

A SUSTAINABLE CHEMISTRY

“I helped murder a chicken,” Katie shuddered into her phone.

“What? Hold on the kids are crazy...”

As usual, Katie waited even though her sister had called her. She stepped out from her guest room to the landing, glancing down over the guests milling about the front room as they waited for the dinner bell. She’d arrived that morning at the farm with its red barn, main house, and slew of goats, pigs, and chickens milling around, and already she wasn’t so sure about this.

“I’m back. Girl, I told you that farm-workshop-agritourism-whatever week was a bad idea! I gave you money for your birthday so you could take a trip, meet some *guys*, put yourself out there...”

Katie spaced out. She had heard the “why are you single” talk before from her married sister Chandra, and variations of it from her Mom, dental hygienists, and random people.

“Are there any guys?”

Katie sighed. “I’m here because I want to learn about sustainability and...”

“Yeah, yeah, and bee keeping, I know. And meet *guys*. What kind of people are there?”

“Well... a Birkenstock lady; a dreadlocks couple who believe in soap; some annoyingly gorgeous blond girl, and Jan who runs it, and her son...”

“Wait, wait. What about the son?”

“I haven’t met him yet.”

Katie wasn’t about to say his pictures online led her to pick *this* farm in particular. She just hoped he was worth the two showers to get the chicken smell off her.

“Well, any other potentials?”

She scanned the crowd lingering over a nerdy guy on the couch who tapped his knee in nervous patterns.

“Well... not really.”

“Just remember, not all guys are like Carl...”

Katie sighed. “I gotta go, it’s dinner.”

The chicken breast stared back at Katie from her plate. Why was her first chore “processing” chickens for dinner? Everyone else at the long table ate and chatted about their easy afternoon jobs. No sign of Jan’s son, whom she secretly named Hunky Farmer. Feeling nauseous, Katie reached for the wine. The nerdy guy next to her noticed and passed it along.

She glanced up. “Thanks.”

“Sure, y’know it’s France’s favorite economy wine.” He tapped the label.

Katie poured some. “So, you like Weezer?”

He looked confused. “Yeah... How’d you know?”

She nodded toward his shirt.

“Oh, yeah. Right... I’m William. You like them?”

“I’m Katie. Yeah, y’know, I liked ‘The Sweater Song’ but the new stuff ...”

Then boom, there he was - Hunky Farmer - every bit as dreamy in real life as on the web. Katie’s inside’s flipped.

“Sorry I’m late,” said the fresh-faced guy in flannel and jeans. He strode past, then pulled out a chair down the table; his hair still wet from his shower. A trail of scent followed him that Katie could only describe as spicy attraction.

He smiled at the blond with silky hair which deflated Katie’s excitement. The West Virginia humidity had turned her curly hair into an impression of a brown sheep dog. And why had she not brought gel!

Hunky Farmer served his food with gusto not waiting to dig in.

Jan stood at the head of the table. “Everyone, I’d like to officially welcome you to Heritage Farm. Hopefully you will come away enriched and a convert to organic farming.”

There was a murmur of approval, except from William.

“And a special treat! Our sow, Carnita, is in early labor. She may deliver tomorrow.”

Another murmur of delight.

“And this is my son, Matthew, just back from the fields,” Jan added as she sat.

Matthew wiped his mouth and gave a little nod, meeting eyes with Katie for a moment. Katie wanted to stare at him until the cows came home, and yet, she also had an immense desire to hide under the table if her hair would fit. She tried to eat some arugula greens in a honey vinaigrette as William droned on about his research and the Blue album.

After the dinner plates were cleared, Matthew came over, leaning between her and William, passing out crème brulee to everyone. He set hers down last and lingered.

“Thanks,” Katie said, barely finding her breath or the guts to look at him.

“Sure thing,” he said smiling.

Katie pictured herself pushing back his brown hair, being enfolded into his flannel chest.

“I hope you like it. It’s made from raw cream.”

William cleared his throat.

Matthew’s spine stiffened. “Yeah?”

“Hey, uh, could I get one?” He was the only one without dessert.

Matthew grabbed another brulee and plunked it on the table.

Heady with cheap wine and the nearness of Matthew, Katie wandered to her room. It was the Rose room – the walls adorned with pink floral wallpaper, and the room furnished for a remake of *The Remains of the Day*. A Victorian wedding dress floated on its dress form in the corner like a ghost out of Dickens. The irony of it all wasn’t lost on her. In many places, being 30 and unmarried wasn’t a big deal, in say, New York, or Paris. But in a Baptist church in Roanoke, it was a big deal.