands go into my hair and he angles my head just so.

“You amaze *me*, Regina. You are my favorite person in the world. I dream of you.” Those last words come out as a whisper and hit me right in my chest. I’ve never wanted a man more than I do right in this moment.

"I want to re-enact every dirty scene in all these books with you," I blurt, realization quickly hitting me before I clap my hands over my mouth in surprise.

Josh smiles down at me, cupping my chin and lifting it up so our eyes meet. "Say that again?"

"I-I'm sorry," I stammer, feeling embarrassed by my impulsiveness. "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"Yeah, you did," he says softly, brushing back a strand of hair from my face. "You meant every word."

My cheeks flush pink as I nod in admission, not trusting myself to speak again.

"That's exactly the kind of thing I want to hear from you. I want you to feel comfortable expressing your desires with me. I want you to feel safe with me, Regina."

Still mortified by my slip up, I close my eyes, allowing his words sink in and ebb away at my doubts. I trust him. For the first time in a long time, I finally feel like I'm with a strong, caring, honorable man. Someone who would never hurt me or leave me standing alone embarrassed the way my ex did.

"I do feel safe with you, Josh," I whisper, my voice barely audible as I risk opening my eyes to look up at him. "And I think I'm finally ready for something more."

He smiles before pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. "Then I'm all yours. Just as you were mine the moment I saw you."

I can feel the warmth of his words seep into my bones, and for the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm home. I'm in the arms of someone I can trust, who I can express myself to, who will let me be me.

"Thank you," I whisper, surprise and gratitude still evident in my voice. "Thank you for being so patient with me."

He pulls back, a smile still lingering on his lips. "You're welcome. Now, let's get these books inside and pick our first read. I have a feeling we're about to take these stories and make them our own."

I can barely contain my smile as I nod and follow him inside, allowing the thought of not just a future with Josh, but a storybook—a dirty storybook

—ending with him, sink in.

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JOSH

The air is thick with anticipation as we sit on Regina's couch reading the first book we chose from our delivery. I'd spent over an hour pouring through the best seller lists, reading blurbs and reviews to see if each book was something I thought we'd both enjoy. And based on the slight smile that seems permanently affixed to her face, I'd say my goal—with this book, at least—was achieved. But it's more than that, this delivery of books has smashed through the last of that wall I've slowly been working through. She's letting me in. And if her blurted comment about re-enacting the dirty scenes is anything to go by, she's been thinking about being with me as much as I've been thinking about being with her. It seems we've found a match in each other.

A match.

It's not really something I saw in my future when I took over the responsibility of the family farm. At most, I thought I'd end up with one of the girls I went to high school with. Someone who understood what it was like to live in a rural town and had willingly chosen to stay. We wouldn't have a great love story, but we would have companionship and

understanding. It was all a man tied to the land the way I am could wish for.

Initially, the farm was supposed to be handed down to my older brother, Theo, when my parents passed on. But he had a wanderer's heart and left home early to explore the world. Our father didn't really react well to that and ended up leaving the farm in my hands. Sure, I'd been helping to run things for years, but taking it on full time was a whole different ballgame.

Overwhelmed as I was, I was still determined to make it a success and prove that I was more than capable of carrying on the tradition that generations before me had started. But it was often lonely, and I found myself longing for something more in life—or even just the time to go out there and search for it. I'd almost given up on the idea of ever getting that chance when I happened upon Regina. That moment, strange as it was, changed my life. I finally had the opportunity to feel something other than the heavy burden of responsibility.

When I'm with Regina, I don't feel lonely anymore. I don't feel overwhelmed or stressed. I feel like I'm exactly where I belong. I feel peace. I don't have to settle for the life that was left to me, I get to live one worthy of the plot in a romance novel. I'm not just a farmer anymore. I'm the man who makes the pretty girl smile. I'm the man who loves on her so hard she forgets what it's like to feel sorrow.

I smile to myself as I turn the page, my gaze flicking over to her, taking in the way her eyes light up as she reads. We've been careful to keep pace with each other, and since I'm a little faster reader than her, it's been giving me the chance to watch her get immersed in the story, react to the tension and finally, blush when things start heating up.

"We don't have to do this tonight if you're having second thoughts," I say when her eyes fly up to mine the moment she hits the sex scene.

Her chest rises and falls with a harsh breath before she shakes her head, a ghost of a smile taking over her lips. "I'm not having second thoughts. I want to do this. With you."

"OK," I whisper, reaching for her and sliding my hand up her neck until I'm cradling her head. She leans into my touch, and I instantly move closer and brush my lips against hers. "I can't fucking wait to taste you, Regina."

She trembles as I press my forehead against hers, and when I pull away, she takes a deep breath before tearing her eyes from mine and continuing to read.

Every word on the page is amplified by the tension in the air, the sound of

her breathing and the growing arousal in my pants. Like most men my age, I've partaken in the video variety of these kinds of scenes. And sure, they did the job, but they didn't pack the same kind of punch that each and every descriptive word has. It's like I'm right there with the characters instead of some voyeur on the other side of a screen. And what's more, I'm about to touch and tease the woman beside me for real. I've never been more turned on.

I turn the page, eager to know what's next. And when I do, the increased depth of Regina's breathing is obvious. I love that she's as into this as I am, and the further into the scene I get, the less I can refrain from shifting this fantasy into the real world.

"What are you doing?" she gasps, her eyes bright with anticipation as I set my book aside and drop to my knees on the floor in front of her.

"Keep reading and you'll find out," I say, my voice thick as I slide my hands up her thighs and hook my fingers into the waistband of her yoga pants, easing them and her panties down her deliciously round thighs and discarding them so I can part her knees and get my first look of the promised land.

It's glistening.

A growl rumbles out of me.

"Ohhhh," Reggie gasps, her book falling to her side as she shifts her focus to me.

I pause. "Don't you dare stop reading," I command, running my hands along the inside of her thighs until my fingertips are dipping into her soaked seam. She moans at my touch, but she lifts the book again and returns to the scene obediently.

"Good girl," I rasp, leaning in and dragging my teeth against that soft piece of skin where her thigh meets her apex. She whimpers and lifts her hips, urging me to do more than just touch and nip.

I tease her entrance for a moment longer before I finally give in and dip one finger into her tight channel.

Regina arches her back. And to my unending pleasure, she still reads.

"So fucking wet," I murmur, watching my finger emerge from her body soaked before I slide it back in again. "So tight." I add a second finger into the mix as I bow my head and breathe her in.

Her heady scent takes over my senses, and I'm driven by a carnal instinct to drag my tongue from my buried fingers to her swollen clit.

With a throaty moan, Regina rests her head against the back of the couch, the pages of her book quivering as she continues to read, her fingers gripping the armrests as I lick and suck, thrusting my fingers in and out of her, taking her ever closer to the edge as I devour her with a hunger I've never felt before.

I'm lost in the intensity of the moment, reading every beat of her body's response until her whimpers change pitch, and I know there's no way she's reading anymore.

"Josh!"

With my free hand, I twist open the buttons of my fly and shove my jeans and boxers down my thighs. I need her more than I need my next breath.

Pushing the book aside, I wrap my hands around her thighs and pull her to me, my length pressing against her slick heat as her arms immediately go around my neck and our mouths collide.

"Farm boy," she whimpers with an urgency that matches my own.

I answer her with an intense kiss, exploring every inch of her mouth, sharing her flavor before I drag my lips near her ear and whisper, "Just like in the book."

She lets out a guttural moan as I position myself between her thighs and push inside, her tight heat surrounding me. I can barely see from the pleasure of it, electricity sparking between us as we move together.

"Fuck, Reggie. You feel so good."

"So do you," she whimpers, her head lolling back as each thrust drives us higher and higher as we become one with each other and the story. Every word, every sensation, every emotion is raw and real. It's like I'm having a sexual awakening, and I know I'll never be able to feel like this with anyone but her, ever again. She's mine. I'm hers. There's nothing else that matters.

Finally, when the intensity reaches almost unbearable heights, I reach between us and place a barely featherlight touch on her clit when she explodes.

"Joooooosssshhhh!!!!"

"Oh, Regina," I grunt, my insides drawing tight before I unload inside her, the pulsing of our combined orgasm reaching its peak then coming down as I collapse onto her, intimately connected, our heartbeats thudding as one.

Time seems to stop in that moment, and we lie there on that couch, our breathless bodies trembling, boneless and sated until I find the energy to shift back slightly and look into her eyes. She smiles.

"That... was..." She trails off, unable to find the words as her eyes search my face.

"Fucking amazing," I finish for her, pressing my forehead against hers and closing my eyes as we both laugh and hold each other tighter.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to look at a book the same way again."

I chuckle and press a soft kiss against her already swollen lips. "I don't think I'll ever be able to read a scene like that around anyone but you."

"I'm glad." She lowers her gaze as her fingers trail a lazy circle in the center of my shirt. "Because after that, I think I'd be incredibly jealous if you did. I want you all to myself."

"I'm not going anywhere, flick," I murmur, hooking my finger under her chin so I can tilt her face to mine. "I'm yours now as much as you are mine. And if I'm really honest, I wouldn't mind trying our hand at writing a love scene of our own."

"Literally or figuratively?"

I squint one eye as I think for a moment. "Can we do both?"

"You want to write a book with me?"

"I think we could give it a go. I mean, we've read enough of them."

"I suppose. I never really saw myself as an author, though."

"Hmm." I draw her closer. "I might have to carry you into the bedroom and do some convincing."

She grins against my mouth as I drop a kiss on her lips. "I might take *a lot* of convincing."

"Lucky I've been thinking about you naked and coming for me from the moment I first saw you."

She chuckles as her eyes spark bright. "I bet you did, you voyeur."

"Hey, you were the one with the open window," I say, kissing her deep before lifting her from the couch and carrying her to the bedroom so we can start something all of our own that we didn't read in books.

REGINA

We tumble back onto the bed, exhausted and out of breath with tangled legs and arms, my head tucked under his chin while we both melt into the mattress with blissful contentment. “You’re good at those sex scenes,” I murmur, keeping my eyes closed as I snuggle closer to him, inhaling his scent and listening to the strong beat of his heart beneath my ear. I could stay like this forever.

“Love scenes,” he corrects, his voice a soft whisper as he presses a kiss onto my forehead.

“What makes them love scenes?” I ask, a goofy smile spreading across my lips as I play with the light smattering of hair across his strong, workingman’s chest.

“The fact that I love you,” he murmurs, his arm tightening around me.

My heart flips at his words, and I’m quick to look up at him to see how serious he is. “You mean that?”

“Every word,” he says, nothing but honesty and vulnerability in his expression as he pushes my messy hair back from my face.

“I love you too,” I whisper, leaning into his touch as his fingers brush my

cheek. He releases a deep, contented breath as I press a kiss against his palm.

“Has anyone ever told you how fucking sexy and perfect you are?”

“Not really. But I definitely like hearing those words from you. You’re kinda sexy and perfect—not to mention hot—too.”

He grins and pulls me closer, brushing his lips against mine before taking my mouth in a slow, languid kiss that ends with me on my back and him leaning over me, making me feel so safe, secure and wanted in the comfort of his embrace. His fingers trail lazily down my naked side.

"I want to make love to you all night long, flick," he murmurs, lifting himself on one elbow to look at me. His bright blue eyes so filled with warmth, love, and desire, that I get an instant thrill of anticipation. I don't think I ever want to live in a world where his hands *aren't* on my body. Being in bed with and loved by this man is just too good a combination.

“I’m not planning on leaving this bed, farm boy. So, since you seem to be taking up at least half of the real estate here, pleasuring me is the least you can do.”

“Already making me earn my keep?”

“You better believe it. Life in the middle of nowhere is kind of hard. No free loaders.”

“Hard, you say?” He laughs, gently wrapping his arm around my waist as he pulls me flush against his body. “I think I have a little something that’ll show you just how *hard* things can get.”

“Little?” I gasp teasingly. “Oh, dear sir, you really have lived a sheltered life, haven’t you? There is nothing little about you.”

His response is an amused growl as he covers us with the blanket and we get lost in each other all over again. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this wanted, or this worshipped. I’ve never felt so completely, utterly loved. I left the city to tend to the wounds of my broken heart. But instead, I found the cure. Josh was patient and kind with me while I took the time I needed to realize how much I needed him. And now that we’re finally together, it feels like nothing could ever tear us apart.

JOSHUA

“*I* need to tell you something,” Regina whispers, her body resting on top of mine, brown hair splayed across my chest as we lie together in the darkness, bone tired, but still too wired on each other to sleep.

“You can tell me anything,” I return, my fingers brushing over the soft skin of her back, up and down in a slow caress as her soft breaths whisper across my skin.

She swallows and takes a sharp inhale before she speaks. “I was engaged.”

I still.

“He left me standing at the altar.”

“What?” My head feels like it’s spinning. The idea of her promising herself to another man hits me in a way I don’t care to explore but learning that same man did something so soul-crushing to her has me wanting to tear off limbs. No one hurts what’s mine.

“That’s why I moved here,” she says, lifting her head so she can look at me. “I couldn’t handle all the pity from everyone back home. It was like I couldn’t heal, because everywhere I went, someone we knew would be

asking how I was and why it happened. It was humiliating.”

“Why *did* it happen? Did he explain it to you?”

Tears spring to her eyes as she rolls her lips together and shakes her head. “He said he just wasn’t feeling it anymore.” I baulk. “I know, lame excuse, right? I think I would have preferred it if there was someone else, or if maybe he was secretly gay and only figured it out leading up to the wedding. But no, he simply decided that being married to me wasn’t for him. So instead of calling things off, he showed up and embarrassed me in front of everyone.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you, flick,” I murmur, brushing the back of my hand against her cheek where a tear has fallen. I hate that she even wanted to marry some guy who isn’t me. But I hate that she was humiliated even more. No one deserves that.

“I’m not,” she says, sniffing slightly before her expression shifts into a bright smile. “I mean, I could have done with him calling the wedding off earlier. But I’m not sorry it’s over. Without that heartache, I never would have moved here and found you.”

“Technically, I’m the one who found you.”

She laughs. “Well, your sheep did.”

“True. But I found the sheep. So…”

“OK. OK. You found me.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “I fuckin’ did. And I’m keeping you too.”

“Finders keepers, losers weepers.”

“You are my dream woman, Regina,” I say, emotion and honesty making my voice hoarse. “I will do anything it takes to make you happy, and I can sure as hell promise that I will never, *ever* do a damn thing to intentionally hurt you. You and me, we’re forever. And if I ever get my hands on that asshole ex, he’ll not only rue the day he walked away from the best thing that ever happened to him, he’ll also leave walkin’ funny because I’m gonna have to beat his ass for making you cry.”

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you, Josh,” she forces out, her cheeks flushing pink before she buries her face in my chest, her lips grazing against my bare skin. “You’re too good to be true.”

“Um… have you met you?” I ask, jerking my head back slightly. “You’re quite the catch.”

She huffs a burst of amused air from her nose. “I think every guest at my failed wedding would beg to differ with you there.”

“Hey,” I say, lifting her by the chin and looking deep into her emerald

gaze. “That guy didn’t deserve you. No man with even a shred of decency would leave his woman at the altar like that. I know I never would. And I won’t. Standing in front of everyone we know while declarin’ my love for you sounds like a dream come true.”

“What if I told you that I don’t know if I could ever go through it again,” she whispers, the old hurt swimming in the backs of her eyes, fear surfacing.

“Gettin’ married?”

She frowns and nods. “Does that change how you feel about me?”

I shake my head. “No. Because right now, you’re too close to the hurt and embarrassment that asshole made you feel. But you mark my words, Regina Malone, I’m gonna love on you so hard that when the time comes for us to finally walk down that aisle, you won’t even remember that guy’s name. You’ll be so secure in our relationship and my love for you, that you won’t doubt my showing up for a second.”

“You sound very sure about yourself there, farm boy.”

“That’s because I am. If there’s one thing you should know about me, it’s that I always know what I want. I don’t waver.”

“And, if I’m hearing you correctly, what you want is me?”

“What I want is you,” I repeat, bringing my mouth to hers and kissing her until she sighs longingly in my mouth. “I’ll never stop wanting you, flick.”

“Oh, Josh,” she sighs, a tiny whimper escaping her mouth as I hook her leg over mine and slip myself inside her, the slow, deep grind of our connection, combined with our continued kissing seems to melt all her doubts and worries away. All that remains is our connection, our love and the promises we’re making to each other with every stroke and sigh.

We move in harmony, fanning the other’s flames until neither of us can take the heat anymore, peaking and coming apart in each other’s arms.

After we’ve both come down, I pull her close and kiss her forehead. “I’m so glad I caught you pleasuring yourself,” I whisper into her tangled hair.

She laughs and runs her fingers through my hair before pressing her forehead against mine. “Me too,” she whispers. “Me too.”

REGINA

When I pull up to the farmhouse for the first time a few days later, I'm a bucket full of nerves. The house is huge and beautiful, with whitewashed shutters and a wraparound porch. It's picture perfect with potted plants adding a splash of color and a swing near the door. I imagine sitting with Josh at night and admiring the stars, maybe doing a little more reading before heading inside to act out what we've read. But none of that is why I'm nervous.

I'm here to meet his sister, Kymberly. And while I've learned over the years not to care what others' opinions of me are, I really want her to like me.

With a bouquet of flowers and an apricot pie in hand, I step up onto the porch and knock on the front door. There's a stomping of feet on the other side before the door swings open and an out of breath blonde with wildly curly hair stands tall and strong in front of me. I have to crane my neck to meet her eyes, but when I do, I feel instantly at ease. She has the same sky-blue gaze as her brother. One that's filled with mirth and kindness.

"You must be Reggie," she says, reaching out and practically dragging me into the house. I'm swept along the entry hall and into the kitchen while

she talks a mile a minute. “Josh is just at the store grabbin’ a few things we seem to be missin’. But I think that works out great because it gives us girls the chance to chat without him puttin’ his two cents in every five seconds. Do you like lamb? Seems it’s all we really eat around here, but that means I’m real good at cookin’ it. Is that pie for dessert?”

It takes me a moment to catch up, but when I do, I thrust the pie forward, thankfully not tossing it in the air. “Yes. And the flowers are yours too.”

Her face lights up. “Really? Gosh. I don’t think anyone’s bought be flowers before. This is a real treat. Do you drink sweet tea?”

“Ah, yes. Yes, I do.”

“I just can’t get enough of the stuff. Momma always said I’d end up with a mouth full of cavities on account of having such a sweet tooth, but boy was she wrong.” She flashes her perfectly white, straight teeth and clacks them together. “Not even one filling in all my thirty years on this earth.”

“I’m thirty in May,” I say, smiling because she’s full of energy, and I can already tell I’m going to like her.

She beams in return. “Then I think we’ll be the best of friends. Have you had much of a chance to get to know any of the locals yet?”

“Not really. I’ve kind of been keeping to myself.”

“Josh says you’re a big reader.”

My cheeks heat. Reading has suddenly become more entertaining since Josh and I started sleeping together. “I am,” is all I manage without my voice squeaking.

“I don’t get a huge amount of time to read with all the farm work. But I have a kindle that’s loaded with romance. Maybe you can recommend some books to me.”

I wonder if I’ll ever be able to recommend a book with a straight face again, so I just nod in agreement.

Once she’s finished putting the flowers in water and the pie in the warm oven, she pours us both a glass of ice-cold sweet tea and we move into the living room while we wait for Josh to return. Kymberly feels more like an old friend than someone I just met, and we talk easily for a while about their brother Theo, who’s now married and living in a place called Whisper Valley, running a vineyard with his wife, Dottie.

Kymberly tells me stories about Josh growing up, like how he was always getting into trouble at school but had a big heart for animals and excelled at anything farm related. She talks about how much pride their parents would

have for him if they could see how well he was managing the family farm on his own.

“You’re here helping him too, right?” I say as the sound of a motor and wheels on gravel draws our attention outside. “I’m sure they’d also be proud of you.”

“I doubt that.” She laughs sardonically. “They’d be askin’ me why I’m not married and having babies yet. They were kind of old-fashioned that way.”

“But Josh isn’t married.”

She laughs but it’s hollow. “Josh is a man. I’m a woman with a biological clock going tick-toc, tick-toc. All they ever wanted was for their children to have children to work on the farm and keep it in the family. Kind of why they got so mad when Theo wanted to travel.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up any bad feelings.”

She reaches out and places her hand on mine, giving me a bright smile as she squeezes my hand. “You did nothing wrong. And I’m sure the right man for me will come along when the stars are aligned or whatever magic needs to happen for an eligible bachelor to make his way to the boonies. I’m still technically young.”

“And gorgeous, might I add.”

Kymberly smiles, and this one is genuine. “I think you’re pretty too. I could tell right away why my brother has fallen all over himself to woo you.”

“Who am I wooing?” Josh booms the moment he enters the house. My heart flip-flops excitedly at the sight of him.

“Why, our lovely neighbor, of course,” Kymberly says.

Josh kicks off his boots and sets his keys on a small table before he walks over to us and hands the grocery bag to Kymberly who quickly switches gears and digs through it while returning to the kitchen to finish cooking. Then he drops a kiss on my head. “I thought I’d already wooed the crap out of you,” he says near my ear.

“You have. But I don’t want you to ever stop.”

He waggles his brows. “Deal,” he says, pulling me to my feet so he can kiss me properly before we follow his sister back to the back of the house where we enjoy an amazing home-cooked meal that you can only get on a farm like this one. We laugh and talk until late into the night before finally saying our goodbyes when Kymberly makes her excuses to leave Josh and me alone.

“You don’t live in the farmhouse too?” I ask when she collects her things, including the vase of flowers I bought for her.

“Not for a while now. I got me a little cottage not so unlike yours near the back paddock. It’s cozy and means I can be close to help out while also havin’ a little space all to myself.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It is. You should come over and visit some time. It was real nice meetin’ you.”

“You too, Kymberly,” I say, meaning every word.

She beams. “Call me Kym. And thank you again for these flowers. They’re a treat.”

And with that, she steps out into the night, leaving Josh and I to our own devices. We sit on the porch swing and just swing together in silence for a while, looking up at the stars and drinking in the quiet of the night mixed with the occasional sounds of the animals as they settle in.

“This must have been a pretty cool place to grow up,” I say after a while, realizing that I haven’t heard the noise of traffic or sirens for weeks now.

“Want a tour?” he asks, taking my hand when I nod and leading me into the house. We wander around, exploring each room. I can feel the joy radiating off him as he shows me the place he grew up in and shares little anecdotes along the way.

“I can’t help but notice you’re yet to show me the bedroom,” I tease, leaning against him when we pause in the hallway.

He circles his arms around my waist and grins down at me. “I’m saving the best to last,” he says, his eyes flicking to the closed door at the end of the hall.

“Why am I suddenly picturing you sneaking all the pretty girls in town into your room while your parents were sleeping? I’ll bet you were a real stud in high school. The girls probably couldn’t get enough of you.”

“Flick, I used to share a room with my brother, and I haven’t had a relationship since before my father passed.”

I look up at him and narrow my eyes slightly. “Are you trying to tell me I’m the first girl you’ve brought home?”

He grins. “First woman,” he says. “I don’t date girls.”

“Why is that so hot?” I whisper, the sudden urge to do very dirty things to him lighting up my veins.

“I’ve got no idea. But honestly, all you have to do is look at me and I’m

hard. So...”

I bite my lip and look into his eyes, grinning as I allow my hand to slide between us and cup his hard length through his pants. “So hard.”

“Always for you, flick.”

”Farm boy,” I whisper, leaning in and gently sucking the slightly stubbled skin under his jaw.

“Hmmm?”

“I want to christen your hallway.”

“By fucking in it?”

I shake my head and reach between us. “By giving you head in it.”

“Fuck, flick.” He groans and grabs my hands, moving me back just far enough for me to drop to my knees where I make a show of looking up at him while I reach for his jeans and slowly unzip him, releasing his cock from the denim confines and stroking his hard length.

When I lean in and take him in my mouth, he leans against the wall in an effort to stay upright, swearing softly as my tongue circles his tip before I swallow down his length hungrily.

“Fuck that feels good,” he gasps, barely holding on as I move faster and stroke harder, swirling my tongue around his tip and teasing him until he can’t take it anymore. He grabs the back of my head and surges forward one last time as he finds his release.

I swallow every drop.

After he catches his breath, he pulls me back up and kisses me tenderly.

“That one should definitely go in the book. If we write it, of course.”

“I want to write it. As long as it’s as hot as we are together,” I whisper, giggling against his mouth before my laughter fades into a deep sigh of satisfaction. “I think we better get to the bedroom now. I’m not sure if this hallway can handle any more christenings.”

“You’re right,” he says, scooping me up into his strong arms. “The mattress will get jealous.”

“What about the rest of your furniture?” I ask with a giggle as he carries me into his room and sets me on the soft bed.

He leans over me. “They’ll just have to wait their turn,” he murmurs, taking my mouth in what becomes a beautiful blur of loving touches and lustful moans. And as the night passes and makes its way into morning I know one thing for sure—I am head over heels in love with Josh Oliver.

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JOSH

“Are you going to be OK? I was pretty nervous about meeting your sister.”

“I know you were,” I say, cutting the engine of Reggie’s little hatchback when we pull into a parking space at the airport. “I’m OK. I promise.” I turn to face her so she can see my expression. I may have been a little quiet on the drive here, which is what’s sparked her worry.

“But are you *sure* you’re ready for *this* level of intensity?” Reggie’s brow pinches slightly. “Once we get started, we can be...*a lot*.”

“I’m fine. I promise. I can handle anything you two can throw at me,” I say, chuckling as I reach over and take her hand in mine. “I just want to make a good impression for you is all.”

“You will. You’re a very impressive man, farm boy.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to her knuckles as she smiles up at me.

“I think I might be the one who’s nervous,” she admits, and I’m quick to pull her into a tight hug. “It feels like forever since I’ve seen her.”

“It’ll be like no time has passed the moment you see each other. You’ll see.”

“I hope so.” She lets out a heavy puff of nervous air then readies herself to get out of the car. I follow.

We’ve been together for a solid month now and with every moment we spend together, our lives and hearts are finding themselves more intertwined. I’ve never felt so close to another human being before, and the fact she’s curvy and gorgeous with a killer sense of humor just adds to that. However, now it’s time for me to meet, not her parents, but her best friend. Getting the tick of approval from the one person Reggie is closest to is important to me. And as much as I’m reassuring her that I’m fine, I’m nervous as hell.

Hand in hand, we walk into the airport and quickly locate the correct terminal. There’s a swarm of people already heading our way from baggage claim, and it doesn’t take long before Reggie points out a redheaded woman with warm-brown eyes and a smile that could light up any room.

“Mariah!”

“Reggie!” Mariah lets out a loud squeal as she runs to hug Reggie, the two of them spinning in circles in the middle of the airport as they laugh and cry over their reunion. It’s a wonderful sight, and I make myself busy fetching Mariah’s luggage while they rejoice in each other.

“You must be Josh,” Mariah says when I return, giving me a tight squeeze not unlike the one she just gave Reggie. *She’s definitely a hugger.*

“That’s me,” I reply with a smile as I release her and step back.

“Reggie was right, you *are* a hunk,” she says, glancing at Reggie who rolls her eyes and giggles like a schoolgirl. It’s adorable. “Wonderful to finally meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mariah. Reggie’s told me so much about you.”

“I hope she’s said nothing but good things.”

“Nothing but,” I reply, before putting my arm around Reggie’s shoulders and pulling her close. “She only has kind words for you.”

“Well then, our best friend status remains. Even though I’ve missed you terribly these past months. Saturday brunch just isn’t the same without you.”

“Saturday brunch?” I ask.

“It’s something our friend group has been doing since college,” Reggie explains.

“It’s how we keep apprised of all the gossip,” Mariah adds as we start walking back to the carpark. “You know, who’s dating who; who got a promotion; who got fired. The usual.”

“I see,” I say, gesturing for both women to walk ahead of me through the

exit door. “Folks in Cedarwood Valley just go to the diner for that. Missy is like the town herald and will fill anyone in on anythin’ at all. Whether you ask about it or not.”

“That sounds kinda fun,” Mariah says as the three of us locate Reggie’s car and get in.

As we make the long drive back to Cedarwood Valley, I keep my focus on the road while Reggie and Mariah seem to talk non-stop. Despite chatting regularly on the phone, they still have months of catching up to do while also pausing to explain things to me, so I have a little background knowledge. By the time I turn into Reggie’s driveway, I feel like I know more about Mariah and their friend group than I know about myself.

We took all of Reggie’s excess boxes over to the farm for storage so Mariah could use the spare room during her stay. So once we get her situated, we head into the kitchen to prepare some food.

“What do you think of her?” Reggie asks in a hushed whisper. “She’s great, right?”

“She’s great.” I smile and kiss her on the forehead. “You feelin’ calmer now?”

“Yeah. You were right. It is just like old times.”

Changed out of her travel clothes, Mariah joins us in the living room, and over the next few hours, we sit together eating good food, drinking tart wine, and of course, talking. I get my second crash course of the day, this time learning about all things Mariah. She talks of her job as an PR specialist and how she’d love to travel Europe and finance her travels as a lounge singer. She’s quite the character.

“You know, I auditioned for the American Idol once?” she says, holding her glass out while I top up her drink. “Didn’t get past the first round, but at least I didn’t end up being one of those horror stories everyone makes fun of.”

“That’s because you can actually sing,” Reggie says, giving me a nod when I top up her wine too.

“I hear that sometimes good—even great—singers miss out because they’ve already selected someone with a similar sound,” I say. Mariah smiles.

“You know what, that’s exactly how I’m going to tell the story going forward. That I missed out on a technicality, so I’m not at all bad.”

We share many a laugh, and Mariah asks me lots of questions about my life on the farm, if I wanted to be anything besides a sheep farmer, and if I

manage to get much free time.

“I get just enough time to spend time with my beautiful girlfriend, read books we both like, and dream about one day writing one.”

Mariah’s eyes light up. “You’re going to write a book? You should write one together. Reggie’s best class was creative writing back in college.”

“Is that so?” I say, lifting my brows as Reggie blushes into her glass. “You haven’t mentioned that part.”

“That’s because there’s a big difference between a short story and a novel. I’m not sure I’m good enough for that.”

“You’ve already talked about this?” Mariah asks, looking between us with a blush of excitement on her face. “Oh my god, guys. You *have* to do this. I’ll even help by reading it if you like. You know how much I like my books.”

“Hey, I’m not ruling it out,” Reggie says, her hand covering her mouth as she giggles slightly, the wine seeming to make her lightheaded. “I’m just saying that I’m having fun during the research process right now.” Her eyes meet mine, and it’s my turn to use the wine glass as a shield. There’s hunger in her gaze, and if she keeps insinuating what I know she’s insinuating, I’ll end up driving Mariah back to the airport just to have my woman all to myself.

Both Reggie and Mariah fall over in a fit of giggles. I drain my glass and get up from the floor in front of the coffee table where we’ve been sitting. “On that note, I think I’d better leave you ladies to catch up without me getting in the way.”

“Oh, don’t go now,” Mariah calls out. “Things were just getting interesting.”

With a laugh and an eye roll, I say my goodbyes to Mariah and help Reggie to her feet. She walks me to the front door, and I tell her I’ll call her in the morning. “Try not to tell her too many details about that research we’ve been doing,” I murmur near her ear, giving her a kiss on the temple.

“My lips are sealed, farm boy. You are mine and mine alone. I don’t want to share anything beyond your witty charm.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” I kiss her again, but instead of leaving me at the door, she walks me to my truck, parked off to the side since we drove her car to the airport so the farm stench wouldn’t be Mariah’s first impression of me.

“So...do you think I passed?” I ask when we’re far enough away to not

be heard.

“Well, she’s not really going to say much until I get back inside, so I guess you’ll have to suffer until morning.”

“Cruel.” I laugh and she lifts on her toes to give me a playful kiss.

“Relax. She likes you. And that’s because she can see that I love you.”

Making a big show, I clutch my heart and stagger back until I land against the side of my truck. “Did you seriously just say you love me outside of the bedroom?” I ask.

She grins, looping her hands with mine as she steps closer to me. “You’ve won me over, farm boy. In and out of the sack.”

Barely able to control my smile, I lean in and press my forehead to hers. “You make me an incredibly happy man, flick.”

“That’s all I want, Josh. For us to be happy together.”

I lean in, my mouth barely brushing against hers before the sound of crunching gravel steals the moment away and a blue sedan pulls to a stop in front of us.

“Oh my god. Mariah!” She calls out over her shoulder to the house, her smile quickly morphing into a tight-set jaw. “This had better not be her doing.”

“What’s going on? Do you know this guy?” I ask, glancing at Reggie with a raised brow.

“Yeah. That’s my ex-fiancé,” she says, her voice flat and uncertain.

“The one who hurt you?” I bristle immediately, putting myself between him and Regina before he can even open his door. I don’t know what he wants, or why he’s here. But there is no way in hell I’m letting him do anything to upset the woman I love. He walked away, and I’m the guy who’s here treating her the way she deserves. And no one—no one—is getting in the way of her happiness.

REGINA

“Oh my god. This was *not* my doing,” Mariah calls out from the front porch. “What the hell are you doing here, Elliot?”

Josh growls and shifts forward. I imagine if he had the strength of a superhero, he’d pick up my ex’s car and toss it into space. I wouldn’t stop him either. Elliot has no right showing up here uninvited.

“Josh, I’m OK,” I say, gently placing my hand on his arm as the door of the sedan opens and my ex-fiancé steps out.

Josh doesn't budge from his protective stance. He just remains there as a barrier between me and the man who hurt me, his shoulders rising and falling as an aura of warning surrounds him. I can't see his face, but I imagine Josh is glaring daggers at the man ranks last on my list of ‘people I want to see again’.

Elliot Cyril. The man I once thought I'd spend my life with. A man who not only broke my heart, but also destroyed my self worth. I'm not sure what he's doing here, but I can already tell you there's nothing he can say that could ever make what he did OK. He was dead to me the moment he walked away.

"This is private property. You're not welcome here," Josh booms, making Elliot freeze in his tracks.

"Not gonna pull a gun on me, are you?"

"I haven't made that decision yet," Josh says.

Elliot baulks. He stands there for a moment, his hands opening and closing by his sides before his eyes move to me and a slow smile forces the uncertainty from his face. "You look good, Gina."

"When a person isn't welcome, that generally means it's time for them to leave," Josh says, his chest puffing in a way that makes him look even taller and bigger. Elliot licks his lips and tries to keep his attention on me, but can't help but keep glancing nervously at Josh.

"I'll leave once I've had a chance to talk to my fiancée. Alone."

A gasp leaves my throat unbidden.

"Your fiancée?" Josh says, sliding his arm around my waist and pulling me in close. "Is that how you see him, Reggie?"

I shake my head. "Running out of the church is a pretty clear sign things are over. He's nothing to me. I never want to see him again."

"You heard the lady."

"Gina, I can explain."

"I don't want you to," I snap. "The only thing I want from you is to never have to see or even think about you again. What you did was horrible. You had months to change your mind, but you waited until the last minute and humiliated me in front of everyone." I feel Josh's arm tighten around my waist and I lean into him, thankful for his presence. "There is no excusing that."

Elliot nods then takes a deep breath. "I know I hurt you, and I know what I did was shitty and horrible."

"Then why are you here?" I cry, my emotions suddenly getting the better of me and burning in my eyes. "What could possibly be gained by you showing up here?"

"I wanted to say I'm sorry."

"You could have done that by text."

"Maybe. But..." His eyes swing to Josh then back to me as he moves closer and lowers his voice. "Can we maybe speak...alone? Just for a minute. Please?"

Josh stiffens beside me, and I move my hand to the small of his back, a silent gesture meant to assure him that I have this.

"No," I say firmly. "We can't."

Elliot frowns. "You don't even want to know *why* I walked away? That I see that moment as the absolute worst decision of my life, and I regret it every moment of every day? I want you back, Gina. I was scared then. But I'm not now. I'm ready. And I know you've moved on. Hell, I can see you have. But I'm not going to let that stop me from telling you I still love you. I still want to marry you. I fucked up big time. But I think you and I both know that this isn't what you want." He looks at his surrounds in disgust before letting his gaze rest on Josh. "This is all beneath you."

My mouth falls open, but before I can even conjure up a response, Josh's fist shoots out and collides with the side of Elliot's jaw, dropping him like a sack of potatoes on my front lawn.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Elliot wails, clutching his face as he rolls around moaning, undoubtedly seeing stars.

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with you? What kind of man shows up uninvited, refuses to leave and then *insults* his host as if he has any right to make a judgement about her life. Your involvement with *my* woman ended when you ran out of that church like a scared little mouse without a tail. It has taken a lot for her to pick herself back up again and start livin' her life again. And I'm the man helpin' her do it. I'm here, fixin' what you broke, showing her that the ones who truly love her stand by her no matter what. You think living out in the country and datin' a farmer are beneath her, do you? Well, look where you are right now—face first in the dirt. Something tells me you're the lowly one. And if I ever catch you sniffing around the woman I love and care about again, I'll do more than just hit you. You might not like it out here, but I can promise to make this your eternal resting place. I've got a lot of land, and I doubt anyone would bother searching it for a slimy little coward like you."

Reaching down, Josh grabs the front of Elliot's shirt and hauls him to his feet.

"You're fucking crazy!" Elliot yells, jerking his body back from Josh's grip. "This is seriously what you want, Regina?"

I take a deep breath and set my shoulders before nodding. "A guy who'd kill for me?" I look to Josh, and my heart swells. Whether his threat was literal or figurative, I've never felt so protected and cared for in my entire life. It's taken this moment for me to realize that he is everything I could ever want. My present, my future, my forever. "It's exactly what I want. I have a

home I love, and a man who thinks I'm absolutely perfect just as I am, and a future writing career I can't wait to get started on." Josh's eyes flick to me and his scowl shifts slightly into a smile.

"*What?*" The word comes out high-pitched as Elliot scrunches his face up like he can't believe what he's hearing.

"I love it here," I continue. "And the only thing I'm lacking is the sight of *you* driving away. So, please, if you care for me even a little bit, go now and never come back. The only reason I don't regret meeting you is because I might not have moved here and met the real love of my life without your shitty behavior."

Elliot's shoulders sag, and he looks at me with a mix of surprise and disbelief before narrowing his eyes. "Fine. I'll go. Have a shitty life."

"And I'm blocking you on social media!" Mariah calls out from the porch. "It's the only way he could've found out where you are," she adds when I turn a confused look her way.

Muttering a bunch of obscenities under his breath, Elliot throws up his hands and stalks back to his car, slamming the door shut with a loud bang before peeling out of the driveway.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish!" Mariah calls out before grabbing her cell and jabbing away at the screen like she's on a mission. I'm guessing that's her blocking him like she said.

"You OK, flick?" Josh asks, pulling me close once the car has sped off and vanished from sight.

I smile up at him and nod, wrapping my arms around his neck. "I'm more than OK. Some hunky guy just got into a fist fight for me."

He belly laughs. "Wasn't much of a fight."

"Still, it was pretty hot. I've never had someone care about me enough to fight for me before."

He leans his forehead against mine and smiles, taking my hand and pressing his lips to my knuckles. "I would fight the devil himself if it meant being with you, Regina."

I close my eyes and press my hands to his cheeks, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips. "I have never loved a man the way that I love you, Josh."

"I heard. You just said you're gonna write that book with me."

My cheeks are starting to hurt from smiling. "I'll do more than just that with you, Joshua Oliver. I want it all. I'm ready."

“Then I’m gonna hold you to that,” he says, sweeping me into an embrace and pressing his lips to mine, kissing me for only a brief moment before Mariah calls out from the house.

“OK. So I did post about coming to see you, but I didn’t mention where. It looks like he found out where you are though, because I have my snapchat maps on. It doesn’t help now, but I’m so very sorry for that oversight. It’s switched off, so no more giving up your address accidentally.”

“I know you didn’t do it on purpose, Mariah,” I say, giving her a reassuring smile because I’m sure she feels awful right now. “And it all worked out for the best, right?”

Mariah grins. “Oh yeah. I hope you’re going to put that punch out scene into your book. It was pretty hot.”

Josh chuckles as he takes my hand in his and we make our way up the porch steps. “I know I was gonna leave you two ladies for some quality girl time, but I’d feel a heck of a lot better if I stuck around a while longer. Hope that’s not cramping your style.”

“Not at all,” Mariah says with a bright grin. “I wanna talk more about that punch. Like, on a scale of one to two hundred, how good did it feel to have the smarmy bastard’s face crunch beneath your fist?”

Josh gives Mariah an amused look before he answers, “Two hundred.”

“I knew it!” Mariah crows, walking back into the house with Josh and I following close behind her. I lean into him and let out a happy sigh. For the first time in years, I feel safe and loved, and I know that no matter what I face, I have a partner in Josh to help get me through it all. He’s my forever.

JOSH

*M*y alarm goes off at dawn, but the last thing I want to do is get out of bed when there's a woman snuggled against me who's not only naked, but the girl of my dreams. And what's even better, last night she agreed to two things—co-authoring a book together and spending the rest of her life with me. Not so long ago, she said she wasn't sure she could do either of those things. But it seems my luck is coming in. We want the same things.

"Can't the sheep go feed themselves?" she mutters, her arms tightening across my chest.

I chuckle as I kiss her on the forehead. "Kind of. But we need to let them out into the field, and it's my turn to do that. So..." I start extricating myself from her warm body, but she wraps both arms around my middle and clutches on.

"I'm not letting go. You can't leave."

I laugh and try to wrestle my way out of her grip, but she just tightens it further, adding in her thighs around my legs to make it almost impossible for me to do anything but relent. My girl wants to play dirty. I can play dirty too.

Grabbing hold of her hands, I roll on top of her, pinning her in place with her arms above her head. “Is this why you want me to stay?” I murmur, holding her gaze as I grind my rock-hard cock against her silken slit.

“Part of it,” she whispers, lifting her hips slightly to respond in kind. “I also just really fucking like you. You make me feel whole, farm boy.”

All of a sudden, the gravity of the moment hits me, and I feel like I could drown in those sparkling emerald eyes, lose myself forever in her welcoming body. She is mine, and I am hers. And the faster we make that official, the better. I want the world with her. Love, life, babies. I want to laugh with her and fight with her over stupid shit then laugh again when we’ve made up and made love, because no matter what life throws at us, this woman is mine and mine alone. I won’t ever leave her.

Without thinking about what I'm doing, I lean down and press my lips to hers again—this time with a much greater purpose than before. One hand tangles in the silk of her hair as the other slides down her body and pulls her closer to me.

"Marry me," I say softly, my heart thundering nervously even though I know that this is what we both want.

The morning air grows still around us, and I pull back slightly, pressing up on my elbow so I can look into her eyes as I add, “I will *never* walk away from you. From us.”

“I know that,” she gasps, tears fill her eyes as she nods and throws her arms around my neck in a tight hug. “Yes, Josh. I’ll marry you.”

A feeling of pure joy washes over me as I pull her close, breathing her in, knowing that she has been and will be my perfect mate. We belong together.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you too,” she returns, letting out a slow exhale as I roll my hips against hers, my hard length fitting perfectly between her thighs, gliding through her juices while the ridged tip rubs against her engorged clit. She gasps. “This move is definitely going in our book.”

Chuckling, I bury my face in the curve of her neck, kissing and sucking her soft skin as we continue to move, slowly bringing her to climax before I slip inside her and find my own release. I seal my mouth over hers, in a kiss that deepens with each passing second as we revel in the intensity of what it is to be us—to be *engaged* and us.

Finally I pull back, both of us breathless and tinged with pink flush. She smiles up at me and my heart swells with a love that I can hardly contain. “I

can't wait to make you my wife, flick. But..."

"Oh god. There's a but?"

Taking both of her hands in mine, I stand up and gently pull her off the bed. "It's well past time to feed the sheep. And since you're the reason they're waiting on breakfast, you're gonna come help to speed things up," I say with a grin.

"That's fair," she says, rising up on her tiptoes to give me a kiss. "And since it means I get to spend more time with you, I'm in. Gotta learn how to be a farmer's wife at some point too, I suppose."

"Reggie, I would get up at the crack of dawn to let you sleep in for all my days."

"Interesting. Because I would get up at the crack of dawn just to help lessen your load."

"Then I guess we're a perfect pair."

She smiles up at me sweetly. "I guess we are."

With a final kiss, we get ourselves dressed and take off for the barn—leaving a note for Mariah, of course—spending the next couple of hours filling troughs, checking on animals, and making big plans for both our future and our unwritten book. The sun is just beginning to peek over the horizon when we finish up our chores and stand in companionable silence watching its ascent, the sheep providing a stuttered soundtrack in the absence of music.

"Can I ask you something?" she says, turning to me as I take a deep breath and nod.

"You can ask me anything."

"How long would you have waited?"

"For you?"

"Yeah. I know I caved super-fast—"

"That's only because I'm incredibly charming irresistible."

She giggles and nudges me playfully in the side. "It's true. I *was* powerless against your charms."

"Knew it."

"But seriously, though. Had I not caved so soon, how long do you think you would have waited?"

"Forever," I say immediately and without further question. "There's no one but you for me."

"I feel the same way."

"Good," I start, taking her hands in mine. "Because if there was one

single iota of worry in that pretty head of yours, then I haven't done my job properly. The moment I saw you, I knew I was put on this earth to be everythin' you'll ever need. I love everything about you. And not only can I not wait to see you walkin' down that aisle toward me, I can't wait to get you back home so we can get busy making babies together."

"Well, we should probably work out how many of those we're planning to have."

"As many as that luscious body of yours will give us."

"So...two?"

I toss my head back and laugh. "Sounds perfect."

She grins, leaning against me and resting her head on my shoulder with a happy sigh. "Yeah. It does, doesn't it?"

Dropping a kiss on the top of her head in response, I wrap an arm around her, and we just stand there like that for what feels like hours, drinking in this moment of perfect bliss until finally the sun is high, and it's time for us to get back to our lives and the responsibilities it gives us.

But now, it's all different. Now, we know that we have each other no matter what life throws at us. In this moment, nothing feels hard anymore. I press another kiss to the top of her head, breathing her in, content in the knowledge that from this moment forward, we'll be together, always and forever.

EPILOGUE 1 - REGINA

12 mths later

The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and I'm walking down a long aisle in the gardens of a vineyard in Whisper Valley. I'm in a beautiful white dress, and my family and friends are watching me as I make my way toward the love of my life. There's no fear, no worry or concern in my heart as I take each step closer to Josh. He's not going to walk away. He's not going to break my heart. He's here to love me, warts and all. And pretty soon, that love will be legal, binding and forever. I've never felt happier or more excited in my life.

As I reach the altar, Josh nods his thanks to my father, then takes both of my hands into his and holds them tight. "You look like a dream," he murmurs, his eyes soft and filled with love as he drinks me in. I feel like a princess.

"You don't look so bad yourself," I say, admiring how amazing my farmer looks in a suit and tie. While I definitely prefer him naked, all-dressed-up is almost as hot.

He leans in, his warm breath on my ear as he whispers, "You know I love you more than life itself, right?"

"I do," I gasp, thrilled butterflies bursting to life in my belly as the knowledge that this man is about to be my lifelong partner, my *husband*, till death do us part.

The officiant clears his throat. "I think you're supposed to say that *after* the vows."

Josh presses his forehead to mine as we both chuckle, the guests joining in before a hush falls and the ceremony begins. The officiant speaks of love, commitment, and unbreakable bonds until it's time for Josh and me to take the vows that will join us in both heart and matrimony.

"I vow to love you, cherish you and honor you, for as long as we both shall live," Josh says, his voice strong yet emotional. "I will always be faithful and true, and I pledge myself to you in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer. And I promise to always keep your bookshelves stacked." Our guests laugh at that.

"Joshua--farm boy--I promise to love you, honor you, and respect you," I say, my voice steady despite the tears of joy slipping down my cheeks. "I pledge to be loyal to you and to always share my books with you. I vow to always support you and be by your side--even when it's raining outside and I don't want to feed the sheep. And most of all, I promise to bind my heart and soul to yours, forevermore. Oh, and I'll always keep the curtains drawn so you're the only man who'll ever--."

Josh quickly seals his mouth over mine, stopping me from revealing the true meaning behind his nickname for me--not that I'd ever truly tell such a large group of people. Which is why I wrap my arms around his neck, laughing into the kiss as I murmur, "I love you, farm boy."

"I love you too, flick."

"I take it this means you both 'do'?" the officiant asks, amusement in his voice.

Josh and I stop kissing just long enough to chorus, "I do!" before returning to our joyful kissing.

"OK then. I pronounce you husband and wife. You may now continue kissing the bride!"

The officiant laughs and our guests join in, clapping and cheering as Josh pulls me even closer, kissing me even deeper. I sink into the moment, smelling the sweet scent of the flowers around us, feeling the warmth of Josh's--my *husband's*--arms, and hearing the joyous clapping from the people who love us and wish us the best. It is quite easily the greatest moment of my life.

When he finally pulls away, Josh looks into my eyes. "Hey there, Mrs. Oliver."

I giggle, sniffing as tears of joy continue to stream down my face. "Hey there, husband. I guess we're tied together forever now. No takie-backsies."

Josh chuckles as he wipes away my tears and places a soft kiss on my forehead. "Never in your wildest dreams. We're going to have a long, happy life together. Kids, books...each other."

I nod, my heart full of love and joy. "I can't wait."

And with that, we take our first official step together as husband and wife, off toward a future that's brighter than anything I ever imagined before him. He's my One, my champion, my love, and I will forever be grateful for the journey that led me here to him—to us.

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EPILOGUE 2 - JOSH

5 years later

“*M*ommy! Mommy! Look!” Our little girl, Valerie, points up to the massive light-up billboard in Times Square. “It’s yours and Daddy’s book!”

"Oh my." Regina's eyes fill with tears as she claps a hand over her heart, the other clutching mine. "Will you look at what we did?"

With my eyes fixed on the giant advertisement, my heart fills with pride. "This is the *fourth* best thing that has ever happened to me."

After years of balancing the farm, raising a new family, nurturing our marriage *and* squeezing in some writing time, we have finally released our first book, aptly named 'Bean Flicker' because it's a small-town love story centered around the interesting way that we both met. We had originally planned to self-publish, but then Mariah, bless her, created a social media campaign for us that took off. The attention we garnered turned into a bidding war between publishing houses, and now after striking a deal that made us scream so loud the cattle in the neighboring farm answered back, we are the proud authors of a book featured on billboards in Times Square? It just doesn't feel real.

"Why the fourth?" Regina asks, turning face me as our four-year-old twirls in a circle at our feet.

"Well, the first was the day I met you. Second was the day you became my wife, and third was the day you gave me this gorgeous little munchkin here," I say, scrubbing the top of Val's head and earning a fit of giggles and a

squealed, "Daddy!"

Regina's cheeks go pink, and she shakes her head before standing on her tiptoes and pecking me with a kiss. "You don't have to keep wooing me. In case you haven't noticed, I'm already thoroughly wooed," she says, rubbing a hand over her six-month pregnant belly--a boy this time.

I lean down and kiss her soft lips, feeling a spark of love just like the first day we met. "I know, but I hold a firm belief that earning your love is a lifetime endeavor. I will never stop wooing you, flick."

Regina sighs, a small smile on her lips. "Well if that's the case, then I'm the luckiest woman alive. You're stuck with me forever, farm boy."

I swoop Val up in my arms and grab Regina's hand, linking our fingers together. "You know it. Now come on, Mrs. Oliver. Let's get some food into that belly of yours before our baby boy gets too demanding and the hangry monster comes out." I growl and nuzzle Valerie while she roars like a little monster.

Regina laughs and I'm quick to join in, the combination of love and joy so overpowering that my heart feels full to bursting. I can quite honestly say that I think I'm the luckiest man alive. I'm wealthy in life, love and purpose, and I've got nothing but glowing days ahead of me with the most important people in the world right by my side.

And now with our story being shared with the world, I can only imagine what the future holds.

Anything is possible.

THE END...ISH

If you want more Quirky Curves, click 'Follow' on Amazon when the rating window pops up on your device or sign up for my newsletter to get news of when book 2 is dropping.

Until then, if you're not ready to say goodbye to Regina and Josh, you can get a FREE BONUS EPILOGUE of them ten years into the future right here: <https://BookHip.com/JFPPJRW>

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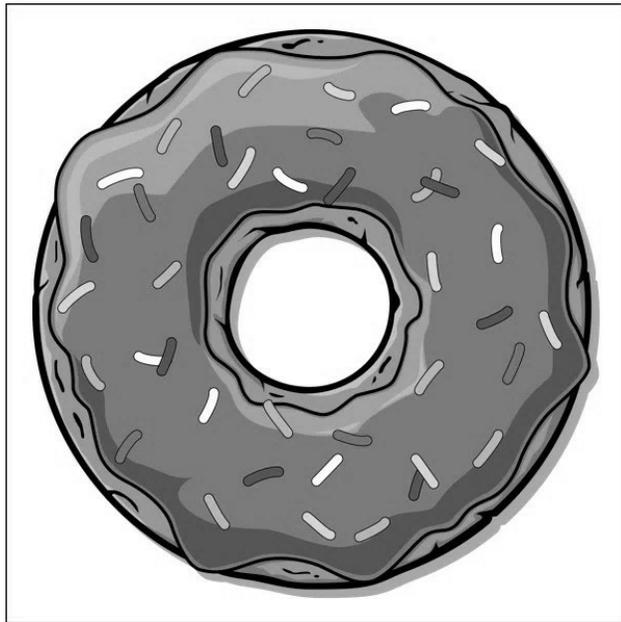
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