

ALEXANDRA HALE

FOREVER IN THE  
*Country*

A CLEMENTINE CREEK NOVEL

# **FOREVER IN THE COUNTRY**

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A CLEMENTINE CREEK NOVEL

ALEXANDRA HALE

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MAY VARY.

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*To my husband who is not for everyone but is perfect for me - we'll always be better together.*

*To Atlee who has been asking for this story since December 2021 before I ever hit publish.*

*To everyone who has ever met the broody hero and thought - mine.*

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## **AUTHOR NOTE**

Sorren and Rhea's stories both touch on some topics that may be sensitive for some readers - such as infertility, past memory of a miscarriage, military deployment and injury, and mention of child abandonment. Overall, this story is a light hearted, steamy, small town read, but readers should be aware of the few sensitive topics.



## PROLOGUE

### SORREN

“Hey, Mama said you can sleep over if it’s okay with Gran and Pop.”

Waylon’s eyes are wide with excitement and a crooked grin plays on his lips. I can feel mine start to twitch, but I’ve never gone to a sleepover.

I’ve never been away from Marlee that long—I couldn’t.

And even though she’s happy here—I’m happy here—it’s hard to let six years go like I haven’t been keeping my sister and myself alive almost on my own.

“I, uh...I’ll ask,” I say and his smile grows, his brown hair flopping over his eyes. He’s that laid-back, carefree country boy like you see in movies, and I’m fourteen with short hair, gaining weight only because Gran never lets my plate be empty, and have a lifetime’s worth of stress bearing down on my shoulders.

The counselor at school says I’m *adjusting* but I don’t think this is something I’ll ever truly get over.

“She’s gonna say yes.” He rolls his eyes and then pushes my shoulder playfully. “Just go ask.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grumble as I walk backward toward my grandparents’ house.

“Hurry up! Mama is makin’ fried chicken coz it’s your favorite!” I chuckle at that and turn and jog toward the house and up the porch steps.

I breathe in a lungful of air like I always do when I look at this house. The first time I ever stepped foot on this land, I felt home in a way I never

had before.

Opening the front door, I find Gran at the stove cooking a big pot of soup. Homemade biscuits are covered in the basket next to her, and I don't even have to see them to know how they melt in your mouth.

"Hi baby," Gran says with a warm smile. I walk willingly toward her and then let her wrap me in a hug. My body sags against hers for only a second before I pull back. She's already shorter than I am but she feels like she's ten feet tall with love bursting out of every pore.

"Waylon asked if I could spend the night."

"Would you like to do that?" I hesitate and she takes my hand and leads me to the table where we both sit. "Flora called and asked if it would be all right."

"She did?"

"She wanted to give me a heads-up and make sure it was okay with you." Gran pauses and searches my face. "Is it okay with you? Boys your age have sleepovers all the time. It's okay with me and Pop if you want to go."

I hear what she's saying because logically I *know* kids my age do this all the time but—*my sister*.

"We'll take care of her, baby. Go be a boy and stay up late watchin' movies and talk about pretty girls and sneak downstairs to eat the desserts Flora didn't secretly make for y'all anyway."

I try for a smile but fall short. Soft, wrinkled hands cup my face, and she pulls me gently down so we're eye to eye.

"I will keep her safe. Just be you tonight, okay?"

"K," I manage as I swallow the lump in my throat.

"Good boy."

This time when she pats my cheek and releases my face, I smile and it's real and I allow myself this moment of peace. They keep telling me this will get easier— living my life apart from Marlee—but I'll never believe it as long as my parents are still out there just one call away from turning our world upside down again.

"SORREN! COME ON, MAN!" Waylon yells my name from upstairs, and from the noise I can tell that he and his brothers have piled into his room to watch the game—probably his sister too.

At least until she's sick of us.

“I’ll be right up!” I yell even as Mrs. Thayer watches me shift my weight back and forth as she sits at the long, worn table.

“What do you need, honey?”

“Can I call my sister?” The words rush out and I feel my cheeks heat.

“Of course.” She stands and grabs the phone, dials it, and hands it to me.

“Sorren!” Marlee’s sweet voice answers on the second ring, and the breath I was holding whooshes out of me. She’s safe. I’m safe. We’re okay.

“Marlee Girl, are you being good for Gran and Pop?” I put as much enthusiasm into my words as I possibly can.

“Yes! Gran let me have an extra cookie! And she said we can watch a movie before bed because you’re having a fun night too!”

I laugh softly and close my eyes as I tilt my head toward the ceiling.

“I just wanted to call and say I love you and goodnight, Marlee Girl.”

“You’re silly but I love you! Night, brother,” she says sweetly and then there’s shuffling sounds before Gran comes on the line.

“Go have fun, baby. Promise me.”

“I promise, Gran.”

“Love you, baby.”

“Love you too,” I say and then disconnect the call. I hand the phone to Mrs. Thayer and she puts it back with a smile and a kiss to my cheek.

“Why don’t you take a minute? I’m gonna take those boys some snacks.” She points to the table. “I set those aside for you because no matter how hard I try, it feels like I’m raisin’ a bunch of animals.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Thayer,” I say automatically. She narrows her eyes but doesn’t correct me to call her Flora.

I watch as she walks out of the room before pulling out a chair and collapsing into it. My head lands on the table with a thud and I breathe out a heavy sigh. Every cell in my body is exhausted, and I feel well past my fourteen years.

“Mind if I join you?” Mr. Thayer’s voice is deep and gruff like the man himself, but he’s welcomed us into his home so I sit up and nod. “I know we haven’t had a lot of time to talk yet, but I wanted you to know you have family here. When you lay your head down at night, you’re safe, and there’s not a person in this house—*this town*—that won’t lay down their life to keep it that way.”

My eyes widen in alarm. “I don’t want anyone to die,” I say seriously and his lips twitch.

“But you get the idea.” He also doesn’t correct me.

The words tumble over and over in my brain, and it’s like a dam that can’t hold back a storm surge. Tears stream down my face and I wipe at them frantically.

“I’m so scared,” I whisper in the space between us, my voice choked with emotion. His massive hand lands on my shoulder as he leans forward to look me in the eye.

“You will never have to fight alone. You have my word and my promise to keep you and your sister safe.”

“But how?” I say through the tears. “How could you want us when our parents didn’t want us? Didn’t want her? How could they look at Marlee and see anything but good and light and happiness?”

“They didn’t deserve her. Either of you. But you’re ours now, and I’ll be damned if they ever get near you and your sister again.”

A sob racks my body as my hands cover my face. He pulls me against his chest and holds me so fiercely I start to believe him. I cry for the childhood I was forced to give up to raise my sister. I cry for the life that should have been happy and full of dreams. And I cry for the little girl next door who’s excited about an extra cookie at bedtime.

“You can rest now, Sorren.” Mr. Thayer’s deep voice echoes in my head. “It’s my turn to stand watch—I’ve got it from here.”

**RHEA**

PRESENT DAY

“Auntie Rhea?” my nephew Briggs asks from the backseat. I had to pry him out of my brother Otto’s arms—the guy is seriously obsessed with being a bonus dad.

“Yeah, bud?”

“If you had to be *any* dinosaur, what would you be?” I glance at the seven-year-old in the rearview mirror and grin.

“What’s that one with the spikes down his back?”

“Stegosaurus?”

“Yeah, that one,” I say and he giggles. “What? Spikes are cool!”

“I’d be a T. rex.” I mock gasp because that answer would surprise absolutely no one. “What about Uncle Wren?”

The way he calls Sorren “Wren” absolutely melts my heart. From the very first day Sorren and Marlee landed in Clementine Creek, I knew he was different. We were all just kids back then, but he was quiet and serious with moments of fun and carefree.

Seeing him smile continues to be one of my very favorite things, because it happens so rarely, I want to make sure to treasure it. The darkness of his early life had ebbed slowly from his eyes over the years, but when he was discharged from the military following an injury, we all stepped up again to help him get back to himself.

I smile at the little boy with messy blond hair in the back seat because he’s gotten to Sorren in a way the rest of us never could. Every single one of Sorren’s rough edges and hard lines melts away when he spends time with Briggs.

I've found them passed out together on the couch at more than one family function—Sorren with his hand behind his head and Briggs with his head on Sorren's chest.

“What's that other big one? Alphasaurus? Allysaurous?”

“Allosaurus,” Briggs hoots and shimmies from his seat. He thinks I'm hilarious and he's right. Someday, he'll be too old for nephew night and won't think it's awesome that his aunts and uncles fight over spending time with him.

Until then, I'll milk it for all it's worth.

I snap my fingers. “That's the one.” Briggs never fails to pepper me with his dinosaur knowledge and while I am rusty, I *did* grow up with four brothers.

“Is Uncle Wren coming tonight?”

“You know it.”

“Yes!” Briggs does a little fist pump as I turn onto my street. Sorren's car is already in the driveway along with Tanner's. “Dad's here too!”

A horn beeps behind me as I pull into the driveway. My brother Case waves like a lunatic and his fiancée, Hannah, laughs in the passenger seat. Spilling out into the front yard, my brother scoops Briggs up and throws him over his shoulder. “Coming through!” he bellows as Tanner opens the door.

“Whoa!” Tanner chuckles as he watches Case carry his son into the house. We've welcomed Tanner into our family with open arms. He might be Fallon's ex-husband, but Otto has never made him feel like he wasn't a part of our family too.

“Dad!” Briggs yells and waves from upside down.

“Hey buddy.” Tanner smiles and it's so full of love for his son. He's still getting used to us—and the unending chaos—but nights like these are for family, and whether he likes it or not, he's part of ours. “Is it all right if I crash nephew night?”

Briggs whoops and then giggles as Case tickles him till he dissolves into belly laughs.

“Need a hand, Rhea?” Tanner asks, and I narrow my eyes playfully.

“Remember the rules of nephew night. We let you come because you're cool and we like you. But there's no parenting tonight. Nephew night is sacred. Keep it cool,” I say seriously.

“Yeah, be cool, Dad!” Briggs yells from somewhere inside.

“I'm always cool!” he yells back and then frowns when Case and Briggs

start laughing again at his reply.

I pat his shoulder and try to hide my smile. “Can you grab the cupcakes out of the back?” He nods and takes off down the steps.

It’s already pandemonium in my house but I love it. Fallon had confided in us that they’d been isolated when Tanner had been in the Air Force. They did the best they could, but moving to Clementine Creek had been as much about her coming back to her hometown as it was about giving Briggs a life full of love and happiness.

Lucky for them, we’d adopted them all outright and spoiled the daylights out of Briggs.

“Is everything ready?” I ask Sorren as I dump my purse on the counter. He bends down and kisses my cheek like he does every time he sees me.

I ignore the sparks that flare with that single touch.

“It’s all set, Sunshine.” He smirks and I have to brace my hand on the counter. A smile of that magnitude from Sorren Mackay is a thing of beauty. That plus the use of his nickname for me and I’m a goner. “What?” he asks, and I bite my bottom lip in response.

“You’re smiling.”

“I smile,” he deadpans, but his scowl has returned and I can’t do anything but throw my head back and laugh.

“It’s cute you think that,” I tease but he doesn’t say anything. “I just need to change and then we can get started.” His eyes roam over my body, and I cross my arms over my chest.

Sorren’s gaze snaps to meet mine, and I let him see the fury for only a second before I lock it away. He drags his hand over the stubble on his chin and I want to scream. He’s drawn the line in the sand but has no problem toeing that fucker on a daily basis.

Growling, I spin away and grab Hannah’s hand before dragging her down the hall to my room.

“Oh boy,” she says as soon as I close my door behind us. Hannah is the most recent transplant in Clementine Creek and my soon-to-be sister-in-law. She is beautiful with dark hair and dark-blue eyes and the only person I’ve ever seen make Case all out of sorts.

“He doesn’t get to check me out,” I snarl as I whip my tank over my head and grab a clean T-shirt from my drawer. I have no issues changing in front of Hannah because she saw me in a lot less than this when she volunteered to do boudoir shoots for all the girls.



Unlike the rest of them, I don't have anyone to show my photos to.  
And that, unfortunately, includes the brooding man in my kitchen.

"But you're hot." I stare at her and she shrugs. "What? You are and he knows it."

"That doesn't help if no one is getting laid," I hiss and she snickers. Hannah and Case shamelessly hold the record for the most sex in public places. No one would have guessed it would be *him* taming *her*, but it worked and I loved getting another sister out of the deal.

"Well, you could do something about that," she hedges, and I open my mouth to speak but snap it closed.

*I tried.*

I don't dare speak the words aloud. Only Sorren and I know what happened that night, and while I've tried my best to act normal, it doesn't always work. No one has missed the tension between us for the better part of a year, and it's getting exhausting.

So damn exhausting.

Instead of answering her, I fix my hair and turn to her with a bright smile that I can tell she knows is fake.

"I'm ready. Let's go."

"We'll be talking about this later," she replies in a singsong as she follows me out of my room.

*Not if I can help it.*

"Hey y'all!" I yell over the guys when we walk into the kitchen. "Who's ready for nephew night?"

Hoots and hollers go around the room, and I feel a smile stretch across my face. With snacks, games, and movies on the agenda tonight, I push thoughts of Sorren into the background.

He's my friend.

He's family.

And for as long as his walls are up, he'll never be mine.

**SORREN**

1 YEAR AGO

“**Y**ou know,” Tanner Holiday says as we park in front of the abandoned warehouse, “if you were looking to get rid of me there’s probably a much easier way.”

“Shut up and get out of the car,” I say on a grunt, and he laughs as we both ease out of my Charger. I really should get over myself and get a truck, but the car was the first thing I ever truly bought for *me* and I can’t give it up quite yet.

Also, it drives like a dream over the country roads, and my body is constantly thankful for that.

Sucking in a lungful of air, I take a minute to appreciate being home. Despite the discontent running through my veins, Clementine Creek has always been that place for me. Taking in the sight before me, I hope that this one piece will be what I need to settle down and, God help me, relax.

Right on the outskirts of town, the building is a white painted brick, the paint chipped from exposure and lack of maintenance but overall not terrible. I found it not long after returning to Clementine Creek.

It called to me. The building and the open expanse of land. I’d been restless.

Unsettled.

Still am most days.

But this property felt like a sign, and each time I’d visited I’d been more sure that this was the right thing for me. The right thing for this town and people like Tanner and me just looking for a little comfort on this side of civilian life.

Pulling the keys from my pocket, I unlock the door and hold it open for him and he steps inside without question.

Guess he's over the serial killer vibes.

The building is surprisingly clean for sitting empty for the last several years. Dust covers every available surface and the floor, but any repairs will be strictly cosmetic.

"What is this place?" Tanner asks as he spins around. I can see the way he's analyzing—assessing—much like I do on any given day.

"I have an idea," I say with a swallow. "I want to open a shelter and training facility for dogs. The shelters down here are up to and over capacity with all the natural disasters that roll through here all the way to the Gulf."

"Okay..."

"I want to name it Vetted Paws." Tanner's gaze lands on me, a flash of emotion before it's gone again. "We'd be trained to handle the dogs, and could maybe take some specialized classes or bring in someone who could train some of them as therapy dogs."

"And you want to do this together?"

I nod.

"Why?" he asks honestly.

"Because we're still both looking for something we just can't shake. It's hard going back to this." I wave my hand around. "I need something for me, and it finally feels like the right time."

It was the most honest I'd been verbally, and while it was uncomfortable, I also felt a little lighter.

"Funding?"

I nod my head. "I have some tucked away. Inheritance and savings. Figured we'd ask Isla for a loan rather than going to the bank." I smirk. "Also I like my nuts where they are, and I don't like thinkin' about what she'd do if she found out we'd kept her out of the loop."

"I have some too," he says with a tentative smile.

"I'm not looking at percentages, Tanner. If you want in, we do this together—partners. We make it work. I have a feeling you're going to be better with paperwork and shit like that."

"Is that an Air Force joke?"

I ignore him. "Also you're better with people."

"You *choose* not to be good with people. That's not the same thing."

Shrugging, I look around the space. "I'm selective."

“And you let my kid call you Uncle Wren,” Tanner says, and I feel the tips of my ears heat. “He talked all day about you picking him up from school last week and taking him to the park to throw a football.” Tanner lowers his voice. “Said Aunt Rhea was mad at you.”

I grunt and he laughs. “She knows I hate raisins.”

“What did you do this time?”

“Who knows,” I say but I know. I definitely fucking know why I’ll be getting oatmeal raisin cookies until I get my shit together.

Tanner’s expression says he doesn’t believe me, but he doesn’t press. “Anyway, thanks for being good to my kid.”

“I love kids and he’s awesome,” I say without thinking, and if Tanner is surprised he doesn’t show it, and I appreciate the hell out of him for that.

“Well, he loves you so it means a lot.” Clearing his throat, Tanner turns and points toward the open space. “Show me what you’re thinking.”

He’s given me a pass and so I give him the same grace he’s shown me. People think there’s this constant need to analyze and dissect someone’s life when all they need is that reassurance that someone is there when you’re ready.

I need Rhea to know I’m not ready, but I can’t ask her to wait.

But hell if I can let her go.

Swallowing down my own bullshit, I motion toward the far side of the building. “We’ll put kennels on these walls. There’s hookups for water in the back so we can put basins in to wash them down, maybe hire out a groomer a couple times a month.” Tanner nods so I continue, “I read a lot about acclimating dogs to living environments—like being on the street and then adjusting to a home.”

“Mock living spaces.”

“Yeah. I talked to a woman out in Nashville who has a rehabilitation facility that we can go take a look at. She gets funding through donations and grants.”

“Think Isla would give us a crash course? Maybe Cullen? I don’t speak grants.”

Isla is a powerhouse and a transplant from Chicago. She was a stranger in our little slice of backwoods heaven and she didn’t care one bit about fitting in. She wooed the Thayers and the whole damn town before Hank had fixed the dent she put in his truck.

She fell hard for the eldest Thayer brother but hell if he didn’t fall first.

She loves our little town so much she moved her father here after he retired. A heart attack was the wake-up Cullen needed to reconnect with his daughter.

The thought makes my chest tight because I know, heart attack or not, there would never be a joyous reunion with my parents. It shouldn't bother me after almost twenty years but it does.

"So what's next?" Tanner asks as the silence stretches on between us.

"I have a list."

"Of course you do," he mutters and it has my lips twitching again. Hands on his hips, he turns in a slow circle and nods. "All right. Let's do it. You can show me your *list* and we'll divide things up. Why haven't you talked to your brothers about this?"

He says *brothers* so casually, as if the Thayers are blood and not chosen. I guess that's also something the military reinforced but they didn't have to teach me. I'd chosen my family the minute I told my parents that I was taking Marlee and leaving Massachusetts.

"They all have their own things going on, and I can tolerate you well enough."

He throws his head back and laughs. "Man, you say the nicest things. It's no wonder everyone is drawn to you."

"It's a gift."

"I bet it is," he murmurs. "Let's go get lunch and we can hash out what needs to be done and what our timeline is for opening and getting everything ready." He looks around the room. "We're going to let them help with the painting and construction, right?"

My knees creak, and a little jolt of pain shoots from my calf as I stand. "You already goin' soft? Hell, you haven't even been out that long."

Despite the ribbing, I respect the hell out of Tanner. He'd come out to his wife, they'd divorced, he finished his contract, had been discharged from the military and uprooted his life to move here so they could coparent.

I'd been thrust into the past the first time I ever met Briggs. He'd been the same age Marlee had been when we first moved here, and that had damn near ripped my heart clean out of my chest. The circumstances were different, but the sentiment had been the same.

Life had changed and would continue to change, and I vowed to do everything in my power to make Briggs's transition into life in Clementine Creek a good one.

"Fuck off." He laughs as we make our way back outside. "I hate painting

and like you said—I'm much better with paperwork.”

“Won't get out of it that easy, Holiday, but yeah, we'll get them to help. God knows I've helped the lot of them enough since I got back.”

“I don't know if I'll ever get used to it.”

“What?”

“Family.”

“You and me both.”

**SORREN**



## PRESENT DAY

ALERT: The alert you set has been activated. Please contact the account holder for more information. If this is in error please disregard this message.

Silently cursing, I resist the urge to slam my phone face down on the counter.

“Why are you so angry?” a feminine voice asks, and my eye twitches at the sound.

“I’m not.”

“Well, you look angry,” the blonde says from beside me. I’m sure she’s pretty but I haven’t given her more than a glance. More to the point, she’s one strong inhale from rubbing her tits on my forearm, and I want to crawl out of my skin.

“I always look like this,” I deadpan but it’s the truth. She grimaces.

“Well, maybe if you smiled, more people would want to talk to you.”

“I can’t get rid of the people who want to talk to me now,” I say pointedly because I’m well past the give-a-fuck quotient of my night. With a huff and a flip of her hair, she flounces off the barstool, blessedly leaving me alone.

Everyone is so quick to put a label on you whether it’s medical, mental, or physical, and all I want is just five minutes of peace where I don’t need to convince anyone that everything is fine.

Because it is.

I’m still adjusting to being home. To being a civilian. It’s not just

something that happens overnight. That part of my life is over, but it doesn't mean I can just flip a switch and forget that I lived and breathed the military every second of the day for years.

A twinge in my calf never fails to remind me of how my time ended. The shrapnel that ripped through my flesh could have been worse. I was scarred but physically still whole. Hell, there were guys out there missing toes from mowing the lawn that had lost more than I had.

I didn't regret my time in the Marine Corps, and I didn't regret being home. I just wanted to do it on my own terms. My whole life has come with a contingency plan and it's fucking exhausting. I've never been able to just sit back and enjoy the moment because every single one has come with an expiration date.

A warm hand lands on my forearm accompanied by the smell of frosting and sugar. My whole body relaxes even though my muscles flex under her touch.

"Hey," she says as she places her wallet thing on the bar and settles onto the stool next to me. I nod as she flags the bartender down and orders a glass of wine and then looks at the TV.

I've been here for twenty minutes and I have no idea what's on. My hand clenches around my glass of soda before Rhea's hand comes back to rest on my forearm. Her thumb moves back and forth but she doesn't say anything—doesn't stop until I've relaxed again.

"Do you think you can help me move stuff around in the walk-in freezer tomorrow?"

I nod. "Of course." She doesn't need my help but she knows I don't do well sitting idle. She probably also doesn't want me rearranging her baking supplies without supervision.

Again.

Tanner and I have a million balls in the air, but we're in a holding pattern for one thing or another. Knowing our luck, we'll get approvals, material, and dogs all on the same day and then have to scramble to catch up again.

"Thanks." She smiles and it feels like the sun is warming my face. She's all that's right in the world, and I'm a lucky son of a bitch for even having a moment to bask in her light. "Oh, I almost forgot!"

She pulls out a small square of fabric and places it in front of me on the bar.

"What's this?" I ask as I unfold it.

“I saw it online. It’s a fabric book cover.” When I just stare at her she says, “You said you like the paperbacks sometimes but don’t want to take the sexy man covers out in public.”

“I didn’t say that.”

She continues like she didn’t hear me. “So I thought you could try this. Still get the books you want and be free to read wherever, then take that baby off when you get home. Like taking off your bra after a long day—there’s no better feeling.”

“I don’t wear a bra,” I deadpan, and I fight like hell to not think about her full, luscious tits that are barely peeking out of her shirt. So much Goddamn temptation that can never be mine.

She rolls her eyes like I’m not half hard thinking about her taking her bra off. “Fine, your vest then. You wore one of those, right?”

Did I ever. And she’s right—nothing better than peeling that fucker off in the middle of the desert, drenched head to toe.

“Yeah,” I say without elaborating.

“See?” She waves the fabric in front of me. “Same concept.”

My lips turn up ever so slightly, and a smile spreads across her gorgeous face. Her blue eyes twinkle in the light of the bar, and it takes everything in me not to get lost in them. I don’t need alcohol because I’m practically drunk on the way she’s looking at me.

Being this close to Rhea is dangerous. I’ve been walking a line that’s been getting thinner and thinner with every passing day, and right now, I can’t remember why I drew it in the first place.

“I can’t believe you dragged me here,” I murmur, and she huffs as she takes a sip of her wine.

“I needed a night out and it’s good for you to socialize.”

“Socialize, hmm?” I intentionally drop my voice into gravel territory as I say, “Like with the girl trying to sit in my lap? I don’t think she was as much interested in talkin’ as she was with showing me her tits.”

Rhea’s eyes narrow in challenge. I shouldn’t bait her like this, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like her all riled up.

“And what did she say?”

“That if I smiled, more people would want to talk to me.”

She throws her head back and laughs as I smile against the lip of my glass before taking a sip. The root beer is cold, and even though I’m sitting at the bar, no one bothers me that it’s soda and not something harder.

“Poor girl. I almost feel bad for her.”

“Almost, huh?”

She lifts a shoulder but doesn't dispute my statement. She looks away, and I know it's to hide the hope in her eyes. We've been there before, and it's taken me a long time to get back to *this*.

I can't lose her again.

I can't lose *this*.

Silently, I pull her barstool a little closer to mine. It's the opposite of what I should be doing but fuck if I can help it. She sighs and rests her head on my shoulder, the movement causing her intoxicating scent to surround us.

I've never been big on sweets but *fuck* I'd devour her.

Digging my thumb and forefinger into my eyes, I send up a silent prayer for the strength I'll need to resist the woman who has slowly become my best friend. She deserves more than the man I am now, and I'll prove I deserve her. I just need more time.

**RHEA**

2 YEARS AGO

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Sorren grumbles from the passenger seat as he stares at the Cedar Lake Day Spa out the windshield. He’s been home about a month and while he says his leg doesn’t bother him, I know some days it does.

“One time. You will go in one time, and if you hate it you’ll never have to go again. But Sorren,”—I wait till he meets my gaze—“I need you to trust me.”

He doesn’t really talk about his injury, and I’ve never asked. We haven’t talked a lot about his time in the military at all but that’s okay. I know that he finds comfort and solace in my presence so I try not to push.

“One time?” His voice is resigned, and I hide my smile the best I can.

“Once,” I say, pushing my door open and then looking back at him, “unless you like it. Then we can come once a month.”

He exhales heavily as he opens his door and steps onto the sidewalk. His limp is barely noticeable, and I know he works hard to keep it that way.

The outside is freshly painted white shiplap with forest-green shutters and cedar accents. They’d hired Waylon for the benches and Otto and Case to do the landscaping. Seeing their work every time I come here fills me with joy and pride at everything they’ve accomplished.

Sorren holds the door for me, and I step inside with a smile as I greet Colette. She’s been my girl for a few years now and answered an insane amount of questions for me leading up to this visit. Despite my outwardly calm demeanor, I’m nervous.

The wide cedar plank floor is beautiful against the soft-gray walls. It’s

lakeside chic, and I always feel myself relax the slightest bit just walking in here.

“They’re not going to do polish, right?” Sorren says under his breath as we walk to the last two chairs in the room where another girl is waiting with a smile.

“Of course not.” I slide my hand into his and he lets me. “But you can pick mine.” He looks out the side of his eye at me, and I pull my bottom lip between my teeth to hide my smile.

Ruby holds out her hand, and Sorren shakes it with his free one.

Her eyes never leave his as she says, “I understand you experienced an injury, and while I believe I’m prepared to minimize your discomfort, please be honest with me so we can adjust to ensure your experience is enjoyable.”

I squeeze his hand harder as his gaze slides to mine. I have nothing to hide, and I let him see that. This is supposed to be a relaxing afternoon, but I just need to get him in the chair to make that happen.

“All right.” He says the words to me before looking back at Ruby. “No polish.” Then points to me. “She gets hot pink.”

Ruby beams and nods before directing us both to our respective chairs. We sit and dip our feet into the basin of warm water, and I hand him his e-reader that I stowed away in my purse.

“Anyone know we’re here?”

I shake my head. “Not unless you want them to.” He leans his head back against the headrest and closes his eyes as Ruby takes his uninjured leg from the water and begins.

“This is weird,” he says after a few minutes, and I chuckle.

“I can work with weird.”

While Colette removes my old polish and cleans up my cuticles, Ruby has already started massaging Sorren’s foot. He groans, and the sound reverberates around us. It’s one of pleasure, and I shift slightly in response.

His gravelly timbre is something I’ve always found pleasant—sexy even—but there’s never been anything between us. I’m his safe space, and I won’t do anything to jeopardize that, even if my body’s reaction to him has me more than a little curious.

Ruby’s hands glide over his injured calf and he sighs. Her hands are gentle as she watches his face intently, and I make a mental note to tip her extra after the care she’s taken to ensure he’s okay.

“I can feel you watching me,” he says without opening his eyes.

“I like the view,” I tease, and his lips twitch at the corners.

His head lolls to the side as his dark-green eyes find mine. There are flecks of gold in them, and I can’t help getting lost in them for a while.

“I’m okay, you know.”

I mimic his position in my chair. “I know. But I thought this might be nice.”

He rolls his lips inward. “I’m really trying not to like it.”

I giggle and Ruby and Colette snicker.

“Which one?” Colette says as she holds up two pink polishes in her hand. Sorren points to the one on her left and she nods and gets to work. She makes it look easy, while unless I try *really* hard, it always looks like I did it with my eyes closed.

I can do intricate designs with just a piping bag at the bakery, but this is completely out of my wheelhouse. Besides, it’s one of the few things I splurge on for myself in the name of self-care.

Colette applies the topcoat and then helps me slip on my sandals. Sorren’s boots are already laced up, but the anxious energy that usually radiates from him is gone, and my heart swells in my chest.

He’s at peace and even though it’s temporary, it means everything in this moment.

Easing toward the door, I ask the one thing on everyone’s mind. “So, what did you think?” My smile is hesitant as I pull cash from my bag and hand it to both Colette and Ruby. I paid for the pedicures in advance so I wouldn’t have to deal with Sorren trying to strong-arm me over the bill.

It’s happened before.

We wait with bated breath as his hand rubs against his stubble-covered jaw, “I think I’d be all right if we did this again.” Ruby does a fist pump, and he grins before shaking her hand and thanking her.

I book us appointments for the following month and walk a little taller all the way to the car.

“Thank you,” he says, the engine barely on long enough to cool the Tennessee heat.

“You, sir, are very welcome.”

“You did your homework.” The words are innocent, a compliment even, but I swear his eyes darken.

“We all did.” I shrug. “Plus, you wear boots all the time and you wore boots for years in the military. I figured it might help to get you pampered a



little.”

“Don’t make me take back all the nice things I was gonna say about you.”

“Hey, I deserve those nice things. I was sweatin’ bullets for weeks leadin’ up to this little trip.”

He lifts a shoulder. “Sweating bullets is better than dodgin’ them.”

My mouth drops open, and he licks his lips as a small smile spreads over them.

“Did you just...?”

He made a joke. Sorren Mackay made a joke—a dark one—but a joke nonetheless. His shoulders shake with silent laughter as he leans across the console and presses a quick kiss to my cheek.

“Thank you,” he says, the deep resonance of his voice sending a shiver through my body.

I don’t blush but I don’t *not* blush either.

“You’re welcome,” I say again and turn up “Everything I Shouldn’t Be Thinking About” by Thompson Square on the radio. I resist the urge to change the song because it hits way too close to home right now, and I definitely don’t have the time to figure out why.

We’re friends. He’s like family.

This is fine.

“Lunch?” he asks and my head whips toward him. He must be *really* relaxed. Or maybe I’m just suddenly jumpy.

“Really?” I ask, my voice a little higher than normal.

I can’t see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but I can imagine they’re sparkling right now. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you paid beforehand so I wouldn’t fight you on it.”

“So you want to settle the score?” I say with a flippant tone instead of the mild disappointment I’m feeling. His hand lands on my bare thigh, and he squeezes gently, his hand remaining until I look at him.

“I appreciate that we can still be us. That you just let me be me.”

There’s never been a more loaded phrase in the history of the world than that, and I don’t know how to respond. It’s the most incredible thing anyone has ever said to me, and the way he’s looking at me right now has me feelin’ all kinds of ways.

“Okay,” I manage even though the heat from his palm mixed with the roughness of his skin against mine is beyond distracting.

He’s close enough I could kiss him. All I’d have to do is lean in just a

little, and I'd finally know how he tastes and how all-consuming that experience would be.

Because it would be.

The intensity radiating off him is a guarantee of that.

Clearing my throat, I hit the button to change the station and "Chillin' It" by Cole Swindell comes on.

His lips twitch as he leans back in his seat and points out the windshield toward the road. "Let's go that way. I know a place we can go to."

He means lunch. I know he does, but that doesn't make my heart beat any slower as I back out of the parking lot and make the turn.

We've had a good day, and that's the only thing I need to focus on.

**SORREN**

PRESENT DAY

“Hey Marlee Girl,” I say as my sister wraps her arms around my waist. Her head rests on my chest as I pull her into a hug. Her grip is firm, and I bend enough to kiss the top of her blonde hair. “Are you okay?”

She’d been in my driveway when I walked out of the trailer.

“I just missed you,” she says with a sigh.

My immediate reaction is to say that we’ve been in the same damn town for months and *years*, but I know I haven’t been present like I should. At first I just needed space, then it was because I wanted to give her and Waylon time to themselves without me interfering—God knows I caught enough shit for that.

But the other part of me knows it has nothing to do with my best friend marrying my little sister and everything to do with feeling displaced in the pecking order here.

“I missed you too.”

“Are you mad at me?” she asks quietly, still not letting go, but I push her back a little to see her eyes and instantly regret it. They’re shiny with unshed tears, and I know that I did that to her. I am still fucking up after all this time.

“Never, Marlee Girl,” I say as one tear slips free and I wipe it away with the pad of my thumb. “I’ve, uh...”

“I know.” Her shoulders sag as she takes a step back.

Fuck.

“I’m sorry.”

She lifts one shoulder. “You don’t have to be sorry.”

“Don’t make excuses for me,” I say, grabbing her hand and pulling her

back to face me. “I’m sorry, okay?” Mossy-green eyes stare back at me and I swallow hard. Her eyes are so much lighter than my emerald-green ones but it fits. She’s bright and happy and full of love and I’m...me.

“I just wish you would talk to me. In general—not even just about the hard stuff.” She looks away. “We used to talk all the time, then it was just sometimes, and now it hurts having you so close and still feeling like you’re miles away.”

My cold, dead heart breaks in my chest at her words. Guilt and remorse make it hard to breathe, and I swallow down the bile that threatens because—*fuck*.

“How about this,” I say around the lump in my throat. “How about we take a drive—go get ice cream, maybe take the kayaks out at Hank’s?”

Her eyes brighten just the smallest bit. “Really?”

“If you’re not busy. I mean, I know you’re doing a lot right now and—”

Holding up her hand, she shakes her head and grins. “Nope. No take backs.”

I chuckle and her smile grows. “Go get changed, Marlee Girl, and we’ll head out.” She pops up on her toes and kisses my cheek before taking off for her car.

The guilt still rattles around inside me as I change into swim trunks, the scars on my calf stretching with the movement. I’d sat for a couple of sessions at the tattoo shop in Blackstone Falls to have them covered.

I’d given Gemma, the tattoo artist, almost free rein outside from the basics. She’d come back with a work of art that still resonates deep inside me. Gemma had designed a timepiece and laid it over a skull, black-and-gray shading hiding the Marine Corps emblem in the mouth. I’d been choked up at the care she’d taken. You had to really look for it, but it was there.

I knew it was there and that’s all that mattered.

That’s all I wanted.

The surrounding areas were a combination of gears and bullets, the date my grandparents took us in, my sister’s birthday, purple flowers for Gran, and a sunflower for Marlee.

The flowers were the only color on the entire piece and balanced the harshness of the design. It’s me to the core and I take a minute to admire it. The tattoo was less about my needing to cover the scars and more to prevent the questions and stares that inevitably came.

I’d dealt with whispers and hushed tones my entire life. Whether it was

between my parents, landing in Clementine Creek, or getting out of the military, people had *feelings* and concerns about me.

And well-meaning or not, it made my skin crawl.

*That poor boy having to care for his sister. I can't even imagine what's going on in his head.*

*You can barely see his limp anymore but after all he's been through...*

I hated well-wishers and the look of sympathy or pity depending on their motivation.

I'd been dealt my hand and there was nothing I could do but try and do better, be better, find some sort of balance, and ride it until the next thing went wrong.

Shaking myself from the spiral, I drag my hands down my face and take a deep breath. It doesn't matter what the world thinks of me. The only ones who matter are just my family—my sister.

And her.

Pulling out my phone, I tap out a message and hit send.

SORREN: Can I borrow your house?

SUNSHINE: Yes.

SUNSHINE: Wait—for what? You're not hooking up with some tramp in my house

SORREN: I'm going to ignore the fact you think I entertain tramps.

SUNSHINE: Tramps are people too.

SORREN: Sunshine, can I borrow your house and have Marlee and Waylon over for dinner?

SUNSHINE: Of course

SUNSHINE: That's really sweet

SORREN: I've been a shit brother and friend

SUNSHINE: We've talked about this

SORREN: Well I'm done making excuses

SUNSHINE: (gif of woman rubbing her temples looking irritated)

SUNSHINE: Okay so what do you need me to do? You already vacuumed...

SORREN: How do you know it was me?

SUNSHINE: Because that damn vacuum hasn't worked for like three months and I've just been ignoring it

SORREN: Fine I fixed the vacuum and then used it

SUNSHINE: You're sexy when you clean

SORREN: Hilarious

SUNSHINE: Not to the entire female population in Tennessee —probably most of the men too

SORREN: We're getting off topic

SUNSHINE: Fiiiiine.

SUNSHINE: Want me to be there or no?

SORREN: Always want you

SUNSHINE: Are you flirting with me, Sorren Mackay?

SORREN: That implies I know how to flirt

SUNSHINE: You're impossible

SORREN: I'm taking Marlee out for the day. I'll text Waylon and I'm going to ask Hank to make dinner

SUNSHINE: That's a lot for you

SORREN: It's past due

SUNSHINE: I'm proud of you

SORREN: Nothing to be proud of Sunshine—I'm just catching up

SUNSHINE: Agree to disagree.

MY LIPS TWITCH at her sass as I pocket my phone. Rhea has become such an integral part of my existence, my recovery, and my assimilation to civilian life. I can feel our relationship starting to shift, but dammit, I need more time.

She waded with me through the darkness, through the doubt and the pain. She pushed me to be better, while never trying to make me feel less than for what I was able to give.

But that night was still burned into my brain, and the faster I got over myself, the faster I could convince her to give us a real shot.



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## RHEA

Despite him telling me he has it all under control, I still leave work early to get things ready for tonight. I want to make this special for Sorren because I don't want him beating himself up over what he could have done instead of what he *did do*.

I'm the middle sister sandwiched between two older and two younger brothers, so there was never any lack of sibling dynamics. But things between Sorren and Marlee have always been different.

He'd been her caretaker and guardian from the moment she'd been born, and every struggle, every heartache she ever had he'd internalized like it was his own. The only thing I could remotely relate to was the way Hank and I had begun working in the bakery together after he'd gotten out of prison. He'd been incarcerated for something he hadn't done and had only been recently exonerated thanks to his wife.

Hank had shown up one morning after he'd just gotten out. I hadn't been open long but I'd been hustling. I worked long hours and kept my inventory focused on the best-selling items before expanding.

I hadn't asked any questions when Hank plopped a bag of ingredients on the counter across from me, and we continued on that way for weeks.

The demand for the bread he'd baked was astronomical, and I'd taken credit, at his request, for years. I hated that he suffered for something that he didn't do, but I cherished those mornings together.

I still do.

He'd found sanctuary in the walls of my bakery—the place my heart hums as soon as I step inside. I couldn't take all the credit, but I'd gotten my

brother back and it was something I never took for granted.

Marlee had still been young when Hank got out of prison and even younger when he'd gone in. She attached herself to him like a shadow he couldn't shake—not surprising considering he's only a couple years older than Sorren. And while she looked at that particularly growly brother like a brother, I looked at hers and wanted to climb him like a tree.

And it was starting to be a problem.

Marlee hadn't given Hank an option and he'd never complained about her being in his space—the egg incident aside. But Sorren's homecoming wasn't the same, and I knew it still hurt her knowing she wasn't able to bulldoze into his life and make everything better.

Outwardly, Sorren *had* gotten better. He'd been more available to help and would show up at family functions with minimal growling.

Sometimes I missed the growling.

But he pulled back with his sister, giving her and Waylon space as they settled into being newlyweds. He'd supported Hank, showed up for Otto and Briggs, and painted most of Hannah's bookstore to help Case.

But inside, I knew it was hard for him. It was hard for him in a way that was just as hard for me. At first, I felt my friends from college picking up and leaving one by one. We'd all been busy but me being in Clementine Creek didn't fit in with their lives with husbands and kids and PTA meetings.

The reality stung, but I had my family and I loved the chaos that came with being this close to them. With each of my brothers getting married, I felt those same feelings creeping into my psyche.

I loved my brothers and their wives—I'd gained sisters and friends—but late at night when my house was quiet and the loneliness set in, I wanted that. I wanted mornings tangled up with a man who would worship my body as much as I would his.

I wanted stolen moments and kisses that were almost indecent in public and to come home after a long day and get lost in the comfort of a person who loved me every day and always.

Sighing, I arrange the flowers I picked up from Case in a water pitcher because I can't find anything else. They're pretty. Peonies, I think he said, in a beautiful peach color.

My finger caresses the delicate petals and a smile teases my lips.

*I want those things with Sorren.*

My breath catches and my smile fades like a flame being doused with a

bucket of water.

There might have been a time—hell, I thought it was inevitable—but I’d been put so far into the friend zone there was no hope of getting out. I’d made peace with it, mostly, but moments like these still snuck in when I wasn’t paying attention.

A knock on the door pulls me out of my spiral, and I can’t help my smile as my brother Hank fills the doorway.

“Can you take that top pan? It’s not hot,” he says by way of greeting.

“It’s nice to see you too, big brother,” I tease, but he just narrows his eyes at me before walking into the kitchen and preheating the oven. “You could have told me to do that before you got here.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t need long anyway.”

“What did you make?” I ask, resting my elbows on the island and peering over at him. It smells delicious, and I can’t remember the last time I ate today.

“Stuffed manicotti. There’s sauce in there.” He levels me with a serious look. “Do not burn it.” My brother is a bear of a man like our father. His dark hair is pulled into a knot at the nape of his neck, and his beard is a little longer than usual. I wonder if it’s because his wife likes it or that they’re just too busy with the triplets.

“Seriously, once. It happened once and I learned my lesson.”

“I still have nightmares,” he states flatly and I stick my tongue out at him. Hank chuckles and it’s low and husky, and my heart squeezes in my chest. My brother deserves so much happiness and now, after all these years, he finally has it.

“How did you make all this with the babies?”

He shrugs like having three of them isn’t a hardship. “Duke likes to be in that wrap thing so I wore him around the kitchen.”

My smile is impossibly wide at the mention of my nephew and godson. Not to mention the fact that the hulking man in front of me wears the baby wrap.

“You’re adorable.”

“Don’t say shit like that,” he grumbles, but it’s not as gruff as he thinks it is and does absolutely nothing to lessen the aww factor.

“Don’t say shit like what?” Sorren asks from behind me and I jump, almost knocking over the seat next to me.

“Jesus!” I gasp as I spin on him. “Make noise next time.”

“What?” Sorren asks, but the hint of a smile on his lips says he knew exactly what he was doing and will definitely be doing it again. Like it was my fault he was damn near silent coming into the house.

“You guys still on for watching the babies this weekend?” Hank asks, pulling us both out of our staring contest.

“Yeah, we’ll be there.” I narrow my eyes at Sorren as he answers for both of us before turning to nod at my brother.

“We’ll be there.”

“You guys make me tired,” Hank laments.

“We make you tired?” I ask indignantly. “You have three babies at home.”

“I know.” He levels his gaze at me, and I huff because it’s ridiculous. And probably true.

Hank stares at both of us before giving me the rundown of last-minute serving instructions. The man is remarkably bossy when it comes to food, but because he usually provides me leftovers, I don’t tease him about it.

Much.

Seriously, over the last several months he’s practically become the caterer for all family gatherings not hosted by our mama, and even then he usually contributes something big. Also, the girls’ night drink bar and charcuterie spreads he does are to die for.

With one last promise not to burn the sauce, I finally hustle my brother out the door. My reprieve doesn’t last long because as soon as I turn around, I find Sorren leaning against the island with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

Those emerald eyes sweep up and down my body and I shiver.

“I like that dress on you, Sunshine.”

His voice is so not helpful, the gravel practically soaking my panties. His gaze trails down me slowly like he knows the effect he has on me, and I want to say something to push this weird dance between us one way or the other.

I open my mouth to speak, but the sound of a car pulling into the driveway has the words dying on my lips. Sorren looks to the door and then back at me. I can’t read his expression. Instead, I give him a weak smile then paste a happier one on before opening the door.

He asked me to help him tonight, and that’s what I intend to do.

## SORREN

Waylon and Marlee arrived not long after Hank had finally relented and left the manicotti in our mostly capable hands. My sister and I had spent all day at the lake, and I could feel the tiredness in my shoulders from having paddled all over that damn thing.

But I couldn't regret it. It was a good day and we'd talked more than we had in a long while. That was my fault and I owned it, but it was still hard to see her as not only a grown woman but a married one too.

Waylon Thayer is one of the best men I know, but that doesn't mean I wanted *any* of the details about what he and my sister did behind closed doors.

It was that and it wasn't. Hank knew what it was like to shoulder the weight of the world just like I did and the thought of doing anything to taint my sister's happiness was out of the question.

Instead, I told her about Vetted Paws and the plans we had for the next few months. We were close to being able to start taking in dogs, and we'd need her and Isla to help coordinate the social media piece I wanted zero part in. I told her about some of the books I'd read and the trainings I'd attended in preparation for opening up the shelter.

She told me about how things were going with her thriving graphic design business, Willow Creek Designs, that she'd started around the time I arrived back in Clementine Creek. There weren't many places you could go in town or the surrounding counties that hadn't been touched by her expertise.

I was so proud of her for going after what she wanted. She hadn't let

anyone get in her way, especially me.

We talked about the trip she and Waylon planned to take and the frustration and heartache of not being pregnant after months of trying. She confided in me that she felt like something was wrong with her and if our mother was so awful, maybe she wasn't meant to be one either.

Those words had gutted me but not nearly as much as the look in her eyes as she said them. Guilt gnawed at me for not being able to do more, for failing to see how much she's struggling. I didn't want to overstep, but I was dying to do *something*.

Being in the kayaks made it awkward, but I'd dragged her as close as I could and taken her hand in mine. A reassuring squeeze was all I could offer as we rocked gently on the lake, but I did my best to comfort her. Marlee's heart is so big—so full of love—I'd burn down the world for her to ensure she never lost that.

The clanging of dishes in the sink pulls me from my thoughts. Rhea's been quieter than usual, and I don't want to read into it but it's probably my fault. I've asked too much from her tonight and so many times before.

When I'd first gotten home, she'd been a reassuring presence, always checking in on me but demanding nothing in return. Somewhere along the way, I'd become dependent on her, monopolizing all her time.

Kept her for myself.

It wasn't fair—I knew that. Swallowing my pride, I open my mouth to speak.

*Buzz.*

*Buzz.*

*Buzz.*

My phone vibrates on the counter, and I sigh before I even pick it up.

OTTO: How come we weren't invited to dinner?

CASE: That's a good question SORREN

OTTO: That's not allowed is it?

WAYLON: It was delicious

WAYLON: And quiet

CASE: Low blow man—low blow

HANK: They didn't burn the sauce right?

SORREN: We didn't fucking burn the sauce

OTTO: (gif of guy laughing)

CASE: (gif of guy looking scared)

WAYLON: (gif of guy snickering)

HANK: Act like my sister doesn't burn water

OTTO: That's true. Girl is a baking genius but damn she cannot cook

CASE: Also do you think she's punking us not having any food in the house?

CASE: Like she actually has it hidden behind a secret wall so we don't eat her stuff

OTTO: That's ridiculous

WAYLON: Definitely—we just raid Hank's fridge

HANK: You could return the fucking Tupperware once and a while

OTTO: ...

CASE: ...

SORREN: I got nothing for this one

WAYLON: Seriously man...

HANK: (gif of guy banging his head against the table)

HANK: Return the damn containers

OTTO: Yes dad!

HANK: I hate all of you

SORREN: Hey that's my line

“AWFULLY POPULAR OVER THERE.” Rhea says, her voice a sassy southern drawl.

“Your brothers are mad they weren't invited to dinner.” I pause and then add, “And Hank is pissed no one returns his Tupperware.”

Her eyes widen to comic proportions because she too is guilty of hoarding the containers.

“I'll drop them off tomorrow,” she says as she looks around the kitchen.

“I'm sure he'll appreciate that.” I can't hide my amusement, and she huffs and throws the dishtowel at me.

And just like that, everything is right in our world again.



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## SORREN

“Y oo-hoo! Sorren, dear.” Miss Thelma’s voice carries over the lawn as if I wasn’t already en route to her front porch. The little red-sided ranch is clean and well cared for. Flowers line the front planters, and despite Case’s offering every season, Miss Thelma does the work herself.

Her white hair is cropped close to her head and looks like she’s just come back from the salon. She’s a little thing, but she’s feisty as hell and not as frail as her more than eighty years would suggest.

“Mornin’, Miss Thelma,” I say and drop a kiss on her cheek. She swats the back of her hand against my chest like she does every time. She pretends she’s immune to the flattery but she’s not, and I love getting a rise out of her when I can.

She’s about to head for a rocking chair when she stops dead in her tracks. Her gaze narrows as she studies my face. I don’t school my expression like I do with almost everyone else, and I don’t flinch when her soft, wrinkled hand pats my cheek.

“You look tired.”

“You keep sayin’ such sweet things to me and I might never leave,” I deadpan, and she snorts before turning and heading up the porch.

She sits and grunts softly, and concern flares in my chest, but she must catch my expression because she waves me away with her hand. Woman is stubborn to a fault—probably why I like her so much.

“So tell me what’s new,” she says, smoothing down her yellow shirt that has a cat riding a skateboard on it. I’d be unsurprised to find out that she actually hated her extensive feline clothing collection and only acquired it to

give Clementine Creek something to talk about.

She's a busybody by nature but I also trust her more than most—my family notwithstanding. The weekly check-ins when I'd come home had initially been taxing, but as the time has passed I've found I like the routine of it. Thelma claimed that my Gran made her promise to look after Marlee and me when she was gone and whether it was true or not, it didn't matter.

I like the woman sitting next to me, and I'm thankful I never have to put on a front. Plus she's a pisser.

"The journalist called again," I start. "She wants to do a couple of pieces on the shelter, like behind the scenes. I know it's good for us but I hate it."

"Why? You're a delight in person."

I glare at her and she chuckles. "She'll want to talk about my time in the Marines, about being injured, probably about my past, but I like my privacy."

"And?"

"And I don't want to make it somethin' it's not. I want the focus to be on what we're doing, what we hope to achieve, and not some sob story about an injured veteran with a shitty past."

She mulls this over for a minute. "So then say that."

My gaze slides to her and she shrugs.

"Or make Tanner do the interview."

"Maybe."

"You're stalling. You know he'll say yes." Pausing for a moment, she finally adds, "But you're the heart of that place whether you believe it or not. I think it's important that you at least give her a little to work with."

"I'll think about it."

"You do that." She lowers her voice, trouble plain in her eyes. "We could talk about that other thing you keep avoiding."

"Don't start." The words are harsh, but she waves them off like they're nothing but a nuisance.

Louise, the cat whose picture adorns her shirt, weaves between Miss Thelma's legs before coming over and jumping into my lap. She purrs when I scratch behind her ear, and before long, she's settled onto my lap.

"I can see what you're doing, you know," I say without looking up.

"I meant you to," Miss Thelma huffs as she lowers her phone into her lap, a mischievous smile teasing her lips.

"Do I even want to know?" I ask and her smile grows.

"Probably not." The lift of her shoulder means I definitely don't want to

know. She's trying to appear innocent, but the woman hasn't been innocent in like six decades. "But I do think we should talk about that *other* thing."

"We've talked about it." She huffs again, and I have to fight the grin that tugs at my lips.

"It's time," she hisses, but she's wrong. I have a few more things that need to be in place before I can act. Just when I think she's dropped it she says, "Well, if you don't, someone else will, and I'm not using my savings to bail you out of jail."

Fuck.

"Soon," I relent, and her expression turns smug.

"That's my boy," she says and then cackles as her phone dings with an incoming message, reaffirming that I definitely don't want to know what she's up to.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK?" my best friend asks as he claps his hand on my shoulder. I'm not one to get choked up, but seeing everything come together this week has been nothing short of incredible.

"It looks great," I say as I stare at the sign Waylon installed over the entrance. It's massive. A mix of materials that embody the feeling we'd been trying to capture—hope, love of country, and second chances.

A distressed American flag is painted on wood planks that Waylon recovered from a barn in town. The name, Vetted Paws, is centered in front of it, the cut steel masculine and yet still refined.

Tanner clears his throat next to me, and I don't dare glance at him because I know he looks how I feel and I won't be able to keep it together. What I said to Miss Thelma was true; this place means something to Tanner and me, and I want that to be the focus—not some salacious spin on our personal lives.

The concept may have been mine but Tanner's worked just as hard to make this place be everything we need it to be both personally and professionally.

"I'm proud of you," Waylon says so only I can hear. I nod because now I can't look at him either. Despite the way our relationship has changed since he started dating and then married my sister, he'll always be my best friend.

He saw me and he never let me hide. Even when we were fourteen and he was this fresh-faced kid with shaggy blond hair and a smile plastered on his face. I yearned for even an ounce of his carefree attitude back then and relished the days I'd let it happen.

Engines rumble in the distance, and I know our moment of peace is almost over. It's the right thing to do and I *want* to share this with them, but I still appreciate the quiet that's so rare when we're all together.

Tires on gravel and doors slamming is the only warning I have before a feminine hand slips into mine.

"Oh Sorren," Marlee says reverently, her moss-green eyes looking up to meet mine. Our resemblance is obvious, but her light features are such a contrast to the dark of mine. "This is amazing."

"It's hard to believe we're getting so close."

Blood, sweat, and tears went into making this dream a reality. I'd recruited the Thayers, and even Briggs had helped out around the place. He'd used the money he made to be the first customer at the grand opening of Hannah's bookstore, Wandering Pages.

It had been cute as shit. He'd asked Fallon to bring him so he could ask me to hire him—he didn't want Tanner or Otto to influence my decision. He may be young but man, the kid is going places.

Seeing him pushing a broom around the floor had me thinking back to being barely fifteen working at Darling Farms. We'd done anything and everything they needed out in the orchard. Waylon and I had taken girls out for milkshakes with that first paycheck.

He'd made me promise we'd spend it—said he'd let me save all the ones after but that first one we were going to have fun.

And we did.

I didn't save a penny, but I also made sure to take Marlee out for an ice cream sundae too. It was the first time I'd ever bought her something simply because I wanted to and not because I had to. Flora had taken a picture of us in the booth, my arm wrapped around her and our smiles wide and carefree.

That picture traveled with me overseas and back home again. I'd been lucky enough to save it from where I stowed it in the pocket of my plate carrier. When the offices are done here, I'll frame it so I can see every day how far we've come.

How far I've come.

We stare at the building a while longer before my eyes lock with my

favorite pair of blue ones. Rhea stands off to the side, her arms crossed over her chest and a soft smile on her lips.

It's been days since I've seen her, and it's starting to wear on me. I crave the quiet she brings and after today, I'm going to need it.

Looking around the lot, I take a breath and squeeze my sister's hand once more before letting go. I have to make the rounds and then hopefully I'll be able to soak in a little sunshine.

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## SORREN

After texting Rhea, I head over to her place. The drive isn't far, but I'm antsy after today. Pulling into her driveway, I put my car in park and climb out. Her house is the perfect blend of things to make it feel welcoming—like home.

I knock and when there's no answer, I let myself in. I've been here hundreds of times, so I don't think twice about letting myself in. She'd even given me a key for when she was at the shop and I needed a place to unwind.

The kitchen smells like fresh-baked cookies, and a smile instantly graces my lips. The house *always* smells like something sugary and delicious—much like it's owner.

Her purse and phone are on the counter, and it's quiet except for Rhea's soft feminine voice and a low hum coming from the back bedroom.

*What the...*

My brain stutters on that thought until a soft moan sounds from down the hall.

The one that leads to Rhea's bedroom.

Swallowing, I move closer, silently avoiding every creak in the hardwood as my heart pounds in my chest.

I shouldn't be doing this but I just—

“Oh yes! *Oh God yes! Sorren, please.*”

Rhea's moans grow louder and I can't turn away and I can't wait any longer. Putting my hand on the doorknob, the metal feels cool as I turn it and push the door open.

Oh shit.

*Oh shit.*

I sit up on a gasp—my heart racing faster than any amount of cardio could produce—and drag my hands down my face.

A dream.

A goddamn fucking dream.

I woke up before my mind could conjure her naked and spread out for me on her bed, but it felt so real—her moans and my name on her lips.

Fuck.

My dick strains against my boxer briefs to the point of pain, and I already hate myself for what I'm about to do. I hadn't gotten to see her last night. She'd left soon after showing up at Vetted Paws, claiming she was tired and would see me later.

She hadn't responded to my texts last night, and apparently my mind needed no help summoning dreams of her.

Hot fucking dreams.

Throwing the sheets back, my feet hit the carpet, and it's a short walk to the bathroom in what used to be Waylon's trailer. My calf is tight but no more than any other day.

My steps are silent as I move through the space.

Light on.

Water on.

Do not look in the mirror.

The last one I repeat again to myself before stepping in under the spray and immediately taking my dick in my hand. I don't even stop the images from coming as I grip myself harder and stroke from base to head.

Rhea spread out on the bed is like a goddamn movie in my mind. One hand cupping her perfect tit while the other works the vibrator between her legs. She moans and I can hear that sweet fucking rasp as she says my name, begs me to join her, but I like seeing her like this.

I like knowing just the idea of me can get her off.

Dips and valleys I want to drag my tongue over, pretty pink nipples I want to nip and lavish with my mouth, and the perfect curve of her hips that I want to sink my fingers in as I thrust into her over and over.

My movements are controlled even as my pace increases, but inside I'm anything but. The intensity of my release is brutal as it paints the wall of the shower.

Dropping my head back, I stare up at the ceiling and blow out a breath.

This never happened before—well, not until recently—and there was a fucking reason. I couldn't look at Rhea like that so I didn't.

Hadn't.

I was a goddamn mess and not capable of offering anyone anything right now. Not only that, but Rhea had become my haven—my safe space. She was the calm to the chaos that raged inside me.

That had been my excuse in the beginning, what I told myself over and over so I wouldn't start wishing for things that could never be mine. But after months—years—it was just that. An excuse.

But that kiss after her friend Harper's wedding had changed everything. It lived rent free in my mind and it was becoming a fucking problem. The cum on the shower wall was proof of that.

The wedding in Nashville, over eight months ago, had been a decent time, and I hadn't hesitated when she'd asked me to be her date. If I'd known this would've been the result I would have done the same damn thing.

For her.

Because she'd asked.

I wanted to protect her, sure—it was a couple of hours' drive from Clementine Creek and she shouldn't have to go alone— but selfishly thinking about some douchebag with his hands on her made me see red.

She'd had a couple of drinks and hadn't stopped touching me all night. Every touch, no matter how innocent, had lit me up inside and I'd unapologetically returned them knowing I couldn't act on them the way I wanted to.

The contradictions weren't lost on me. I didn't want anyone else to have her but I couldn't have her either.

Yet.

I couldn't have her *yet*.

But fuck, that kiss.

It kept me up at night and I could feel my restraint slipping with each passing day. This morning was further proof of that, but I need more time.

Soon.

Soon I wouldn't have to wonder what she tasted like as she fell apart in my hands.

Slamming the water too cold, I wash away my earlier transgressions and do my best to chill my ass out because it's going to be a long fucking day and I have shit to do.





## RHEA

I fold the dough over again with more force than necessary as Sorren broods from the stool on the other side of the island at The Poppy Seed. I've been avoiding him for the last couple of days, and I don't even know why exactly.

I'd been overcome with emotion seeing all the hard work he and Tanner had put into Vetted Paws finally coming together. He'd wanted to see me after he finished up, and I'd wanted to celebrate him and his accomplishments. But the later it got, the more I felt like an afterthought. I'd ignored his messages when they finally came because my feelings were hurt. I wasn't his girlfriend and maybe that was the problem.

I was sick of pretending I didn't want him. I was tired of acting like being his friend was all I'd ever need. And I was in desperate need of an orgasm that wasn't at my own hand.

Beneath all of that, though, were feelings I'd tried to ignore. They were petty and childish but I couldn't help it. I felt like I'd been replaced. Since starting up Vetted Paws, he'd been distracted. He spent all his time with Tanner, which made sense, but my stupid heart didn't care. He felt like another person who'd moved on when I was still here doing the same things day after day.

That and when he was present he was growling at every guy who dared glance in my direction. I hated the tension between us almost as much as I craved its inevitable combustion. We'd survived this long, but there was no way we'd make it much longer. Not unless something changed.

"Why are you upset?" Sorren's voice breaks the silence and I grunt.

"I'm not."

He's just sitting there and staring but I can *feel* the tension radiating off him. He doesn't believe me, and not even the magical voice of Carrie Underwood can keep me in my baking groove.

As a rule—a strict rule—I don't bake when I'm in a bad mood because, call me crazy, but I believe in baking with love and positive vibes.

And that's not what's happening right now.

I slam my hands on the countertop, but Sorren doesn't even flinch as his eyes travel slowly up my body to meet mine and that pisses me off more. It's assessing and interested and dammit... I just can't anymore.

"What?" I demand.

"I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to. I can tell something is wrong and you're in here throwing off my baking vibes and I can't with this right now so tell me *what* is going on." I bark out the words like I haven't been over here stewing after telling him I'm fine too.

We stare at each other, neither of us giving an inch in this standoff. My chest heaves and I'm a second away from throwing the sugar cookie dough at his head when he speaks.

"Marlee and Waylon are having trouble getting pregnant."

"I know. I've talked to her a little bit about it," I say carefully because this conversation has thrown me.

"She's hurting and I don't know how to help."

"You help by being there for her. By being there for Waylon and listening when they need to talk. You ask them what they need and then do your best to provide it."

*The things I never had.*

"But maybe I could call the doctor I found, a specialist—"

"You did what?!" I screech and his jaw tics. "Sorren that is *not* your place. Marlee is your sister and she's a grown, *married* woman. Those decisions—doctor decisions—should be made privately between her and Waylon unless they ask for your help. That is wildly out of line."

"She's my sister. I just want what's best for her and—"

"She's not a job!" I yell as I fight to get the apron over my head and fist it in my hand. "She's not something you need to obsess over. She's married and you know as well as anyone that Waylon will do everything in his power to make his wife happy and loved and safe."

"She's not a fucking job. She's the only family I have. You think it's so

wrong that I want her to be happy and living the life she deserves?”

“What about you, Sorren? Are *you* living the life you deserve?” He doesn’t answer so I keep going. “Your sister fell in love with my brother and guess what—they’re happy. Totally head over heels in love and yes, it’s really hard right now but they have each other and if they need us, we’re all here for them.”

“I’m livin’ just fine.”

“Are you? Are you though? What about us?”

“Fuck, Rhea, don’t push this again. What we have now works. I like being there for you. Being the person you call—bein’ here. Can’t we just leave it at that? I need to just leave it at that.”

“What the hell do you think a relationship is, Sorren? That’s exactly what we are. I just don’t get to have any orgasms.” His eye twitches and I throw the apron that I’ve wadded up in my hands at his head. He catches it with ease as he stands slowly.

“We talked about this,” he says in a deadly calm voice that does nothing but make me madder than a bee in a bonnet.

“We did. And I’m done pretendin’ you’re going to pull your head out of your ass and pick a life with me over the obligation you feel toward your sister.”

“That is not what it is.”

“Bullshit,” I snap and I dig my nails into my palm to hold off the tears a little longer. “You know what the worst part is? I was asked out on a date and I didn’t respond because I thought *maybe* you’d man up and be the one.” Shaking my head, I chuff out a humorless laugh as a single tear slides down my cheek. He doesn’t miss it because his jaw tics. “I’m going to call Hank to come take care of this.” I wave my hands around the kitchen. “I need a couple of days. Do *not* follow me.”

“Rhea.”

“Don’t.”

“Dammit, Rhea.” His voice is low and gravelly like it always is, but I ignore him as I grab my purse and keys and head out the back door. My hands are still covered in dough as I slam the call button.

“Hey, are you all right?” Hank asks on the first ring.

“I need you to go to the bakery and...” I blow out a breath because I don’t even know what has to be done. “Just put the dough in the freezer and clean up.” He’s quiet for a beat and then I hear him talking in a muffled voice

followed by the closing of his front door.

“Are you going to tell me why?”

“It’s probably still sitting there.”

“Did he do something?” he asks in a deadly tone that would rival Sorren’s. I worry my bottom lip, debating how much I can tell my brother.

How much I’m willing to give.

“It’s more like what he’s *not* doing and also I said some things he didn’t want to hear so I think he’s pissed but...” I brush away another tear. “I just want to be happy, you know? I want to be someone’s first priority and...” My breath catches and I swallow down the emotion. “If you need help just call me and I’ll walk you through it.”

“I’ll be fine. Just take care of you.” He pauses and I almost think he’s hung up when he speaks. “You deserve it all, Rhea. Love you.”

“Love you too,” I whisper into the phone and then hang up. I need time and I need space away because I was stupid to think he’d ever choose me.

Picking up my phone again, I call the one man that won’t ask any questions.

“Hello?” He says on the second ring.

“Can I stay at your place for a couple of days?”



**RHEA**

8 MONTHS AGO

It feels like I've barely closed my eyes when my alarm goes off. It's well and truly the only time I hate owning my own business because despite having done this exact thing for *years*—I hate early mornings.

I'm not a morning person and my brothers have all given me shit for it—at least up until they wanted coffee and muffins on their way to work.

Harper's wedding had been beautiful, and I loved seeing my friend get married but not finding coverage sooner was a huge oversight on my part.

Dragging myself from my bed, I bypass the mirror—seriously, no one needs that—and jump into the shower. I wish I could take a hot one but I'll be sleeping standing up so I hustle through the necessities in lukewarm water.

I'm thankful that my foggy brain waited until I was at least dressed before it assaulted me with memories from the night before. My stomach sinks at how the near perfect night turned so fast.

Because of me.

I wanted to yell and scream at all his excuses because that's what they were.

Sorren Mackay had kissed me back. He'd kissed me and stopped just short of hauling me across the console to sit in his lap. He'd liked it.

I knew he did.

But then he'd been so angry when he pulled away—like it was my fault for makin' him feel something.

*Is this because of what happened before? You're doin' this now to get back at me?*

The accusation hadn't made sense last night and it doesn't make sense



now. I'd jumped out of the car so fast I barely heard his cursing behind me as I hustled up my front walk.

He'd caged me against the front door, his expression stormy and his chest heaving. He was all worked up, and I wanted to see him lose that last bit of control more than I wanted my next breath.

Sorren and I had never been a *thing*. We'd never had a moment or a time in our lives when we'd been pining after each other, so I didn't understand what he was tryin' to raise hell about.

A niggling at the back of my mind has me pausing, the wand of my mascara frozen in front of my face. A weird, misplaced memory of a few weeks in college has my heart beating a little faster before I shake my head and coat my lashes accordingly.

I don't have secrets.

Except that one.

It wasn't really even a secret—just something that I tried not to think about too often for fear of soul-numbing guilt and heartache. I hadn't done anything wrong, but the relief I felt was still something I struggled with.

Sighing, I throw the tube in my makeup bag and pull my wet hair back into a small bun. I just have to make it through the morning shift and then I can come home and take a bath—dammit, a hot shower.

Baths make me think of Sorren, and my imagination has no shortage of material of him soapy and soaking wet. Our trips to the spa had resulted in him commandeering my tub on occasion to soak in the hot water. He claimed it helped his calf after a long day and I couldn't argue with that.

Growling, I snatch my phone from the counter, stomp through my bedroom, and yank open the door.

And stop dead in my tracks.

Sorren's massive form unfolds from my couch as he sits up and looks at me. He's wearing only a white cotton T-shirt and boxer briefs hidden under the blanket I keep over the back of the couch.

It's my favorite and I gifted myself the blue flannel monstrosity two Christmases ago.

His pants, dress shirt, and jacket are draped over the recliner, and I know he's assessing me just as much as I am him. I have so many questions and part of me is pissed that he crashed on my couch.

Not because he slept here—he's slept here before—but he should have used the guest room. He didn't feel comfortable enough to sleep there and it

hurts my heart.

“You can sleep a little longer or I can make coffee,” I say as his eyes finally meet mine. The truth is I don’t want to fight with him even if he is so beautiful it leaves me breathless and wanting.

So much wanting.

“I just wanted to know you’re okay,” he says, his voice thick with sleep making it sound more gravelly than normal.

Suppressing a shiver, I paste a soft smile on my face. “Why wouldn’t I be?” I know he’s not talking about my limited alcohol consumption, and a part of me regrets the words when the emotion in his eyes disappears completely.

“I don’t want you to be late. I’ll lock up, or just give me two minutes and I’ll be gone.”

He doesn’t wait for my answer, just stands and lets the blanket drop to the couch. I avert my eyes as I hustle into the kitchen and then shamelessly look at him over my shoulder for a full three seconds and practically whimper.

The material of his boxer briefs is *molded* to his ass and thighs and it’s all muscle. So much glorious muscle I can’t touch.

And now it’s weird.

This morning is weird, I’m being weird, and now, so is he.

I slam two travel mugs onto the counter.

Sorren clears his throat behind me, and the sound has my shoulders climbing up toward my ears. He notices because he lets out an almost silent curse.

“I’m just going to go,” he says.

“You’ll wait for coffee.”

“Rhea—”

Spinning, I slam my hands onto my hips. “You will *wait* for coffee.” I bark the words and I have no idea why.

“You don’t need to do that. I can just—”

I point at the coffee pot behind me that’s hissing and dripping as the deliciously rich scent fills the air. “No.”

The corners of his lips twitch just the slightest bit as he holds his hands out in surrender. “I’m not tryin’ to make more work for you, Sunshine. I just wanted you to be okay.”

He’s rumpled and sexy and I hate that I want to climb him when that’s the last thing he wants. He’s mouthwatering and I’m grouchy and look only

slightly better than the living dead.

And I'm wearing makeup. Life is so unfair.

"Don't call me sunshine. I'm nobody's sunshine," I snap because on top of everything else, I'm defensive and hurt and lacking caffeine.

"You're my sunshine," he says quietly as he takes a step toward me then stops. "I'm sorry I can't be what you need."

Any of the fight still coursing through my veins dissipates, and my shoulders sag because losing him makes me feel like I'm going to throw up.

"We're fine. I'm sorry. I just got caught up in the moment," I say as I wrap my arms around his waist and press the side of my face to his chest. The cotton of his T-shirt is soft and still smells like the cologne he put on yesterday.

It happens slowly, but Sorren's arms finally come around me. He sighs into my hair, his lips pressing a lingering kiss on my head.

The coffee pot beeps, breaking the spell between us. Reluctantly, I let go and fix his coffee the way he likes it, my heart hammering as my hands move on autopilot.

Our fingertips brush as he takes the travel mug from me and takes a sip, his eyes locked on mine.

"Thank you," he murmurs and I nod before grabbing my own mug. He moves toward the door, and before I can stop myself I call out after him.

"Are we okay?"

"Yeah, Sunshine. We're okay." He winks and then Sorren Mackay is out the door, and I blow out the breath I've been holding since I walked inside the house last night.



**SORREN**

PRESENT DAY

Rage consumes me as I watch Rhea walk out the door. I can't follow her because—fuck! If I follow her I'm going to kiss the hell out of her.

Maybe I should have kissed her—consequences be damned.

I drag my hands down my face and slow my breathing so I don't do something else I'm going to regret.

She's going on a date?

Fuck that.

Just hearing the words was like a knife to the chest, and I'm so in my own head that I almost miss the sound of a truck outside.

Almost.

The boots are heavy on the sidewalk, and I know who I'm about to face off with before he even comes into view.

Out of all the brothers, Hank and I are the most evenly matched physically. His face is a mask of indifference, but his eyes hold a fury I know well. Stepping inside, he walks straight to the sink and washes his hands.

He's waiting me out but he doesn't need to. We both know I'm fucking this up. I just need to figure out how to fix it.

Hank dries his hands on a towel and then sets the oven to preheat before moving to the work bench and attacking the dough with a rolling pin.

"I'm only going to say this once because honestly it's none of my business and Rhea can take care of herself." He pauses and then looks me dead in the eye as he says, "She's the best of all of us. Don't make her your project. Be her fucking partner, and if that's not the best you can give her—then let her go."

“That’s not—”

“She is the best of all of us.” He punctuates each word, and as intended, I feel every single one like a bullet to the chest.

“Did she—” I try again but he cuts me off with a snarl.

“No, she didn’t say anything, asshole. But anyone who has been watching *at all* since you got back knows there’s something going on between you two.”

I don’t like the implication that people have been whispering about us, especially for that long, but I’m not surprised. The miscommunication I failed to correct tonight isn’t that she’s second best—she’s not. She’s so much better than I am and I’m so fucking scared I’m going to lose her, not just as a lover but as a friend.

“What if…” I start and then swallow hard as Hank’s expression goes from murderous to somewhat less lethal, but I don’t know how to form the words.

*What if I lose her? What if I lose the only place I feel like I can truly let my guard down and be myself? What if she gets tired of holding me up all the time?*

The last one hurts the worst because the wound is still fresh and I hate feeling like I deserve this—like it was only just a matter of time before something good was ripped from my life again.

Hank points his finger at me. “Fix that shit.”

He knows better than anyone what I’m feeling. He lived a very parallel existence and while he’s found his place, my road to recovery is something else entirely.

Hank slams the cookie cutter down with surprising precision across the flattened dough before he looks at me again. “What?”

“I never wanted anyone to have to choose sides.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Hank’s eye twitches as he whips the cookie cutter into the sink. It slams around before coming to rest in the basin, the sound echoing through the quiet of the kitchen. “It’s not about sides. Do you think I didn’t want to beat the shit out of Waylon after everything he pulled with Marlee?” He points an accusatory finger at me. “And you for that matter?”

Waylon and I had definitely been on the wrong side of my sister’s wrath, but even in the moment I was proud of her for standing her ground. I’d had to build a chicken coop and help plan his *grand gesture*, but it was far from penance seeing her so happy in the end.

But Hank was right. Marlee had been pissed and she'd called him and he'd been there without question.

"It's hard, man. I won't say it's not. It's constantly reminding yourself every day that you're worth the time and affection of another person—to let that person see the darkest sides of you. But you have to."

*I don't know if I can.*

He must see it written on my face because he lifts a shoulder and then lets it fall before grabbing a baking sheet and setting it on the island next to him.

"Whatever is haunting you"—he pauses for emphasis like he knows it isn't just one thing—"will never be worth the loneliness. She's already shown you she can walk beside you. You just haven't been paying attention."

With that, he returns to the task at hand, and I slip silently from the kitchen and out into the night. Hank was right about a lot of things except one. I *have* been paying attention and that's the problem. Fear seeps into my veins as the reality that I may have already lost her crashes over me. And now I need the only other place that has ever felt like home if I have any chance of surviving this mess.

I LET myself in the back door of the farmhouse that growing up was more to me than just my best friend's house. Vincent sits at the table reading the paper and looks up when he hears the creak of the screen door.

"Should I be concerned that my daughter is takin' a few days off at the bakery and you're here lookin' like you do?"

The pages crinkle as he folds it back into its original shape and waits. I know I could walk right past him and up the stairs to the room they keep for when I need to disappear for a while.

Hiding in plain sight.

But for all intents and purposes he's my father and he deserves...*something*.

Pulling the chair out across from him, I drop my head into my hands as my elbows hit the kitchen table.

"She's mad at me."

"Put that together all on my own if you can believe it."

My lips twitch ruefully as I sit back and drag my hands down my face



before looking at him.

“I don’t know how to turn it off.”

He doesn’t ask me to clarify because we’ve talked about it time and time again. I’ve been assessing situations since I was eight years old while taking care of my sister. When we came here, it took a while, but I slowly let others share the burden. It was never truly gone but I wasn’t so panicked all the time over how she was or what she was doing.

I trusted everyone to keep her safe—I trusted *her* to be safe when I joined the Marine Corps. It was something I wanted so badly—a need. A calling. And I’d been damn good at it.

It should have been my career, but shit happens and I’d landed back in Clementine Creek with nothing but time on my hands.

“Tanner and I have been working nonstop, and he’s the only one who gets it because he’s adjusting too but—”

“It’s a process and there’s nothin’ wrong with needing time.”

I want to say *tell that to your daughter* but I’d never disrespect him like that.

“She’s going on a date.”

He crosses his big arms over his chest and stares at me. “It’s her decision and all, but do you want her to go?”

I don’t answer right away and not because I need to think about it—I don’t. I’m just sick of doing the right thing.

“She doesn’t deserve me like this.”

“Son, let me tell you what my daddy told me.” The chair creaks as he tips back in it. “Flora and I were hemmin’ and hawin’ about having a baby but we didn’t have much, and I just kept lookin’ to the next thing thinkin’ *that* would make me feel ready. And you know what he said to me?”

I shake my head.

“He said we would never be *ready*. We could prepare until the cows came home but there would never be a ‘right time.’”

“So what, you just do it, consequences be damned?”

“No.” His answer is firm as his gaze locks on mine. “You trust your partner to help you through it. You’ve done the work, son. You let your brothers and your sister walk with you and you’ve leaned on Rhea the most through it all.”

“Didn’t have much choice with the lot of them.”

His lips tip up slightly. “But you did have one.” I give a halfhearted nod.

“She loves you, you know.”

“I know. That’s the problem.”

*I won’t survive if she stops loving me.*

Silence stretches between us before he raps his knuckles on the table twice before standing.

“Let me ask you this,” he says as he stares down at me. “Will you stay if you lose her?” Vincent’s gaze is knowing. “I know you’ve got the shelter, but you’ve been restless since you landed on your granddaddy’s porch. You must be tired from waitin’ for the other shoe to drop after all these years.”

“I’m not sure she’s going to forgive me.”

She’d forgive me as a friend—as family. But being *with* her—there was no guarantee.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Guess it just depends how hard you’re gonna work for it. For her.”

That was the question...and it wasn’t. I wanted her—God, how I wanted her—but did she deserve the darkness I couldn’t shake?

It wasn’t something I could answer tonight. Pulling myself from the table, I push in the chair and climb the stairs, praying I’ll be able to fall asleep.



## RHEA

Sneaking into Colt's lake house last night had been harder than I'd anticipated. The shortstop for the Illinois Blues was my accidental friend and nothing more, despite the occasional murmurings through town. In another lifetime we might have had a shot at something romantic, but in this one we were both hopelessly pining over people who hadn't returned the sentiment.

Misery loves company and all that.

He hadn't hesitated when I called and asked to stay here. Colt was flying down tomorrow to check on his restaurant and passion project, The Iron Cask, but for the time being, I had the place to myself.

I'd navigated down the winding driveway after turning off the main road and cutting my headlights. I had no illusions I'd go completely undetected here, but I hoped to do everything I could to postpone the inevitable. Parking in the small garage, I'd drawn the curtains as soon as I got inside.

The lake house was pretty, but it wasn't home. Not my home at least. The interior reminded me of the Cedar Lake Spa with the soft paint tones, oversized furniture, and plank wood floors. And that had my thoughts circling back to Sorren's and my pedicure appointments that I'd canceled for later today. I couldn't face him.

Not yet.

Looking down at my toes, I sigh because I was really looking forward to that, and my nail polish has seen better days.

A knock on the door has me jumping, dry cereal flying across the kitchen. "Don't even bother acting like you're not in there," Isla says. Resigned, I

make my way across the hardwood floor to let my sister-in-law inside.

“Hey,” I say defeatedly as I pull the door open and find not only her, but Hannah too.

“Hey yourself,” Isla says as she walks past me.

Hannah gives me a rueful smile. “We share a wall, Cupcake.”

*Fuck my life.*

I really needed to remember that Hannah’s bookstore, Wandering Pages, was connected to my bakery. My brother Case turned the vacant side of my building into Hannah’s dream and I couldn’t lie—it still made my eyes tear up a little.

Taking a cleansing breath, I close the door and then follow them into the kitchen where I find a broom in the pantry and start cleaning up my mess.

The Cheerios at least.

“How did you find me?” I ask even though I’m not sure I want to know.

Isla gives me an annoyed look. “Traced your phone.”

“What?” I screech and Hannah snickers.

“I’m kidding.” I stare at Isla expectantly. “What? What good is having a private investigator on retainer if I can’t use him?”

“Isla...” I warn and she coughs out a laugh.

“Fine. I had to grab something from the cabin and asked my dad to come over and stay with the babies so I could get it.” She shrugs. “I saw the lights on and Colt always tells us when he’s coming. It wasn’t hard to put together.”

“They were on for like two seconds.”

“Well then, it was a poorly planned two seconds on your part.”

“Did you guys tell my brothers I’m here?” They shake their heads and I blow out a breath then narrow my eyes at Hannah. “Wait. So how are you here?”

“I knew Hank came to close up the bakery, so I texted Isla because I was worried.” When I don’t respond she adds, “Seriously, we share a wall and I’m nosy.”

For someone who had such a hard time putting down roots, Hannah had acclimated to the small town busybody life pretty quickly.

“Want to talk about why you’re not climbing Sorren Mackay like a tree right now and why he’s especially murderous?” Isla asks, focusing the attention back on me?

Clutching the broom to my chest, I look up at them and give a sad smile. “Because he doesn’t want me.”

Isla snorts. “Yeah...” she drawls. “He doesn’t want you almost as much as Hank is a little protective over his kids.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Isn’t it though?” Isla asks.

“He literally said it.”

“Those exact words?” Hannah presses.

“I, uh...” I look away quickly, my eyes blinking fast to stop the tears. “I kissed him. After the wedding we were at with Hayden and Everett.” Turning back, I meet her gaze. “He was mad and things haven’t been the same, but they were fine and then yesterday I’d just had enough.”

It wasn’t all of it but it was all I could give. I’d left my heart on the floor of the bakery and I wasn’t sure if I was more mad at him or me. I’d been so stupid to think if I just gave him time he’d come around.

“Hold on,” Hannah says. “I need details on that kiss.”

“The kiss is irrelevant,” I hiss.

“Uh, the kiss is totally relevant,” Isla adds. “Did he kiss you back? Was it mind-blowing?”

“Ugh!” I cover my face with my hands. “Yes. And yes.”

“I knew it,” Hannah says and Isla high-fives her.

“Would have been such a letdown otherwise.”

“Can we focus?” I all but snap and Hannah holds her hand out, motioning for me to continue. Clearing my throat I say, “I need to move on. I told him I was done.” Lowering my voice I add, “I told him someone asked me on a date.” Dinner with Colt wasn’t a date, but I’d still felt guilty agreeing before things had blown up with Sorren.

Isla’s eyebrows are in her hairline before she laughs. “Oh, I can’t wait.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I wave my hand around. “Am I supposed to hide out here forever and be a hermit? I just can’t be Waylon’s sad little sister pining after a guy who has just transferred all his overbearing bullshit on me because he can’t suffocate his sister anymore.”

“You know damn well he’s still fussing over her.” I don’t say anything because try as I might, I don’t hate him enough to betray his trust. “And I don’t think he sees you like that at all.”

Now it’s my turn to snort. “Of course he does.”

Hannah raises her hand like she’s waiting for the teacher to call on her. “I’m also going to have to disagree. I saw the two of you at the bar, remember? After we did the boudoir shoots? You can’t fake that kind of

chemistry.”

Hannah had offered to do the shoot for each of us. Marlee had wanted to surprise Waylon with something for their anniversary, and somehow I’d been roped into it too. My pictures, while beautiful, sit hidden in my closet. I don’t have anyone to show them to and at the rate my life is going right now, that won’t be changing anytime soon.

Dropping onto the nearest stool, I slump against the counter. “Y’all aren’t helping.”

Isla looks to Hannah. “I didn’t think that was why we were here, did you?”

“Nope.” Hannah pops the *p*, and I throw a stray Cheerio from the counter at her.

“I’m here for the entertainment and pity party,” Isla says, and it’s delivered with so much sass I can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of my throat.

She grins and I hate my sister-in-law a little less.

“What am I going to do?”

“What do you want to do?” Hannah asks and I shrug.

“I want to be happy and I want to be someone’s first priority.” I swallow hard and unsuccessfully blink away the tears. “I just want to be happy like y’all are.”

“Oh sweetie,” Isla says and then both she and Hannah are wrapping their arms around me. I’m not sure how long they let me cry, Isla cradling me against her chest and Hannah whispering words of encouragement and offers of burying his body in turn.

And I appreciate both of them more than I can possibly say.

“I don’t want to make this weird,” I start as I look at Isla, “but your boobs are really great.”

She stares down and then cups them with her hands. “Right? Pregnancy and breastfeeding have made them out of control, but the babies like them.” Her expression turns mischievous. “And so does your brother.”

I laugh and even though my heart is heavy, I know that no matter what happens, these girls won’t let me fall.

“So, just to clarify, no to the body burying right now?” Hannah asks sweetly and I snort.

“For now.”

“Well, the offer stands,” she says with a wink and I nod with a smile.

A real one.

And even though I'm mad at him, I hope Sorren is okay.





# SORREN

OTTO: Do we need to kill you?

CASE: Seriously man. I love you but she's our baby sister

SORREN: She's like two years older than you

OTTO: THAT IS NOT IMPORTANT

SORREN: I'm trying to fix it

WAYLON: Work faster

SORREN: Like each of you hasn't fucked up

SORREN: Like I haven't helped every one of you so give me a goddamn break

HANK: I told you last night

SORREN: I know

OTTO: Well?

CASE: She's the best though man—it's different when she's hurting.

OTTO: I hurt when she hurts

WAYLON: She really is the best

OTTO: Gives the best presents too

HANK: Is that pertinent right now?

OTTO: What? She does

CASE: Isla teach you that word?

HANK: Fuck off

OTTO: (gif of little kid giggling)

CASE: He MEANS she's really thoughtful and KNOWS us.

OTTO: Thanks bro

CASE: (gif of guy winking)

WAYLON: Cool so anyway, what's the plan

SORREN: I'm doing this alone

SORREN: Believe it or not—not everyone wants to share every  
fucking thing they ate today

OTTO: (gif of guy squinting)

OTTO: I know he wasn't talking to us

CASE: Definitely not

WAYLON: It's okay to ask for help

SORREN: Unless you know where she's hiding then I don't  
need help

HANK: She didn't tell me but I think at least some of the girls  
know

CASE: What are you going to do when you find her?

SORREN: She deserves any kind of conversation before you fuckers

OTTO: (gif of guy spraying champagne all over)

WAYLON: Fucking finally

HANK: I'll second that

OTTO: It's third big guy

HANK: What?

OTTO: Waylon gets second

HANK: What the fuck ever

CASE: I love when you get all riled up

SORREN: Are we done now?

WAYLON: Dunno. Are we?

OTTO: We are. I trust you not to screw it up anymore.

OTTO: Team SORRHEA

CASE: I can't tell if that's weird or not

HANK: Definitely weird

**M**y phone feels like it's going to shatter in my hand from how hard I'm holding it. I've been driving around for hours today and I still can't find her. She hasn't returned my calls or texts and low-key panic is starting to set in.

I let my head fall back against the headrest and count to ten. My phone continues to vibrate but I ignore it, every incoming message grating on my nerves.

I need a break and I need to regroup. My calf is practically screaming from sitting for so long. Without giving it a second thought, I close out of the group message and pull up my contacts. Scrolling, I find who I'm looking for and hit the call button.

"Hello?"

"You home?" I ask Tanner without preamble.

"Yes."

"Briggs with you?"

"No."

"I'm coming over."

"O—"

I hang up and do my best not to peel out of Rhea's driveway. I'd started and stopped here today just fucking praying she'd come home and we could talk about last night. I couldn't form the words and that's on me.

But now I need to find her—so I can say everything I should have so she knows what she's getting into.

So she knows what she does to me.

The ride to Tanner's house is something of a blur, and I'm thankful that it takes no more than a few minutes to get from one side of town to the other.

Parking almost sideways behind his car, I climb out. I'm about to start banging on his door when he opens it. Tanner doesn't speak as he steps back, allowing me to barge into his space.

A root beer sits on the table next to a glass already filled with ice. It's become an unspoken thing that everyone just has cans of root beer for me at all times. After being injured, the medication really fucked with me and I don't want to have that feeling of losing control ever again.

I crack the can open and dump it into the glass. The pop and fizz of the liquid as it slides over the ice fills the silence with a deafening roar. I'm stalling but he doesn't rush me. Instead, Tanner leans against the sink watching me.

"I need you to tell me I didn't just fuck up the best thing I have going right now."

Tanner's eyebrows lift slowly but he remains silent. "With Rhea?" he asks after a long pause.

I nod, picking the glass up and putting it back on the table without taking a sip. Standing up, I curse under my breath and brace my hands on the kitchen chair, using its stability to stretch out my calf. Wordlessly, Tanner

places a bottle of over the counter pain meds in front of me and returns to his spot at the sink.

Popping the top, I take a couple and then finally look at my friend and business partner.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I admit finally.

“I’m no expert, but I think you’ve already been doing it.”

Rhea’s words from last night float through my mind. I’d had all night to dissect everything she’d said.

And everything she hadn’t.

He blows out a breath, crossing and uncrossing his arms. “I’m probably not the right person to give advice but,”—he sighs—“what are you so afraid of? Honestly, I’m surprised she’s let this go on so long.”

“I just wanted more time.”

“For what?”

“To be settled. Established. To—”

“Those are fucking excuses,” Tanner says and it sounds so unnatural coming from him. “She’s been with you this whole time and *that* should mean something.”

“It means everything. I just wanted more time.”

“Some don’t get that luxury,” he says pointedly. It’s a dig and it’s not. I’m lucky to be here. Lucky to be alive but is it so wrong to want to do this on my terms?

“I know.”

“So what are you scared of?”

*That being with me will dim her light.*

“That I’ll lose her in the end.”

“You’ve lost her now.” I suppress the growl that wants to escape and he shrugs. “By all accounts you have, and you’re going to need to do something big to show her you’re all in.”

“You’re kind of shit at this.”

“Yeah well, bottom line is we all have baggage and it’s up to the people we build a relationship with if they want to help us carry it or not. We can’t make that decision for them.”

“That mean you’re ready to jump into the dating pool?”

“Hell no,” he says and I grunt.

“What happened to all that ‘let them help you carry it’ BS you just said?”

“I’m still packing mine.” He tries for a joke. “Might need a bigger

suitcase.”

“I’m here if you want to talk about it.”

“I think it’s best if only one of us is having a breakdown at a time, don’t you?” My lips twitch the slightest bit and he nods.

“Yeah, and thanks for”—I wave my hand around the kitchen—“this.”

He smiles and his relief is palpable. “Anytime.”

Ducking my head, I turn and head for the door. I can’t decide if I feel better or worse but one thing is clear. I need to find Rhea and I need to trust that it’s not too late.

THE DAY WAS TURNING into night and I still hadn’t found her. I’d been all over Clementine Creek and the surrounding towns with no leads. She could have gone farther but it didn’t feel right. She was close—I just had to figure out where.

My phone vibrates in the cupholder and reluctantly, I pull over to look.

HAYDEN: I need you to pick a new book

NORMALLY I LIKED buddy reading with Hayden, but right now my only focus is getting Rhea back. I met Hayden at Rhea’s friend Harper’s wedding, and through an unlikely series of events, we’ve negotiated buddy reading a couple times a month.

SORREN: I’m not in the mood

HAYDEN: Did I say “Sorren, will you please pick a book?”

HAYDEN: No I did not

SORREN: I’m a little busy

HAYDEN: Yeah fucking it up with the love of your life

SORREN: I will permanently remove you for all future buddy reads

HAYDEN: Liar

SORREN: Try me

HAYDEN: I know where she's meeting her hot date tonight

SORREN: Fuck

HAYDEN: I know. They might. Wouldn't that be nifty?

SORREN: If it gets to that I'll need bail money

HAYDEN: So pick a book

SORREN: Where are they going?

HAYDEN: Pick. A. Book.

SORREN: I will

SORREN: Now tell me so you don't have to write me in prison

HAYDEN: I do love a man in uniform

HAYDEN: Pretty poetic if you ask me

SORREN: I swear to God—

HAYDEN: They have a private table in the back of the Iron Cask. Reservation was for 7pm so if you hustle you should catch them before he takes her home

SORREN: I'll send you a book tomorrow

HAYDEN: You say the sweetest things

HAYDEN: Go get your girl!



Tossing my phone onto the passenger seat, I make a U-turn and haul ass to Blackstone Falls.



## RHEA

“Are these the perks of owning your own restaurant?” I ask Colt as I take a sip of my sweet tea. He gives me his all-American-boy grin. His blond hair has that effortless wave to it that makes him look put together but also relaxed and approachable. My hair on the other hand required time, product, and prayers to the humidity gods.

“I like my privacy, so yeah.”

We’re seated in the far back of the restaurant in a space that seems like he created it for this exact reason. Being a famous baseball player must be exhausting, always having to be on and expecting a camera to pop up at every turn.

“Are you ready?” he asks and I reach for my wallet. “Don’t you dare.” My head whips up and he looks annoyed.

“You don’t have to pay for my dinner.” So many times I’d wished I could feel something, *anything*, for the man across from me but it never happened. We’d commiserated over that truth too.

He waves his hand around. “Perks, remember?” I roll my eyes.

“Well then, for letting me stay at your house.”

“Which sits vacant most of the year,” he says, fishing his wallet from his pocket and throwing more than enough to cover our dinner three times over.

“Fine,” I huff but he just smiles and shakes his head. Colt puts his hand on my back and guides me through a side door.

“I told you it’s fine if you want to stay. I had this trip planned a while ago.”

“No, I need to go to the bakery tomorrow and—”

I can see the Charger the moment we step out of the restaurant, and I exhale something between a sigh and a growl. Colt's hand presses harder on my back and I feel him look down at me before following my gaze to where Sorren's form slowly unfolds from the car.

It doesn't matter how mad I am at him, he's gorgeous like this—lethal grace cast in shadows. His expression is hard but it only accentuates the sharp lines of his jaw and the fire in his emerald-green eyes.

“Well, shit,” Colt says under his breath. “You had to pick the scary motherfucker, huh?”

“He didn't choose me,” I say with defeat, my shoulders slumping with my words.

“I wouldn't be so sure about that.”

We stand like that for a while. Colt's hand drops to his side and Sorren tracks the movement. If he thinks I'm just going to waltz over to him and fall into his arms, he's out of his damn mind.

“I'm going to wait inside and call Cheyenne to bring me home,” I say. I don't want to involve her, but she's closer than Hannah and I need out of here *now*.

“I can bring you home. You still have a bag at my house.”

“No, you can't. I'll grab my stuff tomorrow. Thanks for letting me hide in your guest room. I don't want you in the middle of this.”

Colt chuckles. “I'm already in the middle. And you know you're always welcome. I'm not there much anyway.”

Turning, I wrap my friend in a hug, our shared heartbreak a bond between us. “You going to tell her?” I ask and he shakes his head.

“She's got that douchebag boyfriend. It's not the right time.” He looks over my shoulder as Sorren stalks across the parking lot, hands clenched at his sides. “Good luck with that. You sure you're okay?”

“Yes.” I huff. Turning, I get ready to lay into Sorren about being a jerk with no boundaries and havin' no business following me here, but I don't get the chance.

Strong, possessive hands cup my face as his mouth crashes over mine. He steals my unspoken words as his tongue battles for control. My hands grip his forearms, nails digging into his skin, as I try and steady myself against the way he's trying to consume every ounce of my being.

No one in my entire life has kissed me like this.

And I don't dare to hope that no one else will get the chance.

Sorren pulls away and meets my gaze, eyes blazing and wild, and it has a shiver racing down my spine because that look is a threat and a promise and I want it—all of it.

But I'm pissed.

"Go home, All-star," he says but he never looks away from me.

Colt shifts on his feet. "Rhea, you good?"

"I'm fine," I say as I try and fail to make my voice not sound breathy. He's going to get the riot act when we get in the car, and by the slight tic of his jaw he knows it.

"Text me tomorrow and you can grab your stuff," Colt says and I want to murder him for adding more fuel to the fire and turning this into something it's not. I'd stayed at his house, yes, but he hadn't even gotten there until today. Colt smiles at Sorren and I'm less inclined to save him if he keeps poking the man next to me.

Sorren rises to his full height as his hand trails down my arm to take my hand. They stare at each other, and I hate whatever pissing match is taking place because of me. Colt doesn't need any added stress from me and Sorren needs to cut the shit.

"I will," I say to Colt and then tug Sorren's hand. "Let's go." He stares at the shortstop for the Illinois Blues for another moment before turning and leading me to the car.

When we reach the passenger door, I spin to face him and stab a finger into his chest. "You don't get to show up and act like kissin' me means something to you when we both know it doesn't."

Now that the adrenaline is wearing off, panic and sadness and absolute fury flood my veins. Sorren boxes me against the car, his body hard against mine—and that's not the only thing.

His hips trap mine against the door, and there's no hiding how turned on he is right now. God, how I want that to be for me.

"We're going to talk, Sunshine, and you're going to see *exactly* how I feel about you."

"That's not an answer."

His hand moves from where it rests beside me to the column of my neck. His touch is gentle as he watches his fingers slide down before they fan out at the base of my throat. His thumb brushes over the notch of my collarbone.

"You wore this for him."

The white V-neck sundress is pretty but not revealing, and I like the way

it looks against my tan.

“I wore it for me,” I say honestly, but not daring to move.

“For you,” he says, looking at his hand before his gaze slowly drags over my face and finally meets my eyes. My heart hammers in my chest and I know he can feel it—see it—sense it. “What would you wear for me?”

The question catches me off guard because I’m so wrapped up in the very real desire emanating from him. This dangerous seduction is uncharted territory, and I hate that I like it.

I’m pissed and angry and embarrassed by how turned on I am. I’ve never been into the *touch her and die* thing but I can definitely see the appeal in this moment.

“You don’t get to ask me that,” I say evenly, and I’m proud I’m able to deliver the words so calmly when I’m anything but on the inside.

“Oh but I do.”

His hand travels back up my throat, coming to rest just under my jaw. He grips the side of my neck as his thumb traces over my bottom lip. My tongue peeks out and swipes the pad of his finger. His eyes darken and they look almost black this far away from the streetlight.

“Get in the car, Sunshine, because I plan to share you with absolutely no one.” We stare at each other for another minute before he’s pushing off me and moving me over enough to open the door. Dazed, I slide into the passenger seat without argument and buckle my seatbelt.

He stalks around the hood of the car before dropping into the driver’s seat. His door slams as the engine roars to life. Not that I’ll admit this to him now but this car is *sexy* with the black on black and the leather seats. I’ve ridden in it before, but something about tonight makes it feel different.

Intimate.

Dangerous.

I’ve imagined being naked in here more than once which I’ll also not be telling him right now. Instead, I look out the window as we pull out of the parking lot and onto the road toward Clementine Creek.

Questions swirl around in my head, and I want desperately to voice them all. I want answers and to know what the hell this is—what he thinks we’re doing—but I don’t trust myself to say any of it.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

His phone vibrates in the cupholder at the same time mine vibrates in my purse. We don’t need to check what it is, though, because the siren blares the

warning loud and clear. Sorren takes the next right down my parents' driveway. The house is dark, and I vaguely remember them saying they'd be having dinner with Cullen and Gwen tonight.

Throwing the car into park, Sorren grabs a sweatshirt from the backseat and climbs out. I should wait for him to get my door but I don't because I know it will piss him off. He growls as he places his hand on my lower back and guides me toward the storm shelter.

I ignore him. And the warmth of his palm seeping through the thin material. It's lower than where Colt's hand had been, and where Colt's gesture was friendly—gentlemanly—there's no mistaking the possession in Sorren's touch.

No one else is here and I flip on the Christmas lights before stepping inside the steel box like I've done a million times in my life. Sorren pulls the door shut behind us and bolts it.

It's only been a few minutes since we got the alert, but I can already hear the wind howling outside.

"I hope nothing happens to your car," I say as I cross my arms over my chest.

"I don't give a fuck about my car," he says as he closes the distance between us. Sorren hands me the sweatshirt and I glare as I put it on.

"Yeah? Well, what *do* you care about?" I snap as I shamelessly snuggle into the soft fabric that smells like him.

"You."





## RHEA

**Y**ou.

I scoff. “Whatever.”

“I hate that fucking word.” The vehemence in his voice startles me but I won’t back down. I don’t want to hear him tell me how we need to stay friends and keep things the way they are.

Friends *do not* kiss friends like that.

His arms stretch out to the sides. “This is me, Rhea. This is it for me. You wanted this—*me*—this is it.”

I roll my eyes with a forced bravado as my heart starts pounding in my chest again. “Yeah, I can see it’s you.”

“No.” He stalks toward me, my steps backward matching his until he’s caged me against the wall, and I appreciate the support of the steel behind me.

“No?” I ask.

“You want me to tell you it’s always been you? I can’t because I never believed I’d ever get here. I never knew I’d be able to deserve you and hell if I still don’t. You forced my hand and now here we are.”

“I didn’t—”

“You said that you didn’t want to be second to my sister. That you wanted to be first and that I was never going to give that to you.” He waits for my eyes to meet his, but it’s a struggle because his mouth is so deliciously captivating. “You have no idea what I’d give for you—to be the one that gets to touch you.”

“So what...now we’re just doing this? Just like that? We’re just going to

act like the other day never happened?”

“You tell me.”

“It’s bullshit and you know it.” I seethe.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to look at someone and see forever but know you’re not fucking good enough for them yet? Do you know what it’s like to pray every day and night that they hold out just a little longer?”

“Why didn’t you say something?” I demand. “Why didn’t you just ask for more time? Tell me how you were feeling—”

“And what?” He cuts me off. “Be another person you’re taking care of when everyone already relies on you? After I’ve already done it for two damn years? I couldn’t. I’m shit at talkin’ but I’m doing the best I can—showing you the best I can that I’m trying.”

“Sorren—”

“You scare the fuck out of me, Sunshine. You make me unhinged and I know I won’t be gentle. I can’t. I can’t be sweet and loving and all the shit you deserve. And there’s no going back if I have you. If I taste your pussy, if I have my dick between your legs—you’re fuckin’ mine.”

His chest heaves as the confession leaves him. The wind howls outside but it’s nothing compared to the war being waged inside the shelter.

Inside Sorren.

Reaching between us, I cup his face with shaking hands and force him to look at me as I search his gaze for the certainty I already know is there but need to verify anyway.

“I don’t want to go back.” The stubble on his jaw bites into my palm and a little shiver races down my spine.

“I’m serious. Once I—”

I pull him down until his lips meet mine and there’s no doubt between us. He kisses me with a ferocity that’s beyond passion. It’s raw and desperate and wipes away the days, weeks, and months of keeping him at arm’s length.

His hands grip my ass and he pulls me up the wall like I weigh nothing before pinning me with his body. My legs wrap around his waist and I rock against him looking for any friction I can get.

“You smell so good,” he says as he kisses down my neck, and I need more, so much more.

“I’m still mad at you.”

“I know,” he rasps, the gravel of his voice sending heat straight to my core.

“We’re going to talk about what you did and—”

“Figured,” he says as his hand drags up my side to cup my breast under the sweatshirt and I gasp.

“I deserve—”

“Everything,” he says reverently as he kisses me slower but with just as much intensity as in the parking lot.

“Then stop teasing me.”

“I’m not fucking you in here.” He pinches my nipple when I start to protest and I moan at the same time he rocks his hips against me. “You’ll get off, don’t worry.” His mouth trails hot kisses down my neck, his stubble scraping against my skin. “I want you to know *exactly* who you belong to.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Sorren.”

“Maybe you should be,” he says raising his head to meet my gaze.

He’s trying to give me one last chance to get out of this—to say no—but I’ve never wanted anything less.

“I’m not.”

“Makes one of us.” He murmurs the words against the shell of my ear.

“And what about you?” I’m proud of the way my voice doesn’t waver even as my legs tighten around his waist. “Do you belong to me?”

“Rhea.” The way he says my name sends a shiver down my spine. “I’ve belonged to you a lot longer than just tonight.”

He says it like it should be obvious, and the nonchalance of it makes me want to strangle him. How long have we wasted in this exhausting in-between when we could have been together?

“Stop talking,” I snap.

“Why?”

“Because I want you to make me come more than I want to plot your murder right now.”

His lips twitch as his roughened palm travels up my thigh and under the hem of my dress. “Sunshine, I didn’t say I was perfect, I just said I was me.”

“Seriously, stop—” The pad of his thumb brushes over my clit and I moan as my head falls back against the wall. He growls and I don’t know if it’s because he’s finally touching me or if it’s because my panties are soaking wet.

His lips capture mine in a bruising kiss—ravaging my mouth and stealing the breath from my lungs. His fingers slip under my panties, and the feel of his fingers on my sensitive skin has me exploding the minute he plunges one

inside me.

He pushes me harder into the wall as I buck against him and ride out every glorious pulse and flutter of my orgasm.

I'm boneless as my eyes blink open, but I'm not prepared for the absolutely feral look on Sorren's face.

"Again."

"Wh-wh-at?" I stammer as he fingers me slowly before pressing his thumb to my clit. I yelp but he doesn't let up.

"One wasn't enough for me," he says as he inserts a second finger. "Again."

My nails dig into his shoulders as my back bows off the wall. I have no control over it and until this very minute, I had no idea I could even *have* a second orgasm at all let alone this soon after the first.

"Sorren—" I plead but the sensation is already starting to build inside me like his sole purpose in life is to bring me pleasure.

"That's right, Sunshine, don't fight it." His other hand kneads my ass cheek and it's not enough. I want to be naked and completely bare to him. I want... "Do you have any idea how fucking crazy it made me seein' you with someone else?"

"Yeah, well I'm still mad at you," I force out between clenched teeth as I try to hold out a little longer, my nails scratching his back through the cotton of his shirt.

"I know. Now be a good girl and come all over my fucking hand, Rhea."

I don't know if it's the command in his voice or the predatory gleam in his eyes but I do.

My scream echoes off the walls mixed with a slew of curses muttered under his breath. I collapse against him—my forehead resting against his as he slowly pulls his hand from between my legs.

"Fuck." He grunts as he spins us and walks to a folding chair, twisting me in his hold so I'm across his lap as he sits.

"Wow." I breathe, still dazed and sated as he places a lingering kiss on my temple.

It's sweet and filled with adoration and completely at odds with the way he owned my body mere seconds ago. I shift on his lap and suppress the whimper that threatens to escape.

Sorren's erection digs into my leg where I'm sprawled across him and *good Lord in heaven*.

“Can I—”

“Not tonight,” he says a moment before his phone starts buzzing in his pocket. Cursing, he digs it out and after a heavy sigh meets my gaze. “I should get you home.”

Home? It sounds a lot like a dismissal and I stiffen. He doesn’t miss it, his arm holding me tighter when I try to stand.

“Let go.” I seethe as the buzzing continues.

“No.” There’s conviction in that single word, like he truly doesn’t want to let *me* go, but I can already feel his walls going back up.

“You’re busy,” I say even though I know my phone is in the car doing the exact same thing. Undoubtedly, it’s the family group chat making sure everyone is all right. The storm had been a small reprieve from reality. Now that there’s no longer a threat, it seems the sanctuary we found here is gone too.

His jaw clenches as he tosses the phone across the room. It bounces around like a ping-pong ball, but before it’s even stopped, Sorren’s hands are in my hair and his mouth is colliding with mine.

It’s punishing and glorious and claiming.

And I match his fury with my own.

When he pulls back he looks exhausted. “You can be mad, but stop tryin’ to fight me.”

“It’s a lot,” I admit. Our relationship has become an avalanche—the tension building fast and furious until it’s consumed everything in its wake.

“I know and I need you to trust me while we figure it out.”

Placing a soft kiss on his lips, I give the only answer I can. “Just please don’t shut me out.”

“I’ll try.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “I can’t change overnight, Rhea, and I won’t always be able to talk about it.” He swallows. “I’m doin’ the best I can.”

“I just want to help,” I say quietly.

“You have. Since the moment I crossed the county line.” His phone vibrates on the floor again and Sorren lets out a defeated breath. “I need to get that before they send out a search party.”

“Okay.” His finger tips up my chin, and he places a lingering kiss on my lips. It’s not enough, but for now it will have to do.



# SORREN

ALERT: The alert you set has been activated. Please contact the account holder for more information. If this is in error please disregard this message.

“I can’t stay tonight,” I say as I park in Rhea’s driveway and kill the engine. My jaw clenches and I try desperately to relax. She doesn’t need any more bullshit to pile on to how pissed she already is at me.

The moments following the storm were the same chaos they always were, and I picked my phone up to find no fewer than forty messages. Scanning to make sure everyone was okay, I replied we were fine and then silenced it.

Rhea had to respond one-handed once I tucked her into the passenger seat because I couldn’t make myself let go of her hand. Even walking around the car to the driver’s seat had been pure torture.

Every ounce of restraint evaporated seeing Colt’s arms wrap around her in the parking lot. I was unhinged in a way I’d never allowed myself to be. Even now, my heart is beating too fast in my chest and I need to rein it in before I scare her off.

Before I do exactly what I was afraid of.

Her mouth opens and then closes again before she pulls her hand from mine and crosses her arms over her chest defensively. Exhaling heavily through my nose, I clarify, “I have a week-long training with Tanner a couple of hours from here.”

“Of course you do,” she replies on a growl and I fight the twitch of my

lips.

“We’ve been on a waitlist, and two seats just became available and we need it to complete our certifications.”

“No, I get it. I just don’t like it.” She glares. “Your timing sucks.”

“I told you I wasn’t ready yet,” I say quietly. I don’t want to fight with her, but this whole night has been a fucking mess. Her coming all over my fingers was a glorious fucking mess but still.

“You did.” She pushes out of the car and charges up the sidewalk.

I’m out just as fast, my hand gripping her arm and pulling her around to face me. “Rhea.”

Pulling out of my hold, she squares up on me, hands on her hips. “You told me tonight. You didn’t tell me weeks or months ago. You told me you didn’t want me and then you show up tonight guns blazing like this is some damn western and made a scene in front of Colt.”

Just the mention of his name has my jaw clenching.

“You owe him an apology.”

“I will have a conversation with him,” I say because I won’t apologize for getting my fucking girl.

Her eyes narrow. “That’s not what I said.”

“Yeah, and I’ll make it clear that if he touches you again he’ll have a real hard time playin’ baseball in a cast.”

She throws her arms up in defeat. “You can’t say things like that. Do you even hear yourself?”

Fishing her house key from her purse, she slams it into the lock and pushes the door open so hard it bounces off the wall in the entryway. I follow her in, closing it behind me and letting the latch catch with a small *snick*.

“Sunshine, there’s not a man on this earth I won’t level to get to you.”

Her mouth drops open and then closes as she stares at me. I sit on the arm of the couch and wait. I think it’s finally starting to sink in that I’m not kidding. It really shouldn’t be a surprise—I’m not really known for my hilarity.

“I just don’t even know what to do with you right now.”

She starts pacing and when she gets close enough, I reach out and grab her arm, pulling her slowly to me.

“I know you’re mad,”—my hands rest on her hips as she stands between my legs, my eyelids falling shut as exhaustion settles over me—“but can I just hold you a while?”



When she doesn't respond, I break a little more.

"I fucking missed you, Rhea."

I missed her for weeks and months in the span of a few days and the ache is visceral.

"You said we were going to talk," she says as her fingernails trail up and down the back of my neck.

"I'm not saying we won't."

She sighs. "It feels like..." I search her face, my chest tightening with each passing second she doesn't speak. "It feels like you're only here because I went to dinner with someone else."

I push down the rage that bubbles inside me. Doubt. Uncertainty.

She hasn't said she missed me.

She hasn't said that being away from me for a couple of nights ripped her heart out of her chest the way it did mine.

"I thought..." I swallow hard. "I thought if I could get the shelter a little further along it would be easier to show you I can do this."

"Do what?"

"Be with you." She tries to pull back but I hold her tighter. "I want to be the man you want to be with—the man you need."

"Why do you think that you're not enough? Like you haven't been this entire time? Reorganizing the spice rack at the bakery aside," she says, adding a small bit of levity, "I just want you."

"I don't want you to have any regrets."

"Right now I regret feelin' like we wasted over eight months when we could have been doing this together." I open my mouth to speak but she holds up her hand and shakes her head. "I'm exhausted and if I only have a couple of hours with you, then..."

She takes my hand and pulls me up as she walks backward to her bedroom. I've been in her house plenty of times but I've never been in here. It's all warm tones and more pillows than should ever be allowed on a bed. The colors are in complete contrast to the bright ones in the rest of her place, but it fits.

It's another side to her that's beautiful and serene, and I do my best to soak it in before I have to leave her.

Toeing off my boots, I leave them by the door. She hasn't moved, her eyes dragging down my body in a blatant perusal.

"Take your shirt off."

“Sunshine.” It’s a warning, but she doesn’t back down.

“I want it.” Her lips tip up on the side. “Don’t get shy on me now. Besides,”—she shrugs one shoulder—“you’re going to be gone a whole week.” The faintest blush covers her cheeks, and I need no more encouragement before fisting the fabric on my back and pulling it over my head.

“Anything else?” I ask as I throw it at her. She shakes her head and nibbles on her bottom lip. “Go change,” I growl. She giggles and spins on her heel, her dress twirling around her.

A dress I had my hands under not more than an hour ago.

Lying down with my head on the massive stack of pillows, I drag my hands down my face and silently curse. I want to fuck her senseless. I want to tie her to this goddamn bed and make her scream until she’s hoarse and loses count of how many orgasms she’s had.

She has no idea what she’s done to me—hell, I didn’t fully know what she was doing to me until now.

“I can’t say I hate the view.” Her voice is sweet and sexy and I drop my hands to find her makeup-free and standing in my black T-shirt. Her legs are bare and my dick stirs at the memory of how they’d been wrapped around me, her satin-covered pussy grinding against my length.

Fuck.

“You’re a whole lot of temptation, Sunshine.”

“Yeah,”—she looks down her body and then rolls her eyes as she saunters toward the bed—“the bags under my eyes are so sexy.”

Rolling onto my elbow, I wait till she’s close enough and then reach out and hook my other arm around her waist. She yelps and then giggles as I yank her onto the bed and then roll on top of her.

Her breath catches in her throat as I rock against her. I shouldn’t be doing this but fuck if I can help it.

Lowering my mouth to hers, I savor her in a way I was unable to in the storm shelter. I let my tongue tangle and slide along hers—tasting and exploring every available inch.

She whimpers and tries to pull me closer but this isn’t the time. Resting my forehead against hers, I do my best to slow my breathing—to gain some composure.

“I need you to wait just a little longer.” I meet her gaze and it’s filled with frustration and desire and so many things I can’t acknowledge right now.

“Please.”

“You got me all worked up again.” She pouts and I can’t stop the grin that slides across my lips before dragging them over her jaw and to her ear.

“Will it help you sleep better if I get you off again?” I suck her earlobe into my mouth, biting down just hard enough to make her gasp. “Is that what you want? Something to tide you over until I get home?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll be a good girl and wait for me?” Circling her wrists, I move them above her head until I can pin them together in one hand.

“I—”

“I’m serious, baby,” I say as I trail kisses down her neck while my hand travels up the inside of her thigh. Her breath hitches and her eyelids flutter closed. I nip at her collarbone and she shudders.

“Jesus.”

“Rhea.” My finger trails up and down her slit through her panties. I keep the pressure light so it’s just as torturous for her as it is for me. Her eyes snap to mine and I reward her by circling her clit in small tight strokes.

“I want that to be you.”

“It is me, Sunshine.”

“I want you inside me.”

“You have to wait. Can you do that for me?” Leaning forward, I suck her nipple through the fabric of my shirt and then bite down, her back arching and pushing her tit harder against my mouth.

She likes that, huh?

I flick my tongue back and forth, my teeth still clamped around the tight peak. She writhes under me, her hips bucking against my hand, but she won’t get what she wants until I do.

“I asked you a question, Rhea.”

“What?” She’s breathless, cheeks flushed, her hands fighting against my hold and she’s so fucking sexy like this—stretched out for me.

Dying for my touch.

“That you’ll wait for me.” I drag my nose along the underside of her jaw, forcing her head to tilt up, exposing her neck. “That I get to come home to you and only you.”

“Yes.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

My fingers slip under her panties and she cries out. “You know what I want?” I don’t give her a chance to answer as I thrust two fingers inside her and curl them where I already know she likes. “I want to absolutely *ruin* you for any other man who thinks he’d ever have a chance with you.”

“Sorren!” she screams my name as the orgasm rips through her. She thrashes against my hold, her pussy pulsing around my fingers as she comes the hardest she has all night.

It’s beautiful.

Glorious.

Filthy.

I want to taste her on my lips as she comes. I want her perfect thighs wrapped around my head as she bucks against my face. But most of all, I want her naked and flushed so I can see exactly what I do to her.

As gently as I can, I remove my hand from between her legs and release her wrists. She’s limp against the bed and I bring her hand to my mouth, peppering soft kisses against the red of her skin.

“No need to worry,” she says on a yawn, a sleepy smile on her face. Pulling the blankets down, I help maneuver her under the covers after throwing half a Home Goods store’s worth of pillows onto the floor.

“Worry about what?” I ask, sliding in next to her and bringing her back to my front.

“I was ruined for you the first time we kissed.”

I wrap her tighter against me, burying my face in her hair. She still smells delicious like sugar and frosting, and I sigh as I relax with her in my arms.

“Me too, Sunshine. Me too.” She snuggles back into me, and I love that I can just be with her in this way. “Sleep now. I’ll be home soon.”



## RHEA

I wake alone in my bed, my alarm blaring before the sun is up. The sheets are cold and even though I know Sorren left hours ago, it somehow feels twice as lonely knowing I have to face today without him here.

It felt like a dream, but he'd kissed me goodbye before sliding out of bed. I'd been too tired to keep my eyes open, but I'd heard him pause in the doorway after putting his boots on.

Like it was actually painful for him to leave and not just my imagination running away in the early morning hours.

It's hard to even wrap my head around yesterday and the absolute insanity that took place in the blink of an eye. I'd gone from heartbroken and gutted to screaming his name.

*Three times.*

My core throbs as I stand and it's the most exquisite kind of ache as I stumble into the bathroom and turn on the shower. My neck is red from his beard, and I can't help but blush furiously as I stare at myself in the mirror.

Steam billows around me and I shake myself from the spell a certain broody man has cast on me. I slide my panties down my legs and then hold his shirt to my nose and inhale.

It's shameless the way I love being in his clothes, surrounded by the scent of him, but I can't help it. It's not until I've stepped into the spray and washed my hair that doubt starts to creep in.

Possession.

Fierce.

Palpable.

The intensity with which he owned me still steals my breath. He'd been borderline feral and yet I trusted him completely.

At least with my body.

My heart still hurts from our fight—the fight we still haven't talked about—and my head is caught somewhere in the middle. Logically, I know he is still adjusting to being a civilian. It isn't something you can put a timeframe on, and I am trying desperately to respect that and to help him through it. I know that he has secrets—demons—he keeps locked away, but like I told him last night, I'm not scared of him.

But I just want him to trust me—to give me a chance to help heal some of the pieces he thought were too broken to matter.

I need him to let me in.

Turning off the water, I tie my hair up in a towel and grab a second one to dry my body. I make quick work of getting dressed, opting for the softest leggings in my drawer and a hot-pink tank top. Sweeping my hair into a bun, I do the bare minimum amount of makeup on my face but focus on spreading a little extra powder over the beard rash and pray no one brings it up.

On the vanity, my phone buzzes with an incoming text.

SORREN: Good morning, Sunshine. I hope you got some sleep.

RHEA: A little. Did you?

SORREN: I couldn't risk it. I would have never left.

RHEA: You say that like it's a bad thing

SORREN: I already made Tanner drive so I could nap on the way there

RHEA: I'm sorry you didn't sleep.

SORREN: I'm not

RHEA: And even though I don't like that you're gone I know this is important to you.

SORREN: I've been through worse nights than having a beautiful woman in my arms

RHEA: Last night doesn't feel real

SORREN: I'll try harder next time

RHEA: If you try any harder I won't be able to walk

SORREN: That's the idea

RHEA: We still need to talk

SORREN: I know

RHEA: You can't just fix everything with orgasms

SORREN: I know that too

I SET my phone on the counter and start the coffee pot. Technically I could just wait until I get to the bakery, but I like the routine of brewing coffee at home. Growing up, our house always smelled like coffee because Mama made sure Daddy had a hot cup for his ride to work. He only had to go the next town over, but I loved that she did that for him.

My parents have a classic kind of love. He's quiet and reserved but when he speaks, people listen. Mama will talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime. I always thought that drove Daddy crazy but he always looked at her with the kind of lifelong affection they write about in books.

Not that I read many.

My lips tip up thinking of Sorren's dive into the world of romance books when he came back to Clementine Creek. He's blown through so many I am happy I'd gifted him one of those subscriptions where you could endlessly borrow them.

*"And you'll be a good girl and wait for me?"*

I shiver at the memory of his words from the night before. They'd been so intoxicating coming from him, and I have to wonder if it was because of the words themselves or the fact that *he'd* said them.



Glancing at the clock on the microwave, I grab the milk from the fridge and add a little to the travel mug before double-checking everything is put away and unplugged. I slide my feet into my sneakers before turning off the lights and heading out the door.

I have my coffee cup balanced on my phone and keys and as I turn, a flash of pink catches my eye. A single rose rests on my windshield, a card tucked under my windshield wiper.

*Sunshine—  
I'd do it all again just to hold you for a few hours.*

THERE'S no signature but it doesn't matter, there's only one person who ever calls me that.

RHEA: It's hard to be upset when you're sweet

SORREN: I didn't do it so you wouldn't be upset

RHEA: Then why did you do it?

SORREN: Because it's what I should have been doing all along

MY FINGERS FREEZE above the keyboard as I read and reread the words he'd typed and sent without hesitation. There'd been no lapse in time, no disappearing and reappearing dots on the screen.

SORREN: It's okay you don't believe me.

SORREN: You will.

RHEA: How can you be so sure?

I ASKED the question even as my heartbeat kicked up into a sprint. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to trust that he wanted *me* and not just because we were both here in the same town and happened to be attracted to each other.

That it was more than chemistry and lust.

SORREN: I told you last night—it's us now.

RHEA: You didn't have your mouth OR your cock between my legs if you recall

SORREN: Not yet

SORREN: You're out of your damn mind if you think having my fingers inside that sweet pussy as you came all over them is any different

I GULP and squeeze my thighs together, but it does nothing to stem the ache between my legs. I'm still a little tender, but last night was a tease. A really, really mind-blowing tease. But I just want—him. I want to know that it was real and not just a figment of my imagination.

I want him desperate and undone just like he made me.

RHEA: I'm still upset

SORREN: You forced my hand so you'll just have to let me fix it as we go instead of the way I wanted to do it...

RHEA: So it's my fault?

SORREN: It's your fault I couldn't be buried inside you last night, yeah.

RHEA: We had time

SORREN: Sunshine, a couple hours was not enough time for what I want to do to you

RHEA: And now you're gone for a week

SORREN: See above...

RHEA: Ugh, but what are we doing?

SORREN: What do you want to do?

RHEA: That's not an answer

SORREN: I know what I want, Sunshine, and it's you.

SORREN: I'll earn your trust but you have to let me.

RHEA: You know I trust you.

THE IDEA that I don't trust him is absurd. Sorren has been in my life for close to two decades.

SORREN: Your heart, Rhea. I need you to trust me with your heart.

THERE WAS no way I could respond to that because he is right—I don't trust him with my heart. Not yet.

Our conversation simply reaffirmed the doubts I'd had since waking up, and I hated that just as much. I wanted to feel his weight pressed against me

and I wanted to be worshipped like no one else had ever done before.

But I also wanted a love like my Mama and Daddy's, and while I believed I could have that with Sorren, I just needed him to believe it too.



# SORREN

OTTO: Rhea looks happier today

CASE: Agreed

WAYLON: I don't want to know

WAYLON: Obviously I want her to be happy

OTTO: Obviously

WAYLON: But no details

CASE: Pot meet kettle

WAYLON: Shut up

HANK: So glad we don't have to kill you

OTTO: Tanner did you bring one of our matching shirts to your training?

OTTO: You still like them right?

OTTO: You never want to hang out anymore

SORREN: Tell me why I'm in this one again

WAYLON: It concerns you

SORREN: Apparently not as much as Otto's concern over his bromance with Tanner

CASE: Heh you said bromance

Tanner's eye twitches with each message that comes through as he wrestles his cell from his pocket.  
"Oh for fuck's sake," he grumbles as he reads them and then glares at me.

TANNER: Otto I saw you right before I left.

TANNER: You literally brought me a new one so that I could pack it

OTTO: But did you?

TANNER: (gif of guy facepalming)

TANNER: Yes dear

CASE: You fit right in. This makes me so happy!

CASE: \*heart eye emoji\*

SORREN: I'll make sure he sends you a picture when he wears it

TANNER: I had to drive this morning because Sorren spent the night at your sister's and was too tired

TANNER: Class is about to start gotta go

TANNER SLAMS the off button and drops his phone on the table in front of

him. Class isn't about to start and my phone hasn't stopped vibrating since Tanner sent the message to end all messages.

Part of me is proud and the other wants to punch him in the face. He smirks and I silence my phone without checking any of the fuckery taking place in that group message.

"I didn't think you had it in you," I say and I sit back in my chair and stare at my business partner and friend.

Although right now the *friend* part remains to be seen.

"You didn't see the shirt."

"I'm sure it's not that bad." It's a lie. I've known Otto since I was fourteen and that guy is the most exhausting person on the planet. His heart is bigger than the state of Tennessee, and he'll bulldoze you with his charm and enthusiasm until you can't remember life without him.

He's a great guy. The best.

But that doesn't mean he won't drive you up the fucking wall with his antics.

"It says, *I'm not the baby daddy. I'm the bonus dad-ish.*"

Rolling my lips inward, I do my best not to laugh and try to hide my smile. It doesn't work because his eyes narrow before he drags his hands down his face.

"No one would believe me," he whines and this time I can't stop my chuckle. He glares and it makes me laugh more.

"It could be worse."

"I know. I repeat that a million times a day because I *am* lucky. Fallon is lucky. Briggs hit the extended family jackpot, and I just have to remind myself that murder is illegal and I would actually feel sad because I do love the guy."

"Yup, welcome to the family."

"Thanks," he says as he stares at the ceiling, a small smile teasing the corner of his mouth.

"That mean you're going to wear the shirt?" I ask and he sighs.

"Yes, that means I'm going to wear the shirt." I snort and he points at me. "In the room. You take the picture and send it, then I can take it off and we don't speak of it again. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Good. Now I don't have to tell everyone that you mauled Rhea in the parking lot of The Iron Cask after she came out with Colt Harrington."



My jaw clenches and he raises an eyebrow.

“How did you—”

“Picking up takeout.” He leans back in his chair, a smug look on his face.

“Keep that to yourself and I won’t start sending Otto shirt ideas.”

“You got it, boss.”



## RHEA

“I need to talk to you,” I say as I walk into Hank and Isla’s house without knocking. Normally, I’d be a little more composed, but there is nothing normal about this.

Having Sorren in my bed, no matter how briefly, had me all twisted up at work. Ella had practically kicked me out of the bakery before my shift was even over. I need to give that girl a raise. She’s young but she’s loyal and motivated and pretty much runs The Poppy Seed regardless of whether or not I’m there.

My brother looks up, his glass halfway to his mouth. “Hello to you too.”

“Yeah, yeah, hello big brother, now get out so I can talk to your wife.” Hank scowls and Isla snickers as she pats her hand on his chest.

“Don’t worry, honey, I’ll do that thing you like with my tongue later...”

“Knock it off, you two,” I hiss. Isla rolls her eyes.

“Oh, like you’re not here to talk about orgasms.”

“What?” Hank asks before holding up his hand. “I don’t want to know. I’m going to go check on the babies.”

“You’re such a hot dad,” Isla calls after him and his shoulders shake with silent laughter as he disappears around the corner. “Okay, spill,” she says when he’s out of earshot.

Dropping into the nearest chair, I groan. “I’m still sore and he only used his hand.”

“That good, huh?” Isla says, her voice full of glee.

“I thought double orgasms were a myth but he just—” I mime a mind blown expression and Isla laughs. “It was so hot and he’s so *growly* and *good*

girl and, ugh, I also want to strangle him. And then he gave me another one.”

“That sounds about right.”

“What?” I ask, my gaze snapping to meet hers. Her eyes sparkle with amusement.

“Men like your brother and Sorren are a lot of work. They’re broody and stubborn and downright exhausting sometimes.” Her expression turns wistful. “But they’re also loyal and fiercely passionate and mind-blowingly intense.”

“It’s a lot.”

“It is,” she agrees. “They’ve seen things, Rhea. Things most people can’t ever imagine. They’re not broken, just guarded, and it hurts knowing that you can’t just make it better all at once. But you have to keep trying.”

My heart hurts for my brother and the years he spent in prison for something he didn’t do.

“He’s gone all week and I miss him, but I’m also doubting myself and him and what we’re doing and—”

My phone vibrates with a text and I glance at the screen and then shove it at Isla who just laughs.

SORREN: I heard this song and thought of you

SORREN: (Link to Warren Zeiders “One Hell of an Angel”)

MY HEART POUNDS as I listen to the lyrics. *This* is the stuff I’ll never survive. It’s the flower on my windshield and the song I’ll listen to on repeat because it makes me feel closer to him.

I’ve seen so many sides of Sorren in my lifetime and each one is more than the last but never all of him. Those cards he holds so close to his chest are the ones that will break us if we’re not careful. They’re the ones that will destroy any chance at a future.

The song says as much.

RHEA: You think you need to be saved?

SORREN: I know you make me better

SORREN: And I know I love your fire—I can't stay away

RHEA: I don't want you to

“WHY DON'T you go snuggle some babies?” Isla says and I look up at her beautiful, tired face.

“You're an amazing mom,” I say as I reach over to squeeze her hand. She grips me back tight as her eyes water with unshed tears.

“It's these damn hormones and I just love them so much but I'm so tired.”

“Go lie down. I'll stay a while.”

“Are you sure? I know you came over to talk.”

I smile because I love her and I'm humbled that she's comfortable enough to be vulnerable in this moment.

“I'm sure. Maybe we can do a girls' dinner this week?”

“That would be amazing.”

I stand and drop a kiss on her cheek and then follow the path my brother took to the babies' nursery.

Leaning against the doorjamb, I watch as Hank rocks Nova Jane in his arms. As much as I love being here, being with them, there's always a pang of sadness that I feel deep in my soul. I should have told someone—anyone—but it never felt right.

Never made sense.

I'm not sure it ever will.

“You can come in, you know.” His voice is a low murmur, pulling me from the turmoil inside me, as I step onto the soft cream carpet.

“I was just soaking it all in.”

“What's that?”

“You bein' a dad.” I wave my hand around the soft-gray room. “I love this for you.”

He smiles and I have to brush away the tear that slides down my cheek. He doesn't miss it, but he also doesn't comment.

Crew fusses in his crib, so I scoop him up and sway back and forth as he snuggles his little face against me. Crew Mannings Thayer looks exactly like

Hank, his middle name a namesake for Deke Mannings, the elderly gentleman Hank had befriended in high school.

Even though he'd left Hank his lake property in his will when he passed, most of us would always refer to it as Deke's place.

"Is Isla resting?" my brother asks quietly.

"Yeah, I said I'd stay for a while."

"Missing your man?" Hank deadpans and I shake my head with a grin.

"A little," I concede.

"Did y'all figure out your"—he looks down at the baby in his arms and says—"stuff?"

"Yes and no." I look up to find Hank watching me carefully. "Any pointers?"

Hank is silent for a while, his low voice still soothing as he rocks Nova. "There's something different about the person who challenges you to be better." His dark-blue eyes meet mine and there's so much emotion there, so much I've never seen from him before. "I love our family—even the *stuff* that makes me crazy. But Isla—she saw me, knew my past, and basically told me to get over myself."

I chuckle softly. "She's so flipping awesome."

"She is. But you are too." I playfully roll my eyes, but his lips don't so much as twitch. "You're the best of us, Rhea, and we don't tell you enough."

"I don't do anything you wouldn't do for me," I say firmly even as my heart squeezes at his words.

"It's different."

"It better not be because I'm a girl," I sass and he shakes his head, swallowing hard.

"It's because after the first time I went to The Poppy Seed to make bread, a recipe book showed up in the mail and you started stocking things you thought I might want to try." I open my mouth to speak but he just pushes on. "It's sending coffee and muffins to the jobsites that Otto and Case are on when they have a deadline coming up fast."

"I just—"

"I have a hundred more examples if you wanna fight about it."

I resist the urge to stick my tongue out at him but just barely. "I do it because I love you."

"But you just don't see how you hold us together. How you pulled the girls in and gave them a home. You don't let people shy away from you,

Rhea. You find out what they need to thrive and you help them get there.”

Tears stream down my face, and I try desperately to wipe them away before they land on Crew’s chubby little cheeks.

Hank stands and drops a kiss on the top of my head and then one on Nova’s forehead before setting her gently back in her bed.

“He sees it, Rhea.” My brother turns and faces me. “He sees the way you keep everyone together—he’s seen it every day since he landed here with Marlee. Imagine tryin’ to walk next to the woman who holds that much power.”

“Hank.” My throat is hoarse as I choke out his name.

“Sorren sees a future that’s almost within reach, but that doesn’t mean he knows exactly how to get there. He’s going to screw up, and it won’t be because he doesn’t love you or doesn’t value you.” Clearing his throat, he says, “It’s because he’ll be wondering why someone as good as you would still be standing next to him.”

My brother’s smile is small but honest as he searches my face. It’s a miracle I can see him at all through the tears. Leaning in, he drops a kiss on Crew’s forehead and then one on my cheek.

“You’re good for him but make sure he deserves you. I’m going to go check on Isla. Stay as long as you want.”

And with that, Hank quietly exits the nursery and heads down the hall. Setting Crew down, I move to Duke’s crib and brush my knuckle down his cheek. While his siblings each favor one of their parents, Duke is a stunning mix of both.

They’d named him Duke Mackay Thayer, a namesake for Sorren and Marlee, and named Sorren and me his godparents.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I take a picture of the sleeping baby and send a quick text.

RHEA: Duke hopes you’re having a good day in class

RHEA: (picture of sleeping baby)

SORREN: Man he looks big

SORREN: It’s death by PowerPoint right now

RHEA: Will you call me tonight?

SORREN: Do you want me to?

I STARE at his message but then slide my phone into my pocket without responding. I hate that I don't know how to navigate this with him, and I hate that on some level he's right.

Waiting would have been easier, but I'd do it again to know what it feels like to be in his arms. Checking on each of the babies one last time, I quietly back out of the room and close the door behind me.

I'm halfway across the kitchen when my phone vibrates and my breath stutters in my chest.

SORREN: I'll call you tonight.





## SORREN

The sun is barely over the horizon as Tanner and I finish the last half mile of our run. I barely slept and Tanner had kicked off his covers with a growl well before our alarms went off.

He blamed me, but we were both sleeping like shit being away from home. Talking to Rhea last night made it worse. I don't know shit about being a boyfriend but I miss her, and if she wanted a phone call I'd suck it up and do it.

"I mean," Tanner starts, breaking me out of my daydream, "doesn't matter to me but, uh"—he picks up the hem of his shirt to wipe his face and points at my back and shoulders—"she got you pretty good."

I'm impressed he's able to deliver the line with a straight face. If it had been any of the other guys it would have been an endless stream of jokes, and I seriously don't have the energy right now.

Dragging my shirt back over my head, I nod. "Thanks." He rolls his lips in but otherwise doesn't comment as we walk back to the hotel. Stepping into the lobby, I pull out my phone.

SORREN: Apparently, you left marks all over my back

SUNSHINE: What?

SORREN: Probably from when I had you pressed against the shelter wall

SUNSHINE: Sorren...

SORREN: Tanner told me “she got you pretty good”

SUNSHINE: (gif of woman blushing and hiding her face)

SUNSHINE: OMG how am I going to look at him again?

SORREN: The same way I still talk to Waylon knowing what he does to my baby sister

SUNSHINE: Ugh.

SORREN: Are you saying you regret that orgasm, Sunshine? Because I remember you rather liked it...

SORREN: And the two after that

SUNSHINE: You cannot say things like that—you're gone for so long!

SORREN: Patience baby

SUNSHINE: But I want you inside me. I want to feel every inch of you...

SORREN: I'm in a fucking elevator you cannot say that shit

SUNSHINE: (selfie with view down shirt)

SORREN: You're in so much trouble

SORREN: Tanner asked if I was okay because he could hear my teeth grinding

SUNSHINE: Who knew being yours would be so fun?

SORREN: Big. Trouble.

TANNER WHISTLES as he steps off the elevator and walks toward our room.

“Seriously, why do I even like you?” I growl as I pocket my phone.

“Honestly, I think it’s by default.”

“That sounds right.”

Tanner snickers and then uses the room key to open the door. We’ve only been here a couple of nights and I’m already sick of it. I’ve slept in places far worse with far less, but after having Rhea in my arms I don’t think I’ll ever sleep again unless she’s with me.

“You shower. I’m going to talk to Briggs before he goes to school.”

“You mean talk to Otto?” I grin and he sighs.

“Yeah, that too.” Tanner rubs at his sternum and looks away.

“You okay?” I ask giving him my full attention. He’s about a year behind me in the “figuring shit out” portion of post military life.

“Yeah, I just…” He trails off so I wait. I don’t want to pressure him, but considering we spend a lot of time together I know something is off. “I never made her that happy.” His eyes are full of sadness and regret. “I know now that I never would have been able to but—”

“I think y’all ended up exactly where you were meant to be.”

“It’s weird hearing you say *y’all*.”

“Do you want me to be nice or not?” I grouse but I’m happy to see a little of the hurt has faded from his expression.

“By all means.” He holds his hand out for me to proceed so I do.

“Does Fallon blame you?”

“What? No. She’s been really supportive and I did love her—do love her—just not the way she deserved.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you think you got the love you deserved?” He opens his mouth but I just hold up my hand. “Your path led you to Briggs. You couldn’t have him without your time with Fallon, and even though it wasn’t right for either of you, it was the absolute best thing you could have done for your kid. He’s awesome and he knows his parents love him. You’ve been more selfless than you give yourself credit for. Hell, you moved to middle of nowhere Tennessee—consequences be damned.”

His eyes are wet with unshed tears, and I hate that he’s holding so much inside.

“You know,” he says, clearing his throat, “for a guy who hates talking and people,”—he gives a small smile—“you’re pretty good at this.”

“Yeah, well, apparently people get pissed when you don’t tell them how you’re feeling.”

He snorts. “I think I lost the pool on that one.”

I roll my eyes. “Sorry.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t deck Colt Harrington.” I glare and he laughs. “Is she still mad?”

“She’s not *not* mad. More like aggravated.” I shrug. “I can work with that.”

“I just bet you can.”

“Okay, I’m done sharing.” I grunt as I get up and walk into the bathroom, closing the door with more force than necessary.

Tanner’s laugh is muffled but it’s there, and my heart feels a little lighter. I didn’t need another friend, but the guy snuck in there anyway and I don’t hate it at all.

THE AFTERNOON IS FILLED with first-hand accounts of people who have benefited from being matched with a service or shelter dog.

And I love the variety.

Tanner and I talked at length about what we wanted to focus on—who we would want to target—and even though we’d be military driven that wouldn’t exclude matching a dog to someone in need.

My eyes drift to the man in his late fifties at the end. He’s wearing a leather vest and is holding a Pomeranian with a bandanna around its neck. He seems at ease, but every time he shifts his weight, the dog nudges his hand. At first glance, the dog seems to want attention, but the longer I watch his posture, the more intuitive the dog seems to be with the needs of his owner.

On the note pad in front of Tanner I scribble, *guy on the end*. He nods after a minute and then returns his focus to the front.

This session is as fascinating as it is draining. Some of the speakers share stories of medical conditions, others relay traumas, before the last group of veterans speak about how having a dog has changed their life—their quality of life—for the better.

Tanner asks questions about each of the programs and what they liked and didn’t like, what we could do to improve the experience at Vetted Paws. I

watch the subtle movements of each person and their dog. I see how the dog responds to its owner, both assessing and, when necessary, offering comfort and support.

Excitement floods my veins at the prospect of being able to provide this kind of support in my community—in the only home I’ve ever known. It’s heady and I start to feel the roots I’ve been longing for finally take hold.

This is what I’ve been waiting for, and I can’t wait to share it with my girl—my family.

After the session is over, we’re able to move around and talk to those willing to share their experience in more detail. While Tanner heads to an army vet with a prosthetic leg, I walk over to the man on the end with an easy expression.

“Good afternoon, I’m Sorren Mackay.” I hold out my hand and he shakes it, his grasp firm and steady.

“Dean Hagan.” He looks down at the dog in his hands. “This here is Lady.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say honestly, and relax at his not so guarded expression. I hate small talk, but for some reason this guy puts me at ease. “I know you said that you connected with Lady after your wife passed, but I was wondering if you could tell me a little more about your experience.”

“You’ve seen her nudge my hand.” I nod and he gives a sad smile. “My wife passed away from breast cancer. We knew it was coming, but it didn’t lessen the blow of losing her. We’d had all these plans for retirement and we never got the chance.” He clears his throat and the dog nuzzles against his hand. “I spiraled into depression fast and furious. I was angry and spent a lot of time locked in the house. The world kept spinning, and I didn’t want to be a part of it when someone so beautiful like my Ginny wasn’t there to appreciate it.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I say, meaning it, and he nods.

“About six months after her passing, I was walkin’ outta the store just picking up groceries and I saw this flyer for a new shelter event happening the next town over. I can’t explain it, but I knew that I had to go.”

“How did you know Lady was the dog for you?”

“A lot of the dogs were barking when I walked in. I felt myself gettin’ worked up—like all of their anxiety was increasing mine.” He looks down and scratches the dog under her neck. “Lady was sitting with her nose poking through the gate watching me. Her tail started goin’ back and forth when I

approached, and it just felt like she got it—got *me*.” His cheeks heat ever so slightly.

“It looks like y’all are the perfect match.”

“She saved me.” He chuckles. “I know that sounds cliché but it’s the truth. My Ginny wouldn’t have wanted me wastin’ away in the memories and coulda beens.” He blows out a sigh. “I do this”—he waves his hand around—“because I know what I look like. I’m a big guy with a fluffy dog, but it’s her gentleness that soothes me.”

*...it’s her gentleness that soothes me.*

The words are like a sucker punch to the gut because dammit if I don’t understand that.

Rhea had been doing it all along. Hell, they all had. I’d gone with it begrudgingly because I *knew* I had to. I had to reacclimate to being in Clementine Creek and everything that came with it.

I loathed everything I loved about being there. I wanted space and quiet and privacy and Rhea had given me that. She’d been understanding, steering me gently toward the things I needed even when it was hard.

The fight we had in the bakery assaults my memory. She’d said the things I hadn’t wanted to hear, but she’d been right. I was holding on to things I couldn’t control—that were aging me because I couldn’t let them go.

“I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me, Dean.” I fish a business card from my pocket and hand it to him. “Would you do me a favor and send me an email? I think a lot of people could learn from you and Lady.” Clearing my throat, I confess, “You’ve helped me more than you know.”

He smiles as his hand brushes over the dog’s fur again. “I had a feelin’.”

We say our goodbyes and I talk to a few other people before meeting up with Tanner and heading to the last session. We had a lot to catch up on, but there was something I needed to do—someone I needed to talk to.

And more importantly, someone who deserved an apology.





# RHEA

SORREN: You were right

RHEA: About what?

SORREN: Marlee

**M**y breath catches in my throat as I stare at her name. Guilt eats at me thinking about that night even though everything I said was the truth. I was frustrated and angry and he didn't deserve me unloading all of that on him the way I did.

Three dots appear and disappear more times than I can count, but I won't rush him.

SORREN: Our fight at the bakery. You were right.

SORREN: I hate callin' it a fight—I don't want to fight with you

RHEA: I don't want to fight with you either

SORREN: I've spent my whole life fixing problems—keeping her safe. I did it in the military and whatever reason everyone comes to me for advice now.

SORREN: But my sister...that's a problem I can't fix

SORREN: One I'm not supposed to, and it's killing me

TEARS LEAK DOWN my face and I wish we were having this conversation in person. It's too raw and real and I know he's doing it through text because of that, but all I want in this moment is to wrap my arms around him and never let go.

*I love you and I hate that you're hurting.*

RHEA: She's lucky to have you. We all are.

RHEA: I should have been more sensitive that night

SORREN: You were right and I needed it. I just didn't want to hear it.

RHEA: You're stubborn

SORREN: Surprise to no one

RHEA: I don't want you to feel forced into this

RHEA: I don't want you to regret being with me

SORREN: Sunshine, the things I regret in my life will never include you

SORREN: I told you—I'll never be perfect

SORREN: I just wanted to be better for you

RHEA: We can be better together you just have to let me in

SORREN: I'm trying

SORREN: I have to go back to class

SORREN: No i's or k's

RHEA: What?

SORREN: How do you spell 'like'?

SORREN: I'm not ready to say it—but it's there and I feel it.

I READ and reread the messages and *holy shit*.

RHEA: No i's or k's

SORREN: Took you a minute

RHEA: I didn't know you could be so cute

SORREN: Me either. I'm full of surprises

RHEA: You are. Now go to class so you can come home to me.

SORREN: I'm hurrying, Sunshine.

POCKETING MY PHONE, I can't wipe the smile from my face. Sorren Mackay doesn't just *like* me. He loves me but he's right—it's too soon to say it even though I feel it.

*No i's or k's.*



# RHEA

RHEA: Girls' night on Thursday

CHEYENNE: YES

MARLEE: What she said but also that was enthusiastic  
Cheyenne

CHEYENNE: It's been a week

MARLEE: It's Wednesday morning

CHEYENNE: I know

FALLON: I cannot wait for the follow up

FALLON: Also everyone needs to have an extra drink for me  
because I'm 75 weeks pregnant and my ankles are swollen

ISLA: That's seriously the worst

HANNAH: I got you covered on the drinks

MARLEE: Hannah, you're such a team player

HANNAH: I know, right?

ISLA: Fallon do you have compression socks? Those helped  
me around the house

FALLON: I would die of heat stroke just putting them on

ISLA: That's fair

RHEA: I'll make sure you keep your feet up

FALLON: Thanks babe, I'll bring my own lemonade

RHEA: I can make lemonade...

FALLON: I mean you can

FALLON: But baby girl wants lemonade so I've been drinking it by the gallon

HANNAH: I could probably have my brother fly in some exotic lemons

MARLEE: I spit out my drink

HANNAH: (gif of woman saying oops)

ISLA: Could be worse

ISLA: I woke Hank up more than once because I needed nachos

ISLA: With all the toppings

MARLEE: Did you share?

ISLA: (gif of woman gasping in outrage)

ISLA: Absolutely not.

RHEA: (gif of woman doubled over laughing)

HANNAH: I'm so proud of you

HANNAH: (gif of woman dabbing her eyes with a tissue)

ISLA: He learned to make his own after that first time.

FALLON: Totally. No sharing. Get your own.

MARLEE: (gif of woman spitting out her drink laughing)

MARLEE: Happened again

ISLA: You spit a lot

ISLA: Took you for more of a swallower

HANNAH: (gif of two people high-fiving)

CHEYENNE: I seriously want to be you when I grow up

RHEA: Well that got out of hand quickly

ISLA: (gif of person giving side eye)

ISLA: Seriously no one? Out of hand...

ISLA: Such a missed opportunity

HANNAH: Cannot wait for tomorrow

RHEA: Okay great, 5 gallons of lemonade for Fallon, any other requests?

CHEYENNE: \*laughing emoji\*

FALLON: That should do it

RHEA: I'm more excited than a wet dog on the fourth of July!

ISLA: NOT

ISLA: A

ISLA: THING

MARLEE: (gif of woman cackling)

HANNAH: Maybe I should get that made into a sign for the bookstore

FALLON: Y'all are the best

Because she wasn't kidding, I had Otto bring over one of those water coolers that football teams use on the sidelines filled with lemonade. We're nothing if not accommodating in this family.

"I'm glad y'all will have some time together," Otto says as he maneuvers the cooler onto the island. His phone vibrates next to him and he ignores it. "Fallon hasn't been feelin' great."

"She is growing your child," I tease and he beams even as his cheeks heat. It's adorable and I step forward to give him a hug.

"That little baby already has you wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she?"

"You know it. We can't agree on a name though, and we've vetoed all of Briggs's suggestions."

I giggle as I step back, imagining Briggs offering all sorts of silly things. Otto's phone vibrates again, and I glance down briefly at the screen before everything comes to a screeching halt.

My mouth drops open, and I bump him out of the way with my hip before snatching up the device and putting the table between me and my younger brother.

"Give me that! You weren't supposed to see it!" he says, panic in his tone. He lunges to the right, and I move in the opposite direction, keeping as much of the table as I can between us as I enter his password and watch in horror at what plays out on the screen.

"How do you know my password anyway?" Otto grumbles as he admits defeat.

"It's Briggs's birthday, but Otto"—I wave the phone back and forth—"what is this?"

He worries his bottom lip with his teeth as he fights a smile, and like an addict, I can't help but watch as the video plays out again.

It's Sorren reading in a lawn chair.

Shirtless.



“He’s going to kill you.”

My gaze scans to the account name and then to the number of views and likes and *oh my God*.

My brother is totally dead. Probably Case too considering there’s no way only one of them is involved.

“You’re not going to tell him, are you?” Otto whines and I shrug.

“I won’t tell him, but I won’t lie when he finds out.”

“He won’t find out.”

My eyes widen. “I would agree with you if you said that about Hank, but there’s no way...” My voice trails off as I scroll through some of the comments. It’s a mistake because they’re filthy and now I’m pissed.

“Have you seen what they’re saying?” I hiss and he smirks.

“Why do you care?”

“Because you know Sorren is private and, and—”

“And you’re banging him?”

“I am *not* banging him.” Otto raises his eyebrows, eyes wide and totally disbelieving. “We haven’t...” I huff and my brother laughs.

“I like seein’ you happy.” He pauses. “We’ll take it down...eventually.”

A knock on the door is the distraction he needs because he snatches his phone from my hand and shoves it into his pocket.

“Don’t tell him.”

“Delete it,” I hiss as Cheyenne walks in the door carrying shopping bags and a casserole dish. Otto says hello and goodbye and hurries out the door before I can say anything else.

Coward.

“Sorry I’m early,” Cheyenne says as I take the dish from her, and she drops all the bags on the table.

“What is all this?” I laugh.

“Snacks, and what?” she says as I give her an amused look. “I was hungry when I went to the store.”

“Because I never have enough food,” I muse and she rolls her eyes.

“Options.”

“I brought drink options,” Hannah says as she drops a bottle of wine and a bottle of vodka on the counter.

I snort as Isla and Marlee let themselves in, followed by Fallon who sort of waddles in behind them. She catches me staring and narrows her eyes.

“Do not say a word.” Fallon’s voice is full of warning which makes a

giant smile spread across my face.

“But you look so cute.”

“I’m not cute.” She pouts as she drops into the closest chair. “There is nothing cute about my ankles.” I slide her a glass of lemonade and her face instantly brightens. “Oh! Thanks!”

Isla snickers and then moves around my small kitchen to pull out plates and cups. Otto had distracted me from finishing up my hostess duties, but I’m happy the girls make themselves at home here.

Mama always had a kitchen full of kids while I was growing up. My siblings and I, Marlee and Sorren, our friends, and some of the neighbor kids all wound up there at some point during the day.

It’s something I’ve wanted for myself. I like taking care of everyone, but more importantly, I like being the one they turn to for advice or help or just want to hang out with.

“Have y’all picked a name yet?” Marlee asks and Fallon groans.

“No. This poor thing is due in like a month and a half and we can’t agree on a name.”

“Maybe it will come to you when you see her.” Cheyenne looks around. “That’s a thing, right?”

“Totally a thing.” We all agree whether everyone believes it or not.

“Who is more of a diva dad? Hank or Otto?” I ask and everyone bursts out laughing.

“I mean…” Isla starts, “I think Hank wanted to put me in bubble wrap but…”

“There is no debate necessary. My husband is the most diva father to be on the planet,” Fallon laments dryly.

Hannah cackles and Cheyenne wipes a tear from her cheek before saying, “He’s asked me to make so many shirts, so no one be surprised if you get one.”

Fallon nods solemnly. “Be prepared, y’all.”

“I love that you have your accent back,” Marlee tells Fallon and she smiles.

“I’m happy to be back.” Her eyes flood with tears and Isla hands over a tissue without being asked.

“Pregnancy is so weird,” Hannah whispers to me, and I nod while squeezing Marlee into my side.

She hugs me back and doesn’t let go.

“I’m okay,” she murmurs, and I turn and drop a kiss on her hair.

“I know you are.”

“You still give the best hugs though.” We stay like that, talking and laughing and embracing every moment of being together. These women have never hesitated to drop everything to be together, and it’s so much more than I ever could have hoped for.

“So,” Hannah says as she pops a chip into her mouth, “are we finally going to talk about what you have going on with tall, dark, and murderous?”

My mouth hangs open as Marlee turns to look at me.

“My brother?!” she squeals.

“I love that you automatically know it’s him,” Cheyenne says before taking a sip of her wine.

“Are you guys finally together?” Marlee asks with no less enthusiasm than her earlier question I’d hoped to put off a while longer.

“I mean,” I start as Isla narrows her eyes at me, “we’re figuring things out and—”

“He’s got no problem figuring how to give you orgasms,” Isla says smugly over the rim of her drink.

Marlee’s mouth falls open as her hands land on my shoulders, shaking me before she’s jumping up and down and screaming. Her excitement has the other girls doubled over laughing and Fallon standing and hustling to the bathroom so she doesn’t pee her pants.

Literally.

“Oh my God, you’re finally together!” She squeezes me in a hug so tight and so hard it’s difficult to breathe. “I’m just so happy,” she says when she finally pulls away, her eyes filled with unshed tears as her gaze meets mine.

“It’s new,” I say even though it sounds stupid even to my own ears.

“I’ve always hoped you’d end up together.”

“You have?”

She rolls her eyes like it couldn’t be more obvious. “Of course, what could be better? Me marrying your brother and you marrying mine. You’re going to make him so happy.” She hugs me again, her words a choked whisper. “Thank you for taking care of him when I couldn’t.”

I squeeze her tighter, my mouth unable to form the words to respond to something like that. “I love you,” I say instead around the lump in my throat.

“I know. But more importantly,” she says around a shuddery breath, “love him. Love him fiercely because no one deserves it more, and know that

he'll do the same in return.”

“Dammit, you guys, I can't stop cryin’,” Fallon says, turning my own tears into a watery laugh.

“Are we hugging or did they fill the quota for the night?” Hannah deadpans, and I throw a chip at her. She winks at me and I smile.

I might have been born with brothers, but I wouldn't trade the girls in this room—my sisters—for anything.



## RHEA

The short loop of the song “Boots On” by Randy Houser plays over and over as I watch the slow motion video of Sorren leaning back against the truck and propping his boot on the tire. It’s the profile of his face that gets me worked up, with the sharp lines of his cheek bones and the dark beard covering his jaw. He’s always been handsome, but having his hands on me flipped a switch I didn’t even know I had.

He’s dangerous, deliciously so, and it’s already an addiction I’ll never be able to escape.

And I don’t want to.

I had half a mind to send him a couple of dirty texts last night and a picture to match after the girls left but chickened out before I hit send. He was saying all the right things, but it was still so new and so much had happened in such a short time it was hard to process.

I want the easiness between us back but I wouldn’t sacrifice knowing how it felt to have his lips on mine and his hands on my body to get it. Sighing, I scroll through a couple more videos, trying and failing not to notice how sexy he is just being himself.

I’m just about to close out of the app but stop when the next video starts to play. Sorren—petting Louise—at Miss Thelma’s.

*Oh shit.*

Not knowing whether to laugh or be horrified, I grab my purse and keys and head to my car because I just cannot believe...

Jumping into the driver’s seat, I don’t wait for the air conditioning to kick on before I’m backing out of the driveway and heading down the road. Her

house isn't far—nothing in Clementine Creek is—but it still feels like an eternity before I'm pulling up in front of the little white house.

Miss Thelma sits in a rocking chair on the porch, and even without opening my mouth I know it's true.

"I cannot believe you're in on what Case and Otto are doing with that account."

Her eyes widen with faux innocence as I hustle up the short walk and drop into the other chair—the one Sorren had been in in the video.

"What ever do you mean?" She flutters her lashes and I shake my head.

"He's going to be so mad."

"Are you mad because y'all are finally gettin' busy and you don't want to share?"

My mouth drops open, but I have no idea why I'm surprised. This woman is nothing but trouble.

Lovable trouble—but trouble, nonetheless.

"You can't just—"

She cackles as my cheeks heat. "Honey, this is one of the perks about being old."

"Meddling and posting thirst traps?"

"Exactly."

"It's disturbing that you even know what a thirst trap is."

"Honey, you young people might have a different name for it, but the concept isn't new." She shrugs. "Besides, the man needs a little spice in his life,"—she throws me an unladylike grin—"unless you're covered in the spice department."

I blush furiously because I can't stop thinking about those orgasms and what he'll do to me when he gets home.

Then I blush harder because talking with Miss Thelma about my sex life has never been on my radar.

"Good for you." She nods approvingly. "Took y'all long enough."

"Not my fault," I grumble because honestly, at this point, there's no reason to sugarcoat it.

"I do wish I had seen the showdown with Colt," she muses and I slide my gaze to her. "Such a missed opportunity."

"You're a piece of work, Miss Thelma."

She shrugs. "He needed a swift kick in the backside and that's what he got. Nothing I said got through that thick skull of his."

“Do you think he’s ready now?”

She rocks back and forth in silence for what feels like eternity before finally speaking. “I won’t pretend to know everything that boy has been through”—she pauses, weighing her words—“but I know he’s tired.”

“Tired?” I feel it too but I ask the question anyway.

“Do you remember when they first came here?” I nod because it’s a time that will forever be burned into my brain. “I met Sorren for the first time when I went over to drop off some tomatoes for their Gran. He was sitting on the porch watching Marlee play with her dolls, but when I came up the steps, he stood and put his body between me and his sister. I wasn’t a threat but he didn’t know that. I saw a lifetime flash through his eyes.” She turns and looks at me. “He’s an extraordinary man, but that little boy is still inside him, Rhea.”

*“You want me to tell you it’s always been you? I can’t because I never believed I’d ever get here. I never knew I’d be able to deserve you and hell if I still don’t. You forced my hand and now here we are.”*

His words echo in my head, and I let my eyelids fall closed to hold off the tears. Mama had told us back then that we needed to show Sorren and Marlee kindness.

Love.

Mama had helped me make a batch of oatmeal raisin cookies to bring over to them—my specialty at eleven—and I’d watched as he choked the damn things down without complaint. It had taken me a couple of years to get him to admit that he didn’t like them even though I never made them for him again.

Until recently at least.

It had become my passive-aggressive way of letting him know I was pissy with him—not that he really needed the hint.

“That boy was just as extraordinary,” I say when I’m composed enough to speak.

“He was,” she agrees with a small smile, “but he always shines brightest with you.”

I search her face but there’s only sincerity. Truth. My heart races at the implication.

“He deserves to be loved.”

Miss Thelma shakes her head. “He’s been loved since the moment he stepped foot into Clementine Creek. There’s no shortage of that here. But



Sorren deserves to be *seen*. He's lived his life showing people what they want to see—what he allows them to see.”

*“This is me, Rhea. This is it for me. You wanted this—me—this is it.”*

I'd taken the words at face value when he'd said them in the storm shelter but she was right. He'd been enraged, vulnerable—raw. I'd been too mad to see it, to hear what he was actually saying.

The woman next to me nods, the twinkle back in her eyes. “Y'all have been readin' the same book, just been on different pages is all.”

“We...” The analogy rolls through my brain, pushing clarity to the forefront of my mind. Sorren and I have so much to talk about, but maybe she's right, maybe he's been trying to catch up.

She pats my hand. “It will work itself out. Although by your blushing earlier I'd say it already has.” I narrow my eyes and she hoots with laughter before standing from the rocking chair. “Come on, honey, let's go get ourselves a drink.”

I look at the time on my phone. “It's one in the afternoon.”

“We can talk more about you getting busy with—”

“You know what? Moscow Mules sound great.”

She cackles as I follow her inside, hoping she's right and that Sorren and I will find our way.

Together.



# SORREN

HAYDEN: I really think she should have made him work for it

SORREN: I thought you'd be all about that grand gesture

HAYDEN: I needed more groveling. More pain.

SORREN: That sounds nothing like you

HAYDEN: I want to READ about it. Not live it.

I snort as I read the messages, causing Tanner to raise his eyebrow at me. “Hayden doesn’t like the end of the book we just finished. Wanted more pain.”

“That sounds nothing like him.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Although,”—Tanner blushes—“he sends me some weird recommendations.”

“That tracks.”

“Does it?” he says, his voice laced with annoyance. “Is he sending you vegetable shifter books?”

I smirk. “Not anymore.”

“Ugh, what’s your secret?” I stare at him and he groans. “Take him back. I had to bleach my eyeballs after just reading the description on some of the

books he's sent."

"He's just trying to help you broaden your literary horizons."

"I seriously hate you. You know that, right?"

I shrug. "You're being dramatic."

"I'm..." He growls and drags his hand down his face. "It's a really good thing I'm happy for you because you're practically intolerable."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"What?" he asks, his voice jumping up a couple of octaves. I raise an eyebrow and wait. "Fine." He drops down onto the edge of his bed and rubs the back of his neck. "I joined a dating app."

"Okay..."

"And then I deleted it." He scoffs. "I think the vegetable shifters would be preferable to the shit that ended up in my inbox."

"That bad?"

"Worse." He looks down at the floor, his hands folded in his lap. "I just want to be happy, and while I realize apps are generally for hooking up, I didn't realize what I was getting into."

"There's no wrong way to figure out what you need," I tell him. His gaze is filled with a mix of hope and vulnerability. "But don't settle for less than what you want—what you deserve."

"You taking your own advice?"

"Trying," I admit, because I am. After closing myself off for so long, the about-face is hard—even when the girl is my end-all.

"How much trouble are you in when we get home?"

I lift one shoulder and let it drop because I honestly have no idea. "Remains to be seen." I drag my hand over my mouth to hide my smile.

Tanner snorts. "You're a masochist."

I don't say anything because he's not wrong. I can't wait to be incinerated by her fire. There's no need to worry about being burned—I plan on being completely consumed by the flames.

My phone buzzes on the desk in the hotel room, pulling me from thoughts of Rhea and the things I plan on doing to earn her forgiveness.

ALERT: The alert you set has been activated. Please contact the account holder for more information. If this is in error please disregard this message.

“FUCK!” The word roars out of me from a place deep in my soul. Tanner’s head whips up to look at me, and the only thing stopping me from smashing my phone is the fact that I need the damn thing.

I shouldn’t have waited so long, but I’d been so sure it wouldn’t come to this—that they wouldn’t be stupid enough to try something.

“What’s wrong?” Tanner asks, rising to his full height.

I don’t want to answer him. I don’t want to give voice to the absolute fuckery that’s about to descend on my life.

On the life I’d hoped to build with Rhea.

“There’s going to be no resting once we get back to Clementine Creek. Shit just got complicated.”

He nods at my nonanswer that somehow speaks volumes.

“Let me know what you need.” I don’t respond and he claps me on the shoulder as he steers me toward the door. “Let’s finish this so we can get the hell out of here.”

I let him lead me into the hall and across the hotel to the conference room we’ve practically lived in this week. Tanner pauses at the entrance but then walks in without a word, leaving me to marinate in the fury I need to push from my mind.

I need to focus, and I can’t do that with the unknown hanging over my head. There’s no way to fix it now but if I can find a little sunshine, I’ll be able to make it through the rest of the day.

SORREN: No i’s or k’s

SUNSHINE: (picture of double fudge caramel brownies)

SUNSHINE: No i’s or k’s

SUNSHINE: \*kiss face emoji\*

SORREN: That for me?

SUNSHINE: The kiss or the brownies?

SORREN: Both

SUNSHINE: Then yes

SUNSHINE: I can't wait to see you

SORREN: Soon.

POCKETING MY PHONE, I allow myself one steadying breath before squaring my shoulders and walking into the room.



## RHEA

“Did you see the paper?” Mama says before I’ve even made it inside my childhood home. I’d been at the Cedar Lake Spa for the better part of the day, courtesy of Sorren as an apology for making me cancel on our monthly pedicure appointments.

Colette hadn’t even told me what was happening; she just whisked me into the back where I’d experienced the most decadent afternoon of my life.

“No, I haven’t had the chance,” I say as she thrusts the paper into my hand, and I opt not to tell her I could read the article online. She looks at me expectantly so I turn my focus back to Sorren and Tanner on the front page of the local paper. They’re standing in front of Vetted Paws, arms crossed, biceps bulging, and every bit the military man candy Sorren will bitch about later.

My breath catches in my throat at the sight of him. Pride and lust, a heady concoction, fill me as my gaze drops down to the article.

*Veterans Look to do More Than Save A Few Dogs in Clementine Creek*  
By: Arden James

*Clementine Creek native Sorren Mackay and Tanner Holiday, a recent transplant, have been working hard to bring their dream to life in the small Tennessee town. “We’re looking forward to the opportunity to help not only those in the community but also provide relief to shelters already at capacity in the area and beyond,” Holiday said.*



*The Air Force veteran spoke fondly of being part of such a worthy cause. “So much of our life in the military was focused on honor and being bigger than ourselves, and I think this is our way of maintaining those values on the civilian side.” Holiday went on to describe the extensive training he and his business partner have gone through to make sure they’d be able to provide the best care to animal and owner alike.*

*“There’s no shortage of help needed in Tennessee,” Mackay said solemnly. The Marine Corps veteran, injured overseas, returned to the small town a decorated hero. While private about his time in the military, Mackay did share his desire to bestow a sense of hope, love of country, and second chances here at Vetted Paws.*

*Mackay and Holiday are looking forward to facilitating matching shelter dogs with veterans as well as others in the community. “We’re hoping that we’ll be able to expand within the next year to be able to provide more specialized training in-house. Services are not always easily accessed or readily available, and we’re hoping to help bridge that gap for those in this part of Tennessee,” Mackay said.*

THE ARTICLE WENT ON to provide quotes from Miss Thelma, Joe, and Waylon, all praising Tanner and Sorren’s hard work and dedication to the community. My eyes are full of tears when they finally meet Mama’s, and I have to wipe a stray one from my cheek.

“He’s gonna hate it,” I say on a choked laugh and Mama chuckles, nodding her agreement.

“He most certainly is.” She turns the paper and trails her fingertips over the side of the picture. “I’m so proud of him. Tanner too. Those boys have had a lot of challenges, and I’m not naive enough to think this fixes everything for them, but what they’re doin’—it’s going to help so many people.”

I nod because I still don’t trust my voice to speak. Mama moves around the kitchen before placing a plate with a scone on it in front of me with a glass of sweet tea.

“How are things going with you two anyhow?” she asks just as I’m about to take a bite of the cranberry orange comfort.

Clearing my throat, I place the uneaten bite back on the plate. “It’s still new.”

“Y’all made quite a scene over in Blackstone Falls.”

“Mama!” I hiss and she laughs, with a twinkle in her eye I’d rather ignore.

“Not my fault you went out on a date with Colt Harrington.”

“It wasn’t a date. Colt and I are just friends commiserating over unrequited love.”

“Not very unrequited if the rumors are to be believed.”

“Mama,” I warn but her smile only grows.

“What? The whole town has been waitin’ with bated breath to see when the tension between you two would finally ignite.”

“Ugh.” I groan and then shove a piece of scone in my mouth. Clementine Creek has always been my favorite place, but right now I’d give anything not to be the center of town gossip.

“We’re just happy for you is all,” she says sweetly. “Besides, you’ve always known how to handle him better than most.”

“What?”

This time when she reaches across the table, her smile is genuine. “You’ve always had a soft spot for him, and the way he’s gravitated toward you since bein’ home—seems like he’s always had one for you too.”

I run my hand along the wood table that’s seen its fair share of Thayer family dinners. Like everything else in this house, it’s familiar and comfortable and feels so much like *home*.

“You don’t think it’s just a convenience thing?” I say finally, not brave enough to meet Mama’s gaze.

“Why on God’s green earth would you say such a thing?”

“It’s just a lot of change, Mama. He went from not liking me to kissin’ me breathless in the middle of the parking lot.”

Mama nods and pats my hand. “That boy has always liked you, make no mistake about it.” I snort and she wraps her slender fingers around mine. “Just because he isn’t always good at showing it doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“I need him to say it.”

“He will,”—she pauses—“but make sure you look at what he’s not sayin’ too.” I grip Mama’s hand harder and pray that she’s right. I don’t want to

doubt his intentions, especially after being pampered all afternoon, but it's all so surreal at this exact moment.

“I will, Mama. I just need him to come home.”



## SORREN

“I need your help,” I say as I stand in front of the only person with resources that far surpass my own. I’d made Tanner drive back to Clementine Creek so I could confirm what I already knew—they’re looking for us.

Me.

The alerts had been more frequent recently, but I’d attributed it to the chatter about Vetted Paws. It still might just be a coincidence, but my gut says otherwise. This isn’t going to go away before it lands on my doorstep. The question wasn’t “if” but “when.”

All I want to do is go to my girl and kiss the hell out of her—just because I can.

Just because I missed her.

The ache was constant being away from her, and I hated every minute of it.

But instead, I’m not in Clementine Creek for more than five minutes before having to deal with the shitstorm of my past.

“Anything you need,” Cullen says without hesitation, and I feel the tension in my shoulders start to ease.

“I need you to look into my parents.” His expression doesn’t change, but he visibly settles into his seat at the kitchen table. “I set up some alerts with the bank—the house—just in case. They’re poking around. News about the shelter is online and fuck, I don’t need this right now.”

“How long has it been going on?”

“I don’t know—a couple weeks maybe? It’s not like we’ve been hiding. I

just don't want to be surprised if they suddenly decide we're worth something to them."

"Have you told Marlee?"

I shake my head, and he gives me the *you're making a mistake* smile that all parents seem to have.

Well, except mine. No, mine were slowly making their way down the East Coast, and every state closer to Tennessee has my hackles rising.

"It's been brought to my attention in recent years that women hate being left in the dark. And if I can quote my wife, 'I've been makin' my own damn decisions my whole life. I don't need you steppin' in to rescue me.' I believe that's a direct quote." He smirks and so do I because Gwen is a hell of a woman.

"I'm not keepin' it from her. I just don't want to worry her for no reason if this all is a misunderstanding."

"Do you think it's a misunderstanding?"

Not even a little, but the alternative is so much worse.

"Is it too much to just say I'm tired of all this?" I stare up at the ceiling with my hands clasped behind my head. "I just want to not worry all the damn time."

"Son, you have a family here that loves you and will help shoulder the burden. You've carried more than most people do in a lifetime, and I'm sure I don't know the half of it." He takes a deep breath and I drop my hands and look at him. "No one actually likes a martyr—whether you're tryin' to be one or not."

"I just want my sister to be happy."

"That girl is walkin' on sunshine, and if you think Waylon wouldn't lay down his life for her, you're not paying attention."

"I know that." He gives me a raised eyebrow. "I do. Really. But they shouldn't have to deal with something like this." *Not when they're tryin' for a baby.*

"I know a few things about internalizing emotions and not letting your loved ones share in the burden. I also know that Isla and I wouldn't be where we are today if I hadn't made the change. You've recognized your need for help." He motions between us. "You wouldn't be here otherwise, but you're never going to heal that piece of you—the fourteen-year-old boy. He's done enough, don't you think?"

I take a steadying breath and look out the window because that kid is so

tired. Every time he catches a break, something puts him right back at the beginning.

“Let’s start with a phone call, okay? I’ll talk to my guy and we’ll go from there.”

“I need to know if they’re coming here.”

“What are you afraid of? They can’t take her away from you—from here.”

The truth of his words rings loud in the space between us as he waits for my answer.

“They’re not nice people.” He doesn’t say anything so I add, “I know I can’t protect her from everything, but I could protect her from *them*. And I have, but—”

“I get it. I do. Just know that you have an entire town just waiting to come to the rescue.”

I nod and hold out my hand as he stands from the table. He returns the shake but doesn’t let go as he pulls me in for a hug. It’s oddly reassuring, and maybe I’m just tired but I don’t hate it.

Needing to put some space between me and my past, I step out into the evening air and blow out a breath. I should tell Marlee.

I should go to Rhea.

But today was too damn much.

I’m exhausted, and I need to get myself under control before I see either of them. Mind made up, I get into my car and head toward some much-needed quiet.

SUNSHINE: Are you coming over?

I STARE at the message as the steam from the bathwater fills the room. Mama just hugged me when I walked in the back door without a word. I didn’t want to end up here, but I couldn’t stop myself from turning down the dirt drive.

SORREN: Not tonight

I SHOULD ELABORATE—I should explain, but the words die on my lips. Today was too much and I hate that she'd understand. Rhea would try and make it better, but tonight I want to sulk in the darkness that's trickled into my mind.

I don't want to taint her with the bullshit of my past, and more importantly, I don't want this to be hanging over me when I see her.

Three dots appear and then disappear and then *nothing*.

Sighing, I step into the tub and sink down into the water. The bath salts are the least fragrant I could find—lavender, I think—and I hiss as I settle back against the tub. My phone vibrates in my hand and I force myself to read the words.

SUNSHINE: I'm trying not to be mad

SUNSHINE: And I'm totally eating your brownies

SORREN: Fuck I forgot about those

SORREN: I just need tonight.

SORREN: Tomorrow I'm yours.

SUNSHINE: So just not on the bad days?

MY HEAD DROPS BACK against the wall of the shower with a *thunk*. I don't want to argue with her over text, but I'd be pissed if I were her too.

SORREN: Please give me this one. You can be mad but I don't want to fight about it.

SORREN: Tonight was a lot and I don't want to be feeling this way when I see you



THE BUBBLES APPEAR and then disappear and I hold my breath as I flex my calf in the water.

SUNSHINE: No i's or k's

SORREN: No i's or k's

I SET my phone on the floor beside the tub and let my eyelids fall shut. There's no hope of a good night's sleep for me. The best I can hope for is a couple of hours here and there before the sun comes up. Part of me thinks I should just put my bullshit aside and hope Rhea lets me into her bed.

Being wrapped around her tight body is tempting.

So fucking tempting.

But I'd want to touch her and I can't—not when I'm feelin' like I do. She deserves more than I am right now.

*Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.*

Dammit.

I want to ignore it but it's already vibrated six more times.

OTTO: Did you know that accidentally eating a sandwich in the refrigerator that a pregnant woman may or may not have wanted is a criminal offense?

CASE: Umm...

HANK: Learned that the hard way

WAYLON: Was it yours?

OTTO: No but it's not like it said DO NOT EAT on it or anything

OTTO: She cried though. Like actual tears.

OTTO: Said she'd been thinking about that turkey sandwich all day.

WAYLON: Not deli meat though right? I don't think you're supposed to have deli meat if you're pregnant

OTTO: Nah man this was one of those thanksgiving sandwiches with the big slices of turkey and the cranberry sauce...

SORREN: Did you replace it?

OTTO: What?

SORREN: The fucking sandwich

OTTO: ...

CASE: Dude he's right

SORREN: Go get her another sandwich

SORREN: And dessert

OTTO: Wow you're good at this

CASE: He KNOWS things

WAYLON: Like we know about him and our sister?

CASE: (gif of guy making a surprised face)

OTTO: (gif of woman gasping with shocked face)

CASE: Is it official?

OTTO: I think I'm winning that bet

HANK: No confirmation yet

SORREN: We're not doing this over text

OTTO: THAT'S NOT A NO

CASE: That's a good point

HANK: I don't think shouty caps are necessary

CASE: It's weird you said 'shouty caps'

WAYLON: I didn't put tools back in the garage and he didn't even yell

OTTO: Man fatherhood looks so good on you

CASE: Mellowed his ass right out

OTTO: I should have Cheyenne make a shirt that says DILF

WAYLON: Is that weird coming from you?

OTTO: Is anything weird coming from me?

HANK: Yes.

SORREN: Yes

OTTO: You guys are no fun

A GHOST of a smile kisses my lips as I silence my phone and set it back on the floor. It wasn't exactly the reprieve I was looking for, but it helped. As long as I don't wake up with fifty notifications, I'll take it as a win.



## RHEA

“Lord Almighty, what did that poor cookie ever do to you?” Hayden’s voice startles me out of angry frosting another flower cookie. I’d been this way most of the night and again all morning, stewing over what had happened to Sorren and why he didn’t come over last night.

“What’s wrong with it?” I ask even though it’s pretty obvious.

“Nothin’” he says casually, “if you’re promoting those as being frosted by your seven-year-old nephew.”

I growl and set the piping bag on the island. Ella steps up to the counter with a smile and takes his order, but I can still feel him watching me.

“Ella honey, can you manage things for a second while I steal your boss? She’s about to murder an entire batch of cookies.”

“That’s the second batch,” Ella mumbles under her breath.

“You’re fired,” I hiss and she laughs before handing me a cup of coffee and shoving me around the counter. Hayden hooks his arm through mine as he leads me to a table that’s as private as you can get in here.

“What’s going on? Did Sorren do something wrong?” he asks as soon as we’re seated.

“How do you know we’re together? Did he tell you that? Why do you think he did something wrong? Am I really that obvious?”

His eyebrows rise slowly, and he takes an intentional sip of his drink without breaking eye contact.

Shit. “I sound crazy.”

“Yup.” He pops the *p* at the end and I narrow my gaze at him. He ignores me and pats my hand.

“You just—”

“Oh, get over yourself honey,” he scolds, and I look heavenward and pray for patience. “No, he hasn’t told me you’re together but it doesn’t take a detective.” He waggles his eyebrows. “Also, I told him where you were meeting Colt.”

The words take a minute to process. Hayden looks like the Cheshire cat as I stare at him in shock.

“I can’t believe you did that!”

“I *believe* the words you’re looking for are *thank you*.”

“He—”

“Girl, he was tearing apart the town looking for you, and *you’re* delusional if you think he’s not deliciously obsessed with you.”

“You read too many romance books.”

“Hasn’t failed me yet,” he says with a wink then pauses. “Also, I’d like to point out that I read a lot with your man.”

“It’s really adorable,” I concede and he smirks. Their buddy reading is my most favorite thing. Hayden is loud and dramatic—vivacious—and Sorren is broody with his jaw clenching and eye twitches. It’s delightful seeing them in action.

“I know, right?”

“He said that Tanner was a little concerned with some of the recs you’ve been sending.”

Hayden’s expression is full of glee. “Man’s gotta know his limitations,” he says casually.

“And that includes shifters of the prehistoric and veggie variety?”

He shrugs. “It’s selfless really.” I just stare and he rolls his eyes. “Fine, enough deflecting, what’s the problem?” He motions in the general direction of where the cookies are I was trying to frost.

Sighing, I confess, “I feel like I don’t understand him. All this time it’s been so easy, but now that we’re kind of together it feels like something’s off. He’s guarded and short with me, but he’s still affectionate in his own way.” I groan because saying it out loud sounds as crazy as it did in my head.

“And...”

“And, we didn’t have any time together to work things out before he left for that training. Then he got home last night but didn’t want to see me.”

“Didn’t or couldn’t?”

“I don’t know. He said he needed the night and he’d see me today, but

aside from a good morning text I haven't heard from him."

"Do you trust him?"

"Of course I trust him." Sorren's request that I trust him with my heart floats through my mind, but I push it away. "But he needs to trust me too—with all the things, even the hard ones."

"Rhea,"—Hayden reaches across the table and puts his hand over mine—"you're expecting a man who has never relied on anyone to change overnight. You need to give him time."

"But—"

"I know it was difficult not seeing him, but imagine how hard it was for him. He's shouldering whatever is bothering him plus the guilt of disappointing you."

My stomach sinks at the implication. Hayden is silent for a moment, and it's obvious he's choosing his words carefully.

"When Everett made his grand 'I'm all in love with you' gesture,"—he stirs his coffee without looking at me—"I had a hard time believing he just woke up one day and was certain we were meant to be together, but..."

"But you guys had been friends a long time."

"We had, and when I looked at the pictures and the moments that made up our friendship—it was just so obvious."

"It was pretty obvious from the outside too," I say cheekily and he sticks his tongue out at me.

"What I mean is Everett had been showing me all along how much he cared for me. Before he even knew what it meant to him, he was makin' sure I knew I was important. Special."

I stare at him while the words sink in. He must see what he's looking for because he raises a single eyebrow in response, then adds, "I know it's hard to believe, but I'm not always great with talking about my feelings either."

"No." I gasp and clutch at my nonexistent pearls.

"Pipe down, cookie maimer." I snicker and he grins. "I hurt Everett because I couldn't put into words what I was feeling. It came out wrong when I tried, and I hurt the person who means the most to me in this world."

"But it worked out."

"It did. But feelings are hard. Change is hard and while I give Sorren shit for not being chatty, we both know that's just how he is."

"So what? Let him off the hook because he's not a big talker?"

Hayden squeezes my hand again. "Maybe you should try listening to

what he's not saying."

"I..." I start to refute his statement but pause when his words sink in.

"Your relationship has shifted, Rhea. Sorren, your friend, could bulldoze his way through your life because that was what you allowed, but Sorren, your boyfriend..." He waggles his eyebrows and I throw a wadded-up napkin at him even as the smile tugs at my lips. "Sorren, your boyfriend, recognizes that relationships—healthy ones—have boundaries. He's not doing everything right, but he's trying."

"You guys are really close, huh?"

He shrugs. "You can tell a lot about a man by what he reads and besides,"—he pauses for dramatic effect—"the broody ones are always flawed." I open my mouth and close it because he's not wrong.

"Thanks, Hayden."

He stands and kisses my cheek. "Speaking of reading, I need to go next door to Wandering Pages and see if my book is in."

"Do I even want to know?" I ask.

He fakes swooning as he says, "Arranged marriage, mafia kingpin, and oh so spicy."

"You're ridiculous." I giggle and stand.

"Maybe." He lifts a shoulder as he turns to leave then says, "but Everett reaps the benefits from all that spice. Bet you will too." Throwing me a wink, Hayden whistles casually and walks across the bakery, leaving me to attempt another round of cookies while I think about just how spicy things are about to get.





# SORREN

I spend the entire morning fielding messages from Cullen's private investigator, Tom Oakden, and checking in with different shelters and vendors. Every time I thought I could break away to see Rhea, something else popped up and I was back to a vicious cycle of guilt and frustration.

She's responded to the few texts I'd sent this morning but it's not enough. Sighing, I take out my phone and hesitate only a second before hitting send.

SORREN: I'm screwing things up with Rhea

HAYDEN: Not surprised

SORREN: I didn't see her when I got home last night

HAYDEN: That tracks

SORREN: What?

HAYDEN: She was murdering sugar cookies today

SORREN: ...

SORREN: This is not helpful

HAYDEN: YOU HATE THE MISCOMMUNICATION TROPE!

SORREN: Why are you yelling?

HAYDEN: (gif of guy face palming)

HAYDEN: You need to talk to her

SORREN: I know but that's part of the problem—it's not the same

HAYDEN: Umm you've been friends with her FOR YEARS

SORREN: That was different

HAYDEN: What's different?

SORREN: I don't want her to leave

HAYDEN: I'm hugging you the next time I see you

SORREN: No

HAYDEN: Not negotiable

HAYDEN: What if you ask her to read with you?

SORREN: Why?

HAYDEN: Because you like reading and it makes you tolerable. Also it's a good way to open lines of communication

HAYDEN: I bet that would be something to share with her

SORREN: I still don't get it

HAYDEN: She bakes. She loves baking. She shares that with you.

SORREN: Okay.

HAYDEN: I'm too young to have gray hairs, Sorren

SORREN: She likes mine

HAYDEN: (gif of little boy giggling)

HAYDEN: Everyone likes your grays

SORREN: That's weird

HAYDEN: You're like a fine wine—better with age

SORREN: I don't drink

HAYDEN: Yup that's another gray hair just from this conversation alone

SORREN: So ask her to do something with me that I like?

HAYDEN: Yes

SORREN: What if she doesn't want to?

HAYDEN: Then you find something else you can do together.

HAYDEN: She loves you, Sorren—let her love you.

SORREN: But...

HAYDEN: YOU ARE LOVABLE

HAYDEN: You spend so much damn time trying to convince people you're not but you are.

SORREN: It's a lot of pressure

HAYDEN: To be loved?

SORREN: Yes

HAYDEN: Just because you're choosing not to acknowledge you are VERY loved doesn't make it go away

SORREN: It's not the same

HAYDEN: I bet if you just let it in—even a little—it won't be so hard to accept

HAYDEN: Start with Rhea and go from there.

SORREN: Thanks

HAYDEN: Awww!

SORREN: Does that get me out of the hug?

HAYDEN: Not a chance.

“SERIOUSLY, WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?” Tanner asks as he walks in the front door of Vetted Paws.

“I—”

“I don't want to hear it. You have shit to do—admin stuff can wait.”

“Everything okay?” I ask as I pocket my phone and stand.

“What? Yeah. I'm fine—everything's fine.”

“Unsolicited dick pics got you flustered again?”

He blushes. “I am not flustered. I just know you don't need to be here.”

We stare at each other before I finally relent. He's right so I grab my keys before heading toward the parking lot. I have one stop to make before I can see Rhea, and even though it feels unnecessary, I need to do it.

For me.

SORREN: Meet me at the garage in ten.

HANK: I work here so...

OTTO: Oh I can't wait

CASE: Opening side bets for this announcement

WAYLON: On my way

SILENCING MY PHONE, I get in the car and drive the short distance to The Rusty Fender. The white building with black bay doors sits on Main Street in the heart of Clementine Creek.

We'd all worked here growing up, and seeing Hank as the new owner fills me with pride for my friend and brother. He's worked damn hard to put the past behind him, and I need to do the same.

Parking, I climb out and feel sweat already dotting my skin. The sun down here is brutal and today is no different.

"There he is," Otto yells as I step inside the air-conditioned space. Case tries to school his expression and Waylon tries to hide his face behind a water bottle. Hank looks almost bored until our eyes meet.

I already hate the buildup.

"I'm dating your sister," I say without preamble and begin a silent countdown in my head.

I don't make it to *three*.

Hank smirks, Otto pauses with his drink halfway to his mouth, Case's eyes go wide, and Waylon grins like a motherfucker.

And then all hell breaks loose as Otto doubles over laughing and Case punches Otto in the arm while Hank and Waylon both pull money from their wallets and drop it on the desk in front of Otto.

"I knew it!" Otto says as he pulls a piece of paper from his wallet and slaps it on the island. "More than a year, dramatic reveal, did it on his own."

I should really hate them for betting on my relationship with Rhea, but I'd bet on most of theirs too.

"It's serious, right?" Waylon asks as Otto tucks his winnings into his pocket.

"Yes."

"Isn't she still mad at you?" Case asks, his head tilted to the side.

I rub the back of my neck. "Yeah. She's my next stop."

"We're happy for you man, just..." Otto starts. "I know you know and I know you will, just make sure she knows she's the best."

Hank's words from my fight with Rhea echo in my head.

*She's the best of all of us.*

My gaze locks with Hank's, and he holds it for a long moment before nodding because he obviously remembers too.

Swallowing hard, I look each of them in the eyes before saying, “I will because she’s everything.”





## RHEA

“Oh my God!” the girl on the other side of the counter says to her friend.  
“It’s that guy!”

I’m only half listening as Ella and I hustle to fill orders of the post-lunch rush. I don’t see him at first but I can feel him—his presence is almost suffocating.

The other girl squeals, points at her phone, and then looks at Sorren. He doesn’t notice because his gaze is locked on me.

“You’re, like, totally the guy!” girl one says as she grips Sorren’s forearm. “You’re, like, famous! Oh em gee, can I, like, take a selfie with you?”

Slowly, and with scowl firmly in place, Sorren removes her hand from his arm and takes a step away. Jealousy boils inside me and I can’t take it a second longer.

“Office. Now.” The words are practically a growl, but he’s out of his damn mind if he thinks that I’m going to sit back and watch some other woman paw all over him in my damn bakery.

“Excuse me,” he says but I don’t turn to look. The girls are bitching about the brush-off, but I couldn’t care less as I do my best not to slam my office door open.

“Rhea—” I close the door behind him and then push him back with enough force to make my point. He grunts, and my hand grips him through his jeans and his eyes flash with desire.

“Do not think for one second I’m okay with someone else touching you. You might have run but I’m not.” I squeeze harder and he grunts as I drop to

my knees, ripping open his belt and yanking his pants down.

“You know you’re the only one I want touching me.” He growls as he moves to grip my wrist. “But we’re not doing this here.”

“I’m not doing it for you,” I murmur, pulling out of his grasp. Wrapping my fingers around his length, I stroke him twice, the challenge in my words as I say, “I’m doing this for *me*.”

His gaze scorches me as I wrap my lips around him and then suck him all the way to the back of my throat. Sorren’s head thunks against the door as he releases a pained exhale through his nose.

His normal, carefully placed mask is nowhere in sight, but I want him unhinged—desperate. I want him out of his mind for me, to crave the intensity of it. His hands are fisted at his sides, but I so desperately want them tangled in my hair.

Next time.

“Sunshine.” It’s a warning I appreciate and ignore. I can feel the way his body is barreling toward release, and he’d be a damn fool to think I’ll be doing anything but swallowing every drop I can pull from him.

He’s glorious—bigger than I’ve imagined—and I suck and lick and stroke him until he’s coming down my throat on a restrained groan.

Pulling my lips from him, I stand without breaking eye contact and tuck him back into his pants.

He’s livid.

Turned on.

And I am here for it.

Strong hands circle my waist, sliding down my back, and then he’s gripping my ass and lifting me off the ground and into his arms. My legs wrap around his waist on their own because it’s so fucking hot seeing him like this and I just can’t help it.

Hard body, flexing muscles, raw fucking strength.

His mouth slams against mine in a bruising kiss. It’s punishing and *god* I want him to take out his frustration on me. No one in my entire life has made me feel the way he does with a few kisses and orgasms and the unconventional way he shows he cares.

That he loves me—even if he’s not saying it yet.

It’s wild and crazy, but I wasn’t lying when I told him I wasn’t scared.

We’ve had a lifetime of unspoken conversations that have led us to this moment, and now that I have him, I won’t let him go.

His tongue plunders my mouth like he's starving for me, my nails digging into his back as he growls against my lips.

Between this and him coming down my throat, my panties are soaked. I wish I was stronger but I'm aching for relief—for *him*. Carrying me across the room, Sorren drops me down on my desk and then cages me in with both arms.

"I didn't run."

"Yes, you did. And then you let someone else touch you. Right in front of me in my damn bakery," I seethe, and I don't even care.

"Is that what this is about? You jealous?" His taunt has me reaching between us and him angling his hips away from me.

"Stop tryin' to grab my dick."

"Seems like the only time you can think straight is if I'm touchin' it." Seriously, what is wrong with me? This has been literally the only time I've touched him if you don't count me grinding against him like a cat in heat in the storm shelter.

"I didn't run. There's no choice, Rhea. It's you."

"You ran," I challenge because I can't let it go.

"I needed a minute, Sunshine. And I can't say it won't happen again." He pauses. "But it was a me thing, not a you thing."

"Why can't it be an us thing?"

Sorren's lips twitch before he drags them softly against my jaw to my ear. "I don't know how to be an us yet, Rhea. It's been a long time since I was with a woman, and Sunshine, you're not just any woman," he whispers and a shiver racks my body as he moves down my throat.

"It's been a long time for me too, but we're already an us. We're just adding sex and—"

"And you're fuckin' mine." His teeth nip at my earlobe and I arch into him. The pressure against my clit is barely there, and it feels like my entire being is aching for this man.

"Obviously." His hips rock against me and I gasp.

"Do you have any idea what I want to do to you? It's all I can think about—you're all I can think about. For a whole goddamn week, Rhea. I had a taste and it wasn't enough."

"Why is that so bad?"

"Because I'll never get enough of you. I'm going to want you wholly and completely and forever. I'm fuckin' terrified. I've kept my need to be close to

you in check, but if we do this, I'm gonna be fuckin' obsessed with you."

"I thought we were already doin' this."

"Rhea..." My name is a warning, and I love the way the low timbre of his voice sends a shiver through me.

"I'm not scared of you."

"Fuck—you should be."

"I like you obsessed." The words are breathy as he drags his rough palms up and down my body, torturously slow.

"And demanding. So fucking demanding."

His teeth nip at my collarbone and I try to rock into him, but his hands grip me harder.

"Please."

"You're still mad at me."

"I sure am," I say as he pulls my shirt over my head and discards it on the floor. My bra follows and I pray that the door is locked.

"We're supposed to talk." The stubble of his jaw grazes over my skin, sending little shock waves of sensation through me.

"I know but—"

His arm knocks the stack of papers off my desk before hooking his fingers in the top of my leggings and pulling them down my legs with my panties until I'm completely bare.

He doesn't move to take off my sneakers, just ducks between my legs and pushes my thighs wider as he kneels in front of me. The desk is cold against my skin, and I'll never be able to sit in here without thinking of him devouring me with sweet fucking abandon.

"All these things we need to do, Sunshine,"—his palms grip my ass cheeks as he pulls me to the edge of the desk—"and all I want is to bury my face in your pussy and watch you hold back your scream."

He doesn't wait for a response before sucking my clit into his mouth. My back bows off the desk, my sneakers digging into his back with my leggings and panties still around my ankles.

He grunts as he licks and sucks, his hands kneading my ass as he winds me higher and higher. My hips buck off the desk in an attempt to get impossibly closer—to get *more* of everything he's doing to me.

"You taste so fuckin' sweet," he murmurs against my slit, and I bite my lip to hold back the whimper that threatens to escape.

"I just—" I clamp my hands over my mouth as he sucks my clit and I

shatter. All the pent-up frustration from the last week is caught up in the orgasm as it rips through every cell of my being.

I thrash against the desk, against his face, but he doesn't let up—not until he's pulled every shred of pleasure from me.

Collapsing against the wood, I try—and fail—to slow my breathing. Ducking back under my leg, Sorren pulls the bottom of his shirt up and wipes his mouth with the soft fabric. The view of his abs has my mouth watering, and I scramble to sit up, to feel the hard muscles beneath my fingertips.

Forgetting my feet are still tangled in my clothing, I stumble a little before Sorren rights me and then lowers me to the ground, pulling my panties and leggings up where they belong.

Handing me my bra and shirt, he watches as I finish dressing.

The words “now what” die on my lips when he takes mine in a languid kiss. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, doing all the things he did to me while his face was between my legs.

“Finish up whatever you have to do and then get your ass home,” he says, his voice full of gravel.

“You don't just get to boss me around and—”

He cuts the rest of my protest off with another searing kiss.

“Please.” As his hands cup my face, it feels like his intense gaze is staring into my soul.

“I'll hurry,” I whisper because I know what it means for him to ask. His lips twitch with a sweet smile before he presses a kiss to my forehead.

“I'll be waitin'.”



## SORREN

The ride from The Poppy Seed to Rhea's house is a blur. I'd had my fair share of adrenaline dumps overseas—it was normal, expected even—but this week had rocked me to my core.

I can barely lift my feet over the threshold of Rhea's house by the time I finally arrive. Being away with things so unsettled between us had added a level of stress I wasn't used to feeling.

Combine that with my visit to Cullen today and I'm borderline manic on the inside. Outside, I kept my usual mask in place. I'd been off-kilter—unhinged—which is why I'd allowed Rhea to blow me in her office. I was wound too tight, and seeing her on her knees full of fire and jealous as hell was too much to resist.

And I was done resisting her.

*“I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing this for me.”*

Those words on her lips had me wanting to fuck her into oblivion. But the fire in those baby blues held me captive as she took me all the way to the back of her throat. It's a vision that's been burned into my brain and one I'll be guaranteed to jerk off to in the future.

And while all that was incredible, some part of me still recognizes that I need to find some sort of balance. I was more overbearing and she was less appreciative of that than normal—today was evidence of that. I don't blame her, but I couldn't stop. She was making me so damn crazy.

I should have gone back to my trailer to clean up, but the allure of being in her space was too much to resist.

Toeing my boots off, I line them up next to the door and grab the

overnight bag I'd taken with me to the training. I still had a set of clean clothes and that would be enough.

The smell of cinnamon and sugar is faint in the room, like she whipped up a batch of cookies before leaving for work. The notion would be absurd if it was anyone else but Rhea.

But it's not—and if I'm really lucky the cookies hidden somewhere in here won't be oatmeal raisin.

I probably deserve them but hell, a man can dream.

Stripping off my clothes, I turn the water on in the shower and step into the spray without waiting for it to warm up. The energy vibrating through me is volatile, and I need to rein myself in before I have to face the woman I never want to be without.

She's sweet and sunshine, fire and strength. I leaned on her when I first returned home, and she'd never said a word about it. Being with her was still such a mindfuck.

Part of me feels like because she's seen me at my weakest—at my most vulnerable—I need to prove myself before going after her. That I have to work twice as hard to be strong and capable even though she takes me for pedicures, knows I soak in the bathtub, and that I read romance.

She knows all the things that are so at odds with the man I am to the world. It's comforting and exhausting, and I don't know who I'm supposed to be or where we're supposed to go from here.

The soft snick of the bathroom door has my eyes falling shut and a warning on my lips. "Rhea," I growl as I scrub my hands over my face.

"Shh," she says, stepping into the tub and wrapping her arms around my waist.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I settle one hand on her back and tangle the other in her hair.

"Being with you."

"I didn't even get to strip you out of your clothes like I wanted," I murmur as I trace small circles on her back.

She tilts her face up to look at me and she's utter perfection. Her full, perky breasts are pressed against my chest, and I let my hand slide down to cup her ass.

"Is that your only grievance? Because I think you did just fine."

"I wanted to spread you out."

"We have time for that," she says slowly, "but right now, you need this."



“Need what?”

“Me”—she presses a soft kiss to my chest before looking up at me again—“just like this.”

I could give her this—admit that she’s right.

A simple request with a simple answer.

But I can’t stop myself from going through all the reasons we should wait. I’m still stuck in my head when her voice breaks through the uncertainty.

“You’re so beautiful, Sorren.” Her lips return to my chest and over the black ink that marks my skin. Each addition had been cathartic—necessary.

Healing.

I let my eyelids fall shut as she kisses across my chest, over my pecs and back again. Her nails rake down my back, and I love the bite that’s such a glorious fucking contrast to the gentleness of her mouth.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she whispers. “I’m not afraid of what this means for us.”

“Be sure. Be so fucking sure.” I’d said the words so many times I didn’t know if they were for her or me.

“I’m sure.”

Anticipation pumps through my veins as my lips slide against hers. She sighs into the kiss even as I knead her ass cheek and pull her tighter against me.

“I don’t want anything between us,” she breathes as she pulls back and searches my gaze. Her blue eyes are like sapphires, brilliant in the steam-filled shower. “I’m on the pill, but it’s been a long time since I’ve been with anyone.”

“Not as long as it’s been for me.” Our eyes lock and I swallow hard. *I haven’t been with anyone since before I deployed.*

“Are you sure I’m not the one who has to be gentle?” she says, a tease in her voice that I’d believe more if her nipples weren’t pebbled and aching for my mouth.

“Sunshine,” I warn as I take her hands and pin them above her head with one of mine. Dipping my head, I lick one rosy-pink bud before pinching it gently between my teeth.

She squirms as I move to her other breast while my hand drifts between her legs.

“I barely got to taste you.”

“After.” She writhes against the shower wall, mewling and bucking against my touch. “Please, I don’t want to come again unless you’re inside me.”

The roar of my soul is deafening as her words settle over me.

Claiming.

Possessing.

Mine.

I don’t ask her again if she’s sure because she’s told me.

Shown me.

And it’s time I start listening.

Releasing her hands, I grip her ass as I drag her up the shower wall. “Put me inside you.” I could line her up and impale her on my dick, but watching her slender fingers wrap around me and guide me to her tight little pussy has my muscles flexing with restraint.

She holds my shaft as she rubs her clit over the throbbing head until I’m certifiably out of my mind.

“Now, baby.” My words are hoarse, her gaze meeting mine before she sinks down just enough to make my fingers flex against her skin.

I pull back the slightest bit and then slam inside her. Her cry echoes off the tile, mixing with the curses falling from my lips.

A slow rock and a hard thrust have her gasping and moaning against my mouth. The pace is punishing for both of us, and her nails claw at my shoulders while her heels dig into my ass and I relish in the pain—in her desperation.

“Not yet,” I admonish and she whimpers. Her hands grip the short strands of my hair, tilting my neck to the side to give her access. Soft licks, stinging bites, and open-mouth kisses pepper the column of my throat before her teeth snag my earlobe.

“Make me come, Sorren,” she whispers as her tongue traces the shell of my ear, and I groan as I piston into her. I want to hold back—draw this out—but how can I when she’s all fucking over me.

She screams my name as I slam into her one last time and press her harder into the wall as my orgasm takes hold.

My vision goes black around the edges and I have to remember to breathe as wave after wave assaults my senses. Her pussy squeezes and pulses around me and I shudder, the sensation almost too much to handle.

I want to tell her how good she feels and how fucking perfect it feels

being inside her, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out. It doesn't matter though because Rhea's lips slant over mine in the next breath. She dominates the kiss as she wraps herself tighter around me—impressing the moment on both of us.

She needn't have worried because all I want to do—to breathe and taste for the rest of my life—is her.



## SORREN

“I see Rhea is walking like she had a good night.” Hayden grins as he drops into the seat next to me at Case and Hannah’s table. The impromptu gathering had been thrown together in record time and only worth noting because Rhea and I had come together.

It’s been a couple of weeks since we officially started dating or whatever the fuck. I don’t need some damn label to know she is mine, but if she wanted me to get her name tattooed on my ass I’d do it. For me, none of that matters as long as she is in my arms every night.

“Don’t you—”

“Are you talkin’ about boning my sister? Because, like, I’m happy for y’all but I don’t need any details,” Otto says as he takes the seat on the other side of me.

I grip my cup harder and pray for patience.

“We are not—” I start at the same time Hayden says, “We totally are.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I hiss. Returning my glass to the table, I don’t even bother acknowledging either one of them.

“Don’t you have people that actually want to hang out with you? Like forever and always shit?” I ask out loud because right now I’ll gladly hand off either one.

“Oh, come on. This is fun!” Hayden says. “We can totally double date!”

I do my best to hold off but the eye twitch is inevitable.

“Count me in.” Otto nods as I drag my hands down my face. If they thought me being with Rhea would magically make me more social they were dead wrong.

“Fallon,” I yell instead, “come get your husband.”

“Aw, man, don’t be like that,” Otto says with glee I know is written all over his face without even looking. “And why does he get to stay?” he whines.

“He’s leaving too. He’s out of book club.”

“So you admit we’re a club,” Hayden says smugly and I feel a headache coming on, “Can we get shirts now, *please?*”

“Hey, shirts are my thing.” Otto pouts and now the headache is approaching migraine territory.

“Fallon!” I try again but she just laughs.

“Heck no! He’s yours,” she yells back, her eyes narrowing on him, and he slinks down into his seat. “He used the good dish towel to clean up spilled juice.”

“I didn’t know that wasn’t allowed,” Otto mumbles under his breath.

“Otto Raymond Thayer, don’t you dare say you didn’t know. I told you no more than five minutes before that to pick something else.”

I cuff him on the back of the head. “What is wrong with you?”

“They all look the same,” he grouses.

“They do not!” Hayden says with indignation, and Fallon snickers before turning back to the girls.

“You’re supposed to be on my side,” Otto hisses causing Hayden to roll his eyes.

“Then maybe you should be right.” I snort and they both look at me.

“What?” I ask.

“This is weirder than when Hank started smiling,” Otto says as Tanner sits down next to him.

“Aw, missed you, buddy!” Otto announces as he wraps his arm around Tanner’s shoulders and squeezes before letting go. If Tanner thought being in this family would get less overwhelming, he was wrong.

“I saw you yesterday,” Tanner says on a sigh, but I can see the corner of his lips turn up the slightest.

“Y’all are real cute,” Hayden coos before turning back to me. “Oh, I got this for you.” He pulls a gift bag out of nowhere and sets it on the table. I open my mouth to protest, but his scowl is enough to have me reaching for the paper instead.

I’m speechless as I pull the book out and hold it reverently in my hands. We’d finished it not long ago, and it had become one of my favorites—

something I planned to reread in the future.

Maybe even read with Rhea.

I'd seen that the author had attended a bookstore signing not far from Clementine Creek while Tanner and I had been at the training.

I wasn't sure if I would have gone—it felt kind of weird thinking about standing in line for someone to look at me and want to know *my* story, as they signed theirs. I know men read romance, but I'm also aware enough to know that if a guy like me is standing in a line of women, I'm going to draw some attention.

"You're *literally* killing me," Hayden whines and I open the front cover and turn the first page.

My name is scrawled there with a short message and the author's signature. It's simple, but I have to swallow down the lump of emotion that gets stuck in my throat. I don't receive gifts well and I hardly *need* anything, but this—this is special.

"Thank you," I say quietly as I meet Hayden's gaze. He squeals and does a little dance in his seat before he throws his arms around me and hugs me.

"I knew you'd love it!" I pat him on the back and he releases me before looking at the other two. "A bestie always knows."

Otto narrows his eyes. "I thought Everett was your best friend."

"I can have more than one." Hayden sniffs and I chuckle. All three sets of eyes turn toward me and I shrug.

"It *is* pretty awesome," I admit.

"Thank God he was able to give it to you," Everett says as he drops a kiss on Hayden's cheek. "It's all he's talked about since we went."

"He dragged you along for the ride?" Everett's cheeks pinken and Hayden smirks, leaving absolutely no doubt what the reward was for that little outing.

"He had fun. Didn't you, babe?" Hayden asks causing Everett to clear his throat. Otto snickers and Tanner looks away as he takes a sip of his drink.

"I'll be"—he points vaguely in the direction of the food—"if you need me."

Everett turns and leaves the group while Hayden watches him shamelessly. Rhea catches my eye and I wink at her. Her smile is immediate, and I feel the warmth spread through my chest.

"Um, Otto?" Fallon's voice is shrill as his head whips toward her while he stands abruptly, knocking his chair over in the process.

“Is it go time?” he yells and I hear the panic in his voice. I stand and place what I hope is a steady hand on his shoulder. Tanner does the same as we wait to confirm what everyone on the other side of the room already knows.

“My water broke,” she says, tears in her eyes.

“I’m going to be a dad.” His voice is shaky as he looks from me to Tanner.

“You’re already a dad,” Tanner says confidently. “You just get the really small version this time.”

“Holy shit! I’m a dad!” he yells and laughter erupts around the room as the girls help clean Fallon up and plans are made to see the baby when they’re all ready.

Otto wraps Tanner in a bear hug before turning to me. I nod and he hugs me too before striding over to his wife and placing a hard kiss on her lips. She winces when he pulls away, and I imagine she’ll be cursing him out before they even make it to the hospital.

Fallon gives us a wave, and we watch as Otto helps her to the car. My gaze tracks toward my sister and my gut clenches. She’s curled into Waylon’s side as he drops a kiss on the top of her head. I ache to comfort her—to ease her pain.

*It’s not my job anymore.*

Like she knows I’m struggling, Rhea’s hand slips into mine as she presses her lips to my bicep. It’s a sweet gesture, simple, but it calms my immediate need for action—to fix the problem and find a solution.

Blowing out a breath, I turn so I can wrap my arms around her and bury my face in her hair.

“No i’s or k’s,” I whisper and then kiss her breathless because I don’t need to hear it and this one is just for her.





## RHEA

“**W**hen’s the last time you ate?” Sorren asks while nonchalantly pushing the sandwich across my desk.

“Are you implying I’m overreacting because I’m hungry!?” I practically screech but his expression doesn’t change.

“I’m just sayin’...” His words are slow and measured. The drawl in his gravelly voice turns up a notch. “You work hard and sometimes you forget to eat is all.”

Snatching the sandwich from the wood, I tear open the wrapper and take an oversized bite. His eyes sparkle and his lips twitch just the slightest bit.

The jerk.

I moan as actual food hits my taste buds. Despite popular belief, one cannot simply exist on sugar cookies and royal icing.

“Thank you,” I grumble as I shove the final bite in my mouth. He smartly doesn’t comment on me inhaling the proffered item.

“You’re welcome,” he says, sitting on the edge of my desk. Grabbing my hand, he pulls me out of my chair and over until I’m standing between his spread thighs. He also doesn’t mention that my meltdown—over not being able to find my favorite set of measuring cups this morning—was in fact blown out of proportion.

Ella had sent me back to my office to do paperwork saying that she’d had enough.

“I still have work to do,” I whine even as my body leans willingly toward him.

“You have time for me to kiss you.”

“It never stops at just kissin’ with you,” I murmur and he grins.

“I don’t see the problem.” He rubs his nose against mine. “Besides, we’re supposed to go see the baby when you’re done.”

“I know. That’s why I skipped lunch. I’m trying to get this all taken care of so I don’t have to think about it when I leave.” He frowns and it’s adorable.

“Should you hire someone else? Another baker?”

“I’ve been looking. Ella and I have been doing all right, and I always hire some high school or college kids when it picks up.”

I don’t tell him that I’ve been all nervous energy today about seeing the baby or why I still get like this. Instead, I let him kiss me and then shoo him out the door so I can get myself together, finishing up here before going to see our niece.

“I NEED TO TELL YOU SOMETHING.” Sorren watches me but remains silent, and it only ratchets up my nerves. “You’re supposed to say something.”

“You haven’t said anything yet,” he says carefully.

He’d picked me up a couple of hours after coming by The Poppy Seed, and we’d driven straight to the hospital. We’d stopped in to say hi to Hayden and Harper at the nurses’ station before going up to the maternity ward.

Fallon had been tired, but her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed. Their baby girl, Rosie Breen Thayer, wrapped her little hand around my finger and effectively around my heart.

I didn’t know my brother’s heart could grow any bigger, but seeing him with his wife, his son, and their newborn daughter was nothing short of magical. We’d hugged and cried and it had been everything it should be.

Sorren had held Rosie, the tiny bundle almost comical in his arms. He looked so content, so at ease, it made my heart clench and my knees weak. He’d asked me no fewer than three times since we’d gotten home if I was all right, and I’d just blurted it out.

*I need to tell you something.*

“I know,” I try again, “but this is hard and I just...” His rough, callused palm slides against mine, and he squeezes it as he pulls me gently into his lap. I don’t know if this makes it better or worse for what I’m about to tell

him, but I don't fight him as he wraps his arms around me.

"Tell me." The words are gentle but his body is still tense as his eyes search mine.

"I had a miscarriage." His jaw clenches so I continue, "In college."

His mouth opens and closes before he says, "I'm sorry that happened to you."

"I'm not." The words are heavy between us, but I feel lighter than I have in years. "Well, I am and I'm not. It was really early. My period had always been regular so when it was late, I took a test and it was positive."

His fingers draw small circles on my back, and it warms something inside me. "Did you tell anyone?"

I shake my head. "I made an appointment and right before I was supposed to go in, I started bleeding. The nurse called it a chemical pregnancy. She said I wouldn't have even known I was pregnant if I'd just waited a little longer to take a test." I feel him tense beneath me but he doesn't say anything. "After all the bloodwork confirmed it...I was relieved." My voice catches on the last word but I force myself to keep going, "A chemical pregnancy isn't viable, but I was still relieved."

Guilt washes over me the way it always does when I remember everything that happened, and I let my eyelids fall shut.

"You were young." His voice startles me and I look at him, shock written all over my expression. His thumb brushes away a tear I didn't realize had fallen.

"I'd met the guy at a party and the condom broke and I was on birth control so I thought it was fine but"—I blow out a breath—"I was relieved that I wasn't having a baby with a guy I barely knew."

"That's understandable."

"I would have been a good mom if I hadn't lost—"

"I know."

"And I would have loved the baby with my whole heart," I say as my words break on a sob.

"I know, Sunshine. It wasn't your fault."

"Why aren't you mad?"

"Why would I be mad?" he asks as he continues to wipe away the tears streaming down my face.

"Because of your sister. Because your mom and how awful she was and everyone is getting pregnant and your sister is struggling and I *got* pregnant

without even trying. And I just thought—”

“Rhea.” He threads his fingers in my hair and places a slow lingering kiss on my lips. “Those are not the same thing.”

“I was thankful I didn’t have the baby,” I whisper.

“And you’ve been living with the guilt ever since,” he says matter-of-factly and that hurts just as much. “My parents being married and accidentally getting pregnant and not loving a baby is not the same thing as a girl in college letting loose and getting pregnant from a one-night stand.”

“But—”

“You’ve paid a penance that wasn’t yours, Sunshine, and I think,”—he brushes a loose piece of hair behind my ear—“if you talked to the girls they’d tell you the same thing.”

“How could I tell them when they’re so happy having babies? When your sister wants so desperately to be a mom?”

“If we got pregnant right now, how would you feel?”

“I’d probably have a heart attack at first but I’d be happy.”

“Even though things between us are still new and I’m still fucking up trying to figure out how to do this?”

“Yes.” A smile pulls at my lips. “And you aren’t that bad.” I sigh, “But we’re older and we care about each other and it’s different.”

“It is different. I’m sorry you went through it alone.” He presses a kiss to my cheek. “And I’m sorry you’ve carried so much guilt since then.” He kisses me again, this time slanting his mouth over mine before pulling back. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I say, my heart rate picking up with each passing second.

“When that happened,”—his eyes search mine—“I, uh...” He swallows and licks his lips. “You came home, right? Stayed at your parents’?”

“Yes...” I say cautiously.

I remember it being sometime before Sorren left for the Marine Corps. Marlee had graduated from high school a few months later.

“I thought you were blowing me off. I’d been tryin’ to ask you out.” My mouth falls open as he looks away. “On a date. I felt like with Marlee almost off to college I could start focusing on what I wanted.” He swallows hard. “It’s why I said that when you kissed me in the car.”

I’m still reeling from his confession as memories from the night of the wedding flutter through my mind—the kiss and Sorren’s subsequent freak-out.

*Is this because of what happened before? You're doin' this now to get back at me?*

His comment had seemed so out of place but I'd been too embarrassed and upset to dwell on it.

I shake my head. "I didn't even know you *wanted* to ask me. I just wanted to be alone. I felt like I should have stayed at school, but I just wanted to sleep in my bed and have Mama fuss over me."

"I hate that you went through that. And I hate that the nurse was so insensitive."

Her words have replayed in my mind almost every day since. She might have meant them to comfort, but it had only fueled the guilt and the questions I'd never have the answers to.

*What did I do wrong? Was it my fault? What if I hadn't tested so soon?*

The questions are endless, and they've weighed heavily on my heart for so long it's a relief to share the burden with someone else.

Needing a dose of levity, I say, "I hate that I didn't know Sorren Mackay was going to ask me out." He pinches my side and I yelp as I squirm in his lap.

Yanking me tighter against him, Sorren kisses me with a reverence that has me clinging to him. Each stroke of his tongue, each nip of his teeth soothes the ache and longing I'd been carrying.

I'd been ashamed and scared, but I'd found solace in his arms, and for that I'd be forever grateful.



## SORREN

I sent a text to Tanner late last night telling him I wouldn't be in today. Listening to Rhea recount what had happened to her wasn't something I'd been ready for. She'd been so damn scared both then and now, and it was unbearable to think of the guilt she'd carried for so long.

After kissing the hell out of her, I'd taken her to the bathroom and drawn a bath, sliding in behind her and showing her every way I could that I was there. I'd made love to her until she'd fallen asleep in my arms and then I'd watched her sleep until I could no longer keep my eyes open.

"What are you thinkin' so hard about over there?" Rhea says without opening her eyes.

"You," I reply, kissing her shoulder.

"What about me?" She wiggles back against me, her ass pressing against my dick and all its morning glory.

Burying my face in her hair, I kiss her neck as I say, "How brave you are." I press another kiss higher up her neck. "How completely in awe I am of your strength and compassion." I place one last kiss just behind her ear as I whisper, "How I'm absolutely fucking in love with you."

She rolls onto her back, eyes glassy with unshed tears. Her hair is wild, more from my raking my hands through it than just sleeping, as I push it off her face.

"I love you," I say again.

"Are you sure?" she whispers and I chuckle.

"Yeah, Sunshine, I'm sure."

"But like really—" I swallow whatever else she was about to say,



pressing her into the mattress with my body.

“Ride me,” I beg, my hands already roaming over her hip. “I need—”

My phone chirps on the nightstand and my gut clenches as I roll over to grab it.

“Sorren, what—”

TOM OAKDEN: They arrived in Nashville this morning—paid cash

TOM OAKDEN: Vivian used her maiden name to rent a car which is why we just found them

FUCK.

“Sorren?”

The touch of her hand on my arm startles me back to reality. I’m not ready, and fuck if I’ll ever be.

“I need you to get dressed. I need,”—I swallow hard—“I need you. My parents are on their way here.”

“What? Oh my God, why didn’t you tell me?”

SORREN: Don’t go outside I’m coming over

MARLEE: Why? What’s wrong?

SORREN: I’ll explain when I get there—5 minutes

“SORREN.” Rhea’s voice is sharp as I throw my shirt over my head and yank my jeans up over my boxer briefs.

“I had Cullen look into them. I’ve been keeping an eye on them just...for peace of mind and—”

“And how’s that working out?” she says around a mouthful of toothpaste.

“It’s not,” I say, grabbing my own from the counter. “I know I fucked up. I just didn’t want it to get to this point.”

She stalks out of the room while I tap out a text to Hank.

SORREN: I need you and Isla to meet me at Marlee’s

HANK: I’ll have Mama come stay with the babies

EXITING THE BATHROOM, I barely catch the car keys Rhea launches at my head. I can’t even hope for the best because I know, even if I’m lucky, shit is about to hit the fan.



## SORREN

I slam my fist against the steering wheel as we pull down the dirt road that leads to both of our childhood homes. Gran and Pop might have left their house to Marlee and me, but I'd signed it over to her outright when Waylon told me he was going to propose.

It was a house that deserved a family, and while I knew I'd have my own someday, I couldn't imagine my sister and hers anywhere else.

My thoughts come to a screeching halt when a car with out-of-state plates comes into view. It's flashy and out of place with two very out of place people standing next to it.

Fuck.

I jump out of the car just in time to see a flash of blonde hair out of the corner of my eye.

"Oh, hell no." My sister's voice echoes from somewhere to my left, followed by the screen door slamming, and I'm wholly unprepared for this moment.

"You need to leave," I say firmly as their eyes ping-pong between me and my sister. Marlee's small frame slides in front of me like I'm the one needing protection.

"You do *not* get to come here. You are *not* part of this family and you are not welcome here. Get off my property before I call the sheriff." Marlee's voice is deadly, and I can't remember another time I've ever heard her like this.

Vivian Mackay straightens and scoffs. She's everything and nothing like I remember. Her hair is dyed blonde instead of Marlee's natural coloring.

She's had more than a few injections. What startles me the most, though, is how expressionless her eyes are. I'd made excuses for her disconnect, but maybe I'd just been too young to see her for what she really was.

"This is my parents' house we have—"

"It is *not* your anything. Are we clear? This house, my childhood home, belongs to me and my husband," Marlee snaps.

"You best be goin'. You're makin' my wife upset." Vivian's eyes bounce from Waylon to Marlee and back again as he takes her hand.

"We just wanted to come and talk. It's been a long time." I snort, and every set of eyes turns to look at me. Rhea's hand slips into mine and she squeezes it. She tries to let go but I hold on tighter.

"Oh, good, I love a party." Isla's voice rises over the silence that seems to be suffocating everyone in our general proximity. "Mr. and Mrs. Mackay, I think that's twice now you've been asked to leave." She makes a shooing motion with her hand, and Hank's lips twitch as he crosses his arms over his chest behind her.

"You have no right to talk to us like that. This is our land and we have every right to be here."

"Oh, land disputes!" Isla claps her hands and Waylon coughs to cover his laugh. "Baby, we love those, don't we?"

"Yeah, City Girl, can't get enough of 'em."

"Great!" Isla beams in that scary way she does right before she flies off the rails. "Sheriff Kade is on the way over because I hate confrontation." Marlee snickers and reaches out her hand for Isla who takes it and steps up next to my sister.

"That is unnecessary and just—"

"You've been told to leave. You were not invited here. Haven't you done enough to my brother for one lifetime?"

"He's our son and you're our daughter."

"No." Marlee points at Flora and Vincent's house. "He's their son. I'm their daughter. The man in that house"—she points again—"danced with me at my wedding. My brother gave me away to the man of my dreams. *My brother.*" She accentuates the words as she points at our parents. "You have no claim to him. If he wants a relationship with you, that's his business, but right now? You're makin' him upset." She takes a breath. "And as for me? You're nothing and I don't want you comin' anywhere near me or my family."

Isla claps.

I've barely said a word, but maybe this is what was supposed to happen.

"You ungrateful—" Vivian is cut off by the sound of Sheriff Kade coming down the road. Her spine straightens, but Michael barely reacts like he doesn't have a spine at all. He's older, tired, and still catering to the wretched woman beside him.

"You'd do well not to finish that sentence," Waylon says, his voice laced with warning as he stares at Vivian.

She looks to me. "Another time."

"I'm all set. Y'all can see yourselves out of Clementine Creek." Her eyes widen the slightest bit before she's turning back to the car.

"I hope you didn't pay full price for that knockoff," Isla calls out, her gaze dropping to Vivian's purse. "The stitching is embarrassing."

Vivian gasps, and it's only when Kade gets out of his car do they hustle into theirs. We watch as he talks to them for a moment and then directs them back onto the main road.

"Well, I guess I'll make breakfast," Hank says, but before anyone can answer, Marlee's gaze locks on mine.

"I need to be alone right now," Marlee says and takes off toward the house.

I need to go to her. I need to talk to her. I need—

My boot has barely left the ground before Waylon's hand is on my chest, holding me in place. "She'll let you know when she's ready."

"Waylon." His name is a hoarse whisper as it's ripped from my throat, but he shakes his head. I remember watching Hank stumble backward when he learned Isla had left for Chicago. I remember the look of anguish on his face and how the panic had almost pulled him under, and I suck in a deep breath. "Then you take care of her like you promised. If it can't be me anymore, then I'm trusting you to take care of her."

I hadn't understood what it meant, but I do now and Waylon does too. I was trusting him to keep her heart safe—even from me.

"I'm gonna go," I say, turning to Rhea, and I know she wants me to stay. She wants me to stay and let her help, but I don't fucking know how. Dropping a kiss on her cheek, I watch as her eyelids fall closed. Stepping back, I turn toward my car because I won't be able to stomach seeing the disappointment when she opens them.



## RHEA

We watch as Sorren and Marlee take off in opposite directions. I want to go to them—both of them—but I can't get my feet to move.

"So about breakfast..." Hank says earning an elbow to the stomach from Isla and a scowl from Waylon.

"Too soon, big brother," I whisper to Hank before wrapping my arms around Waylon. Heartbreak and devastation are written all over his face as Marlee disappears from view.

"I don't know how to fix this," Waylon says quietly.

"Together, Waylon," Isla replies pointedly. "We are going to fix it together."

"But how?"

"I'm going to talk to Dad and then Oakey."

"Who?" Waylon asks as he finally turns his gaze away from the house to the dark-haired powerhouse we get to call our sister-in-law.

"Tom Oakden is a private investigator that we have on retainer for Andrews International." Hank nods like it's no big deal and for him it's probably not. I didn't have all the details, but I knew Tom Oakden had been instrumental in helping Hank unravel the conviction that landed him in jail years ago.

Both Isla and her father had left the business and settled down in Clementine Creek, but apparently that didn't stop them from retaining certain perks.

"Can someone bring me to work?" I ask.

Hank opens his mouth to speak, but Isla just pats him on the chest. "Why



don't you get started on breakfast and I'll drive your sister. Waylon, go to your wife, and when she's ready, bring her to the house." Waylon looks unsure so she adds, "You gave her a minute, now go."

My brother doesn't waste another second before taking off across the lawn.

"Have I told you lately that I want to be you when I grow up?" I ask as Isla hooks her arm through mine and leads me to her fancy white SUV. The first time I'd ridden in it, she'd turned on whatever makes the seat cold and I'd jumped higher than a wet dog in a truck bed.

"Flattery will get you everywhere." Pulling down the drive, Isla stops at the main road and turns to look at me. "Are you sure you want to go to work?"

No.

"Yes." She rolls her eyes but doesn't move.

"It's okay. Y'all have been thrown headfirst into all the heavy stuff. Anyone going through what you guys are would be reeling too."

"I don't think I'll ever get over hearin' you say y'all."

"Your deflection is not appreciated but noted."

I snort and she pulls onto the main road toward the bakery.

"I feel like this has been the longest few weeks of my life," I say as she parks in front of the bright teal building I love so much.

"I told you men like Hank and Sorren are exhausting and they're going to screw up." She sighs. "His whole world came to a head today, and he needs you, Rhea. He's going to need you when he pulls his head out of his ass, but he might not know when or how or if he deserves to have you."

"Love you," I say as I reach across the console and hug her tight.

"Love you too."

Biting the inside of my cheek, I walk the few steps into the bakery as her words wash over me. I'd watched Sorren's face during the exchange with his parents. Felt the tension radiating from his body as he stood there so enraged he could barely speak.

Marlee had done enough for both of them, and I hope he could see her strength in that moment. That when he needed her—even before he knew it—she'd been there.

"Hey, you're not supposed to be in today," Ella says as she places a gentle hand on my arm. I jump, and her look of confusion turns to one of concern.

“I’m just gonna make a few things, that’s all.”

She assesses me for a minute then tilts her head to the side. “If you start cryin’ into the batter, I’ll kill him myself.”

I laugh and wrap her in a quick hug.

“No need, but I appreciate the offer.”

“Hmm. I’ll keep the option open.”

I chuckle and shake my head as I walk back to the sink and wash my hands.

IT’S ALMOST eight at night by the time there’s a knock at my front door. I’d spent all day at the bakery trying to distract myself, but it had been a foolhearted attempt. From the prepping area, I could see out into the shop, and I’d seen Sorren’s parents walk by the big glass windows a few times before stopping in.

Ella hadn’t even gotten to greet them before I’d practically launched myself over the counter, dough still covering my hands. I’d refused them service and told them they weren’t welcome in my bakery.

I’ll reassess if Sorren wants to rekindle a relationship with them, but in the meantime, I’ll protect him the only way I can. Hannah had heard the commotion and walked through the door connecting the bakery to the bookstore Case had built for her. She hadn’t needed any details outside of the ones raging through the group text to inform Vivian and Michael Mackay that they were not welcome in her shop either.

Vivian had made a show of turning on her heel and stalking out of the bakery, but I’d seen the way Michael’s eyes widened as if he was just understanding the lengths we’d go to in order to protect our family.

Another knock on the door sounds and I brace myself for the inevitable.

“It’s open,” I call and there’s a moment of hesitation before the knob turns. Sorren’s eyes are haunted when they meet mine.

“I’m mad at you.”

“Sunshine, I’m—”

“Don’t,” I say, taking a step back.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what, Sorren?”

“For not being able to do this right. To do this like you deserve.” The words are quiet but firm.

“You think that’s why I’m mad?”

“I was really hoping we hadn’t gotten to mad yet.”

“Hmm.” He takes another step toward me, his hands flexing at his sides. He’s trying so hard not to reach for me and there’s a little crack in my resolve. “I’m not mad.”

“Disappointed is worse,” he murmurs and I tilt my head up to meet his gaze.

“I need you to talk to me.”

“I’m trying,” he says, and I know he is, but I need it and not just on his timeline.

“Don’t make me worry if you’re all right.”

“It won’t happen again.” His voice is low and holds so much pain. We face off in my living room for several moments before I finally relent. I hold my hand out to him, and he closes the distance between us before scooping me into his arms and dropping onto the couch.

His arms wrap around me, and he buries his face in the crook of my neck. I hate that he’s hurting, his heart pounding in his chest as I hold him tighter against me.

“I just needed to know I could still come home.”

His eyes search mine, and I know he’s not talking about the walls around us.

“You can always come home.” His Adam’s apple bobs in his throat as his arms tighten around my waist. “But you have to let me love you. All of you.”

“I love you so damn much it’s hard to breathe,” he whispers, and my heart breaks for the little boy who never truly believed he’d get here—that he could be loved to the moon and back and love in return.

Taking his face in my hands, I force him to hold my gaze. “We are better together than we ever are apart. Stop tryin’ to do this by yourself.”

“I never want to do this with anyone else.” His lips curve up ever so slightly. “So let’s do this—together.”

“Together.” The word was barely out before his mouth slams against mine in a kiss that I’ll remember for the rest of my life. It’s the kind they write about in books that are timeless because the love inside is relevant and classic and embodies the feeling of two souls forever intertwined.

Our love isn’t a fairytale, it’s so much more.

It's real.



## RHEA

Closing the bakery took longer than anticipated tonight and after being on my feet all day, I'm more than a little tired. My feet ache from standing, and I'm almost positive I still have some frosting in my hair.

The sightings of Sorren and Marlee's parents around town the past couple of days haven't diminished. I don't know if he is waiting for them to give up and leave or if he hopes he can just ignore them forever.

At the end of the day, he doesn't care about Vivian and Michael—only the fact that Marlee hasn't spoken to him since they'd shown up at the house. He thought she needed time, but I know she needed him to make a decision and she didn't want to interfere. She didn't have a relationship with them to salvage but he did—if he wanted to.

Sorren's Charger is in the driveway and a sad smile pulls at my lips. Blowing out a breath, I try to prepare myself for what I'm about to walk into. My hand reaches up to push my hair back from my face and snags on frosting.

While he's seen me at all my awkward stages growing up, I still feel like it's way too early to completely give up on trying to impress him. I growl knowing that I'll have to jump in the shower instead of just crawling into bed.

Throwing my keys and purse on the island in the kitchen, I kick my shoes off and walk toward the back of the house. The light is soft coming from my bedroom, and I'm all of three steps into the room when I skid to a stop.

Sorren's eyes slowly lift from the paperback in his lap, and I can feel my lips part at the sight. Thin-framed reading glasses sit on the bridge of his nose, and he stares at me over the top of them when he looks up.

He's shirtless, the sheet covering him from the waist down, but I've licked every inch of him below the soft, gray fabric. My mouth waters at the thought—all concepts of jumping in the shower gone as his lips tip up into a small smile.

"What are you doing?" I ask quietly as I take a step toward the bed.

"Reading."

"I see that."

"Will you read with me?" The low tone of his voice has my panties damp in seconds. God, this man has no idea how sexy he is. My hair is pulled back haphazardly, my leggings are covered in flour, and I'm pretty sure I spilled coffee on this tank top. Even wearing my apron all day, I'm a mess.

But Sorren is looking at me like he's never seen anything more beautiful.

"I've never loved reading," I say quietly.

He studies me for a second before dipping his head with a slight nod. His index finger holds his page as he lets the paperback fall shut.

"I want to show you what I like," he says when he meets my gaze, and my cheeks heat instantly. He grins and holds up the book. "I like reading, Sunshine."

Clearing my throat, I try and act like I wasn't halfway to stripping him all the way naked and finding out everything he *likes* and more.

Buying myself some time, I pull my hair from the hair tie, run my fingers through the strands, and then secure it again at the nape of my neck. "It's important to you."

He lifts one shoulder but doesn't say anything. I hate reading—I always have. My mind wanders as soon as I read the first sentence, but the look on his face and the fact that he *asked* has me offering up what I hope is a viable alternative.

Taking a step toward him, I let my knees sink into the mattress one at a time. He watches me closely and nothing but the flutter of the pulse in his neck gives away how he's feeling. Settling myself over his thighs, I cup his face in my hands and kiss him.

My tongue tangles with his, and he lets me explore every inch of his mouth as a growl rumbles in his chest. I pull back enough to see his eyes blazing with heat and want and *need*.

For me.

Biting my lip, I sit back and drop my hands to my thighs. "I like the reading glasses."

“You do, huh?” he says wryly and I nod.

“Very sexy.”

“You have frosting in your hair.”

“Hazards of the job,” I say and then tilt my head to the side. “Would you consider reading to me?”

“You’d want to hear me talk that much?” he says in a self-deprecating tone.

“Yes.” I press a hard kiss to his lips, and his hand grips the back of my neck, holding me in place.

“Then I will read to you,” he murmurs against my lips before slanting his mouth over mine and swallowing my moan.

“I need a shower,” I say on a gasp. “But first...”

Breaking out of his hold, I shimmy down the bed, bringing the sheet with me. His cock is hard and straining against the fabric of his boxer briefs.

“The glasses really do it for you, huh?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” I pant as I strip his underwear low enough to let his glorious length spring free.

“Sunshine—” My name is a warning on his lips which I wholeheartedly ignore as I take him as far as I can without gagging. My tongue swirls around his cock, and after lavishing the head, I plunge his length to the back of my throat.

Sorren’s abs flex as his hand tangles in my hair. The sting of pain has heat pooling in my belly, and I moan around him in response. His hips rock the slightest bit and I work him harder, my hand moving in time with my mouth.

I love his restraint but when he comes undone—there’s nothing like it.

“Fuck, you feel good.” He tugs my hair harder. “Get up here so I can come inside you.”

I practically snarl my dissent, my hand pumping him harder, and like a challenge, he bucks up into my mouth. I gag, but if he thinks I’m tapping out he’s crazy.

“Baby—fuck—”

Cum spills down my throat as he comes on a restrained roar. His body is covered with a sheen of sweat from the exertion of holding himself back for so long.

“I’m going to shower,” I say sweetly after placing a kiss on the head of his cock and sitting up.



“I don’t fucking think so.” His arm snakes around my waist as he hauls me up his body. His glasses and book go flying along with my tank top and bra. He curses as he strips me out of my leggings and rips my panties from my body because he can’t wait any more.

“That was supposed to be for you,” I try as he settles my pussy over his face.

“And this is for me too.” The words are a low rumble that I feel absolutely everywhere. I gasp as his tongue thrusts inside me *twice* before he’s lapping at my clit. “Sunshine?”

“What?” I can barely croak out the question, my legs already shaking from trying not to suffocate him.

“You’re going to ride my face.” His palm comes down hard across my ass cheek, and I yelp as my hips buck forward on their own. “And if you don’t do it to my liking,”—he pinches my clit between his teeth, and I whimper at the sensation—“I’ll make you do it until you get it right.”

*Oh my god.*

Gripping the headboard, I lower myself farther—spread myself *wider* for his taking. A blush creeps up my chest, and I resist the urge to pull back even an inch as his hands grip my ass. I want to hide but I can’t. Not when he’s looking at me like he’s about to feast on me and definitely not as he growls against my slit—

“Good. Fucking. Girl.”



## SORREN

I'd woken up this morning with Rhea sliding down my cock. I wanted every morning to be like that, and while we showered I realized there was only one way to make it happen.

And it was long overdue.

"Mama!" I yell before I'm even over the threshold. The screen door slams behind me as Flora rounds the corner.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

Michael and Vivian had shown up at Vetted Paws, and the realization had made me sick. The house and everything else were secondary to attaching themselves—reuniting—with their estranged son, small town war hero giving second chances to people and pets alike.

I'd seen the way Vivian's eyes had lit up. It's a hell of a story and would gain them more than a little attention in certain philanthropic circles, which they were not part of. At the bottom of it, I'd hoped they'd realize that Marlee and I are worth more than dredging up the past for their own personal gain.

But that hadn't been the case—not even a little.

"I need them gone. I wanted to just handle it myself, but dammit, I need help and I—"

Her arms wrap around my middle and she squeezes me tight like she has since the very first time I met her. I'm bigger now, but in this moment I'm still the boy who sought refuge at her kitchen table at fourteen and every day since.

When she pulls back, she places her hand on my cheek and gives me her gentle smile. "Come sit, okay? I have to make a phone call."

I let her lead me to the table and pull out a chair. She sets a cup of coffee and a scone in front of me like she's been waiting for this.

Maybe she has. Maybe I'm the only one too stubborn to see the mess I am making doing this on my own.

She picks up her cell and puts it to her ear. My cup is halfway to my mouth when she speaks.

"Miss Thelma, it's Flora." Pause. "It's time. 'Operation Darling' starts now."

She listens a beat before saying goodbye and placing her phone back on the table. My coffee cup meets the wood with a thud.

"Do I even want to know what that means?" I ask as she takes the seat next to me and places her hand over mine.

"If you think our town hasn't been preparing for this moment for almost twenty years, then you don't know us at all."

"But why now? They've been here for basically a week already."

She shrugs but doesn't move her hand. "You had to make the choice. Marlee made hers; we were just waitin' on you." Her eyes soften as she looks at me. "You have the right to have a relationship with your parents, Sorren. It's no one's business but yours."

I stare back at the woman who has always been more of a mother to me than the woman parading around Clementine Creek in her knockoff designer clothes.

Swallowing hard, I let go of the small piece of me that thought Michael and Vivian would be worthy of my time and attention—that as an adult I could reconnect with them in a way that would allow us to be cordial going forward.

The acceptance that it isn't a possibility eases some of the grief I've carried since I was a teenager. I made the right choice then and I've made the right choice now.

The only difference is that now I have a family—a community—to lean on. A crazy, dysfunctional, codependent family, but damn if I don't secretly love that too.

I swallow again as the knuckles of my free hand rap against the table. "My parents live here."

Her eyes well with tears, and I'm not ashamed to admit that mine do too. Marlee had broken down the first time we'd been invited to dinner here. She'd cried and fallen into Mama's arms at the promise of love and safety

and a family.

I'd been so hesitant—so scared—always looking over my shoulder for our past to catch up with us. It took nearly two decades for me to finally realize what I've had all along.

A home, a family, a forever in this small town. I'd fallen in love and found my forever home.

It wasn't lost on me that I'd made it my legacy to find dogs—unloved and misplaced animals—their forever homes.

"You always have been the most stubborn of all my kids," Mama says as a tear trails down her cheek.

"Thanks for not giving up on me."

"Never, baby, you know that."

"I do." Her smile is one of relief, both of us acknowledging that I've finally figured it out. "I love you, Mama."

"Oh, I love you too, baby." She pats my hand as she stands. "You stay as long as you like. I gotta go make sure Miss Thelma sticks to the plan. We don't need Sheriff Kade getting involved."

"Operation Darling, huh?" I muse and she nods.

"Has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?"

Her eyes sparkle with mischief and I shake my head and chuckle. "Y'all be careful." I pause as I stand, wrapping her in a hug and dropping a kiss to the top of her head. "And call me if you need bail money."

"Don't you worry, baby, we've got it all under control."



## RHEA

“Wanted” by Jessie James blares through the speakers of the bakery. It’s just me this time of night and this song speaks to my soul. I’m much less coordinated than Ms. James as I stir the melted chocolate and dip the strawberry before placing it on the tray.

My hips shimmy and rock to the beat—the lyrics taking me to a completely unprofessional place as I imagine Sorren’s hands and lips on my body.

*God, that man.*

Goose bumps break out all over my body at the thought of him, my heart rate kicking up a notch. He’s sexier than any man has the right to be and downright sinful both in and out of bed.

He’d gone to see Mama this morning, and I’d heard from him only briefly, when he warned me to watch out for Miss Thelma and whatever hell she was about to rain down on his parents.

A string of text messages had been sent out to all the business owners in town. I hadn’t been old enough to be a part of *Operation Darling* at its inception, as Mama and Miss Thelma were calling it, but having a shop now, I’d been dialed in.

Tomorrow, we’d be on the lookout for them, and the first sighting of Vivian and Michael would result in closed signs on all the businesses—making sure they knew we’d closed just for them.

Ideas had been flying nonstop since then, and word had already traveled to Blackstone Falls. Colt texted me to say they would be refused at The Iron Cask, and other local businesses were rallying for the cause.

My phone pings with an incoming text and I glance at the screen.

GWEN: The painters arrived today at their hotel so they're going to have to relocate

MISS THELMA: Word has it all the local accommodations have no vacancy

MISS THELMA: (angel emoji) (devil emoji)

HANNAH: They saw Case and Otto outside the bookstore today and crossed to the other side of the street

MAMA: I'm so proud

JOE: I got rid of them once today when they tried to come in for lunch

MAMA: Good work y'all! We have tomorrow all set and then we'll move into stage two.

MISS THELMA: Roger that Big Mama

MAMA: For the last time we do not have call signs (facepalm emoji)

MAMA: Besides your feline names got out of hand

HANNAH: Ooo this sounds fun!

MAMA: Do not encourage her...

MISS THELMA: I still like Feline Fatale

JOE: It's clever, I'll give you that. But you're not callin' me Smokin' Hoe

MISS THELMA: Y'all are no fun



I CAN'T HELP the unladylike snort that leaves me because these women are *everything* I love about living here. They're loyal and fierce as hell and honestly, I can't wait for tomorrow. Sorren and Marlee's parents are awful and deserve whatever Clementine Creek—and Blackstone Falls—are about to send their way.

As I turn back to the bowl in front of me, my mind automatically drifts to Sorren and the fact that we've barely spoken today. Normally, it would make me unsettled, but I know that today was hard for him and even though I don't love it—I know he needs space.

The man just better find his way back to me before I have to pull a stunt like he did in the parking lot of The Iron Cask. We're finally figuring out how to do this together, but he still needs to show me he's done running.

Still dancing to the music, I place the last strawberry down on the tray and turn to set it in the rack, nearly jumping out of my skin in the process.

"Jesus!" I squeak as I tap my phone and lower the volume as Sorren watches me with amusement.

"Don't stop on my account," he says, his gaze scorching as it trails down my body.

"How long how have you been staring at my ass?"

"Not nearly long enough." I love his open perusal and the fact that he doesn't hide how much he wants me.

"I have to do another tray and then I can box them up. Cheyenne is coming to pick them up in the morning."

"Better hurry up then," he says, his voice low and full of promise.

"Did you have a good day?" I ask as I move the tray and put an extra sway in my hips as I return to the chocolate.

"Not as good as it is right now." Glancing over my shoulder, I see Sorren's gaze unapologetically locked on my ass.

When he finally meets my gaze, he winks and I have to brace my hand on the corner of the counter because—*wow*.

Blushing furiously, I turn my attention back to the task at hand because I need these strawberries done—like yesterday.

"Buttons" by the Pussycat Dolls comes on, and I squeeze my thighs together. Sorren chuckles but there's nothing funny about the way my panties are soaked. This playlist usually pumps me up so I can get through the monotony of a large order that's just pure repetition, but right now all I can think about is being naked.

With Sorren.

Placing the last strawberry on the tray, I double check the numbers to ensure the order is filled with a couple extra for each box. With the tray in the rack, I'm about to fit the box together when Sorren rumbles, "One more," from behind me.

"What?"

"Strawberry." His eyes track to the chocolate and then back to me. "One more."

Blowing out a slow breath, I turn toward the stove with a strawberry in hand. Stirring the chocolate with my right hand, I dip the bright red fruit and swirl it around.

Sorren's chest presses against my back, his arm reaching over me to turn the stove off before his left hand wraps around my wrist. His movements are slow as he guides the strawberry to his mouth, his eyes never leaving mine.

My mouth falls open on a pant as his lips wrap around the fruit, his other hand moving from my hip to right under my breast. My heart pounds in my chest as he chews and swallows—his gaze molten.

Sorren's hand stays firmly around my wrist, the other moving to wrap around the column of my neck. His fingertip pushes my chin up, and before I can blink, his lips crash against mine.

The kiss is sweet and decadent and absolutely filthy as his tongue sweeps every corner of my mouth. My nails dig into his forearm as I moan and push back against him.

The hard length of his erection grinds against my ass and I want it—*need it*.

"I want to lay you out naked on that table," he rasps against my ear, "and lick chocolate from your body until you're *begging* me to come."

Sorren tightens his grip on my throat and I gasp.

"Too much?"

"No."

I relish in his intensity—in his power—his control. He's lethal, and literally placing my life in his hands is the ultimate high. I trust him implicitly, and I'm delirious with anticipation.

"You want that, don't you?" He rocks against me again—his dick impossibly harder than the moment before.

"Yes," I whimper. I feel open and exposed like this even though he's barely touched me.

“You want me inside this pretty pussy?” I whimper and dig my nails harder into his forearm. It could never be like this with anyone else—I’d never allow someone else to control my body like this, to worship every inch of me until I was boneless and sated.

“Please.”

“You’ll have to wait.” My head falls back against his chest, as his hand slides over my breasts to my leggings. “I’m going to love peeling these over your tight little ass, Sunshine.”

“Sorren,” I beg as he toys with the top of the fabric before sliding under my panties and over my clit.

I can’t help the moan that escapes and I wouldn’t dare try.

“I love seein’ you needy, Rhea. I love the way your pulse hammers in your throat,”—he sinks one finger inside me—“the way your nipples harden when you’re aching for me.”

My hand grips the back of his neck and I arch into him as he sinks another finger inside me.

“You’re so ready, aren’t you?” His fingers pump in and out of me and I’m shameless as I grind myself against his hand. “Do you want this,”—he pulls out slowly, dragging along *that* spot before plunging inside me again—“to be my dick?”

“Yes. Please, baby.” His teeth nip at the tendon in my neck and I scream.

“You’re going to wake the whole neighborhood, Sunshine.”

“I don’t care. I’m so close.”

His fingers slow and I want to sob in response. “Guess I’ll have to find something else to do with your mouth.” His hand moves my other arm around his neck. “Don’t move.”

Locking my fingers together causes my back to arch and my breasts to push forward.

“Such a good girl.”

“Sorren, please.” I rock against his hand as he tugs the fabric of my tank top and bra until my breast is exposed.

“So fuckin’ pretty.” He pinches my nipple and I cry out again as he fondles me—squeezing and pinching and sending a riot of pleasure through my body. “Are you ready to come all over me?”

“Yes,” I breathe out, and it’s laced with desperation.

“You’re perfect, Rhea.” Dipping his finger in chocolate, he brings it to my mouth, grazing it lightly against my lips. “Now suck.”

Opening wide, I do as I'm told—licking and swirling my tongue around as he pushes me completely over the edge. Pleasure slams into me with a force so intense, my scream is still audible even with his finger still in my mouth.

“I love the way your pussy clamps around me like that. It's going to feel so good when you're strangling my dick.” His hand moves slower between my legs as I ride out the aftershocks of my orgasm. His finger slides from my mouth, but I can't catch my breath because his lips are on mine and I can only sag back against him.

His arm bands around my waist, holding me to him before he pulls back—his eyes locking with mine as he sucks his fingers into his mouth.

The ones that were inside me.

“So fucking delicious, aren't you?” he asks before taking me in another kiss. It tastes like me and chocolate and Sorren and I moan. The combination is heady and I want more—so much more. He chuckles. “I knew you'd like that.”

Sorren's hips rock against my ass and I shudder as the evidence of his arousal digs into me.

“Do you want me to—” I start to turn around, to ask him if he wants me on my knees but he stops me.

“I told you what I want, Sunshine.” His words are a deep rasp. “Now,”—he takes a step back, and I watch him over my shoulder as his gaze rakes down my body—“hands on the counter.”



## SORREN

Reha releases a shuddery breath but does as she's told, and my dick hardens at the sight. It's beyond painful but totally worth seeing her arch her back for my benefit.

"Good girl," I growl as I open the clasp on my belt. I make sure she can hear every slide of the leather through the loops.

I let it fall to the floor, the clank of the metal and hide echoing through the bakery. She's torn between looking at me over her shoulder and facing forward—the anticipation written all over her gorgeous face. She's still flushed from her orgasm, her chest rising and falling faster with each passing second.

Popping the button on my jeans, I watch her gaze fall to my still-covered dick. She licks her lips as I drag the zipper down, and *fuck* I want her mouth all over me.

Later.

I palm my erection through my boxer briefs and practically snarl at the contact. Her hooded eyes ping-pong between my face and my hand—her bottom lip snagged between her teeth as she presses her thighs together.

"Sorren..."

Her hands grip the counter harder, her knuckles turning white as she tries to ease the ache between her legs.

"Are you ready for me, Sunshine?"

"Yes."

"Why don't we check, hmm?" I ask before taking a step toward her. Without warning, I hook my fingers into the top of her leggings and drag

them with her panties down her legs.

She gasps as the cold air hits her heated skin, and I waste no time dipping two fingers inside her pussy. I want to devour her—spank her—fuck her over and over again.

Any self-control I possessed tonight went out the window the second I saw her shaking her ass at the counter. That plus the smell of chocolate was like a damn aphrodisiac.

“You’re so fucking wet.” The words are full of praise, and she dips her head in response.

“Yes.”

“It’s not going to be gentle,” I warn her as I push my underwear and jeans only far enough to let my dick spring free.

“Please, Sorren.”

“Hold on, baby.”

It’s a command she obeys right before I slam inside her. My fingers bite into her hips as I piston in and out of her tight body. I grit my teeth, the sound of skin slapping and her incoherent rambling the only thing I can hear.

“You take me so good. So fucking good, Rhea.”

She screams as her pussy tightens around me, and it’s enough to push me over the edge. She collapses onto the counter, her head resting on her forearms while we both come down from the euphoria.

“Holy shit,” she whispers, and I roll my lips inward to hold back my smile.

“You okay?”

“You fucked me within an inch of my life.” She peeks back at me and sighs. “Well done, sir,” she sasses and I laugh.

“Thank you.”

Her lips curl up into a smile as she props herself up on her elbows. “I love your laugh.”

I wink at her as I gently pull out and swipe a couple of paper towels from the roll beside her.

“Huh, almost like you planned that,” she jokes.

“Almost.” I smirk and then clean her up after tucking my dick back inside my pants. She shimmies back into her clothes and grimaces. “What?”

“My panties are wet.” My grin is wolfish as she raises a single eyebrow. “Know anything about that?”

“I know *everything* about that,” I say as I wrap my arm around her waist

and haul her against me. Dipping my head, I take her mouth in a slow, appreciative kiss. “How much do you have left to do here?”

She drags her fingernails up and down the back of my neck, and this time I’m the one who shivers. Her smile is playful, and I squeeze her ass in response.

“I have to box the strawberries and then clean up.” She looks to the side and back at me. “So much cleaning.”

“You take care of the strawberries and I’ll clean.”

“You’re such a weirdo.”

“It’s relaxing.” She opens her mouth to protest but I silence her with a quick kiss before pulling back. “To me.” Her eyes narrow. “And when we get home we can take a bath. How about that?”

“You just want an excuse to get me naked,” she teases as she pulls away.

“Excuses are for boys, Sunshine, not men.”

She fans her face dramatically. “Go ahead, keep saying sexy things to me and see how long it takes us to clean this place.”

“Think I won’t throw you over my shoulder and haul you out of here when I’m done?”

“Not helping.”

“Then move your ass, I have plans for you,”—I grab the spray bottle as she sticks her tongue out at me—“and that mouth.”

Her cheeks flush and she spins on her heel and hustles to the sink to wash her hands.





## SORREN

*“He put the pad of his thumb against my lips and I braced myself against the railing. The smell of the soap on his skin and the faint trace of his cologne made my heart flutter. I kissed his thumb—my gaze never leaving his.”*

“That’s hot,” Rhea says from the pillow next to me. “You have nice cologne too.”

We were only a few pages into this book, but she hadn’t let me read more than a few paragraphs before she had one comment or another. If it was anyone else it would probably make me crazy, but for some reason I liked it.

I liked doing this with her.

Hayden was right, but I couldn’t tell him that or I’d never hear the end of it.

“I already hate the roommate.”

“We’re like ten pages in.” I chuckle. “She’s bound to have some redeeming qualities.”

“She’s against her best friend dating her brother.” She rolls her eyes. “Know anyone in our family like that?”

“Technically,” I start while grabbing her leg and hooking it over mine, “best friends ended up with little sisters. It’s not the same thing.”

“First, that sounds weird. Second,”—she pauses dramatically—“Hayden’s right, you really are annoying with the trope thing.”

“I think it’s one of my more appealing qualities.”

“That thing you do when your head is between my legs is one of your more appealing qualities,” she mutters, and I can’t help the laugh that

escapes. Her smile is shy but bright as she peeks at me from where her head rests on the pillow next to me.

“Was that your not so subtle way of asking me to lick your pussy?”

“Oh my gosh!” She shoves at my chest before rolling onto her back and laughing until tears leak from her eyes. “I will never get over the dirty talk.”

I wave the book at her. “Inspiration is endless.”

“Something tells me you don’t need a whole lot.”

“You make it easy.” I wink and she giggles before sobering.

“Are you ready to see Marlee tomorrow?”

I nod slowly, blowing out a breath. “Yeah, I miss her. Waylon has been good with givin’ me updates. It was really amazing seein’ her stand up for herself—for us.”

And she wasn’t the only one. It’d only been a couple of days since I talked to Mama, but things were already starting to happen. I’d heard all the businesses flipped their signs from open to closed on Main Street when they caught sight of my parents.

This morning, I’d driven through on the way to Vetted Paws and witnessed all the shop owners standing in front of their businesses—arms crossed—and blocking entry to Michael and Vivian. Miss Thelma had not so subtly informed me that all hotels within a twenty-mile radius were unexpectedly booked, and I’d caught a glimpse of luggage in their rented car.

They looked tired, and I couldn’t stop the wave of gratitude from blooming in my chest. The town had rallied, and it was a debt I’d never be able to repay.

“She’s strong. Resilient. You should definitely be proud,” Rhea says, pulling me back to the present.

“I am.”

“And I’m proud of *you* for respecting her boundaries.”

“Is that like when I told you I needed space and you threw out my brownies and replaced them with oatmeal raisin cookies?”

“Those things are completely unrelated.” Her eyes widen innocently, and I place the book on the nightstand with my reading glasses.

“I’m going to make you clean all the kennels when the dogs finally get here.”

She rolls her eyes as I pull her chest flush against mine and hike her leg over my hip. “Like I haven’t been cleaning up after animals my entire life.”

“Um, out of the two of us, I’m the only one who has used your vacuum in

the last year.” My hand clamps down on her ass as she rocks her core against my hardening dick.

“And you look so sexy wielding the hose.” I lick my lips and she tracks the movement.

“Ah, but Sunshine,”—I roll my hips into her, and her eyelids flutter the slightest bit—“the only sucking power I’m concerned with is yours.”

Throwing her head back, she laughs and I can’t help doing the same.

“Thank you,” I say quietly as I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, “for not giving up on me.”

“Still doesn’t get you out of apologizing to Colt.”

“While I have you almost naked in bed,”—grabbing her ass, I roll her on top of me and then grind her cotton-covered pussy against my length—“we will not speak of him.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Besides, Waylon is gonna make something real nice for him.”

“Soren—”

I pinch her clit between my thumb and forefinger as she gasps. “Trust me, Sunshine, he’ll like it just fine.” I grin and she shakes her head.

“We still need to talk.”

All playfulness gone, I cup her face in my hands and bring her down to meet my gaze.

“I know. I just want to have the conversation with Marlee first.” She nods and presses a soft kiss to my lips.

“I’ll be waiting.”



## SORREN

“Took you long enough,” Marlee says the next morning as she all but hauls me onto the back porch of our grandparents’ home.

Her home.

We’d grown up within these walls that had given us life and happiness and love when we’d been without for so long.

And somewhere along the way, I’d missed the fact that my sister had turned into a stunning young woman. Not just in appearance but in the way she carries herself, in the way she loves and continues spreading joy and light to everyone she meets. I’m both in awe and a little sad at the realization.

She’s not a little girl anymore, and if I want to continue to watch her thrive, I need to give her the closure she needs. The closure we both need.

“You think I wouldn’t have been here sooner? You said you needed space and I was trying to respect that—isn’t that what you wanted? Boundaries and shit?”

She snorts but it holds no humor. “Something like that. How did you even know they were here? This is my home too. Dammit, you should have told me!”

“I know, but I can’t change it and I don’t know if I would have anyway.”

She starts to protest but I just hold up my hand. “I set up alerts on the house, some accounts—had a buddy from the military do one of those search things so I’d be notified if anyone looked us up.”

“How long have you known?”

“Few weeks? Maybe a month? The alerts increased after that first article about Vetted Paws was released. When Tanner and I got home from that

training, I went to see Cullen. He put me in touch with that PI that helped Hank.”

“Has this happened before?”

I shake my head, and we both stare out at the orchard. This whole thing had gotten out of hand, and right, wrong, or indifferent—this one was on me.

“I never...” I start but have to swallow down the lump in my throat. “I never wanted you to ever have to hear it.”

“And you think years of not knowing was any better? That I magically didn’t think about what I’d overheard that night?”

That night.

The one that had set everything in motion.

The one that had enabled me to move my six-year-old sister and me here to live with Gran and Pop.

The one that had shredded my heart into irreparable pieces.

I look back out over the rows of trees I’d wandered aimlessly as I let the past wash over me. Sinking onto the porch step, I motion for her to do the same.

“I need to know, Sorren. I need the closure that comes with knowing.” She swallows hard. “Confirming those people don’t deserve a place in my life.”

The naive part of me hoped that someday we’d have a happy reunion, but the people that showed up weren’t here for that.

“That night, when you were at the top of the stairs,”—I sigh, resigned—“it wasn’t the first time they’d talked about it. They wanted me to go with them. They were going to give you up, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

I’d heard her little feet in the hall upstairs. Vivian had been close to screeching and there was nothing I could do to stop her—to stop Marlee from hearing all the nasty and vile things our mother said about her.

It wasn’t fair—she’d only wanted to feel safe. To sleep without bad dreams and be loved the way a six-year-old should be loved.

Cherished.

I couldn’t stand how she’d cried herself to sleep, and I vowed to never let it happen again. I’d done my best—working anywhere I could under the table that would let her tag along. I’d gotten our father to buy the air mattress but I’d purchased the princess sheets on my own and surprised her.

It had been our secret, and she was able to come and go from my room whenever she wanted, just pulling the mattress out from under my bed if she

needed me—if she needed to feel safe.

Marlee swipes away a tear that runs down her cheek, but she doesn't speak.

“The first time they brought it up I thought they were kidding. We were fucking kids and that kind of shit wasn't supposed to be real but...” I slam my eyelids shut against the onslaught of memories—Vivian's insistence that I go with them, that we'd all be better off without Marlee, that we could live the life we had before she'd been born.

But I couldn't remember a life without her, and I never wanted to. She snuffles and then her head is resting on my shoulder as she wraps her arms around mine. I rest my hand on hers where it grips my bicep.

“I'm so sorry,” she whispers, but I'm already shaking my head.

“I, uh...” I clear my throat and try again. “I talked to my football coach—said we were in trouble, and he helped me get everything moving. I remember the first time I ever heard Gran's voice. I thought she sounded like an angel.”

Marlee lets out a watery laugh and squeezes me tighter.

“She was an angel.”

“She still is, Marlee Girl.” I can't help the way my eyes tear up at the thought. A breeze moves through the orchard, and I could swear it feels like a hug as it swirls around us.

“They're really awful, aren't they? Even after all these years trying to use you—manipulate you. I'm so sorry, Sorren.”

“I'd do it all again for you.”

Seeing Michael and Vivian had fueled the rage that I'd buried for so long. They'd had the audacity to come to my town—my home—and think I owed them for letting us go.

“Thank you.” Her voice is quiet but firm as she picks her head up and meets my gaze.

“For what?”

“I don't think I ever thanked you. Really thanked you for saving us. For doing more than any teenager should ever do. You sacrificed your childhood to give me mine, and I don't think I ever thanked you.”

“There's nothin' to thank me for, Marlee Girl. I would have died before I let them take you from me.”

“I'm really glad it didn't come to that,” she says honestly.

“Me too,” I say, returning her expression even if it's not as bright.



“You know,” Marlee starts, “I feel better.” Standing, she walks down into the grass and tilts her face to the sky before looking back at me.

“You feel better?”

She nods. “We have a family here and they’re all I need. You’re all I need and now,”—she spins in a circle, her blonde hair flying out around her—“I don’t have to wonder.”

“Is it really that easy?” I ask, half teasing and half disbelieving.

“Yeah.” Her smile is wide and bright and everything I’d ever wanted for her. “You gave me this.” She motions around us. “All of this and it wasn’t always perfect but that’s what I love about it—every wild and crazy thing about this town.”

“We did all right, didn’t we?”

“We did.” She agrees with a nod. “But I need you to do something.” I raise an eyebrow and she does the same. “I need you to let it go and finally let yourself be happy.”

“I am happy.”

“All the way happy,” Marlee says with a whole lot of sass. “Rhea deserves it and so do you.”

Standing, I wrap my arms around my sister and hold her tight. She’d been begging me to lean on her since I’d come back here, but I hadn’t been ready. I hadn’t been prepared to see Michael and Vivian, but when I’d finally pulled my head out of my ass, it was easy to see I wasn’t alone.

My family and the whole damn town had taken great joy in fucking with the people who had given me life. They’d rallied around my sister and me almost twenty years ago and in that time absolutely nothing had changed.

Otto had said over and over *we always show up for family* but I hadn’t been listening—I didn’t realize it applied to me too.

I thought they’d done enough for me—that I’d be forever in their debt.

But I’d never made peace with the boy who’d only been offered a half-life at the expense of his sister’s. Because being without her would be no life at all. I’d carried the guilt of Michael and Vivian’s actions and internalized it—a chain to the past that would never let me go.

We’d been offered more than sanctuary here. We’d been given a home—a real one filled with all the things we’d never had before.

We’d found our family.

And it was time to let them in.

“I love you, Marlee Girl.”

“I love you too.” She pauses and then pulls back. “Even though you’re stubborn as hell.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a blessing and a curse.” I sigh, “Just pray for me now that I have to go talk to Rhea.”

Her eyes sparkle as they meet my gaze. “How long do you think she’s going to make you eat oatmeal raisin cookies?”

I laugh and push her away from me. “Not at all if I play my cards right.”

“And what cards are those?”

“Trust me, Marlee Girl, you don’t want to know.”



## RHEA

The front door opens and Sorren fills the doorway. He's so handsome in the dark gray T-shirt that stretches across his expansive chest, hiding the tattoos I love so much. He looks tired and relieved and uncertain all at the same time.

"Are you okay?" I ask gently.

"I talked to Marlee," he says as he drops onto the couch and rubs his palms over his face. "I told her everything." He holds his hand out to me and I take it, letting him pull me down next to him.

Sorren drapes my legs over his and then threads his fingers through mine. We're quiet for a while, and I can feel the enormity of this moment warring with him. Decades of pain and grief and *guilt* manifested into this single event.

"Is Marlee okay?" I ask finally.

"She's better than I expected," he says with the ghost of a smile.

"Sometimes knowing, even if it's hard, is easier than the not knowing."

He nods but regret is written all over his face. "I told her they weren't going to take her—that they were only going to take me and..." He swallows hard as his eyelids fall shut.

"Oh, Sorren." The words are a whisper, and my heart breaks for the boy that landed in Clementine Creek all those years ago and for the man who had to carry that secret for all these years.

"I want to tell you..."

"I'm here."

His eyes search mine before he leans in and places a soft kiss on my lips.

Maybe it is for comfort or strength, I don't know, but over the next hour he tells me about his childhood.

He tells me about the tension while his mother was pregnant with Marlee, the spiral she went through after Marlee was born, and how he'd never experienced true, unconditional love until he held his sister for the first time.

He recounts the years of taking care of her, doing odd jobs—mowing lawns, raking leaves—to make sure she had more than just the bare minimum. His eyelids fall closed again as he tells me about the night Marlee hid at the top of the stairs and overheard his mother saying she didn't want them.

How he'd vowed in that moment at only fourteen years old to get them both out of there—to keep his sister safe.

Tears fall freely down my face, and I don't try and wipe them away. I don't dare take my eyes off him because I know he needs this.

He needs me.

I sit there and listen as he recounts talking to the court, about coming to Clementine Creek, and the first time he met Gran and Pop. He doesn't hold back the emotion as he talks about his late grandparents and the safe haven they provided—the love they showed Marlee and him.

He talks about his time in the military, the feeling of brotherhood and being a part of something bigger than himself. He tells me about being injured and how my father came to visit him in secret when he was in the hospital after returning to the states.

Sorren said Mama was furious he wouldn't let her go too but that it would have been too much. His career had all but been confirmed over, and he couldn't handle knowing she'd be heartbroken for him too. He needed my father's calm, and he needed the reassurance only Vincent Thayer can provide.

He told me about the stress of coming home and having to field the questions, learning to live with the stares and the well-meaning comments that sent his hackles up.

I'm wrung out emotionally by the time his gaze finally meets mine again, and I grip his hand harder when the corners of his mouth tip up into a sad smile.

“It's a lot to unpack.”

“But you're trusting Waylon to take care of Marlee. To be gentle with her heart.” I cup his face in my hands and place a soft kiss on his lips. “Trust me

to do the same. Trust me with yours.”

Turning his head, he presses his lips against my palm. “I do.” Warmth blooms in my chest at the admission. “Do you remember the morning after Harper’s wedding?” I nod. Up until now, that whole memory made me want to rage but I’d been blind to what was in front of me.

To what he was trying to tell me.

“I called you Sunshine.”

My hands slide down his chest only to fist the hem of his shirt like a lifeline as I say, “I told you I was no one’s sunshine.” His mouth hitches up on the side as he cups my cheek with his roughened palm.

“I told you that you were mine. I needed you and your light—it was addictive and I couldn’t stay away. It still is.” His thumb brushes over my cheek as tears well in my eyes again.

“I was so mad—hurt. I just wanted you to want me like I wanted you.”

“I did, Sunshine. I did, so fucking much, and that’s why I couldn’t have you.” His expression is open and gentle and so devastatingly handsome as he says, “I couldn’t lose you, and I would have if I had given in that night—if I took you to bed and did all the things I wanted to.”

“And the night with Colt?”

He worries his bottom lip with his teeth and then dips his head. “I needed a swift kick in the ass.”

Laughter bubbles out of me, and he grins before pulling me into a kiss that has me gasping and wishing I could erase all the hurt—all the heartache.

“You did make quite a scene,” I murmur against his lips.

“I wasn’t going to let him touch you, Rhea.”

“We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, well,”—he hooks his arm around me and pulls me up until I’m straddling his lap—“you’re fucking mine and I wanted to make sure he knew it.” He grinds me down against his erection and I moan.

“Oh, he knew it,” I say, my words breathy as he slides me up and down his length again.

“You’re a forever kind of girl, Sunshine.” Eyes hooded, Sorren’s gaze drops to my lips before returning to my eyes. “My forever.”

And then his mouth is slanting over mine and he’s ravaging me so thoroughly I can barely breathe. His hands tear at my clothes until I’m sitting naked over him—dazed and wanting and everything in between.

His need to claim me—possess me—is potent. A tangible feeling of lust

and animalistic desire as his gaze rakes over my body. The air around us crackles like a live wire and I'm barely hanging on.

"I love you like this." Leaning forward, he sucks my nipple into his mouth. "Are you wet for me?"

I whimper but don't get the chance to answer before he's dipping one finger and then a second inside me.

"Sorren!" His name is wrenched from my throat as his thumb rubs slow circles against my clit.

"Will you get on your knees for me, baby?" His thumb presses harder as he pumps faster in and out of me. "Sit at my feet and take me to the back of your throat?"

"Yes."

"Fuck yes. God, you're so wet. Sunshine, come for me."

Whether it's the demand or the praise I'm not sure, but I shatter as his other hand comes down on my ass. Pleasure spirals through me with a fury I can't resist. My mouth falls open as I continue bucking against his hand.

"I love how greedy your pussy is." His hand squeezes my ass harder. "That's it, baby, take it all."

I moan as he gives me exactly what I need—more than I need—and never enough. My core is still pulsing with the aftershocks of my orgasm as he watches me.

My cheeks heat as he sucks his fingers into his mouth. "I love the way you taste." His fingers are barely out of me and already I'm trying to squeeze my legs together to find some relief.

He doesn't miss it, and a knowing look flashes across his face.

I'm impossibly wetter thinking about licking him from base to head.

Just like this.

"What are you thinking about, Sunshine?"

"Sucking your cock," I say without thinking.

Sorren takes my mouth in a bruising kiss before pulling back, his eyes wild as he rasps, "Then get on your knees."

The words are full of gravel, and I scramble off his lap and onto the floor in front of him. I've never been this girl, but there's something about the way he looks at me in moments like this that has me willing to do almost anything to please him.

"Such a good fucking girl, Rhea." He undoes the buckle on his belt and sits forward enough to pull it through the loops before reaching for the

button.

My mouth waters and my fingers move down my stomach to my core.

“That pussy,”—the harshness in his voice startles me—“belongs to me.” He drags the zipper down painfully slowly, and I watch him, my palm still pressed against my stomach. “Hands behind your back.”

“Excuse me?” My eyes snap to his and *oh my God*.

Sorren’s expression is practically feral as he stares at me, his dark eyes almost black with a hunger that feels like it could swallow me whole.

“Hands behind your back, Rhea. The only one touching your pussy tonight is me, and I won’t be cheated from tasting you on my lips, feeling you clench around my fingers, having you drip all over my dick.” He pulls his shirt over his head and then frees his cock from his boxer briefs. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I say eagerly as I interlock my fingers behind me.

“Good.” He strokes his length hard, the head angry with every pass. “Come here.” I lean forward but right as I’m about to take him in my mouth, he pulls back the slightest bit. “You need to tell me if it’s too much. I can’t—I’m too far gone.”

“I trust you.” I breathe before licking up his shaft and wrapping my lips around him. He growls and throws one arm over the back of the couch while his other hand tangles in my hair.

Peeking up at him through my lashes, I can’t help but moan around his length. He looks gorgeous—powerful—almost regal. His muscles bunch and flex as I take him all the way to the back of my throat.

His eyes are wild as he watches me, his fist in my hair tightening as I pull off and slide all the way down.

“Again,” he demands but it’s strangled, his other hand clenching the fabric of the cushion.

I do as he asks and push myself farther until I gag before doing it again.

“Fuck, Rhea, just like that.” My fingers squeeze together as I try and focus on breathing and not on all the filthy things he’s saying, but it’s torture.

It’s the absolute best kind of torture.

“I can’t wait to have my head between your legs—that little taste wasn’t enough, baby.” I mewl but he doesn’t stop. “I’m going to devour your sweet pussy, fuck you with my tongue, and make you beg for every release.”

*Oh God, oh God, oh God.*

I suck him harder and he comes on a roar, thrusting one last time and



hitting the back of my throat. His hand grips my hair as he holds me where he wants me. I gag, but it doesn't matter because he's cursing and I'm so turned on I'm practically delirious with anticipation.

“Fuck. *Fuck*. That's going to be burned into my memory until the day I die.” He pulls me off him, my mouth making an audible pop and my lips swollen, as he hauls me into his lap and kisses me with a ferocity that hasn't diminished. “Time to make good on my promise, Sunshine.”

Lifting me in his arms, I gasp and wrap my legs around Sorren as he walks us to the bedroom and does in fact make good on every single promise.



## SORREN

The sun beats down on my back as I haul another two bags of dog food over my shoulder to bring inside. We'd been connected with a big donation from a company local in Tennessee, and I'd opted to pick it up instead of sitting through another meeting.

Tanner had flipped me off on my way out the door, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Luckily, he knows that.

The article about Vetted Paws had gained some traction, and we'd had to officially hire Marlee to manage the accounts until we could figure out our next step. Despite his grumbling, Tanner was a natural at putting people at ease, and we'd agreed that he'd handle more things at the front of the house so I could work behind the scenes.

I wasn't naïve enough to think I'd never have to do an interview or charity event. I just didn't want to do it all the time.

My feet follow the same path I've been making for the last fifteen minutes through the building, passing Otto and Case on their way to the truck for another load. Mama, Rhea, and the girls are all talking and cooing to the dogs as we get the place ready for the soft opening this weekend.

I'd mentioned I needed a little help making sure things were in order, and practically the entire damn town showed up to help. Apparently, a guy asks for help one time in twenty years and he can't hear the end of it.

The thought makes me grin but not as big as watching Miss Thelma with a clipboard she's commandeered, barking orders to anyone within earshot. As I drop a kiss on the top of her white hair, she blushes and then smiles wide, patting my cheek with her free hand.

“So proud of you.” Her words are quiet but I have to swallow down the emotion all the same.

“Hey man,” Otto starts as he walks past me, “this stuff isn’t going to stack itself.”

“He’s just sayin’ that cause he’s winded,” Case adds with a smirk, and I shake my head as I walk back to the parking lot, leaving them bickering in the storeroom.

My boots crunch over the gravel as I step out into the sun. This time though, there’s a small SUV in the parking lot, and Vivian and Michael are standing next to it, their luggage in the back seat like it has been since they were unceremoniously booted from their hotel for *painting and maintenance*.

“This is...nice,” Vivian says, and I have to force myself to relax as she looks around the building that Tanner and I have busted our asses over.

“What are you doing here?” I ask but I honestly don’t care. I need them gone, and I need it to happen before everyone inside realizes what’s going on.

Vivian turns up the charm with a smile faker than Otto’s hair color that summer we convinced him that frosted tips were all the rage. “We came to see what our son has been working so hard on since we really didn’t get to the last time we stopped by. We’re so *thrilled*, a war hero and a humanitarian.” Her inflection is dripping with a saccharine sweetness that makes my jaw tighten.

Their last-ditch effort is unwelcome. They’d been here before and I was just as pissed seeing them now as I had been a few days ago after they’d been shunned from everywhere else in Clementine Creek.

And Blackstone Falls.

“You know nothing about me.”

“But we want to,” she says, and my father shifts on his feet. I can’t quite get a read on him. “We’re just so proud of all our son has accomplished.”

“And what about your daughter?” My hands flex at my sides as an older model pickup comes into view, pulling in on the other side of my truck.

I can’t see the driver or the passenger, but I don’t need to in order to know who’s inside.

“You know we never really connected,” she says flippantly, and I feel myself lean forward before a hand lands on my shoulder.

Bodhi Maxwell stands next to me without saying a word—solidarity in his actions as he stares at my parents. He and his foster brother, Mason, had found refuge in Clementine Creek and jobs working with Case and Otto.

The energy radiating off Bodhi matches my own. He doesn't know *me* but he knows *this*. He knows vindictiveness and manipulation and he knows loyalty.

The door opens behind us, and Case curses loud enough for me to hear. I ignore it as I focus on the man who was supposed to be my father.

"Well then, thank you," I say. Michael's eyes widen and Vivian leans closer like I'm about to fix the mess they found themselves in. Like I'm going to choose them over the people at my back. "Thank you for helping me finally let go of my past. My home is here. My family is here."

I swear Miss Thelma growls something like *hell yeah, we are* as footsteps sound around us, but no one else speaks. Their presence is almost deafening in this moment, but it's all the reassurance I need.

"We're your parents," Vivian declares and I shake my head.

"You might have given me life, but I've made my life here. My forever is here and you're not part of it."

As if I've summoned her, Rhea's hand slips into mine and she squeezes firmly, giving me the last push I need to end this.

"Sorren, let's talk about this in private," Vivian tries as she glares at Bodhi, ignoring the crowd behind me and the girl at my side, but it's no use. She'll never understand.

"He stays," I say acknowledging Bodhi. "They all stay."

"What is *this*?" Vivian says with a haughtiness that reeks of entitlement.

"Family," I reply automatically. "And that's the second time you've insulted mine," I say, my tone deadly calm. "Time for you to go." I stare pointedly at my father before turning back to the woman who brought me into this world. "You're not welcome here. If I catch you on this property again, I'll have you arrested for trespassing."

"That goes for the bookstore too! Hell, you're not welcome in this town at all," Hannah yells and her declaration is followed by hoots and hollers. Warmth fills my chest at the woman leading the charge who only just put down roots here and found a home.

"We're your family, Sorren, not these,"—she lifts her nose a little higher— "people."

"Oh no, she—" Isla's outrage is undoubtedly muffled by Hank's hand over her mouth, but I don't turn to confirm that.

"Get *the fuck*,"—my voice drops, the warning clear—"out of my town."

A flash of emotion crosses her face like the finality of the situation has

just sunk in.

“Let’s go, Vivian.” My father’s gaze sweeps over the crowd, but he doesn’t meet my gaze as he ushers her to the car—decades later and he’s still a puppet on a string.

After he tucks her into the passenger seat, our eyes meet as he rounds the hood of the car. “For what it’s worth,” he says, “you did the right thing. You were a better man than me even all those years ago. You should be proud of yourself.”

The praise is hollow as he gives a slight nod and joins his wife in the car.

I clamp my jaw shut because he doesn’t deserve anything else from me. We all wait with bated breath as the car starts and travels across the parking lot.

“And stay out!” Otto yells as they turn onto the country road and finally drive out of sight. Cheers erupt around me, and it’s enough to startle some birds in the field to my left. For the first time, I don’t mind the raucous celebration, and I don’t fight the twitch of my lips.

Or the smile that follows.



## SORREN

“Are you okay?” Rhea asks, and I nod before dropping a quick kiss on her lips. The departure of Vivian and Michael from Clementine Creek and my life is both anticlimactic and also like the biggest fucking weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

“Finally.” She beams up at me and grips my bicep in her other hand as I turn and look at Bodhi. “Learn anything?”

“Blood isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” My lips turn up at the end because isn’t that the damn truth.

“But we always show up for *family*,” Otto says as he wraps his arm around Bodhi’s shoulders.

“Hell yeah, we do,” Case says as he steps up alongside us.

“What brought you out here?” I ask as we all turn to look at Bodhi.

“Honestly?” he asks as he rubs the palm of his hand over his jaw. He glances over to where Mama is fussin’ over Mason, the kid just soaking it all in. “I dunno. I just had a feeling like this is where I needed to be.”

I nod because I get it and sometimes that’s all the explanation you need.

“Wanna help move these bags inside?”

“Yep.”

“Good man,” Waylon says as he steps up and clasps Bodhi on the shoulder.

“I’m glad you finally told them off,” Marlee says as she pops up onto her toes and places a kiss on my cheek.

“Me too.” And I mean it.

Turning, I look at everyone gathered around us, my heart squeezing



uncomfortably in my chest. I've been with these people a million times before, at a million different birthdays and holidays and picnics but...today just hits differently.

The reality that they've shown up for me—for Marlee—over and over again has my breath whooshing from my lungs.

*Gratitude.*

*Strength.*

*Love.*

It's almost too much to handle—to accept.

“All right, everyone, back to work,” Vincent says with a subtle wink in my direction. I owe so much of my life to him—my freedom and recovery and peace of mind—not to mention he taught me how to perfect that particular wink.

Bet he didn't plan on me using it on his daughter though.

“We'll talk later,” Miss Thelma calls after me with a wave and her clipboard, and I nod as Mama races over and hugs me tight.

“I just love you so much and we're so proud of you.”

“Love you too, Mama.” She holds me a beat longer before releasing me with a watery smile.

“I'll meet you inside?” Rhea asks and I wish I could just take her away from here right now. I'd give almost anything to get lost in her for the next few days with zero interruptions.

Watching her ass sway in her cutoff shorts, I mentally start clearing my schedule to do exactly that.

“What did I miss?” Tanner asks as he jumps out of his car and jogs toward me.

“A lot, brother, but,”—Otto comes out of Vetted Paws and wraps my business partner in a bear hug—“Otto will fill you in.”

Tanner glares at me but lets Otto drag him through the front door as he talks a mile a minute.

Bodhi gives them a wide berth and meets me at the truck. I haul two bags onto my shoulder and he grabs the remaining ones. “For what it's worth,” I start and wait until he looks at me, “you're safe here. You won't find a better place.”

“I know.”

Shaking my head, I let my lips tip up a little. “You don't—but you will.”

He snorts as we linger in the parking lot. “Mason is practically ready to

let Flora read him a bedtime story he's so at home."

He means it as a joke but I can hear the longing in his words. It's something he won't allow himself because he's always been Mason's protector. It's the same reason that even though my sister is grown and married, I still lost sleep over not being able to keep the moon hung for her.

"It's what keeps our hearts from turning black."

"What?"

"Their innocence." Bodhi's lips press into a thin line as I continue. "We lost ours a long time ago, and even though they've seen things we wished they hadn't—they still burn bright."

"So much better than us."

"It's why we crave their light. Makes us feel like we could have it too."

"But how do you find normal? Where the fuck is the balance?"

My mind drift to the Thayers, my sister—to Rhea.

"You let them in and if you do stay,"—I smirk—"this town will demolish the fuck out of your walls."

"That sounds terrible," he says but his expression isn't so tight.

"Get ready, man, because it's comin' at you faster than Miley Cyrus on a wrecking ball."

"Who are you?" he asks in disbelief and it almost makes me smile.

"Just a guy." I pause. "But don't be like me—live your life and take chances. I let twenty years go by waitin' for the other shoe to drop."

We both stare out to where my parents disappeared from sight.

"I can't let it go yet."

"Then just know that when you're ready..." I motion around us but don't say anything else. I don't need to. We've both probably shared more in this one conversation than most people get out of us in a week.

And wouldn't you know, I got a couple more things to say.



## RHEA

It took a couple of days for all the excitement to die down before we could get everyone together to celebrate at Waylon and Marlee's. It seemed prophetic to be at the place where it all started so many years ago.

Miss Thelma had been tight-lipped about any additional shenanigans that had pushed Vivian and Michael out of town but it didn't matter. It had worked, Sheriff Kade hadn't arrested anyone, and Sorren had taken me on every surface of our house.

I sidle up next to Otto and take baby Rosie from his arms. "Hey, that's mine," he grumbles and I chuckle as Case comes striding over.

"I had dibs on next." He pouts and I roll my lips inward.

"Well, if I were you, I'd focus my energy on figuring out what you're going to do now that Sorren *knows* about the social media account."

Otto's eyes widen and Case whips around trying to find out where my boyfriend is located and if he has enough time to escape. No doubt he'd sacrifice his twin to save himself.

"How did you get out of it?" Otto asks, unease clear in his tone.

"I just had to suck his dick and all was forgiven," I say flippantly.

"Rhea!" Otto screeches before placing his hands over Rosie's tiny ears. The little girl is fast asleep despite her father's outrage.

"I seriously didn't need to know that," Case says as he drags his hands down his face and groans.

I arch an eyebrow at him. "Um, did you forget we share a wall? At least when Sorren and I do something at the bakery, we close the connecting door first."

The tips of Case's ears turn pink as he searches for Hannah and then sprints off in her direction, muttering under his breath.

"Good luck!" I call after him and Otto snorts. "You're not worried?" He shrugs but there's a smile on his lips.

"I knew what I was getting into." The only one likely to escape unscathed is Miss Thelma, and that's only because she's basically a cornerstone in Clementine Creek, and I hope to be just like her one day.

"Hey Otto," Sorren says casually, causing my brother's eyes to widen unnaturally, "mind if I hold the baby?"

"What? No, of course not. All yours. I mean not *yours* but you know." He slaps Sorren on the back and then looks around. "I think Fallon is callin' me. I better go find her."

"Hmm." He watches Otto scurry away before looking back at me. "That was weird, right?" he asks while taking Rosie from my arms.

"I told him you know about the videos." He smirks as his gaze scorches a trail down my body. He'd punished me all night for not telling him, bringing me so close to orgasm so many times I was practically weeping when he finally pushed me over the edge.

It had been intense and incredible, and I'd had a little trouble sitting the next day. As if he's reading my mind, he smirks.

And winks.

*Swoon.*

The wink is totally underrated in my opinion, and seeing this man holding a baby is just the cherry on top.

"I never asked," he says quietly, looking from the baby back to me, "if you wanted this."

A thousand lifetimes span only a few seconds before my eyes well with tears and I nod.

"Do you?"

"Yeah." He looks down at the baby. "You're going to be the best mom."

Popping up on my toes, I place a lingering kiss on his lips. "I'm not gonna call you daddy."

His expression is wicked as he looks me over again. "Never say never, Sunshine."

"Can I have y'all's attention?" Marlee says over the noise of the party.

She's glowing.

She's actually glowing as my brother takes her hand, the goofiest damn

smile I've ever seen plastered on his face, and my heart launches into my throat. Sorren wraps his arms around my shoulders, his other one still holding the sleeping newborn as we wait.

"We know this is a celebration of new beginning,"—her eyes meet mine and she smiles—"closing that chapter on our past and embracing this beautiful family we've made here. I know I speak for Sorren when I say that coming here was the best thing that's ever happened to us."

Mama's already crying and Daddy pulls her against him—the pillar of strength in what promises to be an emotional event.

"We're thankful,"—her words catch in her throat and she swallows hard, eyes shiny—"for the love we've found here."

"And the chickens!" Otto yells and everyone laughs.

"And the chickens," Marlee agrees. "I had more to say but..." Her smile is infectious and I cling to Sorren as his eyes lock with his sister and she nods. He stumbles just the smallest bit, but I don't let go.

Not now and not ever.

"Tell us!" Case shouts, causing hoots and hollers to erupt.

Marlee and Waylon laugh, their eyes meeting for just a moment before looking at Mama. "I hope you have room at your table for one more." Then, taking a breath, she yells, "Because we're having a baby!"

Chaos ensues and it's pure, overwhelming joy, and I can't wipe my tears away fast enough. Rosie sleeps soundly, completely unbothered by the party going on around her. Reaching up, I brush a tear from Sorren's cheek, and he nuzzles his face against my palm.

"I'll take the little one from you if you don't mind," my father says as he steps up next to us. Marlee and Waylon haven't moved an inch as everyone wishes them congratulations.

"Thanks, Dad," he says and everyone freezes as we let that sink in. Sorren has called my mom *Mama*, but he's never called my father anything but Vincent.

"You let Miss Thelma know I won the pool," my father tells my mother before pulling Sorren into a half hug and taking the baby from his arms.

Mama rolls her eyes.

"Seriously? You've had a decades' long pool on when I'd pull my head out of my ass?" Sorren asks incredulously.

"Sorren, language," Mama chides as my brothers sidle up next to her. Otto snickers and Hank cuffs him on the back of the head.

“Ow, what was that for?” Otto whines.

Hank shrugs. “Seemed fitting.”

“No,” my father says seriously, “the pool was to see how long it took you to realize you’d truly come home.” He looks proud as punch as he adds, “Just took makin’ peace with the past and falling in love to figure it out.”

“Nothing major,” Otto adds with a grin then ducks out of Hank’s reach.

Sorren lifts a shoulder. “The most selfless thing they ever did was let us go.” Looking down at me, he whispers, “I’d do it all again to have forever with you.”

“Forever sounds nice.”

“So what do you think, do you still want to be called Uncle Wren?” Marlee says with a cheeky smile.

“Can’t be changin’ it up now,” Sorren says before taking a step and picking her up off the ground. She laughs as he spins her around, and I wrap my arms around Waylon, resting my head on his chest.

It’s a moment I’ll never forget. A moment filled with love and happiness and so much that had come full circle.

“Are you happy?” he asks quietly, and I can’t stop my smile.

“It’s everything I’ve ever dreamed of.”

“Me too,” my brother agrees as Marlee and Sorren turn back toward us. “How’d we get so lucky?”

“We finally found forever.”





## SORREN

“Night’s on Fire” by David Nail plays as rain pelts the windshield and I don’t think about it—I turn off the main road and onto the dirt one that leads down to Cedar Lake.

We’d just left the party at Waylon and Marlee’s as the rain started. Their pregnancy announcement had left me reeling in the best possible way. It really did feel like a new beginning, and I wouldn’t let myself miss out on enjoying this new lease on life.

Rhea and Marlee had talked animatedly about the details while Waylon and I just smiled at the fact that we’d been so lucky to have found happiness here. I couldn’t figure out the math, but Marlee said she’d been so busy she hadn’t noticed she was late.

Really late.

“What are you doing?” Rhea asks, but I don’t answer.

I can’t.

No one would ever call me spontaneous, but hell if I don’t want to just let go and be in this moment. I kill the engine when I pull into the driveway of Hank’s lakeside property and stare out the windshield.

“Sorren?”

“Come with me?”

I ask the question and let Rhea see the vulnerability in my gaze. Biting her bottom lip, she nods and I can’t help the way I have to kiss her—the way I always seem to need my mouth on hers.

She’s intoxicating, and maybe that’s why I never let myself see this before—see her before. I knew she’d ruin me and save me all in the same

breath.

Her lips are soft against mine, but she's not shy about the way she wants me—needs me—and *fuck* if that's not the biggest turn-on.

Pulling back, I make quick work of untying my boots and kicking them off on the floorboards before pushing open the car door as Rhea calls my name. I strip my shirt over my head as the rain coats my skin and throw the balled-up fabric at her.

She giggles and calls my name again, but she's already taking off her sandals as I shuck my jeans and throw them onto the driver's seat.

“Sorren!” she yells, the smile practically splitting her cheeks as I close the door and walk backward toward the water wearing only my boxer briefs.

Tilting my face up toward the sky, I let my eyelids fall closed and stretch my arms out to the side. I let the rain pelt my skin, and I give in to the way the sound ricochets around the lake.

I hear the door closing and Rhea's footsteps as she jogs over to where I'm standing. My eyes pop open barely a second before she jumps into my arms and slams her lips over mine.

We stumble backward before I regain my balance and walk us into the water. It's warm compared to the rain, but she still gasps into my mouth when I bend my knees and drop us neck deep into the lake.

Rhea throws her head back and laughs, her hair dipping into the water, causing it to dance and sway along the surface.

“I love you.” My words are low but sure because I've known forever and a day that this girl was all I'd ever need.

Her arms wrap tighter against my neck, and she rests her forehead against mine. “I love you.”

Her nose nudges against mine and I take the hint, turning my head enough to kiss her. To slide my tongue between her lips as I tangle my hand in her hair and hold her exactly where I want her.

Forever.

Her hips rock against me and I groan. My dick hasn't seen this much action in *years* and while he'd love to make up for lost time—wild and fast until she's screaming—it's not what I need.

“Sunshine,” I moan as she drags her tongue down the column of my throat and I knead her ass in my hands. The scrap of lace covering her pussy is one gentle tug from being torn from her body.

“Yes,” she breathes the word into my ear. “Whatever you want, the

answer is yes.”

I stand with her in my arms and walk to the shore before dropping into the sand. She straddles my lap and pushes me back onto the wet sand, the aqua-colored lace of her bra darker than usual.

My fingers make quick work of opening the clasp and stripping it from her body. I palm her tits, kneading and massaging them while sucking each nipple into my mouth as she grinds against me.

“Ride me, baby,” I manage as I switch from lavishing one side to the other.

The sand is hard against my back and guaranteed to leave a mark by the time this is done, but I’m here for it.

I crave seeing her come undone and the absolute high of knowing she’ll get herself off on my dick—using me for her pleasure.

Pulling my length through the front of my boxers, she slides her panties to the side and then meets my gaze as she slides so fucking slowly down my shaft.

“Fuck, Sunshine, you feel so good.”

“I’m not going to last.” The words are a panting breath as she swivels her hips and then slams herself down onto me. I groan with each deliberate movement she makes. “Sorren, I need—”

Gripping her ass, I hold her in place as I thrust up into her. I know what she needs, and I’m willing to give it to her every damn time. Her eyes squeeze shut as her walls flutter around me and I suck her nipple into my mouth before lashing it with my tongue.

She screams my name, her body shaking as she rides out her release—the tightening of her pussy around my cock sending me over the edge just as fast.

It’s everything I need in this moment.

It’s everything I need always.

And it’s every word I don’t know how to say.

Rhea collapses against my chest, our bodies slick with the water and rain and us. Her hair is a beautiful mess, sand clinging to it unapologetically.

I let my head fall back against the sand and close my eyelids against the rain. I’m not sure I’ve ever felt this at peace in my life.

There’s always been something hanging over my head, something in the periphery, but this—this is what freedom feels like. This is hope and relief and happiness in its truest form.

This is love.

Laughter rumbles low in my chest before bursting from my lips. Rhea picks her head up to stare at me, a smile on her face and her eyes bright with amusement.

I don't hide my smile as I cup her cheek and pull her toward me, our lips meeting in a sweet and sensual kiss that's full of a lifetime of promises I intend to keep.

This moment is for us now and forever.

I've made love to the woman I plan on marrying in the sand while the rain falls all around us. I hadn't planned it, hadn't calculated the risks or had a contingency plan if things went sideways.

I've traveled around the world and came home to a second chance at living, but it's taken the woman in my arms to show me what that truly means.

"I love it when you smile."

"Better get used to it, Sunshine. It's here to stay."

"You're still going to growl though, right? I love it when you're all dark and broody and—"

She yelps and then moans as I roll her under me and press her into the sand, my dick already half hard inside her.

"Don't worry." I trail kisses along her jaw, forcing her head back and exposing the column of her throat. "I know *just* what you like..."

# **EPILOGUE**

SORREN

6 WEEKS LATER

OTTO: Hey man you can't be serious

CASE: Seriously I mean—there's just no way

SORREN: Don't worry, I already got the green light from Fallon and Hannah

SORREN: Also good news—Miss Thelma has graciously offered to help you 'get into position'—her words not mine

HANK: Oh I can't wait for this

WAYLON: Marlee and I are bringing snacks so we don't miss the entertainment

HAYDEN: Otto I bet you fill out that...position REALLY well

OTTO: I hate you

HAYDEN: That was a compliment!

SORREN: Case make sure you show your best side I mean your wife is the one taking the pictures

HAYDEN: He means your booty

EVERETT: You didn't just say that

CASE: NO ONE SHOULD BE SAYING IT

SORREN: You did this to yourself

OTTO: Yeah and Otto of like ten years ago—even five years ago—would be all over this

OTTO: I think I gained some pregnancy weight and I'm a little self-conscious

TANNER: I wouldn't mention that to Fallon

TANNER: Personal experience

OTTO: Not cool man—we have matching shirts—you're supposed to be on my side!

TANNER: Oh! I got you a new shirt for when you're done.

SORREN: Probably going to be chilly in there though—you know so the dogs don't overheat

HANK: This is terrifying

CASE: So you're not coming?

HANK: Oh I'm definitely coming—might even be a Christmas card opportunity

OTTO: No one wants my ass on a Christmas card

WAYLON: (gif of person doubled over laughing)

SORREN: I beg to differ

SORREN: According to the...50k followers on my account—they're very eager to see if you can match my 'energy'

HANK: What's BDE?

HAYDEN: Oh pick me!

EVERETT: You're not telling my boss what it means

HANK: Never mind—Isla told me

HANK: Said I'm definitely BDE

OTTO: Can we focus please?

SORREN: I'm so glad you're focused—can't wait to see what you do behind the camera

CASE: I hate all of you

SORREN: Just when I started tolerating these messages

SORREN: Such a shame...

I look up from my phone and snicker before my smile immediately disappears.

Shit.

“Sorren!” Rhea yells from inside her office. Pushing open the door, I see the German shepherd puppy mix tearing around the room, tail wagging and with his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. “Come here, you little shit,” she growls, lunging for the animal that now thinks they’re playing a game. “I swear to God if you—”

I whistle and the dog leaps off the couch and races over to sit at my feet. Pulling a treat from my pocket, I give it to Kona before telling him to lie down.

He does and Rhea slams her hands onto her hips. Eyeing her warily, I take a tentative step toward my girl. I’m barely fighting a smile as I reach for her.

She stares at me with her arms crossed. She’s pissed but not *upset*, and that’s at least marginally better for me.



“Sunshine...”

“Don’t you *Sunshine* me, Sorren Mackay.” She points at the dog still obediently lying on the floor. He’d been one of the first rescues we’d received, and he’d taken to me immediately. He was currently really interested in pulling Rhea’s panties out of the hamper, which she did not appreciate.

“He’s still learning. He’s a puppy and—”

“He sent emails to clients! And my grocery order arrived with, like, five times the amount of cornstarch any one person could ever need.”

“You can order groceries in this town?”

She stomps her foot, and my name is a cry and not the good kind. “Sorren!”

Taking a step toward her again, I smile as she watches me warily but doesn’t move, and I take that as a good sign. I gently pull her toward me until I can wrap her in my arms.

“He’s lucky he’s so cute.”

“I thought I was cute.”

“You’re lucky you can give me orgasms.”

“Listen, Sunshine, I stress about a lot of things,”—eyeing her slowly up and down, I smirk—“but makin’ you come is not one of them.”

“You owe me tonight.”

“Promise.” I press a quick kiss to her lips. “Right after the photoshoot.”

PULLING up to Vetted Paws is pandemonium. Cars and trucks fill the parking lot, but I can’t stop my smile when I see Otto pacing around the front entrance.

“Did you tell him?” Rhea asks as she stares from her brother and back to me.

“Nope.” I smirk before opening my door and stepping out into the sun. “Mornin’ Otto,” I call, and his head whips to me and then to his sister as if trying to determine the weaker link to get out of this.

“Dude,”—he lowers his voice as he hustles over—“at least give me a big dog, you know? These love handles are no joke, and Fallon says she loves them but she has to say that and I gotta cut back on sneakin’ Mama’s cobbler

and—”

“Yoo-hoo! Otto!” Miss Thelma calls, and I’ve never loved this woman more than I do now. “We’re almost ready for you.” She winks at me as Rhea shakes with silent laughter.

It’s better than I could have imagined.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Hannah says as she comes around the corner, camera in hand. “I wanted you to get a look at the setup. Case is ready and this one,”—she hitches her thumb toward Otto—“has been crying since he got here.”

He gasps. “I have not. You’re my least favorite sister-in-law right now.”

“Aww, don’t be like that. I told you I could airbrush you if I had to.”

“I do *not* need airbrushing,” he mutters.

“Oh, honey, you’ll be fine. The oil will take care of any problem spots, no worries,” Hayden says as he comes around the corner with the biggest bottle of tanning oil I’ve ever seen.

Otto’s mouth drops open, and Hannah and Rhea dissolve into a fit of giggles. They’re doubled over and barely holding each other up they’re laughing so hard.

“Otto,” I say on a laugh, “there’s no—”

“Okay, I’m ready. Let’s do this,” Case says as he comes around the corner holding a small towel around his waist in one hand and the leash of a dog in the other.

Hayden joins the girls laughing on the floor, and Case blushes from his chest to the tips of his ears.

“Whoa,” Hank says, spinning on his heel to avert his gaze from his brother. “I have not had enough coffee for this yet.”

“Oh, work it, Case!” Isla catcalls and he blushes harder. “Hey, maybe you guys can do a twin picture—that will totally bring in the money.”

“It IS for charity,” Hannah says from the floor between breaths.

“I fucking hate all of you,” Case mutters, and I take the leash from his hand so he doesn’t traumatize the poor animal more than he already has.

“So now that Case has almost shown everyone his cock before we’ve had coffee, why don’t you go put some clothes on so we can get started?” I say, trying to sound stern.

“But you said—” Case starts.

“You said—” Otto looks around the room before looking back at me and I lose it. A grin takes over my face, and I can’t stop the laugh that barks out

of me.

No pun intended.

“You went along with this?!” Case asks Hannah who has managed to stand and is now wiping the tears from her eyes.

“So...worth it.”

“What the fuck, man. Where are your clothes?” Tanner says as he looks from Case to the rest of us. “I told you he was kidding.”

“Yeah, but I’m not scared of you.” Case frowns. “No offense.”

“None taken. Now can you please put clothes on so I can bleach this morning from my mind?” Tanner groans.

“Don’t you say a word!” Otto says as Tanner opens and closes his mouth. Hank chuckles, Miss Thelma high-fives me, Hayden cackles, and then it happens—Case doubles over laughing as Otto’s lips twitch before he too is laughing so hard tears stream down his face.

I meet Rhea’s gaze across the room and wink. Her lips part as realization sets in and she mouths *did you know the whole time?*

I lift my shoulder and let it drop as a smirk pulls at the corner of my mouth. She walks around her brothers until she’s standing in front of me.

“You’re something else, Sorren Mackay.”

“What? I know things.” She laughs and then presses her body into mine and kisses me like she always does.

Like every kiss is precious.

Like she can never get enough—I know I never will.

And until my dying breath, we’ll always be better together.

Forever in the country.

THE END

Want more of Sorren and Rhea? How about the rest of Clementine Creek?

Click [HERE](#) for the bonus scene!

## WHAT'S NEXT?

A rockstar, a lawyer and a baseball player move into a small town in Illinois - what's the worst that can happen?

Turn the page for an (unedited and subject to change) look at **Staged** coming  
Fall 2023!

# CHAPTER 1

## EMERSON PRESENT DAY

“I still don’t get how this is a good idea.” I say defiantly from the back seat of the town car as we navigate the streets of Chicago.

“Emerson, we’ve talked about this.” My father says pointedly. The *at length* is implied but it doesn’t make it easier. “Besides he came highly recommended.”

Yes, Garrett North, current rockstar bad boy had been in the tabloids for the better part of a year, only disappearing within the last month or so. I’d nearly fallen over when we’d been approached by his assistant.

And my cousin.

“I cannot believe you let Isla talk you into this.”

“Tom Oakden has already run all the checks on him. You know I would never put you in a situation that was unsafe. Your uncle and cousin leaving soon after each other left a lot of unrest. We need to reassure the masses that we’re just as strong as ever.”

“And I need a man to do that?” My father rolls his eyes before pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. My uncle’s heart attack had left my father more than a little shaken and while his retiring was the best thing for him, my father and I had had to shoulder the weight of his absence.

The hours were long and the bullshit was running rampant but we were doing it and everything was *fine*.

“You don’t *need* a man. But balance would be good. Isla trusts his friend – what’s his name?”

“Colt Harrington, shortstop of the Illinois Blues.” I say automatically because I’d read through every single document Tom Oakden could find on anyone and everyone Garrett North had any interaction within the last five years.

Oakey, as Isla and I affectionately called him, had become more of an uncle than an employee. At this point we considered him family and that made him tolerate his nickname with a not so forced smile. Retired from the military, the silver fox turned more than a few heads around the office while running the private investigation arm of Andrews International.

“Right. Colt. Your cousin trusts him and he went to bat for Garrett.”

“Terrible pun.” I say and my father ignores me even as his lips turn up a little bit.

“Colt said that a lot of the media shitstorm was based on false reporting or at the very least a salacious spin. Tom’s investigation confirmed that too. North seems like a homebody – being targeted for some unknown reason.”

“Again,” I say slowly, “That’s the kind of man you think is going to have me shaking hands and kissing babies as we take Andrews International to new heights?”

“It is if you want to finally launch your department.” My breath stalls in my lungs as our eyes lock. *I knew there was a catch.* “Show the world who Garrett really is and that you’re capable of facilitating such a monumental change. Philanthropy is coveted in our industry after all.”

“I’m not using Garrett North for personal gain.”

“It’s a symbiotic partnership. And it’s business.” He levels his gaze at me, “For both of you.”

If I was going to jump in bed with my rockstar crush it would have been because I was drunk on his music and his presence on stage. Now it was only another thing I’d been robbed of by being part of the company’s upper echelon.

My phone buzzes in my bag and I pull it out as I try to bring my blood pressure down to a reasonable level.

ISLA: How are you feeling?

EMERSON: I can’t believe you agreed to this

ISLA: We've seen it done before

ISLA: And I know Colt – he wouldn't have reached out about Garrett if he didn't truly believe he was a good guy

EMERSON: Do you even hear yourself?

EMERSON: I'm going to be fake dating AND living with him

ISLA: My dad said he's nice. He met him not long ago at the lake when he came down with Colt

EMERSON: Uncle Cullen is in on it too?!

ISLA: He's team Emerson so that's good news!

ISLA: Oh! Make sure you bring those leggings you had made

EMERSON: This is not funny

ISLA: I know but the leggings are hilarious

EMERSON: It was funny but more importantly now I can't even enjoy him in my rockstar fantasies

ISLA: Why not? You're going to be living together – seems like a prime opportunity to take advantage of

EMERSON: It's tainted

EMERSON: Like the rest of the next six months of this charade

ISLA: Or it could be full of orgasms

EMERSON: Is that like the glass is half full?

ISLA: But with orgasms

EMERSON: The only one having sex is you

ISLA: Your loss

EMERSON: I KNOW THAT'S THE PROBLEM

ISLA: Don't blame this on you not getting laid

EMERSON: Way to rub it in

ISLA: You could be rubbing one out – on Garrett

EMERSON: (gif of woman spitting out her drink)

ISLA: I know you're upset and nervous but –

ISLA: I trust Colt. Garrett wrote that song as a favor for Hayden and Everett – he's a good guy Em and if anyone can show the world that it's you.

EMERSON: I can't tell if I love you or hate you more right now

ISLA: I'll take both

ISLA: But I love you always

EMERSON: Love you more

The car pulls to a stop and I throw my phone into my bag. It's expensive – pretentious even but it's so pretty and dammit if I have to deal with this today I'm pulling out all the stops.

The Sterling & Associates law firm is just as I expected it to look and while we'd never done business with them, they were well respected.

“Are you ready?” My father asks before reaching for the handle.

*No.*

A single nod is all I can manage because of all the things we've been through – this is the first time I don't feel like we're on the same side.

He offers me his hand and I take it as I step out onto the sidewalk and push down every ounce of vulnerability I'd unleashed in the car. I'd go along with this charade but I'd do it on my terms and no one else's.

[Add STAGED to your TBR here!](#)



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexandra Hale is a small town girl living with her family in Upstate New York. She routinely runs on caffeine, dry shampoo and thrives on procrastination.

A lover of all things romance, Alexandra finally began putting pen to paper shortly after graduating college. An unobtainable dream has slowly become a reality with the love and support of her friends and family and the romance community.

She currently writes steamy, small town romance with a dash of lighthearted fun and happily ever afters that will make you swoon.

[Connect with Alexandra here!](#)



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