



Bidding on the Orc Outcast (Sweet Monster Treats)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: What happens when you win the town's grumpiest orc?

Posy is brand new to Fairhaven Falls, but she's determined to find her place in the charming small town—even if it means participating in an unusual bachelor auction. But she certainly doesn't expect to end up bidding on the mysterious orc who everyone seems to avoid.

Varek has lived in the woods outside Fairhaven Falls for years, convinced he's unwelcome among its residents. But when his meddling godmother ropes him into the bachelor auction, he reluctantly agrees—if only to get her off his back. Winning a blind date with an adorable little female wasn't in his plans, nor was the undeniable spark between them.

As Posy and Varek navigate awkward dates, unexpected chemistry, and the secrets that keep Varek in the shadows, can Posy convince him that he's not as unwanted as he believes? And can Varek show Posy that sometimes the biggest... hearts are found in the most unexpected places?

Welcome to Fairhaven Falls, where love isn't just blind—it's monstrous, magical, and utterly irresistible.

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CHAPTER ONE

“S econd Chance”

Posy took a step back to admire her new sign, an elegant swoop of emerald letters against the freshly painted cream storefront. The morning sun caught the gold flecks in the paint, making the name shimmer like a promise. A promise of a second chance not just for the items in her thrift store but for her as well.

The sun was shining but the air still carried the winter chill and she tugged her bright yellow coat closer - a vintage find that had sparked her love for pre-loved treasures years ago. A love that her ex-husband had not appreciated at all.

Pushing thoughts of him aside, she studied the frontage again and nodded. The display window still needed work. She'd only managed to arrange a few pieces, including a mid-century modern lamp and an art deco vanity mirror, but it already looked more like the store she'd envisioned. When she'd purchased the thrift shop from the previous owner - an elderly fairy who'd decided to move to Florida - it had been a charming but chaotic jumble of items. She was gradually restoring order to the chaos while hopefully retaining the charm.

The breeze picked up, bringing the scent of snow down from the surrounding mountains and rustling the newly hung wind chimes, their gentle tinkling mixing with opening sounds from the other Main Street stores. The street consisted of a mixture of old two and three story brick-fronted shops and old residences that had been converted into quirky little establishments, everything leading down the hill to the Town Square and the wide river that sparkled under the cold winter sunlight.

“Your new sign is very pretty.” Mrs. Chen from the herb shop next door came over to join her, carrying a small potted lavender bush. “This is for you, dear. Every new business needs a lucky plant.”

She gave her neighbor a grateful smile as she took the pot and breathed in the heavenly fragrance.

“Mrs. Chen, you shouldn’t have-”

“Nonsense. Martha was here forever, but change is good.” Mrs. Chen beamed up at her. She was even shorter than Posy’s already modest height, her skin tinted a subtle blue that shimmered in the sunlight. “‘Second Chance.’ I like it. Very meaningful.”

Exactly what she had thought. The name had come to her during one of those sleepless nights after signing the divorce papers, when she’d sat surrounded by moving boxes and doubt. But standing here now, watching the morning light play across her very own storefront, those doubts seemed very far away.

“Thank you,” she said, tightening her arms around the pot nervously. “I was worried people might think I was trying to erase Martha’s legacy.”

Mrs. Chen waved her hand dismissively. “Oh please. Martha would love this. She always said this place needed someone with fresh eyes and a young heart. Whimsical Wonders was her store. Second Chance is yours.”

Posy thanked her again, and Mrs. Chen bustled back to her store. All around her the street was coming alive as shop owners flipped their “Closed” signs to “Open” and greeted the morning. She smiled at the number of Others - creatures of myth and legend who lived alongside humans - emerging from their businesses. A towering troll arranged produce outside the greengrocer’s, his massive hands stacking apples into perfect pyramids. Down the block, a pixie zipped between flower baskets,

leaving trails of sparkles that faded in the sunlight.

She'd previously lived in the city where Others were relatively rare, and it was a pleasant reminder of how different Fairhaven Falls was from her old home. Those differences were one of the reasons she had chosen the town - along with the incentives the town was offering to encourage more humans to move in.

Across the street, the door to "Java Joy" swung open, releasing the rich scent of coffee into the morning air. Elara, the very pretty, very curvy shop owner, bounced out, her blonde curls as sunny as her personality. Her mate Grondar, a massive orc, followed her, his broad shoulders barely fitting through the door frame. Despite his intimidating size, he wore a crisp white apron with little coffee cups embroidered across it.

"Hi Posy!" Elara waved enthusiastically, nearly knocking over their sidewalk chalkboard. "Your new sign looks amazing!"

She returned the wave, delighted by Elara's enthusiasm. The other woman had been one of the first to welcome her to Fairhaven Falls, showing up at her door with a cappuccino and fresh croissants the day she'd started renovations.

Grondar steadied the chalkboard with a massive green hand, his tusks glinting as he shook his head at his wife's antics. "Careful, sugar. We just got that new board."

"Oh hush, you worry too much." Elara smiled up at her mate, and he bent down - way down - to kiss her. The size difference between them could have been comical, but the tenderness between them was obvious.

A tiny pang of longing hit her as she watched them, envying their closeness, but she quickly pushed it away. She was here for a fresh start, not to find a man.

When Grondar raised his head, Elara was flushed and smiling. He started to lead her back into the store, but she stopped and looked over at Posy.

“Come by later. Grondar has perfected his maple oat scone recipe.”

“They’re acceptable,” he admitted.

Elara rolled her eyes and winked at her.

“I’m thinking of calling them Grumpy Orc Scones,” Elara said, ignoring her mate’s snort of protest.

Posy laughed and nodded. “I’ll come by after lunch.”

“Perfect!” Elara waved again and disappeared into the coffee shop, Grondar close behind her.

The pang returned as she watched them go. She and Larry had never shared that kind of friendly affection - which should have been one of the first signs that something was wrong.

Refusing to dwell on the past she entered her own store, breathing in the familiar mix of vintage fabric and wood polish. Sunlight streamed through the freshly cleaned windows, the crystal wind chimes sending rainbow reflections across the old wide planked wooden floors, now glowing softly after hours of polishing.

She’d transformed the space from cluttered to open, alive with warmth and color. Jewel-toned scarves draped between sections created intimate shopping nooks. A restored Art Deco vanity held a collection of costume jewelry, each piece cleaned and polished until it sparkled like new.

Near the window, she'd arranged a living room scene with a reupholstered emerald velvet armchair and a brass floor lamp. The chair's worn patches had been patched with fragments of vintage brocade, turning its flaws into features. A hand-knit throw in shades of gold and cream draped over one arm.

"You all deserve another chance to be loved," she murmured, running her fingers along a rack of vintage dresses. She'd spent hours sorting through the old stock, selecting pieces with potential and bringing them back to life. A 1950s cocktail dress with a torn hem now sported delicate lace trim. A faded denim jacket bloomed with hand-embroidered wildflowers covering old stains.

The old wardrobe she'd rescued from an estate sale now gleamed after days of careful restoration, and she'd lined the inside with wallpaper featuring golden birds in flight to match the polished brass handles. Every item told a story, carried memories of lives lived and celebrations shared. They weren't finished yet – they were just waiting for the right person to see their worth.

She was adjusting a display of vintage teacups so that the morning light caught their gilt edges, making them glow like tiny treasures, when the bell over the door chimed. She glanced up as Flora and Gladys entered. Flora was an elderly lady with short white curls and a wicked grin who claimed to be an orc, even though she was barely five foot tall. Today she was resplendent in a hot pink tracksuit with "Too Hot to Handle" emblazoned across the back in silver sequins. She was also a member of the Town Council and one of the people who had approved Posy's purchase of the thrift shop.

"This place looks entirely different," Flora said approvingly. "You've done a wonderful job."

"I'll say," Gladys agreed. She was an attractive, older woman who looked perfectly normal - except for the witch's hat perched on her silver hair. "The aura in here is

completely different.”

“Thank you. I want it to feel welcoming.”

“You’ve definitely succeeded.” Gladys nodded her approval as she explored, then disappeared into the back room that Posy had deliberately left a little more cluttered to allow for the thrill of discovery.

“Such an interesting mixture of items,” Flora murmured, examining a tray of vintage brooches, then gave Posy an innocent look. “Have you considered adding a line of sex toys?”

Posy choked on the sip of coffee she’d just taken and it took a full minute for her to stop coughing.

“Sex toys? In a thrift shop?”

“If you want to serve the community, you should consider all of their needs,” Flora said calmly.

“I’m sure that there are plenty of other places where they can purchase sex toys,” she said, not entirely sure that was true but hoping Flora would let the matter drop.

“True, but it’s a long drive to the adult store by the highway.”

Deciding she didn’t even want to ask how Flora knew that, she did her best to bring the discussion to an end.

“I’ll think about it.”

Black eyes sparkled at her.

“You could even make them vintage if that makes you feel better. Did you know they used whalebone to make the most enormous dil-”

“Flora,” Gladys sighed as she reappeared with two silk scarves and a long crystal necklace. “Stop teasing the poor girl.”

She wasn’t convinced that Flora was teasing her, but she gave Gladys a grateful smile as she rang up her purchases.

“That reminds me.” Flora opened her huge sequined purse and pulled out a sheaf of hot pink flyers. “We’re hosting our annual Valentine’s Day bachelor auction at the community center. All proceeds go to the local animal shelter. Would you mind if we put up a few of these?”

It was clearly a command rather than a question, but she nodded anyway.

“Sure. I’d love to help. Where would you like them?”

“By the register would be perfect.” Her stomach sank as the innocent expression returned to Flora’s face. “I hope you’re planning to attend, dear. We’ve got some prime specimens this year.”

After Larry and the whole divorce mess, dating felt like stepping into quicksand - scary and potentially disastrous.

“I really don’t think-”

Flora ignored her protest. “It’s about community. Getting to know your neighbors. And we have some very interesting neighbors.”

“Flora’s right.” Gladys twirled her new necklace, leaving trails of purple sparkles in

its wake. “Half the fun is watching Flora drive up the bidding. Last year she managed to convince Lola Henderson that a date with the troll bridge inspector was worth her entire bingo winnings.”

“He was worth every penny.” Flora’s black eyes twinkled. “They’re expecting their second baby this fall. My matchmaking record speaks for itself.”

“I appreciate the invitation, but-”

“No buts. You’ve been in town for what, four weeks? And all you do is work in this shop. When was the last time you went out and had fun?”

She winced at the question, unable to remember the last time she’d done anything purely for fun. Between the divorce, moving, and setting up the shop, fun had taken a permanent backseat.

Flora arranged the flyers neatly then gave her another saintly look.

“You don’t have to bid. You can just watch me terrorize the eligible bachelors.”

“And I’ll be serving my special punch,” Gladys added with a wink. “Guaranteed to bring the fun.”

Posy looked from Flora’s too-innocent expression to Gladys’s encouraging smile and felt her resistance crumbling. Maybe they were right. She did want to be part of the community, and it wouldn’t hurt to step out of her comfort zone a little.

“I suppose I could come,” she said nervously. “But I’m really not looking to date anyone. Been there, done that, got the divorce papers.”

Her fingers tightened on the edge of the counter, memories of Larry’s betrayal still

fresh in her mind. The way he'd looked at her across the conference table, his new girlfriend's ring sparkling as she'd rested her hand on her pregnant belly. “

Flora reached over and patted her hand. “It isn't really about dating. It's about having fun. Meeting people. Getting to know your neighbors beyond just waving at them through your shop window.”

“The last auction raised enough money to fix the library roof,” Gladys chimed in. “And replace all those books the pixies ruined when they had that drinking party in the stacks.”

Flora sighed. “I keep telling you that was an accident. But you see, Posy? It's about community. Supporting local causes.”

“I support plenty of causes,” she protested. “Just yesterday I donated money to purchase three boxes of children's books for-”

“That's not the same and you know it.” Flora shook her head, that dark gaze uncomfortably penetrating. “Writing checks is easy. Being part of something takes courage.”

The words hit closer to home than she wanted to admit. She'd chosen Fairhaven Falls precisely because it was different from her old life - because it represented a chance to belong somewhere real. Somewhere authentic.

“And even if you aren't interested in dating, there's nothing wrong with checking out the offerings,” Flora added.

“Fine,” she finally agreed. “I'll come, but I'm not going to bid.”

“Of course not, dear.”

Flora's innocent expression didn't change, but as the two women left the store, she had the uncomfortable feeling that she'd somehow been outmaneuvered.

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CHAPTER TWO

V arek adjusted the leather satchel filled with the results of his labors against his shoulder. The morning's foraging had yielded a good harvest despite the snow still covering much of the ground. The familiar sights and sounds of the forest surrounded him - the soft rustle of the wind through the pines, the distant chatter of birds - creating a rare moment of peace.

The peaceful feeling evaporated when a splash of yellow caught his eye. His godmother Flora was perched on the front steps of his cabin wearing a fluffy yellow tracksuit that made her look like an innocent little chickadee. He knew better. Flora almost always had some kind of scheme in mind when she came to visit him, and her harmless appearance didn't fool him for a second.

He carefully took a quiet step back, then another, praying he could escape before she dis-

"Don't even think about sneaking away, boy." Flora's amused voice carried across the clearing in front of his cabin. "I know you're there."

He sighed and went to join her. The sooner he dealt with whatever she wanted, the sooner she'd leave. "What do you want, Flora?"

Her eyes widened in innocent surprise.

"Maybe I just wanted to see how my favorite godson-"

“Your only godson.”

“-my favorite godson was doing. Come and join me.”

She gave him her sweetest smile as she patted the step next to her, but that only made him more suspicious. His godmother - if she actually was his godmother as she claimed - was most dangerous when she looked the most innocent.

“I’m fine. Working.”

He patted his satchel and remained standing, towering over her small body, but she didn’t look even remotely intimidated. She claimed her diminutive size came from a fairy somewhere in her family tree, but her lack of inches made her no less formidable than a full-sized orc.

“Don’t be silly. Your plants aren’t going anywhere. Opportunities, on the other hand, can slip right by while you’re hiding in these woods.”

“I’m not hiding.” The familiar defensiveness crept into his voice.

“I’m glad to hear it. Then you won’t mind participating in the Valentine’s Day bachelor auction. It’s to raise money for the animal shelter.”

A bachelor auction? Standing on a stage for people to gawk at and whisper about? She must have lost her mind.

“Absolutely not.”

Her eyes widened again.

“Don’t you care about those poor animals?”

“You know I do, but I’m not going.”

“It’s just for one evening. Unless you’re scared?”

“Manipulation doesn’t work on me anymore.” But even as he said it, he suspected he’d end up doing whatever she wanted. He always did.

Not this time.

He cast a longing look at the surrounding forest. It should be dense enough to hide him, at least for a little while. Flora had an uncanny ability to track him down. But if it would buy him some time...

His fingers tightened on the leather strap of his satchel, but his godmother only laughed and patted the step next to her again.

“Oh, stop plotting useless escape routes, boy, and sit down. My neck hurts from looking up at you.”

The wooden step creaked under his weight as he sighed and lowered himself down beside her, careful to leave space between them.

“What’s this really about?”

“You’re so suspicious,” she complained, smoothing the downy yellow feathers covering her tracksuit.

“That’s because I know that look.”

“What look?”

“The one that means trouble. For me.”

The mischievous look disappeared as she reached over and patted his knee.

“I worry about you out here alone.”

His jaw tightened again. “I’m fine.”

“No you’re not. You’ve isolated yourself from everything and everyone. And don’t tell me you prefer it that way. No one prefers loneliness.”

He flinched, the words striking a little too close to home. He’d come to terms with his life, even found a certain satisfaction in it, but he couldn’t deny that it was a lonely one. When the only sounds he heard for weeks on end were the chattering of the birds and the wind whispering through the leaves. But he knew better than to admit it.

“I don’t need your meddling in my life, Flora.”

“Of course not,” she agreed and he almost relaxed, but then her hand tightened on his knee. “All I want is for you to enter the bachelor auction.”

“Why? No one is going to bid on me.”

Something flashed across her face too quickly for him to read before she shook her head.

“Remember when you climbed Mr. Thompson’s apple tree and got stuck?”

He blinked at her, the abrupt change of subject catching him off guard.

“Yes. Why?”

“Because you’re still stuck. You’re letting one event define you. That’s why you’ve retreated to this cabin in the middle of nowhere and turned your back on everyone and everything.”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t answer. The truth was lodged somewhere deep inside, but bringing it out into the open was still more than he could bear.

She sighed and patted his knee again. “You don’t have to be alone.”

His chest ached and he swallowed hard, forcing down the feelings that threatened to rise to the surface. Why did she have to start stirring up everything he’d buried?

“What do you want?” The words came out rougher than he intended.

“Just for you to rejoin the land of the living. Starting with the bachelor auction.”

He focused on the strap of his satchel, running it between his fingers as he avoided her gaze.

“Fairhaven Falls has changed. You’ve changed,” she said softly. “You can’t spend the rest of your life gathering herbs and mixing oils all by yourself.”

His jaw clenched. The oils helped people, even if they didn’t know where they came from. That was enough for him.

“I mean it.” The feathers on her tracksuit fluttered as she shifted to face him. “This self-imposed exile needs to end. You’re not that angry teenager anymore, and what happened wasn’t your fault.”

The old guilt churned in his stomach, and he stood, unable to stay still under her knowing gaze. “I’m fine here.”

“You’re existing. There’s a difference.”

“Drop it,” he growled.

“When have I ever dropped anything?” Flora shook her head. “You think I don’t see right through this ‘perfectly happy’ act?”

So maybe he wasn’t happy. But he was resigned to his quiet life, to the solitude of his cabin and the predictable rhythm of gathering herbs and brewing oils. It was better this way - for everyone.

“The woods don’t judge,” he muttered.

“The woods don’t love either. And you deserve that, whether you believe it or not.” She pulled a pink flyer from her tracksuit pocket and waved it under his nose. “You’ll be Bachelor Number Seven.”

“What?”

“I’ve already paid your entry fee.”

Blood roared in his ears. The thought of standing on display, of watching faces twist with fear or disgust...

His tusks ached from clenching his jaw. “Take it back.”

“Can’t. No refunds.” Black eyes sparkled mischievously. “Besides, it’s for charity.”

“The town won’t want me there.” The words scraped his throat raw as memories of sideways glances and mothers pulling children closer flickered through his mind.

Flora sighed.

“You have every right to be there. And anyone who doesn’t like it can kiss my ass. You’re going.”

“No.” He crossed his arms over his chest, drawing himself up to his full height.

“Yes.” She matched his stance, all five-foot-nothing of her radiating pure stubbornness. “The auction is this weekend. Plenty of time to get you a proper shirt.”

He glared at her. “There’s nothing wrong with my clothes.”

“Other than the fact that they’re almost as old as you are?” She jabbed a surprisingly painful finger at his chest. “You’re going. End of discussion.”

Fuck. Once Flora set her mind to something, she was worse than a dog with a bone. But the thought of standing on that stage, of seeing the same judgment and fear he’d faced years ago...

“The town remembers what happened,” he said roughly.

“The town needs to get over itself. And you need to stop letting one incident define your whole life.” Her black eyes suddenly sparkled with mischief. “Besides, there are plenty of new faces in town. People who don’t know about-”

“Don’t.”

“Fine.” Flora patted his arm. “But you’re going. Even if I have to march down here with my entire knitting circle and drag you there myself.”

Since the average age of her knitting circle was well above seventy, the mental image

of Flora and her gaggle of friends - human and Other alike - trying to budge his seven-foot body almost made him smile. Almost.

“Half those ladies would break a hip.”

“Then save us all the trouble and show up on your own.” Flora headed down the porch steps with the determined stride that had terrorized reluctant bachelors for decades. “This weekend, Varek. Wear something nice.”

He watched her go, his jaw clenching until his tusks ached again. His godmother was more stubborn than a mule - and twice as crafty. If she’d decided that it was time for him to leave the woods, she’d keep coming back, wearing him down with her particular blend of guilt and manipulation until he gave in.

His shoulders slumped. Maybe it was better to get it over with. One night of discomfort and then blessed peace.

“Flora,” he called after her.

She turned, yellow feathers fluttering the breeze. “Yes, dear?”

He crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at her. “If I agree to participate in this ridiculous auction, you’ll stop. No more schemes to drag me into town. No surprise visits about community events. No matchmaking.”

Her delighted smile instantly made him regret speaking. “Of course not, dear. One auction and I’ll never bother you about town participation again.”

The promise came a little too easily, but he was still going to take advantage of it. “Fine.”

“Excellent. Now about your clothes-”

“No,” he growled. “I agreed to show up. That’s it.”

“But-”

“Those are my terms.”

She studied him for a moment, then nodded. “I suppose that’s all right. Some women go for that rugged look after all. And who knows? You might end up going on a wonderful date and finally getting laid.”

He choked and she grinned at him before disappearing down the forest path. He stared after her in dismay, then slumped back against the porch railing. What had he just agreed to? The thought of standing on display while women bid on him made his skin crawl. Or more likely, didn’t bid on him.

But if it put an end to Flora’s schemes... He’d endure worse for that kind of peace.

CHAPTER THREE

Posy tugged nervously at the neckline of her vintage dress as she paid her entrance fee and picked up one of the numbered paddles from the table just inside the Town Hall. How in the world had she let Flora talk her into this?

A group of nearby females - a human, a dryad, and two trolls - were discussing potential “merchandise” in hushed whispers. She caught the names of a local business owner, a visiting professor from the nearby college, and someone who apparently worked at the lumber mill outside of town. They didn’t sound like exciting dates, but she wasn’t sure what else she’d been expecting from a small-town bachelor auction.

The thought of bidding on any of them made her stomach churn, but she reminded herself yet again that she didn’t have to bid. She held her paddle against her side, hoping her full skirt would conceal it as she edged into the main meeting room.

“There you are.” Gladys smiled at her from behind a lavishly decorated table complete with a bubbling cauldron. She was in full witch regalia tonight, with flowing black robes to match the ever present witch’s hat. “Would you like some of my special punch? Only five dollars for a cup.”

She gave the bubbling red liquid a doubtful look.

“Um. What’s in it?”

“What do you think would be in a witch’s brew?” The older woman laughed. “You should see your expression. Actually it’s just mulled wine with cinnamon and honey

and a little extra food coloring. And remember, it's for charity."

She returned Gladys's smile and bought a cup, then took a cautious sip, sighing with pleasure as the taste exploded in her mouth.

"This is delicious."

"Gladys always had a knack for potions," a deep pleasant voice agreed, and she looked up to see a tall, handsome black man with short iron grey hair standing next to her. He was wearing a well-tailored suit that reminded her of one of Larry's business suits, but it was topped with a colorful necklace composed of charms and feathers and what looked like tiny bones. "I would like a cup, please. It's for charity," he added quietly when Gladys glared at him.

The older woman's smile had vanished, her lips pressed tightly together as she ladled out another cup.

"I'm surprised you're not participating, Jeremiah," Gladys snapped as she took his money.

"Now why would I do that? You don't have a bidding paddle."

For a fraction of a second Gladys's face softened, but then she stiffened and looked away as Flora appeared.

"You look lovely, Posy. Doesn't she look lovely, Jeremiah?"

Jeremiah obediently turned and looked at her, then smiled.

"She does indeed. I'm delighted to be surrounded by so many beautiful women."

His gaze returned to Gladys, and color tinted the witch's cheekbones before she gave a disdainful sniff. Jeremiah bowed politely and moved away as Flora sighed.

"I've never known anyone to hold a grudge as long as you can, Gladys."

"He deserves it," Gladys snapped, but Posy saw her gaze following Jeremiah.

"Stubborn old witch," Flora muttered. "I've half a mind to-"

"Don't you dare."

Gladys glared at her friend and their gazes locked, neither one of them prepared to back down. Then Flora gave her a slightly terrifying smile and shrugged.

"Whatever will be will be."

The words sounded ominous to Posy, and Gladys must have agreed because she immediately started to protest.

"I mean it, Flora. Don't you-"

"Have to dash. It's almost time to start."

Flora darted away as Gladys gave a frustrated sigh.

"Sorry about that," Gladys said, her cheeks pink as she avoided Posy's gaze. "Flora can be a handful."

"I've noticed."

They both laughed, and then Gladys urged her to go and find a seat. She started to

slip behind a column but Elara caught sight of her and waved her over. Grondar was seated next to Elara, a forbidding frown on his face. Robin, another newcomer to town, and her mate Eric - the big werewolf sheriff - were with them as well. Robin was practically glowing with happiness, the complete opposite to the haunted woman Posy had originally met.

“I saved you a seat,” Elara said cheerfully, patting the empty seat between her and Robin.

The seat was a little too close to the front of the stage for her liking, but it would be nice to be with people she knew, and she gave Elara a grateful smile as she joined them.

“We’ll get to see all the good stuff from here,” Elara said innocently.

“Good stuff?” Grondar growled. “You promised we were just here to support the shelter.”

“Of course, pookie. You know I only have eyes for you.” Elara fluttered her eyelashes at her mate, then winked at Posy. Grondar sighed and wrapped a massive green arm around her shoulders.

“I love your dress,” Robin said. “Vintage, I assume?”

She fingered the red silk nervously. “Yes. You don’t think it’s too dressy, do you?”

“Not at all. You look beautiful, and a lot of the females here are dressed to kill. You don’t need to be nervous.”

“Is that obvious?” she asked ruefully.

“Town events can be a little overwhelming.” Eric’s badge glinted under the lights as he turned towards her. “I was born here and I still managed to knock over the entire punch bowl at the Harvest Festival. Still haven’t lived that down.”

“I’m not sure that makes me feel any better.”

Robin laughed. “Just don’t knock over the punch bowl or people will start offering you sippy cups whenever you want a drink.”

She laughed as well, her shoulders relaxing. The punch warmed her hands as she settled into the comfortable chatter around her, happy to be included. These people didn’t care about her past failures. They just wanted to include her in their present.

The lights dimmed as Flora sauntered onto the stage. She’d changed into a white tracksuit decorated with tiny red hearts. The motto on the front said “I bet I can make Cupid blush,” and Posy heard Grondar groan.

“She’s going to be outrageous, isn’t she?”

“Is she ever anything else?” Elara asked, patting his leg.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!” Flora beamed at the crowd. “I can’t wait to introduce you to tonight’s bachelors. I guarantee that each of them is tall, handsome, and equipped with a huge...” She paused for dramatic effect, eyes sparkling. “Heart.”

The audience laughed, and Grondar sighed with relief.

“What did you think I was going to say?” Flora asked the crowd, looking the picture of the innocent old lady she most certainly was not. “Now get those bidding paddles ready, ladies. Remember, all proceeds go to the animal shelter, so don’t be stingy with those wallets.”

The first bachelor was an attractive man with long green hair who strolled onto the stage grinning.

“First up is Brannigan. Half-fae, all charm. Ladies, his green thumb isn’t the only magical thing about him.” Flora winked at the audience. “His hobbies include hiking, camping, and music.”

“Any type of music?” someone called out.

“Any type except country,” Flora answered. “He also owns that gorgeous piece of real estate down by the river - perfect for a little late night skinny dipping. What do you think, ladies? Let’s start the bidding!”

Brannigan was quickly claimed by a slender dryad with a seductive smile, and Flora introduced the next bachelor. He was a big, dark-haired male who strode out onto the stage as if he owned the place.

“Moving on to Rex, our local veterinarian. He’s a werewolf who really knows his way around anatomy. He’s looking to sink his teeth into something - or someone - new.”

Flora waggled her eyebrows suggestively and the crowd erupted in cheers and laughter. The bidding was fierce, with a human female finally claiming him. She didn’t seem to mind the smug look on his face as he left the stage.

Four more males followed, all of them playing to the audience, even a human male who responded good-naturedly to Flora’s teasing. Posy wasn’t tempted to bid on anyone, but she laughed along with everyone else at Flora’s outrageous comments. The bachelor auction was turning out to be more entertainment than dating event, which suited her just fine. Then Flora summoned the next bachelor to the stage.

“And now, my personal favorite - more than seven feet of pure muscle, with a heart as big as his biceps. Here’s Varek!”

The crowd went silent as Grondar swore under his breath.

“What the hell is she playing at?”

Her breath caught as the largest orc she’d ever seen stomped onto the stage. All of the other males had dressed up, but Varek was in an old flannel shirt and worn jeans that clung to his massive body. Her eyes were drawn to his broad shoulders, then dropped to the impressive bulge outlined by the faded denim, then back up to his face. His features were more rugged than Grondar’s and his tusks thicker, gleaming under the stage lights, but there was something appealing about that hard face. Brilliant amber eyes flicked briefly over the audience before he fixed his gaze on the back of the room.

The silence broke into a wave of whispers.

“Can’t believe he showed up-”

“Have you heard-”

“Flora’s lost her mind-”

“What’s going on?” she whispered to Robin, and Eric sighed.

“Varek has something of a reputation.”

“An undeserved one,” Grondar muttered.

“I’ve never had any trouble with him,” Eric agreed. “And everyone deserves an

opportunity to leave the past behind them.”

“Ladies, ladies! Where are your manners?” Flora planted her hands on her hips, her eyes sparkling dangerously. “This fine specimen knows his way around the forest better than anyone. He also makes the most exquisite herbal oils and soaps. Just be careful where you rub them.” She winked at the crowd and turned to Varek. “Tell us, sweetie, what are you looking for in a female?”

He frowned down at Flora, his glower only highlighting the harsh planes of his face, and her heart gave a sudden thump. Despite the forbidding scowl, it was a lonely face.

“Someone who won’t be scared of me,” he finally said in a deep, low rumble. His eyes swept the audience again and their gazes locked for a second before he looked away. She felt a tug, low down in her belly, but she wasn’t sure why.

“Let’s start the bidding!” Flora said cheerfully.

A long, awkward silence followed as the single females in the audience gave each other uncertain looks. She couldn’t entirely blame them - he was huge and intimidating, especially with that scowl on his face. The fact that he loomed over Flora by a good two feet didn’t help. Despite that her heart ached for him. He reminded her of a wounded animal, braced for another blow.

Her throat tightened. She knew that feeling, remembered standing in the courthouse while her ex-husband’s new girlfriend flashed her engagement ring. Remembered the pitying looks, the judgment, the way people who’d called themselves friends suddenly had other places to be.

“What the fuck?” Grondar growled. “Elara-”

“I can’t,” her friend whispered. “It wouldn’t be fair. And I don’t even have a paddle.”

I have a paddle.

She bit her lip as the thought occurred to her, not sure she had the courage to bid. But then Varek’s fists clenched, his posture growing even more defensive, and she couldn’t stand it. Most of her money was in the business but she still had some left in her personal checking account.

“Two hundred and thirty-two dollars and eighty-eight cents.”

Her voice rang out with surprising strength, and Flora grinned at her as more whispers erupted from the crowd.

“Going, going, gone! Sold to the pretty newcomer who knows a treasure when she sees it.”

She managed a weak smile in return as she dropped back down in her seat, suddenly very conscious of all the stares and whispers.

Oh lord, what have I done?

CHAPTER FOUR

V arek stared in shock at the woman who'd bid on him. He'd noticed her the first time he scanned the crowd - a pretty little human with a heart-shaped face and curves that made his mouth go dry. But it was her eyes that had really caught his attention, warm and brown and sympathetic in a way that felt like understanding rather than pity.

She gave him a tentative smile, and something in his chest constricted. He managed a short nod in response, then stalked off the stage before Flora could make any more announcements. Unable to remain still, he paced the hallway behind the stage as Flora auctioned off the last three bachelors. He'd been dreading the auction ever since he made the agreement with Flora, and it had started off as badly as he'd anticipated. He'd done his best to remain stoic as the silence lengthened after Flora's call for bids, counting the seconds until she gave up and he could escape.

And then the pretty little female had bid on him. What the hell had she been thinking? Was it some kind of joke? But despite her obvious nerves, her smile seemed genuine, her eyes kind. He ran a hand over his face, his palms rough against his skin.

As soon as the auction was over he'd have to face her. His stomach twisted at the thought.

Unable to resist, he edged closer to the stage, peering out at her from the wings. He couldn't tell exactly how tall she was, but despite her lush curves she looked small. Fragile. So delicate he could probably span her waist with his hands. The thought of touching her sent an unexpected wave of heat rushing through him, but it was quickly

followed by dread.

He scrubbed a hand over his face again. What was he doing? He couldn't be attracted to her. Humans were fragile, breakable things. The last time he'd tried to help one...

The memory of accusations and angry faces flashed through his mind. His fingers dug into his palms until pain cleared his head.

She shifted in her seat, and the stage lights caught a splash of freckles across her nose. Something inside him ached at how soft she looked. How warm.

But that warmth wasn't for him. Couldn't be for him. She'd probably only bid out of pity - the poor, unwanted orc no one else would touch. Or worse, she'd been dared to do it, and soon the whole town would be laughing about it. Laughter might even be worse than fear.

The scent of honeysuckle drifted from the audience, and somehow he knew it was her scent. It wrapped around him, making his tusks throb with the need to mark, to claim. He forced down a growl.

This was exactly why he needed to stay in his cabin, away from temptation. Away from soft, curvy humans with kind eyes who made him forget what he was.

He left the wings and headed for the back exit, his boots thudding against the wooden floor as he lengthened his stride. The sooner he got out of here, the better. He'd fulfilled his obligation to Flora - more than fulfilled it. No one could say he hadn't tried.

A red and white blur stepped into his path.

"And where do you think you're going?" Flora planted her hands on her hips and

glared up at him.

“Home.” He tried to step around her, but she moved with surprising agility for someone her age and he couldn’t bring himself to move her out of the way.

“That sweet girl just bid on you.”

“Out of pity.” The words tasted bitter on his tongue.

“Nonsense. I saw how she looked at you.”

“Like I was going to eat her?”

He gave her a humorless smile, but to his surprise she grinned back and waggled her eyebrows.

“Like she wanted you to.”

The tips of his ears heated at the all too tempting thought. “Flora-”

“Don’t you ‘Flora’ me. You made a deal - participate in the auction. That means following through with the date.”

“The deal was to show up. I showed up.”

“The deal was to participate.” She jabbed a small, bony finger painfully at his chest. “You’re not participating if you run away like a scared rabbit.”

His growl echoed off the walls. “I don’t run.”

“Then prove it.” Her face softened. “Give her a chance, Varek. Give yourself one.”

The scent of honeysuckle drifted down the hallway again, and his fists clenched. The thought of spending time with her, of having those eyes fixed on him, was far too tempting. And he couldn't let himself be tempted.

"I can't-" He swallowed hard. "I won't risk hurting anyone again."

Flora sighed. "The only one you're hurting is yourself."

The click of heels caught his attention as the scent of honeysuckle grew stronger. His pulse began to thunder in his ears as the female who'd won him rounded the corner.

Now that she was standing he could fully appreciate the red silk dress wrapped around those luscious curves, curves his fingers wanted to trace. Dark brown hair fell in soft waves past her shoulders, and her eyes - warm and kind - fixed on his face.

"Hi." She stretched out her hand, pretty red lips curving into a shy, enchanting smile. "I'm Posy."

Posy. The name suited her.

His hand automatically engulfed hers, and the contact jolted through him like lightning. Her skin was impossibly soft, delicate bones shifting under his grip. Heat radiated from that single point of contact, spreading up his arm and settling in his chest.

His muscles ached with the need to pull her closer, to scoop her up and carry her far away. The rational part of his brain warred with instincts he'd thought long buried.

She was so small. So fragile. One wrong move and he could break her without meaning to. But she didn't look afraid, even though her head barely his sternum, and her fingers curled around his. That simple acceptance threatened to undo him

completely.

He forced himself to release her hand before he did something stupid. Like give in to the possessive growl building in his chest.

Instead he bolted, his boots pounding against the floor. He heard Flora calling him as he burst through the back door into the frigid night air. He ran until the lights of the town disappeared, until his legs burned and his chest heaved, then made his way back to his cabin.

The familiar walls closed around him, but they brought no comfort. He paced the worn floorboards. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Her scent clung to his hand and he found himself breathing it in. He scrubbed it angrily against his jeans, but the ghost of her touch remained. Soft. Warm. Trusting.

“Stupid,” he muttered. “What was I thinking?”

He hadn’t been thinking. That was the problem. One look from those warm brown eyes, one brush of her fingers, and years of carefully built walls had started to crack.

The fireplace sat cold and dark and he seized the opportunity to do something useful. He stacked logs with more force than necessary, then struck a match. The flames caught, warming the room, but they did nothing to warm the chill in his heart.

More pacing, his boots leaving marks on the floor.

She’ll hear the stories. Someone will tell her what happened. What they think happened.

Despite Flora’s dismissal, the people of Fairhaven Falls had long memories. They’d

whispered behind his back for years, mothers pulling their children closer when he passed. One small act of kindness from a stranger couldn't erase that.

"It's better this way," he decided, the words tasting like ash. "She deserves better than a monster who hides in the woods."

But his traitorous mind kept circling back to that smile. To the way she'd looked at him without judgement or fear. To the warmth of her small hand in his. To those luscious curves wrapped in red silk.

He groaned and dropped his face into his hands. "Damn you, Flora."

CHAPTER FIVE

Posy shifted from foot to foot on Varek's porch, her heart hammering against her ribs. The worn wooden boards creaked beneath her vintage red boots as she remembered Flora's words from the previous night after Varek had fled.

"Don't take this the wrong way, dear. Varek is one of the finest males I know. But he's stubborn and scared and... well." Flora sighed. "Don't give up on him."

"Why did he run?" she asked, her cheeks still hot from the humiliation of his abrupt exit.

"Life hasn't been kind to him. But he deserves some happiness. You both do."

Flora had given her directions to Varek's cabin, and she'd agreed to think about going to see him, then left through the back door, unable to face her friends. Both Robin and Elara had texted her but she'd simply told them she was fine and she'd talk to them later. She wasn't exactly sure if she'd been afraid they'd try and talk her out of coming or if they'd encourage her instead.

But here she was, standing on Varek's porch. The small log cabin was nestled in a clearing surrounded by towering trees, looking like something out of a fairy tale. She half expected to see a girl in a red cape coming down the path. The cabin suited him - rustic and solid, with herbs drying from the rafters of the covered porch.

She knocked again, harder this time, the sound echoing through the clearing. Maybe he wasn't home. Most people were home on Sundays, but she suspected Varek

wasn't like most people.

Heavy footsteps approached from inside the cabin. The door swung open and her breath caught. Varek filled the doorway, his face grim. His flannel shirt stretched across broad shoulders, the sleeves rolled up to reveal muscled green forearms.

"Hi." Her voice came out smaller than she intended, and she cleared her throat. "I wanted to check on you after last night. You left so quickly."

His tusks caught the morning light as his jaw worked. He gripped the doorway, the wood creaking under his fingers.

"You shouldn't be here." The gruff words contrasted with the way his amber gaze roamed her face.

"Maybe not." She lifted her chin. "But I am."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Why?"

"Well, I did win a date with you at the auction." She did her best to keep her tone light and cheerful. "I thought we could figure out when and where."

His fingers dug into the wooden doorway. "You don't have to do this."

"I know." She tilted her head, studying the way the morning sun illuminated the strong lines of his face. "But I want to."

A low rumble emerged from his chest. "Why?"

Because something about him called to her. Because she suspected he was lonely. Because there was a sadness in his eyes that made her heart ache.

“I’d like to get to know you,” she finally said.

“Why?” He repeated the word like a broken record, still eyeing her suspiciously.

“I told you. I won you.”

“I’ll give you your money back.” He started to reach into his pocket, but she put her hand over his. As soon as they touched an unexpected wave of heat swept over her.

“I don’t want the money. I want the date.”

His shoulders tensed, and she watched the muscle in his jaw work. “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

“I’m asking for coffee. Not your hand in marriage.” The words came out teasing, but her stomach fluttered when his eyes locked onto hers.

The intensity of his gaze reminded her of a cornered animal - not dangerous, but scared. She recognized that look. She’d seen it in her own mirror after Larry announced he was divorcing her.

“The town...”

His voice trailed off. She still didn’t know why he’d apparently earned such a bad reputation, but he didn’t frighten her.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks. Do you always let other people make your choices for you?”

He scowled at her. “No.”

“Then stop using them as an excuse,” she said briskly. “If you really don’t want to have coffee with me, say so. But don’t hide behind what other people might think.”

Color darkened his cheeks, turning his moss-green skin a deeper shade as his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

“I’m not hiding.”

“Aren’t you?” She gestured at the dense woods surrounding the cabin. “When was the last time you actually went into Fairhaven Falls? And last night doesn’t count.”

“I don’t need to go to town,” he said defensively.

She could see the conflict on his face and decided to try a different approach.

“How about this? We don’t have to jump straight to a date. Maybe we could just... talk? Get to know each other a little?”

His broad shoulders relaxed a fraction. “Talk?”

“Yep. No pressure. No expectations.”

She started to sit down on the top step of the porch, but he shook his head. Her heart sank but her disappointment was replaced by shock when he pulled off his flannel shirt and spread it out across the step. Oh my. That was an awful lot of bare green skin. He looked even bigger without the shirt, his chest broad and thick, his arms heavily muscled. She didn’t miss the way his gaze ran over her again, but this time his expression was more assessing than suspicious.

“I don’t want your pretty coat to get dirty. Now sit,” he commanded.

“Bossy, aren’t you?” she teased, but took the offered seat as she tried to pretend that she wasn’t affected by the sight of his naked chest. And that she wasn’t touched by his thoughtfulness.

He lowered himself down beside her, keeping a careful distance between them, and they sat in silence for a long moment. The morning sun filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows across his features. Up close, she noticed the slight chip in one of his tusks, the way his thick dark hair curled over his shoulders. His big body radiated heat even with the careful space between them.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked at last, the low rumble of his deep voice sending a pleasant shiver down her spine.

Her gaze caught on his mouth, on those fascinating tusks. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she wondered what it would feel like to kiss him. Would those tusks scrape against her skin? Would his lips be as soft as they looked?

She dragged her thoughts back from that dangerous path.

“Just talking.”

He studied her face, his expression unreadable, but he didn’t immediately reject her suggestion. The silence stretched between them again, broken only by birdsong and the whisper of wind through the trees.

Her heart thumped against her ribs. Had she said the wrong thing? Should she have suggested something more specific? She forced herself to wait, to not fill the silence with chatter.

“I don’t...” He cleared his throat. “I’m not good at talking.”

“That’s okay.” She pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. “We can start small. Flora mentioned you work with herbs. Do you grow them or gather them?”

“A little of both. Things like wintergreen and juniper grow wild and are easy to find. I cultivate some of the rarer plants, or ones that won’t survive the winter.”

“And you make essential oils with them?”

“I started learning when I was young. My mother taught me.” A shadow crossed his face, and she decided not to ask about his mother.

“What do you use them for?” she asked instead.

“I use some to make a few traditional orc remedies, but mostly I sell them. Online,” he added, answering her unspoken question.

A rustic cabin in the woods seemed an unlikely location for an e-commerce business, and the thought of him packing and shipping the oils made her smile.

“Flora said they’re magical,” she teased gently.

“They are.”

“You can’t tell me you cast spells.”

He shook his head, but his lips curved up for the first time. “No. But there’s magic in the woods, in the plants. If you know how to find it.”

“Could you show me?” She immediately bit her tongue. He’d only agreed to talking, and she suspected she’d already pushed hard enough.

Instead of responding, he rose to his feet and she followed him. She half-expected him to send her packing, but after a long pause he pulled on his shirt, leaving it unbuttoned, and nodded.

“Greenhouse is around back.”

CHAPTER SIX

V arek led the way down the path that curved around his cabin, worn smooth from his frequent trips. Posy followed, her footsteps light and quick compared to his, and he automatically slowed his pace to accommodate her. He'd fenced in the area behind the house in a not entirely successful attempt to keep the deer away from his gardens. Most of them laid fallow under a blanket of snow, only a few hardy varieties still visible, but the greenhouse was a riot of color.

He stopped to unlatch the gate, then waved her through. Her eyes widened as she took in the greenhouse.

"That's amazing. Did you build it?"

He nodded, unexpectedly pleased by her appreciation. He pieced it together over months, carefully assembling the discarded windows he'd collected like pieces of a puzzle until they formed a weatherproof shelter for his plants. Each pane told its own story - the arched window from an abandoned church, square panels from a demolished schoolhouse, even a few broken stained glass windows discarded from Garrick Stonehaven's mansion that he'd meticulously repaired.

The result looked nothing like the sleek greenhouses in his gardening magazines, but it suited the location. It suited him. The fact that she seemed to understand that made something inside him warm.

He held the door for her, ducking his head to follow her into the section he used for his workshop - shelves lined with bottles and a variety of mortar and pestles, along

with more modern equipment.

“Are these all medicinal?” she asked.

“Most of them.” He picked up a small glass bottle filled with amber liquid. “This one’s pine and cedar. Good for muscle aches.”

“May I?”

She held out her hand, and he passed her the bottle, careful not to let their fingers brush. She uncapped it and inhaled, her eyes closing in appreciation.

“That’s wonderful. The scent is so... clean and earthy.” She opened her eyes and smiled at him. “Did you grow the ingredients?”

“I collected those, but yes, I grow most of my plants.”

He opened the door to the larger section of the greenhouse, extending almost thirty feet, and the familiar scent of earth and growing things surrounded them. Even in the depths of winter, life flourished here. Climbing vines wrapped the support beams, their tendrils reaching toward the glass ceiling. Herbs filled every available space - some in neat rows in the wooden planters he’d built, others sprawling wild in terracotta pots.

The mismatched windows filtered the morning light, casting a patchwork of shadows across the plants. Mist drifted above the water barrel in the corner, where he collected rainwater for watering.

Her eyes widened as she looked around his sanctuary.

“Wow, it’s like a jungle in here. Is that a silly thing to say?”

“Not at all. It’s very accurate.” The steamy warmth, the lush vegetation, the smells that were both familiar and exotic.

“It’s certainly warm enough to be a jungle.”

She grinned at him as she slipped off her coat. She wasn’t wearing anything fancy - a pair of faded blue jeans and a soft sweater with a beaded neckline - but they clung to her curves in a way that made his mouth go dry again. In the bright light of the greenhouse he could see the smattering of freckles that spread across her nose and cheeks, and the golden strands amidst the dark waves of hair. His fingers tingled with the urge to reach out and touch her hair, to see if it was as soft as it looked.

She turned and caught him staring at her. Pink colored her cheeks, but she didn’t say anything, just started wandering down one of the narrow paths between the beds. He followed her as she explored, eagerly examining the wide variety of plants.

“These are pretty. What are they?”

She bent over to examine a cluster of pink flowers and her jeans tightened across the generous curve of her ass. He swallowed hard, trying to focus on the flowers instead of his body’s response to the tempting sight.

“Those are wild geraniums. They’re native to the area. Good for stomach aches and migraines. I’ve been working on cultivating a hybrid, though, something that will produce more blooms and grow in a pot.”

He pointed to a pot containing a smaller version of the plants she’d been admiring and she nodded thoughtfully.

“This is a lot more involved than just gathering wild herbs, or even growing them. I don’t know a lot about it, but I do know it takes a lot of skill to hybridize plants.”

The tips of his ears heated at the praise, but she only smiled and moved on. The greenhouse felt smaller with her in it, but not uncomfortably so. Instead her presence added something - a warmth different from the humid air that nourished his plants. He found himself wanting to show her more, to share the knowledge he'd gathered over years of working with these herbs.

“This is forest sage. It only grows in certain spots around here but the oils help with headaches.”

Her small fingers delicately stroked the soft leaves, and he had a momentary vision of those fingers on his skin. His body threatened to respond to that image as well and he quickly moved on, pointing to a cluster of delicate purple flowers. “Lavender. Good for sleep, anxiety.”

She stroked those leaves as well, then brought her fingers to her nose and inhaled.

“Is that where the scent is? It smells so fresh and clean.”

“The scent is in the leaves and the tiny hairs that cover the leaves and the stems, called trichomes.” He ran his own fingers over the leaves, demonstrating, and she nodded. “They contain tiny droplets of the oils.”

“Can I taste it?”

He nodded, watching as she took a small leaf and put it in her mouth. Her eyes closed, and he saw her mouth move as she savored the flavor.

“That’s really good,” she said a moment later. “I can see why people would pay a lot of money for these oils.”

He shrugged. “I don’t charge a lot.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t need a lot.”

“And you only sell them online?”

“Mostly.” He hesitated. “I also sell some to Gladys and Jeremiah, as well as Dr. Jekyll.”

Her eyes widened again.

“Dr. Jekyll? Like Jekyll and Hyde?”

“Not exactly, and his real name is Dr. Jackson. But there are some similarities.” Her mouth opened again and he decided he didn’t want to encourage her curiosity about another male. “I sell to the apothecary shop as well, although I’d prefer you didn’t mention that to anyone.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “I’m not sure everyone in town would appreciate the source. The distillation process varies from plant to plant,” he added, changing the subject. “Some oils come from the flowers, others from roots or leaves. And distillation takes time. I have to be careful with the temperature and the timing.”

“Fascinating,” she murmured as she followed him back into the workshop section of the greenhouse.

“I dry some of the herbs as well.” He pointed to a rack of drying herbs above them, filling the air with their mixed fragrances. He’d built the system himself, ensuring proper airflow to prevent mold. “Different plants need different drying times. Too

fast, they lose potency. Too slow, they spoil.”

“This is really impressive, Varek.” She picked up a bottle of lavender oil and took an appreciative sniff, then gave him a thoughtful look. “Have you ever considered using some of the oils to create scented candles? I think they’d sell really well in my shop.”

His first instinct was to dismiss the idea - it would mean more interaction with the town - but the idea had merit. Candles were a natural extension of his work with oils.

“I don’t know anything about candle making.”

“It’s not hard. I used to make them with my grandmother at Christmas every year. Believe me, if you can cultivate all these plants, you can make candles. I could even help if you wanted me too.”

He liked the idea of working with her a little too much, but the thought of his products sitting in her shop window, drawing attention...

He shook his head. “I don’t think the town would want-”

“I think the town would love them.” She touched his arm, her small hand warm through his flannel shirt. “Your oils already help so many people. Why not let them enjoy them in other ways?”

“I suppose I could do a test batch,” he conceded.

Her smile hit him like summer sunshine.

“We could try different combinations. Lavender for relaxation, citrus for energy...” She gestured at his herb collection. “You have so many options.”

He nodded slowly, already considering the possibilities. And the thought of working with her made his chest tighten in a way that wasn't exactly uncomfortable.

His other local clients - Gladys and the doctors - picked up their orders from a box on his porch. But he could deliver these to her. He could easily imagine dropping off fresh batches of candles and seeing her face light up as she arranged them in her shop window.

"I could deliver them myself." The words slipped out before he could stop them. "To your shop, I mean."

Her eyes widened. "You'd do that?"

The tips of his ears heated. "I'd need to make sure they were displayed properly. They'd be temperature sensitive." A weak excuse, but she didn't call him on it.

He moved to a shelf of dried herbs, brushing his fingers over the leaves to hide his nervousness. The scents helped ground him - rosemary, sage, lavender.

"I could add some of the dried herbs as well, to reinforce the scent."

"And make them prettier." She came over to join him, looking over the dried herbs. "You could do a whole line of relaxation scents, maybe themed to the seasons."

He nodded slowly. "I have some wintergreen and fir needles I could add to a pine-scented candle. And I could make a springtime one with lemon and lilac, maybe a touch of rosemary."

Her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"I love it. We could even do a small launch, a little party for people to check out the

candles.”

“A party?”

“You know. Some snacks, some music, some wine...”

He shook his head, even though under other circumstances, he thought he would enjoy attending such a gathering with her. “I don’t do parties.”

“You don’t have to. This would be a business event. You’d just need to drop off the candles. I can handle everything else.”

He hesitated, not sure how to explain his reluctance, but she didn’t pressure him.

“Where do you find all these plants in the wild?”

“Various places depending on the time of the year. There’s a meadow past the creek that’s full of yarrow and chamomile in spring. The north ridge has wild mint growing between the rocks.” His voice softened as he described each location, all of them special to him. “My favorite spot is this hidden valley where wintergreen grows thick under the pines. The whole place smells like Christmas.”

“That sounds magical.” She gave him a hopeful look. “Will you show me?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Posy's heart pounded as she waited for Varek's response.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," she added when he glanced towards the greenhouse door like he might bolt again.

"When would you want to go?" he asked slowly

"How about now? The weather's perfect for a walk."

"Now?"

"Unless you're busy?"

She held her breath, hoping she hadn't pushed too hard. His massive hands flexed at his sides, but he finally shook his head.

"No, I'm not busy. The wintergreen valley isn't far."

She smiled up at him as she picked up her coat.

"Then lead the way."

Instead of setting out immediately, he took her coat, then held it for her as she slid her arms into the sleeves. The old-fashioned gesture made her smile. She hadn't dated much before her marriage, and her ex-husband had certainly never treated her with

such care. Even her friends teased her about her “grandma” sensibilities, but she’d always felt a connection to the past. A desire to preserve the charm and romance that seemed to have faded from the world.

Varek was a lot like one of her vintage finds, a little damaged on the surface, but solid and dependable underneath. He just needed a little attention to make him shine. She shook her head at the whimsical notion, but she couldn’t help wondering what other surprises he had in store for her.

She followed him back out into the sunny morning, the scent of wood smoke lingering in the air. He led her back around the cabin, then headed deeper into the woods. Tall trees stretched above them, their branches covered in snow like sugar-dusted candy canes. Sunlight dappled the path, turning the snow to glitter. It was as magical as she’d envisioned.

He slowed his long strides to match her pace as they followed a narrow path that wound up the mountainside. The air grew cooler, nipping at her cheeks, but her wool coat kept her warm.

She watched him from the corner of her eye as they walked. He moved with remarkable grace for someone of his size. He looked completely at home here, effortlessly avoiding fallen branches and patches of ice, and his head turned at the slightest sound - a bird’s wing, a branch creaking in the wind.

“Red-tailed hawk,” he murmured as a shadow passed overhead. “They nest in the tall pines near the ridge.”

The path curved around a cluster of frost-covered boulders and she hit a patch of ice. His hand shot out to steady her when she stumbled, and his touch sent warmth spreading through her despite the winter chill.

“Watch your step here.” He pointed to tracks in the snow. “Deer crossed through earlier. They browse on the winterberry bushes.”

He read their surroundings the way another person would have read a book - taking in every detail, understanding all the subtle meanings. He paused to brush snow from a small evergreen plant tucked against a fallen log.

“Partridge berry,” he explained. “The berries last all winter. Good for tea.”

He stroked a gentle finger over the bright red fruit, and a chickadee landed on a branch near his shoulder, tilting its head curiously. He remained perfectly still until it fluttered away, and then his lips curved in a slight smile that softened his stern features.

“The birds know you,” she said.

He shrugged. “They know I won’t harm them. Everything out here has its place, its purpose. Even the thorns and bitter herbs.”

The way he said it made her wonder if he included himself among the things others might consider unwelcome but necessary.

As they climbed higher, he kept spotting things she would have missed. He paused next to what looked like a clump of snow to her to reveal a patch of dark green leaves.

“Wintergreen,” he said. “The leaves keep their scent even now.”

He plucked a leaf and crushed it between his fingers, then held it out to her. The fresh, minty fragrance mingled with his own spicy scent, and her fingertips brushed his as she took the leaf from him. She felt that same pulse of heat, and her gaze flew

to his, wondering if he felt it too, but he only nodded towards a narrow gap between two massive boulders.

“Through here,” he said.

He had to turn sideways to squeeze through the gap. His broad back blocked the sun, casting her into shadow, and she took the opportunity to admire the way his jeans hugged his remarkably fine ass. A girl could definitely get used to a view like that.

When she emerged on the other side, she stopped, her breath catching. The mountainside fell away, revealing a small valley nestled between two ridges. The sun illuminated the snow-capped peaks in the distance, and the whole valley glowed with the golden light. Snow clung to the pines, and beneath them, a carpet of tiny red berries covered the ground.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

She could almost imagine a herd of reindeer bursting from the trees, or elves emerging from the shadows. The air felt charged with magic, as if anything was possible. Maybe the magic was the fact that he’d brought her here.

He’d shared something special, something uniquely his.

She stepped closer, not stopping until their shoulders brushed.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I’ve seen so much of the town, but I never thought to come up here.”

“It’s not the same in summer,” he said gruffly.

“I bet it’s always beautiful.”

He grunted but didn't disagree. The valley was too lovely for him to deny its appeal.

They stood together in silence, watching the sunlight play across the mountains, until she shivered. He glanced down, a frown drawing his heavy brows together.

"Are you cold?"

"Not exactly," she said, which was true. It was more an internal shiver than anything the wool coat couldn't protect her from. "It's just... it's so beautiful, it's overwhelming. Like I can feel how special it is in my heart."

His brow smoothed as he looked back at the valley. "I know what you mean."

"Have you come here often?"

"Once or twice a week in winter, less in the summer."

"Why do you come here?" She'd only been there a few moments, but she could already see it was a place you came back to.

He shrugged, his big shoulders almost touching hers.

"It's peaceful." His gaze scanned the valley. "You can think here."

"What do you think about?" she asked softly.

He looked down at her, amber eyes full of an emotion she couldn't read.

"Mostly the past."

She waited, wondering if he'd say more, but he only turned back to the view. The sun

had moved, casting half the valley into shadow.

“We should start back,” he said finally, and she nodded.

Just after they passed through the boulders, he came to an abrupt stop, then stepped off the path. Kneeling beside a fallen tree, he brushed away ice crystals to reveal a cluster of tiny white flowers.

“Snowdrops,” he said softly. “First blooms of the year.”

He hesitated, then carefully picked one of the delicate flowers. Rising to his full height, he held it out to her, carefully avoiding her gaze. As she took it from him, his rough fingers gently brushed against her palm and a jolt of electricity shot through her.

“Thank you,” she said as she tucked the flower behind her ear, and he finally looked directly at her, his eyes dark and unreadable.

They were so close she could feel the heat radiating from that massive body, and she wanted to lean into him. His gaze dropped to her mouth and for an exhilarating second she thought he was going to kiss her, but then he jerked back.

“We need to go back to the cabin,” he said roughly.

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine. Cabin. Now.”

He turned and strode away, his long legs eating up the distance. She sighed and hurried after him, but the combination of the rough path and her shorter legs conspired to slow her down. When she slipped on an icy patch in her rush, she barely

avoided falling, catching herself against a nearby tree trunk.

“Varek, wait!”

He stopped and turned around, conflict clear on his face. After a moment he came back towards her and bent down.

“Get on,” he ordered.

“Excuse me?”

He gave her an exasperated look.

“Get on my back. I’ll carry you.”

“You want to carry me? You don’t have to do that.”

“I’m tired of going slow,” he grumbled. “Now get on.”

Without waiting for her to respond, he scooped her up and swung her around to his back. She squeaked as the world spun, but then she was against his back, her legs automatically curling around his hips. His scent surrounded her, warm and spicy and tempting, and she couldn’t help noticing how good he felt against her - all those thick muscles flexing as he started down the mountain. He’d somehow managed to arrange her so that her coat protected her from the cold, but she could feel the warmth of his skin through the layers of fabric.

She leaned against his back, letting the steady rhythm of his movement soothe her. His hair tickled her cheek, surprisingly silky beneath her skin, and she resisted the urge to bury her face in his neck. He maneuvered over the rough ground, as easily as if he were walking on flat, open terrain. There were worse ways to travel, she

decided, although she still wasn't sure what had brought about such an abrupt change in his demeanor.

A chickadee called from a nearby branch, and his head jerked towards the sound, his nostrils flaring as he scanned their surroundings. He no longer seemed to be searching for the hidden treasures of the forest - instead it felt like he was looking for an escape route.

It suddenly occurred to her that he probably hadn't shared his forest with anyone in years. Perhaps not even his greenhouse. All of it had been his alone until today. No wonder he looked like a spooked deer. She'd wandered into his private world and he'd actually let her in, even if just for a little while.

When his cabin came into view through the trees, some of the tension left his body. Another private space, and one he hadn't shared with her. He turned around to lower her onto the porch. She reluctantly released him and stepped back, trying to decide what to do. She didn't want to leave, but she was convinced he needed some space.

"I should head back to the shop," she said, drinking in the sight of him one last time. The winter sun caught his eyes, turning amber to molten gold. "Thank you for today. For letting me into your world."

His throat worked as he swallowed, those impressive tusks catching the light. He looked so confused that her heart ached. The urge to touch him, to break through that careful wall he'd built, overwhelmed her good intentions.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she leaned towards him and lightly pressed her lips to his. Her mouth fit perfectly between his tusks. As if we were made for each other.

For one heart-stopping moment, he went completely still. Then his big hands caught

her waist and yanked her up against him so he could kiss her properly, his mouth claiming hers with a hunger that stole her breath. The brush of his tusks against her skin sent pleasant shivers down her spine, and she melted against him.

His arms tightened, pulling her higher so that her feet left the ground and she wrapped her legs around his hips again. This time she was lodged directly over the massive ridge of his erection. Need burned through her veins like wildfire as the kiss turned fierce and desperate, and she kissed him back with equal passion. She wound her fingers in his shirt, wanting to crawl inside the warmth of him and stay there forever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

V arek lost himself in the kiss. Her lips were impossibly soft beneath his, softer than the petals of the flowers in his greenhouse, softer than anything he'd ever felt. The scent of her filled his head - the smell of the winter air mixed with the sweet honeysuckle scent that was all hers. She clung to him, her soft body cradling his aching shaft as his arms tightened around her. Her curves filled his palms, so warm and tempting that he groaned, a deep rumble of need that he felt in every inch of his body.

Heat coursed through his veins. He wanted to carry her inside and never let her go.

The thought snapped him back to reality. He jerked back, his breath ragged, and quickly lowered her to the ground. She stared up at him, her eyes wide and dazed.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have-"

"Don't you dare apologize." Pink stained her cheeks, but her eyes sparkled. She touched her lips, which were slightly swollen from his kiss. "That was... wow."

His chest tightened at her expression. No one had ever looked at him like that before - as if he was something wonderful, not someone to be feared.

"You're not afraid?" The words slipped out before he could stop them.

"Of you?" She shook her head. "The only thing that scares me is how much I want to kiss you again."

The simple honesty in her voice undid him. He took a step back, needing distance before he gave in to temptation. “You should go.”

“All right. But... would you like to come to dinner tomorrow?” Her words tumbled out in a rush. “At my place? After the shop closes?”

His first instinct was to refuse. Being alone with her in an enclosed space was dangerous - not because he’d hurt her, but because he wanted her too much. The kiss had proven that. But the hopeful look in those big brown eyes broke through his defenses.

“What time?” The words came out before he could stop them.

“Seven?” She brightened, practically glowing. “I live above the shop. There’s a side entrance with stairs leading up and blue fairy lights around the door.”

Every rational part of him screamed to take it back, to make an excuse. Instead, he nodded. “I’ll bring wine.”

“Perfect.” She bounced on her toes, and for a moment he thought she might kiss him again. His body tensed in anticipation, but she just gave him a warm smile. “See you tomorrow then.”

He watched her walk away, his fingers curling into fists at his sides. What was he thinking, agreeing to dinner? Being in her apartment, surrounded by her scent, sharing a meal...

But he couldn’t bring himself to regret saying yes. Not when her smile had lit up her whole face like that. The kiss replayed in his mind over and over - the soft press of her lips, how perfectly she fit against him, the little sound she made when his hand tightened on her luscious ass.

Maybe he was being a fool, but he couldn't wait to see her again.

He returned to the cabin and sank onto the couch. The fire had gone out, but he didn't bother to rekindle it. Instead he stared at the cold embers and tried to make sense of the day. Of all the things he expected when he woke up this morning, none of them had included Posy. Or the way she'd made him feel.

Alive.

As if the winter had ended and spring was on the horizon. As if he'd come back from the dead. He shook his head at the fanciful notion, but he couldn't shake the feeling. The way she'd looked at his herbs, at the valley, at his greenhouse. No one had ever seemed so genuinely interested in what he did before. He'd shared more with her in a few hours than he had with anyone else in years. Maybe ever.

She's different.

Not just because of her sunny smile, or the curves that made his body ache, but because she seemed to understand him in a way no one else had. He could almost see her in that wintergreen valley, the snow clinging to her dark hair, the pale sunlight highlighting the golden strands. She belonged there.

With me.

Fuck. What was he thinking? They were from different worlds. The townsfolk seemed to have accepted her easily enough, but she'd given them no reason to fear her. They'd always be wary of him, and he couldn't blame them. And Posy... eventually she'd see it too. She'd realize what everyone else already knew - that he didn't belong among them. The warmth in her eyes would turn cold, and that radiant smile would fade. Better to end it now before she rejected him.

But the thought of disappointing her, of being the one to dim that light in her eyes, caused an unfamiliar ache in his stomach.

Fuck. He was already in too deep and he knew it.

He swore again and decided to spend a few hours in his workshop. Maybe if he focused hard enough on his work, he could forget about soft lips and radiant smiles. He'd almost reached the greenhouse when a shadow passed overhead, followed by a rush of displaced air. Nakor dropped into a smooth landing, folding his golden wings behind him as he strolled casually towards the greenhouse, and Varek swore again.

He wouldn't call Nakor a friend exactly - he didn't have friends - but they got along well enough. The dragon owned most of the mountain bordering Varek's property and he valued his privacy as much as Varek did. Nakor was also arrogant enough not to be afraid of him - with some justification. A dragon was a formidable opponent.

"Your path needs maintenance." Nakor brushed an invisible speck from his expensively tailored sleeve. "I nearly scuffed my shoes."

He crossed his arms and glared at the dragon. "If you're that concerned about your footwear, don't come and visit me."

"Can't a neighbor drop by?" Nakor strolled past him into the workshop. "Though I must admit, I'm intrigued by this latest development. Last I checked, you were determined to live like a hermit."

"Still am." Varek followed him in, watching as the dragon examined the neat rows of bottles on his workbench.

"Clearly. I suppose that's why you agreed to participate in that ridiculous bachelor auction."

Damn. He'd forgotten just how fast news traveled in Fairhaven Falls. He sighed.

"It was Flora's idea."

"Ah." Nakor nodded, examining his manicured nails. "That explains it. Though I hear you actually found someone. A mate, perhaps?"

"She's not my mate." The denial tasted bitter on his tongue as the memory of their kiss replayed in his mind. His body responded with a surge of possessive hunger but he did his best to ignore it.

"No? Finding a mate is a good thing, you know. Even for those of us who think we're better off alone."

"Not for me."

Nakor's nostrils flared, smoke trickling from his nose as his golden eyes gleamed.

"And yet, I can distinctly scent the presence of a human female."

"She just stopped by to... talk."

"Just talk?" Nakor's eyes gleamed.

"Yes." The memory of their kiss flashed through his mind and he turned away, organizing bottles that didn't need organizing. "She'll realize her mistake soon enough."

"Interesting." Nakor's voice held a note of amusement that made Varek want to throw something at him. "You seem quite certain about that."

He gripped the edge of his workbench hard enough that the wood creaked under his fingers. “Because it’s true.”

But even as he said it, his treacherous mind conjured images of Posy in his greenhouse, her eyes bright with interest, her smile warming something inside him he’d thought long frozen.

“Indeed?” Nakor raised an eyebrow before pointing to a row of bottles. “I’ll take your entire stock of lavender oil. My mate likes the scent.”

“Fine.” Anything to change the subject. He started packing up the bottles, but Nakor wasn’t finished.

“You know, isolation is highly overrated. And sometimes the real treasure isn’t what you think it is.”

“You don’t understand. You know what Fairhaven Falls thinks of me.”

Nakor curled his lip. “I know that other people’s opinions are of no consequence. You can’t let small-minded fools dictate your life.”

“They’ll poison her against me.” He could already picture the whispers, the sideways glances when he walked into town with her. The thought of seeing that warmth in her eyes turn cold made his stomach churn. “Or worse, turn against her.”

Nakor sighed.

“It’s been ten years since that incident with the Morgan girl-”

“Don’t,” he growled, but Nakor ignored him.

“You were only trying to help her. Everyone who matters knows that now.” Nakor straightened his perfectly tailored jacket. “The question is, when will you stop punishing yourself and seek your own happiness?”

The dragon set a stack of bills on the workbench, then picked up the box of bottles and left without another word, leaving him alone with thoughts he'd rather not examine. But those thoughts continued to circle like wolves in the dark - what if Nakor was right? What if he could have something more? What if he could be worthy of Posy's bright smiles? If only...

He shook his head. There was no use dwelling on what couldn't be. Better to focus on the work that needed doing. He'd agreed to have dinner with her, and he'd keep his promise, but that was it. It would be foolish to expect anything more. After all, he knew better than to think a happy ending was possible for someone like him. He was a creature of the winter woods, and winter was always waiting around the corner, no matter how warm the sunshine.

CHAPTER NINE

P osy hummed to herself as she worked on the meal she'd rushed up from the shop to prepare. She wasn't a great cook, but she was determined to do this right. She put the chicken in the oven to roast - the recipe she'd found online promised that it would turn out crispy and delicious - and started on the mashed potatoes. They looked a little lumpy but she decided that just made it obvious they were homemade.

Once everything was cooking, she pulled a set of vintage dishes from the cabinet - white with delicate silver and blue snowflakes that danced around the edges. Perfect for a winter evening. The matching plates and bowls had caught her eye at an estate sale last week, and she'd been unable to resist keeping them for herself.

A quick trip to her tiny balcony yielded the potted rosemary plant she'd been nurturing. She snipped a few sprigs and arranged them with the tiny white flower Verek had given her in a cut glass bud vase.

"Perfect."

She smoothed the rose-colored tablecloth, another thrift store treasure, and set out her grandmother's silver candlesticks. The table looked cozy - and romantic. Would that frighten him off? She decided it was too late to worry about it now - a glance at the clock told her it was already six thirty. She'd gotten distracted while making dessert. She'd opted for chocolate chip cookies instead of the complicated layer cake she'd originally planned on. The first batch had burned but the second batch was ready to go into the oven when the chicken came out.

She hurried into her bedroom, sighing at the sight of her flour-dusted hair and the smudge of chocolate on her cheek. Stripping off her food splattered work clothes, she ducked into the bathroom for the fastest shower she'd ever taken, then quickly surveyed her wardrobe. She discarded three dresses before deciding on a vintage-inspired emerald green dress - not too formal but special enough for the occasion. The sweetheart neckline and full skirt always made her feel pretty.

She slipped it on, then added a pair of low heels. Her wavy hair cooperated for once as she styled it into soft curls that framed her face. A touch of mascara, a swipe of rose-colored lipstick, and she was ready just as the antique clock chimed seven.

The chimes were immediately followed by a sharp knock on the door. Her heart fluttered as she smoothed her dress one last time and hurried to the door.

Varek filled the doorway, his shoulders almost touching each side. He'd traded his usual flannel for a black button-down that stretched across his broad chest. The scent of pine and spice drifted from him, making her stomach tighten. His eyes went wide when he saw her, and she could almost feel them traveling over her skin. The tips of his ears flushed as his eyes dipped to the curve of her cleavage, and her nipples tightened under that heated gaze.

He awkwardly thrust a small bouquet of delicate white and purple wildflowers wrapped in brown paper towards her.

"These are-" His nostrils flared and his head snapped up. "Something's burning."

Before she could react, he ducked through the door and charged towards the kitchen. Smoke billowed from the oven, filling the small space with an acrid haze. He pulled the smoking pan of blackened chicken out of the oven and dropped it in the sink before throwing open the window, letting in a blast of cold winter air that cleared away the worst of the haze.

Her eyes stung, though whether from the smoke or mortification, she couldn't tell.

"I don't understand. It was supposed to be crispy, not turn into charcoal."

The first laugh startled her. A deep rumble, like distant thunder. It transformed his face, his eyes crinkling as his mouth curved in a smile that made her heart skip. This was how he should look all the time - happy.

"Did the recipe say something about turning the oven down?" he asked gently, still smiling.

"Oh. I think I forgot that part. But the truth is, I can't cook. At all. My ex used to..." She swallowed hard. "Well, he made it clear how useless I was in the kitchen. I thought maybe I could manage something simple, but clearly I was wrong."

Her voice cracked on the last word, and she blinked rapidly, determined not to cry over burned food and bad memories. His eyes softened as he pulled her close, his strong arms encircling her in a warm embrace.

"Then he was a fool. I can't think of anything better than a home-cooked meal, even if it doesn't turn out well."

"Even if it's completely inedible?"

"Even then. It's the effort that counts."

She gave him a watery smile and he gently brushed a stray curl back from her face. His hand lingered on her cheek and she licked her lips in anticipation of another kiss, but although he followed the movement, he took a step back. She could still feel the warmth of his body, and she had to resist the urge to press herself against him.

“We could... there’s a cafe,” he said gruffly. “At the end of Main Street.”

Her heart skipped. He was willing to go into town, to be seen in public with her? After everything that had happened at the auction, she could guess what the offer must have cost him.

“The River Cafe? Are you sure?”

He couldn’t quite hide the uncertainty in his eyes, but he nodded firmly enough.

“Yeah. I think we need to give your apartment a chance to air out.”

“That would be wonderful.” She smiled up at him, touched by his willingness to step so far outside his comfort zone just to salvage their evening. “But first I have something for you.”

She hurried back to the kitchen, waving away the lingering smoke as she retrieved the candle from the windowsill where it had been cooling. It wasn’t much to look at - just a small glass container filled with wax and a few sprigs of dried herbs - but he looked down at the gift with a strange expression on his face.

“I know it’s not very impressive,” she began, then stopped when he looked back at her.

“You made this for me?”

“Yes. It’s a calming candle. I used lavender and chamomile because they’re soothing.” She gave him a rueful smile. “Of course you already know that. Anyway, the herbs have a nice scent when they burn. I thought maybe you could light it while you worked and it might help relax you a little.”

“It’s wonderful. No one’s ever made something for me before.”

The words were so quiet she wasn’t sure if she’d heard them correctly, but he carefully tucked the candle in his pocket as if it were something precious, and she smiled to herself. Before she could overthink it, she rose on her tiptoes and kissed him. His whole body went as rigid as if he were made of stone.

Heat flooded her cheeks as she pulled back. What was she thinking, ambushing him with another kiss?

“I’ll just... get my coat.”

She spun around and hurried to her bedroom, her heart pounding against her ribs. When she returned clutching a green tweed coat, he didn’t look as if he’d moved, but the bouquet of flowers he’d brought was now neatly arranged in a small vase.

“Thank you for putting those in water.” She hesitated, twisting her coat nervously in her hands. “I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I don’t mean to keep ambushing you with kisses-”

“I wasn’t uncomfortable, little flower.” His deep voice sent another shiver down her spine. “We should go.”

Before she could process what was happening, he’d plucked the coat from her hands and held it open just as he had before. She slipped her arms into the sleeves, overwhelmingly conscious of his massive body behind her. He freed her hair from the collar, his fingers lingering on her neck for a fraction too long.

As he guided her towards the door, he placed a big, warm hand on the small of her back. The casual possessiveness of the gesture made her pulse race. The warmth of his touch radiated through her coat, and she found herself leaning into it just a

fraction. For someone who'd run away from her at the auction, he certainly wasn't acting like he wanted to escape now.

CHAPTER TEN

V arek's heart nearly stopped when Posy's foot slid on a patch of black ice. His arm automatically shot out, catching her before she could fall. The warmth of her body pressed against his side, her small hand clutching his shirt.

"Thank you." Her breath came out in a white puff in the cold night air.

He should step away from her as he'd done when they first emerged onto the street, determined to keep his distance. But the need to protect her overrode his usual caution.

"The sidewalks are treacherous this time of year." He put his arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer to his side. "For safety," he muttered, waiting for her to pull away.

Instead, she curved into him, fitting perfectly against his much larger body. Her face tilted up, brown eyes sparkling in the glow of the street lamps. "My hero."

The teasing note in her voice sparked something warm in his chest. His thumb traced small circles on her shoulder through her coat before he caught himself.

If only he could be her hero. But at least he could play the role tonight. He smiled down at her and tucked her closer against him. The night was cold, the air crisp and clear, but the heat of her body chased away the winter chill. He'd never walked with a female like this, and the rightness of it shook him to the core. As if she were made for him.

Stop .

It couldn't happen. Wouldn't happen. But he'd have tonight to remember. He just prayed it didn't go horribly wrong. He knew visiting the cafe was a risk, but he owed it to her. She'd made him a gift. And tried to make dinner, despite the results.

His chest tightened again at the memory of the candle. He'd noticed the rather ragged herbs in her apartment but assumed they were for cooking. But no - she'd actually made a candle, just for him. No one had ever given him something so personal before. Not since he was a child, long before his father died.

The streets of Fairhaven Falls were quiet tonight, most businesses already closed for the night. A few lights shone in the windows of the surrounding houses, and the street lamps cast a warm glow on the sidewalk. Despite the cold it was a beautiful evening, made even more beautiful by the woman beside him.

A small group of people walked up the sidewalk on the other side of the street, their eyes widening at the sight of him with his arm around Posy. One woman whispered something to her companion and he tensed.

He started to withdraw his arm, but Posy put her hand over his, keeping it in place.

"Thank you for keeping me upright." She pitched her voice so it could carry to the passing group. "These sidewalks are so slippery tonight."

His arm tightened fractionally around her shoulders as they continued toward the lights of the cafe. Her presence made it easier to ignore the curious looks thrown their way. A couple hurried across the street to avoid them. Old Mrs. Garcia gaped from her shop window. The hardware store owner dropped his keys.

His jaw clenched, the urge to retreat back to his cabin growing with each step.

But her warmth against his side anchored him. Her hand still rested on his, keeping his arm in place, as if she sensed his internal struggle.

The bell above the cafe door chimed as they entered, and the buzz of conversation died. Forks clattered against plates. Every head turned toward them. The cafe wasn't as busy as it was during the day but it seemed full of staring faces.

The familiar weight of dozens of stares pressed down on him - some hostile, others merely shocked. He couldn't move. The last time he'd been in here...

His grip on Posy's shoulder loosened. He needed to leave. Get out. Before-

"Table for two?" Rona's cheerful voice cut through the silence. The waitress who'd run the cafe for as long as he could remember appeared in front of them, acting as if nothing was unusual about his presence.

His throat closed up. He couldn't form words. Couldn't move as Rona waited patiently for his response, her smile still firmly in place. Posy came to the rescue.

"Yes, please."

"Great. We've got a cozy booth right here." Rona gestured to an empty spot near the window. "Or there's a table out back on the patio by the fireplace, right next to the river."

He hadn't realized how cold the evening was until they'd walked from Posy's apartment. Even with the outdoor fireplace, she'd freeze out there. He opened his mouth to choose the booth, but Posy beat him to it.

"The patio sounds perfect. I love watching the river at night," she added, smiling up at him.

His protest died on his lips. The patio would mean fewer people, more privacy. And the way she looked at him, like his comfort mattered more than the cold...

“Right this way then.” Rona led them through the cafe.

The weight of the stares lessened with each step toward the back door, and his shoulders slowly lowered from around his ears. The riverside patio was almost empty except for the crackling fireplace and the twinkling strings of lights overhead. The sound of rushing water mixed with the snap of burning wood.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” Rona said after she showed them to the cozy table next to the fire. The wooden benches on either side were topped with deep cushions and there was a blanket at each place.

The door clicked shut behind Rona and they were finally alone. He could breathe again. The river’s constant flow soothed his jangled nerves, and there were no judgmental stares, just Posy’s warm presence across the table, her pretty face glowing in the firelight.

“Why’d you pick outside?” he asked gruffly.

She shrugged, tracing the grain on the worn wooden table.

“It’s such a beautiful night. I can’t believe how many stars you can see, even in town.” She lifted her face to the sky, then met his gaze. “And I noticed how tense you were in there.”

The tips of his ears burned but the heat had nothing to do with the fire. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine, but he didn’t want to talk about it. Unfortunately, she kept going.

“I also noticed that everyone looked at you, just as they did at the auction. Why do they do that?”

“Because they’re afraid of me,” he said bitterly, the truth escaping before he could call it back.

“Why?”

There was no judgement in those big brown eyes, just curiosity and something that looked like concern. It made his chest tight, but he owed her the truth, even if she rejected him afterwards.

“I had a reputation when I was a teenager - not a very good one.” He’d never been as bad as he was painted, but he hadn’t exactly been a saint either. “But then there was a terrible... incident. Ten years ago.”

“What happened?”

The memory of that night still burned in his mind - the screams, the accusations, the way the town had turned on him.

“I tried to help someone. It went wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

“A group of teenagers were harassing a girl, and I stepped in. I wasn’t as mindful of my strength as I should have been.” His fingers curled into fists under the table. “One of the teenagers claimed that I’d hurt him. Badly.”

The fire crackled, sending sparks into the night air. He watched them fade rather than meet her gaze.

“Did you? Hurt him?”

“All I did was pull him away from her, but when he tried to get away from me, he tripped and fell. He landed badly and broke his leg, plus his head was bleeding because he hit it when he fell. When other people showed up, he claimed that I’d beaten him and broken his leg,” The words came out as a growl, and he forced his voice level. “His little gang backed up his story and everyone believed him. It didn’t help that his family had a lot of influence in the town. Easier to blame the angry orc kid with a record of getting in trouble. And of course the story spread, making me more of a monster each time.”

“That’s awful. The girl didn’t even speak up for you?”

“She was too afraid of them to say anything. I can’t blame her for that. She might have changed her mind as she got older, but her family left town not long afterwards.” He shrugged, as if he didn’t care. “Anyway, the kid recovered, but I was permanently branded as the orc who attacked a defenseless teenager. I’ve done my best to avoid causing problems since then, which isn’t too hard when I keep to myself.”

“How old were you?” Her voice was soft, filled with an empathy that made him want to run.

“Seventeen.”

He shifted in his seat as the memories of that time crashed over him like an icy wave - the sneers, the whispers, the way mothers pulled their children close when he passed. The familiar combination of anger and shame filled his chest, but then a small, warm hand squeezed his, jolting him back to the present. When he snuck a quick peek at her, expecting disgust or even fear but instead her expression blazed with righteous anger.

“That’s completely unfair. They just assumed you were guilty without any proof? And they’re still treating you like this years later?”

He blinked, thrown by her reaction. He’d expected her to make excuses to leave, not defend him. “It’s what people do.”

“Well, it’s wrong.” Color flushed her cheeks as she leaned forward. “You were trying to help someone. They should have stood by you, not pushed you away.”

The fierce protectiveness in her voice made his heart stutter. No one except Flora had ever taken his side like this. He stared at their joined hands, at how perfectly her smaller one fit in his.

“You’re not…” He cleared his throat. “You’re not worried about being seen with me now that you know?”

“The only thing I’m worried about is how badly this town treated you.” She gave his hand another squeeze. “And I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

The warmth of her touch spread through his body, melting something that had been frozen for a long time. He wanted to believe her, wanted to trust that she meant what she said. But years of isolation made hope feel dangerous.

Pushing it aside to consider later, he turned the tables.

“Why did you come to Fairhaven Falls?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Posy really didn't want to discuss her past, but Varek had opened up to her. She owed it to him to answer his question.

"I needed a fresh start." She took a deep breath. "My ex-husband was a lawyer. Very successful, very charming. And apparently very good at hiding things."

He made a low growling sound, but gestured for her to go on.

"I found out he'd been having an affair with his paralegal for months. She was pregnant, even though he'd told me he didn't want to have children." She dug her nails into her palms to combat the pain of that memory. "He didn't even try to apologize. He just said that I should understand his position."

Varek's jaw clenched, his tusks gleaming in the firelight.

"The worst part wasn't even the betrayal. It was realizing how blind I'd been. How I'd ignored my own unhappiness because I wanted so badly to believe in our perfect life." She forced her hands to relax. "But you know what? Getting divorced was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"How so?" His voice was rough, but gentle.

"It made me stop trying to be what everyone else wanted. Fortunately, one of his ex-partners agreed to represent me and he did an excellent job on my behalf. I used part of the divorce settlement to buy Second Chance." She shook her head. "I'd always

loved vintage things, the stories behind them. My ex thought it was silly. But here I am, doing what I love.”

“Why Fairhaven Falls specifically?”

“I researched small towns that needed businesses. When I saw the listing for the shop, something just clicked. Plus I liked the fact that there were more Others than humans here. It felt like a place where being different wasn’t just tolerated, but celebrated.”

His expression hardened. “Except when it’s not.”

“Well, those people are wrong.” She reached across the table and touched his hand again. “Everyone deserves a second chance. Even grumpy orcs who make essential oils in the woods.”

The firelight played across his face, softening the hard lines, but he didn’t seem convinced by her words.

“Have you ever thought about leaving?” she asked gently. “Starting fresh somewhere else?”

“No. This is my home.” The words burst from him with surprising force, and his eyes widened, as if the admission had shocked him as much as her.

Her heart ached for him. Despite everything the town had put him through, despite withdrawing to the woods, he still considered this place his home. She recognized that bone-deep connection - it was what she’d been searching for her whole life.

“I mean...” He cleared his throat. “The greenhouse, my cabin... I built everything there myself.”

“Even the cabin? It looks as if it’s been there for years.”

“Even that. My dad spent most of his money acquiring the land so all he could afford was a trailer. I was just a kid - it seemed fine to me - but he kept saying he was going to build us a cabin one day. He died before he could do it.”

“And you carried out his wish.”

He stared at her, those amber eyes filled with an emotion she couldn’t quite read. The fire popped, sending sparks dancing into the night air. Time stretched out between them for an endless moment before she returned to the original topic.

“I suppose I can understand not wanting to leave your friends and family behind. It was easier in my case because most of my friends were the wives of Larry’s business associates and I knew they’d side with him. Plus my mom and dad had already moved to Florida so they weren’t keeping me there either.”

“But I don’t have-” he began.

“Yes, you do.” She cut him off, earning a startled blink. “Flora cares about you so much she practically dragged you out of the woods. Grondar was angry on your behalf at the auction. And even Rona made sure to give us a private spot where you’d be comfortable.”

His jaw worked, those impressive tusks catching the firelight as he stared down at the table.

“People care about you, even if you try to push them away.” She reached across the table, letting her fingers brush his forearm, his skin was warm despite the cold evening. “Maybe they’re just waiting for you to let them show it.”

He looked up at last, his eyes filled with confusion and something that looked like hope before he quickly masked it.

“They shouldn’t,” he muttered, but he didn’t pull away from her touch.

“Why not?” She traced a small pattern on his skin. “Because of what happened years ago? The person you are now grows healing herbs and makes essential oils. That doesn’t sound like someone people shouldn’t care about.”

His expression turned vulnerable for a split second before he covered it with his usual gruff mask. She bit her lip to keep from pressing further. He needed time to think about what she’d said.

The patio door swung open and Rona emerged carrying two steaming plates. Her mouth watered as Rona placed one in front of her - roasted butternut squash ravioli in a brown butter sauce with fresh sage. It was exactly what she’d been craving without even knowing it.

She glanced over at Varek and found him nodding appreciatively at a plate with a thick venison steak, wild mushrooms, and roasted root vegetables.

“We didn’t even look at the menu,” she said, amazed, and Rona winked.

“Don’t need one, sweetie. My gift is knowing what folks want to eat before they do. Though I gotta say, you two made it easy tonight. Clear appetites, clear hearts.”

Rona gave them a knowing look before heading back inside, and Posy knew she was blushing. Doing her best to ignore it, she picked up her fork, hoping the meal tasted as good as it looked. It did, the first bite melting in her mouth. “Oh, this is perfect.”

He relaxed enough to smile at her blissful expression before he cut into his own meal,

the meat perfectly rare.

“She’s always had a knack,” he agreed. “Even when I was younger, although I’m a little surprised she bothered to use it on me. Or that she’s as nice as you pointed out.”

“Why?”

“Remember that wild youth I mentioned? I got into a fight here once and ended up breaking two tables and half a dozen chairs.”

“Here?” She glanced around at the cozy patio, then at the peaceful river, and couldn’t imagine it.

“It was a long time ago. She told me I wasn’t welcome back. I wasn’t surprised, and I never expected to return.”

“I’m sorry.” She couldn’t imagine how much it must have hurt to be turned away by yet another person in the town that was supposed to be your home.

“The ban actually didn’t last that long but then everything else happened.” He shrugged and smiled at her. “Now why don’t we forget about the past and enjoy our meal?”

She laughed and agreed. The food was incredible, and she savored each bite. Varek’s presence across the table felt natural, as if they’d shared meals together before. They talked about some of the hybrid plants he was working on, and then he asked her about her plans for the shop.

She set down her fork and traced the rim of her water glass. “I’ve been thinking about expanding the vintage section of the shop. Maybe adding a lounge area where people could hang out.”

He nodded.

“And maybe host some evening events - craft nights or jewelry making workshops. Something to bring the community together.”

His shoulders immediately tensed

“Not that I’m trying to take over the town or anything,” she added quickly. “I just want to make some friends.” She reached across the table and touched his hand. “Like you.”

His fingers twitched under hers, but he didn’t pull away, and the tension in his shoulders eased slightly.

“Friends? Is that what we are?” His voice was deeper than usual, a husky rumble that sent heat curling through her veins.

Her tongue darted out, moistening her lips, and his gaze focused on the movement. “As long as we’re the kind of friends who can kiss.”

He stared at her, his eyes blazing with heat and hunger, and she suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

The patio door creaked as it opened and they both jumped, startled by the sound. Rona gathered up their empty plates and promised to return. As the waitress left, an icy breeze swept across the patio, and Posy shivered despite her warm coat. She tried to hide it, not wanting to cut their evening short, but he’d caught the slight tremor.

He shifted in his seat, hesitating for a moment before coming to her side of the table, moving as carefully as if he were approaching a wild animal, then settled on the bench next to her. His arm hovered uncertainly behind her shoulders before slowly

coming to rest around her. Heat radiated from his body, chasing away the cold. She smiled and leaned into his solid warmth, breathing in the lingering smell of his herbs mingled with his own spicy scent.

Rona reappeared with two steaming mugs of hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and what looked like homemade marshmallows. She set them down without comment, but Posy caught the hint of approval in her expression before she disappeared back inside.

“This is perfect,” Posy murmured, wrapping her hands around the warm mug. She felt Varek relax slightly, his thumb tracing small circles on her shoulder.

The fire crackled, sending sparks dancing into the night sky. Across the river, lights twinkled in windows, and the moon cast silver ribbons on the water’s surface. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so content.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Posy's sweet scent filled Varek's head as she nestled against him. His heart thundered in his chest as he looked down at her contented face, but for once he didn't feel the urge to run.

"The stars are beautiful tonight," she sighed, pointing up at the clear winter sky.

His gaze followed her gesture, then dropped back to study her profile. The walls he'd built over the years felt paper-thin in her presence. "Not as beautiful as-

He caught himself, ducking his head.

She turned to face him, brown eyes sparkling. "As what?"

The tips of his cheeks burned. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this flustered - or this alive. Words failed him, but she didn't seem to mind his silence. Instead, she reached up and traced one of his tusks with gentle fingers.

"I like how expressive these are. They give away what you're feeling, even when you try to hide it."

His breath caught. No one had ever touched him with such casual affection, such acceptance. The rest of the world fell away - the whispers, the judgment, the years of isolation. There was only Posy, her small form fitting perfectly against his side, her touch melting away decades of hurt.

“I never thought...” He cleared his throat. “This evening has been...”

“Nice?” She supplied with a soft laugh.

“More than nice.” The words came out rough with emotion. For the first time in years, he allowed himself to imagine a different future - one that wasn’t defined by solitude and regret. One that included the vibrant woman beside him, bringing color and warmth to his carefully ordered world.

The door to the cafe opened again and Rona emerged with a metal tray loaded with food. She carried it over to the railing, then gave them a cheerful wave as she hurried back inside. She didn’t seem the least bit surprised to see them snuggling by the fireplace but he had the uneasy feeling that his godmother would soon know all about it - if she didn’t already.

“Why did she-” Posy’s eyes widened to saucers as a long dark tentacle emerged from the river and plucked the tray neatly off the railing, and her grip tightened on his arm. “Was that...?”

“That was Sam.” His lips twitched at her reaction. “He’s a kraken.”

The tentacle emerged again, this time moving more slowly. It waved in their direction before retreating beneath the surface, creating gentle ripples in the moonlit water.

“He’s been here longer than I have,” he said quietly. “He keeps to himself mostly and people tend to forget he’s there until he reaches up to help.” He paused, recognizing a familiar pattern. “I think he gets lonely sometimes, living under the river. But it’s easier than dealing with folks who don’t understand you.”

The words hit too close to home. He hadn’t meant to draw the parallel between himself and the solitary male, but there it was.

Her expression shifted from surprise to understanding, and she squeezed his hand. “Does anyone ever visit him?”

“We talk sometimes. He likes sweets - and beer - both of which are in short supply in the river so I’ll occasionally bring some by.” He shrugged. “I suppose I’ve gotten to know him over the years. We both tend to be up late when the town’s quiet.”

“He can talk?”

“Of course. He just doesn’t choose to very often. He prefers to keep to himself, although he listens a lot.”

She shook her head. “This town never fails to surprise me. In a good way,” she added softly, smiling up at him.

The warmth of her smile and the softness of her body pressed against him were too tempting. His hand drifted to her face, feathering his thumb over her cheek. So soft. So delicate. Her eyes widened, and he hesitated. What if he’d read the signals wrong? What if she didn’t want this - didn’t want him? He’d been alone for so long, In spite of their previous kisses, it was hard to believe someone like her could be interested in someone like him.

But then she made an impatient noise and slid her hand around his neck, tugging his head down. Their lips met, and it felt like coming home. Her mouth was soft, her scent intoxicating. He could taste the chocolate on her tongue and feel her heartbeat racing under his palm. His tusks brushed her cheek as he lifted her onto his lap. He bit back a groan as luscious ass settled directly over his rock hard cock. Her other hand fisted in his shirt, holding on to him.

“Varek...” she whispered, and his name on her lips was more than he could resist. He nipped at her bottom lip, eliciting a gasp from her, and then she was kissing him

again, her tongue tangling with his. When they finally pulled apart, her cheeks were flushed and her pupils dilated with desire, her lips swollen from his kisses.

It would be so easy to lose himself in her. To forget everything except how much he wanted her - needed her. But he couldn't. Not here, in full view of the town. The thought sent a pang of loss through him.

She sighed and snuggled back against his chest, seemingly unaware of his turmoil. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. They sat there in silence for several more minutes, listening to the crackle of the fire and the gentle rush of the river, but the wind started to pick up and she shivered.

"I should probably head back. The shop opens early tomorrow."

His chest tightened. The evening had passed too quickly, but he couldn't keep her out in the cold. He pulled out his wallet and placed cash on the table.

"Oh no, I can't let you-" She reached for her purse.

"Already done." He stood and offered his hand, surprised by how natural the gesture felt. Her small fingers slipped into his, warm despite the chill air.

Rona appeared to collect their payment. "You two have a good night."

Her smile held no judgment, and this time he saw the genuine warmth behind it. It caught him off guard - was Posy right that not everyone in town viewed him negatively?

He was still thinking about it as they emerged on the quiet street. He automatically put his arm around her and she leaned into him.

A tentacle broke the river's surface behind them, waving goodbye. He raised his free hand in response, catching her delighted grin from the corner of his eye, and his lips curved up despite himself. Strange how her presence made everything feel lighter. Instead of heading directly back to her apartment, he guided her towards the stone wall bordering the side of the Town Square that faced the river. The moon painted silver streaks across the dark water below, and somewhere in the distance, a night bird called.

He pointed downstream to where the river curved. "Do you see that island? That's where Sam lives."

She squinted at the dark shape. "Is that a house?"

"Yes. He built it himself." He leaned against the wall, keeping one arm around her.

"But he's alone out there?"

"He likes his privacy." The words felt hollow as soon as they left his mouth. How many times had he used that same excuse?

She turned to face him, her eyes wide and dark in the moonlight. "It must get lonely though. Being so isolated from everyone."

His throat tightened as he recognized the parallel. He looked back over the river, uncomfortable with how easily she saw through his defenses.

"I told you Sam talks to people sometimes," he muttered, but the defense sounded weak even to his own ears.

"But not as often as he could." She placed her hand on his chest as she'd done earlier, the warmth of her touch burning through his shirt. "Not as often as people might like

to see him.”

Before he could respond, he heard footsteps. The familiar stench of expensive cologne hit his nose, followed by Sebastian Blackwood’s nasal drawl.

“Well, if it isn’t the monster of Fairhaven Falls.” Sebastian’s leather shoes clicked against the cobblestones. Two sets of footsteps followed - Marcus and James, no doubt. “And look, he’s found himself a little pet.”

The three came to a halt in front of them. Sebastian was tall and slim, with a permanent sneer on what might have been a handsome face. Like Nakor, Sebastian was expensively dressed, but he didn’t wear the clothes with Nakor’s natural ease.

Posy stiffened against him, her fingers curling into his shirt.

“I didn’t think you had the balls to show your face in town again,” Sebastian sneered, his gaze flicking from Posy to him and back again.

His hands curled into fists, fighting the urge to throw Sebastian over the wall.

“You’d better watch out, sweetheart,” Sebastian drawled. “He’s not as tame as he looks. Ask anyone in town. They’ll tell you he’s nothing but a brutal, violent-”

“We’re leaving.” He tightened his arm around her shoulders and steered her away, his jaw clenched so tight it ached.

Sebastian’s laughter followed them up the street. Shame and anger twisted in his gut and the walk back to her apartment passed in a blur of self-recrimination. All the progress he’d made that evening evaporated.

They reached the stairs leading to her apartment, the warm glow from the windows

above beckoning him, but he knew better now.

“Will you come up for coffee?” she asked quietly. Her fingers brushed his arm, gentle and warm. “We could talk about-”

“No.” The word came out harsher than he meant. He stepped back, breaking contact. “I can’t.”

Her face fell, but he forced himself to look away. This had been a mistake from the start. He’d known better, but he’d let himself hope. Let himself believe he could have something normal, something good.

“Varek, wait-”

He turned and stalked away, his long strides eating up the distance. She called his name again, but he didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop.

The lights of the town fell away behind him as he reached the woods. Darkness wrapped around him like an old friend, familiar and safe, but for the first time in years, it felt suffocating rather than comforting.

He’d been foolish to think he could move past what happened, that the town would ever see him as anything but a monster. Worse, he’d been selfish to drag her into it. She deserved better than to be tainted by her association with him.

The weight of solitude settled over his shoulders like a heavy cloak as he walked deeper into the woods. This was where he belonged. Alone. Away from everyone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Posy yanked the vintage dress off the mannequin with more force than necessary. The fabric caught on one of the arms and she had to stop herself from ripping it free. Three days. Three whole days of silence after what had felt like such a perfect evening - right up until that awful encounter.

She smoothed the dress, guilt prickling at her rough treatment of the delicate garment. It wasn't the dress's fault that Varek had disappeared on her. Or that she kept replaying their dinner in her mind - the way he'd opened up, how his eyes softened when he smiled, the hunger in his kiss.

The bell above the door chimed. Her heart leaped, but it was just Mrs. Henderson coming to browse the costume jewelry display again.

"Morning," she called out, forcing a cheerfulness she didn't feel into her voice as she turned back to the window. She draped a peacock-blue party dress on the mannequin. The sequins caught the morning light, sending tiny rainbows dancing across the floor.

She adjusted the dress, then fiercely stabbed pins into the delicate fabric to hold it in place. She was not going to pine after someone who clearly didn't want to be found. Even if she missed his gruff voice. Even if she caught herself touching her lips, remembering their kisses.

A shadow fell across the window, and her breath caught, but it was just a delivery truck passing by. She slumped against the windows, pressing her forehead to the cool glass. This was ridiculous. She had come to Fairhaven Falls for a fresh start, not to

moon over someone who wasn't willing to take a chance.

She positioned the mannequin in the window, then stepped back to assess the finished display. The peacock dress sparkled between a champagne-colored evening gown and an emerald cocktail number. At least something in her life looked right.

Mrs. Henderson bought two antique brooches and left just as Elara arrived bearing two steaming cups.

"Your window looks amazing." Elara handed her one of the cups. "That blue dress is perfect for catching people's attention."

"Thanks." She forced a smile as she inhaled the rich aroma of the coffee. "I needed this."

"So..." Elara perched on the vintage fainting couch near the window. "How was your date with Varek? Flora mentioned that you two had dinner at the cafe."

Her shoulders slumped. "It was wonderful. Right up until it wasn't."

"What happened?"

"This horrible human male showed up with two of his buddies." Her fingers tightened around the warm cup. "They insulted Varek and he just... shut down. Walked me home and disappeared. That was three days ago."

"Oh honey. I'm so sorry. I heard there'd been some trouble with Sebastian."

"It's just so frustrating. There's something between us, I know there is." She blinked hard. "It felt so right, but it's like that one nasty encounter ruined everything else."

Elara sighed. “Based on what Grondar told me, Varek’s had it rough.”

“I know. He told me some of it.”

“Did he tell you that Sebastian was the one who accused Varek of hurting him?”

She winced and shook her head. No wonder he’d wanted to get away.

“I know it was a terrible thing that happened to him, but past events don’t have to define you forever. I refuse to let my ex-husband’s betrayal make me afraid to try again. And Varek deserves better than hiding in those woods.”

“The thing is...” Elara twisted a strand of curly blonde hair. “Grondar told me about Varek’s past. His father died in an accident at the lumber mill when Varek was fourteen.”

“He told me his father had died.”

“After that his mother just checked out. Buried herself in grief and alcohol. She left Varek to basically raise himself but he never told anyone. Never asked for help.”

She remembered the careful way Varek tended his greenhouse, the gentle way he’d picked that tiny flower for her. How had he learned such tenderness with no one to show him?

“He got in with a rough crowd for a while. Not because he was bad, but because he was frustrated and angry. But when Sebastian accused Varek of hurting him, a lot of people believed him.”

“Varek was trying to help someone,” she snapped.

“Yes, but the town had already decided what kind of person he was. He made it worse by running off to the woods.”

The coffee turned bitter in Posy’s mouth. No wonder Varek had built such thick walls around himself. Everyone who should have protected him had abandoned him.

“Didn’t anyone help him?”

“Flora tried, but she couldn’t get through to him.”

“What about his mother?”

“She died in a car crash the year before. Grondar says Varek blamed himself. Thought if he’d been a better son, he could have saved her.” Elara reached across and squeezed Posy’s hand. “That’s why he keeps everyone at arm’s length. He’s convinced he doesn’t deserve anything good.”

She stared down at her cooling coffee, her heart aching for Varek. Everything made more sense now - his isolation, his reluctance to let anyone close, the way he’d pulled back after Sebastian’s taunts.

“Do you think I can get through to him?” The question slipped out before she could stop it.

“I don’t know,” Elara admitted. “But I think it’s possible. Grondar didn’t trust human women, but I managed to make him see that we weren’t all alike.”

“How?”

Elara gave her a teasing look. “A lot of kissing helped.”

She laughed, but the memory of Varek's kiss flashed through her mind. The taste of his mouth, the feel of his body against hers...

"Patience," Elara said softly. "And don't let him push you away. If he's worth the effort, that is."

"He is."

"The best ones are worth fighting for." Elara squeezed her hand again. "And look how far you've come already. Getting him to the cafe for the first time in ten years? That's huge."

Elara's words eased some of the hurt from the last few days. She wasn't giving up on him yet. But first she had to figure out the best way to reach him.

She was still thinking about it after Elara left, idly sorting through a box of antique campaign buttons. The bell above the door chimed and she looked up as Flora waltzed in, wearing a bright orange tracksuit with "Save a Cowboy. Ride a Centaur." emblazoned across the front in glittering letters.

"Just checking in on my favorite shop owner." Flora said airily. "How are things going?"

"Fine." She busied herself straightening a display of vintage brooches, hoping to avoid the conversation she was sure was coming. "The shop's doing well."

"And how was your dinner with my godson?"

And there it was. She sighed and gave in to the inevitable.

"I suspect you know exactly how it went. Sebastian showed up and Varek..." She

swallowed hard. “He left and I haven’t heard from him since.”

“That boy.” Flora shook her head. “Always running when happiness comes knocking.”

“He’s determined to stay alone in those woods. I understand why, after what he told me and after what Elara told me about his past, but-”

“But you care about him,” Flora said softly. “Despite his best efforts to push you away.”

“Yes.” The admission came out barely above a whisper. “I do.”

“Good.” Flora reached over and patted her cheek. “Because that stubborn boy needs someone who won’t give up on him, even when he’s given up on himself.”

She sighed. “You planned this, didn’t you? The auction, everything?”

“I might have noticed how perfect you two would be together.” Flora’s innocent expression didn’t fool her for a second. “But the connection between you? That’s all your own.”

Flora grinned and headed for the door, then paused to look at the window display.

“You know what this window needs? A few candles to give it that cozy vintage feel.”

Her heart skipped a beat. The candles she’d suggested Varek make - they were the perfect excuse to see him again.

“Thanks, Flora. That’s actually a great idea.”

Flora's eyes twinkled. "Isn't it though?"

After Flora left she paced behind the counter, debating. Would showing up at his cabin seem too pushy? But the candle idea was legitimate business. And she refused to let him keep hiding, convinced he didn't deserve happiness.

She grabbed her coat and flipped the "Back in 30 Minutes" sign on the door. The walk to the cabin took less time than she remembered, and all too soon she reached the solitary clearing. The cabin looked exactly the same - solid and solitary, with smoke curling from the chimney.

She stood there for a long moment, gathering her courage. She hadn't felt this nervous even when confronting her cheating ex. But this mattered more. Varek mattered more.

"You can do this," she whispered to herself. "It's just business." Even though she knew it wasn't.

Taking a deep breath, she marched up to his door. Before she could second-guess herself, she knocked firmly. Her heart pounded anxiously as she waited for him to answer.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

V arek aggressively pruned a wayward branch, his movements sharp with frustration. The peaceful atmosphere of his greenhouse brought him no comfort today. Steam rose from the heated stones he'd placed between the plants, carrying the mingled scents of herbs and flowers, but even that couldn't soothe his troubled thoughts.

His shears snipped with more force than necessary. A leaf fluttered to the ground.

"Stupid," he muttered, and the word echoed in the glass-enclosed space.

Flora had come to visit him earlier but he'd refused to answer the door and eventually she'd given up.

"You're making a mistake, boy," she snapped before she left.

Was he making a mistake? The memory of Posy's smile flashed through his mind. The way she'd fit against him when he'd put his arm around her. How her eyes had sparkled in the firelight...

He dropped his pruning shears with a clatter. This was exactly what he'd been trying not to think about. He picked up his watering can instead, focusing on the routine task of checking soil moisture. But each plant reminded him of her. The tiny white flowers like the ones he'd given her. The lavender she'd suggested would make wonderful candles. The mint that had made her eyes light up when she'd crushed a leaf between her fingers.

A shadow fell across the greenhouse door and he tensed, ready for another confrontation with Flora. But it wasn't Flora's form outlined by the sun. It was Posy. He froze, his watering can dangling from one hand.

She raised her fist and knocked briskly on the greenhouse door.

He moved to the door, his heart hammering. He could pretend he wasn't home, avoid the conversation that would no doubt be awkward and painful. But he found himself reaching for the door handle anyway.

Fuck. She was even more beautiful than he remembered, her cheeks flushed pink from the cold, but his heart ached at the wariness in her eyes.

"I thought you might be here. I came to discuss a business proposition," she said briskly as she entered, but her fingers twisted the strap of her purse. "About the candles. My window display needs something, and I thought-"

"I made some." The words slipped out before he could stop them, and the tips of his ears burned. "Samples. To test."

Her eyes widened. "You did?"

He nodded, not trusting his voice. He'd spent the past two nights experimenting with different combinations, telling himself it was just to keep busy. Not because he'd wanted an excuse to see her again.

"Wait here."

He ducked into his workshop and grabbed the box of candles he'd made. Each one carefully crafted with different scent combinations - lavender and cedar, wild mint and sage, winter pine and citrus.

When he returned, she was examining a hanging basket of trailing vines, sunlight catching the gold in her hair. Now that he knew how soft it felt, he wanted to bury his fingers in it even more.

Instead he set the box on the potting bench. “These are the samples. They’re just rough attempts.”

She peered into the box, her face lighting up.

“They’re beautiful.” She lifted one to her nose and inhaled. “And they smell amazing.”

Despite his determination to maintain his distance, her praise filled him with pride. She picked up another candle, turning it in her hands.

“The containers - are these old jars and tins?”

“Found objects. Things people discarded.” Like him.

“Perfect for a thrift shop. We could price them reasonably. Split the profits.”

Business. Focus on business. He could handle that. Maybe.

“That sounds fair.”

“Great. I’ll take them to the shop now.”

She reached for the box, but his hand shot out, covering hers. Her skin felt like silk beneath his rough palm, and he quickly yanked his hand back. “I’ll carry them.”

“You don’t have to-”

“They’re heavy.” He picked up the box, careful not to crush the delicate glass containers. The thought of going into town made his stomach clench, but he couldn’t let her struggle with the weight.

She bounced on her toes. “Perfect. I can arrange them right away.”

The path into town felt like a gauntlet. His shoulders tensed with each step closer to Main Street, but her presence beside him created a buffer against his rising anxiety. She chattered about possible display arrangements, her enthusiasm infectious.

“The vintage tins will look amazing with my collection of old cameras,” she said. “And those blue glass ones would be perfect near the window to catch the light.”

He glanced down at her animated face. A stray curl had escaped her scarf, dancing in the winter breeze. His fingers twitched with the urge to tuck it back.

“What do you think?” She looked up at him expectantly.

He cleared his throat. “You’d know better than me.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. These are your creations.” She gestured at the box. “You should have a say in how they’re displayed.”

The warmth in her voice made his chest tight. No one had valued his opinion in... he couldn’t remember how long.

He carried the box into the shop and carefully set it on the counter. The shop’s warmth wrapped around him, a delightful combination of vivid colors and faded fabrics, objects ranging from precious to merely charming. Her sweet scent filled the place, just as it had filled her apartment before their disastrous date.

He quickly tried to redirect his thoughts, watching her sort through the candles. Her fingers traced the glass, leaving trails of heat in his chest as he imagined her touching him the same way. She arranged the candles around the shop, looking at him for approval with each display.

When she was done, she turned to him. The question burned in his throat.

“Was this-” His voice came out rough. He cleared it and tried again. “Was this the only reason you came to see me?”

She stilled, one hand resting on the counter. Her pulse fluttered at her throat as she turned to face him.

“No.” The word fell soft between them and he closed the distance between them.

His hand found her waist, drawing her closer. She tipped her face up, eyes dark and wanting. The last thread of his resistance snapped.

He bent down and captured her mouth with his. Her lips parted on a sigh, fingers curling into his shirt. The kiss deepened, desperate and hungry. She tasted like coffee and possibility.

His other hand tangled in her hair, cradling the back of her head. She pressed closer, fitting perfectly against him. A growl rumbled in his chest as she nipped lightly at his lower lip. The teasing gesture fanned the flames building inside him and his hand slid up from her waist to cup a perfect breast. Her taut nipple stabbed his palm as she gasped into his mouth. The kiss deepened, claiming, demanding. He needed her like air.

The shop bell chimed, and he instantly released her, his heart hammering. A customer stood frozen in the doorway - Mrs. Chen from the herb shop. Her eyes darted

between them before she backed out, the bell chiming again as the door closed.

The warm bubble that had enveloped him burst, reality crashing back. What had he been thinking? The whole town would know by nightfall.

“I should go.” He took a step back, but she caught his wrist.

“Wait-” Her lips were still flushed from their kiss, hair mussed where his fingers had tangled in it. “Please don’t run away again.”

The scent of her skin pulled at him. His thumb brushed her cheek before he could stop himself. She leaned into his touch, eyes fluttering closed.

“You don’t understand what you’re getting into.” His voice came out rough. “The things people will say-”

“I don’t care what they say.” She moved closer, and his resolve wavered. “I... care about you.”

Fuck. When was the last time anyone had said that to him? His arms wrapped around her of their own accord, drawing her against his chest. She fit there like she belonged.

But then the memory of Sebastian’s sneering face flashed through his mind. The whispers would start. The stares. The judgment. They’d make her an outcast too.

He couldn’t do that to her. She deserved better than a life in the shadows with him.

He forced himself to release her.

“This was a mistake.” The words tasted like ashes. “I can’t-”

He backed toward the door, desperate to escape before he changed his mind. The warmth of her kiss still lingered on his lips, making it hard to think straight.

She planted her hands on her hips, brown eyes flashing. “No. You don’t get to do this again.”

His hand froze on the doorknob. The determination in her voice caught him off guard.

“You can’t kiss me like that and then run away. Either you want this or you don’t.” She took a step closer. “But you need to make up your mind, Varek. Because I’m not going to keep chasing after you every time you get scared.”

The word “scared” hit a nerve, and he tensed. “I’m not-”

“Yes, you are.” She crossed her arms. “And I get it. But I’m standing right here telling you I want to be with you, and you keep finding excuses to push me away.”

His chest tightened. The truth in her words stripped away his defenses, leaving him raw and exposed. She saw right through him, through all the walls he’d built.

“Mrs. Chen will tell everyone,” he muttered, grasping at straws.

“So let her.” Her expression softened. “I told you before - I don’t care what anyone else thinks.”

The certainty in her voice made something crack inside him. How could she be so sure when he was drowning in doubt?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Posy rearranged the display of Varek's candles for the third time that morning. The scents of lavender and pine drifted up, reminding her of his greenhouse. Was he there now, hiding away from the world? Or was he thinking about what she'd said? She'd meant what she told him about making up his mind if he wanted to be with her or not, but perhaps it wasn't fair to expect him to overcome ten years of isolation so quickly.

The bell above the door chimed and she forced herself to focus on her customer. But as she wrapped vintage scarves and helped someone find the perfect second hand coffee table, her mind kept drifting back to the hunger in those amber eyes and the gentleness in those big hands.

"These smell amazing." A customer held up one of the candles. "Where did you get them?"

"They're made locally, actually." Her chest tightened. "By someone who grows his own herbs."

The woman bought three, and she wrapped them carefully, wondering if she should tell Varek how well they were selling. But he'd made it clear he wanted space, even if his kisses told a different story.

She glanced at her phone. No messages. Not that she expected any - he seemed like the type who'd rather trek through thorny bushes than send a text. Still, she kept hoping he'd decide to let her in.

She was rushed off her feet all morning and it wasn't until after lunch that she had a moment to think. Sun slanted through her windows, catching the crystal wind chimes and sending rainbow patterns dancing across the floor. A pair of vintage brass candlesticks caught her eye, and she picked one up, studying its graceful curves.

Maybe she should suggest that he make tapers as well. And maybe she was being too hasty in giving up. After all, she'd come to Fairhaven Falls for a second chance herself.

She set down the candlestick as the shop door opened, letting in a blast of cold air. A woman slipped inside, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Her coat was a lightweight denim jacket that belonged in spring, not the depths of winter. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, and her cheekbones stood sharp against pale skin. She would have been very pretty if she didn't look so haunted.

The woman's gaze swept the shop before landing on a rack of vintage dresses. Her fingers brushed over a 1950s cocktail dress in emerald silk.

"That's a beautiful piece," she said as she joined her. "Original buttons too."

"The construction is amazing." The woman lifted the sleeve, examining the French seams. "Look at this hand-stitched hem. You don't see this kind of quality anymore."

"You know your fashion."

"I used to work in costume design." The woman moved to a display of wool coats, her hands lingering on a camel hair beauty from the 1960s. "This is mohair blend, isn't it? The nap is perfect."

She nodded, impressed. Most customers couldn't tell the difference between wool and synthetic, let alone identify specific fibers. The woman's knowledge contrasted

sharply with her worn jeans and thin jacket. She kept one arm crossed over her middle, as if holding herself together.

“Would you like to try anything on?” Posy gestured to the fitting room. “That green dress would look lovely with your coloring.”

The woman shook her head, quickly stepping back from the clothes.

“I-I’m just looking.” Her voice wavered slightly. “Everything’s gorgeous though. You have amazing taste.”

She watched as the woman moved to a basket of scarves, her fingers tracing the edge of a silk scarf, precise and gentle despite her trembling hands. There was something about the woman’s demeanor that tugged at her heart - a familiar mix of hope and desperation she recognized from her own days after the divorce.

The woman cleared her throat.

“I don’t suppose you’re... looking for help?” Her voice dropped to barely above a whisper. “I know I don’t have retail experience, but I learn fast and-”

“Actually, I could use someone.” The words came out before she had fully processed them, but they felt right. The shop had been getting busier, and she’d been thinking about hiring help. “Especially someone who knows vintage clothing.”

“Really?” The woman’s eyes widened hopefully.

“We could start with a two-week trial period.” She moved behind the counter and pulled out one of the application forms she’d printed out. “See if it’s a good fit for both of us.”

The transformation in the woman's face was immediate - like sunshine breaking through storm clouds. Her smile lit up her whole face, erasing the shadows of exhaustion.

"I'm Nina." She stepped forward, extending her hand. "And I promise you won't regret this."

"When would you like to start?"

"Would today be too soon?"

"Not at all." She handed Nina the application. "You can fill this out after I show you around."

Nina clutched the paper to her chest like a lifeline. "Yes, please."

Posy walked her through the shop's layout - the vintage clothing section organized by decade and the racks of less valuable clothing, the corner with antique furniture and the section with old books and magazines. Nina listened intently, asking intelligent questions and nodding thoughtfully as she explained the pricing system.

After the tour, Nina perched on a stool at the counter and filled out her application, hesitating at each question. When she was finished, Posy took the completed application and scanned it. The answers were minimal at best.

"It says here that you're new to Fairhaven Falls," she said, trying to sound casual. "Where did you move from?"

"Atlanta." Nina's smile faltered. "It's a long story."

"Those are usually the most interesting." She kept her gaze on the application, not

wanting to spook Nina by staring at her. “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine, of course. But if you ever need someone to listen...”

Nina chewed her lip, then gave her a weak smile. “It’s kind of a lot. Maybe another time? I’d rather focus on the future.”

“A second chance,” she said softly, then reached across the counter and squeezed Nina’s hand. “Well, I’m glad you ended up here. It’s a good place to start over.”

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Nina proved to be a natural. Her knowledge of fashion history helped three different customers find exactly what they were looking for. She handled the register like she’d been doing it for years, and even reorganized a rack of 1950s dresses by color and style.

But there was something in the way Nina flinched when the door chimed. How her shoulders tensed whenever someone walked too close. The way her eyes darted to the exits. Why was she so wary?

Nina also quickly deflected any personal questions. When a customer asked where she was from, she smoothly redirected the conversation to the beaded purse the woman was holding.

The sun was setting when Nina finished reorganizing the jewelry case. Her hands were steady but dark circles rimmed her eyes.

“You’ve done amazing work today.” She counted out a week’s worth of wages from the register. “Here - consider it an advance. You’ve more than proven yourself.”

Nina stared at the money. “I can’t-”

“You can and you will.” She locked the register with a decisive click

Nina reached for the money with trembling hands. “Thank you. What time should I come in tomorrow?”

“Eight thirty.” She hesitated, then added, “And we’ll have breakfast. I always pick up extra pastries from the bakery across the street.

A flash of relief crossed Nina’s face before she schooled her features back to neutral. “That’s very kind of you.”

She hesitated, then asked gently, “Do you have a place to stay?”

She didn’t want to embarrass the other woman but she hadn’t recognized the address on the application. Nina flashed her a quick smile. The smile transformed her features, revealing the beauty beneath the exhaustion and wariness.

“I’m staying with a... friend,” she said quickly. “I’ll be fine.”

She wanted to press for more details but decided against it. Whatever Nina was hiding, it was clearly painful. She couldn’t force her to share her story, even if she wanted to protect her.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

After Nina left, she climbed the narrow stairs to her apartment but tonight her cozy home felt silent and empty. She lit some candles and turned on her favorite playlist, but nothing dispelled the hollow feeling that had settled in her chest.

She wandered into the kitchen, touching the scorched spot on the door of the stove from her failed dinner with Varek. The bouquet of wildflowers he’d brought sat in a mason jar on her counter, dried but still fragrant.

Her vintage dishes were stacked neatly in the cupboard, unused since that night. She'd planned to cook for him again, maybe actually succeed this time. Now it didn't seem like she'd ever get a chance.

She sighed and collapsed onto her couch, hugging a throw pillow to her chest. The apartment felt too empty tonight. Even the sounds of Main Street below seemed muffled and far away. Varek's presence had filled the room, made it feel warmer, more alive.

She pulled out her phone, finger hovering over his number. Flora had programmed it in "just in case" although she'd warned her that he usually kept it off. And even if he answered, what would she say?

I miss you.

That was the truth. She missed him. Not just the fire in his kisses, but the attentive way he listened to her, the careful way he tended his plants, the gruff exterior that hid a kind heart.

But he'd pushed her away. Again. She'd told him to make up his mind if he wanted to be with her, and apparently he'd made his choice.

A tear slid down her cheek and she wiped it away angrily. She'd fought hard to build a new life for herself in Fairhaven Falls and she wouldn't let him take that from her. She tossed her phone onto the table.

A knock echoed through the apartment.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she told herself sternly that it was probably Nina returning for something she'd forgotten.

But when she opened the door, Varek was standing awkwardly outside.

“I-” He looked down at his hands. “Flora said I was being an idiot.”

“Was she right?”

“She usually is.”

“Then I suppose you’d better come in.” She reached for his hand, his skin warm despite the winter chill clinging to him. “Come inside.”

He hesitated, his fingers tightening around hers. “People will talk.”

“Let them.” She tugged him forward. “I don’t care what they say.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

V arek's heart hammered against his ribs as Posy's smile lit up her face. Fuck, she was beautiful. Pink silk edged with lace clung delightfully to her curves. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair and tug her against his chest. To kiss every delicious inch of her soft skin. To never let her go.

Instead his fingers tightened around the cardboard box of candles, the scent of lavender and pine wafting up from inside, and he thrust the package towards her.

Her smile dimmed, a flicker of disappointment crossing her features, and the sight twisted something deep in his chest.

"I..." The words caught in his throat. He cleared it, shifted his weight. "That's not why I came."

Her eyebrows lifted, hope rekindling in those warm brown eyes.

The box trembled in his grip. "Flora said I was being an idiot."

"Was she right?"

"She usually is. I-I wanted to see you." The admission came out rough, scraping past years of carefully constructed barriers. "I can't stop thinking about you."

She reached for the box, her small fingers brushing his as she took it. The contact sent sparks racing up his arm, and he had to clench his fists to keep from reaching for her.

“The candles are just an excuse?” A teasing note crept into her voice, but her eyes were soft and warm.

“Yes.” He dragged in a breath heavy with her honeysuckle scent. “I know I’ve been...” He gestured vaguely, unable to find the right words.

“Confusing? Distant? Running hot and cold?” She set the box on the table next to the door and took a step closer to him.

His mouth went dry. “All of that.”

“And now?” Another step brought her close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from her body.

“Now I’m here.” He unclenched his fists, letting his guard drop just a fraction. “If you’ll still have me.”

The radiant smile returned, warming something deep in his chest. She stepped back from the doorway, gesturing for him to enter.

“Come in. Please.”

He hesitated, forcing himself to warn her one last time. “People will talk.”

“Let them.” She took his hand and tugged him inside. “I don’t care what they say.”

His feet felt like lead as he crossed the threshold. He’d forgotten how welcoming her apartment felt. The vintage furniture she’d chosen gave the space a cozy, lived-in feel that made his own cabin seem stark and empty in comparison.

He stood in the middle of the room, unsure what to do next. Her small hand was still

clasped in his, but the silence stretched between them, broken only by the tick of an old clock on the wall.

“Are you hungry?” she asked finally, breaking the silence. “I could make us something.” She hesitated, her cheeks turning that pretty pink again. “Well, try to make something. Though after what happened last time, maybe we should just order in?”

The memory of smoke and flames made his lips twitch. “You don’t have to-”

“I want to.” She took a step toward the kitchen, then stopped. “Though fair warning - my cooking skills haven’t improved in the last few days.”

The self-deprecating tone in her voice eased some of the tension in his shoulders. He found himself following her into the kitchen, drawn by her warmth like a moth to flame.

“I could cook.” The words slipped out before he could stop them. Her eyes widened, and he fought the urge to take them back. “If you want.”

“You cook?” she asked eagerly.

He shrugged. “I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time.”

She bounced on her toes. “I’d love that. Though I’m not sure what I have...” She opened her refrigerator, peering inside. “There’s eggs, some vegetables, cheese...”

The sight of her bent over, pink silk stretched tight across that delicious ass, made his mouth water. He wanted to strip her bare, to bury his face between her thighs and feast. His body responded to the thought, his cock pressing painfully against his jeans. He forced his gaze away, focusing on the ingredients she’d listed.

“Omelets,” he said roughly.

She straightened and looked up at him. Her cheeks turned pink again and he wondered if she knew what he’d been thinking. Her nipples stiffened beneath the pink silk, impossibly tempting, but he cleared his throat and tried again.

“We can make omelets. With vegetables and cheese.”

“That sounds wonderful,” she said breathlessly, as she moved aside to let him pull things out of the fridge.

As he started preparing vegetables, she hopped up on the other counter watching him curiously.

“How did you learn to cook?”

“I told you that my dad died.” His knife paused over a red pepper. “Mom... she couldn’t handle it. She started drinking.”

She didn’t say anything, but he felt her presence, warm and steady, and the silence encouraged him to continue.

“I got pretty good at covering for her.” He resumed chopping, the rhythmic sound filling the kitchen. “I made excuses when she missed work. Cleaned up empty bottles. I learned to cook because she needed to eat.”

The vegetables sizzled as he added them to the pan.

“She hid it pretty well from everyone else. But inside...” He cracked eggs into a bowl, whisking them with more force than necessary. “Inside she was falling apart.”

His hands stilled over the bowl. “She died in a car crash when I was seventeen. A single vehicle, late at night. I’ve always wondered if she did it on purpose.”

He poured the eggs into the pan, watching them start to set. “I never told anyone that before.”

The confession hung in the air between them, heavier than he’d expected. He’d carried those thoughts alone for so long, they felt strange spoken aloud.

“I’m so sorry,” she said softly.

“It was a long time ago.”

“That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

He tried to focus on the task rather than her closeness but her scent made his head spin.

His grip tightened on the wooden spoon. “Been thinking about you.”

The confession slipped out before he could stop it and the tips of his ear burned.

“I’ve been thinking about you too.”

He turned to look at her. The kitchen lights caught the gold in her hair and the warmth in her eyes. He put down the spatula and crossed over to her. Her knees parted automatically to make room for him, and she looked up at him, her pretty lips parted.

“I’ve been thinking about us,” he said roughly and her breath caught.

“Us,” she repeated, as if testing the word. “I like the sound of that.”

“Me too.” He bent his head, brushing his lips across hers, tasting the sweetness of her mouth. She arched up, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer. Her soft breasts pressed against his chest, making his cock throb.

He deepened the kiss, tracing her lower lip with his tongue until she parted her lips and let him in. Her tongue met his, teasing and exploring. Heat flooded him as she moaned, pressing herself against him, and his hands slid down to cup her perfect ass and hold her there. He could stay here all day, all week, exploring her mouth and her body, drinking in her scent and the taste of her. Nothing existed beyond this moment, beyond her.

Smoke tickled his nose, and he broke away with a curse, lunging for the stove. The omelet had gone from golden brown to charred black.

“Fuck. Not again.”

He switched off the burner, moving the smoking pan to a cool element, and heard a muffled sound. He turned to find her with her hand over her mouth, her eyes bright and her shoulders shaking with laughter. A reluctant grin tugged at his lips.

She lowered her hand, eyes sparkling. “We really suck at this whole cooking dinner thing, huh?”

“I had other things on my mind.”

“Like what?” she asked, her voice husky.

“Like this.”

He moved back between her thighs, sliding his thumb across her lower lip. Her lips parted, her pink tongue darting out to taste his skin. He groaned, capturing her mouth with his. She kissed him back eagerly, fingers tangling in his hair. Her tongue stroked his, teasing and coaxing.

He slid his hand down her back, tracing the curve of her spine. Her skin was silky soft under her pajamas, and he wanted to feel more. He tugged her top up, revealing her luscious breasts, her nipples already flushed dark pink.

“You’re not wearing a bra,” he blurted out.

“Are you objecting?”

“Fuck no,” he growled, bending to take one nipple in his mouth. She gasped, hips bucking, and the movement pressed her core against his throbbing cock.

He licked and sucked, teasing the stiff little peak while she writhed in his arms. His other hand cupped her neglected breast, thumb circling the nipple, and she moaned, fingers digging into his scalp, urging him on.

He released her breast and turned his attention to the other nipple. This time, he scraped his teeth across the sensitive flesh, and she cried out, her back arching. He switched back and forth, lavishing attention on each nipple until she was panting, her body trembling in his embrace.

He lifted his head, admiring her flushed skin and dazed expression. She blinked up at him, lips swollen and red, and the sight made him want to roar in triumph.

“More,” she whispered.

His cock pulsed, but he ignored the ache. “Not until you’re ready.”

She reached for his belt. "I'm definitely ready."

He caught her hand, lifting it to his mouth and kissing her fingers. "Let me take care of you."

She shivered at the promise in his words and he nudged the edge of her pajama pants. "Can I take these off?"

"Yes," she breathed, lifting her hips.

He tugged them down slowly, revealing her creamy skin. The scent of her arousal hit him and his cock strained against his jeans. He ignored it, focusing on the sight of her spread open before him like a feast. Her pretty little cunt glistened with moisture. Fuck, he wanted to taste her.

He kneeled in front of her, spreading her open with his thumbs. The sight of her slick, swollen flesh made him groan, the scent of her arousal making his head spin. He wanted to devour her, to make her come apart beneath him, but he forced himself to start slow, trailing kisses up her inner thigh.

She whined in protest, wiggling closer, and he circled her clit with his tongue, teasing the sensitive flesh, before dragging his tongue through her wetness. Her hips bucked, and he wrapped his arms around her thighs to hold her still. He started slowly, licking and sucking until she was panting, her head thrown back in ecstasy.

He traced her entrance with his tongue, circling but not entering, and she gasped, hips straining towards him. He kept up the slow pace, exploring every inch of her, tasting her sweetness, until he felt her thighs start to tremble.

He pulled away, and she made a small noise of protest.

“Varek, please-”

He slid two fingers inside her, curling them to stroke her inner walls, and she moaned. He bent his head to flick her clit with his tongue. Her tight little cunt gripped his fingers, pulsing as he sucked her clit into his mouth. He thrust his fingers deeper, finding a rhythm that had her hips rocking, chasing her pleasure, and he growled against her flesh.

Her thighs tightened around his shoulders, and he felt her body tensing, preparing for release. He picked up the pace, driving her closer to the edge until she cried out, her body shuddering as she came hard, flooding his mouth with her sweet juices. He licked and sucked every drop, drawing out her pleasure until she collapsed against him, boneless and sated.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Posy floated in a pleasant daze as Varek carried her into the living room and sat down, cradling her in his lap. She'd never come that hard in her entire life. He held her as if she were delicate, precious, and his spicy scent enveloped her as his mouth claimed hers again. Her skin tingled as he slid his hand down her side.

His tusks grazed her neck, sending shivers down her spine. She tangled her fingers in his dark hair, loving how the strands felt like silk against her skin.

But a whisper of doubt crept in. The memory of him walking away, of days of silence, of the walls he kept trying to put between them...

She pulled back, pressing her hands against his chest. "Wait."

He froze. His eyes searched her face, confusion and concern replacing the heat that had been there moments before.

"I need to know. Are..." Her voice cracked. "Are you going to push me away again tomorrow?"

His arms tightened around her. "Posy-"

"No, listen." She traced her fingers along the strong line of his jaw. "I want this. I want you. But I've already had one man decide I wasn't worth staying for. I need to know you won't do the same thing."

Pain flashed across his features. He pressed his forehead against hers, his breath warm against her lips.

“I won’t walk away. Not again.” His voice dropped to a rumble. “These past days without you... I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Wanting you.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.” He brushed his lips against hers. “No more running.”

The last of her hesitation melted away. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss. He kissed her as passionately as before, but this time he pulled away before things escalated..

“What is it?” she asked softly.

“I meant what I said about not walking away, but it goes both ways.” He swallowed hard. “This... being with someone... I’ve never...”

The vulnerability in his expression made her chest ache. She covered his hand with hers. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t want to mess this up.” His thumb brushed across her lower lip. “For either of us.”

“Then let’s take it slow.” She pressed a soft kiss to his palm. “We don’t have to figure everything out tonight.”

The tension in his shoulders eased. “You’d be willing to do that?”

“Of course. We can just spend time together. No pressure, remember?” She wiggled a

little, feeling his erection flex beneath her. “But I feel as if I’m leaving you hanging, so to speak.”

His lips curved into that rare smile. “Trust me, I enjoyed myself. But you’re right. We should wait. Although I’m going to find it hard to keep my hands off you. Especially if you’re naked.”

Heat flooded her cheeks but she smiled at him. “Then I guess I’d better get dressed.”

“Unfortunately.”

His eyes swept down over her body appreciatively as she stood, enjoying the way his gaze lingered on her as she walked into the kitchen. A wicked impulse struck her, and she slowly bent to pick up her pajama pants, giving him an eyeful of her naked backside. The rough growl that escaped his throat made heat pool in her stomach.

“Teasing minx,” he muttered.

She grinned, unrepentant. “Just giving you something to remember me by.”

He snorted. “As if I could forget. Now put on some clothes before I change my mind.”

She pulled her pajamas back on, then grabbed one of her oversized vintage sweaters. When she came back, his eyes traced the soft curves of the fabric.

“You look beautiful.”

“I look cozy,” she corrected, but he only shook his head.

They ordered Chinese and settled back on the couch to watch a movie.

“What do you want to watch?” She picked up the remote, trying to focus on the screen instead of the heat radiating from his body.

“You choose.” His deep voice rumbled through her.

She selected a classic romantic comedy, though she couldn’t concentrate on the plot. Every shift of his body, every brush of his arm against hers sent sparks through her system.

Halfway through their meal, his fingers grazed hers as he reached for his drink. The touch jolted through her and she turned to find him watching her, his amber eyes dark with desire.

“This isn’t working, is it?” His voice was rough.

She shook her head. “Not really.”

His hand cupped her face and she leaned into his touch. Their lips met in a heated kiss that made her forget about food, movies, and everything else except the feel of him.

His fingers tangled in her hair as he deepened the kiss. She pressed closer, lost in the taste of him, the way his tusks grazed her skin. Taking it slow was going to be harder than she’d thought.

He broke the kiss, his breath ragged against her cheek. “I should go.”

His words sent a chill down her spine and she caught his hand as he started to pull away.

“Stay. Please.” Her heart hammered as she waited for his response.

He studied her face for a long moment. “Are you sure?”

“We don’t have to do anything. I just... I don’t want you to leave yet.” She traced her fingers along his palm, marveling at how small her hand looked against his. “We could finish the movie.”

He hesitated, then settled back against the couch. “All right.”

Relief flooded through her as she curled into his side. His arm came around her shoulders, pulling her closer until her head rested against his chest. The steady thump of his heart beneath her ear soothed her racing pulse.

On screen, the movie continued to play, but she was more interested in the warmth of Varek’s body, the way his thumb absently stroked her arm. The tension between them eased into something softer, more comfortable.

She felt him relax by degrees, his muscles loosening as she gently stroked his chest. When she glanced up, the harsh lines of his face had smoothed out, making him look younger.

This felt right - just being together, no pressure, no expectations. Just the two of them in their own quiet bubble, away from the complications of the outside world.

She drifted awake to warmth and scent of herbs. Her eyes fluttered open to find herself nestled against Varek’s broad chest, his arm draped protectively around her waist. They’d fallen asleep on the couch during the movie, and somehow he’d stayed.

With his pattern of running away, she’d half expected to wake up alone.

She traced her fingers along the soft flannel of his shirt, watching the rise and fall of his chest. The morning light filtering through her curtains softened his features.

His eyes opened, catching her in the act of studying him. Instead of pulling away, he tightened his arm around her.

“Morning,” she whispered.

His response was a deep rumble that vibrated through her body. His free hand came up to cup her face, thumb brushing across her cheek, and the tender gesture made her breath catch.

She lifted her face to his, and his lips met hers in a slow, thorough kiss that made her toes curl. His fingers tangled in her hair as he deepened the kiss, drawing a soft sound from her throat.

When they finally broke apart, his eyes were dark with desire, but there was something else there too - a vulnerability that made her heart ache.

“I thought you might be gone when I woke up,” she admitted.

“I thought about it.” His voice was rough. “But I didn’t want to leave you.”

She pressed another kiss to his lips, savoring the way he responded instantly, like he couldn’t help himself. The knowledge that he’d chosen to stay, fought against his instinct to run, filled her with warmth.

Then she caught a glimpse of her vintage clock and jolted upright.

“Oh no, Nina’s going to be here in fifteen minutes!”

She scrambled off the couch, her legs tangling in the throw blanket, but he steadied her with those big hands. “I’ll help carry down the candles.”

She rushed to freshen up while he gathered the boxes. Her reflection showed tousled hair and kiss-swollen lips. A quick brush through her waves and a splash of water on her face would have to do.

When she emerged from the bathroom, Varek had already moved the candles downstairs. She found him arranging them on an antique display table, carefully positioning each one.

“They look perfect there.” She straightened her bright yellow dress, smoothing the vintage fabric.

He turned to her, his amber eyes warm. “I’ll get you some coffee from next door.”

“You don’t have to-”

“I want to.” His gruff tone held a note of tenderness that made her heart flutter.

She watched him duck through the doorway, his broad shoulders filling the frame. The bell chimed as he left, and she pressed her fingers to her lips, still feeling the phantom pressure of his kisses.

The memory of waking up in his arms sent a pleasant shiver through her. He’d stayed. After all his running away, he’d actually stayed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

V arek's boots felt like lead as he approached Java Joy. The old brick storefront beckoned with warm light and the mingled scents of coffee and fresh-baked pastries, but his chest tightened at the thought of going inside.

He paused at the door, hand hovering over the brass handle. Through the window, he could see an assortment of customers lounging in overstuffed chairs and perched in front of a gleaming wood counter. Two werewolves were arguing over a game of cards, while a goth pixie with pink hair cleared tables. Everyday life in Fairhaven Falls - a life he hadn't been part of in a long time.

Gathering his courage, he entered the coffee shop. The morning chatter died. Coffee cups froze mid-sip. Eyes darted his way, then quickly looked elsewhere. His shoulders tensed as he joined the end of the line, keeping his gaze fixed on the chalkboard menu above.

"Morning!" Elara's cheerful voice cut through the silence. She beamed at him from behind the counter as she handed a paper cup to another customer.

Grondar's massive form appeared in the kitchen doorway, his green skin a shade darker than Varek's. He gave a slight nod of acknowledgment before returning to his baking.

The line inched forward. His fingers drummed against his thigh as whispers rippled through the room. Two elderly dryads gathered their things and shuffled toward the door.

His jaw clenched. He should leave. Get Posy coffee from somewhere else. But Elara's genuine welcome and Grondar's quiet acceptance made him plant his feet.

The coffee shop's exposed brick walls and worn wooden floors spoke of history, of belonging. Maybe it was time he stopped letting old wounds dictate his future. Posy's smile flashed in his mind, warming him despite the chill of unwelcome stares.

He straightened his spine and took another step forward as the line moved. For her, he could do this. For himself too, perhaps.

Grondar reappeared again and jerked his head towards the kitchen. Now what? His shoulders tensed - he'd hoped to just get the coffee and leave. But ignoring Grondar wasn't really an option so he sighed and followed him into the kitchen. The pristine space gleamed with industrial steel and the sweet scent of baking.

"Been a while," Grondar said, returning to a batch of scones he was forming.

He leaned against a prep table, crossing his arms defensively.

"Flora tell you to lecture me?"

Grondar snorted. "Since when does Gran need anyone to do her dirty work? But I hear things. And I saw you with Posy at the auction. And coming down her stairs this morning."

Fuck. He hadn't thought about that. He braced himself for the inevitable warning to stay away from town, to keep his distance. His jaw clenched as Grondar's expression darkened into a frown.

"What?" he growled, shoulders squaring for a fight.

But Grondar's next words knocked the wind from his sails. "Good to see you around again."

What?

He searched Grondar's face for any hint of mockery or deception, but found none. Just the steady gaze of someone he'd known since they were kids getting into trouble together, before everything went wrong.

His throat tightened, and he only managed a grunt in response, not trusting his voice for more.

"Been too long," Grondar added, turning back to his baking. "Town's changed. People have changed."

His fingers dug into his biceps where his arms remained crossed. The weight of years of isolation pressed against his chest. He'd convinced himself the town would never accept him again, that staying away was better for everyone. Now both Grondar and Flora were suggesting otherwise.

"Most of them anyway. Heard about Sebastian hassling you and Posy the other night."

His muscles tensed. Of course word had gotten around. Nothing stayed private in this town.

"You should have stood up to that little shit," Grondar said. "Running away just made you look guilty."

His jaw worked as he processed Grondar's statement. He'd been so focused on protecting Posy from his reputation that he hadn't considered he might be making

things worse.

“I wasn’t going to risk?—”

“Risk what? Sebastian getting what he deserves?” Grondar snorted. “You weren’t guilty back then, and everyone who matters knows it. But skulking away like you did? It made you look guilty - and that’s exactly what he wanted.”

Another shock. He stared at the other orc, his mind reeling. “You... don’t believe what they said about me?”

“Never did.” Grondar wiped the flour from his hands, then pulled a tray of pastries from the oven. “Neither did Flora or half the town. But you disappeared before anyone could tell you that.”

All these years, he’d assumed everyone believed Sebastian’s lies. “Last time I got into it with a human?—”

“You got blamed for something that wasn’t your fault,” Grondar cut in. “Then you ran yourself out of town before anyone could sort out the truth.”

His throat tightened. “The whole town turned against me.”

“No.” Grondar set down the tray with a clang. “A few loud mouths stirred up trouble, sure. But you’re the one who chose to hide in those woods. Nobody forced you out there.”

He winced as he recognized the truth in the other orc’s words. He’d been so young, so hurt by the accusations. He’d convinced himself that exile was his only option. But had he really given anyone a chance to stand up for him?

“You let Sebastian and his daddy win,” Grondar said. “They wanted you gone, and you gave them exactly what they wanted. Most folks have moved past it. Only ones still holding onto that old story are Sebastian and his cronies.”

“But people are still staring at me, avoiding me.”

“They’re staring at you because no one’s seen you for the past decade and everyone in this town is interested in everyone else’s business.”

“But those two dryads left when I came in,” he protested weakly.

“Because they were finished with their fucking coffee,” Grondar growled. “You need to spend less time imagining things and pay attention to the truth.”

Before he could form a response, a paper bag filled with warm muffins landed against his chest.

“Take those.”

The kitchen door swung open and Elara breezed in, balancing a tray with three steaming cups, and grinned at him.

“Perfect timing. One black coffee and a plain cappuccino for the new girl. Plus one vanilla caramel latte with extra whip - Posy’s favorite.”

The tips of his ears burned again. He hadn’t even known what to order for her.

“Don’t look so worried.” Elara winked as she transferred the drinks to a carrier. “She’ll love it.”

He curled his fingers around the bag and the carrier, the scent of coffee and blueberry

muffins filling his nose. The thoughtfulness of their gesture left him wrong-footed, unused to such casual kindness.

“Thanks,” he muttered, ducking his head as he backed toward the door.

“Any time. You’re always welcome,” Elara said gently, and Grondar nodded.

As he left the coffee shop, the weight of the coffee carrier and bag of muffins felt like more than just breakfast - it was an offering of friendship he hadn’t realized was there all along.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Posy was arranging a display of vintage earrings when the bell chimed. Her heart skipped a beat as Varek ducked through the doorway, carrying coffee and a paper bag that smelled of fresh-baked muffins.

His expression was distant, almost puzzled, as he set everything on the counter.

“Maybe I was wrong about some things.”

“Oh?” She picked up her coffee, inhaling the rich aroma. “What kind of things?”

“The town. How they see me.” He rubbed the back of his neck, looking oddly abashed. “Grondar and Elara were...nice.”

“Why wouldn’t they be? Didn’t I say people care about you?”

His deep laugh rumbled through the shop as he caught her around the waist. “Yes, you did. You’re annoyingly perceptive.”

“Annoyingly?” She pressed closer, tilting her face up.

“Mmm.” He bent down and captured her lips in a slow, deep kiss that made her toes curl. His tusks grazed her cheek as he pulled back slightly. “In the best possible way.”

She wound her arms around his neck, ready to kiss him again, but his body suddenly tensed. His head snapped toward the back of the shop.

“What’s wrong?”

“I heard something.” His eyes narrowed as he tilted his head. “A cry. From behind the building.”

She hurried after him as he strode through the back door of her shop. The morning air bit at her exposed skin, but the chill wasn’t what made her freeze.

Sebastian had Nina pinned against the brick wall. The girl’s face was white with terror, her thin coat hanging off one shoulder.

A deep growl rumbled from Varek’s chest. “Let. Her. Go.”

Sebastian’s lips curved into that same cruel smirk he’d worn the other night.

“Well, if it isn’t the town monster.” He tightened his grip on Nina’s arm. “What are you going to do about it?”

Her heart hammered against her ribs. The memory of Varek’s pain when he’d told her about his past clashed with the rage she could see building in him. She wanted to step between them, to stop this before it escalated, but her feet wouldn’t move.

Sebastian pulled Nina against him and she whimpered, the sound cutting through the tension like a knife.

“Come on, big guy.” Sebastian’s voice dripped with mockery. “Show us what you’re really like. Show your little slut exactly what kind of monster you are.”

Varek moved so fast she barely saw him cross the space. One moment Sebastian held Nina, the next he dangled from Varek’s grip, feet scraping the ground as Varek pinned him against the brick wall.

Her heart leaped into her throat. Not from fear of Varek, but fear for him. The last time he'd tried to help someone, the town had turned against him.

Heavy boots crunched on gravel, and the sheriff appeared at the end of the alley, his expression unreadable. Her stomach dropped.

Sebastian's face twisted into an ugly sneer.

"He attacked me! Just like last time. I told you all he was dangerous-"

"That true, Varek?" Eric asked, his voice completely neutral.

She opened her mouth to defend him, to explain what really happened, but the words caught in her throat. This wasn't her story to tell. She glanced over at Nina huddling against the wall, arms wrapped around herself.

The silence stretched, broken only by Sebastian's labored breathing as he dangled from Varek's grip.

Her heart clenched as she watched Varek's jaw work. His eyes darkened, and she saw the weight of the past pressing down on those broad shoulders. He started to lower Sebastian to the ground, defeat etched in every line of his face.

Then his spine straightened. "No. That's not what happened." His deep voice rumbled through the alley. "Sebastian had her cornered. I pulled him away before he could hurt her."

Pride swelled in her chest, and she stepped forward, her chin lifted.

"I saw everything, Sheriff. Sebastian was threatening my employee. Varek protected her."

Sebastian's face flushed an ugly red. "You're lying. She's just covering for him because-"

"Because what?" Her voice crackled with anger. "Because I saw exactly what happened? Because I won't let you twist the truth like you did before?"

She moved closer to Varek, her shoulder brushing his arm. She reached up and placed her hand on his forearm, the one still holding Sebastian against the wall. His muscles tensed under her touch, but he didn't pull away.

"I was there, Sheriff. Varek didn't hurt him. He just stopped Sebastian from hurting someone else."

Sebastian's lip curled as he glared at her.

"She's clearly prejudiced. Look at her, hanging all over him." His voice dripped with disdain. "You can't trust anything she says."

Her fingers tightened on Varek's arm, rage building in her chest at Sebastian's smug expression. Before she could respond, a small voice spoke up behind her.

"He's lying." Nina stepped forward, wrapping her thin arms around herself. Her face was still white, but her voice was steady. "Sebastian grabbed me, but Varek protected me. He didn't hurt anyone."

The sheriff's keen gaze shifted between them all, settling on Sebastian's reddening face. "All right, that's enough. Put him down, Varek. Sebastian, you're coming with me."

Varek hesitated for a fraction of a second, then released Sebastian.

“This is ridiculous.” Sebastian tried to jerk away as the sheriff took his arm. “You can’t seriously believe-”

“I said that’s enough.” The sheriff’s voice hardened as he steered Sebastian toward the street. “We’re going to have a talk about harassment.”

Sebastian’s protests echoed off the brick walls as the sheriff led him away. She released a shaky breath, her heart still pounding from the confrontation. She kept her hand on Varek’s arm, feeling the tension slowly drain from his muscles.

He turned to her, his eyes wide with disbelief. Her heart ached at his expression - a mixture of wonder and confusion, as if he couldn’t quite process what had happened.

She flashed him a triumphant smile. “See? I told you people would stand up for you if you gave them a chance.”

Giving him a minute to think about it, she turned to Nina. The other woman was still hugging herself, but the color had returned to her face.

“Are you okay?” she asked gently.

Nine nodded, straightening her shoulders, and flashed her a sweet smile.

“Yes, thank you. And thank you, Varek. I don’t know if Sebastian would have done all the things he threatened, but...” Nina shuddered.

“You’re welcome,” Varek said quietly, but his deep voice still sounded stunned.

She fished her keys from her pocket and tossed them over to Nina.

“Can you take care of the shop? I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Without waiting for a response, she grabbed Varek's hand and tugged him towards the stairs leading to her apartment. He followed without resistance, though she could sense his bewilderment.

Her pulse quickened at the feel of his solid presence behind her as they climbed the steps. She needed to talk to him about what just happened, to make sure he understood what it meant. The sheriff had listened. Her assistant had spoken up. Things were different than he believed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

V arek followed Posy up the stairs in a daze. His mind kept replaying the scene - not just the confrontation with Sebastian, but how two people had stood up for him. Even the sheriff hadn't automatically assumed he was guilty.

"Sit down before you fall down." Posy pushed him onto her couch.

He sank into the cushions, his big body making the furniture creak. "I don't understand."

"What's there to understand?" She perched next to him and took his hand. "You did the right thing."

"But the sheriff-"

"Listened to the truth instead of jumping to conclusions." She squeezed his fingers. "Maybe it's time you stopped assuming everyone is against you."

Her words echoed Grondar's. He'd spent so many years convinced the entire town hated him, he'd never considered that opinions could change. Or that maybe they hadn't all believed the worst of him in the first place.

"Grondar said something similar." His voice came out rough. "That I ran myself out of town."

"Smart orc." She shifted closer, her hip pressing against his thigh. "Though I notice

you didn't run this time."

He hadn't. For the first time in years, he'd stood his ground. Defended someone. Spoken up for himself.

"I couldn't let him hurt her." The memory of Sebastian's sneer made his hands clench. "Not when I could stop it."

"And you did. Without hurting anyone." She touched his cheek, turning his face toward her. "That's who you really are, Varek. Not whatever story Sebastian and his cronies tried to spread about you."

The simple faith in her voice made his chest ache. He caught her hand, pressing it more firmly against his skin. "You make me want to be better."

"You don't need to be better. You're wonderful just the way you are."

He leaned forward until their foreheads rested against each other. "I'm starting to believe that. Because of you."

Her fingers traced along his jaw. "You know, Eric told me something interesting at the auction after I won you. He said he never believed those stories about you. That he remembered you from when you were both teenagers, and you always looked out for the younger kids."

He'd forgotten about those days, when he'd chase off the bullies targeting the smaller kids. Before everything went wrong. Eric had been several years older than him in school and he'd never thought he'd noticed him at all.

But the sheriff hadn't believed the lies. Had remembered him as he truly was.

Something broke loose in his chest, a weight he'd carried for so long it had become part of him. With a growl, he pulled her into his arms, claiming her mouth in a desperate kiss. She melted against him, her small hands clutching his shoulders as he poured years of pain and loneliness into the connection between them.

When he finally pulled back, she was flushed and breathless, her lips swollen from his kisses. "What was that for?"

"For making me see what I couldn't." His voice came out hoarse. "For believing in me when I didn't believe in myself."

She put her hand on his cheek, her eyes warm and soft.

"I know it's just one incident. But for the first time since..." He swallowed hard. "Since everything happened, I feel like maybe there's hope. That I can be part of Fairhaven Falls again."

She smiled at him, her eyes full of that unwavering faith that both terrified and thrilled him.

"With you." The words came out rough. "If that's what you want. If you're willing to deal with..." He gestured vaguely at himself, at all his broken pieces.

Her fingers pressed against his lips, stopping his words. The simple touch sent sparks through his entire body. He fought the urge to take her hand in his mouth, to taste her skin.

"What I want," she said, "is for you to stop hiding who you really are. The orc who protected that girl today - that's who you've always been. You just needed to be reminded."

She saw him - really saw him - in a way no one had in years. Not as the troubled teenager who'd made mistakes, or the monster the rumors had painted him as, but as himself.

His breath caught as she laced her fingers through his and rose to her feet. Her radiant smile lit up her whole face as she tugged him toward her bedroom. His heart thundered against his ribs, desire and nerves warring inside him.

The room was as bright and colorful as she was - vintage floral wallpaper, a patchwork quilt in jewel tones, and little touches that spoke of her everywhere. The morning sun spilled through gauzy curtains, painting patterns across her skin.

She reached up and touched his face, her fingers tracing the edge of his tusk. The gentle exploration made him shiver. He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm, breathing in her sweet scent.

"You're sure?" he asked, his voice rough.

Her answer was to pull him down for a kiss. The last of his hesitation crumbled as she pressed against him. He swept her up in his arms, marveling at how perfectly she fit there.

She was so small, so delicate compared to him, but there was nothing fragile about the way she responded to his touch. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing herself against his throbbing erection.

With a low growl, he carried her to the bed, laying her down among the riot of color. Her dark hair fanned out across the quilt, her eyes shining as she reached for him. He followed her down, bracing his weight on his forearms so he didn't crush her.

Her hands traced the muscles of his arms, his shoulders, his chest, as if she were

memorizing him by touch alone. Every brush of her fingers sent sparks of heat through him, and he wanted more. So much more. Her dress had slipped up her thighs, and he slid a hand beneath it, reveling in the smooth silk of her skin.

Her breath hitched as his fingers traced the curve of her leg, teasing at her inner thigh. She squirmed beneath him, her nails digging into his back. The tiny pricks of pain only heightened the sensation, and his cock twitched in response. A soft sound escaped her throat, and he dipped his head to kiss her again, swallowing the needy little noise. He captured her lower lip between his teeth, tugging gently, and she gasped. The sound shot through him, and he deepened the kiss, claiming her mouth. She responded with equal hunger, her tongue tangling with his. It was intoxicating, addictive, and he never wanted to stop.

He tore his mouth from hers and trailed kisses along her jawline, down the smooth column of her throat. She arched against him as he nipped at the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. Her scent surrounded him, her skin flushed and warm.

Her hands slid between them, tugging at the buttons of her dress. He lifted himself enough for her to wiggle out of the dress, leaving her in just a scrap of lace that barely covered her breasts.

“Beautiful.” His voice was a low rumble as he traced the edge of the lace with one finger. Her skin flushed pink, her nipples hard beneath the thin fabric.

She reached for him again, her fingers tugging at the hem of his shirt. He obliged her, sitting up and stripping off the offending garment in one smooth motion. Her eyes widened, taking in the expanse of his bare chest. He tensed, waiting for the usual fear or disgust that came with seeing his scars. But her expression only showed hunger and need. She ran her hands over the planes of his chest, tracing the lines of old scars with gentle fingers.

“You’re perfect.” Her words were a whisper, and he bent down to capture her lips again.

This time, the kiss was slow and languid. He savored the taste of her, the way she melted against him as he trailed a hand down her side. He traced the curve of her hip, the swell of her breast. His thumb brushed over her nipple, and she gasped into his mouth. He did it again, loving the way her body responded to his touch. She was so responsive, so eager. It was intoxicating.

He broke the kiss and moved down her body, pressing a kiss to the soft curve of her belly. She writhed beneath him, her breath coming in short gasps as he teased her through the lace of her bra. Finally, he took pity on her and tugged the flimsy fabric down. Her nipples were rosy and tight, begging for attention. He took one in his mouth, swirling his tongue around the sensitive bud. She whimpered, her back arching off the bed. He moved to the other nipple, lavishing it with the same attention.

Her hands tangled in his hair, holding him close as he feasted on her. Her hips bucked, rubbing against his cock, and he groaned.

He released her nipple and looked up at her, his voice husky. “I need to taste you again.”

Her eyes widened, and a shy smile curved her lips. “Please.”

He slid down her body, his hands skimming over her thighs. He tugged her panties down, and she obligingly lifted her hips to help. The scrap of lace joined her bra on the floor, leaving her completely naked. He spread her thighs, baring her to his hungry gaze.

She was glistening wet, her folds flushed and swollen. He bent his head and licked a

slow stripe from her entrance to her clit. Her taste exploded on his tongue, sweet and tangy. He groaned, diving back in for more. He licked and sucked, exploring every inch of her. She was so wet, so responsive. Every lick of his tongue made her gasp and writhe.

He focused his attention on her clit, flicking it with his tongue. Her hands clenched in the sheets, her body tense and quivering. He slipped one finger inside her, then two, curling them to find the spot that made her cry out. He worked her mercilessly, his fingers and tongue driving her higher and higher.

She was close, he could feel it in the way her body clenched around his fingers. He redoubled his efforts, his tongue lashing her clit as he thrust his fingers inside her. Her cries grew louder, her hips bucking as he pushed her to the edge.

With a scream, she came, her body shuddering as her orgasm crashed over her. He kept licking and stroking her, drawing out her pleasure until she lay limp and sated beneath him.

He lifted his head, his chin slick with her wetness, and crawled back up her body. He kissed her deeply, letting her taste herself on his tongue. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her hips grinding against his aching cock.

“Please,” she whispered. “I want you.”

He paused, searching her face. “You’re sure? Once we do this, there’s no going back.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.” She cupped his cheek, her thumb brushing over his lower lip. “I want you, Varek. All of you.”

He reached between them, positioning his cock at her entrance. He pushed forward

slowly, giving her time to adjust to his size. She was so tight, so wet. He had to fight to keep control. He didn't want to hurt her, but gods, he wanted to be inside her.

She whimpered, her hips lifting to meet his. He slid deeper, inch by inch, until he was fully seated inside her. He paused, giving her time to adjust. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted. She looked up at him with a mix of awe and desire.

He pulled back, then thrust forward, setting a slow, deep rhythm. She matched him stroke for stroke, her hips rising to meet his. Her hands clutched his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin. The small pricks of pain only heightened his pleasure, and he growled, his hips snapping forward harder.

He could feel her tightening around him, her body tensing as she neared her climax. He slid a hand between them, finding her clit and stroking it in time with his thrusts. Her cries grew louder, her body arching off the bed. He felt her clench around him, her body shaking as she came. He followed her over the edge, his hips pounding into her as he spilled inside her. His cock pulsed, filling her with his seed. Her legs tightened around him, holding him close as they rode out their pleasure.

As they came down from their high, he rolled to the side, pulling her with him. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. Her head rested on his chest, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on his skin. The simple intimacy of the gesture struck him - how natural it felt to be here with her, to let down his walls.

His chest tightened as the realization hit him. He was happy. Truly, deeply happy in a way he hadn't been since... he couldn't even remember when. The constant weight of isolation and judgment that had pressed down on him for so long had lifted.

All because of this amazing woman in his arms. He held her tighter, breathing in her scent, feeling the steady beat of her heart against his.

“I love you,” he said quietly, the words slipping out before he could stop them. But he found he didn’t want to take them back. He wanted her to know how he felt, how she’d changed his life.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide with surprise and happiness. “I love you, too,” she said, her voice soft. “So much.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. For the first time in years, the future looked bright. Not just bearable, but filled with hope and possibilities.

As long as he had her as his side, he could face anything.

EPILOGUE

Two months later...

Posy stirred awake to the sound of birds chirping outside the cabin window. Golden morning light filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow across the rustic bedroom, and Varek's body was warm and solid behind her. The bedroom smelled of his herbs, mixed with the fresh mountain air that drifted through the slightly open window. Solid pine furniture and the vintage accents she'd added gave the space a cozy feel.

The bed creaked as she shifted to face him. His eyes were already open, watching her with that tender expression that made her heart skip.

"Morning," she traced a finger along one of his tusks. The cabin wasn't as convenient as living above Second Chance, but waking up like this made the commute worthwhile. Besides, Nina had needed the apartment more than she did.

Her assistant had flourished over the past few months, both at work and in her new home. The shadows in her eyes had faded, replaced by genuine smiles as she greeted customers and arranged displays with an artistic eye that complemented her own.

"You're thinking too hard for this early," his gruff voice held a note of amusement.

"Just appreciating how things worked out." She pressed a kiss to his chest. "Though I should probably get up soon. We have to set up the booth for the Spring Festival"

He tightened his arms around her. "Nina will take care of it. Stay with me."

"I really shouldn't." She wiggled against him, the hard length of his erection lodging between her thighs. "As tempting as you make it."

"Let's see if I can make it a little more tempting." He rolled her beneath him, his big body pinning her to the bed.

She laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck. "You know, I think I can spare a few minutes."

She fell asleep again after he made slow, delicious love to her and woke to find herself alone. Strange - usually she had to drag Varek out of bed with promises of coffee and kisses. Maybe he'd already gone to his workshop. Time for her to get to town anyway.

She padded out to the kitchen. He was standing by the window, his broad shoulders tense as he gazed out at the misty forest, and her stomach clenched. She hadn't seen that distant look in his eyes since those early days when he'd fought so hard against letting her in.

"Hey you." She wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his back. His skin radiated warmth through the thin cotton of his shirt.

He turned, gathering her close. His kiss was as deep and thorough as ever, filled with the same heat that never failed to make her toes curl. His fingers tangled in her sleep-tousled hair as he backed her against the counter, but when they broke apart, that faraway look still lingered in his eyes. Something was definitely bothering him.

"What's wrong?" She touched his cheek gently.

He shook his head and nuzzled her palm. "Nothing. Just thinking."

“About?”

Instead of answering, he kissed her again, his tusks grazing her lips in that way that always sent shivers down her spine. But she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

A distant clock chimed, distracting her from her concerns. She pressed her palms against his chest and pulled back with a regretful sigh. “We need to get ready for the festival.”

His hands stilled on her hips. Something flickered across his face - an expression she couldn't quite read - before he gave a short nod.

“The herbs need loading.” He stepped back, his warmth fading as he moved away.

She watched as he strode out the back door toward the greenhouse. His shoulders were tight again, that earlier tension returning. She rubbed her arms, missing his touch already.

Through the window, she saw him gathering the bundles of dried herbs they'd prepared for their booth. The fresh ones were already packed in boxes, ready to be arranged into the display they'd planned. Their first festival together as a couple - she'd been looking forward to it for weeks.

But now, watching him methodically load the truck, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The way he'd looked when she mentioned the festival...

The slam of the truck's tailgate jolted her from her thoughts. She needed to get dressed. Whatever was bothering him would have to wait.

An hour later, she stepped back to admire their booth. The vintage displays she'd chosen complemented Varek's herbs perfectly - dried lavender draped over an

antique mirror, rosemary tucked into depression glass vases, and sweet-smelling sachets arranged in weathered wooden boxes. And of course, lots of his herb scented candles. The morning sun caught the glass and made everything sparkle.

She turned to share her excitement with him, but he was staring off into the distance again, his jaw tight. Before she could ask what was wrong, the first wave of festival-goers swept through.

The booth stayed busy. She and Nina wrapped purchases in brown paper tied with twine and explained the history behind various pieces. Varek answered questions about his herbs and oils, his voice gruff but patient. She caught glimpses of him between customers, noticed how he kept glancing around like he was waiting for something.

Flora stopped by, but instead of her usual cheerful chatter, she gave them both an odd, calculating look. Even Elara seemed distracted when she brought them coffee, her smile not quite reaching her eyes.

The sun was well past midday when the crowd finally thinned. Her feet ached from standing, and her throat was dry from talking.

His hand settled warm on her lower back. “Want to take a break?”

She leaned into his touch, grateful for the suggestion. “That sounds perfect. Nina are you for a break?”

Nina shot Varek a quick look, then shook her head.

“I’m fine, but you go ahead.”

Before she could try and convince Nina, Varek took her hand and led her away from the rows of stalls. Her feet protested each step, but curiosity kept her moving as they

headed toward the river overlook. The afternoon sun glinted off the water, creating dancing patterns on the surface.

This was where Sebastian had confronted them that night. The memory should have been unpleasant, but instead it reminded her of how far they'd come since then. How far Varek had come in believing in himself.

He kept glancing around, his ears twitching, and his hand trembled slightly in hers. Something was definitely up.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Posy planted her feet and crossed her arms. “You’ve been acting weird all morning, and don’t think I haven’t noticed everyone else being strange too.”

His eyes met hers, filled with an intensity that made her breath catch. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, movement caught her eye.

Hundreds of Iridescent bubbles rose from the river’s surface, catching the sunlight and sending rainbow reflections dancing across their faces. They drifted upward in a mesmerizing display.

She laughed in delight and turned back to Varek, just as he sank to one knee before her, his big body somehow managing to look both powerful and vulnerable at the same time.

Her heart skipped a beat as he pulled a ring from his pocket - a delicate antique band with tiny flowers crafted from rose gold. His hands shook slightly as he held it out to her.

“Will you marry me?”

Joy exploded inside her like fireworks, filling her chest with warmth, and she threw

herself into his arms with such force that he almost toppled over. “Yes! Yes, of course yes!”

Cheers erupted around them and she lifted her head from his shoulder to see what seemed like half the town gathered nearby. Flora gave her a triumphant grin while Grondar had his arm around a beaming Elara. Sam’s tentacles waved celebratory patterns in the air, still creating those magical bubbles.

Nina whistled and clapped along with the rest of the crowd before heading to the river’s edge. Eric tipped his hat, a smiling Robin clinging to his other hand. Even Rona was there, carrying a basket that probably contained exactly what they’d want to eat for an engagement picnic.

These weren’t just townspeople anymore - they were friends. Family. The thought brought tears to her eyes as Varek slipped the ring onto her finger.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her deeply, seemingly oblivious to their audience. She melted into him, overwhelmed by the love she felt - both for him and from him. This gruff, tender-hearted man who had stolen her heart so completely.

When they finally broke apart, she whispered against his lips, “I love you.”

His eyes glowed with happiness. “I love you too, my little flower. Forever.”

Flora hummed happily as she watched Varek and Posy. Matching the perfect couple was always rewarding, but healing someone as wounded as Varek made it even more special. Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only male in town who needed her special brand of help - and she had the perfect one in mind!

Could Sam be Flora’s biggest challenge yet?

Find out in Kiss for My Kraken!