

Excerpt from *Weekends in Carolina*, by Jennifer Lohmann

MAX WAS TOUCHED when Trey walked her back to the barn, insisting despite her contention that she walked the farm alone most of the time and had done so for years. Plus, she had Ashes to protect her from raccoons and coyotes. “I’m not doing this for you,” Trey had said, “but for my mom, who would be appalled if I didn’t walk a girl to her front door. I recognize that it’s a mostly empty gesture, but—”

“So long as we both know it’s a bit silly, I’ll let you do it for Noreen’s memory.”

The walk across the grass had been silent and awkward. An evening spent watching a college basketball game and eating the leftovers from a funeral wasn’t a date, but at some point it hadn’t felt like two friends hanging out, either. Flashes of light from the big-screen TV had emphasized the attraction in Trey’s eyes and she had been grateful for the oversize woolen sweater hiding the way her nipples had answered. She could have pretended it was the cold, but she would’ve been lying. Trey was attractive and she liked the way his silliness escaped despite heavy, black eyebrows and a serious career.

He was here for the rest of the week—right next door and very convenient. And then he would leave and she wouldn’t have to worry, *what next?* Responsibility-free sex would be nice. Could she do it, though? And shouldn’t she pick a better candidate for such an indulgence than the man who owned her land? Only she couldn’t socialize while at work and the men at the farmers’ market saw a farmer rather than a woman. She went out with friends only occasionally, and even on those rare nights out she wondered if money spent at a bar would have been better put aside for buying land.

That last sad statement was reason enough to give this a try.

Her hand had wanted to reach for his on the walk over—like they were in middle school or something—and she’d had to yank it back. Her pajama bottoms didn’t have pockets to give her hands somewhere to go, so the one closest to Trey still twitched. At least her nipples hardening had been a sexual response. She was an adult and he was good-looking, so that was easy enough to explain away. But hand-holding implied a desire for a relationship and, while she now knew what job required Trey to wear a suit, he was still a stranger and he still lived in D.C. Sex, rather than hand-holding, is what should be on the agenda.

They stopped on her front porch, the wind blowing the storm in, mussing up her hair as surely as his short hair stood on end with no escape. Ashes sat at the door and stared at the wood. “Thank you for dinner and the game. This is the latest I’ve stayed up in ages.” That statement was true, even if she didn’t have her watch on her. “Farmers up with the chickens and all,” she finished awkwardly.

God, this was weird. His eyes were warm and steady on her lips, despite the wind buffeting about everything else in the vicinity. Like some out-of-body experience, she could feel her lips part and her chin lift a little. Her heart fluttered. Warmth flooded her body and she wanted to take off her sweater to cool down. She shifted slightly forward. Trey’s hand was coming out. She wanted him to slip it under her big sweater, to feel his grip tight on her waist.

Ashes barked. Trey’s hand brushed her breasts, more accidental than not, on its way up to the back of his neck. “So, my tour. What time tomorrow?”

She blinked. The spell was over. “I have to start seeding broccoli tomorrow in the greenhouse. Come find me whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay.”

They stood at her front door. Trey was probably waiting for her to go in. She didn’t know what she was waiting for, so she reached behind her and turned the knob. Ashes rushed inside to his bed by the fireplace. “Thanks again.”

“My pleasure.” He leaned back onto his heels, but didn’t leave her porch. “Do you need help getting the fire started?”

Bone-warming, dry air from the woodstove drifted across her back through the open doorway. “No. I left a pretty good fire going. I’ll just need to add some logs and it should keep me through the night.”

“Tomorrow, then.” He wasn’t going to leave. Max didn’t really want him to. She either had to go inside and shut the door on him or invite him in.

She nodded, stepped back until she was inside and closed the door. Only when she heard his feet bounce off her steps did she take off her shoes and head up the stairs to her bed. When she asked Ashes what the hell that had been about, her otherwise reliable dog had no answer.