

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

# MERRY EVER AFTER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TESSA  
BAILEY



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**MERRY  
EVER  
AFTER**

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[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



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# Chapter One

## EVIE

**T**he farmer is back.

I can hear him fumbling and cursing in the dressing room of my shop. The dirty shoelaces of his muddy work boots peek out from beneath the red velvet curtain, making me sigh. I'll have to break out the Swiffer mop as soon as he leaves. But the mess he's making isn't my main concern. I only want to know if he found anything that fits.

Abruptly, the farmer straightens, the back of his head becoming visible over the top of the curtain. Our eyes meet briefly in the mirror, which is outlined in blinking white Christmas lights, and embarrassment streaks through my chest at having been caught watching him. My gaze zips back down to the tuxedo-dress design I'm sketching, and I continue to shade beneath the collar.

There's a pause between the endless stream of holiday music emanating from the old stereo before "Last Christmas" by Wham! takes over for Elvis. The songs seem so out of place because it isn't even cold outside, the way it would be back in Chicago by now. Surely it can't be December 22? Yet the streetlamps just beyond the windows are decorated with big tinsel bells, and come evening, the big fir tree in the town square will light up with multicolored vintage bulbs. Christmas in Texas just hits different, I guess.

When I hear a disappointed grunt from inside the dressing room, my shoulders slump. Not a single winner in that entire pile of secondhand jeans he carried in there with him ten minutes ago?

Moments later, when that weathered hand yanks back the curtain and the farmer emerges with a scowl, I'm reminded why he can never find anything in the little corner thrift shop that fits. He's biblically huge.

At *least* six feet six inches of brute force. Broad and stacked. Filthy from farmwork. Mean looking. A grizzly bear wouldn't cross his path.

And he's blushing to the tips of his ears.

As the farmer approaches the register, he carries a single pair of jeans in his hand, the rest of them left neatly stacked behind him in the dressing room. The sound of him clearing his throat is like a crack of thunder and causes me to drop my pencil, deepening the red flush that encompasses the sides of his bristled face.

Soulful brown eyes meet mine from way above. Like, I actually have to tip my head back to make eye contact, and when I do? There's a worrying little twitch just below my belly button, followed by a slow inundation of heat, beginning at the top of my spine and finishing with a singe of my nerve endings. All of them. What *was* that?

A moment's hesitation passes before he sets the jeans on the counter, nudging them forward. "These didn't fit, but I ripped the damn things trying to get them off." He dips his chin. "I'll be paying for them."

Guess that explains the blush. "That isn't necessary."

"Tell me how much, please."

They couldn't be more ancient. Frayed and faded and patched. "Five."

He hides his skepticism and sets a twenty on the counter. "The rest is for the mess, ma'am. I do apologize."

Just like the last three times the farmer has attempted to find jeans that fit in the thrift shop where I work, in the seconds right before he leaves, he looks at me as if he wants to say something. Maybe ask my name. Maybe ask for my number.

Part of me wishes he would.

The rest of me hopes he doesn't, because I would have to decline.

The five-month-old baby sleeping in the tiny back office ensures I don't have time to date. I'm lucky they let me bring my son to work. Lucky the elderly couple who owns the shop allows me an entire rack to display my upcycled designs and keep the cash it generates. That they're lenient with me if something comes up with Sonny, like a pediatrician appointment or a cold. This isn't the kind of town that takes chances on a blow-in from the city—so yeah, I'm lucky.

Hoping for anything more would be selfish.



I'm not very smart about choosing men, anyway. The farmer could have a mean streak or mommy issues. A pet boa constrictor roaming freely about his house. Perhaps he chats about agriculture with a mannequin propped up in his kitchen. Who knows.

Bottom line, I wouldn't give him my number.

For some reason, though, when he fixes his stare on the ground, sighs, and turns to leave, I find myself blurting, "You know, I could *make* you some jeans. Custom."

His boots scrape to a stop, and he looks back at me through narrowed eyes. "That sounds like a fuss."

"It wouldn't be. I like making clothes." I make an absent gesture toward my very own rack of designs, and I immediately wish I hadn't. It comes off like a boast when I meant to be reassuring. Now I'm the one with red ears. "That is to say, I enjoy making new clothes out of old ones."

"Where did you come from?" he asks from left field, his voice so deep and resonant, it should be singing an old hymn from the back row of a church.

"What?"

He gives a brief, exasperated headshake, obviously directed at himself. "I know everyone in this town, but I don't know you. One day"—he nods at the counter—"you were just standing there."

"Why don't you start by asking me my name?" I tease gently.

*Careful, that came close to flirting.*

And obviously, this man has not been the recipient of many flirtatious advances. He's looking at me like maybe he misheard me, though his giant chest is dipping and rising faster than before. "What is it? Please. If you don't mind me asking."

No mean streak in this guy, unless he hides it very well. "I'm Evie," I say, extending my hand across the counter for a shake. "Evie Crowe."

He studies my hand as he takes it in his astronomically larger one. A polar bear holding a candy cane. "Luke Ward."

I'm caught quite off guard by the sensation of work-roughened hands and the friction they create on my soft palms. What would they feel like taking tight hold of my butt, rocking me up and back? Lord, I've been lonely for so long, I'd settle for him scratching behind my ears. I'd probably thump my leg like a cocker spaniel.

"It's nice to formally meet you, Luke."

"Evie," he says, testing the word. Humming afterward. He's still holding my hand, but I don't think he realizes it. "Like I said, I don't want a fuss."

"Zero fuss, I swear. But I'd have to take your measurements."

"Oh. No." Finally, he releases my hand and begins walking backward toward the entrance, those ears fire-engine red again. "No, I don't think so."

"It's very straightforward. I'd only need a minute."

"Maybe if some bigger jeans come in, you could just set them aside for me."

"I don't foresee that happening, Luke. You're . . ." I flap a hand around to indicate him. "You're one of a kind."

"I'm always thinking the same thing about you."

That gusting confession lands like a piano on a sidewalk, though the crash doesn't make a sound. He's not making a pass at me. I don't think he meant to say it at all. For some strange reason, that makes his words all the more effective. Truthful. I'm shivering beneath my shirtdress, and oh God, my eyes feel ever so slightly damp? Kindness hits me really hard these days, even if his words do go beyond simple benevolence.

I think he . . . likes me. That was his way of letting me know.

"Thank you," I manage, not sure what to say or do next.

My son takes that indecision out of my hands when he starts to cry from inside the Pack 'n Play where he's sleeping in the rear office.

Luke's eyes widen as if to ask *Is that yours?*

I lift my chin in confirmation.

His expression darkens, and he's out the door before Sonny's next wail.

"Apparently, drifter-single mothers aren't his type," I murmur to my son a minute later while cradling him in my arms, walking him back and forth in front of the register to calm him. "His loss, isn't it, kid?"

I refuse to acknowledge how much Luke's reaction has let me down.

Silly. So silly. I only learned his name ten minutes ago.

And I don't want to date. I *can't*. I don't know any babysitters, and couldn't afford one if I did. Still . . .

“You know what, Sonny? Screw the measurements. I’m going to make him the best pair of jeans in his life. He’s not going to dismiss me so easily.”

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# Chapter Two

## LUKE

**M**y mug of coffee pauses halfway to my mouth.  
What in the hell?  
It's *her*. Evie Crowe.

How did she find out where I live? As soon as I begin to wonder, I mentally scoff at myself. Finding out where the skyscraper-size farmer dwells wouldn't be difficult. Any number of town residents could have told her. Whatever method she used to get my address, she's coming up the pathway to my house now with a baby strapped to her chest and a brown bag dangling from a couple of her fingers. Let me tell you, it's a sight. Something's got her a little mad this morning, but not mad enough to step on the chickens in her path. No, even through the window, I can hear her apologizing to them as she closes the distance to my door, and that makes me feel some kind of way.

Not sure what the feeling is *called* yet.

Only that she's the only one who seems to give it to me.

A married woman. Of course I told a *married woman* she's one of a kind. I'm surprised her husband hasn't shown up with a shotgun yet to put a bullet in me. I wouldn't even blame him. If she was my wife, I'd put the fear of God into anyone who showed her interest. Especially out loud, like I did.

What's she carrying in that bag?

I can hardly focus long enough to make an educated guess, because I'm distracted by the dark-auburn swing of her hair, how the morning light sets it on fire. She has a beautiful stubborn nose and an Irish chin. A wide mouth. I'm not going to marvel over her body now that I know she's taken, but if I was . . .

Ah, Jesus, she's got nice sturdy hips.

A lot of men don't notice that type of thing, but a man my size does. She would handle me well.

And the fact that she already has a man should make me ashamed that I fucked my fist in bed this morning to thoughts of her bent over the counter of her shop, moaning while I gave it to her good and proper from behind, one hand gripping her hip, the other tangled in her hair. Yesterday, in my fantasies, I had her in the dressing room. I've had her all over town since the first day I saw her.

This infatuation needs to stop, but it only appears to be picking up steam. Case in point, my heart driving up into my throat now that she's knocking briskly on my front door.

As much as I want to see her hazel eyes up close, I hesitate to answer, on account of still being embarrassed. First, I ripped a pair of jeans, thanks to my freakishly large frame. Second, I hit on a married woman.

Excuse me for wanting to remain hidden in the shadows.

"I saw you standing in the window."

"Goddamn it," I mutter, setting down my mug of coffee. Inhaling, exhaling, and crossing to the front door. Opening it to find the most beautiful woman to ever grace this property—hell, the planet—staring up at me, a touch defiant in itty-bitty jean shorts, a Santa Claus T-shirt, and red cowboy boots. Her sleeping baby has a little patch of red on the crown of its head, and I experience a sudden welling of envy toward whoever gets to call these two his family. Maybe it's the holidays that have me wishing for . . . more out of this simple life of mine. Craving someone to celebrate Christmas Eve with tomorrow night. But deep down, I know it's not December at all. It's this woman who's got me pondering things I shouldn't. "Good morning, Evie."

"Good morning, Luke." She holds out the bag. "Your jeans."

A bus crashes into my chest. "What?"

"Go try them on, please. If they need adjustments, I'll bring them back to the store."

I can't think of a single thing to say. This woman not only designed jeans big enough for my too-big body, but she also walked here to deliver them with a baby in tow.

It's . . . amazing. Touching. Surprising.

It's unacceptable, is what it is.

"I told you not to fuss," I try to growl, but I sound winded instead. I *am*. She's knocked the breath out of me. As the oldest of four siblings, I'm the one who goes out of my way to make sure everyone has what they need. I've never had anyone do the same for me. The gesture makes me feel unsettled, like I don't deserve such a gift.

"Why do you have such a fixation on fussing?"

"I don't like it."

"That much is clear."

"I haven't done anything for *you*—" I cut myself off, feeling extremely foolish. "I'm sorry, let me get some money."

"I don't want it." She still has that temper up. Why? Did her husband piss her off? Because I'd be more than happy to go sort him out . . . "You trying them on and having them fit will be payment enough. We'll call it an early Christmas present."

A discomfiting thought occurs to me. "You don't want me to come back to the store anymore. Is that it?" I hold up the bag. "That's why you did this."

Her hazel eyes soften slightly. "What? No." The temper reengages. "I just wanted to show you what I'm capable of. A single mother made those jeans, okay? The fact that I made them in between feedings and naps and work and bath time is what makes me one of a kind. Not my tits. Got it?"

*Single mother.*

She's a single mother.

And I'm . . . an unbelievable idiot.

I made an incorrect assumption based on my own upbringing and preconceived notions about what a family consists of . . . and damn, guilt is worming its way through my gut. But what I don't understand is her implication that I somehow think she's less impressive—or simply *less*—because she's unmarried with a child. "Why don't you explain why you're pissed off at me so we can straighten it out?"

"You dismissed me when you heard Sonny crying. I saw it. And I shouldn't even care. We don't *know* each other. I guess . . ." She adjusted the sling around her shoulders, and I check the urge to help carry the weight. To . . . hold the baby. Do *something*. "Maybe you didn't mean it,



but I've gotten that look a lot in the last five months and just had to do something about it. For me."

"I didn't dismiss you, Evie. When I heard the baby crying, I assumed you were married." She's not. *She's not married*. What the hell am I going to do about that? "I'd just got finished telling you . . . well, what I said. And I walked away because that's the right thing to do when someone is attached."

She loses her head of steam while absorbing that. "Oh."

I raise an eyebrow.

She raises one back.

I put mine down.

Hell. This woman has me tied up in all kinds of fucking knots this morning. The first time I saw her, I decided she was out of my league. The second time, I confirmed it: Yup. Way out. I haven't changed my mind, either. She's young and sexy and *good God*, she's full of fire and spirit. Talent. She loves that baby, too. I can see it in the way she cradles his head like she's trying to protect him from the world. She's nurturing on top of everything else.

A man could fall in love and stay there with this one. Stay there forever.

Something about her on my doorstep feels right. Like she was meant to show up sooner or later. What if there is a chance she could feel the same? Sure, I'm a farmer constantly covered in dirt; I have zero romance or wooing skills to speak of; and I'm a lumbering, assumption-making giant to boot. But maybe it's true what they say and there *is* someone for everybody.

I don't know. But I'll regret it for a long time if I don't try.

"If you come in, I'll try on the jeans." I replay that back and quickly clarify, my neck going hot. "I'll try them on in another room, that is."

It's kind of comical the way she leans to one side to peer into my home, as if searching for torture devices, and I wonder what she thinks of my eight-foot undecorated Christmas tree that I propped up in the corner of the living room. I cut it down and brought it home myself, just for the smell of fresh pine, but I wouldn't know where the hell to start buying shiny things to hang on it.

"Entering a stranger's home is frowned upon where I come from, but it would be nice to sit down for a minute," she says. "I realized about

halfway here that these boots are more style than substance.”

My pulse stutters. “You got a blister?”

She nods, though it’s grudging—and I’m already mentally riffling through my first aid kit. I don’t bother bandaging my own cuts and scrapes, so I have no idea what’s in there. Cobwebs, probably. “If you’re not comfortable coming in, I’ll bring a chair outside.”

A little more softening on her end.

Damn. Maybe I’m not so useless with women after all?

Or maybe it’s just this one I’ve got a knack for. I hope so.

“No,” she says slowly. “I’ll come in.”

I swallow my relief and step aside, trying not to stare at the sight of a beautiful redhead entering my house. Ordering myself to pay attention, I scrape a chair out from beneath the table. I only have two, and they’re massive. I had to make them myself out in the barn, on account of my size. She doesn’t comment on the extra-large dimensions, but she does seem slightly amused that her feet don’t touch the floor.

The baby is starting to squirm in the sling around her chest. She rocks subtly side to side, cooing to him while I locate the first aid kit in one of the kitchen cabinets. During one of my many glances at her over my shoulder, I notice her wince and straighten her spine.

“Carrying the baby all this way must have been hell on your back.” Finally, I locate the first aid kit, then set it on the counter so I can check the contents. “Do you want to lie him down on my bed?”

A small hesitation. “Maybe just for a minute or two.”

I indicate the back hallway with a nod. “It’s just through there.”

She mutters something about having lost her survival skills, but she does toe off the red boots, stand up, and carry the child to the rear of the house. As soon as she gives me her back, I see the twin red splotches of blood seeping through her socks. And I reckon that tells me a lot about this woman: she’ll bleed to make a point.

She returns a moment later, looking like her load has been lightened, and sits down once again, her gaze heating my back while I gather the supplies I need. What does she think when she looks at me? Is it possible she admires my size? Or does she simply want to gawk, like everyone else?

“You said you don’t enter strangers’ homes where you come from. Where’s that?”

“Chicago.”

A moving mental image of her in the distant city dances in my head. She’s walking through a maze of people in a crosswalk while horns blare and sirens whine. I don’t like it very much. “How did you end up here?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

A centering breath expands her chest. “I took a road trip with my mom when I was thirteen, and we stopped for lunch here. At the diner. There’d been a sign on the road boasting the world’s biggest ant statue—you know, the one on the roof of the hardware store.” She smiles and my heart beats faster. “We looked at the ant through the window of the diner while we drank milkshakes and ate fries. We named him Andy, by the way, and Mom made up this whole story about how I’d kiss Andy and he’d turn into a handsome prince, climb off the roof of the hardware store, and carry us into the sunset on his back—excuse me, *thorax*. It was silly, but . . . it was a good day after a lot of bad ones.” She doesn’t elaborate on that, and I don’t ask her to. Not yet. “Ever since I moved to town, she’s been texting me to ask if Andy has proposed yet. I send her pictures of me blowing him kisses or looking at him with googly eyes. I’m sure the hardware-store owners think I’m one nugget shy of a Happy Meal.”

A rumble kicks up in my chest.

Am I jealous of an ant statue? Christ, I think I am.

I pick up the slightly rusted blue metal box and cross the kitchen, then kneel down in front of her, glancing up in time to watch her mouth pop open, her hands flying to the edges of the seat, gripping. Have I surprised her by kneeling? How else did she think I was going to get down here to tend to her feet?

From this position, I’m close enough to see tiny peach fuzz hairs on her thighs, the subtle shift of muscle under supple skin. She has a scar on her right knee that looks like it’s from childhood, freckles scattered about. I try very hard not to look at the seam of her shorts, but I fail, my attention ticking there long enough to memorize the denim swell of her pussy, how her inner thighs are extra soft the higher they go.

What would it be like to have a woman like this welcome me between her legs?

Fucking paradise, that’s what.

“A handsome prince,” I say hoarsely, ripping open the tiny alcohol-swab package with my teeth. “Is that what you’re looking for?”

“No.” She doesn’t hiss or wince when I apply the alcohol to her wound, cleaning it, that lack of reaction telling me more about her. “I’m just focused on earning a living and taking care of my son. I’m not looking for a man at all. Or an ant.”

Shit. “You can’t always time these things. What if someone came along and started looking interesting to you?”

Evie doesn’t answer right away. She watches me apply Neosporin to two Band-Aids and put them on her blisters, smoothing the adhesive with my thumbs. Are those goose bumps popping up on her legs? Is it cold in here?

“If someone looked interesting to me,” she starts, voice husky in a way that makes my skin hot, “I guess I’d propose a casual arrangement.”

My mouth is suddenly dry. “What’s a ‘casual arrangement’?”

“You know . . .”

And then she says three words that I immediately form a love-hate relationship with.

“Friends with benefits.”

# Chapter Three

## EVIE

**I**t's a Whole Thing, having this Very Big Man kneeling at my feet, fixing my blisters.

Up close, he smells like . . . land. Wind, earth, hard leather. His skin is so weathered, it's almost like the sun has baked some of the farm's richest soil into his flesh. Even the simple task of putting Band-Aids on my heels has caused a whole riot of flexing triceps and trapezius muscles. His mouth and eyebrows are set in a line, the look of concentration and care on his face nudging something inside me that I'm not ready to have nudged.

No way.

Not happening.

"I think I should go," I whisper.

"I haven't even tried the jeans on yet."

"Oh, right." I swallow hard, ignoring the deep yen to feel his palms skimming up my thighs. "Could you?"

"Could I what?" he asks, definitely stealing a look at the fly of my jean shorts and getting distracted. Can he see me clenching through the denim?

Good *gravy*, am I attracted to this man. And not only for the physique that suggests he could lift an eighteen-wheeler but also his demeanor. Not only has he apologized for making incorrect assumptions about me—he went out of his way to make me feel safe and comfortable. Now he's on his knees, bandaging my wounds.

A man with pride who is also willing to set it aside. Now that's . . . something.

Something that could lead to something more than casual.

Uh-uh. Not happening.

“Could you try on the jeans now?”

Is that a knowing glint in his eye as he stands to his full, magnificent height? It better not be. “Sure, Evie.”

While he’s in the hallway bathroom changing, I give myself a pep talk. I’ve seen how fickle men can be. How hurtful and irresponsible. I came here for a fresh start with my son, and I’ve done that. I’ve sketched the framework of a new life, and now I’m coloring it in slowly. Romance only causes the colors to bleed, the sketch to become distorted. Or it becomes a new sketch entirely. I don’t want that. I’m not ready for that.

Except when Luke moseys out of the bathroom in jeans and no shirt, my hormones start making their own sketch. One where I find a reliable babysitter and have my way with this giant, humble farmer from time to time. Surely there would be no harm in that. When done properly and safely, sex is downright healthy!

“Evie . . . ,” he starts, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ve never had pants that fit me before. Not well, anyway. These feel like they were made for me.”

The gratitude in his tone distracts me from the high-cut muscles of his hips. “They *were* made for you.”

He nods once, starts to say something, and closes his mouth again, like he’s sort of overcome by my Christmas gift, and now I feel even worse about coming here to throw it in his face. In fact, I wish I’d made him ten pairs of jeans. Maybe I’m even going to. “Thank you,” he says finally. “I expect you to charge me.”

“Not this time,” I say, shaking my head. “They’re a gift.”

Not unlike the day he demanded to pay five dollars for the jeans he ripped, I glimpse a stubborn streak in the farmer. I don’t find it off-putting, though. Not when it seems to stem from a need to repay kindness. I find that . . . appealing. Too appealing.

“I’m afraid I can’t accept a gift without reciprocating,” he says. “I practically raised my brothers and sisters, all while preparing to take over this farm from my parents. I understand giving, not taking.”

I stand up and cross the room, circling around Luke’s back, tugging the waistband in spots to check the fit. “You can’t even accept a pair of jeans?”

“No.”



I'm standing in front of him now, close enough to feel the heat of his thick torso, his breath on the crown of my head.

"And I'm warning you, if you don't take my money, I'm going to return the favor a different way. You won't see it coming."

"Oooh, scary," I say, tipping my head back and faking a shiver. Although, that shiver becomes real and warm when I catch him staring at my mouth like it's chocolate gelato. "I guess I just have to take my chances, Luke Ward."

His throat works. "Do you want to be kissed, or am I dreaming?"

I allow my breasts to meet his chest, and he breaks off a sound. "Try it and find out."

"Fuck."

He hasn't even finished breathing the word like an oath before his mouth latches on to mine and I'm stumbling back over the sensual impact of his need. It's heavy, this weight he's been carrying. I sense that immediately, and it turns me on because I'm needy, too, and while my head is spinning from the first lap of his tongue against mine, I can't lie to myself. This neediness started the first time he came into the thrift shop and nothing fit.

"God, you're so beautiful. *God.*" The fingers of his right hand tunnel through my hair, then continue, frantic, down my back, drawing me close, tight. Letting me feel the growing ridge in his jeans. "I like the look of you in my house, Evie."

An alarm bell chimes in the back of my head. Not enough to call a halt to the delicious slant of his mouth over mine, but enough to issue a necessary warning. "I'm not interested in anything serious."

He twists a fist in the rear waistband of my jean shorts and draws me up onto my toes like that, the denim pressure against my core making me whimper. *Oh man. Oh wow.* "What are you interested in?" he asks, looking me in the eye. Tugging my waistband.

Up. Up.

"I already told you, Luke," I gasp, following his silent directive to climb, winding my legs around his hips, letting hard settle into soft, pressing, pressing, a soft exclamation tumbling out of my mouth, a curse coming from his.

"Friends with benefits is for boys," he says, backing me against his refrigerator. Planting his erection *right there* and grinding lightly, then

harder. Harder. “I ain’t no boy.”

He certainly, certainly is not. Has a man ever actually gotten me out of breath like this before? Is this what it means to be in a lather? I’m having trouble concentrating, pulse all erratic, senses snapping like Bubble Wrap. “Let’s s-say we spend adult time together once in a while . . .” My mouth falls open on a sob when he humps me three times in quick succession, rattling the appliance. “What . . . *oh* . . . what do you want to call it?”

“Fucking my woman,” he rasps into my neck. “That’s what I want to call it.”

“I wouldn’t be your woman. I’m my own woman.”

“How about this, sweetheart? If you still don’t want to be called my *woman* after I’ve given it to you down and dirty, I’ll let you call me your *friend with benefits*.”

Um . . . laughably easy. Right? I think I can manage not to call myself someone’s *woman*, like we’re in an old Western. “Deal.”

“Thank God that was easy.” His teeth latch on to my earlobe, those hips grinding me up against the fridge, and oh Mama, I might come like this. I might actually come if he keeps rolling his lower body like that. *Please. Please. Please.* “I won’t be easy, Evie. You understand what I’m telling you?”

I understood it five minutes ago. “You’re big all over.”

“Yes.” He drops his face into my neck, nuzzling it there with a drawn-out groan. “They don’t make jeans that fit me, and they don’t make many women that fit me, either.”

Judging from his tone of voice, he’s had some frustrating experiences.

Instinctively, I know it won’t be like that with us. I mean, dang, call me Slick Rick after a few kisses. I can’t even imagine how this wild chemistry will implode once we’re naked.

I want to be naked with him. Now. *Badly.*

“I will. I’m going to fit all of you,” I whisper, nipping and licking at his jaw, opening my knees wider to allow him to crowd closer. “Try me on for size.”

“Evie,” he growls, stamping his mouth down over mine—and we just begin wrestling with clothes. My shirt comes off, and he makes a desperate animal sound, licking my nipples into stiff peaks in between

hungered assaults of my lips, and I've never been more relieved I didn't wear a bra this morning. He grips my butt roughly in his hands and noisily sucks the rosy tips of my breasts, his chest heaving wildly, his pupils blocking out the chocolate brown of his eyes. A man in heat. For me. "What kind of man lets this get away?"

"I . . . don't know, I—"

"Going to get all of me inside your wet cunt, are you? Good girl." He grazes the side of my neck and jawline with his teeth. "How hard are you going to let me pump?"

*Hard as you want.*

*Wreck me forever.*

*Daddy.*

I'm poised to scream those knee-jerk responses, but I never get the chance, because Sonny starts to cry in the back bedroom. The familiar and beloved sound is like having a dagger's blade sink into my side. Over the course of the last several minutes, I totally forgot my son was asleep on this man's bed.

I lost myself. I forgot about my top priority.

Is that what this man is going to make me do?

If so, he's dangerous. He's what I vowed to avoid.

Committing myself to someone when I need to be totally committed to myself.

My son.

"I have to go."

He nods jerkily, lets my thighs drop from around his waist. Puts his hand on his hips and steps back, trying to regain his breath. "There's something happening here, Evie."

"I know," I manage while filling my lungs. "It doesn't exactly scream *casual*, does it?"

"Nope." A line snaps in his cheek. He appears to be battling the urge to pin me again. Part of me wishes he would. "You'll decide what this is and how fast it moves, but I'm going to do everything I can to help you decide in my favor. You, Evie, are in my goddamn favor. In whatever capacity you allow me." He holds eye contact long enough to make my pulse feel fizzy. "But I'm going to say something for the record one time, just so it's clear: you're a package deal with your boy. I'm not scared of that." He jerks his stubbled jaw in the direction of my

feet. “I’ll be driving you home, Evie. I’ll be damned before you spill one more drop of blood on my behalf.”

My throat constricts violently, his image blurs—and I know I need to get out of here.

Get my head clear, reset my priorities.

Remember that getting distracted by a man only leads to disappointment.

A very silent fifteen minutes later, when Luke drops me and Sonny off outside the thrift shop, he watches me unlock the door that leads to the little apartment upstairs, and he doesn’t bother hiding his hunger or determination when I glance back. And despite what I’ve been forced to believe about romance and commitment and men, I can’t help but acknowledge . . . Luke might be a distraction from my priorities.

But he wouldn’t be a disappointment.

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# Chapter Four

## LUKE

**K**eeping an eye on the building that houses the thrift shop below—and my reluctant woman above—I circle around back of my pickup truck, lifting the blue tarp and staring at the bicycle I just drove fifty miles to purchase. Sure, I could have gotten one locally, but none of the secondhand ones in town seemed special enough for Evie. However, now that the time has come to give her the damn thing, my nerves are picking up speed.

It's Christmas Eve, and there is finally a bite of cold in the air. And though it will probably be absorbed by the Texas sunshine tomorrow, the coolness of the evening lends authenticity to the holiday, along with the blue strings of lights fading from dark to bright on the eaves of the thrift shop and the scent of apple cinnamon drifting from the church function down the block.

My gaze strays to the second-story window, and I catch sight of Evie at the stove, stirring something up in a pot, spoon in one hand, Sonny in the other. A hefty pressure settles in the dead center of my chest—same one I get every time I'm in the same room as her.

Did I ever really believe I'd find jeans that fit at the thrift shop?

No.

It was always about getting a look at the beautiful woman behind the counter.

The one who is perpetually optimistic yet guarded.

I've got a strong gut feeling about a woman who starts over in a small town because of an ant statue and a good memory. This woman, who'd hoof it all the way to my farm to deliver jeans and a rebuke. This

woman, whose body and mouth and skin have kept me in a constant state of painful hunger since she allowed me to kiss her.

I aim to keep Evie. Making that happen is going to be one hell of a delicate operation. She doesn't want a man coming along and messing shit up—again, apparently, though I've yet to get the details. I need to be patient. Need to show her that if she allows me into her and Sonny's lives, it'll be for the better.

And then I get to spend every day delivering.

Damn, I'm looking forward to it.

Firming my jaw, I lift the bike out of the truck bed and settle it on the sidewalk, in view of the apartment window. After adjusting the big red bow tied to the handlebars, I use the chain and lock to secure it to the bike rack; then I pace for a spell, working up the nerve to climb the stairs to her door. There's a good possibility she's not going to appreciate me showing up unannounced. If I'm going to convince Evie to give me a chance, though, I'm going to have to take a couple myself.

Finally, I find myself outside her apartment door, knocking. The TV is muted inside, hesitant steps approaching.

"Hello?"

Every muscle in my body goes as tight as a bowstring at the sound of her voice. "Evie."

Is that her swallowing? "Luke."

There's a moment's hesitation, followed by the click of a dead bolt disengaging. Relief has me closing my eyes, but they open just as eagerly to catch my first sight of her in twenty-four hours—and Lord, she was worth the wait. Sonny is perched on her right hip, fiddling with her hair. I'm not even sure what to call the dress she's wearing, only I think it's technically called a *slip*. A dress women wear *under* their dresses, which makes almost no sense, but I'm currently grateful for their existence because this one is nearly see-through. Short too.

I can see damn near all of Evie's thighs.

The shape of her.

God have mercy on my sanity.

"It's . . . it's Christmas Eve. What are you doing here?"

"I brought you a present."

She sweeps me with a look of growing unease. "Where is it?"



“Downstairs.” I nod at the interior of her apartment. “You can see it through the window. I’ll wait here, if you want.”

Absently, she tosses her hair back to avoid Sonny’s grabby hands. She’s thinking. Weighing pros and cons. Maybe I shouldn’t have put her on the spot. “No, come in,” she murmurs, stepping aside, her lips twitching with humor when I have to duck to clear the doorframe. “Still rocking the jeans, I see.”

“I haven’t taken them off, except to sleep. And shower,” I’m quick to add, lest she think I don’t have good hygiene. “Been getting lots of compliments on them, too.”

“Really? From whom?”

“Mostly the chickens.”

She sets loose the most incredible laugh I’ve ever heard in my life. I feel it everywhere, but especially in my heart. The sound grabs Sonny’s attention, and he watches his mother curiously as they cross to the window, looking out, then down.

“Oh,” she breathes. “That’s a bike.”

“It’s a bike.”

“With a . . . with a baby seat on the back.”

I wish I was wearing a hat so I had something to fuss with right now. My hands have no idea what to do with themselves. “I’m hoping you’ll use it to come see me at the farm, Evie.”

She doesn’t respond.

I’d give all one hundred acres of my land to know what she’s thinking right now.

“Thank you,” she says finally, a slight tremble in her voice. “Thank you.” She turns, cradling the baby’s head against her chest. “That was really thoughtful, Luke.”

I grunt. What else can I do?

I’ve made my intentions clear. The next step is hers to take.

“I’ve caught you in the middle of making dinner,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck on the way to the door, pausing with my other hand on the knob. “I know tomorrow is Christmas Day, but would it be all right if I called on you anyway—”

“Stay now,” she blurts out, turning a pretty shade of pink. “I mean, why don’t you stay for dinner? Since you’re already here.”

“I couldn’t.”

“You could. You will.” The way she takes charge once she’s made a decision is very Evie, and I like knowing this. I like having knowledge—*any* knowledge—of her, no matter how big or small. Right now, she’s crossing the room toward me, taking hold of my elbow and ushering me toward the blue upholstered couch, which faces the muted television. *Home Alone* is playing. She has great taste. “Here. Sit and relax. I’ll just . . .” She trails off, glancing toward the kitchen. “I was just making grilled cheese and tomato soup. Is that okay?”

“Better than okay.”

“Good. Okay.” She turns in a circle. Have I flustered her?

“Evie.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t mind leaving.”

“I don’t want you to leave, Luke. I’m just overwhelmed by the bike. It never occurred to me to get one. And the baby seat.” She rolls her lips inward, wetting them. “I’m not sure I should accept. Like I told you, I’m not—”

“Looking for anything serious. I know. It’s repayment for the jeans.” I raise an eyebrow. “If you’d just taken my money, you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

She battles a grudging smile. “Lesson learned.”

We stare at each other for nearly a full ten seconds, and I’d happily stay like this forever, being the center of this woman’s attention. “If you want me to watch Sonny while you’re cooking, I can do that. I’m the oldest of five. There’s a thirteen-year gap between me and the youngest, so I’m battle tested.”

Evie hums, rocks her son side to side. “I don’t think anyone has ever held him besides me and the nurses at the hospital.”

I nod.

And wait.

“He’ll fuss if you hold him while you’re sitting down. He likes to make you work.”

“My sister was the same way.”

“Where is she now?”

“Living in Canada. Calgary. She met a man at school, and they’re getting married in the fall.” I give her a look. “I might need a custom suit, if you know a good tailor.”

Another one of those pretty lip twitches. "I might."

She takes one step forward. Another. Shifts the baby in a way that indicates she's ready to hand him over. Trying not to let my relief show, I stand up and take Sonny in my arms, maneuvering the tiny infant until he's against my shoulder, beginning a slow, bouncing walk under Evie's watchful eye.

She has no idea I feel as though I've just won the lottery.

That exchange of trust wasn't easy for her, but she did it. She trusts me.

I want more.

"What about your other siblings?" she asks, walking barefoot back to the stove, stirring the soup and putting together a second grilled cheese. "Where are they?"

"Spread out. Besides the one in Calgary, one still lives with my parents not far from here. One is still in school, and the other travels with a theater group. She's the dramatic one."

I pace closer to the kitchen, smiling inwardly when the baby blows a raspberry, his hand twisting in the collar of my shirt. "Do you have any siblings?"

"No." She shakes her head. "No, but I always wished for a sister."

"You can borrow one of mine—the dramatic one, preferably."

I'm only able to see the side view of her smile. "Was it just natural for you to take over the farm because you're the oldest?"

"Sort of, yes. But I don't think the rest were born for it. Either way, I think . . ." I find my throat getting crowded. "I think I might have come on too strong, trying to make them love the farm as much as I did. Maybe I even drove them in other directions—before I realized what I was doing, you know?" She meets my eyes. There's no judgment or sympathy in hers, only quiet understanding. "I love farming. It's in my blood. Something else is in theirs, and that's okay."

I'm watching her soften little by little, the tension leaving her shoulders, her movements at the stove growing more confident. "I keep waiting for you to ask me what happened with Sonny's father, but you never do. It's usually the first question people ask."

"I reckon you'll tell me when you're ready."

She places both sandwiches on the hot pan, the buttered bread beginning to sizzle. When I make myself grilled cheese sandwiches, I

usually eat four of those suckers, but I'm not going to tell her that. One will have to suffice tonight—but thank God there's soup, too.

There's a chance I might live.

“We were together two years when I got pregnant. He wasn't interested in having a family and left. Honestly, I didn't want a child, either, at first, but . . .” She shrugs. “I was an accident, too. My mom always called me her little silver lining. I guess maybe I felt bonded to Sonny right away and I just . . . I wanted to try. I was ready.” She looks back at me over her shoulder, vulnerable. “To be the good in someone's life.”

My throat tugs . . . and keeps right on tugging. She's going to be this kid's hero.

“I'd say you're going to be a lot more than that.” I pretend the baby is whispering in my ear. “Sonny confirms the bottles have been the perfect temperature. Mom of the Year.”

She laughs again. I could really get used to that sound. Thank God I stopped being too tongue-tied around her to make jokes. “How many grilled cheeses should I make you?” Evie asks me then, totally nonchalant. “Three or four?”

That seals it. I'm marrying her, come hell or high water.

# Chapter Five

## EVIE

Luke holds the baby all through dinner.

He eats with one hand and cradles a sleepy Sonny against his shoulder with the other, and I'm starting to wonder if this man is even real. I'm sitting here at the table, telling him about my childhood travels with my mother and some of the funniest customer interactions I've had downstairs, but mentally I'm still standing at the window, looking down at the bike with the big red bow and the baby seat.

I've never received such a beautiful gift.

It checks so many boxes that I hadn't thought to check myself. The bike gives me freedom, gives me options for traveling places. Sonny will get fresh air and sunshine and core memories on the back of that bike. It looks expensive, too. Brand new. Shiny. Gears on the handlebars. I shouldn't accept the bike, but . . .

I think maybe I *want* to be able to go see Luke more easily.

Just for a booty call, obviously, but still. Beats walking.

There's a little voice in the back of my head calling me a liar for writing him off as a casual lover, but I'm ignoring it. Staunchly. I made a promise to myself and Sonny to protect us from temporary interlopers like his father. Like *my* father. I can't be bought with a bicycle. I'm not going to cave thanks to his big-boy mystique.

Why am I so turned on watching him eat his fourth grilled cheese?

There's something about the grit of his body, the deep tan, the workingman's muscles, those watchful brown eyes. His sincerity when he talks about his family or the farm. Or anything, really. The way his hand makes my soup spoon look like it belongs to a children's Playskool tea party set. There's just something about him, period.

“Baby’s asleep,” Luke rumbles quietly. “You want to lay him down?”

I nod and stand, alarmed to feel my legs are a bit like jelly. “We share a room,” I say needlessly, waving him toward the single bedroom in the apartment. “When he gets bigger, I’ll have to figure something out.”

Luke hums. “I’m sure you will.”

“I’m glad one of us is.” I indicate the crib in the corner of the room, and Luke passes by me, his gaze sweeping the space and taking everything in: The half-finished blouse pinned to a headless mannequin beside my thrifted dresser. The jade-green peel-and-stick wallpaper. My floral bedspread. The silk robe hanging from a hook on my closet. The baby-changing table stocked with diapers, wipes, and clean onesies. “I try to put away half the money I make from selling my designs into a house fund. We’ll see. I’d love for him to have a yard. Space to run around.”

“I’ve got plenty of that. Space.” He straightens up from laying Sonny down in the crib. Looks at me. “Anytime you want to use it, sweetheart.”

That jelly feeling in my legs is spreading like wildfire. I’ve never been jelly for anyone.

I don’t know if I like it yet.

“What exactly are you hoping for here?” I whisper as he comes closer. “With me?”

“I’m hoping for you.” His big hands slide around my hips and squeeze. “Whatever that looks like. However much time it takes.”

Oh God, my suicidal heart is pulsing in an entirely new way. Big, almost painful booms. “You know that saying *If something is too good to be true, it probably is?*”

“Yeah.”

My head tilts back to keep eye contact. “That’s what this feels like.”

He’s visibly confused. “*I’m . . . too good to be true? Me?*”

“You bought me a *bike*, Luke. You’re good with my son . . .”

“You made me jeans that fit. You apologized to my chickens for making them get out of your way.” The last thing I expect is for him to physically pick me up, but that’s what happens. In fact, I’m tossed up into his arms like pizza dough and trapped against his burly chest as he



walks us slowly back out into the living room, using a hip to close the bedroom door. “You’re brave and sentimental and a little heartbroken for a few different reasons. You’ve got a lot of pride. Talent. You’re breathtaking, Evie. Gorgeous. If anyone is too good to be true here, it’s you.”

I’m squirming in his arms, no idea what to do with the overflow of compliments. Or how they make me feel like I’m standing in the sun after a cold winter. I’m not hiding my reason very well, either, so neither one of us takes me seriously when I say, “Maybe you’re just saying all that because you want to sleep with me.”

“I can tell the truth and still want to fuck you.”

“Wow. ‘Get you a man who does both,’ right?”

“You don’t have to. I’m right here.”

He sets me down on my feet in front of the couch, hands flexing at his sides, obviously waiting for me to give him the green light. “You know,” I say, sprinkling some seduction into my voice, “you get a little more confident every time I see you.” He allows me to reverse our positions and push him down onto the couch. “What’s that about?”

“I don’t know.” His chest puffs up and down. “Maybe it’s the way you look at me.”

I kneel in front of him, settling my hands on his knees and slowly, slowly letting my palms travel toward the juncture of his thighs. The closer I get to his mounting erection, the faster he breathes, his fingers digging into the couch cushions, lust bracketing his mouth. “How do I look at you?” My hands reach the growing bulge between his legs and scrub over it lightly—up, back, up and back—while he curses gutturally, making him stiff as possible before I unzip his jeans. “Like I want to do this?” I lean down and kiss the ridge trapped in his gray underwear before peeling the waistband down, exhaling in a rush at the sight of him, long and thick and wrapped in veins. “Oh, my sweet Lord.”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same exact thing,” he groans, his head falling back, his arms stretching out along the back of the couch. “It ain’t built for sucking, sweetheart, I know. Just use your hands and lick the head for a while if you can. If you don’t mind.”

I have no idea what to address first: how politely he’s requesting a (sort of?) blow job or the other part. “Not built for sucking?” He shakes his head adamantly, as if to drive that point home. A point I’m suddenly

determined to show him is false. Placing my lips on the crown of his erection, I speak right against it so my lips stroke him with every word. “I think we need to disprove that theory.”

He moans.

I haven’t even done anything yet and he’s moaning, fingers buried in the couch cushions, his stomach heaving up and down. This man has not been given the pleasure he deserves—and I’m going to get a lot of satisfaction out of being the first.

Bringing him fully out of his briefs, I gather my hair in a ponytail and make brief eye contact, wordlessly asking him to hold it. He does. In an unsteady hand. And all of him turns unsteady as soon as I suck him into my mouth, stretching my lips to their full capabilities, using both hands to masturbate him, twisting gently on the upstroke, taking as much of him into my mouth as I can handle, spitting on him to help lubricate my path.

“Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus,” he chants when I give him an extra-rough suck, followed by quick, continuous strokes. “Oh Jesus, please.”

“I think you were built for sucking,” I murmur, then rake my teeth up and down the side of his straining sex, flicker my tongue against the head. “Say it, Luke.”

“I was made for sucking.” His fist gets firmer in my hair, and my hormones sing happily. “It was made for Evie to suck on.”

I rub the tip of my tongue in his slit, and come appears like liquid pearls, streaking down the side of his thickness, where I catch the droplets with my stroking hands, using them to make him even more slippery, hands moving faster, making his breath hitch along with his hips, his giant body growing restless on the couch.

“That’s all I can handle, Evie. Baby, time to quit.”

I pout at him and his eyes glaze over.

“I’m warning you,” he growls.

I’ve never considered myself a tease, but going forward, I can definitely see myself becoming one if teasing makes his thick thighs shake, his lips peeling back from his teeth in a pained grimace, his fist pounding on the back of the couch. My goodness, Luke is hot. He was hot before, but his appeal is tenfold when he’s worked up. And I’m so distracted by the flex of his thigh muscles and his raspy breathing that I forget he warned me.

I'm flat on my back on the living room rug before I've had my fill and am still whining about it when Luke yanks off my panties and drops onto his belly, pressing my legs open and grinding his open mouth down on my sex, groaning deeply enough to send a vibration along the entire length of my body. But oh shit, oh shit, it vibrates for an entirely different reason when he rubs his face side to side to part my flesh and begins lapping at my clit like its fruit from the tree of life, his calloused hands reverent on my knees, massaging, stroking, wet sounds, grunts and gasps, filling the living room.

"I want you inside me."

"It ain't ready yet."

"Yes. Yes, it is."

I attempt to sit up, falsely believing I can pull this huge man anywhere, let alone on top of me, but his heavy forearm straps across my belly, keeping me pinned. "I want you screaming for more, not less, sweetheart." We make eye contact over the length of my writhing body, and when he's satisfied that I'm not going to sit up again, he slides his forearm off my belly, bringing that hand between my legs, watching me with sweat on his brow while he pushes two fingers inside my soaked entrance, keeping them shallow, drawing them in and out five, six times, before biting down on his lower lip and pumping them deep, jiggling them as if trying to loosen me up, prepare me. "How the hell am I going to stop touching you long enough to get on a condom?"

"You don't need one," I say on a hot shudder. "I'm on the pill. I was just seen by the doctor, too . . ."

He looks at me like I've just granted him entrance to the pearly gates. "I can have you without one?"

"Yes." I'm suddenly so positive this man is going to blow my mind, I let out a sob. "Please."

He spits on me. Twice.

I love it.

"'Please' fuck you?"

"Yes."

His low rumble of anticipation fills my ears as he sits back and kneels long enough to strip his shirt off over his head and throw it onto the ground, the glorious breadth and musculature and power of him on full display, not to mention the shaft he's choking in his fist. And he falls

on top of me, catching himself on his left elbow before his full weight flattens me, his right hand fitting his flesh to mine, poising himself to thrust, an earthquake of need traveling through him, through me.

“What’s this little dress called?” He leans down and bites the neckline, turning his head left to right until it starts to rip. “Get the straps down and show me them tits.”

“Yes, sir,” I whimper without thinking, almost delirious, fully under this man’s spell, which is not really a spell at all, it’s just authenticity. He’s a man who wants what he wants—badly—and that’s me. When I’m thoroughly enjoying every action, every word out of his mouth, who am I to slow us down? “It’s a slip,” I say unsteadily, drawing the straps down my arms and baring my breasts. “A slip.”

He stares down, gulping. “You look beautiful in or out of it. You’d be beautiful wearing anything.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, kind of shaken. I slide my fingers into his hair, my nails abrading his scalp, and massage his hips with my inner thighs. And he loves that, loves the skin-to-skin contact, my touch, the friction. Loves it as much as I do.

“God, Evie, I’m ashamed of how hard I want to fuck something so pretty, but I need you too much,” he breathes unevenly into my neck, his right hand moving, as if on its own, shaking, pinning my knee to the floor, hard, his length beginning to press home inside me, causing a delicious stretching sensation, the slowly realized state of being full. So full that I can barely stand the pleasure/pain. “Been wanting between these legs since I saw you.”

“I’ve been wanting you here, too. So bad,” I gasp. My eyes start to water and he’s only halfway inside me. There’s an instinct to demand we slow down, let me get used to him, but there’s an even louder one to feel him fully *now*, a promise of the most intense pleasure of my life on the other side—and I trust it. I trust him. I trust what I feel between us. “I’ve wanted you.”

“You have?” Luke pants, pausing his forward press inside me, lifting his head to look at me with brown ones that are glazed with need. A trace of vulnerability among the sea of hunger.

Unbelievable that this impressive man needs reassurance, but I’m all too prepared to give it to him. Drawing him into a groaning kiss, I gently rake my nails down his back and sink them into the flesh of his

butt, contracting my inner walls until he grits his teeth and shudders. "Don't you know how hot you are?" I lean up and snare his earlobe with my teeth, lifting my hips and squeezing. "Nothing has ever tasted better than your kiss." My voice falls to a whisper. "Except maybe your cock."

"*Son of a bitch, Evie.*"

"Give me all of it."

"Oh *fuuuuuck*," he heaves, plowing his hips forward on a harsh grunt, making me scream into my closed mouth, my nails definitely drawing blood on his back . . . but after a second, I realize I was right. The pleasure is a lot, but it's magnificent. It's a full claiming. It's pushing all the boundaries I didn't know needed pushing, and I want more. More. I'm yanking on his hips for it, begging with gibberish I somehow know he'll understand. "Evie."

"Move. Move, please."

"Do I feel good this deep?"

"Yes. Yes."

Right before my eyes, his expression transforms from astonishment to unimaginable lust, relief, gratitude, and he begins to buck his hips, his testicles smacking loudly off my backside, the floorboards groaning underneath me, his forearm snaking beneath my lower back to hold me steady while he fucks me in a desperate frenzy, his lower body brutal in its strength and perfect in its honesty, the depth of his need exposed. "Come on, then, woman, and take some dick," he grits out. "Waltz into my town and make me hard, leaning over the counter of the shop to show me your pretty, round tits. I saw 'em, baby. Now they're mine."

"They're yours. *Yes.*"

Damn it, oh *damn it*, I'm so horny it almost feels wrong. I'm opening my thighs in a way that's nearly lewd, arching my back so he can watch my breasts bounce in time to his anguished thrusts. Yes, anguished. He's in pain, but the only way to solve it is to bang me on the living room floor, and that erotic truth is a rush. It's a wild rush, being needed like that, so I whimper ridiculous things into the dark I'd never say in the light. Things that sound amazing right now but I'll blush over in the morning. I tell him he's Daddy and my pussy needs his come, and I've never had it so deep, so good in my life, which is 100 percent true. So achingly true that my orgasm is like a sharp slap to my senses, a fresh gasp of air on another planet. It arrives with a vengeance, rippling my

flesh and unearthing incoherent screams from deep inside me, all while Luke labors on top of me, his erection even fuller than before, his control gone.

Good.

“Didn’t mean to take you on the floor,” he slurs.

“That’s okay,” I sob, being pummeled by my release. “It’s okay.”

“Maybe that’s what you get for having pussy this motherfucking sweet, huh?” He drives deep, hard, holding, his big hand reaching down to slap my backside, once, twice, only intensifying my peak. “I’ll work my ass off for this tight thing. I’d sweat all day under ten suns for one little hit. Taking me so fucking *deep*, baby. *Fuck*. All the way to my balls. *Good girl*.”

I’m done.

The wave crests one more time and I twist beneath him, tires screeching in my head, grinding, grinding, grinding out the last of the pleasure, rife with relief and wonder.

On the other side of my orgasm, I’m drained and euphoric, my vision blurry, my heart and mind determined to feel the proof of his pleasure, too. I want it now. I need it so bad. My knees are open and I’m holding on for dear life, rejoicing in the brutality of how he fucks me against the soft carpet, grunting like an animal into my neck, his sweat mingling with mine, his harshening breaths telling me it’s almost time. Almost time to feel that blast of heat . . . and when it happens, when he goes off like a bomb inside me, I wrap my thighs around his hips as tightly as possible, kissing the moans off his mouth, liquid heat gathering inside me, fulfilling me. Fulfilling him.

“Anytime you want it, Luke,” I gasp into his ear, *squeezing*. “Anytime.”

“How about for the rest of my fucking life, Evie?” he says, sealing his mouth over mine, kissing me roughly during those final dizzying thrusts. “How about that?”

He drops down on top of me, his full weight pinning me for two, three seconds while he struggles to fill his lungs, but he becomes self-aware all too quickly, rolling off me onto his back, though he twines our fingers together immediately, as if he dreads severing the connection we just created—and his behavior is what brings the moment screaming into focus.

*How about for the rest of my fucking life, Evie?*

I've lost control of how fast this relationship is moving. So much so that it feels like a relationship already. What I thought would be a mutual swap of pleasure turned out to be . . . more. The way he took me was more of a vow, a possession, than anything that belongs in a friends with benefits situation.

He put my son to sleep.

I already feel . . . connected to Luke in some way. It snuck right up on me.

"Evie."

"Yes?"

I look over to find him studying me, scrutinizing my face . . . and when his mouth sets itself in a resigned line, I know he's reading my mind word for word. Which is scary in itself.

Luke fastens his jeans, then rolls onto his side and kisses my shoulder, reaching down to raise the straps of my slip and gently cover my sex with the hem of the garment. He pulls me close and nuzzles his forehead with mine, but he stops short of kissing me, something I notice way too much, probably because I'm craving the texture of his lips, the sandpaper scratch of his evening stubble.

"Evie . . ." His breath is stilted. "I'll never recover from what you just gave me."

"Luke . . ."

"I reckon I have to wait for you to come to me now," he says slowly, as if he's only realizing this now. Adapting to me as we go. *This man*. "I'd rather die than scare you or push you for more than you're ready to give. But I've made my position clear. If you want to be mine, if you want me to be yours, you know where to find me."

# Chapter Six

## LUKE

**M**aybe I've made a mistake.

It's New Year's Day, and a week has passed with no sign of Evie, the girl who ripped the soul clean out of my body on her living room floor. I meant what I said: I'll never recover from the feel of her. That lack of recovery has come in the form of staring off into space when I'm meant to be tending the farm, like now.

There's a fence that needs mending and a field waiting to be plowed, but I'm battling a terrible dread in my stomach that makes it hard to motivate myself. To move. To do anything but sit here on the porch, in the wooden chair built by my grandfather, and wonder how I could have done things differently.

For starters, I shouldn't have left. At the time, with her clamming up on me and panicking, it seemed like the only option. To give her that space. But I'd just got finished telling her I wanted forever, so maybe I made myself seem unreliable by leaving. Wishy-washy. That's the last thing I am when it comes to Evie. I know what I want.

I want her.

No, *need*.

I need to wake up every morning with my nose buried in her red hair.

I need those clever eyes to twinkle at me when I say something funny.

I need to break my back working in the field, knowing I've got her waiting at home.

Most of all, perhaps, I need her to trust me. I'm not some boy who cuts and runs. When I make a commitment, I keep it. And if Evie



somehow decides to be with me, I'd be making one to her *and* Sonny. Hell, I'd be honored to give that child the space he needs to run around, to grow. To be a kid.

I lean forward in my chair, resting my elbows on my knees and folding my hands together. My head drops forward, a deep sigh welling in my chest. I'm not going to make it much longer before I go see Evie and try again. I pushed too hard, too fast, didn't I? Foisted the farm on her. What my land and home could be for her and Sonny.

Same way I did with my family.

On top of being too intense, I made love to her like a brute, but hot damn, I've never felt anything so wet and hot in my thirty-three years. Never heard sweeter sounds than her sobs for me to drive deeper. Never felt like my heart and head and testosterone were aligned so perfectly, everything inside me shouting, *This is your home.*

*She is your home.*

Did I just tell myself what I wanted to hear?

I'm starting to think so . . .

My head comes up when I hear an unfamiliar sound. It sounds like wind, so I look across the field at my turbine on instinct, as if I might find it malfunctioning, but no. It turns, reliably lazy, in the wind. What the hell is that sound? Thinking it might be something inside making the whooshing sound, I stand up, preparing to go check. That's when something coming up the road leading to the house catches my eye.

When I realize what I'm seeing, my heart drops clear down to my ankles, then shoots straight back up into my mouth. Somehow, I know it's a vision that will stay with me until I take my last breath.

It's Evie on the bike, riding toward my house, Sonny in the baby seat on the back.

My feet are rooted to the ground even though my brain is telling me to go meet her halfway. Or at the very least, meet her in front of the house. Don't be caught standing there staring like a zombie. I don't manage to propel myself into action until she's about fifty yards from the porch, making it to the bottom step as she glides to a stop, her red hair tumbling around behind her in the breeze while Sonny grabs for it with puny fingers.

It takes me a moment to speak, mainly because she's fucking breathtaking in a blue sundress, with straps that tie behind her neck, and

she's smiling at me.

"I was starting to think you'd never come," I manage.

Her smile dims and we look at each other for several quiet seconds, nothing but the breeze and Sonny's gurgles to fill the silence, and I swear, I can feel the years ahead locking into place, creating a life where a totally different one existed before. For both of us.

"Well, here I am," she murmurs finally. "I made you something."

"Did you?"

She nods, twisting the handlebars in her grip. "It was impulsive. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but . . ." She exhales on a laugh. "Maybe I should wait to give it to you—"

"No, please. I'd like to see it. Whatever it is."

With a swallow, she reaches into the woven basket on the front of the bike and takes out a folded length of material. Navy blue. I take it from her, turn it over in my hands, but I can't tell exactly what it is until I let it unravel.

It's a baby sling. A king-size one that will fit me.

Unexpected heat presses in behind my eyes, fast and furious, my heart beating loudly in my ears. It's the most incredible gift she could have given me, because it's a symbol of her trust. Trust I'm sure wasn't easy to give.

Unable to speak, I put on the sling and go around to the baby seat and unstrap Sonny, then tuck him carefully into the swatch of material, until I'm satisfied that he's nestled safely against my chest. When I finally feel like I'm not going to be swept off in a tide of emotion, I kiss my woman while her son squirms between us. If I have my way, it'll be the first of ten million kisses. More.

"You're both welcome here as often as you want, Evie," I say against her mouth, voice gruff, my heart telling me not to hold back even after all the self-doubt I've been living with for a week. "You're welcome forever, if you want it."

She searches my eyes. "*Forever* sounded less and less scary every day I spent away from you."

A knot ties itself tight in my throat. "You let me know when it's no longer scary at all, Evie Crowe."

"I will, Luke Ward."

We hold hands on our way into the house. I'm pretty sure I don't let go for hours.

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# Epilogue

EVIE

## *Seven years later*

**M**y husband and son are silhouettes in the golden sunset, their voices carrying through the late-afternoon haze to reach me on the porch. Luke is explaining the stages of harvest to Sonny, his hand resting on the top of his head, Sonny leaned against Luke's hip, wearing an identical hat. The sight of them together always makes me wish I was a painter so I could capture their bond on a canvas, but today it's enough to know I sewed the clothes they're wearing by hand.

Using my big toe, I gently rock the porch swing, my fingers sifting through the hair of my daughter, who dozes with her head in my lap. June will start prekindergarten soon, and I'm going to miss her running barefoot around the farm all day, but I'm also ready to devote more time to the shop. Five years ago, Luke purchased the thrift shop as a wedding gift for me, and now, more than half the clothes we offer are my upcycled designs. Soon, the whole store will be original pieces with my name stitched on the inner collar. And with the addition of my new online presence, I'm hoping to create even more demand.

Not unlike most days, I marvel over how a decision centered around an ant statue has led me here. To this beloved time and place, this . . . man. My man.

As though I've called to him out loud, Luke glances back at me over his shoulder. The sun prevents me from seeing his eyes, but I know they soften. I know they brim with love, seeing me here with our

daughter's head in my lap. I know everything about Luke and he knows everything about me. We're lovers, partners, and best friends.

*Forever.*

Funny how quickly that word became a comfort once I let myself trust again.

*That trust was not misplaced*, hums my heart as Luke guides Sonny back toward the house, patting him on the shoulder and encouraging him to run ahead, no doubt to wash up for the Christmas Eve dinner I've got roasting in the oven. Sensing the return of her beloved big brother, June reanimates with a yawn and ambles off into the house after her sibling, leaving me to greet my husband alone.

I rise from the swing and cross the porch to the top of the steps, leaning a hip against the banister. Luke, covered in dust and sweat and clothes made by my own two hands, stops at the bottom of the stairs and slowly removes his hat, letting it drop to his outer thigh. And he drinks me in like he does at the end of every day, his gaze carrying slowly up the length of my legs, hips, stomach, and breasts, his Adam's apple paused in motion.

"Merry Christmas Eve," he says, sounding a touch raspy. "That a new design you're wearing?"

"It is." I turn in a circle, pretending not to hear the appreciative noise he makes while looking at my butt in the tight denim skirt. "Do you like it?"

"How long until dinner?" he asks in lieu of answering.

My pulse starts to pick up. "Twenty minutes, give or take."

Luke takes all four stairs in two strides and yanks open the front door of the house. "Sonny, keep an eye on your sister for twenty minutes and there'll be an extra present for you under the tree come tomorrow morning."

"Okay, Dad."

Now my hand is enclosed in Luke's, and I'm jogging to keep up with him on our way across the sunbaked paddock to the barn. My eyes are still a smidge damp from hearing Sonny refer to Luke as *Dad*, even though that's what he's called him since he learned to speak. It's not something I'll ever take for granted, though. Not for a single moment.

As soon as we reach our secret spot, Luke drops his hat and backs me into the shadows behind the final horse stall, pressing his thick body

against mine, his calloused fingers already snagging the hem of my skirt, wrenching it up to my hips, his mouth crashing down on mine. Those hardworking hands grip the cheeks of my backside and treat them roughly, kneading and slapping as the kiss grows more frantic.

“You don’t know what it does to me,” he pants while I unfasten his jeans, groaning and wincing as I lower the zipper, “seeing you there waiting for me, all lit up by the sun. The only Christmas present I need. This year or any other year.” He shakes his head. “What gives you the right to be so beautiful, Evie Ward?”

Head tilted back, looking him in the eye, I whisper, “Happiness. You.”

He pauses ever so briefly in the act of shoving down my panties. “If I’ve made you half as happy as you’ve made me, I consider that a life well spent.”

“We still have decades to go,” I whisper, letting his tongue dip into my mouth.

“And I thank God for that every day.” He takes a tight hold of my bottom and drags me upward against his body, both of us moaning when his naked flesh meets mine, hard and unforgiving greeting soft and sweet. “I love you, Evie.”

“I love you, too, Luke.” Saying it once is never enough. “I love you.”

He visibly absorbs my words, his body seeming to take added strength from them. “You’re a mother, a designer, a business owner. All these things. You do them so well, sweetheart. If I don’t tell you often enough, I’m so damn proud of you.”

Caught off guard, I respond unevenly. “Luke—”

“But right now?” He tilts his hips and slides inside me, sending a head-to-toe ripple through my body, a whimper issuing from my throat. “Right now, you’re just my good girl.” He pushes himself deep as he can go and holds, gives two shallow drives, then rears all the way back, pounding me roughly against the wall of the barn, gritting my name into my ear as animal lust explodes between us. “Ain’t that right?”

“Yes, sir,” I breathe, locking my ankles behind his back.

His fingertips bite hard into my outer thighs, sliding slowly down to my knees, before he hooks his forearms beneath them, keeping me open,

his lower body powering up and up and up into my welcoming body, my gasps swallowed by his frenzied mouth. “Hold on tight and show me.”

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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*New York Times* bestselling author Tessa Bailey can solve all problems except for her own, so she focuses those efforts on stubborn, fictional blue-collar men and loyal, lovable heroines. She lives on Long Island avoiding the sun and social interactions, then wonders why no one has called. Dubbed the “Michelangelo of dirty talk” by *Entertainment Weekly*, Tessa writes with spice, spirit, swoon, and a guaranteed happily ever after. Catch her on TikTok at @authortessabailey or check out [www.tessabailey.com](http://www.tessabailey.com) for a complete list of books.

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