







# Unlikely You

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Bren:

I don't trust people, and for good reason. My parents kicked me out the second I turned eighteen, and my friends from high school or college all lost touch. No matter how close we get, how much they claim they love me, they always abandon me. The only person I can rely on is me, which is why I've built my own business from the ground up making bookish merch and accessories. So far, I'm hitting or exceeding all my goals and that's all I need.

Honey:

If someone asked my family to describe me, one of the first words that would come up is "reliable." That's me, Honey Holloway, the girl who will get it done with a smile on her face. It's easy to grin and pretend I'm fine with my parents being unconcerned with things like taxes and invoices and the "boring" parts of running our family apiary and farm. I too would like nothing more than to hang out with the bees all day, but someone has to keep this place together and make sure my siblings have a future.

Bren:

There is one person that I talk to though, and that's Melliferal. We met online over a year ago and clicked right away over our shared love of books and fanfiction. After getting burned badly by another online friendship, I'm reluctant to share too much about myself, but she seems fine with that. I especially don't tell her about the Holloway family, who have the table next to mine four days a week at the local marketplace. Most of my ire is reserved for Honey Holloway, specifically. There's just something about her that drives me to distraction and it's not just because she's so beautiful she makes me want to punch myself in the face. I've just never met someone who looked so much like they ate sunshine and rainbows for breakfast every morning. It's bizarre and intriguing and irritating and arousing.

Honey:

When I finally have a moment to myself, I talk to my online friend Bibliofile. She's the only person who I feel like I can be honest with. Up to a point, though, because we don't discuss any personal details. Even without knowing her real name, I've developed a raging crush on an internet stranger, and that's on top of my IRL (hopeless) crush on Bren Hendrix. At least I know Bibliofile likes me, though. Bren so obviously doesn't, but I'm not going to let that stop me. I've never seen someone who needs a friend more than Bren. She's going to be

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Bren

“Dammit,” I said under my breath as I stopped in front of my table at the Maine Marketplace. I’d been running late this morning and hadn’t arrived in time to have a nice quiet set up the way I preferred. Everything had gone wrong, starting with not being able to sleep last night. This morning I’d been out of coffee, my cat Arson decided to puke in the middle of the living room rug, and I’d found a hole in my favorite shirt. I could mend the hole, of course, but it was just one more thing that I’d have to deal with.

And then I’d arrived at the marketplace and they were here. The Holloways. The family who’d had the table next to mine for weeks now and it had been a nightmare every single day we’d had to share space.

I set my bag down and tried to block them out, but it was impossible.

The happy Holloways were singing. They were actually fucking singing. If this had been the first time I’d heard it, I would have stared in shock. But this wasn’t the first time, or even the fiftieth.

They were so loud, there seemed to be a million of them, but I’d worked out that there were two parents and four kids. Well, one adult, two teenagers, and one that was younger.

The Maine Marketplace ran Thursday through Sunday from April to October, so I

didn't have to see them all every single day.

Unfortunately, today was Saturday, and they were all here. Singing. Like the fucking Von Trapp family.

I shoved my noise-canceling headphones on my skull and went through my mental checklist. The marketplace was a temporary set up, so each night we covered our displays and every Sunday we carted everything out to bring it all back in on Thursday again. It was grueling, but it was one of the ways I made money, and it had been pretty lucrative for me the past few months.

My table was at the beginning of a row, right near one of the doors, which was a prime spot. If only I wasn't next to the Holloway Apiary table.

I went about my business, making sure everything on my table was perfect, pulling out more book sleeves, stickers, bookmarks, and other bookish items that I made in my apartment and sold here, on my website, and on consignment at a few local shops.

The podcast I'd been listening to drowned out the singing from the table next to me ended and I checked the time. Doors would be opening soon, and I'd have to slip into my customer service persona. I rolled my shoulders and prepared. Selling at the marketplace was not only physically grueling, it was mentally exhausting too.

"Go ahead, I've got this," a voice said, cutting through all the chatter and sounds of other sellers setting up their tables.

Shewas here. She was always here.

"You sure, darling?" The Mom asked. I knew her name, but I just thought of her as The Mom. The Mom, The Dad, and the kids—with one exception.

Honey. Her goddamn name was Honey. Honey, and her family kept bees. Adorable, right?

Not in my opinion. It was so cutesy it made my teeth hurt.

Honey was always here, wearing her little shirt with the Holloway logo on it. Honey and her bright smile and her cheerful energy that was enough to make me want to shake her and ask what the hell was wrong with her. Was she just like that? Was she on drugs? Was she in a cult? No one was that bubbly and sweet in real life. It wasn't possible. I'd watched her too. Looked for any slip of that smile. Any moment where she dropped the mask and revealed how she really felt.

Never saw it. This woman must have had happiness injected into her perfect ass every morning. Oh, and it was a perfect ass. In addition to being the personification of sunshine and light, she was annoyingly gorgeous. Disgusting attractive. Nauseatingly beautiful.

Her body had curves and softness just where you wanted. Her hourglass was more than half full, and if she were anyone else, I would have already tried to get my hands on her and wrapped her legs around me.

And that was just her body. Her face was just as devastating. Full lips and blushing cheeks and long very light brown hair with golden (dare I say honey?) highlights. And her eyes. Her eyes were wide and you could never quite pin down the dominant color. Blue? Green? There were also flecks of brown and gold, the color on her driver's license was probably listed as hazel. What an inadequate word for her eyes. They required something more. Something that was too many letters and hard to pronounce.

I did my best not to stare at her as she spoke to her younger siblings. Anyone could see from a quick look that she was the oldest. The Louisa. Wait, was that the oldest

Von Trapp daughter? I couldn't remember. It didn't matter. Honey was in charge when her parents weren't around, and she was also kind of in charge when they were.

The Mom and the Dad were obviously the owners of the business, but they didn't necessarily have the best-selling instincts. Either they were so wrapped up in each other that they ignored customers, or they spent all their time talking to one person who was only going to buy one jar of honey and probably never come back again.

Honey kept things moving smoothly, sharing her lovely smile and offering to answer questions and drawing people in who might not have drifted closer to the table. I'd heard her pitch about how her parents had founded the apiary at least a thousand times, but I still listened to the sincerity in her voice every time she told it again. You couldn't help but be drawn in and more than one customer found themselves buying jars of honey or beeswax candles with a somewhat bewildered look on their face as if they hadn't been in complete control of their actions.

Honey was like that. She wove a spell around people. She could sell ice in Alaska if she put her mind to it.

She was everything sweet and I couldn't stand it.

My own sales skills left a lot to be desired, but I held my own. I managed to keep my business going even in a shitty economy which I was pretty fucking proud of. I didn't have the option to fail. Unlike my neighbors, I didn't have a family supporting me. I had no one.

My parents had pretty much ignored me my whole life and the minute I graduated from high school, they gave me moving boxes and told me to get out. I think they'd assumed that I would have fallen flat on my face and might have taken some satisfaction in that, but I'd been planning for the day they were going to kick me out since I was ten. I'd started working as young as I could, saving as much money as

possible until I had enough to take care of myself until it was time to start college. In the three years (I'd expedited my bachelor's degree to save money) it took to get my graphic design and marketing degree, I'd barely slept. Between paid jobs and internships, I'd managed to graduate with job offers already in my inbox.

I'd busted my ass in the corporate world as long as I could stomach it and worked on my real passion until I could justify quitting my job. That was just over a year ago and I was exceeding all of my meticulous projections.



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Taking one last look at my display, I looked toward the doors and prepared myself for the next seven hours.

“Thank you so much, have a wonderful day,” Honey said, handing the paper bag over to the customer. It was stamped with the Holloway Apiary logo. Cute and rustic. I had to hand it to them, their marketing and branding was perfect. I wondered if the parents or if Honey was responsible. The parents didn’t seem like the type to worry about things like logos or brand cohesion, so I had the suspicion it was more her doing. The font was sweet and charming, with a little watercolor bee. I would have tweaked a few things, but overall, it looked nice.

I turned around and dropped my smile, massaging my jaw. I had a natural resting bitch face that I had to fight nearly every single day by forcing my face into a smile. Sometimes it even gave me headaches. One of my indulgences was a massage whenever my body decided I’d had too much. My massage therapist always did a lot of work on my face and jaw and that helped.

Honey probably didn’t need medical attention after smiling all day. Her face was built for smiling. Literally, because she had a dimple in each cheek. A matching set. And to add insult to injury, she was one of those people who smiled and made you want to smile in return. I’d seen people with straight-up frowns on their faces leave the Holloway Apiary table with grins.

What the hell did they put in that honey? They were always giving out these little sample sticks that people lost their minds over.

“Busy day,” Honey called over to me.

That was the other thing. She wouldn't stop trying to be friends with me. No matter what I did, she always acted like we were besties. Or coworkers in the trenches together.

I let out a grunting noise that was supposed to make her smile falter and not want to talk to me anymore.

It didn't, though.

"Would you like some tea? We're brewing lavender chamomile today. It's very soothing."

Jesus fucking Christ. That was another thing they did. Gave away free cups of tea (dosed with liberal drizzles of their honey of course) to anyone who wanted one. Obviously, I knew that giving away free shit was a marketing tactic, but they gave away a lot of free shit.

They were just so...nice.

We were smack dab in the middle of the mid-afternoon lull that I absolutely hated. The energy ebbed and flowed with the crowds and I would have much preferred it to be busy as opposed to quiet with just browsers who were bored and weren't going to buy anything.

All I wanted to do was sit down, but that could signal bad energy, so I kept standing and tried to ignore Honey. Her parents were who knew where and her siblings were either kidnapped, missing, or behind the table on their various electronics. I couldn't blame them. If I was a kid, I wouldn't want to be here on my summer vacation either. Why the hell weren't they at camp? My parents had loved camp. An excuse to get rid of me for weeks at a time when they could mostly forget I existed? Sold.

Yet here they were, bored out of their skulls and only doing something when Honey goaded them. As an only child, I didn't really get her dynamic with them, but it was pretty obvious that the mom and dad were kind of off in their own world and didn't really concern themselves with much.

I had to give Honey respect for that, at the very least. Respect and nothing more. She still annoyed the living hell out of me.

"I'm fine," I told her because I couldn't not respond. I could be a bitch, but I didn't want to be an asshole. Most of the time. I could be an asshole if the situation warranted and sometimes when it didn't.

Honey just kept smiling and filled up a cup. "Suit yourself."

I clenched my teeth and went to rearrange my display. Again.

At last, it was time to close down for the day. I rolled my tight shoulders and thought about a bathtub full of water and Epsom salts that was calling my name. Maybe I'd have an edible too. Or at least a half of one to take the edge off.

That would all have to wait until I'd eaten, fed Arson, and had caught up on some admin work. I did my best to take care of that earlier in the week, but it didn't always happen. No matter how much I did, there was always more work that could be done.

At least Arson would be happy to see me, even if she was only happy that I was there to feed her.

I covered up my table and made sure everything was as it should be. The marketplace had excellent security, so I didn't have to worry about leaving everything overnight.

The kids were all yammering at Honey that they were hungry and asking her what

they were having for dinner. The parents had swanned in and out about an hour ago.

“We’re having taco lasagna, remember?” she said, fixing the ponytail of the youngest girl. One of these days I was actually going to learn their names.

“Why can’t we have pizza?” the only boy whined. The sound grated on my ears after hearing so many voices all day. I couldn’t wait to get home to my quiet apartment. Arson was a vocal cat, but that didn’t bother me.

“Because we had pizza on Friday night, remember? Pizza is for Fridays, buddy.” The boy didn’t look impressed as he crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes.

“You love taco lasagna. And you can put tons of sour cream on it,” Honey said, putting her arm around him and ruffling his hair. There she was, working her magic again. Her voice was soft, but firm.

“Come on, Arch. It’ll be good.” She kissed his forehead and I could sense he really wanted to argue, but she’d mollified him somehow.

Arch. His name was Archer, I recalled. The girls were...Emily? No, something fancier than that. The other one they called Ellie, but that was a nickname for something probably. I really was bad at paying attention to them. To be fair, their names were ridiculous. Naming a baby Honey was all cute when she was young, but what about when she was an adult and had to get people to take her seriously? You couldn’t take someone named Honey seriously.

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“See you tomorrow,” she called to me as she shoved the kids toward the door.

Ugh, I guess I’d have to.

Arson was inconsolable when I arrived home, but that was nothing new.

“Oh my god, I’m going to trip over you one day and fall down and die and then who’s going to feed you?” I asked as she wrapped herself around my legs and screamed her head off.

I set everything down and leaned down to pet her.

“Yes, yes, I missed you too. Even though you’re so loud. Please stop being so loud.” She answered by screaming again.

I filled her bowl and watched as she acted like she had never eaten in her life. I’d found her wandering outside a house that had burned down and been abandoned and she was orange, so naturally I had to name her Arson. She lived up to the name, adding other petty crimes to her rap sheet every single day.

Arson was an absolute pain in the ass, but I loved her anyway. Maybe even loved her more because of it. That cat didn’t let anyone tell her what to do. Not even me.

Once I fed the orange demon, I sorted out my own dinner, throwing some chicken tenders in the air fryer and tossing a frozen bag of pasta, sauce, and veggies into a pan and throwing it all together in a big bowl. Good enough.

Once I was no longer ravenous, I put my hair up into a messy bun and checked my emails and comments on social media. I did my best not to be on my phone during the days when I was at the marketplace. Seeing a salesperson with their eyes glued to their phone wasn't a good look.

So that meant I had a million things to do when I got home and all I wanted to do was nothing. This job was still better than working in corporate arguing for hours about two different nearly identical sans serif fonts for the new website. Never again.

I waded through as much as I could stand before making myself a cup of tea, soaking in the tub for a while, and then curling up on the couch with Arson and a new ebook that I'd been saving. It was only a matter of time before I passed out and had to drag myself to bed, but as long as I could keep my eyes open, I was going to read.

Wild Saturday night.

They were singing again on Sunday. It was a good thing I wasn't hormonal or else I might have said something not so nice. But I was just my regular annoyed self, so I clenched my teeth and did my best to block it out with my headphones and another podcast.

Could they just...not? For one day?

Honey was her radiant self, as always. Hair in a perfect ponytail, her Holloway Apiary T-shirt fitting her curves perfectly. No one should look that good in a generic T-shirt. Maybe she'd tailored it to fit her curves. Her shorts certainly were designed to make her generous hips and thighs drive me to distraction.

It wasn't fair to have all of that so close to me for so many hours in a day.

I had to keep my eyes on my own table and focus. I wasn't going to make any money

ogling the beautiful beekeeper.

## Chapter Two

### Honey

She looked tired today. I wanted so much to just go over and bring her a cup of tea, but past experiences told me she'd reject it.

The kids were being especially ornery today, and I wished that Mom or Dad would take them home, to be honest. Their passion for helping with the family business lasted about an hour and then all they wanted was to be hanging out with their friends, or playing games, or literally anywhere else but the marketplace, with the exception of Ellie, who was my main helper.

It was hard keeping them entertained, but at least they were well-behaved. Sure, Ember wore a perpetual frown and glared at people most of the day, but Ellie and Archer were willing to help me keep things going. Mom and Dad would hang out for a few hours and be present, but every day they'd wander off to go chat with one of the other vendors or they'd need to be back on the farm for tours or classes or to tend things.

I always told myself the best part of working for a family business was getting to work with your family. The worst part of working for a family business was getting to work with your family.

Since I was the oldest by eight years, it meant that someone had to hold everything together. Someone had to make sure we ordered enough jars and that we had enough inventory and to take care of pesky things like "taxes" and "licensing" and the rest of the hurdles you had to jump to run a profitable business.

I loved my parents, so much, but they were so much better at being on the farm and managing the bees than here at the marketplace trying to sell anything. I'd told them that I could manage the table by myself, but they always said that we did everything as a family, so we were doing this together or not at all. Yet more often than not, I was doing it all by myself.

"Pleaseeee can I go hang out with Harper and Olivia and Kyra? Harper said she'd pick me up," Ember said, looking up from her phone.

We'd opened an hour ago and since the weather was gorgeous, it was a slow morning. We tended to do best when the weather was cloudy or rainy, causing people to seek indoor activities instead of going out on a boat or to the beach or the pier.

"They're going to the beach and everyone is going to be there," Ember said with all the intensity of someone who is sixteen. I remembered being that age so well.

I sighed. If I didn't let her go, she'd be in a snit for the rest of the day and I didn't want to deal with another sulky teenager.



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“You can go, but remember your sunscreen, please.”

She answered me with an eyeroll. Letting her get in the car with another teen driver made me feel like I was going to break out into hives, but my parents were far more laissez-faire about parenting. It was hard being the only strict one, because I wasn't Ember's mom. I was her older sister and I had less authority, especially when what she wanted to do coordinated with what my parents allowed.

Ember squealed and ran off with her bag, which no doubt had a change of clothes in it so her friends didn't see her wearing her Holloway Apiary T-shirt.

“Well, it's just us now,” I said to Archer and Ellie. Archer was already gaming, but Ellie gave me a smile. Of all the kids, she was the one who helped the most.

“Wanna help me hand out tea and samples?” I asked her. She nodded. Ellie was friendly, and with her almost white-blond curls and bright smile, people were just drawn to her.

A few potential customers wandered over to see what was going on and I handed out some honey stick samples and gave out cups of tea. I hated the waste of using disposable cups, but at least the marketplace had recycling bins, and the cups we used were also made from recycled paper.

I chatted with people, giving the history of how the farm was started as a hobby by my parents after they retired from teaching music and then turned into a family business. I also handed out the postcards with the family picture on them and more information on the back.

“And we do tours and classes all year round,” I added. That was another area where my parents excelled. They hadn’t wanted to monetize the classes and tours at first, but I’d had to sit them down and give them the cold hard reality that if we didn’t diversify our income as much as possible, the farm wasn’t going to survive. They might not like to think about things like bills and taxes, but those things could put us out of business.

In addition to working for the farm, I also had a side hustle removing and relocating bee colonies and had grown a following on social media when I posted videos of my work. Jobs were few and far between, but I also did short videos centered on education around bees and how we made our honey and beeswax candles and balms. I’d honed my public speaking skills from doing dozens of tours, and the videos did fairly well after I’d done some experimentation. It also didn’t escape my notice that when I was in the videos with full hair and makeup and wearing something cute, they did better. Irritating, but true.

The kids wanted to get in on the videos, but I’d only agreed to let Ember and she didn’t want to. Archer and Ellie were still too young. Besides, I had an additional reason to keep Ellie specifically out of the spotlight. No views were worth potentially exposing my trans sister to the horrors of the internet. Her life so far had been mostly sheltered and I wanted to keep her in a safe place as long as I possibly could. My parents and I were on the same page about that at least.

“Yes, they’re all handmade,” I heard Bren say. Her voice might have been bright, but I’d heard her enough times to know she was tired. Bren was never directly rude, and she was always smiling (somewhat), but I could see the strain on her face by Sunday afternoon. I knew exactly how she felt. I just managed to hide it better.

Ignoring Bren wasn’t an easy task. Not only was I obsessed with everything she made, she was also completely and utterly gorgeous. Silky dark hair and brooding dark eyes and a mysterious vibe about her that made me want to lean closer so she

could whisper secrets in my ear.

That she was a hard worker only made her more attractive in my eyes. She busted her ass every day with no help. I'd offered many times to watch her table so she could take a break, but she always turned me down.

Determined to do it on her own, I guess. Something I could understand, but eventually, you had to let someone help you. I might have had to pick up the slack for my parents, but I still had them and wouldn't have been able to run the farm without their work and passion.

Bren was beautiful and having her so close made it so hard to focus that my siblings had started teasing me about her. Luckily, I didn't think Bren had heard any of it, or else I would have died of mortification.

Bren wasn't the kind of woman who went out with someone like me. The most I could ever hope for was "cute," but Bren was stunning and sexy and could have anyone she wanted.

And then there was the fact that I knew my family annoyed her. She probably thought she hid it well, but she didn't. I'd catch her rolling her eyes and clenching her jaw when we'd sing in the morning. My parents were very musical people, as well as bee enthusiasts, so not a day went by when we weren't singing together. I think if my mom had been able to have more children, she might have forced us to become a traveling singing group instead. My siblings all played various instruments, me included, but singing had always been what I'd enjoyed most. If I'd gone to college, I might have majored in vocal performance. Maybe. There was no reason to speculate because it didn't happen.

I let myself have another glance at Bren. I made sure I didn't look at her too many times per hour, and once I'd used up my looks for the day, I was done until we said

goodbye.

I still remembered the first time we'd set up our table and how chaotic it had been. My parents had argued about where everything should go, even though we'd already agreed on the setup and I'd drawn a layout to make sure everything was in the right place.

I'd looked over at Bren and she'd given me this absolutely horrified look that almost made me laugh out loud before she'd turned away, her cheeks going a little pink.

"She's pretty," Ellie had whispered to me.

"Yes, she is," I'd agreed.

The rest of the day, I'd barely been able to focus on anything but on Bren. I'd strained my ears to hear her voice when she talked to customers or to see her face when she didn't know I was looking.

"Pretty" was an insult to her. Bren was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen in my entire life, and that was no exaggeration.

Growing up, I'd always known girls and women were lovely, but it wasn't until I was a teenager that I realized not everyone thought the way I did. My parents had been both unsurprised and supportive when I came out as a lesbian. I guess I'd kind of paved the way for my siblings because Ellie had come out as a trans girl and Ember was questioning her sexuality and hadn't settled on a label yet. Archer grumbled that he was the token cis and heterosexual kid in the family.

Bren sighed and my ears picked up on it. I seemed to be attuned to her every breath now. So distracting.

Normally I wouldn't do anything, but after a quick glance over at her, I could see that she needed something. We had a lovely orange spice tea today that was absolutely heaven with our honey, so I poured a cup, added honey, and stirred it to make sure it was incorporated before straightening my shoulders and walking a few feet to her table.

"It's on the house," I said, holding out the tea as she glanced up at me. Bren almost never sat down, so that was how I knew things were serious.

"What?" she asked, confused at my bad attempt at a joke.

"Sorry. I just... You seemed like you could use this. There's no caffeine in it, though." Great, now I was babbling. She brought it out in me.

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Bren looked from my face to the cup and back again.

“I don’t drink tea,” she said.

Undeterred, I kept holding it out to her. I’d set it down, but then there was a chance it would spill on her things and I’d feel horrible about that.

“It’s really good, I promise. You’ll like it.”

Bren let out another sigh, this one tinged with more irritation, but she reached out one hand and took the cup from me.

“You promise I’ll like it? That’s bold. What if I hate it?” she asked, the cup suspended a few inches in front of her mouth.

“You won’t,” I said with more confidence than I felt.

Bren raised one dark eyebrow and then sipped the tea. I could hear Ellie and Archer talking to customers at our table, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Bren as she carefully sipped and swallowed, her elegant throat working. For a moment, I entertained the thought of licking that throat. Of sucking on it until it was covered in marks from me.

It was a really good thing that Bren couldn’t read my scandalous thoughts. No doubt she’d be horrified.

Bren’s eyes narrowed as she considered the tea before she let out yet another sigh. Those seemed to be her response of choice.

“It’s fine,” she said, but that probably meant it was delicious. Bren seemed like the kind of person who would deny that she liked anything.

“Great. If you want any more, you know where I am.” I wanted to say something else, but I just kind of smiled at her and then Ellie got my attention to help with a customer who wanted to buy some candles.

I turned away from Bren, but I could feel her eyes on my back. Good thing she couldn’t see me blushing.

It was a huge relief to pack everything up at the marketplace for the week and return home.

Technically, I still lived with my parents on the farm, but in my own apartment that was on the second floor of the barn. It gave me privacy, but still let me see everyone whenever I wanted or needed.

The quiet that greeted me after I came back from having dinner with the family made the tension in my body instantly evaporate. I moved around the space, lighting one of my many candles. I’d formulated this particular scent myself and it was a blood orange and tonka mix that I was obsessed with. There were some parts of my job that I absolutely loved and helping make the scent blends for our candles was one of them. It had been a family decision, but I’d really gotten into it and had totally thrown myself into smelling a million things when we’d been ordering test scents.

My apartment was cozy and filled with all the things I loved: pictures of my siblings and of the farm, bright warm rugs, my watercolors, and a ton of bee items. You’d think that having an apiary would mean I’d be sick of bees, but I wasn’t. Having them around in any form made me happy. Jumbled stacks and piles of books were everywhere, which I thought made the place cozier.

The one place that I kept scrupulously organized was my desk. I had a gorgeous desktop monitor and my favorite pens and a cute little ceramic bee lamp that I'd bought at a yard sale five years ago.

In addition to managing things at the market, I did all of the work on the website, handled a lot of the customer service and business email account, shipping, and a million other things.

Doing anything that required brain power or math was out of the question right now, and I'd learned that the hard way. Monday I'd be up bright and early to tackle a few website updates and emails, but for right now, my brain needed a break, so I logged into my social media accounts and saw a message from one of my favorite people.

Why do happy people piss me off so much?

I laughed and typed out a quick response.

Because your heart is full of darkness and shadows.

Her response was quick. Ohhh, isn't that poetic? It makes me sound deep and not like a total bitch.

I snorted. Don't worry. I know you're still a bitch.

I'd met my friend @Bibliofile about a year ago on a fanfic site. We'd found each other in the comments of several fics and I'd loved her observations. From there, we'd followed each other on social media and had started sending each other links to new fics we thought the other might like. Pretty soon we were talking about everything from the logistics of time travel, to sharing our favorite soup recipes (I was more of a cook than she was), to which member of The L Word cast we'd fuck, marry, kill. I knew we were going to be friends for a long time when we both said to



kill Jenny, in spite of her already being dead.

I would want to resurrect her via necromancy and then kill her againshe'd said.

One rule we'd made for each other early on: no personal details. Other than her age, her gender, and the fact that she was a lesbian, I didn't know where she lived, other than in the US. Sure, I'd read between the lines of her message and gleaned that she was probably in the same time zone and probably in New England. But there was an allure to the mystery for some reason. Not sharing many details had been her idea at first, and I'd thought it was because she was hiding something. That could still be the case, but after all this time of talking to her nearly all day, every day, I think I was safe in saying that Iknewher.

And she knew me.

I'm watching it againshe sent.

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“It” was one of the shows we had both seen that had killed off the lesbian character because queer women weren’t allowed to be happy apparently.

Why are you doing that? It’s only going to make you mad and send me a million ranty messages in the middle of the night. I responded.

One thing about her, she’d go off at any time of day. It was so funny when I’d put my phone away while I was serving customers or working on the farm and I’d come back to a string of messages from her about something completely random. I loved getting them, even if I had no idea what had set her off. More often than not they made me laugh. Her sense of humor was dry and could be biting, but she didn’t hold herself back with me. At least, I didn’t think she did. It wasn’t like I could know for sure.

You like my ranty messages she said.

It was true. I did. Bibliofile was pretty much one of my favorite people in the entire world. I had a few friends that I hung out with, but my duties toward my family and the farm meant that social time was put on the back burner more often than not. Besides, I felt like my life was different than a lot of people my age. I had the farm, and my siblings, and I hadn’t been able to go away to college. My parents had encouraged me, but the reality was that someone had to keep everything together. Not to mention the money. I didn’t have enough in my bank account and financial aid wouldn’t have covered everything. It wasn’t even worth trying to go for something that was so far out of reach. So I’d taken classes online and learned on my own.

It was easier to not even think about college as an option than to entertain it and then be disappointed.

I'd been scrappy and motivated and done everything on my own. I mean, my parents hadn't known shit about owning a farm when they'd bought this place. The previous owners had died, and the place had been pretty much abandoned until the bank took possession. Using inheritance money from my mom's parents, they'd turned the place around and decided to focus their time and energy on bees.

Bibliofile interrupted my ruminating.

Do you ever get annoyed by someone but you can't put your finger on why? They haven't done anything, but they just rub you the wrong way.

I smiled.

All. The. Time. Literally all the time. Usually I find out that there was a reason for my initial feelings, and they're validated in time. For a long time I didn't trust my instincts about people and I made a lot of mistakes.

That was for sure. My only relationships and the subsequent breakups had been complete and total disasters. Epic and embarrassing disasters. That was one of the things that I hadn't told Bibliofile, because it was on the "too personal" list.

That's true. I guess I just haven't figured out why she's bad news. I'll keep you updated. Good mice.

That made me laugh. When we'd first started talking, we'd signed off for the night by telling each other goodnight, but an autocorrect one late night had given us "good mice" and it had stuck.

Good mice to you too.

Chapter Three

Bren

“This is new,” I said, pointing to the sparkly dildos that I hadn’t seen last time I’d visited *Between the Sheets*, a romance bookstore in the city.

The new products were located in the back behind a folding screen which pissed me off, but I understood why Larison, the owner, had made the choice to put them back there.

Delaney, one of the booksellers poked her head around the screen and smiled.

“Aren’t they fantastic? I can’t decide if I want to use them or decorate with them. My boyfriend would have a fit either way.”

“Use them, definitely,” I said, snorting. A lot of them were actually pretty. So many toys were a little too realistic for me. I much preferred a fantasy with wild colors and shapes. These were absolutely my kind of thing.

“Aren’t they great?” Larison said, coming around the corner. “I’m just glad that my daughter didn’t open that box when we were doing inventory and pull them out. I wasn’t sure how to handle the dildo conversation with her.”

I almost choked. Larison’s daughter, Juniper, was often in the shop when she wasn’t in school. I couldn’t imagine having to have that talk with her.

“You’re going to make me have that conversation with her, aren’t you?” Larison’s fiancée, Jo, said as she came out from the back room with a box of books.

“Maybe. I think you’d do it better.” Jo rolled her eyes behind her clear-framed glasses and blew some curly blonde hair out of her face.

“Figures,” she said, setting the box down and wincing.

“You’ve got to stop carrying those. Use the dolly,” Larison scolded as Jo dug her fingers into her lower back.

“I know, I know. It was just a few, though. And now I have an excuse to book us a massage.” She wiggled her eyebrows and Larison grinned.

“You are positively diabolical, baby.” She crossed the space and pulled Jo into her arms as Delaney sighed happily.

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“They’re just like a fairytale, I swear.”

They certainly were. It was almost sickening, so I turned my attention to the dildos.

My phone went off and I realized I’d spent far too much time here. Between the Sheets was just one of the businesses where I sold my products on commission. They’d been very good to me, and it also gave me an excuse to come in and end up leaving with armfuls of romance books. As a general rule, I read more ebooks, but I also couldn’t pass up a pretty paperback, or a special edition of one of my favorite authors.

Larison had also started a monthly book club and had fun events that I loved coming to. She wanted me to teach one about crafting your own book or ereader sleeve, but I didn’t think I’d be good at teaching anyone anything, so I’d declined, but that didn’t stop her from asking every time I was here, or bugging me to join book club.

“Okay, I really need to get out of here,” I said, looking over at the counter where I’d stacked a bunch of books that I wanted to buy. Shit. I really shouldn’t.

“Let me just ring you up,” Delaney said as Larison and Jo were in their own world.

Between the Sheets was truly one of my favorite places, and not just because I made a lot of money by selling my products here. It was a cozy and welcoming space, with mismatched rugs and comfy worn chairs and beautiful murals on the walls and the prettiest wooden shelves. If I could, I’d spend all day here. As long as there weren’t a bunch of people around, but the place was popular, so that wasn’t realistic. I wondered if Larison would let me pay to come in after hours for an hour. Private

browsing, like I was an heiress or something.

Laney gave me the total and even with my discount, it was more than I should have been spending on non-essential items. I liked to justify it because I needed books (new releases and popular titles especially) to use in product demonstrations and social media posts.

“Oh, I almost forgot that Holiday wanted to ask if you could drop off one of the shell-themed ereader covers for her the next time you come?” Laney handed me the note that the other part-time bookseller, Holiday, had left.

“You know what, I bet I have one in my trunk.” I took my purchases out and checked, and I just happened to have one of the covers. They’d mostly sold out fast and I couldn’t get any more of that specific fabric, so they’d been a one-off drop at the beginning of the summer.

“She’s in luck,” I said, holding it up. Laney beamed.

“You are an angel. She’s going to be so happy.”

As a general rule, I didn’t enjoy most people, but Holiday was an exception. I didn’t know what it was about her, but I liked her. We’d had more than a few deep discussions about books we loved when I’d come to the bookshop. In some ways, she reminded me of Melliferal. A person who brought out a nicer side of me.

I said my goodbyes again and realized I had spent far too much time at the bookshop and needed to bust my ass if I was going to get through my list for today. I kept strict schedule, with each day blocked out for different tasks and if I got behind on one thing, it threw off the rest of my day, and sometimes my week. There were only enough hours in the day to do about half of the things I needed to get done.

The bookshop had been my last stop of the day, so I stopped and allowed myself to indulge in a dirty chai to help get me through the rest of the afternoon. Could I have made it at home? Sure. But did it taste as good? No, it didn't.

The business had taken over my apartment, with my sewing machine taking prominence in front of the window in my living room, baskets of fabric covering the floor, and my sticker and bookmark printers on another table. I preferred to use my laptop on the couch with a blanket, so at least I hadn't needed a desk, but I would have given one of my lesser-important fingers for a decent desktop with a huge screen.

My computer was laggy and overheated constantly and had decided it really hated me by shutting down at least once every time I needed to use it. I'd gotten really militant about backing up my work.

I didn't quite have enough in my budget for a new or refurbished computer, but I might get to the point where the choice would be made for me. I hoped to put it off as long as possible.

After an extremely quick snack of peanut butter slathered on crackers that I ate in the kitchen, I washed my hands and sat down at my sewing machine. Arson took up her regular post in the cat bed by my feet. I had a bunch of ebook sleeves that needed finishing which I'd been putting off. Don't get me wrong, I loved my job and I loved sewing, but finishing always stressed me out and I worried about the most microscopic flaws.

When I'd first started making the book sleeves, my seams had been shitty, so I'd taken classes and worked hard to improve so I didn't give anyone an inferior product. Originally, they hadn't had any kind of closure, but now I'd added a button, so they could protect the books better. My ebook sleeves had a flap and snap and all of them were waterproof, which had been an absolute must.



I got into my rhythm and listened to my podcast with only half my attention, but that was how I usually worked. Once I finished up sewing all the buttons, I switched over the laundry to the dryer. I washed a lot of fabric, so having a washer and dryer in my apartment had been essential, even if it made my rent terrifyingly expensive.

By the time I was stopping for a break, it was late and my stomach was desperate for something nourishing. Too often I got so focused on my work that everything else fell away, including hunger and the needs of my bladder.

In addition to planning my schedule for maximum output for work, I also made sure that I didn't have to spend too much time on things that didn't contribute to my business. Like cooking and cleaning. So that meant I fit a once-a-week cleaner into my budget, as well as a crockpot and an air fryer, and I made a menu each week. Being organized kept me sane and made me feel like I wasn't completely falling apart. Hell, I'd been taking care of my own meals and laundry since I was about nine, so I'd had years to refine my system.

Tonight, I had leftovers that I pulled from the fridge and heated up in the microwave. Rubbing my itchy and tired eyes, I sat on the couch and stared at the television, not even sure what I was watching. It didn't matter. I was done for the day. Even Arson had passed out on the couch after I'd fed her.

A new message came through on my phone.

Mondayyyyyyyit said with a gif of someone screaming. Guess Melliferal had had a rough one too.

I think we're both entitled to compensationI responded.I will take mine in the form of peanut butter chocolate fudge and a day-long massage.

She sent me the drooling emoji.Peanut butter chocolate fudge would cure me right

now, I think. Peanut butter chocolate fudge and maybe one hour of quiet. The mayhem has been mayhemming especially hard today.

Melliferal had told me she had a loud family (she'd said they were such a part of her life that she couldn't pretend they didn't exist, but she'd kept the details sparse), and I knew she lived near them, if not with them. I literally couldn't imagine her life.

What was it like to have parents who didn't resent your existence from the minute you were born? Who didn't act like your basic needs were excessive and annoying? Who didn't keep an accounting of every cent they spent on you and then give you the bill, as if you could pay it? They'd tried, but I'd torn it up on my way out the door. I almost wish I'd had a lighter on me so I could have burned it in front of them and thrown the ashes on the lawn. But they probably would have called the cops and told them I'd tried to burn their house down.

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My parents were affable and charming to everyone except for their own daughter. No one would have believed me if I'd told them how my parents had treated me, so I just hadn't said anything. It had been easy when they'd been off on trips to invite friends over and pretend that my parents just really trusted me and that my independence was exactly what I wanted.

I'm sorry. Do you wanna play our alphabet game? Melliferal had told me about the game she played with her family when we'd first started talking and I'd eagerly participated. One of us would pick a letter to start with. Then we'd have a conversation, but each answer had to start with the next letter of the alphabet. So if she started with E, she'd say Even my teeth hurt and I'd respond fuck, that sucks, and so on. It was fun and a little challenging sometimes. It was also a great distraction if you'd had a shitty day.

Yes please. You can start.

I wiggled my fingers and tried to come up with something good. Let's start with H. Have you ever heard of vampire hedgehogs?

There was no way to hear her laugh, but I really wished I could have known if that had made her laugh.

I have not.

Just go to Vietnam to see them.

Kindly, I think I'm good.

Little friend, you're missing out.

We went back and forth like that and my face hurt from smiling. I'd never had a bad or uninteresting conversation with her. It was remarkable. Even when we'd disagreed on things, it had been civil and we'd acknowledged the other's point.

Melliferal and I were so different, but we understood each other in ways that made everything else not matter.

I wondered sometimes what she looked like. Exactly how old she was. It was strange, knowing so many intimate things about someone, but not knowing their face. Were her eyes blue or brown or green or something else? Was she taller? Or shorter?

Those questions were going to remain unanswered. Not after what I'd gone through with my last internet friend that I got close to. Melliferal was nothing like her, but that didn't mean anything. People could turn on you in a second and you'd never see it coming.

I knew from experience.

Who won? Melliferal asked.

You did I answered. I almost always let her win because she got all happy and cute about it.

She sent me a bunch of flower emojis.

You always let me win.

I have no idea what you're talking about I responded.

Yeah, sure. Ugh, I'm so tired. I think I need to shut everything down early tonight. Good mice.

I tried not to be too disappointed when I answered her.

Good mice, Mel.

## Chapter Four

### Honey

When my parents bought the farm and decided to turn it into an apiary, I'd done a massive amount of research on bees. They'd read some of it, but mostly they corresponded with a few people online and said they'd figure the rest out as they went.

That wasn't the way I wanted them to do things, but they were the ones in charge, so I did what I could to help.

My reading took me down all kinds of interesting paths. I learned about telling the bees, a tradition of telling bees about important milestones in the lives of their keepers. My parents had thought that was a lovely idea, so we all started telling the bees about all kinds of things.

I might have gone a little overboard, because anytime I had a problem, I'd tell the bees first. It was much easier to inform my parents about a bad grade or a mistake I'd made after telling the bees and listening to their soft buzzing comfort. I told them good things too. Like when I had my first kiss. The bees knew more about my sex life than anyone else. I hoped they appreciated it. They seemed to.

My parents also had us sing to the bees, thinking that it was a gift to give them in

thanks for the honey.

Sometimes when I couldn't sleep and it wasn't too cold out, I'd go sit with them and tell them all my troubles. The bees never judged or yelled or tried to offer advice. They were good like that.

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I'd told the bees about my little crush on Bren and they'd been very supportive. I'd even pitched an idea for visitors to the apiary to get a chance to tell the bees as part of the farm tour.

There were so many programs I wanted to do, including apiary management for local aspiring beekeepers, but there wasn't time for that with everything else.

It was too much. Every morning I groaned when my alarm went off, feeling like I hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep. The work was endless, and it never slowed down or paused. Even in the winter when the bees were tucked safely in the hive to ward off the cold and protect their queens, we had to monitor them and make sure everything was the way it was supposed to be.

Not to mention the other animals on the farm, including two dogs, three cats, the chickens, and the ducks. My siblings had also wanted goats, but my parents had put their foot down on that, for which I was grateful. Not to mention our gardens where we grew dozens of varieties of flowers for the bees, and the lavender and other herbs that went into the candles, and my jalapeños that went into the hot honey, which was a new product for us. It had been more of an experiment and I'd wanted to try it after seeing hot honey on so many menus. So far, our customers were loving it and I was working on a mild and a hotter version for more discerning palates.

I yawned as I put on my work boots that I kept by the door and pulled on a sweater. This early, it was still a little chilly outside. I'd be warm in no time though.

As much as it could suck to be up this early, seeing the morning mist hanging in the air made everything feel magical and mysterious. Like I was walking through a

different land. Both of the dogs followed me, bounding around and happy to be outside.

The chickens were warm and grumpy as I searched for eggs and then fed them and checked their water. The ducks greeted me and wiggled their sweet little butts. It always made me laugh. Later on today they were getting their favorite treat of frozen peas. I was going to take a video and add it to our social media. People seemed to love goofy videos of the ducks eating and getting hosed down, so I tried to get some good ones every week.

I waved to Mom, who was already on her knees in the flower gardens and Dad was already checking the hives for the morning. My siblings were supposed to get up and help, but that rarely happened.

Sighing, I went inside the main house to get some breakfast started for everyone. On days when we weren't going to the marketplace, and didn't have morning tours, I liked to make a nice big breakfast for everyone. Mom had made batches of pie crust that we'd frozen, so I pulled two out of the deep freezer and set them to pre-bake while I mixed up some of our fresh eggs, ham, cheese, and green peppers. The coffee burbled away, and I doctored my cup with liberal glugs of caramel creamer. Mom would want tea with honey and lemon, and Dad took his coffee strong and black. The kids would ask for some, but only Ember was allowed a half a cup. My parents had decided sixteen was the right age to have coffee, in spite of Ember having had caffeinated soda years earlier. It didn't make sense, but as long as my siblings had to follow the same rules I did, then I didn't care.

Archer bounced down the stairs while I was pouring the quiche mixture into the pie crusts.

"Good morning to you," I told him as he came over and gave me a hug. He was always chipper in the mornings and his mood got worse as the day went on.



Behind him was Ember, already wearing a scowl on her face, but it brightened a little when I handed her a half cup of coffee with so much creamer it barely resembled coffee anymore. Sweet Ellie was last, padding down with pillow creases on her cheek and her curls sticking up as if she'd been electrocuted.

"Can I help?" she asked.

"Of course you can." I instructed her to get the strawberries from the fridge and the peaches from the counter so we could have a little fruit salad.

"Is there bacon?" Archer asked, resting his chin on the long dining table that was right next to the kitchen. The first floor of the house was almost completely open, with raw wood beams and knotted hardwood original floors. It was exactly what a farmhouse should look like, with red-painted cabinets and a rusted wagon wheel with hooks for the pots and pans.

"No, there isn't any bacon, but there's ham in the quiche," I told him.

Ellie sang softly to herself as she carefully sliced strawberries and peaches. A perfectionist to her core, she made sure each piece was a similar size. I didn't bother to tell her that it didn't matter. She was happy.

"Ember, can you please, please, use your headphones?" I asked as my sister played videos on her phone at full volume.

She huffed, but put them on and I enjoyed the quiet for a few minutes.

It was only a few minutes, because soon my parents came back inside, harmonizing a folk song together.

The day had begun.

The rest of my waking hours were a blur of candle pouring and packing online orders and website admin and attempting to keep my younger siblings from letting their brains rot from too much technology.

“You’re literally always on your phone. That’s a little hypocritical,” Ember said, giving me a smug smile. She’d been studying for her SAT and she’d been flinging all kinds of vocabulary words at us ever since.

“I am not ‘literally’ always on my phone,” I said. Most of the time I was exchanging messages with Bibliofile. I had a few other online friends, but none like her. In fact, I probably had a few messages from her waiting for me.

“Why aren’t you hanging out with your friends?” I asked her. It was unusual for her to spend the entire day here. Several of her older friends had their licenses and were always picking her up to go park in the lot at the local gas station to look cool. I’d been invited to do the same thing when I’d been in high school, but it had seemed like a waste of time and I didn’t like the people who always went over there. They were rude and mean and never talked about anything interesting.

I was happier on the farm or spending the day at the library or even just driving around by myself and listening to whatever music I wanted. It was so peaceful to only have my own thoughts and the music as my company. Some days I’d take a book out with me and sit near the hives and read out loud to the bees. They seemed to enjoy that too.

Ember let out a huffy sound. “Amara is fighting with Ruby over Declan, and Harley and Bryn have just started going out and they don’t want to hang out with anyone else. And Henry is off at theater camp and has a new boyfriend. So. I’m here to avoid drama.” That sounded like a lot.

“What’s the Amara-Ruby-Declan situation?” I asked, sitting down on the couch next

to her. If I didn't do some yoga tonight, my body was going to hate me tomorrow.

Ember rolled her eyes and sighed.

"It's so stupid, okay." She launched into an epic story of teen crushes and betrayal, complete with social media receipts. It reminded me so much of being that young and having crushes and friendships that all felt like the end of the world.

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“So now Amara is pissed and if I talk to Ruby she’s going to be even more pissed, so I’m not talking to either of them because who has time for that?”

“Not me,” I told her, holding back a smile.

“Anyway,” Ember said, as if realizing this was the longest conversation we’d had in months, “that’s what’s happening.”

“You don’t have any crushes of your own?” Ember had come out and said she was questioning her sexuality earlier this year, but she hadn’t landed on a label quite yet. Didn’t matter. She had a whole lifetime ahead of her.

Ember shrugged, but her cheeks were red.

“Oh, so you DO have a crush!” I said, grabbing her arm. “Tell me.”

Ember moaned and tipped sideways into a pillow. Her voice was muffled as she said, “Shut upppppp.”

“Tell me who it is, tell me, tell me,” I chanted, and she sat up, completely red and glaring at me.

“Leave me alone!” She flounced out of the room with her phone as I laughed.

“That’s what big sisters are for,” I called after her.

“What’s going on?” Ellie asked, taking Ember’s seat. I pulled her close in a hug and

whispered in her ear, “Ember has a crush but she won’t tell me who it is.”

“Do you mean Mateo or Lyric?” Ellie asked, snuggling closer. At least one of my siblings still loved me. Archer was outside, the crash of the basketball on the backboard attached to the barn announcing his presence.

“Wait, who are Mateo and Lyric?” I asked.

Ellie rolled her eyes. “Don’t you pay attention at all?”

I hid a snort at how grown up she sounded.

“I guess not. I’ve had other things on my mind. Tell me what you know.”

Ellie had apparently been paying very close attention to Ember and gave me all the details of her many crushes. Seemed as if Ember caught crushes as easily as you could catch a cold and I thought that was adorable.

“But I think she doesn’t really like any of them. She’s actually in love with Bryn, but Bryn’s dating Harley now and Ember is really upset about it. So be extra nice to her, okay?”

This kid.

I kissed the top of her head. “You are the sweetest girl in the history of the world, and I love that about you.”

Ellie giggled as I ticked her in her ribs.

“Stop itttt.”

“Never,” I said, kissing her head again.

“Fuck!” Archer yelled.

“Language!” I yelled back.

“Fudge!” he responded.

“That’s better.”

Siblings.

I checked my personal email later that day and found a message from Bibliofile. We sent messages back and forth all the time, but we also would send longer emails sometimes. Longer musings, clips from articles, all kinds of things. They were mostly a stream of consciousness and I loved it every time I got to open one. If I could have sent her letters, I would have, but this was the next best thing.

Mel,

## Page 11

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Do you ever wonder who you'd be if you'd made one decision differently? I can't help thinking about that all the time. That there are all these different paths in front of me and which flavor latte I order at the cafe is going to send me on a new one. I hope I don't sound like I'm losing my mind. I hope you know what I'm talking about. I feel like if anyone knew what I was talking about, it would be you.

Okay, enough of that. Here's an article about a really cool jellyfish.

-Bibliofile

I read the article about the jellyfish, which was less cool and more completely terrifying. I went upstairs to my computer to type out a response. I could write emails on my phone, but I liked the sound of a keyboard when I typed them out.

Biblio,

Yes, I know EXACTLY what you're talking about. I think about decisions I've made years afterwards and wonder what would have happened if I'd chosen something different. Isn't that what life is? Making choices and living with whatever future those choices give you. That sounds depressing, sorry about that.

Did you know that there are more trees here on Earth than there are stars in the Milky Way galaxy? I think that's pretty impressive and inspiring. Oh, and here's a cool video of some hummingbirds that I saw. That jellyfish is TERRIFYING and I don't trust anything that lives that deep in the ocean.

-Melliferal

## Chapter Five

Bren

I was in the midst of setting up my table at the marketplace on Thursday morning when I could feel Honey watching me. As soon as I glanced over, she wasn't anymore, but I wasn't that unobservant. Mostly because I'd been watching her back.

I was making sure my display was perfectly spaced and fiddling with the last elements when she came over.

"Good morning," she said, as if she'd woken up on the right side of the bed and had a cup of sunshine instead of coffee for breakfast. It was a wonder she hadn't been plucked from Maine to go pretend to be a princess at a theme park or for children's birthday parties. She had that pure, kind, wholesome energy. For some reason, it made my skin break out in little prickles of heat.

Honey wasn't my type. I preferred people who were just as brooding or more so than I was. People who had also had a rough time so we could commiserate. That was when I actually dated, which I rarely did. I'd never even had a committed relationship. There wasn't the time or energy available for it. Everything I had went into my business. Sex was a whole other story.

"Morning," I grunted, hoping my gruffness would dissuade her from trying to make small talk with me.

"I know we've had the spot next to you for a while, but I realized I never gave you a sample of our honey to try. We have hot honey too, if that's more to your liking."

I hadn't turned to look at her, too busy staring a hole in the cloth that covered my table. If I looked at her, I was going to stare, and if I stared, she was going to think I



liked her, and I didn't like her. She was nice to look at, that was it. Everything else about her got on my nerves.

But then a jar of honey entered my line of vision, pushed toward me by her elegant fingers. Her nails were short but painted a light pink that was probably called Baby Whispers or Sweetie Girl or something insipid. She had a few rings on her fingers, including one that had a little gold bee on it. Guess she was really into the whole bee thing.

The jar of honey was cute, a hexagonal shape, a lid with a sticker on top and a little tag with the logo on it as well, tied with a little bit of twine. Very nice packaging and I did love the logo and the font and everything about the way they'd branded themselves. It was pretty and whimsical, when they could have gone in a completely different (tacky) direction.

"Thank you," I said because I wasn't a total asshole. I just wanted her to stop being so sexy and for the rest of her family to stop singing and being loud and intruding into my bubble. I was lucky that I only had them on one side of me. Nearly every other table had one person on either side and sometimes another booth behind as well. I had paid more to only have one other booth next to me. Things had been fine up until the Holloways had gotten here. And now I would have taken being surrounded by other people who weren't them.

"You're very welcome," Honey said, her voice soft. I waited until she walked away to glance over at the booth. The parents were singing as they unboxed jars of honey and set them up. At least they didn't have an instrument today. Sometimes they did. Those were the worst days. It wasn't as if they were bad singers, either. No, they were all talented, but it was just...why? Why the singing in the morning in a building with high ceilings and good acoustics when they hadn't asked anyone around them if they minded?

I'd forgotten my noise-canceling headphones today. That was the origin of my particularly awful mood. Or I was getting my period soon. Both, probably.

My hand closed around the jar of honey and I put it carefully in my bag. The least I could do was bring it home with me. I wasn't going to use it or anything, but as long as she thought I had taken it, that was what mattered.

I wasn't going to use it.

So why was I on my phone two minutes later looking up "recipes using honey?"

Despite the badstart to Thursday, the rest of the day went much better. The Holloways were busy, which meant they weren't in my hair, and I had a lot of business myself. I spent way too long talking with two teen girls about their favorite books and they each bought two book sleeves and tons of stickers and bookmarks. I had to replenish my stash after they left, and I was feeling really great when one of the booths that sold the most delicious challah came around offering samples to everyone. Each piece was slathered in butter or jam from another vendor. I almost grabbed the entire tray, but I held back and took two pieces, one with butter and one with what turned out to be blackberry jam.

Heaven. Absolute heaven.

"Honey goes great on bread," a voice said, and I opened my eyes to find Honey standing in front of my booth.

"Does it now?" I said, wiping my face to make sure I hadn't gotten any jam on my chin.

She nodded and pretended she was perusing my table. She'd done that before, but I just assumed she wasn't interested in anything I was selling.

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“Oh,” she said softly, pulling one of my book sleeves out of the basket. It was one of the simpler fabrics and just so happened to be yellow hexagons that might look like honeycomb. Of course.

“You’re really into the bee thing, aren’t you?” I said before I could consider if it was smart to talk to her like a regular person.

“What can I say? I love them.” She pulled her necklace forward which, you guessed it, had a bee charm.

“I’ll take this one,” she said, tapping it with one of those pink nails.

Was this a joke? Was she messing with me? I narrowed my eyes and then decided she was way too sweet for that. Way too nice. The earnestness just dripped off her. I had to get her away from me as soon as possible.

Normally I would have chatted with a customer as I processed the transaction, but I didn’t do that with her. I simply pointed at the tablet where she could swipe her card and didn’t ask her if she wanted a bag or to have a good day.

She declined the receipt and put her card back in her leather wallet (which had a bee stamped on the front) and gave me a smile as if I’d made her entire day.

“Thanks. I’ve been meaning to get one of these for ages. Have a great afternoon.” With that she flounced back to her table and I was left wondering what the actual hell had just happened.

Why do nice people make me want to stab something? I sent to Melliferal later that night when I'd gotten home.

Every nice person? Or just certain nice people? Because that would be a lot of stabby thoughts to have on a daily basis.

I guess it's just certain people that make me want to stab. And you know I don't REALLY mean stab.

Joking about murder and fantasizing about it in detail were two different things. With someone online, you never knew exactly where they were coming from, so it was important to clarify for her that I didn't actually mean stabbing.

I know. You're not really as mean and stabby as you want me to believe you are. I know we're just internet friends, but I think I know you pretty well. Not details, but I know important things.

As much as I'd tried not to tell her personal details, she knew other things. For some reason it was easier to talk to a stranger on the internet about truly intimate things than speak to someone you'd known for years. There was no baggage, no history that might cloud the advice. I trusted Melliferal with more of myself than anyone else. I'd given her far too much already, but there was no putting all of that back in a box or pretending I hadn't opened up to her.

As long as I didn't share too many other personal details, I wouldn't sink deeper. She wouldn't get any more of me than what I'd already given.

You don't really know me, Melliferal. And I don't know you. I regretted the message the second I sent it.

I'm sorry. It's just been a long day. I don't think I should be talking to anyone right

now.

There.

I waited for a response, but one didn't come. Sighing, I set my phone down and went to check on my printing machines. I was working on a new set of stickers that I was really excited about. The designs were super cute, which was different than my usual more dramatic and darker style, but I wanted to have a range for my customers.

To be honest, I'd tried to channel Honey Holloway when I was designing them. She'd want cute, rounded shapes and fonts and bright colors. I hadn't known how much she was truly into bees until today. I'd figured most of it was just because of the business, but it seemed like she was really into them. So I might have just finished a little bee sticker and was printing it out with the others.

It didn't mean anything. She'd just given me an idea. I also had some flower stickers, so the bee went along with them. Besides, bees were popular. Lots of people liked them. Didn't mean that I'd made the stickers just for her.

It didn't mean anything.

Melliferal didn't get back to me until much later that night. As much as I knew it was my right to put up boundaries with her, I hadn't needed to be such a bitch about it.

I wanted to apologize again, but I'd wanted to wait for her to reach out first to see if she was still interested in talking with me. Melliferal and I hadn't really had that many disagreements in the past. There had been no need to. She'd backed off whenever I'd told her things were getting too personal for me.

I don't know why, but I wanted you to see this. The message was attached to a video of a little girl sitting beside a fence with an accordion. An adult (probably a parent)

encouraged her to play, so she did. Within moments, cows started appearing in the background, as if drawn by the music.

It was adorable and silly and made me smile.

Thanks, I did need to see that. Sorry about snapping at you earlier.

It's okay. I'm used to you being a little bit prickly. I can handle it.

She was always like that. Always smoothing over my rough edges and saying she would take me as I was.

Well, the parts of me she knew. Melliferal would never know all of me.

Thanks. Good mice, Mel.

Good mice, B.

### Chapter Six

#### Honey

I was in love with my new ereader sleeve. I'd been eyeing Bren's booth for weeks and trying to get up the courage to go over and buy something and today I'd finally done it. She'd accepted the honey since I saw her put it in her bag, and she hadn't rejected my purchase.

I stroked the little tag with her business name on it. Wild Prose. There was a rose with thorns in her logo, which I thought was clever and totally Bren.

I hated how much I liked her. Crushes could be inconvenient even when circumstances were ideal, and these were absolutely not. For one, Bren did not like me. This was no secret, even though she thought she was doing a good job of hiding it. Bren didn't like my whole family, but there seemed to be something about me in particular that set her off and I didn't know what it was, but I could take a guess.

I'd been accused by many people in the past of being "too much." Too happy, too loud, too smiley, too positive, too...whatever. It all meant the same thing and it cut deep whenever someone said something like that to me. They'd couch it as advice or trying to help me, but it hurt all the same. Often people would also use it as an excuse to infantilize me. As if I was unaware of how cruel the world could be. As if I was

just a cartoon princess singing and swirling in a dress. Forgetting, of course, that all those cartoon princesses had been through a lot. Cinderella lost her father. Snow White was chased through the woods by a man literally trying to kill her. Belle was trapped in a castle with a terrifying monster that everyone else said would probably kill her. If there was one thing those cartoon princesses knew about, it was pain and trauma and grief.

But people didn't want to hear my treatise on cartoon princesses. They just wanted to make themselves feel superior by bringing someone else down.

I had no time or patience for that. While it hurt to cut people out of my life, I had no qualms about doing it if someone was going to be an asshole.

Bibliofile had been a little mean, yes, but I understood why she'd lashed out a little bit. I'd agreed to her terms when we'd first started talking and I had been chafing against them and having to pull back ever since.

I just...I wanted more. I wanted to know her. What difference did it make if I knew where she lived if I already knew some of her darkest moments from middle school? She might not have given me the names of her bullies, but I knew what they'd done. How they'd made her feel. How the words still hurt years later. I'd told her my own stories in sympathy, and she'd been so wonderfully kind. There was a soft soul under all her prickliness.

There was an ache inside me when we talked sometimes. An itch to reach through a screen and grab her hand and hold it tight so she'd know I was there. I was with her. I was her friend.

I sighed and opened my ereader, trying to decide what book I was going to open. I was an intense mood reader, and I would put a book down in the middle of a sentence if I wasn't feeling it. I was midway through three books, but none of them called to



me, so I scrolled through my library and realized I'd downloaded the newest Eloise Roth and had completely forgotten about preordering it. When it came to books, I mainly read queer romances, but Eloise Roth was one of my Aunt Eileen's favorite authors and I'd been reading her books for years. Even my mom had a few battered paperbacks in the family library from her. She was from Maine, too, which was exciting. Recognizing the places she was talking about was always an extra little treat.

Plus, Eloise Roth had very publicly come out and talked about her girlfriend, so her books might not be queer, but I was more than happy to give my time and energy to a queer author.

Her books really were addicting. I'd never been able to put one down.

Another message from Bibliofile came in as I was finishing the first page of the book. I flicked my eyes down and saw that she'd sent me a video.

It was a person who traveled around the US and made the recipes that some people had requested be carved on their tombstones. It was both sweet and morbid and I found myself getting a little teared up as I watched it.

That's beautiful, thank you.

You're welcome. It made sense to send it to you. I don't know why.

So many things were like that with us. I didn't know why something made me want to tell Bibliofile about it, but it happened multiple times a day. It happened in the middle of the night too. The two of us had never met, but more than a few times, I'd turned as if I was going to say something to her. As if she was sitting right next to me. How silly was that?

She'd become such a presence in my life that it didn't matter that we hadn't met. There was a Bibliofile-shaped space in my life that I hadn't even really built. It had just...happened.

Have you read this one?She asked, sending me a book link. As a matter of fact, I had, and I'd loved it.

Have you? Because I could give a whole PowerPoint presentation on how much I love it.

Bring it onshe responded.

I hida yawn behind my hand as I stacked some new jars of honey and made sure we had an even amount of each candle scent and that they were all in perfect rows.

My siblings were also in rare form today. Ellie was in a bleak mood and I couldn't coax a smile out of her, and Ember was still fighting with her friends. At least Archer was finally at his basketball camp for the next two weeks. We wouldn't have his extra hands at the marketplace or on the farm, but he was sporadic about helping at best. It was honestly easier for me to just go ahead and do everything.

My parents had two of their Beekeeping for Beginners workshops today, so they were back at the farm, which was also better. Still, I was ready for bed and the day hadn't even started.

I wished the tea I worked on preparing was caffeinated. Instead I'd have to wait until everything was quiet for a moment and hope that Ember and Ellie could watch our table while I ran to the bathroom and maybe grabbed a matcha. God, that would be so good right now. An iced matcha with cream and then I'd add a few spoonfuls of our wildflower honey. There was nothing better.

Realizing it was almost time to open, I snapped my fingers at Ember, who had been frowning at her phone and furiously typing for the last ten minutes and set the tray with the free honey sample sticks in Ellie's hands.

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“Cheer up, Ellie Belly,” I told her, stroking her hair.

“Okay, Honey,” she said in a dull voice, practically ripping my heart open. Maybe I should send her home, but there was no one to come get her unless I asked Aunt Eileen, but she had MS and I didn’t like to burden her if I could help it.

“Hey,” I said, leaning down a little bit to look in Ellie’s eyes, “can you do me a big favor?”

Her eyes lit up just a little. There.

“Can you go and get me an iced matcha? And you can get yourself a strawberry lemonade.” Buying treats at the marketplace couldn’t happen every weekend or else my siblings would eat and drink their way through all our profits. But to cheer up my little sister, I could spare a few dollars for an organic, fresh squeezed strawberry lemonade.

I gave Ellie the money and she dashed off as the doors opened and the first round of customers filed in. I smiled and picked up the tray of honey samples and got ready.

Movement in the corner of my eye showed me that Bren was doing the same thing, but her smile was more forced. She’d be better if someone came over and was excited about her wares. Then her smile was more subtle, but it was genuine. You really saw it when a customer talked with her about books. Then she’d get fully into using her hands and nodding and sometimes she’d even softly laugh.

Bren just wasn’t an overly emotive person, but her pleasure when conversing about

books was beautiful to see.

And my crush just kept growing and growing, taking up space in my chest. Sooner or later, it was going to start pushing against my organs. And then there was whatever the hell I felt for Bibliofile, squeezed in around everything else, making it hard to breathe.

Ellie returned with the drinks and I swirled honey into the matcha before sipping and letting out an involuntary sound.

“Ew,” Ember said from the floor where she’d been sitting behind our table.

“I’m sorry that I take pleasure in the simple things, Ember. You should try it sometime.”

“Not if I’m going to sound like I’m...you know.” I looked over the table to find her with a reddened face.

“No, I don’t know, what do you mean?” I asked, but she couldn’t answer because several people walked up and I had to hit the pause button on that little discussion and abandon the beautiful matcha until no one was around.

Time to work.

By the time I got back to my matcha, the ice was melted and everything was watered down, but it was still delicious and improved my morning. Ellie seemed to perk up with her strawberry lemonade and was doing her thing giving out samples. People just thought she was the cutest and couldn’t help but say yes to her. Maybe it was shady, but we had to use every single tool at our disposal.

Mom called when I was shoving a veggie hummus wrap in my face and left a

message that someone local had called for me to come and remove bees from a lawn chair in someone's yard next week. It might be the perfect removal to film, which meant I would have to prevail upon one of my sisters to come and be in charge of that part while I dealt with the bees.

"Hey, Ellie, do you want to help me rescue some bees on Monday?" I asked and for the first time that day, she truly smiled.

"Yeah, can I help?" She'd gone with me enough times and was so gentle with the bees and she'd never been scared at all. Ellie was a natural with all creatures. They seemed to flock to her. Sometimes I joked that she was a secret princess and one day she'd finally get her crown and rule her kingdom with the help of all her animal friends. If I could have made that future for her, I would have. I'd just have to settle for buying her a tiara and loving her as fiercely as I could.

"Of course. I need someone to help and film for me." Ellie bounced on her heels and I was so relieved to see her enthusiasm. I was still going to try and talk to her when we got home and tell Mom that she might want to check on her too. All of us kept a special eye on Ellie.

"Okay," Ellie said, loading up the tray with some more samples to pass out.

I sent Mom a message back that we could do the job and I'd check the details later. The job was exciting and even though I might not prefer to be in front of the camera, the videos really helped get eyes on our business and help drive people to our online store. I'd have to enlist my siblings to fill orders next week because we had a huge shipment for a wedding that needed to go out. Packing and shipping glass jars wasn't an easy task and required exacting standards to make sure everything got to where it was going in one piece.

Just thinking about all of it made me pre-tired, but it had to be done. At least my

parents took charge of most of it.

A message from Aunt Eileen came in and I read the goofy meme and laughed before putting my phone away again. I needed to go see Aunt Eileen. It had been too long. I'd drive over and grab her and we could go out and do something together. Even more than my own mother, Aunt Eileen was the one I relied on for the best life advice. Unlike my mom, who would tell me to sing or spend time in the garden when I was wrestling with something, Aunt Eileen would tell me when I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself or when I needed to suck it up and get my shit together. There was a no-nonsense energy about her that I really needed sometimes. I could get too in my head about things, think too hard about how something would affect everyone else and not even consider my own internal feelings about it. She'd admonish me to stop putting myself last and start letting my parents take a little more responsibility. Aunt Eileen had no qualms about telling me what she really thought about my mother.

At the very least, I owed her a phone call. I'd try tonight, if I didn't pass out too early.

Bren's voice penetrated the commotion around me as she explained how her book sleeves were waterproof and could protect your paperbacks and hardbacks, and which sizes would fit most books.

For just a moment, I allowed myself to watch her out of the corner of my eye. A little reward for myself for ignoring her for most of today.

Her face was relaxed as she held up one of her book sleeves and showed how the book fit inside and closed it with the clever little button and loop. I needed to get more of them for my books. If I wasn't careful, I'd buy her entire booth just to get her to notice me. As if I even had the money. If I was rich, I would. Then again, if I was rich, I probably wouldn't be working here at the marketplace and I wouldn't have met her in the first place, and that would have been a huge shame.

My perusal of Bren only lasted a few moments, because I had customers of my own and tea to pass out and questions to answer and sales to make.

What would you do with a million dollars? I wrote to Bibliofile after I'd finished chores and dinner that night. I still needed to call Eileen, but I wanted to talk to Biblio first.



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She didn't answer right away, so I just stared at my phone as I lay on my stomach in bed. If I wasn't careful, I was going to fall asleep like this.

Hmmm, probably buy a house. Pay off my loans. All that practical shit. I frowned as I read her message.

And after you did all that, what would you buy? Not something you need, something you want.

Biblio was a practical person, I knew, but there had to be something frivolous that she'd been aching to own.

Okay fine. I'd buy an old church that was falling apart and I'd fix it up and renovate it into a house. I've seen other people do things like that online and I think it would be amazing to do a project like that.

Wow. That was a completely unexpected answer. I liked it a lot.

I know it's not super fancy like that, but there's this set of ceramic spice jars that are shaped like little houses and they come as a set and I've always coveted them. Wanted to have them in my own kitchen. I did have a tiny kitchen in my apartment, but most of my cooking was done in the main house. Someday I might have my own big kitchen where I got to decide where everything went, and the space would be all mine. I could make pie crust with no one bothering me or stealing the fruit or asking me to stop and do something else.

I like your idea better, though I added.

Her idea was definitely better than mine.

Yours is much more attainable. I don't think I'll ever have that much money at my disposal. Nor would I, but I liked thinking about things like that.

Dropping the conversation with Biblio there, I called my aunt.

"It's about damn time you called me, Honey Bunny." She'd always called me that.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. How are you?"

She sighed. "Oh, I'm as good as can be expected. You don't need to hear the laundry list of problems. I'm guessing since you finally got your act together to call me, something is on your mind." Nothing got past Aunt Eileen.

Now it was my turn to sigh. "Just...life. Everything." I told her how the farm was doing and how my siblings were and how my parents were, and she eventually interrupted me.

"That's all well and good, but what about you, my girl? What about you?"

Aunt Eileen had two kids, my cousins Jeremy and Brent, who were both at least five years older than me. They'd both gone away to college and lived in different states, Jeremy in Chicago with his partner and Brent all the way in Seattle. Since I still lived so close, she spent her extra attention on me.

"I have a crush on two people," I blurted out.

"Hold on, this sounds like I'm going to need something." I heard her rustling around and then the clink and swish as if she was pouring liquid into a glass.

“Okay, I’ve got my scotch.”

“Aunt Eileen! Are you allowed to have scotch?”

“You hush. I get enough scolding from my husband, leave me alone and tell me what’s going on.”

This woman was something else.

She listened as I told her about my crushes on Biblio and Bren. Aunt Eileen already knew about Biblio (just not the crush part) because I’d talked about her often enough. I hadn’t told her about Bren yet.

“Ohh, my girl, you’re in the thick of it, aren’t you?”

I laughed a little. “Yeah, I am.”

“Firstly, you don’t actually know if this Bren doesn’t like you. You’ve just decided that. And looks can be deceiving. You’ve only seen her when she’s at work.” That was true.

“If you saw me when I was working, you would have thought I was a raging bitch.” She paused for a moment. “You would have been right, but that’s not the point.” She cackled at her own joke and I snorted.

“You need to see her in a different environment. And maybe with someone else who can get the temperature of the interaction. That’s my advice. And if she really doesn’t like you? Then fuck her, she’s not worth your time and she has terrible taste. You are a damn angel, Honey. Anyone who can’t see that has something wrong with them.”

I choked on a breath, unable to think of anything to say to that for a few moments.

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“I think you might be a little biased, Aunt Eileen.”

“Biased my ass. I’m right.”

I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation.

“Now onto the other one. This online friend? My girl, you don’t know this person. I know you think you do, but how can you when you’re never met? They could be lying about everything.” My first instinct was to argue. To tell her that I did know Bibliofile. That we had shared so many things with her. No one, not even my family, knew that I wanted that spice set collection. I’d told Biblio so many things I’d never dream of telling someone else.

But Aunt Eileen was also right that I didn’t know some very important things about Bibliofile that I’d have to know if my crush was going to go anywhere.

“This online person could be in a relationship. They could be emotionally cheating with you. Did you think about that possibility?”

I had, but so far everything with Biblio had been completely platonic. Anytime things got flirty (which was usually me taking things there because I couldn’t help myself), Biblio would just stop responding to me for a while. She’d go dark and then a while later she’d come back and pretend that nothing had happened. And I’d be extra careful for days afterward to make sure she knew I wasn’t trying to push her into anything.

Bibliofile was my friend, first and foremost. I’d rather live with an unrequited crush

for the rest of my life if it meant that I got to keep talking to her. Even if we never met. Even if I never knew her real name. It would be worth it.

I explained all that to Aunt Eileen and she sighed again.

“Honey Bunny, I think you’re lonely.”

I scoffed. “I’m literally surrounded by people all the time. How could I possibly be lonely?”

“You can be lonely standing in a stadium full of people. What about friends?”

We’d had this talk before.

“I have friends,” I said, sounding petulant.

“Other than me? Other than your online person?”

I had acquaintances that I said hello to. I had people who I promised to call for coffee or some other thing that we never did. Friends? I didn’t have the time, even if I wanted them.

“You’re so young, my girl. You have all this life out ahead of you. I want you to go out and do something social next week. This is not a suggestion.” Her tone was firm, and I knew there was no use arguing. I could be stubborn, but Aunt Eileen was older and had more years of practice winning battles.

Arguments raced through my head, but she wasn’t going to listen to any of them. There were always reasons I couldn’t go out and do something. Always something happening at the farm. Always something going on with my siblings or my parents.

“Okay,” I said.

“Wow, you didn’t even fight me that hard. Good job,” she said. “And when you go out and do something fun for yourself, I want you to take a picture and send it to me. I’m going to need evidence of this adventure.”

Honestly. This was ridiculous.

“Okay, fine. I’ll do it.”

Eileen snorted. “You’re acting like I’m forcing you to get a pap smear. I want you to go out and have fun. Be young while you are young! Jesus Christ, girl.”

Well when she put it like that, it was a little silly. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to do fun things. There were just so many other things that seemed more important than fun.

“I’m going to do it, I promise.”

She harrumphed. “You’d better.”

## Chapter Seven

Bren

It was karaoke night at Sapph and I had picked the wrong night to come out, but I was here, so I’d have to suffer through it. While a beautiful butch murdered Melissa Etheridge, I tried to get one of the bartender’s attention.

Coming to Sapph was better than going to any other bar, plus, there were beautiful people to look at everywhere.

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“What can I get you, hon?” the bartender with both arms covered in tattoos asked. She also had sparkling surface piercings on her clavicles that were revealed by the tank top she wore. This was why I came to Sapph.

“I’ll have a SoCo and Coke with lime,” I said. It was a boring drink, but I liked it and saw no reason to change.

The bartender grinned at the easy order and went to make it for me.

The Melissa Etheridge murderer finished her song with a flourish and a small group near the stage cheered as two new singers stepped up to the mic.

I was gonna hear so much Chappell Roan and Tegan and Sara and Hayley Kiyoko getting destroyed tonight. Could be worse.

It was hard to even take a deep breath with how many people were stuffed into the bar. Coming here in the summer on a weekend was always a gamble, yet here I was.

The bartender returned with my drink and I told her to open a tab for me. My apartment wasn’t that far, but I’d called a car to bring me to and from anyway.

Moving away from the mayhem at the bar with everyone trying to order drinks, I searched for anywhere to stand where I wouldn’t be smashed up against at least three other sweaty bodies.

Not much luck. It was hard enough moving forward and not spilling my drink all over the floor.

That was a challenge, but I finally found a corner where I could squish myself and have a little room. Close enough. I set my sights on that spot and stepped as quickly as I could toward it.

I'd had to scoot near the bathroom doors to reach my corner, and one of them flew open, nearly smacking me in the face.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry."

Honey. Honey Holloway. Honey Holloway was coming out of the bathroom at Sapph.

I dropped my drink, which was fortunately in a plastic cup so there wasn't any glass on the floor, but it made a huge puddle and splashed all over my jeans and shoes.

"Fuck!" I yelled, and several people turned and booed at me for spilling my drink. Within moments, someone who worked at Sapph came forward to wipe up the mess. Honey seemed frozen in horror.

"I'm... I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry! I'll get you a new drink. Are you okay?" She reached out to me as if I'd been physically injured.

"I'm fine," I said through gritted teeth. I'd worn sneakers tonight and the cold drink was already soaking through the canvas and into my socks. I didn't want another drink. I wanted not to have wet fucking shoes or be the freak who dropped a drink at Sapph.

I put both hands up. "Leave me alone."

Shoving past her, I squelched into the bathroom and went to the sink to see what I could do. Nothing. There was nothing to do. I needed a change of clothes and shoes



that I didn't have with me.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and pulled up the app to order a ride home.

This was what I got for leaving my apartment and trying to be around other people.

"Bren?" Her voice was soft, but somehow cut through everything else, including the group scream-singing "Good Luck Babe."

I looked into the mirror to find Honey standing behind me, her face blooming with a blush that somehow made her even prettier. The blush went all the way down to her chest, drawing my attention to the cleavage revealed by her low-cut top.

Stop staring at her tits, Bren. This woman is the reason you have wet and sticky socks right now.

"Leave me alone," I said, washing my hands in the sink so I had something to do instead of looking at her. A look of hurt crossed her face as if I was the one who had wronged her.

"I'm so sorry. Do you need anything?"

"Do you have a new pair of jeans, shoes, and socks in my size on you?" I snapped, rinsing my hands under the water. I reached for one of the scratchy brown paper towels to dry off.

"Well, no. But...I have to do something. I feel awful."

"You're not the one with wet feet."

Normally I wouldn't be so mean about this, but I'd come out tonight and had barely

gotten here and the night had been ruined.

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I wiggled my toes and winced.

“Maybe I can—” she started to say, and I finally turned around and looked at her.

“I’m going home,” I said and squelched toward the door. I didn’t care if she followed.

Once I got outside the bar, I felt like I could breathe more easily. A small group of smokers lingered on the sidewalk, puffing into the air. At least it wasn’t winter, so I wasn’t going to freeze my ass off. I went back to the app and ordered a car to come get me.

“Bren?”

Oh my god, couldn’t she leave me alone? I didn’t bother to turn around.

“At least let me get you a ride.”

“You drove here?” I asked as she stepped up to my side. I kept my head right ahead.

“Yeah, but I can call a car for you. On me. It’s the least I can do.”

“I already did,” I said.

That didn’t deter her. “Then tell me how much it is, and I’ll send it to you.”

I rolled my eyes. This was a bit much. It wasn’t going to cost very much to get me home.

“You don’t have to do that. It was an accident.” If we were being exact, I was the one who had dropped a drink at the shock of seeing her.

“I still feel bad.”

My car was still eight minutes away. Fuck.

“I can’t help you with that.” I shuffled from foot to foot. My feet were no longer cold, so at least there was that.

“I’ll wait with you,” she said, and that made me face her.

“What?”

She shrugged. “I’ll wait with you. It’s late and you’re here by yourself so I’ll wait for your ride with you.”

My eyebrows went up and I glanced around. “This isn’t exactly a high-crime area.”

“I know. But still. It’ll help you pass the time.”

What was with this woman?

“Plus, now you don’t have to hear ‘Pink Pony Club.’ Again.”

Against my will, I laughed, and that made Honey smile.

Fuck, she could do anything with that smile. Cheeks and dimples and beautiful eyes and the kind of warmth that made you feel like you were standing under a ray of sun, even though it was night.

“They should make a rule that you can only sing certain songs twice before you’re cut off,” I found myself saying.

“Agreed. And what about the classics? ‘Fast Car,’ anybody?”

I shook my head. “Very few people can do that song justice. Why risk it?”

Honey sighed. “Ah, I guess you’re right. What song would you do?”

I choked. “I would never get up and sing. Never ever.”

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Honey rolled her eyes. “I know that. But if you did. In some alternative universe.”

There was absolutely no universe where I would do that, but she made me want to play along.

“I think I’d do ‘Boyfriend.’ What about you?”

“The standard. ‘Girls Like Girls.’” I bet she’d kill it.

Silence fell between us for a moment.

“Why did your parents name you Honey?” I blurted out. I hadn’t meant to ask her that. At least, not like this.

She beamed at me and I had to stop myself from leaning closer to her.

“Believe it or not, they named me honey before they owned the apiary. They didn’t buy the farm and do the bee thing until I was in high school. They named me Honey because they thought it was a sweet, unique name.” She shrugged. “And my middle name Beatrix is for Beatrix Potter. Of course.”

I gave her a blank look. The name sort of rung a bell, but I couldn’t come up with any specifics. Maybe something about books?

“You know, the children’s author? Who did the cute little watercolors of the animals? Peter Rabbit? Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle? Jemima Puddle-Duck?”

I couldn't stop staring at her. Was she speaking English?

But Honey just giggled. "Hold on."

She typed on her phone and then thrust it in front of my face.

"See?"

I scrolled through a few watercolor illustrations and they looked vaguely familiar.

"Didn't your parents ever read the books to you?"

Clenching my teeth, I handed the phone back. "No."

"Oh," she said, and I didn't like the scrutiny she was giving me.

"Anyway. I think it's pretty cool to be named after her. You know she never married? In my own personal headcanon, she was a lesbian. No idea if it's true or not, but it could be. I like to think about things like that."

Was she serious?

I glanced down at my phone. The car was still five minutes away. An eternity. At this rate, I should just walk. Maybe then I'd get away from her.

"You should come back. Next week. I'll buy you a drink and I'll make sure it doesn't spill. Please." If she hadn't added that last little word, I would have told her to fuck off. I absolutely would have told her to fuck off.

But that little word and the way she said it made me want to say yes.

Instead I said, “maybe.”

She smiled as if I’d said yes and then said something else, but I was doing my best to ignore her. To tune her out. I couldn’t do that, but I could make sure that I wasn’t listening to every single word she said.

Instead I focused on the tone of her voice, her eagerness, her earnestness. She really was sunshine in the dark.

At last, the car arrived and she waved at me as I got in and the driver confirmed I was the right passenger and they were taking me to the correct location.

Honey stood outside the car and gave me a little wave before the driver pulled away from the curb.

Against my will, I turned around and watched her through the window until the driver turned at the end of the street.

The first thing I did when I got home was to strip naked and get in the shower to scrub off the soda and alcohol residue from my skin. It was a relief to wash it away and get into some comfortable clothes. After, I fed a screaming Arson and told her all about what had happened.



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I'd been on the fence about going to Sapph and I should have just stayed home with my book or some work.

It was rare that I took a night off, but eventually I got to the point where I had to. There was only so much work you could do before burning out and I couldn't afford to be out of commission. Taking care of myself was just good business sense.

My night off had turned into something else and I was still grumpy about it. I wasn't that upset about my shoes and jeans. That was partially my fault anyway. If anyone else had walked out of that bathroom, I would have been over it by now.

But no. The person who came out of the bathroom just had to be Honey Holloway. Honey Holloway, at the sapphic bar, wearing an outfit that showed her body and made her look like the kind of woman you'd dream about but never see in real life. And then she'd talked to me about her name and blathered on about nonsense while she waited with me.

For some reason she just always got under my skin. It wasn't fair how often I had to see her every week and then on my night off, she'd infiltrated Sapph?

Some cosmic force was playing a joke on me.

"Why did it have to be her?" I asked Arson. She just slow-blinked at me and started licking one of her paws.

I hope you're doing something better than what I'm doing tonightI sent to Melliferal.

She didn't answer right away, which meant she probably was doing something better than staying at home and reading like I was. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but when I'd had my mind set on having a drink at Sapph and staring at the beautiful people, reading was a little bit of a letdown.

At least no one in my books would spill SoCo and Coke all over me. That was a plus.

Deciding to make the best of things, I put on my softest and most favorite socks, a sheet mask that I'd been saving that had gold or something in it, and made myself a little vodka cranberry with lime. At least I didn't have to hear any karaoke singers.

I scrolled through my ereader and perused the paperbacks and hardcovers I had on my two shelves of books I still needed to read. Okay, so it was three shelves. Reading books and buying books were two different hobbies and I was better at one than the other, especially when I had to visit the bookshop regularly for work.

Nothing on my shelves was grabbing me, so I perused my ereader and selected a new release that was supposed to rip your heart out. That sounded like exactly what I needed. Someone else's struggles to lose myself in for a while.

## Chapter Eight

### Honey

I really did feel horrible about what had happened with Bren. She didn't seem like the kind of person who would even go to Sapph in the first place and then I'd surprised her and wrecked her night. I'd done my best to salvage the situation, but she'd just completely shut down on me no matter what I'd done. So I blabbered and tried to make pleasant small talk so we weren't standing there silently waiting for her car. That probably annoyed her more, but I didn't know how to do anything else. For a second, I even thought about singing, but she might have strangled me and that would

have ruined both of our nights.

So I sent her off in a car and had to decide if I went back into Sapph, or if I went home. Aunt Eileen's words ran through my head. She'd told me to go out and here I was. I hadn't even had the chance to order a drink when I'd needed to hit the restroom to pee.

If I left now, then I was giving in. And I had been having a good time, the few minutes I'd been there. Sure, the karaoke was mostly offensive to my ears, but it was all in good fun. If I had a few drinks in me, I might even get up and sing.

I turned around after watching Bren's car vanish around a corner and went back into Sapph.

A little while later, I had a pink drink in my hand and was posing for a selfie to send to Aunt Eileen as evidence I was out and having a good time.

The drink was sweet and fruity and masked the taste of the alcohol, which was exactly the kind of drink I liked, so I did my best to pace myself and not gulp it too fast.

I'd somehow managed to find a corner far enough away from the bathrooms and the karaoke that I could actually hear myself think. I sipped and breathed a sigh of relief when there was a break in the karaoke madness for some real music. Bopping along, I looked around at all the beautiful people. A few caught my eye, but I was still thinking about Bren. I wished she was here with me. No doubt she'd be scowling at everyone and grumbling about something under her breath, but maybe I could tease her and drag her out onto the dance floor, doing my best to make her smile.

That was the fantasy. Reality wasn't that kind. I'd never made Bren laugh, not even close. And after making her spill her drink, she was going to be even more annoyed

by me when I saw her tomorrow. That was going to be awkward. I fully intended to pay her back for the drink, though. She had her payment accounts linked on her displays at the marketplace so it would be easy to send it to her. She might reject it, but I was going to try. And if I ever saw her at Sapph again, I'd buy her another one.

Aunt Eileen sent me back a message that she was thrilled I was out and having a good time. And then she told me to find someone cute to kiss, but I wasn't going to do that. Besides, the last few people I'd kissed had been total disasters.

A few people approached me and asked to buy me a drink or have a dance and I said no. I could have just gone and danced, but I was scared. After my last several completely awful relationships, I was terrified to try again.

My most recent girlfriend, Mila, had left me for her high school boyfriend when she'd gone to her ten-year reunion and had informed me that our eight-month relationship was over via a drunken voice note, and again via text in the morning.

I should have known she wasn't serious about me because she always said, "why do we have to put a label on it?" whenever I asked if she was my girlfriend, or if we could talk about our relationship. But she'd been sweet when she wanted to be, was funny as hell, and the sex was pretty good. I'd been all too happy to pretend those red flags weren't slapping me in the face until it was too late.

Some people only got their hearts broken once in their life. I seemed to have drawn some sort of cosmic short straw and I'd had mine broken a few too many times already. That was why I wasn't dancing with beautiful women or letting pretty people buy me drinks or any of that. One minute I'd be having a good time and the next I'd get the feeling like the world had dropped out from under my feet and I'd know I'd caught feelings again.

Keeping my distance was not only smart, it was good for my health.

Admire from afar, that was the way to go. Gotta keep my heart safe for the next person who was going to break it.

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The karaoke started up again and I did have a good time watching people sing their hearts out without managing to hit one single note. I could have gotten up to sing, but I only ended up having two drinks over the time I was there. I'd need at least three or more before I'd subject myself to this crowd, not that they were anything but supportive.

Singing with my family was one thing, but singing on my own in front of a bunch of attractive lesbians wasn't on my agenda tonight. Things were just starting to turn a little wild and the dancing got sloppier and sexier. That was when I knew it was my time to leave. I wished I was the kind of person who could grab someone for a quick and dirty fingerbang in the bathroom, but I had fallen in love with literally everyone I'd ever had sex with.

I was cursed.

I decided against driving my truck home and called for a car instead, wondering how Bren was doing. I realized I'd missed a message from Bibliofile, asking if I'd been doing anything fun.

I went out and had some drinks by myself. Aren't you proud of me? I left the house.

Her answer came through as I stood outside away from the smokers while I waited.

Going out isn't always the best. I went out and regretted it. Now I'm home reading.

She sent me the link for the book, and it was one I had preordered but hadn't read yet. Most of the time, I gravitated more toward low-conflict fluffy romances, but then

there were times when all I wanted was to have my heart ripped out and mended, or to let myself have a good cry. There was nothing like letting all those emotions out over a beautiful story, wiping your eyes, sighing, and then putting the book away.

Going home to read is always the best place to be. You know we both agree on that.

It was one of the first conversations we'd had. About how we valued our reading time more than almost everything else.

The car continued to drive out of the city and toward the suburbs. Our farm was so close to the city, but it seemed a thousand miles away.

I rested my head back on the seat and exhaled. Going out was tiring. Tomorrow I was going to be dragging my ass, but I'd made Aunt Eileen happy, so that was something. I knew how much she worried about me. Too much, definitely. At least I wasn't still hung up on Mila anymore.

I must have blinked and dozed off or something because a second later the car was pulling into the driveway and dropping me off. I made sure to thank the driver, and give the max amount of stars as well as a tip.

The exterior lights had come on, but everyone was already in bed, except for the glow of something electronic in Ember's room that I could see.

I pulled myself upstairs to my apartment and headed immediately for the shower.

I'd been tired when I got in, but by the time I got out, I was getting a second wind for some reason. My skin tingled with energy and I wanted to do something pointless, like rearranging my furniture or reorganizing my bookshelves.

Instead I opened the book that Bren was reading and decided to start it and go until I

passed out.

My alarm came far too early the next morning and all I wanted to do was lay in bed and sleep for another three hours at least. I couldn't, though. It was another day at the marketplace, which meant I had to get all my chores done and feed everyone before we left and I got my truck from where I'd parked it.

I allowed myself to curse as much as I wanted to as I got dressed and pulled my boots on. Robotically, I went through feeding the chickens and the ducks, waving to my dad as he checked the bees, nodded at my mom in the garden, and did all the other random things you had to do every damn day to get a farm and apiary running.

My parents were doing a "meet the beekeepers" weekend, so it was up to me to manage the booth at the marketplace.

Ellie was in the kitchen when I returned from replenishing the little farm stand we had out by the mailbox with our fresh eggs. People would come by and get what eggs they wanted and leave cash. You'd think it would give people encouragement to steal, but that had only happened once. We had a security camera, but it had been broken for months. I kept forgetting to order a replacement.

Just another thing I couldn't remember to do.

Too many things. I had too many things to juggle and I was so close to dropping a bunch of them.

I cut myself some slack by heating up frozen waffles and making scrambled eggs for breakfast and chucking some blackberries into a bowl. Archer was still at basketball camp, so I had one less mouth to feed, which was nice.

We got to the marketplace later than I wanted to, but it couldn't be helped. I rushed



around and did my best to get everything looking perfect. Bren was already here and was fiddling with her bookmarks. Her table was always pristine and perfect. True, she did it all by herself, but sometimes my siblings were more of a hindrance than a help.

Ellie was in a much better mood and asked if she could get a strawberry lemonade if she got me a matcha. I shouldn't have said yes, but I couldn't escape the lure of the matcha, so I sent her off along with an order from Ember for an iced half-caf coffee with a million syrups and nonsense. Ellie sweetly wrote down the order and dashed off to get it for us.

Ember was on her phone again but didn't grumble too much when I asked her to open a new box of honey and start passing me jars.

"And can you please go fill up the water for tea?" I asked.

"Fine," she said, which almost made me fall over.

I made sure everything else was ready and we only had a few minutes to spare, but I grabbed the QR code from Bren's sign and sent her twenty bucks. Immediately, her phone went off and her head snapped over to me after she read the notification.

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“What the hell is this?” she asked, stomping over and holding up her phone.

“It’s for the drink last night. I’m really sorry. Again.”

Bren clenched her teeth and if I could have come up with a perfect word for her current expression, it was “seething.”

She was still pissed at me.

Bren opened her mouth as if she was going to give me a tongue lashing but then she snapped her jaw shut and stormed the few feet back to her table.

My first instinct was to go to her and try and smooth things over, but Ellie came up with my matcha and that was all I could see at the moment. Bren might need some time to cool off and the doors were opening in a few seconds. There wasn’t time for us to get into it, and I also didn’t want to distract her from her business. That would only piss her off more.

So I left her alone and did my best to ignore her, which wasn’t an easy task, even with the weekend crowds that acted like they’d never seen honey before.

To be fair, our honey was exceptionally good, if I did say so myself. And then when they heard we had hot honey made with our own organic jalapeños grown on our farm? They were so happy.

One of these days, when I actually had some free time, I was going to write a Holloway Apiary cookbook with some of our favorite recipes using our honey. Mom

thought it was a wonderful idea, but it required time. Most of what I made was based on my own instincts and I was very much a “measure with your heart” kind of person, so I’d have to actually sit down and figure out exact measurements.

Someday. I’d get to it someday. I also wanted to do beautiful watercolor illustrations of everything to go with the book. The logo and the labels were all done by me, using a combination of watercolors and graphic design that I’d taught myself using tutorials online. I was pretty proud of the final result and got a lot of compliments on everything, which was so rewarding. I should spend more time doing my watercolor art, but it was hard to get up the energy and find my supplies and even have the mental energy to think about what to paint.

“Yes, they do come in different sizes,” I heard Bren say over the general marketplace noise.

“Would you like some tea? It’s chamomile with our wildflower honey,” I said, holding out a tray to a group of women passing by. They stopped and took the little cups of tea, sipped and said it was good but drifted away when I tried to pitch our honey. One thing you had to get used to as a salesperson: rejection.

I handed the tray to Ellie, because she was much better at luring people toward the table and went to check our cash and make sure we had enough bags.

“Shit!” I heard someone curse and I looked up to find Bren frowning down at her finger.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, fine. Just cut my finger.”

Immediately I reached under our table for the first aid kit. I never went anywhere

without having supplies on hand.

Giving Ember a look to get off her ass, I walked over to where Bren was still frowning at her finger and dabbing at it with a napkin.

“Stop that,” I said, surprised at the sharpness in my voice. “Let me see.”

She stared at me. “It’s nothing.” Leaning away from me, I had a momentary thought that she was going to hiss at me like a feral cat with a thorn in its paw.

“Come on, don’t be a baby,” I told her. If she was going to act like a child, I was going to treat her like one. I wasn’t leaving her without getting some antiseptic spray, antibiotic cream, and a band aid on that cut. This woman wasn’t going to die of sepsis on my watch.

Bren sputtered at me, but then she gasped when I just reached out and took her hand.

Carefully, I wiped the small cut with a wipe, and she hissed.

“Sorry. It’s going to sting.”

“You could have warned me,” she grumbled.

I concentrated on cleaning the cut before squeezing a small dollop of antiseptic lotion on a band aid and then winding it around her finger, making sure it wasn’t too tight to cut off her circulation.

“There. All better,” I said, placing a kiss on top of the band aid like I would have done for my siblings. Her gasp made me realize what I’d just done.

“I’m sorry!” I said, dropping her hand and gathering up the supplies with a blush all

over my face and chest and probably my entire body. I'd just kissed her boo boo. What the hell was wrong with me?

Bren just continued to stare at me, but I turned away, throwing the first aid kit back under the table and rushing to the bathroom to wash off my hands. And to throw myself in the toilet and try and flush myself away due to humiliation.

## Chapter Nine

Bren

Did...didshe just kiss my finger? I couldn't believe that was a thing that had actually happened until her eyes went wide, her face turned a shade of red I'd never seen on a human face before and she literally ran away.

The whole situation was bizarre. She'd just...bullied her way in and tended my (very minor) wound as if that was a thing we did. As if we weren't pretty much strangers. As if I wasn't still annoyed at her for the whole drink thing at Sapph from last night.

It was my own fault for cutting myself while using the scissors. I'd been unable to get my mind to relax last night and as a result, had only slept for a few hours. My patience was already on thin ice, as well as my attention. I hadn't been careful, and I'd paid the price for it. At least the cut was minor. It would heal in a few days.

Honey had treated it as if it was serious. I'd watched her in shock as she'd bent over my hand and had tended to me with both competence and efficiency. Something told me she'd handled a few wounds before from her siblings. For a moment, I imagined her patching up a skinned knee with that little kiss.

My finger tingled. Definitely from the antiseptic spray. Definitely just that.

When was the last time someone had touched me like that? I had absolutely no idea. As a general rule, people didn't touch me. I tried to recall a single time my parents had hugged me and couldn't. Friends? Not really. Sexual partners were more for quickies and less for holding and comforting. I'd never needed all of that.

Still, I flexed my finger with the bandage and tried to shake myself out of whatever trance that Honey had put me into when she'd barged into my space.

"Ohhh, these are so cute!" a voice said. Looking up, I saw three girls who were in their late teens admiring my book sleeves. Time to go back to work.

I was reluctant to peel off the band aid when I got home that night. It had been easy to avoid Honey the rest of the day because she avoided me. That was a first. I could almost feel her doing her best not to give me any kind of attention. She was working so hard so not notice me that it gave me a chance to study her. Give myself a chance to appreciate her body and the way she moved. The way she gave each person her full attention, as if they were the most important person in the world. Something about those eyes and her smile that just... Sunshine. She was human sunshine and you wanted to bask beneath her rays.

Not me, but someone else. Anyone else. I didn't want to linger in her light. I was just forced to be blinded by her every now and then.

Shaking my head at myself, I peeled off the band aid and got into the shower. The hot water made the cut twinge a little bit, but it wasn't a big deal. So minor. I'd had harsher menstrual cramps.

Arson stood outside the shower curtain and cried, like she sometimes did when I bathed. I reassured her that I was okay and I wasn't going to die.

With the band aid thing, I'd completely forgotten about what she'd done that morning. How dare she just send me money? I hadn't accepted it yet. I wanted to send it right back to her, but then she might try and do something else to get the money to me. The easiest way to put an end to it was to accept the money and then...I didn't know yet. Maybe I'd buy some honey or something.

I finished up in the shower and carefully brushed out my dark hair. It had always been wispy and straight. My mother had always complained about it not curling or always hanging in my face, as if it was my fault for my hair texture. I avoided my reflection as I rubbed moisturizer into my skin and brushed my teeth before heading to my room. I grabbed my phone to see if there were any messages from Melliferal, but there weren't. She'd been scarce today.

I looked up the Holloway Apiary online while Arson situated herself in my lap and looked for something that was twenty dollars. I was a sucker for a good tote bag and theirs were just about the right price with shipping. Perfect.

I added it to my cart, put in my information, and clicked the buy link before I could second guess myself.

Honey would know it was my order seeing as how my name was on it. I guess she'd know my address now, but that didn't matter so much, as long as she knew I was giving the money back.

There. Now she'd have to drop it.

Monday I accidentally slept in and got myself all off my schedule. It was a sewing and printing day, so while I gulped down coffee and begged my brain to wake up, I got the printers going and started cutting and pinning fabric. I paused for breakfast only to quiet my stomach and give me enough energy for the rest of the day. I threw a bunch of ingredients, protein powder, and some strawberries and frozen bananas in the blender and made myself a gorgeous smoothie that I sucked down so fast I got a headache.

"Get it together," I told myself and went back to pinning and printing and then sewing, the rumble of the machine a comforting heartbeat. My alarms told me when to switch projects and when to eat and even when to drink water.



I kept my mind as busy as my hands so I wouldn't have time to think about things like what Honey Holloway was doing today. Had anyone told her about my order? Something told me she might be the one who packed them up and shipped them out. I hope she was. I wanted her to see.

Melliferal was still quiet, but when I took an afternoon break to do my wrist stretches, I saw a new email from Melliferal.

Biblio,

I feel as if we haven't talked for a thousand years, but it hasn't even been a day. Anyway, I've been busy and I kept thinking about writing you something but then I didn't know what to say. So here I am, rambling away on my keyboard when I should be doing a million other things. I tried to do something nice for someone after messing up and they don't seem to want to accept either my apology or my attempted reparations. For some reason, this won't stop bothering me. Has something like that ever happened to you? Normally I have endless patience and give the people around me all kinds of grace, but this person? Just makes me want to yell and stamp my feet and say "what the hell is WRONG with you?"

That doesn't make any sense, I know, but sometimes I just need to type these things out to get them out of my brain. You just happen to be the one who gets to read all of it. You don't have to, you know, but it's nice to think that someone out there in the world is listening to me.

You don't have to answer this. I should just delete it. I really should. Instead I'm still rambling just to hear the sounds of my keyboard and because I feel like you're out there listening. Okay, I'm going to stop before this gets too sappy. Please forgive me for all of this.

-Melliferal

I found myself touched and amused by the email. She was having a day and that meant it was my responsibility to get her out of it as best I could. The two of us had done this routine enough times before that I immediately went looking in my phone for saved jokes and memes and videos that I kept for situations just like this. Every time I saw something I thought would make her smile (or at least tell me that it made her smile), I saved it and now I had a whole file full of them.

I picked a bunch of them, maybe even some I'd sent before that I knew she liked and sent them rapid fire in private messages.

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Thought you'd need a little something. I read your email. I'm not one for apologizing (usually), which just proves you're a far nicer person than I am. I don't really have any advice, but I guess the person has kind of told you without telling you that they want space. Give it to them. And then maybe they'll come around. Maybe. Or they won't. Either way, you've apologized and tried to make it right and the ball is in their court now. I know you like to try and fix everything, but you can't. You're one person, Mel. You can't fix the world, no matter how much you want to.

I'd written far too much, but I sent the message before I could second guess myself. She'd rambled and thought that was embarrassing so it was only fair that I did the same. Besides, the things I told Melliferal didn't feel so embarrassing. That was the beauty of an online friendship. She was my friend, but I didn't know what her face looked like when she was upset with me or disappointed or any other negative thing. I didn't have to listen to the tone of her voice and figure out if she was pissed at me. It was all of the positives without any of the uncomfortable negatives. The perfect kind of friendship, in my opinion. I had absolutely no desire to change anything about it. Years from now I hoped that Melliferal and I would still be sending messages back and forth. We'd have a million inside jokes and silly phrases and stories to share. She'd always be there. My friend until the end.

Over the next few days I lost myself in packaging up online orders, replenishing the stock at the local stores, searching for new fabrics both online and in person, playing with Arson, and doing my best not to think about Honey Holloway.

I kept checking my email to see if my order had shipped, but I hadn't gotten a confirmation yet. That didn't surprise me. I was betting that they didn't do shipping very often. It was rough being a small business, which I knew all too well. At least

she had help. If I had an assistant for even a few hours a week, I'd get so much more done. Once I hit certain revenue targets, my plans were to hire someone to come and handle shipping for me one day a week. It would free up so much time and energy and I'd love to hire someone young who was looking for some extra cash. A college student, maybe. But I had certain numbers to hit this quarter and next to have the money in my budget for that. I had to be so, so careful with every single penny. Every cent was precious and needed to be accounted for. Mistakes couldn't happen.

I brooded about my finances instead of thinking about Honey and how she'd kissed my finger. The scene kept replaying in my mind on a loop. As if it was a video that was stuck on Repeat. I couldn't get over how casually she'd done it. From never touching me at all to kissing my injured finger.

Logically I knew I was blowing it up in my mind to be something bigger than what it was, but I couldn't help myself. The majority of my days were spent alone, so I had a tendency to ruminate on things a little too much. To break myself out of it, I did my best to take breaks and force myself to interact with other humans. I walked to get coffee, chatted with Holiday and Larison at Between the Sheets, and hit the library. I also visited the farmers' market and made a summer vegetable lasagna and did everything to stop thinking about Honey.

None of it was working and by the time Thursday rolled around, I was dreading seeing her. She'd probably gotten over it and maybe didn't even remember what had happened last week, but it sat in the back of my mind and haunted me, like an annoying ghost.

I arrived earlier than I ever had, which did mean I had time to get a bagel sandwich from one of the vendors. I sat in the chair behind my table and devoured an everything bagel with roasted garlic and chive cream cheese that made my eyes roll back in my head. If I had to get here early, at least I had this.

I finished the latte I'd brought with me and started setting up my table. Did it need something? Should I move the bookmarks? Every week I considered changing something. Editing my table until anyone walking by had to investigate.

"I think this is yours," a voice said, and I'd been so focused on my table that I hadn't heard anyone approach me.

I jumped and turned to find Honey standing there holding a padded envelope out to me.

"What?" I said, momentarily stunned that she was speaking to me. Her cheeks were just the lightest shade of pink, which made her so pretty I wanted to scream.

"Your order. Did you think I wasn't going to notice?" She gently shook the envelope at me. "You just always have to have the last word, don't you?"

"Yes," I said immediately and then she smirked. She freaking smirked at me.

"I'm going to pay you back one way or another. You think you've won, but you haven't."

The woman who'd kissed my finger and ran away was gone. In her place was this brazen beauty who was making it hard to draw a complete breath or form a coherent thought.

"I'm going to pay you back for that drink, whether you want me to or not."

She placed the package on my table, being careful not to disturb anything, and went to go harangue her siblings for not doing what she asked them to do.

What the hell?

Making sure she was busy before I reached for it, I grabbed the envelope and opened it. Inside was the tote bag I'd ordered. There was also a shipping label on the front of the envelope with my address on it.

Annoyed again, I shoved the package into my bag and did my best to get myself together. Honey had singlehandedly destroyed my bagel buzz and now it was going to be a challenge to get through the rest of the day.

Honey was ignoring me again, but this time it was obvious she wanted me to know she was ignoring me. Smiling and laughing and tossing her hair and being even brighter than she usually was, which was saying something. She might as well be glowing. I practically needed sunglasses to look in her direction without burning out my retinas.

No matter how much I didn't want to look at her, I couldn't stop. She drew my attention more than she ever had before and it was a struggle to remember what the hell I was actually doing. I kept losing my train of thought or drifting off or forgetting what I wanted to say. It was a miracle that I didn't mess up anyone's transactions.

Honey had been a distraction before. Now she was something else. Like a giant flashing billboard that I couldn't ignore.

No matter what I did, I couldn't ignore her.

But she didn't talk to me or even look at me. I was putting everything away and covering up my table for the day when someone tapped me on the shoulder. Gritting my teeth to find a customer or someone else to annoy me, I was shocked when I found the youngest Holloway girl standing there and smiling at me, her blonde curls wild around her head, as if she'd just escaped from a windstorm.

"Hi. This is for you." She held out a crisp twenty-dollar bill.

My mouth dropped open.

“It’s from Honey,” she said, shaking the bill at me. “She told me to give it to you.”

Oh she was shameless. Using an adorable child to try and settle this between us. Honey Holloway was more devious than I would have thought. I might have to reevaluate my initial impressions of this woman.

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“You can take it back to her,” I said. “She doesn’t have to pay me. Tell her she can forget about it. I plan to.”

I expected my rejection to make the girl cry or something, but she just said, “okay!” and skipped off to inform Honey. If I wasn’t careful, she was going to sneak that twenty dollars into my pocket or something. I was almost curious to see what lengths she’d go to get me the money. How far would she go?

I wanted to find out.

Hey, you read that Agatha All Along fic that I sent you the link for? It updated and I’m scared to open it.

If Melliferal hadn’t started the fic, I might threaten to never speak to her again. She needed to read it so we could suffer together. Online, anyway.

Yes, I started it and I had to stop because I couldn’t handle the emotional damage. Someday I’m going to take a week off and go somewhere and do nothing but read books and refuse to talk to anyone.

That sounded like heaven, honestly.

If you do it, tell me when and I’ll do the same thing. We’ll be alone, together.

It sounded amazing. Shutting off all my messages except for hers. I’d rent a cozy cabin near a mountain. Or on a mountain. Somewhere there had to be a mountain. But there also had to be decent wi-fi. I’d plan out every single hour with what book I was



going to read, what snacks I would bring. I'd pack all my coziest clothes and meal plan and pack everything up to bring with me. I'd create the perfect playlist too, themed to go with each one of my books or fanfics, of course.

It would be amazing. If only I could take the time off now, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But I didn't have any full days off scheduled for at least a month. Summers were too busy with the marketplace. I had to make the most of the tourist season and bank more revenue for when things got quieter in the winter and I switched my attention to holiday shopping for my online store.

I had to think strategically every single day.

That sounds almost perfect. I wish we could make it happen, but at least on my side, it's going to be a while.

She sounded just as swamped as I was. Not that I knew what she did. That was one of the rules, so neither of us knew what job the other had. But I could at least assume she didn't work some kind of corporate job, or something that had odd shifts, like a nurse. I wasn't sure if she'd gone to college. She'd never talked about it. Not that it mattered. Our jobs weren't the reason we were friends.

I know what you mean.

I spent the next fifteen minutes looking up remote cabins up north and dreaming of my reading retreat.

I arrived at the marketplace prepared for Honey's antics the next day and spent at least ten minutes going through my stuff and making sure she hadn't hidden the twenty dollars somewhere. So far, nothing.

The Holloways arrived with their usual fanfare. Singing their way to the table, not

even caring that everyone was staring at them.

There was a kind of unselfconsciousness about them that I was a little in awe and terrified of at the same time. What was it like to walk around like that and not care if you had that many eyes on you? To be so intent on your own enjoyment that it didn't matter where you were. You just had to sing.

They were living in a musical and everyone else was in reality.

"Good morning," Honey chirped to me as she uncovered their display. Of course it was covered by several sheets with bees on them.

I grunted back at her. Had to keep up with tradition.

Honey let out a little snorting noise that made me look up to find she was smiling.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said, still grinning like she had a secret.

"Stop trying to give me twenty dollars," I said low enough that only she could hear me as her parents continued to sing and encourage the other two, who were a little less enthusiastic. The oldest teen girl was mouthing words but clearly no sound was coming out of her mouth. I supported her rebellion.

Honey laughed and I stared at her dimples. I wanted to lick my tongue into them. Fuck.

She leaned closer. "Never."

I let out a disgusted sound that made her laugh under her breath.

This was ridiculous.

## Chapter Ten

Honey

Annoying Bren was my new favorite thing. She'd get all growly and speechless and glare-y and it made her so hot that I couldn't even swallow or feel my toes. The side effects were totally worth it.

I wasn't going to try and give it to her today, though. Keeping her on her toes was more fun. She'd be vigilantly waiting for me to do something and I wasn't going to do anything.

Ellie had been the one to suggest that I try and have her give Bren the money. Apparently she'd been watching our interactions and had worked out that something was up. I told her that I owed Bren and didn't know how to get it back to her. She'd told me to give her twenty dollars and I had, curious to see what would happen. And then she marched right up to Bren and had attempted to give her the cash. I couldn't help but stare as Ellie talked to Bren and Bren spoke back. The noise in the marketplace was too loud for me to hear exactly what they were saying, but Ellie had skipped back over with the twenty still in her hand.

"She wouldn't take it," she'd said, slapping the bill back into my hand and picking up the tray of honey sticks to hand out.

My sister was ridiculous, and Bren hadn't been swayed by her adorableness, but that didn't surprise me.

I'd get her in a way she wasn't expecting. I just had to figure out what that way was first.

Your advice to leave the ball in the other person's court was sound, but I'm ignoring it. Sorry not sorry. I sent to Biblio that afternoon.

You're ignoring my advice? How dare you. I'm blocking you. I knew she wasn't serious. She threatened to block me at least once a week usually.

I just think that my way is better. I responded.

You can't see me but I'm rolling my eyes right now.

I wish I could see her. I wish I could know her face. Her eyes. Her smile. The ache that I'd developed along with my crush on her had gotten worse and worse over the past few weeks. Sometimes I wanted to beg her to show me even part of her face. Just a small section. A blurry shot of the back of her head. One of her toes, anything. The not knowing kept me up at night. Wondering about her shape, her dimensions. Her corners and curves and edges.

But I didn't ask. I didn't ask because I knew what she would say. That had been our deal right in the beginning. No details. I understood her reasons. They still hurt in ways that I hadn't expected.

Let me know how your way turns out. But you'll probably just lie and tell me it went well. I'd never know.

She would know because one thing I didn't do with Biblio was lie to her. Ever. I might hold back, but I'd never lied to her from the beginning.

I'd never lie to you. You know all my most embarrassing favorite fanfics.

It was true. I'd shared the worst of the worst with her. The ones that I would rather throw myself into a hive of angry bees without a suit than ever admit to reading.

Mine are so much more embarrassing than yours, and you know that.

That was true. But then I'd read those fics and had been surprised by more than a few of them. You really could never tell where a story was going to go from your initial impression or the synopsis. One minute you were reading a story about two random cartoon characters that were in a few episodes of a kid's show from fifteen years ago and the next minute you were crying at some of the most gorgeous prose you'd ever seen with your eyeballs.

I looked up from my phone and saw Bren throwing a glare at me.

You okay? I mouthed and that made her glare intensify before she looked away. This woman knew how to hold a grudge. She also looked so hot when she glared. Made me all tingly and hot and distracted.

"Honey?" Ellie asked.

"What?" My voice was so loud that a few people walking by turned around. "Sorry," I said to no one in particular.

Bren Hendrix was messing with my brain and my ability to do my job.

"You were staring at Bren," Ellie said, bouncing on her toes.

"No I wasn't."

Ellie just smirked at me. "Yes you were. She's pretty."

Bren wasn't pretty. She was too much for such a flimsy word. She was gorgeous, she was devastating, she was overwhelming. Not pretty.

I made a noncommittal noise and turned my attention to asking passersby if they wanted tea. My parents were wandering around the marketplace far from the booth with honey samples, but I'd lost track of them. Who knew if they were going to get anyone to the table. Ember must have made up with at least one of her friends because she'd gone off to meet someone at the pier for a few hours. Hopefully they had smoothed things over for now and Ember wouldn't come back upset or crying.

The energy was high, but I couldn't stop glancing over to watch Bren at work.

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I was hopeless. Completely hopeless.

That night I didn't get much of a break because we were behind on online orders (again), and there was fresh honey that Dad had harvested that needed to go into clean jars, so that was our family project for the evening.

Once I was finally done with everything, I dragged myself into the bathtub with some bath salts and my waterproof ereader. My book was exciting, so it was keeping me awake, but the second I put my pajamas on, I was ready to pass out.

I checked my phone one last time to find a link from Bibliofile for a sapphic romance that was on sale. I immediately one-clicked the book.

You're always looking out for me.

I still hadn't come up with a good plan to get Bren the twenty dollars, but I'd run through a lot of ideas. I'd bounced some of them off Ellie, but she wasn't very helpful. She just told me to be brave and ask her to get lunch.

There was no way Bren would agree to get lunch with me.

Still, I could ask, right? She'd say no and I'd try something else. The day must have used up all my fucks because as I was covering the table with the blankets to close up shop for the night, I stopped right in the middle of what I was doing and walked over to Bren's table.

She stared at me with raised eyebrows.



“Can I help you with something?” she asked in the least helpful voice.

“I’d like to buy you lunch. Next week.” There it was. I’d said the words out loud.

If possible, her eyebrows went even higher and were in danger of merging with her natural hairline.

“Are you fucking serious?” There were no more customers around that might get offended by her language, thankfully.

“Yup.”

She shook her head slowly back and forth as if she didn’t know what to make of me.

“Please? Just let me buy you lunch and then I’ll leave you alone. Pretend that we don’t know each other.”

Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms. “Wedon’tknow each other.”

“That’s fair.” I waited for a moment. “One lunch, Bren. Please.”

I liked the way her name felt on my tongue. There was a softness and a weight to it. An intimacy that tasted good.

Her shoulders tensed, climbing up toward her ears before dropping back down.

“If I let you buy me lunch, you’ll leave me alone?”

No, but she didn’t know that.

“Uh huh.” I nodded.

She let out the world's longest sigh.

“Fine.”

“Do you want my number? Or you can just DM the Holloway Apiary social accounts. I'm the one who usually goes through them.”

“No,” she said, grabbing one of her business cards and scrawling something on the back. She held it out to me, and I took it.

I'd expected a username for a secure messaging app or something, but she'd given me her phone number. Oraphone number. My mouth dropped open in shock.

“It's not a fake number,” she said. “You can check it.” Her chin jutted out defensively.

“I trust you,” I said, and she snorted.

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“If you abuse that, I will block your number.”

Tucking the card into my shorts, I nodded. “Understood.”

Sensing it was time to make my getaway, I scurried back to the table to find my family waiting for me. Mom and Dad were smiling at each other, Ellie looked like she was bursting to ask me a million questions, and even Ember was staring at me instead of her phone.

My face went fifteen different shades of red and I couldn’t look anyone in the eye.

I held up one finger. “Not a word. Not a single word.”

Grabbing my bag with as much dignity as I could manage, I checked the table one last time before I headed for the door that led to the parking garage that was attached to the marketplace. My family trailed me, talking in hushed voices that weren’t all that hushed.

The second everyone was in the van with the doors closed, they all started talking at me at once.

“I asked her to lunch!” I said above the commotion. “I just asked her to lunch! That’s it! Not a date. It’s not anything. She barely agreed to it. That’s it.”

My parents shared a fond look and Ellie buzzed in the seat in front of me. I knew she was going to seek me out later and grill me until I told her, but she’d do it when it was just the two of us.

“You should go for it,” Ember said as she started out the window. The sky was gloomy, and rain was expected tonight. I hoped it would storm. I loved sleeping when it rained. The sounds always lulled me into the deepest sleep.

I took the card Bren had given me out of my pocket and stared at the number she’d written down in her sprawling handwriting.

Deciding to go for it, I typed out a quick message.

Testing, testing, 1 2 3. This is Honey Holloway. Over.

The message was obnoxious, and I could just picture how it would make her eyes narrow to read it. Getting a reaction out of Bren was my new favorite hobby. I couldn’t wait until I had her attention for an entire meal.

Her response didn’t come until we’d arrived back home, and I’d gone into the kitchen to start dinner to avoid any further questions about the Bren situation.

I know who you are. You told me your middle name, remember?

Right. I’d babbled it that night at Sapph.

Do you have a middle name? Is Bren your full first name?

She was totally going to block me and refuse to go to lunch if I wasn’t careful.

My full first name is Brenna. I hate it. Her response was surprising. I’d expected her to tell me to fuck off.

“Are you talking to Bren?” Ellie whispered as she sidled up to me.

I looked around, but my parents were checking the bees and the animals and shutting the farm down for the night.

Ember was in the living room on her phone.

“Yes,” I whispered back. “Where should we go for lunch?”

Ellie thought about that for a few moments. “If it’s sunny out, you should go to the pier and get something you can eat outside. If it’s raining, you should go someplace nice with good burgers and onion rings. No one can get mad or be unhappy if you have onion rings.”

Choking back a laugh, I tried to focus on the tomatoes I was slicing for the salad. “That’s really good advice, thanks.”

“I’m gonna go say goodnight to the ducks,” she said and was out the door before I could remind her to put her shoes on.

Brenna doesn’t really suit you anyway I sent back to Bren.

I know. That’s why I don’t use it. Her message was defensive, and I could tell there was a history of strife around her first name.

You can call yourself whatever you want. But I like Bren. It worked for her.

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Okay fine. My middle name is Rachel. I didn't want to use that either. Wow. She was remarkably willing to converse via messages. Interesting.

I bet more people have made fun of my name than of yours I responded. Over the years I'd heard every single joke about my name, as well as people not believing that people would legally name their daughter Honey. But with so many unusual names becoming popular, Honey wasn't so strange anymore.

I bet. What was that like?

Did she just ask me a question? I dropped the knife I'd been using to slice the tomatoes, but it just clattered onto the counter.

"Crap," I said under my breath.

"Sooo," Ember's voice said behind me as she jumped up on the kitchen island. "What's the deal with you and Bren?"

I sighed and stared at the slices of eggplant that I'd breaded earlier.

"There is no deal with Bren," I said, keeping my voice even as I slid the tray of eggplant into the oven and set the timer.

"Uh huh. Sure." She was baiting me, but I wasn't going for it. Instead I stirred the sauce and filled a pot with water for the pasta.

Ember's legs made thunking noises as she swung them, and the sound was getting on

my nerves.

“Do you have to do that while I’m trying to concentrate?”

Ember snickered. “You’re concentrating a little too hard on dinner. You’ve made this a million times.” It was true. I could make most meals in my sleep. Some days I’d been so tired that it felt like I had.

“I’m trying not to burn the eggplant. You’re welcome.”

“I love how I’m supposed to tell you everything going on in my life, but then you have something interesting happening finally and we’re not allowed to ask about it. How is that fair?”

I exhaled a slow breath.

“Life isn’t fair,” I said, pointing at her with my pasta tongs, but she just grinned at me.

“You like her. It’s been obvious forever. But she likes you too.”

I dropped the tongs and held back a curse. Picking them up, I went to the sink to wash them off.

“She does?” I asked. “She doesn’t act like it. She glares at me all the time and every time I’ve tried to talk to her, she’s been mad.”

Ember nodded. “Yeah, that’s how I know she likes you.”

“I’m not following.”

Ember huffed as if I was being difficult. “She’s mad at herself for liking you. I know you think I’m always on my phone, but I do pay attention. Bren looks at you, a lot, and you don’t see the look on her face when she knows you can’t see her.”

My fingers gripped the tongs. “Are you sure?”

She nodded and hopped off the counter as her phone buzzed with a new message. She read it and smiled before glancing up at me.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

Well.

Bren got quiet later that night and I assumed I’d pestered her enough for one day.

Guess what? I was right and you were wrong. I didn’t give up and now I’m going to get them to accept my apology. So there.

I grinned as I sent the message to Bibliofile. If there was someone I could gloat to about my success, it was her.

But HAVE they accepted your apology? Officially?



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Way to rain on my victory parade, Biblio. Sometimes her realistic outlook was too intense for me.

Fine. No. But I'm getting there. I've made progress. Lunch with Bren was a huge step. I was still shocked that she'd agreed to it, and then had given me her number so we could hash out the details. I had no doubt that if I was too much for her, that she'd block my number without even thinking twice.

What was it with me having crushes on skittish people? Was I sending out a beacon for them or something?

Just be careful. I don't want you to get your hopes up and then get them crushed. I might not have shared my real name with Biblio, but she knew that I had a tendency to think the best would happen and not prepare for the worst in case it happened and then I was devastated if it did anyway.

I didn't have my head completely in the clouds, though. Reality was always breathing down my neck. Hell, I was far more grounded in reality than just about anyone in my home with the exception of Ellie, who had had to deal with more than one kid should at her age.

Yes, I was grounded by the numbers on the balance sheets I kept, but I also had faith in people. That they were basically good, on the whole, and could surprise you with their goodness. And I always trusted my instincts about people and there was something about Bren.

I'm not going to get crushed. It's not that big a deal. Hadn't I told my family the same

thing? This lunch with Bren shouldn't be a huge thing, but every time I tried to imagine sitting across from her at a table or going to one of the food trucks on the pier, my stomach started doing backflips and front flips and all kinds of other gymnastic movements.

Well, tell me how it goes.

I would.

That night I was filled with so much restless energy that I couldn't sleep until I'd tiptoed downstairs, slipped on my work boots and headed out to the hives.

I'd brought a blanket to throw over my shoulders to ward off the cold, but I still shivered a little. I'd done this walk so many times that I knew how to avoid triggering the automatic outside lights.

Like the humans inside the house, the bees were tucked in for the night in their hives, but that didn't matter.

Sighing, I sat down on a soft patch of grass. Hopefully no spiders were going to crawl on me. I slapped at a mosquito and listened to the quiet, the sounds of the wind in the trees broken only by the soft rhythm of the peepers in the nearby pond.

A firefly flew lazily by as I tried to get comfortable.

"So, I asked Bren to go to lunch. And she agreed. And then she gave me her number, if you can believe that." When I'd first started talking to the bees, I'd wondered if I needed to say anything special, but I hadn't been able to figure out what that was so over the years I'd just talked to them like I'd speak to anyone else. I thought they appreciated my familiarity and friendliness.

I informed them about Bren (I'd told them about her many times already, so they had already heard her name), and poured out all my worries and anxieties and hopes.

"I just...I know that she's not going to wake up one morning and realize she's in love with me. And my track record with falling in love? Not great. At this point, I would settle to be her friend. If anyone needs a friend, it's someone like Bren."

My words were met with just the barest hint of a buzz.

"If all I can have is friendship? I'll take it. I'll probably develop a new crush anyway." When I was younger, I'd had a new one every single week and they'd all been devastating. The bees had heard all about them and I'd cried more times than I wanted to count about this girl or that one. The second one crush would end, I'd wake up with another one.

I didn't want to be this fickle person. I didn't want my heart to be this way, but I couldn't stop it—and I'd tried. Every crush was like a storm in my body, an unstoppable force that I was almost powerless against.

One minute the other person would be just someone I knew and the next minute they'd be someone I couldn't breathe without.

"I don't like being like this," I said. "I want to...I want to be the kind of person who falls for someone and it's real. It's...solid. Mine always feel so tumultuous and wild and they're not even fun. I don't enjoy it that much." That was for sure. I dreaded each new crush. If there were some kind of crush vaccine, I would have taken it. Or at least some sort of crush blocker that I could have until I was ready to fall in love with a good person. Someone who wouldn't love me less than I loved them.

I was tired of loving more. Loving too much.

“I’ve decided to try something new. Friends. Friends with Bren. And then there’s Bibliofile, who I don’t have a chance in hell with because who knows if she’s even single or if we’re compatible outside of the internet.” Probably not. It would be just my luck to fall for someone so completely unattainable and unavailable.

“Do you have any advice for me?”

I waited, but there was nothing. Something rustled out in the grass and I prayed it wasn’t a skunk because then I’d be in big trouble. Freezing where I was, I waited for whatever it was to move off and decided it was time to head back inside. My ass was almost frozen to the ground.

“Thanks for listening. Love you.” I always thanked the bees for everything they did for me.

Wincing as I shook out my stiff legs, I did my best to walk quietly back to my apartment and upstairs to my warm bed.

## Chapter Eleven

Bren

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

Over the next few days, Honey tried to draw me into conversation, both in person and via messages. I ignored most of it or gave noncommittal answers, but she didn't stop trying.

This woman was relentless. If I hadn't agreed to go to lunch with her, I'd hate to see what she would have unleashed on me.

No one had ever pursued me this way before. Not even in a romantic way, and I didn't think this was that. I didn't know what Honey's motives were, other than feeling bad about what happened at Sapph, but she couldn't be doing all this just for that. It almost felt like she'd decided I was a project and she was going to work on me relentlessly.

If Honey attacked business the same way she attacked me, her family was going to be successful.

Trying to ignore her at the marketplace was next to impossible now. I'd feel someone's eyes on me and glance over to find her smiling at me, her dimples popping in her cheeks. I still wanted to stick my tongue in them and now the urge was even worse. Other urges were constant. No matter what I did, I couldn't put a lid on the fantasies of getting her naked. Of digging my fingers into her skin. Of taking her apart and seeing what she was made of at her basest level. To make her come until she cried. To literally fuck all night until we couldn't move anymore, and I knew her inside and out.

Sex, in my past, had been a quick and casual thing. I'd known intrinsically that the kinds of desires I had weren't always the same as other people. That some of the

things I wanted weren't the kinds of things you were supposed to discuss in polite company.

Sure, most people were fine with a few little spanks or some mild domination, but what I wanted went deeper than that and the things I wanted sometimes scared me. And then there was my other problem on top of that. So sex had never felt right for me and I'd kind of given up on pursuing it.

Honey would never be into the kinds of things I liked. Honey was the kind of woman who wanted to have a soft and sweet orgasm on a cloud. Lots of little kisses and praise. I could picture her on a white bed with too many soft pillows.

I didn't do cute sex.

It was a moot point because I wasn't going to be having sex of any kind with Honey Beatrix Holloway. I hated that I knew her middle name. I also hated the way my brain had started calling her "Honey Bea" and how I couldn't seem to stop.

It was harder to ignore her when she sent me messages. Melliferal had been kind of quiet and distracted for a few days, so I guess I needed to meet my quota of human interaction and Honey was the only taker.

After much back and forth, I agreed to go to lunch with her on Tuesday at the pier. The weather was supposed to be absolutely gorgeous. Seventy-two and sunny the entire day. It was also good because I wouldn't be forced to sit at a table across from her the whole time. There would be other distractions.

"See you on Tuesday," she sang at me on Sunday evening when we were packing up from the marketplace. I shoved everything into the wheeled cart that I used to bring everything to my car. I thought about waving to her with only one of my fingers but I didn't. I just did a grunt and nod, which made her smile and flutter her fingers in a

little wave.

It wasn't just Honey that I'd had to avoid the past few days. Oh no. Her family had started paying far too much attention to me. Especially the youngest one. The boy wasn't around, so at least it was one less person, but I absolutely caught the parents talking about me in what they thought were hushed voices, but I heard every word. I did my best to ignore it, but all of the attention was getting on my nerves. I was used to being able to come here and focus completely on my business and my customers, but with all this other stuff going on, that was a challenge that I didn't need.

And then, to make matters worse, I had a hard time keeping my thoughts on my work and almost sewed my fingers together. Twice.

Honey Holloway and her family were physically and mentally dangerous for me. What the hell was I going to do?

If anyone asked, I hadn't changed my outfit three times before going to meet Honey at the pier. I hadn't looked at every angle in the mirror to make sure I looked as cute as possible. Most days I barely thought about my clothes, but today I wanted to make an effort. Not because of Honey. Just...because.

Finally, I selected a crocheted crop top that I'd bought on a whim and a pair of distressed jean shorts that made my ass look good. Not that I cared about my ass looking good for Honey. It didn't matter. The shorts were comfortable. That was all.

I pulled my hair into a ponytail and kept my makeup light, but I never left the house without doing my eyes, and I made an extra effort to make sure my eyeliner was perfect. So sharp you could slice your enemies with it.

I arrived exactly on time to the pier, right at the entrance and looked around. She wasn't here.

Figured she'd be late.

Sighing, I looked down at my phone and waited for a "running late, sorry" message.

"Hey, I'm sorry!" a voice said, making me look up and watch her running across the street.

She was wearing a dress with flowers and bees on it. Of course. Of fucking course.

The dress hugged her every curve and had a halter top, giving a plunging look at her cleavage from the front.

Indecent. It was indecent to look like this in public. She'd start a riot.

"Jesus Christ," I said to myself as she skipped up to me, her sandals delicate on her feet. Her toes were painted a soft buttery yellow and they had designs on them that I couldn't make out. Bees, probably.

Her hair curled softly, hastily twisted up in a clip.

"I'm not that late, am I?" she asked, pulling her phone out of her leather crossbody bag and checking the time. "Two minutes late. That's not bad. I got busy packing online orders and lost track of time. So. Where do you want to go?"

Honestly, I didn't care. All the food at the pier was good. But she was buying, and this was the first and last time I'd ever have a meal with her so why not go big?



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“How would you feel about lobster?”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh my god, it’s been forever since I’ve had lobster. I’m in. As long as we get to have ice cream after. I am craving a brownie sundae.” She rolled with my suggestion, walking beside me as if we were the best of friends who had done this dozens of times.

There was a line at the window to order, so we had to wait.

“What have you been up to today?” she asked, turning to face me.

“Nothing,” I said. She might have convinced me to come, but she couldn’t get me to talk. I wasn’t going to make this easy on her.

“You must work a ton when you’re not at the marketplace. You do everything yourself, right?”

Great. Now she wanted to talk shop.

“Yes, I do everything myself.” Why wasn’t this line moving faster?

“I can’t imagine. I mean, I also do most everything myself, but my parents do a lot, and my siblings sometimes help.” From what I saw, Honey was the CEO of Holloway Apiary.

“My parents bought the farm the year I started high school. All of their friends thought they were crazy, but my parents are the kinds of people who buy a falling-

down farm and fix it up.”

She took her hair down from the clip and then twisted it back up again while I tried my best not to stare at any part of her body. Especially not her tits. They were off limits.

The line was still barely moving.

“My mom’s like a musical prodigy, but she hated school, so she’s always taught private music lessons and my dad worked as an elementary school music teacher for years and got burned out on it. So now they tend the bees and give classes and force us kids to do music instead.”

“That explains the singing,” I found myself saying.

Honey beamed next to me. “Sorry if it’s a lot. We kind of tend to forget that not everyone is singing all the time. It’s normal in our house. I have to remind myself not to sing when I’m out and about.”

I’d been right about her. They lived like they were in a musical. Unbelievable.

The line finally started to move, and I realized I needed to figure out what I wanted to order.

“What are you getting?” Honey asked, leaning close to me to see the menu board.

“Lobster roll. Onion rings. Soda.” Basic order, but it was what I wanted.

“Ohhh, that sounds perfect. I’m going to get the same thing.” I stopped myself from rolling my eyes.

Honey ordered for us and was all sweetness and light with the person taking the order, making him laugh. He probably thought she was flirting with him. Honey must get people hitting on her constantly. That was why you didn't walk around being so nice all the time. People would misinterpret it.

She pulled a few dollars from her bag and stuffed them in the tip jar before we both moved to the pickup window to wait. There were several picnic tables that were covered in red paint that had been warmed by the sun and covered in ketchup stains and stray french fries.

I sat down and Honey took the spot right next to me.

"What a gorgeous day." She tilted her head up and basked in the sun. As if she wasn't a fallen ray of sun herself.

Pulling my sunglasses out of my bag, I put them on and made a sound of agreement.

"You think you're going to annoy me or make me stop talking if you respond like that, but that's okay. I'll keep talking until you tell me to shut up."

I opened my mouth to tell her to shut up, but the words stuck in my throat. I wanted to be mean to this woman, but I couldn't. How could anyone be mean to someone so lovely with bees on her dress? Honey was the kind of person who always tipped, who helped elderly people across the street, who didn't lie on her taxes and looked forward to jury duty. Golden goodness. I bet her siblings hated her.

She let out a little sigh and leaned back with her elbows on the top of the picnic table.

"So, Bren, what do you do for fun?"

Did I want to answer her? No. Did I answer her? Yes.

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“Not much.”

That wasn't even a lie. What did I do for fun? Come up with new marketing strategies. Do research on SEO. And when all that was done, I read. Reading was probably the only thing I did. Reading, playing with Arson, eating sweets in bed, baths. That was about it.

She nodded as if I'd actually said something. “I know how that is. I feel like I don't have much time for anything fun. I read a lot though. In case you ever need a book recommendation.”

We definitely didn't read the same kind of books. I could only picture Honey reading the most achingly sweet and fluffy romances where the characters just stared at each other and every single touch was fraught with tension. Nothing wrong with that, but sometimes I just wanted to read a book about women getting railed. Or railing other sapphics. As long as someone was getting railed and it was described in excruciating detail multiple times.

Honey would probably be totally scandalized by some of the stuff I'd read, no doubt.

“Have you been to Between the Sheets? It's a romance bookstore. Actually, it's not that far away. You should go, if you haven't.”

Now I had to say something.

“I know. They're one of my vendors.”

Instead of flinching away from my tone, she just acted like I'd told her something wonderful.

"Oh no way! That's so cool. I'll have to pay attention better next time I go in. I usually get totally lost in the books and forget they have other things."

This woman definitely hadn't gone behind the little curtain to see the more adult items at Between the Sheets. Absolutely not. She'd probably faint.

Our order still wasn't up, so she just kept talking about the book she was reading and I almost opened my mouth and told her I'd read the same one, but that would be participating in the conversation and I wasn't going to do that, so I kept my jaw clenched shut.

After what seemed like an eternity, our order was finally at the window.

"I'll get it," I told her, grabbing for the tray.

"Thanks," she said, reaching for napkins. "Where do you want to sit?"

There were several other picnic tables right on the water with umbrellas to protect them from the sun. I nodded toward one that had just been vacated.

"That looks good."

We both sat down on opposite sides, Honey demurely tucking her dress under before sitting down.

She handed me some napkins and I tucked them under the tray so they wouldn't blow away with the soft ocean breeze.

I had to admit, if only to myself, that it was nice to be outside. My mind wouldn't stop running through all the things I should be doing with my time right now instead of having lunch with Honey Holloway, though.

Speaking of Honey, she let out a happy little sigh and picked up her lobster roll after she'd gotten some ketchup for her onion rings. Gross.

"You can't beat this view, even if the food was awful," she said, gazing out at the bay. She did have a point, but I wasn't going to let her know that.

I let myself watch her a little as she ate, her manners clean and neat. No loud sounds or chewing to even annoy me.

"Mmm, this is perfect," she said when she was halfway through her roll.

It really was. The lobster was fresh and sweet and had just the right ratio of meat to buttered bun.

A few kids ran by and Honey laughed at their antics.

"My brother is at basketball camp right now and I'm expecting he's going to make that his entire personality for the rest of the summer. I'm not looking forward to how many things he's going to break by bouncing a ball in the house." She huffed out a breath that sounded like fondness.

"Arrow, right?" I asked. Shit. Now I was engaging in conversation.

Honey gave me a dimpled grin. "Archer. Close, though."

I wanted to make fun of their names, but that was just a little too mean.

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“And the one always on her phone is Ember, and Ellie is the youngest. Ellowen.” Jesus, her parents had really done a number on them with the names.

“No siblings for you?”

“None,” I said, hoping my tone made it clear that was a topic that was off limits.

“I can’t imagine. My siblings are growing up and I don’t know what I’m going to do when they go off and do their own thing. It’s going to be awful.” She sounded more like a parent than a sibling, but from what I had observed, that was a role she had filled. Or that she’d had to fill.

“You’re going to stay with your parents?” I couldn’t think of a worse hell on this earth.

“For now. They need me.” She shrugged as if that was an answer.

“They’re adults, though. If your siblings are older, then why do you have to stay?”

For the first time, I saw some of her sunniness drop. How interesting.

“Why do you care?”

Sneaky little thing. She’d deflected beautifully.

“I don’t,” I threw back at her.

“Well, Bren, this is the longest conversation we’ve had so I’m calling it a win. And I’m eating lobster. That’s a double win.”

Fucking hell. She’d done it.

“You’re dangerous,” I blurted out and it made her laugh. Instead of having one of those high kinds of laughs that stabbed your eardrums, her laugh was low and dark and made me want to wrap it up and put it in my pocket so I could take it home with me.

“No one’s ever called me dangerous before. I like it.” I bet no one had called her that before.

We finished our lobster rolls in silence, but I couldn’t help grimacing when she dipped her onion rings in ketchup.

She noticed and deliberately licked some ketchup from her finger. Then I wasn’t thinking about the disgusting condiment. I was thinking about a whole lot of other things.

Honey made a sound in her throat that was something like a laugh. As if she knew exactly what she was doing.

Dangerous. I was right on the money.

## Chapter Twelve

Honey

Bren was doing her best to ignore me, but it wasn’t working, which delighted me. I was going to crack that hard candy shell around her if it was the last thing I did.



There had to be a gooey soft center underneath and I wanted to taste it. I wanted to gorge myself on it.

The need to see her soft underbelly was intense. More intense than I was willing to admit. Bren was a challenge, and I wanted to win.

She'd finally talked to me. Reluctantly, but it was something. Progress. Slow and hard-won progress.

And then she'd called me "dangerous" in a way that made my face go numb and my clit throb between my legs like a heartbeat. I couldn't help but respond in kind and my words came out flirtier than I'd intended. Oops.

To be fair, Bren was sexy. So sexy she made my eyes cross. Her crop top left a sliver of pale belly exposed that I wanted to lick and taste and leave my mark on. Don't even get me started on her legs in those shorts. I almost had to sit on my hands so I wouldn't reach out and touch her.

She was every sexual fantasy I'd ever have come true and she was sitting right there.

Friend. Bren needed a friend. Not someone who was going to constantly think about getting her legs on either side of my face.

I'd never had to reel in my libido this bad. Hell, I didn't need to reel it in. I needed to put it in a cage with multiple locks.

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Lock it up, Honey.

Bren managed to keep her comments to herself as I finished my onion rings and she ate the rest of hers.

We each wiped the grease off our fingers and sat there for a minute before Bren grabbed at the trash and escaped me to throw it away.

“Ice cream?” I asked when she got back.

“I really need to get back to work,” she said, and I almost opened my mouth to beg her not to leave yet.

Pathetic. This woman made me absolutely pathetic.

“We agreed, remember?” I managed to get out.

Bren huffed. I’d never met anyone who sighed as much as she did. Or maybe she just sighed around me. I think I would have noticed if she did it with her customers.

“Fine,” she said, as if I was walking her to the gallows and not steering her toward the ice cream shop.

“Wanna share a brownie sundae?” I asked, just to see her reaction.

Her eyes widened and she gave me an “are you fucking serious?” look that made me burst out laughing.

“No? Then all the more for me,” I said, stepping up to the window and ordering a brownie sundae with coffee ice cream, whipped cream, nuts, and extra cherries.

I heard Bren muttering under her breath before she ordered a dish of black raspberry with chocolate sprinkles.

We walked together with our ice cream, even though it was a challenge to eat a brownie sundae and make sure I didn't trip at the same time. Bren and I strolled to the end of the pier where a man was playing songs on an accordion while people watched and a few danced.

“I can play the accordion,” I told Bren.

She turned and raised her eyebrows.

“I told you my mom can play just about any instrument and that talent didn't pass down to me, but I did manage to learn the accordion at the least.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked, and I stared as she flicked her tongue across her spoon. Eating ice cream wasn't helping with my raging libido, that was for sure. Bad idea. I should have picked a less sexual dessert. There was too much tongue involved in ice cream. Too much licking. Made my pussy get ideas.

“Because we're having a conversation. And I thought you might find it interesting.”

Bren scoffed, but I had her number. She was starting to like me, against her will. I'd take it.

“Why would you want to play the accordion?”

I watched a little girl execute a twirl to the music, her skirt flaring around her. She

reminded me of Ellie.

“Why not? I thought it was very chic and Parisian when I was younger.” The kids at school had quickly disabused me of the idea that the accordion was cool, but I’d never let that kind of talk bother me. People had always thought my family was strange and our names were odd, so I was used to not fitting in with my peers.

Bren snorted. “I guess.”

An older couple started dancing together and it was so sweet that I sighed.

“I want that,” I said, not realizing for a moment that I’d spoken aloud.

“Mmm,” Bren said, her sound disapproving. Bren went back to focusing on her ice cream and I softly swayed back and forth to the music. If both our hands weren’t busy with ice cream, I would have asked her to dance. She would have said no, but maybe I could have talked her into it.

“How’s your ice cream?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said, but she was scraping her spoon in the bowl to get the last remnants.

“Want a bite of mine?” I asked, loading my spoon up and holding it out to her.

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“No,” she said immediately. God, it was fun to wind her up.

“Your loss,” I said, eating the bite and savoring. This was exactly what I’d needed. A brownie sundae and Bren. Even if she was a total grump.

“It doesn’t bother you?” she asked after she’d tossed the empty bowl into one of the trash cans.

“What doesn’t bother me?”

“Me not wanting to talk to you.”

I had the last few bites of my sundae before I answered.

My answer was simple and easy. “No.”

She leaned closer, as if she was drawn toward me. “Why not?”

“Because I know that you really want to.” I’d watched her hold back a response so many times. It was getting harder for her the longer she was with me.

I loved it.

Her mouth dropped open and she stared at me for a few seconds before letting out a little choking noise and turning away, but I saw the smile she was desperately battling with make a brief appearance on her face.

Bren crossed her arms and glared at the ocean. At least, I assumed she was glaring from behind her sunglasses.

She'd definitely been using them to try and hide. It was a shame I didn't get to see her gorgeous eyes, but I guess I couldn't have everything today.

"You're different than I thought you'd be," she said, her voice so quiet that I almost didn't hear her over the accordion music and the call of the seagulls who were battling over scraps from the trash cans.

"How so?" I asked, a little terrified of the answer.

"I don't know. Just...different."

I didn't know what to do with that.

"Do you want to get out from under the sun?" Bren had the pallor of someone who didn't get outside that much.

"I need to go," she said, and I was struck with the desire to reach out and give her a hug. To pull her in and hold her for a little while. She'd be stiff at first. Not used to the contact. But something told me she'd just melt if given the chance, like ice cream left in the sun.

"Sure," I said, not willing to beg or let her know how desperate I was for even another minute of her company. Being with her made me giddy and nervous and fluttery and terrified.

"Are we even now?" she asked, crossing her arms and frowning. "Because you definitely spent more than twenty dollars on me today." I had, but it didn't matter.

“That’s okay. You’ll just get me back next time.” She stiffened with shock and I laughed again.

“There’s not going to be a next time,” she said through clenched teeth.

“There will be.” Where this well of confidence I’d dipped into had come from, I didn’t know, but I was going with it.

Bren scoffed. “Bye, Honey.”

“Bye, Bren. See you on Thursday.”

She shook her head and walked away from me. As much as I wanted to catch up and walk her to her car, I held back. Let her have her way this time.

I still watched her walk away, wishing I could burn the image of her in my retinas permanently.

God, I wanted to bite that ass.

Friendship. We were working on friendship.

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Mentally slapping myself, I waited until she was out of sight and then went to get a second brownie sundae. I was going to need it.

Mom and Elliewere in the garden when I got back home.

“How are my babies doing?” I asked as they checked on my jalapeños.

“They’re doing very well,” Mom said, wiping her arm across her forehead and smearing dirt everywhere. She wore old and faded overalls and a ratty flannel shirt, and Ellie was matching her. Adorable.

I crouched down beside them. “Looks like we can do another harvest in a week or so. Next year maybe we can grow some hotter peppers and make an extreme hot honey for people who are adventurous.”

It wasn’t exactly consistent with our brand, but it could still be fun to make a very small batch and maybe sell them online as an experiment before we tried at the marketplace.

“How was yourdate?” Ellie asked, smirking at me as she adjusted her kid-sized gardening gloves.

“It wasn’t a date,” I said, and Mom laughed under her breath.

“Then why did you dress up?” Ellie asked.

I narrowed my eyes and pretended to glare at her. “Children should be seen and not



heard.”

She just cackled and Mom sat back and enjoyed herself.

I stood up and dusted my hands off. “I’m going to check on the chickens and ducks.”

“Darling, not wearing those shoes,” Mom pointed out. Right. I was still wearing the outfit that I’d put on to see Bren.

Huffing with annoyance at my nosy family, I went up to my apartment to change into my regular clothes.

Once I had my farm clothes on, I did go out to check on the chickens and the ducks and make sure Dad was good as he packed a bulk order for a wedding. Several times we’d had people reach out to us to do favors for various events, so I’d found tiny jars and had designed custom labels. It had been time-consuming but fun.

“Everything good?” I asked as he carefully loaded up the boxes with the jars and enough padding so they wouldn’t break. The wedding planner was picking them up tomorrow.

“This is the last box,” he said.

“Sounds good,” I said, nodding as I leaned on the counter.

“Something on your mind, Bea?” Dad had always called me Bea.

“No, not really.” That was a big bold lie.

“Hmm,” he said, focusing on his task.

“You and Mom started out as friends, right?” I asked.

He glanced up and I was hit by how he and Ellie had the exact same warm brown eyes.

“We did...” he said slowly, not sure why I was bringing that up.

“When did you know that you loved her?” My parents talked about falling in love all the time, but Dad had always said he’d known from the beginning.

Dad set the jars down and leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. “I knew the moment she smiled. It was like...time stopped. And I knew nothing would ever be the same after seeing it. She was just there, across the room from me at a terrible party that I’d wanted to leave for at least an hour. And then there she was. I don’t even remember walking toward her.”

His voice took on a dreamy quality.

All my life, I’d known that my parents were really and truly in love and I’d known that I would accept nothing less than that for myself.

And then I’d fallen in love and gotten my heart broken over and over again and it hadn’t been like that at all.

What was wrong with my heart? Why couldn’t it pick the right person to throw all my affection and devotion at? All I wanted was someone who loved me even close to the level I loved them. Someone who wasn’t scared of all of me.

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“Does that help?” Dad asked after several moments of silence.

I put a smile on my face. It was easy to do. “Yeah, that did help. Thanks.” I gave him a hug and went back inside to check the online orders and update our social media accounts.

How has the rest of your day been? I sent to Bren. I wasn’t sure if she’d answer, or if she was totally sick of me for the day.

I decided not to worry about it and check in with Bibliofile by sending her a funny meme about romance readers.

Hey, I was just going to write to you. Have you read this one? She attached a link for a book.

No, I haven’t yet. I know everyone loves it, so I’m wary of all the hype. Worried it won’t live up to expectations.

It had happened to me before with a wildly popular sapphic book that I thought was just okay, but not life-altering. Only Bibliofile knew my true opinions on that one.

Hmmm. Now I don’t know if I should go for it.

We talked some more about books and I really wished I could ask her for advice about Bren. I knew she’d have something good to say to me about it, but I didn’t know how to tell her about Bren. It felt...wrong. Not that she knew I had a crush on her and on Bren, but still. It wasn’t anything close to cheating, but my stomach tied

itself into knots anytime I thought about it.

So I didn't tell Biblio about Bren and conversed with her while I waited to see if Bren was ever going to talk to me again.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Bren

The lunch with Honey had been...weird. Not for any specific reason, but I'd left feeling unsettled and itchy. The second I got home I threw myself into work so I wasn't thinking about Honey and her smile and her tits and her legs or any other part of her body. I definitely wasn't thinking about her laugh, which kept echoing through my skull as if it was playing on a loop.

I didn't think about her while I packed orders and stacked them by the door to take to the post office. I didn't think about her while I printed more stickers and cut out fabric and heated up some leftovers for dinner and fed and played with Arson.

She'd sent me a message and I wasn't going to respond. I wasn't going to respond to any of her messages ever again. We'd had the lunch, she'd "paid" me back for the drink and whatever thing we'd been doing was over. Concluded. There was no reason that we needed to have further communication.

Except...I typed out several different responses before deleting every single one and putting my phone down again.

I tried to go to bed, but the spiders in my brain were spinning too many thoughts for sleep to be an option.

Instead, I went to the Holloway Apiary account and scrolled through the posts.

Watched the videos. I knew Honey would probably get a notification, but I didn't care.

There were videos of Honey rescuing bees from various locations. Those were the ones with the most views and comments. Her voice soothed me from the voiceover as she explained what she was doing, and it was no wonder so many people had watched the videos. Her voice was magnetic. Before I knew what had happened, I'd watched dozens of videos narrated by Honey. She really had done a ton of work on this account. The number of followers and engagement was impressive for such a small business. I wondered if she'd ever had media inquiries and if she knew how to handle that kind of thing?

I wanted to ask her, but I didn't want to talk to her.

I didn't.

Your social media account for the apiary is really impressiveI typed out and sent before remembering it was practically the middle of the night and she was probably asleep. Whatever. Hopefully she had her phone set on silent.

Thank you. That means a lot. I work really hard at it. Didn't know anything when I started it.

That was even more impressive.

The videos rescuing the bees are my favoriteI sent the message before I realized what she was going to take from it. Shit.

That's high praise indeed, thanks Bren!

Hell. I never should have said anything to her. Now she was going to think that we

were friends.

You're welcome I responded because I would have felt like a bitch otherwise.

What are you doing up so late? Burning the midnight oil?

No. Lying in bed and obsessing about her was more like it.

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Something like that I sent.

You should go to sleep. Get your rest so you can conquer the world tomorrow.

Fuck. Those simple words made me feel like I could bust through a wall. Like I could do anything.

Goodnight Honey.

Goodnight Bren.

I did not punch through a wall the next day. Not even close. Things went wrong from the start when I'd somehow burned my eggs. Then I saw the fabric that had been on back order that I'd been waiting for had a printing mistake in the pattern and there was no way I could use it. Then I got a nasty customer review for something that wasn't even my fault and had to waste many precious minutes dealing with that.

I'd decided to order lunch from the fancy salad place that was way too expensive, but seriously delicious. They swapped my order with someone else's, so by the time I got the right order, I was ravenous and would have eaten the cardboard container the salad came in.

The queen bee says hello. The message was accompanied by a video of Honey holding up a clear plastic clip that had a large bee in it. I'd take her word for it that that was the queen bee. It was wild that Honey would just handle bees with her bare hands.

Have you ever been stung?

Oh yeah, lots of times. I'm not allergic. Ellie says hello too. There was another video of the youngest girl, Ellie, waving.

Hello I responded because it would have been rude not to.

Okay, now I have to get the rest of this hive into this box. They've been living in an upturned baby pool.

I didn't know why she'd reached out to me in the first place. I guess it was cool what she did. And I had watched a bunch of her other videos.

I went back to work and about an hour later she sent me a picture of a white beehive in the back of a truck and a hand flashing a thumbs up sign.

For a moment, I considered telling her that she didn't have to give me constant updates. That I didn't care what she was doing. That I was literally going to see her tomorrow, but I didn't.

In their new home.

Another picture of rows of beehives from the farm.

Feeling weird and squirmy, I took a picture of my piles of fabric that I was pinning together with the foam for the ereader sleeves.

How long does it take you to make one?

I'd done some process videos on my social media and considered sending those to Honey, but I didn't.



So I told her. I put my work aside and took pictures and even just sent her a video of me narrating because I didn't want to type everything out.

Honey asked insightful questions and before I knew it, we'd been talking for a long time and I didn't know how it had even happened.

I was helpless to defend myself against her, even when she wasn't here with me. She'd crawled her way into my brain and had made herself cozy in the nooks and crannies and made it impossible to not think about her. I should be angrier about this kind of infection, but I wasn't.

It was...nice. Having someone to talk to wasn't horrible. She made me laugh and she was interested in what I said, and she was paying attention to what I said. She listened.

A little flame flickered in my chest as we kept talking and she sent me videos from the farm.

"These guys go bonkers for frozen peas. Watch." She filmed a video of her cute ducks as she gave them bowls of frozen peas in water and they did seem very excited, making lots of noise and gobbling at the peas while Honey laughed.

Fuck, I wanted to pour that sound into my ears every single day. I wanted to absorb it into my skin. I wanted to drink it and breathe it into my lungs.

What was she doing to me?!

## Chapter Fourteen

Honey

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

I'd half expected Bren to continue to pretend I didn't exist, but I kept reaching out anyway. And she eventually responded. Tentative at first, but then she was sending me videos of her workspace, narrated in her glorious voice, showing me everything.

It was like I'd unlocked her, and everything came spilling out. Worried that it wouldn't last, I kept talking back to her and sending her videos. Showing her my life. Trading her information for information.

"Who are you talking to?" Ember asked, looking over my shoulder. I was helping make dinner and she'd snuck up behind me.

"None of your beeswax," I said.

"Ha ha," she said, her voice deadpan.

Setting my phone face down, I went back to shredding rainbow carrots for a salad.

"She's been talking to Bren for hours," Mom said as she shucked another ear of corn. Dad was already outside at the barbecue with the chicken and veggie skewers.

"Honey loves Brennnnnn," Ellie said, skidding into the room as if she just had to get a word in.

"I do not!" I shrieked. "I don't love her. I don't even know her."

"Has that ever mattered to you before? You love people all the time," Ember said, smirking. I threw a carrot top at her that she dodged.

“No throwing vegetables inside the house. If you want to do that, go outside. And aim for the compost pile,” Mom admonished.

“I’m not in love with her,” I mumbled, going back to the carrots and nearly shredding my knuckles raw on the box grater.

Ellie sidled up to me. “It’s okay, Honey. I like her.” She whispered it and I wanted to roll my eyes, but she was such a sweetie.

“I’m not in love with her, but that’s good to know,” I whispered back.

My phone buzzed and I washed my hands before reaching for it.

What does this fabric say to you?The message was attached to a picture of a yellowish fabric with little designs on it. I zoomed in and then typed out a response.

It’s giving me like, 70s grandma vibes, but in a vintage cool way. I like it.

Bren thanked me and then sent another picture of a different fabric. This time it had a galaxy pattern on it.

Oooh, I love anything that’s got stars on it. You’ll hit the fantasy fans of a certain series as well as the sci-fi and alien romance readers.

It was so natural to give her my true opinion. There was something about Bren that made me feel freer than if I were talking with someone else. I might have tempered my enthusiasm so I didn’t seem too eager or fake, and I might have softened anything that could have been seen as criticism so I didn’t come off as mean.

But none of those pressures weighed on my shoulders with her. It was a new feeling that I enjoyed trying on.

You should definitely do more bee fabrics, in my opinion.I sent.

You would say that. You're really into that, aren't you?

I was.

Bees are absolutely miraculous and amazing creatures. I love them.

If Bren wanted me to blast her with bee facts, I was only too happy to indulge my obsession.

You're so cuteshe sent and then immediately added a second message.I didn't mean it that way.

Mean it what way Bren?I asked, a smile on my face. Bren thought I was cute! Even if she hadn't meant to tell me that, I still did a happy little wiggle.

"Honey love, dinner is ready," Mom said, tapping my shoulder.

"What?" I asked, looking up from my phone to find my family staring at me.

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

“I told you three times,” Mom said with a smirk. Shit. I’d gotten totally distracted by Bren.

“Okay,” I said, wanting to use my hands to hide my blushing cheeks, but that would have only made things worse.

Instead, I rushed to the table and busily started filling my plate as my phone vibrated in the kitchen with another message that was probably from Bren. All I wanted to do was get up and get it, but that would just confirm my obsession to my family.

“No phones at the table,” Dad said as he passed the plate of corn around.

“Yeah, HONEY,” Ember said.

“Excuse me? Who has been caught sneaking their phone under the table the most times in this family? Definitely not me.”

Ember sputtered and looked to my parents for sympathy.

“She’s right, my darling. You do have an unhealthy obsession with your phone,” Mom said.

“Yeah, like everyone else! It’s not my fault that none of my friends live closer.” She pouted and crossed her arms.

“Ember, your friends live like ten minutes away and a lot of them have cars. We don’t live in Siberia,” I said.

Ember huffed. “Why is everyone ganging up on me? Honey’s the one we were talking about.”

“We’re not ganging up on you, sweetheart,” Dad said in a gentle voice. “The no phones rule is for everyone.”

“Not me!” Ellie said, her voice cheerful.

“That’s because you don’t have a phone,” Ember fired at her.

“And if I had my way, none of you would have anything other than a device to make and receive calls until you were eighteen, but then I’d be accused of child abuse,” Mom said, rolling her eyes.

My phone went off again.

“Maybe you could get your phone and put it on silent,” Dad said. “So it’s not disturbing our meal.”

Ember made an irritated exclamation as I got up and fetched my phone from the kitchen.

You’re NOT cute, Honey.

I wanted to respond, but I muted my phone and set it face down on the table next to me.

Bren Hendrix thought I was cute.

Later that night after we’d cleaned up from dinner and had done the evening chores to put the farm to bed, I typed out a response to Bren.

You can say that you didn't say it, but it's literally right there. You can't take it back, Bren. You think I'm cute.

I was going to tease her mercilessly about this.

Fucking hell. That wasn't what I MEANT.

What other meaning could there be?

Then what did you mean?

Nothing! I meant nothing. She was really backtracking now. If she'd simply let the comment slide without freaking out about it, then I might have believed she didn't seriously mean it. But now she was protesting so much that I knew it was true.

Okay, sure. Whatever you say??

I could just hear her letting out a frustrated sound, her face getting all red.

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

Bren didn't answer for a while and I worried that I might have pushed too far. Even though I spent so many days with our table next to hers at the marketplace, I still knew very little about Bren. The teasing might have gone too far. I really hoped not.

Do bees sleep?The message was completely out of left field, but it still made me smile.

Give me a second.Getting out of bed, I went downstairs and shoved my feet into my boots before walking out to the hives.

I turned on my video and waited for the light to adjust.

“Bees sleep on average five to eight hours a day, usually at night. They're just like us and they need to recharge.”

I sent her the video and waited.

I've never thought about bees sleeping until right now. It feels like something I should have already known.

That's okay. I'm full of sooooo much bee information. Just say the word and I'll bore you to tears.

I couldn't keep the goofy smile off my face if I tried.

I don't think you could ever bore me, Honey Bea.



For a second, I stopped breathing.

Honey Bea. No one had ever called me that before, but it was perfect. So perfect.

Well that's good to hear.

"I like her so much," I moaned to the sleeping bees. "I like her so much and it's going to ruin me." I knew this already. My other crushes and heartbreaks had been horrible, sure, but Bren? Bren was a tornado where those others were just a strong breeze.

Someone like Bren was life-altering.

I expected Bren to walk back the nickname, but she didn't.

I need to get to bed. Tell the bees I said hello.

"Bren says hello. What do you want me to tell her?"

I pretended to listen.

They say goodnight and they hope you enjoyed their honey. Goodnight Bren.

Tell them I appreciated it. Goodnight Honey.

## Chapter Fifteen

Bren

What the actualfuck was wrong with me? No one had held a gun to my head and forced me to keep going back and forth with her. No one had taken me hostage and made me call her Honey Bea. HONEY BEA. Where the hell did that come from?

If I believed in any kind of possession, I might have been looking for ways to banish a spirit from my body, but since I didn't, I only had myself to blame for whatever I'd said last night. The worst part? I'd been completely sober the entire time.

Honey reached into my chest and grabbed onto pieces of me that I didn't even know were there and then yanked them into the light and made me look at them. It was horrifying and freeing at the same time. Both the best and the worst.

I'd never gone skydiving, but I was going to assume that it felt similarly. That terror that you were going to die and the exhilaration of falling.

I wanted more.

"Oh my god, you have to read this one. You're buying a copy," Delaney said on Tuesday when I stopped by Between the Sheets to restock my inventory.

Delaney was working today, and she had just finished what looked like an extremely heterosexual romance, judging by the enormous hockey player and the woman he was gazing at on the illustrated cover. They could be bi, but something told me they weren't. Larison was busy with other customers and the shop was bustling, which made me happy.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

“I’m telling you, it’sso good,” Delaney promised. I adored her, but we did not have the exact same taste in books. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed a sweet romance now and then, but more often I wanted something sexy, something dark, or something really gay. Preferably all three.

Delaney was more Cinderella with singing mice making her dress and I was more Beauty and the Beast, but the beast is a woman who’s into BDSM and may or may not be a terrifying monster.

But she was not going to let me get away without buying this incredibly popular hockey romance and if I didn’t read it, she’d be disappointed in me. Delaney was one of the sweetest and most cheerful people I’d ever met and there was a fragility about her that I didn’t want to mess with.

“I keep telling my boyfriend he should be happy I’m reading these because I learn all kinds of things,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

Precious Delaney. From what I’d heard about her boyfriend, he wasn’t anything to write home about. Sure, he was employed, and he didn’t yell at her, but reading between the lines, he didn’t do a whole lot else. There were many stories of him going away with his friends on hunting trips, including on her birthday weekend. His excuse had been that one of his buddies got a moose permit and they were harder to get than a new Birkin bag, but I thought that was bullshit. Not that I knew anything about relationships, but her birthday was important to Delaney, so it should be important to the man who claimed he loved her.

“Mmmm,” I said, pretending I was paying attention as she told me another story

about him that was supposed to be funny but was really just kind of sad.

“And then he was like, ‘stop reading those smutty books,’ and I told him that he could thank those books for some of my skills.” She giggled and I didn’t know what to say.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a book for my daughter and I don’t want to get her anything that isn’t appropriate for her age, but she’s always reading and begging for more books,” a woman said to Delaney and I was free from having to hear about her mediocre boyfriend.

“Are you coming to book club?” Larison asked me. I usually turned her down, but for some reason I found myself asking which book they were reading and being surprised that it was something I would actually enjoy.

“It’s very low-pressure. Some people just come for the free snacks and don’t even say anything. And then some are more enthusiastic. It’s all up to you.” Wondering if I was making a mistake, I added the selection to the stack of other books that I was taking home with me. The meeting was next week, which would give me just enough time to read the book beforehand. I’d have to pause on my other reading, but I could roll with that.

I guess it would be fun. And if it wasn’t, I could always just stuff my mouth with cheese and crackers and mentally check out. Or people watch. That was something I did enjoy. It was one of the reasons I hadn’t rejected the marketplace idea when I’d been building my business plan.

Book lovers were the kinds of people I could tolerate. There was a connection there that I couldn’t put into words, but once you found a reader’s favorite genre or author or trope to talk about, their eyes lit up and you could see the passion in their expression.

Larison said they already had about twenty-five other people signed up for book club, but usually not everyone showed up. That was still enough of a crowd I could lose myself in.

“You’re coming?” Delaney asked as I was attempting to leave.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.” Well now I had to go.

Delaney beamed so bright that you would have thought someone announced that Christmas had come early this year.

“It’s going to be so fun! I’m making this really good cannoli dip with chips. Don’t eat before you come because there’s tons of food. And drinks.”

It was probably worth it to come just for that, even without the book discussion.

I agreed that I would be there (again) and forced myself to leave the bookshop and get on with my day.

A message came through on my phone while I was walking to my car. For the past few days, Honey and I had been talking. A lot.

Too much. Way too much. Every response or new message from her was like a hit of every drug combined. Not that I’d ever done that, but that was how it felt. A high that made me want to laugh and giggle and twirl around in a circle in the middle of the grocery store or kick my feet in a gleeful tantrum in bed.

I was officially hooked on Honey Holloway. Desperate for more. Hoping that I wouldn’t get cut off.

Every day I woke up with a start, eager to see if I had a message from her. I’d never

been much of a morning person, but she was quickly turning me into one. It seemed that she got up earlier than I did, which made sense since she was busy with farm chores. Sometimes she'd take a video of what she was doing and narrate it for me. Made me feel like I was right there with her. No wonder the farm had so many followers.

She'd worked her magic on me. Her kindness and sweetness were integral to who she was and for some reason I was letting her get to me. Normally I would have run in the other direction and just completely ghosted her. That wasn't entirely possible given that we were in close proximity to each other four days a week, but I could have given her the coldest shoulder. Made it clear that I didn't want to be her friend. Didn't want her light in my life.

But I didn't.

No. I stretched and reached for her like a struggling plant bending toward the sun.

It was pathetic how much nourishment I got from those messages and videos and attention. I'd hate myself if I wasn't so...well I wouldn't go so far to say that I was happy. I was something though. An emotion that made me feel light and bubbly as if I was constantly full of champagne minus the hangover.

Sure, I did lose a little bit of sleep thinking about her and trying to figure out something witty to respond with, but I was willing to sacrifice.

I was quickly becoming someone I didn't recognize. Someone who smiled a lot more. My cheeks were even a little stiff and sore, as if I hadn't exercised those muscles in too long.

Honey was just who I thought she'd be, except more so. I kept waiting for a crack, a moment where she'd reveal her true feelings and that she wasn't just a bubble of joy,

but it wasn't happening. Either she was really good at keeping up a facade, or she was just really like that.

I was still skeptical.

Her behavior toward me at the marketplace wasn't all that different, which I was grateful for. If she'd made a big deal out of everything, then everyone would have known. I did my best to limit my interactions with the other vendors to mostly polite nods and greetings, but there were always those certain people who just wanted us all to be coworkers or soldiers in the trenches together or comrades.

Most of the time I ignored them, but if they scented even a whiff of new gossip, they'd be up my ass and talking about me in voices that they thought weren't loud but carried across the entire marketplace because of the high ceilings and concrete floors.

Something told me Honey wasn't worried about that gossip, but that she didn't want to give her family any ammunition, which was interesting. I'd caught her speaking to them in a hushed voice as they pretended not to be watching me and I pretended not to notice them watching me.

I'd caught her blushing a few times as well, which was so sweet that I had to bite my lips so I'd stop smiling.

Every now and then, though, when her family members were distracted, Honey would throw me a grin or a wink or an eye roll and my heart pulsed in my chest in a way that was both thrilling and disconcerting.

I couldn't stop myself from smiling back at her.

She also sent me messages throughout the day. Sometimes they were questions like do



you think flowers have emotions?and sometimes they were silly relatable things that made me laugh. There were also more bee facts, but none of them were boring. Honey had a way of putting even the driest piece of information in an interesting or entertaining way. She could have been a teacher, and I guess she kind of was in a way.

On Saturday night I'd thought about going to Sapph again, but instead I ordered food and stayed in my apartment to read and talk to Honey.

She told me about growing up with her siblings and I'd never talked to someone who loved other people so much. She was brimming with it.

My parents asked me to help a little bit, but I always wanted to do more. My mom laughs that she never changed a diaper for Ellie because I always got there first. I took care of Ember and Archer too, but Ellie was MY baby.

I was surprised when she confided in me about her sister being trans and how scared she was for the world she was going to grow up in. I couldn't imagine the stress of that myself.

I can't change the world for her, but damn, I'm going to try.

Some of Honey's messages were so intense I didn't know what to say to them. That was one of them.

Honey Holloway was a force of nature. She was the sun, yes, but she was also fire. She was a hurricane and a tornado and a snowstorm. She was the kind of woman you didn't recover from. The kind of woman I knew instinctively to avoid and yet, I hadn't. Every other time I'd heeded those warning signals from my brain about a woman, but I hadn't been able to resist Honey.

On Sunday I was dragging after spending so much time thinking about Honey, composing messages to her, and doing my best not to reveal how completely she'd infiltrated my life.

I was just fixing the bookmark display when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned to find Honey standing there with an iced drink.

"I got you a matcha. You looked like you could use a pick-me-up and it's my favorite. I snuck some of our honey in there too."

Matcha had never been my thing, but if Honey Holloway handed me a cup of battery acid, I would have drunk it with a smile on my face.

"Uh, thank you," I said, taking the cup from her. She'd thoughtfully gotten a cup sleeve so it didn't get my hand all wet.

"Of course. I just... It feels weird to be talking so much and not actually hearing your voice, you know?" It was strange, but I'd been comfortable with it. Honey standing right in front of me was too much. All I could see were her lips and her cheeks and bright eyes. I could have spent hours fascinated by every single pore.

Pathetic. I was truly pathetic.

"How's your weekend been?"

Oh I guess we were chatting now. Her parents were gone, and the only sibling around was her youngest sister who was handing out tea samples with the kind of enthusiasm you can only have when you're young.

"Oh, it's fine," I said. "Same old, same old." The days pretty much blurred together

for me. My body and my mind went on autopilot and I didn't come back to myself until I got home.

"Did you hear about the Johnsons?" she asked.

"Who?"

"You know, the couple who sell the cheese?" Oh, them. They were always having some drama or another. I did my best to avoid their table, even if their cheese was divine. It wasn't worth the secondhand embarrassment of having to witness their marital squabbles. They never really yelled at each other, but the tension was as thick as their sharp cheddar and they were always hissing nasty comments back and forth to each other and trading dirty looks. It was hard to believe they didn't realize that their behavior might affect their business.

"Oh god, what now?" I asked.

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Honey's eyes went wide and she stepped closer and spoke in a low voice that made me think of sweaty tangled sheets and heavy breathing and I gripped the matcha until my fingers went numb so I didn't make any kind of embarrassing noises.

"I guess it was their anniversary the other day and he forgot so she's going to make him pay for it. Passive aggressively of course."

"Shitttt," I said, and Honey let out a low laugh.

She shrugged one shoulder. "I went over to get some cheese when he was on a break and she talked my ear off. I think I've got one of those faces that makes people want to tell me their whole life stories, you know?"

I let out a snort. "My face is the exact opposite."

Honey giggled. "You do give off a kind of 'don't fuck with me' vibe sometimes."

Good. That was what I wanted.

"But then you smile, and it changes your whole face."

Fuck, I needed to stop talking to her. I needed someone to come up and ask me about my book sleeves so I had a good excuse. Only problem was the lack of customers wandering by to use as a distraction. Just a few people wandered by, and they were pure browsers. Not interested in anything but wasting time.

I hated how my face went red and I couldn't put my hands up and hide my cheeks

without drawing more attention.

For something to do, I sucked in a sip of the matcha which caused me to almost choke. I managed to keep the liquid in my mouth and not spray it all over Honey and the floor, but it was close.

“You okay?” Honey asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, my voice rough as I had another (smaller) sip. It was actually good. The honey was a nice touch.

“Honey, we need more tea,” Ellie said, coming over and tapping her sister on the arm before turning and speaking to me.

“Hi Bren!” I’d never seen anyone so happy to see me in my entire life. It was almost unnerving.

“Uh, hi, Ellie.”

“Do you want some tea?” she asked me.

“No, I’m good. Your sister brought me a drink already.” I held it up.

“You should get another drink, Honey, and then you can have them together,” Ellie said, bouncing on her toes next to her sister. Okay, this kid was cute. Not subtle, but cute.

Honey grinned at me, as if we were sharing a joke.

“I think we should let Bren get back to work, don’t you? And we should make one last batch of tea for the day.”

Ellie let out a heavy sigh paired with an epic eye roll. Honey had her hands full with this one.

“Come on, Ellie Belly,” Honey said, throwing me a wink and ushering her sister back toward the table.

A group of teens chose that moment to find my table and get excited about my book sleeves and stickers, so I lost track of Honey for a little while. It was almost time to go and I was practically twitching to be out of here and not have to speak to another person for the rest of the night. I’d also finished the matcha and that might have also contributed to my antsy feeling.

“I’m guessing you just want to get out of here, huh?” Honey asked, startling me. I’d literally been staring off into space, completely mentally checked out for the day.

I had officially reached my limit and no amount of caffeine was going to help.

“Is it that obvious?” I asked, my voice a little rough. The first few weeks of working at the marketplace, I’d actually lost my voice by Sunday night. Now I was more used to so much talking, but I still drank special throat soother tea a few times a week.

“How are you always so...” I trailed off and gestured, unable to find the right word. I was worded out for the time being.

Honey crossed her arms, drawing attention to her perfect chest. Polo shirts looked pretty bad on just about everyone, but the way it stretched across her breasts made it even harder to think. “So what? I feel like whatever word you come up with might be insulting.”

“No, not insulting. You’re just always so friendly and smiling. How?” It was the question I’d been wondering the second I’d seen her the first time.

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“Oh, uh, I don’t know.” Her face fell and I wish I hadn’t said anything. I didn’t want to be the reason she wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Sorry. That was rude. Forget I said anything. It’s been a long weekend.”

God, I was so tired. In mind and body.

I closed my eyes and wished I was back home. By myself.

When I opened my eyes, I found Honey giving me a worried look.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You look a little pale.”

I snorted. “Yes, that is my regular complexion.” My foundation shades were always called Porcelain or Ivory or something like that.

Honey appeared to be someone who spent a healthy amount of time in the sun. I appeared as if I was likely to haunt an old dusty home.

Honey made a little huffing noise. “No, I mean, paler than usual. And your complexion is fine. Better than fine.” She fumbled a little bit over the words and her cheeks blushed a pretty pink. Fuck, she was gorgeous.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out, going redder.

“Honey, darling, it’s time to pack up,” a voice said, and her mom wandered over. She wore a flowing dress that looked like it might have been handmade, and her hair was

braided back from her face. She and Honey didn't look much alike, which had puzzled me since Honey didn't resemble her father much either. Though she did share features with her siblings. Genetics were interesting.

"Nice to see you, Bren," she said, her voice and smile warm. "Have you had a good weekend?"

"Oh yes, sure," I said as Honey pressed her lips together and looked like she was trying not to laugh.

As a result of talking with Honey so much, I now knew her parents were Sharon and Bill. Such ordinary names. Maybe that was why they'd gotten creative with their children. With the exception of Ellie, who had chosen her own name, but had decided to fit the vibe of everyone else.

"Well, we should get packed up. Honey, why don't you give Bren a hand? We've got this here."

Honey opened her mouth to argue, but Sharon squeezed her arm and then said something in her ear.

"I don't need any help," I said, but Sharon had already twirled away, singing, Bill joining in while Ellie skipped around, and Ember sat there on her phone. Archer was slowly putting jars of honey back in their crates as if he'd rather be doing anything else. Must be hard with so many sisters and singing parents.

Honey looked at her family and sighed.

"I should help them. We'll never get out of here if I let them handle things."

"I can handle my stuff if you need to go," I told her. It would take longer for me if I



had to supervise someone and tell them what to do.

Honey bit her bottom lip as if she couldn't decide.

“Go. Be with your family. I've done this every week. I have a system.”

“Just give me ten minutes,” she said, touching my arm and then going to wrangle the rest of the Holloways.

I looked down at my arm where she'd touched me. Obviously there was no visual evidence of her touch. But that didn't stop my arm from tingling.

## Chapter Sixteen

Honey

I wanted to help Bren. Well, I wanted to be near Bren, at least. I knew she had her system and I didn't want to mess with it or annoy her if I did something wrong. Bren was the kind of woman who was particular about the way she did things, I had noticed.

Once I managed to get my family moving in the right direction, I stepped beside Bren, who was packing up her book sleeves.

“Can I help? Or should I not distract you?” I asked.

She looked up and it took a moment for her eyes to focus.

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“If you grab that box, you can put all the bookmarks in it.” I reached for the box she indicated and did as she asked, making sure I didn’t just dump them in.

“That goes in the bin right there.” Bren managed to continue her task while directing me and we got everything packed away in her bins and on her rolling cart in no time. It was amazing how she’d made everything fit perfectly with no unused space. Efficient and compact. Not like my family, cramming everything into the van and hoping nothing broke. Granted, her items did tend to stack more easily, and she didn’t have to deal with any glass jars.

Bren did one last check and faced me.

“I could, um, help you?” She sounded so unsure. It was adorable.

“I’m good, thanks. Many hands, light work, and all that.” Many hands made more work sometimes, but we didn’t need Bren. There were plenty of us. She was all on her own.

“Okay, sure,” she said, passing the handle of her cart back and forth in her hands. “I’ll, um, see you next week, I guess?”

“Unless I see you sooner,” I said, and her eyes went wide, almost in fear. She really was fun to mess with.

“You never know where I might pop up, Bren. Or you could always come by the farm. We do tours and you’ll get a free sample of honey. You can even name a bee and get a little certificate saying that you’re an amateur beekeeper.”

Bren just stared at me as if I'd spoken in another language.

"Do you...do you think that's something I'd be into?" she asked.

Absolutely not, which was why I'd said it. I adored watching her reactions.

"No? You don't want to get your picture taken wearing a full beekeeping outfit? You'd look so cute."

Bren wouldn't look cute in it. She'd look hot as fuck, but I couldn't tell her that. I also was never going to tell her I'd had several erotic dreams of her stripping out of the suit or wearing the hat with the veil down and nothing else. My mind came up with strange fantasies sometimes.

"I think I'll pass," she said, tapping one finger on the cart handle. She obviously wanted to go, but I didn't want to let her. I wanted to beg her to go somewhere with me. Anywhere we could be alone, and I could sit and gorge myself on her face and her voice and her expressions.

"Fine. Your loss," I said, pretending a nonchalance that I very much didn't feel.

"Okay, uh, bye," she said, her eyes flicking around as she started to back toward the door.

"Bye, Bren," I said, giving her a goofy little wave that she didn't return.

"Honey and Bren, sitting in a tree..." Ellie sang.

"Wow, are kids still saying that one?" I asked.

Ellie grinned up at me as I pulled the elastic out of her hair and redid her ponytail for

her.

“I am. You’re gonna kiss her,” Ellie said, looking up at me and smiling, showing me the gaps where she had missing teeth that had yet to grow back in. My adorable little Jack-o-lantern. She didn’t believe in the tooth fairy anymore, but we still snuck little things under her pillow and took away the baby teeth which my mom kept in a little silver box, along with the rest of ours. I was torn between thinking it was sweet and creepy at the same time.

“Am I? When’s that going to happen?” I asked her.

“Soon,” she said, with all the confidence of one so young.

“Well, could you give me a heads up so I make sure my teeth are brushed beforehand?”

Ellie giggled and I kissed the top of her head. I didn’t have to lean down far. Someday, she would be taller than me and I was dreading that day already.

Eventually we got packed up and made our way back home. Bren hadn’t sent any messages to me and I had the feeling she was a little taken aback about me asking her to come to the farm. In a normal interaction with someone, it would have been a very natural thing to ask to move a friendship forward.

But Bren was different. She was clearly someone who hadn’t gotten a lot of practice being a friend. Or maybe she’d had friends and had bad experiences. I hated to think it was the second option. While it was true that she was a little prickly and hard to get to know, she was worth it, and that was the truth.

To break the ice a little, I went out and put on a full beekeeping outfit. We rarely wore the full suits anymore, since we were so comfortable with handling the bees and

knowing their behavior.

I pulled the veil down and then asked Ellie to take a picture of me posing.

She demanded that we take multiple shots in different poses.

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“Are you going to be a professional photographer?” I asked her when she’d finally handed the phone back to me.

She shrugged. “Maybe. Can I be a vet and a photographer?”

I looked into her eyes. “You can be whatever you want to be, Ellie Belly. Never, ever forget that. You can be a photographer veterinarian president model teacher if you decide.”

Ellie grinned at me. “I don’t think I want to be president though.”

Laughing, I scrolled through the pictures she’d taken. “I don’t blame you. I don’t want to be president either.”

I found one of the cutest pictures and sent it off to Bren. If that didn’t thaw her, I didn’t know what would.

Well it looks great on you, but you’d make anything look good.

I almost let out a little excited squeal.

“What did she say?” Ellie asked, grabbing my arm to try and see my phone screen.

“She thinks I look good.”

Ellie giggled and clapped. “I told you you’re gonna kiss her.”

That one comment from Bren had me buzzing the rest of the night. I couldn't help going back to look at it.

She hadn't backpedaled either! That was progress. We were making progress together.

With all the conversing with Bren, I realized I hadn't spoken much with Bibliofile. I'd sent her a few messages here and there, but my main focus had been Bren and that wasn't fair to Biblio, so I sent her a message apologizing about being MIA.

No worries. I've been busy myself. Believe it or not, I'm actually going to brave other people and go to a book club. I got talked into it and the book is actually really good. Are you proud of me?

I actually was. That was something completely out of her normal comfort zone.

You can't see me, but I'm doing a little dance in your honor right now. Will there be snacks?

She told me there would be and I gave her all kinds of encouragement.

You know what? You've inspired me. I'm signing up for my local book club too.

Between the Sheets had a monthly book club and while buying the book was part of it, I didn't mind supporting the business at all. I'd been on the fence, but I went to the website and signed up also placing an order for the book that I'd pick up in the store tomorrow. That was an excellent reason to stop by Between the Sheets and see if they had anything new. Maybe I could even convince Ember to come with me. She did like to read, and it would be nice to have some sister time with her.

I went downstairs and found my parents snuggled up and watching an old black-and-

white movie. Archer was still outside, the sound of the basketball bouncing on the driveway in competition with the peepers. At least he was doing that and wasn't gaming for twelve hours a day. Ellie was on the couch with Mom and Dad, and I assumed Ember was in her room, so I went upstairs to find her.

"Em? It's me," I told her when I knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" she said, the one word full of teenage irritation that I would dare disturb her.

Gently, I opened the door and poked my head in.

"Hey, I have to drop by the bookstore tomorrow and wanted to know if you'd come with me? I'll buy you lunch." I wasn't above luring her with free food.

Ember looked up from her phone and thought about it for a few seconds before shrugging. "Sure."

"You good?" I asked.

"Uh huh," she said, her voice tight. Oh no. Something was up.

"Okay, well you can tell me about it tomorrow."

I left before she could argue with me.



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“Yay, I’m so glad you’re doing book club,” Delaney said when I picked up my book the next day after browsing the store and grabbing two new releases and one older book I loved that had recently come out with a special edition with sprayed edges that I had to have.

“I’ve been trying to do more social things lately,” I said, remembering what Aunt Eileen had told me. She’d still been checking in on me and making sure I was going out and having fun. Book club was only a few hours and nothing at the farm was going to fall apart if I went. I’d probably have a better time than when I’d gone to Sapph. That hadn’t been a terrible time, but at least with book club there was a much smaller chance that I’d cause Bren Hendrix to spill a drink. She was definitely not a book club kind of person. All those people? No way.

Too bad, because it might actually be a good way to pitch her products. They were on prominent display and it made me proud seeing them. I almost wanted to go up to anyone else in the shop and steer them over to the Wild Prose shelves and say how good the book sleeves were and shove bookmarks and stickers into their hands. I’d managed to stop myself, which was good.

Ember had come with me and she’d stepped away from me when I’d come into the bookshop and had gone immediately to the young adult section to browse. That was fine with me. I’d told her I’d buy her three books of her choice in addition to lunch. I was really laying the bribery on thick today. I felt guilty for being so close to Ellie and for not doing as much for my other two siblings. They knew I loved them, but I needed to make sure I held onto them as they went through their tumultuous teen years. I wouldn’t let them suffer in silence if there was something I could do.

Ember was my first project. She seemed to have made up with her friends, but there was absolutely something else bothering her and I was going to get to the bottom of it, even if that took bribery.

Delaney was one of the loveliest people I'd ever met, and I said that as someone who tried to lead every interaction with kindness myself. She absolutely had me beat. There was a purity of her spirit, as if even if something bad happened to her, it would just slide right off and she'd continue to glow.

We were deep in conversation about a book we were anticipating the release of when her phone went off in quick succession.

"I'm so sorry about that," she said, checking it.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

Delaney gave me a tight smile and typed out a quick response before putting her phone away.

"My boyfriend. He's just checking up on me. He's a total sweetheart." I wouldn't say I was an expert at reading people, but I knew enough to know that Delaney was lying through her teeth. Everyone knew about her boyfriend because she was always talking about him. You had to find the truth in the things she didn't say and in the way she told the stories about him.

Delaney was clearly a woman who believed in the fairytale. Hell, she worked in a romance bookstore because of how much she adored books about love and romance. She also ran a small screen-printing business when she wasn't working at the bookstore and they also sold her shirts and tote bags.

But Delaney couldn't paint a rosy picture about her relationship, no matter how hard

she tried. It made me sad for her, to be honest. She tried so hard to make everyone believe she was living in a romantic novel, but he was no prince. From what I'd gleaned, he was stringing her along and would probably say things like "why do we need labels?" if she asked him if she was his girlfriend. Funny, because they literally lived together, but I guess that didn't matter to him.

He worked sporadically and seemed to have a lot of issues finding a steady job. Delaney defended him, of course, but a few times I wanted to tell her that she didn't need to.

It wasn't my place to tell her that her boyfriend wasn't worthy of her, though. And even if I did? She wasn't going to believe me and then I'd have hurt her for nothing.

So I just nodded and waited for a moment to change the subject.

Ember interrupted us, which was a welcome distraction.

"Find some books?" I asked as she held out a stack of at least five books, four of them hardbacks.

This was going to be an expensive day.

"I can't decide," Ember said, biting her lip.

"Oh, I can absolutely help," Delaney said, ushering Ember over to one of the seating areas and motioning for her to set the books down. I stood back as Delaney talked with Ember and I watched my sister talk back, her face and hands animated. It was good to see. When Ember came back to me, she had three books this time.

"Okay. I think these ones. Delaney said she'd put the others aside for me if I decide I want them. One is the second in the series and I need to read the first one."

“Sounds good.” We both went to pay, and I tried not to wince at the total. We were supporting a small business. Books brought us joy. I was bonding with my sister.

“See you on Wednesday!” Delaney called as we were leaving.

“Can’t wait!” I called back.

## Chapter Seventeen

Bren

Book club was creeping up on me and I was almost done with the book, but the ticking clock was stressing me out. I’d built my reading time into my daily schedule, but I was still cutting it close. I had a new product drop coming in two weeks that was also sucking up a lot of my time. I had to make sure that my website was ready to take the orders, I had enough ready to ship, and that the photography and product listings were perfect. I’d done this routine before, but I never wanted to get lazy or complacent because that was when things went wrong.

I had two different themed lines dropping: dark romance and what I was calling “summertime small town.” They were each so different that I hoped there was enough of a range for every one of my customers to find something they wanted. While the summertime small town was fun, I really loved the fabrics I’d found for the dark romance line.

I sent Honey a few pictures of the new products.

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You are sworn to secrecy. No one else has seen these except for me.

I promise I won't share! These are gorgeous!

She told me which one was her favorite and I went ahead and set aside a book sleeve and a matching bookmark for her. She'd already gifted me some honey and had helped me pack up my table, so it wasn't that big a deal to give her something.

Honey and I were still sending messages furiously back and forth to each other. Some days I got a cramp in my hand from holding my phone all day so I could talk to her. I'd even caved and had sent her some voice notes when I got tired of typing things out that I wanted to say.

She answered with her own voice notes and I enjoyed hearing her, especially when it was late, and her voice got a little rough. It made me think about her being in bed and what she was wearing. Or not wearing. My naughty thoughts about Honey had only increased in frequency and they were so bad sometimes that I had to stop what I was doing. It got so bad I even tried to take care of it myself, which ended with me just being frustrated as usual.

I managed to finish the book club book on Wednesday afternoon with only a few hours to spare. I did as Delaney asked and didn't eat dinner before I arrived at the shop. The sidewalks were full of people going out to dinner or drinks or just enjoying the summer evening. The air was still thick and muggy, and I pulled my hair off the back of my neck when I got out of my car. At least it wouldn't be hot in the bookshop.

I checked my bag to make sure I had my book and locked my car before walking to the bookshop. I'd timed myself to be about ten minutes early so I could scope everything out and find a good seat in the back, preferably near the food.

The bookshop was all lit up and cozy as I opened the door and was greeted with a room full of people and a circle of chairs. Shit. There was no way to sit in the back. They'd arranged this to encourage participation no doubt, but that was the last thing I wanted.

Looking around, I searched to see if I'd know anyone, but I didn't see anyone familiar other than Delaney, who was setting trays on the table to the left side of the room. That was actually a relief. Not that I knew a whole lot of people, but it would have been a nightmare to see someone from the marketplace.

I made a beeline for Delaney and she happened to look up just as I reached her.

"Bren! I'm so glad you're here. Please, get something to eat so I don't have to bring it home with me. Although, maybe that would make my boyfriend happy." She laughed and I picked up a plate. Honestly, I was starving. I liked eating at very regular times, and this was late for me.

"Thanks," I told her, and she flitted away to tackle some other task. I selected items and filled my plate, but not too much because I didn't want to look like I was eating half the food and leaving nothing for anyone else.

"Bren?" a soft voice said behind me and I slowly turned to find Honey standing behind me with a heart-stopping smile on her face.

Like she was thrilled to see me.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

“Book club,” I said, stating the obvious.

She shook her head and let out a little laugh. “Of course. I just...I didn’t expect you to be at something like this.”

I snorted. “That makes two of us. I don’t really know why I’m here.”

Honey stepped closer to me, reaching around to grab a paper plate. “Free food?”

“Well, I had to buy the book to come, so it wasn’t exactly free, was it?”

Honey chuckled quietly. “That’s true. Where are you sitting?”

“I haven’t found a spot yet. I went for the food first.”

That made her laugh fully.

“A woman after my own heart.” Honey loaded up with snacks and then turned to me. “Where do you want to sit?”

I looked at the circle of chairs, several of which already had people sitting in them, some talking in small groups, a few on their phones or looking around with nervous looks.

“In the back,” I said.

“Well, that’s not exactly an option, so how about here?” She motioned to two chairs near the food table, but not directly in front of it so people wouldn’t be crowding our space to get to it.

“Yeah, sure,” I said. It was as good a place as any. Honey took the chair on my right

and balanced her plate on her legs.

“I didn’t think I’d see anyone I knew here, other than Delaney.” It made sense that she would be here. Honey was exactly the kind of person who came to a book club. Her being friends with Delaney was also entirely predictable. They were very similar.

“Is this the first time you’ve come?” I asked her, assembling a little sandwich with crackers and a slice of cheese.



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“Yeah. I’m... Well, I’m trying to get out and do more social activities.”

That floored me. Honey didn’t seem like the kind of person who would struggle with being social.

“Really?” I asked, raising both eyebrows.

She nodded and looked down at her plate. “I have a tendency to get too wrapped up in the farm and my family and forget to go out.” Huh. That was completely surprising.

“I do that too. But it’s because I’m generally sick of people by the end of the day and am so tired of talking that I just want to be alone.”

She studied my face for a moment. “Then what brought you out tonight?”

I sighed. “I don’t even really know. I caved to peer pressure from Delaney and Larison. They were very persuasive.”

Honey nodded. “Yeah, they are.”

She looked good tonight in a cute little T-shirt with strawberries on it and wide-leg light-wash jeans with pink sneakers. Her hair was down and softly curling on her shoulders.

She looked good enough to lick.

I'd gotten so lost in staring at her that I missed what she'd just said.

Fuck, I shouldn't have sat next to her.

"I also came because a friend of mine said they were going to a book club and inspired me. She actually reminds me of you a little bit."

I snorted. "So she hates people?"

"No. Well, maybe a little bit. She likes me. I think." She frowned. "No, she definitely likes me."

"Why don't you ask her?" How could anyone not like Honey? Yes, I had initially disliked her, but that was for very valid reasons. She'd won me over anyway.

"Maybe I will."

Delaney walked to the center of the room and clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"Hello, welcome to Between the Sheets Book Club. I'm so happy to see so many familiar and new faces. Can you raise your hand if this is your first meeting with us?"

Begrudgingly I raised my hand, as did Honey and about three other people out of the almost two dozen.

"Wonderful. Great to have you here. I just want to reiterate that participation is entirely voluntary, and we keep things loosely structured. I'm here to help facilitate, but if there's a direction we want to go in, then feel free. I've got some lists of questions we'll start with and then go from there." She passed out sheets of paper with bulleted questions on them.

“Okay, let’s start with how did everyone like the book?”

I’d been afraid that her question would have been met with silence, but this wasn’t that kind of book club. Most of the participants were lively and eager to share their opinions. Delaney stepped in every now and then if things got quiet or when people had gone off on a tangent too far and brought everyone back with a new question. She did an incredible job of keeping things moving and not allowing anyone to dominate. I didn’t speak myself, but Honey did and every time she opened her mouth, I found myself leaning closer to her, as if I wanted to melt into her skin. I also compulsively nodded at anything she said so she’d know I was paying complete attention to her.

We took a break and more people got food before we sat back down and finished our discussion. Delaney stood up.

“Well, we’re just about out of time for tonight, so thank you all for coming. We’ll be emailing the options for next month’s pick, so make sure you check your inbox. We’ve got some really fun options and I won’t tell you which one to vote for, even though I want to.” She laughed. “Please grab any snacks or drinks you’d like to take home with you and get home safely.”

Well, that wasn’t so bad. In my head I’d expected icebreakers and forced introductions and “tell us three fun facts” even though Larison and Delaney had promised me it wasn’t like that.

Honey turned toward me. “That wasn’t terrible. I don’t know why I was so nervous.”

“If you were, I couldn’t tell.” Her smile was beaming, and I had to grip the edges of my chair so I didn’t reach for her face and kiss her so I could taste that smile.

I really was getting desperate. Time to go home before I said something like “hey,

can I lick your neck and suffocate between your tits for a little while?”

I hadn’t been this fucking horny in years and it was incredibly distracting.

“Thanks, Bren.”

She pulled her phone out and took a smiling selfie. “My aunt is always pestering me to go out and do things, so this is evidence that I did. And I’m going to tell my friend that I came and had a good time.”

She was so damn cute I couldn’t stand it.

My phone buzzed with a new message and I saw that it was from Melliferal.

Survived my first book club meeting. Found a friend, so it wasn’t terrible!

Everything in the room ground to a halt.

I stared at the message and then looked at Honey.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, my voice sounding like it came from someone else.

Before I freaked out, I was going to check, so I stumbled to the bathroom and locked the door before sending Melliferal a message.

That’s great! What book was it?

My hands shook as I held my phone and waited for a response from Mel.

It came almost immediately, and the title of the book was the one that we’d read tonight.

My phone clattered to the floor and I found it difficult to breathe. Running to the sink, I turned on the cold water and thrust my hands under the tap, meeting my wide eyes in the speckled mirror.

“Holy shit,” I said, my entire body trembling like I was in the midst of an earthquake.

Honey was Melliferal.

Honey

I waited for Bren to come out of the bathroom, but she’d been in there a long time. Most everyone had left, and I needed to get home myself, but I wanted to make sure she was okay.

Gently, I knocked on the bathroom door.

“Bren? You okay?”

“Yeah, fine,” she said, not sounding fine at all.

“Are you sure? Do you need anything? I can give you a ride if you need.” No matter what was going on with her, I wanted to help. Even if she ruined the passenger seat of my car.

“I’m fine, Honey. Just go home.” Her voice was sharp and irritated. Okay then. She didn’t want me to help her, but I wasn’t going to abandon her in the bathroom.

I found Delaney folding up the chairs and taking them to the storage room.

“Hey, so I think something is up with Bren, but she doesn’t want me to help, so can you just make sure she’s okay?”

Delaney's eyes went wide. "Oh no, I hope she didn't have a reaction or something. Thanks for letting me know."

She went right away to the bathroom and I stood back as she knocked. Whatever Bren told her made her nod at me and then shrug as she stepped away from the door.

"She said she's fine. Just had an issue with her contacts."

As far as I knew, Bren didn't wear contacts. Something was up, but she wasn't going to tell me about it. Like I'd care if she had her period and stained her pants or anything else like that.

"Oh, okay. Thanks, Delaney," I said. There was nothing else I could do but send Bren a message saying I hoped she got home safe and to leave the bookshop completely and utterly confused.

Bren didn't respond to my message and then Bibliofile had also gone silent. Had I done something to piss off everyone in my life?

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I snuck out to tell the bees all about book club and the weirdness at the end.

“I’m probably being totally self-centered thinking that I did something. It probably has absolutely nothing to do with me. That doesn’t stop me from wanting to make it okay.”

I would see Bren tomorrow and hopefully I could get an explanation. Until then, my mind was running wild with all kinds of increasingly wild theories until I finally passed out that night.

Tomorrow was going to be interesting.

### Chapter Eighteen

Bren

What the fuck was I supposed to do? I finally escaped the bathroom and I knew Delaney didn’t buy my contacts explanation, but she didn’t push, and I was allowed to leave on unsteady legs.

How the hell was this possible? Of all the people in the world, I’d found Honey Holloway in the comments of a random fanfic and we’d become friends and she ended up with the table next to mine at the marketplace? The odds of that were too tiny to bother counting.

It was absolutely fucking wild.



I somehow drove back to my apartment and made it up the stairs and onto my couch where I ended up staring at the turned-off TV for a while, my thoughts spinning and tumbling all over each other.

Both Honey and Melliferal were sending me messages now. I couldn't seem to grasp the fact that they were the same person. I'd pictured Melliferal over the years but had never really imagined her exact features.

Now I knew. I knew the shape of her cheeks and that she had dimples and that her hair wasn't just gold, but it was tarnished brass and wheat and the soft brown of a baby animal. I knew her exact height and how I wouldn't have to lean too far at all to kiss her.

I knew the shape and depth of her laugh. I knew about her parents and her siblings and her bee obsession.

This was why I hadn't wanted to know anything about Melliferal. This was what I'd been hoping to avoid.

Now here I was. Completely obsessed with two women who were actually the same woman.

Robotically, I stumbled into the shower and managed to wash myself before sliding into my pajamas and getting into bed. I'd left my phone on the kitchen counter. I couldn't deal with it right now. I was too busy flipping out about tonight's revelation.

How in the hell was I supposed to look at her tomorrow? What was I supposed to do?

Those questions kept me up most of the night.

In the morning, I had to get up and get my ass to the marketplace, but it was the last

thing I wanted to be doing. There was no choice, though. Of course there were times when other vendors couldn't show up for one reason or another, but if you did it too much, you had the risk of losing your space.

I had to go. There was no one else to cover for me.

No matter how much I mentally fortified myself before I walked in, I was not prepared to see Honey standing in a shaft of sunlight and smiling at her youngest sister.

Fucking fuck. Was the universe trying to torture me? What had I done to deserve this? Was it because I was kind of rude and couldn't stand most people? Was it something from my childhood?

Things got worse when I turned to start setting up my table and Honey noticed me.

"Bren, good morning." She was practically trembling with the need to barrage me with questions, but she was doing her best to hold back. Her hands were clasped behind her back, but she was leaning toward me, her eyes bright and worried.

"Good morning," I said, amazed that my voice sounded normal.

"How are your, um, eyes?"

"What?" I asked, confused.

She pointed to her eye. "You had a contact issue last night? That's why you were in the bathroom?" Right. That lie. Being near her made it impossible to form a coherent thought.

This was Melliferal. The woman I'd told so many secrets and wishes and revealed so

many corners of my soul to. I might not have told her my name, but I'd told her a hell of a lot of other shit that was more important.

And now this woman knew my name and about my most shameful moments.

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I couldn't tell her. She couldn't know.

"It's fine. I just...had to fix it," I said.

She peered at me as if looking for the lies and waited for me to admit that I'd been lying.

I wasn't going to do that.

"Good. That's...good. I'll, um, let you get back to work." She wilted, her smile drooping along with her shoulders and it made me want to grab her and hold her close and tell her that it wasn't her fault. I didn't want to be the one who made her look like that. Who made her feel anything less than happy and safe and adored.

Fuck! This fucking situation was so fucking impossible!

I opened my mouth to tell her the truth and slammed it shut again, making my teeth snap painfully against each other.

She couldn't know.

I could never tell her.

The rest of the day Honey avoided me, and so did Melliferal. Now that I knew they were the same person it was blindingly obvious. They had the same tone and go-to words and sense of humor. I'd been falling for Melliferal and Honey at the same time without knowing they were the same person. It was a complete punch to the gut.

Every time I happened to see her in my peripheral, it was like being stabbed.

I ran through every scenario in my head of what I could do. My two options: tell her or don't tell her both sucked. I hated them. I wanted a better option, but there wasn't one. This was an all or nothing situation.

If I told her, she'd be thrilled. She'd be so happy. She'd want to bring our Bibliofile and Melliferal relationship into the real world and the idea of being that intimate with her in person made me want to throw up.

If only I could go back in time and keep my online relationship with Melliferal on a different level. If only I could have kept her at a distance and not slowly unfolded myself to her in each new message over the past year.

Honey knew too much. Far too much. I wanted to get all of that back, but since I couldn't, the only option was to not tell her. To cut off Melliferal. To chill things with Honey as well. It didn't seem right to try to be Honey's friend while ghosting her online persona. Plus, continuing the friendship opened me up to her finding out and then being really angry with me. That couldn't happen either.

I had to cut them both off. Immediately.

I could do this.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Honey

Bren was angry with me and I had no idea why. I had no idea what I could have possibly done. I'd gone over the book club meeting and tried to analyze every word I'd said to her and came up empty. There was nothing, which meant I had no idea

how to fix it. What I needed to say to her to get her to look at me again.

Smiling and hawking honey and other products was a struggle when I could still hear Bren being kind to her customers while she was so viciously avoiding even looking at me.

I could feel her eyes on me, and I could feel the moment she turned if she thought I might glance her way.

“Why is Bren mad?” Ellie asked, leaning close to whisper to me.

“I don’t know,” I whispered back, stretching my hand out from holding the tray of samples. “I have no idea.”

Ellie turned her head to the side, her eyebrows drawing together as she thought.

“Maybe she’s not madatyou. Maybe she’s mad about something else.” But what? And why was she taking it out on me?

Nothing made sense and my stomach had been in knots all day about it.

Having Bren ignore me like this was awful. All I wanted to do was to go home and lay in bed and not talk to anyone. Hopefully while rain pattered gently on the windows and sad music played.

A few times I had to let go of my smile to give my face a break. I’d been avoiding my phone all day. This was something I’d talk to Bibliofile about and get her advice, but for some reason I was holding back on this.

Everything had been so good. I’d been excited to see Bren at book club and we’d been chatting and then...

This.

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“You should talk to her,” Ellie announced as we were putting things away for the night.

“I don’t think she wants to talk to me.” Bren was sending me big red signals and I wanted to respect them.

“I still think you should talk to her. If you don’t, then you can’t figure it out. Maybe she needs a friend.”

Bren absolutely needed a friend, but was I the person to fill that role? Especially when I was hiding these other more intense and romantic and sexual feelings for her?

What a mess. What a sticky, messy mess.

I blew out a breath and risked a glance over at Bren. She was just standing in front of her table and staring straight ahead as if she had mentally checked out. Something was definitely wrong with her.

“Wish me luck,” I told Ellie as I crossed the short distance between me and Bren.

“Hey,” I said softly. “I know you’ve been avoiding me, but I was just curious why.”

My voice trembled a little as I spoke, and I didn’t miss that she flinched when she heard my voice.

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes and I took a deep breath. Shit. I wasn’t going to get through this.



“I just don’t...” she looked up at the ceiling and then glanced at me. “Fuck.”

The tears I’d been trying to hold back dripped down my cheeks and I hurried to brush them away. God, how embarrassing.

“I’m sorry. For whatever I did,” I said with my shaking voice. “Everything seemed fine and then today you look like you hate me.”

Bren reached out with both hands and then froze.

“I don’t hate you. I wish I did.” She whispered the last part.

“Why?” I’d missed something that had happened with her.

She opened her mouth to say something and then grabbed her phone instead. She typed out a message and then looked up at me.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Check your phone.” I’d had mine on silent all day.

There was a new message from Bibliofile.

Hey Honey Beait said.

“What?” I asked, looking up at Bren.

“I’m Bibliofile,” she said, but the words weren’t making sense to my reality.

“You can’t be Bibliofile.” That wasn’t possible.

“You can check my message log. Or send me a message back.”

I decided to do that.

Bren?

It's meshe responded in the Bibliofile chat.

“How? I don't...” I trailed off, at a complete loss for words.

“I know,” she said. “I have no idea how it happened, but I got that message you send Biblio last night and I knew. That was why I went to the bathroom. Because I flipped out a little. I'm sorry.”

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“Oh,” I said. Such a small insignificant word that encompassed so much.

I stared down at my phone as if it would explain to me how this could have happened.

“You’re Bibliofile?” I had to have her confirm it again.

Bren nodded. “And you’re Melliferal.”

“Bees are called Apis Mellifera. I just tweaked the word a little.” I’d thought it was so cute and clever at the time.

Bren nodded slowly. “That makes sense now that you say it. Feels obvious.”

“I can’t...I can’t believe this is happening. That you’re her.” Two people I’d developed feelings for were really just the same person. Two sides of Bren and I’d fallen for both of them.

This was a disaster of epic proportions.

“And she’s you,” she said slowly. Bren wouldn’t look directly in my eyes and I realized why.

“You didn’t want to tell me.”

She shook her head slowly and met my eyes. “No. I didn’t. This was exactly what I was hoping to avoid.” Bren let out a long exhale and pressed her lips together. She’d been upset about finding out that I was Melliferal.

She was angry and I was both stunned and excited.

“What are you going to do now?” The shock of finding out was wearing off and other emotions were jostling for control.

Bren hadn’t planned on telling me and her plan had been to avoid me. To hope that she could cut off contact with both me and Melliferal and I’d just go away and leave her alone. So she could be alone.

No. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

I crossed my arms and waited for her to speak.

“I don’t know,” she said, running her hands through her hair. “I don’t fucking know, Honey. This is all...it’s too much. It’s way too much.”

Too bad.

“I know what you want to do. You want to push me away. To pull back and hope that if you ignore me, eventually I’ll go away. It’s the reason you didn’t want to talk about anything personal with Melliferal.”

Anger flashed through me and I didn’t know how to push it away.

“You are so scared of letting anyone know you, Bren, but it’s too late. I know you and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

I breathed hard, as if I’d just run up the stairs and I’d moved closer to her. Bren’s eyes went wide.

“If you want to get rid of me, you’re going to have to work pretty damn hard.”

“Honeyyyyyy,” Ellie called. “Can you help me?” I didn’t know why Ellie chose that moment to need my attention when Archer, Ember, and my parents were here, but I stepped back from Bren.

Lifting one hand I pointed at her. “I know you, Bren Hendrix.”

And there was nothing she could do about it.

## Chapter Twenty

Bren

That did not go the way I hoped it would. I couldn’t even go one entire day ignoring her while I was working. Most of the time I’d been doing my best not to look at her while also finding my eyes drawn to her as if my body couldn’t help itself. Her confusion and frustration came at me in waves, feeling almost like a physical touch. A painful one.

I was almost out of the woods when she came at me with those big sad eyes leaking tears and begging me to tell her what she’d done.

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It wasn't her fault, but I didn't know how else to handle it. And then I'd made the mistake of actually looking into her eyes and had blurted out the whole thing.

Her initial reaction was shock that turned into excitement. She was happy that I was Bren and Bibliofile. And then when I couldn't find any words to give her, she got angry with me.

That was completely unexpected.

She called me out, right in the marketplace. Flayed me with her words as easily as if she'd held a knife to my skin.

Then she'd left me standing there, wanting to look down to see if I was bleeding anywhere.

I wasn't.

Somehow, I got my shit together and made it back to my apartment.

Expecting to have a message from Honey/Melliferal, I checked my phone but there was nothing. Huh. She was probably busy with her family.

For the rest of the night, I checked my phone every few minutes, but no messages from Honey/Mel while Arson snuggled in my lap. Seems she was giving me the cold shoulder.

I absolutely hated it, but I'd have to get used to it. This could be the perfect way to

untangle myself from this complicated situation. Here was my out. Honey was pissed and didn't want to talk to me. All I had to do was not message her. To keep the silent treatment going. After a while, she'd give up. Everyone had a different limit, but eventually, it would be too humiliating and not worth it to keep trying.

I wasn't worth it. That I knew for a fact.

Honey would give up, and that would be that.

I just had to hold on until she gave up.

After a wretched night of sleep, I was in a shitty mood the next morning when I showed up at the marketplace. God, why did the Holloways have to have the table right next to mine? Why did Honey have to be a few feet away from me for four days a week? She was right there, and I had to pretend she wasn't.

It was torture. Absolute torture. Every time I heard her lovely voice, I wanted to hang on every word. When she smiled at a customer, I wanted to run over and steal the smile for myself.

I'd never been a jealous person, but I didn't know another word for the burning in my chest.

Everyone else got to bask in her light except for me. I'd banished myself to the darkness and now I was cursing my horrible luck.

I really must have done something terrible in a previous life.

The hours crawled by, and even though business was steady, I watched the big clock in the corner of the room like a hawk.

“Why are you mad at Honey?” a voice asked, and I snapped my eyes away from the clock to find Ellie Holloway standing in front of my table.

My day had just gone from bad to worse. If a hole opened up under my table to suck me down to the underworld, I would hop right in.

“I’m not mad at her,” I said immediately, but her eyes narrowed. Too perceptive for one so young. She was going to be holy terror when she got older.

“Then why aren’t you friends anymore?”

How in the hell could I explain the situation to this kid?

“It’s complicated,” I told her, but she just huffed and rolled her eyes.

“That’s what adults always say, but most of the time they’re lying.”

I let out a shocked laugh.

“You’re too smart for your own good,” I told her.

She grinned as if I’d given her the best compliment of her life. “People say that to me a lot.” I bet they did.

“In this case, it really is complicated. Has Honey told you anything?” I would assume she’d tell her siblings all about me and how awful I was.



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Ellie shook her head. “No. But I know that she’s mad and sad at the same time and you’re avoiding each other.”

I nodded. “I’m sorry about that. I just don’t think we can be friends anymore.”

Fuck, I hated explaining this to her.

“Why not?”

I let out a sigh. “We just can’t.”

Ellie’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s not a good reason.”

It wasn’t, but it was all I had for her.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not sure why I was apologizing to this kid I barely knew.

“You should go back to being friends. You made Honey happy.”

Motherfucker. Now the sister was slicing me with words. Next thing the parents would be giving me a tongue lashing.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. She huffed again and went back to the table. Without looking over, I knew that Honey had been watching us.

This was a nightmare.

At last, the day ended and I braced myself for Honey to come and admonish me for being mean to her little sister, but she didn't. She also hadn't sent me any messages. Not as herself, and not as Melliferal.

I'd been scrolling back through our chat history and found myself smiling and laughing about our old jokes and silly things we'd shared with each other. In spite of not knowing names or anything else, I'd opened up to Melliferal in ways I hadn't with anyone, maybe ever.

I'd never been safe enough to share those deep and quiet thoughts with my family and the last time I'd tried to get close to an online friend, she'd ended up turning on me and then ghosting me after accusing me of doing all kinds of things I'd never done. I was still hurt and confused about that whole thing.

And then I'd met Melliferal and had let myself trust someone new, against my better judgment. Now here she was, handling jars of hot honey just a few feet away. Real and beautiful and impossible.

No one said anything to me when I got up to leave, and I decided to count myself lucky that no one else in the Holloway family had decided to come and yell at me for making Honey sad.

Honey wouldn't be sad for long. She'd find someone else. She had to.

Not wanting to go home and be bitter and alone, I decided to venture to Sapph and be bitter surrounded by people with a neon pink drink in my hand. I'd let the bartender talk me into one of the specials and it was like drinking a liquefied candy store, but for some reason the sweetness was working on me.

So many lovely people dancing and sweating and being free. It should have made me sad or angry, but it didn't. I liked being near them. Kind of like how I liked being near Honey and her intrinsic sunshine.

Honey Holloway didn't light up a room. She lit up the entire world. She lit mine up, at least. Blinded me with her intensity. Wiped out everything else but her.

Honey wasn't here and I didn't want her to be.

I didn't.

I wasn't going to be able to get rid of her if I kept pining for her.

Not pining. I wasn't pining. I didn't pine. Pining was for pathetic people.

"Hey gorgeous, can I buy you a drink?" a soft butch with an undercut and a sharp jaw asked me as she sidled up next to my stool.

"I'm good, thank you," I said, not making eye contact.

"You sure?" she asked.

"Yup."

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I didn't need anyone buying me drinks. I didn't need anyone, period. My entire life I'd only relied on myself and things had turned out well. My business was successful, I had a somewhat decent apartment in a vibrant city, and I was sitting here at a sapphic bar enjoying myself.

Sure, I didn't have a relationship, but that shit complicated life. I was busy, but my existence was simple. Planned. Uncomplicated (most of the time).

And boring as fuck.

God, I was so damnbored. I hadn't even noticed until I'd started talking with Melliferal and then it had been even more apparent when I'd started talking with Honey.

Not only was she beautiful, but she was interesting, and I never really knew what she was going to say. Plus, she seemed interested in me. Honey coaxed and teased and pulled parts of me out that I'd ignored or forgotten or hadn't been aware of.

I liked the version of myself I was around her.

"That was a heavy sigh," the bartender said. I hadn't realized I'd let out one out that anyone had been listening.

"Long day," I said, because that was the thing you said.

"You want another?" I'd reached the bottom of my drink.

“Give me a SoCo and Coke with lime,” I said, falling back on my usual. I couldn’t handle another one of those too-sweet concoctions. Honey would probably love it.

“I’ll have the same,” a familiar voice said over my shoulder and I nearly slid right off my stool in my hurry to confirm it was her.

“What’s a girl like you doing in a place like this?” she asked, leaning on one hip, a soft smile playing on her lips in the darkened room.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I croaked.

“You can put her drink on my tab,” Honey said, passing the bartender her card.

“You got it, doll,” the bartender said, and went to make our drinks.

“I promise I won’t make you spill this one.”

The stool next to me was empty, and Honey sat down. Too close. Way too close. Over all the smells that collided in the slightly warm air, I could smell Honey.

Sweet. So sweet.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my voice sounding like I was begging her to make me understand. Why did she keep infiltrating my life?

“Well, I was going to mope in my room about something, but I have a very wise aunt who told me not to do that. So here I am. Didn’t think I’d see you.”

She’d had no way to know that I’d be here. It was just a coincidence. No matter how I tried to get away from her, it was impossible. Honey Holloway was around every corner.

The bartender returned with our drinks and set them in front of us. Honey picked hers up and held it out toward me.

“How about we leave everything else aside for one night and just be Honey and Bren for a few hours?”

The hopefulness in her eyes was devastating. Saying no was impossible.

“Okay,” I said, tapping my glass gently to hers. We both sipped and she turned her head to the side as she considered the taste.

“That’s good. I like it.”

She gave me her full attention again. “So, how are you doing tonight?”

I almost opened my mouth and said, “better now” but I managed to stop myself at the last second.

She’d been the source of my misery and here she was as the cure. Being next to her made me feel better almost instantly.

“I’m doing fine. How are you?”

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My body leaned toward her and she did the same, creating a little cocoon for both of us in the chaos of the bar.

Honey put her elbow on the bar and leaned her face into her hand.

“I’m pretty damn great, Bren. Pretty damn great.”

### Chapter Twenty-One

Honey

A little whisper in my brain said that maybe Bren would be at Sapph. That wasn’t why I’d gone, but then she’d been here.

She was here.

I hadn’t known if she would yell at me or ignore me or ask me to leave, but then I’d pleaded with her to have a night off from everything else and she’d agreed.

Now I got to sit next to her at this crowded, noisy bar and pretend that she was the only person in the world.

I loved the way her hair glowed under the neon lights. Her eyeliner was sharp and her lipstick dark. Her mouth looked like poison and I desperately wanted a taste.

We talked a little about the marketplace and about the people around us and our favorite drinks.

The alcohol flowed through my veins, warming me and making me a little braver.

“Come dance with me, Bren.” I couldn’t stop saying her name. It melted like chocolate on my tongue.

Hopping off the stool less than gracefully, I held my hand out to her. I’d had fantasies of this. Of moving our bodies together. Granted, most of my fantasies involved less clothing, but this was a start.

“Please, Bren?” I wasn’t above begging. Not at all.

Her mouth pressed into a line and then she rolled her eyes before throwing back the rest of her drink and setting the glass down on the bar with authority.

“Fine,” she said through clenched teeth, as if I was leading her to the guillotine instead of to the dance floor.

The space was packed, without much room to move without bumping into multiple other sweaty bodies. The music thumped through my chest, at odds with the pounding of my heart.

Bren faced me and for a moment, she didn’t seem to know what to do.

Taking the lead, I moved closer and started swinging my hips to the beat. I didn’t think I was the best dancer, but I could find a beat and roll with it.

For a moment, Bren was frozen. And then her eyes changed, and I felt a rush of two things: fear and desire.

Bren reached out and gripped my hips with both hands, pulling me until we were pressed together. Now I was the one freezing.



Bren's breath was loud as her fingers flexed, as if wanting to hold me tighter.

I'd stopped dancing, but her hips moved, picking up the beat and carrying me along with her.

I'd never expected this when I'd come to Sapph tonight.

I'd never expected Bren to touch me like this, period. Only this morning she'd been ignoring me and then acting like we could never speak again.

Now she held onto me as if she never wanted to let go, moving with me as if we'd done this before.

If you asked me what song was playing, I couldn't tell. The only thing I could see and hear and smell and feel was Bren.

Bren, Bren,Bren.

Taking a chance, I lifted my arms and rested them on her shoulders. Her hands squeezed me in response.

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Yes.

I panted as we continued to sway to the beat, the space practically steaming between us. Her mouth parted and I wanted to bite her tongue. To taste her and consume her and devour her.

I'd never felt this way about anyone before. Ever. None of my previous crushes had even come close to touching this inferno Bren had ignited in my body.

The song changed to something with a driving beat and everything and everyone else around us melted away as Bren and I danced with each other.

I looked up and met Bren's eyes that were a little blurry because of how close we were. If I veered even a little bit, our mouths would touch.

I wanted our mouths to touch.

Bren moved with determination and I was happy to let her hold me and set the tone, but I wanted our first kiss to be mine.

She wanted it. She wanted me. I knew that as well as I knew the pounding of my own heart.

It was easy, so easy, to use one of my hands that had wrapped around her shoulders to softly grip her chin to hold her face steady. I waited a second, so she would know what I was planning. So she could say no.

I knew she wouldn't say no.

I inhaled a second before I pressed my lips to hers, drawing her into my lungs.

The kiss was explosive. Incinerating. You'd think a kiss would be a simple thing. Two sets of lips touching. Sometimes tongues were involved. Sometimes you had to figure things out and angle your heads so you could still breathe, and sometimes saliva was an issue or someone being too enthusiastic.

This kiss was none of those things. It wasn't simple, and it wasn't awkward or strange or uncomfortable.

It was the perfect kiss. As if all the stars had aligned to get my lips to touch hers. A cosmic kiss.

It certainly felt that way as stars exploded behind my eyes and her mouth engulfed mine, stealing my breath and making me ache for more.

We'd stopped dancing, giving ourselves over completely to this kiss.

It was soft at first, but that didn't last as Bren opened her mouth and sucked on my bottom lip and traced my mouth with her tongue. I pushed back, using my tongue to demand entrance to her mouth, which she gave me and then I was melting in warm, delicious bliss.

Bren Hendrix knew how to kiss, that was for damn sure.

Everything had been going full speed ahead and then she started pulling back, gentling the kiss and drawing her tongue away.

"Wait," she said against my lips as I chased her, trying to get back to where we'd

been.

“No,” I moaned and that made her chuckle.

“Honey.” Her voice caressed my name, turning it into something completely new and different. “We shouldn’t.”

She moved back from me just enough, but it was like a cold blast of air hit my body.

My eyes went wide and I searched her face for an answer. Why was she stopping the most incredible kiss that had ever been kissed?

“Let’s take a minute and talk,” she said, removing her hands from my sides and touching my shoulder to lead me away from the dance floor.

“No,” I said again, and I could hear the whine in my voice. All I wanted was to go back to kissing her. I’d devote the rest of my life kissing her. Forever. Until my lips fell off.

Bren towed me away from the dance floor and to a corner near the bathroom that was just a little quieter than the rest of the bar.

“We need to talk,” she said.

No, we needed to be making out. I opened my mouth to tell her that, but she spoke first.

“I didn’t mean to kiss you.”

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“Then why did you?” I asked. There she went again. She was going to diminish everything and put up a wall between us.

“I...” she didn’t finish.

“You wanted to kiss me. You wanted to dance with me. You want me, Bren, and you can deny it, but let’s look at the fact that you went with me to the dance floor, you kissed me back. I’m listening to your actions, not your words. And your actions are speaking pretty clearly.”

I had no idea where those words had come from, but they were true, and I wasn’t going to let her get out of this easily. She could lie to herself all she wanted, but she wasn’t going to lie to my face.

“Jesus, Honey.” She closed her eyes and rubbed a spot right between her eyebrows as if she was trying to stave off a headache.

“Tell me I’m wrong. Go ahead.” There was that anger again. It had flared up even worse than before. Probably because I was so damn horny. The kissing and the dancing with her had ignited my lust and it was burning through my veins. I’d have to take care of myself when I got home, because this need wasn’t going away anytime soon. Bren had set me on fire.

“It’s not that simple,” she said.

“You keep trying to make things complicated, but this isn’t complicated.” I grabbed her hand and entwined our fingers, holding them up in front of her face. I kissed the

back of her hand, adding a little bit of tongue. She tried to stay unaffected, but she let out a little sound that was almost a whimper.

“Not complicated,” I said. “So what now? I know you want me, physically and mentally, and I want you back.” What the hell was I saying? I shouldn’t be telling her this! But if Bren was going to try and reject me, I was going to make sure she knew everything first so I left without any regrets.

It was terrifying, but she had to know. She needed to hear everything.

“I’ve wanted you, Bren and Bibliofile, for months. I’ve been falling for both of you. I want you, Bren Hendrix. All of you.”

There. That was it. The words I’d imagined saying so many times but swore that I never would, so I didn’t scare her. But fuck it. If she couldn’t handle how I felt, then she couldn’t handle me.

If she couldn’t handle me, she didn’t deserve me. As much as that would devastate me, being with someone who wasn’t all-in with me would be worse.

I’d always been the one to feel more, to love more, to give more.

I wasn’t doing it again. Not with her. Not even for her. It would just drain me and diminish me. Again. And I’d just end up with a broken heart anyway.

“God, Honey.” Bren exhaled and then pressed her forehead to mine, her entire body trembling. I reached out to wrap my arms around her. I didn’t even know what I was doing, but I needed to touch her. To hold her.

“You are unlike anyone I’ve ever met,” she said.

“Is that a compliment?”

She let out a breathy laugh. “It’s definitely a compliment. Fuck.”

Bren lifted her head and stared into my eyes. I let myself get lost in the dark swirls of her irises.

“Talk to me,” I demanded.

Bren shook her head slowly. “I can’t.”

“Yes you can. You just don’t want to because you’re scared. But ignoring me isn’t going to make me go away. Even if we never say another word to each other, you’re going to see me at the marketplace. I’m not going to avoid you.”

She might hurt me, but she couldn’t break me. I wouldn’t let her.

Bren cursed under her breath, her body still shaking.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she said, so low that I almost couldn’t hear her.

“It’s okay. I don’t really know how to do this right either. Every other relationship I’ve had has been a disaster. I haven’t told you about them, but I will.” I’d show her everything: the good parts and the bad. She’d already seen a lot of my bad as Bibliofile.

“Relationship,” she said. “Is that what this is?”

I laughed.

“Yes, Bren. I’d like to have a relationship with you. Whatever that looks like.”

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She let out a shaky breath.

“You’ll have to be patient with me. You know I’m not good with people.”

Oh my god. This was happening.

“That’s okay,” I said, stroking her cheek. “You’re good with me. Most of the time.”

We both laughed and Bren pulled me into her arms. Everything fell into place and I sighed as I held her.

I couldn’t believe I was hugging Bibliofile. The woman I’d imagined a hundred different times.

I never could have predicted Bren. She blew all of my fantasies away. My mind could never have conjured her up if I’d been given a million years.

Reality was so much better than I predicted.

“Bren.” I had to keep saying her name.

“Honey Bea,” she said, and I almost let out a little squeal of delight.

“I like it when you call me that.” She started swaying a little, not dancing to any beat in particular.

“I like saying it,” she admitted, speaking into my ear.



“Say it again.”

“Honey Bea.”

“Mmmm,” I said, and she held me tighter.

“I like that sound you make.”

“I can make all kinds of sounds.”

She let out a groan and leaned back to gaze down at me.

“You’re dangerous.”

I smiled. “You’ve told me that before.”

Her mouth tipped up on one side in something that was like a smirk. “Well, it’s true. You’re dangerous tome.”

“Aw, Bren. I’ll be nice.”

Her smile got darker. “Hopefully not too nice.”

There was an edge to Bren that scared me and turned me on at the same time and brought out a little bit of darkness that I’d always pushed aside in myself.

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

We’d figure this out together.

“Do you... Would you come somewhere with me?” she asked, and she sounded both

shy and hopeful. So damn cute.

“I’d go anywhere with you,” I said.

Bren slid one of her hands into mine. “Dangerous.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bren

The night had changed drastically. One moment I'd been sitting at the bar and moping about Honey and then there she was. The kiss had also been completely and totally unexpected and had altered my fundamental chemistry. I hadn't known that kisses could do that, but Honey's kiss had. If I went to the hospital and they told me that all of my internal organs had been rearranged, I wouldn't have been surprised. Her kiss had changed me.

My life was now split into two sections: before the kiss and after the kiss. Now that I was in my AK, After Kiss era, I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I found myself standing outside of Sapph and then turning in the direction of my car.

"Wait. I didn't drive here. Did you?" I asked her. I hadn't planned this very well. I hadn't planned this at all. I just knew that I wanted to get her someplace quieter so we could talk and figure this shit out and I could maybe have a panic attack in a safe environment.

Because I was absolutely going to have some sort of attack when I realized what the hell I'd just agreed to.

"Bren. I can drive us," Honey said, squeezing my hand hard enough to get me to focus. It had started to rain just a little bit, making the sidewalk shiny.

"What?" I asked, too busy staring at the way her lips formed the words than what she was actually saying.

“I can drive us. Just give me directions.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Honey’s cart turned out to be a truck that she’d parked pretty far away from the bar.

“It’s hard to find street parking, but I need my truck,” she said, patting the passenger door. She opened it for me and gave me a hand to get up, even though I didn’t need it.

“Thanks,” I said.

The interior was clean and organized and the upholstery smelled like her. I inhaled and closed my eyes as she hopped into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut.

“Okay, where are we going?” I put the address into my phone and set it in the holder on her console. The truck was older and didn’t have any bells or whistles except for a CD player.

The detached voice of the GPS told Honey where to go as I fidgeted in the passenger seat and tried not to freak the fuck out.

Honey reached over with one hand and squeezed my thigh.

“Take a deep breath with me.”

I looked over and she flashed me a smile, her teeth bright in the headlights of an oncoming car.

“Inhale for one, two, three, four, hold for one, two, three four, and exhale for one, two, three, four.” We did that a few times and it did help a little bit.

“You looked like you were going to open the door and try to escape,” she said as she reached a stoplight.

“I wasn’t,” I said, but I couldn’t lie and say it hadn’t crossed my mind. Not seriously, of course. I’d never do something that dangerous or dramatic to get away from her. And it wasn’t her, necessarily, that I wanted to get away from. It was everything else.

The word “relationship” kept banging around in my brain. That word scared the shit out of me. I’d never done the relationship thing, and for a good reason. Relationships were messy and they could hurt and wreck you and I’d had more than enough of people disappointing me and hurting me already in my life. I didn’t need to take on more of it.

Being by myself was comfortable and safe and I had my damn cat.

What more could I need? Financial security would keep me warm at night.

And then Honey had smashed into my life in two different ways, attacked me on two different fronts.

Now we were driving to my apartment.

“I’m not bringing you to my place for sex,” I blurted out. “In case you thought that was what this is. It’s not.”

Honey let out that low laugh that made me think about her naked.

“Let’s start with talking first. Getting naked would complicate things and I’d rather lay everything out on the table first, you know?”

That made sense.

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“Yeah,” I said, and she squeezed my leg again. We’d reached my apartment, and Honey drove down the street to find a parking spot for her truck.

“You okay?” she asked me when she turned the truck off and we were left in silence together.

“Uh huh,” I said, but my voice sounded like it came from someone else.

It was still raining, but Honey reached into a bin she had in the back and pulled out an umbrella.

“Wait right there.” She got out and came around my side to open my door and be there with the umbrella to shield me. She was always thinking of things like that. So considerate.

“Shall we?” She gave me her arm like she was a gentleman and I was a lady wearing a dress that she was helping step over a puddle.

I led us both toward my apartment and then up the stairs to my door. Honey shook off the umbrella and left it beside my door. Someone was probably going to steal it.

“I have a cat,” I announced after I’d unlocked the door but before I opened it.

“You do? I have a few cats, but they live in the main house with my siblings, along with the dogs.”

Oh. Right. I’d warned Honey about my cat just in case she was scared or allergic,

forgetting that she literally lived on a farm with many animals.

I opened the door and Arson was right there, screaming her displeasure at being left alone.

“I know, I know, calm down,” I said, sticking my leg out so she didn’t dart into the hallway. That had happened a few times and I’d had to trap her and remind her what happened to bad kitties who escaped from their apartments. Just because she’d been a feral kitten didn’t mean she could survive the city streets.

Once I moved Arson back from the door, Honey dropped down to a crouch.

“Oh, hello gorgeous,” she said in a soft voice, holding her fingers out for Arson to sniff.

“Her name is Arson,” I told her, and Honey laughed softly.

“Good name. Bibliofile didn’t tell me about the cat.” I hadn’t, and I didn’t know why. Too personal.

Arson cautiously approached Honey, giving her fingers a little sniff before bonking her head against Honey’s hand.

“Oh you’re just a little love, aren’t you?” Honey said, and Arson totally melted, coming over to rub up against her legs before rolling onto her back.

“Wow, she normally doesn’t do that with strangers.” Arson was a spicy cat on most days, but with Honey here she was a furry little orange marshmallow.

“That belly looks like a trap, so I’m not going to touch it,” Honey said, stroking Arson’s head before getting to her feet again.

“Smart,” I said, suddenly hit with the fact that Honey Holloway was in my apartment.

Staying near the door, I watched as she took in the space. It was a little cluttered due to the fact that it wasn’t just my home, it was also my office and warehouse and sewing room.

“This is so cool,” she said, stepping over to where I had my sewing machine in the window.

She turned and beamed at me, as if she was pleased.

“You’ve got it so organized, but I’d expect nothing less.” Arson abandoned me and went to twine around Honey’s legs.

“Did you, uh, want a drink?”

I honestly couldn’t remember the last time I’d had someone else at my apartment. You were supposed to offer people drinks, right? Drinks and food?

“Oh, sure. Whatever you have is fine.” She leaned closer to inspect my row of printers.

“You do the bookmarks and stickers yourself too?” she asked.

“Yeah. It gives me better quality control. And I can make new designs or print as many as I need right away. It made much more sense to invest in my own printers. I only had one at first, but as the business grew, I added more.”



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She seemed interested so I showed her more. My fabrics and the folded pieces of the waterproof padding that went into my ebook and book sleeves. Honey even sifted her hand into my button basket, letting them tumble through her fingers.

“It must be hard keeping all this nice with a kitty around.” Arson chose that moment to make her presence known.

“There’s a reason I keep everything in bins with lids. I know that the chances of someone getting a little cat hair with their order is pretty high, but I hope they don’t get mad.”

I’d even made little Arson stickers saying PACKED BY ARSON that I used for some of my orders, and she featured prominently in my social media posts. People on the internet loved cats.

I’d forgotten to get Honey a drink, so I went ahead and poured some mango passion fruit juice into two glasses.

She’d taken a seat on the couch and was now eyeing my bookshelves.

“It’s so weird being here in your place. I pictured Bibliofile’s house a ton of times.”

The couch was small enough that I couldn’t sit on it without being incredibly close to her, but I guess I didn’t mind.

“And does this match up with what you pictured?” I’d pictured Melliferal’s place too.

“Sort of. I definitely knew you’d be organized. That was a given. And I knew you’d have books, obviously.” She gestured to my shelves that were organized by author’s last name, except for my TBR shelves, which were in order of which book I was going to read first. I also had a spreadsheet on my computer with all of them. Just in case.

“I didn’t lie about the books,” I said. I hadn’t lied about anything with her, actually.

Honey sipped from her drink and met my eyes.

“I didn’t lie to you about anything either. I still can’t believe you’re Biblio. We’ve been talking for, what, a year?”

I nodded. “A year.”

Honey leaned back on the couch and Arson jumped into her lap. She rubbed Arson’s head, causing her to purr loudly. Honey charmed everyone, human and cat alike. No wonder she was the one who went out and rescued the bees. I bet they all loved her too.

“I can’t believe you’re a real person,” she whispered. “I mean, I knew you were, but here you are. I never thought I’d see you in person. You made it pretty clear that it was never going to be a possibility.” She frowned.

“I’m real. And I never thought I’d meet you either.”

Honey pressed her full lips together. “Are you disappointed?”

No. Whatever else I was, I wasn’t disappointed.

Slowly I shook my head.

“But you’re not happy it’s me,” she said.

“I’m...I am still struggling to process this, Honey. To process everything.” We shouldn’t have kissed. That just added a wild wrench into the works.

Honey kept petting Arson, who had fallen asleep.

“You—” I started to say and then couldn’t finish. “I don’t know how to do this.” I gestured between the two of us. “Honey, I don’t do relationships. I don’t do complications. I don’t even do people in myhouse.”

Honey sat and listened to me, her eyes riveted to my face.

“I don’t do this for a reason. People are complicated and messy, and they want things I can’t give them, and they need things I can’t give them. I don’t have it to give, Honey.” I was desperate to make her understand. That I wasn’t worthy of her. That she should give her attention to someone else. Anyone else.

Honey listened and nodded.

“I’m hearing what you’re saying. But it’s at odds with what just happened at Sapph. And the way you kissed me and held me. I think you’re scared. But if your fear is stronger than what’s between us, then fine. I’ll go home and you can go back to ignoring me. I’m not going to beg you, Bren.”

I knew she wasn’t. Her words still made me feel sick inside. She couldn’t possibly know the conflict that warred inside me. About the conflicting desires to protect the life I’d built and my desire for her.

Fuck, I wanted her so much. It had made me shake at Sapph and I was trembling now with the need to grab her and hold her and kiss her and touch her. But I stayed where

I was.

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“Don’t get up,” Honey said, getting to her feet and setting the drink on a coaster atop the coffee table.

I stood up anyway, reaching out for her. To stop her. Arson had woken up and started meowing about it.

“Honey, wait,” I said, and she pivoted around.

“Yes, Bren?”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

“Hey,” she said, her voice soft. “It’s okay.”

It wasn’t okay. She couldn’t leave like this. I couldn’t let her leave like this.

“Honey Bea,” I said, my voice breaking. I knew, even if she absolutely ruined my life, that if I let her walk out, I would never forgive myself.

“Come here,” I said, pulling her toward me. She came, with halting steps until her body was pressed up against mine. One of my hands gripped her side, sinking into her curves and the other went into her hair and circled the back of her neck. Holding onto her made everything better.

“Bren?” she asked.

“Just kiss me,” I breathed before I did exactly that. It wasn’t a conscious choice to

kiss her. It was a necessity. A basic need.

Honey made a little sound of surprise and then kissed me back, eagerly matching my energy as I struggled to taste all of her at once. Her tongue, her teeth, the insides of her cheeks, her lips. I wanted to swallow her whole.

Honey seemed to be of the same mind as she drove her tongue into my mouth, reaching and searching and taking.

It was a battle of a kiss and it was perfect.

At some point I'd pressed her up against my door, driving my hips toward hers, crushing my body against hers.

"Bren," she breathed when we both gasped for air.

"I'm sorry," I said, not even sure what I was apologizing for.

Honey lifted her hand and tucked some hair behind my ear, tugging gently at my lobe.

"What are you sorry for?" she asked, her kiss-swollen lips forming a smile.

"I attacked you," I said.

Honey laughed softly. "Did you hear me complaining?"

No. But I still didn't want to push her too much. Honey was sweet and soft and didn't need to be kissed like that.

I decided to kiss her again, this time with more restraint. Soft, deep kisses that were

no less mind-altering.

She pulled back and gave me a quizzical look.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Kissing you? What do you mean?” Honey stroked the back of my neck and I wanted to lean into her touch. God, she was touching me, and I couldn’t get enough.

“You were kissing me differently,” she said. “Why?”

I licked my lips, almost moaning at the taste of her. No doubt she’d taste incredible everywhere. I couldn’t wait to bury my face between her legs and make her scream until her voice went hoarse. Until she was crying and telling me she couldn’t come anymore. Until she was so worn out she couldn’t even move.

“Because you should have what you deserve,” I told her.

Honey’s brows drew together in confusion.

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“And what’s that?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I was getting irritated with this conversation. Why was she interrogating me about kissing? “Because you’re...you.”

Honey put a hand on my chest and gently pushed. Immediately, I stepped away from her, even though every cell in my body screamed not to move a single inch.

“Hold on. We need to talk for a minute.”

I let out a frustrated sound and then looked down to find Arson standing there and blinking up at us.

“Why do you think I didn’t want you to kiss me the way you were kissing me?” she asked.

“Because you’re...” I gestured at her and she started laughing.

“What the hell does that mean, Bren?” She seemed to relish saying my name and I adored hearing it from her lips.

“I don’t think we want the same things. You don’t want what I could give you. What I’m capable of giving you.” Honey still seemed puzzled, putting her hands on her generous hips.

“And who decided you were the authority on what I want? Was there a vote, an election, a poll? Because I don’t recall getting a say and I think my opinion is the



most important, don't you?"

I opened my mouth to argue with her, but she just raised her eyebrows and stared at me.

Oh.

"If I don't like something, I have no problem telling you that. And I feel like you've created a version of me that doesn't exist. If you want to know what I want, just ask me."

"That's too logical," I blurted out, making her laugh.

"Oh, Bren. We'll figure it out." She stroked the side of my face and I pressed into her touch. It just felt so good. Maybe there was something to that data that you needed so many hugs per day. I honestly couldn't think of the last hug I'd had with a human. I hugged Arson as much as she'd allow, which wasn't often.

"I'm scared of hurting you," I told her, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Why do you think you'd hurt me, Bren?" Honey asked, her tone so gentle.

"Because of the things I want. And then there's...there's something else. But we maybe don't have to talk about that." The idea of telling Honey about the second thing was too mortifying to even consider.

"Okay, I'm hitting the pause button for right now, Bren. I think we need to take a time out, hmm?" That was probably a good idea.

"Yeah."

She continued to run her fingers through my hair and then scratched her nails against my scalp.

“Ohhh, that feels good,” I said, my voice part moan.

Honey chuckled. “I could stay here and touch your hair all night. It’s beautiful.”

No one had ever said anything particularly positive about my hair. Her compliment made me feel like I was glowing from the inside out. What was this woman doing to me?

“Okay.” I wanted to rub up against her. I wanted to touch all of her skin with all of mine. I wanted to wrap every single appendage I could around her and let her caress me however she wanted for however long she wanted.

“Bren?” she asked, and I surfaced from wherever I’d drifted to on an ocean of endorphins.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to leave, but I’m afraid if I stay that we’ll go too fast too soon.”

As much as I hated it, she was right. There were things about me she needed to know before we got physical.

Every other time I’d been with someone it had been just a physical thing and the only words you really needed were “there” and “more” and “yes.”

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Honey was different. I wasn't going to treat her like that. Honey deserved more.

"Yes," I said, agreeing. "Do you want to just...come and sit with me? We could talk or read or something."

Honey's smile was cute and made her dimples appear. I still wanted to lick them with my tongue, but that would have to come later.

"I'd lovethat."

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Honey

Bren was different than I predicted, but that wasn't a bad thing at all. She was more hesitant. More unsure. At least when she wasn't kissing me. When she was doing that, she was assertive and aggressive in a way that made my pussy pulse and my toes curl imagining how she'd be once I got her naked.

And then she'd pulled back and given me these weak and gentle kisses, as if she was afraid to break me and I knew something was off and I needed to know what it was.

Communication was key, and I wouldn't let her sidestep it and distract me.

We were doing this right, and the first step was understanding each other.

Sex was totally off the table for tonight, which made me want to scream, but I didn't

want to make a mistake with her. All of this might blow up and we might crash and burn, but I wouldn't let it happen over something we could have sat down and had a discussion about.

We made our way to the couch, accompanied by Arson the cat. I loved the name. It was just the kind of name that Bren would give a cat.

Bren and I sat on the couch together and I kept my hand in her hair because she seemed to like it so much. If she could have purred, I bet she would have. She probably didn't even know that she was leaning into my hand, her eyes fluttering closed every now and then.

She and I fell back on something we'd had in common since the beginning: books.

Her shelves were organized, I could tell. Pulling out my phone, I took down a few titles to check out for myself.

"I just wanted it to be better," she said about one book we'd both been excited about, but which she said had been a letdown. "It was so disappointing. I'd been looking forward to it so much."

"Well that's a bummer," I said, scratching my nails along her scalp close to the back of her neck. Bren leaned toward me, like a cat begging for me to pet the right spot.

"I know," she said with a sigh. "Is there anything else you need? I could make some snacks or something."

She looked tired and I wanted to help. "Let me."

Bren sat up. "You don't have to do that."

I pressed my hand on her shoulder. “I want to.”

Rising to my feet, I moved to her kitchen. Bren got up and followed me.

“Go sit down. I can figure this out.”

Her kitchen was small, so it didn’t take a genius to find out where everything was.

Bren hovered as I looked through her fridge and cabinets and started pulling things out.

Crackers and some cheese and prosciutto and oranges and some cookies. I set everything up on plate.

“The only thing missing is some Holloway Apiary hot honey,” I said.

“I still have it,” she said, going to one of the cabinets and taking down a jar. She hadn’t opened it.

“Did you try it?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I was saving it.”

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“For what? If you decided you really liked it, I’d give you more. You can have as much honey as you want.” I realized the double meaning just as Bren started laughing.

“I can, can I?” she asked, putting her arms around me from behind and resting her chin on my shoulder.

“Yes. You can.”

She could have everything.

Bren and I had our snacks on the couch as we snuggled together with the cat. It was sweet and domestic and what I’d always imagined with her. And with Bibliofile, to an extent, even if I hadn’t known what she looked like. I did now and I could insert Bren in all those fantasies I’d had.

I fed Bren a cracker topped with prosciutto, cheese, and a drizzle of the hot honey.

“It’s really good. The honey, I mean,” she said.

“Thanks. The jalapeños were an experiment and I had no idea if they were going to grow or if they were going to work with the honey, but it all turned out well.”

“It was a good idea,” she said, and I smiled at the praise.

“Thanks.”

“Did you do your logo?” she asked.

“Yeah, I did. I also painted the bee.”

She sat up, surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah. Watercolors are one of my hobbies. I’ve been doing them since I was a teenager. Partially inspired by Beatrix Potter.” I’d wanted to feel closer to my namesake and wound up loving the medium. Water was unpredictable. You could have all the skills and control in the world, but it would do what it was going to do. I liked that. There was also a softness to watercolors that made me happy.

“You’re talented,” she said.

“Wow, you’re full of praise tonight. My ego is going to start swelling.”

Bren looked at my chest.

“That’s not my ego, Bren,” I said, laughing.

She licked her lips. “No, but they’re spectacular.”

My chest had always been large, and when I was younger I’d hated it but over the years I’d grown to accept my body the way it was, and I liked the way Bren looked at me.

“You’re pretty spectacular yourself, Bren.” Everything about her was incredible.

Her cheeks went pink. “Thank you.”

God, her blush was so cute. Bren was incredibly sexy, but she also had these adorable

moments and all of it mixed together was dangerous for my heart and my libido.

If she wasn't careful, I was going to throw caution to the wind and press her back on the couch so I could show her just how much I appreciated her body.

"You're welcome," I said, holding myself still so I didn't attack her.

Bren yawned.

We both had a full day at the marketplace tomorrow, and it was going to be rough when my alarm went off, but I'd miss some sleep in exchange for time with Bren like this.

Just the act of being able to touch her felt indulgent. Almost like I was getting away with something.

"I should go," I said, but didn't move at all.

Bren nodded. "Yeah. If we're not careful I'm going to fall asleep like this. I don't think I've ever been this comfortable."



“That’s good to hear.”

Bren burrowed into me and I wrapped my arms around her, breathing in her scent. It was rich and dark and made my mouth water and want to lick her skin to get a taste of it.

I needed to go before I did something like that.

“Okay, I’m going,” I said, stretching out my legs and pushing to my feet. Bren followed me, as well as Arson, who’d woken up and seemed upset about it.

“Oh, sweet kitty. It’s okay. I’ll be back.” I scratched Arson’s head as she purred against me.

Bren just walked into my arms and I embraced her as she held me.

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” I asked, one hand brushing her hair. I couldn’t stop touching it.

“For giving me time and space and just...for beingyou.”

“You’re welcome. And thank you for moving past your fear and letting me in.” I meant to her apartment, but I also meant her life.

“I’m going to walk you out.”

She locked her door grabbed my still-damp umbrella, followed me down the stairs, and out to the sidewalk. I wanted to hold her hand, but that seemed like it might be too much for tonight.

We reached my truck and I unlocked the driver side before turning and facing Bren.

She melted into me and I held her close.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said. I couldn’t wait.

“See you tomorrow.” Bren let me go and then smiled slowly.

“Good mice, Honey.”

Letting out a laugh, I had to lean forward and give her a kiss before I said, “good mice, Bren.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Bren

“What thefuck?” I said to Arson when I got back upstairs from watching Honey drive away in her truck.

The past few hours had been completely wild. Honey and I had kissed, repeatedly, and we’d mutually agreed to have some kind of relationship with each other.

The person I was when I’d woken up this morning wasn’t the same person when I was getting ready for bed.

I stared at my face in the mirror, searching for visible changes without finding any.

Maybe my cheeks were a little more flushed, but that was it.

As wonderful as everything with Honey had been, I was still scared of everything else. We needed to talk about being physical and I needed to figure out how I was going to be the person she needed.

While I brushed my teeth, I searched the internet for tips on being a good girlfriend. Not that I wanted that label (even thinking about it made me start to sweat), but I wanted to be a decent partner to her. I'd never really dated anyone seriously and hadn't paid much attention to other people who'd gotten into serious relationships. What were the rules? What were the expectations? I was in the dark.

When I got in bed with Arson, I received a message from Melliferal.

It feels wrong to end this chat, so I'm just going to keep it going if that's okay with you. Just wanted to let you know that I got home safe and that I had a really good time with you tonight. I'm excited to see where this goes. Hopefully that doesn't freak you out, but I wanted you to know where my head was at. If you want to do something after the marketplace closes tomorrow, just let me know. Okay. Good mice, Bren.

I put my hand on my chest, feeling the thump of my heart as I tried to decide how to answer. Feeling at a loss, I decided to send a voice note.

"Hey. Thanks for letting me know you got home safe. I should have asked about that. Sorry. You're going to find out that I'm not good at this. I'm sorry in advance for when I fuck things up, because I'm going to fuck things up. Just know that I'm going to try. I'm going to try so hard for you, Honey. You're so good and I want to be good for you too. I like the version of myself that I am when I'm with you. That's probably telling you way too much, but I guess I'm just going to keep talking. Anyway. I need to get to bed, but I can't stop thinking about you. Good mice, Honey Bea."

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My finger hovered above the delete option before I just went ahead and sent it.

Honey responded with a voice message of her own.

“You’re so cute, Bren. I can’t get over it. All I ask is that you’re open with me and you talk to me. You don’t have to try so hard. Just be yourself. That’s all I want. Just be Bren and I’ll be Honey. Okay, I’m cutting myself off before I ramble too long. Good mice, Bren.”

I played the message three times before I turned my lights off and let Arson curl up on my chest.

“I’m scared of how I feel about her,” I told the cat. She just yawned and settled herself on me again.

“What am I going to do?”

The blare of my alarm came far too early even though I’d gone to bed at a fairly reasonable hour. Everything with Honey last night had exhausted me, but as soon as I thought about seeing her face today, I found the energy to get out of bed and get ready.

Did I put on more makeup than I normally would have? Yes. Was I ashamed of wanting to look good for Honey? Only a tiny bit.

At the last minute, I decided I wanted to bring her something, but I only had a short time to decide what that was.

I looked through my stickers and found one of the bee ones I'd printed recently. It was totally adorable, and I knew she'd like it, so I put it into my bag along with a few bookmarks. There. That was something.

I almost wanted to bring her breakfast, but she probably already ate, and I didn't know what she'd like anyway.

Matcha. She was always getting matcha from the marketplace. I'd get her one of those when I arrived.

Perfect.

Honey

Bren approached me with a smile on her face and an iced matcha in her hand.

"Good morning," she said, holding the matcha out to me. She had an iced coffee in her other hand.

"Oh my god, yes, it is a good morning now. Hi." I stepped around the matcha and leaned close to her.

Her eyes went wide.

Crap. Public kissing was probably pushing her too far.

"Sorry," I said, stepping back and taking the matcha.

I could feel multiple sets of eyes watching us.

"They're staring, aren't they?" I asked. My family hadn't stopped singing, but they

were doing it with a little less enthusiasm than usual.

“Oh yeah,” Bren said, having a perfect view of them. “Did you tell them?”

I shook my head. “No. Because they’d have all kinds of opinions and right now, I only want to listen to my own when it comes to you.”

If I didn’t hold them back, they’d overwhelm me, and I might let someone else’s ideas influence me and I didn’t want that.

“I’m not used to people being so interested in me like this. It’s a lot.”

She was trying not to make eye contact with anyone, but I could tell they were absolutely watching her. There was no privacy for us right now.

“How about we keep things on a business level today and then tonight we can maybe do something?”

Bren nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like a better idea than trying to talk while standing in a fishbowl. Christ, everyone is probably talking about us right now. I bet even the Johnsons have stopped fighting to talk about us.” She muttered the last part and I stifled a laugh.

“Maybe. They do love fighting with each other though. Thank you for the matcha. This was really sweet.”

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“Oh,” she said, her eyes going wide. “I brought you something else.”

She found her bag and pulled a few things out.

“I made this sticker a while ago. I guess I had bees on the brain.” She handed me a sticker and three bookmarks from her shop. They were all gorgeous. I loved her products so much.

“Thank you,” I said. She’d gotten me matcha and this? “I think you like me a little bit, Bren.”

She cursed under her breath. “Is it that obvious?”

Bren was hopeless, but so cute.

“You like me,” I sang softly.

“Can you sing?” she asked. “I mean, I’ve heard you with your family but never just you.”

“Yeah, I can. Do you want me to sing for you, Bren?”

“Maybe,” she said.

Silence fell between us, but it was a silence that was full of things unsaid.

“I really wish I could kiss you right now,” I whispered.

“Me too.”

The problem was, if I kissed her, I might not be able to stop and then we’d get kicked out of the marketplace for public indecency.

“Definitely gonna kiss you later though,” I said. “Let me know if you want to go out and maybe eat somewhere, or if you wanted to stay in. You could always come to the farm and have family dinner with the Holloways.”

I saw her suppress a shudder.

“Don’t worry. I know you’re not ready to tackle all of us at once. It’s a lot. We’re an acquired taste.” Hopefully Bren would be able to handle all of us someday. I wanted her to get along with my family. I needed her to get along with my family.

“If they just weren’t singing all the time,” she said and she was so disgruntled that I laughed out loud, making a few people around us stare.

“Okay, I need to step away from you or else I’ll want to spend the entire day with you,” I said.

“Go sell lots of honey,” she told me.

“You mean the kind in the jars, I’m assuming?” I asked.

Her face went a brilliant red that made her look so cute. “Yes. Don’t sell yourself. Unless you want to.”

This was a strange conversation, but it was also hilarious.

I leaned close so only she could hear me. “I’m not selling myself because I can’t. I’m



already yours.”

Her eyes went wide, but before she could say anything else, I turned around and walked to my table. Let her think about that all day.

Normally I didn’t check my phone that much at the marketplace, because it was a distraction from work, but I couldn’t help but keep looking for messages from Bren. That was in addition to glancing over at her constantly. She was laser focused on her work, but I also caught her glancing at me and more than once I’d caught her staring at my ass. Guess she liked it. I put that in my back pocket for later.

Bren was an ass woman. She’d also made comments about my tits too, so she was into that as well. I hope I’d have a chance to go home and change out of my Holloway Apiary shirt and into someone a little more flattering.

The teasing from my family was constant, but I did my best to ignore all of it. Ellie was totally excited and wouldn’t stop coming up with date ideas and gift ideas and even wedding ideas.

“You should have horses at your wedding,” Ellie announced about an hour before the marketplace was due to close.

“Should we? Why?”

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“Because.” That was a good enough reason for me. Hopefully Bren wasn’t allergic or opposed to horses.

What would you say about coming over to my place and ordering food? That sounded perfect to me. It would mean that my family would be on their own for dinner, though.

I told Mom that I might not be around for dinner and she waved her hand. “We will survive without you for an evening, my darling Honey. You take on too much responsibility.” I’d taken it on because someone had to. Someone had to make sure the farm bills got paid and the jars got ordered and that all the other little things that had to happen to keep things running happened. But I guess I could take off for the night. Aunt Eileen was going to be happy. I’d have to tell her about Bren soon. She’d want to know all the details.

I’d love to. Is it okay if I go home first and then meet you at your place?

I looked up from my phone and found Bren watching me.

She nodded.

Thanks. I’ll be sure to wear something cute.

I saw her read the message with a smile playing on her face.

You always look cute, Honey Bea.

It took forever for me to get dressed when I got home because everyone wanted to give their opinions on my outfit. Even Archer shared his opinion.

“I’ve dressed myself before without your help!” I finally yelled when there were a bunch of outfits that my family had pulled out of my closet and thrown on my bed.

I’d decided to keep things casual with my favorite jeans that made my ass look great, tank, and a cropped yellow sweater with bee buttons down the front.

Not all of my clothes were bee-related, but I knew it would make Bren smile and that was all that mattered. Plus, it was soft and cute and easy to get out of.

I’d also worn the bra and underwear set that I’d been saving for something special. Bren didn’t need to know that I’d been saving it, but the light blue lace was gorgeous and made me feel sexy as hell. My family also didn’t know about that part either and they never needed to.

Finally I pushed them all out of my room and made sure I looked good, fluffing my hair and checking my outfit. At the last minute, I threw a change of clothes, my vitamins, and my toothbrush into my bag. Just in case. I wasn’t planning on staying the night, but I wanted to be prepared.

“Okay, I’m going,” I said, opening the door to the main house and calling out. A chorus of voices answered me.

“Good luck!”

“Don’t get pregnant!”

“Tell her she’s pretty!”

I rolled my eyes and slammed the door, laughing as I got in my truck to go see Bren.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Bren

“Do I look okay?” I asked Arson. I’d run around the second I got home to clean my apartment and Honey was going to be here any minute, but I couldn’t decide what to wear. I’d ripped through several outfits and finally slid on some black jeans and dark red T-shirt that had some ruffles on the sleeves. Not typically my kind of thing, but I thought that Honey might think they were sweet.

Normally I didn’t wear shoes in the house, so I didn’t put any on, but slid my feet into a pair of fuzzy socks. Not sexy, exactly, but maybe she wasn’t coming here for that. Just because we had sexual chemistry didn’t mean that we were going to immediately fall into bed together.

Besides, we had to talk about sex before anyway. I wanted to do whatever this was with her in the right way and telling her about my true desires was the right thing to do. She also needed to know about my other big secret so I could set her expectations.

That part made my hands shake and sweat a little and my stomach roll uncomfortably.

Honey sent me a message when she arrived, and I ran downstairs to let her in.

“Hey,” she said, smiling as I opened the door before she threw herself at me. I managed to catch her.

“God, I’ve been desperate to touch you all day,” she said in my ear as I held her and breathed her in. I hadn’t even gotten to see her outfit, but it didn’t matter.

She was here.

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Honey and I eventually unwrapped our limbs from each other and walked up the stairs. I took her bag from her and put it on my shoulder before taking her hand.

“Wow, Bren. You’re sweeping me off my feet.”

“Don’t trip,” I told her, and she laughed as I unlocked my door and did the little routine to make sure Arson didn’t make a run for it.

Honey greeted her and made sure my kitty got enough love. I set her bag down by the door and she slid out of her shoes.

She had the softest looking sweater on that I wanted to pet before I pulled it off her and got her naked.

No. Naked later. Maybe. Talk and food first.

“So, what did you want to order?” I asked her pulling up the app on my phone.

She put both hands on her stomach. “I’m literally starving, so I’m not picky. Whatever’s fastest.” We both heard her belly rumble and she blushed.

“Sorry!”

“No problem at all. How about some Italian subs?” She nodded and I asked her what she wanted and put in the order, as well as for some drinks and a box of their assorted cookies. I really needed to go grocery shopping. I would have done it today, but I hadn’t had time when I’d come back from the marketplace.

Honey scooped up Arson and carried her to the couch, sitting down with a sigh.

“The food should be here in about twenty minutes,” I told her.

“Great. Ahhh, that feels good.” She leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes.

“Sitting down is so nice after standing all day. God, I sound like I’m a thousand years old.” She laughed as I joined her.

“I know what you mean.” I had to hold back my own sigh of relief. My couch was small, but incredibly comfortable.

“How was your day?” she asked, moving her fingers under Arson’s chin like she preferred.

“I mean, you were there.”

She nodded. “I know, but we were both so busy that I barely got to talk to you.”

That was true, I supposed.

So I told her about my day. I talked about the customers I’d had and the people who seemed like customers and the other things she might have missed. In turn she told me about hers and things went back to being easy between us. In some way we were also colleagues.

“I hate spending so much time on someone and then they don’t even buy anything,” I said.

“I know! I sometimes want to ask them what their goal is. Why are they wasting my time?”

The food arrived and Honey had a gleam in her eye as I handed her order over.

“I know we should get plates, but would you care if I just went for it?” she asked.

“Not at all.” I’d been planning on doing the same thing.

Honey shoved a massive bite of her sub in her mouth as Arson watched both of us from the floor, her tail swishing in agitation that we would dare eat without offering her some or giving her at least a sniff.

“You wouldn’t want any of this,” I told her, my mouth almost full.

“That’s not entirely true,” Honey pointed out. “She would probably like the ham part.”

I shook my head. “Nope. She definitely doesn’t like ham. I’ve tried that before.”

Arson didn’t like anything besides two flavors of wet food and one brand of dry. I’d had a lot of trial and error when I’d first rescued her to find food she wouldn’t reject.



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“You know I found her by a burned-out house.” I told Honey the story of rescuing Arson and she told me about her pets and a few of her favorite ducks and chickens.

“How do you work on the farm and then do the marketplace? It sounds exhausting.” I couldn’t imagine. All of the work I did Monday through Wednesday was tiring, but it wasn’t like the manual labor of being on a farm.

“Well, that’s why I say many hands make light work. My parents do a lot.”

I guess they must.

“And your siblings?”

Honey let out a sigh. “They do what they can. I just...I feel like it was me and my parents building the farm when they first bought it and the three of us agreed that we were building this for them. So that they could have something to take pride in, a place to work if they needed it. I have no idea if that makes any sense.” Honey finished her sub and tore open the bag of kettle cooked chips.

“It does make sense.” Not to me, really, because my family had never been like that. But I could see Honey feeling that way.

“You never talk about your family at all,” she said, examining a chip and then popping it into her mouth.

“You noticed that, huh,” I said, setting down the remains of my sandwich, no longer interested in eating.

“Yes. Is there a reason?”

“There is.” I’d thought we were going to discuss sex tonight, but I guess we were talking about this first.

“My parents kicked me out the second they could. We’d never been a family. Not like you are with your parents and your siblings. Just three people who shared a home for a while. Honestly, they never should have had me. They weren’t suited to being parents. They cared more about their own activities and having fun than things like making sure I got to school on time or got good grades or anything. I was just as happy to leave as they were to get rid of me.”

I hadn’t said any of this to someone before. Not even the people I’d been sort of friends with in high school had known. I wasn’t the kind of person who invited people over and when people asked where my parents were, I made up work trips or sick relatives or whatever I had to so I could cover up the fact that they just didn’t give a shit.

“Oh, Bren,” Honey said, reaching out and squeezing my arm. “Can I please give you a hug?”

I wanted to tell her no, but I didn’t. Instead I nodded and let myself be gathered into her arms as she held me and stroked my hair and made soothing noises. When had I started crying?

“Oh, my Bren,” Honey said, squeezing me. “They didn’t deserve you. They didn’t deserve you.”

She didn’t deserve me. She deserved much better.

This night had taken a turn and I didn’t like it. Talking about my shitty parents just

made me feel awful and gross and like I wanted to climb into bed and sleep for a week.

“I’m sorry.” I’d cried and snotted all over Honey’s beautiful sweater.

“Oh this is nothing. At least it’s human.” She reached for a tissue from the nearby box and wiped my face like I was a child.

“I don’t want to cry about them,” I told her while tears continued to drip from my eyes and make my cheeks damp and salty.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

She wiped my nose. “Doesn’t mean I can’t still be sorry, Bren. Have a cookie.” She handed one to me and I started eating it, not even tasting what flavor it was.

“I didn’t know bringing that up was a bad idea. I’m sorry about that,” Honey said.

Finishing the cookie, I dusted my hands off. “You didn’t know. It’s...it’s whatever. Can we please talk about something else?”

She agreed, and Arson jumped into her lap.

“You wanna talk about my butt?” she asked, wiggling her eyebrows. The shift was so unexpected that I burst out laughing.

“Yes please, let’s talk about your butt.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Honey

I'd had no idea about her parents. It made sense and explained why Bibliofile hadn't wanted to talk about personal things. Someday I wanted to delve deeper and make her understand that she had done nothing wrong to make her parents neglect her like that, but that would be for another time.

"You have a seriously great butt," Bren said.

"You have a seriously great everything," I told her. She looked gorgeous tonight, but she always looked incredible.

"Thank you, Honey Bea."

"I need to come up with a nickname for you too," I said as I stroked my fingers through her hair. I'd have to ask her what kind of conditioner she used to make it so soft and shiny.

She closed her eyes, as if basking in my touch. "Bren is already a nickname."

"I know. But I need one that's just for me. Like Honey Bea is just for you."

"You could..." she started to say, then blushed and pressed her lips together.

"No, what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say you could call me babe. Or baby. Since they start with B." Oh.

That was unexpected. Not that long ago she was determined never to speak to me again. Now she wanted me to call her baby.

“How about we try both? Babe.”

She tilted her head to the side as if she was considering. “Use it in a sentence.”

“Uhhh, hey babe, can I eat your chips?”

Bren smiled and handed me the bag. “You really were hungry.”

“Sure was, baby.”

She laughed. “I don’t know. I think I need to get used to them. I’ve never had someone use a term of endearment like that for me before.”

I had a million of them. Everyone in my family seemed to come up with several for me, some more ridiculous than the others.

“I’ll try out all kinds of them if you want. You can have whatever you want, Bren.” I meant that in more ways than one.

Our eyes met and the temperature in the room rose a few degrees. Bren shifted and closed her eyes.

“Before we... If we... I need to talk to you about something. I’d love to put it off, but I don’t think we can. You need to know a few things about me before we go further.”

Okay, we were doing this. She’d alluded to needing to tell me something last night too.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me. You can trust me with it.”

She reached out and took my hand, squeezing my fingers so tightly that my bones ached.

“Thank you. I know. You’re the only person I’ve ever really trusted.”

Bren collected herself for a few moments.

“Firstly, I need to tell you that I’ve had sex before, but I’ve never...I’ve never, um, had an orgasm.” The last part came out in a rush, the words all hooked together so I could barely make them out.

I waited to see if there was more.

Her face was redder than I’d ever seen it and her fingers trembled in mine. She had been absolutely terrified to tell me this.

“Bren, baby. That’s okay. That’s fine. It doesn’t matter to me. That’s not always the goal. And maybe we can talk about it together and work on it. I mean, that sounds like it could be fun.”

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She searched my eyes, as if she was looking for lies. I was telling her the complete truth.

“What if I’m broken?” she asked.

“You’re not broken. And even if you never have one, that won’t matter. Sex can be about so much more than getting off. I don’t think it’s the most important part at all.”

Bren exhaled slowly and nodded. “Okay. Okay.”

We sat together and I let her process.

“Was there anything else?” I asked gently, stroking her arm with the fingers that weren’t holding her hand.

“Yeah. In addition to, um, the no orgasms, I also don’t seem to want the kind of sex that other people want.” What did that mean? I was going to need some clarification.

“I think I need some specifics, Bren.”

She was quiet for so long I almost shook my hand in front of her face to make sure she was still with me.

“The way I want you, Honey, it’s not nice. When I think about being with you, having sex with you? I want to wreck you. Ruin you. Bite marks all over your skin. Hold you down. Force you to come so many times that it makes you cry. Fuck. I’m sorry.”

In a rush, she stood up from the couch and started pacing. Arson woke up and meowed, jumping to the floor and following Bren.

“I can’t believe I just told you that. You’re probably think I’m disgusting now and you have every right to leave, but I had to tell you.”

She wasn’t looking at me as she paced, so I got up and threw my arms around her. Bren stiffened for a moment and then relaxed into my arms.

“You don’t scare me. You think you’re the only one who wants that? I’ve been thinking about biting you since the first day I saw you. God, I can picture your skin with red marks and hickeys all over it. I’d turn you into a leopard. It would be so fucking hot.” Bren let out a little breathless laugh and her body sagged further into me as her arms circled my waist.

“I want you so much, Honey. It scares me.”

“Good, then we’re on the same page. And if there’s anything you do that I don’t want, I have no problem throwing out my safe word.”

“What is your safe word? I’ve never used one before.”

While Bren might have been having sex before, reading between the lines it sounded like she wasn’t used to discussing the kind of sex she wanted to be having with her partners. That was fine with me. I’d talk about it with her. Talking about sex was sometimes almost as good as having it.

“I’m a big fan of a one-syllable safe word that you don’t have to think about in the moment. You know, there’s that joke about ‘pineapple’ but when you’re in the heat of the moment, is your brain even going to be able to remember that? Potentially not. Better to be safe and choose an easy word. So mine is ‘sting.’”



Bren leaned back and smiled at me. “That’s a perfect word for you.”

“I think so.” I brushed her hair out of her eyes. “You’re safe with me. You can tell me any of your wants or desires and I promise not to judge. We all have those kinks or fantasies that are just a little bit out of the norm. I think society would be a much better place if we stopped having a hierarchy of acceptable and not acceptable sex between consenting adult humans.”

“Wow,” Bren said, her eyes widening.

“What?”

“You’re amazing. You’re so amazing.” She hugged me again.

“Well thanks, baby. That’s nice to hear.”

The two of us held each other and even though there was no music, I started humming and we swayed back and forth.

“Do you want me to sing for you?” I asked.

“Yes. But I think...I think I need to kiss you now.”

I almost laughed at the way she said it, but I couldn’t. Instead Bren slid her hands up to dive into my hair and cup the back of my neck.

“I was so terrified to tell you.” Her dark eyes were fathomless. I could drown in them.

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“I know. But it’s okay. It’s all okay.” We swayed a few more times before she kissed me, and it was like our bodies had been waiting for this moment.

Her lips ignited a fire in my chest and I could taste that the feeling was mutual. This time she didn’t kiss me softly or tentatively. No. She kissed me how she wanted to kiss me. And I kissed her back the same way.

Kissing and trying to undress at the same time wasn’t an easy feat, and we didn’t get very far. My sweater landed on the floor and I managed to shove my hands under her shirt, but I would have had to remove my mouth from hers to get her shirt off and I wasn’t willing to do that.

We’d also stumbled in the direction of her bedroom and I would have loved to look around, but there would be time for that later. After I’d had my way with her and vice versa.

The orgasm thing went through my mind and I wanted to ask her more questions. I wondered if she’d ever asked a doctor or done any research or if she’d just gotten so frustrated that she gave up.

If she didn’t want to try, I was absolutely fine with that, but if she did, I was happy to help. Maybe she’d just never felt safe enough.

“Take off your shirt,” she said between kisses.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Why not?” she asked, her mouth mashed into mine. Okay, we were getting nowhere.

Hating myself, I broke the kiss and ripped my shirt over my head as fast as I could without getting my arms tangled in the tank straps.

“Oh, fuck,” Bren said as her eyes latched on my blue lacy bra that barely covered my nipples.

“Your turn.”

It took her a few moments to process my words before she pulled the T-shirt with the ruffled sleeves off her head and threw it onto the floor.

Her bra was silk and black and made my knees weak.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I said, getting a look at her. She moved her hair over her shoulder and tugged at the button on my jeans.

“More.”

I grinned.

“Yes. More.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bren

Honey had listened as I’d rambled about my sex stuff and she’d been absolutely wonderful about it. I’d assumed she would have left and said she never wanted to speak to me again.

But she hadn't. She'd held me and told me it was okay and said that she wanted similar things as I did. I wasn't sure how much of that I believed, but the way she looked at me? No one had never looked at me like that before. Ever.

Now we were in my room and she was taking off her clothes and this was happening. It was happening and I was afraid of the inevitable moment when I didn't come. When I couldn't come.

She'd said that it didn't matter, but I couldn't bear to see disappointment on her face and know that I was the cause of it.

"Where'd you go?" Honey asked, and I realized I'd stopped moving, too lost in my own thoughts.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about—" she put her finger on my lips to stop me.

"Don't think so much. Don't worry. You're here with me and that's all that matters. This moment right now. Do you want me to take my pants off?"

Normally right about now if I'd been having sex with someone else, I would have taken the reigns and dominated so they wouldn't know that I wasn't getting off myself. I'd also faked a time or two so my partner wasn't disappointed.

I didn't want to lie with Honey. I didn't want anything to be fake or artificial between us.

"Yes. I want you to take your pants off," I said, and she smiled before shimmying out of her jeans. Her bottoms matched her bra and I couldn't believe this gorgeous creature was in my bedroom with me.

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“Fuck, I just want to stare at you for hours, but I also want to see your skin. Nothing could be more beautiful than that.”

“Mmmm, I agree. Which is why I want to see you too.” She pulled at my belt loop. Right. I still had my pants on.

Honey hopped up on the bed and spread her legs, crooking her finger at me.

“Come here, baby.” I did like her calling me that. It gave me a rush of something that felt really damn good.

“Let me see that ass,” she said, shoving her hands between my jeans and my underwear and squeezing my ass cheeks.

“Fuccckkkkkk,” I said, drawing the word out.

“That’s the idea,” she said, and then she licked the side of my neck before biting down gently. A whimpering sound I’d never made before echoed in my throat. She was turning me inside out already.

Honey sucked on my neck the way she’d told me she wanted to and then dragged my earlobe through her teeth before nipping it.

What was I supposed to be doing? My brain had short circuited.

“Pants, babe,” she said. Right. Pants.

Somehow, I struggled my way out of my pants and didn't fall over in the process. Success.

"You aren't real," Honey said, leaning back and using her hands to prop herself up.

"You aren't real," I fired back, stepping between her legs and pressing myself into her body. I stroked my fingers through her hair as she gazed up at me with trust in her eyes.

"I think I should have a safe word too," I told her.

She nodded. "Okay. Pick something easy you know you'll remember."

Thinking about a safe word was difficult with her sitting in front of me looking so delicious, but I latched onto the first thing that came to mind.

"Mel," I told her. I wasn't likely to call her that or use it by accident.

"Mel," she said, stroking my arms. "That's perfect. And mine is sting."

"Sting," I said, committing it to memory.

Honey nodded. "Good. Can I kiss you, Bren?"

She could always kiss me.

"Yes," I said.

She reached for my face and pulled me toward her body and onto the bed. I crawled atop her as she slid back and rested on my pillows.

“Mmmm, I like the way you feel on top of me,” Honey said between kisses as I ran my hand along her curves, squeezing here and there. I couldn’t wait to fill my hands with her.

“Will you take everything else off for me? Please?” The begging in my voice should have been embarrassing, but it wasn’t. Honey just smiled up at me and put a hand on my chest so she could sit up and undo the clasp of her bra and pull it off. She dropped it onto the floor and then looked down at her bottoms, lifting her hips and wiggling.

“Help me out?”

I was more than happy to.

“Oh, Honey,” I breathed when she was laid out on my bed, fully naked. A feast of warm lightly tanned skin and soft dimples and rolls of goodness I wanted to sink my teeth and fingers into.

“You’re beautiful.” I looked up into her face to find her giving me an unfathomable look.

“You’re beautiful too, Bren,” She reached up and stroked the side of my face and I was momentarily lost in her touch.

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“Can I see you?”

Once I’d removed my clothes, we lay next to each other on the bed.

“For someone who said they wanted to ruin me, you’re being awfully sweet,” Honey teased.

“I do want to ruin you, but in a good way. If that makes sense.” My fingers walked across her belly, stopping to dip into her belly button.

“Mmmm, same here.”

I looked into her eyes. “I don’t know if you can.”

Honey’s smile got wider and predatory. “Giving you an orgasm isn’t the only way to ruin you.”

This woman was absolutely going to ruin me.

Honey

Bren had told me about what she wanted, and I’d expected her to claw at me immediately, but she seemed almost shy now that we were both naked. Like all of this was new to her. Something told me it was.

“What do you want, Bren?” I asked her.



She licked her lips. “I want to fuck you with my tongue until you scream and suffocate me between your thighs.”

Well. That was a good way to start. I spread my legs and reached for her.

“Go ahead then.”

Bren hesitated for about half a second and then she was between my legs, pushing them back and nuzzling my pubic hair. I kept things trimmed, but not completely bare, and Bren seemed to like it.

“Bren please,” I begged as my legs shook. I hooked my hands around my thighs to hold myself as open as I could for her.

She looked up and met my eyes, kissing the inside of one of my thighs.

“Bren,” I gasped.

“Keep saying my name, Honey Bea. I’m going to make you scream it.”

I was about to tell her that she was awfully confident, but then she put her mouth on me and I discovered that she had every reason to be confident.

Bren Hendrix was a master at eating pussy. Her hands dug into my legs as she twirled and thrust and licked with her tongue, alternating between barely touching me, to fucking it inside me, to painting every inch of my clit up and down and all around. Hard pressure, soft pressure, fluttering pressure, she did it all, and she switched it up so much that I could never anticipate what was coming next.

And then she grazed my clit with her teeth in a way that was just on the right side of painful and I did scream her name.

“Oh god, Brennnnn,” I chanted as she continued to assault me, inserting one and then two fingers into my dripping pussy and hammering away at my G-spot as if someone had drawn her a map.

I was halfway through a blinding, body-shaking orgasm before I even knew it had started. Everything in my world coalesced to one point and then exploded outward, shattering me into a million points of light.

Eventually I floated back down to earth, landing heavily in my body, my legs flopping uselessly to the bed.

My skin was tingly and oversensitive and warm.

Gasping, I tilted my head up to look down at Bren, who had propped herself up on her elbows.

“Told you I could make you scream,” she said, winking. Her face glistened and I reached for her. Or I tried to, with heavy arms that fell back to the bed.

“Come here, now,” I said, my tone not as commanding as I would have liked.

Bren chuckled and slithered up my body, pressing her hips against mine.

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“You telling me what to do?” she asked.

I found the strength to grab the back of her neck. “Yes.” I kissed her deeply, driving my tongue into her mouth before licking her chin.

“Oh fuck, that’s so hot,” she said as I tipped her face up and suckled on her neck.

“Mmmm,” I said, busy sucking and biting. Her neck was going to look incredible when I was done with her.

“Don’t forget these,” she said, holding up her hand that glistened. I opened my mouth and she pushed two fingers inside. I wrapped my tongue around them before she slowly started fucking my mouth with her fingers, making my pussy pulse and need attention again.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” Bren said as I looked up at her through my lashes as she thrust her fingers into my mouth.

I smiled and her fingers left my lips with a pop.

“I think I’ll make you come just with these now,” she said, wiggling her hand in front of my face. “I wonder how many you can take.”

I moaned and she just smiled. “Let’s find out.”

The answer was four.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bren

She was so lovely and responsive and as much as I wanted to force her to come over and over again, I also wanted to savor every climax with her. There would be time to get her to have one on top of the other, but tonight I wanted to learn her body. Find out what made her make the loudest noises and shake and tremble.

Honey was vocal, too, telling me exactly when I'd hit the right spot, when she was close, when she needed more.

My own pussy ached so hard it was painful, but I ignored it in favor of giving Honey everything she needed.

After the fourth orgasm, she put her hand up. "I can't come again. I seriously can't." Her body was glazed in sweat and the bed was soaked underneath her. I was a mess too.

Honey sat up, wincing.

"I know you want to focus on me, but can I...I really want to touch you. And taste you."

This was the part I'd been avoiding. My hope had been to get her off so many times that she basically passed out and forgot about me.

"No pressure, I swear." Her hand trailed down my body and she circled one finger around my nipple, making it harden.

"Ohhhh, that feels good," I said, closing my eyes and falling onto my back. Before I

knew it, Honey was up and straddling my hips, her hair falling all around us in a damp curtain.

“Now it’s my turn,” she said, her voice husky. Whereas I’d gone straight for her pussy, she started with my face. My cheeks and my forehead, leaving little soft kisses that almost felt like raindrops. Honey took her time, as if she wanted to taste each part of me so slowly. Savoring.

I was gasping and begging by the time she reached my neck, sucking and biting and laughing at my desperation. Her hips pressed into mine, trying to keep me still. My fingers dove into her hair and my nails scratched against her scalp, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Honey traveled down my body, leaving almost no part of me untouched. Her hands were also busy, and all of the sensations were making fireworks go off in my brain and pleasant little fires burn my skin.

I’d never felt somuchat once.

Everything she did made heat and want gather right between my legs and behind my eyes and in my teeth and nipples and toes. I was familiar with this feeling. This buildup. This racing to the top of a cliff. What I never reached was the drop, the release, the end. I just went in circles of frustration before giving up the journey and going to bed with swollen, aching labia and sore wrists.

She was so unhurried. As if she had all the time in the world with me. I looked down and waited for her to look up at me from right around my belly button. My nipples glistened from her mouth licking them. Honey grinned up at me.

“Can I play with your pussy a little bit?”

Fuck. The way she asked made need pulse deep inside me.

“Yes,” I said. There was no harm in letting her touch me. And I wanted her to touch me. It would feel so much better than touching myself. It always did.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:44 pm*

“I like your little strip,” she said, commenting on the waxing job. It was always just easier for me to go in and get it done than bother with shaving myself and getting razor burn down there.

“Thanks,” I said as her fingers fluttered against my lips.

“I think I need to get a better view, though.”

Honey pushed and shoved me as I laughed.

“Gimme that pillow,” she said, pointing. Honey took it from me and then shoved it under my hips.

“That’s much better. Now my neck won’t hurt.”

She pulled my legs apart and then drew my feet to rest on her back, my knees splayed wide.

I was open and exposed and I absolutely wanted to snap my legs shut and then hide under the covers that were soaked from Honey’s arousal.

“Such pretty petals,” Honey said, tugging gently at one of them and making me whimper. Her exploration was slow and sweet as she explored me outside. The warmth of her breath and the gentleness of her touch made my legs twitch, and that seemed to amuse her.

“Can I touch you inside too? Just one finger.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. I was so wet that her finger slid in with no resistance. God, she was being so gentle and careful with me.

It was so much more arousing than I thought it would be.

Honey’s finger was warm and assertive as she thrust it in and out of me at a slow pace.

Her touch still made my hips rock against her hand and my breathing pick up and my desire explode.

“Oh god, that feels so good, so good,” I blathered.

“You’re getting so wet for me, baby, can you hear it?” I listened to the sounds as she kept fucking me with her hand and they were loud in my bedroom.

Everything was wrapping around me and drawing me toward that peak that I always was clawing to reach.

“Do you want another finger, babe?”

“Uh huh,” I moaned. She’d picked up her pace and she was expertly hitting my G-spot every time. It wasn’t enough, but it was so, so close.

I’d always get close, but still too far away.

“You’re drenching my fingers and I want to taste you. Can I taste you, Bren? You’re making my mouth water.”

Oh fuck. Her words. Her words in combination with everything she was doing had turned this interaction up another level I’d never been before.



“Please, please,” I chanted. Honey adjusted her body so she could lick my clit as well as continue to slam her fingers inside me and that familiar heat and pressure coiled inside me, tighter and tighter.

So close. So so so close.

“I’m close,” I moaned.

“Baby, you’re so pretty like this, I can feel you clenching my fingers. I can feel how much you want me. You taste so fucking good. I want to drink you down my throat. Want you to drown me. Let go for me, baby.”

She stopped talking and went back to sucking my clit into her mouth, tapping it with her tongue at the same time as hammering my G-spot with her fingers and it was right...

THERE.

I screamed as waves upon waves of the most intense sensations of rich dark pleasure crashed over me, and I was the one drawing and gasping, my vision littered with bursting stars.

Honey kept up the intensity until the storm began to ebb and pulled away when I let out a sound of pain, my pussy too sensitive to continue being touched.

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“Did you just come?” Honey asked and I wanted to answer her, but I couldn’t.

I was plastered to the bed with exhaustion and shock.

Oh. So that was an orgasm.

No wonder people were trying to have them as often as possible.

It was different than I thought it would be. More visceral. Sharper. Like a blade or a cord that had been stretched too far and then snapped.

“Yes,” I finally said, my voice a croak.

“Wait, really?”

Honey sounded both shocked and thrilled. I couldn’t lift my head to see her, but I wished I could.

“Yeah,” I said. “Come here.”

She snuggled her way up my body and lay next to me. Somehow, I found the energy to turn my head and meet her eyes.

“How do you feel?” she asked, stroking my stomach which was misted in drying sweat. We both needed a shower and I’d have to change the bed before I went to sleep.

“I don’t know. Sparkly,” I said, raising a hand and looking at it.

Honey chuckled. “Sparkly? That’s it?”

“I don’t know. It was amazing. You’re amazing.”

My fingers cupped her cheek as she smiled. She shifted onto her side facing me.

“What do you think it was that made the difference?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to think about it later when the blood has returned to my brain. I think it’s all centered down there right now.”

Honey snorted and stroked my hair.

“You were beautiful, you know. It feels like an honor to have been here. Thank you for trusting me with yourself.”

I brushed my thumb across her soft lips. “You’re welcome. And thank you. For that. I didn’t think it could happen.”

I’d resigned myself to be someone who didn’t have orgasms, but maybe it was possible. It had happened once, so that meant it could probably happen again.

“Come here, baby,” Honey said, reaching for me. I rolled onto my side and slung one of my legs over hers.

“I’m so tired now,” I said, yawning. “Were you planning on staying the night? You can. Or not. I don’t want to presume.”

She tucked my head into her chest.

“I’d love to stay with you. But I’m not sleeping on this wet spot.”

We both laughed.

“Give me a minute and we can clean up and change the bed.”

Arson got very excited that we were putting new sheets on the bed and came to “help” by interfering as much as she could with the process.

“Oh my god, stop!” I said for the fourth time as she attempted to attack the sheet as I tucked it in.

“I’ve got her.” Honey reached for Arson and swooped her up. She wore a baggy T-shirt and a tiny pair of shorts, and she looked delectable. Her hair was damp and hanging over one shoulder.

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Arson meowed in distress but allowed Honey to hold her until I finished the bed.

“There. Let her go.” Honey tossed Arson on the bed and she curled up in the middle and shut her eyes.

“Where are we supposed to sleep?” I asked Arson. She just sighed.

“I have no idea what she’s got to sigh about.”

Honey laughed and leaned over to kiss my shoulder. She’d been sweet and tender in the shower and we’d had fun spotting the marks we’d left on each other.

“I don’t want to go to the marketplace tomorrow,” she said, leaning against me.

“Me neither. Monday can’t come soon enough.” I’d never been bothered much by working weekends, but now I had Honey in my life and there weren’t enough hours in my schedule for her.

“How are we going to make this work?” I asked.

Honey stepped in front of me, forcing me to give her all my attention.

“Make us work, you mean?”

I nodded.

She tucked some of my damp hair behind my ear. “Well. We figure it out. You can

come and stay with me sometimes. My apartment is separate from the rest of the house and if we get home late enough and leave early enough, you won't even have to see my family."

I thought about that. "It wouldn't be terrible. Seeing your family. I mean, I see them a lot already."

She smiled and bounced on her toes. "Really? Because I want to show you the farm. Have you meet the bees."

"Oh, you were serious about that?" I asked.

"Of course. The bees already know about you because I told them, but they should officially meet you."

I wasn't so sure about that. She was very comfortable with them, but I didn't want to get stung.

"Can I wear the outfit?" It would look silly, but it would protect me.

"Hell yeah you can wear the outfit. You'd look so cute. I've actually had fantasies of you in the outfit." She wiggled her eyebrows.

"Oh yeah?" I slid my hands down her back and grabbed her ass, making her squeak, and hold onto me. "I've got to hear about these fantasies."

"Get in bed with me and I'll tell you."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Honey

Bren's bed was bigger than mine, but I still ended up plastered against her and woke up with her hair in my mouth in the morning and one of my legs slung across her belly.

She cursed as she shut off her alarm and then I heard a soft meow from the vicinity of my feet.

Arson had curled up at the end of the bed, but was up and stretching, walking across our limbs to come and poke at Bren.

"Good morning, little baby," I said to Arson as she stared at me as if to ask "you're still here?"

"I'm not that little. I'm taller than you," Bren mumbled, turning to bury her face in my hair.

"I was talking to Arson."

She laughed softly and then leaned back so she could look at me.

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“Last night was incredible.”

“It was.” I pressed a soft kiss to her lips, keeping bad breath in mind.

“What is your family going to say about you staying over?”

I rolled my eyes. “They’re probably going to throw me a party. They’ve been encouraging me to go after you forever. They knew how much I liked you.”

She gasped. “Why Honey, are you saying you like me?”

I smacked a kiss on her forehead. “Yes, Bren. I like you. A lot.” My chest thundered with the realization that I was lying.

I didn’t like her a lot.

I loved her. I truly loved Bren Hendrix, and I had for a while.

Ohshit. Here I’d just barely convinced her to try a relationship with me and I’d had to go fall in love with her.

Ellie had been right, but she’d be insufferable if I told her.

“What is it?” Bren asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking about work.”



Bren nodded and kissed my cheek, licking it and making me giggle.

“Stop it!”

“You know, I’ve been wanting to taste your dimples since the first day I saw you.”

I made a face. “Why?”

Bren shrugged and I loved seeing her like this. So relaxed and warm and with her hair all over the place. Sure, sex was great, but this? Seeing her the way no one other than her cat did? This was priceless.

“I wonder what my family is doing for breakfast right now. I usually cook it. And if someone doesn’t gather the eggs, I’m going to be pissed,” I said, but Bren put her finger to my lips.

“Don’t worry about that right now. You have too much on your shoulders, Honey Bea.” I knew that, but hearing it from Bren made it more obvious somehow.

“I know I do. It’s what I do. It’s what I’ve always done.”

Bren studied me for a moment and then sat up, dragging a hand through her hair.

“Maybe we can sit down and think of some ways that you could do less. Or I could yell at your family and stop relying on you so much. There are a range of options.”

I snorted, imagining Bren yelling at my siblings to do their chores. They might actually listen.

“I do have to handle the financial stuff, though. My parents really can’t handle that. Trust me, I let them do the taxes one year and it was a bad idea.”

Bren nodded and I could tell she was having a problem understanding why I was so adamant about helping my parents, given that they were both grown adults.

“I’ve been thinking about hiring an accountant, at least for the tax stuff.”

“That’s a great idea. And if you’re okay with it, I might be able to look through everything you have and see if there might be ways you could cut or streamline or outsource some things to free your time up,” she said.

She did have a degree and I’d learned everything on my own. I wasn’t opposed to using her expertise and her incredible brain to help my family.

“Okay. But let’s not talk about business right now. I’m hungry.”

Bren smiled and then her eyes went wide. “Oh god, I don’t think I have much food in the house at all. I was planning on making you breakfast.”

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No one had made me breakfast in a long time. I always just went ahead and did it.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay, baby. Do you want to just order something?” I was going to have to stop at home and grab a few things before going to the marketplace. I’d never done a walk of shame before.

“Yeah, let’s order something and I’ll make you breakfast next time.”

I stood up and stretched my arms over my head, my shoulders popping. “So you’re saying that there will be a next time?”

Bren wrapped her arms around me and rested her chin on my shoulder, sighing happily.

“There will definitely be a next time, Honey. Now that I’ve got you, I’m not letting you go.”

Good. I didn’t want her to.

We ended up flirting and kissing and wasting so much time that I had to rush back to the farm and barely had enough time to throw on new clothes and run a brush through my hair before I had to hurl myself into my truck and drive to the marketplace. My family hadn’t even been there; they’d already left. That was good, but I was worried what I’d find when I got there. I’d wanted to drive in with Bren, but it hadn’t worked out, so I didn’t see her again until I walked in.

She had her table ready and a matcha sitting there waiting for me as she sipped her iced coffee.

“Hey, Honey Bea,” she said, coming over and kissing me right on the lips. Right there in the marketplace.

“I missed you,” she said as my eyes went wide.

“Bren. You just kissed me.”

She grinned. “Sure did. Couldn’t wait.”

Oh.

This was a new and terrifying Bren. Terrifying at how much I wanted her. How much I loved her.

Love, love, love. It thumped in my chest along with my heart. Or maybe it had taken over my heart by now. Had become a part of me.

It was true that I’d been in love before, but never, ever like this. There was only one Bren Hendrix and I was completely and totally head over ass in love with her.

I kissed her back. “I couldn’t wait either.”

“Hi, Bren.” Ellie’s voice penetrated the Bren haze in my mind.

Bren leaned back from me and glanced over at Ellie.

“Hello, Ellie. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Are you and Honey girlfriends now?” I let out a choking noise and struggled to breathe.

I was even more shocked when Bren flashed me a smile before looking back at Ellie.

“Yes, I am. I think. I am, right?”

This was quite the turn of events. One orgasm and Bren was ready to call me her girlfriend. I knew it had to be more than the orgasm, but it was still a lot when she’d been so reluctant.

“Hey, Ellie Belly, can you give Bren and I a second?”

“Sure!” she ran off to tell the news to the rest of my family and they huddled around her.

Pulling Bren to the back of her table so we could have a little privacy, I searched her face.

“Are you really okay with all this? It’s not just post-coital glow or something?”

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Bren laughed. “No, it’s not. I think I kept telling myself that I couldn’t be in a relationship so much that I believed it. And no one has been worth trying with until you. God, I don’t want to mess this up, Honey. I know that I’m going to make mistakes, but I have to try. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t give this a chance.”

Her eyes were bright, and she was so earnest that it made my heart pound.

“I want to try with you too. I haven’t had the best record of relationships myself. We’ll just figure this out together, won’t we?”

She pulled me into her arms and inhaled as if she was smelling my hair. I did the same.

“I’m scared out of my mind, but I want this with you. I want you in my life, Honey Bea. Melliferal.”

That was all I wanted to hear.

I leaned back and smiled at her. “Same, babe.” An alarm went off on her phone, making us both jump.

“Oh, we’re opening. I completely lost track of time,” she said.

I had too. “I hope the table is set up right. I bet no one made the tea.” I looked over to find my family pretending that they hadn’t been watching the whole thing with me and Bren.

Ellie stood out front with a tray of cups of tea and a brilliant smile on her face.

“Everything looks fine to me,” Bren said.

“Huh. Look at that.”

## Chapter Thirty

Bren

I gave up trying not to pay attention to Honey. It was futile. When I wasn't staring at her, I was thinking about her.

Thinking about last night.

I was still basking in the glow of my first orgasm and trying to figure out just how it had happened, but not coming up with any concrete answers. All I wanted to do was drag Honey home with me and get her naked so we could try again. And again.

I'd also promised to make her climax until she cried, and I was more than ready for that.

I officially had my first girlfriend and I was surprised when I looked down and found my feet touching the floor because my entire body felt like it was floating.

There was a warmth and a peace that I'd never experienced, and it wasn't just her. It was...comfort. It was safety.

I'd trusted Honey and she'd cradled that trust in her hands and cherished it like a fragile gift.

This was all still new, but I did trust her completely. When was the last time I'd given anyone my trust? Hardly ever. And those who had come before her had mostly wrecked it. My parents, my old friends, one of my closest online friends.

Honey was different and I was different with her. I smiled more and laughed more and wasn't constantly expecting doom and gloom around every corner.

There was color in my life now and Honey had helped bring it to me, both as herself and as Melliferal. We were still keeping up the chat and I got giddy every time I had a new message from her.

This was new and scary, but I was going to trust it. I was going to grab onto this feeling and this woman with both hands and not let go.

I wished today was Sunday so I could have Honey without the pressure of the marketplace the next day, but I'd have to wait. She was still coming over tonight anyway, but after dinner, since she wanted to eat with her family.

I understood that and respected it, but I also wanted to hoard all her extra time for myself. My priorities had changed so much in the past few days.

Throughout the day, she'd come over to check on me and even give me little kisses that tasted sweet and made my knees weak.

I'd never counted down the hours to the end of the day with more excitement before.

"Finally," I said when the doors were closed, and the customers were gone and I got to put everything away for the night.



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Honey was busy wrangling her crew and I was done so I walked over and asked, “can I help?”

Every single one of the Holloways stared at me.

Honey recovered first. “Yeah, sure. If you could toss these cups in the recycling.” I went and did that, coming back to find Honey giving orders.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“No, I think we’ve got it.” Her cheeks were adorably pink right now and I couldn’t help but kiss one of them.

“Introduce me,” I whispered in her ear.

“They already know you.”

“But not as your girlfriend, they don’t. I want to make a good impression on your parents.”

Honey’s eyes flew wide.

“Really?”

I nodded, and she still appeared skeptical.

“Mom, Dad, this is Bren. Who you already know, but I guess she wanted to officially

meet you.”

“Hello. I thought we should do this more formally since you’re going to be seeing a lot of me.” I couldn’t even believe the words coming out of my mouth. Who was I? Honey had to hide her shock, too.

I shook Bill’s hand and then Sharon pulled me into a hug.

“Oh, darling Bren. We’re so happy you’re joining our family.”

Honey gasped. “Whoa, Mom. Let’s pump the brakes. Bren and I literally just started dating.”

Sharon released me and smiled in a way that reminded me so much of Honey.

I said hello to the other kids, and Ellie clasped me in a hug.

“I get to have another sister!”

“Slow your roll,” Ember said, rolling her eyes. “They’re not getting married. Yet.”

She smirked when she added that last word.

“My dear, do you know any folk songs?” Sharon asked me.

“I don’t sing,” I said, but she just laughed.

“Oh, we’ll change that.”

Less than an hour later, I found myself standing next to Honey at the stove of the Holloway home and not even sure how it had happened. I’d been invited to dinner

and I hadn't said no.

The house was warm and filled with pictures and noise and love. So much love here.

Honey managed the chaos effortlessly as I watched and tried to help. I'd been awkward at first, but soon I relaxed and discovered that I liked being here. The singing was still a bit much, but they were a family in every sense of the word. They enjoyed spending time together. Their camaraderie made me ache to be a part of their circle. To join in with my offkey voice.

Who could have imagined?

Dinner was as noisy and chaotic as I thought it would be, but I got through it and it wasn't so bad. Honey finally dragged me around and gave me a tour, complete with meeting the bees and helping me get into one of the bee outfits.

"How do I look?" I asked, posing as she took a few pics on her phone.

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She lifted the veil and kissed me, driving her tongue into my mouth.

“Hot as fuck.”

I laughed at the absurdity of the situation. “I love you.”

The words had slipped out without me even realizing. I slapped my hand to my mouth as if I could hold them in.

“Oh my god, I didn’t mean that.”

Honey’s grip on me tightened and her blue gaze became intense.

“Didn’t you?”

I dropped my hand. “I mean...yes? No. Fuck.”

Honey smiled slowly. “It’s okay if you didn’t mean to say it yet, but you should know that I’m saying it now and I mean it. I love you, Bren.”

Oh. Fucking hell.

“I know it’s soon to say it, but I couldn’t just hold onto it. I say it when I feel it, which hasn’t worked out in the past, but I don’t care. You don’t have to say it back.”

She seemed flustered, her blush covering her cheeks and moving down to her chest as she held onto both my arms with an iron grip.

I thought about those three words. About what they meant, for me and for both of us.

No. I didn't want to take them back.

Leaning forward, I kissed her lips. "I." A second kiss. "Love." And a third. "You."

"Really?!" Honey squealed. "You do?"

I nodded. "Yes. I do."

She flung herself into my arms and I managed to catch her, both of us laughing.

"Did you hear that? She loves me! I'm so glad the bees were here when you told me."

They buzzed softly around both of our heads as Honey kissed me and kissed me, before she dragged me upstairs to her apartment to have her way with me. Again. And again.

Epilogue

Honey

"You're doing so good. Just stay calm."

Bren's face was pale under the veil, but she was doing everything I'd asked her to as she carefully carved the honeycomb from the frame.

It had been a few weeks since we'd first started dating and I couldn't imagine being happier. We had fit ourselves into each other's life and made space, and sometimes it was a tight fit, but we worked. Somehow, we worked.

"Okay," Bren said, setting down the knife and sliding the frame back into the hive

and backing away slowly with the bucket of comb we'd already harvested.

She put the bucket on the ground and grinned at me. "I did it!"

"You did!" Bren flung her arms around me and we danced next to the hives.

"God, you two are dorks," Ember grumbled on her way to the chicken coop. I'd sat my siblings down and had a little chat with them about helping around the farm and that I'd be doing less. They'd agreed to step up and do more, and so far, they'd been carrying more of the load.

In addition to helping with my business, I'd also had some ideas for Bren on how to outsource some of her tasks. She was still a complete and total control freak, but she was getting better. I always reminded her that the less time she had to spend on boring tasks, the more time we could be having mind-blowing sex.

The sex was still mind-blowing, which was a surprise and a delight. Bren and I were both adventurous and willing to try new things. There was an ease with her that I hadn't had with other partners, and she would have said the same thing. Sometimes she couldn't climax, no matter what we tried, but that was just the nature of sex. Sometimes you couldn't get there and that didn't mean it was a bad time. I still made sure she felt good. Every time.

Every night we spent together (we didn't like to sleep without each other if we could help it) she would turn to me and say, "good mice, Honey Bea" and I'd say, "Good mice, baby."

Life was pretty damn good these days.

"Can we try my honey? I'm starving," Bren said, picking up the bucket and walking toward the barn.

I grabbed her hand and swung our arms together. “You can try me anytime you want.”

Her laughter rang out under the afternoon soon.