

LOVE IN AUTUMN SERIES BOOK ONE

A hand holding a mug of coffee with a cinnamon stick, surrounded by autumn ingredients like cinnamon sticks, chocolate, and nuts on a wooden surface.

*Falling
For You*

T. THOMAS

LOVE IN AUTUMN SERIES BOOK ONE



*Falling
For You*

T. THOMAS

*For Riley, my reason for everything that I do.
For every reader who shares the same love of Autumn that
I do.*

OTHER BOOKS BY T. THOMAS

Website:

<https://www.thomastbooks.webador.com>

All Books In The Series



©January 2022. T. Thomas. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Interior Design: Tiff Writes Romance

Cover Design: Tiff Writes Romance

Editing: Tiff Writes Romance

Proofreading: Kimberly Peterson, Taylor Jade



Prologue

It was a beautiful sight.

Max sat dutifully at my side, my hand resting on the top of his head as I stared at the mountains in front of me.

After my mother passed away two months ago, finally losing her battle against ovarian cancer, I packed two duffel bags of clothes, loaded Max up into my SUV, and took off on a trip across the country, living off the money I had saved for college.

I never wanted to go back to that town. It held so many memories of my mother. And yeah, memories could be great, but for me, they were heartbreaking.

They were a sore reminder that my mother had been taken away from me too soon.

At twenty-three, I'd been left to my own defenses, left to figure out how to navigate life without my mom. She'd been my rock, my confidante.

And now that she was no longer here with me, I suddenly found that the life I had planned suddenly didn't feel like the life for me.

I didn't want to go to college. I didn't want to teach math to students anymore. All of the hard work I'd done to save up money so I wouldn't have to pull out student loans was all a waste.

I'd instead used all of that money to live out of my car and to travel across the United States, visiting all of the places my mother had expressed to me she wished she'd had the chance to visit.

So, as I drove, in each place, I sprinkled a little bit of her ashes so she could finally visit every place on her bucket list. And I only hoped that she was smiling down at me from wherever she was at now.

I lightly scratched behind Max's ear, heaving a heavy sigh. "I like it here, boy," I quietly told him. "What about you?"

He just thumped his tail on the ground. Tears blurred my eyes as I thought of my mother – thought about how much she would have loved this place. She always talked about one day seeing the mountains and breathing in the fresh, crisp air of a true autumn season.

Max bumped his nose with my chin just as he'd been trained to do when he could sense my anxiety levels rising.

The last place I had stopped was a small town, smaller than where I'd grown up. I'd driven through here during the night and slept in a small B&B. When I'd woken up to make myself a

cup of coffee this morning, I'd been blown away by the view of the mountains.

It was stunning – the kind of view you wouldn't find anywhere else.

“I want to stay,” I said softly. I looked down at Max. It would do him good to be here, too. The field we were sitting in was filled with brown, dying grass, the leaves around us tinted with golds, oranges, yellows, and reds. I could see snow on the top of the mountains in the distance.

It was so *beautiful*.

“Come on, boy,” I said, walking back towards the SUV. I needed to find somewhere to stay, and then, I needed to figure out what in the world I was going to do here for work.

I was slowly driving through town when I saw it: the for-rent sign in the window of a small store squished between a restaurant and a bakery.

I quickly pulled over and parked, getting out of my car, Max following just as he always did. I wiped the dusty window with the sleeve of my hoodie so I could better read the sign.

Six hundred a month. To get the small, studio apartment above with it, it would be nine hundred a month.

It would barely make a dent in the money I'd been left by my mother.

With a small smile crossing my lips, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and dialed the number on the paper in the

window.

I believe I'd just found our new home.



Chapter One

Opening day.

Today was the day I finally owned my bookstore-slash-coffee shop: Warm Comforts. Shockingly, there wasn't a coffee shop in town before today. Everyone either snagged coffee at the bakery, or they got a coffee from the restaurant.

I would finally be the place people could get a variety of coffee. I had a teenage girl in her junior year of high school working the book counter after school, and during the day, Mrs. Eldana, a sweet woman in her mid-sixties would work the counter.

Much like me, she'd just lost someone dear to her. Her husband had passed a month ago, and she was looking to do something to pass her time. And since I allowed her to knit between customers, she was very excited to work for me.

"Good morning, Mrs. Eldana," I greeted with a smile as I unlocked the front door to the shop, letting her in. "You look lovely this morning."

She was wearing a pair of tan slacks with a white blouse, a very flattering, knitted shawl over her shoulders.

“It’s beginning to get chilly in the morning times,” she said as she passed me, carrying her small basket towards the counter. I set a steaming mug of hot chocolate in front of her, my smile still on my face. “Oh, honey, you’re a godsend. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Eldana.” I patted the counter. “If you need me, I’ll be somewhere in this building. Just page me.”

She waved me off. “I know everyone in this town, dear. I can handle it.”

I gently squeezed her hand before I walked off, Max trailing at my side as I moved to go arrange my book display for the day, featuring the latest smutty romance novels from *TikTok*. Every day, these would change, whether it was for different genres, new, budding indie authors, or well-known, traditionally published authors.

I wanted my customers to have a variety to choose from, and I wanted the opportunity to support every type of author that I could.

I was adjusting the last book on my shelf when a tattooed hand shot out and grabbed the book. The veins in the man’s hand stood out, a clear sign he did some kind of manual labor or he worked out a lot.

Swallowing nervously, I jerked back. Max placed himself between me and the man in front of me. He was wearing a police uniform, and it fit him perfectly. Every part of his body

was showcased in his uniform, the muscles in his arms bulging, his tattoos revealed by the rolled-up sleeves.

I slowly raised my eyes to look at his face, and my breath caught in my throat.

Was it possible for a man to be beautiful? Because this man was *sinfully* beautiful.

He had been carved by a god.

His jawline was sharp and angular, his cheekbones high in his face. A light stubble dusted his jaw, casting his face with an alluring shadow. His blue eyes were framed by dark lashes, and hair just as dark as his lashes curled over his forehead, cropped closely on the sides.

He flashed me a wicked grin. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” he said, his deep voice sliding around me.

“I, um – Meredith,” I finally blurted. “My name is Meredith. I’m new to town.”

His grin widened, and my heart skipped a beat in my chest in response. “So, I gathered,” he teased. “I grew up here, so I basically know everyone.” He glanced down at the book in his hands, releasing a low whistle at the erotically entwined couple on the front. My cheeks heated. “My sister is going to love this place.”

“Your sister likes erotica?”

He laughed. “Likes?” he asked, placing the book back down exactly how I’d had it. Major pointers for him for that. “She

loves these kinds of books. She's a hopeless romantic." He held his hand out to me. Max pressed against my legs, growling softly in warning to the stranger. He instantly dropped his hand with an understanding smile. Max relaxed. "I'm Chase – the sheriff in town. I heard you'd opened a coffee shop in this place, and I had to come. I'm a coffee addict."

Familiar territory. I was now on familiar territory.

"You do?" I questioned. "I have a large variety." I led him over to the little coffee shop area. Max stayed at my side, a constant reminder I was safe and okay. "Tell me what you like, and I can whip something up for you – free of charge for your first cup." I turned and smiled at him, breathing easier now that a counter sat between us.

He shook his head. "Nah; I'll pay. You got something with a hint of cinnamon but also with some caramel? I want it hot."

I nodded and quickly got to work on his coffee. He walked around the small coffee area, taking everything in as he waited. It was actually slightly comfortable being in the small area with just him, which shocked me.

The reason I had Max was because men made me extremely wary and nervous, and ninety percent of the time, they caused minor anxiety attacks. I knew that not all men were monsters, but I had a bad enough experience with one that made me wary of them all.

But there was something about Chase that put me at ease.

"Your coffee," I announced, setting the steaming to-go cup on the counter.

“How much do I owe you?” he asked me.

I shook my head, watching as his tattooed hand wrapped around the cup. He inhaled, and a low, throaty hum sounded from his throat. “You don’t owe me anything,” I told him, hating that I sounded somewhat breathless.

He cast me a smile. “Tell you what, since you won’t let me pay, at least let me take you to dinner. What do you say?”

My throat closed up. Max released a low whine and pushed himself against my legs. Chase smiled at me. “I’m harmless, Meredith,” he tried assuring me. “If you agree to dinner, we’ll have it next door at a table instead of a booth so you feel more comfortable. I like you, and you’re a gorgeous woman.”

“Dinner?” I asked softly. “*Just* dinner, right?”

He nodded at me, understanding in his eyes. It almost undid me. “Just dinner, Meredith.”

I drew in a deep breath. I’d come here for a fresh start, away from the memories – *all* of the memories.

Swallowing thickly all while I dug my fingers into Max’s fur, I nodded. “Dinner sounds great,” I said quietly.

That grin spread his lips again, making my heart skip a beat in my chest. “Meet me next door at six?” he asked.

I nodded. He smiled at me and took a sip of the coffee as he turned on his heel. “By the way,” he called over his shoulder, “I’ll be spreading word about your coffee. I’ve never tasted anything this great.”

I laughed, unable to help myself. He shot me a wink over his shoulder before he slipped out of the door, heading to a dark blue truck that was parked at the curb.



Chapter Two

“Jamie, I’m heading out for my dinner break. If you need me, I’m right next door, and I have my cell phone,” I told her, waving my phone in the air to show her.

She smiled at me. Jamie was a red-haired girl with freckles across her face, and currently, she had her nose stuck in a book. She promised me it would be a slow time of day considering everyone around here had a routine, and this was everyone’s dinner time, so I should have enough time to go grab dinner with Chase and come back in time to do all of my closing procedures.

Max trailed at my side as I left the building, keeping close to me to keep strangers away. Chase was getting out of his truck when I turned, and the smile he shot me nearly brought me to my knees.

Was it normal for a man to affect me like this?

“You look great,” Chase said with a smile as he walked up to me, respectfully keeping his distance.

I laughed a little at his charm. “I’m literally wearing the same exact thing I was wearing when you met me earlier,” I teased.

He shrugged. “Yeah, but you didn’t have a bit of sugar on your shirt.”

My cheeks burned in mortification as I looked down at my shirt. Sure enough, I had a little bit of powdered sugar on my shirt. “Oh, jeez,” I whispered, my face so hot it was radiating down my neck. “Can we pretend that’s not there?” I sheepishly asked.

Chase laughed and held open the door to the restaurant, giving me space to slip by him with Max between us. “I’ll do my best,” he teased, “but I can’t make any promises, especially when you smell like coffee.”

Oh, my God.

Mrs. Margaret looked up from the counter where she was cashing out the tips for one of her waitresses, and she beamed at me. “Oh, Meredith! How has the first day been?”

I smiled warmly at her, only tensing a little as she came around the counter to wrap me in a warm hug, though Max stayed between us. “It’s been great so far,” I told her, and it really had been. Chase had done exactly as he said he would, and I’ve had everyone in town coming to get coffee on their lunch breaks, chatting with me as they did so.

You learned a lot in a small town. You found out who had a fight with their husband and who was dating who. You found out that grouchy Mr. Greene was actually very pleasant when

his coffee was made perfectly and you threw in a small, free powdered donut with it to brighten his day.

I loved it here so far, and this small town still had yet to disappoint me.

“I’ve learned that just about everyone in this town gossips,” I told her with a laugh.

She smiled widely. “Oh, hun, yes, we do,” she told me, not even trying to deny it. “And just know, the gossip mill will be running wild when they hear about you capturing our town sheriff’s attention so quickly.”

“Nana, please stop giving her a hard time,” Chase pleaded from behind me.

I looked up at him wide-eyed. He shrugged. “Yes, Mrs. Margaret is my grandmother,” he informed me. “I’m related to just about half the town.” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to the top of his grandmother’s head. “Peach cobbler tonight?” he asked her.

She swatted him with her towel, which made me giggle. “Don’t I always have peach cobbler, boy? It’s a wonder you don’t weigh a ton,” she scolded.

He flexed his biceps. My cheeks flamed, unable to help myself as I watched. He flashed me a knowing grin. “Gym keeps me in shape, Nana.” He moved around her. “Come on; let’s go sit before she keeps your attention all evening.”

Mrs. Margaret squeezed my shoulder before going back behind the counter. I followed Chase to a table near the back of

the restaurant. Max squeezed himself beneath the table between my legs.

“No one has ever given you problems about bringing him into places with you, have they?” Chase suddenly asked me.

I shook my head. “Only once, but I always carry his papers with me,” I explained. “The issue was quickly resolved.”

Chase nodded. “Don’t tell anyone I told you this, but every once in a while, Nana will bring her Rottweiler to work with her. Daisy is a massive dog, and she can be a bit mean, but she makes Nana feel safe, especially when she has to open this place by herself in the mornings.”

I frowned, a chill crawling up my spine, suddenly making me cold. “I thought this was a pretty safe town?” I questioned, not trying to sound alarmed and freaked out.

Chase flashed me an easy-going smile. “It is, sweetheart,” *oh dear, the pet names*, “but crime can pop up anywhere, even a small town like this.”

I knew that better than anyone. Your neighbor who had always been kind to you and your mother could one day turn out to be the number one person you had to fear.

I brushed that thought away, focusing back on Chase, determined to enjoy this dinner with him despite my fears of getting close to anyone ever again.

“What made you settle down here?” Chase asked me.

I shrugged. “I lost my mother to cancer,” I told him quietly, a pang hitting my chest as I mentioned her.

Chase’s smile fell from his lips immediately. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said softly. He reached out to touch my hand, but thought better of it, pulling it back again. “That must have been hard.”

I nodded. “It was. I didn’t know how to cope, so I used all the money I had saved up for college to take a road trip around the United States to spread her ashes in all of the places she wished she could have visited. I ended up here, and it just – the town just spoke to me.”

He smiled then. “It happens like that sometimes,” he admitted. “You just see something, and it calls to your soul.”

And the way he was staring at me, I kind of felt like he was talking about me.

A young girl walked up to our table, breaking his intense stare. She had blonde hair pulled up in a high ponytail with a bow in it that was the colors of the local high school. Her make-up was done to perfection, and the smile on her face was super bright but definitely genuine.

And her cheeks flushed at the sight of Chase. Obviously, he was the local guy *everyone* seemed to want.

“Um, hi, Sheriff,” she said shyly, setting two menus down in front of us. Her eyes brightened when she saw me. “Oh, you just opened the bookstore next door, didn’t you?” she asked me.

I smiled at her. “I did, yes.”

She was immediately gushing. “Oh, my God, my friend – Jamie – told me you can special order books if we request them. Can you do that?”

I laughed. “I sure can. Tell me what the book is and the author.”

Chase laughed softly as he opened his menu when she clapped her hands together, clearly excited. “There’s a new indie romance author out, and her books are *to die for*.” My smile widened. “She has a book called *Nobody But You* – her name is Taylor Jade. Mom doesn’t believe in ordering *anything* from Amazon, but can you order it for your store so I can *finally* get a copy?”

I nodded, pulling out my phone to make a note. “I will do it this evening. If she has other books—”

“She does!” the younger girl beamed.

I laughed. “I will definitely order them for you as well, and I’ll put a small stock up on the shelves as well, so if any of your other friends want them, they’re available.”

“Oh, my God – thank you!”

She threw her arms around my shoulders. Panic clawed at my throat. Max barked, moving between us at the same time Chase jumped up from his chair, gently pulling the girl back from me.

Max laid his paws on my lap and pushed his face against mine as I tried to suck some air into my lungs. I wound my arms

around him, digging my fingers into his fur. “I’m okay, boy,” I whispered, my heart still knocking crazily against my chest.

“I’m so sorry,” the girl profusely apologized, looking thoroughly freaked out. I swallowed thickly, tears suddenly burning in my eyes. I hated feeling like a freak, and right then, I could feel the eyes of everyone in that restaurant on me.

“It’s okay,” I told her, trying to give her a smile, though I knew it looked extremely forced. I stood up on shaky legs, and Max pressed his body to my side. I latched onto his harness. “Can we reschedule?” I asked Chase.

He nodded, understanding in his eyes. Swallowing thickly, I quickly walked out of the restaurant. I bit back my tears, forcing a smile on my face for Jamie as I told her goodnight and began to close up the shop.

I was about to lock the front door when Chase appeared, two carryout containers in his hands. He gave me a small smile.

“I thought eating without a crowd of people would be more preferable,” he said quietly.

Oh, dear God, my heart.



Chapter Three

We settled down in the coffee shop area at one of the small tables. “Nana said this was what you normally order unless you were feeling like something new, and she admitted that wasn’t often.” I couldn’t help it – I laughed. I was a woman of routine. “I’m sorry our dinner got ruined. Emily is very enthusiastic, and she’s a hugger.”

“So, I gathered,” I mused.

He flashed me a smile. “Excuse me for being blunt when I say this.” I tensed, slowly raising my eyes from my food to look up at him. His expression was solemn, but there was understanding in his eyes. “Whatever has you so afraid, you don’t have to be afraid of that here.”

“And who’s to say I’m afraid of something?” I asked, forking a piece of ravioli and sticking it in my mouth.

“Me,” he said bluntly. I almost choked. I quickly swallowed some water. “I served overseas in Afghanistan for three years – got shipped over right after I finished basic training.” I set my fork down, giving him my undivided attention. “I saw things I

can't unsee that I wish I could." I swallowed thickly at the fear and horror that flashed in his eyes for a split second. "When I came home after my contract was up, I wasn't the same person. But my sister, Farrah, finally had enough and forced me to go see a therapist. And my sister forced me to find my purpose, much like you have."

He drummed his fingers on the table. "So, yes, whereas what I went through is probably much different than what you did, I *do* understand it, Meredith."

I sighed heavily, looking out the tall, floor-to-ceiling windows next to our table. Mr. Jenkins was out walking his poodle to get his evening exercise in, just as he always did.

Everyone here was on a routine, and I *craved* routine – needed it after that horrific day changed my life forever.

"Come on; let's eat," Chase coaxed. I turned my head to look back at him, coming out of my head. He flashed me a warm smile. "By the way, is there a chance I can get you to ring up that book I saw earlier?" he asked. "I told my sister about it. She wanted to get over here to come purchase it and meet you, but she's been busy with cows all day."

"Cows?" I asked him, a bit confused.

He laughed. "She's a veterinarian. Went to school and came back home to work with farm animals. Some people here swear she's more trustworthy than a regular doc."

I laughed. "That sounds like something Mrs. Crawford would say."

Chase grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “You’re learning,” he praised. My cheeks warmed. “Mrs. Crawford doesn’t trust a doctor as far as she can throw one, and at her age, that’s not at all.”

“She swears by her herbs,” I told him. “In fact, I came down with a cold a couple of days after moving here, and she heard me sniffing in the grocery store when I was trying to buy medication – gave me some herbs and a couple of teas to drink, and the next day, I was good as new.”

“She and my mom got into it when I was a little boy,” he said, pausing to take a bite of food. “I’d fallen off my bike – broke my arm. Mr. Crawford found me crying on the side of the road, and Mrs. Crawford was with him. They took me home to my mom, and she and Mrs. Crawford had to have argued for a good fifteen minutes about taking me to the hospital because Mrs. Crawford swore the hospital was going to give me diseases.”

I laughed. “She’s a lively character.”

He grinned. “That she is, but everyone here respects her, even Mom. The entire town was extremely saddened when Mr. Crawford passed, but Mrs. Crawford just lit her sage and her herbs, and she said she would continue living for him.”

I had to blink back tears. “That’s incredibly sweet,” I murmured. “Love like that hardly exists anymore.”

Chase shook his head, his eyes burning as they met mine. I shifted in my seat. “I believe it exists everywhere – just most people are too afraid to wait to find it and instead settle.” He shook his head. “I’ve always believed that as long as I remained patient, that burning, passionate love would fall right into my arms.”

I quickly darted my gaze away from him, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. But it wasn't from anxiety this time.

No, it was because the man sitting across from me kept saying one thing, and I felt like he was insinuating something completely different.

“Coffee?” I suddenly asked him, needing to get up and do something.

He smirked, his eyes lighting up with laughter. I huffed, unable to help myself. He barked out a laugh and leaned back in my seat. “Coffee sounds great, sweetheart.”

That name again.

I quickly stood up and moved behind my coffee counter, making the same order from this morning. “By the way, sweetheart, if you're looking for the way into my heart, you're on the right road.” I splashed milk on the counter as my cheeks flamed. “Coffee will send you right through my heart and into my soul.”

This man.



Chapter Four

I was raising the blinds in my coffee shop when Chase strode in, a wide grin on his face. For a week now, this had become our routine. Every morning, he came in at the same time I was raising the blinds on my windows, and he took the same coffee I'd made him the first time.

Every evening, he brought me dinner from the restaurant next door. It always contained my favorite ravioli.

This morning, he was in jeans and a camouflage hoodie, a pair of worn boots on his feet. A camouflage cap was sitting on his dark curls, shading his blue eyes.

“Not working today?” I asked him, instantly moving behind the counter to make his coffee.

He shook his head. “It’s my one day off a week,” he told me. “I was hoping I could pull you away for the day.”

I paused, the milk raised in mid-air. “Away?” I asked cautiously.

He nodded. "Away. Picnic for lunch. Take you to meet my sister since she's working with a new horse and can't get away."

I stammered, unsure. I set the milk down and licked my suddenly dry lips, flattening my palms on the counter. Being in the bookstore with Chase had been a safe territory for me.

Venturing outside of the walls with him was frightening.

"Easy," he soothed. I slowly raised my eyes to his. "I won't hurt you, and Max will always be with us," he promised.

Max whined and pushed at my legs. I curled my fingers into his fur, running my eyes over Chase's face. Seeing nothing but sincerity in his gaze, I drew in a deep breath and nodded at him. "Okay," I said softly. "Just let me check with Mrs. Eldana and make sure she's going to be okay for the day until Jamie comes in. And I have to be back by seven to close up."

He nodded. "Deal," he said with a smile.

I drew in a deep breath and finished making his coffee, ringing him out before going to Mrs. Eldana. She just smiled at me from her chair behind the book counter. "Now you go on and have fun with Chase, you hear me? That boy is smitten with you, Meredith."

My cheeks flamed, and not wanting to embarrass myself further, I quickly rushed away from her towards Chase, Max walking at my side. Chase cast me a warm smile. "Ready, sweetheart?"

I nodded, grabbing my hoodie from the coat hanger by the door, slipping it on over my head. "As ready as I'll ever be," I

told him honestly.

He held his hand out to me, offering me the opportunity to hold his hand. With my heart thumping crazily in my chest, I placed my hand in his, allowing him to link our fingers together. “I was hoping you’d say yes,” he told me as he walked past his truck, moving down the sidewalk. I instantly grabbed Max’s harness with my other hand. “Every Sunday morning, those that aren’t at church are normally at the small farmer’s market we have, selling jams, pies, cookies, and fresh vegetables. Have you been yet?”

I shook my head at him. I’d wanted to go, but the crowd I always saw freaked me out too much to ever venture in with just Max.

Chase squeezed my hand, that understanding look in his eyes again. “Hey, just keep your hand in mine and keep Max by your side, and no one will come close that you don’t want, okay?”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He gently squeezed my hand again in response. We walked in a comfortable silence as we walked towards the farmer’s market. When we got to the market, I was almost overwhelmed with all the scents. It all smelled so heavenly – so good – and I was dying to get my hands on some cakes and cookies.

“You like candles?” Chase asked me as he led me over to the first, small booth that held a ton of different candles and waxes, all in fall scents.

“I *love* candles,” I told him. I reached forward and picked one up, lifting it to my nose. “Oh, this smells *so good*,” I breathed. With a smile, I held it up, wanting him to smell it, too.

He flashed me a grin before leaning down slightly to smell the candle.

“Brinley always makes the best smelling candles,” he told me. “You want this?”

I nodded. “But hold on, I’ll probably grab a couple more,” I told him, unable to help myself. I was a candle fanatic, and having candles lit always soothed my anxiety. I didn’t know why, but they did.

“I’m guessing candles are the way to your heart?” Chase lightly teased.

I blushed and shrugged. “Possibly,” I flirted, surprising myself.

He barked out a laugh and grabbed a candle, his hand still never leaving mine. He sniffed it before holding it up to my nose. “*Oh, my God,*” I gushed, blinking back tears. It smelled like a perfume my mother used to use during the holidays that always made her smell like a sugar cookie. “How many more of those does she have?”

“She,” a woman about my age said as she appeared behind the booth, surprising me, “has ten more. How many do you want?” she asked me.

“All?” I asked. Her eyes widened. I blushed. “It’s just – they smell like a perfume my mom used to wear around the holidays,” I explained.

Chase, surprising me, leaned over and pressed a kiss to the top of my head, lingering for a moment before standing back up to his full height.

He knew.

He understood.

“Sure,” the woman said with a wide smile, turning to a box on the tailgate behind her. “My name’s Brinley, by the way. You must be Meredith. Gossip vine’s been goin’ wild talkin’ ‘bout you and Chase here,” she told me.

My face was basically on fire. “I was warned everyone would gossip,” I said, unsure of what to say in this situation.

She laughed. “Every woman within two hundred miles of here has been trying to snag our dear sheriff’s attention,” she told me, placing each candle into another, smaller box, wrapping each one individually for me to keep the glass around them from breaking. “For a minute now, I’ve been wonderin’ if he swings for the other team, if you know what I’m sayin’.”

I laughed, unable to help myself. Chase rolled his eyes. “Stop being a brat, Brinley,” he scolded her. “And tell my sister to stop running her mouth to everyone.”

Brinley laughed. “You tell your sister that yourself,” she told him, closing up the box.

He grunted in response and hooked his arm around the small box, never letting go of my hand. “That’ll be fifty even,” Brinley told me. “I normally charge twelve per candle, but since your new to town, I’ll give you a hefty discount.”

I shook my head. “No, please – what would be the full amount?” I asked her.

She waved me off. “My mind is set. There’s no changin’ it. Fifty even.”

With a sigh, I slowly released Max’s harness and dropped Chase’s hand so I could pull a fifty out of my wallet. Brinley smiled wildly at me as I passed her the bill, making sure our fingers didn’t touch. I quickly put my wallet back into my pocket and grabbed Chase’s hand again, squeezing it tightly as I gripped Max’s harness.

“Hope to see you around again, Meredith,” she told me with a wave as she turned to her next customer.

“We should cart these back to your place, and then we can come back,” Chase told me.

I nodded in agreement. As soon as we were out of the farmer’s market, I breathed a little easier, loosening my grip on his hand a little. I hadn’t realized I’d been holding it so tightly. “Thank you for being there with me,” I told him, meaning it from the bottom of my soul. “I’ve been wanting to go, but the crowds ...”

He flashed me a grin. “I’ll come here with you anytime, sweetheart. Now come on. Let’s get these to your apartment so we can come back and fill you up with cupcakes and cookies.”

I laughed. “Are you sure that’s the true reason you want them?”

He flashed me a grin that had my soul warming. “I plead the Fifth.”



Chapter Five

After going back to the farmers market and grabbing more candles, cakes, and cupcakes I probably didn't need but couldn't resist, Chase was taking me out to meet his sister.

I was extremely nervous.

“Are you sure she's going to like me?” I asked him. Chase had become a very soothing, grounding force in my life in such a short amount of time, and I couldn't stand the thought that his sister might not like me.

He grabbed my hand in his and laced our fingers together. “Breathe,” he soothed. “She's going to love you; I promise. There's nothing to worry about; I swear.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I nodded my head. “Okay,” I whispered, trying to trust his promise.

He gently squeezed my hand before turning down a long, dirt drive.



Max stayed faithfully at my side as Chase held my hand, leading me to a barn a few feet from us. I could hear a woman talking softly, and soon, she came into view.

She was stunning. Her curly, brown hair was up in a messy knot on the top of her head. She was wearing a pair of rubber boots and leggings, a black sweatshirt on over what looked to possibly be a yellow shirt. She turned to face us as we walked in, and I was a bit blown away by how much she looked like Chase.

“Chase!” she exclaimed, a broad smile pulling at her lips. She looked at me, and her eyes lit up. “Oh, my God, are you Meredith?” she asked, setting down the brush she’d been holding. “My poor brother won’t shut up about you,” she laughed.

I smiled, my nerves easing. She was definitely a lot more eccentric and hyper than Chase, but she was already so sweet and kind to me.

“Come on; Grayson is out this morning – something about a fence,” she explained, walking past us to lead us back out of the barn.

“Grayson is my best friend,” Chase explained to me. “Farrah,” he said, gesturing to his sister’s back, “does a lot of work with the animals for him.”

“He’s a grump,” Farrah said. “He’s always been grumpy and moody – never understood why,” she huffed.

Chase just smiled and shook his head. “Grayson is *actually* a nice guy,” Chase informed me. “My sister just wears on his last nerve.”

I laughed softly when Farrah scoffed, shooting her brother a scowl over her shoulder.

We followed her inside of the small house. Chase pulled out a chair for me at the dining room table before he sat down beside me. His sister made us all a cup of coffee before sitting down with us.

“So, do you carry any other books like the one Chase snagged for me?” Farrah asked me.

My cheeks tinted pink, but I nodded. “I carry a wide selection,” I informed her. “You should swing by sometime, grab some coffee, and peruse the books.”

She smiled. “Trust me, it’s on my endless list of things to do,” she laughed. “So, where are you from?”

I gripped Max’s fur in my hand, trying to steady myself. “I’m from a small town in Georgia,” I told her. “It was a little bit bigger than this one here.”

“Oh?” She hummed. “Why move from one small town to another?”

“Farrah,” Chase quietly scolded.

I shook my head at him. “No, it’s fine,” I said softly, reaching forward to gently squeeze his hand. He quickly laced

our fingers together and lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles. My cheeks heated all while my heart knocked hard against my breastbone and my belly clenched.

I looked back at his sister as he set our joined hands back on the table. “My mother passed,” I explained, leaving it at that.

Farrah’s face fell. “Oh, hun, I’m so sorry for prying,” she quickly apologized. “It’s one of my worst flaws. I don’t know when to stop asking questions.”

I gave her a small smile. “No worries,” I assured her. I suddenly needed air, though. “Um, do you mind if we look at the horses?” I asked her.

She brightened and quickly stood up from the table. “Of course!” she exclaimed. “I’ll get the most docile one – Ginger. She’s a sweetheart. Chase will lead you out to the field,” she said, gently squeezing her older brother’s shoulder as she passed him.

Chase gently gripped my chin and turned my head to face him once we were standing. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, tightening my hand in Max’s fur. “I just need some air,” I told him.

Without another word, he quickly led me outside. I drew in a deep breath, my anxiety and the painful memory of my mother easing.

“Ah, hell,” I heard a man groan as he came around the side of the house, spooking me, “what’s a man got to do to keep your ugly face from around here?”

Chase barked out a laugh. “Screw you, Grayson.”

I looked around Chase, and instantly, I tensed, my chest constricting, my lungs tightening.

He was the spitting image of a younger version of *him* – the monster of mine and my mother’s life.

The last thing I heard was Chase calling my name and catching me in his arms.



Chapter Six

When I came to, I was laying on a very comfortable couch. I felt a little disoriented for a moment, but I knew Chase was sitting next to my hip, his hand holding mine, his worried gaze roving over my face.

“Chase?” I croaked.

He brushed his thumb over the back of my hand. “I’m here, sweetheart. You okay?”

I licked my dry lips and slowly sat up. Chase gripped my waist, holding me steady. I looked around, swallowing thickly when my eyes landed on the man Chase had called Grayson, the man his little sister worked for.

“Do you know him?” I blurted.

Grayson frowned at me. “Know who?” he asked me.

I swallowed thickly, my fingers trembling. Chase tightened his hold around my hand, soothing me for a moment. Max whined and pressed his head against my stomach. I dug the fingers of my free hand into his fur.

“Gerald Lawson,” I whispered. Grayson’s face went pale. “So, you do know him?”

“How do *you* know him?” Grayson demanded, looking like his entire world had been tilted on his axis.

I felt like throwing up. My chest was tightening. I squeezed my eyes shut, drawing in a deep breath, trying to steady myself before I had an anxiety attack, or worse, passed out again.

“Easy, sweetheart,” Chase crooned. I slowly opened my eyes, locking them on his soulful, blue eyes. “Breathe. It’s going to be okay.” He looked at his best friend. “Grayson, answer her question.”

“Gerald Lawson is my biological father,” Grayson bitterly responded.

Vomit rose up my throat with barely any warning. “I’m going to throw up,” I blurted.

Grayson quickly snatched up a trashcan before Chase or I could move and thrust it towards me. I gripped it and threw up into it as Chase held my hair back from my face. I dry-heaved a couple more times before it passed. Chase handed me a stick of gum, and I quickly shoved it into my mouth.

“Now, how do you know him?” Grayson repeated his earlier question.

“My mother and I are the reason he’s rotting in a prison cell right now,” I bitterly responded, my heart knocking crazily against my breastbone. I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath, tightening my hand on Max. He just pushed more against me in response. “Can we not talk about this?” I whispered. “I just really want to go home.”

Chase stood and helped me up from the couch. My legs were wobbly, and I had to grip his arm for support as Max pushed against the other side of my legs.

Grayson was frowning at me, sadness and regret in his eyes. “For what it’s worth, Meredith, I’m sorry he tainted your life, too.”

So am I, Grayson.



When I got home that evening, Chase made sure I made it upstairs safely before promising me he would help get the store closed up before coming back up.

I was exhausted and tired. My emotions were at an all-time high, and my anxiety levels were spiking horribly.

I curled up on the couch. Max managed to squish himself onto the couch with me and nestled against my abdomen with his head right beneath my chin. I ran my fingers through his fur.

Of all the places to have to face a reminder of that tragic night, I found it *here* in a small town, smaller than I grew up in.

How did this happen?

Why couldn't I just escape it?

My cell phone rang on the table in front of me. With a sigh, I grabbed it, thinking it might be Chase needing help with something downstairs. Instead, the police department from my hometown was calling me.

My already bad day instantly got worse, and a horrible feeling settled in the pit of my stomach.

“Hello?” I quietly asked.

“Is this Miss Meredith Shaw?” a woman asked on the other end of the line, her voice kind.

“This is. How can I help you?”

I tightened my fingers in Max's further, my chest already tightening. “Miss Shaw, I'm calling to inform you that Gerald Lawson was released this morning on parole. The chief of police asked me to give you a call to ask if you'd like a restraining order put in place.”

I couldn't answer. My vision was tunneling. I couldn't breathe. The phone dropped from my hand. Max barked and pushed against me, but I couldn't focus.

My head was spinning.

This wasn't happening – couldn't be happening.

Chase burst into the apartment. My lips trembled. Max barked again.

“Help me,” I cried.



Chapter Seven

“Hey, hey now,” Chase crooned as he gripped my upper arms, squatting in front of me. “Breathe, Meredith,” he ordered. “Just breathe. I’m here. No one can hurt you as long as I’m around,” he swore.

I closed my eyes and drew in a long, deep breath. I fisted my hands in Chase’s shirt, trying to calm my erratic breathing, trying to calm my mind. Max whined, pushing his head against my chest, his way of reminding me to breathe and suck air into my lungs.

“You’re safe,” Chase soothed.

I clung to those words in my mind with a vice-like grip.

Chase continued holding my upper arms, his eyes steady on mine as he waited for my breathing to regulate. Once I was mostly breathing normally again, he brushed his fingers over my cheek, his eyes intent on my face.

“You scared the hell out of me,” he said softly. I cast my eyes to my lap. He gripped my chin, forcing my gaze back on his. “I heard Max bark, and I knew something was wrong.” I gave him a weak smile. “You’re pale as a sheet, Meredith. What happened, sweetheart?”

“He got released,” I whispered. My hands shook, so I pressed them between my thighs as I drew in a deep breath, trying to keep myself calm. “The sheriff from my hometown called me to inform me.”

Chase clenched his jaw, anger swirling in his gaze. “Sweetheart, I need you to tell me what he did to you,” he coaxed. “I could pull records, but I don’t want to do that.” *Oh, this man.* “I want *you* to tell me.”

Tears burned in my eyes. “It’s a crappy story,” I croaked.

Chase sat on the old, worn coffee table in front of me, his hands smoothing down my arms, but he never released them from his grip. His firm hold on my upper arms helped keep me grounded.

Max pushed against my chin, sensing my anxiety.

The night I was about to tell Chase about was the entire reason I had a support animal.

“He was our next-door neighbor,” I said softly, my eyes on my lap, unable to look at Chase. His grip stayed firm on my arms, somehow holding me together. “He was always kind of strange – the way he kept flirting with my mother—” I shook my head, my skin crawling at the memories. “It wasn’t normal flirting. It was so ... creepy, and he freaked my mother out every single time. She always urged me to keep my head down and not look at him.”

Chase gently squeezed my arms when I paused for a good moment, not speaking. “I’m here, Meredith,” he said softly. “I’m here, and I promise, you’re not alone.”

Swallowing thickly, I continued. “I was fifteen when it happened. My mother was yelling outside, telling him to leave her alone, to get his hands off of her.” A shudder wracked my frame. “I went to go help her.” I shook my head. “I should have just called the police,” I whispered.

Max whined, pushing his body further against me. I dug my fingers into his soft fur. “He took advantage of the door being open and shoved my mom inside, coming in with her. There was this crazy gleam in his eyes – I’ll never forget it.” I drew in a shuddering breath. “He knocked me unconscious when I tried pushing him away from my mom, yelling at him to get out of our house.”

My lips trembled, tears clogging my throat. I tried to swallow them down.

“When I came to, he was – he was—” I couldn’t get it out. Chase rubbed my arms. “I shoved him off of her.” My entire body was trembling. “He was furious, and he decided to – to—” I stopped.

“I guess our neighbors next door heard the commotion. When cops came pouring into the house, I was naked, barely coherent. Mom was still knocked out on the floor.”

“Easy,” Chase soothed, coming to sit beside me on the couch. He pulled me onto his lap, wrapping his strong, tatted arms around me. “I’ve got you,” he promised.

Tears streamed down my face. I wrapped my arms tight around his midsection, holding him to me as shudders wracked my frame, sobs tearing themselves from my throat. Max draped his head over my legs.

Chase didn't leave at all that night. When my tears finally began to slow and my eyelids began to droop, he simply picked me up, cradling me to his chest. He maneuvered his way around my apartment, carrying me to my bedroom.

I didn't even have to ask him to stay.

He simply kicked off his shoes and crawled into bed behind me, wrapping me up tight in his arms. Max pressed himself to the front of my body, the two of them sandwiching me between them.

Not a word was needed. I understood what Chase was telling me without me even having to ask.

He was here. He wasn't going anywhere.

I wasn't alone – not anymore and not ever again.



Chapter Eight

I jerked awake to the bed moving, my heart thumping rapidly in my chest. Chase soothed his hand over my side, pressing a kiss to my temple until I relaxed again. “Easy. I have to go home and change for work,” he said softly.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes before looking up at him. He was still standing next to my bed, and despite how tired I knew he must have been, he still seemed bright-eyed and alert.

Me? I felt like I’d been run through a cheese grinder or something. I was exhausted. My entire body ached. And my temples were pulsing with the beginnings of a migraine.

“I need to get up as well,” I mumbled, yawning.

Chase frowned at me. “You need more sleep, sweetheart.”

I shook my head and slid from the bed. “I don’t want to sleep. The flashbacks—”

Understanding settled in his gentle, blue eyes. He grabbed the back of my neck and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Okay,” he said softly. “I’m only a phone call away if you need me, you hear? I’ll be by for coffee in a little bit.”

I smiled up at him, glad that his routine wasn’t changing despite the mess going on around us. He aimed a crooked grin down at me in return. “Have a good day, yeah?”

I nodded. “I’ll do my best,” I assured him.

He pressed another kiss to my forehead before he yanked his shoes on and left my apartment. I went about my daily routine – start the coffee pot, take a shower, make a cup of coffee, get dressed, drink said coffee with my multivitamin, dry my hair, and brush my teeth. My routine never changed; it was always the same.

It gave me structure.

The only thing that was different was how early I was getting up.

Max followed me downstairs, and since I was already up and awake *way* before it was time to open my store, I went about rearranging shelves and putting new stock up. I also changed my window displays and set up my new center of the store display with sweet romance indie author books, making sure I had the author Taylor Jade up front and center since she seemed to have been popular with Emily. I was hoping I could make her popular with some of the other girls and women, too.

By the time I did all of that, it was eight o’clock, and it was time to open the store. It was nice and cool outside, so taking advantage of the temperature, I propped the door open, allowing

the fresh, Autumn air to come inside and mix with the smell of books and coffee.

It was the perfect mixture, actually.

A bit more cheerful now with Fall in the air, I set about making myself a cup of coffee. I called out a hello to Mrs. Eldana as she walked inside. She instantly set about knitting her blanket. She'd come so far with it, and it was beginning to look absolutely gorgeous.

I brought her a cup of hot chocolate just like I did every morning. She smiled warmly up at me and gently squeezed my hand in thanks before going back to what she was doing.

I was wiping down one of the coffee machines when Chase strolled in. He was in his uniform, the shirt pulled taut over his muscular body. His sleeves were rolled down today, most likely against the cooler weather. He flashed me a warm smile as I walked towards him, warming my insides. He cupped my face in his hands and pressed a soft kiss to my lips.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” he greeted.

“Good morning.” I couldn't help but smile at him. “Your regular coffee?” I asked him.

He nodded, following me into the small coffee area, leaning his hip against the counter as I set to work. “Can you throw in a bagel with cream cheese and chives?” he asked me. “Didn't really get to eat dinner last night,” I frowned because that was my fault, “and my stomach is rumbling.”

I looked up at him. “I'm sorry,” I said quietly.

He shook his head at me. “Don’t be sorry, sweetheart. I’m here for you – always.”

“Thank you,” I told him, meaning it from the bottom of my heart and with every fiber of my being.

He smiled at me. “Don’t thank me, sweetheart.”

I handed him his coffee and set about making his bagel. Once I was done doing that, he pressed a kiss to the top of my head before leaving, waving at Mrs. Eldana as he walked out.

“That boy is absolutely smitten with you, Meredith.”

I blushed. “The feeling is mutual, I assure you,” I told her. “He’s great, and he’s extremely sweet.”

She smiled at me. “You’ll do that boy a lot of good. And he’s doing you a lot of good, too. You’re not so standoffish anymore, Meredith. He’s bringing out a beautiful side to you.”

“Oh, Mrs. Eldana,” I said softly. I pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You are the sweetest soul to grace this Earth, I swear.”

She patted my cheek. “I believe that title goes to you, my dear. Despite this being a small town and all of us knowing each other, you’re the only sweet soul to offer me a job and let me enjoy doing what I like to do at the same time.”

I laughed. “You got lucky by having a peculiar woman like me hire you,” I teased her.

She laughed as well. “Your mother would be very proud of you, hun.”

My throat closed up with tears. “You think so?” I croaked. Max pushed against my legs, his head nudging my fingers.

She nodded. “I may not have known the woman, Meredith, but judging by how sweet and lovely you are, she raised you right, and wherever she is right now, my dear, she’s smiling down at you, and she’s extremely proud to have you as her daughter.”



Jaime waved at me as she took Mrs. Eldana’s spot. I gave Mrs. Eldana a hot chocolate to take home with her before waving her goodbye. Jaime set to work on her homework, and knowing she could man the ship for a little while so I could take a small food break, I grabbed my mail and began heading up the stairs to my small apartment.

I paused, staring down at the unmarked envelope. Fear crawled through me like cobwebs, settling deep in my bones. With shaking fingers, I tore open the envelope.

You’re going to pay.

My vision tunneled. I gasped for breath, my legs giving out beneath me. I faintly heard Max barking, trying to get someone to come help me.

I slumped backward, and the last thing I felt was my body rolling back down the stairs.



Chapter Nine

CHASE

I stared down at the file in front of me, though I already knew everything that was inside of it.

Grayson's father, Gerald Lawson, had always been a nasty guy. He had a bad temper, horrible drinking habits, and he liked to use his fists on his son and wife.

Mrs. Ira had done the best thing for both her and her son when she finally grew the nerve to call the police during one of his drunken rages. And then, she divorced him.

They'd been free of him ever since.

Until now. Until he started messing with one of our own.

And Meredith? She belonged here in our small town. Within such a little bit of time, she had grabbed the heart of every local here, and they loved her.

Not as much as I did, granted, but they did love her.

I was pretty sure I'd loved Meredith from the moment I laid my eyes on hers. There was just something about her – something about her sweet personality that had just called to my soul.

And I wasn't letting her go. I definitely wasn't letting anything happen to her, either.

My phone went off, jerking me from my head. I snatched it off my desk, frowning when I saw the bookstore's number pop up on my phone. Instantly, a bad feeling settled in the pit of my stomach.

If Meredith wanted to talk to me, she always called me from her personal cell phone. She left the store line open for customers and vendors.

“Hello?” I cautiously answered.

“Sheriff?” Jaime's young voice cried through the line. I jerked up from my seat, already pulling my jacket on as I waited for her to gather herself and tell me what was going on. “I just found Meredith passed out at the bottom of the stairs.” My heart clenched so tightly that I almost forgot how to breathe. “She's not moving.”

I steeled myself, forcing myself to continue thinking straight despite how panicked I was feeling. Nothing could happen to her. I would lose my mind.

I could hear Max barking in the background. “I'm on my way, Jaime. I need you to keep everyone away from the back of

the store, you hear me? Don't move her." God, if she moved Meredith and something was terribly wrong, she could make the entire situation catastrophic.

"Okay," she croaked.

After ending the call, I called for a paramedic to get to the scene and also called the dispatcher to let her know I wasn't available for calls at the moment and to field them all to my deputy, Drake.

I was at the bookstore in record time. Ignoring the sea of people that seemed to be in the bookstore, I pushed past them and rushed to the back where her stairs were. She was sprawled at the bottom of them, but she was moaning low in the back of her throat, slowly coming to.

"Easy, sweetheart," I soothed, needing to keep her calm. "Don't move. I've got a paramedic here to check on you, okay?"

Her eyes slowly opened. They were a bit glassy, but one thing registered.

Fear.

She was afraid.

I looked around, noticing the open letter in her hand. I quickly took it, reading the messy scrawl. I clenched my jaw, anger bursting through my veins.

I wanted to destroy something – or someone.

She had fainted.

Josh rushed around the corner and knelt beside her. He checked her over, finally confirming she had a minor concussion but should be alright. As I expected she would, she denied a trip to the hospital.

“I want to go upstairs,” she whispered.

I didn't have to be told twice. I scooped her up into my arms and ascended the stairs, pushing open the door to her apartment. After sitting her on the couch, I strode to her small kitchen and began making a cup of coffee, scrounging around in her bathroom until I found some Tylenol tablets.

When I came back into the living room, she was hugging Max, her face still extremely pale. I brushed her hair back from her face and handed her the coffee and tablets. “Take these,” I told her. “It'll help with the headache you've got.”

After taking the medicine and downing the rest of the hot coffee, she had some color to her face, though I knew it was only because the coffee was hot.

A light knock sounded on the door. Meredith tensed, but I pressed a kiss to her forehead, holding my lips there until she relaxed again. “You're safe with me,” I gently reminded her.

She drew in a shaky breath, watching as I strode to the door to open it. Grayson was standing on the landing with Farrah.

“She's not feeling all that well,” I told them quietly, knowing the news had already reached them. This town's gossip vine worked extremely fast. I let them in. “Please keep that in mind while you're here.”

Grayson clapped a hand to my shoulder. “If you need to go down and close the shop early for her, we can sit with her until you get back,” he quietly told me.

I nodded. “Thanks, man.”

I sat down beside Meredith and wrapped my arm around her shoulders, holding her against my side. Farrah gently squeezed Meredith’s fingers, hesitating a moment before she did so though, to give Meredith time to pull away if she wanted.

My sister might have been very rambunctious, but she was thoughtful, and she cared deeply about people.

“How are you feeling, hun?”

“Like crap,” Meredith admitted. I pressed my lips to the top of her head. “But I’ll deal. I always do.”

She was so *brave*.

“I’m here if you need me,” Farrah told her, sincerity ringing in her voice. “And I mean that, Meredith. I don’t care if it’s two in the morning. You give me a call if you need someone, okay?”

Meredith gave her a wobbly smile, her eyes flooding with tears. She blinked them back. “Thank you,” she croaked.

Farrah gently squeezed her hand again before standing. “I know it’s a short visit, but Mr. Crowley has a cow about to give birth, and he’s got a gut feeling it’s going to be a complicated one. I need to be there.”

Meredith nodded. Farrah leaned down and hugged Meredith before leaving, casting me a worried glance as she did so. I just inclined my head to her, assuring her in our own silent way that I would take care of the beautiful woman at my side.

And do my best to take care of myself as well.



Chapter Ten

MEREDITH

Silence rang in the apartment after Farrah's departure. It was uncomfortable, and anxiety bubbled in my chest.

"I'm sorry," Grayson blurted. I jerked my eyes up from my lap to look at him. Chase tightened his arm around me. "I know it's not my fault, but – God, I feel so helpless right now. He's my father – should be my *own* problem – not trying to ruin your life."

Surprising myself, I leaned forward and grabbed his hand in both of mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Grayson, this isn't your fault," I assured him. "You shouldn't feel guilty for something a monster is doing. He hurt you, too," I quietly reminded him. Grayson frowned.

"I was hoping the very first time he went to jail would have been a wake-up call for him," Grayson muttered. "But to find out he got out and hurt you, too – that now he's back again?" Grayson shook his head. "I hate that he's tainted someone else's life, too."

He looked up at me. “But Chase and I? We’ll do everything in our power to make sure he doesn’t touch you again, Meredith.” I heard Chase grunt in agreement next to me. “Even if I have to call the bastard myself, I’ll find out where he is, and we’ll stop him before he comes here; I promise.”

I immediately shook my head, drawing my hands back when they grew clammy. I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Don’t make those kinds of promises to me,” I told them. Chase narrowed his eyes at me. “Please,” I begged. “It’s not a promise you can one hundred percent guarantee that you’ll be able to keep. And breaking that kind of promise to someone—” my voice broke, “it hurts you – deep.”

Chase wrapped both of his arms around me that time, pulling me to sit on his lap. He gently ran his hand over my hair as I sucked in a ragged breath, trying not to cry again.

I just wanted to go to sleep and wake up with this all hopefully being a really bad dream.

“Get some rest,” Grayson quietly told me as he stood up from my coffee table. “Chase, I’ll hit you up in the morning.”

“Drive safe, bro.”

Grayson nodded before he left my apartment, quietly closing the door behind him. Chase stood from the couch with me cradled to his chest. After placing me on my bed, he pressed his lips to my forehead. “Take a nap,” he said softly. “I’m going downstairs to close the store early. I’ll be back up soon.”

“Okay,” I whispered, wrapping my arm over Max as he snuggled against the front of my body, his head beneath my

chin.

I was asleep not too long after I heard my apartment door slowly click closed after Chase left.



Chase's phone blared out from the nightstand, jerking us both out of our sleep. He was above the covers, his arm over me. With a groan, he rolled over and snatched up the phone. He was out of bed a moment later, yanking his boots onto his feet.

"I'm on my way," Chase said. "Fire is contained?"

I sat up on my elbows, frowning at him. He hung up the phone a moment later. "I need to go take care of this. Some kids decided to have a drunken night in Mr. Hallow's field out on Mayberry, and they started a fire. He's losing his crops."

"Go," I urged him, making a mental note to give Mr. and Mrs. Hallow free coffee and brownies tomorrow morning when they came in for their coffee – if they came in, that was. "I'll be fine."

He grabbed my face in his hands. "I hate leaving you." He pressed his lips to mine in a short, sweet kiss. "Call Grayson or Farrah to come sit with you if you need them to."

"Chase—"

He pressed a finger over my lips, shutting me up. “No arguments, sweetheart. I’ll be back soon.”

He left the apartment, shutting the door behind him. I sighed and laid back down, snuggling back against Max. I shut my eyes, willing sleep to come back to me as I sent up a prayer to God that Chase would be okay.



Glass breaking broke me out of my sleep. Max growled from next to me, already standing up. My alarms went off a moment later, making me shriek in fear. I quickly sat up and grabbed my phone, calling 9-1-1.

“There’s been a break-in at my bookstore,” I rushed out when the dispatcher picked up the phone.

“Hold on, hun. We’ve already got officers en route. Just stay upstairs and keep your door locked, okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered.

I ended the call and dialed Chase, my fingers shaking. It rang and rang, but he didn’t answer. Worry settled in the pit of my stomach. I tried again. Still no answer.

The sound of heavy boots slowly moving up the stairs to my apartment reached my ears. Max barked, trying to warn the person away. I kept dialing Chase, my tears blurring the screen of my phone.

He wasn't answering.

Why wasn't he answering?!

The doorknob jiggled. Max jumped off my bed, growls and barks tearing from his throat and chest. I stared in horror when my door was shoved open, and the man of my nightmares stood before me.

Max attacked, but the man had been anticipating it and kicked Max in the side of the head, knocking my dog out.

"Max," I whimpered, fear clawing at my throat. I rushed off my bed, too panicked to think straight.

"It's all over now," Gerald snarled at me.



Chapter Eleven

GRAYSON

I was aimlessly driving, trying to clear my head when I saw the mess. Officers were already on the scene at the bookstore, inspecting the shattered glass.

But Meredith was nowhere to be found; neither was Chase. I instantly knew something was wrong, a bad feeling settling in the pit of my stomach like a dead-weight stone.

I slung my truck into park and jumped out, rushing up to the scene. “Where’s Chase?” I asked Deek, one of the officers.

He shrugged. “Don’t know. He’s on-call tonight, but he’s not answering his phone. I’m guessing he went somewhere with Mrs. Meredith.”

I shook my head. This wasn’t like Chase, and I had a feeling that it *definitely* wasn’t like Meredith.

I rushed around the back of the building to the stairs that led up to Meredith's apartment. I jogged up them two at a time, swinging open the screen door that led into the small hall. To my left were the stairs that led down into the bookstore. To my right was Meredith's door, which was standing ajar.

I rushed inside and instantly saw red.

The monster from my childhood was straddling Meredith, holding a pillow over her face. Max was unconscious on the floor in the kitchen. I snatched up a frying pan on the counter and slammed it against Gerald's skull, knocking him out.

He landed on the floor next to Meredith with a thump. "Meredith?" I asked, rushing forward. I shoved the pillow off her face. Her body was already bruising. Her face was blue. I pressed my fingers to her pulse, finding it after a moment. It was weak, but she was still alive.

"Stay with me, girl," I mumbled. "Help!" I shouted down the stairs before I rushed back to Meredith's body.

A moment later, I heard shoes pounding up the stairs. Instantly, two paramedics began to work on Meredith, placing an oxygen mask over her face, checking her pulse, loading her onto a stretcher to carry her down the stairs.

And that's when Chase rushed in.

His eyes were crazed, his clothes torn, blood running from some cuts on his body. His skin was smudged with soot.

But the look that entered his eyes, flashed across his face when he landed his eyes on his girlfriend?

It gutted me.

Horror took over his face before it turned pained, tears glistening in his eyes. “Meredith?” he croaked, rushing forward. “Explain to me what’s going on,” he snapped at the paramedic.

“Suffocation,” Jean told him. “She’s alive but barely. We need to get her to the hospital. You coming or what?”

Numbly, my best friend nodded his head and followed them down the stairs, waving off a couple of his officers when they tried to get him to get checked out.

I knew nothing was going to tear Chase away from Meredith right then.

I called Farrah. “Grayson?” she cried.

My heart broke in my chest. I hated hearing her cry. It tore at my soul.

“You okay, girly?” I roughly asked her, shoving my hand through my hair.

“No,” she whimpered. “I found Chase on the side of the road. His truck was on fire. There was glass and twisted metal —” she broke off, a sob tearing from her throat. “I thought he was dead, but he was pulling himself out of the truck right as I pulled over.”

“Brave girl,” I murmured, knowing it would soothe her. She sniffled. “Meredith is on her way to the hospital. Chase is with her.”

“What happened?” she gasped.

I moved down the stairs, nodding at a couple of the guys as they called out to me. I headed back towards my truck. “Gerald got into her apartment. He was suffocating her.” *Crap, the dog.*

I rushed back up the stairs. Max was waking up, and he howled as he began to search for Meredith. Farrah stayed silent as I coaxed him to me, promising him we were going to her.

“I might need your help with him,” I told Farrah in all honesty. I didn’t know crap about service dogs.

“Stay there,” she croaked. “I’m coming up.”

A minute later, Farrah emerged, her blue eyes bloodshot and glassy with tears. Her face was pale. I drew her into a hug, holding her long enough for her to get herself together before I released her, allowing her to tend to Max.

After getting him calm, we rode together in my truck to the hospital.

Farrah kept her hand on Max when we got there. We were quickly led to Meredith’s hospital room, and just as I’d thought he would be, Chase was sitting in a chair by her bed, her hand in his, his broken eyes on her face.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” he whispered. His tone was broken, conveying every bit of guilt and pain he felt. Farrah clamped her hand to her mouth, a whimper muffled by her palm. I drew her into my arms as she let Max go, allowing him to go to her. Chase said something softly to the dog, soothing him as he nudged Meredith’s hand.

“They’ll be okay, right?” Farrah whispered, her voice breaking.

I rested my chin on the top of her head. “They have to be, girly,” I whispered. “They *have* to be.”

Because if everyone thought Chase was screwed up when he came home from the military? They would think he had been normal if he lost Meredith.

His mental health wouldn’t survive losing her.



Chapter Twelve

CHASE

I looked up at the sound of the door softly closing. Meredith had been in the hospital for hours now, and sunlight was streaming into her hospital room from outside. I figured it was somewhere between eight or nine in the morning judging by the position and brightness of the sun, but I'd had everyone make sure I wasn't called for work.

I was in no shape or condition to still be working. My entire body ached from my accident, and my head was throbbing.

And the woman I'd sworn to protect was now lying in a hospital bed.

Bruises littered her pale skin. The color had returned back to her face. Her brain scans came back normal, so the doctors were almost completely positive she would be okay once she woke.

But I knew she wouldn't.

After this, she'd never be the same again.

Gerald Lawson had almost succeeded in killing her. Had Grayson not shown up in time, he would have.

I owed my best friend my life.

Grayson handed me a cup of coffee. "Thought you might need this," he gruffly told me. "How is she?"

I shrugged. "Better, but the same," I quietly informed him, knowing he would understand what I meant. "Doc says the pain medication is keeping her under." I drew in a deep breath. "This is why she asked us not to make that promise to keep her safe." I shook my head. "She knew we couldn't keep it."

Grayson's hand settled over my shoulder. "She's not going to blame you for this, Chase."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter," I gruffly told him. "Because *I'm* going to blame myself for this. She doesn't have to because I already am. I failed her." I looked up at him. "The same vehicle that was parked downstairs at her bookstore?" Grayson nodded, following what I was saying. "I don't know if you saw it or not, but it's the same one that caused my accident. He had to have known who I was to her. Guys say because I never made it to the scene of the fire, Mr. Hallow lost an entire field of crops because of those kids." I scrubbed my hands down my face.

"Mr. Hallow isn't going to blame you for that," Grayson assured me.

I laughed, but it held no humor. "I know, man. He's already heard the news and come by to see me and Meredith. I feel like

the whole town has tried to come by and see her. I ordered no visitors unless it was you or Farrah until she woke up.” I looked up at Grayson. “How is Farrah?” I asked him. “She was pretty torn up over seeing me in my accident.”

“She stayed at my place last night,” Grayson quietly informed me. I was too tired and torn up inside to be angry at them sleeping in the same house, especially when I knew Grayson harbored feelings for Farrah. “She was pretty torn up, but I finally got her to get some sleep. She was still sleeping when I left this morning.”

“Separate rooms?” I asked him.

Grayson softly laughed. “Recliner,” he corrected. “Had to rock your little sister to sleep. I put her in my room this morning so she could continue sleeping.”

I nodded, not bothering to say anything else because honestly, if my sister ended up with him, at least I knew Grayson was a good guy and would take care of her.

“Has your mom and dad been by?” Grayson questioned.

I nodded. “Mom was a sobbing mess, and I couldn’t deal with it, so Dad took her back home.”

Grayson’s lips twitched in amusement. “She was always very emotional about anything that happened to you after that concussion you received.”

I shrugged.

Meredith released a soft groan at that moment. Grayson took his leave without a word as I jumped from my chair, hovering over her, desperate to finally see her awake again.

“Meredith?” I softly asked. “Sweetheart, can you open your eyes for me?”

She slowly ripped her eyes open, staring up at me. “It hurts,” she mumbled.

I brushed my hand over her blonde hair. “I know, sweetheart. The doc has you on some pain medication, though,” I assured her. “It’s probably time for another dose.”

Her hand fluttered to the oxygen tubes in her nose, but I stopped her. “Don’t pull at them,” I told her. “You almost died, sweetheart.” I swallowed thickly. Fear flashed through her eyes, ripping my soul apart. “Your organs still need the oxygen.”

“He—”

“He is on his way back to prison,” I told her. Relief flooded her features. I paused for a moment, trying to figure out the best way to word what I needed to say next. I didn’t want her facing him in a courtroom again. I would already have to testify and so would Grayson since he’d saved her.

But I wanted to prevent her from reliving that horrible night as much as possible.

“If I can get pictures of your body and if you allow me access to your medical records for your court case, you won’t have to face him in court,” I told her.

She licked her dry lips and nodded. “Okay,” she whispered. “Do whatever you need to.” She glanced away from me for a moment, seemingly trying to bring herself back together before she looked at me again. Tears glistened in her pretty eyes, breaking my heart. “I don’t want to see him again,” she croaked.

I leaned down and gently smoothed my lips over hers, reaching up to gently cup her pretty, bruised face. “Then you won’t have to,” I assured her.

Then, she burst into tears.



Chapter Thirteen

MEREDITH

It was a struggle to get Chase to leave my side, but a couple of days later, after being informed I would be released, I got him to go to my apartment and get me some things. I couldn't stay at my own place right now with it being part of a crime scene. Chase assured me it all should be wrapped up by the end of the week, but in all honesty, I had no urge to go back to that apartment anytime soon.

It was already going to be hard enough to return on Monday to open my bookstore again.

Chase stepped into the room and shot a warm smile at me. He was healing nicely, his cuts scabbed over, what little bruises he had already beginning to fade despite only a little bit of time having passed.

Me? I looked like I'd been in a sparring ring.

My entire body was battered and bruised.

I eased into a sitting position and rummaged through my bag, grabbing some toiletries and clothes so I could take a shower and get dressed.

“You sure I don’t need to get you a nurse?” Chase asked me.

I shook my head. “I’ll be fine,” I promised him. “You mind calling your Nana and getting us some food to go?”

He flashed me a grin. “Not a problem, sweetheart.”

After showering and getting dressed in the sweatpants and large, long-sleeved shirt Chase had grabbed for me, I slid on the bedroom shoes on the floor by my bed so we could go. I was beyond ready to be out of the hospital.

I stayed in my car while Chase went in to get our food. I didn’t feel like walking, and I definitely wasn’t ready for all of the questions and stares.

Max pushed very gently against my arm. I turned my head to look at him. “I know, boy,” I said softly. “We’ll be at Chase’s soon, okay?”

I knew Max was getting antsy. I normally took him for long walks in the morning, and he was used to running around with me all day, stuck to my side like glue as I worked. For the past couple of days, he’d been confined to the hospital room for me except when Chase took him out to use the bathroom, so Max was desperate to move around and get some of his energy out.

Chase popped back into the car a minute later. “Nana is worried about you,” he told me.

I sighed. “Sorry, I just—”

He cupped the side of my neck and pressed a soft, gentle kiss to my lips. “Easy, sweetheart. I know, and I get it.” He laid his hand on my knee, giving it a very small squeeze. “Let’s go home, eat some of this greasy food, and then we’ll cuddle on my bed and watch a movie. Sound good?”

I smiled at him, relaxing again. It was so easy being with Chase like this.

“Sounds perfect,” I told him.



The next day was kind of chaotic.

In a town like this where everyone knew everyone else, you were bound to get visitors. Even I knew that.

But I was used to the visitors being confined to my bookstore, not in the safe place I was calling home for a moment.

“Sis, seriously, I specifically asked you to give us some space,” I heard Chase grumble from the kitchen as he opened the front door.

“And I wanted to see my new friend and check on her,” Farrah retorted. “And I brought her some books to occupy her

mind.”

I relaxed, turning slightly on the couch to smile at her. She beamed at me, not even flinching at the bruises on my face. “Hey!” she cheerily greeted. “I don’t know if you read erotica and smutty books, but I have a ton here for you to binge on while you’re slumming it at my brother’s,” she teased.

I laughed, unable to help myself. She was so cheery; it was contagious.

“Thanks,” I told her, my cheeks burning red at the very first book on the pile she placed on the table. The man’s arms were wrapped around a *very* naked woman, her legs crossed, his hands covering her breasts. “Um, this is very ...” my voice trailed off. “Thanks?” I choked out.

She burst out laughing. “Chase won’t flinch at what you choose to read,” she assured me. “He’s so used to it by now.”

Chase grumbled something in the kitchen I didn’t catch, but apparently, Farrah did because she shot him a dark look before aiming her smile back at me. “I’m not staying long,” she told me. “I just wanted to check on you and bring you these to read. If you need girl time, though, holler, yeah?”

I nodded, smiling at her. “I will,” I told her. “Thanks, Farrah.”

She waved at me before kicking her brother in the back of the leg and darting out of the house. He glared after her in annoyance.

“I think she was adopted,” he finally grumbled.

I giggled.



The rest of the day followed much the same.

People brought flowers, casseroles, cakes, brownies – you name it, we probably had it sitting somewhere in the kitchen.

Chase was looking a bit alarmed at the amount of food we'd managed to collect. And to say that I was a bit overwhelmed was an understatement.

“All this food,” Chase grumbled, “all of these *people* that have come by today, and not a single soul brought *coffee*,” he muttered.

I laughed at him, his annoyance somehow easing my nerves. He flashed me a crooked grin. “Sorry, sweetheart. Everyone in town knows I hate unexpected visitors, but I guess the boundaries I set go out the window when you're here,” he teased. “Someone could have *at least* brought coffee, though.”

“Did I hear someone say coffee?”

Chase spun around, his eyes brightening. “Mom!” He laughed and leaned down to hug her, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “I didn't expect you to come by.”

She handed him a grocery bag as well as a steaming cup of coffee. “I knew everyone in town would be stopping by with Meredith being here, and I knew none of them would remember you like coffee.” She smiled at me before striding over to where I was sitting. “How are you feeling, hun?” she asked me, taking a seat on the couch next to me.

I vaguely remembered meeting her while I was in the hospital, but I was pretty sure I was still doped up on quite a bit of medication.

“Tired,” I told her honestly. “Coffee was a godsend. Thank you.”

She laughed. “Chase can’t survive without it. That boy of mine has been a coffee addict for years. And he *hates* unexpected visitors.”

“You’re an exception,” Chase called out from the kitchen where he was starting a pot of coffee. “Where’s Dad?”

“Helping your sister,” she told him.

Chase grunted in response. I smiled. “He grunts a lot,” I noted.

His mother laughed. “That he does.” She gently squeezed my knee before standing. “You make sure my boy of mine takes good care of you, you hear? And if he doesn’t, you give me a phone call. I’ll straighten him out right quick.”

I smiled at her. “I will,” I assured her.

She hugged Chase bye before leaving. Chase sighed once the door shut behind her. “I hope that is the *last* person we have to see today,” he grumbled.

“You’re so moody,” I teased.

He rolled his eyes. “I wanted a *quiet* day.”

“Impossible in this town,” I told him. “Even if I don’t have a single book sale at the bookstore during the day, I can always count on a coffee sale or a pastry sale because *someone* is going to need to be in someone’s business,” I told him.

Chase laughed before sitting beside me with an open bag of Cheetos. “So’s the way of life,” he hummed. “Cheeto?”

I smiled at him, leaning forward to press a quick kiss to his lips. “Thought you’d never ask.”



Chapter Fourteen

Chase leaned over the couch, his hands braced on the back of it, caging me in as he leaned down to press a soft kiss to my lips. “I’m running to the store because we’re out of sugar, and you know I need sugar with my coffee,” he told me.

I smiled. “Make sure you stop by the diner and grab you a cup before you wander into the grocery store,” I told him. “It might save someone’s life.”

He laughed and kissed me again. “Yeah, you’re right. Call me if you need me, yeah?”

“I will,” I assured him.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead before he snatched up his car keys and left. Max got on the couch and curled against my side. I slid my fingers through his soft fur before focusing my attention back on the television screen in front of me.



“Meredith?” I heard Grayson call. I jerked my attention away from the TV, looking towards the locked screen door. Grayson waved at me.

“Oh!” I exclaimed. I got up, padding over to the door. “Sorry,” I sheepishly apologized. “I got engrossed in the movie. Everything okay?”

He nodded. “How are you feeling?” he asked me as he took a seat on the other couch. I sat back down beside Max, sliding my fingers into his soft fur.

I shrugged. “Still a little sore, but the pain medicine is helping,” I told him.

He frowned. “I’m really sorry about Gerald, Meredith. He’s a sick individual who seems to get a kick out of hurting people smaller than him,” he grumbled.

“Grayson,” I softly called, drawing his eyes to me again, “what happened to you and your mom?” It had been bugging me, and I hadn’t wanted to ask. But maybe hearing how they survived would help me get through this, too.

Because at night, I still jerked awake from flashbacks, and Chase had to soothe me back to sleep each time.

He sighed, leaning his head back to stare up at the ceiling before looking back over at me. “Mom and Gerald dated when they were in high school,” he explained. I noticed how he didn’t

call Gerald his father. It was probably a coping mechanism for him. “From what I understand, everything was great for them until Mom got pregnant. Gerald had a full ride to the University of Tennessee on a football scholarship, but apparently, he gave it all up to be there for Mom.”

He was silent for a moment. I let him get his thoughts together, not speaking.

“He began to drink, stayed out a lot, partying.” His forehead creased. “Someone called Mom – told her that Gerald was screwing some girl that bullied Mom a lot in the back of his truck. When he came to see her the next day, she tried breaking up with him.” He swallowed thickly. “I was born prematurely. He beat the hell out of her.”

“Oh, no,” I whispered.

“He wouldn’t ever let her leave – said if she was going to ruin his life, he was going to ruin hers. And he did in more ways than one. Along the way, he ruined mine, too.”

“Until he was sent to jail,” I said softly.

Grayson nodded. “Until he went to jail,” he confirmed. “I thought that would be it. Mom finally got her divorce. She doesn’t come out much. I mostly do all of her shopping for her. She can’t stand public places, can’t stand being unexpectedly touched.”

“Oh, Grayson, I’m so sorry,” I whispered, meaning it because I kind of knew how his mom felt.

Grayson offered me a weak smile. “I’m just sorry he tainted your life, too, girly,” he told me. He stood up. “But I didn’t

come over here to hash out my past. I wanted to take you out to my farm, let you explore it since you didn't really get to the first time. You up for that?"

"Um, just let me text Chase," I told him.

He nodded. "Sure. And make sure you put jeans and boots on," he told me. "I'm going to teach you how to ride a horse." His watch went off, and he sighed, looking down at it. "Aaand, I guess Farrah will be joining us."

I laughed. "She's a work of art," I told him, getting up from the couch. Max got up as well, sticking to my side.

Grayson rolled his eyes. "She's a pain in my butt, is what she is."



Chapter Fifteen

CHASE

It hadn't been my plan to stop by work while I was in town, but it happened.

Turns out, I guess I couldn't turn off that part of my brain, especially when it concerned Meredith.

"Investigation is done," Brady informed me, handing me the folder. I set my coffee on his desk and flipped open the folder, looking at the pictures. My stomach turned at the sight of Meredith in her hospital bed, oxygen tubes up her nose, blood on her hairline, bruises littering her skin.

"Bookstore and apartment are ready for work, then?" I asked him.

He nodded. "All set and ready to go," he informed me.

I handed him back the folder. “And she won’t have to testify against him in court?”

Brady shook his head. “We might have to interview her to get all of our facts together before the case, but no. I’ll stand in for her.”

I shook his hand before I picked up my coffee again. “Thanks, Brady.”

He dipped his chin. “Anytime, Sheriff.”

I strode out of the small office, waving to the dispatcher before I strode outside, pulling my phone from my pocket. I called in a couple of favors to a construction crew in town as well as a window installer for Meredith’s store. I was assured the job would be done within the next few days.

“You’re head over heels for this woman, aren’t you, Chase?” Heeler asked me, amusement in his tone.

“Fell face first,” I admitted, not even ashamed about it.

He laughed. “Figured you’d be the first one out of all of us to settle down, though I’ve been wondering if Grayson would beat you to the punch with Farrah.”

I grunted. Heeler laughed harder. “Alright; I’ll shut up. Let your pretty lady know we’ll have it done by the end of the week,” he told me.

“Thanks, Heeler.”

I hung up and finally went to the grocery store. When I got there, my phone pinged with a message from Meredith.

***Grayson stopped by and asked to take me out to his ranch.
Hope that's okay. If you need me, that's where I'll be. -
Meredith***

I smiled down at my phone, sending a mental thank you to my best friend for getting her out of the house and to somewhere that she didn't have to worry about people bothering her and staring at her.

Have fun, sweetheart. I'll see you in a bit. -Chase



I walked out towards the barn where I could hear Meredith laughing. Farrah was standing next to her, and Grayson was mucking a horse stall.

Meredith was beaming down at the tiny kitten in her arms, her eyes lit up with joy.

It was one of the most beautiful sights I'd ever seen in my life.

“Hey, sweetheart,” I greeted.

She looked up, aiming that perfect smile at me. “Chase, look at this cute little baby!” she exclaimed.

I reached out and rubbed the little guy's head, my smile widening when he purred. He was gray with white paws and extremely fluffy.

He fit perfectly with Meredith.

“You wanting a kitten?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “Don't they require a lot of work, though? I mean, I'm normally always busy—”

“Cats are pretty self-sufficient animals,” Grayson told her, leaning his shovel against the wall before walking over to us. I saw my sister's eyes linger on him before she blushed and looked back at the kitten. “If you want him, you can have him.”

Meredith beamed at him. “Really? How much do you want for him?”

Grayson chuckled and shook his head. “I don't want anything except to have him out of my hair,” he assured her. “One barn cat is enough for me.”

She frowned. “I don't like taking things for free.”

He playfully rolled his eyes at her. “Then spread the word to your customers when you reopen that I've got free kittens.”

She nodded. “Okay,” she smiled.

“Speaking of reopening,” I said, drawing her attention back to me, “the investigation has been closed. Your shop is all set to reopen Monday. I called in a couple of favors to some people,

and they'll have your shop and apartment ready to go by the end of the week."

Her eyes washed with tears. Holding the kitten to her chest with one hand, she threw her other arm around my neck. I wrapped my arms around her waist, holding her to me. "Oh, Chase, thank you," she whispered, her voice thick with tears.

I pressed my lips to the top of her head. "Anything for you, sweetheart."

And I meant that.



Epilogue

MEREDITH

I nervously ran my hands over my dress, drawing in a shaky breath as I did so.

Today, I was marrying the man of my dreams.

Chase had proposed in that same grassy field that made me fall in love with this town – the same field that I made the decision to settle down here.

Today was also the day that I would officially move out of my apartment into our new home that Chase and I had built. We wanted to start off fresh in a home that was completely ours.

Chase and I would both be putting our old places up for rent soon. It still felt so surreal that this was happening – that I'd fallen in love with a man as amazing as Chase.

Chase's mom knocked lightly on the door, smiling at me through the mirror I was facing. "It's time, hun. You ready?"

"I'm nervous," I told her. "Extremely nervous."

She gave me an understanding smile. "If it makes you feel any better, Chase is practically sweating bullets. He's nervous as well. He wants this day to be absolutely perfect for you, but he's also terrified you're going to run out of the church on him."

I laughed softly, turning to face her. "He should know me well enough by now to know that I wouldn't," I told her.

She smiled at me. "My boy loves hard when he loves someone, Meredith, and he does love you." My cheeks warmed, my heart softening. "Now, come on before you make my boy cry thinking you're not marrying him after all."

I laughed and followed her out of the room. Grayson was waiting for me, a warm smile on his face. "You look great," he told me, holding his arm out for me to take.

I laughed, my nerves easing some. "Just great?" I teased.

He flashed me a boyish grin. "Chase will have me by my—"

"Grayson!" Chase's mother lightly scolded, cutting him off. We both laughed.

Grayson gently squeezed my hand that was resting on his arm. "Don't be nervous. Chase is madly in love with you, and he's excited as hell to spend the rest of his life with you. Just breathe. This will be just as easy as everything else with him is."

“Thanks, Grayson,” I whispered as the doors opened.

And there stood my groom at the end of the alter, his eyes on me.

And when he saw me, a tear rolled down his cheek.



I laughed as Chase spun me around before taking me back into his arms, his blue eyes twinkling with love as he gazed down at me.

“You’ve made me the happiest man in the world today,” he told me. “Thank you.”

I blushed. “No need to thank me,” I assured him. “Just love me until the end of time.”

He grinned. “Always, sweetheart. Even after time ends, I’ll still continue to love you.”

Oh, my heart.

“Are you two ever going to come cut this cake?” Farrah called out.

Chase rolled his eyes. “I thought she would become less annoying as she got older, but it seems to only get worse.”

I laughed and led him over to the cake table. Together, we cut the cake, and before I knew it, Chase was smashing the piece we had just cut into my face.

I shrieked in shock, but before I could retaliate, Chase dragged my body against his and took my cake-covered lips in a sweet kiss before licking my lips clean.

“You’re so gross,” I laughed as he set to work swiping icing off my face.

He flashed me a classic Chase grin that was full of amusement and mischievousness. “Just wait until I finally get you home, Mrs. Warren.”

My cheeks flamed red.

SNAG THE NEXT BOOK IN THE SERIES!



<https://books2read.com/loveinautumn2>

PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW!

I'd love to know what you thought about my book, even if you completely hated it!

<https://books2read.com/loveinautumn1>

Goodreads:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/59470579>

BookBub: [Falling For You: A Small Town Sweet Romance \(Love In Autumn Book 1\) by T. Thomas - BookBub](#)

FOLLOW T. THOMAS

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authorthomast>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/authorthomast>

Facebook group:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/authorthomast>

BookBub: <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/t-thomas>

Goodreads:
https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/288005.T_Thomas

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T. Thomas is a young adult romance author. Her first book, *Destructive Savior*, is set to release on June 1, 2021.

She has been writing since she was thirteen years old. She enjoys spending all of her spare time writing, but she absolutely detests editing and proofreading.

T. Thomas can normally be found in her little room of her own that she calls her “woman cave” writing her next book and putting off editing and proofreading for as long as possible.