

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing in a vast field of red poppies. The man, on the left, is wearing a white t-shirt and has his arms around the woman. The woman, on the right, has long blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored, sleeveless top. The background is a soft-focus field of red flowers under a cloudy sky.

**ALEXANDRA HALE**

**HOME IN THE**

*Country*

**A CLEMENTINE CREEK NOVEL**

# HOME IN THE COUNTRY

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A CLEMENTINE CREEK NOVEL

ALEXANDRA HALE




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*Being a hot mess doesn't mean you're not strong, capable,  
sexy and vibrant. Every season of you is beautiful.*

*To Gram and Pa, who always made sure every kid had a  
grandparent on grandparent's day.*

*And to Jenna, who did indeed, call him first.*

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# PROLOGUE

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OTTO - SPRING BREAK FRESHMAN YEAR OF  
COLLEGE

“Are you trying to seduce me, Ms. Jones?” “Is it working?”  
God, her voice is husky compared to her usual sweet sound, and I can’t do anything but take it all in. Sunlight dances over her long strawberry blonde hair, causing the red to show in the strands.

“Maybe.”

“Guess I’ll have to try harder...” Her voice trails off as her eyelids fall closed and she places barely there kisses down my neck.

God, she doesn’t have to try *at all* because it’s finally happening.

After months, more like *years*, of wooing the girl of my dreams, Fallon Jones *finally* agreed to hang out with me.

I wanted to take her to dinner, but she said she had something else in mind. You can’t really argue when a beautiful girl wants to get you alone—we don’t even need Netflix.

Our story will be one for the ages, and I can’t stop the twitch of my lips as it all plays out in my mind.

*Hot science nerd falls madly in love with misunderstood football jock.*

It’s a classic.

“Why are you smiling?” she purrs, her hot little body straddling my lap as the tall grass blows gently around us.

“Because I’m *really* happy you’re here with me.” I let my southern drawl seep into my words for effect and don’t dare move as her eyes drop to my mouth. “Why are *you* smiling?”

“Because you have *very* nice lips.”

“Thank you.” I’m smiling too when she looks up. Her honey-colored gaze locks with mine for only a second before she’s slanting her mouth over mine.

*Fucking heaven.*

I leave my hands braced behind me on the blanket as she kisses me at a maddeningly slow pace. Her tongue is hot and playful against mine. Teasing. Tasting. It’s the slowest exploration, and I can’t get enough, but I’m trying to let her set the pace. I *need* her to set the pace.

Out of the two of us, only one of us is a virgin—and it isn’t her.

“Hey Otto?”

“Hmm?” My eyes are still closed, her breath hot on my skin.

“I’m not wearing any panties.”

Two things happen simultaneously.

The first is that my dick tries to punch through my jeans to the heaven straddled over me.

The second is that no amount of deep breathing is going to help control the lust and desire coursing through me.

Fallon knows it too.

Her fingers tease the top button of my shirt.

“I want to wear this as I ride you.”

*Holy fucking shit.*

“Anything you want, Princess.”

“Princess?”

“I think it fits...” My breath catches as her hands trail down my body, deftly flicking open the buttons until my shirt

is splayed open. Fallon licks her lips as her gaze sweeps over my pecs and down to my abs. Her fingers follow the same path, and my muscles twitch and flex under her not-so-innocent perusal.

I'd planned to go slow, keep myself in check, but I'm only a guy, and my control is not as impressive as I portray it to be.

Also, this is not the same girl that I'd shared a lab bench with. No, the woman seducing the fuck out of me is a damn vixen in a red cotton sundress.

Sitting up, Fallon's hands slide up my chest and over my shoulders. She pushes the fabric off me as she goes, and my heart pounds in my chest.

Together, we work my shirt off, and she discards it next to her on the blanket.

"Thought you wanted that?" I groan and then tilt my head as she kisses across my shoulder and nips at the nape of my neck with her teeth. The sting makes my body hum with desire. She's wound me up tight in a matter of minutes, and we are still almost fully clothed.

"Later."

The wetness of her tongue under my jaw sends a shiver down my spine and I gasp. This is the most exquisite torture I've ever experienced. Fallon's hips rock ever so gently against me, and she sighs into my ear while her nails dig into my shoulders.

My arms wrap around her back and pull her flush to me.

"Fallon," I rasp into the space between us. "Please, baby."

"Do you want me, Otto?"

The question is innocent—flirty—but the gleam in her eyes is anything but.

"God, yes." My arms shake the slightest bit, and I dig my fingers into her waist to steady myself. If she wants to run this show, I'm absolutely going to let her.

Releasing her grip on me, she bites her lip as she reaches up and pulls the tie loose from around her neck. My heart stops. Just dead right there in my chest.

I've heard talk about time slowing down, things moving in slow motion, but I've never really understood that until this moment.

The fabric of her top caresses every inch of her breasts like water running off a slope. I don't blink, my lips part, my dick aches, and I realize I am fucking *starving* for this woman in my lap.

Fallon watches me then looks down at her naked chest. Meeting my gaze, she sits up on her knees, bringing her tits directly in line with my mouth.

“Do you want to touch?”

I swallow. Hard. “So much,” I rasp.

Somehow this has turned into a game I'm quickly losing at. My restraint is barely holding on by a thread—another saying that only made sense in this moment.

Fallon drags her nipple across my bottom lip and I whimper.

I fucking whimper.

Begging is next. I need this so bad. I need *her*.

“Fallon. Baby. I can't—”

“Put your mouth on me, Otto.”

I descend on her tits in an instant. With the peak of one nipple snug between my teeth, I flick it over and over with my tongue. The other is pinched and rolled firmly between two fingers as she moans and rocks into my touch.

“You're so fucking perfect,” I say to her chest, my free hand stroking up her spine. I've never craved a woman like this before. I might be young still, but I know this isn't normal. Our chemistry, our connection—it's all-consuming and *I like it*.

“Oh, Otto,” she moans as her fingers tangle into the thick strands of my hair. “Take my dress off.”

I fumble with the hem as I pull it up and over her head. It’s awkward, and I have to shimmy it over her shoulders because the seam or some shit and I’m not smooth.

She laughs as she sits naked in my lap, but I don’t.

I can’t. I’ve swallowed my tongue and can only stare at the utter perfection of her body. She’s better than I imagined.

“Your turn.”

“What?” I rasp as her hands move to my belt.

“I want you naked.”

“Anything you want.”

She smiles against my lips as she works my jeans open and then moves down my body, bringing the denim and my boxer briefs with her.

I thank God we already kicked our shoes off because I can’t imagine having to fumble with those too right now.

My cock springs free and slaps against my stomach, causing a sly grin to cross her lips.

“Someone’s happy to see me,” she purrs as she pulls a condom from the front pocket of my pants.

“You have no idea,” I groan. Her touch is gentle as she rolls it down my length, but *holy hell* it feels incredible.

Fallon places one hand on my chest and then pushes me back against the blanket before grabbing my button-down shirt and putting it on. It swims on her, but I can’t help but love seein’ her in something that’s mine.

“Please, Princess.” My hands grip her face, and I pull her mouth to mine. I may not have any experience with sex, but I’m a hell of a kisser.

She pants and whimpers against my lips before she’s sitting up and sliding down my cock.

I remember everything and nothing after that as her hot, tight pussy swallows me down and my hips buck up to meet hers.

It's the most incredible experience of my life, and this is only the beginning for us.



FALLON



## PRESENT DAY

I can feel the exhaustion kick in as the miles tick down toward our new home. My childhood home, as it were. The windshield wipers keeping up a steady rhythm, the music turned low, and Briggs sleeping soundly in the back make it almost peaceful.

Almost.

Only ten more minutes until—pop! The car swerves, and I do my best not to overcorrect as I navigate to the side of the road. With my heart in my throat, I pull my cell phone from my purse with shaking hands.

We do not need a flat tire. Do. Not.

But this is my life.

Punching in the number for roadside assistance, I walk through the thousand prompts while waiting for them to tell me it will be hours before they can help us.

Briggs snores softly in the back seat. The kid is a world-class sleeper.

“Thank you for calling roadside assistance, how can I help you today?” The woman’s chipper voice on the other end of the line grates my nerves.

“Hi, we have a flat tire, and we’re on the side of the road about ten minutes outside of Clementine Creek.”

*Tap tap tap tap.*

The keyboard on her end is getting a workout, and I hold my breath for some good news.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, where did you say you are?”

“Near Clementine Creek, Tennessee.”

“Oh, I am *so* sorry. This number is for the area local to where you registered with our services. I’m going to have to transfer you. Can you please hold?”

“Sure. Right. Of course.” I grit out the words because it’s not her fault I’m an idiot.

A normal person probably would have remembered to change the information over, but seriously, it’s roadside assistance and I just thought they’d help me...*roadside*.

“Hello, ma’am?”

“Yes, hello.”

We go through all the pertinent information, and I’m back to waiting as the *tapping* echoes through the phone.

“I’m sorry, but it looks like the tech closest to you is about two hours away.” Her lack of accent means that wherever she’s working from is nowhere near me. My spirits sink.

*This is fine. This is totally fine.*

My head falls back against the headrest, and I close my eyes. I thank her and hang up the phone. This day totally sucks.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

The sound of knuckles on my window and the accompanying shadow looming over me make me jump in the seat.

The figure takes a step back, and my breath catches in my throat. Even with the rain dripping off the brim of his baseball hat, there’s no denying who the hulking form belongs to.

*Shit.*

Of all the days of my life, why does Otto Thayer have to crash land into this one?

Rolling my window down, I steel myself against what I know will be a potentially awkward encounter.

“Hey Otto.” There. Casual.

His body stiffens like he’s just realized it’s me. His jaw tightens as his gaze assesses me before flashing to the back seat where Briggs is still sound asleep.

“Anyone coming to fix your flat?”

*Ooookay.* Apparently we’re skipping pleasantries.

“Roadside assistance is two hours away. I was just going to call my parents and then get the car later. I didn’t want to change it myself and risk my son waking up and not knowing where I am and...” I press my lips together to stop the word vomit—and actual vomit—from escaping.

He eyes the back seat again.

He already knew I have a son because Cheyenne mentioned she ran into Otto at the farmers’ market where she first met Jake. She said that Otto’s demeanor completely changed, and I could guess why.

“Do you have a spare?”

“Yes.”

“Pop the trunk and stay in the car.”

“It’s packed full and I don’t want to be any trouble, I just —”

“Just do it, Fallon. I’m already wet.”

He’s gone before I can say anything else, so I pull the trunk release while putting my window up. Otto’s clipped words hurt as I replay them. I knew there would be some potential saltiness, but this is something else.

We were practically kids back then—or at least that’s how it feels now. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t wish things had worked out differently. I’d never give up Briggs for anything, but that time with Otto was one of the best of my life.

Everything had changed so quickly after that, and it feels like I am still catching my breath after the fallout.

The rain picks up gradually, the sound echoing off the roof of the car. Clanks and tings of metal on metal mix with the swoosh of the wipers. I'd laugh at the makeshift symphony if I wasn't so on edge.

A short time later, another knock sounds against the window. This time, there's no hesitation when I roll it down.

"You're all set. Bring it to the shop tomorrow and see if Hank can fix it for you. I put all your stuff back, so I'll drop the tire off too."

"Thank you, Otto, truly. Can I—"

"Have a good night, Fallon."

He's wet and tense as he stalks away. I watch his backside in the sideview mirror and practically weep at the perfection. It doesn't look like I'll get to reacquaint myself with it anytime soon.

The sound of a slamming truck door and flashing headlights pull me from my daydream.

My hands shake as I use my signal and pull back onto the road and head toward my parents' house. Otto stays behind me for most of the way, but when I turn off the main road, he continues straight and I assume goes to drop off my tire.

I need to put him from my mind before I start to spiral. The girl Otto knew back in school, and more importantly that day in the field, was happy and carefree and surprisingly not afraid of what she wanted.

I'd hoped to have my life together a little more before I tried to reconnect with him, or at least apologize. All these years, he's never been far from my mind, and that kind of weight and longing isn't easy to shake. I've missed him.

But nothing screams *please date me* like an unemployed, recently divorced single mom with all the balls in the air and no roots to speak of.

Sighing, I pull into the driveway as “Perfect” by Ed Sheeran begins to play on the radio—and that’s a hard pass. I slap the volume until it’s silent inside the car except for the hum of the engine, and I take one last deep breath as the front door opens.

My mother waves, and a warm smile lights up her face. My father joins her and wraps an arm around her shoulders. She fits perfectly in his embrace, and it’s impossible to keep the tears at bay.

I’m finally back in my hometown, so I don’t try as relief washes over me. Firing a text off to my ex-husband and returning one from my friend Bianca, I turn off the car and grab my purse before unbuckling Briggs from his seat.

His little arms wrap around my neck, and I hold him tighter as I climb the steps to the next chapter of our lives.



# OTTO

**M**y heart pounds the entire way home. What in the fuck is happening? And why did I react to Fallon like that?

It's been *years* since I last saw her. She unknowingly took my heart with her when she left abruptly for school. I'd been here, and she vanished in the middle of the night without a word.

Fuming, I slam my truck in park and then stomp into the house. My clothes slop against the top of the washing machine as I strip down to nothing. The rain has been unrelenting—just like my thoughts of Fallon.

I *cannot* fall into her trap again. It's bullshit she's back and with a kid no less. Cute little shit but that's not important. My brain rattles through previous conversations with Cheyenne.

*Getting divorced.*

*Moving home.*

There definitely had been no ring because I sure as shit checked for one.

Not that I had any right looking.

Fuck.

Jumping in the shower, I try to warm my bone-deep chill and ease my mind. I'd been twice as pissed getting back out into the rain to drop her tire at The Rusty Fender, but I also wasn't going to put it off.

I manage to warm to merely clammy before my nervous energy gets to be too much. Turning off the water, I climb out and wrap a towel around my waist before grabbing my phone and calling Sorren.

“Lo?”

“You busy?”

He pauses, and I know he’s debating if he can dodge my question. Fun fact? He can’t.

“Good. Pick me up in ten,” I say without giving him any more time to respond.

“Dude, it’s fucking pouring.”

“I’m well aware it’s pouring; I was just out in it.” I scrub a hand over my face and let out a tired breath. “I need to get out.”

He’s quiet for a long minute before responding.

“Fine, but I’m not carrying your drunk ass inside later.”

I snort. “Liar.”

He grumbles something under his breath and then hangs up. I almost smile. Sorren and I were never super close growing up. He’s a little older than I am and primarily hung out with Waylon growing up.

Sorren and his sister, Marlee, came to live with their grandparents—our neighbors—when they were still kids. Blood or not, they’ve always been family to me.

He’d joined the Marine Corps after Marlee started college, and he’d finally seemed settled. But an injury overseas, just a few years after extending his contract, had him being medically discharged. It had understandably changed him, and we’d all taken to looking out for him in different ways.

I usually dragged him with me to places he didn’t want to go. There was always a forty percent chance he’d have a decent time.

The roar of a truck sounds outside as I grab my keys, wallet, and phone. Why I need my keys is a mystery



considering my twin brother, Case, and I never lock our door. It just isn't done here. Still, it's a habit over anything else.

Taking a breath, I run through the rain and throw myself inside the cab of the truck.

“Why do you have Waylon's truck?”

“Because I don't want you ruining my nice pristine leather.” Honestly, I can't even blame him. I wouldn't want me in that car either.

“You know Waylon has boned your sister in here, right?”

“You seriously want me to leave you in a ditch somewhere?”

“Just sayin'.”

He studies me. “You look like shit.”

“Shut up.”

His lips twitch as we turn out of the driveway and onto the road. We ride in silence. Sorren isn't particularly chatty and that suits me just fine. Usually, I'd keep a running commentary of anything to fill the space, but I just don't have it in me right now.

My world has been knocked off its fucking axis, and I don't know how to make it right. I need answers, but that's going to have to wait.

Sorren heads out of town in the direction of Blackstone Falls, and I'm grateful that he knows I don't need an audience tonight.

“I heard Colt went to visit Rhea last time he was in town. He's a cool dude; I wonder if he asked her out.”

I really shouldn't be such a dick, but I want to see his reaction. Since Waylon and Marlee got married, Sorren has been increasingly protective of Rhea—like his focus shifted from his sister to mine.

I'm dying to know if it's platonic or if there's something else going on. His jaw clenches but that's pretty standard, especially if he's aggravated. I'll have to try harder next time.

Instead of answering, Sorren pulls into a parking spot and turns off the truck.

“Are you going to be like this all night?” he asks like he knows I’m intentionally aggravating him.

“Probably.” It’s fun and I need the distraction.

He doesn’t reply as he gets out of the truck and walks toward the entrance. Matching his pace, we’re equally damp by the time we step inside. The Iron Cask is a passion project for Colt Harrington, who plays for the Illinois Blues and also happens to be Hank’s lakefront neighbor.

It’s all dark wood and mood lighting in here and somehow manages to be the perfect balance of sports hangout and date night. Grabbing two seats at the bar, I wave the bartender over.

“What can I get you boys?” The woman, with her silver hair cut short, is somewhere between Mama and Miss Thelma in age.

“I’ll take two shots of whiskey and a beer, and he’ll have a Dr Pepper.”

I smirk, and Sorren’s eye twitches before turning to her.

“A root beer, please.” She nods and turns to hide her smile.

“Why do you do that?” he asks, annoyed.

“I just want to see how long it takes to get you riled up.”

“You’re a dick.”

“It’s been said.”

Our drinks arrive, and I throw a shot back before setting the empty glass on the bar. The alcohol burns, but I relish the feeling. Sorren will definitely be dragging my ass inside tonight.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Nope.”

“Thank fuck.”

I *almost* crack a grin at that, but I don’t. Instead we sit side by side in silence. Sorren turns back to a local football game

playing behind the bar even though I know he doesn't give a shit about what's on. He's good people, and I appreciate the hell out of him right now.

"You ever been in love?"

Breathing a heavy sigh through his nose, Sorren takes a leisurely sip of his soda. "No."

Downing my beer, I take the next shot in front of me and then pick at the label of my empty bottle.

"I didn't think I'd see her again, and it's fuckin' with my head."

My words are quiet like I haven't fully committed to sharing this little revelation.

"Same girl that had you all messed up at the chowder thing?"

"*Chowda*," I correct but he ignores me, and I go back to pickin' at the label before clearing my throat. "Yeah, same girl."

"And she's friends with Cheyenne?"

"Yes."

"And Cheyenne is friends with Rhea, Marlee, and Isla?"

"Yeah?" I don't mean it to come out as a question, but it's more because I know I'm not going to like this line of questioning.

"So let's just assume for argument's sake,"—he gives me a look that says he thinks I'm an idiot—"your girl is going to hang out with them."

"She's not my girl."

"But you want her to be."

"Doesn't matter if I do, she—"

Sorren makes a strangled sound while also gripping his glass harder than necessary. "First of all, Isla is the scariest person I know, and if you fuck with your girl and shit goes sideways—well, I wouldn't want to be you."

“Thanks—”

He cuts me off with a semiamused look. “Also, if I have to listen to them bitch about how you’re an asshole because you didn’t just stay away from Fallon, *I’m* going to kick the shit out of you.”

“I didn’t think you knew her name.”

“*That’s* the part you want to focus on?”

I shrug because it’s as good a part as any.

“It’s a good thing I don’t drink because you’re hangover enough.”

“I think I’m offended.”

The bartender drops off another round for me, and I take a sip of beer before throwing back the shot.

“She’s got a kid?” Sorren’s voice is muffled by the shouts over the game, but I hear him just fine.

“Yeah.”

He turns his head and waits until I look up at him.

“Do not fuck around with her unless you’re serious about that kid.”

“I never said...”

“You didn’t have to, but that kid is innocent in all this, so don’t bring your bullshit to his door.”

“How do you know she has a son?”

He scoffs. “I know damn near everything. I *try* to be unapproachable, but here I am...” His voice trails off as he lifts his glass to his lips.

There is a minefield in this conversation that I’m not equipped to handle right now. Sorren and Marlee’s history is complicated and makes me want to rage if I think about it too long.

I don’t even have all the details and I don’t need ’em. The most important thing is that they came to Clementine Creek, and we’ve loved the shit out of them every day since.

Their grandparents, Gran and Pop, were the *best* kind of people. Pop always let me ask him a million questions about everything and nothin', and Gran knew when I needed an extra hug and a treat.

“What are you thinkin' so hard about over there?” Sorren's voice cuts through my memory, and I have to take a sip of my drink to cover the lump in my throat.

“Honestly? Gran teachin' me how to make banana bread and Pop showin' me how to tinker with my bike.”

His smile is soft and almost wistful as he nods but doesn't say anything.

He doesn't have to because *I know*.

And as much shit as I've given Sorren tonight, he's one of the best men I know. Guy's been dealt a hell of a hand, but he never complains. After seein' how bein' with Isla changed Hank's life, I can only pray Sorren pulls his head out of his ass to see what's in front of him.

I can't help the smirk that forms on my lips because that would be a hell of a wake-up call.

“So what are you gonna do with Fallon?”

“Avoid her at all costs.”

He snorts—like actually snorts as if this is hilarious. “You're so fucked.”

“Am not. She's got a kid and a life that don't include me, so I'll just mind my business and carry on as usual.”

“So I can ask her out?”

“Not unless you want me to tell you all the places I know Waylon has had sex with your sister.”

His eye twitches as his jaw ticks, and I take a self-satisfied sip of my beer. In all honesty, I have no idea where they've had sex, but I can tell him where *I've* taken a girl and let him draw his own conclusions.

“You know they're gonna have kids, right?”

He looks at me like I'm a moron.

"You know how that happens, right?"

My grin is a watt too bright because he pushes his stool back and stands before throwing some money on the counter and grabbing me by the back of the shirt.

"Okay, bonding time is over," he says as he yanks me toward the door. I shake off his arm before swinging mine over his shoulder.

"Seriously, why me?" Sorren asks to no one in particular.

"It's because of your smile—totally inviting."

He shoves me off with an eye roll and the barest twitch of his lips. "You're a dick. Get in the truck."

I laugh as I climb in and shake the rain off my hat.

"I knew you were the right brother to call."

"You mean the only one who picked up," he growls as he starts the truck, and I lower my voice and stare out the window.

"The only one I called."

His hand falters as he goes to put the truck in gear.

"Alright," is all he says before his stoic demeanor slides back in place and we're traveling toward my house.

Dude doesn't give himself enough credit sometimes, but I also know this conversation is over so I drop it, for now.

Case isn't home when we pull into the driveway—which isn't surprising—but I can't tell if I'm bummed or not.

"Thanks for the ride, man."

Sorren opens his mouth and then closes it before nodding once. "You're welcome."

"Aww, see, that wasn't so hard, was it?" My words are teasing, and the look he cuts my way would make a lesser man piss himself, but I'm immune to his charms.

“Out!” he barks, but he’s trying to hide his smile as I do as instructed.

I’ve barely shut the door before he’s peeling away. Looking up, I take off my hat and appreciate this rainy night in Tennessee. It’s not enough to wash Fallon from my system, but I’m prayin’ it’s a start.





# OTTO

“What in the hell did that tire ever do to you?”

Looking up, I watch Everett, the garage’s newest mechanic, approach with a smirk on his face. I try unsuccessfully to clear my throat.

“Want me to bring up how your roommate regularly drops off your lunch so he can ogle my brother?”

“I haven’t had enough coffee for this,” he grumbles as he stomps past me toward the employee break room.

“That’s what I thought!” I yell for no reason because he’s right. Waking up on the wrong side of the bed would be an understatement for what happened this morning.

After tossing and turning most of the night, I finally fell asleep only to wake up with a cat snuggled on my chest.

I don’t have a cat.

Not only do I not have a cat, but also I’m allergic.

“Dude, have you been crying? Also, stop harassing my employees.”

Hank, my brother and the new owner of The Rusty Fender, smirks at me. Dude is my oldest brother and the biggest in stature of all the Thayer men aside from our father. Also I’m still constantly perplexed and annoyed by how he can look so good with the beard and man bun when I can’t even get my facial hair to grow in evenly.

“Shut up. Louise snuck into the house again last night, and she usually snuggles with Case, but the fucker didn’t come home so she chose me.”

I wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my shirt.

“Miss Thelma’s cat?”

“Do you know another Louise?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Did you take anything?”

“Course I took somethin’,” I snap. “Just hasn’t kicked in yet.”

Hank’s lips fight a smile for barely a second before a booming laugh fills the garage. Times like these make me miss Hank pre-Isla when he was grumpy and I was the one prodding him, not the other way around.

Turning back to the tire, I check everything over again and then set it aside before cleaning up.

“Where’d that come from?”

“It’s Fallon’s.” His eyebrows shoot up to an almost comical level. “She got home yesterday. Got a flat. I changed it for her when I saw her pulled over on the side of the road.” I narrow my eyes at him. “What’s that look for?”

“What look?”

“Does everyone know about Fallon?”

“Would it be Clementine Creek if we didn’t?”

Sniffing, I stand and wipe my hands on a shop rag.

“I gotta go meet Case at the job site. When she comes in just...tell her it’s taken care of. I’ll pay it later.”

“What, you think you got a tab open here?” His tone is playful, and I struggle not to roll my eyes. It’s hard to reconcile the man in front of me with my oldest brother.

“Yeah, I do. Plus I saved your ass out at Montana’s field not long ago so,”—I shrug—“I get special treatment.”

“It was *one time*,” Everett says from behind me.

“I *believe* what you’re searchin’ for is *thank you*.”

“Seriously, go mope around somewhere else. I’m not thankin’ you every time I see you,” Everett barks with a grimace. When Hank sent him out to fix a tractor for Montana, the two of ’em managed to get the tractor *and* the garage’s work truck stuck in the mud. Case and I had to meet them all over there, and it took the five of us to get it out. Pretty sure it put Hank in the doghouse for a missed date night.

Turned out all right in the end though.

Hank chuckles and then slaps Everett on the back like he didn’t just insult me. “Kid’s right; get out of here.”

“You guys are the worst,” I grumble.

“No doubt about it, now git,” Hank orders before pulling out his phone and grinning.

“What? Isla sending you dirty pics at...” I look at my phone to check the time and see several missed messages.

CASE: Anyone seen Otto? We gotta be at the job site in like 20 minutes and we’re supposed to go together.

SORREN: Seriously why is this in the group text?

CASE: I wanted to keep everyone in the loop

SORREN: I don’t want to be in the loop—loop me the fuck out of this

WAYLON: Dude you’re so grouchy before you’ve had coffee. You still doin’ yoga? I heard that’s calming

SORREN: (gif of guy repeatedly banging his head against a table)

WAYLON: Marlee said she saw his truck at Hank’s garage when she went to grab coffee from Rhea.

HANK: He’s here—crying about a cat

CASE: Louise sneak in again? Sorry bro

WAYLON: Sure he's not cryin' over a certain single mom who just moved back to town?

HANK: Definitely a cat, but also the mom

CASE: She's hot right? If she's hot she can totally call me daddy

OTTO: I will smother you with the cat

SORREN: There he is

CASE: Louise would be so sad

WAYLON: Would you be able to pull that off before anaphylaxis kicks in?

OTTO: I hate all of you

SORREN: You do this shit to me all the time, suck it up, buttercup

OTTO: Yeah I like it better that way

HANK: My how the tables have turned...

I look up from my phone and stare at my brother. "Who the hell are you?" He grins and snaps a picture of me before I even know what's happening.

HANK: (Photo of Otto)

SORREN: You look like shit.

SORREN: Are you other assholes allergic to cats? Maybe I'll get one.

CASE: Please—you'd miss us too much

SORREN: Unlikely

CASE: Should we stop for allergy stuff? Are you coming to get me?

OTTO: Yeah, I'm on my way

CASE: Cool. I got the travel cup you like ready to go—made it just how you like it

WAYLON: I'm gonna puke

CASE: You say way worse cutesy stuff about Marlee

SORREN: Stop talkin' about my sister

WAYLON: She's my wife, ya know

HANK: Why is everyone so hostile?

OTTO: I liked you better when you weren't getting laid regularly

HANK: No you didn't

SORREN: Are we done now? Case found Otto—can we be done?

CASE: You keep up that attitude and we'll kick you out of the chat

SORREN: I'VE BEEN TRYIN' TO MAKE IT HAPPEN SINCE YOU PUT ME IN HERE

OTTO: I feel like the yellin' is uncalled for...

Hank snickers, and I throw a wave and a goodbye over my shoulder before walking out the door. The sun is bright and warms my skin as I make my way to my truck. Only a few puddles remain from last night's storm, but they'll be dried up before long.

Flipping on the radio, "Chattahoochee," by Alan Jackson plays through the speakers. I turn up the volume and wind my way through the streets of Clementine Creek. It's one of my

favorite songs, but it's not touchin' my mood. I'm exhausted and it's only partially the cat's fault.

"Yo!" Case yells from our front porch. Jumping up, he grabs our lunches and coffees and hustles over. "Dude, took you forever."

"Yeah, well, it's been a morning."

He hands me the cup, and I instantly take a sip and wince. No matter the temperature in Tennessee, our first cup of coffee is *always* lava hot.

I've also never *not* burned my tongue because apparently I never learn— might be a theme in my life.

"You okay?" Case asks as I drive us out of town toward the building complex we're working on.

"Fine."

"I would have come home if you'd just told me."

I don't even have to look at my brother to know he's upset, but I do because I deserve to see the hurt on his face. Case is the only one that knows how much I pined after Fallon in high school and how devastated I was after she ghosted me that fateful spring break freshman year of college.

We'd always been labeled as *those Thayer twins*, and after she left, we truly lived up to the hype. People expected a certain image from us, and we gave it to them—haven't stopped either.

Despite being my twin, Case has always resembled Waylon more than me. His eyes are this cool blue-gray color that more than a few girls have called *soulful* rather than my glacier-blue ones. Plus he keeps a neatly trimmed beard that women go crazy over, and I'll probably be carded at bars for the rest of my life.

I've stopped fighting the battle and accepted that I'll just look young and devilishly handsome to go along with my boyish charm.

"I knew you were busy, and I just didn't want to talk about it."

“But you called Sorren.”

It’s not a question.

“Yeah, but that’s why I called him. Did he tell you that?”

“Nah, Waylon was bitchin’ about his truck seat bein’ wet. I just put it together.”

Extending an olive branch, I say, “You wanna grab a beer after work or are you meetin’ Ashley again?”

“Beer’s good. I gotta end things with her anyway.”

I snort. “Why this time?”

“You know the kind of girl that likes me—I’m fun but not serious dating material.”

Giving him the side-eye, I don’t state the obvious. We created our over-the-top personas, and we could change them just as easily. We’re *ourselves*, just an amplified version.

I’ve asked myself a million times if he embraced this bachelor lifestyle because of me. I hope to God that’s not the case, but sitting in the truck right now, I’m not so sure.

“You know you can be with a girl for more than a couple of weeks, right?”

He shrugs as I pull into the parking lot of the job site.

“Figure I’ll find her when I’m ready.”

“Amen, brother.”

Exiting the truck, I look at the space in front of us. The owners gave us free rein on design and a healthy budget to boot. I sketched out the walkways and focused on the overall aesthetic and then handed it over to Case to make it pretty.

The guy is an absolute genius when it comes to flowers and plants, which makes us the ultimate duo.

Also it helps that we can still bless the hearts of all the people who said we’d never make it.

“I really like how the levels turned out. You were right about the stained wood versus stone. It’s going to look bangin’ when Waylon installs the benches.”

“Agreed.”

Case and me going into business had been a foregone conclusion. We’d kicked around a couple of ideas before settling on architectural landscaping. My need for constant motion and hands-on design balances Case’s need to nurture a connection with a space through horticulture.

Honestly, if I didn’t know us I’d think we were full of shit too, but it works—we work.

And pretty damn well if our full calendar says anything. Twinscapes started as a joke, at least in name, but since it’s *kinda* our thing, most of the advertising was done for us.

“We gotta talk about hirin’ another person, maybe two.”

“I know, but when are we gonna interview ’em?”

I grin. “We could always let Isla do it.”

Our sister-in-law is scary—like run the world scary—so it surprised absolutely no one that she tamed our grumpy older brother. They surprised the hell out of us when they threw a barbeque over at the lake, and it was actually their wedding ceremony and reception.

They’ve always done their own thing, but it was nice seein’ Cullen get to be involved. Guy hasn’t always been there for his daughter, but he’s definitely been tryin’ to make up for it since movin’ to Clementine Creek.

“I know you’re kiddin’, but let’s ask her. We can volunteer to sponsor somethin’ for the scholarship program in exchange for her time.”

“Wanna play rock, paper, scissors to see who has to ask her?”

“You’re on.”





## FALLON

“C heyenne, is this really necessary?” I ask as she continues to pull clothing off the racks at Velvet Threads, the local shop owned and operated by Cheyenne and her mom, Gwen.

It hasn’t been that long since Briggs and I moved to Clementine Creek, but apparently, I can no longer put this off.

“You’re interviewing for a new job, Fallon, and I’m going to guess, based on our video chats, that your wardrobe could use a little *refresh*.”

“I remember you being a lot sweeter when we first started talking again,” I tease even as I narrow my eyes at her.

“Sorry, that’s my fault.”

“And mine.”

“Now y’all are just showin’ off.”

The voices belong to the three gorgeous women now smirking at me outside the dressing room.

“Hi, these two are so rude. I’m Isla,” she says with so much grace and confidence that I’m practically in awe. Her skin is flawless and tanned in a way that compliments her black hair and dark-brown eyes.

She’s stunning, and I’m totally staring.

“She’s married to Hank,” Marlee says, and my head whips toward her as my eyebrows shoot up my forehead.

“Wow, good for you,” I reply and nod like an idiot. “Also, I’m Fallon.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Isla says on a laugh. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you settled in.”

“She’s from here, you know,” Marlee says and then pulls me in for a tight hug. “Welcome home.”

“Shoot, did I not do the welcome thing right?” Isla’s pout is comical. “Fine, let’s shop then; I know how to do that.”

Rhea bumps her out of the way with her hip and then pulls me in for a hug. “Stop being so dramatic,” she says over my shoulder before pulling back and looking at me. “Welcome back, Fallon.”

“Thank you.” I stare at the trio and Cheyenne as I try and pull myself together. “I wasn’t expecting this...”

“Well, get used to it, girlfriend. Now get your butt in the dressing room and let’s see what we’re working with,” Isla says as she takes a seat in one of the chairs facing a full-length mirror.

Rhea and Marlee sit beside her while Cheyenne hangs everything up inside the room.

“Go on.” Rhea makes a shooing motion, and I go with more than a little hesitation.

“This feels like a bit much.”

“I held them off as long as I could.” Cheyenne laughs as she pulls me in for a quick hug before leaving me alone to *apparently put on a fashion show*.

It has only been a couple of weeks since I descended on Clementine Creek, but so many things have happened in that time. Briggs and I found a small house to rent that we can move into next week, Briggs started kindergarten, and I have an interview at the middle school later this week for the eighth-grade science teacher position.

It’s basically my dream job.

“Okay, this is the first one,” I say as I open the dressing room door and step out wearing a conservative navy blue blazer and skirt suit with a blush silk blouse.

“Very classy and interview appropriate,” Rhea confirms with a nod. “Next.”

“Y’all are ridiculous.”

My laughter follows me as I replace the clothes on the hanger and move on to the next one. There’s no shortage of commentary as each outfit is approved or discarded by my entourage.

By the time I’m hanging up the last dress, I’m exhausted but happier than I’ve been in a while. “I Remember” by Cheat Codes and Russell Dickerson plays, and it instantly makes me think of Otto even though we only had that one stolen afternoon together.

“Last one,” Isla says while handing me a hanger over the top of the door.

“I thought the last one was the last one.”

“Stop whining and put it on,” Marlee says with a laugh.

“How are you supposed to pee wearing this?” I grumble as I pull on the olive-green romper. It shouldn’t work with my coloring, but it’s honestly amazing. The back has a large keyhole cutout and I feel...really pretty.

It’s feminine and sexy without showing off a ton of skin. Small details and embellishments make it clear that the beautiful garment is a Cheyenne original. My best friend is incredibly gifted and has always added her own flair to the pieces in the shop.

“The faster you come out here the faster we can go get drinks,” Rhea says with a knowing lilt to her voice.

“Y’all are terrible, ya know that?”

“Maybe,”—Isla shrugs—“but you look great so you’re welcome.”

“Modesty isn’t her strong suit,” Rhea stage-whispers.

“Am I wrong?”

“Nope.” Cheyenne pops the *p* and grins at me like a fool. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks. It’s beautiful. But seriously, how do you pee? I had a kid, and while I’ve taken care of myself, my bladder isn’t what it used to be.”

“The things to look forward to,” Marlee muses as she shows me some secret trick to disrobing before hustling me back to change back into my clothes.

“Hey, hand over the yes and no piles and we’ll get them sorted,” Cheyenne yells, and I oblige.

“I’ll go through them when I’m dressed and narrow it down,” I say, but it’s suspiciously quiet. Mentally, I sort through the items and figure out what I can afford while fixing my hair in the mirror. Decision made and permission to splurge on the romper I’m not sure I’ll be able to get out of granted, I emerge from the dressing room and make my way to the register.

“Ready to go?” Rhea asks.

“Sure, just let me pay for...” The girls all have bags in their hands with purses over their shoulders.

“It’s all taken care of,” Isla says.

“What? No! Absolutely not. You can’t—”

Rhea and Cheyenne snicker as Marlee bites her bottom lip to hide her obvious grin. Isla looks cooler than a wet dog at a barbeque.

“Consider this your welcome casserole.”

“Um, what?”

Isla smiles. “I don’t cook, usually, because Hank is really hot to watch in the kitchen, so this is my welcome home gift to you.”

Tears well in my eyes as I see her complete sincerity reflected back at me.

“You don’t even know me.”

Her smile is bright and her teeth are practically blinding as she wraps me in a tight hug. “You’re important to them, and now you’re important to me.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Wiping at my cheeks as I pull away, I see that everyone now has gentle smiles on their faces.

“Thank you might work,” Marlee quips and everyone laughs. I grab Isla’s hand in mine.

“Thank you.”

“It’s my love language.” Spinning toward the door, she adds, “And that romper will look great on you next Friday night when we all go out to dance at the Brew, Q, ’n Boogie!”

“Wait, what?”

Their combined laughter echoes throughout the store as they make their way to the exit, and I’m left wondering what the hell just happened.

“But we move in next week to our new house. I can’t—”

“Good thing you’ve got lots of people to help!” Cheyenne singsongs.

“Let’s go, babe. Wine waits for no one!” Isla calls, and I just laugh as I reply, “You guys are ridiculous!”



# FALLON

After nailing the interview with the school and settling into my classroom, I agreed to meet the girls in Blackstone Falls for a rare night out. My parents graciously took Briggs for a sleepover, and I was able to tidy up the house a little before Marlee, Rhea, and Waylon came to pick me up.

As promised, the majority of the Thayers and Cheyenne and Jake came to help move Briggs and me into our rental. I haven't gotten around to unpacking anything except the kitchen, bedrooms, and bathroom essentials but it's *ours*.

A knock at the door pulls me from my musings, and I drag a light hand over the loose curls in my hair. It's been a while since I've been out and even longer since I went out anywhere that required more than just braiding my wet hair.

"Daaamn, girl! Look at you!" Rhea catcalls as way of greeting, and I can't help the blush that creeps over my cheeks at her assessment.

"You look great too," I say, and she throws me a wink as we walk to Waylon's truck.

Short denim shorts show off her toned legs, and her cowboy boots give an extra lift to her small frame. I admire my own boots, which I'd only worn a couple of times after leaving Clementine Creek.

"Hey Fallon," Waylon greets me as I buckle my seatbelt.

"Hey, thanks for givin' me a ride."

"No problem."



“All About Tonight” by Blake Shelton plays on the radio, and Marlee turns it up while bouncing in her seat. Waylon looks at her with sheer adoration in his eyes, and my heart squeezes in my chest.

I’m not sure that Tanner ever looked at me like *that*, but I know another man who did, and I’m terrified of running into him tonight.

Rhea and Marlee sing along as I stare out the window. So much has changed, but so many things are still the same in this part of Tennessee. Cheyenne has kept me up to date on all things related to her husband, Jake, and his now highly successful concert events.

When we pull in to park, trucks and cars already line one side of a massive field. It’s roped off into rows, and we find an open spot between a lifted truck and some sort of crossover.

“Okay! We’re here! Rule for tonight is,” Marlee says as she spins in her seat to look at me, “you *will* dance with at least one guy.”

“Why? I’ll do just fine dancin’ on my own or with you girls.”

She squints at me. “It’s *one* dance.”

“Are you really going to fight her on this?” Rhea asks as she motions to Marlee who is now pouting.

“Y’all are the worst.”

“I’ll take it.” Marlee beams and we all get out and walk around to the entrance.

The field is already milling with people, and food trucks line the area opposite the stage where a local country band is finishing up their set. The mood is fun and relaxed, and suddenly dancing with one guy doesn’t seem so bad.

“Hey y’all!” Isla calls and waves with one hand as a very grumpy-looking Hank holds her other hand possessively.

He is...*wow*. Hank isn’t my type and is also more than a few years older than I am, but a girl can appreciate rugged, scowling perfection when she sees it.

“There you are!” Cheyenne calls and wraps me in a hug before rocking us from side to side. “Have you eaten? I’m starving.”

Grabbing my hand, she pulls me toward a taco truck and squeezes me again.

“I’m so happy you’re here—not just tonight—but in Clementine Creek.” She squeals, and my heart warms for my friend who has found so much happiness here recently. If there’s anyone who deserves a happily ever after it’s her, and in a way, it gives me hope that mine might be out there too.

We grab food and wine slushies that she promised would change my life and head back to the group only to find several new and familiar faces.

“Oh my goodness! Fallon, darlin’, you haven’t aged a day! And that hair— Lord almighty, girlfriend, your hair is glorious. We’re callin’ it strawberry blonde, right?” Hayden Scott says in a single breath before looking over his shoulder without removing his arms from around me, “Ev, isn’t she just the prettiest thing?”

Everett Teal grumbles his agreement and gives me a wave while I’m momentarily stunned by everything happening around me.

“Hayden, hi, how are you?” I manage on a laugh.

“I’m good, darlin’. Just workin’ as a nurse over at the hospital here and still roommates with that big lug.” He hitches his thumb at Everett, and I laugh at the eye roll and wink I receive from said roommate.

“That sounds amazing.”

“Save him a dance, wouldya? He’s insufferable today.” His eyes gleam with mischief. “And tell me, how are you?”

“I’m happy to be back and excited to give my son the kind of childhood I had livin’ here.”

Hayden takes my left hand and turns it over, revealing no ring on my hand.

“Divorced,” I sigh and answer without him having to voice the question.

While I know that getting divorced from Tanner was the right thing to do, it still does something to me every time I think about bein’ twenty-six and a divorced single mom.

“Well darlin’, you let Uncle Hayden know if you ever need a babysitter. I love kids, and I make a mean batch of boxed brownies.” He winks, and I hug him tighter than either of us expects, forcing me to swallow down the emotion bubbling up inside me.

“Oh! Everett! Here!”

Before I know what’s going on, and apparently sensing I need an outlet, Hayden shoves me at Everett and I land against his chest with an *oomph*.

The band plays the opening chords of “Long Hot Summer Day” by Turnpike Troubadours.

“Do you wanna dance?” Everett asks with a shy smile.

“Sure.” My soft laugh floats between us as we pick a spot, and I let him lead me along with the music.

I forgot how much I missed this, and when Everett spins me out, I’m filled with joy as the world revolves around me before being tucked against his strong body once again.

He’s handsome and no longer a boy like I remembered, with his casually messy dark hair and stubble. He’s lean and muscled with tattoos covering his forearms—he’s definitely a type, but unfortunately he isn’t mine.

“Mind if I cut in?” Otto’s voice is frosty at best, and Everett looks between him and me before releasing my hand.

In a low voice, Everett looks me dead in the eye and says, “You holler.”

I nod as Otto turns us away from the group as the band starts playing, “How Do You Like Me Now” by Toby Keith, and the irony is not lost on me.

It's the first time I've seen him since he fixed my tire in the rain, but the memory of him is nothing compared to the man holding me in his arms.

Gulping as the tempo picks up, Otto spins me out fast before possessively pulling me back against him. His movements are intentional and precise, and I do my best to keep up. An angry intensity vibrates off him, and it has my heart absolutely racing in my chest.

*I want him.*

Even with him fuming at me, I want this man. His dark hair is more disheveled than I remember, but where Everett's is possibly deliberate, Otto's is obviously from runnin' his hand through it.

Maybe I'm crazy, but he makes me feel so *alive*.

The song ends and I'm jolted from his embrace as he pushes past me without a word.

"Otto, wait!" I call after him but he doesn't stop. "Dammit, Otto, will you stop?"

He turns so fast I stumble back to avoid slamming into his chest—even if it is a very nice chest.

"What could you *possibly* want from me?"

"I want to have sex," I blurt out because, while the words are honest, I'd like to think I have *some* finesse.

"Good for you," he grits out.

"With you."

"Why?" The question is clipped but curious.

"Because I need it. I need to feel like me again, and even though you're mad, I still trust you."

Silence stretches between us as unsuspecting concertgoers skirt around our standoff. I'm not this girl who propositions men for sex, but this feels *right* in some twisted way. That thought should probably register as a red flag, but I'm choosing to ignore it for orgasm reasons.

“You play by my rules.”

“Okay,” I say without hesitation, and he raises one eyebrow in response. I don’t have anything to follow that up with so I wait.

Growling, he grabs my hand and pulls me through the field, and I’m struck by another memory of being in a field. Lying on the blanket draped over him while he lazily stroked his fingers up and down my arm. He’d had one arm tucked behind his head as we watched the clouds float by without a care in the world. That memory is filled with a sweet, youthful bliss and absolutely nothing like my current reality.

And yet...

My heart pumps harder in my chest as the possibilities race through my mind.

Even if this is purely hate sex for him, I want to be properly ravaged by him. I want to feel sexy and needed and desired—hell, I want to feel *used* in all the ways that make him come undone.

We stop in front of the passenger side of a pickup truck that’s different from the one he had in college.

“Are you sure? Like *really* fuckin’ sure?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

He wrenches the door open and points. “Then get in the fuckin’ truck.”

I refrain from saying *yes sir* because I’m not sure how well received that would be right now.

Tucking that thought away for later, I buckle my seatbelt, then take my phone out and text Marlee.

FALLON: Otto is bringing me home

CHEYENNE: Yeah, no one missed that

RHEA: You okay?

FALLON: How did this become a group text?

ISLA: You're stuck with us babe (kiss face emoji)

FALLON: Well then yes, I'm fine

RHEA: Sigh...use protection and call if you need a ride

FALLON: Thanks girls (heart emoji)

“Your kid okay?” Otto’s voice startles me, and I jump a little in the seat as the engine roars to life.

“Yeah, my parents have him overnight. I just wanted to let Marlee know that I wasn’t riding home with her, and now I’m in a group text, I guess.”

I try to laugh it off, but Otto’s hands tighten on the wheel as he slowly navigates through the lot to the main road.

“I’d invite you to my new place but I’m only half unpacked, and I mean, it’s fine if we just have sex but—”

Cutting myself off, I wring my hands in my lap. My son is five. I should have no problem staying quiet because that kid talks *a lot*, but this is different. The silence isn’t comfortable; it’s filled with tension and I hate that.

“Thank you for taking care of my tire. You didn’t need to do that. I tried to pay Hank, but he said it was taken care of so if you just let me know I can pay you for it.”

“You’re welcome,” he grumbles under his breath.

Going for broke I say, “Do you wanna talk about what happened—”

“No.” The word is icy and honestly surprising. I thought he would want to talk about it—closure and all that. But apparently that’s not an option tonight. Probably better to not completely kill the mood.

Otto wasn’t normally unreasonable, at least he hadn’t been back then, but looking at the man in the seat next to me, I’m not so sure.

My body says he's everything I remember and more, but my heart still aches for the broken promises and dreams whispered in the wind that sunny spring day.

The truck comes to a stop outside my house, and I'm startled from the memory and also surprised he brought us here.

"No one's home?"

Shaking my head, I try as casually as I can to wipe my hands on my romper. I'm nervous and excited and completely out of my mind with need for him.

"Am I droppin' you off or comin' inside?"

*For the love of Joe's barbeque mac and cheese, please come inside.*

"Come inside."

Before I lose my nerve, I hop out and pull my keys from my bag. My hand is shaking as I try to fit the key into the lock.

Otto's breath on my neck isn't helping, and neither is his rock-hard body pressed against my back.

I gasp at his closeness as he closes his hand over mine and puts his mouth to my ear. "If you want to keep this thing you're wearin' in one piece, you best take it off as soon as we get inside. Are we clear?"

"Yes." The word is a pant of lust and need and *so much* yes.

Pushing open the door, I toss my bag on the counter as Otto stalks over to me.

There's zero preamble as I back up toward my room, and he follows with a look that's absolutely molten.

My bed is only a few feet away when I manage to successfully unzip and discard the romper on the small chair in the corner. Otto's gaze rakes over me in my simple black bra and panties, and I shiver.

I'd forgotten how this felt—this *need* to be completely owned by another person in a way that meant you'd never be

the same after having them.

“It’s a shame,”—Otto’s thumb drags over my bottom lip—“I never got to feel this pretty mouth wrapped around me.”

His normally lazy southern drawl is laced with so much gravel I squeeze my legs together to keep from sucking his thumb into my mouth. I don’t know what the rules are here, but he’s *definitely* running the show.

“Do you want me to now?”





## OTTO

“No.” I force the word out as I rip my shirt over my head and kick off my boots. Fallon takes a step back, her pouty lips still parted, and I growl involuntarily. The fantasy of her on her knees in front of me with that long strawberry blonde hair wrapped around my fist as I fuck her mouth is burned into my brain.

Her bra and panties shouldn't be sexy but they are. They're simple cotton that says she feels comfortable in them but wasn't looking to take anyone home—so much for that, apparently.

The thought gives me a primal satisfaction that she didn't set out to pick up some random guy. I'm being crazy, but I can't help it, not when it's Fallon.

My cock hardens as I take in her flawless, pale skin and appreciate the way her body has changed since becoming a mom. I flick on the light, and her hands immediately cross her stomach, and she does this weird turn thing as if that's all it takes to hide from me.

“What are you doing?” I just stare at her and blink.

“Can we just leave the lights off?”

“Why?”

“I just feel more comfortable with them off.”

“What if I want to see you?”

She snorts but there's zero humor in her tone when she speaks. “I'm sure I'm not the type of girl you usually want.”

I turn the light off to hide the anger burning my cheeks as I pick her up and toss her on the bed. Any ounce of control or compassion I had is gone as I launch myself at her and pin her arms above her head.

“You don’t know the first *fuckin’* thing about what I want.”

My tone is venomous, and the only sound she makes is a slight whimper when my denim-covered cock rubs against her clit.

Dragging my nose down her throat, I inhale deeply and then trace her collarbone with my tongue.

“Otto?” My name is a panting breath.

“Yeah, Princess?”

“Sometimes—” She clears her throat even as her hips continue to search for the friction she so desperately needs. “Sometimes it’s hard for me to, um...and I need some extra attention. God, this is embarrassing.”

My lips crash against hers, and I swallow whatever else she’s about to say. I’ve heard enough to know that having Briggs has changed her body and she thinks that warrants a conversation.

Fine.

I heard her but I’m also not a moron—she was brave enough to tell me, and I won’t betray that trust, even if I’m still pissed at her.

My tongue plunders her mouth until she’s moaning and writhing beneath me. Sliding one hand down the valley of her breasts, I savor the feel of her smooth skin beneath my fingers.

She’s perfect, but I can’t tell her that, not after years of silence when I’m still so damn in love with her. I push the thought from my head as my fingers dip below the waistband of her panties.

Fallon gasps when I rub a slow circle over her clit and then cants her hips, looking for more. I grin against her mouth.

“So greedy, Princess,” I say without giving her what she wants. “That pretty pussy will have to wait until I’m good and ready.”

I kiss a path over her jaw and down her neck until my face is nuzzled between her breasts. I hope to explore them later, but right now, I have a point to make. My teeth clamp down on her nipple through the cotton of her bra at the same time I increase the pressure on her clit.

“Otto!”

Fallon thrashes beneath me, and it’s pure fuckin’ magic watchin’ her come apart.

“That’s one,” I say as I gently plunge a finger into her pussy. Her walls clamp around me as the aftershocks of her orgasm ripple through her.

“I don’t—”

“Oh, Princess.” I chuckle as I slide my finger out and back in. “You’re gonna get *exactly* what you asked for.”

She whimpers as I pull her panties from her body, and dammit, her pussy looks fucking delicious.

“Take your bra off.” The command has her arching off the bed to maneuver her hands behind her.

Two beautiful tits stare back at me as Fallon lies naked on the bed. I want her—all of her, all at once—but I can’t give myself over to her like that.

It would be too easy to just let go of the past and lose myself in her, to her, but my heart would never survive. I have that fucker locked down as I kiss the smooth skin of her stomach and then hike one creamy white thigh over my shoulder.

Even in the dark I can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest. I want her to taste the anticipation on her tongue like I’m about to taste her pussy on mine.

She shimmies her hips, and I blow a hot breath of air on her center, causing her to groan.

“Rub your tits, Princess.”

“Wha-at?”

“You heard me.” Tentative hands cup her breasts, and I reward her with one long lick up her slit.

“Good girl.” I lick her again. “Now don’t stop.”

Her movements are awkward at first and unsure, like she’s never indulged in this level of self-love, but watching her tweak her nipples and moan in response has me doubling my efforts.

“Otto, oh my God!”

“Not yet.” Slowing, I look up at her with my tongue barely grazing her folds. “You said I’d have to work for it.”

“It’s not,”—she swallows hard as she tries to catch her breath—“it’s not normally like this. Or ever.”

Part of me wants to be sad for her that she’s been lacking adequate pleasure, but the other part of me is downright giddy that I’m the one to fill the void, no matter the consequences.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she asks with panic in her tone as I stand at the end of the bed and work open my belt and jeans.

“Thought you wanted me to fuck you?”

“I do.”

I shuck my clothes and then move back over her with the condom in my hand.

“Greedy pussy wants to come again, doesn’t it?” I plunge two fingers inside her, and she bows off the bed.

“Yes!”

I rip the condom open with my teeth before pulling my fingers out of her and using both hands to roll it over my length. I’m throbbing for her, and she watches with parted lips as I stroke myself.

“Are you ready?”

“Please.”

The sound of her pleading—begging—is such a turn-on, but nothing prepares me for the moment that I push inside her.

She's tight, tighter than I remember, and I want to slam inside her over and over until there's nothing left but memories of the two of us.

Her legs wrap around my back and I snap. Fingers digging into her hips, I piston in and out, her tits bouncing from the ferocity of my movements. She's completely at my mercy, and I catalog every single emotion that crosses her face as she gives herself over to me.

My thumb finds her clit, and she screams my name as she comes. She's beautiful like this, so beautiful it hurts, but the vision of her flushed and arched off the bed is the only thing I see as my own release barrels down on me.

I roar and bury myself so hard and so deep that she gasps even as she continues to pulse around my dick.

Those honey-colored eyes that I've missed so much are wide when they finally meet mine. She's not the same person anymore, and neither am I, but damn if the chemistry between us isn't still explosive.

Pulling out, I move off the bed and dispose of the condom, all the while reminding myself that nothing good will come from getting caught up in her web again.

Returning to her bedroom, I put on my cockiest smirk. "That's two."



# FALLON

The morning light casts a warm glow around my bedroom, and I heave a sigh as the events of a few hours ago replay through my mind. Otto's abrupt departure before the sun came up sends a pang of regret coursing through me.

It also has me squeezing my thighs together because it's been *forever* since I've seen that much action. I'm exhausted both physically and emotionally, and I feel a headache coming on.

Otto alternated between being sweet and thoughtful and cold and withdrawn. It was confusing, but the spark is still alive and well between us even if he gave me no indication of wanting to see me again.

Climbing out of bed, I stretch and feel every single muscle in my body groan after being made into a pretzel and fucked within an inch of my life. It was glorious, and despite the noise and doubt on the periphery, I want to do it again.

The floor is cold beneath my feet as I pad to the bathroom and turn the shower on. My stomach growls, and I place my hand to my skin to silence it. It doesn't help, but I smile thinking of how Otto took the time to show my body appreciation.

When I propositioned him, the idea of him seeing me naked post-baby never even crossed my mind. But as soon as he flipped the light on, all I could see were my imperfections.

Otto made sure I knew he could only see *me*.



My phone vibrates on the sink, and I pick it up to see a message from one of the other military wives and maybe the only real friend I had out there.

BIANCA: Just checking in

FALLON: Hey! We're doing good—I'm going to pick up Briggs in a little bit

FALLON: (Picture of Briggs eating ice cream)

BIANCA: Aww he's such a cutie

BIANCA: You went out? Good for you! Meet anyone?

I bite my lip and think of how to answer.

FALLON: Kind of...sort of hooked up with an old flame

BIANCA: I'm proud of you. Let's catch up soon—I'm heading in to get my hair done.

BIANCA: You kiss that sweet little boy for me

FALLON: I will (heart emoji)

Setting down my phone, I smile at the steam-covered mirror and get in the shower. The water is hot as I step under the spray, and I relish in not needing to rush. There's no one that needs a snack or a show changed or the answer to some obscure question that has no bearing on anything we're doing but now has life-and-death implications.

I exfoliate and scrub myself from top to bottom and reluctantly replace Otto's scent with my own before stepping out and wrapping my new towels around myself. Tanner had demanded that he keep our towels and I buy new ones that matched my new place.

The anxiety over Tanner eventually moving here and interacting with Otto tries to overtake my good mood, but I push that away to deal with at a later time.

Throwing on a T-shirt and shorts, I brush my wet hair and throw it into a messy bun on the top of my head. I have a couple of hours before I need to get Briggs from my parents, so I grab my keys and purse and decide breakfast in town is in order.

Last night aside, I don't splurge a lot, but this morning warrants a little indulgence. Pointing my car toward Smokin' Joe's, I turn on the radio and sing along to "Baggage Claim" by Miranda Lambert because Lord knows I have enough to fill an aircraft carrier.

Before long, I'm pulling into the parking lot of the bright yellow building and smiling wide. This town hasn't changed and I love it. It still feels like home even though I've been away for several years.

Opening the door, I'm hit with the smell of smoked meat and sweet maple syrup. My stomach growls again as I step in the rest of the way and look around.

"Anywhere you want, hun!" Joe calls, and I glance around again before spotting Marlee in a booth to my right.

"Hey, can I join you?" I ask with a smile.

"Of course." Her lips tip up but it feels forced.

"Oh, I don't want to bother you; I can sit somewhere else." Shaking her head, she meets my gaze and her eyes are filled with unshed tears.

Without thinking, I slide in the booth next to her and wrap her in a tight hug. Marlee holds on to me and we stay like that for a long time before she pulls back and dabs the corner of her eyes with a napkin.

"I'm sorry. I've made a mess of your shirt," she says.

"It's not even a thing," I reply honestly. "Do you want to talk?"

"Fallon, let me know what I can get you, and then I'll get out of your hair," Joe says, and I rattle off something from the specials board.

Moving back to my side of the booth, we wait as she drops a cup of coffee in front of me and refills Marlee's mug.

"Waylon and I are trying to get pregnant." I reach over and take her hand. "We haven't been trying long but,"—she worries her bottom lip—"it still sucks."

"I won't pretend to know what you're going through because Tanner and I didn't get pregnant on purpose—but I am here for you, and I'm sorry, and it sucks."

"It totally sucks," she says on a watery snuffle.

"When I moved out to base, I was scared. Tanner and I were basically dating while being married and trying to prepare for this baby we hadn't planned for. Do you wanna know what he said to me?"

"What?"

"He took my hand,"—I squeeze hers for emphasis—"and said we wouldn't know why we were destined to have this baby until we held him in our arms. We were both terrified, but he always believed that Briggs was destined to be ours. That together we'd be this perfectly imperfect family."

"That is just so,"—she fans her face—"beautiful. Thank you."

"I don't know what your journey will be like, but enjoy the process. Love your husband, and be honest with him about what you're feeling. I will support you as much or as little as you want me to."

"You're amazing, do you know that?"

"Here you go, ladies."

Joe leaves a vegetable omelet in front of me and a massive stack of chocolate chip pancakes—with enough whipped cream to satisfy my five-year-old—in front of Marlee. We thank her, and I watch Marlee with amusement as she shoves a huge bite in her mouth.

"Comfort food," she manages once she's chewed and swallowed.

“You’re allowed.”

“Fallon?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you. I think I’ve been putting too much pressure on us, and it might be nice to just,”—she lowers her voice—“not have sex on a schedule.”

My cheeks heat and she laughs.

“Sorry, that was an overshare.”

I wave her off. “It’s fine. I’m just awkward.”

“Do you want to talk about Otto instead?” She cackles as I choke on my sip of coffee, a brightness back in her eyes.

“Not exactly.”

“Well, if you ever want to talk, you know where to find me.”

“Likewise.”

We eat and chat and both leave a little lighter than when we arrived. It felt good to connect with Marlee on more than a surface level. I’d tried to make friends with the other military wives on base, but it was hard to navigate the social constructs. There was a lot of it I didn’t understand, and after a while, I didn’t want to. Life there was temporary and so were the relationships I made.

Turning onto my parents’ street, I blow out a breath. It’s sunny today and the neighbors are out doing yard work or otherwise enjoying the day.

“Mornin’, baby,” my mother greets me when I park my car and make my way inside.

“Hi, Mama. Where’s Briggs? Was he good for you?”

“He was an angel. He’s outside paintin’ a birdhouse with your daddy.”

My heart squeezes because I’d been so worried my son would miss out on this. Tanner’s father had a lengthy military career and retired only a few years before Briggs was born. He

and Tanner's mom weren't unkind, but they were far from loving.

I could never figure out how someone as gentle and sweet as Tanner came from those two, but it didn't matter. I refused to let them bully their son. They'd been shocked the first time I'd pushed back at their disregard for his feelings, and I vowed to never let him feel undermined if I could help it.

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank us for lovin' our grandbaby."

"I know. I'm just grateful, that's all." Mama nods as she reads between the lines.

"When is Tanner comin' here?"

"We think in a couple of months, but it's not definite."

"He doin' okay bein' away from the both of you?" Tanner and I are officially divorced, but I made sure my parents knew he was still family.

"Yes and no. We're managing and trying to be as transparent as possible with Briggs."

"He seems like he's adjustin' all right."

"He's amazing—exhausting but amazing."

She gives me a wry grin before her expression falters. Mama straightens a stack of magazines on the table and doesn't look up as she says, "Be careful with that Thayer boy."

"Excuse me?" I ask, careful to keep the accusation from my voice.

"Word travels fast in this town." Mama meets my gaze. "Your father ran into someone that saw you and Otto havin' a dance and then saw you chasin' after him."

I cross my arms over my chest defensively. "It's no one's business," I hiss.

She holds up her hands. "I'm just sayin' you should be careful. Those twins have a reputation around town, and you have a child to think about."

“You’re saying Otto Thayer is what? A bad guy? I assure you he’s not.”

She sighs. “I’m sayin’ be careful is all. The Thayers are good people. All those kids work hard and the twins are no different, but they are also all havin’ a good time if you know what I mean.”

I blink as my mouth opens and closes without forming words, and suddenly I just want to get my son and go home.

“Mommy!” The whirlwind in question crashes into me and wraps his little arms around my waist.

“Hi baby, I missed you.”

“I missed you! Can we paint my room today?”

I ruffle his shaggy blond hair and nod. “Yeah, baby. Go clean up and get your bag, and we’ll head over to the store and you can pick out your paint.”

He pumps his fist and takes off down the hall.

“Hey Pumpkin.”

“Hi, Daddy.” My father gives me a tight side hug and kisses my hair.

“I’m gonna need a nap now.” He chuckles and it’s low and familiar and instantly brings a smile to my face.

“I miss when he used to nap,” I say wistfully.

“You’re doin’ good with that boy. He’s a great kid, Fallon.” He looks over at my mother and then back at me.

“Thank you,” I manage as a ball of emotion lodges itself in my throat. “I know what I’m doing,” I say and he nods.

“Are you ready, Mommy?”

“Are *you* ready!?” I laugh and hop around. It makes him giggle and it’s still the sweetest sound.

“Come ’ere, kiddo.” My father scoops Briggs up and spins him around. They laugh and it’s a moment I’ll remember forever.

We say our goodbyes, and I pepper Briggs's face with kisses as I buckle him into his booster seat.

"I missed you."

"It was only one night!" He tries to sound exasperated, but I can tell he's secretly pleased.

"Ready to go get paint?"

"Yes!" He wiggles in his seat as I close his door and open mine. Despite Mama's warning, I refuse to feel guilty over doing something for myself. Things are falling into place, and I send up a silent prayer that this is only the beginning.





## OTTO

I t's been a week since I saw Fallon, and I've done everything in my power to keep it that way. She's invaded my every waking thought and most of my dreaming ones too. I swear that despite showering every day this week, I can still smell her on me.

"You're doing it again," Case says while giving me the side-eye.

"Doin' what?"

"That pensive sighing thing."

Instead of answering, I take a bite of my sandwich.

"What's wrong with just askin' her out?"

"I don't wanna ask her out."

"Care if I do then?" I glare at my brother and he raises an eyebrow at me.

"Why does this have to be a thing?"

"Because you're mopin' around, and it's drivin' me fucking nuts."

"I'm not that bad."

"You are, and for what it's worth, I think you're bein' a moron. You still love her, and she's *here* so why are you so hell-bent on the past?"

"I'm not—"

“Yeah, what she did was fucked-up—ghostin’ you like that—but is this *seriously* the hill you wanna die on?”

I hate when he’s logical, but I’m not willing to let it go just yet, so I grunt and ball up the foil from my lunch and throw it in the garbage.

We don’t talk for the next few hours, and Case only glares at me a handful of times when I sigh. My chest feels heavy, and a big part of me wishes she’d never come back, that I’d never touched her, so I’d never have to feel like this again.

But the other part feels like a flicker of hope. It’s misguided and full of false promises I can’t afford to get attached to.

“Hey, can you run over to Jake’s? He says he has somethin’ he wants picked up.”

“Sure.” I don’t ask what it is because it doesn’t matter. My brother is trying to get rid of me, and lookin’ at the clock, it’s close enough to quittin’ time I can just take off after.

The problem with working and living with your brother is that you’re together all the time. But it was never a problem before.

Also, Fallon hadn’t been here.

“Sorry, Case,” I say as I clean up my tools.

“I’m not mad. But I am pissed that you’re bein’ a chickenshit.”

“She’s got a kid.”

“And?”

“And I’ll get attached.”

My answer has him opening his mouth and closing it again.

“Well,” he says carefully, “I think that if you are serious about her and go slow, it might turn out good for everyone.”

“What if I screw it up?”

“People date single parents all the time,” he states matter-of-factly. “Most importantly, you’re never going to know if you don’t try or at least ask.”

“Seriously, dude, who are you?”

“What? I know shit.” He shrugs, and I shake my head before pulling my brother into a sweaty man hug.

“Love you, man.”

“Yeah, yeah, love you too. Now go get whatever it is from Jake and then get your ass home. You’re buyin’ dinner.”

“Deal.” I laugh and then I’m in my truck headed to Blackstone Falls, where Jake and Cheyenne live.

I’ve been there a couple of times over the years, and I can’t deny how much I love seein’ Cheyenne’s touch throughout the place. It’s what people mean when they say you turned a house into a home.

They’re happy, and I’m happy for ’em.

Despite the hot day, I drive with the windows rolled down and jam out to a song by Descending North playing on the radio. My good mood is dashed when I turn down their road and see Fallon’s car sitting in the driveway.

OTTO: Did you know she was here?

CASE: Yep but also Jake has something for you so win-win

CASE: (winking face emoji)

OTTO: You’re my least favorite brother

CASE: Worth it

CASE: You’re still buyin’ dinner

OTTO: Dammit

I throw my phone onto the passenger seat, and it bounces off and lands on the floorboard. Growling, I slam my door and

stomp up to the house and knock on the door.

The muffled sound of a woman's voice echoes from inside before the door opens in a flourish to reveal the sweetest little face I've ever seen.

“Briggs, we've talked about opening the door and—”

Fallon's words die on her tongue as she looks up and our eyes lock.

“But Mommy, Uncle Jake said that his friend was coming over.”

“Yes, I remember, but only grown-ups answer the door, okay?” she says while looking at me before returning her gaze to the young boy next to her.

His hair is more blond than red like Fallon's strawberry blonde, and his eyes are sage-colored with a smattering of freckles over his nose and cheeks.

Clearing my throat, I squat down and hold out my hand. “I'm Otto.”

He eyes my hand then looks for his mother's approval. She nods and he puts his hand in mine.

“I'm Briggs.”

“It's nice to meet you, Briggs.” I force the words out because this is exactly what I was afraid of.

He grins and a dimple pops in his little cheek before he runs back toward the kitchen.

“Hey Otto.” Jake walks over and pulls me in for a half handshake, half hug, but I'm still looking at Fallon. “Thanks for comin' by, man. Case said you guys would be my guinea pigs for this.”

“I'm sure he did,” I mumble as I follow Jake into the kitchen. He hands me a growler of beer with a beaming smile.

“What's this?”

“I've been makin' my own—you know, small batches and stuff—and I think I finally got it where I want it, but I need

some feedback before I offer it at the field.”

“We’ll definitely let you know.”

“I appreciate it.” Moving around the island, I hug Cheyenne and then take a step toward the door. I have zero desire to stay here a moment longer than necessary.

“Sure. I’ll see you guys around. Big Rigg, it was nice to meet you, bud.” He giggles and waves, and I’m halfway to freedom when I hear Fallon’s voice.

“I’ll walk you out.”

She hustles to catch up and then follows me out the door and into the humid Tennessee air.

“I appreciate you bein’ so nice to Briggs.”

“Did you think I’d be a dick to your kid?” She squares her shoulders as she faces me.

“No. I just like to acknowledge when people take the time to interact with my child. Not everyone likes kids, and it means a lot to me despite what’s going on between us.”

“There’s nothing going on between us,” I say with more force than necessary and then scrub my palm over my jaw. “Are people really dicks to him?”

She sighs wearily and shrugs. “Sometimes. Sometimes it’s intentional, other times it’s not, but it still hurts my heart.”

Mine too, apparently, but I refrain from rubbing at the ache in my chest.

“Well, I’m always gonna be nice to your kid, so that’s a nonissue.”

“I know.” She nods and takes a step toward me. “What about the other piece?”

“There is no other piece.”

“What if I want to continue what we did last week?”

“No.” I move to step past her, but she blocks me with that sweet fuckin’ body I can’t get out of my head.

“Why not? It can just be sex, like friends with benefits.”

“Someone always gets attached and we’re not friends.”

“I won’t get attached.”

*I’m already attached.*

I don’t say that, and instead of sayin’ no again I do the opposite and step into her space.

“Just sex. No sleepovers.”

I say it as a warning so she’ll back off, but the way her eyes sparkle means she took it as a challenge. She thinks she won’t get attached—that I’m not worth the attachment.

It fuckin’ sucks, and I keep my mask of indifference firmly in place.

“I like when you’re bossy,” she purrs as her gaze rakes down my body and back up again.

I clench my jaw to prevent my mouth from falling open.

“Does it have to be complicated, Otto? Can’t we just want to enjoy having really great, rock-your-world sex?”

“Give me your phone.”

She hands it over and I enter my number and send a message to myself.

“Friday.”

“Okay.” She gives me a shy smile like she didn’t just negotiate orgasms with me. “Hey Otto?”

“What?” The word is almost a whine, but every fiber of my being is exhausted.

“I know you don’t want to talk about before, and I know you’re still mad, but I know you’d never hurt me. You make me feel alive and sexy and so much more than the divorced single mom who just moved back to her hometown.”

I swallow hard as she takes a step forward and places a hand on my chest. My muscles flex under her touch, and a zing of electricity radiates through me.

“Maybe that’s selfish and misguided, but”—she lowers her voice but it’s still confident when she says—“it doesn’t feel

wrong.”

Needing to put distance between us, I take a step toward my truck and clear my throat.

“Friday then.”

“Friday,” she confirms.

I’m just about to close the door when I call after her, “Oh, and Fallon?”

“Yeah?”

“Wear a dress.”





## FALLON

“M ommy, we had library today.”

“Library.”

“I *know*.”

I might have taken charge with Otto and our arrangement, but apparently I’m destined to be bossed around by the small human in the back seat for eternity.

“Did you pick out a new book?”

“Yeah! It’s a dinosaur book.”

“I can’t wait to read it with you at bedtime.”

Briggs smiles from ear to ear and then chatters on about the rest of his day. We hadn’t planned on stopping by to see Jake and Cheyenne, but I was so happy when she called to ask us to come over. I’d missed a lot of time with her, and it was nice to be able to swing by on a moment’s notice instead of planning cross-country travel accommodations.

Cheyenne had given us dinner to take home—which Briggs thankfully ate without complaint—and a bottle of wine for after bedtime.

I learn all about velociraptors from his book from the library, and my heart melts a little each time he points out a sight word he learned at school. He never fails to amaze me, even if we’ve transitioned into the phase of testing boundaries at an exhausting rate.

With Briggs tucked into bed, I pull the bottle of wine from the fridge and pour myself a small glass before heading into the living room and calling Cheyenne.

“How was dinner? Did Briggs like it?”

I laugh and relax against the cushions. “He loved it and thank you again. It was an amazing surprise.”

“Not as amazin’ as seein’ Otto, I guess.” I hum in response and she laughs. “Don’t think you’re getting out of this.”

“Seriously, who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“Mama calls it findin’ my voice.”

I sigh. “Okay, well,”—pausing, I take a sip of the fruity white wine and bask in the faux decadence—“I asked him if we could have a friends with benefits arrangement.”

“Good for you, askin’ for what you want. How did he respond? Things looked tense out there.”

“Were you spyin’ on us?” I tease.

“Most definitely.”

“You’re terrible.”

“How can you blame me? He couldn’t get out of here fast enough, and then you practically chased him to the door.”

“I did not!” I gasp and her giggle fills the line.

“You most certainly did.”

My cheeks heat, and I press the cool of the wineglass to my skin. “I just...I can’t stay away from him, Cheyenne. Like, I want to and I know I need to not get wrapped up in him, but my whole body lights up anytime he’s within shoutin’ distance.”

She whistles low into the phone.

“I didn’t realize it was so serious.”

“I’m trying to set boundaries, for both of us.”

Otto's gruff words still echo in my head. "*You don't know the first fuckin' thing about what I want.*"

He'd been angry when he said them, but I blocked it out because if I dare hope... Shaking my head, I push everything out of my mind. I've grieved too much to add Otto to the list before I've really had him.

"So how did you guys leave it?"

"He told me to come over on Friday. I need to ask my parents to take Briggs overnight."

Guilt gnaws at me for dumping my son at his grandparents all so I can get laid.

"Do you think—" I'm about to voice the thought when Cheyenne cuts me off.

"Why don't you drop him here? Jake and Waylon are going to pick up some equipment or barn wood; I can't remember. I'll invite Marlee over and we'll spoil our favorite nephew."

Tears instantly cloud my eyes. The questions in my head are constant when it comes to Briggs and me. Am I doing enough? Should I be doing more? Am I balancing my life with his needs? Am I relying too heavily on other people already?

The mom guilt is *real* and so much more potent now that I'm in Clementine Creek. I thought it would be the opposite, but it's not.

"Cheyenne..." I say, my voice thick with emotion.

"Do *not* act like I don't want to spend time with that sweet boy."

"I know you do but—"

"Fallon," she says my name in the same tone she uses when she's trying to explain something to Briggs. "I love you *and* your son, and I plan to make up for the time I missed out on. You're not a burden; you're family and you deserve a night out."

"I feel like I just had a night out."

“Yeah, like a week ago, so what?”

“It feels like I’m pawning him off on other people.”

“First of all, I resent the notion that I’m *other people*. Second, you’re a great mom, and taking a night off a few times a month to recharge is beneficial for you *and* Briggs. He’s going to have fun with his Auntie Cheyenne, and you’re going to have all the orgasms Otto can manage.”

“Seriously, what happened to my shy and innocent best friend?” I say on a laugh.

“She had an orgasm,” Cheyenne deadpans, and we both dissolve into a fit of giggles that has nothing to do with the wine.

“Thank you,” I finally squeak out.

“For what? Havin’ an orgasm?”

“Oh my God, stop saying *orgasm*.”

“Who knew I could be so fun?”

Jake’s voice echoes in the background, and she playfully scolds him before turning her attention back to me.

“Cheyenne, I’m going to let you go; your night seems a lot more interesting than mine.”

“Well, your night will be plenty interesting on Friday so... Just a few more days.”

“We’re done talking about this,” I say, laughing, “Say hi to Jake for me, and thank you again for dinner.”

“Anytime, sweetie, you know that.”

I nod because I do know that.

We say our goodbyes, and I toss my phone onto the cushion next to me. The silence of the house feels like a balm on my frazzled nerves, and I soak it in. My mind isn’t quiet, but it’s more settled after talking to Cheyenne. I just wish I could do something for her, and then I smile as the realization hits.

FALLON: Hey Bianca, I was wondering if you were still looking for someone to make you a couple of custom gowns

BIANCA: Girl! How are you? You read my mind. I was just complaining to Harrison about that very thing.

BIANCA: Do you know someone? How is small town Tennessee?

FALLON: It's going well, Briggs is looking forward to having Tanner finally move here though

BIANCA: And the old flame?

FALLON: I'm seeing him this Friday

We text back and forth, and Bianca pries unsuccessfully about details of my non-date Friday night. I rave about Cheyenne and her incredible talent. It feels nice to brag about my best friend, especially now that she's taking on more custom work at the shop, and it's nice to catch up with Bianca.

She was one of the first people to really show me any kind of warmth and compassion. Texas born and raised, she comes from a family of ranchers and a lavish lifestyle. Her husband, Harrison, is almost fifteen years her senior, and their quick nuptials raised more than a few eyebrows, I've been told.

In fact, as far as I know, no one actually knows the story of how they met, and I've always found that oddly romantic.

Rumors circulated that she married him for his money and status, but she has more than enough of both all on her own. I've never seen her be anything less than a doting and loving wife, and Harrison the same in return.

By the time we say goodbye, it's well after eleven, and I know I'll be tired in the morning.

My phone vibrates twice in quick succession, and I expect to see a message from Bianca, but I couldn't be more wrong.

The first message from Otto is the address to his house and a time for Friday night. The second message is something else

entirely.

OTTO: Dress. No panties.



# OTTO

Fallon pulls into my driveway on Friday night, and I wonder for the millionth time if I'm doing the right thing. I cooked dinner and I still don't know why exactly.

She rings the bell, which no one ever uses, and I open the door but don't step aside.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" I ask.

"Yes." My gaze drifts down her body and the deliciously innocent-looking dress she's wearing. It's red with little white polka dots all over it and a line of buttons that run down the entire length of the dress.

Allowing her entry, I close the door and step around her into the kitchen.

"Well, you wore a dress. What about the other thing I asked?"

"It was more of a demand, don't you think?"

I glare at her because I, along with a shot of whiskey late that night, had been pretty bold. "I'll take that as a no."

Taking a step forward, I hold out my hand. She eyes it cautiously before meeting my gaze.

"Now, Fallon."

My tone is hard, and her mouth forms a surprised O. Taking another step into her, I hear her breath catch in her throat. She has to tilt her head back to look at me.

Submissive.



And right now, she's mine. "You got to call the shots last time. Now it's my turn."

Her swallow would be audible had it not been for the blood pounding in my ears. Moving back, I watch as she moves shaking hands up the hem of her dress to move her panties down her legs. She steps out of them, and I glance down at my outstretched hand. Obediently, she places the small scrap of lace in my palm.

I don't think about how I can still feel how hot she is for me, and I *definitely* don't think about how the smell of her arousal is now imprinted on my brain. I toss her panties onto the counter beside me—like I'm unaffected by this exchange, like this doesn't tear out my insides.

Face impassive, I lead her to the table I have set for dinner. Her body stills as she sees I've gone all out.

"Otto, what is all this?"

"My conditions."

"Dinner?" The word is almost a squeak, and I'm happy to know that she's feeling a fraction of what I am. I spin on her so fast, I startle her and she stumbles just a bit.

"You want to fuck and run? Go find someone else." The words are out of my mouth before I can think better of them. My mother would use a bar of soap on me, but I couldn't care less in this moment.

"You're acting like you have some hold on me or something. Like you took my virginity or whatever. We have an agreement, and dinner is already pushing it." She's trying to act tough, but even after all these years I still know her.

"No, Princess, I didn't take yours. You took mine." Her mouth is hanging wide open, and I think of a few things she could do with that mouth. Soft pink lips would feel incredible wrapped around my cock right about now, and damn if I don't need to ease the tension coursing through my veins.

"I—" I don't let her finish her thought because it's not up for discussion. Instead, I round the table and pull out a chair for her.

“Either sit or get out.”

Her resolve is almost admirable.

Almost.

Sitting gingerly, she looks up at me through mascara-covered lashes. My heart thunders in my chest because this woman is still the only one who makes me feel like I can finally breathe when she’s near me.

“Hook your ankles under the rungs of the chair.” Her eyes dilate, but she does as she’s told. Her legs are now forced open, as I slide the chair into the spot at the head of the table. Her dress is hiked farther up her thighs, and if I wanted to look, I could see her glistening center...and I will.

But not yet.

Dropping into the chair beside her, I turn my body to face her as I casually plate our dinner. Her chest is practically heaving as she watches me.

“How have you been, Fallon?” Letting one callused hand slide over the exposed skin of her thigh, I dip my thumb under the hem and draw small circles.

She swallows. Twice.

Then she picks up her fork with a shaky hand and skewers a piece of zucchini.

“It’s been hard being away from here. I’m happy Briggs will have a childhood like I had.”

I nod as I listen, eating small bites without removing my hand from her leg. My fingers tease higher without touching where she needs me the most. She’s so responsive even if she’s trying not to be.

“Are your parents happy to have their grandson here now?”

“They are. We’re all just trying to decompress from the chaos these last few months have been.”

My hand squeezes when she says “decompress,” and she sucks in a shaky breath.

“Otto, I’m sorry—”

Dropping my fork, I push my seat back at the same time I haul hers in front of me. Her hands grip the wood on either side of her ass as she tries to steady herself.

“No,” I growl with both hands now gripping her creamy white flesh.

“No?” It’s a breathy whisper on parted lips. She has no idea what she did to me—hell, *I* didn’t know what she did to me until this exact moment. Anger and lust are warring inside me, and I’m not sure which emotion is going to win.

“No. You don’t want to get to know me, Fallon. You want a fuck buddy. I’ll give that to you, but you don’t get to throw around apologies or feel guilty about what you did to me when you left.” She swallows whatever she was about to say. “Last chance, Princess. You staying or leaving again?”

“Staying.”

Her gaze is steady on mine as I flick open the buttons on her dress. Her breasts spill over the lacy cups of her white lace bra, and my mouth waters. She might have dressed innocently enough, but I know she’s far from it if the other night is any indication.

My fingers find the clasp nestled between her tits, so I pop that open too.

“Don’t move your hands. Understood?”

She nods.

“I need words, Fallon,” I murmur as I dip my head and pull one delicious nipple into my mouth.

She gasps, “Yes.”

I suck and lick and nibble on her as my hands slide up as far as they can without touching her slick pussy. My thumbs draw intentional circles, pressing gently as I go. Her body is vibrating with her need for release, but I want to hear it.

Pulling off with a pop, I blow on her sensitive peak before turning to the other side. Fallon is panting as she pushes her

chest out toward my assault. Her head has fallen back against the top of the chair, and she's moaning and writhing as she looks for the friction she's desperate for.

"Please, Otto."

"Please what?" I say after giving her nipple one more swirl with my tongue.

"It only feels like this with you. Please, I...I...I need you to make me come."

She slams her eyes shut like saying the words revealed too much of herself. But this is what I wanted, right? Her completely at my mercy?

I push the uncertainty down as one hand continues the work my mouth was doing on her breast, while the other finds her absolutely dripping for me. The groan I swallow is almost painful in its intensity.

My thumb finds her clit while I slide two fingers inside her. She thrashes against her restrained position, and I feel the *second* the orgasm hits her. Her walls are a vise grip around my fingers, but I don't let up. I can't. She's so fucking beautiful as she moans and milks every ounce of pleasure she can from me.

When she stills, I pull her body gently into mine. I unhook her legs from the bottom of the chair before lifting her into my arms. Her eyes are glazed but still filled with lust as she slants her lips over mine.

She's demanding in her kiss, sucking and nipping at me until I have one arm braced against her back and my other hand tangled in her hair. Her legs are wrapped tightly around my waist as she plunders my mouth with her tongue. She's no longer the gentle, exploratory girl from that day in the field.

She's not even the body-conscious woman from the other night.

No, now she's this fucking goddess that will completely destroy me when she leaves again.

I know I won't survive her, but I can't stop.

My legs meet the side of the bed and I lay her down gently. An impatient little sound escapes from her, and it makes me chuckle. Unwrapping her legs from my back, I take one ankle in my hand and kiss the skin there. It's angry and red from being pressed into the chair, and guilt washes over me. Peppering kisses over her skin, I massage all the way up her leg before switching to the other side.

Her breathing has slowed, but it's still elevated as she watches me. The tension between us is still there but it's also shifted into something...else. Before I can analyze it any further, I have her legs thrown over my shoulders and my face buried in her folds.

She tastes fucking delicious. A part of me always knew that she'd be this intoxicating, this addictive. It's a heady sensation and one I can't ignore.

"Oh God, Otto, yes!" she cries out over and over as I devour her. Her back arches off the mattress as her hips grind against my face.

I could die like this, and Case would have my tombstone engraved with, "He went out with a smile on his face," because damn if that isn't the God's honest truth.

"Holy shit."

Fallon's hoarse whisper cuts through my daydream. I smile and place a gentle kiss against her center before crawling up her body.

Bracing myself over her, I bury my face in her neck and inhale. She still smells like fresh-cut flowers, and while it's made me want to rage over the years, right now in this moment I feel home. One of her hands is playing with my hair while the other runs up and down my back. I can't let her in like this, but it feels too damn good.

My cock must think so too, because it rocks against her and she gasps, whether from how hard I am or how sensitive she is, I have no idea.

"You need this," she whispers against my ear and I nod. Everything feels so raw and exposed, so I don't look at her. I

clutch at her and focus on how small she feels under me. I focus on how her heartbeat is in sync with mine, and I try to force some emotion back in the fucking box it's been locked in.

“Take me, Otto.”

When I don't move, she works her hands between us and uses her legs to push my jeans and boxer briefs down my body. I pull my shirt over my head and then trail kisses down her stomach as I undo each button on her dress.

I don't *make love to her* but I don't not make love to her either. The level of intensity doesn't match the easy arrangement we'd agreed to, but I can't help it.

This is what she does to me. Fallon has always driven me completely out of my mind, but being inside her makes it so much worse.

I'm unhinged and broken and somehow more at peace than I've been in years. I was kidding myself after the night of the concert. There was no protecting my heart—she'd never given it back in the first place.



# FALLON

I wake slowly to the sound of rain against the window and snuggle farther into the covers. Glancing at the clock, I embrace the last few minutes of quiet before Briggs wakes up.

We've had a good week, and I pray we can keep it going. Briggs is growing up in front of my eyes but it's equal parts "I can do it myself" and "can I sit in your lap and read this book?" It's hard saying *yes* to the things that will make a mess but I'm trying, and most times, it's not that bad.

Maybe getting naked with Otto helped clear my head, because I swear I'm more relaxed than I have been in months.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I reluctantly reach out from my warm cocoon to grab it.

TANNER: Happy Three Month Divorced-iversary!

FALLON: I don't think there's an ex-husband on the planet that not only wishes his ex-wife happy three months since we got divorced but also sends her flowers a day early

TANNER: Well maybe they should—maybe that can be my retirement gig

FALLON: You're ridiculous

TANNER: Are you holding up okay? Are you and Briggs getting settled in the new place?

FALLON: We talked to you last night before bed.



TANNER: (eyeroll emoji)

FALLON: We're adjusting—he misses you. I miss you too. Is that weird?

TANNER: No, it's not weird. I miss you guys too.

TANNER: We didn't get divorced because we hate each other—you're still my best friend.

FALLON: I know

TANNER: Did something happen with the guy from your past?

FALLON: You could say that

TANNER: Are you sure it's a good idea getting involved with him already?

FALLON: I thought you'd be supportive

TANNER: I'm just worried about Briggs having something else to deal with.

FALLON: I'd never do anything to hurt Briggs

TANNER: Have you told that guy about me moving?

FALLON: If it gets to a point where I need to tell him I will

TANNER: How long has it been?

FALLON: A few weeks? Ish?

TANNER: WEEKS??? And you're just telling me...

FALLON: Are you mad?

TANNER: I mean—I'm not happy but I'm going to be pissed if you don't tell him

TANNER: TELL HIM

FALLON: Stop yelling at me through text

TANNER: I'm going to be really pissed if I get punched as soon as I step foot in Clementine Creek

FALLON: No one is going to punch you

TANNER: They won't if you tell him

FALLON: You're being dramatic

TANNER: Fallon...

FALLON: I'll have Briggs video chat you when he's home from school

TANNER: Your topic change is noted and I'm not impressed

FALLON: Good thing I'm charming right?

TANNER: Not even a little

Ignoring his snarky remark, I get up and get dressed before heading into the kitchen to make coffee and breakfast. I understand why Tanner isn't totally on board with me dating—or currently sleeping with Otto—but it doesn't make it hurt any less. All I want is to find the balance and the pieces of myself I'd lost over the years.

I can hear Briggs moving around in his room, and I can only hope that there's some semblance of a matching outfit when he emerges.

“Hi, Mommy.” He wraps his arms around my waist, and I bend down to kiss the top of his head. He's opted for a blue T-shirt and the same color blue shorts, and since we've had worse, I take it as a win.

“Hi baby, how did you sleep?”

“Good. I dreamed that dinosaurs were in our yard and they were tryin’ to eat my lunch, and I told them no, that they didn’t even like my lunch but they wanted it. Then Dad came and sent them home.”

I set a bowl of cereal in front of him at the island and watch as he enthusiastically devours it. I need about three hours before I can even contemplate eating food most days.

Replaying my son’s running nighttime commentary, I swallow hard as the last part makes my heart squeeze. “Well, it’s a good thing your dad was there to help you. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I bet that Daddy was thinking of you and that’s why he was in your dream.”

“Really?” Briggs squeals and I smile.

“Yeah, baby, I know Daddy misses you so much. You can tell him all about your dream after school, okay? Now go brush your teeth so we can get going.”

Briggs hops off the stool, and I take his now empty bowl and load it into the dishwasher before tapping out a quick text to Tanner. He can handle the dinosaur dream later, and I decide not to let his earlier concern tank my good mood.

With an extra spring in my step, we manage to make it early to school, but that’s where my good morning stops.

A waterlogged ceiling tile fell onto one of the lab benches overnight, and while maintenance is doing their best to clean up the mess, it still disrupts the entire day. Switching gears, I’m halfway through rearranging the room and setting out materials when my phone rings on the table.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me and I have bad news.” My heart sinks as Tanner tells me why he’s delayed in coming out here by more than a few weeks.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I say, “I know that you don’t have any control of this but—” I cut my words off

because *I knew better*. “I told Briggs.”

“Oh, Fallon,” he sighs, and I hang my head because it’s the cardinal rule of military life.

“I know. But it was close and things here are going well, and I just got carried away and now he’s going to be crushed.”

“We’ll figure it out together like we always do, okay? You’re not alone in this, and it’s hard, harder than I ever imagined, but I wouldn’t have wanted to do this with anyone else.”

“You sure about that?”

“I’m sure,” he says without hesitation and my eyes well with tears. “I’m sorry I made you upset earlier about that guy, but I just want you to be careful, okay? I get it; we were pretty much kids ourselves when you got pregnant. We got married and dated at the same time, and while I know it wasn’t this incredible passionate be-all and end-all undying love—I still love you.”

“I still love you too.”

“We’ll tell Briggs together tonight, and we’ll just take it one day at a time, okay? I’ll cut the time with my parents short and it will all be fine.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t seen them in a while.”

“It’s by design.” He chuckles and I wipe the last of the tears from my eyes.

“You should still see them.”

“I will, just won’t be as long.”

“And now I think you’ll be getting here right after my parents go to visit Jade.”

“That’s a bummer, but at least I know that I’ll be able to pop in and see them when they get home.”

While surprised by our sudden pregnancy and marriage, my parents had been supportive. I’d been through a lot, and they’d recognized my need to distance myself from everything.

In that way, Tanner had been the perfect partner—the perfect person to help me heal.

“Are you even listening to me?” Tanner asks.

“I zoned out.” He clicks his tongue in annoyance. “What did you say?”

“I said just because I’m delayed in getting there does *not* mean that you get to put off telling what’s his face.”

“Otto. You know his name is Otto.”

“Ah, see, you do know who I’m talking about. Pull up your big girl panties, preferably ones that are more than your basic cotton ones—”

“Hey, what’s wrong with those?”

“Cotton doesn’t give you confidence, Fallon Jane. Lace says I’m sexy and sophisticated and also please give me orgasms.”

“This conversation is weird.”

“Only if you make it weird.”

“We’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay. Don’t worry about it, Fallon. We’re going to figure it out.”

I give him a noncommittal answer and then hang up the phone and return to the mess at hand.

Unfortunately for me, the day only gets worse.



# FALLON

OTTO: Did you get the flowers?

FALLON: You shouldn't have sent them

FALLON: We need to talk

I reread the messages that caused me to be standing in the middle of the field at the Brew Q 'n Boogie. My response had been harsh but necessary, because things are changing between Otto and me, and I'm not ready.

More importantly, Briggs isn't ready. My parents and Tanner weren't wrong, but they're not right either and it's just a lot.

The sound of an engine catches my attention, and I steel myself for what's about to happen. Otto eases down the dirt road like he's in no particular hurry while I'm crawling out of my skin with nerves.

The logo for the company he and his brother Case run is displayed on the side—Twinscapes—and it almost makes me smile. They've made a name for themselves in the community, and I couldn't be more proud even if I have no right to be.

Otto's expression is cautious as he parks and makes his way over to me, and I see the hope disappear from his eyes as we stare at each other.

“You wanted to talk?”

*I guess I'll just get to it then.*

“Yeah, okay.” I swallow and tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. I’ve had to recite this story countless times, but the tension between us makes it feel like I’m living through it again.

Otto sighs. “What happened, Fallon?”

It shouldn’t disappoint me that he doesn’t call me *Princess* but it does.

“Not long after I went home that day we were together, I got a call from my roommate’s parents at school. She,”—I swallow down the lump in my throat and fight back tears—“she’d been killed in a hit-and-run accident right off campus.

“Most people would probably have had the opposite reaction than I did, like they wouldn’t be able to be where they lost someone but I...I threw myself into everything.”

Otto’s shoulders visibly sag as he watches me. He doesn’t move to comfort me, but it’s still progress.

“I wanted to be involved in the investigation. I wanted updates and I organized a candlelight vigil and a memorial run—literally anything I could to keep her at the forefront of everyone’s mind.”

“No one could fault you for that; you were grieving.”

“Not even you?” I try for levity but it falls flat.

“Not even me.” His smile is weak in return, but again... progress.

“It consumed me, and then one day like a year and a half later I got a call that they’d arrested the guy who had done it. It was a relief and just *crippling* all at the same time, you know? I’d dedicated all my time to Shelby and making sure she got justice and was remembered and—” I swallow.

“And so when some other friends invited me to a party, I said *yes* because it felt like something to be celebrated. Tanner was visiting some friends while he was on leave from the military, and we just connected in an easy, fun way.”



I shrug because I know Otto doesn't want to hear about me sleeping with another man, but it *is* relevant to the story.

“It wasn't like red-hot passion or anything. It was more like *hey I think havin' sex sounds like fun and I bet we'd be good at it*. You know that sort of thing.”

“Fallon...” Otto growls my name, and a shiver races down my spine.

“Yeah, so we hooked up and he went back to base and we talked casually, and then I missed my period and we made the decision to give Briggs the best possible life.”

“Not everyone gets married just because they're havin' a kid. You would have had family and support here if you came home.”

“Tanner and I were never right for each other, but I love him and he loves me. He's my best friend, and we're still going to give Briggs the best life we can.”

Otto rears back like I slapped him.

“You said you were divorced.”

“I am. Just because you love someone doesn't mean you're *in love* with them, Otto. I can't regret my life with Tanner because I know with every fiber of my being that I was meant to be Briggs's mom. I haven't always done the right thing but I'm tryin'—Lord, am I tryin'. My son—he's saved me in so many ways.”

“I just—” He runs his hand roughly through his hair before he looks at me again. “Why didn't you call me? Even to tell me to fuck off would have been better than radio silence all these years.”

It's my turn to look away now, because this part hurts the most. It's the one piece I never got over no matter how many hours of therapy I attended.

“Shelby asked me to stay at school the weekend I came here to see you. She told me I was being ridiculous for not wanting to binge watch *Gilmore Girls* for the second time.”

I give him a watery smile right before he crushes me to his chest and wraps me so tight in his arms I can barely breathe.

“Being with you was the best and worst day of my life, and I couldn’t call you because I could barely breathe with all the guilt.”

“Jesus, Fallon, I—” His voice cracks and I hug him tighter.

“I know, and it’s not my fault either, but it took me a long time to get to this point. I mean, I’m a mess but—”

Rough fingertips graze my jaw until he’s tilting my chin up to meet his gaze. “What do you want?”

“It’s not about what I want.” I step out of his arms. “It’s about what I need.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I need space.”

“Space.” It’s the most loaded word ever uttered.

“You want more, and I *just* got divorced, Otto. Tanner got delayed in New Mexico for God knows how long now, and Briggs is struggling.”

“So you think it’s better for you to hole yourself off and do this all on your own then? Can’t ask for help?”

“I can’t let Briggs get attached to you for you to turn around and leave when you realize you don’t want an instant family.”

“Who said I’m leavin’? And why does it have to be all or nothin’ right off the bat?”

A frustrated noise escapes from my throat. “I’m saying there are a lot of unknowns and you want to what—date me? I don’t have the energy to entertain someone else.”

“Friends? Nothing? Dammit, Fallon, I don’t want to let you go again.”

“That would imply that you had me before.” The words are meant to be teasing, but Otto swallows and runs his hand through his hair as he looks out across the field.

“Yeah.”

“Otto, I was joking, truly.”

“It’s fine.” He shoves his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and scuffs a boot against the dirt.

He won’t look at me, and my heart sinks. So much of Otto is bright and loud that you can easily overlook the sensitive guy beneath. It’s not a facade per se, but it’s not something he shares easily.

“I *do* want you, Otto, but I just... I’m not the girl you lost your virginity to anymore, and I have Briggs to think about. I need to focus on my son and not a relationship that may or may not go anywhere.”

A blush creeps over his cheeks, but his eyes turn cold, and *dammit* I’m screwing this up.

“Shit. That didn’t come out right—”

“Don’t worry about it.” He takes another step back. “Thank you for sharing what happened with me. I guess we both have some closure now.”

“I thought you said you weren’t letting me go.” I choke the words out as he moves toward his truck even though I know I shouldn’t say them.

But suddenly the thing I thought was best for me feels like severing a limb from my body.

“You don’t really want this,”—he motions between us—“and I thought I was okay fuckin’ around with you, but I’m not, Fallon. I’ve always—”

His eyes squeeze shut and his jaw clenches tight. It’s more than a minute before he looks at me, and when he does, it knocks the wind right out of me.

Glassy ice-blue eyes stare back at me, and I gasp.

“If you need help fixin’ something or need a friend, I can do that. But I just... you’re never going to want me the way I want you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m already in too deep, and you can’t make enough excuses to put me off. So it’s fine; I can’t even be mad. Take care of Briggs and let me know if you need somethin’.”

And with that last devastating blow, Otto climbs into his truck and eases down the road with the same casualness he came here with, but nothing is the same, and the gaping hole in my chest says it might never be again.



## OTTO

I t's not a mystery that people think I'm a fuckup.

I fell into the role of the *funny guy* pretty easily, and in general *I am that guy*. I like being happy and making people happy, but I've never felt more inadequate than this moment.

The words *I've always been in love with you* almost slipped past my lips while talking to Fallon, but that would have been a fucking disaster. I couldn't even take a hint as she was trying to let me down easy the *entire time*.

I just kept pushin' and pushin' like I could change her mind—like I could be what she needed. But I'm nothin' but a damn fool.

Hearing her say she's not the same girl that took my virginity was the wake-up call I needed—need—because I'm always going to be part of the worst day of her life. That realization fucking shattered my heart right there in the dirt.

My truck eases into a spot at my sister's bakery, The Poppy Seed, and I steel myself against the undercurrent of emotion pulsing through my body. Pasting on a smile, I walk inside and head straight for the counter.

It's bright and comfortable in here and always smells amazing. My sister is a hell of a baker, and she always knows exactly what I'm looking for as soon as I walk in. It's a blessing and a curse that she can read me so well and today, it's a curse.

Rhea's wearing a turquoise apron with pineapples all over it, and the cheery print is completely at odds with the scowl on

her face.

“I’m fine,” I say without much enthusiasm.

“Get your ass back there.” She gentles her tone and adds, “I’ll bring you snacks.”

“A chocolate chip cookie?” I ask like the man-child everyone assumes I am.

“I’ll get two,” she agrees while pointing to her office. “Ella, can you come watch the register?”

Moving through the shop, I don’t wait to hear her response, only brace myself for the onslaught of questions headed my way.

I slump onto the loveseat, and with my elbows on my knees, drop my head into my hands and try the deep breathing exercises Mama is always talkin’ about.

The door clicks shut quietly and then Rhea is sitting next to me with her head on my shoulder and her arms locked around me.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m still so fuckin’ in love with her.”

“I know.”

Raising my head, I look at her with skepticism plain in my gaze.

She rolls her eyes. “I know everything.”

I squint at her. “You and Sorren would be really scary together.” I drop my head back into my hands. “Bunch of know-it-alls,” I grumble, and she laughs.

A cookie is thrust into my field of vision, and I can’t help the way my mood instantly perks up at the promise of sugar.

“Fallon is complicated, sweetie; it doesn’t mean she’s not the one for you.”

“She doesn’t want to be with me. I’m too much and not enough.”

“Did she *actually* say that?”

“Pretty damn close.”

“Okay, but like,”—she takes a sip of coffee and then sets the cup back at her feet—“did she *really* say that? Or are you paraphrasing, because you’re a catch, Otto. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“She said she wants me, but I’m not what she needs.” I bite off half the cookie, and Rhea squints at me as I try to buy myself some time. Swallowing takes effort but finally I say, “She doesn’t really want *me*. She’s fine using me as a distraction, but I can’t do it because seeing her again... I’m still in love with her and I won’t survive it when she decides I’m not worth it.”

A fist connects hard with my bicep, and I jump in my seat at the same time I rub my hand against the stinging flesh.

“Cut the shit, baby brother.”

“Ow. That hurt, you know.”

“You’re whinier than a wet dog at a barbeque.”

“Seriously, I’m *from here* and that makes no sense.”

“You. Are. Worth. It.” I start to roll my eyes but stop when she cocks her arm back again. I wait for impact but it never comes. “You let people see exactly what you want them to see, and that’s fine. You *are* the good time guy, but you’re also loyal and kind and thoughtful and would literally give the shirt off your back if someone needed it.”

“I’m a good neighbor,” I say with a shrug.

“That.” She points at my face as she shoves another cookie into my hand. “You claim all the bullshit, but you won’t claim the fact that you’re a good guy. You work hard, Otto, you’re successful, and you’re not the playboy everyone thinks you are.”

“That’s weird, right? Like no one believes it’s Case—dude has his shit on lock.”

“Anyway,” she says, and I grin, the first real grin since everything went sideways with Fallon, “maybe you need to



show Fallon what you can bring to the relationship instead of what she has to do to maintain it.”

“I...what?”

“She’s a single mom who recently got divorced, and she’s settling into a new life here. If it were me, the idea of dating someone on top of all of that would be really stressful, don’t you think?”

“Yeah...”

“So maybe try to make her life easier.” She shrugs, but the wheels in my head are turning.

“You’re pretty smart, you know that?”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” She hugs me again, and before she releases me she says, “Please don’t doubt that you are worthy and deserving of love.”

Tears well in my eyes and I’m back to fast blinking and deep breathing to keep myself together.

I kiss the top of her head and squeeze her hand where it still rests on my arm.

“So did you hang out with Colt when he was here last?”

The subject change has her laughing and shaking her head.

“Get out, goof.”

“What? You didn’t show him your goodies?” I hold up the cookie in my hand, and she chucks a wadded-up napkin at my head.

“Out. We’re done sharing.”

“I’m just sayin’, if you ever want to talk, I’m here for you.”

“Out!” Her laugh falls around us as she literally pushes me from her office and out into the hall.

“Love you.”

“Love you more, now go.”

With one last hug, I take the rest of my coffee and walk back to my truck before pulling out my phone.

OTTO: I fucked up

HANK: Shocker

CASE: Bail money?

SORREN: Seriously, why am I even in this group chat?

SORREN: Also I told you so

OTTO: Feel better now that you said it?

SORREN: A little

OTTO: Where's Waylon?

CASE: Probably doing something with Marlee I don't want to think about

SORREN: Shut. The. Fuck. Up.

OTTO: Yeah that's gross man—like good for them but no

OTTO: Seriously though where is he?

HANK: If you wanted to talk to him why didn't you JUST TEXT HIM?!?

OTTO: I need all hands on deck to romance Fallon

CASE: We're twins and all but that's not really my thing man

OTTO: Sorren is this how you feel when you talk to me?

SORREN: Yes.

OTTO: Damn that's annoying

CASE: I'm still here ya know

OTTO: Yeah and I need you to be serious

WAYLON: Jesus, what's the emergency? I got like 97 notifications

CASE: And y'all think I'm dramatic

SORREN: Well you are...

HANK: Otto fucked shit up with Fallon already

WAYLON: Already? Dude...

OTTO: Can everyone not be a dick for five seconds?

WAYLON: That sounds nothing like us

OTTO: Guys I need help. I need to show her I'm going to make her life better not more stressful

SORREN: But you make my life stressful...

WAYLON: Otto you come up with that all on your own?

OTTO: Naw, Rhea talked some sense into me— she's pretty smart.

CASE: [[link to classroom wishlist](#)]

CASE: What about this?

OTTO: Dude, how do you even know this shit?

CASE: I have good ideas

HANK: I'll make some freezer meals you can take over

WAYLON: I can make her kid a sign for his room. What does he like? Dinosaurs? Trucks?

CASE: I'll give you some white carnations. They can do an easy color changing experiment—she's a science teacher she'll love it

SORREN: I'll give my card to Rhea and she can make Fallon one of those relaxing baskets with the bath shit

WAYLON: Dude who are you?

SORREN: What? It's relaxing but it's weird if it comes from me.

CASE: I think I'm speechless

SORREN: Don't make this a thing

HANK: I think you made this a thing

SORREN: Don't act like you didn't have a big-ass tub delivered like two weeks ago.

HANK: My girl gets what she wants

WAYLON: Marlee is real jealous of that tub – thinkin' about gettin' her one

SORREN: I hate all of you

CASE: I didn't even do anything this time

SORREN: Guilt by association

OTTO: I love you guys and #realmentakebaths

SORREN: (middle finger emoji)

Smiling, I tuck my phone into my back pocket. I'm exhausted from the emotional whiplash of today, but knowing that my family has my back eases some of the tension.

I know I'm a lot, but now I just have to show Fallon that I'm *worth* a lot too. With my tentative plan in place, I throw my truck in gear and turn up "Chicken Fried" by the Zac Brown Band and sing all the way home.



# FALLON

“M ommy, did you know...” Briggs pauses and waits till I meet his gaze before continuing, “that ice *melts* in water?”

“I did know that,” I say, perking up. “Do you want to talk about why it melts?”

He shrugs and I pull the electric teakettle out and fill it with water. As we wait for it to boil, I put some ice cubes in a bowl and grab a measuring cup for the hot water.

When everything is ready, I explain the basic points and then hand him two empty cups. He places two ice cubes in each cup and then watches in awe as he pours room temperature in one cup and hot water in the other.

His excitement is palpable, and I’m so thankful for this moment that soothes the ache in my chest and also makes the science nerd in me want to do a happy dance.

My phone buzzes on the counter, and my mood sours instantly knowing the message won’t be from Otto. He hasn’t talked to me in more than a week, and while I could have reached out to him...I shake my head.

I’m pretty sure *sorry I freaked out about everything and placed it all unfairly on you* won’t magically fix things between us.

Watching Briggs add additional ice cubes to the cups, I flip my phone over and the screen lights up.

CHEYENNE: Want to explain to me why I'm making three custom gowns for some lady in New Mexico?

CHEYENNE: Did I mention she sent me design ideas and told me—and I quote— there's no budget.

CHEYENNE: Fallon!

I snicker as I imagine Cheyenne flushed with agitation but still sweet as ever, typing out progressively annoyed messages.

FALLON: I'm so glad Bianca got hold of you.

CHEYENNE: She's THAT Bianca?

FALLON: How many women named Bianca do you think I know? (eye roll emoji)

FALLON: Yes and she's super nice. She and her husband are actually Briggs's godparents

CHEYENNE: She mentioned flying out here soon

FALLON: You'll like her. She's like a blonde version of Isla.

CHEYENNE: That sounds terrifying

I giggle as Briggs looks up and cocks his head to the side.

“You look pretty,” he says, and I smile.

“Thanks, buddy, I appreciate that.” Seemingly unfazed with the fact that he just melted my heart faster than the ice cubes, Briggs returns his focus to the table.

“What do you think about heading over to the bakery and grabbin' something before heading to the park?”

“Like those cookies with the chocolate on them?”

I laugh. “Yeah, you can get one of those.”

He pumps his fist and then jumps down from the table and is halfway down the hall before I call him back.

“Hey! Clean up first.”

“Oh yeah,” he says like he didn’t just spill water all over the table and onto the floor.

We tidy up quickly and head out to the car and start toward The Poppy Seed. Briggs is wiggling in his seat as he sings along to a tune only he can hear as we pull up to the shop and park.

The bell jingles overhead as we step inside, Briggs’s hand holding mine. I hope he never stops. Between telling me I look pretty and holding my hand, the kid can probably get whatever he wants right now.

“Hey y’all!” Rhea greets with a smile. She leans over the counter until she’s eye level with Briggs. “Are you being good for your mom?”

He looks to me for confirmation, and I nod and squeeze his hand. He beams at me and then turns his megawatt smile on Rhea.

“Yes, Miss Rhea.”

She lays her hand over her heart in a dramatic fashion and gasps. “Aren’t you just the sweetest little thing.”

He giggles, and she reaches into the pastry case and pulls out a vanilla wafer cookie dipped in chocolate and hands it to my son.

“Thank you!” he practically yells, but I’m just happy I didn’t have to remind him, so I take it as a win.

“And for you?”

“Can I get one of the blueberry scones, please?” I say as I reach into my purse and pull out my wallet.

“It’s on the house.”

Growling, I glare at my new friend. “No, it’s not.”

“It *is*, because I have a favor to ask you.”

“Sure, what’s up?” My gaze never leaves hers as I drop a couple of dollars in the tip jar on the counter.



“You’re a pain in my backside, you know that, right?”

“Backside, huh?”

She rolls her eyes. “Little ears and all that.”

We both glance toward Briggs, who sits at a small café table with his cookie and a napkin and his little legs swinging without reaching the floor.

“He told me I look pretty.”

“Well, you are,” Rhea says with a smile. “Also, I was super bummed to miss Nephew Night.”

“What?” I ask on a laugh.

“Nephew Night. That’s what we’re calling it when we get Briggs. Marlee and Cheyenne got to hang with your guy, and I’m still jealous.”

“He’s actually pretty good in the kitchen. He can make boxed brownies almost all by himself.”

Rhea looks horrified at the prospect, and I can’t help the grin that takes over my face.

“What? We make those cookies that come in the refrigerated section where you just place them on the bakin’ sheet and put them in the oven. You don’t even have to cut them.”

Rhea’s eye twitches, and it looks so out of place I snicker.

“The humanity!” she gasps and clutches at her chest before pointing an accusatory finger at me. “Find yourself a date or whatever.” She waves her hand around for emphasis.

The thought makes the single bite of scone I ate sit like a lead balloon in my stomach. The idea of being out with anyone other than Otto makes me want to be sick and that’s... telling.

I’m such an idiot.

“What’s that look for?”

“What?”

“You made a face.”

“It’s nothing,” I say even though Otto is the furthest thing from nothing, “What’s this favor you needed to ask me?”

“Oh, it’s Everett’s birthday and Hayden ordered a cake, but he’s swamped at the hospital and Ella won’t be in till later so I can’t run it over. Also, I totally don’t believe you.”

Choosing to ignore the last part, I ask, “Hayden wants it delivered to Everett at work?”

“Yup.”

“Isn’t Everett going to hate that?”

“Pretty sure,” she says with a grin.

I laugh and nod as she puts the cake in a box with The Poppy Seed’s logo stamped on the front.

“Make sure you let me know how it goes.”

“I will. Briggs, are you ready, buddy? We have to drop this off first.”

He grabs his napkin and jumps out of his seat.

“Push in your chair.”

“Oh, yeah.” His little body spins, and he races to fix the chair before returning to my side just as fast.

“Let’s go, you silly goose.” He giggles, and we decide it’s nice enough to walk the short distance to The Rusty Fender without melting.

“TNT” by AC/DC blasts out the open bay doors of the garage. Briggs scrunches his nose as he looks up at me. “What is that?”

“Rock and roll, Big Rigg.” Otto steps around the side of the building, and I’m so startled I almost drop the box in my hands.

Briggs giggles, and Otto holds his fist out, which Briggs taps enthusiastically with his own.

“What are you doing here?” I blurt out, and two sets of male eyes turn to look at me. Otto holds up some tool that

looks like a big wrench in one hand and motions toward the garage with the other.

“Case broke the excavator, and I needed somethin’ bigger to fix it. Also my brother owns the garage so...”

“Right. Of course, that makes sense,” I stammer. Luckily my hands are full, otherwise I’d be tucking a lock of hair behind my ear right now. Otto smirks.

“What are you doin’ here?” He eyes the box with suspicion.

“It’s for Everett.” Otto’s expression is eerily impassive, but his eye twitches so I rush to add, “Rhea said that Hayden ordered it for Everett’s birthday, but he got held up at work, and Rhea is busy, and we just happened to stop in so she asked if we could bring it down.”

“That was quite the mouthful.” His gaze drops to my lips for the briefest second, and I feel my cheeks flame. “Did you say it’s Everett’s birthday?”

“Apparently.”

Otto turns to Briggs with a mischievous grin. “Big Rigg, do you know how to sing ‘Happy Birthday’?”

“Yes!”

“Cool. Wanna go sing to my friend Everett?”

“Yeah! Can I, Mommy?”

“I guess...”

They take off toward the garage, and I watch as Otto nods along to something Briggs says and then laughs. Briggs is smiling ear to ear, and I wonder if it wouldn’t be so bad having him around more. Maybe we could take things slow.

I’m shaken from that line of thinking when Otto shouts and the music abruptly stops.

“Everett, man, you didn’t tell me it’s your birthday!”

“Son of a—” The gruff male voice cuts off, and I round the corner just in time to see Everett acknowledge that Briggs is

standing in the bay.

“Briggs, are you ready?” My son nods, and the two of them begin the world’s worst rendition of the birthday song.

Everett is glaring at Otto, Hank is smirking, and Waylon pops out of a back room with a smile on his face.

Walking up next to the birthday boy, I hold out the box as a peace offering.

“Hayden thought you might like this.”

He takes the box from my hands. “I’m going to…”—he looks at Briggs and then says—“unalive him.”

“At least the cake will be good, right?” I say hopefully.

Everett sighs with defeat and motions everyone to follow him toward the back.

“Oh, we should be—”

“Come on, Fallon. You delivered the cake; you get a piece too,” Everett grumbles, and Briggs takes my hand as we follow the group.

“Fallon, before I forget, I have something for you. I’ll be right back,” Waylon says before walking back toward the parking lot.

Confused, we continue into the break room where Hank has set out plates and plastic forks. Otto is arguing with Everett about proper cake-cutting techniques, and this very well might be the strangest day I’ve had in a long time.

As the guys pass out cake, Waylon walks in holding a wooden sign that’s almost as tall as Briggs.

“Hey Briggs, I’m Waylon.”

“Like Marlee?” Briggs asks, and Waylon grins.

“Exactly.” He squats down until he’s eye level with my son and then turns the sign around. “She told me that you love cars and trucks, and I thought this might look cool in your new room.”

Briggs's eyes go wide, and he lets out a loud shriek causing everyone to turn and look at us. Otto winks and then responds to something Hank said.

"Thank you!" Briggs hops from foot to foot and gives Waylon a toothy grin.

Tears cloud my vision, and I do my best to blink them away. The sign is beautifully carved and stained, with tire tracks burned into the wood and Briggs's name in big block letters. It's young enough for a boy but still something that he'll love a few years from now, if the cars and trucks all over the house are any indication.

"Waylon, this is beautiful. I don't know what to say."

He smiles, and it's warm and open but there's a hint of mischief in his gaze.

"We take care of family."

My mouth opens, and I'm about to say *but we aren't family* but stop short because this feels like family—stopping by the garage to drop something off, teasing Everett about his birthday, meeting Otto in the parking lot.

We belong here and we have people who love us. Why the hell am I fighting it so hard?

I look up and see Otto staring at me, and the intensity makes my breath catch. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Waylon stand to his full height, and he says in a low voice, "Sometimes the people we love the most are the hardest to let in."

"What?" I look at him, and his smile is knowing as he gives my shoulder a light squeeze. I'm vaguely aware of Briggs sitting next to Everett at the table as they both eat cake and giggle about something.

"Sorry I'm late!" Hayden singsongs as he bursts into the room with a flourish. He's dressed in pink scrubs and does a little shimmy as he drops his bag on a chair in the corner and bends over slightly as he rummages through it.

Briggs is still talking Everett's ear off, but I see the man's eyes flick up to where his roommate is located...and linger for just a moment longer than necessary. It's a quick scan, but the interest is obvious.

Guess I'm not the only one struggling with going after what I want.

Hayden turns with his phone in his hand and types something before placing it on the table.

"Thought you were workin' all day today?" Everett asks.

"Nope. I swapped with Harper. She's collectin' favors so that she has extra time off for her wedding."

Everett stares at Hayden like he can't quite put this puzzle together. Hank smirks from across the room and rubs his palm over his mouth to hide it.

"Boss man said I can take you home early," Hayden deadpans, and Everett's blush goes from his neck up to the tips of his ears.

"Umm..."

Hayden rolls his eyes. "We have tickets."

"For?"

"You seriously take the fun out of this birthday thing every year."

"And every year you pretend like this isn't my reaction."

We all watch in fascination as the two face off in the break room. Tension is high and it's not all platonic, at least not from Everett.

From behind his back and a place unknown, Hayden pulls a card and tosses it onto the table in front of Everett.

Everett picks it up, and we all watch as the card is opened and two pieces of paper fall into his hand.

"So where are you going?" Waylon asks casually.

"You got me tickets to Descending North." The rock band had a solid following and was local to Chicago. Their music

filtered down to Tennessee, and I've heard more than one of their songs on the radio since I've been back to town.

"Yes! They're playing in a little spot outside of Nashville. I had to drink like six cups of coffee to stay awake after my nightshift to get them when they went on sale."

"This is amazing. Thank you." Everett's voice is hoarse, and my heart squeezes for him—for them—for all of it.

"Briggs, are you ready, buddy? We'll let these guys get back to work and let Everett go celebrate his birthday."

"Can we still go to the playground?"

I ruffle his hair and nod. "Say thank you and goodbye."

We do a round of hugs and fist bumps before heading toward the door.

"Hey, lemme grab that for you; I'll walk you to your car," Otto says as he takes the sign from Briggs a second before I was going to.

"Oh, that's okay, I got it."

"I don't mind," Otto says with a suggestive smile. "I'm headin' out anyway."

"Thanks! Come on, Mommy, we gotta go to the playground!" Briggs takes my hand, and I relent in allowing Otto to walk us to our car.

In the time it takes us, my son has covered a plethora of topics that have nothing to do with each other, but Otto just nods along and responds like it's completely normal.

When we reach the car, I turn it on and get Briggs settled in the air conditioning before taking the sign from Otto and placing it carefully in the trunk.

"I can come help you hang that, if you'd like."

"Oh, umm...thank you. I'll uh,"—I brush a piece of hair off my forehead—"I'll let you know."

He smirks and backs away toward the way we came.

"Oh and Fallon?"

“Yeah?”

“You look pretty today. I just wanted to tell you.”

“Thank you.”

Biting his lip, he turns and walks back toward the garage, and once again I'm left watching his glorious backside walk away from me.





## OTTO

Lifting my shirt up, I wipe the sweat from my face. It's hotter than Hades out here today, and we haven't taken a break all day. Case reaches in the cooler and tosses me a water bottle before cracking open one for himself.

"What do you think? Two? Maybe three days left?"

I nod as I take a sip. "I think three just to be safe. We're still waitin' on those bags of mulch, and I want to make sure we've got enough time to get it all cleaned up."

We talk a little more about logistics and the pros and cons of tradin' out the bushes on the far end when my phone rings.

Pulling it from my pocket, I smile before answering, "Hey, Cullen, what can I do you for?"

"Otto, I'm glad I caught you. I know you and Case are busy, but I was hopin' to talk to you guys about refreshin' the landscape over at the farm. Gwen and I were talking, and she has some really good ideas."

My smile stretches ear to ear as I listen. "You and Gwen, huh?"

"Is that the only part you heard?"

"Naw, I heard the rest, but that's the part I wanna talk about."

"Anyone ever tell you that you're exhausting?"

"At least one person already today. But seriously, I think you're great for her. Gwen is a real special girl, and I'm just

glad to see her finally happy.”

He clears his throat. “Well, I appreciate that—feels like I’m finally doing things right this time around.”

“I’ll talk to Case and then see when we can make it over there.”

“Sounds good, Otto. Thank you.”

“Bye now.”

Hanging up, I turn to my brother who is starin’ at me with an expression I’m not quite sure how to read.

“Cullen wants to know when we can get over there and give him *and Gwen* an estimate for updating the farm. Said she’s got some real good ideas.”

I grin and he does too before clapping his hands together and rubbing them back and forth.

“Finally! I’ve been dyin’ to get my hands on that place since we did the work the last time.”

Harry Aubergine, whose name Isla finds hilarious for some reason, had hired us before the decals had been smoothed out on our truck. He’d been real good to us over the years, letting us change out flowers for the season, but as the farm changed, he’d focused on areas other than landscaping.

With Cullen Andrews at the helm now and Gwen workin’ her magic on him, the possibilities seem endless.

After making a plan, Case and I finish out our day, and he heads over to Montana’s farm to grab a couple things while I head over to meet Cullen.

I’m hit with a sense of nostalgia as soon as I step out of the truck. Darling Farms was basically my backyard growing up, and there’s not one bad memory attached to the orchard.

Cullen meets me in the gravel driveway with the smile of a man enjoying retirement.

”Hey, Otto, thanks for coming.” Cullen shakes my outstretched hand with a firm grip. Dude must have been a

force in the boardroom. I totally see where Isla gets her boss status from.

I love the shit out of her, but she's a pint-sized version of "don't fuck with me" in expensive packaging.

"What's the smile for?" Cullen asks.

"Just remembering how Isla tore into Clementine Creek. She's a trip, that one."

His smile is affectionate and accompanied by a chuckle. "I'd like to take credit for her, but I can't. Doin' my best to make up for it though."

Nodding, we both look out at the orchard. Since Cullen came to town, I've seen a spark in Isla that some would say borders on gentle. I wouldn't say it because I don't want to get hit—but some might.

Cullen's heart attack a while ago was a catalyst for a lot of things, including Hank pulling his head out of his ass and getting back his girl. Isla might have forgiven my brother for shouldering years of bullshit on his own, but I didn't, at least not at first.

"You ever think you'd end up with a son-in-law like my brother?"

Cullen's chuckle is a deep rumble. The guy is a cowboy hat away from sounding like Sam Elliot.

"You know, I always thought she'd marry a suit in Chicago, but...she would have ended up like me and I wouldn't wish that on anyone, especially her. Hank's a good man, and he loves my daughter even when she makes him crazy."

"I think he loves her *especially* when she drives him crazy."

We share a knowing glance before getting down to business. As expected, their plans are elaborate and pricey, the latter of which Cullen waves off.

"You get me a proposal once you talk to Case and Gwen, and we'll get the ball rolling."

We shake hands.

“It’s going to give us the push we need to hire some extra guys. I think we’re gonna ask Isla if she wants to conduct interviews.”

Cullen’s eyebrows shoot up to his salt-and-pepper hairline before a belly laugh rumbles from his chest.

“Those poor candidates.”

A grin splits my cheeks. “Our thoughts exactly. Give us the ones with the most potential. Keep up with the awesomeness, you know?”

“Let me know when interviews are so I can get a lawn chair ready.” We chuckle before he sobers. “What you do isn’t easy, and from what I understand, you and your brother have built your business all on your own. You have a great reputation with increasing visibility.”

“Marlee has helped with our online presence, and Isla has looked over some of it too. The women in my life could run the world.”

He slaps me on the shoulder. “We’re just along for the ride.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“How do you,”—I pause and rub my palm over my jaw—“how do you let go of the anger and the hurt to let someone in again?”

“Isla might be better at answering this than I am, but you have to choose to let it go. Hold it, own it, make peace with it, and let it go. The toxicity—learned that word from my daughter—of the relationship I had with my ex-wife almost prevented me from forming a new one with Isla. I can’t change the fact that I missed out on so much with her, but I can show up for her every day now.”

“I know it makes her happy havin’ you here.”

“I’m happy being here.” He pauses and then looks at me. “I don’t have all the answers to what you’re looking for, but what I can say is that you have to show up for the people in your life. Appreciate them with words and actions.”

“I get carried away with words sometimes.”

“Don’t be anyone but yourself.” Cullen looks out over the orchard. “You know what Gwen likes?”

“I dunno; do I wanna know?” My smirk is devilish, and he just shakes his head with a sigh.

“We were talking over dinner one night and she told me about how her favorite shade of lipstick had been discontinued.” He shrugs. “She didn’t make a big deal over it or anything, but she’s been wearing that color a long time and I could see that it was upsetting to her.”

“What did you do?” I say in a half teasing, half serious tone.

“I found a couple of tubes of it and ordered them.”

“That’s pretty slick.”

He nods. “Know what she was most excited about?”

“That she gets to wear it a while longer?”

Shaking his head, he smiles. “She told me that knowing I had listened meant more to her than the actual gift.” Blushing, he adds, “We call them lipstick moments now—like when something is true and genuine and meaningful, no matter how small.”

“I like that.”

“Listen, son, don’t get to be my age learning for the first time how to really love someone.”

“You love her?” I ask, surprised.

“We haven’t said it yet, but she knows. We’ve each done a lot of living and not a lot of loving, and I think that we’ve agreed that we can do both of those things together.”

“Well, I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, Otto.”

“And can I just say that I knew you were a goner the moment you stepped into our little town.”

He chuckles. “Well, worse things have happened to me.”

Reaching out his hand, I shake it, pull him in for a half hug, and say, “Who knew a couple of city slickers would fit in so well with the folks in Clementine Creek?”

“It’s because y’all are so welcoming.” He scrunches up his face after he tries the “y’all,” and I laugh. “Not ready for that level yet,” he concedes.

“Keep practicin’; you’ll get it.” I chuckle as he walks me to my truck.

“Just remember,”—he waits till I’m looking at him—“home isn’t a place, Otto.” Cullen shrugs. “It’s the people we love. I’ve lived in a lot of lonely places but this,”—he waves at me and then toward where my parents live—“this is what makes a life.”

“Dammit, Cullen,” I grouse as my eyes tear up, and I pull him in for a hug just shy of bone crushing because Isla would kill me if I hurt her dad. He slaps me on the back and chuckles.

“Go find your home.”

I nod as I step back and climb into my truck. The problem isn’t finding my home; it’s convincin’ her to take a chance on me.





# FALLON

“Excuse me, Ms. Holiday?”

“Yes?”

I look up from my desk and see Annette, the secretary who has worked here since I went here as a student, standing in my doorway. Her smile is wide and mischievous, and I tilt my head to the side in question.

“You have a delivery.”

“What? I didn’t order anything.”

A second later, a man with a dolly rolls into my classroom and looks around. “Where do you want me to put the boxes?”

“Oh, um...by the back wall, I guess. Do you know what’s in there or where it came from?”

“Sorry, ma’am, I just go where they tell me,” he says. I thank him and then it’s just Annette and me. She’s hovering in the doorway.

“What in the world is all this?” I say out loud to no one in particular.

“Well, honey, let’s open it and find out.” Annette’s hair doesn’t move at all as she nods vigorously at the mountain in front of us.

Grabbing the scissors from my desk, I carefully open the first box and gasp.

A stuffed frog sits just under the packing material and order receipt.

*You made biology fun back then – I bet you still do now. Hope some of this stuff helps you feel more settled in your classroom. You're doing great.*

*-Otto*

Annette whistles beside me, clearly reading over my shoulder. I'm too stunned to be mad.

"That man has it bad for you."

"Oh no, he's just being neighborly."

She smirks before walking toward the door. "Uh-huh, and I'm the queen of England."

I don't acknowledge her remark as I open the next one.

Box after box is filled with items from my wish list. The other teachers had encouraged me to make one for the school's website, saying that parents and people in the community were known to purchase things over the course of the year.

Not all in one shot.

Pulling out my phone, I dial the number that's mocked me every day since our disastrous talk in the field.

"Hey Fallon, what's up?"

"You bought, like, everything on my wishlist."

"My brothers and I all pitched in—wanted to make sure you had what you needed to start the school year."

"It's too much."

"Nah, it's for the kids. They're gonna love it."

A million thoughts race through my mind.

"I don't know what to say."

"Then just say thank you and get excited for the kids."

"Yes, thank you, but, Otto, this is so much."

“Can’t a guy just do something nice for a girl?”

I can’t help but laugh at the implication, as if *I’m* the ridiculous one. “Otto, buying a girl a coffee is doing something nice. There’s several hundred dollars’ worth of stuff here.”

“So it’s a really big coffee. You’re splittin’ hairs, darlin’.”

The term makes me cringe, but it’s a *me* problem not a *him* problem. I have a nickname, and heaven help me, I want him to call me *princess*.

“Otto,” I whisper, and it’s so close to a whine he chuckles.

“Just say thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“I gotta get back to work...” His voice trails off and I so badly want to tell him to ask me out.

Hell, I want to ask him out, but when I open my mouth, nothing happens.

“I’ll see you around, Fallon.”

“Bye.”

After pressing the end button with more force than necessary, I drop my phone onto my desk and heave out a sigh.

My teacher heart is happy; the rest of me is not.

I miss him, but I’m still not sure if it’s smart to add something else to my plate. Especially when things are still so up in the air with Tanner.

Cleaning up the boxes, I throw on a music playlist and then glare at my phone as “Hot N Cold” by Katy Perry comes on.

The lyrics hit a little too close to home, and I end up rage cleaning the rest of the room before grabbing my purse and shutting the lights off. Looking at the time, I’m thankful that I only have to go a short distance to pick up Briggs, because I’m barely on the right side of being late.

Luckily, my son is more than willing to fill any and all silence the entire ride home. I'm so distracted by his school day monologue that I almost miss the two bags on the front steps.

Grabbing our stuff from the car, Briggs races to the porch and does a little dance as he looks inside at our mystery presents.

“What is it, buddy?”

“Flowers,”—he wrinkles his nose—“and snacks.” The latter makes him grin.

Together we manage to get everything inside, and I take the first relaxing breath all day as I kick my shoes off. Briggs hangs up his backpack and then empties his lunchbox before bouncing over to me.

His excitement could fill an entire room, and I can't help but laugh. I hold my arms out, and he steps into them easily and wraps me in a hug.

“I missed you today,” I say quietly.

“I missed you too.”

We stay like that a minute longer, and I appreciate the stillness and that he knows I need it.

“Mama?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we open presents now?”

Releasing him, I chuckle and he hops onto the stool as I pull out two mason jars filled with white carnations. A box of food coloring sits in the bottom of the bag with a little note attached to it.

*Thought you guys might like to see these  
flowers change colors just like magic! Add a  
couple drops to each jar and you'll have a fun  
surprise in the morning!*

Briggs's eyes widen as I read the note aloud. "Cool! Can we do it?"

"Sure. Let's see what's in the other bag first."

He pulls the bag over and we work together to get the Tupperware container out. Inside are homemade Rice Krispie cereal bars with mini chocolate chips. There's also a second note.

*Can't do magic without snacks.*

Briggs giggles, but I want to scream and cry and not at all in a bad way. So many nights, I come home tired and *no* is on the tip of my tongue. I'm trying to give my all at school, and it feels like I can't do the same each night when I get home.

I keep hoping that it will get easier as we get used to our new schedule, but it feels daunting, and the mom guilt is always at the periphery.

"How about this,"—I wait for Briggs to look at me—"you pick what color you want to put in each jar, and I'll get us a snack and we can do the colors together."

"Yeah!"

When it's all said and done, we have one hopeful jar with blue water and one with green water. Briggs is a sticky mess, but he's happy and *I'm happy*. He runs down the hall to wash his hands, and I do the same in the kitchen before pulling out my phone.

FALLON: Thank you for the surprises on our doorstep

OTTO: How do you know it was me?

FALLON: It wasn't? Should I be thanking someone else?

OTTO: You're welcome

FALLON: I knew it (winking emoji)

FALLON: But seriously, it was perfect and Briggs is so excited to see the flowers in the morning

OTTO: I'm glad.

OTTO: Enjoy your night and the snacks

FALLON: You too. I mean if you have snacks—you have snacks, right?

OTTO: Always snacks. It's the number one rule, if your girl says she doesn't want anything you ALWAYS pick somethin' up just in case.

FALLON: Your girl?

OTTO: Girls can be friends...



# OTTO

“Man, that looks good,” I say to Case as we admire the last paver on the massive walkway. We made this project from hell our bitch, but I’m not sad to say goodbye either.

My phone rings in my pocket, and I pull it out without looking at the screen.

“Hello?”

“Oh, Otto, thank God.” Fallon’s voice is breathy and panicked.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have anyone else and this is such a big ask and—”

“Fallon...”

A heavy sigh comes over the line. “Can you pick up Briggs? I can’t be there for another few hours, and the girl I hired to watch him after school can’t do it anymore and my parents are visiting my sister and I couldn’t get ahold of anyone and I just—”

“No problem. I’m on my way now.”

Waving to my brother, I jog to my truck and climb inside as the Bluetooth picks up the call.

“Is he going to be okay with me gettin’ him? Or the school? Do I need to show them my license or something?”

“Yes to the license, and Briggs knows you, but...”

She clears her throat and lets out a nervous chuckle.



“We have a safe word to use in case of emergencies.”

“Somethin’ to think about...” I say to lighten the mood. She laughs, and a smile pulls at my lips.

“It’s coconut.”

“I like it. Might never look at one the same, but hell, no judgment here.”

Fallon snorts and then chuckles.

“Thank you, Otto, for doing this. It means a lot.”

“I told you all you needed to do was ask for help.” The silence stretches between us, so I ask a question instead.

“Is there a seat for him I have to pick up?”

“Oh! Yes, I left it outside his classroom. Do you know how to put it in? Miss Baker should be able to help you and—”

“Fallon, relax. It’s all under control.”

“Thank you, Otto. This day has been nonstop and thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I actively ignore the part of my brain that wants to remind me that I was nowhere near the top of her list for this particular emergency.

“I’ll let you know when I get him.”

“Okay. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

We disconnect, and I make my way through Clementine Creek to the elementary school. It doesn’t look a whole lot different from when I went there, but I think there’s some kind of unspoken rule that nostalgia is king at the grade school level.

Parking my truck, I pull my wallet out and sandwich my license in the center so I don’t have to fumble with it. I’m nervous. Honestly, more nervous than I’ve been in a long time.

Putting on my game face, I purse my lips and let out three loud whistles as I walk up the sidewalk to the fence. All the

kids look up and then return to playing, but Briggs's gaze is a mixture of concern and excitement.

I give the teacher my license, and she smiles at me with kind eyes.

"Hi, I'm Miss Baker. Ms. Holiday called and said you'd be picking Briggs up today. I put you on the approved list." She holds out her hand and we shake.

"Thank you," I say before returning my attention to the playground. "Hey Big Rigg, whaddya say we go have a guy's day?"

Briggs put his toys away slowly before grabbing his backpack and coming to stand in front of me.

He leans his little head back as he asks, "What's our word?"

Squatting down, I turn my hat backward so he can see my eyes. Then I lower my voice and whisper, "Coconut."

A smile spreads across his face as he rocks back and forth on his heels.

"Where's Mommy?"

"She had to work late, and I asked her if it would be okay if we could hang out for a bit so she wouldn't have to worry. Is that okay with you?"

He nods.

"Cool." Standing, I hold out my hand. "Let's go, Big Rigg."

Briggs giggles as he slides his palm against mine. The feeling jars something loose inside me, and I clear my throat to cover the unexpected emotion.

"What did you learn at school today?"

"B-b-baby! And do you know that *my* name is B! Miss Baker's too! And she said I wrote it good. And we learned a new sight word and did math and had cookies for snack!"

“That sounds like you had fun at school, Big Rigg. What do you want to do today?” I ask as I check and recheck that the booster seat is in position and then help him into the truck and buckle him in.

“We can watch airplanes?”

“Airplanes?”

He nods.

“I miss Daddy.”

I squeeze his hand because I have no idea what this transition has been like for him, but I sure as hell won't make it worse.

“Let's get a milkshake and go watch some airplanes, Big Rigg.”

“Chocolate?”

Damn, this kid is cute. “Whatever you want.”

The hand not holding mine does a fist pump, and I can't help but laugh. After releasing his hand, I climb into the driver's seat and send a text to Fallon about our plans.

OTTO: (Picture message of Briggs smiling in booster seat)

OTTO: Gonna grab milkshakes and watch the airplanes take off – that okay?

FALLON: Is he okay? Is he upset?

OTTO: He's excited for milkshakes

FALLON: (Facepalm emoji)

FALLON: Thank you for doing this

OTTO: It's what friends do

FALLON: Sigh...

I have no desire to touch that last message, so I buckle my seatbelt and throw my phone into the cup holder. After grabbing a couple of milkshakes from Smokin' Joes, I put the windows down and turn up the radio to a popular country station.

I exaggerate the words to "Friends in Low Places" by Garth Brooks, and Briggs giggles as he sings random lines and shimmies in his seat.

It's comfortable and easy and I don't take for granted this time together. I'm drawn to this kid in a way I don't understand. Maybe it's because he's Fallon's, but I just want to *know* him.

Part of me thinks I should be jealous that he wants to go to an airport and watch planes take off because he misses his father. The other part of me is so damn thankful that he trusts me enough to let me share this with him.

Choosing to embrace the latter, I follow the signs and pull into a gravel lot and park facing away from the fence and hop out. I get Briggs out of his seat and leave him in charge of our shakes.

Pulling out two camping chairs, I set them up in the bed of the truck facing the tarmac and help him get settled before getting comfortable myself. Blackstone Falls isn't particularly busy, but there's still enough going on that Briggs's attention bounces around.

He talks almost as much as I do, and it makes me smile. I feel...settled.

"Did you know Dean has a brother *and* a sister? I wish I had one. Do you have one?"

"I have three brothers and a sister."

"Wow! You got lots."

"I do. And ya know what else is cool?"

"What?" His eyes sparkle with wonder and anticipation, and it's so hard not to be completely swept up in this little boy.

"I'm a *twin*. Do you know what that means?"

He squints like he's trying really hard to figure it out then shrugs. I laugh and pull out my phone to show him a picture of Case and me.

"That's my brother Case. He's my twin. We were in my mom's belly at the same time."

"Wow! Her belly was big, huh?"

"I suppose it was."

His smile turns sad.

"I want a sister but Mama said Daddy is getting a new house when he comes."

Fuck. Me.

Not for the first time, I want to shake Fallon for pushing me away and making me completely wing this situation. I debate what I'm about to say for only a minute before scrolling through my phone again.

"Do you see these two?" I point to Sorren and Marlee smiling on the day she married Waylon.

He nods. "That's Marlee. She's pretty."

I chuckle. "She is. They're brother and sister, and they lived with their grandparents growing up."

"Like my Nonna and Pappy."

"Yes, just like that. My mama said we needed to treat them like family when they came to Clementine Creek."

I point to them respectively. "I think of Marlee like a sister and I think of Sorren like a brother. So even though we don't have the same mom and dad, they're my family."

I watch his little face and hope like hell I'm doin' this right.

"Like Aunt Cheyenne? She's Mama's frriend." He rolls the *r* and I laugh.

"Just like that."

"Cool! Do you like dogs? Miss Baker has a dog and she showed us a picture of it and his name is Nugget."

The relief coursing through my body has me practically falling out of my chair at his apparent acceptance and the abrupt subject change.

I feel like I need to apologize to my mother for my childhood because I'm already exhausted.

We stay there for another hour talking and walkin' around the lot. Briggs makes up stories, and we jump over potholes in the parking lot. He reminds me of how Case and I grew up being wild and curious.

Hank and Waylon were more intentional in their shenanigans whereas Case and I just wanted to see if we *could*.

"You likin' school?"

"Yeah, Miss Baker said I do real good with math, and we get books at the library."

"Library."

"I know."

"What books do you like?"

"Dinosaurs. Some trucks."

"Cool dude, I like trucks and dinosaurs too."

"You do?"

"Definitely. What do you say we go home and you can show me your library book and we make Mom dinner?"

"Yeah!"

His entire body moves with the fist pump he does, and I chuckle as I ruffle his hair and help him into his booster seat. Briggs is such an awesome kid, and I can't help but wish for more days like today.



## FALLON

My nerves are shot by the time I'm finally pulling in to my driveway and it's only half from being trapped at work all day.

The lights are on inside, and I park next to Otto's truck before taking a deep breath and climbing out. Calling him had been a last resort and even though I trust him to keep Briggs safe, the idea of relying on him after I've created this weird thing between us has me on edge.

Regardless of how kind he's been these last few weeks, this is still different. Caring for a child that isn't yours is not the same as dropping off dinner.

And that's another thing. Between Hank and Isla bringing premade meals for Briggs and me and Rhea delivering a spa basket, I'm on emotional overload.

I'm so very thankful, but what I need is a six-foot-tall man with wild brown hair and eyes the color of a glacier when the sun hits them just right. My fingers massage the space between my eyebrows to stave off the headache that's lurking beneath the surface.

I think our sudden platonic friendship is screwing with my head because I've never *wanted* to *just be friends* with Otto Thayer.

Music plays softly as I push open the door, and the sight before me takes my breath away.

"Mommy!"



“Hi, baby.” I drop my bag on the floor as my son launches himself into my arms. I squeeze him tight and eye Otto over his shoulder.

The man has a shy smile on his face and is stirring something on the stove that smells heavenly.

“Did you have a good day?”

“Yes!” Briggs jumps up and pulls me toward the table where papers are spread out with crayons, colored pencils, and markers.

“Wow. These look great!” I beam at my son and he gives me the brightest smile in return. Goodness radiates from him, and I take a moment to soak it up.

“Otto said Daddy would like a picture.” He holds up a piece of green construction paper with...something drawn on it.

“He’ll love it, Briggs. Tell me about it.”

He launches into an explanation of an airplane with a big hand waving and a dog, and I make a note to label each item before we send it to Tanner.

“And we saw plllllanes, Mommy!”

“That’s so great, baby. How about you make one more picture and then clean everything up so we can eat, okay?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

I kiss the top of his hair and breathe him in and let the stress of the day finally go.

Otto’s back is propped against the counter, and I let my gaze wander slowly up his body. I probably shouldn’t, but he has this effortless sexy thing going on with his jeans and fitted gray shirt, and I know I look like a swamp monster after a full day of eighth graders and then parent conferences.

My makeup melted off somewhere between stuffing my turkey sandwich in my mouth during my prep period and realizing that I’d only been wearing one earring for the first half of the day. I touched up myself the best I could before the

parents arrived, but I ended up being more *lacking sleep* than *fresh-faced*.

Otto lifts a single brow as my eyes finally land on his.

“That wasn’t very *friendly*, Princess.” The low drawl of his voice coupled with the use of the nickname has my pulse kicking up a notch.

*My nickname!* I somehow manage to not squeal like a preteen girl and casually tuck a piece of hair behind my ear instead.

Clearing my throat, I turn my gaze to the stove. Water is starting to boil for pasta and a pot of sauce simmers next to it.

“It’s just jar sauce, but I doctored it a little bit. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s amazing. Thank you. You didn’t have to do this. I was going to throw a frozen pizza in the oven and just wing it, so this is amazing.”

I press my lips together to stop the onslaught of words I’m sure will come if I let them.

“Why don’t you go get changed while I set the table, and when you get back I’ll head out.”

“You’re not going to stay and eat?” I sound alarmed even to my own ears, and now it’s his turn to press his lips together.

“I, uh, wasn’t planning on it. Figured you’d like some time just to yourselves.”

I hate the words that come out of the mouth that’s tasted every inch of me. They hurt in a way that so many others never have.

“Friends eat dinner together all the time.” My voice is just above a whisper.

“But that was before I fell in love with your kid. I don’t know how to do the right thing, Fallon.”

“Stay.”

His eyes fall shut and I hold my breath.

“Otto, are you eatin’ with us? You have to!”

Briggs busies himself cleaning up the table, but his excitement is clear.

“I’m going to go change,” I say.

Backing away, I don’t give him a chance to answer before I’m turning and heading for my room.

I exchange my blouse and slacks for black leggings and an oversized, button-down flannel with the sleeves rolled up. It’s not until I’m back in the kitchen that I realize what I’m wearing.

Otto chokes on a sip of water and pounds a fist into his chest as his eyes go molten. His normal icy-blue eyes are almost electric as he stares at me. He doesn’t hide his desire, and I wipe my hands down the front of my shirt.

*His shirt.*

The shirt I took from him the day we had sex in the field. He told me it looked better on me anyway, and I didn’t argue because it smelled like him.

Fresh-cut grass and wood and something citrusy.

I remember crying in my dorm room when the smell had finally worn off. Maybe it made me crazy, but I didn’t care because I needed the comfort even if I couldn’t reach out to him.

A thousand questions pass between us, and I can’t answer any of them because Briggs races into the room and jumps in his seat.

“Mama, I’m sooo hungry! Can we eat, please?”

I sigh but smile at my son and pray that I can keep him little just a bit longer.

“Sure, buddy, let me get your plate.”

“Otto, you can sit next to me!”

Maybe I should feel bad that Otto physically can’t say no to Briggs, but I can’t—not when I finally know what I need to

say to him.



# OTTO

I somehow get roped into staying for dinner and helping Fallon clean up the kitchen after Briggs goes to sleep. It shouldn't be this easy, this natural, with her but it is, and it's fucking with my head.

This house feels like a home in a way that living with Case never has. Sure, it's ours, and we've remodeled it over time so it's nice, but it doesn't feel like this. There's no smell of freshly baked cookies or pictures and toy trucks strewn across every available surface.

And it didn't escape my notice that the carnations I dropped off are still going strong in their colored water. Looking around one last time, I know I've got to leave before I beg her to let me stay.

"I'm going to head out. Thanks for trusting me with Briggs. I had a great time with him."

"Thank you for being so wonderful with him." She smiles. "He can be a lot, but his heart is so big and he's just so awesome."

"He is. Thanks again for today."

Scooping my keys up, I walk to the door and open it. I can't stand lookin' at her in my shirt for one more minute knowin' she isn't mine.

"I'll walk you out."

"You don't have to; it's already pretty late."

It is *not* late, but dammit, I need to get out of here.

Following me out onto the front porch, Fallon calls my name.

“Hey Otto?”

I don’t want to turn around but I do—my self-preservation is absolute shit.

“What, Fallon?”

“What if I wanted to ask you out on a date?”

“No.”

The word is out of my mouth before I can even process it.

“How come?” Her voice is soft and *sad*, but hell, I’m sad too.

I close the distance between us and then point toward the house behind her.

“Because I would rather have that little boy in my life than be some guy you’re fuckin’. I don’t want to lose him. He’s amazing, and if the choice is to spend time with him or get you naked when *you* feel like it then it’s no choice.”

She rears back like I slapped her.

“I haven’t even taken you out on a date. You didn’t want it, and I went along with it, but I won’t be your dirty little secret.”

“What? How could you even say that I—”

I glare at her, and she presses her lips together.

“More importantly, you gave me *one* afternoon with him and I fell so damn hard. I know I have no right to ask, but please don’t take that away from me.”

“Jesus, Otto... You weren’t... I don’t want to just fuck you. That’s not what I want.” Her eyes are glassy, and she looks up and blinks rapidly before speaking again. “I want to try with you.”

I stare off into the distance and start counting to calm down but lose my place and have to start over. My brain is at war with my body, but ultimately, fierce possession wins out.

I back her against the front door and cage her in with my body. Her eyes widen and she swallows hard.

“I’m out of my damn mind.” I growl each word for emphasis.

“Is it because I’m wearing your shirt?” she manages with absolutely zero bite.

“I *really* want to spank the sass outta you right now.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, and I think I might like it.” Her breath is hot against my face, her chest rising and falling quicker with each passing second.

“It is when you’re trying to distract me from what’s important.”

“What’s that?”

“If we do this, we do it on *my* terms.”

“I really don’t think—”

“*My. Terms.*”

“What are your terms?”

“We don’t have sex until I’m ready.”

“So like tomorrow?” She tries to make the joke, but my muscles flex with the insinuation.

“No,” I grit out. “Like when I think you’re in this with me—as a partner. You’re mine, Fallon. I want you *and* Briggs. I don’t share, and I sure as shit won’t lie to anyone or hide that we’re together.”

“Otto…”

“Don’t answer me tonight.” I push off the door and drag my hands down my face. “I’m serious, Fallon. If we do this, we do it for real. *Just friends* doesn’t work for me.”

I clench my hands into fists to stop myself from touching her. From tellin’ her it’s *forever*.

“What about what you said before?”



“What about it? You’re so fuckin’ all over the place I can’t keep up. I’m *tryin’* to respect your space and what you need, but dammit, woman, I’m exhausted.”

“That’s not fair. It’s all so crazy and I’m doin’ the best I can.”

“I’m not sayin’ you’re not,” I agree and soften my tone. “But you don’t know what you want, and I’ve only wanted *you* since I was thirteen and you sat next to me in Mrs. Greene’s class. You’re it for me, Fallon. You’ve always been it for me. If I’m still not it for you then let me go.”

Looking somewhere past me, Fallon chews on her bottom lip, and I wait for whatever is about to upend my world.

“Tanner is moving to Clementine Creek.”

“Do you love him?” I ask calmly even though I’m already calculating if I have enough whiskey at the house or if I should get a new bottle on the way home.

“Not in a romantic way.”

“I’m gonna need you to elaborate.”

“We’re not right for each other. But he’s my best friend and I love him in that way. He’s an amazing father and supportive partner, and we want to give Briggs a life here as together as we can.”

“When is he moving here?”

“We’re not sure yet. We thought there was a date set, but it was pushed back so we’re waiting for arrangements to be finalized.”

“He know about me?”

“Yes.”

“What’s he think of all this?”

“He’s,”—I pause, looking for the right word—“hesitant, but I know he wants me to be happy.”

I chuff out a laugh because what in the actual fuck is going on right now?

“Is that so hard to believe?” she asks with a huff and a hand on her hip.

“I can’t imagine any man willingly lettin’ you go, Princess.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m watchin’ a man tryin’ to let me go right now.”

“I’m tryin’ to do the right thing,” I say as I spread my arms out wide, “and I have no fucking clue what that is.”

“How about you let me make my own damn choice then?”

Looking up at the sky, I exhale through my nose even though it does nothing to calm me.

“Fine. But not tonight.” She starts to speak but I hold up my hand. “Be sure, Fallon. We’ll go slow, and I’ll make nice with your ex, but for the love of Mama’s chicken pot pie, be sure.”

“Okay.” The word is a whisper on the breeze.

We’re both so damn tired but I won’t survive any more back and forth with her. Stepping in, I place a gentle kiss on her cheek and then head to my truck and climb in. In the quiet of the cab, I pull out my phone.

OTTO: Do we have whiskey?

CASE: Is that a rhetorical question?

OTTO: No

CASE: Then we have whiskey

OTTO: I’m on my way

I turn the key, and the song “Good Ol’ Man” by Drew Green starts playin’ immediately because of course it does. The song is the most amazing kick in the nuts, and dammit, I gotta do better too—just after whiskey.



# OTTO

“Mama!” My voice carries and echoes off the porch as I knock and immediately walk into my childhood home.

“Otto? Is everything all right?”

Unsurprisingly, the whiskey I drank with Case the night before provided exactly zero clarity and only managed to give me a headache I couldn't shake. Work was hot and exhausting, and while the physical labor usually helps to quiet my mind, it only seemed to amplify everything with Fallon.

Dragging my hands down my face, I say the simplest thing I can think of. “I love him, Mama.”

She pauses, clearly confused, and then wraps herself around me in a fierce hug.

“We love you, baby, no matter who you love.”

My brain takes only seconds to catch up before a laugh rumbles in my chest.

“No, Mama.” I wrap my arms tighter around her. “Fallon's kid. I love him and I think I loved him the first time I saw him, but he's not mine to love and she's driving me absolutely *crazy* and I just... How did this happen?”

Pulling back, she holds my face in her hands and looks at me the way she always has when my world gets too loud.

“Come sit, baby.”

I do.

We're quiet as she hustles around the kitchen and places a glass of sweet tea and a slice of apple pie down for each of us.

"What happened?"

"I've loved Fallon a long time," I admit with my head down. "I've always been drawn to her, and we had a brief *something* and then she disappeared."

"I remember that. Always thought it was a girl." Her smile is warm and devoid of judgment.

"I thought I'd moved on, but as soon as I saw her again..." Working though the running stream of commentary in my head, I take a bite of pie and relish in the way the cinnamon and nutmeg marry together in my mouth.

"First loves are hard, baby."

"I'd give her up if it meant I could spend time with Briggs. Is that weird? Obviously I want to be with her like I want my next breath but she..." I swallow down the hurt and uneasiness coursing through me. "I don't know if we truly want the same things, and my heart can't take just bein' physical with her."

Looking up, I cringe, but Mama waves me away.

"That's far from the worst thing I've heard comin' from you boys."

"Still weird," I say as I shove a forkful of pie into my mouth.

"And yet you're comfortable enough to talk to your Mama about it." She beams and we both know she's right.

"Why am I so attached to him, Mama? I picked him up from school yesterday when Fallon got held up, and it was the *best day*. He wanted to see airplanes because his dad, Fallon's ex-husband, is in the air force and I didn't even care. I wasn't jealous; I just wanted to make him happy."

Realizing I'm talking to the table again, I look up to see Mama's eyes full of unshed tears.

"You're such a good man, Otto Raymond. You have a big heart, and there's nothin' wrong with showin' that boy some

love.” I feel the tips of my ears go hot under her praise.

“It’s kinda like when Marlee and Sorren moved here.”

“It is. Waylon and Sorren might have bought her Henny Penny, but I’m the one who received the call that you’d punched that boy in the face for makin’ fun of Marlee on the playground.”

“I don’t think she ever knew I did that.” That day would forever be burned into my brain. *No one* was gonna talk to Marlee like that.

“Did you do it for the recognition?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t want to see her hurt.”

“She’s our family, Otto. She and Sorren are our family, and it has nothing to do with anything but how much we love them.”

My mind slows as her words sink in, and everything doesn’t seem as daunting as when I arrived.

“So what do I do?”

“Be respectful and listen, and I think it will turn out all right. You have a big heart, baby. It’d be a shame not to share it.”

We sit in silence and I mull over everything she said before voicing my other concerns.

“Mama?”

“Hmm?”

“How do I help Fallon if she doesn’t know she needs help?” Mama raises an eyebrow in my direction, and I stumble over my words, tryin’ to clarify. “She’s trying to do everything by herself. I know that her parents help with Briggs sometimes, but her plate is overflowing and I’m worried she’s gonna crash hard.”

“Well baby, it’s hard to say. I know that sometimes pride, like in Hank’s case, can get in the way of gettin’ what you need. Do the best you can to offer support without

oversteppin’.” She sighs with a tired smile. “And prepare for the crash.”

“But—”

“Who do you call when you wanna blow off some steam?”

“Case, but he’s usually with me.”

“And who do you call to go on a drive or look at somethin’—when you need a levelheaded opinion?”

“Waylon.”

“And who do you call if there’s somethin’ that needs fixin’?”

“Hank.”

“And who do you call when you’re at your most vulnerable but you aren’t ready to share it yet?”

“Sorren.”

We stare at each other before she grins.

“Do I need to go through the girls?”

I shake my head and sigh.

“You count on different people because your daddy and I taught you to trust your family to pick you up when you need it. Askin’ for help doesn’t make you weak, baby, but it’s not always easy, is it?”

“No, Mama, it’s not.”

“I’m guessin’ that Fallon is trying to find *her* balance here in Clementine Creek. She’s makin’ a life for her and that little boy, and while I won’t claim to know *everything*, I’m sure that she feels like she has somethin’ to prove comin’ back home.”

“You’re a smart cookie, Mama.” Reaching across the table, she pats my hand before holding it with her own.

“I had help and I’m still learnin’. Be gentle with her, Otto. You do everything big, and that’s one of the things I love about you, but she’s not gonna want you to rush in and fix all her problems.”

“I can be gentle.”

She squeezes my hand before pullin’ away. “I know you can.”

“Thanks, Mama.” We talk a while longer before I stand and help clean up.

“You’re a smart man, Otto. Don’t doubt your worth.”

The comment gives me pause because it’s not the first time I’ve heard it. Apparently, everyone is tryin’ to tell me something, and I just need to man up about it.

Pullin’ her in tight, I hold my mama like she’s done for me so many times before, then I kiss her cheek and head back out the door.

Outside, I find my father tinkering under the hood of his truck. He waves me over with his trademark barely there smile.

“How’s it goin’, son?”

“It’s”—I rub my palm over the back of my neck—“goin’.”

He grunts and then straightens to look at me. Like always, his silence compels me to speak.

“Do you think I’ll make a good dad?” I blurt out and feel my face heat. Hearin’ I’m a good man from mama is one thing, but I’ve always looked up to my father with a sort of reverence. He’s the kind of man I’ve always tried to be, and I just want to make him proud.

“It’s not even a question.” His answer has a force behind it that makes my eyes prick with tears, and dammit, I’ve never been a crier. Looking up at the sky, I take in the blue that’s always a little darker than my eyes as I try to wrangle in my emotions.

“I don’t want to *replace* his dad, but I want to be there. And I’m gettin’ ahead of myself, but I can’t imagine not havin’ him and days like yesterday pickin’ him up from school and makin’ dinner with him, waitin’ for Fallon to get home. And I could teach him stuff, ya know? Like workin’ on cars and what I do with Case at Twinscapes and—”



My words stop when I see my father's expression soften, and a real smile takes over his face.

"Sounds to me like you'll be just fine." He wipes his hands on a rag from his back pocket. "There's no rulebook, Otto, you learn right along with 'em."

"I just didn't expect to be here, I guess. Hell, I'm still a kid half the time myself."

He chuckles. "Kids are pretty great though. They're all different, and you just love them equally in different ways."

"I don't know what that means."

"Listen to what that boy is sayin',"—he pauses—"and what he's not sayin'." When I don't say anything he continues, "Take Rhea for example. Girl is a firecracker just like her mama. She's determined and self-sufficient and loves takin' care of everyone."

"She is a lot like Mama. Gives the best presents too. Last year she got me this subscription to a coffee of the month club," I say wistfully because damn that coffee was good. My father nods.

"She comes to me for advice and reassurance and sometimes just because she needs her dad. But Rhea isn't a daddy's girl. Marlee is. My girls are different, but I love them wholly and unconditionally."

"That makes sense."

"You know...you're a lot like Sorren." My eyes go wide, and he chuckles as I shake my head because there's *no way*.

"I bet Sorren is gettin' an eye twitch right now just at the mention of that floatin' in the wind." This time, my father doesn't smile.

"I've seen you be more yourself these past several weeks than you have been in a long time. You've been protecting us from the burden you've been carryin', but that doesn't mean we haven't seen it."

"Why not say something?"

“That’s not always how it works, son. Hank kept his secrets for more than a decade, and he probably would have taken them to the grave had it not been for Isla.”

“It took me a long time to get over that.”

“Why? You could have said something to him.” There’s no judgment on his face, but I have a feeling we’re about to come full circle with this talk.

“It’s different.”

“Is it? Are you less deserving of love and happiness than your brother?”

“No.” I toe the ground.

“Sorren’s been keepin’ secrets since he was fourteen years old, probably before that too. Is he less deserving?”

“No.” This time the word is said with confidence.

“You’re more sure about that than you are about yourself.” I don’t respond because a ball of emotion is lodged in my throat. “Do you think Briggs is feelin’ a lot of ways too?”

“Yeah.”

“I reckon that you feel so close to him because at that age he’s larger than life. He’s hope and enthusiasm and reckless curiosity. He makes you better. He reminds you of *you*.”

“He does,” I agree. My father shrugs like that answers everything.

“So what do I do?”

He smiles. “I think you already know.”

We stare at each other for a minute and then I pull him in for a tight hug. “Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, son.”

Breaking apart, I give him a wave and walk back to my truck. I can’t explain it, but I pull my phone out and fire off a text.

OTTO: I just wanted to tell you that I love you

Three dots appear and then disappear. I'm buckling my seatbelt when a message pops up.

SORREN: You too

OTTO: Say it

SORREN: No

OTTO: Say you love me

OTTO: DO ITTTTT

SORREN: (eyeroll emoji)

OTTO: Say it, brother

SORREN: Yeah man, love you too

I smile and tuck my phone into my cup holder as some of the tension in my shoulders starts to ease.



# FALLON

“Maaaa, are we there yet?”

I give Briggs a pointed eyebrow raise in the rearview mirror. “Seriously, buddy, the town isn’t big enough for you to be askin’ me already. We *just* left the house.”

“Fineeee.” He draws out the words and it’s a whole lot of everything. The drive isn’t long, but between the sighing in the back seat and my already frazzled nerves, I feel like I’ve run a marathon by the time we pull up to Otto’s house.

Putting the car in park, I take a deep breath and slowly exhale.

“Okay, buddy, are you ready?” He nods and unbuckles his seat belt, and I grab the gift bag next to me before climbing out and opening his door.

“Can I knock?” Briggs asks as he races up the steps of the front porch. It’s tidy and bursting with pots of flowers, and you’d never guess that two—hopefully only one after today—bachelors live here.

“Go ahead.”

Briggs knocks on the door and it’s only a moment before it swings open. Otto’s face is painted with confusion that quickly morphs into excitement as he ruffles my son’s hair.

“Hey, Big Rigg, how’s it going?”

“We got you presents!” he yells and does an impatient little dance that has Otto chuckling. “Here.” He thrusts a toy truck into Otto’s hand with a smile. “Now we both have this one!”

It's my favorite and Mommy said I could pick one out for you. Do you like it?"

"Thanks, buddy, I love it." Otto drives it over Briggs's head, sound effects included, causing them both to crack up.

"We got you this too." I step hesitantly onto the porch, my eyes never leaving Otto's as I hand him the bag. He takes it, and I wring my hands in front of me. It's so reminiscent of the first time I stood on this porch with uncertainty.

He pulls the tissue paper from the bag slowly as Briggs bounces from one foot to the other—the kid is practically never still. I wish I could bottle his energy; even a little bit would be nice.

A full bellied laugh startles me back to reality, and I watch as Otto turns the travel mug in his hand.

"I like that one!" Briggs points at something I can't see, but Otto nods and smiles as he turns it and takes it all in.

"You tryin' to tell me somethin', Fallon?" He waves the cup at me with a grin. Pictures of Briggs and me making silly and cute faces line the outside of a travel coffee mug. It was one of those "aha" and hope for the best finds at the store. I'd cut and taped all the pictures together and then fed the sheet back between the plastic barriers.

"I'm sure." I bite my lip, and his gaze drops to my mouth before traveling back to my eyes.

"Is that right?"

"It is. And I wanted you to know that I—we'd—be proud to have you show us off." I nod toward the mug in his hand. His smile is almost blinding.

"Hey! No one said there was a party out here!" Case says with a flourish as he steps onto the porch behind Otto. "What's up, big man?" He holds his hand out to Briggs and he slaps it. Case makes a point of shaking his hand out, which causes Briggs to dissolve into a fit of giggles.

"Case, you remember Fallon, right?"

Case holds his hand out with a wicked grin.

“Sure do, nice to see you again, Fallon.” We shake, and it’s like he’s both teasing and assessing me. “Y’all hungry? We just put some chicken on the grill, and Otto stole some potato salad from Mama’s house so we have plenty.”

“I didn’t *steal* it. She told me I could take it,” he huffs.

“Well, I for sure took some of those little fruit tart things from Hank, so we got it all covered.”

The brothers stare expectantly at me, and I look down at Briggs who is practically vibrating with excitement.

“Sure, that would be great.”

“Cool, cool. Hey Briggs, do you wanna help me with the grill?”

My eyes widen in alarm at the same time Briggs says, “You know my name?”

“Yeah, man, Otto talks about how cool you are all the time.”

Otto blushes but he nods. “Definitely, coolest dude I know.”

“And we’ll be safe, right, Mom?” Case asks Briggs.

“We’ll be safe, Mom! Can I go?”

“Oh, um, okay. Just listen to Case, okay?”

“Okay!” Case and Briggs chatter away like they’ve known each other for a lifetime instead of only a few minutes.

“So...” Otto draws out the word and I shift my gaze back to him. He looks tired but so handsome, and I just want to fall into his arms and tell him that everything is going to be fine.

That we’re going to be fine.

“I’m sure,” I repeat.

“No sex until I’m ready.”

“Yes,” I say, and I’m proud of myself for keeping the whine out of my voice.

“We go slow and build something real. Lasting.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re mine. Like out for dinner and holdin’ hands in public—mine.”

“Yes.” My lips twitch and I take a step forward and turn the cup in his hand. “I wouldn’t have put that one on there,” I say, pointing to a particularly terrible picture of me singing into a wooden spoon, “if I had any reservations.”

Chuckling, he places the cup and truck in the bag before setting it down on the rocking chair behind him.

“I thought you’d be happier about this,” I say with a gently teasing tone.

Otto pulls me into his chest and wraps his arms around me, then rests his chin on the top of my head.

“I am,” he sighs, and his body relaxes a little more against me. “It’s just a lot for me too, you know?”

Did I? I wasn’t sure.

“Is this what you want?” Tilting my chin up, I lean back until I can see his eyes. They’re swimming with emotion.

“Yes, but it doesn’t make it less scary.”

“I’m scary now?”

“Of course you are. You’re my ‘it’ girl. The one that got away, the one I almost lost again, and dammit, I just want to keep you and Briggs and do this thing right.”

*Oh, Otto.*

“We’re both bound to mess up trying to navigate being together, but I want to if you do.”

“Yeah, Princess, I do.”

My lips tip up as he brushes his mouth against mine in a sweet kiss.

“Mama! Time to eat!” Briggs bellows from somewhere inside the house, and I chuckle.

“You want that too?”



Otto smiles and nods before taking my hand and guiding us toward the door. "I want all of it."



# OTTO

**D**espite my bravado, I was struggling tryin' to figure out how to date a single mom. Sometimes, like when I'd dropped off dinner or kicked the ball with Briggs in their backyard, everything made sense.

Other times, I wanted to strangle her for almost fallin' off a ladder that was rotted trying to get a toy from the porch roof when she could have just called me for help.

And a new ladder.

That one had resulted in a standoff and then a trip to the hardware store where I picked out a ladder but *she* insisted payin' for it. My eye twitch hadn't gone away the entire night. The next mornin', Rhea had delivered coffee and muffins to the jobsite courtesy of Fallon.

It was a new dance to learn, and while I didn't always do what I was supposed to, like have flowers delivered to her classroom, I was slowly gettin' the hang of it.

Mama's words still replayed in the back of my mind though as the weeks passed, but I could only do as much as she allowed me. She didn't look at me as a partner, and while I didn't expect her to right off the bat, I did expect her to talk to me about what she needed. We needed to communicate, and she was tryin' to run the world all on her own.

I'm a lot of things but a mind reader isn't one of them. I thought I hit the jackpot tonight when my phone had vibrated with a text.

FALLON: Can you come over?

OTTO: Everything okay?

FALLON: No

OTTO: I'm on my way

With my heart hammering in my chest, I say goodbye to Case and then jump in my truck. I'm thankful, not for the first time, that Clementine Creek is the size of a postage stamp, because I'm at her house in a matter of minutes.

Racing up the walkway, I knock twice and hear a muffled "come in" and I don't even breathe as I turn the knob.

"Hey Fallon?" I ease the door open to find her sitting at the kitchen table staring into something only she can see. The house is silent aside from the soft sounds of toy trucks crashing down the hall.

I kneel next to her, and she turns to me with tears in her eyes. My instinct is to pull her into me, but I know she needs to have this breakdown no matter how much it guts me. *This* is the moment I've prepared for.

"I lost it, Otto," she whispers. "I yelled and I don't do that, but I was just *so* frustrated, you know?"

I nod and take the seat next to her.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

A hysterical laugh falls from her lips, and as discreetly as I can, I pull out my phone and send the *911* text to Marlee to start everything in motion.

"I'm so tired, Otto. Like *so* tired. Briggs misses his dad, and no matter how many times we video chat it is never enough. I'm *exhausted*. I was a stay at home mom when I was married because that's what we wanted for Briggs, but all of a sudden I have a full-time job and childcare and kindergarten and I'm trying to do this on my own before Tanner gets here because I need to prove to myself that I can.

“I’m just not the *fun* mom anymore. When I get home it’s time for dinner and bed and then we wake up and do it all over again. There’s no break and I feel *so* guilty that I can’t get it together enough to just let loose. He’s doing so well in school, and he’s so well behaved that when he gets home he’s *wild* and I get it. I’d love to whip my bra off and run around the house like a maniac too, but someone has to cook dinner and get lunches ready and do baths and bedtime and—”

Her rant is cut off by a brisk knock and the arrival of Marlee.

“What are you...?” Fallon looks between us like she can’t quite figure out what’s going on.

“It’s going to be okay,” I whisper as I stand.

“Otto, go pack her bag. I sent you a list.” I nod but linger as she squats down in front of Fallon and takes my girl’s face in her hands.

“We’re going to take care of you and Briggs tonight, okay?”

“Okay.” Her whisper is barely audible over the blood pounding in my ears, and I hope like hell I made the right choice.



# FALLON

“Trust me?” Marlee asks, but I’m still overwhelmed, and reality is a bit fuzzy at this point.

“Yes, but I don’t understand...” Her grip on my face is firm, and she forces my eyes to focus on her.

“Repeat after me. I am a badass mom and I deserve to have my village rally around me.”

“What?”

“I am a badass mom and I deserve to have my village rally around me.”

“Marlee, what?”

She drops my face but takes my hands and squeezes.

“I know I didn’t stutter. Say it, Fallon.”

“I am a badass mom and I deserve to have my village rally around me.”

“Say it again.”

I do. Marlee makes me say it three more times before she’s satisfied.

“Good girl. Are you ready for part two?” She grins and I return it.

“Yes.”

Pulling me to my feet, Marlee places her hands on my shoulders and again locks eyes with me. Has she always been this intense? I can’t remember.

“You’re going to go in and say goodnight to Briggs. You’re going to love on him for a minute and then I’m bringing you home with me for a much-needed recharge.”

“But who—”

“Otto is going to stay. Waylon is on his way over for support, and Hank is bringing everything to make mini pizzas. You’re both having a sleepover, and you’ll return rested and recharged to your sweet but exhausting little boy.”

My eyes fill with tears, and she points an accusatory finger at me.

“No. You will keep your shit together until we get in the car. Go smile for your son and let him know it’s okay to be excited too.”

I can’t help it—I laugh. Marlee’s smile is bright as she hugs me and then spins me quickly and pushes me down the hall with a slap on my ass. That girl is a trip. Honestly, I’m too tired to do anything but follow her directions.

Briggs is still playing in his room, and he looks up with a shy smile.

“Here, Mom, you can be the blue truck.”

All of the air leaves my lungs on a relieved sigh. This little boy is all that is right in my world. Placing a lingering kiss on the top of his head, I take the truck and drop down next to him.

We sit like that for a few minutes, just crashing and making silly noises. He’s fine.

*We’re fine.*

But Marlee is right; I need to take care of myself too. I need a recharge.

“Hey Buddy?” His little round face looks up at me. “What do you think about you having a sleepover with Otto and some of his brothers? Mommy is going to have a sleepover, too, at Marlee’s house.”

Briggs jumps up so fast, half the precariously placed toys go flying around us as he launches into a stream of excited



gibberish.

“So that’s a yes?” I laugh.

“Yes! I love sleepovers!” He does a fist pump with his little hand, and I pull him down into my lap and tickle his sides as he giggles.

“You’re going to be good for them, okay?”

“Uh-huh, and I’m big now so I can have sleepovers.”

“But you’re still my baby.” He rolls his eyes, but they’re filled with love and innocence, and the guilt of the day starts to subside. “I love you, Buddy.”

“I love you, Mommy.”

I squeeze him tight, his little arms coming around my neck, and soak in his stillness. It only lasts a moment before he’s bouncing in my lap, but it’s enough.

“Come onnnn, Mommy, let’s go!” Grabbing my hand, he pulls me up and out into the hallway. “Marleeee!”

He yells her name and then launches himself into her waiting arms.

She chuckles. “I hope you’re always this excited to see me, little man.”

“You ready for a fun night, Big Rigg?” Otto hands my bag to Marlee as Briggs dances around the kitchen.

“Yes! Sleepover!”

“We’re going to be fine.”

“I know. Briggs, give me one more kiss. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.” His smile is bright and sure, and it’s only when Marlee laces her fingers with mine do I realize I’m frozen to my spot.

“Love you, Buddy.”

“Bye, Mommy!”

“Thanks, Marlee,” Otto says with a smile.

“You got it. Night, boys!” she calls over her shoulder as she leads me out to her car and opens the passenger side door for me. Climbing in, she places my bag at my feet and then moves around to get in the driver’s seat.

The passenger window lowers, and I look at Marlee before seeing Otto jog toward the car.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” Leaning in, he places the sweetest kiss on my lips before pulling back and searching my eyes. “You’re gonna have fun, I promise.”

“Hmm,” I sigh as he steals another quick kiss and then straightens.

“Goodnight, ladies.”

“Night, Otto, have fun!” Marlee calls and then rolls up the window.

“Okay, how are we on tears? Do we need to cry? Do we need to let it out?” Her gaze bounces between me and the road. “The goodbye kiss was a nice touch.”

“No crying.”

“Whoop!” She fist pumps not unlike my son and then turns up “Shake it Off” by Taylor Swift. “Mandatory singalong, girl!”

Marlee puts the windows down, and something about the wind in my hair and her unabashed energy has me singing the words I’ve only sung in the privacy of my home.

It’s...freeing.

Pulling up in front of her house, I see that all the lights on the first floor are on, and a few more cars than I expected litter the driveway.

“Marlee, what is this?”

“It’s your meltdown party!”

“My *what?*” I don’t mean to screech the last word but it can’t be helped.

“Girl,”—she takes my hand as she turns to face me—“you have been *running yourself ragged*. You’re super mom, no doubt, but you’ve neglected the fact that there are people here that love you and consider you family and wanna help. You are not a burden; you are family and we love you.”

“Now I’m cryin’.”

“And apparently gettin’ your accent back too.”

My laugh comes out as a cough while I try and wipe the tears from my face. “I can’t with you.”

She shrugs. “I’ve heard worse.”

Climbing out of the car, we walk up the steps to the porch as the door flies open.

“Howdy, y’all!” Isla shouts.

“Too much.” Marlee is cackling as we cross the threshold and are instantly handed a margarita. Cheyenne drops a lei around our necks, and I’m a second closer to bursting into tears again.

“Last Name” by Carrie Underwood plays from the speakers, and the spread of snacks on the island has my mouth hanging open. It’s literally the ultimate smorgasbord of binge foods.

Cheyenne’s mom, Gwen, wraps me in a hug. “You call me anytime if you need help with that sweet boy.” She pushes me back but keeps her hands firmly on my shoulders. “Or if you need to talk. I know a thing or two about bein’ a single mom.”

“Thank you,” I whisper before I’m swept into Flora Thayer’s arms.

“Oh sweet girl, how are you holdin’ up?”

“I’m exhausted,” I say as I sag into her embrace.

“And your mama and daddy are still visiting your sister?”

I nod against her without lifting my head. “Seriously, how can you play with cars wrong? Today he threw a fit about eating a banana for a snack, but he’s begged for one literally *every single day this week*.”

Her shoulders shake and then she lets out a belly laugh.

“Get used to it; kids are brutal. They’re learnin’ and dreaming and we’re just along for the ride. Don’t take it too personally though—what’s wrong today may be right tomorrow.”

Taking a sip of my margarita, I sigh. “I found a frog hopping around the tub the other night. Briggs asked if the frog could take a bath with him. I said *no* and then there was a twenty-minute meltdown followed by a *release party*.”

Cheyenne makes no attempt to hide her smile, and Marlee’s eyes are filled with glee.

“Guys, I had to light a candle and everything.”

“Otto and Case once put the garden hose in the dryer vent. Ya know the one on the outside of the house? Well, they thought it was a flashin’ *insert here sign*—”

“That tracks,” Rhea deadpans and everyone bursts into giggles.

“Uh-huh,” Flora drawls with a smile. “Anyway, I’m walking past the laundry room and I think I musta forgotten that I put something in the washer but no, just my dryer goin’ *swish, swish, swish*.”

“Shoulda stopped after me.” Rhea grins and Flora rolls her eyes to the ceiling.

“I love those boys, but golly, did they try my patience.” She pats her hair. “And they’re the reason I had to start making regular visits to the salon.”

Gwen points a red manicured fingernail at her daughter. “I got a call from Cheyenne’s fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Dawson, askin’ *could I talk to my daughter about knitting in class*.”

Cheyenne blushes but shrugs. “I was going through a scarf phase.”

“Donated the whole lot of them to the senior center that winter, if I remember right,” Flora says with pride.

“She did,” Gwen confirms, “but we had to move the knitting to after school because the teachers were afraid the kids were goin’ to joust with the needles.”

Rhea exaggerates a cough. “CaseandOtto,” she says as one word, and we all laugh again.

It feels *good*, and it’s absolutely everything I was too stubborn to admit I needed. My lips twitch at having to tell Otto that he was right.

Marlee points at me. “What is *that*?” Her tone is playful but accusatory.

“What?” Turning, I look behind me, but there’s no one there.

“That *look* on your face!”

I feel the blush creeping up my neck and take a sip of my drink.

“Probably thinking about an orgasm Otto gave her,” Isla says.

I choke on my drink, Marlee cackles, Rhea groans, and both Gwen and Flora fail at hiding their amusement.

“Well, on that note, I think it’s time I head on home,” Flora says. “I need zero details on my sons’ sex lives.”

She pulls her phone from her pocket and taps out something before placing it on the table.

“Vincent and Cullen will be over in a minute to collect us.”

“Who’s Cullen?”

“My father. He bought Darling Orchard from Harry Aubergine,” Isla says with a dramatic flair.

“I remember Harry; he was always nice.”

“Ugh, y’all are the worst,” Isla grumbles, and it causes the others to laugh. “Seriously? Harry Aubergine—Harry purple eggplant? You know what; forget it.”

“I am so lost right now.” My brain is definitely too fried for this conversation.

“Isla is obsessed with—” Marlee sticks her tongue against her cheek in a suggestive manner.

“Mothers are standin’ right here,” Flora mock chastises. Isla shrugs but grins as she wraps her arm around Cheyenne’s shoulder.

“We’re hopin’ to be officially sisters someday.” Gwen blushes the slightest bit, but it’s accompanied by so much self-assurance I can’t help but be in awe.

“Oh wow. Small world, huh?”

“The smallest,” Isla agrees. “Oh! Speaking of small world, I found the cutest winery online, and they shipped me a box. It’s *delicious*. Hank and I have been sampling them before bed.”

She throws us an exaggerated wink before handing Gwen and Flora each a bottle.

“Sweetgum Winery,” Gwen says, turning it in her hand to read the label.

“Where’s Retherford Farms?” Flora asks.

“Somewhere south of us, I think.” Isla shrugs. “I found them online—super cute website by the way—and called to place an order.” Lowering her voice, she says, “I talked to a guy named Jason, and wow, did he have a sexy voice.”

Everyone laughs as Isla fans her face.

“And don’t worry, each of you will get a bottle to take home.”

“You really are something else,” Rhea says as she pulls Isla in for a side hug.

Isla smiles wide, and her joy is so obvious it practically saturates the room. She’s fierce and gorgeous, but her heart is just as stunning. Actually, looking around at the women gathered, it’s clear that sentiment can be said for all of them.

A knock at the door has Gwen and Flora engaging in another round of goodbyes as Vincent and Cullen step inside. Both men are handsome in their own right, but where Vincent

is ruggedly good-looking like his sons, Cullen is handsome in a distinguished uptown kind of way.

The one very obvious quality the men share is that they are positively smitten with their ladies. Between the looks they exchange and the sweet greetings, I'm practically swooning.

My lips pull up into a wistful smile, and I must zone out because the next words startle me out of my daydream.

"Okay, now spill," Rhea says as soon as the mothers are out the door. My eyes widen.

"Hmm?" Shoving another mini quiche into my mouth, I do my best to buy myself more time.

"You have an ex-husband in the wind, and Miss Thelma said she bumped into Otto at the post office and he wasn't smilin', and she was concerned—somethin' about you almost fallin' off a ladder?" Marlee says and it takes me a minute to fully appreciate that whole sentence.

*I missed this place so much.*

"I really need to stop over and see Miss Thelma."

"Don't change the subject," Isla says without looking up from refilling her glass. I push mine toward her and accept my fate.

"Ugh, he's withholding sex."

"I'm sorry." Marlee is barely holding herself together as she says, "I thought you just said that Otto is withholding sex."

"I didn't stutter," I grumble and Isla snorts.

"Imma need more on that," Cheyenne says.

"We're going *slow*..."

"And no orgasms?" Marlee clarifies.

"Didn't y'all fuck like rabbits when you came back?"

"Do you *have* a filter?" Rhea asks Isla with a knowing grin.

"You wouldn't love me if I did."

“True,” Rhea reluctantly agrees even though she’s smiling.

“Focus, ladies.” Marlee snaps her fingers and all eyes land on me again.

“Isn’t this weird for y’all? Talkin’ about your family?”

“I’m more concerned about your lack of orgasms,” Isla says.

My finger traces around the rim of my glass, and I suck a piece of salt off the edge as I figure out how much to tell them.

“I wanted to keep it casual and he ultimately...didn’t. It’s just hard, you know? I obviously care about him, but I *just* got out of a marriage, and while Tanner and I are in the best possible scenario, it’s still *a lot*. Plus Tanner isn’t totally on board with Otto—not because of Otto but because of Briggs.”

“Do we get to ask about Tanner?” Cheyenne looks at me with an eyebrow raised, and I shake my head.

“Not tonight.” She knows a lot of it but she doesn’t know *the reason* we officially ended things, only that we were better as friends.

“Okay, but everyone knows that my brother loves that little boy. He’d never hurt him,” Rhea says defensively.

“I know, and I’m just trying to balance everything and everyone.”

“*Orgasms.*” It’s a loud whisper from Isla as she props her head in her hand.

“You have a one-track mind,” Marlee says.

“Listen, if Hank stopped giving me orgasms after knowing what he can do to me—well, girl, I’d be cranky too.”

My head drops to the island on a groan.

“It was so good.”

And it *was*. Things with Tanner had been fine—nice even. We both were physically satisfied, but it was nothing like being with Otto. He extracted pleasure from me in a way I never knew was possible.



He was rough with me but tender in all the right ways, and I craved that feeling of being ravaged while still feeling cherished.

“So what happened?” Marlee asks gently.

“He wants to date me. Like get to know me and Briggs, be a friend and build a foundation. I agreed. But guys, I don’t want to *be his friend*. I want to be naked.”

“So you’re dating?” Cheyenne asks.

“Yes.”

“And not having sex,” Isla asks.

“Also yes.”

“Have you told him that? The naked part, I mean,” Rhea asks and I squint at her through the alcohol-induced fog, because she looks like she knows something.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure he knows, but we’re waiting until *he’s ready*.”

“Umm...” Cheyenne tilts her head to the side, and I feel bad that I haven’t been a better friend to her. She’s my best friend, and I haven’t confided in her about anything related to Otto.

“We’re taking it slow, like I wanted, but this is like glacial and I’m *dying*.”

“So...why don’t you test the waters? You know, find a *happy* medium.” Isla places the emphasis on happy and the girls all giggle.

“I’m afraid that if I try something he’s going to think that I don’t think he’s serious about bein’ with me.”

Marlee studies her glass with concern before lookin’ at Cheyenne.

“Am I drunk or was that foggier than bug spray in a truck bed?”

“That’s not a thing,” Isla hisses before we all laugh.

“Okay, serious question,” Rhea says once we settle down. “Do you *feel* like you guys are in a spot where sex will enhance your relationship rather than dominate it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being dominated,” Isla argues.

“I have such a girl crush on you. Is that weird?” I ask, and Marlee gives me a high five.

“Been there. She’s just such a badass all the time.”

“You are.” Isla grins as she blows Marlee a kiss before winking at me. “Totally not weird. We just need to help you see your inner badass.”

“I’m not badass,” I say with a chuckle and another sip of my drink.

“That right there is the problem,” Marlee says. “What did I tell you?”

“I am a badass mom and I deserve to have my village rally around me.”

“That’s a good line.” Rhea tips her glass at Marlee.

“Right? Okay, so *we* know you’re amazing, but what can we do to help you see it? Embrace it and own it. What’s missing?”

“I want to feel sexy, desirable.” Blushing, I ask, “Is that not the right thing?”

“Why don’t you tell us what that means for you?” Cheyenne says gently.

“Things with Tanner were good. He made me feel loved and cherished but in a gentle and respectful way. Otto is passionate and intense, and he makes me feel bold and empowered. He makes me feel safe asking for what I need.”

“Have you told him that?” Rhea drags each word in the sentence out, and I squint at her again because she *definitely* knows something.

“I didn’t realize it was a thing until right now. I just thought his cock was magic...and addictive.”

“Hey, it’s fine for that to be a thing too,” Isla encourages as the others cackle. “Magic peen is totally addictive. But I think the important thing is that Otto has *reminded* you what it’s like to feel like a woman.”

“I liked the word *empowered*,” Cheyenne adds.

“It’s a good word,” Marlee agrees.

“You are allowed to be more than just a teacher, mother, ex-wife—all of it. Your needs are important, and if your cuppeth be dry...”

“Seriously, what is wrong with you?” Rhea asks Isla on a laugh.

“Keep your cups.” I grin. “How do I get Otto on board with all this?”

“You could always talk to him,” Cheyenne offers.

“Or you could give him a demonstration.” Marlee grins and I point at her.

“That. What can I do to get him on board?”

“Try something spontaneous. Something with shock value,” she says.

“I...what?”

Shrugging, Marlee says, “What about road head?”

“Is that shocking?” Isla deadpans.

“Seriously?” Rhea turns on her. “What is wrong with you?”

“What? My husband is sexy as fuck, and I’m good at it.” She taps her finger to her lip. “There was that one time he almost ran off the road, but he rewarded my efforts handsomely.” Her grin is wicked, and I can’t help but blush.

Looking over, I see Cheyenne blushing, but she’s nodding along.

“You too?” I ask incredulously.

“It’s fun learnin’ what you like, what your partner likes.”

Marlee, Isla, and Cheyenne all nod as Rhea tips her glass and finishes her drink. “Ugh, y’all are the worst.”

“I bet I know someone who could help you with that,” Isla says into her glass, and Rhea shoots a look at her. It’s a weird standoff, but I could probably guess what Isla is implying.

“Who needs a refill?” Cheyenne grabs my glass, and it breaks the tension in the room. Isla grins and Rhea rolls her eyes, but there’s a smirk on her lips.

“Wild Nights” by John Mellencamp plays over the speaker, and with each joke and story, I feel the tension start to dissipate.

I’m lucky. I’m so damn lucky that I fell into this group of women that took me in without question, in the town that I love where my son is thriving. I’ve been so worried about the next thing that I truly haven’t stopped to appreciate the *now*.

Smiling, I take a deep breath and resolve myself to do better, because right now, anything feels possible.



## FALLON

After my night with the girls, I went home feeling refreshed. The guys had not only left my house better than when they arrived, but Hank had made muffins for the week and put dinner in the crockpot. Someone had mowed the lawn and tidied up the garden, a vase full of flowers replaced the ones on the kitchen table, and my son hadn't stopped smiling.

Briggs and I spent the day together after I'd kissed the hell out of Otto on the back porch. Otto had given me a wicked grin before sauntering off, and this time, I hadn't been so sad to see his backside because I knew he'd be here again soon.

Briggs and I had gone to a small indoor aquarium a few towns over and then had lunch without a care in the world. There was no talk of schedules or school or laundry that despite him still being so little, I'd never stay caught up with.

At night, we lay in his bed reading books and talked about Otto and Tanner and the Thayers and how we were creating a family of people we loved and loved us in return. Talking with Briggs was eye-opening. Somehow, my baby had grown into a little boy, and while he was still only five, he understood more than I gave him credit for, and my heart was bursting with love and pride and everything in between.

Unfortunately, our smooth sailing comes to a screeching halt on Thursday morning. There's exactly zero warning before Briggs comes blazing into the kitchen dressed in navy blue shorts and a white polo shirt with sailboats on it.

"Mama! You promised!"

I'd done no such thing, but that point is moot as far as my kindergartner is concerned.

"Briggs, I'm so sorry, baby, and Daddy is so sorry. He wanted to be here."

He wails louder, and if I wasn't still in my probationary period with the school, I would just keep him home. Tanner and I had discussed the fathers' luncheon and up until today, it hadn't been an issue for Briggs.

"But Josh said that my daddy doesn't love me and that's why he's not here."

*That little shit.*

Crouching down to his level, I frame his splotchy red face in my hands.

"You are *so* loved, Briggs. Mommy has always told you that no matter the distance and no matter the time, you are loved."

I put his little hand over my heart and place mine overtop.

"What do you feel?"

"Your heart."

"And who does it beat for?"

"Me." He snuffles but there's a small smile there too. Whipping out my phone, I pull up the video chat with Tanner.

His eyes widen, and I raise my brow before handing the phone to Briggs.

"Daddy!"

"Hey buddy! Did you grow? Wow! You look so big. Holy cow, kiddo!" Tanner's overenthusiastic voice carries across the room to where I'm gathering up all the things we'll need to tackle the day, and I slip an extra piece of candy into Briggs's lunchbox.

"Daddy, you're so silly."

They chat for a while longer, and by the time Briggs hands my phone back to me, he's smiling.

“Are you ready to go?” I place my hand to my heart, and he does the same.

“Ready.”

We make it to school in one piece, and I remind Briggs that he’s brave and handsome and loved, and we can grab ice cream when I pick him up. His ears perk up on the last part, and after one last goodbye, he makes his way toward the front doors.

I watch him until he’s disappeared from sight before making my way over to work. I’ve barely taken a breath when my phone buzzes in my purse.

OTTO: Good morning beautiful, how are you?

FALLON: It was a rocky morning.

OTTO: What happened?

FALLON: Some little shit kid told Briggs his daddy doesn’t love him because he’s not coming to the fathers’ luncheon today

OTTO: Is he ok?

FALLON: He talked to Tanner and he was okay at drop-off but I know he’s still bummed. My parents are still visiting my sister so my dad can’t even go.

FALLON: And I have to call the school and make sure that other kid isn’t bullying my baby

OTTO: Would it be okay if I went? I know I’m not his dad but I’d love to be there for him

FALLON: I can’t ask you to do that

OTTO: You’re not – I am offering

FALLON: If you can make it, I know he’d love that. I understand if you can’t

OTTO: I’ll take care of it don’t worry.



FALLON: Thank you (heart emoji)

OTTO: (Kiss face emoji)

Stuffing my phone into my bag, I climb out of the car and take a sip of my scalding hot coffee to keep my emotions at bay. I growl as I fight with the front door and then snag my phone again and fire off a text to Tanner.

FALLON: Otto is going to meet Briggs at school – he asked if he could when he found out Briggs was upset

TANNER: I think Briggs will love that and I appreciate that other people love our kid as much as we do

FALLON: So you're not mad?

TANNER: Do I wish I could be there? Without a doubt. But if the option is our kid has no one and you have to beat up a kindergartner later versus having someone there who obviously loves him—it's no contest.

FALLON: You're such a good man

TANNER: I'm such a good man I won't even ask if you told him yet...

I laugh but ignore his message as I slip my phone into my desk. Things with Otto are great, but I'm not ready to rock the boat. I just hope that decision doesn't come back to bite me in the ass.



# OTTO

“Hey Case?”

“Yeah?” my brother says without looking up from the hole he’s digging.

“Some kid made fun of Briggs cause his father isn’t here for that dad’s lunch thing at school.” Giving me his full attention, Case’s eyebrows slash down before a scowl takes over his face.

“We goin’?”

My smile is immediate. “You wanna go?”

“Hell yeah. Kid is family.”

OTTO: Kid made fun of Briggs coz his dad isn’t here for dad’s lunch at school. Case is comin’ with me—anyone else?

SORREN: What time?

HANK: I’ll bring Everett

WAYLON: I’m in and so are Dad and Cullen

WAYLON: Hank, your father-in-law is weirdly excited about this

HANK: Makin’ up for lost time – also Hayden is coming apparently

WAYLON: And Jake

HANK: I'll bring some extra food – I'm sure they're not expecting us to descend on the school

SORREN: I'm going to swing by the bakery and grab the stuff Rhea is putting together

OTTO: Meet outside the school at 11:30

OTTO: Thanks guys

SORREN: It's what we do

For being the least approachable out of everyone, Sorren is always the first one to answer when it's important. Mama's words ring through my mind again because she was right, like *always*. My heart fills with pride and hope and so much fuckin' love it's about to burst.

I'll probably cry today, but I gotta keep my shit together for at least a little while longer.

OTTO: I need a favor

CHEYENNE: What do you need?

The hours pass in a blur, and everyone is already waiting in the school parking lot by the time Case and I pull up. Cheyenne, the angel that she is, managed to fill my order with minutes to spare. I stuffed a wad of cash in the register after she refused to let me pay her.

*Fuck that.*

Girl is hella talented, and selfishly it was easier to be a goof about it than start cryin' like a baby. I did that when I played "My Boy" by Elvie Shane on the way to the school because I'm a glutton for punishment and all up in my feelings today.

"You guys ready?" I ask as I climb out of the truck with the stack of shirts in my hand.

Case and I already have the navy blue T-shirts on that say *Property of Briggs* in big white lettering on the front.

“That’s awesome,” Waylon says with a smile as he strips out of his shirt and pulls the new one on.

“What the hell is that?” Hank barks out a laugh as Case comes around with a cardboard cutout of Tanner with a shirt that we draped over it and tied so it wouldn’t fall off.

“Briggs’s dad.” I shrug and *every single* set of eyes lands on me, and I feel my cheeks heat.

“How did you even manage to get that made that fast?” Hayden asks.

“I know a girl...” Case smirks and everyone laughs.

My father wraps me in a side hug that has me clearing my throat when he lets go.

“Everyone ready?”

Affirmatives go up around us as we cross the parking lot and I press the buzzer.

“Can I help...oh my...hold on.” The woman’s voice is full of wonder, but she’s absolutely beaming as she opens the front door. I recognize the secretary, Mrs. Hicks, immediately.

“Mrs. Hicks! You’re lookin’ beautiful as ever.” She blushes even as she swats at my shoulder.

“Snake charmer, this one.”

“Only because it’s true.” I wink and then add, “We’re here for the lunch thing.”

“And we brought food,” Hank says, and Sorren lifts his box too.

“Fallon said that you’d be comin’ but she didn’t mention you’d be bringin’ so many.”

“We don’t do anything small in this family.”

Mrs. Hicks dabs at her eyes before hustling us down the hall toward the gymnasium, which still smells exactly how I remember when I went here.

“Excuse me, Miss Baker, Briggs has some last-minute guests.”

We pile into the room, and it doesn't escape my notice that there are several kids without an adult present today.

"Everyone take a kid, okay?" my father says under his breath, and we all nod as Briggs jumps up from the table and sprints across the room.

His little body collides with mine, and I hug him as tight as I can manage without cutting off his air supply.

"You came."

Pulling back, I look him in the eye as I say, "We always show up for family." And because the tears in his eyes match my own, I point at my shirt and say, "We made shirts."

His eyes widen as he takes everyone in for the first time before spotting the cutout.

"That's my dad!" His head tilts to the side. "He looks funny." Briggs giggles, and it's honestly the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

Pulling the final shirt from my back pocket, I put it over his head and smile as he looks down.

"That's my name!" Cheyenne printed his with just his name on the front because she's on top of things like that.

"And ours say *Property of Briggs.*"

The guys take turns with hugs, fist bumps, and hair ruffles, which Briggs doesn't even complain about even though all eyes are on us.

"This is the best day ever!" Everyone chuckles and then Miss Baker gathers us up with Briggs in the front for a picture. I have her take one with my phone and send it off to Fallon before turning my attention back to Briggs.

"Ready, Big Rigg?" I ask before grabbing the cutout of Tanner and hauling it toward the table. Briggs's little hand rests in mine as he leads us to his seat.

"Miss Baker said some daddies had to work today."

"They did," I agree. "Which is why I brought everyone with me so none of your friends would be alone today."

Briggs turns his head and smiles. I smile at the sea of navy blue shirts before turning back to the table.

“This is Nolan and his dad,” Briggs says. “He’s my Otto.”

*I. Am. Dead.*

Like just pick me up off the floor because my heart has exploded from the sheer joy of this moment.

Wrapping my arm around his shoulders, I squeeze him tight against my side until he giggles, then I kiss the top of his head before finally releasing him.

Nolan’s dad, Dylan, smiles knowingly as I blink quickly to quell the tears, again.

“They’re pretty cool, right?” Dylan says quietly as the boys chatter about trucks and how the Jell-O is slimy but still tastes good and if Bigfoot lives in Tennessee.

“Totally.” We share a smile and turn back to the boys, and I know this is a day I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.





# FALLON

A few weeks have passed since my party-worthy meltdown, and Otto is still treating me—us—with kid gloves. Talking to the girls was exactly what I needed—and what I needed to hear.

Briggs and I didn't have a big support system in New Mexico, and when Tanner was deployed we stayed mostly to ourselves. I didn't fit in, and maybe I should have tried harder, but I wasn't going to subject my son to people who only wanted to be with us when it benefited them. Bianca was, of course, the exception.

My return to Clementine Creek opened my eyes to *so many things*. I wanted to be here so that Briggs would have a loving and stable environment. But without even trying, I was guarding myself and him just like I did when we were across the country.

I needed the change, and I'd been making a conscious effort since the girls' night. Otto and I have had one nice date night that ended with a lingering kiss at my door and a few family nights with Briggs which Otto seemed just as happy about.

Despite me practically trying to jump him after his fathers' luncheon stunt, Otto seems as determined as ever to take things slow. I have bided my time, but tonight, all bets are off.

The knock at the door has a small smile pulling at my lips as I walk the short distance to open it.

“Hey.” Otto leans in and kisses my cheek as I step back and let him inside. He looks absolutely edible in worn jeans and one of the flannel button-downs I love so much rolled up to his elbows.

“Hey. I brought takeout. I thought we could just hang and watch a movie or something.” He looks around me into the quiet living room. “Where’s Briggs?”

“Cheyenne said that she wanted some *auntie* time, so she asked if they could have a sleepover. I think she’s taking him to the lake where it will probably turn into Nephew Night.”

“And you’re okay with that? The lake, I mean. Can he swim? I mean my brothers just threw me in the water, but I’m pretty sure that’s not how most kids learn and—”

I bite my lip as I raise an eyebrow in his direction. He scrubs the back of his neck with his hand as he nods.

“Right, right, you’re his Mama. I just worry, ya know? I mean yeah, okay. Nephew Night? That sounds cool.”

“It’s cute that you’re worried,” I say as I trail my fingertips up and down his arm.

Otto blows out a breath and then moves to put the bag of food on the counter. “I got a bunch of stuff from the Wok In in Blackstone Falls. I didn’t know what Briggs would like, but he’s not here and—”

“Let’s go for a drive.”

“Okay, sure, anything you want.”

I hate that he’s so eager to placate me, and I release an unintentional growl. Otto gives me a funny look but doesn’t say anything. It’s almost like he’s been twice as cautious since the event at school.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know, maybe some of the back roads and just listen to music. I feel like we should have done that back then.” I’m impressed by the nonchalance in my delivery.

“Does this mean I get to pick the first song?”

“Sure.” I laugh.

He plays with the radio until “All Over the Road” by Easton Corbin comes on and then eases the truck out of town. He has no idea how fitting this song is for the little adventure I have planned.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and I look down to see my leg bouncing. Taking a breath, I nod and then turn in my seat.

We haven’t seen anyone in a few miles, and when I place my hand on Otto’s thigh, I don’t wait. I travel up his leg until his gaze is bouncing between the road and my hand, the muscles bunching and flexing under my caress.

He’s hard almost immediately, and his breathing is labored as I wrangle his belt buckle open. Otto’s free hand grips my wrist as I lean over to trail kisses down his neck.

“What are you doing, Fallon?”

“Pay attention to the road and don’t let us crash,” I whisper into his ear before tugging the lobe between my teeth.

His grip tightens on me as I lick the shell of his ear.

“You said *anything*, Otto. Trust me when I say I *want* your cock in my mouth.” The whisper is a seductive purr that even impresses the hell out of me.

He groans and releases my hand, allowing me to work his jeans open until his cock is free and hard and ready for me.

Licking my lips, I adjust myself in the seat and then lean over and take him into my mouth. Otto curses, and heat pulses between my legs.

Arguably, country roads are probably not ideal for anyone, regardless of gag reflex, but I’m determined to do this.

For him.

*For me.*

I want this experience burned into my brain for eternity. Taking Otto as deep as I can, I swirl my tongue around his shaft before dragging my mouth up to the crown. His hand drops to the back of my head and tangles in my hair. He’s not

rough, but I know the slight tremor in his grip has nothing to do with the truck *or* the road.

Gentling my movements, I pull off before looking up at him through my lashes.

“You seem tense,” I tease.

“Dammit, Fallon, I’m trying not to choke you on my cock. I’m trying to be a fuckin’ gentleman.”

“I don’t need a gentleman, Otto. Show me what I do to you.”

Without waiting for a response, I take a breath and then take him to the back of my throat. His restraint is waning and I want to make this good for him. I want to remember this moment knowing I brought Otto Thayer to his knees.

The truck jerks to the right before he’s stomping on the brake and throwing it into park. I’d probably laugh if my mouth wasn’t otherwise occupied.

“Fuck, Princess. Baby. God, you’re good at that.”

His hand in my hair tightens, and I’m addicted to the way his hips barely rock, pushing him deeper into my mouth.

The angle is awkward, but I’m so turned on it barely matters. I can feel how close he is, but I don’t pick up my pace. Instead I suck him harder, and he swears.

“You look so fucking sexy right now. Please don’t stop. God, Princess, don’t stop.”

I don’t.

I hum, and he groans as his hand cradles the back of my head. The pressure is gentle, but it makes the lust pumping through my veins ignite. I love that he’s so overwhelmed with need that he can’t help but ensure I stay exactly where I am.

“Just like that, Fallon. I’m—”

The sentence dies on his lips as I take his pleasure on mine.

His release hits the back of my throat as he moans into the cab of the truck. It's sinful and gravelly, and I can guarantee that my panties are drenched.

My body hums with anticipation and need as I slowly pull off him.

"Holy Jesus, Fallon, I think my dick is swooning over you."

"That's high praise, I reckon." My words are appropriately delivered with the proper southern twang.

His eyes sparkle and he smirks. "Lotta sass now that you got some southern in ya." His eyes zero in on my lips, and I can't help the laugh that bubbles out of my chest.

"Is that right?"

"Mmmm."

His hand trails up the side of my face to cup my cheek before pulling me in for an unhurried kiss. His tongue moves over mine in a delicate, exploratory dance before he pulls back and stares into my eyes.

"I want to take you home and fuck you with this pretty dress hiked up over that sweet little ass of yours."

"Oh, thank God," I say with so much dramatic flair I flop back in my seat.

"Careful, Princess, it's been a while since I've been inside your tight pussy. You might not be able to walk tomorrow."

"A girl can dream." My sigh is wistful, and I see him stare at me out of the corner of his eye before throwing the car in drive and pulling a U-turn.

Dirt and rocks kick up as the truck gains purchase on the road and then we're racing back to where I hope he makes good on every one of his promises.



## OTTO

The back tires of my truck fishtail as I punch the gas instead of hitting the brakes around the turn. Fallon giggles in the passenger seat, and I don't know if it's my imagination or if I can actually *smell* her arousal.

I push the pedal to the floor, and she smacks my arm as she laughs again.

"I'd rather die from pleasure than die because you arrive prematurely..."

"I *never* come prematurely," I scoff, all the offense taken. "What is with that mouth?"

My cock twitches at the mention of her mouth and I adjust him, again, after haphazardly shoving myself into my jeans earlier.

"I miss the feel of you inside me," she says, and I glance at her. "The way you control my body—it's all I can think about."

*Me too, Princess, me too.*

Pulling onto her street, I've barely thrown the truck into park before I'm ripping my door open and stalking toward her side.

Wide, mischievous eyes meet mine, but she doesn't make a move to climb out.

With more restraint than I thought I possessed, I open her door and cage her against the seat.

“Be sure, Princess. Be so fuckin’ sure, because this isn’t just tonight.”

*It’s forever.*

“I’m sure. I need this.” She brushes a hand through my hair. “*We* need this.”

There’s no hesitation in her words and no space to breathe as I crash my mouth against Fallon’s and grip her ass as I pull her across the seat and lift her out of the truck. Using the heel of my boot, I kick her door shut before crossing the distance to her front door.

Pressing her into the wood, I fumble with her keys as she tightens her legs around my waist and rocks her hips against me.

On a deep exhale, I fit the metal into the lock and damn near cheer as the knob turns in my hand. She chuckles against my neck, causing hot puffs of air to coast over my skin, short-circuiting my brain.

I shiver and groan as I move us inside and kick that door shut as well. I *should* take her to the bedroom, but all I can think about is the promise I made.

Dropping her to the floor, I cut off Fallon’s protests as I spin her and push her forward over the arm of the couch.

Her gasp is equal parts shock and anticipation. She’s turned on, and I waste no time pushing her dress up to expose the creamy white globes of her ass.

She’s fuckin’ perfection.

I massage one cheek and then the other as the emotions inside me battle for dominance.

*Smack.*

My palm lands across her ass, and she gasps before moaning into the couch cushion.

*Smack.*

“Oh God, Otto, please.”



“You make me fuckin’ crazy, Princess. Do you know that?” I drop to my knees behind her and kiss the pink of her skin as I slide her thong down her legs. She wiggles and pushes back toward me on a whimper.

*Smack.*

“I asked you a question.”

“Yes! I know I do.”

“I tried to be good and do the right thing.” My hands caress and grip her ass, her hips, and I nip at the small stretch mark on the inside of her right thigh before easing the sting with my tongue.

“You’re so good, Otto. For me.” I lick her pussy with intention like a man possessed. “Ohmygod, ohmygod...”

Her legs shake and her hips buck backward, but I don’t change the pace. I let her whimper and writhe and beg for release, and she doesn’t disappoint.

It’s unintelligible, and I relish in triumph as wave after wave crashes over her. As I lick her clean, she collapses forward, her ass still on display.

“I’m not done with you, Princess.”

Another whimper has me pulling my cock from my jeans and dragging the head over still-pink skin. Someday, I’ll spill myself all over her perfect backside but not today. I’m too frantic and I need inside her *now*.

She whimpers at the sound of the foil condom packet ripping open, her hair more red in the dim light as it covers all of her face but her parted lips.

*Lips that were just wrapped around my cock.*

Yanking her hips back, I nudge my dick at her entrance before slamming all the way inside her. My balls slap her clit and she gasps. She’s so tight my eyes roll back in my head, and I savor the feel of her hot and wet for me.

*Only me.*

My fingertips dig into her as I pull almost all the way out—this time, I don't hesitate.

“Otto!”

Stars dance behind my eyes as I pound into her. Her hands are braced on the cushion as she pushes back against me. I'm punishing her—punishing *me*—and I can't stop.

She's not even naked, *I'm* not naked, and I'm fuckin' ravenous for her. It's never been like this with anyone else, and it doesn't matter because there'll never be anyone but her again.

Reaching around, my fingers find her clit, and like she didn't just come all over my face, her pussy clamps down around me like a vise grip.

A roar is ripped from my throat as pleasure decimates me. My knees give out, and I barely catch myself on the back of the couch before completely collapsing on Fallon.

When I'm confident I can stand, I pull out as gently as I can before tossing the condom in the trash and kicking off my boots. Fallon still hasn't moved, and I scoop her into my arms and walk us into the bedroom.

She nuzzles against my neck, and the flowery scent of her perfume mixed with *us* settles some of the bullshit in my mind.

I always just wanted the girl who was a little too quiet, a little bit nerdy, and sinfully hot in a way that I could appreciate even in my teenage years.

I hated being overlooked by her back then, like it was okay for us to be friendly in class but she couldn't be bothered to acknowledge me in the hallways or around town.

Havin' her in the field felt like winnin' the Kentucky Derby, and while I knew I should have taken her out first, I thought I had *time* to do it right.

All my life, Case and I have been labeled as the party hard playboys. After Fallon ghosted me, I didn't make any attempt to disprove that assumption.

We've always let the world see what we wanted them to see—control the narrative, as my professor used to say.

Soft lips place a featherlight kiss against my throat like she *knows* I let myself get carried away again.

“Get cleaned up and then come to bed,” I say as I place a kiss of my own against her forehead and set her down in front of the bathroom.

“You're awfully confident I can walk after that.”

“UTIs are no joke.” I pat her ass and she stares up at me with a furrowed brow.

“What? I know things.” She shakes her head, but her grin is unmistakable as she turns and closes the door behind her.

Stripping down to everything but my boxer briefs, I make my way into the kitchen to reheat the food we abandoned.

I'm halfway through dishing out the second container of vegetable lo mein when I hear Fallon come up behind me.

“Anyone ever tell you how sexy you look in the kitchen?”

“Not a lot of opportunities livin' with my brother.”

Her nails dig into my abs as she presses her front into my back and then trails kisses up my spine.

“You're a good man, Otto. I haven't told you that enough.”

Swallowing, I place the spoon and container on the counter and then turn to hold her in my arms.

“I like that you think I'm amazing.”

“I'm sorry there was any doubt.”

Tangling her fingers in my hair, she pulls me down for a sweet kiss, and I'm content to just hold her body against mine.

“Nice shirt,” I murmur against her lips, and I can't help but smile. She pulls away and looks down at the Twinscapes logo I already know is printed across the front, and damn if I don't love seein' her in my shirt.

“I stole it from my boyfriend.”

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I look into her honey-colored eyes and see nothing but adoration and truth.

“I bet he’d give you the world and you wouldn’t even have to ask.”

“He already has.”

There’s no more talking after that and more than a few orgasms before we get around to devouring anything besides each other.



## FALLON

“Hey! Did you make it okay? I’m so sorry I’m late.”

My ex-husband stands from the table and wraps me in a tight hug. The tension in his body seems to dissipate the longer we stand there, until finally, I pull away and take the chair opposite him in Smokin’ Joes.

“I know you told me Clementine Creek is a small town, but that didn’t sink in until I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Isn’t it great?” He chuckles and I smile. Tanner has always been a handsome man with these evergreen eyes that always project warmth and affection.

“Hey Fallon, who’s your friend?” Joe asks with curiosity laced with a big helping of warning.

“This is my ex-husband, Tanner. He just got out of the military and moved here so we can coparent.” I give her my most confident smile as her gaze drags slowly from me to him and back again. Like everyone else in this town, my ex-husband included, she knows I’m dating Otto.

Tanner’s eyebrows are so far into his hairline they practically disappear. He’s a private person and this is a lot of sharing.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he says, and she only *hmms* in response.

“What’ll ya have?”

Tanner orders a burger, and I order a chicken salad wrap, then wait for Joe to be out of earshot.

“Well, that went about as well as the conversation with my parents,” he states sadly.

My heart sinks. “Really? I thought they’d be understanding.”

“They’re...adjusting.”

“I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do? Do you want me to call your mom?”

He shakes his head and then moves the conversation toward Briggs, and we catch up on things he’s learned and how excited he’ll be to see Tanner.

Joe drops off our food and Tanner sighs. I grip his hand and smile.

“It’s going to be fine. Once we’re all settled and you meet everyone—and Otto—they’ll see that you’re here for Briggs and it won’t be an issue.”

The bell over the door rings, and Tanner freezes in his seat.

“Is that your guy?”

I look up in time to see Otto retreating and then look down to see my hand clasped with Tanner’s.

*Shit.*

Let me just add another thing to my list of things that I need to do that will absolutely suck.

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t tell him?”

“He *knows* I’m divorced and that you are moving here.” He eyes me expectantly with a brow raised, and I sigh. “I didn’t really get to tell him *when* you’d be here or the rest of it.”

“Fallon...” His tone is pure disappointment, and it raises my hackles.

“Is it so wrong that I wanted to just be *me* for a little while without the rest of it?” I hiss, and I feel like such a bitch.

“Um, it is when your ex-husband is about to crash land into your little bubble and pop that fucker like a piece of gum.”

I hate when he’s right.

“I’ll tell him.”

“You *have* to, Fallon. If you don’t, I will.”

“You are *not* telling him.”

“Have you seen that dude? I mean I can hold my own but if he tries to fight me, I’m throwing you right the hell under the bus.”

I scowl and he smirks.

“Go. I’ll take care of the bill and try not to get maimed on my way out of here.”

Grabbing my purse from the bench next to me, I stand. “Now you’re being dramatic.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s revisit this conversation later.”

Racing out of the restaurant, I can’t find Otto’s truck anywhere.

*Shit.*

My phone is already in my hand and I’m dialing his number, but it doesn’t even ring before his voicemail picks up.

I dial him again and...nothing.

Looking at the time, panic starts to set in. I need to find Otto and explain, but I only had my lunch break to spare today. Tanner arrived earlier than expected, and I didn’t have enough notice to take the day off. He’s excited to get Briggs from school, which is great, but it doesn’t save me from the shitstorm I just caused.

Dialing the phone again, it rings three times before a familiar voice answers.

“Everything okay?”

“Case! Thank God you picked up. Have you seen Otto? I don’t have time to explain but I *swear* it’s not what it looked



like, and he left before I could explain and I know people say that *all the time* but I swear—I just need to find him.”

The last part comes on a choked sob as I get in my car and start it.

Case is silent on the other end, and I know it’s bad, maybe worse than I imagined.

“I haven’t talked to Otto,” he says slowly, “but I did get a call tellin’ me you’re holding hands with your ex-husband durin’ the lunch rush.”

“To comfort, Case. I put my hand over his, and I would’ve done the same thing if you were havin’ a hard time and confided in me.”

“You promise?”

“I swear on my love for my son.”

A heavy breath comes over the line.

“I’ll fix the gossip from Smokin’ Joes, and I’ll let you know if I see Otto. You got him up in knots, Fallon. It’s only ever been you.”

“He’s it for me, Case. I just...I screwed up. I was scared and—”

“Make it right,” he says, cutting off my rambling thoughts.

“I will.” I say the words with confidence, but Case only grunts before disconnecting the call.

I try Otto again but it goes to voicemail, and I have to get back to school before my class starts.

*This is only a speed bump.*

Resolved to not let myself spiral, I type out a message to Otto.

FALLON: I should have told you Tanner was coming today and I’m sorry. There’s nothing going on between us and I need you to trust me. Trust you and me.

FALLON: Trust us.

FALLON: I have to go back to work now so be mad – but be ready to talk when I'm done. You're MINE, Otto Raymond.

Throwing my phone into my purse, I back the car out of the parking space and send up a little prayer that all my bravado isn't for nothing.



# OTTO

**M**y hands tighten around the steering wheel as gravel crunches under my tires. Hank's lakeside property is quiet and serene and completely at odds with the absolute mayhem raging inside me.

I'm fuming because Fallon didn't tell me, when I'm bustin' my ass every single day to show her I'm in this for always.

My phone is still quiet which I'm *more pissed* about and then I realize that the damn thing is dead.

Fuckin' perfect.

Plugging it in, I step out of the truck and let the gentle sound of the waves wash over me as I pick up a flat rock and skip it across the surface.

I do it again.

And again.

My mind is speeding faster than a racecar in Daytona, but the thing that hits the hardest is that I'm *hurt*.

Fallon didn't trust me enough or think I deserved to know that Tanner was here officially.

I'm not sure how long I stand there, but the more time that passes, the less settled I feel. My phone is lit up when I get back in my truck with several missed calls and text messages from Fallon, which I read but don't respond to even if the last one almost makes me smile.

The one from my brother, though, gives me pause.

CASE: Don't be an idiot. Talk to her. I took care of Smokin' Joes.

I don't respond to that one either, but it settles me at least a little bit. With a dangerous amount of free time on my hands, I head back into town and toward the small, newly rented house I know Tanner now occupies—one of the perks of a small town.

Throwing the truck in park, I stomp up to the door. There's no plan other than I'm already sick of waiting and not knowing what's going on. I trust her but that doesn't mean I trust *him*.

Fallon and I are something special, and I'll be damned if Tanner thinks he's just going to waltz into my town and take my girl.

My fist slams against the door, and I'm surprised when it opens before I have the chance to hit it a third time.

The guy that opens the door is a few years older than I am with light brown hair and a runner's build. I recognize him from his picture immediately.

Taking a step back, I clench my fists at my side.

"If we're going to fight, can we do it out back? I haven't met the neighbors yet, and the house is too small to do it in here even without any real furniture."

The words are like a bucket of cold water. "Do you think we need to fight?"

"You tell me."

He's not intimidated by me even though I probably look like a raving lunatic. This whole conversation is freaking me out, so I stay silent.

"Cool," he says after a minute. "So how about I grab us some waters and we talk in the backyard and *then* we can decide if we're going to fight?"

I seriously want to laugh because *what in the actual fuck* is going on? Tanner turns and leaves me standing on the front step as he makes his way into the kitchen.

Stepping inside, I linger in the entryway then follow him through the house to a small patio with two camping chairs set out.

“Movers arrive later this week, so it’s the best I can do for now.”

He hands me a bottle, and we sit in silence just staring out at the well-manicured lawn. I’m still dissecting the last ten minutes when he speaks.

“I can see how it looks from your perspective, but there is nothing going on between me and Fallon except trying our best to raise Briggs.”

I look over, but he’s still staring out in front of him.

“I don’t care if you and I are friends. I won’t lose any sleep over it if this is the only drink we ever share.” He holds the bottled water in my direction and meets my gaze. “The only thing I care about is how you treat Fallon and how you treat my son. That’s *always* been my concern, and I’m not going away.”

“He’s a great kid and she...” My voice trails off and I rub my fist over the ache in my chest. “I never stopped loving her.”

“Are you *in love* with her?”

“Yes.”

“Does she know?”

I shrug. “We haven’t really talked about it.”

Tanner takes a sip of his drink and then picks at the label. “She’s...” It’s his turn to be at a loss. “She’s going through a rough time with everything.”

My back stiffens and I grip the bottle until it crinkles loudly in my hand.

“Dude, relax.” He rolls his eyes before taking another sip. “She got a divorce, she’s dealing with my...reality, she moved back across the country, and now she’s trying to restart her life, rekindle shit with you, and balance everything.”

“Is your *reality* something I’m going to have to deal with?”

Tanner goes completely still before looking at me for a really long time. Minutes feel like hours as we stare at each other.

“I’m going to tell you something and not because I really want to but because I think it will help you understand. And I’m honestly pissed she put us in this position.”

“That right?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well?” My voice is laced with irritation.

“I’m gay. Congratulations, you’re one of a few people who knows.”

Tanner chugs the rest of his water before aggressively putting the cap back on and slamming it into the mesh cup holder.

His declaration doesn’t land in the top five things I thought he was going to throw at me. I don’t care—his preference is his preference—but I definitely have some follow-up questions.

“That’s uh...good for you, man,” I say carefully because while no one has ever *come out* to me before, and I don’t know Tanner, I feel like this is a big deal for him.

“So in the order I think you’re wanting to ask—yes, I love Fallon. No, I’m not *in love* with her. Yes, I was attracted to her but I think it was more her mind than her body when we conceived Briggs. No, I don’t want to have sex with her or any other woman. Yes, I know I’m in my late twenties. No, I’m not attracted to you and have zero interest in hooking up with you or her or both of you together so don’t make it weird.”

“Dude.” I double over in my chair and laugh until my stomach hurts. Glancing up through the tears in my eyes, I

catch a slight smile on Tanner's lips.

"Did I miss anything?"

I sober and look at him head on. "I want you to know that I don't take it lightly that you shared that with me."

Holding my hand out, I wait with bated breath for him to take it. When he does, there's an understanding that passes between us. We might not be friends now, but we could be. If Fallon and I make a life together, Tanner is going to be a part of that.

"I...appreciate that," he says, releasing my hand and rubbing the back of his neck. "It's been enlightening. Fallon has been supportive, but we're both working through what it all means."

"How are you adjusting? Is that the right word?" He tilts his head back and forth as he mulls it over.

"There's a lot of misplaced emotion right now. I know it's not my fault, but there's guilt and uncertainty and some confusion." He lowers his voice. "I'm not ashamed of being gay, but a part of me is ashamed for keeping Fallon in a marriage that wasn't what she deserved. She had to make a lot of sacrifices, but she stayed with me until my contract was up and we could get out here."

"Are you talking to someone about"—I circle my hand in his direction—"all that misplaced emotion?"

He shrugs and I make a mental note to revisit that at a later date. "Were you really going to hit me when you got here?"

I smirk and finish my water. "I hadn't planned that far ahead, but it was definitely a possibility."

"I told Fallon when you walked out of the restaurant that if she didn't tell you, I wasn't going to get hit because she was all in her head."

"I appreciate you being honest with me."

"Yeah,"—he rubs the back of his neck—"and thanks for..." He gestures haphazardly with his hand but I get it.



“Yeah,” I say with a nod and then because I can’t help myself I add, “If she keeps me can we get shirts?”

“What is it with you and shirts?” He laughs like he can’t quite follow my brand of crazy.

“Tell me the one for Briggs wasn’t awesome. Go on, I’ll wait,” I challenge and then punch him in the arm with a grin. “Dude, we brought a life-sized cutout of you with us.”

He laughs and shakes his head but is clearly resigned to his fate.

“That was pretty legit.” Tanner sighs. “Briggs couldn’t stop talking about you showing up with your entire family for him.”

“We take care of family.”

Closing his eyes, Tanner looks up toward the sky. He’s quiet for a moment before he says, “All right, what do you want to get?”

I let out a *whoop* and he snorts.

“Like you see in those videos where they have dad and bonus dad shirts.”

“You want to be a bonus dad?” He’s teasing me, but I nod. “And you want to get matching shirts?” I nod again and he shakes his head but can’t keep the smile from his face. “Yeah, Otto. If Fallon keeps you around, we can get matching shirts.”

I fist pump to really lay it on thick, and he just shakes his head.

“I hope she realizes that you’re like having a second kid. You’ve been here for like twenty minutes and I’m already exhausted.”

“I’ll have you know that I am a delight to be around.”

He snorts. “Yep. I gathered that.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out.

FALLON: Where are you?

“Hey, let’s take a selfie.” I don’t wait for his response before leaning toward him with my phone out. “Act like you tolerate me; it’s for Fallon.”

He snorts and then we both smile, and I take the picture and send it without any additional text.

Her response is immediate.

FALLON: Oh shit

FALLON: How much trouble am I in?

OTTO: Dunno Princess...you tell me.

Three dots appear and then disappear repeatedly and my lips twitch.

“You’re getting Briggs from school?”

“Yes,” Tanner slowly says.

“Cool. I’ll go with you. Fallon can meet us there, and I’ll stand back while y’all have your reunion.”

“I don’t—”

“She’s gonna wanna be there, and then I’ll be taking her back to my house.”

“Ah...”

“And you guys won’t need Fallon for anything other than a call at bedtime.”

“Yep.” His lips are rolled inward, and it’s doing absolutely nothing to hide his amusement.

“Good. She’s busy.”

“Noted.”

“And then we’ll have a big welcome barbeque at my parents’ on Saturday and you can meet everyone.”

His eyes widen. “Oh, um...that’s not necessary. It’s sudden and after what happened at lunch—”

“My brother took care of it,” I say, recalling Case’s message.

“Do I even wanna know?” Tanner drags his hands down his face. The guy looks exhausted, and I know I’m a lot, but I’m also the most genuine motherfucker you’ll ever meet.

Shrugging, I say, “Probably not,” then tap out a new message.

OTTO: Meet us at the school

FALLON: What? Why? What happened?

OTTO: We’re bonding—and I know you’ll want to be with them for the reunion

FALLON: Thank you Otto—I know you’re mad but that means so much to me (heart emoji)

OTTO: I know

OTTO: But Princess?

FALLON: Yes?

OTTO: Tanner is takin’ Briggs home and then be ready because you’re mine tonight

FALLON: \*\*gulp\*\*

I don’t bother responding. She can take it however she wants because tonight there will be *no question* who she belongs to and what my intentions are.

“I don’t want to know what that smile is for, do I?”

“Prolly not.”

“We should start heading over to the school,” Tanner says as he gathers his water bottle.

“Do you wanna take my truck? Then you can take Fallon’s car back with Briggs.”

“Sure.” He gives me a side-eye before shaking his head. “Shouldn’t this be weird?”

“What?”

“Ex-husband and new boyfriend.”

Shrugging, I say, “I dunno, man, but I already told Fallon once I’d give her up for Briggs if she just wanted to fuck, so basically you get me regardless.”

“You really said that?”

“Yeah man, your kid is awesome and I just”—I scuff my boot on the ground, suddenly unsure—“I’ll do anything to keep him happy, you know?”

“He’s lucky to have you.”

My smile is small as we make our way out to my truck, but my heart is ready to explode. I didn’t realize how much I wanted Tanner to like me. He’s connected to Fallon and Briggs in a way that I’ll never be, but that doesn’t mean we can’t all make something new *together*.

The ride is quiet as I drive to the elementary school. It’s not until we’re parked that Tanner speaks again.

“Is it weird I’m nervous?”

“Nope. But it’s gonna be great, and he’s going to be over the fuckin’ moon to see you.” He’s nodding but his gaze is focused on the entrance.

“I missed him so much.”

“I can’t even imagine. Hell, I missed him for you.”

Tanner’s hand scrubs against his jaw, and it’s then that I notice that he hasn’t shaved in a few days, probably not since he left.

“Just so you know, I came today to make sure no one fucks with you.” He looks at me in surprise.

“That happen a lot in the elementary school parking lot?”

“Dunno. Never had a reason to do this. But I’m not gonna let anyone ruin this for Briggs. They see me with you and hopefully they’ll move on. We’re gonna figure this whole thing out together.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re like a golden retriever? It’s annoying how damn likable you are.”

Grinning, I say, “It’s been said. But more importantly I protect my family.”

We’re saved from any more emotional breakthroughs as the bell rings, and I see Fallon walking toward the front steps. Tanner notices her too, and we pile out of the truck and make our way to what will hopefully be our own blended family.

I didn’t know this is something I would ever want, that I would ever be okay with, but being here now, I know every single moment in my life has prepared me for this one.



## FALLON

No one prepares you for the magnitude of seeing your ex-husband walking with your boyfriend for the first time. If Tanner was just my ex-husband, this wouldn't be such a big deal, but he's the father of our child and will forever be part of Briggs's life and mine too.

Humility washes over me in waves as they approach. I didn't listen to Tanner and I didn't trust the strength of my relationship with Otto, even though he's done nothing but show up for me day after day.

"I'm so sorry, guys, I—"

"Later," Tanner says as he holds out his arms. I step into them without hesitation because I missed him and I'm a mess. "Good luck," Tanner singsongs on a whisper before moving toward the door.

Otto's eyes narrow at me as I wring my hands together. My heart is in my throat, and I'm so nervous I feel like I'm going to be sick.

He doesn't give me a chance.

Otto takes one step into me before his hands are threaded in my hair and his lips land on mine. Gripping his forearms, I surrender to the onslaught of need and passion and possession that he pours into the kiss.

"Do not *ever* pull that shit again, do you hear me?" His words are low but stern, and I nod as best I can with his hands still tangled in my hair.

“I won’t. I’m so sorry, Otto, I—”

“Later,” he growls before placing one more searing kiss on me and pulling away. “And Princess?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re in *big* fuckin’ trouble.”

I swallow hard for an entirely different reason when I catch the fire-laced mischief in his ice-blue eyes. Reaching for my hand, Otto and I walk to where Tanner shifts from one foot to the other.

“I already signed him out, so it should be just a couple more minutes.”

Tanner nods, his fidgeting worsening with each passing second until a small voice is heard above the chatter.

“That’s my dad!” Briggs yells and races through the other kids, his bookbag jumping on his shoulders with each step he takes. He launches himself at Tanner, but I can’t see anything through the tears streaming down my face.

Otto squeezes my hand, and it’s only when I look up at him that I notice his phone in his hand. It’s pointed at Tanner and Briggs. He’s recording the reunion of my son and his father, and then there’s no question.

No hesitation.

I’ve fallen head over heels in love for this stupidly beautiful man with his big selfless heart and generous soul.

He nods toward Tanner and Briggs and releases my hand, and I fall just a little more. My arms wrap around them and there’s no way to hold back the tears.

I’m home.

My family is home.

And the love of my life has given me everything I could ever want and more than I deserve.

“Otto! Did you see my dad came?” Otto tucks his phone in his pocket as Tanner and I wipe our eyes.



“I did, Big Rigg. That’s pretty darn cool.” Briggs jumps from Tanner’s arms and into Otto’s waiting ones.

“You’re still My Otto, right?” he whispers in a way that is absolutely *not* a whisper, and I choke on a new wave of emotion.

“Yeah, Big Rigg, your dad and I talked so we’re friends now.”

“Awesome!”

Leaning toward Tanner I *actually whisper*, “Friends? Already?”

“Seriously, that guy is impossible not to like.”

“I know.”

Otto winks at me over Briggs’s head as he tells an animated story about playing dinosaurs on the playground.

“He’s already getting us matching shirts.”

“No, he’s not.”

“He is. And he told me if things don’t work out with you, he’s still going to be around for Briggs, so you’re going to need to figure it out because I can’t handle two kids right now on my own.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” I giggle.

“Are you kidding? I’ve been with him for like an hour and I’m beat.” Tanner lowers his voice. “So when are you gonna marry him?”

“What?” The word is a hiss as I stare at my ex-husband in disbelief. He rolls his eyes. “We *just* got a divorce.”

“Otto?”

“Yo!” he says as he puts Briggs on the ground and faces us.

“What are we getting on our shirts?”

Otto’s grin is wide as his eyes bounce between us.

“I got some ideas.”

“Can I get a shirt too?”

“Definitely, Big Rigg. Let’s get you home with your dad and then we’re gonna have a big barbeque on Saturday so your dad can meet everybody. How’s that sound?”

“It’s gonna be the best day ever, right, Dad?”

Hope pours out of our son as he looks over his shoulder at Tanner. Otto winks, and Tanner just shakes his head.

“Yeah, buddy, it’s going to be great.”

My gaze bounces between the three most important men in my life, and I soak in the rightness of this moment. I needed this, and now that I have it, I won’t take it for granted.

Tanner was right; we didn’t get divorced because we hate each other. We got divorced because we weren’t right for each other. As I watch Otto buckle Briggs into his seat, I know that despite the heartache, this is the path I was meant to take.



# FALLON

The air is heavy in the cab of Otto's truck as we sit parked in front of his house. His arm is braced on the steering wheel as his tongue peeks out to wet his lips. My heart races, and I'm absolutely mesmerized as I wait with bated breath.

"When we get inside,"—he pauses without looking at me—"you're gonna go into my bedroom and you're gonna lie face down."

I nod.

"Princess?"

"Yes?" My response is breathy, and I know he hears it by the way his eyes darken.

"You're gonna hike that dress up so I can see that pretty backside when I walk in. Are we clear?"

"Yes." My thighs clamp together at the seriousness in his tone.

"You gave me a lotta grief today..." He trails off as the insinuation hangs between us.

"I know."

"Gonna be hard to sit down tomorrow." I swallow and shift in my seat as if the movement can prepare me for his hands on my flesh.

"Then I'm gonna fuck you in that dress." His eyes rake down over my body. "We got a long night ahead of us, Princess. You sure you're up for it?"

“Yes.” It whooshes from my lips like a plea and a prayer, but his face is stoic as ever and completely at odds with the man I know.

*I like it.*

I like that he’s so consumed by this—by *me*.

“Go on inside then.”

Unbuckling my seatbelt with shaky hands, I gather my purse from the floorboard before opening the door and hopping out of the truck. I try to keep my steps measured and even, but it’s impossible when I can feel his gaze searing into me.

He hasn’t moved by the time I enter the house, so I leave the door propped open a crack and kick off my shoes. The hardwood floor is cold beneath my feet as I pad down the hall.

Each step is exhilarating, and when I finally cross the threshold to his bedroom, I’m practically panting. The smell of fresh-cut grass and soap greets me, and it’s the most potent aphrodisiac.

The king-size bed is made with its gray checkered comforter, and I don’t hesitate. Climbing onto the mattress, I grab the hem of my dress and pull it up over my hips before lying down.

The anticipation of what he’s about to do to me is almost too much to take, and when I hear the front door close and his keys hit the counter, I squirm in search of relief.

The *thunk* of his boots hitting the floor has me gripping the fabric of my dress still clutched in my hands. My panties are soaked, and I know he’s going to figure that out as soon as he walks in the room.

Soft, intentional steps grow closer, and I muffle a groan into the comforter.

“That’s a mighty fine sight, Princess.”

Rough hands travel up the back of my legs from my ankles, up my calves to the apex of my thighs. I whimper

when his thumbs press into my flesh so close to where I need him and yet a million miles away.

His hands travel back down to my ankles, his thumbs tracing small circles over the bone before his grip tightens and he wrenches my legs open.

I gasp.

Hot open-mouthed kisses trail up one thigh as the bed dips between my legs and his hand coasts up the other.

“Oh God.”

“Princess, ain’t nobody here but me.”

The crack of his palm against my ass cuts off any retort I’d been about to make. The sting is second to the pleasure that shoots directly to my core as his hand massages the area thoroughly.

“Such a good girl, but you liked that, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe next time I’ll spank you over my knee. Would you like that?” His other hand connects with my other cheek, and I writhe under his touch.

“Maybe.”

Two more strikes land against the opposite side in quick succession, but my gasp is replaced by a moan as his tongue licks over the sensitive flesh.

“Please.”

“I love seein’ you spread for me like this. Be even better if I could see how wet your pussy is right now.”

“Otto.”

I push back into him because try as I might, I *like* being spanked. No one has ever done this to me, and I have no idea if I’d have had the same response, but it doesn’t matter.

I need him to do it again.

“Please, Otto.”

The angle is awkward, but his fingers expertly find my lace-covered clit. He pinches the bud unapologetically and I gasp. My hips buck against his hand as his other smacks my ass once, twice, *three times*.

“Baby, please... I need... Otto, please.” I’m mumbling and rambling and gasping for air as my vision starts to blur and he presses tight circles against that little bundle of nerves.

I need the release more than I need my next breath. My movements are frantic and uncoordinated as I climb higher and higher.

I’m completely and holy unprepared for the orgasm that rearranges my molecular makeup. My body thrashes against the bed as wave after wave of pleasure rockets through me.

His touch gentles as I come back to myself, my chest heaving from the exertion of obeying the man behind me.

“That’s one.”

“Whaaat?” My voice is shaky when I look over my shoulder at the absolutely ravenous look in his eyes.

“I told you, Princess. You have a lot of makin’ up to do.” He smirks as he undoes the buckle of his belt and shucks his pants off. “I’m collectin’ orgasms. Startin’ with yours.”

His hands find the lace of my thong, and he drags the soaked fabric down my legs at an excruciatingly slow pace.

There’s a crinkling sound somewhere behind me and then Otto’s hands are massaging my ass, and I’m so turned on again I can barely breathe.

“Hands on the headboard.”

My legs are jelly, but I manage to do as he asks before bowing my head in anticipation. There’s no amount of deep breathing to prepare me for the need radiating off him.

Otto’s breath in my ear makes me shiver as his chest ghosts over my back.

“I thought you wanted my cock in that greedy little pussy.”

His hand cups my breast through my dress, and I arch into him without thought.

“Makin’ me do all the work, Princess.” He fondles me while his other hand skates down my back and pushes me lower. “You just want me to spank you again, is that it?”

“God, that’s filthy.”

“You like it, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I want you hungry for my cock, Fallon. I want you pushing back, beggin’ me to fuck you.” He licks the shell of my ear as he pinches my nipple. “I like lookin’ at you like this, your ass pink from my hand with your dress hiked up around your waist.”

I moan; I can’t help it. His palm comes down against one cheek and then the other before he slams all the way inside me. The onslaught of pleasure is damn near euphoric and not nearly enough.

We both cry out, and he holds himself still for only a moment before he’s pulling out and thrusting so hard and so deep, I can’t do anything but hang on.

“Otto, oh my. I…” My hands grip the solid wood as his fingers dig into my hips.

The slapping sound of skin on skin snaps the last of my restraint, and I finally give in to the moment. I’m aware of everything—my dress exposing me, his breath on the back of my neck, the way my pussy clenches around him when he hits that spot inside me just right.

I’ve never felt more free than in this moment. Throwing my head back, I let go of the stress of the entire day and push my hips back to meet his.

Otto grunts and growls filthy promises that have my face heating and my body absolutely on fire.

“Harder,” I rasp. “Fuck me harder.”



He pistons into me with so much force my back bows in a way I had no idea I was capable.

“Yes! Oh, yes, don’t stop!”

I shatter, wholly and completely, and Otto follows right behind me, and it feels like he’s putting me back together—like I’m doing it to him too.

He collapses against my back and then rolls us to the side to lie on the bed.

“See what happens when you just communicate instead of runnin’ scared?”

“That was a hell of a lesson.” My walls squeeze around him still inside me, and he grunts before slowly pulling out.

“Don’t move.” He climbs out of bed, and I watch his perfect backside strut toward the bathroom. It’s really unfair how incredible he looks, but then I also can’t help the smile from spreading over my face when I think about the way he looks at *me*.

There hasn’t been a single second that he hasn’t looked at me with need and lust and affection. Even when he was pissed at me in the very beginning, I could still see the longing and the appreciation in the way his gaze raked over me.

“What’s goin’ on in that head of yours?”

Crawling over me, he doesn’t wait for an answer before he’s kissing me senseless like he didn’t just completely rock my world.

“Hmm?” His nose drags against mine, but his grin is what has butterflies erupting in my belly.

“Just appreciatin’ your fine male form,” I tease, and he looks up with a wicked smirk on his lips. “And the way you make me feel—how you make me see me the way that you do.”

My nails scrape against his scalp, and he leans into my touch.

“You’re beautiful, Fallon. Everything about you. Even the parts that drive me fuckin’ nuts,”—he pauses and raises a single brow—“and not in the sexy way either.”

“I love you, Otto. Wholly and unconditionally and forever.”

“You can’t take it back,” he whispers, his expression hopeful but still unsure.

“I don’t want to take it back.” Cradling his face in my hands, I say, “I want to love you the way you deserve.”

I let my palms drift down his neck, over his shoulders, and along the taut muscles of his abdomen before landing on his ass, which I give a hearty squeeze.

He chuckles and lowers his weight on top of me. “I love you. I’ve loved you a long time and I just”—his voice cracks and I pull him tighter against me—“I didn’t know if I’d ever get to be this happy.”

“We get to be this happy forever.”

“I love you. And Briggs. And even Tanner.”

“You do? Tanner, I mean. You just met him.”

The man naked on top of me shrugs, and I laugh, a full deep belly laugh that has him lifting off me and bracing himself on the mattress so he can look down at my face.

“He said we could get matching shirts.”

Wiping tears from my eyes, I nod. “I’m sure he did. You’re hard not to love.”

“Took you long enough to notice.”

Rolling my eyes, I push him the rest of the way off me and climb off the bed.

“What happens now?”

Otto stalks over to where I’m standing and pulls me tight against him.

“Right now,”—he drops a kiss to the corner of my mouth—“I’m going to peel your clothes from your body and then

I'm gonna love on you."

"Didn't you just do that?" I say with a knowing smile.

"No, Princess, I fucked you hard and fast and dirty. Now I'm gonna make love to you."

My cheeks heat and he chuckles.

"What?"

"That's what makes you blush? All the filthy things I said to you, did to you, and *that's* what gets you?"

I shrug and then reach for the hem of my dress and pull it over my head.

"Learnin' what I like, I guess."

"You're somethin' else, Princess."

Shrugging, I give him a small smile. "Maybe, but I'm yours."

"And I'll never get tired of hearin' it."



## OTTO

I made good on my promise to love on Fallon. I'd surprised myself, but I think she did too. There was a lot of *everything* tangled up with us that seemed to settle with the early mornin' light. We'd talked and made love until fallin' asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

I refrained from askin' her to marry me but only because Briggs still needs time to adjust, and as much as I love Fallon, that kid comes first.

"What are you thinkin' so hard about over there?" Fallon asks as she picks up the coffee mug on the counter that I fixed for her and blows on the steaming liquid.

"Just about how we do this with Briggs—makin' sure he's comfortable."

"It's going to be an adjustment again, but he has so many people who love him and shower him with affection. We're lucky to be in this position." She moves to stand between my legs while wearin' my shirt, and I can't help but run my hands up to tease the hem against her thigh.

"What position is that?" I murmur as I nuzzle my face against her breasts. She laughs and pushes out of my hold.

"Not *that* position." Putting the island between us, she smirks over her cup.

"Why not?" I say while standing. "We've got a couple of hours before we need to be at Mama's for the barbeque."

She takes a step back as I round the island, keeping it between us.

“Haven’t you had enough of me?” Her cheeks are flushed as she puts her coffee down without taking her eyes off me.

I grin.

“Never.”

“Otto...” She says my name in warning, but her eyes are bright with anticipation.

We move in tandem but I’m gaining on her. My phone buzzes on the counter, and she’s distracted just enough for me to round the island.

She squeals as I hook my arm around her thighs and throw her over my shoulder.

“Otto!”

“Still on my time, Princess, and right now, it’s time for breakfast,” I say in the most lecherous tone I can manage as I smack her ass.

“Oh my God, you goof, put me down!” She can barely get the words out she’s laughing so hard as I carry her to the bedroom.

“As the lady wishes.”

She lets out a small *oof* as she lands on the mattress. Her smile is wide and inviting, and I give her one of my own before burying my face between her legs.

“I can’t believe you almost made us late!” Fallon hisses as we park my truck at my parents’ house. We’d spent the last few hours naked and enjoying the uninhibited connection between us.

“Why are you so worried? We’re *not* late and even if we were, Briggs knows everyone.” I smile down at my *Property of Briggs* shirt.

“Yeah, but Tanner doesn’t. You don’t think it’s weird that we’re together and my ex-husband is going to be here with *your* family?”

“Okay, well, if you want to dwell on Tanner being your ex-husband, that’s on you. I trust you and I like him enough currently, but I’d rather look at him as Briggs’s dad instead of your ex.”

“Huh.”

Turning in my seat, I cup her cheek in my hand and guide her toward me until our lips are barely touching.

“He’s always going to be Briggs’s dad. But you’re mine and I’ll do anything to make Briggs happy, and there’s no denyin’ that kid loves Tanner.”

“How are you so amazing?” Her tear-filled eyes dart to mine before falling to my lips. I indulge her with a sweet kiss before answering her question.

“I know what I want, Fallon.”

Her hand snakes around the back of my neck as she crushes her mouth against mine. I’d probably chuckle at her eagerness if the kiss wasn’t laced with gratitude and relief and love.

“I love you,” she whispers against my lips, and they curve up in response.

“I love you too.” Pulling back, I let my smile fall into a smirk. “Come on, let’s go welcome Tanner to the family. I even invited Miss Thelma.”

“Otto! You did not.” She gasps and I chuckle as I get out of the truck and round the hood to her side.

“I most certainly did. If he’s gonna live here, he needs to know all the people who reside in our little slice of heaven.” My accent is heavy as I draw out the last few words, and Fallon rolls her eyes as Tanner parks his car next to mine.

“Otto! Is Hank here?”

“Yeah, Big Rigg, probably out back.”

Briggs takes off like a shot, and Fallon stands there with her mouth agape.

“The one he’s attached himself to is Hank?”

I shrug. “Seems that way.” Holding my hand out to Tanner, I say, “Welcome, man.”

“Thanks for uh...having me. I think.” His shake is firm but his words are hesitant.

“Look, Tanner, everyone is going to know who you are, but when I introduce you to the group I’m not going to harp on the ex thing—you’re Briggs’s dad. That simple.” I turn my gaze between the two of them. “Seriously with the s’s?”

Tanner points at Fallon. “Her fault and I appreciate that. And honestly I’m still kind of weirded out by you and how easy this transition has been.”

“If y’all are done gabbin’, I got food to put on the table.”

“Sorry, Mama, we’re comin’.”

She points her wooden spoon at Tanner. “Inside, Tanner. I need you to help with this pasta salad. Otto, go help your daddy. Fallon, we’ll catch up in a bit, sweetheart.”

“Hi, Flora, thanks so much for havin’ us.”

Mama waves her off. “You know I live for havin’ my family close. Now come on, I wanna get everything out before it’s cold.”

I slap Tanner on the shoulder as Mama waits on the porch expectantly.

“Good luck, brother,” I say on a soft chuckle before taking Fallon’s hand and leaving him to fend for himself.

“He’s going to be okay, right?” she whispers as we head into the backyard.

“Of course, you know how Mama is. She’s gonna ease him into the chaos.”

She gives me a side-eye but otherwise doesn’t say anything.

“Hey y’all!” Marlee yells when she sees us before coming over and giving us each a hug.



“Hey Marlee.” I hug my sister-in-law for a beat longer than normal, and she squeezes me in return. Tanner might be a different circumstance, but when Sorren and Marlee landed in Clementine Creek, there was no question they were ours.

In my mind, Tanner is ours too. He’s family, and I’ll make sure everyone knows it.

“You okay?” Marlee whispers as she pulls back to look at me.

“Yeah, I just—”

“We love them because you love them.”

“I wouldn’t say I *love* Tanner.”

“Yet.” She grins. “You don’t love him *yet*, but you will.”

Pulling her tight against me again, I rock us back and forth in a dramatic fashion until she giggles and Waylon pulls her into his arms.

“Get off my girl. You got your own,” he says, but he’s smiling too.

Tanner comes out carrying a bowl in each hand as Mama talks his ear off. His expression is relaxed as he nods along with whatever she’s saying.

Until he looks up.

A couple dozen people stare back at him, and his body visibly tenses while he sets the bowls on the picnic table. I kiss Fallon on the forehead and walk over and throw my arm around Tanner’s shoulders.

“Hey everyone, make sure you come introduce yourself to Briggs’s dad, Tanner.”

I meet the eyes of everyone gathered today to drive home the point. Hank smirks and so does Isla, my father nods approvingly, and Briggs runs over to launch himself at us.

“Oof!” I say and bend over. “Did you get stronger from the last time I saw you?”

“Well, aren’t *you* handsome!” Miss Thelma sashays over and sticks out her hand. “I’m Miss Thelma.”

“Tanner. It’s lovely to meet you, ma’am.”

“Do I look old to you, son?” Tanner’s eyes widen in panic, and I hold back a laugh.

“No, Miss Thelma, you look lovely,” he says with a nod toward her white Capri pants and pink shirt with cat faces all over them—Louise’s face to be exact.

“Otto, Louise hasn’t been sneakin’ into your bed again, has she? I was awful sorry about that.”

Tanner’s eyebrows slash down and Miss Thelma catches the look and points to her shirt.

“Louise is my cat, and Otto is awful allergic. She usually sneaks out to sleep with Case, but I guess he wasn’t home, and you can’t blame a girl for wanting to cuddle with a big strong man, now can you?”

Tanner’s mouth opens and then closes before he clears his throat. I arch an eyebrow at him, and the tips of his ears turn pink.

“Miss Thelma?” Sorren asks with so much charm *I’m* almost flustered.

“Oh, hello, Sorren.” Slipping her arm into his offered elbow, he leads her toward the food.

“Wow,” Tanner whispers, and I’m not sure if he means his interaction with Miss Thelma or Sorren.

“He’s straight.”

“Oh, I didn’t...I mean, I know...I wasn’t—”

Squeezing his shoulder, I give him a nod. “I know, man. Just relax. Let’s get a beer.”

On the way to the cooler, I introduce him to my siblings and some of the other friends and neighbors that came.

“You guys are a lot,” he mutters from the side of his mouth after taking a long pull from the bottle Waylon hands him.

“But we’ll love the fuck outta you.”

“I guess there’s that.”

“Hey man, I’m Case.” Tanner shakes Case’s hand and smiles.

“Briggs thinks it’s the coolest that you guys are twins.”

“He’s a great kid.” My brother shoves his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and scuffs his boot against the grass.

“Thanks. And thank you for...everything. Otto says you cleared things up at Smokin’ Joes and just for being great to Briggs. I,”—he rubs the back of his neck—“I didn’t know what to expect moving here, and it’s been weirdly nice.”

“I’m so glad we’re keepin’ him,” Case says to me with a grin, which I return.

“Me too.”

The rest of the evening is much of the same. Tanner is bombarded with well-wishers and stories of Clementine Creek and promises of delivered casseroles to welcome him to town.

Briggs falls asleep soon after Hank lights the bonfire, and Mama puts him in the room she’s made up for him. He’s her first grandson by all accounts, and her love for him makes me want to explode with happiness.

Fallon’s parents stopped by after getting back late from their trip, and I feel better than I have in years. Their acceptance and approval is a work in progress, but I don’t mind. My family is finally here together, and even though it’s different than I thought it’d look, I know in my heart it’s better.

“You’re amazing,” Fallon says on a dreamy sigh. She’s sitting on my lap with her head resting on my shoulder and her face turned into my neck.

“You are.” I kiss the top of her head, and Tanner looks up from his conversation with Sorren and gives me a small smile.

Sitting up slightly, Fallon turns and holds my face in her hands and stares into my soul.

“I didn’t know it could be like this. I thought I’d have to give up something to be here,” she murmurs quietly.

“I’ll give you anything you want, Princess.”

“You already have.” Kissing me gently, she pulls back and rests her forehead against mine. “This is everything. *You* are everything.”

I kiss her sweetly in front of the fire before tucking her back against me to watch the flames dance into the night sky.

The soft sound of “Sweet” by Kurt Thomas plays from the speakers, and it’s everything I’ve never let myself dream could be real.

But tonight, holding my girl in my arms with my family all around, it feels like the first day of the rest of our lives.



OTTO

## 6 MONTHS LATER

“**S**he’s going to say yes, right?” Tanner rolls his eyes like I’m a moron—which to be clear, I *am* most of the time—but right now is not one of those times.

“I wouldn’t have helped you plan this if I didn’t think so.” He leans against the bathroom doorjamb as I turn back to the mirror. Taking a calming breath, I drag the razor down my face and rinse it under the faucet.

“Hey, I need to shave!” Briggs pops his head around Tanner and then looks from me up to his dad. He frowns. “You too, Dad.”

“Let’s go, Dad,” I tease and Tanner glares.

“Don’t start with me,” he grumps, but he can’t fight the grin as he steps up to the other sink.

Getting Briggs situated with his shaving cream and capped razor, the three of us look into the mirror and make the first swipe down our faces. A camera clicks to my left, and the photographer smiles.

“That was perfect. You guys are the absolute cutest.”

“I think you mean rugged and manly,” I say, puffing up my chest. She rolls her eyes and then gives me a placating smile.

“That is *exactly* what I meant.”

Shaking my head, I look back to see Briggs in complete concentration. His tongue peeks out of his mouth and touches

the shaving cream above his lip. My eyes meet Tanner's in the mirror, and we chuckle before shaving and rinsing our faces.

It's a moment I'll never forget for as long as I live, and I hope that we have many more just like it.

Briggs scurries down the hall as we step back into the living room just out of earshot of my brothers and Sorren.

"Here, I wanted to give you this before everything got too hectic." Tanner hands me a wrapped garment box, and I eye him suspiciously before turning it over and opening it.

Behind the layer of tissue paper sits a black shirt with "Bonus Dad" in white block letters. My heart catches in my throat because *dammit* it's been ready to explode all day.

Tanner makes quick work of the buttons on his shirt and then he opens it to reveal his "Dad" shirt. I grin and then Briggs comes racing toward us and skids to a stop with his hands stretched out and a smile just as big.

His shirt reads "Son."

And then I can't stop the tears. Scooping Briggs into one arm, I wrap the other around Tanner and hold them tight. It wasn't easy getting here. We had some really hard days and more than a few tears shed.

But we show up every single day, and God, I wouldn't trade a minute of it.

"I love you guys," I choke out through the tears and kiss the top of Briggs's head. Tanner returns the sentiment, emotion clear in his voice.

"I love my dads!" Briggs yells into where we're huddled together, and it brings the relief we need to pull ourselves together.

I'm lucky—so damn lucky—and already know today is going to be the best day of my life.

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## FALLON

“Y’ALL, IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?” I ASK AS MY HAIR IS curled and pinned and sprayed into submission.

Isla shrugs. “Otto said it was part of the package he got for the family photo shoot.” She eyes me over the top of her magazine. “Have we talked about how cute that is yet?”

“My brother is such a romantic at heart,” Rhea says with a smile.

“I can’t believe how adamant he is about doing this. I like the candid photos we have, but he wants professional ones.” I roll my eyes and Cheyenne grins.

“Y’all are the absolute sweetest, and the way that Otto and Tanner get along...” She places a hand over her heart.

“Right? They have the ultimate bromance.” Marlee laughs.

“They’re ridiculous.” I chuckle and then stare at myself in the mirror. “Is this too much?” I ask and they all shake their heads.

“You look beautiful,” Rhea says, and she looks so sincere I can’t help but smile. I’ve had this weird flutter in my stomach all day that I can’t quite put my finger on. I woke up to a text from Otto. He sent me a link to the song “Stop Coming Over” by Chris Lane.

Again.

He’s been hinting not so subtly that he thinks we should move in together and really start on the next chapter of our lives.

Honestly, it’s weird. I *want* to marry Otto and move in and do all the things, but the lead-up to that feels exhausting. It’s not just Otto and me that we have to consider, and boy have we considered *everything*. The planning and merging and all the details—I just want to skip ahead to the good part.

“What’s the look for?” Isla asks.

“Adulting is hard.” She snorts as I continue, “I’m hoping I can convince Otto to just elope or do a city hall marriage.”

“No, ma’am,” Rhea says with a hand on her hip. “Mama was already sad she didn’t get to fuss over this one.” She hitches her thumb in Isla’s direction.

Unsurprisingly, Isla shrugs.

“Plus you can’t deny us seein’ Briggs all dressed up in his little suit dancin’ with you,” Cheyenne whines.

“*Fine*,” I hiss as I’m doused with another layer of hairspray. The girls snicker, and when I’m finally made up within an inch of my life, they shove me in the bathroom with a lacy white dress that hits just above the knee.

It looks very...bridal.

“Y’all, are you sure about this dress?” I ask as I step out in my tan cowboy boots.

“You look so pretty!” Marlee squeals. “You’re gonna look perfect for the pictures.”

I squint at her. “Do you know something?”

“I know that my brother-in-law is so proud to show you off and wants to pamper you a little in the process. What’s so wrong with that?”

I don’t answer, but I’m still skeptical considering the photographer had popped in twice for “in the moment pictures” of hair and makeup. It was the strangest day, but she insisted the photos would help her with building her website, so I agreed.

“Are you drivin’ or is someone pickin’ you up?” Isla asks.

“Tanner is coming to get me, I guess. I don’t know; Otto said something about us all taking a couple together.”

I rub at the spot between my eyebrows to stave off the headache I can feel coming on.

“Hey ladies,” Tanner says with a smile as he steps into the salon. The girls all say hello and hug my ex-husband before hugging me and heading out the door. “You look really pretty. Are you ready?”

“You look very nice too, but is something happening today?” I ask as I grab his elbow and turn him to face me. He’s dressed in a crisp white button-down shirt and navy blue slacks.

He shrugs and laughs. “I don’t know. Ask your boyfriend. I just do what I’m told.”

I smirk. “I heard that about you.”

His mouth drops open in shock and then we’re both laughing and getting into his car. Pulling out onto the road, I send up a little prayer that Otto knows what he’s doing and then take a deep breath and brace myself for all that awaits me.



# OTTO

“**Y**ou ready, Big Rigg?” He nods his little head.

“Yes!”

“What’s first?”

“We smile *real* nice.”

“Then what?”

“You give the signal.” He tries to wink but ends up blinking both eyes with a massive smile on his face. “And then it’s time!”

I hold up my hand and he slaps it.

“That’s right.”

“Y’all ready?” the photographer asks.

Nodding, I say, “Yeah, nervous though.”

She smiles. “This is probably the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard, and romance isn’t even my thing.”

“Well, if everything goes as planned, my brother will be lookin’ for a roommate if you wanna get out of your aunt’s house.”

“We’ll see,” she says nonchalantly as Tanner’s car comes into view.

“They’re here.” Briggs squeals and I chuckle as my heart starts to race. I’ve dreamed of this moment, and I can only hope I’m doin’ it right.

“Mama!” Briggs yells as he runs and wraps his arms around her waist. “You look pretty.”

“Thanks, baby, and look at you! My goodness—so handsome!” She takes in Briggs’s short-sleeved white button-down, navy blue shorts, and suspenders. Tanner and I match except I have a matching blue vest on and will put on my suit coat—later.

“Okay! Everyone, let’s get some posed pictures and then we’ll grab some candid shots!” The photographer directs us how to stand, and we swap out here and there until my mouth hurts from smiling.

While Fallon is distracted, I give Briggs the sign, and he rushes over and drops down to his knee beside me. When she turns around and sees us, she gasps and then turns to Tanner.

“You knew!”

He shrugs but smiles. Tear-filled eyes land back on me, and a million thoughts and fears and hopes and dreams pass through them as she walks to stand in front of us.

“I think in any other situation I would agree that we’d need more time.” I smile down at Briggs, and he gives me one in return. “But there’s nothin’ I want more than this. Than you. I want the chaos of a life with you, the good and the bad and the incredible. I want to wear matching shirts with Tanner and take Briggs to the lake and dance with you in a crowd and in our kitchen. Be sure when I ask you, Fallon.”

“Yes.”

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes. Oh my gosh, yes!” She holds out a shaky hand, and I slide the diamond ring—a princess cut on a white gold band—halfway up her finger.

“Are you sure?” I ask as I look up at her.

“I’m sure.” And with that, I slide it on and then nod to Briggs.

“Mama.” He holds up his own little box that holds a white gold bracelet with three connected stars.

“Oh Briggs, it’s beautiful.”

“Three stars for past, present, and future,” I say as I clasp it around her wrist. She smiles as she wipes a tear from her cheek and leans down to kiss Briggs.

He grins and then hugs her tight. Tapping his elbow, I ask, “Can I kiss your mom now?”

“I guess,” he says with an eye roll as I stand to my full height and take her face in my hands.

“I love you.” Her whisper is loud enough for only me to hear, and I whisper the words back against her lips before I kiss the woman who is about to be my wife.

# EPILOGUE

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## FALLON - 20 MINUTES LATER

“It’s just over this hill!” the photographer yells from in front of us as we walk through the field. Every once in a while she turns around to take a photo of us. Otto holds my right hand while Briggs holds my left and Tanner holds his other hand.

Today has been a whirlwind of emotions and worth all the hairspray I inhaled. I never thought I’d be the kind of woman who wanted a photographer to capture an engagement, but I can’t wait to see those moments memorialized forever.

Just like from the moment that Tanner came to Clementine Creek, we’ve been a united front—Otto made sure of that and I’ve never been more grateful.

“Hey Princess?” Otto asks as I catch a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye.

“Yeah?” I say, but I’m already turning my head and gasping as people stand from chairs in the distance to face us.

“I have another question for you.” I turn to look at the man beside me with the icy-blue eyes and wild brown hair that I love running my hands through.

“What’s that?”

“Will you marry me today?” I look back at the crowd of expectant guests and then throw my head back and laugh.

“Come on, Fallon, say yes. I already gave him the ‘bonus dad’ shirt,” Tanner says from my left, and I meet Otto’s gaze.

“Yes, you goof. I will marry you,” I pause, “today.”

He lets out a *whoop* and a fist pump and the crowd goes wild. Otto presses a quick kiss on my lips and lets go of my hand.

“See you up there. Let’s go, Big Rigg!” Briggs takes Otto’s hand, and the two of them walk tall up to where the chairs are parted. My father stands at the end, waiting for me.

Tanner holds out his elbow to me, and I take it before walking toward the guests at a slower pace.

“You knew all about this.”

“I did.”

“And we’re going to be okay?”

“I’ve only ever wanted us to be happy.” He nods toward where Otto is standing under a flower-covered archway. “He makes you happy, and honestly, I think that we both needed this.”

“You got him a shirt.”

“I did. He’s a great guy, and Briggs and I are lucky to have him too. I didn’t know what to expect coming here, but thank you.”

“For what?”

“For letting me be loved too. For choosing someone who not only welcomed me into his life but his family’s as well. For finding someone who loves Briggs as fiercely as he does.” We’re just a few paces away from my father when Tanner stops us and takes both my hands in his. “For not resenting me and giving me the strength and support I needed. For being my best friend. I love you.”

“I love you too,” I say as tears streak down my face, and I throw my arms around his shoulders for a hug. He holds me a minute longer and then pulls back and brushes away my tears.

“And now,”—he walks over to my father and places my hand in my dad’s—“thank you for letting me give you away.”

“Oh my gosh, stop talking before I have no makeup left.” I fan my face and the crowd chuckles. “Is it waterproof?” I hiss.

“We’re professionals!” Isla yells from the front which brings a new round of chuckles.

Tanner shakes my father’s hand and then pulls him in for a hug.

“Thank you for takin’ good care of our girl,” my father says. “You don’t be a stranger now, all right?”

“Yes sir,” Tanner says, but there’s a glassiness to his eyes as he kisses my cheek and then walks down the aisle toward the front.

I smooth my hands down the lapels of my father’s jacket and smile. “You look handsome, Daddy.”

“And you look beautiful.” His face takes on a serious expression. “Is this what you want? You say the words.”

I chuckle. “This is what I want.” His frown instantly transforms into a smile, and he holds out his elbow for me.

“Well then, let’s go get you married.”

THE END

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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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