



Almost Had You

Author: *Rachel Robinson*

Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Clover: I've always had a knack for following the rules. As a southern mayor's daughter, I carry my strait-laced reputation like an Academy Award. There was never a need to question my place under the sun. It glitters. It's splendid. I am blessed. From the second Mercer Ballentine, war hero, Navy SEAL extraordinaire stepped off the airplane, my life has been nothing but one hijinks after another. Nothing will ever be the same. It's a good thing I'm ready for a change, because that man has tilted my world upside down. He might brandish roguish cowboy charm and rippling abs, but those things are no match for the wiles of a true southern belle. I always get what I want and I don't want to follow anybody's rules for another second.

Mercer: Alabama. Home. A three-week furlough. Fighting a war that seems will never end is wearing me down and I've never needed a vacation more. My plans to unwind, drink myself numb, and catch up with my friends are thwarted by a taffeta covered pageant queen who is nothing like what she seems. My daddy is running against hers this election and the stakes have never been higher. I'm heading back to war. I don't need attachments. I don't need drama. I definitely don't need to save this woman. Then again, I always want the things I don't need, and you've never seen Clover Wellsley—there's a madness to her beauty. I need to make her mine. If she'll let me.

Total Pages (Source): 60

Chapter One

Mercer

THE HEAT FROM the blazing sun kicks up the scent of asphalt on the landing strip. As I walk down the deplaning stairs into an Alabama day, I wince against the intense light. Inhaling a breath, I let the powerful sense of relief wash over me. Safety. American soil. Home. The million-pound weight that has been tied around my neck for the past six months lifts. No one is hunting, lurking, plotting against me or anyone else here. My feet meet solid ground. “Fuck yeah,” I whisper to myself, but even I hear the weary, hell beat tone in my voice. I need this furlough. Probably never needed a break more in my career as a Navy SEAL. I have three weeks to clear my head and rest before I have to go back to Europe for another six months—back to war.

Shielding my eyes against the sun, I walk toward the terminal where the airport employees are directing us. The whirring noise of the large jet behind me lowers as the engines shift modes. With a large duffle bag slung over one shoulder, I edge my way into the cool building. I called my parents when I reactivated my phone in Germany to give them flight details. They hold us in Germany for a day or two as a decompression period before they release us back into civilization. I wanted to fly straight to Alabama instead of going to Harbour Point, my base in Cape Cod where I’ve been stationed for a year and a half. I wanted sun, my buddies from high school, and the dive bar that I got kicked out of a half dozen times before I turned twenty-one. Distraction is what I crave and work is what I hope to avoid.

Even though I should know better, I'd glossed over the possibility my parents would bring the entire town of Greenton, Alabama with them. Striding around a corner, that's exactly what I run into. Mom and Dad are standing in front of a crowd of around thirty people, waving American flags and as my gaze scans the familiar faces, I take in the posters and balloons and cheerful shouts. I startle, a slight jerk, because that will forever be my first reaction to the unexpected. It's not a bad response, it's why I'm still alive after countless combat deployments, but I can see how my initial reaction affects my mom. She paces quickly to close the distance between us, folding me in her arms. Her hair smells like apple cobbler and AquaNet. Home.

"Hey, Mom. Real subtle," I say, chuckling under my breath. I'm annoyed, but not enough to bring it up in mixed company. Mom raised a good Southern boy. "I missed you something fierce," I drawl, pulling her closer. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to them before I left for the war raging in London. It's been a year and a half since I've seen my parents—or any of the people surrounding us. My dad is waiting patiently for my mom to release me from her clutches. Ever patient. Ever understanding. Ever the Southern gentleman. His dad, my grandpa, God bless his soul, owned a large tract of land he sold to the state when the Interstate went through. With those millions and smart investment decisions, my dad enjoys his true passion, his position as the Finance Director for Greenton, Alabama. He reports directly to Mayor Wellsley, and it's been that way since as long as I can remember.

"You didn't think I'd let the chance slip by to celebrate my schmoo baby boy finally coming home," Mom snaps, her Southern accent thick. She swats my arm as she pulls away to get a better look at me. "Now give your mom some sugar. I didn't know what to do with myself. This has been the longest you've been away since you started your career. Nothing felt the same this time. It was so hard not knowing." Tears are streaking down the makeup on her cheeks, watery black drops cutting a path down her powdered face. I kiss her on unscathed skin.

"Don't worry about me. I tried to get home sooner, but you know how that pesky ol'

war works. Doesn't stop because I need some R and R and my mom needs some sugar." It's meant as a light-hearted joke, but again, she shifts uncomfortably away. I have a feeling there's going to be a lot of that. I can pretend to be normal, but facts are, war changes people. My goal is to make sure it changes me for the best. "I'm happy to be back in 'Bama. I'm home now. Right here in lovin' distance." She hugs me once again, tittering on about how I've gotten bigger since she last held me. My dad catches my eye. He hits me with that proud, side grin and opens his arms, an invitation that has always been one of my favorites ever since I was a child. His unwavering, unfaltering love for his son.

"My turn," he says, swallowing hard. He's a stoic man. The kind of man who wanted his only child to stay close by and follow in his small-town political footsteps. Not because he doesn't think my career path isn't honorable and respectable, but because he misses me and wants me nearby.

I clap him on the back as he hugs me tightly. "You couldn't rein her in a bit, could ya, old man?" I nod and smile at a few familiar faces standing next to my family while I welcome the feeling of being in my father's arms.

When I pull back there are tears in his eyes. He glances at my mom and back at me. "Not even God himself can rein that woman in, son. You're lucky she didn't bring a parade to the airport parking lot." Grinning widely, he looks me from top to bottom. "I wouldn't have stopped her either. I'm so proud of you."

I widen my eyes. "No," I say, swallowing hard, adjusting a strap on my bag as it cuts into my hand. "A parade? Here? You're lying."

Dad shakes his head. "Afraid not. She ran into a hiccup getting permits for horses and she took that as a divine sign to organize it for another day."

I nod. "Thank you, horses," I whisper. We both laugh to ourselves as Mom bustles in

the crowd of people, chatting up our friends before I get to them.

“I’m happy you’re home, Son. It hasn’t been the same since you left.”

I can’t even remember life before I left for war. This time. I’ve seen so much in the past six months—been forced to use training that sounds cool to the average dude but is actually fucking scary as hell when it becomes reality. The terrorist attacks that warped our country have died down stateside, and that’s a great thing for the United States, for the rest of the world? Not so much. One group of extremists is extinguished and seven more pop up in another location. Forces overseas need our support and that’s where we’ll be, come hell or high-water.

“There’s so much I want to talk to you about, Dad. Later on tonight?” I ask, leaving my hands on his broad shoulders. “Or tomorrow morning over breakfast at the Slippery Egg?” It’s our tradition every Sunday after church. A diner that’s been there since Dad was a boy.

A smile touches his eyes. “I’d like that. I suspect you’ll be up late. I’ll make sure Mom knows you won’t be at the early service tomorrow.”

I give him a brisk nod and kiss his cheek. “Love you, Dad.”

He doesn’t release me easily. “I’m glad you’re okay, Son. I really don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I swallow hard. The emotion reflecting in his eyes is cloying. “And leave you to deal with Raelynn Ballentine on your own?” I reply grinning. “You’ll never know what you have to do without me.” I pray it’s a truth, but ain’t no one but God knows that for sure. I turn from my dad before anything comes to mind—before I start reliving every single time I almost died. My stomach rolls and I take a deep breath.

“Mercer Motherfucking Ballentine.” I’d recognize that voice anywhere. His accent is more accented than anyone else I know. My name has a lot of vowels and if you’re Southern, vowels are all drawn out. It takes him several seconds to say the nickname he’s called me since high school.

“Bentley,” I say, turning to my best friend. More relief cascades over my body—his presence a salve to my state of mind.

He smirks, shaking his head. “You son of a bitch. Only you go to war and come back with even more muscles than you left with. Look at you all Hollywood now. I can’t even believe it. Is my best friend even inside that body?” Bentley drawls, knocking his fists lightly on my arm, then my chest, then stomach. “Mercer Ballentine, are you in that big ass body somewhere? This alien beefcake eat you for supper? Don’t worry, brother. I’ll get you out. If you can hear me, talk like Chewbacca or start reciting the Greek alphabet backward.”

“Oh, shut up, you idiot,” I reply, swatting his hand away. “Someone has to save the rest of the world. You’ve got Greenton covered. You need bigger muscles overseas than here,” I joke, glancing sideways to make sure no one is listening. If they are, they are trying to look like they’re not. Typical.

Bentley presses his lips together and shakes his head again. “I didn’t think I’d see you again. The news, man, it’s not good. I hate that your biceps are bigger than mine, but I’m glad you’re home. We’re gonna drink and fish and drink and drink some more. I missed your ugly face in these parts.”

I clench and unclench my fists by my sides. This is as close to emotion as my friend will get. “I haven’t done the Chewbacca voice since I was twelve years old,” I say, avoiding that which I’m not familiar with. “What’s the drinking plan now?” I ask, shaking Glenda’s hand as she welcomes me home. Glenda owns the Dizzy Rocket and she’s a no-nonsense broad.

“I rented out DRs for us,” Bent says, looking at Glenda proudly. Glenda doesn’t look impressed as she strides away. I growl once and hoot in celebration. “Yes!” Bentley puffs out his chest. “That was my idea and my idea alone. Your mom wanted something more sophisticated, but I convinced her that a Navy SEAL wants to get drunk at his favorite bar with his best friends, not eat finger fairy cakes and drink minty tea. I was right. Wasn’t I?”

I nod. “I haven’t been to the Dizzy Rocket in forever. Remember the time we got kicked out for breaking the back wall down when you thought there were gold nuggets behind it?” As I say it, I realize how immature and insane we used to be. “We can’t be breaking down walls now that we’re adults.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

Bentley clears his throat. “That was part of the contract I signed to get DRs rented for tonight. No damages to the building or the employees...and no animals inside the building.”

My brows shoot up. “You signed a contract, Bent? That sounds so official. Professional—really unlike you in every single way.”

“I’ll have you know I’m the lead electrician at Rikki’s Electric now. You’re not the only one to grow up and get all fancy.”

“That’s awesome, man. Mom told me in an email. Really, that’s great,” I say, grabbing his elbow. “Let me say hello to the mayor and a few other people and I’ll ride with you over to DR. I’m assuming that’s where we’re taking this party right now. Or rather, that’s exactly where I want to take this party right now.”

“Roger that,” Bent says. “Hear that, Mercer Monster? I just used military talk!” He cackles, holding his stomach.

“You’re real-time. Congratulations, buddy. You’re basically a SEAL now.” I release his arm.

He nods. “Yep. I’m going to tell Jolene Shaw I’m a SEAL and see if I can get lucky tonight.” I think I remember Mom telling me Jolene got married, but I’ll tackle that pill with Bentley later. His pension for the unavailable is a touchy subject.

I laugh and approach the mayor. He’s holding a large sign that says Welcome Home Mercer. Our town head gives me a short speech that may or may not have been

rehearsed ahead of time. It's about how proud he is of me and what I've been fighting for. He shakes my hand. A firm, aggressive grip, that counters everything he just said. It tells me he's still in charge and I go ahead and let him think that. After he leaves, my gaze darts to the left, to his wife, who turns and leaves with him, and then one step over to where Mayor Wellsley's daughter always stands. Clover Victoria Wellsley.

She's standing where she's always been, where she's supposed to be. The picture of aristocratic, Southern style. Her pastel dress flounces just above her knees, the purple hue complementing her tanned skin and svelte features. She has always been attractive. In high school, she wouldn't grace anyone with a single date. It didn't stop everyone from trying though. Time has been good to her, high school pretty turned into adult perfection. I lick my lips.

Gliding into her personal space, I pause in front of her. "Why hello stranger," I say, pressing my lips into a cocky smirk as I bow my head in her direction. I draw out the hello far longer than is acceptable in proper English.

Clover tilts her chin up, straightening her back. "Mercer Ballentine. I'm happy you're home in one piece, yet I'm a little angry I'm missing my quilting class because of it." She smiles widely, showing me her pearly whites between perfectly glossed lips. This certain type of charm might be lost on some men. The kind who prefer the straightforward, no-nonsense vibe of a Yankee. Fortunately for me, I catch what Clover Wellsley is subtly weaving. She is flirting.

I fire back, "My, my, that's quite a hobby for a, ah, lady of your young years." It's a subtle jab. We graduated together so we're both almost thirty.

Clover clasps her hands behind her back, posture astute, her gaze demanding my full attention. "Surely you aren't making fun of my quilting hobby. What do your hobbies look like?" She narrows her eyes, her truly captivating hazel eyes challenging mine.

“A touch more nefarious than making quilts for babies, I’d gather?”

I hold up my hands, palms forward. “Now, now, Ms. Wellsley don’t get your tail up. I didn’t mean any offense by it, it was merely an observation.”

She looks away, completely finished with the conversation, and then lets her eyes flick to mine once more. “I think what you meant to say was thank you for coming to my homecoming. It means a lot to have you here, especially knowin’ you’re missing out on your favorite sewing class? Something like that, maybe?” Clover winks, her black lashes long and thick.

Nervously, I drum my thumbs against my thighs, and reply, “Yeah, something like that.” I can’t recall the last time I smiled this hard. Clover takes a step back, her high ass heel snapping on the flooring. Just ask her, idiot, I tell myself. “You fixin’ to go over to the Dizzy Rocket?”

Clover backs up another step. “And waste more time in this precious day God made? I don’t think so, Mr. Ballentine.” Her smile is as wide as mine, and it makes my stomach flip. It’d be rude to let my eyes wander any place except her face, but even in this confection of a dress that covers most everything, her bare arms force tiger thoughts to my mind.

“I’ll buy you the very best glass of white wine that Dizzy Rocket offers. What do you say?”

She inclines her head to one side, and her curled hair barely moves with the gesture. “I’d say fine, one glass of wine. Only because quilting class is over and I heard that DR has a few bottles of Grand Cru. No lady can say no to a glass of that.”

Tilting my head back, I laugh, relieved she’s said yes. “I’ll see you there, Ms. Wellsley. I look forward to it even.”

She smirks, then says, “You’re surprised?”

“What, that you agreed to let me buy you a drink?”

She laughs. “No silly, that you’re looking forward to buying me a drink.”

Rocking my head side to side, I press my lips together. “Yeah, I suppose I am.”

“Classic,” Clover says as she waggles her fingers over her bare shoulder and walks off.

I’m sweating when Bentley comes over to collect me. I’d forgotten how hard this was. Women. The real world. Alabama women, more specifically. It’s a kind of work I haven’t done, or even thought of, for half a year. “I’m out of practice,” I tell Bent, as he tells me who all is going to be at DR.

“It’s like riding a bicycle. Unless you’re Teddy Vondtete, because that poor boy could never ride a bike. You get back on it and keep it straight, and you’ll have the ladies in your lane in no time. Don’t you worry about that, I have a plan.”

“No plans, Bent. No.” Nothing but trouble comes when Bentley makes plans.

He laughs. “I’ll put in a good word and you’ll be bending over Billy-Jo before the night is over.” She was one of my high school girlfriends, a safe place and a familiar face. “Nope. Not happening and I don’t need your good words or any of your words for that matter. I can bend over Billy-Jo if I want to. I think I have my sights on something a lil’ more fancy.” I watch as Clover’s cupcake, purple dress disappears out the airport exit.

Bentley grabs the bag by my feet and slings it over his shoulder, sinking from the heavy weight, as my mom and dad wave me on. We walk outside and the Alabama

heat again welcomes me home. “Clover Wellsley won’t touch you or any other man if her life depended on it. She can’t shit where she eats, you know that. She’s too high-falutin’. I’m trying to save you time, brother. Don’t waste time gettin’ twisted up wantin’ perfect when perfectly good is ready and waiting. It’s downright rude.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I lie, watching covertly as Clover holds her dress in place as she slides into the backseat of her father’s Lincoln Navigator.

Bent slings my bag into the bed of his Rikki’s Electric truck. It’s white and well-loved. Maybe that’s why I left—the difference between me and my best friends from childhood, and even the difference between my father and me. I wanted something more. Something different. The challenge. The thrill of the unknowns after you work devil hard for something.

Looking around at all of the people here to support me, I realize how much I love them, and this place, and with one last brief glance at a modest cut, iron-clad, purple dress, I also recognize how I’ve changed.

Chapter Two

Clover

MY LIES AREso windy I keep the windows rolled down no matter the temperature. Add them to the fact I’m forced to endure my mama and daddy talking about Mercer Ballentine in a closed space, and I’m basically a volcano about to erupt. The ride home from the airport is only four minutes, but it feels longer when you’re trying not to say things that will give something away.

You can drive from one side of Greenton to the other in nine minutes and fifteen seconds if the traffic lights stop you, even less if they don’t. We are a blip on a map.

Not even a dot. We're an exit sign on the interstate and a town so old and crusty it seems we're stuck in the nineteen eighties with flashes of modern life.

"He sure grew into a strapping man, now didn't he?" Mama parrots. I'm not sure if it's directed at me, but I'm not going to answer. Mercer is more than strapping. He's a gaggle of muscle. A wall of Southern charm. An annoying feeling in my stomach that makes me sweat thinking about him. I don't need to talk about how strapping he is. I saw it in all its glory.

Daddy clears his throat. "It's required for his job, Susanne. He has to haul buildings off people and such. Muscles are part of the job description. It's not that impressive."

"You're describing a Marvel Superhero, Daddy, not a military man."

My mother claps giddily. "Not just any military man, A Navy SEAL. Clover, are you going over to the Dizzy Rocket for a drink?" Her wishes are completely transparent, and I'm not surprised she was listening in on our conversation inside the airport lobby. Making sure the family and Daddy always look good is everyone's job, hers especially.

My mind is on a million other things, so I let it slide off my back. "Yes, I agreed to a drink with Mercer. I'm going to pick up my car when we get home and head over. I need to help Tannie plan the festival after, so I won't be there for long. One drink." I'm not helping my best friend, Tannie do anything, but that's a meager lie in the big scheme of things.

Dad pulls into our long driveway that curls into a formidable circle. "When Clover is ready, we have several suitors who will make fine husbands."

My breaths come quicker, and that floppy feeling in my midsection creeps up to my throat. "I don't want to talk suitors or men right now. Mercer is just a friend. He's

always been a friend. Since childhood. You know that. He's nothing more. A drink isn't going to change that."

"Good girl," Daddy says, putting the car into park—a firm grip on the steering wheel. My mom huffs from the heat as she hops down from the passenger side of the blacked-out SUV, and I follow suit. The large water fountain in the center of our drive is spitting water twenty feet high. It's a circular garden my mama spends most of her time in. The water is dyed light pink to match the flowers she has planted in there right now. One Christmas the water was dyed green and I accidentally fell in. My skin was stained a Grinch green color for a week straight. I lost a beauty pageant because of it. I've also never walked close to that mother trucking fountain since.

"Oh, Clover," my mother calls as I rush to my garage bay on the far end of the drive, catty-corner to the house.

I glance over my shoulder. "Yeah, Mama?" She's standing, eyes shielded as she surveys her squirting pride and joy.

She pauses, looks over at my father, rolls her eyes, and says, "Tell everyone we said hello. Be a good girl and don't drink too much. The Wellsley name is on the line."

"You don't have to remind me of a fact I was born knowing, Mother. It's always on the line." A weaker woman would crack under the pressure they've put on me my entire life. And maybe I have cracked and I'm just doing it in a backward kind of way.

"Maria is cleaning your house, darling. Make sure you take off your shoes at the door when you get home from DR later." Seven million. The probable number of times she's said this phrase or a variation of this phrase since I was old enough to understand what it means. It's Saturday the day Maria always cleans.

I swallow hard, trying to contain the tirade I'd like to scream if I were a different person. "Of course," I reply, nodding. "Cleanliness is as close to godliness as we can get." I used to believe it, but sometime over the course of the last decade, I just started saying it because I always have. It's what is expected of me.

Mama nods and links arms with my daddy as they approach the entrance to the manor. It is an old plantation house that they renovated and expanded before we moved in when I was four. There are fifteen thick columns out front because the Bridgeton's next door has fourteen. There are parts of the house that I've barely explored, an entire wing my father calls his cave. It takes seven full-time staff members to keep everything running smoothly. It's all I've ever known and yet I know it's not what I want for myself.

I'm right smack dab in the middle of an existential crisis, waiting for whatever sign God wants to give me before I detonate into shards of lace, proper manners, and a bride unwilling. I toss my oblivious parents another goodbye and punch in the code, my birthday, to open the garage bay door. I grab the extra set of keys that hang on a hook on the wall and start my car, last year's Christmas present. Kit, the handyman, is parking my father's SUV so I wait, tapping my nails on the leather steering wheel, for him to back it into the garage next to mine. Pulling out into the driveway, I take a deep breath as the pink fountain catches my eye in the rearview mirror.

There is no escape in a small town. Secrets spread like a silent breed of ivy, wrapping around every tree, every building, every person. I'm forced to be the woman everyone else thinks I am. It's not all bad, don't get me wrong. I'm fortunate I have parents that care and a trust fund that guarantees I never need to work a day in my life. That means I'm jealous of what it feels like to have to do things. What am I missing? Girls with curls want straight hair. Girls with straight hair want curls. I want the freedom that comes with being able to dictate my own destiny. I pull into the DR parking lot and park next to Tannie's red BMW.

I flip down my mirror as I try to calm my thoughts and pull the Clover Wellsley everyone expects to the surface. A caricature of my real self. Tannie opens the passenger door of my car and slides in, perching her Chanel bag in her lap. I gave it to her as a present for her birthday last month.

“How was it? How does he look?”

I slide the gloss brush against my bottom lip. “Who do you mean?”

“Oh, my God, you are such a space cadet these days. Mercer. How does Mercer look, Clover? I couldn’t make it to the airport, so I didn’t catch that first glimpse, you lucky girl, you.”

“He looks like Mercer. Like he’s always looked. Like his muscles ate his brain,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I’ve got a lot on my mind, that’s all. A little support would be nice.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“I’d support you if you told me what was going on,” Tannie hisses. I can’t tell anyone, especially my best friend who is a bigger gossip than a blowhard politician. “I meant does he look like a tortured war hero that needs comforting,” she adds, my problems all but forgotten in place of her own desires. “By a willing woman that is.”

“Seriously? Joe just broke up with you last week and you’re ready to dive back in?”

My best friend groans, opening the makeup pouch in her purse. “It will help me get over Joe. You don’t get it, Clover. You don’t date. You don’t have boyfriends or give your heart away and let men stomp all over it. Sometimes you need to mete out revenge...retribution.”

“Sounds like I’m not missing out on much,” I reply, capping my gloss and sucking in a deep breath. “I’m sorry Joe hurt you, but that has nothing to do with me, and I am capable of imagining what it feels like.”

“Actually,” she says, cocking her head to look at me. “Maybe you are the one who needs a night with Mercer Ballentine. What would be better than spending time with a man when you know there can’t be strings attached? He’s leaving, right? Not serious. No dating. No giving your heart away. Just something to get your mind off of whatever is plaguing you.” Tannie groans. “That you won’t even tell your best friend about.”

I consider it, truly. It takes a few seconds for me to snap back to reality. “Mercer isn’t that type of guy.”

“You mean, you’re not that type of girl.”

Oh, I am. But Mercer is too close to Greenton, too entwined in our lives. Our fathers work together. “I didn’t save my virginity for nearly three decades to give it to a man who cares nothing for it.”

“I bet he cares a lot,” Tannie says. “I bet if you got it over with, you’d feel a lot better.”

“Since when did we talk about such unladylike things?” I growl. “Let’s go in,” I order and open my car door to the humidity of an Alabama evening. Talking about more of my shortcomings isn’t good for my mental state. Not right now when I’m about to see Mercer again.

Tannie’s heels sound against the pavement as she tries to catch up to me. “I’m only trying to help you.”

Sighing, I halt and wait for my friend. “It’s not helping me, okay?” Bentley’s truck is parked off to the side and it catches my eye. “I’m having a drink and then leaving.”

My friend nods. “I’m sorry. That’s fine.”

I push on the good side of the double doors and enter DR. It always smells like wood polish and stale beer. The jukebox is playing an old country song, and everyone is wearing smiles. The bar is full, all the high-top tables filled with couples and groups of friends. I keep my head held high as Tannie links her arm in mine. “To the bar,” she says.

We make our way toward the long counter in the back of the room, where the large neon sign that says Dizzy Rocket blinks out a dying wish, making an annoying zapping sound. Tannie wedges her way between two men sitting on bar stools to get the bartender’s attention. “Ladies need drinks,” she croons. “Come on now! Where are your manners?”

While my friend uses her feminine wiles, I scan the crowd to take stock of my surroundings. I smile at a few frenemies that catch my eye.

“If you’re looking for me darlin’, you should know I saw you the second you stepped through the door,” Mercer drawls from behind me. “The good side of the door.”

Smirking, I turn. “Well, well, well. There is the man of the hour. Tell me, did it hurt?”

Mercer changed into a plaid dress shirt. This must be his fancy shirt. His smile takes my focus away from his clothes, though. It’s wide and white and it takes me a moment to catch my breath.

“When I fell from Heaven?” Mercer asks, biting his bottom lip.

I shake my head. “Trying to fit your enormous head through the door. The bad side of the door. The one that’s broken.”

He laughs, tilting his head back, wide neck working as the chuckle shakes his body. I lick my lips and regret it when I taste my gloss. “You owe me white wine,” I announce.

Mercer is already nodding. “I got the bottle you mentioned ready. Let’s head over to the end of the bar and I’ll pour you a glass.”

Tannie snakes in next to us. A friendly serpent in expensive heels. “Mercer Ballentine you look good enough to eat.” She touches his shoulder. “Welcome back from the perilous war, my friend. Tell me how you’re doin’.”

I said I wasn’t interested so it shouldn’t unnerve me to see her hands on the man, but it does. Tannie has something I want, something I’m working at obtaining for myself.

Free will. She has the ability to date whoever she wants. No one judging her for a one-night stand, or whispering behind her back for touching him. I interrupt, gritting my teeth. “About that glass of wine, then?”

My friend looks at me, and like a good Southern girl, she senses my irritation and backs off—stepping sideways a couple times. “Yeah, yeah you guys go catch up. I saw George and I need to know if Joe is dating yet. If he touches that bimbo Clarice, I will never forgive him.” George is Joe’s best friend, and it’s obvious she hasn’t embraced the fact that he is gone for good. I tell her I’ll catch up with her later and watch as she walks away. George sees her coming and his jovial smile morphs into fear.

Mercer holds out his arm. “After you.” There are two empty stools at the very end in the quietest part of the bar—farthest from the jukebox. This is where people sit when they’re on dates. I swallow down my hesitation, because it’s a stupid thing to worry about. Rather, it should be a stupid thing, but it’s not. My world has an odd set of rules.

“Shouldn’t you be working the crowd?” I ask, sitting on the stool, crossing my ankles like a lady, instead of at my knees like a lady of the night. Mercer nods at the bartender and then gestures to the bottle of wine chilling in a wine cooler. I can’t help but look around, take note of everyone who is staring at us. My skin prickles.

“What? Can’t this be considered working the crowd?” he replies, running a hand through his hair. I catch a whiff of his shampoo and clear my throat. He grabs two filled long stem glasses from the bartender and offers me one. I accept the glass, holding it up in between our bodies. “Cheers to Greenton. To making my way back home,” Mercer drawls, his blue eyes hold mine as we clink glasses and take that first delicious sip.

“It’s good, isn’t it,” I say, savoring the taste, trying not to think about how good he

smells and why I'm hung up on such an insignificant thing.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“For someone who doesn’t drink wine, I’d say this is an A-plus,” Mercer replies, taking a big gulp. “How have you been, Clover?”

Setting my glass down, I rub my hands together to warm them up. “It’s same ole, same ole. You know how this place is. Not much changes.”

Mercer twirls the wine stem in between two fingers. “I didn’t ask how Greenton was. I asked how you’ve been.”

Sighing, I smile. “I sort of am Greenton, Mercer,” I reply, meeting his searching gaze. “I’ve always been Greenton. I’ve never had a choice.”

He winces and smirks at the same time. “I’d disagree with that, but I never question a lady.”

Sipping my wine once, and then again, I try to compile my reply. “I still live in the house on my parents’ property. They’re trying to match me with every suitable bachelor in the state, and I’m fighting like mad against it, against everything.” I turn to him. “Mama and Daddy don’t know I’m fighting it. Sort of avoiding and deflecting.”

Mercer chuckles. “You always have been a pro at diversion.” He rubs the stubble on his chin. “Tell me something then,” he says, tilting his head to the side.

“Only if I want to,” I reply, smiling to match his.

“I know you’re balancing what’s expected of you with what you want, but at what

point do you break protocol and put your desires first?"

Is he speaking in code? Was that a pickup line? I can't tell and I should be able to. Mercer is my people. Why is he being cryptic? I sip my wine and nod, letting him know I'm thinking about his question.

I meet his eyes and it's a mistake, because it confuses me even more. "Well, I, ah, I guess I'm waiting for a sign." That covers all the bases. "Busying myself with everything under the sun to fill up my life. I started a non-profit. It helps women and children in the area get back on their feet after a trauma...domestic abuse, anything really. They can stay as long as it takes to sort life out. I've been trying to implement programs to help them find stable work. Greenton is small, though, so it's a challenge. It's over on Fifth Street. Where Cranky's Gym used to be."

"I know the place," Mercer says, brows raised. "That's fantastic. Who knew the Ice Queen had a heart of gold?" He smirks. I don't take offense to the nickname that was pinned on me sophomore year of high school. Then he tells me about a place in Cape Cod, next to his home base, that offers the same services, and tells me I should get in touch with them because they may be able to help me expand the services we offer. Mercer also said they may have some ideas on where I can find grants. Not only is it nice he's offering to help me with my passion project, it's hot beyond all measure. Draining my glass, Mercer reaches over the bar to grab the bottle and goes to refill my glass.

I hold out my hand to stop him. "I agreed to one glass."

He gives me puppy dog eyes. A look completely out of place for Mercer Ballentine. He's all hard planes and rugged handsome. He's the opposite of the suited, coifed men I date. "I'm not worth two drinks?" he asks, batting his lashes. "I bought the entire bottle for you and I just got home from war. Two drinks seem the mannerly thing to do."

“The whole bottle for me, war hero?” I press a palm on my chest. Mercer’s eyes follow the movement and catch there. “I have to drive. I will take it with me for later when I get home if you bought it for me though.” I bat my lashes back at him, exaggerating. “Using the whole war hero thing softens me up, I guess.”

He laughs. “That’s fair. I don’t like this stuff anyway.” Mercer pulls a face as he reaches for the bottle and cork, and puts it on the bar in front of me.

“Now I’ll look like an alcoholic carrying this out to my car. It’s an open container.”

Mercer shrugs. “I’ll walk you out and put it in the trunk for you.”

I want to move into different territory—conversation that isn’t about myself. “Tell me about it. Your time overseas. Is it awful? Does the news get it right?”

His gaze turns down to the worn-out wood bar, and his shoulders slump. “As awful as you’d imagine, ma’am.”

“I’m sorry, that’s impolite of me to ask. I’m not sure what casual conversation looks like if we can’t talk about work. We talked about mine already.” I swallow hard.

“We can talk about your work more,” he offers. “Or how about your dating life. All the bachelors you mentioned.”

I laugh. “It’s just as awful as you’d imagine, sir.”

“Sir, huh? I like that,” Mercer fires back, gaze mirthful—a palpable longing flashing across his features. “Tell me about it.”

I cross my ankles on the other side and shake my head. Not what I want to talk about, but isn’t this better than forcing him to think of war? “I grew up here, you know that,

obviously, but even I see how ludicrous the whole process of finding a suitable husband works down here. My mama lists off their career accomplishments like it's supposed to make me weak in the knees for 'em. She told me last week that a man she's fixin' me up with had good hair. Good hair, Mercer. That is a qualifier in her quest to seal my martial fate. It's been this way for years and I don't see any sign of it stopping." I pause, debating how far I want to get into my personal circus. "Last year, I almost accepted a proposal from a nice businessman who lived in the city. It was our second date; we'd never even kissed! I knew he was gay within the first ten minutes of our first date." I laugh, remembering the odd, telling conversation. "It would have gotten my parents off my back and I could protect his secret in favor of being able to live my life how I want." It was more than tempting, most importantly, it would get me off my parents' property. "A marriage based on love seems like a myth."

I clear my throat and signal for the bartender. When he stops in front of me, I ask him for a water. Mercer barrages me with questions because he is shocked by my honesty. I answer, trying to keep my tone light. Then he asks, "How many men have you dated, Clover?"

"Since when?" I tease. "Since you left? Since I was deemed an eligible bachelorette?"

He stares at me, his eyes wide. "That many?" He apologizes, explaining he doesn't mean the question in an offensive way.

"Dating doesn't mean the same here as it does elsewhere, you know that, right? When I tell you I've dated over fifty men in the past four years, that doesn't mean I've dated fifty men in the past four years." I drink my water as quickly as is courteous because I know I need to leave here as soon as possible. My stomach is in knots and I don't want to give my secrets away. Not to Mercer.

He smirks, full lips pressing to one side. "It so happens I need dating advice from a

pro. You might be the ticket,” Mercer drawls. “Willing to help a man out of practice?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“Oh? What kind of advice?” My heart drops from my chest to my feet. All in one fell swoop. This is why he asked me for a drink. He needs something. That’s the way it works in a small town so I shouldn’t be surprised. The sting is real.

“There’s this woman I’m interested in,” Mercer says, glancing away then back to meet my gaze. I look where he was looking.

I widen my eyes. “Oh, good heavens, is it Tannie? You want me to help you? She’s my best friend, but she’s all hung up and spun out over her ex, Joe.” I look away. “But you wouldn’t want to date her, would you? That’s not what you’re asking. You want a hookup. You’re leaving soon.” I steeple my fingertips on the bar. “You’re not the dating kind. You’ll hurt her.”

“Are you finished concocting a whole scenario from start to finish yet?” he asks. “I don’t want a hookup.”

I gasp. “You do want to date her?”

He chuckles. “Seeing as it seems there are a few different definitions of that word, yes. Not Tannie, though.”

“Oh,” I reply, adjusting my feet on the bar stool rung. “Who then?”

“This other woman. She’s sort of a player, likes really expensive white wine, and has the best smile for five counties.”

My stomach spins. “Only five counties?” I say.

Mercer's lips pull into a big grin. "Maybe six." He drinks the rest of his wine and winces after he swallows. "She's hard to read. I don't know if she doesn't want to date any men, or just the kind of men she's dated up until now are awful."

My whole body buzzes. "Maybe she'll know it when she sees it?"

"She's seen it. She's known him her entire life. It would be complicated though because my job takes me away for long periods of time and her life is settled in another place far away from where I work."

I slam my hand on the bar. "Are you playing coy with me, Mercer Ballentine?"

"Do I look like a man who plays coy?" He drags his tongue across the bottom of his front teeth. My gaze tracks the movement.

"You look like a man who would do whatever it takes to get something he wants. Out with it then. I have to get on the road."

"Will you go out on a date with me?" He says it louder than he should have and it draws curious glares from patrons around the bar.

I panic, trying to avoid eye contact. "I can't. I'm not that type of woman." I make sure my reply is just as loud so they hear my answer to his absurd question.

"You're already having a drink with me. This was our first date. Will you go on a second date with me? I should have phrased my question better," Mercer says, his cheeks pink from the unwanted attention or from being shot down, I can't be certain.

"We are friends grabbing a drink," I assert, standing from the bar stool. "Thank you for the drink. I'm glad that you're home safely."

He stands, because it's polite. "That's it then? A drink and you're leaving."

Breathing deeply for a couple beats, I brush the sides of my dress down. Mercer watches. I like that he watches. I need to ditch this place now. Lowly, so only he hears, I say, "You do not want to get mixed up with me right now. I'm not the woman you think I am."

He leans in, his lips grazing my ear as he bends to say, "I know. That's exactly why I want you."

Straightening my back, I flash a polite grin when he leans back up to meet my eyes. "No, thank you." My reply is completely monotone. I don't believe it, why would he?

Mercer shakes his head, small smile playing on his lips. "G'night, ma'am. Drive safely." He grabs the wine on the bar top and hands it to me.

My face turns red, I'm sure of it. "Walk me out and place the bottle in my trunk like you said you would."

His knowing laugh rings out victorious. For now.

Chapter Three

Clover

IGNORING THE WHISPERS and stares as I make my way to the door is impossible. I saw Tannie whispering something to Sue-Ellen Kline. She'll pay for that later. Even if she's innocent. Mercer keeps a safe distance but opens the door for me. There's no way his manners would slip for a bout of gossip. That's one thing that's similar to

other men I've dated. They aren't galaxies apart. Maybe just a light-year or two.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“It’s a beautiful night,” Mercer says, sucking in a deep breath of the muggy night.

I make a guttural, unladylike noise. “It’s hell on earth out here.”

He chuckles as he follows me to my car. “I know a thing or two about hell on Earth ma’am, and this ain’t it. This is paradise.”

Glancing over my shoulder I see Mercer holding his arms out wide, the dadgum wine bottle clutched in one hand grinning like a fool. “Put the wine bottle down,” I hiss, looking around the empty lot. “You look like Lucky Louie on a Saturday night.” Greenton’s favorite drunk always seems to get booze lucky on the weekends.

Mercer leans against my car, one arm steadying his body when I open the driver’s side door. “Are you okay to drive?” he asks, eyes flicking up and down my body—as if that holds the answer to his question.

“I’m fine. You know us Greenton women.”

He offers a lopsided grin. “I do.”

“Listen, Mercer—” I say, sliding into the car, ready to shoot him down again.

He cuts me off. “Pop the trunk. I’ll put the wine in and you can be on your way.”

A sudden realization hits. “Just give it here,” I say, reaching over and taking the bottle from him. I wedge it in my backseat. He can’t see what’s in my trunk. “I’m heading straight home anyway.” Another lie. They flow so easily these days.

“You’re going to say you don’t want to go out with me again, and I’m not taking no for an answer,” Mercer says, his accent growing thicker by the second. “Let’s just get to the point where you agree. What do you say?”

“Awful forward of you,” I reply, smoothing my hair. The scent of new car fills my nostrils—a welcome distraction from Mercer’s soap.

He shrugs once and puts his other hand on the door of my car. Sighing, he says, “This place. There’s something about this place that makes me happy. I have three weeks to make the most of it.” I meet his gaze and it’s a mistake. All the things I’m trying to shove down, including rebuttals, get lost in the swirling haze of desire.

Swallowing hard, I find myself. “I’m sorry, Mercer. I’m not the person to do that with.”

“Who said anything about doing things?” He winks. I turn to look out my windshield and silence envelops me. “You are obviously searching for something. Why not give a look with me?”

“The thing is, I know exactly who I am, Mercer. I am not some two-bit floozy who you can use and toss aside. I am Clover Wellsley. The mayor’s daughter.”

Mercer leans away. “And here I was thinking you were your own person.” There’s a challenge blazing in his eyes. It makes my heart pound. “My mistake. Have a nice night, Clover Wellsley, mayor’s daughter.”

Gripping my steering wheel, I take a deep breath. “We all can’t run around here doing whatever it is we feel like. There are repercussions for actions. Thank you for the wine, and the company, but I have to go now.” Polite yet firm. It works like a charm ninety percent of the time. The other ten is reserved for indignant, Southern rage.

He tips his head, that infuriating cowboy gesture, and smiles wide. “Drive safe, ma’am.” Mercer closes my door. He doesn’t slam it. He’s a perfect gentleman. And he’s also right. Starting up my car, I watch him walk back into DR. Slamming my eyes shut, I yell out a cuss, “Oh, Sherlock!” I back out of my space and pull onto the road. I’m not going home, though. Not yet.

Fixing my eyes on the route out of town, I drive toward it, minding the speed limit with my music louder than fifteen. I’m such a rebel. Why did he have to be the ninety percent? I’d feel better right now if I got to scream at someone.

A sign.

That’s what I asked for, what I’m waiting for. Mercer Ballentine could be that sign, right? In fact, he’s flashing brighter than anything I’ve seen my entire life. There are a few weird things I do when I’m trying to decide if something is a good idea. Making lists is one of those things. Very detailed and very neat lists with pros on one side and cons on the other. After nine minutes and fifteen seconds of making a mental list, I realize I’m hung up on things that don’t matter to me. The negative column is filled with things that matter to the life I was born into. To my parents. I’m painfully aware that my unhappiness and the unsettling feeling of not belonging is because of it.

I don’t see the pickup truck pulling onto the main road because it’s coming from a hidden drive. As my thoughts wandered and I traveled out of town, my speed ratcheted up, and I don’t think I can stop in time. I’m plowing down the pavement toward the bumper when I chance a glance in my rearview at the bright headlights rushing toward me. Light. That’s all I see a moment before the car clips the back end of my car and sends me spinning into the easement, and then a tree.

Panicking once my car comes to a stop, I see the car that hit me speeding off in the distance. He must have passed the truck that pulled out in front of me. I touch my

chest, my head, my legs, and realize I am perfectly fine. Rolling my neck and surveying my surroundings, I start thanking God. Over and over at a manic pace. “I could have died,” I wail out, trying the handle of my door when steam begins to rise from my crunched-up hood that’s melded to a tree. “Farm truck. They’re going to kill me,” I whisper when the facts settle in.

Another set of headlights beam into my face from my window that is now facing the road. “Great. Please don’t let it be a cop. Please don’t let it be Harry if it is a cop.” Clenching my teeth, I hold my breath. Harry is the Sheriff of Greenton and he’s in my daddy’s pocket. He will call him the second he sees it’s me. I need time to get myself out of this mess—to think. Squinting my eyes, I try my best to see through the darkness. It’s a white truck, not a cruiser. I let out a long, haggard breath. Just someone stopping to help, no doubt. Removing my heels, I push on my door with my feet until it unwillingly creaks open. Waving my arms as I step out of the car to signal, I am okay, but yes, I need help. Promptly, and without an ounce of grace, I slip in a gloppy mud puddle and fall face first. It rained like cats and dogs yesterday. It turns this place into a big swamp, and I’m today’s casualty.

Leaning up and climbing to my knees, I’m a dark shade of horse manure. Two large figures hop out of the truck and jog toward me. It’s Mercer and Bentley, flashlights shining at me like I’m a deer about to get flayed.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I scream, wiping mud from my face, but only managing to apply more. “This is the sign?” I shout at the sky, shaking a fist. “This? Out of all things?”

Mercer approaches first. “Are you hurt?”

Southern ladies keep their cool in situations such as these. In all situations and occurrences actually, but the hysteria creeps in and replaces all of that. “Am I okay? That’s what you’re askin’? Look at me, Mercer Ballentine. Do I look okay? Turn off

the trucking flashlight, I don't want to go blind tonight, too!"

He shakes his head. "No ma'am, you don't look okay. Not one bit. We saw the accident. The car that didn't stop. We saw you spinning, and I have to say it's a miracle you're okay. Are you sure you're not hurt?" Bentley is looking at me like I'm a rabid animal. Fair. It's what I feel like right now. "I have medical training. I can help." He holds one palm out, like he's waiting for me to charge like a bull. The flashlight is aimed at my steaming car. There's a weird smell that I assume is my poor car crying out for help.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“I’m not hurt, but I’m not okay, Mercer.” He walks toward me, still holding out a hand. His face is stoic, serious. I change my tune. “I’m okay. I’m okay.” I repeat it one more time.

Mercer tilts his head, inquisitively. “You said you’re not okay in the same breath you said you were okay.”

This is the sign, right? I’m so sick of bottling it up. I’m running with it. “I’m not in a quilting club,” I blurt.

Mercer widens his eyes, swallows hard and says, “Okay. You don’t need to know how to quilt anyway. Can’t machines do that these days?” They can, but that’s beside the point. He closes the distance between us, stepping into the mud puddle carefully. He takes my mud-caked hand in his and pulls me away from my car. Mercer uses his thumb to remove mud from my lip. His touch ignites an ache deep inside me. The signs keep coming.

“I graduated from beauty school. Beauty school. I want to do hair. That’s been my dream my entire life. My parents think I’ve been in a quilting club all this time. Oh my goodness, I’ve been lying for so long I don’t know where my truths are anymore.” The tears come.

Bentley is on the phone; I hear him calling someone to get my car towed. “Don’t call the cops, Bent! There’s an open bottle of wine in my car.” I suck in a deep breath. “I’m a fugitive. A wild fugitive who doesn’t belong here. I don’t belong.” My breaths come quicker and I inhale the thick smell of the dirt coating my body.

“Calm down, Clover.” He puts his hand on my neck, and another on my arm. I think it’s an intimate gesture, I won’t do anything to stop. Not now, but his fingers are moving slowly, with a precision. “That feels okay. Are you sure your neck doesn’t hurt? Did you hit your head?” His hands slide up my neck to my head, thumbs pressed behind my ears.

“I’m telling you my whole life is a lie and you’re givin’ me an exam?”

He smirks. “Back at Dizzy Rocket, you were saying you weren’t the same woman. I think what you meant was you’re a shake away from the looney bin. Clover, take a deep breath.”

“I’m not looney. I’m just a liar! You know my cousin, Goldie?” My tone is a near screech.

Mercer nods his head as he moves his hand and manipulates my wrist, asking if I feel any pain. “She owns that super chic salon in Cape Cod? You knew that, right?” At the mention of Cape Cod, his attention piques. “It doesn’t hurt,” I add.

“Yeah, I know which one you mean. I’d forgotten Goldie owns that place, I guess.”

“She offered me a booth there when I’m ready. That’s the sign I’ve been waiting for, Mercer. I finally have my license and I’ve had enough practice. I’m ready to move to Cape Cod and do hair at Goldie’s.”

“Wow. Okay,” he replies, dropping his hands to rest by his sides. “You wouldn’t want to do hair here? With your parents? Your friends? Cape Cod is a long way from Greenton.”

I shake my head furiously. “Of course not. I’ve been planning this whole different life waiting for the right time to get out of here. Winnie has taken over much of the

shelter and management duties. I'll still foot that bill, because let's be honest, I'll never need for money, but I need for a life of my own." Winnie is my right-hand woman. She runs the day to day happenings, and I've groomed her to take over completely. I pay her a good salary and she makes sure the legacy I began keeps the same values I founded it on. I hold up one finger in front of Mercer. "Pause that thought, I need to talk to Bentley." I hear Bent chatting up his friend on the phone.

Barefoot and covered in mud, I march toward him. "Ms. Wellsley, you look like a muddy Carrie. Are you here to kill me? I'm sorry for every time I called you a bitch. Don't take vengeance on me. Please."

I sigh, holding out my hand. "Give me your cell." He complies immediately. "Where are you guys heading now?" I ask Bentley before addressing the person on the phone.

"Jimmy's hunting camp off route three twenty-six," he says, voice shaky. "To drink and do man shit."

To the person on the other end of the line, I ask, "You have a tow truck?"

The man replies in the affirmative. I describe where my car is and tell him to tow it to Jimmy's hunting camp instead of to a body shop. I'm going to take care of this all by myself. My parents won't even know a thing.

Mercer is standing behind me; I feel his body heat—his presence. I turn to face him, and he's bare-chested, holding out his plaid shirt. "You're not getting into the cab of Bent's truck covered in mud. My shirt will be long enough to cover everything." He gestures to my body with his free hand.

"But now you're not covered," I shriek.

He shakes his head. "I wasn't sure if you were okay, but listening to you boss those

boys around I see you're in perfect Clover form. Take the shirt. My abs are the least of your worries, darlin'. It's the gentlemanly thing to do." His abs are the most of my confounded worries!

I snatch the shirt, with a huff, and go to the passenger side of Bentley's truck to unzip my dress. It weighs five pounds more now that it's soaked and caked with mud. It's completely destroyed and there's no way I can drop it off at the dry cleaners like this. Such a shame, I think. What's not a shame is having Mercer's scent wrapping around my body. It's almost as if he's marking me as his, and I can't deny I like the way it feels.

I'm still shaken, but I have to take care of business. I walk back to my car, grab my purse on the floorboard, the bottle of wine that blessedly survived, and try to pop the trunk. It doesn't open.

"We need to get out of here before someone drives by and sees your car. Or you, wearing my shirt." Mercer sets his hand on my shoulder.

"Daddy says you're basically a superhero. Get this trunk open, please. I need the black bag and wheeled suitcase."

The headlights on Bentley's truck are blazing our way, so I can see his grin. "A superhero, huh? A shirtless one? That mean yes for a date?"

"Depends if you get my belongings out or not, I guess."

"Consider yourself taken then, ma'am."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

My stomach flips. I don't correct him. Mercer, with his big hands and bulging biceps, muscles the trunk open enough to slide my things out. He hands the bag to me. "Dead body in there?" he jokes while continuing to hold my cart.

"Nope. Just the head," I reply, sliding the handles on my shoulder. "Can you close it now?"

"Awful demanding, aren't you?"

I shake my head. He closes it the same way he opened it, with brute strength. Mercer looks at me, chest heaving with exertion after it's sealed shut. Abs accentuated by the way the light is hitting him "I just wanted to watch you do it," I admit.

Mercer bites his lip and then says, "Just a superhero doing his job. You ready to go? The tow truck is almost here. Not sure what your plan is for when it gets to the hunting camp, but I can't wait to find out."

I nod, and without looking back at the steaming pile that is my car. To Bentley, I say, "To the huntin' camp to do man stuff!"

Mercer opens the door for me and puts my muddy dress and cart in the back of the truck while I slide in. My heart skips a beat when he climbs in after me. "Are you sure she didn't hit her head? The mayor is going to put a hit out on us if something happens to her. Shouldn't we take her to Greenton General just to make sure her noggin is on the up and up?"

"And risk being front-page news tomorrow?" I hiss. "I'm handling this, Bent. Just get

us out of here.”

Mercer and his beautiful bare chest is almost more of a distraction than I can take. It controls my thoughts. “You heard the muddy lady,” Mercer says, setting a hand on my bare thigh. Every skin cell on my body prickles in response. “To the hunting camp.” Mercer throws a fist out the open window, a carefree, wild sense to his whole being. I want that. I need it.

“This is the first night of the rest of my life,” I say, clutching his hand. “I’m ready. I’m ready.” After this, I won’t have a choice. This sign just sent my whole world into a tailspin. Literally and figuratively.

Bentley pulls onto the road and heads toward the camp. The wind whips through the cabin. As we barrel down the road, I think about the second I saw Mercer Ballentine at the airport. I knew right then things would never be the same. I’m not sure how, but I don’t care. He’s my sign.

Chapter Four

Clover

“ANOTHER SHOT!” I yell out, slamming the tiny glass down on the peeling Formica countertop. The shot glass has a sombrero on one side, and the words South of the Border on the other. The B has been worn to a P and I find it hilarious. “South of the Porder,” I shout, raising it in the air, laughing until my stomach aches. The hunting camp isn’t unlike any other hunting camp. It smells a little weird, but after the third shot, I stopped smelling it, and pretty much everything else that has a scent. I never act out like this. Letting loose isn’t something I’m well versed in and it must show from the glares sliding my way.

“We’re cutting you off, sugar,” Bentley drawls, winking. “If you throw up in here, Jimmy will have my head on a stake.” Mercer and Bentley take another shot of tequila without me. I shrug off the slight and dance my way into the living room a few steps away. The walls are covered with buck antlers and dead animal busts. The nineties style stereo is pulsing music throughout the two-bedroom cabin, vibrating the taxidermy.

There’s a raccoon in the corner staring at me with beady, unblinking eyes. I use the remote to change it to a new song and lower the volume. “That’s a fine piece of taxidermy,” I call out, hearing the slur in my voice. “It looks like it wants to tear out my eyeballs. Maybe if I compliment it, I’ll gain some favor.” I back up a step because it’s creeping me out. “And then it will stop staring at me, too.”

I take another step away, and I’m halted by Mercer’s bare chest. “It’s staring at you because it can’t help it.” His hands fall on my waist, on top of his shirt that I’m still wearing. I showered and put it back on after. Jimmy’s closet only had jackets that smelled like musky animals and dirt. Mercer leans over and buries his face in my neck. I gave up trying to keep my desires at bay when I finished the bottle of white wine on my own. “You’re so beautiful.” Mercer sways with me to the music, his shoulders forcing me to follow his lead—his warm body commanding my full attention.

Laughing, I lean my head back on his chest, tilting my head up. “Beautiful, huh? I’d almost believe it if it didn’t smell like tequila.”

He spins me, keeping me tight against his body. Meeting his gaze, I hold my breath. He makes me feel things I’ve never experienced before. I can tear down the walls and show him the real me. I’m not scared or apprehensive, either. “Tequila doesn’t have anything to do with my compliment,” Mercer drawls, tilting his head as his eyes trail down my chest, to the open buttons, where my cleavage is exposed, still warm from my shower.

“Tell me I’m beautiful tomorrow,” I say. “If you remember.”

He takes my face in his hands, a firm grip that tells me his intentions are thinly controlled. I want to push him to the brink; I want him to give me more. “How could I forget when I’ve had the knowledge of your beauty my entire life?”

I pull away and his hands drop. I can’t help where my eyes wander. Down his chest, his rippling arms, to the jeans slung low on his hips. My mouth goes dry. “South of the Porder?” I ask, saying anything to distract myself from what he’s making me feel. Is it because I’ve never been this intimate with a man who is nearly naked? No. That’s not it. I’ve drunk too much? Nope. Haven’t had enough. With a purpose only a woman has, I march back into the kitchen and pour myself another full shot into my little sombrero glass and down it. The fire screams down my throat and I can feel the flush rise to my face and neck.

Bentley looks like he’s going to say something, but I wave my glass at him. “Don’t say it, Bent. Mercer is over there complimenting me and I’m not nearly drunk enough to stay away from him,” I hiss out. “This is so strong.” Shaking my head, I playback my previous sentence and realize how backward it came out.

“Don’t you mean you’re not drunk enough to bewithme?” Mercer says, voice cutting through the music, testosterone-fueled presence entering my bloodstream.

I spin, confused. I hear the hurt laced in his tone. “No. Why would you think that?”

He casts his eyes down. “No reason. I’m heading outside to grab some fresh air. It’s a little stale in here.”

Bentley makes an annoyed noise. “Oh, come on! The camp’s been shuttered up for months don’t be a little bitch. It doesn’t stink, you’re just trying to escape because she’s ruining man time!” He follows Mercer outside, talking so fast not even I can

hear the words behind this thick Southern accent. I pour another shot when the screen door slams. I take it over to the raccoon and sit down on a busted sofa covered in dark brown flowers. It matches the valance hanging across the window in the kitchen. I take the shot and the room spins. Perfect. “He’s right,” I tell the raccoon. “I don’t know how to interact with a man like Mercer Ballentine.” I only know how to handle men who I’m not attracted to. It’s more of a business deal with those interactions. They want me for reasons other than my heart, and I’m supposed to want them for the same. My parents didn’t prepare me to desire, to fall in love, or any of the romantic things. They groomed me to broker fair trade marriage deals. There isn’t much that perturbs me, but the fact I don’t know how to do this specifically, is eating me alive.

The music lulls between songs and I hang my head between my knees, wrapping my arms around my middle. “I wanted to be a different person and I’m over here offending the only person who wants to help me get what I want.”

I stand up and trip over an area rug corner. “Shut up, raccoon. I’m going to apologize now. What do you think I am? A complete barbarian? I’m a farm trucking lady!” I look down at my hands and see my mangled manicure. “Maybe I am uncivilized. I take that back.” I shrug and sigh.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

The screen door slams behind me as I wander onto the front porch. Bent and Mercer are leaning against the back of his truck, talking in low voices. "Listen. I came to apologize," I call out, cupping my mouth. "I'm sorry for being a bitty varmint, Mercer! My sincerest apologies."

"It's two in the morning. Clover, don't yell. We have neighbors over there," Bentley hisses in my direction. "Were you born in a barn?"

"Mother trucker," I say. "I need to find my cell phone. My parents are probably having a right fit."

I fly back into the log cabin, into one of the bedrooms and fish my cell phone from the bottom of my handbag. There's a text from Tannie:

Don't worry about your parents. I covered for you when your mama called. Told her you were staying with me tonight while we planned. I said your phone died. You owe me...all the details tomorrow.

"Mother trucker," I whisper once more, losing all ability to hold my foul language at bay.

Mercer comes up behind me. "Everything okay? Need a ride back home? Jimmy's neighbor is on the other side of the pond. He might be sober. No promises though. It's two."

"Stop trying to fix things for me. I don't deserve it." I'm not sure what I deserve, but I have a feeling, a good man like Mercer isn't something life owes me.

He laughs. "I'm not fixing things for you. Just being a decent guy. I'd do it for anyone." He sighs out. "Because I wasn't born in a barn," he adds.

I throw my phone back into the abyss that is my bag. "Tannie thinks we're...on a date tonight. She covered for me. She saw us leave DR together. My mama called her when I didn't come home. I have a huge mess to clean up tomorrow." Before I got really drunk, I dealt with my car. A body shop from two towns over is picking it up in the morning and fixing it. They'll deliver it back here when it's done. I'll tell Daddy I'm finally getting the windows tinted and I'll rent a car tomorrow. It's the best plan I could come up with on the fly.

"I hope you told her the truth. That you wouldn't date me if your life depended on it."

"We went on a date tonight already. We grabbed a drink at the Dizzy Rocket. Everyone saw it, remember?" I lay a hand on my forehead, adding that to the mental list of damage control. What must everyone be saying about me today?

"That's not the kind of date I'm talkin' about." Mercer looks out the window over my head.

Because I'm drunker than a skunk, I have no problem losing my good sense. "Sex? Is that what this is about? You're barking up the wrong tree." Standing, I slap his shoulder, but it's a mistake because his skin is hot and now my palm is warm, and it makes me want to touch more of his skin to see if the temperature matches.

"Tell me then," Mercer says, running a hand through his hair, making his abs flex. "If I were a respectable businessman with a job in the city, wore a suit, carried a computer, had a significant last name, would you date me tonight?"

I rub my eyes. I see two faces in front of me. "You are so far off it's funny. I'm not a 'for a good time, call this number' type of woman." He looks confused, so I continue,

just to watch his face, both of them. “I’m a virgin, Mercer.”

His eyes widen and his jaw drops open. He stutters once and then starts listing off men I’ve dated in the past. I shake my head after each one. After he concludes his list, he says, “How? How is that humanly possible?”

I swallow hard. “Because I’m sure none of them looked like you without a shirt on.”

He opens his mouth to say something, and then closes it, perching his hands on his hips. He shakes a finger at me. “You’re drunk. Let’s get you to bed, ma’am.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you. It’s why I don’t tell anyone. People treat me differently.” I shake my head. “Don’t ‘ma’am’ me.”

He coughs. “I’m not. But you also are every drunk.”

“If I said I wanted to have sex with you right now, you’d be cool with it? I’m sure if I was Billy-Jo Babcock, you’d be on top of me before I finished this sentence.” He steps away, not saying a word—blue eyes flashing a warning. “Thought so,” I say.

“For the record, I don’t only want sex from you,” Mercer says, gaze locked with mine.

I reach up and grab his shirt on my body. My drunk fingers fumble with the buttons. “That’s a lie. Lucky for you, I don’t care because tonight is the first night of my new life and this is how I want to start it.” With a bang.

I’ve startled him. He glances over his shoulder to the open bedroom door, and back to my body. I don’t have my bra on anymore, but the shirt isn’t opened all the way, so I’m not on full display. Yet. “You don’t want to lose your virginity when you won’t even remember it in the morning. Regardless of what type of woman you’re hoping

to be in your new life.” He air quotes the last word. “I’m not that type of man. I wish I was because you’re standing there wearing my shirt, looking like every bit my favorite recipe, but I can’t. Not tonight.”

“Shut the door, Mercer,” I order. “If you want to take me to dinner tomorrow night, and every night after that, until you leave again, shut the door.” I swallow hard, slip his shirt off my shoulders and toss it on the bed behind us without taking my eyes off his. “And lock it.” My skin prickles as he takes me in—a feral look transforming his features.

“I’m shutting the door because I don’t want Bentley or anyone else that might show up to see you, but I’m not doing anything inappropriate with you. You would think it a mistake in the morning.” He’s right. Like always. But that doesn’t mean I can’t at least have a little of him. A small taste. Mercer donkey kicks the door closed and steps back to lock it, all while watching me. He swallows hard. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. I should leave the room right now.”

I take a step toward him. “But you won’t.”

His chest moves up and down rapidly. He shakes his head as his reply. “I want you,” he drawls.

“I’ve wanted you all day long. Since the moment I saw you at the airport,” I reply, sauntering forward a step. The air is electric, and my hope is his mind goes on autopilot. I want mischief.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

He smirks. “That would mean more if it didn’t smell like tequila.”

“Touché.” I smile back. “You’re right about a couple things. I don’t want to lose my virginity drunk and I do want to remember it. You’re wrong about something, though. Losing it to you wouldn’t be a mistake. That’s what I want. Just maybe not while South of the Porder is the funniest joke I’ve ever heard.” I crack myself up, covering my mouth to stifle the laughter.

Mercer laughs but stops before I do. “If that’s the case then you should get dressed. The thoughts running through my mind aren’t very pure, ma’am. In fact, I’m not sure they’ve ever been more impure.”

I take another step toward him, letting my fingers finally touch the skin on his chest. I step back so I can watch them run over his hot, sweaty skin. Heat clings to him—everything wants to be on him right now. “Clover,” he rasps, eyes watching my hands move against his body, a methodical study laced with nefarious intent. “You’re not well versed on how things work behind closed doors, I realize. But when the only thing standing between my dick and your body is a pair of jeans and a scrap of lace, touching me like that makes things a bit more challenging. How about we both get some clothes on?”

Ignoring his pleas, I watch my hands glide over firm muscle. “Question,” I say.

“Can my virginity leave this room intact by morning if you stay with me tonight?”

He pulls away from me, “Woah, woah, woah.”

“I’m not a horse,” I say, teasing, biting my bottom lip waiting for his reply.

He fists his hands by his sides. “On a normal day, when I’m not strung out from being away from home for six months, probably, but tonight? When I’m realizing I might be in over my head with you, I’m not so sure.” Mercer shakes his head twice, slowly.

“You call the shots,” I say. “Tell me to stop. We can take breaks. Even sleep if you want to. I don’t want this to end. I want you to stay with me. I’ve never been able to reach out and take what I want before. Not without balancing what it would cost.”

“Don’t forget the most important part there, killer. You want to wake up a virgin. Woah,” he says once again, dragging both hands through his hair. He glances up at the ceiling and looks like he’s praying, lips opening and closing. After several seconds of him muttering things I can’t understand, he says, “Fine. You have to listen to me though. What have you done with men? I need you to be honest.” He runs a hand down his face. “Have mercy, I’ve never sobered up so quickly in my entire life.”

“And I’ve never been this drunk in my entire life.”

“Another point in the ‘I should leave this room right now’ column. You aren’t helping your case, here.” He slings his hands on his hips. I back onto the bed and kick back the musty comforter. “Answer my question, Clover. What experience do you have?”

“What’s it matter?” I pat the bed next to me.

“It matters to me.” Mercer stalks to the end of the bed and watches me, blue eyes blazing into my own. “Tell me.”

“You’re killing the mood.”

“Good. I think that would be best anyway.”

“Kissing. Fondling. I’ve let a few guys get to third base, but I have zero experience on how to do anything to a man. Properly anyway.” I laugh. “There isn’t much proper about doing things to a man, is there?”

He tosses his arms out to the sides. “Hilarious, Clover. If you can’t talk about it without laughing, how improper are the actual acts going to feel? What does get to third base mean to you? I want to make sure you aren’t using an antiquated system.” He presses his lips together and adds, “You’re not doing anything to me tonight,” he deadpans. “I’m not doing anything to you either. At least not until you’re sober.” I fold my arms across my chest. Bentley must have come back into the cabin because the song switches and the stereo volume increases.

“That doesn’t sound like any kind of fun,” I say.

“Trust me, I feel the same way. Let’s make out,” Mercer says, licking his lips. “My pants stay on and in a perfect world so would your shirt, but your body is,” he says, clearing his throat, “pardon me for saying, is so fucking beautiful that covering it up would be a crime. I’ll deal with what it’s doing to me. Don’t worry.”

Yes. Yes. Yes. This feels so right. Nothing has ever felt this natural. Why is it happening now? “What’s my body doing to you?”

He crawls toward me and when his hands are on each side of my head, he says, “You’ll be able to feel that soon enough.” His lips pull into a delicious side smirk.

He lays down on his side and pulls me to face him. Mercer cradles my head and brings his lips against mine. They move with mine for several seconds. He pulls away

too soon. “I forgot to breathe,” he says, inhaling noisily, and chuckling. Butterflies flap in my stomach and my head swims.

My skin feels electric where it touches his. “I took your breath away, huh?” I slide closer to him, pressing my breasts firmly against his chest and rubbing my skin on his. Mercer’s hand slides down to my neck, then to my collar bone, and down my arm and rests on my hip. Mercer’s fingers glide over the side of my panties. I kiss his mouth again. It’s still wet from our last kiss. He tastes like tequila and everything forbidden. A combination that is toxic—to not only my body, but to the very core of my being. He groans as he clutches my panties in a tight fist.

Against my mouth, he says, “I want to take more than your breath away. I’d start with these.” He grasps the lace so tight, they cut into my skin. He groans again and deepens the kiss, his tongue possessing my mouth. My stomach spins and I forget my own name. Wetness floods my panties and I lose my breath. It all happens at once. I’ve kissed men before, but this feels different. I don’t want it to end, and I’m not worried about what it will cost in the morning. I’ve underestimated what it feels like to take what I want and accept what is freely given.

“Maybe you should do just that then,” I say, laying my hand on top of his, the one clutching my panties.

Mercer rolls on top of me, placing his hips between mine. “Maybe I should.” His neck works as he swallows. I feel him hard, through his jeans. Mercer leans down and kisses my chest, just once. I feel it all over my body. He takes one of my nipples in his mouth and it feels like it’s connected to my core. I clench tightly. Then again Mercer moves over to the other nipple.

“You should,” I moan out, wrapping my legs around his waist. “You really should.”

He drags his tongue along my neck, up to my ear. “What would everyone say?”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“That Clover got something she wanted,” I fire back. “That Mercer is the king that conquered the Ice Queen? I don’t care what they say.” In this moment, I really don’t care. I’d take the backlash if it meant feeling Mercer inside me. Finally losing my virginity to a man who knows exactly how to work my body. His experience is a sure bet.

“You want it?” he asks, thrusting his hips so he rubs against my core.

Closing my eyes, I fantasize about the scenarios that could take place. “More than I thought was possible.” He kisses me again.

Against my lips, he says, “Good.”

My heart rate ratchets up and the familiar Lynyrd Skynyrd song vibrates against the thin wall. We both smile. “Here’s the thing, I care what people say, Clover.” He leans back, looking down at me, shaking his head. “I could fuck you right now and prove everyone right. Or, I could show you the real side of me and you can let the real side of you come out and we could really have something together.”

“Why does that make me want sex even more?”

He laughs, his smile makes me wetter than I was a second before. He mumbles the lyrics to the song we’ve both heard a billion times. This time they mean a little more than they used to. “Sweet Home Alabama,” he whispers softly, resting his forehead on mine.

“I’ll take the second option tonight. But that first option better be on the menu

eventually.”

He shakes his head. “Killer, I’ll let you order whatever you want when your requests don’t smell like tequila.”

Chapter Five

Clover

“THANK GOD YOU don’t have a job,” I say, sitting in the passenger side of Bentley’s work truck. We dropped him off at the main office for desk duty and Mercer just returned to the cab with a pink shopping bag. “Right now, I mean. You don’t really have a job right now.”

“I have a job, I’m on leave. You’re lucky I like shopping for ladies on my downtime.” He hands me the familiar boutique bag and I peek inside. I’d take anything at this point. I’m wearing Jimmy’s hunting jacket over my bra and panties. My hair is tied up into a top knot and my face is bare of makeup. I. Am. Scandalous. I. Am. Free. “I saw a few dresses that had Clover written all over them, but I bought you something a little more appropriate for what I have planned for us today.” It’s a pair of jeans, cowboy boots, socks, and a tank top. We went over my sizes before he entered one of my favorite stores. We also went over what to say to the ladies who work there if they asked who the clothes were for.

I smell like a dead animal mated with a bottle of Old Spice and it makes me want to vomit. I couldn’t stroll into the rental car place wearing Mercer’s shirt. Nor could I enter my parents’ property looking like I’d been ridden hard and hung up wet. “What are we doing today?” I ask, glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one is around before shimmying off Jimmy’s jacket to don my new clothing.

Mercer clears his throat and rests a hand on his mouth. “Before you were nearly naked, I thought we could go four-wheeling out in the East Woods.” He pauses, gaze picking parts of my body to study. I’d be self-conscious if I didn’t know exactly how much Mercer likes my body. He must have told me a thousand different ways last night, maybe even in a foreign language once or twice. “Now that you’re almost naked, I’d like to kiss every single inch of your body.”

“Both plans sound acceptable,” I say, pulling on the jeans. “Drop me off at the rental car place and I’ll meet you at your house at two.” I tell him he should spend some time with his parents since he missed church and I need time to deal with the damages from last night. My phone buzzes from my purse. It’s Tannie. “I have to take this. I’m sorry.”

“Back to reality, huh?” he jokes, but my stomach sinks. It’s accurate. I have so much to deal with before I can truly be free with him for three weeks of untethered madness. I slide the tank over my head and answer the call.

“I’m fine. I’m alive.”

“Are you still intact? That’s the only important factor here. Did the master of mack show you his ways?”

I meet Mercer’s gaze, and he looks like he’s floating on a cloud as he takes in my new outfit. I mouth the words, thank you, as I slide my hands down the jeans that fit like a glove. He nods, a dreamy smile on a pair of lips I want to kiss more than anything else right now.

“Since when was it appropriate for you to talk like a dirty, drunk male? A lady never kisses and tells, and for your information, everything is still intact, including your bitty varmint personality.”

Tannie huffs. “I’m sorry. Seriously though?”

I stare out of the windshield. It gives me a better idea than a rental car. “Listen, Tannie. I’m coming over. I need to borrow your old BMW for a few days.” I pause. “I’ll tell you everything about last night.”

I hear her clap. “Of course. Did he deflower you in your car? Is it defiled? Does it need to be detailed because of the mess it made? Oh, I knew it was going to be dirty. I’m so jealous you got a taste of that.”

I swallow hard. Letting her believe her own lie will be less harmful than telling her the truth. Even if it makes my stomach hurt. I’ve protected my integrity for nearly thirty years, and it’ll be gone to the Greenton gossip mill in a matter of seconds after I hang up this call. I meet Mercer’s eyes. I’ll lose it to him eventually. Maybe even today. “You know me so well,” I tell Tannie, choking on the last word. “It was amazing.”

Mercer’s eyes widen. I shake my head. Tannie squeals like a piglet. “I’ll tell you everything when I get there. Thanks for letting me borrow Sara-Beth. I owe you.” I hang up the phone.

“It was amazing, huh?” Mercer says, pressing his lips together in a smirk. “To Tannie’s then? You sure that lie was a good idea?”

“The man at the rental car place would ask too many questions. I made a snap judgment call. She will tell the town we had sex, but at least I’ll control the narrative. I really want to take care of my car situation without my parents finding out. It’s best for my cause.” He pulls out of the parking lot. “If I tell them about moving out and getting a job at Goldie’s, at least I’ll have something to stand on without their help.” Mercer is chuckling. I remind him where Tannie lives.

“Thanks for the clothes again. You did a great job picking stuff out. You’ve done it a lot, I’m guessing. Girlfriends in the past or whatnot.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

He runs a hand over the scruff on his jaw. “I’ve had a relationship with my job. The clothes are because I know you. I don’t think I’d be able to get it right for another woman.”

“You don’t know me. Not anymore,” I reply, looking out the window. The cows are in the big field today.

Mercer clears his throat. “I know you better now, after one night, than I ever did before.” He pauses. “You really don’t care that everyone is going to think we did the deed last night?”

“There are more pressing matters in the world.”

“Your parents?” Mercer presses.

I suck in a breath. “I’ll deal with them. Tell them the truth. Well, not the whole truth, but you know?” I lean over and put on the cowboy boots. They’re tight like all new leather boots. I’ll have blisters in no time.

“You’re beautiful,” he rasps, drawing my gaze to the side of his smiling face.

“And that’s not the tequila talkin’,” I say.

His grin widens. “It never was, ma’am.” We pull into Tannie’s drive. It’s a modest home, in a great neighborhood where real estate goes for a ton more than it should.

Mercer pushes the drive shaft into park and looks over at me. “Last night was fun.”

“Could have been more fun,” I fire back.

He nods. “Three weeks. You sure you’re ready for this adventure?”

My stomach flips, and I lean over to kiss him. He grabs my head with one hand and pulls me in tighter. When he releases me, we’re both breathing heavy, minds recalling last night when we wore less clothes and had one thing on our minds. Mercer hops out of the truck and goes around the open my door. My boots hit the ground and he lays another kiss square on my mouth. “Two o’clock sharp, ma’am.”

I nod. “I’ll be there.”

He waits until I’m inside Tannie’s house before he jumps back into Bentley’s truck and leaves. Tannie’s voice screeches down the hall. I turn and face my best friend. She’s already impeccable, face done, hair coifed, and dress crisply pressed. “Clover Wellsley,” she spits out, gaze roving over my nonstandard outfit. Are you okay?” She raises one brow.

I smile wide. That remains unchanged, I think. “Do you know how good that man looks naked? You don’t. Let me tell you.”

Suddenly, my outfit is all but forgotten and she’s leading me into her gossip parlor offering me sweet tea and finger sandwiches. Who is counting my lies at this point?

My mama bought my story about getting my windows tinted. She taught me how to tell white lies with success, so she doesn’t really have anyone to blame but herself. I feel the least guilty about lying to her. I know I only have a little while until Tannie spreads the details of my illicit romp with Mercer far and wide. What I didn’t tell Mercer is that it’s part of my plan to cut myself loose from my chains. I’ll be sullied.

Less likely to nab a suitor my parents are thrusting my way. I feel most guilty for that, but he should know better than getting tangled up with a woman like me. He even told me he cared about what people said, what they thought of us.

I push open my glass front door and I'm met with a pleasant smell of gardenias. It's the scent of cleaner Maria uses. It's the perfect temperature, cool, but not cold. Everything is impeccable in here, and I can't deny I've gotten used to a certain standard of living over the years. The wheels of my plan are starting, and I know I'm going to leave all of this behind. I've lived in the house on my parents' property since I turned eighteen. It's an illusion of privacy—a scrap of dignity because they assume I'll always be here.

I open the fridge and pour myself another glass of iced tea. This stuff is made with fake sugar. My mama gives the orders to the chef about all of the food and drinks in both of our houses and because I'm trying to match with a suitor, the phrase this decade is “slim hips sink ships.” Wincing, I swallow the last of it. It tastes like garbage after having the real stuff at Tannie's house. “Tannie's hips are still slim, Mama,” I growl at the empty glass, rinsing it and setting it in the sink.

I take a real shower, with all of my favorite products, take my time with my hair and makeup and pop a Tylenol to stave off the lingering effects of last night's tequila binge. I can hold my liquor, but I've reached the age where I feel it longer. Another sign of my dwindling youth. I take care in my oversized closet selecting a matching bra and panty set. I cut off the tags and lotion my entire body before putting the outfit Mercer picked out back on. I smile as I look at myself in the mirror.

I pull my hair back, the golden ponytail falling over one shoulder. I move the stool over to the hat section of my closet and slide aside my Mint Julep hats to grab a worn-out ball cap that hasn't seen sunlight in five years or so.

My front door slams. “Clooooooover,” Mama sings.

“Oh, bitty varmint,” I whisper, stepping off the stool, folding the hat into the back of my jeans.

She takes off her heels and places them by the door with a thud. “Where are you?”

I call back to her as I enter my room and start busying myself with a stack of books on my nightstand.

“Your daddy and I were talking. You should have told us about your plans for your car. You didn’t have to borrow Tannie’s old thing, we would have given you our extra SUV.”

“I appreciate that, Mama. I got it covered. What are you guys up to today?” I never felt like I missed out on much growing up without a sibling. Now, I wish I had one to deflect some of their attention. They could take some of this heat.

Her eyes narrow. Suspicion. “How was planning the town festival with Tannie last night?”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

My heart pounds against my chest. Corner questioning. She's heard the false story already. "Great. We have several booths sorted and the food and game vendors are already confirmed. Winnie is going to have a booth there to promote the shelter. I'm having pamphlets made to promote some of the new services we're offering to the community. It's coming together real nice...why do you ask?" She never takes any interest in my extracurricular activities that don't serve her purpose to find me a husband.

"Oh, no reason. You must have been really into it to spend the night at Tannie's. Wouldn't you rather sleep in your own bed?"

Her familiar perfume enters my breathing space and I hold my breath. Whenever she's this close to me, she's either mad or wants a hug. I remember having the fight or flight response to this scent when I was a child. "Yeah, there were several emails we had to get out and it took a while. Plus, we had some wine and I didn't want to drive. Tannie likes having company, anyway. You know that." Though, she regularly spends the night at my house and not the other way around.

"Peculiar, that's all. I'm worried about you," Mama says. Her judging gaze rakes my outfit.

I clear my throat. "If you have something to say to me, just say it. You never do well beatin' around the bush."

She shrugs and looks at her perfect manicure. "Your father loves that you've taken such an interest in the festival this year unlike years past. He decided to add a new feature—a game if you will." Oh, Sherlock. Why didn't I catch her nefarious plan

vibe? I'm usually so good at sniffing them out. Because I'm too busy lying and making my own reprehensible plans.

"Oh, really? What would that be? I have it all covered. Not sure we have space for anything else in the schedule."

Her smile grows wide and absolutely terrifying. "We're auctioning you off. For charity, of course. Your charity. Win a date with the mayor's daughter. I've picked out the dress you'll wear and everything. You know what a fantastic opportunity the festival is. All of the remaining eligible bachelors will come when they hear about it. They can't say no to charity. Or Clover Wellsley." My pulse ricochets in my ears. The threat weaves through the undercurrent of her words. Not only has she heard the story, this is the only way she'll forget it. Trust me, I need her to forget it. She has me pinned in a corner.

"You're not joking, are you?" Red creeps up my neck and covers my face, I feel it coating my body like a telling second skin.

"I do not joke. I'm excited to spearhead it myself. Don't you worry. I'll make sure you end up with a handsome man. Someone who could be the one."

I breathe out once and nod. You dished it out, Clover. Now you take your punishment. "Looking forward to it," I reply, giving her my best pageant face. The deep desire to smother her with one of the twenty-two throw pillows on my bed rises, but I curtsy instead and excuse myself.

"Oh, and Clover?" One last nail in the coffin. I know my mother.

I pick up the cowboy boots next to the island in my kitchen. She makes a very obvious negative appraisal of them. "I have Mercer Ballentine's welcome home parade scheduled for the festival too. I took over the duties from his mother this

afternoon. It will be leading into your charity auction, of course.” Devious. Perfect. I don’t expect anything less. I need to get away from this place before I become like her, before the full metamorphosis happens and I’m stuck in the glass display cage that’s been created for me. All the lies I’m keeping only reinforce how close I already am to embracing the true Wellsley way.

I swallow hard. “Great. I was wondering how that was coming along. Seems like you got all the kinks ironed on out. Let me know if you need anything.” I lay my hand on the doorknob after sliding into my boots. She asks where I’m going and I tell her I’m going to check out a vendor, on a farm, in the next county over.

She puffs out her bouffant hair, like the full can of hairspray isn’t doing its job. “Careful, Clover. You have a lot on the line right now.”

“I’m not sure what you’re worried about, but I’ll drive safely. I can’t wait for the festival.” I slam the door as soon as she bids her goodbye and I call Tannie the second I get in the car.

“I know you’ve booked the vendors and games for the festival, but I need you to book more. My fate depends on it. Don’t ask any questions. What about the band that played the Christmas Cantata? We need them to play a set or two. Maybe they know someone up and coming in the area? Book ‘em too. Please.” Fill all of the gaps and space so there’s no way to fit my auction in is what I want to say to her, but I don’t.

“Okay, Clover, but you need to confess your sins later. Things are getting crazy and I know it has to do with what you’re not telling me.”

“Of course.” I hang up without saying goodbye and cut through a dirt side road to make my way to the Ballentine household with my pockets full of deceit.

Chapter Six

Clover

“YOU DON’T LOOK like yourself without your signature dress, Clover,” Mrs. Ballentine says, pulling me into a hug. Mercer met me out in the drive. He was pacing, hands folded behind his back, gaze eating the pavement. It made me wonder what he was thinking, what was bothering him. As soon as I got out of the car, he kissed me, tongue parting my lips in a groan, and I forgot to ask.

I ignore her low-key jab about my appearance, similar to the one my mama issued. “You must be so happy to have him home,” I say, grinning at Mercer. He hasn’t stopped staring at me since I entered his house. His home is nice by anyone’s standards. His family has been in Alabama for a long time. Not quite as long as mine though. Mercer was the first man I know to deviate from the plan laid out by family members before him. I respect him more than he knows for that.

“I haven’t felt whole since he was gone. I couldn’t turn on the news without crying. Without worrying about my baby boy out there fighting those monsters. I don’t want him to go back,” she replies, sadness swelling in her eyes. She turns to look at him, relief forcing her shoulders to relax once she sees him. He’s home. Not at war.

Mercer folds a large arm around her shoulder and kisses her on the top of her head. “No need to get weepy again. I’m home, and even when I’m not home, those bad guys don’t stand a chance. I’m safe.” He meets my eyes, and then his gaze skirts away as his smile fades. Seems I’m not the only one telling lies.

“I packed you a lunch,” Mrs. Ballentine says, patting underneath her eyes gently to not disturb her eye makeup. “Let me go get the picnic basket.” She retreats to the kitchen. Mercer takes my hand and guides me over to the sofa in the front sitting room.

“We have a problem,” he says, taking my other hand in his. I look down at our hands.

“That bad?”

He hikes up one shoulder. “You know how moms are. They sort of know when you’re omitting something.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“If you’re not a good liar,” I add, tilting my head. “Which you’re not, so go on, continue.”

He smirks. “Well, she kept asking where I was and who I was with last night and next thing I know she knows I was with you all night. Actually, I think she already knew. Anyway, she knows we are going four-wheeling today not to a farm to see a vendor. She wants you to come for dinner tonight.”

I bring a hand to my forehead. Not the end of the world. I don’t think the Ballentines can be bought with auctioning me off to the highest bidder. We have to do it the honest way. “Well, we’ll tell ‘em the truth.”

“Unless you can scare up a plan between now and then.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to make any more plans. I’m all tapped out at the moment. It’s just dinner,” I exclaim louder than is polite.

He squeezes my hand. “It’s easier this way. The truth. We’ll have a safe place here.”

“Valid point, Soldier,” I reply, nodding.

“Not a soldier. Sailor. But thanks for trying, darlin’.”

Mrs. Ballentine rounds a corner and smiles when she sees us. I immediately pull away from Mercer and straighten my back. “Thank you so much for the invitation to dinner, Mrs. Ballentine. I’d love to. Can I make an apple pie?” I ask, glancing at Mercer. “If we have time to get back to my house to fix it beforehand?”

“Sure,” Mercer says. “Or we can make it here. Mom won’t mind.”

She interjects, “I wouldn’t mind not one bit. I’d love to see you make your granny’s recipe. Maybe catch a glimpse at the recipe card myself. That pie has won so many contests over the years.” That recipe card is all in my head, along with dozens of other dishes that make mouths water.

“Thank you. That is so kind of you. Done. Consider it a plan.” A real one. One that doesn’t involve me lying to an entire town. Mercer grabs the picnic basket, kisses her on the cheek, and I say goodbye.

Mercer dropped Bentley’s truck back to him at work and we’re driving his dad’s big truck with a four-wheel trailer hooked up to the back. He opens the passenger side door for me and hands over the basket. The drive to East Woods is about twenty minutes. I handle several emails on my cell phone while he drives, windows down. Winnie had questions about the pamphlets and there was an email I’ve been waiting for that needed an immediate response. I have just enough time to take care of pressing work as he pulls onto a dirt road. Dust mote particles float through the cab, tainting the air.

Mercer parks in a place that doesn’t look like an actual parking spot. “Taking the four-wheeler from here,” he drawls. “You ready?”

“Confession. I haven’t been out here since high school. Also, my mom knows about us. Or you know, she knows what she thinks is the truth about us. I’m deflecting the back blow as best I can, but you should know she knows in case she gets feisty and tries something we’re not ready for.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“Ice Queen didn’t hail from the Good Witch, Mercer Ballentine.”

A sleepy little smile crosses his face. My insides melt. “I dunno. I think you might be a little good witch, a little evil witch. The perfect combination.” He unclips his seat belt. I do the same. “If you’re okay with everyone thinking we’re together, I’ll be okay.”

“Oh my goodness, you think I told Tannie we’re together? Like dating together?”

His eyes widen. “Yeah, I mean what else would you tell her? Not that I was a one-night stand? That would be even worse for your reputation, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, it was easier to explain away dirty sex when it was a one-night stand.”

Mercer turns his face and stares out the windshield. He shakes his head, lips pressing into a firm line. “Should have known.”

“Oh, come on. It was all a fib, Mercer. To throw them off my trail.”

“I can’t even be your fictional boyfriend, huh?”

Grabbing the handle of the picnic basket, I bring it on my lap. “I never said that at all. It was a tall tale that Tannie gobbled up. One I knew would spread fast. That’s the thing with my plans. They are harebrained. I never know if they’re going to work. If they will blow back in my face. You’re hurt by it, and that wasn’t my intention.”

Mercer stays silent and pops over to open the door for me. I watch him work on unloading the four-wheeler. His muscles bunch every time he moves, and I recall last night. The parts that aren’t hazed by tequila. “I’m sorry, Mercer. You can be my boyfriend if you want.”

“You think I want to be your boyfriend?” He smirks, but not at me, it’s directed at the engine of the four-wheeler. “Hand me the basket.” Mercer slams a helmet on his

head.

I huff but do what I'm told. He latches it to the back and straps it down with bungee cords. "You're a confoundin' man," I shout. He mounts the ATV and walks it off the trailer, watching over his shoulder to make sure he's clear.

He extends a helmet when he's parked. My invitation. "Ask me to be your boyfriend when you smell like mud again," he drawls, a glint of mischief in his eye. "I'll consider it then."

"I'll keep that in mind, but I might forget," I say, snatching the shiny, black helmet from his hand. "Especially because it isn't very ladylike."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“Says the classy lass about to straddle a four-wheeler and get dirty with me.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Are you insinuating I’m not a classy lady?”

He lifts his chin. “I’m insinuating you don’t want to be a classy lady.” He shakes his head. “Not with me.”

My stomach flips as I don the helmet and straddle his back. “Ride on, Sailor,” I command.

His laughter is the last thing I hear before the engine fires and Mercer guns it full speed. The trees whirl past, the green and the muted brown colors blurring into one quickly moving picture. I laugh, but the wind captures it. I clutch him around his waist, my hands pressed firmly against his abs. I can feel them flex any time he makes a turn or changes paths. Mercer seems to know these woods well. I’m not sure what he’s using as a marker, but the trails all seem to be equally ridden.

It’s exhilarating being out here, surrounded by nature, a film of sweat dotting my skin, his scent reassuring me. We are soaring, flying, and I’ve never felt safer in my life. There’s something about his presence. There’s a hope in his touch. A blind trust that I know won’t fail me. Not like the people in my world. Mercer is from my world, but he’s different. He had the courage to leave when I couldn’t. He doesn’t have a tether—a man of the world. The draw to him is inexplicable. The reasons are countless, but feeling my body next to him, I know I have never felt chemistry so strong. Not while dating the countless, meaningless men throughout my adulthood. This man holds possibility. Oceans of it, and I’d be lying if I didn’t say I’m afraid of drowning in it.

Mercer dips left and weaves right, and we hit a patch of mud. Unlike last night, it doesn't coat me completely, it splatters, and I can't contain the giddy laugh. Mercer's laugh rumbles against my hands and I pull myself closer, clutching his pecs, pressing my breasts against his back. He hits another section of muck, but it splatters against a tree instead of on us. The winding trail opens up and a pond comes into view. It's isolated, nothing but forest on all sides. I've never been to this particular spot before.

He cuts the engine when the brush gets to be too much. "I don't want to get her stuck. We'll have to walk from here." He takes off his helmet and grabs mine from me. I get off and shake my legs out. I've been keeping them tense and didn't realize it.

I breathe out once, big and long. "That was so much fun. I can't remember the last time I smiled so much. My face hurts."

"Your pageants," Mercer teases, unstrapping the picnic basket. "Or that doesn't count?" He raises one brow, questioning.

I place my hands on my hips. "Those are mostly fake smiles, so they don't count. I'll have you know; I plug my nonprofit at those things, so it's mostly a business decision these days. Plus, if I won't be a role model for little girls these days, who will?"

His blue eyes lock with mine. "Maybe drop that role model act for the next few hours, huh? I never said anything bad about your pageants. Just mentioning you smile all the time. Wondering how do you know the difference?"

My smile falls. "I know what you're doing. I know the difference because right now, with you, I feel happy."

"You're not happy on that stage? All lights on you?"

I drop my arms and all pretenses. "I'm happy right now because I'm not pretending to

be someone else. This is the person I feel most comfortable with. The happiest.”

“You just broke free. You don’t really know if this makes you the happiest.”

“Fair point. I’d be happier if you were kissin’ me.”

He crosses over and pecks my cheek. “Nice try, but you’re not muddy enough yet.”

“Real funny,” I mutter, grabbing his hand as we trek through the brush to the edge of the pond. There are cattails and tall grass surrounding the water, but there’s a patch of flat grass off to the left side and I know that’s where we’re headed.

“Over the log,” Mercer says, as he lifts one leg to hop over the fallen tree. I follow suit, jumping a little higher with my shorter legs. Mercer sets the picnic basket down and opens a side pocket that has a thin blanket. He spreads it out over the grass.

I kick a few sticks out of the way. “Your mom sure knows how to pack a picnic.”

“She’s so happy I’m home she’d do anything, literally anything I ask. Don’t worry though. I’d never take advantage of it. Figured her packing a lunch would be better than me forgetting something.”

“She’d do anything to make you happy,” I say, mostly for my own benefit. My smile falls. “Must be nice.”

“Sit down,” he says, sitting back on the blanket. There’s a frog or two singing the song of their people and a light breeze blowing that fights a bit of the humidity. “Your mama loves you. In her kind of way. You know that, right?” She would slaughter me if she thought it would gain her societal standing.

“Right,” I say. “They are going to try to stop me from leaving,” I tell him. “It’s going

to be so hard.” I brush some of the mud splatter off my jeans.

“Come over here, get on me,” Mercer says, holding out his arms. I smile and go into his waiting arms, pressing my back against his chest. We’re overlooking the water. “They can’t stop you and I have a feeling if you’re honest with them about your dreams, they’ll be happy for you.” He doesn’t know them like I do. “Parents want their kids to be happy even if it means doing it away from them.” He kisses me on my temple. “Confessing the first lie is the hardest. You’ll break your mama’s heart when she knows you can’t quilt.”

I break out into laughter. “Is it stupid though? Throwing away my life here?”

“This life isn’t going anywhere, but your life somewhere else isn’t even created yet. If you think about it that way, you’re missing out now.” He reaches next to us into the basket and pulls out a big mason jar filled with sweet tea.

“Tell me that has real sugar and I’ll make out with you right now.”

Mercer chuckles, opening it, both of his hands in front of my chest, the jar right in my face. Once the top is twisted off, he says, “Try it and tell me.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

I take a sip and moan. “Sugar,” I drawl, spinning in his arms to face him, the jar in hand.

“Now you gonna give me some sugar?” Mercer licks his lips. A breeze hits my face.

Leaning in, I kiss his lips once, closing my eyes to feel this moment more deeply. I feel his hands taking the jar from me, and I break away.

“Let’s put the lid on it and take this sugar a little more seriously. What do you say?”

“I’d say that’s a fine plan, Mercer Ballentine.”

He places the tea back in the basket and rolls onto me, lips crashing into mine. His tongue finds mine and as the kiss turns to fire, his hand traces the side of my waist and hip, I catch his gaze. “Do we really only have three weeks?”

The turned-on smile he wore all last night and right now fades into something more somber. “Don’t bring that up now. Not when I’m trying to forget it.”

“If it’s that horrible, why do you want to go back?” I ask, running my thumbs across his wet mouth, memorizing the bow of his lips—the slant of his chiseled jaw.

“I have to. It’s my job. My dream.” And with that, he’ll never have to explain further. I know what it’s like to have a dream that seems unobtainable. Something you don’t think anyone else will understand. “You’re going to be a hard goodbye, Clover Wellsley. Of that, I’m certain.” He pushes up on his hands so he can get a better look at me. “If you finally get on out of here, and make it to Cape Cod, I’ll be there when I

get back from my deployment. We could have a crack at real time, darlin’.”

“We’d be more than just a three-week fling?” I ask, raising both brows.

He quirks a brow. “Would you want that? I’m just your scapegoat right now.”

I hit his shoulder. “You’re more than a scapegoat. I’d like more than a three-week fling. What little girl dreams of growing up and having a three-week fling with a military man. That’s not in the textbook. I hate to break it to you.”

He grins. “Okay then, it sounds like we can count on Cape Cod. You. Me. More snow than you’ll know what to do with. It grows on you.”

“You’re assuming I escape Greenton with my life.”

“You will. I’ll make sure of it. Wanna have some lunch?”

I nod as he rolls off me and starts taking stuff out. Removing my boots, I cross my legs. “This place is so beautiful. How many girls have you taken out here?” I ask, my tone light.

He chuckles. “A few, but not for the reasons you’re thinkin’. This is Bentley’s fishing spot. I’m the only other person who knows how to get here, I reckon. I’ve brought girls out here to hang out with him.”

“He’s letting you borrow his spot? How sweet of him. It really is beautiful. If my dad knew about it, he’d have a park built here in no time.” I hug my knees up to my chest. “Something to make more money.”

“Mercer shrugs. “I didn’t ask Bent. Better to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission.”

I accept a small sandwich he's handing me and take a bite. "I did see my forever in Greenton until a few years ago, you know? I'm not sure what happened. What changed for me." Chewing slowly, I look at Mercer eating. "I want a dose of what you have. You got out of here and you've seen the world."

"I'll give you a dose, alright," he replies. "The world is a bit of a mess right now, Clover." His eyes glass over as he gazes at the pond. "The safety and security you have here is so rare it's hard for me to tell you to leave it behind. It's one of the few untouched places since the war began." I know this fact. "Maybe that's why it's been hard for you to leave the known." Mercer recalls the start of the war when the terrorist attacks sparked in nearly every city in the United States and abroad. No place was safe. Greenton was.

"I think you're right. I think that combined with the fact that all of my family and friends are here made for a lethal combo. I'm ready though. I'm calling Goldie. When you leave, I'm leaving too. She said she'd need a couple weeks to get ready for me." I tell him everything that I've never told another living soul. About the duplex Goldie owns that I can move into. About the salon and how I've been driving up to the city to the teaching salon to keep my skills up a few times a week for nearly two years. That's my quilting class. The first six months, I kept quilting stuff around my house, then I just told my mother I kept it where my lessons were. I tell him about the exams and practicals I will have to take to transfer my license. I have done my research; my plan is solid.

"I know I said it before, but I like you in those clothes," Mercer says, wiping his hands on his pants.

I clear my throat after swallowing a large bite. "This beautiful man picked them out for me."

"He has good taste," he replies. "About dinner at my house tonight," he adds

hesitantly.

I shake my head. “Unless you don’t want me there, I’m eating dinner at your house.”

“My mama gossips as much as Tannie,” Mercer says.

“We’ll give her something to gossip about,” I reply.

He runs a finger down my shoulder. “On second thought, as much as I love these clothes, I think I’d rather see them on the ground.” Mercer tugs on the tight fabric of my shirt, and then my jeans.

“Oh, sir, you are really forward.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

Instead of replying, he pulls off his shirt and slides his jeans off. I watch his every move closely. Mostly because watching his muscles bunch and ripple is mesmerizing, but also because I want to see how far he's willing to go. "You wanted adventure, mayor's daughter. Take off your clothes and meet me in the murky water. If that's not a euphuism, I don't know what is." He stands up to his full height of six feet and waits for my reply. "Come on now, darlin'. Caution to the wind."

My eyes widen, as I take his hand to stand. "What's in there?"

"I don't know, but I'm not scared. Are you?"

"I'm not going to think about it. I'm just going to do it," I reply, blowing out a breath.

He chuckles. "Thatta' girl. Now strip." Mercer steps away, placing his hands on his hips. Crickets are squawking loudly as I strip off my jeans and socks. "Let me help a bit because you didn't let me last night." Confidently, he grabs the hem of my shirt and pulls it up and over my head and tosses it on the blanket. He sighs dreamily. "That felt just as good as I thought it would."

I laugh. "Taking off my shirt?"

He nods. "Yes. Do you know how many boys dreamed of doing that and never got the chance? If I had a dollar for each one, I'd never have to work another day in my life." He presses his lips together. "Now taking off your bra? That's worth two dollars."

I tilt my head back, letting true happiness spark. "Better beat all of those boys then,

right? Take it off. I wouldn't dare let your dreams slip away."

He reaches behind my back with both hands, cradling me. I feel when his fingers land on the clasp. "This," he says, leaning in to kiss me. "Is for every boy who dreamed of doing it and couldn't."

I lean up to twine my arms around his neck. My bra unsnaps and Mercer slides the straps down my shoulders and steps away, holding it in his hand. "Living the dream," he says, smirking. "Joking aside, I've never seen a more magnificent sight."

"You've been to places around the world and you're telling me—" I say, he cuts me off with a look.

He nods. "I'm telling you that Clover Wellsley standing nearly naked by this pond, is the most spectacular sight in the entire world." He shakes his head. "Highlight reel of my life type of stuff."

A strange feeling blooms in my chest and tears prick my eyes. He's living life to the fullest right now and if I pause for a second to understand why, I'll lose it completely. He has to. Tomorrow isn't promised for a man like Mercer Ballentine. It's infuriatingly haunting. His honesty is on display every single second we're together.

"Would me standing here without my panties make the highlight reel, too?" I ask, tilting my head to watch him as he appraises me, thumb and forefinger cradling his chin.

"Trick question?" he asks, blue eyes meeting mine.

I pinch my lips together with my teeth and cross my feet at my ankles. "I hate to mar your highlight reel, but if we're going in that water, I'm leaving my panties on."

He laughs, a big hearty laugh. “Why?” Mercer furrows his brow.

“Okay, I’m sure this is unladylike to say, but you’ve said the next few hours are kind of canceled out, so I’m just going to be honest.”

“Always the right thing to do,” he adds, scratching his stubble.

I blow out a breath. “I don’t want little fish to swim into my lady parts.”

He laughs. I put my hands on my hips. He notices I’m not laughing. “You’re serious. Oh.” He collects himself. “Fish aren’t going to swim inside you, Clover.”

“How do you know? Haven’t you ever watched those medical shows?”

He chuckles and takes me into his arms. He presses a kiss on my bare shoulder. “There is a better chance of something else finding its way inside you than fish, ma’am.”

My skin prickles and wetness floods my panties. “I admit. That was a good line.”

He drags his lips against my neck, a languid soft touch that sends fire to my belly and below. “I’ll be here all day. And a few after that if you want a repeat show.”

I roll my head to the side to give him better access. Closing my eyes, I say, “Haven’t had the first show yet.” His tongue licks a trail up to my ear and a moan escapes my lips.

“We’ll fix that. I want all of you,” Mercer rasps against the rim of my ear. “Patience.”

I’m so consumed with the longing and lust, I don’t see what he’s planned next. Mercer picks me up, hands tight, and runs into the water. It smells a little bit like mud

and God knows what, but that doesn't stop me from laughing. I clutch his neck and try to capture his waist with my legs to keep away from the murk. He carries me easily into the water that ends up being up to his chest. The tip of my ponytail dips into the lake.

"This is how I die. This is it. Alligator," I shout. "Come and get me. Take down the man first. He has more meat!" I realize the double entendre the second I speak.

Mercer tightens his grip on me as he laughs, a bright smile lighting up my world. I wonder if he's always this happy. Do I have anything to do with it? Is that even possible? Do I have this power over a man who seems to own everything surrounding him? "Alligator," he says, calling out in the same direction I just did, mocking. "My meat is no good here."

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

I giggle. “It’s not! I changed my mind.”

“Eat her first,” he adds, sexy gaze flicking to dance with mine. “Or not. I’d like to do that before the alligator does.” He tilts his head, like he’s considering eating me, going through the motions in his mind.

I swallow hard at the visible, feral hunger. Our eyes remain locked as he leans in and kisses the ever-loving sin out of me. If ever a kiss declared ownership, this is the one. Neither of us question it. We’re both hungry for more when he pulls away. “Something just brushed my leg,” he says against my mouth. “And I don’t even care. I’d lose a leg if it meant I get to kiss you every day.”

“That mean you wanna be my boyfriend?” I ask, licking my lips to make sure he sees.

His dark lashes blink a few times as his gaze slides across my face. He pauses, kisses my lips, inhales my neck, kisses it for good measure then faces me dead on. “Yeah, darlin’. You’re muddled up enough for me now.”

My smile might crack, it’s so big. His matches. He kisses me again and it’s interrupted by the sound of a gruff four-wheeler engine. Mercer’s head pops up, eyes narrowed. He lets me fall into the water so my breasts aren’t exposed to our visitor.

“Oh, good heavens,” I declare when I see the perpetrator.

Mercer holds up his free hand. “Jimmy! What in tarnation are you doing?” His voice booms in a deep baritone command full of testosterone. I’d follow him into battle if he shouted at me like that. I get it now. How women say they go weak in the knees.

Mercer Ballentine makes me weak in the everything on my body.

Jimmy grabs the sweet tea from the picnic basket and downs the whole mason jar. “Hey,” I shout. “That is not polite!”

“You know what’s not polite? Not making the bed and leaving my hunting camp a mess! I don’t care if you’re home from war, buddy. Fair is fair!” Jimmy shakes a fist at us, but his grin is huge and mocking. He stoops down, gathers our clothes, taking special care with my bra and dashes back to his four-wheeler before we’re even out of the water.

“Farm truck,” I shout when we reach the grassy spot.

“Pardon me, ma’am, but this deserves a true, oh fuck.” Mercer shakes the water out of his hair and rubs water off his arms.

In my panties, standing on the blanket, I catch my breath from the thrill. Also, a bit of anger, but mostly thrill. We talk about a plan. I’ll wear the blanket and he’ll be fine in his underwear. “Mercer,” I say, tapping my foot.

“Yes?” he asks, after apologizing for the twentieth time. He can’t even look me in the eye as he gathers everything to get ready to head back.

“Look at me.” When he does, I shake my head, wearing a coy smile. “Is this a bad time to tell you I think I might have a fish up in my lady parts?”

He chuckles. “Only if you won’t let me go in and find it.”

I shrug and cast a nonchalant smile over my shoulder. “Might be good fun locating it tonight. When we’re alone.”

“Or a stinky mess to deal with when it dies inside of you,” he fires back.

I widen my eyes. “Okay, not a funny joke anymore.”

Mercer bites his bottom lip. “Thanks for being such a good sport, Clover.”

“Thanks for the adventure.” I jump into his arms and kiss him so hard the blanket falls off.

Chapter Seven

Clover

EVEN THOUGH I don't have fish in my honeypot, I smelled a little funny from our mucky swamp expedition. There were a lot of jokes made about flesh-eating bacteria and brain inhabiting amoebas. So many that I broke my own rule and showered at Mercer's parents' house when we arrived back. I couldn't help it. We snuck into the bathroom attached to the pool and took turns showering in the tiny stall. Mercer was smooth. He told his mom my clothes got covered in mud and I needed something to change into for dinner. She didn't ask any questions. Or she knows we came home without clothes and doesn't care because that means Mercer is happy. I think she's the kind of person who would turn a blind eye at any cost if it meant her darling boy was happy. My parents could do with a dose of that.

I'm wearing a pink sheath dress that Mercer's mama wore when she was twenty years old. No panties or bra. I'm beyond inappropriate. I called my mama, Winnie, and my best friend when we got back to check in and make sure there weren't any fires that needed dousin'. Tannie seemed remorseful, offering to do whatever I wanted for the festival to make up for telling Sue-Ellen Kline about Mercer and me. That's the thing

with having a best friend who can't keep her mouth closed. She will always owe me something. She can't help herself and I live with it because I always have. It's a weird, mutually beneficial relationship. I don't even tell her I know she told people about my romp with Mercer. She knows I know. Enough time has passed to assume correctly.

"Hand me the mandolin so I can cut the apples, Mercer," I say, holding an empty hand out. He fell into a helper position quickly. We're baking the pie in the mini maid's kitchen off to the side of their main kitchen. Most of the older homes in the South still have these. The Ballentines have remodeled over the years to modernize the space and it's completely functional without being gaudy.

Mercer hands me the tool and lingers as close as he can. "Jimmy followed us into the woods earlier. He saw dad's truck and knew it was me," he says, breath brushing my shoulder. "Bentley promised he would clean up after we left and I suppose he didn't. You have to believe me."

"We're still on this?" I ask, slicing carefully, tossing the apples in a bowl. "I'm over it. I'm a tough woman. You don't have to worry about me." Being caught naked with Mercer by Jimmy is low on my worry list at the moment. Crazy Jimmy Cotter, the only taxidermist in the two surrounding counties may be a lot of things, but he won't tell anyone about what he saw. Not right away. He'll want to use it as leverage.

Mercer clears his throat. "You deserve to be treated like a queen and I haven't managed to give you a half of a normal date. I bet the other men you've dated didn't get your clothes stolen."

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

It has been one hijinks after the other since he came back to town. “I’m not with those other men, am I? Maybe there’s something to riding a four-wheeler without a brassiere. Or drinking tequila from a South of the Porder glass. Kissin’ when it’s only stayin’ kissin’ and nothing more. Maybe when it’s right, everything is different.” Maybe when it’s different, everything is right, I think.

We continue talking as I work on Grandma’s pie. Mrs. Ballentine pops her head in a few times to see how it’s coming along or if she can bring me anything. I make sure to call out the steps as I do them so she can hear in the big kitchen next door. She’s working on dinner and Mr. Ballentine is playing a round of golf with his buddies. Mercer would be with him if I wasn’t here. “I feel bad you didn’t get to play golf with your daddy and his friends. I’m taking up family time.”

“He plays most days, Clover. Trust me, I’ll have my fill of golf before I go back,” Mercer replies, looking away. The far off, glazed over appearance transforms his face and a pit settles in my stomach. I cut strips of dough for the top of the pie and try to make small talk about the weather forecast for the week. Small talk comes easy for us. It’s how we fill all of the silences. The only downfall is Mercer knows what I’m trying to do. “If you want to know something, ask me. I might not always want to answer, but at least I know you want to know,” he says, laying a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t need the weather report.”

I fake a laugh. “You’ve never settled down with a woman?” I toss it out like it’s as significant as weather, not very, but I want to know. How much does his job affect the rest of his life?

Mercer rounds the island so he’s standing on the other side of the narrow counter,

facing me. “There’s not much time for meeting women. There’s even less time for meeting the right kind of women.”

I glance up from making my lattice top and meet his eyes. “You left ‘Bama and couldn’t find a Southern woman elsewhere? Go figure. Here I was thinking you were of the intelligent sort.”

He shakes his head. “I never said anything about Southern. It’s hard to find someone who keeps my attention in general. I said therightkind of woman.”

“Lots of women who don’t hold your attention?” I ask, pressing my lips into a grin.

Mercer tilts his head, studying me. “There aren’t very many ways I can decompress, Clover. I’m working more than I’m not. And even when I’m not working, I’m training to work. Or I’m sleeping. Even though I’ve traveled the world, my scope of it is actually small. If we give this a real shot, it’s going to change a lot of things.”

My heart pounds. “Like what?”

“I’ll make time to call you every day when I’m away, if I can. When I come home, I’m coming home to you. When I have time off, I want it to be with you.”

I finish crimping the edges and dust my hands off on the apron I’m borrowing. “You have three weeks off. We’ve spent one night together and you’re already talking serious.” I make sure to keep my voice down so I don’t give his mama a reason to listen closer. “I don’t understand why you don’t find a woman that wants a fun time and just keep things simple. Why me? Why something more? I’ll keep you dizzy as a tornado.”

Half of his face pulls into a grin. My insides melt into a gooey pile of mush as I take in his white teeth and confident stance. “I like storms.” He holds up one finger.

I cross my arms. “How rude.”

Mercer laughs and pulls one of my flour-covered hands into his. “I complimented you, ma’am. That’s not rude.” He crooks his finger, requesting my other hand. “Come closer,” he whispers. Leaning on the counter, I give him both of my hands. I glance into the main kitchen and don’t see Mrs. Ballentine. Mercer closes the distance and plants his lips on mine. Pulling back, blue eyes sear into mine. “Plus, I think I kinda like you.”

I smile. “What if I’m just the first proper lady you set eyes on after coming home and you’re all mixed up?” I peck his lips because he’s grinning so big. “I know I’m a catch, don’t get me wrong, I want to make sure you realize I’m a catch. More of a wild catch. Sort of like a mad, feral catfish or a big ole’ mean fish that breaks the line, but keeps coming back because it can’t resist the bait.”

“Are you calling me bait, darlin’? Here’s what I think, I think we go up to my room so we can pull out the old yearbooks and make out instead. How long is the pie in there?”

Biting my lip, I stifle a laugh. “We have an hour,” I say.

Mercer calls out to his mom to tell her we’re going to look at yearbooks and he drags me up the stairs by one wrist, like we’re seventeen. He spins on me once we’re in his childhood bedroom, and closes the door behind us. There are photos and posters covering his walls. It looks untouched from his teenaged years. “Feral catfish, huh?” he drawls, leaning against an antique wooden desk.

“I told you I almost got engaged to a man because it would have been advantageous to my life, not because I loved him. You need to know what you’re getting yourself into.” It sounds as bad as it did in my head before I spoke. “I’ve never been the type of person to play it safe, Mercer, but I press the limits inside of the boundaries laid

out for me. This,” I say, nodding to him, “Is so outside the boundaries. I texted Goldie earlier to tell her we needed to talk about the move and the salon.”

He crosses the room to sit on his bed. It’s covered with a dark green comforter and matching throw pillows. “If you break one boundary, you’re going to break them all?” he asks.

“Yes. All the ones I find confining,” I say, lacing my hands behind my back as I take in all the family photos on the wall. “Mama is going to have a duck fit. All at once will be easier on her.” I pause and turn to face him. “She has to know I’m unhappy. When many of my friends were getting married in their early twenties and I had no interest, I saw the disappointment. Then again when I began the non-profit because she saw that as a gross misuse of my time. It’s been one thing not on her agenda after the other.” I swallow hard. “Weren’t we going to make out?”

Mercer holds open his hands. “Talkin’ is good too. Believe it or not, I’m starved for decent conversation. I could watch your lips all day long.” He smiles with his eyes. “Also, you’re wearing my mama’s dress and I’d feel a little weird taking it off you.”

I laugh. “You know how to lighten the mood.” I tap my chin with a finger. “Are you saying if I took this dress off right now, you would turn me away?”

“No, ma’am, that’s not what I’m saying at all.” He chuckles, then clears his throat. “I think we should take it slow. Good things take time. Becoming a SEAL took two years. It was miserable, painful, more intense than anything I’ve done in my life. Planning a mission that might take an hour takes months, sometimes even years, if we want it to be successful, if the stakes are high. There’s no sense in rushing into sex.”

“Because I’m a virgin? You should know better by now. Tell me not to do something and I want to do the opposite.”

“I’m not using reverse psychology on you. You aren’t a child. I’m being honest. I want this to be more than a way to spend my time off. If we give it space and time to grow, I think it could be something grand. Big. Do you feel that way?” He shakes his head once. “I’m not getting any younger.”

I feel a whole mess of things when I think about a relationship with Mercer Ballentine. “I agree. That sounds like a good idea.” I take another few steps to stand in front of him. He’s sitting on the edge of his bed with his legs wide. He pulls me to him, his hands splayed against my backside. Resting my hands on each side of his face, I say, “I do declare, Mr. Ballentine. You have snagged yourself a catch.”

He slides his fingers down to the hem of the dress and slides his hands up high enough to feel I’m not wearing panties. He groans and lays his head against my stomach. “A wild catch.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

Dinner with the Ballentines was a polite affair. There were shared jokes, but I felt comfortable at their dinner table. They made sure to include me in the conversation and we talked a lot about Mr. Ballentine's friends and their golf game. I know of them because they are either my friend's dads or my father has spoken about them in my presence. They accepted me into the fold immediately—warmly. I had thinly veiled clap backs ready without need. My guard dropped completely for the first time...ever.

“After eating the best apple pie my mouth has ever had the pleasure of partaking in, I need to announce some news,” Mr. Ballentine drawls. Mercer's mother claps her hands, pin curls shaking with her excitement as her giggle ricochets the dining room.

“Oh, good gracious, thank heavens you're finally telling him. I've been losing my cool trying to keep it under wraps.” Mrs. Ballentine releases a pent-up breath.

His dad meets Mercer's eye and grins wide. It reminds me of Mercer's smile. When his gaze flicks to mine, the smile disappears. “The timing of this is a little bit ironic, Ms. Wellsley.”

I clear my throat and take a sip of water. The polite thing to do is nod, so I do.

“What is it, Dad?” Mercer says, excited accent twanging.

Mr. Ballentine leans back in his chair and puffs out a breath. “I'm doing it. It's official. I'm running for mayor this election.”

“What?” I squeal the impolite question because I'm so shocked. “No one has run

against my daddy for the last decade.” Possibly more. There was one time when someone tried, but it didn’t last long. Daddy probably strong-armed him from the race. Which is what I realize he’s going to do with Mercer’s dad. It makes my stomach hurt.

Mrs. Ballentine coos. “Oh, sweet Clover, we love your father and it’s not personal at all. It’s just that there are a few antiquated procedures and policies that need fixin’.”

Mercer stays quiet, his hands sitting in his lap, eyes focused on me. Waitin’ for my tornado to blow, surely. They work together. Why couldn’t they work together to fix things? I know how politics work, and I know it’s more complicated than that, but I also know Southern manners and friendships mean more to us than they do to most other people in other parts of our country.

“Congratulations, Dad,” Mercer says, raising his glass. “This is something to celebrate. I know how long you’ve been working toward this.” He’s dutiful in avoiding eye contact with me. “I’m so glad I’m here for it.”

I swallow down the nails I want to spit and choke out the words, “Congratulations, Mr. Ballentine.” I leave off, good luck, because that’s a given. My daddy is going to thrash him and here I thought everything between Mercer and me was complicated before.

Mr. Ballentine thanks us, and we toast again. Mrs. Ballentine clears plates and I help. She watches me closely, trying to read my mood. I make it difficult by wearing my pride as a shield. Not even the best lady can see through that. My mind is racing with a thousand different scenarios as I dry the china. I can fix this. If I can nip this in the bud quickly.

As soon as we’re alone in the driveway, I pull Mercer into Tannie’s old car. “You have to get him to drop out,” I nearly shout when he’s in the passenger seat.

Mercer narrows his eyes. “How can you say that? Why? He’s not good enough? Not ‘Bama royalty? Doesn’t have the right name to do the job?”

My heart drops. “It has nothing to do with names or whether he’d be good at the job. Actually, I’m sure he’d be great at the job, Mercer. My daddy doesn’t play nice when challenged. That’s why he needs to drop out.”

Mercer scoffs. “Seriously? You’re trying to tell me you’re worried about my father? That’s rich, Clover. You must think I’m an idiot. We aren’t afraid of a fight.”

I grip the steering wheel. “This changes everything, don’t you see? I will literally be sleeping with the enemy when he gets hold of this information.”

Mercer is seething mad, breaths pushing through his lips. “This is why my dad should be the new mayor. You Wellsleys are antiquated. Who cares who you’re with? It shouldn’t matter.” He looks away, shaking his head. “It’s a good thing you didn’t sleep with the enemy then, isn’t it?”

The butterflies move from my stomach to every other area inside my body. “Why do you think I want out, Mercer? This is what I’ve been trying to tell you. Look!” I shout. “You’re mad about it, and I’ve already told you this is why I’m not like them. Why I’m leaving.” I tell him to look at me. He doesn’t, so I ask louder. He turns. “You haven’t been around. The last man that challenged my dad in the race for mayor left with tail tucked between his legs. I’d hate to see anything bad happen to your dad...to your family, because of my daddy.”

“So, he shouldn’t even try? You do see the flawed logic in what you’re saying right? Admitting things need changing around here and also trying to halt the change. I think we let the people vote and the chips will fall where they may. It’s a democracy, Clover. This isn’t war. There are rules.”

I shake my head. “He plays by a whole different set of rules.”

“We’ll take our chances. I need to go celebrate with my family. Spend some time with them.”

I nod. Won’t be much to celebrate in a few weeks’ time. I know it now. The Ballentines will know it soon.

“Call me,” I shout out before he shuts the car door.

I won’t hold my breath.

Chapter Eight

Clover

FOR THE PAST three days, I’ve thrown myself into my work for the festival. Everything is finalized and there are only a few loose ends to tie up. I spent five hours at the shelter working on the books and meeting a couple of new women who Winnie took in while I was busy with Mercer. My cousin Goldie knows I’m ready, and she’s working on getting a few things fixed in the duplex for my impending arrival. Even if my heart hurts thinking about Mercer, I know he gave me something in two days that took me a lifetime to reach out for. Bravery—the courage to go against the grain and to follow my passion. He still hasn’t called and it’s extremely frustrating.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

The last thing to do is to tell my mama and daddy about moving. I'm still trying to decide the best way to do that. Last minute—giving them less chance to try to stop me or to pull some harebrained trick to lure me to stay? Or just tell them now and get it out in the open? I don't put anything past my mama. As far as I know, Mr. Ballentine hasn't announced his run for office yet. That will spread quicker than wildfire.

I'm sitting in the town square underneath a jasmine covered pergola, on my laptop looking at a map of Cape Cod. I can't help but wonder if I'll be close to Mercer. How often I'll see him. If I can run into him when I'm settled in a new life. An email pings. It's from the auto body shop telling me a part they need to fix my car is backordered and it's going to be another few days. I send back a quick reply and then fish out my cell.

Tannie answers on the first ring. "Hey, I'm going to need your car for a few more days at least. A part is backordered or something, you know how that stuff goes. Anyway, I hope that's okay." She tells me I can keep the car as long as I want. She still feels bad about gossiping, is what she's saying in different words. "Want to meet for lunch?" I ask.

"Late lunch? I need to wrap up some stuff here at the office."

"Sure," I reply.

Tannie clears her throat. "Still no word from Mercer then?"

"Like I'd tell you," I hiss back.

She swallows hard. “I’m sorry. What happened? I won’t say anything.” I have casually mentioned that Mercer and I are cooling off after a hiccup. I didn’t dare give her details, and honestly, she’ll know soon enough. It gives me an idea. A more organic way for everyone to find out about my new life.

“I’ll tell you what’s been going on today at lunch. Thank you for letting me keep your car a bit longer.”

She bids me goodbye after we agree on a time, and I hang up the call. “Was wondering how long it would take to run into you,” Mercer drawls, voice licking up my spine.

I turn around and see him leaning against the jasmine. “You’re supposed to pretend you don’t see me and take the long way around the square. Don’t you know anything about living in a small town?” I reply.

He chuckles. It makes my skin crawl. In the good way. I suck in a deep breath and close my eyes. Jasmine. One of my favorite scents. I focus on that. “Memory isn’t what it used to be,” he says, sitting next to me on the bench. “That must have slipped my mind.”

“That’s it then,” I bite back.

“That’s what?”

I sigh. “Why you didn’t call me when you said you would.”

He reaches around the bench to sling an arm around my shoulder. “You ordered me to call you. I never said I would. Let’s call it a difference of opinion.”

“I guess you don’t remember telling me you thought we could be grand, either? Or

the fact we basically agreed we were an item. You're not as strong as I thought you were. It's okay though because most people in my life disappoint me. You're not special."

"Ouch," he says, drawing the word out. "I spent one full day golfing with my dad, another day talking about gardening and your grandma's apple pie with my mom, and today was spent with Bentley at the DR on his day off." He clears his throat. "I was hoping to run into you."

"Yet you didn't think to call me?" I rasp, sliding my laptop into a soft carrying case and zipping it up. "Again, I'm questioning your intelligence."

Mercer lays a hand on my wrist. "I don't do this. Relationships. You were mad. I was upset. Figured it would be best to let you lead. Come to me when you were ready and cooled down."

"Bad idea. Awful plan. Not the way it works." I shake my head, offended by his typical male mentality. "Always call. Always come over. Never assume anything. I'm glad you spent time with your parents and Bent." I push down the irritation when I put it in perspective. He has three weeks to spend time with everyone he cares about. I'm a new shiny toy he hasn't decided is worth the effort. I think. "I'm meeting Tannie for lunch. I'm going to tell her I'm moving. I figure it will be out before midnight."

"You really need new friends," Mercer says, laughing, reminding me how unconventional the friendship with Tannie is. "My mom is making one of my favorites for dinner, but maybe we can grab an ice cream after? Hit up Dixie Swirl then snag a drink at the Dizzy Rocket?"

"Is that a normal date?" I bite back.

He rubs my hand with his rough thumb. “An apology offering of frozen sugar. No wild adventures tonight. I can tell you about Cape Cod.” He nods at my laptop bag.

I raise one brow. “You saw the map I was looking at? How long were you standing behind me?”

He presses his lips together. “Long enough to know you already had lunch plans so I shouldn’t ask.”

“Stalker.” I flip my hair.

Backing away, he opens his big arms to the side. “Where are you going to eat? DR or Slippy Egg?” he asks. “If you tell me it’s not stalking when I casually stop in.”

I shake my head. “I’m irritated. I’m not angry with you. No need to stalk,” I snap. Forgive easily. It’s something I strive to do and it’s probably the most difficult task to accomplish successfully. How is one supposed to determine who is most deserving of forgiveness? Does anyone know?

“I’m a stupid man. I’m sorry I didn’t stop by. I’ll text you later.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

I groan, hook my bag in my elbow and brush my dress down on the sides. “You better, Mercer Ballentine.”

He points at me and winks. “You, me, and frozen sugar, sugar. I’m going to get a workout in. I left a bag of clothes in Bentley’s truck. Figured it would come in handy if I was making plans with you. We seem to ruin or lose clothing for sport.”

I can’t help but laugh, even if I’m shaking my head at the same time. We part ways. The walk to the Slippy Egg, where I’m meeting Tannie for lunch only takes five minutes. It’s right next to Dixie Swirl and Dizzy Rocket is right across the street from that. Mercer was making a joke about asking where we’re eating, there’s only one spot. On a typical day, most of the people in this restaurant are travelers passing through. They need gas and food and we have it. I wave at the waitress and take a seat at a two-seater table in the corner against the window. I open my laptop and connect to the spotty Wi-Fi to open the maps back up.

I spend fifteen minutes doing research on the area and mapping different locations until Tannie breezes in the door and takes a seat in front of me. Alabama heat still clings to her skin. She drinks down the water directly after she sits. “Spill it,” Tannie says, catching her breath. She waves our waitress over and orders the usual chicken sandwich, and I get the same. You have to eat it fried if you want to ensure you won’t get sick. All the locals know it. I can spot the travelers who don’t. Poor souls.

“He didn’t call after he said he would,” I explain, keeping it loose. “Mercer was busy with his friends and family and he just didn’t have a chance. That’s all. We’re meeting tonight. He apologized.” Sort of.

“Busy? Yeah, he was busy with someone else, Clover. Don’t be stupid. Think about the man. Where he’s been. How long he’s been without a woman’s touch. Mercer’s been busy alright, but don’t buy his brand of horse manure.” My throat clogs. She’s right. “He’d call an alligator a lizard to get laid, sweetie.”

This is tricky area. Tannie dates more—has more experience, but she’s also been known for giving some pretty terrible advice. “Are you sure? Did you see him with someone? Together? I don’t think that’s what he’s after.” It’s not what he’s making me seem he’s after. It could be all for show.

Tannie scoffs, points at her cup to signal she needs more water to the waitress and meets my eyes. “He’s after anything that says yes, he’s a military man without any responsibilities at the moment.” I can believe her and turn more tricks to find out if it’s truth, or I can deliver the message I need her to hear.

I shrug, brushing it off. “I’ll talk to him. Hey, I have to tell you something else. Something really important that you can’t talk about. Okay?”

Tannie’s blue eyes light up like a neon sign. “It may come as a shock, but I’m moving to Cape Cod to cut hair in my cousin Goldie’s salon. I haven’t told my parents, and I sort of hid beauty school from everyone. I’ve been sneaking around trying to make my dreams come true and this is what I want to do. What I’ve always wanted to do. To be a stylist in a fancy salon, making a life somewhere completely different.”

She looks at me, unblinking, and I think she may cry or scream, or be irrational, but when she finally speaks, she says, “We all knew you were leaving someday, Clover. It’s not shocking. I’m surprised it’s taken you this long. Why now, though? Cape Cod is so far away.”

Her response makes me feel a thousand times better. “I graduated and have

experience under my belt. I've been doing hair in the city at the teaching school for a while now. Goldie's salon is beautiful and I think it will be a perfect fit. It's time. Election season is coming up and I can't pretend anymore, Tan. I can't be a perfect pawn in their perfect life any longer. All of these years, I've been everything they've wanted me to be, and I'm done faking it."

Tannie smiles. "I'll miss you," she says. "You're strong. The strongest person I know. I'm not worried about you. I'm worried about everyone here. You're a pillar in our community. You are in charge of so many things. Have you considered that? The shelter? What happens when you leave?"

I've been working toward cutting these cords for a long time. If I told her how long, she'd be upset I was hiding it for so long. "It's all handled. The shelter will continue to run, and I'll be able to help remotely. You have all the town committee stuff. You have had it for a while now, or haven't you realized?" I smile at my friend as the proverbial light bulb clicks on.

"Your mama is going to pop her top. Let me know before you tell her so I can get outta town." The waitress comes and sets down our plates and we begin to eat. She asks questions and I give her the best answers I can, not knowing a lot of the finer details myself. It's strange saying things out loud that have been imprisoned in my mind for so many years. Tannie's easy acceptance gives me hope my mama knows me the same way my best friend does. She'll expect it in some form. She will let me go without ultimatums and bad blood.

"Clover, are you even paying attention? Where are you right now?" My friend snaps her French manicured fingers in front of my face like she's waking me from a trance.

I heave a sigh. "Far away," I say, laughing. "Why?"

Tannie rolls her eyes as she finishes her water. "Mercer has run by about a half dozen

times trying to get your attention. He's the only man I know who would workout wearing shorts like that."

My gaze shoots to the window. To the hulking man wearing an ugly brown shirt and black workout shorts that even I'd deem scandalous, they're so short. It must be a military issue. No one would choose it on their own unless they were crazy. "What in the world?" I mutter under my breath. I watch the muscles bunch under his shirt as he runs away from us. When he gets to the only stoplight on this side of town, he turns and runs back toward the restaurant. When he's close enough, I see him grinning as sweat drips down his face and neck, staining his shirt dark.

"He has your attention," Tannie says. "Now what?"

I fish my wallet out of my purse and put down a bill to pay for our lunches and tip, and rise from the booth. "I have no clue," I tell Tannie, shaking my head. My friend follows me out the door, the bell jangling as we leave.

"Mercer Ballentine, what in God's name are you doing out here?" I call out, cupping a hand over my mouth.

"Ain't it obvious, ma'am? I'm working out." He continues jogging in place, right in front of me. Tannie stays a few steps behind me, giggling.

I sling one hand on my hip. "Here? Right now?"

"I wanted to remind you of one important detail, as well."

I nod, waiting for him to go on.

He grins. "I don't have your phone number. This is me texting you, darlin'."

How is that possible? That so much has happened over the past five days and we didn't exchange numbers? Keeping my back straight, I refuse to admit defeat over him. "You could have gotten my number from a dozen different people," I say, jutting my chin. "Don't think this is me forgiving you for not calling for days on end. That's unacceptable."

He pauses his jogging in place and takes a deep breath, wincing. "I'd never dream of asking for forgiveness. That's what frozen sugar is for." He pants out a few more breaths. "It's really hot. I'm knocking on the Devil's den." His exclamation makes both Tannie and I chuckle.

"Out of Alabama shape. You should be ashamed of yourself, Mercer," Tannie drawls.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

I adjust my laptop case on my other elbow and shake my head. “Seriously. It might be Greenton’s way of making sure you never come back.”

He waggles his brows. “Couldn’t keep me away with a blow torch. Cape Cod tries to kill me with cold. It’s a balancing act.”

I cross my arms, waiting for my friend to pick up on it. “Consider me called on. You can run somewhere else now,” I say.

She’s quick on the uptake. “Cape Cod? I thought you were stationed in Florida?” Tannie hisses, her eyes on me the entire time. Every once in a while, our local paper does a story about our small-town hero. She must have missed an article here or there, just as I suspected. “This is why you’re moving to Cape Cod? Oh, dear baby Jesus on the cross, Clover Wellsley, I take it back. Your mama isn’t going to pop her top she’s going to kill you dead. Then your daddy is going to kill Mercer.”

Mercer chuckles. “I had nothing to do with her plans. I know it seems like strange and ironic timing, but that’s sort of been our trend. Clover is doing her own thing. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad she’s heading my way.” He winks at me but turns his attention back to Tannie. “If you think someone’s daddy is gonna kill me, you don’t know me very well.”

“It really is a coincidence, Tannie. I swear it. You know Goldie lives there.”

She’s tapping her nails together, making an annoying clicking noise. “I guess so,” Tannie replies. “Listen, I have to get back to the office. Sheila is covering phones for me and she gets madder than a wet panther when I take too long. We have more to

talk about later.” I swallow hard. “I don’t think you’re just strong anymore, though. You’re strong and sure-fire crazy, Clover. Good luck.”

She clicks off down the street, and I turn to face my sweaty suitor. I eye him, feet up and back down, slowly. “Those shorts are atrocious. I can nearly see the promised land.”

“Navy issued, darlin’. I think they do good things for my quads.” He points a leg out to flash bulging muscle on his thigh and calf. “What do you think?”

I take a deep breath to clear my head, but it’s a mistake. Mercer Ballentine enters my oxygen. A sweaty, delicious mess of alpha male. “I think you are going to drive me to drink. That’s what I think.”

“When are you going to tell your parents?” Mercer asks. “You want to beat Tannie to it, right? Or do you have some other devious thoughts on how it’s going down?”

“You’re not afraid of being killed by my daddy. That’s what you said?”

He starts jogging in place again. My gaze darts down to his shorts and the huge, bouncing shaft making the silky material jut up and down. Forgive me, Lord, but it is hypnotizing. I can see the curve of the tip—the width, basically the whole shebang. I try to avert my gaze, but I’m not quick enough and Mercer drawls, “Conversation is up here.” His eyes are narrowed, lips upturned in a sexy smirk.

I lick my lips. “You didn’t answer my question,” I say, trying to get the X-rated image out of my head but failing. “You’re not afraid?”

He cocks his head, studying me. “I’m not afraid of much, definitely not your father. What’s that have to do with you telling him?”

I fix my shoulders and run a hand through my soft curls. “You owe me an apology. In the Wellsley family, actions speak louder than words, so you’ll be with me when I tell them.”

His eyes widen. “What? You want a bodyguard?” A bout of laughter escapes him.

I shake my head. “No. You’re going to be an arsenal. We’re together now. Two Greenton kids in Cape Cod. We’re a couple. You’ll take care of me while I’m far away from home.”

Mercer opens his mouth to say something, then closes it again. “You’re serious. You want to use me so they are more open to you leaving?”

“You say using, I say stretching the truth. I am capable of taking care of myself, you know that. Having you as my...partner is a safeguard. They’ll worry about me and if they know I have you, they’ll worry less. Just roll with it. This was your proposition.”

He places his hands on his hips, standing still now. “How do you do that?

“What?” I ask, breathing heavy.

He raises both brows. “Make it seem like I’m responsible for your crazy ideas?”

I lift and lower one shoulder. “You’re in or you’re in, Mercer Ballentine. What’s it gonna be? You scared? You want me? Us? Willing to fight for it?”

“Yes. No. Double yes. Always,” Mercer deadpans.

My heart races as five words sink into my awareness. “I’m parked over in town square. Want to take a ride to Daddy’s office?”

Mercer looks down to his workout clothes and pinches his damp shirt. “Wearing this? This needs to be done right now?”

I nod. “We’ll start with Daddy then ride over to my house to talk to Mama. You can run there if you want to finish your workout?” I let the sentence hang. “No time to change.”

“You are a hurricane. Not a tornado.” He sucks in a deep breath. “Let’s go then. I’ll run over to DR so I can grab my bag. I want to change out of these clothes eventually.”

I agree as we cross the road together and I can tell his mind is running away with him. “You’re forgetting something, though. Your daddy doesn’t want you with a man like me.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“Do you think I didn’t think that through? He doesn’t want me to leave Greenton. Do you honestly think he’d rather me be with some Yankee man who he doesn’t know at all? You are the best choice given the circumstances.” It’s a really long shot, but it’s my best shot.

“A weaker man would be offended by that.” Mercer jogs over to the DR parking lot and grabs his bag. He’s panting when he rejoins me.

We walk the five minutes back to my car in the town square quietly. I swallow hard as we get to my car. “I know that, by the way. That most people would be offended.” It’s part of the reason I haven’t found the right man yet. No one can handle me the way I want to be handled.

I set off for the other section of town. The town hall is an old brick building. It was destroyed by a hurricane, but they were able to restore it back to its old glory. The office building adjacent to it houses all of Greenton’s public offices. This is the section of town that has my favorite clothing boutique. I park in a small lot and sit there, letting the cool air calm my nerves. Mercer is holding his palms over the vents on the passenger side.

“Pardon me for saying so, but my balls are sweating all over Tannie’s seat right now. You ready to go on in?” Mercer drawls, humor in his voice. “Any tips? Bombs I can expect to catch when we go in there.”

I laugh. “This is our joint task. I’m so glad you chose to accept it. I’m confident that you’ll be able to catch whatever bombs I throw to you during this hazardous mission. I hope you still have balls to sweat when we come back out.”

He grabs my arm. I glance his way. "I'm not worried about that. I know you want my balls intact when we come out. You won't let anything happen to 'em."

"Confidence," I say, nodding. "That's attractive on a man." Mercer gets out of the car and walks around to open my car door. He's grinning when I step out, my hand in his. I love that he keeps the gentlemanly ways of the South. "That's attractive too," I exclaim, sighing. "Game face, Mercer. I'm not sure how far good manners are going to get you in there." I hike my thumb over my shoulder and envision my daddy sitting behind his desk. Cold, stern face fixated on whatever he's working on. He's been a hard worker his entire life. Whenever we go on vacation, he gets antsy and is on edge. He obsesses over all the things he's not getting done while he's relaxing.

"One thing before we go in," he says, pulling on my hand. Mercer brushes a stray strand of hair off my face. "I wanna taste what I'm fighting for." Tilting my chin with a single finger, he brings his head down and plants his lips against mine. A second of his intoxicating kiss is all it takes for my head to swim. I grab his sides, his shirt, and pull myself closer to deepen the sensation. Against his body, with my tongue sliding against his, I'm numb to everything around us. Drowning in Mercer Ballentine is a death I'd relive a million times. His warm hands are on my waist, and I've forgotten about the three days I've waited on him and am kicking myself for not being the aggressor and going after him. I'm lost in the sensations when Mercer pulls away.

His eyes are sleepy, turned on. It matches the bulge throbbing against my stomach. I swallow hard, gazing into his wild eyes. "Just as I thought," Mercer says, country accent thick. "Worth dyin' in battle for." He grabs my shoulders. "If we're going in there to talk to your father, I need to calm down for a second."

I clear my throat and sneak a peek at what needs calming. "Those shorts really don't hide a thing."

"On a normal day, I'm not kissing you. Working out doesn't really get me going if

you know what I mean.”

I bite my lip. “On a normal day, you’ll be kissing me.”

“I’ll wear my chastity belt from here on out,” Mercer replies, readjusting himself and the waistband of the shorts. “You ready?” He looks dangerously handsome; his skimpy shorts be darned.

“As I’ll ever be.” I sigh. This isn’t in any way I ever envisioned this going, but now that I’m here, in this moment, I can’t think of a better way. “Thank you, by the way.”

He grabs my hand, and we walk toward the brick building and the double doors. “Don’t thank me yet, that comes at the end. When the mission is complete.”

The secretary has a bright smile when she sees me, but her bottom jaw drops when her gaze slides right and sees big ole’ Mercer, holding my hand. “Ms. Wellsley,” she stutters. “What can I help you with? I don’t see you on his schedule, but of course you don’t need to be on his schedule.” Her bright blonde curls are perfect, and her lips are painted a hue of red I would never dare wear. “Should I let him know you’re here?” This question shouldn’t be taken at face value, she’s giving me an out. An escape. In case I just now realized what an awful idea this is. She’s a kind woman. My mother often wonders just how kind she is.

“Please let him know I’m here to chat. He’s not expecting me, but I do hope he has a few minutes. Mr. Ballentine and I have a bit of business to address,” I say. I can feel Mercer’s chuckle next to me. I elbow him. The secretary flies out of her seat and down the hall to my daddy’s office. She calls down to us to come right away. As we walk down the hall, I lean in and say, “Andrew Jackson says she listens through the door.”

“That’s the losing end of the stick. How about twenty on her calling someone before

we even leave the building.”

I nod. “You’re on.”

Daddy’s eyes are on the door as I stride through, and his gaze immediately flicks to Mercer. I take the first word. “Hey, Daddy. I wanted to stop in and quell the rumor mill before it kicks up too much dust.”

He stands from his chair. “Close the door,” Daddy says. “Mr. Ballentine,” Daddy addresses Mercer. “Your father just left for the day. Were you here to see him?”

“Hello, sir. No, I’m here to see you,” Mercer says, stepping forward to take my daddy’s hand in a shake. He steps back to stand by my side. The laser gaze my daddy is bouncing between us is palpable. “I apologize for my informal clothing, Ms. Wellsley here asked I accompany her and as I’m sure you well know, you can’t tell her no.”

Oh, smooth, Mercer, real smooth.

I smirk and approach the side of his desk so I don’t feel like we’re conducting business. When I meet his eyes, I see the questions, the confusion, the accusations, and while I’m being honest, I see the disappointment. I let it rip. “Daddy, I’m moving to Cape Cod to be a stylist in Goldie’s salon. She already has a place for me to live and a booth in her salon.” He’s wearing that face that’s unreadable. I can’t tell if he’s going to have a fit, so I bluster on. “I graduated last year, and I haven’t been going to quilting class. That was a cover while I was working at the hair school up in the city. You won’t have to worry about me.” This is where I’m going to segue into having Mercer with me. Well, he’ll be with me when he’s not deployed. Better than nothing.

“No,” Daddy deadpans. “You get these ideas and you have no idea how the real world works. This isn’t the time to be flighty, Clover. This is the time to make a life

for yourself. A real one. Not playing pretend in another state doing meaningless work.”

My fists clench at my sides. The anger I feel is boiling and I know everyone in the room can feel it. “I’m following my dream. This wasn’t a question. I’m leaving Greenton for good. You can’t stop me. I’m an adult and quite frankly, I’m upset you think I was asking permission. This is me telling you that I’m moving out of the house on your property and starting a life of my own.”

Daddy smirks. It’s the scary one. “That’s it then? Okay.” He nods at Mercer. “What’s he doing here?”

Mercer steps up, literally and figuratively. “I’m here to tell you I will protect her. I care about your daughter, sir, and I will do my best to make sure she’s happy in Cape Cod.”

This shocks my daddy. I think his hairline recedes a touch. “You,” Daddy says, and then points to me. “And Clover?” Daddy chuckles. “You have both lost your minds. I have work to do. Go run along. Don’t bother your mother with this nonsense. She has enough on her plate right now. It won’t do her health any good having to deal with more of your batty antics, Clover.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“I just wanted your support. Most children have parents who want their kids to follow their dreams. I’m almost thirty, Daddy. Please.” It’s my last plea for a different outcome with this conversation. “I’m going to tell Mama because this is happening whether you want it to or not.”

Daddy falls back in his chair, a little wildly. “You never do what you’re supposed to do.” He shakes his head. “From the day you were born, we’ve been cursed with your unruly personality. You bring up a poignant point. You’re almost thirty. You need to get married. Bring some value to your life.” My anger fades into defeat—my dreams squashed like a defenseless bug. I was bred to be married off and breed myself. This has always been their goals for me, as antiquated as they may be, I remember a time when I wanted the same things.

Mercer clears his throat. “Sir, I don’t mean to insert myself into family business here, but Clover has more value and purpose in this world than any other person I’ve met. It’s not fair to say she needs to marry to obtain some intangible quality.”

My daddy laughs meanly. “See, Son! You won’t even marry her, but you’ll talk about it. No one will. She’s a wild spinster with a nose in her causes without a care for what her reputation is doing to my career. She wants to go fix hair. The trust fund baby wants to follow her wild dreams.” He huffs. “Someone has to keep her head on straight. Clover,” he says. “I’m sorry, but you’re not going anywhere.”

“I never said I wouldn’t marry her, sir,” Mercer says, shaking his head, correcting him. “I think a lady should be able to pick who and when she marries or even if she wants to marry at all. I have dedicated my life to fighting for her freedom to choose her life. Yours too. I’d thank you kindly for not insulting her freedoms anymore.” He

grabs my hand. “Are you ready to go?” Thank God he’s here to catch me before I go to pieces in front of my past.

“I’m sorry we don’t see eye to eye, Son,” Daddy says to Mercer. To me, he coos, “I won’t let you waltz off into the sunset, Clover. Go get a manicure or buy a dress. You’ll come ‘round.” Daddy picks up a file on his desk. “I have work to do. You’ll excuse me?”

That’s our cue to leave and I feel like I’ve been drowned in a different way. Mercer takes my arm and leads me out of the office, past the secretary’s desk and into the humid day. When we get to the car, he asks if he can drive. I toss him the keys and he opens the door for me.

“Heading to talk to your mom, then?” he asks, voice tentative.

I lay my head on the dashboard. “Maybe I should buy a dress and forget about my dreams,” I whine. “This is going to be a nightmare.”

Mercer sighs as he starts up the car. “A nightmare, ma’am, is buying a dress instead of living a life.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I ask, teary gaze meeting his for a second before he turns his back to the road.

He swallows hard. “Because I told you I’d fight for us. This is all part of it, right?”

“He’s not going to let me leave. I’m going to need more help than you can give,” I admit. “Remember when I was telling you about your daddy running against him for mayor? How I was worried about what he would do? Well, me leaving might be a good distraction. All of his rage and deceiving ways will be aimed at me.”

“He’s not going to hurt you. You’re his daughter,” he replies, turning into my driveway. I give him the code to open the gates and they swing open to our long drive. “Maybe I’m a glutton for solving a problem,” he adds, shrugging. “Or I really just want you to be mine.”

Mercer raises his brows when he sees the pink fountains, but he doesn’t say anything. “Thank you for speaking up for me back there. I appreciate you trying to talk sense into him,” I whisper.

“I just told the truth. Maybe if enough people say it loud enough, the man will hear it. I meant it. I know you don’t need anyone.”

I wipe under my eyes and fix my hair. “Mercer, Tannie said something today about you only bein’ off for three weeks, and how you’re pretty much only after one thing, and as much as I wanted to believe she was right because that makes things easier, I know that’s not the case. You’re here and it’s messy and if you really wanted something easy instead of my insanity, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

Mercer taps his fingers on the steering wheel and presses his lips together. “You really need new friends. Did she say that to upset you?”

Sighing, I straighten the sleeve of my dress. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

He apologizes for the curse words he’s going to say in his next sentence. “If I wanted a loose fuck I could drive up to the city and have my pick. Easy women are plentiful. They don’t want to talk or get to know me. They want to ride my dick and leave before the sun rises.” At his colorful language, I lean away. He parks the car and meets my shocked gaze. “You ready to go tell your mama I’m your man?”

I nod. “Although I’m not sure I know how to handle my man.”

He smirks a half-smile. “You don’t worry about that, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

We walk into my parents’ house, and I hear my mama’s wails and cries from the entrance foyer. I look up to Mercer and whisper, “Oh, Sherlock.”

He nods once and sets his shoulders square. Battle number two.

Chapter Nine

Clover

MAMA IS CLUTCHING me like she’ll lose me if she releases her grip. Daddy called her before we got here. The only good thing about that fact is it means Daddy actually believed what I told him, that I’m leaving. There’s no way he’d work Mama up otherwise. They know I’m serious as a heart attack. She finished asking me why and moved on to guilting me into staying for her health. Mama has a big ole’ case of hypochondria. Her doctor has never diagnosed her with anything real, but that doesn’t stop her from having things or convincing my daddy she has things.

“The festival, though? I have everything set up,” Mama says, sniffing. “All that work.”

She’s persuasive. “I’ll still be here for the festival.” I eye Mercer, standing in the corner giving us space. Unlike Daddy, Mama is sad. This is harder. “I’ll do your auction,” I whisper. I’ll explain that to Mercer later. Surely, he won’t mind me going on a fake date.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“And him?” she nods at Mercer. “You are with him? The rumors are true?”

“Not all of them,” I say. “I planted one of them because Tannie was getting annoying.”

She sighs. “Thank you, God. I hoped that one wasn’t true.” Mama pauses, eyes wilting in the corner. “I’d be happier about this pairing if it came with a different outcome. Your father would never approve, but I want you to know, I do.” So, the auction is my father’s brainchild. It was a toss-up on who was responsible. At least I know the truth.

I lower my voice. “He’s a good man, Mama. A real good one. He’s respectable. He values the same things we value—a true Southern gentleman. He wants me to be happy. The way I see it, I couldn’t ask for a better man.” She looks at him, skeptical. “You’re going to have to trust me,” I add.

It’s odd when I get the emotional version of my mama. Usually it’s the shark. I know how to handle that version quite well. This is tricky territory. I need to give her information, but not so much she can use it against me when she rallies. “He’ll take care of me. I need to start a life. I can’t organize festivals for the rest of my life. I won’t be happy. You can’t possibly want that for me.”

She brings up my charity, like a last resort weapon. I have a reply for that too and by the time we’re finished with our faux sweet tea she’s out of ideas and the poor woman reeks of desperation.

“Your daddy isn’t going to make this easy, sweetie,” Mama says, cupping my cheek.

“I hope you have Plan B and C on deck.” She knows me well. I tell her not to worry and drift over to apologize to Mercer.

“Everything okay?” He asks, distracted by the grandeur of the foyer. I think about everything that’s happened this afternoon and my mental state.

I make the sign for so-so, and tell him how my mom took the news. “I really need that frozen sugar today. Want to go back to my house and shower and then get out of here? Think your mama wants to feed one more tonight? Would she mind?” Southern mothers never mind an extra, and I think I’m in good enough graces to be welcomed at the Ballentine’s even after his father’s candidate announcement.

He leans over to whisper, “You joining me in the shower?”

Goosebumps prickle my skin. Turning, I see my mom watching us like a hawk. “Let’s get out of here.”

“We’ll talk later, Mama,” I say. “Maybe you can soften Daddy up when he gets home.”

“I’ll be too busy having a heart attack, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Go have a seat and watch your shows,” I fire back. “I’m having dinner at Mercer’s house.” I’m waiting for some tongue in cheek remark, or subtle jab, but it doesn’t come. I broke her.

The walk to my house is brisk, and I lock the bolt lock when we’re both safely inside. I’m ready for more of his lips, but he’s too busy looking up at the vaulted ceilings and examining the artwork on my walls. “Wow,” he says. “I knew your parents had a mansion. I didn’t realize you lived in a mini version.”

“I’m a reflection of them, why wouldn’t I have a mini-mansion?” It’s meant as a joke, but Mercer winces.

“Yeah,” he says, clearing his throat, rubbing a hand over his mouth. “It’s a lot, isn’t it?”

I’m careful with my words. It’s all I’ve ever known, but I can tell it’s making him uncomfortable. “It’s just a house, a place to live. Want that shower now?”

“Are you going to miss it?” Mercer drags a hand over a marble column, shaking his head.

I side-eye him. “Miss what? Being controlled? Being told how to breathe? Or living in the house my mom designed for me to live out the rest of my days in?” I distinctly remember when I was ten years old, my mother obsessing over the plans for this house. Not a common thing for a kid, I realize now. I told her to make the whole house pink and the walls made of fluffy cotton candy.

His reply is straight forward. “The money.”

My cell chimes a text from my handbag. It’s Tannie telling me she wants to come over tonight. I use my cell phone as a distraction from the awkward conversation. “I don’t know,” I reply. “Do I think Daddy will leverage my trust fund? Probably. Have I already put in safe holds in case he does? Absolutely. Leaving here means leaving this entire life behind. The flashy houses, cars, and easy friends because of my last name will be gone.” I fire off the text and meet his eye. “It’s not as if you grew up in the projects, now is it?”

He sways as he walks toward me, his gaze still taking in everything around him. “Not quite the same, but I get what you’re saying. It’s not going to be easy, Clover. Don’t get me wrong, I make a killing in the military. The more time I’m gone, the more

money they throw at me. Gain a new skill, make more money, but this” —he waves an arm around him— “is a type of wealth most people don’t know exists. It’s going to be hard to walk away from this without looking back.”

“It’s not good to worry about things I can’t change. I’ll figure out how to live on a stylist’s salary. If it was easy, I wouldn’t want it.”

Mercer laughs. “Usually it’s the other way around, you know? People trying to attain what you’re walking away from.”

“I’m not a normal person, Mercer. Don’t compare me to others. Can I ask if you’re assumin’ I haven’t thought of that? That I might not have a clue how to live without this?” I wave an arm around and then point at him. “You’re going to help me.”

Mercer laughs, placing a palm against his stomach. “How am I supposed to help you? Before you ask me for lessons on balancing a checkbook, I’ll stop to remind you I’m headin’ back to London for six months. Goldie is going to have to give you the crash course on how to live without the silver spoon.” Mercer casts his eyes to the side. “I’m sorry, that was harsh.”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before.” I set my hands on my hips. “I’ve lived without you for a mess of time. What’s six months more?”

His face softens, and his neck flexes as he looks elsewhere. “Yeah?” he asks.

“Time never scares me.” Relaxing my arms by my sides, I weigh my decision.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

Mercer takes me in his arms. “What about war?”

“There’s a little trepidation there, but you’ll be safe. You know you have to get back to teach me to balance a checkbook.” I pause, gazing into his blue eyes. “Mercy, Mercer. You are surefire handsome.” He’s always been handsome, but he was never a man I was allowed to look at closely. To know. Right now, he makes my heart skip a beat.

He grins. “That’s the real reason why you wanna wait for me.” His low voice licks up my spine. When he phrases it like that, waiting, I’m not sure I’m equipped to pause my life for anyone. Especially now that I’m starting something brand new.

I tip my head a bit. “Maybe.”

“I’m going to call Mom and tell her you’ll be my plus one for dinner, then I’m takin’ a shower in your twenty-four-karat gold bathroom. After that, I’m thinkin’ I can teach you something else right quick.”

“Not balancing a checkbook?” I raise one brow.

He shakes his head, lips brushing mine. “No one uses checkbooks anymore, Clover. Something else that needs teachin’.”

Twining my hands around his neck, I bring my lips against his in a kiss and speak against his mouth. “I’ll be a good student as long as you don’t turn into King Midas durin’ your shower.”

Unceremoniously, Mercer grabs my butt and pulls me against him as he deepens the kiss. My breath quickens and I can taste the fervor igniting between our bodies. His hands grip my backside more firmly and he caresses me before we break apart. His gaze is flicking over my face, my lips, my eyes, back to my lips. He bites his bottom lip and shakes his head. “Well my kiss didn’t turn you to gold, but I do have a firmer plan.” I grin, and back out of his grasp. Walking to the guest bathroom connected to a spare bedroom, I grab a towel out of the linen closet on our way.

Mercer cranks on the water and then glances over his shoulder. “You want to stay and watch?” The shower is large and enclosed in glass. There’s no privacy in this room until the bathroom fogs with heat and that won’t happen unless I close the door. The unfamiliar feeling of doing something wrong floods me, warning bells bouncing from one side of my mind to the other. This is a feeling I’d run from in the past—do anything in my power to avoid. Careful, Clover. Careful. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. The Wellsley name is on the line. Careful. My parents’ warnings flit through my mind and promptly vanish into a vapor. Now, I crave disobedience, I want it to inhabit my body and make me a slave to it.

“Would you mind?” I ask, tentatively taking a step toward the shower.

Mercer’s body tenses and his muscles ripple as he moves. A predator lying in wait. He pulls off his shirt and tosses it on the ground “It will be good for what I want to teach you after if you watch. Stay. Please.”

I nod, because words fail me in the moment. I’m so twisted up in the ache that it’s stolen my common sense. “Your body,” I say, swallowing hard as goosebumps skate up my neck, and down my arms. “I’m not sure I’ve ever wanted something more. It’s perfect.”

He presses his lips together, ignoring my worship. “Here’s the thing about my body,” Mercer says, tucking his thumbs into the waistband of his workout shorts and pulling

them down in one movement. “It’s part of my job to look like this.”

Aside from wiping the drool dripping from my mouth, I raise one brow. “My daddy said the same thing.”

He chuckles. “Are you really talking about your daddy while staring at my dick?”

My gaze flits to his. “No, no. Of course not,” I say, rushing my words. “I get it. You have to pick up and put down heavy things. It’s just...” My words trail off as thoughts of ravaging his body with my bare hands, mouth...every single body part I own seeps into my mind.

Mercer shakes his head and enters the shower and starts washing his body. I speak louder so he can hear me under the pressure of the water. “You are fully naked, and I’ve never had a naked man inside my house. It goes against...everything. I’m nervous.”

Mercer rubs shampoo in his hair, scrubbing back and forth, a jagged movement so unlike the dainty strokes I use to clean my own hair. “Do you want me to put on clothes?” His eyes slide to the side—landing on mine.

“No!” I shout. “I prefer you this way, actually. It’s just taking some getting used to because you’re making me feel things just by being naked. You’re not even touching me. I’m looking at you and that’s enough. I didn’t know it was possible is all.”

“That’s what I was hoping for.”

“You knew it would happen? Is that how it is with all of your other women?”

Looking up to the shower spray, he rinses his hair while shaking his head. The water rolling over and down his body only adds to the appeal. He’s wet. I’m wet. My heart

is hammering against my chest, egging me on. “Clover, there aren’t any other women. There haven’t been for a really long time. None that have ever mattered the way you do.”

“Forgive me, but when you look like that naked, it’s a crime there aren’t. You are practically illegal.”

He laughs and grabs a bottle of body wash, examines it, and flips it over to read the ingredients. Mercer dumps some in his palm and turns to face me. He runs his hands over his pecs and arms and then grips his perfectly sculpted, ram-rod hard shaft. His blue eyes lock on mine as water runs over his head, dripping off his long lashes and washing down the rest of his body.

I step forward again—for a better look, and because my libido is driving the movements instead of my well-trained brain. “Watch me,” he commands, arm bunching as he works his hand on himself. His eyelids are at half-mast as his hunger drives him on, into uncharted territory with me.

“I’m watching,” I murmur so low I’m sure he can’t hear me. “I can’t not watch,” I say more to myself. This is a type of eroticism I didn’t know existed. Sure, people fall into bed together and play hide the mole, but this experience is something else altogether. Watching him is illicit, gripping, something I’ll never be able to clear from my mind.

“The grip. The pace?” he asks, tilting his head, eyes raking my body.

I nod. “Got it. Can I try now?”

“Not yet,” Mercer says, slowing his fist to a sloping drag across his flushed skin. “I’m getting carried away. Let me finish cleaning up and I’ll meet you in the bedroom. Looking at you.” His jaw works. “Just looking at you, too. It does things to me,

Clover. We're on the same page there." He doesn't do a good job of concealing the shock his confession causes and it drives home more truth.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“I have clothes on. I can’t possibly have the same effect on you, in there, hard, naked, watching me like that,” I say, suddenly feeling vastly exposed even though I’m clothed.

He ticks his head to the side. “My memory is good, and I’ve got a pretty vivid imagination.” Grabbing the bottle, he finishes washing his body, but I don’t leave like he asked of me, I don’t want to miss a second of viewing him like this. What if I never get the same opportunity again? Not exactly like this. Maybe something similar, but I want to take every experience Mercer will give me so I can use it as a comparison for the rest of my life. It’s sadistic and totally warranted. I was taught to compare myself to others to drive the hunger for success at all times. This is different, the hunger more of an ache that won’t be sated until I have everything.

He steps out of the shower, one powerful leg leading, and then the rest of his glistening body emerges.

“Everything just sort of stopped while I was looking at you,” I confess. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“I wanted you to watch. To see me hot for you.” Mercer grabs the white cotton on the hook and towels off his head and slides it over his body, a casual wiping. The scent of soap fills the air, warm and sweet. “I’m going to need you to finish what I started though,” he adds, not bothering to wrap the towel around his waist. He keeps it draped over his shoulder as he closes the distance between our bodies. My room is too far away, all the way across the house, so I lead him to the guest room attached to this bathroom. Recklessly, I disrobe as quickly as I can. He smirks as he watches me fumble with my bra. I nearly tip over as I, quite literally jump out of my panties. I’m

panting, lips separated as breaths push through my dry mouth. My stomach tightens as Mercer's face flashes thinly-veiled control and he trains his gaze on my bare flesh. To cause a man as strong and powerful as him to falter, makes me preen—gives me all the confidence I need to handle the testosterone seeping into my skin by proximity.

“Finish it,” Mercer orders, tipping his chin up to punctuate the command. Another dip in my stomach.

I don't waste time with pleasantries or speaking, I'm too eager for a lesson in seduction. Kneeling, I wrap my hands around his steely rod and move my hand like he did, his warm skin searing my palm. Mercer groans as he clenches his teeth, an audible noise. He brings his hand down to close over my own and guides me into a steady pace.

“Like this,” I proclaim, casting my eyes forward to his member. The veins rise dark and thick as a bead swells on the tip.

Mercer replies with a throaty noise. Through my lashes, I glance up to find his face twisted in pleasure. He removes his hand from mine, trusting me to keep going. Leaning in, I lick the tip of the chiseled helmet while moving my hand. It's a tentative gesture, worshipping and questioning at the same time. I don't wonder for long because when I wrap my lips around his shaft, his hands fist in my hair.

“Yes. Yes. Your mouth,” he says, sucking in a ragged breath as I try to figure out how to suck a dick and jack one off at the same time. It's a messy, slippery job, but my spit helps my hand slide, and finding a rhythm becomes easier. I'd worry I was doing it wrong if Mercer wasn't singing like a happy canary, in the form of muttered curse words with my name mixed in. My eyes water as his length slides down my throat, choking me, but in this foreign to me position, I feel a power I've never had my entire life. It makes little sense because I am power personified, but being with

Mercer like this brings me something new, an authority over his body.

Watching his abs flex and retract as he breathes tells me before he says so. “I’m going to come. Get on the bed. Spread your legs.” There’s a half-second of pause, because it escalated, but I do as he says, keeping my strokes as even as I can as I back into the bed and sit on the edge. With my heels, I edge back knees bent and spread my legs. “How is this?” I ask, licking my lips, letting my spit covered hand fall from him.

He swallows hard, his hand replacing mine. “Seeing you open for me like this,” he growls. “Inside you. I want inside you.” Everything below my waist throbs in agreement. I drag a finger over my swollen clit and press down. Mercer shakes his head as he watches me with a laser focus. “Not yet.”

The melodic sound of his wet flesh as he strokes himself is what I imagine sex sounds like. What it will sound like when his thick shaft is pumping into me, the friction and fullness capturing me with pleasure. While I’m dreaming about him penetrating me, Mercer comes, a guttural noise lighting the air, his seed streaming in hot bursts across my stomach and against the soft part of my inner thigh.

“So close,” I pant out. “Mercer,” I say, after he collapses against me, his heavy dick laying on my stomach. It’s hot and wet and if I squirmed just a little, I think I could slip him inside me. “I really want you to take me. Right now.”

He lies down on top of me, transferring the cum to him, too. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for that?”

“To come on my stomach? Not very long, I’d imagine. When there are a hundred other places you could put it. Is that it then?” I prod, jutting my hips up to let him know I’m thirsty, needing attentions. “Or do you want to watch me?”

He nuzzles his face into my neck, rolling off me and onto his side. “A hundred places? Sorry, I got a little hung up on trying to think of more than five.” With one hand, he brushes a stray hair from my face, cupping my face, with the other hand, he snakes it down between my legs. “Oh,” I exclaim, jumping a bit at first contact.

“I don’t want to watch, darlin’, I want to do it for myself. I want everything. All of you.”

I nod furiously as his deft fingers move over my clit and a finger slides into my clenching wetness. “All of this for me,” he rasps, pressing a kiss on my neck while he works me into a frenzy. I lose control and it’s unexpected, but it’s just as it should be. Me writhing under his skill, him licking a trail of passion up my neck, to my ear, across my cheek to meet my mouth. When our lips collide, I come apart, my orgasm rolling over my body—a sedative and a siren. I can smell me while I taste him and feel his muscles asserting their control. He withdraws his finger and moves away from the kiss to position his face between my legs. Mercer gives me a crooked smile before kissing one inner thigh and then the other.

He licks a gratifying trail from my left thigh to my dripping center. I’m tender, still riding the waves of the deconstructed Clover Wellsley when he closes his mouth around my clit and sucks. Hard. I bend my knees and jerk at the shuddering, all over sensation. I call out his name, but he doesn’t halt the action, so instead of pulling away or pushing his head to the side, I trust him. He wraps his arms around my legs and pulls me onto his face, tongue driving into me. I don’t have control of my body. It’s electricity. Somehow, I feel disconnected from my body because of how many different sensations envelop me. My mind isn’t trying to talk me out of it, and I wouldn’t care if my parents walked into the room right now, I wouldn’t want him to stop.

He pops up, smiling, lips glistening with my essence. “I’m gonna put some fingers in this tight masterpiece. It might hurt a bit at first, try to relax.”

“Relax,” I call out, barely recognizing my lust-hazed voice. “How am I supposed to relax when your mouth is down there.”

“It’s a good place to be. Thanks for this,” Mercer drawls, dropping a kiss at my core. I shudder in pleasure. Casting his gaze on my face, he snakes one finger in, then a second. I close my eyes and whisper a plea for mercy to whoever is listening. Mercer chuckles when I raise my hips to get more friction.

“It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t hurt at all,” I say.

He does something with his fingers inside me and a bolt of staggering sensations crawl all over my body—my insides turn to icy fire. Goosebumps prickle my skin and even though it’s a new feeling, it’s also earth-shattering, an epiphany. He crooks his fingers several more times, his mouth stationed on my clit, and an orgasm like one I’ve never felt before cascades through me. I buck my hips to get his fingers deeper as my legs tingle and body subtly shakes.

Mercer’s mouth stays warm, covering me as he withdraws his fingers slowly. I’m a heaving heap of quivering flesh, unable to move, and the sole thought I’m capable of is that I want him to do that to me for the rest of my life. I need it like I’ve needed oxygen and designer dresses. I need Mercer Ballentine to be mine completely.

“How in God’s name am I supposed to recover from that?”

He wipes his mouth on his arm, while crawling up my body. “You’re not supposed to recover from it, you’re supposed to revel in it.”

“And after I revel?” His face cuts my view of the vaulted ceiling. How is he even more beautiful than he was an hour ago? Why is my heart pounding like this? His gaze cuts through the surface and sees the real me. I feel it. Like he’s reaching inside and willing these emotions to the surface. “What then?” I ask, my voice tripping.

“Well, it’s simple really,” Mercer says, raising one questioning brow. “You fall for me.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull him down so his eyes are nearer. I tip up my chin and whisper one word. "Done."

I don't need to hear him reciprocate, his dadgum smile tells me more than words could. He's finished falling and I'm the one catching up.

Chapter Ten

Clover

ICAN HEAR Mercer's welcome home parade ending on the other side of town, the band blaring, from my place on this portable stage in the center of town square. Today's festival has been a success, but as Mama predicted, I am the main attraction. My parents had my auction for charity while Mercer's parade was ending so he wouldn't be able to be here right away. They're keen and crafty. I can't blame them, or anyone who thinks I've lost my mind, because it feels maybe I have. I broke Mercer's daddy's truck when he was giving me head in the cab two days ago. The orgasm was strong, and he was making these throaty, feral noises that turn me into a maniac. I kicked the gear shift in a fit of pleasure and it broke clean off. I'm not sure how Mercer explained it to his daddy, but Mr. Ballentine looked at me funny when I saw him at DR last night.

Even Tannie couldn't keep this auction from happening. She offers a weak smile from the side of the stage where everyone is gathering, waiting for my daddy to come out and do the honor of selling his daughter. I pouted for the three hours it took to get

primped and fussed over like an F.F.A. animal. I'm wearing the dress my mama selected, a pink confection covered in brightly colored oranges. Some have stems attached and others just seem to be rolling around on their own accord. I would have picked it out for myself on a different occasion, now it's been tainted, and I'll probably never wear it again. Even if I don't want to be here, don't want to date another man, I'm already on Clover Wellsley autopilot. My wide pageant grin is perfection, and my shoulders are proud and back. I don't think I'll ever kick the habit of putting my best face forward, even when it's a detriment.

Clasping my hands behind my back, I smile and nod as those gathered make eye contact. They study me. Wait for me to falter. I can pick out the suitors straight away, heck I even recognize some of them from my time on the dating circuit. Seersucker suits, slicked-back hair, and golden Rolex watches appoint their wrists. It's the summer uniform of the rich and infamous. Like, what Patrick Bateman would look like if he spent the summer in the Hamptons instead of murdering people for fun. Another habit I haven't kicked, wanting their eyes on me, craving the attention that others seek. Even as I think it, I know I really only want Mercer's attentions. All of them. All of the time. I'm antsy right now, shifting from one foot to the other, because I haven't seen him since early this morning when he was sneaking off my property, a pair of my lace panties stuffed in his pocket.

My dad parts the crowd, his commanding demeanor startling and awing Greenton residents and visitors alike. He grabs the microphone sitting on a chair next to Tannie, without even glancing at me. "How about the parade for Mercer Ballentine?" he booms, stance wide, the light blue and white checked pants breaking on his shoe at the perfect degree. The crowd cheers, and my father's eyes light. "A real hometown hero. I'm happy to welcome him home." Like any skilled politician, he's using this as an opportunity to campaign. "My lovely wife, Mrs. Wellsley, organized it from top to bottom." More cheers, applause, and catcalls break out. I shift again, sweat breaking out behind my knees. The attention will turn to me soon.

My dad asks if everyone is enjoying themselves and if we should plan another event soon. The crowd agrees like he knew they would. Every single resident of Greenton is out and about today. The festivals and town parties are one of few causes for celebration. “Where are all of my eligible bachelors?” Dad booms. The women by the stage tidy up, smoothing dresses, and patting their hair. Vultures waiting to see who gives up bidding first.

I reach down into the hidden dress pocket and turn on my mic, and try to keep my hands relaxed by my sides. It’s hard when I want to strangle the man who gave me life.

“May I introduce you to my daughter. The philanthropist, the domestic goddess, Clover Wellsley.” More seersucker cuts into my line of view and I hold my smile steady. “Today’s auction will be for one date with Clover! All of the proceeds will go to the women’s and children’s shelter right here in Greenton. This cause is dear to Clover’s heart, so I hope that you’ll open your checkbooks and show her you have something in common.” Dad finally looks at me. There is a flash of an apology in his eyes, but he knows it’s too late for that. I don’t flinch, nope. It’s my time.

With my mouth shut, I run my tongue along my top teeth as a last preventative measure to ensure I don’t have lipstick where it shouldn’t be. “Welcome, welcome,” I say, schooling my face, perfecting the stance, one leg crossed over the other, heels pressing close together. “He’s right,” I say, my voice echoing through the speakers. “It is near and dear to my heart. I’ll give the fine print details really quick before Daddy starts the bidding.” Mercer’s band music fades in the distance and the silence cuts as everyone focuses on me. It doesn’t affect me like it does most people. It’s like a pageant. You sort of pretend you’re someone different and fade into character. I deliver the fine print of the contest, take a bit to enlighten everyone about the shelter, then list my favorite foods and describe my favorite type of date.

There are about eight men in front of the stage, their mirrored sunglasses hiding their

excitement. “Get it started, Mayor Wellsley,” I say.

A nervousness swells in my chest as Daddy starts the bidding at twenty-five dollars. Slicked-back man number one throws his lace auction paddle in the air, a yellow stain waving at me from his armpit. Mama made the paddles especially for this occasion. They’re embarrassingly pink and the numbers are written in a swirly script. Bachelor number five throws up his paddle and calls out, “Seventy-five dollars.” High rollers, I think, a swift annoyance replacing my nervousness. Minutes tick by like this, a painful crawl until we’ve reached one thousand dollars. This is where I expect people to bow out. The threshold where rich people pause and consider what else they could do with that same amount at the mall. Is the tax deduction really worth it?

“For charity, guys,” I add in, tilting my head to the side. This auction is just for show. The shelter is completely funded because of our family wealth—it’s a drop in the bucket. The people of Greenton don’t know the depths of the Wellsley’s pockets and shows like this make my daddy look more human, more like them. It’s integral to keep our family grounded and in good standing with our community. What will me leaving do to that reputation? I might be madder than sin today, but these people are still my family—the people who love me in their bent out of shape way.

One thousand dollars jumps to two thousand, and all but two bidders have bowed out. The other bachelors set their lace paddles on the edge of the stage and wander over to the beer garden. The women who were loitering around the stage earlier have now all magically appeared in the beer garden as well. Dog eat dog. These are bachelors from the city. A ticket out of here and on to a better life that won’t be around often.

A familiar face appears, weaving through the crowd growing now that the bid has increased. He grabs a random lace paddle off the stage, and my smile widens. I declined his proposal and yet here he is saving me. Making eye contact with my daddy, he extends the lace in the air and proclaims, “Five thousand dollars for a date with Clover Wellsley.”

My daddy's eyes light. A man who has money and who wants to date his daughter. Little does he know; this man swings a bat for the other team. When the other men look defeated—hanging their heads, I scramble to say, “Winner! Winner! You win!” When Daddy sees my excitement, he closes the bidding and asks for the winner's name. After thanking everyone for attending the festival and those bidding, I switch off my mic and descend the portable stairs next to Tannie.

She pulls me into a hug. “Mercer is on his way here. Joe just texted me to say it was the end of the parade. I'm sure he'll come right quick to save you.” I've just been saved, but I never told Tannie about this man's proposal. No one else knew.

“Out of everything you just said, I'm most concerned with the name Joe.”

Tannie rolls her eyes. “We're just chit-chatting.”

“Right, I know what that actually means.”

She pulls the mic off the collar of my dress, her eyelashes fluttering. “Go meet your suitor, Clover. Don't worry about what I'm doing.”

“It's ironic that you worry about my every move,” I say. “It's merely a business transaction. You know how bad Joe is for you. I worry about you.”

“Not everyone has your kinda options.” The mask of cool indifference slides into place, and I barely recognize my best friend. I can't hide my background from her, and therein lies the complication. This will make leaving her that much easier.

“You're right. It's none of my business.” And with that statement, she knows what I'm really saying is that my life isn't any of her business anymore either. I hand her the black box from my pocket, the wireless headset, and meet her gaze. “Great job with the festival. You really did an amazing job.” A compliment to ease the sting.

“Enjoy yourself today.”

Tannie’s eyes flare as she tries to decide what to say, but I don’t give her the opportunity. Edging my way around several people, I make my way to where my daddy is talking to Preston Sears. “That went well,” I say to my father. To Preston, I extend my hand and drawl, “Thank you so much for your generous contribution to the shelter. I appreciate it so much. Shall we have a drink at the beer garden and discuss our date?” I don’t miss the spark in my father’s eyes when he realizes exactly which family Preston belongs to as he examines the check.

Preston takes my offered hand and kisses it instead of shaking it. “I’ve been dreaming of the day I’d get to be in the graces of the beautiful Clover Wellsley again. I daresay you do not disappoint, ma’am.” He offers an elbow, and I link my arm into his. All eyes are on us as he ushers me forward.

“Dear God in Heaven, Preston,” I mutter, teeth clenched. “I’ll pay you back double for this. You don’t know how much it means to me.” I keep my tone low, but I know Preston hears me because of his wide grin—eyes crinkling in the corner.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

When we're out of earshot of everyone he pulls me in front of him, extending my hand in the air. "Let me see what I've won." He chuckles. "I do have some idea how much this means to you," he says, cheeks flushing. "It wasn't my idea, but I did think it was a fantastic one."

I shake my head. "I should have married you, Preston. We're like a superhero team. This unstoppable duo. We could probably take over the world."

"Except, I have no interest in giving you the same things he wants to give you," Preston says, Southern accent fainter than my own. Glancing where he's nodded, I see Mercer Ballentine jogging toward the beer garden. He's wearing his dadgum uniform. The white one. His brightly-hued ribbons displayed on his chest, the big trident pin that marks him as a Navy SEAL glitters golden in the sunlight.

I swallow hard. "Lord."

Preston watches him approach us. "Yeah, I agree. Lord. You're one lucky woman." He looks back to me. "But it's obvious you already know that."

"Wait," I say, scrunching up my nose. "This was Mercer's idea? You being here?"

There isn't time for an answer. Mercer is here, wide chest demanding attention. I lose my breath as my body reacts to his proximity. "How did it go?" he asks, casting his eyes between Preston and me.

"Just as planned, Mr. Ballentine," Preston replies. "I got here just in time. It was a success."

I blink a few times. “You had him buy me. How did you find Preston to begin with? I never told you his name. I barely told you anything about him.” I rattle the conversation I had with Mercer at DR the night he got home around in my mind.

Mercer sighs, taking my hands in his. “My job offers me a peculiar set of skills and by the description you gave, well, I was able to figure it out on my own. I also knew your daddy would do everything in his power to stop me from being here, so I figured it out. It worked.” Mercer lifts and lowers his arms, releasing me. Preston watches him, eyes rapt.

“I bought you in his honor, Clover,” Preston says, gaze mirthful, joking. “Not that humans can be bought.”

“I appreciated it when I didn’t know Mercer was involved, but even more so now. You’re a good friend, Preston. I owe you one. Let me know if you ever need me to buy you, okay?”

Preston shakes his head, white smile flashing. “Don’t even mention it. I’m happy to help. Now if you’ll excuse me, bachelor number seven was making eyes and I need to find out if I have a chance.”

Mercer shades his eyes, peering in the direction where Preston is looking. “Oh, there’s a one-hundred percent chance of snow over there, buddy. Go get ‘em.” He slaps Preston on the shoulder. “Thank you for today. I owe you one, too.”

Preston points a finger at Mercer. “I will take you up on that one day.” Preston leaves.

Mercer slides his hands into his pockets, his biceps pulling the white fabric of his uniform. “He wouldn’t even let me pay him back.” He shrugs. “He’s a good friend to have in your corner.” Speaking of friends in corners, I see my dad peering at us, eyes

narrowed, hands on his hips.

“Beer?” I ask, pulling on his arm.

Mercer adjusts his cover and lets me lead him away. There’s a dirt patch that has patio tables and chairs. He pulls out a chair for me and I take a seat. “I don’t want to drink while in uniform, but I’ll grab you a beer. Wine?”

I tell him what I’d like, but then become aware of all of the attention we’re receiving. Tannie is glaring, standing next to my dad. My mama is busy with a few women from her gardening club, chatting animatedly. She’s oblivious for the moment. When Mercer gets back, I take the beer and try to keep a friendly grin on my face. “Thank you.” Tipping my head back, I take a long swallow. “Nothing like getting sold in front of your town to create a thirst.”

“You know they only act that way because they don’t know any different,” Mercer says, folding his hands on the table in front of him.

Ignoring the sad state of affairs, I say, “You are unbearably attractive in that uniform. There are a few things I’d like to do when we get back to my place.”

“Hey, hey. Don’t change the subject.”

“How was the parade?” I ask. “Do you feel properly welcomed home?”

He tilts his chin down. “It was unnecessary. You know I’m not about all this. I wanted to visit home and relax before I go back. Parades are sort of the opposite of relaxation.”

I choke down the rest of my beer. “I am the opposite of relaxation. I have no idea why you’re mixing yourself up with my crazy. You had to track down my gay ex to

save myself the pain of dating a proper Southern gentleman.”

His gaze cuts away, eyeing something over my shoulder. “Because I’m surely not a Southern gentleman, right?” Mercer shakes his head, letting his gaze land on the people surrounding us.

I panic, my heart ricocheting in my chest. “No. That’s not what I meant. Of course you are. I want you.” I enunciate the last word harshly.

He leans in and licks his lips. “You want me because I’m forbidden. A good time wrapped in a tight package. I’m the thrill before you settle for bachelor number five. You don’t look at me like anything more than a good time. Nothing I do seems to increase my odds of changing your perspective of me.”

My throat burns as I swallow hard. “You don’t get it. How hard it is for me to shun the only life I’ve ever known to jump into something that I’m clueless about. I’m still learning. I used the wrong words. Look at you.” I nod at his uniform. “You are more than a Southern gentleman, you’re that plus some. Please. I’m sorry, Mercer. I shouldn’t have said that.” How insecure must he be that a slip of the tongue creates such a visceral response from him. His breathing is heavy, and his pupils dilate. His ego isn’t what I’m used to. There’s an unfamiliar fragility to it. “Look at me.”

Mercer turns his gaze to meet mine and my heart skips a beat. I take both of his hands in mine. “Let’s go to Cape Cod. Spend a week there before you redeploy. I’m ready to leave this all behind. Start a new life. Together.” My car came back from the shop and I’m ready. There is nothing left on my list to check off. If leaving this place with Mercer helps him understand how much he means to me, then that’s what I want to do.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

“As simple as that?” He shutters the emotion visible seconds before. “Pack your car and drive to Cape Cod to start a new life?”

I shrug. “Exactly that. You don’t have to go if you want to stay here and visit with your parents and friends, but I’m ready.” By enacting this plan, I’m telling him I’m serious about a new life. That I’m serious about him. “Mercer, I want you. This place though? It makes me behave in a way that I hate. I need out.”

“I’ll go with you,” he says, pulling his hands from mine. “I have stuff to take care of back there before I leave again anyway. You’re sure then? About all of it?”

I nod, glancing back to where my parents and my friends are standing, staring in my direction. “I am.”

Mercer chuckles when I meet his gaze. “I like your dress,” he says through his laughter.

“What’s so funny about it?” I reply.

He shakes his head, debating if he should speak it. “Why did the blonde stare at the bottle of orange juice?”

I roll my eyes all the way back. Mercer’s eyes flit from my cleavage back up to my face. “I’ll bite. Even though blonde jokes are awful. Why was she staring at the bottle of orange juice?”

“It said concentrate,” he says, chortling. I tell him it’s a bad joke, and he laughs even

louder. I stand from the table and Mercer follows suit. “To your house then?”

“As long as you don’t tell me any more blonde jokes.”

“What about orange jokes?”

“The only orange joke I want to hear is the one where the oranges on my dress meet the floor of my bedroom.”

He snakes an arm around my waist and my body buzzes. “You’re insatiable, Ms. Wellsley.” I meet eyes with Preston and mouth the words thank you one more time before slipping into the crowd. I’ll pay him back one day, I’ll make it my dying wish.

Chapter Eleven

Clover

MERCER DROVE HISdad’s truck and I drove my car home from the festival. We’re at my house, I’m standing on one side of my bedroom and Mercer is standing on the other. In a white uniform that was made for him, tailored to every muscle and curve of his body. He looks good enough to eat, but I just remembered the awful truth about what’s underneath the orange dress that has been the butt of twenty-seven jokes in my mind on the ride here.

“No, I want to. It’s just I’m not ready right now,” I say, hoping he won’t probe. He just called himself a Southern gentleman, didn’t he? “I need to change first, that’s all.”

He takes off his uniform shirt. “Ready how? Are you a recipe that needs to simmer?

A loaf of bread that has to rise?” His words are light, but his gaze is fire. “I will take the dress off of you. We’ll solve the whole changing first problem when you’ll end up naked anyway.”

“Undergarments, Mercer. I don’t expect you to understand, but leave it to you to turn this into something about food.”

He pulls the white undershirt out of his pants, untucking both in a brusque move. “I don’t care if your bra and panties match, Clover. I want what’s under them. It’s always about food. Both things I want to eat. Same. Same.” His gaze turns hungry and I realize how embarrassing this is about to get. There’s no stopping it now.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” I exclaim, adjusting the deep V of my dress, even though I know everything is secure.

Mercer grins, not taking me seriously. “Come on, darlin’ Let’s get this started. I’ve been wanting you all day long. You’re cooked and risen and it’s sort of a lucky coincidence, I’m risen, too.” The bulge in his white uniform pants twitches to drive his point home.

I breathe out. I want it so badly. “You’re such a smooth talker, aren’t you? Tell me what smooth and suave thing you have to say about this.” I push the shoulders of my dress down my arms and slide the dress down to pool at my waist. My breasts spring free, and his face contorts in absolute confusion—brows furrowed and lips twisted. “It’s tape, Mercer, pick your jaw up off the floor.”

“What is happening here? It looks a bit like a Marilyn Manson music video, but I dig it.” He nods subtly as he studies me.

“It’s a trick most women would love to keep secret. You didn’t give me that courtesy. I can’t wear a bra with this dress, so I taped my boobs up and out. It conceals my

nipples and makes things stand a little higher, keeps them inside the dress, if you catch my drift. I'm pretty offended you're comparing my gaffer's tape bra to a musician." I point at my breasts. "A lot of women do this." Especially in the pageant world, but that's something I don't want him thinking about. The old Clover. The one I swore to leave behind.

He presses his lips into a firm line, trying to control a laugh. "I'm really sorry I didn't have the proper response when you pulled those puppies out. I think any man would have a hard time coming up with something smooth to say." He swallows. "Hey sweetie, can I stick to you like your tape? If you can't fix it with tape, you aren't using enough tape? I like you like I like my tape, sticky and ready to bring things together?"

"Oh my gosh, enough!" I say, waving my hands. "I can't take another bad joke from you today."

He steps closer, running a thumb on each side, on top of the nude-colored tape. "The level of enthusiasm you have for undergarments renders me speechless right now. How the hell do you get this off without hurting yourself?"

I clear my throat. "Like taking off a bandage. I'd compare it to waxing my legs, but I have a feeling you wouldn't be able to relate to that as well."

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

With his fingernail, he grips the top of the tape at my shoulders, watching me. “Like this?” he asks.

I nod, keeping my gaze locked with his. “One, two, three,” I exclaim. Before he can pull it down, my doorbell rings. He steps back, hands going to button his pants. I slide my arms back into my dress and tell him to wait here for me. Mercer looks irate. The world has been against us today. Begrudgingly, I pull my dress up and over my shoulders.

I open my front door and I’m greeted with my mother’s red face, her fingers twining in her hair, a nervous twitch. “What did you do?”

Stepping back, I move out of her way as she barrels into my personal space. I glance over my shoulder at my bedroom door. It’s closed. “What are you talking about, Mama?”

“You left the festival early with Mercer. You didn’t even stay to help Tannie oversee the clean-up. What’s gotten into you? Have you forgotten your manners completely?”

I drop my chin. “You’re serious. This is why you’re flying off the handle right now?”

“You’re going to leave and not say goodbye to us, aren’t you? I can sense it, Clover. You’re doing this, leaving Greenton, and it’s all his fault. We were content before he breezed into town.”

I hold up one hand. “I haven’t been content for years. It’s my decision. How in the world would it be his fault when he’s going back to war, Mama? I’m not moving

anywhere for a man,” I hiss at her, getting more furious as the seconds tick by. I’m sick of not being understood. “Consider this me saying goodbye then. If you’re so worried about me not bidding farewells before I move. This isn’t easy for me and you and Daddy are bent on making it darn near impossible.”

“Well, good!” Mama bursts out, laying a hand on her chest. “I want it to be impossible.” Mercer makes a noise from my bedroom and Mama hears it, cocking her head. “I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

“Good. That means I’ve finally found myself,” I drawl, motioning to the door. “I have to pack quickly so I can get back to the festival and help Tannie and the volunteer crew clean up. Wouldn’t want to give the wrong impression before I leave town.”

She shakes her head sadly as her chest moves up and down in a harried pace. “This is your home.”

I nod. “It will always be my home, it’s not my life though, Mama. This place isn’t my life. Not like you. Not like other women.” She turns on her heel as tears threaten. I close the door behind her and lock it. “You can come out now, Mercer.”

He walks out, hands in his pockets, gaze trained on the floor. “This expensive mini-mansion has thin walls. I heard it all. Every single word of it. I hate that they think I’m the reason you’re leaving, and I have no clue how to change their opinion on the matter.”

“You know as well as I that no one can change their opinion.” He sits next to me on the couch and takes my hand in his. It’s warm against my cool skin.

“Almost, Clover. You’re close. Right there. Some people say the first step is the hardest, but I challenge that. I think the last step is the hardest, ’cause that’s the step

that officially changes everything. Instead of having one foot in each world, you've crossed over to the other side." He shakes his head once. "There's no going back after the last step. Hometown truths," he says. "No one will understand and you gotta step anyway." Mercer drapes an arm around my shoulder.

"I'm going to get changed and then I have to take care of a few things in town. I want to leave as soon as possible."

Mercer pauses, drumming his thumb on my shoulder. "Are you takin' the tape off?"

I chuckle. "You want to pull it off for me?"

"Does the Tin Man have a sheet metal cock?" Mercer fires back.

"I don't know," I say, wrinkling my nose.

He groans. "He does, Four Leaf Clover. Yes. He's the Tin-Man. He's made of sheet metal."

I shrug, blushing at the adorable nickname mixed into his statement. "If you say so. I prefer does a bear shit in the woods. It's more traditional. Everyone knows the answer is yes."

"That's cliché," he replies, flashing a satisfied smile. "Let's get that tape off and get some errands run. We have a long drive tomorrow." Mercer pauses. "How much stuff will you bring?"

I glance around the lavish living room appointed with beautiful decorations and expensive furniture and sigh. "Not much. As little as possible. Whatever will fit in my car. How much do you have?" He tells me one bag, and I'm confident we'll be able to fit it all into my car. I don't have a house in my name, but the car has always

been in my name from the get-go. It might be the only thing I technically own. Even the dress on my back was purchased by my mother.

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say I’m terrified, Mercer.”

“Clover Wellsley isn’t afraid of anything,” he says. “She’s a force to be reckoned with. I’m going to hop home really quick and give my parents the news. They knew I was planning on leaving a bit early, so it won’t be a shock to them. You’ll be okay by yourself? You can stay at my house tonight and we can leave early in the morning. I’ll come back over to help you load up, just give me a call.”

My heart pounds along at a rapid-fire pace. “Yes. Please,” I say, voice cracking.

Mercer kisses me on my cheek and lets himself out. He forgot to take my tape off.

I have a Louis Vuitton trunk, two suitcases, and a duffle bag containing everything I think I’ll need, filling my trunk and backseat as I drive to Mercer’s house. I loaded it without his help because I wasn’t able to pack most of my wardrobe, but I won’t need sugar frill dresses in the north. I won’t need most of my old life up there and it’s a thrilling thought. I can be whoever I want. Soon. After I packed, I went to help Tannie and then the shelter. I spent an hour talking to one of the women Winnie took in about a week ago. There was something about her that made me uneasy. The way she watched me while we spoke. Or perhaps it was the questions she was asking.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:53 am

They weren't typical questions that women have asked me in the past, but then again, this woman isn't from Greenton, she's a nomad. She wouldn't know who my parents are and why I began the shelter, or where I got a certain dress, or if Sandra in town was my hairdresser. I excused myself because I didn't plan on staying there as long as I did, and the conversation felt like a one-sided interview. After I wrote a note to Winnie, I locked the office and felt the woman's eyes on my back as I left the building.

Tannie wasn't surprised when I stopped by and I'm sure it's because my mom called her to tell her. She was cool and distant, and she had to leave before I did because she was going to meet Joe. I mean, she didn't say she was going to meet Joe but her lack of explanation on where she was heading told me she was meeting him. The goodbyes went smoothly, and I've had a pit in my stomach. They assume I'll be back, that I won't be able to hack it outside of Greenton, Alabama. Now I don't just have something to prove to myself, I have a mission to prove everyone else wrong in the process.

I drive cautiously, taking my time as I drive onto the Ballentine property. Mercer is waiting outside for me when I arrive, like he's done on multiple other occasions. I park the car in front of a garage bay and Mercer opens the car door for me.

"There you are. How did it go?" He offered to be with me when I said goodbye to my parents, but I wanted to do it alone. They already think I'm leaving for him; I didn't want his presence to give them more reason to assume so.

"Mama set you up in the guest room," Mercer rushes out. "I told her you could sleep in my bedroom with me, but she wouldn't have it. I think she's scared of your

mother.”

“That’s insane. I respect her wishes though.”

“Can I sneak in tonight?” Mercer asks, waggling his brows as he extends his hand to me. I grab my oversized purse, with a change of clothes and my toiletries off the passenger seat and take his hand, shaking my head no even as I say, “Yes.”

He leads me in the front door, and I’m surprised by the jubilant atmosphere inside his home. He’s leaving to go to Cape Cod, and then back to war and his parents are acting like it’s a celebration. My face must relay confusion because Mercer leans down and says, “They like me to leave with a happy vision,” he says. “It’s a little crazy, but it’s how they’ve been since the start of my military career. Like if they showed how sad they were, it might put my life in jeopardy.”

Smirking, I whisper, “I think they’re just excited to have an empty house tomorrow so they can do indecent things anywhere they please.”

He tightens his hand on my shoulder as he laughs. “Thanks for that image. I’ll never be able to burn it from my mind.”

The evening rolls on and we debate going to DR for a drink and to see anyone we’ve missed, but Mercer wants to spend more time with his parents instead. He saw Bentley all morning. I excuse myself from their parlor and head upstairs to the guestroom where I left my bag earlier. It’s cool and quiet here, so I’m startled when their doorbell rings out, a warning cry.

Then I hear my father’s voice.

Chapter Twelve

Clover

“HOW CAN YOU do this to me?” my daddy says, voice laced with surgical precision. Mr. Ballentine replies to his question, but his voice is lower, pacifying, calmer. I creep from the bedroom and make my way into the upstairs hallway. Their voices carry better from this vantage point and I need to hear everything.

“First your son decides to whisk my daughter to the North and now you’re trying to take my job? After everything we’ve been through? Years and years of friendship and comradery you’re flushing down the loo? What are you thinking? Our partnership worked perfectly. A well-oiled machine that everybody accepted.”

“Clover was making plans to move long before my son came home, sir,” Mr. Ballentine fires back. Before my daddy can argue, Mercer’s daddy goes on. “Our partnership worked for you because it’s about what you want, not about what’s best for our town, Wally. This is beyond me and you or just you, anymore. We need change. The people demand it. You can’t be blind to that. I don’t want people to accept me, I want to do right by them.”

My stomach fills with dread as I tiptoe to the landing of the stairs. This won’t end well for the Ballentines. Just as I told Mercer. Fuss all you want about change, but don’t try to trigger it unless you want a war of your very own.

“I never meant you any disrespect, in fact, I was hoping things would stay amicable between us.”

“Daddy,” I say, stepping out of the darkness. “Please stop. This isn’t the time for this.”

“And you,” Daddy rushes out, aiming a finger at me like a weapon. “You are a disappointment. You have no right to tell me to stop or to do anything. Deceiving everyone today at the festival with false promises of that date. The scheme. The gall of it all. I should have known the whispers around town about you and the Ballentine boy were true.” He clears his throat, realizing he is standing in front of his co-worker and not lashing me in private. “Bringing shame to the family name, nearly driving your mama into an early grave. Mark me, Clover, you will kill her.”

“Did it ever occur to you that Greenton is killing me? I’ve tried to do everything in my power to make this place something it’s not. The Ballentines don’t have anything to do with this. It’s between you and me. Let’s talk outside.” He has to know I’m trying to use distraction. I want him to focus his anger on me, someone he won’t hurt. Not Mr. Ballentine who might as well be a defenseless mole rat.

Daddy shakes his head, and I notice his tie is loose and his slacks are wrinkled. He’s out of sorts. “I’m here to talk to Earl about work, about him trying to steal my job from me.”

“It’s an election, Wally. I’m not stealing anything,” Earl Ballentine butts in, jaw clenching. “Let’s keep things fair and honorable. Like we always have.” There’s a tremor to his voice which leads me to believe things aren’t fair and honorable any longer. They probably haven’t been for years, and that makes the pit in my stomach turn into a boulder. Mercer appears in the grand foyer, a concerned look creasing his features. His mom puts a hand on his shoulder to tell him not to intervene.

My dad hangs his head, knuckles cracking by his side. “You don’t think I know how an election works?”

His steely gaze darts up to meet mine. “Bye, Clover,” Daddy says. “Best of luck keeping company with traitors.”

“That’s an awful thing to say,” Mr. Ballentine rasps. “A friend would be happy for me and wish me luck regardless.” Friends. Such an icy word that never means what it should in Greenton. Will that be different once I move away? Will others be my friend if I have nothing to offer?

“Luck,” Daddy scoffs. “You’ll need more than luck, Earl. You’ll need a God-sent miracle.”

Mr. Ballentine bristles. “Are you trying to intimidate me right now?”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

Daddy shakes his head just once. “A promise, Earl. A promise. Good evening, Mrs. Ballentine. My apologies for bringing work into the home. Forgive me.”

Mrs. Ballentine is taken aback by his show of kindness. She clears her throat and shows Daddy to the door. I bound down the stairs and follow my maker into the night. His SUV is idling in front of the house, driver’s side door still open. Kip isn’t here to follow him around and clean up after him.

“Daddy, please.”

He holds out a hand to stop me. A gesture he’s done thousands of times before. When I was a little girl, rushing his home office to show him the newest fashion on my Barbie doll, and when I wanted to ask permission to go on the mission to Africa to help with the hunger crisis, when I wanted to tell him about a homeless girl I saw in town square. Wallace Wellsley wouldn’t hear of any of those things from his daughter, giving her the palm of his hand and a twitch of his lip to show his annoyance. I grab his wrist and force it down, out of my face.

“I might be a disappointment and I might bring you shame by leaving, but you need to get a couple things straight.” I breathe in a rush, my heart banging against my ribcage as my father studies me through slits. “I am not killin’ Mama.” I shake my head. “The Ballentines aren’t traitors, and I may have been sneaking around your back, but it was because you never would have listened to me anyway. You don’t even want to listen to me now.”

He sighs loudly. “You’re right about that.” He places a hand on the door and swings into his SUV. “Watch yourself. You may not want to have anything to do us in your

quest to leave this place behind, but you wear the Wellsley name, Clover, and regardless of what you think you want, I know you'll be back. This is your home. It's where you belong. Go on and move somewhere else to figure it out." He clears his throat, placing both of his hands on the steering wheel. "But don't bring home any mistakes you can't pack in luggage."

I swallow down the lump in my throat and close his door without responding. I watch his taillights as they disappear down the drive and turn onto the main road. Maybe words so cruel and sharp would give others pause, but they drive me forward—propel me in the solidarity of my decision.

Mercer comes up behind me, his warm hand on my shoulder. "Well now that we've got the semantics out of the way, we have a twenty-four-hour drive on the horizon. Let's rest up."

"I'm sorry you had to hear that," I whisper into the warm night air.

He breathes heavily, bending his head into my neck, lips against the skin behind my ear. "I'm sorry you had to grow up with that."

I turn in his arms to face him. "Twenty-four hours, huh? Good thing I packed my knitting needles."

Mercer quirks a brow. "You did not."

"What else did you think I was going to do all day in a car with you?"

I press my hands against his hard chest. That one brow of his waggles up and down. "Have you heard of such a thing as road head?"

I play at mock disgust but ask him to tell me the details of how it works without

creating a traffic accident. He does, voice low, and I almost forget my daddy's threats.

"Sounds dangerous," I conclude.

He ushers me into the house. "Not nearly as dangerous as that there knitting hobby of yours." Mercer winks at me as he closes and locks the door behind us.

"My legs are going to fall right off," I whine. Mercer turns up his blasted, annoying music instead of answering my fifth cry for help this hour. "I'm going to die inside this car." I groan loudly and open the window to let my hand float along the breeze. I was okay the first fifteen hours, and then we switched so Mercer could take a quick nap. I drove for four blissful hours. Now that he's back at the helm, the militant atmosphere has returned. I'm only allowed to drink every once in a while, because I refuse to pee in a zip lock baggy and sling it out the window. I told him I'd squat outside, behind a tree, but he said that would ruin our time. The GPS is merely displaying the time to beat, not the amount of time it will take to arrive at our destination. I capped my water after that and have resigned myself to misery.

"Poor, poor pet," he chirps back at me. "At least you'll die in the confines of riches. How much did this car cost anyway?" We've talked about almost everything under the sun. I'm surprised this is the first time my car has come up in conversation.

I'd toss this car off a cliff if it meant I never had to sit in it again at this point. We only have thirty minutes of driving left and my whole body is stiff and aching. I shrug. "I don't know, it was a gift." Honesty concealing a lie. The true Southern way.

Mercer passes me a look. The one that says he doesn't believe me. "I'm just curious. I don't judge you for your insane wealth. How much? Come on."

“You called it insane,” I fire back. “That’s judging.”

He nods. “It is quite insane, but I didn’t call you insane.”

I mess with the top knot on top of my head. “Less than a hundred...I think.”

“Dollars? Pesos? Quid?” Mercer throws out, knowing darn well what I mean.

I grunt. “Thousand. Because for some reason you want to hear me say it. Less than one hundred thousand dollars.” One hundred and seven if we’re being specific. I only know because I saw the figure on the invoice after it came back from the shop.

He shakes his head and readjusts his grip on the steering wheel. “And you’ll drive it to the salon to cut hair. You’re a walking oxymoron. Pointing out, again, I’m not judging you, just giving you a plebian point of view. This car costs more than some folk’s houses, Four Leaf Clover. Your co-workers work to pay bills. No offense, but you don’t know what that feels like.”

Mercer is pointing out obvious things. “You don’t think I know that? How do you think Goldie got the funds to buy the salon to begin with? I’ll be with her, and yeah, so, maybe the stylists that work there won’t understand, but she will. Goldie did the same thing I’m doing. She just figured it out earlier than I did.” And her parents supported her decision, I think. “The car is just a car.”

“Only someone with wealth can say this is just a car.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

Rolling up my window, I fiddle with the controls on the A/C. “You came from blessed circumstances, too. Don’t act like you were running around the corner store with jiffy feet and hand-me-down pants.”

Mercer chortles. “Jiffy feet. You know people up here won’t understand some of your...colloquialisms, right?”

“Who doesn’t know what jiffy feet are? That’s an obvious one. Black feet from running around the jiffy store barefoot.”

He pauses his laughter only to inform me that people up north may not even know what a jiffy store is. I’ve visited other places around the United States over the years, but I never compared myself to others because I knew we weren’t like them. Not in any way, shape, or form. Now that I’ll be living in a completely different climate, these are actual things I’ll need to take into consideration, or get ready to do some apologizing and explaining.

I see hedges shaping the words Cape Cod and I know we’re finally nearing our destination and my backside cheers in relief.

“Now that we’re almost here, give me the summary.”

“Summary of what?” I ask, glancing at him from the side. He’s grinning wide, one wrist on top of the wheel, the other hand fisted and against the side of his head. It makes me happy to know that he is in fact just as uncomfortable as I am. He’s just used to living in barbaric conditions.

“The summary of our drive. We’ve been stuck in a car together; without any road head, might I add. Tell me what you’ve learned about me. I’ll return the favor after.”

“With road head?” I quip.

“If you want, but was thinking you’d want to know the important things I learned about you.”

Stretching my neck, I grab my Chapstick from the pocket in the door and smear some more on. “Fine. Go on. Tell me what you’ve learned.” I pull my legs up underneath my body and clasp my hands in my lap.

He glances at me, a quick, just to be sure gesture, and places both hands on the wheel. He opens his mouth to speak, and closes it again, his strong jaw working. “You didn’t wake up like this,” he says, clearing his throat. “This has always been inside you. The will. The fight. The desire for something more has always been waiting. You aren’t letting your fears dictate which self you allow yourself to embrace anymore. You can do this, I know, because the same things live inside me. Have always been there.”

He stuns me silent. After a beat or two, I nod. “That’s pretty deep.”

“Did you expect some kiddy pool stuff?”

I shake my head. “No, but how did you figure all of that out.”

I can tell he’s not going to hold back, and I brace against whatever is coming next. “Growing up, everyone always assumed you were acting too good, or you thought you were better than others because of the family you were born into.” He makes a turn, and memories from my past trickle in. He’s right, and again, I never gave it a second thought. “It wasn’t because of the family you were born into. You acted that way because you were always destined for more than what others expected of you.

Sure, you never dated any of the guys in high school and everyone thought you were an Ice Queen because of it.”

I hold a finger in the air. “Daddy wouldn’t let me date,” I explain. “And I was always friendly to everyone. I was a friend to everyone.”

He nods. “I know that. We are a product of our surroundings and somehow you managed to get it.”

“Get what?” I ask, swallowing the love sized lump pressing against my throat.

“Life. What’s it about. Helping others. Saving the people who can’t save themselves. Even with the pageants when you were younger, I remember you had the same platform. Helping. Four Leaf Clover, you’re a helper in a world of taking. You aren’t anything like what people think you are.”

“I appreciate that. You saying that. It’s easy to forget when you’re so busy living life. Or maybe the helping gets all foggy while I’ve been trying to find my own happiness because it’s such a selfish thing. To abandon causes.” I think of the shelter and a pang of regret hits me square in the chest.

“It will always be there, and those people will always have somewhere to go because of you. You did more for Greenton than any politician could hope to achieve. Be proud.”

“That’s all you learned about me on this drive? Sounds like you’ve known this for a while.”

He lifts and lowers one bulky shoulder. “Needed an excuse to compliment you.”

“You never need an excuse to compliment a lady.”

Mercer reaches for my hand over the console. I take it. “You like cake over ice cream, white wine over most everything else, you love your family, you’ve always wanted a bird, but never had the courage to kill something other than a plant.”

I squeeze his hand. “Hey, that’s not nice. I mean, it’s true though and I hate that.”

His thumb slides across the pad of my hand. “You only like old country music, not that new stuff.” Mercer nods to the radio where some hip, new country song is playing.

“I’m a purist. What can I say?”

“You are pure, Clover and it scares me. You scare me.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

It's my turn to glance over. I see it then. "You're scared of little ole' me?" I razz, tilting my head.

He snuffs out a breath. "You have no idea." Mercer turns down a small street next to a mom and pop grocer. The speed limit is fifteen, and after being on the interstate for so long, this feels like a crawling pace. "I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do." My father's words echo, and I think they may have gotten to Mercer Ballentine.

He pulls into a neatly kept duplex and I know we've arrived. The houses look completely different from what I'm used to and as I take note of the differences, the words I want to say twist in my mind.

"Mercer," I say. He puts the car in park and looks at me. The fact that we're stopped and neither of us are exiting the vehicle immediately says a lot about what we're feeling. "Most of the time I'm on autopilot because that's what it takes to get through a busy day—a busy life. There are moments of happiness, a joke shared with someone via text, that first sip of latte in the morning, my favorite show, but they're fleeting things, just part of the script I've accepted." His beautiful eyes flicker with an indescribable emotion. "For the first time in my life, I'm feeling what it's like to live because I'm happy. I am in love. Every moment is filled with exhilaration and promise." I blink away a tear. "And you're to blame for it."

A blinding grin crosses his face. "There you go blaming me again."

"I'm serious," I say. "My legs are about to go gangrene and fall off, but I want you to know that I choose you. I want you. Because you're one of the kindest, most

honorable people I know. Because you are strong and vulnerable at the same time, you're a Southern purist reformed in only the best kind of ways. Mercer, you are ungodly beautiful, and your heart is the softest place I've ever landed. You are my decision and if that still scares you, well we have some different problems to tackle."

"That's what you learned about me then?"

"That's the gist of it," I say. "Everyone knows you're awesome. I just realized you're my kind of awesome."

Mercer lays a hand on the door handle, and I do the same. "You can't get gangrene by sitting in a car too long, by the way."

Raising my brows, I say, "I know." I don't know, but I do now. We exit the car and I tell Mercer where Goldie put the hide-a-key. It's under the girl garden gnome, next to the yellow tulips. He grabs the key while stretching out his legs. I make a show of dancing, arms and legs jiggling to get the kinks out. "I moved too quick and now I have to pee," I exclaim, crossing my legs at the ankles.

He slides the key into the lock, and I can see his hesitance. He opens the door and holds out an arm for me to go first. I feel Mercer's eyes burning a hole in the side of my head as I take in my new home so different than my last. The bathroom is easy to find, and I stare at the wall as I pee quickly and wander back to the living room. There's a sofa, a coffee table, and the small kitchen is feet away. I hear the door click shut and Mercer announces he's going to find the thermostat to get the air pumping. I realize minutes have passed and I haven't said a word.

"Mercer," I call out, standing in front of the queen-sized bed in the sole bedroom. Under my breath, I whisper, "Farm truck."

He's right next to me and I didn't realize it. "How bad is it on a scale of one to having

a panic attack and requiring medical services?”

“I love it. It’s perfect, I just need to ask you a question.”

He snakes an arm around my waist. “Anything.”

I swallow hard. “I pretty much told you I’m in love with you and you didn’t really reciprocate.”

He spins me to look at him, hands on my shoulders. “I feel the same. I thought I made my feelings abundantly clear. I rode in a car with you for a solid day.”

My heart pounds as I gaze into his eyes. “You love me enough to help me paint the walls in this joint?”

He chuckles, lifting one brow. “Really? The walls? That’s it? You know when you rent you can’t just paint the walls, right? You have to ask your landlord.”

“It’s the same color as my bedroom in Greenton. Any other color. Literally. Any other color. You pick it. We cover the walls with it. Goldie will let me paint.”

He nods, looking around, taking mental measurements. He rattles off how much paint and supplies we’ll need and moves into the kitchen, calling out questions as he goes. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t jarring realizing that this is my new home. There is no pomp or circumstance in between these walls. There isn’t priceless artwork or rugs that you can’t walk on top of. The furniture, while new, as Goldie promised, came from one of those stores inside a mall, not a custom store overseas. I wander into the living room and see Mercer, hands perched on his hips, gazing at the blank space above the couch.

“I got an idea for up there,” he says, shaking a finger at the wall.

“Yeah?” I reply.

“You trust me?”

“Obviously, I do. I spent a day in the car with you,” I say, smirking. “By the way, how far away do you live from here?” I know the Cape is a small town, but when compared to Greenton it’s probably ten times the size. The Cape might as well be a metropolis in comparison to what I’m used to.

Taking my hand in his, he walks us to the front bay window and stabs a finger at the house across the street. It is a two-story house with light green doors and shutters. It’s the same style as my duplex, but much larger. “I’d fathom it’s about sixty yards door to door,” he says. “Give or take.” The relief I feel is tinged with something else, something inappropriate and carnal. He’ll be close to me. “But I’m leaving, and it will be empty until I get back. Maybe you can keep it up for me?”

“I can’t believe you’re that close. It’s so ironic...that even here we’ll be in spitting distance. Why don’t you have any roommates? It looks like it’s big enough.”

He clears his throat. “Well, it was what was available when I needed a place and well, I’ve gotten to an age where when I’m home, I want my peace, and things my own way. I considered getting a roommate when I first purchased it, but it’s easier to just worry about myself.”

“Why didn’t you tell me when I told you the address of my place?”

Mercer sighs. “I figured it would be best to tell you just like this.” He runs a hand through his hair and pulls his arm across his chest to stretch.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“I have an addendum to what I’ve learned about you. You’re this loud, rowdy Southern boy who is actually a quiet recluse who prefers seclusion to company.”

“Should I be offended?” he edges, stretching his other arm.

After taking in his house, I spin to my own meager accommodations. “Only if you don’t want company.”

His grin widens. “I want your company any day of the week that I can walk around naked and don’t have to label my peanut butter in black Sharpie.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know what to do with those two things in the same sentence together, but I’ll take it. I’m going to call Mama to let her know I’m here safely and then Goldie to thank her for everything.”

“I’ll grab stuff from the trunk and then we can hit the hardware store. Oh, and Four Leaf Clover?”

Smiling at my nickname, I focus my gaze on his. A bout of self-conscious dread hits me when I think of what I must look like because of the way he’s studying me—eyes sliding up and down, all over my body. “What?” I ask, stomping a sneaker-clad foot in mock irritation.

He swallows hard. “I fell in love with you in Greenton, but I love you most right now. Looking like that, standing here, with me, giving me something to live for.”

It’s a lot to hear, it’s a lot to acknowledge, and it’s what I’ve prayed for my entire

life. Someone who sees me and still wants to keep me when my makeup comes off.

Chapter Thirteen

Clover

“GOLDIE IS ONher way over here right now,” I shriek. “Fix it!”

“I can’t fix a hole in the drywall in five minutes, darlin’,” Mercer chirps back, smile still wide even though I’m perfectly horrified. “You have to admit, your sweet backside driving a hole in the wall is pretty funny.” I cross my arms over my paint-covered chest. “Come on, Clover. This is easy to fix.” He gestures to the butt sized hole mid-wall in the hallway. When I don’t respond, he laughs again. “I’m telling you I’ll fix it in no time, just not in five minutes without supplies. It was an accident. You tripped.”

“Stop laughing, Mercer.”

“I bet she’ll find this just as funny as I do. I mean, Clover Wellsley doing home improvements, painting the walls, stumbles over the paint tray and crashes into a wall, ass first.”

“Some kind of lady I’m turning into,” I huff out, just as I hear the screech of the doorbell. I wince. “Can we fix that sound next?” I ask, uncrossing my arms and offering a weak grin.

He shakes his head. “Still using those Southern ways to get what you want, are you? You forget where we’re at?”

“Are you telling me no?” I fire back.

He stands, paintbrush tipped in white in one hand. “Quite the contrary. I’ll always have a hard time telling you no, it may require a bit more than asking with a sweet smile on your face though. I’ll get back to you on the terms. Go grab the door.” Mercer winks.

My heart races as I think about tonight when I’ve washed the paint from every square inch of my body and I have Mercer alone, not confined in a moving vehicle. I’m exhausted, but something about the promise of later drives me forward.

I pat my hair and feel dried paint stuck in clumps as I rush toward the door. I pull it open and make sure that pageant smile is in place. “Goldie,” I exclaim.

“Oh Clover,” my cousin returns, but then her eyes peruse over my clothes and hair. “Are you okay?”

I slide my hands down Mercer’s old t-shirt I have tucked into a pair of jeans. “I’m doing some painting, remember,” I say, smile slipping a bit. I texted her to let her know about the paint color and my intentions. “Mercer is helping me of course, like I mentioned. It’s going to be beautiful.”

Goldie pulls me into a tentative hug. “Wow. Okay, well, you look as beautiful as always.” She pulls away to look me in the eye. “Still the picture of youth.” Goldie is in her forties and she is obsessed with youth. Being young. Anyone who is younger than her. How old everyone around her is. I’d forgotten how much it drives her personality. “I figured Mercer would paint and you’d sip sweet tea from the couch.”

I offer a fake, high pitched laugh. “And not get in on this DIY action? A full-on life change, Goldie,” I remind her. Mercer rounds the corner and I see Goldie’s eyes widen. Sure, she’s been up here for a decade and maybe her Southern roots have

morphed into Northern steel, but I know what the look crossing her face means and I don't like it one bit.

She crosses to him, her hand extended. Mercer wipes his hands on a rag he pulls from his back pocket. "Goldie," he says, shaking her hand. "It's been a really long time. Looks like you're doing right fine for yourself."

"You look good enough to eat, honey. I heard you bought the house across the street, but haven't seen you around," she coos at Mercer releasing his hand in favor of air kissing both of his cheeks. Mercer looks confused for a second but goes along with my cousin who seems to just have remembered her Southern manners. "When did you graduate Greenton High?" she asks, stepping away from him when I walk up.

He takes my hand. "Same year as Clover. Yes, I bought it, but I'm deployed most of the time. Or have been, I should say."

She nods, lips pulling down in the corners, face lined and weary. "Spring chickens you are," she rasps, honing in on our ages once again. "I confess I wasn't expecting to see the both of you here like this. Doing...work. I could have called someone to get it done. There's really no need to waste your time with menial tasks. I want Clover to be comfortable." Goldie lifts her head higher. "It's not going to be easy for her to adjust, so any comfort I can help her with is a win in my book."

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

Anger burns in my chest, but my heart wonders if she's right. Mercer looks at me. "Ah, I think we're having fun. It was Clover's idea here to get it done as soon as possible."

"Your mama called me. She said you didn't want to video chat and she is wondering if you were living in a third world country brothel. You really should just open the flood gates and let them know that this is it." Goldie pauses, eyes flicking over my face. "Speaking from experience, of course. It's easier for you and for everyone else the sooner they get used to the idea that you're serious about this."

"I know," I say, feeling scolded. "I wanted to get a few touches put on the house before I gave her the tour, you know? Make her feel good about where I'm living. We just got in this morning. If I wait a few days, I think she'll live."

Goldie nods, moving into the kitchen. I notice the way her eyes roved over Mercer's body the moment before. This time, he notices too. He smirks at my irritation. "This is one of my rental properties, so your neighbor has been screened. He is a good guy, works as a cop in town. If you need anything, you know since Mercer is deployed most of the time, he'd be a good person to ask."

"Oh," I say, gaze sliding to Mercer who is standing next to me. His back is straight, and his face takes on a stoicism that I imagine is his way of hiding what he's feeling about that cop next door. "That's good to know."

"She can call me if she needs anything," Mercer adds. It's a weak sentiment, but it pains me he feels the need to add it in. What is the possibility of him helping me with a problem or issue from wherever in the world he'll be? Time zones aside, Mercer

might as well be trapped in a well for how much he'll be able to be there for me once he leaves.

I squeeze his arm. "I'll be fine on my own. Don't worry."

Goldie laughs, as she opens and closes cabinets double-checking to make sure I'll have everything I need. She rattles off a few things, adding them to the mental list she's making. "Clover, I love you, baby, but you can't be naïve. You will need help." Her eyes flick to the hole in the wall.

"I'm going to fix that," Mercer chimes in, shaking his head. "My elbow went through it. Sort of stumbled back after painting the bottom of the wall." His gaze slides to me. "Must be tired from that drive."

I laugh and go up on my tiptoes to peck him on his lips. He tightens his hold on my waist and my mouth waters, dying for more. Goldie clears her throat, and we pull apart. "Well, aren't you two just the picture of young love."

Mercer breathes out noisily and replies. "We're thirty, not teenagers."

"Well you look like teenagers," Goldie fires back, hands perched on her hips. "Might as well be." Her brown eyes fix on Mercer's hand on my body. "This fling that you both are entertaining is great, but you are going back to war. Have you turned on the news lately, Clover?"

I've been so wrapped up in my new relationship with Mercer that I have neglected news headlines. That's not a new occurrence. When there's so much evil and bad happening in our world, it's easy for me to turn a blind eye, but now it affects me more than it ever has. I remember the terrorist attack that happened here in Cape Cod, at the Harbour Point SEAL base and my stomach flips. "There's always war. That's just the world we live in."

“Now you’re holding hands with the front line,” Goldie deadpans. Automatically, my gaze slides to our hands and my pulse begins to pound in my ears.

I calm my breath. “I know.”

“There’s no need to upset Clover,” Mercer adds. “I’ll be fine. I’m always fine. Nothing is going to happen to me.”

“Why does that sound like a lie to placate a young child?” I say, trying to disentangle our entwined fingers. He doesn’t let me.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. I want you to understand how different life is going to be for you here. Without him. Without your family. Without everything you’ve grown accustomed to. It would be easier for you if you started this off alone. Figured it all out before making life more complicated with a relationship.”

“That’s not any of your business, ma’am,” Mercer inserts, posture straightening. “Clover doesn’t need me or her family, but she could use a bit of positivity from the person who will be here with her.”

I squeeze his hand before I release him. “I can handle this. Let’s talk outside,” I say, approaching my cousin. There’s a sliding glass door next to the kitchen that leads outside, and I have to push trucking hard to get it to slide open. When we’re outside, I look up to the sky and breathe in fresh air.

“Thank you, Goldie. For getting me out of Greenton. This means a lot to me. I want you to know that.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you or Mercer. It’s just I follow the news closely and I see what the SEAL teams are doing here and there and everywhere, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Lightly, I grab one of her hands. “Nothing can possibly hurt me more than living a life that isn’t my own. I’d rather take my chances at something scary than live a lie for another second. I want to paint walls.” I nod at the door beside us. “I want to wear a man’s t-shirt.” I pinch the fabric on my chest. “I want to cut and dye hair. Have Sunday dinner each week. Make a dessert and actually eat it. Love a man because I fell for him, not because he’ll garner influence for the Wellsley family. My reasons and my life.”

She sighs. “I get it. I was you once. I’m older,” Goldie says. “I have experience you don’t. Not trying to force my old lady knowledge on you, it’s hard to keep my mouth shut sometimes.”

“I appreciate the wisdom, I do, and you are not an old lady. But I need to mess up and find balance on my own.”

Goldie picks paint out of my hair, heavily mascaraed eyes wincing as she plucks. “I’m sorry. I’ll do better at helping without inserting my own opinions. Okay?”

“Thank you,” I reply.

“You love him?” Her face registers shock and awe. It’s obvious she truly did assume this was a fling.

Blowing out a breath, I flex my fingers by my sides. “So much, it terrifies me. I’ll tell you what, it’s been a crazy two weeks.”

“Two weeks? You can’t fall in love in two weeks!” Goldie exclaims, then covers her mouth when she realizes she shouted. “That doesn’t happen in the real world. That’s the kind of tall tale the town mystic talks about, sweetie.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

I laugh and hold my arms out. “I’m living it. It’s one of those inexplicable things. Like the craft room in old Bette Mueller’s house. I can’t explain it, but I’ve never been surer of anything in my life. It’s real. It feels like it would have happened no matter what I wanted. It’s been a cosmic pain in the rear. Imagine the look on Mama’s face. I wouldn’t tell you unless I was sure.” That brings a snarl of a smile to her lips.

Goldie and I speak for a few more minutes. Mostly about the salon and when I can stop by and begin my training, but we do talk a bit more about Greenton and who is still there and who is doing what with whom. The mood shifts after I stand up to her in my own way. We’ve come to an unspoken agreement about Mercer and my choices. If she thinks I’m going to follow any more rules, she’s mistaken. When we enter the house, Mercer has resumed painting, and he pretends he’s not listening as I walk Goldie out. He does shout a polite goodbye because feelings be darned, manners matter.

“Let me know if you need anything. I’ll get you the kitchen items you’re missing, and maybe you need something to wear to the salon?” Goldie asks, eyes roving my outfit once again. “All black, remember?”

“That’s such a dreadful, boring color. Can’t we have flamboyant Friday or something?”

Goldie quirks a brow. “There’s no taffeta and lace in the North, honey. You might be able to find it in black if you search online,” she says. It’s a joke, but she notices my eyes light up because she shakes her head once and pats me on the head before heading down the walk to her car parked on the street.

“Nice car, by the way,” Goldie, says over her shoulder. “Very inconspicuous.”

I roll my eyes, thinking I might have to sell it to blend in. My eyes catch on Mercer’s house across the street and I narrow my eyes trying to see in the open windows.

Opening the front door, I shout. “Can we take a break? I want a tour of your house.”

That stoic, pale face Mercer donned when Goldie spoke to him is still there. “Sure, if that’s what you’d like to do. Listen though,” he says, swallowing hard, jaw sliding back and forth. “She’s not wrong. I’m angry at what she said, but she’s not wrong.”

“Are you an attorney now with that false positive? Can’t you say she’s right?”

His lips twitch. “It’s dangerous. I will complicate things. You’ll be waiting for me to come home and...maybe your cousin is right.” I think of the worst-case scenario and know she can’t be right. There’s no possible way.

I lift my chin. “Mercer Ballentine, you are not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting. I am a grown woman and if I want to wait for you, I will. I won’t ask the cop for any help if that’s what you’re worrying over.”

“It’s more than the guy next door, but if you say you’re ready for the long-distance and the lonely nights, I’ll trust you.” I don’t believe him. He’s hiding something behind the smile and warm embrace he wraps around my body. My place is small so we’re nearly through painting, with only a section of the bathroom and the hole in the wall to attend to. I change the subject to his house to avoid any more uncomfortable conversations today.

“I don’t really recall how I left the place,” Mercer says, clearing his throat as he grabs his big bag out of my trunk. “It might be tornado status over there.”

“How much stuff can you have in there? You haven’t lived there very long,” I ask, as we cross the street and walk up the narrow brick path leading to his front door.

He turns the key and pushes the door open. “You’d be surprised how much stuff you can accumulate when you have the space for it.” It’s dusty inside, the motes floating around searching for somewhere to land. The house has been shuttered for a long time and it shows. I’m immediately struck with how tidy it is. It’s not a tornado at all. He said that in denial or at the very least to manage my expectations.

“It’s nice, Mercer,” I admit, nodding, walking deeper into the entrance. The kitchen is modern, and it opens to the living room. “Why did you say it would be a mess?”

“It’s not what you’re used to. Not at all. Didn’t want you expecting a palace.” If I thought the mood called for a joke, I’d tell him I knew it wasn’t a palace from the outside, but I can tell he wouldn’t want to hear that. “I can’t offer you what your typical suitors can. I know that means something to you. Just a lowly government employee.” He smirks. There’s nothing lowly about him and he knows it.

There’s nothing I’d change about his place. The wooden floors are dusty, albeit beautiful, the colors are bright and cheery, and the setting sun streams in from double-paned rounded windows filling the home with light. “You’re right,” I say, turning to face him. His hands are in the pockets of his jeans, and unlike me, he doesn’t have a splatter of paint anywhere on his body. It’s unnerving. “You offer more than my typical suitors because you have my whole heart.” A ray of burnt sun cuts a path across his face. His blue eyes are illuminated, and I see the emotion behind his spoken words. “I love you, and I’ve never been in a place I’d rather be more.”

“That a fact, darlin’?” Mercer’s drawl thickens and my panties flood with wetness. It’s embarrassing that’s all it takes, but my mind flicks to sex, his body, what he can do with it, immediately. “Well how about you get washed up at your house, then

come back over to mine? I'll clean up a bit and we can christen the upstairs." He juts his chin to the chairs behind his shoulder. He said christen, so that means I'm the first here. The insecure woman rears and flips her hair off her shoulder. Yeah, girl. That's a victory. It has to be with a man like Mercer. Even my only family member here made goo-goo eyes at the man. I get to have him all to myself.

"You mean, finally?" I shout. "Finally?" I clap my hands, and then an awful realization hits and I furrow my brow and look down at my shoes while I do the math.

"It's up to you now. You tell me your ready, I'm game," Mercer says, licking his lips. "We don't have to," he adds when I don't respond. "There's no rush."

"I want to," I say, sucking my bottom lip into my mouth. "My monthly. It's due. What if, you know, it comes while we're happening," I say, motioning between our bodies. "And I ruin it, and oh my goodness I'd die of embarrassment if my first time resembled something out of a bloody action film. Can you imagine?"

Mercer shuts me up with a kiss, his tongue separating my lips and filling my mouth. The warmth and wetness forces me to moan out a haphazard cry. There hasn't been nearly enough of this lately. When I'm good and quiet, he pulls away, that lazy, turned on gleam in his eye. "Permission to speak frankly about the female body, ma'am?"

"Don't ma'am me, Mercer. Yes. Always speak freely with me," I return, gaze on his lips.

"If you think I'm put off by a little blood, well, uh, you're wrong. That said, I want your first time to be everything you want it to be. We're not in our parents' houses, or in a vehicle. We have all that seclusion I'm so fond of now, so it's your call." He's not saying what we're both thinking. He's leaving for war in a week or less and our time together is dwindling.

How did I envision losing my virginity? Before falling in love with Mercer, I'd say on my wedding night with a man who I didn't feel a fraction of what I feel right now. It would be commerce. "Just like this is what I envisioned," I say, mind mending my previous assumptions. "Like this is what I want. I want real, Mercer. Maybe real is messy and wild and nothing what I thought it would be. I'm leading with my heart here, and I want you to have all of it. All of me. We don't have a lot of time and I think if you're not afraid of blood, neither am I."

His grin twists into something humorous, but I can tell he's excited. "Alright then. Plans stand. Meet me back here with your game face. I'll bring the tarp."

"Tarp?" I rasp, arms stilling by my sides.

He holds out his hands. "It was a joke." Mercer laughs. "You should have seen your face. Do you really think I'd break out a tarp? I'm intent on making this perfect, not a scene from a triple-x film."

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“Not funny. Maybe I changed my mind now that you’re making jokes,” I proclaim, stepping away. He steps toward me, dipping his head into my neck. He doesn’t kiss me, he just breathes, exhaling, sending waves of goosebumps glossing across every inch of my skin. “Or maybe not,” I sigh. I can feel and hear his chuckle and it drives a ragged breath from my mouth.

“Go get ready, Clover,” he says my name like it’s an order. One I want to take. The ache is growing every second that passes.

I nod, cast my eyes forward and take myself back home in a lust-filled haze of longing.

There are self-served pep talks and weak promises as I shower and shave my legs. There are also nerves and foreboding as I think about calling Tannie for tips and tricks. That’s the logical thing to do, yet I know my body will tell me exactly what to do. What it has wanted to do since the moment he kissed me. Everything about my life is changing. Might as well start with this.

When I’m dressed in a teal dress that flounces against my knees, and coated in lotion, I take my shaking hands and trembling legs to my front door. While I blow dried my hair, I sent a few texts back and forth with Winnie and Tannie about trivial things to calm my nerves. I open my door and lock it, tossing my keyring into my tote bag. Turning to face Mercer’s house, I notice all of the vehicles. They’re lining the street, parked in his driveway—some are even on my side of the street. I was too distracted to notice before they popped up right under my nose.

“Bitty varmint,” I hiss under my breath, glancing at my watch. I left two and a half

hours ago and now his house is chock full of people. I consider calling him, but that would make me look stupid, I'm right here, might as well join the party and ask questions later.

It's raucous, there must be several Bluetooth speakers blowing out music at top volume. Sliding into the door, I hesitantly glance around. The dining room table is now a beer pong table, three men on each side. I went to a few parties back in my early twenties when my friends in college coerced me into it, and I determined quickly they weren't for me. Not in any way, shape or form. Some big, burly dude who reeks of alcohol bumps into me on his way out and splashes beer down my well-moisturized chest.

He grabs my wrist. "Sorry, sorry. Wasn't watching where I was going," he says, Northern accent thick. His eyes flick over me in an appraisal and he quirks a brow. "Okay," he adds, swallowing hard. "I must have had way too much to drink and drive. Uber it is."

"Nice to meet you too," I say to the closing door. Turning, I weave my way around another man telling a story to a group of more large men. Guns are involved in the narrative, and if I wasn't sure before, I am now. These are Mercer's workfriends.

When I finally get to the kitchen, I hear my name. Or rather, I hear someone behind me say, "You must be Clover from down south."

I spin on my heel. I'm face to face with a rogue looking man. Not unattractive, but also not fiery handsome at first glance. "What gave you that idea?" I return, idly wondering how long it took to grow a face so full of hair.

"I'm Remy," he says instead, holding out a massive hand.

Shaking it, I reply, "I am Clover. Clover Wellsley." I release his grip. "Where is

Mercer?" I ask, clearing my throat. "We had plans tonight." I grab a dishtowel off the counter and dab my dress and chest while cursing under my breath. I'll have to find a dry cleaner sooner than anticipated.

Rexy glances around the party and fixes me with a smile. "We surprised him with a welcome home slash farewell gathering. We've been waiting for him to get back to Cape Cod for a while now. Seems he got a bit held up down in Alabama. Something about a woman with a weed for a name. Some pretty bird that bewitched him." His lips twitch. "To answer your question, he's probably taking shots in the upstairs office with the boys."

I smile for the first time since I walked into the house. "Bewitched, huh? His word or yours?"

He tilts his head to the side to examine me further. "I have a lot of words, but who's counting? Your accent is thicker than Mercer's is."

Self-consciously, I run a hand through my soft hair. "That's what you get in Alabama, I'm afraid. Born and raised. Mercer is just better at hiding his accent," I remark. "Also, I'll have you know that clover isn't a weed."

"I spray it with herbicide at my house," Rexy replies. "Fucks with my lawn."

I nod. "Fair enough. I'm going to find Mercer."

Tossing the towel back on the counter, I readjust the bag on my shoulder and walk past him. He clears his throat loudly. "It was the dress," Rexy calls to my back.

I narrow my eyes at him over my shoulder. "What?"

"The lace gave you away, Clover. No one wears stuff like that here. How can I

explain it in a way you'd understand?" Remy gestures with his hands and then holds up one finger. "I've got it," he exclaims, smirking. "You're like a fish out of water."

"I'm not stupid, you don't have to talk to me like that. Moreover, it's not polite."

Remy motions to someone across the room and my eyes trail the movement. Another man is now looking at me like I'm the mortal enemy.

"Pardon me for being rude," Remy says, stepping toward me. "I'm going to have to say you are a bit daft if you don't leave Mercer and go back to the pit whence you came." He swallows hard, and my heart slams against my ribcage. "He might be bewitched, but I assure you all he needs is a little exorcism to cure that ailment."

The threat looms in the air between us, eviscerating the last strings of excitement I had for this night alone with Mercer. Without another word, I hit the stairs at a quick clip. There are only four doors at the top and they're all open, so I peek in the first and see an empty bedroom, the next is the bathroom and the other side of the hall is where the noise is coming from. Peering around the frame from an angle I can't be seen, I survey the room. Mercer is sitting in a beat-up desk chair that's been pulled over to the window. His feet are propped up. There are four other guys in here, two sitting on the desk, and two others rifling through a cabinet pulling out bottles of alcohol. Two women are sitting on a futon against the wall, hands gesturing wildly as they speak to each other.

I hear a man call over to them, asking what they want to drink. Sierra and Luella are their names and like Remy said, they don't look anything like me. They are sleek and modern to my frilly lace. They are cool and refined, and I look like a show poodle trying to lose her virginity to a man way out of her league. Love be damned, right? People have to match. They have to go together. They have to fit. I didn't fit in Greenton, but oh my goodness, I don't fit in here either. I recall Goldie's comments about buying black and getting rid of my dresses and I think she was downplaying to

save my feelings. Big time.

Rexy booms from behind me. “Look who I found wandering around downstairs.” He puts a hand on my shoulder and guides me into the room. Farm truck.

Mercer’s eyes light up when he sees me. Thank God for small miracles. “Clover.” He rushes out of his seat and crosses to me. “How long have you been here? I thought you would call.” I should have called, I think. “The guys who were still in town threw this surprise party. I had no idea. I should have called you when they showed up.” He repeats his first question, a cautious thoughtfulness in his eyes.

“Just a bit. I haven’t been here long,” I reply, smoothing my hands down the side of this awful choice of a dress. “Got a beer spilled on me, and met your friend here,” I say, making the word friend sound like a question. “Guess I’m a bit late to the party.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

One of the girls on the futon pipes up. “Rexy, my dear brother is down on manners. I’m Luella,” she says while standing. “And this is Sierra. Sierra is with Grange over there. The one with the naked lady on the back of his shirt,” she adds, nodding in the direction of the guy, “And I’m a free agent,” Luella finishes, smiling widely, eyes flicking to Mercer.

My stomach flips as I try to find the confidence that usually comes to me so easily. “I’m Clover Wellsley, and I’ve known Mercer...all of our lives.” We shake hands and her grip is weak. I don’t miss it as she casts a calculated glare in Rexy’s direction, and then nods pleasantly at me.

“Clover is my girlfriend,” Mercer announces and I’m not sure he’s done me any favors. “She’s moved here from Alabama. Maybe you girls can help her out while I’m gone. Give her the lay of the land. Entertain her like good hosts?”

I’d like to shake Mercer silly, because he’s saying things that would be passable in Greenton, but they won’t fly here, and he should know it. The women are looking at me like I’m an invader of the worst kind, and honestly, I can’t blame them.

“Yeah, I will,” Sierra says, and I don’t detect any hostility in her tone.

Luella snaps her gaze to her friend. “Sure, we will, Mercer. Anything you’d like. Where are you living, Clover?” Everyone’s eyes are on me. Not with the awestruck looks of jealousy, more like I’m a caged animal in the zoo they’re trying to categorize into species and genus.

“My place is just across the street. My cousin Goldie owns it and a salon. Maybe

you've heard of Blunt? I'll be doing hair there, too." When the women react positively to the name of the salon, I talk about that more, distancing myself from the awkward stares and honing in on my cousin and everything hair related.

"You'll have to come see me," I offer when I feel confidence return, letting my eyes appraise their hair for the first time.

Grange walks over and hangs a heavy arm over Sierra's shoulder. He introduces himself and his mild-mannered attitude immediately draws me to him. We talk a bit more about my move and Alabama and Sierra asks a few questions about my life before this, and what Mercer was like as a teenager. I don't give anything away I don't think he'd want me to. Luella's voice cuts through the air, "Let's take a selfie," she coos, butting into my conversation and edging Grange out of the way. She pulls us together, holds out her hand, we smile, and she snaps several photos. After she's satisfied with an image she proclaims, "Don't worry, Clover, I'll filter it up and make you look perfect." I grit my teeth and keep my comments to myself. "What's your Instagram handle? I'll tag you."

"I'm private," I say. I locked down all of my social media accounts a while ago. Between the women's shelter and my dad's career, I never wanted anyone drawing conclusions about who I am and what that means about my family. There isn't anything scandalous, by any means, and I am starting a new life, so I make a rash decision. "But it's @misscloverw. I'll add you when I see your request." I need to be friends with these people. I need friends in general. This is what friends do. New life, I remind myself again. Sierra and Luella are filtering and posting on their phones, so I pull mine out of my tote, side-eyeing Mercer as I do. He smiles on, like he's happy I'm not tearing them to shreds with a verbal, Southern assault.

Mercer hands me a full shot glass. "There aren't any letters missing on this one, but I think you'll appreciate what's inside."

I look at the shot glass with narrowed eyes. I whisper under my breath. “So, about tonight. Or what was supposed to happen tonight. You’ve been drinking a bit?” I lean away from him to watch his face. It answers the question for me. “Mercer,” I whine. “We had big plans.”

He clears his throat, and excuses us into the hallway, and then into his bedroom a few steps away. When we’re stowed away from everyone else, he closes the door and spins to face me. “I’m sorry. I really am. You have to know I’d rather it be just you and me and this bed for a full twenty-four hours, but,” he says, sentence cutting off completely. “I love you, Clover.”

“This is the part where you saybutone more time. Except I end up spittin’ mad this go, isn’t it?” Taking in a breath, I shudder. “Or cry. Or call Tannie and tell her she was right? Tell my parents they were right. Tell the whole world they saw what I couldn’t.”

Mercer bites his bottom lip. “I’m redeploying tomorrow, darlin’.”

My stomach drops to the floor and I honest to God feel light-headed. I rush out, “All the more reason to clear this dadgum house of all these people and get this started, Mercer. Oh, my God. Just like that? That’s how it works?” I fan my face with my hands where I’ve broken out in a sheen of sweat. “I can’t believe this. We just got here; we have like a week left. We have plans. So many plans. You were going to take my virginity, patch a hole in my wall, give me the grand tour of Cape Cod and the Harbour Point Base.” Closing my eyes, I pinch the bridge of my nose. I knew this would happen. I didn’t anticipate my reaction to it. “I’m sorry.” When I open my eyes, Mercer is standing in front of me, arms folded across his chest, a sly smile playing on his lips. The moment takes on an ethereal quality. He’s going to leave, and I’ll be left here wondering what was real.

“The sooner I get back at it, the sooner I come home to you.” He tips my chin up so

our gazes lock. “And mercy me, there’s nothing I look forward to more.” Mercer swallows hard. “I’ve never had someone to come home to. Never had a woman who made leaving harder than going. This,” he says, motioning between our bodies, “is real. It’s going to stay real while I’m gone and for the rest of time. You have to hang on.” He leans his forehead down to meet mine.

“Hang on to what, Mercer? This is the time to be specific. It all feels like a rush. I fell in love with you in a rush. Made important decisions in a rush. You’re leaving in a rush. You get why this doesn’t seem real, right?”

“Hang on to what you’re feeling right now.”

“Terror?” I nearly shriek. “Or panic, self-loathing, trepidation, confusion? Any of those sound like things I should hang on to? I’m feeling all of them.” My pulse is still ricocheting in my ears. I repeat my death sentence. “Tomorrow?”

Mercer pulls away and puts his lips against mine. I melt into his arms and the kiss, captured by the intense passion he gives and the control I relinquish immediately.

Someone raps a fist against the bedroom door. “Tomorrow,” Mercer repeats.

“And tonight, we have to go back out there and make nice with everyone,” I deadpan.

He nods. “Unfortunately.” He tucks my hair behind my ears and rests his hands on the sides of my face. “We’re done rushing things for now anyway.”

I sigh. “Fine.”

“Tomorrow morning. I want to take you somewhere. Morning is mine?” He releases my face and takes a step backward.

“Of course, Mercer Ballentine.” More than tomorrow morning, though. The man has me hook, line, and sinker for the rest of time.

Chapter Fourteen

Clover

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

I WOKE WRAPPED in Mercer's arms before the sun rose. A surprising fact when you know that the party waned in the wee hours of the morning. By the time the house emptied, we crashed in his bed face first. I didn't drink, too wrapped up with my thoughts and worries for the future. I slipped out of his warm embrace as he snored lightly and retreated to my house. Before I knew what I was doing, I had on a pair of workout shorts and sneakers and I was staring down the empty, sleepy road. Then, I just ran.

I ran away from everything and nothing. Each step guiding me somewhere new, somewhere I'm not familiar with. In that Forrest Gump sort of way, and also in that brand new me way. Studying the quaint houses with their manicured lawns gave me a peace of mind—like playing pretend for just a second. Picturing what the families inside were like, and how I may be similar to them. Carving out a new path, in a new place completely foreign to me was always going to be a challenge, but Mercer gave me something I didn't realize I was relying on. A safety net. A reassuring presence that looks, feels, and even smells like home. The soft comfortable blanket when I'm sick. Everything I was told not to grasp onto from a young age. They told me to rely on myself, and in the same breath spoke of marrying me off.

The soles of my shoes made a soft crunch each time I landed on the sandy sidewalk. While my mind wandered, time passed. The sun rose in the distance, coloring the sleepy town with a more promising hue. Spinning on my heel, I caught my breath before taking off in the direction I came from, passing the same houses that no longer were silent and dormant. Lights were on, and bodies moving inside houses where the curtains were no longer closed, a sweeping movement of life.

Mercer was waiting for me outside my house when I rounded the bend, dripping

sweat, and heaving carbon dioxide. He proceeded to give me a tongue lashing about not waking him up to tell him where I was going.

I mop my brow with the hem of my t-shirt, concealing my face. “I couldn’t sleep. No sense giving you a dose of that. That’s just plain rude.” I’m still catching my breath in between words. “I needed to clear my head and get a feel for the neighborhood. I’ll be doing it on my own. It’s not like I’ll be telling you every time I leave the house from here on out.” I let the words I didn’t say hang between us. Because you won’t be here.

“It scared me,” he says, sighing. Mercer looks down at his watch and when his eyes meet mine, I see the finality of the moment. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight.” Shaking his head, he swallows hard. Worry lines crease his forehead as he glances to his house. His big bag, that horrible big bag, and all it signifies is waiting behind his truck. The bulging sides taunting me—proving that I’m not worth staying for. I’m surprised by my train of thought, and I set the negativity aside.

“I have a ride coming in two hours. I want to take you somewhere. It’s my favorite spot.”

Smoothing my tongue over my teeth, I nod. “Okay. Let me rinse off really quick.”

Mercer tells me he needs to go inside to grab something and we’ll meet back at my car in ten. It’s not until after I get out of the shower that I see Mercer patched the hole in my wall. It’s smoothed over with white, but still needs a coat of paint. I get a lump in my throat as I realize how thoughtful the gesture is. I can’t drown out the voices screaming obscenities about my life situation right now. I rush the door with my purse in hand. Mercer is waiting on the passenger side of the car. His eyes flick over my body once and he smiles a half-grin.

“I have a favor to ask,” he says as we get into the car. I start it up, and he tells me

where to go. When I set down the road, he adds, “Can you keep an eye on my house? You can stay there if you want. I’ll leave you keys and stuff.”

“Sure. How hard can house sitting be? I can see it from my living room.” My reply is clipped. It’s unintentional, but Mercer picks up on my mood and tries to lighten it with his carefree charm and jokes. I smile as I head toward the coast, the road narrowing when we get closer to our destination.

“Park there,” he commands, motioning to a corner spot next to a walkway leading to a rocky beach that looks nothing like Alabama beaches. “It’s small, but there’s never many people here, if any at all. I always have it to myself when I come down here. It’s my almost place,” he explains, tipping his head down to gaze at me. “There are a million other things we could be doing right now, but Clover, I want to be with you, and I need you to know that what I feel for you is real.” Mercer looks away, off into the distance. I wonder if sunrise will look the same where he’ll be. I wonder if I’ll be the same person when he comes back. And if I’m not, what does that mean for us? Is wasting heartbreak on saying goodbye worth it?

“What’s an almost place?” I ask.

Mercer takes my hand and walks slowly, holding the wooden rail. “You know? It’s almost a beach, right?”

I nod, describing how it’s different than our favorite beach in Alabama. “As simple as that then? It’s almost a beach,” I prod. He breaks away from me, kicks his flip flops off to the side and walks to stand closer to the water. In that place where most of the waves can’t reach, but the brave few can tackle if they gather enough power. The sand is wet and hard-packed where he’s standing, and my feet sink into the craggy sand that has a mixture of broken shells and dried seaweed.

Mercer’s body shifts, he pops one knee out and in, his shoulder tilts to the side, his

posture is slack and restless. He turns his head to the side so I can see his profile. “No. It’s not as simple as that,” he deadpans. “I come here when I want to recharge. When I want to fill up and recharge. It’s almost a beach, in a place that is almost home, where I’m almost happy.” His eyes lock with mine as he turns to face me. I take a few steps to close the distance between us.

“I’d like to give you something else for you to remember me by,” Mercer drawls, shoving his hand into his pocket and comes out with a small jewelry box. “But the timing isn’t quite right for anything other than this.” He bounces the box on his large palm as my hands shake by my sides. “Which is a horrific, unfortunate thing,” he says, swallowing hard. His eyes dart to the sand and back up to meet mine. “Because I almost had you.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I rush out in one big breath. Instead of replying, he opens the box. It’s a pair of gold flower earrings. Camellias. Intricate gold petals form the flowers and they are stunning. I take the box from his hand. “The Alabama state flower. They are perfect. I love them so much, Mercer. I’ll wear them every day.”

“You can remember our almost.” There’s an irrevocable tremor in his tone. A goodbye encased in a goodbye. He feels it too. My stomach sinks, but I know I have to be strong right now.

Going up on my tiptoes, I place my hands on the sides of his clean-shaven face. “Maybe in our world, almost counts.” My voice shakes, but my body is pressed against his and responds accordingly. Fire. Gasoline. Burning. Burning. Burning. For a man who I only half have. Who I will always and forever only half have. Mercer picks me up and I wrap my legs around his waist. Forehead to forehead we search for answers in each other’s eyes. Answers we both know we won’t find. I clutch the earring box in my hands, a reminder of the past. I squeeze it until a corner hurts my palm until the reminder of home causes me physical pain.

His lips brush mine. Back and forth, a feather-light touch. “It’s not going to be easy, Clover,” Mercer says against my lips. “I love you and I want you to be here when I get back. For me. Because you’re mine now and I will torch the earth to make my way back inside your arms.”

“I love you,” I reply, kissing him more forcefully. “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.” A lesson I learned the hard way many times. I’m better for it now, though.

I can feel Mercer’s smile against my lips. “You do it right the first time, or you do it again,” he returns. That must have been the lesson he learned. I grin.

“I can be strong enough. I want you. I want us. I want our almost,” I say, voice cracking. “Mercer, I’ve waited my entire life for a sign and I’m not even superstitious, or not really.” Mercer smirks. “I know that we are meant to be. I can feel it inside me. They say when you know, you know? I know. Go do your job,” I say, swallowing down the lump in my throat. “And come home. To me. We can finish what we started.”

“I’ll let you be a little superstitious if it’s telling you to stay here and wait for me.”

Scoffing, I lean back to study his face. “Then again, maybe it’s telling me to throw all your clothes into the front yard and see what they look like after six months.” He doesn’t know how long he’ll be gone. It’s mission dependent, so it could be shorter than six months or longer. I don’t want to think about the latter.

He kisses the sense out of me, and I let him. Sliding down his body, out of breath and turned on, Mercer takes the box from my hand and removes the earrings. The waves crash against the shore behind us and the scent of saltwater fills my senses. Mercer tucks my hair behind one ear and puts one earring in, using a soft touch. He repeats the motion on the other side and then steps away to look at his handiwork. “They

look just as I thought they would on you. Perfect.”

Reaching up, I touch the flowers and think about what they mean. “If I had more time, I would have gotten you something.”

Before I even finish talking, he’s shaking his head. “Don’t even say it. I can’t bring much with me, and everything I take I have to be okay with it if it is lost forever. It’s like a life pause button. I would cherish any gift from you too much to be okay with losing it.” He blows out a breath and grabs my hands. “I do have a few more gifts for you. They’ll come while I’m gone though. One will take a while because it needs some prep work.”

“Mercer, seriously. I’m not a child that needs gifts to feel happy. I’m an adult and I’ll be fine.” It’s imperative he believes me. I want to be the woman he sees. A strong, capable woman who can make it no matter what. Not the spoiled princess who lived a pampered life. “Don’t buy me presents.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

He shrugs. "It's already done. I know you don't need presents, but put yourself in my shoes for a second. Maybe I want to give you presents because it makes me feel better. Makes me feel more secure in a situation where I have little to no power."

The emotion swells, a swift assault on my throat. "I understand that."

"Good," he replies. "It's not like any gift I buy you will cost a million dollars. Don't worry." He smiles. "I'll keep it low key."

I stomp one foot and cross my arms. "I wasn't worried on that front. You're so rude," I tease. "Don't worry about me is all I was trying to say."

He pulls me into a hug. "I'll try not to. We have to get back before my ride gets there. I'm not good with goodbyes. Well, I've never really done them like this, but I think I'd like it best if we could say goodbye here. In my almost place."

Licking my lips, I reply, "Whatever you want." His embrace is tight. "I'm not sure what to say right here," I admit. "Have a nice trip? Don't get blown up? Or shot? Or captured? Or good luck? That doesn't seem politically correct. None of it does, actually. Tell me what to say?"

"Darlin'," Mercer rasps, drawing back to hit me with an emotion-filled gaze. "Tell me you're mine, kiss me on the lips, and make me believe in forever."

I try to do what he says. I think he even believes it. The kiss feels too short, and his hands go from hot to cold on my waist. The wind whips around us a little too fast. The sand feels a bit more like quicksand as we walk back to the car. Mercer doesn't

look at me while we drive back to the house. He asks me about the salon, gives directions on how to get to the mall, who I can call if I have any problems, he rattles off the precautionary measures of our separation. Like a man doling out custody orders to an estranged wife. Except he loves me. He's my forever. Mindlessly, without thought, the drive ends as I pull into my driveway and step out of my car. Mercer says goodbye, and his voice is hoarse.

"Be good, Four Leaf Clover. Don't take over the town before I get back, you hear?"

I nod, tears forming in my eyes. "I hear. Don't take over the world," I fire back.

He rounds the car and kisses me one more time even though we've already spoken our peace. A pick-up truck rolls up and idles in front of Mercer's driveway. It's a black shiny Ford that is jacked up with tinted windows. Not too far off from what the country boys in the south are obsessed with. It's why I notice the vehicle at all.

He looks over his shoulder, light and charismatic. The Mercer I've known my whole life says, "Everyone wants to be a Navy SEAL until it's time to do Navy SEAL shit." With a wink, he adds, "Pardon my French, darlin'."

Smiling, I put up my hand in a feeble attempt at a wave. I'm sure it looks more like I'm Spock, frozen in my signature greeting. It's fitting that he rides off in a truck. I picture him heading somewhere with Bentley. I can pretend he's going fishing, or hunting or mudding. Not heading back to the front lines. In another country, far away from me. In harm's way. To war.

My stomach flips as I reach up and touch a golden Camellia.

Then my cell phone buzzes from inside the purse on my shoulder.

A text from Goldie: Meet me at the salon. I'm here doing stock, and my friend Misty

is heading in. She wants a fresh cut. I told her I have a woman for the job.

New life begins now. And I get my period.

Chapter Fifteen

Mercer

Four Months Later . . .

I'M COVERED IN soot, head to fucking toe—I'd wager even the whites of my eyes are black. London, England. The peak of war for this country. The terrorists shift continents and use encrypted web pages to communicate with each other and arrange attacks. We use counterintelligence to track them and try to stop the attacks before they happen, but it's hard to keep up as they get smarter, wittier, hire new genius-level coders to try to trick us. It's also hard when the will to destroy innocent life is greater than the ability to stop it. This war has raged on for countless years and while attacks have died down in America, the rest of the world is on fire. Everyone is tired. Maybe that's the point. Grind the good down until we are a bleak, dull, piece of uncaring flesh. Indifference magnified by horrific monotony. The scene before me is why I needed a break so badly, why I craved the simple nature of Greenton.

Soot rains down as we move through a building trying to evaluate if anyone lived. It's highly unlikely. What started out as fashion week, which I guess is a real fancy event where models walk runways to show designer's new clothes, ended in tantamount devastation. The government tells the people to go on with their lives as if it's any other day and to not give power to the enemy by being afraid to live life, but this is the risk you take. I step over a body. Then another. The corpses are holding hands, both heads have white blonde hair that are saturated in thick blood. Grange stoops to

check for a pulse even though he knows they're dead. An unnatural twist to their limbs says more than blood can. I swallow a lump of bile down and cast my gaze ahead, to the next body, the next casualty, the next person I wasn't able to save.

It's quiet now, our officer on the comms talking to headquarters about where to land the Medi-vac is the only noise that cuts the morose silence. We were too late, and if I'm being honest, there's no way we could have done anything to stop this bombing today anyway. We should have been here days ago when they were setting up the stages and hauling in props for the extravagant sets. That's how the bombs came in, how the enemy breached such a highly-populated crowd without notice. We didn't hear the chatter of something awry until a few hours ago. Sifting through the debris and finely clothed bodies is easy. Explaining to the world how this happened? Hard as fuck. I wouldn't want that job. These people who died today were famous. They had money, influence, and power. Their families will want to place blame. The hunger to avenge their loved one's deaths greater than the patriotism for their country. The terrorists strive to pull apart nations, turning neighbors against neighbors, and allies against allies. Their end goal is simple: eradicate the world of everyone who doesn't believe what they do. There's no stopping that kind of hate. Not with kindness, not with meetings or rational declarations.

"Front left area is where we need to place this group of bodies," Grange says, standing, fidgeting with the rubber glove on his hand, pulling on it. He's the trained medic in our team, and at this point, it's obvious we're too late to use military skills. This is a clean-up operation and a job for Intel to unravel. We missed another one. The acrid taste in my mouth doesn't leave as I move out of the building on orders. The scent of burnt flesh is overpowering and even if I'm unaffected by the carnage before me, the smell brings me back to reality and I nearly heave when I reach the fresh air outdoors.

Grange claps a hand on my back, but we don't meet gazes. The secondary team rushes by us into the building now that we've cleared it to make sure there aren't any

more bad guys lurking. Spoiler alert: they weren't here today. The timed bombs went off seamlessly, activated from a remote location. "What good are we doing? This is so fucked up," Grange mutters, snapping his gloves off.

I snake a rag that I have tucked into my back pocket out and hold it over my mouth and nose. It has a sweet-smelling oil on it, and it neutralizes the putrid scent still clinging to my nose hairs. Even after we leave, I'll smell it for days—a phantom reminder of what I saw today. "We don't have a fucking choice," I remark, keeping alert, watching the buildings surrounding us. "We needed them when the U.S. was falling apart, and this is how we make good on promises."

"By not being able to help at all? We are these highly trained machines and we are useless." My friend has never been big on eating humble pie. "We are no good here. They need to send us back home."

If I agreed with him, I'd feel like a traitor, but he's right. There's nothing I want more than to get back home. But I'm a good guy and it seems the whole world is on a short supply of those these days.

Rexy walks up, hearing our conversation, he says, "Maybe they will send us home. It's obvious we need to recalculate how we operate. This isn't getting us anywhere. Showing up after" —he motions to the building behind us— "everything is changing and it's changing quickly."

Page 45

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

All of my gear and helmet feel as though they weigh a ton. I wipe the sweat off my brow as people exit the building holding a stretcher with a beautiful brunette. She has long brown hair and full lips. I avert my eyes quickly when I recognize her from American television.

Rexy follows us away from the scene, helmet tucked under one arm. “You guys off tonight?”

“I am,” I say, engaging in perfectly common conversation inside of a violent tragedy. A day off doesn’t look like it you’d expect it to. I usually sleep and make phone calls home most of the day. There is zero desire to go outside and explore the city. I can’t do it without being on high alert. It’s safer for my sanity on base where I know I won’t run into something I’m not supposed to.

I’m alone in this sentiment. Just because I’m equipped to deal with anything doesn’t mean I want to. “Gonna stay in your room and fuck your hand all day?” Rexy snaps, eyeing me from the side. Jokes that I’d brush off with Southern charm in the past now annoy me.

“Fuck off, man. You go have yourself a merry little time in the brothels. They’re going to run out of penicillin shots in the clinic if you keep up your pace.”

The seedy parts in any big city flourish in war times. Criminals are more active doing things that might have gotten them arrested back in the day, but now the police and military have bigger problems than prostitution, theft, and drugs. They have entire events being blown apart. I tell the guys I’m heading back to base, check with my officer to make sure we’re clear, and find my way to one of our idling, armored

vehicles. I'm alone with my thoughts for a few more minutes as we wait for more men and set off for base, using back roads and driving a cautious speed.

I'm uneasy when I'm not behind the wheel, when I can't control every facet of my life. There's a pit in my stomach all the way back. I grab the handles in the car and keep my eyes on the road ahead. Someone tries to engage me in conversation, but I brush them off, favoring the silence where I can stay attuned to my surroundings. A few ambulances, their sirens blaring in that unfamiliar off-kilter tune Americans aren't accustomed to, zoom toward the direction we just left. When the SUV rumbles up to the gate protecting our compound, we show identification to the gate guards. They check our vehicle thoroughly before we're granted access. It's not until the gate closes behind me do I feel safe enough to relax. The tension eases out of my shoulders as I release a breath. Ironically, this is when the adrenaline hits—my body processes the danger it was just in. I thank the driver as I swing out of the vehicle and start for my room on the back side of the base, the farthest from the entrance. London rises up around all sides of our compound and it's an odd placement, not like any sort of base we've ever stayed on before. We're not on a boat, or in the desert, or butted up to water. We're in a thriving city. I can hear the city, smell it, soak in the energy, feel the danger from all angles.

I use my key card to scan into the empty housing building and start shrugging off my gear piece by piece. My room requires another scan of a card. The skin on my arms prickles with cold. The heating and cooling units only have two settings: balls freezing or hot as hell. Now, it's arctic cold. It's dark, only a swinging light bulb illuminates the space the size of a large storage closet. There's a twin bed pushed against the wall and a small rickety desk by the door. My bags are stuffed under my bed and the folding chair stays leaning against the wall when I'm not using it. I have a small sink and a mirror above it. The showers and toilets are in a shared bathroom across the hall. I take off my boots before I step into my room and place them outside of my door. Ash and blood and whatever the fuck else is on the bottom of my boots can stay out there.

I don't let myself think of anything else when I'm working. To do my job perfectly, I need single-minded focus. The type that comes when you aren't thinking about anything other than what I'm doing or what I need to do. The kind of focus that comes when you prioritize your career above all else. The balance is tricky, if you can even call it balance, and I know that my family and friends back home feel the strain of the relationships. Clover especially. At the thought of her, I sigh. That woman is my guilty pleasure. A thought I cherish so reverently, that I have to ration my attentions or they'll consume me completely. Pulling off my chest plates and removing my weapons, I set them on my bed. I cover the air vent on the floor with a Kevlar plate to staunch the flow of air before settling at my desk in the folding chair.

Opening my laptop, I check the time and a swirl of excitement hits when I see what time it is. I open up an encrypted messaging app and send Clover a text. It should go directly to her phone and her computer so there's a maximum chance she'll see or hear I'm messaging. We had a scheduled call in an hour, but I'd kill to see her now. It's been so long, and I'm frustrated in every aspect of my life. A bit like a ticking time bomb. A bit like a boat sinking. A lot like a man who hasn't fucked in almost a year. Falling for Clover was fast and hard, and it took a mere moment. Sometimes when I'm drifting to sleep in this cold room, the time spent in Alabama on leave feels like a dream from a different lifetime. This will be the first time I've seen her since I left. She's sent me a random selfie or two, but between the bad connectivity and my schedule, it's been near impossible to get alone time. The time zones don't help. The terrorists help even less.

I'm not ready!comes Clover's written reply.Are you already finished with work for the day?I can hear the panic in her words and that's in only two sentences.

This is familiar territory. Leading Clover. Not leading men.You always look beautiful,I type back.Turn on that camera and show me what I've been missing.I feel myself switching over, back into the person Clover knows—the real me. Not the hardened machine who doesn't flinch at dead bodies. Gray bubbles pop up to signal

she's typing a response. It's taking a while, so I grab a washcloth from my laundry pile and wet it at the sink. Wiping at my face, neck, and arms—anyplace exposed to ash. Easier to clean it off than explain where I've been and what happened. If the media in America had picked up on the terrorist attack, it would have been the first thing Clover said. It wasn't. She doesn't know yet. I have at least a little while longer to pretend with her. I pray for a full conversation without the need to speak about work.

We weren't supposed to video chat for another hour. I'm in the middle of getting ready. This is the first time you've seen me, and I don't look how I want to look, and my cell phone is ringing off the hook, a water pipe busted in my neighbor's place, and there are workers over there trying to keep the water from leaking all over. Goldie just left and the box you sent me a couple days ago is sitting right here in front of me. You told me not to open it, but I have to tell you I'm pretty angry you wouldn't let me. I didn't. Every time I've walked by, I've cursed your name. Gifts that can't be opened are plain bad manners, Ballentine.

I can tell her tirade won't stop until I do it myself. Clover, I tap out the message quickly and send it. The bubble disappears as she stops typing. This call with you is the only thing I've been looking forward to since the moment I left. If you're trying to postpone it or cancel it, think again. Turn on your camera and then you can open the package. It's more of a gift for both of us. My hands sweat as I rub my fingers against my palms. I really went out on a limb for this present. For this entire call. It needed to be perfect. I need this. My sanity requires it. Running my hands back and forth through my hair a few times, I hit the button to turn on my camera capture. Don't answer your phone. Turn it off, I tap out quickly as an aside. Just us for a bit, okay?

Clover turns on her camera and all I see is her sofa. She has her laptop on the coffee table. Drumming my fingers on the table next to me, I say, "The suspense is killing me darlin'."

“It’s been so long. I’m so nervous,” Clover says as she edges into the camera’s view. I have to school my expression when she sits down because she doesn’t look the same. Not at all. Her hair is darker, not the Clover Wellsley blonde you can see from a half-mile away. She has circles under her eyes that match the black dress she’s wearing on her slimmed-down frame.

“Was there a funeral?” I ask, keeping my tone light. Clearing my throat, I add. “You look beautiful. I miss you so much, Four Leaf Clover.” Another byproduct of not letting my personal life slip in while I’m away is that I miss glaring signs. Clover’s struggle in her new life wasn’t right under my nose and she never mentioned it.

Her eyes dart to her lap. “I, uh, switched up my wardrobe to blend in. Goldie suggested darker tones and she was right; I feel a little better.” Pausing, she gathers her thoughts. “I was going to fix my makeup. I probably look a bit tired.” Her Southern accent sounds subdued. My heart rattles around in my chest like a pissed off cobra. I miss her. I want to hold her. Touch her. Be there for her in every single way possible. I want to be her man. She looks away from the camera.

“Hey. Tell me something good,” I drawl.

Clover smiles and it transforms her face. “I ran five miles this morning and didn’t die. I’ve been working up to it for the past four months.” Looking to the side, she nibbles her bottom lip and then looks back at the camera. “I’m finally getting to see your handsome mug.” Her cheeks pink.

“Are you acting shy? Is the sky falling?” I say, thinking about the ash raining down outside. “Clover never gets shy. Especially over a man.”

She clears her throat. “I’ve missed seeing you. Talking to you is nice and all, but sometimes when I’m trying to fall asleep, I try to picture your face and can’t. Not perfectly. It’s unnerving. What if you’re not as hot as I thought you were, you

know?” Clover feels the same way I do. Our short time together doesn’t feel real. Was that time together enough to bring us through this? “Like that freckle by your eye, or how many abs you have.”

“How did you forget what my abs looked like? That’s offensive.”

Clover cocks her head and folds her arms across her chest. “I’m sorry.”

I laugh. “Eight,” I add. “I have eight abs.” I stand up and flex my muscles, sliding my hands down the front of my stomach. After, I sit and lean in so she can get a better look at the freckle in question.

“You’re too pretty to be real. I don’t remember you being this pretty when we were kids,” she says, studying the screen. Crossing and uncrossing her legs, she gives me a peek at her pink panties.

“You weren’t looking at me at all back then, ma’am,” I reply. “Which is fine, because if you looked at me back then like this you might not be lookin’ at me like that right now and that would be criminal.”

“Ma’am, huh? We’re back to that?” Clover says, a little of the accent I know sliding back in, a grin playing on her full lips. “Mercer, so much has happened the past four months.” Her eyes turn down in the corner. “It’s been a wild bull ride.”

I hold out my hand. “Open the box first. You and me. The outside isn’t allowed in here yet.”

Shaking her head softly, she giggles as she reaches for the rectangular box sitting next to her. I lace my hands behind my head to keep them from shaking. Far and away, this is the most forward thing I’ve done when it comes to relationships and women. As she tears into the box, I resist the urge to tell her to throw the whole thing

in the trash. A mannered gentleman wouldn't even think of giving this gift, but it proves how crazed Clover makes me.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

Her eyes narrow as she pulls off the lid of the smaller rectangular box. “Definitely not a pearl necklace then, is it?” Clover teases, pulling tissue paper out and setting it next to her. Her hand pauses when she sees what’s inside. Her gaze flies to mine in the monitor.

Play it cool, fucker, I remind myself.

“A dildo!” she hisses, pulling her hand away from it like it might burn her. She fans her face. “Oh, heavens above. What in the wild blue Earth were you thinking?”

I laugh, an uneasy noise. “Wait, wait, before you fling it across the room, I need you to know that it’s not just any dildo.”

She swallows hard. “Is it a special porky meat stick? Is it gold? Can I wear it as a necklace? Put it in a flower arrangement? Stir chili in the crockpot with it? Get to explainin’ then. Before my heart gives out.”

I open my arms to the side and then clasp my hands in front of me. “It’s...my actual dick in dildo form.” I sigh long and heavy.

Her eyes grow wide. “What?” She lays a hand on it and pulls it from the box, inspecting it more closely, fingers running over the silicone ridges.

I lean forward, setting my hands under my chin. “How accurate is it?”

I laugh. “I want you to imagine me getting myself hard, thinking of you of course, and then sticking my dick into a cylinder filled with molding goop. I had to let it

harden and then pull it out. It was quite the process and if anyone ever found out about it, I'd never live it down."

"Oh my goodness. It is your dick!" Clover shrieks, finger sliding over an engorged vein. Her smile is wide so I'm grateful she's not horrified at this insane idea. Yet. "You really had a dildo made of yourself for me? Why go through the trouble? You have a beautiful dick, like maybe they're going to use your mold to make a million dildos now. Will you get a cut of the profits?"

I chuckle, closing my eyes, then I swallow the laugh down and bring the truth forward. "I want you to be mine, and I can't be with you," I breathe. I meet her eyes through the computer screen. "Time is passing. It's going fast and slow and I want you to be mine forever. This is my way of making sure you're always mine first." I see her turning my words over in her mind.

She tips her chin down as she gazes at the flesh-colored Mercer shaft. "You want me to lose my virginity to you, with this? You're serious? That's not the same thing, Mercer Ballentine. I can wait for you. I'll wait for you."

I shake my head firmly once. "It's not the same thing. But it's all I can give you right now. I can be with you, like this. Watching you. Talking to you. Telling you what to do. I don't want you to wait for me. This is what I want. Can you give it to me?"

Her eyes fix on the silicone and then she glances back to me. "There were a million things I thought would be in that box, Mercer. Never in my wildest dreams did I think you would make a mold of your cock and then ask me to lose my virginity to it. First it was the earrings and then the bird a few days ago." She smirks.

I had the local pet shop deliver a cockatoo to her house. There was a catch. They had to teach it to talk first. Very specifically, it says farm truck, four-leaf clover, and kiss me darlin'. It took a couple months to get it up to speed.

“I didn’t think I could fall any more in love with you after those things, but this, while the most inappropriate thing I’ve ever received is also one of the most thoughtful. You. Molded. Your. Dick. For. Me. There’s something about it,” she says. “I can’t put my finger on it.” She slaps my dick against her palm a few times as she speaks. “Or my whole hand for that matter.”

“Does that mean you love the bird more than my dick?” I fire back, trying to tamp down on the happiness I feel at watching her play. Looking at her, looking at me—that feral look in her eye. I’m transported to her living room. Standing in front of her. A man, not a screen.

“I haven’t fucked your dick yet. Give me time to decide. It’s the polite thing to do.”

That’s all it takes for my cock to stand, pressing against my pants. She continues. “I suspect you’re not much into being polite right now though, are you? You want to claim me?”

I nod. “More than anything else.”

“And you couldn’t find the time before you left? This is what I get now? A substitute.” Her words don’t match how turned on she is right now. It’s penetrating the screen.

I blow out a noisy breath. “It’s my greatest regret. I think about it every day. You lay in bed trying to remember what I look like and I fall asleep fucking you every which way in my dreams.”

“Fair. You wanted it to be perfect, that’s why you wanted to wait, and it seems you’re changing your tune. You want to claim me in whatever way you can. In creative ways, shall we say?”

“One day, I’ll be a man who can be there for you all of the time, right now wanting you is killing me, and this is the only way to get it done. I love you, Clover Wellsley. The insane kind of love that makes me do things I don’t usually do. The kind that makes living without you painful. My days are bleak, and I’d be pissed at you for what I feel if I wasn’t so mad about you.” Licking my lips, I go on, “I’m asking you to do this for me. I hope you want to, even if it’s just a little bit.”

Clover stops me, holding up a palm. Standing, she takes the black dress off over her head. She’s not wearing a bra, and her pink panties are tight against her skin. A breath lodges in my throat. “I’d do questionable things to touch you right now.”

“Touch me how?” she counters, sliding her laptop back so I can see her full body, including her face. “That’s how this goes.” She waves the dildo, my dick never looking bigger than in front of her small frame. “Make me believe this is you, but before you do, take off your pants. I want to see all eight of your abs and everything below them.” Her courteous dirty talk is my favorite recipe. That taste of home. A familiar embrace inside of the living nightmare I’m currently enduring.

I obey her, hooking my thumbs into my pants and pulling them down my legs. I grab and tip my computer down so she can see my cock, my abs, my mouth, and my nose. I can still see her on my screen from this angle. “If I were there, I would rip the panties off your body and finger you to make you wet,” I say.

Clover interrupts, “I’m already wet. Go on. What after that?” She is so game for this that I’m pissed at myself for worrying about what she’d think.

“I’d kiss you so hard you’d forget your name.” I swallow hard as she lets the pink panties fall down her toned legs. “I’d kiss you there, too. I’d lick your pussy until you came on my face. Your hands would be in my hair. I want you to pull my hair, guide me. Tell me exactly how fast or slow you want it. Do you want my fingers inside you while I lick your clit?” The hand I have on my ram-rod hard dick starts moving up

and down the second Clover reaches down with two fingers and starts rubbing herself.

“I want that so bad,” Clover says, shrinking down onto the sofa, keeping her legs apart and bent so I have an eagle eye view of what is making my mouth water. “Why can’t you be here right now?” she asks, tone heavy with longing.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“I am,” I say, quickening my strokes. A bead of pre-cum forms on the head, and I use it as lube.

“Now grab my cock. I’m going to make you mine.”

Chapter Sixteen

Mercer

CLOVER LINES THE flesh-colored cock up with her pussy and a pang of jealousy stabs at me. I have to remind myself that it’s me. Just as if I was there. But I’m not. And maybe that’s where the animosity toward the inanimate object comes from. Her pink folds shine in the light from her computer screen, and my stomach tightens. I want to come deep inside her. She’s wet and willing and wants me to be her first.

“Rub the head on your clit,” I command. She does, running it in circles, moaning slightly as it dips in her wet center on accident. “Not yet,” I bark, stroking my cock, gaze intent on how she’s moving it. Back and forth, over her wet mound.

“It’s killing me,” she says, voice aching with need. “I want you inside me.” Clover is watching me jack off, her hazel eyes hooded—longing evident in every move she makes.

My chest is rising and falling rapidly as I lose my breath to the onslaught of desire raging through my body. “Just the tip,” I say, catching my breath by slowing my

pace. It hurts, the orgasm is there, ready to rip out of my body like an explosion. Not yet, I tell myself. This needs to last. It's all I'll have to hold on to until the next time and who knows when that will be.

"Like this?" Clover asks, dipping the dildo head into her wet body slowly. I watch as an inch disappears into her body, her cunt closing the girth—a tight sheath.

"Like that," I reply, tone harsh. "Just like that. Tell me what it feels like."

"It feels like more. More. I want all of you inside of me," she says, hand readjusting the grip on the silicone toy and teasing more inside her. "It's so hard and you're inside me. I want to have an orgasm around you."

"Yes," I say, picking up the pace. "Fuck yourself. You pick the pace. Show me how to fuck you," I growl.

Thank God she doesn't need any more direction. Clover takes it and slides it halfway in and then all the way out again. My mouth drops open and my stomach flips at the sight. Me and her together. "Does it turn you on knowing I'm watching you? I'm so fucking turned on right now I could come on the spot."

"Wait for me," she says, thrusting the toy inside her body over and over, fucking at a medium, steady pace in and out. It's glistening with her wetness as she draws it out of her body and shoves it all the way back in.

I grunt out in frustration. "Hurry, Clover. Watching you fuck me is driving me wild."

Clover picks up the pace and strokes her clit with her free hand. Her knees fall open wider and now I can see everything. Her pussy taking my cock, her sweet asshole fluttering open and closed as she draws nearer to her climax. I want to be in every hole. Fucking her. Marking her. I want to put my babies inside her. Come in her tight

little asshole. In her mouth. All over her body. Any male in a million-mile radius will look at her, smell her, breathe near her, and know without a shadow of a doubt that she belongs to me forever.

Her face is rapture as her hand shifts, and she fucks herself to the hilt and comes apart. Her expression is what does me in and I come, hot bursts landing on my stomach. More than I've seen in a long ass time. The pipes haven't been clogged, but they definitely needed this something fierce.

Clover leaves the dildo inside her. "I want you to stay inside me for a while longer."

Emotion clogs my throat. "There's nothing I'd like more than staying inside you all night long. Did it hurt? You were worried I wouldn't fit and looking at you right now I'd say we are a perfect fit." My cock jerks in my hand. A reminder of how much we both love Clover Wellsley's naked body splayed in front of us. Before I deployed, we had a conversation about sex and what she's afraid of. None of the emotional things were mentioned, it was all about the size of my dick. The only thing I could think of as a solution to this worry was...a dildo. From there, I knew I wanted to at least watch. Here we are and it's bittersweet.

"Well because I've been fantasizing about having you inside me for so long, the pleasure took over for the pain. What's the catch? You realize now that I have your dick at my disposal, I can fuck you whenever I want even if you're not on a computer screen in front of me?"

"Clover, as long as you're fucking my dick, I don't care how many times you do it. I'm glad you gave this to me. It's been really...rough." I try not to break her high. Her chest is still red from her orgasm and there's a sheen of sweat on her forehead. She looks perfectly fucked and a sense of pride is washed away by reality. "I can't say I won't get jealous of my own cock, but I don't want you to go without. I don't want you to go without anything you want."

She pulls the dildo from her body and her pussy gapes a little. I wince. “You know I’d kill to lick your cunt right now, right?”

“Kill is a strong word,” she says, sitting up and pulling her knees to her chest. There’s still a small patch of her cunt showing, and I know it’s purposeful. “How is it going over there, Mercer?” The change of subject is swift and painful.

I right myself in the chair and fix the computer so she’s able to view my whole face. “It’s a mess,” I say, honestly. “The good of it is they’ll probably send me home soon. The bad of it is I’ve never felt more useless. It’s pretty bad. Details aren’t something you need to know, but it’s bad. Tell me how you’re doing. Really doing, Clover. Can’t lie to my face.”

She grins at me as she fishes her dress from the floor and pulls it over her head. “I’m not even allowed to bask in the loss of my virginity afterglow before being questioned?” She picks up the dildo and puts it in the smaller box it came in holding up a small bottle that was inside. “Didn’t need the lube at all. I’m impressed with myself. There really was nothing to be afraid of. If it were really you here with me, it would be even better.”

“It will be amazing,” I correct, clearing my throat. The dark circles framing her eyes are seemingly deeper than they just were. “How is Cape Cod? How are you?”

Her pretty nose scrunches up. “Different? Challenging? An adjustment? I only have Goldie, so I’m pretty lonely when I’m home, but that will change now that I have a cussing bird! He really is great, by the way. Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad they were able to do that for you. For me. What about Luella and Sierra? That was a promising start.” I guess I assumed she would blend in seamlessly, thinking because I’m taken with her everyone else would be, too.

She tries to change the subject, but I lead her back to the women. Sighing, she says, “They posted that selfie they took at the party on Instagram and tagged my account. Remember? I took my profile off private and all their friends came after me with pitchforks for the pageant stuff, my daddy’s political stances, and our money. Basically, I’m a Southern princess who hates women. They were mean, and you’d be proud. I didn’t even retaliate.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“Yet,” I counter. “I’m so sorry, Clover. They don’t know you like I do. They wouldn’t dare do that if I was there.”

“But you’re not here,” Clover fires back. “I’m sorting life on my own without your help. For a while, I was trying to make sense of it. They accept you with your Southern roots without a problem, but because I’m a woman from the south I’m automatically the enemy. It didn’t make sense. It doesn’t feel like the normal woman cattiness I’m used to.”

I sigh. “It’s not because you’re Southern. It’s because you’re a woman. Luella has been trying to make us work for years and because Remy is her brother, she feels some weird claim to me. You can’t take it personally.”

“I can’t?” Clover says, eyes widening. Uh-oh. “They told all their friends not to come to the salon. Goldie was spitting mad because it’s affecting business. All she wanted to do was help me get away from Alabama, and now she’s paying the price for breathing in the same atmosphere as me. I feel awful. I can’t sleep well. I run a lot because it’s the only time I can clear my mind. I throw everything I have into the clients I do get at the salon, but I have to say, Mercer.” I know what she’s going to say next and I know I’ll be equally as surprised as I was expecting it. “I don’t know if it’s going to work out for me here. I’m not cut out for this kind of life. You know I know how to deal with people hating me, but this is different.”

“The Clover I know wouldn’t deal with this. Not from anyone. You’re stronger than they are. It will work out if you decide it will. Think about the woman who left the only place she’s ever known. You are brave.”

“I was brave,” she says, gaze far away. “I don’t think I’m that person any longer. I’m trying the best I know how, but how am I supposed to deal with them without being the catty, Southern bitch they’re accusing me of?” She swore. A real curse word.

“You’re creative. I love you because of that. Give them a taste of their own medicine.”

She meets my gaze through the computer. I see what this is costing her. “Maybe I will,” she says, not really meaning it. “You and Luella? Has it already happened or what? If this is really why they’re attacking me, you surely left a lasting impression.”

Honesty is best given these circumstances. “Once. Like four years ago. I drank too much and I’ll spare you the details because I don’t really recall much anyhow, but she means nothing to me. A friend in every sense of the word. Nothing more.”

“Okay,” Clover says cautiously. “That complicates things a bit.”

I scramble. “No, it doesn’t. It doesn’t. I’ll tell Rexy to get ahold of Luella, okay? Don’t stress over this. I’ll fix it.”

“From another country? While you’re busy trying to save the world? You’ll fix your girlfriend’s idiotic drama problems? You do realize how stupid that sounds, right? I can deal with it. It’s why I never mentioned it before. I want you to focus on your work and getting home to me, Ballentine. I hate you for being with Luella, but give me some time to think this through and I’ll fix things for myself. Promise me you’ll leave it alone. You getting involved will only make them hate me more.”

She’s right. This shouldn’t be on my radar, but it is because I’m that wrapped up in Clover and her happiness. I’d do anything if it brought a smile to her face. I need her to stay in Cape Cod until I get back, until I can show her how amazing life can be with me. With us together.

“I promise,” I reply. “Hey, I believe in you. In case no one has told you that lately.”

That brings a spark to her eyes. “Thank you. I appreciate that.” She rattles off an insane story about Tannie and how the election campaigns are ratcheting up in Greenton. The election is soon. It reminds me to check in on my parents. Mid-sentence Clover looks over to where her front door is. “Sherlock,” she exclaims. “That must be Jack.” When she glances at my unimpressed face, she adds, “The neighbor, Jack. The leak. Remember I tried telling you about it earlier. Hold for a second.” She scrambles, clearing the boxes and panties before I hear the creak of an opening door.

Then there is a low rumble of a male’s voice, but I can’t make out any words. Clover laughs. That’s clear. The pit in my stomach widens to encompass my entire body. I ache. The subliminal need to be there right now stronger than anything else in the world. Clover comes back in front of the computer. “I can call you back in a few, Mercer,” she says, not sitting down, just leaning over. “They opened Jack’s wall and found mold. Goldie is over there and says I need to see where it butts up to my unit. They may need to do something to treat it on my side as well,” she explains hastily.

Jack says something in the background, and unfiltered rage ignites my heart. “Sure. I hope everything turns out okay.”

“Bye,” she says, quickly trying to end the call.

“Hey, I love you, Clover,” I say, voice loud.

She smiles wide and it makes me feel a little better. “I love you so much more, Mercer. Talk later.”

She disconnects the call and her face disappears. I don’t know that I’ve ever been surer about anything in my entire life as I am of this moment.

I want to rip my heart from my chest, make her swallow it down, so she can sense what it feels like to live inside my body every second of the day.

How much it costs to love her.

I'm standing in Remy's doorway after nearly breaking his door off the hinges. It's so late it's early and he fell back into his room about five minutes ago piss ass, stumbling drunk. He stinks of patchouli, vomit, and Jägermeister. Clover never called me back or got online after we hung up and I've been unable to fall asleep. I'm a man on fire, and I can't keep my mind from wandering to scary places.

"Can't a man get some sleep in this hell hole?" Remy growls, voice scratchy and scented by alcohol. "As if today wasn't a waste of time, now you want to screw with my sleep!"

I breathe in and out a few times—an attempt to ratchet in my rage. "Luella is being a fucking bitch," I hiss. There really was only one person who I could blame and even though I promised her I wouldn't say anything to Remy, I need to or risk doing something really crazy. "Tell your sister I'll never want anything to do with her. She needs to cut the shit now."

Remy tsks me. "Careful, careful. We are talking about my sister, Ballentine. Don't talk shit about my family."

"She is fucking with Clover," I yell. This gets Remy's attention, his eyes narrow and I see him sober up a degree.

He closes the door behind me, shaking the handle when he realizes I did break it. "This is about a girl?"

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

I shove my chest at his, looking down my nose at him. “Don’t play stupid,” I say, jaw working. “You know I’m with Clover and you also know your sister is a manipulating whore.”

“Whore, is it?” Remy says, cracking his neck once on the left and then the right. “Luella, my baby sister is a whore? Is that what you were moaning when you fucked her?”

I shake my head. “It was a mistake. You out of all people should know exactly how those kinds of mistakes happen. I have never had feelings for Luella. I never will. She is the one that twisted this into something it’s not. Something it will never be. Now she’s making Clover’s life a living hell and killing business at the salon. I need you to talk some sense into Luella. Tell her that I am never crossing over to that side again with her. I’m serious. I’m fucking pissed.”

He cackles, one hand on his stomach. “Since when has ordering people around like this gotten you anything? You catch more flies with honey and all that. Or is it you catch the honeys by being fly? I can never remember.” Remy throws up gun signs. I grit my teeth so hard my jaw hurts. He continues, “You’re acting like a complete fool. Get your dick out of your head, bro. You seem crazy. Ever think she deserves it?”

“No,” I roar. Remy pushes at my chest to create space between our bodies. “She doesn’t deserve any of it. She’s in a new place, fuck, the woman is in a whole different world from what she’s used to, and she’s dealing with your sister and her cronies while they try to ruin her life. Catty bullshit. Clover doesn’t deserve that.”

Remy rubs at his eyes and looks sleepy when he pulls his hands from his face. “You

can't even help yourself, can you? You really are twisted up with this girl." He does his best to play at curiosity and I think it's a ploy to calm me down.

"That's not your business," I fire back.

He laughs. "You want me to talk to my sister for you, so I'd say it is exactly my business."

"Because it's the right thing to do. The moral thing to do. Fuck that though, right? You don't do morals or care what's right or wrong," I counter.

"You're mad at me for something my sister did. I'd say you're the one who doesn't care what's right or wrong. Pull your head out of your ass, man. No woman is worth this much anger. Look at yourself. You're miserable."

My fists clench. "Look where we're at," I say, throwing an arm out in the tiny room identical to mine. "You know I'm miserable here. We're useless. We're not helping or doing our job. I don't even know how many people died yesterday and we couldn't stop it. It will happen again and again, and we'll probably be too late those times as well. So, you could say I'm miserable and frustrated. Aren't you? Aren't we all?"

He interrupts. "We can't control the attacks—the war. That's what this is all about." There's a deafening silence in the air when a generator cycle switches off. "And this thing with Clover is something you can control. I get it, man. I get it. She's an adult though, don't you think she can handle her business?"

Inhaling, I take in a noisy breath. "She can handle herself." Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply once again. "I can't lose her. You don't get it. How can you possibly understand without having someone you care about?"

Rexy clears his throat. We don't talk about stuff like this. His jaw works as his gaze

strays from mine. “If you’ll lose her due to a jealous woman, I’d say she is worth losing,” he counters.

“You’d say a lot of things I don’t agree with. I’m not asking that Luella be best friends with Clover, I’m askin’ that she stops giving her a hard time.”

Grabbing a plastic basket of toiletries from his desk, he groans. “I’ll talk to her. Luella does what she wants, and I doubt she’ll care what I say. She’s hung up on you, I bet she’d listen to you before me. That’s my opinion though. I’m heading to shower now that you’ve sobered me up.”

“Thanks for your opinion, man, but I don’t have the patience or endurance to talk to Luella. Not about this. Not without losing my temper.” Shaking my head, I move out of his way and lay a hand on his shoulder before he opens the door. “I’m not mad at you, either. I’m just mad in general.”

He claps me on the back. “I’m mad, too.” Remy meets my eyes. “Pull it together, yeah?” Opening the door, he exits into the hallway and I follow. Three men, including our officer, are approaching from the main building entrance.

I swallow down a wave of nausea when I see the looks on their faces. A grim representation about what they’re about to say. “Rest up, guys,” my boss says. “We found them. Intel worked overtime and a lucky tip came in about a half hour ago. They’re hiding out in the countryside. All of the leaders in one place. We’ll have a meeting before we head out. If we’re successful in cutting the head off this fucking snake, we’ll be heading home this time next week.”

My heart pounds. “Yes, sir,” I mutter, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice even though it would be warranted given our circumstances. Remy asks about the intel and they tell us what they can. Others wander out of their rooms to join us in the hallway, the hype continues to build as they discuss the straight forward plan.

They're certain it's going to be an easy kill; their smiles are confident and cocky. The old swagger we used to have when our job was simpler—the cut and dry maneuvers we are the best at.

“There we go, man,” Remy says as I head back to my room. “The kind of fuck yeah news we needed.” He offers a few more words in the same vein of his initial sentiment. He's trying. I made things weird by opening up to him, and this is how he's responding. I should give him credit, but that would just make me feel even more awkward.

I offer a weak smile and close and lock the door to my room. A few men still linger in the hallway, I can hear their deep voices carrying through the walls. I clear my bed and lie down on top of the blanket. I should be focusing on my work, what needs to happen tomorrow, but I can't shake the image of Clover fucking the dildo.

I also can't forget her gleeful laugh the moment before she ended our conversation to go to the neighbor's house. I'll just have to burn on both ends tonight. One side love and the other rage.

Chapter Seventeen

Mercer

WE AREN'T JUSTIn the English countryside, we fast roped out of our chopper and walked to a fully functional livestock farm. One of the few that still exist in the U.K. We're cloaked by dark, but even the moon seems too bright, casting an icy glow on the barn-like structures on the property. The structures that contain the people we came to exterminate. On the flight here we devised the ground plan, and we're all following those orders, staying alert. Do lives hang in the balance? Sure. More rides

on this mission than any of the others. We have partner forces with us to help round out our numbers and let's be honest, so they can say they had a hand if it's successful and we'll be able to pull out of the country without fuss. Everything is political. Nothing is sacred.

There's a worn-out farmhouse to our left. The red paint is peeling, and a white fence surrounds a small side yard. There are lights on, and at this point, the men inside know we're coming. We might have gotten lucky with the information we received, but that doesn't mean they're idiots. Far from it. Which is why this goddamned war has stretched on for so long. It's a war against freedom—a raging shit fire that makes less and less sense as the years stretch on. There aren't demands. There is just nonsensical bloodshed. We're here to give them a dose of the latter, except it will make perfect sense.

We're wearing night vision, so the landscape appears shades of green with flecks of white where cows graze in the pasture in the distance. Grange and his small team are posted about a hundred yards away, weapons trained on a barn in varying vantage points. I sink down to my knees when our team reaches our agreed upon point, our guns aimed at the house, more specifically, all the exits. We know that the farmer and his family aren't on the premises. A figure moves past a window—a kitchen window. I hold my breath and steady my sights. The man moves out of my crosshair and I release my breath. The brief glimpse is enough for me to recognize the motherfucker. I give my confirmation, a hand gesture to identify the man on the world's most-wanted list to my boss. He nods, green head bobbing on my night vision. A swirl of anticipation and excitement washes over me. For the first time since I can remember, I feel hope. This could end things. At least for a good while if not forever.

Seconds later, the first bombs are dropped by drone planes on top of the house. Then on the barn, and every other structure where they could ostensibly hide. The moon doesn't have anything on explosions, and it lights up the night like a lunchtime picnic. We are merely here to make sure no one escapes and to confirm identities

after it's all said and done. The blasts ricochet, and it gets a bit warmer where we're standing, but we are all far enough away to not be harmed by the destruction in front of us. When the fire gives way to smoke, the ominous stench of warfare hits us like an ambush. One we'll gladly accept.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

Standing guard, our weapons at the ready, we wait. Finally, when we get our orders to move on target and confirm kills, it feels like a lifetime has passed. There's no way anything survived. We move quickly and efficiently, keeping our formation as we approach. I don't cover my nose to try to erase the smell of the dead tonight. Tonight, I relish the feelings of my stomach flipping. We did it. The vibrations of excitement hit the air and enter my bloodstream. A moment later the ugly truth rears.

What would America do if they knew we were a useless cog in a war machine? Would they panic? Do they assume it's out of our hands at this point anyway? The media won't tell them we got lucky—that our win tonight was dumb fucking, fumbling luck, and they'll praise our name, call us heroes for taking another step, the final step, to end the war. They won't see our frustration, total lack of accountability, the haphazard planning, nor will they know our fear. Pure, fresh from the tap, terror at knowing the only thing standing between annihilation and humanity is a useless cog. Because it was a success. Maybe that's how it is for all people who do anything labeled a success. Maybe they're all just praying no one knows it was equal parts luck as it was devout preparation. The buildings on the farm are all cleared. It doesn't take long because of the precise accuracy of the missiles dropped.

Choppers land southwest of our location, their blades cutting the air, making the smoke swirl. There's a body fifty feet from me, Remy sees it the same time I do. Knees bent; he jogs quickly.

"It's him," he says, and repeats it a few more times in shock, while stooping next to the body, pulling out his flashlight, night vision removed.

Out of breath, I stop when I reach Remy, and flip up my nod. I want to see the man

with my own eyes. How many years have we seen mugshots of this man? Thousands of pictures of him in different disguises? He has been the face of this war since the beginning. Way back when we, as a nation, stood unguarded and unprepared for the massacre that was the start of the war. Us against the terrorists. Humans against these inhuman beings that seemed to only want death and destruction. They harbor no empathy, no regard for life in any form. Old or young, this man and the people he commanded smote millions of people, innocent lives. Blood trails out of his mouth, just on one side, as his lifeless eyes cast a gaze to the heavens. A place he surely won't be heading. Years of studying his moves and stalking those around him always ended in disappointment. Until now. Until the moment he was no more.

"We got him," I say, narrowing my own eyes at this picturesque moment. Brothers have retired trying to get this guy. Armies around the world made memes and jokes of his face. Tonight, the victory is ours. "Oh my God. We got him," I repeat. Of course, we did when I take into account the arsenal that was used, but seeing the man dead in person is surreal. We never knew if this moment would come. "The man is responsible for those first terror attacks all over the U.S. and here he is. Gone for good. It's hard to believe." I swallow hard, emotion clogging my throat.

"Like a fucking celebrity or something, right? We're looking at history right now," Remy says before radioing to our officer. It only takes a few minutes for everyone else to join us, a huge circle around a solitary lifeless human body. He doesn't look like the most awful person in the world right now. I have to remind myself of how much loss of life he's responsible for.

"His entire cabinet was killed in the barn," Grange says. "We got them all." He relishes saying the last sentence. Like it's a prayer.

"Every single one," someone else chimes in. "They won't bounce back from this. They can't. All their communications are offline. All of their minions will scatter. They're ready for this to be over with. These men were the only ones keeping the war

alive. It's really over."

Politics will fix the rest. Or at least that's what I assume.

Someone finally says what we're all thinking. "It's over. It's finally fucking over."

Cheers erupt in a violent celebration. Photos are taken of the body as proof and for the media, and I drift back toward the helicopters. Their blades slapping the sky in a familiar pattern that lulls me. My heart rate returns to resting on the long walk back to our ride. Sliding my hand into my pocket, I finger the tiny trinket I keep in my pocket on every mission I've ever been on. It's a little metal Camelia. I roll it between my thumb and forefinger before letting it fall back to the bottom of my pocket.

I take a ragged breath as I lean into a seat, removing my helmet and night vision. Hope turns into joy and that turns into visceral anticipation. "Time to go home," I whisper to myself.

I had a normal video call with Clover four days ago. In an effort to surprise her, I kept quiet about when I was returning from the U.K., I crept back into my house last night at midnight. All the lights were off at her house and it took all of my power to not barge into her house and take her in every way possible. I want to play it cool, because I have big plans for the first time I see her. It's going to be perfect. Everything that Clover Wellsley deserves. I didn't sleep a wink because my sleep cycle is all fucked up, and because the diamond ring my mom gave me is sitting on my dresser burning holes into my subconscious. Mostly because I'm not sure I deserve Clover, and I'm still hung up wondering if she'll actually say yes. We've been apart longer than we've been together. Even when we were together, we weren't really together in the ways traditional couples are together. My stomach wants to heave chunks all over my bedroom floor when I finally let my feet meet the wood and

make my way to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. The sun is rising, and the feelings of security and happiness overtake my nerves about what I'm going to do today.

Pouring a cup of coffee, I look out my front window and I unexpectedly see Clover. She's wearing a silk pajama set that swoops low, revealing her cleavage and that hugs her thighs perfectly. Black running shoes, laces untied are a stark contrast to the pink silk. I narrow my eyes in her direction as I take my first sip of coffee.

"What in the fresh hell," I mutter, drawing nearer to the window to get a better look. God, I've missed her. My heart pounds out as my love for her swells. Her darker hair is in a mad tangle on top of her head. Her body is lithe and sculpted. She's up to some sort of antic this early in the morning. Clover motions to her roof saying something, her warm breath cutting a fog in the cold November air. She lifts her arms and points, raising the hem of her top exposing the abs that I want to kiss, and that's when the shirtless man, pants unbuckled, walks out of her front door and looks where she's pointing.

I clench the handle of the coffee cup so hard the ceramic breaks and hits the floor sending coffee all over my bare feet. I don't move. I don't blink. I let the murderous rage do the moving. It ignites inside me like a fucking torch. I breathe, closing my eyes, praying when I open them the scene will be different, that I'll be back in my fucking metal box in London. That this nightmare is something I'll work through when I wake.

What would happen if I walked outside right now? The unbearable urge to confront them is dampened when my cell phone rings. It's my father. I told him I was home. God love him, he knew I'd be up this early. I answer on the third ring, holding my shaking hand up to my ear. "Hey Dad," I say, swallowing down the lump in my throat.

His greeting is bright and cheery. I watch as the shirtless man gets a ladder from his garage and props it against the side of Clover's house. "Let me buy you a plane ticket home, Son. To celebrate my victory as Mayor of Greenton."

If he had called a half hour ago, I would have told him no, because I have plans. I continue staring as the man climbs up, and walks unsteadily across the roof, making his way to the bricked chimney. Clover jumps up and down, hand covering her mouth as he shuffles his feet awkwardly. I can imagine the words coming out of her mouth. She seems frantic with worry, arms flailing and posture swaying.

"When?" I ask, clearing my throat. "I'm so happy I'll be with you to celebrate the big win," I deadpan, my voice cracking. "Mom must be planning the party of the century."

The man makes it to the chimney, barely, then reaches inside and pulls out a brightly colored bird. The motherfucking bird. My dad tells me about the events leading up to the main celebration in Greenton and I ask appropriate questions when I should, being totally distracted with Clover and her neighbor and their body language. "Yeah, yeah. Sounds perfect, Dad," I agree with the time of the flight he suggested. It's tonight. "Bentley will be able to pick me up?" I ask. "Not you, and Mom, and the whole town," I assert. "As much as I love Mom's fervor, I'm not up for it right now."

Dad laughs. "Bentley can pick you up from the airport if that's what you'd like. Can't say I blame you, it's the only low-key option as far as I can tell. Now that you're responsible for ending the war everyone is going crazy here."

I shake my head. Since the news broke of our mission that ended the war, it's been nothing but one big, sugar-coated media rush. Opinions are like assholes. Everyone has one. Doesn't mean they're right or even based on fact. I don't listen to the buzz because the only thing that matters is that I'm home because there won't be any more attacks and the governments are going to strike hard and fast when copycat artists

start chatter of something else. For all intents and purposes, the snake was beheaded, and the minions were set free.

“I didn’t end the war, Dad. We got lucky.”

“Yeah, yeah, Son. Whatever you say. We raised you to be a humble, honorable man.” I can hear the smile in his voice. Why do I want to do dishonorable things and tear that man’s head from his neck then, Dad?

The man climbs down the ladder, handing the bird to Clover when he’s close enough for her to reach up and grab it. She races into the open front door, the bird clutched in both hands like it’s a live grenade. She returns about thirty seconds later.

“It’s over,” Dad says, emotion swelling in his voice.

“I can’t wait to see you,” I counter. “It’s going to be so nice to be in Greenton after being away.” When the guy gets to the bottom of the ladder, he folds it up and turns around, Clover clutches him around his neck. “I gotta go. Nature calls,” I tell my dad. He bids me goodbye and tells me he can’t wait to see me once more.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

After I hang up, I toss the cell onto a chair in the corner of the room without taking my eyes off the couple in front of me. And they are definitely a couple. He's cradling her around her waist, fingers digging into the silk like he's familiar with the texture, knows how it bunches when it lands on the floor. I stagger back a step, and then another as the pain crawls from the tip of my toes to the top of my head. The heartbreak takes root inside my center, my heart, as Clover grabs the sides of the guy's face and plants her lips, my lips, on his mouth. Just once.

"It is over," I whisper.

I lose my breath completely—absentmindedly forgetting to take in oxygen. I watch as he pulls out of her embrace and strides into his side of the duplex, the taste of my girl on his lips. I catch my breath in a sputtering, noisy inhale. How can she do this? Why? I want to rush over there and get answers to all of the questions invading my mind. What are the odds of me bearing witness to what just happened? Slim to none and for some reason, the universe thought I needed to see it. In vivid detail. I rub my eyes, shaking my head—a limp attempt at erasing it from my mind. It's my fault. I told her to make friends. I was gone. I have no right to be upset. I never had a claim on Clover after only two weeks. She never loved me. She loved the idea of me. Of us. The hold I had on her lessened in my absence. I was foolish to think a woman like Clover could be kept. That she'd marry me. Beating that dude to a pulp would do nothing to help my cause.

Walking back to the bathroom, I clean the coffee off my feet and bring the towel to the front room to clean the mess. After I sop up the ceramic littered coffee, I stand with the larger pieces of the broken cup. It used to say Back by Popular Demand. The shards laying in my palm don't say anything anymore. I glance out the window, my

hands still shaking.

Clover is staring at my house, like she knows I'm in here. Or wished I was. Maybe she feels guilty for what she's doing. Or maybe she really doesn't care at all. My mama has a canvas hanging in the hallway back in 'Bama. It says, 'Show me what you love, and I'll tell you who you are.' I'm a lying, cheating, manipulating pile of absolute hogwash.

Chapter Eighteen

Mercer

IT'S TEN IN the morning and Bentley and I are back at Dizzy Rocket. He drove us straight here after I landed last night. I didn't have my fill of oblivion, so I called him early this morning and told him to pick my ass up. We banged on the good side of the DR doors two minutes before Glenda opened up shop. It's quiet, not even the breakfast crowd has shown up yet. Everyone is probably at home gearing up for the party in town square tonight. No one likes a damn festive occasion more than Greenton. American flags are attached to every light pole and red white and blue décor is pasted to the windows of the businesses lining the main drag. The occasion is the war ending and the mayoral elections.

"Let's get Glenda to fix you some eggs," Bentley says, grabbing my shoulder from behind. "You drink any more of that heartbreak hooch on an empty stomach and more than your heart will be broken." Glenda glares at me from the kitchen, her gaze like angry lasers. Bent leans down. "She's scary, Ballentine. Your hero status is running out. Especially after you put a hole in the bathroom wall last night." I'd forgotten about that. My damn fist mustered up a mind of its own.

I down the bourbon sitting on the bar top in front of me, remnants of someone else from last night, and shove the glass away. The room tilts, and my seat moves. My cell phone is open on Clover Wellsley's social media. There are colorful squares with her life staring back up at me. I drag my finger down on the screen and wait to see if anything new pops up. Nothing. Just a photo of her bird from three days ago and a stupid poem she wrote about him escaping up the chimney. I hate the bird, the poem, and the chimney. Most of all, I hate what Clover has done to me.

"Order yourself another bourbon," I tell Bent.

He growls at me. "She knows it's for you, dumb ass. As loose as I am, I don't even drink this early. Don't you want to go visit with your parents? You showed up drunk last night and left before they could even tell you good morning." When I don't respond to him, he lays his hand on top of my phone to cover it. "Listen to me. Get the fuck out of your head. There's a way things that are bending change before they snap. You know, a little shiny, losing shape. That's you right now, my friend. You're a stone's throw away from a loud ass snap."

I lean back and almost fall off the stool. "That's not me, it's physics, Bent. You're right about one thing. I need to have a clear head when my dad gives his acceptance speech. I'm so angry. There's nothing I can do to forget. To get that woman out of my damned head."

Bentley moves his hand off my cell and puts his hand back on my shoulder. "No one has figured out the female species. They're the world's most confounding mystery. Why do they do what they do? Who are they really?" He pauses for effect. "The government has a compound of them like Area Fifty-One where they laugh at us men while we navigate all the shit that makes no sense!"

I update Clover's feed and a new image appears. A photo I myself saw in person an hour before. It's Greenton Main Street, all the patriotic décor on display. A block or

so from DR.

“She’s here,” I say, choking on my own tongue. Bent is in his own world, telling me conspiracy theories about women that explain why he’s single. Rising from the chair, I slide my phone back into my pocket and grab a large bill out of my wallet. I slam it on the counter and thank Glenda. She snarls at me. “Bent, buddy,” I interrupt. “The more likely scenario is you’re an asshole. That’s okay, though. I love you. But I’ll love you more if we get the fuck out of here right now. Clover is here.”

He quirks a brow. “In Greenton? Wellsley lost the election. Why would she be in Greenton?”

My heart races. “No, fucker. She’s here,” I say, gaze darting to the door when two shadowy figures appear. “Here, here,” I add. “Glenda,” I call out, sliding over the counter in a baseball slide. Bentley follows. “The nation requires the use of your back door.” I wince when I realize how bad it sounds. We’re crouched behind the bar. It’s sticky from spilled sweet drinks last night. We move around the edge until we get back to the kitchen. The room tilts sideways as I stand and push my back against the wall. We’re hidden from view at this angle.

“We’re here for breakfast,” a woman calls. It’s Goldie. Fuck. Why aren’t they at the Slippy Egg? Sweat breaks out under my shirt as my body goes into flight mode. Bent’s eyes go large and round. Glenda responds to Goldie to tell her she’ll be there in one shake of a stick.

Before she leaves the kitchen, she comes over, grabs me by the collar of my shirt, and pulls me to her. “Last get out of jail free card, boy. You owe me working hours tonight after you sober up. Floors need cleaned, the grease trap could use a hose down, and you will fix that hole.”

I nod furiously.

Glenda turns her glare to Bent. “Take him home and sober him up. His daddy would be so ashamed if he saw him right now. With the party tonight too.” She tsks in a way that actually does make me feel like I’ve disappointed her.

“Yes, ma’am. Of course, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am. That breakup of his is really eating at him. Gotta appreciate a broken heart,” Bentley says, trying to win my favor.

“Get out of here. Don’t touch anything in the back room,” Glenda hisses, grabbing two menus from the cart next to us.

My friend grabs my arm and pushes me out of the double doors into the back storage room. “It’s Clover and Goldie,” he says. “How did you not know she was coming?”

I cough, shaking my head. Nausea hits. “Well Einstein, you think I was stalking her social media for no good reason? That’s why I was obsessing.” Half of why I was obsessing.

“I thought you were trying to hunt down the guy she’s fucking. Didn’t know you were keeping tabs on her.” That’s all it takes to lose it altogether. Shuffling outside, I toss my cookies next to a rusted dumpster. Bent follows me out, the heavy metal door slamming shut. My hair is wet with sweat and I have on the same shirt as last night. A mess would be a nice way to describe my appearance. The thought of the woman I love fucking another man is terrifying, enraging. “Alright, alright,” Bent coos. “Get it all out.” He peeks down the alleyway to make sure no one is coming, and I vomit again missing our shoes by a few inches.

Leaning up, I brace my hands on my hips, catching my breath. “I haven’t been this drunk since high school.” I wipe at my face with my sleeve.

Bentley makes an annoyed noise. “You were this drunk last night. Why don’t you sober up and actually talk to Clover? Give yourself some closure of this whole thing.

Or I can call up Billy-Jo and you can get this out of your system in an alternative way. What do you say, pal? Tit for tat?"

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

He's trying to be helpful, wants to be a friend, but he doesn't have a damn clue. I shake my head and stuff my hand into my pocket and pull out my mom's diamond ring. I hold it up in front of my face. "I was going to ask her to marry me. It's not something I can fuck out of my system. She was going to be my forever girl." I swallow down the lump in my throat. My jaw works as I grind my teeth. "I need to give it back to my mom before I lose it."

Bentley snatches it from my hand and holds it behind his back, his gaze surprised, glaring at someone over my shoulder. "My God, Goldie you are as bright as the sun," he drawls.

I spin. Sure as shit. There's Goldie, all perfect hair and makeup. "Good Lord, Mercer, did you sleep in that dumpster last night." She winces, plugging her nose. "Good to see you, Bentley. Thank you for that compliment, you're looking as fresh as ever." Goldie's accent is almost completely gone now. "You," she says. "Why aren't you answering your phone?"

"I don't have my phone," I slur, holding a hand on my stomach all the while on alert for Clover. My phone pings from my pocket.

Goldie crosses her arms over her chest and narrows her eyes. "She didn't see your eloquent escape, but I did. Don't worry. It's just us. Bentley, would you excuse us for a moment, I have a bone to pick with this youngin'."

Bent bows. "Of course, ma'am. Maybe we can catch up later? I'll buy you a drink." His eyes are bright and earnest, looking at Goldie in more than a casual way.

Goldie softens. “Sure. That sounds nice.”

Bent celebrates, shaking fists in the air. “Mercer, I’ll wait for you in my truck. Can you find it okay?”

Goldie answers for me. “I’ll make sure he gets to your truck. This will only take a few minutes.”

Why do I feel like I’m about to be tortured? My headache thumps against my skull. My friend abandons me with this scary, perfumed monster. Goldie was always the scary older girl in Greenton. There was a way she would catch your eye, lick her lips, and make you feel like she could kill you without making physical contact. Through the haze, I realize Goldie seems softer, a concern in her gaze that was never there before.

She pulls me away from the dumpster and my pile of puke. “You going to remember this conversation tonight?” she asks.

I sigh. “Depends on what you’re askin’ me to remember, darlin’.”

Goldie smacks me across the face. Hard. It’s going to leave a red mark. I cradle my cheek. “What’s that for?”

“First off, calling me darlin’, it’s not the stone age. And it’s for not calling Clover when you got home from deployment. It’s also because a good thump will help sober your dumb ass up. What’s your deal? Something bad happen to you overseas? Something so awful that you leave your girlfriend pining without even a text?” She holds out one manicured finger. “It better be good, Mercer Ballentine. I better believe it. You don’t know what she’s been going through all these months without you in Cape Cod. There was only so much I could do for her. Your circle is ruthless.”

Swallowing, I realize I'm going to have to do this drunker than Grandpa on Thanksgiving. "Listen," I whisper. "I didn't call her when I got home because I wanted to surprise her." That doesn't give too much away.

"And? She's still waiting? You got back four days ago. Four. I know this because Sierra came into the salon the day before you guys rolled in and told me her boyfriend was coming back. I waxed her vagina and put in new highlights. Figured your ass was with him. Clover didn't hear that of course, but she heard from someone else at the grocery store that you were home. You're here drunk, so is that her surprise? Man, she's a lucky woman." Goldie raises one brow. "There's a reason beauty is wasted on the young, you're blooming idiots."

I turn away to look at the brick wall of the bar, trying to catch a breath without tasting puke. "I'll just come out with it then. Her fucking neighbor. I saw her with him. Clover had on sexy pajamas. It was really early in the morning." Vomit rises at the horrible thought—transporting myself back into that moment. "He was shirtless." I meet Goldie's eyes. She seems confused, brows furrowing. "They kissed." I sigh, shaking my head. "I should have killed him right there. I want to kill him right now. Still."

"Wait," Goldie says, adjusting her purse strap on her shoulder. "You saw Clover, kissing Jack?"

That's right. The fucker has a name. An annoying one. The way Goldie says it like she's surprised makes it more infuriating.

"He saved the bird from the chimney and she kissed him. They both came out of her house. Like he was sleeping there. I saw everything, Goldie. She's the one who owes explanations. I'm not a bad guy." I lay my other palm on the wall next to us. "I'm drunk right now, but in no universe am I at fault, you hear me?" My vision is double, and I stagger away from Clover's cousin out of the alley, toward the street and the

parking lot. I need to get out of here. Now that Clover is in Greenton I'll have to hide out in places less public.

Tannie is walking with a man, heading toward the DR entrance. I don't recognize the man at first, but he sees me before Tannie does and his gaze locks with mine. It's the fucking neighbor. I don't think about anything else this time. I'm on alcohol instead of coffee and that's all that matters. Jack's eyes widen as I approach and cock my fist back. I clock him in the face. Tannie screams as the fucker hits the pavement, cradling his eye.

"You are a bastard," I mutter, eyes glassed over. Goldie runs over and pulls at my arms from the back.

"Mercer," she screams.

"Ballentine," Goldie says firmer this time. "Jack is gay. He's gay! I don't know what you saw, but it wasn't what you thought."

"What?" I spin to face Goldie, adrenaline mixing with bourbon. "No," I say, shaking my head. "I know what I saw. Don't try to stick up for her. Clover is a liar."

Jack releases his eye, hand shaking. It's already bruising and there's a split with blood dripping down to his lip. "She's quite right. I'm gay. One hundred percent gay actually. Don't worry, you're not my type if that's the issue," he reaffirms. "I'm here to meet a guy Clover is setting me up with. Nice to meet you, by the way. Guessing you're Mercer Ballentine then?" His voice creaks with pain. Oh, balls.

The bells of the Dizzy Rocket front door jingle and I know I only have a few seconds before everything crashes down around me. "Fuck," I mutter. Then because I'm a goddamn gentleman, I eat crow and say, "I'm sorry. I really am."

Then, I run haphazardly, in the opposite direction, to the parking lot on the other side of the building where Bentley's truck is idling. I get in, whole body shaking. "Fucking drive. Fast and far," I tell my friend. "I fucked up, Bent." My breaths are quick, and I can't catch hold of the erratic pace of my heart.

"Which time?" he asks. "You're looking mighty sober right now, so my guess is a new fuck up then?" Bent pulls out of the parking lot. He looks right and sees the scene I just left. Except Clover is out there now, fussing over Jack's face. "Oh wow. Grade A fuck up. Gotcha."

I blow out a breath. "I don't even know where to start."

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“Always start at the beginning, pal. You know that.”

I open his glove compartment. “Got anything to drink in here?” I’m frantic for escape.

Bless my best friend, he pulls a plastic bottle of Jack Daniel’s from under his seat and tosses it in my lap. I tell him the whole story, slurring through the kiss I saw and how I could have misconstrued the whole scenario. This is a nightmare I created. The chance to clear the air and stop this from snowballing was immediately after it happened. Now, I’m going to have to think of a Clover sized scheme to fix it. I pass out before we get wherever Bent is taking me, though, too drunk to even dream.

I open one eye first. I’m in bed at my parents’ house. My first thought after checking my watch is that I wish the past four days were a dream. Or a nightmare. Anything except reality. The engagement ring is sitting on the bedside table with a note from Bent. Your dad’s speech is at seven. Coffee in pot downstairs.

Sitting up, I hold the sides of my head trying to erase my splitting headache. I trudge to the bathroom, take something for the pain, and crank on the shower. I grab my toothbrush off the ledge, pour on some toothpaste and give my teeth and tongue a severe scrubbing. After I wash the last twenty-four hours off my body, I step onto the bath mat a changed man. My resolve is firm, and I know what needs to happen. Whether it works is a whole different matter entirely. Clover is here in Greenton. I need to talk to her. It was a misunderstanding. I think. First, I’ll start at the source. I grab my phone out of the pocket of the jeans laying on the floor. I scroll until I find

the name Preston, and hit call.

Chapter Nineteen

Clover

“WHY WOULDN’T HE come to me and ask?” I cry out, holding Goldie’s hands over the picnic table. We’re in the middle of the town square and everyone is gathering for Mr. Ballentine’s speech. Well, everyone except my daddy. I expect he’ll willow on in fashionably late and try to hide in the back. Mr. Ballentine won the election by a landslide and I think that’s the sole reason Daddy didn’t blow a gasket and start a crusade against the world. Well, and he has good sense and stuff. It’s going to be a different way of life for him. It’s already wildly different.

He has plans to add on to my women’s shelter and is working on enhancing the work program for men as well. Mama says he’s doing everything and anything to fill his time to avoid clearing out his office downtown. A laughable point when you know he has a two thousand square foot office in his house. It’s merely a matter of pride and predictability at this point. I almost feel bad for Winnie for having to deal with him since the loss.

“Really, I just can’t believe he was there, in his house, watching me out there in my pajamas havin’ Jack chase my bird, and he didn’t come over. Surprise me? Like how? Jump out of a cake? I’m so lost, Gold. I really just don’t even know what’s going on right now. I’m sad, too. He ran from me today. What am I to make of that?” Not just a regular run, either. Bentley squealed out of the parking lot like a bat out of hell.

Tannie sits down next to me on the bench and sets the three beers she just purchased in the center of the table as Goldie tries to comfort me. “Honey, he was so drunk he

couldn't tell which way was up. I told you he didn't know Jack was gay. It was a complete mess. Maybe he'll show up soon and you can talk to him about it. I'm as surprised as you are that he's in 'Bama. We came to support your daddy in his...time of need."

That we did. This election was a big deal. Anytime I called home over the past four months it's all I heard about. From my friends and my parents. Both candidates campaigned hard and I felt guilty the entire time. Like I was sleeping with the enemy. Except unfortunately, I wasn't. Not even once. Not even a little bit. Unless personalized dildos count, that is.

I take a sip of beer. "Maybe I don't want to talk to Mercer. Maybe he's a jerk who is so drunk on testosterone that he can't make rational decisions." Translation: I am terribly hurt that I wasn't the first thing he wanted when he got home. If the tables were turned, I would have been breaking windows and walls to get to him. To touch his skin and feel his lips against mine.

Tannie clears her throat, circling the brim of her beer cup with her forefinger. "Or he's a man who just got home from war. Who maybe might be lacking self-confidence because of his absence. You have a whole new life in Cape Cod and he has nothing to do with it." Goldie and I both turn to stare at my friend. Tannie shrugs, raising her brows. "Think about it, Clover. He's away from you and home and everything that's familiar, doing heaven knows what. He's getting snippets of home from you, but he's detached. If I put myself in his shoes, and I saw what he saw between Jack and you, I think I would have come to the same conclusion." Tannie drinks her beer while eyeing me. "It was a mouth kiss, right? You and Jack? Tell us again exactly what Mercer saw."

Guilt rears and I can't deny my friend is making sense. She grew leaps and bounds after I left. Tannie wrote off Joe after he got some eighteen-year-old pregnant and now she's being the responsible adult she's always strived to be. In other words,

moving on from Joe and worrying about herself.

“Clover,” she says, prompting my response about the kiss with my gay friend.

I sigh and tilt my head back to look at the sky. “Yes, it was on the mouth. Like a peck though. One you’d give Gammy. Not like an ‘I want you in my bed type’ of kiss. He’s gay, it’s like kissing you.” I stab a finger at Goldie. “Or you,” I add, pointing at my friend. “God knows if I knew Mercer was watching, and knew he didn’t know Jack was gay, I would have given him a high-five for saving my bird. A gesture of thankfulness, guys. That’s all it was.” I think about what I was wearing.

The bird escaped up the chimney while I was making coffee early in the morning. I keep the cage open before I go to work to let him stretch his wings. He stretched them too far trucking far that day. I threw on my running shoes by the sliding glass door and ran through the back yard to bang on Jack’s bedroom window. I was only going to ask him for a ladder, but he insisted on helping me.

“He’s a cop, he is used to helping people,” I remark, thinking about the situation from a different point of view. “I was just so thankful; I didn’t even think much about it.”

Tannie clears her throat. “But you can see how if that’s what he saw why he’d freak out a little bit? Whatever is going on between you guys was in fledgling stages before he left, right?”

Goldie makes a noise in her throat. “Totally fledgling. You should have seen the way they looked at each other.”

I throw up my arms. “Oh whatever. Still, if he thought that I was cheating on him with Jack, why didn’t he storm over there and fight me on it? Mercer didn’t even fight.” My own fight drains from my body. Everything I thought I knew about my relationship proved to be a lie.

Tannie groans. “Maybe he didn’t feel like fighting both at home and while he was deployed. I understand where he’s coming from.” She gets a far off look in her eye. “If I witnessed Joe kissing another woman, I wouldn’t approach them.” Tannie shakes her head. “I wouldn’t give him another second of my life.” She’s literally inserting herself into the story and playing pretend right now. I can see it on her face.

“You’re really annoying tonight, Tannie,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “Mr. Ballentine is going on the stage now,” I say, noticing everyone around us staring in the same direction.

The stage has a large projection screen behind it still up from the weekly movie night in the park. An American flag is projecting on the white screen. I let my gaze dart around, a careful maneuver in case I find myself staring into his eyes. He’s nowhere to be found. I do see my daddy lurking near the back. I wave him over and he reluctantly leaves the light post and sits next to me on the bench. I hand him my beer.

“Where’s Mama?” I ask when he takes my cup and drains the rest of it.

“Don’t have to worry about drinking in public anymore now do I?” Daddy says, a dramatic flair to his words. “She’s somewhere, helping someone.” He’s not upset she’s not next to him and that is a revelation and proof of his changing ways.

I roll my eyes and hiss, “Oh, stop it. You will still help Mr. Ballentine. He’ll need your guidance. You’ve been mayor for as long as these people can remember. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“Change is good,” he says, repeating the mantra he’s used since he discovered he wasn’t re-elected. “It’s going to be good for the town,” he finishes, trying to convince himself.

I’m about to begin listing all the good things he’s responsible for in Greenton, but Mercer Ballentine walks up on the stage holding his mama’s hand and my heart stops beating. The crowd cheers, beers held up in his direction. Mr. Ballentine waves and takes his wife’s hand. With Mercer in his uniform, they are literally a picture of perfection. Not the kind of perfect you see in the movies, the kind that happens in real life and everyone else calls bull crap because it seems impossible. The kind of perfect when you don’t have to fib, or lie, because reality is grander than anything anyone can make up. The family raises their held hands into the air.

“First off,” Mr. Ballentine bellows, the mic booming his voice through the speakers. “Can we get a little more celebratin’ for my son right here?” Cheers erupt. When they quiet, he goes on, “And the end of the war.” More rowdy chants and hollering.

I swallow down my emotions because I feelev everythingseeing Mercer right now. His face is scanning the crowd and I know I only have a few moments before he spots me. The anger ebbs as the bond I have with this man takes over. The bond has its own life form. His energy calls out in a Clover Wellsley catcall, a siren song, in a manner impossible for me to ignore.

After all this time has passed, I’m still affected by him in earnest. My heart rattles against my chest, I can’t catch my breath and my skin tingles. Running my hands up my bare arms, I try to make the goosebumps go away. A shiver runs up my spine when Mercer’s gaze locks on mine. A sly smile pulls one side of his mouth and his

eyelids lower a fraction.

I blow out a noisy breath. My friend nudges me. She saw the look. Everyone else must have read into it, too because I feel the stares on my face. I can't look away. Not after all of the nights I spent using my memory to form his beautiful, strong features. Even my imagination didn't paint him handsome enough. The spotlights beaming on the stage give him an ethereal quality. I'd have a doctor check my pulse if I didn't feel my dad's hand on my arm.

"Strapping lad, huh?" Daddy says, squeezing my forearm to get my attention.

That breaks the haze. "You know we're on the outs," I whisper.

He chuckles under his breath, a real off-putting sound coming out of a Wellsley's body, honestly. "Clover, honey, that look says everything but on the outs. I gave you a hard time at first because I wanted the best for you and didn't want to see you get hurt." He swallows and turns his gaze to the stage as Mr. Ballentine settles into his speech and Mercer and Mrs. Ballentine take a seat in the metal folding chairs behind the microphone stand.

"Well, you were right. I got hurt," I say.

He shakes his head and looks back at me. "Back then, I didn't know what was good for anyone. Including myself. A man like Mercer who puts God and his nation above all else is a risk, but that doesn't mean he's not best for you. You have a tender heart and I think, quite possibly, I was wrong."

I choke on my next breath. "Did you just admit you were wrong?" I taunt under my breath, keeping my eyes forward so it doesn't appear as if we aren't paying attention to the stage. "The sky is going to fall at any second."

Daddy smiles widely and wraps an arm around my shoulder. “It’s rude to carry on like this. Focus on the stage, Clover,” he replies, eyes narrowing in a way that looks like he’s listening intently.

Mr. Ballentine is confident, his suit crisp, and his eyes bright. He clutches the microphone and walks as he concludes his brief speech. “We are a strong community and I want to thank you for giving me a chance. I’ve been behind the scenes for a long time lobbying for our people. Things are settling in our country, but Greenton won’t stay stagnant. We will move forward with Southern grace, tenacity, and grit. I want to thank the former Mayor Wellsley for being a worthy friend, colleague, and opponent.”

My daddy tips his imaginary hat toward Mr. Ballentine and wears his work smile. Eyes are on me as well, so I flash the pageant grin, avoiding Mercer’s searing gaze.

Mr. Ballentine turns to look at his family and then back at the crowd, at me. “My family wants to thank everyone and start off this season with a bang. Mercer will be serving drinks at the Dizzy Rocket and there will be a catered meal, family-style. Please walk over there with us and accept our thanks. Here’s to the future, to passion, and to a community I’m fortunate to be part of.” The crowd erupts with applause.

I turn on the picnic table to face Goldie. “Mercer serving drinks, huh? Might have to check this out for myself.”

The smirk she gives in reply is devious. Tannie inserts her opinion on the tactic we need to deploy, and I agree. Daddy kisses me on the cheek. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Please,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You can’t use that line anymore.”

He drops his hands into his pants pockets. “Giving second chances isn’t something

you should think about. Everyone deserves one or two.” Then he leans over, kisses the top of my head like he did when I was a child and saunters over to where my mama is chatting with a group of her friends.

The look she gives my father when he reaches down to hold her hand is swoon-worthy, real love story sort of stuff and I think for the thousandth time tonight how much better life will be because my daddy didn’t get what he thought he wanted.

“To DR,” I proclaim, taking Goldie’s beer and finishing it. I fish out my cell phone and tell Jack and Preston to meet us there. What is it Mercer said? You do it right the first time or you do it again.

Chapter Twenty

Mercer

I’M SLINGING DRINKS, wearing my uniform, and not only have I earned Glenda’s favor, the town is eating it up. I have no clue if Clover is going to show up. When she looked at me while I was up on stage during my dad’s speech, the spark was still there. It was alive and buzzing. She might not want to talk in public, so I need to settle in for a long night and the possibility that I’ll make a house call after this party is over. Moods are jubilant, everyone soaring high. Free alcohol and dinner paired with nothing but positive things in the news is really something to behold. The world is happy. Greenton is no exception.

I slide a drink to Billy-Jo, and she winks at me, her heavy makeup cracking as her eye wrinkles fold. I’m trying to make a Miami Vice when I hear Clover’s voice. I look up, and my stomach slides up to my throat. “Clover,” I say, stopping the blender.

“You,” she says, neck working as she swallows. Goldie and Tannie are next to her, followed by Jack and Preston. Jack’s shiner makes me cringe. Five seats clear as Goldie gives the current patrons the evil eye.

“My friends and I would like a drink,” Clover says. I blend the last part to the drink I’m working on and pour it for the customer. “White wine if you have it,” she adds. I nod at the others in the group, my token of greeting, and to Jack another apology. I also plead with Preston to forgive me for my atrocious behavior. He merely winks.

Walking to stand in front of her, I place my hands on the bar. “That it then? You here for drinks only?” I take out a house bottle of white and pour them all glasses and slide them down.

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

She folds her arms under her chest, gaze as potent as stormy skies. “What else would we be here for?” She takes in my uniform, a subtle appraisal.

“Me,” I say simply. “I don’t know about you, but kissing you is the only thing on my mind right now. It’s been quite some time since I’ve tasted those lips.”

She looks away, to her friend. “You don’t get to do that,” she returns. “Not before you grovel to Jack for your hideous behavior. And apologize to...”

“You,” I supply, helpfully, setting my hand on hers. Her nails are painted a light pink. Clover pulls her hand away and tucks her hair behind one ear. She’s wearing the earrings I bought her. “I’m sorry, Clover. If you’re going to make me do this right here in front of everyone. I’m sorry. A million stinky ponds sorry.” I look at Jack and Preston. “I’m really sorry for that,” I say. Turning my eyes back to Clover, I add, “It takes two for a misunderstanding, though.”

Tannie elbows Clover. “I’m sorry for what you saw. Jack was my closest friend in Cape Cod aside from Goldie. I promise you, me kissing him was like me kissing a grandparent.”

Jack scoffs. “That’s so distasteful,” he says, drawing out the word.

Preston laughs, rubbing Jack’s arm. “I don’t think about my grandma when I kiss you.”

Jack smiles with his eyes. “I guess that makes me feel better,” he says, leaning over to plant a kiss square on Preston’s mouth.

Goldie groans and tells them to get a room. Tannie elbows Clover again. “And? What else? Keep going,” Tannie prompts before she drains her glass of wine.

“I forgive you, Mercer,” Clover drawls.

I swallow hard. “That mean I can kiss my girl now?”

Clover shakes her head. “Pour some shots. We need to play opossum or panda first.”

I take a step back, confused. “Seriously? The game we played in high school?”

She nods once. “Maybe not with Fireball this time. Get out the good stuff. We are in our thirties now. Let’s do this the refined way.” The other bartender covers the rest of the bar when he sees me preoccupied. I offer him a grateful nod.

Reaching under the counter, I pull out six shot glasses and line them up, and pour a mid-level whiskey into them carefully. Preston makes a joke that I have a career in bartending if my military career washes up now that the war is done. I make his shot a double.

Clover clears her throat. “Rules. One person says a statement. We all guess true or false and whoever is wrong, takes a shot.” She pulls a shot glass in front of her exposed chest and watches my face as I stare.

Goldie admonishes Tannie for whining about never winning this game and Jack offers an apology to me for that morning even though he didn’t need to. I hate myself a little more for what his face looks like.

“Start it up, darlin’,” I order.

“Mercer loves Clover,” she proclaims, then adds, “Panda.”

Everyone chimes in at the same time, “Panda.”

I grin. “You really are taking it back old school, aren’t you?”

She shrugs. “Wouldn’t want it to get inappropriate in a public venue.”

“Panda,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “My turn.”

“Clover kisses all her friends on the mouth,” I say.

Goldie and Tannie, in unison, “Opossum.”

Preston looks up in thought before he says opossum. Jack looks scared, but he agrees with the group. Clover is last with a deadpan, “Opossum.” No one drinks.

I take a shot. “I was panda,” I proclaim, hissing out the sting on my tongue. “I have one more, though.”

“Go on,” Tannie says, grinning. Jack and Preston are wrapped up in their own conversation at this point and we all know this is Clover’s game of fishing.

“This is the story where the guy gets the girl in the end,” I proclaim, leaning my elbows on the bar. “And I won’t leave you in suspense, I’m going with panda.”

Clover’s eyes go big and round, my reflection shining back at me. Clear as a sun-filled morning and as earnest as a hard day’s work. She leans in sliding the shot glass away with her elbow. “I’m thinking that’s probably panda.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“Probably?” I counter.

Her lips brush mine when she says, “Opossum.”

I pull back, confused. “Huh?”

“Not probably, Mercer. Definitely panda.”

My lips sink into hers and they taste like magic—home. Everything I dared to dream for. It only takes a few seconds to realize the bar separating us is the only thing stopping me from taking her clothes off and having her in all ways. Her tongue tentatively probes against mine and I greet it with my own. My whole body ignites and I pull away before I get carried away.

Leaning my forehead against hers, I whisper, “I need to take you somewhere and show you something. What do you say?” I’m aware that everyone is looking at us, that we’re in a bar filled with people who just saw a kiss that wasn’t just a kiss.

“We still playing a game?” Clover asks. “Is what you have to show me X-Rated?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. That’s later on.”

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” Tannie exclaims, rising from her stool. “You guys want to go get something to eat and let these lovebirds get...reacquainted?” She hikes her thumb over her shoulder to the long table with food set out. The group agrees.

Clover laughs and bids her friends goodbye. I check with Glenda back in the kitchen

and maybe it's the uniform, but she agrees to let me go with a smile. I offer to come back to help her with the chores around the kitchen another day and apologize again for my drunken tirade.

When I exit, Clover is waiting for me, arms wrapped around her bare shoulders. The moon hits her skin and gives her a dewy glow. This is the part where we're finally alone and I'll have to use willpower alone to get through this without breaking down or just pushing her against a wall and kissing four months of missing her away.

"Where you taking me?"

"There's something I want to show you." My voice shakes and Clover hears it. "It's a surprise," I admit, opening my arms to the side.

"I missed you, Mercer," Clover drawls, tears forming in her eyes. "Seeing you tonight up on that stage made me realize how much everything else doesn't matter. You're home safe and time didn't touch my feelings for you."

My heart rate picks up as we walk back to town square. This is going just as I hoped it would. "You don't know how happy I am to hear you say that. This is sort of the surprise I was trying to pull back in Cape Cod." I stop when we're in front of the screen that still has an American flag projected. "I should have known it wasn't clever enough and I'd have to Clover-ize the plan to fit."

Clover quirks one brow and looks at me, her eyes shining. "I'm listening," she says, taking both my hands in hers.

"Okay," I say, stepping out of her grasp. "Stay here and watch the screen. Give me a few minutes."

She nods, a coy smile playing on her lips.

I jog up to the little control station that houses the projector. There's a feeling that comes with the thrill of a chase, or when action meets preparation. I feel it during missions, and I feel it now. I hit the play button, and make sure the video is focused and centered. My face pops up on the screen. It's a little blurry because I used my older laptop to record the video.

My stomach flips when Clover steps closer to the screen to get a better look. The video plays.

"Clover Wellsley. It's me." I cover my mouth to cover a cough. "I just got here in London. There should be a little date stamp proving that." There is. Clover steps even closer. The urge to walk over and pull her into my arms wars with my need for this to be as perfect as I can make it.

"Leaving you was harder than anything I've ever done before. It's how I know that you are the person for me. Not just the person for me at this stage of life, but the person I want to be with for the rest of time. No matter what happens, I wanted you to know that I choose you."

Clover turns to seek me out, but I move quickly, making my way around the control station toward the stage—hidden from view.

"When people talk about soul mates, I never thought mine would be someone I knew my whole life. Or that I'd find you on the side of the road covered in mud talking about lying to the world. It was then that I knew I was lying to the world too." I pause on the video, trying to keep my emotions in check. "I wasn't happy. I was fulfilled with my career, but my life needed more. You stumbled into me, literally, and I knew that life was about more than just my duty. Sometimes it's about helping the person you thought needed help least. Or falling for a woman who doesn't fall for anyone or anything. Here I sit in a small tin room in London feeling that 'Bama sun on my face and that Camelia love in my chest because I love a woman more than I love my own

life. Some people you have to let haunt you because they brought you to life, and if you didn't allow it, they'd kill you completely. That's where I'm at, Clover Wellsley. I'm letting you haunt my soul because it belongs to you. You're home. You're my love. My life. I want you to be mine forever. So, I'm asking for your hand in marriage. I'm asking you to be mine."

Just as I hoped, Clover is so wrapped up in the video that she didn't notice me walk up the stage in the dark right corner.

"Will you marry me, Clover?"

I get down on one knee, my mom's small engagement ring in between my forefinger and thumb. "Marry me," I ask.

Clover stumbles toward the front stairs of the stage, tears pouring down her face. When she gets to the top stair, she drops to her knees in front of me.

"I know it's crazy to feel this way after such a short time, darlin'. There's no one else for me. Not in the entire world. You are my definition of perfection. However you accept, just accept, I'll do anything to make you happy for the rest of your life."

She puts her finger on my mouth, takes the ring from my hand and slides it on her left ring finger. "Mercer Ballentine, I love you so, so much."

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

“That’s a yes?” I ask, taking her cheeks in my hand, wiping her tears with my thumbs.

“Panda,” Clover says, throwing her hands around my neck, making me fall backward on the stage. We kiss for what seems like forever, her tiny body on top of mine, the cool sting of the ring metal on my face. She’s mine. The happiness is so complete and satisfying that I know nothing will ever compare to this moment.

We’re broken from the moment when we hear cheers and whistles. I sit up, Clover staying on my lap as I turn to see our friends watching us. Clover is a little tousled, and I’m a lot turned on, but she stands in front of me and throws her left hand in the air.

“I got the man!” she says. “We’re gettin’ hitched!”

Swooping her into my arms, I carry her off the stage and into the waiting truck I had Preston arrange earlier in the day. She claps her hands and squeals as she examines her hand. “I love you so much.”

“Ma’am,” I say, using a firmer tone. “I love you, too, but we have a couple i’s to dot and t’s to cross.”

Her gaze flicks up to mine and when she knows immediately what I mean and her eyes melt into a longing, ache-filled possession.

I swallow hard and throw the truck into drive. “Buckle up.”

Clover spins once she's in the middle of the room at the bed and breakfast we just checked into. I close the door without taking my eyes off her. "Define best sex of your life as it pertains to a virgin," she replies to the statement I just made.

I pull off my uniform and toss it over a chair before saying, "You already fucked my cock. This is just a formality."

Clover takes a deep breath. "You've been planning this for far longer than I imagined. The taking of my virginity, that is."

I pull off my white undershirt and my socks. "I plan everything. Some things are more enjoyable to plan than others. Like the proposal."

"Which was perfect. I can't believe you recorded that so long ago," she says, gaze trailing over my body. She takes her time, commits body parts to memory. The scent of a fresh floral bouquet fills the room and there's a faint chirp of a whippoorwill outside the curtained window.

"I wanted to do it the day that, ah, your bird escaped," I say, walking back because I don't want to think about that day in this moment. "Tonight, it went better than I planned for. It's my mom's ring. I don't know if I mentioned that in between make-out sessions. They've known this entire time that I wanted to ask you to marry me. I wanted to do it before I left, but I was afraid that you'd think it was too rash a decision. Or worse, that I was doing it to keep you tied to me only because I was deploying. Even your parents knew and approved...eventually."

Clover closes the space between us, her palms grazing my pecs. "Mercer, you know me better than anyone else and you managed to do that in a short amount of time. I trust you. The amount of time we spent loving each other is irrelevant at this point.

Now we have the rest of our lives to coat each other with kisses and make every single memory together.”

I rest my hands on the only safe spot, her shoulders. Anywhere else, and the hunger would take over completely. “For the first month after I left, I asked myself why now? Why couldn’t we fall in love back in our teenaged years and have spent all these years together up until now.” I shake my head. “That’s not how it works. Love doesn’t say when. It says how. And the how of it, Ms. Wellsley, is you are the most magnificent person in the entire world.” I eye the large bed over her shoulder. “Would you do me the honor of handing me your virginity.” I wink. “On a silver platter would be nice.”

She swoons, cheeks red, eyes half-mast, and then she fixes me with a smirk. “I thought your cock has already been inside me? No need for a silver platter.”

“Technicality,” I mutter, watching my hand slide down her tan arm. Grabbing her waist, I pull her against me so she can feel me hard and ready. “I’m a jealous man. This is for you, but it’s for me too. I’ll say when. And the when is now. You tell me how.” I grab the hem of her dress and raise it over her head and toss it on the same chair my uniform is on. I kiss a trail up her neck and then whisper, “Tell me. How do you want it?”

Her breaths come quicker as I pull away and admire the body inside her lavender colored bra and panties. Her stomach is toned and tight and she’s smaller than she was when I last saw her naked. The months away have changed her, and a pang of regret splices my chest for what I’ve missed—the fact that I’ve missed anything at all.

Clover brings her lips to mine and clasps her hands around my neck. Gently, she pulls me toward the bed. I fall on top of her, bracing my weight with my arms. “As much of your skin on my skin as possible,” she says, cradling my face, and tickling my

chest and abs as her hand finds the edge of my underwear. Sucking in, I hold my breath as her fingers close around my shaft. It feels better than I remember. Our connection vibrates in the inch of space between our bodies. I lick a path over her collarbone, a delicious trail that leaves my mouth filled with her scent.

I unsnap her bra in between her breasts and try to focus on licking her nipples while her hand pumps in my underwear. “Let’s take the rest off,” Clover says, her breathy tone sending a jolt to my cock. Leaning up, I remove my underwear and peel hers off her body. The scant lace is wet and smells like her. An indescribable mix of scents that sets my teeth on edge. Longing hits. The ache comes next when she spreads her legs and opens for me. “My honeypot is wet for you, Mercer Ballentine. What are you going to do about it? Go fishing? Or go fishing?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Clover

MERCER FLASHES A wolfish grin as he lowers his head between my legs. “Oh, okay then. That’s nice. Real nice,” I say, running my hands through his hair, closing my eyes. My whole body is writhing with feelings—an onslaught of eroticism. His tongue flicks my clit and I feel pleasure in my stomach, in my knees, in that place below my belly button. He growls as he slides a finger inside my wet pussy and my back arches. “I want to come with you inside me. Not on a finger. Mercer,” I say. Swallowing and breathing at the same time seem like too much of a challenge in the haze he has me in. From the moment I laid eyes on him in the airport, I dreamed of this. The claiming by Mercer Ballentine. A fantasy by any woman’s standards, and my farm trucking real life.

“Give me the real one. Inside me. I won’t smell like rubber after. It’s going to be the

best night of my life.”

He laughs, gliding away from my center, kissing my hips, my stomach, the tips of my breasts. Once on each side. Hitting every erogenous zone on his blazing path to my neck and mouth. “You’re making me jealous of my own cock.” A throaty, turned-on laugh, rumbles his body. “Never thought I’d say that.”

“Then stop talking,” I order, moving my hips up, seeking his wide girth. It is the same yet completely different than the dildo. His dick is warm and softer, my core will wrap around it differently than rubber. I bring his face to mine, his mouth to mine, his gaze, so soulful, searing mine. “Take me. I’m yours.”

He nudges gently, just to see if he’s in the right ballpark. When he meets my wet, hot opening, his eyes fall closed with a soft moan. His neck works as he swallows hard and thrusts again, the tip entering me, his width stretching my pussy open. “Tell me if it hurts.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

It won't hurt, I've practiced with the dildo several times. All I feel right now is stripped down, raw pleasure at being entered by a man—by him.

Tentatively, I reach around his back and find his well-sculpted ass. I pull, encouraging him deeper. He lets out a guttural noise when his cock enters all the way. His whole body stills when he's buried in me. "It only feels good. Amazing. You're inside me," I say, seeking out his kiss. It's tongues and madness as he thrusts again and again. I can see the agonizing pleasure on his face, and it matches the desperate need for orgasm in mine. Moving my arms back up to his shoulders, the engagement ring catches the dull light from the bedside table and the monumental meaning cascades over me like a sedative. I'm making love to the man who I will spend a lifetime with.

It was never supposed to be like this. Love was never going to creep up on me. It was going to be a thoughtful decision made with the utmost care and deliberation. Then it wouldn't be with Mercer, and I don't want that kind of life if it means he's not in it. My love for him has changed me in all the ways I didn't know I needed changing. His face is against my neck and I can tell he's close because his breathing has changed. Taken by the moment, I grind my hips against his pelvis and tell him I'm going to come. One more thrust and the pleasure starts rippling through my body.

"I'm coming with you inside me," I breathe, clutching him to me, sealing it with wet tongues. The orgasm is still tearing through my body when he pulls out and ejaculates on my stomach, head hanging limply down, like he doesn't have the energy to keep it upright.

Instead of wiping it off, he collapses on top of me, his face once again tucked sweetly

into my neck.

“The dildo has nothing on the real thing. In case you’re wondering.” I pant a few sweaty breaths and he kisses me behind my ear. It’s like that place is connected to my core because it contracts, an empty longing. More. I want more.

“Thank God,” Mercer says, laughing. “I was worried the whole body attached to it would be an encumbrance for you.”

“More of a bonus piece if you want the truth. The muscles, the mouth, it’s all impressive.” I sigh. “I’m gonna want that a few more times tonight.”

“Let’s thank God because I wasn’t sure how I was going to let you know I have a lot of fucking to get out of my system and having you under me, with your tight body, wet cunt, wearing my ring? Well, let’s just say the draw to you is pretty strong, darlin’.”

“I love it when you talk dirty,” I say, shifting him down when I feel his shaft rising again, against my stomach. “Lay down,” I say. I want to get on top.

Mercer flips me on top with ease and settles me on top of his erection. The muscles on his neck work as he lifts his head from the pillow. “Let me watch,” he begs.

Positioning him just so, I sink down slowly, inch by inch. He gives me his hands and I interlace my fingers with his. “I never knew it could feel this good,” I breathe, lifting and lowering so the head of his cock rubs against my sensitive walls. “You were made for me.”

“No,” Mercer growls. “You were made for me.”

“We were made for each other,” I amend. “From this angle,” I say, losing my breath

to a flash of pleasure. “It’s rubbing...” I trail off again. “That place inside me.” When I open my eyes, Mercer is grinning.

“Let’s give you a G-spot orgasm, shall we? Lean forward,” he commands. “Put your hands on my shoulders.” I do, and another intense wave hits and my core clenches. He reaches down between our connected bodies and moves his cock inside me as I ride him. The increased pressure makes me buck. There’s nothing to compare it to. I feel like I might pee, or orgasm, or leave planet earth for another galaxy far, far away.

“Keep moving,” Mercer sighs. “Just like that.”

I swallow a mouth full of spit and concentrate on that one spot. He pulls his dick against my wall harder and I circle my hips once more, and this time when I come, I see stars. There’s a loud scream and my legs tingle. Like an explosion that starts at that place where he’s giving pressure and drowning the rest of my body. I feel the orgasm everywhere. Breathing seems a trivial task when my body is writhing in such bliss.

I open my eyes when the shock wears off. Mercer is watching me, a mirthful smile on his lips. He flexes his dick. “That was fun, huh?”

“How are you so good at that?”

He chuckles. “There may be several things I can teach you.” I feel him move inside me again. “Watching you come apart like that might have just beat out your face when I proposed.”

“That’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever said.” We both laugh, but not for long because he needs to be taken care of. “How do you want it.” I rise off him, leaving a puddle around the base of his cock.

“On all fours,” he says, gaze flicking all over my body. I’m red on the chest, sticky from his cum, and my makeup is probably smeared all over my face. I do as I’m told, because what if he has more tricks up his sleeve? Even though my pussy is sensitive, I want to feel more. Everything. “You have no idea how much tonight means to me,” he says, voice hoarse. I want to turn to see his face because the phrase seems to hold so much more than just plain words, but he pushes into me, filling me up, his hands firm on my hips as he fucks himself using my body. It’s raw and stripped down to base level, and I love it. My ass slaps against his stomach as he pumps into me and he smacks my ass on each side hard enough to leave marks.

He reaches around and starts working my clit with his finger, a harsh jiggling of his skilled finger leaves me panting, almost breathless as I chase the high of another explosion. His pumps get more erratic, but his hand is steady.

“That’s it. You feel it?” he says, low timbre making my insides shake with fear.

“Yes,” I reply, voice tired. He presses into me, both my clit and his shaft all the way to the hilt, and the ache turns into more waves, relief, cascading oxytocin wrapping my body. He pumps once more, his sweat making the sound ricochet throughout the room and pulls out, leaving me empty. I hang my head between my arms in blissful defeat.

He spreads my butt cheeks with one hand, and I feel hot spurts land on my most sensitive areas, the last shot landing on my sore pussy, dripping onto my clit, and then onto the bed beneath us. It’s tinged pink.

Mercer leans over and tongues my core, lapping up what he just gave me, sending new sensations igniting my pink, swollen folds. His tongue is a warm salve and even if I’m embarrassed at being this exposed, I relax into his attentions because I can’t help myself.

His tongue is wide and strong, and I move against him, anticipating his next thrust, his next move. “This is why newlyweds never go out with their friends,” I deadpan, my voice cracking on the last syllable because he flicked my clit. “They’re in bed giving each other orgasms all day long.”

“Something like that,” Mercer says, kissing my ass cheek. “Does this feel good? How sore are you?”

I waggle my butt in the air. “It was sore, but when you use your tongue like that it goes away and all I feel is...good.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

He clears his throat. “The trick to going all night is lots of tongue in between. It helps.” He pulls me up to sit in his lap, my back against his front. “Clover, I love you something mad. Do you know that?” He kisses my shoulder.

My breathing finally eases back into something normal. “I love you. Thank you for tonight. For everything, really. You showed me how to be me without shoving it down my throat.”

He pulls us down and under the covers. I roll to face him and trace the planes of his face with my fingers. “You set me free and captured me at the same time,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “I don’t even know how to explain that.”

Mercer bites the tip of my finger and holds it between his teeth before sucking it. I feel it in my core. I take his free hand and put it between my legs. “And you know exactly how to work my body so I’d appreciate it if you’d just do that as much as possible right now.”

“I didn’t capture you. You merely fell in love with a Southern boy.” Mercer winks before he dips a finger inside me eliciting a quiet moan. His tongue parts my lips and I lose myself again.

Which I’ve come to realize is okay, because Mercer Ballentine will always find me.

Epilogue

Mercer

“COUNT THE STARS,” Clover says, pointing to the sky. We’re at our almost beach in Cape Cod. We watched the light fade into night, but we weren’t ready to go after. We still had more champagne and she said her bucket wasn’t full yet. Her love bucket, that is. I lean over and kiss her cheek. She’s so beautiful, the moon is glowing on her creamy skin.

“That’s an impossibility,” I say. “There are one hundred billion stars in the Milky Way. There aren’t enough hours in a day to count all of the stars.”

She turns to look at me. “How ‘bout I count the ones I see in your eyes?” Her smile is bright and white. Almost as big as it was on our wedding day last year when I finally got the girl forever. There was no almost about it. There was a finality to our vows that brought me relief. This woman was my missing piece and I didn’t realize how unfulfilled I was until I was able to call her my wife. My partner in everything and anything.

“How many in my eyes then?” I counter, humoring her.

Clover furrows her brows in deep thought. “I only see myself,” she admits. “No stars. Zero.”

“Or infinity, you are my only star,” I joke, winking at her.

Clover takes a ragged breath. “Why are you impossibly perfect?”

“‘Cause I got a good woman by my side.”

Clover casts her eyes back at the sky. “I never thanked you. You’ve been so supportive while we opened the new salon. I didn’t think it would be this much

work.” Goldie and Clover expanded, and they are co-owners of an even more successful salon in a ritzy part of town.

I fold my arms behind my head. “No thanks needed, darlin’. You deal with a heaping of mess with my job.”

There are still a lot of training trips, but since the war ended and the multi-country agreement was signed, I haven’t deployed. It’s the most peaceful my life has ever been. We will spend a month in Greenton later this year because we both miss home, but we have carved out a life for ourselves in Cape Cod. The Harbour Point SEAL Base is where I belong. Clover is merely squaring up her dreams to match mine, and I can’t discredit how much she has changed and given to make us successful. Her daddy has more time on his hands and is a much happier person because of it. Her parents came to visit us in my house after we got married and all the scores were settled. We are a family now. In every way. There isn’t bad blood.

They support Clover and help in any way they can. It’s hard to keep up with her as she always has several things going on at the same time, and I’m just lucky that I’m the one thing that is always in the forefront of her mind. The love she has for me is something I didn’t know was real—or even possible. She loves my flaws as fiercely as she loves my good parts. I guess the only reason I am able to understand was because I feel the same way about her.

Clover sits up and grabs the champagne flute. She has a drink and then looks down at me. “Listen, I know I have the salon, and the quilting club, the volunteer hours at the shelter, the remodel of the house, and uh, you know training for the marathon, but I was thinking,” she says, sipping once more. “Maybe we could try for a baby. What do you think?”

I sit up. “Are you serious?”

Her eyes light up. She nods, a line forming between her eyes. “Look at how obsessed with you, I am. I’m ready to bring more obsession into this. Or we can at least have fun trying at the very least?”

Emotion clogs my throat. I clear it. “I think it’s a great idea. There’s nothing I love doing more than trying to make a baby with you.”

“You just have to like, come inside me instead of pulling out. That’s the plan, then.” She says it so matter-of-factly that I have to laugh. “What?” Clover whines.

I lick my lips and drag my hand over my mouth. “How about you let me worry about how babies are made and you just worry about having fun while we do it?” She folds her arms and tilts her head. “You have a lot going on. I’m just taking something off your plate.” I grin and hold out my hand. When she doesn’t take it, I say, “I’d love to come in you, Clover Wellsley. Putting a baby inside you will be my greatest accomplishment and I will take the responsibility very seriously.” I lay a hand over my heart. Her cold front breaks and she giggles, laying her hand on my arm.

She tells me the positions she was told to help her chances of getting pregnant and my cock stiffens. I have to change the subject because sand will end up places it shouldn’t be if she keeps talking technical about baby-making.

“Do you have everything buttoned up for Tannie’s bachelorette party?” I ask, grabbing the bottle to refill her glass.

Clover takes it and sips a few times. “I do. I know I’ve said it a thousand times before, but I’m so happy she met a great guy. Did I tell you Joe called her last week begging for another chance when he read her engagement announcement in the paper? Classic Joe. A day late and a dollar short.”

Source Creation Date: August 16, 2025, 9:54 am

I brush a wayward strand of hair off her face, and she smiles at me.

“What about you? Don’t you have a bachelor party to attend in a couple weekends?”

Ah, I hadn’t told her. That’s the thing with bad news, I never want to crush Clover in any way and if I can avoid telling her things that might upset her, I will. Especially when it doesn’t affect her at all.

“They broke up,” I admit. When she wrinkles her nose, I wrinkle my nose back in an attempt to make her smile. “He, ah, cheated on her. A drunken mistake, but Sierra didn’t take well to it. She called off the wedding.”

Clover’s face wilts. “Poor Sierra,” she says, crying out in actual pain. “I’m going to get her in the salon for the works. Make her feel like a million dollars. I wish you told me earlier and I would have been there for her.” Typical Clover. Sierra and Luella made her life a living hell while I was gone and the only thing she feels for the girl in this moment is pain, and the need to make her feel better. “What a dog.”

I cough. “He is,” I admit. I’ve never seen the sense in cheating, though many in my line of work relish the thrill of getting away with murder, in every sense. The pull of Clover was always too strong to ignore in any form. Jeopardizing that in any way seems like the most foolish thing in the world. I was there for Grange after he fucked up, but even as he explained the situation, I wasn’t sure how he got himself in that deep to begin with. “Listen, let’s get back to not pulling out. Or your marathon. Or the remodel. Or Preston and Jack’s remodel?”

My drunken punch sealed their romantic fate. Preston fell so hard he left Alabama

behind to join Jack in Massachusetts. They're living in Clover's old place as well as Jack's while the house they purchased in Cape Cod is modernized. They needed both duplexes for Preston's things. Their relationship is the only reason the guilt from that day has eased.

"Speaking of housework, our bird called the contractor a farm trucking babe yesterday. I thought his eyes were going to bulge out of his head. He didn't see me in the other room. He asked him to repeat what he said, and you know that he did. Like fifteen times. You need to stop teaching him inappropriate things. What happens when you stop pulling out and we have a baby?" She finishes the flute as she shakes her head. "Baby's first word is going to be a swear word, I know it."

I kiss her shining lips. She tastes sweet. "I hate to be the one to tell you this, but the bird doesn't say cuss words. He says your fake version of cuss words. I think everything is going to be okay. I'll throw in some extensive vocabulary words if I get to stop pulling out."

Clover grabs my ears and turns our kiss into a make-out session. Her breathing deepens and I know where it will lead and exactly how long I have before I need to pull away from her or unzip my pants.

"Want to take this back home?"

She moans against my lips. "What if we shake off this blanket and get this thing started?"

The adrenaline hits and I'm not surprised she suggests it because that's Clover for you. I take her under my body and slide her dress up, panties down, my pants and underwear down to my knees and kiss her mouth. She tilts her hips up to meet mine and dusts a hand off before reaching down to find that she's literally soaking wet. She grins when she sees my surprised face.

“I think it was all of that pulling out talk,” she explains.

Shaking my head, I sink into her warm flesh and close my eyes. The champagne on her lips and the scent of her perfume intoxicate me in a singular way. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for this woman. I changed my life to make her fit. I gave her a part of myself I’d never given to anyone else. All my life, she was there. She was waiting. I take a ragged breath as I feel her wet pussy flex around me. She’s coming fast and hard, her body stiff under me. I pump a few more times and the elation of not having to pull out hits the same time my balls and stomach tighten. I come inside her, a vicious fusion of what she wants and what I want to give her. Everything.

The formidable energy that exists in this moment tells me all I need to know. Here in my almost place, with the girl I almost didn’t get, wasn’t an almost kind of moment. It was a real one that will change our worlds. We made love. Changed our forever story. Almost counted for a little while, but now forever drives our truck.

Clover squeals giddily from beneath me. “Oh, my gosh. Panda.”

I catch my breath and whisper into her ear, “One hundred percent.”