



Going Au Naturel at Hallow's Cove (Hallow's Cove)

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Description: Organic Auditor and city girl Sydney Jacobs has finally made it out of the office and into the field. Though not a fan of her job, it pays the bills, and her first step up the corporate ladder. She had lofty goals of living large, and she wouldn't let a little thing like hating her job change that. Her first assignment? Middle-of-no-where, aka Hallow's Cove, to audit Hoffman Farms. Everything should be perfect...minus the part where her college nemesis blackmailed her to fail the farm.

Brooks Hoffman, however, has straightforward goals: Keep his family farm afloat, get that organic certification, take care of his pet duck Chicken, and now, Sydney Jacobs. While she's a bit prickly, he can't get her piercing green gaze out of his head. But the farm means everything to him, and he can't let anything get in the way, not even his newest temptation, Sydney.

When the lines between passion and professionalism blur with the due date of their certification results fast approaching, will these two be able to thwart Sydney's enemy? Or were they meant to go down in flames au naturel?

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Chapter one

Brooks

Why was there a cow at my window?

I mean, I did live on a farm, so it wasn't that unusual, but she wasn't where she was supposed to be. I pushed myself up and stretched, my muscles slightly sore from putting up the new fence in the western field. It was supposed to hold the cows, but obviously we missed a spot.

I let out a long sigh. We would need to wrangle the ones that got out and get the fence finished. Maybe I could ask Bryce to help me with that this morning.

I stood up and made my way to the kitchen. My hooves clicked on the wooden floors of my farmhouse. I always made sure I took the time to enjoy the quiet mornings before I made my way to the main house.

It was always bustling with people. I grew up there with my parents, my grandfather, and my four siblings. There was never a quiet moment back then.

Now, I lived in a house I'd built on the south side of the farm. It still wasn't perfect, and there were a lot of things I wanted to add, but I built it with my two hands with the help of a few of my brothers, and I loved it.

I ran the coffee machine and watched as the dark liquid dripped down into the pot. As I waited, I checked the calendar I had pinned to my fridge.

I paused when I read tomorrow's date.

Visit from the Organic Certifiers of Stonebridge.

Was that tomorrow? I swore they were coming next week. I went to my kitchen table that doubled as my office and flicked through the forms until I found the letter with the date on it.

Yup, tomorrow was the day, and I was not as prepared as I wanted to be. I knew the farm was well qualified to be certified organic. We didn't use artificial pesticides, and the animals on our farm were well taken care of.

Even though the certification was just a stamp on the label, it was a stamp that could help our sales.

Though we did pretty well for a small, family-run farm, we needed to do more. Being able to charge more and attract more customers would help. With all my siblings growing up and most having families, one bad year could put us in trouble, and I never wanted to worry about that.

A knock came at the door, making me jump. It was still dark outside, so I knew it could only be one person. I opened to see Gabe, one of my best friends, standing there, his circular glasses on, pushed up high on his nose.

"Mornin'," I said, leaving the door open for him to come in. "You know you don't have to knock."

Gabe came around often in the morning—he'd been doing that since we were children since I had to be up early to help with the farm chores. Being a gargoyle, he could only be awake at night, and I was one of the only people in town up at the same time as him.

“I always knock,” he asserted.

“Fine, have it your way.” We’d been through this before. “I’m gonna go get dressed. There’s coffee ready.”

I heard him clank around the kitchen as I went up and threw on a pair of jeans and a Henley and grabbed my worn brown hat. When I went back down, I set it on the table and grabbed myself a cup.

“How’s the shop doing?” I hadn’t been going into town in the evening lately. Spring was a busy season for us.

“Fine. It’s always a bit slow in the winter, but it’s getting better now. How’s the farm been?”

“Busy as always,” I said with a sigh. “But I’m feeling pretty prepped for Blossom Fest this year, and we have the organic auditor coming tomorrow.”

“Are you ready for it?” he asked, his tone taking on that therapist tone he developed in school.

I rolled my eyes, as I often did when his questions turned clinical. “Yes, and I had a good childhood.”

It was his turn to roll his eyes. “I’m just saying, I know how big a deal this is for you.”

I looked down into the black abyss of my mug, my own reflection looking back. I wanted to change things.

My entire family had pretty good genes, so much so that people thought I was still a

teen well into my twenties. My hair was still blond as ever, but I was starting to pick out the fine lines around my mouth and eyes and I could feel my bones growing tired. I didn't want to hope things would work out while I broke my back every day.

I needed a strategy, a long-term plan that would keep this place going long after me. And this was a great first step.

I sighed. "It is, but I truly feel ready. The farm is in great shape, and I've delegated all the tasks I needed to give this my undivided attention."

"Then I'm excited for you." We both looked toward the window and didn't say anything for a while. That was our thing. Quiet support. In the winter, we were able to spend more time together because it stayed darker longer, but now the sky was already beginning to lighten.

"Well, it's getting late... um... early," Gabe amended. "I've gotta go but let me know how it goes."

"I will."

Gabe left after that. When I stepped into the living room and headed for the porch, Chicken was there waiting.

"Hey bud," I said, rubbing the top of his head.

He preened under my touch. Chicken was a harlequin duck. We had a small flock of them, but for some reason, Chicken never showed any interest in them. He'd find ways to escape the coop and would end up on my porch every morning. I worried he would get eaten by a bobcat or something out there, so I let him in, and he made himself at home.

Now he had a dog bed in the corner, a few plastic balls, and a drawer full of duck treats.

“Let’s go, Chicken; we have a big day ahead.”

Well, he didn’t. He would go back to the coop for the day with his flock. Though he didn’t sleep there, it was good for him to spend time with them.

I grabbed my duck jacket before leaving and was glad I did. The air was still crisp in the morning, biting at the tips of my fingers.

I picked up Chicken and carried him to my old, rusty—and dependable—truck and made the drive from my house to the main farmhouse, where my parents and grandfather still lived.

Most of my other siblings lived somewhere on farm property, with the exception of the youngest, who had just turned eighteen, and my one sister in Stonebridge. It wasn’t a long way away from here, and she moved as soon as she could afford it. We were all happy for her, and she came home to visit on holidays and such.

As usual, the first thing I did when I got there was drop Chicken and let all the ducks out before heading to the farmhouse. It was large and blue, with big windows and wind chimes rattling off the wrap-around deck. Every time I saw it, it brought back memories of running around that porch chasing Bridget with a frog and of Beau, always looking out for her, sticking his foot out to trip me, making me lose my frog.

I could almost see our small footsteps worn into the walkway. And the ones of my parents, and their parents.

This house could be mine one day. My parents offered to move out when I took ownership of the farm, but even though I had fond memories of this place, it wasn’t

my place. I never had any alone time back then; not that I did now, but at night I got to go to a place I built with my two hands and relax.

Sometimes it got a bit lonely, but I had Chicken and Gabe and single-night partners I could take for a ride every once in a while—with all the work I had, that was all I had to offer.

I was... content.

I opened the door to the same everyday madness. My mother was in the kitchen, making enough pancakes and bacon to feed the family. My brother Beau and his kids were already there, as usual. He ran the farm Butchery, so he was always here bright and early. His kids were three and six and way too energetic for five a.m.

Blake, the youngest, was coming down the stairs, clearly still wiping the sleep from his eyes, probably woken up by the rowdy kids in the living room.

“Morning,” I said, shoving my fingers in his hair and giving them a shake.

He batted me away, irritation evident in his features. He had darker hair than me, and while he kept it shorter, there were still the same Hoffman curls piled on top of his head.

“Morning, Uncle Brooks,” Nia, Beau’s daughter, said. She was three and adorable, with her mom’s black hair and fur. Beau’s wife, Mandi, was a rabbit shifter, so while both of their kids still had their horns, they also sprouted large ears every once in a while, especially when excited like this.

I picked her up and swung her around as she screamed shrilly. “Morning, Munchkin.”

“Don’t rile her up too much,” Beau warned me, sipping his coffee deeply. “Mandi

will kill me if I bring her back all crazy.”

With the way they were running around and the extra chocolate chips I was sure my mother slipped into their pancakes, I didn’t know if that was possible, but I swung her once more before setting her down.

“Wash your hands,” my mother said, emerging from the kitchen, and they ran up to do it. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Hey, Mom, thanks for breakfast”

“Hey yourself, and you don’t need to thank me every morning,” she said, kissing my cheek. “Pop said Millie was in the yard this morning. I thought you guys finished that fence?”

“Me too. I’ll head into town to get supplies to fix it and have Jared round them up. We’ll have the people coming for our organic certification here tomorrow.”

“Oh, that should be nice.”

“No, it won’t,” my grandfather’s voice called from behind me. “We don’t need some government official here sniffing in our business.”

I sighed. I was hoping to avoid him today. He’d been against getting certified since I started the process, but he needed to realize times had changed since he ran things.

“We’ve talked about this,” I said. “It’s not the government; it’s one of their contractors. This will boost our sales through the roof.”

Hoffman Farm wasn’t your average family farm. We did everything from raising animals to growing wide fields to beekeeping to body care products. We basically

kept the whole town fed, including all the tourists, and even exported.

Though we were considered a family-run small business, it was on a larger scale with a lot of moving parts, and we needed all those parts to continue moving. One poor year could kill it all.

“I still don’t like it,” he grumbled.

“They shouldn’t be here long.” Though I didn’t know if that was fully true. We had a lot of land and business to go over.

By the time we sat down for breakfast, Bailey had made her way in with her fiancée, Cleo. It was surprising to see them so early. Bailey always said her bees liked to sleep in, and so did she.

Everyone chatted the way we did every day until Beau and the girls left, Bailey and Cleo stuck around to finish, and Blake went upstairs to get ready for the day. He was a jack of all trades but an especially talented mechanic. He took care of all the machines we used, and he was damn good at it.

Then, I got up and helped my mother with the dishes until she all but threw me out, and I was surprised to see my father on the porch, sitting in one of the rocking chairs.

“Morning, Pop,” I greeted, taking a moment to sit with him. The sun was bright in the sky now, and it was time to get to work, but it was nice to take a moment and enjoy the vast fields and beautiful sky.

“Morning, Brooks. How’s everything?”

“Good. We have the organic people coming tomorrow.”

He nodded. My dad handed over ownership of the farm to me the year after Beau and his wife had their first kid. He and my mom decided they wanted to be there for their grandkids more and take it easy.

I'd been working to take over the farm since I was old enough to collect eggs from the coops, so it felt right. I wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm glad to see how you've handled everything," he said. "You're doing a good job."

I blinked. My father was a very caring man but odd about expressing it. It always happened out of the blue.

"Thanks, Dad. You taught me well." And that was true. He'd taken me under his wing at an early age, so it happened seamlessly.

"Well, I'm going out to the west field to look at that fence, so I know what supplies I need. Then I need to do a last-minute sweep of everything."

"You need help?" he asked.

"If you could help round up the cows, I would appreciate it."

"That I can do," he said as I left.

It was a usual early spring day for me. I made sure fields were prepped, seeds were ready, and animals were fed. I loved working with my hands and with the earth. Something about it felt so gratifying, and even more so when my whole family was involved, even though my job had now turned into a lot of managing.

By early evening, I still needed to run into town to grab some extra planks from

Rick's to fix that fence. The hole turned out to be larger than I thought.

"Hey," my sister Bailey called as I headed toward my truck. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Could you run this honey to Jake? He wanted to try a new flavoring for his moonshine, and I think this will add a good sweetness."

I took the box. "Sure thing. Ready for the market to start this year?" I asked. The bees were finally coming out of the hive again and producing, so Bailey could make more products.

"Yep. I've got a new body butter recipe that I think will be a hit for the Blossom Festival."

The Blossom Festival happened every year and was a big selling day for us. Production would need to be monitored so we could be prepared. I'd also need to see if Lerana would have any time to come help Ma bake for the event. With the festival, we'd need all the extra hands we could have.

I put the box in my truck and drove to town, windows down, turning up the radio coming through my speakers, probably a bit too loud. But I was alone, with the breeze through my hair. It always made me feel alive.

Until I noticed a car pulled off to the side of the road. It had to be someone coming up to the farm who had gotten stuck in the mud, but I didn't recognize the car. Either way, I put my hat on and pulled my truck over to help.

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Chapter two

Sydney

I revved the engine again, but the tires just kept spinning.

Fuck.

I rested my head against the steering wheel, trying to figure out how I got here. Well—I knew exactly how, but I wasn't happy about it.

I'd gone to college for a business degree, without knowing that, in the current job market, unless you were a nepo baby, your chances of a job at a major company were almost nonexistent, which had me scrambling for one. The first job offer I got was for the Organic Certifiers of Stonebridge, and I jumped at the opportunity. Most of the time I pushed papers around, so I was determined to get out of there soon.

Today, however, I'd been asked to sub for one of the auditors. We were all certified to do it, but only certain people were considered field people.

Apparently, on this occasion, that was me.

I looked at my partner in the passenger seat, sleeping soundly. Matilda had been at the job longer than I'd been alive. She had been moved to desk duty a long time ago, but because this was the beginning of spring, there was no one else available.

She looked like a librarian, with short, gray curls and large, framed glasses perched

on her nose, and she was sleeping like the dead, which I worried she was until I heard her snore every once in a while.

“Matilda,” I said, trying to wake her to figure out what the fuck we were going to do. She didn’t budge.

“Matilda,” I called again, shaking her slightly. Still nothing.

“Matilda!” I all but yelled.

That time she jumped, looking around. “Are we there?” she asked. Her voice was warm, like a grandmother’s. I wondered briefly if she was one.

“Kind of.” There was no GPS out here in the middle of nowhere. We’d been warned cell service was choppy, and they weren’t kidding. Not a single bar. According to the map, we should be pretty close, but I had no actual way to tell. I’d never read a map in my life, much less to drive, and the sun should be setting soon.

“The car’s stuck,” I said.

“Stuck?” she repeated.

I revved the engine again, and the tires spun through the mud.

“Hm,” she offered.

That’s it? Hm? Hm wasn’t going to get us out of here. I glanced around but saw nothing but fields for miles.

I heard the clanking of an exhaust when I saw a truck come toward us from the other side of the road.

“Oh, perfect,” I mumbled, unbuckling quickly and stepping out of the car. I had immediate regret when my heel plunked through the mud and my entire foot went with it.

“Stupid middle-of-nowhere town,” I grumbled. I’d always lived in Stonebridge. Growing up poor, I promised myself I would go to college, get a good job, and get myself a nice penthouse and maybe one of those fluffy dogs rich people had.

I kept telling myself this job was a stepping stone. I didn’t know how, but this opportunity made me confident I would get there.

The banged-up blue truck rolled to a stop next to us. When the window came down, I gasped unintentionally. The man had hazel eyes and skin that looked tanned from long days in the sun. He also had blond hair that was a bit long peeking out under a worn leather cowboy hat and darker, curved horns curling above it. His ears were also different, with them being a bit harrier and almost pointed. The bit of scruff on his face added to the rugged vibes.

I knew this farm was owned by a family of satyrs, and though there weren’t many monsters in the city, it wasn’t anything new to me. I was more surprised by how... attractive he was.

“Need help, ma’am?” he asked. His voice was deep and thick with an accent I wasn’t used to hearing.

Ma’am?

“Uh, yes,” I stuttered out. What is wrong with me? “Our car is stuck.”

He looked down at the tires. “I’m not surprised. It’s muddy season, and two-wheel drive won’t cut it.”

I crossed my arms. “Well, I apologize for not buying a new car for the trip.”

Something like amusement flashed in his gaze, which I didn’t expect. Normally when I spoke to people like that they shied away, but it seemed as if he almost pushed closer. “I’ll help you out.”

He shut his truck off and got out, approaching me easily.

My eyes widened when he came around and I realized he towered over me. I knew I was a short woman, just barely hitting five feet, but he was a foot and then some taller than me. His body was also massive. Muscles built from what I assumed was a lifetime of hard work covered him everywhere. He was wearing a red flannel and jeans, but I could see his hooves sticking out from the bottom.

I was again surprised by my reaction. This guy wasn’t my type at all. I normally went for slimmer men with dark hair and a stoic attitude, which he didn’t seem to have. Still, there was something so... captivating about him.

He ran his fingers through his hair before bending over to check my tires.

“Wow, you’re really stuck. I think I’m going to need to call one of the tow guys. How many times did you spin yourself down?”

“You think I counted?” I spit back.

His smile stayed in place, even with my harsh tone. “Once you’re in the mud, you’re better off staying still and getting help.”

“I don’t deal with a lot of mud, so I wouldn’t know.”

He snorted. “I can tell.”

My eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothin’,” he said. “I’ve just never seen you around here before. Why are you here?”

I straightened my blazer. “I’m Sydney,” I said, holding my hand out for a shake. “We’re here for an organic certification audit at Hoffman Farm.”

“Well, you’re in luck, I happen to be the owner. I thought you weren’t supposed to be here until tomorrow.” He gripped my hand back, and they were so different from mine—rough and calloused, but warm. I was also shocked that he was the owner. I had been expecting someone older, with white hair and maybe a pitchfork.

“We weren’t. We decided to get settled at the inn tonight, but I think I took a wrong turn. The GPS stopped working miles back.”

“That’s Hallow’s Cove for ya,” he said. “The perfect destination because it’s so remote. Anyway, how about I take you to the inn, and we can call the tow?”

I looked around. I knew getting into a car with a strange man probably wasn’t the best decision, but I wasn’t fully alone, and he was who I was here to see. If he killed me and buried me in his field, he wouldn’t get his certification.

“That’s fine,” I said. “I just need to tell my partner and grab our things.”

I opened Matilda’s door, and she jumped as I woke her once again. “Mr. Hoffman is going to take us to the inn so the car can get towed.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” she replied as she wiggled her way out.

“Hello, ma’am,” Brooks greeted. “I’m sorry about your car.”

“Oh, my.” She sounded as taken aback as I felt. “No problem, young man. If we get a ride with you, it’s all worth it.”

My mouth fell open. Was Matilda always like this?

Brooks helped her through the mud and into the truck while I grabbed our bags. Once he was done, he also helped me sling all of them in the back, save for my camera bag. I made sure to hold onto that.

When I first got this job, I went out and bought myself a used camera. It wasn’t fancy, but it took pretty good photos. I’d been able to splurge on a few new lenses in the meantime, which had really improved my output. I loved it and knew this would be my first opportunity to take photos out of the city.

With that bag in hand, I followed him around the truck. When I opened the door, Matilda was already sound asleep in the passenger seat. Seriously? I looked at her and back at Brooks.

“Do you think I can slide in on your side?” I asked.

“Sure thing.” I shut the door lightly, trying not to wake her up. I followed Brooks to the other side, and as he opened the door for me, I looked up at the seat, truly, for the first time. It was as high as my shoulders.

“Here,” he said, holding his hand out to me when he realized I needed help. I took it as I stepped up onto the metal step and climbed up to the seat of the truck. When I got there, I crawled across the cab and turned to sit when I reached the middle.

When I looked back, Brooks was standing there, frozen. His eyes were slightly wide, and his cheeks were flushed.

“You coming?” I asked, confused.

He cleared his throat and looked down, slightly shaking his head. “Yes, let’s go.”

He drove us down the muddy road easily. I looked over the fields as we passed. There were a few green patches where it looked like things were beginning to grow. I couldn’t even guess what they were, but it was very pretty and very different from what I was used to. Everything in the city was sleek and gray, but everything out here was vibrant and teeming with life.

However, it was hard to focus on the outside. I tried my best to stick close to Matilda, but it was a small cab, and Brooks was a large satyr. Plus, I wasn’t all that small either. I had curves everywhere, and my thighs definitely expanded when I sat. So my left thigh was all but glued to his, and every time the truck hit a bump in the road, I swayed against his large, muscled body. I was trying to think about something else, anything else, but apparently I had a one-track mind.

Soon, wide-open fields became stout brick buildings with lots of different signs. I saw a sign for Cool Beans Café, Ted’s Diner, and a place that just said... Bookstore, which seemed odd, but I didn’t have much time to think about it.

Looking to the left, I did a double take when I saw a phone booth. I don’t think I’d ever seen one except ?in the movies, but it made sense with the lack of signal.

We soon pulled up to a large white Victorian home with pillars running across the front and a shingled brown roof. Did everything in this town look like it came straight out of a cheesy movie?

Brooks hopped out, his hooves clacking on the paved drive, and I slid out in his direction. As I did, my foot caught on the step of his truck, and I felt myself begin to fall.

I braced myself for it, but was quickly caught by a warm, hot body that held me to his chest. My eyes widened as I realized Brooks had caught me. His blue eyes shone in the early evening sun, making them almost twinkle.

He cleared his throat, setting me on the ground safely. “Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded, unwilling to trust my voice.

“We should probably get your co-worker.”

Right. Matilda, my job, all the things I was here for.

I followed him around the truck, almost needing to run to catch up, and gave Matilda a shake, letting her know we were here. Brooks helped her out of the truck, to which she noted how nice of a young man he was—again—and led us inside. I tried to tell him we could take it from here, but he insisted it was no bother.

He grabbed our stuff from the back, carrying it inside easily. The inn was cozy-looking, with worn wood floors and cream walls featuring older, black-and-white photos in mismatched frames.

“Welcome!” a cheery voice from behind the counter said. It was a woman with brown hair and freckles, but she also had a pair of bunny ears flopping down around her face. “Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes.” I went to pull out my phone but remembered there was no internet. “Should be under Sydney Jacobs and Matilda Smith.”

To my surprise, she then flipped open a handwritten guest book and ran her finger down until she found our names. “Yes, I see you here.”

She wrote a few things by hand and turned to grab something. When she pressed the cold metal in my hand, I was shocked by the regular keys I was given—no keycard, all manual. It again added to the obvious charm of this place.

“You’ll be in room three,” she told Matilda, “and you’re in four across the hall. Breakfast is served from six to nine. Definitely drop into Ted’s if you’re looking for lunch or dinner, and Cool Beans will have lavender macaroons to celebrate the Blossom Festival happening soon.”

Blossom Festival? What kind of event was that? I thought I shouldn’t ask, since we’d probably be out of here before that, anyway.

“Thank you,” I said, handing Matilda her key.

When I turned around, Brooks was still standing there, bags in hand. “I can help bring these to your room,” he offered.

“I think we’re—”

“That would be lovely. You’re so kind,” Matilda cut in before I could finish.

I huffed, but gestured toward the hall. It was fairly thin, and while Matilda and I could walk side by side, there was no way someone could walk next to Brooks. His shoulders almost touched the walls on either side. My gaze slid from his toned shoulders to his enormous arms that looked seconds from bursting from the sleeves to his tight back.

My eyes traveled lower to his backside in those jeans. Really, did they need to be so tight? They looked glued to his ass, showing off how round and firm it was. I briefly thought about how it would feel if I touched it, but shoved that away. That was a highly inappropriate train of thought, one I didn’t need to be riding on right now.

I'm glad I looked up just as he stopped, or I would've run right into him. I didn't need any additional accidental touching today.

Brooks took Matilda's key and helped her open her door. I turned to mine and slid the key in. I tried to open it—I twisted it both ways—but nothing happened.

I rattled the handle and by now was considering attempting to force it open when I noticed the light had disappeared and a shadow loomed over the door.

"Do you need some help?" Brooks asked, now standing much closer to me.

"I'm fine," I responded. I jiggled the handle again to no avail. "Maybe not," I mumbled as I stepped away and he took my place.

Brooks turned it once, and the door easily swung open. My jaw was on the floor. "How did you do that?" I asked.

"Trade secret," he said with a wink.

I could feel my face getting hot but ignored it as I followed him into the room. It was simple, with a single queen bed with a floral bedspread and floral-covered walls with a clashing print. There was no TV, but it had a dresser and a small desk. The bathroom was to the side, and after the day I'd had, I couldn't wait to shower and unwind.

Brooks set my bags down next to the bed and turned back to me.

"What time did you plan on coming to the farm tomorrow?"

I crossed my arms. "Early. Why?"

He raised a brow at me. “I’ll get the tow truck to get your car, so I’m assuming you’ll need a ride. Even when it’s ready, I think trying to take it through there again would be a mistake.”

“Oh,” I said, shifting on my feet. I had totally forgotten about it. “Thank you. Is eight too early?” I asked.

“Eight is perfect. I’m up with the sun.”

“Me too,” I said, though I wasn’t sure why. He probably didn’t care. “Always been an early riser.”

He grinned. We both stood there for way too long. I wasn’t sure what we were doing, but it felt like I was stuck in a spell until he broke it. “Anyway, I should go, but I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

I nodded, and he left, clicking the door shut behind him.

As soon as he was gone, I locked the door, toed off my muddy heels, and rummaged through my things to grab something comfortable.

I turned on the water to the right setting before standing in front of the mirror and sliding out my contacts, essentially blinding me.

As soon as I stepped under the warm running water, I felt better. I kept my hair up and out of the way, hoping I wouldn’t need to wash it while I was here. At home I had a hot tool that easily let me achieve this blowout, but I didn’t know how to do it without. And I needed it to stay nice. Not only was this my opportunity to get ahead, and I wanted to look good and impress, but I also felt my best when I looked my best.

When I was young, we couldn’t afford nice clothes or makeup, and while I was still

conservative, I always did my best to look nice. Plus, being poor in high school—at peak insecurity time, made it easier for me to make cheap look expensive, and had honed the skill into adulthood, though I couldn't always help but pick up a nice perfume or dress every once in a while.

Once I was thoroughly exfoliated and washed, I hopped out, did my full skincare routine, moisturized, and put my glasses on. I didn't wear them much. They were chunky, black plastic frames. I couldn't wear cute, dainty ones because my lenses were so thick, and my face looked so different to me with them on.

I planned to go over the paperwork once more before bed, but I looked out the window, and the entire sky was bathed in oranges and purples. I knew I needed to get a photo.

I took my camera out, secured the lens, and went out to the back. Normally, I would have bothered getting redressed so as not to be caught in my sweats, but there were so few people milling around I was sure I wouldn't be seen.

From there, I could see the water a bit, so I put my camera to my face and snapped a few in that direction. I was sure to catch the last few sparkles of the sun against the surface of the pond.

I kept my eye in the viewfinder as I swept around, looking for another interesting shot. There was also a building directly across that looked old and official that I had to capture. I realized there were people talking in front of it, and when I zoomed slightly, I realized it was Brooks and a man with small ears poking from dark hair and a tail that was ringed like a raccoon. He was shorter than Brooks, but I couldn't imagine many were taller.

I knew I should move my camera away, that I should look somewhere else, anywhere else, but my lens stayed focused on the farmer I'd met this morning.

He was smiling at whoever he was talking to. It was as if he radiated sunshine.

In a moment only to be described as sheer insanity, I clicked my shutter, capturing his smile, just for me.

For a moment, I was sure he looked in my direction, and I shifted my camera away quickly. I tried to stay calm. From this distance, there was no chance, but that didn't help with my nerves.

So I decided to go inside and get ready for tomorrow.

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Chapter three

Brooks

I chunked off another piece of my banana and held it out to Chicken, who almost nipped my fingers as he took it from me.

“Careful,” I chided, though he paid me no mind. “If you bite off my finger, who will feed you then?” I asked him.

He ruffled his feathers at me, still unconcerned about my health or safety.

I checked my watch: seven-thirty. I needed to head out soon to pick up Sydney and Matilda.

Yesterday, I stopped because that’s what I’d do for anyone stuck in the mud, but when I saw her for the first time and those eyes caught mine, every one of my hairs stood on end. She was like no one I’d seen. Her short dark hair was as shiny as corn silk. Her eyes were green like the glades on the far end of the farm. She had a sharp jaw and a serious expression, and something about it made me want to see her smile, especially since she hadn’t cracked a single one the entire time.

And watching her climb across the cab of my truck almost sent me into an early grave. Her ass was round and jiggled a bit as she moved, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off it. I had to climb into the truck as quickly as I could in hopes she wouldn’t see my cock hardening beneath my jeans.

It was obvious she wasn't interested in being here. She seemed like a city girl through and through, but her eyes did wander with interest as we passed everything.

"Let's take you to the coop before I head into town."

I gave Chicken the last piece of the banana and stood up, brushing myself off. It was strange—my body woke up at my normal time and completed my usual routine, but when I would have gotten ready and driven to my parents', I found myself just... waiting. I thought about getting to the inn early but didn't want to come across as forceful. My obvious attraction to Sydney aside, we needed this organic certification. This silly process had taken almost nine months already, and this was the final hurdle. We needed to make a good impression.

I took Chicken to the coop then headed into town. I waved to Lerana, who was walking into Ted's, and Rick, who was just opening for the day.

It was quiet when I pulled into the inn. I could see a few flowers beginning to peek through the ground, and I hoped they would be in full bloom by the time of the festival in a couple of weeks. People loved coming to look at the floral sculptures in town and to the farmer's market.

I was glad I was paying attention as I walked inside, because when I opened the door, I was almost trampled by an onslaught of small bunny shifter boys running my way, almost tripping over one another.

"You boys slow down," Judy Harrison called as she came around the corner. She had her gray hair up and flour on her apron. The Harrisons had a lot of kids, and subsequently, even more grandchildren running around, including my nieces.

She paused when she saw me. "Ah, morning, Brooks," she said, blowing a stray piece of hair off her face.

"Morning, Mrs. Harrison," I greeted.

"Sorry about them," she apologized, gesturing to the gaggle of boys. "I told them they could get macaroons from Cool Beans, and you know how that gets." I laughed. "I very much do." At that age, everything felt so carefree and fun. While I still tried to have fun while I could, running a farm took a lot out of everyone, including me. Though seeing them now made me think less of my youth and more about my possibility for a family, though that was far off still.

"Anyway," she continued. "What can I do for you this morning?" "I'm here to pick up a couple of your guests," I said. "They should be here any minute." As if summoned, Sydney came around the corner with Matilda in tow. Her hair was still shiny and perfectly styled. Today she wore a black blazer with a green button-up underneath and sinfully tight pants. She had a backpack and a black bag on her side.

Gods, this is going to be a long day.

Matilda looked much more refreshed than yesterday. "Good morning," I greeted, slightly tilting the hat I was wearing.

"Morning," Sydney said in her no-nonsense tone. "We're ready."

Judy looked between us and snorted. "Have a good day, guys." We all headed to my truck. Matilda sat in the middle this time; luckily, there was no sleep to be had, and we were soon pulling up to my parents' house.

I switched off the engine, and everyone got out.

"What are we doing?" Sydney asked as we started to walk up the steps.

"I haven't had breakfast yet," I replied. "And I need to see about your car."

I had called Blake to come tow her car, but when he pulled it out of the mud, it was easy to see there was some wheel damage. Hopefully he would be able to tell me about it. I could tell Sydney wanted to fight me on staying, but she didn't, and they both followed me inside.

When we got there, the chaos was a bit tamed, with just my siblings at the table talking amongst themselves.

"Good morning, baby," my mother said, coming from the kitchen. She gave me the same hug I got every morning before peering behind me to see my guests. "Who have you brought?"

"This is Sydney and Matilda. They're the auditors from the Organic Certifiers of Stonebridge."

"Oh, hello! Would you like some breakfast? The herd here has devoured most of the biscuits, but I still have bacon, French toast, and a hot pot of coffee."

"I'll take some," Matilda said, pushing past Sydney and me and making her way to the kitchen table, sitting down.

"What about you?" I asked as Sydney stood there, frozen in place. "Want something to eat?"

She cleared her throat. "I'm fine, I had breakfast this morning. I would prefer to get started as soon as possible."

"Oh, I insist," Mom called from the kitchen. "Even just a cup of coffee before you go out. The mornings are still so chilly." For a moment Sydney looked as if she might argue, but I'd never known anyone capable of saying no to my mother.

"If you insist," she said, not unkindly. She even almost cracked a little smile.

Almost.

She went to the table and took the seat next to Matilda while I took the other side. Bailey was surprisingly still there this morning, as were Blake and Bryce.

"Where are the kids?" I asked Bryce.

"With their mother. She's having them help pot up some of the flowers for the festival." "What festival?" Matilda asked.

"The Blossom Festival," I said. "It's a town celebration to mark the coming spring and open the farmer's market." "That sounds delightful!" she exclaimed, but Sydney's face stayed neutral.

My mother came a few minutes later with plates for everyone. The food was all in the middle, served family-style like it always was. I thanked her and dug in, grabbing a bit of everything. Matilda grabbed herself some pancakes, but Sydney only grabbed a bit of the fruit and poured herself some coffee, taking a deep sip.

"Thanks Ma," I said as I ate.

"You're welcome."

I was happy my siblings decided to behave themselves while we had guests. It seemed like Sydney spooked easily and probably wouldn't take too kindly to all the noise. Bailey talked about the bees and how she was hoping for an early honey harvest this year. She still had a buildup of beeswax to render from last year to make products, but it wasn't quite time to harvest more honey yet.

“What’s the damage to the car?” I asked Blake before he started heading out.

He shrugged. “I’m not totally sure. I can tell the left tire will need to be replaced. But the muffler might be dinged up too.”

Sydney’s eyes widened. “The car broke?”

I winced, realizing I had been so distracted this morning I’d forgotten to mention it.

“Yeah,” Blake continued. “It’s not totaled or anything, but it’ll take some time to get the parts I need.”

She leaned back in the chair, looking dejected. “I can’t even imagine the cost, and going through insurance will take forever.”

“Don’t worry about that,” I said quickly.

Sydney crossed her arms, looking skeptical. “What do you mean?”

I swallowed. “I mean, our farm broke your car, so we can fix it.”

She was silent for a long moment, and I could tell everyone was tense. Everyone except Matilda, that is. She was fully focused on her meal. “I can’t just pass you because you’re fixing our car.”

Though he tried to hide it, I could hear Blake turn his snort into a cough. “I wouldn’t even dare dream of it, darlin,” I said, turning up the charm a bit.

And though Matilda’s cheeks did redden when I did, Sydney’s stone-hard resolve never wavered. “Fine, I accept. We should probably get to work.” With that, she took the final chug of her coffee and stood, walking toward the door.

I got up and followed obediently, even though she hadn't said anything. I was quite shocked at her nonreaction. The Hoffmans were notorious charmers, and I had gotten that gene is spades, but none of that seemed to matter to her.

"Shouldn't you wait for your colleague?" I asked.

She looked back at Matilda, who was reading the newspaper in front of her, still eating. "I think we can come back for her."

"Sounds good." "Don't worry," Mom said. "I'll send her your way when she's done." "Great. We're going out to the western barn; I still need to fix that fence." She nodded, and Sydney and I made our way towards the door. Before we exited, she paused and turned. "Thank you for breakfast." My mother smiled. "You're welcome dear. Anytime." I'd dropped all the tools I needed out there last night, so instead of taking the truck, we walked our way over.

As we went, she looked around, seeming to take interest in everything. It was hard to tell, because her face didn't change much, but her eyes were shining.

"First time on a farm?" I asked.

She faced me suddenly, and it felt like being under a microscope. I'd never had anyone look at me in such a critical light, and it made me almost nervous. I'd never been nervous talking to anyone. Not when I gave farmhands who had been here my whole life instructions, or when I argued with my father before I took over the farm.

Sydney made me nervous, though.

"Maybe," she finally replied. "But I'm very competent at my job."

"I wasn't questioning that. You just seem more like the city type."

“Born and raised,” she said in a no-nonsense way that made my cock threaten to rise.

I opened the barn to see the cows were back where they should be. They all looked antsy to get out, so I opened it up to allow them to graze. I’d be standing in front of the hole patching it up so we wouldn’t have any more escapees. I didn’t see Milkshake, but when she got out, she was always the hardest to track down.

“Is there anything I can get you?” I asked.

She pulled out a tablet from her bag, and her eyes were suddenly glued to it. “You know that won’t work out here right? No internet?” I asked at her non-response.

“I knew there wouldn’t be internet, this is just for my notes and photos, which don’t require that. And I’m fine, just want to get started.” “Oh-kay.”

With that, I got to work and left her to her observation.

Though my eyes never wandered far.

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Chapter four

Sydney

I brought out my tablet and checked my to-do list, making sure I knew what I was doing. Since this was my first time in the field, I couldn't mess it up. This could be what propelled me to the next step in my career. I needed to collect samples for the lab, but decided I would do that later, since it would require much more concentration, and my mind really was not on the job.

My eyes wandered to my current fixation—again. Brooks was bent over toward the fence, assessing the damage, in another pair of skintight jeans and a Henley, which did nothing to hide the muscles about to burst from the material.

I shook my head, forcing myself to glance away. Checking out the client was highly unprofessional, not to mention creepy.

I began to snap photos, starting with the cows in the barn. It was large and red, with white beams running across the top; basically like any photo of a barn I'd come across.

What the pictures didn't show was the smell. It was for sure not pleasant, and I resisted the urge to cover my nose. Despite that hiccup, everything looked clean: the stalls were all well-kept, and the cows seemed to have plenty of space.

Most of them were outside, having been let out just moments ago. It looked like the scene of a movie. There were rolling hills and cows grazing lazily, it was scenic in a

way I'd never experienced.

When I turned to the side, I almost swallowed my tongue. Over there was Brooks, now shirtless, lifting some heavy-looking wood and moving it out to where the fence was broken. He had a slight tan that I only assumed got darker in the summer, when he'd be out in the sun all day. His biceps flexed with the strain, showing off his toned body and large shoulders even more. He had a bit of hair on his chest, certainly more than most humans, and his jeans covered where I assumed the hair on his legs started.

Gods, I'd never see a body like that in the city .

Realizing how long I'd been gawking, I whipped around, focusing back on my work. If he had noticed I would have been mortified.

I quickly scribbled down some notes, then took photos of the cows in the field. Once I was done, and despite my best judgment, I looked back at Brooks, who was busy hammering wood together and looking too hot for his own good.

I decided not to bother him and went out further into the field, toward the cows. I'd never seen one up close before, and they seemed to be used to people, letting me get pretty close.

I walked right up to one that was just grazing. When it lifted its head, I smiled. It had a cute face, with a big nose and a black spot over its eye that looked almost like a heart. I didn't realize before how large cows really were, coming right up to my face.

I held my hand out, and it rubbed its head against me. It was softer than I thought it would be. I was moving it down toward its nose when it opened its mouth and a long tongue stuck out and licked my hand.

"Ah!" I pulled back, shocked at the touch.

"Cows lick people they like," Brooks's voice said from behind me, and I jumped, not expecting him to be there.

He laughed, and I noticed he'd pulled his flannel on, but unbuttoned, with his chest peeking through. He was slightly sweaty, but for all the work he'd done, he looked fairly relaxed.

"I didn't know that," I admitted. It was nice to think the cow liked me, though. "Are you done?"

"Not quite. I need one of the guys to hold up the pieces while I screw them in, so I'll need to wait until someone's free." "I could help," I offered.

He gave me a skeptical look.

I crossed my arms, irritation filling me. "What's that look for?" He held up his hands in feigned innocence. "I didn't say anything." "But your face did." "I just... don't want to make you do work you don't have to."

"Well, I'm perfectly capable," I said, rolling my blazer sleeves up. "Let's go." I started walking over to the hole in the fence, determined to help him. How hard could holding a board in place be? Did he think I was that incompetent? Just because I was from the city didn't mean I didn't understand hard work.

Brooks came up beside me. "I already put the pieces together," he explained. "I can hold them up since they're heavy while you screw the sides in." He held out the electric drill, and I took it. When I pressed the trigger, it started to whirl; the sound surprised me, and it had a kickback that I didn't expect. It was now I realized I'd never even held one. I hadn't even hung the heavier frames I bought for some of my photos because I didn't want to screw them into the wall.

I didn't want to prove Brooks right, though, so I grabbed one of the screws and tried to line it up with the premade hole as he waited patiently, not reacting at all to my pace.

However, the stupid screw kept tilting, never wanting to remain straight. When I finally got it where I wanted, I pulled the trigger, but it began spinning way faster than I thought and fell to the ground.

I groaned but picked it up and tried again. By my third attempt, I was getting frustrated.

On my fourth, I couldn't help it. "Fuck! Why won't it just stay?" I said aloud, losing my temper.

I only briefly considered throwing the machine into the cows' water when Brooks set the wood down.

"Can I show you how it works?" he asked. There was no irritation or I told you so in his voice, though there should have been.

"I guess," I snapped. I shouldn't be rude to him considering how kind he was being even though I wasn't actually helping him, but the tone just fell off my tongue.

"Here." He picked up one of the boards that was hanging there, attached only on one single side. He held it with one hand, then grabbed a screw. "The drill bit is magnetic. You want to line it up and put pressure behind it in a straight line. You might need to put your hand on the back to add enough force." When he did it, it went through the wood seamlessly.

"Now you try." He handed it over to me. The one he'd just screwed in was holding it nicely, so I lined up another, making sure to follow his instructions. It wiggled once

again and fell to the grass.

"Try again," Brooks encouraged.

I blew my bangs out of my face and tried even harder. It started to wiggle, but before it could fall, I felt his body behind me and his warm hands came over mine, pushing harder and sending the screw forward and straight through the wood like butter.

"You did it," he said, sounding genuinely impressed.

"With your help," I added.

"And next time you'll do it on your own." His hand was still over mine, his body still close. Neither of us moved away for a while. It was like he radiated heat, and everywhere we almost touched felt warmer than it should have.

A truck coming from the west finally made Brooks jump back, clearing his throat. I almost dropped the drill but managed to hold onto it before setting it down gently.

A silver truck rounded the bend. It stopped near us, and Blake, one of Brooks's brothers, and another farmhand I hadn't met jumped out.

"Hey, y'all," he said with a wave. "Heard you needed help." "Yeah, the fence is still busted," Brooks replied as they approached. "I put the pieces together, but they need to be slotted into the posts." "We got this," Blake assured him. "Why don't you guys continue with the tour?" "Are you sure?" Brooks asked. "Yeah, it's no problem. I'm sure you're not interested in this part of things." Blake said to me, and I just nodded.

"Fine, thanks," Brooks responded, his voice a bit clipped. I was surprised at his tone but didn't question it too much.

His brother also looked confused for a moment but shrugged it off with a, "See ya later." Brooks led me away from the barn and back in the direction we'd come from.

"Sorry about Blake," he finally said.

I shrugged. "I guess he's not wrong. I'm here just to observe." Though something about the way he'd said it had annoyed me. "We can head over to the chicken coop and you can do some more observing there." The walk there wasn't long, though my feet were already starting to hurt. I wasn't used to walking on this kind of uneven ground. Though I was wearing flats instead of heels, they still weren't made for this.

I could already tell this was going to be a long day.

Especially if Brooks kept that shirt unbuttoned.

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Chapter five

Brooks

We made it to the chicken coop, but my mind was still on what Blake had said. I didn't know why I was being so sensitive. He didn't mean anything by it, and Sydney didn't seem affected, but it still rubbed me the wrong way.

I could hear the clucks of the chickens as we neared. They needed to be fed, and the eggs collected. Normally, someone else would take care of it, but I had changed everyone's schedule to create the easiest tour possible, so I gave myself all those jobs since I would be here anyway.

"I'm just going to do their feeding and collecting. Do you need anything?" "I'm fine."

I went about my business, looking up to see her observing and taking notes every once in a while. It was like I couldn't keep my eyes off her. I had caught her looking at me earlier while I was putting some of the boards together. It went on for a while, but I couldn't be sure if it was because she was interested in me, or because she had never seen a satyr before.

Though monsters were all over the place, they tended to stay in higher concentrations together, like here in Hallow's Cove. This meant that the humans who came here hadn't had many interactions with one, so her potential curiosity made sense.

Still, I just couldn't help hoping it was the former.

I scooped the feed into the measuring cup and started pouring the seed around. The chickens all ran to me, ready to eat, which gave me the opportunity to sneak into the coop and grab the eggs they left. There was one chicken in there, being broody over her eggs, and since she almost got my hand when I tried to nudge her, I gave up and let her keep them.

Job done, I took the basket and headed out to Sydney. She was still standing there, but she had swapped the tablet in her hand for a professional-looking camera and was snapping photos of the chickens. She had that same intense gaze she'd given me earlier, but when she pulled back and looked at the photos she took, there was something lighter—almost excited—in her eyes.

I had to look away, not willing to be caught staring.

"Brooks," I heard her call and turned around. "I think this one is in the wrong place." When she turned slightly, I saw Chicken's blue head tilted to the side, looking up at her.

"Oh, that's Chicken," I said.

She looked at Chicken, then back at me. "I know it's the wrong color, but it's shaped way more like a duck than a chicken." I couldn't help it; I laughed. A knee-bending, belly laugh. Tears came to my eyes, and my abs hurt by the time I was done.

"What's so funny?" she asked. Her cheeks reddened in embarrassment. "Is this some strange kind of chicken I didn't know about?" I wiped a tear from my eye. "No, that's not a chicken, he's my pet duck named Chicken. And he's not the wrong color, he's a harlequin duck." She looked at him again. "You have a pet duck?"

"More like he has a pet human," I said. "He just claimed me one day and now won't leave. I take him to the other ducks during the day, but it seems that he managed to

escape and find us.”

He leaned up against her leg and rubbed. "Can I pet him?" she asked.

"Yeah, he usually likes it." He'd only ever bitten Beau, but that's because he held the snack he was feeding him a bit too close to his fingers.

She bent down and stuck her hand out tentatively, then patted the top of his head. He ruffled his feathers a bit before pushing back against her touch. It wasn't that he didn't like people, because he was a people duck, but he seemed to really like Sydney.

"He's so cute," she said, standing up and brushing herself off.

"Is that for work?" I asked, pointing to the camera still hanging around her neck.

She turned it away from me slightly, as if keeping a secret.

"Um... No. It's mine. Is it okay if I take photos?" "Take as many as you want," I told her. I wanted to ask her to show them to me, but she didn't seem inclined to do it, and I didn't want to push.

I went back to cleaning all the coops, and by the time I was wrapping up, it was almost lunchtime.

Sydney was taking a few more notes when I found her, scribbling away at her tablet. "Want to break for lunch?" I asked her. "I was going to head over to Ted's to grab a bite." She looked around. "I'm not sure if I should... I didn't really have lunch plans, and Matilda is still not here." "Well, Ted's is really your only option unless you want a pastry from Cool Beans. And we might as well go together, considering you don't have a car. If she's at my parents', we'll bring her along." She contemplated it for a second. "I guess that's fine," she said, and I couldn't keep myself from hoping my

mom had taken her colleague somewhere.

We headed back to the house where my truck was. I opened the passenger door for her, and she looked at me suspiciously before moving to get in while I went inside.

The kitchen was empty. I wasn't worried about Matilda—I was sure my parents had taken her somewhere—so I ran to the driver's side. The engine roared to life, and I began down the dirt path toward town.

“She wasn't there. Maybe she's checking something else around the farm?”

"Maybe." I thought that would annoy her, but she seemed at peace with it. “May I?” she asked, pointing at the radio.

I handed her the cord that was sticking out. "There's no cell service around here, but if you have music downloaded, you can play it." She took it and plugged her phone in.

"Yeah, well, isn't it odd, living without cell service?"

When I glanced at her, she seemed to be scrolling through a playlist. "Not really," I said. "I grew up like this. To have it now might be even stranger." "I guess it is nice. I don't think I remember a time I didn't have it, but it's nice to have a break. I'm still carrying my phone around, though it's as good as a paperweight."

I laughed, agreeing with her assessment. It's why I never even bothered to buy one. Soon, an upbeat pop song came from the speakers. It was pretty good, though I'd never heard it before.

"Is this okay?" she asked.

"It's perfect." We listened the rest of the way into town until I pulled into Ted's.

The building had been the same my entire life. It was tan on the outside, with a large, slightly worn red sign with Ted's written in bold letters.

The inside looked exactly the way I assumed every other diner in a small town would, with worn red pleather seats, linoleum floors, and overly aggressive fluorescent lighting.

We were seated in a booth, and Lerana came to take our drink order. I stuck with a sweet iced tea while Sydney asked for a matcha, which they didn't have. So then she decided on an iced black coffee.

"Who doesn't have matcha?" she asked, perusing the laminated fold-out menu.

"Ted's," I responded with a smirk. Though I never picked the same thing every time, I had this menu memorized front to back. Almost anyone who lived in this town did.

Lerana came back with our drinks and Sydney ordered a wrap while I got a turkey burger with fries.

"So, how does a big city girl like you end up with a job in agriculture?" She looked shocked by the question. "How did you end up a farmer?" she asked, turning the question back on me.

"My family has owned that farm for at least four generations," I replied easily. "It was bred into me to own the farm, and I took it over from my father about five years ago." She seemed surprised by my straightforward answer.

"Your turn," I said with a smirk. Sydney huffed. "It's not that complicated. I went to college, applied to jobs, ended up with this one. I'm normally in the office, but this is

our busy season, and they needed all hands on deck. Not very interesting." "I see. Is this the job you wanted?"

"You're asking a lot of questions," she pointed out.

I shrugged, trying to seem inconspicuous. "Just trying to drum up conversation." That was a half-truth. Though I was trying to avoid any awkward silence, I was mostly interested in learning about her.

"Most people stick to the weather," she said, averting her eyes.

I let it go. It was okay. Sydney seemed like a mystery I would enjoy solving, even if it took some time. And to be a farmer, you needed patience. Plants took time to grow, bees took time to produce honey, chickens took time to lay eggs. Everything on the farm had taught me patience was the key to getting anything good in life.

If I had to be patient to learn about Sydney, it would be even sweeter.

Once we were done, I paid, though she argued with me over it the entire time.

"I have money, you know?" she insisted.

"I never said you didn't." I said as I filled out the tip at the bottom. "But I asked you out to lunch, so it's my treat." It dawned on me what I said made it sound like a date, and while that would be nice, I also knew that wasn't what this was.

Yet.

She mumbled her thanks as we walked back to the truck, and the ride home was quiet save for that upbeat pop music I actually quite enjoyed.

When we got to the house, Matilda was on the front porch, sipping tea with my grandfather. I was shocked, to say the least. They seemed amicable, which was unexpected. He had been so fervently against having the auditors here, but here he was, smiling and sipping from his mug as they chatted.

"Who's that?" Sydney asked, looking at the two.

"My grandfather." She hopped out of the truck, looking just as unsure as I felt, and I followed suit.

"Brooks," my grandfather called in greeting.

"Hey, Gramps, what's going on?" His smile was strangely charming. "Just chatting with our lovely auditor here. She is a gem." Matilda giggled slightly. Were they flirting? I didn't even want to think about it.

"We should continue," Sydney said, seeming unconcerned about her co-worker relaxing on the job.

"We can go to the next barn, but it's further away, so let's step back into the truck."

Matilda made no move to follow. Sydney didn't comment, so I kept my mouth shut too.

As soon as we pulled up, Sydney got out and started doing her thing, taking photos and notes. The chores had already been done for the morning there, so I did some tidying, but there was nothing to do but follow Sydney around.

I asked her questions—her favorite color, foods she liked, things like that—keeping it very surface level so she wouldn't go defensive on me again while still allowing me to get to know her.

She answered every one and asked some in return. I was sure she was doing it to be polite, but it still made my tail wiggle a bit every time.

This barn was much larger than the one before, so by the time she was done, the sun was setting, and she was ready to go back to the inn.

We returned to my parents and Matilda was there this time, regaling us with tales of going to the grocery store with my family. Soon we were headed back to the inn, Matilda once again in the middle, her purse tucked into her lap.

Though she was plenty pleasant, if I was honest, I hated that it wasn't just Sydney and I.

And I hated saying goodbye for the night even more.

Chapter six

Sydney

I flopped down on the bed, exhausted from the day. Though I was used to the constant walking in the city, something about the unevenness of the ground and the constant change of terrain made my feet hurt even more than usual.

Once I was showered, I grabbed my laptop and camera bag and flopped down on the bed. I wasn't sure what detergent they used, but as I did, the scent of flowers wafted up toward me, as if the floral pattern held its own scent.

After opening my laptop and my camera case, I took the USB out and slid it into the computer to move all the photos there. I then opened Lightroom, thinking about doing some edits. Those photos I took of Chicken earlier would do well with a bit of saturation and a white balance adjustment. He let me get really close, so I ended up with some interesting angles.

I laughed to myself as I thought about that name. Chicken. I would need to ask Brooks why he'd named it that.

My mind instantly flicked to him in that worn hat, shirtless, muscles flexed. No one should have the right to look that sexy. And it wasn't just his looks—it was his charm. It was obvious he was aware of it, which is why I refused to acknowledge it, but inside I was melting. I prided myself on my hard resolve, but I wasn't sure how long I could last if he kept it on.

Keep it professional, Sydney.

A person's charm wasn't new to me. I'd spent my fair share of time in clubs, letting them buy me drinks and sometimes going home with them. I was all about casual sex. Relationships were a distraction—one I didn't need. Though I had a nine-to-five job, I would, on occasion, take freelance gigs taking photos, like the usual professional headshot or the occasional family photo shoot, but I knew I wasn't good enough to turn it into a full-time thing. Still, dreaming about it was nice.

I scrolled my gallery and paused on one of the photos I'd taken of Brooks. He was checking on one of the chickens, his smile as bright as the sun rays peering out from behind him.

Gods, why do I have to be this drawn to him?

I slammed the laptop shut harder than I meant to and lay down, staring at the ceiling. The fan was on low, whirling around in my vision. Why did my thoughts keep flitting back to Brooks? And not in a professional way.

I needed to do something to relieve... whatever I was feeling for him. It had to just be physical attraction. When was the last time I had sex? I couldn't actually recall, which probably meant I was just pent-up, ready to crawl up the first attractive person I saw.

With that in mind, I went to my rolling suitcase and dug to the bottom until I found it. My blue rabbit vibrator. It was curved, with a slightly flared tip and a smaller clit stimulator at the bottom. I crawled back into bed and got under the covers, closing my eyes and letting my mind flit, which instantly meant Brooks.

The thought of his bright smile and the way he winked at me were enough to make me feel warm all over. I brought my hands up to my breasts, imagining they were

Brooks's rough, calloused ones. I flicked my nipples, giving them a tighter squeeze than I normally would—the way I thought he would.

Then I removed my pants and teased my opening with the toy. I was so wet it went in easily, and I felt it stretch me. This was a fairly large one, and I was glad for it, since it made my fantasy even better. I had no way to prove it—well, I did, but I wasn't going there now—I was sure Brooks would have a huge cock. Big enough that I might be nervous about it, but I somehow know he'd be careful.

I nudged it in more, imagining him sliding in deeper and deeper, slowly until he bottomed out. I wondered if his expression would change. If he would still look carefree, or if something different would come over him as he lost control.

As the toy hit my G-spot, I turned it on, and the vibrations made my back arch off of the bed. A sheen of sweat broke out over me as I got closer to release.

I lowered the toy a bit and let the small protrusion rub against my clit. It made me think about him on his knees, using his tongue on me. Maybe that was the way to get him to stop talking and asking me questions.

I smiled as I fucked myself harder, hitting that spot over and over. It would only take a little more to send me over the edge, so I pushed the toy all the way in and pressed the vibrator to my clit hard. I imagined his face when he came deep inside me, filling me up, marking me as his.

The thought sent me spiraling into my orgasm. Everything fell away, and the only thing that was left was the image of Brooks in my mind.

I took a deep breath as I came down, shutting the toy off and throwing it to the side. Though I felt sated, I was frustrated when I realized I was now thinking about Brooks more than before.

I grumbled, fixed my clothes, and went to clean the vibrator and put it away. As I rolled off the bed, I heard a loud groan but didn't think much of it until it happened a second time. Louder.

All of a sudden, the ceiling above me burst open and a flood of water came through. I shrieked as it covered the floor quicker than I could react. I picked up my suitcase, already soaked at the bottom, and made a mad dash to my backpack and camera bag, which were safely on the desk in the corner. Once I got those, I jumped across the bed and went to the door.

The same kind-looking rabbit shifter I'd seen this morning was already making her way over, worry on her face.

"Oh dear! What happened?"

"T-the ceiling burst and water started pouring into my room."

She looked as alarmed as I felt. "I am so incredibly sorry. Let me get the plumber on the phone and see if we can get it sorted. It might take him a minute to get here, but you can wait at the café if you don't want to stay here." She went to her desk and dug around the drawers until she pulled something out. "It's a complimentary ticket for a drink and a scone. We give them out if we can't serve breakfast for any reason. Please enjoy while we get this sorted."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Though I didn't want to go out like this, a hot drink did sound nice.

I left my suitcase and backpack behind the counter, took my camera bag, and headed toward Cool Beans. It had an artsy, industrial vibe, with brick walls and a dark chalkboard menu. After perusing the menu, I decided to go with the lavender latte and the rose water meringue. The wolfman at the counter took my order and I went to

stand at the end, waiting for it to be delivered.

“Sydney Jacobs?” I heard from behind me.

I hadn’t heard that voice in a long time, but it still gave me a viscerally unpleasant reaction.

I turned to see Preston Fairfield standing there. He looked just as average as he did in college—same basic blond hair cut short, same dark eyes, same receding hairline he was still trying to hide.

“Hi,” I said, hoping to keep the interaction brief.

“How are you? I haven’t seen you since college.”

“Yep, keeping busy,” I replied. I looked at the counter, hoping my order would appear so I could go back to the inn, but there was no luck quite yet.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Work stuff. Completing an organic certification.” Though I didn’t want to talk to him, I couldn’t help but wonder why he was here. I was pretty sure he lived in the city, working for his father’s company with his wife. Maybe they were here on vacation. Or maybe she sent him on a solo one. Though we weren’t friends in college or anything, she was way out of his league, and it never made sense why she liked him.

“Do you mean at Hoffman Farm?”

“Yup,” I said, hoping not to engage any further.

“Interesting.” The way he said it had me turning in his direction. He had this evil glint in his eye that made me squirm.

“Sydney,” I heard from the counter. I took a relieved breath and moved to get my order.

However, before I could get far, Preston’s hand shot out and grabbed me. I turned to tell him off, but before I could get a word out, he said, “How about you come sit with me and we have a little chat? I think we could help each other.”

I pulled my arm from his weak grip. “I’m not interested,” I snapped.

I grabbed my stuff, and when I turned around, I expected him to be gone, but he was now totally in my personal space.

“I think we should talk. Maybe about your little... side business in college.”

I froze at his words, my heart falling into my stomach. Does he mean the tests? I didn’t know, but I had to be sure.

“Fine,” I gritted out.

I took my things and followed him toward the table near the window in the corner. I slid the metal chair out, the sound of it on the hard floor grating my nerves as I sat.

He leaned back casually, taking a sip of his drink as if this was a casual meeting. “You know, I really appreciate your help during college. My dad would have been pissed if I’d failed my LSAT.”

I crumpled my cup slightly under my grip. In college, I’d been lucky enough to get a full ride, but there were things you needed to buy that no one talked about: textbooks,

clickers to answer silly questions in class for attendance, and software. Why couldn't every teacher just agree on the platform they wanted to use for homework instead of making us buy a new one every semester?

But because of that, I started taking tests for people. It started with a single test for a friend—her Biology 102 final—and she'd paid me three hundred dollars.

At the time, I had a part-time job, but I was sick of it, and it consumed so much of my time I was barely getting my work done. But when my friend told me someone else wanted me to do the same for them, and they were willing to pay double, I couldn't say no.

So I kept going. I only had to do a bit of extra studying, and I was quickly making hundreds. It seemed like the perfect gig, and it was always for classes so large no one noticed me.

My friend at the time had acted as a liaison. She got me clients and told me where to be, and I gave her twenty percent. It had been great until I left college and was able to get a real job. Now I was comfortable enough to have an acceptable wardrobe, my own apartment, and the occasional splurge item, and I couldn't let some rich douchebag ruin me by exposing my test-taking scheme. The school could denounce my diploma, and then I'd be back at square one.

“What do you want from me?”

“Hm, those are the words I wanted to hear,” he said in his slimy way. “I want you to fail the farm.”

I paused. Out of all the things he could ask, that wasn't the one I was expecting. “What? Why?”

“You don’t need to worry your pretty head about it. You just do this for me, and I won’t expose you to the school board, who will probably revoke your degree.”

“You can’t just threaten me. You don’t have any proof. And besides, that would mean you had to admit you didn’t take your own test. You’d be fucked too.”

He shrugged. “You can choose to believe that. But I can assure you, I always save these things. And you think I’m worried about that? My family is paying for the new wing of their law building, I assure you, I’m safe. A nobody like you though...” he shrugged.

I could feel my eye twitch. I couldn’t tell if he was lying, but could I truly risk it? If I lost my degree, I would lose my job and probably wouldn’t be able to get back into any other university. All of my dreams, my goals, would shatter.

“I’ll think about it.”

“I trust you’ll do more than think about it.” His grin made my skin crawl.

“What are we thinking about?” A soothing voice said from behind him.

I looked up and realized Brooks was standing there. And his face was far from the pleasant, carefree one I’d seen earlier. It was... intense.

“Nothing for you to worry about, Mr. Hoffman. Thought any more about my offer?”

Brooks’s nostrils flared in irritation. “Nope, and I can promise you, the answer will always be no.”

Preston picked a piece of lint that didn’t exist from his cuff and, seeming unbothered, turned back to me. “I’ll see you later, Sydney.”

With that, he got up from the table, abandoning his empty coffee cup.

“Was he botherin’ you?” Brooks asked, his voice still taking on that heavy tone. And while I was still out of sorts from that interaction, it was weirdly comforting.

Like he was standing up for me. Wanting to defend me. And I felt okay with that.

“N-no,” I replied hesitantly. “He just recognized me from school.”

He nodded, but his shoulders still sat tight.

Something about it told me he wasn’t buying it, but he luckily let it go.

Well fuck.

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Chapter seven

Brooks

After dropping the women off at the inn, I stopped by Rick's to pick up a few odds and ends. It felt like every time I went into town, I needed something from there.

The bell above the door tinged as I entered. This place had always been the classic repair store—no frills, just shelves for everything to have a place and a counter to check people out.

Rick was behind it, fiddling with something I couldn't see.

“Hey, Rick,” I said as I approached. “What are you workin’ on?”

He looked up from behind the counter. He was tall, even for a monster, with brown fur and tall horns sprouting from the top of his head.

“Fixing Mr. Karmin's radio. I told him to get a new one, but he insists on using this one, even though it's mostly static.”

I laughed. “That sounds like him. He can barely hear anyhow.”

“That's true. I—”

Suddenly, the sound of a drill going into the wall next door sounded loudly, cutting him off. Rick sighed loudly.

“They finally putting something next door?” I asked.

He grunted in confirmation. “And whatever it is is already causing grief. All this racket.”

“It should be over soon. And then we’ll have a new business in town.”

He harrumphed once more. “I think the town is fine the way it is. Anyway, what are you here for?”

“Here you go.” I handed him the list I had drawn up earlier.

Rick’s eyes ran over it before he nodded and started grabbing everything I needed. I used to do it myself, but when I had asked where something was one too many times, he insisted on doing it for me.

He was efficient, grabbing everything and ringing me up quickly.

“Thanks. Will I see you at the Blossom Fest?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Might stop by if your sister is selling any of that wood finish.”

“She probably will. She has quite the stock up of beeswax.”

Just then the bell rang, and Turner entered. He was the town plumber and someone I ran into often here. He was a snake shifter, with a long green tail that sat beneath him and scales running up his arms and chest that eventually tapered out into skin. His hair had started graying with age, but he was still as spry as ever.

“Hoffman,” he greeted, tipping his head.

“Hey, Turner. New job?”

He grunted in affirmation. “Big leak over at the inn. One of the rooms is fully flooded.”

My stomach rose to my throat. I knew there were plenty of rooms in there, but I still felt the need to check.

I thanked Rick and quickly left, hopping into my truck and heading back to the inn. Judy was in the lobby, furiously scribbling something on the pad of paper in front of her.

“Hey, Brooks, what can I do for you?” she asked, her voice strained.

“Nothin’, I was just checking in. I saw Turner at the shop.”

“Oh yeah, a pipe burst in one of the rooms and flooded it. We’ll be able to repair it, but the guest staying there won’t be able to stay, and we don’t have any extra rooms, so I think she’ll have to go to the ski lodge.”

“Is it one of the women I brought?”

She nodded. “Yes, Sydney, the poor girl. I sent her to the café, but I’m going to have to tell her she can’t stay.”

“I can do it,” I said quickly.

“Thanks, Brooks, I would appreciate it. Here,” she passed me a light, slightly soggy suitcase and a backpack I knew were Sydney’s.

As I went to throw them in the back of my truck, I realized the backpack must have

been left open in her rush. There was stuff that seemed to have been thrown in there, including something blue that was just sticking out. I knew I shouldn't be snooping, so I set it on my seat and gave it a quick shake so I could close it.

As I did, the blue thing came into view. A blue vibrator . It had a long shaft and an extra protrusion I was sure was for clit stimulation.

Smiling, I quickly zipped the backpack up and tossed it on the floor of the passenger side. Then, I had to sit there for a moment, willing my cock to stop hardening and my mind to stop wandering toward all the things I could do to her with that.

All the things she could do to me .

Once I felt more in control, I drove over to the café, and as I was making my way inside, a glance through the window stopped me in my tracks.

Sydney was sitting with Preston fucking Fairfield. He was the biggest douche canoe in town, and unfortunately, my best friend's stepbrother. I'd tolerated him for a while, until he started trying to buy my family's farm, fuck knows why. I'd never asked because I'd never sell. But that did add more pressure to make sure numbers grew each year, and for the past few, they'd been stagnant.

It's why the certification meant so much. We could charge more for everything with that single little stamp on our labels. And I knew that if we didn't get it, it could tank us. Customers would know we'd failed, and that was worse than not having it.

But I wouldn't think about that. We had never used pesticides, and since starting this journey, I'd followed the guidelines to the letter. Poured over them on long nights and long mornings with Gabe keeping me company. It was something I'd worked hard at, and something we would succeed at.

I was sure.

But seeing her with him had me shaking with tension. I could feel the coil in my chest pulling tightly, winding me up in a way I didn't normally like. I tried to keep positive. Every problem had a solution and staying upbeat until you figured it out normally helped me keep a level head, but there could not be a happy thought while Preston was around.

And especially not when he was around Sydney.

I threw open the door and walked up to the table.

"I trust you'll do more than think about it," Preston told her.

"What are we thinking about?" I asked as I approached, my voice tight.

Sydney looked shocked, and so did Preston for a moment before he schooled his features and left, but not before trying to make me an offer I would always refuse.

I felt much more relaxed as he left, but Sydney didn't. I wanted to push, ask if there was anything wrong, but I didn't want to upset her further. I grabbed the cup Preston left, too lazy to throw it away, and tossed it before sitting across from her.

"I have news from the inn."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know?"

I didn't want to admit I'd gone just to check on her. "I had to drop something off with Judy for my brother's wife that I forgot earlier." It was a small white lie, but one that kept me from seeming as obsessed with her as I seemed to be.

That fucking blue vibrator.

She nodded. “What did they say?”

“Your room is totally flooded and needs to be fixed before anyone can stay in there again.”

“So they’re going to move me?”

I shook my head. “With the Blossom Festival happening soon, they’re completely booked.”

Her gaze moved to her now-empty cup. “So now what?”

I laced my fingers in front of me, pressing my thumbs together harder than necessary. “Well, I assume staying with Matilda is not an option, so you could stay up at Hallow Hill. It’s the ski lodge, and while it’s nice, it’s pretty out of the way.”

A long sigh was drawn from her. “I guess. I don’t know how I’ll get down to the farm, though.”

“Or you could stay with me.”

My eyes flickered up to hers, and she was looking right back. The air between us seemed to be crackling, but I couldn’t tell if it was just me.

“Really?”

I swallowed but nodded. “I have a spare room. And that would make work easier.”

She contemplated for a moment before nodding, and when I smiled, she gave me a

small one back, one of many I hoped to be gifted with.

Baby steps.

“Cool. Let’s go.”

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Chapter eight

Sydney

My music came through the truck speakers as we made our way back to the farm.

How the hell did this happen? How was I now stuck staying in Brooks house? And what was I supposed to make of what Preston said? Did he really have incriminating evidence? I had no way to prove it, but something told me he wasn't lying. I didn't tell anyone I did this—my friend was the only one who knew—and my name was kept out of it. That was meant to keep me safe.

I couldn't let it get out.

I couldn't help but continue to glance at Brooks, who occasionally tapped on the steering wheel to the beat of my music. I'd been really into a specific artist lately and hadn't realized I'd been playing her on repeat.

The truck pulled up to one of the coops, and I looked at him, confused.

"Give me one second."

He hopped out of the truck, and I watched as he went inside and came out with something in his arms. His door creaked open, and I realized he was holding his duck, Chicken.

"I hope you don't mind," he started, "but if I leave him, he'll just find a way to get out

and end up on my porch." I let out a small snort at that. "It's fine."

Brooks settled Chicken in the seat between us. He shook a bit before settling down, acting more like a cat than a duck—but then again, what did I know about ducks? The sun had set as we pulled into a small cabin-looking home. It wasn't as large as the farmhouse, but it looked well-built and cared for.

Brooks grabbed Chicken, and I hopped out after them. My eyes caught on all the small details: the stepping stone path, the flower beds that currently had small sprouts in them, the bird feeder that sat on the edge of the large porch.

I followed Brooks up the stairs and inside, which was just as nice as the outside. It wasn't like the bachelor pads I'd been to in the city with a mattress on the floor and a TV balanced on old shipping boxes. There was a put-together living area, with a couch, TV, and coffee table that looked to have been carved out of a tree. I could also see a dog bed in the corner I assumed was Chicken's.

"I'll show you to the guest room," he said, leading me down the hall. He stopped at the second door, and I could see another straight ahead that I assumed was his.

The room wasn't fancy, but it was warm and inviting. The walls were a neutral cream color, and the bed looked big and comfortable. Not a floral pattern in sight, which was very welcomed.

He set my bags down. "If you want to hop in the shower, the bathroom is right outside your room. I can get dinner going." "Thank you," I said. I had to set my camera bag somewhere safe and go take a shower. My clothes were mostly dry at this point, but they now stuck to my body uncomfortably, and I was chilled to the bone.

I tried to wash away the anxiety over Preston's words as I did the cold, but it wasn't quite working.

With a towel wrapped around me, I reached inside my suitcase for some clothes and paused, realizing they were mostly wet.

I cracked the door open and stuck my head out. I was about to ask Brooks for something to wear when I saw a stack of clothes already next to the door, so I took them.

Brooks thought of everything.

It was a worn T-shirt and sweatpants, and as I pulled the shirt over my head, I was hit with notes of freshly cut grass and something else earthy. It wasn't a smell I was used to. Stonebridge didn't have a lot of trees and even fewer patches of grass, so it was a new but comforting fragrance.

I slid the gray sweatpants on next. Brooks was so tall I had to roll them multiple times to get them to stay on, and the T-shirt was so large it fell to my thighs. I decided to tie it, so a bit of my midsection was now showing, but it wasn't too much.

Now that I felt more put together, I sprayed my favorite perfume and headed out. Even though I was in borrowed sweats and a T-shirt, I felt better than I had in days and comfortable enough to go into the kitchen.

My mouth dropped open when I got there. Brooks looked like he'd showered as well, his hair shiny and wet, his slight curls even wilder. He wore a pair of sweatpants that hid everything except for his hooves and was shirtless, showing me his wide, toned shoulders and back again. I couldn't help but stare, going as far as ignoring something delicious sizzling on the pan.

Noticing my entrance, Brooks turned. As he did, his eyes widened a fraction as he took me in. His lips parted, and something flashed in his eyes—something hot that made my middle warm. I mentally shook myself. I had to be mistaken. There was no

way Brooks was looking at me that way.

He cleared his throat. "I'm making some stir fry if that's okay. Something easy."
"That's perfect." I sat down at the small kitchen table, watching him continue. He poured some sauces in, making it even more fragrant. "Can I help?"

"Sure. Would you mind grabbing the plates from that cupboard?" he asked, pointing to the one behind him. I moved to the wooden door and grabbed a few. They weren't in a set at all—in fact, nothing was. His mugs, cups, bowls... They were all different, and something about the chaos of it all just worked.

It was nothing like my apartment. I'd just gone to the nearest box store and bought a set of four of everything in the same, boring black ceramic. I had never wanted to call the place home, so I didn't do much to make it so.

"Forks are in the drawer right there," he said as he took the plates from me and loaded them with food. With cutlery in hand, I followed him over to the dining table. It was still odd to be here. I knew I shouldn't. I should have gone up to the ski resort and put as much distance between us as possible, but here I was, sitting at his table and eating dinner with him.

The man I was insanely attracted to.

The same man who owned the farm I was going to have to fuck over.

I just couldn't see a way out of it. I couldn't let Preston ruin me.

"This is really good," I said as I took a bite. The vegetables were so fresh, better tasting than any I'd ever had.

"Thanks. The carrots are coming in really well this year."

We didn't really do much small talk. I figured he was tired, and so was I. We simply ate, and being full and clean made me feel refreshed. He took both plates before I could blink and washed up as I took the chance to admire his toned ass.

"Do you want to do your laundry?" he asked, snapping me out of my gawking. "I noticed your suitcase was wet when I picked it up, which was why I left you some clothes."

I looked away quickly, glad he hadn't turned around to ask. It was all just so... thoughtful. I didn't know how to react. "That would be great, thanks." He dried his hands and gestured for me to follow him to the laundry room, with a quick stop for me to grab my stuff.

He opened the washer so I could throw everything in, and when I checked the backpack for any clothes I might have thrown in there, I noticed the vibrator.

I looked back at Brooks, whose eyes snapped up to my face, his cheeks slightly pinked.

Did he see it in there? And had he been... checking me out too? No. I had to be imagining it. And even if he had, we couldn't go there. There was too much at stake. I was here to do a job and leave. That was all.

He added some soap and started the washer, the whirling sound filling the space.

I didn't realize how small the room truly was with the two machines. And Brooks was larger than he had any right to be, taking up most of the rest. He gazed down at me just as I gazed up at him. It was as if electricity was in the air. It sounded absurd, it felt absurd, but it was so real.

Quack, quack, quack.

I jumped as flat feet slapped the floor beneath us, and Chicken stepped between our feet. It broke the spell, and I could think straight again.

Brooks seemed to feel the same as he flicked his gaze down and picked him up like he was a cat.

"Can you just lift him like that?" I asked.

He nodded. "He likes it. Go ahead and pet him if you want."

I held my hand out like you do to dogs to let him smell me, but he didn't seem interested, so I rubbed my hand over his head. His feathers were soft, and he ruffled a bit, preening under my touch.

"He really likes you," Brooks said.

"You think?"

"Yeah. He likes people, but he seems to really like you." Something about that made me feel warm, and it was better if I kept some distance. So I pulled away and stepped back. "I think I'm going to go to bed," I said.

"Of course. I'll be up for a little while, so let me know if you need anything."

I nodded and left, retreating to the spare bedroom and snapping the door shut. I crawled into the bed and snuggled up, trying to push this day and whatever this was between us out of my head.

I was here to do a job. Nothing else.

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Chapter nine

Brooks

I woke up earlier than normal the next morning, barely able to sleep. Thoughts of Sydney filled my brain, making me unable to rest. She was in the room right next to mine, probably sleeping soundly, having no idea that the client she was working for had a major crush on her.

Though I tried to think about something else, anything else, one part of my body just wouldn't get the memo. My hard dick pressed against my sweats, begging for release. Luckily, I had a bathroom in my bedroom, so I didn't need to worry about avoiding Sydney as I made my way to the shower.

I turned the water on colder than normal, undressed, and stepped in, hoping to relax. My hooves stayed steady on the stone tile below. Most people had acrylic showers nowadays, but I opted for a more expensive one that was well worth it to prevent slipping.

I washed my hair and face before I was forced to admit my dick wouldn't be going down on its own.

I wrapped my hand around it, gripping it tightly and playing with the tip with my fingers.

My mind wandered to Sydney. The way she looked crawling into my truck, the intensity of her eyes as she snapped photos with her camera. I couldn't help but

imagine the way her ass would bounce as I fucked her from behind, slamming into that tight, warm cunt.

Maybe her eyeliner would run as she took my cock to the back of her throat, and she would cry out as I ate her pussy, making her come over and over again.

Though I enjoyed getting off as much as the next person, the real joy for me came from pleasuring my partner, particularly oral. I was bi, and quickly learned that whether it was sucking dick or eating pussy, I loved it all and would do it for hours on end if I could.

The vision of her coming above me, her thighs wrapped around my face, had ropes of cum shooting from me, covering my shower wall more than I'd like to admit.

I used the sprayer to wash it down before cleaning myself up, drying off, and getting dressed in my usual jeans and flannel before stepping out.

When I got to the living room, I was surprised to see Chicken's crate open. I was concerned until I heard the telltale foot slaps and a slight bit of laughter from the kitchen.

Sydney was there, her knees on the floor and her camera in her hand. She was snapping photos of Chicken, who looked to be eating some of the food I kept for him in the house. She was using it as a treat to keep him focused.

I allowed myself to watch for a few seconds. Something about her with a camera in her hand made her look much freer than normal. It was all in the subtlety. The way her jaw unclenched, and her eyes went wide in wonder.

"Mornin'," I drawled. "You're up early." The only one usually up at the same time as me was Gabe, and that's because night was day for him.

Her eyes flicked to mine. Every time I saw them, I was reminded of my favorite glade on the edge of the property. Maybe I should take her there.

I shook my head. Stop it. There was no reason for me to do that. She wasn't staying.

Sydney stood up, being extra cautious with the camera in her hands.

"Good morning. Yeah, I tend to get up early. I hope it's okay I fed him," she said. "He kept quacking at me, and I felt bad." "It's fine. I usually feed him right about now anyway."

I would also usually head to my mother's to have breakfast right after, but something wanted me to keep her close as long as possible. She had changed out of my clothes, wearing tight tan slacks and a green blouse. Just like yesterday, not a hair was out of place, not a wrinkle in her clothes despite sitting in the dryer.

It made me want to see her rumpled even more.

"How do eggs sound?" I asked as I entered the kitchen, grabbing the pan and eggs from the fridge. Anything to keep my hands busy.

"Sounds good. Do you have avocados?"

I turned and glanced at her. "Avocados?" Though this was a farm, avocado trees needed to grow in an almost tropical environment.

"I like having avocado toast in the mornings."

"I don't, we can't grow them here. But I can do some roasted tomatoes and cheese," I offered. She looked a bit skeptical but went with, "I'll try it."

She sat at the table behind me, doing something on her computer as I cooked for both of us. Though I wasn't a chef by any means, I felt comfortable in the kitchen and made some pretty decent eggs.

Once the toast was done, I stacked it with seasoned fried tomatoes, sunny-side-up eggs, and some feta I had kicking around the fridge.

I brought both plates to the table and noticed Sydney was uploading photos.

"Are those the ones you took?" I asked.

She snapped her laptop shut as if she was caught doing something bad. "Yes," she clipped.

I sat down next to her, a smirk gracing my lips. "Can I see?" She set her laptop aside, avoiding looking my way. "They aren't done yet." She looked around. "Can I have a fork and knife?" I stood and grabbed one quickly. "What do you mean not done? Don't you just snap the photos and... done?" "Thank you," she said as I passed the utensils over. She cut off an edge and took a bite. Even when she ate, she was so perfectly composed and polite.

I picked up my piece and ate half in one go. The runny yolk broke, dribbling down my chin a bit. I caught it with my finger and trailed it back up to my lips.

When I brought my glance back to her, she was eyeing me, but I didn't see any judgment there, just interest.

"To clarify, there's much more to photography than just snapping the photo. I edit them all afterward to get the look I'm going for. And half the time, the photo isn't usable." I furrowed my brows. "Why not?" "There's so many things that go into a good photo. Lighting, camera settings, composition. I spend hours before editing just

shuffling through to see if I got anything I like." "I didn't know that."

She shrugged. "Most people don't."

We finished up breakfast. She tried to do the dishes, but I told her it was fine and shooed her away.

"You're letting me stay here and eat your delicious food; the least I can do is the dishes," she insisted.

"I'm glad you liked it," I said with a satisfied smirk. "You can relax before we need to go out," I told her. "We have a long day ahead." I had planned for us to visit the fields so she could gather her samples, meaning we would be out for hours.

"I insist," she said, not budging.

I sighed, my tail flicking behind me. "I wash, you dry?"

She crossed her arms. "Fine." So we did just that. Between the two of us, it didn't take long, even with her learning the layout of my kitchen.

Once we were finished, I grabbed Chicken, and we headed out to my mother's.

"Oh no. I forgot Matilda. We should have gone to get her at the inn," Sydney said. She looked... guilty.

"It's okay, don't worry. We can go there right after."

But when we arrived, Matilda was already there and reading to my nieces and nephews, who were enthralled by her storytelling. Even my mother was sitting with her knitting on the couch listening.

“What’s goin’ on?” I asked Beau, who was still at the table eating.

“Oh, Gramps picked her up this morning and brought her here. Matilda is great with the kids. They’ve been stuck to her since she got here. And she keeps pulling these from what seems like nowhere.” Beau reached into his pocket and pulled out a candy I recognized well. It was that one that looked like a strawberry on the outside. I had no idea what they were called or why it seemed only old people had them, but they were good.

I plucked that one from his fingers faster than he could react, quickly unwrapping it and popping it into my mouth before Beau could fight me for it. “Hey! That was mine,” he snapped.

I sucked the candy harder and shrugged as the slightly sour strawberry taste filled my mouth.

“Don’t fight, boys,” Matilda said from her chair, noticing the commotion. “I have more.” She pulled a handful from her cardigan pocket. Beau was right; that looked like way more than would fit in that small pocket.

The children rushed her as she pulled them out, asking politely for another. She gave them each one but said that was the last one until after supper.

“Sydney dear,” Matilda said. “Richard told me about the room flooding. I was asleep by the time it happened. Are you okay?” Sydney looked surprised she was being checked on. “I’m fine. They had to move me because the rest of the rooms were taken.” “Where are you staying then? We have some room here if you need,” my mother said as she came in from the kitchen.

“She’s fine,” I said a bit too quickly. “She’s staying with me.” The room fell into what could be described as stunned silence.

My mother seemed to snap out of it first. “That’s great. It’s close so she won’t have to come all the way from the mountain.” “Yes,” Sydney said in her extreme professional tone. “Brooks has been an excellent host.” Something about the way she said that grated on my nerves. It was just so... detached, in a way I didn’t like.

“I’m glad you found somewhere to go,” Matilda said before she carried on with her reading.

“She seems to be good with them,” Sydney said from behind me.

“She’s great,” Beau agreed. “She watched them yesterday when she was here too—at least when she wasn’t napping.”

Sydney gave a small smile. “We can just leave her here then, I suppose.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she affirmed, still acting a bit strange. “Let’s go.”

I followed her out. As I trailed behind her, I couldn’t help but stare. She was gorgeous in her slacks and blouse with boot-like heels.

She was gorgeous in anything. Like yesterday, when she had been wearing my clothes.

“Are you sure you don’t need help?” I asked. “I’m sure Matilda expected to work.”

Sydney shrugged. “Matilda is nice and all, but she’s not the fastest, and I don’t think she’s been out on site since before the internet. I think it’s better this way; I’ll get it done faster.”

I nodded. "I guess that tracks." Though the thought of her working faster bummed me out. I wanted her to stay longer, though I knew that was a silly thought.

As we drove, I realized that, if we were going to the field today, there was no way she could wear those pretty heels. I should have warned her. Though a lot of the rainy season had passed, it was still pretty muddy.

With that in mind, I turned right instead of left at the bottom of the hill and started driving us into town. She was playing something a little different today. It wasn't quite as bubbly, but it had more of a beat to it, and I still enjoyed it.

"Where are we going?" she asked after we'd been driving for a little while.

"Oh," I was so in my head I had forgotten to tell her. "To town. You need new clothes."

She scoffed. "There's nothing wrong with my clothes."

"I'm not saying there is." I chuckled. "But it's muddy out in the fields, and I don't think your heels are going to cut it."

Her eyes moved down to her feet. "But they're boots."

"Maybe in the city. But three seconds with those out there and you'll be as stuck as your car was."

"I see your point," she said.

Soon we were off the dirt roads and out on the cracked pavement leading into town.

"This place is cute," she said as we drove through Main Street.

“Cute?” I asked.

She nodded. “No crowded streets or noisy traffic. People say hi to each other when they pass. Hell, you barely have a single traffic light. It just feels like a place ripped straight from a book.”

“I guess. Have you been out of the city much?”

She shook her head. “We almost never left. When I went to college, I didn’t have the time or money to go out and have any kind of crazy spring break, and then I jumped right into working, so there hasn’t been much time for that.”

I considered her words. It had been a long time since I actually looked at my surroundings, but with Sydney here, it felt like I was seeing it all for the first time. Though I’d only been to the city once, this place was a whole different world compared to that.

I parked along the street, and we got out in front of Trash to Treasure. It was a tall, red-brick building with a large, worn, hand-painted sign with the name over the window. The front windows were full of showpieces Jake managed to arrange in a semi-organized way. It was always a bit chaotic, but he tended to at least make it presentable while big events were going on.

That could not be said for the rest of the store. It was filled to the brim with racks of clothes shoved in so tight that pulling out one usually brought a few more along. The back wall was stacked to the roof with furniture precariously balanced on top of one another. I wondered what he did when someone wanted something from the middle. Maybe they were too intimidated by the pile to even ask.

“Jake!” I called as we walked in.

“Back here,” Jake said. We tried to follow his voice, but it had always been a maze in here.

“One more time,” I said.

“Over here,” he huffed, as if he didn’t know his store wasn’t easy to traverse.

We finally found him amongst the shelves of old stationery. “Hey,” he said. “I’m just unloading some of the new stuff. You have to see these new comics I got in too. I’m going to take them over to Gabe later to see if they’re worth anything.”

“I’m sure he’d love those.”

“Can I see?” Sydney asked.

Jake’s eyes moved to her, as if he hadn’t noticed her at first, and his face instantly changed. He was a racoon shifter, with small black ears and a ringed tail to match. Jake, Gabe, and I had grown up together, and though some people thought Jake could be rude, he was just... fully himself.

“You’re not with the... government, are you?” he asked.

She blinked. “No. I work for an agency that is contracted to provide organic certifications.”

“So you work with the government? You’re not actually a spy?”

“I can promise you the only thing she’s spying on is the state of my pesticides,” I replied in her stead. “And she’s cool, don’t worry.”

Sydney’s cheeks pinked in the most delightful way at my words.

Jake shrugged and pushed the box over. Sydney bent down to look at them. I squatted alongside her as she flipped through the box, occasionally pausing before continuing.

“Do you read comics?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I used to when I was younger. My library had a huge collection, and I’ve always loved the art style.”

I hadn’t ever been that into comics. Jake and Gabe had always loved them and traded them back and forth, but sitting down to read something for that long had never been my forte.

Sydney’s gasp had my attention going back to her. “This is Spark Girl! It was one of my favorites. And it looks like there’s a whole collection here.”

“We can get it if you want,” I said without thinking. I think I would get her anything to see her glow like that.

“Just take them,” Jake said.

Sydney looked up. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “If Brooks approves of you, you’re probably okay.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you have any work boots or jeans we could grab?” I asked, remembering why we were here. “Syd needs something she can wear in the field.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “If you go back around the corner and take a left at the decorative duck statue, you can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, man.”

We walked in that direction, passing the duck statue he mentioned. It had a sun hat tied over its head and rested in a bed of ceramic florals.

“Aw, cute,” Sydney said. “Reminds me of Chicken.” While this was certainly modeled after a mallard and not a harlequin duck, I could see the personality resemblance she was referring to.

We finally made it to the rack of clothes with different shoes resting above them. It was easy to find a pair of worn-down work boots, a few thick pairs of jeans, and a couple of flannels she could get dirty.

Jake checked us out, and I made him promise to grab drinks with me once the Blossom Festival was over.

“I forgot about that,” he grumbled. “It’s the worst time with tourists.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “Every time is a bad time with tourists.”

Whatever the season, Hallow’s Cove was a premium vacationing spot. In part because it was disconnected from most of the outside world without phone service, but also because you could find everything here.

You could ski up at Hallow Hill in the winter, go down to Kasper Marina in the summer to swim, and of course, everything that happened in the town itself. Our mayor, Louise, and town founder, Barnaby, had done a good job over the past few years bringing more fun events, including the Street Fair they had started last year. And though not everyone loved how touristy the town was, no one could deny they kept it thriving.

We went back to the truck, but when I checked the clock, it was almost noon. “Why don’t we do a bit of walking around before we head back?” I asked.

Sydney looked wary for a moment. “Don’t we need to work?”

I shrugged. “I’m sure we can get it all done. And it’s almost time for lunch anyway.”

She shifted on her feet as she considered, and I could almost see a smile when she said, “Sure.”

Chapter ten

Sydney

Brooks and I walked down Main Street together toward Ted's. I could feel my nerves getting the best of me. I'd never played hooky from work before, and this felt exactly like that.

But something about Brooks made it so hard to say no. And he was right; I was efficient and could get things done this afternoon. We would grab lunch, stop at a store or two if he needed something else, and go back.

We ate at Ted's quickly, me getting a wrap and him getting a stack of pancakes and bacon. Something about being with him made it pleasant. I tended to be a fairly private person. Most of the time I ate alone, preferring to have lunch at work alone in my car. I would occasionally go out with friends, but even those occasions were few and far between. But something about eating with Brooks, just doing something ordinary with him, was fun.

We left Ted's with our bellies full, ready to explore. I paused as we stood in front of Bookstore. I was still shocked it was simply called that.

"Want to go in?" Brooks asked as I eyed the place.

"Sure." I wasn't much of a reader, but it looked cute, despite being sort of dark. "Is it open?"

Brooks checked his watch. "It should be. They usually open around noon."

"Noon?" I asked. "Isn't that late?"

He shrugged. "When it's run by a vampire, it makes sense."

I paused. Though I was sure Brooks wouldn't take me anywhere dangerous, all the fictional media around vampires made me a bit wary.

"Don't worry," Brooks said, seeming to sense my apprehension. "Barnaby has never fed on humans, and I heard he has a little snack of his own now."

I didn't know what that meant, but I did trust him, so I nodded and followed him inside. It was lit so dimly that I almost couldn't see the space, but it seemed very basic, with a wooden desk for checkout near the front and matching shelves covering the space, each filled to the brim with books.

"Welcome!" a red-haired woman at the desk said. She wore a large gray sweater and leggings, and there was a computer sitting in front of her. "Let me know if you need any help!"

"Thanks, Maisie; we will," Brooks said. Was she the new... snack ... he had mentioned? Well, she didn't seem lifeless or unhappy, so that was a plus.

We walked around a bit. Some of the books looked very old, but I didn't touch any of those for fear of breaking something expensive.

Brooks went off to look at sci-fi stuff while I browsed the classics. I had many books I hadn't read for book clubs I'd never attended, but I still liked to look at the shelves and think about it.

“That’s one of my favorites,” a voice said from behind me, making me jump.

He was a tall man, with black, graying hair and intense dark eyes, intimidating enough to make me take an instinctual step backward toward the shelf.

His face was so neutral it was almost worse than if he looked angry.

“I haven’t read it,” I managed. Though I’d never encountered a vampire before, I wouldn’t let myself feel intimidated.

“It’s very compelling.”

“I agree,” a voice from my other side said. It was Maisie, who was standing there with a smile. “Barnaby showed me that one.” She nodded at the one I’d been admiring.

“I only recommend you the best.” There was a warmth in his voice that didn’t seem to match him at all.

When Maisie smiled at him, I noticed the briefest bit of fang sticking out. Was she a vampire too?

“You like them?” she asked, poking one with her finger.

“Oh, yes, they’re nice,” I said.

“Right? So cool.”

I would never think of having fangs as cool, but to each their own, I supposed.

“Barnaby,” Brooks greeted as he approached with a large tome in his hands.

“Brooks, nice to see you. I haven’t been around the farm in a while.”

“I noticed. No need for cow’s blood anymore, I see.”

Barnaby looked at Maisie lovingly. “Not anymore.” He looked at me. “Is this your new partner?”

I felt my face heat, and Brooks choked, coughing heavily before composing himself. Maisie laughed behind her hand.

“No,” I affirmed. “I’m the organic auditor.”

“I see,” Barnaby said. “Well, I hope that goes smoothly for them. We wouldn’t want any problems.”

That felt slightly like a threat, but I shrugged it off, especially when Maisie bumped him and told him to stop being rude.

“Are you ready?” I asked Brooks, who still looked somewhat taken aback.

“Yeah. I got this space odyssey that looks cool.” I looked at the book. It wasn’t something I would normally pick, but it had a nice cover.

We went to the counter, and Maisie rang us up. “Don’t be a stranger,” she said. “I would love to know what you think of the book.” She tapped the cover of the one I ended up choosing.

“For sure.” I didn’t know if I would have a second to even look at it before I left, but I might come back here before I did. Maisie seemed nice, and so did Barnaby, if a little strange.

We left and continued our walk. There was some construction work going on for what looked like a new shop. It didn't look to be much yet, but I caught glimpses of shelves and green walls.

Next to it was Rick's Hardware, and I could see a man walking around with horns and a long snout inside. I assumed he was a minotaur, but I had never met one in person, so I couldn't be sure.

"Want to stop here?" Brooks asked as we approached. "Gargoyle's Horde?"

"Sure." We walked in, and my mouth dropped. Every wall was covered in games, comics, plushies, figurines, and card collections. There were tables in the middle for people to play games if they wanted.

"Hey, Brooks," the woman behind the counter said. She was pretty, with long brown hair and a short stature. She had kind round eyes that made me feel welcomed.

"Hey, Gwen. This is my auditor, Sydney."

"Nice to meet you," I said with a wave.

"What can I help you with?" Gwen asked.

"Just came to say hi. Sydney wanted to see the store."

"It's lovely," I commented, and I meant it. I could spend hours perusing the comic section alone.

"Well, take your time and let me know if you have any questions."

I nodded and began working my way around. I checked out the comics first before I

made it to the games. Though I didn't play much, I did enjoy strategy games.

When we got to the plushies, they were all super cute, but I spotted one that made me pause. It was a little golden retriever. While I liked dogs, I'd never had one, but when I looked at it, it reminded me of Brooks in a strange way.

"Do you like that one?" he asked.

I jumped and bit my lip as I realized he was behind me. There was no way he could know what I was thinking, but it made me flustered all the same.

"Yeah, it's cute."

He picked it up and looked at it, and this time I couldn't help the giggle that left me.

"What are you doing?"

"We're getting it, aren't we?"

"We don't have to," I said. "I just thought it was cute."

"Well, that's a good enough reason for me."

"You really need to stop buying me stuff. People might get the wrong impression."

"I don't care what others think. Only what you do."

He took it over to the counter, and I was left there with warm cheeks.

We left after that. I felt like I was seeing lots of pieces to lots of people's lives that I usually wouldn't. In the city, things tended to stay private, and people kept to themselves. I didn't even know my neighbor's name, much less what they looked

like. I knew next to nothing about my co-workers. Even Matilda, who I just shared a four-hour drive with... I didn't even know her birthday.

Yet in Hallow's Cove I felt like I wanted to know people, and everyone seemed interested in getting to know me. It wasn't something I'd ever experienced before, but I found that I might enjoy it a little.

We made it back to the truck and drove back down to the farm. The sun was closer to setting than I realized, and looking at the clock, it was already almost four.

We'd wasted almost an entire day, and I had that sinking feeling like I'd done something wrong. I always tried to be on top of my work, to excel at what I did, but it felt easy to get distracted by things here.

And by the man who went out of his way to show me everything.

We pulled back up to his house and took everything inside. I realized we had picked up a lot, but I packed light, so I thought it would fit in my suitcase.

I went back to the spare room to change into the clothes we got. The jeans were worn and slightly large, and the flannel was so big I had to tie it at the bottom instead of just buttoning it.

Thinking about being in a field made me realize I should probably put my hair up, so I did just that with a claw clip.

I picked up my camera and my tablet, along with the sample bag, and went to the living room.

"I'm ready," I said.

When I came around the corner and made eye contact with Brooks, his mouth hung open, and he dropped the granola bar he was eating. It went down with a thud, and crumbs flew across the tile floor.

What the hell was that?

“S-sorry,” he stuttered. He reached around for the broom and swept it all up, tossing it into the garbage. “Let’s go.”

I followed him out the door and back into his truck. He took us to a field that looked to be filled with corn. It wasn’t very high yet, but the green stalks had started to sprout.

It was beautiful out here. Flat land for miles and the mountain reaching to the sky above in the backdrop.

Brooks followed me around as I took pictures and samples. At some point, he left to grab Chicken from the coop, and I stayed back to finish up. By the time he got back, the sun was setting, and it cast a beautiful evening glow over everything.

Chicken walked around the field a bit, and Brooks followed him. I took out my camera and took some photos of the setting sun and a few of them both. The orange of the sun sat nicely against his hair, and his smile was brighter than those golden beams could ever be.

After we got home that night, he made me dinner, and we both tidied up the kitchen. It was very... domestic, and our silences were never awkward.

Later, when I was curled up in bed with my laptop, I looked at the photos a bit closer, and one thing became abundantly clear.

I had a serious crush on Brooks Hoffman.

Chapter eleven

Brooks

I tapped my hands on the steering wheel to the beat of yet another new artist as we made our way down the road toward the beehouses. Bailey told me today would be good for her, and I was also excited to bring Sydney here.

As we pulled up, her gasp told me I was right to be excited. Across the field was a meadow of spring flowers that had just started their main blossom. Peonies, Jacob's ladders, and bell sprouts filled the area, making it pop with color.

"This is gorgeous," Sydney commented. "I've never seen so many flowers in one place."

"It's one of my favorite spots," I agreed. When I turned the truck off, we could hear the slight buzzing of the bees flying around.

We walked toward my sister's workshop. It was a shed that looked like a classic barn. I'd helped her build it when she decided she wanted not only to make honey but also to produce soaps, lotions, and other honey-based things.

Part of what I loved about the family farm was that it really was a family farm. There was a place for everyone to do something they wanted to do. Even Bridget, who had left, helped with the website occasionally. I prided myself on keeping this a thriving place for everyone, and that included keeping everyone afloat.

Which started with the certification.

I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. My sister's space was kept clean, with worktables on each side and hanging shelves and pegboards around holding various tools and products. She currently had her blonde curls in a ponytail and her glasses on her face. She was holding a piping bag and was filling a bunch of glass jars quickly and efficiently. Her phone was set up to record. I didn't understand the social media side of the business, but that was one of the things Bailey was best at.

"Hey, we're here," I called, not wanting to scare her. She was slightly rocking back and forth, and I could tell she didn't hear me.

"Bay," I tried to call, waving my arms, but nothing.

Finally, I stepped up next to her and set my hand gently on her shoulder. She jumped and squeezed the bag, overfilling the glass she was working on.

"Brooks!" she yelped, pulling one of her headphones out. The music was so loud I could easily hear it. "You scared me."

"I know," I said. "You told us to be here at nine, so we're here. And I tried to get your attention, but you didn't look up."

"Oh," she said, looking sheepish. "Still, don't scare me in my own workshop." She smacked my shoulder as she walked past to wash her hands.

"It's not my fault you lost track of time."

"What's this?" Sydney asked as she examined the jars.

"They're my best-selling body butter," Bailey responded as she washed her hands. "I

usually sell out early, so I'm trying to prepare a lot."

"Can I try some?" she asked.

Bailey raised a brow. "Are you going to test if it's organic through your skin?"

Sydney's eyes went wide. "No. I just meant it looks nice, and I wanted to..." Her voice dropped down to a mumble as her face flashed a heated red.

Bailey only laughed. "I'm kidding. Go ahead. You can use that jar someone ruined." She glared back at me as if I'd actually done something wrong.

Sydney ran her manicured nail through it, picking some up and putting it on the back of her hand before rubbing it in. She brought it to her nose, smelling the body butter.

"This smells amazing," she said. "It's sweet and luxurious but fresh. I couldn't get anything like this in the city."

It was Bailey's turn to flush. She'd never been the best at accepting compliments, even when her work really was amazing. "Thanks. It's my special blend."

"Well, you should get this on shelves everywhere. People would love it."

"You're too kind. You can take that messed-up jar; I can just scrape some off the top for you."

Sydney gave her a vibrant smile I'd only seen a couple of times, but each time I witnessed it, it felt more and more special. "Thank you. I would like that."

Bailey packed that up for her before we suited up to go out to where the bees were kept. They were very active by the time we got there, milling around the fields and

going back and forth to the hives. It always felt so nice and peaceful out here. The humming of the bees provided a nice white noise, and they were used to humans, so they were fairly docile.

Sydney snapped the photos she needed while chatting with my sister. They seemed to get along pretty well and even discovered a shared love for a reality TV show they both watched religiously.

“I go to the café to download every new episode as soon as it airs,” Bailey said. “It’s one of the only places in town with Wi-fi. The owner opens late so I can get it right when it’s out.”

“Yeah, you have to stay on top of it, or else you’ll fall behind and never catch up. I’m glad I started in the beginning. Which couple was your favorite last season?”

And on it went, as they discussed their favorite and least favorite contestants, the heartbreaks, and their favorite revenge moments.

That conversation almost had me rethinking their sanity.

But soon Sydney had taken all her notes and photos and collected all her samples. She then put her stuff away and pulled out her personal camera. “May I?” she asked.

“Sure,” Bailey said. “The bees don’t mind.”

They both laughed as Sydney uncapped her lens and fiddled with the settings. Though I’d spent most of the morning just sitting back and watching, it felt like something I could do all day. Sydney seemed to pull me in, like she had her own gravity, the kind that consumed all my thoughts. I knew I shouldn’t think like this. That she would soon pack up and head back to the city, and I would stay here with my farm, but every time I had that thought I pushed it away, unable to manage it.

Once Sydney was done with the bee photos, we went back to the work shed and took off the suits.

“Thanks for the tour,” Sydney said to Bailey. “I enjoyed it.”

“You’re welcome. Come by anytime. And I’ll see you at the market,” Bailey said to me.

I nodded, and we made our way out. It was still late morning. We could probably head to one of the fields close by before heading out to lunch.

“Do you mind if I take a few more photos before we go?” Sydney asked, gesturing to the rest of the fields.

“Yeah, we can do that.”

I followed her toward the tall stalks of flowers. They were all in various stages of bloom since it was a bit early in the season, but no less beautiful than when it was a full sea of color.

I watched as she took a few wide shots, getting the blue sky in the background. Then she bent down, I’m assuming to get some close-ups of the flowers. As she did, her jeans flexed and her ass bounced slightly, showing off her curves in a way that had me blushing from horn to hoof.

I forced myself to turn away. If I let myself look and let my mind wander any further, there was a one-hundred-percent chance I’d get hard in the middle of this field, and I couldn’t have that.

I closed my eyes and let my face turn up toward the sun. It was something I’d done since I was small; something about the warmth on my face made me feel centered

and comforted. And it was a good distraction from my current predicament. Especially when added to the shuttering of the camera.

When I glanced back, the lens was no longer facing the flowers on the ground but up. Facing me.

Sydney shifted slightly, as if she'd realized she'd been caught, pretending she was capturing the tree line beyond me. Though it might have all been in my head, considering she might be taking photos of me was exhilarating.

“Can I try?” I asked.

“Try what?”

I pointed at the camera in her hands. “Taking a photo.”

She stood up, assessing me once again under that microscopic gaze. “This is a very expensive camera, and I don’t normally let anyone touch it.”

“I understand that,” I said. And I did. It seemed to be important to her. “I was just curious, is all.”

She shifted on her feet in thought, looking down at the digital screen. Then she removed the strap from around her neck and held it out to me. “If you break it, I will bury you in this field.”

I took it from her, handling it with care as I slipped the strap around my neck. The camera fell heavily against my chest, a weight I wasn’t used to.

“How does it work?” I asked.

“Have you never used a camera?”

“I have,” I said. “But this one is way fancier than any I’ve touched.”

“Come here,” she said, gesturing for me to sink down to her height so she could see it. Being at her level made me much closer to her than I normally was. Her sweet, floral scent wafted towards me, making me want to lick up the column of her neck, where I could see her pulse race against her luscious skin. “The photo button is in the same spot as every camera. You do this to zoom, this to adjust aperture, which is how much light it lets in, and this to adjust shutter speed. That tells the camera how fast to take the photo, so if you want to capture something moving, you can take it a bit faster to make it still.”

“Got it.” I didn’t really, but I was sure I could take something nice. “And how do I see the photo I took?”

“Here,” she told me, gesturing to the button.

I aimed the camera up toward the field, looked through the small window like I’d seen Sydney do, and snapped the photo. I then checked it. It was a bit crooked, and I thought I’d moved slightly when I took it, making everything a bit blurry, but it was still pretty.

I took a few more, finding myself facing the tree line off in the distance, my truck in the driveway, and finally, landing on Sydney, standing amongst the flowers. Looking like the prettiest one of all.

She was looking right at me, and before I could think about it, I snapped the photo.

“Did you take one of me?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “And I want to take another. Pose for me.”

“I don’t know how to pose,” she said.

I quirked a brow. “You take all these photos, and you don’t know how to pose?”

She furrowed her brow. “I’m usually behind the camera, not in front of it.”

I wanted to tell her it should be the other way around. That I wanted to photograph her and keep her in my memory forever, but under the circumstances, that wouldn’t be appropriate.

“Why don’t you pretend to be looking over there? I’ve seen that in magazines.”

She sighed. “Fine.”

She turned so she was facing sideways and looked toward the sky in the distance. I was right; she should be in front of the camera. I snapped a few, listening to the shutter go off every time.

“I think you’d make a great model,” I said, and I wasn’t kidding.

“Yeah, right.” She showed me that bright smile that I couldn’t get enough of once again, and I took as many photos as I could manage before it slipped. I wondered if there was a way I could get copies of it without seeming weird, but probably not. Maybe I’d be okay with being weird if I got to see that smile every day.

“Want to see?” I asked.

“I’m sure I don’t look that great,” she said, but came over anyway.

I pressed the button she'd shown me earlier, and her image popped up. There was photo after photo of her smiling at the camera, at me.

"I agree," I said quietly.

"Agree with what?"

I looked down at her, but her eyes were still on the screen. "You don't look that great." She looked up at me in confusion until I continued. "You look... like a tall drink of water on a hot summer day."

"That's cheesy," she said, though her cheeks pinked at the mention.

"Maybe, but it's true. You're the most gorgeous person I've ever laid my eyes on, and none of these photos could ever do you justice."

We stood there, just existing in the words I'd laid out between us. I hadn't realized until now how close we were.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. Even so, I could feel the words lassoing around us, pulling us closer.

I wasn't sure who leaned in first, but soon the camera was forgotten, and my lips were on hers.

It was timid at first, neither of us sure if we were doing the right thing, but it felt like watching the flowers bloom for the first time.

I deepened our kiss, needing to taste her further. She was sweet like the honey she'd had earlier, but there was another flavor that was uniquely her .

Her arms came around me, and I was sure to move the camera to the side to pull her closer, feeling her warm body against mine. She was much smaller than me, small enough that I was easily able to put my hands beneath her thighs and lift her into my arms.

Her legs came around me easily, like they belonged there, pressing her entire body even closer, and it still didn't feel like enough. I wanted our clothes gone; I wanted to feel her skin against mine.

Eventually, we had to pull away, and I was breathless, so was she. That moment seemed to bring us back to reality, where she was my auditor and we were so different.

I let her slide down my body, feeling her close one last time before she retreated. I took her camera off my neck and handed it back.

“Hm... Should we head to the next field?” I asked.

She nodded but didn't say anything as she turned away and headed back to the truck.

Chapter twelve

Sydney

“I’m going to run and grab Chicken if you want to get comfortable,” Brooks said as he dropped me off in front of his house.

I nodded in silence and hightailed it out of the truck as if it were on fire. When I got inside, I kicked off my shoes and fled to the guest room. As soon as the door was closed behind me, I threw myself onto the bed, tossed my head into the pillow, and screamed. Was it potentially dramatic and the most 90s thing I’d ever done? Yes, but I was finally able to express myself in some way after being trapped with Brooks all day.

After our kiss in the field, I realized how truly fucked I was. I kissed the man whose farm I was meant to bring to ruin. How fucked up was that?

Even so, I couldn’t stop thinking about the way his lips tasted on mine. He was such a good kisser. I was no stranger to being kissed, but it had never felt like that.

Like the bees had stopped buzzing, the breeze had stopped blowing, and the world had stopped spinning. It felt good and free, in a way I’d never felt before.

I had always wanted to feel free, but there was always something holding me back, and it was usually money. It was why I worked so hard to get where I was and still strived for more. However, being here and kissing Brooks gave me the feeling I’d been chasing all this time.

What does it mean?

And what can I do about it?

My head was a mess.

As I was praying for the bed to open up and consume me whole, I heard the door open and the distinct sound of webbed feet slapping the hard floors.

I also listened as Brooks shuffled around. He was doing something in the kitchen, then moved down the hall toward his room. I watched the light shift from under the door as he walked by. It was a bit odd to listen to him clicking around instead of the padding sound human feet made, but I was becoming accustomed to it. It seemed I was becoming accustomed to everything that had to do with Brooks Hoffman.

That led my thoughts right back to that earth-shattering kiss and had me throwing my face into the pillow once more.

A light knock came and pulled me out of my current stupor. "I made dinner if you want some," he said through the door. Even when I was blatantly ignoring him, he was considerate.

And I was an adult. I could have dinner with someone I'd kissed. It was only a kiss. It was no big deal.

Liar.

"I'll be out in a minute," I said finally, jumping up, trying to hype myself up to go out.

I thought maybe changing would make me feel less like the Sydney who thought

kissing Brooks was a good idea. I needed to feel like city-me, so I slipped into one of my skirts, tights, and a nice black blouse. I added cute earrings and brushed my hair until it fell into place.

I wasn't as comfortable as I had been with looser clothes, but it was what I needed to brave going out there. I took one last look at myself, then made my way to the kitchen.

When I got there, Brooks was shredding some kind of cheese over what looked to be a yummy plate of pasta. Of course he had showered and changed, so he was now shirtless, his toned back fully exposed. Each grating motion made his shoulders flex, making my mouth water.

I am so screwed.

When he turned around, he looked like he was going to say something but stopped himself. His eyes roamed over my body until they landed on my eyes.

"What?" I asked, fidgeting a bit under his gaze.

"N-nothing," he stuttered.

I took my normal seat at the table and watched as Brooks set the steaming, pesto-covered pasta down in front of me.

"It's tortellini. Every year my mother takes a huge batch of the flour and spinach we produce and makes tortellini with it for all of us. I've been storing it in the freezer and thought it was a good time to break it out."

"It looks great," I said, and taking a bite only made me agree more. It was delicious.

We ate in silence, the same way we had at lunch. At least this felt a little less awkward, but that kiss was still lingering heavily around us.

“Tomorrow I thought we could go check out the apple orchard,” Brooks said, breaking the heavy silence. “There aren’t apples this time in the season, of course, but the blossoms are coming in, so it’s still pretty.”

“Sounds good,” I said. I would also need to start thinking about how I was going to sabotage the test. I could slide something into my written report. Buying pesticides and contaminants would be too risky. I could photoshop the images, but that could be traced.

Even considering any of these options made my stomach roll. There had to be another way out of this, but I couldn’t see it right now, so I decided to just do my job and figure the rest out later. There was nothing else I could do at this point.

I just had to hope it would all work out.

It was midday, and the field of apple trees was green and vibrant. They’d just begun to bloom, and a sea of pink and white flowers topped the trees. I was glad to finally be done with the work part of it so I could begin to take photos.

My camera came out of my bag, and I went to snap as many photos as I could. Of the trees, of the individual flowers, of the pretty framing the paths made. And a few sneaky ones of Brooks as he checked on how the trees were doing.

I then took a few of Chicken as he waddled by me. Brooks told me he enjoyed the apple orchard and the pond that rested beside it, so he brought him along. Sometimes he was less like a cat and more like a dog, just following us around, doing his own thing but also taking an interest every time he thought Brooks might have an apple or something in his hand.

He continued walking toward what I assumed to be the pond.

“Hey, I’m going to run to the truck to grab my pruners. Some of the trees are starting to get unruly and come into the path. Are you good for a couple of minutes?”

“Yeah. I’ll probably go check out the pond.”

“Sounds good.” He turned and started walking back down the path.

As he did, I snapped a few photos of him, surrounded by the trees in almost a perfect natural frame. I think if Brooks weren’t so good at running Hoffman Farm, he would have an excellent back-up career as a model.

Once I was done, I walked the opposite way, toward where Chicken went. It took me a little while, but I eventually made it to the opening at the end of the tree rows. It landed me in a grassy area surrounding a pretty body of water. Cattails stuck up out of the edges, and it had a slightly irregular oval shape. I couldn’t see the bottom, but it seemed pretty deep for a pond. The water was a bit murky, but clear enough I could make out the silhouettes of the fish swimming below the surface.

On the other side were the blackberries that we were going to look at next. In the correct seasons, they allowed people to come here and pick their own produce. People apparently loved it and traveled here just for the blackberries. There was something about them that made them extra juicy, I’d read. It was one of the big draws to Hallow’s Cove on tourist sites.

For now, though, I sat on the edge of the pond and took some more photos. I was glad I’d brought another SD card for this trip because I’d filled the other one already, and I might still have a week left.

I took a few of Chicken in the water. He would fluff his feathers, move around, and

even dunk his head for a second before coming back up.

It was so peaceful out here, it made me feel like I had a second to think. In the city, there was always so much stimulation that made it easy to ignore my own thoughts. But out here there was only the humming of bugs and Chicken splashing. Though it wasn't something I was used to, I was beginning to see the upside of it. Maybe once things were over, I could come here on vacation.

Then again, maybe that wouldn't be the best idea. I was here to ruin the beautiful farm I was living on. I didn't even know what the fuck Preston could want with all this land. He certainly didn't have any interest in farming, and I didn't ask when he blackmailed me into this. I couldn't do anything but agree anyway, so what did it matter?

But every day that passed, every moment I spent with Brooks and his family and in this town made me regret that. I didn't want to do any of this, but every time I tried to think of a way out, I ended up back at square one. I couldn't tell anyone what was happening, or I would be fucked anyway.

The wind blew by, a cool spring breeze that fluttered through my hair. I could even smell a bit of Bailey's body butter I had applied this morning.

I decided to snap a few more of Chicken while he was there. As I was, he bent down below the water's surface and didn't come back up. Then he sank lower, putting almost the entire front half of his body in the water.

I expected him to pop back up as he always did, but he just stayed lowered, not moving much. I put the camera down, letting it rest against my chest with the strap around my neck.

"Chicken," I called. He normally responded to his name, but there was nothing. No

feet kicking or moving. Just his body bobbing in the water. Was something wrong with him? I didn't know anything about ducks. I only knew pigeons, and that knowledge extended to the very small number of fucks they gave about you walking near them.

"Chicken!" I called again, more panicked. I couldn't tell how long it had been, but it felt like he'd been under for way too long.

"Brooks!" I tried instead, but maybe he was still back at his truck. "Brooks!"

I shifted on my feet, unsure of what to do. If he was drowning and he died, I knew Brooks would be crushed. Hell, I would be crushed at this point. I'd spent every morning listening to him pad across the floor, feeding him treats, and pushing his little ball with the bell around.

I needed to do something quickly. I decided I was going to get him. He couldn't have much time left. I went to jump into the water. At the last minute, I remembered my camera and tried to take it off and set it aside, but I was already on the bank. It was so slippery, my boot caught, and I couldn't stop myself from sliding down into the water.

Chapter thirteen

Brooks

I whistled the song we'd listened to on the way here as I walked back with the shears. Today was a new artist, one that had a more melodic tone, which was nice too. I had never been much of a pop music guy, but Sydney might be converting me.

The trees were unusually wild for this time of year, and it was better to trim them back now. The paths needed to be neat when people came for self-picking, and since I had some time, I might as well do it.

It also gave me a minute to go back to what had happened yesterday. Though I had felt my feelings develop for Sydney since we met, that kiss solidified them. I needed to talk to her about how I felt and see where we stood. I knew we lived in different places and led different lives, but maybe we could make it work. I could visit the city, especially when things were slow in the winter, and she could probably come here during the summer. It wouldn't be easy, but I knew she was worth it.

That was... if she felt the same way. Who knew what was going through her mind? I was just letting my mind spiral with all the different possibilities, which only made me emotionally dizzy.

I was walking back when I thought I heard my name. It was faint, but I was sure it happened. I stood there for a moment and then kept walking at a slightly brisker pace.

"Brooks!" I heard more clearly this time, and it was obviously Sydney. She sounded

distressed. I dropped the shears and took off, running as fast as I could. Something was wrong.

I didn't hear her call again, which seemed worse. When I finally reached the clearing, I noticed the bubbling of water, Chicken popping his head up, and Sydney nowhere in sight.

Inferring what had happened, I threw my shirt off and dove straight into the pond. It was freezing cold, but I barely felt it as I searched for her. It wasn't long before I felt her and dragged us both up. She was coughing and thrashing but able to wade through the water pressed up against me. I moved us back to shore, throwing her up on the edge before I followed.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded, coughing up water. I rubbed her back, hoping to be comforting as she caught her breath.

"I-I was sitting here and Chicken went under and didn't come back up for a long time. There's something wrong with him. Is he okay?"

I blinked slowly at her. Before I could say anything, Chicken hopped up onto the bank and shook himself off. Looking very okay.

"But... but... I thought..."

"Ducks do that," I said carefully. "They can stay underwater for a pretty long time searching for food. And that's probably what he was doing."

She her mouth was agape as she looked at me. Her hair was wet and pushed back and her wet clothes were clinging to her body. Especially her shirt, which clung to the

darker-colored bra she was wearing underneath.

Focus, Brooks, that's not what you should be thinking about right now.

"I didn't know that!" she yelled. "How does anyone know that? I thought he was drowning."

A small laugh escaped my lips. My hand wandered on its own, pushing the bit of hair out of her face. "If you haven't seen a lot of ducks, it would be alarming. I'm sorry it happened, but I'm glad Chicken has someone like you looking out for him."

She glanced away, flushing a bit. "Thanks. I guess now that it's over, it is pretty funny." She let out a small laugh, as if she'd zoomed out of the situation and realized how funny it really was.

I couldn't help it; her high-pitched, melodic laugh was infectious, and I joined in until she leaned her head against my shoulder, which ceased my laughter altogether. All of my attention was now focused on where we were touching. The rest of my body was freezing from the pond water, but everywhere we were connected felt like it was on fire.

Her laughter eventually died out as well, leaving us sitting together on the bank, dripping wet. I let my hand crawl toward hers until our pinkies hooked together.

I could hear her barely perceptible inhale of breath, and it reflected how I felt perfectly. I was no virgin, but I had never had... feelings like this for anyone. Something about Sydney drew me, like a moth to a flame. She was so different from me, but something inside me recognized her.

When I turned down to look at her, I realized she was looking right at me. Before I could make a decision, her hand came around my neck, pulling me in toward her

mouth.

I went willingly, pressing my lips to hers, gently at first. I expected her to be a bit apprehensive, but there was nothing but want in her kiss, and I returned it in kind.

My tongue licked across the seam of her lips, tasting her, hoping she'd let me in. One second later, she did, letting me taste her fully. My hand at her side came around her waist tighter, trying to get her as close as possible. When I couldn't take it anymore, I wrapped my hand a bit tighter around her and pulled her up. She squealed as I set her in my lap, needing to feel her nearness. Her arms wound fully around me now, holding my neck almost too tight, but I found I liked that.

When we pulled away, I couldn't breathe. She was so stunning, even drenched in pond water. I needed to tell her how I felt. It was the perfect moment, and I couldn't mess this up.

"Sydney, I—"

"Wait! Fuck!" she started, her eyes going wide as she scrambled off my lap toward the bank.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

That's when she pulled up a soaking wet strap with a waterlogged camera at the end.

"Goddamnit!" she swore loudly. "I thought I left it to the side before I jumped in."

I could see tears gathering at the sides of her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Syd."

She sniffed. "It's fine. It's my fault for being careless. Now it's broken, and I don't know how I'll afford a new one."

I wanted to tell her I would buy her one. I would buy her a hundred if that would make her happy. But I felt that if I said that, she would take it as pity, and I knew she wouldn't take it well.

“Why don't we go home? Maybe we can put it in rice or something.”

She laughed at that. “I don't think there's enough rice in the world. But yeah, let's go.”

My shirt forgotten, I reached my hand out to help her over the slight ledge of the bank, and she took it easily, stepping over and following next to me to the truck. She held my hand the whole time, which gave me hope. It was obviously not the time to tell her all my feelings right now, but it made me think maybe they weren't so one-sided.

We got to the truck, and when I helped her up, she started to shiver. I quickly reached into the cargo box and grabbed the blanket I kept there just in case and wrapped it around her. Sydney snuggled down into it, her shivering slowing.

Then she did something I didn't expect. She leaned in and dropped a quick kiss to my lips. “Thanks.”

I smirked. “If that's my payment, I'll need to do nice things for you all the time.”

She huffed a laugh. “Let's get going.”

I hopped out of the cab and clicked my tongue, waiting for Chicken to come back. After a few moments, I heard the telltale flap of his feet on the ground. He quacked once he was at my feet, letting me know he was ready to be lifted into the truck.

He really had me trained well.

Sydney sighed as Chicken pressed against her. “I would love to be mad at you if you weren’t so cute.”

“It’s hard to stay mad at him,” I agreed. “When he was younger, I came home to every book I had on the bottom shelf ripped to shreds. It’s why he goes to the pen during the day.”

“I see.”

We made it to my house, and I got us all inside.

“I need a shower,” Sydney said.

“Yeah, me too.”

We went our separate ways. It was nice to get clean after being in cool pond water, even though Sydney had warmed me up after that. Just thinking about her on my lap made me hard, but I didn’t have time to get off. I wanted to get back to her as soon as I could. Maybe there would be time for that tonight.

I dried and dressed quickly, thinking about whipping up some quick tomato soup to hopefully warm us up, and briefly wondered if I had the ingredients to make grilled cheese to go with it.

I decided to knock on the bathroom door to make sure Sydney was okay with that. But before I could, the door opened and she got out running, knocking us both against the hallway wall.

On instinct, I reached out and caught her before she fell, and as I did, I realized I was touching a very wet, naked Sydney, whose towel was now on the ground between us.

Chapter fourteen

Sydney

My vision had been blurry since my dip in the freezing pond, so the first thing I did was take out my contacts and soak them in solution.

Even though the blanket Brooks had brought me had helped, I was chilled to the bone, so a shower was my first priority.

The warm water felt amazing, but my mind kept going back to my now-busted camera. I'd done a lot with it since I bought it; there were a lot of memories attached to it, and I didn't know when I'd be able to afford to fix it, much less get another one.

I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around me, feeling clean and fresh. Looking around, I realized I'd been in such a hurry that I hadn't grabbed any clothes. I was grateful for satyr-sized towels, though, because they covered me fully... Just in case I happened to run into Brooks in the hallway.

Trying to avoid that, I opened the door, meaning to dash to my room...

And ran right into Brooks. In fact, I think I bulldozed him into the wall.

And dropped my towel in the process.

And almost went down until he grabbed me, placing his arms around me.

Then we were just... there, frozen, neither of us sure what to do. His hands were wrapped around me, the bottom one on the small of my back and the top over my shoulder, dangerously close to my breast. The sound of our breathing and what I was sure was my pounding heart filled the space.

I expected him to push me away, maybe turn, but that's not what happened. Instead, he looked , and not briefly either .

It was as if his eyes were metal and my body was a giant magnet.

His gaze started as far down as he could see and slowly trailed up. Each glance felt like a caress across my skin. I knew when his gaze hit my tits because he gasped slightly. The small action alone was enough to make me blush. Especially because they weren't particularly large, they were perky sure, but they'd always been small. I carried most of my weight in my hips and back side.

He steadied me, and the hand wrapped around the small of my back rose to come around, caressing my hip, roaming up over my waist. I was holding my breath, waiting for what he would do next.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his eyes now focused on mine.

I nodded, unable to speak. I worried if I did, nothing would come out anyway. His movements sparked a fire up my side as he kept climbing. His touch was featherlight, as if he were afraid I would break if he touched me too hard.

When his hand reached the underside of my boob, I was so sensitive it felt as if I'd been shocked. His light caress turned to cupping the underside while his thumb ran over my nipple, and I took in a sharp breath in as the sensation went right to my clit.

He kept looking into my eyes as he touched me, and it felt like whatever had sat

between us before had shattered. There was no more apprehension, no more holding back.

“Are you sure you want this?” he asked in a whisper.

“I’m sure,” I said, finally finding my voice. “I want you.”

Brooks snapped, and I found myself pushed up against the hallway wall while he towered over me, taking me in with his intense blue eyes.

Then his lips were on mine. He wasn’t kissing me sweetly like before. He was taking, giving in to the lust and desire that we’d both been hiding for what felt like too long. His tongue tangled with mine in a messy, intense kiss.

I bit down on his lip, harder than I intended, but he only moaned, and I could feel the pulse of his cock beneath his sweatpants. It felt large. Inhumanly large. But I guess that would make sense since Brooks wasn’t human. I couldn’t help but wonder if it would fit, but we would cross that bridge when we got to it.

His mouth traveled to my jaw, kissing from the base of my ear all the way down to my chin, searing me as he went.

I let my hands travel up under his T-shirt. I could feel the ripple of his abs, built from years of hard labor, and something about that made it even hotter. He broke away from me for a moment to tear his shirt up over his head and his pants down before tossing both away. Though I’d been stealing glances at him the entire time, this was the first time I really let myself look at him. He was muscular everywhere; a short coating of hair went over his chest that turned thicker just below his belly button.

His legs were where he definitely stopped being human. Not only were they covered in fur, but also shaped slightly differently, with a more curved calf. He had thick

thighs and a toned ass to match, and I wanted to squeeze it. His hooves were also very different, black and hard-looking, but it didn't matter.

No one had ever been this attractive to me.

My eyes stopped on something still trapped behind a pair of briefs. I had been correct in my earlier assessment— much larger than a human's. And thicker too. There also seemed to be... a bulge at the bottom. I wasn't sure what it was, but thinking about taking that cock had me licking my lips and dripping wet already.

"Had your fill?" Brooks asked with a grin.

I felt my cheeks heat in embarrassment. Of course he noticed me looking, I wasn't being very sneaky.

"I suppose."

"Don't worry, honey. I haven't had my fill either."

He bent, and his mouth instantly latched onto my neck, giving it a hard suck, followed by a bite that was quickly soothed away by his tongue. He continued down along my collarbone and over my shoulder. I used the cool wall behind me to keep myself grounded while the rest of me was lost to this feeling of need brewing between us.

When his lips went lower, kissing over my right tit and trailing down until he reached my nipple, flicking it with his tongue, my back arched into him, craving more.

Taking the cue, Brooks put his mouth around the bud, sucking and licking in the most perfect way. I ran my hands through his hair, feeling his still damp but soft curls.

When he gave the other one the same treatment, it felt like a direct line to my clit. I tugged hard at his hair, and he groaned against me, the vibrations of his deep voice pleasing me even more.

“Do you like that?” he asked, as if he were unsure.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Good,” he said as he kissed my nipple one final time before going lower, kissing my sensitive ribs and belly, waist and hip bone, until he was on his knees before me.

It felt like he was worshiping my body.

I thought he would continue down, but instead he went across, all the way to my other hip bone, ignoring where I needed him the most.

“Brooks...” I started, but I didn’t have to. He wasn’t going to make me wait, and I felt his kiss drift over my cunt until he reached my lips.

Lightly, tentatively, I felt the press of his tongue against me, parting my folds. I shivered at the feeling. He did it once again, deeper this time.

“Gods, I knew you’d taste good.”

Seeming to lose control, Brooks grabbed hold of one of my thighs and lifted it up, setting it on his shoulder, spreading me completely apart for him.

I could feel the cold air drift across my pussy, telling me exactly how wet I was. I tried to close my legs, suddenly embarrassed about feeling so exposed.

But Brooks was right there, his fingers spreading me so he could take a closer look.

“Your cunt is so pretty and pink,” he said, and it made me warm all over. He sounded honest. Like he was just stating a fact, rather than giving a compliment.

When he brought his mouth to me again while spreading me with his fingers, I pushed myself forward, into the feeling. Brooks went with it, sucking my clit into his mouth a bit too hard before releasing and licking me gently.

“Fuck, Brooks,” I groaned. My hands found purchase in his hair again, making me feel like I was in control when I really wasn’t.

“Yes, fuck me,” I half begged, half demanded as his two fingers circled my entrance.

“Whatever you need, honey.”

Bringing his fingers to his mouth, he coated them in his saliva before spearing me easily. I cried out as he did; he was stretching me more than I expected. So he slowed down, working them in and out of me, his tongue still circling my clit.

“God, you’re so good at that,” I moaned.

His chuckle against my clit sent some delicious vibrations everywhere. “Anything for you.”

I looked down at him. Those intense blue eyes were looking right at me, and it felt as if he was looking through me. As if he could see my deepest secret. As if he knew I had to let him down eventually.

Anything for you.

Did he mean more than just this moment?

Before I could spiral, Brooks curled his fingers, easily finding my G-spot.

“Fuck,” I cried as he did it again and again, bringing me close to the edge.

I watched as one of his hands moved down, rubbing over his clothed cock, seeking relief, and a small smirk touched my lips.

“Is eating me out turning you on that much?”

He nodded.

“Do you want to play with yourself?” I asked.

He nodded once more.

“I need words, baby. Tell me what you need.”

He pulled away from me, a string of saliva hanging in the air between us for a moment before disappearing. Even something that simple was hot.

“I want to touch my cock,” he said, his eyes looking so round and pleading.

“Good boy. Now let me watch.”

Chapter fifteen

Brooks

I think I've died. There's no way this is real life.

Sydney was draped above me, her pretty pink pussy in my face, looking down at me, wanting to watch me play with myself.

At the very least, I had to be in a coma. One I never wanted to leave.

"Take it out," she ordered, snapping me back to reality.

Her command made my cock throb with the need to obey. I had topped and bottomed for men and women, but I'd never felt the carnal need to listen like this.

I grabbed it out, pulling it above my boxers. It was hard and angrily flushed, needing attention.

As I did, Sydney gasped. When I looked at her, her eyes were glued to my cock. I didn't find it to be anything special, but many of my human partners had commented on its size, and of course, the knot. It was a fairly common monstrous appendage, but not one I used with a partner. Knotting meant locking myself to them, which meant needing to stay together for a long period of time, which had never been something I wanted before.

I took it in my hand, spreading the precum dripping from my tip over my length. It

felt amazing, and I could feel myself barreling toward release.

I kissed her thigh, still thrown over my shoulder, inhaling her scent. It was luxurious; something I'd never been interested in before but could get used to craving quickly.

Tingles raced down my lower back as I drew closer to coming.

"Slower," Sydney said.

I groaned. As much as I wanted to disobey, I couldn't. I forced my hand to slow its pace, edging myself.

"Spit on it," she said. Her voice was somehow deeper and sexier with each new command. As if she'd found herself enjoying it more than she thought she would too.

I turned my head down and let a string of spit drop onto my cock, lubing it up. My pace picked up a bit more; I was chasing my orgasm.

"Slow down or you won't get to come at all."

I groaned and leaned forward, licking her gently, though it only made me want to come more.

"You're killing me," I breathed against her.

"You love it," she replied, her hand petting my hair. And she was right; I did. I preened under her attention, craving even more.

"Now finish what you started, and maybe you can come when I'm done."

Gods, this woman's mouth. Her fingers came down and she opened herself further for

me, letting me see just how wet she was. That wetness was all for me.

I pressed right against her, burying my tongue in her and rubbing my nose along her clit as I went. When she responded by yanking on my hair, it made me even hornier. The pain mixed with the slight suffocation made my head spin in the best way.

I let my mouth travel up to her clit and used my other hand to fuck her again. I was sure to curl my fingers over the place that made her pulse from inside.

“Brooks, yes,” she moaned.

I loved the way she moaned my name, could feel her legs trembling around me, and I knew she was close. I continued exactly what I was doing, not wanting to move and mess up the rhythm.

“I’m gonna come,” she cried. “Come with me.”

I listened, jerking myself harder and faster, barreling toward release.

Her hand came up over my horn, gripping it tightly as she came all over my tongue. The mix of her taste and the feel of her hand wrapped around my sensitive horn had me coming too, shooting rope after rope all over the floor. I was sure I’d never come so hard in my life, and I definitely wanted to again.

When it subsided, I set her leg down and she slid down the wall. I shifted to catch her so I could put her in my lap, and we stayed there, curled against each other.

The steady thrum of our heartbeats was the only sound, and I couldn’t tell whose was louder. I didn’t dare speak. Though there was a lot I wanted to say, I knew she would see it as it being said in the heat of the moment. Meaningless in the long run.

When I told her how I felt, I wanted her to know I meant it.

Then I heard those tell-tale flips of Chicken's feet on the floor. We both watched as he came around the corner. As soon as he caught our eye, he approached and started quacking loudly.

"I think someone's hungry," Sydney said with a smile.

I laughed. "I think so too."

I stood and helped her up. She picked up her towel and sauntered off toward his bowl, and I watched him follow her.

Damn, I was in trouble.

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Chapter sixteen

Sydney

“I think I’ll need to shower for the rest of my life,” I said as we took the drive back to the farmhouse. We had just left the butchery. Though I managed to avoid a full inspection, it was still much more than I could stomach.

Beau was very kind, though. He was a bit older than Brooks and showed us photos of his wife and kids. They looked like such a happy family. He threw barbs at Brooks every once in a while, but that seemed to be a sibling thing. I didn’t have any, and barely any family, so I couldn’t really relate.

I looked at the vanity mirror of the truck. I’d put my hair up in a ponytail. When it wasn’t blown out, it got this strange half-curly, half-straight look that I wasn’t a fan of, so it was better to keep it back. I’d also put my contacts in, though they were starting to bother me. I might have to wear my glasses going forward.

“It wasn’t that bad. You don’t even have a drop of blood on you,” Brooks said with a grin.

“And that’s all luck.” I’d been very careful during sample collection.

I expected us to go right back to the farm, but Brooks turned the truck left, I was pretty sure in the direction of town. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“I have a little surprise for you.”

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I was excited.

After last night, and me behaving like a coward and running as soon as I could, I wasn't sure where we stood, but I couldn't deny how delicious it had all been. Dominance wasn't something I normally did, but having Brooks on his knees for me like that hadn't only been a huge turn-on but also made me feel alive . He was huge and strong and could have easily taken over whenever he wanted, but he liked being dominated, wanted me to take control, and that made it even hotter.

I kept dreading him bringing up last night while wanting him to at the same time. It was... incredible. I'd never had sex like that, and I wasn't sure I would again. It made me even more sure about my crush, which was not ideal, to say the least. What the hell am I doing?

And also... What now? I didn't think we could date... right? The city was far, but not so far we couldn't visit. And maybe after a while I could move here...

Wait, what? I had never thought of leaving the city. I always assumed it was the only place that offered any opportunity for me, but something about Hallow's Cove—about the farm—felt almost magical.

I gazed at the shops as we passed, already recognizing some of the faces of the people walking by. One of which made me do a double take.

Matilda was there, walking with Brooks's grandfather, hand in hand.

"Did you see that?" I asked, pointing out the window.

"See what?" Brooks looked over.

I could tell the moment he caught it because his eyes widened. "What are they

doing?”

“Looks like they’re on a date,” I drawled, waggling my brows.

Brooks shook his head. “Please never say that again.”

The laugh that left me was almost a cackle. “But what if it’s true?”

“Then it’s none of my business. I don’t need to know.”

His reaction made me laugh harder, and I was wiping the tears from my eyes when we pulled up in front of a store I’d yet to go to.

Deja Doo, the sign hanging from the front said. Hair and nail salon.

My brows furrowed as I looked at it. “Brooks, why are we here?”

He looked a bit sheepish. “I know I can’t fix your camera, but I could tell you had your hair done. Since it got all wet yesterday, I thought I could at least fix that, so I made you an appointment.”

I didn’t know what to say. Most people never noticed my hair at all. No one had ever given me a gift this thoughtful.

For a moment, I felt a bit choked up, but managed to push that down. I turned to Brooks and pressed a kiss to his lips. He seemed surprised but quickly kissed me back. I had meant for it to be a short thing, but then I kissed him again and again.

I licked his lips, and he let me in easily, his hand coming around my waist, pulling me as close as he could. I moved across the middle seat, wanting to be closer to him.

His hand ran over my thigh, down to my ass, giving it a squeeze through my jeans. He moaned in my mouth at the feel, and warmth flooded my core.

When we finally pulled away, his lips were pink and swollen, so pretty I felt the need to lean in one more time and bite the bottom one, just as I took the chance to run my hand over his hardened length.

Brooks let out a rugged sigh, one laced with pleasure. “You need to go before I turn this truck around and take you to my bed. Maybe we can even use that little blue thing you have stashed away.”

“Is that a promise?” I asked. I knew he’d seen it, but now, it just turned me on to think about. “Because, if it is, I think I’d rather have something larger instead.”

The sound that came from him had me wetter than I cared to admit. “Enjoy your appointment, I’ll pick you up after,” he said against my lips.

“Okay.” I gave him one more quick kiss before getting out and heading toward the door.

It was a cute place I’d seen on our outings before. It was a purple building with a matching sign with big, bold, black letters spelling out the business name.

I stepped up onto the porch and went inside. There, it looked exactly the way I’d expected a small-town salon to look. Only a couple of stations lined the walls, with the washing sinks in the back and a few sitting dryers along with it. I could hear the whirl of the hair dryer and smell the artificial good smell of the products they used.

“Welcome,” a short woman behind the counter said. She had long hair and pointed ears. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Yes; should be under Sydney.”

She ran her finger over the ledger in front of her. “Yes, Sydney, I see you here. You’re with Flora today. Let me go grab her for you.”

“Thanks.” She scurried to the back, and I leaned against the counter as I waited. Though Brooks wasn’t doing anything to make me feel uncomfortable—quite the opposite, actually—having some time away from him would hopefully get my head on straight and allow me to think about anything else.

From the back of the salon came the receptionist along with a beautiful woman who, if I had to guess, was a fairy. She had long, shimmering blue wings that were tucked neatly behind her, long curls that framed her face, and bright pink eyeliner that almost glowed against her deep skin.

“Are you Sydney?” she asked.

I nodded. “You must be Flora.”

“That I am. Why don’t you come back to my chair, and we can take a look at your hair?”

I followed her toward what was clearly her station. It had colorful tools scattered on the desk and photos up on the wall behind her mirror, ranging from what looked like personal photos to things she ripped out of a magazine.

“So what do you want to do today?” She ran her fingers through my hair as she talked, looking at me through the mirror.

“A blowout, and maybe some kind of hydrating treatment. I sort of took a tumble in a pond, and it’s been dry ever since.”

Her face twisted in question, but she didn't say anything. "That makes sense. We can do all that. And maybe a light trim; you have a few split ends."

"Please."

She got out the cape, put it around me, and took me over to the wash bowl. I lay my head back and let my eyes close. The sound of the water came through as she turned on the sprayer and adjusted the temperature. I jumped a bit as it touched my scalp.

"Is the water okay?" she asked, and I was so relaxed, I just nodded.

"So, what brings you to Hallow's Cove? You're a bit out of the regular tourist season."

"Work," I told her. "I'm doing an inspection on the Hoffman Farm."

"Oh, that's exciting. They have the best produce. I can't wait for the farmer's market to open this year."

"I can't wait either," one of the other women chimed in from another chair. "And those Hoffman men. How I wish I could scoop one up."

Flora snorted. "I think most of them are scooped up."

"There are still a couple left," she insisted. "I think Bryce is still on the market. And I'm sure Brooks is as well. He spends so much time working that we rarely see him. But wouldn't I love a piece of that farm man."

My face heated at the conversation, and white-hot jealousy streaked through me. There was no reason for that. Brooks wasn't mine, and one night and a few kisses didn't change that. But as much as I told my brain that, my heart didn't care.

“Who wouldn’t?” someone else chimed in. “Men and women have been chasing him since high school. But he’s never seemed interested in settling down.”

“One day he has to,” the first person said. “You need lots of kids to run a farm that large.”

That statement had my mind wandering. What would have happened if he’d taken me home to his bed instead ? What would have happened if we had gone further yesterday?

No, I wasn’t considering kids or anything, but my mind traveled anyway. I remembered the feel of his body against mine, his calloused hands caressing me in his gentle way. The feel of his horns in my hands as he went down on me.

The water flicked back on suddenly and was super cold, causing me to fling my eyes open and almost sit up.

“Sorry!” Flora said. “Sometimes the water goes cold for a second. It’s good now.”

“No problem.” Honestly, a splash of cold water was exactly what I needed.

Fuck. Me.

Brooks picked me up right after my appointment and drove us home. When I got in the car, he complimented my hair a bunch, and I couldn’t say I disagreed with him. Flora gave me a few extra layers and did a great job with the blowout. The way he looked at me made me warm all over. We picked up Chicken on our way back, but I couldn’t get back soon enough. I had a plan, one I’d formulated since being in the chair.

When we got home, I slipped into my room and pulled out the little black silk sleep

shorts I had and the matching camisole top. I didn't put on a bra or panties, and I could already feel my nipples poking through as the top rubbed against them. I also finally took my irritating contacts out and slid on my thick-rimmed glasses.

When I stepped out into the living room, Brooks was there, a checkbook on his lap and his face in full concentration.

He glanced up at me, then back down, eyes wide.

I shuffled on my feet, being a bit coy. "What?"

He set the booklet aside and walked until he was right in front of me.

"I've just... never seen you in glasses."

I pushed them up on instinct. I had expected him to comment on everything else I was wearing, and for a moment, I felt self-conscious.

"Is that a problem?" My voice was harsher than I meant it.

He shook his head with a smile, his hands finding their way to my hips. "No; it's... really hot."

My cheeks tinged pink. "So, just to clarify—it's not the thin outfit that's hot, it's the glasses?"

"It's you," he replied honestly as his hands began to creep up the sides of my thighs, trailing under my shorts.

His fingers were warm against my skin, making goose bumps break out all over. "You're a real flirt," I said, a bit uneasy.

“Again, only for you.”

He pushed me back onto the couch, his body over me, making me feel even smaller than I normally did around him. My hands ran up under his shirt, feeling his toned abs and moving up to his hard pecs. His nipples were hard, and I couldn't help but flick one. I got the exact response I wanted, the breathy moan that left him so sweet to my ears.

“Do you like that, baby?” I asked.

“I like everything you do to me.”

The power I felt around this man was inexplicably sexy. It made me wonder how far I could push him. Could I tie him up? Could I cause him a little pain?

Could I fuck him?

I knew we weren't quite there, but pegging had always been a fantasy of mine. I never had a long-term partner to bring it up, but I always found it fascinating and wondered if that was something Brooks would be interested in.

Back to the present, I continued playing with his nipples. He squirmed over me, but I wanted more.

“Strip and sit,” I said. He backed off and tore his shirt up over his head before yanking his pants and underwear down. I stood, and we swapped spots.

“Give me one sec.” I ran to the room and grabbed my little blue rabbit, his comment earlier giving me confidence he'd want to use it. And right now, I wanted to give him everything he wanted, even if it was my dominance.

I came back and stared at his perfect naked form. He was good and made no move to touch himself. His cock wept the longer I stared at him, precum dribbling out of the slit.

I dropped to my knees in front of him, and his eyes widened with the movement.

“Hold my hair?” I asked.

“Anything for you, honey.” His fingers ran through it and held it off my face. I took my time, rubbing my hands up and down his furred thighs. I ran my hand up his length, pushing his foreskin up and back down over his pink tip. God, he was big ; thinking about fitting him inside me made me nervous.

My hand traveled further down to his knot. I’d never seen one before, but it was just a small swell at the bottom that seemed to get bigger the more I played with him.

I wrapped my hand around it, and he jerked beneath me hard. For a moment, I worried I had hurt him, but as I gazed up, I realized he liked it. I ran my hand up around it again, giving it a bit of a squeeze this time.

“Fuck, Syd, you’re gonna kill me.”

I hummed. “Are you sensitive here?”

He nodded, lip between his teeth.

I gave it another squeeze, tighter this time. “I asked you a question; I want a real answer.”

“Ah! Yes, it’s sensitive, but it feels so good.”

“That’s my good boy, I have something even better for you.” I held the toy out and he looked at it with wide eyes, like he hadn’t expected it, hadn’t noticed earlier.

The buzz sounded around us as I flicked it on and touched his thigh with it, making him jump. “Can I use it?” He swallowed heavily. “Please.” I brought the vibrating toy down further, towards his cock. He squirmed at the feeling, but didn’t jerk as I brought it down to his balls, letting it pleasure him there. I could see his strain not to shove me down, but I wanted him to.

I pulled off him, gasping as I did. Saliva fell from the corners of my mouth. “Do you want to fuck my mouth, baby?” I asked bluntly.

“Yes, please,” he begged. Having this strong man whimper and beg with his need for me had me reeling.

“If I need you to stop, I’ll do this.” I pinched his leg hard.

“Got it.”

I put my mouth around him and let him adjust his hands in my hair. He started slow, letting himself get the feel of how deep he could go. It didn’t take him long to pick up his pace, fucking me in earnest. I ran my tongue under the bottom as he did, needing to taste him more.

He held me down for a moment, choking me long enough for tears to spring to my eyes. Over and over again, he fucked me like I was just a toy. My fingers traced down to my clit, rubbing it hard. The slight air deprivation had me craving release.

He watched me touching myself and pumped harder, chasing his own release. “I’m gonna come,” he breathed. “Where do you want me to—”

At that, I met his eyes and doubled down, sucking him harder. I took the vibrator and brought it up, holding it on his knot and turning it up.

“Fuck,” he said as he slammed into me one final time and filled my mouth with him. I came hard then, the taste of him pushing me over the edge. Hard enough that I even gushed onto the floor and could feel myself dripping.

I tried to swallow as he came, but it was much more than I thought. When I started to choke, he pulled out, but he wasn’t quite done, so he jerked himself as he did, spraying the last of it on my face, dripping down onto my tits.

Brooks was laid back, boneless on the couch with his cock in his hand, still hard as a rock. Though I felt partially sated, I wanted to go all the way.

I wanted him buried inside me.

“Where’s that bed you mentioned earlier?”

Chapter seventeen

Brooks

I sat up, looking down at Sydney on her knees for me. She looked so beautiful there, my cum covering her face, her eyes red-rimmed from the tears that fell as she took me. I had no idea what I'd done to get this lucky, but I had no plans to take it for granted.

She quirked her brow at me, reminding me she had asked a question, but I was so out of it that I couldn't remember what she said. "What?"

She giggled, standing in front of me. "Him," she started, poking my still hard cock. Satyrs could easily go for more than one round, and with Sydney, I felt I could go forever. "And you." She poked my chest. "Would you both like to follow me to the bedroom?"

I stood and let her lead me back to my room. She hadn't been in there yet, though it was nothing special. It was all tan walls, two nightstands, a bed in the middle. My closet was well organized, and while I hadn't made my bed, all my clothes were in the laundry basket.

She looked just a moment before she dropped her sleep shorts and threw off her top, exposing her fully to me.

Fuck me. She is gorgeous.

She hopped up in my bed, and I followed suit, crawling up her body.

I noticed my cum still sticking to her face and tits. Unable to help it, I licked her face, tasting myself mixed with the flavor of her skin. Something about our combined essences turned me on.

“Did you like that?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Well, there’s more to clean up.”

I licked across her cheek, down her neck, following the trail all the way to where it fell on her tits. I cleaned them until nothing was left, then took a nipple into my mouth and tugged on it with my teeth before soothing the pain with my tongue.

“There’s somewhere else you need to clean up as well,” she said, spreading her lower lips for me.

I wasted no time trailing down her body and parting her legs.

Just as I was about to taste her, her hand came to my forehead, stopping me. I looked up to meet those pretty emerald eyes.

“I want you to ask me nicely.”

My eyes glazed over with pleasure. “Please, honey, can I taste you? I need to fuck you with my tongue more than I need air.”

“What a good little beggar you are,” she replied as she moved her hand and allowed me access.

My request had been honest. I needed to taste her again. My mouth moved to her pussy and sucked hard, still tasting her need for me. I rolled her clit along my tongue, tracing my name as I did, marking her pussy as mine.

“Ah, Brooks, please. I need you to fuck me,” she moaned, and I paused just as I was finishing the s .

“You want to take my cock?” I asked, kissing her thigh.

“Yes, I need it. Give it to me now.”

I chuckled. “I thought you liked to be in charge.”

“I do,” she said clearly. “And I’m telling you to fuck my brains out.”

Obedying her seemed to be in my DNA. I crawled up her body until we were once again face to face. “Should I grab a condom?”

“Do they make ones big enough for all that?” she asked, gesturing.

I laughed, my chest puffing a bit with the obvious compliment. “They do if you wanted to”

She shrugged. “I take the pill and have been tested.”

“I was too, recently.”

Her legs came up and wrapped around my middle, her cunt rubbing up my length. “Then I want to feel you. Give it to me.”

I ground down against her, enjoying the way she shuddered every time I rubbed her

clit.

Finally, I pulled back and lined myself up with her entrance and began pushing in. She squeezed my tip so tight I thought I might come instantly.

“Fuck, baby, you’re tight,” I spoke aloud as I continued to slip in. “You need to relax. Let me in.” She stretched so well for me, as if her cunt was made to take me, and I kept pushing inside.

“Does that feel good?” I asked her.

She gave me a breathy confirmation that I wasn’t quite sure was words, and I kept going all the way down to my knot.

“Do you need a moment?” I asked.

“No,” she said quickly. “Fuck me.”

I could never deny her anything, especially not something this sweet. She was so wet I could easily slide in and out, giving it to her exactly how she wanted. I leaned down and stole a dirty, rough kiss, one that had our teeth mashing and tongues tangled.

I angled back slightly as I pressed in and knew I’d hit her G-spot when she moaned into my mouth. My fingers came down to circle her clit, our combined wetness making it easy to play with.

“Fuck, Brooks, don’t stop. I’m going to come.”

I groaned, her words sending me spiraling toward release quicker than I wanted. “Yes, honey. Come around my cock. Show me how much you love it.”

I kept a consistent rhythm as I fucked her, craning my neck down and nipping at her shoulder, giving her that slight bit of pain I was sure would take her over the edge.

My assumption was correct, and I felt as her walls tightened around me, her nails digging so hard into my back I would for sure have marks tomorrow. And I'd wear those proudly.

My knot swelled with need. I wanted to tie us together, claim her as mine in every way I could. "Can I knot you, honey?"

"Do it," she cried through her orgasm.

I pressed into her further, feeling the knot stretch her impossibly further and grip around me. As soon as I was through to the base, I came hard, flooding her with me. Knotting her felt like another part of my brain unlocked and made me even more obsessed with this woman, which would have seemed impossible before this moment.

I wrapped myself around her and turned us to the side, my leg thrown over hers.

She wiggled a bit, and I sucked in a sharp breath. "Are we... stuck together?" she asked.

"Yeah, until my knot goes down. Sorry; I should have told you."

She landed a small kiss on my nose. "It's okay, I kind of like it. Is that to, like... make your partner get pregnant?"

An image of Sydney pregnant with my kid flashed through my mind, and I felt a slight bit more cum leak from me. But I pushed that away quickly. We definitely weren't ready for that yet.

“As a barrier, yes, so the cum stays there, but not in any other way.”

“It feels nice,” she said, and bore down on it slightly.

My cock hardened once more. “Baby, if you ever want to disconnect, you can’t do that.”

She shuffled around a bit, teasing me. “Hm, doesn’t seem so bad to me.”

I flipped us so she was now on top of me. She sat up easily and pressed her hands to my chest. I held mine over hers, loving how soft they were. They were so drastically different from my own, rough, calloused ones, and it was something else I loved about her.

Love.

That word stuck in my head as I gazed up at her. As she humped back and forth, chasing her pleasure as she rode my cock. As I came inside her once more.

I was falling in love with Sydney Jacobs.

Chapter eighteen

Brooks

I loaded the last of the produce from the truck onto the front of our table. As I glanced around, I was happy with the abundance we had. Our entire family was taking up four stalls, between produce, meat, honey, and body care. It seemed to expand every year, and every year I got to see the fruits of my family's labor spread out in front of me. It made me appreciate how hard they all worked and how much the farm meant to them.

Though it made me happy, this time always made my hands shake. Today set the general tone for the whole year. Last year it rained for a lot of the day, and sales just weren't as solid as usual. Though it hadn't put us in the danger zone, it hadn't been good either.

It was why I pushed so hard for the certification and made sure we had functioning equipment. Everyone was depending on me, and the market was always a reminder of that.

"Everything looks amazing," Sydney said as she approached. Today she wore a yellow sundress that made her shine even brighter than normal.

"It really does," I said. A few days ago, I'd mentioned the festival and invited her but told her she might need to be alone for a while, since I needed to work. Sydney insisted she could help, and here she was, doing an amazing job.

Everything felt like it had been flipped on its head since that night. When we were done, instead of going back to the guest room, she curled up with me. And the next morning she was still there as those first sunrays peaked through the curtains and bounced off her pretty skin.

I allowed myself to stay in bed way longer than I had any morning I think ever, just enjoying being around her. When I did manage to get away I made her breakfast and brought it to bed, which she was very appreciative of. It was nice to laze around together. Once breakfast was over we spent some time just... exploring. Kissing everywhere, touching her most sensitive parts, learning her body. The last few days felt like heaven, one I wasn't going to be able to leave.

But today everyone had done a great job, even Sydney. She'd been helping us set up all morning, even stacking up all the body care intricately along the table with Bailey. "Thank you for today. I know it's technically your day off."

I grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. She returned it in kind. "Of course. There's nothing else I'd rather do."

My heart felt tight. After all this was over, I had to tell her how I felt, and I had an idea of just how to do it.

But that was for later. Now, we had a festival to work. I could see the beginnings of a crowd trickling in; lots of unfamiliar faces, which was good. It meant tourists were finding their way here.

It got busy quickly. Every stall had lines, people wanting to try a little bit of everything. The blur that was Blossom Fest started the way it always did: with a series of customers asking questions, buying stuff, and all of us running around to restock.

It was early afternoon by the time it felt like things were beginning to slow. This always happened, with people breaking for a little while to have lunch.

I slumped down on a stack of empty crates, needing to rest for just a minute.

“Here,” a voice I hadn’t heard in a while said from above me.

I looked up, and Bridget stood there, a water bottle held out in her hand.

“Thanks,” I said, taking it and downing most of it in a single swig. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

She scoffed, tossing a lock of hair behind her. Though she still had the telltale curls, she’d dyed it black with a neon shock of purple in the front. She had a dark streak of eyeliner across her eyes with orange eye shadow around it. Bridget had always loved a bold look. It was part of what made her so cool, along with her knowledge of exactly what she wanted to do.

She was the first Hoffman in generations to decide to leave Hallow’s Cove. No one was forced to stay, but as the farm expanded, everyone had found something they enjoyed in it. Not Bridget, though. This internet-less town had weighed her down. So as soon as she was old enough, she decided to go to school in Stonebridge for software and robotics. Now she did medical equipment research for the hospital and kept our website updated.

“You would have known if you had stopped by Mom’s once in the past week.” She quirked her brow, trying to figure out what was up.

“I’ve... been busy,” I replied. It was odd I hadn’t been to my parents’ in a week.

“Busy with what?”

“Hey,” Sydney said, coming up beside the two of us. “Bailey was wondering if you’d moved any of her sample honey jars. She can’t find them.”

I had to blink for a moment. Something about Sydney in this sundress made me lose all concentration. And I couldn’t wait to get home and bend her over something and push it up to get inside her.

Gods, I was terrible. “Uh, I think they’re in the cab of the truck. I didn’t want them to break. I can grab them.”

I went to stand, but Sydney placed her hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, I can check.”

I watched her saunter off toward the truck.

“Ah, now I see what you’ve been doing ,” Bridget teased, snapping me from my thoughts.

“Stop,” I warned her, my face aflame.

“She’s cute,” she continued, completely ignoring me. “Totally my type, but we’ve always had similar tastes. Where’d she come from?”

“You stay away,” I said with a playful push to her shoulder. My sister, besides being cooler than me, was a huge flirt. “She’s our organic auditor.”

Bridget mock-gasped and clutched her nonexistent pearls. “I knew you wanted that certification, but sleeping with the auditor for it seems a little low, even for you.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know I would never.”

She laughed. “I do. It’s still strange someone’s caught your eye. That’s never happened; she must be special.”

A light smile touched my lips. “Yeah. She is.”

“And what’s with Grandpa?” she asked. “He’s been chasing around her co-worker just as much as you have Sydney it seems. I saw them sharing a candy apple earlier.” I groaned. “Don’t remind me, I have no idea, and I don’t wanna know.” “I think it’s cute,” she said. “Grandpa seems... happy.” “Yeah,” and I did like to see that. I just didn’t want to think too hard about it.

A few minutes later, Sydney returned. “Bailey shooed me away and told me to take a break.” She looked at Bridget as if she hadn’t noticed she was there earlier. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Sydney.”

She held her hand out, and my sister took it. “Bridget. This one’s much cooler older sister.”

I bumped her once again. “She wishes.”

“Oh, nice to meet you.”

“You too. You know what, I was just telling Brooks he needed a break as well. Why don’t you guys go take a walk? We got it here.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. I didn’t normally leave the table at all.

“Yeah. Just because you’re the boss doesn’t mean you don’t get a break.”

I smiled, knowing exactly what she was doing. “Sure. We’ll be back soon. Holler if you need anything.”

She waved me off, and I stood, reaching instinctually for Sydney's hand, and we began walking through the festival. I hardly ever got to see the rest of the stalls.

Almost everyone in town attended. Cool Beans always had a stand for coffee, The Bookstore came to buy and trade for new books, and the ski lodge came down to sell their iced hot chocolate and advertise the year-round ice-skating rink.

We walked hand in hand, starting down Artist's Alley. This was where all the craftsmen were. Everything from pottery to handmade jewelry to fiber arts was here. Before I ran the farm and could sneak away, I would always end up here. I loved seeing all the things people brought and made.

Sydney paused at one specific booth. It was a photographer selling their photos on large canvases. They were a bit darker, pictures of abandoned castles and dark woods, and she examined each one.

"Did you take all these yourself?" I asked, and the selkie who ran the booth nodded.

"Each and every one. I travel all around the world to find these abandoned places."

"It's beautiful," Sydney said, looking wistfully at the photos, I assumed thinking about her own ruined camera. "Can I ask what settings you used to achieve such a dark black?"

The two of them chatted about camera and editing settings for a little while. I'd never seen Sydney actually talk about photography this way. She knew a lot and spoke about it so passionately it was endearing, and she ended up purchasing one of the smaller prints of the night sky before we continued.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked. We'd been talking about ourselves over the last few days, but this was something I always felt weird mentioning. But now I couldn't

help it.

“You just did,” she snarked.

“Ha-ha.”

She laughed genuinely. “Sure.”

“Why are you an organic certifier?”

She paused. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just... You don’t quite seem to like it.”

Sydney sighed. “It was a job, and I was freshly out of college. I don’t hate it, but I’m not passionate about it.”

“What are you passionate about?”

“Photography, obviously, but I don’t think I’d be good enough to make it full-time. I’m thinking about going into consulting.”

I blinked. “Why would you do that if you’re not passionate about it?”

“Money,” she answered quickly. “I just want life to be... easy. And money does that. And consulting is good money.”

I guess I could understand that. Money is what kept the farm going and was something I thought about often. But I wouldn’t say it was the most important thing to me.

“You spend a lot of time working; shouldn’t it be something you enjoy?”

“I find enjoyment in other things.” Though she sounded certain, her face told me otherwise. “Besides, there aren’t a lot of other options.”

My mind was reeling. I had to stop myself from saying everything I was thinking.

Just stay with me. Take photos for the rest of your life.

I hadn’t even confessed my feelings yet, so I certainly couldn’t go around thinking about us living together. No matter how right it felt.

So for now we just continued our walk. We stopped by Cool Beans and grabbed a hot cup of coffee to drink while we roamed.

“Look at you out of your stall!” Jake said as he approached. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Whatever, man,” I replied playfully. “How’s the festival been treating you?”

He looked slightly annoyed. “Fine, except for all the people who want to be in my store. If I didn’t need sales to keep it open, I would close forever.”

“Then no one would get to hunt for their own treasure.”

He rolled his eyes. Though he wasn’t a fan of... people generally, he did enjoy helping them find just what they needed. And he almost always had it or knew where to acquire it. He didn’t think much of it, but it was a true talent. A few years ago, when I’d needed a part for one of our oldest tractors and everyone told me I wouldn’t find it anywhere, he had.

“So I closed for an hour and figured I would come for Boba.”

“There’s Boba here?” Sydney asked, sounding excited.

I nodded. “It’s Jake’s favorite and very good.”

“I usually have it once a week in the city. I love taro.”

“Then let’s go.”

We headed over to Bubbles and Brews, and we each ordered our own. I got matcha because I wasn’t a big fan of tapioca, but Sydney got a taro tea that was purple with white foam sitting on top, and Jake had a bright green honeydew tea he’d already slurped halfway down. I would be surprised if this was the first one he’d had today, and even more so if it was the last.

The three of us made our way around the rest of the bustling market before heading back toward our stall.

“Do you have any cherries back there?” Jake asked as we approached.

“Maybe. Only if you have a bottle to share with me when it’s done.”

“I always do.”

We went behind the booth, and I grabbed him a few cartons before he scurried off.

“What was that about?” Sydney asked.

“Moonshine,” Brooks answered easily. “Jake has always loved brewing it, and has gotten really good at it, and a lot of time he gets his flavorings from us.”

“Oh interesting.” I watch her eyes roam over the booth, looking probably a lot like I do when I’m working here. “I’m going to go grab another case of strawberries,” Sydney said, pointing at the almost empty container.

“I can do it.”

“Don’t worry, I got it.” She gave me a quick peck on the lips I wasn’t expecting and turned to go.

I touched my fingers to my lips and smiled.

“Hey, Brooks,” Gwen said as she approached the table.

I turned to greet her but was instantly soured by the face next to her. Preston Fairfield stood there, his arm around her. It wasn’t because he cared about her; it was about control, and it disgusted me.

“Hey, Gwen,” I said, specifically addressing her. “Are you having fun at the festival?”

“She’s fine,” Preston answered for her. “It’s the same as it is every year.”

I could feel my knuckles turn white as I grabbed the table in front of me, trying to keep calm.

“Can I get you anything?” I said through gritted teeth.

“No, we’re just looking around.” He peered over the produce with his nose turned up. “Are they organic?” he asked.

“Technically, not yet. But we are getting certified.”

“So no?” he said bluntly.

“No.”

He sniffed. “People really care about those things these days. This is all basically worthless without it. You may want to reconsider my offer before you’re all dried up and have to take the lowest deal you can get.”

“I think we’ll manage. And either way, I wouldn’t be taking any money from you.”

I could see his pale face light up in anger, the red bleeding over his cheeks.

“I’m trying to be fair. We wouldn’t want anything to happen to the farm.”

I stood up straighter. I stood taller than most humans, but I towered over this pathetic little worm.

“Are you threatenin’ me?”

The loud crash of a crate behind me drew my attention. Sydney was standing there, and she looked white as a ghost.

Chapter nineteen

Sydney

I walked to the truck for strawberries, whistling as I went. Something about life here was just so... pleasant. Pleasant enough to make me want to whistle, apparently. I could also still feel the tingle on my lips where we kissed. I didn't know what made me kiss him out of the blue in public, but it just felt right.

There was still no telling what any of this meant. Brooks hadn't brought it up, and I had no plan to either. I wouldn't even know what to say.

I'd thought about telling him about Preston, but how was I supposed to do that when I didn't have a way to fix it? Every night I lay awake trying to figure out how I could, but I always turned up empty. I needed to sort it out soon, though. I couldn't keep playing pretend like this; it was weighing too heavily on me.

As I rounded the truck, I jumped when I saw Bridget leaning against the side, smoking the small electric stick in her hand. She gave me a glance before shooting a long exhale to the sky that smelled like weed.

"Oh, sorry, you scared me," I said, hoping to sound semi-normal.

"Don't worry. I know I have that effect on people."

My eyes blew wide. "No. I just meant I didn't expect anyone to be here. I don't think you're scary. You're not scary." I was babbling, but I couldn't seem to stop.

She let out a small laugh that matched Brooks's almost to a T. "I'm just fucking with you. Want a hit?" She offered me the small pen.

"I'm fine, thanks." Though I enjoyed getting high just as much as the next person, I wasn't very high-functioning when I did smoke, so it wasn't the best idea.

She took another drag. "Suit yourself. So what's up with you and my brother?"

"I... Uh..." The question took me off guard. I didn't even know the answer to that myself, much less how to verbalize it.

"Yeah, I figured. I can tell what he sees in you, though. We've always had the same taste."

She looked right at me, and my mind went blank. I wasn't shocked into silence often. In Stonebridge, lots of people were crass and direct—it's how I had grown up. But it seemed a couple of weeks here had me losing my edge.

"Brooks has just never shown interest in... Well, anyone, seriously. My advice? Don't fuck it up. I may be biased, but he's the best."

She walked away then, leaving me stunned. Bridget was really different from anyone I'd met here, which I guess made sense.

I needed to go get the strawberries, so I went to the back and grabbed one of the crates. There was something I quite enjoyed about all this—working alongside everyone and talking to customers was actually pretty exciting. I even snapped a few photos with my phone. It wasn't the same, but I was sure I could fix them up after.

It made me wonder if Hoffman Farm needed new stuff for their website. There were only a few photos on there, and they all looked like they'd been snapped by a local

paper. Maybe Brooks, or whoever updated the site, would appreciate these.

As I walked back, I paused when I noticed Brooks talking to someone. He wasn't his normal, relaxed self. His hands were gripping the table, and he was standing straight, his entire body looking tense.

I walked closer and froze when I saw who he was talking to. Behind Brooks was Preston Fairfield. The man blackmailing me. And down went the crate.

What the fuck is he doing here?

Brooks turned around, and I tried to compose myself. "I'm sorry," I mumbled as I started picking up the spilled packages.

Brooks turned back to Preston and said something I couldn't hear. My blood was pumping through my ears. Why the fuck was he still here? His wife and job were back in the city, and he never seemed one for country life.

Though I hadn't known Preston well in college, everyone knew the hyper-rich Fairfield, who treated everyone like a tool for his personal use.

Including me now, apparently.

I didn't think doing that test for him would cause so much trouble. Because of his reputation, I had even charged double, and my friend told me he hadn't even blinked. But of course that would come back to haunt me, and I was now facing a broken heart and a ruined career. It was all just too much. I could feel myself hyperventilating, and my palms were sweating.

"Hey," Brooks said, setting his hand on my shoulder. I jumped, almost knocking us both from our squatting position. "Are you okay?"

“Fine,” I snapped too quickly. I was the farthest thing from it. “I think I just need some water. I’ll be back.”

I stood and all but ran out the back of the stall toward the alley. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. There was no use freaking out. And how would I explain it to Brooks if I did? No, I just needed to relax.

After I managed to pull it together, I stepped back out. I’d just tell Brooks I got overly hot and needed a minute.

“Looks like you’re doing a bit more than your job,” the voice that haunted my nightmares said from behind me.

I turned and there stood Preston. God, he was just so painfully... average.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied and tried to keep walking, but he grabbed my arm, holding me in place.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten our little deal,” he said. “Or are you not concerned about everything you’ve worked for going down the drain?”

I snapped my arm away from him. “I know what I’m doing.” That couldn’t have been further from the truth, but I didn’t want him to know I was having second thoughts. “It will be done.”

He put his hand back in his pocket. “See that it is.”

“Babe?” a voice I recognized called.

I turned around to see the girl from the game store standing there. Gwen, her name was. Who was she talking to?

“Don’t forget,” Preston said once more before walking toward her. He grabbed her arm in an aggressive way and leaned into her ear, surely scolding her.

Babe? Preston had a wife, and it sure wasn’t her. What the hell?

I shook the interaction off and headed back to the stand. My head was a mess, but I owed it to Brooks to keep it together.

When I returned, he immediately took me in his arms. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay? If you’re not used to it, these events can be a lot.”

“Yeah. I think you’re right; I’m just not used to it.”

He kissed me on my forehead in his sweet way. “It’ll be over soon, and we’ll head on home.”

“That would be nice.”

I relaxed into him with a new thought in mind. I was going to get Brooks out of this, even if I wasn’t able to save myself.

When we got back that night, I finished up my report. I technically had a few samples to take, but what I collected should be enough. Once I was finished, I asked Brooks if I could take his truck to town. He handed over the keys willingly, not asking any questions, and I was off to the post.

I pulled out in front of Griffin Post, printed all the pages of the report, wrapped up the samples, and overnight-shipped everything. The cost was enormous, which I expected, but it was worth it.

I had another week to set things right, and I would do it.

Chapter twenty

Sydney

The following days were a blur. The last samples were collected, there was more mind-blowing sex, and more dead ends. Nothing I came up with had me getting out of this unscathed while saving their farm.

Though Preston was an ass, he was a smart one and covered his tracks. I had no real evidence of his blackmail, but I was sure he had evidence of what I'd done, and there was no way for me to go to his house and steal it. I was supposed to be done by the end of the week, and I was still at a loss.

Even the car had been returned a few days ago. When it was, Brooks seemed as sad about it as I felt, until I insisted he would still have to drive me around because I didn't know where I was going. To be honest, it was because I liked it.

I'd never met anyone who cared about what they did the way he did. Even though he spent most of his time with me, there was almost always someone who needed something from town or needed his help doing something. He always seemed to be working during the day, and there'd even been a few nights where he'd been called away. He was determined to see everyone here succeed, and he was willing to run himself into the ground over it.

Even so, he always made sure to let me know he was paying attention to me, that he was thinking about me. I'd never had a partner—or anyone really—who made me feel like I was this important. It was something I thought I'd never tire of.

I was curled up on the couch with my laptop when Brooks came and slammed himself down next to me. Chicken was in his bed in the corner, sleeping soundly, not being a menace for once. He really was like a cat sometimes.

“What are you doing now?”

“You act like I’m the workaholic here,” I said playfully.

“Well, you are always working.”

“No. I came here on a work trip, and I feel like I spend more time just watching you help everyone than actually doing my job.”

His cheeks pinked at my words. I’d noticed they did that every time I gave him a compliment, especially about work. It seemed he wasn’t used to it, which made me want to do it even more.

“I’m just editing some photos. Would you like to see?”

He looked surprised. “I’m allowed to?”

“I think these are just about done. They aren’t perfect. I took them with my phone at the festival, but with some touch-ups, I think they really came together.”

I turned my screen and watched him flip through the images. There were some of the different products and produce. Some of Bailey talking with one of her customers. Even some of Blake and Beau laughing hysterically at something.

He didn’t say anything, just continued to flip through until the album was over.

“What do you think?” I asked.

His gaze flicked up to me. “I think if you can do all this with just your phone, you’d be the best photographer this town has ever seen.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear. “They’re okay. I may touch them up a bit more later.”

I shut my laptop and set it aside. Brooks took that chance to shuffle over to lay his head in my lap.

“It looks like neither of us can take a compliment.”

I ran my hands through his hair instinctually. “I guess not.”

His touch drifted over my thighs as he lay there. “I have a surprise for you.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What is it?”

“It wouldn’t be much of a surprise if I told you, would it?”

I huffed. “I guess not.”

He then suddenly stood, holding his hand out. “Ready?”

I took it easily. He led us to the truck, and when I hopped up onto my side, Brooks was already in the driver’s seat, holding a blindfold in his hand. He gestured for me to turn, and I did, letting him secure it behind my head.

“If you wanted to take me to the woods to murder me, you could have done it weeks ago,” I teased as I felt the truck ease into movement.

“No murdering tonight. I promise.”

I laughed as he took my phone and played some music. The song was my favorite, and I was surprised he'd managed to pick it out.

It took a while before the truck came to a stop. "I'm going to get things ready, and I'll be right back to get you."

"Still sounds like murder, but fine."

He scared me briefly when he kissed my cheek, then disappeared outside.

I sat with the blindfold on, trying to gauge any little sound that might tell me where we were, but there was almost nothing. I felt the truck rock a few times, but nothing other than that.

I couldn't tell how much time had passed when my side door opened and Brooks stepped onto the side bar. He bent inward, and I could feel how close his face was.

"Put your arms around my neck."

I did as instructed and gasped as he placed his arms the rest of the way around me and lifted me bridal-style from the car before he shut the door.

I let my body rest against him, listening to the hard beating of his heart. It was a rhythm I felt like I'd come to know over the past few weeks, and one I'd come to cherish.

I was set on the edge of his truck bed, resting my hands on the thick textured plastic.

"Take off the blindfold."

I did, and gasped at what I saw. We were parked in a field, not unlike the flower field

we'd been before, but this one was all tall grass as far as the eye could see. The sun was just beginning to set, bathing the world in oranges and golds. Far, far out in the distance, you could see the backdrop of the mountains, the sun bouncing off the snow still gracing the caps. I didn't think I'd ever seen anything as beautiful before.

"This is..."

"I know," he said, sitting next to me. "And I thought we could have a small snack while we watched." I turned, and the back of his truck had been turned into a cozy fort, with blankets covering the bottom, pillows laid all the way around, and a charcuterie board sitting in the middle, piled high with fruit, cured meats, and cheeses.

I was stunned into silence. This was all just so... perfect in a way I could have never imagined.

"I love it," I said softly.

Brooks kissed me, "I'm glad."

We scooted back together against the pillows. The sun kept setting, soon turning the sky into pinks and purples. As I ate some of the salami, Brooks pulled out a bottle of wine and glasses from behind him. It was a pretty bottle, and the wine bubbled as he poured it. I took a sip, the fizz dancing across my lips, and its sweet, fruity taste pairing perfectly with the other things on the board.

"Are you a secret sommelier?" I asked.

He laughed. "No, the old woman in the grocery store just knows her shit and is happy to help a desperate farmer in need."

“Desperate indeed,” I giggled.

We enjoyed the food and wine until the bottle was gone and the sun had fully disappeared, plunging the sky into darkness. Brooks put away everything so we could cuddle up. Stars began flickering around us, so clear it was like we could see the whole Milky Way from here.

“You can’t see the stars in the city,” I said.

“Why?”

“All the lights make it almost impossible to see anything other than the moon. But out here it’s like I can see every one.”

“It is really pretty. I’ve never thought about it before now, but with you, sometimes it feels like I’m seeing everything with fresh eyes. It’s hard to explain.”

“I feel the same way.” I turned to face him, and he did as well. Our faces were so close I could feel his breath tickle my nose.

He kissed me softly. It was just as sweet as always, something I’d come to love about my days. Waking up next to him, our morning talks, our late nights. It was all blending together and starting to feel like it could be my forever.

His hands traveled my body, touching my tits, my waist, my thighs.

“Does anyone come out here?” I asked against his lips.

“Nope,” he said. “Just us.”

“Good.” I flipped him over and started unbuttoning his pants. His zipper hissed down

and I popped him out of his jeans, his length hard and ready to go.

My mouth came around it easily, sucking him down as far as I could in a single take. He groaned, his hands coming around to touch my head. I pulled up and ran my tongue around the tip the way I learned he liked, earning me a small shot of precum that I lapped up happily. I'd never gotten this hot just from bringing a partner pleasure, but something about seeing him writhing under me had my cunt tingling.

I pushed my thighs together, rubbing, hoping for some friction. "Do you want me to fuck you?" he asked. "I can see you wanting; let me give it to you."

I pulled off him and looked up to see his blue eyes shining at me. He still had his hat on, and something about it always made him that much hotter.

I gripped it and placed it on my own head.

"How does it look?"

"Good," he said, his voice thick with need. "Really good."

I was glad to be wearing a dress so I could easily pull my panties aside and position myself over him.

I sank down all at once, obsessed with the feel of him stretching me quickly.

"Fuck," he growled, his hands going to my hips. I bounced on him, loving the way he filled me over and over again. Every once in a while, I would go as far down as I could and grind, rubbing my clit against him.

"Honey, you feel so good." He grabbed my hips and pushed up, taking the lead. Brooks normally let me ride him, but once we started fucking in earnest, he would

give it to me just the way I liked. As if we were so in tune that he knew exactly what I needed, even when I didn't ask.

I pulled up and off and listened to him whine for a second.

“Don't worry, baby. We're far from done.”

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Chapter twenty-one

Brooks

Sydney got on all fours in front of me, her face in the pillows and her ass straight up, showing me her juicy cunt.

“I want you to pull my hair and fuck me from behind.”

Gods, I wanted nothing more. I lined up with her and slammed home, fucking her hard and quick, just the way she wanted. My hand found her hair and wrapped around the strands, pulling them harder than I normally would, but she seemed to like it as she screamed out. It echoed across the field, and I loved knowing I was the reason for it.

My hand came around her front and played with her clit. “Come for me. Squeeze my cock the way I like it.”

I knew she was close, but my words pushed her over the edge. This position made her even tighter, and it didn’t take me long to follow her, slamming home into her once more before coming deeply. I didn’t knot her since it was getting late, but coming inside her anytime felt just as sweet.

I pulled out when we were done and grabbed the towel I’d brought to clean us both up. Once we were righted, we lay back in the truck, wrapped up in each other. It was fully night now and the stars twinkled above us. If it weren’t for the blankets surrounding us, it would probably be cold, but it wasn’t.

It was perfect.

Everything was perfect, and I knew right then what I needed to do.

I turned my body to face Sydney. She was still looking up at the stars, wonder in her eyes. When she said the stars were hard to see from the city, I knew I had been right to bring her out here. Hopefully she liked it enough to consider staying.

Sydney finally noticed my staring and turned so we were now facing each other. Her legs were tangled in mine, and her green eyes sparkled in the light.

“I need to tell you something.”

She paused. “What?”

I took a deep, steadying breath.

“These past couple of weeks have been... life-changing. There’s something about you that makes me feel whole. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. Only you.”

Tears sprang to her eyes, but I continued. “I know you probably wouldn’t want to move here right away, or maybe ever, but I thought we could take it one step at a time. Maybe I could visit you in the winter when it’s slow, and you could come here in the summer. Whatever it is, I want to try to work it out, because I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Sydney sat up, pulling away partially as she did. I followed her motion.

“I need to tell you something too.”

I took a deep breath, hoping against hope that she felt the same. “Brooks... I’m not the same person I was before I stepped into this town. I want to work it out. And I think I’m falling in love with you too.”

I smiled. When I went to pull her close, she put her hand out. “There’s more. Preston blackmailed me.”

My stomach sank. “What do you mean?”

Tears poured down her cheeks as she explained it all. Preston threatening her, the blackmail, her plan to sabotage us.

When she was done, it felt like my entire world had been shattered. We both sat in silence for a while, neither knowing what to say.

What was there to say? She wanted to ruin my family’s farm. The one I’d worked my entire life to make better.

“So is that what this is? You getting close to me so you could use me?”

“No,” she replied quickly. She reached for my hand, and for some reason, I let her. “You have to believe me. This wasn’t planned. You weren’t planned.”

“So if you hadn’t fallen in love with me, you would have sent my farm to ruin?”

She shook her head and dropped my hand. I didn’t know what to believe any longer. Part of me understood the awful situation Preston put her in. I knew how hard she had worked for everything she had, and seeing all that crumble around her...

But how was I ever supposed to get past this?

“Is that why you freaked out? When you saw Preston and Gwen?”

She nodded. “He cornered me later and reminded me why I was here. I worried how far he would have gone if Gwen hadn’t shown up. I have no idea why she was there, but I feel like she saved me.”

“Well, she’s his wife, so that tracks.”

Sydney gave me a weird look. “No, she’s not.”

“Yeah, she is. We all remember being shocked that she had gotten married to that dickbag after college.”

She looked even more confused. “No, after college he married Vanessa... something. She went to school with us.”

I absorbed this new information. “Wait, so he’s married to someone else?”

“Yeah. And they live in the city together.”

My eyes widened. “He’s always taking business trips there.”

“Business isn’t what he’s doing there. But it doesn’t matter, other than the fact that I feel bad for Gwen. She seems so nice.”

She was nice. My anger bubbled over for everyone Preston was trying to fuck over in this situation. But with that anger came clarity.

“If we can prove that’s what’s going on, we could probably get him to back off. Blackmail him back.”

Sydney paused as she wiped her nose. “Yeah, but how? I don’t think they’ve posted any photos. Even their wedding was a private thing with very few guests. Preston covers himself well, the slimy bastard.”

“I don’t know.” I really didn’t. Everything felt like such a mess, and I didn’t know how I was going to fix it. Though I appreciated Sydney’s plan to keep the farm safe, how was I going to keep her safe?

“I think we should go back,” I said. I needed to wrap my head around everything.

“I understand,” she whispered.

We packed everything up and drove back in a tense silence. I wanted to say something—anything—reassuring, but I just couldn’t.

Not until I found a way out of this.

When we got home, it was quiet. I’d had Bridget pick Chicken up so he wouldn’t be there. I thought we’d be celebrating, but that wasn’t the case.

“We need to talk—”

“I think I’m going to bed,” she said. Before I could answer, she went into the guest room and closed the door.

I knew I should have knocked, tried to talk to her, but instead I slinked off into my own room and stared at the ceiling, hoping to figure out what to do.

Chapter twenty-two

Sydney

My hands shook as I placed all my things into my bags. It was all ruined.

Though Brooks said he wanted to talk, I knew what was left to say. How could he ever look me in my eyes again? All I saw in his the whole time was pain. Like I'd driven a knife right through his heart.

I deserved this. I should have told him I wouldn't do it. Fuck the money. And now I'd lost the one I knew was the love of my life over it.

I had to get out of here.

Being as quiet as I could, I hopped into the car and started it up. It was quiet, unlike the loud roar I was used to with the truck. I knew the inn was likely still full, so I made my way up the mountain toward the only other place to stay in town.

Hallow Hill was pretty, with its exposed wood beams and large fireplace, but I didn't notice much else; I just checked in and headed up to my room.

Once I was there, I flopped onto the bed and let myself fully sob for the first time tonight. I let myself mourn the love I could have had, the new life I could have had. Brooks offered me everything, and I destroyed it.

I destroyed him .

I wasn't sure how much time had passed or if I'd actually had any sleep, but when I glanced up, I could see the sky lightening with daybreak.

I went into the bathroom and ran some cold water over my face, trying to get rid of some of the puffiness under my eyes.

I looked like a wreck, and it reflected how I felt inside pretty well.

Maybe I could have fixed it by telling him I passed him anyway. He might have forgiven me, but I wasn't sure I deserved the forgiveness. He was right. If I hadn't fallen in love, I might have failed the farm, which meant that Brooks was just... too good for me.

Once I was done, I crawled back into bed. I clicked open my laptop and began flipping through my photos. There were so many that made me think about what I had lost. That image of Brooks right before I broke my camera, walking through the orchard, the one in the flower field, even the one I'd taken at the inn. The photos blurred as tears fled my vision.

I continued scrolling up, getting lost in my work. The photos in the city were so much less vibrant than anything I'd taken here, and I hated the idea of going back now.

I continued my mindless scrolling, working my way through folders from the past few years. As I flipped through an album I'd taken for a friend in the college quad, I paused and looked at the background.

Zooming in, I noticed a couple looking very snug. This one was slightly blurry, so I flipped through some more until I found one that showed exactly who it was, and my mouth almost dropped to the ground.

In the photo were Preston and Vanessa, kissing next to the arts building. I took a

screenshot of that one before going through all of them, saving the ones where you could see them clearly.

This could be it; this could be my out. I shared all the images to my phone, then went to sleep.

I knew what I had to do now.

I rose with the sun and was in my car and down the hill just as it was starting to become visible.

At the reception desk, I pretended to be Preston's friend from college to learn where he lived, and soon after I was pulling up to a well-manicured lawn and overly styled home. It was just as gaudy as I thought it would be. I was not surprised, though. If you needed to hide something, you needed to keep it inside a cage.

God, what a douche canoe.

I cut the engine, got out of the car, and walked to the massive black door. I put my finger on the bell and held it there, listening to the terrible shrill sound through the house.

It took five minutes before the door was flung open to an extremely disgruntled Preston.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he asked. He was wrapped in a horrid red robe that made him look just like the rich asshole he was.

"Oh, just coming to pay a visit. Do you have a minute? Or does Gwen? I would love to speak to her."

His eyes narrowed. “What are you getting at?”

“I just thought she might like to know about your... other activities back at the city.”

Preston’s eyes flickered with worry for a moment before returning to irritation. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. My work?”

“I don’t know if I would call it work. More like an entire other life, wife and all?”

I said the last part a bit loud intentionally, and Preston stepped out of his house and shut the door. Gwen was probably inside. “Not that it’s true, but if it is, you have no proof.”

“You’re right; how would I have something like that? You’re so private,” I drawled out the o just to watch him squirm. “And that would be true if someone hadn’t been enjoying some PDA in the quad.”

I unlocked my phone and pulled up the photo. His face got even paler than before, and he tried to snatch my phone from my hand, but I was faster.

“Don’t tell me you think I don’t have copies?”

Preston righted himself and let out a loud huff. “Fine, what do you want?”

“What do you think? Leave Hoffman Farm alone.”

He quirked his brow. “Wait. All you care about is that shitty little plot of land?”

“What I care about is none of your concern,” I said. What was going on with Brooks and me was certainly none of his business. “And this is about the blackmail; you release what you have on me, and I do the same.” Though, if I was being honest, my

past coming out no longer felt so vital to me. “Mutual destruction seems pretty safe, doesn’t it?”

He was clenching his jaw so hard I was sure he’d crack a tooth. I don’t think Preston had been outplayed like this many times in his life, and that made it all feel that much better.

“So, what do you say?” I asked after a few moments of silence. “Or should I go see if Gwen wants to see these photos?”

“No, we have a deal. Just get the fuck off my property.”

“As long as you stay off mine.” I hadn’t meant to call it mine—it wasn’t—though the sentiment was the same. “And I don’t want you to even breathe near Brooks. If he’s walking down the street toward you, cross it. Do you get me?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Good.”

With that, I stepped off the porch and fled to my car. When I got back in, Preston was gone, and my hands had finally stopped shaking. Though this would always be in the back of my mind, the photos were my insurance. And hopefully he would heed my words and leave Brooks alone.

With that settled, I drove back up the mountain. As much as I wanted to leave early, Matilda would ask too many questions, and I didn’t want to deal with it. So I would stay the extra few days and then go home, leaving Hallow’s Cove—and Brooks—behind.

Chapter twenty-three

Brooks

I heard her door open. I heard her walk out, heard her car start as she left. Part of me wanted to stop her or chase her, tell her it would all be okay, but I didn't know how it could be... yet.

I lay in bed for a bit longer, letting my mind wander until I was so anxious I had to stand and pace. Finally, I decided I couldn't just sit here. I needed to get out. So I grabbed my hat and my keys, made my way to my truck, and barreled my way into town.

I pulled into Killy's Bar, needing a quick drink. But I didn't want it alone. I walked over to the thrift store and knocked on the door hard, just in case Jake was upstairs.

The door opened a few minutes later to an irritated-looking Jake. "What?"

"Come grab a drink with me?"

"I'm not really in the mood," he said.

"I could use it."

He must have noticed something in my expression because he rolled his eyes at me before answering, "Fine. But you're buying."

We walked over together and found a seat at the bar. I stuck with a hoppy IPA while Jake opted for a whiskey.

“So why did you need this drink so badly?” he asked.

I took a long sip from the top of the bottle before recounting everything that happened, just needing to get it off my chest.

“Damn,” was all he said when I was finished.

I snorted an unamused laugh. “My thoughts exactly.”

“Do you know what you’re going to do?”

I shook my head. “If I’m honest, I’m in love with her. I don’t think this situation has changed that... or even if it could change that. She was in a hard place, and I have no idea what I would have done if the roles had been reversed.”

Jake nodded, and we sat there, enjoying our drinks. Though he wasn’t the type to talk things through the way Gabe was, he would always stick by you when you needed company.

“Yo,” I heard from behind me. I turned to see Blake standing there. “I thought that was you. What are you doing here?”

“Having a drink. What are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “The same. Hey, by the way, Mom wanted me to give you this.” He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a slightly crumpled envelope. “I figured I’d run into you sooner or later.”

“Thanks.”

“See you later,” Blake said as he continued to the back where his friends were playing pool. I turned the envelope over to see it addressed to me from Organic Certifiers of Stonebridge. I sliced through the top and tore the paper out.

As I scanned it, my jaw dropped.

We are pleased to inform you that Hoffman Farm has passed their certification and will be awarded the official organic seal...

I continued reading down the page until I reached the date. This had been posted three days ago, which meant Sydney had submitted our results before knowing if there was a way out of this for her. Why hadn't she told me?

Because she thought I wouldn't listen.

“Well, congrats on the certification,” Jake said, looking over my shoulder. “It seems that Sydney—”

“Thanks,” I said, cutting him off. “I gotta go.” I threw some money on the bar top and ran back to my truck, thoughts swimming through my head as I drove toward my house.

As I entered the kitchen, I realized Sydney's broken camera was still on the counter. I lifted it and put it in my bag for tomorrow.

I was going to fix that and everything else by tomorrow.

I was going to get her back.

The next morning, I was up bright and early as always. I started by stopping by my parents, which surprised my mom since I hadn't been there in a while.

"Sorry, I've been a bit busy."

She nodded and smiled but didn't push the subject. Maybe because she saw Sydney was not with me. "I saw the audit came back. How did we do?"

I smiled lightly at her. "We got it."

She took me into her arms, squeezing me tightly. "I knew you could do it. You've done such amazing work since taking over. I'm so proud of you."

I squeezed her back. I knew I had all their support all the time, but this kind of validation felt really good.

When I pulled away, I asked, "Is Bridget still here?"

Mom nodded. "Yeah, but you know she's not used to farm life anymore. She's fast asleep."

"That's fine. I just need her for a sec."

"Okay, but will you be staying for breakfast?"

"Not today," I said. "I have something to do."

"Okay. I'll have a sandwich ready for you when you come back down."

I thanked her and headed up the stairs to my sister's old room. My parents hadn't changed anything about the house since we all moved out, so everyone's room was

still exactly how it had been when we were eighteen.

I knocked on her door for at least two minutes before it cracked open, and a very pissed-off Bridget stood on the other side.

“What?” she asked sharply.

“I need your help,” I said, cutting right to the chase.

“Does it need to happen at this ungodly hour?”

“It does.”

She sighed but opened her door to let me in. It was just as I remembered. Though all our walls were white, you could barely see hers under all of the peeling band posters and random magazine covers she’d stuck up everywhere. Everything else was black, from her comforter to her desk chair.

She sat on the edge of the bed, crossing her hooves. “What do you need?”

I pulled out the camera from my bag. “Can you fix this?”

She snatched it from my hands and turned it over. “A camera? Since when do you care about taking photos?”

I cleared my throat. “It’s actually not mine.”

She hummed in understanding. “Ah, so your girlfriend broke her camera?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I replied. Not yet at least.

Bridget rolled her eyes. “Your fuck buddy? Friend with benefits? Fling?” She looked at me, and I probably looked annoyed. “Fine, whatever. Do you know what happened to it?”

“It fell in the pond.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Let me take a look. If the damage isn’t too bad, I may be able to repair it.”

“Thanks. If you could drop it at the house when you’re done, I would really appreciate it. I gotta run now. Love you!”

I turned and left her room. I was on a mission and couldn’t be distracted.

As I went through the kitchen, my mother handed me an egg muffin and an apple, which I ate as I drove to my next location.

I made my way into town to Main Street Bodega to grab a few things before heading out to the city. I wanted some snacks for the road.

I grabbed everything I needed, and Betsy scanned all my items.

“Going on a trip?” she asked.

I nodded. “To the city to see someone.”

“That’s nice. You know, I heard there was a girl from the city who drove up to the ski lodge last night. It’s weird for tourists to go up there now. And an odd time to do it too.”

I paused at what she said. “What does the girl look like?”

“Hm... Lerana said short, dark hair, cute face, but definitely from the city. She’d served her a few times since she’s been here.”

That was Sydney. That was where she had gone last night.

She hadn’t left yet.

“Thanks,” I said.

Betsy looked confused, but I quickly paid and hopped in my truck, heading up the hill toward the ski lodge.

Chapter twenty-four

Sydney

I zipped my suitcase before making sure I wasn't leaving anything behind. After what happened with Preston, I realized I'd done all I could here. Staying would only make everything worse.

So I planned to go over to the inn and tell Matilda I was going back early. I was sure she would find another way to make it to the city—if she even wanted to, that is. I hadn't really checked on her and on her dating situation with Brooks's grandfather.

Checking the time, I knew I should get going. Part of me thought about going to get the camera from Brooks's house before I left, but it was broken anyway, and facing him just didn't feel like an option. The hurt on his face was seared into my brain, and I couldn't see it again. I had to go.

I was stacking my backpack on top of my roller when there was a knock at the door. It was still plenty early, so it shouldn't be housekeeping.

As I opened it, my mouth fell open.

Brooks looked perfect, his blond curls shining on his head and his worn hat in his hand. He looked tired, but his eyes were no longer sad—there was a light in them today, and it looked good with the slight crinkle in the corner from how much he smiled.

“Hi,” he said. “Can I come in?”

I blinked a few times, trying to figure out what was happening. I had made peace with the fact that I wouldn’t ever see him again, but here he was.

“I’m actually on my way out,” I replied quietly, no longer able to meet his eyes. If he wanted to say it was over in person, that was fine. I would take it.

I just couldn’t look at him as he did.

“It’s important.”

Even now, I couldn’t say no to him. I swung the door open and gestured for him to come in. His large body passed me, and I caught a whiff of that clean, earthy smell he always had.

He sat on the bed, his legs stretched out in front of him and his hooves crossed at the ankles. “These rooms are nice,” he commented.

“They are.”

The room plunged into an uncomfortable silence. I stood there, my arms crossed, just waiting for the rejection I knew was coming.

“The farm passed,” he finally said.

I knew it would, but I wasn’t expecting it to be this fast. They hadn’t even requested the remaining samples, but maybe they didn’t need them all.

“That’s good.”

Brooks stood, and I watched everything around me darken as he towered over me. “You submitted the correct results. The ones that would get us approved.”

“And?” I asked.

His hand came under my chin and tilted it up so I would meet his eyes. Just looking at him almost caused tears to begin flowing.

“And you didn’t think to tell me that last night?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “I just didn’t think it was relevant. I had still thought about betraying you. Ruining the life you built for your entire family.”

“But you didn’t,” he replied easily. “You didn’t even when you knew what he could do to you. That is so incredibly brave, and I don’t know if I would have made the same decision in your shoes.”

I scoffed. “Of course you would. You wouldn’t have entertained him in the first place.”

“I’m not as good as you think I am. But it doesn’t matter; you did the right thing. And even if you hadn’t, it wouldn’t have mattered, because you have become everything to me. Fuck the certification. You’re the one thing I can’t live without.”

My expression turned shocked. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I don’t care. I don’t give a shit about any of it. I care about you . Sydney Jacobs, I think I’ve been in love with you since the day I saw you on the side of the road, and I’d love nothing more than to make you mine.”

I felt tears run freely down my face. “Really?”

He brought me forward, kissing the top of my forehead. My eyes fluttered closed, savoring the touch. “Really. I love you, and there’s nothing that’s going to change that. And we’ll fight Preston together. Whatever he throws at you, he throws at us .”

I smiled through the tears. “He won’t be bothering me again. Or you. Or the farm. Turns out keeping old photos comes in handy.” He gave me an inquisitive look, but I just shook my head. I’d tell him eventually. “All that matters is that I love you too,” I managed. “I don’t know when it happened or how, but you and this town have changed something in me, and I couldn’t see myself going back to who I was before. I want more out of life, so much more, and I want it with you.”

He pulled me close, kissing me hard, as if we’d been apart for years. I wrapped my hands around his neck, and he put his around my thighs, lifting me easily as I tightened my thighs around his middle, needing to feel close to him.

I never wanted to be far from him again.

His other hand found my hair, running his fingers through it and tugging it just the smallest bit. He began kissing down my neck, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. I moaned loudly, just glad to be back in his arms.

“Gods, you’re divine,” he mumbled between kisses. “I have no idea how I got so lucky.”

He took us to the bed and laid us down, draping himself over me. I pulled him in, needing to feel him fully. “I’m the one who got lucky. You’re the one for me.”

We all but tore each other’s clothes off. There was no room for gentle or slow; there was only need, one that had been filling the room since he entered and had finally exploded, leaving only us.

“I need to be inside this pussy so bad,” he said. “But I need to taste you first.”

He sank down to his knees and kissed my clit once before fully tongue-fucking me. Brooks consumed me like he needed me to live, and I relished every second.

My entire body shivered, and I grabbed his horns to steady myself. He moaned as I did. I used them to shift him slightly up, where I was the most sensitive, and he knew exactly what I needed. His tongue was slightly rougher than a human's, so when he circled my clit, it felt that much better.

“I love when you're like this,” he said, his words vibrating against my already sensitive clit. “So needy for me. Soaked because I know how to make you feel good.”

“Yes,” I cried. “You're so good! Don't stop! I'm gonna come.”

He continued until I found my release, and when I did, he shoved his fingers inside me, filling me in a way I wasn't expecting and fucking me hard.

It felt like one orgasm rolled into another as his fingers curved slightly to hit the perfect spot inside.

“Brooks, I think I'm...” I couldn't even finish. I came harder than I ever had and watched as a gush of liquid squirted from me and drenched his face, but he never stopped. He simply continued to lap up my juices until I was sated.

I was boneless when he pulled away and crawled up my body, kissing up my stomach, over each boob, before landing face to face in front of me.

“That was really hot,” he said. “I almost came.”

“Well, I'm glad you didn't. I'm not done with you.”

I grabbed his cock and lined it up with my entrance. As soon as he was there, he pushed in. He tried to start slow, but I wasn't having that today. I couldn't. I needed him too much.

"Fuck me the way you want to."

"I don't want to hurt you," he replied, though I could tell he was just a moment away from snapping.

"You won't. I need to feel you."

"Whatever you need."

He gave me a final sweet kiss before readjusting us so my hips were tilted up and he leaned back on his calves a bit. Brooks sank into me in one swift, fluid motion and didn't give me any time to adjust before pulling out and pushing back in, just like I asked.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head as he fucked me with abandon, chasing his own pleasure. It was so intense, I could feel my orgasm build once again.

"I'm so full." I was almost babbling at this point.

"I know," he pushed on my lower stomach, and everything became more sensitive. "I can see where my cock is right here, and it's the hottest thing I've ever seen."

I glanced down and realized he was right. At this angle, I could see exactly where it was, and it was really fucking hot.

His fingers worked down against my clit, circling it at just the perfect pace, in sync with me as always.

“Brooks, I love you,” I cried as I fell into oblivion.

“Fuck, I—” he stuttered as I felt his knot fill me and his cum start flowing. He kept thrusting into me with small, jerky movements until he was finished.

When he collapsed, he was careful not to fall on me and turned me sideways. I curled against him, loving the feel of us still connected. There was something so intimate about being knotted that I found hard to describe but was so pleasurable.

He dropped a kiss on my forehead as his breathing returned to normal. “I meant to say I love you too, but hearing those words from you just sent me into the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had.”

I smirked. “Good to know. I’ll be sure to use that when I’m making you hold back.”

He laughed and kissed me hard. “I look forward to that.” Brooks looked around. “What time is checkout?”

“Not for a couple more hours.”

His smile was devious then. “Good, because we’re far from done.”

Chapter twenty-five

Sydney

Once we were showered, dressed, and checked out, we drove separately down the mountain back to the main farmhouse, where we were sure Matilda would be by now. Brooks opened my car door and held his hand out to me, and I couldn't help but kiss him.

When we entered, it was quiet. There were no kids running around; just Brooks's mom on the couch, watching daytime television, and Matilda and his grandfather at the table playing mahjong.

"I was wonderin' where you kids got off to," his grandfather said.

"Sorry I'm late," I said to Matilda. "We got a bit... distracted. But everything's sorted, and we should be able to head back today if you want. I can drive you there and come—"

Matilda let out a hearty laugh. "Oh, dear, I'm not going back."

Brooks and I looked at each other with matching confusion. "What?"

"I'm only six months away from retirement, and I think I've found where I belong. From what I can see—and what I've been told—I think I can say the same for you, hm?"

I blushed. “I suppose, but don’t you have to work those months?”

She shrugged. “No money is worth giving Richard up.” She gave Brooks’s grandfather a loving smile that he returned.

Her words sat heavily with me as I drove back to Brooks’s house, one I’d become so acquainted with over the past couple of weeks. One that had begun to feel a bit like mine as well.

When we got inside, I climbed up on the couch, Brooks following close behind. He snuggled up behind me, his hand trailing through my hair. I had washed it, so it wasn’t as silky smooth as it had been earlier, but for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t bothered.

“So... What do you want to do now?” Brooks asked.

I blew out a long breath. The thought of going back to the city gave me the same dread it had before, but I couldn’t avoid it forever.

“I do have a few vacation days saved up,” I said.

“Really?”

I nodded. “And I think I need to take some time to see what I really want. I mean, I know I can’t just quit my job—”

“Why not?”

I turned to face him. “What do you mean, why not ? How would I live?”

Brooks looked a little sheepish. “Well, you’re definitely good enough at photography

to live off that.”

“I don’t think so. But even if I were, my camera is busted, and it takes money to start a photography business.”

“Listen.” He shifted so we were now face-to-face. “I love you, and though we’re not Preston-fuckhead rich, I have some money. We can get a new camera and all the things you need. I want to support you and your dreams. And with this new certification, I’m sure the farm will be more profitable than ever.”

I could feel the pressure of tears at the back of my eyes. “I couldn’t ask that of you.”

The idea of being a financial burden for him weighed heavily on me.

“You aren’t asking; I’m giving. And you can say no. If you want to keep your job, we will make it work. I know you’re the one, and no matter what, we’ll figure it out.”

I grabbed him by the cheeks and pulled him in, planting a kiss to his lips. One I hoped conveyed everything I felt, all the things I could never begin to express with words.

“Thank you. I would love to figure it out with you. But for now, I can email them, take two weeks of vacation, and we can do whatever we please.”

He hummed happily. “I think I like the sound of that.”

I climbed on top of him and started kissing him hard, our tongues tangling in the most delightful way. But I jumped as someone knocked on the door so hard I thought they might break it down.

Brooks groaned as he stood to answer it. Bridget was there, wearing her dark eyeliner, with her hair in two very intricate braids.

“What’s up?” Brooks asked, sounding snippy. I guess he didn’t like us getting interrupted, and that made me smile.

Bridget just rolled her eyes. “Calm down, cowboy; I just came to return this.”

My camera was dangling from her finger on its strap. “We got lucky. Jake had the piece I needed to fix it in his infinite amounts of stuff. It wasn’t that hard.”

I walked forward and took it in my hands. The lens didn’t look as cloudy, and as I opened the shutter, the screen turned on like normal. “Oh my God! You fixed it!”

She shrugged. “Of course I did; I’m the family genius after all.”

I rushed her, pulling her in for a hug. She seemed shocked but eventually hugged me back. I wasn’t really a hugger either, but I was just so happy.

“Wow, you really are cute,” she said in that sultry voice.

“Quit it,” Brooks warned, but I just laughed.

“What do I owe you?” I asked.

“Not a thing. You, on the other hand...” she started, looking at Brooks. “Where’s my board?”

“Ugh, not this again.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“When I was sixteen, I got a skateboard, and Mom wouldn’t give Brooks one because he was too young. It suddenly went missing, and I know you have it.”

“I do not!”

“I know you do. Return it or the camera gets it.”

I took a step back to keep it—and me—out of the line of fire. Their staring contest felt like it could set something ablaze.

“Gods... Fine!” Brooks finally said. “It’s in the south barn. I couldn’t even ride the stupid thing.”

“Then why didn’t you give it back?”

“At that point, on principle.”

“You little—”

“Okay,” I interjected. “So now we know where it is.” I turned to Bridget. “Thank you again. I really appreciate this.”

Her angry resolve depleted easily. “No problem. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a board to recover.”

With that, she left, and Brooks shut the door.

“You hid her skateboard for that long?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It just didn’t make sense to give it to her after a while.”

I rubbed his arm. “Well, I appreciate you giving it up for me.”

Brooks leaned down and kissed me. “I would give up a lot for you.” He smirked and

gave me a sexy look. “Now, why don’t you get naked so we can test if the camera is just as good as before?”

I smiled. “I would like that.”

Chapter twenty-six

Epilogue

Sydney

“Just like that,” I said as my camera shuttered. The gorgeous couple in front of me were so in love it made it very easy to get a good shot. I looked down at my viewfinder, flipping through. These are going to be beautiful when they’re done.

“I think we’re set unless there’s anything else you wanted to get,” I said, checking in that they were satisfied with everything.

“No I think that’s everything, thanks Sydney, I can’t wait. Based on all your other work, I know these will be amazing.” My chest swelled with pride. “I should have these to you in a few weeks.”

They left and I cleaned up my setup. Every time someone told me they loved my work it lit me up inside.

Though at the time it felt a bit unhinged, after my extended work vacation I found myself uninterested in returning, and Brooks was sure living together would go well, and he was right of course. It was like we’d always been together, which was a strange feeling. Of course there were growing pains, learning each other’s routines and habits, but it never felt hard, just like a new experience we got to have together.

And tonight we were going to have another one.

Once I got all my things packed and in the car I drove through the little town I now got to call mine. I waved at Gwen who was walking across the street as I passed, and she smiled and waved back easily. Everything here had felt so easy and carefree, everything I had ever craved in my life.

It wasn't long before I was pulling up to my home, cutting the engine, and all but running inside.

The house was empty, which is what I'd been hoping for. I asked Bailey if she could watch Chicken without making it obvious and insisted she could trick Brooks, and so far, I hadn't heard a word, so it must have worked.

I got everything prepared, the wine I knew he liked was chilling in the fridge, our favorite chocolate in town was in the pantry, and—of course, the toy in the closet.

I ordered it in the mail weeks ago, and it had finally arrived. Since officially getting together we've played with toys more, and found we both enjoyed them. I'd worked him all the way up to almost taking four of my fingers and a fairly large plug, and I thought we were finally ready to go the rest of the way.

I was drinking a glass of water in the kitchen when I heard the truck barreling down the drive. As the engine cut I made my way to the living room. It had been so long since I felt this nervous around Brooks. Though we'd been building to something like this, and talked about it briefly, I didn't know how he would actually react to it.

I tried to sit casually on the couch as he came in, but knew I was shifting in my seat.

The door creaked open and Brooks walked in. It was later in the season so he was tanned now, even more than before. He looked just as sexy as the day we met. "Hi baby," I said.

He took his hat off and gave me that same, bright smile he always did. "Hey honey,"

he said as he came in. He took off his boots and slid his hat up onto the hook behind the door. It was slightly messy, but his curls had the same bounce they normally did.

He came over and dropped a kiss to my lips. I could tell he meant for it to be casual, but I gripped his collar and pulled him in further, deepening our kiss, excited about everything I had planned. “Damn I love you,” he said as he pulled away. “I need to shower quickly but then I thought maybe a movie? My sister insisted on taking Chicken, talking about spending time with her nephew. She’s weird.” I laughed, but not for the reason he thought. “She can be very weird. Go shower, I’m going to get things ready.” He looked confused for a moment, but didn’t ask as he turned and moved to our bedroom.

While he was gone I brought everything out and ran to the guest room closet to grab the toy. The black harness straps had already been adjusted to fit my waist perfectly, and the toy at the end seemed like the perfect size for him.

I was sure not to forget the lube as I brought all of the things into our bedroom, setting the strapon on my bedside table furthest from the bathroom door, the chocolates on the bed, and the wine on his nightstand. And then I waited, the nerves almost getting the best of me as I heard the water shut off and his hooves clicking against the ground.

It took him a bit longer as he liked to dry the fur on his hair before he came out. When he finally did, however, his eyes blew wide at the sight.

I was sure mine matched, he had put sweats on, but his top was left bare, and his hair was still damp as he ran his towel through it. “What’s all this?” he asked.

I shrugged, “I thought we could do something special tonight.”

He grinned and began crawling up the bed towards me. I grabbed one of the chocolates—the dark chocolate cherry, which is his favorite—and hold it out to him.

He makes eye contact with with me as he plucks it from my fingers with his teeth, scraping my fingers lightly as he does. A rush of warmth floods my core. “These are my favorite,” he said voice low. “I know,” I told him as I licked the slightly melted chocolate from my fingers.

He turned and grabbed the wine glasses, handing me one before holding his out to cheers. I met him and took a sip. The sweet, bitterness playing on my tongue felt like background noise as I watched his adam’s apple bob with the movement of his drink.

When we were done, we set the glasses aside and he picked one of my favorites from the box—white chocolate macadamia—and fed it to me.

We did that back and forth until half of the box was gone and our sweet teeth had been satiated. The box went to the side with the wine and when Brooks turned back I was on him. I jumped into his arms, and brought my lips to his. He was surprised, but caught me easily and kissed me back just as intense.

My hands trailed his torso and chest, the one I’d grown to know so well. His hands came down and gripped my ass, squeezing hard enough to sting. I ground down against his cock which I knew I’d find hard.

He moaned against my lips, and I pulled away, just enough to speak. “There’s more to the surprise.”

His eyes opened, “I can’t wait to see.” I reached onto my side of the bed and he tracked my movement before pausing on what he saw.

“Is that...” he trailed.

I wasn’t sure if that was a positive or negative, but we were already there. “Yeah, I bought it online, and I thought we could try it. I know it might have just been talk so there’s no pressure, but I figured why not.” He gave no reaction at first, and I worried

I'd misread the situation. I was about to back pedal when he pulled me in for another heart melting kiss. "Do you wanna fuck me hun?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"Tell me what to do, and I'm yours," he said.

Gods, I loved this man.

"I'm gonna go put it on and I want you to get ready for me." I gave him a final kiss before slinking off the bed and grabbing the strap. The one I bought had the classic harness strap to keep it secure, but also, a piece that went inside of me, so I could enjoy it just as much.

I turned as I heard Brooks moan to see him on his hands and knees for me, the lube strewn on the bed and two of his fingers already inside of him. We'd been stretching him for a while, in prep for something like this, but every time it turned me on to watch.

"Add another," I instructed as I leaned against the wall, enjoying the view. My hands drifted over my cock and jerked it a bit, pushing it in and out of me as well. I moaned at the feel, the cock hitting the perfect spot inside of me.

"Another," I instructed. I stepped over and spit down on his fingers and hole, giving him more lube to add his fourth finger. "You have no idea how sexy you look," I told him.

He cried out as I slapped my cock down against his ass hard enough to sting. "Do you wanna take my cock baby?" I asked.

"Yes."

Brooks

This was the best surprise I could have asked for. Since Sydney moved in everything had changed for the better. She had become my rock, my home, I'd never had another person understand me the way she did. I was so in love my friends and family poked fun, but I didn't care, especially because they were right.

After we got our certification, Sydney and Bridget made it their mission to revamp the branding. They designed a new logo, Sydney took all new photos and product images, and we even now had a social media presence. It was difficult without internet most of the time, but Sydney always made a point to go to the cafe and schedule posts.

I had no idea how I got so lucky.

"Do you want my cock baby?" she asked me again, snapping me from my daydream that had become my perfect reality.

"Please," I begged. I had been stretched and ready for her for a while, but I knew she liked the show.

She reached beside me and picked up the lube on the bed, rubbing it across her cock. I turned to watch her do it and felt my balls pull up at the sight. She was gorgeous and knowing she was going to fuck me was so sexy.

"Ready?" she asked, and I felt her slick tip line up with me.

"Yes honey, fuck me please." She took it slow, pushing just the tip in at first, but it felt very different than anything else we'd used. It had a slightly fleshy texture, that made it feel even more new.

She pushed past that initial tight ring and pulled out a bit before going further the next

time. I could tell she was trying to be gentle, and while I appreciated it, I wanted more.

“You feel amazing,” I praised, hoping she would know I liked it. “So do you,” she moaned, the part inside probably pressing hard inside of her.

Soon she was bottomed out, her pelvis and strap pressed to my thighs. I’d never been so full. She’s somehow picked out one that was large enough to make me feel full and stretched, but not too much.

“Are you ready for me to move baby?” she asked, breathless. Knowing she was equally as affected turned me on even more.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

Sydney pulled out excruciatingly slow, all the way to the tip before pushing back in. Though I was prepped pretty well, this went so deep it still gave me a stretch I wasn’t prepared for, but enjoyed a lot.

“God just like that,” I called as she slid back in, snapping her hips hard at the end.

It seemed my praise gave her confidence as she began to fuck me harder, pounding into me easily. Our moans and pants filled the space, and my body shook with pleasure. Though sex between us was always amazing, something about being fuck was so much different, gave me pleasure from an entirely different place that now felt unlocked.

On her next thrust she angled up, and I buried my head to groan loudly as she ground against my g-spot.

She hummed with pleasure. “That’s the spot isn’t it baby.” “Yeah,” I breathed. Now that she found it, she refused to let up, grinding against it with every pass. “I-I’m

close,” I told her, knowing she liked to know, she liked me to ask.

“Me too,” she said, and I was relieved, I couldn’t last much longer. “I wanna see you come for me baby.” She pulled out and I shuttered at the loss until she motioned for me to get up so she could lay beneath me. “I wanna watch you fuck yourself on me. Just like I’m your little toy.” I adjusted the way she wanted and held myself over her. “God you and your filthy mouth are gonna kill me one day.” “And what a beautiful way to go,” she said, kissing me lightly before grabbing her strap and tapping me with it. “Now ride me, come around my cock.” Lifting onto my knees I lowered myself once more, spearing myself on her cock. At this angle it was much easier to hit my g-spot and it didn’t take long for my cock to start jerking once more.

“Just like that,” she said, her breathing ragged. “Fuck me, make me come.”

I continued my set pace, knowing every time I thrust in she felt it. “I want to come, please can I?” I asked, pleaded.

“Yes, come for me, cover my tits in it.” I grabbed my cock, jerking myself a bit, I knew I wouldn’t need much.

“Don’t touch,” she commanded, looking at my hand.

“But—” “I want to see you come untouched,” she interrupted. “I want you to come from my cock alone.” As much as it pained me, I set my hand aside and focused on my hole, how needy I felt, how close I was to the edge.

I knew I was loosing my rhythm, but I couldn’t help it, I was chasing my pleasure, needing to come.

“Fuck Brooks yes, I’m—” she didn’t finish as I watched her tremble beneath me, enjoying her own release.

Seeing her is what broke me. I felt my lower spine tingle and my balls draw up as my cock twitched and unloaded, shooting rope after rope of spunk across her chest, so hard it even reached her chin and lips.

When we were done I pulled off of her and laid beside her, getting to watch as she licked me off her lips. I leaned in and kissed her, tasting us together.

“That was... amazing. Thank you,” I said.

“No need to thank me,” she replied. “I loved it just as much.”

We sat in silence for a while, just basking in the afterglow of our sex. “Maybe now we can try some of the other things we talked about,” Sydney said after a minute.

“The whipped cream?” I asked. “Because I think that’s not a huge step up.”

“No,” she giggled. “Though also, yes, but I mean the other thing.” My brows furrowed. “The other thi...”

I paused, eyes wide. There was only one other thing we had discussed, but that couldn’t be what she meant, right?

“Do you mean having a...” I couldn’t even say it out loud. It had always been something I thought about, and now I had Sydney I found myself dreaming about it more.

She nodded. “I think I want to start talking about it—and maybe trying—more seriously. I didn’t pick up my last round of pills.” I starry at her starry eyed. “Are you sure? I know it’s a big step.” She nodded, looking emotional herself. “Yeah, I’ve thought about it a lot and I want to start our family. For so long I thought I needed nothing but money to feel whole, but you’ve showed me it’s so much more than that, and I’m so excited to start our forever.” A tear came from the corner of my eye,

matching hers. “I love you, and I know our forever will be great.” She gave me one final kiss. “Me too.”