



The

*Best Friend*  
Zone

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICOLE SNOW

# **THE BEST FRIEND ZONE**

---

A SMALL TOWN ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

ICE LIPS PRESS

Content copyright © Nicole Snow. All rights reserved.  
Published in the United States of America.  
First published in September, 2020.

**Disclaimer:** The following book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance characters in this story may have to real people is only coincidental.

Please respect this author's hard work! No section of this book may be reproduced or copied without permission. Exception for brief quotations used in reviews or promotions. This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. Thanks!

Cover Design – CoverLuv. Photo by Michelle Lancaster @lanefotograf.

## CONTENTS

### About the Book

1. Here We Goat Again (Tory)
2. Just Goat Serious (Faulkner)
3. Goat To Be Kidding Me (Tory)
4. Someone Got His Goat (Faulkner)
5. Can't Goat Enough (Tory)
6. Goat A Helping Hand? (Faulkner)
7. Goat It Together (Tory)
8. Just Goat Real (Faulkner)
9. Goat A Load of This (Tory)
10. Goat Me Down (Faulkner)
11. Goat A Bad Feeling (Tory)
12. We've Goat Issues (Faulkner)
13. You've Goat It Baaad (Tory)
14. Goat Me All Riled (Faulkner)
15. We've Goat This (Tory)
16. Almost Goat To Eden (Faulkner)
17. You Goat Me Dreamin' (Tory)
18. We Goat the Beat (Faulkner)
19. You Goat Me Wrong (Tory)
20. Goat Me Twisted Up (Faulkner)
21. Goat Some Bad News (Tory)
22. We've Goat Trouble (Faulkner)
23. I've Goat You (Tory)
24. We've Goat Company (Faulkner)
25. Goat Ourselves A Party (Tory)

### The Romeo Arrangement Preview

### About Nicole Snow

### More Books by Nicole

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Just friends? Is a peach pie to the face “just” a little mishap?

I know what I felt the day Quinn Faulkner saved me from death by dessert.

My best friend was always The One. *The Impossible*.

Older. Flawless. Brutally gorgeous. A small-town prince of summer crushes.

Leagues above a tag-along dance nerd like me.

Years later, my uncle needs a goat wrangler. I just need an escape.

What better way to flee a cheating ex and dumpster fire career?

What better way to collide with the boy who got away?

And now he's an atrociously hot, mysterious, overprotective beast.

*Breathe in. Breathe out.*

I'm grown up now.

Unmoved by his slayer charms and heart-stompy memories.

I can't stay to unravel his darkness—or savor his vows to protect me.

We're safely platonic.

Until the Ferris wheel incident.

Then we're alone with a tension so thick you can chew it.

Quinn kisses me like no tomorrow. Truly. Madly. All in.

I wanted to piece my life back together.

Will shattering the best friend zone leave us whole or heartbroken?



## HERE WE GOAT AGAIN (TORY)



*Nine Years Ago*

WHEN I LOOK BACK at my seventeen-year-old self, there are exactly seven minutes and twenty seconds forever burned into my brain.

That's how long it takes to get out of Granny's little red Nova I'd driven over to Farmer Faulkner's place, carrying a freshly baked peach pie smelling like heaven.

How long I bite my lip on their doorstep, unsure if Quinn would even be home, much less receptive to a decadent dessert at ten o'clock in the morning. But Granny did give it her ringing endorsement, swearing it's the best I've ever made from her recipe.

How long I exhale in relief as a tall, handsome boy who looks a thousand times better than this pie smells opens the door with his trademark grin.

How long I stand there speechless, staring up at him, and forget how to form words.

Thankfully, Quinn remembers for me, holding the door open and waving me inside with a bewildered look. Even though we've been friends for years, I still get clogged full of butterflies when he shoots me *that* smile.

"Don't just stand there teasing me. Get in here," he says with a laugh like a song.

"Okay! I just baked it this morning," I mumble, shocked I can speak with my cheeks in flames. "Granny's recipe. We thought maybe you'd be in the mood for \_\_\_"

*Record screech.*

Stop.

We're not quite halfway through my seven minutes of heaven. This is when it takes a detour through hell.

Because a second later, the toe of my shoe catches on Grandpa Faulkner's unseen pile of boots by the door. For another second, there's just panic, a faint hope I might get lucky and avoid making a total fool of myself.

Nope.

Not today.

The jarring sensation of my body spinning and hitting the floor proves one thing.

I just ruined any hope the hottest boy in town ever had of eating this delicious pie by planting myself in it face-first.

At least it isn't so piping hot it hurts. Not physically.

Emotionally? I'm dead.

I think the only reason I'm not bawling when his strong arms lift me up is because I'm too freaking sticky, plastered in peach filling.

"Tory, holy shit. Take my hand," he growls, slipping his big fingers through mine. "Let's get you cleaned up."

For the next minute, I'm just silent as a grave, counting how many times I must've dreamed of this moment, holding Quinn Faulkner's hand.

And not *one* of those dreams ever included being a hot mess of sticky hair, fruit filling, crust, and skin so red with shame I wonder if it'll stain me crimson for life.

Somehow, he's still laughing, even as he brings me upstairs to the bathroom and fetches a washcloth from nowhere, wiping at my face.

But it's not a cruel, arrogant, look-at-what-a-klutz-you-are laugh.

He's too good for that.

It's kind, as if to say, *no big deal. Peach-flavored shit happens.*

I'm a little less sticky when I grab the washcloth out of his hand and use it to blot at my face, trying to hide the tears, and failing.

"I...I'm sorry, Quinn. I'm such an idiot. I tried to do one nice thing for you and—"

"And?" he echoes, snatching the damp cloth from my trembling hand and gently blotting peach goo off my cheek. "Last I checked, it's the thought that counts. Don't think I don't appreciate it."

"But you saw how clumsy I am!" I whine, tipping my face up to the ceiling.

"I saw you practicing one hell of a talent act," he whips back.

For a second, I look down and glare at him, biting my lip. But the gentle,

joking shine in his bright-green eyes is there to soothe me. Not taunt.

He's always been the older boy, but he's also mature beyond his years.

"Is this what you do when you go home to your fancy-schmancy dance routines?" he asks, that Oklahoma twang in his voice turning me to butter.

"You think I planned this?" Shaking my head, I smile anyway at how absurd it is. "You think I wanted to look like a total ass in front of you and your grandpa?"

"I mean...it's a step up from the bees," he says with a wink, referring back to the infamous time we met several summers ago. "And Gramps ain't here. He's in town today picking up jars for his honey."

"Okay, but all that effort...I made it for you guys and I ruined it. You never even got a chance to taste—"

I flinch as he runs his finger over my cheek, wiping a small dab of peach off my skin. Then I watch in disbelief as he plucks it into his mouth, taking his sweet time licking his finger.

Oh my God.

I pull my messy hair over my face like a shield.

Bad idea, probably, when blushing this hard could set my face on fire.

"Tastes like summer to me. Sugary, sweet, just a little tangy, and...oh, wait a minute."

I freeze in terror as he frowns, deep in thought.

"Yeah, I think it tastes just a little bit like an overachieving whiner who thinks I'm gonna send pictures of her peach-splattered face to her family, her friends, her teachers, all her future bosses, and every dude who wants to date her." His eyes practically fuse with mine as he smiles.

"Idiot!" I snap, punching him in the arm. "Be serious. I'm trying to apologize."

"And I'm telling you, there's no need. Shit happens. You'll bring over a new pie when you feel like it and we'll pretend this never happened."

Right.

Like it's just that easy.

But the twinkle in his eyes insists it is.

"You're the worst," I say, grabbing the washcloth again so I can scrub away the smile I'm fighting. "I'll never live it down. And what kind of man wants a girl who makes a mess like this? He'd probably be scared I'll hit *him* in the face with a pie, sooner or later."

"Plenty of guys, Peach. I promise you. You're gonna make some dude ecstatic."

My eyes dart up, fully expecting to see another playful and annoyingly

gorgeous smirk etched on Quinn's face.

Only, there's not a shred of fun in those emerald fire eyes.

None of the usual clown sarcasm.

He's stone-cold serious.

And I try to blame every last bit of the searing hot blood rushing to my face on the pie mishap as my seven minutes and twenty seconds to heaven expires.

That's how long it takes for him to save me for the second of many times in my life.

It's also how long it takes me to fall from schoolgirl infatuation to head over heels in love with Quinn Faulkner.



### *Present*

LIFE IS a whole series of firsts.

The rush of a first kiss with an impossible boy on a sticky summer day.

The first disappointment of that damning B on a Euro history test your overachieving butt busted itself over.

The first time your adult self steps into a small town that still feels magical, even though you're far too old for that kinda thinking anymore.

And then there's your first time with goats.

"Come on, guy, why are you looking at me like that? It's not like I *planned* on winding up a goat wrangler in Dallas, North Dakota," I tell Owl, the huge black hill of a dog sitting next to me in the passenger seat. He's looking at me now, turning away from staring out the truck's windshield like my copilot.

Honestly, he *is* my copilot on this journey. The only one I can depend on when the time comes to turn loose a dozen bleating, horned eating machines on a couple overgrown acres.

"You know, I could be dancing on Broadway right now," I whisper to the Tibetan Mastiff. "If it wasn't for this bum knee..."

I glance at the dog. His big almond-shaped brown eyes settle on me, and he blinks lazily. Just once before turning his square block of a head back to gazing at the hills rolling by.

He's not impressed.

Fair enough.

I'm not either.

Deep down, I think I always knew I'd fall short. A Spidey-sense warning me my dancing career wouldn't last forever.

Heck, how many dancers are still tearing up the spotlight in their forties?

Trouble is, I'm not even thirty years old yet. I still had over a decade to go, and if I'd just gotten to Broadway...you'd better believe I'd have slayed.

"Wanna know a secret, Owl? It wasn't my fault," I tell him, mainly because this shaggy beast is the closest thing I have to a true confidant now. "It wasn't even an accident. The bitch tripped me—on purpose."

I get another dull look from him.

"I'm serious. Swear to God. Madeline Shafer. She'd make you lick salt in Death Valley if she thought she could get away with it. Fake blonde hair, long legs, and no tits." I glance down at my own rather flat chest with a sigh. "I mean, meh boobs kinda come with the territory. I've done enough cardio for ten lifetimes." I huff out a breath. "The fact that I'm almost up to a B-cup might be the only good thing about sitting on my ass for months."

Owl's big brown doggie eyes land on my hair. Probably because sitting on the seat the way he is makes him taller than me.

I feel like he should be wearing the seat belt, but I couldn't figure out how that would do anything except get him tangled up and annoyed. He's still staring at my hair with his meaty pink tongue flopped out as I touch my ponytail, making sure it's intact.

"I thought dogs couldn't appreciate bright colors? I'll have you know I kept these pink highlights from my last big show. Jean-Paul swore I'd be center stage, but I guess Madeline talked him into other plans. I still can't help but wonder if they schemed it together."

My teeth grit together. A wave of ice-cold sadness strikes as I glance in the rearview mirror at the stock trailer I'm pulling.

The one full of goats.

Forget Broadway, prestigious dance halls, two-timing competitors, and cheating exes. This is my life now in Dallas. Hauling around Rent-A-Goats for my lazy slug of an uncle, bless his heart.

"Never mind," I tell the dog, swallowing my frustration. "But having pink highlights in brown hair is no easy task. They had to strip all the color out of those sections, so for a week I was walking around with white stripes, looking like some kind of overgrown skunk. Then Cheryl, she's my—*was* my—hairdresser, put in the pink. Bright neon pink. You should've seen it, Owl. I basically glowed in the dark. This is after two months, so it's pretty faded now."

I release a heavy sigh. “Good things don’t last forever. I’m not going through the process of having my hair stripped again.”

He leans forward then, laying his big scrunched muzzle on the dashboard with a hint of drool.

“Jeez, sorry to bore you!”

He lets out a long grumble-sigh, no doubt counting down the seconds until he’s free to flop down on Uncle Dean’s porch again without a care in the world.

Who can blame him?

My personal tragedy only makes sense to yours truly. To anyone else, it’s one more dream that fell short.

But I’m so bright, they tell me. Good education, good looks, and oh-so-pleasant. Hey, my parents are even rich.

I can reinvent myself and do practically anything.

I’m young. I’m smart. I’ll figure it out.

And sometimes I take a second to count my blessings and realize they’re almost right. *Almost*.

But if I had my druthers? I’d still be in Chicago, dancing my heart out, working toward the day when people would spend exorbitant sums on tickets to see the fantabulous Tory Redson-Riddle-Coffey.

Yeah, I’m certain the Queen Bitch tripped me intentionally, right in the middle of a double cabriole.

Madeline was in line behind me. There was no reason whatsoever for her to have gotten close enough to bump into me.

Her little oopsie sent me crashing down face-first, narrowly avoiding a broken nose. The way my knee hyperextended meant nasty surgery to repair the torn ligaments and a ruptured tendon.

I still have over three more months of real healing before I can even consider slow dancing again. Light exercise and a few other physical therapy exercises are all I’m allowed to do right now.

Good thing the goats and Owl do ninety-nine percent of the work on this gig, or so I’ve been told.

The dog sits up and lets out a low *woof* a split second before my phone’s navigation tells me I’ll need to turn in a quarter mile.

“How’d you know?” I ask him.

He barks again, but because I don’t speak canine, I have no idea what he’s saying.

“Good dog.” I flip on the blinker.

He is a good dog from what I’ve seen. This will be our first time truly working together, besides loading the goats into the stock trailer back at Uncle

Dean's place.

Owl pretty much did that part all by himself.

I swear, if he had hands instead of paws, he wouldn't have even needed me to pull down the ramp or open the trailer doors.

"Ever met this guy before?" I ask, turning down the long dirt road leading up to the grand country estate on a hill. "Our client today is no less than Ridge Barnet, the famous actor."

I grin. I haven't ever met him since I came back here, but he's still the talk of the town.

I've heard the same story over a dozen times from so many people, how the billionaire actor moved here over a year ago and got himself in a mighty big pickle with a girl being chased by some bad guys her dad owed money to.

It had a happy ending, of course.

All the best stories do.

A sham engagement, a whirlwind romance, a gaggle of villains brought to justice.

Dallasfolk seem just as grateful to Ridge for giving them something to boast about as they are for the times when he let half the town put their drinks on his tab.

I'm still thinking it over when Owl barks, just as my phone navigation speaks. Our destination is a mile ahead, on the right, underscoring just how big the Barnet ranch is.

We drive past a small herd of cattle grazing on a hill. They're the start of big plans for this ranch from what I've heard, though last fall they had plenty of business in the run up to Halloween.

"Uncle Dean says the Barnets want this land cleared for more pumpkins," I tell the dog, shaking my head at the thought of a rich and famous badass movie star growing freaking pumpkins. "Can you believe it?"

It seems so odd, but maybe it's his wife's pet project or something. Almost as odd as the fact that I'm talking to a dog and half expecting him to answer.

"Funny, I can't remember who owned this property years ago when I spent summers here with Granny, but I know it's next to Reed land. You know, North Earhart Oil fame, where half the town works. Old man Reed's granddaughter liked to come here and spend summers with him. We used to play together as kids. Bella was a cool lady."

Owl barks as soon as I say her name.

"You know her? Oh, wait," I say, snorting before he can bark another answer. "Don't tell me. Is that horse still alive? Edison? He must be a dinosaur by now. Like, two hundred in horse years. People always swore he was half dog,

so I guess you'd get along. Maybe because dogs are supposed to be smarter than people."

Owl lets out an agreeable *woof* twice in quick succession.

I laugh. "I'm glad you're so opinionated. This job would get lonely if you were the strong, silent type."

His brown doggie eyes land on me again.

"Hey. Don't get me wrong, you're plenty strong, my dude. What do you weigh, anyway? Probably more than me."

He barks again, tossing his head.

I can't help but lose it again.

Look, if I'm slowly going crazy, I'll do it laughing.

The synthetic voice on my phone says our destination is on the right. We've arrived.

*Finally.*

I stop the truck and look out the window. Sure enough, there's a big patch of overgrown brush in the center of the field, along with two big trees. I recognize it from the photos.

Uncle Dean said Ridge and his family fenced this area off last year when they ran the pumpkin patch, so all I have to do is deliver the goats, let them roam free, and their endless appetite will do the rest.

I thought it was a joke at first when my uncle swore a few goats could clear a whole patch of land in hours, eating up almost anything that grows. But I've done my due diligence online and seen the living, bleating proof.

Now, I'm actually a little excited to see it in person.

There's a metal gate connected to the barbed wire fence that runs the length of the property, both running parallel to a good-sized trench.

I can see how this area was recently fenced off from the rest of the field, but there isn't a driveway or gravel approach for me to back the trailer over the ditch and into the field. *Hmmm.*

"Well, Owl, looks like you're going to have to lead our little friends through the ditch and up into the field. Are you up for that?"

He plants his massive paws on the center console and stands up like a furry soldier. With his black bushy tail curled up over his back, brushing the headliner of the truck, he barks again.

"I'll take your word for it." I shut off the engine and open my door. "Hold on, I'll get your door."

He lets out a whimper and wags his tail harder. I wonder if he's just excited to get to work or away from my loud mouth, permanently set to TMI.

Owl doesn't wait for me to come to his side. I slide out of my seat, step

outside, and barely scramble out of the way before he flies across the driver's seat and lands on the ground beside me with a *whomp!*

"So nimble!" I tell him proudly, scratching his huge head. "Just try not to knock me over next time, okay?"

He really is quite the dog, looking like he was just flown in from the Himalayas. Owl could probably give old Edison a run for his money in the IQ department.

Maybe that's his goal in life, who knows?

We all have big dreams.

And when some dreams go sour, we either conjure up new ones or go insane.

Today, my new dream is in sight, making a successful venture out of my uncle's latest harebrained scheme. Pretty much what Uncle Dean does best.

He'd started up the Rent-A-Goat business earlier this spring, billing it as a fast, all-organic solution to the many properties here in rural North Dakota that need weeds and brush cleared. He promised every farmer in earshot that his crew can chew through anything, leaving no chemicals and no mess.

Easy-peasy.

Except Uncle Dean threw his back out the week after he landed his first three clients.

So he claims.

Ironically, that happened right after I got here.

Surprise, surprise.

I'm the one who's supposed to be recovering from surgery, and he bribed me into doing his work for him. Still, I'd rather deal with Dallas family drama any time than what's waiting for me at home.

True recovery wasn't happening in Chicago with all the stress there, so Granny said I should pay her a visit, or she'd pay me one anyway and drag me home with her.

My parents—especially my father, who was born and raised in Granny's little house—fought it tooth and nail. That alone said it was the right move.

I think I'm the only one living outside North Dakota who still appreciates this place.

Dad hightailed it out of the sticks as soon as he turned eighteen, and the few times he'd returned were to drop me off with Gran or pick me up again.

He's in real estate now. High-end, luxury real estate that barely exists in Dallas, not counting the two billionaire families who've made fabulous homes here.

Dean, on the other hand, has country written in his soul. Forever the Nascar-loving, beer-drinking, wise-cracking, money-scheming brother. Dad's tried his

entire life to pretend he isn't family.

He can't stand sharing a drop of blood with Uncle Dean. Neither can my mom—she came from money.

Old blue Chicago business money.

The kind that leaves kids with three last names, so everyone knows you have a pedigree.

Mom was a dancer, like me, who, also like me, was injured in her prime. Unlike me, she'd healed in days and went on to dance for years before falling for a young dashing real estate broker new to the big city.

Hence the reason I'm here.

She wanted me back in the studio the first week after my surgery, when just climbing out of bed felt like scaling Everest.

Typical Mom, who always knows more than the doctors and therapists do. Just ask her.

Thing is, I'm not ready to step foot in that studio, and it's not just because my knee won't let me.

My heart puts up a much bigger fight. I'm so not ready to watch Jean-Paul and Madeline making eyes at each other, cozied up in the corner flipping through notes, his hands going places they shouldn't be.

God, if I see either of them face-to-face again, I might just—

A loud bark jerks me out of memory lane.

"Thanks, Bud," I tell Owl, who's wagging his tail impatiently. "You're right. None of that matters. Let's get these goats in the field. Oh, wait, company?"

I stare up at a tall older man approaching in a starch-white shirt, bright green eyes flickering behind his oval glasses.

The Barnet's valet and household assistant, Tobin, comes off just as nonsense as he looks. Uncle Dean warned me.

We exchange a few words, and I go over the job again, repeating everything I was told to do.

The butler nods with satisfaction and matter-of-factly assures me I shouldn't have "*the least hesitation*"—his words—to contact him at the house if I run into any cause for concern.

Oof.

I shouldn't be intimidated but...

Meeting Tobin reminds me this is real work. Serious business for a very influential family in town, and I'd better do it right.

It also makes me smile at just how strange little old Dallas can be.

"Okay. Go time," I whisper to myself as much as Owl, rubbing my hands.

I walk around to the back of the trailer, unhitch the latch for the ramp, and

lower it to the ground.

“Look alive! A dozen goats coming right up,” I tell Owl, while walking up the ramp to peek inside.

He runs toward the ditch and barks. I’m grateful it has a natural slope and doesn’t look muddy, so they shouldn’t have too much trouble climbing up and down to the field.

“Yep, that’s where you’re going, guys, straight to the buffet.” I unlatch the door and yank it open as he barks again impatiently. “Give me a minute, will you? I’m working on it.”

Looks like Owl isn’t the only one who wants me to hurry it up.

The goats start bleating restlessly, making these rumbling little grunts that echo off the trailer’s metal sides.

Uncle Dean says it’s just their way of saying hello. Right now, it sounds more like *shake your ass, lady. We’re not waiting all day.*

The tribe, which is what a herd of goats is called—it’s amazing how much I’ve learned about goats—is a mix of colors. Everything from solid white, spotted black, mottled brown, and one who’s this pretty ginger color. Most of them have horns and goatees, and in all honesty, they’re cute critters. Friendly, too.

“All right, Owl, you ready?” I ask, unhooking the mesh gate that keeps the goats from escaping.

He barks.

I let it rip, pulling back the mesh gate. “Sweet freedom, boys and girls. Do your stuff!”

I hold in a breath.

It’s almost anticlimactic. Slowly, the goats start plodding out of the trailer and down the ramp, looking around curiously. Owl barks and circles the ramp, nudging the first few onward, down into the ditch.

I’m watching the scene with a flicker of satisfaction when Owl sits and woofs at me.

That’s when I realize my mistake.

Oh, crap.

I should’ve opened the gate on the other side of the trench before letting them out.

Jumping off the ramp is my second mistake. The quick movement spooks the goats, and they instantly start running in all directions, kicking up their heels and bleating loudly.

*Ugh.* Totally not the smooth transition I hoped for into rent-a-goating.

I race down into the steep ditch and up the other side, thankful I’m wearing

thick leather cowboy boots. The grass is too tall to see if I'm about to step on anything or not.

It's steeper than I thought. At one point I feel like I'm running up a mountain.

At the top of the ditch, I'm almost to the gate when I get whacked in the butt so hard it tosses me forward.

"Ow!" I shout, grabbing the gate for balance, narrowly stopping myself from slamming into the big metal pipes. "That's going to leave a mark, you brat."

Spinning around, I glare at a large shaggy black goat.

He bleats and puts his head down.

*That's right. You should be ashamed.*

But before I can dwell on my goat-wounded pride, I jump up on the bottom rung of the gate and scramble over the top before he can headbutt me *in* the butt again. "Ha! I'm not making myself an easy target, little guy."

Too bad the troublemaker veers past me, crashing his horned head against the gate. The metal structure vibrates, and so does the fence it's connected to.

*Sweet Jesus. What have I gotten myself into?* I wonder.

Owl barks up a storm, and though he's busy rounding up goats, forcing them neatly into the ditch, I have a distinct feeling he's barking at me. Telling me to open the damn gate, already.

"Working on it!" I shout back and run to the edge of the gate.

Of course, the latch is rusty and on the other side.

*Of course.*

Anything else would be too easy.

Sighing, I scramble up on the metal and lean over the top, fighting for the latch, fingers working for just the right leverage.

"The things I do..." I mutter. "Climbing gates isn't on my list of physical therapy exercises. Neither is running through ditches the size of Royal Gorge!"

I'm exaggerating, but in my mildly panicked state, it doesn't feel like it.

Then the gate vibrates again, courtesy of another horn-strike by my agitated, impatient jet-black alpha goat.

Owl woofs again, this time louder.

I let out a growl and dig my heels in, pushing against the rusty latch with all my might.

There's a loud *pop* as it releases.

Hallelujah.

The gate swings open, its metallic hinges screeching beautifully. I'm about to turn around and give Owl a triumphant grin when I notice how it *keeps* swinging.

Oh, no.

With my weight giving it momentum, it flies all the way open, taking me with it, until I'm hovering over the ditch.

The very *steep* ditch.

“Crud!”

Now I'm suspended over the Royal Gorge of North Dakota.

This just gets better and better.

I can't jump down. My knee won't take an eight-foot tumble, maybe more.

So clutching the top rung, I try walking along the bottom pipe inch by inch, but my movement causes the gate to swing back toward the fence and the mischievous buck.

I swear to God he's staring at me now, head down, and smiling—*can goats actually smile?*

He's definitely waiting to headbutt me again. I know that much.

“Owl! Get that rascal inside,” I call out.

The dog barks, but he's busy rounding up the rest of the dirty dozen, trying to keep them in a neat formation.

Pursing my lips, I keep still, holding on to the top pipe for dear life.

Maybe I'll just wait. Once Owl has them all inside the field, I'll edge along the pipe, making it swing shut. That'll work, I think.

That dog is so smart, I have half a mind to tell him to shut the gate with me on it.

Over my shoulder, I watch as Owl does his job, general of his own little goat army. The animals make their way down one side and up the other of the steep ditch and through the gate, taking their sweet time.

Relief is almost in sight, but then I get this odd tingle at the base of my neck.

Almost like...I'm being watched?

Slowly, I turn my head to the road, half expecting to see that damn dark ringleader goat eyeing me again, plotting his next move.

Nope. Not him.

It's a big blue pickup truck, and it's slowing down to take in the glorious sight of my helpless butt swinging on the gate like a stranded raccoon. The flash of the driver I get looks younger than Tobin, too.

*Awesome.*

My very first job and the property owner finds me in a shamefully precarious position. Hardly part of the “expert crew” Uncle Dean promised.

Well. Maybe he won't notice. Maybe he'll just keep driving.

If it's Ridge Barnet himself, surely he's a busy man? The rich and famous have better things to do than stare at some hapless goat-chick completely out of

lucky breaks...right?

Right.

I think the odds of me dancing in Paris next week are better.

And I know I'm completely out of luck when the truck stops and I hear a door popping open.

Oh, here we go. I turn away from the road and close my eyes, somehow hoping that if I can't see him, he can't see me.

This is already so ridiculous, what's one more absurd wish?

"Hey, lady, you all right?" he shouts. "Looks like you're fixing to play stunt woman in Ridge's next Western flick."

The voice is familiar...I think?

A tingle zips up my spine and I open my eyes.

I probably recognize it because I've seen more than one Ridge Barnet movie. The guy is Captain McHottie and a half. And newly, happily, till-death-do-they-part married.

Totally off the market for this damsel in distress.

Not that I'd ever be in the running in an alternate universe. Or that I'm even looking.

I've logged off the male gender for a good long while after Jean-Paul showed me just what lying, conniving, heartless backstabbers some guys can be.

"I'm fine!" I call out as loudly as I can in my mortified state. "Got it all under control here. Just waiting until they're inside to shut the gate!"

"You sure about that, Peach?"

Sarcasm is the last thing I need right now. "Yes, really."

*Peach?*

Again, this weird sense of familiarity hits.

I chance a glance at Owl, see he's still chasing down a couple of goats, and then make a quick count of the beasts already inside the fence. Nine. Including the black one standing in the opening, watching me with a glint in his eye identical to Lucifer's. "Just three more to go."

"You know goats can sense rain coming, don't you?"

"Rain?" I glance up.

Where the hell did that dark cloud come from? Me, probably, considering I always have a black cloud over my head. The chaos today proves it.

"Yep. They'll go right for the closest shelter at the first hint of a storm coming. Which, right now, appears to be your trailer."

Crap, he's right. Two goats are sprinting toward the gate from inside the fenced-in field.

"Oh, no, no, no." I rock the gate, trying to make it move, but now it's like the

stupid thing is stuck. “Son of a biscuit eater!”

“Tory Redson-Riddle-Coffey? Shitfire, it *is* you,” the stranger says.

It bops me like a boulder to the head.

That Oklahoma twang I haven’t heard in years.

I whip my head around so fast my neck pops.

I’m staring at a dangerously handsome, wickedly amused, very built man smiling dead at me.

He’s older, bigger, and broader than I remember, but he has the same boyish dimples behind a dark scratch of beard.

The same emerald-green eyes drinking me in with a gaze that used to stir me up like a blender.

The same forehead, aquiline nose, and neat ears perched in a face that still looks like it was crafted by Michelangelo.

The same good-natured slip of a smile on his chiseled face—a half smirk, but not a cruel one. More like the kinda smile that says he knows a scandalous secret, and you’ll spend every second you’re with him just *itching* to find out what he knows.

Holy Hannah.

My hold on the gate slips. Squealing, I catch myself from falling at the last second, yanking myself forward and finding my footing on the metal.

“Quinn? Quinn Faulkner?” It rushes out of me in total disbelief.

“Don’t wear my name out, Peach. I knew it was you. I’ve only ever heard two people say son of a biscuit eater in my entire life,” he says, scratching at his chin. “You and your granny.”

I shrug, because that’s true, and then ask the obvious.

“I...I thought you were Ridge? What’re you doing here at his house, anyway?”

“I was wondering the same about you,” he says smugly, lifting a brow. “I’d tell you now, but something tells me you’d be a lot happier getting off that thing. Here, let me—”

Owl interrupts with a loud series of barks.

“The goats! Wait, I have to make sure they don’t wander.”

Quinn nods once. He must know dog-speak, too, because he shoots down the ditch and up the other side like it’s nothing, shooing the goats back into the fence, including the devil goat.

I jerk harder on the gate. Definitely stuck. It won’t budge.

So I start working my way along the metallic piping, toward the fence, wondering why on earth this gate is so long, just as Owl chases the last three horned beasts through the opening.

My foot slips, scratching at the ground, and pain shoots up my leg.  
Wincing, raw fire surges to my knee.

The injury warns me it's had its fill of this, and I'm sensing it's the only warning I'll get.

God. I pause, breathing through the pain, but I've barely sucked in a gulp of fresh air when the gate starts swinging closed.

A strong pull is all it takes before I'm hovering over solid ground again with Quinn.

No, actually, he's facing my back when the gate finally clicks shut.  
I'm almost afraid to turn around.

If Ridge Barnet is a Captain McHottie, Quinn Faulkner is *two* and a half superhero hunks.

He was...

Kinda my first boyfriend.

Totally my first raging crush.

Absolutely, positively my best friend on the long, hot summers of small-town teenage hijinks here in Dallas that always made the Windy City a distant memory.

The first two things were completely unknown to him, of course—and I plan to keep it that way.

Years ago, when he'd spend summers with his grandpa and I'd spend mine with Granny, he delivered the first hint of butterflies I'd ever had for any boy.

This innocent, chaste crush we never dared turn into anything else because I think, deep down, we both appreciated an unlikely friendship too much to risk setting it on fire.

That pesky age gap between us also didn't help.

Still, I'd been plenty crushed when I returned here for my last summer and found out Quinn wasn't coming to Dallas. He'd grown up and joined the Army.

Yet here he is, grasping my waist, snapping me back to reality, which sends a gazillion volts through me. Then he lifts me off the fence like I'm lighter than a feather.

"I heard you were home, Tory. Figured we'd bump into each other sooner or later. Didn't know you were helping Dean with his goat business," he says, rendering me speechless with another panty-ripping Faulkner smile.

My feet are on the ground.

*I think.*

He's released my waist, but I keep an awkward hold on the gate as I slowly turn, needing the stability. Both because that sting in my knee won't let up and the shock of seeing him again makes it hard to stand.

He's wearing a black t-shirt that leaves virtually nothing to the imagination when it comes to a rugged mess of biceps, pecs, and abs hot enough to grill on.

A pair of snug-fitting blue jeans and brown cowboy boots rounds out a picture my mind files away to haunt me for another ten years.

"Um, y-yeah, that's my job...goat helper, extraordinaire." Swallowing because grown-up Quinn is illegally, deliriously hotter than boy Quinn, I remember how to form words and nod. "I'm being a good niece. Pretending I like this and didn't get roped in."

Those lush green eyes of his flash again in the light. Even with the last of the sun disappearing behind the rain clouds, his gaze glows.

Seriously.

No one, man or woman, should have eyes as gorgeous as his. They sparkle like lights on the Vegas strip where it's always St. Patrick's Day, rimmed with dark lashes and thick brows which make them stand out even more.

"Damn good to see you again, Tory." He shakes his head. "How long have you been in town?"

I nod because it's *damn good* to see him, too. I'd thought it'd never happen, even if I secretly hoped it might.

Of course, I can't admit that.

"Just a couple weeks," I answer. "We all know summer's the best time to visit these parts. North Dakota winters? Count me *out*."

I scrunch up my nose, and he chuckles.

"Aw," he says, with that twang that's as appealing as the rest of him. "So this is your first big job."

I shrug again, and then, because it's Quinn, I also laugh.

"How'd you guess? Was it watching me get butt-rammed by a goat? Or maybe it was just running around like a hen on fire that gave it all away?"

He throws his head back and laughs, just like he used to so many years ago.

My smile feels magnetic.

"I missed the ass-ramming part. Nice knowing the peach nickname still fits since I guess everybody wants a piece." His eyes flick to my hips and then away again just as fast.

Oh my God.

If he *wanted* to make this comfy reunion turn hella awkward, and honestly weirdly sexy all at once...mission accomplished.

I scratch at my face a little too furiously, desperately trying to hide the blush braising my cheeks. Turning my head into a Fotomat has always been his superpower.

"So, what?" I ask softly. "You've never seen a goat wrangler girl hanging off

a gate before? It's *Dallas*, North Dakota, Quinn. We're like a colder, weirder, tinier version of the other Dallas."

"Nah, that was a first for this town. Congratulations," he says with a smile. Then he grabs my hand, pulls me aside, and then checks to make sure the gate is shut before latching it. "C'mon. Let's make sure those goats are all accounted for before the rain starts up."

I hear him, but right now, I'm all eyes.

I still can't peel my gaze off him.

*Quinn flipping Faulkner.*

If I had a dime for every time I've thought about him, I'd be a rich lady.

He points at the edge of a brush cluster, counting the animals. "See there? They're already taking shelter under those big trees. I'm seeing ten, how about you?"

"There should be a dozen," I say.

I do a quick headcount—or horn-count, technically, since I'm a sucker for lame puns—and find the other two moving just behind a big tree, already sticking their faces into the brush that isn't being doused with rain.

"Who're we missing?" he asks.

"There's two more behind that big tree. We're good."

Quinn nods, satisfied. We start walking and I try to ignore the pain shooting up my leg.

I stumble through it, fairly sure I haven't reinjured anything. It's just sore from use and a little more excitement than I needed today. There's a difference, and I've learned to recognize it.

"You sure you're all right?" he asks. "Can't help noticing a little bit of a limp."

"Oh, it's nothing. Just an old injury." I don't care to let him know old means just a few months in this case.

"Dance, right?" he asks, his tone oddly neutral.

I look up at him. "You remember...?"

"Well, I've seen Granny Coffey more than a few times since moving back here. The old gal's proud of you, Tory. You're damn near all she talks about some nights at the Purple Bobcat."

I give him a friendly smile, while making a mental note to ask my grandmother why she hadn't mentioned running into him. Weird.

She's talked up nearly everyone else I ever knew in Dallas and filled me in on their whole biography, where they are, what they're doing.

Most cases are too predictable. They're settled, working, and raising kids. The older folks are retired. But pretty much everybody's following the small-

town circle of life: grow up, get a job, get hitched, have kids, and go gossip. That last one is super important.

“When did you move back here yourself?” I ask, hoping he has a happier reason for being in Dallas as a grown man.

“Over a year ago. Ridge and I were Army buddies. I came by today to drop off a few old things I found in my barn for his lady. Grace Barnett’s been a one-woman decorating machine since before she married him. Hell, I’m the reason he moved out here and met her,” he says proudly, thumbing his chest. “He was looking to leave Hollywood, and I kept pulling his tail about Dallas being the best escape. Couldn’t believe it when he actually bought a place here not long after I returned. I wound up helping him with a little personal mess and decided to stay longer. My grandpa willed me his place when he died, and since I was the only one in the family interested...here I am.”

“So, you’re living there full time then?”

“Yep, just fixing the old farm up, piece by piece. The farm sat empty for several years between Gramps’ health failing and me settling in after his funeral.” He turns his head, holding my gaze, pinning me down with those otherworldly eyes. “This town gets a hold on you, don’t it? I always had a funny feeling I wasn’t quite done here.”

“Maybe so,” I whisper, giving up a smile.

The more he talks, the faster questions bolt through my head, chasing after memories of better times.

Memories with a charming boy who’s turned into a rugged man, and he’s still coming to my rescue after all these years, apparently.

Imagine that.

Being a temporary goat wrangler in Dallas, North Dakota, just got interesting.



## JUST GOAT SERIOUS (FAULKNER)



The longer I gawk at her like I've mentally reverted back to seventeen, the harder it is to *believe* I just found Tory Redson-Riddle-Coffey swinging off Ridge's gate.

She, with three names announcing to the world that she was born big-city royalty.

She, with a smile that still cuts like sunlight on days when the sky goes grey.

She, who tormented me with wet dreams every time I'd go home to Tulsa, and years later on hot nights in Kandahar and Bagram base. Every time my mind wandered thousands of miles home to cold beer, cooler breezes, and pretty girls I wish I'd bedded.

None more than the slice of Chicago deep dish sweetness standing in front of me, legs longer than I remember, and a face that says it's seen some shit even if she's all bashful smiles and cute lies.

She's also a girl, a friend, a confidant I grew up respecting like hell.

Therefore, totally off-limits to the kid who was a few years older.

Hey, I had just enough restraint to think with my head instead of my dick sometimes, *thank you very much*.

Hearing her say son of a biscuit eater left me stunned. I thought I was hallucinating the woman hanging off of Ridge's gate. Sure, I'd recognized Dean Coffey's rig with its brand-new Rent-A-Goat logo splashed on the side, but never, not in a million years, thought Tory would be the one driving it.

Delivering goats to this cleanup job around the pond where Ridge wants more acreage cleared. Nothing says married life like the sprawling pumpkin business he's running with Grace and Nelson, his father-in-law.

Ridge is on an all-organic kick between the pumpkins and his cattle. He'd mentioned hiring Dean's Rent-A-Goats a couple weeks ago before leaving for

another shoot in Hollywood, and Grace said today was the big day while I'd brought in her stuff.

"How long are you in town for?" I ask Tory, keeping our walking pace slow due to the way she's favoring one leg.

"Just until my knee heals. Gran threatened to drag me here if I didn't visit while I have the downtime." She smiles, flicking her hair over one shoulder.

"What'd you do to it?" I ask.

"Little dancing mishap. Overextended it, tore some ligaments, kinda ruptured a tendon. No big."

"Fucking ouch." I shake my head at her. "You shouldn't have been climbing the gate over the ditch in that state."

"It wasn't my choice!" she says, slipping a hand over her face. "I just...it turns out goats are a bigger handful than I bargained for, okay?"

I chuckle again.

That's Tory, all right.

Accidentally tumbling into mischief might as well be her specialty.

The lady always could make me laugh with her antics, though. Even the first time I saw her, when she and a group of other kids thought it'd be cool to steal a honeycomb out of my grandpa's bee boxes.

They'd dared her, supposedly, giving her all kinds of shit because she was terrified of bee stings.

The other kids scattered as soon as they heard me coming, but she'd stayed behind to apologize.

That impressed Gramps when he found out. Honestly, it impressed me, too, owning up to her mess.

She'd been a scrawny kid with long brown cinnamon hair and big blue eyes, several years younger than me. In no time, she became the one I always looked forward to seeing every summer.

There was a small group of us back then. Summer munchkins, they called us.

Kids whose parents hightailed it out of Dallas as soon as they'd been old enough, and then years later, sent their own children back to North Dakota every summer. That was my dad and hers.

"So what's got Dean so busy he's sending you out here to drop off his goats instead of doing it himself?" I ask her, flicking a mosquito off the back of my neck. "Don't tell me he's busy with that hot rod racing thing again? Sheriff Wallace almost threw him in jail last summer over the noise."

Tory snickers, covering her mouth. "Oh, no. He threw his back out. Just as he was supposed to get busy with his first few clients, including the Barnets."

I nod, not over her words as much as the sassy look she shoots my way.

A likely story. Everyone in town knows her uncle and his abhorrence for real work that requires any stamina.

If Dean Coffey could stick to one thing for more than a week, he'd be a jack of all trades. His ideas always seem great in theory, but when he discovers there's actual work involved in these get-rich-quick schemes, his enthusiasm fizzles fast.

"His back," I say slowly, pressing my tongue against my cheek. "Right-o."

"Yeah, he can barely crawl out of his recliner." She grins, giving me a splash of those morning-blue eyes. "Except to get a beer and warm up a chuckwagon sandwich in the microwave, of course. Poor guy."

I cringe. "Hell. Chuckwagon sandwiches. Everybody deserves to eat like a king a few times in their lives."

"But don't they do it by choice?" She half grimaces, half giggles. "Those things are like Uncle Dean's entire diet."

Laughing, we arrive at the tree and take a moment to recount the goats for good measure.

"A full dirty dozen," I tell her, studying the animals as they bob around, chewing at whatever they can find that won't have them risking their necks in the rain.

"That's what I count, too."

"Yeah, so now what?"

She shrugs. "Dean says I just leave them here. The guy I talked to, Tobin, he said they'd be just fine back here, as long as the gate's shut. I'll check back tomorrow and pick them up in a day or two, after they've had a chance to eat up the brush."

The storm picks up, big drops of rain falling. I put my hand on her back, guiding her under the tree branches to keep us from getting wet. "We might as well wait it out with the little guys. Doesn't look like it'll last long. Don't think the forecast is calling for bigger rains the next few days, so they should be good."

With my hand still on her back, I push our way through the goats huddled together until we're near the tree trunk. I keep an extra eye on that dark, wicked-looking goat with the shifty eyes and longer beard.

"Uncle Dean didn't mention goats not liking rain," she says, leaning against the tree.

"It's true. Even before the first hint of rain, they've got a sixth sense about it and head for coverage."

"How do you know?" Frowning, she eyes me skeptically.

"Gramps had a couple goats one time. Twenty minutes before a rain storm,

this big billy would always be standing on the porch, wanting to come inside. Couldn't get him off it, either, not until it quit raining, then he'd leave all on his own."

"A billy like that one?" She points to the large onyx goat with the hanging goatee.

"Yep. Quite a resemblance."

"Hope yours was nicer. He's half devil!" she hisses.

Grinning at the way she glares at the goat, I ask, "So he's the boy who started this mess, huh?"

"Unfortunately." Then she frowns. "Hmm. I don't remember your grandfather having goats."

I gently nudge a couple more goats away from us and kneel, brushing aside some sticks and dead grass, clearing a spot for us to sit.

"It was way back before he had bees. I was really young, so it would've been before you came sneaking around that first time." I pat the ground beside me. "Have a seat, Peach."

She plants herself down, cautiously, keeping one leg stiffer.

"Trying to steal honeycomb." She chuckles. "How stupid was that?"

"Pretty damn dumb," I agree.

"Harsh!" She playfully whacks me in the bicep. "I apologized, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," I say, mock-rubbing my arm and wincing. I didn't actually feel a thing, but I do it so she laughs.

Man, she's cute.

Nah, wait.

She *was* cute when she was young and wearing pie filling.

Now? She's goddamn ravishing. Gorgeous. Straight-up knock out territory.

Her hair is pulled back in a long ponytail, and it's not just chestnut-brown like I remember. It's turned this rich auburn cinnamon shade, laced with short stripes of pink.

She's still the same thin, long-legged girl I remember, but she's filled out and ripened in ways that won't stop hounding my cock.

Shit. I knew my mind would go there eventually.

That last summer, when she was seventeen, I'd started to look at her in a grown-up way. I'd been twenty, so she was definitely off-limits. Jailbait in a town like Dallas, and anywhere else for good reason.

A few years apart when you're young is a gaping chasm. But when you're older, when you've both turned into responsible adults...

No.

Not even going there.

Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

It's Tory for fuck's sake. Not some sexy stranger for me to slobber over.

"So do you think you're back for good?" she asks, patting Owl's head. The big bear of a mastiff sprawls out on her other side, resting his head on her thigh.

"No," I admit. "I mean, no plans to hang around here permanently. Just came here to fix up the old place. Get it ready for sale and get my head straight for what's next."

"Oh? Where'd you live before all these years? After you left the Army, I mean?"

I find myself glancing at her hands, looking for a ring. I figure her granny would've mentioned it for sure if she was married, but I can't help snooping anyway. Nope, no jewelry.

"Here and there," I tell her. "Spent lots of time back in Oklahoma, the OKC. I was assigned there for a few years."

"Assigned?"

"I was with the FBI for several years after I took my discharge from the military. Trained in Quantico and then they sent me to work pretty close to home."

"Wow. I did not know that." She looks at me and blinks like she's seeing someone else.

Hell, knowing the expression I'm wearing, maybe she is.

"Not too many people do." I'm holding out on her for obvious reasons. "I'm on a sabbatical of sorts. Still helping with cases where I can here in Dallas to keep my skills sharp, detective-for-hire type stuff. All safe, easy gigs and quick cash."

That's not completely true. I was on sabbatical till I'd turned in my resignation.

"Sabbatical." She nods. "Cool. Everybody deserves some time off. Just look at me."

No, it's not fucking cool. I'd taken a sabbatical because one case went hideously awry, and it was all my fault. Searching for a change of subject, I point to her leg.

"So you're just here till the knee heals up? How long will that be?"

"A couple months at most. End of summer, I guess." She makes a cute grimace. "Unless Granny gets sick of me and kicks me out sooner."

I snort. "Can't see that happening."

"You don't know my grandmother like I do." She lays a hand on my forearm. "I know it's too late, but I'm sorry about your grandpa's death. I understand he died pretty suddenly, right?"

I nod. “Thanks. Yeah, I was the only one who made it back here to be at his side in time, but I came. He passed away peacefully, and he wasn’t alone.”

“I’m glad. Grandpa Faulkner was a good man. The folks in town still talk about him sometimes. They miss his honey.”

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “He was still messing around with his bees and selling jars of that stuff almost up to his dying day. I’ve got a few jars somewhere. Stuff keeps forever.”

Tory smiles. Not about to change the conversation back to me, I look up and I’m glad to see the rain has stopped. Several of the goats poke their heads out from under the tree, slowly venturing deeper into the brush.

“Well, looks like it’s clearing up,” I tell her. “We’d better leave and let the goats do their thing.”

She looks up at the blue sky and sunshine lancing down. “That was fast! I’d forgotten how quick the rains can come and go here. Guess I’ve lived with the big lake effect for too long back home.”

“You know the saying. If you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes.” I stand and hold out a hand, helping her up.

I *force* myself not to check her out completely. Or let myself think too hard about how sweet her little hand feels in mind.

Fuck.

*This. Is. Tory. You. Jackass.*

I remind myself for the umpteenth time.

Childhood friend. Rich and cultured. Walking nostalgia bomb.

Probably the darling of every rich Chicago big shot on Tinder by now, if she even bothers going stomping around there for dates. I doubt it. She’s probably got a stable of jacked brain surgeons lined up back home.

Every reason in the world why *don’t* should be the word of the day.

Don’t even stare at her yellow-and-white-checked shirt, tucked into her blue jeans, how it highlights her trim curves to perfection.

Don’t even pretend to get attached.

Don’t be stupid.

“So,” I say, sucking in a fortifying breath of fresh air. “You just leave the goats and come back? No supervision or anything?”

“As long as they’re fenced in, it’s all good,” she says, stretching her arms over her head, tempting my eyes to skim over wicked places I have no business gawking at.

I watch the entire tribe of goats go rummaging deeper into the brush. Unlike other animals, they’ll eat up everything before touching a blade of grass.

Owl ignores the critters as he walks beside us, seemingly just as ready as we

are to get out of here.

“I’ll drive out here and check them every day,” she says. “Plus I have a few other properties to check out, make sure there’s nothing poisonous to the goats before I drop them off.”

“Like what?”

“Mountain laurel and swallow-wort.”

I raise a brow. “Don’t think either of those grow here in North Dakota.”

“The resources I’ve checked say they don’t.” She flashes another dangerously adorable grin. “But I have to look like I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m sure you’re doing a better job than Dean. He’d probably forget to come back for the goats and leave ’em to eat up the Barnets’ pumpkins, too.”

“I mean...outdoing Uncle Dean doesn’t take much.” She laughs, bumping my arm with her shoulder.

There is no denying that, but I say, “He’s a good guy. Don’t get me wrong. He’d give you the shirt off his back if he thought you needed it.”

Although the whole town knows Dean, his schemes, and his famous lack of ambition, he’s helpful in a pinch and generally well liked.

“Oh, I know he would, and I love him for that. For being who he is. We don’t all get the luxury.”

I look at her, cocking my head. Somehow, the shift in tone tells me there’s more going on in her life than a healing visit back to these old small-town stomping grounds.

Tory shrugs. “What can I say? I’m happy to help out, and it gets me out of the house. Away from Granny for a few hours.”

“Aw, she can’t be that bad. Whirlwind, sure. Pain in the ass, no.”

“I love her to pieces, but she’s seventy...not sixteen like she thinks she is.”

I chuckle because it’s true.

Granny Coffey is as well known in Dallas as her son Dean, and even better liked.

“When it comes to Granny Coffey, I’d have her pegged at twenty-one, not sixteen. She likes her wine too much to revert back under drinking age.”

Just like that, Tory grins, her teeth showing real bright in the sun. “She’s a fiend. And you won’t *believe* what we take to the grocery store.”

“What, her Nova? That’s one sweet car.” Cherry red, her 1979 Chevy Nova Super Sport is a classic and looks astonishingly brand new.

Kept inside and only driven to church and the market on Sundays by a little old lady is no lie for that ride.

“I wish. We’ve got ourselves a tandem bike. Complete with a flower-painted basket on the front and two wire baskets on the back. Bright red, of course.”

I can't help smiling at that. "How does your knee handle it? Sounds like a lot of work keeping up with that woman."

"Actually, my physical therapist approved it, so a bicycle built for two is how we roll. Matching helmets, too, with daisies she painted on just like the ones on the basket."

Laughing together this time, we arrive at the gate. I look at the drainage ditch, knowing how much she's been favoring that leg.

The trench is steep, and the grass will be slick now after the rain. Knowing what I'll have to do, I open the gate and hold it open for her and Owl.

Once they step through the opening, I close the gate and lock it.

Then, before she can protest, I hoist her up and start plodding down the ditch.

"Hold on," I tell her. "Gonna be a bumpy ride."

"Quinn! What do you think you're doing? I'm not *that* feeble." Even as she protests, her arms fold tightly around my neck and I smile. "Put me down this instant—I'm too heavy!"

"Bull. I could bench-press two of you without breaking a sweat." I reach the bottom and start up the other side. "I've seen how you're favoring that leg after hanging off the gate like a monkey. No sense in making anything worse."

"It's just sore," she whines, her long lashes fluttering against my cheek.

*Fuck.*

"It's injured, Peach. No point in putting more strain on it. Or do you want to double your recovery time? I've seen how nasty it gets tearing up the same muscle."

By the time we're back on the other side and reach the road, I'm wondering if I'll ever be the same.

She smells as fresh as the air, and holding her like this has my blood roaring through my veins.

*It can't be her, I tell myself. You just haven't gotten laid since the Stone Age.*

Not since that fucking disaster in Oklahoma City, anyway, and I turned in my Special Agent badge.

"There. You're welcome," I tell her, planting her gently on the ground again.

"Well, thanks." She throws her hands out at her sides, slapping her thighs. "Thank you, Quinn, for all your help today. I'd still be stranded on that gate if you hadn't stopped by."

"Give yourself some credit. You'd have figured something out, but helping you has been nothing but my pleasure. Damn good to see you again, Tory."

That's the full truth.

Shit, I can't remember the last time I felt this good, this content.

I walk over and close the trailer door for her, then lift up the ramp.

She slides the bolt latch into place, still wearing this sunny smile I linger on a little too long. “Maybe whenever we bump heads again, I won’t look like such an idiot next time.”

“We will, because you’re gonna call me when it’s time to pick up your goats.” I wink at her. “It takes two people to manage that gate. No sense in having Tobin dirty his hands out here, either. He has a little bit of leg trauma left over from this dustup at the ranch about a year ago.”

She laughs as she turns, throwing a saucy, too-friendly smile back over her shoulder. “Careful, Quinn. I might just take you up on that offer.”

*Careful* is right.

Scratching the back of my neck—and this time I don’t think it’s a mosquito—I walk to the cab of her truck. “Where’s your phone?”

“In the door pocket. Why?”

I pop the door open, fish out the phone, and hand it to her. “Open up your contacts and I’ll punch in my number. It’s your lucky day. Most folks I give this number to are paying clients, but for you and your goats, it’s free.”

She rolls her eyes. After a couple of swipes on the screen, she hands it back to me.

I tap in my name and number and hit save before handing it back.

“Faulk?” She reads it and looks up at me.

“That’s what everyone calls me now.”

Her brows knit together as she stares at me, her mouth forming a confused O.

“I don’t know.” Shaking her head, she grins and looks at me. “You’ll always be Quinn Faulkner to me.”

“We all change, Tory, but I’ll answer to any of my aliases.” I give her a joking wink and have to look away because my mind is going places it damn well shouldn’t. “Let me get the passenger door for Owl.”

I say goodbye once the dog climbs in the truck, then shut the door and walk to my truck.

She drives forward, lurches up the road, and then backs the trailer in with precision. Then she pulls out and heads toward the highway down the long winding drive Ridge complains about non-stop in the winter when it becomes an impassable wall of snow.

We’re going in the same direction.

Damn. Tory Coffey.

I’ve thought about her plenty over the years, wondering whatever became of the girl who made my summers here a lot more exciting.

We all change, just like I told her.

For a second, I think I slipped back into that goofy, easygoing boy I used to be. The one she knew like her own shadow those summers half a lifetime ago.

I wish that's who I could be.

Trouble is, it doesn't last, and I'm right back to being the man I've become—the man she'd be afraid of.

If she only knew what kind of haunted, bitter wraith I've become as Faulk, hiding my grief behind the odd flash of humor, I think she'd never speak to me again.



IF I'VE CHECKED my phone once for messages and missed calls since yesterday morning, I've checked it a hundred times.

Literally lost count of how many times I've glanced at the screen.

Tory hasn't called.

I'd expected her to after checking on the goats in the morning, but maybe she doesn't go out there till afternoons. I'd called Ridge while driving to the highway with her in Dean's truck and told him he had to put a walking bridge over the ditch before somebody snaps their neck.

I know for certain it's been done. When Ridge and Tobin find out there's anything they can do to upgrade their property, they're on it.

Now I'm looking forward to Tory's reaction, whenever she sees it.

I shouldn't be so impatient. What's waiting a little longer for her to call?

I've got plenty to keep me busy, like replenishing my kitchen.

Walking along the meat aisle of the grocery store, I absently grab at packages, making sure I hit all the major food groups.

Beef. Chicken. Pork. Sausage. Salmon. Bacon.

*More* bacon.

My freezer needs to be stocked. Working day and night, I've barely left the house, trying to wrap up the kitchen remodel I've been picking at since late spring.

The rest of the house will need minor stuff. New doors, trim, fresh paint. The floors and windows were done last year. Same for the siding and new porch.

"Welllll, if it isn't Quinn Faulkner!" a familiar voice chirps, announcing my presence to the whole store.

I'm already wearing a grin when I turn around.

"Hello, Granny." My smile widens when I notice *two* helmets in her shopping cart, both with white and yellow daisies painted on them.

The knowing glance I share with Tory nearly makes me burst out laughing.

“Look at this cart, young man,” Granny says, clucking her tongue. She shoves her hands inside, lifting out a couple meat packages. “Meat, more meat, and chips? Not a fruit or vegetable in sight. Shameful.”

I pick up two bottles and hold them out. “Hot sauce is made of peppers, Granny Coffey. Peppers are a vegetable, last I checked. Plus, catsup, tomatoes, technically a fruit. Unless scientists have started giving plants the Pluto treatment.”

Tory bites her lips together as she swallows her laughter.

“Nice try. Since you mentioned Pluto—still a planet, forever, by the way—your nonexistent veggies are just as invisible to the naked eye.” Granny plants her hands on her hips, eyeballing me with the same bright-blue eyes she shares with her granddaughter. “Are you still working day and night at your grandfather’s place?”

She’s wearing a neon orange shirt, white ankle-length jeans, and high-heeled sandals. Her hair is dyed dark brown, and her skin is as tan as a teenager’s. All in all, she looks good for her age, but it’s her personality that wins everybody over.

This woman’s not afraid to tell anyone how a bear shits in the woods.

“It’s keeping me busy,” I tell her, eyeing my stolen bacon.

“Along with your detective work,” she says. “Tell me, has anyone had you MacGyver anything with a sausage yet? You’ve got enough to feed three grown men, so surely there’s some to spare.”

I glance at Tory, who has a brow lifted.

“Hardly. And those side gigs of mine ought to stay quiet if I want folks to hire me,” I tell her. “Enough with the rumors.”

I give her a friendly wink.

Honestly, I’m grateful for the detective jobs. Mainly for something to do besides swing a hammer, lay tile, and put in countertops. It keeps me paid and comfortable in a town where jobs don’t grow on career trees.

“They aren’t rumors and you know it.” She’s pulling lettuce, cucumbers, bananas, peaches, and other vegetables and fruits out of her cart and putting them in mine. “You should show Tory what you’ve done with the old place.” Setting a basket of strawberries in my cart, Granny looks at her. “You’d like a trip down memory lane, wouldn’t you?”

“Um, Gran...you just put all the groceries into Quinn’s cart,” Tory says, avoiding the question. “It took you twenty minutes to pick them out.”

“Isn’t that kind of me? Making sure he has the very best in the store.” Granny looks at me. “Tory’s not busy tonight, Quinn.” The old gal wags her painted-on eyebrows once. “She’ll be home alone while I go to the senior center.

It's bridge night."

"Gran!" Tory hisses.

Holding in a chuckle, I pick up the strawberries to put back in her cart, but she wheels it behind her, safely out of my reach.

Damn, she's good.

Inwardly groaning, I drop the berries back in my cart to keep the peace. "Bridge night? Don't you mean Texas Hold 'em?"

She gives me a dull look from beneath her lashes. False ones, I'm sure.

"I know Wilson," I remind her. The old man who deals cards for the seniors at the center is also a regular at the Purple Bobcat, my favorite watering hole in town.

Shrugging, Granny nods.

"He's an excellent dealer in all the games worth playing. I do believe he spent some time working one of the big casinos in Vegas years ago." She turns and grabs the handle on her cart, spinning it around. "Come on, Tory! We have to get to aisle one before Thelma Simon gets all the good strawberries!"

"Sorry," Tory mouths as she turns to follow her grandmother, so mortified she's gone pale.

Hilarious.

"You can pick her up at seven," Granny whispers loudly over her shoulder. "She's never been to the *new* Purple Bobcat. Not since Wylie sold the place off and Grady made it his baby. Show her a good time, won't you?"

"Gran!" Tory says louder as she slaps a hand against her forehead.

"You're sure you don't want to join in, Granny?" I ask, laughing.

"Nope. I have to be at the center by six thirty sharp with the strawberry shortcake I promised—if Thelma's left any decent strawberries in the store."

"All right then," I say, wondering why my head feels like it's spinning. "I'll stop by and grab Tory around seven."

Tory turns around and stares at me wide-eyed.

"Does Tory not have a say in this?" she asks. "Or am I the only one who realizes I'm standing here and last I checked, I'm still of sound mind." Pointing at her lime-green t-shirt, she adds, "Tory. Right here."

"I see you, Peach," I say, lowering my voice so her granny can't hear. "It's just a couple drinks and an excuse to get out. What's the harm? Might be fun to catch up like old times. I'll see you at seven."

Granny grabs Tory's arm and pulls her along in her cart's wake.

Another glowing example of why this town respects Granny Coffey. Including me.

The woman doesn't slow down and take a breath for anything.

I'm also not sure she's ever taken no for an answer.

I won't either. If there's one thing I know about Tory, even without knowing her for years, it's that she looks like she needs a night out as bad as I do.

Plus catching up on life without any goats hanging around ought to be fun.

With more than I bargained for in my cart, I wrap up my shopping and check out. While loading my groceries, including the avalanche of fruits and vegetables Granny dumped on me into my truck, I catch movement out of the corner of my eye.

A bike.

A two-seater, with two women wearing matching bike helmets pedaling out of the parking lot.

It just falls out of me then. I laugh like a fool at how Granny's bent over the handlebars, cycling away like she's on the Tour de France, while Tory drags behind her.

Yeah.

One more reason she's always been special.

Can't think of anybody else who'd merrily go along with her grandmother's quirkiness.



I PICK Tory up at seven, and by seven twenty, we're at the Purple Bobcat, a bar just a few miles outside of town, right off the highway.

Laughing nearly the entire way here about Granny's antics—especially that damn tandem bike—she keeps apologizing for her grandmother forcing me to load up my fridge with plants.

I'm grateful for the distraction. Whether she knows it or not, she's dressed to fucking *kill*.

First casualty being me.

The dude who's not supposed to be casting lingering gazes at his friend.

Maybe I'm out of excuses, but you'd better believe I'll blame it on the firefly pink she's decked out in tonight.

It draws my eyes like magnets. I still can't look away by the time we're perched at our table, tall glasses of beer dripping condensation in front of us.

Her hair hangs loosely over her shoulders, down her back, and the pink highlights are the same shade as her short-sleeved sweater.

Her black jeans have pink stitching, and so do her heeled cowboy boots.

“What do you think? Granny picked out my outfit tonight,” she tells me,

having caught me staring. “Believe it or not, we’re the same size.”

“I can believe it. Looks cute. Guess I’ll have to help you fight off the guys who’ll come sniffing around once the night crew rolls in. Fair warning: this town gets thirsty, girl.”

Another airy laugh falls out of her. I wonder if she senses what a liar I am.

She’s not cute.

She’s a certified destroyer of men.

I’d struggled dearly to keep my eyes on the road during the drive out here. Peeling my eyes off her ever since we sat down has been damn near impossible.

Tory gives me a smug grin and shakes her head. “I’d apologize for Gran again, but I’ve already done that—”

“Only a hundred times,” I say with a snort.

“At least.” She sighs and glances around the room while taking a sip off her glass. “So, this is the legendary Purple Bobcat. I thought it was a dive? This actually looks...serviceable.”

“Hey, duchess, it’s not that hipster crap from the Windy City, but it does the job.” I raise my glass proudly and she giggles. “You want something fancier, there’s Libations over on Main Street, but that’s more of a place for live music, special events, and family dinners. My pal, Grady McKnight, took this place over and turned it into something special. Every red-blooded man in town loves the vibe.”

“I mean, I knew it’d changed. Uncle Dean used to practically live here, always trying to glad-hand bikers and getting into trouble,” she says, fluttering her lashes at the memories. “Dad would lecture me to the nth degree every summer. Under absolutely no circumstances was I allowed to let Uncle Dean bring me here. If that happened, it was a guaranteed trip home, and he’d be very disappointed in me.”

*Brutal.*

Not that I can fully blame her old man for having a stick up his ass on this one. The old place was called The Den, and it definitely attracted a rougher crowd. Old Wylie, the owner then, kept a shotgun behind the bar, though I don’t think he ever put it to good use.

It dawns on me that the Tory back then and the one sitting here have one thing in common.

She always followed the rules to the letter, and she still does it now because she hates disappointing people.

That’s why I caught her that day at Gramps’ house, holding a half-broken stick with a runny honeycomb on the ground. Bawling her eyes out and blubbering apologies when I so much as asked what the hell she was doing with

the bees.

“It’s a cooler bar now, even if it still attracts a younger, single crowd,” I say. “Grady worked his way up to owning this place not long ago after working here forever. He upgraded it into a real honky tonk. Not the wannabe biker bar it was before.”

“Big upgrade if the stories are true.” Shaking her head, she adds, “Seriously, though...it’s nice. I like the woodwork and the décor. Old signs and antiques and just a few off-color jokes. It’s pretty rustic. Fits nicely here in Dallas.”

“That’s what Grace does. Ridge’s wife. She helped Grady polish up the interior about a couple months ago.”

“Awesome. It shows.” She nods and then looks at me. “So, I almost called you this afternoon when I saw the bridge from the road to the gate while checking up on the goats, but...I figured you already knew about it.”

I nod and feel slightly odd, detecting she’s not real happy about the bridge.

“Did you try it out? Ridge just had it installed. Somebody couldn’t help but mention what a hazard that ditch can be.”

“Oh, I did! So did Owl. It makes the job much safer, that’s for sure.”

“Good,” I tell her, taking a long, thoughtful pull off my beer.

Maybe that disgruntled hint in her voice earlier was just my imagination.

Tory glances around at the full tables and barstools. “Looks like the new owner is pulling in some good business.” Holding up her glass, she adds, “The beer’s good. Probably twice the amount you’d get back home for the same price.”

“I figured you for a wine gal,” I say, taking another sip of beer.

“I’m flexible. Literally. Before my injury, I used to be able to touch my shin to my head.”

*Holy fuck.*

Not the image I need right now.

It’s suddenly a feat to choke down my brew without spewing it everywhere.

“Nothing wrong with that,” I mutter. Ignoring my dick pulling at my jeans, I take another furious slurp off my beer. “When did you stop coming to Dallas, anyhow?”

“Right after I turned eighteen. I graduated high school and then went off to college in Chicago, because of dancing with the ballet and—” She clamps her lips tight and shakes her head. “Well, nothing too exciting.”

“Do your parents still live in the city?” I ask, wondering if that’s what made her clam up.

I know how hard they used to drive her. Her ma, especially, was a stickler for perfect grades and a list of extracurriculars so long it got exhausting just

hearing about it.

“Oh, yeah, they’ll never leave while they’ve got a pulse,” she says, perking up. “How about your family? Are they still in Oklahoma?”

“Nah, Dad retired a couple years ago and they moved to Hawaii.”

“Beautiful place! How about your brother? Where’s he at now?”

I’m amazed she remembers so much about me. Alan never spent the summers here, but I’d mentioned him to her years ago.

Hell, I’d mentioned a lot of things. She’d always been so easy to talk to, not mean or judgmental like other kids. A true friend when I’d needed one.

I smile. “Guess my whole family just got sick of living in the lower forty-eight states. He moved up to Alaska a while ago. He’s a bush pilot now and loves it to death. Married with two kids.”

“Wow. Good for him.” She lays her chin on her palm, genuinely interested in my family’s boring moves.

Damn.

I’ve never felt unsure around Tory before, yet I’m beginning to sense this weird tension that wasn’t there yesterday.

“What about you and your dancing? I heard bits and pieces from Granny. Sounds like a hell of an accomplishment. Dancing with a prestigious ballet group and living your dream.” That’s the way her grandmother put it, anyway.

She shrugs. “Yes and no. It was my dream, but like everything else...dreams aren’t always all they’re cut out to be.”

“Is it your knee?” I venture, hoping it’s not a touchy subject. “I can see how that’d put a person out of commission, no matter how talented.”

She empties her beer and sets the glass down with a loud *thump*.

“Well, that, too...” she tells me, looking down.

Those blue eyes seem a shade darker, laced with sadness.

While I think about how to steer the conversation back to happier places, I decide another round can’t do us any harm.

Glancing at the bar to get the waitress’ attention, instead I see a big man waving.

Grady. He’s staring right at us, motioning me over.

Odd.

He wasn’t there earlier when we walked in, and the serious stone-like expression behind his thick, dark beard already has me concerned.

He’s probably just curious who’s with me tonight, I tell myself.

It’s not like I bring women around here regularly.

“Hold that thought and let me get us a couple more beers,” I say, sliding out of my seat.

Tory nods as I stand.

Feels bad because I sense there's more behind her dancing issues, something she wants to open up about, but Grady won't look away. "I'll be right back."

"Sure."

I walk to the bar and ask the waitress to take two glasses of beer to our table before heading over to where Grady is near the end of the bar.

"I tried calling you earlier, Faulk," he says, his voice a low growl.

I recall my phone going off, vibrating while I'd been checking out at the grocery store. I'd forgotten about calling him back and my voicemails.

"Sorry, man. Busy day. What's up?"

"I see that." He nods at Tory. "Listen, the last thing I want to do is get between you and a date, but—"

"She's an old friend. Nothing crazy. You know Granny Coffey? Of course you do. That's her granddaughter, Tory."

"Got it." He takes another long look, nods thoughtfully, then leans across the bar. "Well, a couple dudes dropped by here earlier. Stopped in for burgers around lunchtime, but they were asking about you. They were awful curious if you were here in Dallas."

My gut churns, tossing my brain into confusion.

What he just said doesn't make sense. Unless...

Oh, fuck. It can't be. It better *not* be.

"Me? You're sure, Grady? Why?" I whisper, running a hand through my hair.

"Can't say for sure, but I got a bad vibe off them the second they started asking questions. My gut says someone's fishing for info on you, Faulk. Maybe even trying to buy it. I told them I'd never heard of you, but I'm sure they'll be back. They seemed pretty damn confident you've got roots here."

*Shit.*

My blood ices over. "Did they say a name? Who's trying to get in touch with me?"

"No, but it's not good news, is it? If you need help, I'm right here."

Guilt rocks through me in a sudden flash so hard I lay my hand on the countertop for balance.

"Nah, nah, nothing like that. I'll follow up, though. Don't you worry, big guy," I tell him, forcing a smile as I slap a friendly hand on his shoulder.

He's always been good to me.

Grady's a solid friend, a single dad to two girls, a person I know I can trust. And someone I don't want to see hurt.

Not by skeletons hell-bent on crawling out of their closet.

There's only one thing that makes sense with men asking around.

It's the whole reason why I left the FBI—so no one else would get hurt thanks to my botched job—and it needs to stay that way.

There's only one asshole I can think of who'd be after intel on me.

*Bat Pickett.*

Angry regret sours my blood as I glance over my shoulder at Tory.

Like it or not, if this is what I think it is, I have to take her home right now.

And then I have homework, making sure Bat's still rotting away in an Oklahoma prison where he belongs. He'd sworn revenge the day he found out what happened to his brother.

I just didn't think he'd ever be in a position to make good on it.



## GOAT TO BE KIDDING ME (TORY)



I have no good reason not to trust Quinn Faulkner. He's *Quinn* for crying out loud, the most honest man I've probably ever known, but somehow...

...I still have this ragey-sad-awkward pit in my stomach.

It started when Granny nearly put *me* in his grocery cart along with the fruits and veggies back at Filmore's grocery store.

Poor Faulk didn't have much choice in buying them.

He also didn't have much choice in bringing me here tonight.

And maybe when I saw that brand-spanking-new bridge stretched over mini Royal Gorge, the pit in my stomach got bigger.

I know he was just being nice, but I wonder...did he ask Ridge to build it so he wouldn't have to help me load the goats up once they're finished clearing that field?

If so, I can't totally blame him.

He's a busy man who's clearly done big things with his life, even if I don't understand why he'd ever go on sabbatical from something as intense and prestigious as the FBI.

The last thing he needs is helpless old me calling him up, begging for a hand like some kind of demented Bo Peep with scraggly goats instead of adorable sheep.

Some things never change, I guess.

If he still sees me as that awkward little girl with her hand caught in the honeycomb, or the awkward teenager who planted her face in a freaking pie, is he wrong?

It's just a shame he's too much of a gentleman to come out and tell me.

Quinn Faulkner is far too easy to talk to. I almost spilled the beans on just

how disappointing my dance career was even back in college.

Yes, it was my big dream then, but half the time, I felt like it was Mother's.

Some dreams are infectious. They just get their hooks in and there's no time to stop, think, and consider what's in it for you.

The show must go on.

I didn't have a choice.

I've never told anyone that.

Just like I'd never told those stupid kids I was allergic to bees way back when they'd dared each other to steal a honeycomb out of Farmer Faulkner's beehives. The kids kept teasing me about being a 'fraidy-cat city girl' who was terrified of bees.

They were right.

I was a city girl with good reason to be scared after Mother lectured me for years, letting me know one itty bitty sting could kill with the wrong allergies. But I'd been determined to be one of the group that summer.

I hadn't made any friends in Dallas yet besides Bella Reed, and her own visits to her oil baron grandfather's ranch didn't always line up with mine.

So off to Farmer Faulkner's we'd ventured. His place was just on the edge of town, it wasn't miles, but I remember feeling like we'd walked at least ten miles that day. Straight to his place and down by the pond where he'd kept his bee boxes.

The other kids saw the tall, awkward, pissed off kid coming before I did that day, and took off running. I'd taken their stupid dare, trying to win a smidge of respect.

There I was, stick in hand, ten feet away from certain death by honeybees.

"*You know you're trespassing on private property, right?*" Those were the first words Quinn ever said to me.

Oh, I'd known, but before I'd had a chance to say so, he'd started in. Red-faced and tongue running a mile a minute about how flipping hard his grandfather works at beekeeping, harvesting the honey, and selling it because his flimsy pension and Social Security weren't much to live on.

By the time he was done, I was in tears.

He went quiet when I started up the frantic litany of apologies.

And then he bent down, this hangdog look on his face. He helped me up, pulled the honeycomb I'd pried out with the stick from my hand, and just...

He hugged me.

This big, bearish embrace, even when we were just kids.

"Heard enough out of you, little girl," he whispered in my ear. "Guess you've learned your lesson. I'll make sure Gramps understands. Now dry your

eyes. We'll forget this ever happened."

Everybody knows how much teenagers suck at using their words, but Quinn didn't.

I never realized then how rare it is to meet a straight shooter, but I already respected it.

I didn't want to join that group of kids anymore.

I just wanted to be his friend.

The same thing I still want now.

"Here ya are, hon! Your man said to mix it up, so I gave you this special stuff Grady bought up for the summer from Maui brewing. Aloha." The waitress sets two glasses of beer on the table with a smile that smacks me back to the present.

I thank her and take a long sip of the pleasantly sweet, light Hawaiian brew as my eyes roam over to Quinn. He's talking to a big man at the end of the bar with a thick black beard.

From what I can tell, it's a heavy conversation.

Neither of them look particularly happy.

*Hmmm.* My toes scrunch up inside my boots.

He arrives at the table a minute later, finally, but doesn't sit down, lifting his beer instead for a quick audible slurp before he sets it down.

"Shit, that's good," he says, wiping his mouth.

I smile.

"Where's the fire? Nothing stopping you from sitting down and savoring it like a normal human being, Quinn." I wink at him, taking another satisfying drink off my glass.

But his face is anything but fun and games.

*Oh, no.*

"About that. Hey, I'm really sorry, Tory, but Grady, the owner over there," he gestures to the muscle man he'd been talking to, "he just told me about something I really need to check on."

"Oh. Okay." I can almost feel my frown sliding off my chin.

Whoa, that just came out of left field.

So maybe I wasn't wrong about the bridge. He must've had Ridge put it up so he wouldn't have to deal with me, and now he's enlisted the bar owner for a good excuse to get rid of me tonight.

"No prob. I'm ready to call it a night myself. This goat business has me wanting to turn in earlier than Granny." I stand up and stretch, willing myself not to waste the delicious beer. I managed to drink it down halfway while he does the same. "All that bike riding wears a girl out, too."

Quinn cocks his head.

“I don’t want this to end. I just need it to,” he says, this weird chill in his voice I can’t decipher as he fishes through his wallet to pay the tab.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, already on my way to the door.

At least I didn’t spill my guts about how disappointing my life has been. Then I’d really look like a double idiot. Probably as stupid and naive as I’d looked when I saw Jean-Paul’s phone lit up with flirty texts and kissy-faced, half-naked pics of Queen Bitch Madeline Shafer.

“Seriously, I was having fun tonight. I wanted to catch up,” Quinn says as he opens the door for me. “Can we do this again? After I’ve taken care of business?”

Jesus, do I look *that* fragile?

I shouldn’t be this disappointed, or this suspicious that he’s just trying to be nice in that oh-so-gentlemanly Faulkner way, but I just can’t help it.

My love life—if you can call it that—has been riddled with too much cloak-and-dagger stuff for this lifetime.

So is it any wonder I sense at least three meanings to every sentence out of his mouth?

Ugh. Am I really letting love woes rub off on Quinn, though?

Good Lord, I need help.

“Tory?” he calls my name again because I haven’t said a word.

Part of me wants to smack myself. The other part is just hurt. Bewildered. Self-pitying.

“Sure, sure, I was just running my schedule through my head,” I lie. “Uncle Dean says he has a long list of customers lined up for the goats. Add that to Granny’s schedule, all the little things she needs help with, and I can’t say when I’ll be available. But thanks for the drink. It was nice seeing the legendary Purple Bobcat.”

He gives me a firm smile but says nothing. Almost like he can taste the bitter steam rolling off me.

We arrive at his truck and I open the door, climbing in.

A tense silence fills the space as Quinn buckles his seat belt and starts the engine.

I stare at the flashing neon purple sign of a big winking bobcat as he backs the truck up and then pulls onto the highway.

“So,” he ventures, his eyes fixed on the road. “You were telling me about your dance career back home. Do you still love tearing up the floor? Or stage? Or fuck, whatever dancers dance on?”

I shrug, fighting back a smile. Mainly because it’s another loaded question.

I'm not sure if I *loved* it since I was little. Long before the pressure, the weeks full of practice, all the milkshakes I had to skip to stay fit as a grasshopper for my bulldog teachers.

"As much as anyone can love dancing seven days a week," I say, brushing a loose strand of hair back over my ear.

"Damn, it was that time consuming?" his eyes light up as they flick over, twin emeralds in the sunset.

"Worse when we were on tour. I might do eight or more hours straight between warm-ups and shows."

"On tour? What, like Broadway?"

I wince at hearing my broken dream destination.

"No, never Broadway, but other big shows. We did Chicago, Boston, L.A., Miami, St. Louis, New Orleans. I think I must've gotten a few whiplash tours of the entire country. Too bad we never stuck around a day or two after the shows to enjoy it."

I sigh, hating how hard it is to rip myself out of *poor me* central.

"Pretty impressive, lady," he says, genuine excitement in his voice. "You must miss it like hell."

That's the worst part.

Ever since Wicked Witch Madeline arranged an "unfortunate" accident...

I haven't missed it enough.

No. I don't miss the pressure. I don't miss the deadlines. I damn sure don't miss Jean-Paul's two-timing, wine collector ass.

"Absolutely," I tell him firmly, purely for show.

If this is the last ride I ever get in Quinn Faulkner's truck, I won't have him thinking I'm a loser.

"Bet this feels like the longest summer of your life, huh?" he asks, a smirk pulling at his lips. "You're looking forward to getting back to it ASAP, I'm sure. I've only been back in Dallas for roughly a year and a half and it already feels like an eternity. Time just moves slower out here."

"I'm looking forward to my knee being a hundred percent functional," I say.

Maybe then I can get on with life.

Being in limbo sucks, but oddly enough, I've felt like I've been drifting for years.

"How about you?" I need to get the subject off me. "What are your plans once you sell your grandpa's place? Will your sabbatical end? You'll go back to the FBI?" Shaking my head at my own rambling, I add, "Nothing like twenty questions, right?"

He chuckles. It's such a nice manly sound and fills me with an odd sense of

longing for something I missed.

Whether he's desperate to give me the brush-off or not, I can't say I'm not enjoying this.

I've missed him like hell.

"Still working that out, Peach. Just between you and me, it feels nice to settle down and whittle away at a slower pace, even if it ain't forever. Bureau work gets sticky, draining, dangerous," he says, his profile glowing with the shadows at dusk, accenting that strong, able jawline peppered with stubble.

"Ever land any big-time bad guys? Like bin Laden or Ted Bundy kinda stuff?" I ask, studying him in the creeping darkness.

"The assholes I was after were more like little El Chapos with none of his mystique. Usually crossed paths plenty of times with the DEA, but the details are classified. All I'll say is Oklahoma and Texas are big places. They're crawling with dirty, well-organized scum always looking for their next payoff." His voice drops to low thunder and a chill sweeps up my spine. "Hell, even this little town's had its worries. Just ask Drake Larkin or sit down with Ridge and Grace."

"Yeah, I heard...some kinda mafia drug thing, right?" I blink as he nods, gobsmacked at how some people seem cursed with the wrong kind of excitement. "Granny gave me little bits and pieces about Bella, too. It's cool that she landed herself a badass cop."

"Yep. Dude married her before they said hello, no thanks to her grandpa putting it in his will. Wild shit. Drake's a great guy, though. They've got themselves a little girl and a hundred bucks says he'll run for sheriff one day when old Rodney Wallace steps down."

"I can't imagine. Makes my worries seem like nothing," I say idly, hoping he doesn't latch on to that.

"Gotta ask you about that bike you ride with Granny before I forget," he says. "I've heard they can be tricky."

"That's putting it mildly." I laugh. "Once you get the hang of it, it's fine. But the first few starts are rough. Helmets are a must. It's a little like dancing, really. One person has to lead, the other has to follow, or it just doesn't work."

"I hadn't noticed it around town before. When did Granny get it?"

"Pretty much the week I arrived. She'd ordered it through Wayne's Hardware, and Uncle Dean picked it up. This was before his big back blowout, of course."

"Gotcha," he says with a knowing wink.

The rest of the ride home is actually decent. We spend our time talking about bikes, the hand-me-downs we'd ride through town when we were younger, and

share a few words about the locals who'd either give us fresh-baked brownies or come out with their fist raised and a warning to *stay off the damn lawn*.

In a little town like this, you get to know real fast how folks treat company when you're a kid trying to find ways to pass a lazy summer.

"Thanks again for the beer," I tell him, opening the passenger door once we're in the driveway leading up to Gran's lilac-colored house. It's been that mellow shade for as long as I can remember, along with the white trim and shutters that have these cute breezy hearts carved in them.

Quinn opens his door before I have a chance to step out.

Walking me to the door isn't necessary, I want to tell him, but it's Quinn. Even as a boy he was Mr. Gentleman, and it's adorable he hasn't lost it with age.

Not like Jean-Paul, who'd get me a taxi or an Uber and slap the hood as a signal for the driver to leave.

Maybe it's the whole Army-turned-FBI thing. It must've cemented whatever basic chivalry he grew up with in his bones.

As we both arrive near the front of the truck, I wave at the overhead door. "I'll go in through the garage. I can use the keypad. Think there's a jug of cider Granny wants brought in."

"Call me when it's time to round up the goats," he says while we head for the garage.

Holy hell.

Not what I expected him to say but...what if he's just being nice?

I nod, too tangled up to think. Way too conflicted over this long-lost friend I swear to God I'm *not* still crushing on.

But with the bridge to the gate installed, even if he's being real, there's no good reason to bother him.

I probably shouldn't see him again.

Not until I put a leash on my runaway thoughts, at least.

Comparing him to Jean-Paul seems like the quickest, craziest way to ruin a friendship, after all.

We arrive at the garage and I punch in the code.

"Need help with that cider?" he says, flexing one arm and turning his nose up like a cartoon sailor.

"Ha, no! I can still lift five pounds without going to pieces," I tell him. "Thanks again for tonight, Quinn. It was fun."

And I actually mean it by the time I dash inside the garage as the door is still going up. I grab the cider and beeline it to the door, then hit the close button so the overhead door slips back down.

I don't look back.

Even if I know he's not the type to linger—especially if he really does have a fire to put out somewhere—having his eyes on my backside makes me feel some kinda way I shouldn't be feeling.

God, what if it's all in my head?

And I'm here, acting like a jealous-scorned-crazy person over nothing?

A heavy sigh rolls out of me as I shove the door open and stomp into the house.

The worst part is, Granny will be bursting with questions about my evening when she gets home.

Not the kind I want to dwell on.

So I grab one of the cinnamon apple muffins she made this morning, wolf it down, and head straight to bed.

Maybe if I sleep on it, I'll forget all about caring what Quinn Faulkner thinks of me.



THE INTERROGATION I'd avoided by turning in early last night catches up with me come morning.

Granny fires questions off faster than she pedals her bike before she's even poured my coffee.

*Isn't he the sweetest thing?*

*Didn't I adore Grady's bar?*

*And when—damn her—am I going to see that handsome young man again?*

She's also quick to remind me we have a history. Totally unlike any of those "lazy, good-for-nothing" boys who don't know how to treat a real woman back in the Windy City.

Yeah.

Shoot me.

A bit of screaming hot lead couldn't be worse than feeling my face turning into a cherry tomato as I sit through her grinning attempt to play matchmaker, mumbling half answers.

I'm grateful when it's finally past breakfast and time to round up the goats for the day ahead. I'm honestly *stunned* at how much they've devoured. Most of the brush is down to nubs and it looks like a brand-new piece of land.

The happy, well fed tribe comes bounding back into the trailer without a hitch, no thanks to Owl, stepping over the comfortably placed bridge.

Even the big shaggy black goat with a taste for mischief seems more

cooperative today. I've nicknamed him Hellboy.

Tobin the butler apologies profusely for my trouble with the gate and hands me a check.

My heart swells with pride, knowing I've actually made myself useful, until I'm back with Gran. She just doesn't let up.

More than anything, she impatiently wonders why Quinn hasn't called for the next two days.

He hasn't, no, but he has sent a few text messages spaced several days apart.

***Faulk: I'm sorry as hell for cutting things short the other night, Peach. Let me make it up to you?***

***Faulk: You free tonight or are you just pissed at me?***

***Faulk: Hell. How 'bout we skip the Bobcat and I take you out to Libations? It's Dallas fancy. Bella says they've got this peach cobbler that'll make you think you kissed an angel...and this time nobody cares if you stick your face right in. I ain't judging.***

I haven't responded with more than a quick maybe.

***I'll let you know,*** I text him. ***I'm not mad. Just busy.***

The baggage, the guilt, the angst I'm carrying around has only increased the last few days because my mother starts texting constantly.

Sigh.

Updating me on the ballet and Jean-Paul, the huge show he staged in the city to raise money for the fire department, telling me how much I'm missed.

Right.

I'm sure I'm missed about as much as an old doormat when you buy a new one. You either banish it to the backdoor or the dumpster.

I can't believe I've hit the dumpster quite yet, though. I am a good dancer, but I'm definitely backdoor material. Even the prettiest doves can't fly with a broken wing.

Mother doesn't want to admit how screwed up my knee really is.

I wonder if she ever will.

She's pushing for me to return soon so I can attend the summer show.

It'll run for the next two and a half months, so there's no reason to rush home—even if I *wanted* to see my cheating ex of a director giving the spotlight to the skank who set my life on fire.

Nope.

I'm not that big a sucker for punishment.

Owl lets out a loud woof, bringing me back to the task at hand.

"Thanks, dude," I tell him as I take my foot off the gas and turn on the blinker.

At least I've got a big furry anchor to keep me grounded.

We're on our way to pick up the goats from the latest job. I'd driven out this morning to check on them after dropping them off yesterday evening, and then went to Uncle Dean's place to pick up the trailer.

He said word's spreading far and wide about the incredible job our little eating machines did, no thanks to Ridge. Apparently, he's back in town and just as awestruck as his wife at the goats creating usable land from thin air.

A recommendation from someone so high-profile has our phones blowing up. Uncle Dean has several new places lined up, and I guess he's already looking at getting more goats.

Dang.

I still feel a little guilty for not texting Quinn when I picked them up from the Barnet ranch, but I really won't be needing his help. Why bother him?

Keeping a safe distance, and my mind off him, is the healthiest option right now.

It also makes it ever-so-slightly easier to dodge Gran's machine gun questions.

"Hope you've had lunch. We'll be at this all day," I tell Owl as we turn onto a country road. "Several smaller jobs are up next. They should go fast. Easy work and quick cash."

He barks his agreement. Or maybe he just wants a *second* lunch.

"Hey, I wasn't offering. You get plenty of treats. You know what, Owl, I think I'll ask Uncle Dean if you can just stay with me the next few days at Granny's. That way I won't have to drive out there to grab you when it's time to get to the next job. What do you think?"

His ears perk, as much as they can for a Tibetan Mastiff when they're buried in a pile of fur, and he woofs.

"Is that a yes or a no? Wait." I hold up a hand to his muzzle, stopping him from barking again. "One bark for no, two for yes."

He barks twice.

Pure insanity.

I have no idea if he's a canine Einstein or I'm just gullible enough to believe he understands me.

Either way, I'm laughing like a fool.

"All right. It's settled. You'll stay with me at Granny's and help give her something else to think about besides my dating life."

He barks loudly again. Twice.

Still laughing, I stop the truck near the next farm and throw an arm around him. "If only everything in life was as easy as loving you."

He truly is an amazing beast, and not just because he butts his giant head on my shoulder.

The fact that all I have to do is open up the trailer after I let him out and he's off like a racehorse, steering the goats in tight formation, wows me like nothing else.

Owl even lets Hellboy know who's boss, unleashing a loud bark in his face.

Good timing because I *swear* I see that freaky goat grinning at me again.

Today, we're working with a nice young couple who just bought an old farm. They want the area in the fenced-in corral cleaned up, plus a few stray plants removed closer to their house.

Since they have kids, I choose three sweet goats for the job by the house. Hellboy gets to feast to his heart's content well away from them.

It's actually dumbfounding how fast the goats fill their stomachs.

A few hours later, they're done and we're rounding them up to head out for more fun.

This time, we go south of town, where a rough-voiced elderly man wants an old garden area cleared for new veggies. It takes a couple hours because he has a portable fence, but he didn't have it all in place.

I help him toss it up and place a small metal wash tub in the area. We fill it with water for the thirsty goats and set out a fresh bowl for Owl, too.

The man, Robert Duncan, who reminds me of Don Knotts, insists on feeding us lunch before we leave. I lend him a hand again throwing together salami sandwiches for all of us, including Owl.

Robert is a hoot and keeps me laughing nearly the entire time.

Of course, the old man knows Granny, just like everyone in town, and I'm sure he's more than a little smitten with her.

Awesome. I leave him feeling hopeful about his chances—and mine.

If I can get her to spend a night out with a guy her age, maybe she'll forget about me.

Next up on the Rent-A-Goat route is a city park. An attendant directs us to a fenced-off area, and we leave three goats there to eat up what little overgrowth there is for a few hours.

I park myself on a bench next to Owl, enjoying the puffy white clouds sweeping across the blue canvas sky. A typically beautiful, big sky North Dakota afternoon, where having any worries seems criminal.

I smile, wishing it were always this easy to slip into the cozy small-town vibe.

If I could just get past this awkwardness with Quinn, Dallas life wouldn't be half bad.



IT'S EVENING by the time I wheel the truck into our last stop of the day.

I pick up my phone to double-check the address before turning off the engine.

"Looks like this is it," I tell Owl, dropping the phone in the breast pocket of my shirt.

We're in an older residential area where a fence is set up around an empty lot between two older homes. Uncle Dean's text says that the landlord owns all three lots, and he hired us to clear the brush and weeds from the whole area, especially the empty lot.

I leave the door open for Owl to follow me out of the truck. We walk along the fence, making sure it's stable enough, checking to make sure there's plenty of water for the goats, and finally find the gate.

"Looks good," I tell Owl while opening it.

Always the first thing on the to-do list.

I'll never make the same mistake again I made on the first day.

"Let's get the crew together," I say.

Owl barks and runs to the back of the trailer, eager to do his job. What would I do without him?

I unlatch the ramp, then open the door.

The past three places, I've stayed on the ramp, only letting several goats out at a time so it's easier for Owl to manage. But this time, I pull the mesh gate all the way back and walk down the ramp.

Owl runs up and darts into the trailer to shoo the goats out.

"Hey! What in the shit-hell do you think you're doing?" someone shouts.

A very unpleasant, harsh someone I can't bring myself to call a lady, judging by the sound of her voice.

I walk to the other side of the trailer and squint.

Sure enough, a bleached blonde who looks like a washed-up model with a facelift gone bad—very bad—is barreling toward us.

*Well, crud. It wouldn't be any kinda business without those customers. Keep your cool,* I tell myself.

"Howdy. I'm with Dean's Rent-A-Goat," I say to Miss Nasty, pointing to the name painted on the side of the trailer in slashing green letters.

Wearing tight, white, and very short shorts with an even tighter hot-pink tank top, she walks past a beat-up pickup truck parked in the driveway.

"Try again. I didn't order any fuckin' goats," she snarls.

Yikes. Tough crowd.

Owl already has the goats, including Hellboy, inside the fence...which means I need to get the gate shut pronto before this nut sends them scattering.

“Are you the landlord, ma’am?” I ask, hurrying around the trailer to the fence.

“What do you think, Tinkerbell? I *live* here,” she says, stomping around the front of my pickup like a bear trying to figure out the best place to claw it open. “I don’t want those nasty-ass things on my property!”

“Do you own this property?” I ask, wondering if the husband ordered the goats and the wife—God help him—doesn’t know.

“I pay rent. Same damn thing!”

No, it’s really not, but arguing that point would be useless.

It’s not my job, either, reciting North Dakota tenants’ rights to pissed off, irrational screamers.

Owl comes out of the gate with his tail wagging, and I close it, just in time to keep Hellboy inside.

Latching the gate, I say, “Well, you’ll have to take it up with your landlord. He’s the guy who hired us. I’m just here to do my job.”

She marches over then, shoulders squared, thrusting her hilariously fake double-D’s forward by planting her hands on her hips. “And I’m telling you to take those mangy, smelly, monkey-butt bastard things out of here. *Right now.*”

Really? Like I’m going to take orders from a chick who thinks eyelashes that false look natural?

Hardly. Her rudeness is no threat either.

I’ve dealt with bigger bitches by far on the Chicago L-line, where being rude is an art and a religion for some people.

“Enough of this crap. You deaf?” She grabs hold of the gate and tries to shove me aside. “I said get them out of here now!”

“And I said you’ll have to take it up with your landlord, lady.” My hands fly out, straining to keep her from moving the gate.

She’s got a brute strength I don’t have.

“What’s all the screaming out here?” Another voice shoots over us, deeper and male.

Owl lets out a low, menacing growl as a rough-looking character walks between the back of the beat-up truck and the front of mine.

Wifebeater muscle shirt underneath the flannel hanging off his shoulders, unkempt mullet, torn jeans, no belt. Pretty much every bad redneck stereotype rolled into one wannabe badass with an attitude.

But he’s also tall, packing lean muscle, and covered in tattoos that look like

they were stripped off a whacked-out heavy metal rocker and glued to him. Snakes, thorns, skulls, dripping blood, swords, the works.

It'd be a little ridiculous if it weren't for the sneer on his face, and thick, calloused hands that look like they're used to calling the shots. He flexes one hand against his palm so loud the knuckles crack like splintering wood.

"I told this whore I don't want no damn livestock next to my house!" the woman growls. "They'll stink up everything and shit everywhere."

Sure. As if I totally wouldn't think to clean that up in a residential zone.

I also wouldn't call a few goats *livestock*, and they can't possibly smell worse than her.

The whiskey stink rolls off her so strong it makes me gag. Reeks like she's been on a three-day drunken bender. Her bloodshot eyes hint at it, too.

"Sir, the owner of this lot hired me to place several goats here to clean up some overgrown weeds," I tell the man, trying to defuse the situation. "Just doing my due diligence. If she has a problem with that, she needs to call her landlord. We're on a tight schedule."

The man shakes his head and shoves a hand through his long, greasy hair.

"Wrong," he grunts, pulling open his unbuttoned plaid shirt, revealing the gun tucked in his waistband. "If the lady said she doesn't want those critters here, then they ain't staying."

Holy hell.

Seriously? A gun? *Over goats?*

This is going sideways in so many ways.

But I'm also getting more than a little freaked. Another glance at the wild-eyed woman and her partner says something's just off.

They could be on drugs, past the point of any reasoning.

Owl growls again and puts himself between me and the man.

Tattoo Guy practically growls back, laying his hand on the gun, his eyes snapping to mine. "You got any sense, you'll get your mutt out of here. Don't think I *won't* if he starts coming at me or Carolina."

Shit.

I grab his collar, urging him back, desperate to get us both away just as my cellphone rings.

Yanking out the phone, I hope it's Uncle Dean so I can tell him I quit. This is way more than I signed up for.

Glancing at the screen, I'm shocked at the name.

**FAULK.**

Quinn?

Is he psychic now? How the heck does he know the exact instant when I

need help?

However he knows, I take a deep breath and hold it in my lungs, swiping my finger across the screen.



## SOMEONE GOT HIS GOAT (FAULKNER)



I don't want to be upset with her, but fuck.

Why? Why didn't she call me when she was going to pick up the goats from Ridge's place? She could've slipped off that bridge and messed up her knee for good.

For a couple days, it's been radio silence, except for that halfhearted reply she sent about being busy.

Zero interest shown in a *my bad* apology dinner at Libations.

Am I that cursed?

First hearing about the men casting their lures after me, and now, without even trying, I've fucked up everything with my old friend?

I should've called her before this morning.

Then again, I hadn't thought it'd take Grady and I so long to look through the pictures on the intel link an old FBI contact sent to me.

I've spent the past two days trying to stitch together intel on the thugs asking around back at the Purple Bobcat.

It doesn't make sense.

Bart "Bat" Pickett still lives in the cramped Oklahoma prison system, up for a suspiciously early parole hearing soon.

Still, that doesn't mean he couldn't be buying information on my whereabouts through his vast seedy network. I think he'd crawl through hell for a taste of revenge, considering our history.

Tory picks up on the third ring, shattering all other thoughts.

"Hey," I tell her. "Sorry to keep blowing up your phone, but I'm hoping we can talk. You were supposed to call me back the other day when you did the pickup at Ridge's place."

"Ah, yep, I-ah...I didn't have a chance."

My spine instantly stiffens.

She doesn't sound like herself.

"Where are you?" I bite off, gripping the steering wheel. I'm still in traffic after picking up a couple cans of paint for the house.

"I'm, uh, dropping off goats again...right in town, actually," she stammers.

"You aren't swinging from another gate, are you?" A bite in my gut tells me that's not it before she even answers.

"No. Not really. I'm just...Quinn, where are you?"

Not really? What the hell? My heartbeat increases as my *she's in trouble* instinct kicks in.

"I'm driving right past the pharmacy now. What's wrong?"

"Ohhh, just a little customer complaint. A minor misunderstanding," she whispers, grinding out strained laughter.

Bullshit.

Not minor. I'm sure of that.

"What's the address? I'll be right over," I tell her.

She rattles off a house number.

I don't recognize the address, but I know the street she mentioned and there's only one Rent-A-Goat trailer in this town. It won't be hard to find her.

"Give me five minutes, Peach," I growl, punching my foot on the gas pedal.

"That would be great," she says, this odd tension in her voice again.

Almost like she's cornered, alone, *afraid*.

Shit. Her tone has me shoving the pedal to the floor.

Whatever's going down, she doesn't want to say it, which tells me I'm wrong about the alone part.

"I'll be there soon. Hold on," I tell her again.

"Okay. Bye."

"No! Don't hang up," I yell back.

Dammit. Too late. She already has.

Pinching my teeth, I barrel down the road through town. Why didn't I man up and call her this morning?

I know. Because I haven't wanted to pull her any deeper into my life and compound whatever woes she's already got hanging over her.

Being with Quinn Faulkner isn't exactly a safe place to be when I don't know who's after me, or why, even if I have a pretty good idea it involves a maniac very, very interested in his own freak brand of vengeance.

That's part of the reason why I've stayed here in Dallas.

Most folks think I've kept so low-key because I've been doing PI stuff for more than random private clients. That's not the full story.

Ridge and Grady know my past is serious business, even if I've never told them everything.

I've hinted it's gotten good people killed on long nights at the Bobcat after hours, when it's just me, the boys, and an endless supply of beers.

Not something I plan on ever letting happen again.

I hit the outskirts of town with the speedometer cranked up, slowing down only enough to make the first corner onto the street Tory mentioned.

Within a few blocks, I see the trailer and hit the brakes. The truck skids to a stop at the end of the driveway.

Tory stands next to the truck with the trailer attached, and Owl's planted between her and two mean-looking strangers. A lady and some fuck who looks like he lives for bad tattoos and bar fights.

Leaping out of the truck, I slam the door shut and approach, but before I say anything, someone calls my name.

That woman's voice makes my skin crawl.

*Carolina Dibs.*

A local barfly who looks like she's been ridden hard and put away wet so many times I wonder if there's any sober grey matter left in her skull.

She saunters toward me, flashing this syrupy little smile.

"I've missed you, Faulk," Carolina says with a fake southern drawl that she thinks sounds sexy.

Like hell. It really sounds like she's smoked a cigar factory.

She's also implying we know each other far better than we do, and that pisses me right off.

I'm not stupid.

The few times I've seen her at the Purple Bobcat, I've kept my distance. The first man of several to turn her down before she winds up going home with whatever the night's flavor of passerby is. Someone who doesn't know her and won't ever lay eyes on her again.

I don't respond. Instead, I scan Tory, making sure she's all right as I walk toward her.

"What's going on here? These two giving you trouble?"

"I just dropped the goats off for the landlord. Supposed to be a quick and easy job, but..." She trails off, nodding at the lot behind her.

"I pay rent here, Faulk," Carolina says as she steps up beside me. "I told her I don't want those animals stinking up the place. They crap everywhere, especially if they're eating up all the junk growing over there."

I'm hardly listening.

The man standing between the front of Tory's truck and the back of a beat-

up, faded orange Dodge is a bigger concern. He takes a step back as soon as he sees me.

It's slight, but I notice.

*Weird.* I've never seen him around town before, but I don't know everyone.

It could be one of her random hookups, a biker or trucker, or maybe some dude who's passing through town for a quick contractor job.

"The goats aren't what you should be worried about stinking up the place," I say, glaring at the man.

He squares his shoulders and scowls, knowing I'm mincing no words.

"She pays rent and she has rights to what happens here," the man snarls, folding his arms, flexing his muscle like I'm supposed to be scared.

Laughable. Besides being bigger, I'm plenty sure I can show this rat how to chew the cheddar with one hand tied behind my back.

"Rights?" I echo, barking out a false laugh. Glancing at Tory, I ask her, "Did either of these two pricks threaten you?"

"Oh, no, nothing so sinister! You know me, Faulk." Carolina jumps in with a fluttery, innocent wave before Tory can answer. "We just...we don't want those goats here."

Ignoring Carolina, I keep my eyes glued to Tory.

Her attempt to force a grin fails as she shakes her head *no*.

Yeah, I don't buy it.

She's not intimidated that easily, but she's scared witless right now.

Something happened here.

I also notice how she'd quickly glanced at the man, her eyes lingering near his waistband.

Since she wouldn't be caught dead ogling his type, it isn't hard to guess why.

Certain what I'll find, I launch forward several steps and grab the guy by the front of his shirt with one hand.

My other hand reaches down, tugging the gun out of his waistband in one swift pull before he's able to even think about pushing me back.

"What the fuck!" he shouts, fighting for his gun a second too late.

"My turn." I stick the barrel into his stomach, just below his ribs. "Got a permit for this piece?"

It's been a while since I've handled a weapon in a precarious situation, but nobody ever called me rusty. I'll also bet every dime in my bank account a dirt bag like him would never qualify for a permit in any state.

He has trouble written all over his ugly mug. A life of crime and violence.

Exactly the type of bad boy poser that Carolina likes to mount when she can't snag anything better.

He tries to step back, but I tighten my hold on his shirt, reeling him closer.

“Careful, now. I asked you a question. It’d be a damn shame if you need to chat with Sheriff Wallace instead of me.”

“Faulk, let Marvin go! He didn’t do nothing; he was just looking after me,” Carolina shouts, trying to barge in without quite getting between us.

“Marvin, is it?” I ask the man. “Where you from, Marvin? I can tell you’re not a local.”

“None of your damn business,” he throws back. “What the hell are you? Some kinda cop or something?”

It’s times like this I wish the Bureau let me keep my badge so I could flash it in his face, but no dice.

“Close enough,” I grind out, baring my teeth. “And I also know a thing or two about *hell*. I’d be happy to send you on a cruise there—no expenses spared—if you don’t beat it in the next twenty seconds.”

He scoffs, even as his face turns beet red. “You...you can’t tell me what to do!”

“Bad news. I *can*.”

“No, wait, wait, he’s staying here with me,” Carolina clucks, grabbing at my arm with those overdone nails.

Let her dig like an angry kitten. I’m not releasing my new friend till I’m good and ready.

“Are you paying rent with her?” I ask him.

He doesn’t answer.

Cool. A freeloader, then. Just like I thought.

Snarling, I shove him backwards so I can get a look at his license plates on the orange Dodge.

Oklahoma?

I do a double take.

Son-of-a-bitch.

For a second, I’m so shocked I almost lose my grip. But it looks like helping Tory did me another favor.

I bet he’s one of the weasels asking about me at the Purple Bobcat, looking to sell my whereabouts straight to Bat Pickett.

Carolina would’ve already told him all she knows, which is enough to confirm who I am and that I live here in Dallas.

Without releasing my hold on the asshole’s shirt or taking the gun out of his gut, I turn to Tory. “Close the gate on the trailer and back it out of the driveway.”

While she’s doing that, I tell Marvin, “Listen real good. You’re gonna get in

that beat-up shitpile of a truck and start driving. Leave town, leave the county, and never come back, you hear?”

The defiant look in those nasty eyes tells me I haven't been loud enough for him to read me.

“Who do you think you are?” Marvin snaps. “If you're a cop, I'll report your ass for—”

“You know who I am.” I push the barrel harder against his torso till he winces. Good. “But you don't know what I'm capable of, and you don't want to find out. That, I can assure you.”

“You don't know sh—”

I laugh, cutting him off. “What you're capable of? Sure, I do. And I guess you'll just have to man up in jail for weeks, months, even years if I *ever* see you around this town again.”

“For what?”

“Threatening bodily harm against a lady trying to do her job,” I growl. “I don't take kindly to folks fucking with my friends. In fact, I can't think of anything I dislike more. You should also know that the sheriff's a personal friend of mine, and so's the entire Dallas police force. You don't want to deal with that.”

Once Tory has her truck moved, I frog-march Marvin around his pickup to the driver's door and shoulder-slam him against the metal. A menacing snatch of ink on his neck catches my eye.

Prison gang tattoo. Laughing Jokers, like the kind somebody designing poker cards on LSD might draw.

Shit.

More hints he has serious ties to the old Pickett crew.

I release his shirt and open the door. Before he gets in, I yank the phone out of his shirt pocket. An obvious cheap, bare-bones burner model.

“I'll be keeping this.” I pocket his phone. “And this piece.” I poke his stomach with the gun again. “You can report that back to your sources, whenever you find the nearest store and active your next burner.”

I know that's the first place he'll go, too, straight for a new disposable phone.

He glares at me, his dark eyes turning into angry slits.

I stare venom back and rattle off the plate number of his truck.

“What the—?” he sputters.

“Hush, I'm memorizing. Your plate number will be called into the highway patrol within two hours. That should give you just enough time to hit the Montana border, if you're lucky. And if that rusted-out box doesn't fall apart on

you.”

Marvin visibly turns pale. “Dude. Hold up...”

“Nah,” I say. “Every highway patrol this side of North Dakota deserves a fair shake. I bet they’ll be mighty interested in any warrants already posted for your arrest. I’m thinking you’ve got plenty.”

I hit a nerve there.

He climbs in his truck, cursing under his breath.

“What’s going on?” Carolina asks. “What’d you say to him, Faulk? Marvin? Hey, where are you going?”

“Marvin’s leaving town, sugar,” I tell her, slamming the truck door shut. “And I suggest you start taking lessons from the goats.”

“Huh?” She bats her eyes at me.

I gesture at the overflowing trash can and various junk sitting around it: cheap torn-up purses, discarded clothes, moldy packages of bread that could’ve went to families in need if her greedy ass hadn’t swiped so much from the food bank.

“You heard me. Be a goat. Clean this place up before you’re evicted, Carolina. There’re plenty of hardworking folks at North Earhart Oil looking for places to rent, and housing doesn’t grow on trees around here. It’s a seller’s market.”

She scowls at me and steps toward the truck as Marvin starts the engine.

I pull her away, wondering why the sour expression on her face suddenly brightens.

“Waitasec...you’re so jealous, you’re sending him away?” she asks, cringe-worthy flattery ringing in her voice. “Is that it?”

Not in this lifetime.

“Not hardly,” I reply. Then, just to make sure she doesn’t do something to harm the goats, I point to the fence. “See that shaggy black goat over there? We call him Hellboy for a reason. You so much as touch that fence and you’ll find out why. Let me tell you, having an ass full of horns ain’t pleasant.”

Her eyes widen as she stares at the fence.

For a second, she and Hellboy lock eyes.

I try not to laugh.

Stuffing Marvin’s gun into my belt, I walk down the driveway, following him as he backs the truck out. He flips me the bird as he pulls away.

I have half a notion to shoot out a tire, just for the hell of it, but it’s a peaceful neighborhood, even if it’s a little run down.

The folks in the other houses don’t deserve that crap.

Tory and Owl are standing outside of her truck, trying to process what

they've just witnessed. A sickness hits me square in the gut.

Like it or not, I've just potentially dragged her in deeper than I ever wanted to.

I hope like hell I'm wrong.

It can't be that dire, right?

Bat's still locked up in prison a thousand miles away. No clear release date in the foreseeable future, but if he's able to land a lawyer who can sweet-talk a judge into an early parole...

Not fucking good.

Hopefully, her knee will be healed up by then, and we'll both be far away from Dallas, and each other, whenever Bat gets out and tries something stupid.

I walk over, resting a hand on the hood of her truck.

She looks fine—relieved, really—but I still ask, “You all right, Peach?”

“I'm fine, but what the hell was that? Did you just kick him out?” She glances at Carolina, who's glaring our way from her porch. “She must be a close friend of yours to listen.”

“Not even close.” I shake my head. “If I ever get that desperate, put a man out of his misery.”

I want to choke when I look back at Carolina, then Tory.

There's no comparison.

Not with how cute she looks today, dolled up in her jeans, boots, and a red shirt with Dean's Rent-A-Goat printed on it in big black letters. Peach and the caked-up, worn-out-looking Carolina don't even inhabit the same universe.

“Sorry, Quinn. I just...I wasn't sure. Didn't mean to imply—”

“You know me better than that, woman. She's a frigging barfly Grady barely tolerates at the Purple Bobcat because she pays in cash. Nothin' more. And her hookup was a no-good drifter who'd better think twice about flashing a gun at one of my friends ever again.”

Her cheeks flush slightly. “He didn't aim it at me or anything.”

“He made sure you saw it,” I say. “Not something he has any business doing.”

“You're right.” She sighs. “God, I can't believe it. Up until now, it was a pretty smooth day.”

I shake my head at her. “You were supposed to call me days ago when you went to pick up the goats at Ridge's place.”

“I know, but with the bridge, I didn't need a hand. Owl had them loaded up in no time as soon as the gate was open.”

“And what if Hellboy there knocked you off that bridge? Your knee could've been messed up permanently.”

She huffs out a breath, tapping her knee. “This didn’t have anything to do with the bridge.”

“No, it didn’t,” I agree. “How long have you been here? It’s evening, and I still see a lot of overgrowth, so I’m thinking not long.”

Looking at the fence, she nods.

“I’d just locked the gate when she came storming out of the house. We got into a spat and he let me know pretty fast he had a gun in his waistband when you called.” She frowns and looks at me. “How is it you always show up at just the right moment?”

“Must be fate.” I shrug and wink at her.

“Fate?” She shakes her head. “More like an omen.”

She feels bad about getting me involved, and I still feel pretty rotten about cutting our evening short the other night.

“Either way, I’m glad I called. Now you can’t avoid me anymore.” I take her arm and walk her to the door of her truck, grateful she doesn’t fight me. “And I’m damn glad you answered so I could get you out of this jam.”

“Yeah, well, we’re both happy about that. Thank you, Quinn,” she whispers, her cheeks beginning to glow.

“You never really responded to my texts. Until the other day, I was starting to wonder if Granny gave me the right number.”

“It’s the right number. I told you, I wasn’t mad, just busy. About the other night...it was weird. I think you know it, too, and...well, it shouldn’t be. I just don’t want you thinking—”

“Thinking *what*? We’re friends, Tory. End of story,” I say, cutting her off. “I didn’t mean any offense having to rush off to something important. And I still owe you. What’re you doing now? Looks like this job’ll have to wait till tomorrow. At least let me buy you a burger?”

“Um, you just came to my rescue,” she says weakly, twirling her cinnamon hair, avoiding my eyes. “If anyone should be buying supper, it’s me who should be getting yours.”

“You’re on,” I tell her, snapping my fingers. “This man never passed up a free breakfast, lunch, or dinner.”

Laughing, she shakes her head, sending that auburn mess of curls everywhere.

For a second, I wonder if she’d smile like that if I did the unthinkable.

If I slid my fingers through it, pulled with that gentle, growly tension a lot of girls like, if I brought my lips home for a taste of Little Miss Three Names.

Fuck, I bet I’d hallucinate her flavor.

She’d even *taste* like a peach.

And one time devouring her mouth wouldn't be nearly enough.

I'd want to send my kisses marching lower, straight down that sun-kissed throat, lingering on her tits, gliding past her belly, straight to that sweet, hot heaven waiting between her—

No.

I pinch my thigh as my senses fly back, wondering what the hell I'm thinking. It's gotta be the tension, the adrenaline rush from getting up in Marvin's face.

Ever since that Old Town Boys bust with Ridge and Grace over a year ago, I haven't had a lot of excitement, and like a lot of dudes, this shit always made me a little hard after it was over.

Guess it's my way of feeling grateful to be alive and well with a new appreciation for life, including its finer pleasures.

Hiding my bulge, I swagger over and open her truck door, then wave to Owl, who instantly hops in. "How long do you need to drop off this rig?"

"Tonight? Oh, you're serious—"

"Don't back out on me now." I gesture for her to climb in. "The diner on Main Street has awesome-ass burgers. I'll pick you up in an hour."

"An hour?" She shakes her head as she starts the truck, but she knows not to complain.

"Fine, lady. An hour and a half tops."

Then I shut the door, knowing full well I'm slowly losing my mind.



## CAN'T GOAT ENOUGH (TORY)



**T**ime to freak out.

My heart thuds a thousand beats a minute and I know it has nothing to do with the angry jerkface Quinn just chased out of town with his tail between his legs.

Or how he did it by snatching away the brute's own gun and turning it against him.

A scary sight for a Chicago girl, where gun violence is a fact of life.

But with Quinn in control, I didn't even flinch.

His command, his strength, his focus...

Wow. With his training, he clearly knows his way around an armed weapon and how to send folks packing who shouldn't have them.

My heart's still pounding.

It wasn't even the standoff, really. Not with the way his truck squealed to a stop and he'd come barreling up the driveway, looking like he was ready to tear apart anything in his way with his bare hands. I couldn't help but be reminded of the first time we'd met.

He'd been so ready to defend his grandpa's bee boxes then. This red-faced, angry boy who calmed as soon as he realized I wasn't a threat, just a silly little girl in over her head.

Today, he'd been ready to defend *me*.

I've never had this before, but I've dreamed about it more often than I care to admit.

Jean-Paul was no Hercules. I honestly wondered sometimes what would happen if we got mugged or assaulted while bouncing around the city to museums and Italian restaurants with mouthful names.

Even back in Chicago, my eye wandered to hard, capable men who looked

like they'd be able to quash violence as easy as swatting a fly.

And if I wanted to stop thinking of Quinn *that way*, comparing him to my idiot of an ex?

Yeah.

This so isn't helping.

The strange, forbidden pulse and heat flaring between my thighs shouldn't be happening.

My life is so messed up right now, and I really don't need complications like my beast of a friend turning into the perfect hero before my eyes.

At least I know my strengths, though.

I'm too good at messing things up all the way around. Hence Quinn's need to come save my bacon twice so far.

In all fairness, today wasn't my fault.

Still, he'd arrived, bolting to the rescue like a knight in shining armor.

Sighing, I pull the truck into Granny's driveway and park it far to the left so she has plenty of room to back her Nova out of the garage if needed. Owl follows me through the garage and into the house where Granny stands near the counter, wearing a white apron that says *I cook as good as I look*, and holding a purple monster in her hand.

"Hmm. What were we going to make out of this rascal again?" she asks without any sort of greeting.

"Eggplant Parmesan," I say, feeling guilty about not being able to make it tonight, but I can't back out on Quinn after that.

"Right. Another one of your mother's meatless wonders. We'll find a way to spice this boy up." She opens the fridge and puts the eggplant back in the vegetable drawer, then rummages around on the other side. "Say cheese! I hope you like a lake of mozzarella with a side of eggplant, dear."

She pulls out two bulging bags of shredded cheese with a saucy grin on her face.

"Aw, Gran, it's delicious with just a little," I say. "No lie. You'll like it once you try it."

"Maybe so, but it won't be tonight."

"Oh?"

She pulls out a head of lettuce and various other vegetables, stacking them neatly on the counter. "I just accepted an invitation to go next door. Otis and Velma are firing up their grill and have an extra steak. It's a sample cut of the new Barnet Farm's meat and rather delicious, or so they say. Wanna join me? I'm throwing together a shrimp salad as our contribution."

"Well, actually...I just accepted an invite to eat at the diner."

Granny looks up, raising an eyebrow. “Really, now? Did the Faulkner boy come to his senses?”

“Um, don’t know about that, but...yeah. It’s Quinn.”

Stupid blush.

Stupid tongue.

Stupid *me*.

“Well, well, finally some good news around here! What did I tell you, Tory?” She lets out a loud cackle as she closes the fridge door.

“Gran, it isn’t like that. We’re just—”

“*Nooope*. Not listening. No colorful f-words around here, young lady.” Still smiling, she presses her hands against her ears and walks away.

Yes, having a normal conversation with my grandmother someday is still on my bucket list.

Owl stands up from his spot on the floor and stretches, blissfully oblivious to my death by embarrassment.

“Hope you’re hungry, you little bear,” she whispers, patting Owl’s head. “I’ll be sharing my steak with you instead while Tory goes off on her big date.”

*Oh my God.*

Ignoring her insanity, I head for the sink to wash my hands.

“Is that all right?” I ask her, turning the faucet on. “Him staying here with us? I figured it’d be easier that way than dragging him back and forth.”

“Quinn? Most certainly,” Gran says without a lick of hesitation.

“What? No, I...” My heart pounds so hard the rush renders me speechless. “Not Quinn. Owl. You know that’s who I meant! Anyway, with him here, I don’t have to drive over to Uncle Dean’s to drop him off or pick him up in the mornings.”

“Of course, it’s all right. I love having baby mammoths as guests.” She pulls out a cutting board and whacks the head of lettuce in half with one slice of her knife. “And the invitation remains open for Quinn anytime. I adore having cavemen around the house, too.”

“Gran!” I huff out a breath, awed that she’s reached a new level of insufferable. “Why are you riding this train so hard anyway? Now that I’m busted, is that the plan? Just hitch me up with some local boy and marry me off?” Grabbing a towel, I add, “I mean, I remember you not wanting me to spend too much time with Quinn years ago.”

“Back then, you weren’t a grown woman. You were a young girl with a crush, and Quinn was that older boy.”

“I *never* had a crush on him.”

The words taste like ash. Did I mention I’m a terrible liar?

“And I’m still a virgin.” Her eye roll leaves me dizzy.

“Gran!”

“What? You can’t believe it?” She hacks at the lettuce again, muttering to herself. “Join the club, Tory. I don’t believe a word out of you either, dear. And don’t wheel me off to the nursing home just yet. My memory’s as clear as a looking glass. I’ll be pushing daisies before I forget how you mooned over that boy every summer since you got caught trying to break into Farmer Faulkner’s bees.”

I hang the towel on the oven door with a little twist of shame.

“Granny, I’m not worried about your mind. Your hearing, though...let’s try this again. We became good friends that day. We’re *still* friends. Nothing more.”

“It could be plenty more, girl, with a bull like him,” she whispers, throwing me an annoyed glance.

“Gran.”

“Oh, enough. Nothing I’ve said is that scandalous. You’re a grown woman, Tory, smack-dab in your prime. You’ve had a regular boyfriend before. I just wish you’d find one who treats you right.”

And I wish she’d butt out.

But I see her point.

In her totally outrageous Gran way, she’s always looking out for me.

“Well, he’s history now,” I tell her.

“Thank God! Didn’t that man wear *leggings*?” She looks up in horror.

“He’s a dance director, Gran. A guy has to put freedom of movement above fashion.”

“Bah.” She swipes a hand through the air. “And to think how your mother used to threaten me. She said I’d never see you again if you ever came home pregnant after your summers here, yet there she goes and throws you in bed with Jean-Paul What’s-his-face because he’s supposed to be the best dance coach on the planet. Never mind the fact that he was *ten* years older than you, and divorced twice!”

Damn.

Right between the eyes.

I bite my lips together to keep from responding. I’m not sure whether to laugh or cry because everything she’s said is true.

Besides me becoming pregnant in Dallas when I was young. That’s the first I’m hearing it, and sad to say, it’s exactly what Mom *would* worry about.

Why, I think her head might pop off if I ever tarnished the illustrious Redson-Riddle bloodline of admirals, artists, and politicians with something as pearl-clutching as an unplanned pregnancy with a farm boy. Even now that I’m

in my mid-twenties.

Ugh.

“Quinn was just as infatuated with you,” Gran continues with a sigh. “But he was also too sensible. He understood the wretched complications with you two doves getting closer then. He really was a responsible kid, so mature for his age, and he’s a heck of a grown man now. He needs some, and so do you, dear.”

*What. Is. Happening?*

Of all the madness I expect with Gran, standing in her kitchen while she critiques my sex life—and Quinn’s—is not on my big list of crazy.

“Um, what?” Dumbfounded, I stare at her.

“An affair. A sleepover. A little nighttime nibble.” She shrugs like she’s telling me the weather. “Call it whatever you want, but I bet that young man’s an absolute *wolverine* when the lights go out. Don’t you?”

Holy Toledo.

I can’t even form a coherent response. My mind is blown by the places she’s gone, and I’m not coming along for the ride.

It also doesn’t help to have her feeding red meat to thoughts I shouldn’t be having.

“You know I love you, Tory, and I also know what you need,” Granny continues, undaunted. “To know other men so you can get that jackass dance instructor out of your head.” She points the twelve-inch knife that she’s using to dice a cucumber now right at me. “I’m sorry your knee was injured, but frankly, I think it might be the best thing to ever happen to you. Now you have a chance to see what else life has to offer besides a jerk of a boyfriend-boss who walks like he has a corn cob stuck up his butt. I’ve seen the Barnet rooster, Cornelius, with a better strut.”

I groan, pushing a hand over my face.

“Is that why you were so insistent I come out here to heal?”

“Yep. You’ve also been living your mother’s dreams too long and losing yours. It’s time for you to find your own, Tory. Sometimes you kids need to hear it from your grandparents.”

“Sometimes,” I echo, sarcasm off the charts.

“Fine. Just ask Bella Larkin, then. Old Jonah Reed was still giving her advice after he was dead, or so I hear. Now look at her—married to the man of her dreams and a little bundle of joy on her knee!” She winks and goes back to cutting up her cucumber. “Don’t get me wrong, now, I love your mama. For some unholy reason, she’s made your father very happy over the years, and me, by giving birth to you.”

I sense there’s more coming. With Granny there always is.

“But she’s made you chase after her dance career since the time you could walk,” she says, shaking her head. “She wanted you to be a dancer when she couldn’t anymore. Hardly fair.”

“But I *wanted* to be a dancer, too,” I say, feeling the need to defend my mother on this one. She’s been my biggest motivator and probably my biggest fan. Biggest hard-ass, definitely. “I’m not some robot running around, doing whatever she tells me to.”

“I know, dear, and you’re a beautiful dancer. Always have been.” She pushes aside the cucumber and starts on an onion, dicing it in no time without a hint of tears. “Still, you never had a chance to be anything else. You’ve been a little puppet on a string, and Gloria made sure you enjoyed it.” Barely taking a breath, she points the knife at the clock. “Time’s a wasting. You’d best go get showered. Want me to pick out an outfit for you?”

“No, thanks, I have plenty of clothes.” I head for the hall, wondering about what she’d just said.

“Don’t be afraid to show a little cleavage!” she shouts in my wake.

Good Lord.

I love that woman, though, even if she’s blunt as a brick. She’s as tactful as she is tall, which is barely five feet.

“Did you hear me?”

“Unfortunately!” I yell back.

And maybe, just for kicks, I won’t be afraid tonight.

Every so often, Granny’s unique lunacy turns out to be a stroke of genius.

What if Quinn *is* the distraction I need?

What if it’s just a little innocent flirting?

Granny was certainly right about the crush I had on him once upon a time.

And that last innocent summer, given the chance, if Quinn had done anything even hinting at being more than my big, older, adorably overprotective friend...

God. I would’ve been all over it. Head over heels.

As I step into the shower and let my brain go to shower-thoughts, the same question hits me over and over.

*What if Quinn feels just as torn up over what-ifs as I am?*



I TOWEL OFF, blow dry my hair, and use the straightener before I realize this is way too much effort for a man I’m *not* dating.

Then I toss on a pair of skinny black jeans, a low-cut pink-and-white cami-

tank top, and Granny's dress boots with the bright-pink stitching. At the last second, I grab a silky white blouse, just in case I feel exposed with too much boob hanging out.

*It's just to humor Gran, and myself, I think. I'm not actually giving Quinn a show.*

Right.

Maybe if I repeat it enough times I'll believe it, too.

Granny is still putzing around in the kitchen, whipping up a homemade ranch dressing for her salad.

The shrill wolf whistle she belts out as I enter the room makes Owl bolt up. The big mastiff lets out a heavy *woof!* of approval. *I think.*

"See? Smart boy! How'd you hook up with old Dean, anyway?" Laughing, Granny flashes me a wink.

"I wondered the same thing. How did Uncle Dean ever train him so well? He hasn't had him too long." I'd never asked until now.

"Train him? You kidding?" Granny cackles. "He came with the goats, dear." She then gives me a critical eye. "Wait. Those aren't my jeans."

"Nope, mine."

"I might have to borrow them. They have a way of making your cute butt even cuter. Good eye."

I shake my head at her, beyond mortified, even if I'm also glad she'll go to her grave being Granny Coffey.

"Have you heard about how Faulk—as everyone calls him now—helped Ridge Barnet bust some baddies who were after Ridge's wife? Grace is such a doll, and one hell of an interior decorator. I can't wait until my kitchen and bathroom remodels are done. She's been drafted to help."

"I heard, it's quite a story. And when are you having remodeling done?"

She spins around and fumbles with the lid, fixing it on her bowl of dressing. "Um, soon. Very soon. Do I hear a truck?"

I get a feeling that something is off somewhere, but I'm not sure what as I walk into the living room and look out the window.

"Is it Quinn?"

"Not yet. You know, half the single ladies in this town have tried to flash him for attention ever since he moved back to town. Why, the Bobcat is practically turning into a low-grade strip club some nights between girls chasing Quinn and his pal, Grady. Lucky for that grump of a bartender he can hide behind his little girls."

"Yeah, I found that out today," I say, still looking out the window at the empty street.

“Oh? Enlighten me.”

“Carolina Dibs.”

Granny’s face twists like she’s bitten into a rancid orange.

“Yuck, yuck, *yuck!* That strumpet? She’s had more men on her than a Vegas sofa, and I guarantee you Quinn Faulkner isn’t one of them. The boy has the good sense not to rot his equipment.”

Snickering, I pivot on one heel and watch her standing in the archway from the hall into the living room. Earlier, when Carolina told Quinn she’d missed him, I’d felt a stab of jealousy far deeper than I’d felt over Jean-Paul and Madeline.

“How do you even know that, Gran? You’re an expert on Quinn’s love life too?”

Granny laughs. “Because he has good taste and a brain, dear.” She walks into the living room. “When did you see Carolina Dibs?”

“Oh, I dropped the goats off for her landlord.”

“Wesley Grouper?”

I shrug.

“Don’t remember the name, only the address.” Recalling the old man I’d also delivered goats to, I say, “I also delivered goats to Robert Duncan.”

“Oh, that old goat? I don’t like the idea of you going some places all by yourself.”

“Not alone. I have Owl.”

“And Quinn?” she asks, obviously hell-bent on tormenting me as long as she can.

“He called while I was at Carolina’s place and kinda bailed me out. She wasn’t happy about the goats showing up, to put it mildly.”

“Don’t ya love having a hero around? I like that man more and more.” She winks at me. “If you don’t hurry it up, I might consider tossing in a bid to go after the most eligible bachelor in Dallas myself.”

My jaw drops because this is one of those times when it’s hard to tell if she’s joking.

Ouch.

A flash of lights in the driveway draws my eye back to the window. “He’s here. Do you want to tell him you’re that hard up for a date, or should I?”

With a wicked smile, she tugs at her apron, so the words are clearly visible while she walks to the front door. “I will.”

No way. She can’t be serious.

I scuttle in front of her. “Please don’t.”

She just laughs and skirts around me to open the door.

“Hello, handsome!”

“Granny. Lovely as always,” he says, walking inside. Once he reaches the door, he leans forward and smiles. “Nice apron. Kind of you to give every bachelor in town a reminder.”

“If someone ever invites you to the house for dinner, I’ll loan *her* the apron,” she says, stepping aside and glancing at me.

Quinn laughs and gives Owl a greeting pat on the head while looking at me with his emerald eyes twinkling.

“Ready for some grub?”

I smile, rubbing a temple, knowing no matter what I say, it’ll be twisted by Granny. So we’d better get out of here ASAP.

“I just need to grab my purse from the kitchen,” I say. “Hang on.”

As I enter the hall, I hear Granny telling Quinn about her going next door, and hurry for the kitchen, hoping like hell she keeps the conversation strictly platonic until I can get back.

If I’m really lucky, she won’t embarrass me to death again.

“Well, as you know, I’m not like most grannies,” she says as I reenter the living room.

“No, Granny, you most certainly ain’t,” Quinn agrees, concealing a smile as he scratches his chin.

I step between the two of them. “Ready.”

He laughs, winks at Granny, and then swaggers aside for me to walk out of the door before him.

“I won’t wait up!” Granny shouts. “And I’m a deep, deep sleeper!”

*When does the torture end?*

I close my eyes, resisting the urge to drag my face right off with my hand. No need to dwell on her playing matchmaker so the first minute of our little outing feels brutally awkward.

“Good thing you have Owl here,” Quinn says to Granny, blissfully oblivious to her hints.

*I hope.*

Granny laughs her butt off as she closes the door, and I hold in another groan.

I love her to pieces, but she truly is a piece of work.

“Looking good, Peach,” he says, casting that wild green gaze across me. “Hell of a good summer style.”

“Y-you too,” I say shyly.

Pathetic, I know.

Of course he looks *extremely* sinful.

He's changed into a white shirt that enhances just how tanned he is, and the pearl snaps make me imagine watching him remove it with those big rough hands.

*Damn you, Granny.* She's succeeded at putting horrid thoughts in my head with her idiotic 'nighttime nibble.'

"Because it's you, I'm gonna admit it's the only clean shirt I had left in my closet," he says with a grin.

I climb in the passenger side of his big blue truck and wait until he's in the driver's seat before asking, "Don't like doing laundry?"

"*Can't* do laundry. Not by anything but hand or a trip to the laundromat. I haven't installed the new washer yet. That's up next tomorrow. Old one conked out on me a couple months ago."

"A likely excuse." I flick my tongue out at him.

Again, he gives me that addictive chuckle while putting the truck in reverse. "The washer's been there for a week. No denying it."

"Why didn't you just have the delivery guy install it?"

"Because *I'm* the delivery guy, Peach."

Curious, I ask, "What made you stick around and fix up your grandpa's place, anyway? Seems like that's something you could hire out and wrap up fast."

"It was time for a rest, and there's no place like little old Dallas. Go back to my roots and forget the OKC for a while, y'know?"

Yeah.

I also know he's gone stiff as a board. I sense it as well as see it.

Well, at least I'm not alone.

I have enough tension brewing with Granny's cursed thoughts.

But I just want this evening to be nice, casual, and uneventful, so I nod.

"Cool beans."

He glances at me and grins. "You still say that? How many more Tory-isms have you kept up?"

I laugh, feeling the tension seeping out of him, and I'm glad.

"Stick around long enough and maybe you'll learn some new ones. You already heard 'son of a biscuit eater.'"

"Have you drunk any of your granny's strawberry rhubarb wine?"

I blink in confusion. "What wine?"

"She told me she was taking some to the neighbors, and her famous wine was the reason they'd invited her over."

"No, I haven't." I shake my head, even though I fully believe him, and her...I think.

Granny might've just made up the steak and salad thing as an excuse. But I also can't put it past her to whip up a secret stash of country wine. Wasn't there a big jar of something in the garage fridge?

"I told her I thought most grandmas make strawberry rhubarb jam or pie," Quinn continues. "She made sure I know she's special."

"Ha, I heard that part," I say. "And now I guess I know what's in the big glass dispenser in the spare fridge."

"Might have to sample that stuff someday. Give the old gal her due."

"Careful, Quinn. Knowing Granny, it's probably stronger than straight-up moonshine."

"Hell yeah. I'd be disappointed if it weren't."

We share a laugh and then chat about the homes and little shops we pass until he parks in front of the diner. Little wooden airplane cutouts with DALLAS on them cling to every lamppost, a cute reminder of the town's oil history, back when Jonah Reed used to tell everyone who'd listen that Amelia Earhart was a distant relative of his.

He even staked North Earhart Oil's name on the alleged ancestry.

"Wow. So this place actually won best burger in North Dakota?" I ask, nodding at the flashy sign in the window for the first time as we walk to the door.

"That's what the sign says, so it must be true." He opens the door and holds it for me.

So maybe I'm blushing, okay?

We both order the Mack burgers, their trademark dish. It's loaded with a big mess of gooey cheeses, fried pickles, and hot peppers, plus a basket of fries bigger than my head. Oh, and it'd be downright sinful to turn down a frosty strawberry shake on the side.

The shake alone would give my mother and Jean-Paul a double heart attack.

In an odd sense, that feels good.

Defying them, taking a day off counting calories and fats and macros, ordering for *me* with Quinn's lovable encouragement.

"What are you smiling about?" Quinn asks, leaning back in his chair.

I wonder if it's how his taut white shirt stretches over the miles of muscles he's packing now.

"The food!" I tell him, rubbing my hands. "I'm starving, and I can't remember being able to finish a whole Mack burger back when we were young. Lord knows I'll try tonight. Jeez, I don't even recall the last time I ate a hamburger. Probably a birthday or something."

"You're shitting me."

“I’m serious. Our dance group had really strict standards and a killer fitness routine with a nutritionist. I’ve broken it a few times already since arriving at Granny’s, that’s for sure, but...not to this extreme.” I nod at the waitress carrying two tall glasses of pink deliciousness topped with whipped cream and cherries. “And I plan on thoroughly enjoying every second.”

He thanks the waitress and then looks at me.

“Ladies first. Tell me what you think.”

I take a draw on the straw and nearly melt at the heavenly taste of rich ice cream, juicy *real* strawberries, whole milk, and just the right tartness.

“O. M. G.”

I flop back in my chair.

More than a little scared I might have a spontaneous milkshake orgasm in front of him.

“That good, huh?” He laughs, slapping his hand gently on the table. “Should I call you an ambulance?”

“Yes. Maybe. I...oh, Jesus, it’s divine.”

Or else I’ve just been deprived like a starving monk.

“Why such a strict diet anyhow? Dancing must burn up a shit ton of calories.” He looks at me, taking a sip off his own shake.

“Yes, but it’s more than just the calories. It’s the macronutrients, the carbs, the supplements...a whole lifestyle that has to be maintained. We put lean proteins first—baked or grilled, never fried—carbs in moderation, endless leafy vegetables...” I rattle off my diet, sadly aware of how slim my pickings became after summers with Granny ended.

“Fuck,” he whispers, his green eyes bulging comically in that oh-so-Quinn way. “Sounds like a starvation death march to me. Didn’t you ever snap?”

I shrug. “I never had time to think about it. My meals were premade and stacked up in my fridge, usually. Perfectly planned out and labeled. Sure I’d go out for a nice dinner every so often or cheat during the holidays, but I mostly stayed true.”

“Who did the meal planning?”

“My mother,” I say, blocking a frown with another big sip of strawberry ambrosia.

So maybe Granny’s right. Mother has ruled too much of my life for too long.

She always claimed she was doing everything to give me a leg up over the other girls. The money my parents dropped on a high-end meal service was like nothing to them and made things far easier for me.

Mom was doing me a favor, yeah, but she was also doing herself one, too.

The realization is a stinging slap across the face, really, but I won’t let it drag

this night down.

The burgers arrive and I grin so hard my cheeks hurt.

“Holy...it’s as big as the plate!” I point at my burger in astonishment. “Something tells me this won’t be the day I conquer Mack’s finest.”

“Only one way to find out,” he tells me, grabbing a fry and popping it into his mouth.

There must be ten or twenty Idaho monsters sliced up, steaming in the basket between us.

“Bon appétit!” he says, picking up his own burger, loaded with extra jalapenos.

I cut mine in half, intending to avoid death by burger today, and pick one section up.

The first bite is just as heavenly as the shake.

We spend a few minutes eating quietly, blissfully chewing, enjoying our own companionable munching.

“So, to be clear, I’ve been living in Chicago, dancing, and eating kale for the last decade,” I say, hoping to get the spotlight off me. “But what about you? Where have you been? Besides traveling around playing superman with the Army and the FBI, I mean.”

He sets his burger down and gives me a wry smile. “I spent a lot of time defending borders of several allied countries, special ops, and then the Bureau kept me on the go. Even if home was Oklahoma City for a long time.”

“Hawaii? Alaska? Do you get to see your family?” I ask.

“Yes. Damn nice places. Though I think I’m a Midwestern boy to my bones. Can’t imagine living anywhere full time that’s too frigid or too tropical.”

“Where’s your favorite place?” I ask, leaning forward.

He frowns for a moment, pondering, then sighs with another smile I can’t read.

“Call me crazy, but hell. I think I might’ve found it right in front of me.”

Those jade-green eyes are blazing now, staring right past me into the future.

“Dallas, you mean?” I’m actually stunned.

He nods.

“Wow. Having second thoughts about putting your grandfather’s place up for sale, then?”

He shakes his head. “Can’t.”

“Why? You already have a buyer lined up?” I cock my head.

“Nope. I think I’ll sell anyway, even if I’m planning on staying here a while. The place is big enough for a family and I’m just one dude.” He looks at me cryptically. “I’ve got...reasons I’m getting to. Hang on, food first.”

He pauses to devour his burger, making these muffled pleasure sounds that make me want to smile, but I pretend not to notice.

I follow his lead, polishing off as much Mack burger as I can stand, wondering the entire time what he's holding back.

I still have half a burger left and a pile of fries a few minutes later. I wave a hand at my plate and basket. "Still hungry? Help yourself. I'm stuffed. But about those reasons, what's up?"

"Gonna need a couple boxes." He shakes his head and pushes his plate to the side. "Listen, Peach, I have to tell you something."

My stomach twists, full of food, and I brace for what's coming.

I can tell it's as heavy as a boulder.

Pushing my plate aside, I lock eyes with him.

"All right. What it is? Shoot."

"That guy at Carolina's earlier today..." He glances around quickly before looking at me again. "I don't think we've seen the last of him, and I need to know if you get so much as a glimpse of that prick. Or anybody else like him who gives you a bad vibe."

*Huh?* Whatever I expected, it wasn't being asked to play informant.

An odd sensation sweeps up my spine.

"He had a prison tattoo on his neck," Quinn tells me, a shadow hanging over his face. "A laughing joker with a real ugly mug. That's a favorite in some prison circles down south. He's hooked up with some shit, no doubt, even if I don't know exactly what he was in for."

Yikes. I hadn't noticed the creepy tattoo, and I'm kinda glad.

"O-kayyy. But why do you think we'll see him again? Or anybody like him?"

"Can you keep this hush? Pinky swear for old time's sake?"

He gives me that lopsided grin that takes me back to a hundred pinky swears we made on summers so long ago. Smiling, I hold my hand up and feel his warm finger hook around mine.

He gives it a little shake and pulls away.

"All right. A while back, I was part of an op that put away a big-time meth manufacturer in the OKC. He did hard time and wound up being sentenced for life. That tattoo's connected to one of the big gangs in the state pen. I'd know it anywhere."

This is getting freakier by the second. I take a sip of strawberry flavored courage and shake my head as I swallow.

"And you think he's out now? After you?"

"Not him. The dude who got life died while he was in the pen, but there were

a lot of people in his network.” His eyes glow darkly. “This man’s brother, he’s still behind bars, locked up in another cell back in Oklahoma. You’d better believe he’ll come looking for revenge if he’s let out.”

“Jesus. You’re being, like...cased?” I only know that word from watching TV mysteries and I’m not even sure it’s right.

He leans forward, giving me this feral look, those huge, powerful hands folded in front of him.

“Yes. I just wanted you to know so you’ll be extra cautious. Always keep one eye in the back of your head.

*Eep.*

My throat feels dry as cotton and I reach for the shake again.

“Um, I’ll try,” I whisper, still trying to process everything.

“Please do. And you call me whenever you’re going around these parts with the goats. Pickups, drop-offs, tune-ups, whatever. I want to know about it, you hear?”

I nod firmly.

That guy today was a major creepazoid, but the others were all nice, normal people. It seems like overkill.

“I don’t know, Quinn. Seems like I’d be calling you nonstop for every job. You don’t have time for that, do you?”

He sits back in his chair as the waitress arrives and asks how the meal was. We both give her rave reviews as she takes the plates away to box up our leftovers.

“Trust me.” While pulling out his wallet, he looks at me. “I *do* have time for that. Besides, it won’t be forever. In a few weeks, I’ll have the house ready to sell and you’ll be healed up, safely back in Chicago.”

I don’t like the sound of that one bit.

Sighing, I pick up my purse. “I’m paying, remember? I owe you one.”

Before he can object, I stand and speed-walk to the cash register near the door. There, I lay out my money on the counter, tell the waitress thanks again, return to grab our food, and walk to the door.

Quinn tries to give me cash as we walk outside, and I push it back in his hand.

And by push, I don’t even move him an inch, but I hope he gets the message.

“Quinn, no. Dancing was not only time consuming; it paid pretty well, especially in Chicago.” That’s a small stretch, but I was comfortable, especially living at home without the city’s brutal rent.

If I had to pay my parents back for the lessons they’d shelled out money for over the years, I wouldn’t have a dime to my name, but he doesn’t need to know

that.

And right now, Quinn Faulkner also doesn't need to know I'm a little freaked over this inmate with a grudge, either.

Not scared for me.

*For him.*



## GOAT A HELPING HAND? (FAULKNER)



**T**alk about a botched plan.

Shit. Why had I told her any of this? Why did I decide to open my big mouth, much less run it to an early grave?

Why the hell can't I have one—*just one*—nice, easy, laugh-it-up evening with Tory Three Names like old times?

It's like we're frigging jinxed.

The whole threat feels like a curse, anyway.

I put Jake Pickett in jail to rot years ago. Now his brother Bat is paying for any and all intel on me, probably planning to hire a hatchet man to put the axe in my skull if he doesn't do it himself whenever he gets out.

That doesn't mean I need to spill my guts and scare the living shit out of the little lady, though.

It's just...fuck, it's Tory.

Way back when, when we were the summer munchkins, I'd been able to talk to her like nothing. Confide in her. Joke about any dumb thing.

I'd been sent up to Gramps' place for the entire summer that first time because Dad had it with my shit. I'd been suspended for fights at school three times. He barely talked the principal into stopping short of expelling my dumb ass.

The year before, my ma died and my dad remarried awful fast. Far too quick for my liking.

I hadn't been a happy camper at all.

Truthfully, I'd acted out like the teenage punk I was, so I got a one-way ticket to Dallas to cool my heels. I'd told Tory all about it one day, and she'd listened, without judgment or advice.

*Just listened with her heart.*

I guess that's what I was hoping would happen here again. Especially when the stakes are a little bit higher than me working through some family grief.

If Bat Pickett comes calling with a mark on my head, then I just became radioactive to everybody close to me.

I climb in the pickup feeling like mud, shut the door, and turn to her.

"You aren't in any danger, Tory. Not yet. I promise I won't let anything happen." My words come out strained, this growl that surprises even me. "I've got people who can help, and I'm gonna take care of this. Didn't mean to get you all stirred up over nothing."

"I'm not worried about being in danger, Quinn. This is Dallas, North Dakota. Not Dallas, Texas. Not even Heart's Edge...did you hear about the insanity that happens out there?"

Damn her, I smile.

"Yeah, who hasn't? If only I could hire a couple of those Montana boys to lick that shady fuck behind bars. But I'm thinking they're enjoying their retirement."

"Right. Kids around here still ride their bikes all over town. They know it's time to go home when the streetlights switch on, and then sneak out to go swimming in the pond behind the park. Crazy murder mystery stuff doesn't happen out here."

"Not counting what went down with Drake and Bella, Ridge and Grace, poor old Tobin, you mean..." I tick each name off with my fingers. "This town might be a speck on the map, but it's not as quiet as it used to be, darlin'."

I'm not just trying to give her shit. She reminded me of something else the instant she mentioned swimming in that pond.

How I'd found her with the other kids, swimming in the city pond that last summer before I went off to serve Uncle Sam. Stripped down to their skivvies.

She was too young, too perfect, too hot not to drill down in my brain and leave me with dirty damn dreams out the wazoo.

I'd been twenty. Already too old to look at her with any longing.

But hell, when she looked up and smiled with all that skin, asking if I was just gonna stand there all day with a stick up my butt or take off my shirt and dive in...

I'd wanted to leap in and show her sassy little hind the palm of my hand.

"Remember that? When you'd hauled me home to Granny after swimming?" she asks, flashing me a smile that drags my mind right back to her sweet, grown-up, all-too-enticing ass.

I start the truck and back out of the parking spot.

"Yeah, yeah, I remember. You shouldn't have been out that late. It was

already almost sundown; the fireflies were coming out. And that pond is mostly for ice skating in the winter. It's never been deep enough for real swimming, more like a soak," I grumble, trying like hell to avoid thinking about how she'd look now in nothing but a bikini.

"So? That never stopped you from joining in for all of ten or twenty minutes."

My throat catches on this little sputter.

She isn't wrong, but damn her if I'll admit it.

Damn her again if Tory ever finds out I practically dragged her home because I couldn't take this other boy her age looking every time she turned around. I was on the brink of laying claim to every bit of her, and goddamn jealous, too.

"I know you liked it," she says. "My memory never lets me down."

"Sure. We all used that little hole to cool off when it got real humid," I tell her.

"I bet kids still mess around in the pond."

"I don't. The party's over."

"What? No way." Her eyes light up adorably. "Why?"

"Because Sheriff Wallace decided to step up park patrols a little while ago. Too many punks bringing their daddy's six-packs there to slurp without even having the decency to clean up the cans. Can't have minors getting drunk on public property or turning it into a dump."

"Oh. Bummer." She toys with an auburn lock of hair, deep in her own head as I fight to look away. "Seems like some things never change around here. I kinda hoped that was one more. Imagine if we snuck back there for nostalgia?"

I huff out a breath like fire at the idea of going swimming with her now. *At night.*

Now that we're both grown-up and finding every excuse to hang out like this. Never mind whether or not they're good ones.

*Shit.*

"Just promise to call me when you're heading out next time for goat duty, okay?"

"I can't put you out like that, Quinn." She smiles at me. "But I will text you. And I promise to call you if I need help, or if I see anybody else with freaky tattoos trying to get in Carolina's pants."

"Woman, you'd better," I growl.

Figuring I'm going to have to settle for that right now, I give her an easy smile.

"And you'd better be ready to drink some strawberry rhubarb wine," Tory

says.

“Why’s that?”

She points at the clock on the dash. “We’ve only been gone a little over an hour. Granny’s next door, at Otis and Velma’s, and she’ll see us pull in. I don’t want her getting...ideas.”

She bites her lip on that last word, pulling on her heart-shaped mouth.

Oh, fuck.

So much for not going home with blue balls bigger than boulders tonight.

She’s right about one thing, though.

“If you’re so hungry for a break from Granny Coffey, fine. I’m not taking you home yet.” I turn at the next corner.

“Where are we going?”

“You just volunteered to help me install a washer so I’ll have clean clothes tomorrow.”

“You’re so ridiculous.” She falls back in her seat and laughs, shaking her head fiercely. “Tell me you at least have a dryer?”

“Yep. Brand new. She’s a beaut,” I throw back.

“Which also needs to be installed?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thanks for being so willing to help a man out. Don’t worry, nothing with muscle, you get the light stuff.”

Hell no. I’ve got half a mind to just keep her there holding a screwdriver, looking real pretty.

She laughs. “I hope you know what you’re doing. Other than pushing the start button, I don’t have a clue how washers or dryers work.”

“Can’t be that hard. They came with a big fat instruction manual. Nice not having it all online. You can read it to me.”

She laughs again, amusement pouring out of her like energy. Like music. Like life.

Her laugh always echoed like a song.

Tory’s voice has a melody like no other. I think I could listen to her talk or grumble or giggle her little face off all damn day.

And that’s why this shit is so hard.

The chasm between how I *should* be in her peach-sweet presence, and how I *want* to be, only grows wider.



MY HOUSE IS on the edge of town, and the look Tory gives me as we pull into

the driveway fills me with a sense of pride I haven't felt in ages.

"Wow. No, wow. Quinn, this place looks amazing!" she gushes, her face splashed with tilting light.

The sun, just starting to set, surrounds the house with the same rosy golden glow.

Normally, I'd be fighting off her shower of praise with a humble umbrella, but I've gotta admit, it ain't half bad. My hard work pays off a little more with each passing week.

The brand spankin' new red siding and white trim, brick walkway, new sod, and freshly trimmed hedge do look awfully fine.

"It's like...magazine-perfect," she whispers again, opening the passenger door. "I can't wait to see the inside. Race you to the front door!"

"Tory!"

Shit, she's quicker than a rabbit. I jump out and race after her, knowing I don't have a prayer of catching up with her lithe body flying toward the porch.

"C'mon, slow poke. Can't you see I'm excited?" She bounces on her heels, sending a ripple through layers of curves I really don't need to see.

Turning so she can't see my mutinous hard-on, I fish out my keys.

"It's not all done yet," I warn her, casting her a *settle down* look. "Very damn much a work in progress."

"Oh, I know. That's why I'm here, right? To help you install a washer and dryer I know nothing about."

I snort. "It's more than the appliances that ain't fully settled yet, Peach."

I watch as she does a quick turn, taking in the porch we're standing on.

"Did you do all this yourself?" she asks, her voice airy with wonder.

"I had a little help with some things. Mostly friends and locals."

"I love this brick porch! It's so unique. And right there, the perfect place for a swing."

Damn her. I forgot how many times we'd slip onto the same wavelength in the past, and apparently that hasn't changed with time.

I point to the corner of the porch. "You get one guess what's in that box."

"No way. A white one?" she whispers hopefully.

"Maybe," I tell her coyly.

"Holy crap. Awesome. We're so hanging that up after we finish with the machines."

"We'll see. No telling how long the install will take," I tell her, smiling as I unlock the door.

"I have all night," she says, sidestepping me to run up to the box. "Oh my gosh, I can see it now. Sitting out here in the morning with a cup of coffee,

listening to the birds sing...that would be so calming. This place is a lot quieter than it was in your grandfather's day."

I nod. No arguing with that. Unlike Gramps, I haven't gotten buried with tons of critters.

Also can't help picturing Tory sitting there, lazily sipping off a warm mug and listening to the birds tweet while the sun warms the horizon.

*Hell.*

*Another life*, I tell myself. A dark flicker roils my guts, a repressed wish that things could be different if she wasn't Miss Fancy Schmancy, and if I didn't have a violent fucking convict breathing down my neck.

And if I'd had the balls to write her after that last summer, if I'd visited Chicago between deployments...

Goddamn.

Shaking my head, I dispel the what-ifs and question my sanity.

Why *did* I bring her here, really?

"Come on, I'll show you our project," I tell her, trying to answer my own question.

Pushing the door open, I wait impatiently while she *oohs* and *aaahs* over the hardwood floors, the vaulted ceiling, and the open floor plan I spent weeks knocking down drywall to perfect.

Nice to see someone appreciates my work.

I guess.

The not-so-nice part is the tempting fury she puts in my blood.

"Ohhh. White trim with black doors—nice contrast!" She opens the closest door, grinning like a kid who's been given the keys to the kingdom. "Whoa, a mudroom? Too perfect for North Dakota. You really thought of everything, Quinn."

"It was just gonna be a closet at first, but I decided to enclose the length of the wall instead," I tell her, forgetting how I'd whacked my thumb with a hammer and woke the devil with my curses on that little modification.

"Cute bench, cute cubbies, and functional hooks." She points to the door on the other end of the closet. "Does that door go to the garage?"

"Yep, with the garage on that side, I didn't like the idea of a door leading straight into the living room," I tell her.

"Did this place always have a garage?" she asks. "Thought I remembered Farmer Faulkner always parking his truck next to his tractor in the nicer weather?"

"You're right. Gramps had it put on just a couple years before he died. He finally got sick of the winters."

She closes the door and steps into the living room.

“The kitchen isn’t done yet,” I warn her, pointing out the obvious on the far side of the room. “Still have to paint the cabinets and finish off the island.”

She’s staring with her back to me, transfixed like she’s imagining what it’d be like to live here.

Fuck.

Not something she needs to imagine.

Definitely not something *I* need to think of her thinkin’.

“It’s an awesome start,” she says softly, walking in to explore. “I love the copper farm sink. What’s up with the island, though? The top looks new, but the rest...it’s almost like an old workbench.”

I lean against the top of it, smiling at the curiosity dancing across her face.

“Because it is. It was my grandpa’s. I took it out of the shop, jacked it up a few inches, sanded it down, and put on the granite countertop. It’ll be painted charcoal grey, along with the cupboards, once I’m through.”

“Wow,” she mouths, letting her fingers flutter below her chin. “That’s so sweet. I’m glad you found a way to honor his memory.”

I nod, then quickly change the subject. “Ridge’s wife, Grace, helped me pick the colors. It’s what she does, makes shit pretty for a living. You’ll have to meet her if you’re around these parts long enough.”

“I’d like that,” Tory says, flashing me World Ending Smile number one hundred. “You know how stubborn Granny gets, but maybe I could sweet-talk her into sprucing up a few things.”

“Your funeral, lady,” I say, completely deadpan.

Of course she laughs, wrinkling her nose.

And of course I’m about to kick my own ass for ever thinking bringing Tory Three Names home would make this weird thing between us easier, less tense, more platonic.

Crossing the kitchen, I lead her down the hall that stretches to the back of the house.

“Now for the less glamorous part. The laundry room’s back here.”

“Hey, is that a sliding barn door?” She rushes right past me to the door that was a royal pain to hang all by my lonesome. “Did you take a survey of dream homes and put every element in here, or what?”

I watch, dumbfounded, as she slides open the door like it’s the greatest game in the world. Then she somehow sees past the appliance boxes sitting there.

“What the...I thought you said it was barely finished? I see tiled floors, a full sink, loads of cupboards and *space*. You really know your stuff, Quinn Faulkner,” she says with an accusing laugh, turning to face me again.

“Yeah, well, it ain’t finished,” I grumble again, ignoring the awkward heat against my face. “I don’t brag about anything till the job’s done.”

She laughs again. “Oh, don’t be ridiculous. This place will sell in a heartbeat! Or if you decided to settle in for a while—”

“Selling. That’s the goal.” I cut her off, unsure what my endgame really is.

I plod over to the boxes and slap the top of one. “Washer here. Dryer there. Both good Bosch models.”

“Don’t tell me they’re white.” She flinches slightly and scrunches up her face. “All the character in this room deserves color.”

“Nope.” I grab a box cutter and slice open a box. “Royal blue. Custom order.”

I stiffen as Tory applauds, a goofy grin plastered on her face.

“Glad to have your approval.”

“Sorry. I mean, white would be fine, but the rest of the place just screams *unique*. I know you’re not trying to get featured on a home shopping show or whatever but...yes. Just yes.”

My dick twitches at the way she breathes it out.

“Come again?” I ask.

“That blue shade is a dream. That’s all.” She pats her face, mock-slapping herself awake again. “Sorry, Quinn. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I never usually get this excited over appliances.”

Neither do I.

And I normally don’t get hard enough to drive nails thanks to a strange woman in my house, either.

I’m glad I took Grace’s advice, though. When she suggested I order a colorful set, I thought she was going overboard, but seeing Tory’s reaction...

Shit.

I’ll either be thanking her or cursing the day I enlisted her help.

“Well, we’d better get started. I know you didn’t just bring me here to drool over the place,” Tory says glumly, shrugging like I’ve been the one holding her back from the grind ahead.

“Can’t be that bad. Many hands, light work, you know the rest.” I chuckle, handing her the plastic bag off the top of the washer with the manual and small parts. “You read me the story of how Sir Faulk slayed the washer dragon while I get this beast out of its box.”

I look away just as she casts me a glance that’s equal parts amused and utterly fed up with my bull.

What can I say?

Screwing around with dumb jokes and teasing glances might be playing with

fire, but I've always had a pyro edge.



THE NEXT FEW hours are more fun than I've had in forever.

With Tory reading me the right mechanical incantations, I'm able to get the machines hooked up and working in no time. Relief lashes my veins as I listen to that beauty purr.

Tory insisted on testing them out ASAP, so I found a couple old jackets due for a cleaning.

No surprise, my helper was just as adamant about assisting me with the porch swing.

So I cave, my way of saying thanks for lending me a hand.

Assembling the swing doesn't take long. Not with her hands holding it up, standing opposite me while I plant the hooks.

For just a second, my chest grazes her tits. I almost lose my grip with half the blood in my body plunging below my waistline.

*Fuck.*

It's a miracle I manage to finish the job without mangling anything, much less Tory noticing the tool with a mind of its own stretching my denim.

As soon as it's secured from the porch ceiling, I grab us both a beer and we sit down, trying it out because the damn thing *just has* to be big enough for two.

"So what's next, Mr. Fix It?" Tory asks shyly, sipping her beer, cozied up against my shoulder.

Far off crickets sing to us while the silver stars twinkle above like tinsel. No other light around except the soft, mellow orange glow of the porch lamp.

It feels downright romantic, and that's the problem.

"Next?" Ignoring the flash of devouring her mouth, then picking her up and carrying her upstairs to my bed, I take a long swig off my longneck bottle.

"We could start painting the kitchen cupboards, couldn't we?" she muses, elbowing me playfully in the side.

I lean back, shaking my head at her as much as I'm reprimanding my own dark thoughts.

"Not tonight, girl. We're coming up on midnight. Gotta sleep sometime."

"Aw, you're just as much a night owl as I am." She takes a quick sip off her beer. "Why not, Quinn? You have two more hands for free."

Oof. You know it's fucking bad when just hearing about her *hands* sets me off.

I can't stop thinking about exactly where I'd love to put them to work, and it's got nothing to do with this old house.

Pushing off the floor with one foot, I make the swing move, staring down at my beer. "Trouble is, that's an all-day job, and you've already helped plenty for one night."

"I like painting, and I'm pretty good at it," she offers.

"Really? What have you painted?"

"My entire room back home." She laughs. "It took me forever to finish it because of my dance schedule. It drove Mother crazy having the walls half-finished for over a month. She likes everything just so." Leaning back, she takes another fast drink of her beer. "Perfectionist to the end. Maybe we're not so different that way..."

I sense there's more behind her words.

Almost like she's been molded in her ma's perfectionist image when she doesn't want to be.

I want to ask, but I'm already in too deep.

Working with Tory all evening has been a bizarre torture. A tease, a living memory, and a guilt trip in one.

She smells too good.

She's too damn delectable.

She's sexy without even trying to be.

Everything about her puts a fire in my balls like nothing else.

I'm beginning to wonder if it's truly her or just the unholy place my brain has gone, stuck on dirty thoughts about a friend I can't have.

I'm not an animal. I can't betray her that way. And the longer she's around, the more we touch, the less space there is between us...I'm worried I'll lose control. Take her in ways I shouldn't, and I'll fuck things up without meaning to.

Hiding a sigh, I down my beer and stand. "Better get you home before Granny shows up on her bike looking for you, Peach."

"Oh, she's not going to come looking for me here." She rolls her eyes.

"Probably not, but I don't want to worry her or piss off Granny Coffey. She's a pistol in this town." I hold out a hand. "Come on. Time to go."

A heavy frown pulls at her face, but finally, she sticks out her fingers.

I take them to help her up.

The moment she lays her hand in mine, frantic heat races up my arm.

Call it cheesy as hell, predictable even, I don't fucking care.

There's always been this weird polarity between us, and it's only gotten worse.

Her touch resonates the same energy she had all those years ago.

I'd stopped touching her much then, the more we grew up, even holding her hand. It was like being struck by lightning every time and *enjoying* it.

And the older I got, turning from a boy into a man, I started to figure out just what that feeling really means.

I'm about to drop her hand like a hot rock when her grip tightens.

She steps closer. "Thanks, Quinn. It's been fun. Exactly what I needed to get my mind off some things back home."

*Oh, hell.*

She's close enough to kiss, and I rediscover just how weak I am when it comes to her.

Because I'm fighting like mad to keep my lips to myself, damn scared of what I'll lose if I slip up and put my mouth where it doesn't belong.

"No need to bullshit." Fumbling a step back like I've been shot, I say, "Who ever had fun putting in a washer and dryer?"

"I did!" she insists, her pitch turning into this jittery, adorable squeak. "Hanging up the swing and trying it out was fun too. I swear, I could lounge around on it all day."

Damn her, maybe it was fun, but I have more reason now than ever to keep things platonic, simple, and easy. Far more reason than I'd had even years ago.

Then it was because she'd been so young, and so different, this high-class creature who felt downright otherworldly to an Oklahoma farm boy.

Now? It's because I'm a danger to her.

My shit could hurt her, pull her in, and all over nothing she ever had anything to do with.

*It ain't fair.*

With easy talk over the town and old times, I drive her home, walk her to the door, and flee like the dickens without touching her again, ignoring the hellfire pulse in my lips.

Trust me, it's a major feat.

An achievement I have to be proud of, blue smurf balls and all, because the alternative is a whole lot more fucked up than torching bridges with my childhood best friend.

I won't have an innocent, bright, vulnerable woman getting hurt on my conscience.

*Not again.*

Not after what that freak and his brother did the first time I crossed swords with the Pickett machine.



AFTER A SOMEWHAT SLEEPLESS NIGHT—BECAUSE if I'm not thinking about Tory Three Names, I'm helplessly dreaming about her—I head to the police station to see if Sheriff Wallace ever had a chance to run the plate number on that thug from Oklahoma.

I'd called him shortly after leaving Carolina's and left the info with his secretary.

When I reach Main Street, though, I head west instead of east. I'm taking a short detour past Dean Coffey's place.

It'd be helpful to have a list of places where his goats are being hired, just so I can check up on Tory.

She's too frigging stubborn to call me herself.

I don't even want to imagine what might've happened if I hadn't called her at Carolina's place when I did.

With a list, I can keep an eye on her without her knowing it.

That'll be better for me, too. Keeping space. Not being up in her face for a few days.

A cold shower hadn't eased the voodoo effect she has.

Neither did an angry, gut-wrenching wank this morning. The guilt I'm feeling now jacking off to her was almost worth the release that turned me inside out.

*Hell.*

But it doesn't help one bit that we're both grown-up, and she's all woman.

When we were kids, the age gap was like the Grand Canyon. Now, she's twenty-six, and being a few years older than her ain't the issue holding me back from claiming that sweet ass.

Her life, her safety, is.

A far better reason to keep us apart than our age did years ago.

I find Dean sitting outside in his bathrobe with a shotgun and cleaning gear leaning beside his chair. He's an eclectic guy, but that's funny even for him.

I pull up and park right beside his mostly camo-painted Jeep.

Painting cars was another gig he'd tried out last year.

He'd quit just before finishing his own *showcase* vehicle. Go figure.

"Mornin', Dean," I say, climbing out of my truck.

"Faulk." He gives a single head nod like he's been expecting me.

His bushy blond hair looks like it hasn't been brushed since his last cut, which was probably months ago, judging by the wilderness look.

“Going hunting?” I plant a foot on his bottom step and lean a hand on my knee.

“Nah.” He looks up and shakes his head. “Just been sitting out here since about two this morning, waiting around.”

I frown. That’s mighty strange even for Dean Coffey.

“What’s up? You in some trouble?” I ask.

“I caught something prowling around the goats last night,” he tells me, lifting a cup of coffee I’d bet my right leg is loaded up with Bailey’s.

“Coyotes, huh? Heard a few other folks had trouble with them lately over at the Bobcat.” No lie, they’re wily enough to come this close to people when wolves usually won’t.

“I wish. This animal had two legs and drove a Dodge.”

“Shit.” My spine stiffens. “What happened?”

“Well, I was in the middle of a big *Bonanza* marathon, having a few smokes when I heard a vehicle pull up. I figured it was just someone driving by, wanting to turn around, but then I heard a door close. Somebody was sneaking around on my turf.” He stands up, thankfully holding his robe shut. “Here, I’ll show ya.”

He walks down the steps, and I follow him to the barn where I recognize several goats in their corral, including Hellboy with his typical wicked flash of teeth that looks too much like a grin.

“What’d your intruder look like?” I ask, wishing like hell I didn’t have to.

“Don’t know. It was too dark, but I got a footprint. Over here, in the mud by the water spigot. It leaks a lot, and the bastard stepped right in it the second I fired a warning shot in the air. He took off, running for his truck.”

I nod, trying not to let the tension turning me into a statue show.

Most places I’ve lived, a gunshot in the middle of the night would get reported to the sheriff, but here in Dallas, the neighbors deal with coyotes and the rare cougar after their livestock regularly.

“You said he was driving a Dodge?”

“Yep, I’m sure of it.” Dean sniffs loudly and spits into the corner. “Probably some desperate puke looking for something to steal for drug money. Those sorta bandits come and go like the wind, didn’t bother reporting it to the sheriff.”

“What did the Dodge look like?” I ask, pressing him harder.

He turns his head slowly, stroking his chin. “Hm, dunno. It was parked on the other side of the barn and took off in that direction. Think it was missing some paint.”

“And you’re sure it was a Dodge?”

“Didn’t need to see it, man. I *heard* it. Cummins engines have a rattle like no other when they’re wearing down. I’d say it was a mid-nineties model, maybe.

Rusted and banged up. Typical goddamn meth mobile.”

Dammit.

Exactly what I feared.

He just described Marvin’s truck. That asshole didn’t heed my warning and scam like I told him.

Instead, he’s following up, tracing the Rent-A-Goat name on the trailer back to Tory and her uncle.

“You got my number?” I ask, catching Dean’s eye.

He flashes me a bewildered look. “Huh? Yeah, I think...is there a reason I ought to keep you on speed dial? Still got your eye on my niece?”

He chuckles and I pinch my jaw.

*This town.* Seems like I’m never gonna stop catching shit from the many, many people wanting Tory and me to be a thing.

“Listen, don’t tell anybody, but Grady says he’s seen some oddball characters creeping around Dallas lately,” I tell him, not dropping the hint it involves me.

“What? Like that funny business a year back before Ridge and Grace tied the knot? When he told us to keep an eye out for reporters and it turned out to be some mobster jackasses and his goons?” Dean scratches his cheek, stubby fingers raking stubble loudly in the silence.

“Not quite like that but...yeah, keep your eyes peeled. And if you won’t call Sheriff Wallace, call *me* if this snooping ever happens again.”

For a second, he’s frozen. Then he looks from side to side quickly as a big, goofy, entirely Dean grin eats up his face.

“Ah, wait. Is this some PI thing? Or even bigger, Faulk?” He leans in, still grinning like he’s holding onto this wild secret. “I heard you used to be a *Fed*, dude. Is that what this is?”

Oh, hell.

Here we go.

I hold up a finger to my lips, shushing him, deciding if he’s already made up his mind off the town gossip machine, it could work to my advantage.

As long as he cooperates, can’t say I care if he thinks I’m a flyin’ purple people eater.

“Dean. Just call me, okay? I can’t say more,” I mutter low, leaning toward his ear. “It’s classified.”

“Oh, man. Shit. I...will do, Faulk! You can count on me.” He looks at me again, so giddy he’s almost bouncing.

If only the rest of this were just as easy as getting Dean Coffey baited and worked up.

I have to follow up on that Marvin asshole today, before he comes prowling around this place or anybody else with Coffey in their name.



## GOAT IT TOGETHER (TORY)



**W**hy the hell did I answer my phone again?  
Just why?

I hadn't said a word to Mother about working for Uncle Dean. I know neither he nor Granny would've mentioned it, so I'm wondering how Dad knows all about it.

But somehow, he's heard, and he's pissed. That's for sure.

I mean, as low-key, passive-aggressive worried-pissed as Dad can get.

I huff out a breath, holding the phone away from my ear as he tells me he's booking a plane ticket for my return home and he'll text me the information later.

Of course, he also insists that I can't miss the summer dance show this weekend.

Don't I know how much they're expecting me?

Don't I know how many big players will be swarming like bees?

Don't I know what it could do for my career?

All lines Mother *would* give him.

I'm sure she's right behind him, whispering in his ear because she knows I'll take it more seriously coming from him with his sharp, ever-so-diplomatic delivery.

But when he yammers on about how reckless, irresponsible, and *stupid* Uncle Dean has always been...

I wish that was Mother.

"He's your brother, Dad, and he's a good guy," I say, having heard enough. "I'm happy helping him out. The Rent-A-Goats are actually profitable, believe it or not, and definitely one of his better ideas. I'm not coming home. Not yet."

"Tory, I don't think you're understanding the significance," he tells me, his

tone flat. “The mayor and half the city council will be there for Mr. Delong, plus a large chunk of the local Fortune 500. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for you to—”

“Do what? Grovel?” I snap. “Dad, if Jean-Paul Delong wants me there so bad, he can call me up himself. Don’t do his dirty work *or* Mother’s.”

He sputters, temporarily at a loss for words.

“Tory, please. I understand your personal reasons with him, but not for walking away from what you love and crash-landing in Dallas all summer. It’s not doing you a bit of good, just causing trouble. They’re such a nosy bunch out there. Nobody ever thinks things through, and you’re...”

I hold the phone away as he proceeds to rattle off reasons why I should fly home ASAP, and also why it’s such an atrocity I’m playing in the mud in this little Podunk town.

I don’t hear half of it. My thoughts have shifted to Quinn.

Mother would have an absolute cow—an elephant!—if she knew about him coming to my rescue, not once, but *twice*.

At least I know they’ve got spies among the locals, feeding them tidbits. Or else just well-meaning folks who just don’t know when to shut it.

Whoever told them about me working for Uncle Dean could’ve also mentioned my dinner with Quinn last night. But I guess the fact that Dad hasn’t brought it up yet means I’m temporarily safe from best friend ‘dating’ drama.

“Dad,” I interrupt his rant while he’s dumping reason number thirteen why I need to think of my future. “I have to go. Granny and I have plans today. Love you, bye.”

I hang up before he can chew me out.

Spoiler: we don’t have plans. None that I know of, anyway, which could change any second with Granny.

But honestly? I like how she rolls. I adore spontaneity.

I enjoy the *fun* I’ve had since coming here, without stressing about my blown-out knee or my chasm of a future or my asshole ex who also just so happens to be my key back into the dance scene.

*Sigh.*

I’m over being told what to do twenty-four seven. That’s been the story of my life long before Madeline decided to literally kick me in another direction.

That’s what I’d told Quinn last night, too, in my own way.

Mother has always wanted everything to be perfect. Especially me. Her only golden child.

I’m tired now.

So sick and tired of trying to live up to everyone’s expectations. Namely my

parents’.

They want me dancing again as soon as possible. They also wanted me to marry Jean-Paul at one point.

A possibility that makes me violently retch and reach for my glass of water.

Mother was pushing Jean-Paul for years, even back when I was actually interested in him.

He was older, cultured, moneyed, and fit.

She steered me into dating him, and she’d been hoping to hear about a ring up until I caught him with Madeline. Even after I told Mother, I think she *still* holds out hope we’ll reconcile, climb up a rainbow, and live happily ever after.

For all I know it’s the real reason why she wants me home so bad, and why she’s twisted Dad into calling and trying to talk “sense” to me.

Whatever.

I’ll go back eventually. I have to. Dancing is my life, after all, and even if I’m too messed up to ever be on a stage, I’d love to find another job in the industry.

But I don’t have to kiss and make up with Jean-Paul.

I don’t have to beg.

I damn sure don’t have to meet him again—unless it’s to deliver the resounding slap to the face the cheating prick deserves.

My palm itches at the thought.

Then I flump back against the chair, wondering what I’m doing.

Maybe my parents have no right to pull strings on my life, but they aren’t wrong to wonder. I can’t even answer the question myself.

Goat wrangling is fine for a few weeks, but it’s not something I want to do for the rest of my life. Neither is living in Dallas, even if it is a charming small-town break from my bad luck city.

“Are you off the phone?”

I get up and open my bedroom door, peering out. I can’t see Granny, but her voice carries through the house like nobody’s business.

“Now I am,” I call back, raising my voice to reach her.

“Oh, good. Get your crap together and let’s go,” she calls, jiggling her keys loudly on their chain.

“Huh? Go where?”

“Shopping, dear! Don’t tell me you just woke up?”

I smile, shaking my head. She’s already ten steps ahead of me as usual. With a quick stretch, I grab my purse and leave the bedroom, finding her waiting impatiently in the kitchen.

“What now, Gran? I thought we had plenty of food here.”

“I need to get out and stretch my legs. You need a new outfit for the rodeo. Imagine that,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Rodeo?” I echo.

“Yep.” She opens the door to the garage. “The big one’s coming to the county fairgrounds this weekend. You’ll love it.”

*Will I?* I rub my eyes, seriously wondering if this is some fragmented dream.

Nope. Just typical stir-crazy Granny.

“Hey, wait.” I follow her into the garage and shut the door. “I never said I’m going to the rodeo.”

“*What?* You mean to tell me Quinn didn’t ask you last night?”

Oh my God.

My face wants to melt right off under her appalled gaze, and I swipe a hand over it.

“No. Don’t even think he’s going himself,” I say with a shrug. “He’s a busy guy.”

“Oh, hush, no one’s too busy to miss the biggest shindig all summer.” She hands me a bike helmet. “He will. Just you wait and see. And you’ll be ready to make that boy see stars.”

“I’ll say no is what I think you mean.”

Helmet on, she laughs at my hilarious not-joke while opening the garage.

“What’s so funny?” I put on my helmet, angrily adjusting it. “We’re friends, Gran. Nothing more, and last I checked, we’re not joined at the hip either. We both have lives.”

“Such a shame. You ask me, you could use less complainin’ and more kissin’ with the Faulkner boy. Now close the door behind us, dear.”

Holy hell.

I pretend I didn’t hear that as I follow her order. She pushes the bike out of the garage before I shut the door and climbs on, waiting. Once the door shuts, I get on behind her.

“So, I heard from Dad,” I say, desperate to change the subject. “My parents want me home soon. It’s the summer show, the big one where our group showcases new techniques for all our big donors, apparently.”

“And you told them no like a sensible young lady. Wonderful, Tory, I’m proud of you for that.”

I snicker into my hand.

“Jeez, Gran, were you listening through my door?”

I’m not even offended.

It’s *Granny*.

“Oh, these old ears just hear whatever they want to sometimes. And I didn’t

want to interrupt, just in case you were yakking with someone important.” Flashing a wicked grin at me over her shoulder, she says, “Okay, now, ready? On three!”

With a sigh, I put my feet on the pedals.

That’s how we get the bike going.

On her count of three, we both start pedaling. It’s taken practice for us to get the timing just right, but we’re quite the experts now.

As soon as the bike lurches forward, we zoom down the driveway together, the wheels completely stable beneath us.

“Rodeo or not, I don’t need new clothes,” I tell her firmly as we bike up the street.

“Yes, you do, you little whiner. You’ve had enough fun wearing my old outfits because your Chicago wardrobe didn’t come with anything fit for Dallas.” Head down, she pedals onward, pumping her tanned legs, the spitting image of a bicycle pro. “I’m thinking a white shirt...with fringes and rhinestones. It’d suit you good,” she says, huffing for oxygen between words.

“Fringes and rhinestones? Seriously, who do I look like? I’m not a country western singer.”

“Ah, what might have been,” Gran clucks. “You’d have made a fine one if your lovely mother was just as obsessed with country music as she is with ballet.”

I smile because she has a point.

And before I know it, we’re at the classiest little fashion boutique in town. I end up finding a white shirt with silver pearl snaps, white fringe, and yes, *freaking rhinestones*.

Since I’m stuck now, I also buy a pair of my own dress boots, rather than wearing Granny’s pink-stitched ones. A pair of black jeans gets added to the bill to round out the ensemble.

I’m ashamed to admit I love the clothes more than I should.

Even the gaudy rodeo shirt Granny almost staples to my skin.



AFTER WE GET HOME, I head out with Owl to check on the goats we’d delivered this morning, starting with a quick supervised job at the rental properties to clear out the weeds.

Thankfully, no sign of Carolina or trouble.

Since then, we’ve divided the tribe up on a couple small jobs they’re

working simultaneously.

The first place we stop at belongs to a young couple, where the goats are busy clearing out a fenced-in area for their sheep. As we pull in, the husband and wife are standing near the barn door, giving friendly waves.

The building needs plenty of work, but I can see these two turning the place into their hobby farm dream in no time.

“Hello, hello!” the wife shouts. She’s a petite woman with curly black hair.

“Morning, folks!” Owl leaps out behind me after I park. “Just stopped by to check on our friends. How’re they doing?”

“Hungry little guys! They’re doing fine, though,” the husband answers, leading us toward the barn. He’s tall with a shaved head. “Until a few minutes ago, I guess. We heard a big crash and ran out here. They knocked down the back door, and now they’re all inside the barn.”

“Oh, crap. I’m so sorry.” I glance up at the blue sky, noting a thick cluster of clouds on the horizon.

*I should’ve known.*

“It’s going to rain,” I say flatly.

Husband and wife look at each other, then at me, like I’ve just lost my mind.

Hard to blame them.

My weather prediction wouldn’t have made any sense to me a week ago, either. Not before Quinn Faulkner and a gate over a ditch gave me a lesson I’ll never forget about goats and rainstorms.

“They can sense it coming,” I tell them as Owl trots ahead to the barn door and I gesture at the clouds rolling in briskly. “They like to take cover and stay dry before any big storms roll in.”

“Really?” the husband asks. “Well, that explains a thing or two.”

“For sure. And I hope they didn’t do too much damage to the barn door.” I hold my breath.

We’re insured, but dealing with goat-caused property damage doesn’t seem the least bit fun.

“Nah, no problem, that thing was already about to fall right off. We just hurried out here when we heard the commotion because we didn’t want them breaking down this door. It’s not in much better condition, but we thought they might escape.”

“No, they’ll stay put until the rain stops, usually.” I nod toward the door, which only has one hinge. “Hey, I can help you secure that door, though, just to be on the safe side.”

“Thanks, ma’am, but I can secure it just fine,” the man tells me. “It’s good knowing what spooked them to take cover, though.”

“We’ll keep that in mind if we ever get our own herd one fine day.” His wife laughs. “We’re learning more about real-life heartland farming every day. We did our time on the organic farms as WWOOFers in Hawaii, but this is pretty different.”

“I’m learning too,” I admit. “So, besides breaking into the barn, did they clean everything up?”

“They’re doing great so far! Looks like they have a little left, but you can leave them overnight if you want. The kids love watching them, and they’re pestering us to get a couple of our own once we’re ready for some animals.” The woman smiles at the man. “If we left it up to the kids, this place would be like Noah’s Ark.”

Her hubby nods. “I’m gonna grab a hammer and some nails before the rain hits. Thanks for stopping by,” he tells me. “We appreciate it.”

“Call if you need anything or have more trouble with them,” I tell him.

After visiting with the woman for a few more minutes, I whistle for my dog and we leave.

My mind shifts to the other goats as the rain picks up, hitting the windshield in fat waves.

The ones back at a rental cabin have trees to gather under, but the farmer with the empty lot worries me. I’d left him three goats, and he’d just had an old corn crib leveled, leaving almost nothing except overgrown brush and weeds.

I give him a quick call. Fortunately, the man tells me they’re just fine after taking shelter in an old storage shed with a tin roof.

While we’re talking, I think about the clothes I bought this morning, and if I’ll go to the rodeo.

I’ll never hear the end of it from Gran if I don’t.

But I also wonder...would Quinn *ever* ask me on a real date?

It’s silly. I don’t even know if he’s a rodeo kinda guy.

I’ll go if he asks, but if he doesn’t, I’ll skip it.

*Silly*, I said.

And it’s extra silly that he’s stuck on an endless loop of handsome enigma in my brain.

I’d purposefully stepped closer to him more than once at his place, especially while we were working on the swing.

If he was interested...

Let’s just say he had ample opportunity for a kiss.

At one point, I’d thought it might happen when we sat on the swing together. His gaze was glued to the stars for most of the conversation, this far-off look in his bottomless green eyes.

But every time he looked at me, they twinkled so much brighter than the sky. He was full of kind words and sexy half glances he probably didn't give a second thought to.

Exactly the kinda glances putting awful ideas in my head, filling it with crazy wishes I'm sure we'd both regret the second after they came true.

I mean, nothing happened.

End of story.

In fact, when he'd dropped me off, he couldn't seem to get away fast enough.

I should be glad he's always been the careful one.

"Guess I'd better face the facts," I tell Owl. "He's interested in being friends for old time's sake, and it's probably for the best, right?"

Owl turns his head and stares at me with big dark almond eyes, his monster of a tongue rolling out.

"Quinn," I clarify. "He's not interested in wagging his tongue like you are. As much as I might wish it was different...it's not. Tell me I should be happy? I'm not a casual fling kinda girl. That isn't why I'm here. Despite what Granny thinks, that won't solve anything. It'd just make my life a whole lot worse."

Owl lets out a single loud yip.

I turn the corner and head up the same street that veers off toward Carolina's rental house, and the empty lot we finished this morning. It's raining harder now, a proper shower, and I click the wipers up a notch.

I really hope the goats are okay at all three properties. There's no telling what Hellboy might do if he gets antsy or scared.

He hasn't done anything curse-worthy since the butt-gate incident, but that doesn't mean he's earned my trust.

Between the wipers swishing across the windshield, clearing away the drops, I decide to turn down the street and drive by the rental houses. If I can confirm that ratty old truck belonging to the gross guy with the gun is gone, it might set my mind at ease, and Quinn's too.

As soon as we're going past, I notice a pickup in Carolina's driveway, but it's not the beat-up truck from yesterday.

A blue pickup I know too well.

Quinn's.

*What the hell?*

My heart doesn't know how to react. My brain starts rifling through reasons he'd be here.

More trouble with the man he confronted?

More shady business he's scoping out?

More interested in that skank than he let on?

*No way.* I can't believe he's the least bit into Carolina, but why else would he be here if it isn't trouble?

A nervous twitch in my belly makes the decision for me.

I pull over on the side of the road so the trailer isn't blocking the driveway. Ignoring Quinn's truck, I scan the empty lot.

Nothing seems too out of the ordinary.

It's the same quiet, melancholy-looking old house with a few pieces of junk on the porch and spilling out into the front yard. No different than yesterday, really.

I should be satisfied, and leave to go check on the other goats, or at least call the clients. Shuffling back to the truck, I get in and grab the keys, but someone steps up to the passenger door, just a silhouette in the rain.

My heart shoots into my throat.

Wait.

*Quinn.*

A hiss of relief slips out as I hit the unlock button.

"Jump in the back, Owl," he says, opening the door.

For being the size of a small pony, the dog is graceful and lumbers into the back seat while Quinn climbs in and shuts the door.

"This rain came out of nowhere," he says. "Is that why you're here? Driving around to check on the goats and you saw my truck?"

"Sure," I say, holding back the burning need to ask why *he's* here. Mainly because I don't want to find out if he's interested in Carolina for some ungodly reason.

"Have you spoken to Dean today?" he asks.

"Not since this morning. Why?"

"Damn, I thought he'd mention it." He huffs out a breath. "Well, I stopped by his place this morning."

Noting a harshness in his tone, I shift in my seat, studying his features, the worried frown lines etched on his forehead. His chiseled jaw looks like it's about to crack.

The tension makes me shiver.

"What's wrong? Is Uncle Dean all right? Did something happen?" I try to keep my voice soft, anything to soothe the beast staring at me.

"He's fine, and yes, something happened." He looks at me with eyes of dark emerald, secretive and stern.

"You're scaring me, Quinn."

His death-stare eases just slightly.

“Look, I...I’m sorry, Peach.” He slowly sighs. “I stopped by to talk to Carolina, but she ain’t home. Or else she isn’t answering her door. Figures.”

“What does that have to do with Uncle Dean?” I’m genuinely confused.

“Turns out, some clown in an old Dodge was sneaking around your uncle’s place last night. Dean was watching TV when he heard noises and ran outside with his shotgun. He sat out there till morning waiting for trouble.” He stares at his truck in the driveway. “I think it was that lowlife chickenshit who was staying here. So I stopped by to see what I could learn.”

“Who, that Marvin guy? Joker tattoo man?”

He nods. “Marvin Heckles. That’s his name. I’ve been digging into his background.”

“And?” I shake my head. “Why would he have been at Uncle Dean’s?”

“Trying to make a connection between you and me,” Quinn growls. “I was afraid that I hadn’t seen the end of him, but don’t you worry. The sheriff’s on the lookout for his shitbox Dodge, and I sent Drake Larkin over to your uncle’s place. Told ’em to keep it quiet and friendly so Dean doesn’t raise a fuss over involving the cops. Drake’s helping put up some surveillance cameras in case anyone comes sneaking around again. Same ones he used to help Bella once, and then loaned to Ridge last year.”

A chill knifes through me, and not from the rain still pelting the windshield.

“Okay. And what *aren’t* you telling me?”

He freezes, those green eyes glowing like brilliant jade.

“Peach, I—”

“Don’t you dare hold out on me, Quinn Faulkner. I know there’s more. You’re barely a better liar than I am.”

For a second, he pauses, then lets out a soft growl through his faint smile.

“Heckles is a snake from Texas, originally. He’s got a nasty record, a string of crimes, mostly petty thefts and drug dealing in Oklahoma, where he did some time and picked up that shitty tattoo.”

“The same prison as that guy you put away? Just like you thought?”

“Unfortunately, and now I’m sure Heckles isn’t working alone. That’s why I wanted to talk to Carolina. Pick her screwed up brain, find out where she snagged him, and whatever else she’ll tell me.”

Dang.

I must be a sick person for ever thinking he came over here for anything besides that. But knowing he wanted to chat up Carolina about the thug makes me happy.

Maybe Dad was right.

I’m only causing trouble by staying here, getting myself worked up over

nothing, stressing over a crush I swore I squelched years ago.

And now I'm chasing ghosts of butterflies and getting up in his very serious, very dangerous business.

Would it be better for everyone if I was back in Chicago?

"What should I do?" I wonder out loud, biting my bottom lip.

"There's no reason they'd want to hurt you or any of your kin," Quinn says, reaching over. "Don't worry, Tory. I'm not gonna let this bastard chase you home before you're ready."

My heartbeat stalls as his fingers touch my chin, gently tilting my face up, right into the storm of his eyes.

Can he read my mind?

The fact that I'm even asking the question tells me I'm off my rocker.

"They only want info on me. They'll want to keep it clean and quiet, and getting tangled up with anybody else complicates that," he says, dropping his hand but keeping that bright-eyed gaze on me.

"And what will they do with that info?" I whisper, my hands gripping my thighs.

"Sell it."

I do a double take.

"Sell it? What do you mean—"

"That's how shit works in the prison system. Everything has a price, and you can bet any man who's currently locked up looking for intel on me is willing to pay through the nose."

Just then, a rusty old car pulls up in the driveway, and Carolina gets out with a sneer on her face.

"Sweet, there's Miss Congeniality. I have to go," Quinn says, opening his door. "See you later, Peach."

My insides do a weird somersault as I watch him walk up to Carolina, and again when he fights her off after she tries looping an arm through his.

Then, with a quick glance over his shoulder as if to say *I've got this*, they head for her house.



## JUST GOAT REAL (FAULKNER)



### *Three Years Ago*

HE'S A FREAK OF NATURE, but then, as I'd learn soon enough, both Pickett brothers are.

Across the table, Jake Pickett towers over everyone, even sitting down.

I'm a tall man myself, and so is Ted Goode, the senior police investigator at my side, but we're nothing against this titan in a suit that must've cost a fortune to custom tailor for his size.

He's over seven feet tall. Tattooed hands with fingers so long they look more like ropes. A set of harsh eyes set deep in his head, more like a hawk's than a human being's.

Now I know how David felt facing down Goliath.

Only, in this case, Goliath has one hell of a lawyer—if only he'd let him do the talking.

“Jake, please, if you'd allow me to talk to them like we agreed—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Jake snarls, whipping his face around until the ant of a lawyer sinks into his chair. Then that harsh gaze is on me again. “Listen, *Fed*, I haven't done shit, and I know you know it. If you had anything on me, I'd already be in handcuffs. I came here as a courtesy.”

I look at him coldly, wishing like hell that were the case.

“Of course. Your lawyer, Mr. Tweedy, kindly responded to our information request hoping to clear your name,” I say, folding my hands, leaning forward into his *I-will-kill-you* stare. “As you know, Oklahoma City Police have arrested

a number of laundromat owners in the area this past year with evidence of illegal weapons deals and large caches of methamphetamine. What's curious is this—your name comes up as a repair contractor for all six businesses. However, considering their accounts omit any references to receipts paid to Pickett and Fix-It Appliance Repair...we're wondering how that works.”

“Objection!” Tweedy sits up, stiff as a board. “My client overpaid his taxes the last three years, as the returns show. There's hardly anything suspicious about messy bookkeeping for a man as busy as Jake Pickett and the fine establishments he services, so I'd argue the nonexistent receipts, invoices, or whatever paperwork you're looking for simply isn't relevant.”

*Prick.*

“We're also wonderin' why trucks registered to you showed up overnight on cameras at several of the places, and pretty darn consistently too,” Ted, the investigator, says at my side. “Just how often, Mr. Pickett, do laundry machines need servicin'?”

I turn slowly. I'd expected Ted to save the real *gotcha* question for the end, like we'd discussed. The fact that he's dragging it out into the open now seems risky.

Still, I nod firmly, playing my favorite role as bad cop.

“Pretty damn often if they're as old and shitty and run-down as the units around here. You boys stupid or something? Do you know how many loads those places handle every single day?” Jake glowers, his brow furrowed, completely ignoring the puppy dog looks from his lawyer to keep his mouth shut.

*Keep talking, asshole. Help us dig your grave,* I think to myself.

“Interesting,” I whisper, flipping through a couple pages in front of me. “Because it says right here, the Bumblebee Laundromat in Midtown got all new high-capacity machines a couple years ago. And they came with warranties from the supplier. So, Mr. Pickett, you care to explain why your repair crews showed up there five times last month?”

Pickett's greyish blue eyes go a shade darker and those long, snake-like fingers on one hand coil into a fist.

For a second, I wonder if I'm about to hear an angry rattle. He looks at his lawyer, beaming him an obvious *do something, jackass*.

“Gentleman, I believe my client prefers not to be badgered over minor details of routine business operations without his records in front of him. That's beyond the scope of this entirely *voluntary* sit-down in good faith, and you've produced no reason to detain my client,” Tweedy says in typical lawyer-speak, adjusting his spectacles. “We're awful thankful for your time, but since there's

no warrant issued by a judge, I think we'll conclude this effort to settle any—”

“You done with these jackoffs? Let’s fucking go,” Pickett snaps, ripping his chair back and standing to his full intimidating height.

Again, I’m staring up at a man-eating giant, and every instinct I have tells me this won’t be the last I’ll ever see of him.

I’m also a little pissed because I *knew* they’d cut and run if we dropped that question on their heads up front. Sure, we’ll be going right for that warrant next to make Jake Pickett’s next Q&A less than voluntary, but fuck.

What was Goode thinking?

For what it’s worth, he’s slumped in his chair, his mustache twitching, this hangdog look like he knows he messed up.

I stay riveted to my seat, glaring silently as Tweedy gathers up his folder of strong-arm legalese meant to protect human trash.

Jake leers at me with those pale-blue eyes as he rounds the table with his lawyer, no doubt wishing he could burn me down to ash with nothing more than a nasty look.

Fuck him. We’ve still got something up our sleeve no judge will balk at—a criminal witness.

His woman.

She’s been making noise about talking to us, but I’m afraid for her if she does, so that’s one reason I tried to trap this overgrown rat into slipping up.

If only I’d tried harder.

Because less than a week later, I’d be seeing the freak again, this time with bullets flying.

And at our next meeting, those long, savage fingers of his would rip my world to shreds.



## *Present*

I THROW down a crumpled twenty to pay Grady for the beers in front of me, Ridge, and Drake.

They’ve all been helping me look for Marvin, local hands on deck I can trust in case my old contacts at the Bureau don’t come through with solid intel.

I'd barely even asked the boys. They'd just stepped up and volunteered the second I hinted at trouble, without asking questions.

Damn. I hate pulling anybody else into this hell, but since Tory's already been dragged in the muck, I'll accept their help without complaint.

"I installed a camera at Granny Coffey's place for good measure," Drake says while setting up the remote camera app on my phone for viewing. "I'm labeling it Granny's."

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it. How'd she take it?"

Drake chuckles, his blue eyes shining under a crop of dark-blond hair. "You think I'd risk her finding out? I made sure she wasn't around to see me do the installation. Waited until she took off on that bike built for two with Tory."

"How the hell does that old lady have the stamina to ride that thing all over town?" Ridge asks with a grin. "She has to be pushing seventy."

"That's just Granny," I tell him. "She's always acted half her age."

"She looks like it too," Ridge answers. "For a senior, she's fit as a fiddle. Shit, if I ever need a sassy old ballbuster in one of my films, I'd consider casting her."

I can't help laughing at the thought. Since he's back in Hollywood part time for what he swears will be his last big acting run, I think he might be serious.

"That might bring you more trouble than it's worth. Her brain's still sharp as a tack. She tells it like she sees it and doesn't worry about the bruises."

We all get a chuckle out of that, some of the truest words ever spoken in this bar.

Then Grady's expression flattens behind his dark beard. "So you're convinced this Heckles prick is some kind of spy? He's looking to sell info on you to Bat Pickett?"

I nod. "That's the only reason for him to have come here asking, and then snooping around Dean Coffey's place. You said that beat-up truck was here a couple times."

Grady nods. "Can't forget that shit. Thing left a pile of rust I had to sweep up from the lot."

"Clue us in, Faulk. Who's this Bat Pickett dude, anyway?" Ridge asks, taking a long pull off his beer.

As soon as he heard I'd asked Drake to put up cameras at Dean's place, Ridge called and said whatever it was, he was in.

The man can't help returning a favor. He wouldn't take no for an answer.

Fine.

I'd done my job enlisting the Feds to help him with some demons chasing down his wife and father-in-law.

It's been a few days, and there hasn't been hide nor hair of Marvin Heckles anywhere in Dallas.

Carolina didn't know shit, either. She shrugged off my questions, and the minute she started trying to pull down her leopard top to flash those fake-as-hell tits, I was done.

What else is new?

All I got was the fact that she'd picked him up at a dive bar out by the interstate, a couple towns over, before they came back to the Bobcat.

"Bart Pickett, aka Bat, is a good-for-nothing drug dealer rotting in an Oklahoma prison," I say, angrily inhaling my beer. "Trouble is, he's got bad money buying good lawyers who'll sweet-talk their way to parole. He won't stay locked up forever."

"You put him there?" Ridge asks, sitting up taller.

"No." I take another swig of beer. Anything to do with the witness protection program is technically classified, but I can tell them the gist of the story. "I made the bust that put away his brother, Jake Pickett, about three years ago."

My gut churns hellfire at the memory.

The deaths that shit caused.

The *sacrifice*.

Justin Franklin was the best partner I'd ever had, and telling his widow he'd been shot and killed gutted me. I would've rather been garroted ten times than rip her heart out, but somebody had to deliver the bad news.

I tip my beer and let it pour down my throat, hoping to wash away memories so bitter they make my eyes burn.

"You okay, man?" Grady grunts out.

"Yeah. Jake was killed less than a year after he went to prison. Drowned in a dirty sink by a rival drug gang while they were doing laundry," I tell them. "No easy task. They build those things real shallow to prevent that sort of shit."

I shudder just picturing it, remembering how freakishly tall the Picketts are. It must've taken half a dozen men built like bulldozers to hold him down in a basin hardly any deeper than a mixing bowl.

"Bat was the younger brother. He took over their meth trade after Jake went to jail. He was a little smarter, a little better at hiding his street operation. He abandoned his brother's shady repair business. Nobody could get him on logistics, but he orchestrated a complex prison hit on the men who murdered Jake. Bat got himself arrested after an investigation found a link to him bribing those dudes to take out his brother's killers."

"Fuck, that's intense," Drake growls, his blue eyes flashing. "But the man's locked up. That's good news, right?"

Just like all of us here, he's seen his fair share of violence.

"It won't stay that way. Plus, Bat looked up to Jake like he hung the stars from everything I've heard. He won't forget anybody who had a hand in getting his brother murdered, even indirectly. He won't give up on revenge. Once he's out, he's coming straight for me."

"When's he up?" Grady asks, slurping that dark ale with a cold brew coffee concentrate that's always his go-to.

I shake my head. "His records are sealed. Don't know how or why. Some things I'm not privy to since I turned in my badge, even with my friends still on the inside. There were rumors all along the Picketts had somebody on the inside, but it could be their wizard lawyers locking down the records, too. No one else I've asked can find out. Since Bat's got men fishing after me, he must be up soon. Could be a month from now, or maybe a year."

"Sounds like he's so shady he doesn't cast a shadow," Drake says, stretching his tattooed arms out in front of him. "Why's he called Bat? Don't tell me he drinks blood too?"

"Same dick-waving fuckery behind every street name," I tell him. "He only operates at night and his men like to string people up. They're good at cutting just the right places and letting the blood drain out, leaving the empty body as a message. Oh, and of course he has a big shitty tattoo across his back of some rat with wings baring its teeth."

"Jesus." Ridge groans into his hand. "Makes that Grendal freak I dealt with seem normal."

"No foolin'. And I'm not sure who he has on his payroll, either, besides that Marvin asshole," I admit.

"Well, he'll catch pure hell if he thinks you're an easy target in this town. Everybody here right now plus plenty more have your back, Faulk. Dallas is your home," Ridge says, hoisting his bottle. The grin he flashes looks like it could shoot in my defense.

"You know it." Grady lifts his beer in a salute.

"Me three," Drake says, raising his bottle. "Just because I wear a police badge now doesn't mean I'm above fucking anybody up who screws with you, brother."

I have no choice but to raise mine and clink it against all of theirs.

"Thanks, guys. I really do appreciate y'all helping with surveillance." I stop there, but the truth is, if it comes to an armed stand-off with Bat, I don't want them around.

Drake and Ridge are married men. New fathers. Happy lives and happy families.

As for Grady, he's got his two older girls to look after, a single dad who never gets to stop and breathe. I feel just as bad risking his neck.

I'll be damned if I'll *ever* be the cause of another woman losing her husband, much less kids being orphaned.

We spend the next hour or so talking strategies and fallback plans before Drake chugs the last of his second beer and sets down the empty bottle.

"Gotta get home. Edison has to be at the fairgrounds by five to practice for the opening ceremony at the rodeo," he tells us.

"Wouldn't be opening night without Edison!" Ridge says with a laugh. "Is Bella riding him?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" Drake winks. "My wife and that horse are practically connected at the hip. He's too old to ride real proper, but he'll tolerate it for a half hour or so, just long enough for the opener."

I shake my head. "Edison must be as old as Granny Coffey in horse years."

"At least," Drake answers with a grin. "But when it comes to Bella, he's a spring chicken." He shakes his head.

"Still can't believe you inherited old man Reed's horse," I say.

"And his daughter. They've both done me a ton of good. For real, though, guys, there are times when I'm jealous of that big old beast." Drake frowns for added effect.

Ridge laughs. "At least Edison is a horse, man. I'm jealous of a frigging *rooster*. Cornelius is so stuck on Grace for giving him treats that every time I convince her to have some fun in the barn, I have to shut us in the tack room. Otherwise that peckerhead will spur me right in the ass!"

We all get a gut-busting laugh out of that image.

"Say, you're bringing Tory to the rodeo, aren't you, Faulk?" Drake asks, casting me a knowing look. "Bella's been hoping to see her again. She remembers playing back when you were kids and Bella spent summers here with her granddad."

Finishing my beer, I set down the bottle.

"Eh, I wasn't planning on it. Honestly, I'm not even sure I'll make it myself with everything going on between the old house and now this Pickett shit."

I'm not just feeding them a story.

I've worked hard—damn hard—the last few days to stay away from Tory and do some real work. The schedule I'd gotten from Dean lets me keep an eye on her from afar, without her knowing it.

Another strange hell.

Seeing her, but not talking to her.

Not touching her.

Not catching her smile.

Not since that day at Carolina's.

It's torturous.

Almost as bad as how I'd looked into her eyes, feeling drawn to her lips, hating how I had to settle for my hand grazing her chin. If it was any other rainy day with both of us shut in the truck, I swear to all that's holy I would've—

"Dude, you *have* to come to the rodeo and bring your girl too," Ridge says, interrupting my thoughts as he sets his empty bottle down with a frustrated *thump*. "Grace has been itching like mad to meet her. She was disappointed she didn't get a chance while the goats were at our place, but with the kiddo and wrapping up my last film, we had to send out Tobin." He shakes his head at me. "I don't like my wife being disappointed."

I grin. "How's that my problem again?"

Ridge lifts a brow and gives me his award-winning dead-eyed outlaw look. "It will be if you don't bring Tory to the rodeo and enjoy a few hours off."

"This isn't Hollywood and we're not back in Afghanistan," I tell him. "Your tough guy act doesn't work here, buddy."

We all laugh again before Ridge and Drake head out.

"Tell me the truth. You're going to the rodeo with her, aren't you, Faulk?" Grady asks, shoving the twenty I'd laid out when we got here on the counter back toward me. "Keep your money, it's on the house."

"Nope." I slide the twenty back his way. "And big nope on the rodeo and Tory."

"Aw, hell. William Selleck will be there. The Selleck bull's the toughest one in the riding event. You remember what we talked about a few weeks ago?" he asks, his eyes dark and questioning.

Shit. I'd forgotten all about it after recent events.

Turns out, Joyce Selleck is a friend of Grady's and she wants proof her husband's been cheating on her for years with a former rodeo queen. Grady asked if I'd do it since snooping after missing persons and two-timing spouses are practically all I do anymore.

"Should be easy. A picture or two of his hands in the wrong—or right—place is all the proof Joyce needs for the prenup she made him sign to hold strong when she files for divorce. William's been sucking money off her ever since she married him." Grady shakes his head. "Why she ever married that prick is beyond anyone who knows her."

I hold in a sigh, knowing I can't say no.

Between raising two kids on his own and managing the best bar in town, Grady is one hell of a guy with a huge heart. When he makes a friend, it's for

life.

He's befriended Joyce Selleck since she spends so much time looking after his kids while he's working. And I'd already half agreed to get the scoop on her cheating husband, knowing Joyce would be out of town during the rodeo, leaving William plenty of chances to mess around with the other woman.

"I'd go and take them myself," Grady tells me, "but most of my part-timers are going to the rodeo. Don't need to tell you it's the biggest bash of the summer in this little town after the Fourth. That means one good chance to give the bar a deep cleaning, and then run the girls over later for the fireworks they shoot off."

"I'll get the pictures as planned," I say, giving him a nod. "Don't worry. I don't need Tory for that."

"But having Tory along will make you blend in, just one of the crowd, Faulk," Grady says, tossing the beer bottles in the recycling without picking up the twenty.

Damn him.

And damn him again for giving me a *good* reason to mingle yet again with the woman I can't pry out of my head.

"We'll see. I've done gigs like this without a hitch all by my lonesome before, but I'll do it." I stand and tap the bar with my knuckles. "See you later, man."



LONG AFTER LEAVING the bar and driving into town, I've got three things on my mind.

Tory, Tory, and also Tory.

No thanks to the blaring 'encouragement' I don't need from Drake, Ridge, and Grady.

This ain't about the rodeo. Every last one of 'em wants to see me get some action, I think, if not downright hitched.

They know me too well, including how I've lived like a monk ever since I came back to Dallas, with next to no patience for hookups and even less for serious dates.

But they're all helping me, too, just because they want to.

Maybe I shouldn't be so stubborn and I should throw my friends a bone.

What's one more night out with her when they all want it?

Ridge and Drake for their wives. Grady for his friend. All three of them for me.

*Shit.*

Looks like I'm taking Tory to the rodeo.

*If* she'll even go with me.

For all I know, she might already have plans with someone else. Granny, maybe, or hell, any handsome single man looking for a sweet piece of arm candy.

How arrogant am I for thinking I'm the center of her whole universe here in Dallas?

Even so, that doesn't sit well with me at all.

Hot jealousy pumps through my veins. A territorial image flashes through my mind: going to her door, throwing her over my shoulder, and carting her off to bed. All for a girl—a *friend*—I've got no right to.

Insanity.

I stop at my house just long enough for a quick shower and a shave.

Cranking the water to cold, I scrub furiously at my skin, wondering if it'll magically scratch Tory out of my head.

Nope, it just makes it worse.

It's like that whole *don't think of a pink elephant* trick.

Only, in this case, I wish I had an annoying goddamn pachyderm stuck on my mind.

Instead, I'm thinking about Tory wearing those boots with the pink stitching and nothing else.

Preferably bent over, her hair in my fist, ass up, moaning my name with this fuck-hot smolder in her throat.

*Hell.*

I don't even know what I'm doing at first when I look down and see my fist wrapped around an angry hard-on, stroking it harder, driven by animal lust more than conscious thought.

I remember how good she felt pressed up against me on that swing.

Then I think about how nimble she was while she helped me hang it. Even with her knee messed up, Tory Three Names can flex like a yoga teacher, her lithe body and lush curves bending in ways that'd ignite any red-blooded man's imagination.

She sends mine right off the rails to dark places full of flesh. Stolen kisses. Driving hips.

She makes me imagine what it'd be like to shred the veil of everything we've had, all chaste smiles and friendly jabs and electric need throbbing underneath it.

She begs me to get her on the nearest surface, stretch those long dancer legs over my face, and devour every last bit of her soft, dripping peach till the only

sounds she can make are ragged, otherworldly screams.

And then I'd flip her over, put her under me as I stare into her eyes, drunk on her taste. I'd watch her face shudder and twist with delight, sinking every furious inch I own deep inside her.

A tension rips up my spine, fills every muscle, and before I know it—

“Fuck, Tory!” I'm grinding her name through my teeth, panting for dear life.

A white-hot orgasm rips out of me in a sudden burst and streams all over my leg, the wall, and my fist before the water rinses it away.

Unbelievable.

This is who I am right now.

Comin' my fucking brains out to my childhood best friend, who I haven't touched, haven't kissed, haven't even gotten comfortable with in anything more than a friendly way.

Because *this* is exactly what I'm afraid of.

This is what a baser, wicked, totally irrational part of me wants.

And this is what might just happen, whether I like it or not, when I ask Tory out tomorrow on something that's bound to feel like a date.

I'm glad the boys gave me bottle salutes for good luck back at the Bobcat.

There might be no coming back from this.

Stick a fork in my horny ass, I'm *done*.



THE NEXT EVENING, I head over to Granny Coffey's.

She opens the door before I get a chance to knock, decked out in a pink-and-white-checkered shirt, jeans with a huge silvery belt buckle, and pink boots just like I'd seen Tory wearing.

“Oh, thank God you're here, young man!” she hisses while grabbing my arm. “I damn near lost faith in you.”

My nerves instantly kick into gear. “Why? What's happened? Where's Tory?”

“*Shhh*.” She presses a finger to her lips, then taps it against her mouth. “She's in the kitchen, getting ready to cook that godforsaken eggplant,” she says under her breath. “Look, I'm all for adventurous eating, but that blasted thing is *purple*. Some plants God made for decorations, and nothing else.”

I bite back a grin. “Can't disagree with your logic, ma'am.”

“I knew you wouldn't.” She glances over her shoulder, still whispering. “You have to take her to the rodeo tonight, Quinn. *Have to*.”

“Why’s that?” I whisper back.

“Because I’m not choking down eggplant parmesan for supper. I’m having a burrito as big as my head from Kenny’s Taco Truck. I’ve been hankering for one ever since I saw the first rodeo poster, but I can’t go get one with her cooking us supper.”

“Sounds like you’d better take her to the rodeo then,” I say, a small doubtful part of me wondering if Tory will give me a chance.

“Oh, posh.” She rolls her eyes. “Would *you* want to go to the rodeo with your grandma, Quinn Faulkner?”

I shake my head. “Granny, anyone who rides around town on a bike built for two with their grandma won’t mind going to the rodeo with her.”

“Truth be told, I bought that bike to help exercise her poor knee. That first week of riding damn near killed me, but if you tell anyone that, I’ll deny it till I’m blue in the face. Now come along.” Looping a hand through my arm, she pulls me farther into the living room. “Tory, dear! You have a visitor. Quinn’s here to take you to the rodeo tonight!”

“*What?*” Tory yells from the kitchen. “What the...did you text him?”

Granny looks up at me and whispers, “Delete my text.”

“I didn’t get a text from you,” I whisper back, confused.

“Huh?” She takes her phone out of her back pocket and starts punching buttons like a teenager. “Oh damn, looks like it didn’t send.”

She frowns. Then grins as she pockets the phone.

“*Of course*, I didn’t text him, Tory! He came freely and he’s of sound mind, so get your butt out here,” she calls.

Tory comes around the corner just then with wide blue eyes.

“Quinn?” She looks at me and frowns. “What are you actually doing here?”

“Granny’s right.” I step forward, throwing her an easy smile. “I came to see if you wanted to hit the rodeo. Biggest night of the summer. Didn’t you get my text?”

“Weird, no. I didn’t get a text from you.” Tory eyes me critically.

“Shoot. Maybe I forgot to hit send. You know how these phones are...”

Granny snickers as she walks over and grabs Tory’s arm. “Go put on your shiny new outfit. We bought it special just for tonight. I’ll serve Quinn a glass of strawberry rhubarb wine while he waits.”

Tory’s face flushes red and she looks down, an adorable wrinkle of confusion across her brow.

“But...I just cut up the eggplant,” she says quietly. “It has to be cooked, Gran. It won’t keep.”

“Oh, well, what’s one eggplant? Hardly a tragedy.” Granny says to her

before looking at me with sparkling eyes.

“Kenny’s Taco Truck will be at the rodeo,” I say, clearing my throat. “I hear they have a damn good burrito.”

“A burrito off a truck?” Tory asks, cocking her head. “Sounds like a bad case of indigestion to me.”

“Would you forget eating like a bird for one day? I have some Pepto chewables in the cupboard you can take with.” Granny stomps over and pushes Tory into the hall. “Go. I’ll get some for you to put in your purse while you’re getting ready.”

I should feel sorry for Tory being forced into a rodeo trip, but the excitement of spending the evening with her and saving Granny from a miserable dinner wins out.

“Edison’s performance starts in about an hour, I think,” I tell her, trying to make it easier. “We don’t want to miss that opener.”

“No, sirree, you don’t!” Granny sings.

Tory looks at me and then, shaking her head, hurries down the hall.

“Thanks, lady.” I pull out my wallet and hand Granny a ten. “Your burrito’s on me tonight.”

“Ahh, well. You always were one of my favorite people,” she says with a wink, taking the bill and stuffing it in a pocket. Then she pulls out her phone. “I’d better text Velma to wait up. They’re my ride and now I know I’ll be going to the rodeo after all.” She shakes her head while texting with both thumbs. “I could kiss you right about now, young man. But how about that wine?”

I walk around her while her thumbs are still flying. “I’ll take a beer instead, if you don’t mind. Got some in the fridge?”

“Yep. And go right ahead and toss that heinous eggplant in the trash while you’re at it!”

I don’t touch the eggplant, but I do grab us each a beer.

We’re still drinking it when Tory reappears.

She’s dressed to *slaughter*.

White shirt with fringes across the yoke, rhinestone and sparkling pearl buttons, black jeans, and black-and-white boots.

My cock almost explodes in my pants.

Her hair hangs around her shoulders in soft waves, this sweet mess of cinnamon-auburn I’m sure feels as sweet as it smells. All my filthy thoughts from the shower come rushing back.

I can’t even look at her without imagining that hair in my fist.

I know. I *know*.

Now I’m completely screwed, blued, and tattooed.

Somehow, I manage to hold in a wolf whistle—barely—but Granny lets one rip for me.

“We’ve got ourselves a hot tamale tonight, don’t we, Quinn?” The old woman turns toward me, her eyes lit with pure mischief.

“Gran!” Tory hisses, laughing shyly.

“No joke.” Setting my beer on the table, I stand up. “You’re stunning, Tory.”

Tory shakes her head, that fiery pink burst on her cheeks glowing, then looks at Granny. “Will you please wrap the eggplant and try to save it from—”

“Uh-oh, look at the time! You two run along,” Granny interrupts. “Don’t you dare miss Edison. He’s a special creature.”

Owl, who’s been sprawled out on the sofa, lifts his head and lets out an offended *woof*.

“Oh, hush. Not as special as you, and don’t we know it,” Granny says to the dog before waving at us with both hands. “*Get*. Don’t make me find my broom and shoo the two of you out of here.”

It’s more likely she’ll throw the eggplant at us.

Grabbing Tory’s hand, I pull her gently toward the door.

“She’s right. No telling what Edison will get up to tonight. Drake said they had something special planned,” I tell her.

“Everything with that horse is special,” she says with a laugh. “So did Granny text you or not? I want the truth.”

I open the door for her while saying, “Nope. She didn’t.”

“She called you?”

“No, Peach. She didn’t call me, either.” I sigh. “Can’t a man decide to bring his friend out for some fun without her crazy granny goading him?”

“Weird how I didn’t get a text from you,” she says once we’re in the truck.

“Right. I must’ve just thought about it and never really got around to doing it,” I admit. I’d only said that to get Granny off the hook at the house.

“Ugh, I do that all the time,” she says, flopping back in her seat.

Goddamn.

Between the soft brown curls, the curves, and the delectable outfit I want to shear right off her with my teeth, I can’t tug my eyes away.

Especially when she looks at me with those sky-blue eyes so bright, her mouth pursed like a ripe strawberry.

“So, are the cupboards painted yet?” she asks.

I cringe inwardly. Keeping track of her and following up on Marvin hasn’t left me much time to hit the house hard the last few days.

“I’ve been busy with other stuff,” I tell her.

I’ll be damned if I let on anything about that grim *just-in-case* strategy

session with my friends yesterday. Or the fact that I've been tracking her every move when she's out with the goats.

"Define 'stuff?'" Her curiosity only makes her cuter, even as it sends me plummeting to a whole new level of hell.

"Just cases I'm working on. Actually, I need your help tonight."

"Tonight? A case?" She sucks in a gasp. "You mean you're doing that private eye stuff at the rodeo?"

"It helps keep the lights on. This is a special job for Grady I took as a favor. So, there's this lady named Joyce Selleck..."

I fill her in on Grady's friend and how I need to snap a couple of pictures of the rat husband while we're there.

It seems to help take her mind off other things. The idea of helping with an undercover surveillance job excites her. Tory keeps looking at me like a bright-eyed chipmunk, reaching over the console to rub her face on my shoulder.

"You're in luck tonight, Quinn Faulkner. I'll be the best freaking spy-chick you ever laid eyes on," she rushes out, already high on the excitement.

"A regular Fuchsia Delaney," I tell her.

"Huh?" She tilts her face up.

"Nothing." I'm guessing she didn't dive into all of those Heart's Edge stories from the press as deeply as I did back when things went nuts out there. Blake Silverton's weird radio show also broadcasts out here from Montana, and I'm a sucker for late-night background noise. "I'm happy to have you along for the ride, Peach. Don't let me down."

"Never!" she whispers, squeezing my arm, digging her nails into my skin just a tad.

Holy fuck.

I hold in the first of many growls to come.

One thing's for sure—catching William Selleck up to no good promises to be a cakewalk compared to resisting the frantic, scary, throbbing urges this little firecracker puts in my blood.



BEFORE I CAN EVEN BLINK, we're in line at Kenny's Taco Truck with our mouths watering.

The smell alone teleports me to Phoenix and Albuquerque, and I overhear Kenny himself comes from Sedona. I can't shove money at him fast enough as he grills up our food with a couple lanky kids helping assemble burritos big

enough to pacify Godzilla.

Then we're carrying tall bottles of water and these Hatch chili-smothered monsters in their red-and-white-checkered trays to the grandstand.

Ridge sees us and waves us over to join him, right next to Grace. Their baby boy, Levi, bounces on Grace's lap while Ridge holds their burritos.

"I knew you'd make it, Faulk!" Ridge belts out with a proud grin as soon as he sees us. "And I see you've brought the lovely Tory Coffey. Welcome back to Dallas, lady. I'm Ridge Barnet, and this is my beautiful wife and squirmy son."

I step aside to let Tory shake hands and blush at meeting a famous movie star, which makes me roll my eyes every time.

Don't care how rich or infamous Ridge Barnet is. He'll always just be Corporal Barnet to me, one more grunt in the dirt pulling dumb stunts to pass the time with the rest of us in between missions.

There's some truth to the Army being the great equalizer.

When the bullets fly and mortar shells are bursting too close for comfort, a man forgets his money and class—or lack thereof—awfully fast.

"It's so good to meet you!" Tory gushes, squeezing in between me and Grace. "I want to hear all about your interior decorating business later, Grace. Everybody in town loves what you do."

The girls blab on for a few minutes while all four of us eat our grub with plastic forks, waiting for the rodeo show to start.

I'm thankful for the distance from my buddy so he can't give me any snide shit over showing up with "your girl," something I know he'll call her if he's given half a chance.

The speakers crackle and buzz to life before the announcer welcomes the attendees and introduces the biggest hero this town will ever have.

Edison.

The crowd erupts and stands as the National Anthem ripples through the air.

Edison, his black head up with a creamy white spot, looks as badass as he did ten years ago. He prances onto the field like he owns it with Bella Larkin on his back, carrying a star spangled banner.

The horse bounces his way around the arena, dashing two laps before stopping in the center.

He tosses his head several times and snorts, just as the country music coming in the wake of the anthem hits its pitch, almost like he's *dancing* to the beat.

Even I pull my hands off my burrito box long enough to clap. I'd bet my bottom dollar there isn't a soul here who isn't impressed with this beast.

As the song ends with Bella raising herself up in the saddle, hoisting the flag high, Edison tucks back one front leg and takes a bow.

Everybody in the stands fucking freaks.

Tory bursts out giggling at my side, scrunching her face, cute as a button and totally entertained.

Edison tosses his head again, as if to say *you're welcome*, and then prances out of the arena.

The best part? Bella never touched the reins once.

The horse just followed the whole routine on his own. Some parts I wonder if he improvised.

It was amazing, yeah, but watching Tory blows me away even more as the big events begin.

She's spellbound by the bareback riders, steer wrestling, and team roping. She yells out, cheering for the participants, and clamps a hand over her mouth, frowning during failed attempts.

Never knew the woman had a screamer set of lungs.

Fuck, and now that I do, my thoughts go *terrible places*.

Just as the saddle bronc event starts with a young rider and a bucking horse, I notice a newer pickup pulling in to the back side of the arena where most folks park their vehicles, livestock trailers, and campers.

The truck is unmistakable with the elaborate paint job advertising Selleck brand bulls.

Shit. I suck down the rest of my water and turn.

"Hate to spoil the fun, but it's time to go get some pictures," I tell Tory.

She nods and we get up, waving farewell to the Barnets.

We make our way out of the stands, around to the barns connected to the side of the arena, dodging laughing people probably going for their fifth drinks of the evening.

"See there? It's Selleck's truck pulling into the back of the lot," she says, stopping to point.

"Yeah. The stock trailer that matches his truck is parked right next to the biffs."

I'd noticed that, too.

"Good observation. This might be our best chance," I say.

I also explain that the former rodeo queen he's having his likely affair with is scheduled to perform in the barrel racing, which is the second to the last event. Bull riding is always the grand finale, and though I don't mention it to Tory, I'm sure Selleck and Rosie West were locked away at the local motel till the last moment possible.

We arrive at the biffs—portable outhouses—just as the truck pulls up beside Selleck's trailer.

Can't be more than twenty feet away.

"I'll be right back." Tory shoots me a grin and then enters the last biff, the perfect excuse for me to be standing there, waiting on her.

I walk over and rest a foot on the split rail fence bordering the parking area and pretend to scan my phone. Really, I'm snapping pictures, everything I can get from Selleck's truck.

Rosie's clearly in the passenger seat, her wavy hair flopping around, but I can't get a clear shot of her. Selleck backed his ride into the parking space and his rear window is covered with a window cling of a bull.

Still, I get a couple shots of him climbing out, walking around to the passenger side a minute later.

*What's he doing? Is he seriously gonna screw around with her right here in public?*

Damn, it's too perfect.

Trouble is, I can't see through the cling, but he can, and he might notice if I move any closer.

Annoying.

Deciding I'll have to wait until after the last events when I'll have more people milling around for cover, I shift my stance and glance at the biffs.

Crap. Tory still hasn't exited, and I wonder if her disappearing wasn't just for show.

Maybe the burrito monster got her. She's not used to eating like this.

Frankly, I'm amazed she even finished it when she had to take half her Mack burger home from the diner.

As the minutes tick by, my concern grows, and I wonder if I should go knock on the door and make sure she's all right.

Just as I'm about to do that, a pickup door slams shut.

A quick glance over my shoulder shows Selleck entering the camper section of his stock trailer, while Rosie walks away from the truck, adjusting her top as she heads for the barns on the side of the arena.

A second later, the biff door opens and Tory walks out.

"You okay?" I hurry toward her. "I was beginning to wonder if you died in there, Peach."

"I'm fine," she says with a laugh. "And I believe I got just what you need."

"What?" I squint at her.

"Not here," she whispers, hooking her arm through mine and turning toward the grandstands. "Let's go sit down again so the sun won't be shining on my phone. I'll show you."

"Your phone? You got pictures of Selleck?"

It's too good to be true.

She tugs at me to start walking beside her, so I do. "And a video. All I had to do was crack the biff door a little. Gave me a perfect shot of the space between his truck and trailer."

"No shit?" An irresistible smile pulls at my lips.

"Really, Quinn. You're set."

"I owe you then, lady. And here I was scared the burrito made you sick as a dog."

She laughs. "Hardly. That was the best freaking thing I've ever eaten."

"Better than eggplant parmesan?"

Her laughter flows out of her and she tumbles against me, this soft slip of a woman with the world's most infectious laugh.

Dammit, I'm grinning as I catch her, help steady her feet, and tighten my grip as we head back to the arena.

"I believe I've found granny's kryptonite," she whispers, her eyes narrowing with mischief. "All the more reason I *have* to make sure she tries it."

"So that's what's going on. You're trying to give the poor old gal indigestion."

"Oh, I'm so onto her with that eggplant. She didn't wriggle her way out of it tonight. Just delayed the inevitable."

I smile, thinking Granny Coffey has met her match in her very own granddaughter.

As soon as we sit down in our seats, Tory hands me her phone.

"Here, have a look. Fair warning, it's kinda graphic."

Her cheeks are tinged bright pink, which makes me frown, until the video starts.

Holy shit.

This time the girl has good reason to blush.

It's practically a bad porn clip featuring Selleck and Rosie, tits and ass galore. She's sitting on the truck seat, and he's standing next to the open door.

Her shirt is open, and he's taken full advantage of her exposed tits, going at her like a fucking bear.

I twist the phone carefully and hold a hand over the screen, making sure no one around us can see what's playing.

What's on this screen right now definitely ain't fit for polite company.

Despite my twisting and turning, it's enough to identify both faces besides all the other skin showing.

William Selleck's goose is about to get cooked to a crisp by Joyce's lawyer.

Tory's position in the biff gave her a clear shot of everything. Selleck kept

glancing around between going to town on his mistress, but he never noticed the door cracked open in the rows and rows of portable toilets.

No wonder he'd gone straight inside his trailer.

After what they did, he's bound to need some cooling off time.

"Can you send everything?" I ask, clicking off her phone.

Tory takes it back and glances at the screen with her lips twisted. "Hmm. It's probably too big to text, but...I'll upload it to the cloud and give you a shared password. You should be able to download it from there."

"Thanks. That'll do just fine for Grady to pass along, too." I swallow, hard.

After watching that shit, and seeing how Tory blushed, a downright wicked part of me can't resist acknowledging there's a devil's heat in my blood.

And it's got nothing to do with the amateur clown show on the phone.

Just looking at Tory Three Names and the saucy red glow lingering on her cheeks fills me with a mad desire to kiss her.

Long, hard, and preferably somewhere more private than where Selleck decided to screw around and ruin his marriage.

Shit. Am I serious?

My hand trembles—*fucking trembles*—on my knee. It's like I've been plugged into a current.

Pure electric heat throttles my heart while dangerous thoughts whip through my head.

This is Tory Three Names.

Peach.

Smart.

Classy.

Gorgeous.

Nimble.

Best friend.

Wet dream.

After that psycho jerkoff session in the shower, though, and the way I woke up hard as brick this morning with her stuck in my grey matter like a spur made of sunshine and lust...

Yeah, who the fuck knows what I'm thinking.

And maybe I'm *not* thinking at all anymore as I turn to her and see her staring with this soft, curious look pooling in her blue eyes. *Shit, am I that obvious?*

"Thanks again, Peach," I tell her, clearing my throat and shifting my feet together. Whatever it takes to kill the sudden attack of the raging hard-on. "I would've had to do a lot more sleuthin' without you."

“No problem. I hope it helps you solve the case.”

“It will,” I tell her with a nod and a smile that feels carnivorous.

There’s no doubt about the debauchery she captured being perfect.

My desires, on the other hand...

The worst part is, they aren’t even hampered by the crowd or the excitement of the bull rides that finish the main rodeo event. Then folks pack their stuff up and a couple hundred voices clash through the night, their owners spilling outside, ready to look at animals and play overpriced games when they’re not buying up every last morsel from the food stands.

“Hey, want a beer or hard lemonade?” I ask as we exit the grandstand. “My treat for making my job easier.”

“A lemonade sounds refreshing,” she says, grabbing my arm as I push us through the slow-moving crowds. “Oh, wait, is that Bella Reed?”

“Larkin now,” I mutter.

Damn, and here I’d been hoping to get her alone.

“Oh, right. Let’s grab our drinks and say hello!”

Even as we do exactly that, I keep my arm locked around hers, pulling tighter, the rawness in my blood forcing me to keep a possessive hold.

Doesn’t seem to bother her. She looks at me funny a couple times before giving me that hellfire blush again a second later.

Fuck, I’m almost afraid of what she’s thinking.

Those pink cheeks, blue eyes, and cryptic Mona Lisa smiles of hers are gonna murder me before the night ends.

Once I’ve got an ice-cold beer and she’s sucking on her lemonade, we find my friends, who are all clustered together now.

Drake and Ridge join us, along with their wives, and the six of us wander to the midway. I can barely get a word in with the guys between Bella and Tory laughing up a storm over old times, Edison’s antics, all the times Bella’s grandpa was fit to be tied with that horse.

It’s well after sunset now.

The colorful lights shine brightly off the rides in the little carnival area they’ve set up.

I’m not sure who suggests we all take a ride on the Ferris wheel—a surprisingly big one for a little town like Dallas—but that’s what happens.

Taking her hand, I lead us into one of the small pods before the next ride starts up.

Once we’re buckled into our seats together and the door shuts, the big wheel grinds forward to load the next folks. Ridge, Grace, and Levi by the looks of it.

“What’s the matter?” I ask her, leaning in, wondering if she’s gone pale or

it's just my imagination.

"Um...I probably should've mentioned I'm not a huge fan of heights," Tory says, hiding her face behind one slim hand.

"You aren't?"

She shakes her head, still keeping her hand up.

"Aw, Peach. Why'd you agree to ride?"

"I just...I thought you wanted to." She squeezes her eyes shut as the wheel lurches again, this time higher. She lets out a squeak, throwing one hand against the side of the pod and the other against my chest. "I didn't want to disappoint you, Quinn."

I move, looping an arm around her shoulders, trying to ignore the brutal urges flicking through my body.

"Not even possible. Riding this old thing doesn't matter to me either way. I've got you," I growl, pulling her face to my shoulder, tilting her chin up softly. "Just don't look down."

"Where else is there to look?" she asks quietly, her big eyes gazing up at mine like matching pools.

"Here." I touch her under the chin, grazing a finger across her soft skin so she shudders. "Staring contest, just like old times. Look at me, Tory Three Names."

"Oh my God. You haven't called me that in *years*," she snorts, closing her eyes.

"But now you're not thinking about the heights, are you?"

"Oh. So just like this then?" Her eyes flutter open, this time less afraid. "We just gawk at each other the whole ride?"

For a second, I'm lost for words.

Her pretty face is bathed in tilted shadows, soft light, and I'm pretty damn sure it's not just worry etched in her features anymore.

She's looking at me with something else like wonder. Amusement. Anticipation.

*Oh, hell.*

"No," I grind out, "I've got something less awkward in mind."

Then whatever shred of restraint I had left gets obliterated.

Leaning forward, I push my forehead to hers and let my thirsty lips move in, drinking my fill of sin.

Not just a small peck.

Not second-guessing.

Not even wondering if we'll hate ourselves in sixty seconds.

With the way she melts for me and whimpers against my tongue, and the

way her little hand shakes on my shoulder, there's only one thing I can do.

I kiss Tory with a full, fierce, tongue-probing kiss that leaves us both in flames.



## GOAT A LOAD OF THIS (TORY)



**H**oly flipping hell.  
I'm tasting Quinn Faulkner for the very first time and I think I'm already drunk.

I still don't know what's happening as his tongue finds mine, as he pulls me closer, as he growls into my mouth.

Yes, *growls*.

To be fair, I started it, letting that little moan slip out.

I'd say it was just surprise, but that'd be a total lie.

It's want.

It's need.

It's straight-up obsession.

Sure, I know how insane that sounds, but the reality is even more ludicrously sexy.

Kissing Quinn is nothing like I'd ever imagined it would be.

I expected it to be tender, uncertain, and sticky sweet.

And even if all those things are there, little hints I feel every time his lips take over just a little more, every time his tongue chases mine, every time his hand slides across my face, sealing this white-hot bliss...

I can't begin to describe how dominant, how intense, how all-consuming he kisses.

The man doesn't ask.

He takes.

He rules.

And now—*now and forever*—there's not even a shred of doubt in my brain as I give up, give in, and give out.

God.

The only sane thought I can still cling to is how bad I want to keep kissing him.

So I press harder against his chest, loving being so close, inhaling his masculine scent. I *pour* the last decade of yearning for this very moment into living it.

Quinn's lips become my world.

It's like the rest of reality melts away.

Nothing exists in our slick, hot, panting moment except us.

To call him an excellent kisser would be a hilarious understatement, but I love how tight he's holding me, letting his free hand roam down my back, just to the edge of my butt.

Oh, wow.

I don't want to stop, but it's too much. Eventually, I have to catch my breath.

Jerking backward, I sputter, gasping for air.

*Real smooth.*

If he's laughing, he doesn't show it in the slightest.

Quinn lays his forehead against mine, breathing just as hard as I am.

"Tory, I—"

The second I've caught my breath, I capture his lips, preventing him from saying more, because honestly? I'm afraid of what he might say.

Scary words like *we shouldn't*.

Believe me, I already know, but ask me if I'm going to stop.

Not when it feels too right. Too perfect. Too addicting.

I jump when the Ferris wheel finally stops and he pulls his lips off mine with a startled look. I don't open my eyes, just lean my head against his chest, relishing the afterglow of a make-out session so hot I feel like he's been inside me.

"Better keep your eyes closed," he whispers.

"Why?" I ask, even while nodding.

"We're perched on the top of the Ferris wheel," he answers, a smirk bending his lips. "The very top, high over the rodeo. They're starting to unload the other cars."

Crap.

Gasping, I lean harder against him for support, staring into his wild green eyes so I don't have to look down. It's not just the long way to the ground that gets me.

Quinn's kisses have already left me feeling like I'm on top of the world. Something no other man's kiss ever accomplished—especially Jean-Paul's.

*Oof.*

Inwardly, I flinch.

Why would I think about him right now? There's nothing remotely comparable between my ex and Quinn Faulkner.

They're as different as night and day.

Maybe that's why my brain goes there, because they're such stark opposites, drawing contrasts it shouldn't.

Well, I know one thing—Jean-Paul Delong wouldn't be caught *dead* kissing me on a rodeo Ferris wheel.

Though I can't imagine Quinn attending a ballet, which makes me sigh.

Hey, if Mr. Perfect doesn't exist, I know who comes dangerously close. And he's drinking me in right now with those demanding emerald eyes.

They still look hungry, even after ravishing me for the entire ride with his lips.

A wicked pulse aches between my legs, and I'm afraid to wonder where this goes next. Do we wind up back at his place in a race to see who tears whose clothes off faster?

Do we even *dare*?

"You still okay, Tory?" he asks.

"I'm fine. Sorry, it's just the heights."

I *wish* it was just the freaking phobia.

"Hang tight. We're almost to the ground," he tells me, pushing his fingers between mine.

I sit up and blink my eyes, willing myself to look out the little window.

We're still a few carts from being released, but high enough to make my stomach flip.

His gentle hold on my hand tightens the instant I nearly break his freaking fingers off.

"S-sorry," I whisper, trying to make myself relax.

"Do high places always bother you this much or just some?" he asks.

"Not always. Not all of them. Just...really, really high ones like this. If it's more than thirty feet up, I embrace my inner baby." I tense. "I saw it out of the corner of my eye, looks like you can see the whole town from up here."

"You're too funny." He smiles. "So up here it's too much but not hanging off gates over a deep ditch with an evil goat ramming your butt?"

My cheeks burn when he mentions the butt ramming.

Go ahead and laugh.

"That was different!" I hiss, pulsing my fingers in his. "It was far enough to jump, I just couldn't because of my knee."

"Whatever, Peach," he says, a wry grin widening on his face. "You're braver

than you let on.”

*Oh, hello, awkward blush.*

It comes back with a vengeance because I’m sure he isn’t just talking about the ditch incident with Hellboy.

“It makes sense. I mean, as long as I know I can land safely on my feet or there’s something to grab on to, I’m fine. When I know I can’t, I’m not so fine.”

That sounds silly, but it’s truly how it works for me.

“I ain’t arguing the point,” he says, giving my hand a squeeze. “Plenty of better things we can do with these mouths.”

Holy hell.

Does he mean more kissing or...

My eyes flick to a noticeable bulge in his pants. He’s as hard as I am sopping wet.

As much as I’d *love* to find out exactly what his mouth can do—and what mine could do to him—fear climbs up my throat.

I’m suddenly lashed with heat, confusion, desire, and doubt. Too many conflicted emotions to process when we’re stuck up here in the sky.

“I’m not arguing either, just making a point,” I tell him, ignoring the hint.

I don’t even know where my mind is anymore.

Sorting up from down has officially become impossible.

Kissing Quinn makes me feel like we’ve stepped into an alternate universe where the rules are far from clear, and that’s not a place I can be.

Because with him and those rogue lips, we’ve left the stratosphere, and I just know.

I *know* I could never land on my feet again if I fall.

Thank God the wheel jerks forward again, saving us from an awkward silence.

As soon as the attendant unlocks the door and removes the brace bar, I jump off the seat and stand up in a rush.

“Whoa.” Quinn catches my arm with his big hand. “Peach, slow down.”

“This has been riveting, but I just realized...I need to get home. Check on Granny. I don’t like her being alone for too long.” I clamp my lips together, knowing I’m babbling, but I have to get out of here.

Away from him.

Before we screw up everything.

It hits me how sudden this is, how reckless, how our worlds are completely different.

He might be one notch below Mr. Perfect, but I’m Little Miss Booboo.

“Okay, yeah, Granny’s probably back home by now after having her burrito,

all alone, twiddling her thumbs,” he says mockingly.

Fine. I deserve that.

We both know Gran never needed anybody looking after her.

I just...I need to *think*.

Kissing him still lives in me, electrifying my senses, and as much as the wet heat between my legs screams to go right back to his place and do more...that angry noodle in my head yells back *bad, bad idea*.

I’m punch drunk on adrenaline, on lust, and I’ve learned by hard knocks that’s no state to make any big decisions in—especially decisions with ginormous butterfly effects.

*Like sleeping with my best friend, for one.*

“Sorry to flip out. This isn’t like me, and I liked what happened, Quinn, but...” I tug on his hand, shooting him a smile.

The red-hot gaze he throws back almost burns me down on the spot.

“No need to explain. If you gotta go, we’ll head on home. Let’s find the Larkins and Barnets and say goodbye,” Quinn tells me.

I nod eagerly.

Hellishly awkward aftermath of the hottest make-out session of my life aside, it was a fun night.

I loved seeing Bella again and meeting her hubby. Always my favorite person after Quinn on those bygone Dallas summers.

The other two couples are just exiting the ride.

We wait for them and bid our farewells.

The entire ride home, I’m torn between hoping he’ll ignore my crap and kiss me goodnight, and also hoping he won’t.

Seriously.

What the *hell* is wrong with me?

“Well, thanks for everything. I’m glad I could help you get pictures of that creeper,” I say as soon as he pulls up in the driveway. I pop the door open before he stops the truck. “And the rodeo was fun! You were right to pick me up; it was worth sacrificing an eggplant to have a little fun.”

“Tory—” Quinn starts, but he never gets in another word.

“Night!” I dart out and *run* to the garage door, mashing the buttons, then dash beneath it as soon as it starts rolling up.

Granny meets me at the door into the house with a confused scowl on her face. “Why’d you use this door? I left the front unlocked.”

“Because I...” I glance into the hall, looking for an excuse, my brain and my heart and every sense I own fried.

A hundred questions from her is so not what I need right now.

Seeing the bathroom, I stiffen.

“Gran, I...I think the burrito I ate is about to come up!” I dash past her and race for the toilet.

Honestly, my stomach feels fine.

It’s my heart that wishes it could heave up a hundred conflicting feels, drain the emotional venom from my system.

How can one hot mess of exquisite kisses do this to a girl?

How can a man you’ve known for half your life feel so right when he’s wrongness incarnate?

Sighing, I hug my sides.

On the ten-point scale of Tory Being Ridiculous, I think this might be a solid eleven.

But I also think I was never, ever meant to taste Quinn and trigger this madness.

Leaning over the sink, I splash cool water on my face, eyeing my expression in the mirror. I look equal parts terrified and triumphant.

Ten freaking years, or close enough.

That’s how long I’d wanted a single kiss with that gorgeous beast.

Trouble is, it has a colossal price, and it’s also made me want more.

*So much more.*

Granny stands in the hall when I open the door, wearing a concerned look, bright-pink tablets in her hand.

“Poor girl. I should’ve told you Kenny’s is a delicacy worth working up to if you’re not used to the spice,” she tells me.

I take the Pepto pills and pop them in my mouth. “I enjoyed it. It was just...too much, too soon. Thanks, Gran. I need to lay down.”

She doesn’t need to know *too much, too soon* has nothing to do with burrito heaven and everything to do with the man they call Faulk.

I flop down on my back, staring at the ceiling, trying to hash out what’s wrong with me.

Quinn took a big risk—or was it a big step?—by kissing me.

Like, seriously *kissing* me.

Hardly an innocent exploration between friends, but a full-on conquest by a man who knows what he wants, and who.

Dear Lord.

I should be buzzing and dreaming about more with a smile so wide it hurts my face.

Hell, I shouldn’t even be in my own bed tonight.

What would be wrong with finishing what we’d started, history aside?

I'm not committed to anyone.

Jean-Paul was the only real relationship I've had. Knowing he cheated on me with Bitchface Madeline infuriated me, but it hadn't broken my heart.

Sure, it thoroughly pissed me off because I'd done everything—*everything*—to pour my heart, body, soul into getting the center dancer honor.

And having that ripped away in a heartbeat by the woman who was sleeping with my effing boyfriend sent me to a very dark place.

It filled me with hatred.

For everyone in Chicago and everything, including dancing.

I'm still crawling out of that pit now. I have the self-awareness to know.

And maybe that's my biggest issue with a full-blown surrender to Quinn and his growly, unbelievable charm.

Being here has helped soothe the heartache over...well, everything.

Granny knew it would, that's why she insisted I visit.

Mother was mad and never missed a chance to remind me I'm running from my problems.

Maybe I was.

Maybe I still am.

Maybe I'm too full of maybes.

But maybe Granny is right, too.

That an affair with Quinn—as she put it the first time because I'm never, ever calling it a *nighttime nibble*—is exactly what I need to get my crap together again.

After the way he kissed, I sure wouldn't mind it.

I swear, if we hadn't been strapped in on a Ferris wheel, I guarantee things would've evolved way beyond kissing. I'd have welcomed it.

Rolling over, I punch down my pillow and huff out an angry breath.

Why is this so complicated?

Because I don't know the future?

Whether or not I'll ever be able to dance again?

The exercises my physical therapist gave me included dance steps, but I haven't tried any of them yet. It freaks me out, knowing if my knee can't take the twisting and turning, then what?

Then I won't have anything.

My short-lived career is all I've ever had. The sun my life orbited for as long as I can remember, inseparably linked to everything else a girl should care about.

Family. Money. *Men*.

My summers here were the only time I got a taste of a different world, and that's what Dallas still gives me now.

Which is just as scary, honestly. I can't live here forever being a goat wrangler, shacking up with a man who's trying to make sense of his own life.

I can't do that to Quinn.

He's got enough on his plate between sorting out his grandfather's house and now this crazy stalker thing with a dangerous convict.

Plus, Uncle Dean will give up this goat scheme soon. He's already hinting at it, he couldn't shut up about watching beekeeping YouTubes yesterday.

He only has a few more jobs lined up, committed, and that's only because I insisted he follow up on the leads from Ridge.

I don't have endless patience to take on the goats alone forever, and I certainly can't keep them all here at Granny's.

She might be a crazy old lady, but she's not a crazy *goat* lady.

It doesn't make sense why my life is so screwed up, so dependent on others.

Yet, I'm convinced it always will be.



I'M NOT sure when I finally drifted off last night, but as I shower this morning, I know nothing got resolved.

Not in my life. Not in my job. And not one bit in the desires Quinn stroked into my body last night using that Casanova tongue.

After getting dressed and drying my hair, I plod down the hall, but something in Granny's voice causes me to pause near the door.

She's on the phone.

"I see. Instead of a refund, can't I just switch the dates?" she asks, then pauses for several seconds. "Oh, you've *got* to be kidding me?" Another pause. "No, no, no. Just leave it as is for now and—"

My phone picks the perfect time to go off. *Loudly*.

Flustered, I rip it out of my pocket and try to hit the silence button, but accidentally swipe the answer icon instead.

A garbled voice comes out of the speaker. I don't even look at the screen to see who it is before I answer.

"Hello?" I clip, flying down the hall to the living room.

"Good morning, my gazelle, I didn't wake you, did I? It's been too long."

Every last part of me ices over.

I recognized the voice before Jean-Paul even called me his gazelle.

Woof. In hindsight, it's not that flattering, but once upon a time, I was smitten just to hear it.

He's used that lame pet name for years. And now I think it annoys me almost as much as him.

"What do you want?" I force out, wondering why I bother.

"I did wake you," he says softly with just a hint of smarmy sarcasm. "Of course you're taking advantage of your vacation and sleeping in."

"I'm not on vacation," I snap. "I'm on medical leave, and you know it." The ballet doesn't technically have medical leave, or vacation time, but that phrase makes me feel connected.

It's a fine thread to normalcy, but it's there, and I've needed it.

"How are you doing? How's your knee healing?"

"Fine," I lie, loving how he asks about my knee first and *not* the carnage he left in my heart.

"You aren't still miffed at me, are you?" he asks.

Miffed?

Flipping *miffed*?

Is he serious?

That's hardly the right word for this. Not even a polite euphemism. I wish I could magically reach through the phone and slap the smart-ass smirk I'm sure he's wearing right off his face.

But I wait too long before his voice floods me again.

"I trust you read my letter—you never replied. I understand. You needed some time in the country, away from the urban pulse, to think about things. As I explained then...I *had* to be nice to Madeline, you see. She was the only person who could take over your position after your injury."

Bull. Shit.

He'd been 'nice' to her without any clothes on long before my injury, I'm sure.

"What do you want, Jean-Paul?" I snarl out. "Get to the point or I'm hanging up."

"I hope you'll be happy to hear our opening night of the Summer Royale was a massive hit," he ventures, this weird caution I don't like in his voice. "Truly, it was a dream, better than anything we could've imagined. The crowd gave the longest standing ovation I've ever seen at the end."

Ugh. I'd forgotten that the biggest show of the summer was last night.

"Also...we're it, Tory!" he whips out excitedly. "We won the international spot to host our peers, including the prestigious Strelkov Ballet group from Moscow. Everything we've been working for the last four years."

A flash of excitement cuts through me.

I can't help it. Hosting other countries ranks right up there with the Olympics

when it comes to dance. It was always on my radar, part of why I'd worked so hard, so one day I'd have the privilege of working with teams where classic ballet has been an art for centuries.

"Congratulations," I say dryly, trying my hardest not to let any excitement slip.

"Thank you, my gazelle, and I mean that with all my heart. You were a tremendous piece of this victory. The training you gave the other girls, the endless support and encouragement...you made them work even harder after you were gone. Harder than ever to win this for *you*."

I close my eyes because he's hitting a nerve. A hateful hot, wet sensation floods down my cheek.

The other dancers are the only thing I've missed during my time away.

I've danced with some of them for years, and they're as close to me as sisters. A hint of guilt strikes at how I've practically ignored them since the double whammy to my knee and my heart.

Besides one-word replies to their text messages, I haven't had the courage to speak to them. It makes me *sick* every time I wonder what they think of me, for just letting Jean-Paul and Madeline trash my reputation.

A few of them know very well what happened.

Call it selfish, the no contact decision, but it hurt too bad in the beginning.

I was too embarrassed. A couple girls still in the dark even saw me turn a blind eye to Jean-Paul and Madeline and tried to gently call me out on it over Facebook messenger.

Swiping my hand across a searing tear, I dig the phone into my ear.

"So is that all you called for, or what?" I bite off.

"No. I have a proposition I'd like to discuss with you, Tory. A rather serious one. When are you coming home?"

"I don't know. What is it?" I ask. "Just tell me."

"For this, I would greatly prefer to speak in person."

"Tell me, Jean-Paul, or this call is over."

I've had it up to *here* with his shit. I'm not going to let him drown me in toxic games any longer.

"Well, without going into specific details...I'd like you to take over the role of Creative Dance Director. I'll have my hands full with our new arrivals from overseas and their directors, and you did a better job with the new girls than I could've managed the past few years, being so busy with the intricacies of business."

Oh, God.

What? His job?

*Oh. My. God.*

“It’s physically light work,” he continues. “I know you can help the other girls through their routines without even dancing yourself, and as for morale...if you can work the same magic with our Russian friends, you’ll send us to the stars. Why should the past be any obstacle? Together, we can go places, Tory. Straight to Elysium.”

Damn, damn, *damn* him.

Dance Director would be too perfect, and something I barely dreamed of landing one day.

I’d be doing everything I loved most about dancing without the grueling exertion.

“I want you, Tory. I want you to be a part of all this, and frankly, if possible...I want us to have a chance to mend.”

And just like that I go from stunned out of my skin to pissed. I can’t believe I’m hearing these words, but I’m too furious to stop him.

“We were good together, and now, we’ll only be better with this extraordinary opportunity. Together, we could put our ballet group on top of the list, worldwide.” He takes a harsh, loud breath. “People will pay millions for performances at that level, gazelle. Do you want to be a royal?”

I don’t want to admit anything.

How much I want to be a part of the success, but not him.

Not the *us* he mentioned.

That’s long dead, but the ballet...

I feel like he’s stabbing me with choices. Making our group effectively number one globally didn’t even seem possible, but now...how could I turn my back?

How could I walk away?

How could I live with myself?

“Tory? What do you say?” he whispers, his words a fast hell my mind can’t keep up with.

I shake my head, not knowing what to think, what to say, what to do.

“I think...” Taking a deep breath, I say, “I need time to think about this, Jean-Paul.”

“About what?” He goes quiet.

Hell if I know.

“I have several commitments here in North Dakota,” I whisper, grasping at straws.

“What commitments? Watching goats?” he asks sourly.

The revulsion in his tone raises my ire.

“Your mother told me that’s what you’re doing,” he says. “That’s not a commitment of any kind. It’s crude, demeaning work for a smart, capable woman like yourself. Entirely beneath you, working for a drunk.”

Oh, here we go.

“Excuse you? My uncle is *not* a drunk, and the goats are none of your damn business,” I whip out. “There’s more to it than just watching them. It’s a viable business and—and you know what?—I don’t have to justify jack shit to you, Jean-Paul.”

For a second, we’re both suspended in this stunned silence. I never once talked back to him with so much anger.

“Tory, I don’t want to argue over your small-town pursuits. I just want you home.”

*Home.*

That word draws a blank.

Do I even have one? Is there a place where I still fit in? Is Chicago completely alien now?

“I can book a flight for you today,” Jean-Paul says, trying to strong-arm me into getting his way.

As usual.

“No.”

I’m not sure why everyone thinks I need them to book my ticket.

I’m not completely helpless. I’ve just let others rule my life for so long, they think I can’t do it myself.

“What do you—”

“I’ll book my own damn flight when I’m good and ready,” I say coldly. “And I’ll call you again when I make a decision about the job.”

“It’s more than a job,” he tells me, as if I don’t already know it. “And you know how fast these things move, Tory. I—”

“Bye, Jean-Paul.” I cut him off and finger-punch the End Call icon.

“Jean-Paul Whats-the-schmuck?” Granny asks, sauntering around the corner. “What kind of job is that gutless fink offering you now?”

I turn around and shove my phone in my pocket as it dings with a text message.

One from Jean-Paul, no doubt.

Somehow, I doubt standing up for myself—something I’ve never done before—makes him any less relentless.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it, Gran.” My nerves are too frayed to go into all of that with Granny right now, so I change the subject. “What were you trying to cancel on the phone, anyway?”

Fair is fair.

If she can boldly eavesdrop on my conversations, it's only fair I mention what I overheard, too.

"Oh, just a trip." She gestures to the pocket holding my phone. "Is he trying to convince you to go home?"

"What sort of trip?" I press her again.

She huffs out a sigh and folds her tanned arms. "A cruise, if you must know, Miss Nosy. A large group of us from the senior center and VA got together and set up a little getaway."

"Really? To where?"

"Alaska."

"Whoa, awesome choice!" Then I remember something critical. "Wait. Why were you trying to cancel it?"

"The dates no longer work for me." She plants her hands on her hips. "So now are you gonna tell an old woman what he wanted or not?"

Fine, fine.

"He offered me a position back home. Creative Dance Director. Higher level, more pay, lots more respect..." Lifting a brow, so she knows I want the truth, I say, "When's your cruise?"

"Director? Sounds impressive."

"It is," I admit, but I'm not about to let her off the hook. "Granny, when?"

"Next week," she says, chin up, looking directly at me.

*Next whaaa—?*

Oh, no.

My heart drops.

"You're trying to cancel it because of me," I say numbly. "Because I'm here."

"Mm-hmm. Exactly where you need to be, young lady," she says firmly. "Now, enough yammering about phone calls. What do you want for breakfast?"



## GOAT ME DOWN (FAULKNER)



**E**ggplant.

I glance at the two swollen, downright ugly purple beasts in the seat next to me.

That's the best I can come up with? Hauling around a vegetable that's become a stand-in for every big dick joke ever spoken in emojis?

Talk about fucked up excuses.

Still, I couldn't think of a better reason to see Tory, and see her I must.

I barely slept a wink last night.

When I wasn't tossing and turning, thinking about kissing her, I was dreaming about doing a whole lot more than tongue fencing.

A cold shower was a must when I woke up this morning, temperature cranked to Siberian chill.

Fuck.

I know. I shouldn't have kissed her last night and scared her off.

I'd fought the urge for so long, swore it'd never happen. My best efforts weren't enough.

I'd lost the battle and maybe the whole war on that damn Ferris wheel ride.

My self-control, definitely obliterated.

Tory's lips were so soft, warm and sweet and supple, everything I always knew I'd find after giving her that peach namesake like a fool so many years ago. It's like teenage me set a colossal trap for grown-up me.

Damn if I didn't enjoy myself, though, consequences aside.

Once I'd started in on those strawberry lips, once I'd laid my hands on her like a man, once I'd thrust my tongue in her mouth, leaving zero doubt what I wanted to do with more than lips...

I couldn't stop for nothing.

You don't get between a kiss that becomes a force of nature.

A grizzly bear with a jetpack coming at us on that ride couldn't have pried my lips off Tory Three Names.

Thank all that's holy we *were* on the Ferris wheel then.

If it was solid ground instead, I'd still have her chained up hostage in my bed.

Reason number one thousand why recklessly kissing my childhood friend can never, ever happen again.

Of course, I can't leave her hanging, thinking it was her fault.

Or something.

I don't really know what chicks think when dudes like me put our mouths where they don't belong.

All I do know is, last night, as soon as that Ferris wheel stopped, she'd wanted nothing to do with me.

It hurt to see her run, even if she did it quietly and politely the whole way back to her place, before she bolted for the house like I had rattlesnakes in my hair.

Distance was clearly her goal, and I can't blame her.

I need to apologize.

It's Tory Coffey. I can't have her hating me forever over one jackass slip.

Dean's pickup is still in the driveway, the same workhorse truck she uses for the goats, so I know she's home.

Before I second-guess my pathetic purple excuse to come here again, I pull in, park, and grab the eggplants, carrying them like they're grenades.

Granny answers the door with a cheery smile.

"Good morning, Romeo." Her grin fades the second she pushes open the screen door and sees what I'm holding. "What the hell? What in God's name do you think you're doing here with devil's fruit?"

"Making up for the one you had to throw away last night." I hold up the eggplants.

Her glare knifes right through me.

"Thank you, Quinn," Tory says, stepping up shyly behind Granny. "That's so nice of you."

At least there's a smile on her face, but her eyes look somber.

She reaches around Granny and takes the eggplants gingerly like they're baby animals.

"Ohhh, you picked some good ones. We'll have eggplant parmesan for sure tonight!"

Granny's eyes widen. I can practically see the flames shooting out as she

grabs my arm.

“Quinn said he’ll be joining us for supper tonight! He wisely brought along plenty for three,” she says as Tory walks to the kitchen.

I shake my head.

“Like hell you won’t,” Granny hisses. “If I have to eat that purple shit, so do you, son!”

“It can’t be that bad,” I whisper. “Pretty sure I’ve had it a time or two—”

“We’ll both find out tonight, won’t we?” Under her breath, she adds, “Jackass.”

I have to chuckle at her.

“Laugh it up now, barf later.” She yanks me inside. “Come have some coffee, though. Tory needs the company after the morning we’ve had.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

“She’s just in a funk today,” Granny says with a sigh. “I’m sure it’s due to those calls from Chicago.”

Before we reach the kitchen, Tory, with Owl on her heels, steps into the hall.

“Quinn’s going to have coffee with us,” Granny says. “Fetch him an extra mug, please.”

“With *you*,” Tory says, stepping around us. “I have goats to round up.”

“I’m already wired for the day,” I tell Granny, pivoting on one heel to follow Tory.

“Is something wrong?” I ask once we’re outside.

She keeps walking toward Dean’s pickup without missing a beat.

“Nothing you should worry about, it’s just...it’s time for goat duty.”

“Big jobs?” I wonder, trying to pierce through this evasive mask she’s wearing.

“Bigger one this afternoon.” She stops at the truck and pulls open the door. “The morning should be light. I’m doing city hall and the police station. Don’t think there’s much to clean up there. I’m pretty sure they just want the goats around for publicity.”

She sounds weirdly despondent and looks like it, too.

“Need help?” I ask. “I’m pretty free today if you—”

“Owl does all the real work, you know, I just—” She throws her arms in the air, clearly annoyed. “I just open the trailer, talk to people, and sign papers. Easy work as long as I’m not late for it.”

I gently lay a hand on her shoulder.

“Tory. What’s going on?”

She shakes her head, biting her bottom lip.

Fuck.

“Listen. I didn’t mean to stir shit up by showing up on your doorstep. Thought you’d get a kick out of the eggplants.” I give her a lopsided grin, feeling like the world’s biggest dummy right now.

She sighs, glancing back at the house.

“Goats and eggplants. What a life.” She lets out a raw laugh. “Might as well add raining on everybody’s parades too.”

“What parades?”

She snaps her fingers at Owl, gesturing him to get in the truck. “Granny. She tried canceling an Alaskan cruise with her friends because I’m here. Tying her down.”

“When’s the cruise?”

“Next week.” She throws her purse in the truck and climbs inside. “But it’s all right. She’s still going, and I’ll be gone by then.”

My heart hits my gut like a falling stone.

“Gone? You mean you’re going home?” I try not to growl my words.

“Maybe. I’ve been offered a promotion of sorts...a new job. Dance director for the studio. They won a contest to host some prestigious dance groups from around the world. Pretty much the dream.” An oddly sad smile digs at her cheeks.

It doesn’t sound much like *the dream* to me.

Not with the way she’s acting.

Yet I have to admit, her leaving town would solve my issues, like it or lump it.

If she goes back to Chicago, I won’t have to worry about her getting caught up in my Pickett mess.

And without having to run around town checking up on her, maybe I’ll get my head screwed on straight. I’ll finally be distraction free to hunt down that maniac the second he arrives, and if I’m lucky, keep him locked up for good.

Yeah.

I should be fucking happy as a lark.

So why does it feel like I’ve just been sucker punched square in the gut?

Tory pulls the door shut without another word and starts the truck.

I’m well aware we’ve ignored the three ton elephant in the room—the glaring fact that I kissed Tory Three Names like I own her and she can’t make heads or tails of it any better than I can.

Ass, I think to myself.

I question if I should follow her, but it’s clear she doesn’t want that. Doesn’t want me around. Doesn’t want anything except space to think about her problems, one of which is me.

How did I fuck this up so bad? A friendship we'd just reignited.  
A friendship I've treasured having in my life again.  
However it happened, I know one thing—asking questions doesn't help.  
If I ever want to fix this, I need more, and not from Granny.



WITH MY HEAD MESSED UP, I head over to Dean's place.

I need an updated list of jobs where she'll be delivering the goats, plus Dean might know more about that Chicago job she's been offered.

He's in his garage, assembling what looks like...bee boxes?  
Christ.

"Hey, Dean, what do we have there?"

"Bee boxes," he answers, just like I thought, while pointing his hammer at a book titled, *Beekeepin' for the Total Fool*. "Honey's the new gold. Did you know that? All natural. Healthy. Cheap to mass produce. People love it. You can even make pretty candles out of the wax!"

I glance around. "Have you already ordered the bugs yet?"

"Nope." He pats the top of one box. "I just bought these boxes from Jake Murray. He was gonna sell them at a garage sale, but I talked him down to a steal."

"You do know Tory's highly allergic to bees, don't you?" I ask.

He sets down his hammer and blinks. "Nah, I didn't know that."

"At least that's what her mother always told her."

"Ah, hell, probably a lie, then," Dean says with a laugh. "Gloria's been making up nonsense ever since the day she brought Tory into the world, wanting to keep her under lock and key."

"You sure?" I press.

It doesn't take much to get Dean Coffey going.

"Yep, she smothers the poor gal, just like she does my brother. Why John ever married her, I'll never know. She never was all that cute. Aw, what the hell am I saying? It was the money."

"Come again?" I cock my head.

"That's the real reason he married Gloria Redson-Riddle—her family was loaded. But she's held on tight to those purse strings, doling out cash only when she wants to, and on what she wants." He looks down at the boxes and shakes his head. "Tory won't be here much longer, anyway. Gloria will be getting her way again soon enough."

“What do you mean?”

“She has that stupid-ass calling Tory now, offering her a bigger job at the ballet,” he snarls, shaking his head.

“Tory told you about the job offer?” I ask.

“No, my ma called me a little bit ago. Told me all about Gene-Pete or whatever the hell he’s called baiting her back to misery.” He leans against the workbench and crosses his arms. “Nieces get a man in a special way. I love that girl, and I’ll tell you what, I’d rather shoot that bastard than look at him. He blew it once, and now he’s trying to make up for cheating on her.”

*Cheating?*

My spine stiffens. I need to make sure I heard him right.

“Cheating on who, Dean?”

“Tory, man. Pay attention.”

“Yeah, I figured. Hell. Who’s this guy you’re talking about, though?”

“Jean-Paul DeLong. I think that’s how you say it. Even his name sounds like a stuck-up snail. That’s what he is, too. I met him once when Ma and I went to Chicago to watch Tory dance.” He whistles. “Never saw nothing like it. That girl can take the stage like a butterfly takes to the skies. Graceful. Beautiful. Real good at what she does. And how she can do it all on the very tips of her toes is beyond me. That crap’s gotta hurt.”

He pauses, smiling so wide I can’t help but smile back.

“She says it doesn’t,” he continues. “That you get used to it when you’ve been at it as long as her. She has grit. Just look what she’s done with those goats. Shame I’ll have to find those guys a new home this fall. Don’t know how I’ll even be able to finish the jobs I’ve got lined up without Tory around. See, my back—”

“This Jean-Paul dude,” I say, steering his conversation back where I want it. “He’s the one who offered Tory a new gig in Chicago?”

“Yeah. He was the dancin’ director or whatever of the company she danced for, and...” He huffs out a heavy breath. “And he was Tory’s boyfriend for a while. Mostly ’cause Gloria wanted him to be Tory’s man. It was prestigious for her daughter to be dating the director. That’s all Gloria’s ever cared about. Titles and status. How much higher she can get her nose stuck up in the breeze.”

A wave of jealousy strikes me so hard my jaw goes tight.

“They were serious then? And you said he cheated on her?”

“Afraid so. Prick even messed around with the dancer who caused her accident, the one that tore her knee all up. Now he’s calling our girl, offering her some big fancy-sounding job. All so she’ll come lick his boots.” Dean slaps the counter behind him. “I’ll tell you the real reason he’s doing it. It’s so Gloria

won't pull away the money if he doesn't listen. She's been propping up the arts and cultures with big donations for years, including his shady ass, usually with Tory none the wiser."

Sonofa...

Well. That explains Tory's behavior today.

Why her dream job isn't much of a dream.

I feel the same way as Dean. I'd rather show Jean-Paul Delong the business end of a shotgun than look at him, and I don't even know the fuck.

I'm sure as hell not gonna let Tory get stung by him a second time, lured into games bound to bruise the heart.

"Where's she taking the goats today?" I ask. It's not my place to butt into her life, but someone needs to, and it might as well be me. "And the ones she's picking up today? I'm just wondering if she needs a hand."

"A couple city places this morning, then Neuman's Dairy this afternoon," Dean says. "It's a big job. They've got major acreage. It'll probably take the entire tribe a couple weeks to clear everything. If she's gone, I'll have to wrap it up myself."

Which wouldn't be the end of the world, but there's no use in telling that to a man who believes honey's the new gold.

"Chalk it up as another good reason not to order bees," I say.

"Hmm. Maybe you're right about that, this already feels like a lot of work." He throws down his hammer. "So much for beekeepin'."

I walk to the door. "Wise choice, Dean. Bee farming isn't as easy as it sounds. It's a helluva lot of work. My grandpa did it for years, and trust me, he didn't get rich."

"You're a lifesaver," he says, wiping the sweat from his brow. "You're also awful nice to offer a helping hand with the goats, but I can't afford to put you on payroll."

"Don't worry about it. Favor for a friend," I say, and then I turn, quickly heading for my truck.

There's nothing worse than having to play superhero, but duty calls.

If I have to save Peach from everything fixing to mess up her life—Jean-Paul the Snail, Bat Pickett, and my own dumbass—then so be it.

I just hope I'm not too late to come out of this without her hating me.



## GOAT A BAD FEELING (TORY)



I watch as Owl races around, his huge furry bulk whipping past in a blur, herding the last of the goats into the large overgrown pasture.

The Neuman place is a good-sized dairy farm specializing in everything from butter, to cheese, to milk that gets shipped out across the state. The new owners are looking to expand their herd, which means more pasture space, but first they have to clear up the brush.

I like the thought of the goats clearing land naturally for their organic farm products instead of harsh chemicals.

That's one of the nice things about this job, knowing it's environmentally friendly.

It's also a hundred times less stressful than dancing. The endless practice, keeping up with *en pointe* routines, artistic huddles with Jean-Paul, sleepless nights, and travel that never seemed to end is still branded in my head.

You couldn't pay me to forget how grueling it can be, and the director job promises a meaner gauntlet.

The last goat goes through the open gate and Owl barks at me before I get too deep in my own head, brushing up against my waist.

*Good boy, keeping me on task again.*

Walking up, I push the tall gate closed, latch it, and rest my chin on the top rung, watching the goats sniffing around, getting to know their new space.

They're sweet animals. Besides the first day, not even Hellboy has given me an issue. Not a single complaint from customers, either.

They eat up everything they're supposed to, never make a mess, and depart leaving shiny new land ready for whatever the owners want.

Call it silly, but there's a lot to be said for goat wrangling.

Only, it's still not something I want to do with the rest of my life.

It isn't even practical if I *did* want to make it a career. Not in a town this small.

Since talking with Jean-Paul this morning, I've realized just how much I've missed dancing.

Not the action itself, and definitely not the backbreaking work, but the rest of it?

Yes.

There's a beauty, a grace, a challenge I haven't found anywhere else outside the stage.

And as much as I don't want to admit it, teaching—helping others learn their moves and watching them improve—is what I truly miss.

It's insanely fulfilling to watch someone improve, gaining new skills, growing their confidence. You make new friends and launch careers. You win respect for life.

And with the director position, it's not as physically demanding. I could do it for the rest of my life whether or not my body fails me.

If only people were more like animals: honest, upright, and completely without ulterior motives.

There's my solution—a dance program for animals.

I smile at my own ludicrous thought.

Then frown because the goats aren't my main problem anymore.

Neither is the job offer from Jean-Paul hanging over my head like an axe.

It's the fact that I might have to leave without resolving anything with Quinn.

Inwardly, I cringe, thinking back to this morning.

Neither of us mentioned what happened last night.

If he's embarrassed, if he's wishing it never happened, I just might crawl into a hole and die.

I might do that anyway, overstaying my welcome in Dallas.

Granny won't go on her cruise if I hang around any longer. It tears me up.

She's done so much for me over the years, always the voice of wisdom with the self-restraint of a twelve-year-old.

I can't let her cancel her plans on my account.

It's just...if I return to Chicago, Jean-Paul will think it's because I'm snapping up his offer.

The job and *him*.

*Blech.*

The director job is tempting, sure, but I don't know if I can handle the inevitable baggage that comes with it. I want to return to Chicago on my own

terms.

Great time for me to decide that, right?

Actually, it *is* perfect timing.

An idea darts across my brain so fast I tap my fingers gently against Owl's head, giving him a friendly scratch that sends his brush of a tail wagging.

Granny doesn't need to be here in order for me to stay. I'm a grown woman.

Why can't I just house sit for her?

I'd hinted at it once over breakfast, and she'd already said no, she won't go, but never gave me a good reason.

Because there isn't one.

There's no earthly reason why I can't stay there alone while she stomps around trying to throw wild salmon into grizzly bears' mouths or whatever else Granny would totally do in Alaska.

That also makes me think back to the look on her face when she saw the eggplants.

*Freaking. Eggplants.*

Despite trying not to, I grinned until it hurt at the gifts he showed up with. Most guys just bring a girl flowers when he wants to say he's sorry.

God, I don't even know if eggplants were Quinn's apology.

Either way, both he and Granny will be eating a whole pan of eggplant parm tonight. And I'll be staying here in Dallas while Granny goes on her trip, stalling Jean-Paul out as long as I care to. I'll buy the thinking time I need to make a good decision for once.

It's too perfect.

A vehicle's rumble has me turning around, breaking my thoughts.

I glance up the road at the wispy plume of dust being whipped up by a bright-red pickup.

"Let's go see who that is," I say, patting my thigh for the dog to follow me to the trailer that's parked a few yards away, next to the fence.

By the time I have the door shut and the ramp secured, the red truck stops directly in front of mine.

That's...weird.

Just a bad parking job, hopefully?

Am I parked somewhere I shouldn't be?

My answer comes a second later as a tall, built, lean-looking guy steps out. And when I say tall, I mean *really* freaking tall.

The stranger could slam dunk me through a hoop and still have plenty of room to stretch.

He's coming toward us with a lanky swagger, dressed in a long-sleeved

flannel shirt, rounding the front of his truck. Looking down, his boots are shiny, new, and laced up tight, which look as out of place as his thick flannel shirt.

It's hot out today, a proper sticky North Dakota day.

The baseball cap on his head doesn't quite fit him, either.

I can't quite put my finger on it, but something just doesn't look right, like he's pulled it on awkwardly because he's not used to wearing it.

Yeah, Twilight Zone stuff.

Especially as he draws nearer, and his ridiculous size just stands out more.

Before I know it, I'm gazing up at a literal giant. He's easily over seven feet tall.

I think his freaky height spooks Owl, too. The fur on the mastiff's back stands up.

Yikes.

I've only ever seen that once...

When he'd gotten between me and that Marvin Heckles creep.

Just like he's doing now with this guy, transforming himself into a big furry shield. I have to wonder why.

"Sir? Can I help you?" I push out, trying to keep this professional.

He smiles then. A long dark line under the shadow cast by his baseball cap.

More like a smudge of ink than a human smile.

"Letting off the goats, are ya?" His voice is deep, as if it reverberates through those long bones before pouring out of him.

Oh. He's not from around here, is he?

His accent sounds kinda southern.

"Yes. Just like we agreed." I frown.

Technically, I haven't met any of the Neumans, the dairy owners, so he could be one of them, or an employee.

"Do you have questions?" I ask softly.

He pauses for a long second, scoping us out, and then shakes his head.

"Nah, just curious. Looks like you've brought a whole mess of goats for the job. Should make quick work of it."

A whole mess? How about a herd, a tribe? That's how a dairy farmer would say it, I imagine.

My frown only deepens. My neck already feels sore just staring up at him, trying to make eye contact.

Why doesn't he seem to know a single detail about the clearing job?

"How many we got?" he asks.

"Eighteen. We brought our whole crew and my uncle borrowed a few more from locals. They're all well behaved and hungry—just don't get between them

and dinner,” I say, hopelessly trying to inject some humor. Uncle Dean had extras he’d enlisted when I stopped by this morning.

Polyphemus stares down at me with total disinterest.

I don’t care if he has more than one eye, unlike the giant in *The Odyssey*. The name still fits.

Trust me.

I certainly feel like I’m being assessed by a cyclops.

“How long?” he asks coldly.

“Huh?”

“How long does it take them for a job like this? Do they just eat up everything in a couple hours, or what?”

Holy crap.

Now his ignorance scares me. Each goat would need five stomachs to clear a job this size in a matter of hours.

This guy doesn’t know a flipping thing about the job, the tribe, or me. And somehow, I doubt he even works here.

Worse, I’m not the only one getting freaked out.

Owl is, too.

His lips peel back a little more every time the man speaks.

I lay a hand on the dog’s back. *It’s okay, Bud. Let’s not escalate this.*

Since he’s been so amazing at reading minds, I hope it continues now.

“That’s all spelled out in the contract, including our rough estimated time,” I say politely, putting on my best disarming smile. “If you’d like, I think I have a spare copy rattling around in the glovebox. I’ll just go grab it for you and—”

“No. No copy.” He nods sternly and glances around, twisting his lips to the side. “So it’s just you and the dog out here then? Got any other help? Friends, family...boyfriend?”

“It’s a family business. My, uh...my boyfriend isn’t involved. He’s in another line of work,” I lie, suddenly feeling the need to hide behind a fake boyfriend.

What if *I’m* what he’s after?

He nods again like he’s working on a long delay, slowly processing my words.

Jesus.

Okay.

I’m officially done letting this weirdo drag this out.

With the fakest smile ever, I motion briskly at his truck. “Unfortunately, I need to ask you to move. I have other deliveries to make today.”

Another lie, but I *really* don’t like this guy.

He’s reminding me more of that Marvin scumbag by the minute. Except, I

think I'd rather have Heckles with his ugly wifebeater look than Polyphemus here, staring down at me like prey with his cold, dead eyes.

I get a good look at the truck, at least.

A Chevy, rather than a Dodge. I can't quite see the license plate, but I know one thing.

I'm calling Quinn the instant I'm out of here. Without hesitation.

This situation definitely falls under *things more important than awkward make-out drama*.

"Sir, if you could just..."

"Just being friendly," he says in a tone that's anything but. "No reason to get all snotty, ma'am. I'll move."

"Not being snotty. It's just a busy day, y'know?" I give Owl a pat on the head as I take a step back, and then another, steadily moving toward the truck.

The dog steps back, too, his eyes locked fiercely on the giant the entire time.

*C'mon, Tory, he's not a bear. You can turn your back.*

I hope. Knowing Owl will protect me, I decide to end this ridiculous staring contest and turn, quickly walking to the truck and flinging open the driver's door.

His eyes are on me the whole time, staring as if he's reconsidering my request to move the truck that's boxing me in.

Then Owl hits his limit, snarling and baring his huge canine teeth.

"Oh, crap. Let's go. Don't worry about him," I whisper to the mastiff, trying to push his huge furry bulk into the truck and having no success.

The mastiff intends to stand his ground, and I can't blame him.

Without a word, the guy walks to his truck.

Good enough. *Barely*.

Owl turns and jumps up in the driver's seat, finally, stumbling over to the passenger side, keeping one eye glued to the stranger the entire time.

I keep my eyes on him too while scuttling in and starting the truck.

Polyphemus cuts a sharp turn out of the Neuman farm as I pull onto the road behind him, going the opposite direction. But I notice when he turns around instantly, coming up behind me, that cherry-bomb of a truck filling my mirrors.

"Crud," I whisper.

For a split second, I question if I should call Quinn, but only for the amount of time it takes to grab my phone, punch his contact, and press it to my hot little ear.

The call goes straight to voicemail. I glance in the side mirror and the bright-red Chevy is still trailing me.

No mistaking it, even if he's keeping his distance.

“H-hey, Quinn!” I stammer. “It’s Tory. You know that. Just...give me a call ASAP. Thanks.”

The next ten seconds feel like an eternity as I push the gas, watching the maniac behind us speeding up, hovering several car lengths back, but matching our pace.

Then my phone rings. I fumble to hit the answer icon.

“Quinn!”

“Sorry, I was on the other line. What’s up?”

“It’s probably nothing, but...”

“But what?” His voice is alert, as if he just instinctively senses my nerves.

“There’s some dude in a red Chevy following me.”

“Where are you?”

The concern in his tone makes me feel like I’m making a mountain out of a molehill. But every time I glance back, the truck is still there, eerily steady, its driver’s eyes hidden under the brim of his hat.

“Just left Neuman’s Dairy, where I dropped the goats off for a big job. It’s off Highway—”

“I know where it’s at, woman. You’re only a few miles from the Purple Bobcat. Head there. Go inside and tell Grady I’m on my way.”

“The Purple—Quinn, I can’t. I have Owl with me. He’ll get overheated if I leave him in the truc—”

“Bar, Tory. Grady’s not stupid, he’ll let you bring Owl inside.”

“But—”

“Grady won’t care. Get your sweet ass over there now and quit arguin’,” he snaps, this growly command in his voice that’d be fun and sexy if I weren’t being tailed by a bad horror movie monster. “You’re gonna take a left on the next crossroad. It runs off almost parallel to the highway, but it’s a service road that runs right by the bar and comes out on the highway again, you copy?”

“Uh, copy.” I glance in the mirror. The red torpedo on wheels chugs along. “I think I know the road.”

“Good. It comes out just half a mile from Grady’s place.” He draws in a harsh breath. “Don’t hang up. Tell me if he gets any closer. Have you called the cops?”

“No. I thought I’d better try you first. He’s still behind me. Not close enough that I can see his plate. He’s about...three or maybe four car lengths back.”

“Did you see this guy? What’s he look like?”

“Yeah, he pulled up while I was leaving, and got out for a few minutes, asking about the goats.”

“What does he look like, Peach? Describe him.”

Like Goliath took a brickbat to the face!

But I can't just say that.

He'll probably wonder if I'm losing my mind if I try to describe what a stack of freak this guy is without Quinn seeing it for himself.

Some kind of beeping comes through my phone.

"Quinn? What's that noise? Is that you?"

"I put you on speaker so I can text Grady. Telling him to meet you in the parking lot now. I'll be there in a few. Now tell me what he looks like, darlin'. Hair color. Height. Tattoos. How old is he?"

If he's texting Grady, I won't need to say he's on his way. A thought that makes me worry.

"Don't text and drive!" I hiss, knowing my warning won't stop him from doing it. I glance at the mirror again. "Um, well, I'm not real good at guessing ages. Thirties, maybe. Around your age. Short hair, or maybe bald. I couldn't see any hair. He's wearing a baseball cap and a long-sleeved flannel shirt in this heat. Pretty odd."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"His boots were laced up and higher than usual. Not really work boots, but more like motorcycle riding boots or something. Black. They looked new. He's slender, muscular, and—oh, yeah—tall. So tall, it's scary."

"Tall?" he echoes numbly. "You're sure? What else?"

"Oh, yeah. And he's not exactly skinny, but not a bodybuilder either." *Not buff like you*, but of course I can't say that. "He had narrow eyes—couldn't get a read on their color—and scruffy whiskers like he hasn't shaved in a couple days."

"Any tattoos? Very important," he growls.

"I didn't see any, but I wasn't looking. And he was pretty buttoned up under that flannel outfit." I click on my blinker to turn sharply, passing the sign for the upcoming road.

"Is that your blinker? Are you turning onto the county road?"

"It's coming up."

"Is he turning, too?" Quinn asks, each question one more machine gun bullet after another.

"His blinker isn't on," I answer, glancing in the mirror.

"Is he by himself, Peach?"

"I...I think so. Never saw another vehicle, anyway, and I can't see anyone else in the pickup." I slow, just enough to make the corner.

The Chevy slows to a crawl, too.

My stomach sinks as I tell Quinn, "Looks like he's taking the corner, too."

Coming up right behind me.”

“Shit. It’s all right, darlin’. The road’s only a mile long, then just half a mile more to Grady’s place. You can do it. Push that truck as hard as it can go, speeding laws be damned. No harm in getting the cops’ attention right now if they’re around.”

I take a deep breath.

My shaky fingers turn white at their knuckles as I grip the wheel.

*Dear God.*

If I wasn’t on the phone with Quinn, I’d be a basket case by now. I’m sure of it.

“Where are you?” I ask. “Are you close?”

“On my way.”

I smile at that, how I already knew.

“Where, Quinn?”

“In town, just coming out the other side. Is he closing in on your ass? Making any moves to try to ram you?”

*Ram me? Holy hell.*

That’s action movie stuff. The thought never even crossed my mind, and I hold in a breath as my eyes flick back.

“No. He’s still three or four car lengths behind the trailer.” The sign telling me the highway is coming up comes into view. “I’m almost to the highway again, right by the Bobcat, I think.”

“Perfect. I’ll be at Grady’s in a few minutes.”

“How fast are you driving?” I shake my head, knowing how long it takes to get out here from Dallas’ main drag.

“Why’s it matter?” he asks.

“Because you must be speeding! I don’t want you getting into trouble.”

“I know all the deputies. They won’t give me shit.”

I smile. “What about the highway patrols?”

“Tory, fuck. They won’t pull me over, either. Now stop talking crap and tell me you’re on the highway?”

“Almost.” I don’t turn on my blinker this time. Quinn will drive past this road on his way, so I ask, “Are you near the intersection?”

“I will be shortly.”

I slow enough to get on the highway.

“He’s right behind me now. Taking the corner onto the highway.”

“Okay. Chin up. Grady knows you’re on your way. He’s waiting in the parking lot.”

That makes me worry about his safety.

“Um, how *long* was that text you sent him? Sounds like you told him everything.”

“Can you see the bar?” he asks, ignoring my question.

“Nope, I haven’t topped the hill just yet.”

“You’ll be able to see it as soon as you do.”

“I know.” That’s why I said I hadn’t topped the hill, but no sense in pointing it out.

We’re both so keyed up it’s a miracle we can think. A double miracle, certainly, that I’m able to drive like this.

I glance at Owl, who stares at the mirror outside the passenger window like he also knows something’s very wrong.

“I can see the Purple Bobcat sign,” I tell Quinn a moment later.

“All right, slow down. Tell me if he brakes, too.”

I tap my brakes and turn on my blinker, then shut it off, knowing that would tell Polyphemus what I’m doing.

But before I can worry more, the Chevy changes lanes abruptly.

“He’s changing lanes. He’s...he’s passing me! Thank *Gawd*.”

“Perfect. Just pull into the lot. Can you see Grady?”

“I see someone standing next to a black truck. It looks like Grady, but I’m not there yet. He’s too far away. The Chevy just flew past the bar, by the way...”

“Okay. I’ll be there in a jiffy, Peach. Hang on.”

For him, I think I always will.

“I see Grady,” I say softly. “I’ll hang up now. See you soon. And thanks!”

“Don’t even, Peach. Don’t thank me,” he rumbles with an edge. “If anything ever happened to you, I’d...fuck. You know, Tory. I think you *know*.”

Suddenly I have a whole new reason to freeze up. The intense, ferocious, and adorably choked off way Quinn flipping Faulkner says he cares for me puts the whole car chase to shame.

Holy hell.

I wait until he says bye before hitting the end button and turning into the parking lot.

Then I brace for how obscenely *hard* I’m going to hug this man, and never, ever let go.



## WE'VE GOAT ISSUES (FAULKNER)



**T**he relief that washes over me when my truck crests the hill and I see Tory's trailer in the Purple Bobcat's parking lot shreds me.

Son of a bitch.

She's safe. She's sound. She's still in one gorgeous piece.

If the psycho following her had tried to run her off the road, there wouldn't have been a damn thing I could've done.

I'm thankful as hell for small favors, even if it pricks up the hair on the back of my neck.

Somebody knew what they were doing, tailing my girl just enough to shake her up.

*Wait.*

*My girl?*

Shit.

I suck in a few gulps of air to anchor my nerves and try to get my head back in the right space.

Clearly, I'm the one who's shook.

I ain't thinking straight because it was too fucking close.

This can't go on.

Can't and *won't*.

My original plan was to head for the dairy farm to check on her, but just as I'd been leaving town, Joyce Selleck called. I'd sent the video Tory took straight to Joyce's lawyer this morning, after leaving Dean's place.

I'd gone home then, to put out some feelers on Jean-Paul Delong.

William Selleck's cheating ass on video—literally—was almost an afterthought.

The lady was mighty pleased with my work, though, and gave me a bigger

paycheck than I expected.

Money I intend to split with Tory since those X-rated shots of Mr. Cheater were hers.

I turn into the parking lot, pull up next to Tory's truck, and throw mine in park.

"Faulk, she's fine," Grady tells me under his breath as I race around the front of my truck to the door, pushing past him into the bar.

I have to see for myself.

The instant I see her, I'm glassed.

She's parked on a barstool, looking drop-dead sexy as ever.

Being scared out of her wits does nothing to sand away her beauty.

I don't even realize I'm standing there, gawking like a fool, until she pokes her head up and opens those lips I might die to taste again.

"Hey, Quinn," she says, her smile wobbly. "Sorry for making such a fuss."

"Don't," I growl, stepping forward, rapidly closing the space between us. "Don't you even *dare* apologize. Not for doing the right thing."

And the instant she stands, I can't tell who ignites first.

All I know is my arms are wrapped around her, pressing tight, hoisting her off her feet as she squeals and locks her arms around my neck.

I want to kiss her so fucking bad.

But seeing how I'm already whacked out of my head and we haven't even talked about my lips mauling her on the Ferris wheel the first time...I settle.

Settle for pushing her face to my shoulder, stroking her hair, breathing her in, convincing myself she's okay, dammit.

*She's okay.*

One more tight squeeze from her and a sky-blue glance, and I finally set her down.

Tory shakes her head, spilling her auburn curls everywhere.

"It was probably nothing," she says. "He might even work for the Neuman's, or maybe he was just going in the same direction as me. I've never met them. Uncle Dean set the job up. And the guy thought I was being kinda 'snotty' since he scared me, put me on edge, so—"

"Bullshit. He shouldn't have followed you like that, whether he was a Neuman worker or not. I'm gonna follow up and find out, don't you worry," I say, trying to make her feel better.

The angry, black storm in my gut says there's no fucking chance it was anything so innocent as a dairy farmer being a jackass on the road.

Still, I don't want to scare her, freak her out, so I leave her with the slim possibility.

“I got a couple pictures of the truck as it blew past,” Grady says, joining us. “They might be blurry—my phone’s four years old—but maybe we can blow them up so you can get a license plate number or something. I’ll text them to you, Faulk.”

“Thanks. I’ll send them to the sheriff’s office and the Neuman place, see if they can make anything out.” Not wanting to upset Tory more, I change the subject. “I sent Joyce Selleck’s lawyer the stuff we talked about. They’re both impressed. Don’t think he’ll have a leg to stand on in court. I ain’t no lawyer, but it sounds like North Dakota still recognizes fault in some cases, and this dude definitely didn’t just slip and fall into Rosie’s tits.”

Tory belts out an adorable laugh. I grin because it’s good to see her laughing again after what just went down.

“Damn, Faulk. You really outdid yourself, getting them in such a compromising position,” Grady says, giving a thankful nod. “Joyce already offered me a lifetime of babysitting, but of course I’m not biting and taking advantage. She’s already too good to my girls.”

“Gotta give credit where it’s due—Tory here shot the juiciest stuff at the rodeo,” I say, casting a proud grin her way. “Thank her for making Joyce’s prenup ironclad.”

“Thanks for helping Joyce out, Faulk,” Grady says, turning. “You, too, Tory.”

Her cheeks glow bashful pink.

“No problem.” Nodding, she adds, “Thank you for returning the favor today, Grady. I hope I didn’t cause much trouble for you and your customers.”

“None at all. It’s pretty dead right now before the regulars start rolling in for the evening.” Grady motions to the empty seats. “Why don’t you two stay a while? Beers on the house.”

“I wish I could.” Tory shakes her head. “But I have Owl to worry about and need to get home.”

“I need to get back to town, too,” I tell him. “Rain check, man. Thanks again for your help.”

“Anytime.” Grady slaps my shoulder with his big paw. “You know it.”

He waves at Tory one more time and then heads back behind the bar, doing what Grady does best.

“Are you okay to drive?” I ask her.

“I’m fine. Just embarrassed, really. I’m sure this was a bunch of excitement over nothing.”

And I’m absolutely sure it wasn’t. The pressure is on to tell her the truth.

The whole truth, but not here.

“I’ll follow you to Granny’s. Peace of mind.” I reach for my wallet and pull it out. “Oh yeah, and before I forget...half of this belongs to you.”

“You wrote me a check?” She looks up, confused.

“You did the lion’s share of the work with our little cheater bust at the rodeo. Fair’s fair, and I bet you can use the money. Don’t fight me,” I warn.

“Oh, Quinn, you don’t have to do that. The check or following me home...”

She tries to push the slip of paper back to me, the little minx.

I ain’t having it. Swatting her hand away, I grab it, open her palm, and then close her fist around it.

“But—”

“No buts, Peach. That’s the one thing we’ve got no time for today.” I shift my hand and give the back of her neck a soft squeeze. “I want you to keep it, just like I want to make sure you get home okay.”

Removing my hand, I lead her outside.

Tory follows, prettier than she has any business being under the evening sun. My eyes roam every chance they get as she follows me to my truck.

Once we’re there, I give the door a quick slap. “I’ll be right behind you. You good?”

With a slow, jerky smile, she nods. “Y-yeah. You’re a heck of a guy.”

Wrong.

I’m the whole reason she’s worried about mysterious wolves with sharp teeth chasing her out of the blue.

Still, I keep my mouth shut, flash her another easygoing grin, and climb in the driver’s seat.

She waits till I’m in my truck before getting back in Dean’s rig with Owl and pulling forward. Her trailer rumbles across the parking lot and then onto the highway.

I’m right behind her, and now that I’m no longer on the phone with her, I dial an old FBI contact who can drill deep. He’s got intense resources I don’t have in private security, even though he turned in his badge before I did.

Ever since we were classmates at Quantico, James Nobel left an impression I’ll never forget.

Always the smartest sounding dude in the room, platinum-blond hair like a prince, permanent stick up his ass with...well, everything.

I smile, knowing married life and years of working for Enguard Security out west has softened his assholery. Even so, I’m betting he’s still the sharpest tool in the box.

The call goes direct to his voicemail.

“James, it’s Faulkner. You got that stuff I sent over about Bart Pickett’s files

being sealed a few days ago? I need an update, whenever you get a chance. Thanks.”

A sigh leaves me as I follow Tory into town.

I think I’ll always appreciate how the countryside just melts into Dallas like a Mayberry dream. Idyllic Midwestern fields give way to busy people on little streets, kids running along beside their parents with ice cream cones hanging in their hands.

It’s innocence itself, an oasis in a world full of lethal shitheels like the Pickett brothers and their corrosive drugs.

In the blink of an eye, I wonder what it’d be like to take Tory Three Names on a real date around here.

Not the kind where we wind up sharing burgers or giving into animal urges on a Ferris wheel we don’t talk about again.

More like the kind where it’s just us, easy conversation, and a lazy afternoon.

The kind where I’d have her hand in mine, and we’d browse the little shops, chit-chat with the locals, feed the ducks in the park, and then stop for a stolen kiss or two in the evening’s orange glow.

The kind where those greedy kisses wouldn’t stop with awkward second-guessing, but they’d lead us straight home, out of our clothes, into a frolicking flesh heap equal parts sugar and spice.

Yeah, fuck.

Silly as it sounds, I’d like that a lot.

I’d like to *be* with her, even if I know full well it’d only be temporary.

This morning, when I’d logged into the cloud she’d sent me with the Selleck stuff, I’d taken a few minutes to look at some of the other videos she had saved.

I’m normally not a snoop, but curiosity caught me by the balls.

Soon I was staring at Tory on the stage, dancing her heart out, graceful as a swan.

Everything Dean said was dead-on.

She’s one hell of a dancer.

Her style ain’t exactly the traditional ballet with tutus and old-timey shoes I pictured. It felt more like a blend of modern and traditional moves and music stitched together in harmony.

Energetic. Beautiful. Indescribably elegant.

I’m no artsty-fartsy guy, but I couldn’t pull my eyes away.

I’ve never seen anything like it.

Never watched a ballet before, but the videos of her dancing were pure perfection as she moved, whirling in tight form, making her body an instrument of the music, arms and legs like spinning silks in the air.

Not a single missed step or stumble.

Dean described it perfectly when he said it was like watching a butterfly take flight.

Damn right it was.

In fact, if I hadn't already sent out feelers about that Jean-Paul De-asshole, I'm not sure I'd want anything to do with keeping her away from home after watching those videos. They spoke loud and clear.

Tory needs to return to Chicago and her dreams.

Whether she dances with his outfit or another, she belongs on the stage.

Those videos showed her talent, her soul, how she's in her glory while she's moving like an angel, bathed in soft music and basking in bright lights.

It feels like it barely takes a few minutes before we arrive at Granny's house.

Tory climbs out of the truck with Owl hot on her heels.

"Home safe and sound," she says, more flippant than she appears as we meet near the front of my truck. "You're free to get back to better things, I'm sure."

The worry lines on her face are proof I haven't been the only one thinking hard about a lot of things the whole way here.

They'll ease, I'm sure, but it makes my blood go molten to think about her scared. I'd heard it in her voice on the phone during the chase.

Hell, she'd probably heard a little fear in mine, too.

"I, uh, better get Owl a drink of water. It's hot out here." She folds her hands in front of her.

The glance she throws me behind those long lashes tells me the prick from the Neuman place ain't the only thing on her mind. I can also sense this isn't the place or time to gab about *us*—for lack of a better two-letter word with infinite awkwardness.

So I manage a smile. "What time will the infamous eggplant parm be served tonight?"

"You don't have to eat supper with us." She shakes her head.

"Wrong, Peach. If I don't, Granny Coffey will hunt me down like a rabid dog."

The grimace she makes is not only cute, it tells me she knows I'm totally right.

"Six o'clock. Does that work?" she asks.

"Sure. I'll be back with an appetite."

"Thanks, and thanks again for..." She shrugs, meeting my eyes. "For everything."

"It's what I do."

With a parting wink, I walk around my truck and get in, lingering till she's

inside before starting the engine and backing out.



BEARING GIFTS, I knock on Granny's door a few hours later.

As usual, it's Granny herself who answers the door.

"I knew you wouldn't let me down," she says, nodding at my full hands. "Time to face the music, punk."

"Eggplant has a theme song? News to me," I say with a grin.

Granny isn't the least bit amused at my shitty joke till I hand her the wine bottle. A large one with a California label.

Her eyes light up.

"That's for the trouble I've caused. Should help the medicine go down easier," I say, then hold up the purple flowers in my other hand. "These are for the cook, something to match the stuff she's preparing." Finally, I pull out the big rawhide bone tucked under my arm. "And this is for your boy on four legs."

Granny laughs.

"My, my, a busy man out to steal the hearts of the entire household." Granny gives me a wink. "I like it." Stepping aside, she waves me inside. "Come on in."

"Thanks."

As she shuts the door, she whispers, "Just so you know, I have ham sandwiches hidden in the garage fridge in case you need a *real* dinner."

I laugh, but also admit, "It smells good, at least."

"Smells can be terribly deceiving," she snaps.

"I think you've got eggplant phobia, Granny."

"And?" She shrugs, hoisting her nose in the air. "There are far worse afflictions."

"Maybe so," I say, swallowing another chuckle.

"Beer or wine?" she asks, leading me into the kitchen.

I go for the beer and take a seat at the table as directed after giving Tory her flowers and Owl his bone. They both appear to like their gifts.

Within a few minutes, the food materializes on the table, and it all looks delicious.

I don't care what the old lady thinks.

Besides the heaping pan of steaming eggplant parm, there's a garden salad prepped from a real garden, a diced fruit mix, cottage cheese, and garlic bread slathered with melted cheese.

What can I say? I've never been an overly picky eater—never had much

choice—especially while spending summers here with Gramps. The Army didn't offer much variety, and neither did the years I spent working for the FBI.

My meals were usually grab-and-go or straight out of a can.

I start with a forkful of the eggplant. Granny and Tory's eyes are both glued to me in breathless expectation.

Shoveling it in, I give it a good chew, letting the flavor wash over me.

"Good stuff," I say. "Seriously good."

No lie.

With harsh skepticism in her eyes, Granny sneers at her fork. Then, after a heavy second, she decides to bite the bullet—or eat it in this case.

I share a subtle grin with Tory across the table as we both watch the old woman gingerly trying to make sense of the dreaded plant in her mouth.

A moment later, Granny's eyes light up.

"Well...well, well, well. This isn't the slop I expected." She takes another bite, this time a bigger one. "Not bad at all."

Tory grins, but doesn't say *I told you so*, like most people would.

She's too good an all-around person, and once again, I'm torn up about what I have to do.

*Convince her to go home.*

My sources are still looking into Bat and his likely parole date. The fact that his records are all sealed is too strange. I'm counting down the hours till James gets back to me.

Sealed records don't happen with thugs like him.

Not unless he's made some kind of deal.

A sick, tortured part of me wonders if he's already out. Already *here*.

I think back to the car chase earlier. *So tall, it's scary.*

That's how Tory described the man she encountered. An unmistakable Pickett family trait, even if I have a hard time believing he'd be out and about, doing the dirty work himself.

But my gut tells me if it wasn't Bat, it could've been somebody else from the Pickett clan. A cousin or something.

All rolling into Dallas, searching and plotting a grisly end for yours truly.

Shit, it ain't fair.

Then again, nothing in this world ever is.

Despite how gutted I'd felt when she first told me about the new job offer, I need her to leave Dallas behind without looking back.

I can't keep an eye on her twenty-four seven, and that's what I'd need to do if she stays here. Bat and the scum working for him have already connected her to me.

I wait until our plates are almost empty before saying, “So, when does this new job in Chicago start up?”

Tory shrugs. “It doesn’t have a set date, but it won’t be long before the groups from overseas arrive. I’m not going back to Chicago until after Granny takes her cruise.”

“You decided to go after all?” I ask Granny. Talk about a wrench in my plan, getting Tory out of town ASAP.

“That’s news to me! Last I checked, I’m not going,” she clips, looking at Tory warily.

“Oh, yes, you are, Gran,” Tory insists. “What kind of granddaughter would I be if I stopped you from going on the trip of a lifetime?”

“Now who said it was the trip of a lifetime?” Granny narrows her eyes.

“Robert Duncan, when I picked the goats up from his neighbor’s place before the Neuman job,” Tory answers.

“How fitting!” Granny snorts. “He’s such a nasty old goat himself.”

“Gran, you’ve already paid for the cruise,” Tory says, her voice strained like she’s on the verge of pleading. “I said I’d stay here and watch your house. It’s no big deal.”

“You can’t, dear,” Granny says. “There’s no other option.”

“Yes, there is,” Tory argues, hot frustration bursting on her cheeks. “Is something going on? Is it Mom breathing down your neck again?”

For a second, Granny Coffey looks jarred.

*Damn.* Not totally wanting to self-insert into the middle of their fight, I feel I have to, especially when I don’t like the thought of Tory staying here alone. “But you could go if she took the Chicago job, right?”

“Oh, no. She’s not taking that bait,” Granny answers, rolling out a sigh. “She came here to heal, and she’s not done healin’ yet.”

“I’m healed enough, Gran.” Tory levels a glare at her grandmother. “And you never answered my question. Are Mom and Dad involved in this? I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn, otherwise.”

“Me? You’re the one who’s being stubborn as a mule, missy.” Granny says. “And no. You really think I’d do your parents’ bidding? Ha!”

Granny throws up her arms.

Tory facepalms.

Yep. I’d say they’re neck and neck in the stubbornness department.

“Then give me one solid reason why I can’t just stay here and house-sit while you go on your cruise like a normal person.” Tory holds up a finger. “A *good* reason, Granny. Not an excuse.”

Granny sets down her fork with a *clink* and leans back in her chair, arms

crossed.

“Fine. You want to know the real reason? I’ll tell you. It’s because the cruise was a package deal that Imhoff Builders offered to seniors. Anyone who booked a cruise was given a large percentage off the cost of a home remodeling project to be completed during the cruise.”

“What? Oh...” Tory frowns thoughtfully. “So *that’s* what you meant when you said you were having your kitchen and bathroom remodeled soon.”

“Yes, soon-soon, and that’s exactly why you can’t stay here if I’m gone. You won’t have a kitchen or bathroom, or any running water. So, I’m just canceling the entire thing. I’ll do it next year.”

“Next year? No.” Tory shakes her head. “Did you already pay for the remodeling too?”

“It was all one big ball of wax.” Granny shrugs. “No biggie. I’ve lived in this house as is for forty years. What’s one more?”

“It’s a lot if I’m the cause of it. You deserve a vacation and a nicer place, Gran.” Tory runs a hand through her hair, letting out a hiss of frustration.

“Let’s not get dramatic,” Granny says softly. “It’s my choice not to go, dear. I’m still kicking and my mind’s plenty sharp. I invited you to come here and stay until you’re fully healed, and that’s what’s going to happen. You’re *not* going back to Chicago until you’re ready. And I’m not going to Alaska. Easy-peasy.”

“You’re right about me not going back to Chicago just yet. I have to finish the goat gigs. I promised Uncle Dean I would.” Tory slaps the table gently. “Hey, that’s it! I could stay with Uncle Dean and keep an eye on the remodeling project for you.”

*No, dammit, I think to myself, her going to Chicago would solve bigger problems.*

“In that hovel?” Granny scoffs. “He only has two bedrooms, and with all the crap in his house, good luck finding them. Last time I was there, he had a lawnmower engine on his coffee table.” She looks at me. “I love my son, but he’s a Neanderthal.”

I smile in agreement, but the hair on my neck starts to stand on end as Granny’s gaze locks on. A slow, curly smile forms on her lips.

*Oh, hell. What now?*

As her eyes begin twinkling, she glances at Tory.

“Say, now, that’s not such a bad idea,” Granny says, rubbing her chin. “You staying with someone else in town...why didn’t I think of that?”

Shit.

*Shit, shit, shit!*

My stomach churns as I realize what the old woman’s thinking, and it ain’t

happening.

Tory *living* with me isn't even an option right now.

I've got headaches with men who want me dead, a torn-up house, and last but not least, she's a walking Siren.

How the hell would I ever get anything done with Peach up in my space?

How could I even undo the kiss at the rodeo and keep us friends?

"It would have to be someone upstanding," Granny continues while she stands. "Someone I could trust a hundred percent." She pats my shoulder as she walks behind me, around the table. "Come to think of it, I *would* like to go on that cruise, and they can't guarantee me a spot next year."

I watch her, glaring as she opens the fridge and pulls out a lemon meringue pie.

"And wouldn't you know I've dreamed of having a dishwasher for thirty years?" she laughs.

Tory gives her a weird look, and then starts collecting the dinner plates and silverware, carrying them to the counter.

"Well, maybe I could stay next door with Otis and Velma."

"Not happening." Granny sets the pie on the table. "It has to be someone who can stand up to your folks if they start trying to jerk you around. Would you, handsome?" She hands me a knife to cut the pie.

"Yeah," I say dryly, stabbing the knife into the creamy layers.

"Because you just know your parents, or that Jean-Paul character," she says his name with a sneer, "are gonna show up with pretty excuses sooner or later. They'll try to reel you back in as soon as they hear I'm gone."

"I mean...fine. You're right." Tory brings small plates and forks to the table and sits down with a sigh. "They'll give it their best annoying shot. Maybe I can just rent a cheap place."

That won't work, but I don't have to say it.

Not when Granny's already on the case.

"Maybe if it was winter, but this time of year? There's nothing to rent around here." She pats my shoulder again. "We need someone with a big old house. Lots of spare rooms. And it always helps to have somebody you know because, who needs that awkwardness, living with a total stranger?"

Yeah.

Subtlety and Granny Coffey don't share the same universe.

I help her lift the pieces I've cut up with the knife, ignoring her brutally obvious hints of me and my house.

Granny sets three big pieces of pie on the plates and lays forks next to them. Then she picks up two of the plates.

“Well, this old gal’s brain is fresh out of ideas. Why don’t you two think on it while I take these next door for Otis and Velma?” She gives me a devilish wink. “Ta-ta!”

A moment later. She’s out the door, whistling to herself.

“Oh, Granny...she only left us one piece. I’ll get another plate and fork. It’s a big one so we can share,” Tory says.

I lay a hand on her arm.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m full. The eggplant parm was really good.”

She picks up the fork with a sunny smile. “You sure? Granny makes the best lemon meringue pie on the planet.” She slices the pie with her fork and holds it up to me. “It’s won more than one blue ribbon. Just try it.”

I lean over and take the bite of pie off the fork. The sudden tart hit of sugar and citrus is blue-ribbon worthy, I’ll admit.

She laughs when I’m still chewing after ten seconds.

“That good, right?”

“Very,” I grunt, hating how my eyes instantly fall to her pink lips.

The lemon meringue might be dessert heaven, but it’s not the pie making me hard as a rock now.

Fuck.

Using the same fork, she takes a bite, moving her lips in a way perfectly designed to torture me. “Mmmm-mmm. Oh my *God*. I’d forgotten *how* good.”

*Oh my God.*

Hearing her gasp in sheer rapture replays in my head like a loop.

My dick jerks in my pants.

I can’t help picturing her under me, those long legs wrapped tight, raking my back with her nails while I tame that wicked mouth and my hips pound hers into the mattress.

So this is what it feels like when a man loses his mind.

The fork hangs at my mouth again, holding another piece she’s peeled off, offering to feed me.

I eat it, hoping the taste brings me back to earth.

“Why don’t you want to go back to Chicago yet? Besides the goats, I mean?”

She eats another bite of pie. “It’s a mess back there, Quinn. I’m not ready to face it yet.”

“What sort of mess?” I wonder, surprised at her honesty.

Setting down the fork, she shakes her head, blinking away sadness.

“A mess. A bigger one than here,” she whispers, throwing me a bitter look. “Thing is, I can deal with whatever small-town drama happens here. But back home...I just don’t know where to begin. The dance director job has a massive

catch I'm still working through."

Great.

So Chicago isn't the best place for her, and who am I to tell her how she should go about chasing her own dreams? Even if she's damn good at what she does, and I think she'd be real sad giving up dancing.

There's also no mistaking what she means about Dallas drama, something I had a big fat hand in—or rather, a big fat mouth.

My brain scans through my options and keeps sticking on the same one.

If she's gonna stay here in Dallas, it has to be where I can keep her safe.

At least till I know for sure what's going down with Bat Pickett and his crew.

I pick up the fork and feed her a hunk of sweetness as I gather up the strength for what's coming next—the unbearable admission that Granny Coffey's dumb idea might be *right*.

"Quinn? You're quiet," she says, smiling sheepishly when she's done chewing.

"We'd better get your stuff packed," I tell her.

She frowns. "Stuff packed? Why? I just told you I'm not going back to Chicago."

"I know." Filling the fork with a bigger chunk from the end, I hold it to her lips again.

Once she's so full of pie she can't speak, I drop the bomb.

"You're moving in with me tonight."

Her eyes widen.

She slaps a hand over her full mouth, desperately trying not to spit.

I hope like hell I didn't just ruin that last bite, waiting with bated breath for her to swallow and speak. She beams a look at me like I've lost my mind.

"W-what did you just say?" she asks, her words shaking.

For the life of me, I don't fucking know.

I just know what has to be done.



## YOU'VE GOAT IT BAAAD (TORY)



**W**hen I think back, it's somewhat of a blur how it happened, but I'm here. Quinn's house.

This time for a whole lot longer than just one evening installing appliances and a swing.

I'm not sure if it was Granny's idea, or Quinn's, or God's. But the fact remains, I've moved in, and Granny is busy packing for the Alaskan wilderness.

She'd flat out told me if I didn't stay here with Quinn, she'd cancel the trip and the remodeling job, ultimately forfeiting half the money she'd put down for a deposit.

Ugh.

What could I say to that?

The only part that surprises me is it was Quinn who invited me. Well, more than invited, he'd *demand*ed it in all his growly, green-eyed glory.

I knew I shouldn't just up and agree.

Not with the issues back home, the issues in my head, or the ginormous fire-breathing issues of living with my best friend who kisses me with the solar heat of a thousand suns.

An issue I still haven't touched with him. Much less sorted out. Much less *forgotten*.

Happy days.

It's so rare when a red flag whacks you right across the face like this one, screaming *bad idea*. But it did, and I'd ignored it.

That first day was awkward to say the least.

We went about our business on pins and needles, inhabiting the same space without truly sharing it. Yesterday was better, though, and today might be the first day I can actually call this arrangement fine.

At least the house is gorgeous, no thanks to Quinn's remodeling work and keen eye for detail. It's plenty large enough for far more than two people.

He gave me my pick of the four bedrooms—excluding his, of course.

Sharing a house already makes me twelve shades of red.

The thought of sharing a room with him might cause spontaneous Tory-combustion.

I finish brushing my hair and leave the tiled bathroom attached to my bedroom. Sitting on the bed, I pull on my boots and give my arms a solid overhead stretch. My muscles are still burning from the resistance band exercises I did this morning.

Without Granny around, I'm not riding the bike all over town, so I'll have to find another way to give my legs a good workout every day.

The house is quiet as I make my way downstairs, though I'm sure Quinn is up.

Owl was also part of the move from Granny's to Quinn's, but I don't see him in the laundry room, where he's made himself comfy the last couple of nights, sprawled out on the cool floor.

He must be dying in the summer heat behind all that fur, so I like to get him outside to check on the goats early in the mornings, before the day's oppressive heat rolls in.

The coffee brewing in the drip maker is still hot. I pour myself a cup and grab one more for Quinn before walking out the back door, looking for signs of activity as I walk down the steps.

Besides a smaller metal workshop building, there's a large barn behind the house.

Noting the open door, I make my way over.

Owl, with his sixth sense, rushes out of the barn and races up the small hill to greet me. I give him a friendly bump with my hip—the best I can manage with my hands full—before we walk to the barn together.

The building is old, but it's been painted recently on the outside. Classic red with white trim, which makes me smile.

"Mornin', Peach." Quinn steps out carrying a dustpan.

My heart skips a beat at the sight of him.

Basically the normal thing it does now. Actually, it was already a thing when it came to seeing him, but I'm not dwelling on it for too many reasons.

"Good morning." I stare at the broom in his hand. "You're sweeping out the barn with a dustpan?"

"No, just the corner." He dumps the contents of the dustpan in a cardboard box on the ground. "There was some old broken glass. Never noticed it before,

probably something from way back when Gramps was around. He liked to have his whiskey out here sometimes.”

I nod, grinning as I step toward the open door. “I remember a big party in this barn one summer. That time he was out of town, fishing in Montana...”

“A party you were too young to be at,” he growls, his eyes flashing mock-serious.

“Yeah, right. I was as old as half the other kids here,” I say, heading inside for a good look around.

The Faulkner barn has happy memories etched in its worn wood. The barn is just as spacious as I remember, with big brace timber framing overhead and an old scuffed-up wooden floor.

He follows me inside. “The other kids were also too damn young to be here.”

“I know. Here, figured you could use a refill.” I take a sip off my coffee and pass him the extra mug. “You were always Mr. Hall Monitor, sending everyone underage home.”

“And you didn’t listen.” He takes a loud slurp off his coffee.

“Because I knew you wouldn’t *make* me.” I laugh, flashing him an evil smile.

“Brat now, brat then. What else is new?”

“I think you’d agree we’ve both done some growing up.” I laugh again as a sense of genuine happiness fills me. And also at how he sputters on his next sip. “I distinctly recall leaving well before eleven, my curfew time.”

“Because if you hadn’t, your granny would’ve come looking. Probably riding Edison to help sniff you out.”

Laughing, I nod.

She totally would’ve.

I walk deeper into the barn, sipping coffee and staring at the rafters. This place really is huge and so wide open. I’m not sure they make them like this anymore.

“What happened to the old tractor? Didn’t he park it here in the winter?” I ask.

“Sold it at the auction,” he says. “Hated to give it up, but it’s in better hands with somebody who needs it for work.”

Slowly, I turn, watching him pull a couple cans of paint off a shelf in the corner. “What auction was that?”

“My brother Alan and I inherited this place, but he didn’t want anything to do with it. So we decided to auction off what we could from Gramps’ old tools and antiques. He got some money, and I got the place.”

“Won’t you be a little sad to sell it?” I bite my lips, knowing it’s none of my

business.

He sets the paint cans on the floor and leans back, arms crossed.

“Honestly? Yeah. The longer I’m here, the more it’s grown on me. I’m a country boy to my bones, I guess, even if I’ve spent half my life away from farming. I thought I could just spend a few months fixing it up and sell it real easy, but now, after a year and a half...I’m wondering if I should keep it. Maybe rent it out, or, hell, I don’t know, turn it into another place Ridge and Grace can use for their projects.”

“Aren’t they like bazillionaires? They probably don’t need the space,” I say softly. “You could just live here.”

He nods once, but then shakes his head.

“I mean...nah, it ain’t practical. No matter how long I stay in Dallas, I can’t be running after a place this big forever all by myself. Tons of upkeep.”

“Why’s that? Looks like you’ve been managing just fine,” I say. “Are you thinking ahead? Once you go back to the FBI?”

He picks up the paint cans with a shrug that almost seems annoyed.

“I won’t be going back to the FBI, Peach.”

Whoa.

What?

Confused, I shake my head and speed up to follow him to the door. “Why? You said you were on a sabbatical.”

“I was, for a year. Then I quit.”

His eyes seize mine darkly as I catch up. He even sounds bruised, like I’ve just poked at a painful scab.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry...so you’ve been doing your private detective work since then?”

“That’s the long and short of it,” he tells me, though his voice says there’s a lot more.

Owl joins us as we head for the house.

“You make enough to live on with those jobs like the one we did for Grady’s friend? Not being nosy, I’m just curious.”

“Peach, you’re nosy as hell. And it’s okay.” He laughs. “Some months, the money’s good. This is a quiet town and sleepy county, but there’s always some asshole who’s five years behind on child support or runaway teenagers to find. Some months, the money ain’t great, but it doesn’t matter.”

“No?” I’m baffled how he’s surviving, especially with what he must’ve sunk into this house for renovations.

I know Grandpa Faulkner wasn’t a rich man, so he couldn’t have left behind much...

“Okay, Miss Nosy, you really want to know?” Quinn gives me a lopsided smile, his eyes flashing. “Alan, besides being a bush pilot, is a financial planner. Years ago, when he was first starting in the trade, he convinced me to let him invest my Army pay in a couple of big A’s and G’s. I couldn’t spend it on shit while I was overseas with no family to support back home, so I took the gamble.”

“Big A’s and G’s?”

“Amazon and Google, mostly, back when they were little. I’ve also made out like a bandit on a few other companies you’d recognize. He’s kept up being my financial planner ever since and makes sure to rap me across the knuckles if I ever start trying to draw out so much money it won’t last.”

“Wow. The Faulkner wolves of Dallas Street. Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” I’m being silly, but I love how his face lights up anyway.

“Let’s just say my brother’s ingenuity not only set him up for life, it’s bought me one hell of a cushion.” He gives me a cock-eyed grin.

“Good for you—and Alan! You guys are humble about it, too.”

So not like Mom’s old school money and Dad’s endless boasting about his tech stocks.

We arrive at the house a minute later, enjoying a companionable silence, and I point to the paint cans he’d picked up again just before leaving the barn. “Are you finally tackling the cupboards today?”

“Sure am.” He holds open the screen door for me to enter. “Are you interested in helping?”

“Definitely! But Owl and I have to go do goat duty first. They’ve still got a long ways to go at Neuman’s Dairy before they’re close to finished.”

He sets the cans down on the laundry room floor.

“I’ll come with,” he says, his voice serious. “We can go through the drive thru and pick up a couple breakfast burritos on the way through town, then we’ll come back and paint some cupboards.”

“I’m game for that.” I set my coffee down. “Ready whenever you are.”

He opens the door again. “Then let’s grab our stuff and go. We’ll take my truck.”

Like Uncle Dean’s, it’s a large GMC, just a whole lot newer and nicer. “We should take mine. We’ll need Owl in case we need to chase the goats around the property or something.”

“My truck’s dog friendly, Peach.”

I shrug. “If you don’t mind, neither do we. I’m sure he’ll love the air conditioning.”

“It’s not working in your truck?”

“It’s Uncle Dean’s truck,” I say. “What do you think the answer to that is?”

He chuckles knowingly. “We can have one of Jess Berland’s mechanics look at it. He owns the Chevy dealership. I bought my truck there and he’s a good guy. Grady’s nephew, Weston, also does auto work part time.”

We climb in his truck with Owl filling up the back seat.

“Sounds like overkill,” I say. “I’ll only need the truck for a couple more weeks tops.”

The relaxed smile hanging on Quinn’s face fades.

“Still thinking you’ll head back to Chicago by then?” he asks, steering us out of the driveway.

I nod, even as a tight knot forms in my stomach.

“I can’t stall forever. I have to face my other life sooner or later.” Watching the trees, the grass, the open space go by through the window, I hold in a sigh.

“I guess I’m a lot like you. The longer I’m here, the more this place grows on me. It’s nice not having the pressure of the city. All the people. All the work. All the stress.” I release my sigh then, as reality hits home. “But I’m not like you...I didn’t have an older brother invest in any magic letters for me.”

“And you miss dancing like hell,” he finishes for me.

“Maybe.” I twist my head to get a good look at him. “How’d you know?”

“You have to miss what you’re good at.” He grins. “I’ve got a confession. Don’t hate me. When you sent me that link to the cloud, I checked out a couple of your videos...”

*Oh my God.*

I barely resist the urge to pull my hair over my face and hide behind it.

“You’re one hell of a dancer, Tory Three Names. Like lightning in a bottle.”

Oh, wow.

Suddenly I’m less upset that he’d looked at the videos I’d clumsily left up.

Actually, I feel weirdly flattered.

“Thanks. I think. And how much do you know about ballet?”

His next laugh comes straight from the gut, one of the best ever, so intense it makes *me* want to join in just hearing it.

“Probably about as much as you knew about goats when you showed up back here.”

“That much?” I’m giggling as I say it.

“Yep. But just because I’m clueless doesn’t mean I didn’t like what I saw. You were fucking amazing.”

“Well, thanks,” I sputter, trying with all my might not to blush. “Good thing we have Owl. I think he’s a secret expert on everything.”

Quinn’s eyes are glowing like emeralds in the sun as his gaze turns on me.

“And I have you. You must know more about dance than anyone. You’ve been doing it your entire life.”

I nod, but no longer feel like laughing.

“You’re not wrong,” I tell him.

“So, what’s it like? Dancing on the ends of your toes?” He shakes his head. “Just thinking about that shit makes my feet ache.”

“It hurts,” I say. “*At first*. But once you get the hang of it, you don’t even notice. And most dancing these days is a lot more contemporary, a fusion of past and present.” Memories whip through my mind so fast, I close my eyes. “When the music fills you and you’ve got your routine down pat...it’s a little like you’re flying. It doesn’t take any effort, any thought. You just let the music be the wind beneath your wings.”

I lean back and smile at the rush. I do miss that. Letting the music carry me away like I’m a feather on the open air.

The hundreds of routines I’ve practiced over the years flood my mind. I can see myself dancing, twirling, and spinning on the tips of my toes.

“You really miss it, don’t you?” he asks quietly.

I open my eyes. “Yeah, but I don’t miss the pressure. Or all the *shit* that comes with the territory. People—a few very specific people—are the worst.”

“Everything’s a give and take.”

“No denying that,” I whisper, my eyes fixed on him.

Somehow, I get the feeling we’ve moved past ballet, casting these longing looks at each other. Or maybe it’s just my imagination after being run through an emotional juicer.

Thankfully, we’ve arrived at the breakfast place, lending a much needed distraction.

“One burrito or two?” he asks as he pulls into the drive thru.

“Just one. I’m still a little burritoed out after Kenny’s truck, even though these are way smaller.”

He orders six, plus two orange juices.

“Six? Um, you must be really hungry,” I say just as we arrive at the window to pay.

“One for you, two for Owl, and three for me.”

Owl barks in loud agreement. We both laugh.

We eat our food in the parking lot and then head for the dairy farm, talking about nothing important, yet conversing the entire time.

It always was that way between us, easy conversations and easier feelings.

I should be glad that’s falling back into place, our friendship, especially now that we’re living in the same house.

Too bad this wild, anxious part of me isn't glad.

The persistent part that keeps wishing *something* would happen with Quinn Faulkner, consequences be damned.

The goats are fine over at the Neuman's.

As we stand in the pasture, after accounting for all of them, I ask, "If you do decide to keep your grandpa's place, will you get any animals?"

"Probably not."

"Why? You don't like them?"

"I like 'em just fine. It's just that being a detective can pull me anywhere, any time, and then what do I do? Animals need people around every day to take care of them."

"You've got friends who'd help in a pinch, right?"

He shakes his head. "Wouldn't be fair to them or the animals. I think my farming days ended while Gramps was still alive."

We start walking back to the gate.

"I guess I see your point," I mutter quietly.

And I do, even if I can't help being a little disappointed. It's too easy picturing this place with a happy family and a diverse menagerie scattered across the grounds.

"Are you getting attached to the tribe?" he asks.

"I mean, I don't mind them. They're cute little guys, and I will miss them. They just don't quite fit in my life or Uncle Dean's once he's moved onto his next scheme. I'm really going to miss this big guy, though." I pause long enough to give Owl's thick neck a hug. "I already made my uncle promise he'll hang on to Owl if the goats have to move on."

"You've never had a dog before?"

"With my mother?" I laugh hysterically. "Nooo way. Not even a stuffed dog because they collect dust, don't you know."

"What about a cat?"

"Something that pees in a box? Absolutely not. There was a squirrel living in a tree near my room once, and she called animal control to get rid of it."

"Shit." He rakes a hand through his sandy brown hair like he can't believe it.

"Yep."

"Is your apartment near your folks' house?"

I'm ashamed to admit just *how* close it is, but it's Quinn. "It's kinda...right above their garage. When I turned twenty-one and wanted my own place, Mother had the attic remodeled."

"Damn, woman. I wondered how she filled your fridge with food."

"Now you know."

Yes, I'm blushing. Big surprise.

Now he also knows how pathetically stunted my adult life has been, and why my summers with Granny meant so much.

They were the only freedom away from home I've ever had.

Getting a taste of it again makes me not want to return. Ever.

But I have to. I miss my career.

It's a part of me I'm not quite ready to bury, and I'm also not excited to stare down the barrel of *what's next? If you quit, what then?*

"Well, are you ready for some painting?" he says, slashing through my thoughts with the perfect distraction.

"I'll make those cupboards *sing*, Quinn Faulkner."

"Wow me," he rumbles.

We share a wicked grin.



SURPRISE, surprise.

As much as I love painting, the giddy excitement wears off fast.

Hours later, I arch my back to smooth out a kink from bending over for so long and set down my brush. The cupboard doors are laid out on sawhorses throughout the barn.

We've already painted all of the actual cupboards inside the kitchen but brought the doors here where it was easier to lay them flat.

"Your arms about to fall off yet?" Quinn asks.

"Are yours?" I flick my tongue out at him.

Laughing, he sets his brush down. "Fuck, this is tedious."

"But they'll look so nice once they're done! No work, no reward."

"Yeah, well, right now they need to dry before we can give them a second coat. Let's clean up and stretch our legs. I could go for a walk. Then I'll grill us some steaks."

I collect my paintbrush and rolling pan. "Holy crap. It's really almost dinner, isn't it?"

Forget having fun, time flies when you're working yourself into jelly.

We use the outside spigot to wash our painting gear and leave it in the sun to dry before making our way around the barn.

Behind it, there's a trail that leads into the trees, where a shallow creek twists and turns through them before making its way to the pond on the far side of the grove.

“How many acres do you own?” I ask as we walk together.

“Ten. Luckily, it’s never been annexed into the city, so I just pay state and county taxes for the land.”

“The others are that much more?”

“Yep, they’d be charged as buildable lots rather than farm acreage.”

I think about that as we continue.

There are so many things I don’t know about because I’ve been so sheltered.

And how badly I don’t want to go back to that.

I really don’t.

I can’t help but wonder how different things would be right now if my life took a detour.

What if I’d just told Mother to pound sand and stayed at Granny’s that last summer after high school?

Would I be a dancer somewhere else? Would I be someone totally different?

A wife? A mother? A rodeo clown?

Someone who wouldn’t be afraid to do what she wants—namely, press my lips to Quinn’s and let our tongues lead where they may.

God. The possibilities in a person’s life are like tree rings.

He takes my hand as we cross into the rougher terrain, stepping from boulder to boulder. We walk over fallen logs while crossing the creek several times as we head through the trees.

In my imagination, I go back to when we were teens. How I would’ve *died* a hundred times over just to have him hold my hand. My heart almost stopped forever that day I took a peach pie to the face and he was so good to me.

But he’d always been aloof, too.

That’s just who he is.

Kind, funny, handsome, and alpha as Hercules, but never ready to risk what we had.

Never ready to take our friendship further than the kids we were then, and the adults we’ve become.

I was just the tagalong little girl, his sidekick, wishing for more than a silly one-sided crush.

And here I am again.

Wishing, hoping, and praying for something I’m also scared to death to plunge into.

Once we step out of the trees, Owl barks and goes charging ahead to the pond, chasing two Canadian geese swimming near the shore. They take off at the last second with a few parting *screw you* honks.

“Wait. I recognize this place,” I murmur, slowing down. “It’s where your

grandpa had his bee boxes, isn't it?"

Quinn smiles, and I wonder if he's been meaning to lead us here this whole time.

"Good memory. I was wondering if you forgot. This, right here, is the exact spot where we first met." He shakes his head. "What a fucking day. I thought you'd fall down and die from shame if the bees didn't get you first."

"Almost ten years ago." I pause to snicker. "Wow."

His hold on my hand tightens.

My breath seizes.

That feral green gaze sharpens as our eyes meet, and my heart beats its way up my throat.

"Nearly a decade, Peach. Long damn time." His eyes fall to my lips and linger.

Oh.

Oh, no.

My lips, my entire body, quiver as I remember kissing him at the rodeo, tasting the heat of his growl. Kissing him was more than I'd ever dreamed then.

Sweet Jesus, I'm *still* dreaming about it.

Constantly.

It's worse with us both dancing around the subject, never bringing it up. Apparently, part of our emotional maturity level is still stuck in the last decade, too.

"I wondered about you so many times over the years," he tells me, and I wonder if I'm wrong about being stuck.

A hot thrill rips through me.

"I thought about you, too. I wish I'd tried to write while you were overseas, but I knew you didn't want me worried sick. Still, I wondered where you were, what you were doing, who you'd turned into..."

He smiles, those green eyes flickering in the soft light.

"Thinking about you. That's all I ever did, Peach. Whatever comes and goes, whoever I work for, however the seasons change...that's the one damn thing that never strays. And I know it's out of line, but I'm telling you right now—it ain't gonna change when you head back to Chicago. I'll be thinking about you then, too."

Holy hell.

My heart nearly explodes. I can barely breathe. I start opening my mouth, searching for words, but he casts me this sad, hangdog look like he's realized he just said too much.

"Quinn—"

“Let’s uh—” He clears his throat and glances quickly at the pond. “Skip rocks. We used to do that shit all the time. How long has it been since you tried?”

I smile, loving and hating how he tries to save face. I have half a mind to grab his face and kiss him...but for now, I’ll play along.

“Probably not since the last summer we were here,” I say.

“Far too long.” He lays a hand on the small of my back and guides me to the pond. “High time we have another go.”

We search the ground, find the flattest rocks, and then take turns pitching them over the top of the water. A fun little competition breaks out over the number of times each rock skips before sinking into the murky depths.

It’s more fun than I’ve had in ages, and not because it’s something so easy, so innocent.

It’s because I’m doing it with Quinn—and the fact that my rocks win nearly every round doesn’t hurt one bit.

“Who the hell went and made you Miss Rock and Roll? You’re too good, lady,” he says. “I give up!”

I toss a rock in the air and catch it, flashing a victory grin.

“How?” He wipes the sweat off his brow, grinning back. “Just how’d you go and kick my ass that hard when you said you haven’t done this for years?”

“I was taught by the best.” I wink at him.

Growling, he swipes the rock out of the air when I toss it up again. “And you’ve been practicing the last ten years, liar.”

I grab his hand and try prying it open to get my rock back. “No, I haven’t. Swear to God. Give me my rock.”

He holds his hand just out of my reach, using his height to his advantage.

“Hmm, I don’t know. What will you give me for it? I hear these things can be pretty valuable.”

*A kiss, you lunk,* I want to say.

But that’s the one thing that would ruin the evening, the week, the rest our lives.

Scrambling for the ground, I pick up another rock.

“Here, bozo. I’ll give you this one for it. Rock for rock. Sound fair?”

He tosses the rock in the air and catches it again, swinging his hand down with a grin that almost melts my panties right off.

“That rock for this one, huh?”

“Yes! What are you expecting? A Ferrari?”

He holds it up to his face, stroking his chin like he’s pondering the meaning of life with a stone that’s magically turned to solid gold. It’s so ridiculous and

exaggerated I burst out laughing.

“Sorry. This is a far better rock. Can’t part with it for that crappy basic bitch skipper you picked up. It ain’t even an eggplant.” Then he spins while I’m busy laughing my butt off and side pitches it across the water.

I yell out the count as it skips.

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven! Seven.” I throw my rock on the ground. “Seven, you dick. The most I had was five! So you’ve been letting me win this whole time?”

With a knowing chuckle, he grabs my hand.

“Or maybe I just got lucky with the right rock. We’ll never know. Come on, darlin’, I’m getting mighty hungry. Time for steaks and hash browns.”

“I’m making us a salad. I’m not going to die here from protein and carb overload,” I say, playfully pushing at his side.

Quinn whips out another slayer smile.

Even if he does it a thousand times, I swear, I’ll never get sick of that look.

Oh, and as for the food...yes, I’m hungry, but I’d forgo ever eating again in a heartbeat to do more than hold his hand.



## GOAT ME ALL RILED (FAULKNER)



I had to be out of my mind to agree to this—having Tory Three Names move in with me.

Ridge might as well have tossed me in one of his Western flicks and cast me as the idiot who gets tied to a pole with fire ants crawling up his pants.

That can't be more tortuous than spending whole days with the girl I've jacked off to since before I could drink.

Shit. I'm as horny as a quarterback watching the cheerleaders.

Make that *cheerleader*, singular.

Just one.

But even that ain't right.

Tory's a full-blown, sexy-as-all-hell dancer who can do a whole lot more with her body than an entire cheer squad.

Of course she has dynamite legs. I've been staring at them all day, tracing how they run up into that supple peach of an ass.

I try to end my creepin' there, before my eyes slide up her spine, turn her around, and find those tits I want to shove my face in and own.

Don't fucking care if she's not the bustiest gal in the world.

What she's packing is enough for ten lifetimes, and if I don't find some goddamn self-control, I'm gonna rip that flimsy outfit right off her and see what she's been hiding.

As soon as we got home from checking on the goats this morning, she'd changed out of her jeans and boots, into a pair of white shorts, a lime-green tank top, and flip-flops to paint in.

She'd still been wearing her flip-flops on our walk, and not wanting her to slip on the rocks or fallen logs, I'd taken her hand as we'd followed the creek to the pond.

That simple touch, holding her hand for balance, almost burned me down.  
And sparring with her by the pond, fighting over rocks?  
Fuck.

I think I've reverted back to caveman, and I'm still trying to remember how to talk as we work on dinner.

"Do you want tomatoes in your salad?" she asks through the screen door.

I'm just as surprised as anybody my fridge now houses vegetables. So much green and red I think I see Christmas every time I open the door. Even a couple eggplants.

"If you do," I call back, checking the grill.

She's silent for a moment, then asks, "What about kale?"

"We bought kale? Was I *drunk*?"

Laughing, she pushes open the door and takes a swig off a beer bottle, one from the case we'd also picked up on our shopping trip.

"Psych! I was just testing you." She hands me the beer, winks, and saunters back inside. "I'll buy some next time I'm at the store, though. You're not getting off that easy."

I take a long pull off the beer, hating how her lips make it taste better than it should.

Then I go back to flipping the steaks, trying to deduce whether I'm more pissed at my poor blue balls or the fact that I'll be eating kale before this is over.

Damn, I need to switch gears. Whip my thoughts back in line to a place that doesn't involve picturing Tory bouncing on my cock, but it's damn near impossible.

Especially when I think about the curve of her ass in those shorts as she turned after sassing me.

Welcome to hell. Population: me.

I can't even think straight.

I'm a raving beast.

Like down by the pond, when she looked at me with those baby blue eyes brighter than a desert sky.

They're as gorgeous as the rest of her, and just as likely to tempt me into signing my soul away.

Owl lets out a sharp bark from beside the grill.

Huh?

Oh, shit!

I yank the steaks out of the flames just in the nick of time and set them on the side of the grill.

"Thanks, dude," I tell the dog. "You'll have some extra meat on the T-bone

in your dish tonight. I promise.”

He wags his bush of a tail, flopping his tongue out.

“What are you two talking about out there?” Tory asks from the kitchen window.

“The steaks. Next time I’m buying three.”

“Oh, there’ll be plenty for him. Those are two of the biggest steaks I’ve ever seen.”

“They’ll be the best steaks you’ve ever tasted, too,” I tell her.

“Promises, promises,” she says, laughing as her face disappears.

I’d damn well like to make a few other promises we could only fulfill in the bedroom.

If I knew for certain that Bat Pickett wasn’t coming for my ass, I’d write them with my tongue all over her skin, and deal with the fallout later.

Until then, I’ll have to learn to live with the raging hard-on from hell.

*Until then?*

Hell, what am I saying?

I’ll never be able to fulfill carnal promises of any kind with Tory once Pickett gets released.

That’s a given. Same for the fact that he wants to cut off my head. The psycho won’t ever get over my part in putting his brother away.

Not while I’m still breathing.

I need to be prepared for that.

Fully.

I’d shown her Pickett’s sneering mug shot, and she said that probably wasn’t the man who’d been in the red Chevy. I hate that she couldn’t get a good read on his face. We couldn’t get a positive ID from the low-res pictures Grady took, but my gut tells me the dude had something to do with Pickett, guaranteed.

Another Marvin, another minion, looking for intel to feed to Bat.

I pull the steaks off the gentler side of the grill and carry them inside. Even with the kitchen in disarray with all the cupboards open, missing their doors, this place has started to feel more homey than anywhere else I’ve ever lived.

I’m starting to like it a lot.

And yeah, that might just have something to do with the fact that I’m not alone anymore.

No denying I also like the sight of Tory, wearing her short shorts and skimpy tank top, in the kitchen, in the house, in the guest room. I like it more every time I see it, and the only thing I’d like more is having her wearing less.

Shifting my pants for cover, I try to battle the bulge before heading back into the house.

I buck up, pull on my best wasn't-just-thinking-about-you-naked grin, and call out, "Steaks are done!"



IN THE MORNING, I drive her to check on the goats again, then we stop by Granny's house before heading home.

"Wow!" Tory says, staring at the dumpster in the driveway. "They left the whole freaking kitchen and bathroom in here." Frowning, she asks, "Do you think they'll have it all done by the time she returns?"

"Yep. They're a good, trustworthy company, and that's why they wanted the place empty. A house is a lot easier to remodel with nobody living there."

We go inside, chat with the workmen for a few minutes, and have a good look around. Then, once Tory's satisfied that all's well, we head back to my place.

"I'll go change and meet you in the barn," Tory says as she climbs out of the truck.

I don't know whether to be happy or worried.

She's bound to return with another skimpy pair of short shorts clinging to that delectable ass.

I'm starting to regret ever giving her that peach nickname.

"C'mon, buddy," I tell Owl, holding the door for him to hop out of the truck and into the balmy summer heat. "I think we could both use a splash of ice water."

After I've watered the dog and tried to douse my own fire, I turn around and face today's death by sexy roommate.

*Bam.*

Right between the eyes.

The shorts she's wearing are cut-off blue jeans with ragged fringes. They're short, riding up to the edge of her ass, and naturally they look damn good. So does the tight red t-shirt hugging her chest, a wicked eye-trap contrasting with the jean shorts.

The blocky white lettering on her shirt says **NOBODY'S PERFEC— NEVER MIND!**

"Granny strikes again?" I stare, not skipping a fair chance to have a good look at her tits, my eyebrow raised.

"Nope, all me this time," she says proudly. "Kind of a running joke in our dance group. That's what happens when you throw together a bunch of girls who

obsess over every single detail.”

I nod, fully aware I’m the one doing the obsessing right now. Can’t peel my eyes off her till she begins walking.

Later, we make small talk while giving the cupboard doors a second coat of paint. As I walk over to do the last door, I test the paint on the first one I’d finished.

Finding it dry, I say, “We’ll be able to hang these after lunch.”

“Awesome. I can’t wait to see how they look.” Tory smiles like I just made her day. “I really like this slate grey color. What’s next on the list after these?”

“Mainly trim work,” I say, half sorry the project is almost over. I’ve enjoyed working on the house, and having her help has even made it fun. “Quarter round molding on the doors and windows, and crown molding for the ceilings.”

“Is that what’s wrapped up in plastic in the corner?” she asks, pointing to the section of the barn where I’ve been storing materials like a beaver prepping for the apocalypse.

“Bingo. It’s already painted white. Didn’t want it getting scratched.”

“Are you going to do anything more inside the barn?” she asks, her eyes big.

“More? Like what?” I haven’t done anything to the barn except clean it out for storing supplies, which are almost depleted. It has new siding and a new roof—both upgrades I paid for. Those jobs were too big to handle alone.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Extra space to store stuff?”

“Hadn’t planned on it. Why?”

“Well, um, I was thinking...”

She glances around, and her eyes land on the beams overhead.

“Thinking what?” I ask.

“Sooo, I know I’ll only be here a few more weeks tops, but if you aren’t using the barn for anything special...I was wondering if maybe I could?”

“For the goats?” I ask. “Sure, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’d save you a trip to Dean’s place between jobs.”

I smile at the thought of her beasts roaming around here. Gramps never had a lot of livestock the older he got. He’d pulled the stable walls out years ago to make more room to store the old antique junk he collected.

The corral’s still in good shape. I’d fixed it up and painted it a month ago, just in case whoever I sold it to might have animals. For the goats, I’d have to fence in an area with more grass for them, which wouldn’t be that much work.

“No, the goats will be at the dairy farm for at least that long.” She grimaces slightly. “I want the space for me.”

“You?” I blink in confusion. “Don’t like your room? Wish you’d told me, peach. It must suck awful bad if you’d rather sleep in the hay.”

“No, no!” She swings her arms with a loud belly laugh. “I love the room, but with Granny gone, I’m not getting enough exercise. With bike riding gone, I need more strength exercises, room to do workouts. I can’t run for long stretches. That’s too rough on my knee, and walking isn’t strenuous enough.” She points up. “The beams in here, though...they’d be perfect for aerial silks.”

“What the hell’s an aerial silk?”

She flashes her perfect teeth and continues to roll paint on a door. “You’ve probably seen them. They’re these long silk ropes that people climb, great for aerobics. I can show you on my phone.”

A heinous vision of Tory climbing colorful hangers without a stitch of clothing on streaks through my head.

*Goddamn. Not what I need to think about.*

I clear my throat.

“Yeah, I know what you’re talking about. I’ve seen them. You know how to do that?”

“I’ve done it for years! My friend, Miriam, got me into it. Her dad owns a huge gym downtown and they were offering classes. It’s great for overall body strengthening.”

The excitement in her voice makes me grin, despite the fury in my cock.

“Sure, we could figure something out, but where would you get the supplies? Dallas ain’t Chicago, darlin’.”

“Everything’s online, Quinn. Remember that Big A you invested in? Probably wouldn’t cost a ton to have it shipped here.” She stands back and examines the door on the sawhorse in front of her, then runs the roller over the edge. “Oh, and I’d need to put up a couple big mirrors, too.”

I examine my door, and satisfied with the work, walk over and set down my roller in the tray we’ve been sharing.

“Mirrors, huh?”

“Right.” She sets her roller next to mine. “People always think the mirrors in dance studios are because dancers are vain, but that’s not it. They’re an important training tool. They give you instant feedback, show you the height and shape of your movements, your body and line position.” She shrugs. “You can’t fix what you don’t know is wrong.”

There’s nothing *wrong* with her body whatsoever, but what the hell do I know about ballet?

“We could hang up some mirrors, no problem. But what about the floor? It’s pretty old and scuffed up. Won’t be much good if you get tripped or step on a sliver.”

“It’s fine!” She rubs the floor with the sole of her sandal. “A good sweeping

and mopping, and it'll be perfect. I've had to practice in worse places."

I'm not so sure, but I could rent the industrial sander I'd used in the house again.

"What about under those silks? Don't you need a mat or something? Padding in case you fall." I'm not convinced I love the idea of her climbing silks, whether or not it makes me hard enough to pound nails.

I've seen it on TV and the shit looks dangerous, the higher it goes. More bad news for her knee if she slips again—or worse.

"You worry too much." Tory laughs, her mind made up. "I won't fall. I've done this for years, and it's exactly what I need right now to get back in shape."

"You ain't *out* of shape, woman." The words burst out before I can stop them. "If anybody's telling you that, give me their name and I'll set 'em straight."

"I'm out of form for a dancer." A thoughtful expression crosses her face as she slowly looks around the barn, visualizing everything. "With a little bit of equipment and your help...I could go back to Chicago in tip-top shape."

Damn.

There's a longing in her voice. A determination. Whatever doubts I've got rolling around in my head can't argue with that.

"Order whatever you need," I tell her. "I'll put it up and check everything over to make sure it's solid. You promise me you won't go crazy till I've signed off on the safety."

"Absolutely!" Her face lights up like I just descended from the sky with a halo. "Thank you so much, Quinn!" She claps her hands together, lets out a wild squeal, and then throws her arms around me. "You're too good to me."

My hands instantly grasp her waist, which fits too perfectly in my palms.

She hits me with soft blue-eyed gratitude and the same smile she'd always give me when we were kids. Every time I ever got between her and disaster.

It's so familiar it hurts, but there's a key difference.

Feeling her under my hands puts lightning in my blood.

She makes me hungry, almost rendered breathless and definitely speechless, awestruck by how sexy, how tight, how beautiful she is.

Forget the fucking silks.

Having Tory up in my face like this, tempting me to do terrible things?

That's the real danger.

No question.

"I'm so excited," she says, bouncing a couple times on her heels. "I've missed having them around for a real workout. You don't even know."

*Bull. I'm sad to say I do.*

Because her missing those silks can't hold a candle to how horribly I've missed having my hands all over her, exploring places I shouldn't, capturing her flesh the same way I want to seize that strawberry of a mouth—with teeth.

When she looks at me again, she must see the seething in my eyes, the bearish need coming out.

Fuck.

We both know what I need.

And looking at her, blinded by those perfect pink lips, without leaning down to touch them, to kiss them, to take them over, is *killing me*.

"I'll go make us some lunch so we can get the doors hung up as soon as they're dry," she says, stretching, offering her lips.

I don't release her.

Not when we're human magnets with a sexual polarity I can feel singeing the air.

The way she smiles and arches her back makes hot sticky blood roar through my veins.

Neither of us dare to look away.

I have to kiss her. One more time. Just to get it out of my system.

Tory's eyes flutter closed as I pull her close, her body against mine, and she knows what's coming.

I swallow a growl, loving how her breasts feel on my chest, how her hips mold to mine. She has to feel the demanding bulge in my jeans, too, and I'm past caring.

My lips find hers like a hunter.

They come down hot, slick, devouring, prying her open with my tongue till she whimpers.

I almost fucking gasp, reaching up to clasp her chin, cradling her face as I pull her into a kiss with no surrender.

And she knows she's beaten.

Her arms tighten around my neck. Her lips part, kissing me back with the same giddy passion I'm pouring into the kiss.

Even though we're chest to chest, I pull her closer, wanting more. My hands caress the swell of her hips, the small of her back, roaming with mad intent as my tongue chases hers, driving a moan out of her.

I don't want to stop.

Not until I've had her under me.

Not until I'm in her balls deep, wrenching moan after sweet moan out of her ruby lips.

Not until I've brought her off so hard, so many times, she's ruined, spent, her

legs crooked and her pussy leaking my seed.

I fully admit I'm insane.

Driven mad by crossing lines with my best friend that should still matter, but aren't worth a damn when we're this keyed up, tearing at each other's clothes, and—

The sudden screech of a vehicle's horn rips through me like a cold shower, along with Owl's bark a second later.

Damnation.

I rip my lips off hers so fast I nearly pull a neck muscle.

She drops her arms from around my shoulders, and eyes closed, stumbles a step back.

Reluctantly, I release her hips. We're both staring out the barn door at the direction the sound came from.

"I'll go see who it is," I say numbly.

I'll get rid of them, too. Whoever decided to interrupt the most important kiss of my life better have a damn good reason.

Stomping out of the barn, I jog up the hill toward the house with every part of my body still heated, still throbbing, still angry that it hasn't gotten its fill of Tory.

My teeth are bared as I plod over the top and see...a police cruiser?

"Hey, there you are!" Drake shouts as he rounds the corner of my house, wearing his Dallas PD uniform, gold badge flickering in the light. "I knocked, but no one answered. Your truck's here, so I honked. Hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

*Only the hottest sex ever, buddy. No big deal.*

But I can't stay pissed at him forever.

"No. Just painting cupboard doors in the barn," I half lie, walking the last few feet to meet him and give a handshake that nearly tears his arm off.

"Damn, man. Must be some paint job," he grins, shaking out his arm. "The extra cameras I ordered for you came in. The winter fried a few of the sensors on the ones I gave Ridge, but these are brand new and should do the trick."

I'd almost forgotten. Since Tory's here now and the Pickett situation uncertain, I figured I'd have him put a few up around the property so I'll know if anyone comes prowling around.

"When can you put them up?"

"Now? Might as well, if you're not tied down. This camera shit is almost turning into a running gag for too many dudes in Dallas," he says, his blue eyes sparking. "Guess you're gonna get married off next, seeing what happened to me and Ridge."

“Whatever,” I growl, silently rattling off a few curses. “Sounds good, I guess. Where do we start?”

“If you’re busy, I can do—”

I slap a hand on his shoulder.

“Nah, I’ll help. We were just finishing up the painting, anyway.” Honestly, cooling off a little after what almost just happened in the barn right now would be a good thing, even if my dick objects fiercely.

“Okay. It’s all in my truck. Let me grab the gear,” he says.

We discuss where to put them while opening the boxes, and then get to work. Tory brings us sandwiches and iced tea later. I don’t want to worry her, so I tell her it’s just the security system I’d ordered, which is half true. Some of this is stuff I’ll pay him for and leave up for the new owner if I decide to sell.

After she’s carried our empty plates and glasses back into the house, Drake eyes me slyly. “So, it must be going good between you two, yeah? She’s moved in.”

“It’s fine. We’ve been friends for years,” I tell him, keeping my voice even to head off the shit he no doubt wants to serve me.

“Friends,” he echoes dryly, raking back his dark-blond hair.

“Friends. That a problem, Officer?” I grunt back sarcastically.

He looks at me and grins. “I’m gonna have to give you a citation for excessive bullshit, yeah. C’mon, man, who do you think you’re talking to? An old married guy like me *knows* when a man and a woman are more than friends.”

“You haven’t been married that long,” I tell him.

“And I’m not that old.” He laughs. “I’m happy for you, man. She’s hot. Nothing like my Bella, of course, but no woman ever is.”

“Just keep those eyes to yourself,” I warn him.

He chuckles harder. “There’s nothing like it, Faulk. You ought to get over yourself and try.”

“Try *what*?”

“Being married to your best friend. The woman you want to grow old with.” He shakes his head, his lips quirking up with a whimsical smile. “Falling in love with Bella hit me like a fucking freight train, truth be told. Just between you and me, it scared the living shit out of me at first. There was a lot going on in my life then, and I thought there wasn’t room for a woman. For marriage. A real marriage, I mean, not the fake one we started with. You know how old Jonah Reed set us up.”

“Everybody does,” I bite off.

“Right. Anyway, once I came to my senses, from that moment on, life’s been better than I ever imagined,” he continues.

“Yeah, well, there’s a lot going on in my life right now,” I say, echoing his words.

“And that’s why I’m here—to help you get your shit worked out—and I don’t just mean the cameras and this fuckhead in prison who hates you.” He picks up another camera. “You going on top of that barn, or am I?”

“I’ll do it,” I say sharply.

Though I wonder at the shine lingering in his deep-blue eyes.

Drake’s one lucky man with a wife, a kid, and another on the way.

Could that ever be me and Tory?

Could the mountains between us just melt away someday like they did for Drake and Bella, leaving a bliss I know he’d die for?



IT TAKES the better part of the afternoon to get everything set up and checked over.

I thank Drake for his help before he leaves and then head into the house.

Tory carried the cupboard doors from the barn to the house earlier. I’d told her to wait for me before hanging them up.

She’s at the kitchen counter now, cutting raw chicken into strips.

I have to tighten every muscle in my body to resist walking up behind her, spinning her around, and picking up right where we’d left off in the barn.

“Hey,” she says, glancing over her shoulder. “I screwed the knobs and hinges on the doors, but I couldn’t get them in place. They’re just too cumbersome.”

I walk to the sink and wash my hands.

“I know. That’s why I said wait up. Thanks for putting the hinges on, though. Hanging them won’t take long at all.” Nodding at the cutting board on the counter, I ask, “What’s for supper?”

“Chicken stir-fry. The meat just needs to marinate for an hour or so. Plenty of garlic and ginger!”

I inhale, and my nostrils are pleased.

“Smells damn good,” I tell her.

“Let’s hope it tastes good too. Are you a stir-fry fan, Quinn?”

I shrug. “Is that kale shit in it?”

She pushes a giggle back with her hand. “No, you’re safe tonight, but there is bok choy.”

“Bok what?”

I wipe my hands with a paper towel.

“It’s kinda like celery and green onion had a baby. You’ll like it.”

“I’m trusting you,” I say, pointing two fingers at my eyes and then at her. I wad up the paper towel and throw it in the trash can. “I’ll start on the doors while you wrap up the grub.”

She hits me with that sunshine smile again.

“I’m almost done. I just have to get the chicken in the fridge, then I’ll help with the doors.”

True to her word, she holds the doors while I use the drill to screw the hinges to the cupboards. All while trying like hell *not* to let my eyes crawl up her legs the entire time.

She tells me the silk ropes and mirrors are ordered, and they should show up in the next forty-eight hours.

I’ll rent the floor sander tomorrow and then give the floor a good varnishing. Can’t risk her tripping over roughed up spots and hurting herself.

She balks at that idea at first, but agrees before mentioning she’s also ordered a small sound system that’ll be arriving soon.

I’m happy she’s so excited for her space.

Dirty thoughts aside, I’m legit excited for her.

We’ve just hung the last door and we’re admiring our handiwork—the entire kitchen looks picture-perfect—when her phone rings on the center island.

I watch her walk over, look at it, and freeze in her tracks. The ringtone continues to blare.

“Aren’t you gonna answer that?” I ask, suddenly damn curious what’s wrong.

She whips her head back and forth from me to the phone and gives me a horrified look.

“It’s Jean-Paul. He’s been texting all day.”

Hot, jealous rage hits my veins like a storm.

“And you haven’t answered?” I ask, fishing for more.

“No.” She flips around and leans against the island as the phone stops ringing, this dread in her eyes. Her voicemail pings a few seconds later.

“Talk to me, Peach,” I demand, stepping up to her, hating the sadness in her eyes.

“I love dancing, Quinn, I really do. It’s been my whole life. But I know I can’t do it forever...I’ll be too old soon, or who knows, maybe my knee will never be strong enough to handle the rigors. That’s why the director job would be perfect. A dream come true. I’d be teaching, directing, planning—all the things I love just as much, if not more, than dancing itself. Everything I think I

could do forever.”

I wait, and when she doesn't say more, I drop the inevitable.

“But?”

Her shoulders roll with a heavy sigh. She looks at me with a wry smile.

“How'd you know there's a but?”

“There always is,” I growl. “Tell me, darlin'. What's holding you back?”

“I don't want my old life.” Her eyes pinch shut. “It's, well...it's not a fun life. I have no freedom there.”

I recall what Dean said about her ma smothering her.

“Your folks? Your mom?” I ask.

“And Jean-Paul. I hate the man I'd be working with. My title would be Creative Dance Director, but I won't have any artistic freedom. He'll still be calling the shots and expecting me to execute everything. I'll be put in the same sad box I've always been in.” She throws her arms in the air. “And when I refuse to marry him—”

“Marry *who*?” I blurt out, wondering what the hell I missed.

“Jean-Paul,” she says, her voice just a whisper.

I can't fucking help it.

I can't stop the jealousy curdling my face.

“Bullshit. You're telling me you're gonna go marry that fucking—”

“No. I'd never marry him, not after what he did, and that's the problem.” She runs a nervous hand through her hair while shaking her head. “We dated for years. It was always assumed we'd tie the knot eventually. Lord knows Mother wanted it. But we were never engaged, and then he cheated on me with that bitch, Madeline, and she knocked me down, hurt my knee and—”

“Hold up. The whore he cheated with caused your injury?” Anger, not at her, but *for* her tears through me like a bolt.

I know Dean hinted at it before, but I wanted to think he was wrong. Hearing it from Tory's mouth confirms how big a clusterfuck she really lived.

Then her phone starts ringing again.

I swear on my mother's grave, I could break a window with that thing.

“Yeah,” she says quietly, ignoring the phone. “It's just a mess, Quinn, and I don't want to deal with it. Not yet. Maybe not ever...”

Damn right it's a mess, and she's not diving back in just to get her heart torn up all over again.

Not if I can help it.

Snarling, I march over and grab the phone off the counter.

The screen says **JEAN-PAUL (YUCK)**.

Turning away from Tory, I hit the answer icon.

“*What?*” It shoots out of my mouth like a bullet.

There’s a confused silence before the man on the other end clears his throat.

“W-who’s this?”

“Quinn Faulkner,” I snap. “Why the fuck are you calling every five minutes?”

Another long pause. “This is Tory Redson-Riddle-Coffey’s phone, is it not? I’m looking for her. We need to have a very important discussion, and I don’t appreciate this...odd reception.”

Shit, he even sounds like a colossal prick.

Big surprise.

“She’s busy being happy,” I grind out. “And I don’t think she cares to listen to you flapping your gums till you learn some goddamn manners, champ.”

“Champ?” he echoes back. “Well. Enough of this nonsense, where’s Tory? I’ve been calling all day and—”

“And you need to stop. Fair warning. Next time I see your name on her screen, I’ll fly to Chicago and make sure the only person you’re calling is your nurse, fuckboy. She doesn’t want to talk to you. You read me?”

“I—”

“And why the hell should she, you heartless, crusty fucking baguette? When—and *if*—she ever wants to talk, she’ll call. Don’t dial this number again. Because I’ll be the one answering, and you definitely won’t want to hear what I have to say.”

My heart slaps my ribs like a bear charging its cage.

I hit End Call, knowing if I don’t stop now, I’ll probably say something illegal, and slowly turn around.

Tory has a hand over her mouth, trembling. The look on her pale face is pure bloodless mortification.

“Tory?” I whisper, taking a step forward. “Peach?”

Shaking her head slowly, she pivots on one foot and races to the laundry room. Then, a moment later, the screen door slams shut.

Yeah.

Somebody just fucked up big-time.

One guess who.



## WE'VE GOAT THIS (TORY)



I'm shaking so hard my teeth rattle.

One fact keeps replaying over and over in my mind, pressing my thoughts through a spinning kaleidoscope.

Quinn told Jean-Paul his name.

Crud.

No, *crud!*

Now Mother has all the ammo she needs to shoot down my decisions. Hell, to tell me I don't have a hand in deciding anything because *somebody* has to be putting ideas in my head.

I can just hear her now.

*Grow up and be responsible, Tory.*

*You're acting out, Tory.*

*What? You're still listening to that farm boy, Tory?*

End me. It doesn't help that she's the only person, besides Granny, who knows how in love I was with Quinn.

The last summer I made it to Dallas, Mother had puppies over me coming here since I'd just turned eighteen—old enough to decide my own fate with the boy I'd always had eyes on. And when she found out Quinn wasn't there and he'd enlisted in the Army, she'd been ecstatic.

Pain shoots up my leg. It's the running making my teeth rattle, I realize.

Still favoring my undamaged knee, my gait isn't so smooth.

It's hurting, too, so I slow to a slight, off-kilter jog and push through the grove of trees. At the first fallen log, I sit down and rub my leg.

The hurt muscle is nothing compared to the soreness inside.

Mother always insisted Quinn Faulkner was beneath me.

Not because she singled him out, really, but because *no one* in Dallas was

good enough.

I have three last names, after all. A pedigree that stems from her side of the family.

Oh, never mind the fact that she married a small-town farm boy who'd bootstrapped his way up the social ladder. She'll be the first to jump up and explain how Dad was the first crab to pull himself out of his backwater bucket.

He made it to a good college. He learned real estate. He's slayed a hundred dragons in business and investing—no thanks to a little lemon squeeze from her trust fund.

The wealth and pride behind the Redson-Riddle line goes back generations. And Mother clings to that reputation with an iron fist. It's how she keeps Dad on a short leash, and—though I hate to admit it—it's how she controls *me*.

She's held big money, bigger pride, and fantastic dreams over my head my entire life.

If I played along, there was always a prize at the end.

A new doll, a new dress, new ballet shoes, hell, even my car. She bought me a shiny pink convertible that's sparkling away in the garage back home when she first heard I'd started dating Jean-Paul.

I needed something *fitting* to impress him, in her eyes, because my personality and good looks count for diddly, I guess.

A stick snapping loudly has me glancing over my shoulder.

Owl bounds forward, tail wagging as if to say, *found you!*

Then I hear heavy footsteps plodding over more twigs strewn on the ground. Quinn's right behind him.

"Hey," he says, somewhat cautiously. "Figured you'd need the fresh air."

"Yeah, well..." I rub Owl's head as the fluff of a mastiff hunkers down beside me. "No sense in letting what happened back there waste a nice day."

Quinn steps closer, running a hand over the back of his neck. "I'm sorry, Tory. I don't know what the fuck else to say. I shouldn't have answered your phone and ripped his throat out. Shouldn't have said what I did to that dude—even if he is a pushy fuckin' snail of a dude."

It's hard not to smile.

Okay, make that impossible.

I've never seen Quinn anything but confident, just, protective.

Upstanding. Righteous. Hard-ass.

That's how he's always been, and it isn't a bad thing.

His apology right now makes him even more endearing.

Slowly, I sigh, craning my head to look up at him. "There's nothing to be sorry about, Quinn. I'm not mad at you. Sit down."

He walks to the log and hunkers down next to me.

“Then why’d you run?” he asks. “I thought you were gonna bound right out of here and hop on the first plane home after I pissed in Jean-Paul’s Cheerios.”

I hold my breath until my lungs burn.

Letting it out, I tell him the truth. “Because you told him your name.”

“Yeah, guilty. What’s that got to do with—”

“He’ll tell Mother,” I say, shaking my head.

“So? I’ve never met your mother.” He quirks an eyebrow, clearly not comprehending the fire-breathing piece of work Gloria Redson-Riddle-Coffey can be.

“No, you haven’t.” I sigh again. “Thank God.”

He scratches the side of his neck. “I’m not sure what to do, Peach. How to make up for what I did. Don’t think your ma’s got any place telling you what to do, but it’s your life. I ain’t here to make your decisions, but I do get real pissed off at the folks trying to make them for you.”

“You don’t need to *do* anything.” I lean my head against his shoulder. “I owe you a huge thanks for telling Jean-Paul to stop calling me, honestly. He has no business harassing me constantly. I told him he’d hear back once I’ve made up my mind...I need time. Time to figure out what I’m going to do.”

He wraps an arm around me and pulls me close.

“You deserve time. It’s your life to figure out without any prick getting in the way,” he rumbles, his inked muscle tightening around my shoulders.

“It was my life until my knee went out. Maybe I just never realized how stuck I was. How I was *letting* everyone else control me.”

“Can’t beat yourself up, Peach. Your blinders are off. How’s the knee doing now, anyway?” he asks, his eyes flicking to my legs. “I saw you rubbing it.”

“It’s fine.” To prove it, and to prove I’m in control of myself, I stand. He rises with me, arm still around my shoulders.

“Come on,” I say. “I have stir fry to finish.”

“With bok choy,” he mutters, dryly amused.

“And you’re going to like it.”

“No promises, lady.”

I giggle because I can’t decide who’s more ridiculous with new foods—Quinn or Granny.

But I love how he can make me laugh so effortlessly.

And an hour later, I love that he wolfs down the stir-fry I made and goes for seconds.



THREE DAYS LATER, I have something else to love: how he's transformed the old barn.

I've helped, sure, but Quinn did the heavy labor—with his shirt off at times.

Lord, he has a body to die for.

It's like he's *trying* to destroy any daytime reprieve from the dirty thoughts I've been having at night. It's safe here, quiet and peaceful, but I've spent every night since I moved in tossing and turning, knowing he's just a few walls away.

We're both early risers. I know he sleeps shirtless the times I've caught him coming out of his room, wearing nothing but a loose pair of shorts that hang off his hips like the devil's own torture, obscenely close to exposing what's under that rigid V of muscle slicing up into his washboard abs.

And just like today, when he's shirtless, and I can see—really freaking *see*—that mass of muscle flexing, pumping, folding its ink like a living canvas...

Holy Toledo.

Holy London.

Holy Tokyo.

I don't think there's a city big enough to stand in for the tingle that shoots through me, pools between my legs, and leaves me so wet it's an effort just to walk.

Last night, I lost it.

I rubbed one out like an animal in heat, biting my fist to keep from gasping his name, fingers striking my clit with reckless need.

Every single time with the same forbidden visions of Quinn Faulkner on top of me, behind me, under me, flinging me against his slab of a body until I break.

It's not like I had any choice.

It was either give in to raw fantasies and bring myself off...or tiptoe to his room and jump him.

And we know I'm not brave enough for that.

I also haven't been able to decipher his signals—if they're actually signals at all and not just wishful thinking.

No, he hasn't kissed me again.

Not since that day Drake showed up. Mainly because he's been working on the barn nonstop, rigging up everything just for me.

He rented a huge sander for the floors, then coated them with varnish that shines so bright I can practically see my reflection. He also hung new lights, big ones, so I can be out here long after dark if I want.

Then, today, after the big brown truck dropped off my mirror panels, aerial silks, and sound system, he instantly went to work installing everything.

The space has transformed into a proper dance studio.

An amazing one.

“I’ll never doubt it again. Dreams can come true,” I say, watching him secure one of the speakers up in the rafters.

He shoves a screwdriver in his back pocket, then turns around on the ladder, looking around at the space. “It does look pretty awesome.”

“Pretty?” I shake my head. “It’s *totally* awesome!”

Kicking off my shoes, I drop the ballet slippers I’ve been holding onto the floor. “I can’t wait any longer. I *have* to try out this floor.”

I’ve been itching to break it in ever since I watched him varnishing it.

Moving to the center of the floor, I position myself in front of the mirrors, bend, rise up, and glide left, loving how wonderfully the smooth floor helps me flow so free and easy.

I dart around, complete a tight turn, and then glide back to the center, where I do a full pirouette, spinning, rising to a full pointe on my toes.

Arms over my head, one hand up, I whirl on the ends of my toes, until my momentum slows.

I bend at the waist, spread my arms wide, and lift one foot, revolving on the other until coming to a stop.

Unexpected applause echoes off the high ceiling and solid walls.

Blinking, I twist around to face him and bow, a smile tucked between my reddened cheeks.

“Thank you, kind sir.”

“I’m fucking speechless.” He walks closer, off the ladder now. “That was glorious, Peach. But aren’t you dizzy after that?”

“Nope. I’m used to it.” I tap my temple. “My brain adjusted years ago. I can’t even remember the last time spinning made me dizzy.”

He glances at my feet. “And your toes? They don’t hurt, either?”

“No way.” I press both hands to my chest and flutter my lashes. “They feel like heaven.”

“What about your knee?”

He’s too sweet.

His concern is too real for me to laugh at, but it does make me smile.

“The knee’s just dandy.” A sigh full of happiness escapes. “I can’t wait until tomorrow morning, when I can try out the silks.”

“Why do you have to wait till tomorrow?”

“Because it’s almost time for supper. I have barbecue ribs in the slow

cooker, and you must be starving after all the work you've done this afternoon."

"We'll eat later. Go ahead and give it a whirl."

Excitement fills me. I bounce a couple times on my toes.

"You're sure you don't mind? I won't take long, I promise. The ribs should be fine for a little while longer."

He grabs my hand.

"One question first. If your ma made all your meals, how do you know how to cook like a boss?"

"You think I cook...well?"

"Very well." He tilts his face down, bathing me in a gaze that leaves zero doubt he's serious.

Oh, wow.

Just when I think he's out of ways to charm me...

"From Granny mostly. She drafted me to help her every summer here. But I picked up a few things from Mother, too, in all fairness..."

"Let me guess—the eggplant parm?"

I give him a wink and run to the colorful ribbons hanging off the last beam.

Leaping as I reach it, I twine the silk around one leg and climb, finding my balance and inching my body upward.

Silks, like dancing, are kinda like riding a bike. Once you learn, you never forget.

In minutes, I'm in the midst of a full routine of wraps, swings, and spirals, loving the freedom that comes with gliding through the air on makeshift tethers.

By the time I finish the routine a second time, my muscles burn, proving just how out of shape I've become since leaving Chicago. Not wanting to overdo it the first time, I flip my way down the silks, shimmying carefully.

Quinn's big, firm hands grasp my waist before my feet touch the floor.

Next thing I know, he's twisting me around, pulling me against him.

"Good job scaring the hell out of me, Tory," he growls, his arms locking around my hips. "You were all the way at the top. Nothing there to hold you up except that flimsy material wrapped around one ankle. Be careful."

I cup his face with both hands, gently squeezing my palms against his jaw. "That's how it's done."

"Too dangerous. I'm installing a damn net next. What happened to your fear of heights?"

I grin. "I told you. When I'm in control, it's fine."

Quinn gives me the stink eye.

*Why does he look so hot when he's pissed?*

And "dangerous" is definitely the way he's holding me, off the floor, flush

up against him.

It's the feral way he's staring, sending my heart racing.

God, I want to kiss him so bad—and his lips land on mine before my thought finishes.

He pushes into my mouth angrily, as if he wants to tame it for talking back, for taking risks I shouldn't.

His arms close around my hips, his hands clasp my ass, and then I'm tasting his heat, his passion, his fury.

I shouldn't love this kind of bossy, grumpalicious kiss as much as I do, but good luck resisting.

No woman ever had a prayer when a man this hot, this intense, and this maddeningly caring lifts her up in his storm.

Thrilled, I not only wrap my arms around his neck, I hook my legs around his waist, sealing us together.

His body is too perfect, too firm, too muscular.

Nothing like the men back home who carve lean bodies with orderly protein and trips to the gym.

Quinn's country edge comes naturally, sculpted by real work, sweat, tears, and the harsh, scary things I'm sure he did as a soldier and a secret agent man.

Holy hell!

Even his smell makes me delirious, earthy and masculine, like lying underneath a huge pine tree.

It's enough to drive me mad, and I flush when I realize I'm grinding against him, dragging a harsh groan out of him against my tongue.

"Peach, fuck," he snarls, pulling his hips away from mine—only for a split second before he collides with me again, this time making me feel the raging bulge in his jeans.

Every vicious inch of him catches my folds with *just the right* friction behind a few thin layers of fabric.

It's so on.

I don't think the entire town walking into the barn right now could stop the category five full-body lashing Quinn Faulkner is about to lay on every bit of me.

I can't help it—I shudder.

I've never been that into sex, but now? I want it like a crazy person.

He pulls out of the kiss, and like the last two times, I feel his regret, like he shouldn't have kissed me at all. It's a total contrast to the passion flooding his kisses barely a second ago.

Without a word, his hold lessens, and a war rages behind those emerald-

green eyes.

Disappointed and still throbbing, so wet I could die, I unhook my legs and lower them to the floor.

“Those ribs are probably done by now,” he says, trying to sound like he isn’t as breathless as I am.

*Screw the stupid ribs.*

Is he trying to make me have a stroke?

My body sags with frustration. He can’t even hint at why he goes all cold shoulder, and I know I’m not revolting—not with how he attacks my mouth like a starving beast.

I drop my arms from around his shoulders. “I’m sure they’re done. I made a potato salad to go with them, and coleslaw.”

Taking my elbow, he guides us to the door. “I’m not used to having someone cook for me all the time.”

Cooking is hardly what I’d like to discuss.

Still, I’m too confused to ask him point-blank what the hell just happened.

“Funny, I’m not used to cooking for anyone, either.”

“Could’ve fooled me. You’re an amazing woman, Tory. In the kitchen and...”

“And?” I repeat, stopping and casting him a harsh look.

“...and on those silks, safety shit aside,” he says, coughing once into his hand. “You glide like an angel acrobat.”

He’s so hard to crack, acting like nothing happened.

Like he didn’t just grab my ass and glorify my tongue and give me a *horrible* tease of that thick, hard flesh below the belt.

I’ve never gone pole dancing, but for Quinn, naked? *A girl can learn.*

Jeez.

It’s not like I want him to ask me to marry him or something.

Is that it? Is he so old-fashioned he’s torn up about taking me to bed, the wall, or right here on the floor?

Any old surface will do.

I just want to jump his bones.

A little affair like Granny said. It would finally release this hellish tension between us.

It’s there all the time, and I’m sick and tired of pretending it’s not.

I think about that the entire time we’re eating, picking at my food, averting my eyes every time I see his lips chewing. I know too well what that mouth is capable of, and the fact that he’s wasting it on delicious ribs instead of decadent, sex-crazed *me* leaves me reeling.

Afterwards, when I go upstairs to shower, it's a miracle I haven't just pounced on the table like a cat and thrown myself at him.

But I'm not about to lose it for a monk who feels some kinda way about the relentless, panting, sheet-ripping horizontal tango we could be having...

...and the fact that we're *not* having it right now says it all.

Pitiful, right?

Technically, it's old news. I was desperate as a teenager, and adult me might just be famished.

Does he still see me as that little girl who'd get into trouble and make him laugh, but was always too young to steal a kiss from?

Is he that trapped in the past?

Too afraid or too stubborn to see the full-grown woman right in front of him who's ready to roll the dice?

To take a chance on a different kind of relationship—even if it isn't meant to last forever.

My phone is ringing when I step out of the shower, and though I have no intention of answering, I glance over where it's lying on the counter next to the sink.

**MOTHER** is lit up on the screen.

My nose instinctively wrinkles. Whatever.

I've been expecting *that* call ever since Quinn told Jean-Paul his name, and where he could shove it.

Ignoring the ringing, I wrap a towel around my hair and dry off, then apply body lotion before putting on a pair of loose-fitting shorts and a t-shirt. I cut off the sleeves and widened the neck a while ago. Comfort always beats beauty when it comes to sleeping attire.

After drying my hair, I brush it and leave it hanging loose to air dry. Finally, I pick up my phone and read the texts while brushing my teeth.

**Mother: I'm SO disappointed in you, Tory. Your father and I gave you everything you've ever needed, ever wanted, and this is how you repay us?**

**Mother again: By shacking up with some townie who's totally beneath you? I'm not stupid. I know your grandmother is off on a cruise and you're with that Faulkner boy you were always so infatuated with.**

She follows that text with a sad emoji, and then delivers the knockout punch.

**You're not a child. It's time you stop acting like one. I've booked you a flight home from Bismarck later this week and you'd best be on it. Look for the email with your flight info. Call me immediately.**

Ah, there she is.

Gloria Redson-Riddle-Coffey at her finest.

With a level of anger approaching DEFCON One, I close out of the message, spit, and rinse out the toothbrush. Leaving the phone on the counter, I exit the room, shutting off the light and closing the door behind me.

*Hell no*, I won't be on a plane tomorrow—or anytime soon.

She's right. I'm not a child, and it's high time I stopped acting like one. It's also time for everyone to stop treating me like one, too. Her, Jean-Paul, and Quinn.

He's sitting on the front porch, a beer at his side, next to Owl when I emerge. I take a deep breath.

The worst thing that can happen is he'll say no before I push open the screen door, but he doesn't hear me coming.

It's hard to buckle up for a heavy confrontation when it's so peaceful here at night.

The frogs are croaking, crickets chirping away, and a soft breeze rustles the leaves overhead. The nights here really are perfect.

"See any lightning bugs?" I ask softly.

"Nah. Not dark enough for them yet. Come on out," he says without ever turning around.

Stepping onto the porch, I let the screen door bang shut behind me.

He's sitting in one of the rocking chairs. Rather than sitting in the other one, or on the swing, I walk over and lean against one of the pillars, right in front of him, suddenly feeling very underdressed.

"Dusk is the best time to see them, I hear. Must be plenty down by the pond."

"Plenty of mosquitoes down there, too. Those little bastards will suck you dry for every inch of skin you give 'em," he says, slowly looking me up and down.

"Probably."

*Oof. Awkward.*

I suck at confrontation. I've also never tried to seduce a man before, so...I really don't know how to start.

"Thanks again for letting me use the barn, and for all your hard work. I'm planning on doing a workout before I go and check on the goats tomorrow morning."

"Okay. Just be careful. I need to put down something under those things if you're gonna be climbing up near the ceiling."

He's showered, too, I notice. His hair is still wet, and I can smell the spicy soap he uses, mingled with that quintessentially *Quinn* essence.

A sigh builds inside me.

“Tory?” He calls my name, sensing the weight in the air. “What’s on your mind?”

“You.” It comes out harshly. “You with your hot and cold seesaw crap. You kiss me and run away. You put your hands on me...and then we never talk about it again. You always give me those looks—the same kinda look you’re giving me right now—like it’s eating you up inside that you can’t just—”

“Just what, woman?” His voice is low, distant thunder as he stands, crossing the tiny space between us. “Make the biggest goddamn mistake of our lives?”

I pinch my eyes shut.

*Mistake.*

That’s all I am to him?

“Believe me, I’m tempted,” he finishes. “I’ve been fighting like hell so I don’t fuck you blind ever since you moved in.”

I open my eyes again and catch his gaze in the shadows, this sexy, stern profile of masculine torment, staring out of the darkness like a statue being ripped apart by the soul held prisoner inside.

“You...you have?”

“Ain’t it obvious, Peach? Today’s been the worst,” he growls, barely an inch away from me now, his hand reaching up to slowly, tenderly caress down my face. “I’m not playin’ games. I know what just happened in the barn. I know what we did on the Ferris wheel. I know what I’d like to do every hot second I look at you, and I wish I *didn’t* know some of it when I see you twirling that body, moving like you were made to take every lovin’ inch of me.”

Holy, holy hell.

My legs are shaking. I feel like I’m melting in place, a candle under the roaring flame of his eyes, his words, that little hitch at the end of his sentence because he wants me that bad.

I feel like an ass now.

“Quinn, I...I know you never meant any harm. It’s okay—it’s good, even—to look at me like that. Because it’s the same way I’ve been looking at you, wanting and hoping.” It’s so hard to say these words.

Especially when his lips quirk up in a smirking, excited, almost proud smile.

What now? Do I just...ask him?

Jean-Paul was always the one to suggest sex. Literally.

*We should have sex tonight*, he’d say over dinner, an android who never had an ounce of game in his system.

I can’t see Quinn saying that. Nor can I imagine feeling *obligated* to agree.

Not like I had with Jean-Paul. Sex with him was a chore. Another task I had to complete before my day ended and I could finally sleep.

What would Quinn do if I just up and used Jean-Paul's craptacular phrase?

"What's the grin for?" he asks a moment later, his voice more even. "Is jacking myself off every night to you that funny?"

Pure angst and amazement rips through me so swiftly I shudder.

"No—God, no! Sorry. And what grin?"

"The one that showed up on your face a hot second ago, Peach. Like you have some sorta secret that just made you real happy."

His voice is so smooth, so sexy, it curls my toes.

"I am happy, and...I do have a secret."

"Yeah?" he rasps. "Your new gym? Gonna guess that's what you're smiling about."

He doesn't need to wink.

I almost die on the spot as he transforms into an even bigger tease.

"Dance studio," I correct, trying to play along. "That makes me happy, too."

"Too? What's the other thing?" he growls, his eyes so bright.

I whimper.

Welp, it's now or never.

Pushing off the porch pillar, I fall into his arms, stretch up on my toes, and plant my hands on his back to bring my face directly in front of his.

"You," I whisper.

"Shit." He stiffens slightly. "Tory—"

No.

We're so done talking.

I stop whatever he was going to say with my lips, pressing them hard against his, begging for a chance.

He's stock-still, and for an agonizing second my heart sinks.

Until his lips move beneath mine and his hands grab my waist, hoisting me up. He flings us both back into the chair, and I'm anchored to his lap.

The kiss we share is so hot, so reckless, we're both gasping when our lips part.

He presses his forehead against mine, fingers skimming through my hair as we try to catch enough breath for more.

"Tory—"

"I want you, Quinn." I cup the side of his face with one hand. "I've wanted you for years, and you know it. I'm not a kid anymore. We're both grown adults with wants and needs and...and there's nothing *wrong* with us acting on it if we both decide we want to. Can we just have tonight? Can we try?"

"Sure, but you should know, I have things going on in my life, things that—"

"Nope. Not taking no for an answer. I have big things happening, too, but

right now the most important one is you.” I kiss him again, delving my tongue against his.

“Tory,” he groans, his hands reaching behind to squeeze me, a bulge I can’t ignore suddenly in his jeans, shifting up against my thigh. “Fuck!”

One simple word.

The walls come crashing down.

There’s no hesitation in his response, or in how his hand dives up my shirt.

The skin on skin contact nearly sends me over the edge, dangerously close to grinding on him again and coming in my shorts.

He devours my mouth, fingers working around to my breasts, spilling more hot breath against my tongue before he pulls out of the kiss.

“You sure about this?” he rasps. “Tell me now. I can’t fucking stop if we keep going.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” I whisper, running a hand through his damp hair. “I’m clean. As soon as I heard about Jean-Paul sleeping with someone else, I went to the doctor.”

“I’m clean as a whistle, too.” He shakes his head and curses. “Shit.”

“What?”

“I don’t have any condoms, though. Never had any plans to bring a girl back here since I was always so busy, and the casuals at the Bobcat ain’t my type.”

“It’s your lucky day.” I smile and kiss his chin. “I’m on the pill.”

The look he flashes me could devour a city.

I bite back how I’ve been on the pill since before coming out here when I was young for the last time.

The summer he wasn’t here.

My mother took me to the doctor because she didn’t want me coming home pregnant—another offensive fear of hers she never kept from Gran.

In one swift movement, he’s standing, lifting me up, holding me.

I loop my arms around his neck and nuzzle his cheek.

“Where are we going?” I whisper.

“Inside.” He whistles for Owl, and once the door shuts behind us, he releases my legs and kisses me like there’s a screaming meteor on the way to end life as we know it.

His embrace is so tight, I can barely breathe.

It doesn’t matter a moment later when his tongue finds mine, when my knees buckle, when he’s holding me up and taking me over, pressing every single button I’ve got.

I’m so flipping gone.

I have no idea how we wind up on the couch, but when the kissing ends,

that's where we are, stroking and caressing each other like our lives depend on it.

The skin beneath his shirt is so hot, so hard, I need more. Pushing his shirt up reveals muscle anointed with dark tattoos.

He does the same with my shirt, and as I pull my arms free, he grasps them, holding them over my head, devouring me with those shining green eyes.

"Dammit, darlin', you're so fucking beautiful." For a second he bares his teeth, sucking a sharp breath through them. "So ready."

Again, I almost spontaneously combust into an O on the spot.

He's also too sweet, considering I've always felt extremely inadequate in one place.

"Fair warning. I'm a dancer and we're often kinda flat."

"Bullshit," he snarls.

The thrill he sends through me, kissing my nipples one at a time, shows how much he means it.

"More than a mouthful might be a waste," he says, bringing one nipple fully into his mouth to resume proving his point.

Holy Hades.

I've never experienced anything like the rough, playful, and utterly needy way he sucks me. Guys like Jean-Paul just did it out of habit, lacking real passion.

But Quinn teases my breasts like he's been waiting to his whole life.

Every slap of his tongue, every soft kiss, every tender scratch of his teeth...

It jolts me so sharply I can hardly even think, except to relish just how incredible this is.

He's still working my buds and raking his stubble against my breasts when his hand slides inside my shorts, straight to where I'm throbbing, burning, pleading for him most.

The way he touches, strokes, it's thrilling and soothing at the same time.

Beyond perfection.

This man knows exactly where to touch, how much pressure, when to give and take, when to tease and when to render me breathless.

My pussy tenses, sending a white-hot needling heat down my legs, up my spine, through my entirety.

And when he finally parts my soaked folds—shoving two fingers in—when his thumb smothers my clit, when he barely moves until I *ride* his hand, I'm worse than screwed.

I'm owned.

Holding my breath at the pressure building inside me, I gasp his name.

“Quinn!”

“Go with it, Tory,” he whispers, quickening his fingers, stroking my walls with this mad, hot glint in his eye.

Oh.

Oh, shit.

My hips buckle. My thighs squeeze his hand. My legs start trembling like he’s going to split me in two.

I’ve never felt *anything* like the breach in my body right now.

The intensity of Quinn Faulkner’s otherworldly pleasure.

My walls clench around his fingers as he glides them in and out, all the while keeping this mad, steady pressure on one specific point. Devastating.

He has me pumping against his hand, losing my mind while a tsunami builds, demanding release.

I can’t stop it to save my life.

Nor do I want to.

It’s like the end of a dance routine, when the music is about to crescendo, and you’re given over to the sweet, sweet insanity.

“That’s it, Peach,” he says, urging me on, even as I grab his wrist and dig my nails in.

“Quinn, Quinn, I’m...I’m going to—”

“Fucking do it,” he demands. “Come hard for me, Peach. Let me feel you lose it.”

My eyes pinch shut and my body nearly convulses as his strokes continue, tenderizing my most sensitive nerves. Flames ignite, starting at my clit, winding in, working through me like searing hot ropes.

*Coming!*

Out of nowhere, it hits with brute force, racking my body with wave after wave of the most intense pleasure ever known to womankind. I scream his name as it tears through me—*I try*.

But I’m not even sure what planet I’m on as he holds me down, pumping his fingers, thumbing my clit with that endless heat, endless control, endless call to surrender.

Sweet hell, do I ever.

I’m having my first orgasm with a man.

Another something that’s never happened before.

Ecstasy consumes me in all its relentless, shrieking glory as I sink deep into the couch, utterly amazed, trying to comprehend what he’s done to me, and what I’ll always want him to do.

Smiling, Quinn kisses me back to life.

Sure, it's not quite Sleeping Beauty, but if that drowsy bitch ever came this hard on the hand of the man she's been lusting over a whole freaking decade?

Yeah.

Yeah, I think Prince Charming's kiss might be the only thing in the universe to snap her out of *that* coma.

"I...I've never come before," I tell him once I can form words again. "Not during sex."

The grin he throws at me threatens to make it happen again.

"I figured. You had a lot of pent-up energy, darlin'. You still do." His expression sharpens into something very, very hungry.

"It was amazing," I whisper, shaking my head at how inadequate that word really is.

He stands, scooping me off the couch like I've gone fully weightless.

Maybe I have, considering I can't feel gravity anymore.

"Wait till round two."

Oh, crap. How had I forgotten?

We haven't even had sex-sex yet...or the thousand other things my body suddenly aches to do with him.

Looping my arms around his neck, I smile.

"Will I have to wait long?"

"Just the minute it takes to get you to bed," he tells me.

Joyous, I laugh and tease him, stroking my legs against his.

"Promises, promises," I whisper. "You'd better not under-deliver."

He quirks a brow. "That even a question after I made you come your soul out?"

Flushed cherry-red, I shake my head.

No way.

If there's one thing I'll never doubt, it's Quinn Faulkner's prowess in the art of mastering the female body.



NO SOONER than we're upstairs, he throws me on the bed and sheds his clothes.

Before I can even say *ginormous*, I'm face to shaft with a swollen, angry rod of a dick that's almost as thick as my wrist. He turns, mischief on his face, like he fully expected to stun me speechless.

"Your move, darlin'. I'm all yours tonight." He inhales sharply.

I look up, catching the want in his eyes and their dark, amused energy,

wrapping my fingers around his cock, just as full, hard, and strong as the rest of him.

A few quick pumps send this pearly, clear liquid pulsing into my hand, which I use to stroke him. Every glide down to his balls and back up again makes me wetter, especially as he tilts his head back, closes his eyes, and grinds out his pleasure.

Time for another first, I think, gingerly giving his swollen tip a quick peck with my lips.

The look he shoots me is pure torture.

*If you're gonna suck, woman, then do it*, his eyes say.

For a second, I hesitate, squeezing the full, sweet length of him.

Oh, I've given head before. But with Jean-Paul, it was overly awkward and over too fast, and now I just want to know how a real man reacts to my lips.

I find out a moment later, opening wide to engulf his seething length.

Quinn growls, fisting my hair, urging me on with just the right tension.

I do my best. I take him faster, finding my rhythm. I don't even know if I make it halfway down his steel, but Lord, do I try.

I love how his chest billows out when my tongue finds the skin just under his crown.

I love how he stiffens, swelling around my lips, releasing one long growl as his hips move slowly, meeting my pace, using my mouth like it was always *made* to be used.

And holy hell do I love the thrill when he uses me for several breathless minutes until he pulls away, just when I think he might come.

It's a little disappointing that he doesn't—at first.

But then he draws me up for a kiss, wraps his arms so tight around my back, and lays me down, centering his well-teased hard-on against my pussy.

A half stroke of his hips has me crying out. I realize I'm feeling the head of his cock against my clit, so devilishly close to what we both need.

"Quinn," I whimper, breaking the kiss that smothers me. "Quinn, please. I want you inside me."

For a second, his hand caresses my face. Those feral green eyes brighten, alive with this animalistic need, something wild he's tried to hold back for so long—and now I've just given my permission.

Oh. My. God.

"You know how many times I've jacked off to this, Tory?" he whispers, his voice like sandpaper. "This very second? Both of us naked, tangled, having you under me, my dick ready to split you apart..."

"Quinn, yes." I run my ankles up his calves, teasing him, wishing he'd do all

that and more.

Not just because it's what he deserves, but because I'll die like this if he doesn't.

"Tory, fuck," he growls, his hips rolling back.

I spend a breathless second worried he's having second thoughts.

But then—oh, *then*—his hips roll forward, perfectly aligned with my body, slowly feeding his pulsing tip into my depths.

Quinn tries to go slow, but I don't let him when I push back, taking him fully into me.

Panting, fingers tangled in his hair, every inch of him inside me, I see the very instant Quinn loses the last shred of his control.

He's already in to the hilt, his balls resting on my ass, when he makes this sharp jerk, sinking deeper, showing me I'm unmistakably his.

Forever more.

Because if I thought his hand owned me, if I thought I lost myself in his kisses...

I didn't have a clue what was coming.

Every frenzied stroke, every slash of his hips, every time his teeth find my throat in these hot, wicked kisses brand me for life.

Hell yes, I'm his.

His as he makes me feel every punishing thrust, training my body to accommodate him.

His as his pubic bone grinds against my clit, his strokes coming harder and deeper, making me clench around his length for dear life.

His as I'm racked with a bestial pleasure I never dared imagine, every limb pinched to his body, trying to scream because I flipping *can't*.

He's made me this breathless.

He's made me this wanton.

He's made me a toy as I rasp out a breathless screech, coming for the first time with his cock still pumping like mad, his body just a streak of tattooed muscle above me.

I'm so many levels of gone I might never come back.

I'm coming, gasping, groaning, raking my nails down his back in a fever.

He gives back an even faster rhythm, even harder strokes, wringing every bit of pleasure out of me.

And just when I think I'm done and spent, his steady thrusts start again, reminding me we're only done when *he* says so.

I want to feel him come inside me so bad.

I'm driven half insane, imagining the heat, the thought of him pouring into

me, taking his release from my flesh.

“Quinn,” I whimper, barely recognizing my own voice as I try to match his rhythm.

“Almost there, darlin’,” he strangles out, his throat tight with pleasure.

I’m going to be brutally sore come morning between the silks and this wilder workout, but right now?

Now, the only thing that matters is this mess of limbs and so many hot, rampant kisses I know I won’t last.

Every tight pitch of his hips brings me closer, a merciless, machine-like friction designed to ignite the fuse in my core.

Oh, hell, I’m going to come again, just as soon as he—

“Tory, fuck,” he pants. “Gonna come inside you, baby girl.”

“Yes!” I hiss, the last coherent word I get out before it happens.

My whole reality shatters as he pins me down, kisses me with thunder on his tongue, and throws his full force into me, pushing my ass deep into the mattress, right before his cock swells and molten heat washes over me from the inside out.

Call me marked. Wrecked. Ruined. Reborn.

Call me a thousand outrageous names and filthy adjectives and they still won’t be enough to describe the moment Quinn Faulkner floods his seed into me with a snarling crescendo, a wave of tense muscle, and this animal relief carved across his face in sheer release.

I don’t come this time.

I go supernova.

The sensation rocketing through me as my release joins his can’t be anything less than unadulterated, sexy nirvana.

Instinct binding me to this beautiful beast of a man who strains through every jerk of his body, filling me to overflowing, each thick rope he hurls into my depths making me come a little harder.

Even when he’s done, he stays rooted in me, kissing me softly again and again, playfully drawing my tongue out and then chasing it back into my mouth.

I’m almost crying when I run my hand across his cheek, loving his rough stubble, loving this, loving *him*.

The only man who’s ever been worthy of my heart.

The only protector I’ve ever had.

Of all the amazing things that unfold tonight—and keep unfolding when we slip apart—resting in each other’s arms, I know what blindsides me the most.

It’s this undeniable sense that life will never, ever be the same.

*Sorry, Gran.*

Turns out those flings, affairs, and yes—even nighttime nibbles, ugh—come

with major cases of feelings, altered lives, and so many unpredictable ripple effects I'm already trembling.



## ALMOST GOAT TO EDEN (FAULKNER)



**B**y the third evening since I started taking Tory Three Names to bed, you'd have to beat me off her with a crowbar.

I swear to God, I've never wanted to give pleasure as bad as I want to deliver it to Tory in buckets.

She's never been treated the way she deserves, loved the way she ought to be loved, worshiped from head to toe with my tongue, my hands, and every wicked inch of me intent on keeping her fulfilled.

I could tell she was starved the first time I brought her off with my hands.

And tonight, after we're back from the Neuman place to check on the goats and I've spent a few frustrating hours trying to draw more info out about Pickett without much luck, I dive right into the one thing I can still control.

What happens with my best friend, my obsession, and the hottest angel ever come to Earth. I think we've got ourselves a slice of Eden.

Feels like it as I slowly lay her down on my bed.

My breath catches at how fucking gorgeous she is. Her skin glows, flawless except for this adorable mole on her neck, which adds a splash of character.

Her trim shape is a perfect balance of lean muscle and firm flesh, topped with auburn curls I've come dangerously close to pulling out of her head when we're really going at it.

I run a hand up her arm, across her shoulder, along the side of her face.

Then, leaning down, I find that strawberry mouth and take every last bit of it.

"I knew this is what would happen if I ever touched you," I whisper against her lips. "Knew I wouldn't be able to stop."

She giggles, a musical sound that just makes me harder.

"It's what I hoped would happen." Looping her arms around my neck, she kisses me. "Now, about those promises you made at the Neuman place..."

I grin, shrugging like I've got no idea what she's talking about.

It's become this little game, teasing each other with promises, ever since I talked myself up the first time. Damn glad I delivered.

It wasn't easy.

Not with how hard I fought to hold myself back from coming the instant I slipped inside her.

I kiss my way down her neck, adding the hint of teeth I know she loves.

"What promises are those? Jog a man's memory."

She lets out a little moan.

While trailing kisses across her shoulder blade, I grasp the waistband of her shorts, and as I kiss my way down her torso, I slip the shorts over her hips, straight down her thighs.

She's wearing a lacy pair of panties today, pink with a tiny black bow on the elastic.

All dressed up with no place to go—except where my mouth takes her.

Adorable.

Growling, I tug them lower, noticing how wet they feel. It's beautifully obscene how responsive she is to every kiss, every caress, every filthy word I whisper in her ear.

Of course it sends my cock into a manic frenzy, throbbing with need.

Not yet.

*Not fucking yet.*

Soon, I'll be inside her, scratching my itch, but first I want her to come on my mouth.

I run a finger over her pussy lips, trying not to shudder. Just like her namesake, she's all peach sweetness down there, and in less than a week I've become addicted to her nectar.

A soft moan soars out of her the instant I graze her clit.

My cock jerks at the greedy way she arches up, pressed against my hand, giving up another throaty moan, this time louder.

"This got anything to do with those promises I made?" I ask, grinning.

Fuck, do I love how her eyes roll.

"Oh, oh yes," she whines.

My knuckle presses against her clit, adding wicked pleasure, and I nearly come spontaneously at how her body trembles just for me.

It's a wild thing when a man takes control like this, binding it in soft sighs and frenzied flesh.

"Quinn!" she half groans out my name. "That feels so...so..."

"Good?" I ask, chuckling. "I'm hoping that's why you can't speak, darlin'."

She digs her hands into the comforter and her hips rise up.

“Beyond *good*.”

Music to my ears.

I go down on her then, sealing my mouth around her clit, sucking till she’s pumping her wet heat against me, hard and fast and reckless.

Just a little tease, a warm-up before my mouth moves to her folds. Then she’s splayed open, dripping, baring her sticky sweetness for my tongue like this rare wine.

Too flowery sounding? I don’t give a single fuck.

I’m not exaggerating when I say I could eat this pussy morning, noon, and night.

She tastes so good it ought to be illegal.

Makes for a savage aphrodisiac, too, and the more I taste, the harder I ache.

I’m panting, damn near growling as my tongue fucks her from the inside out, fighting back mindless lust with all my might.

I’ll get my reward in the end, even if it feels like it’ll take an eternity at the moment.

This is for her.

Completely.

I lick, suck, and torment her with my tongue, pushing my whole mouth in deep, making her feel the scratch of my scruff on every last bit of her thighs.

It doesn’t take long before those moans become breathless hitches.

And she’s shouting my name, her fingers pressed against my head, digging at my scalp, but I’ll be damned if I’ll stop for anything.

“Quinn, Quinn, you’re about to make me—”

Yeah, darlin’.

*I know.*

There’s my cue to push my face in even harder, lick back up to her clit, and pull that nub between my teeth while it gets one good tongue lash after another.

Just when her legs are starting to shake, I do it.

Carefully, I hoist her up, throw her legs over my shoulders, and carry her across the room. She’s held up and perched on me while I hold her midair, pinning her sweet ass to the wall, securing her so my face can go to town.

I love how she thought I was out of tricks, and I was just gonna finish her in bed.

The surprise turns into a delight as she goes back to the brink in no time, shuddering, grinding her soaked cunt against my face.

And when her body goes rigid, legs vibrating on my shoulders, feet kicking my back, pure electricity shooting through her with every feral tongue stroke, I

get what I want.

I drink my fill of Tory Three Names long and deep.

I get fucking drunk on her scent, her cream, her shrill whimpers.

Her everything.

I make her pleasure last till her body goes limp, her back flat against the wall, and she's gasping for air. Her nails dig into my scalp, trying to hold her balance.

That's when I look up and catch a scene stolen from heaven—the brightest blue eyes I've ever seen peeking out behind a tangle of auburn hair splashed over her face.

Holy shit.

She's a hot mess, no thanks to yours truly.

More importantly, she's *my* hot mess, and fuck, do I love it.

When she's finally breathing again, I help get her feet back on the ground, then fold her in a tight embrace so we can kiss.

"How? How do you do this to me?" she asks, pushing her little hand into mine, pulling me playfully back toward the bed.

"Because I know what you need, Peach." Unbuttoning my jeans, I know what I need, too, and it ain't gonna wait any longer. I kick off my jeans and boxers, then pull off my shirt as I climb into bed with her, finding my place between her legs.

"I'm that predictable? Sad." She gives me a mock-pout, pursing her lips.

"Hardly," I tell her, brushing my lips over hers. "If finding new ways to make the hottest woman I've ever had in my bed come like a rocket means predictable, sign me the hell up. Just because I know you'll blow like the prettiest firecracker ever made every time doesn't make it any less enjoyable, woman."

For a second, she laughs, new redness painting her cheeks.

Sooner or later, she's gonna get used to flattery, too, but I can't blame her eyes as they drift to the angry spike jutting out below my waist.

"Good Lord, Quinn." She's staring at my hard-on. "You're so big."

My ego grows three times bigger, even as I fight the urge to laugh at her comment and her pink cheeks.

She must've seen it up close at least a dozen times by now, and she still acts like I just descended out of the sky with a dick sculpted by Zeus.

Hey, I'll be the first to admit, there are *worse* things a woman can say about a dude's equipment. And as long as this tool gets to go happily to work soon...

My mouth closes over hers again. I kiss down her throat, finding her nipples, making sure she's good and ready to take every inch of me.

“If you want to go slow tonight, just say so,” I whisper, stopping my tongue-work when she moans.

She arches her hips with another pout on her face. This time, not so playful.

“Not *too* slow. I want you now.”

Shit, she’s good.

The girl doesn’t even need to be a born dirty talker to make my balls ache like they’re on fire. The heat in her voice and those steaming witchfire-blue eyes turn me rabid.

Sitting back, I wrap a fist around my throbbing base and guide my tip into her.

The first touch of her hot, wet pussy feels divine. Like having my entire length sucked off by an angel the deeper I go.

“So fucking tight...you’re *killing* me,” I growl when I’m in as deep as I can go, pinning her fully under me, touching my forehead to hers.

Between her slick heat and the moan I pull out of her, I know this won’t last as long as I want it to.

My full glide inside her is as close to perfection as I’ve ever known.

For a few seconds, I just savor her, closing my eyes.

The way she clenches around me is just that fucking good.

I hold still, giving her time to get used to me, feel me filling her completely.

If she wants it fast and dirty tonight, the more she’s warmed up, the harder I’ll take her.

“I’ve never felt anything so perfect,” she says, reading my mind and letting out another sultry groan.

“Never,” I agree. “More to come. Hold the fuck on, darlin’. We’re gonna go hard.”

She wraps her legs around my hips and lifts her head up to kiss my chest, adding this teasing nip of her teeth.

Fuck, I can’t hold on any longer.

My hips peel back and crash into hers again, one harsh, full-bodied stroke.

I love how her eyes flutter shut as she lifts her hips to meet me several strokes later, sucking me in all the way to the base of my cock.

For such a small woman, it’s a miracle how well she takes me.

It’s like we were built to fuck, crafted for passion, meant to be tormented with a decade apart so this—fucking *this*—would be that much more rewarding.

Hell, I make sure we’re both rewarded plenty as my speed picks up, slamming myself into her, grinding my pubic bone down hard on her clit.

I thought I’d be the one in trouble trying to last, but Tory loses her mind in a matter of minutes, riding my fullness with these mad, desperate jerks of her

body.

She practically *climbs* me as I fuck her deeper, faster, harder.

We're a mess of tangled limbs, moving as one, and the magic words hurl her straight over the edge the second they're torn out of my mouth.

"Come like you mean it, Peach," I snarl, sending her eyes to nirvana as they waver shut with one last glimpse of my crazy sex gaze.

Fuck.

She nearly rips an orgasm right from my balls when her pussy hugs me so tight, constricting, her release rocking every bit of me.

Somehow, I'm still thrusting, powering straight through her release, hammering her with pleasure like a storm churns the sea.

Call it what you will.

Embellished, over the top, outrageous, even a little violent.

Whatever.

It's exactly how Tory Three Names makes me that much more addicted, that much more driven to own every bit of her.

She barely gets a minute to catch her breath before I'm flipping her over, finding my place.

I mount her from behind when she's on her knees, feeding inch after raging inch in, kissing the back of her neck, then stopping with my lips near her ear.

"Hands above your head. Grab the pillows if you need to. Keep your ass up," I whisper darkly. "Tonight's the night I make you forget every man you've ever fucked."

I can't help it.

It's jealous as hell and maybe a little psycho, but truly?

There's exactly *one* fucking snail I want to erase from her brain, her body, her soul.

And if I can grind him out of her by bringing her off so hard she can't remember her own name, Lord knows I'll try.

She's made me a Tory-crazed monster.

Still, judging by the way she gasps and how her walls milk my cock, it seems I ain't the only one interested in making that happen.

She's fucking me as much as I am her now, and it's devastating.

A high unlike anything I've ever known whips through my brain. I clamp my jaw tight, wanting to drag this out as long as possible.

With long, languid strokes, I make sure my balls slap her swollen clit.

She moans real sweet for me a little while later, flinging her ass back into my abs, her fingernails tangled in the pillows over her head as she arches. Screams. Comes un-fucking-done.

*Shit!*

I don't know what comes over me when my hand flies out and crashes across her ass cheek. But it makes her come instantly, so I drive on harder, losing myself in her climax.

"Coming with you, Peach. Hold the fuck on."

And I do.

An electric current blasts up my spine as I get in a few last angry thrusts, then piston down against her ass, burying myself balls deep a split second ahead of the torrent that rends me in two.

Holy fuck.

I'm barely human when I come inside her, my spine bent and my head back, hurling every last fiery drop in her depths.

I've reverted back to some savage, primal thing.

A beast absolutely crazed to plant his seed hot and hard and deep, and brand this girl from the inside out.

Forget control.

It ain't just Peach losing herself in complete surrender and unconditional rapture, forgetting what she is as she squeals, her pleasure heightened by my flood.

*I'm* the one who forgets my own name.

Every last shitty, stubborn, unbreakable mountain between us comes crashing down as I empty my balls, snarling out her name, filling her with a passion and a roar that'd scare a lion.

My fingers are pale, digging into her cheeks, fusing us together.

Everything drops away except for us and how fucking good we feel locked in bliss.

Spent, I release the death-grip on her ass and brace my weight on my arms so I won't crush her as I relax, hovering over her body gently, brushing my lips across hers as she turns her head.

"Now I know," she whispers, still trying to catch her breath.

"Know what?"

"What the big deal over sex is." Closing her eyes, she flops down deeper into the mattress. "With you, it's like nothing on Earth."

Just when I think she couldn't make me smile any harder...

Well, hell, she's right.

What I just experienced with her was like nothing I've ever had in my life.

Talk about worrisome.

Now that we've unleashed a passion a whole decade in the making, nothing else will ever compare.

Now that we're more than just friends—happy lovers—there's no way I can ever stop it from taking over everything we thought we knew.



I WAKE up to the sun painting the sky rosy pink.

Still sound asleep, Tory pulls the sheet over her naked body tighter, wrapped up next to me.

Let her rest.

It's amazing I'm even awake, considering I'd never gone so many consecutive rounds as we'd had last night.

Six times.

That's how often I let that little minx ruin me with the hottest, ball-busting nuts of my life. If you asked me to remember how many times I sent her over the ledge, I couldn't tell you to save my life.

It's even more incredible I want her again.

Fuck.

I'm officially out of my depth when it comes to this woman.

Needing to prove that I still have a faint shred of self-control, I ease off the bed and quietly walk to the bathroom. Thinking she's so tired she won't hear, I step into the shower and turn on the water.

The cold spray helps wash away a little of the black magic spell she's got on me.

At least I feel human again, and not like a frigging wolf in mating season.

Yeah. I'm gonna have to set some boundaries.

We want each other, we want to enjoy each other, fine.

It just can't go anywhere further right now. Beyond sex.

My past and present won't allow it. Not till my dire situation clears up.

Bat Pickett thinks I killed his brother.

I hadn't, but I'd wanted to.

Justin Franklin, a great agent, never should've went down the way he did—especially not in that godforsaken bust.

He ought to be alive and happy, making love to his woman and watching his kids grow up. He had a wife and two sons. Boys who'll never know their father. And the only reason he died is because he was by my side, trying to put one more devil behind bars.

It doesn't help that Jake died like the savage he was, drowned by a pack of fellow demons.

I shove my head under the spray of water, trying to wash away the images that crash through my head like a bad movie I had to live.

Jake Pickett leering over me, back at the interrogation in the OKC, looking like he wanted to reach across the table with those freakishly huge fingers and snap my fucking neck.

If only he'd fucking tried.

The call from his girl, Janie, hearing how scared she was, how she knew she shouldn't even be talking to us, but she didn't have another choice.

I promised we'd keep her safe.

A promise I'd damn well broken even when I gave it my best.

Justin smiling as he climbed in his car, telling me he couldn't rest easy till we had Pickett's girlfriend in witness protection. He knew as well as I did that her flipping on her rat-fuck of a boyfriend would give us an express ticket to lock up Jake and take apart his grimy little laundromat distribution system.

It ain't fair, goddammit.

There was no justice.

And now, thanks to some shady insider, Jake's equally wicked little brother is gonna walk out into the broad daylight and come up here.

For me and everybody else I've been stupid enough to reel into my web of a life.

Tory deserves better, and so does Dallas. They deserve to—

Something touches my shoulder.

My eyes fly open and I whip around.

My heart skips a beat at the sight of a smile like sunshine and blue eyes as naked as the rest of her, promising a damn good morning.

"I missed you when I woke up." Tory steps closer, lays her hands on my chest, and stretches on her toes. "Knew you hadn't gone too far. Good morning, Quinn," she says, laying her lips on mine.

That's all it takes before I have her against the wall, pulling at her bottom lip with my teeth, pushing one hand between her legs.

I think it's the longest shower of my life, but I'm not complaining one bit.

Roughly an hour passes before we're on our way to the Neuman place, and for the life of me, all I can think about is the killer fuckery in the shower we just shared.

She'd gone down on her knees like she sensed my tension, locking those luscious lips around my dick in a soft pink ring, launching me to heaven.

Just thinking about her mouth so full of me turns my brain on again.

If we were anywhere else but the drive thru, waiting on our breakfast order before goat duty, I'd find a way to take her right here in this truck.

My stomach growls, pulling my thoughts to food and coffee, when Tory grabs my arm.

“Quinn—that’s the truck! See it there? The red Chevy.”

Every part of my body snaps to attention.

A red truck as bright as a fire engine turns onto Main Street, heading for the highway.

And we’re boxed in, waiting for a good-sized order because I let my gut do the talking.

*Fuck.*

There’s a car ahead of us and one behind us, besides the building on my side and the tall concrete barrier on hers. My teeth clench.

There’s no way for me to make a clean exit to give chase.

Not the worst thing, honestly.

Going after a potentially dangerous piece of scum with Tory along isn’t smart. It’s not safe, either, meaning I couldn’t go flying with that vehicle even if I had a clean shot.

“Keep an eye on it,” I tell her, even as I watch the Chevy turn and start barreling down the highway. It’s going north at a fast clip, the same direction we’ll be heading soon.

The car ahead of me grinds forward, but then stops.

The people in the car search their bags for a fucking century, obviously making sure they got the right food.

A muscle in my eyeball twitches.

Then it’s our turn to race up.

“Here’s your order!” The smiley teenager in the window hands me an OJ and a steaming coffee.

“Sorry, we’re in a hurry,” I mutter, getting grabby real fast.

I barely avoid spilling as I mash the drinks in the truck’s holders, yank the bag from her hand, hold my breath while she swipes my card, and floor it, almost ramming the car ahead of us.

They finally pull forward a few more feet—giving me a well-deserved dirty look in the mirror—and I swerve around them.

“Quinn, whoa.”

“Sorry I’m driving like an asshole. We need a read on that truck—can you still see it?” I ask, jerking my head from side to side, searching.

“It just pulled onto the highway...I lost sight of it then.” Tory sets the bag on the floor by her feet. “Maybe they do work for Neuman’s Dairy.”

No. I checked that out right after it happened. No one at Neuman’s ever had anybody on payroll fitting that man’s description with a red Chevy truck.

I take the highway turn sharply, laying my foot on the gas.

Behind me, I hear Owl's breathing sharpen. His big tongue flops out like he's enjoying the action.

With Tory in the truck, I won't overtake the guy or do anything stupid, but I do need to know where he's going.

Even though we slept in a little, it's still early, barely eight in the morning.

He could be a local, even if he's not a Neuman's employee. An extra summer field hand going to work for some farmer or something.

My gut disagrees, though, rumbling with this dark hint that tells me he's here for one reason.

*He wants you dead, I think to myself. He wants to help Bat Pickett put you down like a mad dog.*

Holding our speed steady, I stay far enough behind the guy to keep an eye on him. We're several lengths back, a comfortable distance to avoid raising his suspicion.

"Is there anything down that road except for the lake?" Tory asks just as the red truck turns off the highway.

"Not that I know of," I answer. "It's close to Drake and Bella's property, the spare acreage they barely use, way the hell out. Except when Edison does his Houdini escape thing, I mean. I think there's a couple other big old farms down that way."

She nods, then gives me a surprised look. "Hey, aren't we going to follow him?"

"Not today," I bite off.

"Why not?" She rubs a hand at her eyes, casting a dirty look. "Quinn, he had to slow down on that service road. You could catch him real easy."

Acting nonchalant, I stiffen in my seat. "We don't know who or what the fuck he is. He could just work out here somewhere."

I can feel her confusion and taste my own sour lie, trying to quell her worries.

Still, I keep staring at the road straight ahead as we roll past the gravel road the Chevy turned down.

Once we get to the dairy, I'll call Drake.

With his place being close to the lake and being Sheriff Wallace's right-hand man, he'll know what, if anything, is down that road.

He'll also know how best to get a better look if warranted.

"Do you want your breakfast?" she asks.

Owl belts out an enthusiastic *woof!*

Trying to keep things as normal as possible, I smile in agreement.

“Sure, we might as well eat before we see the goats,” I say.

She passes out the food to me and Owl, who’s anxiously waiting with his head stuck between the seats. I devour my breakfast burritos, deep in thought.

Food’s food, even when it sits more heavily than usual in my stomach.

When we roll up to the dairy farm, it’s eerily pleasant. Sunshine galore, the cows grazing in the distance, and a few workers milling around the far-off barns. Makes it feel like an idyllic trip with my girl in the countryside.

Easy to forget the shitty reminder of what I’m really dealing with.

No sooner are we out of the truck than I’m awed by the size of the Neuman place yet again. The critters are making steady progress, but they’ve got a heap of chewing left to go before the wild acreage is anything close to clear.

Though the goats have wiped out a lot of brush, there are still several large overgrown thickets that make it impossible to see them all at once.

Tory and I separate to make a head count, her taking Owl.

While I’m walking toward a clump of bushes, I take out my phone and wake the screen. I hadn’t checked it last night or real closely this morning, seeing how we were happily occupied.

Now I see the alert from the app rigged up to the cameras.

*Shit.*

I curse myself for slacking off when I see a notice that the camera named Granny’s went dead and stopped recording at five thirty this morning.

Those things are built to withstand World War Three, at least when it’s not winter. Nothing short of a person with tools snipping the right wire could’ve disabled them at Granny’s empty place.

It could be a glitch with the app, or maybe one of the remodeling crew accidentally shut ’em off, though I know the probability of that is next to nil.

Jaw clenched, I tap my Contacts, find Drake’s name, and hit Call.

He answers on the first ring.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?” I ask, aware of the time.

“Nah, just getting ready to take Bella for the baby’s checkup. What’s happening?”

I tell him about Granny’s cameras and the red truck heading down the old service road to the lake that runs past the edge of their massive property.

“Thing is, I don’t know how the fuck that tech could just crash abruptly,” I say. “You said it’s state of the art stuff. The kind of gear you’d need to take a bomb to or else clip the right wire...”

“Yeah. Realistically, the only way they can be totally disarmed without the built-in alarm chirping is if someone took the batteries out,” he says. “Stop over here when you’re done with the goats and we’ll check out Big Fish Lake. The

only vacant place down that road right now is the old Maddock farm.”

I agree, tuck my phone away, and hustle over to Tory, counting goats along the way.

Something’s off, and it’s not just the bad juju with the cameras going down.

We’re missing a goat.

I recount just to be sure when I only total seventeen before asking, “How many in your head count?”

“Seventeen, but Owl’s in that overgrown area, sniffing around like crazy. I’m hoping he’ll flush out the last one.” She winces, shaking her head. “It’s Hellboy who’s missing.”

“Of course,” I grumble, slapping my thighs lightly.

If there was ever an animal made for trouble, it’s him.

Can’t ignore the worry lining her face, though. Or the ill feeling tossing around my gut.

I lay a hand around her shoulders, rubbing her for comfort. “Owl will suss him out. He could find a chicken bone in a sulfur pit.”

“I hope you’re right,” she whispers back. “I swear, if something happens to that poor stupid goat, I’ll—”

She’s cutoff mid-sentence the instant Owl starts barking.

Not his usual goat gathering bark, either.

Tory starts forward, but I grab her arm, gently urging her back.

“Wait here,” I tell her. “Let me have a look. It’s a mess out there, and we don’t know if—”

“Oh, no,” she replies, bolting toward the dog. “He’s my goat. Keep up, Quinn!”

Damn her cute, stubborn butt.

My feet hit the ground, and it’s not hard to pull ahead of her, leaving her in the dust.

I’d give anything to hear her laughing, if this was just another one of our dumb games, but I know that ain’t it.

Today, I’ll give anything I can to shield this woman who’s got me falling so hard, I’ll never stand up again if I lose her.



## YOU GOAT ME DREAMIN' (TORY)



**T**hree things I've learned about goats by now: they're curious creatures, they're cute to a fault even when they decide to be bleating pains in the butt, and they love trouble with a capital T.

But the way the rope is tangled around Hellboy's curved horns sends an ice-cold shiver up my spine.

An old rope wouldn't concern me. This one is *new*.

Maybe Hellboy doesn't have an innocent bone in his body, but the pitiful little whine he makes as soon as he sees me says this wasn't his fault.

No way in hell.

The end of the rope caught in the V of a fallen log looks frayed, possibly from Hellboy dragging it through the brush.

Quinn gently folds an arm around the animal's back, and we work together to get the rope off the goat's horns and cut away from the log.

"You poor little monster," I whisper, stroking his fur. "Hang on, you're almost free..."

A few frantic seconds later, he's out of his predicament.

Hellboy bumps my arm and bleats, softly but purposefully, as if to say thanks.

Then he turns and scrambles out of the brush, back toward the safety of the tribe.

Something about his woes seem extra unsettling.

Over the past few weeks, I've noticed he's basically become the self-proclaimed leader of the tribe. Who knew goats were such social creatures?

Whatever else Hellboy is, he's shown his intelligence repeatedly. And to see the black shaggy alpha-goat with the wicked smile almost brought to a humiliating end...

It's too suspicious.

Something stinks to high heaven.

"Where would that rope come from?" I ask, frowning so hard my face hurts. "The Neumans haven't used this land in ages."

"Hard to say," Quinn replies while wrapping the rope's remnants into a coil. "Could've just been lying around, an old artifact from years ago, maybe. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

His voice is too level.

I stop and study him.

No way he believes that, and neither do I, yet neither of us say it as we walk to the truck.

I hadn't pushed him to chase the red truck to the lake, either, because I'm not sure I *want* to know if that guy is part of Quinn's past or not.

*What happened to him? I wonder. All of those years we spent apart?*

There's this shadow hanging over him, dark with secrets.

No, he hasn't mentioned anything more about the brother of that guy he'd busted, but I have a pretty keen sense he thinks about it a lot.

The last week has been so incredible, turning my world upside down, I just didn't want to dwell on it.

Still, the pinholes of darkness in our light are there.

When he thinks I'm asleep, I catch him up, staring into the night.

I see a lonely, faraway look in his restless green eyes, an anxiousness, and I know he's not thinking pleasant thoughts.

That worries me.

"Before we head home, I need to stop by Drake and Bella's place," Quinn says as we arrive at the truck.

"Okay." I hold open the back door for Owl to jump in the back before I get in the front.

I saw what he was doing.

Quinn was examining the ground the entire time we walked to the gate, and now he's paying an eerie amount of attention to the gravel road.

He doesn't say anything when he climbs in the driver's seat.

Just leans over, grasps the back of my neck, and pulls me toward him.

"You okay, Tory?"

"Perfectly fine," I lie, flashing him a side-eye. "Are *you*?"

"If Hellboy's all right, so am I. I'm in no mood to come here and find a man down—er, goat, I guess." He gives me that boyish smile then, the same kind he always wore when we were kids.

God.

You've got to appreciate just how hard it is to stay mad at him.

I don't complain when he leans in, delivering a long, sweet kiss. So very different from the storming inferno of tongue and teeth this morning.

As he pulls away and starts the engine, he gives me a wink.

I let out a long sigh as I lean back in my seat, wishing this weren't so hard.

His kisses, like the rest of him, are unlike anything I've ever experienced in all the best, masculine, oh-so-growly ways.

If only his secrets, whatever he's hiding, didn't feel equally devastating.

Drake and Bella's ranch is only a few miles away from the dairy. They walk out of their house as Quinn shuts off the truck.

Bella freaking glows like her skin can't hold anymore sun. It's a throwback to how she looked when we were young—petite, pretty, and bubbly as ever—except now she has a round stomach from the new baby they'll be welcoming into the world in a few months. Their second child.

Her pregnancy wasn't as noticeable at the rodeo as it is today.

Or maybe she's just one of those girls who starts showing big-time a few weeks apart.

Confession: I'm a little jealous.

Surprising, really. I've never thought of having kids before. My focus was always dancing, dancing, and more dancing. How could I live that dream with a baby to look after?

Whoever said to dream big wasn't thinking it through.

I'm dreaming as big as it gets—a sudden vision of myself as a mother with one special, achingly handsome Oklahoma snarlypants husband by my side—and it sucks.

Because baby dream collides headfirst with ballet dream.

Because some dreams get so big and overgrown they become binary choices.

And right now, the director job waiting back home with a life and man who trigger my gag reflex feels like a phantom from another life.

Here, in Dallas, the dreams are just different.

I can't lie. Not when the biggest recurring dream this week includes falling asleep in Quinn's bed with his inked arms snug around me every night.

Turns out, it also includes looking like Bella one day, with a basketball belly and skin kissed by Athena.

That wouldn't be so bad, would it?

The pregnancy glow is practically *made* to communicate happiness to the whole world.

While Owl mills around the pasture, where I see Edison and his mare Edna grazing, we spend the next hour visiting, before we climb back in the truck and

head for town.

Uncle Dean's truck is parked at Quinn's place when we return, a warning that this day is about to get so much better.

*Ugh.*

"Finally! I was about to go driving all over town for you, Tory," he says, flashing me that toothy, disarming Uncle Dean smile.

"What are you doing here? Is this about the goats?" I ask, trying to check my inner bitch and hear him out.

"Well...sorta. I'm supposed to drive you to Bismarck," he tells me quietly. "Your flight's tonight, I hear. Your mama called me, said if I didn't get you to the airport, there'd be hell to pay."

Okay, no.

Inner bitch *activated*.

My phone is still on the counter in the bathroom where I'd left it last night.

I bet there are a hundred missed calls and texts from Mother. She's been eerily quiet the last few days, and I'd ignored the email from Delta with the flight info.

She must be *really* desperate to have drafted Uncle Dean for roundup duty.

"I'm sorry she called you, but I'm not going to Bismarck, and I'm not going home, Uncle Dean. Not right now." I shoot him the coldest look I can manage.

Uncle Dean shrugs, clearing his throat awkwardly. He gives me a sympathetic look.

"I'm not supposed to take no for an answer, babe. I know you've got issues with your folks—fair issues those damn idiots caused, I'm sure—but they care about you, Tory. They just want you home."

"Not going," I grind out while Quinn lays a gentle hand on my shoulder, trying to calm me. "Sorry."

For a second, we have the world's weirdest staring contest between uncle and niece.

He's pissing me off, sure, but I also feel for him.

It's not fair that he's been put in this position.

But it's even less fair that I've never had a say in my own life, and the one time I try, they want to *force* me home?

No.

I'm a grown woman, an adult, and I'm entirely *done* with Mother's passive-aggressive brainwashing.

"Tory, if you'll just hear me out—"

"Uncle Dean, I've been hearing you. No is my final answer."

Quinn's fingers tighten on my shoulder, subtly promising backup.

I almost go pale at the thought that he'd need to against a human golden retriever like my uncle.

"Dammit, yeah. I know. Figured you'd say that." My uncle sighs and shakes his head, unsure what to do. "Trouble is, I—uh...I'm supposed to fire you, too."

Anger lances through me, and I take a step forward until we're just inches apart.

"Interesting! I wonder who'll take care of the goats then? They're only halfway done at the Neuman place, still plenty of cleanup left to go." I pinch the bridge of my nose and look down before meeting his gaze again. "If Quinn and I hadn't gone out there and accounted for each and every one of them this morning, Rent-A-Goat would be up the creek without a paddle, Uncle Dean. Poor Hellboy would be tangled up in a rope—or worse. He could've easily wound up breaking his neck or something."

"That bad?" He winces, a guilty look on his face.

Behind me, Quinn nods for emphasis.

"Yup. He's fine now, no thanks to us, but if we hadn't been there in time..." I trail off, watching as it sinks in.

"Aw, hell. You're right. Guess I'll have to do it myself, or sell them ASAP," Uncle Dean replies, kicking at the ground. "I don't want to. Right now, we're actually making a profit. It's not big money, but hell, this is by far the most profitable business I've ever had."

Right, because I'm doing all the work!

I mean, Owl might be the real MVP, and Quinn helps me more than he should, but I'm still the coordinator and the rep who signs off on everything.

That's beside the point, though.

"Tell me one thing," I mutter, tilting my head. "Since when do you take orders from Gloria Redson-Riddle-Coffey?"

For a second, he's a deer in the headlights. Then his brow wrinkles, confusion giving way to spitting anger.

"You know what? I bet she's kicking her heels up and laughing her ass off right now, using John as a footstool," he growls. "She sounded so desperate on the phone—real worried for you—but this is just like her, isn't it?"

It's no laughing matter, but it's hard not to smile at how furious he gets, realizing he's been had.

This is totally out of her playbook.

I'm not upset with Uncle Dean. Not really.

I'm just mad at my parents for believing they can keep ruling my life.

And I'm angry at myself when I should've seen it coming. I've let Mother steer my ship forever, so what makes me think she'll stop all of a sudden?

I need to draw a clear, unmistakable boundary she can read. I need to—  
“Peach....maybe you should think about going back home.”

Goosebumps prick my skin as I turn and look at Quinn like he’s grown a second head.

*What the crap?*

“You...you *want* me back in Chicago?” I stammer.

I’m completely lost. I thought the last few weeks meant as much to him as they did me, but if he’s asking me to cut and run?

Maybe that’s one more fatal flaw in dreaming big.

You’re bound for disappointment.

“No, but maybe it would be best right now,” he says slowly.

“Best for who?”

“You.” He looks around as if he doesn’t want to make eye contact. “You miss dancing. You said you need the right equipment to get the exercise you need for your leg to heal.” He shrugs. “You’ll have all the best stuff there, plus therapists and sports doctors. Nothing like a two-bit studio I threw together with those silks—which I still haven’t gotten a damn net for.”

That can’t be it, this sudden, odd worry over my exercise routine.

There’s something he’s withholding, and I don’t get why.

Anger, hurt, and disbelief erupt in my belly like a dam crashing down.

“I have the right stuff here,” I throw back. “And actually, I think I’m going to take a break from this crap and put it to good use.”

I have to get away like yesterday.

Turning to Uncle Dean, I tell him, “Call my parents and tell them I won’t be on a plane until I want to be. Or don’t bother, Uncle Dean. I don’t care.”

Seriously.

With the cold shoulder I’m getting from Quinn, I’m tempted to hop on a jet to Madagascar and leave everyone behind.



AFTER CHANGING MY CLOTHES, I go out the back, not sure if Uncle Dean and Quinn are still on the front porch or not. I’m past caring.

In the barn, I hook my phone up to the sound system, choosing a playlist that should help me focus and find my zen. I have some feels to sweat out.

Like the fact that all I can think about is Quinn suggesting I go back to Chicago.

Ouch.

As the music starts, I go through a series of stretches, loosening my muscles and my mind, then I grasp a bright-yellow silk and work my way up.

Reaching for the second, a crimson one, I grasp it and let my body do its thing.

Clear my mind.

Work through the moves that loosen my muscles until I'm a burning mess of jelly and bone.

It's so routine I don't need to actively think about what I'm doing, which is kinda counterproductive to getting Quinn Faulkner and his stupid games out of my head.

If only it worked like that.

Nope.

Of course he's all I can think about.

I don't want to be a fling, a mistake, an outburst of passion, but after what he said...

Yeah, I wonder.

Trouble is, it doesn't make sense, even if the outside possibility exists that he lured me into his bed to blow off some much-needed steam.

If that was all he wanted, he could've had it years ago.

Quinn always claimed I was too young, then, though. A young man who only wanted a few red-hot nights wouldn't have let that get in the way.

And he wouldn't have taken it slower than a burning candle this summer, after we reunited.

He wouldn't have stopped with a single beautiful, heart-stabby kiss on the Ferris wheel.

He wouldn't have been so torn, so conflicted, before we finally gave in and enjoyed the kind of sexy sex you only get in romance books and TV shows where the people are forever gorgeous.

*God.*

I know who Quinn is.

At least, I *think* I do.

He's righteous, strong, reserved, and a tease.

He's a natural protector, hauling around a heart so guarded I feel like I need a prowler's kit just to make him crack, to steal the truth caged behind those lush green eyes.

With my mind wandering, I'm not paying attention.

I forget to catch the second silk after a single flip.

Unfazed, I do a double flip instead, barely catching the silk.

"Tory! Jesus. I thought you were gonna fall on your ass and break

something!” Quinn has a hold of the silk in his fist, staring up at me. “Haven’t you done enough for one day, lady?”

I twist the silk tighter around one ankle, rolling my eyes.

“Why? So I can go hop in Uncle Dean’s truck and catch the flight home to misery? No thanks.”

He shakes his head, giving me a look that’s equal parts sexy and pissed with his eyes blazing jade glass.

“Get the fuck down here,” he orders.

“Hmm, I don’t know. Need a good reason to shimmy down when I’ve worked so hard to get up here...and I’m not seeing it,” I say, my sarcasm echoing through the barn.

He makes a flustered sound, muttering a few rapid fire curses under his breath. “Can’t we just talk without me worrying you’re gonna break a leg?”

“I’m *not* going to fall.”

“I’ll be convinced when you’re standing on the floor next to me,” he snaps. “Now get down here.”

Just to prove I’m totally in control—and to show off, let’s be real—I do a cartwheel drop on my way down, whipping around the silk as the world spins.

“Shit, now you’re just *trying* to give me a heart attack.” He grasps my waist the instant I’m in reach. “This was a bad idea.”

“What?” I ask, panic in my voice.

He can’t mean *us*, right?

“These silk ropes,” he growls, shaking his head. “Seeing you flippin’ and twistin’ around without a net or even a mat...it scares the living shit out of me, Tory.”

For a second, I frown, actually feeling a little bad.

Then I remember I’m still mad at him for the asshat move that sent me into an early anger-workout.

Untwisting my leg from the silk, I let him lower me to the floor.

“I know what I’m doing, Quinn,” I say. “I wish you’d just trust me.”

He looks at me silently, grasping the fact that I’m not just talking about the stupid silks.

The look he gives scolds fiercer than a spanking, before he flattens me against him, covering my mouth with angry lips, delving deep with his tongue.

Holy hell.

I’m instantly caught up in the kiss that reminds me who’s in charge, sapping my will to fight with tongue, with teeth, with so much passion I can’t fight.

Is *this* what gets taught to secret agent men in the FBI?

How to make a woman delirious and fully captive with a kiss that’s too

perfect for life?

Oh, wait, I can think of other things. Mainly where I want this kiss to lead.

His bed, mostly. Or mine. Or the couch. Or right here on the floor.

I'm not particular about where it happens, I just want it.

And later, after I've wrung every snarly drop of passion from his balls, after I can think again, I'll get my answers from Quinn Faulkner.

*Promise.*



## WE GOAT THE BEAT (FAULKNER)



Whatever.

So maybe Peach knows what she's doing on those silk ropes, and I'm the fool who's trying to tell her otherwise.

Maybe I'm also the idiot with my head up my ass, missing a compass to point the way back to common sense.

Not when it comes to her.

I always knew once I'd kissed her, claimed her, dragged her to my bed that we'd be shattering the only world we knew—the friend zone.

And as soon as I laid it to waste, I'd want more, and that's exactly what happened.

Having her again—morning, noon, and night—is the only coherent thought in my head.

And it's the one craving I can't have. Not like the way we've been going.

That rope around the goat is a grim reminder what's at stake.

Someone was up to no good, no two ways about it.

Just like the camera taken out of commission at Granny's place.

Although it's pure torture, I rip my mouth off hers before it's too late.

Before the need to haul her back to my cave for another round of the best goddamn sex of my life wins over any rational thinking.

You've seen that dumbass meme about two wolves inside a person?

That's me right now. One wolf wants to go monk mode so I can focus on this Pickett shit and nothing else. The other just wants to spend all day seeing how many times I can fill Tory Three Names till she's got triplets.

I release her with a reluctant growl and huff out a breath.

She eyes me coyly. "Do you really want me to go back to Chicago today?"

"No," I huff out, taking a step away from her, needing space between us.

“But you *should* go back. What I want ain’t relevant.”

She walks over, picks up a water bottle, and takes a long drink.

“I told you I will. Someday.” She faces me with her blue eyes lit. “I’m done being told what to do.”

I try not to glare, to avoid launching into a wild-eyed lecture about how awful, how dangerous the Pickett brothers were.

Bart and Jake both had rap sheets a mile long. Small-time petty drug dealing when they were young, car chases, armed robberies, and even if it was never in his official record, I know Jake Pickett was beating on his girl.

I know it too well.

Just like I know his dickless snake of a brother won’t hold back any atrocity on Tory if it means killing me.

They’re the devil’s twins. Two gargantuan freaks who live, breathe, and shit pure evil, inside and out.

Sure, I get her need to stand up for herself. Even Dean’s disgusted by how her ma orders her around like she never aged a day past sixteen.

Still, her family drama can’t hold a candle to winding up at the business end of Bat Pickett and his thirst for blood—figurative and literal.

Bastard hasn’t shown up yet, but he will. If he’s not already out of jail, he will be any week.

That’s why his goons are here, swarming an unsuspecting Dallas. So he knows exactly where I’m at, my schedule, my vulnerabilities.

Namely Tory.

Bat’s gonna use her to try to get to me. His own psycho brand of payback.

I can’t have that shit.

There’s a showdown so imminent I can feel it in the air.

While the girls were chatting this morning at the Larkin place, I pulled Drake aside and we talked.

He’s planning to fly North Earhart Oil’s helicopter over the lake to see if there’s any activity at the old Nelson place. He also said he’d check out the cameras at Granny’s.

Things I should be doing myself but can’t because I need to keep my eyes glued to Tory.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do, darlin’.” I heave out a frustrated breath.

Hands on her hips, she stares at me, assessing whether or not she wants to believe me.

“Why did you say I should go home then? That’s a pretty big power move, Mr. Bossypants.”

I avert my gaze, racking my brain for excuses.

“What aren’t you telling me, Quinn?” she asks softly.

I shake my head.

“Fine. You don’t want me here, I’ll take the hint.” She turns and starts walking, leaving me burned again by my tongue-tied bullshit.

“Wait.” I catch up in a few quick strides and grasp her arm. “I want you here, Tory. It’s just not safe.”

“What? That goon from Oklahoma again with the emo kid tattoos? *Pssht.*” She shakes her head. “Nice try, mister.”

“It’s the damn truth. That goon is connected to the asshole in prison, who’ll be walking free anytime, if he ain’t already. And he’ll beeline it here with a score to settle.”

Frowning, as if she doesn’t believe it’s all that serious, she shrugs.

“So tell the sheriff. He’d probably enjoy some real excitement in a little town like this.”

“Wallace knows, believe me, but it goes a lot deeper than you think.”

She pulls her arm out of my hold and heads for the door, a sadness in her blue eyes. “You don’t have to make things up to get rid of me, Quinn. I’ll go.”

She can’t be serious.

I start to say I’m not trying to get rid of her, but stop, because technically...isn’t that exactly what I’m trying to do?

Send her sweet butt off to safety, where she won’t be another pawn for Bat to check me permanently.

Annoyed, I follow her to the house, trying like hell to keep my anger under wraps.

“Listen, I’m not just spinning stories. I meant what I said. I want you here. I want you to stay, but it’s not safe with a mad dog who could show up on our doorstep any time. Don’t you get it?” I bite off.

She stops in the kitchen once we’re through the door and slowly turns to face me.

“I might, if you’d tell me the truth,” she says, crossing her arms.

“I’ve *been* telling you nothing but,” I say.

Hurt crosses her face as she shakes her head.

“Not enough to make me believe that’s the whole reason you want me to leave. What are you holding back?”

*A frigging boulder, I think to myself. A mountain of grief and regret, all wrapped up in the biggest clusterfuck of my life.*

The worst part is, she’s right.

I haven’t told her enough to make her believe anything. Not about the Pickett

case and not about what happened.

“You really want to know?” I growl, raking a hand through my hair.

“Try me,” she says, never peeling those endless blue eyes off me.

Fine.

Fuck it.

The fact that I’ll try, for her sake, tells me I must be in love—one more scary, unexpected, all-too-complicated thing to deal with. But first, story time.

“The Pickett case was a shitshow from the very start,” I begin, slowly pacing the kitchen. “Jake Pickett was a lowlife, a low-grade meth dealer who worked his way up and managed to get a pretty slick operation going with distribution based around local laundromats. That’s what put him on the DEA radar. Petty drug dealing doesn’t usually fall under FBI jurisdiction, but when it also involves a lot of illegal weapons moving around to keep his crews secure, blackmailing local businesses, and a heap of money laundering? Yeah, then it’s Go Go Gadget Feds.”

I know I’m running my mouth like a fool because she smiles at the *Inspector Gadget* reference.

If only any of this shit were worth a laugh.

“Eventually, the DEA busted a larger drug cartel based in Texas, working its way up through Oklahoma. One of their guys who flipped gave us solid leads on the laundromats, and a repair business Jake Pickett was definitely involved in. I was assigned to follow up on the lead with my partner, Justin Franklin. It was like a spiderweb, no clean line straight to Pickett, yet he was weaved in here and there.”

I felt like something was always missing, right from the beginning, but had to follow orders.

“But you found the connection and arrested him, right?” she asks.

“Yes and no.” My gut churns at how it all went down. “We got enough on Pickett to lure him in for questioning. His lawyer covered his ass, so we didn’t get a smoking gun, but his girlfriend felt the walls closing in. She started talking behind his back, insisted there was someone else at the head of the dragon. Not Jake or his little brother. Someone far more powerful than him, and she agreed to tell us all, if we’d get her and her kid into protection.”

I sigh, turning my back, fully aware her eyes are boring right through me.

“Of course we agreed,” I continue. “Justin was transferring her to a safe house while I was still at the scene of a meth lab bust. They were ambushed.”

I clamp my jaw tight, recalling the scene, the gore, the twisted metal.

“Quinn?” she whispers softly, laying a hand on my shoulder.

“It looked like a scene out of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the way that car got

shot up. There wasn't a foot or two of metal missing bullet holes." I walk across the room, trying to get the image out of my head. "Justin wasn't even supposed to be there. He was scheduled to fly out the night before. Go home. His wife was having their second son. He stayed because of me. Because we'd worked together for so long, we could read each other's minds. He insisted I needed backup."

"Oh my God—how? Don't you guys get more men for this sort of situation?"

"Local police escort never showed up in time. It was Jake himself who sprung the trap, right in broad daylight in the city. He hadn't cared one bit that it was his girlfriend. He mowed them down."

"Jesus, I can't imagine..." She's all soft voice and comfort now, folding her arms around my waist tightly.

"Yeah. I arrested him a little while later after a shootout. The fuck knew he was cornered in an old grain mill, surrounded, and didn't have the balls to off himself. We got him. The case was closed. A few months later, he was drowned in prison. Not too long later, Bat took over his brother's machine and started making moves for revenge. Didn't think much about it till I heard he'd taken over Jake's operation and ended up getting himself arrested over a hit he organized against the men in prison who took out his brother."

I end it there, just as her hands skim up my chest.

I'm sure there's more behind it, infuriating details we haven't hashed out, but I'm no longer on the official case.

By choice. I have to keep telling myself that.

I resigned after what happened to Justin, but looking at Tory, knowing she's involved?

It makes me wish I hadn't.

Then I might have that last key I'm missing. Information I desperately need.

"I'm sorry about your friend, your partner dying," she whispers in my ear.

Fuck, I want to pull her close, but refrain.

"You believe me now? That's why I suggested you return to Chicago, so you aren't around when Bat comes knocking. When he comes to put me under."

"You can't let that happen!" She loops her arms around my neck, stepping in front of me, her eyes shimmering with fear. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Like hell.

And the fact that she won't be scares me pale.

I've never cared about anyone the way I do her, and when her lips touch mine, I can't help devouring them.

It's almost an instinct, like breathing, delving my tongue into her mouth,

teasing her lips with languid thrusts bordering on hypnotic.

I can't stop myself from throwing her over my shoulder a minute later, carrying her upstairs.

Looks like the inner wolf that wants to fuck wins this round.

Once she's down on the bed, I lay beside her and stare.

Don't know why.

To give myself one last chance to come to my senses?

Good fucking luck.

With the way she's grinning up at me, brushing her legs against my waist, my cock is about to rip through my jeans.

If I'm not cursed the instant her tongue grazes mine, I am when she bites her lip, gazing up with so much longing I'd be a monster to deny her.

My dick screams to be freed, to sink deep inside her, to rut hard and empty this tension that's making me fucking shake.

Without skipping a beat, she pulls her tank top over her head and throws it aside.

The sports bra goes next, nearly ripping off in my hand, exposing the tits she insists are too small.

Bullshit.

I've never seen, stroked, and sucked a more perfect pair in the known universe.

I place my hand behind her neck, fisting her cinnamon-red hair with its faded pink highlights.

The better to hold her head in place as my lips ravage hers, cupping one breast, teasing her pert nipple with my fingers.

Tory's hands are under my shirt in a hot second, shoving it up till I have no choice but to end the kiss and shed my clothes.

The jeans go too while she shimmies out of her shorts.

Like the little minx she is, I get a sly, red-faced smile and a second's hesitation before she hooks her thumbs in the waistband of her panties and brings them down last.

Fuck, she's soaked for me, glistening in the evening light seeping through the blinds.

Once we're fully naked, there's no stopping us.

Everything she does, everything about her, flicks a switch deep in my head that says *own her*.

Tory's just as ravenous. Nothing left to the imagination in how hot and wet her pussy is, how she bites at my neck when I sink down into her, and how she fucking guts me when her legs twist high over her head and she tucks her feet

behind her ears.

Apparently, years of dancing pay ridiculous dividends in the bedroom.

The fact that I can fuck her while she's bent like some kind of peach pretzel snaps the very last thread of my sanity.

I'm on her like a hammer, driving deeper than ever, my swollen cockhead stopping just short of her womb.

If I could still form words, and not these animalistic pleasure growls, I'd let her know every last bit of what she does to me.

Being with her brings me highs I've never fathomed. Beyond just sex.

It ain't just fucking that has my heart fit to bang right through my ribs.

And it's not wanting to unscramble the Pickett shit from my head that's got my mouth on hers so tight, my hips coming down, taking her from one shrill release into the next like a human fucking freight train.

This is why they call it making love.

Something I never understood before Tory.

Something I'll never have again if I'm fool enough to let her go.

When the sex happens with your whole soul, a dude *knows*.

And every last bit of her is just as honest and obsessed when she's finished coming for me once, digging her little nails into my back muscles for dear life.

I give her a breather, anchored deep inside her, bringing her back to me with swift caresses of my tongue. The look she beams is blue-eyed angel crack.

A vision of the woman I was always meant to fuck, to love, to make my wife and the mother of my kids.

Her legs hook around me tighter as she arches up, taking me even deeper, ready for me to turn myself inside out when I come so deep inside her.

*Shit.*

"God, I love having you inside me," she whimpers, her eyes still glazed over with lust and something calmer. "I love you, Quinn."

Fucking aye.

What a time to say it...but I can't think of a better time to deliver one more shot to the heart.

"Love you, Tory. Always have and always will," I growl, this new dark energy in my blood, this need to speak the more perfect language of flesh.

I begin moving, thrusting faster, harder, and her bleary-eyed smile widens as she lets out the sexiest purr in existence.

She's divine.

Everything about her comes in waves of hot need, making me jealous as hell to keep it.

How her hair splashes across the pillows just right.

How she rises up effortlessly to meet every thrust, like she's always in my head.

How her face scrunches in this adorable, sexy as hell way when she comes to the edge, under a minute from giving up another screaming hot release on my cock.

I go slower, relishing every second, enjoying this place we create that's only for us.

My pleasure surges, emanating from the base of my spine.

Hers, too.

It's reflected in her eyes, etched on her face, whimpered in low sexy moans and fevered gasps, in the way she clings like I'm one more of those damn silks she climbs.

"Quinn..."

"Peach," I throw back, loving how she moans.

"Quinn!"

She shouts my name again before her peak hits and takes me with her.

I come so fucking hard I wonder if I've just blown out my mind, plunging into her, pouring so much thick, hot release in her cunt I feel it spilling out around us, leaking on the sheets.

Her convulsing pussy pulls at every inch of me, greedy for more than it can hold, milking me dry.

We shake together, a full-bodied frenzy, like coming through a hurricane unscathed.

Leaving me as close to being reborn as I'll ever be.

With our hips still connected, I lower my head and kiss her smile right off her face.

"That. Was. Amazing," she whispers.

"Not half as amazing as you, Peach," I say, meaning every word.

Giggling, she kisses me, suddenly the shy girl again.

"Thank you."

Then, wrapping her legs back around mine, she says, "Now that I have you where I want you, there's something you should know."

Damn, even after having the most satisfying sex ever, I still want her. I'm already getting hard again.

"What?" I manage. "Tell me before my dick won't let you."

She swallows a laugh. "I'm not going anywhere, and nobody can make me. I promise I'll be careful."

My heart sinks as I kiss her nose.

"I don't want you getting hurt. You'll come right back after this bullshit

ends.”

“I won’t.” She arches, pressing her hips tighter against mine. “I’m with you, Quinn, and that’s the safest place I’ll ever be. I can’t let you face this alone.”

A weird pride fills me, knowing she feels safe and loved in my house.

If she’s gonna be that stubborn, well...

Whatever.

I’ll make it work. Ensure she’s nothing but safe and secure.

Another Siren kiss from her seals the deal, and she runs her hands down my sides.

“Could I interest you in another workout before dinner?”

“Darlin’, kindly shut up.” I grin. “You know I’m already interested.”

And just like that, we melt back into our passion, and round two is just as mind-blowing as round one.



THE NEXT FEW days are as close to paradise as any I’ve ever known—even if they’re also so tense it’s a battle not to snap at everything.

Lazy mornings spent checking goats, watching Tory exercising in the barn—now with a newly installed net I picked up from a farmer who used to moonlight in a traveling circus—and making love to her whenever I damn well please.

Our days and nights feel natural, so right, like I’ve found something I never knew I wanted.

Peace.

Too bad it’s an illusion.

Drake’s flyover with the chopper found signs that somebody’s been staying at the old Maddock place.

The buildings are old and falling down, but he’d spotted two trucks parked under some trees near where the overgrown driveway ends.

A red Chevy and a beat-up Dodge, out there more than once.

He’s also fixed the cameras at Granny’s place. Sure enough, some bastard cracked them open and removed both batteries.

He’s moved them, and so far, they haven’t been tampered with again.

Nothing unusual has happened there, either, other than the work crew making good progress on Granny’s remodeling job.

Hardly any comfort.

But the cameras at my place haven’t picked up anything worrying either, and the goats are just chewing away at the dairy farm with no new interruptions.

Some nights, when everything seems so distant and Tory's in my arms, I wonder if I'm making more out of those incidents than I should.

*Fuck no, you're not*, my gut tells me.

Bat Pickett's playing a slow, careful game. Undoubtedly trying to lull me into a false sense of security.

Just like the bloodthirsty beast they named him for on the streets, something I always thought was just a stupid-ass play on his real name, Bart, till I read his file.

Now, I get it.

He's gonna show up soon, no ifs, ands, or buts.

I get a hard knot in my stomach every time I think about Pickett exiting his cage, throbbing with this twisted need for revenge the whole time he was locked up.

Goddamn.

This whole thing feels as off as the costly bust with Jake. *Why?*

I can't put my finger on it, just like I couldn't with what went down with his brother. That's another reason I'd taken the sabbatical my supervisor offered after Justin's death, and then made that break permanent.

It wasn't just the guilt that chewed me up and shat me out. The day I brought Laura Franklin her husband's badge and broke the news about Justin scarred my soul for life. She deserved to hear it in person, from a friend—a friend who couldn't save her man's life.

The guilt, the helplessness, it hurt. So did my fear that I thought I'd lost it.

Missed something critical about the Pickett operation that might've spared Justin's life, and the poor woman who tried to get away from her abuser.

Maybe that's why I want action.

*Now.*

This waiting game is driving me insane.

For Tory's sake, I'm trying to keep things normal. That's why I take her out and treat her like the lady she is.

I glance at her as I park the truck at the Purple Bobcat, and my heart skips.

She's so damn beautiful in the moonlight.

Some days, I find myself doing nothing but staring at her when she thinks I'm not looking—especially while she's working out on her silks.

The girl's been dancing a lot for exercise, too. She's so talented, so graceful, I'm awestruck while watching her.

"What?" Frowning, she flips down the sun visor to look in the mirror. "Do I have something on my face? In my teeth?"

"Worse." I flip the visor up. "You're stunning, and I can't help but stare."

Laughing, she leans over and plants a quick kiss on my lips.

“You sure are good for my ego.” She opens her door. “Let’s go, I’m starving.”

Grady’s bar is hopping tonight, and we’re lucky to snag the last booth.

We order cheeseburgers and beers, a classic pair. It ain’t quite Mack burger level diner grub, but Grady’s got himself a good cook. While we’re eating, this country rock group shows up, and the music gives the soft purple lights shining down a whole new pulse.

“I need to dance,” Tory says, scooting to the edge of the booth.

“You danced all morning,” I tease. “Didn’t you get it out of your system then?”

“Not with a partner!” She’s already pulling at my hand.

Whatever else is on my mind, I’m not rude enough to leave a lady high and dry.

I let her lead us to the floor and pull her close.

Big surprise, she’s as graceful moving to the soft twangy guitar notes and lilting voices as she is doing her artsy thing in the barn.

Just as sexy, too.

Her body sways against mine, heating my blood, turning my relentless dick to granite.

With a glowing smile, she transitions seamlessly into the next song with a fast-paced western beat.

The music is uplifting. I can’t help but laugh as she spins, swinging off the floor with her hands on my shoulders, then flashing me a saucy wink as she lands.

I catch her hand and give her a whirl.

Of course she does it perfectly, clicking a heel on the floor. She sashays around me like the ghost she is.

It’s actually fun.

I keep up with her moves, but I’ll never be the match she deserves for her skills. Her grace in each and every move draws plenty of attention. Especially mine.

It’s impossible not to be in awe. The applause erupting when the song ends is more for her than the band.

She doesn’t even notice as she slides up, gives me a quick kiss, and asks, “One more?”

Though I’ll never match her skills, I love seeing her happy. So I grasp her hand, twirl her beneath my arm, and pull her close.

“For you, Peach, I’ll manage,” I say with a grin.

Then I dip her in my arms and, without giving one damn who's watching, kiss her through the start of the next song.



## YOU GOAT ME WRONG (TORY)



**J**ust when I thought I couldn't love all things dancing more than I already do, Quinn takes it to a whole new level.

Dancing with him in this nowhere bar with ten shades of revolving purple disco lights is better than performing in any show. Whether the songs come fast or slow, his movements are perfect.

I think I could dance with this man for the rest of my life.

Somehow, he even knows how to line dance.

Something I freaking love and never got a chance to try out except in private.

Before you can shout *yeehaw!* we're stomping, twisting, clapping, and clicking our heels in perfect sync, and I'm laughing so hard my sides hurt.

It almost feels wrong, having this much fun.

And I can't stop smiling, even as the song ends.

Not when he envelops me in one of those big spontaneous hugs from the sexiest man alive.

"Shit, I need a break," he says, wiping his brow. "You're wearing me out, woman."

I giggle because I know better. He's being modest.

His stamina is impeccable.

I've experienced it in bed every single night since we became more than just roomies and friends.

"Fine," I say, giving him a teasing eye roll. "We'll sit the next one out." As we approach our booth, I give his arm a squeeze. "I'm going to run to the ladies' room. Grab me another beer, please."

"Will do."

My heart does a double somersault at his parting wink.

He's so handsome in the simple checkerboard flannel shirt he's wearing

tonight with jeans, it isn't fair. I have to remind myself it's not all roses.

The last couple weeks have been too easy, even with the drama.

I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, frowning as I enter the restroom.

How can I call it paradise when I sense how worried Quinn is over this creepy Pickett thing?

Not for himself, of course, but for me.

Oh, he tries to keep it normal, but the tension rolls off him in waves whenever we're together.

He never lets me out of his sight when we're doing the simplest things around the house or heading into town to pick up food.

Clearly, it's wearing on him. My presence, my vulnerability, frays him. And so does the apparent lack of progress with heading this off before a dangerous killer shows up on his doorstep.

I just wish there was something I could do to help.

I'm not even sure he sleeps at night when we're done wearing each other out.

Every time I wake up, he's gone, whether it's the middle of the night or early the next morning.

Talk about unhealthy. He might be Hercules reincarnated, but a sleep debt the size of an elephant catches up with everyone sooner or later.

I almost *wish* something would happen.

This limbo crap is killing him.

We haven't seen that ominous blood-red Chevy since our one-time run-in.

Add in my mother's constant calls and text messages, and I'm ready to just *squeeze* something until it pops in my hand. Can a person get mad enough to rupture an eggplant?

*Ugh.*

I'm just glad Mother hasn't followed through on her threats of coming out here herself to drag me home. Her latest message said time's running out.

And if I don't return ASAP, I won't have a career to come back to.

Huffing out a breath, I wash my hands and walk to the restroom door.

She's right, of course. I won't have a career if I stay away much longer. I'm surprised Jean-Paul hasn't sent me a Dear Jean—pun intended—termination letter from the company after Quinn savaged his ego.

It's equally incredible and gross that my mother's money must speak louder than his own wounded pride.

My knee gets better by the day, at least. The silks help limber up everything and strengthen my whole body. I'll continue practicing while an angsty part of me wonders if I *want* to have a director career.

As I open the restroom door, a woman whips past, heading for the back door

at the end of the hall. I instantly recognize the ratty bleach-blonde hair stacked on her head.

Carolina Dibs.

I shoot a quick glance into the bar area and see Quinn still talking to Grady. They're close, serious-looking, talking in low voices...

Obviously about the Pickett situation.

Quickly, before he spots me, I hurry to the back door. I have no clue if Carolina knows anything or whether she'll tell me if she does, but I have to try.

It's dark outside. The door leads to a small patio smoking area lit up by a long string of lights hanging from the tall wooden poles.

Carolina is the only person around, standing near a tall pub table. Even the long shadow she casts looks more crooked than the Road to Hana. While lighting a cigarette, she gives me a sneer as I close the door behind me.

"You smoke?" she asks, giving me a flippant once-over look.

"No," I answer. "Just needed a touch of fresh air."

"Should've used the front door. It'd be an easier walk in those two-bit heels." She blows a puff of disapproving smoke my way.

*Be nice*, I tell myself.

"This one was closer," I say with a shrug. Then, lifting my hair off the back of my neck, I add, "I worked up quite a sweat dancing."

"Uh-huh. That wasn't all you worked up, ya little attention slut," she says, taking another angry puff off her cigarette.

So, this is going well.

I lift a brow.

She lets out a hoarse laugh that ends in a rough cough.

"Faulk couldn't keep his hands off you. You really must give good head or somethin'." She shoots me another nasty look and spits on the ground.

Can she be any more charming?

The jealousy in her voice matches her sour expression.

Understandable, I guess, but fair's fair.

It seems insane I was jealous of her only a little while ago when I briefly thought Quinn had any interest. Poor guy.

Truth is, I've always been a little jealous of any woman—or girl years ago—who I thought Quinn might have taken a shine to.

Knowing that *I'm* that woman now, the one he's interested in, gives me a powerful sense of pride. It also makes it pretty freaking difficult not to rub it in Carolina's ugly face.

I flash her a people-eating smile. "Honey, this mouth might do some favors, but that's not why he sticks with me. We've got the two most important things I

bet you loved in school—history and chemistry.”

Her eyes turn to spears as she glares at me.

I shrug again, nonchalantly, and step closer to the table.

“I can’t keep my hands off him, either.”

She averts her gaze and takes a long drag off her cigarette like it gives her strength.

Uncle Dean stopped by to pay me this afternoon. Cash, of course, because he doesn’t believe in banks or doing a page of paperwork more than he needs to.

Digging in my back pocket, I pull out two crisp Benjamins, a chunk of this week’s pay. Goat wrangling will never make me rich, but for small-town life, it’s not bad.

There’s nothing else I’d rather spend it on right now if it gets her to spill something useful.

“What the hell’s that?”

“Money. You do use it, right?” I ask cheerfully.

Her eyes narrow. “What for?”

“You.”

Carolina stubs out her cigarette in the sand-filled can. “Why? What do you want?”

“Information.”

“Oh, because I look like a frickin’ library?” she snorts, shaking her head.

“I think you know things,” I say.

Her eyes haven’t left the money, and neither has my hand. I’ll give her until the count of ten.

I get to *four* before she opens her mouth.

“What kinda information you after, bitch?”

“That guy who was at your place when I dropped off the goats...how well do you know him?” I meet her eyes, already looking for lies.

“Marvin, you mean?” She shrugs, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “Haven’t much seen him since that day Quinn chased him off. He left town. Didn’t leave me a number, but we were just fuckin’, so why would he?”

“He didn’t leave,” I snap. “And I think you know it.”

Honestly, I don’t know that for sure, but I did overhear Quinn talking to Drake about the old Dodge.

Carolina pulls out another cigarette and lights it, deep in thought.

*C’mon, lady. Take the bait.*

I push the bills closer to the center of the table. “He’s a criminal, isn’t he? Associated with some pretty dangerous people. Guys from prison down south, right?”

Carolina glances at the money, then at me before she belts out another nasty laugh.

“Girl, let me give you some advice—you need to go back to wherever the hell it is you’re from. Dallas isn’t the quaint little town you think. There’s always something that’s blowing up around here, or a serial killer to chase down, or mass poisonings. Hell, I’m just waiting for a fuckin’ tiger to come tearing through here one fine—”

“Then why do you stay?”

She glances at the door to the bar.

“Who cares? It’s home, and it’s not so bad if you stay out of that shit.” Sighing, she adds, “Other than the fact I’m too broke to leave, I guess.”

A part of me feels for her.

She’s gotten herself stuck in a rut with bad decisions and can’t find a way out.

I know the feeling.

I’m in limbo, too.

Just a very different, prettier limbo than hers.

“Well, men like Marvin aren’t your ticket out of town,” I say, trying to steer her back to what I need.

“I told you, I haven’t seen him lately. What do you think he wanted with me? To date?” She lets out a sad, dry laugh.

Nuts to this. I tug the bills back toward me.

She slaps a hand on them, pinning them down. “But I’ll tell you if I do! That counts, don’t it?”

The door flies open just then, and Quinn comes barreling toward us with worry carved on his face.

Crud.

Carolina is sure to tell him what we’ve been talking about, which will definitely make him madder than he looks right now.

*What happened?* I wonder.

Judging by his expression, he might drive me to Chicago himself—or at least back to Granny’s house. The remodeling isn’t completely done in the kitchen, but the house is livable again.

For a moment, I’m breathless.

Carolina slides the bills out from under my fingers, balls them in her hand, and walks around the table. “Heyyy, Faulk. Nice moves tonight.”

She gives him a gag-worthy switch of her hips and saunters past, back into the bar.

“What were you doing out here with that witch? Talking to her?”

I grin, trying to ease his worry. “Just getting a breath of fresh air. I worked up a sweat after all that dancing.”

“Time to go home, Tory.”

He sounds so cold. Angry. At the end of his rope.

Desperate to change that, I grasp his hand, stepping closer. “How about one more dance? The band’s still playing and we could—”

“No.”

Guilt overcomes me.

“I’m sorry, Quinn. I didn’t mean to upset you or cause any trouble,” I say as we walk across the patio to the parking lot.

“You scared me fucking pale when you didn’t come back to the table,” he growls, throwing a heated flash of green-eyed anger my way.

“I didn’t realize that there was a door at the end of the hall until I saw it, and then I just thought I’d cool off. There’s a lot of people here tonight. Grady could use a better air conditioner for nights like this. I wanted to get out and clear my head.”

“And pick Carolina’s swiss cheese brain?” He does a slow, exasperated blink. “Don’t dabble in something you don’t know shit about, Tory. I’m trying to protect you.”

Whoa.

Justified or not, his warning comes out so condescending, it stuns me.

It sounds too much like Mother, Jean-Paul, everyone who’s ever tried to control me.

“For your information, I wasn’t *dabbling*.” I yank my hand out of his and speed walk to the truck.

“Really? How much money did you give her?” he asks.

“I didn’t—”

“Don’t lie to me. Please. I saw cash in her hand. She doesn’t know a damn thing, and the more you give her, the more she’ll want.”

Pissed, I wrench open the door and climb in, giving it a good slam shut once I’m in my seat.

He slides in the driver’s seat a second later and starts the ignition.

“This is exactly why I wanted you in Chicago. It’s too fucking dangerous for you to be here while I’ve got a target on my back.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Wrong.” He backs out of the parking spot and waits until we’re on the highway to speak again. “I want you out of Dallas. Until this Pickett shit gets settled. Whether that’s Chicago, Bismarck, or Paris, I don’t care. It’s not safe to be with me right now.”

Stunned, I stare at him.

“Seriously? Because I talked to Carolina, you’re going to blow a gasket and send me home?” The minute I’d seen his face when he’d walked out the door, I knew that’s what was on his mind.

Sending me away.

Something I expected from the start.

It’s just like it was years ago, isn’t it? Growing up means nothing.

Back then, I’d get to the point where I thought something might happen between us, and just like now, he’d put up an invisible wall.

He’d always claim I was too young and didn’t know what I was doing.

I’m not a kid now. I know what I’m doing this time.

“Don’t tell me what to do or where you’ll send me, Quinn,” I tell him point blank, shooting my coldest look.

“I’m not *sending* you anywhere,” he says, his voice softer. “I’m asking you to go. Stay safe. For me. For us.”

I don’t know what’s growing faster, my confusion or my hurt.

What *happened* back at the bar to make him act this way?

It had to be more than my worthless chat with Dibs and staying away from the table too long.

“You didn’t ask,” I whisper. “You said you want me gone.”

“Fuck, don’t you get it?” His lip curls in a snarl. “You can come back when it’s over.”

Something inside me snaps.

“When *what’s* over?” I don’t wait for him to answer because it doesn’t matter. “When I leave here, I won’t be coming back. That won’t be an option.”

“Tor—”

“Shut up, Quinn,” I snap, trying to hold back the tears. “Just...please, shut up.”



## GOAT ME TWISTED UP (FAULKNER)



**T**here's no denying the hard truth this time—I stepped in it.

I'd iced over when she hadn't returned to the table while I was busy talking to Grady, filling him in on the intrusions at the not-so-deserted Maddock place. When the waitress told me the ladies' room was empty, my heart lodged in my throat.

Tory's right, though. I do need to shut my yap before I say more shit I'll regret.

Once she cools off, we can talk about it. I'll apologize for turning into a colossal prick.

I'll convince her she can come back and that going to Chicago or wherever else she chooses is only temporary.

My throat locks up at the thought.

*Temporary.*

Let's be real—there's nothing temporary anymore about Tory Three Names.

I've tried fooling myself, claiming once this is over, after Pickett's finished, everything will be fine.

Like hell it will.

She's a dancing angel, a graceful swan in a woman's body, and this little town can't give her the chance she deserves. And no matter how territorial I get, what right do I have taking that from her?

How the fuck can she *stay* with me?

Sure, I could pack up, sell Gramps' place, and move to be with her. There ain't nothing truly holding me back.

Don't have a clue how I'd put up with that rotten piece of escargot if she has to suck it up and work for Jean-Paul What's-It for a while, but...

*Fuck.*

We've got ourselves a dilemma, and maybe that's what triggered our spat tonight as much as my assholery over keeping her safe.

This simple small-town life won't cut it, and neither will I, if I'm fool enough to tie her down.

We could be happy together in Dallas for a time, but there'll come a day when she misses dancing too much, guaranteed.

Would I be better off letting her go now, rather than later? While there's still a chance to figure shit out?

Not when she's stuck and hates my guts. When she realizes all she's given up to settle, and can't ever get back.

I can't let her do that.

Can't let her give up her career, her dream, any more than I can let her get hurt by my imminent rematch with Goliath's not-so-little brother. I know she doesn't get how serious of a threat this is, and that's also my fault.

I've tried to sugarcoat this fuckery for too long, desperately fighting to insulate her from fear.

The ride home is not only silent as the grave, the air in the truck is so thick it hurts to breathe.

She heads straight upstairs when we get home, and I let her.

I'd better let her sleep on it.

That old tip about going to bed angry ain't always true. Sometimes, a person needs their beauty sleep so they can wake up fresh, calm, their sanity restored.

Tomorrow will be soon enough to talk.

I head to the kitchen to grab a beer. My stomach sinks as I open the fridge and see the full shelves. Yes, there's beer, plenty of it, but there are also containers of milk and eggs, fruits and vegetables, meat and poultry.

Turning, I close the door with a grunt.

It doesn't help my pitiful state right now, knowing how she's changed my life.

The rest of the house is just as hard to look at with signs of her everywhere. Harsh, grating proof of just how deep I've let her into my life this summer.

No, I've never been a slob—too much hard ass Army discipline for that—but she's made this place shine as bright as her own smile.

Not only is the house white-glove-inspection clean, she's left flowers in vases she picked up from Grace, pillows on the furniture, and new rugs on the floor.

This place looks more like a home versus the spartan, under-construction cave it's resembled for the past year.

Go ahead and laugh at my sentimental ass.

I don't care.

If there's any man around who claims he doesn't appreciate a woman's touch, he's a stubborn damn liar.

Tory's spell is stronger now than it was years ago. Probably the same weird sign of the Peach she put me under years ago, when she fell face-first in a pie, and I got my first little taste of her wiping it off her cheek.

Oh, I've tried running like hell, trying to live my own life, trying to forget her and this silly little town.

I remember one night in Afghanistan, halfway through my deployment, I started penning her a letter. I'd looked her up, still had her address in Forest Glen and everything.

I can still remember the first line I'd scratched out ten times before settling on something simple:

*DEAR PEACH,*

*IT'S BEEN TOO LONG. Do you ever think about that crap I said a couple years ago to cheer you up? How I promised you "some dude" would be ecstatic to have you? That day you were sticky from that disaster pie, all teary eyed and hopeless? Because...I do. And I wish I'd had the balls to admit I was "some dude."*

YEAH. When I said simple, I meant dumb as dirt.

I'll never win any writerly awards.

Of course, I also remembered she was nineteen, barely out of high school. Hardly a good time for me to be sending her the world's lamest marriage proposal.

Still, that's how you know I'd be lying if I ever said I'd moved on from my best friend during all of those years apart.

That's also the big fat liar ass I'll become if I think for one second I can live without her laugh, her sparkling blue eyes, the sultry nights I wish would last forever.

No matter where I've been, who I've been, what I've been doing, Tory's always been there.

Now more than ever since I'm staring down the barrel of actually losing her, if Pickett doesn't terminate my life first.

When I look up, there's a big furry shape bearing down on me.

I jump.

Owl bumps my hand with his big head.

"Thanks, dude," I snort, roughing up his fur with a scratch that makes his tail wag. "You're right. No use in dwelling on things that won't get fixed tonight. She'll come around."

He lets out a low whine that sounds exactly like he knows what's on my mind.

Smiling, I walk to the back door and let him out. He only takes a minute to empty his bladder and then returns.

Locking the door, I double-check the front and the garage locks before I head upstairs, not looking forward to lying in my bed alone.

If this is my fate after tonight, someday I'll be thankful for the time we had together, sharing the same sheets.

Her door's closed tight as a drum. I get it.

Owl plods over and drops down in front of her room, and I have to force my feet to walk by. I shut the door and plop down on the bed, fully dressed, knowing I'm not gonna sleep a wink tonight.

I have no idea how long I lay there, not even thinking, when my phone vibrates.

Looks like an unknown number. Could be spam, but it's after midnight, so I answer.

"Yeah?"

"Quinn Faulkner," a familiar voice snaps off crisply. "Forgive my lateness—it's incredible what family life does to a man—but this is urgent."

"James?" I say loudly, sitting up. I was beginning to think he'd forgotten my dilemma in the thousand other things a married man working for the premier security firm out west has to do. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes, Faulkner. Something's been terribly wrong for too long, and I'm scolding myself that it took this long to tie up loose ends." His words rush out, each one ringing with the same sharp coldness that made James Nobel an incredible Special Agent and a better elite security specialist now.

The harshness of his tone has me standing, stiff as a board.

"Have you heard from your contacts in Oklahoma? Official channels?" James demands.

The supervisor of the police unit I'd been assigned to work with down there, Ted Goode, is who I'd been communicating with about Pickett. I haven't asked

for anything more than public knowledge, following the rule of law to the letter for former agents.

“Not for several weeks,” I tell him. “Why?”

“I have reason to believe you’re in grave danger, Faulk.”

My breath sticks in my lungs.

“Bat Pickett got released from prison today?” The way my gut churns answers before I even ask the question.

“He was released, all right—over a month ago. Practically the same day his records were sealed. You don’t *want* to know what favors it took to breach that database. We found proof that someone altered the records and put an iron curtain around them on top of it. Faye and I will be babysitting for Enguard’s entire senior leadership until we’re grey.”

“Shit. Worse than I expected,” I growl. “He’s been up here weeks then?”

“It seems likely. Took us forever to get a facial match from Dallas confirming his presence. The security cameras there in rural North Dakota are fifteen years behind the times,” James snaps. “Listen, I’ve reached out to Section Chief Powers to fill him in on the latest. You need to—”

“Powers?” I echo, scratching my neck. “Shit, man, you went that high up the chain? I’m sure he knows I’ve been digging, seeing how I served under him years ago, but hell. If we’re going the official route, it must be *bad*.”

“Atrocious would be a better word for what we’ve found.” He pauses. “Did you have any inkling whatsoever that there’s a high-level insider involved?”

“Jake Pickett’s girl insisted he had a helper in law enforcement years ago, but you know what happened before we could ever pull it out of her,” I say, my head filled with grim possibilities.

The long silence on the other end of the line has the hair on the back of my neck standing up. I hear some kind of...muttering back and forth?

“James?”

“Sorry. I had to remind my idiot friend, Riker, that this isn’t idle chitchat. This is the only chance I’ll get to relay everything. Wheels are in motion, Quinn, and you don’t want to get trapped under them. Powers is in flight as we speak and he’s informing your local sheriff—”

“In flight?” I’m gobsmacked. “What, you mean here? To North Dakota?”

“Correct,” James clips back.

“What the—why?”

“Because our insider took the bait and revealed himself. For now, forget the details. I’ll explain later how a brilliant strategy I crafted with my boss, Landon—and *Riker, fine*—allowed us to spoof a trusted contact’s number. We texted his phone, he opened a crucial link, and he gave the right response—covering Bart

Pickett's ass. Ted Goode is well aware of what Pickett's planning against you. He's fully involved with the cartel the brothers did local distribution for, and he's still tight with Bart Pickett to this day. We have every reason to believe Goode's currently trying to set you up with false evidence. Pin his dirty deeds on *you*, Quinn, as the insider who's helped the Pickett meth machine fly under the radar for so long."

Boom.

There's my missing piece of the puzzle, and it kicks like a mule-strike to the head.

Supervisor Goode.

*Ted mother-fucker Goode.*

That's how Justin's car was ambushed so perfectly, how Jake Pickett shot my partner and his turncoat girlfriend to pieces.

Goode was the only other person who knew Justin was transporting the woman to safety that day.

I never imagined he was the brains. He'd been a straight shooter, tough as nails, and played by the book almost to a fault. But he'd thrown me that day we had Jake Pickett for questioning, and now I know why.

He'd been helping that maniac, shoving a knife in our backs the entire time.

Fuck.

No wonder he's kept in contact with me all this time.

No surprise he's kept feelers on *my* old contacts with the Bureau, who innocently told him the minute I started asking around about Bat Pickett earlier this summer.

He's known my every move. He's been setting this up, egging Bat on, making me believe—*son of bitch!*

"He killed Justin Franklin. My partner—" I stop mid-sentence, not meaning to say it out loud.

I have to lay a hand against the wall to hold myself up.

I'm physically ill.

"I'm afraid so. When was the last time you spoke to Goode?" James asks.

"Weeks ago. Wait, hang on..."

Snarling, I punch up my texts and see one from roughly ten days ago, so bland I'd practically forgotten it. My vision turns red.

"Almost two weeks ago," I say. "He texted, told me Bat was still in prison. 'All clear,' was all he said."

*Bull. Shit.*

And I'd been fool enough to buy it, to believe him.

"He's covered all his bases, making sure you can't connect him to it. That's

why he reached out when he heard you'd grown concerned for your safety," James says, confirming the worst.

If Goode wanted to get me bullet-spitting mad, mission accomplished.

Only thing I hate more than being played is being played by stone-cold killers.

"We're not the only ones who were left in the dark. Powers commissioned an undercover team to revisit the killing of your partner, and they've uncovered their own suspicions about Goode's involvement."

"Thanks, James. Don't know how I can ever pay you back. One of these days, you're gonna bring the whole family up here to little old Dallas. I'll show you how we party in North Dakota," I say. "I'd better get off the horn. Gonna be a long night. Good thing I was already planning on staying up."

"Someday, Quinn." Even his chuckle sounds like pure class. "Lay low until law enforcement arrives. Goode doesn't know we're onto him yet. He thinks he simply has to get rid of you, but if you can catch him snooping around your property, trying to stage a scene, bingo. He'll be in custody in no time. Powers' ETA is zero five hundred. Take care of yourself."

"I will, no thanks to you. Peace, man."

I hang up with my jaw so tight it's fit to break. Holding back a hundred restless thoughts, I stomp into the bathroom and splash cold water over my face, willing focus.

*Okay.*

Right on cue, Drake calls, telling me the sheriff's sent the entire small Dallas PD force to make the rounds by my place. I assure him I'll call the second the cameras ping anything out of the ordinary.

It's close to one a.m. by the time I hang up and my instincts tell me to check on Tory.

She can hate me all she wants, but I need her in the same room.

Hell, I need her the fuck out of here like yesterday.

I'll call Dean, I think, and get them their own police escort.

He can pick her up and bring her to the police station, if need be, until this gets sorted.

She can't be with me once Powers and the other boys from the FBI show up.

Christ, Goode might have more helpers in law enforcement, too. It might be a week or more before we can call this place safe again, even if he goes down fast, and so does Bat.

As all the moving pieces settle in my mind, I exit my room, stepping into the dark hallway.

Owl isn't flopped down in front of her door anymore. It's still closed, so she

probably let him in.

I knock softly, then check the doorknob when half a minute passes without a reply.

It's unlocked. I push the door open.

The room looks dark, but there's just enough moonlight filtering in through the window to show her bed.

Empty.

I flip on the light, my heart climbing into my throat. The covers on the bed are thrown back like she left in a hurry.

"Tory?" I ask, crossing the hall to the bathroom.

It's empty, too, not a drop of water left on the sink.

I pivot, run down the stairs, searching for any signs.

"Tory!" Calling her name rips me open like a dagger, panic stabbing through my blood.

She's not downstairs, either.

The second I see the barn lights on through the kitchen window, I'm stone, glaring into the dimly lit night.

*Damn. It. All. To. Hell.*

I don't know what I'm saving her from, but if I ever want to sleep through another night in my life, I have to.



## GOAT SOME BAD NEWS (TORY)



I wake up to the worst hangover headache of my life. My mouth tastes nasty, clinical, almost like...the way rubbing alcohol smells?

*What happened?* My head hurts so bad I can't pry my eyes open.

Why am I on my stomach? Why can't I move my arms? Why am I bouncing?

I'm moving, I realize, tucked back in a vehicle.

I try to focus, to remember, begging my groggy brain to fire again.

Oh, yeah. I was psycho bitch mad at Quinn—how could I forget?

Then I couldn't sleep, especially when I heard him on the phone with someone having one of his hush-hush secret agent man conversations.

So I'd taken Owl for a walk and my own fine self to the barn to work off some frustration. I'd barely turned the lights on and gotten my bad breakup playlist queued up for the silks when it happened.

Footsteps.

The ones I thought I was hallucinating at first, and Quinn second. Then that shadowy figure crept across the window, heading straight for the door, creeping around far too carefully to be anyone who belongs here...

The last thing I remember is Owl growling. I frantically tried to shush him as I held my breath, grabbing a broom with a thick wooden handle—thick enough to give someone a concussion, I hoped—and opened the barn door.

A sad moan bubbles up my throat as fresh pain streaks through my head.

"She's coming to."

My heart stops at the sound of a stranger's gruff voice.

"Cheap-ass chloroform. I told you this shitty brand was diluted," another voice snaps. Also male. "It never keeps 'em under for long."

*Chloroform?* No wonder my head feels like I've taken a direct hit from a rock.

Panic tightens my chest.

The best part is, Quinn was right all along. I'm in a dangerous situation, in so far over my head I might never come out of it.

"Should I give her another round or what? Stuff the rag over her face again?" Thing One asks.

"Nah, we're almost home. Let the Bat-man have some fun for a change," Thing Two growls back. "He's been chewing nails all week, real tense, waiting to hear from his guy. Never seen him happier than when he found out we could make our run tonight."

*Almost where?* I wonder.

"We're lucky we had practice fucking with those cameras. Couldn't just work the batteries out like we did before, but I'm hoping that other trick did the job."

I force myself not to open my eyes. They can't know I'm awake.

I shift subtly, rolling against my pocket, and find out fast I'm missing my phone.

Lovely.

Of course they've taken it.

What now?

Quinn probably doesn't even know I'm gone.

And Owl—what happened to him? Did they hurt him? Did they—

Oh, God.

My entire body jerks from the roughness of the road and the fear chewing through me. I bite back an anguished moan.

From what I can tell, I'm in the cramped back seat of a pickup truck, with my hands tied behind my back.

"Is she awake?" one of the thugs asks. "Like fully conscious?"

A hand grips my upper arm and shakes me.

I force myself not to react.

"Hm, don't think so, still feels like a rag doll. She must've just been whining in her sleep. Nightmares or somethin'. Go figure."

The unwelcome hand releases my arm, and I let the air I'm holding in slowly seep out of my lungs.

"Damn weird how the dog disappeared, wasn't it?" Thing One asks his fellow minion. "I expected it to attack us, or at least bark like hell and wake up Faulkner."

"I know. I didn't expect her to come outside tonight, either. Figured we'd be

sitting behind that barn half the night figuring out a diversion, a fire or something to flush them out.”

The other guy laughs. “Lucky us. This sure worked better than trying to steal one of those stupid goats for bait. Now we just round up Faulkner and call it a day. Coast should be clear for Bat’s guy to plant whatever the fuck he needs to there. Word is he’s a dirty cop.”

“Yeah. Never, ever fuck with that type,” his buddy says.

Well, now I know why poor Hellboy was tangled up in rope.

Rage courses through my veins.

“I *told* Pickett we’d find a better way to get her.”

They continue talking about Pickett, money, and dick-size compensating sports cars I’m sure they’re planning to buy with their ill-gotten gains.

My mind is stuck on Owl.

He wouldn’t desert me when I need him the most.

That means one thing: something awful happened to him, and it’s my fault.

If only we hadn’t gotten into that stupid effing fight, I would’ve went to bed with Quinn, and they would’ve never breached the property. He’d have known it right away with the cameras and his own good sense the nanosecond these savages started messing around. Especially if they had to light a fire to get his attention.

The truck stops a short time later, jerking to a halt and interrupting my self-pity.

I stay limp when the back door opens and someone grabs my legs. A heavysset man reaches inside, grabs around roughly, and tosses me over his shoulder like a feed sack.

I’m lifting an eye to see if I can make out where we are when a bearish snarl rips through the night.

My eyes fly open, just in time to see Owl leaping out of the back of the truck.

Holy hell. He’s been hiding the whole time!

The man fumbles and drops me as Owl slams into him headfirst, knocking him down.

I hit the ground hard, rolling out of the way as shouts, growls, and furious barks fill the air.

Between the darkness and the tall grass around me, I can’t see anything.

But I can hear people roaring, running, and then louder noises that stop my heart.

*Gunshots.*

At first, I flinch, afraid to call out, but I’m more scared for Owl, afraid he’ll

get killed.

“Round up! Round up!” I scream into the inky sky.

It’s the only command I know that he’ll listen to no matter what.

I wonder if he even hears me over the chaos, the blackness exploding like a battlefield.

Someone grabs me by the arms and lifts me off the ground.

There’s another shot that echoes, a loud skittering sound, and then nothing but the merciless drumming of my own heart.

Upright again, I stumble around, no thanks to my arms being pinned behind my back.

My wrists are still tied and it hurts—*hurts*—but I barely keep my balance as they shove me forward.

It’s so dark out here, except for a sliver of moon shining down.

I see trucks, a couple old buildings in the distance. And...is that water?

I hear it a second before I smell it. A damp, musty odor rolls up my nose.

Definitely algae water.

We must be near a good-sized lake, meaning this has to be the abandoned Maddock farm on the other end of Big Fish Lake.

Swallowing my panic, I tell myself it’ll be okay. It has to be.

Quinn will—

No, he won’t. It’s the middle of the night. He’s in bed, probably still pissed at me, or busy talking to whoever called so late.

I have no clue whatsoever if the thugs made enough noise to wake him. And if they were quick to disable the cameras, and smart enough to stay hidden from the others on the barn roof...

God.

There’s so much going wrong tonight, and inside my head.

I don’t even know how Owl got in the back of the truck. He probably jumped in without them noticing, but I couldn’t tell you when or where.

*Please, just let him be okay.*

“Put her over there,” a man orders. “I’ve called Pickett, he’s on his way.”

With another hard shove that doubles me over, his sidekick drags me up to an old house, onto what feels like a rickety wooden porch. A rough blow to my shins from his boots forces me to sit down, wincing.

Owl is nowhere in sight, and it’s too quiet to mean anything good.

I don’t know how long I’m there, kneeling in misery. It could be ten minutes or it might be an hour.

It’s a miracle I don’t break down sobbing then and there.

But I’m not giving them that. I *force* myself not to cry at the thought that

Owl might be lying in the grass only a few yards away, bleeding and lifeless.

If I can't make myself be brave, then I'm definitely toast.

Why didn't I heed Quinn's warnings? All this time, in the back of my mind, I just didn't take this nightmare seriously enough. I thought I could fix it.

Now, I have to, what little way I can.

Have to find a way out of here. Out of these ropes.

My wrists are skinny. I'm used to twisting them, and do so now, bending them around and around, working the rope looser very slowly, counting seconds in my head for calm.

Four men are standing near the trucks. I recognize that creep, Marvin Heckles, but I don't think I've ever seen the others. No sign of the tall, strange man with the cherry-red Chevy, either.

My heart stops the moment the rope on my wrists goes slack. Looks like Edison the horse isn't the only one in this town who can play Houdini.

I slip one hand out carefully, not wanting anyone to see my movements, but then slide it back in, and keep them behind me. Let them think I'm still tied up.

I also don't know what I'll do for sure, but the rope is all I have for a makeshift weapon.

Do I run for it?

The dairy farm isn't far from here, a few miles, less cross country.

Drake and Bella's place is even closer, but I'm lost on how to get to either place.

All I know is this is the south side of the lake.

I think?

Minutes feel like hours. An eternity passes by the time the headlights finally appear on the road leading to the house.

A pickup chugs up the road and rolls to a stop. Newer than the other trucks.

I watch as a freakishly tall, horribly familiar man with tattoos along his neck unfolds himself and climbs out.

My stomach flips at the way he glares at me, walking toward the porch. I'd get friendlier eyes from a starving wolf.

"Faulkner's girlfriend, huh?" Bat Pickett spits Quinn's name like a curse. "You ever get a primer on what happens with Feds' women?"

I keep my mouth shut. I've already made enough mistakes. I'm not going to mouth off and let this monster backhand me into another mini coma.

He leans down, nostrils flaring as he reaches for my chin, tipping my face up.

For a second, I'm forced to gaze into his blue eyes. Nothing like my own, they're weirdly pale, even in the darkness. Grey, soulless, and angry.

Straightening up, he drops my chin.

“Gotta say, I like that you mind your manners. He’s taught you well. You’re perfect bait,” he says coldly. “We’re gonna have ourselves a big old slice of justice tonight.”

“Justice?” I whisper, wishing it hadn’t slipped out.

He turns, looking at me like I’m just another bug in the night.

“Old school justice, little lady. I’m talkin’ real old, like Babylonian style.” A cruel smile pulls at his lips. “You ever hear of Hammurabi’s Code? This history professor told me all about it, a real degenerate, loved to run his mouth about all sorts of wild shit while I was just a street grunt, keeping him in crystal.”

I look down because I took ancient history at college. I know what he’s getting at before it’s even out of his mouth.

“Those were some smart fuckers back then. You ask me, we’d all be in a better place if we left the laws real simple. You know what I’m talking about?” He pauses, drowning me in that wicked gaze. “No? You ever heard the phrase ‘an eye for an eye?’”

Before he can reach for me again and force an answer, I nod. It feels like my head weighs a ton.

“Thought so,” he says, his smile getting wider. “See, this whole beef with Faulkner happened because he murdered my brother. I ain’t the kinda fuck who gets hard for messing up women and burying them in pits but...well, you understand. I don’t have no choice. Don’t take this personally. To make things right with the universe, right with the law, I’ve gotta kill Faulkner—but first, I’ve gotta kill *you*.”

I’m just as surprised as anyone when I look him in the eye, beaming pure hatred, refusing to shudder.

I just wish defiance won more than brownie points.

The evilness oozing off this towering beast turns my blood ice-cold.



## WE'VE GOAT TROUBLE (FAULKNER)



I stomp my foot on the gas and wrench the wheel, cutting the corner onto the gravel road leading to the Maddock farm so hard my truck sprays rocks.

Those bastards made quick work of the cameras out front—hitting them with black paintballs before they had a chance to capture anything.

Too bad for them they missed one.

The frames from the camera on the barn showed me everything I needed to know about the men I'm about to dismember. I also know exactly where Tory's been taken.

The pictures showed her walking out of the house with Owl at her side, entering the barn, then two soon-to-be-very-sorry minions slinking up to the door.

My heart spills into my gut, recalling the frame where she went limp.

They picked her up like a kitten and carried her around the building to their truck.

They put their hands on *my* woman, signing their death warrants.

The images showed how they'd kept the Chevy parked down by the pond, which is why I hadn't heard it while I'd been on the phone.

I wish to God I had. I would've heard her leaving the house, if my dumb ass wasn't so caught up in getting her to safety while she was already in peril.

If I hadn't put so much faith in this wizard camera tech, where the only way the app alerts fail is human error. Because I was so glued to talking to my people about Pickett that I missed two crucial motion alerts from the camera on the barn, never thinking for one second Tory would leave the house.

Don't worry. There'll be time to kick my own butt to India and back later.

For now, if Bat Pickett has stolen a single hair on her head...I growl at the savage thoughts scalding my brain and stomp the gas again.

Time is of the fucking essence.

I can't wait for Powers and whatever backup he's brought from the Bureau. That's a given.

Drake said he'd get help—the unofficial kind since the entire Dallas PD is about to form ranks with the Feds flying in—and he'd meet me at the Maddock place. Grady and Ridge, no doubt.

Help I don't want, honestly, even if I've got no choice but to take it and be glad.

My friends are husbands and fathers. All the more reason I need to end this myself, without giving another Pickett brother a chance to draw anybody else's blood.

Without creating more widows and kids who'll never know their daddy.

Justin's parting, innocent smile as he climbed into his car sticks in my head. My blood boils over.

This is my mess to clean up and my woman to save. No one else's.

My phone rings just then.

Another unknown number.

I hit the answer button on the steering wheel so it comes over the speaker, but I don't say anything.

"Ah, Faulkner. Just the man I want to invite to my little barbecue."

Bat Pickett's slimy, rough voice sounds just like his dead brother's. I squeeze the steering wheel harder.

"Talk, asshole," I snarl. "Why you calling?"

"No need to play dumb. We both know I have something you want real bad," Bat says, this hot triumph in his voice. "A pretty little thing."

My jaw aches, pinched like a vise. I don't answer.

"Well? Would you like to know where she is?" he asks.

It's hard not to roll my eyes right out of their sockets.

He's such a cartoon villain.

"I *know* where she is," I bite off. "Already on my way. You'll see my headlights in two minutes flat."

The stunned silence on the other end is a tiny victory.

"Let me talk to her," I say. "If I don't get proof she's still alive, I swear to fuck, I'll turn around and come back with an entire SWAT crew for her body—and yours."

I'm working off my playbook.

First rule of FBI negotiations with monsters like Bat Pickett: no matter how hopeless, how dire, how improbable it seems to negotiate, show no fear.

Can't help but flinch, though, when I hear a muffled *thud* and then Bat

whispering, telling Tory to say hello.

“Quinn! We’re...we’re at the Maddock farm” she says breathlessly. “I’m okay.”

“I know. I’m almost there. Did he hurt you?”

The way she pauses makes my fury so hot I’m about to be a flaming wreck.

“Yes.” Her voice is far off, as if the phone gets jerked away.

“I see your headlights now,” Bat says coldly. “Only one set? No backup?”

I snort. “What, and get more folks mixed up in this idiocy? This is between you and me, Bat. My crew stays out of it—unless you do something stupid like shoot me in the head the minute I step out of my truck.”

“I want you *alive*,” he growls. “You have my word. Putting you down instantly like the bastard you are ain’t in the cards.”

How comforting.

I hang up then, because right now, less is more.

Leave him full of questions, scrambling to send a few of his goons away to cover his ass.

Let him think I’m coming with surprises, and he’ll have to work to torture me.

I pull into the yard a minute later, steering past the broken-down fence out front.

Four burly, nasty-looking men, all armed, surround my truck instantly.

*Good times.* Everybody’s gonna get a workout tonight.

Hurling open the door, I pop off my seatbelt and leap out, marching forward like they’re nothing more than the annoying help.

Bat looks just like I remember. He’s the spitting image of Jake, slightly younger, a jagged scar forming a half crescent up one side of his head.

I wonder what otherworldly demon Mama Pickett slept with on at least two occasions to produce these soulless, dead-eyed, menacingly tall killers.

And he has a vicious hold on Tory’s arm, hard enough to bruise, her hands still tucked behind her back. Tied, I’m sure.

It rattles my brain like a bone-crunching blow to the face. A strange flood of relief that she’s okay and livid fury that she’s a prisoner.

Panic, hurt, shame, and fear for what I’m about to do to them whips through me like a current.

One of the armed minions steps in front of me.

Too pissed to be intimidated, I grab the barrel of his gun, yank it from his hand, and bash him across the head with the stock.

The satisfying *crack!* only lasts a second.

Then I’m surrounded by two, three, four more guns.

Bat looks at me, baring his teeth, a cowardly glint in his eye. “Enough! You make one more move, I’ll shoot your balls off.”

“Glad you know I’ve got ’em.” I toss down the gun as the fallen goon on the ground twitches. “Let her go and call off your boys. This bullshit’s between you and me and nobody else.”

He sighs, waving a hand at the men, but jerks Tory back with him, creeping along the side of the house. They’re heading for the lake I can smell in the distance.

“It is between us, Faulkner,” he says slowly. “But first, you’re gonna get an overdue taste of your own medicine.”

I don’t understand till the magnum he’s kept trained on me swings up.

The barrel bites the side of Tory’s neck as he swings it against her, and my fucking heart stops.

I can’t scream, can’t charge him, can’t make him shoot me instead.

Not when one simple pull of the trigger will annihilate the love of my life.

So, I just ball my hands into fists.

“The hell do you want from me? I’m here, I’m talking, I’ll give myself up the second you let her go!” I surge forward, I can’t control it, but he shoves the gun harder into her neck, forcing a whimper from her throat.

“Not so fast, Romeo, or she gets a bullet just like her mutt.”

*Fuck, Owl?* I wondered where he’d gone.

And now I have one more reason to murder this sun-blocking bastard.

I dig my heels into the ground, all I can do to keep from lunging forward, damn the consequences.

It’s too risky. There’re too many chances that gun will go off before I ever reach him.

Then a new gun pokes *me* in the back, urging me forward as Bat pulls Tory along, closer and closer to what looks like a worn down dock on the lake.

Tory’s eyes flutter and her gaze meets mine.

*Shit, think. Think!*

I have a gun tucked in my waistband and a knife in my boot, but going for either one is also too risky right now.

So I walk forward, staring at Tory, trying to assure her I won’t let anything happen.

Without being able to pull a weapon, I use the only Ace I’ve got.

*Words.*

“Guess you had to swap wits for an extra foot of height, huh?” I mutter.

“What?” Pickett snaps, those pale-grey eyes opening a little wider.

“Ted Goode’s playing you like a fiddle, Bat,” I say as calmly as I can muster.

“Are you that goddamn stupid? He’s the guy who got your brother killed. He’s the one who helped Jake snuff out his girlfriend, too. And now he’s using you to do his dirty work, setting you up the same way he’s planning to do to me. You’ll die in a shootout as soon as you’re done with me.”

Bat stumbles slightly. A rock, maybe, but I’m sure it was my statement.

“Shut the fuck up, you—”

“I ain’t finished. He wants you believing the prison hit was all my fault for putting Jake away, sharing the burden with the boys who held him down in a grimy sink,” I say. “All so you’ll try to take me out, when what he really wants is for it to look like we took *each other* out. We’re the only two men alive who know what Ted Goode really is, and how he loves making money.”

“You don’t know that!” he snarls, hateful eyes flickering in the moonlight.

“Don’t I?” I force a sly, harsh smile.

“Fuck off. You’re bamboozling me when I’ve got you cornered like a stuck rat.” He pauses midstep. “If Goode’s flipped, then why were you asking him about my release?”

“So I’d be ready for you *and* him,” I whisper.

“You don’t even know where he’s at! Last time I say it, shut your—”

“Believe me, I know.” I let out a false chuckle. “The real question is, do you?”

He gives Tory a hard tug backward, dragging her onto the run-down dock.

“Of course, I do! Quit playing games. You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Faulkner.”

The edge in his voice is music to my ears.

Angry men are careless men, and careless men get stupid.

Knowing he’s starting to crack, I take several steps closer, ahead of the grunt pushing his gun in my back.

“It’s not obvious? Goode helped orchestrate the prison hit on Jake, just like he let you get away with yours on Jake’s killer. Then he set you up to be arrested so he could get the full cut of your dirty money, managing your operation, letting you think you were still calling the shots. Every message you ever sent to your boys from jail had to go through him, didn’t it?”

Pickett says nothing, standing paralyzed, an angry colossus hate-glaring into the night.

“Don’t shoot the messenger, now,” I say slowly. “And why’d he help you get out on early parole and scare some poor judge into sealing your records? Sure as hell wasn’t for your gain.”

“We’re...we’re partners!” he stammers. “Goode knows I swore revenge on you for killing Jake! He fucking helped us get this—all of this—lined up, you

liar.”

“I didn’t kill Jake. I wasn’t in that prison. But I wonder who the boys that drowned your brother were really working for?” The wheels are turning in his head now, so I walk a little faster, right toward him. “And how about our friends here tonight? Who hired them? You or Goode?”

“Shut up!” he shouts. “*Shut up*. You don’t know shit, you bastard Fed. You don’t know—”

“Yes, I do,” I say sternly. “I’m right about Goode. I’m right about you being dumber than dirt. I’m right about your helpers planning to throw you to the wolves and run, just when you need ’em the most, and you *know it*.”

An odd, faint, somewhat eerie slapping sound echoes across the lake, which causes everyone to pause and whip around.

Wondering if it’s my three musketeers, I scan the waters.

If I know my friends, Ridge and Drake will take the lead, and Grady will hang back with his sniper rifle. If I’m lucky, he’s got a nightscope and a direct bead on the back of Bat’s head right now.

Pickett turns away a second later, facing me again with those crazy eyes.

It’s hard to tell for sure, but I catch a glint of something in the moonlight.

A canoe or small boat gliding this way. If they’re smart, they’re rowing real slow, keeping it deathly quiet.

*Tick-tock.*

I have to get this over with before they arrive and get in harm’s way.

“Goode’s going down one way or another, I promise you,” I tell Bat. “The FBI already knows everything. The best and brightest are about to ram his dick in the door.”

“Like hell!”

“You should’ve picked your friends wisely, Bat. Dirty cops are the worst. They always believe they’re above the law till it all comes crashing down.” I hope he can see my grin in the darkness.

Snarling, Bat jerks his gun at me, away from Tory.

Thank God.

“Why isn’t he here right now, Bat?” I ask, certain that Goode’s heading to my place, planting evidence to implicate me in his dirty dealings just like James suggested.

It’s too clear now and infuriates me that I hadn’t seen it sooner. Tory wouldn’t be in danger right now if I had. And I wouldn’t have to stand here in the middle of the night, repeating myself to this shitheel, willing him to do something stupid and give me the opening I need.

“Why isn’t he here right now?” I ask again.

“Because I’m in charge here!” Bat roars, looking too much like a monster from a bad B-movie in the pale moonlight. “I’m calling the shots, you asshole—not Ted Goode—and I’ve had it up to here with your bullshit.” He motions to his goons, who close in.

The man behind me shoves his gun in my back, harder, while two more grab at my arms.

“Back on track. I’ll make you watch, Faulkner.” Bat takes a heavy step forward until he leers over me. “Come see your girlfriend get the same treatment my brother did. An eye for an eye.”

For a tall pissed off maniac, he’s quicker than I give him credit for.

In less than the blink of an eye, he shoves Tory down and grabs her by the hair, aiming to push her head over the edge of the half-collapsed dock where the water ebbs high, straight into the water.

No!

I lunge forward, handing out presents to his goons in my spinning mad rage.

A well-placed crunch to the nose with my elbow.

A head butt to the throat.

A backwards kick square in the balls. Shitty people don’t get to enjoy the usual rules about not hitting below the belt.

I’m feeling pretty good when hot lead blows an inch past my head at a couple thousand miles per hour. Nice shot, Bat, but you missed.

And I only need a few more seconds to mess him up royally.

That’s exactly what I’m aiming to do as I charge forward—kick ass and save my woman—when this weird, out-of-place clatter suddenly fills the air.



## I'VE GOAT YOU (TORY)



**H**oly crap.

Seeing Quinn fighting off three armed men totally freaks me out and sends adrenaline shrieking through my system. If only I had time to stand around being short-circuited by his noble, insane, and utterly beautiful sacrifice.

*It's now or never!*

I twist my hands out of the rope and take a deep breath, hoping against hope my knee can take this.

Well, only one way to find out.

I crouch down, kick, and leap as high as I can, springing up with just the right ninja momentum, breaking the monster's grip on my hair.

It seems like forever before my feet hit the dock again, missing their shoes.

I'll celebrate getting free of Bat later. For now, ignoring the pain sparking through my knee, I do a double twirl, nailing the giant in the knee with my foot and whacking him across the face with the rope simultaneously.

"Fu—uck!" He stumbles back, briefly shocked, and while I'm trying to figure out my next move, the night explodes with a sound I *must* be imagining.

Is that...?

No. It can't be?

But it keeps coming, closer and louder, like a pack of kids honking toy car horns. Soon, it's undeniable.

Goats.

A whole chorus bleating their angry little hearts out.

The entire tribe comes flying around the house a second later, heads down, with Owl racing behind them on their heels, barking up a storm.

Front and center, head down, running at a full charge, Hellboy beelines for the dock, while the others break rank and come crashing into the bewildered

goons on the ground. It's a miracle they don't knock down Quinn, too, who surges through the sudden chaos onto the dock, blazing toward me.

"Get down!" he roars, waving his arms.

It's the last thing I hear before everything goes eerily silent. Like there's so much insanity happening, my hearing just fades in this dull hum, and all I can do is stare.

Quinn dodging two more furious shots from Bat Pickett's gun.

Quinn smashing into him, elbowing the gun out of his arm, and then locking his arms around a literal human titan.

Quinn power wrestling the overpowered freak in his arms, putting Odysseus and David to shame, snarling as he tries to throw the giant on the ground. They fight their way toward the end of the dock, where it tilts into the water at this crooked angle.

For a horrible second, everything stops, and I send up a prayer.

*Please. Please let Quinn come out on top.*

But when I hear the pounding hooves behind me, I realize he doesn't need to do the impossible. He just needs to keep Bat Pickett distracted for a few more seconds, turned, fighting for balance, barely a foot or two away from the steep drop into the lake.

Hellboy whirls past in a shadowy blur, heading for them, as I flatten myself against the decayed wood.

I wince before it even happens.

Bat Pickett might be a vicious freak, a criminal, and evil incarnate, but I flinch to imagine how a human body feels when it collides with those horns at that speed.

The instant Quinn sidesteps the giant with a parting shove, Hellboy plows straight into Bat from the side, sending all seven-foot-something of him *flying* through the air.

I'm sure half of Dallas hears the massive *splash* echoing through the night.

Then it's just anticlimactic. Hellboy stops at the edge of the dock, his head up tall.

He unleashes a loud bleat anybody could understand, even if they don't speak goat.

*'Take that!'*

"You okay?" Quinn stands over me, reaching down, lifting me up against him. "Tory, darlin'?"

"I'm...I'm fine now!" I push at his chest so I can lean back far enough to see his face and pat his arms, shoulders, and face, convincing myself he's real.

He's okay.

Holy hell. I think we survived.

“What about you?” I ask, rapid-fire. “You were fighting all four of them! And Pickett, Quinn, you—”

“I’m still breathing, Peach, and so are you. That’s a good outcome.” He gives me a quick kiss. “Hang on. I’d better check on Bat.”

In the past few hours, I’ve gone through a litany of strange, whirlwind emotions I’ve never experienced. From believing I was about to die, to finding the grit to kick a bad guy in the knees, to watching Quinn wrestle a flipping monster of a man so our horned guardian angels could finish what he started.

It’s so unbelievable my nerves are fried for the next fifty years.

“Go get him,” I whisper. “Just don’t put yourself in danger if he’s still conscious. Not again.”

He nods, turns, and does a double take when he sees Hellboy’s silhouette glowing in the moonlight, flashing that devil-may-care grin.

“Get him off the dock! This thing’s like a sponge, lots of rot, it’s gonna collapse any second.” Without waiting, Quinn runs to the end, motioning frantically to the goat.

Finally something else I can help him with.

I find my shoes, stuff my feet into them, and run.

“Hellboy, get your cute butt over here!” I click my tongue at the goat, not wanting the dock to collapse with him on it. The water will give him a heart attack if he doesn’t sink straight to the bottom first.

With a bored look, he finally deigns to turn and meet me.

I grasp his horn as soon as he’s in range and lead him off the dock.

“Okay, tough guy, you’ve won me over,” I tell him. “I’m going to make sure Uncle Dean keeps you rich in bananas for the next year.”

Hellboy bleats in agreement.

Despite it all, I laugh, knowing how much he loves his fruit snacks between the big grazing jobs.

As we step off the dock, I notice the other goats, how they have the few goons who didn’t run at the first chance surrounded.

Even Marvin, who Quinn whipped across the face with the guy’s own gun, is flat on the ground, groaning and holding a hand against his side.

Owl’s there, too, this big growling blur of fur, reminding any man who moves that he won’t hesitate to pick up right where the goats left off. The minute he sees me, though, he breaks into a ground-eating run and nearly bowls me over.

I give him a fierce hug. “My other hero. I *knew* you wouldn’t leave me hanging. You’re too tough to let these idiots put you down.”

He gives me an excited bark, then returns to the men, keeping tight circles, overseeing his goat brigade.

By the time I return to the edge of the dock, Quinn pulls a miserable, limp Bat Pickett through the water, just in time for the boat arriving next to them.

“Damn. A day late and a dollar short,” Drake says, sounding disappointed. “Sorry we weren’t quicker. It’s harder than you’d think to steer this thing at night without making a sound. At least we can help you load up the trash.”

“The goats beat you sloths,” Quinn says with a grin. “But yeah, I guess you can help me tie them up. Still one more rattlesnake unaccounted for, and I’m thinking we’ll find him at my place.”

What does he mean? I glance around, knowing all the men here took a huge beating. And the couple oddballs who escaped won’t get far.

Not in nowhere cornfields stretching for miles. Plus, every country road is bound to be swarming with police soon.

“No need,” Ridge says, beaming a blue-eyed smile my way. “The sheriff already arrested Goode. Caught him lurking around your house right after you left. Deputies should be here any minute.”

“Shit, you guys are serious?” Quinn rakes a hand through his hair. “I owe you.”

“I called the sheriff as soon as you hung up,” Drake says. “From everything you told me, I figured he’d move swiftly the second you were gone, trying to plant something to implicate you in all this. Our instincts were right.”

Quinn nods. “Thanks, guys. That’s exactly what I thought after talking to James, too. Just wish he was here so I could thank him.”

I’m officially lost in this conversation, so I mostly keep silent and out of the way as the three men ground the canoe and finish hauling Bat onto the shore. He’s still breathing.

Part of me wishes he wasn’t, but then, there’s no telling how many people they could help by capturing a kingpin creep like this alive. This time, there’ll be no easy ticket out of prison.

Something moves in a tree overhead as soon as the guys are ashore.

I almost scream, wondering if they missed one of Pickett’s men. But I recognize the big, bearded hulk who slides down and turns to me with a smile, a big rifle slung over his back.

“*What. The. Hell.*” Grady rumbles, swiping a hand over his face. “Lady, I’ve seen a lot of crazy shit in my time, but this takes the cake—hell, the whole bakery. You okay?”

I give him a friendly nod. “Fine now. It makes me feel better knowing you were up there the whole time.”

“Faulk did the hard part, never needed my backup,” he says with a shrug. “I couldn’t get a clear line of sight on Goliath over there without risking hitting you or Faulk. You’re damn lucky those goats came charging in when they did. How’d they get here, anyway?”

“Owl,” Quinn says, walking over and beaming at us. “He wasn’t at the house when I left, so I knew he must’ve tried to help her, somehow. He knew Tory was in danger, and it looks like he did what he does best. Rounded up the tribe and brought us reinforcements.”

“I still can’t believe it,” I say, shaking my head.

I also know if the animals hadn’t shown up, Quinn would’ve saved me without their help.

Bat Pickett never had a chance against the four fiercest men in Dallas.

In no time, Grady, Ridge, and Drake hog-tie Bat and the other men. All they’re missing are bows on their foreheads for the cops.

The deputies show up with a couple dozen other officials in tactical gear and black suits. While Quinn, Grady, Ridge, and Drake are busy talking, I stay busy keeping Owl and the goats away from the commotion.

Incredibly, all eighteen are here and accounted for.

And that’s when I finally let myself smile. I bet I’m the only woman who’s ever been saved by eighteen goats, one bull of a mastiff, and the most amazing, kind, and fearless man on the planet.

The man I owe my heart to.

I also want to apologize, even if our hissy fit before this started was a two-way tango, but first I need to get the goats home. Borrowing Quinn’s phone, I call Uncle Dean and tell him to pick up the truck and trailer, then bring it to the old Maddock farm.

I’m amazed he’s even awake, considering it’s after three in the morning, but the man never misses a monster movie marathon on cable. And I guess if he shows up in time, he’ll get a glimpse of a *real* monster.

It couldn’t be more fitting.

Dropping down on an old crate, I wait, stroking Owl’s head, watching Quinn’s handsome profile in the shifting cascade of blinking police cars and floodlights.

*Fitting* might just be the best word for everything tonight.



THE SUN IS up and burning my tired eyes by the time the goats are settled at

Uncle Dean's place and I finally drive the truck home to Quinn's.

Guilt strikes hard when I'm alone, and able to think. How I hadn't taken his warnings seriously enough.

I don't know why. Maybe because no one's ever had my best interests at heart before, and for some reason, I refused to believe it was possible.

Quinn isn't home. He's still at the sheriff's office, meeting with the FBI people.

From what I've gathered, that Goode guy was some sort of high-level police official back in Oklahoma City, but he'd been a double agent of sorts, playing the streets and the law to line his own pockets.

It's sickening. There's a lot more to it, I'm sure, like Goode having a hand in Quinn's partner getting killed...

But my mind is about as cooked as a scrambled egg.

It might be a year before I pick up a thriller again, books I usually love.

The fact that this is way too real still freaks me out.

Having a taste of the life Quinn lived for years during our little intermission scares the crap out of me.

Seriously.

What if there are other dangerous men out there with axes to grind? I'd like to think this insanity was a one-off, but...the mere idea of more makes me tremble from head to toe.

I take a shower, and though I'm dog-tired after being up all night, I know I won't be able to sleep until Quinn gets home.

So I get dressed, feed Owl, and then go to the barn to finish what Pickett's men so rudely interrupted the night before. Honestly, I don't get very far, hanging off a few silks before I'm out of breath and limping to the blanket in the corner.

Even fear can't keep a girl up forever when she's this exhausted.

I'm still there napping, dreaming of how my entire life has changed since summer, when I hear footsteps.

In my groggy state, it scares me.

I jerk up so hard I almost crash right into him.

"Whoa. Easy. Didn't think I'd find you here. Haven't you had enough exercise for one day?" he asks, crouching, laying those big calloused hands on my shoulders.

His grin lassos my heart. I flash him a shy smile.

"Sure, but I didn't want to fall asleep until you were home. I tried to stay awake, but..."

"Never any shame in a power nap, darlin'." He cups my face with both

hands, melting me alive with the hottest emerald-green eyes in existence. I think I'm a puddle by the time his lips mold to mine and he kisses me fully awake. "Have you eaten yet?"

"I'm not hungry. Did you get everything sorted out?"

His eyes darken and he shrugs.

"Eh, it'll be a while. Weeks, maybe months, before everything gets fully sorted and cases closed. I'm finished with the after-action stuff for now, though." Taking my hand, he leads us to the door. "I brought home some Chinese takeout. You up for a bite?"

My stomach growls as soon as he says it.

His growly pants chuckle curls my toes. "I'm thinkin' that's a yes?"

"God, yeah. I haven't had good Chinese in ages."

"Me either. It's a new place next to the sheriff's office and smelled awful good when I walked out."

"What time is it?"

"Almost noon."

"Crap, okay, let's eat!"

He stops and tugs me closer, though, leveling another heavy look on me.

"How're you really doing, Peach? You promise me you're okay?" he asks.

"Yes. It's just, well, kind of crazy. I know you get it."

Kissing the top of my head as we resume walking, he says, "I'm sorry about all that shit. I put you in that position. If I hadn't opened my big mouth and chewed you out before they showed up—"

I freeze, turning toward him, folding my hands in front of me.

"Quinn, no. I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have gone to the barn last night. I wasn't thinking. And I shouldn't have put up such a big fight about leaving town." Huffing out a breath, I continue. "I just...I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd work out until I was tired. I'm truly sorry. I should've listened and taken your warnings more seriously. I know you didn't want to send me home to hurt me. You tried to save me."

He looks down for a moment, then his eyes snap up again, full of warmth like a sunlit forest.

"It's over now. You're fine, I'm fine, and so's everybody else, critters included." He opens the back door and holds it for me. "Ladies first. Go on in before our lunch gets cold. I wasn't sure what you like, and I was hungry as hell, so I bought a lot of everything."

No kidding.

Five huge white bags stuffed to the brim with little boxes and plastic containers are sitting on the center island. It's like he cleaned out a whole round

of a Chinese buffet.

“It looks like you bought one of everything,” I say with a giggle.

“Nothing like leftovers for supper, right?”

“If you mean breakfast, lunch, and dinner tomorrow, sure,” I say, tearing open the first bag. My stomach growls again at the amazing smell of the food. “Ohhh, egg rolls! Pork?”

“At least one kind with every meat known to man.” He smiles and hands me a plate.

The food tastes as good as it smells as we tear into it, sharing each other’s company just like old times when we used to order way too much ice cream. Except back then, I didn’t have Quinn’s bed to look forward to when I’m too full to move.

I’m not only as stuffed as a Thanksgiving turkey by the time we put the leftovers in the fridge, I’m yawning my jaw off.

“Time to crash,” Quinn says.

Too tired to even agree, I lean against him as we walk up the stairs. At the top of the steps, he pauses.

My room is one way, his is the other.

It’s not even a question.

I know where I’m going, but I love the sexy look of frustration he gives me.

His arm around me tightens, leading me to his room, as if to say *only one place you belong, woman. Now and forever.*

I pull off my clothes and dive into bed, wearing just my panties and bra.

Quinn kisses my forehead. “Be right back. Gonna take a shower and clean up.”

Nodding, I snuggle my head into his pillow, inhaling his intoxicating scent.

It’s comforting, intense, real.

Almost as reckless and utterly endearing as our love.



I’M NOT sure what wakes me, at first—then I know it’s the hand on my boob.

Same for the exciting nip of teeth and hot breath on the back of my neck.

The rush begins as I roll over, almost too sore to move, but not sore enough to ignore makeup sex with Quinn Faulkner.

“Still tired?” he whispers softly, the tip of his tongue flicking against my skin.

“Not too tired for...you know,” I answer.

Ha. If I'm ever too tired for him, please check my pulse.

I roll over, catching an eyeful of lust on his face.

"What about you?" I whisper.

Quinn doesn't answer. Not with words.

He reaches behind my head, weaving his fingers through my hair, kissing the side of my face while his other hand dips beneath my bra.

When his lips finally find mine, I'm freaking dying to kiss him.

Completely. Madly. Deeply.

A hot moan rumbles in my throat the second I feel the stubble on his face grazing my silky skin.

"I can't stop touching you," he breathes against my mouth, his eyes brighter than I've ever seen. "Can't stop thinking about you, Tory. I almost lost you. That fuck, I thought he'd—"

"Hey. *Hey*. I'm still here, aren't I? I'm here and I'm yours." I dig my fingers deep in his thick hair to keep his face next to mine. "I know the feeling. They could've taken everything away."

If it's true, then it seems to make him hell-bent on giving everything back.

We kiss again, our mouths hot and wet, tongues at war.

I twist to my side, wind my legs around his and arch against his hips, wanting more of that hungry bulge I can already feel every time I grind against him. Wanting him *inside me*.

He breaks the kiss with a hitched groan, rolling me on my back, shadowing my body with corded muscle and wild ink I want to lick right off his skin.

My turn to moan.

And this time in disappointment because I can't feel his erection pressing into me, not with his hips pulled back and that hot glint in his eye, ordering me to be patient.

God.

I want to devour him just slightly less than I want him to consume me.

Thankfully, he isn't opposed to the thought, trailing sticky kisses over my cheeks, my chin, my neck, before he snaps my sports bra up with a fevered groan.

"Shit, shit. Tory," he rasps. "You still don't have a clue."

"Hmm?" I whisper, my legs stroking his.

"What you fuckin' do to me. Don't you get how bad I need you, need this?"

Drawing a feral breath, he shoves his hand in my panties, reaches down, and fills me with two thieving fingers.

Holy hell.

I'm drenched, bucking against him, finding his knuckle and working my clit

good and hard against it. Somehow, I'm still able to grasp the thick elastic of my bra.

I pull it over my head, hoping beyond all hope that's where his mouth is bound.

His head dips low at the sight of my nipples.

I arch my back, pushing against his mouth, loving how easily he finds the wickedly delicious line between punishment and pleasure with his teeth, his tongue, his *everything*.

I never knew how much that turns me on.

No man has ever kissed me before like he does.

No one has ever loved every inch of me like Quinn.

No man ever will again.

By the time he pulls my other nipple into his mouth and his tongue puts stars in my eyes, I'm burning with need. He's naked, and I reach down, grasping his hard-on.

"Yeah, fuck!" He sucks a harsh breath as I start pumping him with my hand, marveling at how big, how hard, how much he throbs for me.

When he's leaking pre-come all over my hand, he reaches down, fists my panties, and rips them clean off in one swift movement.

For a second, we lock eyes, and he grins. "I'll buy you new ones, whatever the hell you want, just open those legs for me. Right the fuck now."

I don't even care.

I'm too delirious, riding his hand, so close to coming I think I'll lose it the first minute he's inside me.

"Quinn, please." Groaning, I arch into his palm. "I can't take much more."

He stiffens, pulling his hand away. "Same."

"Then what the *hell* are we waiting for?" I ask.

A second later, he mounts me, feeding his entire full, rough length into my body in one deep thrust.

I'll never know how I don't hit my O right then, but I'm glad I last a few more minutes.

Grasping my hips, he pins me against the mattress, folding my legs tight to his wall of a body as he thrusts with perfect pressure.

Divine friction and that white-hot look in his eyes make quick work of my resistance.

"Quinn...come with me," I whimper, digging my teeth into my bottom lip, taking him as hard as I can.

I'm almost to the point of no return.

I want it to last longer, forever, but I want him to fill me with his molten

fiery essence even more.

“Quinn!” I whimper, thrashing my head, damn near clawing him. “I-I can’t hold—”

I can’t *anything*.

My vision blurs as the ecstasy wave hits, radiating out from where we’re joined, hot convulsions sending me crashing against him again and again.

It’s as close as I ever want to get to death by orgasm.

Oh, but Quinn isn’t finished.

The second I hear his rough groan, his thrusts quickening, every inch of him swelling, pulsing, bursting deep inside me, I’m dead.

Dick-matized.

Gone.

I just wish we could ride this wave, this rush, this love forever as my eyes pinch shut.

Together, we let out ragged cries of pleasure, riding a high we both know we’ll never, ever find with another living soul.



THE BED IS empty when I wake up.

I roll over, wincing at my extra angry aches and pains after the past twenty-four hours, and glance at the clock beside the bed. Eight p.m.

Wow, I slept hard. And who could blame me?

Stretching my arms over my head, I sit up with a yawn.

Tossing aside the covers, I scoot to the edge of the bed. Rummaging around in the closet, I find new underwear, shimmy them on, and then grab a shirt.

It’s Quinn’s, but for now it’ll do. I slip it on and leave the room, loving how his scent lingers.

I pause halfway down the stairs, just to stare a moment at a scene from something I’d forgotten.

*Normalcy.*

He’s sitting on the couch, wearing a pair of sweatpants that look dangerously good on him, watching TV with his feet propped up on the coffee table.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” he says without turning around.

Smiling, I continue into the living room, and stop in front of him. “How did you know I was there? The stairs don’t even squeak.”

He pulls me onto his lap and kisses me. “ESP. I meant to come clean about it sooner, but now that I know we’re serious...”

For a second, I blink, confused at how serious he looks.

“Really?”

His grin spreads like a sunrise, as cocky as it is playful. “Nah, you pretty little sucker. I just saw your reflection in the TV screen.”

“Idiot! Don’t you dare think I’m that gullible.” I playfully slap my hands on his bare chest, then run my hands across his pecs, loving the feel of his skin.

He kisses me again. “You hungry?”

“Again? Are you?”

“Yeah. Thought I might starve to death before you woke up. Figured we’d eat leftovers together, though.”

I kiss him and climb off his lap. “You didn’t have to wait up for me.”

“I know.” He stands up and gives my butt a teasing slap. “I wanted to.”

Just when I think I’m out of new reasons to love him, the way he—whoa.

What?

Am I totally sure this is love? The kind that lasts for life? The feeling that hits in a balmy, spinning glow when you’re face-to-face with *The One*?

I stare at him as he warms up our food, trying not to gawk like a total weirdo.

Oddly, for some reason, the big L-word scares me as much as being kidnapped, just in a different way. A very different way.

If I love Quinn Faulkner...fully, wildly, irreversibly, then that means making a life together.

It means giving up Chicago, the dumb director job that was already gone, and maybe even dancing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie. “I was just thinking about what I want to eat. Lo mein or fried rice?”

He laughs, flashing that world-shredding smile.

“No rule saying you can’t have both. I think we’ve burned off a week’s worth of carbs lately. There’s still plenty of everything.”

I nod and take a chair at the little table in the kitchen.

“You’re right. Both sound pretty good, actually.”

I wish I weren’t just talking about the food.

The both I’d really love to have involves keeping Quinn and my dance career.

The Chinese food is just as exquisite the second time around, but I’m not able to eat much.

My mind puts a real damper on my appetite.

I want Quinn.

I want what I have here.

Maybe I even want to stay here in Dallas and live where we've always been the happiest.

But then, what will I do with my life? I'd be lucky to nab a few clients as a personal trainer or something in this little town.

My mind continues tossing around questions, not finding any answers, for the next two days.

Until the moment when I open the front door and see my mother standing on the porch.



## WE'VE GOAT COMPANY (FAULKNER)



The sleek rental car in the driveway is no surprise when I get home.

Granny Coffey called this morning, warning me her pain-in-the-ass daughter-in-law was arriving today to convince my peach to go home with her.

I'd tossed around calling Tory, warning her, but ultimately hadn't. I've committed to not interfering in a meeting this important.

I've had plenty to chase after the past couple days.

The criminal machine Ted Goode ran goes deeper than I'd expected, multi-layered, and Section Chief Powers has asked me to return to the FBI as a part-time consultant to help with the big investigation that has tendrils branching out in several other cold cases.

I said no.

He told me to think about it for a few days.

To his credit, he'd pointed out that Justin's death wasn't my fault. I'd already accepted that years ago, as much as anyone could.

As for Tory's kidnapping, there are no excuses, and that's the problem. I can't let my work hurt her again. *Ever*.

Having Bat Pickett locked up where he belongs again helps, but it's not the final word.

If I knew she'd be happy as a lark here in Dallas, forever, then I'd tell Powers there's no question.

No need for me to think about anything.

I'm not positive that's the case. And if she's not interested in staying, then neither am I.

This little town has too many memories tangled up in that woman to live a life here without her.

Nah, I'm not gonna try and influence her decision. I'm committed to her

having the final say because I respect her that much.

Folks have been marching her around her entire life.

This time, the choice is hers, and hers alone.

Whatever she decides, I'll man up and accept it—even if it means her future can't include me.

I shut off the truck, shake off the heebie-jeebies the thought of meeting Gloria Redson-Riddle-Coffey gives me, and open the driver's door. My feet feel like solid stone as I drag myself to the house and up the porch.

Tory and her ma are in the kitchen, and as soon as I open the door, the tension smacks me clean across the face.

Gloria, a tall woman who still looks like a fashion model in middle age, whips her eyes toward me, a barely concealed scowl on her face aimed like a sword.

For once, I hate the fact that my instincts were right.

My heart goes out to Tory. I try to squelch the anger that fills me at the way her mother glares.

Not even a hello.

Awesome.

Sure, I've never met her, so I shouldn't judge, but...fuck it, *I'm judging*.

Gloria reveals plenty the instant I walk over to Tory, lay a hand on her shoulder, and feel how she's wound tighter than a spring.

"Hey, darlin'. You ladies having fun?" I ask, flashing a wink in Gloria's direction I hope she finds annoying.

"We're fine! How was your meeting with Powers?" She reaches up, lacing her fingers in mine, and squeezes like a hostage trying to communicate their predicament.

"Fine. He's on his way back to D.C. now."

"So that mess is settled then?" Gloria snaps. "I read all about it. You'd think this ridiculous town would get a break after everything that happened with the oil company, and then the movie star...frankly, it's the reason I'm here. To talk some sense into my daughter, and ensure she leaves this miserable hole in the dirt that's never been anything but a magnet for trouble."

Her sharp-eyed look tells me *I'm* the real trouble she's worried about, far more than Dallas.

"Mother!" Tory hisses, slapping a hand on the table. "None of it was Quinn's fault. I told you that, and so did the papers." Looking at me, she hisses a sigh. "Quinn, this is my mother, Gloria Redson-Riddle-Coffey."

I nod, and attempting to hide my aversion, plaster on my best Prince Charming smile.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am. I’ve heard a lot.”

*All bad things, of course.*

Gloria huffs out a thick breath and turns away, lifting her nose in the air. Apparently, she’s too good to even feign politeness.

My jaw tightens, but for Tory’s sake, I ignore her mother’s rebuff.

Reminding myself that I can’t butt in—that whatever she decides is her choice—I clear my throat. “Didn’t mean to interrupt anything. You ladies must have an awful lot to talk about. I’ll leave you be.”

Gloria’s eyes snap back to me, softening ever-so-slightly like I just graduated from pond scum to ordinary mud.

Giving Tory’s arm a gentle squeeze, I add, “I’ll be in the barn if you need anything. Just holler.”

“We won’t be long,” she whispers, patting my hand.

There’s nothing pressing in the barn, but if I stay here, I’ll say far more than I should. Whatever fireworks they’re bound to have don’t need me igniting the fuse. It ain’t fair to Tory.

Owl shoots out the back door as soon as I open it.

Apparently, he’s also had more than he can stand of Tory’s mother. He walks beside me down to the barn.

The goats are back at the dairy farm to finish the big job and should stay there for a few more days. The Neumans fixed the fence they’d torn down during their great escape to help rescue Tory, with Owl playing field marshal, and thankfully weren’t too upset since it was falling apart anyway.

“You know how to work a shovel?” I ask the dog, trying to think of something to keep me busy for an hour or two. There are several blue landscaping stones stacked up near the side of the barn I’d planned on using to make a walking path down to the creek.

Now’s as good a time as any to lay them down and keep my mind off what’s happening in the house.

He barks once.

“All right, fair enough. You worked your tail off this week.” Grinning, I rub his head. “Guess I get to do all the digging.”



THE STONES ARE ALL LAID and I’m tamping down the dirt around the last one when Tory appears, her hands tucked together shyly in front of her.

“These look nice,” she says, stepping from stone to stone.

“Thanks.” I lean against the shovel handle, nodding at Owl who’s sleeping under a tree. “My helper’s on a break.”

“Well, you look like you could use this.” She hands me a bottle of cold water.

“Thanks.” I take it and glug down half before asking, “Is your ma still here?”

“Nope. She went straight back to her hotel room as soon as we were done.”

“Any idea when she’s going home?” I bite my tongue, but it’s an afterthought. The question’s already out.

Tory snickers. “She has a flight tomorrow. Bright and early in the morning.”

Shit, I can’t take this.

“You going with her?” I ask, holding in a deep breath.

For a second, she stares directly at me with a serious, solemn look on her face. “Can you give me a good reason why I shouldn’t?”

Yeah. I love her like an anvil dropped on my heart, but that’s why *I* don’t want her to go.

My reason, not hers.

“It’s your decision, Peach. Wouldn’t be right for me to twist your arm one way or another.”

She closes her eyes and smiles, shaking her head.

“I knew you’d say that.”

I don’t understand. It’s the only thing I can say. This has to be her choice, and entirely hers, with no ifs, ands, or buts.

Her eyelids flutter open as a more serene smile forms on her lips. “Tell me this—do *you* want me to leave Dallas?”

“Darlin’, you already know what I want, and it doesn’t matter. If I launch into theatrics about what you mean to me, how you’re stuck in my head with every loving breath...well, that shit wouldn’t be fair. This is *your* choice. Your future. Your happiness. What I think about it doesn’t count,” I tell her, fully aware I just slipped up and dumped my guts.

Dammit.

“Wrong,” she whips out. “What you want does count. I don’t want to stay if you don’t want me here.”

Curling my lip, I shove the blade of the shovel into the ground and step toward her. “Enough with these games. *I’ll* always want you here, woman, but the question is, do you want to be here? Do you want to be with me? Any way we cut it, you can’t chase your dreams to the stars being tied down with anyone—especially me.”

“Yes,” she whispers, batting her eyes. “I know and I...I want you, Quinn. Having a life without you in it feels like no life at all.”

I realize she's blinking back something heavy and wet a second later.

"What about your dancing?" I ask softly, stopping in front of her, gingerly laying my hands on her shoulders. "You've worked your whole life for it."

Nodding, she says, "Sure, but I've been thinking and...well, I think that part of my life might be over. It's not just you. I'm sick of the stress, sick of Chicago, sick of back-stabby people like Jean-Paul and Madeline. Sick of the endless drama it causes with Mother, too. What would a normal relationship with her be like? All this time, I've been living her dream. Not mine."

"Tory—" I try to cut in, but she ain't having it.

"*Listen.* I've made up my mind and I'm ready for something different. And part of that's figuring out I've felt more alive here than anywhere else, and I'd like to stay longer. See if that feeling lasts, if this is really what I want. The rest will come. We don't have to stay in Dallas forever, but for now? I can't imagine anywhere I'd rather be. And you're the only man I want to be anywhere with, Quinn Faulkner."

Shit, shit.

It's hard pretending my throat's not getting tight, so I squeeze her shoulders, playing a total fool.

"How long?" I ask her. "How long you want to stay here giving small-town life a spin?"

She laughs, wiping away an escaping tear, then lays a hand on my chest.

"Um, until you kick me out?"

It's my turn to chuckle, and grasping her hips, I lean down and take her lips like there's no tomorrow. Then peel back to stare into those blue eyes I want to drown in forever.

"Got some bad news for you, Peach." I pause. "That's never gonna happen. You stay, you're stuck with me."

She beams like the sun. "In that case, I have one more question..."

Her eyes are gleaming now, more than a little mischievous.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Would you consider going on a road trip?"

I cock my head. "Road trip? Sure. Uh, where?"

Her arms loop around my neck and she presses against me, teasing me to a new high.

"Chicago, so I can pick up my things and bring them back here. Don't worry, I already told Mother I'm moving out, so she'll be expecting company."

"Tory, I'd follow you to the devil's doorstep. No question. As long as you're certain." I catch her under the chin with one knuckle, gingerly gliding it across her cheek. "You *are* sure, right? About staying here? About giving up that

director job?”

“Totally. I’d miss you a hundred times more than I’ll ever miss dancing.” She kisses my chin. “Besides, I can still dance in the barn whenever I want.” Stretching on her toes, she whispers next to my ear, “Buck naked.”

Oh, hell, now she’s speaking my language.

My worries are replaced by wild visions of everything I’m aching to do to her tonight.



WE MAKE the trip to Chicago the following weekend.

Turns out, a road trip with Tory is like everything else with her.

Fun-filled days, lots of easy banter, and nights so passionate they leave scorch marks on the sheets.

Once we’re pulling into the Windy City, though, I can sense her jitters compounding with every mile.

After a long stretch where I have to adapt to rude, overly aggressive hornet human beings behind the wheel, we pull the truck up to an immaculate home in a fancy-looking neighborhood.

“Nice place,” I say, breaking the silence that’s dominated the last few blocks.

She nods, then gives me a look with her brows knit tight.

“This seemed like a better idea when we were still in North Dakota.”

“We’re just here to get in, get your stuff, and visit with your folks a little...if they’ll have it.” Taking her hand, I give it a fierce squeeze. “I’ll be at your side the whole time, whatever happens.”

“I guess.” She stretches over the console to give me a quick kiss. “Thanks for having my back. You have no idea how much it helps.”

I catch her lips with a growl and give her a long, solid kiss, intent on dragging her mind off what’s waiting.

“If you change your mind about staying here, we can always rent a hotel or AirBnB. Just say the word.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “If I’m in charge of my own life now, this is where it starts.”

I give her a wink. “You’ve got this, Peach. Let’s rock and roll.”

A moment later, we do exactly that.

Her folks have the wide front door with the stained glass already open and waiting.

As we walk up the steps, Gloria Redson-Riddle-Coffey gives new meaning

to the term ice queen. Her attitude could send a penguin chasing after a space heater.

She kisses the air beside both of Tory's cheeks but doesn't even look my way with more than a passing blink.

"Faulkner," she says with a terse nod.

"Ma'am." Screw it, I give it right back, barely dipping my chin.

We might be guests here, walking on the world's thinnest eggshells, but I'll be damned if I look like a spineless pushover for the sake of politeness.

A tall man walks out of the door behind Gloria.

"Hello, sweetheart!" He gives Tory a solid bear hug before extending his hand to me. "Quinn, I'm John Coffey. I've heard nothing but good things about you."

Gloria huffs out an offended breath as John and I shake hands. Noting the way his eyes twinkle, much like Granny Coffey's, I say, "If those good things are all from your mother, you might want to take 'em with a grain of salt. The woman loves to embellish."

He lets out a laugh and slaps my back. "You know my mother well. Come on in. I have steaks ready to grill and cold beer."

"Sounds great," I say, laying a hand on Tory's back.

Her old man isn't quite what I expected.

He has a pulse, for one, and a smile that seems genuine.

It's hard to see the money grubber who spent his whole life burying his small-town roots to keep his woman happy, but first looks can be deceiving.

Tory smiles up at me. I give her another wink, letting her know we're in this together.

A short time later, John and I are on a huge tiered deck out back. Alone because Gloria insisted she needed to talk to Tory—girl to girl.

John lights the grill, then sits down on one of the cushioned deck chairs.

"You know, this is the day I've dreaded for years," he says with a sigh.

"Why's that?" I ask, assuming he's referring to Tory moving out.

"Because I have to come to grips with the fact that I'm trusting another man to take care of my little girl for the rest of her life."

*Shit.*

*What?*

"Come again?" I blink at him in genuine surprise.

He smiles, almost a little sadly, his eyes drifting over to the warming grill.

"I'm not gonna lie. Gloria's fit to be tied with all this—Tory walking out on her old life, old career, old boyfriend." He winces when he says the last word and leans toward me, lowering his voice. "I never liked the guy."

I nod, glad there's something we can agree on.

"Anyhow, I heard about what happened back in Dallas with you and that bust. Tory told me plenty over the phone, how you came to her rescue. Maybe something you had experience with long before getting mixed up with that Pickett trouble, if I remember what she used to say about those summers in North Dakota." He winks at me. "That's why I can't share my wife's hesitation. Every version of the story I heard from Mama, Dean, and Tory goes slightly different, but they all agree on one thing—you'd die for my daughter."

"I would." I look at him, wondering where this is going.

"Well, any guy who'd put his life on the line for my Tory, who loves her that much, isn't a man worth second guessing," he says, meeting my gaze. "You've earned my respect, Quinn, and an honest shot at keeping her happy."

I nod, understanding this must be difficult for him, caught between his wife's attitude and his own heart. "I'd never do anything to hurt Tory. I'll protect her with my life."

"Glad to hear it." He takes a drink off his beer, then says, "What I want to know, Quinn, is if you'll *live* for her, too?"

I've just gained massive respect for this man.

He puts things in a perspective that's often too skewed.

"Live for her to fulfill her dreams, whatever they are, dancing or something else," he continues. "Live for her to find the destiny she's always craved, but was always too stifled to search for, to grasp. My Gloria, she made mistakes. That's the one thing we struggled to give our daughter—free reign—but the past few months have helped me realize it's the thing she needs."

What else can I do but answer honestly?

"I'll do what you're asking, but I need to tell you...I'm not steering her decisions. It'll always be up to her, and whatever that choice is, I'll be right behind her in any capacity she needs."

He sits thoughtfully for a moment before he nods.

"I believe you will, Quinn, and I can't ask for more." He leans across the table, his hand extended. "Whatever the two of you decide, know that you have my blessing."

I stand to give him the respect he deserves, and wait for him to stand up before taking his hand and shaking it fiercely. "Thank you, Mr. Coffey."

"Call me, John," he says, smiling like the sun.

I nod as we both sit back down.

"Tory's always loved Dallas, you know. I'm guessing she'll be happy there. Frankly, I expected her to move out there years ago."

"She was busy here," I say, taking a long pull off my own beer. "All in the

timing.”

“Timing, yes. She waited because you weren’t there.” He takes another long drink off his beer and then holds up the bottle. “There’s a lot to be said about fate. Her moving back, finding you again, finding herself...it’s like everything’s coming full circle.”

I lift my beer bottle and clink it against his.

“I’ll drink to that, John.” He’s so pleasantly different from his wife.

I wonder how the hell they’ve been married for so long.

“Gloria will come around,” he says a minute later, almost reading my mind. “She’s been stuck, reliving her younger years through Tory, being the overprotective mama bear she is at heart. She’s a good woman, even if her instincts are wrong—believe it or not—I wouldn’t love her as much as I do if she wasn’t. She just needs time, like Tory, to figure it all out.”

Once again, I’m impressed with this man and his calm.

I look forward to getting to know him better. We spend the next half hour or so talking about a variety of subjects, until the sliding glass door opens.

“Look who’s here!”

John and I both turn and watch as Gloria, hugging his arm, escorts a short, thin man with spectacles onto the deck. I have to do a double take.

The guy’s wearing a professorial sweater vest that looks like it came from the last century, tight jeans, and has his curly hair tucked up in a frizzy, uneven man bun.

“Jean-Paul couldn’t resist a chance to wish Tory well while she’s in town,” Gloria says. “Say hello.”

John Coffey looks at me with an apologetic frown. The subtle glint in his eye also reminds me so much of Granny Coffey when she’s up to some mischief that I have to bite back a laugh.

“Jean-Paul,” John says with a broad, fake-as-hell grin, motioning at me. “Meet Quinn Faulkner, Tory’s boyfriend.”

For a second, I stop and stare.

Gloria’s mannequin-like smile tells me everything I need to know.

I’m being tested. She wants to see if I’ll go full Neanderthal and turn this little get-together into a shit-fight over a snail.

I ain’t gonna lie—it’s hell plastering on the phoniest smile of my life and walking up to this pissant.

“We’ve met over the phone,” I say cheerfully, then greet Jean-Paul with a handshake that nearly rips his arm off.

Believe me, it doesn’t take much.

My gaze goes to Tory, who steps outside behind her mother with a worried

look. I flash her an *everything's okay* grin.

The look in her eyes says, *yeah, I can't believe it, either.*

This was the worm she considered marrying at one point.

Now, he's nothing.

Just a stranger with a plastic, desperate smile and a mumbled, "Pleasure to meet you."

He's playing nice for Gloria's amusement. Probably so he can cling to her money after I've made her daughter off-limits till the death of the universe.

"Mother invited Jean-Paul to join us for dinner," Tory says with a mortified smile.

"Awesome," I lie, holding my hand out as she instantly arrives at my side for a searing kiss that borders just on obscene before I glance at Jean-Paul again. "Nothing like a good grilled steak, right, buddy?"

"Jean-Paul doesn't eat meat," Gloria cuts in. "I have a delicious, seasoned portabella mushroom for John to grill him."

Pulling Tory closer, I whisper, "Okay, now we have a problem. Eggplant is one thing, and so is your ex being here, but I'm *not* replacing my steak with a goddamned mushroom."

"I know," she says, her eyes glittering as she laughs, squeezing me tight. "And I'm glad."

That meal is actually one of the highlights of our trip.

By the time it's over, I'm convinced that her ma and Jean-Paul both know Tory's made her choice permanently, and nothing will ever change her mind.

The next day, Gloria actually softens up and treats me like a human being for the first time as she serves us a big breakfast. Waffles, Portuguese sausage, duck eggs, and fresh squeezed blood orange juice.

Fancier than I'm used to, but the stuff tastes good and it could grow on a dude.

Just like I'm hoping her mother will someday, far in the future.



WE LEAVE Chicago a couple days later with the box of my truck full and towing Tory's pink convertible Volkswagen bug. She'll have to stick to the main roads in Dallas with that thing, but at least she'll have wheels again.

My parting invitation for her parents to visit us whenever they can is sincere.

Tory really shined while we were there, and I want them to know that she's in full control of her new life.

Before I can even blink, the rest of summer blurs by.

By October, I believe Tory's happy settling into her new life, and I know I am. I'm also ready to make it forever.

The ring is in my pocket, and the rest is in place.

No thanks to Granny again. The old woman has more tricks up her sleeves than any magician. While Tory was busy helping Grace set up the big harvest festival at the Barnet-Sellers pumpkin farm, Granny's been a busy bee.

She swore everything would be picture perfect when I bring my girl home tonight—hopefully as my fiancée.

I turned down a new position with the FBI, no surprise, but accepted one with the local sheriff's department, just part time, which gives me plenty of time to keep helping with the goats.

They've just retired for the season and are housed back at Dean's place for the winter. Tory insists on keeping up with it for something to do while Dean shares more of the workload.

She loves those goats, though, especially Hellboy.

I swear, if I'd let her, that goat would be inside the house with us just like Owl.

Part of the harvest festival includes a petting zoo, and of course, that means the goats, which is where I find her.

"How's it going out here?" I ask, stepping up behind her near sunset.

"So far? Wonderful!" She sets down a big floppy-eared rabbit on the hay and pats a little girl's head while walking toward me. "The kids adore the animals." Stepping closer, she whispers, "Edison is the main attraction, as always, but don't tell Hellboy. He's pulling a close second."

I kiss her. "I won't say a word, Peach. Can't let anything go to that boy's head."

Giggling, she grasps my arm with both hands. "Isn't this grand? People have been coming all day, picking pumpkins, buying crafts and homemade goodies, having hayrides and walking through the corn maze...I've never seen anything like it. I always thought this town just kinda shut down after summer."

"Nah, wait for winter when we're waist-deep in snow dunes. Then you're snowed in and it's time to get creative." My heart thuds at the way her eyes sparkle.

Fuck, I'll never get tired of looking at her.

Better get over my nerves and cough up what I'm here to do.

"Looks like a big hit. The entire town's been looking forward to this for weeks," I say.

"I can see why." She glances around at the crowd. "Granny's supposed to be

here somewhere, but I haven't seen her." Lowering her voice to a giggling whisper, she adds, "Probably with Robert Duncan again. The two of them are acting like a couple of sneaky teenagers."

I chuckle. Ever since their Alaskan cruise, Granny and Robert have become closer friends, though she still calls him an old goat.

"Yeah, I saw them going in the maze a little while ago," I tell her, scratching my leg. It's like the ring in my pocket is burning a hole through the material. "So are you about ready to head home and rest?"

"Very ready. I know I'd better pace myself. The last week was crazy enough with getting this set up, but worth it. Grace says it'll run for at least the next three weeks through Halloween, unless the first freeze takes out the pumpkins." She points at the petting zoo. "Uncle Dean will be back in the morning to help with feeding. He's also sold four horseshoe coat racks today and wants to be here bright and early to peddle more."

I smile. "Maybe he's finally found his calling."

"For this week, you mean." She laughs.

Then, wagging a finger at Ridge, Grace, and a surprisingly content-looking Cornelius the rooster milling around near the hay wagon, she says, "Let's go say goodbye and get out of here. I'm beat."

"Not too tired, I hope."

She turns, shooting me one of her coy, sexy smiles. "I'm never too tired for *you*."

We spend a few minutes congratulating Ridge and Grace on the successful grand opening and then head home.

The sun's sinking below the horizon by the time I pull the truck into the driveway, leaving the sky a dusty blue streaked with shades of orange, yellow, and brilliant red.

"Any thoughts on food tonight? I could make eggplant parmesan for supper," she says as I turn off the truck.

I shrug, having something else in place.

"No? I thought you liked it."

"I do, but I want to show you something first. Come on."

"Oh. All right." She opens her door and climbs out.

I take a deep breath, knowing every movement counts now so I don't ruin the surprise.

Just like the hundred times I've done before, I check my pocket, feeling to make sure the ring box is still there securely before I climb out. We meet at the front of the truck.

"So what do you want to show me?" she asks, frowning.

“It’s in the barn.” Taking her hand, we head across to the huge building.

“I haven’t even been in there the past few days with everything going on,” she says, clearly racking her brain for clues. “Wait. You *didn’t*. You didn’t get me one of those giant human hamster wheels I showed you on YouTube? It was a joke, Quinn, I—”

“Nah. Nothing quite that insane.” I grin, knowing what I’ve got planned might just be crazier.

She gives me a skeptical look.

I just smile and stare at her longer than I mean to.

To say I’m a little nervous is like calling Owl a little puppy.

I never thought I’d be here, planning to put it all on the line, asking Tory Three Names if she’ll have me forever, but...here the hell we go.

I love her, and that ought to be enough. More than I ever imagined. There isn’t a single shred of doubt I want to spend the rest of my life with this woman.

She hears the soft music as we get closer and glances up at me again, a slow smile forming on her heart-shaped lips.

I don’t say anything yet, just open the door languidly and step aside for her to enter first.

“Quinn Faulkner!” she belts out my name, taking a deep breath. “This is...it’s beautiful. But why?”

I follow her inside and have to agree as I close the door.

The strings of twinkling lights I’d hung along the beams, entwined in her silk ropes, fill the entire space with a mellow glow. In the center of the floor, there’s a table, draped with an ivory-white cloth like a little preview of white, silky things to come.

Flowers everywhere.

An ice bucket with a bottle of champagne chilling in it, and a large platter of finger foods are also on the table, ready to be devoured in celebration.

She looks at me slowly. “When did you have time? You’ve been at the pumpkin farm all day.”

“A little old lady helped me,” I say with a shrug.

She laughs, shakes her head, and looks around.

“This is so lovely.” Glancing at me again, she adds, “And romantic.”

“Good. That’s the vibe I was going for,” I admit.

She stretches up and gives me a quick kiss. “Well, Romeo, you nailed it. I’m all yours.”

“Not yet,” I growl.

She blinks and her smile disappears.

My original plan was to pop the big fat agony question after eating, but hell,

I can't wait a second longer.

It's now or never.

Taking a breath, I step forward, grasping her hands.

For a second, we just share this bewildered glance.

She has no clue what's happening. That goes double for me, wondering how I can condense half a life of feelings for this woman into a few words without giving us both whiplash.

"I love you, Tory Redson-Riddle-Coffey." I just blurt it out. "I've loved you for years, ever since I caught you freaking out over Gramps' honey farm. When you fell down face-first in that peach pie, and I promised you'd find your man, even when you were so sticky and miserable you thought you'd never live it down...I had to prove you right. Here I am, darlin'. The same dude who loved you enough then to lick your face clean. Except now we're grown up and I'm damn glad I get to taste every inch of you."

Her eyes go huge like blue diamonds as the reality of what's happening hits her.

*No going back now. Hell if I want to.*

As I drop to one knee, I pull the box out of my pocket and flick it open. Holding it up for her to see the diamond ring, I reach down deep for a few more words.

"You didn't steal any honey from Gramps and you didn't get my tongue that day with the peach pie like I wanted to give it, but you got something better both times, and again years later when you came back to Dallas. You stole my frigging heart, woman. So, will you marry me, already? Because I'm fresh out of romantic crap to say. I promise to cherish you till my dying day."

Her eyes are blue moons as she puts a trembling hand over her mouth.

My heart pounds in the silence where every second feels like a century.

"Oh. My. God, Quinn, I...I'd hoped and dreamed, but never expected this, so soon, I—" She drops to her knees in front of me and throws her arms around my neck. "Yes! Of course, I'll marry you! I've only loved you my entire life. Let's do forever."

At some point between the whirlwind of sticky, teary-eyed kisses she tackles me with, I manage to slip the ring on her finger. We also eat some of the goodies Granny made, pop the champagne, and dance to the music, laughing till it hurts.

It doesn't take long before we can't keep our hands off each other.

And now, knowing we'll be man and wife, there's zero reason to.

No need for clothes, either.

Good thing I'd planned on this part, too.

Grabbing the thick quilt off the shelf, I throw it over the floor as we shed our

clothes.

Naked, looking more beautiful than ever with the tiny lights painting her skin, Tory runs her hands over my chest, digging her nails into my skin with a sweetness that makes me suck in air.

“You thought of everything,” she whispers. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I tried.” I kiss her, running my tongue along the seam of her mouth slowly, teasing her lips apart. Our lips dance as seductively as our bodies did only minutes ago.

Swallowing a growl, I stop the kiss and pull her down on the quilt beside me, folding my arms around her with a screaming desire to never, ever let go.

“I love you like mad, woman. Keep me crazy.”

Smiling, she presses my shoulders with both hands until I’m lying down. Then she straddles me with her peach-perfect hips I want to lose myself in forever.

“I love you, Quinn, more than anything.”

Grasping hold of her ass as she aligns her sweet, wet silk over my cock, we lock eyes and I watch her take everything, sinking deep inside her.

The moment the head of my dick fills her, pleasure rips through me.

Tory’s eyes flutter closed with a moan while she slowly moves down, finding her place on my shaft.

She rolls her hips slowly and sensually, and damn—I’ll never, ever get sick of this.

Claiming her with a fury in my pulse so hot it makes every last bit of me throb.

“I love the way you fill me,” she says with a soft moan, then lifts, gliding up the length of my cock until it slips out of her pussy before engulfing it again.

It’s enough to drive me crazy, but if I’m gone, I want to be her happy lunatic.

“Lucky you, Peach. I love filling you up,” I say, reaching down and finding her clit.

She leans her head back and whimpers as I tease her, showing her teeth.

“That’s it, darlin’. Let it go.”

She gasps and her eyes flicker open. “You keep that up, and...and I won’t last long.”

“Then don’t. Come all night for me. Come till you can’t.”

With another slurred whine of bliss, she rides me faster, *faster*.

Drunk on her pussy, I focus on her pleasure, holding back my own, driving up deep and hard as she loses control and the frenzy overtakes us.

When her orgasm hits, I don’t stop for a second, turning every thrust into a full body wave.

She gasps.

She twitches.

She clutches my arms as the raging momentum takes her into a second convulsing release.

The heat in my balls, my blood, my soul becomes unbearable.

We're both gasping for oxygen when I can't hold back, when a groan rips out of me, barely ahead of the torrent I'll empty into her, planting my seed deep.

My own climax hits like an avalanche. It's massive, intense, enveloping my whole body in pure white-hot pleasure.

I keep thrusting, fighting it till the end, dragging out every last electric spasm.

She drops to my chest, heaving and shuddering.

I wrap my arms around her, lacing my fingers through her auburn hair, holding her tight against my chest, loving her with my all, my best, and now my forever.



## GOAT OURSELVES A PARTY (TORY)



**S**ure, it's an old cliché to call a girl's wedding the happiest day of her life. For me, it's nothing but the truth.

I've been pinching myself all day, making sure I'm not dreaming. When we're an hour from the magic moment and I still haven't woken up in my bed back in Chicago to drag myself to Jean-Paul's studio...holy crap.

No dream. It's happening. Like really and truly.

I'm about to marry Quinn Faulkner. The love of my life. The boy who was bound to be my forever from day zero.

I've been on cloud nine ever since he'd asked me and we'd set a date weeks ago.

If I'd had my way, we'd already be married. But I knew I couldn't cheat my mother out of helping plan her only daughter's wedding, so I let her whip through every last microscopic detail to her heart's content.

At least I'd had veto power, and I said hell no right away to having it anywhere but Dallas.

She'd also started out by insisting on a long engagement, which I also shot down.

Once I'd convinced her that six weeks was the most I was willing to wait—all we had before the holidays would be right around the corner—she'd come around.

Literally. She'd shown up in Dallas over a month ago, and she's been crashing here ever since.

Incredibly, it's been nice having her around.

I'm sure Granny doesn't agree, having to put up with Mother in her newly remodeled house, but as far as I know, they're getting along with a truce for my sake.

If Mother hadn't flat-out refused to ride the tandem bike, they might've rebooted their whole relationship.

Oh, well.

There's a limit on miracles.

Quinn's done a decent job of winning her over, at least.

Hardly surprising.

He's just that wonderful. I'd be lying if I said that learning how wealthy Quinn's investments have made him over the years wasn't part of the reason she's warming up to him.

But I can live with that. Some things, you just can't change.

Quinn won't either, and today, that's what matters most.

As with everything else, nothing is too much when it comes to Mother.

My dress is absolutely gorgeous. A long flowing white gown made of silk and lace.

The little country church is overflowing with fall flowers, it looks like a florist's wildest dream. Grace spared no time or expense, and the little wooden plane Bella and Drake modified from a North Earhart Oil sign is too perfect.

*Fly high. Love higher, Quinn and Tory*, it says, words painted on the frame lovingly by Bella herself.

Who's actually standing with me now, right next to Grace, the two best bridesmaids in the world. Ridge, Grady, and Drake mirror them perfectly as groomsmen.

"Almost time, honey," Mother says as she enters the dressing room. "Are you nervous?"

"I'm too happy to be nervous."

She adjusts a curl hanging on the side of my face. "You really love him, don't you?"

"With all my heart." No longer afraid to admit anything, I add, "I have since I was a kid, the very first day we met. And that day I tumbled into the pie...let's just say there was no going back."

She smiles softly. "That's what your grandmother says, too. I refused to believe it for years, thought it was just that awful woman trying to raise my blood pressure but...I was wrong, Tory. And I was wrong for ever thinking he wasn't good enough."

A wave of empathy fills me. I reach behind my shoulder and clasp her hand.

"I'm sorry if I disappointed you."

Mother frowns. "Disappointed me?"

"I know you'd rather have me in Chicago, dancing the ballet, sucking up to Jean-Paul, but I truly am happy here, Mom. So very happy."

She pats my face. “Perish the thought, darling. I’m happy you’re happy. All I ever wanted for you.”

“But wouldn’t you rather see me on Broadway?”

“No. I’d rather see you living your life and enjoying it. I realize now that I was selfish. I got a bit carried away in the scramble to help you catch your dreams—and part of me hoped you’d catch mine. You’ll understand someday when you have kids.”

I let out a soft, thoughtful sigh. *Will I?*

“You’ll want them to have everything. To succeed. To excel,” she continues. “That’s what I’ve always wanted for you. I just got confused by what I wanted and what you wanted. I know that now, and I’m sorry for what I put you through. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

I’m stunned, but also impressed by her honesty.

Kissing her cheek, I say, “Of course. I just hope I can give my kids a childhood as wonderful as mine. I’ll always appreciate everything you did, the money you spent to try and make me happy. It didn’t get me to Broadway, but it’s made me the person I am. Thank you.”

“Oh, dear, now you’re making me cry! Don’t you dare make my mascara run.”

I hand her a tissue. “You still look great.”

“Yes, she does,” Dad says, walking into the room. “In fact, I believe I’m looking at the two most beautiful women in the world.” He walks over, kisses us both on the cheek, and then says, “You’re on, sweetheart. Showtime.”

Happiness fills me as I take the bouquet of flowers my mother hands me and then grasp my father’s arm. “I’m so ready.”



MOMENTS LATER, as Dad walks me down the aisle to Quinn, I think I’m about to explode.

I didn’t know it was possible to be this happy.

My almost-husband was already the hottest man of the century, but now he looks atrociously *stunning* in his black tux and a wicked, sly grin that just pops the second he sees me.

Holy crap. Am I hyperventilating?

I’m about to be Mrs. Quinn Faulkner.

*Tory Faulkner.*

For the first time in my life, I’ll have *one* last name!

Reason to celebrate.

But first, I'll make sure I take everything in, and remember every waking moment of this ceremony for the rest of my life.

The vows we whisper, the way he looks at me with longing in those fierce green eyes, the all-consuming *God-I-love-you* kiss in front of all our guests...

No other word fits besides *magical*.

Unfortunately, the real moment no one will ever forget happens after the ceremony.

Smiling at each other, hand in hand, Quinn and I walk out of the church proudly. People line the sidewalk, clapping as we walk toward the limo—another fun thing Mother insisted on—that will take us to the hotel for the reception.

We're about to make a perfectly pretty exit for the cameras when, seemingly out of nowhere, a black goat, bleating loudly, breaks through the line of people.

A split second later, Owl comes barreling through the crowd, barking his head off.

People shout and scatter, but that doesn't stop the animals.

"Son of a biscuit eater!" Granny yells as she does a full whirl that'd put any of my best performances to shame—and flies right into Robert Duncan's arms.

Hellboy's hooves click on the concrete sidewalk as he gallops toward me with Owl on his heels.

Before either of us can react, Hellboy snatches the bouquet of flowers right out of my hands and goes running around the limo.

Owl pauses just long enough to look at me with mournful eyes, as if to say, '*Sorry, I tried to keep him home.*'

Then he continues on a wild tear after Hellboy, herding him back in the direction from which they came.

"Guess somebody got pissed we forgot his invitation," Quinn says, trying to make sense of it.

The crowd erupts with laughter as everyone watches Owl chase Hellboy, who's still carrying my bouquet in his mouth, away from the church. Uncle Dean's farm is at least a good mile away.

"I just want to know how they timed it so perfectly," Dad says with a smile. "Wouldn't be Dallas without a few surprises."

"Right?" Uncle Dean says, elbowing him in the side. "Hey, you think we could get the footage to go viral? Everybody loves animals. We could make a fortune off that craziness."

Quinn and I both look at each other, laughing, and slide into the car.

A sign our married life won't have a dull moment, if there ever was one.

Once we're tucked in the back seat, he kisses me, then pulls an envelope out of his pocket and hands it to me.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Early wedding present. Open it."

Too curious not to, I tear it open and pull out the slip of paper. Reading the first line, my heart swells. I have to blink back tears as I look up at him. "Yearly VIP seats...to the New York City Ballet?"

"Your ma said it was the most prestigious."

"It is, but this letter says it's for two VIP seats."

"I've never seen a ballet, but this was me thinking ahead." He glances at the letter. "This way, we're guaranteed some time alone—minus any goats or dogs or future kids—at least a couple times a year."

My heart does a freaking cartwheel as I kiss him three more times, one after the next.

"*I. Love. You.*" I whisper, loving his foxy smile. Honestly, I never understood 'foxy' before, but Quinn Faulkner definitely fits with sly sexiness incarnate.

"I know," he replies before kissing me again like he has something to prove.

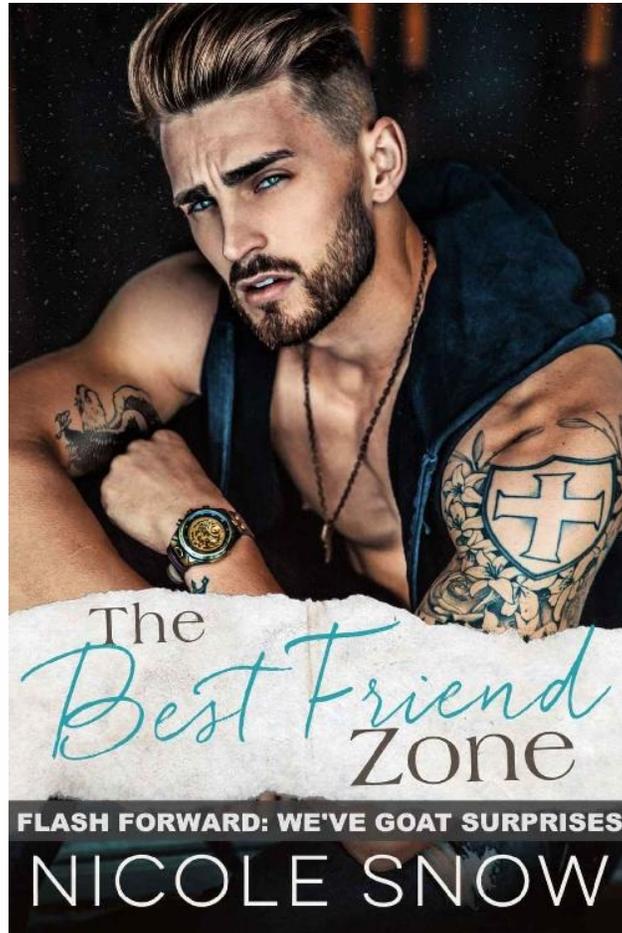
Maybe he does.

His lips, teeth, and tongue show me exactly how much the man I just hitched adores me—and why we were always destined to shatter the best friend zone.



**THANKS FOR READING *The Best Friend Zone!* Look for more *Knights of Dallas* coming soon.**

Hankering for more of Faulk and Tory after the friend zone is just a memory?



Take a look at their lives one year into marriage in [this special flash forward short story](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/88bdkfkzn4). - <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/88bdkfkzn4>

Then read on for a preview of another stunning Dallas love story, The Romeo Arrangement with Ridge and Grace!

## THE ROMEO ARRANGEMENT PREVIEW

### No Place to Crash (Grace)

“Careful, Gracie. This snow’s getting to be too much,” Dad growls, his eyes flicking across the road.

“Just a little longer. There has to be something up ahead.” I bite my lip, hoping to every star above that I’m right.

And it’s hard to hope when the stars are walled off behind the dense, angry clouds intent on burying us for the last hundred miles.

Oh, I’ve got all the fire under my ass a girl could ever need, but I’ll tell you one thing—I’d *kill* for a touch of real fire right now.

I feel a mad affection for every human being who ever shivered, scowled up at the sky, and said *winter, bite me*.

If only winter was the end of my worries.

The loud, ragged cough coming from my father in the passenger seat has me more nervous than the heavy snow drifting across the highway in blustery white sheets. It’s been snowing for hours.

This old truck, which had seen better days long before we left Wisconsin, has already been working overtime to pull the horse trailer up and down the rolling hills.

I’m keeping the speed low so I can try to avoid any mishaps. They’re all too likely with the sort of luck we’ve had on our journey thus far. We must’ve lost a good hour back in Minnesota, straining to change a flat.

Every time I glance at the old Ford’s dashboard, I’m expecting to see red.

A check engine light. Low oil pressure. Battery, alternator, brakes, another broken thingamajig.

Nothing would surprise me.

Still, despite being rusted up and dented, no thanks to my teenage driving skills years ago, the truck soldiers on. It's almost like family, an old workhorse with the air of an immortal.

Only, the signs of aging are as impossible to ignore as its scabs of rust.

I know it's a cheap metaphor for my father, who hacks up another coughing fit next to me.

Ask me how much I care about metaphors right now.

The once robust Nelson Sellers, who used to practically juggle hay bales, has shrunk the past few months. It's not just his weight and musculature.

He slouches, even when sitting, something he always used to get after me for as a kid.

Dad's demeanor has changed, his energy flatlining as his body limps along. His once coppery-brown hair is dull silver, and that fiery shine in his blue eyes that made him Dad is just...gone.

All depressing signs of the crushing weight we've shared lately.

But deep down, he's still a Sellers. He won't stop, and neither will I.

As long as this old Ford trudges on, so will we, all the way to Montana.

Same with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern—aka Rosie and Stern—the two horses riding in the trailer behind us in my rearview mirror. I'm not sure who loves them more, Dad or me.

They were his pride and joy once, and my best friends growing up. Practically the only friends I'd had when we'd left the city for the small farm north of Milwaukee to raise pumpkins.

Yes, *pumpkins*.

Feels like an eternity ago now. I'd finished high school while living on the farm, moved out, went to college for interior design, and dreamed of covering pretty places in prettier ideas.

Sadly, pretty anything hasn't been in the cards for a long time.

I watched too many dreams get demolished on that farm. And then one day, when there was nothing left but smoldering ruins, we threw together our things and hit the road while we still could.

Someday, I'll have my freaking slice of pretty.

Even if it feels like someday might as well be in the next century with this dark, deserted road and white dunes that could swallow a person whole crowding every mile.

"Gracie," Dad says, breathing heavy. "It's getting damn near impassable. You're gonna have an accident. Pull over."

"I can't just stop here, Dad. There's nowhere to park." Not without potentially trapping the truck in an icy grave, and us with it. Believe me, I would

if I could. Even in my boots, my toes are frozen nubs because the heater can't keep up with the cold air invading the cab. "I can't make out a shoulder, let alone how deep the ditches are."

It's the truth, but I don't need to say it.

Dad's eyes aren't that bad.

He can see the snow-covered road and the huge flakes swirling around in the beams of our headlights before splattering against the windshield and being swept away by frantic wipers.

"We'll pull over as soon as I find a hint of civilization," I tell him, scratching my cheek.

"There has to be a town somewhere. I checked the map a hundred miles back; I know I saw something," he grumbles.

"Only *you* still read off of a paper atlas. Every phone has GPS that works most of the time, even when the service sucks." I give him a teasing smile, but it fades just as fast when I see the look on his face.

I can tell how he's trying to hold in another cough. It's there behind the slight sideways quirk of his lips.

My heart hurts for him, and worry sours my stomach.

Congestive heart failure.

*Probable.*

That's what the emergency room doc said last week. We didn't get a chance to stick around for the follow-up with the cardiologist. Honestly, his ticker running out is the whole reason we're in God Forsaken Nowhere, North Dakota.

As soon as we got the bad news, I said we had to go.

Leave.

Before it's too late for him to find a little peace.

I'm still praying it isn't. Nobody deserves to spend their last days on earth being hunted.

"Can't believe how long this is taking," he says, reaching up to wipe at his side of the windshield. "There has to be a pit stop up ahead, a gas station...*something*."

"You'd think so," I say, hoping to lighten the mood. "But I'm pretty sure there are more oil drills than people out in these parts."

"Yeah, yeah. I heard all about the oil boom out here a few years back. Hell of an industry to be in," he answers dryly, but with a hint of a smile. "Oil crews gotta eat, though. That means a town somewhere in this mess."

"It's coming," I say. "And then we'll stop for an overdue breather."

"Not too long," he reminds me, tapping a finger against his seat belt. "Just enough to take a leak and give Noelle a call. You said she left a few messages?"

“Right. I just haven’t had time to—”

Those words stop short in my mouth when I notice an odd purple flashing light in the swirling wintry darkness beyond the headlights.

My eyes narrow to a squint.

It’s almost like the purple light winks right back at me the harder I stare, holding the truck in what I hope is still our lane.

Weird.

I haven’t seen a patch of clear pavement or another vehicle for miles, and I’m almost wondering if I’m seeing things. Hallucinating out of desperation.

Nope.

Purple lights. Still there. Still pulsing.

I’m hoping it’s a business, not just some kind of derelict radio tower or utility site. My hands are cramped from white-knuckling the steering wheel for what’s felt like hours.

The tension in my shoulders and neck makes my muscles burn. It hurts to turn my head enough to glance at Dad again.

“You see that?” he asks. “That purple light?”

“Sure do. Glad it’s not just me.”

Coming closer now, I see the flashing light belongs to a sign. A tall one hoisted high in the sky. Between the snow and the distance, I can’t see anything below the sign, yet.

An old motel, maybe, but it could be something else, too.

“It looks like...a cat?” I whisper, trying to make sense of the round face outlined in bright royal purple with what looks like two pointy ears. “Definitely a cat. Meow.”

Now I can see the whiskers, the cartoonish grin, one eye winking as the sign flicks back and forth.

“Thank God. Hope it’s not just a snowmobile dealer,” Dad mutters.

I get the reference to a big brand in winter gear, but I’m pretty sure their logo doesn’t look anything like this. That winking face is actually kinda ridiculous, and by far the happiest thing I’ve seen all night.

“I think we’re in luck,” I say, smiling.

We’re close enough to read the name stenciled in curly lit letters under the cat’s face.

*The Purple Bobcat, it reads. Good eats. Beer. Fun.*

“Looks like a dive,” Dad says as the building comes into view. “Whatever, it’ll do.”

I nod, holding my breath for signs of vehicles in the lot. I don’t want to get my hopes up unless it’s still open.

The bar itself is a one-story wooden building painted bright purple. The owner must be a huge Prince fan or just hellbent on grabbing attention out here in the sticks.

Coming closer, the windows are lit up bright with beer signs. Looks like a few trucks parked in front of the building.

I exhale that breath I've been holding.

It may not be much, but right now a parking lot and a few walls feel like a luxury resort.

"It's still open. Hope you're hungry," I say, easing my foot off the gas.

I refrain from tapping the brakes. It's hard to determine just how much ice is packed under the snow.

The last thing I need is to send the trailer fishtailing across the lot and smack right into some good old boy's favorite pickup.

Two little blue reflectors sticking out above the snow tell me where the driveway is. I slowly steer the truck between the reflectors and pull up along what I'm assuming is the edge of the parking area where there's room to park without boxing in other vehicles. Plenty of room to make an easy turn when it's time to leave, too.

"Don't forget your hat," I remind Dad as I shut off the truck and stow the keys in my purse. "Go on ahead of me; it's freezing out here. I'll check on Rosie and Stern, then meet you inside."

Dad grumbles under his breath.

Something about being perfectly capable of looking after himself, but he puts on his wool-brimmed hat to humor me. I smile as he pulls the side flaps down over his ears, giving me a firm look that says *happy?* before opening his door.

I dig around on my lap and find my green-and-gold stocking cap, and then tug on my thick, fur-lined, made-in-Duluth Chopper mittens. The wind coming in through Dad's passenger door is so bitter it rips my breath away.

When I open my door, the cold makes me shiver from head to toe.

"Winter, bite me," I say, mostly to myself because I don't think Jack Frost is listening. And if he is, well, the sweeping chill he flings in my face is worse than a middle finger.

Tucking my chin into the collar of my coat, I pull the fur-lined hood tighter around my face to help block the wind. I hate every single big fat snowflake stinging my cheeks and catching on my eyelashes as I waddle past the truck in my boots to the trailer.

Thankfully, it only takes a few minutes to check on the horses. They must be freezing, but they aren't showing any signs of distress from the ride or bad weather. I feed them a couple carrots they wolf down like starving beasts before

my own stomach growls.

If my lucky streak continues tonight, maybe this place will have something that isn't oozing grease. A girl can hope. It'd be nice to keep my blood sugar levels in the happy range where I'm not hankering to chew my own arm off.

By the time I enter the bar, I'm ready to call the weather a winner.

I'm chilled to the bone. The dense snow packed on my boots makes my feet feel like they're twenty pounds heavier. It's a workout as I go stomping through the door.

The Purple Bobcat isn't nearly so colorful inside.

Too bad.

It's smaller than it looked on the outside, dark and dingy, but fairly clean. No ripped-up seats or rickety tables or cracked tile floors. No ugly crowd of guys missing teeth or gals with their boobs hanging out of their shirts over pool tables, either.

The wood-paneled walls are covered with metal signs advertising retro beers and off-color jokes. Dad's found a table where he's parked himself to look over a menu.

One of the only occupied tables tonight, it seems.

If this place has regulars, or newcomers, or even long-haul truckers looking for a nightcap and a side of bawdy conversation, the storm has kept them all away.

Who could blame them in this blizzard?

There's an older man and woman in a booth near the frosty windows, picking at what looks like plates of gyros and fries. The table Dad chose is in the center of the room, surrounded by other empty ones.

At the bar, I count four guys on stools. A couple big blue-collar guys in stained coveralls—oil workers, maybe—plus two tall figures at the far end with several seats between them and the other men.

The maybe-oil-workers are quiet, focused on their tall beers, but the two on the opposite end are talking loudly.

Well, one of them is.

He's tall. Built. Ginormous. Loud.

A tiger of a man stuffed in a red-and-black flannel shirt. I'm a little embarrassed when he whips around with a smile meant for the bartender.

Maybe he sensed the weirdo staring, and with said weirdo being me, looking like Jack Frost just kicked my butt up and down the playground, I...

I can't hold it against him for wondering who the miserable, crazy lady is who just dragged herself in from the cold like a wet cat.

*Am I still staring?*

Maybe.

Because maybe I'm suddenly feeling a whole lot warmer taking in the handsome face perched on his wide shoulders, a jaw so defined it was cut by a mad sculptor, over six feet of defiant muscle that looks like it's ready to burst right out of that flannel corral barely holding it.

Maybe he's sporting *just the right* sandy-dark stubble to sear a woman's skin, like this otherworldly, beautiful freak who just leaped out of a fashion ad.

Oh my God.

Um, and maybe he's staring right back. Turning the most obscene blue-eyed lightning I've ever been struck with on my bewildered face.

It's a look that bites.

A gaze that's too intense, too assessing, too ready to reach down inside me and dredge up feelings I have zero time for and even less energy to give.

It's a fight to tear my eyes away. I stomp my boots on the rubber mat out front again, taking my sweet time, saying a quick prayer that the next time I look up, the tiger will have moved on to other things.

**[Want to read more? Get The Romeo Arrangement HERE.](#)**

## ABOUT NICOLE SNOW

Nicole Snow is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She found her love of writing by hashing out love scenes on lunch breaks and plotting her great escape from boardrooms. Her work roared onto the indie romance scene in 2014 with her Grizzlies MC series.

Since then Snow aims for the very best in growly, heart-of-gold alpha heroes, unbelievable suspense, and swoon storms aplenty.

Already hooked on her stuff? [Sign up for her newsletter here](#) for exclusive offers and more from your favorite characters!

Follow her on [Bookbub here for new release updates](#).

Her website is [nicolesnowbooks.com](http://nicolesnowbooks.com)

Got a question or comment on her work? Reach her anytime at [nicole@nicolesnowbooks.com](mailto:nicole@nicolesnowbooks.com)

Thanks for reading. And please remember to leave an honest review! Nothing helps an author more.

## **MORE BOOKS BY NICOLE**

### **Knights of Dallas Books**

[The Romeo Arrangement](#)

[Accidental Knight](#) (Companion book)\*

### **Heroes of Heart's Edge Books**

[No Perfect Hero](#)

[No Good Doctor](#)

[No Broken Beast](#)

[No Damaged Goods](#)

[No Fair Lady](#)

[No White Knight](#)

### **Marriage Mistake Standalone Books**

[Accidental Hero](#)

[Accidental Romeo](#)

[Accidental Protector](#)

[Accidental Knight](#)

[Accidental Rebel](#)

[Accidental Shield](#)

### **Standalone Novels**

[Cinderella Undone](#)

[Man Enough](#)

[Surprise Daddy](#)

[Prince With Benefits](#)

[Marry Me Again](#)

[Love Scars](#)

[Recklessly His](#)

[Stepbrother UnSEALed](#)

[Stepbrother Charming](#)

### **Enguard Protectors Books**

[Still Not Over You](#)

[Still Not Into You](#)

[Still Not Yours](#)

[Still Not Love](#)

**Baby Fever Books**

[Baby Fever Bride](#)

[Baby Fever Promise](#)

[Baby Fever Secrets](#)

**Only Pretend Books**

[Fiance on Paper](#)

[One Night Bride](#)

**Grizzlies MC Books**

[Outlaw's Kiss](#)

[Outlaw's Obsession](#)

[Outlaw's Bride](#)

[Outlaw's Vow](#)

**Deadly Pistols MC Books**

[Never Love an Outlaw](#)

[Never Kiss an Outlaw](#)

[Never Have an Outlaw's Baby](#)

[Never Wed an Outlaw](#)

**Prairie Devils MC Books**

[Outlaw Kind of Love](#)

[Nomad Kind of Love](#)

[Savage Kind of Love](#)

[Wicked Kind of Love](#)

[Bitter Kind of Love](#)