



The Cowboy's Off Limits Option

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Description: Callie might be off-limits but ever since she came home from college, I've been obsessed.

My buddy doesn't seem to notice that his baby sister's all grown up now. He's still trying to shield her from getting hurt, making sure any boy who shows an interest in her knows better than to get too close.

Turns out, Callie isn't looking for a boy, she's been waiting for a man and when I find out that man is me, I'll risk everything including my friendship and my family's ranch to claim her.

Because I don't see my best friend's little sister when I look at Callie's curvy figure, all I see is the woman who's meant to be my wife.

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Chapter One

Callie

There he is-- in those jeans that fit just right, with his boots on and his shirt off. The man's body should be illegal.

He's standing on top of a stack of hay bales piled on the back of Rowan's flatbed pick-up, tossing them off the truck to my brother while I do my best to act like I'm completely oblivious to the defined chest, the stacked abs, the v of muscle descending below the silver belt buckle... because if Rowan knew that his best friend turned my panties into a sopping wet mess, he'd come unglued.

Not that my brother's hottest friend is in any danger.

He hasn't noticed me since I was a kid, making mud-pies with my friend, Ginger. I still remember him telling me that girls that played in the dirt were gross. Which is only one of the many reasons he's never going to see me as anything more than his buddy's kid sister.

Sigh.

Back to working in the garden-- tending flowers and herbs. Still playing in the dirt after all these years, guaranteeing that Archer Dean O'Leary will always think of me as a gross little girl.

I've been swooning over him since I was nine.

At an age when most girls were still convinced all boys had cooties, I was experimenting with make-up and jewelry-- Mom and Dad were not going to let me get high heels-- trying to figure out what it took to get a boy's attention.

All it took was a few years for the boys in my class to hit puberty and me getting my curves faster than most other girls-- turns out, getting a boy's attention is easy. Problem was, I was trying to get a man's attention.

Unsurprisingly, I never stood a chance.

It would have been pretty creepy if Archer'd noticed me back when I was a desperately crushing preteen; he's an entire decade older than me, after all.

But there's no reason he couldn't notice me now that I'm a grown woman.

Except for maybe my over protective brother, I guess.

I know he loves me, but I'm sure Rowan would lock me in a tower if he could. It's probably a good thing Archer isn't into curvy girls that play in the dirt, because if he ever did notice me that way? It wouldn't just end his friendship with my brother, Row would probably kill him.

Sitting back on my heels, I wipe sweat off my brow with the back of my hand, still holding the trowel I've been using to work the soil in the small flower beds.

The September sun is doing its best to hang on to summer as long as it can, dousing Slow River in a heat wave even though I've already had to pull the summer annuals out of the garden.

The bib of my overalls sticks to my back and I unhook on shoulder strap in an effort to get some relief. The strap falls forward, letting the corner of the bibs hang loose.

Fresh air hits my sweat-soaked tank top and I wish I'd worn shorts instead.

My eyes track Archer's movements without my permission.

The hay bales are still stacked three high on the flat-bed truck and he stands on top of them, stretching his muscles under the high sun as if this is actually a work-out for him.

Archer Dean is one of the O'Leary brothers. They own the Delta O Ranch out of town where the Slow River branches out into a false delta with half a dozen braided streams crisscrossing the valley before rejoining into on river that runs out of the low lands through the Flying R and on to where ever it finally makes it way to the ocean.

I've seen Archer put in much harder days of work than just tossing a few bales of hay off the back of my brother's truck. Maybe it's just the heat that has him making a fuss today.

Archer Dean

I've got about a dozen things that need my attention back at the ranch, but I couldn't pass up an opportunity to help my buddy unload the bales for his animals. Not when it means getting to see Cal.

Fuck, she's got me acting like a dumb kid-- standing up here on top of the hay stacks on the truck with my shirt off, putting more effort than necessary into flexing my muscles as I lift the hay bales and throw them to the ground. Hoping she's gonna notice.

Sweat runs down my chest and back. I stand upright and twist my torso-- partly for the stretching after all the bending to grab the heavy bales, partly making a damn fool of myself up here, hoping the movement might catch Cal's eye.

I've been obsessed with Calla Lillian Maye since not long after she came of age. Which should have been good timing, considering I'm ten years older'n her. If she was any other girl in the whole world, I'd have asked her out. Done my best to make her fall for me. Courted her and married her and had her chasing my kids around the yard all day while I chased her around the bedroom at night.

Best thing about doing physical labor out here in the valley's blazing, late-summer sun is that it does a good job of keeping my dick from causing a scene when thoughts like that start running through my brain.

It also helps a lot that my best friend is standing on the ground, waiting on me to toss down the next bale-- and if he knew the filthy ideas I had about his baby sister, he'd dig those hay tongs into my hide.

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The River's a small place, you know? We all kinda grow up together, and I've known Rowan since we were kids.

By the time high school was over, Row was already managing the big feed supply after he took over from his pop. It's the only place in the valley that can supply a ranch the size of the Delta O, so we saw a lot of each other from doing business together.

Soon enough we were hanging out on our free time and, hell, he's been my best bud aside from my brothers for the last several years now.

I was used to seeing Callie around about most all the time. She was a just a scrawny thing making mud pies with her friends when I first met her.

By the time Row and I started hanging out, she was an awkward teenager, strutting around playing dress up. Trying to figure herself out the way girls do at that age I guess.

I've got three brothers, so what do I know about the phases girls go through?

Cal got her curves early and it seemed like there was always some boy coming around wanting to see her but she never had any interest in any of them.

Rowan got good at running the boys off for her and I was right there with him, playing the part of the protective big brother alongside her real brother.

She went off to the city to do a course in horticulture after she finished high school.

She always was playing in the dirt; doing her gardening and growing flowers. She got some certificate in flower arranging while she was still in high school; won some ribbons at the fair for her designs, I remember.

I used to tease her because it seemed she was always caked in mud every time I saw her. I remember telling her boys didn't like girls who played in mud. Like I said-- didn't stop a damn one of 'em.

Guys don't give a fuck about the dirt when a girl's got curves like Callie's.

Back then, I looked at those curves the same way Rowan did-- from the perspective of a brother who wanted to protect her from getting pawed at by idiot teenage boys that didn't have the sense to see her as more than tits and ass.

"You giving up on me already, old man?" Rowan hollers up at me from the ground, probably thinking it's the afternoon heat that's got me stalling too long before getting the rest of his hay unloaded.

"Fuck off," I give him the finger, not bothering to take my eyes off their target, which isn't the patch of late blooming sunflowers or the bench in the shade of the big cottonwood behind the house that I'll tell him it is if he asks. "I don't see your skinny ass up here throwing bales."

"Can't say I see yours throwing bales either. Get to it, would ya? There's a cold beer in the fridge waiting on me."

"Yeah, yeah."

Grabbing up the tongs again, I rip my gaze off the thing I'm really staring at; the woman kneeling between rows of yellow and orange marigolds with dirt smeared across her face in a pair of worn overalls that are hanging off one shoulder and a

white tank top pushed to the limits to constrain womanly curves that I don't think of like a brother should at all anymore.

Curves I still want to protect, only for different reasons.

Ever since Callie got back from finishing her course in the city, I haven't been able to see anything but a woman when I look at her. A full-grown woman, running her own business now, with her head full of interesting ideas that I enjoy hearing about whenever we get a chance to talk. A woman who's more than just a beautiful face framed by waves of light brown hair with wide, hazel eyes and soft lips that always look like they need to be kissed.

Calla Lillian Maye might be more than a great set of tits and a plump ass, but I can't stop thinking about what it would feel like to fill my hands with those curves and hear her moaning my name while I've got them wrapped around my hard cock at night.

Cal leans forward, working between the plants with a small trowel, up on her hands and knees in a way that has me groaning out loud at the sight of her.

"Come on, Dean, let's get this done."

Rowan's voice pulls me back to reality and I get busy dropping the rest of the bales down to him.

Cal's off limits. I might be willing to risk my friendship with her brother if it meant calling her mine, but Rowan's important to the ranch and I can't risk him blacklisting the Delta O-- even if it means going to my grave without ever claiming my girl.

Chapter Two

Callie

"Tell me about this guy," I demand, stabbing at the lime wedge in my cocktail and mentally calculating whether or not I can handle another one and still get the shop open on time in the morning.

The new bartender at O'Hare's has a heavy hand with the booze and they don't call these thing "mules" for nothing-- they've got a kick.

Ginger sighs and launches into a moony-eyed description of the guy she met up on the mountain where she's opening her brewery.

I think my best friend is in love. I've never seen Ginger act this way about a guy before. This might be it for her; she'll move up to Moonshine Ridge to live happily ever after with her mountain man and I'll be left down here in the valley with my flower shop and a growing herd of cats.

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"Come up to the Ridge and hang out with me while I paint," Ginger tells me when she sees me staring into my empty coppermug, "Current has a couple of single brothers, and my land lady's grandson is smoking hot if you're into that bad boy thing."

She wiggles her eyebrows at me, looks up at the bar and throws up a peace sign. Oh. I guess that's actually a two. As in, two more drinks.

"Not my vibe." I shrug, "I'm not big on beards."

"Puh-leeze, if Dean O'Leary walked in here with whiskers to his knees--"

"Shut up!" If we were alone at Ginger's place where no one could overhear her, I'd be laughing my ass off. Because she's right. If Archer Dean grew a beard, it'd be the sexiest beard that ever bearded. But O'Hare's pub is the bar where all the ranchers hang out. It's full of people that work on the Delta O, and guys from all over town that know my brother. I can't have my bestie tipsily shouting Archer's name like that.

"Why don't you just make a move already?" Ginger sips at the new cocktail that's been delivered to our table, dropping her voice to a respectable level and looking at me with sympathy in her eyes. "Just tell him he's the guy you've been waiting on and ask him to take care of business."

Choking, either from the bourbon or Ginger's bluntness, I shake my head vehemently.

"One, I could never do that! I'm not you. Two, I don't want him to 'take care of business,' Ginge, I want..." Sighing heavily, I sip, wave my hand in circles as if it's

the universal gesture for what I'm getting at, and go on, "...you know, I want the whole picture. And, most importantly, you know Rowan will kill any guy that touches me. I should have dated while I was away at school."

"But you didn't. Because you are going to die on the hill that is Archer Dean O'Leary."

"I'm destined to die a virgin."

"Cal, you're a grown woman now. You run your own business. I know you-- you want a family of your own. Maybe it's time you set your brother straight on who the gatekeeper of your panties is."

"Brothers are supposed to beat up guys who break your heart, not stand in your way of finding happily ever after."

"Maybe," I concede, "if it was anyone but Archer."

Ginger rolls her eyes and mimics "Archer" with a giggle. "Since when is it 'Archer' anyway? He was always just plain old Dean when we were growing up."

"I dunno. His people always called him by his first name. I think he started using it more after his dad passed away. Seems like all the O'Leary boys have done their growing up over this last summer."

Ginger stirs and sips thoughtfully, "I hear Ranger moved back too."

"And brought a girl home with him," I point out. "Gunner's getting married too."

"You know how these things go, Cal; once one of 'em marries up, the others fall like dominoes. Your window of opportunity is closing, you should shoot your shot before

Dean ends up with someone else."

Rolling my eyes, I give my drink more attention than it calls for.

"Yeah right," I mutter, "Even if my brother wasn't an overprotective asshole; Archer still sees me as that little girl making mud pies with you."

When he sees me at all, that is.

It's for the best: he'll find some girl to marry and then he'll be the kind of off-limits that I can't fantasize ways of getting around. Then I'll have to give up on him for good and maybe I can finally get on with my life.

"I think the only person who still thinks you're a little girl making mud pies, is you, Cal. It's okay to grow up, make a play for the things you really want-- find out if they want you too. You can't move on if you don't move past."

Ginger drains her drink in one last swig and gives me a glassy-eyed smile.

"And for fuck's sake, tell your brother to stop with the clam jam."

"Ohmygod!" Maybe it's the drinks, or maybe it's really that funny, but I can't stop giggling. "I cannot believe you just said 'clam jam' unironically! I'm cutting you off!"

Archer Dean

"I'm just saying notto overlook her, honey."

Mom fusses with the pots hanging from the overhead rack Dad made out of welded horseshoes back when I was still little. She finally chooses a large saucepan and sets it on the stove, humming absently while she works and barely paying attention to my

protests.

"She's Rowan's little sister, Mom, you know how he is about her."

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Mom makes a "hmm" noise that isn't part of her tune and I feel like she's making a note about my comment that I hope she doesn't try to explore.

"Rowan's your friend."

"Rowan is our feed supplier. The only one in a fifty mile radius and the only good one within a hundred miles."

"So then, if Rowan was supportive, you'd ask Callie out?"

Damn, ma. I roll my eyes and do my level best not to look guilty when she looks straight at me with the big knife in her hand that she uses for the vegetables.

"Mom," I take a step and lean in to kiss my mother's cheek, sneaking a carrot off the counter behind her as I do. "This is why Ranger talked a stranger into playing pretend, remember? You need to lay off."

"Well things certainly worked out for your brother and Serenity, maybe you shouldn't be so quick to brush me off."

Ma goes back to chopping up veggies for dinner while I take advantage of the chance to sneak out of the house before she can give me any more "good reasons" why Callie and I would make a good couple.

"Range found his own girl, Mom. Love you, but you're way off here. Gotta go."

Mom's saying something about how she doesn't want her grandkids spaced too far

apart so me and my younger brother, Lance, need to get busy finding women soon.

Ever since my older brothers settled down over this summer, Mom's been working overtime on the match-making.

Lance and I give her a lot of grace, seeing as how Dad passed away earlier in the year. Mom's all by herself in the big house now and damn Gunner and Ranger for getting her so excited about grandkids to spoil.

Of course, we all know my baby brother's heart is locked down already. The whole town-- and the girl who's gonna get stuck with him-- is just waiting for him to wise up to the fact and do something about it.

I'm the only one who's gonna end up letting Ma down. Because if it's not Callie, it's not gonna be anybody.

Ma means well, but she doesn't understand just how big a problem it would be if I went for Cal. I can't risk Rowan taking out his anger with me on the ranch by refusing to do business with us anymore. Then it wouldn't just be Row kicking my ass, my brothers would help him.

Though, damn, if it meant putting my ring on Callie's finger? Having her warm body wrapped around mine at night and being able to hold her hand in public and call her mine?

The toe of my boot hits one of the larger rocks in the long, private drive that runs between Mom's house and the ones us boys have built on the property. The rock goes flying, skittering over the others until it comes to a rest several feet in front of me.

Fuck yeah, man. For the chance to call Callie mine, I'd risk a whole helluva a lot. Even if it meant I'd be demoted to driving the feed trailer myself after Rowan

blacklists the Delta O.

Chapter Three

Callie

"Hey Cal."

The rich voice calling my name from the front of the small florist shop I opened just a few months ago, has my heart kicking into overdrive. My hands shake so bad that I'm forced to put the vase I just picked up back down on the table where I'm putting together bouquets of early fall color in the back room.

Calm down, Cal. I admonish myself for getting flustered. I've known the man most of my life, after all. It's not like I haven't had dozens of conversations with him.

"I'm back here, Dean, just come on through."

Seconds later, a tall figure blocks the light streaming in from the front retail area where the morning sunlight is spilling through the big windows.

"Those are pretty."

Archer has his hat in his hands, worrying the brim as he nods toward the buckets of marigolds and chrysanthemums I have lined up on my work table for easy access.

"September," I mutter, "time for fall already."

There was a time when it was a lot easier to talk to him. Even when I was a teenager, going through the most painful part of my hopeless crushing, I could still stand to be in the same room with him and talk easily.

Things have been different between us since I got back from school though. It's like Archer ran out of things to say to me while I was away.

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He used to tease me about the dirt under my nails and ask me about my gardening or my studies or my plans to open my own shop, but now he just seems--nervous--whenever he's alone with me. Like being stuck with just me is something painful that he'd rather not deal with.

"If you wrap one up for me, I'd like to take it home for Mom."

"Of course, that's really sweet of you."

Ugh. Mentally, I beat my head against the wall. My lame responses aren't really doing much to improve our small talk.

When I turn around to hand the bundle of flowers to Archer, he's moved all the way into the back room, causing me to bump into him when I find him standing so close behind me.

"Oh sorry." My reaction is automatic, but when his hands land on my arms to steady me, all the other words I was about to add die in my throat.

Archer Dean is touching me.

His hands linger, hot against my exposed skin that's been cooled by the air conditioning. Then they slide down from my shoulders-- bare under the thin straps of my sundress-- to just above my elbows. The callouses on his hands leaving a wake of goosebumps every place they touch.

I clutch the flowers between us tightly, my palms breaking out in a sweat with the

anxiety of Archer being so damn close to me and, for once in this lifetime, he's not looking at me like I'm a little kid.

"Calla--"

His voice sounds as rough as his fingers feel; with a waver of uncertainty in it as he stares down at me from his six foot, three inches, plus boots, and works a muscle in his jaw on his left side.

"I wa--"

"That's mysister, asshole!"

I'm not sure which one of us jumps the farthest, me or Archer, as my brother's angry voice reaches us from the sidewalk outside the shop.

"I don't give a fuck what you meant, Cal doesn't date. If she did, it sure as fuck wouldn't be some asshole that talks about her like that!"

Archer clears his throat.

I feel the corners of my mouth lift with my shoulders in an embarrassed shrug.

Archer knows all too well how protective my brother is of me. In fact, he's stood with Rowan many times in defending me.

I know he does it because he thinks of me as the little sister he never had himself and he's just following Rowan's lead, but I wish he really was making sure no one else got near me because he wanted me for himself.

A girl can dream.

"Here," I thrust my arm forward, shoving the flowers toward him hastily and miscalculating the distance between us. My knuckles brush his broad chest, stopped short by the wall of solid muscle that's still much closer to me than I'm used to. "Tell your mom I said hi."

Outside the front door, we can hear my brother still shouting down the street at whoever said whatever about me as he makes his way back to the shop door that he left open.

Something flickers across Archer's face as Rowan calls my name; the hard thud of his work boots making it clear he's headed back here to find me.

"Yeah, thanks, what do I owe you?"

"Arch! You're here, awesome, man, I need to talk to you anyway." Rowan greets Archer with a slap on his shoulder before leaning down to kiss my forehead.

"I don't want you talking to that Montgomery kid, hear me, Cal? If he comes around, you let me know."

"Kid's got no manners." He turns his attention to Archer, "I made it clear Callie's not interested. If he didn't get the message the first time, we might need to go tell him again."

Before my brother burst in, it looked like Archer was about to say something. Now, whatever it was is gone from his mind. He takes the flowers from me and gives me the same old, lopsided, Archer Dean grin that's been making my pulse race since I was just a dumb teenager with a crush.

"Don't worry about the flowers. You can make it up to me later."

A new expression crosses Archer's ruggedly handsome features, and for a second I expect him to make the joke that I clearly just Freudian slipped my way right into.

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Then we both glance toward my brother. Even though Rowan's oblivious to my awkward comment-- his head down, attention focused intensely on his phone-- Archer and I both know that's not the kind of teasing we do with each other.

"Okay, well, thanks then. See ya." Archer raises the hand with the bouquet and waves at me.

As Rowan leads him out the door and down the street-- probably toward O'Hare's, or possibly down to Tapped Out, the brew pub down at the far end of Main Street where they sell Ginger's porter and sometimes her other craft beers-- I watch two of the most important men in my life as they chat easily while they walk and wonder why I can't have it all.

Archer

"Nice flowers," Rowan nods in the direction of the bouquet on the table beside me. "Who're they for?"

I sip the beer I agreed to have with my buddy, momentarily confused by the question.

Let's face it, I'm just plain confused.

For a second there...shit. For a second I had Cal's soft skin under my hands. It felt so damn good, and I coulda sworn she was looking at me like-- like, I don't know. Something. Like maybe she was hoping for more.

And I was going to give it to her. I was going to spill my guts and fess up to all the

things I've been thinking and feeling about her.

Then Rowan showed up. Threatening to kick some guy's ass for making a comment about Callie, and reminding me why I can't have her.

Dammit.

"...damn Montgomery kid can drive out to Middleton for his feed." Rowan takes a long pull of the dark beer he ordered.

"He's got seventeen heifers out there, Row, and he's got a full time day job-- you know he can't be going to Middleton for his feed."

"This porter's really good, you need to try it." Rowan says, savoring his next swig of the dark brew in his glass.

"He was walking by Cal's shop with Jake Manning. Didn't even notice me right behind 'em when he turns to Jake and jabs his thumb toward Callie's window and says 'that's one I'd like in my bed for the winter.'"

My hand tightens around my pint glass, my jaw clenching as thoughts of putting Jerry Montgomery's head through a fence fill my mind.

Not for the same reasons his comment got to Row though, but because the only bed Calla Lillian is going to be warming is my own.

"See?" Rowan nods toward the death grip I have on my beer. "Tell me you don't want to go over there and remind him Cal's off limits."

My buddy laughs, thinking we're on the same page here and reminding me why I can't come clean with him-- or Callie.

"So who's getting flowers?" Row looks down at the flowers again.

"Um, mom." I stumble to answer and it's not because I don't plan on giving them to Ma when I get back to the ranch tonight, but because I was still lost in the thoughts of Callie that threaten to keep tormenting me till the day I die.

Rowan leans back and grins at me.

"Uh huh, sure, bro."

"What?"

"You got that look on your face, man. That same stupid look your bothers have been wearing around town since they found women to put rings on. Who is she?"

"No man, really, the flowers are for mom."

"Well, I appreciate you supporting Cal's business, either way," he tells me. "She's worked really hard to open her own place. It's the only thing she's focused on since she was a kid, you know."

Nodding, I watch something serious flicker across my buddy's face, something almost like sadness, as he tilts his glass to peer into the dregs of the dark porter he's been working on.

"You know Cal's friend brews this stuff," he half mumbles, "she's opening a tap house up in Moonshine Ridge. City of SlowRiver wouldn't issue her a permit-- said they didn't want more places serving alcohol downtown."

"Cal says Ginger met some guy up there. She's moving up to the Ridge permanently, already talking about marrying this mountain man she just met...I'm worried Cal's

gonna..."

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His voice trails off and he snaps out of his deep thoughts. Slapping an open palm on the table and grinning back up at me, like he's caught himself talking too seriously.

"So the flowers are for Mom, fine. But seriously, bro, you've only been half with me for days now-- who is she?"

We've been friends too long for me to get off this hook. My buddy has caught on to the fact that I'm head over heels for someone, there's no denying it. I just have to make sure he doesn't realize who it is.

"I knew it!" His grin widens when my face gives me away. "I didn't know you were seeing anyone, man. The way you've been acting lately, I take it it's pretty serious?"

Coughing lightly, I take a pull from my own beer to buy myself some time and think of how to answer.

"Yeah," I finally admit, "it's uh, pretty fucking serious. It's just that, um, well...it's complicated."

"Complicated how? You having trouble closing the deal? You need some pointers?"

This time I laugh, and it's genuine.

Damn. If it was any other woman in the whole fucking world, this conversation might actually be fun.

"Nah, more like, she's kinda-- off limits."

"Fuck that, man! What is this? The eighteen hundreds? You come from good blood, you're rich as fuck, man. Some women even think you're ok looking-- just from what I've heard around town, you know.

"Is she of age?"

"What the fuck man? Yeah. I mean, she's younger than me, but yeah, she's an adult."

"Well, I mean, there's not much left to mark a person as 'off limits.' If she's into you, then fuck whatever the obstacles are. If this is the real thing, it's worth fighting for."

"I don't know man. It's her-- family. Right?"

"This a local gal, Arch?" Rowan's giving me a hard look, that goes confused when I nod cautiously. "What family in Slow River wouldn't be fucking thrilled to have their daughter hook up with an O'Leary?"

"Well..."

"Not like the Ralston's have a sister, so who the hell else is there in town that wouldn't approve of you dating their daughter?"

I don't have the courage to give up details that might give him the clues he needs to figure out who we're talking about. Instead of talking any more about it, I drain the last swig of beer in my glass and grab the bouquet off the table as I get up.

"I gotta head back to the ranch," I explain. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah, cool, man." Rowan says, following me out of Tapped Out's outdoor sitting area. "I need to put a note in Montgomery's file to make sure I'm out of the supplement he likes-- there's an extra charge when I have to put in a special order,

you know."

He grins to let me know he's planning on making Jerry's life hard for his comment about Callie. A comment that echoes thought's I've been thinking more often myself lately.

"Don't be a dick, Row. The guy's trying to build a herd out there. You know how hard it is to break into the business from scratch."

"I'll think about it." Rowan half-heartedly promises as we start off in different directions. "I mean it, Arch, the real thing's worth fighting for. Tell her family to fuck off. They'll come around as soon as they want to see their grandkids!"

Shaking my head, I raise my hand in a half wave toward my friend, not mentioning that it's not my would-be in-laws that I'm worried about.

He can talk all he wants when he's not talking about his own baby sister.

Today's been one reminder after another of why I can't take his advice.

Chapter Four

Callie

"Tell Ginge I tried some of her beer down at Tapped Out today."

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My brother moves through Mom's kitchen like a whirlwind, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and shoving me aside as he moves past me to fill it with water from the fridge.

"It was really good," he continues, after gulping down half the glass. "Glad to hear she's doing so good with her business-- she still gonna marry that guy up on the Ridge?"

"Um, yeah. I think she's actually staying the night up there tonight."

I try to focus on the dishes I'm putting away after cleaning up from my dinner-- Mom and Dad usually eat before I get home from closing up the flower shop-- and not on my jealousy about how easy it was for my best friend to go after her happily ever after as soon as she saw it.

Putting the drying towel back on the hanger, I expect Rowan to have disappeared into the living room to visit with our parents.

He moved out to his own place years ago, but his animals are here at Mom and Dad's since they have the land and Rowan lives in town. Plus, my brother's still single too, so we see a lot of him.

But when I turn around, I'm surprised to find him still standing in the kitchen, silently watching me with a weird look on his face.

"What?"

With a ten year difference between me and Rowan-- my parents honestly thought they were done after one hell-raising toddler-- it took me going away for a couple of years for my degree for him to stop treating me like a little kid, but it's rare for him to get so serious around me as he is right now.

"What about you, Cal?" He asks in a tone much softer than I think I've ever heard him speak to me in. "You ever gonna get out of Mom and Dad's house and start your own family?"

My mouth gapes, but before I can even think of a way to answer that, Rowan's already switching up gears, acting like he never asked.

"Shit, guess I better start thinking that way myself, with another O'Leary about to fall, I'm gonna be looking for a new drinking buddy soon enough."

"Lance finally made a move?"

The entire town has a silent bet running on how long it's going to take for Archer's younger brother to pull his head out of his ass before the girl he's obviously in love with gets away.

But Rowan is shaking his head side to side.

"Archer Dean." He smirks at me, like he just let me in on the world's biggest secret, oblivious to way I sway on my feet with sudden nausea. "Man's got it bad. He was telling me all about it this afternoon. I think we'll be getting another wedding invite pretty soon from the way he was talking today."

"Dean?"

It's barely even a squeak that makes its way out of my tightened throat. My Archer

Dean?

"Yup. Wouldn't tell me who she is, said her family doesn't like him much." Row reaches into the fridge and refills his glass, still talking nonchalantly like my whole world isn't falling out from under me.

Immediately, Jessica Reynolds comes to mind. I heard that she was seen out with Archer for a while when I was still at school, but as far as anyone knew it never went anywhere.

Jess is only a couple years older than I am, and I guess her parents didn't really like the idea of her dating someone older.

It tracks with everything Rowan just told me; younger girl, secret love, family that doesn't approve.

I'm going to be sick.

Fortunately, my brother's already lost interest in me and has gone further into the house to go find our parents for a visit before he heads home. At least he's out of hearing range so he can't hear my heart breaking as I make my way down the hall to my room.

Ginger was right, they're falling like dominoes, and I missed my chance to shoot my shot.

After a solid fifteen minutes of hard, ugly crying until I couldn't catch my breath, I find myself laying on my bed, staring at the ceiling and feeling-- numb.

Ginge is somewhere in Moonshine Ridge, getting cozy with a mountain man and not checking her messages at all.

Well; I did say that if Archer ever found his girl it'd be for the best. Now maybe, I can finally let go of this ridiculous crush I've had on him for half my life.

Rising with determination, I head for my closet, rifling through my options while doing my best to convince myself that it's just a stupid crush.

My feelings for Archer are part of my childhood and they belong in the past.

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Maybe that's what he was going to tell me earlier today? When he came in for the flowers. He probably came to get those flowers for her, not his mom.

Shit! I am so stupid. This whole unrequited love thing is stupid, holding out for a fantasy that I should have known was always impossible.

Between my idiot brother that won't let a man anywhere near me, and me mooning over an older man who obviously never saw me as anything but his friend's little sister; I'm way behind the curve for a lot of life experience.

By the time I've washed my face off, done my hair and makeup, and put on the denim mini skirt and the red halter top I pulled out of the closet, I'm ready to do some catching up.

Problem is, Slow River is a small town and it's only Wednesday.

We don't exactly have a hopping club scene and the only place in town that stays open past nine on the weeknight's in O'Hare's, and Virgie's bar isn't the place you go dancing. Not to mention, everyone down there knows me-- and my brother.

My mood almost crashes, thinking I'm destined for a night at home with too much time on my hands that's only going to give me an opportunity to start feeling sorry for myself.

Then it dawns on me; The Tollhouse.

I've never been out there, but I know there's a bar off the highway going through

Keller's Ferry. The Pereiras hang out down there a lot because the Lazy P is closer to the Ferry than to Slow River. It's got a reputation for being loud and having a crowd that gets pretty crazy, but I doubt it'll be that bad in the middle of the week.

And the only people I know who hang out down there are the Pereiras anyway, and I don't think they'll tell anyone if they see me there.

Problem solved, then, I think as I stash a few twenties and my ID in my bra and grab my keys on the way out the door.

Archer

The best thing about having your name on the operation is not having to be one of the guys on the ranch before dawn, so it's not unusual for me to still be up at this time of night.

The worst thing about having your name on the operation, however, is not having to be on the ranch before dawn-- which means that, on nights like this, I've got nothing to do with myself but think about Callie.

About the way she looked today in that pretty sundress she was wearing under her apron. The way all those flowers made a nice backdrop to the messy bun pinned high on her head to hold back her caramel brown hair and the bright, hazel eyes that always seem like they're looking right inside of me.

The way her skin felt so soft under my rough-ass hands when I touched her arms.

All the things that were on the tip of my tongue right then and how close I came to saying them out loud when Rowan walked in honking like a goose over Jake and Jerry's comments about his sister.

On the coffee table, my phone lights up and dances across the surface while it buzzes with a call from an unknown number.

Nobody I know needs to be calling me after ten p.m. on a weeknight. With a flick of my thumb, I send the call to voicemail and go back to not paying attention to whatever show I've got running on the TV in the background of my thoughts.

Things can't go on like this.

On one side, I've got Mom insisting that me and Cal would be a good couple-- and I can't tell her how right she is on that. On the other side, I've got Rowan telling me to throw good sense to the wind and stake my claim on a woman he doesn't have a clue is his sister. Boxing me in on every other side is my duty to not pissing off one of our suppliers and getting the ranch cut off from local sources that we rely on.

My phone goes off with another call from the same number. This time it calls back again as soon as I cancel it, and again when I cancel the next call.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I shout into the microphone when the number calls right back, "Whatever scam you're pulling--"

"Yeah whatever, man. Look, Calla's out here. She could use a ride back to Slow and I don't wanna get Rowan involved in this." The deep voice on the other end of the line drawls with a faint hint of slur that tells me that where ever "out here" is, there's alcohol involved.

"Who's this?" I demand of the unfamiliar voice, ice prickling my spine and driving me into action even before I understand what's happening.

"Look, man, it's Rowdy--" there's a pause after the Ralston introduces himself, probably knowing my first impulse is to hang up on the bastard. "Like I said, she

don't belong out here. Someone needs to come get her before she gets into trouble. If I call Rowan, he's gonna come in here swinging and get his ass beat. This isn't a crowd that you fuck around with."

"Tollhouse, right?" That's the only place out of town where a Ralston would be drinking on a weeknight, and the only place where the regulars don't already know Callie and wouldn't hesitate to break Rowan's spine.

"Yeah, man. Thanks for taking care of this."

The line goes dead before I get a chance to ask him how the hell he has my personal number.

That's something I can figure out later, right now, I have to cut the forty minute drive to the bar in the next town down to three minutes without getting stopped by the sheriff or ending up in a ditch.

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The truck flies down the two lane highway that runs out to Keller's Ferry while I try to call Callie, but her phone is going to voicemail.

Rowdy's right; the last person we need knowing about this is Rowan.

Keller's Ferry got its name from the land ferry service that operated in the eighteen hundreds when the road between the toll station there and the then-mining settlement that became Moonshine Ridge was a single lane, dirt track that could only handle one way traffic up and down the mountain.

I don't know if the roadhouse bar out there called the Tollhouse has any historic connection to the actual toll station that eventually led to the small town's establishment-- and I've never cared to find out.

The Ferry isn't much more than a glorified cross roads. Being higher in elevation than the valley, it's home to some orchards and the farms that tend to them. It's a great place to sneak off after a high school game if you've got a girl or managed to score some beer or both, if you're lucky.

I think everyone I know has at least one good memory of a bonfire somewhere in the Ferry's pitch black fields that they'll never tell their folks about, but the Tollhouse bar is a whole other story.

It's not the sort of place you go to hang out after work with your buddies for a pitcher and a game of pool. It's a place for getting good and fucked up, first on cheap booze, and then in a fight.

Last I heard, it's caught in a turf war between motorcycle clubs that both want to claim it as their hangout.

Even the Pereiras have been coming into town to do most of their drinking at O'Hare's lately, and that says something about the place, because those guys are idiots who get thrown off bulls for fun.

It takes a lot for the Lazy P to decide your bar is too rowdy for them.

What the hell is Callie doing out there?

Somehow, I manage to get to the blinking red light at the intersection that marks the town of Keller's Ferry in twenty minutes. Unfortunately, the Tollhouse is up in the foothills, another ten miles of winding, country, backroad out of town.

Cal's little hatchback is easy to spot out front. Pulling into the empty lot that serves as the bar's parking lot, the truck skids to a halt, throwing gravel out from under the tires from my hard braking.

A few motorcycles are parked along the fence that walls in a large outdoor area around the building.

Out at the far edge of the lot, there's an early seventies Chevy Blazer with the top off that looks like it used to be blue but now it's wearing a proud coat of rust and dust. I can make out half the Flying R's brand on a peeling sticker on the bumper.

The Ralstons are technically our neighbors to the south, with their ranch, the Flying R, taking up several thousand acres on the other side of an outcropping of rocky foothills where the river finds its way back into one channel after the false delta that gave our ranch its name.

But we don't interact with them as much as we can help it. No one in Slow River does.

We're a town with a long memory and we hold grudges, and the Ralstons burned their bridges four generations back.

People around town tolerate them as far as we have to when they come around for whatever purposes bring them in, but that's about as far as it goes.

The brothers who inherited their family's ranch inherited the reputation that goes with it. Everyone knows the Ralston name and no one's keen on hearing it.

From beyond the door of the bar, propped up by a bucket of concrete that appears to serve as an ashtray for those who bother to use one, I hear shouting. The raised voices are followed by the kind of laughter that sounds like people having a good time at someone else's expense.

The Tollhouse isn't the kind of place you walk into alone.

Squaring my shoulders, I pull myself to my full height, making myself as big as I can-- like I'm facing down a goddamn mountain lion-- and head inside.

Chapter Five

Callie

"Think that one's used getting dinner first."

A gruff voice yells from behind me, where a few men are sitting at the bar.

"Oh, she's used to eating, that's for sure!"

The comment from the guy that just joined his friend and I at the pool table drips with innuendo; his reference to my curves every bit as obvious as the way he leers at them in my short skirt and halter top.

It doesn't feel sexy in the slightest. I feel exposed and vulnerable and I wish I had worn something that shows less cleavage.

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Laughter erupts from the men at the bar.

"Shut the fuck up, man, can't you see I'm trying to score here?"

The guy I've been playing pool is stretched over the table with his cue in place, but I don't think his comment refers to the shot he's about to take.

When I walked in, I was relieved at how dull the place looked. Just a big barn-style building with a lot of corrugated steel panels and rough-textured boards for walls. Neon signs for beer and various brands of hard alcohol hanging higher up. Pool tables, juke box, tables and chairs, plain concrete floor.

A few old men with beer guts in sagging jeans and leather vests covered in patches. A few younger guys at a table to themselves in the far corner.

When I walked in, every head turned to look at me, but no one made me feel threatened.

As soon as I sat down at the bar, this guy--Johnson, I think he said to call him-- came over and told the bartender he was buying whatever I was drinking.

He didn't crowd me or try to touch me or make any lewd comments. He looks older than my dad, but with a gray beard that hangs down to the center of his chest in a thin, scraggly point that ends right above his gut.

I accepted the beer he bought for me a smile and he asked if I wanted to play a game of pool.

I really thought he was being nice to me because I probably remind him of his granddaughter or something.

Then his buddy grabbed a cue from the rack on the wall and started making suggestive comments about me like I wasn't even in the room with them.

Things went south pretty quickly.

There are five of these guys and while they may look old and fat, they're also huge and it's pretty clear that there's plenty of muscle in their bulk.

What did I get myself into?

Looking around, I see the bartender making a genuine effort at not paying attention to anything happening.

There are only a couple of guys at the back table. They're younger and look like they're in way better shape, but they also don't look like they're interested in getting involved.

"Your shot, honey-breeches, what'da ya say you let Big Mel show you how to line that up."

The asshole that's been making the rude remarks licks his lips as he looks at me, then scuffles around to my side of the pool table.

It's pretty obvious what "Big Mel" means when he says he wants to show me how to line up my next shot.

The thought of this guy leaning over my back with me trapped against the table makes me throw up in my mouth a little bit. Especially when he gets close enough

that I can see the telltale stains of chewing tobacco in the corners of the mustache that hangs to his chin like Yosemite Sam.

I thought bikers were supposed to have cool nicknames like "Blade" and "Wrath." What's with "BigMel?"

"Um, you can take my shot for me," I tell Big Mel, taking a step back from the table and doing my best not to look like prey. "I, uh, need to go to the ladies room anyway."

Mel steps forward, crowding me between the pool table and his buddy, Johnson, who seems to have run out of manners now.

Johnson doesn't move out of my way, and I back into his belly when I try to keep Mel from crowding my personal space.

"Cal!"

The deep voice booms from the doorway, filling up the mostly empty bar room and sounding like salvation.

At first, I don't even recognize the voice, all I know is that it knows my name and sounds like he's relieved to see me.

Then, I peek around the mountain of Big Mel to see the furious look on Archer Dean O'Leary's face and I'm sure I've jumped out of the frying pan just to land in the fire.

If Archer's here, my brother is probably with him, and I have zero way of explaining what I'm doing here.

"Callie, come on, let's go." Archer commands of me as he stalks my way, the heels of

his cowboy boots clicking against the cement floor.

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His hand is out for me like he expects me to take it without question, and I'm more than willing to do just that, when Mel steps in front of me, blocking my way.

"Who the fuck are you?" It rumbles out of the big man in front of me, sounding more like a dare than a question.

Mel puts his hands on his hips and widens his stance. When I try to step around him, I feel a meaty hand land on my shoulder, making it clear I'm not to move.

Archer stops just outside of Mel's reach and matches his posture, facing off against him.

Archer looks...hot. I mean, he's taller than Mel. Younger. Inwaybetter shape. And, while the thug blocking my escape stands like he's ready to start throwing punches, Archer's posture is casual. Standing with confidence but not aggression. He looks like there's no question in his mind that he can take this guy.

My panties go wet. I think they just melted. My ovaries might have exploded.

The problem is, Big Mel isn't alone, but as time grinds to a stop as the standoff stretches out, it looks like Archer is.

Archer

"I'm her man, and I'm here to take her home. Let her go and there won't be any trouble."

Look, I'm not gonna pretend I haven't gotten into my share of scrapes in my time. I can take a punch almost as well as I can throw one. Hell, me and the guys have even scrapped right here in the Tollhouse.

But these guys are huge. There's five of them, and they look like ripping arms off guys like me is their idea of a relaxing evening.

I watch Callie's eyes go wide when I tell the entire bar that she belongs to me. Hopefully, she doesn't call my bluff. Guys like these seem to be the type that respect a man's ownership of a woman-- fucked up as that might sound-- and that might be the only thing they respect.

"Seems like you must not be keeping the lady satisfied for her to be showing up down here dressed like that."

The voice comes from one of the men behind me, sounding closer to my back than where they'd been gathered at the bar when I walked in.

Behind the guy blocking her from me, Callie wears an odd expression-- and a skimpy outfit that shows off her killer curves. The fringed hem of a cut-off denim mini skirt grazes her legs at mid-thigh, while the red halter top tied around her neck and waist shows enough of her soft, smooth skin and deep cleavage to momentarily have me forgetting that I might just have to fight my way to her.

But if that's the way it's going to be, I'll make these fuckers regret getting in my way.

Outside the door, the usual cricket and frog sounds of the country night are drowned out by the roar of engines approaching. The sound gets louder and soon the crunch of wheels on gravel is added to the cacophony.

More bikes.

Shit. Did one of the guys at the bar call for back up from the rest of their gang?

A tall figure emerges from the shadows at the back of the room, filling the doorway that leads to the outside.

"Sounds to me like we're in the middle of a lover's spat," Rowdy Ralston says coolly, as he walks farther into the room. "Maybe y'all want to let these kids go make up somewhere private."

Rowdy presses one fist against the heel of his other hand, cracking his knuckles loudly in the quiet that's fallen in the barroom since the bikes pulling up outside have gone quiet.

The trouble with a Ralston, is that you can't trust 'em. He called to tell me Cal was down here, but now he's staring me down across the room, obviously preparing for a fight-- and I can't tell which side he'll be on once fists start flying.

"What's it to you, Ralston?" One of the meatheads behind me asks, sounding friendly enough with Rowdy to have me worried.

"What's it to you?"

A group of men walk through the front door together and line up in formation once they're clear of the entrance.

They all wear biker leathers, but it's clear they aren't with the other guys. The new guys are younger, fitter, more sober, and they move together in a manner that suggests they're used to fighting together.

The guy behind Callie takes his hand off her shoulder and she dashes toward me, falling against my chest as I wrap my arms around her.

The meaty crack of a fist connecting to a jaw cuts my relief short.

"Let's go."

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The fight breaks out around us as Callie and I make our way out of the bar. I never saw which side the Ralston was fighting on.

"Oh shit," Callie stops between my truck and her car, "I've been drinking."

"Just get in, we'll come back for it tomorrow." I pop the locks on the truck and pull my passenger door open, taking her hand while she puts a foot on the step and climbs inside.

"You okay?" I ask as soon as we're safely away from the bar and I'm sure no one's following.

Beside me, I catch Callie's nervous movements with her hands in her lap in the glow of the lights from the dash.

Her head nods affirmatively and she twists the fingers of one hand with the other.

"How did you know where I was?"

"Ralston called me. He didn't want Rowan coming down and getting killed."

A giggle burbles from her throat and goes straight to my dick. It's such an innocent sound. Like she got away with being naughty.

My hands tighten on the wheel. Now is not the time to think about Callie being naughty.

My cock twitches against my thigh, threatening to thicken and get strangled behind my zipper when I can't adjust myself without being obvious.

"So Rowan doesn't know?" Her voice is small and hopeful in the dark cab beside me and I crush the impulse to reach for her hand.

"Nope." I assure her. "But what the hell were you doing in that place alone, Cal?"

My voice comes out harder than I mean it to, but dammit! If Rowdy hadn't seen her, and given at least half a fuck about her, who knows what could have happened to her tonight.

"What the hell were you doing there at all? I don't want you going down there again. Not even with friends. Got it? If you ever want to go when they have a band or something, you go with me...or Rowan."

Damn, I sound like a caveman. The thought of those assholes eye-fucking Callie when I'm not around to make it clear who she belongs to makes me want to turn this truck around and go back to the fight.

I hesitate a beat before remembering to add her brother's name; trying not to give myself away.

"Oh shit," Callie swears softly as I get close enough to her house that we can see the lights on in the living room. "My parents are still up."

It also looks like Rowan's truck is in the driveway. It's late for a week night, so he's probably staying over to haul animals to auction in the morning.

"I can't go in there like this," Callie turns to me, her hand gripping my forearm and lighting my damn nerves on fire. "Please, Archer? I can...shit. Just-- take me to the

shop? I can sleep in the back room."

"What about Ginger? Can't you stay with her?"

My fingers are tightening on the wheel again.

"Ginger's staying the night with her new boyfriend," Callie mutters softly. "Up in Moonshine Ridge."

There's something sad in the way she says it, and I think I start to pick up on why Cal went out tonight. Her friend's found someone, and Callie must be feeling alone. No way am I going to let her sleep in her shop.

"Cal, you can't sleep in the flower shop." I say, pulling the wheel to turn away from her street-- and heading in the opposite direction of town where her flower shop is. "You can stay with me."

I have done some fucking stupid shit in my life, but this takes it to a new level.

Chapter Six

Callie

Archer's house always feels welcoming. I've been here a million times with Rowan and every time, I think how little I'd want to change if we ever ended up together.

I wonder if his secret girlfriend is going to gut the place?

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Stepping out of the shower in his master bathroom, I towel off and reach for the things he offered me to change into; a t-shirt that smells of his laundry detergent and a pair of sweatpants that are far too long for me and have to be rolled down at the waist several times.

This will be the first time I've ever slept in his house, and the first time I've ever been here without Rowan.

I didn't have to wash my hair, but it got damp despite my efforts to keep it dry. Running the towel over it vigorously, I do my best to get it as dry as possible. I doubt Archer has a hair dryer for me to borrow.

Checking my reflection in the steamy mirror, I verify that I got the make-up off. Then I hang the towel on the hook behind the door and walk into his bedroom.

It's also my first time in here.

I've seen his room before-- from the hallway, when I've poked my head through the door to spy on what his personal space looks like while everyone else has been outside, but I've never been brave enough to snoop past the doorway.

Now I take advantage of the opportunity to make my way around the room. Opening a few drawers of his dresser; socks, underwear-- the sexy boxer brief type-- mostly black, a few pairs in dark grays and navy blue, more sweat pants, no pajamas I can find.

Does he sleep naked?

Sliding the drawer closed slightly, I try not to let the idea take up too much space in my head. After all, he belongs to someone else now.

As far as I know, Archer's never dated anyone very seriously. And since I came back to Slow River, he hasn't dated anyone at all. As long as Archer was single, I felt like there was still some hope. I felt like he could be mine, at least on some level.

Now that I know he only seemed single because he was in a secret relationship, it feels wrong to be imagining him naked in the king size bed taking up most of the real estate along one side of the room.

Running my hand over the silky soft, high quality linens and leaning down to inhale his scent from the pillow feels dirty. Not that it stops me. But it still feels wrong.

Until my mind drifts to the pillow on the other side of the bed and I find myself wondering if she's spent the night here. If I sniff that pillow, will it also smell of his aftershave and masculine scented hair products? Or will it smell feminine? Will it smell like a woman has slept there?

I didn't see any signs of a woman's things in his bathroom. I don't see a woman's clothes in his dresser or in the nearly empty walk-in closet that sprawls off the master bath.

But Rowan said the woman is a secret. Someone off limits that isn't ready to risk her family's ire to be claimed by Archer publicly.

Whoever she is-- she's a dumb, fucking bitch.

If Archer Dean wanted me, I'd let him tattoo his name across my forehead. I wouldn't care who had a problem with it, I'd be so proud to be his woman-- I'd even tell my brother to go to hell if he tried to get in the way.

A gentle knock against the other side of the closed bedroom door startles me out of my fantasies.

"Thought you might want a snack?" Archer's deep voice is muffled by the door. "I can make cocoa?"

Happy for the distraction from my miserable thoughts, I open the door to laugh at him face to face.

"Cocoa? It's seventy degrees outside, Arch."

Opening the door must have startled him. He stands in the hall, frozen and looking at me like he's forgotten how to talk.

"There's sweet tea in the fridge." When he finds his voice, it comes out raspy.

He seems shaken, and I wonder if the drama at the bar is starting to sink in. Things definitely got out of hand out there. We got lucky that those other guys showed up when they did.

"...and I could make popcorn. If you feel like staying up for a while longer we could...watch a movie? Or maybe you could tell me what the hell you were doing out at the Tollhouse alone and dressed like you wanted attention?"

His voice is filled with concern and curiosity, but then there's an edge to it too that sounds less like the protective big brother that he usually plays by Rowan's side, and more like-- I dunno; Archer almost sounds like he's jealous.

Weird, but whatever.

I can't tell him all of it, of course. I'd never be able to admit how fucking devastated I

am that he's in love with someone else.

"Does it have anything to do with your friend staying up on the Ridge tonight?" He cocks his head sideways, one corner of his mouth pulling into a sympathetic smile, and sending his hair falling over the wrong way from how he parts it. It's longer on top, but not long enough to fall over his eyes.

Still looks sexy as hell though, and my fingers itch to right it; just for an excuse to touch him.

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Yeah. That'll work. I can tell him I was feeling left out now that Ginger's found someone she's serious about. It's not exactly not true.

Following behind him, I try not to stare at his ass as we make our way down the long hallway, back to the front of the house with the big, farmhouse kitchen that I've imagined myself cooking meals for the make believe family we're never going to have.

Archer pulls a pitcher of cold, sweet tea out of the fridge and sets it next to a couple of glasses he pulls from the cabinet. Then he sorts through some boxes in the walk-in pantry, presumably in search of this popcorn he plans to make, and I find something I would change.

His pantry is a disorganized mess.

Reminding myself that that's going to be someone else's problem to remedy soon enough, I make busy work of filling the tumblers with tea.

When he pulled the sweat pants and t-shirt out for me, he grabbed a change of clothes for himself too; taking them with him before he closed the door behind him to give me privacy for my shower.

The nights are mild this time of year, and the windows are open throughout the house to take let the fresh air in. It lets a faint breeze move through the house, carrying the scents of night blooming jasmine and recently cut alfalfa in with it.

Unfortunately, it's not the cool air that's making my nipples hard.

The halter top I was wearing has a built in bra, so I don't have one to put on under the borrowed tee.

It's just the way my body reacts to the man standing just inside the pantry door, still looking through the shelves for popcorn.

I'm drifting deep into my own head again when I realize he's stopped searching the shelves and is staring at me in silence.

A packet of microwave popcorn is clutched tightly in the fingers of his right hand. Too tightly. His chest rises and falls heavily under his t-shirt.

My eyes take in the full scene while my brain scrambles to make sense of it.

I know what men look like when they're turned on. I know how they look at me when I'm the one they're thinking about-- just because I've never dated, doesn't mean I haven't had offers. Especially in college when my brother wasn't around to run them all off.

It's just that seeing the hunger in Archer Dean's eyes right now is all out of context.

The way his jaw clenches in a way that makes the muscle beside his ear twitch, the hyper-focused stare, unmistakably centered on me-- the enormous erection proudly tenting the front of the black sweat pants hanging from his hips.

"Is that because of me?"

Stupid question. Of course not. Or maybe? What the hell am I doing?

Because he only answers me by closing his eyes tightly and saying my name in a pained whisper as I close the distance between us, too confused to think better of it.

Archer

This is bad. All bad.

But I'm trapped, with nowhere to go but into the dead end of the pantry, because Callie's standing in front of me now and I can't remember how to breathe, let alone move my fucking feet.

I thought I was keeping it together. I thought I'd make it through the rest of the night; stand in the kitchen with the island between us while I let her tell me what had her thinking it'd be a good idea to go out to Keller's Ferry on her own.

My plan was to listen, maybe scold her for doing something that could have ended so badly. Play my part as her over protective big brother's concerned sidekick.

Then she'd sleep in my room and I'd crash in one of the spare bedrooms. In the morning, we'd go get her car and go our separate ways.

She'd go back to living her life and I'd torture myself knowing that she'd been in my bed-- without me.

One of these days, I need to organize the pantry. I tend to just shove boxes in here without thinking. But the real reason it took me so long to find popcorn was because I kept sneaking glances at Callie.

She's so beautiful. Standing in my kitchen, wearing my clothes, bits of her hair still damp from being in my shower. Looking like every fucking fantasy I've been trying to get out of my head for the last two years.

Those curves of hers fill out my sweats where they hug her round ass and those thick thighs, but they're so fucking big everywhere else that she's got the legs rolled up and

the waistrolled down. My old t-shirt hangs on her everywhere but where it's stretched across those full breasts.

It's obvious she's not wearing a bra. The house has cooled down from the open windows and the night air moving through has her nipples mouthwateringly hard. The way her tits sway gently with the movements of her raising and lowering the pitcher of tea to fill the glasses is hypnotic.

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That's what got me caught. I couldn't stop looking. Couldn't stop thinking about how they'd feel filling up my hands, wondering how much harder I could get those nipples if my mouth was on them.

I got carried away; thinking about slipping my hand down the front of those sweats, wondering if she put her panties back on or if I'd find her mound bare against my fingers and whether it'd be covered with a patch of soft hair or if she keeps herself smooth.

If she let me touch her like that...how wet would she be for me? What kind of noises would she make for me when I lift her onto the counter and replace my hand with my mouth?

Hiding my hard-on in the sweats I changed into is impossible. I almost had it under control, using my search for snacks as an excuse to keep my back to her long enough for my damn cock to settle down.

Then I looked up. My fingers tightened on the packet of microwaveable popcorn, the loud crinkle of plastic wrapping not enough to break me out of my daze.

Callie was looking at me. Looking at me like she wanted me every bit as badly as I want her. My dick immediately jumped back to the ready, springing up painfully hard, and utterly impossible to hide from her.

"Cal..." I whisper her name through gritted teeth in a warning. Or a surrender. Because she doesn't stop moving until she's so close to me that I can feel the heat radiating off her body.

"Oh God..." I barely register that I've spoken again as her touch steals the breath from my lungs.

My hand drops the popcorn packet and grips the pantry doorjamb. My eyes shut tightly, and there's no fighting it anymore.

Callie's hand presses against my cock, making me see stars.

"Should I stop?"

Her hand eases the pressure against me until I barely feel it there anymore.

"No."

Opening my eyes, I dare to look down at her only to find those bright hazel eyes looking back at me, filled with what looks like hope.

Callie presses her hand against me again and I suck in a sharp breath at the contact. Her fingers wrap around my girth through the cotton fleece of my sweats.

"I don't understand," she murmurs softly as she tentatively explores my cock like it's the first one she's ever touched.

"Rowan said you're in love...That you wouldn't tell him who she is, but you seemed really serious about her. Why would..."

Her fingers slip upward, leaving my dick wanting, but then she finds her way under the hem of my shirt and her touch on my bare skin is enough to make me stumble backwards, landing against the rear shelves of the pantry.

I'm still struggling to understand what's happening here, and some part of my brain is

holding on to reason, keeping me from putting my hands on her. If I do, I won't be able to stop, and I don't understand why Callie's hands are still on me. I just know I don't want her to stop.

"Why would what?"

My lips are dry and I lick them as I fight through the buzzing inside my brain, but it's Callie that I really want to wet them with.

"Why would I do this to you? You've never even noticed me. Not like this. Why now?"

Her hand slides higher under my shirt and over my chest. I wonder if she notices how fast my heart is beating. But her other hand has joined the delicious torture, drawing light trails down my abs till the muscles twitch under her touch, then exploring beneath the waistband of my sweats but remaining agonizingly clear of my weeping cock.

Something breaks loose inside me. Whatever was left of my resolve shatters and my paralysis gives way to blinding, desperate need.

My back is still against the back pantry wall, one of my feet tangled between a couple of packs of bottled water, one wrong move and I'll lose my balance and end up on the floor but none of it matters.

With both my hands bracing the sides of Callie's face, I bring her lips to meet mine and get my first taste of what I've been thirsting for.

"You, Cal..." I breathe the words urgently between gulps of air before I kiss her again. "I'm in love with you."

Chapter Seven

Callie

Maybe I fell in the shower and hit my head. Or maybe I got killed in the bar fight.

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Archer Dean is kissing me. Kissing me like a condemned man savoring his last meal. And I'm so determined not to second guess what's happening, that his confession doesn't register right away.

The last words he said before his lips crashed against mine whirl around in my addled brain, trying to get my attention

I am making out with Archer Dean. In his kitchen pantry. Surrounded by shelves filled with boxed mac and cheese, instant rice, cans of soup-- I think I just kicked a case of sports drinks.

And he loves me.

I deepen our kiss; pushing the heavy box of bottled drinks by my foot out of the way so that I can get closer to him for better access.

My hands aren't shy. It's like I've fantasized about touching him so many times that I feel like I've done it a million times already. God knows I've seen him without his shirt on enough times to have every bulge and plane of his hard muscles committed to memory.

The dip between deltoid and bicep, the thick lats across his back, the ticklish space where his waist narrows; my fingers run over all of them greedily now before trailing back down that decadent V where his stomach is flat below the ridges of abs before it plunges low and drops into his pants.

Except now, I know my imagination didn't do justice to the parts of him I've never

seen before.

Archer's cock is big. It's impossibly hard, and I'm fascinated by how soft the skin stretched tightly over it is. My thumb runs over the head, swiping through a bead of moisture leaking from the tip. When I do that, Archer's mouth leaves mine and he groans.

"Wait." My brain finally forms a coherent thought. I don't let go of Archer's cock, but I look up to meet a tortured gaze. His breath is ragged, his hands stalling suddenly in place where they'd been so close to reaching my desperate nipples just before I spoke.

"You're in love with me?"

The corners of Archer's mouth twitch and give in to a shy smile.

"You, Cal." He confirms. "Have been since you got back from school."

Tipping my face up to his, I silently beg for new kisses.

"You're in love with me?" I clarify when he lets me breathe again.

"Obsessed," he confesses. "Can't stop thinking about you..." He whispers near my ear, nipping at the shell and sucking on the lobe before kissing down the side of my throat. "I've spent the last two years imagining this--" the tip of his tongue drags lightly over my collar bone, pushing the neck of the t-shirt aside so he can put his mouth to my bare skin. "-- if this would make you moan--" he sucks against the base of my throat and I don't even care if it leaves a mark.

It's not a moan that escapes me, more like a squeak.

Archer's lips smile against my skin when he gets my reaction.

"Or if this would make you giggle."

His fingers slide along the bottom of my rib cage, his thumbs upward so they graze the underside of my breasts.

Definitely not a giggle. More like a strangled, needy sound at the tease. I want him to touch me. I want those callused hands on the tender skin of my breasts. I want his fingers rolling over my hard nipples. I want his mouth on them, dammit.

"Stop teasing me," I scold him hoarsely and tighten my grip on his cock in a threatening squeeze.

"Fuck, Cal," he grits out roughly. "You're one to talk."

"You didn't answer me."

I tighten my hand around him again, this time, pulling slightly and letting my fist run up the length of him. Not to tease him, exactly, but because I'm fascinated by his reaction.

Archer's head lifts and he inhales sharply.

"We need to get out here, before I fuck you up against the ramen."

How does he have this body with a pantry full of carbs? It's not fair.

Reluctantly, I step backwards and allow him to untangle himself from the shelves of dry goods and boxes on the floor.

Once we're out of the confined space of the pantry, he catches me off guard when he lifts me onto the counter of the island quickly.

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"Madly in love with you."

His hands grip my hips and slide to the outside of my thighs.

The inside of my thighs is slick with wetness that's seeped through my panties. I tighten the muscles and try to ignore my need while I concentrate on his words and not his hands.

It's a challenge.

"I want you, Cal. I want to strip you naked and fill my hands and my mouth with every inch of your body."

To make his point, he moves my knees apart and stands between them, but I'm sitting too far back on the counter for us to line up together the way I'm aching to.

"I want to find every way to make you come for me, but I want to be the only man who ever makes you come, Callie. I want my ring on your finger and my name on your driver's license. I want my baby inside you..."

One of his hands lifts and splays over the roundness of my stomach. Possessively.

His eyes fall to his hand, then back up to mine.

Holy shit. He's not joking. This isn't a pick up line or sweet pillow talk.

I don't think Archer Dean is trying to seduce me, I think he actually means it when he

says, "If we keep going, I'll make you mine. I won't be letting you go after that. Till death do us part, Callie, come hell, high water, or murderous brothers. You've got between here and my bedroom door to make up your mind. If you have oats to sow, you do it with me at your side-- there won't be any more solo trips to biker bars."

Archer

Everything I've been wanting to say to her comes tumbling out of my mouth at once. Along with several things that would probably have been best left for later.

But as soon as Cal put her hands on me, she claimed me just as surely as if she'd branded her name into my hide. She needs to know what I have in store for her. In case she thinks this is just burning off some adrenaline from earlier.

"There's no going back from this," I warn her, "I won't be able to let you go, Cal."

My body craves hers with every cell, but I'm fighting the urge to yank her ass to the edge of the counter and press my hard shaft into the cleft of her pussy.

No. Fuck teasing us both like that. I want to strip her down and bury my face between those soft thighs; get her laid out on kitchen island like a fucking late night snack and feast on her till we have to mop the counters off.

"Really?" Her voice is all breathy, sounding every bit as keyed up as she's got me feeling-- and completely shocked at what I'm saying. "You've really thought this through, Archer? All the way? Are you sure?"

"I know you're young, Cal. You didn't date in high school, I haven't seen you going around with anyone since you've been back...maybe you've been focusing on getting your business established. Hell, maybe you haven't thought about getting married at all, maybe starting a family's something way far off in your mind still."

Reminding myself of the age gap between us-- thinking about where my own mind was at her age-- it's enough to cool me down to a high simmer.

Hell, I didn't even know Cal was attracted to me at all till a few minutes ago.

I'm rushing. I'm reading into all this. I'm making demands I got no business with.

But when I try to step back to give her some space, Callie doesn't let me budge. Her hands are wrapped around my arms, gripping tight with a strength that surprises me. Her legs lift and wrap around my waist with her feet locking together behind my ass and forcing me forward till my shaft is pressed up against her exactly the way I'd wanted.

I can feel her heat through the two layers of thick cotton fleece between us and sense quickly seeps right back out of my skull.

"Yes, Archer Dean," she whisper-yells at me, her lips brushing mine as she talks. "Yes, I've thought about getting married. Yes, I want a family. Yes, I want to start while I'm young because I'm hoping for a big one. And no, I never dated in high school-- and not because my brother's an overprotective asshole: I didn't date while I was away either, Archer. Because the only person I ever wanted those things was you."

"Me? I'm the reason you never went with any of the guys that asked about you? I always thought Rowan was the reason...thought you would have finally had a chance to let your hair down while you were away at school...shit, Calla--"

A new thought bubbles up through the noise inside my head, one that has my dick surging impossibly harder, jumping in an involuntary spasm like a bull about to charge.

"You didn't date at all? Ever?" My fingers tighten, itching to feel her tightness, crazed at what I think she's telling me.

"You're the first man I've ever touched, Archer. You're the only man I've ever wanted to touch."

Fuck me.

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I'm going to hell.

I'm going to hell for betraying my best friend.

I'm going to hell for betraying my family and putting our business in jeopardy.

I'm going to hell for not giving a damn about any of that-- because Calla Lillian Maye has her hot little cunt pressed tight to my cock with her whisky gold hair all messed up from my hands raking through it while I kissed her and those big, hazel eyes of hers staring straight into mine while she tells me she's been saving herself for me.

"I went out there tonight because Rowan told me you were in love with someone and Ginger's with her man and I felt so stupid, Archer. I thought I had to accept that I didn't have a chance with you-- that I never had a chance with you. I just wanted to feel...like I'd be able to get over it. Like it didn't mean my life was over."

My hands move up to frame her face again, pulling her head up so I can kiss her again. It's slow and deep, but it's far from soft. Sliding my tongue along hers as our lips move together until neither one of us has any air left.

"Just beginning, baby," I promise. "Life is just beginning. For both of us."

With the next touch of her lips on mine, my patience snaps.

Pulling Callie's hips forward, I slide my hands over her plump ass, both of us groaning at the feel of my hands filled with her softness. Then I have her off the counter. Her thighs tighten against my hips, her body pressed so close to mine that I'd

be inside her if we weren't both still wearing too many damn clothes as I carry her back to my bedroom.

There's no need to kick the door shut behind us, no one else is going to be in the house. Not till we fill it with children.

Cal lands on the bed and I make quick work of getting her out of my borrowed clothes. Then I pull the t-shirt over my head and drop between her legs.

Spread out on my bed like a goddamned angel, Callie looks up at me expectantly. Her hands fold over her bare breasts with an uncertain modesty until I move them aside.

"Let me see, Cal."

She lets me place her hands up by her head and watches me look my fill.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I tell her. "I can't believe you're really here. Really naked for me; really going to be mine.Finally."

Then I fall on her, ravenous, and whatever her response was going to be-- it's nothing but sweet sighs and little gasps that drive me insane.

Chapter Eight

Callie

He licks his lips and tells me I'm beautiful in a voice so ragged with desire that it's impossible not to believe him.

Then his hands run over my body. His palms are wide open and his fingers stretch out as if he's trying to feel as much of me at once as he possibly can.

Finally.Finally, he covers my breasts. Holding them securely, then pushing them together, kneading them firmly, running the pads of his thumbs over my hardened nipples in unison.

I knew I was sensitive there but ohmygosh! I had no idea having someone else touch me like this would feel so amazing.

My back arches and I squirm, desperate for more.

"You like that, baby?"

Archer pinches my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, just hard enough to make me gasp, then rolls them gently, watching to see my reaction.

"Anybody else ever touch these tits for you, Cal?"

My head moves side to side quickly.

"No. Nobody's ever touched them." I find my words because the tone of his voice tells me he expects me to use them, even when he's talking dirty to me in that gravelly voice that makes my head go all swimmy.

"Nobody?" Archer leans in close and raises the tip of my breasts to his mouth. His lips close over my nipple, and the combination of hot and wet around the suction is enough to make me pant.

Is it possible to come just from this?

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"Not even you?" Archer's mouth pops off my nipple and moves to the next one. "You expect me to believe you never played with these pretty breasts yourself?"

He wraps his mouth around the other nipple and I think I might lose my mind. My hands tangle in his hair, holding his head tightly against me. The way Archer is positioned between my thighs, I can't pull my legs together to relieve any of the tension in my swollen clit, but I can lift my hips seeking friction for some relief.

"Fuck baby, I'm trying to take my time here. You're gonna kill me if you keep that up."

One of Archer's hands slides between us, pressing my body back to the mattress, but giving me a taste of what I want.

"You make yourself come, don't you, Callie?"

His mouth continues to worship my breasts, barely able to use one hand because of the way he's braced his weight on his elbow. But that other hand has wandered into the achy space between my legs and now his fingers begin exploring parts of me that have never been touched by anyone else.

A thick fingertip slides between my folds, making me realize how wet I am for him.

I give him his answer with a nod and a long moan when he presses against my clit and starts to rub in increasingly firm circles, testing to see what pressure gets the best results.

"Do you think about me when you get yourself off, Cal?"

He whispers it against my ear and I can't answer this question. I'm too busy coming; bucking hard against the strength of his hand as it holds me in place while his fingers continue to work my clit right through the orgasm; only stilling when I'm a limp noodle trying to catch my breath.

That's something I didn't expect-- how much more intense it would be when it wasn't my own hand doing the work.

"Do you?" I wonder aloud instead of answering him.

Feeling less wound up after that climax, I drift in a haze of euphoria for seconds but I can feel my body still craving more.

Archer gives me a smirk that's a little shy and a lot naughty.

"I asked you first," he retorts.

"Always," I tell him honestly.

"Dammit, Cal, yours is the only name I've had on my tongue for years." He leans to give me a quick kiss on the lips and then moves quickly down my body till his broad shoulders are wedged between my thighs. "Now I'm going to have you on my tongue too."

He doesn't tease. Archer's hot mouth lands on my pussy, completely consuming me.

His hand hastily pushes my thighs wider, then slides under my ass to lift me closer to his mouth.

This is a completely new sensation. I've tried to imagine what having my pussy eaten would feel like. My friends talk about it like it's the holy grail, but I just never understood how I'd ever be able to relax enough to enjoy it.

I mean-- his face is down there. Up close to all the tastes and smells of me. I'm glad I took a shower not long ago, but honestly? I get it, now.

The way Archer spears his tongue into my hole makes new need bubble up in me, then he licks along the edges of my entrance and through the swollen folds of my labia on his way to my clit.

Every place his tongue touches feels so good, I'm desperate for more. My heels press into the mattress at his sides, lifting myself to meet his mouth. The hand holding my ass moves for a firmer grip. I feel his fingers getting closer to the space between my cheeks and start to worry about where they're heading.

Then his mouth is firmly on my clit and it feels so good that I don't even care about the fingertip pressing snugly against my asshole. In fact, together, the two sensations are mind-stealingly good and my next orgasm has me crying out loudly as I convulse violently in Archer's grip.

"You taste like fucking heaven, Cal."

Soft kisses pepper the inside of my thighs.

"Making you come is my new favorite hobby," his kisses move upward till they land feathery against my pussy again.

At first, I flinch, still sensitive from the previous orgasm and not ready to start again. But he keeps his touch light and soon, I realize I want more.

"Is that all I'm going to get, Arch?" I prop myself up on one elbow and look down at him. "What happened to all that pretty talk about making me yours and filling me with babies? You chickening out on me now?"

In response, I get a pained groan. Archer's finger replaces his mouth, sliding easily inside me after two orgasms and how wet I still am in anticipation.

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"Just warming you up, baby. I don't want to hurt you."

Archer

Callie's last orgasm is still tangy on my tongue and here she's already begging me to split her open on my cock.

In all the fantasies I've had about this moment, I never dared to think it'd be like this; being the first man to see Callie this way, naked and overcome with desire. I never expected to be the first man to take her over that edge and watch her come undone for him. I sure as hell didn't think I'd be the one with her in this moment, when she feels man inside her for the first time.

"Archer," she moans as I slide my finger into her tightness, hoping she's relaxed enough now that this doesn't hurt her. "Please. Just do it."

"Baby, you're so fucking tight. I don't want to hurt you." But if I don't get inside her soon, I'll be spilling seed over her soft stomach out of sheer desperation.

Moving up to position myself, I withdraw my fingers from her and lick them clean. Callie tastes like honey and heaven and I can't believe she's going to let me taste her like this for the rest of our lives.

Remembering her eager promises to be mine forever combined with the wet heat of her opening against the head of my dick almost has me embarrassing myself like an over eager teenager.

Callie's small hands move up my waist, around my back and hold on to me tightly.

"You know what you're doing, right?"

Cal's eyes look up at me, wide with nervousness that I feel echoed in the slight tremble running through my own body.

Speechless for a second, I look back at her in the dim light before kissing her for reassurance.

"I mean, yeah, Cal, I've done this a time or two..."

A sharp swat lands on my ass, making my cock twitch eagerly, even as we share a light a laugh.

"I don't want to hear about that," she scolds, "I mean-- " Cal swallows hard and pulls her lower lip between her teeth to worry on it.

My hips settle more fully between her soft thighs as she moves beneath me. I can feel the slickness between us allowing my cockhead to slip beyond the outer edge of her opening, but that's as far as I can go without effort.

"Yeah, baby, don't worry. I got you."

That seems to be the answer she needs, and Cal gives me a smile that makes me feel like a hero.

"I trust you, Archer Dean," she whispers.

We move together, like neither of us can wait any longer, and Callie's nails dig sharply into my shoulders at the moment I break through the slight resistance just

beyond her entrance. I mean to stop and let her adjust to whatever she's feeling, but I'm too far gone.

Continuing to push forward, I'm lost in the feel of Callie's body welcoming me in. The way her tunnel stretches around my intrusion, letting me fill her completely until I'm balls deep and gritting my teeth with Callie making small movements beneath me as she gets used to the feel of me.

"Tell me when, Cal."

Being inside her takes the edge off. I can pause and give her a chance to adjust, let Cal call the next shot, but not for long. New need is already starting to tingle at the base of my spine, triggering the primal instinct to thrust and claim.

"Arch?"

"Yeah, baby."

"Is...am I...is it okay?"

The need crawling up my insides quiets down just a tad, letting me hone in on what she's meaning.

"Oh...hell yeah, baby, it's fucking amazing."

I slip a soft kiss against her lips, and even the slight change in my position has me rubbing along her interior walls enough to make me choke on a groan.

"Why'd you stop?"

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The tips of her short nails drags down my sides, not even tickling a bit when they hit that spot along my ribcage. My foot damn near cramps from holding my muscles so tense.

"Damn woman, I thought I was supposed to give you a chance to breathe or something."

I can't help the chuckle that escapes, more relieved that she's ok than amused at her impatience-- but a little of that too.

"I'm breathing," she tells me, "and I want more."

Cal's hips wiggle under me and the entirety of her channel tightens around me as she moves.

Woman's going to be the death of me if this is what fucking her is always going to be like. She feels too damn good, and my body screams at me to follow her orders.

Pulling back, the sound of her needy little whimper at the loss of me has me slamming back into her harder than I mean to. Cal's right here with me though, gasping out at my force, but quickly recovering, bucking her hips to urge me on.

No way I'm gonna last. Not with the sweet sounds that Callie's making, the feel of her full breasts pressed against my chest, and the smooth slide of her tight little pussy wrapped around my cock so tight it's hard to breathe.

But I want to make her come for me one more time before I lose it. I need to make

sure her first time is good. I want to make sure I was worth the wait.

"Cal." I drop my head for a hungry taste of her lips and she kisses me deeply, leaving my voice hoarse with urgent need when I can speak again.

"Baby, I need you to come for me one more time. Can you do that?"

I guide one of her hands between us to where we're joined, keeping my eyes on hers. If I look down now and see her pussy stretched around my cock, I'll be done.

"Touch yourself for me, Cal."

Callie's eyes widen at my command, her mouth popping open like she's about to protest, but then I feel her fingers under mine as we find her clit together and her expression changes to something else entirely.

"Arrr..." My name dies on her lips, her voice drifting away when she takes possession of her own pleasure. My fingers follow hers, learning what she's already discovered about herself. Together, we circle her swollen little bud, our fingers slipping through her wetness.

"Fuck, Cal, you're fucking gorgeous...show me, baby. Show me how you make yourself come when you're thinking about me."

I can't stop myself, I need to look at this. Raising up, so I can look down between us, the sight of my cock working its way in and out of Callie's swollen pussy, with her fingers working frantically between us as she chases her orgasm-- it's too damn much.

Especially when I feel her hit her peak. Callie's entire body goes with her this time, her back arches, her hips to mine, her thighs clamped tight against my hips.

Then, a series of spasms choke my shaft, each one pulling me deeper and clenching down on me to hold me in place so I can shoot seed deep enough to take root. And that's what I fucking do; exploding inside her, with nothing between us but the sweat coating our skin.

When my vision comes back, I collapse against Callie. I want to snuggle into her warm curves, with my head pressed between her breasts, but if I do that, my softening cock will slip out of her and I'm not willing to lose her warmth yet. Instead, I pull her into my arms and hold her against my chest, enjoying the feel of my heart beating against her cheek as it slows back to normal.

"Thank you, baby." I kiss the top of her head, whispering my words into the soft hair and tasting the sweet, saltiness of her perspiration.

I get a sleepy giggle in reply.

"For what?"

My smile curves against her head.

"For letting me into your body. For letting me see you like that. For sharing your first time with me."

I'd keep going but she cuts me off.

"You're just feeling macho because I was waiting for you."

I move my head back onto a pillow and stroke her bare shoulder idly with my fingers. First, I sigh deeply, but then I grin at the ceiling fan above us.

"Yeah, that's fucking hot, Cal. I still can't believe that. Can't believe how fucking

lucky I am...I love you, Calla Lillian Maye. Gonna marry you...Calla Lillian O'Leary...I like that even better."

"I like that too," she says, lifting her head to meet me for another kiss. "I love you, Archer Dean O'Leary."

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Falling asleep with Callie in my arms feels like a dream. I just hope it doesn't turn into a nightmare when we have to face her brother.

Chapter Nine

Callie

Waking up in Archer's arms was weird-- but in the best of ways.

After making love again, we took a shower together. Archer's been talking non-stop about moving me into as soon as possible while I try to make breakfast.

I can't believe this will be my kitchen now. Is-- is my kitchen now-- according to Archer.

"After we eat, we'll go pick up your car at the Tollhouse."

Archer gets in my way, hovering behind me to steal kisses or slide his hands over my ass as often as he can manage.

"Do you want me to follow you in the truck?" His arms wrap around my middle, his chin resting on my shoulder while I flip pancakes on the griddle insert of his five burner stove top. "We could pack up more things that way."

He nuzzles my neck, at the top of my shoulder, copping a feel of my boob at the same time.

"You better keep my shirt, and make sure to button it all the way."

His fingers lift to trace the mark he left on my throat last night.

Right now, the flannel shirt I stole from him after our shower is unbuttoned dangerously low, giving him access to just about all of me. Since all I have is the skimpy red halter top I wore last night, I'll be wearing his shirt until I can change into something else.

Well that, and because I love the way the worn cotton smells like him and the way it's so big on me that I had to roll the sleeves up four times to be able to handle the spatula and it hangs down to my knees and makes me feel like I'm all wrapped up in Archer.

Later, I'll tie it at the waist and button all the buttons so no one notices the love bite.

I'm hoping it stays long enough that I get to show it off. I'd love to walk around town, proudly showing off Archer's mark on me, but we both know we need to break our news to our parents-- not my biggest worry-- and Rowan, first.

The thought puts a lump in my throat.

I honestly don't know how he's going to react. I mean, sure, my brother is over-protective, but then again, I've never actually introduced him to a boyfriend before. I've always expected that he'll behave better with a guy he knows I actually want him to be nice to...

The fact that the first man to test that theory is ten years older than me and happens to be his best friend?

"Are you sure want to telleveryone today?" I ask nervously as I slide the last of the

pancakes on a plate.

"I don't want to sneak around, Cal. I want to kiss you when I want, and hold your hand in public. I aim to put a ring on that finger as soon as you tell me which one you want, and I don't want you to have to hide it from anyone."

"Maybe we could just tell our parents and let the news sort of trickle down?"

"It'll be fine." Archer promises me around a forkful of pancake. "But if it makes you feel better, we can do it here at the ranch. I doubt he'll punch me too hard in front of Ma. And my brothers will all be here too."

I give him a worried look. Not sure it's such a good idea.

"I don't know, Arch, from what you said, it sounds like your brothers might take Rowan's side."

Worry shadows Archer's features momentarily but quickly gives way to determination.

"No one's keeping me away from you now, Cal. Mom won't let the boys kill me and your brother and I will work things out somehow. It might take a while, but he'll get used to it."

Speak of the devil himself.

With just one knock for warning, the front door swings open and we're caught.

"Arch! You home?"

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There's only a few feet of wall behind the front door that separates the tiled entry leading into the front room from the country kitchen just beyond it.

It's enough to give me time to button up, but there's no hiding the fact that Archer's shirt is all I'm wearing. Well, that, and my panties. Thank God I put my panties back on.

Archer is hardly any more dressed than I am, standing shirtless at the kitchen island in nothing but a fresh pair of sweats and a trickle of syrup at the corner of his mouth that I had just been about to lick clean for him.

At my brother's intrusion, I jump clear of Archer, even as he steps closer to me.

"Oh hey--" Rowan rounds the wall and immediately sees us, our breakfast plates side by side on the island counter with us standing behind them.

Like always, Row's phone is in one hand and his eyes barely flicker between me and his friend before he returns his attention to it to tap out a short message.

Archer's left hand dangles at his side, his fingers reaching out to brush mine below the counter and out of Rowan's sight.

"Cool, you're here. Rowdy called this morning asking if you were okay today. Said something about you showing up out at the Tollhouse? What the fuck, sis?"

Rowan pulls out one of the stools on the other side of the island and slides my plate across to him.

"Mom and Dad said you still weren't home, and neither of you assholes were answering your phones. Figured maybe Arch must have dropped you off with Ginger or something."

"Thanks for taking care of her, man."

I feel like I don't know him. I just stand next to Archer and watch my brother shovel the rest of my breakfast into his mouth like he hasn't even noticed the fact that he walked in on us together.

Arch and I exchange a confused look. Then Archer shrugs his shoulders and we both relax some.

"These are good. Did you make breakfast for Arch, Cal?"

"Yeah, she did." Archer answers on my behalf. "And why the fuck does Rowdy Ralston have my personal phone number? You know anything about that?"

Rowan shakes his head. "No man, I'd never give out your personal, you know that. Glad he does though, if he'd called me, I'd have torn that dump of a bar to the ground. What the heck were you thinking, Calla Lilly? I've told you before to stay out of that place."

"I--" But Archer interrupts again.

"Why the fuck does Rowdy have your number?"

Rowan shrugs, slipping his phone into his back pocket.

"Business, man. The Mayes got no history with the Flying R. They grow damn good alfalfa and they sell it for a reasonable price. They pay their invoices on time when

they need something in return. I'm not gonna turn away good business over old news."

"Damn. Mom and Dad must be worried about me then?"

It suddenly dawns on me that my phone must be dead, I haven't gotten any notifications this morning and last night...well. I wouldn't have noticed if it went off.

Rowan looks annoyed by my question.

"Nah, they reminded me that you're a grown woman and told me to mind my own business," he grumbles.

Beside me, Archer smirks.

"Ralston said you left your car out there?" Rowan slides off the stool and picks up his plate, casually heading toward the sink on our side of the counter.

As he rounds the island, I tense, realizing he might not have been able to see that I'm only wearing Archer's shirt and expecting him to come unglued.

Instead, he rinses the sticky syrup off the plate and checks the dishwasher to see if it's clean or dirty.

"Well, go get dressed and let's go get it. I sold those heifers this morning and I need to square things out at the farm so I can have the calves I bought brought in."

From this side of the room, Rowan can plainly see that neither of us are dressed.

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Is he really taking it this well?

There's no way he hasn't put it together yet. He's usually so quick to jump to conclusions when it comes to me with any guy in the same room.

Is it possible that he's not phased? Even a little bit?

My eyes lift to Archer's, testing our new couple telepathy in a silent question. Are they really that good of friends? That maybe my brother figured out who Archer's secret love really is? Especially after he got the story about Archer driving out to Keller's Ferry to rescue me?

"Your things are still in my room." Archer tells me, plainly testing the waters.

Rowan leans on the counter in front of the kitchen sink and glances between the two of us, then he motions at me to hurry up, so I head back to the master bedroom to put on more clothes.

Archer

"Thanks for taking care of Cal," Rowan pushes off the counter and helps himself to one of the energy drinks in my fridge just like he did to Callie's breakfast.

Things between us seem cool.

"Of course, man. Cal's everything."

My buddy glances down the hallway where his sister went down to my room to get dressed, then sighs heavily and runs a hand through his hair.

"Yeah. I'm glad she's got you, buddy. I was starting to worry about her, you know?"

Damn, am I confused.

"Worried how?" Now it's my turn to stare in the direction Cal went.

"You know, she doesn't date. Ever since her friend met that guy up in Moonshine Ridge, Cal's been acting--off. And Jesus! Tollhouse? On her own? I can't thank you enough for going out there after her, man. Can't imagine what could have happened to her."

Seeing Rowan's face redden with anger at the thought, I decide it'll be a long time before I tell him the situation Cal was facing when I walked into the bar last night.

I'm going to count my blessings that he's handling the fact that he just walked in on me and Callie barely dressed in my kitchen like it's no big deal.

"I'll always keep Callie safe." I assure him. "Don't give her too much shit for it, okay? She and I already had a good talk about it."

Rowan looks at the clock on his phone and back down my hallway.

"What the hell's taking her so long? I've got shit to do today and we gotta go get her car."

"Go do your shit, then. I'll take her to get the car."

"You don't mind?"

Row clutches his phone and his keys in one hand and gives me his standard handshake hug with a clap on my shoulder as he starts for the door.

"Of course not," I tell him. "We were planning on getting it after breakfast, on the way back to your folks to get her things. It's no big deal."

Rowan pauses on the porch as I walk him out, turning to shoot me a confused look, but doesn't say anything.

"I'm ready."

Callie comes up behind me, her hand brushing my ass as she pushes past me where I'm blocking the door.

"Arch says he'll take ya," Rowan tells her, already stepping off the porch, headed for his truck.

"So, you're really okay with it?" Callie goes after her brother, sounding about as skeptical of his behavior as I'm feeling.

Row turns around and gives her a look like he's the one who's confused here.

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"You hanging out with Arch? Yeah. Of course I'm good with it." He shoots a look up at me like he expects me to find her question just as odd as he seems to.

I shrug, but it's not supposed to be a dismissal of Cal's question-- it's more of a "I want to know the same thing" kinda shrug.

Rowan and I have been buddies for fifteen years, we've been about as close as guys get to their friends out here for at least the last few of those. I expect him to know how to read my damn body language.

"Heck, as soon as I figured out who Arch's secret love was, I figured it'd only be a matter of time till we'd have to start sharing him. Might as well let you have him while you can."

Callie turns to look back at me and it's pretty easy to pick up on her unspoken message: What the fuck?

Suddenly, the confused look on Cal's face gives way to a bright smile as she throws her arms around her brother's neck and pulls herself up on her tip toes to hug him when he doesn't bend for her.

"Oh my God, thank you, Row! I thought you were going to be so mad."

Over her shoulder, I get another confused look thrown my way before he finally laughs and wraps his arms around her.

Rowan pulls Cal's feet off the ground, returning the hug and laughing more when she

plants a hard kiss to the side of his cheek before he drops her back to her feet.

"Off," he mouths at me as he climbs into the flat bed pick-up while Callie jogs back to me.

The diesel engine roars to life, but I'm not paying attention to Rowan anymore; I'm busy catching my girl as she flings herself into my arms.

Then I'm busy kissing her every bit as hard as she's kissing me.

Then I'm busy pushing Callie back through the open front door to safety before she can get caught between me and her brother's fist.

"What the actual fuck?!"

Rowan's shouting over the sound of the engine of his truck left idling in the driveway. When he gets to me, my back is turned to him because I'm trying to convince Cal to stay in the house and wait this out.

A hard hand grabs my shoulder and pulls me backward off my porch, making me damn glad it's only a one foot slab and I put down the new sod back in spring. Because I'm completely off balance and I land on my ass pretty hard.

"Rowan!" Cal comes shooting out of the house like her hair's on fire, running straight at her brother without concern for consequence-- like getting in the way of his fist as he swings for my head.

"Goddammit, Cal! Get off me!" Rowan yells, stumbling sideways and hitting the grass with one knee as Cal wraps her arms around his neck and clings to his back, screaming at him to calm down.

It gives me a chance to get back on my feet, but all Callie's screaming only seems to be making him madder. Despite her attempts to hold him back, he comes at me, arms outstretched, either to push me down again or strangle me-- probably depends on if he can get a grip on me.

"You said you were okay with it," I dodge his advance and step backward. My foot lands on a sprinkler head buried in the yard. Like stepping on a damn Lego-- sharp pain radiates through my bare foot.

I'm not dressed for a fucking fight. Hell! I'm not dressed at all.

"I'm okay with you watching out for her, asshole! Not making out with her."

Thanks to Callie's hand over her brother's eyes, I manage to dodge another punch, but Rowan's boot manages to connect with my shin in a side swipe that takes me back to my knees.

"You said you knew you were going to have to share him with me! Stop it, Rowan! Let go!"

Rowan manages to pry Cal's hand loose and twist out of her grip.

"I meant we, Cal! We were going to have to share him-- with Allison, not each other!"

The name Allison stops both Cal and I in our tracks as we both wonder who the hell Rowan's talking about.

"Who the fuck is Allison?" I don't move fast enough and Rowan's fist glances off my chest.

"Allison Miller, man! The girl you were telling me about yesterday."

"I was talking about Calla! Why the fuck would you think I was into Allison Miller?"

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Rowan rushes me, grabbing me around the waist and taking me back to the ground. I manage to get in a kick to his gut before he can land on top of me though. It sends him stumbling backward and landing on his ass for a change.

"Her grandmother hates you and your brothers!"

Speaking of my brothers, I notice Lance running up the road out of the corner of my eye. He's on his phone, shouting something, but I can't get distracted by that now.

"Allison doesn't even live in the valley anymore," Cal reminds him as she gets herself between us before he has a chance to get his balance back.

"Exactly," Rowan rubs his side where I kneed him earlier. "And her daddy's real proud of the fact that she left and got a fancy job in the city. He don't want her moving back just to marry some cowboy out here and make babies."

"There is nothing wrong with being a wife and mother!" Callie's spitting mad now, standing toe to toe with her brother in a stance that has me thinking I should be more worried about Rowan than myself at the moment. "If that's what she wants."

Cal folds her arms, knocking Rowan in the chest.

"You are not having babies with my best friend, Calla Lillian!"

"Arch? You guys okay out here?" Lance calls from a safe distance at the end of the yard. Up the road, I see one of our side by sides haulin' ass with a dust cloud rising up behind it.

Rowan's stupid enough to have leaned down so he's eye to eye with Cal, because as soon as he tells her she can't have my babies, she clocks him.

Row immediately puts his hand to his cheek and before I can move, she knees him in the balls with a force that's enough to drop Rowan like a sack of grain while me and the two of my brothers who've arrived on the scene involuntary flinch with sympathy pain.

"I'll have babies with whoever the fuck I choose to, RowanElliot!"

The emphasis Callie puts on Row's middle name hurts almost as much as the knee to the balls-- he hates his middle name.

Just to make her point, she kicks his thigh with the toe of her boot-- because Row's still on the ground with his hands locked between his thighs.

"Youidiot!"

The fist landing on my jaw catches me completely off guard.

Chapter Ten

Callie

My brother seems to be in a good position to hear sense, but before I can get past reminding him who's in charge of deciding who my baby daddy's going to be, I hear a sound behind me that I'm not prepared for.

I'm no stranger to the sound of a fight, but Rowan's still on the ground so what the hell is going on behind me?

Whipping around, I see Archer staggering backward with his brother, Gunner, preparing to throw another punch.

"You fucking around with Callie Maye, Archer? She's your best friend's little sister, for fuck's sake! Not to mention her brother's our feed supplier, you dumbass. You really willing to get us black listed to get your dick wet?"

"Hey!" I charge the older O'Leary brother with every intention of endangering his ability to make babies himself but Rowan pushes me out of the way and decks Gunner instead.

"Talk about my sister that way again and you can bet your ass I'll black list the Delta O!"

Gunner socks Rowan, and casually lifts the brim of his hat in my direction while my brother rubs his jaw.

"Sorry ma'am, no disrespect," he tells me.

I've known all the O'Leary brothers for about ever. Gunner's always been on the gruff side, but he's polite. I know his comment wasn't about me, he's mad at his brother because he doesn't know the whole story.

"It was really Cal?" My brother's looking a little beat up and lot like he'd rather avoid getting hit again. "That you were talking about when you said you were in love?"

He's looking right at Archer Dean now, and so are Archer's brothers.

"Yeah. It's Calla." Archer admits almost shyly. But he's looking at me with half a grin on his gorgeous face. "It's been Cal for years now. Since she got back from her schooling in the city, I reckon."

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All heads on the lawn swivel in sync to look at me.

"Cal?" Rowan's voice is all kinds of curious.

"It's always been Archer for me," I confess. "Since long before I even knew what the hell love was really going to be. But yeah-- these last couple of years, my feelings for him kind of...grew into something I'll never be able to let go of."

"So you never dated anybody-- because of that fool?" Rowan jerks a thumb toward Archer.

It's my turn to get shy, with a weak shrug of affirmation. Maybe it's ridiculous, but it worked out.

Well, it worked out for me and Archer. Judging from the expressions on the faces around us, it's going to take a while for our brothers to get used to the new arrangement.

"Looks like you got things handled then." Lance breaks the silence but the rest of us continue our stare down. "So, uh, I'll just go let Mom know she was right."

Rowan and I are both confused by the younger O'Leary's statement, but Gunner throws his hat to the ground with a loud curse and Archer drops his head back to look at the sky with a long groan.

"You're gonna give Ranger the hundred you just cost me, asshole." Gunner picks up his hat and backhands Archer's arm as he replaces it on his head. "Never thought

you'd pull a stunt like this in a million years."

Lance laughs as he walks toward the main house where their mother, Kim, lives.

Gunner grumbles about losing money on some bet with his older brother that seems to have involved Archer and me getting together, as he gets back in the side by side and heads back toward the working side of the ranch's sprawling property.

Rowan and Archer hold each other in a steady gaze filled with testosterone and defiance.

When my brother takes a step in Archer's direction, I rush to get between them. Taking my place directly in front of Archer to make my position on the matter as clear as possible.

Archer

Once again, Callie puts herself right in the middle. I appreciate her standing with me and making it clear that she won't be backing down from the promises we've made to one another, and she's certainly shown that she knows where to hit a man when she's fed up with his behavior-- note to self-- but I'd rather she wasn't between me and her brother.

Not when he's stalking toward me with murder still written in his features.

But when I move aside so Cal's not in danger, Rowan's path of travel doesn't follow me. He keeps walking till he's toe to toe with Callie, the two of them locked in a staring match the likes of which I've never witnessed.

"You should have told me." Rowan finally speaks, scolding and hard.

"Told you what? I was in love with your best friend? How was that going to go over, Row?"

Rowan's face only darkens. I don't know if he's taking time to think it over or if he's just fighting to keep his temper under control.

I move closer to Cal, laying my hand on her shoulder in a move that has Rowan's eyes narrow where I'm touching his sister.

"You're too young." He tells her firmly.

"Correction: I wastoo young." Callie edges forward, forcing her brother to step back or get stepped on. "Now I'm a grown woman with a career and my own business, Rowan. Other girls in the valley were getting married straight out of high school. Girls I graduated with are already on their second baby and you never seemed to think that was too young for anybody else."

"The girls you graduated with married boys their own age, Cal. Archer's got ten years on you. What the hell do you have in common that's gonna get you through the long haul together?"

"It's not like I'm marrying a stranger--" I watch Rowan's eye twitch when she says "marrying" and I might feel for my buddy, but hearing her claim me out loud like that feels mighty damn good. "I've been friends with Archer and his whole family just as long you have."

"He's yourbest friend, Rowan."

It's hard to fight the grin that threatens the corner of my lips when lays it on thick like that.

"You wouldn't have been so close to someone for so long if he wasn't a good guy."

She's got him. I see the moment my buddy's resolve cracks open.

"She's got a point, Row." Now I step fully into their space, wrapping my arm around Callie and taking in the slack when she leans into me with her own arm around my waist. "You've known me a long damn time. We've been through some epic shit together. You know I'd never disrespect that."

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"I did my level best these last couple of years to ignore what I was feeling. Nobody knows how protective you are of Cal better than me. No way I'm going to risk our friendship and my family's business relationship with you over something that's not serious. You gotta know me better than that."

Off in the distance, the distinctive sound of delighted chatter joins the tense conversation in my front yard.

I'm really starting to wish I had a shirt on. And some damn shoes.

My mother's excited voice quickly closes in on us, causing a noticeable shift among us.

"Oh my gosh! Callie!" Mom's got her arms wrapped around Cal, pulling her away from me in a bear hug that Cal returns with enthusiasm.

"Lancer told me the good news, I'm so excited!"

Mom releases Callie and goes for Rowan.

"Aren't you excited?" Mom gushes as Rowan awkwardly allows the hug. He looks like cat being forced to take a bath and it's enough to make both Cal and I laugh out loud.

"We're going to be family, Rowan! I've been telling Archer all year that he and Callie were right for each other. I just had a feeling about them. Aren't you happy for your sister?"

Mom babbles excitedly, seemingly unaware of Rowan's objection to our relationship.

Seems to me, Lance would have mentioned the part where fists were flying.

"Uh, yeah, Mrs. O." Rowan's cat in the bath look has morphed to more of a kid with his hand in the cookie jar kind of guilt that does nothing to make me stop laughing. "I guess so, sure...if Cal's happy, I'm happy."

Eyes turn to Cal, who's still stifling giggles at the way my mother has managed to change Rowan's attitude.

"Oh! Yes. I'm happy!" Cal practically sings, stepping back against me so I can wrap my arms around her again. "Very happy."

"Lancer said this all just came out this morning? Have you told your parents yet, Cal?"

Mom seems to have decided that Rowan is sufficiently on board with her match making. Now she's moved into planning mode.

"We were going to tell them today," Cal answers, "when we start moving my things over, but someone decided to throw a tantrum and slowed things down."

Cal's eyes narrow at her brother.

Rowan shifts his weight between his feet and works his jaw in irritation.

"Well then, I'll just call your mother and we'll have them over for dinner tonight and you can make your announcements all at once. How's that sound?"

Mom doesn't wait for any of us to answer, she's already speed walking back to the

house; probably lost in plans of what she'll make for dinner...and where she's setting up the chairs for the wedding if I know Mom.

The three of us watch her go, waiting silently till she's out of hearing range.

Rowan paces forward. He still looks pissed, but it's clear to see that the fight's gone out of him.

"It's happening," Callie tells him coolly. "Make peace with it."

He just stares back at her for a long moment before taking a very deep breath and looking me in the eye.

"You're gonna marry her."

His finger pokes at my bare chest. It's not a question, it's a command.

"She better have a ring on her finger this week. And no long engagements. I expect to be putting a date in my calendar soon.

And she better not be pregnant before you guys are legal."

Rowan's eyes swing back at his sister. She rolls hers at him in response.

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I give her a smirk, knowing there's no way either of us can promise that.

The way she looks back up at me with an upturn to her lips that mirrors mine has me ready to haul her back into my bedroom.

"No backsies, Cal. You marry him, you keep him. It's bad enough you made me kick my best friend's ass, don't make me kick my brother in law's ass too."

Before either Cal or I can respond to that promising note, Rowan's finger is pressed back to my solar plexus, his eyes burning with intensity.

"Fuck her over and they don't find a single piece of you for a hundred years. I'll make the Kelly/Ralston feud look like a joke."

"Won't happen," I assure him. "I'm gonna spend the rest of my life making her happy and chasing kids around this yard."

Forgetting Rowan for a second, I lean down to meet Cal's lips with mine.

Her brother's growl sounds farther away, but I'm too focused on Callie and the way she looks at me like what I said about chasing kids has her thinking about getting started right away.

"Not till you're married, Calla Lillian!" Rowan shouts from his truck as he pulls out of my drive. "Married!"

Gravel from the private road flies as he guns the engine and tears out of the ranch's

property like he can't get away from us fast enough.

Callie rolls her eyes at her brother's display.

"He doesn't mean that," she tells me with a sly grin.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt me," I agree as I lift Callie in my arms and carry her back inside.

Epilogue 1

Six Months Later

Callie

"Really?!"

Ginger squeals, more or less quietly, as I nod excitedly.

"We found out last night," I confirm.

"Cool wedding present," she tells me. Her own hand moves over the bulge beneath her bridesmaid dress. "I'm excited our kids will be about the same age."

"Shh." I hush her quickly, my eye roaming the crowded reception for anyone who might be eavesdropping-- especially my brother. "It's still a secret."

"Don't tell me Row's still being a jerk about you guys getting together."

I give roll my eyes and twist my hand in a kinda-sorta gesture.

"I hope he falls for a girl half his age with a mean daddy." My bestie holds up a champagne flute filled with her home-brewed ginger ale and clicks her glass against mine-- also filled with ginger ale.

"Would totally serve him right," I agree.

With a quick hug and another "congratulations," Ginger slips back through the crowd in search of either her husband, or the bathroom. At seven months ahead of me in her first pregnancy, I've noticed she doesn't stay away from either for very long.

I scan the grounds for my own husband.

Husband.

As of about an hour ago now, Archer Dean is officially my husband.

I'm still so blown away by it that I can't say it enough.

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And last night, we found out that he'll be "daddy" soon too.

That one's a huge shock. Although, it probably shouldn't be, it's not like we've taken my brother's insistence that we wait till we're married very seriously.

Ginger and her new husband, Current, opened their brew pub slash pizza shop up in Moonshine Ridge last month. Archer and I got a room at the lodge there, did our part to contribute to my bestie's successful grand opening-- and just a few weeks later, I missed my period for the first time ever.

So we're thinking that's probably the night it happened.

We figure that since the stick turned blue so close to the wedding date-- we won't make the announcement for a few more weeks.

Just so my ridiculous brother can live in blissful ignorance about his baby sister's sex life.

Speaking of which...

"I want to fuck my wife before we eat."

Archer's crass words are whispered against my ear and everything about them has my body revved up and eagerly letting him lead me away from our wedding reception, up to the suite that's part of the wedding package at the barn where we're holding the reception.

By the time I get the door unlocked, Archer's got the side zipper of my dress undone.

"We not exactly out of sight up here, you know," I remind him, but I do nothing to remove his hand from where it's sneaked into the bodice of my dress to caress the underside of my breast.

"So open the door faster," he tells me. "You're mine on paper now, a man's got a right to make his wife happy she married him on their wedding day."

Before the door swings fully open, Archer has me and all the satin and tulle I'm wrapped up in, off my feet and across the threshold, kicking the door closed behind us without stopping on his way to the king size bed.

"How do you plan on making me any happier about marrying you, Archer Dean O'Leary?"

I land on the bed with a bounce and quickly scramble back up on my knees, busy with untangling my husband from his tux as quickly as possible.

"I have a couple of ideas, Mrs. Archer Dean O'Leary."

I thrill at his emphasis on missus.

Archer's tongue sweeps between my lips, tangling with mine in a slow kiss that has me moaning.

The hidden side zipper that lets me get in and out of the ball gown style dress without undoing a million and five tiny buttons makes a soft purring sound as Archer's fingers dragging it down the track till the strapless dress falls around my knees.

"Damn."

Archer steps back, admiring the view and clearly liking what he sees.

He lets out a slow whistle.

"I was not expecting that."

A strapless gown with boobs like mine requires some serious foundation, but I really wanted to wear something sexy under my dress for my new husband to unwrap when we were alone.

I had some help from Ginger and my new sister-in-law, Serenity. Apparently they did a good job.

The bustier is made of thick, satin panels and it's doing over time for holding my boobs up and waist in, but the barely-there scrap of lace pretending to be panties and the white garter belt and stockings have my husband hypnotized.

"We don't have long before we have to be back down there for the toasts," I tell him.

I maneuver out of the dress as sexily as I can manage, shoving it off the foot of the bed-- I'll have to get back into it before we go back downstairs.

That's all it takes to bring Archer back to reality.

"I'm going to destroy this thing later." His hands run up my back, calluses catching in the satin as he moves over the corset laces keeping me together. "Right now, I'm just going to make you come a little bit for me."

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The way he has me on my hands and knees on the bed in front of him, I expect a quickie.

It's been six months, we've done it hundreds of times now, and while we've definitely found the best ways to drive us both insane-- there hasn't been a time yet that didn't have me moaning his name while I come.

Archer moves the thin strip of elastic and lace running between my legs to the side, but instead of feeling his thick cockhead eagerly straining at my entrance, his tongue slides into me instead.

"Baby, have you been this wet the whole time?"

I am dripping for him right now. I've been wet since I saw the heated look in his eye when he got his first look at me in my gown.

Yup. Right there in front of the preacher, all our family, and half of Slow River. I was standing up there promising to love and honor my new husband for all the rest of our days together, while silently dying to be alone with him.

My answer is a strangled gurgle of affirmation. I can't be expected to make actual words when he's eating my pussy from behind like this.

His fingers slip and slide through my folds, spreading my increasing moisture and making it hard for me find the friction I'm desperately seeking as I grind against his hand.

"Oh fuck, Cal." His mouth breaks contact from me and I know from experience now that Archer is getting worked up on watching me come undone. "You look so fucking good like this, baby. I need to be inside you. Just come for me one time first."

As if I could stop now.

Archer's fingers circle my clit, his tongue working in tandem until my fingers claw into the bedding under me, crumpling several fresh rose petals that were scattered over it sometime earlier.

He doesn't give me time to come down. Behind me, Archer's pants drop to the floor and before I can catch my breath, he's already pushing inside me.

I love the ragged sound of his breathing and the way he grips my hips to hold me steady as he slams into me.

Just knowing how close he is to losing control already has me ramped back up, angling my hips to take him deeper while I race him to the finish line.

"You're gonna make me come, Cal. You know I can't last when you do that."

What I'm doing is coming again. This one hits me hard, making me howl so loud I drop my face into the bedspread to keep our guests downstairs from hearing me.

Only seconds behind me, I feel Archer's hands tighten their grip as his movements become less measured, then he's coming too, filling me with enough sticky seed to make me glad my dress is floor length.

No way the flimsy panties of the lingerie set are going to keep that from running down my legs later.

"I think fucking my wife is even better than fucking my girlfriend was," Archer jokes as he collapses beside me and draws me against him.

"You think?" I tease back.

He hums a pleased little sound and kisses me.

"But I'm going to have to do it again before I can be sure."

Our moment is interrupted by an impatient knock on our door.

"You guys in there?" My brother's voice is muffled by the thick, oak door and the dim sounds of the party going on without us.

"We're here," Archer yells back.

Archer quickly pulls the end of the bedspread over us when the door knob turns.

"Wouldn't do that, man," Archer warns sternly, but there's humor in his voice.

I swat at his chest for that. We've been married for all of a hot minute, but Archer's already had his fun at rubbing it in Rowan's face.

"Motherfucker."

Rowan curses on the other side of the door, but it quickly closes solidly. Archer gives me a knowing look and presses his hand to my stomach with a secretive grin.

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"Lock the damn door for fuck's sake...get your asses down here so I can get this toast out of the way."

Together, we manage to get back into our wedding clothes, although maybe not looking as neatly pressed as before.

There's a dinner to be served, and dances to be had, cake to be shared, a bouquet to toss, and-- as my husband makes wickedly clear as we head back downstairs-- there's a lifetime ahead of us for more stolen moments like this.

Epilogue 2

Ten Years Later

Archer Dean

I look up to watch my heavily pregnant wife laughing with her equally pregnant sister-in-law.

"How you and Sam doing these days?" I ask my buddy. "Looks like things are still strong with you?"

Rowan's busy looking at his wife and not paying much attention to me.

"Yo!" I stop flipping the patties on the grill in front of me to elbow him back to the conversation.

"Never had a single regret about that. She and the girls are the world, man."

"Know what you mean about that," I concur, my eyes still on my wife.

These days we spend a lot of time with my brother-in-law and his family. Ever since he ended up on the wrong end of a shotgun wedding about six years back now, whatever lingering tension that was left over me marrying Cal has been forgotten.

Callie can't stop giving her brother shit for ending up with a girl fifteen years his junior though, let alone one with two brothers that damn near disappeared him when they found out what he was up to with Sammy.

There's not a trace of doubt in my mind about what he says though. The man was smitten the moment Samantha arrived in town and I'm pretty sure he silently thanks her crazy ass brothers every day for making him marry her.

Sam looks up from her conversation with my own bride of a full decade now, like she knows she's being watched. When she sees Rowan's eyes on her, she breaks into a radiant smile that makes it clear that Row's not the only one still smitten with no regrets.

This weekend, we're out on Rowan and Sam's farm, so it's just the four of us and a handful of rowdy kids running barefoot through the sprinklers in the hot, July sun.

When we gather out at the Delta O, we have all my brothers, their wives, and more kids between us now than Mom can keep up with; not that she doesn't give it her all.

So afternoons like this, when I actually get a chance to catch up with my buddy in relative peace are a nice change of pace.

Not surprisingly, it takes about three seconds of eye contact between my buddy and his woman before he leaves me tending the grill so he can go fuss over her. He's

every bit as protective of Sam and their girls as he ever was over Cal, and completely wrapped around their fingers too.

"I just want grilled cheese." Cal switches places with her brother, coming to stand beside me and nuzzling into my side with a glass of ice water and lime in her hand.

"You don't want a patty on your burger, babe?"

Looking down, I see Callie scrunching up her face in disgust as she watches the meat sizzling on the grill.

"Just cheese and bun, grilled crispy."

Cal just hit thirty-seven weeks with our fourth and this pregnancy hasn't done her any favors. She spent the first two trimesters puking at the smell of meat cooking, and even though it doesn't make her sick anymore, she still hasn't wanted to eat much of it.

"Thanks, baby," she tells me, leaning into my chest and sounding tired.

She's also not loving being this far along in the valley's July heat. I can tell she's going to be heading indoors for air conditioning and a nap before much longer.

"You go inside where it's cool, I'll come wake you up when supper's ready."

Callie looks up at me with a twinkle in her eye and a sly glance toward her brother and Sam.

"Make sure you lock the door behind you when you wake me up," she whispers before kissing me and giving my ass a squeeze.

Hot, tired, and picky about what she eats; but my wife still can't get enough of my

cock. And I'm happy to give it to her.

It won't be the first time we've snuck in a couple of orgasms in her brother's spare bedroom.