



The Billionaire and the Runaway

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Description: A wealthy college graduate who needs to escape her boring life. A small-town farmer who needs some help. And a job offer that will change everything.

Ariana Titan hates her life. She has everything but doesn't want any of it. Her wealthy father controls every aspect of her days. Her apartment is starting to feel like a prison cell. She longs to run away to the countryside like in the movies she watches at night. When her father's girlfriend mentions a job posting for a social media marketing manager at a small town farm, she decides to apply...in person. She maybe fails to tell her father exactly where she's gone.

Eric Windsor's farm needs a marketing makeover. He knows business but social media and online marketing are not his strong suits. He needs help and he needs it yesterday. When a young woman shows up at his property with a mile-long list of references and an impressive degree from a fancy university, he hires her on the spot. He soon figures out that his new employee is not only a fish out of water in his coastal town, but she also has the uncanny ability to bring a smile to his face, something that hasn't happened in a long time.

Can Ariana stay afloat while grappling with her past amid a sea of marketing chaos, her overbearing father, and her new overprotective boss? While she fights to swim instead of sink, one burning question remains in her mind: will her mysterious farmer employer be part of her future?

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CHAPTER ONE

Ariana

Once upon a time, I dreamt a prince would rescue me from my overprotective father. But fairy tales aren't real, are they?

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I look pale. My red hair seems more prominent against my alabaster skin than normal.

Groaning, I grab a towel and dry my face before getting dressed. I'm back in my old bedroom in my father's penthouse. I hate it here. My father's apartment, if you can call it that, is more like a museum than a home. It's two stories of white walls and dark floors. Priceless pieces of art offer the only color. I swear his latest girlfriend, Kimberly, is allergic to having blues, reds, greens, or yellows in her home. I secretly daydream of buying cans of paint and randomly painting walls just to see if she'll have a meltdown.

I've only been here for a month since I graduated and I'm already planning my escape. But I need a job first. Sure, I could have gone to work for Dad or one of his friends, but that's selling out. I want to earn a position. I don't want to be a nepo baby. I want to feel needed and useful. Not just some wall decoration.

My phone buzzes and I look down to see a text from my best friend, Katia. Katia Polenski is the daughter of a banking executive and the complete opposite of me. Maybe that's why I love her so much.

Queen of Hearts, Owner of None: Beotch, you have got to come down to the shopping district. The new summer lines are coming in and they are (fire emoji)!

I laugh. One of my few escapes lately has been shopping with Katia when she's in town.

Me: Don't you leave tomorrow?

Queen of Hearts, Owner of None: Whatevs. Jessica is already packing my things. Come on. Bring Daddy's credit card and get your ass down here.

I roll my eyes. This woman is about to set sail on her father's yacht in the Mediterranean and she's fixated on summer fashion lines. Typical. I should go out and have fun. Katia is about the only person I have fun with these days. But I'm feeling sorry for myself. While she's off galivanting in Europe, I'll be here having bland food at the cream table in the off-white dining room with Kimberly who spends most of her days on her phone scrolling social media, and my father who will likely be yelling at someone to do theirfuckingjob. But I need to find a job and delaying it with a vacation will only make it worse.

Me: I really need to get my résumé to some firms today. I'll catch up with you when you get back.

Queen of Hearts, Owner of None: Boring. You're missing out. I'll text you when I get to Saint Tropez. (kissing emoji)

Me: Have fun! I'll miss you!

I have a missed video chat with one of my little brothers. I check the time and decide to try him tomorrow. When my parents divorced seventeen years ago, Dad got full custody of me. Mom took off to Paris, remarried two years later, and had my twin

half brothers several years after that. Lucas and Samuel are annoying but lovable. I should just go with Katia. I could stop in Paris and see them, although that would mean visiting with Mom and I'm not sure my fragile ego can handle her at the moment. Damn, I really do need to get a job. That would help so many parts of my life. Like, trying to be financially free from my dad, so he can't use his money as a pawn to make me do what he wants.

I grab my laptop and decide to go work on job applications in the library. I can't help sliding with my fluffy socks across the hardwood floors as I make my way down the hall. I turn the corner and walk into the library, ready to take my seat at the one big desk in here. But I come to a screeching halt when I find Kimberly sitting there. What in the actual fuck? She's never in here. Hell, does she even read?

She has on headphones and is staring intently at her computer screen. I study her for a long moment. She's not ugly, but her plastic surgery history is written on her face like a tattoo. I can tell she's had a nose job, facelift, fillers, and Botox. I'm sure she was beautiful, but now she just looks like someone fifteen years older than me who's trying to be my age instead of looking beautiful at her age. Shit, she's only thirty-seven, she's technically not even that old. Her hair looks like she just came from the salon. Her long, pink nails make a clickety-clack sound as she types.

She must sense my movement, because she looks up and pauses, her fingers stopping mid-movement. She reaches up and pulls out an earbud.

"Oh, hey," she says.

"Hi," I mumble, glancing at her briefly before looking down at my socks and wishing I had put on actual clothes instead of staying in my black yoga pants and an oversized T-shirt. Wait, can one be underdressed in their own home?

"Sorry, I was just looking at spa retreats for next month. Did you need to work?" she

asks.

I shrug. “I was going to apply to some jobs,” I say as I shift my weight from one foot to the other. I never really know how to act around Kimberly. She’s not outwardly mean or anything, but I can’t help feeling that she loathes having me in her space.

“Oh? How’s that going?” she asks, her lips trying to form a smile, but the botulism that I’m sure she gets more often than her doctor recommends keeps them from moving more than a fraction of an inch.

“OK, I guess.”

She pats a seat next to her. “Sit down. I can help. I used to work in human resources, remember?” she says with another attempted smile.

I want to say something snarky, like yeah, I remember when you worked for my dad, and then slept with him.

I clear my throat and nod, taking a seat because I’m too shocked at her offer to think clearly. She sits back in the chair and looks me up and down. “What is it that you would love to do? Like, what’s your dream job?” she questions.

Shrugging again, I contemplate what to say. Do I lie? Do I tell her that I want the fancy marketing firm job that everyone assumes I want? Or do I tell her the truth? I want to do marketing and social media in a small town, somewhere far away from here. For reasons I’ll never understand, I decide to tell her the truth. What do I have to lose?

“I’d love to work somewhere...small. I want to be hands-on,” I start. She cocks her head to one side. “I guess...working in a small town, helping a small business would be my dream job,” I add, my voice getting lower with each word that manages to

escape from my lips. What am I doing?

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Her eyes widen just a little, but other than that, she maintains her composure.

“OK. Well, let’s see,” she says, turning back to her computer. Those pink nails begin typing, and after a minute, she smiles, like almost a real smile this time.

“How about this? There’s a farm in Storyview Falls that’s looking for a marketing, social media manager...” She pauses to read more before continuing. “Local farm that currently sells produce through a farmstand and has several contracts with local restaurants and grocery stores is looking to expand...” She trails off and looks at me. “I mean, maybe not a farm.” I press my lips together because everything about that sounds like it’s straight from one of those made-for-television movies. You know the ones. Big-city girl comes to help country farmer and wins his heart in the process. I shake my head at the ridiculous thought because a) maybe the farmer is a woman and I’m being sexist, and b) farms probably are not at all like those films that Katia and I absolutely adore.

“I mean...there are a few positions at some smaller marketing firms in the suburbs,” she adds as she points at her screen. “I’ll just send these to you. You take a look,” she adds.

“Uh, right. Thanks,” I mutter as I fidget with my laptop.

She glances at the expensive watch Dad bought her for her birthday last month. “Oh, my, is that the time? I really should go. I have a Pilates class in an hour.” She stands and heads toward the door, pausing at the threshold. She turns her head back toward me. “For what it’s worth, I think a small town would suit you.”

And then she walks through the doorway, leaving me staring at her backside in total shock. What just happened?

Shrugging, I open my laptop and find Kimberly's email. I click on the first link which goes straight to a website for Windsor Family Farm. Geez, their website is lacking. I scroll through some photos of the town and property. Wow, OK, maybe this is more like the movies than I anticipated.

My fingers itch to send my résumé. What harm could it possibly do?

I pull out my phone and call Katia.

"I thought you were bailing on me?" she answers.

"Am I crazy to apply as a social media marketing manager for a farm in a small town?" I ask as I twirl a piece of curly hair around my finger, a nervous habit that I've never been able to break.

"I'm sorry, what? Am I experiencing a real-time glitch in the universe? Wait. Is this a prank call?" she asks.

"Katia! Focus! I'm being serious," I groan.

"What? Hold on, I'm video-calling," she says and a second later I see her face on my phone screen.

I flip my camera to show her the Windsor Family Farm's website.

"Holy shit! Is that place for real?" she asks.

"Right? It totally looks like a movie set," I add.

“For real. Wait, scroll back. And stop twirling your hair,” she demands.

“Where?” I ask, releasing the lock of hair as I start scrolling up on the photos.

“There. Stop,” she commands, and I stare at the screen. It’s a photo of a man, and I dare say, he’s hot as fuck.

“What’s that say below it?” she asks.

I squint and read, “Eric Windsor, current owner and operator of Windsor Family Farm.” My eyes widen. Can I work for someone that attractive? How will I focus? I groan.

“Oh. My. God. You have to apply! That guy is fucking hot! Also, you would legit be living our romantic small-town made-for-television-movie dreams! Do it! Do it for me!” Katia yells and then squeals with excitement. I decide not to mention that I think Dad has a house in this small town. Of course, he has houses in a dozen small towns and cities around the world. I don’t even know if he ever goes here. I have a faint recollection of going here a long time ago, but I’m not sure if the memory is real or just made up out of my deep desire to have a normal relationship with Dad. When I was younger and on school breaks, Dad would just bring me along with him for everything. I was mostly with nannies. And then during the school year, I was away at various boarding schools. I suppose it was a lonely childhood. I always wanted to be in one place and make real friends, not just friends who only wanted to be around me because my dad was the James Titan.

I glare at her as I switch the camera back to my face. “This is real-life shit, Katia. Not a movie.”

She rolls her eyes. “I know that, Ari Party Pooper. But come on, when else in your life will you have a chance like this?”

She makes a valid point. “See, even you know the answer is never,” she points out.

I hate that she’s right.

“My dad would never allow it,” I say. My father is a control freak. He’s had my life plotted out for me since, well, birth. I try to think of a way that I could make this work.

“Girl, you gotta go. Go for me! At least try. Send in your application and then show up in person. What’s the worst that can happen? Where’s this place?” she asks.

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“Storyview Falls,” I state.

“So that’s like only an hour away,” she says after a minute, during which time I am sure she just used her map app to find it. “I’m texting you Daddy’s credit card. Just rent a car, turn off your phone, buy a burner phone, and then drive your ass over there. Text your dad first though and say that you decided to join me on the yacht and the satellite is down, so you won’t be in touch for a few days.” I hear something in the hallway. I walk over to the door and look around, but I don’t see anyone. I walk back over and sit down as Katia keeps talking.

As she lays out this plan, it seems rational. I could do that. What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not like I’m going to fall in love with some farmer. This is real life and shit like that doesn’t happen, ever.

CHAPTERTWO

Eric

I stare out at my farm. My farm. It still doesn’t seem real after all this time.

Shit, I gotta figure out a way to make this profitable. I can’t keep bleeding from my trust fund to take care of it. And honestly, I don’t want to fail. I want to prove to every asshole who stood in my way that I can do this. Mostly though, I want to keep my father’s dream alive. He didn’t want to retire when he did, but Mom forced him. And to be fair, the warmer weather in the Bahamas has been great for her arthritis. And with my sister living in England with her husband and kids, it’s all come down to me. Make it work or sell it to the developers that have been hounding me.

This farm is really all I've ever known. Dad sold his microchip company and used the profits to buy this land and build the farm when I was still pretty young. Storyview Falls is my home.

"Eric!" I hear my name.

I walk down to my office that's attached to the house. Joy, my jack-of-all-trades, is standing in front of her computer.

"What?" I ask as I walk around the desk.

"It's the damn computer screen. Went black again," she says.

I take a deep breath and look around the back of the screen. Yep, the end of the power cord is sitting there. I hold it up and Joy gives me a sheepish grin.

"Oops," she says as I plug it in, and we both watch it come to life.

"I told you it would keep getting knocked out if you had the desk facing the window," I explain as I motion to the configuration of the room.

"And I told you, I want the view. So, I guess I'm gonna have to remember to check that damn cord," she mutters.

"Joy, let's add another room on here. Then you could have a better setup," I argue.

She gives me a pointed look. "Eric, if you want to turn a profit, you gotta stop spending money. I swear, for a boy who has a minor in business administration, you have more heart than business sense."

I open my mouth to counter her point, but Buck and Earl walk into the office. Earl

shoves two coffees toward Joy and me.

“Elisha sent over the latest seasonal latte. I told her we just like our coffee black, no sugar, no cream, just plain old coffee, but that girl was determined to give us some frou-frou drink,” Earl mutters as he looks with contempt at the offending lattes complete with whipped cream on top and something that appears to be cinnamon sprinkled on it.

Joy picks up the coffee and sips it. She moans. “Good God, Elisha is the queen of coffee making. She better never close that café.”

I take a sip of mine. It’s actually pretty good. “Not bad,” I agree.

“Not bad,” Buck says. “This is even better than the one she had last month. If Mr. Curmudgeon over here would just try it...” He trails off and glares at Earl.

“Fine, give that here,” he motions to Joy who passes him her latte. He takes a sip and we all stare at him waiting for the verdict. “God damn it! Why does she have to be so good at this damn coffee-frothing thing? That latte is at least three dollars more than my plain coffee. She’s just trying to upsell me,” he grumbles.

Buck looks up at the ceiling and shakes his head. “She gave us the drinks for free, you piss ant. She made zero dollars. Now, can we take our coffees and go see about that tire on the tractor?”

“Fine, but mark my words, I ain’t paying a penny more for my coffee. I don’t care how good that shit is,” Earl grumbles as the two of them turn and head out the door.

Joy and I watch as they disappear, Earl still grumbling and Buck poking fun at him. I worry about those two. They aren’t exactly young anymore, but neither one would admit it. I won’t fire them, but I do realize I need some younger staff. If I could just

get this farm turned in the right direction financially.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Joy asks as I stare out the window.

“Kingsley is coming by to open the farmstand at noon. I gotta meet with Max about our next seasonal vegetable contract, and I think I got some applications for that social media marketing job that Kingsley talked me into posting.” I turn back to find Joy staring at me with a raised eyebrow.

“So, you actually posted the job?” she says.

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I shrug. “I mean, he’s not wrong. I don’t know the first thing about social media. And if we’re gonna expand to have people coming to pick their own berries or apples and pet the farm animals, we need some better marketing. I just...I don’t know. I could buy a lot of advertisements instead of hiring someone.”

“Kingsley is right. Social media is the new marketing if you can do it right. My granddaughter is an influencer and makes more than my daughter and son-in-law combined,” she states with a pointed look.

I feel my eyebrows shoot up at her statement. “Is that...normal?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Eric, what’s normal these days?”

Sighing, I nod. “Valid point.”

“At least interview a few people, maybe you’ll find someone good,” Joy urges as she sits back down at her computer.

“I’m not sure how much I can pay a new employee. If social media influencers are making six figures, that’s not exactly economical, unless you know something I don’t about our profit margin from last month,” I state dryly.

“Just look at a few of the résumés,” she urges.

I sit down at the desk in the corner and open my laptop, begrudgingly. I’d rather be doing anything other than this. It’s like going to the dentist.

“Eric, you aren’t hiring an assassin. The stakes aren’t that high. Remember your plan. You’ll hire someone on a short-term basis at first and see how it goes,” she reminds me as I doomscroll through news online before logging in to the portal for the job posting.

There are three applications. One from a college kid who hasn’t graduated yet but has a following of ten thousand people on some social media app. One from someone with a graduate degree. I look at the résumé, intrigued. He’s had six jobs in two years. Nope, I think to myself. Red flag. The third one is from a recent college graduate. I click through her social media. It’s very artsy. Artistically taken photos of bags, shoes, cityscapes, park benches, and leather chairs. It’s all at unique angles, and the photos are framed to only show you a small part of the object or scenery. She has...five hundred thousand followers! That can’t be right. I click again. God, I wish I was better at this spy thing. Her profile photo of herself is even cropped. All I can see is part of a facial profile and massive amounts of red wavy hair.

Sighing again, I close the program and turn to Joy. “I don’t know. I was hoping we’d have at least like five candidates that looked good. There’s maybe one in there. I’ll give it a few more days,” I state as I get up and walk to the door.

“Come on, Barkley,” I add as I pat my thigh, waiting for the hound under Joy’s desk to emerge. Barkley has lived with me on the farm since I found him as a puppy dropped off with siblings in a box by the main road. I found homes for all of them but him and he’s been here ever since. He’s older now, and slower, but he’s still our office mascot.

“He’s keeping my feet warm,” Joy complains as I watch Barkley stir and pop his head up to look at me.

“Fine, you traitor. But don’t forget who pays for your food and your vet bills,” I say with a pointed look. Barkley drops his head back on the ground.

Shaking my head, I walk out to the barn to feed the animals. But somewhere in the recesses of my mind, the image of the mysterious redhead nags at me. My fingers itch to touch that hair. It's a fleeting thought. And I push it aside. I've closed the door on anything more than an occasional fling. And even that is at the prompting of my friends. I should face the facts. I'm never going to love another woman. And besides, it's not like beautiful women just fall into my lap out here on the farm.

CHAPTER THREE

Ariana

"In four hundred feet, turn right on Shipwreck Drive," my phone's navigation app says. I've named him Norris, and right now, we are heading for divorce.

"There's no road there, Norris!" I yell angrily as I motion to the lack of a place to turn.

"Make a U-turn in three hundred feet," he replies.

I want to cry. This drive should have been short. Katia said it would take less than two hours to get here. It's been three. Three hours of turning around, making U-turns, and recalculating.

I turn around. I ignore Norris, deciding to read a road sign instead.

"Storyview Falls – 2 miles"

OK, so I can't be that lost. I continue straight, and in exactly two miles, I'm greeted by a cute little wooden sign that indeed says, Storyview Falls.

"Finally!" I squeal. Up ahead, I see the old houses getting closer together and then

they give way to a main street with little shops. They seem vaguely familiar but still no memories come to mind. I had secretly checked Dad's files for his property here. He still owns it. A penthouse condo on some beach nearby. Aside from a cleaning and management company charge, it didn't appear Dad had been out here in a while. I know several other billionaire families that have property here, but I've only seen them at social gatherings in the city.

"Holy crap! This does look just like a movie set," I say to myself as I slow down and park along a cute little park that has an actual gazebo. "Katia is going to shit her pants."

I get out and walk up to the first store I find. It's a pharmacy. But not a chain one, like a little one from television. I read the name as I walk inside. "Clyde's Pharmacy."

There's a small checkout counter that also appears to be the pharmacy counter.

"Hello?" I say as I look for any sign of humans.

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“Just a second,” a voice calls out from somewhere behind shelves of medicine.

A second later, a woman maybe ten years older than me, pops her head out from behind a shelf of antibiotics. “Hey there. What can I do for you?”

“Are you Clyde?” I ask because she doesn’t look like a Clyde.

She laughs as she walks over to me. “No. Clyde would be my grandfather. But he’s retired now. I’m Sylvie. What can I do for you?” she asks as she leans on the counter.

“Oh, uh, I’m sort of lost and my navi is not being helpful. Do you happen to know how to get to Windsor Family Farm from here?” I ask.

“Yeah. Of course. Hold on, this will be easier,” she says as she grabs a sheet of paper and draws me a map. “So, go down Main Street, hook a right on Tower Road, then follow that past the big purple Victorian house, make a left onto Clearview Drive. Now, that forks, so stay to the left, and then about, maybe a mile down that road, you should see a small road, the sign’s down, but it’s Farm Lane and you turn right on that. There’s, like, this massive oak tree right there. And the farm is about a half mile down on the right. There’s a sign. And you’ll see the big red barn where they have the little farmstand shop. Just park there. Are you shopping at the farmstand? Because this time of year I don’t think Kingsley opens it until noon.” She pauses and looks at me.

“No. I, uh, I’m going to see Eric Windsor about a job,” I say as I take the sheet of paper.

She frowns as she looks at me. “To...work on the farm?” she questions as she looks me up and down in confusion. Yeah, I don’t exactly scream farm worker.

I shake my head. “No, no. He’s hiring a social media marketing manager,” I explain.

“Right. Well, good luck,” Sylvie says.

“Thanks,” I reply but my attention is drawn to some awesome postcards.

“These are great. Are these all Storyview Falls?” I ask as I pick up a few.

“Yep. I made them myself. Not that we get tons of tourists, but I think they’re good,” Sylvie says proudly.

“They are very good. You took these photos?” I turn the card over and find her name just as she answers me.

“Yep. Me and my trusty Nikon,” she replies. “Take one. On the house.”

“You sure?” I ask. Because in the city, nothing is for free.

“Yeah. Consider it a good luck postcard.”

I laugh. “Thanks. Maybe I’ll see you again soon.”

She nods as I take a postcard of some fishing boats along a cliffy shoreline.

When I get back to my car, I place the paper on the dashboard and begin following the map. Eight minutes later, I’m pulling up to the red barn just as Sylvie described it. “Wow! A farm and a gazebo. This place is unreal,” I mutter as I get out. I realize then that I’ve not exactly worn the best shoes. My boots have heels, and they keep sinking

in the mud. The barn door is closed, which means that...what did Sylvie say the person's name was...Kingsley isn't here yet. I don't see an office. So I start around the back side of the barn. There's another smaller barn-looking building around the back and a fenced-in area.

There are some stepping stones inside the fenced-in area. I can hear something inside. Maybe it's a person? I open the gate and walk carefully on the round cement stones.

"Hello?" I call out as I approach. I start to peek inside the barn when all of a sudden a snort comes from behind me. I turn just in time to see a giant pig barreling toward me. Can pigs even run? I don't have time to contemplate that as it whips past me and I go tumbling straight into the mud.

"Oh my God!" I cry as I try to stand, only to start sliding again. This time when I lose my balance, I reach out to brace myself, squeezing my eyes shut. But I never hit the ground. Instead, I'm pulled back against something...or someone.

"I got you," a deep voice says in my ear.

I jump and the arms let go slowly.

"I...uh...I..." I'm at a loss for words as I spin around and come face-to-face with Eric Windsor. I recognize him immediately from his photo on the website. I swallow because all I see is his handsome face. My eyes go from his eyes to his arms where his biceps bulge under his long-sleeved shirt. Then, I look down at myself and I'm overcome with horror.

I'm covered in mud. And I don't mean some streaks here and there, I mean full-on doused in earth like I've been rolling around with that monster pig.

"Oh my God!" I whisper. I'm completely mortified. Are these boots salvageable? I

loved these boots. What do I do? Do I run away and never look back? I've come all this way. I can't believe this happened. Tears threaten and I take a deep breath trying to keep them from pouring over my eyelids. I can't cry. Not like this.

"Are you alright?" he asks as his eyes survey my body.

"Y-yes," I stammer, quickly looking away from him again.

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“I’m Eric Windsor. This is my farm. Why don’t we get you cleaned up?” he offers.

Swallowing, I look to the door where he’s pointing. “My office is just over there. There’s a bathroom and a laundry room. I’m sure we have some Windsor Farm gear you can borrow.”

“Oh, that’s alright,” I mutter as I glance back at the door. It’s on a wing of a house that sticks off the back of the home. There’s a path of pebbles and stepping stones leading up to a dark red door. It has a window in the top half. There’s not anyone around us and I suddenly question if I should go inside a house with a man I don’t know.

As if sensing my concern, he pulls out his phone and dials a number. “Joy, we have a guest who slipped in the pigpen. Mind bringing us out a towel?”

“Sure thing,” a woman’s voice responds.

Eric places the phone back in his pocket as an older woman opens the red door and walks out toward us holding a towel.

“Oh my. You poor child. Why don’t you come inside? It’s a bit chilly today. I think we have some Windsor Farm T-shirts and sweatpants. We can get you changed and warmed up and I’ll clean your clothes,” she says as she hands me a towel. I wipe my face and stare at the mud on the towel. How dirty am I?

“There’s a shower in the bathroom, just by the office. It’s all yours,” she urges as she gently takes my arm and guides me inside.

I follow her. I feel Eric walking behind us. His big looming presence feels more like a security detail than anything threatening.

“Let’s see here. Well, we don’t have anything in your size,” Joy says as she looks me up and down. “I’m Joy, by the way. Joy Crushner. Let’s see...well, it’ll have to do for now. The shower is in here and the washer and dryer are just here,” she adds, pointing to the two rooms that are side by side in a hallway that looks like it leads into the house, seemingly connecting what appears to be an office space to what looks like a lived-in home beyond a glass-plated French door.

“Thank you,” I whisper as I accept the clothes and walk into the bathroom. I shut the door and stare at the absolute disaster that is me. I’m completely coated in mud like I went to some day spa. At least I think it’s mud. Ewww! I smell myself. Gross.

“Let me know if you need anything. There should be fresh towels in the linen closet,” Joy’s voice comes from the other side of the door.

“Thank you,” I mutter as I open a small closet door and find fluffy blue towels. Well, at least they smell clean. I disrobe and shower quickly. Thankful for the hot water. As I’m drying off, I glance in the mirror and shudder. There’s no way this man is going to hire me. I look like a drowned rat and already proved that I can’t be trusted on a farm.

Tears well in my eyes again. I try to blink them away as I towel dry my curly, red hair. I look so bland without makeup on, and these clothes are two sizes too big. I look like a child pretending to be an adult.

Sighing at my ruined boots. I wrap my clothes into the discarded towel and open the door. I slide into the laundry room and stare at the washer. I know what it is. I just only have used one once. And I completely forget the instructions my friends gave me that time. Freshman year, Dad got me a laundry service when I was forced to live

in the dorms, and after that, I had an apartment he paid for and a cleaning service.

“You have a college degree. How hard can this be?” I whisper as I open the top lid and plop the soiled clothes and towel into the basin. I close it because that makes sense. Then I stare at the panel in the back. There are so many options.

“Did you find everything alright?” Joy asks as she suddenly appears in the doorway.

I jump and clutch my heart.

“You are like a scared little rabbit, aren’t you? Well, never mind that. Nothing scary around here. Other than Earl, but he won’t bite. Now, let’s see.” Joy adjusts some glasses on her nose and looks at the panel. “It’s been a hot minute, but I believe this is the setting you need.” She presses some buttons and the machine turns on.

“There, all set. Oh, let’s get you a pair of socks while you wait. It’s cold in the office,” she says. “I’ll be right back. Have a seat on the sofa,” she adds as she walks into the house. I can see a really nice kitchen beyond the door but not much else.

I turn to walk back into the office and instead run smack-dab into Eric.

“Whoa,” he says in that low voice.

“Sorry,” I squeak as I take a step back.

I look up at him. He’s giving me a once-over as if he can’t quite make out what I am.

I take a deep breath and hold out my hand. “Hi, I’m Ariana...Harlow,” I say, deciding using my full name with “Titan” on the end would be a bad idea since all my résumés said Harlow. I’ve gone by Ariana Harlow in most professional settings because I hate being labeled by nepotism. And Harlow is my middle name and was

my mother's maiden name, so it's not a lie.

He frowns in what appears to be confusion as he reaches out to shake my hand. "Did you apply for a job here?" he asks.

I nod and give him my best smile while trying not to enjoy the warmth and abrasiveness of his big hand wrapped around mine. He releases it and I immediately feel a loss but maintain my smile. "I did. I, uh, happened to be in the area and thought I'd stop by in person." I look down and then smile sheepishly up at him. "I didn't expect such an unusual first impression."

His lips twitch, fighting a grin, but then it breaks through anyhow, and fuck me. This man goes from a ten-out-of-ten to a twenty-out-of-ten when he smiles.

"Well, I'm glad you came by. I'm sorry Petunia knocked you down," he says as he motions toward the pigpen with his head.

"Petunia? Was that the..." I trail off as I now fight a grin. Of course, this man named his pig Petunia.

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“Why don’t you have a seat, and we can talk?” he suggests as he steps aside to allow me to walk back into the office.

“Here you go,” Joy says hurrying in with a giant pair of white men’s socks. “I swear they’re clean. And here’s a warm cider for you,” she offers as she sets both down on the table in front of me.

“Thank you,” I say softly as I pull the socks on and hope they don’t fall off because they are huge. I take a sip of the drink and moan.

“That’s from our farm,” Joy says proudly as she takes a seat at a desk.

I raise my eyebrows. “Wow! If this is yours, it is not going to be hard to market it.”

Eric takes a seat in an old leather chair across from me. He raises an eyebrow. “Tell me more.”

His eyes seem to penetrate my soul as he stares at me. But instead of feeling intimidated, I feel at ease as I look between him and Joy. I want this job. I need this job. I swallow and hope I can impress him.

CHAPTERFOUR

Eric

I watch as she takes small sips of the cider. Her big, bluish-green eyes take in her surroundings. I can’t quite figure out what to make of her. She’s young. At least ten

years younger than I am. I try to remember her résumé and application, but in the end, I can't remember much and decide I'll interview her on the fly. Worst-case scenario, I hire her for a few weeks and it doesn't work out.

"So," I begin and her eyes dart back to meet mine. "Ariana Harlow, remind me, what did you study in college?"

She sets the mug in her lap. "I just graduated with a major in marketing with a concentration in social media marketing and I double minored in event planning and business administration."

I nod. "Impressive. Do you have any work experience?"

Her cheeks turn pink and her eyes dart down for a second before tracking slowly back to mine. "Yes," she says quietly.

I wait for a second because I'm wondering if she'll continue, and just as I open my mouth to speak, she continues.

"I was fortunate to get several prestigious internships while in college," she starts. She clears her throat and takes a sip of cider.

I motion for her to continue. It's almost like she's stalling, which is strange. Normally people her age would jump at an opportunity to tell a potential employer about a fancy internship.

"I worked for Levitz and Canterbury one summer. I had an internship for credit with the in-house marketing division of Vintagemagazine. I worked at Cannon and Fairfax another summer. I had an externship at the Galaxy Studios, and I also interned for Grayson Mitchell," she rattles off as if working at all these world-famous companies is some sort of everyday occurrence.

It takes me a full ten seconds to recover and lift my jaw off the floor. “Well, that’s...uh...impressive. What were some of the projects you worked on that interested you?” I question as I glance at Joy, whose jaw is still somewhere in my basement.

“Oh, well, at Cannon and Fairfax, I was part of a team that made the marketing campaign for Fruity Sorbet lip balm,” she says.

“The one where all the celebrities were on the ads and all over social media?” I ask.

She nods and blushes again. “The idea of the celebrities being on Team Fruity or Team Sorbet was mine,” she says in almost a whisper.

“Wow. That’s...just wow,” I manage. “Do you have any references?” I ask because this can’t be true. There’s no way someone this talented just landed on my doorstep...or in my pigpen in little Storyview Falls.

We might have a few billionaires that reside here, but this is not a rich-and-famous sort of place. This is the place where everybody knows your name, your favorite food, and what time you go to bed at night.

“Of course,” she says in an almost insulted way.

I scratch the back of my head. “What’s the biggest mistake you’ve ever made?” I ask. There has to be a catch twenty-two.

Her lips twitch as if she’s fighting a smile. “I was at this photoshoot for a social media campaign at Vintagemagazine and the magazine editor wanted me to pick up these scarves. So I went and I didn’t confirm which bag of them when I picked them up, I just grabbed the one closest to me when the girl at the store said it was on the counter. Anyhow, I get back and we open it, and they are not scarves, but berets. We

didn't have time to switch.”

“Wow, she must have been pissed,” I mutter, knowing the editor only by her infamous temper.

She giggles. “Yeah, until the photographer put a few on the models and then they both were like, yes, this is even better. Thank God they loved them, or I would have been fired on the spot.”

She pauses. “Anyhow, I learned always to double-check even if I think it's obvious.”

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I chuckle. “I bet. So what’s your weakness?”

“I can be a little too loyal,” she admits. “I’m working on that.”

“Can I be brutally honest?” I ask as I watch her twirl her hair around her finger.

She nods.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

She laughs. “I know this sounds crazy because even thinking it makes me feel like I sound crazy, but I didn’t want a big-city job. I just didn’t. I want something different. I want to live somewhere where everyone knows my name. I want to make a big difference in a small place. I want to feel like my contribution matters...and not just once in a while, but every day. I know small-town life isn’t perfect. And I’m sure working on a farm will have its challenges, but I love new experiences and I’m excited to learn. I could even make Petunia a mascot,” she says with a grin.

Joy and I both laugh. “Well, perhaps meet some of our other animals first,” I suggest.

“That’s fair,” she replies. She opens her mouth to say something else when Earl and Buck come waltzing in followed by Kingsley.

“And then I told Irene that leaving it out will attract the—” Earl stops midsentence and Buck runs into him as all three men stare at Ariana.

“Hi,” Ariana squeaks with a small wave of her hand.

I press my lips together to keep from laughing because Kingsley looks like he's in love; like giant hearts will pop out of his eyes as though he's a cartoon character. Earl and Buck look completely dumbfounded.

"Earl, Buck, Kingsley, this is Ariana Harlow. She's here to interview for the social media marketing manager position," I state as I motion to Ariana.

"Hi, nice to meet you," Kingsley says as he walks over and extends his hand. Ariana stands and shakes it.

"Nice to meet you too. What is your job on the farm?" she asks, her eyes sparkling as if learning this is the most interesting thing ever. I narrow my eyes as I look between them. The last thing I need is Kingsley falling for a slightly older woman. His sister would reach out from her grave and beat me over the head. He needs to be focused on school.

"I run the farmstand," he answers and then hooks his thumb over his shoulder and motions to Earl and Buck. "Earl Helmner helps with the animals and some of the field stuff. Buck, or Rob Buckner, is the jack-of-all-trades. He's been here since...when did you start, Buck?"

"When the dinosaurs were roaming these parts," he says in his old gravelly voice.

Ariana giggles. "Wow, you must know everything about this farm, then," she says.

My eyebrows shoot up when Buck actually fucking blushes. I don't think I've ever seen him blush a day in his life.

"Well, I suppose I know a thing or two, but Earl's been here just as long," he adds.

"I would definitely want to do some spotlight social media on you three. In fact,

highlighting staff and the animals would be a great way to share Windsor Family Farm with the public,” she says as she looks back at me. “People love stories. You just have to learn how to get them to start listening to yours.”

The room is silent as everyone stares at her, captivated by what she’s saying. “What other ideas do you have?” I ask.

She looks around. “You need more social media-friendly places here. Everyone has a camera phone and social media now. Everyone wants to take a cute photo when they go somewhere. Also, a better setup for people to interact with the animals. You said you run the farmstand, do you give out recipes?”

Kingsley glares at me. “I told you. Ella keeps telling me to post them.”

I narrow my eyes again and look back at Ariana.

“Also, better signage and more signage off Main Street. Heck, make Storyview Falls part of your story. People from other places wouldn’t necessarily come here just for the farm, but a full day trip to a cute small town included, that’s a huge selling point,” she continues. “Anyhow, those are just some things off the top of my head.”

“Impressive,” Joy says quietly.

“The kid’s got some good points there,” Earl mutters as Buck nods.

“I for one vote for that recipe thing,” Kingsley adds.

I glance back at Ariana. She stares at me with such hope that I know before I speak I’m going to offer her a job. There’s something about her, a magnetic pull. I thought it was just me feeling it, but the way all my staff is staring at her makes me think she’s just one of those people that attracts other people. Like some sort of light with

moths surrounding it.

“A three-month trial,” I state.

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“Really?” she asks, her voice rising an octave.

“Yes. When can you start?” I ask.

She grins so wide I can see her back teeth. “Uh, now,” she squeaks.

Everyone laughs. “OK. Well, let’s get your paperwork filled out, then,” I add. I turn to my staff. “Do you all need something?”

“Lunch?” Earl asks.

“In the crockpot in the kitchen,” I mutter as I motion for him to go inside my house. I always cook for everyone on Tuesdays. It was a tradition started by my mom and dad and I guess I liked it.

I turn back to Ariana. “Let’s get your paperwork filled out,” I state as I grab my laptop and settle it on the desk next to me.

“Do you need my help?” Joy asks.

“Nope. Go grab food. I got this,” I reply, pulling up the documents we need. We hire seasonal workers, so I know the drill. Although it’s been a few years since I hired a full-time or even part-time employee.

“OK, let’s get this done,” I state as I pat the chair closest to me. Ariana sits down, her knee grazes mine. She quickly pulls it away. I look over at her fair, freckled skin. She is very beautiful. And based on what she was wearing before, I’m guessing she’s not

used to country life. This is going to either work out great or be a huge mistake.

CHAPTERFIVE

Ariana

I can hear the other employees talking in the kitchen down the hall. It all seems so casual. No separate offices. No cubicles. No formalities at all. I smile as I watch Eric pull up an employment form. I love it here already, except for Petunia, she seems a little...scary.

“Here we go,” Eric says as he adjusts his chair. “Name...Ariana Harlow. Address?”

I go still. Shit. I can’t give him my father’s address. I try to remember if I put an address on the application. No. I just said the city and state. I could use one of Dad’s other houses. Definitely not the one here. If Dad sees I accessed his condo here, then I’m screwed.

“Ariana, address?” Eric repeats.

“I...uh, don’t have one yet. I just moved to town,” I say as I realize I’m an idiot. I was so focused on getting out of the city, I didn’t even think about where the hell I would stay tonight. Is there even a hotel here? Maybe there’s a bed-and-breakfast, like in the movies?

“She could stay here,” Joy interjects. We both turn to find her standing in the doorway with a half-eaten muffin in her hand.

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary,” I say way too quickly.

“Have you even looked for a place yet?” Eric calls my bluff. Shit.

I feel my cheeks turning pink. “N-no?” I stammer and it comes out as a question rather than a statement.

“I do have a guesthouse here. Kingsley was in it, but he’s found an apartment by school when he’s not staying with his mom, so it’s vacant right now. It’s yours if you want it,” Eric offers.

I stare at him in shock. He’s giving me a job and a place to stay. People like this actually exist.

“So...would you like to stay in the guesthouse?” Eric asks, his words slow as if I’m cognitively impaired.

“I couldn’t. I don’t want to be an inconvenience,” I squeak.

Eric looks me over and types in the farm’s address. “You can and you will. There, all done,” he states as he finishes that text box on the screen.

He stands abruptly and I shrink back. I’m so used to my father yelling, that my body just naturally takes over when a big male looms overhead.

Eric steps back and I see his jaw clench before he speaks. “Please use it, Ariana. It’ll be helping me out. I need to get it redone and maybe you’ll have some ideas,” he states. “I’ll show you to it now. We can finish the paperwork later.”

“If you leave your driver’s license here or your social security card, I can start filling out the rest,” Joy says.

Panic washes over me. My father’s address is on that license and my full name is on my social security card. “I left them in the car. I’ll have to grab them in a bit,” I say quickly.

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“No worries, dear. We have plenty of time,” Joy replies with a warm smile as she walks back over to her desk. “I’ll put some sheets and towels in the washer for you. Oh, and here are your clothes.”

“Thank you,” I reply as I take the bundle of clothes and put on my shoes before turning to follow Eric.

He leads me through the hallway and into his house. I frown because he said guesthouse and this is most definitely not a guesthouse. But then he takes me down another hall, past a living room and a study. He opens a door and I find myself on a covered porch. There’s a small pebbled pathway out to a little house. I guess I didn’t see it because it was behind the barn and is much smaller than the barn. It looks like a miniature version of the big farmhouse. It’s adorable.

He opens the green front door and we step inside. There’s a small living space to the right and a kitchen to the left. I see a door in the back of the kitchen. A stairway breaks up the two spaces and is right in front of us.

“It’s not big, but it has everything you need,” he starts. He opens a drawer in the kitchen and pulls out a folded piece of paper. “Wi-Fi passcode is here, the door passcode to the main house is here. You’ll need that to get into the office. There’s a small stacked washer and dryer in that closet or you can use the one up at the house. The bedroom loft is upstairs. I can give you directions to the grocery store if you need them. And...I can’t think of anything else. Do you need help bringing stuff in? Did you bring stuff with you?”

I nod. “I have a few suitcases,” I state.

“Well, let’s go grab them. I’ll let you get settled today and we can start work at nine a.m. sharp tomorrow,” he says as we walk around the house to the parking lot in front of the barn.

Eric takes both suitcases and I grab my oversized purse. I’ll need to figure out how to turn in the car I rented. I only have it for a month. Shrugging, I decide to contemplate that later as I lock the car.

Eric chuckles. “You don’t need to do that,” he says as we walk back to the guesthouse.

“Huh?” I ask as I stop and look around us.

“Trust me, there are motion sensor cameras around the property, including at the driveway, and Storyview Falls’ worst crime since I’ve lived here is when some teenagers toilet-papered the high school. So, you’re safe. Feel free to lock it, but I just wanted you to know that if you forget or something, you don’t need to worry,” he explains as we walk back into the little house I’m calling home for the foreseeable future.

“Good to know,” I say with an air of skepticism because no place is crime-free, that’s crazy.

Eric shrugs as if to say, your call. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Oh, here’s my number,” he says as he holds out his hand. I frown for a second until I realize he wants my phone. I pull it from my pocket and place it in his large hand. I almost want to laugh because my phone looks like a kid’s toy in his palm. I swallow as my eyes trail up his body. Eric is large, like all of him. Without meaning to, I glance at his package and then quickly look away as I realize I was just thinking about my new boss’s dick. Get a grip, I think to myself. He hands me back my phone.

“There. I just texted my phone, so we’re all set. Call me if you need anything, or just come on into the main house.” He pauses and pulls out his phone, typing away before looking back at me. “I just sent you the address of the grocery store in case you need anything. It’s not huge, but it has all the main staples.”

Nodding, I glance at my phone as I see his text come through. I probably should go figure out what I need.

“Great. I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight, Ariana,” he says as he leaves, shutting the door behind him.

I look around before heading upstairs. The loft is small but large enough to house a very tiny closet, a chest of drawers, one small nightstand, and a full-sized bed.

I groan. Will my clothes even fit in here?

I call Katia.

“Beotch! Are you there? Tell me everything!” Katia answers.

I laugh. “I’m here. And guess what?” I say.

“What?”

“I got the job!” I squeal, suddenly feeling excited.

“O.M.G. That’s awesome! Is the town like the movies? Is Eric as hot as I thought he was? Did you do something small town-y like rescue a Christmas tree farm? Tell me more,” she replies.

I giggle. “I did stop at the pharmacy for directions. It was so cute. And the farm is...I

love it. Well, except this pig..." I proceed to tell Katia every part of my adventure so far. She's quiet for the most part, which is unlike her.

"So, you're, like, living on the farm?" she asks, her voice half-disgusted.

"Well, I guess I am," I reply.

"Ewww! But there's like animals and bugs and actual shit. I would triple-wash your hair tonight and then give it a full conditioner treatment," she suggests.

"I suppose. I need to go to the grocery store. How do I do that?" I whisper as I change into real clothes because I cannot go out in these clothes.

"How the hell would I know?" she replies.

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“Ugh. I don’t even know how to cook. What do I get?” I ask as I contemplate this. I’ve never once cooked for myself. I mean, I’ve gotten snacks, but they are all pre-made.

“Good luck with that. You’ll be living on apples and water,” Katia says.

“You are not any help. OK, I’m heading out. I need to figure this all out, like right now,” I state.

“Fine, but call me tomorrow night. I want to hear all about your first day,” she demands. I grin. She’s a pain in my ass but she’s a good friend.

“I will. ’Night,” I say.

“Sleep tight, you runaway,” she teases.

I roll my eyes as I disconnect.

I head out to the car and punch in the address Eric gave me. Fifteen minutes later, I’m pulling up to a small store. Keller Grocery. Not a name brand, but how bad could it be? I park and walk inside. It’s small, not like the grocery stores I’ve seen on television. I try to remember this one cooking show I like that has chefs competing in a grocery store. I think the food is like in groups. I take a cart and grin. This could be fun.

I find some crackers and cheeses. There are some olives in a jar that look alright. I grab various fruits and some bottles of water. They have iced tea in a carton and

lemonade, so I grab those. I'm turning to put them in the cart when I bump into someone.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I mumble.

"No worries, my dear," an older woman looks at me and smiles. "Are you new to town? It's far too early in the season for tourists."

Grinning, I nod. "Just moved here," I answer.

She holds out her hand. "I'm Greta. I own the cleaning service in town."

"Nice to meet you, Greta. I'm Ariana. I just started working at Windsor Family Farm."

"Oh, Eric's farm? How lovely! He's just such a good person. I'm sure you'll love it there," she rattles on as she looks at my cart.

I blush. "I...is there like a coffee shop or someplace like that here?" I ask.

She nods. "Elisha owns the Storyview Fall's Café. She makes the best pastries. You should stop in there. Max's Restaurant is also very good if you don't feel like cooking." She leans in conspiratorially. "I mean, I seldom feel like cooking," she adds with a wink.

I giggle. "Me either," I agree as we both laugh together.

"It was really nice meeting you," I say to her.

"Do you like reading?" she asks.

I nod enthusiastically. Reading and movies have been my escape for as long as I can remember.

“Well, what’s your phone number? You should come to book club. We’re trying to recruit some younger members,” she says.

We exchange numbers and she bids me a good day as I continue throwing random items in my cart. I find a few toiletries and some cleaning materials, which thankfully happens as I run into Greta again because she recommends all the best ones. I head in search of the café afterward.

I snap a few photos with my phone because this place is unreal. The buildings look to be from the eighteen hundreds. The street is tree-lined. People stop and chat with each other as if everyone here is best friends. It looks like a scene from a film rather than real life. It’s not that I’ve never been to a small town before, but honestly, my time in small towns has been rare. I went to college in a nearby city. Even my boarding schools were in or near cities. I vacationed in places like Paris and London and occasionally an island. But none of that is anything like this.

“Oh, hey, how did that job interview go?” I hear from behind me. I turn and find Sylvie from the pharmacy walking out from what looks like a consignment store.

“Hey,” I reply cheerfully. “I got the job!”

“That’s awesome! Welcome to Storyview Falls!” she says as she adjusts a purse strap on her shoulder. “I was just going to grab coffee at the café. Have you been yet?”

I shake my head. “No. I was told it’s good though and was actually heading that way myself.”

“Great. So, where are you from?” Sylvie asks as we begin walking toward a sign that

has a coffee mug on it.

“I grew up downtown, but Eric just offered up his guesthouse here. So I guess I’m officially becoming a Storyview Falls resident,” I explain, glazing over my life story because I don’t want to lie to Sylvie. She seems nice.

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“A city girl, huh? I grew up in the city too, but when Grandpa started talking about retiring, I moved out here,” she says as she opens the café door and we step inside. The smell of fresh bread, baked cookies, and coffee surrounds me like a warm hug.

“Hey, Sylvie,” a woman says from behind the counter.

“Hey, Elisha. This is Ariana. She’s new to town. She’s working for Eric,” Sylvie says as we walk up to the counter. She leans toward me. “I’d get one of her seven-layer bars. They are amazing and she will not tell me the secret ingredient.”

Elisha laughs. “What can I get for you ladies?”

“I’ll have a vanilla cappuccino with almond milk, and oh, what are those?” I ask as I point to a pastry that looks amazing.

“Those are my raspberry chocolate tortes,” Elisha says.

“I will take two of those. And a dozen of your macaroons.”

“Sure thing,” she says. I pull the remaining cash from my purse. Shit. I need to find a bank around here and open an account.

“Hey, is there a bank in town?” I ask.

“Yep. Right by the park off Main Street,” Sylvie says.

“Great. I need to open an account. Geez, so much to do when you move to a new

town,” I say with a smile.

“So, you’re working for Eric, huh?” Elisha asks as she glances over her shoulder at me while she makes my drink.

“Yep. Just started,” I answer.

“You’ll love it. Eric is the best and he could certainly use some help out here,” Elisha replies as she turns and sets my drink down.

Sylvie leans in toward me. “He’s had a rough time of it. I think you’ll be good for him.”

The way she says it makes me wonder what she means. Does his rough time just have to do with the farm? She knows I’m working for him, right? So, not dating him. Clearly, there are some things I don’t know yet about my new boss. I just hope he gives me enough of a chance to learn more about him.

CHAPTERSIX

Eric

I sip my coffee as I go through some bills. Tossing them on Joy’s desk, I stare out at the sun that’s still low in the sky. Earl and Buck are already busy working. Joy is coming late with her grandson who has the day off from school.

I feel like a king looking over his kingdom. God, I hope I can save this place. I can’t imagine life without it. Then again, I couldn’t imagine it without Tori but I’ve somehow managed. I feel the darkness creeping into my mind but then the door flies open and in walks my newest employee. I watch her cross the room and look around.

“Good morning, Ariana,” I say.

She jumps and clutches her chest. “You scared the crap out of me,” she says in a breathless voice.

I hold up my coffee mug. “Coffee?” I ask.

She smiles and sets down a box of macaroons from Elisha’s café. “Yes, please. I brought some of these. I couldn’t resist, they looked so good when I stopped there yesterday.”

I grab a mug and put it under the coffee maker as I pop a new coffee pod in the top. “Elisha’s baked goods are the best. We’re lucky to have her here.” I pause and turn back to Ariana. “I cleared this table for you. I know it’s not much of a desk area, but hopefully, it’ll work for now.”

She tilts her head to one side. “Well, maybe I can run into town and pick up a few things to make it...more functional.”

I’m about to suggest she rummage in Joy’s storage closet in the hallway to see if we have any supplies at all, but then I hear the tractor outside and it doesn’t sound good. We both turn to look out the window.

“Oh no,” I mutter as I head to see what the problem is today.

Earl kicks the tire as I approach. “Damn thing just crapped out on me. I think we’re gonna have to get Marty out here to look at it.”

I groan. Marty runs the one gas station and service shop in town. He’s great with anything on wheels with a motor, but he also comes at a price.

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“Yeah, kid. I know. But this repair is beyond me. Anyhow, sorry, but I think I just blocked in our new employee,” he says as he motions to Ariana’s car.

“Oh,” she says from behind me. I can hear the disappointment in her voice.

I pull my keys from my pocket and toss them to her. “You can take the truck. She’s old, but she’ll get you there. Make sure to save the receipts if you’re buying stuff for the office. Joy can reimburse you.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back,” she promises as she looks around. I point to my truck, a pale blue 1973 Ford F-100. It’s seen better days but it’s a reliable vehicle and does great in bad weather.

I watch as she figures out how to unlock the car. I fight a grin as I wonder if she’s ever seen a car with manual locks on it. She starts it and then the truck makes the worst sound as she tries to put it in reverse. Shit, does she know how to drive manual?

I walk over to the car and lean into the window. “You know how to drive a manual?”

She grimaces as she turns the car off and turns to me, looking for how to roll down the window. I make the motion of turning the old lever and she figures it out.

“I...it’s been a long time since I learned to drive manual,” she admits. She bites her lower lip and my gaze is drawn to her mouth. Damn, she’s cute.

I shake my head a little. Can’t think of my employees that way. Plus, she’s way too

young.

“Looks like our first order of business is to teach you how to drive this thing,” I state as I walk around the car. I motion for her to unlock it which takes a moment for her to figure out. I hop into the passenger seat and buckle up.

“Now what?” she asks as she stares at it.

I laugh. “Now, you have to turn it back on. We won’t get far without the engine on.”

She giggles. “Right...” She turns it on, and I give her a quick tutorial on driving Sheila.

“You named it Sheila,” she laughs.

“Hey now, be nice. She’s sensitive.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t make fun of you. I named my navi system Norris,” she says, giggling.

She follows my instructions as I coach her down the drive and out onto the main road. She manages to come to a stop and go again without stalling the truck which is impressive for a newbie.

“Turn left at the stop sign,” I instruct. “And then there’s an office supply store next to the farm supply store.”

She whips her head toward me. “What?”

“There,” I point at the entrance to the parking lot.

She pulls in and parks, turning to me with a grin. “Not bad for a novice, huh?”

I shake my head as I watch her look at the two buildings in front of us. “This is weird.”

“What is?” I ask, scratching the back of my head.

“Like, do people really go shopping for their office and then decide to get farm supplies at the same time?”

I feel my lips twitching, but I try not to laugh. She has no clue about small-town life.

“I mean, they both needed space and all the stores here are sort of clustered in the same eight blocks.” We get out and start walking to the office supply store. Then she does a double take.

“Are they owned by the same family?”

I nod. “That they are. The Miltons own both stores.”

“Ohhhh...OK, that makes more sense. I mean, real estate-wise and all,” she adds as we walk inside.

“Hey, Eric!” Heidi Milton calls out from the register.

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“Hi, Heidi.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do,” I reply as I follow Ariana through the store.

“Uh, do I have a budget for my office supplies?” she asks as she surveys notebooks.

“How about two hundred?” I suggest.

Her eyes widen. “Two hundred thousand?” she asks, her voice rising an octave with each word.

This time, I can’t stop myself from laughing. “Very funny,” I reply.

Her wide eyes tell me she’s not joking and I stop laughing. Is she for real? What type of money does she come from exactly?

“Two hundred dollars,” I restate.

She grimaces. “I don’t think I can get much for that,” she laments.

“Let’s start with the basics. I’ll tell you what we have and you tell me what you need,” I offer as I text Joy and get a rundown of what’s in that supply closet.

She shrugs as she runs a finger along some binders. Her nails are neatly painted and her hands look like she’s never worked a day in her life.

We slowly begin to walk through the store. She ends up with a notebook, a variety pack of pens and highlighters, some drawing paper, a sketchbook, a lamp that she said was desperately needed, and a monitor for her computer which put us over four hundred dollars, but I let it slide.

“Oh, can I get a chair?” she asks as she looks longingly at one of the leather chairs.

“You can get that one,” I state, pointing at a decent one on sale for fifty dollars.

“Fine,” she agrees as she rolls her eyes.

“Do you know anything about budgeting?” I ask.

“Sure. I just don’t normally work on such small budgets,” she explains. She looks at the cart I’ve managed to grab for us and then up at me. “Is this OK to get? I feel like we went way over your budget.”

“It’s fine. Honestly, we probably needed some of that stuff anyhow,” I admit as I shove a credit card across the counter at Heidi.

We load the truck and head back to the office. She parks and turns to me.

“How’d I do?” she asks.

“Not bad for your first lesson.”

She glances over at the tractor. “Maybe I should try driving some farm equipment next.”

I take the keys from her hand. “Uh, maybe another day.”

Giggling, she heads inside, where I sit and watch as Ariana creates a functional workspace out of seemingly nothing.

“Wow, aren’t you the interior decorator,” Joy says as her grandson, Lennox, comes waltzing into the office.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Lennox!” Joy scolds. “Manners.”

“Sorry, excuse me, miss, who are you?” he restates. We all laugh at that.

Ariana stops what she’s doing and walks over to Lennox, extending her hand. “I’m Ariana. What’s your name?”

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“Lennox,” he replies as he shakes her hand. “Are you working for Mr. Eric too?”

She nods. “Yep. Just started. Hey, Lennox, do you know the farm well?”

“Heck yeah, I do. You want me to show you my favorite place here?” he asks.

“Sure. I could use a good tour guide,” she states as she follows Lennox out the door.

“She’s cute,” Joy says as she watches her grandson lead Ariana over to the side barn where we keep a few animals.

“She’s got a lot to learn, but she may work out,” I declare, not wanting to address the fact that I agree she’s cute. Hell, she’s more than cute, she’s gorgeous. But I can’t linger on that thought. I suddenly wish I had time to visit a nearby town for my several-times-a-year hookup with a woman who’s an airline pilot. She’s not here a lot, which is just fine by me, but right now, I wish she was around so I could get rid of this sudden urge I have. I need to keep my head straight. No distractions. I look back at Ariana. God, it’s going to be hard to keep myself from getting distracted.

CHAPTERSEVEN

Ariana

“And this cow is named Mooman,” Lennox announces as he leans over to pat what looks like a small Highland cow.

“Hi there, Mooman,” I greet as I pet the cow’s head. “Mooman’s pretty cute.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But I like Barkley best,” he says.

“Who’s Barkley?” I ask, looking around as if another cow might appear.

“The dog?” Lennox says as if I’m stupid.

“Oh, right...the hound dog?” I ask as I vaguely remember a floppy-eared spotted dog around here.

“Yeah. He’s super cool. Pricilla is cool too though,” he adds as he walks back through the barn.

“Pricilla?”

“The cat.”

“There’s a cat too?” I ask, looking around again. Lennox points to a half wall between two stalls. I squint and see a long gray cat stretched out, fast asleep.

I walk over to her and Lennox grabs my hand and puts his finger to his lips. “You have to be quiet. She’s got babies in her belly. Mr. Eric says she needs her rest.”

“Oh?” I walk softly up to her and she lifts her head and meows. “Hey there, cutie,” I say softly as I lift my hand for her to smell. She plops her head back down and I stroke her soft fur.

“She’s nice,” I say with a smile.

“I guess so. She doesn’t play fetch like Barkley though,” Lennox says as he kicks a tennis ball on the ground.

“So, do you come here a lot when you are off from school?” I ask as I turn to head back to the office.

“Yeah. Gran Joy watches me. But mostly I come out here and play. Sometimes I help Kingsley in the store. Mr. Eric says I’m a good helper.”

“I bet you are. Well, I should get back inside. Thanks for the tour, Lennox,” I say.

“Miss Ariana?” he says.

I bend down and smile. “You can call me Ari. That’s what all my friends call me.”

He grins. “Miss Ari, I like your hair.”

I laugh as I twirl a piece between my fingers. “Thanks, Lennox.”

“I bet Mr. Eric thinks you’re pretty,” he adds as he skips off like what he’s said is no big deal. I feel my cheeks heat and I try to take some breaths as I walk back to the office. He’s just a kid after all. He’s probably just being silly. Eric seems to have his whole life together. I’m sure he would only ever view me as a kid-sister type.

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I enter the side door into the office. Joy's there but I don't see Eric as I look around.

"Hey, Eric had to go help Buck. I hope Lennox gave you a good tour," she says as she types away at her computer.

"He did. He's very sweet," I say, taking a seat at my desk.

"Let me know if you need anything," she says as I open my laptop and start to brainstorm.

I turn to her. "Can I get access to our website?"

"Of course," she says, getting up and walking over to help me get into the web design for it. I settle in with a cup of coffee five minutes later. I have a lot of work cut out for me.

* * *

"I need some serious coffee," I announce around lunchtime. "I'm going to borrow the truck and go into town."

"Sure thing. You going to Elisha's?" Joy asks.

I nod.

"Here"—she drops some money on my desk—"can you pick up some of her chicken salad sandwiches on a croissant for Lennox and me? And maybe a few cookies?"

“Absolutely,” I say as I gather my things and head to the truck. I manage to get to the café without stalling it. I grin proudly at the old blue truck as I walk inside. The bell chimes letting Elisha know I’ve entered. She glances up and sees me, giving me a wave.

“Hi, Ariana. Welcome back. What can I get for you?” she asks as she wipes her hands on a towel that’s slung over her shoulder.

I look up at a chalkboard and read today’s specials.

“Joy needs two chicken salad sandwiches on croissants. And a few cookies, maybe...” I look down and point at ones with M&M’s in them. “And I’ll have a ham and Swiss on a croissant and a hazelnut latte.”

“Coming right up,” she replies as she gets to work putting the order together.

A blonde woman comes whirling into the shop with a dark-haired man in tow. She twirls and the man puts his hand out to spin her like one of those little figurines inside an old jewelry box.

“Well, someone’s in a good mood,” Elisha laughs as she continues working on my order.

The woman giggles and leans against the glass display case, resting her forearms on top of it. “Tulip fields! We have tulip fields!” she exclaims.

“Seriously? OMG! Your wedding is going to be amazing!” Elisha says as she wraps up the sandwiches. Then she glances toward me as the blonde eyes me with curiosity. “Ella, meet our newest resident, Ariana. Ariana, these are my good friends, Ella and Gustavo. Ariana is working for Eric.”

The man narrows his eyes at her and then looks at me with a grin. “Call me Gus, please. And nice to meet you, Ariana.”

“Welcome to Storyview Falls. I love going to Eric’s farmstand and I love Snuggles!” Ella says.

“Thanks, nice to meet you both,” I reply as I hold out some cash to Elisha while trying to remember if Snuggles was a horse or a cow. The bank said it would be at least two weeks before I got my debit card. I haven’t used this much cash...well, ever.

“Here you go. Is Lennox out at the farm with you guys today?” Elisha asks.

I nod. “I guess there’s no school today or something?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that,” Ella says as she adjusts her hair into a messy bun on top of her head.

“Did I hear you say there are tulip fields here?” I ask as I place the bag of food under my arm so I can adjust my purse strap.

Ella smiles. “Yes. My and my fiancé’s farm started growing them over the winter and then planted a field. It was a total crap shoot if it would work. We’re getting married next weekend and wanted a small field of tulips as the backdrop.”

Gus tries to hold in a laugh but can’t contain it. Ella gives him a little shove.

“Yeah, right. They”—he puts up air quotes—“totally wanted tulips.”

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“Fine, I wanted it. But it took a lot of effort. I had to get staff to help me start growing them in the greenhouse, like, three months ago,” she explains.

I have zero idea what she’s talking about. I know nothing about plants.

“So, where are you from?” she asks as the bell chimes above the door, and a very pretty brunette walks in. Ella squeals and turns to hug the woman.

“Geez, you just saw me,” the woman teases.

“Sorry, Ariana, this is our friend Isa. Anyhow, where are you from?” she repeats with a laugh.

“Just from the city,” I answer.

“Nice to meet you, Ariana,” Isa says extending her hand. I shake it and she looks at Elisha.

“I need a caramel latte stat,” she says.

“Oh boy, cataloging the new books going that well,” Elisha asks.

“I’m the librarian and we just got a huge order of books in,” Isa explains to me.

“Oh? I love books. I’ll have to come by,” I say, frowning because I only used the library at school a few times and I’m not sure how it works here.

“Sure. Come on by and I can get you set up with a library card,” she replies, as Elisha hands her a latte.

“Hey, way to skip the line,” Gus grumbles. Isa laughs and rolls her eyes.

“I better head back. It was nice to meet you all,” I say as I duck out of the café with a wave to a chorus of “byes.”

My phone pings and I look down to see a message from Katia to call her. I hit call once I’m settled back in the truck.

“OMG! Your stepmother is a fucking monster. She prodded your father to call me. Anyhow, I said you were away from the yacht shopping and he said your phone hasn’t pinged in days and where the hell are we and I better get you to call, like, now,” she says.

“Fuck.”

“He even called your mother,” she says.

“Oh God! Uhhhh...can you, like, three-way me,” I ask, “but block my number.”

“Won’t that seem suspicious?” she asks.

“No, if he asks, we can just say your phone is being weird.”

She sighs. “Girl, you fucking owe me so big. Just a minute.”

“Katia, she better be with you!” Dad’s voice rumbles over the phone like thunder.

“I’m here, Dad. What do you need?” I answer calmly, but I’m shaking like a leaf.

Dad has never hurt me physically, but his temper is famous and he can yell like no other. Needless to say, I have a lifetime of therapy needs for PTSD from being screamed at over the years.

“You have been out of contact for over a half a week. You left with a fucking note here. What the hell, Ariana?” he screams and I pull the phone away from my face.

“Dad, calm down. I’m fine. We’re fine. I just really needed to get away,” I explain.

“You better be calling me twice a week from here out. Did you get a job yet?” he asks.

“I had an interview with a small company. And I still have a ton of résumés sent out, so I’m sure I’ll be hired soon,” I fib.

“Good. Don’t forget. If you don’t have anything lined up in a few more weeks, you can start working in my marketing division,” he says, but it sounds more like a demand.

“I know, Dad.”

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“OK. I have to go. You better call your mother. I think she’s worried,” he grumbles.

“Yes, sir,” I reply before he hangs up.

“Your dad is so fucking scary,” Katia says.

I roll my eyes because as scary as he is, he can also be a giant teddy bear. I remember bedtime stories and days fishing on his yacht. He means well. He’s just...stressed.

“Let me go. I should call my mom,” I say as I click on an app I use to call overseas.

“Good luck there,” Katia says as we disconnect.

I hit call and my brother picks up.

“You are so fucking busted,” he says.

“Sam, shut up. Is Mom there?” I ask.

“No, but she’s pissed that your dad called,” he says, and I can tell he’s playing video games from the background noise.

“Can you let her know that I’m fine and I talked to Dad?”

“Sure. You owe me though. I hope whatever you and Katia are up to is worth it,” he quips. He’s a brilliant little shit.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll talk to you later,” I add as I hang up and head back to the farm with lunch. I manage to make it back without stalling Sheila and I’m pretty proud of myself. I need to get this all figured out before I tell my parents. They won’t like it, so I need a plan and some time to prove that I can do things on my own. Just a little more time.

I look up at the house and see Eric in the window. It must be his bedroom. He’s shirtless and my mouth falls open. Holy shit! That man is fucking ripped. It looks like he hits the gym daily. I’ve never had a thing for older guys, hell, I’ve barely had time to think about guys my own age. But right now, all of Katia’s Daddy-vibe comments about older men come tumbling into my brain as I watch the way his abs flex as he pulls a shirt over his head and then covers those perfect muscles I was just ogling.

“Focus!” I whisper to myself. “Do not under any circumstances fall for your older, hot-as-fuck boss.”

Yeah, I can do this, I think to myself. But deep down, I’m not so sure I believe myself about being able to do this job, tell my family, or not fall for Eric. Shit, I’m in so over my head here.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eric

“Coolio, buddy, you got to move,” I say with a sigh as I try to get my Shetland pony to move.

Mooman, my mini Highland cow trots over and shoves his giant head against my thigh.

“Mooman!” I growl.

He turns and starts running and I see he's heading straight for Ariana.

"Ariana!" I yell in a warning.

She steps behind a trough and Mooman stops in confusion. Her eyes are wide. I haven't really shown her all the ropes yet on how to handle the animals.

"Get away from that trough or you'll have all the animals coming over there," Buck yells. Ariana jumps out of the way.

Earl grumbles under his breath. "Someone needs to teach her about the animals. She's just getting in the way out here if she doesn't understand."

I glare at him. Ariana has been here for almost two weeks now. She's still learning about the farm, but she's redone the website and expanded our social media presence. We even had a few new customers come to the farmstand after finding us online.

She rode in the tractor a few days ago with Earl. She said she wants to spend some time with Kingsley and learn about our farmstand. And she wants to talk business plans with me. She seemingly has begun fitting right into our awkward little farm family. Earl even praised her for remembering stuff he was teaching her on the tractor. And Earl does not hand out praise easily. Of course, he's still a big, old grump and sometimes that drives me crazy.

"Enough. She's come a long way. Give her some slack," I warn as I pull off my gloves and head over to see what she needs.

"What's up?" I ask as I open the fence gate and step in front of her.

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“I heard we had a lamb born last night and I wanted to get some photos for the socials,” she says as she holds up her phone.

“Socials?” I ask as I scratch my jaw.

“Social media?” she clarifies.

“Oh, right. Uh, yes. But we have to be quiet. I have the lamb and mom resting in the barn,” I explain as I lead her over to the stall.

I lean on the door of the stall and Ariana comes to stand beside me.

“Oh! It’s so tiny,” she whispers. I look over to find her staring in awe at the newest member of our farm’s animal family. She snaps a few photos.

“What do you think we should name her?” I ask.

“Her?” she confirms.

I nod.

She grins. “How about we come up with a few names and have folks visit our website and vote?”

“I like that,” I answer. I motion to the stall. “You want to pet her?”

“I don’t want to bother them,” she whispers as we watch the lamb feed from its mom.

I open the stall a little. “It’s OK, Ruby,” I say quietly to the mother sheep.

I motion for Ariana to come over to me. She slowly joins me. We crouch down and pet the lamb who has just finished nursing.

“Like this,” I instruct as I pet the lamb.

She starts to reach out but hesitates, so I gently take her hand in mine and place it on the lamb. We stroke the soft coat of the lamb together.

“It’s so soft,” she says in a barely audible voice.

“It is,” I reply.

Her hand stills, and for reasons I can’t explain, I don’t move mine for a long moment. I leave it resting over her much smaller one on top of the lamb. I feel like I can’t breathe. Like I’m in some weird trance and I can’t move, I don’t want to move because I don’t want to break whatever spell has been cast over us.

“Are you coming back out here to help?” Earl grumbles.

I finally move my hand and Ariana yanks hers away.

“I should go back,” she says and quickly scurries away. I watch as she leaves, her curvy body silhouetted by the sunlight outside.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I run a hand over my face.

I get back to work, trying to concentrate on anything that isn’t my social media marketing manager. Nothing good can possibly come from that.

* * *

The day went by quicker than I wanted it to. Buck found some rotting wood in the barn, and we spent the afternoon fixing it. By the time I made it back to the office, Ariana and Joy were packing up for the day.

“Name That Lamb is live and people are starting to vote!” Ariana says happily. Joy smiles over at her.

“I think that’s a great idea,” she says as she grabs her purse to leave. “I’ll see you two tomorrow.”

“Night, Joy,” I say.

“Bye,” Ariana practically sings. I grin to myself as I look over at her. She’s admiring our social media page. I can tell she’s proud of herself. Hell, she should be proud. In two weeks, I can already see an increase in our profit margins. Whatever she’s doing, is working, slowly, but it’s working, and I haven’t even talked business with her yet.

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“Ariana?” I start. She turns to me.

“Yes?”

“How about we have a business meeting dinner? I’ve been meaning to go over my business plan with you and things have just been so busy since you started. Anyhow, I was going to get cleaned up and start making some gnocchi,” I suggest.

“Sure. Do you need help? I...can...well, do whatever, just show me what to do,” she stammers.

I raise an eyebrow. “OK,” I say slowly. “Come with me. Barkley, dinner,” I add. Barkley, who’s been sleeping under Joy’s desk, where he’s pretty much a permanent fixture now, lifts his head and looks at me.

“Come on,” I urge him as I pat my leg. I swear if that dog could roll its eyes, it would.

I walk into my kitchen with Ariana in tow. She’s become familiar with it over the past couple of weeks, joining the rest of us for my weekly homemade lunches and using my microwave here and there.

I wash my hands and grab a towel to dry them, turning back toward her. “Do you cook a lot?” I ask.

She shakes her head and her cheeks flush. “No. I didn’t cook at school,” she explains.

“Oh, right, like a meal plan or something. Well, how about I get you to rinse off some vegetables and chop them?” I ask as I drop some food into Barkley’s bowl, trying to distract myself from thinking about our age difference. The mantrashe’s just an employeekeeps playing in my head as I inhale her perfume. Barkley hobbles over and begins eating while I start pulling things out of the refrigerator and set them on my kitchen island. I grab a knife and a cutting board.

“Here,” I add as I show her the onion, mushrooms, and spinach.

“Uh, sure, right,” she says, and I glance at her face. Her lips are twisted, a sign I have recently learned means she is deep in thought.

“Is everything alright?” I ask.

She quickly smiles, but it’s more like she’s pulled a mask over her face, like she’s practiced this before, smiling when she isn’t happy. And something about that makes me angry. Surely, this angelic creature, this innocent, kind, young woman would never have a reason to need to hide her true feelings.

I watch as she carries the vegetables to the sink. Clearly, she doesn’t want to discuss anything because she’s made herself busy with a task.

Reading her mood, or trying to, I decide to head up to my bathroom. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I say as I go to the stairs.

“OK,” she says quietly.

I rush up to my shower and turn it on, opting for cold water. I hurry through motions that I’d normally take longer with, but I don’t want to leave her for too long.

I finish cleaning myself and turn off the showerhead as I grab a warm, dry towel from

the drying rod on the wall. Joy had told me to put one in when I redid the house, and every time I get out of the shower, I want to call and thank her for the suggestion. I walk into my closet and grab a pair of jeans and a gray T-shirt. I leave my feet bare and don't bother drying my hair. I walk back downstairs and see Ariana carefully cutting the mushroom while watching something on her phone.

"Hey," I say, and she startles and gasps.

"Shit!" she squeaks and holds her finger.

I rush over to her. She's cut herself, but not too badly. I grab a paper towel and take her arm, putting her finger under the tap where I run warm water over it. She winces.

"Sorry, we need to get it cleaned out," I say, lowering my voice like she's a wounded animal.

I guide her to a chair and pull one in front of her. I wrap her wound with a towel and press it until the bleeding stops. I reach for a drawer and pull out a small first aid kit. I use an antiseptic wipe to clean it and then place a bandage around her slender ring finger.

"There. With any luck, we won't have to amputate it," I tease. I realize I'm still holding her hand in mine as we both stare at the bandage.

"A-amputate it?" she stammers as she looks up at me.

I chuckle. "I'm kidding, Ariana. It's just a small cut. Doesn't even need stitches. You'll be right as rain in a few days," I assure her. Her worried face has me wondering if she doesn't often get injured, which would be surprising based on all the little accidents she has around here.

“Not one to use bandages often, huh?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. My da—I mean my family is kind of strict, so I guess I didn’t really do things that caused injury when I was growing up, and well, the last few years, I’ve mostly just been in a classroom studying...” She trails off as she looks back down at her finger.

I slowly pull my hand away and she drops hers into her lap. Standing, I happen to see her phone and I chuckle. It’s playing a cooking video that shows how to chop mushrooms.

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“Oh, shit,” she grumbles as she grabs her phone and clears the screen.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that you don’t cook a lot,” I state as I try to keep my lips from twitching into the smile that I know will offend her.

“No. Not really,” she replies with a sheepish look.

“Well, I love teaching people how to cook. My mom is a great cook and so was my grandmother. Come here. I’ll show you how,” I offer.

“Really?” she asks as she steps toward me.

“Really,” I reply.

I take out a clean knife and begin cutting the mushrooms. “Like this,” I explain.

“Oh. That makes more sense,” she says.

I show her how to cut the onion and do a quick chop on the spinach. Then we make gnocchi from scratch. She beams with delight every time a small potato pasta floats to the surface of the boiling water.

“That’s so cool,” she gasps the first time it happens, and I explain that it’s done cooking.

I make us a pesto sauce and plate our food. Once we’re seated at the kitchen table with some wine and our prepared meal, I decide it’s high time to learn about my new

employee.

“Tell me more about Ariana Harlow,” I say as I lean back with my wineglass in my hand.

“There’s not much to tell,” she replies and looks nervously down at her plate. What’s she hiding? Most people her age are so forthcoming with information about themselves.

I wait and she finally starts talking.

“My parents are divorced. I have two half brothers who live with my mom and her husband in France. My dad works a lot. He’s pretty strict. I guess that’s why I’m so sheltered, or at least, I’m beginning to think I was really sheltered. This is my first time being away from my family and friends. I roomed with my best friend in college. But she’s abroad right now. Anyhow, I didn’t want to work for my dad or anyone we knew, and I was thinking about working at some of the marketing firms where I interned, but I don’t know...I wanted to try something different. I...this is gonna sound silly...” She trails off and looks over at me.

“Try me,” I say with an encouraging smile.

“I want to prove I can make it on my own. So, that’s how I ended up applying to work here. I just really want to prove to myself, I guess, that I can do this. I can figure things out on my own,” she says.

“I know you can,” I offer.

“You think?” she asks, her gaze lifting to meet mine.

“Yes. Ariana, you’ve fixed our website and increased our profits with great social

media content in a matter of days. Your workspace puts the rest of ours to shame and I've seen how you've started decorating the guesthouse. You even learned how to drive a manual. I mean, you won't be winning a race or anything, but you can drive." I pause, and she giggles at that. "Give yourself more credit and time. You're young. You're just starting out. You don't have to have it all figured out right now."

She shifts in her seat. "I know. I...well, it feels like I do." She looks around my house. "Have you always lived out here alone? It's a pretty big house for one person."

I take a sip of wine to give myself a moment to decide how much I want to tell her. I decide to keep it light.

"Well, my parents bought this farm a long time ago, and when they decided to retire and move somewhere warmer, I decided I wanted to try running the place, so I moved back in here. I've been here ever since," I explain, hoping she won't ask more questions because I'm not feeling in the mood to discuss my past.

"That makes sense. Do you have siblings?" she asks.

"One sister. She lives in England with her husband and my niece and nephew," I state.

"That's funny that we both have siblings in Europe," she muses.

"I suppose it is," I reply as I look at our nearly empty plates. She takes a last bite of her food that she's been slowly eating while we talk.

"Dessert?" I ask.

She grins. "I love dessert. Anything sweet always tastes the best!" she says so

innocently that I nearly choke on my wine. I can't tell if she's serious or not. I want to crack a "that's what he said" joke but decide against it.

"I couldn't agree more," I manage, deciding that going to the ice cream parlor is a safer option than staying here alone with her. Why am I doing this to myself and what is she not telling me? If I'm going to figure that latter out, I'll need to forget about the former. Tori would want me to help this woman, I don't know how I know that, but I just do. Now, to figure out how to help her. She clearly needs a friend. Maybe I can at least start there.

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“Let’s go get ice cream,” I announce.

“Well, that’s definitely a way to a girl’s heart,” she giggles. “Come on.” She gets up and walks straight out the side door toward the truck. I jump up and follow her. Hell, I think I might follow her to the ends of the earth.

CHAPTERNINE

Ariana

“Kingsley, I’m here for my grand tour,” I announce as I skip into the farmstand. I twirl in a circle, trying to be theatrical, and instead, I knock over a pile of cabbages.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry,” I mutter as I attempt to pick them up and place them back into a pyramid, which sounds simple enough, but they all just keep rolling off the table.

Kingsley laughs. “I got it, Miss Harlow. There’s a science to it,” he says, trying to make me feel better. I’ve never thought of myself as clumsy until I showed up at this farm. Now, I feel like a toddler learning to walk and not very successfully.

I reach down and hand him a few cabbages and he neatly arranges them like the pro he is.

“It’s just Ariana. And you’re very good at that,” I say as I look around the small store space.

“I may have been doing it for a while,” he admits with a shy grin. Kingsley is probably about my age, maybe a few years younger. He’s attractive in a farmstand-operating-boy sort of way.

“So, you run the farmstand?” I ask because I’m not sure where to start.

He nods. “I started working here in middle school. I’ve known Eric since I was a kid.”

“That’s cool. Are you in school now?”

“Yep. I’m just finishing my freshman year,” he says as he begins pulling lettuce out of a container and organizing them in a refrigerated showcase.

“What are you studying?” I ask as I lean against a wall.

“I’m undecided. I have another semester before I need to declare a major. I just haven’t figured out what I want to do for the rest of my life,” he admits.

“I hear ya. I switched my major freshman year and my dad wanted to kill me,” I say with a roll of my eyes.

“Oh yeah? What were you going to do?” he asks.

“I wanted to be an interior decorator,” I say with a sheepish grin. “I mean, I still like that stuff, but then I started on social media and got a bunch of followers, and it piqued my interest.”

“Yeah, guess I just haven’t figured it out yet,” he says with a shrug.

“Well, you have plenty of time,” I assure him.

I swear he gives me a sad smile, but then quickly looks away. What the hell is that about? I decide not to pry.

“Sooo...tell me about the farmstand,” I say as I look around. The farmstand takes up about half of the giant red barn. There’s a wooden wall that looks to have storage on the other side of it. This part of the barn is two and a half stories high. The only light coming in is from two large barn doors on the front wall and a smaller one on the side wall. It’s sort of dark even with a few hanging lantern lights above. The walls are dark wood and so is the floor. The only pops of color are from the fruit and vegetables in the stands.

I look up at the big empty wall behind the piles of cabbages and lettuce. There’s a single photo and I squint to see it in the dim light. I can make out a much younger Eric and a young girl and two adults. Eric’s family? Then there are two framed newspaper clippings. One about the farmstand opening and one about them winning some award at a county fair.

I run my hand over some purple leaves. “What’s that?” I ask.

“Purple basil. It’s really good. There’s this recipe with gnocchi and some onion and tomatoes...to die for,” he says as he turns the computer on that is set up with a swipe and touchpad for credit cards.

“Do you have other recipes?” I ask.

“Sure. People are always giving me recipes and I’m always looking them up. It’s fun. Sometimes, Eric lets me try them out in his kitchen. Have you seen it there? His kitchen is freaking awesome.”

I laugh. “It is. He just made gnocchi last night. It was really good.” I pause as I look at some plants. “This looks like the one someone put on my desk.”

He blushes as I glance back at him. “That would be from me. It’s a succulent. They’re easy to take care of.”

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Now it's me that's blushing. "Oh, well, thank you, but I'm not doing such a great job."

"Don't water it every day," he recommends.

"Right..." I trail off as I see Eric talking to a woman outside. I feel a twinge of jealousy. What the fuck is that about? Shaking my head a little at my ridiculous reaction. I decide to go back to the office and come up with some plans for our farmstand. There's plenty that we can do to make it better.

"I'll see you later. I'm going to start working on some ideas for this place," I say as I walk past Kingsley.

"Sure thing. It could use some sprucing up."

I nod in his direction but my eyes keep flicking over toward Eric. He's leaning on a post and chatting away with a woman who is both his age and gorgeous. I nearly run into Buck as I reach the office.

"Whoa there!" he says as he reaches out to make sure I don't fall.

"Sorry," I mutter as I step back and motion for him to continue.

"Careful out here, Ariana. It can be dangerous," he scolds, and I hate that he's right. Almost as dangerous as falling for your boss, I think.

"What's that?" he asks.

Oh shit, did I say that out loud?

“Nothing. Just talking to myself,” I state as I quickly open the door and go inside to the safety of the office.

Joy’s fussing with my plant as I walk to my desk.

“Poor little guy needs some rocky soil,” she says as she finishes repotting it.

“Thanks, Joy,” I say as I sit down and start coming up with plans for the farmstand. After an hour, I need a break. So, I walk out to the animal barn and find the lamb. She’s curled up, fast asleep and her mom is out eating in the penned area.

“Hey, little lady,” I whisper as I sit down on a wooden stool next to her. I stroke her soft coat. She stirs but doesn’t wake.

“How’s the baby doing?” Eric asks.

I shrug. “I guess fine. I can’t even keep a plant alive, so I’m hardly one to ask.”

He sits down next to me. “You figure out how to make the farmstand work better?”

“I’m working on it,” I reply. I nod toward the parking lot where the woman from before is coming out from the farmstand with some berries. “Is that your girlfriend?”

He coughs. “Uh, no. That’s Heather. She runs the thrift store in town.”

“Oh. I...never mind,” I stammer.

I steal a glance at him, and his lips are twitching like he’s fighting a smile. I quickly look away knowing my face is getting flushed.

“I don’t have time for a girlfriend,” he says quietly, but the way he says it makes me wonder if there’s more to that statement.

“You should make time. Until today, I hardly see you speak to anyone except your employees and the farm animals,” I say with a pointed look.

“I have plenty of friends, Ariana. And I have a family. And that’s all I need,” he says as he stands and brushes his hands on his pants. I feel like I’ve offended him and suddenly I want to take back what I said. Was I out of line?

“Sorry...I shouldn’t pry,” I whisper.

“It’s alright.” He starts to leave but stops at the stall’s door. “I think you need to take care of something more than a plant.”

My eyes shoot up to meet his. “What?”

“You can be in charge of our newest member here,” he suggests, motioning to the lamb.

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I put up a hand. “Oh no. No, no, no. I can’t. I’d...” I look around and lower my voice. “...kill her. I’m bad at the pet thing. I’ve never really had one.”

“Seriously?”

Sighing, I nod. “Yep. No pets allowed. I always wanted one though, like maybe a cat or dog. Hell, I’d have taken a fish.”

“Well, maybe we’ll have to get you one,” he says as he leaves. I watch him pull away in his truck, wondering where he’s off to in the middle of the day.

After a few minutes of petting the lamb, and then visiting with Mooman, I go back inside and start contacting some people who might be able to help me with the farmstand. I soon learn I need to take measurements. Buck loans me a measuring tape, a tool that I actually know how to use, and I get to work. Kingsley asks me what I’m doing and I give him a general idea.

“I love that. Eric’s going to be stoked,” he says.

“I think I want to surprise him,” I say.

He grins. “He’ll love it.”

I head back to my desk to email some measurements and freeze, when I see a fishbowl with a single colorful fish inside.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“That’s our new intern,” Eric says as he walks in from the bathroom.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I got you an intern,” he repeats, grinning.

“Eric! I’ll kill him,” I groan as Joy and Eric start laughing.

“You won’t. I won’t let you,” Eric assures me.

“I think this is a really bad idea,” I state as I look at the fish which is red and blue with some purple. He’s very pretty. “What is he?”

“He’s a betta fish. They are basically indestructible. Consider him your starter pet,” Eric announces.

“What does he eat?” I ask. And just like that, Joy and Eric teach me all about owning a betta fish. I even got a small booklet filled with information from the pet store.

“What are you going to name him?” Eric asks as we all look at the fish.

“Barry the Betta,” I announce.

Joy giggles. “I like that.”

“Barry, it is,” Eric says.

“Thanks,” I manage as I take my seat to start working again. I’m surprised when Eric sits down at his desk while Joy packs up for the day.

“See ya, Joy,” Eric says as she goes to leave.

I wave at Joy and she nods in my direction as she shuts the door. Eric and I work in silence for about an hour before he turns to me. “How about we go get pizza? I’ve been craving some all day.”

“I should probably finish this,” I say as I point to my laptop because I’m afraid I’m going to start falling for Eric or maybe I already have. But it can’t end well. So I need to not fall for him. And getting pizza with him is going to make that a whole lot harder.

“Come on, little farmer. You can’t work all night,” he says as he stands and opens the door. I contemplate what to do for a full five seconds until I channel my inner Katia and decide what the fuck? I have to eat, right? Or at least that’s what I tell myself as I grab my purse and follow Eric out to his ridiculous, old, blue truck.

CHAPTERTEN

Eric

I keep telling myself to stop hanging out with her every night. Five nights ago, it was pizza. Then Thai. We cooked shrimp scampi. Two nights ago, I taught her how to grill burgers. And last night was a lesson on roasted chicken.

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I've learned that she hates cilantro but loves mushrooms. I've learned that she's brilliant and kind. She cares about that stupid fish I gave her as if it's her child. Even her succulent plants are starting to come back to life.

She's learned how to care for all the animals. Earl even praised her on operating the tractor the other day. She's only been here a little over three weeks and I feel like she's been here forever, like she's a part of this farm, of this town. Everyone on Main Street knows her. She even put gas in Sheila all on her own the other day.

It's like watching a flower open, becoming more beautiful and full of life by the day. She still doesn't talk about her past much. The only time I see a glimmer of something is when she makes a mistake. And it's not a glimmer I like. She's afraid to make even a tiny error. I know someone said or did something to make her afraid and it takes all of my being not to demand she tell me who did that to her.

I'm not surprised when I find her in the stall with the lamb. It's early. Buck and Earl are both working already but Joy isn't even here yet.

"When are we picking a name?" I ask.

"Soon. I have an idea that I wanted to run by you," she says.

"Such as?" I ask as I lean on the door to the stall.

"I...want to fix up the farmstand a bit. And then have sort of a grand re-opening party and we can announce the name then," she explains as she looks up at me. Her big blue eyes look so hopeful that I can't even fathom saying anything but yes.

“Sounds like a good plan,” I reply.

I watch her eyes light up, and damn it, I think I’d say yes to anything she said just to see them do that again. “Really?” she squeals as she jumps up and throws her arms around me, hugging me. But just as fast she jumps back. “OMG! I’m so sorry. I should not have hugged you...I...well, I’m just really excited.”

Her cheeks are pink and I smile. “It’s OK, Ariana. And I’m glad you’re excited. That old farmstand needs a bit of an overhaul. What do you have in mind?” I want to say that she can hug me anytime or that I liked her hug, but I know she’s embarrassed. Hell, maybe she’s embarrassed to have hugged some older guy. She’s closer in age to Kingsley than to me. I wonder if she views me as a big-brother type.

She grins. “You got a minute?”

“Absolutely,” I reply as I step back and motion for her to lead the way.

She practically skips over to the farmstand. We walk inside and I find Kingsley refilling a bin of vegetables.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hi, Kingsley,” Ariana replies with a wave. Then she looks back at me. “OK, picture this,” she says dramatically while waving her hands wide apart. “First, we add more space. I looked behind here and we don’t need that much storage. Then we add better flow. We start people walking in a circle. Most people naturally will turn to the right when they come in, so we should set up the produce accordingly. Sort of like a grocery store. We also want to add shelves here in between items that they probably want to get, the big sellers, with little things that aren’t as big of a seller but that we can price low and use creative displays to draw their eyes. Then the fridge sections along this wall here since it’s easy to access electrical outlets. Some big bins down the

middle and then shelves at the end with all the cute little local items. We can expand them with local artisan crafts. Also, I thought maybe we could highlight some local food places. Like, Elisha told me the other day that you sell her apples that she uses in some of her apple breads and apple donuts. What if we had special events where she comes out and sells those here?"

I mull over all her ideas.

"Oh, and we need more color, better lighting, a window on this back wall so folks can see out on the farm. And some recipes that we give away either on pieces of weighted paper or with QR codes where the produce is located. We could even have a recipe of the week. And we can add a cute little photo op location out front with the farm's name. People love taking selfies and it's free publicity," she finishes.

"Wow!" I say after a beat. "That's...I like that. A lot. But...how much will that cost us?"

"Nothing," she says.

"Nothing?" I ask with a raised eyebrow.

She places her hands on her hips. "Nothing," she repeats. "Buck and Earl already said they would help Kingsley and me build some shelves with the spare wood out in the other barn. Your fridge units are alright for now, we can use some metal paints to freshen them up. And I found a local artist willing to do some painting in exchange for being able to sell some of her stuff here. And the rest is just rearranging things and using our printer."

I'm skeptical it can all be done, but the look in Ariana's eyes has me nodding with little thought. I want to give her a chance to spread her wings and fly. Her ideas are good ones and it's more than what we're doing now. If it doesn't hurt the bottom line,

then I'll give her free rein.

"OK, do your worst. Go for it," I state.

"Seriously?" she asks, her voice rising with excitement.

"Seriously. I think you have some really good ideas, and I'm looking forward to seeing the final product," I admit.

She lets out a breath and smiles. "I won't disappoint you. I promise. It's going to be awesome."

We turn to leave, and she stops me at the barn door with a touch to my arm.

"Eric?" she says.

I pause and look down at her.

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“Thanks.”

I furrow my brows in confusion. “For what?”

She gives me a small smile and her cheeks pinken. “For trusting me.”

“Ariana, you have a lot to offer. Your ideas are amazing and I’ve seen you coming over to the office early and staying late. You work hard. We’re lucky to have you here.”

She bites her lip and I watch her tongue dart out to wet her lower lip when she releases it. I have to look away for a second because I shouldn’t be having these thoughts. I should not be wanting to kiss those lips.

“Thank you. That means a lot,” she says. And then she’s off skipping again back to the office like she doesn’t have a care in the world. This woman is a complete mystery. And I want to figure her out with every fiber of my being.

* * *

It’s Saturday and Kingsley is manning the farmstand. Earl and Buck are patching a fence today and I’m trying to get the hay from the loft down to the ground level. Why we thought to stack it up here, I have no idea. But I’m regretting that right now.

“You need some help with that?” I hear Ariana ask from beneath me.

“Careful, catastrophe!” I yell down. I’ve been teasing her this last week about all her

klutzy moments. But mostly, I'm just worried she'll get really hurt. She's like a fish out of water around here, but she's catching on, very, very slowly.

"Hey! I helped cut down that tree this week and I still have all my limbs!" she protests, holding out her arms as proof.

I laugh. "OK, climb on up. Just be careful. The closest emergency room is back where you came from," I warn.

"Seriously?" she asks as I see her head emerging while she climbs the ladder.

"Yep. One time Earl got pinned by a backhoe and they had to life-flight him because our ambulance would have taken way too long to get him to the trauma response team," I say grimly as I attempt to not remember that day.

"Wow! Poor Earl! No wonder he's a grump," she says with a grin.

"I think Earl was born grumpy," I offer. "So you can grab those hooks, hook the sides, and then toss it down into that container. We'll hook it up to the tractor and get it moved out to the fields."

"Easy enough," she says as she hooks the side of the hay and attempts to lift it. I don't even think she'll get it off the ground. That hay probably weighs more than her, but she can figure that out for herself, and then she can go feed Mooman instead. I watch in horror as she manages to lift the hay and then her entire body goes with the hay over the side and into the container.

"Ariana!" I call out as I scramble down the ladder and jump into the hay, pulling her free while supporting her head with my hand.

She blinks up at me. "Holy shit! I can't believe I just did that," she says as she looks

into my eyes and giggles.

“Are you OK?” I ask, searching her body for injury.

She rubs the back of her head and winces a little. “I think I whacked my head on one of those hooks when I fell, but otherwise, I’m fine,” she tries to assure me as she struggles to climb out of the hay.

“Oh no you don’t,” I state as I pick her up and pull her against my chest. Cradling her, I carry her into the office and down the hall.

She pushes against my chest. “Eric! What are you doing? I’m fine. I swear,” she grumbles as she squirms in my arms.

“Nope. I’m calling Dr. Brighton to come take a look at you,” I state as I manage to get the door open. Joy doesn’t work on the weekends, which is a good thing because she would be mother-henning the hell out of us both.

“Eric. Put me down. I’m fine,” she protests.

I get her into the living room and gently set her on the sofa. She attempts to get up and I can tell something hurts because she teeters on one leg and then sits back down.

“Do you have like a wrap or something? I think I twisted my ankle,” she mutters as she runs her hand over it.

I’m already on my phone. “Jasper? Any chance Doc can come over? I have an employee who fell and want her to take a look,” I explain.

“Sure thing. Kristen! Eric needs you at the farm!” he yells. I hear mumbling in the background. “She’ll be over in about twenty minutes.” I hear more mumbling. “She

wants to know what's injured?"

"She hit her head and twisted an ankle," I state.

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He relays the information to his wife. I hear their daughter squealing in the background. “OK, she’ll see you shortly.”

“Thanks,” I say as we disconnect.

“Let me get you ice for the ankle,” I state as I go to the kitchen and grab two ice packs. One for her head and one for her ankle. I get her propped up with the ice.

“Eric, you are totally overreacting. I promise you, I’m fine,” she argues.

I can tell she’s not one hundred percent because she pulls away a bit when I place the ice on the back of her head. I can already feel a small lump there.

“I’d feel better if we got you checked out,” I declare as I sit down next to her feet. I pull her shoes free and place a pillow under them. She rolls her eyes. “Humor me,” I add.

“Fine,” she mutters as she crosses her arms. I fight a laugh because even injured she’s a little spitfire. Damn, she reminds me of Tori. I look away and stand as I feel emotion wash over me.

“Are you...alright?” she asks. I glance back and she has a worried look on her face.

Swallowing back down the feelings that I never let bubble to the surface, I nod. “Yep. I’ll go let Dr. Brighton in,” I say quickly as I hurry off to the side door. I wait outside for five minutes, wanting to keep a little distance between me and Ariana until I can get my emotions in check. Kingsley pokes his head out of the barn, and just like that,

my damn thoughts go straight back to his older sister.

“Hey, I’m going to close up soon. I think the afternoon rush is over,” he says and then frowns. “You OK?”

Jesus, are my thoughts written on my face in neon lettering?

“Yeah. I’m fine. Go ahead. Ariana had a little fall from the hay loft. Dr. Brighton is on her way to check her out,” I say.

“Oh. Shit. Uh, is she OK?” he asks as he walks toward me.

Nodding, I motion back to the house. “I have her lying down with some ice on her head and ankle, but I think she’ll be OK.”

He swallows and nods as he shoves some pebbles around in the driveway. “She’s...good for you, Eric. Good for all of us. Her ideas are going to change this place, you’ll see.” He looks up at me on the last word.

“She’s my employee, Kingsley, and nothing more. But I agree, she’s been good for Windsor Family Farm. I’m glad I hired her,” I agree.

“Eric, you can’t?—”

The crunch of gravel under a car stops him as we turn to see Dr. Brighton pulling up. Thank God because I can’t have this conversation right now. Kingsley has been urging me to move on for years, and each time, I shoot him down. I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to move on. Maybe I’m just a one-and-done person. Maybe, when Tori died, my heart died with her.

“Hey, where’s my patient?” Kristen asks as she gets out of her car.

“In here,” I state as I motion to the door. “Night, Kingsley.”

He nods and heads over to his car. One that I helped him get about two years ago. I glance back as he drives away. Kingsley is a good kid. When Tori made me promise to look after him, I never thought it would lead to him working here straight into college, but I’m glad it did. And their parents are thankful too. They don’t come out here very often, and I miss them, but I imagine their sense of loss is even worse than mine.

“Hey, I’m Dr. Brighton,” I hear Kristen saying as I lag in the hallway. I hurry up and find her leaning over Ariana.

“Ariana, but please, call me Ari,” Ariana replies. Ari? Does she prefer that nickname? I consider this while Kristen begins to speak.

“So tell me what happened,” Kristen says as she takes a seat next to Ariana. Ariana tells her the short story of her fall. I watch Kristen examine her ankle and her head.

“Well, I think you just twisted the ankle. Rest it, and take some over-the-counter pain medicine if you need it. The ice is a good idea, but don’t leave that on for too long. As for your head, you might have a mild concussion. You certainly have a good bruise forming back there. I’d keep it iced and rest for the next day or two. If you experience any other symptoms at all, blurred vision or nausea, please call me immediately, alright?” Kristen says as she stands.

“Yes. Thank you,” Ariana replies.

“I’ll leave you a wrap for your ankle, but otherwise you should be good to go in a day or two,” she adds as she turns to me. “Let me know if her symptoms worsen.”

“I will. Thank you,” I state.

“It was nice meeting you, Ari. I love the new website. It looks great. I even voted on a name for that lamb. I can’t wait to see which name wins,” she says with a smile.

Ariana grins. “Thanks. Just wait till you see what we have planned out here. It’s going to be a great spring and summer on the farm.”

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“I’m sure. I’ll see you later,” Kristen adds as she turns to me “I’ll see myself out. Take care of our newest resident, OK?”

I chuckle. “Will do.”

The door closes and I turn back to Ariana. “Let’s get you upstairs. I’ll make some soup and bring it up for you.”

Her eyes widen. “I’m sorry. What?”

“You can’t sleep at your place. I have to watch you for symptoms,” I explain as I walk over to her. I remove the ice packs as I lean down and slide my hands under her back and knees, lifting her easily into my arms.

“Eric!” she screeches but quickly wraps her arms around my neck. God, I like that. I shouldn’t like it, but I do. She smells so good and she feels warm against me.

“No protesting. I have like five guest rooms upstairs,” I explain as I carry her to the one I think she’ll like best.

I kick the door open and she looks around as I use my elbow to turn on a light.

“It’s a nice room,” she states as I place her on the giant four-poster bed.

“It was my sister’s room,” I say as I motion to a small painting with the name Alicia above it that hangs over a desk in the corner.

“Do you miss her?” she asks as I pull covers up over her.

“I do. England is far away,” I state. “I’ll be back up in a minute. I’m going to warm up the soup I made last night.”

“Eric, this really isn’t necessary,” she protests.

“It is. Stop arguing,” I growl.

She rolls her eyes. “Fine,” she pouts.

I grin as I walk back downstairs and microwave a bowl of soup. I bring it back up on a tray and set it on Ariana’s lap. She’s found the television remote and has an old romantic comedy movie playing.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she asks.

I shake my head. “No. I ate a lot at lunch.”

I settle myself in the old, oversized chair in the corner, propping my feet on the ottoman. Ariana finishes her soup and sets the tray to the side while continuing to watch the film. I watch her eyelids grow heavy until she finally falls asleep. I don’t know how long I sit there watching her, wondering what it would be like to be on that bed with her, pressing her little body against mine as we both fall asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ariana

I look around and see nothing. Every direction I step in, I hit a dead end. I pound on the walls.

“Help!” I scream. “Help!”

I feel myself sobbing in fear. I need out; I need to be free.

I pound against the walls again, screaming for help.

“Ariana! Ariana! Wake up!” Eric’s voice cuts through the darkness of my nightmare.

I wake on a gasp, sitting straight up with Eric’s hands wrapped around my upper arms. A look of panic is on his face as his eyes wildly search mine.

My mind slowly realizes it was a dream. I’m still processing it as Eric wraps his arms around me and pulls me against his chest.

“It’s OK. You’re safe,” he murmurs with his lips pressed against the top of my head.

It takes a long minute or two for my breathing to slow and the tears to stop. I hate that dream. I’ve had it for years. This is the first time I’ve had it since arriving in Storyview Falls. Normally, I wake up in my bed alone. No one ever comforts me. I’m all alone. I bury myself deeper into Eric’s embrace. His arms tighten around me. He doesn’t push me away or speak. He just holds me as if he knows that’s what I need. I need someone to protect me, to comfort me. How have I never realized this before now? I suppose I’ve been too busy pleasing my parents to consider my own needs. I release a long shaky breath.

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“You want to talk about it?” he asks in a low raspy voice.

I shake my head. “It’s just a reoccurring nightmare. I haven’t had it for a while,” I murmur, my lips pressed against his pectoral muscle. I can feel his heart beating, slow and steady. He smells how I imagined a man would smell, woodsy and musky. Katia always tells me about her conquests and her hookups. And I’ve pretended that I understand, that I’ve done those things with the two or three guys I’ve gone out with over the past five years, but I haven’t. I’ve kissed a guy and I’ve had a guy feel my chest over my bra, but that’s it. Either we broke up too soon or they met my dad and got scared away. All I know about sex comes from reading romance books and talking to friends. God, I’m pathetic. I feel myself tense and I try to relax but I keep thinking about what it would feel like to have Eric’s hands touching me, really touching me. I shouldn’t be thinking about that.

I start to pull away but his arms prevent me from getting far.

“Hey there, little catastrophe. What’s bothering you?” he asks as his eyes search mine. I am a catastrophe, but not in a good way. I swallow, fighting back tears. “It’s OK, Ariana. You can trust me. You can tell me anything,” he assures me as his hand comes up to brush a tear away. And I believe him.

“I...” I trail off as I try to find the words. Where do I start? Do I tell him the entire truth? What if he hates me? I couldn’t bear to disappoint him. He’s done so much for me.

“What?” he prods as he cups my face, forcing me to look at him.

“I don’t want to disappoint you,” I admit. I bite my lip and he uses his thumb to pull it free.

“Not possible,” he says softly.

His thumb runs over my lip and suddenly I want him to kiss me. I start to lean up and he doesn’t move. I’m an inch away from his face, our gazes are locked and I can feel his breath on my skin.

This is it. I’m going to kiss my boss. Screw it. Just do it. That’s what Katia would say.

My eyelids start to close.

BAM!

We jump apart and Eric runs to the window. I slowly get off the bed, careful to step with my busted ankle which feels better.

“Shit,” he mutters.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Mario and Luigi got out,” he says with a sigh. “I’ll be right back.”

I look out the window and see two goats jumping around. I start after Eric but he stops at the door.

“Oh no you don’t. Get back in bed and rest. I got these two little ninjas. They are escape artists. Last time they got out, they somehow ended up down on Main Street and were headbutting that fake little pony ride outside the ice cream shop,” he

explains. I immediately know what he's talking about with the little pony that kids sit on and it rocks back and forth if you put coins in it.

I giggle. "Is this what farm life is?" I ask.

He chuckles. "I suppose it is." He hurries down the stairs and I slink back into bed, pulling the comforter up against me. I can still smell Eric on the covers. Something about his scent is so calming. Just like he is. Even amid my fall, his voice was still calm and strong. It takes a lot to rile him. He's the opposite of my father. He's brilliant. I've seen that every day I've been here. But not in a calculating type of way. In an innovative type of way. And he's kind. I've never seen such kindness before.

I curl up but then I can't help peeking outside. I carefully walk to the window and giggle as I watch Luigi jump out of Eric's arms and on top of the doghouse by the barn. Then Mario starts running in circles around him. I hear Mooman mooing. The baby lamb cries and Eric looks up to the sky for a second. Then his gaze meets mine as I peer out at him. As goats jump around in front of him, he doesn't move, and neither do I. We watch each other for long seconds, unspoken words passing between us. Does he long to touch me too? Is this feeling I have around him mutual? No? That's not possible...or is it?

Then, Eric mouths, "Go back to bed."

I grin and stick out my tongue and he laughs, the corners of his eyes crinkling. God, he's handsome. He's like a prince in one of those fairy tales I used to read or the male lead character in one of those sappy love movies Katia and I watch. He's perfect.

Luigi rams his leg and Eric grabs him, breaking our eye contact. I turn and crawl back into bed. I pull the covers up again and breathe in Eric's scent. My eyelids grow heavy and the last thing I hear are the goats yelling outside as sleep overtakes me.

* * *

The light is so bright when I open my eyes that I shield them with a hand. Squinting, I assess myself. My ankle feels a little better, not perfect but better. I feel the back of my head.

“Ouch,” I whisper as my finger presses the small knot that’s formed. That’ll take a few days to go down. But it doesn’t hurt as bad as yesterday.

I hear a noise and look up to see Eric fast asleep in the armchair. His gentle snores make me smile. He’s still in his clothes. His boots are sitting next to the chair and his giant feet are propped on the ottoman.

I sit up and watch him for a second before realizing that Barkley is curled up next to me. He rolls to his side and I grin.

“Good morning, Barkley,” I whisper.

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He flops his ear over my leg and I scratch his head. His eyes close as I continue to stroke him. I look back at Eric.

“Let’s get you fed and make breakfast,” I say quietly as I slip out of bed. I start toward the door when hands circle my waist and I yelp. Barkley barks and jumps off the bed.

Eric spins me around carefully. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Breakfast?” I state but it comes out as a question.

“You should be resting,” he says with a pointed look.

“I’m fine. I feel much better today,” I say as I roll my ankle. It twinges a little but it’s not bruised and I can step on it. So whatever I did there was very minimal.

Eric’s hand comes up and feels my head. I wince when he finds the knot.

“That’s not OK. I’ll make you breakfast if you’re hungry,” he offers.

“Eric...you’ve already done so much...” I trail off as I look down. I hate that I can’t take care of myself.

His finger presses under my chin until I’m forced to meet his gaze. “Has no one ever taken care of you, little catastrophe?”

I shrug. “No, not really. I don’t want to be a burden.”

His eyes darken and he looks mad. I instinctively try to pull away but his grip tightens, holding me in place. “I will never hurt you, Ariana. I promise you that. And whoever made you feel like you’re a burden...” He trails off and takes a deep breath. “You aren’t a burden.”

I swallow. “I...” But words fail me. I don’t know how to respond. No one has ever spoken to me like this.

“Let’s get you showered. I’ll go grab clean clothes from the guesthouse. You can stay here today, so I can keep an eye on you again, OK?”

“It’s really not?—”

His finger comes over my lips, cutting me off. “That’s non-negotiable.”

I give him a pointed look and he chuckles. “What am I going to do with you?” he says softly.

I shrug again. “Make me breakfast?” I suggest, my lips curving up into a smile.

He leans forward as if he wants to kiss me but then stops short. “I can do that,” he replies and then lets me go, stepping back as if I’m made of lava. Maybe he doesn’t feel what I feel?

“There are clean towels in there. I’ll set your clothes on the dresser,” he says as he walks around me and pats his thigh. “Come on, Barkley.” Barkley comes over and follows him downstairs.

I turn and walk into the adjoining bathroom. How many bathrooms does the house have? Even by my father’s standards, this isn’t a small home. I run a finger along a white fluffy towel. I look in the mirror and gasp. My red, curly hair is a mess. I look

more pale than normal and my eye makeup is smeared.

I take off my dirty clothes and walk into the enormous shower with a glass door. I let the water run over me as I wash my hair and then my face. As I'm soaping my body, I hear noise outside the door. I realize I didn't shut it all the way.

"Your clothes are right here," Eric's voice says.

"Thank you," I reply as I run my hands over my body wishing they were Eric's. My hand massages my breast as I look out at the gap in the door. Eric's standing there, staring at me. His eyes are dark again but in a completely different way. He looks possessive. I run my hand from my breast down my belly. His eyes trail after it. I've never had an erotic moment in my life, but this...this is it. I don't know what possesses me to do it, but I run my fingers down between my legs. His eyelids close a little as he watches me feel myself. I'm so close but I need him. I need his fingers between my legs. Just when I'm about to verbalize that, he turns.

"Sorry...I'll be downstairs with your breakfast when you...finish. Just let me know and I can bring it up to you," he stammers as he walks away, leaving me wanting and needy. I don't bother finishing because it wouldn't be good anyhow. I don't know what it feels like for a man to touch me, but I know it's gotta be way better than what I can do to myself.

I turn off the shower, and as I'm drying off and putting on my clothes, the realization of what just happened begins permeating my thoughts. That was hot as fuck! And I liked it. I'm not even really embarrassed. I'm...turned on? Yes, yes I am. Shit. I have the super hots for Eric and I don't even think I care that he's my boss, hell, that might make it even more hot. I'm so screwed!

I grab my phone from where Eric must have set it on the nightstand and text Katia.

Me: SOS! I need to talk! STAT!

My phone rings.

“I think I want my boss,” I state.

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“What?” she asks.

I quickly fill her in and she listens with the occasional, “OMG!” or “Holy shit!” or “That’s fucking hot!”

When I finish, she’s quiet for a beat. “So?” I ask in a lowered voice.

“So, you need to get him out of his head. He clearly realizes he’s about to cross a boundary and is scared shitless. You need to, like...woo him or some shit,” she says.

“Wait? Isn’t that, like, the guy’s role?” I ask in confusion.

“For the love of...it’s modern times here, Jane Austen. Just...I don’t know...” She trails off. “I got it.”

“What?”

“Snerdling,” she states and I know she’s grinning.

“But...I’d be by myself,” I state as I take in the old term for lying in bed doing nothing but reading and curling up under the covers all day. We found that term while researching for a paper when we were younger and it became our favorite.

“No, get him to snerdle with you. You know...in bed,” she says and I can practically see her winking at me.

“I don’t know. You think he’ll go for that?” I ask as I look down at the sweatpants

and T-shirt he brought me.

“Yes. And make sure you have on zero underwear or bra,” she adds.

“But...the girls! He’ll, like, notice,” I murmur as I look down at my sports bra.

“Duh! That’s the entire point!” she says as if I’m stupid. “Geez! We need to get you out more often. I feel like I’ve failed you as a bestie.”

I giggle. “OK. I’ll give it a try.”

“And then call me after! I need all the deets!” she says.

I roll my eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Yeah. I know. That’s why you love me. OK. Bye!” she says, drawing out the “bye.”

I hang up. “I’m ready for breakfast,” I call out as I curl up on the bed. I wish I had my makeup and a cute outfit. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I hope I can get Eric to admit he likes me. I hope he likes me. Mostly, I just hope that I’m not about to make this situation ten times worse.

CHAPTERTWELVE

Eric

I try to forget what I just saw...what I just did.

“Fuck,” I mutter to myself as I make some eggs and toast for Ariana, grabbing a bite of it while I plate hers. Barkley looks over at me as if to say, “What’s your problem?”

I can't remember ever wanting someone this badly. When I got with Tori, we were in high school. It wasn't like this. We were teenagers. Of course, I was horny back then, but this...this is a whole different level. It's been months since I've been with a woman at all. I've hooked up here and there over the years, but I keep it to one-night stands and hookup buddies. I'm sure a therapist would tell me that I'm trying to protect myself by never getting into a place where I have a relationship or feelings again. And that's not wrong. But the way I feel about Ariana is...different. I have this need to protect her. She's like a wounded butterfly. I see her improving each day, starting to spread her wings and fly on her own. I see her confidence building and the true Ariana coming out to show herself. She's so amazing and she doesn't even know it.

I hear her yell for breakfast and I place the food on a tray and walk up to the bedroom, hoping it's not awkward after what just transpired between us. I want her. I want her so badly, but I'm not sure I should act on that...at least not yet. I need time to process what I'm feeling. I can't just fuck her and forget her, as Earl once called my...what did he name them...right, escapades. I shake my head at his vernacular as I push open the bedroom door and step inside.

Ariana is curled up in bed with a book she must have found on the shelf. I want to groan when I read the cover. It's a romance book. My sister loves romance books.

"Hey," I say tentatively as I set the tray on the bed.

She looks at the food and smiles. "That looks amazing. Thank you."

"Of course. Eat up, doctor's orders," I say as I push the tray closer to her.

She looks at me with such intensity, I have to look away. I cough a little and walk over to the window, pushing back the curtains as if that's the most important task in the world. I wish I hadn't done the morning chores before making breakfast. I need

an excuse to leave this room before I do something I might regret.

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I hear her starting to eat.

“Did you eat?” she asks. I turn and she’s holding up a piece of toast.

“It’s for you. I’m fine,” I assure her but she keeps the bread held up for me.

“Just a bite. If you are hell-bent on taking care of me today, then you should take care of yourself too,” she says. I swallow because there’s no way that’s a double entendre. No, she definitely did not mean it like that.

I slowly walk over to her and she pushes the toast higher up to accommodate my height. I don’t know what overcomes me but I lean down and take a bite, licking my lips as I pull away. She sucks in a breath and her cheeks flush as she brings the toast to her lips. I watch her take a bite. She chews slowly, matching my pace as we both watch each other. My eyes focus on her lips as her tongue darts out and licks a crumb from the lower one. Fuck, I want to do that. I want to lick crumbs from all of her skin. My eyes inadvertently glance down at her breasts, as if they have a mind of their own and hope to find crumbs there.

I turn quickly, breaking our stare because it’s too intense. “Would you like me to bring you anything else?” I ask.

“No. I think I’m going to snerdle today,” she says and I can hear the grin on her face as she says it.

Looking back at her, I confirm the grin. “What’s snerdle?” I ask.

She giggles and pats the bed. "Come here. I'll show you."

My eyebrows shoot up and she laughs some more. "I'm not going to bite. I promise."

I give her a pointed look but I comply for reasons I do not want to explore right now. I crawl onto the bed, careful to keep a good foot or two between us.

She pulls up the blanket and motions for me to get under the covers. I give her a warning look. What is she playing at?

"Do you want to know or not?" she says with a huff.

"Fine," I grumble as I slide my legs under the blanket. She fluffs it up around my waist and smiles.

"There. Now, read this to me," she demands as she shoves the offending book in my direction.

I hold up my hands. "No way. I know what's in that book. Nope."

She frowns, pushing out her lower lip in an exaggerated way that is adorable but I still don't want to give in. "Please!" she begs.

"Little catastrophe, I don't know what you are playing at, but no," I repeat.

She sighs. "Fine, I'll read it out loud, but it would help if you did it. My head still hurts a bit," she protests.

"It does?" I ask, suddenly concerned.

"It's OK. Just a little. Nothing serious and much better than yesterday. My ankle is

almost back to normal, so I must not have twisted it very badly,” she says quickly.

I grab the book from her. “Just for a few minutes,” I groan.

She grins. “Really? You will?”

God, I hate that she can manipulate me like this, but my protective instincts are on high alert and I don’t want to make her head hurt worse. “Yes,” I grumble as I open it to the page she has marked by dog-ear.

I look over the book at her. “You bent the page,” I mutter.

She shrugs. “How do you keep track?” she asks.

I reach into the nightstand drawer and fish around until I find a piece of paper that looks like a shopping list my sister must have left here on her last visit. I place it in the book and shut the pages. “See, easy,” I reply. “I’m not a book page-bending monster,” I add.

“OMG! You are so extra!” she says.

I chuckle. “OK, pot,” I tease.

“Whatever, kettle, now read,” she urges before sticking out her tongue at me.

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Shaking my head, I open the book again but glance over at her before starting. “Are you going to tell me whatsnerdleis, or will I have to guess?”

“Oh, right, it’s this,” she says motioning between us as if the answer is obvious.

“Uh...huh?”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s lying in bed, under the covers, reading a book, and generally doing nothing all day,” she explains.

“Oh...alrighty then,” I reply as I look down at the page and begin to read. I want to sigh with relief when I realize this isn’t a steamy part of the book. I read for the next hour. Ariana curls up on her side and rests her head on her hand as she watches me. It feels...natural and normal as if we do this all the time.

I pause at the end of a chapter and she smiles sleepily up at me. “I like your voice,” she says with a yawn.

“I think you should take a nap,” I state as I snap the book shut.

She pushes the tray down to the chest at the end of the bed and then repositions herself closer to me. “Keep reading, please,” she pleads.

I can’t say no to her, or maybe I don’t want to. “Fine, but just for a little while longer,” I reply, opening it again. She smiles and snuggles closer to me, her knees touching the side of my thigh. I feel like I’m on fire where our bodies are touching. I keep reading, mostly to distract myself.

Eventually, I hear her breathing slow, and when her hand reaches out and curls around my arm. I glance over to find her eyes closed. She moves in her sleep, her arms coming over my waist, her head resting on my lap. I can't help myself, I reach out and stroke her long, curly hair. It's so soft and silky. I continue to run my fingers through it and she gives the smallest almost imperceptible moan in her sleep. My dick jumps to attention.

"Eric," she whispers.

"Yes?" I ask.

"Eric," she mumbles again and I realize she's dreaming about me. She whispers something else that I can't make out and then she presses her body against mine. Holy shit, does she not have a bra on? I can feel her hard nipples through the fabric of her top. My fingers itch to feel them, to pinch them between my thumb and forefinger.

I slowly set the book down on the nightstand and then attempt to pry Ariana from my side. I get her lying on her back. I hover over her for a long moment, brushing the hair off her face with one finger. She's gorgeous. Her beauty is so immense it's almost painful to watch her and not be able to touch her.

I'm about to move away when her big, blue eyes open. She blinks twice and smiles.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi," I reply as I look into those baby blues, memorizing each fleck of dark blue and green.

"Eric?" she asks. I watch her neck constrict as she swallows.

“Yes?”

“I want...” She blushes.

“What?” I ask as I keep my gaze locked on her eyes. “What do you want, Ari?” I say, giving her another nickname.

She licks her lips. She’s quiet for a few seconds and I don’t know what to do. My body and mind are at war and I’m not sure which will win, but my head keeps leaning closer to hers as if her lips have some kind of magnetic pull.

“Kiss me, please,” she whispers. It’s the please that does it for me. She’s not just asking, she’s pleading, and that protective instinct I have had when it comes to her takes over. I have to kiss her now because she’s begging me to.

I don’t speak as I close the last few inches between us. Our eyes stay open as I softly press my lips to hers. I tilt my head a little, deepening our kiss with a long stroke of my tongue along her lips. She moans and her eyelids flutter closed.

Her tongue darts out to meet mine and I stroke mine along hers. She tastes like coffee and toast. The sweetness of the honey I put on that toast coats my tongue and I want more. I want to taste her everywhere.

CHAPTERTHIRTEEN

Ariana

Eric kisses how I imagined I’d be kissed, how men in films kiss, how men in romance books kiss. Not that I’m some great expert, but the handful of times I’ve been kissed before are nothing in comparison to this one.

His hands caress my body through the cotton material of my clothing. I feel like I'm on fire. I want more, so much more. A nagging thought begins to surface in the recesses of my mind as his hands skim along the exposed skin of my abdomen. I'm a virgin. He has no idea. Will he not want to do this with me? Shit. I should say something, but I don't want him to stop.

My thoughts temporarily stop as his finger trails up under my top and traces the underside of my right breast. I let out a moan when he palms my entire breast in his hand.

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I feel a need building between my legs, a throbbing sensation that I need to alleviate. I rub my pelvis against his thigh that's lodged between my legs. He grips my breast a little tighter, a little rougher and I like it.

I feel myself building and climbing. I've never had a man make me come before, just me and my trusty vibrator that Katia bought me as a gag gift a few years ago.

Eric doesn't shy away as I unabashedly grind against his leg, seeking relief. He presses his leg harder against my core as if he knows exactly what I need. His thumb grazes my nipple and then he pinches it between his thumb and forefinger. That's all it takes. It's too much and not enough all at once.

I cry out his name into the silence of the room as I fall over the edge into a bliss that I've never felt before. He continues his motion until my body releases, and I relax into the mattress. And then Eric goes completely still.

I force my eyelids open and find him staring down at me. I can't read his face. Is he regretting this? Does he want more? Is it now when I tell him that I'm a virgin? I swallow because I know what I need to do. I have to share it with him.

"I need to tell you something..." I trail off as the heat rushes to my cheeks and I squeeze my eyelids closed.

He doesn't move. I don't even think he's breathing.

"I'm a..." I trail off again, keeping my eyes closed out of total mortification at admitting this.

“Look at me, Ariana,” he says, his deep voice rumbling above mine.

My eyes open on command at his demand. His gaze is so intense it’s hard not to look away.

“You’re a virgin?” he asks, his face softening just a fraction when he says the dreaded word.

I nod. “Yes,” I squeak.

He sighs and leans back, running his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...I should have guessed. I’m sorry,” he says as he climbs off the bed and stands to the side, slipping his boots back on his feet where he must have kicked them when climbing into the bed.

“Eric, it’s OK. I swear. It’s not weird like that. I just haven’t...my boyfriends and I just never got to that point. I’m not like saving myself for something special. It’s not a big deal,” I stammer. I’m desperate for his touch again. I need his hands on my body.

He gives me a stern look. “Ariana, it is a big deal. You should want your first time to be special. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

“But I asked you to. This isn’t your fault. I wanted this,” I state as I motion back and forth between us. “Don’t you?” I add.

He swallows. “I would do anything for you, Ariana. But you deserve more, better. You deserve things I can’t give you.”

I open my mouth to say something, but he shakes his head a little. “I’m sorry. I wish I was different,” he says and then he walks out of the room and then the house, leaving

me sitting in the bed alone, confused, and needy as fuck.

* * *

Eric has been gone for hours. I've caught small glimpses of him here and there as he does chores outside.

I grow bored. I nap. I watch a film on television. I nap again. As the sun starts to go down, I hear him in the kitchen, and a short while later, he brings up a tray with soup, bread, and lemonade. He sets it on the bed and takes the one from breakfast.

"Do you need anything? How is your head?" he asks, giving me a small smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

I want to shrink away and disappear. That's it. He's officially rejected me. Katia has texted me twice today, but I haven't replied. I'm too embarrassed. God, maybe I should just go home with my tail tucked between my legs. Surely I can't stay here. The absolute horror of going back home to my father and admitting defeat is too much for me to consider at the moment. Maybe we just pretend nothing happened. We go on working like it's all fine.

"I'm fine. I should probably go back to my house," I state as I get out of bed.

"No," he says sternly as he steps forward with the breakfast tray still in his hands. "You should rest for one more day."

I roll my eyes. "Eric, I'm fine. This is all overkill. I have a little bump on my head. I've rested. My ankle is nearly back to normal. I'm fine."

"Please, stay," he replies. "Please, Ariana. I...just for one more night. I'll feel better if I know you've gotten through the weekend without any more symptoms."

I press my lips together to keep myself from speaking. Why the hell does he want me to stay here? He's made it clear that kissing me was a mistake.

“Plus, there's a storm coming in and that guesthouse sometimes loses power. It'll be safer in here in case we have to go to the cellar.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “What do you mean?”

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He sighs. “I mean if there’s a chance of a tornado or something. The guesthouse doesn’t have a cellar. And that bathroom over there has a window. It’s not safe in a bad storm.”

I want to groan but somehow I manage not to.

“Fine,” I grumble as I inhale deeply. I smell the chicken soup and suddenly I’m famished. I glance over and realize he has left a small sandwich on the side table. He must have brought it for lunch while I was napping.

“Please eat,” he encourages with a nod. “I’m going to get things cleaned up before turning in for the night. If we get a storm tomorrow, the farm will be closed for the day. So, I’ll need to spend the morning and afternoon feeding animals and making sure they stay safe.”

“I can help,” I offer.

“Nope. No way. It’s too dangerous,” he says. “I’ll go get more of your things for you.”

“Can you bring me my computer? Oh, crap, and feed Barry?” I ask.

“Of course.”

He leaves again and I begrudgingly eat the soup he’s left. I want it to taste bad because I feel bad, but it doesn’t. It’s delicious, just like everything else he cooks. I glare at the wall in front of me. Barkley rolls over and pants. I had almost forgotten

he was here.

“Hey, buddy,” I say as I reach over and scratch his head. “What are we going to do?”

He makes a moaning noise and flops back onto his belly, looking up at me with big eyes.

“Yeah, I don’t know either. I just hope I didn’t ruin everything,” I state as I finish my soup. I lie back on the pillow and stare up at the ceiling, hoping some sort of brilliant idea will come to me, but instead, I fall back asleep, again.

* * *

When I wake this time, it’s to rain. I can tell it’s morning. The tray and sandwich are gone. There’s a bagel and a coffee in their place. My bag sits on a chair and I see my computer sticking out from it. There’s a note on the nightstand.

Ariana –

Went out to feed the animals and make sure the farm is ready for the storm. We are closed today. There might be bad weather this afternoon. I left you some food. I have chili in the crockpot. Please help yourself.

~Eric

I eat the bagel. He must have gone to Elisha’s café this morning. I pick up my phone and see that it’s nearly eleven. Damn. I guess I needed to sleep.

I grab my laptop and get back to work on the social media posts I’ll be making in another two weeks for the grand re-opening of the new and improved farmstand and our lamb’s name. I’m busy with graphics when my phone rings.

Kimberly.

Ugh.

I decide to answer it. If I don't, she'll probably just get Dad riled up again.

"Hello," I say as I continue to work.

"Ariana, dear. I was just seeing how your trip is going," she says. I frown. Since when does Kimberly give a fuck about my life?

"It's fine," I lie.

"Oh, good. Your father was so worried the other day. I hear you have a job with a small business?" she says.

Did Dad put her up to this? Is this some sort of "gather intel from Ariana" call? I had texted my father about starting a new job remotely. He's asked me a million questions, but so far, I've been able to deflect them all. I still have no idea how I'll come clean about all of this, but that's next month Ariana's problem.

"Yep," I say. Everything about her line of questioning has the hairs on my arm rising. What is this about? Normally, if we talk at all, it's about something she needs from me.

"How's Dad?" I ask, deciding to take control of this conversation ASAP.

"Oh, he's good. He's looking into a new real estate deal. Anyhow, tell me about your new job. How's it going?" she asks.

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I furrow my brows. “It’s fine,” I state because I feel like she’s prying for information.

“Oh? The company is a good one or is it just one of those struggling small businesses?” she asks as if she just asked about the weather.

What game are you playing, Kimberly? I think to myself.

“It’s doing OK. I mean, they hired me, so obviously, there’s money,” I state.

“Oh, of course, right. Well, glad everything is good and that you do all that hard work remotely. Tell Katia I said hi. Maybe I can talk your father into popping over there for a weekend?” she suggests.

“Uh, right. Yeah, well, we’re not sure where we are going next, so...” I trail off.

“I see. Well, have fun. Bye, Ariana,” she says and hangs up with a click. Leaving me wondering what the hell that was all about.

I immediately call Katia.

“Hey, how was his dick? Is it enormous? Was your first time good?” she asks. She’s, like, the only person on the planet that knows I’m a virgin.

“It didn’t happen. I think he got freaked out about kissing me. But whatever. Kimberly just called,” I say, my words coming out fast.

“Whoa! You didn’t do it?” she asks.

“Focus! Kimberly called. She said something about trying to get my dad to come see us,” I say.

“Oh, shit! Well, I can always get our yacht repositioned if we need to, you know...hide or something. I guess let me know,” she says. “And I’m sorry that...what’s his face...Eric? Didn’t want to pop your cherry.”

“Yeah, not as sorry as I am,” I grumble.

“Maybe you should just bail on this job and come over here. I can buy you a plane ticket,” she offers.

I look out the window and watch as Eric dumps food in Petunia’s trough. My mind races through all the employees on the farm, the folks in town, and even the animals. This place needs me. And I can help it.

Resigned, I sigh. “No. I have a job to do. And I’m at least going to stay and finish it.”

“OK, but call me if you change your mind,” she says.

“I will. And, Katia?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks,” I say.

“You’re welcome. Love you!” she replies, and I smile. At least I can always count on my bestie.

“Love you too,” I say as I hang up and get back to making social media graphics because this work is something I can actually do.

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

Eric

I've fed all the animals. I patched a broken board in the barn. I've secured and re-secured things around the property in anticipation of the storm, but I'm kidding myself by saying I did this because of the weather. I did this to avoid confronting my actual feelings for Ariana.

My analytical brain tells me I fucked up. I can't be messing around with an employee. Not that Windsor Family Farm has any sort of employee handbook, but I don't like the idea that there would be any chance she would feel pressured to be with me. I have a feeling that's not the case, but it's certainly a concern I'm having as I try to work hard enough that my brain goes blank.

The rain is coming down in sheets now. I barely feel my phone buzzing in my pocket. I pull it out and answer it when I see it's Kingsley.

"Hey, just checking up on you. Do you need me out there?" he asks.

"Nope. I just fed all the animals again and secured them in their pens and stalls. Everything is as ready as it can be. Stay put. Is your mom home?" I ask. Kingsley still lives at home with his mother and commutes to a local university for classes. His parents divorced after Tori died. Both his mom and I tried to get him to live on campus, but he refused.

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“Yep. She’s working a double shift at the end of the week,” he says and I can hear their dog barking in the background.

“Everything OK over there?”

He laughs. “Yes, the lights just flickered is all. How’s Ariana?” Apparently, word travels fast in our small town because all my staff had already checked in on Ariana throughout the weekend and then again this morning when I made the call to close the farm for the day.

“She’s fine. I’m having her wait out the storm up in the house, but she’s on the mend,” I state as I check the barn door latch for the tenth time.

“Good. Take care of her. Eric?”

“Yeah, bud?”

“It’s OK to move on, you know. Ariana is great. I’d ask her out myself, but I see how she looks at you.” He pauses and I sigh.

“Not gonna happen,” I white lie because it nearly fucking did this morning.

“Why not?” he asks.

“Kingsley, just...let it go,” I say, sounding harsher than I intended. “Listen...I know you mean well. And I appreciate that. Maybe, someday, I’ll feel differently about things. But I’m not there yet. OK?”

“Just know, she’d approve of Ariana, and she’d want you to be happy. I mean come on, it’s not every day a beautiful, smart, talented woman lands in your lap out of seemingly nowhere. And don’t think we all haven’t seen you watching her too. I might be young, Eric, but I’m not blind,” he says with a laugh.

“Smart-ass. Go be useful and make your mom some dinner or something. I’ll see you tomorrow. I just sent a message. We’re going to open around one. Be here at ten. We’ll check the damage then,” I say.

“Aye, aye, captain,” he teases.

With a shake of my head, I disconnect and decide to do one more walk around the property. My phone rings again. This time, it’s an old friend of mine, Adam Wellington. Growing up in Storyview Falls, I was friends with a few kids whose parents were billionaires. Why a handful of billionaire families decided to make this small coastal town their home, I have no idea. It seems completely by happenstance. Or perhaps the town is like a siren to rich families. We’ve had a lot of crazy theories over the years, crazier ones as kids of course.

“Hey,” I answer as I shore up a loose rope on an outside pen that I missed.

“You outside in this weather?” he asks with a laugh.

“Yes, asshat. I have to get animals sorted before it gets worse,” I explain. Adam never lifted a finger aside from working out. He and our other friends weren’t as hands-on with their properties. But then again, my parents were different. They weren’t old money. And my dad specifically moved here to be a farmer, a billionaire farmer, but a farmer nonetheless. I don’t know if it was in my blood because of that or if I just took a natural liking to it growing up here, but either way, I love working on my farm. I’d hate to give it up. But I also know that I need to think with my business brain and not my heart. The last time I thought with my heart, it got

shattered into a million pieces and never quite worked the same again.

“Be careful.” He pauses and I know he has more to say.

“What is it?”

“I hear you have a new employee,” he says.

“Yep,” I reply, wondering why everyone seems to be calling about her today. Did word get to Isa about her fall? What the hell? This is like small-town life at its absolute worst. Everyone knows everything about everyone.

“Isa says she’s gorgeous,” Adam states as if this is a normal conversation. He and I haven’t spoken about girls since we were boys. We certainly don’t talk about women, and he sure as fuck hasn’t mentioned a single one to me since Tori died.

“So you’re calling me, in the middle of a fucking storm, to mention that you heard that my new employee is attractive? Did I get that right?” I growl.

“Yep, he totally likes her,” Adam calls out.

“What the fuck?” I snarl.

“Isa says that you should go for it. That...hold on...” He trails off.

“Eric? This is Isa. Elisha and I think that you should ask Ariana out, like out, out. And that you two would make an amazing couple. I mean, seriously we do not just get awesome new women in town like that. Just consider it, OK?” she says and then there’s silence again.

“Sorry about that. I didn’t really have a choice. It was either listen all night to Isa

scheming to matchmake you two, or just call you and let her say her piece,” he explains.

I groan and run a hand through my now wet hair. “OK, well, message received,” I state dryly.

“Great. Well, I...uh, should let you go. We should get drinks soon,” he says. I know Isa wrangled him into calling and he feels bad about it.

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“Yeah. Definitely. I’ll talk to you later,” I reply and hang up. I hold my phone out and look around. “Anyone else?” I look up at the sky. “Tori, you trying to freaking send me a message here or something?”

No sooner have the words left my mouth when I hear a sound from inside the barn. Meowing? I go back into the barn, searching for Pricilla.

“Pricilla?” I call out. I look in a few of her usual spots but don’t find her. I hear another meow and look under an old table where there’s a thick pile of hay that needs to be swept.

“Holy shit,” I mutter as I stare at five little kittens nursing on Pricilla.

“Well done, momma,” I say as I stroke her head. She purrs and meows again as if to introduce me to her children. I look around. They are probably safe here, but I’d prefer they come inside. I grab a small wooden crate and start packing it up with some old towels I find in a cupboard by the back door of the barn. When I feel it’s adequate, I look down at Pricilla and point to the crate. “We need to move the babies in here,” I state as if she’ll understand.

I start picking them up one by one. She gives me a loud meow at first but then realizes the crate is warmer and more comfortable. She curls up inside it and the kittens go back to nursing, except for one dark gray kitten. The runt? Shit. Just what I need.

I pick up the crate and toss a towel over the top of it. I lock the barn door as we leave, and I bring them into the office.

Peeling back the towel on top, I see the gray kitten is still struggling alongside its siblings. “You lot are terrible brothers and sisters,” I grumble as I start thinking of what to do. I have some formula we’ve used for other hand-raised animals recently. And this isn’t my first rodeo with kittens. I leave the kitten with the others while I quickly shower and get some things prepared.

I’m going to need Ariana’s help with this. I pick up the kitten and it curls against me.

“Tori, if this is some weird-ass message, I swear to God, just don’t fuck this up. Don’t let me fuck this up, OK?” I say toward the kitten.

It raises its head at me, which I take as a sign of some kind because this thing looks hours old and can’t see yet.

I wrap it in a towel that I’ve heated in the microwave. It snuggles down and I pat the syringe I got ready with the formula. Then, I go to my bedroom and get it ready. Just in case, I tell myself.

I have no idea what I’m doing, but me and this kitten are about to go see Ariana. This could be a great idea, or my worst idea ever. Fuck it. I’m about to use this little creature as my excuse to spend time with the woman that I’ve spent the last few weeks falling for. I can’t send her away. And I can’t resist her any longer. I just hope I don’t fuck it all up.

CHAPTERFIFTEEN

Ariana

I’ve only managed to get two graphics finished. My mind keeps wandering back to Eric’s kiss. The way his hands felt on my body.

I fall back against the pillows on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and wishing I was staring up at Eric. Too bad it's so stormy out or I could at least be back in my bed with my vibrator.

I've seen Eric outside throughout the day and I heard him come inside a little while ago. I'd already eaten some dinner when I knew he was busy in the barn. I didn't want to have to face him quite yet.

There's a knock at the door and I practically groan with embarrassment. Why can't he just leave me to wallow in my self-pity?

"Yes?" I answer.

"I have something. Can I come in?" he asks.

I want to be petulant and say something like, it's your house, but I pull all the adulthood I can muster, and reply, "Yes."

He opens the door and I glance over before looking down at my laptop. Then, my head whips back toward him. He's holding a small gray kitten that can't be more than a day or two old.

"Oh my God!" I whisper-yell. I push the laptop onto the chest at the end of the bed and I jump onto the floor and walk over to Eric. The kitten is swaddled in a towel, only its little face peeks out from it. Eric reaches into his pocket and pulls out a syringe.

"I haven't done this in a while. Pricilla had her kittens, and this runt can't fight his siblings for milk. We're going to have to bottle-feed him," Eric explains. "He's too small for a normal bottle yet, so we'll need to use this." He holds up the syringe to me. "You want to try."

I swallow and shake my head. “No, I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ll just watch.”

“Here, get on the bed,” Eric instructs.

I do as I’m told. Eric helps me sit against the headboard and he places the little buddled kitten in my arms like a baby. Then he brings the syringe up to its mouth and we both breathe a sigh of relief when it starts taking the milk.

“That’s right, buddy. Drink up,” Eric coos. I practically melt watching this giant, muscled man gently feed the kitten.

“Here, you try,” Eric says. “We’ll both need to get good at it. Kittens need to be fed a lot, just like a baby. So we’ll take turns.”

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I take the syringe and Eric's hand covers mine, showing me how to slowly press the stopper to release more milk. Together, we feed the kitten for the next minute or two, until all the milk is gone.

The kitten falls fast asleep, and we both watch it, not moving.

"Where should we keep him?" I ask. "Should he go back to his mom?"

"We can try tomorrow when we can keep an eye on him. Stay here with him. I'll get a heating pad and an old alarm clock that I used with Barkley. I can make a little bed," Eric says as he leaves me sitting there, holding the kitten.

"Is it a he or a she?" I call out.

"Don't know. Haven't looked yet," he yells from somewhere down the hall.

I peel back the blanket and look. "It's a he.

"What shall we name you?" I ask the kitten. It's still fast asleep. I contemplate names until Eric comes back into the room. He's holding a box with a bunch of blankets. He plugs in the heating pad and tucks it inside.

"We have a boy," I announce.

"You think of a name yet?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Not yet."

He chuckles. “Shall we have another naming contest?”

I shrug. “I think we should name him.”

He takes the kitten from me and sets him in the box on the nightstand. We both lean over and look at him.

“How about Stormy?” I suggest.

“Isn’t that, like, a girl’s name?” Eric replies as he scoots onto the bed.

I scoff. “Nooo,” I reply. Eric laughs.

“What about Thunder?” Eric says.

I roll my eyes as I look over at the sleeping kitten. “More like crickets. He’s passed out.” I purse my lips and consider names.

“Titan,” I blurt out and then literally slap my hand over my mouth. Why don’t I just scream my real name from the rooftop? I’m an idiot.

But before Eric can reply, the perfect name comes to me, and I grin.

“Out with it. What’s the name?” Eric urges with a grin of his own.

“Thor,” I decide.

I watch Eric’s grin morph into a giant smile and he nods. “Love it.”

I blush under his praise. “Want to see some of what I have planned leading up to the farmstand re-opening event?”

“Let’s see,” he says hesitantly, and I wonder if he’s nervous that I’ll screw it all up. I mean, I can’t blame him. I have sort of fallen and run into things and backed over things, and well, he must think I’m a hot mess, hence his nickname for me. It’s funny because I’ve always been a little klutzy, but I’ve normally hidden it. Dad doesn’t like it. He wanted me to be an athlete and a sophisticated young woman. I roll my eyes.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing. Just thinking about something. Anyhow,” I start, changing the subject because I’m not about to spill the beans that I’m the great and powerful James Titan’s daughter, “here. I thought we should draw from the general appeal of Storyview Falls. There should be some posts for people who want to visit the town and your farm and other posts for the locals. I also started a group on this app where Kingsley is going to be sharing recipes weekly and I got Max and his restaurant’s chef to agree to do weekly cooking classes out in the side yard from June through August. And they’ll even be here for opening weekend. Elisha is going to send her van over with some coffee and baked goods as well. And a few local artists agreed to come too. So essentially, it will be more than just a farmstand on Saturday mornings. It’ll be a little farmer’s market. I’ve gotten agreements set up for you to look at with the local artists to sell some crafts all the time at the farmstand. And of course, it’ll all look brand new and have that great social media backdrop out front. Oh, and I thought we could highlight different animals each week. If you don’t want a full petting zoo, we can just bring one out for photo ops and a meet and greet, and then folks can walk around and see the animals in their enclosures if they want more photos. Kevin, the new bartender at Max’s restaurant, suggested we set up a lavender field. He says his hometown has one and it’s, like, a big draw for people. They even host weddings there, which is something you could expand on.” I pause and pull up a website to show him. It would require a pavilion to be built next to the barn and that we clear another area of the barn to create a formal kitchen and bathrooms. But it would bring in revenue.

He looks at it and back at me. “I thought you were just a social media marketing manager,” he says, his voice low and gravelly and his words seem to have more than one meaning.

I blush. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep. I just...I guess I got carried away.”

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He reaches over and takes my jaw in his hand and turns my head toward him. Our eyes meet.

“I’m not mad about it, Ariana. I love your ideas. They are great ideas. You’re good at this job, and clearly, I’ve underestimated your abilities. You could be so much more than a social media marketing manager. You’re brilliant and you have a great eye for business,” he says as he searches my eyes.

I swallow as I feel the air crackle between us. “I do?”

He nods and runs a thumb over my bottom lip. “You do.” His face is now so close to mine that I can feel his breath on my skin. What is happening? I thought this was a “no-go” zone. “Tell me to stop and I will. You don’t have to ever do anything you don’t want to do,” he whispers against my lips. “We can be just friends if you want.” The last word hangs in the air like a promise. If I want. I’ve never had anyone ask what I want. My parents tell me what to do. Katia decides for us what we will do. My whole life has been about doing whatever everyone else wants me to do. But Eric...is asking me what I want. He’s letting me decide. I feel like a caged bird that just had its door open. I’m free to fly through it but I’m also terrified of what is on the other side. But there’s only one way to know.

“Kiss me, please,” I murmur as my eyes search his. “I want this,” I add, a small smile tugging at my lips. The corners of his lips rise as well, and for a moment, we’re just two souls, staring at each other, our curled lips pressed together. And then it’s like a lightning strike to my heart. I want this. I need him. His lips trail across mine. He plants a kiss on one cheek and then the other before he brings them back to mine. My eyes fall shut at the gentle touches.

He pulls back all too soon and I feel my mouth seeking his and my eyes opening once again. He reaches under me and scoops me up. I wrap my arms around his neck while I frown in confusion.

“Your first time should be special. I’m taking you to my room,” he explains as he leaves Barkley sleeping in front of the kitten and carries me down the hall. He opens a door and I see his entire room for the first time. It’s enormous. Half the upstairs. A California king bed graces one wall. A mural of the farm is painted on a far wall and there are sliding doors that open to the balcony. I’ve gotten glimpses of this room from the guesthouse, but it’s so much more beautiful in its entirety.

A few candles are lit around the room. There’s a soft glow of lighting in the crown molding that illuminates the space. A handwoven blanket is laid over the side of an aged leather chair in the corner. A quilt is folded neatly at the edge of the bed. The entire room is a soft blue. A fireplace is opposite the sliding doors and it’s on, a small fire crackling in the otherwise quiet space. It’s warm and full of color and life. It’s everything I’ve never known.

He nods to the fire.

“How did you know I’d say yes?” I ask softly as I continue to take in the room.

“I had hoped you would. I prepared in case. I didn’t want you to be cold,” he explains as he slowly lets me slide down his body.

I look back up at him in awe. He did this for me?

He gently takes my face in his hands. “Don’t look at me like that, Ariana. You deserve the world, and I’m just sorry no one has given it to you before me. But if I make you one promise, it’ll be that I will never put you in a box. You’re free to do whatever you want.”

I grin, feeling mischievous all of a sudden. “Anything I want?” I ask.

He nods and I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. Is he nervous too?

I take my time and begin removing my clothes. I’ve never really considered myself attractive. But right now, watching him watch me, I feel beautiful. His eyes take me in as I push my underwear down my legs and then toe it to the side.

I reach toward him and begin unbuttoning his shirt. He’s still, letting me take the lead. I’m not rushed as I revel in each part of his body. I’ve seen him from the waist up, but not below. My hand grazes his erection through his boxer briefs once I’ve managed to get his jeans off and I swallow. He’s big, like really big.

As if sensing my apprehension, he takes my hand and leads me over to the bed. He pulls back the covers and I climb onto the soft sheets. I run a hand over them. I don’t know why, but I didn’t expect him to have such soft sheets. My attention is drawn back to him as he climbs on the bed next to me, giving me space. But I suddenly don’t want space. I want him.

I climb over him and lean down, kissing him while I work to pull his underwear off. He chuckles against my lips as I struggle with the offending cotton and elastic band. He slides them off his legs and kicks them somewhere in the room. Our lips press together and then he’s kissing me or I’m kissing him, it’s hard to say.

I feel myself grinding against his erection. I’m not as afraid now. I just want to get that part over with.

Eric places his hands on my hips. “Slow down. Let me get you ready, my little catastrophe,” he growls as he rolls us over and begins kissing his way down my body. My eyes fall closed at the feel of his mouth on my breasts. One of my boyfriends had kissed me there but it wasn’t anything like this. Eric’s tongue lavishes my nipple,

sucking on it between his lips until it pebbles. He does the same to the other one before continuing to lick and suck along my navel. I squirm, not even sure what I need, but wanting more.

“Relax, Ariana. Just relax and let me make you feel good,” he coos. His breath is hot against the small patch of hair between my legs. I haven’t been to a salon in weeks and I’m a little embarrassed my nether regions aren’t better manicured, but it’s like he doesn’t care or doesn’t even notice. His hands spread my thighs apart and then his thumbs separate my folds. I feel his hot breath right above the most sensitive part of my body and I shudder from the feeling.

“Please,” I beg. I feel ridiculous begging but I also have never wanted something more than his touch in my entire life. It feels like if I don’t get more right now, I’ll combust into flames.

Eric wastes no time. He presses his flattened tongue to me and gives a slow lick up my core.

“Oh God!” I whisper, my hands flying to his hair, needing to hold on for dear life as he begins sucking at my clit. Two of his fingers begin tracing around my entrance until I think I might go insane. Then, he gently inserts a single finger. I feel my muscles clamp down hard around him.

“Relax, baby,” he whispers in between licking and sucking.

I let my legs fall open wider as his finger curves inside me, pushing in and out and rubbing just the right places with each thrust. My hips begin to push against him, seeking more friction. I’m so close. When he adds a second finger, I nearly come undone.

“So close,” I murmur as my head thrashes side to side.

He moves his fingers faster and just like that I scream his name into the night air as I fall over the edge into the deepest pit of ecstasy of my life.

I'm semi-aware that he pulls his fingers away. I look up just in time to see him place his fingers in his mouth and lick them clean. It feels dirty and hot as hell all at once. He takes his wet digits and runs them back through my soaking folds. I whimper as I watch. Katia once made me watch a porno and it wasn't nearly as hot as this. Fuck, how did I not know it could be this amazing?

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Eric takes his hand that's not pleasuring me and reaches toward his bedside table. He fumbles around searching for something and then produces a condom.

"No," I whisper.

He stops and stares at me. "I want to feel you," I protest.

"We have to be careful," he replies, his fingers stilling over my entrance.

I look away as shame washes over me. Eric's free hand drops the condom and comes up to grip my face gently, pulling my gaze back to his. "What?" he prods.

I take a deep breath. "My dad didn't trust me. He made me get an IUD when I went to college."

"He what?" Eric growls.

"I mean...I agreed to it. It's easier than remembering to take the pill," I explain. I can see Eric's face getting red with anger. I reach up and run a finger along his jaw and it seems to snap him away from his thoughts.

"You know I'm clean," I say, blushing, "and I'm guessing you are too."

He nods.

"Then, please, no condom. I need to feel...all of you," I plead.

He takes a deep breath and nods as he leans up over me completely and presses the head of his cock against me.

“Are you sure?” he asks once more. I nod. And he very slowly begins to push inside me. The first inch doesn’t feel so bad. He reaches under my thighs and pulls them wider. I feel him continue to press into me and that’s when I realize his fingers were nothing in comparison to his dick. Fuck. That stings.

He seems to sense my discomfort and he pulls back a little. I breathe and he pushes back inside farther. He does this slowly a few times until he’s completely seated inside me.

“Don’t stop,” I urge. I feel impaled and full, and shit, it feels good. Now I know what all the fuss was about. It’s not anything like my vibrator.

Eric begins to move as he leans down. “Are you alright?” he asks, his concerned eyes searching mine.

“Better than alright,” I moan.

He chuckles. “Good, then I’m doing my job right,” he replies before leaning down to kiss me. Between his kisses and the feel of our bodies joining, I never want it to end.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Eric

I don’t remember it ever feeling like this. I mean, I loved making love to Tori, but we were kids. And the women I’ve been with since, there’s just this rush and urgency and then it’s over and I leave or they leave. It’s a scratch to satisfy an itch and nothing more.

Did I put my relationship with Tori on some kind of pedestal? No, there's no way. I just haven't had slow, good sex in so long, I've forgotten what it's like. That has to be it.

I let my mind go blank again, just feeling Ariana's body clenching around my cock. She feels so tight and so good. I haven't had condomless sex since Tori. I feel her hot, slick body squeezing mine and I have to let out a long breath to keep from coming. I watch Ariana, searching her face, trying to learn what movements she likes. I want to grin at how easy she is to read. Her face flushes as she loses control. I keep up the movement, sliding nearly out and then back in, over and over.

"Eric! Don't stop!" she cries out as her hands clench my shoulders and her eyelids squeeze shut. She looks like an angel or a goddess or something unworldly with her red, wavy hair falling around her face on the pillow, her cheeks pink, her dark lashes fluttering on top of her cheeks, and her perfect pink lips parted in a silent cry as she lets go.

"That's it, baby. Come for me," I command as she trembles beneath me, lost in her orgasm.

I should come, but I can't. I want to keep going. I want to go all night. The thought of pulling out of her body has me sliding back in, deep.

She goes from languid and dreamy to back on top of a precipice as I thrust fast and deep, like I've unlocked a whole new gear in her like I've gone from first gear to fifth gear in one swift move.

Her eyes open and her mouth forms a perfect "o." "I..." She trails off, lost for words. It's like her reaction surprises even her.

"I'm going to...oh, God!" she cries out and shudders around me once more and I

can't stop this time. I jerk inside her as I come, groaning her name into her neck.

We both lie still, panting for a few seconds.

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“Is it...always that good?” she asks with a giggle.

I laugh and pull back to look down at her, bracing myself with my hand, so I don’t crush her small frame beneath me.

“No, Ariana, it’s not always that good,” I reply as I lean down and place a kiss on the tip of her nose.

“Oh,” she grumbles.

I look back into her eyes. “I mean, I’ve never had that with any other woman.” I slowly pull out of her, trying not to hurt her. I roll us over and she curls into my side like she was made to fit there.

“I didn’t know I could do that,” she says as she circles my navel with her finger.

“Do what?” I ask, kissing the top of her head.

“Orgasm multiple times,” she whispers, and I don’t have to look at her to know she’s blushing.

“We unlocked a new skill tonight, huh?” I say with a laugh.

She shrugs. “I guess so.”

“You sore?” I ask as I run a single finger down the bumps of her spine.

“A little, but not bad,” she says. “I thought it would hurt more. I’m glad you took your time.”

I place a finger under her chin and draw her head up so I can look into her eyes. “I would never do anything to hurt you, not intentionally. I will promise you that.” I lean down and place a kiss on her lips.

Pulling the covers over us, I continue running my hand up and down her back. Just when I think she’s about to fall asleep, she sits straight up and gasps.

“Thor! We left Thor in my room!” she yelps as she jumps out of bed naked and starts running out of the room with a slight limp from her bad ankle. I admit, I ogle her backside for a good three seconds before I follow her.

When I get to her room, she’s already holding the little kitten against her chest and looking up at me.

“We can’t leave him alone. Barkley certainly isn’t going to feed him, are you?” she says glancing down at my dog who’s still passed out on the rug in front of the bed.

“Come on. We’ll go pre-load a few syringes of milk and then get him fed and tucked back in. Go take him back to my bed, and I’ll get it sorted,” I state as I motion for her to get back to my room.

She shakes her head and shivers. “No, I need to know how to make his formula.”

I pull the blanket on the bed and wrap it around her and Thor, running my hands up and down her upper arms to warm her.

“OK, come on,” I say as I walk downstairs.

“Aren’t you, like, cold?” she asks as she follows me. I turn just in time to catch her and the kitten as she trips over the blanket.

“Oops!” she cries out, keeping Thor tucked against her.

“Come on, little catastrophe. Let’s go feed Thor,” I say as I pick her up and carry them both downstairs.

She giggles. “I swear, I’m more of a klutz than normal. I’ll get better as I learn things.”

I kiss the top of her head and set her on the counter. “You already are learning things. And I don’t care if you are a klutz. I just want you to be safe.”

I pull out the materials and start filling syringes. I place a few in the refrigerator and show Ariana how I warm them in hot water before I hand her one. She feeds Thor, talking softly to him and rubbing his little head as he feeds.

“That’s a good boy,” she whispers. She looks up at me and grins. “He’s so cute.”

“He is. Come on, let’s tuck him back in and get you warmed up,” I state as I pick her back up and carry them to my room. We set Thor in his box that I’ve placed in my room and then I lead Ariana into my bathroom where I turn on the shower.

“Wow! Your bathroom is impressive,” she says as she looks around us.

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“What’d you expect?” I ask as I place a hand under the shower water to make sure it’s warm enough. I pull the blanket off her and lift her into my arms again.

“I can walk, you know?” she giggles.

“Can you?” I tease.

She gives me an exaggerated glare. “You are not being a very good gentleman, Mr. Windsor.”

I laugh as I let the hot water run down her back, allowing her to stand on the warm pebble stone shower floor. She sighs and leans against me.

“I guess I need to make amends,” I reply as I drop to my knees and grasp her thighs, pulling them apart a little so I can lick her folds.

She shudders under my touch and her hands come out to grab my hair.

“How’s that?” I ask.

“Don’t stop, you haven’t made all the amends yet,” she goads. I laugh as I go back to licking her. I add a finger to the mix and work on learning all her little cues. It takes me two minutes to bring her to orgasm.

I stand back up and kiss her. “By the end of the night, you’ll be coming in less than a minute,” I whisper.

“I doubt that,” she says with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t. If I don’t beat my time, then I’m failing you,” I reply. She laughs and I start to soap us. We get cleaned up, and when I go to turn off the water, she reaches for my hand. “What about you?” she asks.

“Let’s get dried off and then I’m all yours,” I say with a wink. She laughs as I turn off the shower and grab us towels. We dry off and climb into bed.

She leans over and starts slowly moving down my body. She’s licking my length as my head falls back and then I hear a noise.

We both sit up and turn to see a squirming Thor in his box.

“Did I just get blowjob blocked by a one-day-old kitten?” I ask.

She turns back to me. “I mean, Thor needs us and”—she motions to my dick—“well, he’s not going anywhere.”

I give her a pointed look and she smiles sheepishly as she crawls off the bed and grabs Thor, bringing him back up to us. We curl up in bed after I run down to get Thor another syringe of milk.

“You’re going to be a big boy, aren’t you?” Ariana says as she kisses his head.

“I didn’t think we’d become parents so quickly,” I state as I lean over her head to stare down at Thor.

“Well, you know what they say,” she says.

“What’s that?” I reply, giving the top of her head a quick kiss.

“You can get pregnant from just one time,” she teases. I tickle her side and she laughs. And I don’t want this moment to end. There’s something perfect about a sleepy, sated, naked Ariana curled up beside me with a warm kitten pressed between us. We talk for hours after we put Thor back to sleep. I don’t dare press her about her past and she doesn’t press me about mine. It’s a perfect night as the wind whips around the farm and the storm finally dies down. I just hope when we learn each other’s entire stories, things won’t change between us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ariana

I’m lying in bed while Eric makes breakfast. No one will be here for two more hours, so we slept in a few minutes before Eric said he had to get up and check on the farm and animals. Since he woke me up with his lips on my body, I really couldn’t complain.

I stretch and grab my phone that he brought in for me.

Me: I slept with the boss.

Queen of Hearts, Owner of None: OMG! I need details! (champagne emoji)

Me: I’ll tell you later. But it was AMAZING! Have to get to work.

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Queen of Hearts, Owner of None: BTW...you really need to tell your dad soon. It's getting harder to hide you from him.

Me: Le sigh. OK. I just need another two or three weeks.

Queen of Hearts, Owner of None: I'll try.

Me: Thank you! You're the best! (kissing emoji)

Queen of Hearts, Owner of None: Obviously (crown emoji)

I laugh and toss my phone down just as Eric walks in with a tray of waffles.

My eyes light up because waffles are my all-time favorite breakfast food. I think I mentioned that to him in passing a while back. There's no way he remembered that.

As he sets the tray down, I realize these aren't just any waffles, they are Belgian waffles with whipped cream and strawberries.

"You remembered," I say quietly as I look down at enough food to feed a family of four.

He smiles. "I remember everything you say, Ariana." I think my heart just melted. How is this man real? Seriously? He has zero flaws. Other than the nagging suspicion that there's something about his past that he's not telling me, I can't think of anything that's not perfect about him.

“Eat up. No more hurkle-durkling,” he says.

I tilt my head to the side. “Hurkle-durkling?” I ask with a laugh.

He grins. “If you get the word snerdling, I get hurkle-durkle.”

I pull out my phone and search for the term. “Hey,” I laugh, “I am not lying in bed when I should be up and about,” I protest.

He raises an eyebrow.

I roll my eyes and giggle as I grab a fork and get myself a giant bite of waffle with a strawberry on top. I shovel it into my mouth and some whipped cream falls on my chin. Eric’s eyes watch it and then slowly he leans forward and licks it off. Holy shit! That was hot!

“Oh, the things I want to do to you, Ariana,” he whispers as he pulls away. I clench my legs together. “But we need to get up and going. Looks like there are a few trees down on the property that Buck and Earl will need to cut up, but everything else seems intact.”

I finish chewing and swallow. “That’s good. I...should go get a shower and take my stuff back to the guesthouse.”

“No,” he states as he puts a fork down with a strawberry still on it. He searches my eyes and I look back at him in confusion. “I want you to stay here.”

I sigh. “Eric...I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” he asks.

“Because, it’s too soon,” I state as if it should be obvious. I throw my hands up in the air. “What will people think?”

“I see. People won’t think anything because it’ll be between you and me,” he explains, motioning between us. “If there’s ever a night you would prefer not to sleep next to me, then you are always welcome to stay in the guesthouse or any of the guest rooms. But now that I’ve had you in my bed, I don’t want to go back. I want you here with me.”

I swallow. “But I still have the guesthouse?” I confirm.

He nods. “It’s yours as long as you want it.”

“OK. For now,” I state hesitantly.

He smiles and leans in to kiss me. Then, I hear a voice.

“Miss Ariana! Are you in here? You want to help me feed the lamb?” Lennox’s voice calls out from downstairs.

My eyes go wide as I look down at my naked body. Holy shitballs! I scramble to get clothes on and Eric chuckles. He leans forward and presses a kiss to my lips.

“Calm down. I’ll go distract him. School must have been called off because of the storm. Come down when you’re ready. I’ll explain that you stayed here per the doctor’s orders,” he says calmly as if a small child isn’t nearly seeing me naked in his bed.

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He gets up and leaves and I stare after him in total disbelief. Katia is not going to believe any of this.

* * *

It's been a long two days at the farm. There was lots of cleanup. Then there was getting back on track with my plans for the farmstand re-opening. I had to explain to Buck and Earl three times that we aren't closing and re-opening, it just means it's all brand new. I'm not sure they believe me, but at least Kingsley is on board and has started to help move stuff in his downtime.

I'm prepping an update on the lamb for our social media when Eric comes into the office. Pricilla and her kittens are in here sleeping along with Barkley and I just fed Thor again and put him in his box next to my desk so I can keep an eye on him. Joy and Lennox have left for the day along with everyone else. Poor Lennox has been out of school for a few days because the storm knocked a power line and the elementary school isn't getting power restored until tomorrow.

"Come on. Finish up. Let's have dinner," Eric says as he walks toward the hallway.

"I'll be right there," I say as I focus on my screen. I turn and my eyes bulge. "You should shower first. What happened?" Eric is caked in mud. It clings to his hair, it's wiped on his face, and don't get me started on the state of his clothes.

"Petunia might have knocked me over in her pen," he says as he tries to run his fingers through his hair, but fails miserably.

“You look like Petunia just trampled you,” I state as I continue to take in his appearance. I giggle.

“You think it’s funny, huh?” he asks stepping toward me. I shriek and jump up from my chair. We play a game of chase around the desk and then he grabs me and pulls me against him.

“You better pay for my dry-cleaning bill,” I protest with a glare, trying to be mad but failing terribly.

He laughs. “OK, I can do that,” he says as he scoops me up and carries me upstairs. I squeal as mud gets slung on my top.

“Ewww!” I cry out.

He sets me down in the middle of his bathroom and makes surprisingly quick work of taking off his dirty clothes. Then his hands are on me, unbuttoning my top and sliding my pants down my legs. He turns on his shower and leads me into it, letting the warm water run down my body.

“This is why I like you here,” he says as he palms my breast and kisses me.

“Right now, I can’t argue with your reasoning,” I reply in between kisses. “Come here, you’re a mess,” I add as I turn us so the water begins washing away the mud from his hair. I pour some shampoo in my hand and reach up to attempt to wash his hair.

“Here,” he says gently as he sinks to his knees and kisses my belly as he grips my hips. It is easier but also very distracting to have him kissing me while I’m trying to clean him.

“Eric,” I scold as I try to rinse his hair with the handheld attachment.

“I’m busy,” he grunts as his kisses get dangerously close to the apex of my thighs.

I grab his hair and force him to look up at me. Fuck. Wrong thing to do. He looks up at me with equal parts feral desire and adoration and I want to sink down next to him.

“We should finish up and eat,” I urge. “We have all night,” I remind him.

“I’m not sure I like you bossy. You make too much sense,” he grumbles as he stands and begins to soap his body. When I try to soap mine, he bats my hands away so he can do it. In another five minutes, we’re clean, dry, and dressed.

“Come on, let’s make some baked chicken,” he suggests as he takes my hand and leads me to the kitchen. He sets some vegetables on a cutting board, and as I begin to chop them, he starts prepping the chicken. It’s like we’ve done this a thousand times. No words need to be spoken. It’s just happening.

I smile at the familiarity of it. “So, tell me, why exactly did you hire me?” I ask, making small talk. I realize my mistake immediately when he stops moving.

“Eric?” I ask, turning to look up at him.

His gaze finds mine. “There are many things you don’t know yet. And for that, I’m sorry. I should have been more honest with you.”

I frown. “Like what things?”

He leans against the counter and wipes his hands on a rag before tossing it on the island. “The farm hasn’t been doing well. We had some crop failures in the last two years. We lost a lot of money. You see...I took over the farm when my parents retired

a few years ago. I love it here and wanted to make it work. I could keep trying to pump my...savings into it, but I want...er...need it to be financially successful on its own.” He stammers over some words and I wonder why, but I suppose it’s because it’s hard to tell me this. “I don’t want it subsidized. Lately, a few developers have been offering to buy it. It’s near town and less than two hours from a major city. It’d be a lucrative place for a development. But I don’t want that. If I can afford to keep it, I will, as long as I can start righting the ship.”

I turn my face away because I know I’m blushing. When he said “developer,” my mind went to my dad. That’s what he does. Or at least, a big part of his empire is development.

I spin to face him. My resolve quickening. I place a hand over his and he looks down at me. “We’re going to fix it. I can do this. I can help you. We will right this ship.”

He smiles and leans down, planting a slow, sexy kiss on my lips. “That’s my girl. I know you can. I had a feeling about you the first time I saw you.”

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I laugh. “Right, you had a feeling I was a klutz. Petunia nearly killed me.”

He chuckles. “True, but you stood your own.”

My phone starts ringing, and I pull it from my pocket.

Kimberly’s phone number appears on the screen, and I feel the blood drain from my face. No. It’s not possible. She can’t have this number. The last time she called, it was forwarded from my regular phone, but this time it is not.

“Ariana?” Eric’s concerned voice cuts through my fog.

“Uh, I’ll be right back. I should take this,” I say quickly as I walk out the back sliding doors to the patio.

“Hello,” I answer once I’m alone.

“So it’s true, then,” her voice replies.

Fuck!

“What’s true?” I ask.

“You’re in Storyview Falls,” she answers.

“How’d you get this number?” I ask.

“Oh, I have my ways. You know, if you are trying to hide from your father, you really ought to not make friends with everyone in that town. They talk, you know?” she says.

Shit. Who told her? Not that anyone would know not to tell her.

“What do you want, Kimberly?” I ask.

“Tell your father. Or I will,” she says.

“Tell him what?”

“The truth. You have two weeks because I have a trip to take. But when I get back, he better know everything or I’ll be telling it to him and I promise you that won’t go over well,” she replies. What the fuck is she playing at?

“I don’t know what game you’re playing, Kimberly, but I was going to tell him in a few weeks anyhow. He already knows I got a job at a small company. I just wanted to get a few things in order first. Make him proud. He’ll know,” I assure her as my heart races.

“Right. Well, have fun playing Sunnybrook Farm or whatever,” she says, and the line goes dead with a click. Oh no. This is bad, really fucking bad.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Eric

Ariana has been unusually quiet during dinner. I filled her in on more about the farm. I don’t get into too much detail about my dad and his fortunes, but I do tell her how he decided he had a big midlife crisis and bought this farm. She laughed but the smile

didn't reach her eyes. She told me her call was just a friend checking in on her, but I don't believe that for one second.

I can't escape the feeling that Ariana is hiding things about her life.

I decide I need to get her to relax a little and then I'll start questioning her this evening. I plate our food while she pulls out silverware for us and then I grab a bottle of wine. Pouring us each a glass, I look over at her. She's sitting at the table texting. Her teeth are biting her bottom lip. She looks worried. And I don't like that at all.

"Here," I say as I set a glass in front of her.

"Oh, thanks," she answers but doesn't look up from her phone until I'm seated.

I reach over and place a hand on hers and I see her eyes glaze over. "What's wrong?" I ask.

She presses her lips together and shakes her head. "Nothing. It's nothing," she tries to assure me.

"Let's eat," I say, changing the subject for the moment. Her shoulders drop slightly as she relaxes. I tell her about the farm cleanup and how the one tree falling caused some damage to the main drive, which gives me an opportunity to turn it into a two-lane drive when the company comes out to fix it next week.

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She smiles and seems to listen attentively, but I know something is weighing on her mind. We clear the dishes, and she helps me clean up the kitchen. Again, it's like she's been here for years. In only a few weeks, she's learned where things go, and she moves around me as if we can sense how the other will move. It's the opposite of her normal klutzy tendencies. When she's working with me in the kitchen, it's like a well-orchestrated dance.

She turns from putting the final plate away. I step in front of her and box her in with my arms on the counter on either side of her.

"Now, where were we?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

She's fighting my distraction as she tries to play along but that smile still doesn't reach her eyes, so I lean in and start kissing her jaw.

"Were we here?" I ask as I kiss her chin.

She shakes her head.

I lean in farther and kiss her earlobe. "How about here?"

"Nope," she whispers.

"Here?" I ask as I graze her cheek with my lips.

"Not quite," she replies.

I hover my lips over hers and look into her eyes. I have her attention now. Mission accomplished. “How about right here?” I question and I watch her eyes darken.

“I think that’s right,” she answers, her lower lip just barely touching mine as she moves it.

“Then, we better pick up where we left off, little catastrophe,” I tease as I press my lips fully against hers and watch her eyelids flutter closed. Her lips are smooth and warm against mine. I love the little whimpers she makes and the way her head moves toward me, seeking more, wanting more of my touch.

I pull back after a minute. “Let’s go upstairs,” I say. “I want to take my time with you.”

She nods. Her arms cross behind my neck as I lift her under her thighs, carrying her up to my bed.

“What about Thor?” she asks.

Fucking pussy-blocking kitten.

“I’m going to feed him and bring him to his box up here. I want you in my bed naked when we get back,” I command.

She grins, and this time it’s a real smile and it makes me smile. “Yes, sir, boss,” she whispers seductively. Fuck me. This woman is going to be the death of me.

I scramble down the stairs and tend to Thor’s insane appetite. This kitten eats like he’s a full-grown lion.

“Come on, buddy,” I urge as he slurps down his formula.

Then I wrap him up and bring him with me to his second box. I still can't believe she made an office box for him. This is going to be one spoiled cat. I have a sneaking suspicion this one will not be a barn cat.

"You're in charge," I say to Pricilla who is lounging in the bed we made her here with her other kittens nursing.

I hurry up the stairs and into my room. I stop and stare before setting Thor into his bedtime box. Ariana is naked in my bed, and she looks like every man's wet dream. She's curvy in all the right places. Her long hair hangs down like curtains around her breasts, only giving me glimpses of the two orbs I want to spend ample time worshipping this evening. Her legs are crossed, and I frown. No, that won't do at all.

"What's wrong?" she asks, furrowing her eyebrows.

I pull my shirt over my head and push my boxers and pants off as I make my way to her. When I reach the bed, I grab each of her ankles and slowly spread her legs until I see exactly what I want.

"Don't keep me from seeing my second-favorite part of you," I grumble as I crawl up between her legs, pressing kisses to each of her knees and thighs as I journey to the center of my world.

She giggles. "Oh? What's your favorite, then?" she asks before groaning as I lick her folds.

I look up at her. "Your face or maybe your eyes or maybe"—I lean forward and take a nipple in my mouth and she groans again—"your breasts. It's a hard choice."

She laughs until I graze her nipple with my teeth and then she moans.

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I get lost in her body for the next hour, memorizing how every square inch of her body feels against mine. After making her come for the fourth time, I roll us over and settle her against my side. She's languid and her breathing is slow. I decide to press her with some questions.

"You know, you could go get the rest of your belongings now that you're settled here," I start.

She tenses a little. "Yeah, I will. I really don't have much that I need. This is my first job since graduating college."

"Were you living with your parents when you weren't at school?" I ask.

She's quiet for a beat.

"I want to know everything about you," I whisper, trying to put her at ease as I kiss the top of her head.

She rolls on her belly and I settle her between my legs with her head propped on her hands that lie on my chest. She looks up at me.

"As I've mentioned, my parents are divorced. My mother lives in France with my half brothers who are in high school. I lived with my dad in the city when I wasn't at school," she starts.

"I haven't heard you call him. Are you close?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Sort of." She sighs. "He's very...demanding. And he's always busy. I love him, but he's difficult to be around. I guess, I wanted to get settled and be able to prove to him that I can make it on my own before I looped him in on all of this." She motions around us.

"So, he doesn't know you're here?" I question.

"No. He...well, sort of. He knows I'm working for a small company doing social media marketing. I'll fill him in on the rest later. He's familiar with this town, so I'm sure he'll be pleased with where I've decided to live," she explains.

"Why do I feel like there's a lot more to that story?" I state with a raised eyebrow.

She blushes and that makes me want to kiss her and forget about this line of questioning, but I also want answers.

"There's more, but none of that matters. I promise I'll share more with you...in time. I just, I'm trying to figure it all out, you know?" she says as she looks up at me with hopeful eyes.

"You can tell me anything, you know that, right?" I say, searching her eyes.

"I know. My family is a lot to handle, and all of this is new and exciting, and I just need some time to process it all. I'll tell my dad everything, and eventually, you can meet him. I want to get through the re-opening first and then I'll work on all my personal stuff, OK?" she says. I don't like that she's keeping things from me, but this information is a start.

I roll us over and kiss her lips gently before pulling back to look down at her. "You don't need my permission to live your life, Ariana. I just want you to share it with me. I want you to be able to tell me anything and everything, no matter if it's good or

bad.”

Her eyes glaze over, and she bites her lip. “I don’t like my dad’s girlfriend. That’s who called tonight. She’s a real...” She trails off.

“Oh. I see. You want to talk about it?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Maybe, you can distract me a little more?” she pleads.

I smile down at her. “Now that, I can do.” I kiss her lips. “I’m available for complete distraction by hot sex whenever you desire it.”

She giggles and the sound warms my heart. I’ll get to the bottom of her life, but for now, I’m just going to enjoy this moment. Hell, maybe it’s better if I don’t know everything, then I can’t get too attached.

CHAPTERNINETEEN

Ariana

I’ve managed to avoid talking to my father for the entire week. The barn is starting to take shape with help from Earl, Buck, and Kingsley. I feel like I learn a new thing every day and I love that. No two days are the same on the farm. It never gets boring. It’s hard, but it’s rewarding. I’ve never done work like this before. Hell, at home I considered microwaving my own food as hard manual labor.

Katia is dying every time I text her a photo. She’s questioning my sanity and thinks it’s all about a booty call with the boss. I mean she’s not wrong. I went from no sex, to a total sex addiction, or at least that’s how it feels when Eric’s around. He just has to walk into a room and I’m suddenly squirming and wanting his hands on me. We’ve somehow managed to keep our relationship a secret, which is not easy considering

how early everyone arrives on the farm. My latest decoy is saying that I've decided to get healthy by running early every morning. I've left all my running clothes at Eric's, and I wear them in the morning and go down to the office when he gets up, so it looks like I just came in from a run. Then I sneak away to "shower" mid-morning.

Then there's my bigger problem. Telling Eric the entire truth. I want to tell him everything, I do, but the longer we go without talking about it, the harder it gets. What if he hates me? What if he feels like I lied to him? I mean, is lying by omission really lying? Ugh. Yes, it is.

And I want to ask him more about his life, but I feel like he's holding back too and I'm afraid of his reasons for doing that. Does he not want to share with me because he doesn't trust me?

I'm in the guesthouse getting some things together to take back to Eric's. As I go to walk up the path, Joy comes walking toward me.

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I stop, wide-eyed. Shit. Shitty, shit, shit. What do I do? I look around as though a giant hole will appear out of thin air, and I can hide inside it.

“Whatcha doing?” she asks.

“Oh, I...uh, was going to use Eric’s washer and dryer. Mine’s not working,” I say, the words coming out in a rush.

“Oh? We should get Earl to take a look. He used to work for our local handyman years ago. Earl! Earl! Come over here!” Joy screams.

Fuck. I try to come up with something. Anything. All I know about washers and dryers are the basics I learned by watching friends do laundry in college. Like the most basic stuff. I once tried to do laundry and I dyed all of my shirts pink because I didn’t know you couldn’t wash bright red clothes with whites.

Earl comes around the corner. “Stop your hollering. What’s the problem? Who died?”

“Ariana says there’s a washer issue at the guesthouse. Can you take a look?” Joy asks.

“Sure. What seems to be the issue?” he asks me as he starts toward the house.

I turn and follow him, trying to come up with some sort of answer that makes sense. A noise? No, that wouldn’t prevent me from washing. No water? No power? I wrack my brain for something, anything. Come on, stupid brain, work! Then I remember something. It’s foggy at first, but eventually, as we enter the house it comes back to

me.

“It’s the turn-y thing. It wasn’t spinning,” I state remembering when my friend’s washer got jammed. Now, I think that was user error but at least I know it’s something that can go wrong.

“The turn-y thing?” Earl says incredulously.

“Yep, that thing,” I concur.

“Right.” He sighs and opens the washer. He spins the turn-y thing.

“Seems to be working just fine.” Then he spins it again, but it stops and the three of us stare at it. Shit, did I really break it?

He fiddles with it, reaching down and feeling around the bottom of the device. Then something begins to come out of that small crevice. A moment later, Earl is standing there with my thong hanging from his finger.

“Found the problem,” he says dryly as he drops the thong in my open hand. “Maybe don’t use butt floss. Damn things always get caught in the machines.”

Oh God. This is when I die, right? I’m not usually bashful, but the image of Earl handing me my underwear is now permanently embedded in my mind for all of eternity. I can never unsee it, ever again.

“What’s going on in here?” Eric asks from the front door. Great. As if this couldn’t get any more awkward.

“Butt floss got caught up in the washer. It’s good as new,” Earl states as he walks toward the door. He jerks his thumb back toward the machine. “You should take her

to town and have her buy some of those granny panties that my Georgia wears. Those things never get caught.”

The fact that Earl is throwing around words like “butt floss” and “granny panties” has me fighting a laugh. I press my lips together. Because I’m equal parts embarrassed and entertained all at the same time. I’m so distracted by Earl’s word choices that I’m not even nervous about anyone finding out I’ve been sleeping with Eric.

Eric chuckles. “Noted, Earl. I suppose I can take our newest employee into town for some shopping. How about it? We can even grab food. I’ll pay,” he says to me. Joy and Earl look back at me and Eric winks. He’s smooth, I’ll give him that.

“Sure. Why not? Not sure I’m a granny-panty type of girl, but I’m sure I can find something,” I state.

“Heather’s thrift store has underwear,” Joy says.

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. “Thrift store?” I ask in horror at the idea of wearing used underwear.

Joy laughs and is joined by Earl and Eric. “She thinks the underwear is thrifted,” Earl says in between nearly sobbing in laughter.

“It’s not?” I ask.

“No. Heather has really nice things on consignment, but she also carries new things. Not all the inventory is used,” Eric explains.

“Oh...I see,” I state as I blush, and Eric’s look goes from amused to that again and I’ll bend you over right here. I have no idea why he loves it when I blush, but he does.

“Well, you two kids have fun. I have to go pick up Lennox from soccer practice. I’ll see you in the morning,” Joy says with a wave.

We all wave back and I look over at Earl. He’s looking from Eric to me. “You two enjoy yourselves. Don’t go too crazy,” he says, his voice laced with suspicion. Oh no! Does he suspect anything? Does that matter? Eric and I haven’t discussed taking our relationship public yet. But I suppose that topic is going to be on the agenda tonight.

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“We will,” Eric assures him as he claps him on the back. Earl nods and tips his ballcap as he walks out of the house and down the path to the parking lot.

Eric looks at me once we are alone. I swear that man is undressing me with his eyes. I swallow. “Should we get going? I don’t want Heather’s to run out of those granny panties,” I tease.

Eric smiles and walks toward me. He boxes me in against a wall and I look up at him.

“I have other ideas of how we can start our evening and they don’t involve any underwear at all,” he says as he leans down and kisses me.

* * *

After an underwear-free hour with Eric, we’ve managed to shower and dress. He let me pick the music on the radio in his truck. When we pull up at the thrift store, I glance over at him.

“We don’t have to go clothes shopping,” I state.

“Why not?” he asks.

What do I say here? Oh, I have access to billions of dollars. My trust fund could buy your farm and a few others. I have a closet the size of your bedroom with every type of underwear ever invented. No. Nope. I need to white lie.

“I don’t really need underwear,” I say because that’s not lying.

“So what? We can just look around,” he says as if he’s the most carefree human on the planet. There’s a lot that seems like a paradox about him. First, he dresses really well for a farmer. I mean, I only know from what I see in movies, but he certainly isn’t shopping at the same place as Buck and Earl. Second, his house is legitimately nice, even by my upbringing standards. His family must have paid a fortune updating it. And the guesthouse is equally well-constructed and decorated. Based on what I’ve seen around here so far, that doesn’t seem to be the case for any other farmhouse I’ve passed by, at least not from the outside of them. And he seems well educated on so many things beyond farming. He said he went to college, but the other night he was listening to an opera while cooking. I’ve never once heard of an opera-loving farmer. It all seems...strange. He mentioned he traveled a lot and then he’s worried about the farm going under, so how did he have money to travel if the farm has been having financial issues for years?

“Earth to Ariana,” he says as he waves a hand in front of me. “You coming?”

I give my head a little shake, trying to clear my thoughts. “Yeah, I’m coming.” He waggles his eyebrows at my answer, and I roll my eyes. Maybe he’s not as cultured as I thought.

I follow him into the thrift store. A woman who I’ve seen before walks over to us.

“Hey, Eric,” she says warmly, her hair pulled up in a bun. She doesn’t look that old, maybe late thirties? She has the most intense gray eyes, and she looks me up and down.

“You must be Ariana. I’m Heather. It’s so nice to finally meet you,” she says to me.

“Nice to meet you too,” I reply trying to match her enthusiastic smile.

“What are we looking for today?” she asks.

“Well, I’m in need of a new shirt and...” Eric trails off as he glances at me.

“Underwear,” I blurt out as my mind goes blank.

Eric smirks and I glare at him. Why did I say that? I’m such an idiot.

“Great. Women’s underwear is right over there behind the sweaters, and you know where men’s shirts are,” she replies as she motions in the direction of the items we’re looking for. “Let me know if I can help with anything.”

“Will do,” Eric replies, walking toward the front of the store. I walk toward the back and come to a wall of women’s underwear. They are in plastic in sets of four or five, rolled up into little sausages. What is this?

I stare at the wall in confusion. I’ve never bought underwear like this before. Normally, I’d text Katia but I’m not sure she’s ever even bought herself regular underwear. My brain desperately tries to figure out what to do. The sizes are like in numbers but not like regular women’s clothes numbers. I reach for a package and pull it down, examining it front to back. On the back, there’s this weird size chart. Oh, my dimensions. I sort of know those. I did get measured a few months ago for this charity ballgown. I slowly figure out the correct size number and then find that number on the shelf. Great. I did it. I can do this. I can be like a normal person and figure out normal stuff. Take that, Dad!

Feeling proud of myself, I walk up to the register and place my plastic underwear package on the counter.

“All set?” Heather asks.

“Yep,” I reply. Heather does a double take at the package but says nothing and rings me up. I pay and wait for Eric. I glance at my underwear bag and realize it says high-

waisted control-top panties. Oh no. I contemplate returning them, but I'm too embarrassed. I get bored after three minutes and meander to the back where I hear Eric in the dressing room.

“You almost done?” I ask.

“Sort of. I can’t get this button undone,” he grumbles.

“Open the door,” I sigh.

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He does and I laugh. He's buttoned the shirt askew and managed to get a bigger button in a smaller hold. I grin at my thought. Fine, maybe having a dirty mind isn't a sign of being uncultured.

"I can help," I say as I step inside. The door swings closed behind me as I tug at the button, prying it out of the small slit in the fabric. I finally manage to get it free, and Eric presses me up against the wall.

"Eric," I hiss, looking around as if someone can see us in here.

He nuzzles my neck. "I can't help it," he whispers as he kisses my collarbone.

I groan softly and he clamps a hand over my mouth as he continues to kiss up my neck and suck on my earlobe.

Then he pulls his hand away and replaces it with his mouth. I fall victim to his amazing lips. This man can kiss!

"You finding everything alright back here," Heather's voice comes from the other side of the door.

I stare up at Eric in horror as he swings open the door. "I'm going to take that one instead." He motions to a shirt on the wall hook. "I got the buttons all messed up on this one. Thank God I brought Ariana to help," he adds with a chuckle.

Again, I'm met with a suspicious gaze for the second time today. Heather looks between us and then takes the shirt off the hook. "I'll ring this up and put it on your

tab,” she says.

“Thanks,” Eric calls out.

I glare at him. “We should talk. This”—I motion between us—“is getting out of hand.”

He smirks. “I like it out of hand,” he replies as he peels the shirt off to change, leaving me staring right at his amazing pectoral muscles and that “V” of muscles that juts out above his jeans. I think his body is my Kryptonite.

CHAPTERTWENTY

Eric

We’ve decided to keep our relationship to ourselves for a few more weeks. I know Ariana isn’t telling me everything. But if anything, I’m a patient man. I can wait. It’s only been a few weeks since we met and less than two weeks since we started, well, whatever this is between us. Neither of us is ready to put an official title on it.

I keep getting knowing looks from my staff. They see right through us, but Ariana doesn’t seem to notice. She’s busied herself with getting things set for our grand re-opening event. She’s already assured me that the farmstand only needs to be closed for four days for all the work to be completed. I find this completely unrealistic, but I’m doing my best to trust her.

Today, she’s been making calls and making something called teasers for our social media pages. I’ve watched her a few times through the large window in the office, her red hair tied up in a bun on top of her head. She’s adorable when she’s concentrating.

It's hard not to have flashes of Tori. It's hard not to think about how hard it was after she died. We had our entire life in front of us, and in an instant, it all was wiped away. But somehow, each day with Ariana, I think less about that time. I'm torn about it. On one hand, I feel guilty, as if not thinking about Tori every day is some sort of mortal sin. On the other hand, I find myself feeling happier every day, which leads me to feel guilty again as if I can't be happy because she died.

I groan at myself as I sling some feed bags onto the bed of my truck.

"Need help, old man?" Kingsley asks.

"Very funny," I grumble. "And no, I'm good."

"If you say so. Hey, I was going to ask if I can take off the days we are closed. I sort of...was going to visit a friend," he says.

I stop what I'm doing and turn to face him. "A friend?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Yeah, a few of us were going to stay at their parents' beach house for a few days. It should be fun. I wasn't going to go, but then if the farmstand is closed anyhow..." He trails off and shuffles his feet.

"Kingsley, you can take off whenever you want. You just need to let me know. By all means, please go and have fun," I assure him.

"OK," he says and then presses his lips together as if that will stop him from saying more.

"Out with it," I state as I cross my arms.

"It's just...I know things are tough here. And Tori would want me to help you. I just

don't want to let you guys down," he explains.

Shit. Is everyone from Tori's life dealing with guilt? I can't even imagine what it's been like for Kingsley. He adored his big sister, and she would be so proud of the man he's become.

"Listen, Tori, first of all, would want you to go live your life and have fun. And second, I do too. There are other people we can get to work around here. Hell, Buck could even fill in for you for a few days or Joy. They have before when you've been sick. And I can do it too. Now...Earl, on the other hand," I tease.

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He laughs. “Ariana could do it too. She’s great. I’ve taught her how to do checkout and inventory. She’s a quick learner,” he says.

“So, then, there’s no guilty feelings, are there?” I point out.

He shrugs again. “I guess not. OK. I gotta run. I have to study for an exam tonight.”

“Good luck. I’ll see you when you get back,” I say.

He waves as he walks to his car, and I watch him drive down our new widened driveway. So much has changed in such a short amount of time.

I wrap up and bid goodnight to Earl and Buck and then Joy. I find Ariana still at her desk. Her fingers move rapidly on the keyboard making that clickity-clack sound. She rolls her head to one side and then the other.

I look around and notice Thor isn’t in his box. Frowning, I walk over to Ariana. I laugh when I see she’s wearing a hoodie backward and Thor is nestled down into the hood that’s on her front. He’s fast asleep, clearly the typing isn’t bothering him at all.

“He couldn’t stay in his box?” I ask.

“Nope. He was crying. So I swaddled him and then tucked him in here. I’ve seen some people online do it. And you know what? It works. The little guy passed right out. I think we should install a cat door for Pricilla. She keeps wanting out during the day,” Ariana says, her eyes still focused on her screen.

“I suppose I could do that. I used to have one for Barkley when he was younger,” I say as I look over at the door.

“Why’d you get rid of it?” she asks, stopping to look up at me.

“Barkley may have gotten out and then may have figured out how to unlatch Mooman’s door,” I explain.

She giggles. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. MoomanandSnuggles, both decided to eat all my good flowers. I wanted to murder all three of them. They’re lucky to still be alive after that. I didn’t have any flowers to sell for three weeks,” I state, my jaw clenching at how mad I was about it.

Ariana giggles as she pets Thor’s head. He leans against her hand. She’s a natural with the animals. They all seem to flock to her.

“How’s that voting thing going?” I ask as I lean against her desk, facing her and Thor.

“Oh, really good. We have...” She trails off as she clicks a few buttons on the keyboard. “Uh, three thousand and fifty-two entries.”

My eyes nearly pop from my skull. “I’m sorry, what?”

She smiles up at me. “That’s just the people that voted. Like ten thousand people saw that post.”

“How is that possible? We don’t even have three thousand people in Storyview Falls,” I state.

“Oh, they don’t have to be from here. They are from the city, and a few other small towns in the area, we had one from France and one from Brazil,” she says with a laugh.

“And what were the names again?” I inquire as I try to wrap my head around that many people caring what we name a lamb.

“Lamberta, Baa-berella, Sheepa Eastwood, Baabara Sheepsand, Lambagini, and April,” she says.

I chuckle. “Those were some great names,” I say. “Why’d we choose April?”

She gives me a pointed look. “Because she was born in April,” she says as if I’ve lost my mind.

“Oh, right. Dinner?” I add as I stand and stretch. She watches my abdomen as my shirt rises.

I lean down and press a kiss to her lips. Pulling back, I search her eyes. “I mean, I wouldn’t mind an appetizer,” I add with a smirk.

She groans and rolls her eyes. “I mean, if you’re hungry,” she says, winking as she sets Thor in his box. He’s already passed out and doesn’t move as she steps away and starts running down the hall. I chase after her while she’s laughing and trying to beat me to the bedroom.

I grab her from behind at my bedroom door and she squeals, but then the squeal turns to a moan as my right hand cups her between the legs.

“This is my favorite meal,” I whisper in her ear. And it’s the truth. I can’t get enough of this woman.

* * *

After my appetizer of tasting every square inch of Ariana, we decided to order a pizza. I made us a salad to go along with it and some garlic bread. Ariana insisted on a carpet picnic in the family room. So we're semi-dressed, eating pizza, and talking. Everything about this is perfect, just like she is. But deep down, the longer I let myself enjoy this, the more nervous I get that I won't be able to make it last, that I'll let those feelings I keep hiding away take over.

"What's wrong?" Ariana asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I'm not remotely ready to talk about what's actually bothering me, so I go the farm route instead.

"I have an offer for the farm," I state.

It's her turn to be surprised. "What?" she asks, setting her pizza down and wiping her swollen lips that were just wrapped around my cock an hour ago. I have to take a deep breath to focus.

"A company is interested in making a subdivision out here. They reached out to me a few days ago with a rather impressive offer," I explain.

"Are you actually considering selling the farm?" she asks, her eyes wide.

I shrug. "I mean...I need to at least consider it," I say because it's true. It'd be bad business not to.

“But...we have the re-opening and all the other plans and what about your staff? This is, like...their whole life,” Ariana says defensively. I love that she doesn’t ask about herself but only cares about the others.

I reach over and place a hand on hers, squeezing it. “I know. And I wouldn’t even consider the offer until after this quarter. I want to see how we do with all of these changes. I’m hopeful, but I also need to be realistic. I could still keep some of the farm and land. I wouldn’t sell the entire thing, but it would provide capital to make what’s left better or at least float us for a while. Eventually, Buck, Earl, and Joy will retire, you know?” I point out, hating the words even as I speak them. I can’t imagine life without those three. They’ve been part of mine since I was a kid. They are more than employees and colleagues, they are family. I’m sure my father would offer them nice retirement packages, but so would I.

“I don’t think you should,” she states emphatically.

“Noted. I don’t want to, but again, I need to be realistic. This place...I love it, but it’s also a money pit. Something is always wrong and broken. I can keep throwing my money into an open fire here, or I can cut my losses and keep what I can,” I explain. Dad always taught me to try and separate money and emotions. I admit, I’m not great at it, not as great as he is. He once sold off some of the farm to another farm up the road to help us float through two bad years of crops. He could have paid for the losses, but he said it was bad business to keep those fields because they wouldn’t be good for planting for years and the other farm had livestock and could use them. On the other hand, though, this town is my home, and part of me wants to drain my accounts trying to keep a piece of it going as long as I can.

“I understand that, but please consider keeping it. We can keep coming up with more ideas. I’ll work on some,” she says, her eyes so honest and true. I love that she wants to help, and I hate that she doesn’t know everything about me. I should tell her about Tori and my past, but I need more time. More time to figure out if I can even be the

man she needs. I want to protect her, but again, I'm left wondering if protecting her from me is more important than protecting her from anything else.

CHAPTERTWENTY-ONE

Ariana

My phone pings and I look down. I'm expecting calls or texts from a half dozen people as the re-opening is approaching. But instead, it's a video call from my brother, Sam.

"Hey," I say as I accept it.

"Hey, how's life?" he asks. I feel sort of bad. I haven't spoken much to him or Lucas in the past few weeks.

"It's going. How are things?" I ask as I save some graphics for the re-opening and email one of the local artists.

"It's fine. I heard Mom talking to your dad again," he says, lowering his voice as if he might be heard.

I stop what I'm doing and stare at him. "What'd she say?" I ask.

"It's not what she said, it's what he said," Sam answers in a hushed voice.

I wait for him to continue.

"He thinks you're just...what were his words..."

"Trying to prove a point," Lucas says as his face comes into view. "Hey, Ari."

“Hi, Luc-puke,” I tease, using a nickname I gave him as a baby.

He rolls his eyes. “Anyhow, Mom agreed with him that your...what did he call it?” Sam asks Lucas who groans.

“So-called job,” Lucas states.

“Right, your so-called job is short term and you’ll be home soon and can work for him. He wants to have you do some sort of event planning or something like that. Anyhow, it sounded super boring. Just thought you should know. Oh, and his girlfriend, Kimberslut, she totally told him your job is not real and you’re just trying to chase a guy or something,” Sam says.

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“Sam, don’t call her that,” I scold, even though I love his nickname for her.

“Whatever. She’s a total you-know-what,” he states.

“Yeah,” I sigh, “you’re not wrong, but she’s been weird lately.” I decide not to tell them too much. They are too young to understand. “Anyhow, I think she’s gone for another day or two.” I frown as I try to remember when she is coming back. I’ve been so busy, I haven’t been thinking about it. Or maybe, I just don’t want to. I feel the clock ticking on me telling my dad.

“I hope her flight gets delayed or they ruin her luggage or something,” Lucas says.

“Guys, thanks for calling with the intel, but I’m swamped with work. Can we catch up next weekend?” I ask.

“No can do. I have a party and Sam here is going to some sort of geek convention,” Lucas says.

“It’s a robotics competition,” Sam growls.

“Yeah, a geek convention, like I said,” Lucas teases.

Sam punches his arm.

“Behave, you two. I’ll talk to you soon,” I say.

They wave bye and I hang up, shaking my head at their ridiculousness. I decide I’ll

call my father this evening. I'm out of time. I'm dreading his angry outburst but at least it won't be in person and Eric will be here with me when it's over.

Thor meows as Joy walks back in from getting lunch. She sets a sandwich on my desk.

"Elisha made Ari's favorite today. Turkey Reuben on focaccia. It's so good," she says.

"Sounds yummy," I say as I look out the window. It's a beautiful day. One of those spring days that threatens to be warm enough for shorts, but doesn't quite reach that temperature.

"I'm going to see if we have any good strawberries to go with this," I say as I get up and pat Thor on the head. I walk over to the farmstand. Looking around, I spot some strawberries just as a young man comes in and says hello to Kingsley.

"Hey, Kevin," Kingsley says. I realize it's one of the bartenders from Max's Restaurant in town.

"Hey," I say to him.

"Oh, Ariana, right?" he asks as he picks up some basil.

"Yep," I reply.

"What brings you out here?" I ask.

"Oh, we're running low on basil because some new guy put it in the freezer instead of the fridge. So I'm picking up some to get us through till tomorrow," he explains.

I grimace. “Sounds like that guy had a bad day.”

He shrugs. “I guess so. It’s tough being the new guy. I should know.”

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“About nine months now,” he replies as he sets his produce on the counter.

“You like it here?” I ask.

He nods. “I’m from a small town, so it feels very homey here. My town wasn’t by the ocean though, so that part has been nice,” he says.

“It is nice, isn’t it? It’s like everyone here really knows each other,” I state.

“Small towns are like that. They become like a family instead of just neighbors. I like the community vibe of it,” he says.

“Kevin?” I ask. “Would you be interested in making some mocktails for our re-opening event? If Max wouldn’t mind, that is. I mentioned it to him, but he’s been out of town, so we never cemented anything.”

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“Sure. I’ll talk to him, but I’m sure it’s fine. He just got back yesterday,” he says with a smile.

“Awesome. Let me know. Well, I’m off to eat lunch. Nice talking to you,” I say to him.

“Same to you, Ariana,” he says as he checks out and starts talking about some local Ultimate Frisbee league with Kingsley.

Eric pulls me into the animal barn as I walk back to the office. He pushes me up against a wall and kisses me. The strawberries nearly go flying.

“Sorry,” he says with a grin as he pulls back, “couldn’t help myself.”

I giggle. “Behave,” I whisper.

He shrugs. “What’s the fun in that, little catastrophe?”

I roll my eyes. “Lunch is here.”

“I’ll be in soon. I need to get the tractor loaded up with some hay to take out to Earl after I eat,” he says.

“OK,” I reply with a nod and a quick peck on his cheek before I turn and head to the office, grinning like a fool. How is my life this great? I have an amazing guy, a great job, and I live in the perfect place. Maybe I can get Eric to go to the beach with me this weekend. We could take Barkley.

If I can just survive telling Dad, then life might be truly perfect. I look over at the tractor, Eric is putting hay on it. He has so much to do. I decide then and there that I'm going to do it for him after I eat. He deserves a quick break and Earl taught me how to drive it last week. It isn't really any harder than the truck.

I eat as quickly as I can. This is followed by giving Thor little belly boops. How can a kitten be this adorable?

"You spoil him," Joy states as she looks over her computer monitor at me, her well-drawn right eyebrow raised.

I shrug as I look back down at Thor. His eyes are open now and he stares up at me.

"Just look at him. He's so freaking cute. I can barely stand it. Aren't you, buddy?" I say in a baby-talk voice as I kiss his big belly again. I turn to Joy. "I'm going out to help Eric. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Alright," she says, barely looking up as she types.

I head out to the guesthouse and change into some sweatpants and these big boots I bought at Heather's thrift shop. I needed something practical, and this was all I could find. I make my way over to the tractor that's all loaded with hay. I spot the place out in the field where it needs to go, and I climb up and find the key in the ignition. I roll my eyes. It's so typical. I never would've dreamt of keeping a key in the ignition at home, but here, I know no one would touch this thing. I start it up and am pleased when I manage to get it started.

"You can do this," I give myself a pep talk. With a nod to my nerves, I remember what I was taught and managed to start driving the beast of machinery. I smile proudly. See, I can do this. I make it to the west field and start down the dirt path in between planted fields. It needs to go along the edge down by the drainage ditch.

I get closer to the drainage ditch and start to turn. A movement to my left startles me. Eric is racing toward me, waving his arms. I wave back smiling as I finish the turn, but then I feel the left side of the tractor start to sink.

“Oh no,” I mutter as I attempt to get it moved out of what I assume is a soft spot along the ditch, but I can’t. It sinks more and more. The right side of the tractor begins to elevate. And then I feel it leave the ground. Everything happens so fast. One minute I’m inside the tractor and the next the tractor is on top of me and I’m in the ditch.

“Ariana! Ariana!” Eric’s panicked voice comes closer, and I hear him running. He slides down along the side of the top of the tractor and peers beneath it.

“I’m OK. I’m...ouch!” I yell as I try to free myself. I start to panic as I realize my leg is caught at a strange angle under the tractor.

“Earl! Get Buck! Call nine-one-one,” Eric yells and then looks back down at me. “We’re going to get you out. Can you feel your leg?”

“I—I d-don’t know,” I stammer as I feel my body begin to shiver.

“Fuck, hold on, baby,” he says, his voice laced with concern as he whips off his flannel button-down shirt, revealing a tight-fitted gray shirt underneath. He ducks under the edge of the tractor roof and covers me. “You’re in shock, Ariana. We have to keep you warm.”

“A-am I—I g-going t-to d-die?” I ask, my voice trembling. I suddenly feel so cold.

“No. You are not going to die. I won’t let you. We’re going to get you out from under there and then get you checked out and you’ll be back home in no time,” he says calmly. I reach up behind me and he grabs my hand. “Do you hear me? You are not

going to die.”

“I’m s-scared,” I admit. And I mean it in all the possible ways. I’m scared I’m falling for him. I’m scared I’m going to die. I’m scared my dad won’t love me anymore if he finds out what I’ve done. I’m scared I’ll mess up and ruin everything. I’m scared that I might have already messed up everything.

His other hand comes down to caress my cheek. I feel him wipe a tear. I didn’t even know I was crying. “Don’t be scared, baby. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“P-promise?” I ask, my bottom lip wobbling.

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“Cross my heart and hope to...never mind. Yes, I promise,” he says gruffly.

“It’s ‘cross my heart and hope to die,’” I state, this time managing to say it without trembling.

“Yes, it is. See, you’re already feeling better if you can remember that,” he says.

“Oh God! You think I might die, don’t you?” I ask suddenly scared shitless. Is this it? I go out on a farm under a tractor. Katia will never let me live this down, even in death.

“Stop it. You aren’t dying,” he reiterates.

I hear lots of noise. Eric’s head pops out of view and then leans back down. “The ambulance and fire truck are here. We’re going to get you out. I’ll be right back,” he says, and before I can beg him not to leave, he’s standing, but I can still see his feet.

“Yeah. Under here. Her leg is pinned,” he says to someone.

A young man’s face appears. “Hey, Ariana?”

I nod.

“I’m Carson. I’m a local EMT. I’m going to assess you real quick and then we’ll get you out from under this tractor, OK?” he says with a smile as if it’s no big deal I’m pinned under here.

“OK,” I whisper.

I suddenly have a blood pressure cuff on my arm and he’s holding a finger to my pulse on my wrist. Then he leans up and yells, “Gonna need the bird. Yep. Call them.”

His face is back down in my vantage point. “Hey. So, I just like to air on the side of caution. We’re going to send you on a little helicopter ride to City General once we get you out of here, OK? Just to be cautious. And that way if you need surgery, you’ll have the best surgeons waiting and ready. Hopefully, you won’t, and you’ll be back here later today, but let’s just make sure. Alright?”

“A helicopter?” I say, my nerves starting to fray. I feel sheer horror take over. I am dying. I’m such an idiot. Why did I think I could do this?

I hear Eric and Carson talking but only hear a few words. “Trauma center.” “Amputation.” “Blood loss.” “Blood type.”

And then everything begins to fade into a fuzzy blackness. The last thing I hear is Eric’s voice. “Ariana! Stay with me, baby! Don’t leave me!”

CHAPTERTWENTY-TWO

Eric

I’m pacing back and forth. I feel like I’ve been here for days. I’m surprised I haven’t worn a permanent hole in the floor. I hear a commotion and Joy, Earl, and Buck come running into the emergency room waiting area.

“Oh, God! How is she?” Joy says as she throws her arms around me. I stop moving and slowly return her hug, realizing she needs comforting just like I do. Her arms

tighten around me, making me even more aware that the woman I want in my arms isn't there.

"She's in surgery. They had to set her femur with some screws and a plate. It nicked a vein when it broke. She lost a lot of blood, but they think she'll be alright," I say quietly, repeating what the doctor just told me five minutes ago.

"Thank God!" Joy cries out as Earl peels her off me and she clings to him.

"She's a stubborn one. She'll be just fine," Buck assures me as he claps me on the back, but I can see the worried look on his face. He's worried about her.

I swallow and nod as I sit and put my head in my hands. Being here, in the hospital, the helicopter ride, all of it is too much. It's like Tori all over again. In the moment, I didn't process anything. I was too fixated on getting Ariana out from under the tractor. And then I was focused on making sure we got here as soon as possible. I remember with Tori a doctor had mentioned this concept of the Golden Hour, that if emergency patients can get to them within an hour of their injury, then they tend to do better or get better results. Tori had not been able to get there that quickly. Now that the initial shock has worn off, all I can do is remember the worst day of my life. The feelings of hopelessness. The pain of knowing that was the last time I would be able to talk to the love of my life. The universe can't possibly be this cruel. It can't give me a second chance at love with Ariana and then just rip it away, can it?

I feel the seat next to me sink as someone sits. It's Kingsley. He must have just arrived.

"She's going to be fine," he states as he looks at me. "It's not like Tori." He looks so sad. This has to be hard for him. He wasn't there when Tori fell. It was just Tori and I hiking. And hell, he was just a kid, but I remember his face when I got back home. I remember how sad he was, how devastated he was.

She had said so many things in those last few minutes I saw her alive. She made me make so many promises. Watching over him was just one of those promises.

I breathe in deeply and the antiseptic hospital smell fills my nostrils. I don't know if I can be here. I couldn't protect her today. I couldn't stop the tractor. I saw it tipping and then...it was horrible to watch.

My thoughts are interrupted by a bellowing voice coming from the reception desk.

"I want to see my daughter now!" the man yells, and before he turns, I know two things for sure, that is Ariana's father, and he is James Titan.

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What. The. Fuck?

It can't be. She's Ariana Harlow. I mean, I know James Titan has a daughter. I've heard that somewhere, maybe from my friend Adam Wellington? But Ariana? No. There must be some other woman here.

"Sir. You'll have to wait with everyone else," the woman says, completely unphased. She motions to us.

"Do you know who I am?" James hisses, his face growing redder by the second.

The woman gives him a pointed look as if to say, "I don't care if you are the ruler of the free world. Go sit down."

"I'm on this hospital's board. You will go find my daughter now if you like having a job," he roars.

The woman gives him a deadpan look and turns, yelling, "Pauline, I have a..." She pauses and turns back to him, raising a single, well-sculpted eyebrow. And from the smirk on her face, I can tell she's enjoying this moment.

"James Titan," he says, his jaw clenching so much that I'm almost surprised he hasn't crushed all of his teeth.

"James Titan here!" she yells back at a woman I can't see because a door is blocking my view.

An older woman walks out and looks at James. “Sir, I need you to take a seat. I will personally go check on your daughter, but having you”—she looks behind him at what appear to be his bodyguards—“and your entourage back there are not going to help things. Our staff need to be undisturbed, so they can concentrate on providing her the very best care.”

She disappears before he can answer.

And then he’s walking toward me. His company has offered to buy my property, but I’ve never met the man nor spoken to him. I’ve been dealing with a real estate attorney on his staff who sends me endless letters and emails. However, the second he sees me, it’s very clear that he knows who I am.

I stand and he walks up to me. I’m not normally thankful for my height, but today I am. James Titan is not a small man, but I still tower over him by at least two inches.

He’s still a good-looking man for his age. And his suit tells me he likes to look powerful.

“What happened?” he asks without even introducing himself.

I sense Buck and Earl stand next to me. They are as old if not older than James, but I know both of them would kick his rich ass if he so much as touched a hair on my head. Hell, even Joy is standing alongside Kingsley. We must look a sight. All of us are covered in mud and dirt. I can only imagine what the other patrons of the emergency room think at this moment. We probably look like some sort of country folk standoff against the mob.

I take a deep breath, remembering that my family has billions also. That a billion dollars sits in my own trust fund. James Titan has nothing on me.

I hold out my hand to him. He stares at it and then back at me, making no attempt to shake it. “Are you going to tell me, or do I need to speak with the police?” he asks, his jaw flexing again. Jesus, this man is surly as fuck. I get he’s worried, but he could at least have manners.

“I’m Eric Windsor, sir. I take it Ariana is your daughter?” I ask the obvious question. As a million questions dance through my head, like, why did she lie to me about who she was?

“Yes. I hear she’s been slumming it at your little farm that I plan to purchase,” he says as he gives me a pointed look.

Now it’s my jaw that clenches. I decide to ignore his comment, if for nothing else, for Ariana’s sake. “Ariana is my social media marketing manager,” I state. “She decided to take our tractor out and misjudged a ditch. She flipped it and pinned her leg beneath it. The doctor just came out a bit ago and said she needed surgery. She has a broken femur and they have to repair an artery. She’s in surgery and they are supposed to send someone to get us soon so we can wait for her outside the surgical ward.”

His face starts to turn red again. “Why the hell was Ariana driving farm equipment? She can barely drive a car,” he says, his voice rising with each word.

“Sir, Ariana can drive a car, a manual car, and a tractor. She’s very competent. If she hadn’t been in a part of the farm where she’s never driven before, I’m confident she wouldn’t have flipped the tractor. It was an accident. It could have happened to any of us. It’s muddy out there.” I motion to my clothes. “We’ve had some rain recently.”

“Well, you can leave. She won’t be returning to your little country property where you play farmer. She has a position at my company,” he states. “Had I known what she was up to sooner, we would have come to collect her weeks ago.” I’m about to

ask who “we” is, but then a woman who looks like she’s ready to attend a luncheon at a country club comes bustling into the ER as if she owns the place. Clearly, she’s with James Titan.

“Oh, good, you beat me here. How is she?” the woman asks. Her smile is tight and it’s almost as if it pains her to be here.

“Kimberly, she’s in surgery,” he says and for the first time I sense the smallest amount of concern in his voice.

“Oh dear. I do hope she’s alright. I just wish I had learned of this earlier so we could have avoided such a terrible accident,” she says as she glances at me with disgust. I already hate her, and she hasn’t even acknowledged me yet.

But before that can happen, a woman in scrubs walks out. “Mr. Titan?” she asks.

“Yes,” he replies as she steps toward her.

“I’m here to escort you to the surgery ward. Ariana’s surgery should be wrapping up soon. The doctor can debrief you shortly,” she says.

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We all step forward, but then she turns to us. “I’m sorry, are you family too?”

“No,” I reply. “I’m her boss. This is a work-related incident.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but only family can be back in the surgery ward. I can have Miss Titan contact you once she’s able,” she says as she turns and walks briskly through a set of double doors with Titan and Kimberly in tow.

James turns at the door and looks at me. “I didn’t care about your little farm one way or another. It was merely going to be an investment property. But now, I’ll make sure it’s mine by the end of the month,” he sneers and then walks through the door. I watch him through the small glass window as he hurries down a corridor. Part of me wants to run after him and beat the crap out of him, but I’m suddenly wondering if I should leave. Ariana doesn’t need me. I’m a blubbering mess. I’m having flashbacks and my farm is clearly about to be taken over by her father if he has his way. She needs someone who can be there for her, and who isn’t afraid to commit to her. I’m not sure that’s me. I’m not like James Titan. I’d do anything to protect her, but James...well, he’s the type of man that could literally move a mountain to protect her. I can’t imagine she wants anything less than that in a man. The sudden realization I can’t be the man she needs washes over me. She’s better off without me.

“Let’s go,” I say to my friends.

“What?” Joy asks.

“No. We can wait here,” Buck states.

Earl claps me on the back. “I’m sure she’ll call once she wakes up from surgery.”

Kingsley steps in front of me. “Don’t let that asshat cloud your judgment. He’s a jerk.”

“No, it’s better this way. I’m sure she’ll reach out when she can. Her father has things under control,” I state as I start toward the door.

“Why the heck did she say her name was Ariana Harlow?” Joy ponders.

“I don’t know, Joy. I don’t know,” I manage as we walk to her minivan and all pile inside. It pains me to leave her like this. I don’t want to leave her at all. My protective instincts tell me to run up the stairs and find her, to make them let me see her, but that nagging voice in the back of my head keeps telling me not to, to let this be the end of things. At least then I don’t have to break her heart later, when I get scared and can’t commit. Maybe this is for the best.

CHAPTERTWENTY-THREE

Ariana

It’s been two weeks since I came home from the hospital. I still haven’t spoken to Eric. When Dad said Eric didn’t want to stay, I was in shock. How could that be? But he assured me that Eric had left. Kimberly said she had checked and everyone from my work had decided not to stay. I don’t trust Kimberly, but I’m not sure why Dad would lie. I was in so much pain that first week. And they didn’t release me from the hospital for a few days. I don’t remember much from week one or two. Dad hired nurses for around-the-clock care. I start physical therapy in another two weeks.

I just want Eric. I’ve cried myself to sleep every night since I came home. I don’t want to be here. I just want to be back on the farm. And I hate that with my leg like

this, I have zero independence. Just when I was starting to feel like I could do anything, I suddenly find myself unable to do a single task alone.

I stare at my ceiling as my phone buzzes. Katia has been calling nonstop, but I don't want to hear her lecture me about falling for Eric or being stupid with farm equipment. I know I need to go get my things and wrap up my work. I wonder how the grand re-opening went. I didn't even have the heart to check our social media page. It's probably not even up to date since no one else there knows the passwords except Eric and he certainly never posts on there.

I look at my nightstand and am greeted by the letter I received last week in the mail. It's for my medical leave from the farm. Apparently, I have very good health insurance and benefits. Even Dad was a bit surprised by this. Although he covered my entire bill saying he wasn't going to let some nobody's insurance pay for it. I swear, only my dad would pay hundreds of thousands of dollars out of pocket completely out of spite.

The letter said I could take off as long as needed and to contact Joy when I was ready to return to work. It was all very formal, and I cried when I read it. Eric didn't even sign it, it was his e-signature, which makes it even worse. I've texted him twice and received no reply. I've started to text him again a hundred different times, but I can't bring myself to hit send. I'm too hurt and too proud. I thought he loved me. Why won't he reply? Did I imagine the entire thing? Was I so naïve that I didn't even see we weren't a real couple?

My leg itches and I want to rip this cast off. I get it changed to a soft cast in a few days. I can hardly wait. At least then I won't have the weight of this giant brick on me. It's hot, itchy, and gross.

I'm drifting off to sleep for the third time today when my door flies open.

“Wake up, beotch!” Katia yells as she steps into my room. My head turns and Katia’s eyes widen as she surveys the damage that is my leg.

“Fuck! That looks bad,” she mutters as she walks to the bed.

I throw my arm over my eyes. “Tell me something I don’t already know,” I mumble.

“That’s it. No more pity party. We are getting you out of here. It’s jailbreak time,” she declares.

I glare at her. “Uh, first of all, I can barely move, this cast weighs a ton, and second, where the hell are we going to go? My dad basically has me on lockdown,” I protest.

“When do you get this cement block off?” she asks as she taps it with one of her long fake nails.

“Hopefully, in three more days,” I grumble.

“Hmmm...well, we’ll just have to make the most of it until then,” she says as she sits down on the edge of my bed. Her face goes from happy to a little sad. “How are you, like, for real?”

My eyes well with tears. “Not good,” I admit.

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“Oh, Ari-bear-y. I’m so sorry,” she whispers as she pulls me up into a hug. I cry for a good five minutes before she pulls my head away from her chest. “Tell me everything. I’m ordering us sushi. You shouldn’t drink, but I’m getting sake.”

She pulls out her phone and taps the screen a few times. “It’ll be here in thirty-five minutes. Now, spill it.”

I press the remote so the head of my bed rises. I look at Katia and then back at my hands. “He doesn’t love me,” I start, feeling the tears well again. And then I spend the next three hours telling her everything, every little detail that I can recall, including my dad yelling at me for, like, two days about lying to him. But clearly, he’s not too mad at Katia because she’s here and not blocked from the penthouse. She listens, not interjecting except for a few questions, which is very un-Katia-like. And when I finish, I lean back, popping the last bite of salmon sushi in my mouth.

“Wow. Just...wow,” she says. “First of all, Kimberly needs to go. She totally told your dad and the fact that she knew about the farm is super sketchy. We need to figure out a plan of action there. Two, there’s no way Eric just stopped loving you. He was totally falling for you one second, saving your life and shit, and then he ghosts you? That doesn’t add up.” She pauses as I consider what she’s said.

“So what do we do?” I ask.

She smirks. “We’re going to get you out of this”—she knocks lightly on my cast—“and then, we’re going to fix this mess. I’ll admit, I like you better here in the city where we can hang out, but I like you even better when you’re happy, and you were so happy there, Ari. It was like Ari two point oh, and we need to find her again.

But first thing is first, we are most definitely getting you a shower because you reek. I don't know what shit helper your dad hired, but they are not earning their keep."

I roll my eyes. "I can't get this leg wet. That's what reeks," I explain.

"Ewww. Seriously?" she asks as she pulls her hand away from my leg as if it's diseased.

"Well, nursing definitely isn't in your future," I mutter with a glare.

She grimaces. "Nope. Definitely not for me." She looks at my hair. "At least let me wash that mop on your head."

"Fine," I mutter.

"Great. We can start scheming about how to fix everything else," she says excitedly. She claps her hands. "This is just like the good old days."

It's my turn to grimace because our college plans never seemed to go right.

* * *

Katia's been camping out here for three days. We've binged countless episodes of our favorite shows. We've video-chatted with our college friends. She's told me all about this guy she met while sailing around the Mediterranean. Kimberly has been surprisingly absent until today.

I just got back from getting my cast off and I'm dying to take a proper bath. I still have to use the wheelchair, but at least my leg isn't the weight of a concrete pillar.

"Your father wants to see you," Kimberly says as she stands in my doorway.

Katia looks her up and down. “How’s it feel?” she asks.

Kimberly frowns, clearly not understanding. Oh shit. Katia is about to call her ass out.

I hold up a hand, stopping Katia. Katia freezes and looks at me because this has never happened before, but I’m a changed woman. I can stand up for myself.

“Why’d you tell my father where I was?” I ask her, crossing my arms and giving her my best pointed look.

“Because he was worried sick and he has a right to know where you’re at,” she says deadpan. Oh, she’s good.

“Then why the veiled threat before you left for your trip?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I was merely giving you a little time to wrap up your charity farmer project. I was being nice.”

I roll my eyes. Kimberly doesn’t have a nice bone in her body.

“Right,” I state sarcastically.

“Believe what you want, Ariana,” she huffs and walks away, leaving Katia fuming.

“That bitch is up to something!” Katia stews.

“I know. Like I told you, she called with that threat. I just don’t get it,” I state.

“Let’s get you soaking in the tub. Where’s that nurse?” Like clockwork, a woman named Diedre walks in and looks at me.

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“Ready for that bath?” she asks.

I nod.

“Great. I’m gonna go snoop,” Katia says.

“Katia, be careful. You’re not exactly Nancy Drew, more like Scooby Doo,” I state.

“Whatever. She’s up to something. I’m going to figure out what. Stay here and take a bath,” she adds as she waltzes out of the room, leaving Diedre to help me to my bathroom.

A few minutes later, I’m soaking in a tub and it feels like the most amazing thing ever. Diedre has given me some privacy. I’m leaning back on my bath pillow with my hair piled high on my head. I glance down and see my bright red scar. With the stitches gone, it looks bad. What would Eric think of me now? I’m...hideous.

It’s like the accident stole my physical beauty and Kimberly’s antics stole my internal beauty. I feel dead inside.

“Holy fucking shit,” Katia’s voice comes from the doorway, drawing my attention away from the scarred flesh that doesn’t resemble the leg I used to have.

“What?” I ask.

She stares at my scar. “That shit is intense. Oh well, at least it’s above your skirt line, so unless you’re in a bikini, no one will see it...well...almost no one. Anyhoo, look

what I found?" she squeals as she flips her phone around.

I frown, trying to read the print.

"What the hell is that?" I ask.

"Your father is rewriting his will," she says.

"I'm sorry, what?" I question as I try to sit up in the tub.

"So, I was just...snooping around...and I hear your dad talking to some guy about rewriting his will and the guy asks if he's going to marry Kimberly and your dad is all like, probably, and he's like, so you're redoing the will, and your dad is like, yeah. Then the guy asks if he's going to need a prenup and your father is like, I don't know."

I frown. "Wait, my father isn't sure he wants a prenup? Is he crazy? That's totally not like him."

"I know, right? So then I maybe waited until your dad was showing the guy out and I snuck into his office," she says with a wink.

My eyes widen. "Katia, Dad would kill you if he found you in there."

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever. He's such a fucking amateur. He had this on his screen. So I poked around. Kimberly is a C-U-N-T. She's been emailing him about you and all this bad stuff you do, which is total fucking lies. She's always telling him how much she loves him and what can she do to help him. It's like she's figured out that your dad is a total narcissist and all she has to do is pump up his ego and he's like putty in her hands. She's trying to get you out of the will so she's his sole heir. And there's something hella suspicious about the farm where you worked. It's like she's

the one suggesting he buy it as some kind of gift to her.”

My mind wanders back to when she suggested I find a job and then mentioned something about the farm.

“I’m an idiot,” I state dryly as I fill Katia in on the conversation that started this whole debacle.

She listens while sitting on the edge of my tub, and when I finish, she sighs. “This woman is a fucking bitch! What a terrible human!”

I nod, suddenly feeling angry, really angry. This is all Kimberly’s fault. Well, except Eric, I’m glad I met him, even if everything we had is over. I wouldn’t change that, at all.

“We have to get her to show her true colors and figure out what the hell is going on with the farm,” I state.

“How?” Katia asks.

“That’s what we’re going to figure out tonight. New plan, take Kimberly down,” I declare.

“What about...you know...everything else?” she asks.

I purse my lips as I consider her question. “Maybe we can kill two birds with one stone,” I begin with a smirk.

Katia grins like the cat who swallowed the canary. “Oh, do tell,” she whispers conspiratorially.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Eric

Ariana's social media is filled with photos of the hospital. I know I shouldn't be stalking her online. I know I should just call her or go see her. But I can't. She texted me two weeks ago. I pull up her text because I've read it a million times.

Ariana: I'm out of the hospital. (champagne popping emoji) I miss you. Why did you leave without saying goodbye?

Then she texted me a week ago.

Ariana: There's something between us, Eric. Or at least I thought there was. I trusted you and I don't trust anyone. And now, you're just gone. I keep wondering if everything actually happened or if it was just a dream. I wish you'd come to see me. I wish we could have a proper goodbye if this is goodbye. Don't you want to say that to my face?

And that's it. No more texts. The office seems less vibrant with her gone. Thor is on the struggle bus. I've barely been able to get him to eat. Hell, I've barely eaten. Yesterday paperwork arrived for a lawsuit against me and the farm by James Titan for the injuries caused to his daughter. That was followed by paperwork today with a final offer to buy the farm. His assistant called to say he would drop the suit if I sold him the farm.

And now, I'm sitting staring at Ariana's things in my closet. She might be gone, but her belongings are here like ghosts, a constant reminder that she was once here.

I haven't washed my sheets in three weeks because I can still smell her perfume on them. I know I should pack up her things and have them shipped home to her, but I can't bring myself to do that yet. Instead, I distract myself by flipping through our social media accounts. I've only posted about the re-opening getting postponed. I should post more, but I don't know what to say.

I scroll through our followers and click on a few of them, curious who is following us now. The third one is a woman named Katia Polenski. I'm about to scroll away when a photo catches my eye. It's Ariana.

I click on it. It's Katia, or I assume it is based on her profile picture, and Ariana. They are sitting in bikinis on a yacht, smiling and laughing. Is this what she's used to? How was she happy here? Is this the life she wants? Maybe it was for the best. This Ariana isn't at all like the woman I know. The woman who feeds a pig and plays with a mini Highland cow or snuggles with a kitten while eating cereal out of a box.

How can she be so different than what she was here? Was it an act?

I grow angry and turn off the computer. I'm done. I need to move on and get back to focusing on the farm. I can fight this lawsuit in court. I have good lawyers and Ariana took the tractor out on her own accord. I groan as I run a hand over my face. I don't want to deal with a frivolous lawsuit. Maybe I should sell.

I turn to Joy. "I'm going to check on Kingsley," I mutter.

"OK, dear. I'll be here," she replies, eyeing me wearily. She's been mother-henning me for days. They all have.

I walk outside. Snuggles walks up to the fence and I pet his side.

"Hey, buddy," I say as he leans his head against me. "I'm fine," I assure him, but then

I feel his nose sniffing. I pull back to find Snuggles has a protein bar in the wrapper that he pulled from my pocket.

“No way, give that back,” I scold as I pry it from his mouth. He huffs at me, and I groan as I manage to free the protein bar. “So much for animal sympathy.”

My phone rings and I pull it out of my pocket. Dad. I haven’t spoken to my parents in a few weeks. Things have been busy.

“You still alive up there?” Dad asks.

“Yeah. You guys OK?” I ask, wondering what the call is about.

“We’re fine. Mom is out in the pool. She mentioned that a friend of a friend said James Titan put an offer on the farm. So, I figured I should call,” he explains.

Fabulous. Just what I need.

“Yeah. I did receive an offer,” I confirm as Snuggles continues to nuzzle my shoulder. I haven’t had the heart to talk to Dad about it yet. I’ve been putting it off for days.

“Son, I think you should reject it. Fight it. You love that farm more than any of us. You have since we first moved there. It’s your home. It’s where you belong. I know you want to make it a successful business and not use your money, but sometimes we need capital to make our businesses grow,” he offers. He’s not wrong and that stings because deep down, I don’t want to bail myself out. Making this farm profitable has become some sort of fixation for me. Like if I can’t do it, then I’m a failure. And if I fail, I let Tori down and all my staff and this town. And...Ariana.

I sit down on a bale of hay. “I wanted to do it, Dad. I wanted to prove I could do it,” I

try to explain.

“You did do it. You aren’t a failure, Eric. Farming is tough. There will be ups and downs. You’ve had months where you are in the black, right?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer. It’s true that about half the months out of the year, we do make a small profit. Nothing to write home about, but it’s not a deficit.

“See, it’s a start. I wasn’t profitable there. Hell, that’s part of the reason why I retired and moved down here. But I didn’t love it like you do. I thought I did. I thought if I left the tech world behind and got my hands dirty, that I’d figure out the secret of life,” he says with a bitter laugh.

“And did you?” I ask.

He’s quiet for a long beat. “I guess I did. I learned about community in Storyview Falls. I made real friends. What do the kids call it today? A found family? Anyhow, I learned life was more about the people I have in it and the time I spend with them, rather than the things or the businesses. I enjoyed being with you kids. I enjoyed having time to see your ball games and your concerts and reading you bedtime stories. I enjoyed our nights at the firepit. I enjoyed building that guesthouse with you and Earl and Buck. But I realized I wasn’t cut out for farming. When you were away at college and traveling with Tori, it just wasn’t the same. I loved our employees, but I wanted more time with my family. I wanted to relax. And that won out because for me, it was never about the farm or the town, it was about finding myself. And I did. And now, I have a great life with your mom and I love when you all visit us and we spend time on the boat and the grandkids play in the pool. That’s what I love,” he says.

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We're both silent then, deep in our own thoughts. I begin telling Dad about Ariana and everything that happened. When I finish, Dad is silent for a beat before responding.

"This woman who got hurt. She sounds special," Dad adds.

I clench my jaw. I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about that with anyone. My need for fatherly advice finally takes over.

"Ariana is James Titan's kid," I grumble.

He laughs.

"Dad, it's not funny," I mutter as I kick a rock with my foot.

"It's a little funny," he replies with a long chuckle.

"Why do you think he wants the property?" Dad adds.

I run a hand over my face. "I don't know. He collects real estate for fun. I think he has a condo near here. Maybe it's convenient?" I suggest.

"No. I think there's something more there," Dad muses.

"Like what?"

"I don't know, kid. But if I were you, I'd look more into it. At least do that before

you make a decision and uproot your entire life. And, Eric?”

“Yeah?”

“I know Tori’s death changed you. I know you miss her every day. But maybe the universe sent Ariana to you for a reason. Maybe it thinks you’re ready to love again. And if it’s not Ariana, then maybe it’ll be someone else someday. Just don’t write off love, OK? You deserve it. You deserve to be loved. And I know it’s scary. But the rewards are so much greater than you can imagine. Promise me that you will at least consider it?” Dad asks.

I stew over his words for a long minute. “OK,” I reply.

“Good. Now, go fix this mess. I know you can,” he says.

I laugh. “Right.”

“You can, Eric. And you will. You’ll see,” Dad says. “Gotta go. Mom’s cooking up some seafood stew and it smells amazing.”

I shake my head as I envision Mom cooking. She loves cooking. It’s probably where I get it from.

“OK. Tell Mom I said hi,” I reply.

“I will. Love you, kid,” Dad says.

“Love you guys too,” I reply as I disconnect and stare at the barn.

I decide to go back inside. I do need to talk to Ariana, but first, I want to figure out why her father wants my property. I have my work cut out for me.

I sit down at my desk and Joy looks over at me. “Joy, how are you at searching land records?” I ask.

“Land records?” she questions.

“Yeah, Dad said something, and now...I don’t know, it could be nothing, but I want us to properly research the farm before I even consider Titan’s offer. Something just doesn’t add up,” I state.

“And what about Ariana?” she asks, giving me a pointed look with one raised eyebrow.

“I need to talk to her. I...just need a little time to collect my thoughts,” I explain.

“Eric?” Joy says.

“Yeah?”

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“Don’t wait too long. There’s no expiration date on true love, but life does move on whether we want it to or not,” she says.

“Joy...” I start but trail off.

She rolls her eyes. “You think we were all born yesterday? We know you two are hooking up. I’m no idiot. And in my humble opinion, that girl was the best thing that ever happened to you. Even Tori would agree if she was still here. So don’t go getting all caught up in your irrational thoughts. You need to go kiss that girl,” Joy states with a nod.

Laughing, I turn back to my computer. “I’ll take it under advisement.”

I pull back up the social media app and stare at the photo of Ariana from last week. She looks sad. And suddenly, that protective instinct I’ve felt for her kicks into overdrive. Did I make her sad? Fuck. Maybe everyone is right. I need to get over this stupid fear. I can’t lose her. I just hope I’m not too late. It was bad enough losing Tori, but I didn’t have a choice with that. I do with Ariana and I’m being a fucking fool. Joy is right. I need to go get my woman...and definitely also kiss her.

CHAPTERTWENTY-FIVE

Ariana

“Dad, I need to get my things,” I protest.

“No, Ariana. I’m done with this conversation,” my father says, waving a hand in the

air dismissively.

“OK, let me say it another way. Dad, I’m going to get my things. I know you have a condo down that way. So, Katia and I will stay there for the night so it’s not too much for me,” I state defiantly, my chin jutting out and my arms crossing.

My father sets down whatever it is he’s reading and stares at me over his glasses. I can tell he’s annoyed that I’ve pointed out that one of his many properties is right near Storyview Falls. “I already said no.” He looks at my leg. “You can’t even walk yet. You just started physical therapy yesterday.”

I glare at him. “And I’m allowed to use crutches a little bit and I get around fine in this chair. I’m an adult. I have a job. I signed a contract. I need to close up my work with them. I’m a professional and I will not have my reputation tarnished over some silly little job. Do you want that?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. I see his eyes narrow. Checkmate.

“Fine. You’ll take Sylvester with you,” he says, motioning for a guard by his door.

“Seriously?” I state.

“Seriously. And you’ll text me when you get there,” he replies deadpan. Anyone else might shrivel under his gaze, but I know my father, and deep down, the man wouldn’t hurt a fly, at least not a fly he loves. Now, I might be the only one that knows that, but it’s true. While most people think my dad is a ruthless businessman, I’ve seen the loving side of James Titan. It exists. There is a heart that beats in his chest. He just has it very walled off from the entire world.

“Whatever. I’ll be back,” I say with a sigh as I turn in my wheelchair and roll myself out of his office.

Sylvester follows me. “Shall I get the car ready, miss?”

I look over my shoulder at the man who is probably thirty years older than me. He’s foreign. I should probably know from where, but honestly, I try to ignore our security team as much as humanly possible. I hate that he’s coming, but what he doesn’t know is that he’s about to enter another planet. Or at least that’s what it will probably feel like to him.

“Yes, please,” I answer. “We’ll be ready in an hour.”

“Will do,” he replies as he leaves and heads toward the elevator.

I roll to my room and find Katia sitting on my bed reading something on her phone. She looks up and quickly sets her phone screen-side down.

“We leave in an hour,” I state as I eye her phone with curiosity. Why was she hiding the screen from me? She has literally shown me sexting photos. We have zero secrets. Whatever, I don’t have the energy to deal with another issue right now. She and I can address whatever that is about later.

She pumps her fist. “Hell yeah. Way to grow some massive lady balls.”

I roll my eyes. “Do you think my plan will work?”

She shrugs. “It’s worth a try.”

We’ve been scheming for forty-eight hours straight.

* * *

“Why are there so many cars here?” I ask as we pull up to the farm. I look at the field

filled with cars. We never have this many people at the farm. Even on a busy day the small parking lot seldom fills up to capacity.

Katia glances over at me and I see her chewing on her bottom lip.

“What did you do?” I ask, my eyes widening as Sylvester drives up to the barn.

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“Nothing,” she says, her voice sounding very suspicious.

I look around as Sylvester finds a single parking spot, a spot that feels oddly reserved.

“Crutches or a wheelchair?” he asks as he gets out and walks around to my side.

“Crutches, please,” I state as I slowly open my car door. He hands them to me and helps me out.

I swivel and stare up at the banner I’d ordered for the grand re-opening. It’s hanging above the open giant barn doors. There’s Elisha with a small tent serving coffee, Max’s restaurant is in a tent next to hers with mocktails, and there are two local artists with crafts and paintings next to them.

Joy walks up to me and I smile at her. “You haven’t had the re-opening yet?” I ask.

She shakes her head and pulls me into a hug as much as she can with my crutches in the way. “No, sweet girl, of course not. We were waiting for you,” she explains as she pulls back. And looks down at my leg. “How are you feeling?” Joy has emailed me a few times about my medical leave and she has asked about how I am doing. But something about hearing it straight from her feels different. It wasn’t just business for her. She cares, like she really cares.

I take a breath to keep my emotions at bay. “I’m good.” I tap my leg in its brace. “I started PT this week. The doctor says I’m making really good progress and should be walking without assistance in another month.”

“That’s wonderful!” she exclaims as Earl and Buck walk over.

“I knew no tractor could take you out, kid,” Earl says with a wink. “You’re stubborn as hell.”

I laugh and shrug. “It tried, but it didn’t stand a chance. Is it…OK?”

Earl lifts his hand and points over toward the animal barn. “Eric kicked it a lot but Buck and I got it going again. She’s good as new.”

“Good,” I reply.

Buck hugs me. “No more taking tractor rides without us, OK?”

“Yeah, I think my days of tractor operating are over,” I agree.

“Come see it. You did great, kid,” Earl says as they all usher me toward the farmstand barn. I’m greeted by so many people from town. Hugs, well-wishes, and funny news surrounds me.

Katia leans over as I take in the new farmstand. “You did this?” she asks. “It doesn’t look anything like the pics on the website we looked at when you applied.”

I smile at her. “Thank God,” I tease.

She laughs. “No shit. This place was horrible. But now, it’s kinda country-cute. I mean, I’d stop here if I felt like doing the small-town-shopping thing.”

Kingsley walks over and hugs me. “You like it?” he asks.

I nod. “It came out even better than I planned.”

I look at all the artwork, the new shelves, the new flow of the store, the fresh paint, and Mooman, walking toward me.

“Hey, buddy,” I say as I give his head a rub.

“I mean, he’s cute for, like, a cow,” Katia states as she stares down at him.

“This is Mooman. And he’s adorable. Aren’t you?” I ask Mooman who moos back at me on cue. Everyone around us laughs.

A tapping of a microphone draws my attention to the far corner. A hush falls over the crowd.

“I’d like to thank everyone for coming out today. Windsor Family Farms has been an important part of Storyview Falls for a little over twenty years and we look forward to the next twenty.” There’s a round of applause. “I guess I need to first let everyone know that Lamberta is the winning name.” He pauses to point to our lamb who is in a small pen in the corner. A few people laugh and clap. “I delayed this opening for a few weeks because we were missing the most important person on our team, Ariana...Titan. She was the one who dreamed this up and made it happen. She’s put our little farm on the map. None of this would be possible without her.” He walks toward me with his wireless microphone. I take a deep breath and immediately regret it. He’s close enough that I smell his cologne. I need to be mad at him, but I don’t want to be. I just want him to hold me and tell me everything will be alright.

“Would you like to say a few words?” he asks as he holds the microphone out toward me.

I realize then that I’m staring at him. I quickly look away, taking in the small crowd that’s gathered inside the barn.

“I...thank you all for coming. This is quite a surprise. I wasn't expecting to make it to our grand re-opening. This took a village to put together, and I want to thank everyone involved for their help. The Windsor Family Farm is a special place.” I glance at Eric. His eyes are fixed on mine. I blush. “And I'm happy to be part of it. So, thank you for coming today and I hope you'll continue to come here every Saturday this spring and summer to enjoy our local vendors and this new incredible farmstand.”

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There's silence for a moment and then everyone claps. Kingsley yells, "Ariana, you rock!" There's some laughing and slowly folks go about their shopping, leaving me standing in front of Eric. He turns off the microphone.

Katia looks between us. "I'm going to check this place out," she squeaks as she steps away.

I feel like I'm in the eye of the tornado. I only see Eric standing in front of me, everything else is a whirl of activity around us.

"Can we talk?" Eric asks.

"Sure," I reply. Eric looks me up and down.

"I can walk. I mean, not great, but let's go to the house," I suggest.

I watch him tighten his fists by his sides as if he's restraining himself. He nods and leads the way. We walk inside through the office. Barry is swimming in his bowl on my desk. It's as if I've never left. Everything is just as I had it when I went out that morning. A flurry of gray comes flying toward me.

"Meow! Meow! Meow!"

"Thor!" I yelp as he begins scaling my leg brace.

"Thor!" Eric growls, grabbing him. Thor's paws try to reach for me, but Eric has him headlocked.

“I can hold him,” I protest as I struggle to hold my crutches while reaching for him.

“When you’re seated,” he answers as he pulls Thor to his chest and starts down the hall to the house.

I sigh, following him into the family room. I sit down and he places Thor in my lap. Thor gives me his “I love you” eyes and curls into a ball, his motor turns up a notch as he settles back to sleep. I stroke his back and side. Then, I peer up at Eric. I hadn’t really taken in his appearance in the barn with all the excitement. He has bags under his eyes. He looks a little thinner. Has he been sleeping?

“You never called,” I whisper as I feel tears well above my lower eyelid. I blink trying to keep them at bay. I don’t want to seem weak. But I have to know why he ghosted me.

Eric takes a big breath and sits down next to me, turning slightly to face me. “Can I tell you a story?”

I frown. “I—I guess so,” I stammer in confusion.

He nods and looks down at his hands in his lap. “I was engaged once. A long time ago,” he begins and then peers up at me. My eyes widen.

“You were?” I ask.

“Yep,” he replies, letting the “p” pop. “Her name was Victoria, Tori, and we were high school sweethearts. After college, we went hiking and backpacking in the mountains. It rained really hard that night. And we camped, waiting it out. But the camp was getting waterlogged. We decided to try to move up the mountain a little, to a safer spot.” He pauses and looks away. “It was stupid. We should have waited three more hours until sunrise. But we were young and...we didn’t think anything bad

would happen if we just hiked up a little farther. We packed up and started climbing higher. We had on headlamps, but the storm was low, and we were in the clouds a bit. The path narrowed and I was sure we were at least ten feet from the edge. I was walking in front and..." He pauses as if the memory is still too painful to relive. I've not seen him like this. He's always stoic, strong, protective. But the man in front of me is hurting. I'm still mad at him, but I can't hold back. My hand darts out and grabs his, squeezing it. We both look at our hands for the longest moment. Then, slowly, he places his other big hand over mine. And just like that, my protector is back. His gaze meets mine. "It was slippery, and she fell forty feet."

My eyes widen.

"She was so strong. She didn't die right away. I made it down to her. Her legs were both broken and her wrist and...she'd hit her head. At first, I thought her injuries were just broken bones. But when I pulled up her shirt...she'd broken a rib and it punctured her lung. She was having trouble breathing. I managed to get a cell phone signal and I called for emergency help. We sat there talking until she lost consciousness. They got to us while she was still alive, but barely. She died on the operating table." He's quiet for a beat and I think that's it, but then he speaks again.

"I'm so sorry, Ariana. I never dated again and never wanted to be in love again. I thought I was broken, and I didn't want to hurt you." He laughs a bitter laugh. "Kingsley is Tori's little brother. She made me promise to take care of him. He keeps telling me to get back out there and he was pissed that I left you at the hospital."

"Why did you? You could have at least said goodbye," I prompt, my bottom lip trembling.

He frowns and suddenly I feel like there's a lot more to our story than just what happened between us.

CHAPTERTWENTY-SIX

Eric

“Your father and his girlfriend arrived,” I explain. “He didn’t want me near you, and I was already so in my head about how I was bad for you and that the accident was my fault and I should have protected you. So I left.”

“He’s...not a horrible person. He’s just protective,” she states.

“I know. He’s your father. Being protective is his job. But I should have called. I should have tried. Instead, I came back here, ready to give up and sell the farm,” I admit.

Her hand squeezes mine and her eyes widen. “Don’t do that,” she says.

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I grin because I'm not going to do that.

"I'm not," I reassure her.

She lets out a long breath. "Good." Then she frowns. "But you were having financial issues."

"Remember when I told you that my dad bought the farm and I decided to stay and run it when he retired?" I ask.

She nods.

"Well, my father might have designed Windpin processors," I state.

Her frown deepens. "Wait, like the ones in all the computers?"

"That'd be the one," I answer.

"Holy shitballs! Seriously? Wait...Oh my God! So you're like...really, really rich?" she asks.

I laugh and Thor stirs from her excitement. "Uh, yeah. I guess I am. I mean, technically, it's my father who is rich, but he did put aside a big chunk of change for me and my sister in a trust fund," I state.

She frowns again. "So, you were never in financial trouble?"

I shake my head. “The farm was. The business was. Could I have bailed it out? Yes. But I wanted it to succeed on its own merit. I wanted to be a successful businessman.”

“That’s why you hired me?” she asks.

“Yes. But I recently found a way to make things profitable, if I need it,” I start.

“How?” she asks, her eyes searching mine.

“I think I know why your father wants this property,” I begin. She holds up a hand to stop me from continuing.

“It’s not my dad. It’s Kimberly, his girlfriend. Katia found some paperwork in my dad’s office. She had Dad rewriting his will. She tried to make him believe I was an ungrateful brat and I shouldn’t get any of his money. And she’s trying to marry him without a prenup and she wants a bunch of properties including this one. I couldn’t figure out what was going on, but then?—”

“Oil,” I finish her sentence.

She nods. “Yes! Katia and I started trying to figure it out a few days ago and I came across some survey records, and you have oil under this property, like, possibly a lot.”

“I know. I was wondering the same thing. I didn’t know it. She had a private company do some survey work on an adjoining farm. Walt Golden’s farm. Fortunately, I figured it out and bought it from him, with rent back so he could stay there. He was struggling too.”

“Wait? You bought his farm?” she asks.

“I did. And I reinvested in this one. Now that I know there’s money in the bank, so to speak, if I need it, I have capital to borrow against.”

“So you’re not going to drill?” she asks.

I shake my head. “No. Not if I don’t need to. This farm is a part of our community and I intend to keep it that way. We’ve been profitable for two months now, Ariana. And that’s all thanks to what you’ve done.”

She smiles. “Really?”

I squeeze her hand again. “Really. I’m so proud of you. And I’m so sorry I fucked up. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to take care of you. I should have been. And I’m sorry about whatever Kimberly is trying to do to ruin things with you and your dad.”

She sets Thor on a pillow and crawls as best she can into my lap. I wrap my arms around her.

“Please forgive me, baby. I’m all yours. I’m not afraid to fall in love with you anymore. I’m only afraid that it’s too late,” I admit, my eyes searching hers.

“Eric Windsor, for someone so smart, you are a really big idiot. I’m here to win you back,” she says with a laugh.

“You never lost me, little catastrophe. You were always mine and I was always yours,” I say as I lean forward and press my lips to hers. They are salty and I realize she’s crying.

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I pull back, worried. “Did I hurt you? Is it your leg?” I ask as I search her body.

She laughs and wipes her eyes. “No, you big dummy. I’m just happy. So happy. I thought I lost you.”

I take her face in my hands and kiss her cheeks, her nose, her forehead. Then I bring my lips to hers. “You’ll never lose me. Because I’m not letting you go again,” I say against her skin. Our lips crash together again and I know I’m forgiven.

A clearing throat has us pulling apart a moment later. We both turn and find Katia leaning against the doorframe.

“Uh, sorry to interrupt this little...well, anyhow, Eric, you’re needed at the farmstand and, Ariana, are we packing or....” Katia trails off and looks between us, raising an eyebrow.

I turn to Ariana. She bites her lip and it takes all my energy not to pick her up and carry her to my room to make love to her all afternoon.

“No packing, Katia. But I do need to make one quick call,” she says as she pulls a phone from her pocket.

I watch her press call on her phone.

“Hi, Dad. I’m here. And there’s something you should know,” she begins.

I start to remove her from my lap, to give her a little privacy, but she grips my arm

and shakes her head. I grin at her and she grins back.

“Well, are you going to tell me, or is this a new guessing game?” James Titan’s voice breaks the silence.

With a little shake of her head, she puts the call on speaker. “Dad, I’m here with Eric Windsor...my...” She pauses and looks at me and I nod. “My boyfriend and my boss.”

“What?” James screams.

“Dad, calm down before you give yourself a stroke. You need to know something about Kimberly.”

“Why are you with Eric? Get your ass back here!” James yells.

“Dad, listen to me!” she screams, and as if in shock, James shuts up. “She wants you to change the prenup and buy the farm where I work because she found oil here on a neighboring property. The private company that she hired used some university to do the survey and that is online. We were able to find it. There’s oil under this farm as well. She’s been telling you lies about me. She wants your money, Dad, and I think this property was going to be her backup plan. You were going to put it in her name, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” he says quietly as he processes what Ariana’s said.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I think Kimberly just wants you for your money. She wanted me out of the picture, and she knew Eric was hiring because of her research that started with the neighboring farm. It sounds like she has an oil tycoon friend and he mentioned something about possible reserves around Storyview Falls. Or at least, that’s what I can figure out from some documents that Katia found,” she continues.

“George Benjamin?” James asks.

“Yes, that’s the guy. Why?” she questions.

There’s not an answer. “I need to go, Ari. But we are discussing this later. You need to make smarter decisions.”

“Dad, wait. I know you think this isn’t the right place for me. I love that you want what’s best for me. But, Dad, Eric and this farm, they are what’s best for me. I know I was stupid about driving that tractor, and I promise I won’t be doing that again. But, Dad, I love him, I love this farm, I love my friends here, and I love this little town. I feel alive here. Please, at least come here and see things. I want to live, Dad. Really, really live. And I can’t do that in your penthouse. I can’t do that working for your company. I need to spread my wings and live my own life. And I want this life, Dad. Please, just promise you’ll come here. I’m going to stay here. Because this is my home.”

There’s dead silence on the other line.

“Dad?” Ariana asks after about ten seconds.

“And what if it falls apart? Then what?” he asks.

“Then, I guess I’ll find another job and another place to live. I can do this, Dad. Please, believe in me,” she begs and I see her tear up again. I squeeze her hand and she squeezes it back.

“I want you to be happy, Ari. I...” He clears his throat. “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“I do, Dad. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but...I needed to make sure this was

right for me. And coming here today...I know it is," she explains as she stares into my eyes. It's like she's talking to me and her father all at the same time.

"I'll come down tomorrow. We can talk. But no more of this lying bullshit, Ari. You tell me the truth. If you love some guy, I better know it. You aren't some teenager. And I'm sorry if I treat you like that, but I love you. And I want what's best for you." He pauses and Ariana's eyes well with tears. I'm guessing her father doesn't profess his love to anyone very often. "But I also want you to be happy. So...we'll talk."

"I love you too, Daddy," she whispers.

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“OK. I need to go,” he replies as if a mask has suddenly come up over his emotions. I wonder if he’s like this all the time. What a strange man.

“Alright, Dad. Call me tomorrow if you’re able to come down here,” she says.

“I will,” he says and hangs up.

“Is he...always like that?” I ask, truly curious.

She sighs. “He is. He’s not all bad, he’s just...James Titan,” she tries to explain.

I laugh and press my forehead to hers. “I’d rather we be hurkle-durkling, but I think I do need to go check on things.”

She giggles. “Well, I could still go snerdle.”

“You both are seriously weird. I’m going to go get a latte at that coffee kiosk,” Katia says while rolling her eyes.

She looks back at me. “Sooo,” she says.

I brush some hair away from her face. “So, you love me?” I ask.

She blushes. God, I missed her blushing. “Yes,” she says quietly.

“Good, because I love you too,” I state as I cup her jaw and press my lips to hers, letting myself lose track of time for a second as I taste her.

Thor meows and we both laugh.

“We love you too, buddy,” I assure him. “Now, let’s go see how this grand re-opening is doing, shall we?”

She grins. “Let’s,” she agrees as I pick her up in my arms and she wraps her hands around my neck.

I kiss her again as I start walking.

“My crutches?” she says.

I look down at her. “You won’t be needing those. Because I’m not letting you go...ever.”

She laughs. “Eric, you’re being silly. I can walk.”

“I know you can, but I don’t want to put you down,” I state. And I kiss her again as I carry her out the back door.

She looks up at me. “Thank you,” she whispers as she kisses my neck.

“For what?” I ask as I walk us toward the barn.

“For giving me my happily ever after.”

CHAPTERTWENTY-SEVEN

Ariana

Three months later...

I watch my father pat Snuggles as Mooman presses his head into my father's leg. I can't believe how much he has come around to my new life in only a few short weeks. It's so un-James-Titan-like of him.

"Mooman," Dad scolds.

"Who the hell is that and what did you do with your dad?" Katia asks.

It's been three months since I came back to the farm. It's been almost six months since I started working here and almost five months since I fell in love with my boss. And it's been two months and twenty-nine days since Dad officially broke up with Kimberly and kicked her ass out of the penthouse. She did her best to get money from Dad. And the inner softy in him finally agreed to let her keep the jewelry he'd purchased her. She had also apparently used some of his money to put a down payment on an apartment. She really had thought of everything. Dad let her keep that apartment too. I argued with him that he shouldn't, but in the end he explained he couldn't kick her out without at least knowing she had somewhere to go.

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“It’s my dad, for sure,” I say with a grin.

“Whatever you say. But that man is clearly an alien posing as your father,” she says with a questioning look.

Laughing, I shake my head. “How long can you stay?” I ask.

“Just till tomorrow. I have a flight to catch. Gotta go check out some new building for my dad’s company,” she says with a roll of her eyes. Then she looks at me and smiles. “Not all of us are so lucky to be sleeping with our boss.”

I make a disgusted face. “Ewww! I sure hope you aren’t sleeping with your boss,” I answer.

“Ewww! No, that’s not what...you’re depraved. I work for my dad, you sicko,” she replies.

I laugh and shake my head at her.

Eric walks over to Dad and they begin talking about a scholarship program Dad wants to start at the local university.

“Is he really funding college scholarships now?” Katia asks.

“He is. But don’t worry, it’s for selfish reasons. He wants to get into more agriculture and so he wants folks who work in bioengineering so he can modify plants for climate change,” I explain.

“Of course. I should have known better,” she replies as we continue watching Eric and Dad talk.

“Those two better stop gossiping like schoolgirls. I need their help. That damn cow pushed his dinner trough into a post and knocked it loose. I swear, I don’t know what’s worse, the animals or the people around here,” Earl grumbles.

“Definitely the people,” Buck states as he claps Earl on the shoulder.

“Fuck off, Buck. You know I’m the best thing out here. Don’t be jealous,” Earl says.

Katia and I giggle.

“Meow!” Thor says from my sweatshirt pocket. Eric bought me a sweatshirt with a big pocket so I can carry him around with me.

“I can’t believe you’re wearing that in the middle of this heat wave. That damn cat is spoiled,” Earl says as Thor pokes his head out of his warm little pouch.

Eric begins walking over toward us. He stops and picks a flower from the flower bed and hands it to me.

“An angel flower for my angel,” he says as he leans down and kisses me.

“He’s not the only one who’s spoiled,” Katia mumbles.

“Who’s spoiled?” Eric asks as he pulls back.

Thor meows again and we all laugh.

I look back at Eric and he’s staring down at me. I blush and he smirks. I give my head

a little shake as I bite my lip and his eyes darken.

He leans down and kisses my cheek before whispering in my ear. “Keep it up, little catastrophe, and you’ll pay for that tonight.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, feigning innocence.

He gives my ear a little bite and I clench my thighs. He pulls back. “James and I are going into town to meet with the university president. Do you need anything?” he asks me.

I shake my head and then nod. “Can you get us some coffee from Elisha’s?”

“Will do,” he replies, and I watch him head to his truck and Dad climbs inside.

“I swear your father is an alien posing as your father,” Katia repeats.

“Nah, he’s just falling under the Storyview Falls spell.”

* * *

Eric

I feel Ariana's muscles clench around my cock, and I groan, thrusting faster as I chase my own release. We've been in bed for two hours, hurkle-durkling, but then one thing led to another and here we are with my cock buried deep inside her. That is after I teased her for wearing the granny panties she bought at Heather's store.

I finish with a roar and collapse on my side, pulling her against me as I wrap my arms tightly around her little body. I kiss her hair and she presses her ass against my softening erection.

"I love you," I whisper against her ear.

"I love you too," she replies with a long, contented sigh.

"I thought we were going to snerdle today," she teases.

"Hurkle-durkle," I correct.

"Snerdle. Will you ever be able to control yourself?" she asks as she cranes her neck to look at me. She's smirking.

"Not around you, baby," I confess as I trace my lips over her jaw.

"Good, because I like it when you lose control around me," she says as she turns her

head and licks at my lower lip.

I feel myself growing hard again. She places her leg on top of mine, inviting me back inside her. I slip the head of my cock just inside her entrance and we both groan as I slide all the way inside her.

I begin moving again, slower this time.

My hand comes around to rub her clit and she whimpers. God, I love how her body responds to mine. She's perfect in every way. It's like she knows what I need on a cellular level.

As we rock together in perfect synchrony, I trail kisses down the side of her face. "Promise me it'll always be like this," she demands.

"I can promise you that I'll always love you more than I can explain and that I will always want to make love to you," I promise.

She laughs. "Eric!" she squeals as I tickle her. I pump hard and her laughter dies on a moan. I pick up my pace and we both begin to lose ourselves as we chase our releases. It only takes a few more thrusts and Ariana cries out as I groan, emptying myself inside her.

This time when I finish, I don't move. We lie like this for a long minute. Just staying in this cocoon of bliss.

"Have I thanked you today?" she asks.

"For what?" I play along.

"For giving me my happily ever after," she says. We play this little game at least once

a day, and I don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing her ask it.

"Not yet today," I reply.

She turns in my arms and looks into my eyes. "Thank you," she says softly.

I kiss her and pull back. "Thankyou," I reply.

"For what?" she asks.

"For givingmemy happily ever after," I declare. And she smiles at me. And I decide right then and there that this is the woman I'm going to marry.

EPILOGUE

Ariana

Six months later...

I twirl in my bedroom and Katia tilts her head to the side.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:33 am

“Come here, you have this one loose hair,” she says as she reaches over and adjusts a single strand on my head.

“Better?” I ask.

She nods. I look down at the flower garden. Last summer, I made Earl and Buck help me put in a giant flower garden that is next to an even bigger patio that we can cover with a tent structure. There’s a small gazebo next to it. And the entire thing overlooks the farm fields. One of which I had planted with tulips so this early spring day would be perfect. And it is. The flowers we brought out to supplement the garden are beautiful and all my early spring flowers are in bloom. We’re the first wedding here, just as I planned, but we’re already booked for weddings almost every other weekend for the rest of this year.

When Eric officially asked me three months ago to be his wife, I knew I didn’t want to wait. He had sent Thor in with a ring tied to his walking harness. It was perfect, right there in our home, just the two of us.

Katia scoffed of course because she wanted an elaborate hot air balloon proposal. But not me. I wanted simple and that’s exactly what Eric gave me.

I look back out the window. All sixty of our guests are seated. My mom, stepdad, and brothers came in from Paris. Alicia, her husband, and her kids are here from England. Eric’s parents are in town and my dad has shown up with his latest girlfriend, a woman who we all can just barely stand. The man never learns.

“Are the flower men ready?” I ask Katia.

Katia groans. “I swear to God, you should have let me plan this thing. Why are Earl and Buck the flower girls?” she asks.

“Flower men,” I correct her.

“Whatever? It’s weird,” Katia argues.

I shake my head at my best friend. Eric has Kingsley as his best man and Katia’s my maid of honor. Joy got ordained so she could officiate our wedding. Max and Elisha are catering with food and a cake. And Kevin, a local bartender, is part of a band and they are playing for our reception and the ceremony music.

“You ready?” Dad asks from the doorway as I turn around.

“Ready,” I say.

Dad looks me up and down and I swear his eyes glaze over a bit. “You look beautiful, Ari,” he says as he steps forward and kisses my cheek.

“Thanks, Dad,” I reply.

Things have been so much better between Dad and me. He comes to visit often. He’s still a ruthless businessman, but he at least is attempting to have a better work-life balance.

Dad holds out his arm for me and I accept it as we walk downstairs and get ready to walk out the patio doors to the flower garden. Eric built a special walkway just for this occasion. The pavers end at the barn and then there’s a path with pebbles and small bricks. Pansies in purples and yellows dot the sides of the path as Dad and I make our way to the back of the rows of seats in the garden.

The music starts and Earl and Buck open their fanny packs and begin tossing rose

petals. Our friends and family burst into laughter at their antics as they dance their way down the aisle in suits with matching floral suspenders. Earl is even sporting a stylish hat.

Then Kingsley and Katia walk down the aisle. And finally, it's just Dad and me.

He squeezes my arm. "You ready for this? I can have you out of here in five seconds flat if you say no," he says, giving me a serious look.

I giggle. "Dad," I protest, drawing out his name.

"I'm serious," he says in a low voice.

I turn and Eric comes into view. He's staring at me as if I'm the most cherished thing on the planet.

"Take me to my future husband, please," I command, and for the first time ever, Dad does what I ask with zero protest. We walk down the flower-covered path between rows of all the people I love most in the world. And then I'm there, in front of the man I get to spend forever with.

"Hi," I say as I stop.

"Hi," he whispers back.

Dad kisses my cheek and takes his seat and Eric takes my hands in his.

"We ready to get this show on the road?" Joy asks us.

We both nod, but our gazes stay locked. We say our short, prepared vows. After much debate, we decided to keep it short and simple. Eric made me promise not to make him cry in front of my dad. So I say that I will always love him, take care of

him, listen to him most of the time, and not make him cry in front of people. That makes people laugh. Eric promises to always listen to me, always, and to always protect me and take care of me and get up and feed the animals so I can sleep in late. I hear more laughter as we stay transfixed on each other.

“The rings?” Joy asks after our vows.

Kingsley grabs a leash and walks Thor over, which takes a minute because Thor fell asleep in the bed I made him out here. Eric leans down and removes the rings off Thor’s lead.

Joy asks us to repeat after her as we slide on the rings. My fingers shake a little and Eric squeezes my hand. Just that simple movement reassures me. He’s my rock and I love that about him.

“Well, before we conclude, I just want to say a few words about this lovely couple,” Joy says. I raise an eyebrow and Eric shrugs. This wasn’t part of the rehearsal ceremony.

“I knew from the second Ariana walked into our office that this was a woman who might be the one for our Eric. And she was. They are the most perfect match of souls and it’s been a joy watching them fall in love and overcome obstacles together. They are the real deal. Eric puts up with Ariana’s need for fashion and Ariana, well, she puts up with Eric.” Everyone laughs. “There’s really only one way to conclude this ceremony...

“Come on and kiss the girl,” Joy urges as she looks at Eric. Eric doesn’t have to be told twice as he leans down and takes me in his arms, pressing his lips to mine. And just like that, I know we really will live happily ever after.