



# Pick Your Battles

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Some battles you just can't win...

Ford is the youngest of eight brothers. After retiring from the army, he rejoins the family's construction business, only to find there isn't a space for him. He wants more. When a buddy offers a chance, Ford takes it. Now he's got a whole apple farm to fix up.

But the real battle? Keeping his thoughts—and his hands—off his buddy's little sister.

Pick Your Battles is the second book in Jemi Fraser's Heroes To The Core romance series. Each of these small-town romances can be read as a stand-alone, although they are best enjoyed in order. The book contains a touch of danger, some strong language and sexy times. Enjoy the read!

**Total Pages (Source):** 87

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## Chapter1

### Drawing Battle Lines

Ford Evans struggled to wrap his brain around the size of four-hundred acres. Now that he was in charge of the buildings on his buddy's apple farm, he figured he'd better get a feel for the size and scope of the property.

He grabbed his tablet and headed to the front of the property. Might as well start his initial survey of what needed to be done at the driveway and work his way in a logical pattern.

Ford had grown up in Miami and he knew blocks, square yards, and linear feet, but not acres. A walking tour of the entire place would help.

He'd been at the farm for the better part of a week, but building a compost facility had taken up a shit-ton—hah—of his time. Now, the Worminator was up and running, so Ford could turn his mind to the rest of the property to see what needed fixing, what needed rebuilding, and what tasks would take priority.

The To Do List would be long. Actually, the To DoListswould be long. He was sure he'd have at least a dozen lists by the time he was done with his initial survey of the place. The thought had him grinning. He would never run out of things to do on the farm. It was perfect.

Who would have thought a kid from Florida would find his place on an apple farm in Vermont, land of winter and snow?

The thought sent chills down his spine, even though it was a warm spring day. Hurricanes? Sure. No problem. You could prep for those. He'd been building window coverings and filling sandbags since he'd been in kindergarten. He knew to always have a go-bag ready. The army had reinforced all those lessons of preparedness.

What the hell did a builder—a construction guy—do in the winter in Vermont? Building snow forts wasn't quite the same as putting up new houses.

Although the family business back in Florida had turned more to commercial buildings. Not Ford's favorite. He liked the buildings to have souls. He actually preferred restoring to building new, not something his family business did.

Older buildings had character. Newer ones were more about cost per square foot. Which meant fewer corners and less interesting shapes. Square boxes stacked on and beside square boxes.

He liked buildings that were unique. Things that had potential. Restoring that potential was the best part of being a builder.

His dad and older brothers, all seven of them, would disagree. They liked efficiency and safety. Straight lines and secure foundations. Nothing wrong with any of that, but it wasn't Ford's thing.

His only younger sibling, Mara, didn't have a single interest in the family business. As the only female in the house, and the youngest, she'd gone out of her way to find something else to be interested in. Baking. Which had made the rest of them happy.

Ford had joined the army in a search to find his own place as well. He'd found his way into special forces and had enjoyed doing good around the world. But the army was a young man's game and after a couple of tours, Ford had figured it was time to go home.

But that hadn't fit. The family business was firmly established. With so many brothers, there hadn't been a lot of open space in the company, and nothing Ford enjoyed. He'd been not much more than an errand boy and odd-job doer. Boring as hell.

So, here he was in Vermont. On an apple farm.

Not something that he'd ever thought about before. But his best buddy from the army, Knox Malssum, had inherited one. Then he'd talked Ford into taking a chance on working with him. Knox wanted Ford to be in charge of the buildings, the fences, and whatever else needed doing.

Like the Worminator. The name still made him laugh. Knox's woman, Thea, was into regenerative farming. Something else Ford had known nothing about.

After building the Worminator, Ford knew more about compost, regenerative farming principles, and the vision Knox and Thea had for the farm. It was fascinating, and he looked forward to being part of the team, bringing this farm back to life in an environmentally healthy way.

Today, he'd start with a farm-wide tour and evaluation of all the structures. Once he had a prioritized list and inventory, he could make some decisions, figure out what needed his attention first.

The apple farm sat along a quiet secondary highway in Vermont. He figured he could stand there for a couple of hours before a single vehicle passed. The road led to a town with the ridiculous name of Phail in one direction and a bunch of even smaller towns in the other.

For a kid from a big city, it was bizarre. Quiet. So many trees and so much green. As different as Kansas was from Oz. He nearly groaned aloud. His sister's loud love of

musicals had drilled dozens of the songs and the storylines into his head.

Mara would love to know she had him thinking in musical terms, so he never planned to share that with her.

Ford shook his head at himself and pulled his mind back to the task. Inventory and evaluation. With the property being so large, it was going to take a while. Certainly more than a day.

He pulled up the first spreadsheet and wrote Roadside Fence on the first tab. The wooden fence bordering the property looked to be at least fifty years old, maybe closer to a hundred. It was worn and matched the feel of the farm. The typical triple-rail fence was in fairly good shape. He paced along both sides to the property line, looking for sections in need of repair.

He took pictures and added notes about those sections to his spreadsheet. Then he added the color-code. Green. This project could wait.

From the road, where not a single vehicle had passed, he could only see glimpses of the first farmhouse. The property had two, but the second wasn't visible from here. Neither were any of the huge barns.

Apple trees dominated the landscape, popping up everywhere. Before he'd arrived, he'd imagined the farm as an orderly march of trees in rows. Some of the orchard was like that, but Knox had told him many of the sections had been planted in the 1800s. No modern machinery for harvesting meant the owners had scattered the trees in a friendlier manner. This space had originated as a small family venture and had grown over more than a dozen decades.

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Right now, blossoms had fallen, and apples were budding. It was going to be interesting to watch them grow.

When he reached the first building, Ford studied it from the farm road. It appeared people had added to the huge farmhouse several times over the years. He'd bet there were tons of interesting nooks inside. With a sigh, he decided not to go in. Instead, he labeled it as green as well. Damn it.

His buddy Knox had chosen the second farmhouse for the team's living spaces. That building was newer and had been updated maybe forty or fifty years before. With plumbing fixtures in various pastel colors, it cried out for help. It would need to be done before Ford turned his attention to the bigger one nearer the road.

They would both be a lot of fun to work on for years to come.

A large field of gardens and apple trees separated the two farmhouses. Well, gardens was pushing it. They were overgrown disasters, and he was glad they weren't his problem. He'd rather fix plumbing and run electrical wire than pull weeds any day.

But his eye was pulled to the garden, anyway. More accurately, his gaze was pulled toward the woman studying the garden with her phone in her hand.

Jolie Malssum. Knox's little sister. She'd arrived the night before in a flurry of smiles and long, long legs.

Ford ripped his gaze away from those legs and the fine ass that topped them. He had

no business lusting after her.

From the first time he'd seen her, she'd intrigued him. When he and Knox had been overseas, privacy had been nonexistent. When one of them had a video call with family, the entire team met the families.

The instant he'd seen Jolie, he'd felt like an electrical overload had zapped him. The woman was gorgeous. Happy and friendly. She always wore a smile.

But she was Knox's little sister. Ford wasn't screwing things up at his new home by doing anything about the need that roared in his system anytime she was near.

Hell, even when she wasn't.

Maybe he needed a new tab on his spreadsheet. How to keep his mind—and his hands—off Jolie Malssum.

Jolie Malssum imagined the disaster in front of her as a garden in full bloom. It could be beautiful and would bring so much life to the property.

At one time, she'd bet there'd been two families who'd lived in these farmhouses. She could see the imprints of two large kitchen gardens in the weeds. And another few smaller flower gardens. Perhaps two herb gardens as well.

The property had probably once been two. Had interconnected families lived here, sharing the bounty of the apples? Had they merged over time into one family?

That was the opposite of what had happened in Jolie's family.

This farm had belonged to her great-uncle Jay Malssum. A man they hadn't known existed until she and her siblings had received letters from a lawyer saying he'd died

and left them this farm.

Why hadn't their grandfather Fox ever mentioned his brother? What had pulled the two men apart?

And why had Jay wanted Fox's grandkids to have the property?

Jolie blinked her eyes to rid them of the tears forming. Fox had died a year before, and she missed him so much. The man had taken in her, Amber, and their three older brothers when their parents had died in a car crash.

Jolie had only been seven. She wished she had better memories of her parents. The others told her lots of stories about them, but she'd love to have her own memories, too.

At least she had decades of memories of Fox. He'd been the best grandfather. Taking in five kids was a lot, but she didn't remember him complaining.

Okay, that was a lie. The old man had loved to complain and grump. He'd moaned about pollution and climate change and selfishness. But never about taking them on. Never about the cost or the work of raising five kids.

He'd been more of a cranky on the outside, sweet on the inside kind of man.

It was through his encouragement that she'd developed her love of plants, along with her deep respect for the planet and the creatures inhabiting it.

The Abenaki people take care of the earth. We owe her everything and we need to fix her. You can't pollute the shit out of a planet and think things are okay.

She grinned at the memory. Fox had tried hard to reduce his swearing around her, but

when he got worked up, he'd forgotten. A lot. She'd giggled so hard at some of his words, and he'd made her promise to never use them herself.

So while she thought them a lot, cursing out loud didn't happen very often. When it did, she always sent Fox a silent apology.

“What happened with you and your brother, Fox? Family was so important to you. Why didn't you try to fix it?”

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Of course, he didn't answer. Neither did his brother. From what Jolie's brother Knox had learned so far, the two men had more similarities than differences. Same crusty exteriors. Same marshmallow insides.

She wanted to be part of bringing this farm to life. Jay had wanted that. Was this his way of reaching out? Had he even known that Fox died the year before? Of a heart attack as well.

Jolie shook herself out of her thoughts and opened her phone. She should make a list of everything that needed doing. It was going to be a long list. Several long lists. This place was full of potential and she couldn't wait to dive in.

These gardens weren't priorities, but they'd need to be helped at some point. When she had time and motivation, she'd find out what they needed. Even though she wasn't passionate about gardens, she took a few pictures to help her remember the state of disrepair.

Time to see the rest of the land. When she'd arrived the previous night, she'd followed the farm road to the orchard. It had been lit up in the distance, and when no one answered her knocks at the farmhouse, she'd investigated.

It had been too dark to see much, but she'd had an impression of peace. The shadows of nature never bothered her like the shadows in cities. Here, the shadows were simply nature resting. Exactly like Fox had taught her when she'd been afraid of the dark.

Shortly after they've moved in with their grandfather, Jolie had been too scared to

sleep in the dark. Sharing a room with Amber had helped, but she'd felt like a coward crawling into bed with her sister.

One night, Fox had taken her outside to sit on the back porch with a couple of blankets. He'd pointed out constellations, shown her how various plants acted differently in the night so they could rest.

She'd learned which animals enjoyed the night and which slept. Watching the bats fly overhead had soon become a favorite pastime.

Bats. The farm could use some. They were excellent predators and helped control harmful bug species. When she toured the farm today, she'd look for signs of them. If there weren't any, she'd build a few bat boxes to see if she could attract them.

Owl nesting boxes too. Owls were also excellent predators and would help the farm thrive.

She should probably talk to Thea and Knox to see what they thought before she went ahead with plans, but she couldn't imagine any objections. Thea wanted to improve the biodiversity of the farm because that was the best way to improve the compost. And compost was key to regenerative farming. Helping the land heal from all the harm humans had caused. Giving the soil life and embracing the diversity of nature.

Jolie didn't know a lot of specifics about apple farms yet. She'd find out what the trees needed before she got too deep into her plans. The last few weeks hadn't allowed her a lot of time for her own pursuits, but she could make up for that now.

Every biome had different needs and challenges. Vermont was so unlike the Carolinas where she'd done her schooling and post grad work. The principles would be the same, but the details would differ.

Eliminate invasive species harming the native plants. Encourage good predators. Increase the variety of flora and fauna. All keeping in mind the main crop of apples.

It was going to be fun.

The basis of all her plans was going to be the pond Thea told her was in the back part of the orchard. Jolie hadn't gone that far yet, but was looking forward to exploring.

She shoved her phone into her pocket and turned to the main driveway. Ford Evans was walking down from the top of the drive. The man looked yummy in his jeans and a t-shirt that stretched across his chest. He wore a plaid flannel shirt over top, making her smile. "Trying to imitate a true Vermonter? I didn't think it was legal to buy plaid flannel in Florida."

He grinned at her. "If you order it online, no one has to know."

She laughed. The crush she'd had on Ford since the first time she'd seen him during a video-chat with Knox showed no signs of abating.

The men had been working for the army overseas. Special forces, she thought, but her brothers never mentioned specifics. Ever. She suspected Ford would be the same.

Not that she wanted to know the things they'd dealt with in the army. Her three brothers had all been deeply affected by what they'd seen overseas, but none of them talked about it. She hoped they at least they talked with each other. No one should deal with that kind of trauma alone.

Thinking of what they'd faced in the army always reminded Jolie that her own problems were small. And in the past. Now that she was in Vermont, they were behind her.

Ford waited for her as she crossed over the overgrown garden beds. Her imagination pictured him waiting for her to take her on a date. Or haul her into his arms for a kiss.

Silly imagination. The man was only being polite.

His smile widened as he spotted her rubber boots. “Nice. I didn’t realize adult boots came in that kind of pattern.”

She lifted one of her bright blue boots, covered in images of yellow cartoon ducks splashing in the rain. “These are one of my favorite pairs.”

His eyebrows shot up. “One of your favorites? How many pairs of rubber boots do you own?”

That made her laugh. “Probably a dozen.”

His eyes widened. “Why? I think most people get by with one pair. Or none. Lots of people have none.”

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She grinned. “Most people don’t get to work outdoors in all weather. They don’t get to play around in ponds and creeks and rivers.”

That made him smile. “Very true. Although, to be fair, most people probably don’t want to.”

She shook her head. “They don’t know what they’re missing.”

“Tell me.”

“What?”

“Tell me what they’re missing.”

She tilted her head to study him and decided he was serious. “They’re missing out on seeing nature in action. Watching how species thrive in less than ideal circumstances. Life on the edges of water echoes life as it began way back in the primordial age. It’s fascinating to study a biome and see how one slight change can affect all the species living there. From plants to bacteria to insects to fish to birds. And then there are the animals that use that water for drinking and cleaning. By studying how the species adapt, we can figure out how humans can adapt to the changes as well.”

She drew in a deep breath and laughed at herself. “Sorry. You probably were just being polite and didn’t want to hear all of that.”

His answering grin had butterflies playing in her belly. “Actually, it’s fascinating. Tell me more.”

His deep voice had shivers running over her skin. She was officially ridiculous. Her brother's best friend had no interest in her, and she needed to remember that.

Plus, she'd screw it up, and then she'd have to deal with the awkwardness she created or leave. While she'd been on the farm for less than twenty-four hours, she felt like she'd found home.

So, she couldn't screw it up.

## Chapter 2

### Pond Scum

Ford forced his hands to remain at his sides. No reaching for this bright, fascinating woman. Her love of the environment shone in her eyes and through her voice. She was a passionate woman.

And he needed to stop thinking about passion. Specifically, about passion and Jolie in the same sentence. He was over thirty and had learned to control his body and his emotions in the army. Still, his body wanted to surge to life and explore that passionate nature with his buddy's little sister.

Not today, probably not ever.

He forced himself to continue the neutral conversation. No one could lose control while discussing biomes and primordial ooze. "Have you seen the pond yet?"

She sighed. "Not yet. I thought I should do a walk-through of the entire farm first. While I want to dive right in—not literally, at least not yet—I figured I'd have a better idea of what Knox envisions for the whole place if I got a good overview first."

He laughed. “You won’t want to dive in literally once you see the pond. It’s pretty stagnant.”

Her eyes lit up. “You’ve been there? Lucky.”

“Again, most people wouldn’t agree with you.”

Her almost-black eyes sparkled with joy. The woman was potent. “As you’ve probably guessed, I’m not like most people.”

And he liked that way too much. Instead of saying that, he grinned down at her bright rubber boots again. “Yeah. I got that.”

And before he could do the sensible thing and wish her fun with her farm tour, he spoke again. “I’m doing an overview of the farm today, too. I’ve been here for a few days, but with all the work to get the Wormanator up and running, I haven’t been around the entire property yet. I need to check it all out and make a priority list.”

She smiled. “Great minds think alike. Is it okay if I walk with you, at least for a bit? You have more of an idea what Knox and Thea are planning, and I’d like to hear your take on the farm as well.”

Ford kept his grin to himself, nodded, and they headed toward the first barn.

Jolie’s head swivelled to take in everything around her. “The trees all look healthy to me. I didn’t see much last night because it was dark when I arrived. Are these trees typical of the ones in all sections of the farm?”

He shrugged. “I think so, but I don’t know much about trees and I haven’t been everywhere yet. From what Thea says, the trees on the front part of the farm are in better shape than the ones in the back. Something about irrigation and invasive

species. I think they've been ignored longer than the closer ones."

Jolie nodded as if he'd imparted something insightful instead of parroting Thea. "Burke will be happy when he sees that the entire place isn't a wasteland. Knox showed us some on video, but it's different seeing it in front of you. It looks to me like the farm has been well loved over the decades. Even though it's been neglected recently, I can easily imagine it thriving. It's a good place. The trees are happy."

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Well, how the hell did he respond to a comment like that?

Instead of speaking, he angled toward the first barn on the property. He'd seen at least one more, but Knox had told him there were three, four if you counted a little one on the northern edge of the property.

Knox had given Ford a set of keys for the buildings, but he didn't pull them out. He didn't want to spend the time inside buildings. Not yet.

He told himself it was because he wanted to get a full overview before he dug into the details, but it was mostly because he wanted to keep talking with Jolie. If he headed inside, she would wander off to see the farm on her own.

And his dumbass self wanted to play tour guide.

The barn stood about thirty feet tall. It looked to be decades old. The wood was weathered and worn. There appeared to be the beginnings of rot around a few of the windows, but there were all high off the ground and it was difficult to tell.

He noted it on his spreadsheet. Jolie's clean scent neared as she leaned over his shoulder to peek at his list.

She sighed. "You're one of those organized people, aren't you?"

Her tone had him grinning again. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It's not a bad thing at all, it's just not something I'm very good at."

“Weren’t you making notes about the gardens back there? Aren’t you doing the same thing?”

Her smile was self-deprecating. “I thought about starting a list, but I took a few pictures instead. I’m notorious for starting lists and then never looking at them again.”

“Maybe your brain doesn’t need them. Not everyone plans the same way. My dad was huge on lists, and I don’t think any of us ever considered not using them. It shocked the hell out of me when I was in school and some people didn’t use spreadsheets to plan their essays.”

Jolie stopped and he turned to find her staring at him. “You used a spreadsheet to plan an essay? Spreadsheets are for math and accounting.”

He grinned. “Spreadsheets are for planning. Like bullet points, only better. I hated writing essays, but with the spreadsheet, I could put the main points I needed to include in some sort of order. Then it wasn’t quite as painful writing the things.” Then he shuddered. “You don’t need to write essays in construction or the army. I’d have never survived if you did.”

Jolie laughed. “I was too young to pay attention to how my brothers coped with essays in school, but it wouldn’t shock me if they did something similar, especially Burke. He loves his spreadsheets.”

Ford knew her brothers from a few joint missions in the army. Burke was the oldest sibling. He’d been fifteen when their parents had died and had helped their grandfather raise the younger kids. From all reports, he was a good guy who took on responsibility for everyone and everything. His army call sign of Boss Man suited him.

Ford knew Knox, call sign Annie, wanted all his brothers and sisters to move to this farm, but Ford wasn't sure it would be Burke's thing.

Not Ford's problem to solve.

But it had taken his mind off Jolie's curves and sweetness for a moment.

She stood beside him, studying the barn with curious eyes. "I think several bird species are using the eaves for nesting. And while the wood is old, it looks in pretty good shape. I don't see signs of any insect infestations on this section, anyway."

"Nice. I didn't expect you to have insights on the buildings. I don't think I'll be as much help with the pond."

Her brilliant smile had him feeling like he could conquer mountains. Or deal with stagnant ponds.

He'd have to get his own pair of rubber boots.

No duckies, though.

Jolie hadn't expected to have so much fun touring the buildings on the farm. So far, she and Ford had checked out the exteriors of two barns, three sheds, and one cabin. They'd also studied trees, cover crops, and looked for animal and bird habitats.

The size of the property was a little mind-boggling. Especially when she remembered she was part-owner of the land. She'd been thinking of it as Knox's farm, but it was hers as well.

As the youngest of five kids, she'd never really been part of any decision making as they'd grown up. She'd been the little one, the one everyone else looked out for.

She'd tried to help over the years, but the others had always been better. Bigger, stronger, smarter.

With this farm, she was determined to contribute equally. Seeing how excited Knox had been for the farm had made her want to support him. Even without the lure of the pond and the task of increasing the diversity in the biome, Jolie figured she'd have jumped on board.

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She wanted to support all her siblings, find ways to make them all happy. Pay them back at least a little for how they'd always taken care of her.

With this farm, it seemed Knox had the same idea. He wanted to pull them all together, and Jolie completely agreed. The four of them deserved a ton of happiness and she wanted to be a part of ensuring that happened.

Which meant she'd control herself around Ford. While she'd never felt such a deep attraction to any other man, he was part of Knox's plan for the farm. She couldn't take the risk.

Knox wanted his friend here, and she could tell Ford was already invested in doing his part in Knox's plan. Jolie wouldn't make a mess of it.

She smelled the pond before they reached it and her excitement ratcheted up some more. Beside her, Ford chuckled. She worked hard to not imagine that sexy rumble against her skin.

Focus, girl. Scummy pond ahead.

Imagining her grandfather's growl helped keep her head in the game. She had great memories of Fox helping her plant the first beans she'd brought home from school. That had expanded to a garden with carrots, onions, and more. Every year, he'd helped her make it a little larger.

That garden had helped Jolie contribute to the family for the first time. Instead of being a burden, she'd helped to put food on the table. And in the mouths of the small

animals and birds who'd visited the property. The career she loved was a direct link back to Fox and that garden.

In the last few years, Fox had loved when she'd told him about her work, whether it was trudging through the water to study tadpoles or eliminating invasive plants. She missed chatting with him about the environment. Their Abenaki heritage had been important to Fox, and he'd taught them all the importance of being good caretakers to the planet.

Fox would love this farm. What had stopped Jay from telling him about it? What had pulled the brothers apart?

Ford broke into her thoughts when he spoke. "I don't need to know a lot about ponds to know this one won't be an easy cleanup. It's a mess. I bet it's been stagnant for years."

When the trees opened up, it only took a quick glance to see he was completely right.

She turned to study the surrounding land, looking for clues to tell her of the pond's history and why it wasn't clear. "I think it's a natural pond. The land all slopes gently this way."

"Is that important?"

She shrugged. "It means the land isn't averse to having a pond here. Once we get it cleaned and get the water moving, it shouldn't be too much trouble to keep it that way for years to come."

"How do you clean a pond?"

He didn't sound anything other than curious. Despite claiming he wasn't a plant or

land guy, he'd shown interest throughout their walk. She'd bet he was one of those people who wanted to know how all things worked. Maybe building things wasn't much different from fixing things in nature.

"First, I'll need to do a bit of a study. Find out what plants are native to the area. See if there are signs of any fish or amphibian life in the pond. Take some water and soil samples to get analyzed. Then, I'll start eliminating the harmful plants. I'll probably need to add some good predators."

"Good predators?"

She nodded. "Predators that eat the harmful plants and insect species. Lady bugs are excellent predators, but I don't know if we have many here."

She looked up at the forest set back further from the pond. "Bats and owls, too, but that's further down the road. First, I'd like to make a better buffer around some sides of the pond. More rocks and sturdy plants. That should help keep the nutrients in."

Ford chuckled. "You've got lots of ideas and even more work ahead of you."

She grinned at him. "It's going to be fun."

His answering smile proved he understood. "I get that. This whole place is great. I've got more buildings to check out, but I'm excited about getting started. There's work to do, but it's good work."

Jolie nodded. "That's exactly it. I've worked on some projects that feel futile. Projects where we're trying to fight against the never-ending human desire to destroy and pollute. This feels different. It's a tiny ecosystem where everyone inside it wants to make it better and stronger. Where no one is trying to destroy anything."

“Except those good predators of yours.”

She laughed. “You’re right.”

Jolie turned her attention back to the pond, letting her eyes rove over the area. “It’s a good place.” A good place to build. A place to call home.

Jolie took out her phone to take a few overview pictures. Later, she’d get in closer and take photos of individual plants, but this would be enough for now. She wanted to let the ideas simmer for a bit. Letting them coalesce in her brain was vital. If she jumped in too quickly, she always made mistakes. Letting her subconscious work out the solutions was always better.

After a few minutes, she and Ford moved around the back of the pond. “Do you know how far the property goes?”

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He shook his head. “Never thought to ask about it.”

The forest was another dozen yards from the back of the pond. There were some paths through the weeds and plants, probably made by animals coming to drink and bathe. Again, she needed to know more about the native species in the area. She didn’t want her work to negatively impact the nature around them. She wanted to lure some of the natural species in closer to the pond and the rest of the farm.

Leaving the pond behind, they walked along the tree line as they moved to the far side of the property. They found a couple of cabins and a few more sheds, some barely holding together.

Between the apple trees, the ground was overgrown and choked with weeds. “I’m guessing this section of the farm hasn’t been tended in a decade or three.”

Ford nodded. “Everything here feels a little more wild, a little less tamed.”

She nodded. “I wonder if Knox plans on touching this area for a while. It might be better to start closer to the Worminator and Thea’s magic compost.”

Ford grinned. “It was a bitch to put together, but I’m excited to see what Thea has planned for all the compost she’s making.”

“Same. I used to have a garden as a kid. This place is like a huge play area. It’s going to be fun to bring out its potential.”

Ford laughed. “I’ve been waiting for that word to come up.”

Jolie grinned. Her family loved to tease her about how she always saw the potential in things. But that was the best part of life. Well, second best. Bringing that potential to life was the best.

And she couldn't wait to dive in.

### Chapter3

#### Battle Ready

Ford pulled a tray of enchiladas out of the oven and set them on the stove to rest. He, Knox, and Thea had set up a rotational cooking schedule, and it was his night to cook. Because of the size of his family growing up, everyone had taken turns cooking.

Ford didn't remember his mom or if she had cooked before cancer had taken her, but his dad had made sure they could all make the basics. He couldn't imagine cooking for nine kids, especially when they were all big eaters. All the boys had gone through growth spurts as they'd entered high school. Now they all stood over six feet and were bottomless pits, himself included.

At least this bunch at the farm wouldn't require four trays of anything.

He wondered if Jolie liked to cook and what her specialties would be once she jumped into the rotation. Ford like easy and filling. Spicy didn't hurt, but he wasn't fussy. If someone else was cooking, he'd gladly eat and do the cleanup.

He rang the triangle Knox had found somewhere and hung up near the door in the kitchen. It was a blast from the past that made Ford grin. far easier than texting everyone.

Sure enough, Thea and Jolie came in together from outside. Knox thumped down the stairs.

Jolie's eyes lit up. "That smells delicious."

Ridiculous pride filled him up. "My dad's secret recipe."

Knox raised an eyebrow and pointed to the empty jar Ford had cleaned out and put in the recycling pile. Ford laughed. "Yep. Dad always said that companies hired real chefs to make their stuff. No sense in competing with chefs."

Jolie grinned. "And that's the secret?"

He nodded. "Sure is. Along with always chopping meat and vegetables the same size, so they cook better."

While they were eating, Knox turned to his sister. "How do you like the farm now that you've seen it in real life?"

Jolie's face brightened. "It's amazing. I tagged along on Ford's tour of the property. Now I have a much better idea of the whole setup. It's a wonderful place."

Thea grinned. "I'm so glad to hear that. Do you have any ideas yet about how to increase the biodiversity of the farm?"

"Only a million or so, but I need to know more about the species that are native to the area."

Ford grinned at Knox as the two women started talking about plant species and naming things that Ford couldn't have identified if his life depended on it. Hell, he wasn't sure if they were talking about plants, insects, or micro-organisms half the

time.

After they'd eaten and cleaned up, the four of them headed to the back porch. Knox and Thea had set up a few old rockers and chairs along the porch. It faced into the orchard and was as peaceful a spot as he'd ever seen.

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Peace was good. After the shit he and his team had experienced in the army, he knew he'd never take peace for granted. They'd rescued a lot of people and stopped many acts of terrorism. It still swam around in his brain and his heart at night.

People deserved to be surrounded by peace. Deserved to live their lives as they wished instead of at the whims of dictators and drug cartels.

Knox brought out a tray of mugs, making Ford realize he'd zoned out enough to miss his friend heading back in. That never happened. His body must trust in the safety surrounding them.

Knox passed him a steaming mug that smelled like cinnamon and other spices he associated with the villages from overseas. "Chai?"

Knox grinned. "Maybe not as good as some places we visited in Afghanistan, but close. There's a woman nearby in a place called Midnight Lake who likes to experiment with pretty much everything. Along with creating robots, Tansy's blending different teas. All caffeine free."

"You landed us all in an interesting part of the world, Annie." Using his buddy's call sign made him think of Mara because she'd been the one to give Knox the Annie call sign. Even now, the melody of It's a Hard Knox Life drifted through his head. "I think my sister would like this place."

Knox laughed. "Reading my mind, Dodge? At some point, I think the farm would benefit from someone who likes to bake. We don't have the product yet, but if Mara ever wants to visit, encourage her. Even if she doesn't want to live here, I'm betting

she'd be full of ideas of what we could make here to help the farm and its apples stand out from the crowd."

Ford nodded, smiling at the use of his own callsign. With a name like Ford, he was constantly being called by the names of other vehicle companies, but Dodge was the one that stuck the most.

At least the teams had picked his, not his sister. Although the Annie callsign had always made his buddy laugh and whistle the tune. "Not exactly a hard Knox life up here, is it?"

Knox grinned. "I'm loving it. I find the whole place fascinating. The trees, the process, the Worminator. The farm is full of potential, isn't it, Jolie?"

She laughed, and the sound warmed up Ford as much as the tea.

Jolie sipped from her own mug. "I've been here for a whole twenty-four hours, but it's got even more potential than I expected. Tomorrow, I'm going to explore the pond. I want to find out what exactly is living in there. Then I'm going to start removing the plants that don't belong. That alone should help move around some of that stale water. Do you know how deep it is?"

Knox and Thea exchanged a glance and shook their heads. "Not a clue."

Jolie didn't look in the least bit deterred. "More to find out. It's going to be fun."

Thea turned to Ford. "How did your overview go today?"

He shrugged. "Pretty well. Aside from some sheds, almost everything is in at least halfway decent shape. The people who built the barns built them to last for centuries. All the foundations are solid. The wood has worn down a bit over the decades, but

that's normal, and adds to the visual attraction. There's nothing quite like the appeal of a barn that looks friendly and lived in. If you ever decide to open the place up to visitors, there are going to be plenty who want to take selfies in front of the barns."

Knox nodded. "Maybe down the road. This year, I think we're going to have our hands full getting things moving in the right direction."

Jolie smiled. "Burke will like the idea of diversifying the income streams. Visitors, especially during apple-picking time, will love this place. They could pick their own. Families would love to bring kids to a place like this."

Ford didn't contribute much more as the conversation swirled around him, batting around ideas for various income streams, and ideas for the future ranging from the practical to the ridiculous.

He settled deeper into the chair and sipped the comforting spiced tea. It was a good place. A place he could be an important part of the team, not an errand boy like he'd been back home.

He hadn't committed to more than coming to visit the farm and help Knox get things fixed up and moving. But the past few days had been the most interesting of his last few years.

Who'd have thought a kid from Miami would travel the world with the army and then settle his ass down on an apple farm in Vermont?

Jolie laughed along with her brother and Ford smiled into his mug. It was a hell of a good place.

Jolie couldn't settle. Her room, with its attached bath appointed with pastel green fixtures, was comfortable and clean. Her brother had done an excellent job of

polishing the entire farmhouse before anyone arrived.

She didn't remember much before moving into Fox's home, but she knew they'd all chipped in and helped there. Cleaning, cooking, laundry. They'd all pulled their weight. Well, Amber had probably carried the biggest load there, but they'd all learned the value of keeping the small home tidy and clean.

Knox said he'd honed those skills in the army where having things out of place or dirty could cost you hours of extra jogging with packs weighing over fifty pounds.

She'd have never survived army training.

Exercise for the sake of exercise wasn't her thing. She preferred to walk and work in nature. Although she loved a good game of volleyball or softball, too. Maybe they could set up a volleyball net somewhere in the orchard.

Her job kept her in good shape. Hiking through the woods, climbing mountains, and digging into streams and ponds required strong muscles and a relaxed attitude about staying clean all day long. She was okay getting dirty as long as a hot shower awaited her at the end of the day.

Jolie slipped out of her room and down the stairs. She'd never been a great sleeper, so the act made her think of the times she'd found Fox in the kitchen with his mug of decaf coffee in front of him. As an adult, she could look back and see the grief in him. As a child of seven, she'd only thought that her grandfather had been waiting in case one of them had a nightmare. She'd had lots.

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But Fox and her siblings had made her feel safe, and those nightmares had mostly faded. Still, she would memorize which steps creaked here so she didn't disturb the others on the nights when sleep didn't come easily.

For tonight, she kept to the edge of the steps, knowing creaks were less likely there. On the main floor, it was dark. So much darker than in the cities. She loved this kind of dark and quiet, but she would order in a few soft nightlights for the space. If she was going to wander, it would be better to have a few in the hallways. Tumbling down the stairs would definitely wake everyone up.

For now, she turned on the hallway light and wandered into the room where Knox figured Jay had spent most of his indoor time.

The room was huge. Probably larger than the footprint of Fox's house. The soft indent in the old leather recliner proved where Jay had spent a lot of time.

She brushed her fingers over the worn leather and imagined this was a chair Fox would have loved as well. What had torn them apart? Why hadn't they fixed it?

Fox had believed in the importance of family. He'd talked often of the way family needed to stand together, needed to support each other. He'd encouraged all of them to learn what was important to the others, and to learn about whatever that was themselves.

That was why Jolie could change her own oil and tires, could sew her own curtains and pillow, knew what the army did overseas, how to use the formula functions on a spreadsheet, and how to see her older siblings as individuals with unique talents and

interests.

What had interested Jay?

She perched on the edge of the recliner and checked out the items on his side table. Farming magazines and catalogues. The folded-down pages piqued her interest, and she turned to those.

Irrigation systems.

Harvesting crates.

Composting facilities like Thea's Worminator. He would be glad that Thea had her dream facility up and running.

Marked pages of cider and pectin making equipment proved he'd thought of diversifying income streams as well.

The books were on farming, apples, woodworking, engine repair, and Abenaki history. Scrap pieces of paper acted as bookmarks and showed Jay loved to learn. Like Fox.

She sighed and stood to wander the rest of the room. A single piece of live-edged wood acted as a mantle above the huge stone fireplace. She crossed to it and ran her fingers over the various textures. She sat on the hearth along the front of the fireplace and looked at the room from a new angle.

If Fox had taken them to visit his brother, there were enough seats on the worn leather couches for them all, but she figured she'd have sat here in front of the fireplace. It was a good spot to watch what was happening. What everyone was doing.

She could picture them all here, the two old men bickering about the best way to do all the things. The rest of them would play board games or whatever Burke came up with to keep the younger ones entertained.

Had Jay liked board games? Cards or chess?

She rose and looked over the shelves, then in the cupboards below them. Sure enough, she found both chess pieces and checkers to go along with a few boards. Decks of cards, worn from years of shuffling. A backgammon board. A few of those wooden puzzles with golf tees set into holes.

She knew Jay hadn't owned the farm for more than a couple of years. Maybe the games weren't his. But she could imagine them all here on a rainy day, playing games and laughing.

It was a good image. Better than imagining a lonely Jay sitting by himself in the recliner. Everyone should have a family to count on.

Which brought her thoughts to Ford. He had a huge family. She knew from previous conversations with Knox that Ford had joined the army for a few reasons. One of them was to find his own path. While he loved building and restoring, having seven older brothers meant the family business was full.

That made her sad, too.

All of her siblings would have automatically made room for any of the others if they wanted to be part of something. And it wouldn't be a fake job. They'd figure it out to make sure everyone was doing something important. Something they wanted to do.

Just like what Knox was doing with the farm. He was open about his desire to pull the five of them together. He'd like to have them all on the farm together, but even if that

didn't happen, they'd all stay connected through the farm. They'd make decisions as a team.

Ford hadn't had that with his family, but maybe he could find it here.

If she focused on helping him realize that his place here on the farm was important, that he was needed, maybe it would help her shove her crush to the side.

She knew nothing would make her crush totally disappear—the man was too yummy—but she could learn to hide it.

Spending the day touring the farm with Ford had proven he was amazing. Intelligent. Funny. Interested in learning things outside of his focus. Kind and thoughtful.

And sexy. She couldn't forget sexy.

Yeah, shoving that crush to the side might require more effort than she thought.

### Chapter4

#### Heading Into Battle

Despite her nocturnal wanderings, Jolie woke early to a sunshine-filled morning. Perfect for a proper evaluation of the pond.

While part of her would rather tag along with Ford no matter what he was up to, most of her wanted to attack the pond. It was going to be a battle to get it healthy and functional.

Jay's books proved he'd agreed with Thea and had wanted the pond to be a vital part of the farm. He'd bookmarked and scribbled notes in margins of his books and catalogues. Once the pond was clean, it could be a natural source of irrigation for the back part of the orchard. It would also help bring in a wider variety of animal life.

Achieving Jay's dream would be her mission. He'd left the farm to them, which meant he thought they would want to be a part of it, would want to help it.

Doing her part would make her feel connected to Jay. And help make up for whatever had gone wrong between the brothers. The added benefit was that it would strengthen her connection to Knox and, hopefully, the others.

Her schooling had taken her away from her family. So had the jobs she'd taken afterward. Now she wanted them closer.

In the kitchen, she made up a pot of oatmeal and sliced in some fresh apples and added a healthy dash of cinnamon. It amazed her that the apples from the previous year's harvest tasted as if she'd plucked them off the tree that morning. And that was without the magic of Thea's compost system.

They were already making good progress, and the farm had only been left to them earlier in the spring.

After she cleaned up her dishes, Jolie put the rest of the oatmeal in a container in the fridge and left a note telling the others it was there if they were hungry. If not, she'd have the rest over the next few days.

Jolie headed to her Escape and grabbed one of the tote boxes from the trunk. The fact that it was a Ford vehicle made her smile. Ford's truck was, predictably, a Ford as well. Now, she'd smile every time she thought of her car.

Jolie set the tote on the ground and locked her vehicle back up. It was likely safe, but she had a lot of equipment in there and she wasn't taking chances.

Jolie looked at the orchard with a frown. She was good with directions, but she hadn't paid a lot of attention to where they'd walked yesterday. She and Ford had wandered from building to building. They hadn't walked in any straight lines. Where exactly was her pond? And how far was it?

From her memory, there weren't any roads leading to it. Should she take her car and get close? The tote she wanted was heavy, and she wasn't sure she could carry it all the way without taking a hundred breaks.

A few weeks before, she'd watched her brother and Thea tour the property on an ATV. Thea had driven while Knox had videoed the ride. That proved there was an ATV here. Were they easy to drive? It would be her best option for getting her

equipment to the pond, but she wasn't sure anyone else was awake. She wouldn't rouse them for that.

If her brain worked like Ford's, she'd only have to check her list and choose another task. But Jolie followed her gut and her heart. Which both wanted to work on the pond.

Maybe the ATV was in the closest barn. That was the equipment barn. Would it be open? She hadn't asked Knox if there were extra sets of keys yet. She should have thought this through the night before.

The sound of a door closing had her turning back to the farmhouse. Ford stopped on the porch with his eyes on the orchard and drew in a deep breath. A small smile played across his face and she squashed down her crush.

Her job was to help Knox keep his friend at the farm. To help him feel part of the family, part of the team. Not to lust after him.

Ford headed down the stairs, and his smile widened when he spotted her. "Good morning."

She couldn't stop her own smile. "Morning."

He eyed her tote box. "What are you up to today?"

She patted the box. "I want to work on the pond, but I've got a couple of problems."

His eyebrows shot up. "What's wrong?"

She grinned. "Nothing serious. I just don't know the right direction for the pond. And I don't know if there's a road leading there. I got turned around on our tour

yesterday.”

He grinned. “No problem. Do you need to bring that with you?”

She nodded.

He waved at her to follow him and pulled out a ring of keys. “Did Knox give you a set of keys yet?”

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“I didn’t think to ask him yesterday. I was more focused on the outside spaces.”

“You’ll need a set, anyway. There are a couple of ATVs over in this barn. Do you know how to drive one?”

“Not yet.”

He laughed. “Good answer. I can drive you down there today, then give you a few driving lessons whenever you like. I’ve only ever seen the one machine running, but I’m hoping the others work as well.”

That would be a good reason to have Lawson here, and a potential way to lure him in. He’d been tinkering with engines from Jolie’s first memories.

Ford unlocked the barn and opened one of the large doors.

The interior had Jolie’s eyes going wide. “Wow. That’s a lot of machinery.”

He grinned. “I know Knox is hoping to use it to talk Bobby into coming here.”

Hearing the name Bobby made her laugh. One of her brother’s teammates had a British background, and he’d been the one to call Lawson Bobby. Police officers were bobbies in England, and with his name starting with Law, the nickname had stuck. “You military guys and your callsigns. You’re going to have to tell me more about them one day.”

He grinned at her. “I look forward to it. Your brother’s isn’t even the weirdest of the

men I've worked with."

His grin was wide and happy. Jolie wanted to taste it. No, no, she didn't. To distract herself, she checked out the barn. "Lawson is going to love this place. It's probably his version of paradise. Well, if you add in some old cars and trucks to restore, it would be."

Ford nodded. "I think he could figure out space for that. It's a huge barn and the farm will need someone to keep these machines in prime condition."

It would be perfect for Lawson. Knox was going to make all of this happen. He'd get her whole family here, and she was going to help.

Ford grabbed a couple of helmets off a shelf and then showed Jolie the basics of driving the machine. He was confident, and she felt like she could hop on and drive with no further lessons. "So, where did a big-city kid learn to drive an ATV?"

He grinned. "When I first joined the army, I was in boot camp with a sergeant who believed we should be able to jumpstart and drive any machine we came across."

"I bet Lawson would have liked him."

Ford nodded. "Bobby and I never worked on the same team, but I've been on a few missions with him. I've never asked him if he ran into Jenkins during training, though."

"Were you ever on missions with Burke?"

"Boss Man? More than once. Our teams were often in the same area. Your brothers are some of the best men I know."

Pride filled her. She'd known her brothers had all worked hard overseas. That's what they did. Knowing others respected her brothers as much as she did filled her heart.

She blinked away the mistiness trying to settle in her eyes, and turned her attention back to the ATV.

Ford drove it out of the barn, and she locked the door behind him. By the time she reached where she'd left her tote, he'd strapped it to the back of the ATV. "Anything else you want to bring down there?"

"That should be good for today. I really don't know what I'm facing yet, but this should do me for now."

Ford swung onto the driver's seat and motioned to her to sit on the seat behind him. There was a running board, so she stood on it and squeezed herself between the tote and Ford.

Not a lot of wiggle room. Her legs bracketed his, and her body instantly wanted to get closer. Instead, she made herself to find a comfortable spot and stay still.

There was nowhere else to put her hands, so she set them on his torso and forced herself not to cuddle in. Although she'd have clunked their helmets together if she'd tried.

"All set?"

Ford's gravelly voice reached her easily through the helmet. "All set."

He started the engine and took off into the orchard at a sedate pace. There was no need to wrap herself around him to keep safe.

Too bad.

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Ford wondered if his attraction to Jolie had somehow dialed his libido back to its teenage years. Having her sit behind him on the ATV had his body reacting in all kinds of ways. Her legs hugged his and her hands lightly rested on his body. Nothing sexual about it at all. He was an ass.

Laughing at himself, he yanked his body under control again and drove through the orchard to the pond. The morning sun brightened everything, and he figured he'd never been in a prettier place.

Who would have thought he was a rural guy?

Nearer the pond, he saw a flash of white through the trees. Fox, the dog.

Ridiculous name for the huge Great Pyrenees, but it made everyone smile. Ford knew the Malssums had lost their parents in a crash when they were all kids. Their grandfather, Fox, had taken them all in and raised them.

While Fox and his brother Jay had been estranged, the dog's name was a sign that Jay had never forgotten his brother. And maybe a sign that Jay wished things had been different. Ford knew Knox thought so, and that he hoped he'd find something in the house that explained the rift.

When Ford parked near the pond, Fox bounded up to meet them. Ford climbed off the ATV and turned to offer Jolie a hand down. She was already on the ground and smiling at the dog. "Hello, Fox. How are you this beautiful morning?"

Fox twined himself around Jolie's legs and then sat while she rubbed him down. And

now Ford was jealous of a damn dog.

He took off his helmet and then greeted Fox in the same way. The dog treated Thea like his family and had welcomed them all, although he stayed in the orchard when there were more than a few people in a group. He didn't go into the buildings much at all, preferring to live freely on the farm.

Ford took off the bungee cords holding Jolie's tote in place and then lifted it down. "Any particular place you want me to put this?"

She shook her head as she looked around. "Maybe just under one of the trees close to the pond."

"Should we put it in the nearest shed? Is there anything valuable in here?"

She grinned. "Not to most people. Just some of the equipment I need to explore the pond in more detail."

He couldn't wait to see what she had and how she intended to explore. "I'm curious as hell about how you're going to tackle this mess."

Jolie laughed. "Me, too. Every place has its own unique needs, so I don't plan too much in advance."

After watching her yesterday, that didn't surprise him. Her approach to tackling her projects was much more intuitive than his. He liked his spreadsheets and lists. Organizing the tasks helped him see the order and the flow of how things would work. She didn't appear to need that, as she kept all the information in her head.

Jolie opened the tote and Fox walked over to check it out with them. The dog shoved his muzzle into the box while Jolie laughed. "Go ahead and check it out, Fox.

Nothing in there can hurt you, but I'll bet you don't find any of it very interesting."

Fox appeared to agree. After he sniffed the contents, he looked at her with his head tilted to the side, as if disappointed to not find any dog treats inside. Then he barked happily at them both and bounded off into the woods.

Ford laughed. "Looks like he agrees. But I'm interested. What have you got?"

A large roll of something made of heavy, blue rubber took up one long edge of the tote. Several small plastic jars and boxes filled up the middle. Small rakes, shovels, trowels, fishing nets, and other tools sat along the other edge.

"This is most of what I need to get started. I'm going to take pictures and get samples. I want to take water samples at various depths to see if there are differences. I'll also grab a few soil samples from the edges and bottom."

"What do you do with the samples?"

She opened one of the small plastic boxes and removed a few small jars. "I'll send them to a lab for analysis. I don't know which lab is closest, but I'll call one I've worked with before and see who they recommend in this area."

She pulled at the rubber material and yanked it out of the tote.

Ford laughed when it unraveled, and he saw what it was. "I thought it was a mat of some kind, or maybe a tarp."

Jolie laughed. "Nope. These are my handy-dandy waders."

"I don't think I've ever seen rubber overalls before."

“You’ve been missing out. The rubberized exterior keeps me dry and warm even in the coolest of water. Although I’ve only worked in the Carolinas before. It’ll be interesting to see how they handle the Vermont weather.”

“You’re not going to explore the pond in the winter, are you?” The thought scared the hell out of him. Water in a Vermont winter had to be dangerous.

She shrugged. “I’ll have to wait and see. I’m hoping to have it settled and healthy before ice forms. But I’m also curious about what happens in ponds during the colder months. I’ll try not to disturb the area unnecessarily, but my curiosity is sometimes hard to control.”

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Just like Ford's body when he was around Jolie.

Apparently, his own curiosity was also strong. He should probably pull out his list and start working on the red items. Instead, he watched in fascination as Jolie opened another box and took out a pair of moccasins and switched into them from her rubber boots. These bright pink ones sported zebras holding umbrellas.

Then she sat on the ground beside her waders and wiggled herself into them.

He couldn't pull his gaze away.

Once she had her feet in the bottoms, she hiked up the rubber as far as she could and then hopped to her feet before he could offer her a hand to haul her up.

Then she wiggled some more and brought the thick material up over her butt. She slipped her arms through the straps and then cinched the tie around her waist.

It all took less than thirty seconds. "Impressive."

She laughed. "In my first field assignment, I thought I could get away with regular hip waders."

"I take it that didn't work out well?"

"Nope. My feet were soaked in no time, and I had to spend the entire day squelching and uncomfortable."

He grinned. “That would suck.”

Her face was full of fun and fond memories. “Oh, it did. That night, a bunch of us dove into researching the best replacement. I’ve had these for years and they’re amazing. I just wish they came in better colors.”

He studied her. “The blue is good.”

She shrugged. “It’s boring. I think they missed out on a huge marketing bonus. Imagine if they came in different patterns like they do with rubber boots? I’d love to have a pair with Sponge Bob or the Little Mermaid on them.”

Ford wondered if he’d ever laughed this much. “I can see that. Although that might be a bit of a niche market.”

She grinned. “Even better. It’s good to be just a little different.”

From where he was standing, a little different was pretty great.

## Chapter5

### The First Battle

Jolie loved the initial inspection stage of a new biome. Having Ford along made it even better. So far, he’d shown no signs of heading off to do his own work. She didn’t mind one bit. She should probably try to brush him off so she didn’t get more attracted, but she didn’t.

It was fun explaining to an interested party how she worked and what people could do to help nature along. Even better, what humans could do to help repair the damage their species had inflicted on the planet.

She filled the pockets on her chest waders with a few sample bottles and the waterproof camera she'd bought a few years back after she'd destroyed yet another phone. The camera might not have as great a resolution as modern phones, but it was good enough for her needs.

Mostly, she wanted to identify the species in the pond and find out which ones belonged and which ones were harming the others and keeping the pond stagnant.

She'd done more research online the previous night, and had a better idea of what was native to this area of Vermont. Thea knew a lot about the plants in the orchard, but the pond's species were a little different.

First, Jolie walked around the outside edge of the pond and took overview photos from various angles. Ford followed along and she kept her steps in the dry areas so he didn't get soaked. There was no need at this point.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm wondering where it would be best to change the slope of one edge of the pond."

"Why?"

She grinned. His curiosity was proving as strong as her own. "Birds and animals will want to use the pond for both drinking and bathing. Having a shallow slope on one edge gives smaller creatures easier access and an easier escape route if needed. If we can attract a variety of animals and birds, it'll help keep things in balance."

"Like the good predators you mentioned yesterday?"

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“Exactly like that. We need to get rid of the bacteria that’s keeping them away. But we also need some of the dead stuff around.”

His eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t expect that. Why?”

“Dead branches house lots of species of insects. Then those insects attract bigger predators. And so on up the food chain. Dead logs and branches also give protection for frogs and toads. Good places to hide from birds of prey looking for an easy meal.”

Which reminded her about the owls and bats. “Any chance you’d be willing to build me some bat and owl boxes at some point?”

He grinned. “I haven’t got a clue what those are, but I’m sure I can help you out.”

“The owl nesting boxes are similar to bird houses, just bigger and higher up, preferably inside the barns. Bat boxes are a little more complicated, but not too complex. I’m guessing Knox won’t mind me adding them to the exterior of the barns.”

“It’s your property, too, Jolie. Even if it wasn’t, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

That lit her up. Itwasher property, too. It was weird to think of it that way. Knox had been the first to visit, the one who’d convinced them to give him a chance to make it a profitable venture. She’d been thinking of it in terms of his farm or their farm. Not hers. But it was hers, too. And that was amazing. “I also might need a fence down here.”

“To surround the pond? Won’t that deter the wildlife rather than encourage it?”

She nodded. “Not around the pond, but maybe around this clearing. If no ducks or geese visit the area regularly, I might get a flock of ones that could free-range here within the fence. If there are enough birds coming here naturally, I won’t need a fence, but I suspect that’s not the case.” She’d seen no evidence of bird droppings anywhere in the clearing.

Over the next hour, Jolie took pictures of the pond from dozens of angles. She figured out where it would be best to add that slope and where she should add to the natural buffer that was in place.

They’d need to find some larger rocks to add to a couple of places. That would help with the buffer and she could add plants that enhanced it as well.

She’d learn more about the bat species native to southern Vermont. Bats needed a long enough pond to act like a runway. They didn’t stop to drink. Instead, they swooped down from mid-flight and drank that way. Once she explained that to Ford, he helped her measure the length so she’d know if she needed to extend the pond. Hopefully not, as it fit nicely into the landscape as is.

At one point, Ford asked if she wanted him to start a list of all things she wanted to change. She shook her head with a grin. “No, thanks. I’d rather keep it loose, in case something better comes to mind. Just saying it out loud helps cement it in my brain.”

When his phone beeped, he sighed. “Annie needs me to give him a hand. You okay here?”

She nodded. “I’m good. Thanks for your help getting the tote down here. And thanks for listening to me ramble.”

His eyes were warm. “I didn’t hear you ramble at all. This whole biodiversity stuff is fascinating. Text me if you need anything or if you want a ride back.”

She waved him off with a smile, then blew out a breath. The man was delicious. Too bad he was her brother’s best friend and that jumping his bones would make everything incredibly awkward if things didn’t work out.

Jolie waded into the pond and eased along the edge. She didn’t want to disturb anything, just wanted to build up her knowledge about the place.

She confirmed the best place to adjust the slope and found out the pond was deeper than she’d expected. She was only a yard off the edge when the water reached her waist and she didn’t go further. Accidents happened quickly on unfamiliar ground.

Maybe there was a small boat on the property. That way, she could explore the middle with a long stick. A lot of deep ponds needed help keeping the bottom healthy. This one might need to be raked out. And she’d maybe need to add something to keep the water moving. She’d rather keep it all natural, but if necessary, she could add a fountain or other feature that moved the water. Something solar or wind powered that she could remove in the winter.

She could also add a load of gravel or sand to the bottom if the depth was causing problems.

From her spot in the water, Jolie checked out the orchard. Eventually, she’d need to run irrigation lines from the pond in several directions. That should keep the back half of the orchard healthy.

Did they want pure water, or was there a way to use some of Thea’s worm poop tea to add nutrients to the trees in the back? They were definitely not as vibrant as the ones in the front.

The compost tea would soon go directly into the irrigation lines that were already in place. Would transporting the nutrients here be too time consuming or cost prohibitive? How else could it be done?

So many things to know, so many things to figure out.

So much potential.

Add in a sexy man she found fascinating, and the farm was turning out to be the perfect place for Jolie to figure out how to best help her family.

The next day, Ford secured the extension ladder with some sandbags. He'd have to look into buying scaffolding. With the height of the barns, it would be safer than using a ladder. And less annoying. Up and down to move the ladder every few feet was a pain.

But this was an initial survey to see if any work was necessary in the eaves. So far, he'd found a few birds' nests. Normally, he would have checked to make sure there weren't any eggs, then he might have tossed the nests.

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After talking to Jolie, he wasn't so sure. Did increasing the biodiversity of the property mean that all the nests should stay? Were these birds part of the good predator list she had in her head?

Not that he had a clue what birds had made these nests. Even if he'd seen the birds, he likely still wouldn't know.

But he would learn. He grinned at the thought. Even if Jolie wasn't intriguing as hell on a personal level, her passion for nature and the farm would have lured him in.

He'd learned more about science and nature from her than he had from all his teachers put together. He'd always been a hands-on learner. Theorizing drove him a little batty. It was much better to get his hands on the pieces and figure it out that way. Whether it was a building project, a puzzle, or a math problem. Being able to manipulate the pieces always made it make sense.

Seeing and hearing Jolie put the puzzle pieces of the pond together had been fun. Hell, he wanted to invest in his own set of chest waders just to explore the pond. With or without her. With would be a lot better.

Ford pulled his phone out and took a picture of the latest nest, wondering what clues Jolie would find to put the pieces together here. Could she tell the type of bird from the nest?

Ford didn't know if birds used nests throughout the year or if they were only useful for laying eggs in the spring. Maybe the nests were useless after that and could be discarded. Unless they reused them year to year. Lots of questions.

He recorded the location of the nest on his spreadsheet and assigned the photo number to it.

So far, he'd found no problems with rot, but debris clogged several air vents. Hopefully, the debris wasn't nests as the vents needed to be cleaned whether the birds used them or not. The vents got the red priority marks. He'd need a taller ladder to get to the roof. Unless there was a way up from the inside, which would be cool.

This harvesting barn was the most important to keep properly ventilated and maintained. If Knox and his family wanted to get the farm producing lots of apples, they needed proper facilities to store and do whatever they did with the fruit.

He was looking forward to seeing those puzzle pieces fit together, too.

From his spot at the top of the ladder, Ford turned to survey the farm. This barn was behind the equipment barn on the same side of the property. Not that he could see the other barn or the farmhouses with the apple trees growing everywhere like a field of flowers. A hell of a pretty sight.

The entire farm was pretty. Well, the pond might not be pretty yet, but he was confident Jolie would fix that.

He climbed down the ladder, moved it a couple of yards to the left, and repositioned the sandbags. Taking a tumble from more than twenty feet up wouldn't be fun.

It took over an hour to do a proper survey of the barn's exterior and by the time he was done, he'd put most of the tasks in the green or yellow sections. Nothing serious to deal with so far, other than the vents.

He debated whether to do the exterior of another barn next or move to the inside of this one. Climbing the ladder another couple of dozen times didn't appeal, so he

headed to the front of the barn.

He unlocked the small door, then worked to open the main doors. They were heavy, and the hinges needed some oil. He added that to the spreadsheet with a red code.

He walked around the main floor first, getting a feel for the layout and the flow of the building. He knew the apples would be put on one of the two conveyor belts. One for perfect apples, the other for those with blemishes.

Could he improve the efficiency of this place? Did the layout work for a small harvest? For a full one?

Needing more research, he took his phone back outside. No point in wasting a nice spring day when he could do that research under the shade of an apple tree.

He watched a bunch of videos, grateful for the people who put them together for no reason other than to help others.

He took notes about the process and analyzed the setup in each video. Many of the farms were on a much smaller scale than Knox's place. Others were warehouse-sized operations.

He took ideas from each of them and wished he had blueprints of the barn to study from an aerial view. Maybe Knox had found something like that.

The sound of the dinner bell had him grinning and checking the time. He'd been lost in a variety of plans for improving the harvesting process and hadn't realized it was so late.

He returned the ladder and sandbags to their places within the barn, then locked up and headed toward the farmhouse.

Jolie was cooking tonight, and he was curious about what she would make.

Ford knew Knox missed his family and wanted to lure them all here. With their rotational cooking routine, it would be easy to slide in new people once they arrived.

Which reminded him he needed to check out the other bedrooms and bathrooms. When he'd picked his room, he'd noticed a few of the window frames had some rot and at least one window had a crack. He'd upgrade those items to red. Anything that helped his buddy lure his family to the farm would be priority red.

The scent of roasting chicken had him picking up his pace. He wasn't a great cook, but he was a big fan of good food.

Mara had spoiled them all with her incredible baking, but she preferred that to cooking. Thankfully, Ford's dad and two of his older brothers had enjoyed cooking and experimenting with recipes. Nate's taco casserole was a thing of beauty. Ford would text him for the recipe later. Or at least the process, as Nate rarely followed a recipe. Maybe he'd bug him and Dan for simple things he could make on his nights.

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He loved his brothers and his dad, but he didn't feel the pull Knox did for his family. He was quite happy with their family chat and the individual texts he had with his siblings, and the calls he shared with his father. They all got along fine, but Ford was enjoying this new adventure.

Spending almost a decade in the army had changed the family dynamic and given Ford another kind of family.

He didn't fit in with his family's vision for the company, and that was fine. They'd all been happy to include him, but he didn't fit within the corporate construction vision. He hadn't found his own place or a job that made him happy.

Here he did. Weird, but true.

The best part was, not only would his family understand, they'd be happy for him. There were all kinds of families. He figured he'd found another his own here.

Now, he couldn't screw it up.

### Chapter6

#### Phailed Plans

Aweek later, Ford headed to the third barn for the equipment he would need. This barn was shaping up to be his workshop and the property's fix-it center.

It wasn't as large as the other two barns, but it was more square footage than any

workshop Ford had ever seen. He hadn't been able to make his way to the back or up to the hayloft yet because he couldn't take two steps without finding something interesting and distracting.

The space was completely disorganized and cluttered. It appeared the previous owners had looked at it as a catch-all building. Everything they didn't know what to do with had landed in this barn. It was fantastic.

It would take months to go through the place and organize it properly. He'd never had a space he could design to his own specifications, and he couldn't wait to dig in after he'd settled on a plan for how the space should look.

He was already grinning when he opened the door to his own personal Play Land. Every time he entered, it was an effort to remember his tasks.

Today, he needed bungee cords and a red cloth for a trip to town with Jolie. Knowing Jolie was part of the day's task made it far easier to keep his mind on track.

The more time they spent together, the more he liked her. And he'd started out with a whole lot of like. His mission to keep his mind off her was failing. Badly.

Today, they were heading into town and he had to talk himself down from seeing it as a date.

The thought of Jolie waiting for him up at the farmhouse meant he didn't loiter in the barn, although he managed a few ideas about good spots in here for sneaking a kiss or two.

Dumbass.

Finding the bungee cords was easy. They were wrapped around boards of various

sizes, keeping them organized and untangled. Finding a red cloth wasn't as difficult as he'd imagined. There was an old crate full of rags. A bunch of red ones proved the previous owner had probably used them as flags for items overhanging their trucks as well.

Satisfied, he headed back through the orchard, stopping to greet Fox on the way.

At the farmhouse, he found Jolie had put two coolers on his tailgate. He set the cords and red flag into the tool box installed in the truck's bed and settled the coolers on the edges.

Jolie exited the farmhouse with a small crate filled with cloth bags. He took them from her and added it to the collection.

Knox followed his sister down the steps and to the truck. He held two large buckets with lids. "Seeing as you're going to see Ginny anyway, can you bring these and exchange them for the ones she has?"

Ford nodded. "Sure. What's in them?"

"These are empty. The ones Ginny will give you are full of coffee grounds and other scraps for the Worminator. Thea met with Ginny and Manuel, and they worked out a system. We pick the buckets up on a weekly basis and return clean ones to them for the next week."

Ford was amazed how tied into the nearby community his buddy already was. It surprised him he wanted that for him and Jolie as well. When Knox headed off into the orchard, Ford turned to her. "Ready?"

She grinned. "Definitely. And excited. I still can't believe the town is named Phail. I'm looking forward to seeing it with my own eyes."

That made Ford laugh. He'd been the same when he'd learned his army buddy, Troy "Epic" Phail, lived in a town of the same name. They hadn't served on the same teams overseas, but their teams had worked on multiple missions together. "It's such a strange name. I'm sure Epic can give us the history if you want to know."

It didn't surprise him when she nodded. The woman's curiosity was boundless. "I'd like to hear about it. I thought it was bad having to spell Malssum a billion times for people to get it right, but I imagine Troy has had a lot more trouble with his surname."

Ford believed it.

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Once they were in the truck, Ford headed south toward Phail. It was a thirty-minute drive from the farm. The road dipped and rose as it curved through the mountains and valleys. The view was different around every corner. “More trees than humans.”

“Different from what you grew up with in Miami?”

“Completely different.” And it surprised him how much he loved the scenery. So many varieties of trees. Rocks and mountains, then valleys with small farms tucked within them.

Jolie’s head swiveled to take in all the views. “I arrived at night so I didn’t get to see any of this. It’s beautiful, and it’s giving me a much better feel for how this area of Vermont should be. It’s good to see how the land works and what keeps the plants happy.”

“Happy?” Had anyone he knew ever talked about the land being happy before?

Jolie nodded. “Happy. Nature does biodiversity really well. We can learn from her what kinds of plants thrive naturally here. Then we can incorporate the ones that will support the apples into the farm.”

“How does that help?”

Jolie smiled. “I’m learning a lot about that. I know biology and environmental systems, but I’ve never known much about farms. Apparently, if a farm focuses only on a single crop, it’s more vulnerable to insect infestations and to natural events. Floods can wash away the soil, but if there are a variety of plants rooting down to

different levels, those roots hang onto the soil and prevent it washing away.”

Ford nodded. “That makes sense.”

“With a wider variety of species, there’s less chance of any one species being wiped out. The food webs are healthier and more complex.”

“So if you need those ladybugs, but they get wiped out from something, the ripple effects are bad.”

“Devastating. It’s much better to follow nature’s cues and keep the biome varied and happy.”

He grinned at the repetition of the word. Happy was important to Jolie. For her insects and plants, as well as the people around her. She was a captivating woman.

He had dozens of ideas about how to keep her happy, but none of them were appropriate for the short time they’d known each other.

The smart move would be to avoid Jolie, to spend as little time in her company as possible. But that wasn’t going to happen. She drew him in like a fish on a line.

Jolie turned and smiled at him. “Tell me more about the callsigns. You said you worked with people with interesting ones.”

He welcomed the change of topic to get his head off ways to keep Jolie happy. “We had a great group of guys on our team of six. You know Knox got stuck with Annie.”

Jolie laughed. “Because of your sister. Sounds like he was called Mal before that. I like Annie better.”

“Of course you do. I don’t think he minds it much, either.”

“He’s always been easy going. If it makes someone else laugh, he’s generally okay with it.”

“Sounds like Annie. Then there’s me. I usually get Dodge, but I’ve been called Chevy, Honda, and even Volvo. If it’s a vehicle company, it’s been used for me.”

She laughed. “Jeep? Tank?”

He grinned. “Yes, to both.”

“Who else was on your team? Knox rarely talks about his time overseas but he has talked about the people.”

Ford nodded. Talking about what they’d seen overseas was never easy. They’d all been assigned therapists to help them readjust to civilian life. Ford figured the veterans lucky enough to have family who cared had the easiest time of things. “We had a few guys who were with us for almost the full two tours. Gray Santoro was one.”

“Let me guess. Pink?”

Ford laughed. “Damn. That would have been a good one. With his surname being Santoro, Gray was stuck with Santa or Claus.”

“That would sound weird when you were making calls over the radios.”

“It did. Although, you get used to it quickly and then it’s just their names. Then we had Adam Simpson.”

“I’m guessing Bart. Or Homer?”

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“Homer it is. You’re getting the hang of it. How about one for Jack Farrow?”

“That’s way too close to Captain Jack Sparrow, so Jack?”

“Hook.”

She laughed again and Ford figured he could do this all day long. “I think Knox said you worked in teams of six. Who’s left?”

“Richard Gomez.”

“Gomez. Like the Addams Family. So Adams?”

“That was too normal. He ended up with Morticia.”

They were still laughing when Ford rounded a new curve and another valley opened up in front of them, dotted with farms and farmhouses. Corrals for animals, too. It was like a postcard.

Another few hills and valleys and then the town of Phail appeared.

The GPS had them drive down Phail Way and park in a small lot beside Phail Phoods.

Along the road, they could see Phail General, Phail Phoods, the No Fail Diner, and Phail Way Park. Pots of coordinated spring flowers sat outside all the businesses.

Jolie grinned as she turned to him. “I feel like we just landed in the middle of a movie set. This is amazing.”

Ford studied her happy face and smiled. “Perfect.”

He wondered if she’d realize he wasn’t talking about the town.

Jolie reminded herself it wasn’t a date as she hopped out of the truck. The trip to town had passed quickly as they’d talked. No awkward silences at all.

Now she had to keep her attraction under control while they shopped. Unless she wanted to take a risk.

No. She wasn’t making a mess of this, no matter how attracted she was to him.

Ford walked around the truck to stand with her. “How about we leave picking up groceries until just before we head home?”

She nodded. “Good idea. That way, they won’t sit in the coolers too long. Should we head to Phail General first and talk to your friend?”

He nodded, and they crossed the street to the general store. Ford opened the door for her and placed his hand on her back to usher her inside. Tingles shot through her body at the simple touch.

She was falling hard and fast.

Phail General was crammed full of shelves, and those shelves were loaded with goods. Baking soda, hammers, batteries, rakes, pet supplies, and so much more. It was like stepping back in time to a pioneer general store. The old-fashioned cash register on the counter set it all off perfectly. “This is wonderful.”

They moved past the aisles and spied another door in the back. Through it she heard banging and spotted Troy Phail hammering a shelving unit into place.

Ford lifted his voice. “Need any help, Epic?”

The man turned with a grin. “Dodge. It’s great to see you.”

Ford placed his hand on her back. “Troy, you remember Jolie Malssum?”

Troy smiled. “From the screening of Annie out on the farm a while back. Nice to see you again, Jolie. Welcome to Phail.”

She couldn’t stop the laugh that bubbled out of her at the phrase. “Thanks. It looks like a great town.”

When she didn’t finish the thought, Ford spoke. “But it sounds awful when you say it out loud. Why haven’t you changed the name, Epic?”

Troy laughed. “Not a chance. It’s memorable and a lot of fun. My ancestors named it back in the eighteen hundreds. I’m not going to change it and imply they did a terrible job.”

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“I hear you’re mayor now. You’ve got the power.”

Another grin. “And that power means we’re keeping the name. In fact, this room in the back is going to be Phail Central.”

Jolie grinned. “Phail Central?”

Troy nodded. “Piper is full of brilliant ideas. This is going to be our tourist center. We’re going to showcase our history and the work of local artisans. It’s going to be amazing.”

Right now, the room was mostly bare walls and tools, but she could imagine it as Troy talked them through his ideas. Finally, he shook his head. “But you didn’t come to hear me talk about the amazing town of Phail. Ginny brought the canoe in with her today. She’s got it on her truck out back of the diner. Come on.”

When they exited the store, Troy locked up but left a sign telling anyone who needed something to call him. He didn’t include his phone number, which meant that most everyone in the town already had it.

It was something that would have happened in the small town where they’d lived with Fox. Her grandfather would have liked the name of Phail for a town. She could hear his wry chuckle at the thought.

Troy lead the way down the sidewalk. “Ginny is my cousin. She owns the No Fail Diner and does the baking.”

“She doesn’t mind lending me the canoe for a few days?”

Troy opened the door to the diner. “If she did, she wouldn’t have brought it with her. Come on and you can meet her.”

Jolie stopped short at the sights and scents of the diner. Like most diners, there was a counter with stools. Booths ran along the front window and far side.

Unlike any diner she’d seen, there was a huge Phail crest decorating the wall. Booths and stools were decorated with matching blue and green tartan. While the sights reminded her of Scotland, the scents making her stomach rumble were Mexican. Cumin, peppers, onions. Delicious.

A woman behind the counter grinned at them. Her hair and coloring were similar to Troy’s. This had to be his cousin.

The woman moved closer to shake their hands. “Welcome to the No Fail Diner. I’m Ginny Phail.”

“I’m Jolie Malssum and this is Ford Evans. Thank you so much for lending us your canoe.”

Ginny grinned. “No problem. Nimii and I don’t use it as much anymore now that we have the kayaks. Do you need suggestions of places to canoe?”

Jolie laughed. “Not yet. Right now, I’m only going as far as the pond at the back of the apple farm.”

Ginny’s eyebrows rose. “It’s big enough to canoe in?”

“Not really. The pond is stagnant and too deep for me to wade into. Until I get the

results from the samples back, I don't want to dive in. I'm hoping I can get an idea how deep it is by using the canoe. And I'm hoping I can bring up some soil samples from the bottom."

Ginny nodded. "Better to be sure before you go in. I don't think there's as much pollution in Vermont as in many other places, but you want to be sure it's not toxic."

"We've also got the compost buckets to exchange with you."

Ginny's face lit up at that. "I love that we're helping your farm and keeping things out of the landfill at the same time. We can bring the buckets over to your vehicle with the canoe."

It didn't take long before the canoe was strapped into Ford's truck bed and the compost buckets had been exchanged.

When Knox closed the tailgate, he smiled at her. "How about we buy Troy lunch at the diner for helping us find a canoe?"

That sounded great. And almost like a date.

Soon, they sat in a booth with Troy and a platter of amazing tacos. "I didn't expect to see such a varied menu in a small town."

Troy grinned. "There's so much more to Phail than you see on the surface."

She was beginning to believe that.

Ford grabbed another taco. "Think we can convince Manuel to move to the farm and cook for us all the time?"

Ginny looked up from where she was pouring coffee for another customer. “Don’t even think about it. You’re not allowed to steal him.”

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Through the cutout window, Manuel sent them a grin, then turned back to creating his next batch of deliciousness.

Jolie worked hard to keep her mind on the conversation. Ford sat beside her in the booth with Troy on the other bench.

Ford's strong thigh brushed against hers occasionally and she needed to focus so that she didn't lean into him.

Ridiculous. She was completely ridiculous.

"Do you scuba dive?"

Troy's question brought her attention back. "Yes."

Ford nodded. "I wondered when you said you might dive to the bottom of the pond earlier. I wonder if there are places to dive around here."

Scuba diving with Ford sounded like an excellent date. "You dive, too?"

He nodded. "All part of the training in the army."

Which again hinted at special forces. Like her brothers, these men were impressive in so many ways.

Troy grinned. "We don't have tons of shipwrecks here in eastern Vermont, but there are great sites in Lake Champlain if you want to spend a weekend there sometime."

Well, that sounded perfect.

Instead of saying that out loud, Jolie nodded.

Ford turned to her and smiled. A smile that seemed to agree that it sounded like a great idea.

Them. Together. Weekend.

How was she supposed to remember it wasn't a date when he looked at her like that?

## Chapter 7

### Duck Hunt

Ford wanted to reach around the back of the booth and settle his arm around Jolie's shoulder. Like a teen at the movies trying to let the girl know he was interested while appearing casual.

Instead, he gripped his hands together for a moment. She was his buddy's little sister. Which was supposed to make her off-limits.

Except, who were you going to trust more than your buddy? Knox knew Ford wasn't an asshole. He knew he wouldn't take advantage of Jolie in any way.

If things went wrong, it would screw everything up. He didn't want to make a mess of things, but he wanted Jolie more with each conversation, each smile, each moment.

He couldn't stop picturing him and Jolie together. Driving across the state. Scuba diving during the day. Sharing a room at night.

Maybe he shouldn't have slid into the same side of the booth as her, but he had. And he'd do it again. Not that he was concerned about Troy. The man was totally in love with Piper and had no interest in Jolie. Ford didn't want anyone else sitting beside her. He preferred to torture himself with her closeness.

Jolie broke into his thoughts when she spoke up. "Do you know anyone in town who raises ducks?"

He grinned at Troy's expression. His friend looked at him and then back at Jolie. "Ducks?"

She nodded. "Ducks. I want to get a small flock. They're going to help control the snail population."

Troy grimaced. "Do I want to know more about how that happens?"

Ford shook his head. "No, you really don't."

Troy gave an exaggerated shudder. "Okay. Not asking for details. I don't know anyone with ducks, but I bet Kimi would know. She's our local veterinarian. She and Scooby run a petting farm and a therapy center on their property. They were at the Annie movie the other night."

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Jolie grinned. “I remember them. I bet she could help.”

Troy nodded. “Their place is on your way home, not too far outside of Phail.”

Home. The word hit Ford hard. He’d only been at the farm for a few weeks, but it sounded right. The farm was home. Could Jolie be his home as well?

After they finished lunch, they stopped at Phail Phoods and bought groceries. They both stocked up on Fiona’s homemade meals for the freezer. Like his dad said, why compete with the chefs? Sliding in a pre-made lasagna would give him more time for his other tasks, too.

It wasn’t difficult to find the property that housed the veterinarian’s business along with the Petting Pharm and Shaggy’s Place, the animal therapy center.

They parked in the lot beside a yellow cottage and followed the signs to the yard behind it. A huge barn and multiple fenced-in areas that housed animals filled the space.

Cows, sheep, and goats. A donkey with more goats, tiny ones. Dogs snoozed in corners and cats watched them from the tops of fences. Two peacocks walked through the paths and headed around the corner of the barn.

“This is amazing.”

He totally agreed with Jolie’s whispered words. “It’s like a movie set.”

A sign on the barn said Kimi was working with the animals in the other half of the property and an arrow pointed the way.

When they rounded the corner of the barn, they both stopped to stare. More animals. Birds that looked like small ostriches. Chickens, different sheep, and very large pigs.

When he looked down, he snagged Jolie's hand and tugged her gently to his side. "You don't want to step in that."

Jolie grinned at him. "There's some proof at least a few of the animals roam free. That would have made for a smelly ride back to the farm. Thanks for the save."

She didn't release his hand, so neither did he, feeling like a high school kid with his first major crush. When she caught his eye, he shrugged, wondering if she was as helpless as he was. The attraction was too strong to fight, and it felt good to give in, even with something as small as holding her hand.

They kept walking through the space and then through a gate. There was another huge barn, this one with its central doors opened wide.

More cats wandered the property and snoozed in the sunbeams. A few smaller fenced areas sat in front of the barn and a huge fenced field sat beyond it.

They spotted Kimi and Garrett with a few ponies in a corner of the big field. Three dogs also lay in the grass nearby. Scooby spotted them and waved them over with a grin.

When they reached the fence, Ford dropped Jolie's hand so they could climb through it. He didn't take it again, but he wanted to. Wanted to be a couple like the pair in front of them.

Kimi smiled at them. “Hi Jolie, Ford. It’s nice to see you both again. You’ve got perfect timing. These little guys arrived the other day and we’re getting them acclimated to strangers.”

Jolie bounced forward with a huge smile. “They’re adorable. I’ve never seen ponies in real life before. Are they babies or fully grown?”

“Fully grown. They’re healthy and happy, but I want to make sure they react well with adults and other animals before we let any of the kids near them.”

Ford looked at the trio of pit bulls. “Did they react to the dogs?”

Garrett smiled. “Nothing other than curiosity. Same with the horses. We think they’ll be great with kids, but we always go slowly with new animals. No sense in causing them any stress.”

Kimi nodded. “One day soon, we’ll take them one at a time through the paddocks on the other side of the property and see how they react.”

A bleating noise behind him had Ford turning. A trio of goats bounced toward them.

Kimi’s face lit up. “The goat therapy troop is on the way. These are Popcorn, Butter, and Raspberry. They’re three of the smartest animals I’ve ever met. They make sure all the other animals are comfortable and safe. Even the scared ones can’t stay sad with Popcorn and her troop in charge.”

Jolie laughed and Ford grinned as the goats worked their way through the fence and over to the humans and the ponies.

The three dogs raised their heads. The black and white one woofed softly and the smallest goat bounced over to place her head against him.

The other two goats rubbed their heads against the ponies and bounced around as if they'd eaten way too much sugar.

“I feel like I’ve fallen down the rabbit hole. This is incredible. You two are incredible.” Jolie’s face was lit with happiness.

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They spent the next hour playing with the animals and finding out that the ponies were happy with both human and goat attention.

He thought the small brown pony might melt into a puddle as Jolie ran her hands over him.

Ford was jealous as hell.

Jolie learned even more about Ford as she watched him interact with both the humans and the animals. He kept his voice and manner gentle and open. The animals loved him.

When Kimi and Garrett took them on a tour of the place, the goats stayed with the ponies, but the dogs followed along. Olaf, Astro, and Star.

Jolie had to blink back tears at the backstory of the dogs. She was relieved that they now lived in such an amazing place.

The therapy center was to help horses and dogs who had lived through tough situations, but Garrett and Kimi had plans to use the animals and petting farm to help people with various disabilities as well.

They found out the ostrich-like birds were rheas and that the pigs liked to watch the chickens. The pygmy goats had adopted the cranky donkey as their best friend.

Jolie laughed. “I feel like I’ve fallen into a Dr. Doolittle movie. You two are incredible people and I’m so impressed with all the good you’re doing.”

The couple tried to shrug it off, but Ford chimed in. “I think Shaggy would be thrilled with what you’ve done and that her name is on the sign.”

Jolie now knew Garrett had been a K-9 officer. His dog, Shaggy, had died while saving a school of children and Garrett’s entire team.

Garrett’s eyes misted. “Thanks. I think Shaggy would love it. She was the best dog.”

The black and white dog woofed, making them all smile. Garrett squatted down and rubbed his head. “It’s okay, Olaf. Remember, there are lots of best dogs and you’re one of them.” Satisfied, the dog wagged his tail.

Jolie decided to bring up her mission. “I know we’ve taken up a chunk of your day, but I have another question.”

Kimi laughed. “We love showing off our animals and our place. This has been fun. How can I help you?”

“I want to get a small flock of ducks. I’m hoping they can help with the snail population at the farm. I don’t know how many I’ll need, but I’d like to start with a small group and maybe get more later if I need them.”

Kimi nodded. “You can always get a drake and breed your own if you need more. I think the best breed for you would be Khaki Campbell ducks. They love snails. Do you have a fenced in area to keep them in or do you want them to free range throughout the farm?”

Jolie blinked. “I haven’t thought that far ahead. Any recommendations?”

Kimi grinned. “Always. You said you were cleaning up a pond at the back of the property. Is it large enough to support the ducks? Is there a good clearing around it?”

If so, they'd be happiest there. Most domestic ducks don't fly more than a few feet, so I don't think you need a fence, but I'm not a duck expert. If they're safe and happy, they'll probably stay on their own. They might even attract more ducks to the area."

Jolie nodded. "The clearing around the pond should be perfect. I'll need to buy a coop though. Fox, a Great Pyrenees who lives on the property, probably keeps a lot of predators away, but it's a big farm and he can't be everywhere."

Ford touched her arm. "I can build those for you. The coop and the fence if we need one. Shouldn't be hard. There are probably plans online."

She smiled up at him. He really was an amazing man.

Kimi nodded. "Perfect. That way, you can build it to your specifications. I'd suggest making it big enough from the beginning in case you want to increase the flock, or if more wild ducks join them. Keep the floor off the ground to keep any rats or other predators away. A ramp for them to get in and out. Lots of hay for insulation on the floor."

Ford pulled out his phone. She watched him add spreadsheets for the duck coop and the fence. He noted down Kimi's suggestions with a smile. "This is going to be fun."

Yep, the man was perfect. Or perfect for her.

The way he'd held her hand after steering her away from the manure made her heart flutter. She wasn't imagining the chemistry zipping between them.

The question was whether they should give into it or not. The consequences if things didn't work out between them were huge.

Jolie's luck with men had never been good. Her first serious boyfriend hadn't thought cheating was a big deal and she should just chill out. Another who'd seduced her friend and wanted to expand their relationship into a threesome. A third who'd figured out her password and taken money from her bank account. No thanks.

She wanted an exclusive relationship with someone she could trust. Ford wouldn't cheat on her or steal from her. She knew that instinctively. He was too honest, too honorable. Knox wouldn't be best friends with a creep.

Would Jolie be enough for Ford? Would he tire of her and want someone else?

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Her heart said no, but her experience said otherwise. She wanted to believe her heart.

A small head butted into her thigh. The therapy goat, Popcorn, proving she was in tune with emotions from people as well as animals.

Jolie squatted down to pat the goat. "I'm okay, Popcorn, but you're right. Time to live in the present and not let the past dictate my feelings." She kept her voice soft enough for only the goat to hear.

Kimi nodded. "For now, you could build a temporary mobile duck shelter. If you put in on wheels, you can move it around at night. Without a floor on it, you'll get the ducks to fertilize a different section of the field each night. A half-dozen birds to start with should be manageable. The mobile coop would give you time to build a full-time building for winter."

Ford laughed. "A mobile composting duck house. Thea will approve."

Jolie stood and tuned back into the conversation. Ford raised his eyebrow at her as if he'd noticed she'd checked out. She smiled at him to let him know all was good.

Really good.

A home. New friends. Several projects that fulfilled her. And a man who intrigued her on every level.

Too bad she wasn't sure she should take on that risk. Because she was pretty sure her heart was tumbling quickly for this man who was planning to help her protect the

ducks she didn't own yet.

## Chapter 8

### Quackers

Ford's mind spun with ideas as he drove back toward the farm. Home.

Fences. Duck coops. Mobile duck coops. Jolie. The future.

All of those things blended together in his mind, and he liked the picture they made. He wanted to build the coops because building weird shit was fun. He also wanted to build them for Jolie. To show her he liked her ideas and wanted to help.

To show her he cared. Ford wasn't one to look for random hookups. He preferred to know and like a woman before they took things to the next level.

His feelings for Jolie were larger than anything he'd ever felt. No one had ever touched his heart like she did.

He'd never been in love. None of the women he'd dated had inspired those feelings. Probably why he'd drifted away from all of them. There hadn't been dramatic breakups. No betrayals. Just no feelings strong enough to make him imagine forever.

He was sure as hell imagining it now.

Jolie stared out the window as he drove, a small smile on her face.

"Excited?"

The smile widened. "Very. I can't believe how amazing this part of the world is

proving to be. Everyone we meet here is so willing to help. They're all doing amazing things and spreading happy."

"And fulfilling their potential?"

Her laughter filled the truck's cab. "Definitely fulfilling their potential. That's what I want to do as well. Not only for myself, but for the farm. For Knox. And the others. And you."

His heart softened. Again. Around Jolie, his heart was about as tough as a butterfly.

"You're doing amazing things at the farm already. And you're going to do more. Your pond is going to be home to so many kinds of wildlife and you're already increasing the biodiversity of the place. It's going to be amazing."

"Thanks. I really want to help my family. I love Knox's idea of pulling us all together, and I want to help him do that. Growing up, I was always the little one, the one everyone took care of and worried about. I want to contribute equally now."

He reached over and squeezed her hand. The road was like a roller coaster, so he didn't keep it there, but he wanted her to feel his support. "You're doing exactly that, Jolie."

"Thanks. I hope so."

He hadn't realized she'd felt like a burden to her family. "Just so you know, your brothers all talk about you with pride."

"Really?" Her voice showed her surprise.

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“Really. They always brag about you and your studies. How you see the potential in the world and people, and how hard you work to help the planet.”

“Wow.” Her voice was soft and a little watery.

He glanced at her. “You’re an amazing woman, Jolie. You were probably an amazing kid, too. None of your brothers ever implied you were anything but awesome.”

She rolled her lips together. “Thank you. That fills me up. A lot.”

He smiled. “What are you thinking about the duck squad?”

She laughed again. “I love Kimi’s suggestions. Are you sure you’re up for helping me build them? I don’t want to steal too much of your time.”

She could steal anything of his that she wanted. He was pretty sure she was well on her way to stealing his heart. “I’m looking forward to it. I love studying plans and choosing which one fits best. It’s going to be fun to build the coops.”

“Thanks. I’m not super talented at woodworking, but I’m more than capable of handling a drill and following instructions.”

He grinned. “Good to know.” Working with her on the plans and the builds sounded fantastic.

He knew he was pretty much blowing off his plans to keep his mind and his hands off her, but her pull was too strong. A few days of working together would tell him how

she felt. He'd see how things went between them and if pursuing his feelings was worth the risk of making a mess of things.

They drove for a few miles in comfortable silence. He liked that they didn't feel the need to fill it with nonsense conversation. He wasn't great at small talk and didn't mind silence at all.

Once they were home, they unpacked the groceries and filled the freezer with ready-to-go meals. It was his turn to cook, so he put a lasagna into the fridge. He'd cook it up later and add the garlic bread and ready-made salad he'd chosen.

For now, he wanted to learn more about duck coops. "I'm going to grab my laptop and check out plans for the coops. Do you want to do that with me or do you have other plans?"

She grinned at him. "I could use the canoe to check out the pond, but it's going to rain, so checking out the coop plans gives me a good excuse to put it off."

He laughed. "Sounds good. I'll grab it and be back down."

When he returned, he found Jolie had put on the kettle and was making them both some chai tea. She smiled at him. "Why don't we set up in the living space Jay used? It'll be more comfortable than the kitchen chairs."

And it would mean sitting together on the couch so they could both see the screen. "Perfect."

She opened a drawer and pulled out a notebook and pen. "I'll bring these in case we need to sketch anything out."

They pored through plans while a storm broke in earnest outside. The rain battered

against the windows while they sat on the couch, where it was warm and dry.

In the end, they decided to build a mobile coop first, giving Ford time to get the materials for the larger one. “I’m sure we can find what we need in my barn for the smaller one. There’s a bit of everything in there. It’s going to take months to go through it all and organize what’s there.”

Jolie smiled. “And you’re looking forward to it.”

It wasn’t a question, but he answered it anyway. “I am. I love having my space organized. And I’m looking forward to digging through the stuff the previous owners kept. See what they figured might be useful one day.”

“It’ll be intriguing. Do you think we have enough supplies to build the mobile coop?”

He nodded, knowing she wanted to have a home ready for the ducks in case Kimi found her a flock quickly. “I don’t know for sure, but I’m betting there’s enough in that barn that’s available to use or repurpose. There are dozens of crates and barrels full of things. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen wheels in one of them. And there’s a ton of plywood. Why don’t I put the lasagna in the oven and we can go check it out now? Fiona said to cook it for an hour, so we’ll have time to get an idea of what’s there.”

And he would get another hour getting to know Jolie better.

He was digging himself a hole. One he didn’t want to climb out of.

The next morning, heavy rain continued to pour. Jolie had never minded the rain. With her schooling and jobs, she’d worked through all the weather the Carolinas had offered. It had never slowed her down.

Today, the rain gave her the excuse she wanted. Instead of exploring the pond, she

could spend the day with Ford without guilt while they worked on the duck coops.

She grinned at her rationalizations. There was no need to feel guilty about her choices. She was an adult and in charge of her own job. There was no boss or supervisor above her.

If she wanted to spend the day building duck coops, she most certainly could. And would.

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After the previous day, she looked forward to spending more time getting to know Ford. He was a fascinating man who thought deeply about everything. He didn't give pat answers that parroted others. His opinions were thought out.

More to love.

Like. Not love. She wasn't ready for love.

It wasn't possible to fall in love so quickly.

More rationalizations. If her heart was going to tumble, she wasn't sure she could stop it.

Shaking it off, Jolie put on a pot of oatmeal and chopped up fruit for everyone. Sure enough, it wasn't long before Thea and Knox joined her in the kitchen with Ford close on their heels.

Sitting around the breakfast table, her traitorous heart pictured them doing this for decades in the future. Which wasn't likely if she screwed up the relationship she kept picturing with Ford.

Knox nudged her with his elbow. "You okay, Jolie? You seem miles away."

She smiled and shook away the worries. "Just thinking about duck coops and the pond."

Thea tilted her head at the window. "Is this downpour going to slow you down? The

forecast says it's going to be like this for the better part of a week."

Her silly heart did a happy dance at that. "It'll be fine. I'm used to working around weather of all kinds. But I'm going to help Ford build the duck coops anyway, so the weather won't be a factor."

Ford nodded, but she realized how presumptuous she'd sounded. "Unless you have other plans or things you need to do. I'm sure I can figure out the mobile coop."

Ford grinned. "We'll do it together. I've never built duck coops before and you're not robbing me of the chance to try something new. It'll be fun."

She beamed back at him. "Good. I'm looking forward to it."

There was a beat of silence before Thea chimed in. "The rain will be good for the compost and the trees. Do you want to check out the Worminator's progress with me this morning, Knox? I think we have enough of the worm poop tea made, and I'd like to figure out how to add it to the irrigation lines."

Jolie looked up to find her brother watching her with narrowed eyes. He turned his gaze to Ford and stared at him.

Shoot. She didn't want him realizing she had feelings for Ford before she'd figured things out herself. Thea had probably been trying to distract her brother because Jolie's feeling were obvious on her face.

Jolie tamped down her goofy grin and smiled at Thea. "How is that going to work? I need to figure out the irrigation lines from the pond, but not for this season."

Thea's eyes sparkled as she spoke. Her new friend was definitely helping her to distract Knox. "We're probably going to focus only on the trees nearest the

Worminator for this year. There's no point in stretching ourselves too thin. We'll learn how to do it properly in a small section before we expand the system."

The conversation bounced around the table, and soon Knox was absorbed into it as well. Crisis averted.

After they'd cleaned up, she and Ford headed out to the barn. She was grateful her rain jacket had a hood as the wind whipped the rain through the trees and it swirled in all directions.

When they reached the barn, Ford unlocked it quickly and held open the door for her. He closed it behind them and laughed. "I think that's more rain than some countries see in an entire year. And it's going to continue for a week?"

Jolie laughed. "Maybe we should be building an ark."

He grinned. "I think duck coops will keep us busy enough. No space in here for an ark."

She looked around the barn. Ford had made progress in organizing the space, but it was still bursting with pieces of the past. "This is amazing."

"I know, right? It's like the previous owners kept things those of us in the future might need. I'm clearing out a workspace on the far side while trying to make a dent in the organizational system."

"You've already done a lot. The building must be happy that you're cleaning it up and using it."

He hung his jacket on a hook near the door and took hers to do the same. His wide grin had her smiling back. "Happy? I like the sound of that."

His voice was sincere. She was used to people not understanding, but Ford seemed to get it. Over the years, she'd seen too many buildings, too many natural spaces that were sad and lonely. That wouldn't happen on this farm. Together, they were making the land and the buildings happier. Healthier and useful. It was a good project in a good place.

As they worked their way to the other side of the barn, she could see where Ford had made piles of similar items and had set out rows of barrels and crates that contained all kinds of goodies.

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She trailed her hand over one barrel containing all kinds of glass jars. “All these barrels have me wondering. Do you think someone once made apple cider here?”

He nodded. “I’ve wondered the same. It would be another income stream for the farm. As long as it’s not too difficult to make. I don’t know anything about the process.”

“I don’t either. Although I went through a bit of a juicing phase when I was around eight. Fox helped me make juice out of all kinds of fruit.” The memory made her grin. “I made such a mess.”

Ford’s chuckle rumbled through her. “I can imagine. Fox sounds like such a good man.”

She blinked away the mist wanting to settle in her eyes. “He was amazing. Always willing to help us experiment and try new things. He never answered my questions directly, but he helped me spell the words I needed to search the information on the internet. We found so many videos.”

“How long did the juicing phase last?”

“Not long. It was a lot of work for very little product. We decided it would be easier for the machines in the factories and that we should leave them to do it.”

Another chuckle. “I think my dad would have got along very well with Fox.”

She remembered Ford saying his father had decided not to compete with the chefs big

companies hired to make their products. “I think you’re right. With all these apples, we’ll need to find ways to sell them and to use them.”

Ford nodded and stopped to survey the cluttered barn. “One day I’ll look up how people used to make cider in the past. We might find some of the old equipment here.”

“That would be fun. Even if it isn’t something that would be usable, it would be great to see it. My sister always talks about showcasing the past. She’s used that in her hospitality jobs.”

Ford rubbed her shoulder. “You miss her. I can hear it in your voice.”

She smiled at his intuition. “I do. We’ve always been close. We do video chats and phone calls a lot, but it’s not the same. I’d love for her to move here with us. I don’t think she’s happy where she is.”

He frowned. “What makes you think that?”

Jolie shrugged. “More of a feeling, I guess. Her eyes haven’t had the usual sparkle for a while. I’ve been working on showing her how great this place is, but I haven’t quite convinced her to come for a visit. Or to stay.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

The absolute confidence in his voice warmed her. They hadn’t known each other that long, but she heard the conviction in his words.

Yep. She was falling fast.

Chapter9

## Build A Better Duck Trap

Ford wanted to wrap Jolie in his arms and comfort her. She missed her sister and worried about her.

Instead of a hug, he rubbed her shoulder because he really didn't have the right to do more. Since their visit to town, the reasons for staying away from this bright and caring woman seemed less and less important.

Throughout the night, he'd tried to talk himself out of his growing attraction to her.

It hadn't worked.

The connection between them was strengthening with every interaction. If she was anyone but his buddy's sister, he'd have kissed her already. They would have discovered if the connection was as strong as he suspected.

Their living situation would definitely make it awkward if things went wrong, but the more he got to know her, the less likely that seemed. They fit.

Which of course sent his imagination to them fitting together in the very best of ways, with no clothing in the way.

His phone rang with a call from his dad. He cleared his brain of images of him and Jolie rolling around in a bed, and smiled at her. "It's my dad. Mind if I take it?"

She smiled. "Of course not, I'll just wander. There's lots to explore in here."

He nodded. "Why don't you say hi first?"

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:12 pm*

He accepted the video call, thinking it was good to have his dad calling. It was usually Ford who initiated contact with his family. It wasn't like they didn't think of him, but after years in the army where he'd been out of contact a lot, it was the usual pattern for him to call.

Most of their contact was through a family chat, where they all chimed in. He also had individual chats with each of his siblings. They were all in contact, but it didn't need to be face-to-face. In fact, he spoke more with his family in the chat than he had when he'd been working in the family company for those long months.

"Hey, Dad. How are you doing?"

His dad smiled. "I'm great. Not calling too early, am I?"

Ford laughed, knowing his dad was joking. Being in construction meant they were all early risers. Life in the army hadn't changed that at all. Now, he was learning farmers were also at work early. "Not a chance. I'm out in the barn that I'm claiming as my workspace."

His dad's eyes lit up. "Nice. I've always loved the idea of having a big workspace. A barn should give you tons of room."

He laughed while Jolie did the same beside him. "Sounds like that should be the case, but this barn is pretty crowded. I'll show you around in a minute. First, I'd like you to meet Jolie Malssum."

He held out the phone and Jolie leaned in so they were both on screen. "Hi, Mr.

Evans. It's so nice to meet you."

Ford's dad smiled. "None of that Mr. Evans nonsense. I'm Jim. You must be Knox's sister. You're a far sight prettier than your brother."

Ford rolled his eyes while Jolie laughed. "Thanks, Jim. You've got a great son here. You must be a proud dad."

Ford watched as his dad's eyes misted at Jolie's words. "You're damn right. He's a great son and I'm so happy to see him finding his own way in the world."

Ford swallowed hard. When he'd told his dad he was heading north to help a buddy with an apple farm, the older man had studied him for a long moment before he'd nodded. "I wish you nothing but the best. I'm sorry this isn't what you want or need."

When Ford had spluttered, his dad had pulled him in for an awkward hug. They'd never been huggers in his family. He wondered if it would have been different if cancer hadn't taken his mom.

"I get it, son. My old man wanted me to follow in his footsteps and sell real estate."

That made Ford laugh. "You'd rather build it than sell it."

"Damn right. And you'd rather restore old buildings and build unique structures than focus on commercial buildings. Follow your heart, Ford. Just know I'm proud of you and that if things don't work, you've always got a place here."

Even the memory from the previous month had Ford choking up. He was glad when Jolie slipped her arm around him to show her support and to ground him in the present.

On screen, his dad held up the chipped Best Dad mug Ford had given him one Christmas and took a drink of what he knew would be strong black coffee. Then he spoke. "I'm sorry to be interrupting your work."

Ford shook his head. "You're not. It's pouring here this week. We're about to start figuring out how to build a couple of projects."

His dad leaned closer. "What kind of projects?"

Ford exchanged a smile with Jolie before he turned back to his dad. "Duck coops."

Jim blinked. "Duck coops?"

Ford nodded and waited, knowing his dad's brain would already be working on it.

Jim nodded. "I assume the ducks help the farm. Why do you need more than one coop? Do you have that many ducks?"

Ford laughed. "None yet, but we're working on it."

Then he angled the phone to Jolie so she could talk. "The ducks will help improve the biodiversity of the farm, and they'll help control the snail population."

"They eat snails?"

She nodded. "Voraciously."

Like everyone else who heard it, his dad shuddered. "Well, that's a great image. Glad I already had breakfast. Tell me about the coops."

For the next fifteen minutes, they batted around ideas for the two coops and he

walked his dad around the barn to show him the crowded space.

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When Jolie wandered off to sort through the barrel of wheels they'd found, he took his dad deep into the barn to show him the old carpenter's tools he'd found. "Hand crafted chisels, hammers, and more."

"Those are treasures, son. Just like that pretty lady and the entire farm. Sure looks like you've found your place."

Ford blinked and decided to ignore the pretty lady part of the comment. "I think I have. Who the hell would have thought a city boy like me would love this remote farm so much?"

His dad's smile softened. "Doesn't surprise me all that much, actually. You were the one your mom always said loved the old and the outdoors the most."

"Yeah?" He didn't have many memories of his mom and he treasured hearing another one.

"Yeah. Kerry loved taking you and Mara out to the garden. It wasn't much, but she loved that the two of you enjoyed playing around in the dirt with her. You used to help her plant, and then work on fixing up the old birdhouses your brothers had built. You liked that better than building your own. Kerry always said you would forge your own path. She'd be so damn proud of you. And so happy to see you having a great time with that farm."

It took Ford a moment to swallow his emotions enough to speak. "Thanks for another memory for the bank, Dad. I don't think I say it often enough, but thanks for being a great dad."

They were silent for a few moments while Ford turned the phone to scan the old tool chest he'd found. He swallowed hard and heard his dad blow his nose in the background.

When he was in control, he turned the phone back to him. "You need to come up and see it all one day. On a nicer day, I'll give you a tour of the Worminator and the pond Jolie is cleaning up."

"And the duck coops. I can't wait to see what you come up with there. That mobile one is going to be fun."

He nodded, and his dad grinned. "I'm going to go now. You go back to spending time with Jolie and making those coops. Make them special, so she smiles and thinks of you every time she sees them."

With a wide grin, his dad disconnected the call before Ford could respond to that comment. Apparently, he wasn't keeping his growing feelings about Jolie as hidden as he'd thought.

For a few moments more, he stared at the tools he'd uncovered without really seeing them. Instead, he was imagining how to make the coops fun. Jolie owned rubber boots covered in ducks. Another pair sported rainbows and umbrellas. A third pair had neon fish and whales dancing all over them.

Boring duck coops would never do. He'd see what colors of paint were in the cans he'd spotted. If there wasn't anything bright and fun, he'd get some.

He wondered if Jolie had any skills as an artist. His were non-existent. Covering the coops with images of cartoon ducks would be fun if they could figure that out.

Finally, he turned his feet back to where he could hear Jolie muttering as she sorted

the wheels. He couldn't wait to start building. Best of all, it would give him more time with Jolie and making her happy.

Thanks, Dad.

Jolie sorted the wheels into pairs, looking for the sturdiest ones. Would they only need two for the coop, or would four be better? A few of the heavier coops they'd studied the previous day had used two sets of wheels side by side. Would that make it easier to move?

She couldn't remember what Ford had said about the wheels, she'd been focused on the feeling of snuggling next to him on the couch.

Okay, there hadn't been any snuggling involved. They'd sat very properly side by side. Still, every time their shoulders or thighs had brushed, shivers had chased themselves over her skin.

And if she'd leaned in closer than necessary to see the screen, who could blame her?

With a smile, she found a match to the sturdiest wheel she'd found so far. She moved them to the side and kept going. She didn't know how Ford wanted to organize the wheels, but seeing them in pairs and groups had to make the job easier.

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to leave you on your own to do all the work."

She laughed even as those shivers returned at his rumble voice. "No problem. It was great to meet your dad, but I wanted you to have a few minutes with him alone."

"Appreciate that. You've got the entire barrel pretty much sorted. Nice."

"I figured you'd prefer to see them organized rather than in a jumble."

He squatted down beside her and grinned. “You’ve even got them organized by size. Which ones do you think would be best for the mobile coop?”

She pointed at the pair she’d placed at the edge. “So far, I think these, but I don’t really know anything about wheels, so feel free to tell me they’re not right for this project.”

He reached across her to pick up one of them. His arm brushed across hers and caused more shivers. “I think these will be great. Good eye.”

They left the rest of the wheels as is. Ford said he wanted to come up with a better system for storing them, but he needed to think about it.

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She followed him to the far corner of the barn. He'd cleared out enough space to set up a few large saws and a couple of work benches. Two well-used tool chests stood at the end of one bench. "Wow. Did you find all of this here? This is amazing."

He nodded. "The table and miter saws are mine, but the benches and tables were here. At least one person had decent carpentry skills over the decades. Probably a bunch of people. Some of the hand tools look to be as old as the land."

She heard the reverence in his voice and smiled. "Fox would definitely have approved of this. I feel like Jay would have as well."

Ford nodded. "From everything I've heard, I agree. Those two would have appreciated good craftsmanship."

"And that you're wanting to use them, not to toss them and use new."

Ford grinned. "More economical this way. And more fun. Okay, let's pull up the plans of what we need for the Quack Mobile."

Jolie laughed. "The Quack Mobile? That's a fabulous name for the coop."

He grinned and pulled up the plans on his phone. She set out the notebook they'd used the previous day with its notes and sketches.

Ford led the way through the barn, searching for plywood, boards, and paint. Soon they had everything they thought they'd need back at his workstation.

“What’s first?”

He pointed at the boards. “I think we should make a frame for the bottom first. That way we’ve got something sturdy to put the sides on and we can build up from there.”

She frowned, trying to visualize it. “The bottom has to be slanted, right? So that it’s easier to move.”

He pointed to the sketch he’d made the night before. “We’ll make the bottom frame level so it’s flat on the ground. We don’t want anything inside except the ducks and their water dish. Cutting the plywood on an angle will make it work with a slanted roof. And we’ll add the wheels in a way they don’t mess up the flat bottom.”

She nodded. “I guess with snow, it’s always better to have a roof with a slant.”

He nodded. “Definitely. Plus, if it was flat, it would be a good place for predators to spend time trying to get at the birds.”

She hadn’t thought of that aspect. Ford was worried about her birds. Another reason to fall for this man.

For the next while, they measured, measured again, cut, and drilled pieces together. Conversation flowed easily, and she found they had more interests in common than she’d expected. A wide range of musical interests, mystery books, no horror.

Ford shook his head. “I’ve seen enough bad shit for a lifetime. No need to add more nightmares to my psyche. But I love a good mystery. It’s always fun to see who done it.”

“I don’t usually solve them before the detectives, but it’s fun to try.”

His eyes warmed. “Are you an Agatha Christie fan? We can pull up some movies based on her books.”

Snuggling on the couch, sharing a bowl of popcorn. Maybe a few kisses? “That sounds amazing.”

His eyes heated, and she wondered if some of her thoughts showed on her face. She realized she didn’t care if they did. They faced the same obstacles if things didn’t work out. But those obstacles no longer seemed big enough to matter.

The connection between them would be strong enough to conquer them. She hoped.

But she couldn’t bring herself to make the first move. Her history with men wasn’t great, and the thought of making a mistake with Ford was devastating.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

His gruff voice caused shivers to roam her skin. It also caused her feet to step closer and her heart to melt. She might as well be honest. “I have a history of screwed up relationships.”

Ford’s eyes darkened, and he stepped closer as well. “Maybe you just haven’t found the right man.”

She smiled. “That part is definitely true. Liars and cheaters.”

This time, his eyes flared with anger. “Assholes.”

She nodded. “I know you’re not one of them.”

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Another step closer. Who had moved?

Ford's hand lifted to caress her cheek, and he ran his finger over her jawline. "Anyone who would cheat on you is a dumbass and an asshole. You're full of sunshine and have the biggest heart. You're pretty much perfect and you deserve better."

Her heart warmed at the absolute sincerity in his voice. In his eyes. Had she moved in again? Had he?

Jolie leaned into his hand and smiled. Ford's thumb grazed over her lips and she trembled.

She placed her hands on his chest. His heart raced as quickly as hers.

His eyes flickered to her mouth and back up to her eyes. She repeated the motion with a smile and rose on her toes.

Heat flared in his eyes, and he returned her smile.

He brushed his lips over hers as softly as fog. Testing.

He lifted his head to check out her gaze, probably making sure he wasn't overstepping. He wasn't. Whatever he saw in her eyes had him smiling, and then he kissed her for real.

She couldn't contain the needy sound that drifted from her throat.

Ford moaned and covered her lips with his. Not so soft. Definitely not testing.

Claiming.

Devouring.

She was being devoured.

And nothing had ever felt better.

His muscled arms pulled her closer until they were pressed together in the very best of ways. He tasted like mint and man.

And desire.

For her.

Her hands drifted over his chest, biceps. The man was made of muscle.

When her knees wobbled, Ford banded his arm around her waist and tugged her closer still. His other hand coasted over her back and then down to her butt.

She moaned into his mouth and the kiss deepened further.

Her head was spinning, and she wasn't sure she could feel her feet when they finally pulled apart to gulp in air.

Ford kissed her forehead and rested his lips there for a long moment. "You okay?"

She couldn't stop the laugh. "Any more okay and I'd be floating above the clouds sending down all that rain."

His gravelly chuckle sent shivers cascading over her skin. “Same.”

His arms tightened, and he swayed them back and forth a few times. “Trying to remember why I thought that wasn’t a good idea.”

When she laughed, he cursed softly. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

He pulled his head back, but didn’t loosen his hold on her. “I’ve been attracted to you from the beginning, Jolie. You sparkle with joy. But I didn’t want to cross a line and mess things up. Except you’re irresistible and I don’t much care about any lines now. Should I apologize?”

Her heart warmed, and she patted his chest. “Not unless you want me to kick your butt.”

He laughed and kissed her forehead again. “Not taking that kind of chance. Especially not when I want to do it again. A lot.”

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This time, her heart melted. “I didn’t want to take the chance of ruining things either, but that hasn’t stopped me from dreaming of it.”

“Yeah?” His eyebrow shot up and his voice dropped into a growl.

“Yeah.”

Then their lips crashed together again. His hands trailed up and down her torso, down to her butt, and back up again. She figured if he was going to destroy her ability to stand, it was his job to keep her upright.

She looped her hands around his strong shoulders and focused on learning what she could do with her mouth to make him lose his mind.

She didn’t know how long they kissed, but when Jolie’s phone beeped, it could have been minutes or hours later.

Ford drew back and hugged her again. “Damn. I could do that for days. You taste like paradise, Jolie.”

She reached up and kissed his jaw. “You’re delicious, too.”

He sighed. “You should probably check your phone.”

“I know.”

But that didn’t happen for another few kisses.

Finally, she groaned and pulled out her phone. The last thing she wanted was her brother barging in on them.

But it wasn't Knox. It was Kimi. The message had her bouncing. "Kimi found us a flock."

Ford grinned and picked her up to swing her in a circle. "That's amazing. When do we pick them up?"

And this was the sign of what a good man he was. No pressure to take things further than a kiss. He was happy for her and more than ready to help.

She texted with Kimi for a few minutes and then did a happy dance. "If we're ready for them, we can pick them up anytime."

Ford grinned and kissed her lightly. "I like being able to do that. Let's finish up this coop and go get the quackers."

Yep, she was falling fast.

## Chapter10

Duck!

Ford was falling in love with Vermont. And with the woman bouncing in her seat beside him. She was full of joy at all times, but on their way to get the ducks, joy pretty much glowed from every pore.

Or maybe that was from the kisses they'd shared over the past couple of days.

He was pretty sure he was doing some glowing himself.

As she'd been doing throughout the drive, Jolie turned to grin at him. She reached over and squeezed his arm. If this area of Vermont wasn't filled with such twisty roads, he'd have been holding her hand like a high school kid on a first date, feeling like the king of the world in his first piece-of-shit car.

This was better than that heady feeling, because this was real. His attraction to Jolie was more than high-school hormones. Sure, she was gorgeous, but she was so much more than that. Smart, fun, hard-working.

He couldn't believe she'd had some exes who'd cheated on her. While he wanted to hunt them down and kick their asses for hurting her, he was also glad she was free of them so that they were free to pursue this attraction between them.

He swore as a thought about the ducks hit him. "We didn't build a fence for the area yet."

Jolie's wide eyes turned to her. "I forgot about the fence. Kimi did say the birds should stick around on their own if they had food, water, and shelter. I was so excited about the coop, I forgot about the fence."

Ford grimaced. "We'll see what the farmer has to say." Kimi had given them directions to Brandon Kane's farm, about an hour away from their own place.

Jolie frowned. "If he thinks we need the fence, we'll have to come back for the ducks another day."

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Ford nodded. “Not a problem. We’ll do what’s best for the birds. I’m sure he’d rather us come back than have the flock in danger.”

They followed the GPS to another valley with a few farms. The day was clear here as they pulled up to Kane’s Farm and into the small parking area by the house. There was a large weathered barn out back and at least a dozen smaller buildings.

Ford took Jolie’s hand as they walked into the back area. There were several large coops. Chickens, ducks, and geese roamed the yard. In the back, he could see pastures with at least a dozen cows and a horse. Maybe a donkey.

A man looked up from where he was filling a kiddie pool with water. He smiled and waved them over. “Hi, I’m Brandon Kane. I’m guessing you’re the ones who are interested in some ducks.”

Ford introduced them both, and they shook hands. “You’ve got quite the place here.”

Jolie nodded. “It’s amazing. The birds are all so happy. And they appear to get along.”

Brandon laughed. “For the most part, they do. Although if I’m late feeding them in the winter, they can get a little crabby. Kimi said you’re looking for ducks to help control snails on an apple farm. Is that right?”

Jolie nodded. “I also want to increase the biodiversity of the area. I think it’s going to be a win-win.”

“You have a good-sized clearing for them?”

Ford liked that the man was protective of his flock. Jolie pulled out her phone and showed Brandon the area around the pond, the orchard, and the coop they’d built.

Ford said. “We’re going to build a permanent structure for the winter, but for now, this will keep them safe at night.”

Brandon nodded. “That’s a good design. I think they’ll be very comfortable there.”

Jolie worried her bottom lip. “But we got excited about having the ducks and forgot about needing a fence. We were going to get that in place before asking about the ducks.”

Brandon laughed and gestured around. “None of my birds are fenced in during the summer, although they stay in the coop overnight. In the winter, I keep them in a fenced area for their safety, but they’re happy to stick around. Easy access to food and water is usually all they need.”

Ford watched Jolie light up at that. “You think we’ll be okay taking them with the farm as it is?”

He nodded. “Khaki Campbells are smart. They also like to stick together. If you show them they’ve got food and safety, they should hang out. If they take off, they should survive. I’ve always got more, but I’m betting they’ll stick around. They’re used to going into the coop here at night and just hanging around near it during the day.”

Jolie grinned. “That’s amazing. But I’ll worry about them if they fly away.”

Brandon grinned. “Don’t. These ducks can flutter a few feet, but they don’t fly like wild ducks. Their bodies are too heavy for long flights.”

Brandon whistled and a border collie jumped up from where he'd been snoozing. The man used hand signals and verbal commands. Soon, there were six ducks grouped at their feet.

Ford laughed. "That was like watching a rodeo."

Brandon grinned. "You can generally herd the ducks yourself because they like to stick together, but a dog makes everything easier. You might want to look into that for yourself, especially if you want them to wander the orchard at night for the snails."

Huh. Ford hadn't considered that either. "Good idea." Dogs were always a good idea. He didn't think Fox would enjoy herding, but he also didn't expect him to be averse to another dog joining them. The Great Pyrenees didn't appear to be in the least territorial.

The collie herded the ducks right into the crate he and Jolie had brought, lined with a sheet of plywood so their feet didn't get stuck in the gaps, and covered with straw. Ford picked it up and set in on the tarp he'd set in the truck bed.

Brandon slapped him on the shoulder. "Smart. Ducks shit pretty much all the time. Good for the land, not so good for the trucks. If you two have questions, you've got my number. Have fun."

Back at the farm, the day was late. He was glad Jolie had texted her brother that they would be late for their evening meal. Knox had said there would be lots in the fridge for them once they settled the ducks.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle when they pulled in. He headed down the farm road that would take them closest to the pond. They'd set the unpainted Quack Mobile in place before they'd headed to pick up the ducks.

Jolie started twisting her hands as he parked. “What if we can’t get them into the coop? What if Fox hates them? What if they fly away and get eaten by a coyote?”

Ford reached over and took her hands in his. “You heard Brandon. They’re pretty smart and they don’t fly far enough to worry. Even if they’re stubborn and won’t go into the coop, they’re used to fending for themselves. But I’m betting we can get them settled for the night.” At least, he hoped so.

They got out and opened the door to the coop. They’d found a wide pan that would be perfect for a water bowl for the night.

It was late enough that Brandon said they could put the ducks straight into the coop for the night and let them explore in the morning.

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Ford grabbed the cage and lowered it to the ground. Jolie squatted down to study the birds.

“Hey girls, welcome to your new home. You’re on an apple farm and we’re going to figure out how to get you to the snail buffet another day. For now, you’ve got a safe coop for the night and some food Brandon gave us. Tomorrow, you can explore the area and get used to your new home. I hope you’ll be happy here.”

Her voice wobbled a little, betraying her nerves. He squeezed her shoulder and then took some of the straw Brandon had sent with them and layered it in the bottom of the coop.

They left the ducks in the cage for a few minutes, letting them acclimate to the new surroundings.

When Jolie was ready, he moved the cage, so the opening was facing the coop’s opening. “Ready?”

She nodded, but continued to worry her lip, making him want to kiss it better. They stood on either side of the opening, ready to guide the birds into the coop if necessary.

It wasn’t. The ducks fluffed their feathers and strutted straight into the coop.

Jolie laughed. “That was great. Anticlimactic, but great.” She closed up the door and flipped the wood that would serve as a lock. For a long moment, they stared at it.

No sounds of stress.

The air vents weren't big enough to see through, but there were no sounds that caused them alarm.

Ford moved behind Jolie and wrapped his arms around her as they watched and waited.

And waited some more.

She turned in his arms and set her hands on his chest. "We should probably wait a few minutes to make sure they're fine. Any ideas of what we could do to fill the time?"

Even the drizzle and the deepening dark couldn't hide the twinkle in her eyes. He lowered his head and brushed her lips with his. "I might have an idea or two."

"Perfect."

And then he was kissing her again. Perfect was the right word.

Excitement pulled Jolie from a sexy dream starring Ford. Not only was she looking forward to seeing—and kissing—him again, she wanted to see how the ducks had fared through the night.

Her dreams had been a weird combination of Ford and ducks. Hot and steamy kisses with Ford. Heating up the sheets with the strong and sexy man.

Dreams about ducks escaping. More ducks than she could count swimming in her pond and ending up with slime coating their feathers.

And one truly bizarre dream that started with a naked Ford with her in the shower and ended with ducks chasing the two of them out so they could use the shower themselves.

Weird.

Although she'd put up with them if it meant she also got the sexy Ford dreams. One day, she wanted to make those dreams a reality. One day in the not-too-distant future.

The rain continued to drizzle as Fox bounded through the trees toward her. She crouched to hug the dog and rub him all over the way he loved. "Have you scented out the ducks yet? Are you okay with having new friends here?"

She pulled out her phone to check the time. Amber had an early shift so she'd be up but not at work yet. Her sister adored dogs and would love Fox. She put in a video chat and angled the phone to include the dog, glad that her sister had got a new phone with a working camera.

Amber answered on the third ring. Her sister's smile was wide, but her eyes were tired. "Hi, Joles. Is this the famous Fox I've heard so much about?" Her smile widened when Fox tilted his head as he studied her.

"Fox, this is my sister, Amber. She's a friend, and she loves dogs. You're going to be good friends when she comes here."

Amber rolled her eyes. "Using the dog to sweeten the deal?"

"Absolutely. Anything that'll work. I think you'd love this place, Amber. It's even brighter and has more potential than I thought."

That earned her a laugh. "I'm not sure if that's possible. You saw a lot of potential

from the beginning.”

“I did. And I’m loving it.”

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“I’m glad.”

Fox leaned forward and sniffed the screen, making them both smile. Then he tilted his head, gave a happy bark, and loped away.

Jolie stood. “And that’s Fox. He never stays too long, but he’s such a happy dog. You should see him hug Thea and Fox. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”

Amber sighed. “You’re not fighting fair, Jolie.”

“I’m the youngest. I’ve never been able to fight fair.”

Amber’s eyes dimmed. “You’ve always been the brightest of us all, Jolie. You sparkle and shine and bring joy to everyone in your life.”

Jolie’s heart nearly burst. “Wow. Thank you.”

Amber smiled the soft smile Jolie loved. Her sister was the quietest of them all, but she probably had the biggest heart.

Jolie smiled. “You’ve always been the best big sister I could wish for. In reward, I’m going to introduce you to our ducks.”

“Ducks? You got ducks?”

“Yesterday. Last night, actually. I’m nervous about how they survived the night in the coop. And I don’t want to see them race away when I open it. I’m hoping they’ll like

the clearing by the pond and stay.”

Actually, she’d been hoping Ford would be with her, but she’d been too busy kissing him to make plans for this morning.

“Do you have a fence to contain them?”

Jolie shrugged as she walked through the orchard. “No. I helped Ford finish the coop yesterday, but the call to pick up the ducks came in and I forgot all about the need for a fence. The farmer said they should be fine without one. They’re used to free ranging at his place, but this is all new to them.”

Amber nodded. “And to you. I’m sure the farmer’s right and they’re fine, but now I need to see them to be sure. How are you going to get them to the snails and back? You said the snails are mostly nocturnal?”

Jolie nodded. “Some snails are crepuscular, but I haven’t spent any time looking for the ones who live here yet. It would be easier if they came out earlier than full dark, but we’ll have to wait and see.”

She arrived at the pond’s clearing and turned the camera around so Amber could see. “Here we are.”

Amber laughed. “I love the coop.”

“Ford called it the Quack Mobile and I think that name’s going to stick.” They hadn’t painted it yet, but that was a project for another day.

“It’s perfect.”

Jolie took a deep breath. “Okay. Wish me luck. I hope they’re all okay and that they

don't take off."

"Good luck. Now, release the quack-ens."

She grinned at her sister. "Ford is going to love that phrase." Then, before she could second guess herself, Jolie opened the door and stepped back. She was glad she'd been quick because the first duck was outside instantly, quacking and fluffing her feathers. The other five immediately followed.

"They're so cute. And they seem to have survived the night just fine."

Jolie nodded, and they both watched as the birds took in their new surroundings. The lead duck fluffed her feathers again, took a few steps, and pecked at the ground, looking for food. The others followed her lead.

"You did it, Jolie. Your ducks look happy."

"They really do. I'm so relieved." They could still take off on her, but at least things were starting off well.

The drizzle didn't bother the birds at all as they moved easily around the clearing.

"I love how much fun you're having, Jolie."

She switched the camera back to her face. "You can have this much fun, too. When you get here, it's going to be even better."

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“I guess I walked right into that one.”

“You sure did. But I’m serious. Knox was onto something when he decided this place would be a great venture for all of us. We need this. And this place needs us.”

Amber’s eyes flickered to the side and Jolie thought she saw fear before her sister relaxed again. “You okay?”

Amber nodded. “Yes. Something startled me, that’s all. I’m sorry, but I have to go now.”

“Duty calls. I get it. Have a good day and I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Have fun with your ducks. And with Ford. I want to know more about why your face lights up whenever you mention him.”

Jolie started to respond, but Amber was gone. She pocketed her phone, wishing her sister would open up. Something was definitely up, but Amber kept her worries to herself. Once she was here, they’d figure it out.

And she would tell her more about why her face lit up at the mention of Ford.

As if she’d conjured him, the man himself approached through the orchard, whistling as he walked. “Good morning. I’m sorry I wasn’t here early enough to help you open up the coop.”

She grinned. “I had Amber on the phone, so it wasn’t as scary. I didn’t want to wake

you up so early and I couldn't wait any longer."

"You can wake me anytime." His eyes warmed as he neared, and then he leaned down to kiss her. The bill of his ball cap didn't stop all the rain, but that didn't matter. The kiss did.

When he straightened, he used his thumb to wipe the raindrops from her face. "You still okay with this?"

She knew he meant the kisses and the way they'd stepped forward in their relationship. "I am. Very okay. As long as you are."

His grin was mischievous. "I think I'm good, although I maybe need another kiss to convince me."

Laughing, she rose on her toes and let herself slip into another amazing kiss.

When they pulled apart, Ford wrapped his arms around her, ignoring the wet jackets they both wore. "How were the quackers this morning?"

She grinned. "Great. One stepped out as soon as I opened the door and the rest followed her. They've been wandering and pecking at the ground."

"Do we need to buy any food to supplement what they find themselves?"

"Kimi gave me the information for a company that delivers locally. It's the same one Brandon recommended. I put in an order last night just to make sure we can keep them healthy. She said to have some on hand in case we need to supplement their diet, but they should be good with their foraging in the summer. Especially once we set them loose on the snails. "

He shuddered, making her grin. “Are we going to wait on that, or do you want to try it tonight?”

She turned and studied the ducks as they wandered. “I think I’d like to wait a few days. I’m nervous enough about getting them back into the Quack Mobile tonight. If they get too excited about the snails, it might be impossible to bring them back here.”

Ford nodded. “Sounds like a good plan. And we’ll add some paint to brighten up the Quack Mobile if this rain ever stops again.”

She grinned and held out her bright pink rubber boots that sported zebras and umbrellas. “Maybe to match these.”

Ford laughed. “Maybe. But I do have a thing for the yellow duckies on your blue pair.”

He had a favorite pair out of all her rubber boots. Yep, falling for sure.

## Chapter 11

### Pick Your Friends

Ford split his time between his own tasks and Jolie’s. And sneaking kisses whenever he had a chance.

They hadn’t been openly demonstrative in front of her brother, and that nagged at Ford. He respected the hell out of Knox. Hiding his feelings for the man’s sister felt wrong.

But it also felt wrong to make a declaration about things before he discussed it with Jolie. They hadn’t taken things any further than kisses, but things were building in a

more intimate direction.

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Why did she have to be Annie's sister? It made things unnecessarily complicated. With them both living and working on the farm, it was already complicated enough.

As had become his custom, Ford headed down to the pond with a packed lunch to share with Jolie. They made the lunches in the mornings while they ate breakfast together. Ford could imagine the routine happening decades from now. Just as he imagined them sharing a room upstairs instead of each keeping their own.

He knew Thea and Knox were working on removing invasive species from the orchard that day, so he didn't bother looking for the ATV. Once Lawson came, he could fix up the other two that were sitting there. None of the four of them could figure out what the machines needed, and no one wanted to waste the time trying to figure it out.

They'd all continued to work on their individual projects despite the heavy rains of the last few days. Ford had mostly worked on inspecting the interiors of the barns and noting where he needed to reinforce foundations or fix boards. Nothing vital still, but stuff that needed to be done.

He planned to work on the farm's exterior needs until winter. Then he could start working on the interiors of the farmhouses and organizing his barn properly. That could take the entire season by itself.

Today's sun was a welcome respite, although the rain had given him bonus time with Jolie. He spotted her sitting on the ground near the Quack Mobile. The birds hadn't taken off so far, and seemed to appreciate the coop at night. Although getting them in there was like an episode of the Three Stooges.

“Hey, Gorgeous. Enjoying the sun?”

She smiled up at him. “Sure am. It’s a nice change. I’m going to use the canoe this afternoon to check out the middle of the pond.”

He sat beside her on the ground. “How are the ducks doing?”

She grinned. “They’re great and seem to love their home. I’m looking up better ways to corral them at night.”

He laughed. “I was just thinking how ridiculous we must look trying to get them into the coop.”

“Exactly. And I haven’t been able to get them up to the orchard yet. I know they’ll enjoy the snails, but it’s getting them there and back to the coop that’s the problem. What if the snails are so delicious, the ducks won’t leave?”

He pulled the containers out of his backpack and handed her a sandwich before taking his own. “Any solutions?”

“I think we need a herding dog.”

He laughed. “I know Brandon had one, but don’t they usually work with cows or sheep?”

“According to what I’ve been reading, they mostly just like to herd anything. I’m a little worried about how Fox might react to another dog on the property.”

As they ate, they talked about other options, but a dog seemed the smartest. “Herding dogs won’t try to eat the ducks, will they?”

“I don’t think so. Knox told me one neighbor used to raise and show a few breeds of dogs. I’m wondering if she could answer some of our questions.”

“Good idea. I’ll go with you. It’s smart to get to know the neighbors. After what happened with Thea, I think we all need to make an effort.”

In the end, he and Jolie decided to check in with the neighbor that afternoon. She would put off her canoe adventure until the next day as the rain was supposed to have stopped for at least a few days.

Jolie called her brother as they walked back to the farmhouse, which made Ford smile. Even though they were on the same property, the size made calling the easiest way to talk to him. She didn’t want to leave without Knox knowing. Another example of how thoughtful she was. And how close she was to her brother.

They took Ford’s truck and a few slices of the apple bread they’d made the previous night. They weren’t bakers, but it had ended up being tasty enough to share.

Lorraine Apostle lived to the north of their land. Her property wasn’t nearly as big as the farm, but it was still an enormous space. Big enough to hold a few Miami blocks.

They drove into the parking area beside Lorraine’s house. At least a half-dozen dogs lazed around the grass and on the back porch where a middle-aged woman was on her knees with a hammer in her hand, repairing a deck board. If she wasn’t finished, he’d offer to help.

Lorraine stood as they hopped out of the truck. One dog rose to stand with her. All the others raised their heads. She patted the dog and smiled at them. “Hello, there.”

Ford returned the smile. “Hello, Lorraine. I’m Ford Evans and this is Jolie Malssum.”

Lorraine's smile widened. "You look a lot like your brother, Jolie."

Jolie laughed. "The Malssum genes run strong in our family. It's nice to meet you, Lorraine. We're not experts by any means, but we brought you some of the apple cake we baked last night."

"I just finished up here and I've got some fresh lemonade that would go nicely with your bread. That work for you both?"

When they nodded, she gestured to the table on the deck. Then she raised her voice a little. "Okay, troops, these are friends. Relax."

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On cue, all the dogs seemed to study him and Jolie. The one who'd stood approached them and when they held out their hands, sniffed them over. The dog was as big and furry as Fox, but with different coloring. Mostly black, but white patches covered its face, chest, and paws. That white was edged with a soft brown transition area. "Aren't you gorgeous?"

When Lorraine returned, he asked. "Your dogs are amazing. What breed is this one?"

Lorraine smiled. "You probably don't want to get me started talking about my troop. This is Gilbert and he's a Bernese mountain dog. I've raised Bernies and boxers for years."

Jolie laughed as she ruffled the dog's fur. "Hello, Gilbert. You're a very handsome boy."

They sat at the table, and Jolie smiled. "I'll confess we didn't just drop by to meet you. I have an ulterior motive."

Lorraine's eyebrows went up. "Is everything all right?"

Jolie smiled. "Yes, sorry to worry you. Actually, I'm hoping to rely on your dog expertise."

Lorraine's face lit up. "You'll make my day, then."

"I'm working on fixing up the pond at the back of the farm. Eventually, it'll be used for irrigation at the back of the orchard, but mostly I want to bring it back to life. It's

been stagnant for too long and I'd like to see it healthy again. We also want to increase the biodiversity of the plants and animals on the farm. To that end, I've got a flock of six ducks."

Lorraine laughed. "Ducks on an apple farm. I love it. I'm glad your family has the farm now. Jay would be happy to see you and what you're doing with the land."

Ford watched Jolie's face light up. "I hope so. We haven't figured out what pulled him and my grandfather apart, but I'm hoping one day we'll find something to give us a clue."

Her eyes misted with emotion, and Ford tucked her into his side. "We're hoping you can recommend a dog breed for us. The ducks have minds of their own."

Lorraine laughed. "I bet they do. Are you looking for a herding dog, then?"

They nodded, and Lorraine smiled. "I can definitely help with that."

For the next hour, they learned all about herding dog breeds, including the beautiful Bernese mountain dogs Lorraine had once raised.

Jolie smiled. "I'm so glad we came over. We want to make sure the dog doesn't upset Fox. It's his territory first, and if another dog causes him stress, we'll figure out another way to convince the ducks to go where we need them."

Lorraine nodded. "Good plan, but I think your Fox will be fine. He plays well with all of my dogs. Never acts aggressive when he comes over. He's also easy-going when other animals are visiting us here."

Lorraine offered to speak with some of her friends to see who knew of an available dog that would fit the job and the farm. They didn't want a puppy. They needed one

who was already trained to do the job. The breed didn't matter.

As they drove home, Jolie bounced in her seat. "I really liked her. I think whatever dog she finds is going to be a great fit for the farm. Thanks for coming with me."

"Any time." In fact, he figured he'd go just about anywhere with her.

The morning brought a beautiful, clear day, with temperatures edging into summer territory. A perfect day to try out the canoe.

Rain had never bothered Jolie, but she'd worried about the borrowed canoe. With the way the rain had poured, she hadn't been sure she wouldn't swamp it. She didn't particularly want to go for a swim in the pond when she wasn't sure what was in there.

She didn't have results on her water and soil samples yet. Not that she expected to find anything dangerous, but she'd rather not bathe in the dirty water until she knew exactly what it contained.

The stormy days had been productive, and the ducks liked the rain. She'd been nervous about leaving them alone during the day, but it had been fine. Fox probably helped protect the property, but with the lure of an easy duck meal, predators would be braver than normal.

Instead of her usual oatmeal, Jolie grabbed an apple and a banana to eat on the way. Her pond was calling.

The door to Ford's room had been open, showing he was already gone for the day. She'd been tempted to step into the room just because his smell lingered there. She was ridiculous, but the giddy feeling of falling for a truly good man was too much fun to squash.

The potential fallout if things didn't work continued to worry her, but it wasn't stopping her from stealing kisses whenever the opportunity arose. Ford's kisses had her forgetting just about everything else.

At the moment, she couldn't imagine things not working. She could only see a big, bright future ahead of her.

Ford wasn't like the slime balls in her past. He wouldn't cheat on her or steal her money. Ford Evans was honest and kind. If he wanted to end things, he'd do that face-to-face. Even if he broke her heart, he'd be kind about it.

Jolie couldn't imagine any circumstance that would make her want to end their relationship. The only thing she could imagine was taking things further.

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She's spent a lot of time, both awake and dreaming, imagining sleeping with him. Even as she walked through the orchard with its gorgeous apple blossoms ready to morph into flowers, her body revved at the thought of seducing Ford.

Was she ready for that step?

How could she not be?

But the consequences she worried about didn't fly away just because she wanted to climb Ford like a tree. She'd have to be an adult and think it through from all sides. Which sent her imagination spinning in new directions.

She was laughing when Fox bounded up to her for his morning rubdown. "Hello there, my friend. How would you feel about having another doggie pal here on the farm?"

Fox licked her face and twined between her legs. "I know you're friends with Gilbert." The dog barked at the name and spun in a circle as if looking for his buddy.

Jolie laughed. "I liked your friend. Lorraine doesn't raise puppies anymore, but she has plenty of friends in the dog world. She's going to look for a dog who likes to herd. We need someone to help with the ducks."

And if these ducks proved to be effective with the snails and spreading nutrients to various parts of the orchard with their poop, she'd consider increasing the size of the flock. From her research, a farm of this size could potentially use a few dozen ducks, or a mixture of ducks and geese. The bird species appeared to mingle easily together,

although they required different coops.

“Let’s go release the quack-ens.”

Fox trotted along for a bit, but when the trees opened up to the clearing with the pond, he gave her a happy bark and headed off to have his own fun.

She knew Fox rarely left the cover of the trees at the front of the property, but he didn’t mind being by the pond. She hoped the ducks weren’t bothering him. If they were, she’d come up with another solution for the snails.

Maybe she could cart the ducks to and from Brandon’s property as needed. Things to think about.

The quacking of the ducks had her realizing Ford had beaten her to the coop. They were becoming individuals to her, so she and Ford had named them.

Daisy was the first one out of the coop every morning and appeared to be the leader of the group. Quackerjack was always last and never seemed to follow along as quickly as the rest.

The other four were more difficult to identify, but she thought she had them mostly straight. Although all their ducks were female, they’d gone with Huey, Dewey, and Louie for three of them. Daffy for the final one.

Daisy stood near the pond, digging in the ground for breakfast. Most of the others stood near her, but Quackerjack had her back to her friends and was looking around like she was lost. Sure enough, as Jolie approached, she fluffed her feather and started to run. Then Daisy quacked and Quackerjack whipped around like she’d been prodded. Jolie laughed as she watched the duck rejoin her friends.

The canoe sat at the edge of the pond, proving Ford was as thoughtful as he was sexy.

She knew he and Knox were rebuilding a shed on the far side of the property today. The building had been rotten on a couple of sides and there was a ton of water damage.

The dozen or more sheds scattered across the property were handy. Stocked with tools, they helped reduce the amount of vehicular traffic required on the farm. Less pollution for the trees and the world in general. It meant more tools were required, so each shed was fully equipped, but the barns had been full of rakes, shears, ladders, and other tools they might need in the different areas of the farm.

Thea had brought up the possibility of using electric or solar powered ATVs and trucks for the farm. Lawson would know more about options there. It would take a while to save up for those, but the idea been put on the list. Several lists.

Jolie appeared to be the only one who kept her list of tasks in her head. It was fun seeing how everyone worked, but none of it made her want to change her own style.

She chatted with the ducks as she put on her chest waders. Daisy followed her to the canoe, with the others trailing along behind.

“Okay, girls, I’m going to check out the middle of the pond and take more samples. Have any of you gone swimming in here yet, or are you waiting for me to clean it?”

When no one answered, she put her longest stick and a couple of sample jars into the canoe and dragged it halfway into the pond.

It took no time to climb aboard and push off, reminding her how much she enjoyed being on the water. Maybe Ginny and Nimii would let her and Ford borrow the kayaks one day. Did Ford like to kayak? More things to learn.

Smiling, she paddled around the pond, checking the edges for areas where frogs and toads should be. She didn't find evidence of any habitats.

Jolie used her stick to take the approximate depth of the pond in various places. There were a few sharp drop offs, but the edge where she wanted to smooth out the slope was already more gradual than the rest. It wouldn't take too much effort to make it better for the wildlife. She'd even spotted an area nearby where she could create a dust bath for birds.

A lot of the pond appeared to be about four feet deep, with the middle being deeper than her stick would reach. The stick was about her height, so the middle probably reached six feet down, maybe more.

At one point, her stick thunked on something solid, instead of the mud she'd been touching everywhere else. Most of the bottom was muddy, but this bit was different. Thankful for the lack of wind, she paddled in a small circle, trying to figure out if it was a large rock or if someone had dumped some garbage.

The depth of the water meant she couldn't hear the tone of her stick hitting it, but the edges were regular. Too regular to be natural.

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It felt like a cylinder, maybe one or two feet long. Like a tiny garbage can, but she couldn't budge it with her stick and lack of leverage.

Why would anyone dump something in the pond? Litterers drove her batty. Taking care of the earth could be incredibly simple.

She needed to remove the cylinder because whatever it contained could be one reason the pond was stagnant. If it was leaking anything toxic into the water or soil, it needed to go.

She tried prying it loose with her stick, but nearly tipped the canoe.

Looked like she was going to break out the scuba gear after all. All she needed was a nearby place to fill her tanks.

Or she could simply snorkel down and find out more. The pond was so murky, even her headlamp wouldn't help at that depth, but she should be able to tell more by touching it.

Her gear was in her car and she didn't want to trudge all that way. She'd keep trying with the stick to dislodge it.

No garbage was allowed to mess up her pond.

Chapter12

Ford Tough

Ford grimaced at the pile of rotting wood and garbage they'd removed from the shed. It appeared a few animals had made nests in the structure over the years.

He and Knox had scoured the barns for wood to replace the rot, but they had to rebuild the structure. At least the roof was intact. It was corrugated metal and with a slope, it would keep off the snow and stop animals and birds from using it as a home.

There were more nests under the eaves, but they'd texted Thea and Jolie before they'd removed them. Apparently the birds who'd built them, built new ones yearly. There hadn't been signs of recent animal life inside, so no animals or birds were being displaced.

He'd have always made sure the birds and animals were safe before, but knowing how important they were to Jolie meant he was more careful now.

He hadn't dealt with many animals or bird homes when he'd been working on new corporate buildings with his family. This was a whole different part of the construction world.

As if reading his mind, Knox spoke. "How are you enjoying life on the farm? Are you missing your family and the business?"

Ford shrugged as he started laying the clean boards for the shed's floor. "I don't miss the business. They know building boring boxes isn't for me."

"Are you keeping in touch?"

Ford nodded. "We've got a group chat going all the time and I talk to my dad every couple of days. He wants to come up and see the farm one day. He's thinking about retirement, so I wouldn't be surprised if he pops up for a visit once he takes that step."

“You know he’s welcome at any time. All of your family is welcome.”

That was Knox. Always looking out for family, even when it wasn’t his own.

“Thanks. My brothers mostly think I’ve lost my mind.”

Knox chuckled. “But they’ve all wanted the urban building stuff since they were kids. You’ve said you were always different in that way.”

Ford shrugged, not surprised his friend remembered. “True. Probably the result of being the youngest boy. Will and John were already working with Dad when I was born. A couple of the others had part-time jobs with the business while they finished high school and college.”

Knox laughed. “I always thought our family of five kids was a lot. Hard to imagine another four.”

“You guys are a lot tighter than we are. Probably because we’re so spread apart in age. The oldest were out of the house before I was really old enough to know them. We get along just fine, but they were more like uncles than brothers.”

“Do you keep in touch with them, too?”

“Some more than others, but we all text a lot. Nate and Dan are helping me come up with things to cook when it’s my night to take care of things here.”

Knox sighed. “It would be nice if we could afford to bring on a cook. We’re all competent, but no one loves it.”

Ford motioned for a longer board and he rose to work on the back side of the shed. “That would be great, but we’re surviving okay. I’m glad Fiona Phail has so much homemade stuff in her store. Takes a little of the pressure off when we can stock the

freezer with her stuff.”

“So you’re not planning to take off anytime soon?”

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Ford shook his head. “Nope. I’m liking farm life a lot more than I expected.”

“And how much of that is because of my baby sister?”

Ford laughed. He hadn’t been expecting this, but he probably should have been. “Playing the protective older brother, Annie? Jolie’s perfectly capable of taking care of herself.”

Knox nodded, no sign of a smile on his face. “She is. But something or someone hurt her, and I don’t want to see that happen again.”

Ford lowered his hands, set down the drill, and looked directly at his best friend. No power tools in use when he was pissed. A family rule his dad had drilled—ha ha—into them from an early age. “And you think I’m the kind of guy to hurt her? To take advantage of her?”

Knox shook his head. “Hell, no. Not on purpose. You’re one of the best men I know. But she’s my little sister.”

Ford closed his eyes and blew out a slow breath. “I know. Hell, I tried to ignore her for that very reason. But she’s like a magnet. She’s a hell of a woman, Knox. Strong and smart. Careful with people and the world around her. Enough curiosity to make a cat jealous. And sexy as hell.”

“Hey.” Knox drew the word out into three syllables.

Ford laughed again. “It’s the truth, Annie. I tried keeping my mind off her. Tried to

ignore the energy she puts out without trying. But I can't."

Ford sighed heavily.

"We've been going slow. Both of us worry about what happens if it doesn't work. But she's special, Knox. Really special."

They studied each other for a long moment and he saw the instant when Knox resigned himself to the reality.

"Fine."

That made Ford laugh again. "Not that you have any say in the matter, but I'm glad you're not going to make things hard."

Knox closed his eyes with a grimace at Ford's inadvertent innuendo.

Glad the conversation was over without knuckles flying or hard feelings, Ford lifted his drill again. "I mean, have you seen those legs of hers? She's an incredibly sexy woman."

His buddy picked up another board with a growl.

Might as well drive him right up the wall. "I enjoy drilling. And nailing. I think we're doing a bang-up job here."

Knox flipped him off, but there wasn't a hint of pissed-off in the gesture. Ford was going to have a lot of fun using construction terms to make Annie nuts. "Pass me some more screws for my drill, would you?"

"Don't make me kill you, Dodge."

Grinning at the use of his call sign, Ford knew they'd be okay. "Couldn't if you tried, Annie."

"Don't make us find out for sure."

Yep, they'd be okay.

Jolie flopped onto the ground, hoping she wasn't lying in duck poop she hadn't spotted. She breathed in the fresh air and let the sunshine lift her mood.

When she found the jackass who'd tossed that cylinder in the pond, she was going to kick his butt. Or at least yell at him a little. Thoughtless jerks. Why couldn't they take their junk to the landfill for proper disposal?

It wasn't a garbage can; it was far too small. More like a large thermos. It appeared to be a completely smooth cylinder, but she didn't know much more. She couldn't see it through the murkiness of the pond, but she had been poking her stick at it for ages.

Removing it had become personal and necessary. Her muscles ached from keeping the canoe balanced while she tried everything she could think of to move the cylinder. She'd even named it.

Cyril. Cyril the Cylinder. Bringer of evil to her pond.

Vanquishing Cyril was now her life's mission. Then she'd hunt down the Cyril thrower-outer and vent the rest of her frustration.

The thought made her smile. In her imagination, she was a tough woman who knew how to administer vengeance. Real life? Not a chance.

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A deep, sexy chuckle interrupted her thoughts of how she'd make the Cyril thrower-outer suffer. Her body tingled to life, especially in all her girly places.

“A sexy mermaid washed to shore, all ripe for the picking.”

She didn't open her eyes, but she couldn't stop the smile as Ford sat beside her and leaned down to kiss her lightly. That opened her eyes and made him chuckle again.

“Maybe I'm mixing my fairy tales, but hello, Sleeping Beauty. Although I like the sexy mermaid image better.”

She grinned. She couldn't remember anyone else comparing her to a fairy-tale princess before.

Ford lounged beside her on the grass, resting on one elbow, so he was looking down at her.

“I like my view better. Sexy, gorgeous rescuer.”

He laughed. “I've never known a woman less in need of rescuing in my life. You're no damsel in distress, Jolie.”

Well, that was an even better compliment than sexy mermaid. She crooked her finger at him until he leaned down for another kiss.

When her body hummed to life and she'd forgotten her aches, she smiled into the kiss. “Thanks. I think you brought me back to life.”

He ran a finger lightly over her cheekbones and down to her lips. “What wore you out?”

His eyes darkened, and she liked the way his thoughts turned. Sexy ideas of ways to wear each other out danced in his eyes. Much better than the reality of what had caused her current state. “Cyril tried to do me in.”

His eyebrows shot up, but she’d kept her tone light so he would know there was nothing to worry about. Still, his eyes tracked the area. “Cyril? Did we get a drake I don’t know about?”

She laughed, loving that he thought of adding to her duck troop. “Nope. Cyril the Cylinder.”

When she started to sit up, he offered her a hand, and then leaned in for another kiss. “I take it Cyril the Cylinder isn’t a rival I need to worry about.”

“Not a chance. No one could meet your very high, very sexy standards, anyway.”

His skin flushed, and the heat in his eyes flared, making her own skin respond. “Good to know. Tell me more about Cyril and why I want to kill him.”

She laughed and pointed at the water. “I took the canoe into the pond and explored a bit. There’s a lot of dead stuff in there which I’m starting to remove. I thought I might find some good amphibian habitats in the debris, but I didn’t find signs of a single frog or much else that’s alive.”

“You’re going to bring it back to life.”

His confidence always made her feel better. “I am, but it’s going to be a bigger job than I thought. There’s a cylinder at the bottom of the pond.”

“The evil Cyril.”

She nodded. “At first I thought it was a garbage can, but it’s much smaller and appears to be sealed. And heavy or stuck. I couldn’t budge it with my stick, no matter how hard I tried. And I tried. My muscles have jellified.”

He barked out a laugh. “Jellified. I like that. So, how are you planning to get Cyril out?”

“I’m not sure yet. If I was sure it wasn’t leaking, I could probably leave it alone. But if there’s something noxious in there, it has to go. And the only way to find out is to bring it up.”

“I’m sure we can rig up something so you don’t have to scuba dive in the pond before you’ve cleaned it.”

She nodded. “I really don’t want to go in there the way it is. Even wearing the equipment, some of my skin would be exposed. Until I get my samples back and get Cyril out of there, I don’t think we should go in. And I’m going to keep using water from the hose for the Quack Mobile at night.”

He nodded, and his gaze roved over their little flock. She loved that he was as concerned about their new friends as she was.

He frowned. “Why would anyone dump something in the pond? I’m going to assume it wasn’t Jay. Anyone who owns a farm should be conscious of the environment surrounding it. No sane farmer would toss something potentially hazardous in there.”

He sat up straighter and looked around. “I wonder if there are neighbors beyond the trees. Maybe they’ve been using this part of the farm as their personal garbage dump.”

“I wondered the same thing. We’ll have to ask Knox and Thea who the other neighbors are. And find out if there are roads leading through those woods to this property. If there are, we can block them to stop further dumping.”

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He nodded. “I don’t imagine there’s any way to tell how long Cyril’s been down there?”

She shrugged. “Not without getting him out. But I’m out of energy and ideas for today.”

With a grin, Ford lifted her to straddle his lap. “I’m not out of ideas. And I think some of them will restore at least a little of your energy.”

She laughed as she wrapped her legs and arms around him. “You have the best ideas.” And then his lips locked onto hers.

It wasn’t long before her energy revved back up to normal and way up beyond that.

She wanted to be brave and take the next step with Ford, but she wasn’t quite ready. Not with her past experiences eroding her trust and with her worries about Knox’s reaction to their relationship.

When Ford slowed the kiss, he rested his head on her forehead. “We’ve got some time before dinner. What to help me with a project?”

She laughed, knowing he wasn’t implying sex. But her imagination spun in that direction.

He waggled his eyebrows and leaned in close to whisper. “The paint I ordered for the Quack Mobile is here.”

Laughing, she kissed his lips with a loud smack. “That’s perfect. Are you going to share the design yet?”

After another kiss, she climbed off his lap, and he popped up to his feet. He gestured at the coop and she realized he’d moved it and set a box of supplies next to it. “Did you move the coop when I was recovering from Cyril-induced stress?”

He laughed. “Sure did. No duck poop for us to sit in while we paint.”

He took her hand, and they walked across the field. “I’m glad you’re wearing those boots today.”

She looked down to see her bright blue boots with the yellow duckies splashing in puddles. “Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Ford pulled out a can of paint and pried it open. The color was a perfect match to the blue of her boots. She clapped her hands. “I love it. The Quack Mobile is going to be bright and beautiful.”

He then pulled out a folder and handed it to her. “Check these out for the second layer of paint.”

She flipped open the folder to find sheets of paper. Designs had been cut out of each sheet. Duck designs that were a close match to the ones on her boots.

Tears filled her eyes as he pointed to a smaller paint can. “That’s yellow. And there’s a small one of black we can use to add the details. We’ll have to wait for the layers to dry, but I think your Quack Mobile is going to be duckingfantastic.”

Laughing, Jolie threw her arms around him. Her heart thumped against her ribs, filled with joy. But she kept the words inside. It was too early to tell him she'd fallen head over rubber boots in love with him.

## Chapter 13

### Jolie Good

The next day, rain poured again. Jolie reminded herself she liked rain, and it was good for the farm and her pond. Her plans to retrieve Cyril could wait. She didn't know how long he'd been down there, so another day or two wouldn't make much difference in the grand scheme of things.

With a sigh, she checked the time and then called Amber. Her sister's shift would start in another hour, so she'd be up.

"Hi, Joles. What's up, baby sis?"

Jolie smiled as her sister's voice improved her mood instantly. "Good morning, my oh so old and wise sister."

Amber chuckled. "I guess I deserve that. You're a highly competent adult, but you'll always be my little sister."

Warmth filled Jolie. Probably because of age and gender, of all her siblings, she was closest to Amber. "It's raining too heavily for me to play with the pond today."

Amber laughed again. "I'm sorry. That sucks, especially when you had plans to eliminate the evil Cyril."

"Exactly. I knew you'd understand my mood."

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“I do.” Amber’s quiet support flowed through the line. “So, what are you going to do instead?”

Jolie’s mind immediately went to Ford. Surprising him in his bedroom if he hadn’t already headed off to work.

Amber laughed again. “I hear some pining in that silence. Are your feelings for Ford growing?”

Because it was her sister, she could be honest. “I don’t know if they can grow much bigger. He’s such a good man. He’s honest and kind. Hard-working. Fun.”

“And hot.”

Jolie grinned. “So hot. I feel like my body’s on fire just thinking about him.”

Amber sighed into the phone. “That sounds lovely.”

“No one setting you on fire just by existing?”

There was a slight hesitation before Amber answered. “No one. It’s been a very long time since I felt that way.” Then she laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “Actually, I’ve never felt that way. You’re a lucky woman.”

Jolie’s heart ached a little. “I am. You sound a little down yourself. What’s up?”

She could imagine Amber shaking herself a little to slough off the mood. Her sister

was the queen of making other people a priority over herself.

“I’m fine.”

Exactly what Jolie expected her to say. She wished she’d made a video call so she could see her sister’s face. “Doesn’t sound like it. Maybe you need a break. Do you have any vacation time to use up? You could come up to the farm. I think you’d love it here.”

“It’s a busy time for the hotel right now.”

Amber was the manager. And uber-responsible with it. “Soon then. The next time you see a break in your schedule. It’s been far too long since we’ve seen each other in person.”

“You’re right. Way too long. I’ll see what I can do.”

Which meant she’d see to her own needs after the hotel’s. “I hope your bosses know what a treasure they have with you running their place. There’s no one who would do a better job.”

“Thanks for the boost.”

“I only speak the truth.”

“So tell me the truth about how big your feelings are for Ford.”

She laughed. “So big, Amber. So big.”

“Sounds scary.”

Jolie didn't have to think about that. "Not at all." Unless he didn't feel the same.

"I've got to go, Joles. Duty calls. I hope you have a good day despite the rain. Maybe you and Ford can find a way to fill the hours."

Jolie laughed as she hung up, and was still smiling by the time she'd showered and dressed. Sadly, Ford's door was open and his room was empty.

Not that she was brave enough to barge in and jump him.

Of course, that brought memories of walking in to find her ex banging someone else on his kitchen table. Asshole. It had been a couple of years before, but Jolie knew she'd never forget the humiliation. Trusting people was a challenge. Trusting men to treat her well was next to impossible.

But she knew Ford would never do that to her. He had more integrity and decency in his pinky than Rick had in his whole body.

The jerk had even called her to see if she wanted to get back together a few weeks after he'd cheated on her. After she'd blocked his number, he'd shown up where she worked, acting as if he was charming. Acted like it was automatic that she'd give him another chance.

Asshole. Even though she hadn't said the word aloud, she mentally apologized for the profanity to Fox. Smiling, she knew her grandfather would have called Rick much worse. She was glad she'd never shared that particular humiliation with anyone.

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She wondered if Jay would have had the same reaction. If he would have been as protective of the siblings as Fox had been. She was pretty sure he would have called Rick all kinds of names as well.

Jolie didn't find anyone in the kitchen, but a note from Thea let her know there was fresh oatmeal for the taking.

Once she'd filled up, she cleaned the kitchen and wondered what to do. She could explore the farmhouse a little more. While she'd been there for a while, she hadn't spent a lot of time indoors. There were several rooms she hadn't entered. Including Jay's room.

She wanted to know more about Fox's brother, but she couldn't face his room alone. Even though her curiosity was almost a physical thing, discovering family secrets by herself wasn't part of the plan. She wanted at least one of her siblings with her when she looked into the past. All of them would be better.

Jolie grabbed a pink ball cap and her raincoat, then headed outside. The rain whipped through the trees, making them dance.

Smiling, she walked beneath the questionable cover of the branches. The apples were taking shape. The blossoms that had littered the ground were now starting their composting process. Returning to the earth to nurture the soil and the trees. So they could bloom again next spring.

The joy of nature doing her thing filled Jolie with wonder and banished her earlier gloomy mood. Rain only bothered her when it messed up her plans.

She walked through the trees, looking for areas that needed care, checking how each section differed.

Thea's efforts in removing unfriendly plants were showing improvements. According to Thea, the trees in the front had been tended most recently. Focusing on that part made sense. They didn't have enough people to harvest hundreds of acres of apples, anyway.

Some trees had been planted decades ago. How would the people who'd planted them feel about the state of the farm now? She imagined they'd be happy to know someone cared about their land and appreciated the work they'd put into it.

Imagining the farm as a fully functional enterprise wasn't difficult. As long as she didn't look too far beyond the surface. Her schooling and background meant she knew a lot about nature and how to care for plants and wildlife. She knew nothing about running an apple farm.

What would she see happening if the farm was fully functional? How many people were needed to tend the trees?

In her imagination, it wouldn't take that many people to do most of the yearly tasks. Harvest time would be another story. There were so many trees, it would take dozens and dozens of humans to collect all the apples. Then they needed to be prepared for sale. What did that part look like?

This learning year was going to be fun. She couldn't wait to see the trees laden with apples, ready to pick.

Apple pie and cider would be great. She hoped Knox's dream of finding someone to bake with their products came true sooner rather than later.

She didn't doubt her brother for a moment. It would all come true. Knox was good at taking care of people and making things happen. His enthusiasm had brought her on board easily. She'd help him get the others to completely buy in.

Amber was leaning toward showing up for at least a bit. She figured once her sister was here and saw the potential in the farm and the other farmhouse, she wouldn't want to leave.

Once Amber was here, they'd work on Lawson next. He'd love the mechanical angle to the business. And if all four of them were here and on board, Burke would cave. Burke would always do what was best for the four of them. He'd been taking care of them since that horrid day they'd lost their parents. He'd taken on the mantle of parenting right alongside Fox.

Burke deserved to relax his vigilance. She knew his focus was on building enough finances so he could protect them all if anything happened. He wanted them all safe and happy.

She wanted his focus to be on finding himself some happy, too.

Jolie smiled when Fox bounded through the trees to greet her. The friendly dog was another lure. No one could be sad when Fox rubbed their legs and demanded his pats and rubdowns.

This place was full of happy, and she wanted to share it with the others.

And she wanted to share it with Ford.

"Where do you think he's working, Fox? Maybe I can talk him into a kissing break."

And soon, she'd be ready for a whole lot more than kissing.

Ford enjoyed the sound of rain battering against the barn's roof. Working in a warm, dry barn while nature was intent on drenching the land was comforting. He could handle weather of any kind. Working in the army had shown him nature at her best and her worst. They'd worked in all of it.

Dry was always better.

Because of the heavy rain and crazy winds, he could devote some time to these new projects. He didn't even have to feel guilty for ignoring the outdoor tasks that could wait for another day.

The farm was a giant work-in-progress. There was a grand overarching plan with a million sub-lists. He imagined there wouldn't ever be a lack of things to do. Which was awesome. He thrived on work and being busy.

None of his family had ever been the type to sit and watch TV. They'd always been doing. Because he and Mara were the youngest, they'd been playing with adult tools from a very young age. He'd been using a real drill in kindergarten. Mara too, but she'd always preferred using the kitchen tools over the woodworking ones. She'd baked and decorated her own cupcakes for the school bake sale when she'd been six. They'd been the first item to sell out.

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He'd call her later on. Check in on how she was doing and talk good memories. Find out what new musical she was addicted to. Maybe talk her into coming to the farm for a visit.

Would she like it here? Would she want to fit here? Or was she happy where she was? Things to find out.

Ford grabbed another few boards from the pile he'd found in the back corner. He needed to get this place better organized so he could find what he needed more quickly. Another day.

Today, he was focused on his projects. Projects that weren't on the red list, but he was doing them anyway because they were on Jolie's wish list.

He grinned as he returned to his makeshift work area. Jolie was one of a kind. She was amazing, and he liked everything about her.

He set the boards to the side and pulled up the various plans on his phone. He wrote the exact specifications for each project in his notebook and then formed a plan.

Cutting the plywood and the boards first would make the most sense. Then building each of the items wouldn't take long.

After that, he'd track down Jolie for a break.

Work first.

Time flew as he fell into the comfortable routine of measure twice, cut once. He stacked boards and plywood for each of the projects. How many would she want of each? He wanted it to be a surprise, so he didn't text her. He'd start with two of each and then they'd see.

The rain was still pounding when the air inside the barn changed. The door to the barn had opened and chilly, wet air swept in. He couldn't see the door from where he was working, but the sudden chill was unmistakable. As was the way his body reacted. Although his reaction had nothing to do with the weather. It was all due to the woman who'd opened the door. "Hey, Jolie. I'm in my work area in the back."

She laughed, and his body liked that too. He'd bet she enjoyed sex. When they came together, it was going to be as fun as it was explosive.

Because they were going to come together, and it was going to be soon.

Not here-in-the-barn-today soon, but soon.

He couldn't wait.

Ford shifted his safety goggles on top of head and turned off the saw. She rounded the stack of boards that blocked in his work area with a smile.

His feet moved before he consciously commanded them to do so. The woman was a definite magnet.

He grinned as she kept walking right into him and leaned up on her toes for a kiss.

Not a simple Hi, how you doing kiss, but a real one. One that set his system to revving.

He hauled himself into control. No way was he making love to her for the first time in a dirty barn without a comfortable surface in sight. He wanted hours for their first time, not minutes.

He squeezed her in for a hug and kissed her hair. “Hi.”

She laughed. “Hi. How did you know it was me? What are you doing way back here?”

He shrugged at the first question. “I just knew.” He was tempted to tell her about what he’d been thinking, but he knew she wasn’t quite ready to jump into bed. He’d wait. Hell, he’d wait forever if that’s what she needed.

He hoped that wasn’t what she needed.

Instead of saying any of that, he gestured at his workspace. “Can you guess?”

She grinned and moved to study what he had out. Her gaze traveled over the plywood and the stacks of boards, sorted by size, then to his notebook, which only showed measurements in columns, no sketches or words to give things away.

“Well, you’re building something.”

Her sassy tone had him laughing. “Genius-level detecting.”

She grinned. “Let’s see if I can do better. You’ve got several stacks of boards cut to the same size. From the measurements, I’d say you’ve got all the sizes you need. You’ve also got two columns of measurements, so maybe you’re working on two separate projects. Unless there’s more on other pages, I’d say you’re ready to start building that something.”

He grinned. “Yep.”

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Her eyes sparkled, and her gaze moved from his to the boards and measurements. Her face lit up the moment she realized what he was working on.

“Bat boxes? Maybe owl nesting boxes? Or both? You’re building my boxes, aren’t you?”

She bounced on her toes and clapped her hands. Joy radiated from her, and he had to kiss her again. “Superior detecting, indeed.”

She laughed and hugged him. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. This is amazing. Can I help?”

His imagination soared to all the ways she could help, but he kept his control of his dumbass imagination. “Sure can.”

It took a few hours, but they built boxes for both the bats and the owls. As they worked, they talked about where to put the boxes and how to attract the creatures.

Apparently, the bat boxes needed to be close to the water because the creatures swooped in to drink in mid-flight. Their boxes also needed to be on the outside of a building to help the bats keep warm. If the box was on a tree, the wind would blast it from all sides and leech the heat. No bats would settle there.

They’d put them on the exterior of the two barns closest to the pond, on the sides facing the back of the property. That should give the bats the protection they needed and easy access to the pond for their water.

The owl nesting boxes were different. They were going to try both interior and exterior boxes for those, these interior ones first.

Jolie grinned. “We should be able to attract barn owls fairly easily around here. Maybe a few other species, too.”

“You sure they’ll want to come inside the barn? Doesn’t it make sense for them to want to be outside?”

Jolie shrugged. “We can try those, too, but interior is safer for them and they know that instinctively. Over the past few years, I’ve seen several successful nesting boxes inside barns. Milking barns, equipment barns, and even a threshing barn. The owls don’t care about the noise or activity. They’re way up at the top of the barn and know they’re safe from humans and ground predators.”

She studied the barn where they stood. “We’ll have to add a little open window up top, though. They need a safe way to fly in and out. And they need to see the nesting box from outside. The potential safety should lure them in.”

He studied the ceiling and imagined the roof and the exterior walls. “I think it would make the most sense to add a small opening at the highest point over the large doors on the front of the barns. Then we can add the nesting box high up on the opposite end. They should be able to spot them from there. If the window and the box are both at the top of the building, they should feel safe from the human activity down here.”

Jolie nodded. “And the babies will be safer too. Do you think we can try one nesting box in each of the barns?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Is there such a thing as too many owls or bats? Is there a tipping point where they mess up the food chain?”

Jolie laughed. “I think you’ve been taking some environmental studies courses on the side. Those are excellent questions.”

He grinned. “No courses. Just listening to a smart woman.”

She reached up to kiss him again. “You’re a very good listener.”

With her, he always would be.

Ford had never thought much about bats or owls before, but it was a hell of a good way to spend a day. They’d spend the next one installing the boxes and hoping to lure in the predators. Who would have thought that he would have so much fun with bats and owls?

As they walked back through the rain to the farmhouse, Ford felt contentment right down to the soles of his work boots. He’d never experienced the feeling as strongly before.

He’d found his place. Here with the farm. With Jolie.

It filled him with joy and with purpose. Couldn’t ask for much more than that from life. This was where he was meant to be.

Now he had to hope he didn’t do something dumb and screw it up.

## Chapter 14

### On The Battlefield

Ford woke bright and early, after a restless night. Sexual longing did that for a guy.

He wasn't going to be an asshole and rush Jolie. He'd let her set the pace forever. The men who'd cheated on her and stolen from her were assholes of the first degree. And idiots to boot. Jolie was the brightest person he'd ever met. Even if she was no damsel in distress, he wanted to help her kick whatever asses needed kicking.

In the kitchen, he found Jolie stirring a pot of oatmeal on the stove. Her welcoming smile had him moving closer for a kiss.

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She didn't hesitate, didn't even look over to make sure her brother wasn't on his way. Which made him realize he hadn't told her about his conversation with Knox yet.

While she turned back to the oatmeal, he grabbed a couple of bowls and spoons. "Annie knows we're doing that, by the way."

Eyes wide, she turned off the element and set the oatmeal to sit. "You told him?"

He shrugged. "More like he asked me."

She worried her bottom lip. "Everything okay between you two?"

He moved back and framed her face. "We're fine. He's worried I'll hurt you, but I think that's normal big brother shit, not about me specifically."

She scowled. "I can make my own decisions. He doesn't get a say in this."

Ford grinned, loving her feistiness. "I'm a big brother too, so I get where he's coming from. He just wants to make sure you're okay. He's not trying to decide for you."

She studied him seriously. "And you two are really okay?"

He nodded. "We are." And then he kissed her.

A loud, dramatic groan had them both smiling.

Thea and Knox moved in from the hallway, and his buddy groaned again. "No PDA

in front of the big brother. Have some compassion here.”

Grinning, Ford pulled Jolie up on her toes and kissed her again. Laughing, she framed his face and placed a smacking kiss on his lips.

Then she slipped out of his arms and moved to Knox. She repeated her actions, framing his face and placing a smacking kiss on his lips, making him laugh.

Then his buddy pulled Jolie in for a hug. Ford wasn't close enough to hear what he said into her ear, but whatever it was had Jolie smiling and nodding.

Then she whispered something back and Annie gave a full-body shudder worthy of a middle-school acting class. “I guess I don't get to kill him. Not yet, anyway.”

Over a breakfast of oatmeal and fruit, the four of them discussed the farm. Ford nudged Jolie's elbow. “Have you told them about Cyril yet?”

Thea leaned forward. “Who's Cyril? I don't think I know anyone around here with that name.”

Grinning, Jolie caught them up to speed on the cylinder she'd found in the pond and her worries that someone had used it in the past as a garbage dump. “I'm worried about the possibility that there are noxious substances inside it. Whatever it is.”

Everyone's curiosity was piqued, and they tossed ideas back and forth about how to retrieve Cyril without Jolie having to scuba dive in the water.

When they asked about surrounding properties, Thea frowned. “I think the forest goes pretty far back there. I don't think there are any farms or houses in that direction, but I'm not sure. We should drive around to see.”

Ford nodded. “Good idea. First, I’d like to check out the area in the daylight. It was getting too late that night to study the woods properly. And then I forgot about it. With the rain, I’ve focused on indoor projects instead.”

Thea and Knox shared a glance. Without a word, they nodded at each other. “We’ll go check out the pond with you.”

Not a single person in this group had a shortage of curiosity. The farm was going to be a huge success. “I want to take the ATV down to the pond. I’m not sure if it’s got a winch on it or not. Either way, maybe we can find something to haul Cyril up.”

The ATV had a winch, but they still needed something to wrap around Cyril. They grabbed a few items they thought might be useful and headed out.

Thea drove the ATV with Jolie on the back. He and Annie jogged. He glanced at his buddy. “You have a weird feeling about this cylinder, too?”

Knox nodded. “It seems so out of place. It’s a stupid spot to dump anything. Other than the farm owners, how would anyone know it’s there? It’s easier to dump something at the landfill than drag it all the way back to the pond. The farm road doesn’t even go that far.”

Ford had been thinking the same thing. Another reason he’d been up half the night. “If Jolie had found a bunch of junk, it would be one thing, but only having one man-made item down there doesn’t sit right. There aren’t any roads leading to it from this side. I want to check the woods to see if there are trails going into the trees. We should be able to judge how often they’re used. Figure out if someone is living back there or using your property for their own reasons.”

Knox nodded. “If none of the trails have been used lately, I’ll feel better. Maybe Cyril’s been down there for decades.”

Ford hoped that was the case. He wanted Jolie safe when she was working down here. Maybe it was the overprotectiveness he felt toward her, but he wouldn't rest easy until he knew the cylinder was a benign piece of trash.

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When they arrived at the pond, the women had released the ducks for the day. The one that had to be Quackerjack stood on a rock with one foot sticking out like she was doing ballet.

Fox was giving his morning hug to Thea. As they approached, the dog stopped to get Jolie to pat him, then he headed to Knox for his hug.

Ford had never seen a dog hug like a human before, and it made him smile every time Fox did it for his two favorite people. When it was his turn for a greeting, Ford rubbed the dog all over. “Good morning, buddy. We’re going to have a friend for you soon. Are you going to like that?”

Fox gave him a happy smile as he ruffled his head. The others headed to the canoe, but Ford headed around the wildflower buffer to the back of the pond.

When he could see past the bushes and rocks, he swore. “Hang on. Leave the canoe there.”

He sensed Annie go instantly on alert and the surprise of the women.

When they approached, Jolie gasped. “It wasn’t like this the last time we were here. Someone was here. Someone drove right up to the pond.”

She was right. There were tracks, probably from an ATV. The tracks led right up to the edge of the pond, where Jolie was planning to improve the slope for small birds and animals.

He pulled out his phone. "I want to take pictures of everything for evidence before we check things out."

"Evidence?"

He rubbed his hand down Jolie's arm. "In case. We don't know who was trespassing, or why. Annie and I are trained to expect the worst. I hope we're wrong, but let's treat this like a crime scene for now."

Jolie's eyes moved around the area. "You think something bad is going on? You think it's connected to Cyril?"

Knox shrugged. "We don't know enough yet. I hope it's nothing other than someone exploring the woods on their ATV. But I'd rather be cautious. The timing is weird, and that's always suspicious."

With Knox's gut feeling echoing his own, Ford knew the timing was extremely suspicious. Other than the asshole who'd targeted Thea a few weeks before, nothing weird had happened on the farm. Not in the year Thea had lived here with Jay. She'd never seen anyone this far back on the property.

But right after Jolie found Cyril in the pond, someone drove their ATV right up to it. His instincts told him no one was hiding in the woods watching them now. They also told him the tire tracks weren't nearly as innocent as he wished.

Cyril was trouble.

Jolie wasn't sure what to think. She trusted Ford's judgement as much as she trusted her brother's. Both men thought something suspicious was happening. In fact, the way they acted, both men thought it was past suspicious and edging into dangerous.

Which had chills running over her body.

Someone had definitely been at the pond after she and Ford had secured the ducks for the night. She turned to check the birds again, but they appeared unconcerned and normal. At least the person hadn't bothered them. She walked to the Quack Mobile. The bright yellow ducks on the blue paint always made her smile, but not this morning. Thankfully, the coop wasn't damaged.

She was glad they'd already seen Fox, too. He was fine. Hopefully, he'd stayed far away if the person had been hoping to cause damage.

Nothing else appeared to be out of place, at least not that she could tell. Not that there was a lot of manmade stuff in view. But the land didn't show any signs of disruption.

Had someone gone into the pond? Had they taken Cyril? The only way they would know about it would be if they'd tossed it there. And then the question was, why? Why toss away a cylinder and then retrieve it?

The men insisted she and Thea stay near the pond and the ATV while they moved into the forest. The army had trained them to do searches. She trusted them both implicitly, but she didn't like them being out of her sight. She didn't want them in danger.

When it was just the two of them, Thea frowned at the woods. "What do you think is going on?"

Jolie shrugged. "If it had been just me this morning, and I'd seen the tracks, I'd have been a little annoyed, but nothing more. I would have assumed someone was having fun exploring the woods and had driven up to the pond to check it out."

"But?"

She grimaced. “But I trust their instincts. They both feel like something is off. I want it to be a kid having fun, but they don’t believe that’s the case.”

Thea nodded, and her eyes studied the woods as well. “Agreed. Without the way they reacted, I wouldn’t have thought much about seeing tracks here. I would have wondered who it was and what they were doing on the farm, but I wouldn’t have been worried.”

Jolie hoped the men were overreacting, but she doubted either of them did that much, if at all. Her brother studied a problem from all directions before he decided on the best solution. From everything she knew about Ford, he was the same.

Which might mean they were simply being cautious. Gathering data before coming to a conclusion.

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She sighed. “I really want to jump into the canoe to see if Cyril is still there. It would be really weird timing if I found Cyril yesterday, then someone came to steal him last night.”

Thea nodded. “Did you explore the whole pond? Is there a chance there’s more than one Cyril?”

She sighed. “I didn’t. I got a little obsessed with trying to get it out. The cylinder wasn’t in the middle, so I didn’t explore the entire bottom. I should have.”

Thea shrugged. “You had no idea that Cyril would turn out to be anything other than potential toxic garbage. Which could still be the case. The ATV might be totally unconnected.”

She didn’t think either of them believed that. Not with the way the men had reacted. They’d been trained to expect trouble, but she figured it had found them all by itself.

Jolie checked the area again. She’d never felt uncomfortable alone here before. Now she wondered if she’d always feel that way.

She shook off the heebie-jeebies. “While we’re waiting, can I pick your brain about where exactly to put our owl and bat boxes? I want to add both predators, and Ford and I built the boxes yesterday. I’m hoping the boxes will attract them naturally, but if not, I’ll look into other options. The farm should be good feeding grounds for both species.”

Thea’s face lit up. “Great idea. Both would help the orchard. I’ve never seen bats

here, although I've sometimes wondered if I've heard them rustling through the trees at dusk. The occasional owl flies over, but I haven't seen any roosting. I'd love to have them as permanent residents, like the ducks. I'm excited for the ducks to do their thing, but it looks like we have to wait on a dog for that."

They both looked at the ducks, who were foraging happily around the pond. Jolie grinned. "I'm guessing once they figure out where the snails are, we'll be able to get them there easily enough. It's getting them into their coop and keeping them safe at night when we're not with them that might be the problem."

Thea nodded. "Depending on the species, snails tend to be more active at night, or at dusk and dawn."

Jolie nodded. "I don't imagine the ducks will need to be out long to fill up on snails. I should have researched that more before I jumped in and grabbed the ducks."

Thea laughed. "We're all early risers. It shouldn't be a problem to let them loose in the orchard either early or when it's getting dark. They're going to benefit the entire farm, so we can all take turns taking care of them."

Jolie nodded and looked back to the woods where the men had disappeared. "You think they're okay?"

"I'm sure of it. They're highly trained. Even if there is a problem, they'll take care of it. And each other."

She had to believe that.

Thea continued. "I'm assuming if the ATV tracks signal a problem, that the person who drove it is long gone. The guys will look for clues as to who it is and where they're from. They might even block a trail to stop them from approaching again."

All true. But having her brother and the man she loved in danger because she'd tried to dig Cyril out of the pond sucked. "I should have just let the cylinder stay there. I should have left it alone."

"And risk it leaking its contents into the pond and then into the orchard? Not a chance. You had to try to get it out. We still do."

Jolie nodded. Her brain had been working on ways to retrieve the cylinder without getting into the pond with her scuba or snorkeling gear.

Most of the ways to retrieve the cylinder relied on luck. If they wanted to use the ATV's winch, they needed to get a strap around Cyril, cinch it tight, and haul it in. From the smooth feel of it, she thought the cylinder was metal, but they would need an industrial strength magnet to get it out that way. A long fishing net might work, but she didn't know if there was one on the farm.

"They're coming back."

At Thea's words, Jolie whipped her head to where Ford and Knox emerged from different sections of the woods. They both held up their hands, signaling the women to wait where they were, and to keep doing what they were doing. "What do you think that means?"

Thea shrugged. "No idea, but it's clear they want us to act as if it's no big deal that they went into the woods."

Which was weird. Jolie's stomach tightened, but she and Thea stayed where they were, pretending to talk about the orchard and their plans.

When the men reached them, Ford's arm squeezed her shoulders, and he kissed her hair.

She didn't wait for him to speak first. "What happened? What did you find?"

Ford pointed into the orchard. "Let's walk a little ways and look at the trees."

The twists in her stomach increased, but she didn't ask questions as they moved away from the pond. When they were a few yards into the trees, they stopped, and she repeated her questions.

Ford sighed and squeezed her hand. "Someone has set up game cameras in the woods."

"Game cameras?" In her courses and jobs, they'd often used game cameras to study wildlife. It was a great way to observe how nature acted when there were no people around. The cameras she'd used in her work were triggered by movement. They could be adjusted to record video and sometimes audio for various lengths of time after the movement activated the device.

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He nodded. “We found three of them. All facing the pond.”

A shudder ran through her, and Ford squeezed her into a hug.

“Did you deactivate them?”

Her brother answered. “Not yet. We wanted to talk to you both so we can all decide together.”

She frowned. “I guess that depends on what we think the cameras are being used for.”

Knox nodded. “Exactly.”

She leaned into Ford. “Hunters obviously use them. We used them in school and on some projects I’ve done to observe wildlife without human interference. Photographers often use them to get wildlife photos and videos. A water source is an excellent place to get those images. How far in were the cameras?”

The men shared a look. “Not close enough for a photographer who wants close-up images of any animals using the water. More like the right distance to observe the overall activity at the pond. They’re positioned at shoulder height or higher in trees. High enough to see the pond over the brush.”

That wasn’t good. “You think they were looking for humans, not wildlife.”

They both nodded, and Ford spoke. “From the angles, we think they’re set up to watch specifically for human activity in the pond.”

“So you think Cyril was tossed in there to hide something, and that they’re watching it to protect it?”

Ford nodded. “We think that’s a distinct possibility.”

Her body shuddered. That was not good news.

## Chapter 15

### Across The Pond

Ford hated scaring Jolie, but he couldn’t keep the truth from her. This was her family’s property, and she had a right to know.

The appearance of the ATV couldn’t possibly have been a coincidence, not once they’d found the cameras. Someone was watching the pond. More specifically, they were watching for someone to check out the middle of the pond.

Jolie had been working on the edges of the pond for days. That hadn’t triggered a reaction. Once Jolie had found Cyril, someone had arrived with an ATV. Had they retrieved the cylinder last night? If so, why hadn’t they removed the cameras?

Now the four of them had to figure out what steps to take. Removing the cameras would likely escalate things quickly, as the people who’d set them up would come to find out what had happened. Leaving them in place meant the people would observe their group working at the pond. If the watchers didn’t think the cameras had been spotted, it might be safer. It should give them time to explore and decide what to do. Of course, if Cyril was gone, it might all be moot.

He sighed. “We need to see if the cylinder is still there. See if we can get it out. The question is, do we do it with the cameras activated, or do we remove them first?”

Jolie frowned. “Both options tell whoever set up the cameras what we’re doing. Do we want to keep them from realizing we know they’re observing, or is it better to work in privacy?”

Everyone considered it. He and Ford exchanged a glance. After years of working together overseas, it was easy to know what the other was thinking. It was always a tactical advantage to know more than the enemy. After a nod, he spoke. “I think we approach it like we don’t have a clue. The cameras don’t look to be expensive ones with audio, and even if they are, they’re too far in the woods to pick up our words.”

Annie nodded. “Agreed. We act like we came to help Jolie clean the pond.”

Jolie frowned. “But that doesn’t help us get Cyril.”

Her brother smiled. “Maybe. You can go back in the canoe and continue your survey, check out the rest of the pond. Don’t look focused on the cylinder. Act like you’ve given up your attempts to retrieve it. Tell the rest of us how to help around the edges of the pond.”

Ford nodded. “You can find out if Cyril is there or if there are more containers down there without looking obvious.”

Knox nodded. “I think we should empty the ATV of the things we brought. Then I’ll run back to the farmhouse with it. I’ll bring some other equipment to help clean the space, and I’ll grab our weapons.”

“Good idea. You remember the code for my lockbox?”

Thea frowned. “If they’re watching, they’ll see the guns.”

Knox laughed and hugged her. “Not a chance. We’ll keep them out of sight, but I’ll

feel better if we have them.”

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Ford agreed. “Chances are good that they’re just gathering intel. I can’t imagine anyone with nefarious plans showing up in broad daylight. Not with four of us here.”

Once everyone was on board with the plan, they headed back to the clearing around the pond. The women were both stilted, and their eyes kept returning to the woods. He grabbed Jolie’s hand and spun her into a slow dance. “Relax.”

“By dancing?” But her laugh had her body moving more naturally.

“Whatever it takes. Maybe this’ll help.” And then he kissed her. As always, his body revved. The woman tasted like perfection, and he’d never tire of her taste, of her reactions to his touch.

Before he could get carried away, Knox’s whistle had him lifting his head and flipping off his friend.

“Hands off my sister. I’m standing right here.”

Ford grinned and dipped Jolie over his arm before bringing her up for another kiss. He kept this one short.

Annie rolled his eyes and slugged him on the arm as they moved to the ATV and removed the equipment they’d brought. Thea and Jolie were both far more natural, especially with an actual task to work on.

When they’d put the tools they planned to use near the pond, Knox headed back to the farm.

The person watching was likely doing it from their phone, probably while sitting at home. If they were even out of bed after their late night. And if they'd retrieved Cyril, they might not be watching at all. Especially if they were sloppy and hadn't spared the game cameras a thought after they'd served their purpose.

No matter what had happened during the night, the people probably weren't close by. Not close enough to attack them before Knox returned with weapons. They'd have to drive in from wherever they were holed up, then take the ATV through the woods. That gave him and Knox plenty of time to have their weapons ready.

Still, Ford kept his senses wide open even as he contributed to the work and the conversation.

"Okay, ladies, you're the experts. Tell me what to do and I'll get it done."

As he'd hoped, they both laughed and Jolie's eyes sparkled. "Carte blanche. I like it."

He spread a tarp where they pointed. Then they walked around the pond's edges, checking the plants out closely. He pulled what he was told to pull and moved what they told him to move. The wet ground had him wishing for his own pair of rubber boots. Plain black with no ducks, though.

Knox returned with a couple of long metal poles and more tarps. And the weapons. He holstered both of his out of sight of the cameras. Knox did the same.

They brought the canoe over to the shallow edge. Jolie hopped in and paddled out, taking the stick she'd used the previous day.

Wearing Jolie's chest waders, Thea waded in to the shallow end. She and Knox worked on improving the slope following Jolie's instructions, while Ford moved around to the far side of the pond, where he could see the woods without being

obvious. He used a long pole to rake through the plants along the edge, looking for the invasive species Jolie had described.

The pond was large, but not so big that they couldn't talk comfortably across it. He was sure the conversation about improving the biome kept the entire scene natural. Non-threatening to the people watching. He doubted anyone would approach or attack, but there were ready if they did.

As they'd decided earlier, Jolie didn't head straight to where she'd found the cylinder. Instead, she moved around the edges of the pond, using her stick to probe the bottom.

When she neared him, she used her stick to yank up some of the debris from the bottom. She captured some of it using a fishing net. Then she dumped a bit into one of the jars she'd brought along.

He paused to watch her, to appreciate her work ethic, her absolute commitment to the environment, and her beauty. "Hey gorgeous. Find anything fun?"

She smiled at him and held up the jar. "I've got samples from the bottom near the edges. I'll be able to analyze them to see if there are any contaminants we need to combat."

Which was probably all true, but it let him know she hadn't found any more cylinders. Smart woman.

For another hour, they worked on the pond. Jolie didn't find any more manmade objects, but she reported that her friend Cyril was still hanging around.

Even if the cameras had audio, that phrase wouldn't alert anyone. He was in love with a brilliant woman.

When it was time for a break, Jolie brought the canoe ashore and they all sat down to share some tea and muffins.

When Jolie's phone beeped, she pulled it out. Her face lit up with a smile. "It's Lorraine. She's got a dog for us to meet. She's pulling into the driveway, and wants directions on how to find us and the ducks."

Perfect. A natural distraction that would keep them here in sight of the pond.

Along with helping with the ducks, a dog would be another layer of protection for the farm.

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With Jolie working down here, he wanted as many layers of protection as he could get.

Jolie walked toward the orchard road with Ford. She wasn't sure how to feel about finding Cyril still in place or knowing cameras watched them. It was all like a movie and she needed a brain break.

Meeting a new dog would be perfect.

It wasn't long before they spotted Lorraine with a gorgeous white and copper dog trotting through the forest. Lorraine had the dog on a leash, but he didn't look in danger of taking off.

When they neared, the humans stopped. Jolie smiled. "Hi Lorraine. It's so nice to see you again. And who is this beauty with you?"

Lorraine smiled. "He is a beauty, isn't he? This is Hemsworth, an Australian shepherd."

Delighted, Jolie laughed. "Hemsworth? That's perfect for a gorgeous Aussie."

"I don't get it." Ford frowned, making her and Lorraine laugh.

The other woman smiled at Ford. "His previous owner named him after an incredibly attractive Australian actor. Or maybe his brother."

Ford raised an eyebrow. "Okay, then."

Jolie squatted down and offered her hand to the dog. “Hello, Hemsworth. You’re beautiful. How do you feel about ducks?”

The dog sniffed her over and licked her hand. He followed the same procedure with Ford. He showed no signs of nerves or anything other than contentment. His eyes roamed the space as if looking for the next human to play with.

Lorraine handed Jolie the leash. “The vet says his previous owner passed away. Hemsworth lived on a farm with all kinds of other animals. The farmer’s family is selling the place and all the stock.”

As they walked toward the pond, Lorraine told them more. “He’s three, even-tempered, and great with kids and other animals. Australian shepherds require a lot of exercise and love outdoor time. He’s herded sheep and geese before. He’ll enjoy indoor time for a while and at nights, but he thrives outside.”

“All of that sounds perfect. I think he’d be happy here.”

Lorraine nodded. “Me too. You’re okay to keep him here for a few days on a trial basis. I know you’re concerned about him getting along with Fox, so you want a few days to be sure.”

Jolie’s heart was already sure. “He’s such a sweetie. I hope they get along.”

Ford chuckled. “We’re about to find out. Fox is hanging out with Thea and Knox.”

Fox spotted them and gave a happy bark. He raced over for his greetings while Hemsworth sat on his haunches and watched.

Then the two dogs went into a mutual sniffing inspection. When they both sat to look at the humans, Jolie laughed. “Looks like they get along just fine.”

Lorraine smiled. “Seems so.”

Hemsworth happily greeted Thea and Knox as well. When he saw the ducks wandering, he stood at attention with his tail wagging and his ears perked up.

Hemsworth looked from Lorraine, to the ducks, and back. Lorraine pointed at Jolie. “She’s your boss now.”

Jolie laughed and unhooked his leash. “Let’s see if the stuff I’ve learned online and from you works.” She pointed at the dog, and then the ducks. “Hemsworth, go. Cast.” From her research, she knew cast was the traditional term for gathering livestock into a group.

The dog bounced up, tail wagging like he’d been given the best treat in the world. In no time, he had the six ducks in a tight circle. He sat and tilted his head at Jolie.

She laughed and clapped. “Good boy, Hemsworth. That’ll do.”

At the words that’ll do, the dog moved away from the flock and returned to her side, where she rubbed his fur. The ducks wandered off slowly, checking the dog to see if he was going to chase them again. Not a single feather was ruffled. They didn’t appear to mind the dog or the herding process at all.

Ford smiled at her. “Looks like you’ve got a duck herder.”

She nodded. “Look out snails, we’re coming for you soon.” And she couldn’t wait.

With Lorraine’s help, they led Hemsworth through a bunch of exercises. The dog was well trained and followed commands readily. He wasn’t distracted by the world going on around them. In short, he was perfect, and Jolie couldn’t imagine giving him up.

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Lorraine smiled. “I think you’re got yourself a wonderful dog, but if things change, let me know. The vet sent along a package of his preferred dog food and a record of his shots and medical history. He’s a healthy boy.”

She and Ford walked Lorraine back to her car, with Hemsworth trotting along beside them, no leash required.

Ford surprised Jolie by bringing up the tire tracks at the pond to their neighbor. “We had a visitor to the pond last night. Someone on an ATV. Do you know if there are more homes behind the woods that border our properties?”

Lorraine frowned. “Dani Richards’s property is just beside mine, but she wouldn’t trespass on your land, and I don’t think she owns an ATV. There’s nothing beyond her. Not for a long way. Those woods go a few miles and up into the mountains before there are any more roads or properties. It’s mostly wilderness, and I’ve never heard of any regular hiking or ATV trails out here. Did they cause any problems? Is the man who bothered Thea still in jail?”

Jolie nodded. “He is. We also found game cameras trained on the pond, but not at angles that would help a photographer or even a hunter. They appeared to be trained on the pond itself.”

Lorraine frowned. “That’s odd. Any idea why?”

Ford nodded. “Jolie was checking out the bottom of the pond yesterday and realized there’s something on the bottom. A cylinder of some kind. She wasn’t able to get it out on her own and we don’t know if it’s leaking anything toxic.”

Lorraine nodded. “You need to remove that. But there might be something else in the pond. If you had a visitor for the first time since you’ve been here the night after you found that cylinder, it’s doubtful it’s a coincidence.”

Jolie agreed. “Exactly what we thought. We left the cameras in place and we’re acting as if we don’t have a clue today. I didn’t find any more human-made things in the pond.”

“Our lands aren’t easily accessible to anyone else. It doesn’t make sense that someone is using it for a garbage dump. Do you think they’re hiding something there?”

Ford squeezed Jolie’s hand. “Probably.”

Lorraine patted Hemsworth’s head as they arrived at her car. “I’m glad you’ve got another good protector here. Make sure you’re careful, and let me know if I can help. If you want my troop to patrol the area, we can do that.”

Jolie smiled. “You’re already been a big help. Hemsworth here is going to be a great addition. Thank you so much for finding him for us.”

The older woman smiled. “Dogs are my soft spot. I’m always happy to help them find loving homes. You’re all going to be happy together. Bring him over anytime to play with my pack. Socialization is important for them all.”

Once Lorraine had driven away, Jolie turned and wrapped her arms around Ford. Hemsworth sat on his haunches beside them.

“Do you think it’s something dangerous?”

Ford held her firmly. “Maybe. Or something valuable.”

“Then why would they hide it? Especially in a pond?”

He shrugged. “No idea. It’s a strange place to hide anything. But the fact that no one has paid much attention to that pond for years, maybe decades, means it’s a secure hiding spot. The pond isn’t big enough to lose the cylinder. And the cameras help them know if anyone spots it.”

“What do you think we should do now?”

He ran his arms up and down her back. “Not sure. Today should have shown anyone watching that we’re ignoring Cyril for now. That means they might just ignore it like they have been.”

“But they might not.”

He sighed into her hair. “No. They might not. Now that they think we might have spotted Cyril, they could want to retrieve it. Which we could just let them do. Then it’s over.”

“Except if a criminal has hidden something, letting them take it means they’re getting away with a crime.”

He chuckled. “You weren’t supposed to be smart enough to figure that out.”

She poked him in the chest. “Hey, I’ve watched my share of TV.”

He laughed and kissed her hair. “Okay, Matlock, let’s talk to the others and figure out what we want to do next.”

Chapter16

## Battle Stations

Ford was glad when the group headed to the farmhouse to regroup over supper. He was tired of thinking some asshole was watching Jolie. He wanted her safe in the farmhouse for a while.

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Maybe he and Annie could talk the two women into staying there for the night while he and his buddy headed out to observe. He knew that wasn't likely to happen, but a man could hope.

Hemsworth followed along with nothing more than a wave. He'd been well-trained and was used to roaming freely. Keeping the dog on a leash would have been insulting.

At the farmhouse, the dog walked in with them. He sniffed around the mudroom and the kitchen, but didn't move to explore further.

Jolie frowned. "We'll pick up some toys and a dog bed for Hemsworth the next time we're in Phail. For now, I'll get him a blanket so he doesn't have to use the hard floor if he wants to nap."

Thea had made up a pot of soup earlier. She turned the burner on under the pot and started building grilled cheese sandwiches to go with it.

When they all sat down to eat, Hemsworth curled up on his blanket with bowls of water and food.

The homey vibe hit Ford hard. It reminded him of the few memories he had of his mom before cancer had taken her. His dad was a great man, and he'd taken good care of them all despite his own overwhelming grief. They'd had meals together, talked about important and silly things, looked out for each other, and the home had been filled with love.

This was the same kind of vibe. Family. Connectedness.

Jolie bumped his shoulder. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Just thinking. Even with the worry over Cyril, this is nice.”

She smiled. “I know exactly what you mean. I’m so glad we all arrived at the farm. I think Jay and Fox would love to see the four of us here.”

Knox nodded. “With more to come.”

Ford spooned up some soup. “Who are you working on next?”

His buddy grinned. “Both Lawson and Amber. Burke is a harder sell, but once he sees us all here and thriving, he’ll need to be part of it, too.”

Jolie laughed. “I’m working on Amber. Did you guess I’d be the first one here?”

“Of course. You’ve always been the first one to jump onboard for a new adventure.”

Ford loved that about Jolie.

Loved? Liked.

Nope, loved. Damn. The last thing he needed was to be hit with the realization that he’d fallen completely in love with this woman at the dinner table.

He busied himself with his food while the siblings plotted how to lure more Malssums here.

Love. He was in love. The forever kind.

Which was great as long as he wasn't the only one feeling things. He knew Jolie cared about him. Enjoyed his company. Kissed him like she wanted to do only that for the rest of her life.

But love?

He was a smart man with a shit-ton of determination. If she wasn't in love with him, he'd work on it. Turn on the charm.

Did he have charm?

Knox's next words had Ford tuning back into the conversation.

"I took one of the security cameras from the harvesting barn and installed it down at the pond today."

Ford wasn't the only one who'd missed that. "How'd you pull that off without us seeing?"

Knox's grin turned cocky. "I'm good."

Thea poked him. "Sneaky. You mean sneaky."

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“That, too.”

Ford narrowed his eyes and searched his memory until he realized where Annie had set it up. “You put it on the tree closest to where we parked the ATV. The one where you were pulling off those vines you said were choking it.”

Knox nodded. “It was the closest place I could think of that wouldn’t be obvious. Our cameras are motion-activated and solar powered, so it should work.”

Ford nodded. “Good plan. I was thinking of putting one on the duck coop, hiding it with some kind of decoration, but the tree is better.”

Knox laughed. “The duck coop would be a great place. You’ve already made it fun, so adding another decoration with a hidden camera would be easy and it wouldn’t attract any attention. The coop moves daily, so we could angle it wherever we want. I’m going to text Sam and order a few more cameras.”

Sam Young and some of his friends ran Midnight Lake Security. He was a security specialist and would know exactly what they’d need to secure the property. “Good plan. Even though this stuff with Cyril should be easy to solve, more security is never a bad idea.”

Jolie sighed. “It’s been so peaceful and happy down at the pond. I hate that someone has ruined that.”

He put his arm around her and squeezed. “It’s only temporary. We’ll have this solved soon. Probably by tomorrow. Then we’ll be back to normal.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Tomorrow? What makes you think that?”

Although he hadn’t talked with Knox, he knew they were thinking along the same lines. “Annie and I are going to stay down by the pond tonight. We’ll make a show of leaving after we secure the ducks, but we’ll find a good vantage point to watch and see what happens.”

Knox nodded. “If no one shows up, we’ll get Cyril out of the pond tomorrow. Either way, it’ll be over.”

The women exchanged a glance, making him wonder if they’d developed their own silent communication system in the short time they’d known each other.

Jolie spoke. “You’re not staying down there alone. We’ll all stay.”

“No.” He and Knox spoke at the same time.

Thea snorted. “You don’t get to decide for us.”

Ford sighed. “It’s safer if you stay here. There’s no sense in all of us being uncomfortable.”

Jolie rolled her eyes. “We’ll bring down some sleeping bags or blankets. Then we’ll take shifts so that no one is up all night. We’ll bring Hemsworth with us. He’ll be a good alert system. And maybe Fox will show up.”

He groaned. “Great. Why don’t we make it a party? That’ll be the best way to stay hidden.”

Jolie laughed and kissed his cheek. “Don’t be grumpy. We’re not staying here while the menfolk ride off into danger.”

He glanced at Knox and saw the same resignation in his eyes. “Looks like it a party.”

Jolie’s eyes sparkled. “Maybe we should make s’mores.”

He knew she was teasing, but he hated that he couldn’t talk her into staying far away from the potential danger.

Even though he and Knox were trained to handle almost anything, when dealing with dangerous people, there was always the potential for someone to get hurt.

If anything happened to Jolie on his watch, he didn’t know how he was supposed to handle it.

Love was a hell of a thing.

Jolie knew the men were annoyed she and Thea insisted on joining their reconnaissance mission, but it wouldn’t stop either of them from tagging along.

Four was better than two.

She wouldn’t sleep in the farmhouse knowing someone dangerous might come to retrieve Cyril while Ford and Knox were out there.

They might all be overreacting. It might simply be a coincidence that an ATV had arrived the night after she’d found Cyril. But if the driver had been there to check on the cylinder, why hadn’t they simply taken it out of the pond? Surely, if they’d put it there in the first place, they had a plan to retrieve it.

Which meant they’d only been checking the previous night. If they returned tonight, they’d be prepared.

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Maybe it would be better if they all stayed in the farmhouse and kept safe. If these people wanted Cyril, they could have it.

But she didn't say it aloud.

Knox and Ford were military men. They'd joined the army to help make the world safer. That was ingrained in both their souls.

She and Thea both wanted to make the world better, too, but they'd chosen a far different route from the men.

If there was a possibility that some criminal element was involved with Cyril, Ford and Knox wanted to intervene. Even if it would be safer to just let them take the cylinder.

Once the four of them arrived at the pond, they packed up their equipment from earlier in the day. Daylight lasted longer these days, but dusk was coming. "Why don't I just grab my snorkeling gear and go get Cyril now?"

Ford shook his head. "It's not safe to go down at night, especially alone."

"It's not dark yet."

"But it's getting there. And we don't have your equipment. We'll bring it down first thing in the morning. Then I'll dive in and get it."

"My wetsuit won't fit you. I'll go."

He sighed. “We’ll figure it out in the morning.”

Which meant he’d try to talk her out of it. Not a chance. Not when she wasn’t sure the water was clean enough for him to dive without a suit. “I should have just dived in when I found it. That would have saved us all this trouble.”

He tugged her to a stop and brushed his hand over her cheek. “Your reasons for not doing it then are still valid. If Cyril is leaking anything, it’s not good to go down there at all. Even with snorkeling gear, it’s probably going to take more than one trip to get it out.”

“I wish there was a nearby place to fill my scuba tanks. That would make it all easier.”

He hugged her. “We’ll get it figured out.”

“Do you really think some criminal tossed Cyril in the pond to hide some evidence?”

He shrugged. “I think it’s a strong possibility. This is a remote pond that’s not easily accessible by roads. It’s on a farm that hasn’t been operational in a decade or more. If someone is hiding things and waiting for the police to lose interest, this is a good spot.”

“It would have been easier to hide it in the woods.”

“Sure, but it would have been easier for it to be found by someone else, too. There was almost zero chance of it being found in the pond.”

“Until I came along.”

He kissed her forehead. “Until Jay left you all the farm, and you followed Thea’s lead

and make it healthier and more productive.”

She hugged him back, and they moved to join the others. “I just wish they’d retrieved Cyril before we got here.”

He squeezed her hand. “That would have been easier. But this way, there’s a chance that we can take down some criminals.”

She frowned at him. “You sound almost excited by that.”

He grinned. “Hard not to be. Taking the bad guys out of commission is a rush.”

Men. She’d never truly understand them. Her brothers would all feel the same. Fox, too. She preferred her corner of the world to be peaceful.

The four of them put away the canoe and equipment they’d been using earlier. Lorraine’s arrival with Hemsworth meant they hadn’t finished any of their tasks. Which gave them a good excuse to have all four of them here.

Hemsworth roamed the area, but never left their sight. He sniffed at everything and didn’t put up any signals he found anything disturbing. Fox showed up for a while and the two dogs went through their sniffing routine, and then each did their own thing. Friendly but not yet friends.

When the light dimmed, Jolie called Hemsworth over. He bounced over with a grin and wagging tail. She pointed at the ducks. “Hemsworth. Cast.”

They’d moved the Quack Mobile to a new position for the night and filled the water bowl. When the dog had the birds grouped, she walked to the coop and pointed. She wasn’t sure what other words to use, so she pointed to the open coop door. “Hemsworth, in the coop.”

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Hemsworth tilted his head as he looked at her. Confused by the different words. She kept her eyes on him and patted the top of the coop. “In the coop.”

Hemsworth moved around the edges of the flock, guiding them toward Jolie, and they moved easily into the Quack Mobile.

After she locked up the coop, she and Ford both praised him and gave him a rubdown along with the treat they’d brought along.

Ford smiled. “Looks like you’ve passed the Fox test and the herding test, Hemsworth.” He turned to Jolie. “You ready to tell Lorraine we’re keeping him?”

His use of the word ‘we’ had her lighting up. “I am. You?”

He nodded. “He’s a great dog. Not only for the ducks, but I like having him around. We always had at least one dog growing up. I’ve missed that.”

“It’s too late tonight, but I’ll call Lorraine with the good news in the morning.”

Ford ruffled the dog’s head. “Hear that, Hemsworth? You’ve got yourself a job and a family. What do you think about that?”

The dog appeared as happy as Jolie felt. The thought of the three of them as a family filled her with joy.

If only they didn’t have the worry about Cyril hanging over their heads, it would be the perfect night to tell Ford she was in love with him.

Ford won the round of Rock, Paper, Scissors over Knox, so he and Jolie took the first watch. She'd tried to have them divide the night into four chunks, with them each taking their own watch, but he and Annie had shot down that suggestion immediately. It was bad enough with them here with potential danger. Having them face it on their own? Not a chance.

Knox and Thea moved further back into the trees to set up a rest area. They'd found a few sleeping bags in the attic, and they'd brought a tarp to set on the ground beneath them.

It wouldn't be like camping with a tent, but on short notice, it was a hell of a lot better than many of the places he'd spent the night overseas.

And he'd have Jolie with him, which meant the night was going to be stellar, anyway.

Not that they'd have sex tonight. Not with a threat hanging over them and the others close by. But he'd have her in his arms.

Was she ready for sex? That would wait for another night when there was no danger, and they had a comfortable bed so he could explore her fabulous body without worrying about her getting bruised by the rocks beneath them.

Yanking his focus back to the task at hand, Ford walked through the edge of the trees and bushes, deciding on the best place to observe both the pond and the trees beyond it.

They'd all changed into dark clothes without zippers that would catch the light. They wore dark ball caps that would add shadows to their faces.

He stopped in an area that wasn't directly across the pond from where they'd found the ATV tracks. They'd be too easy to spot there.

This spot had several trees and bushes that would provide good cover. He stopped and put his mouth to Jolie's ear. He doubted there was anyone nearby, but enjoyed feeling her reaction to his touch. "I'm going to do a quick scout in the woods. I know you want to come, but I know where the cameras are and I just want to see if anyone has played with them. It'll be easier with just me."

She frowned slightly, but nodded. "How long?"

"Give me twenty minutes. I shouldn't be that long, but if I'm not back, text your brother."

She nodded and checked the time on her phone. They'd all dimmed the lights on their devices, but she still turned her back to the pond and squatted down before she checked. Smart.

He kissed her, then turned to the woods.

It didn't take long to see the cameras remained in place. Not surprising. The person didn't have Cyril yet, so they wouldn't take away the cameras until they had their prize.

Monitoring the time, he did a quick scout of the area. Nothing appeared changed. No signs of human activity. No sounds out of place.

When he returned, he found Jolie where he expected, which had him kissing her again. "No signs of anything having been changed. No signs of humans."

They then settled in to wait.

For an untrained civilian, Jolie proved capable of staying still and silent for long stretches. Knowing her, it probably drove her nuts. She was a woman who liked to

move, who liked to be accomplishing something all the time.

Maybe the idea that they were keeping her property safe helped her. Stakeouts were boring as hell.

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At the appointed time, Knox and Thea materialized out of shadows. They exchanged information quietly, and then he and Jolie headed away from the pond.

Following Knox's directions, he found the sleeping bags set up under a tree. "Keep your boots on in case we need to move quickly."

She sighed and sat down. "We're going to have to wash these sleeping bags tomorrow if we're wearing boots."

He chuckled. "There are worse things than wearing boots to sleep in."

She smiled. "I know, it just annoys me. Who knew that staying still and silent could be so exhausting? I'm completely worn out, and we did nothing except watch."

Knox and Thea had zipped two sleeping bags together to make one large bag. He slipped in beside Jolie and tugged her into his arms. "Surveillance and waiting suck."

She laughed, but kept it quiet. "They really do."

She twisted a bit and then rested her head on his chest. He wrapped his arm around her and breathed in her scent, enjoyed her curves against him. "This, however, doesn't suck at all."

She turned her face into his chest to muffle her laugh. "You're right. This is very, very nice. Although it would be nicer without the boots."

He squeezed her as he laughed. "Agreed. No boots would be better."

Her voice was quiet. “And a few less layers of clothing.”

His body reacted predictably to her words. “That sounds perfect. Not for tonight when we’re on a mission, though.”

Her sigh was content. “No, not tonight. But, soon, Ford. Really soon.”

He kissed her hair and rubbed his hand softly up and down her arm. “As soon as you’re ready.”

She yawned and patted his chest. “I’m ready when you are.”

Hell, yeah.

## Chapter 17

### You Sure Know How To Pick 'Em

Jolie woke at the quiet buzz of Ford’s alarm. She hadn’t expected to sleep at all, but Ford’s presence had chased away all of her worries.

She’d slept well, her dreams full of the sexy man holding her close and keeping her safe.

It was still dark, but lighter than when they’d fallen asleep. Dawn wasn’t far off.

She patted Ford’s chest. “Morning.”

He kissed her hair. “Good morning. You feeling okay?”

She lifted her head to grin at him. “Waking with a sexy man offering himself as my

pillow? I'm great."

He grinned. "Good to hear." And then he kissed her until her brain forgot everything but the feel of him.

When he pulled back, he sighed. "Okay, let's check in with the others. I'm guessing nothing happened or they would have woken us."

In moments, they were up, chewing breath mints, and heading back to the pond.

They found Knox and Thea leaning against a tree. Her brother held Thea in front of him as they watched the space.

Knox nodded at them. "Good morning. Boring watch. Not a damn thing moved. Except Hemsworth, who changed where he slept a couple of times."

Ford sighed. "Might as well head back to the farmhouse now. I can't imagine them coming in the light when they've seen we're working here at the pond during the day."

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Jolie sighed. “I’m glad they didn’t come and that we’re maybe wrong. I don’t want any danger coming to the farm. But I also wish it was over and done with.”

Everyone nodded, and Ford wrapped his arm around her. “Why don’t we let the ducks out and then head up and make something warm for breakfast? I think we’re going to need fuel for the day.”

Knox nodded. “Bacon, eggs, and home fries.”

Hemsworth stretched and followed as they all moved off. They let out the ducks and walked to the farmhouse where they shared making breakfast.

As they ate, she couldn’t help but feel satisfied. The family vibe was already strong, and it would be better when the others joined them. Maybe she should call Amber again. She knew her sister would love the place, especially the older farmhouse no one had had time to explore.

Fueled with good food and family vibes, Jolie put on a bathing suit under her clothes and went to her car to grab her wetsuit and snorkeling gear.

Her phone beeped with a text while she was sorting through the items in her trunk. The notification was from the lab where she’d sent the initial samples from the pond.

“Good news?” Ford walked toward her, carrying a duffle over his shoulder.

She grinned. “Yes. Very good news. These are the test results from the pond samples.”

“All clear?”

She laughed. “Well, the water’s not clear and there are a variety of issues for me to work through. But there’s nothing dangerous in the water. I don’t need to worry about my skin on the dive. I had some cream to layer over the exposed parts to minimize effects, but now I don’t have to worry about it.”

“Good. Now you won’t argue when I dive with you.”

She scowled at him. “I only have one snorkel. And you wouldn’t have gone down if the water was potentially dangerous.”

He lifted his hand to trace along her jawline and then rested his fingers in her hair. “There was no way you were going down alone. This way, we don’t have to have the argument.”

She pursed her lips. It would have been an epic argument, and she never handled that well. “Glad we don’t have to argue, then.”

He kissed her. “Me too. Let’s go check it out.”

At the pond, nothing appeared to have been disturbed. Hemsworth romped over to play with the ducks and check out the area. They walked around the pond first, but there were no new tire tracks. She figured the security camera would have sent an alert to their phones if there had been, but it was good to see in person that nothing had happened during the time they were eating breakfast.

Ford turned his back to the cameras. “I’m going to do a quick check in the trees.”

She didn’t like him going in alone, but she knew he was highly skilled, so she nodded. “I’ll grab some of the equipment and bring it to the shallow end of the pond.”

He nodded and disappeared.

Jolie brought over a rake, a shovel, and a sturdy stick. She also grabbed the fishing net. If Cyril was as small as she guessed, it should be easier to haul it up with the net. The bungee cords might help too. Especially if the cylinder she'd felt was only part of the object.

When Ford returned, he smiled. "All good."

If the people were watching, she wondered what they were thinking with all the comings and goings at the pond. Had they realized her group knew they'd been there? Did they know they were being watched in return?

She and Ford moved back to where they'd left her wetsuit and snorkel gear. She sighed. "I've changed into my gear millions of times, but knowing they might be watching makes me feel weird and self-conscious. Silly."

Ford growled. "Not silly at all. I don't like it either. I'll stand between you and the cameras. They won't see anything."

She leaned up to kiss him lightly. "I'm wearing a bathing suit, so it's not like there's anything to see, but that helps. Thanks."

She moved as quickly as she could, slipping off her leggings, t-shirt, and sweater. Wetsuits were never the easiest things to put on, but years of practice had her moving quickly. When she zipped it up, she grinned up at Ford. Then she strapped on her headgear with the lamp. "There. Thanks."

His dark eyes flared. "I should be the one thanking you. That was a lot of fun to watch. Made it very difficult to keep my hands off that incredible body of yours."

Her heart thumped and desire flowed through her veins. She wanted to laugh it off, make light of the moment. She also wanted to unzip the suit and have her way with this man. Right here. Right now. No matter who was watching.

Except, eww. “I’ve never had a desire to be an exhibitionist, but if you keep looking at me like that, the wetsuit might just sizzle off.”

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He laughed and leaned down to kiss her so gently she wondered if the sizzling was commencing. “No one else gets to watch, Jolie. Just us. Soon.”

“I hope so.” Her body was going to combust from just his sexy growl.

He groaned and kissed her again. When he pulled away, they gulped in air. He rested his forehead on hers. “Let’s get Cyril out of the pond as quickly as humanly possible.”

“Or faster.”

Laughing, Ford took her hand, and they headed to where she’d left the tools. He nodded at her selection. “Good choices.”

He whipped off his shirt and tossed it to the side. His boots and jeans followed. Then he wore only board shorts, riding low on his hips.

Jolie couldn’t have moved or looked away even if an alien spaceship had landed beside them. The man was gorgeous. Movie star gorgeous. But better because he was real. And he was hers.

She hoped forever, but at least for now.

With a sexy chuckle, Ford tapped her chin, making her realize her mouth had dropped open. She yanked her eyes off his magnificent body, which was visibly ready to go, up to his eyes. The desire she’d so often seen wasn’t banked in the least.

Her entire body reacted to his look. If her heart hadn't long since been lost to him, it would have tumbled to her feet when she saw the answering affection and desire in his gaze.

He sighed dramatically. "Man. Okay. If we don't get moving, the camera operators are going to get a hell of a show. Choose your weapon."

He gestured to the tools she'd brought to the edge, but her eyes drifted to where his erection strained against his shorts.

Ford choked out a laugh and handed her the shovel. He grabbed the stick with one hand and took her hand with the other. "Let's go cool off. Once we have Cyril, you're all mine."

Little did he know she already was.

Ford let the chilly water cool his libido. Jolie didn't appear to have a clue how incredibly sexy she was. Which made her even sexier.

Add in her joy in the world around her, her smart brain, and a heart that wanted to make everything better, and she was the most desirable woman he'd ever met.

He couldn't wait to explore her body and find out what drove her wild. What made her sigh. And gasp. And scream.

With an effort, he pulled his focus to the task at hand. Work first, pleasure later. Lots and lots of pleasure. He hoped like hell she had no other plans for the day because once he had her in his bed, he wouldn't want to let her go.

Focus.

Cold water. Cyril. Keeping Jolie safe.

That last one helped, and he settled into the task. “I never thought I’d need my wetsuit when I moved to Vermont.”

She laughed. “Me neither, but I’m glad I didn’t sell it. You have your own suit?”

He nodded. “We did water training in the army. I enjoy scuba diving. My suit’s still at my dad’s in Miami.”

“If you get it sent up here, it would be fun to check out Lake Champlain like Troy suggested.”

He nodded. “Shipwrecks are fun. We’ll make a weekend of it.”

Her face brightened. “I like the sound of that. For more reasons than just diving in clear water. I doubt Cyril is from a shipwreck.”

“Let’s find out.”

It took three dives before they located the cylinder. Another two dives to loosen it a bit from where it was wedged in some rocks.

The murkiness of the water was worse the lower they went. Their attempts to dislodge the cylinder didn’t help, and the water was cloudier with every dive. Jolie’s headlamp helped, but the visibility stunk.

When they surfaced for more air, Thea and Knox had arrived. They stood at the shallow edge of the pond near the other equipment. “Find our friend yet?”

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Ford nodded. “We’ve got him and he’s almost loose. Toss me the fishing net.”

He swam closer and Knox tossed it right to him. “If we still can’t dislodge it, we might need an extra set of hands.”

Knox nodded. “No problem. I came prepared.”

Not surprising. But he’d rather have Knox on land and ready to react if anyone showed up once they brought up Cyril. “We’ll know more after this dive. Hang on.”

This time when they dove, he used the stick to wedge under the cylinder while Jolie lifted with the shovel and then stuck the net beneath it.

When they surfaced for more air, she grinned at him. “Almost there. I don’t think it’s as heavy as we thought. It was mostly stuck under those rocks.”

He nodded and shook off Knox’s offer to join them. “You might as well stay dry and keep an eye on things. I think we’ve almost got it.”

It took two more dives, but then Cyril was in the net. He dragged it while Jolie took care of the tools.

They turned to the shallow edge of the pond but Jolie stopped and treaded water. “What happens when we take Cyril out? Is there any way for us to disguise it?”

Hell, he hadn’t thought that far. If the people were desperate to get the cylinder back, they could descend like the hounds of hell when they saw it above water.

He turned to Annie. “Give your buddy Marcus a text. Ask him if he can provide some backup up in case this causes a reaction.”

While Knox did that, Thea had another idea. “Let me grab the towels we brought down. If we hold them up for you, can we block Cyril from the cameras?”

Jolie grinned. “Smart. Yes. If there’s an extra one, we can wrap it around Cyril. Hide him from view. Then pretend like we were just having fun.”

He nodded. When they were closer, he slipped the cylinder out of the fishing net and hugged it to his body.

Jolie took the net. “Let me climb out first. If you stay behind me and the tools, you should be able to hide it.”

When they could stand on the bottom, Thea and Knox held up some towels for them. Jolie made a show of stumbling and dropping all the tools while he wrapped the cylinder quickly in one of the towels. Then he took the other one Annie held and wrapped it around his shoulders, hopefully helping to conceal it.

The group tightened around him, trying to look casual for the cameras. When they edged around the pond, he kept in front, hoping the other three would provide cover as he moved away.

Thea had grabbed his boots and clothes, while Knox helped Jolie with the tools.

When they reached the spot where Jolie had changed, she scooped up her clothes and his duffle, and kept walking into the orchard.

Hemsworth trotted along behind like it was a fun game.

Once they were out of sight of the pond, he heaved a sigh of relief. “Nothing on the security cam, Annie?”

“Nothing. We don’t know if Cyril is bringing danger yet, but I think we should hurry to the farmhouse.”

He nodded and slipped on his boots while Knox stuffed Cyril into Ford’s duffel with his clothes. “Agreed.”

Jolie had unzipped her wetsuit and pushed down the top half. He took her hand. “You want to change before we move?”

She shook her head. “No. I feel like someone is watching. It’s probably just nerves, but I’ll feel better once we’re inside.”

He agreed. They picked up the pace as they moved through the orchard. Fox loped in and joined the group, adding another layer of protection. Both dogs would probably let them know if someone unfamiliar approached.

His nerves were singing. Adrenaline explained a lot, but the army had shown them how to control that. Having the woman he loved with him in a potentially dangerous situation added to his nerves and bugged up his control.

He and Annie exchanged a glance. His friend felt it, too. “Fast as we can, everyone.”

Jolie was in the most difficult outfit for running, but she picked up the pace and they hurried through the orchard.

Hemsworth and Fox both barked as they neared the front of the orchard. Ford couldn’t see anything through the trees that didn’t belong, but his nerves wouldn’t settle. He was damn glad they’d called in backup, but the town of Phail was a good

thirty minutes away.

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As they ran, Ford pulled his weapon out of his duffle without losing a stride. Knox unholstered his own, and they moved to keep the women between them.

They needed to get them inside. They needed to give Jolie a chance to take off the wetsuit.

Jolie breathed heavily. “Anyone have car keys on them? I feel like we need to get Cyril to the police as soon as we can.”

She felt the worry, too. It was a good idea, but no one had keys. They were all inside the farmhouse.

When the orchard opened up to show the farmhouse, Ford couldn’t see the entire drive from this angle, but there weren’t any unknown cars or people in his view.

Fox barked and veered to the left. Hemsworth followed.

“Inside. Quick. Then we’ll grab keys and go.”

Everyone picked up speed, and he positioned himself between Jolie and where he figured a sniper might be.

Then the first shot rang out.

Chapter18

Battle Royal

Jolie couldn't contain the yelp when she heard what had to be a gunshot.

Beside her, Ford slipped into warrior mode. She shouldn't have been able to tell when they were running, but she could.

She wanted to help, but she didn't have a clue how. This entire mess was her fault.

She was the one who'd found Cyril.

She was the one who wouldn't let him rest quietly at the bottom of the pond. Her insatiable curiosity might cost them all.

Now, she was putting them in more danger. With her wetsuit on, she wasn't quick enough. She was holding them all back.

All her fault.

Fear had her heart jack hammering and her feet moving as quickly as she could. She should have taken the extra minute to remove the suit earlier.

Or was someone behind them as well? Would that have made them sitting ducks?

Ducks. Were her ducks okay?

Thea flew up the porch steps and unlocked the door. Jolie gulped in air and forced all her energy into her pace.

Faster.

Another shot sounded, and her heart pounded.

“Go. No one’s hit. Go.” Ford’s word were calm but let her know neither he nor her brother had been hit. And if she could get herself inside, they’d be safer.

When they reached the porch steps, Ford’s arm came around her waist and he lifted her up the steps and inside. Knox followed, and the door slammed and locked behind him.

Ford didn’t put her down until they were in the hallway off the kitchen, out of sight of any windows.

“Change, quickly.”

Gulping in breaths, she nodded and started stripping off her wetsuit. Thea dropped beside her and helped her slip her clothes over her bathing suit and get her shoes tied.

The men were no longer with them, but they hadn’t heard anymore gunshots.

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To gain a semblance of calm, she closed her eyes and drew in steady breaths, hoping to get her system under control.

Thea's hand squeezed hers, and she opened her eyes. Better. "What should we do to help?"

Thea shrugged, eyes dark with worry. "No idea. I've texted Marcus to tell him about the shots and the neighbors to alert them to stay inside."

Panic had Jolie's heart thumping again. "Hemsworth? Did he get inside?"

Thea's eyes widened. "I don't think so. They raced off toward the driveway and I haven't seen them since."

Jolie forced down her panic for the dogs. She shoved to her feet, glad to find her legs would hold her. "Do you know if either Ford or Knox has another gun? We could grab them to help."

"You can shoot?"

Jolie shrugged. "No idea, but if it'll help protect us all, I'm sure we can figure it out."

Jolie gathered up her wetsuit and crept into the nearest room to get it out of the way. She didn't want it to trip any of them up, so she set it and her headlamp on the closest couch.

She returned to the hallway, still working to control her breathing and her fear. Were

Ford and Knox okay? There hadn't been anymore shots, which had to be good news, but she kept her voice low. "We have to help. We need weapons we're comfortable using. And we need to hide Cyril."

She'd hadn't had the bandwidth to do anything other than run. How had Ford lifted her and had his weapon up to protect her while holding Cyril? Was it in the duffle he'd carried? "Where's the cylinder?"

The bag wasn't in the hallway, so she crouched down and moved to peek through the swinging door back into the kitchen. Sure enough, Ford's duffle sat on the floor.

Staying as low as she could, she darted in, grabbed it, and returned to the hallway, heart thumping.

A quick peek inside showed Cyril nestled up with Ford's clothes. "It's so much smaller than I originally thought."

The cylinder wasn't even two feet long, maybe eight inches in diameter. Metallic with a seam near the top, showing it was a lid. Should she hide Cyril or carry the duffle so she didn't lose it?

She returned Cyril to the duffel and slipped the handles over her shoulders so she could carry it like a backpack until they found a good hiding space. Thea nodded at her. "What do you think we should do?"

"I'm not sure, but waiting sucks. I want to know what's happening and how we can help, but I don't want to get in the way either."

Thea nodded. "They're trained for this, but I don't like hiding without a way to help."

"Me neither."

They hadn't heard anything more, so they walked to the end of the hall, near the front door of the farmhouse and the exterior door they never used as they always came in through the kitchen. No people were visible outside, but she felt like a target. "There aren't any curtains, so I don't think we should go this way."

Thea agreed. "The room with Jay's recliner has curtains and faces the side yard. Why don't we start there? At the very least, we can look outside to see if the shooter is on that side."

That view showed them nothing, and they'd seen no sign of Ford or Knox. "Do you think the guys went upstairs for a better view? Should we head up so that we're not as easy to spot? Or should we stay down here where we don't get trapped?"

Thea sighed. "I don't know. Both options sound just as smart."

"And they both sound just as stupid, too. I hate this." Jolie sighed. "I want to peek out the back window. See if we can check on Hemsworth and Fox at least."

Thea nodded, and they crept back to the kitchen, which would have the best view. They were almost there when another shot rang out. Glass shattered and the back door leading to the kitchen crashed open.

Taking Thea's hand, she turned and ran, heading back to the far side of the house.

Ford cursed when he heard the shot and the glass shatter. The assholes had broken in the back door. Close to where he'd left Jolie and Thea.

Knox had taken the main level while Ford had raced up the stairs to get a view from the high ground. Not that he'd been able to spot anyone. Not with the number of trees on the ground and the overgrown gardens and bushes providing options for cover. He'd tried every window, but none had a good view.

He crept down the stairs, gun out and ready. He avoided the squeaky stairs and descended as quickly and silently as he could manage.

At the bottom, he waited for some clue to give him a direction. After the noise in the kitchen, he'd heard only silence. Did Knox have the women with him? Or were they on their own?

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Shit. He shouldn't have taken off, but getting the higher ground was always important. Except in this case, where it had only wasted his time.

Jolie and Thea wouldn't have returned to the kitchen, especially after someone crashed through the door.

He spotted the wetsuit resting over the back of a chair in a room none of them used. Jolie had probably moved it out of the way. She wouldn't stay in the room where she'd left it, but it might lure in the shooters.

Ford pressed against the wall before peeking fully into the room with his gun ready. No one.

The house appeared quiet around him, but he knew that wasn't the case. The home was huge. The main floor housed three living spaces, a library, the huge kitchen, the mudroom, a bathroom, and the laundry.

The women hadn't gone up the stairs, but maybe they'd headed down. Or would they head for another room where they could climb out a window? That would be better than being trapped in the basement.

The shooters wouldn't know the layout of the house, so they'd have to search room by room. Ford hadn't studied the rooms enough himself, but there were a few closets in hallways and there were large cupboards beneath the tall shelves in the library and living spaces. If they were empty, the women could hide in there. Why hadn't he ever looked to see if they were empty? Why hadn't he checked the house more thoroughly to know all the hidey-holes and escape routes?

Because he'd never expected to have an active shooter situation here.

Thanks to his training, he kept his panic under control and his senses open. If Knox had found an opportunity, he would have hustled the women outside and into a car or the orchard. Unless there were more assholes out that way.

Ford cursed the lack of a sight line from the second floor. He didn't even know how many assholes to look for.

A squeak alerted Ford to movement toward the middle of the house. Friend or foe?

He squatted to peek around the hallway corner and saw nothing. He moved toward the noise. A few steps later, he heard another squeak. He was closer.

Knox appeared a moment later from the far end of the hallway, his own gun up. If Knox hadn't made the noise, someone was between them. The only question was if it was the women or the people attacking them.

The library sat along this hallway and as they closed in from both sides, another squeak proved someone was there. He doubted Jolie and Thea would wander the room if they were hiding inside, which meant it was likely the shooters. And they were going down.

With quick hand signals, he and Annie figured out their simple strategy. Ford high and right. Knox low and left.

Neither of them made a sound as they approached the door. Why were the assholes staying inside? It wouldn't take long to search a room for the cylinder.

With a start, he realized he hadn't spared Cyril a single thought. His duffle hadn't been with the wetsuit, or in any of the places he'd seen. It was either where he'd

dropped it in the kitchen or Jolie had taken it with her.

A voice inside the room confirmed it wasn't the women. "We know you're in there. Come out and we won't shoot you."

Damn it. The voice meant there were at least two of them. And it meant they'd spotted some sign showing the women were hiding in the library. Probably in the cupboards Ford had imagined earlier.

If the shooters were focused on the cupboards, they weren't facing the door.

Good news.

Knox nodded once, and the two of them pushed through the door.

Two men stood across the room, guns aimed at the cupboards.

Ford growled low in his throat. These men had aimed guns at the women and they were going to pay. "Drop the weapons assholes, and you might live."

Startled, both men whirled and tried to bring their weapons to bear on Ford and Knox. Too late.

He and Annie shot at the same time. The enemies' guns clattered to the floor, and the men howled in pain. They dropped to their knees and clutched the shoulders of their shooting arms.

Ford cleared the weapons and Knox pulled out zip ties. Something they both carried with them at normal times. A habit they'd picked up in the army and never dropped. Zip ties were handy in all kinds of situations. Because Ford had been diving earlier, the zips were in his jeans, not in the board shorts he wore.

When they'd secured both men with their hands behind their back and their ankles tied together, Ford dragged one to the far side of the room to separate them. The ties would be difficult to break, especially with a bullet in the shoulder, but this way, they couldn't help each other. Then he grabbed a blanket off the back of a chair and ripped it. The homemade gags wouldn't be perfect, but they'd give him and Ford a few minutes.

Annie moved to the cupboards and kept his voice soft. "It's me and Dodge. I'm opening the doors."

They didn't know how many assholes there were. No sense in alerting them two of their team were down.

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Annie cursed softly and Ford turned to see the cupboard doors open. They were jammed with books and board games. Not a woman in sight.

Where was Jolie?

### Chapter19

#### A Pitched Battle

Jolie's heart pounded hard enough to be felt all the way back to the Carolinas.

She and Thea crouched behind the couch in the family room where Jay had spent the most time. They'd planned to go out the window on the side of the house, away from the driveway. The overgrown gardens were close to the trees, and they'd figured that was the safest option.

Except the windows were old and painted shut. Other than breaking the glass, they couldn't open them.

She leaned close to Thea. "Break it or find a better hiding place? Anywhere come to mind?"

Thea shook her head. "The basement doesn't seem like a good idea. There's only the one way out. The closets and cupboards on this floor are obvious and mostly filled with stuff, anyway."

"Anything that might work as a weapon is probably in the kitchen. Should we go

back there? Grab something and head outside to hide in the orchard?”

Hiding inside would be better, but despite the size of the farmhouse, there weren't a lot of places. Too bad there wasn't a hidden room like in the books she'd read.

Being vulnerable and weaponless wasn't sitting well with either of them, so they decided they would head back to the kitchen. They just had to be brave enough to get there.

Before Jolie could ease open the door, she heard male voices. They weren't loud enough to hear the words, but she didn't think it was Ford and Knox.

Panic threatened to overwhelm her, and she closed her eyes to force herself to breathe.

Two gunshots sounded almost simultaneously, and her knees wobbled. She had to lean on the doorjamb to stay upright.

Was Ford okay? Her brother?

She found Thea's eyes wide and she could feel her friend's panic and pain as well as she felt her own. “We need weapons. We need to help.”

Thea nodded. Together, they pulled in a few breaths and then eased out of the door, listening for any more sounds. Looking for any signs.

Be okay. Please be okay.

She was ready to promise the universe anything in order to ensure Ford and her brother were safe and would remain that way.

As they passed the library, they heard noises inside, but couldn't tell what was happening. They hurried past the room and to the kitchen in search of weapons. Knives. Rolling pins. Cast-iron pans. Anything that might help them.

The kitchen door was a swinging one, but it rested still. She eased it open slowly but didn't hear any reaction. A peek showed her the room was empty, so they hurried in. Thea eased the door to stillness while Jolie headed to the knife block.

She was less than a yard away when a man stepped through the space where the back door hung loosely. The man's gun aimed straight at her.

She didn't know him, but she knew he wasn't one of the good guys from Phail to help them. Not with the look on his face. His eyes were mean and his smirk creepy.

"Not another step."

Even if she was brave enough to disobey, a knife wouldn't be effective against his gun.

She hoped Thea had slipped back into the hallway, but the man's eyes shot away from Jolie.

"Take another step toward that door and this one dies."

She heard Thea's gasp and knew her friend had frozen, too.

Another man entered from the porch. His grin was even creepier. His eyes roved over Jolie, making her shudder. "Well, it looks like we've got ourselves a bonus prize. We can have a bit of fun as a reward for a job well done."

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Jolie's stomach turned over.

Creep Two nudged his friend. "Where are the other two?"

Creep One shrugged. "I was outside with you. How the hell should I know?"

Creep Two rolled his eyes and walked toward Jolie. He lifted his gun and brushed it along the side of her jaw, making her shudder again. "Where are the rest?"

She didn't answer.

His eyes narrowed, and he brought the gun up to rest the muzzle on her forehead.

Fear consumed her. She didn't want to die. She hadn't told Ford she loved him. They hadn't started their lives together. Hell, they hadn't even slept together. And that was going to be amazing. No way was this jerk robbing her of that opportunity.

His expression brightened, and she realized he was enjoying her fear. His voice spat at her. "You've got what's mine. I want it back. If you return it, I might just let you live. I think you could warm my bed just fine. And there might even be a little something in it for you once I'm done."

"A little something like a venereal disease?" She shouldn't have said that, but the words had just popped out. At least she hadn't asked if his penis was the little something he was offering.

Creep Two's eyes hardened, and he pressed the gun harder into her head. "Or you can

die slowly and painfully after we've all had a turn with you and your friend here."

Her throat tightened up and she couldn't swallow, never mind speak. Why hadn't that happened ten seconds earlier? Then she wouldn't have made everything worse. Again.

Refusing to let the tears form in her eyes, Jolie forced her fear under control. She'd be brave like Ford. Like her brothers. They'd faced death many times in their careers. She didn't want them to be ashamed of her, and she wasn't going to cower. Maybe she should have used the penis line, anyway. Better to go out with a bang.

Better not to go out at all.

A siren sounded in the distance.

Creep One swore and Creep Two eased off on the pressure of the gun. She didn't dare move a muscle.

Creep One backed toward the door. "Where the fuck are the others? We've got to get out of here."

Creep One swore. "I'm not leaving without my property. Where is it, bitch?"

She'd forgotten all about Ford's duffel that she'd slipped on. She had her back to the counter, so neither of the creeps had spotted it yet. Should she just give it to them? Would they let her and Thea go?

It didn't sound like these two had injured Ford or Knox, but they'd said there were two more of them. They must be the men she'd heard earlier. The shots.

Where was Ford?

These men weren't wearing masks, so she doubted they'd let them live no matter what. If they hadn't seen the duffel, she wasn't alerting them to it.

Creep Two smiled at Jolie. It wasn't comforting. "If you're not worried about yourself, how about this? If you don't tell me where my property is in ten seconds, your friend is going to die."

Jolie couldn't stop the whimper at that.

She was about to tell him she had the cylinder when a loud crash sounded somewhere in the house.

And another gunshot rang out.

Ford was going to carve the asshole into tiny little pieces. Jolie hadn't backed down, hadn't shown fear, but she had to be scared shitless.

The bastard had his gun's muzzle resting right on her forehead.

The jerks hadn't even noticed when he eased the swinging door open incrementally. Ford had his gun trained on the man who pointed at Jolie's brain, but nothing could save her if the jerk shot with the gun right there.

Knox tapped his shoulder in the pattern that let him know his buddy was going to cause a distraction of some kind. Perfect, because Ford had the asshole directly in his sights. All he needed was the gun to move. To not be aimed directly at Jolie.

When the asshole threatened Thea instead, Ford knew his chance was coming. The gun would move. He would take it off Jolie and change his aim to Thea. That would be Ford's opportunity.

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The asshole hadn't even noticed the duffel Jolie wore like a pack. She'd kept herself angled away from him.

Thankfully, she hadn't told him she had the container. He was sure the men had no intention of leaving witnesses behind. Handing over Cyril would have only increased her odds of dying quickly.

He was in love with a smart woman.

As soon as the gun moved far enough from Jolie, Ford moved. He didn't want the gun aimed at Thea either.

A crash and another shot happened behind him. He'd known Knox was creating a distraction, so he didn't so much as blink. Instead, he swung the door hard, slapping it against the wall. The noise and the movement had both men turning to him.

Both the assholes flinched and Ford started to pull the trigger to take the first one down.

Hemsworth and Fox raced through the back door. The dogs flew at the two men, knocking them to the floor. One of their guns fired as Ford moved forward to kick them away. He couldn't take his eyes off them to find out if the bullet hit anyone. "Jolie? You okay? Thea? Anyone hurt?"

It was difficult to hear over the dogs barking and the men swearing. He couldn't take his eyes off the men, so he repeated his questions.

He sensed Jolie approach before she touched his back. “We’re both good. We’re safe. But he said there were more men.”

Knox walked through the door. “We’ve got two of them in the library. We’ll find out if there are more.”

Jolie spoke up. “Creep Two mentioned there were two more. He implied that was all.”

Ford grinned. “Good. We’ve probably got them all, but we’ll do a sweep just in case. Any more zip ties, Annie?”

“All out, but there are more here in the kitchen.” He rummaged through the drawers and soon they had the men tied and under the watchful eye of the two dogs who continued to growl. If either men moved, one of them barked in warning.

“Police.” Marcus’s voice called through the opening where the door had been.

Ford raised his voice. “In the kitchen, Marcus. Four men in custody and secure.”

The police chief moved in with his gun out but facing down. Another officer moved in with him. “Where are the other two?”

Knox spoke up. “This way.”

Knox took Thea’s hand, and they moved to lead the officer to the library.

Ford breathed a sigh of relief and lowered his gun. With his other arm, he wrapped Jolie into him and kissed her hair. “You’re amazing and kickass, and I’m so damn proud of how you handled everything. But we need to find out if there are more people with them.”

She nodded and wrapped her arms around him. “I knew you’d get them. I knew you’d make sure we were safe. Thank you.”

Her words filled him up. He wanted to tell her all the things he was feeling, but this wasn’t the time. “When we’ve cleaned up the asshole mess, I’ve got things to say.”

She smiled up at him. “Me, too.”

Marcus grinned at them both. “Sounds like that should be a private conversation. We’ll get this done as quickly as we can, but it’s going to be a while.”

Jolie squeezed Ford and smiled at the chief. “That’s okay. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

And that sounded amazing.

Marcus’s phone beeped, and he pulled it out. “Backup is here. We’ve got FBI agents and more military officers here to help with this mess.”

The eyes of the men on the ground widened. Ford knew the people coming were all former FBI and former military, but these assholes didn’t need to know that. The more fear, the better.

They separated the four men into different rooms, with at least two of the good guys with each. Hemsworth didn’t leave Jolie’s side while Fox had disappeared into the orchard after he’d hugged both Thea and Knox, and got rubdowns from his other friends.

Ford and Jolie stayed with Marcus and Nico Rivera, a former FBI profiler and current member of the Midnight Security team. They remained in the kitchen with the jerk who’d had his weapon pressed against Jolie’s forehead.

Marcus and Nico lifted the man and set him into a chair. Marcus had patted the man down and had found a knife strapped to his ankle, but no other weapons. He'd found a wallet, though. What kind of idiot took his wallet along for the ride when he was committing a crime? Dumbass.

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Ford pulled one chair to the side for Jolie. He wasn't ready to have her out of his sight yet, especially when they hadn't confirmed they had all the shooters. Hemsworth took up his station at Jolie's side and Ford stood with his hand on her shoulder. She reached up to hold his hand with hers and managed a small smile. He knew that was for his benefit.

Marcus opened the wallet, and the guy snarled.

The police chief ignored him and held up his phone. "I'm recording this conversation. Patrick McConnell. Want to tell me why you threatened to kill this woman?"

McConnell rolled his eyes. "I've got nothing to say."

Marcus ignored that and pulled out his phone. He typed for a few moments and then raised his eyebrow and smiled. "Grand theft larceny. Looks like your stint on the outside is going to be short-lived. You've only been out of prison for a couple of days. You've probably violated every line of your parole order by now. Hope you liked the view from a cell because you're going to enjoy it for many more years."

McConnell swore. "I'm not going back there. You've got nothing on me."

Marcus grinned. "You want a list? And that's just from what I know so far. Once I get statements from these fine folks, I'm going to add a lot more. Your weapon was hot, so it's been fired. Whether in an attempt to murder or maim, I'm not sure yet. Either way, just possessing a weapon is violation one. I'm betting the serial number's been filed off. Violation number two. Threatening. Trespassing. Breaking and entering. Destruction of private property."

The man snarled. “You’ve got nothing.”

Ford growled. “We’ve got all the proof we need, asshole. You had the muzzle of your gun against her forehead while you threatened to rape and kill both her and the other woman.”

Marcus nodded. “And things get worse for you. Better for me. We’ve got four reliable witnesses. And we’ve got your ragtag team in custody.”

Marcus turned to Jolie and Ford and held up his phone. “The others are talking. We have them all in custody, and our ringleader here is not being painted in a flattering light by any of his hired thugs.”

McConnell swore. “I’ll kill them. And you. You’re all going to pay. And when I get my property back, I’ll be so far away, you’ll never find me.”

Dumbass. Ford figured he’d egg him on, get him to spew more while Marcus was recording the entire conversation. “It’s not your property.”

McConnell squirmed in the chair. “It’s mine.”

Ford shook his head. “Nope. She owns the property.”

“Bullshit. That’s mine, and you can’t steal it from me.”

Jolie shifted and slipped the duffel off her shoulders.

McConnell goggled at her. “You had it the whole time? You stupid bitch. That’s mine.” He tried to leap off the chair, but Marcus and Nico easily held him back.

Jolie didn’t flinch. “Our land. Our pond. I’d say our property, but I’m thinking we’ll

return this to whoever you stole it from.”

“It’s mine.” His voice was desperate as he struggled against the two men.

Jolie turned to Marcus. “Do you want me to open it, or would you like to do that once he’s locked away?”

Marcus’s eyes sparkled. “Why don’t you go ahead? That’ll put us one step closer to getting the stolen goods returned to the store McConnell here robbed all those years ago.”

Which meant Marcus knew exactly what was in the cylinder.

Jolie smiled as she handed Cyril to Ford. “Why don’t you do the honors?”

He loosened the lid and twisted it, revealing it was a thermos-style container. He twisted the inner lid and passed it back to Jolie.

She grinned and pulled out a long, thin vacuum-sealed bag.

Jolie gasped, and he was sure his own mouth dropped open.

She held up the bag that was full of small clear stones.

Diamonds.

There’d been dozens and dozens of diamonds on the bottom of the pond.

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Jolie laughed. “Well, I guess I didn’t need to worry about Cyril poisoning the pond, after all.”

### Chapter20

#### Battle Cry

Fatigue dragged at Jolie, but she tried to keep it from showing. Everyone else had to be just as tired as she was, but they needed to finish giving their statements.

A whole caravan of vehicles had driven from the apple farm into Phail.

They’d found the car McConnell and his friends had hidden. Strangely, in the same spot where the man who’d tried to kidnap Thea had parked his car.

There were now plans to put up a fence to block off that section from the road.

Not that it was likely anyone else would try to use it for nefarious purposes again. Twice was enough for one farm.

The Phail Jail—man, she loved this town and its sense of humor—only had two cells, so Marcus had called in some help from the FBI. Not just the former FBI agents who worked at Midnight Lake.

Her mind spun with the competence and experience of the people around her.

A woman named Shanice Williams had arrived with a few agents and secure

transport to take the four prisoners back to New Hampshire before they were transferred again. The FBI was involved because McConnell had robbed a jewelry warehouse back in New York. He'd crossed state lines by bringing the diamonds to Vermont.

Diamonds in her pond.

She and Ford sat with Thea and Knox in the squad room of the Phail Jail and talked to whoever needed their input. They'd given their statements separately and the law enforcement officials were figuring out the next steps.

The entire story was unbelievable. McConnell's grandfather had once owned the farm that Jolie's family had inherited. The man had lost it to bankruptcy a few decades before. McConnell had spent a few childhood summers there.

The man had a list of arrests and prison stints for small-time thefts. This had been his biggest score, and he'd shot a security guard during his escape.

When McConnell had been looking for a safe place to stash the diamonds for a while, he'd thought of the farm and the pond at the back.

His initial plan had been to hide the gems for a few months while he organized an auction. He'd had at least a dozen people interested in buying the stolen diamonds.

Before the auction date, the police had identified him as the prime suspect. His name and face had been splashed all over the media, and most of the people dropped out of the auction.

McConnell had left the diamonds where they were until the heat died down again, and he'd gone into hiding.

But his team wasn't as loyal as he'd thought. McConnell had been caught and had spent the last decade in prison.

While he'd been in prison, McConnell had hired someone to set up the cameras and monitor the pond without ever telling him the reason.

When the man had reported activity at the pond, McConnell had told them to monitor and wait for him, unless the people appeared interested in diving or digging up what was in the bottom of the pond.

McConnell hadn't arrived in the area until that morning, and hadn't had a chance to retrieve the container himself. He'd had diving gear in his vehicle, ready to go. Twenty-four hours too late.

Jolie leaned into Ford's side. "If he'd been released even a week or two earlier, he could have taken back the diamonds and we'd have never known."

He traced patterns over her shoulder with his fingers. "The timing is bizarre. That pond's been left alone for decades. You started investigating right before his release. But now, he's back behind bars where he belongs, and the diamonds will go back to their owner."

She nodded. "It all worked out, but I wish he'd used another pond."

Ford kissed her head. "Me too."

Thea yawned and leaned into Knox. "This has been the longest day."

And it was only early evening.

Jolie's stomach growled, and she laughed. "Anyone else hungry?"

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Ford kissed her head again. “None of us have eaten since breakfast. I’ll talk to Marcus and see if we can head to the Saloon.”

At that moment, Marcus and Shanice approached them. “We’re ready to send these jerks along with Shanice.”

The woman grinned. “The New York office and the NYPD are thrilled to have McConnell and his buddies returning to them. They’re even happier to close this case. Apparently, McConnell is part of a larger organization. In an attempt to gain a lesser sentence, he’s naming as many names as he can.”

Marcus laughed. “Except he didn’t ask for a deal before he started talking. Dumbass.”

Jolie nodded. “Good. I’m glad he’s not getting a deal.” The man should rot in prison forever.

Shanice smiled. “Me too. Thanks for your assistance with all this. I think we have everything we need. I have all of your contact information, so I’ll let you know if anything else comes up. If you have questions, ask.”

Soon, the four of them were sitting at a table in the Saloon. Most of the locals who’d helped during the day joined them.

The group was friendly, the food was delicious, and the time flew. She tried to cover another yawn when Ford squeezed her hand. He smiled at her. “I’m done in, too. You ready to head home?”

Home with Ford. “Sounds perfect to me.”

The four of them said their goodbyes and headed back to Knox’s truck. The drive back was mostly quiet, and she knew the long day had taken its toll on all of them.

When they pulled into the farm, they found two unexpected vehicles. She tensed, but Knox’s voice held a smile. “That’s Lorraine’s SUV and the other one belongs to Mort and Callum, who live just north of Lorraine.”

Jolie blew out a breath of relief, and they piled out of the truck.

On the back deck, they found their three neighbors and several dogs. Hemsworth bounded up to her and Ford while Fox bounced happily to Knox and Thea. Three of Lorraine’s dogs joined them as well.

Lorraine smiled. “You all must be exhausted. Thanks for letting us know they captured those horrid men. Jolie and Ford, I don’t think you’ve met Mort and Callum yet.”

After the introductions, Mort smiled. “We figured you’d feel better with that door closed up.”

Jolie looked up to see that the back door now hung properly. They’d replaced the shattered glass with a sheet of plywood. “Thank you.” Her voice wobbled, and she had to swallow hard.

The trio had also cleaned up the glass and the mess in the kitchen. Lorraine’s dogs had helped Hemsworth rounded up the ducks into their coop for the night.

Ford shook their hands again. “Thank you for everything. Let us know when we can return the favor.”

Mort smiled. “It’s what neighbors do. We can get together another night and get to know each other better. For now, you can rest easy knowing your place is secure.”

Soon, the neighbors were gone, and Fox bounded into the orchard. The dog was becoming more comfortable leaving the trees when it was important, but he still preferred his freedom at night.

Jolie was glad when Hemsworth followed them inside instead of joining his friend. She liked having the dog close. And she didn’t want to be alone tonight. Or any night.

She wanted Ford.

Ford held Jolie’s hand as they walked toward their rooms. He didn’t want to let her go. Not ever.

When they neared his, he slowed but didn’t let go of her. She turned to look up at him, eyes soft and warm.

He brushed her cheek. “You’re coming in.” He tried to make it a question, but didn’t quite manage it. Instead, it sounded like a growly command.

Jolie’s face lit up instantly. “Yes.”

He opened the door and drew her inside. Hemsworth followed them and headed directly to his doggie bed. Apparently, his dog buddies had worn him out because he instantly curled up and fell asleep.

Ford wrapped his arms around Jolie and for a long moment simply held on. Breathed her in. She was safe. The assholes were in jail. He didn’t need to worry about them anymore.

He leaned back and tilted up her chin. Those luminous eyes held everything he wanted. His future. “I love you so damn much, Jolie.”

Her eyes misted with tears, but her smile was glorious. “I love you, too, Ford. So much.”

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His heart damn near exploded. “Good.”

She was laughing when their lips crashed together, and he tasted her joy.

He wanted to devour her in one bite as much as he wanted to take it slowly and savor every inch.

Jolie smiled into the kiss. “I want that, too. All of it. I want you, Ford. Every last inch.”

If her words hadn’t ignited a fire in his veins, he might have felt like a fool for not realizing he’d spoken aloud. “I’m all yours, Jolie.”

“I like the sound of that.”

And he liked the sound of her breathy voice, laden with desire.

And love. She loved him back.

He slipped his hands under her t-shirt and brushed over her soft skin. Up and up until his fingers touched her bra.

He didn’t bother holding in the groan as he brushed over the soft material, stopping at her nipples. They beaded instantly under his touch.

Jolie moaned and lifted her arms to whip her t-shirt over her head. Her purple bra had his pulse rocketing. Even in her underwear, his Jolie loved her colors. He wondered

inately if she had any bras with yellow duckies on them.

And then she shut down his brain when she reached behind to unsnap her bra and let it drop.

His tongue nearly rolled to the floor right along with it. “You’re gorgeous, Jolie. Inside and outside. Right now, I’m going to focus on this glorious outside.”

She laughed as he cupped her breasts and thumbed her nipples, fascinated by her reactions to his every move.

Her laughter turned into moans and then she purred deep in her throat and leaned into his touch.

Needing her all at once, he leaned down to tease one of those glorious nipples with his tongue while his hands got busy undoing her jeans and slipping them down her legs.

As always, they’d kicked off their boots in the mudroom, but he still needed to lift his head to help her slip out of her jeans and panties.

He knelt in front of her and let his eyes soak it all in. She was gloriously naked, and she was his.

His hands drifted up and down her legs and around to her ass. He looked up to find her watching him with eyes on fire. “Hang on to me, Jolie. I need to spend some time studying here. You’re so beautiful and I have so many questions. Questions I can only find answers to by experimenting.”

“Questions?”

He pressed his lips to her stomach. “I want to discover what you like.”

He licked his way to her belly button and dipped his tongue inside. “I want to know what makes you shiver.”

Her body responded to his suggestion, and he felt the shiver through his tongue and the hands where he gripped her ass.

He kissed his way down. “Where’s the best place to kiss to make you purr?”

Her hands dropped to his shoulders as she gasped. He smiled into his kiss as he moved lower still. “Spread those legs a little wider for me.”

She sucked in a breath and did as he asked, leaving him with the best view.

He looked up to find her gaze locked on him. Her breath stuttered. “Ford.”

He grinned. “Ready?”

She nodded, and he turned his attention back to his goal. Making her crazy with his tongue and watching her shatter as many times as he could.

He kissed her thighs, moving closer and closer to her center with every kiss. When her thighs trembled, he tightened his grip.

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Then he licked her, and she gripped his shoulders with another gasp. “Ford.”

He wanted to hear his name in that breathy, desperate voice every day for the rest of his life.

“You taste like honey, Jolie. Best taste in the universe.”

Her knees wobbled, and her fingers tightened.

He dipped in his tongue and stroked. Jolie cried out and her head dropped back.

He added a finger while he stroked her with his tongue. The purrs he loved to hear got breathier and more desperate.

He added another finger and finally let his tongue touch her clit.

“Ford.”

“I’ve got you, Jolie. I’ve got you. Let go. Let me see you shatter.”

It only took another touch of his tongue and she let go with another cry of his name.

Her legs melted completely, and he banded his arm around her to keep her upright.

Feeling like a superhero, he rose and scooped her up and headed to the bed. He was nowhere near done.

One shattering orgasm down, a million to go.

Jolie finally fluttered open her eyes. She didn't want to miss a second of her first time making love with Ford.

Her orgasm had been the most intense experience of her life.

And he'd murmured that they were just getting started.

He laid her gently on the mattress and leaned down to kiss her with such softness that her heart melted. "I love you, Ford."

His eyes flared, and he kissed her with a lot more passion. "I love you, Jolie."

Then he straightened, and she realized he was still fully dressed while she was naked and sated from the best orgasm of her life. "Time for you to be naked, too, Ford."

His growly chuckle had shivers erupting all over her skin. And inside as well. "Yes, ma'am."

She pushed up to her elbows to enjoy the show. He shrugged out of his flannel shirt, revealing the black t-shirt that clung to his muscles and biceps.

Without taking his eyes off of hers, he reached behind his head and yanked off the shirt in one smooth move.

He was gorgeous. Muscled and strong. She couldn't keep the whimper inside and he chuckled again.

He reached for his jeans and she couldn't have looked away even if the house exploded around them. He shucked his jeans and boxer-briefs in one move and

kicked the clothes to the side.

“You’re beautiful, Ford.”

He barked out a laugh. “I believe that’s my line.”

Which filled her with love.

She was a lucky woman who’d fallen in love with an amazing man.

Ford settled on the bed beside her, leaning up on one elbow and looking down at her.

“You feeling okay?”

She laughed. “Any better, and I’m not sure it would be legal.”

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He grinned. “Good. I’ve got more exploring to do.”

“Me too.”

His eyes darkened at her comment and she loved that she could do to him exactly what he was doing to her. Making her feel wanted. Loved.

Ford traced a finger so gently over her breast, like a breath of a summer breeze, and sent more shivers cascading over her skin.

He leaned over and licked, then blew on her breast to heighten the sensation. He pressed a soft kiss on her nipple. “Sounds like we have a lot of work to do for the next few hours. I’d better get started.”

Then he sucked her breast into his mouth, and she cried out again.

He played her body like an instrument, trying different touches with his fingers and his mouth. His growls and chuckles added to the experience, and she was sure there was nothing that could possibly compare to the feelings rocketing through her.

He dropped down her body, started at her toes. She’d had no idea that there were erogenous zones on her feet. Or the backs of her knees. Or the crease between her legs and torso. Or her spine.

When he reached his fingers between her legs again, she couldn’t stop the cry. Or the orgasm that consumed her with barely a touch.

Pleasure swamped her and when she finally was able to discover the world around her again, she found Ford above her, eyes dark and sparkling.

“There you are. Ready for more?”

She lifted a finger to brush it over his face. “I’m ready for you, Ford. Always ready for you.”

She glanced down to find he was already sheathed with a condom. “Next time I want to put that on.”

“Anything you like, Jolie. Anything at all.”

She let her fingers play, but she was ready for more. Ready for everything.

With a growl that sounded like satisfaction, he kissed her. Then he slid into her. Impossibly, her body decided that a third mind-boggling orgasm wasn’t out of reach at all.

He thrust slowly until he couldn’t get any deeper. Their breathing turned harsh and desperate.

She couldn’t form words, she could only remember his name.

And it became a chant as he moved, slowly.

Then faster.

Faster.

More desperate.

When she shouted his name, he groaned out hers, and they shattered together.

## Chapter 21

### Spoils Of War

Ford woke when Hemsworth nuzzled him. He didn't know how much sleep he and Jolie had managed, but it had been the best night of his life.

Jolie lay on his chest with her hand resting on his heart. One of her legs was tangled with his and he'd woken with a smile.

He ruffled the dog's head with one hand. "Just a minute, Hemsworth."

Jolie stirred and kissed his chest. "Morning."

He kissed her hair. "Morning. Hemsworth needs to go out. Stay right there and I'll be back."

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She lifted her head and smiled. Then she turned to the dog. “Good morning, Hemsworth. I hope we didn’t bother you last night.” She grinned at Ford. “I forgot he was even here.”

Ford loved that. “Me too. Didn’t seem to bother him, though. Which is great because I think we should plan on repeating last night every single night in the future.”

She laughed. “An excellent plan. But for now, we need to get up. The ducks have been cooped up for long enough.”

He groaned and thumped back onto the pillow. “Real life. Damn it.”

After they let out the dog, they grabbed some fruit. They’d come back for something more substantial later, but the ducks needed tending. And he wanted to check over the area by the pond. Just in case.

They let Hemsworth take the lead, and it didn’t surprise Ford in the least when the dog aimed straight for the pond and his ducks. “Smart dog.”

Jolie smiled. “He sure is. I think we should have him round up the ducks tonight and get them to snack on some snails.”

He laughed. “I’m going to make sure my stomach isn’t full when we do that.” He said it to hear her laugh, but it was true. Watching ducks gobble snails would probably be disgusting.

At the pond, they let the birds out of the Quack Mobile, with Hemsworth watching

the action and waiting for a command. Jolie frowned. “Do you think he’ll be bored with only having to herd them a few times? There’s only six of them.”

Ford chuckled. “Are you angling to increase your flock?”

She grinned. “Maybe. But I don’t want to get out of control. We’ll see how effective six ducks are at controlling the snails. My preliminary research says the farm can handle a much larger flock, but I’d like to see for myself.”

He nodded. “The entire farm won’t be in use for a while, so maybe we don’t need too many yet.”

“There you go, being logical again. I don’t think controlling the snails in all areas would be a bad thing, but we’ll see. I’m mostly worried about Hemsworth being bored.”

It was a good point, but so far, the dog appeared happy with the farm and his level of activity. “We’ll keep an eye on him to see how he feels. I’m sure we’ll be able to notice if he’s bored. If he starts chewing on our shoes, it’ll be an easy clue.”

Nothing appeared to be touched at the pond, but they walked around the space to be sure.

Jolie frowned at the woods behind the pond. “Are the game cameras still in place? Is someone still watching us?”

Ford wasn’t sure. The previous day had been a flurry of activity. “I can’t remember if Marcus said anything about him or a deputy removing them. Let me send him a text.”

Marcus responded with a call. “I’m on my way to the farm to do just that. Only about ten minutes out. Leave them until I get there. I want to record them in place for more

evidence. Then I'll hand them over to the techs to see what they can find. I'm going to bet they're covered in fingerprints."

"You think we'll need more evidence?"

The police chief laughed. "I'm a cop. I always want more evidence. We have enough to convict the group, as is, but proof of them watching you? Exactly what a judge will want to keep them behind bars longer."

After he hung up, Ford relayed the information to Jolie. She shivered, and he pulled her in for a hug. He'd never tire of doing exactly that. "They're behind bars. They're not getting out. And if they were, they'd be heading the hell away from here. They got their asses kicked yesterday."

She chuckled into his chest. "It almost seems like a movie scene when I think back on it. I was so scared."

He kissed her head. "I'm sorry."

She tightened her arms around him. "No need. None of it was your fault. When I heard shots in the house and didn't know if you were safe, I nearly collapsed."

Damn, there went his heart again. "I know exactly how you felt. Not knowing where you were had my training nearly flying out the window. And we trained for years to avoid that happening. I wanted to kill those bastards."

He hadn't, because that wasn't the way they'd been trained. Depending on the situation, they aimed to neutralize if possible. Kill only when necessary.

Jolie looked up with serious eyes. "I'm glad you didn't kill them. I wouldn't want you to live with that."

He kissed her forehead with a mental shrug. “I would kill to keep you safe, Jolie. But I’m glad we didn’t have to go that far.”

She reached up and cupped his cheek with her hand. “I don’t think I actually thanked you for saving my life, so thank you. Knowing you were going to intervene helped me stay calm.”

That sent a shudder through him. “I’m going to see that asshole holding a gun to your forehead in my nightmares for decades to come.”

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Her eyes misted. “Me too. But I knew I wasn’t going to die. You were there. You were going to save me.”

Her faith in him was all he needed. Along with her love, of course.

Trying to lighten the mood, he smiled at her. “You didn’t act in the least bit scared. Even when he threatened vile things. Then you made the venereal disease comment and proved to him you were a kickass woman who wasn’t putting up with his bullshit.”

She grinned. “I’d forgotten about that. I was considering modifying my answer by asking if the little something he was offering me was his penis.”

Ford laughed and hugged her tightly. “I love your brain. But that might have been too much for his little ego to handle.”

She laughed and then shuddered. “I’m so glad it’s over and they didn’t hurt any of us.”

He rocked her side to side. “Me too. We make a hell of a team, Jolie. The two of us alone, and the four of us with Annie and Thea.”

“Don’t forget Hemsworth and Fox.”

“Never. They were amazing yesterday. Waiting until they had an opportunity and then scaring the shit out of the assholes.”

Jolie leaned back but didn't step out of his arms. She looked to where Hemsworth was sniffing around the edge of the pond and watching the ducks. "He's part of our family now."

"He sure is. He earned himself treats for the rest of his life with his actions yesterday."

Marcus called out a greeting from the orchard, and Hemsworth loped over to greet him. The dog absolutely knew the difference between friends and enemies. Even if they hadn't met the night before, Ford figured Hemsworth was a good people reader like most dogs.

Jolie wanted to see the cameras in place, so they walked with Marcus into the woods.

Ford led them a little further than where the cameras were placed, so they came up on them from behind.

Like most game cameras, they blended in with the woods, but they'd been set with the purpose of watching the pond, so they weren't well hidden. Marcus took videos and photos, then put each camera in a separate evidence bag.

Then they stopped beside the pond, and Marcus studied it. "I haven't been this deep into the property before. This is a beautiful piece of land you've got here."

Jolie nodded. "It might take me a while to be comfortable back here on my own, but I love the entire farm. And this pond will always be a favorite for me."

Marcus nodded. "I can understand why. Don't let McConnell ruin it for you. His greedy ass is going to be sitting in jail for a long time. And there's no reason to think he'd return here. The diamonds are gone. And he found out yesterday that you're fully prepared to defend yourselves and your property. He won't be back."

Jolie smiled. “That’s good to hear. I’m glad it’s over.”

There might be a trial where they’d have to testify, but he wasn’t reminding her of that. He wanted her to bask in the farm’s peace and focus on building their relationship.

Marcus laughed as Quackerjack stood on one foot on a nearby rock and then tumbled to land on her back. She squiggled and hopped back up in no time, looking around to see who’d watched her. “You’ve got a good life here.”

Ford agreed. “We do. And it’s only going to get better.”

Marcus grinned. “Epic will be very glad to hear that. He’s excited about the possibilities. He loves having his friends and family near, and he’s always looking for ways to grow the economy and tourism opportunities of the area.”

Jolie grinned. “We haven’t talked the rest of the family into committing yet.”

Marcus’s eyebrow shot up. “But you will.”

She grinned at Ford and they spoke at the same time. “We will.”

Jolie found her nerves settling as she and Ford talked about the plans for the farm and the pond with Marcus. The police chief was interested and curious.

Hemsworth followed along as they walked and went off to play with Fox after the Great Pyrenees had arrived for his morning rubdowns.

She watched the two dogs run in the woods, moving further away as they played what looked like tag. “Should we call Hemsworth back?” She didn’t want him getting lost.

Ford shrugged. “I’m not sure. I think he likes us enough to come back before going too far. If he’s going to be off-leash, we’re going to have to trust him.”

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She nodded. Trust was always a challenge for her. As if reading her mind, Ford took her hand. “He’ll be good. Let’s just see.”

Marcus nodded. “He seems like a smart dog. I don’t think he’ll wander off. I didn’t think about bringing Finch with me. He’d love it out here.”

“Who’s Finch?”

The chief smiled. “He’s our Great Dane. He took care of three kittens in the wild when he was a half-grown pup. Now they all live with us and the poor guy needs a break from herding cats all day.”

Jolie laughed. “Sounds like he’d love it here. Bring him anytime. Both Hemsworth and Fox enjoy other dogs.”

Jolie’s phone rang with a video call from Amber. She smiled at the men. “It’s my sister. I’m going to take this.”

She wandered away and answered the call. “Hey, Amber.”

Her sister frowned into the camera, her worry face firmly in place. “Are you okay?”

Jolie sighed. “Knox told you what happened?”

“Of course, he told me. He told all of us. The question is, why didn’t you tell us?”

Jolie sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s been busy. Ford and I are with the Phail police chief

right now. We just collected the game cameras from the woods.”

Amber nodded and studied her face. “I can’t believe you went through all of that yesterday. Knox said the jerk threatened you with a gun, but that Ford saved you.”

She doubted Knox had told her all the details and Jolie wasn’t volunteering that he’d pressed the gun into her forehead. There was a slight bruise this morning, but with her job, she was used to being bruised most of the time. She hoped Amber wouldn’t notice the mark was in the shape of a gun muzzle.

Instead, she responded to the last part of Amber’s statement. “He did save me. He and Knox saved us both. And the dogs helped too. It’s still all a blur in my head.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. You must have been so scared.”

“Terrified. But I also knew Ford and Knox would save us. I knew they wouldn’t let anything happen.”

Amber’s eyes filled with tears. “Did you tell him you’re in love with him yet?”

Jolie couldn’t stop the grin. “I did. He loves me, too.”

Amber laughed. “Of course he does. You’re the most lovable person I know, Jolie.”

Wow. That had tears forming in her own eyes.

Then her sister smiled. “I’m so glad for you. I can tell just by looking that’s there’s an excellent reason you didn’t have time to call me last night or early this morning. I bet you had the best time after telling each other you were in love.”

Jolie grinned. “The very best time. It was amazing, Amber. My body nearly melts just

thinking about it.”

Amber smiled. “I’m so happy for you. For you both. I hope he knows how damn lucky he is.”

“You’re the best sister ever, Amber. I think you need to get yourself up here and get to know the man I love a little better.”

Amber rolled her eyes with a smile. “You’re even going to use your man to lure me there.”

“Absolutely. Whatever it takes.” Because despite Amber’s obvious happiness for Jolie, there was something sad in her eyes. Not everything was going well for Amber and Jolie wanted to change that.

“Burke wants to have a family video chat today. He needs to see and hear for himself that you’re okay. Lawson, too.”

Jolie nodded. “I should have thought of that myself. I haven’t seen Knox yet this morning. We headed down to tend to the ducks and then got caught up with Marcus.”

Amber’s eyes sparkled. “And you had far more interesting things to do than chat with your family.”

“I sure did.”

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Amber's eyes flickered to something off-screen. "Duty calls, Joles. Get Knox to set up the chat and make sure Ford is in on the call. He's family now. I'll talk to you soon. Love you."

"Love you, too."

She pocketed the phone and thought about her sister's words. Ford was family now. He'd been pseudo-family before because he'd been Knox's best friend. But now that she was in love with him? Full family status in Amber's eyes. Jolie couldn't find a single problem with that.

When she walked back over to the men, Ford searched her gaze. "All good?"

She nodded. "Knox told them all what happened and Amber wanted to talk to me. In fact, they want to set up a video chat with everyone later today."

He smiled. "Good idea. It'll help them all to see that you're both safe."

"Amber wants you in on the call, too."

"Me?"

She laughed. "Yes, you." She wasn't saying more with Marcus right there, but Ford figured it out, anyway.

"Is this the family inquisition stage of our relationship?"

His wide grin told her he wasn't worried. "I think so."

He squeezed her into his side and kissed her hair. "Bring it on. And Marcus says he's got more information to share with you."

Marcus nodded. "It's for all four of you, but I figure it's okay to tell you first."

Her stomach tightened. "Is it about the farm? Is something wrong?"

Marcus shook his head. "Nothing's wrong. In fact, it's good news."

That was a relief. She didn't want to face any more bad news for a long while.

"The diamonds that were in the canister are worth over seven million dollars."

Her jaw dropped open. "McConnell threw seven million dollar's worth of diamonds into a pond?"

Marcus nodded. "He did. And the company has been hoping for their return for all that time. In fact, they wanted them returned so badly, they set up a reward."

"A reward?"

He nodded, smile wide. "A reward of a hundred thousand dollars."

The amount had her jaw dropping. That was a huge amount of money. "Don't tell me McConnell gets that money. He's the one who stole them."

Marcus laughed. "Nope, he's not getting it. It's going to the people who returned the diamonds."

His smile had her looking at Ford, who looked as dazed as she felt. She couldn't form the question.

As if he knew that, the police chief grinned. "The four of you located and returned the diamonds to their rightful owners. They'll divide the money equally among you."

She was too stunned to react for a long moment. Then she grinned. "Seriously? We get the reward because the idiot hid diamonds on our property?"

Ford laughed. "That's going to piss off McConell."

She agreed. "That's almost the best part."

Marcus shot up that eyebrow again. "And what's the best part?"

She laughed. "Telling my oldest brother that the farm isn't going to be as big a financial burden as we thought."

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Because her share would go right back into supporting the land. Their land.

Ford laughed. “Investing our shares right back into the farm is exactly the right thing to do.”

Her eyes misted with tears. If she’d needed further proof that he was here to stay—here to stay with her—this was it.

She smiled at him. “You sure?”

He nodded. “A hundred percent sure.”

And she knew he wasn’t talking just about the money.

### Chapter22

#### Battle Tested

Because of the way life had worked overseas, Ford had already met all of Jolie’s siblings. Not only had his team worked with Burke and Lawson on a few missions, the lack of privacy meant he’d said hello to the whole family in more than one video chat.

This was different.

Jolie was the youngest of the five siblings and the other four were protective of her. Highly protective.

Ford had already gone through the big brother scene with Knox, but he knew he'd have to do it again with Burke and Lawson. Add in Amber, and he had three people to win over.

Most important battle of his life and one he had no intention of losing.

Knox set up his phone on the kitchen table, where they could all be on camera at the same time. Jolie and Thea sat in the middle, he and Knox beside them.

Knox placed the call, which was apparently the way it always went.

Ford kept his face and body relaxed with his arm around Jolie's chair. He knew she had told Amber they were together, but he didn't know if Lawson or Burke knew anything yet.

The others signed on quickly. Amber's face lit up when she saw him and Jolie sitting together.

Burke and Lawson were more challenging to read. They'd both perfected their game faces in the army and weren't giving him any tells.

Knox started the conversation. "Hey, everyone. I thought it would be good to get us all together, so if you have questions about yesterday's chaos, we can answer them at once and prove to you we're all fine."

Jolie grinned. "And we have another bit of exciting news to share as well."

Burke narrowed his eyes. "You touching our kid sister, Dodge?"

Jolie tensed beside him, but Ford brushed his fingers over her shoulder, letting her know it was fine. "We're together, so, yes."

There was a reason Burke's call sign was Boss Man. His flinty stare had been known to have full-grown men piss themselves. Not happening today. Ford stared right back.

Burke's eyes narrowed further, but Ford didn't add anything else, just waited.

The man's eyes flicked to Jolie, and then he grinned. "Trying to send death rays at me through the screen, Jolie?"

Jolie huffed out a breath. "Stop being an asshole."

There was a collective gasp from the siblings. Ford laughed. Jolie rarely swore, and when she did, she always apologized to her grandfather.

Sure enough, she pursed her lips together. "Sorry, Fox, but he deserved it."

Burke laughed. "Just messing with you." Then his eyes moved back to Ford. "But if you hurt her, you know what happens."

Ford grinned. "It means that Jolie would get her way because you two would show up here at the farm."

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Burke rolled his eyes and then flicked his gaze around the room.

Before he could say anything else, Jolie took Ford's jaw in her hand and gently turned him her way. Her eyes sparkled, and he was grinning before she reached up to kiss him. Not a quiet brush of the lips, either.

Lawson groaned. "No PDA around the brothers, Jolie. I beg you."

Laughing, he and Jolie broke apart. She leaned into his side before looking at her brothers. "Get used to it."

On the screen, Amber had the widest grin he'd ever seen on her. The two men didn't smile, but their eyes were full of affection for their sister.

They'd all be okay.

Knox rubbed his hands together. "Okay, any questions about yesterday before we find out what Jolie's news is?"

Lawson looked surprised. "You don't know either?"

"Not yet, but baby sister is beaming, so it's good."

All the attention turned to Jolie, and he watched her smile at each of them individually. "It's really news for Knox and Thea, but there wasn't enough time to tell them before our chat."

Knox frowned. “What is it?”

She grinned. “Marcus Ramirez, the police chief from Phail, was here this morning. He came to collect the game cameras for evidence.”

Everyone nodded, knowing that wasn’t the news. Ford could feel Jolie vibrating with excitement. “He also had some information on the investigation.”

She paused dramatically, and Ford was sure everyone leaned in closer to hear her news. She grinned at him. “He mentioned how thrilled the company is to have their diamonds back. All seven million dollars’ worth.”

Everyone nodded like bobbleheads.

“He also said there was a reward.”

Lawson frowned. “For the diamonds? Don’t tell me that asshole McConnell gets to collect it after he stole them.”

Jolie shook her head. “Nope, although that was our first thought, too.”

She turned back to Knox and Thea. “The reward is for the return of the diamonds to the company. It’s being evenly split between the four of us.”

Ford grinned at the stunned silence. Then everyone spoke at once, asking questions.

Jolie leaned into him and looked up. “Your turn.”

Because she wanted him to have a part in telling her family the good news. She wanted him to have a happy moment with them.

He kissed her hair and then turned to Knox. “The reward is a hundred thousand dollars, divided between the four of us.”

Another beat of silence, then the group erupted in cheers. Knox hugged Thea, and they spent a moment wordlessly studying the other.

The four of them shared another look, and he knew they were all in agreement. Knox nodded at him, so Ford turned to the ones on screen. “We’d like to invest the money into the farm.”

Amber rolled her lips together and shook her head. “That’s your money. You’ve all earned it. After yesterday’s events, you should take that money and have a fabulous vacation somewhere safe.”

Lawson nodded. “That’s bonus money for you guys. Have fun with it.”

The four of them laughed, and Jolie looked at them all. “Maybe we’ll keep aside a little, but we want this. The farm is important to all of us. We love living here and working on it. It’s incredible to see it coming to life even with the improvements we’ve already made. We’ll take some time and figure out where to invest it, but helping the farm is what we want to do.”

Burke had said nothing yet. Instead, he studied the four of them one by one. “Take your time to decide. Don’t rush into anything. And don’t worry if you change your mind. It’s your money.”

Jolie nodded. “We will, but we love the farm. We love living here. When are you coming to see the place?”

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Burke rolled his eyes. “When work slows down, I’ll see what I can do.”

The other siblings groaned, and Lawson frowned. “You’ve been saying variations of that since you started working at fifteen. You need to take some time off.”

Burke simply shook his head. “Did Marcus say anything else about McConnell or the next steps?”

And with that, Boss Man changed the subject from his workaholic tendencies.

It took a few minutes to have the three on the screen believe they were all fine after the events of the previous day, but eventually they were reassured and ready to sign off.

Before he signed off, Burke pinned Ford with his gaze. “Don’t screw it up, Dodge.”

“Don’t plan to, Boss Man.”

Jolie sighed and started to respond, but her brother ended the call.

Ford kissed her hair again. “It’s fine, Jolie.”

And it wouldn’t ever be anything but because he planned to make sure he never screwed it up.

Later that day, Jolie had mostly shaken off her annoyance with her brothers. As the youngest, she knew the others looked out for her. Always had. Probably always

would.

It had never bothered her much. She'd been scared when their parents had died and having the others always ready to help had been amazing. Comforting.

But she'd applied to school in another state in order to learn to cope with life on her own. Part of the reason she'd taken jobs in the Carolinas as well.

Not that she hadn't loved the area. It was a beautiful part of the country, but it wasn't her part of the country. Vermont was her place. And this apple farm in particular.

She stopped outside Jay's room on the top floor of the farmhouse. He hadn't taken one with a quiet view of the orchard. He'd chosen one that looked over the driveway. From there, she imagined he could see how the farm changed throughout the year.

In the spring, the apple blossoms would have filled his view. She wasn't sure if the apple leaves changed colors in the fall, but the surrounding countryside would be gorgeous.

In the winter, he'd be able to see at least one barn. And in the summer, he would have seen his trees bursting with life and apples.

At all times, he would have been able to see the driveway into the farm before it split into the roads leading to the various areas of the farm itself.

Had Jay watched who came? Had he thought of inviting Fox? Or her and her siblings?

Once again, she wondered if he had known about Fox's death the year before. She imagined he had because he'd obviously kept up with the news enough to know about

the five of them.

Jolie leaned against the doorframe and let her eyes wander the sparse room. Like Fox, he hadn't surrounded himself with physical luxuries. No fancy linens or expensive knick-knacks. Instead, a comfortable quilt covered the bed. Books and farming magazines covered the nightstand.

She imagined the bathroom contained the essentials only and wondered if he and Fox had shared similar tastes there. But she couldn't step into the room to find out.

Maybe when the others came, they'd do it together. Because they would come. It might only be for a visit, but she and Knox would make sure they were all here together for at least a while.

"Would you like that, Jay? Would you like us all together, knowing we're thinking fondly of you and Fox?" Her whisper was barely audible, but she had to swallow against the tears.

Family had been important to both of the brothers and she wished they'd figured things out decades earlier.

She heard Ford moving up the stairs and wasn't surprised when he stopped behind her. He wound his arms around her and stepped in to hug her. "Thinking about Jay?"

She nodded. "I was thinking about him and Fox."

He kissed her hair and squeezed. "They'd both be happy to know you and Knox are here and taking care of the farm."

She smiled. "I think so, too. Jay should have had that reward for the diamonds. They were on his property."

Ford's chin brushed her hair as he nodded. "In a way, he is getting it. If we all invest it back into the farm, we can make some of his dreams come true."

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She turned in this amazing man's arms and hugged him. "I think we already are. The farm catalogue by his recliner downstairs was open to a full page of compost facilities. He had Thea's Worminator circled."

"And now, the pond is on the way to being cleaned. Soon, it'll provide irrigation for more of the farm. I bet that was another of his dreams."

She nodded. "I know I never met Jay, but I miss him anyway. I hate that we never got to see them together."

Ford swayed her in his arms and let her talk.

"It's so easy to imagine Fox joining us here. Seeing him and Jay rocking on the back porch, arguing about the best way to do things."

"By his actions, we know Jay missed Fox, and I'll bet the reverse is true. Fox would be happy you're here, working on his brother's dreams right along with your own."

She lifted her head off his chest to look at him. "You're right. Fox would be happy with what we're doing here. We're going to make him proud. Actually, we're going to make them both proud."

"Damn right."

He kissed her softly and sweetly, pushing away the sadness and reminding her of the present. And the future. A future that was full of potential, of possibilities.

When he pulled back from the kiss, he smiled. “Are you ready for an adventure?”

She wagged her eyebrows. “What kind of adventure?”

He laughed. “Not that kind. Well, not right away, but I’m sure we can work that in.”

“So, what kind of adventure is it?”

He shook his head. “Not telling. You in?”

“Of course.” With Ford, she’d always be all in.

## Chapter23

### Snailing The Night Away

Ford loved how Jolie was always ready for adventures. His woman wasn’t afraid of anything. Not that he’d ever lead her into anything dangerous. Well, not if they could avoid it.

He still wanted to beat himself up over the fact that McConnell had managed to get a gun not only aimed at Jolie, but planted right on her forehead.

A shudder running through him. He’d almost lost her. He’d almost lost everything.

But they’d made it through, and she was safe. The entire farm was safe now. Jolie could spend time down at her pond and not worry about McConnell watching or coming after her.

Not that Ford wouldn’t worry every time she was out of his sight. It was going to take a long while to get over seeing that muzzle on her forehead.

Jolie squeezed his hand. “You okay?”

She was too damn insightful. He nodded. “Just thinking of ways to dismember that fucker if I ever see him again.”

She grinned. “After getting his ass kicked, the last thing he’s going to do is show up at the farm. There’s nothing for him here anymore.”

“You’re right, but it’s going to take me a while to believe it.”

“Me too.”

Ford took her hand as they walked through the orchard. The night was going to be clear, if a bit chilly. He’d prepared for that. Hemsworth loped along beside them, happy that he’d be rounding up the ducks soon.

No matter what adventures they planned in the future, the farm and its inhabitants would come first. Which was more than fine with him.

They fit here. Not something he’d have ever thought as a kid. He would video call his dad from down at the pond one night. Let him watch Hemsworth in action and see the pond that had caused all the fuss.

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Maybe tomorrow. Tonight was all about Jolie.

When they neared the pond, Jolie swung their hands. “It’s so nice to know no one’s watching us from the other side of the pond.”

He agreed.

When the clearing came into view, Ford’s gaze took in the entire space quickly. The habit of scanning for threats had been honed during his army training and reinforced over the past few days.

Jolie let out a happy sound and pointed. “Daisy’s on the pond.”

Sure enough, the duck swam in the middle of the pond.

Jolie’s grin widened. “That’s such a good sign. I hope they’re going to be happy here.”

He hadn’t seen any of the ducks swimming before this. It hadn’t been on his radar either. He didn’t know much about the birds, but they seemed content with their surroundings. He’d bet they were thrilled with the improvements Jolie had made with the pond already.

He knew she had more plans, but her efforts had already yielded results. The area looked better, smelled better, and he hoped more wildlife would be returning soon.

Jolie leaned into him and smiled. “It’s working. It’s really working. We’re going to

heal this place and turn it into a happy spot for us and for everything else that lives here.”

Which was a good segue. “Except the snails.”

He loved when her laugh brimmed with joy. He squeezed her hand. “I think tonight’s a good night to see how these ducks feel about a midnight snail snack. What do you think?”

She smiled. “That’s a great idea. Is that the adventure you talked about earlier?”

And how was he so damn lucky that watching ducks snack on snails was an adventure that lit up the woman he loved? “More like Adventure Part One.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Do tell.”

He laughed and kissed her forehead. “Not yet. No ruining the surprise.”

“Okay. Any idea how to fill the time before it’s dark enough for duck patrol?”

“I have a few.”

Turned out that kissing Jolie in the orchard was an excellent way to spend the time.

When it was dark enough, they whistled for Hemsworth, who’d been exploring the orchard. The dog sat at their feet, ears twitching, tongue lolling, waiting for a command.

Jolie ruffled his head. “We’re going to try something new tonight, Hemsworth. We’re going to take the ducks into the orchard where the snails are hurting the trees. Then we’re going to let them have their fun. After, we’ll bring them back to the Quack

Mobile.”

Ford laughed. “He probably caught more of that than we expect.”

He and Jolie moved to the edge of the trees, far from the coop. He turned on a flashlight and held it down at their feet.

Jolie laughed. “Here goes nothing. Hemsworth. Cast.”

The dog’s ears perked up, and he bounced to his feet. He rounded up the ducks, including the one that had returned from the pond.

He drove the ducks toward the coop, but Jolie called his name. “Hemsworth. Here.”

Sure enough, the dog changed course for them, tail wagging like he’d been given a new treat. “He loves a challenge.”

Jolie rubbed his head. “Good boy, Hemsworth. You’re the smartest boy.”

Ford walked into the forest, shining the light on the ground to lead the way. Jolie grinned at him and bounced as they moved to an area further in. They didn’t want to go too far on the first attempt.

Jolie called out to the dog. “Hemsworth, that’ll do.”

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The command to let the herding dog know the task was done always made Ford smile. They'd learned a lot from Lorraine and the internet.

When Hemsworth stopped herding the ducks, the birds stopped to check out their new surroundings. With a weird quack that sounded more like a honk, one of the ducks fluttered her wings, then half-ran, half-flew to a tree. She gulped down a snail faster than Ford would have thought possible, and wagged in what looked like delight.

The rest of the flock followed her lead and in no time, the ducks were gulping down snails quickly enough to have Ford's stomach churning. "I know they're helping the farm, but this image is going to fuel my nightmares."

Jolie laughed. "Me too. They're pretty voracious."

He gave an exaggerated shudder that had her laughing more.

When they figured the ducks had eaten their fill, they had Hemsworth round them up and head back to the clearing by the pond.

The birds complained at first, but then moved easily through the orchard, quacking and fluffing their feathers as they waddled. Jolie grinned at him. "Well, we know Hemsworth can gather them up without much trouble."

"He's a pretty great dog."

Back at the clearing, Hemsworth rounded the ducks into the Quack Mobile. Ford

hadn't started the winter coop for them yet. He was waiting to see how many birds they'd have before he started. No sense in beginning it until then. It needed to fit the birds comfortably. Too big and their body heat wouldn't keep them warm enough. Too small and they wouldn't be comfortable.

He'd studied a variety of duck and goose coops. Chicken coops too. Hell, he'd gone down a rabbit hole of all the kinds of coops there were. Building them was going to be fun. He even had a name prepared for the first one. One he figured Jolie would love.

Once the ducks were settled for the night, Ford took Jolie's hand and led her toward the spot he'd set up earlier.

She grinned. "Is this Adventure Part Two?"

"Sure is. Ready?"

"With you? Always."

And Ford wondered if his heart would simply explode right there in the orchard.

Jolie wondered what Ford had planned for them next. She was still bouncing from the success of their ducks in the orchard. While the sight wasn't for the squeamish, it had been thrilling to know that the ducks were going to control the snail population in the orchard. Over the next few days, she'd figure out a schedule for them. Figure out if they needed to increase their flock.

Maybe they should add geese next. Then they'd need another coop aside from the one Ford was planning for the ducks for the winter.

She couldn't wait to see all her ducks and other visitors using the pond.

Her thoughts came to a halt as they rounded a bush and she saw what Ford had planned for their adventure. “Oh, Ford. This is amazing.”

He’d set up a cozy nest for them in the open area behind a stand of bushes. Sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows were mounded. A large log rested next to a metal fire pit. Wood was stacked beside it. A couple of cooler bags and a duffel bag sat beside the bed.

Jolie wrapped her arms around Ford. “This is amazing. I can’t believe you got this set up without me knowing about it.”

He chuckled in her ear and swayed her into a dance. “I wanted to help you reclaim this area. It’s your favorite part of the farm, and I want you to have good memories here to help erase the bad stuff.”

This man. “Have I mentioned how much I love you?”

His sexy chuckle rumbled through her as he kept their feet moving in a slow dance to the sounds of the night deepening around them. “I love you, too, Jolie. So much.”

They continued to sway as the peace of the evening settled around them. Hemsworth wandered the area, sniffing the rocks and bushes with every sign of the contentment she felt deep within.

She rested her head on Ford’s chest and he ran his hand softly up and down her back.

Eventually, he kissed her hair. “We should probably light the fire.”

A soft rustling sound had her looking up and squeezing Ford. “Wait.” Her whisper was barely audible.

She searched the sky and then pointed. In the light of the full moon, a small colony of bats flew over the pond. As a group, they dipped to drink and then swooped into the orchard.

Ford picked her up and whirled her in a circle. He kept his happy whoop quiet as a whisper. “You did it, Jolie. You’ve lured in the bats.”

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She laughed. “We did it. I wonder if they’ve always lived here. They might be using the bat house on the barn. We’ll check another night to see if we can see them flying in and out. I can’t believe we saw them.”

For a few more minutes, they watched and listened, but didn’t see the bats again. She hoped they were wandering the forest and eating to their hearts’ content.

When Ford lit the fire, Hemsworth came closer to check out the process. The dog tilted his head and watched the flames reach above the wood.

Jolie patted his head. “Be careful, Hemsworth. It’s hot. We don’t want you getting burned.”

The dog made no motion to get closer and when she and Ford settled on the log he’d set alongside the fire, Hemsworth moved to the end and circled a few times before flopping onto the grass.

Ford stirred the fire, encouraging the flames to catch on the old wood.

Jolie leaned into his side and watched. She loved that he’d set the pit in the clearing so nothing could accidentally start a fire. He had a metal fire pit to contain all the coals and a large bucket of water nearby to douse any sparks. He loved the orchard as much as she did and wouldn’t take any chances with it.

He’d been almost as excited as she’d been to see the bats fly overhead. “For a city boy, you’ve got the whole romantic campfire thing down pat.”

He chuckled again and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “We had a big backyard. Dad made sure we knew how to start a fire and how to ensure it didn’t endanger the land or ourselves. It was too hot to have fires in the summer, but we had them on cool winter nights. Even after they moved out, my older brothers came home for backyard fires all the time.”

“That sounds really nice.”

“It was. Some of my best memories are from those times. Helped me get to know my oldest brothers, even if they didn’t live in the same house. I heard more than my share of inappropriate stories, but it was awfully interesting. It was a whole different kind of thing.”

She grinned. “Like Vegas.”

“Exactly. We’ll do a video chat with them one night and show them our fire setup.”

Jolie hadn’t met any of the brothers yet, and it was a little intimidating to think of meeting the entire gang all at once. “Not tonight?”

He smiled. “Not tonight. Tonight is all about romance and us. They’re all going to love you like my dad already does.”

Which made her realize he’d read her nerves correctly. He knew her so well.

“They sound great.”

He nodded. “They are. But we’ll get you to meet them in small doses. They’re a lot at once. Maybe we’ll do another video chat with dad tomorrow. Or Mara. Then we’ll work our way up.”

She laughed. “You survived the video chat with my siblings. I’m sure I can do the same.”

He grinned. “It’ll be different. My brothers will want to razz on me for falling in love. Your brothers wanted to threaten me with a horrifying death.”

She groaned. “I’m sorry.”

He laughed again. “Nothing to be sorry about. I’m a big brother too, so I get it. And they were mostly joking. Besides, I’m not worried. I don’t plan to do anything that would hurt you or piss them off, so we’re good.”

“I love them all, but being the youngest means they tend to be overprotective.”

Ford used his fingers to nudge her chin up so their gazes locked. “It’s fine, Jolie. We’re seriously all good. It’s just a guy thing.”

She sighed. “No offense, but guys can be kind of weird.”

His laugh filled the forest. “But you love me, anyway.”

She grinned. “I do.” Which was a phrase she hoped to repeat one day in another kind of setting. She could totally picture the two of them living here happily for the rest of their lives.

He wagged his eyebrows. “I’ve got a way to ensure that.”

She figured they’d head straight to the comfy blankets set up beside the fire, but he placed his finger softly on her lips. “We’ll save that for a few minutes. I have something I think you’ll like.”

She raised an eyebrow and shot a look at the makeshift bed. “I know I’ll like it.”

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He was laughing when he rose to grab one of the cooler bags he'd set up by the logs. Then he grabbed two sticks. "How do feel about s'mores?"

Jolie clapped her hands. "I love s'mores."

He handed her a stick and pulled out all the ingredients. It had been years since she'd made a s'more and she'd forgotten how delicious they were.

When she was licking the last of the gooey marshmallow and melty chocolate off her fingers, Ford growled low in his throat. "I think we need a few less layers of clothing for the next round. Seeing you lick your fingers like that has given me thoughts."

Shivers covered her skin at his words. "You have the best ideas."

And he did.

Three weeks later...

Ford drilled in the final board with satisfaction. He hadn't been sure he'd have enough time to finish before Jolie returned. She and Thea had ventured into Phail for groceries and to exchange the compost buckets.

He'd been building the pieces in quiet moments, but the structure had been too unwieldy to build inside the barn. They could have taken it out through the big doors, but it was smarter and easier to put the pieces together here at the pond.

They'd decided on a simple design for the winter coop and it fit nicely at the edge of

the pond's clearing near the trees. If they had to fence in the ducks during the winter, they had plenty of room.

Even if Jolie added geese, there was room for another coop without affecting the huge clearing itself. The birds would apparently get along sharing a yard, but the species required their own coops for night time and extremely cold days.

He couldn't yet imagine the birds playing in the snow, but he was looking forward to seeing them in action.

His phone rang with a call. His sister Mara on video chat. Perfect timing. He'd introduced her and Jolie a while back and the two women got on well.

They'd also piqued Mara's interest in the farm. He was hoping she'd visit one day, but she said the bakery where she worked was too busy for her to take time off.

"Hey, Mara. All done baking your magic for the day?"

She grinned at him. "All finished. Thought I'd see how you're doing with your—" She broke off, eyes wide. "Are you alone?"

He laughed. "I am. And I'm finished. Jolie should be back soon, so you can have the first peek. What do you think?"

He flipped the screen so that Mara could see the winter duck coop. "I love it. The ducks are going to live like royalty."

"That's the plan. I think we're going to call it Duckington Palace."

Mara's delighted laugh had him grinning. That was the exact reaction he was hoping for from Jolie, too. He chatted with his sister for a few minutes before Hemsworth

stood and woofed happily at the orchard. “Gotta go, Sis. Jolie’s on the way.”

“Have fun. She’s going to love it. I’ll work on learning some duck songs. I wonder if there’re any musicals featuring ducks.”

With a laugh, he signed off and walked with Hemsworth to greet Jolie. He spotted her pink shirt through the trees and hurried forward when he realized she carried a large box.

Her face lit up when she spotted him, and he hoped that never changed. Jolie Malssum was a special woman, and he’d work his ass off to ensure she always felt that way.

He leaned down to kiss her and took the box from her hands as he did. She laughed. “How did you know it’s for you?”

His eyebrows shot up. “For me?”

She grinned. “Yep. I wanted to get you something to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

That made him frown. “We’re a team, Jolie. You don’t have to buy me things to thank me. I love working on projects with you.”

She leaned up to kiss his cheek. “I know, but I wanted to get you a surprise. It’s fun. Open it.”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Curious, he took out his jackknife and sliced open the box. He pried it open, and a laugh cracked out of him at the sight. And at the serendipity of the moment.

He set the box down on the ground and pulled out a pair of rubber boots. Black. No duckies, but there were tools all over them. Hammers, saws, wrenches, drills.

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Laughing, he picked up Jolie and swung her in a circle. “They’re fantastic. I love them.”

She squeezed him back. “I know you’ve got a plain pair, but these were fun.”

“They are. I’ve gotta say a few months ago, I wouldn’t have known what to say about these, but I love them. They’re perfect. I’ll think of you and smile every time I wear them. Now, come on, it’s apparently the day for fun surprises. I’ve got a couple waiting for you at the clearing.”

He tucked the boot box under one arm and grabbed Jolie’s hand.

It was only a minute before she spotted the winter coop through the trees. She gasped and squeezed his hand. “You’ve started the winter coop?”

She tugged on his hand until they were jogging the final stretch to the clearing.

He waved at the coop. “Duckington Palace is ready for occupancy.”

Jolie’s eyes misted with tears even as she laughed. “Duckington Palace. I love it. And it’s finished. You built it all. It fits perfectly here. It’s amazing. You’re amazing.”

He was ready when she flung herself into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. His Jolie wasn’t shy about sharing her joy.

He spun her in another circle while she laughed. Then she framed his face and kissed him with enough passion, his knees wobbled.

“You’re an amazing man, Ford Evans. I love you so much.”

That was a perfect segue he couldn’t ignore. He carried her over to where he’d stacked his tools near the ATV, ready for their return trip to the barn.

He slid Jolie down until her feet touched the ground, then kissed her again.

Then he grabbed the box he’d put on the ATV. “This one’s for you.”

She grinned. “Looks like it’s the day for happy surprises.”

He hoped she was even happier in a few minutes. “Open it.”

Her eyebrows shot up at his gruff tone, but she tore into the package with her usual enthusiasm. He imagined she’d been full of fun at Christmas as a kid. Hell, she’d be a lot of fun now. Christmas was going to be a blast.

When she saw the pattern on the rubberized material, Jolie’s eyes misted again even as a smile bloomed on her face.

She looked up at him. “You remembered that conversation?”

He nodded. They’d talked about this one of her first days on the farm. “I remember everything about you. Take them out.” Not that he’d tell her yet, but there was another surprise hidden within.

She stood and pulled the waders out of the box and held them up in front of her. The deep blue pattern was covered in mermaids. He wasn’t sure if her smile could grow any wider.

“They’re absolutely perfect, Ford. You have no idea how many times I’ve wanted a

pair exactly like these. Where did you find them?”

He shrugged. “I had to custom order them.”

Her mouth gaped open, and she dropped the bright waders to throw herself at him again. “You’re the most amazing man I know. I can’t believe you did this for me.”

He chuckled. “The company I worked with had a lot of fun with the order. I’m betting they can make others if you want them.”

She shook her head. “These are perfect. I love them. I’m going to try them on.”

In moments, she’d slipped off her boots and into the waders. Watching her pull on bright blue overalls covered in mermaids was so much sexier than it sounded.

They fit perfectly and she spun in circles to show them off. “They’re amazing. You’re perfect.”

She patted the pockets and oohed and aahed over how many sample bottles she could carry.

And she finally found the small box he’d put inside the front pocket.

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She pulled it out and her eyes shot to his.

Ford dropped to one knee and took the box from her hand. “You’re an incredible woman, Jolie Malssum. I love you more than I thought possible. You’re so bright, you light up my world. Will you marry me, my sexy mermaid?”

Tears streamed down her smiling face. “Of course I’ll marry you, Ford. I love you so much.”

He slid the ring on her finger and rose to kiss her with his whole heart.

They swayed and danced in the clearing. In front of Duckington Palace, in the middle of an apple orchard. So far from anything he’d dreamed of as a child.

So much better than anything he could have imagined.

And when he stripped her out of her mermaid waders, it got even better.

Bonus Scene

Amber Malssum

Amber stared at her closet with a frown. She didn’t have a choice in what to wear. She wore her uniform every single shift.

Crisp white shirt.

Black skirt and jacket.

Name tag.

Every single shift.

Where was the color?

The joy?

Her sister was full of both. Jolie brought color and life to everyone, no matter where she was.

Even to an old apple farm in Vermont.

Her bright rubber boots, her sparkling smile.

She brought joy.

What did Amber bring?

She looked down. Even her underwear was boring.

She'd been so afraid for so long. Since her parents had died in that crash. Amber had worked to make sure Fox would never regret taking them in. Never regret giving up his bachelor life to give his grandchildren a home.

Then she'd worked hard to make him proud. At School. With her jobs.

Now she was scared again.

Putting on the uniform shouldn't require an act of courage, but it did. Her fingers

trembled as she buttoned up the blouse. Sliding on the name tag required deep breaths.

As she had for a couple of weeks now, Amber pictured a pair of steady, almost-black eyes. Remembering the man's calmness and determination helped fuel her own. She might not know his full name, but Santoro had helped her get through some tough times already.

She could do this.

She would get through another shift.

Once she was dressed, she checked her appearance. Boring but acceptable. No one could see the cracks from the outside. No one could know how thin her shields had become.

Those steady eyes approved of her determination and helped her control her breathing as she moved out the door.

Her shift awaited.