



# One Lustful Summer (Texas Summer #14)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Maggie's ready to make some changes in her life, and when she makes a change, she goes all out.

When she stumbles across a cute a quaint farmhouse, in small town Texas, she hits purchase immediately on the cash only sale.

What could go wrong?

The house is in shambles, and so is her life. But she's determined to take on the project.

What she doesn't count for is Rowan. He's part owner of the construction company, and the house she just purchased used to belong to his grandparents.

Rowan's focused on his daughter and giving her the best life. But spending day after day with Maggie on the renovations, she's become more.

As the Texas heat sizzles, Rowan and Maggie give in to each other and enjoy a lust filled summer. But what happens when summer ends?

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Maggie

“This can’t be right,”

I whisper to myself as I take a few steps forward.

I make a full circle in the driveway, waiting for someone to run out of the woods to tell me it’s all a joke like the old MTV show.

But there is no Ashton Kutcher and no camera crew.

I look at the house number barely hanging onto the wooden pole of the porch; the numbers staring back at me, proving that I am in the right place.

The biting Texas wind whips my hair in my face, the ends a sharp sting to my eyes as I try to avoid tears while staring at my new—and frankly terrifying—new home.

Perched atop a hill overlooking a field of wildflowers sits the farmhouse.

Though in person, it’s not so picture perfect.

There’s not much truth in the pictures from the online ad.

Overgrown weeds choke the foundation, broken windowpanes expose the house to the elements, and weathered wood with peeling paint reveals the house’s neglect.

This wasn’t the new start I had envisioned.

I had to escape the relentless pressure from my family and the bitter sting of my broken engagement.

This is supposed to be my new start, the beginning of my life, the life I'm going to make on my own.

But this, this is a disaster.

Don't cry, don't cry.

I will myself to hold it together.

I'm meeting the local realtor here in the next few minutes to get the keys.

When she shows up, I'll just have to tell her it was a mistake, that I would like a refund.

Could you get a refund on a home purchase? I know you can't, but one can ask.

No, this was my making, and I wanted, no needed, to see this through.

It was impulsive, reckless even, but it was a decision I made on my own.

A decision that I was going to have to live with.

A learning opportunity, as my Nana would say.

One minute, I was scrolling through real estate listings, drowning my sorrows in a sea of overpriced apartments and cookie-cutter houses.

The next, I was clicking "buy"

on a farmhouse that needed a little TLC in a town I'd never even heard of.

Paulding, Texas.

It sounded like something out of a dusty old Western, a place where tumbleweeds rolled down Main Street and everyone knew everyone else's business.

And now, here I was, surrounded by the very real, very overwhelming evidence of my questionable decision-making.

I could hear my mother fussing about how I'm quick to make a decision based on emotion and not using my brains before I go off and make a decision.

Her hands clutching the pearls around her neck as she looks at the other ladies in the county club for sympathy.

My family had suffocated me.

The relentless competition, the constant striving to be more of what they wanted me to be and less of who I was.

The shallow relationship that would have bound me to be the next generation of a Stepford wife—it had all become too much.

I needed to escape, to find a place where I could breathe.

A place where I could rebuild myself, brick by weathered brick.

But the reality of the task before me is far more daunting than I'd imagined.

The farmhouse has a certain sad beauty, though.

Beneath the layers of neglect, I could see glimpses of its former beauty.

Tall windows, a few of them broken, suggest large rooms inside.

The large wrap-around porch, once bright and welcoming, now has a weathered look with peeling paint and broken railings.

The overgrown garden, though a challenge, whispers promises of vibrant blooms and bountiful harvests.

There is something about its quiet strength, the way it seems to be patiently waiting for someone to breathe life back into it. Something that resonates with my own need for a fresh start. But how will I manage it all? Where would I even begin?

The sound of gravel crunching beneath tires had me spinning on my heels.

I watched as a white full size SUV pulled up behind my black hatchback.

I watch as a pair of cowboy boots hit the ground and watch a beautiful woman emerge from behind the open door.

“Maggie,”

she calls out, as she holds her hand above her eyes to block out the sun. She looks like what I envision as the typical southern woman. Average height, with long blonde hair in beach waves, a white tank top and straight, wrinkle-free boot-cut jeans over cowboy boots. What every cowboy wants.

Then there is me, five-foot nine, board straight brown hair, and the clumsiness of a new-born foal. Not what every cowboy wants.

“Hey, Lauren, right?”

I ask as I make my way towards her.

She meets me halfway, a huge smile on her face.

“The one and only.”

She quirks as she holds out her hand.

I take her hand in mine and give the courtesy handshake.

“Nice to meet you,”

I tell her. It’s the truth. It’s nice to meet a new face out here. But now I’m about to wipe that smile off her face.

“Listen, I don’t know how to say this in the best way. But this is not what I was expecting.”

And there it is. The smile drains from her face. But I’ll give her credit. She’s quick to fix her reaction.

“It needs some TLC, that’s for sure.”

She shifts on her feet, staring out at the house and grounds.

“How much of the property have you seen?”

Her question catches me off guard. There’s hope in her voice, like she’s a magician waiting to surprise you with the final act.

“Just what we see here. I’ve been too unsure of this ... all of this,”

I wave my hands towards the house at a loss for words.

“Okay, so let’s do this. We can take a quick tour. I want you to hold all judgement until the end.”

“Is there a magical armoire that will lead me to a better place?”

“It’s no Narnia, but it can be your own special escape.”

She answers with a smile.

I internally give the air a fist bump. I know, lame. But no one ever catches some of my references to classic literature.

“Right on, show me what you got,”

I reply with my first genuine smile since I’ve been here.

Lauren takes off to the right side of the house, and I follow. We pass by overgrown bushes I am certain at one point bloomed beautiful flowers and gave a sweet scent to the air around. I imagine colorful buds that opened in the sun, and becoming a haven for bees and birds.

The windows on the side of the house are still intact, but covered in a hazy grime of dust and forgotten webs. The creamy gray color now replaces the long-gone white paint on the split and crumbling trim around the glass.

We crest the back corner of the house and I’m in complete shock. My feet stay rooted where they are as I take in the scene before me. It’s a complete one-eighty from the

front of the house. The back porch has a few years on it, but I can tell from here that it is more structural sound than the front.

“What is this?”

I question out loud. It’s a different world back here.

Lauren chuckles as she takes the few steps up to the porch.

“This is the beginning of your new place.”

She taps on her phone for a moment and then takes the key book that is locked on the back door handle. I watch her punch in a few numbers and the lock unlatches, and she catches the key that falls out.

“Let’s take a look,”

she suggests as she looks at me with a smile, excitement dancing in her features.

“Let’s do,”

I answer as I take the stairs and meet her at the door. Excitement thumping through my veins as my vision changes with this new development.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Maggie

Sun shines in through the cracks in the curtains and I roll to my back, taking it all in.

The small addition on the back of the house was nothing I had envisioned.

When Lauren led me behind the house yesterday, I was unprepared for my discovery.

Fairly new and inviting was the twenty by twenty room.

Newly painted, the white wood siding was crisp and clean.

The windows shined clear, a complete difference from the front of the house.

Every accommodation you could possibly need was in the small room.

A kitchenette that included a mini fridge, a hot plate, and a microwave filled one corner of the room.

There was a small bathroom built out in the opposite corner of the room.

Was it a smaller version of what I was used to? Sure.

But it was mine, and it was more than I was expecting after I saw the house in person yesterday.

When I asked Lauren about this room and why it was up to date when the rest of the

house wasn't, she explained to me that the house had been in the family, and her cousin Rowan had fixed up this room for their grandmother.

The home was too much for her to take care of and the family wanted to move her out, but she wanted to stay on the property, so he gave her a safe place to live while he worked.

He was going to begin the renovations on the rest of the house, but after her passing, the uncle who was over the estate put the house up for sale.

Lauren alluded to Rowan being frustrated that he couldn't bring his family home back to its former glory.

After Lauren gave me a tour around the house and property, she said her goodbyes with an offer to reach out to her about anything I needed.

Whether it be home questions, recommendations of stores or restaurants, or even small town gossip—she was my girl.

Her words, not mine.

But they settled me; gave me a person I could lean on when I needed advice in my new town.

I spent the next few hours giving my new home, or really the room I would live in, a good clean.

Between dusting, sweeping and washing the surface areas, I made list after list in my head.

What needed to be done to refurbish the entire house, what I needed to accomplish

first, and how much I thought everything would cost.

While I had some in savings from a recent inheritance from my grandmother, I had used a sizable chunk to purchase this home.

I would have to look for a job sooner than I had expected.

I made a simple dinner of soup and crackers, enjoying the simplicity of it while I sat at the small table between the kitchen and living room area.

The space was small, only enough room for a two-seater table.

With my stomach settled, I removed the bedding that was left on the bed, surprised and happy to see that the mattress was clean.

I grabbed my bags from my vehicle and returned to make my bed and settle for the night.

With a new day started, I need to get going.

There were a lot of things I needed to accomplish and they wouldn't happen if I lollygagged around in bed.

With a new pep in my step, I drag myself out of bed and take care of my morning business.

Showered and dressed, I grab a yogurt out of the mini fridge, sprinkled some granola on the top, and leaned against the counter as I take everything in and debate my next steps.

According to Lauren, she submitted all the paperwork, and the property and home

officially belonged to me.

So I could take on this project, which was more than the TLC that I expected, or I could sell it and try to start over somewhere else.

The stubborn part of me wants to see that I can bring this home to fruition, that I can complete this.

But the other part of me asks if it's worth the hassle?

I pull up a couple of home renovation YouTube videos while I sit and nibble on my yogurt.

My mind wanders as I think about what I can do myself to eliminate some of the cost.

What kind of budget am I looking at?

Putting the money debate aside for the moment, I finish up my meager breakfast and throw away my yogurt cup and plastic spoon.

Ready to start the day, I slip on my shoes, then grab my purse and make my way to the door.

Finding the local hardware is the first thing on my list.

For today, I can go ahead and tackle something that I know I could handle, which is taking care of the bushes and overgrown weeds around the house.

With my mind made up, I load up in my hatchback and set off for town.

The drive into town is quiet and relaxing as I drive down the county road.

Mature trees cast a shadow against the pavement line on one side of the road.

Pastures extend along the other side of the road as far as the eye can see, while driveways emerge from the tree line every couple hundred yards.

Some pastures hold cattle, young and old, while others are empty.

The drive is the complete opposite of what I am used to when I would head out to the store.

There is no honking, drivers riding the back of my car, or stop lights every half mile down the road.

It's open and free; there are only a few cars on the road until I get closer to town.

My phone rings through the speakers of my car and I groan when I see my mother's name appear on the radio screen.

Mom Calling.

The words filling me with dread.

My finger hovers over the red decline button, my emotions not ready to deal with her disappointment.

But then I remember this is a new me.

It's time to stop living in the shadows and man up. Or well, is it lady up?

Determination on my side, I press the green accept button.

“Hello, Mother. I have just a moment to talk. I’m headed into the store.”

I may not be there just yet, but she doesn’t know that.

“Magnolia, dear. I’m calling to see how you are settling in. I got your text last night, but you know me and texting. It’s so impersonal.”

Her sigh in the phone instantly makes the hair on my forearms stand. It’s the disappointment in her voice. The old me would be quick to placate her, but I am channeling my new self.

“It was a busy night, but all is well.”

The less I tell her, the less I have to hear her disappointment.

“I would love to talk, Mother, but I have to pick up a few things for the house. Do you mind if I call later tonight?”

“Oh yes dear, work on furnishing your place. It’s important to always have your home guest ready. You never know who could pop by. Let’s plan to talk tomorrow afternoon. Your father and I have dinner with the Dean’s this evening. I have tennis in the morning at the club, so I will have some down time later in the day. Call me?”

“I’ll call. Bye, Mother.”

“Talk tomorrow. Bye, Magnolia.”

Just as abruptly as it began, the call ends.

The radio playing through the speakers, when moments earlier it was my mother.

This has always been my life, so the lack of excitement or mystery in my new life shouldn't bother me as much as it does.

If my life choices aren't putting the family name out there to be seen, there is no interest granted.

With the call over, I focus ahead as the town of Paulding comes into view.

The courthouse sits in the center of town, the three-story red brick building is squared off by roads on all sides and businesses across the streets on all sides.

Slanted parking spaces line around the building; parallel parking on the other side of the street in front of the businesses.

On one street, there is a coffee shop and a bakery side by side.

From the windows, they look to be connected inside as there is no wall separating the two businesses.

I envision making a trip to town early tomorrow and splurging on a breakfast of sweet treats and a fancy coffee, something with extra foam and an extra shot of caffeine.

Next door is a hair salon and a cute boutique that's two storefronts.

Decorated windows with home décor and dressed mannequins catch my eye and I add another outing to my list.

Rounding out the first street is The First Bank of Paulding.

It's a small, white building that's attached to the row of business on one side and a

single drive thru lane on the other.

Small and quaint; a different view than the city.

The next road in the square has a lawyer's office, a real estate office, a doctor's office, and the rest of the street has the grocery store.

There are a few parallel parking spots in the front and a sign that proclaims more parking around back.

Turning on the next street of the square, the back of the courthouse faces the hardware and a farm/feed store taking up all the real estate on that street.

I find a parallel parking spot and whip my hatchback into between the lines.

One thing I learned in the city was how to parallel park real fast, and I like to think of myself as an expert.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Rowan

“What kind of cow wears a crown?”

I set the milk carton on the island counter in front of me and tilt my head to the side as I stare at my daughter sitting on the other side of the island. Jodi’s strawberry blonde hair is pulled up in lopsided pig tails. A pink bow clipped to one and a bright green on the other. Her freckled face dances and her green eyes light up as she giggles, waiting for my answer.

“A bull king?”

I answer. I honestly do not know where she gets these jokes, but it is our morning routine. A breakfast joke.

“Daddy,”

she giggles, the sound always tugging at my heart.

“It’s a dairy queen.”

I shoot her a look of amusement, a gentle laugh escaping my lips.

“That’s a good one, Jo.”

She preens at my comment, like a peacock showing off their feathers. She sits up straighter; her smile lighting up her entire face.

“Thanks, Daddy! Papa Coe, told it to me.”

“I’m sure he did,”

I answer and grab the milk to fill my cereal bowl. I know we should have a more nutritional breakfast, but some morning call for the fruity circle cereal. And this morning is one of those.

I woke up late, and everything has been a rush since then. And we now have five minutes before we need to be out of the house and on the road to school. We were in the last few weeks of school. The home-stretch before summer break.

After finishing my bowl of cereal, I grab Jodi’s empty bowl and mine. At the sink, I rinse them out and place them in the dishwasher. Throwing in a washing tab, I close the door and then press start.

“You ready, Jodi-Bug?”

I ask as I walk towards the mud room that leads out to the garage.

“Sure am, Daddy-O.”

Jodi answers as she meets me at the door. She has her backpack on and her lunch box in her hands.

I look at the unicorn lunchbox and my chest squeezes. I know I didn’t pack a lunch for her and if she packed it herself, it’s probably full of chips and fruit snacks.

“Did you pack your lunch?”

I question cautiously. Jodi tries to be very independent for a six-year-old. I try to use

caution when questioning her. I don't want to dampen her independence or free spirit.

She opens the door to the garage and looks back with a smile.

"Nope, Meme helped me last night."

"Bless our Meme,"

I answer as I usher her out the door.

And it's the truth. I don't know what Jodi and I would do if it weren't for my parents. They have always been a constant in my life. My lighthouse in a storm at sea. The ones to have my back and be my biggest support. If it wasn't for them, I'm not sure I would have survived being a single father at twenty-five.

I help Jodi buckle in and then shut the back door of my truck. Sliding into the driver's seat, I shut the door and Jodi hits me with another question.

"Why are cows such awesome dancers?"

I look back at her through the rear-view mirror and my heart clenches. She is my whole world. Nothing prepares you for being a father. And even with all the hic-cups we have endured, the uncertainty and surprises. Every moment is new and exciting. A picture in the reel of life.

"I don't know, why?"

I answer as I put the truck in reverse and back out of the garage.

"They've got all the right moo-ves,"

she answers as she shimmies in her booster seat.

I chuckle at her antics and start the drive to town. Jodi keeps the conversation going the entire drive. She tells me about what she will do at school today.

As she rambles about music class and recess, I half listen as I plan out my day. I need to head to the hardware and secure a load of supplies for the building renovation my crew is working on. After that I plan to stop at the job-site and check in with the crew and then head over to the library to talk with Ms. Eden about the bookshelves she has commissioned for the kids' section.

Pulling into the car rider line, I wait my turn as the line slowly creeps up to the drop-off location. Jodi sees that our time is almost up, so she hits me with one more joke.

“What do you call a sad cow?”

I shake my head and look back at her.

“I have no clue, Jodi-Bug,”

I tell her. Although I believe I know the answer, I never try to get it right. Giving her all the glory.

“Moo-dy,”

she giggles as we move up closer in the line. The cars move forward and I pull up as Jodi works on releasing her seat belt. I put the car in park and shift in my seat to see Jodi off. She leans up and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“Love you, Daddy.”

“Love you, Jodi-Bug. Have a good day!”

The back door opens and a teaching assistant helps Jodi out of the car. With one last wave in her direction, I drive out of the school parking lot and head into town.

The automatic bell on the hardware door chimes as I step inside.

“Morning, Rowan,”

Carla, the cashier says as pass over the threshold.

“Good morning, Miss Carla,”

I reply, giving her a nod and a small wave. I make my way to the counter at the back of the store that leads out to the lumberyard.

While I wait for Joe, Carla’s husband, to finish his phone call, I scroll through my emails on my phone. A minute later, he’s standing in front of me with his ever-present smile on his face. There are only a few times in my life that I have ever seen Joe frustrated or upset. He always wears a friendly demeanor in whatever capacity I have seen him in.

“What can I get you today, Rowan?”

I go over the list of things that are needed for the job site for this week. We make plans for delivery of the items that he has on hand for this afternoon, and he makes a call to set up another delivery for tomorrow for what he doesn’t have in the lot behind the store.

“I can take those for you,”

I hear Carla say a few aisles away. My curiosity overcoming me, I turn to see who she's talking to. I didn't hear anyone come in and didn't see anyone else in the store when I arrived.

I watch Carla walk out of an aisle a few rows away with her hands full. She has a couple pairs of gardening gloves, a roll of black trash bags and a few brown landscaping trash bags laying on top. She walks the items to the register and sets them on the back counter.

Looking back to where Carla came from, I'm stunned to see the woman that emerges out of the aisle. She's not from here. An outsider, but a stunning-looking outsider. Her brown hair is on the top of her head in a messy knot of sorts, with a few pieces framing her face. Brown eyes search the store.

While she looks around, I continue my perusal of this newcomer. Dressed in a white tank top and denim shorts, her long, tan legs catch my eye. Her tennis shoes look new and I wonder how long they will stay clean.

I draw my eyes back up to her face. She's watching me and raises her eyebrow before she gives me a once over. When her eyes meet mine, I smirk. She shakes her head, a small smile on her lips, and heads down the next aisle.

"Okay, I have that delivery all lined up,"

Joe says, making me turn away from the mystery woman.

"Thanks, Joe,"

I tell him and with a handshake to seal the deal, I head out of the hardware. My eyes looking for one more glimpse of the woman.

“Have a good day, Rowan,”

Carla calls out as I exit the door. I throw my hand up above my head, giving her a wave as the door closes behind me.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Maggie

Rowan. That's his name. The handsome man that had me stopping in my tracks.

After we caught each other checking the other out, I kept my head down, but followed him with my eyes. There was an invisible pull that kept me tethered to where he was in the store. His brown hair curled out under his black and red ball cap, suggesting that he needed a haircut soon.

His worn jeans and gray t-shirt fit him to perfection. Showing off muscles in both places. But it was his smirk that set flutters off in my stomach.

With a rake and shovel in my hands, I make my way up to the cash register. I don't have time to lollygag about a man; I have a house to work on.

"All set?"

the cashier asks as I stop at the counter.

"Yes,"

I answer, holding out the rake and shovel. She scans the items, and I lean them against the counter as she rings up my other items.

"I don't mean to sound too intrusive, but did you just move to town?"

The cashier asks, and while her attempt to learn about me should frustrate me, I



remember this is a small town, and she likely knows everyone.

“Is it that obvious?”

I ask with a small smile.

She chuckles as she places my smaller items in plastic bags.

“Just a tad.”

Her smile is sincere and I loosen up a little.

“I’m Carla, and that’s my husband over there, Joe.”

She nods towards the man in at the counter in the back.

“I’m Maggie. I just bought a house unseen and have a lot of work cut out for me.”

Her eyes widen at my confession.

“The Sterling house?”

I nod and she continues.

“There’s a lot of work to be done. Do you have a construction crew lined up?”

I shake my head at her question, frustration clear on my face. I try to mask it, but she sees it.

“Turn that frown upside down, Maggie. I got you.”

She reaches down in a drawer where she pulls out a business card and hands it over to me.

“Thank you,”

I tell her and take the card. She gives me my total and after paying her husband helps me out to my car. I have to lower the back seats and load the rake and shovel through the back of the hatchback.

With everything in the vehicle, I lock up and take a quick walk to the other side of the square, getting a glimpse of what else is available. On the last street there is a diner, bookstore, post office, photographer and building behind a corner parking lot with a sign displaying The Gypsy Rabbit.

Since I have time to spare, I decide to walk the whole square back to my vehicle. I had a pleasant look while I was driving, but I can now window shop as I walk by each building. The sidewalks have a frame signs boasting sales and telling those passing by to come in. It's an all-around welcome feel.

The town square isn't too crowded this late in the morning; this makes me wonder if many people drive out of town for work or are already at their offices.

It's warmer than it was when I left this morning, the sun rising higher in the sky, and I know soon it's going to be overwhelmingly hot and muggy. As I walk back to the street where my car is parked, I hear someone call my name. Looking behind me to see Lauren walking quickly down the sidewalk.

“How is everything going? How was your first night?”

She asks, her voice laced with genuine interest in my answer. I'm so lucky she was the first person I met in Paulding.

“It was good. I woke up a little confused to where I was this morning, but after a quick look around, I was more determined to get the day started.”

And with my lists, I’m more prepared for what I need to focus on first.

“So, how do you like our little town?”

Lauren asks as she waves her hand like Vanna White and chuckles at her actions.

“It’s so cute. I came into town to go to the hardware. Once I got the stuff I needed, I had to take a stroll around the square.”

I take a breath and look over the square, watching a mother and young child walk hand in hand into the bakery.

“Well, I should get on my way. I’m hoping to tackle some of the shrubbery at the front of the house today.”

“Have you thought about the interior of the house? What you plan to do there?”

“Now that I know the state of the house, I know I can’t do a lot of the work myself. I plan to seek some help, but I’m going to figure some things out myself, too.”

“That sounds great,”

she says.

“Do you have anyone in mind for the construction?”

“No, not really. I tell her. Carla gave me a business card while I was at the hardware.”

I pull it out and show it to her.

“DuPont construction. They’re great. I may be a little biased because it’s my uncle’s construction company, but he’s honest, and we’ll do right by you.”

“Well, that makes me feel a little better,”

I tell her.

“Seeing as I don’t know anyone in this area, I’m gonna probably lean on you heavily for information.”

“Like I told you yesterday, I’m your girl. Hey, what are you doing Thursday night?”

“I don’t have any plans,” I reply.

“My friends and I all get together at Gypsy. You should come.”

“The Gypsy Rabbit,”

I ask as I turn to look back at the building I saw earlier.

“Yeah, right over there. It’s kind of like the local hangout. It’s a restaurant in the evenings, Southern barbecue. And then as the dinner rush wears out, it’s where everyone hangs out for a couple of drinks and fun times. Thursday is trivia night.”

“I’ll have to think about it,”

I tell her, unsure of myself.

“Well, you have my cell phone and I have yours, so I’ll send you a message to

remind you and see what you're up to. Well, I should let you go. Talk to you soon."

She tells me, and with a wave, she heads back to her office.

I walk back to my vehicle and open the door, but I hesitate to get in the driver's seat. I feel the sensation of someone watching me. Looking to my left and then to my right, I notice a pickup idling at the stop sign with the window down, and Rowan sitting in the driver's seat.

I give him a small wave and hop into my car. I have no time to be thinking about a man. But I can't get him out of my mind. Who is he? What is his story?

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I've spent the last few days passing around the outside and getting things cleared up. This required a few more trips to the hardware store for supplies. I found it easier to lob off as much of the bushes that I could before I used a shovel to dig them out of the ground.

I also made a few trips to the grocery for supplies, stocking up on pain relievers and muscle cream. I've used muscles I wasn't even aware I had. New pains appear each morning and I wonder again, is it worth it?

I've toured the inside of my new home multiple times. Every time I enter a room, a new vision unfolds in my head.

I finally broke down and called DuPont construction this morning and have a meeting with one of their contractors tomorrow morning.

I've also been texting with Lauren each day, and while I've been reluctant, her persistent personality has broken the spell, and now I find myself looking forward to

her text messages.

I reluctantly agreed to go to trivia night tonight. So I'm now trying to figure out what to wear before I take a quick shower and clean off the day's grime.

I'm meeting her and her friends at Gypsy around seven to have an appetizer dinner. Trivia starts at eight, so we'll have time to eat and I'll get time to meet everyone.

While talking with Lauren these last few days, it's made me really look back and reevaluate what I thought were my friendships from my old life?

The more I look at those relationships, it makes me realize that what I had was not friendship but just acquaintances. No one's checked in on me to see how I'm doing since I left. The people that I thought were my friends stood by and watched everything unfold with my past relationship.

The more I reflect on my conversations with my so-called friends, I'm reminded of what the ultimate goal was with each and every one of them. Everything was about the status of who you were with and the status of what they could do for you. It was all about how you were perceived by other people. My upbringing, sadly, emphasized those things. That's how my mother and father look at things.

But I don't want people to look at me and see dollar signs or she has the best of the best. I don't want to keep up with the Joneses. I want people to see me as me, authentically me. A fun person, I think, a caring person, someone who wants to make sure that people are okay. Someone who generally cares about someone. It's exhausting to be the only person who's caring in a relationship, whether it's a friendship or an intimate relationship.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Rowan

Ready to take it easy for a night, I turn off my truck's engine and scan Gypsy's parking lot to see who is inside. It's the one time a week where I get to be free for a couple hours, not free to go raise chaos and a ruckus, but free just to take the weight off my shoulder for a few hours.

The father part of me never ends, but for a few hours I can hibernate worrying about the about Jodi, the job-site or the jobs that we have coming up.

Every Thursday, my cousins and I end up at the Gypsy for dinner. We usually have a late dinner, and then we stay to play trivia. It's something simple, nothing crazy, something that most of the people around my age enjoy doing in town.

Jodi's with mom and dad, where she'll spend the night and Mom will get her off to school in the morning. It's become somewhat of a tradition that we started when Jodi entered kindergarten.

It gives me an opportunity to get out with friends and my cousins. To some, it may sound a little selfish, but I believe it's best for Jodi and I. There's a reset period for both of us. While she may spend some weekends with my parents, those aren't every weekend, just when I'm working on side jobs or making up rain days on a job-site.

Sometimes I feel like I'm neglecting her when I drop her off with my parents, but mom tells me it's the best for both Jodi and I.

It allows me to recharge. It allows Jodi to recharge.

These Thursday nights and the occasional weekend apart allow Jodi to experience things I'm not comfortable doing. A lot of the times, Jodi comes home on Saturday evening from mom and dad's, and they've made all kinds of different baked goods, something I am not good at.

Now, I can scramble some eggs and cook some bacon, or you can call me the grill master. But a lot of my dinners entail simple, kid friendly meals, which include spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, and chicken nuggets.

Granted, there's some kind of protein with each one and usually some kind of veggie. Well, can you really have a veggie with spaghetti?

I open the door to Gypsy and scan the tables to see what's open, and notice my cousin Dean over in the corner. I head his way, giving a nod and wave to those that I pass by.

"Hey, man, how's it going?"

Dean asks as he stands and pulls me in for a half hug and pat on the back.

"Hey, cuz'. Same shit different day."

"Ain't that the truth,"

he replies as we both take a seat. We make small talk while this server heads our way and takes our drink order. Since I'm driving tonight, I give myself a one minimum drink.

While we wait on the others, Dean tells me about the vehicle he's restoring. While I may be good in the construction area, vehicles were never in my wheelhouse. When it comes to anything with a motor and brakes, I send it Dean's way. I can do the basic



stuff like change a tire, jump a battery, change out the windshield wipers. But anything else and I head over to Dean's garage.

After a few minutes, Thomas and Chris, our other cousins, pull out the remaining chairs and sit down. Before either Dean or I can greet them, Chris immediately gathers the attention of all of us.

“Who's that with Lauren? Did you guys see who's the new girl is with Lauren and her friends?”

I look through the crowd and instantly spot my cousin Lauren. She's seated with a few of her friends and another woman. As I stare at the woman to her right, I take in the side profile of a woman who looks very familiar.

Dark brown hair, a summer dress, and legs encased in some sandals with a heel on the back. I'm a red-blooded man. I've seen legs, I've seen women, but I remember those legs, and I remember that side profile. It's the mystery woman from the hardware store.

She must sense us staring because she turns towards us, her eyes landing right on mine. Her eyes widen at the shock of seeing me, but she quickly hides it and shifts in her seat to join the conversation at her table.

“Whoa,”

Thomas says with a harsh breath.

“You know her?”

His face turned towards me and tilted to the side like he's waiting to hear a juicy story.

I look at all three of them.

“Not really. I saw her the other day at the hardware. Can’t forget a face like that.”

I don’t need to elaborate anymore. There is no need for them to know that I can’t stop thinking about her. Looking for her face every time I head into town.

“Well, I’m gonna go meet our lovely guest,”

Chris says as he stands up and walks towards Lauren’s table.

Our table is silent as we watch him approach the table. He pulls out the empty chair and turns it around. He takes a seat, straddles the back of the chair and rests his forearms on the top.

As he sits there and talks, all the girls giggle except Lauren. She eyes him with curiosity. I can see her brain working, wondering why one of her cousins is suddenly interested in sitting with her and her friends.

We all know Chris is a major flirt, but it looks like he is laying it on pretty thick tonight. When he shifts in his seat and puts his arm on the back of my woman’s chair, and my stomach clenches. My woman. What the hell. I have no claim on her. I don’t even know her name, but there’s something about her that pulls me in.

He shouldn’t be that close to her. The jealousy that runs through me is something I’ve never felt before, not even for Jodi’s mom. She looks back at me, a small smile cresting her lips, but I lose her attention as she speaks with Chris. I can’t make out what she is saying, but her eyes come back to me a few more times.

A few minutes later, Chris makes his way back to our table, takes a seat, smiles and then reveals the information he found out.

“Her name is Maggie. She moved here from the city. She’s single, and y’all won’t believe this, but she is the one who purchased grandma’s place.”

The shock on all our faces at the news was apparent when I looked at Dean and Thomas. The house was an eyesore, but it held a lot of our memories.

“Bet she was in first surprise when she saw the house,”

Thomas says.

“Yeah, Lauren alluded to that a little,”

Chris answers.

“But Maggie just shook her head and said, ‘It’s okay. I’m gonna figure it out.’ She seems very optimistic.”

While they talk amongst themselves, my gut twists and turns. I wanted to purchase the house, but I didn’t have the money. I asked my uncle if he could hold on for a couple more months so I could try to sell my place and have the cash up front to buy the house. The problem was you can’t get a mortgage on that home, because of all the work that needed to be done. No lender was going to take out a loan on it, so it had to be a cash purchase.

But my uncle, my mom’s brother and also the executive of our grandmother’s estate, didn’t want to wait around. His impatience upset a lot of the family. If had given us more time, we could have done something, but he was so money hungry to get what he could. And because of his greed, we lost the opportunity to keep some of our family’s history.

If those walls could talk. I can’t even imagine what we would find out. Years and

years of people living there, of our family, our history.

After placing our food orders with the server, the conversation changes to the end of the school year. Chris and Thomas are both teachers in the local schools. Thomas teaching science at the middle school, and Chris teaching social studies at the high School, and coaching football.

I sit and listen and wonder what it would be like to have an entire summer off, or even a month to have time just to do things for me; for me and Jodi.

As dinner wraps up, and our server takes our empty plates from the table, we order another round of drinks and a sweet tea for myself. I have a one drink minimum if I'm driving.

The announcer, Carl, steps up on the small stage where local bands play every now and again, tapping on the microphone.

“Good evening, Gypsy patrons. We’re going to change things up tonight for trivia.”

This has everyone’s attention. Their faces turned to Carl.

“Since everyone knows everyone here in Paulding and some teams are more knowledgeable than others. I think it’ll be a fun way to mix everything up and make teams of two males and two females. Four person teams.”

There are some groans across the room, but my eyes instantly look over to where Maggie is sitting with Lauren.

Carl continues.

“I’ll give you guys the next five minutes to get teams together, and we’ll have four

per team. I'll be coming around to hand out the kiosks in just a moment."

He steps down, and the piped music plays again.

Lauren looks over at our table, and I raised my eyes up at her. She's caught me staring over there a couple of times, watching Maggie. Her eyes going from me to Maggie. A non-verbal conversation taking place.

Within seconds, Lauren stands and says something to Maggie. In a blink of an eye, Lauren and Maggie are walking this way.

"Okay, guys,"

Lauren says once she has approached our table.

"We gotta split teams. Dean and Rowan, are you with us?"

Dean looks at them both.

"Yeah, have a seat."

"Come on now. What about me and Thomas?"

Chris exclaims with a fake pout on his face.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Maggie

“Susan and Nikki need partners. You better hurry.”

Lauren answers to her cousin Chris.

It’s comical to see how fast he and one of her other cousins are out of their seats and head to the table she and Lauren just left. Lauren and I take the vacated seats, and it’s my luck that the seat is next to the hottie from the hardware.

I feel his eyes on me, but I keep mine averted from him. The magnetic pull I feel from him is confusing. It’s something I’ve never experienced before. A push and pull of sorts. I want to look, to be close. But I’m out of sorts here.

“Maggie,”

Lauren calls, and I look up at her with a smile, grateful that she has pulled me out of my head.

“This is my brother, Dean.”

She says, flicking her wrist at the man next to her.

“And my cousin, Rowan,” she continues as she tips her head to the man next to me.

“Dean, Rowan, this is Maggie.”

“Chris gave us the lowdown,”

Dean drawls.

“But he didn’t tell us how beautiful Maggie is. Right, Rowan?”

I feel my cheeks burn. Both men are handsome, but the one next to me is the one I’m interested to hear from. He’s been quiet since Lauren and I approached.

“That would be correct,”

Rowan says beside me. His deep voice giving me goosebumps.

“Beautiful.”

One word, so many feelings. I look over at Rowan and his eyes lock with mine. I’m held in his trance and I can’t leave. The girl from the hardware that was confident giving him the once over. She’s not here tonight. I try to conjure her up, but fail.

“Now that we’ve met, are you ready to beat everyone?”

Rowan asks, a smirk on his lips.

Thankful for the subject change, I lean close.

“Yeah, I’m not the best at trivia, but I’m very interested in seeing how everything goes.”

Someone places a kiosk on our table, and after a lot of back and forth, we settle on a team name. Lauren gets our name, Two Squared, typed in and then we’re listed along the other teams on the TV screens around the bar. It’s a really cool set-up and my excitement grows.

“We will play three rounds tonight. The first round is about beverages. As usual, It’s twenty questions. Each question is a point in this round. And let’s get started,”

Carl announces.

“First question—What is the oldest dark colored soft drink in America?”

The TV screens display a thirty-second countdown as background instrumental music plays.

“It’s Coke,”

Lauren answers and starts typing into the kiosk.

“Wrong,”

Rowan replies.

“It’s Dr. Pepper.”

“No way,”

Lauren states.

“He’s right,”

I add.

“It’s Dr. Pepper. Trust me.”

“Okay, let me change it real quick,”



Lauren answers as she types away at the kiosk. She hits submit and then our team name is on the board with 3 seconds to go.

“The answers are locked in. If your team’s not on the screen, you didn’t get your answer in on time.”

Carl states.

“The answer is ... Dr. Pepper. Let’s reveal your answers.”

The screen shows each team’s answer next to their team’s names. Checkmarks and X’s stating who got the answer right.

“Thanks for the backup,”

Rowan says while he leans in closer. His woodsy, masculine smell taking over my senses.

“No problem,”

I answer, giving him a smile.

Carl asks question after question and before we know it, we are on the last question of the first round.

“For the final point in this round. What alcohol is made from potatoes?”

Carl asks.

“Vodka,”

I answer quickly, and everyone nods.

Lauren quickly types it in and we wait for the answer. When Carl announces that the winning answer is indeed vodka, it's a round of high fives around the table.

As the evening progresses, I'm more confident in my surroundings. As we talk out answers, my chair has gotten closer to Rowan through the rounds. Our thighs and arms brushing against each other as we lean in with our answers.

Once we complete all three rounds, we secure third place. Not too shabby for my first time. And it comes with a free drink voucher for next week, so that's a score in my books.

"I think I'm gonna take off,"

I say to Lauren as I finish my water. I had a glass of wine with dinner and then switched to water after we sat down for trivia. She gives me a little pout and I laugh at her antics.

"I know it's lame to leave before ten, but I have a lot to accomplish tomorrow."

I stand up and grab my purse from the back of the chair. Approaching Lauren, I gave her a quick hug.

"Thanks for the invite. I enjoyed myself."

And it's the truth. It was great to meet her friends, Susan and Nikki. As well as her brother and cousins. Especially the one who I sat next to for the last hour.

"I'm so glad you came. Next week?"

Lauren asks with a grin.

“Yeah, next week sounds good,” I answer.

I take a step back and hit a solid wall. A warm wall that steadies me at my hip.

“I’m headed out as well. I’ll walk you out,”

Rowan says at my back, his fingers digging in slightly.

The light pressure holding me captive. “Okay,”

I breathe out.

Rowan makes quick work of saying his goodbyes, while Lauren raises her eyebrow at me and smirks. I wink back at her, showing my confidence. But I know my face is flushed.

“After you,”

Rowan states. I take the lead to the exit, Rowan on my side and his large hand pressed against my lower back, leading me through the crowd.

The electricity and warmth from his touch is an exhilarating feeling. It seeps through my cotton dress and wraps itself around me. I have never felt so alive from just a single touch. I have to tell myself to breathe. In and out.

A few steps from the door, Rowan steps forward and opens the door. His hand leaves my back for a few seconds and I instantly feel a chill. The tether between us broken.

“I over there,”

I tell Rowan, point towards the back of the lot.

The parking lot was full when I got here earlier, so I ended up parking towards the back of the lot. Rowan replaces his hand on my back and directs me towards my vehicle.

We walk silently across the rows leading to the back. The quietness is comfortable, there's no need to fill the void with conversation.

"This is me,"

I tell Rowan as we approach my car. Stopping at the back of the hatch, I turn towards him.

"Thank you for walking me out."

"It's no problem,"

Rowan states. He looks around and mumbles.

"they really need to get better lighting out here."

I do another sweep of the parking lot. It's not pitch black where we're at. There is some light from the building and street lights that illuminate the parking lot. But it's not as bright as it was closer to the building.

Not really sure what to say, I dig through my handbag and dig out my keys. I want to be confident, but I'm also nervous. The man is hot, like H-O-T, hot.

I take a step forward and leave his warmth behind. The chill instant, the same as it was moments ago when he got the door to lead us outside. I press down on the key

fob and unlock my door as I walk towards the driver's side door. After opening the door, I turn back to him and hold my head up high.

“It was great to meet you, Rowan.”

“Same,”

he replies.

With one last smile, I climb into the driver's seat and get situated. I'm trying to buy time. I don't want to leave his presence. But does he feel the same or is he just a southern gentleman?

With a small shake of my head, I start the engine and reach out to pull the door shut, but stop when I see a pair of jean-clad legs. If I hadn't caught myself, I would or grabbed something that I don't think either of us is ready for.

Rowan crouches down so that he's at my eye level in the seat.

“You good to drive home?”

He asks with concern. His eyes searching for any hint of doubt.

“Yeah, I only have a glass of wine at dinner. I'm good,”

I answer. Grateful for his concern.

“Okay,”

he replies. He's silent for a moment, his eyes boring into mine as he closes the space between us.

He's close, so close, as his hand reaches up towards my face. His calloused finger brushes against my cheek as he tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. My eyes flutter shut at his touch.

"Be careful,"

he whispers.

When I open my eyes, he stands and takes a few steps back. With my stomach in knots, I back out of my spot and give him a quick wave as I drive away. My mind focused on Rowan the entire drive home.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Rowan

One would think that on Fridays, my mornings would be a little easier because mom has had Jodi overnight and gets her ready and off to school. And while most Fridays are easier for me, I get to sleep in a little longer, catch up on some house duties that may need to be done.

This morning is the complete opposite. I tossed and turned all night. Thoughts of Maggie kept me up. Dreams of Maggie woke me up. I've never been this infatuated with someone that I barely even know.

When I walked her to her car last night, I've never wanted to kiss someone so bad. Her full lips were begging to be touched and teased. Her coconut and sunshine scent, an enticing fragrance that reminded me of beach filled days. Everything about her drew me in.

It was great to get to spend trivia with her, to see her loosen up. I got to see some sides of her that were exciting, fun, interesting.

And I know I should have given her a heads up that I'm going to be the person at her for the construction consultation. But I'm kind of excited to see the surprise on her face when she realizes it's me. Hopefully, she will be as thrilled to see me as I am to see her.

When I took on the consultation earlier in the week and put it on my calendar, I wasn't aware that it was Maggie. I just knew that it was my grandmother's home.

The home where my mom and her siblings grew up. The home where her father grew up with his siblings. The home that's been in our family for generation after generation after generation until recently.

When I agreed to the consultation, dad questioned if I would be okay talking with the new owner. He seemed surprised when I said yes. I understood his concern, but in the end I wanted to see the house completed, and it didn't hurt if I got to be the one to do it.

I had a lot of history already in the house. My grandmother and I work out the details of what she wanted to change and update. It's why we added the addition to the house. She wanted to stay on the property while we worked on the house. Her new living quarters allowed her to do that and stay somewhere safe at the same time.

Unfortunately, her illness struck, and time wasn't on our side.

I check the time on the stove clock and realize that I need to get the day started. Grabbing the original plans I draft for my grandmother, I place them in my laptop bag that already has my electronics stowed away inside.

I am interested in learning what direction Maggie wants to go with the house. Will she want a more modern design, a complete architecture change, or is she interested in restoring it back to a farmhouse? While there is a sadness that the house will no longer be in the family. There may be ways I can take the items Maggie isn't interested in from the house and give them a new life. Restore them into something new for the family, so we always have a little piece with us.

Once on the road, I make a quick detour at Mom and Dad's. I have a few minutes before mom leaves to get Jodi to school. I park my truck next to dad's and hop out, leaving the engine running and the air conditioning on full blast. It's already hot this morning.



I enter through the side door that leads directly into the kitchen. Mom turns from the counter when I enter.

“Just in time. I just wrapped this up for you,”

she tells me and hands me a breakfast burrito wrapped in tinfoil. Feeding everyone is something Mia DuPont will be forever remembered for. No one goes hungry when she’s around.

“Thanks, Ma,”

I tell her, taking the burrito out of her hand and giving her a kiss on the cheek. With my breakfast in hand, I head out of the kitchen and into the open dining room and living room.

“Where’s that crazy daughter of mine?”

I ask loudly, waiting for the giggle that usually follows.

“Oh, Jodi-bug,” I sing-song, looking around the space.

“Oh, shush your racket, boy,”

dad calls from the couch as he stands up for the couch.

“We ain’t got no bugs in this house!”

“No, sir-re. We don’t got no bugs,”

Jodi replies, running around the couch and launching herself towards me. I crouch down and wrap her in my arms and stand up. Her little arms wrap around my neck

and she leans back and smiles.

“But we got cows!”

Jodi hollers, and then she moos like a cow. When dad joins in, they both erupt in laughter and I can’t stop from joining as well.

“Should I start calling you Jodi-cow?”

I ask her. Her giggles erupt again, and it’s music to my ears.

“No, Daddy. I’m your Jodi-bug.”

She gives me a tight squeeze, and I set her back down on her feet.

“What do you get when a cow jumps on a trampoline?”

I lift my shoulders up and tilt my head to the side, pondering her question. She doesn’t give me long to think of an answer, her excitement taking over.

“A milkshake!”

I chuckle at her joke.

“That’s a good one. And a milkshake sounds good. I think that’s what we’ll have for dinner tonight. Hamburgers, fries and milkshakes. Sound good?”

“So good,”

she answers while nodding.

“Okay, I’m out. Let me get one more hug and then I need to go check on some job sites.”

She reaches out and I lean down to meet her. After a quick hug and a kiss on her cheek, I stand up.

“Love you, Daddy!”

“Love you, Jodi.”

She runs over to the couch and puts on her shoes.

After a quick goodbye to my parents, I’m back on the road to start the day.

Both job sites were running smoothly, the deliveries arrived on time and the crews were on schedule. In this business, that was great news. I didn’t stay at either site for too long. The anticipation of my ten o’clock meeting with Maggie was my sole focus.

Pulling into her drive, I park my truck next to her black hatchback. I look over the front of the house and I can see where she has been productive. She has trimmed some of the overgrown bushes and pulled some out to give room for those left in the ground to grow and bloom larger.

I grab my bag with my electronics and designs and hop out of the truck. I debate going to the front door to knock, and then decide against it. Since it needs repair, I assume she is likely not using the inside of the house at the moment.

With my mind made up, I head around to the back addition. I notice her the minute I round the corner. She’s sitting on the back deck with her laptop open, soft music playing and an iced coffee in her hands.

“Knock, knock,”

I call out to grab her attention and not startle her. But my attempt to be subtle fails and she still jumps a little in her seat. Her hand flying to her chest above her racing heart.

“Rowan,”

she asks with a hint of confusion and surprise.

“Hey, I’m your ten o’clock, DuPont Construction,”

I tell her as I take the step up to her.

“Oh, are you the cousin that was going to the work on the house for your grandmother? The one that built the addition?”

I give her a nod, answering her questions.

“Why didn’t I put this all together in my head last night? Are you okay working on this?”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. Let’s see what you want to do to the place.”

I take a seat and pull out my tablet.

“I’m not really sure what I want to do. Do you have any suggestions?”

I answer her question and begin to show her what I have. I start with some basic plans for this style of home that are more modernized. Next, I show her the plans I had originally made for my grandmother in mind, keeping the architectural feel of this

home, trying to stay to the timestamps of when everything would work for this home.

We spend the next hour and a half going over different things that she likes and things she doesn't like. I try to incorporate it all into what her vision is. Does she want the five bedrooms upstairs? Does she want to make them four, knock down a wall, different scenarios to get the best home for her,

Once we've talked it through, I show her a digital version of what we have talked about. Some things that she requested or suggested were not things that I would have thought about in a plan. Different things that a feminine touch brings to designing a home.

"Oh, Rowan, this is going to be amazing."

Maggie states with enthusiasm. Her excitement bleeding into mine.

We talk about her price point, and when she expresses that she wants to do some of the work to keep cost down, I agree with the stipulation that I will help her. There are things she isn't aware of with rebuilds and I don't want anything to happen to her.

She reluctantly agrees, and I take it as a win. If it gives me some alone time with her, who am I to complain?

With the meeting wrapped up, we take one more walk through the main level. We exit out the front door and take a minute on the large front porch. Maggie steps down from the porch, her foot pressing down on the next step.

I'm not fast enough to tell her to warn her about the weak spot, and her foot goes right through. She falls on her butt when I try to grab her, but I'm too slow.

"Oh, ow. Well, I guess we need to fix that,"

Maggie exclaims with a giggle.

I rush to her side and help her up.

“Are you okay?”

My fingers wrap around her forearm as she steadies herself.

With her foot free from the rotten wood, she leans into my hold.

“Yeah, just embarrassed.”

I take a step closer, her scent filling my senses.

“Nothin’ to be embarrassed about,”

I tell her as I take another step closer.

I run my finger over her cheek and tuck in her stray hair. Her soft skin is such a contrast to mine. Her lips part and I want a taste. My eyes flick to hers and she watches me. Her tongue swipes at her lips, preparing them for what she wants. And who I am to disappoint.

I lean in the rest of the way, a hair breath away, ready to take what I want. But I don’t get the choice. My cell phone rings loud and annoyingly in between us.

I step back to take the call and see the hurt and confusion in her eyes. I try to make quick work on the call and get finished so I can get back to her. Instead, she gives me a wave and walks back inside, stepping over the step that has a hole in it.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Maggie

The Pauling Farmer's Market is a buzz on Saturday morning. There are tents set up with vegetables, fruits, sourdough bread, cookies, muffins, meat packages, eggs, and different homemade items.

I have tried to stop by each tent. Currently, I'm browsing through a tent that offers goat's milk soap. I take my time smelling the different concoctions, each one a new and intriguing smell. I settle on a lavender brick and a blueberry brick of goat's milk soap; I pay the vendor and walk out of the tent in search of Lauren.

I almost declined Lauren's invitation last night when she texted, but I'm glad I didn't. It's a pleasant reprieve from working on the house. I had hopes that my little adventure today would get me out of my funk. I've spent too much time thinking of the could have been kisses with Rowan.

I had heard of farmer's markets, but never visited one before. It seemed everyone that lived in Pauling was downtown, visiting the tents and getting their purchases for the week. My fabric grocery bag is over loaded already with two large zucchinis, a bunch of carrots, and a head of broccoli. All great ingredients to make a large stir-fry.

I find Lauren coming back from the lemonade trailer, two big, oversized plastic containers filled with freshly squeezed lemonade. Half lemons still resting in the container's bottom.

"Here you go, girl,"

Lauren says as she hands one to me.

“Thank you,”

I answer, bringing the straw to my lips. I take a sip, the taste explodes on my tongue. The sweetness, the bitterness, everything working together. It is cool and refreshing on this hot and humid morning.

“Oh, thanks. I needed that.”

“Did you find some soaps?”

Lauren asks.

I nod and show her the soaps I found, and she takes a sniff, oohing over the smell.

“Lulu,”

a little girl yells as she runs up to Lauren, throwing herself against her legs and squeezing. She’s so cute, her lopsided pigtails swaying with her movements.

Lauren’s eyes light up in excitement at the little girl. She bends down to her eye level.

“Hey, Jodi. Who you here with today?”

“Daddy and I came to take a look at what everyone has, and then to the diner for a late breakfast.”

There is a familiarity between Lauren and Jodi. Like they have known each other forever. Green eyes stare back at me, reminding me of eyes that I have been trying to forget all morning.



“Jodi-bug,”

a gruff voice calls from behind me. The voice is familiar, sending goosebumps down my arms. I turn to the side and see Rowan, his eyes on the little girl as he walks closer to us.

“Hey, Daddy!”

Jodi answers with gusto.

Daddy? Rowan is a dad? Is he married? Where is her mother? Is that why he wouldn’t kiss me? Is he involved with Jodi’s mother? My breath rushes out as the questions swirl in my head.

Rowan’s head whips my way. His eyes widen when he sees me standing next to Lauren. He must have been so focused on his daughter that he didn’t notice me.

His daughter. I did not expect this turn of events. I guess I have been misreading every interaction I have had with him.

“Maggie,”

Rowan states with a smile. He doesn’t look guilty or concerned that I’ve come face to face with his daughter. That eases a little of my confusion.

“Hi, Miss Maggie. I’m Jodi.”

The little girl steps away from Lauren and stands in front of me. She is so outspoken and cute. She isn’t aware of the internal turmoil I’m having.

“Nice to meet you, Jodi,”

I tell her as I crouch down to her level like Lauren did. She sticks her little hand out and I give her a gentle shake.

When I stand back up, Jodi is telling her dad that she's ready to eat. Jodi asks Lauren and me to come as well. Lauren agrees and looks over to me.

"I don't want to impose,"

I tell the group.

"You're not,"

Rowan answers as he comes to stand closer to me.

"I'd like you to come,"

he says quietly so that only I can hear.

"I'd like that, too."

I tell him. Rowan slips the bag off my shoulder and walks next to me with his hand on my lower back as we follow Lauren and Jodi to the diner.

"So, you have a daughter?"

I ask after a minute. I know I should probably keep my thoughts to myself. But there are so many things I want to know.

"I do,"

he answers with a smirk.

“What about her mom?”

Shit, did I really just come out and ask that.

“Sorry, it’s none of my business.”

“She’s not in the picture. It’s just me and Jodi.”

He stops a few feet from the entrance and looks at Lauren and Jodi.

“Y’all grab a booth. We’ll be right in.”

Lauren nods and heads inside with Jodi. I turn towards Rowan so we are face to face.

“I’m gonna be completely open with you here, Maggie. I know we don’t know each other that well, but there’s something there. I want to see what that is. But, I also have a little girl that is my world. If you think there’s something here as well, then let’s go eat. If it’s too much for you, then I ask that you bow out now.”

Rowan takes a breath and watches me.

There’s so much to unpack in his words. And while he’s direct, I admire how he is looking out for his little girl. I also love the fact that he has voiced the pull between us. It lets me know that this feeling is not one-sided.

“I feel it, too. And I respect that your daughter comes first. Now let’s go eat.”

He grins and shakes his head. A deep chuckle escapes his lips. His hand clasps mine and we head into the diner.

I thought his hand at my lower back was exquisite. Scratch that, his hand in mine —

palm to palm, shoots warmth up my arm.

Lauren raises an eyebrow when we approach the table. Her eyes ping from our joined hands up to mine, a small smile gracing her lips. She has Jodi on her side of the booth, allowing Rowan and me to sit next to each other.

I'm not sure if that was intentional or not, but I'm not complaining. Now that I know where he stands, some nerves and uncertainty have disappeared.

The waitress is quick to take our orders. Jodi insisted I try the French Toast. And I couldn't complain, because who doesn't like pan fried bread lathered in butter with powdered sugar sprinkled on top.

While we wait for our food, Jodi captivates the whole table.

"What did the mother cow say to her calf?"

Jodi asks the table. Lauren and Rowan snicker at her question. Jodi looks at each adult and then blurts out.

"It's pasture bedtime!"

Her giggles are infectious and we all laugh along.

Jodi catches her breath and hits us with another one.

"Why did the cow want to get in the rocket ship?"

She gives us less time to think of an answer before she gives us the punch line.

"He wanted to go to udder space!"

We all laugh at her antics. She is the cutest little girl.

Before she has time to give another joke, our food is being delivered. Throughout the meal, I notice the small things Rowan does for her. He's attentive to her needs, but also allows her to try to figure things out herself first. He waits for her to ask for help.

He doesn't fuss when she gets syrup on the table, or dribbles a little milk on her shirt. There's no frustration from him when she asks for some of his eggs. He takes it all in stride.

It's so different from how I was brought up. You didn't dare to make a mess, no matter how small of a crumb. There was no way I could have been cracking jokes at a public outing. It would have been unheard of. My upbringing ingrained in me the idea that children should be seen and not heard.

It was refreshing to see the grass was greener on the other side. Watching Rowan with his daughter enforced my thoughts on how I wanted to be as a parent. Patient and understanding. Helpful and guiding. Yes, there would be times I had to discipline, but it would be different from what I had endured.

After we finished eating , and Rowan's insistence with covering the bill, we all headed out and say our goodbyes.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Rowan

I hit send on my email to Maggie and close the laptop. I spent yesterday afternoon and this morning working on the quote for the renovations she and I discussed on Friday.

The house is too quiet. Mom picked Jodi up this morning for church, and they have plans to go to shopping this afternoon.

I stand and walk out of my office, looking for something to do. But my brain stops short. My thoughts once again on Maggie. She didn't run yesterday when I laid everything out. So that's a plus.

With her on my mind, I grab my cell and send her a text.

R: Heads up, I just emailed over the quote.

I set my phone on the counter and decide to empty the dishwasher. There is no use staring at the phone, waiting for a response. I'm halfway through the chore when my phone beeps.

M: Great! I'll take a look in a minute.

An idea pops up and I decide to go with it. I want to spend time with her and I don't want all our time to be focused on the renovations.

R: You have plans this afternoon? I want to show you something on the property.

Have you ventured out in the back?

M: No plans. And I haven't made it out far.

M: You want to be my guide?

Hell yeah, I want to be her guide.

R: Yeah, I do. You good if I come over in about 20 minutes?

That should give me enough time to load up the side-by-side and drive over to her place.

M: See you in 20.

I make quick work of hitching the flatbed trailer. Next, I drive the UTV onto the trailer and strap it down with tow straps. Once the UTV is secure, I make a quick stop inside the house and load up a small cooler with some waters, sodas and snacks.

I drive down Maggie's driveway ten minutes later and find her waiting for me on the porch steps. She stands up as I park and walks towards me.

I step out of the truck and take her in. She's dressed in a pink tank top, short cutoff jeans and a pair of black chucks. Her brown hair flows down her back and over her shoulders.

"What's that?"

she asks, pointing to the UTV.

"The Mule,"

I answer and chuckle when her eyes crinkle in confusion.

“It’s an UTV. A utility task vehicle or some call it a side-by-side. This brand is a Mule.”

“Why is it here?”

She asks as I unhook the first strap.

“I’m going to be your guide,”

I tell her as I walk around and unhook the other side.

“There are some trails out in the woods. Thought we would take a ride and then I can show you my favorite spot.”

“Awesome. What do you need me to do?”

“Stay right there while I get this off the trailer.”

I climb up on the trailer and back the Mule off.

Her eyes shine with excitement. And I’m glad I’m the one to share this with her. We haven’t talked too deep yet, but I have a gut feeling that she had a sheltered life. If I had to guess, moving to Paulding has been a total adventure for her.

I pull up next to her and tell her to get in. I hop out and grab the cooler from the truck and put it in the back bed of the Mule, placing a bungee cord around it and securing it in.

“Ready?”



I ask her. She nods and tells me she is, so I take off around the house towards the woods. She grabs the frame on the side with one hand and the other grabs the ‘oh shit’ bar in front of her. I’m about to slow down when her laughter rings out.

I drive down to the woods and follow the tree line to the larger path. I have to let up on the gas a little to maneuver through the overgrown trail.

Maggie’s quiet as she takes it all in. I look over at her every few seconds. Her eyes are wide, and a wide smile as she turns her head left and right, taking it all in.

We make it to the clearing at the creek, and I park. Her gasp has me turning in my seat to face her.

“Rowan,”

she whispers.

“This is beautiful. I own this?”

I scan the area, looking at it from her perspective. Old oaks shadow the clearing. Tall grass now replaces the trimmed area my grandfather kept up with. The creek is wider and deeper here, with plenty of space to wade through and cool off.

“You do. We used to come out and cool off almost every day in the summer. It’s where I did a lot of thinking in the day.”

The nostalgia of being here stings a bit. But I pull that emotion in. She doesn’t need to see it or feel guilty that this is hers.

I take a minute to point out the picnic table that my dad and grandfather built; the rope hanging from the tree across the creek that we used to jump into the water and

fire pit near the far end of the clearing.

“Did you ever bring Jodi out here?”

Maggie questions.

I nod and tell her about a few of our adventures. Teaching Jodi to swim and fish. When she asks where Jodi is, I tell her about the girls’ shopping adventures for today.

“You’re doing a great job with her. She’s a hoot.”

Maggie exclaims.

“Thank you. Sometimes I wonder if I’m giving her a good life. I’m just a man, and I know she needs a mom, a woman’s touch. But she got stuck with me. That’s why I’m so thankful that my mom helps as much as she does. Lauren, too.”

Maggie’s hand lands on my thigh, her touch sparking the electric feel that buzzes anytime we touch.

“She’s not stuck with you. She’s lucky to have you.”

Her words hit hard. It’s the first time an outsider, someone who isn’t family or a friend, or a town person who has known me most of my life, has said those words to me. Words that I actually hear because I see she means it from her heart.

“That means a lot to hear.”

I tell her. I reach behind the seat and grab the blanket I keep hidden.

“Come on, let’s go check it out.”

I step out of the mule and unhook the cooler from the back.

“Let’s take a seat near the creek.”

Maggie steps out and waits for me to walk to her side. She takes the blanket from under my arm and we walk in silence to the bank near the creek. The grass is shorter here, probably from the wildlife grazing and walking alongside the creek.

Maggie spreads out the blanket and takes a seat in the middle. Her legs folded in front of her.

I set the cooler in front of her and then take a seat next to her. I open the cooler and grab a soda and water. Holding them out to her, I wait for her to pick her choice.

“I’ve done so much thinking here. If these trees could talk.”

I reminisce.

“This is where I came to collect myself when I found out that I was going to be a dad.”

I look over at Maggie. She gives me a small smile, and I continue.

“Katie, Jodi’s mom, and I were young. We were focused on partying and hookin’ up.”

I cringe when I think about how that sounds. But one look at Maggie and there is no judgement.

“Katie freaked out, and well you could say I did as well. Hell, I was twenty-four, living in the upstairs garage apartment at my parents’ house. I was nervous, scared,

like could I even be a father? But as time passed, I watched her body grow and Jodi develop, and things changed. I learned about the pregnancy and baby development. And with all the changes and knowledge, I became more excited and ready for fatherhood.”

I take a breath. This next part hurts the most. Not because Katie is not here, but how she treated our daughter. My daughter.

“Two days after I turned twenty-five, Katie went into labor. I’m told it was an easy labor, according to mom and the nurses. After Jodi’s delivery, the medical staff placed her on Katie’s chest. She wanted nothing to do with Jodi. Katie just sat there and stared at the wall. She wouldn’t look at Jodi, would hold her. So I did the skin on skin. I fed Jodi her first bottle, changed her first diaper, and within a few hours, Katie was insistent that she didn’t want to be a mom. That this wasn’t what she had planned for her life. So, with the help of social services in the hospital and the help of my parents, Katie signed over her parental rights. And when the hospital released Jodi, it was Jodi and I from then on.”

Maggie

There's a vulnerability in his words. This strong man beside me shares his memories of when his life changed. And it changed for the better.

I shift my body, tucking my legs underneath me, and look over at him as he stares at the creek. I watch while he gathers his thoughts.

"You're a great dad, Rowan. A great man. Not everybody can do what you're doing, and it sounds like you have a team full of people at your back. Keep doing it."

He looks at me, his green eyes searching.

"I can say the same about you."

He expresses as his hand reaches towards my face.

His calloused fingers brush my cheek and then slide down my neck, stopping where my shoulders begin. He applies slight pressure with his fingers as our heads drift to each other.

I hold my breath. We've been here before, on the edge of a kiss. Twice. But something always ends this moment before it begins. I lean forward, taking the lead. His lips are soft and warm, a complete contradiction of any other kiss I have had.

I pull back and lick my lips. Did I overstep? Before I think about what just happened, his hand threads through my hair at the base of my neck and he pulls me closer, as his

other hand wraps around my back.

This kiss, in contrast to the previous one, is intense and desperate. Our mouths pressing hard against each other, his lips crush mine until they feel swollen and raw. Our tongues exploring each other as we become lost in the sensations.

I pull back, desperate for air, panting through parted lips. He tastes so good, like heaven, sweet like soda and a little salty, a perfect flavor against my tongue. I grab his face, raking my fingers over the scrub of stubble that gives his chin texture. My nipples harden, yearning to feel my skin against his.

While our bodies shift closer together, he cups my ass and pulls me closer so we are hip to hip. I release a deep groan at the sensation. I should be embarrassed at the sound, but I'm not.

"Maggie,"

his deep grumble makes my name sound beautiful and erotic.

"You taste so good,"

he pants his praise against my neck.

His mouth returns to mine as he devours me. He kisses, licks, and nips my throat. His stubble scraping my skin and leaving behind the most delicious burn. Within moments, I'm withering with desperation for more of him.

I lift his face with my hands to catch my breath. Rowan moves our bodies and my back hits the blanket. He hovers over me, his arms on either side of my head, and places his knee between my legs, close to my core.

He continues to explore my mouth with his tongue, while one hand skims down my arm until his fingers clasp with mine. As the kiss deepens, I'm desperate for more.

We kiss and groan, huffing out hot breaths and shifting our bodies against each other. I squirm against his knee. The ache I feel for him is so deep. If he moves his knee just a little higher, I'd be a goner.

"So fucking perfect,"

he murmurs against my skin. His fingers release my hand and grasp my hip.

I open my eyes, unaware when they closed, my lids so sluggish and heavy with arousal, I struggle to peek at him through my lashes.

His hand slips down to my thigh. His calloused fingers leaving a trail of sparks as he trails them higher until he palms my ass under my shorts.

He gives my ass a squeeze, urging me on as I rub my jean clad core against his knee.

I've never felt this desperate before. It's scary and exhilarating at the same time.

He moves his hand from my ass and pushes the palm of his against the seam of my jean shorts, rubbing it in the spot where I want him.

"You want this, Maggie?"

He asks as he applies more pressure to my core.

"Yes, yes,"

I whimper.

Like magic, he releases the button and zipper instantly on my shorts. His hand splays across my lower stomach, while his thumb rubs underneath the panty line.

I'm so desperate for his touch. My hands reach down to my waist and I help him pull my shorts and panties down. Rowan pulls them down my legs further until he removes the clothing from one leg at a time.

"Open for me, Maggie,"

he tells me, and I do as he says. He sucks in a breath. His green eyes shining like emeralds, his nostrils flaring.

"Fuck, you're so wet,"

he groans.

"Only for you," I admit.

With the tip of one finger, he teases a trail up my thigh and through my trimmed curls. My hips buck at the light contact and I lift up trying to get closer to him.

Every touch of his fingers is a brutal tease. I want him inside me, feeling me, but he takes his time studying my body and fingering his way through my arousal until he finds my clit. I throw my head back against the ground and spread my legs wider.

He slides two fingers inside, spearing through my core, gathering my wetness. He spreads it around and over my womanhood. When he adds another finger, the fullness is comforting with him there.

My breath becomes labored. The stretch and fullness is a heady combination. He pulls back and starts again with his thumb rubbing my clit and his fingers curling up



to find the magic spot.

Everything happens at once. My stomach tightens, and a tidal wave of heat flows through me. Sparks shoot off behind my eyelids, and I grab onto his shoulders to ground myself.

His movements slow as I float back down. He pulls his fingers out of me and licks them. "Sweet as fucking honey,"

he groans. He lowers his face to mine, his lips meet mine, giving me a small taste of myself.

When I come down from my orgasm, everything looks brighter. Rowan watches me with a shit-eating grin. Confidence radiating off of him.

I reach towards him, but his hand catches mine.

"What about you? I ask. I want to make him feel as good as I feel..."

"Not today. Today was all about you."

Concerned about sitting out here without my bottom half covered, I stand and quickly shimmy back into my panties and shorts.

When I sit back down, Rowan has pulled out some cheese, crackers and grapes for us to snack on. Once we have gorged ourselves on snacks, Rowan leads me to the creek and we dip our toes in the warm water. We don't stray too far, only go to where the water hits our calves.

As we wade into the water, we walk to the end of the clearing and turn back. We clean up the area when Rowan gets a text from his mom that she and Jodi are back in

town. We pack up and drive back to the house. Reluctantly, Rowan leaves after a scorching goodbye kiss.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Rowan

“Hey, Daddy?”

Jodi calls as she walks into the kitchen and climbs up on the stool at the kitchen island.

“Yeah,”

I answer as I give her my full attention. She’s still in her pajamas, her hair askew from sleep. It’s the first day of summer break and she is in no rush to get ready to leave for summer camp at the library.

“How do you count cows?” she asks.

I give her my ‘thinking’ look, tilting my head to the side.

“With their hoofs?”

“No, silly. With a cow-culator!”

She giggles and I chuckle as I turn around and grab her breakfast. Once I set her up and she’s eating, I finish getting myself ready for the day.

Today is demo day at Maggie’s. I had a dumpster delivered yesterday in preparation. I scheduled a five-man team today to do the most labor intense parts, leaving some of the easier parts for Maggie to complete.

Every day since Sunday, Maggie and I have had to steal moments here and there. Tonight after Jodi's been dropped off at my parents, we'll head to Gypsy for the traditional Thursday night date of dinner and trivia.

Walking out to the kitchen, I see Jodi has finished her breakfast and placed her dishes in the sink. I make quick work of wiping down the counters and then head to her room to see if she is getting ready. I find Jodi in her bathroom already dressed and brushing her hair.

It's a little heartbreaking every time she learns to do things on her own. I know she is growing up, and I don't want to deter that. But it still breaks my heart. There will be a time in the future that she won't need me.

I lean on the doorframe and wait for her to finish. Once she's ready, we hit the road. Drop off is quick and simple at summer camp, and I'm grateful that Jodi does so well.

When I arrive at Maggie's, I park next to her vehicle and step out of the truck. My eyes search the yard and I see my crew gathered at the back of John's truck. He's the foreman of this crew and would usually handle most of the renovation. However, this job is personal, so I plan to be here most days.

I towards the crew, but stop short when Maggie comes around the front of the house. Her signature outfit on—tank top, cutoff jeans and a pair of chucks. Upon seeing her, I change direction and make my way to her.

Once she is within reaching distance, I pull her close and steal a kiss. It's quick and chaste, but we still get catcalls from the guys. Maggie laughs it off as we walk towards the crew.

After instructions are delivered, everyone gets to work. The day flies by and by quitting time we have all the drywall stripped from both floors of the house. It's been

a productive day.

I watch the crew leave and then turn to Maggie.

“I’ll be back around six thirty, does that work?”

“That works,”

she answers as she takes a step closer and lays her lips on mine. I hold back from taking more. I know if I do, I’ll ever leave in time to get Jodi from camp and over to my parents.

\*\*\*

“We’re headed out,”

I tell everyone as I stand and take Maggie’s hand in mine. There is a round of goodbyes from everyone at the table. We had to move two tables together to accommodate all of us.

When we arrived Lauren and her friends were already at a four top waiting for Maggie. Both her and I were hesitant to sit at different tables. Dean saw my conflict and pushed a table up to the other and we all sat tighter. Dean, Chris, Thomas, Lauren, Susan, Nikki, Maggie and me. One big group.

We split off into our same teams as last week and made it to third place again. But now the night was over and I wanted some time with my girl.

As I pull out of the parking lot, Maggie lifts the console in my truck and slides over.

“Your place or mine?”

“Mine,”

I reply. We’ve been leading up to this all night. Hell, all week with the touches and stolen kisses.

I make the drive in half the time and once I park, I grip her hand as she slides out of the truck behind me. We walk inside and once the door is closed, I pull her close and hold her tight around the waist.

“I’m going to kiss you like I’ve been meaning to kiss you all night.”

She widens her eyes and licks her lips. Her breath comes in little puffs, nervous and excited. She nods and lifts her face to mine, bringing her nose as close to mine as she can. I brush my lips against hers, and her sweet breath fills my senses. Just a touch of those plush lips sends my cock into overdrive, and suddenly my brain is no longer in control.

I want her, and I want her now. She tastes divine, and I open my mouth, exploring her depths with my tongue. She mewls against my lips, her hips pressing against my already stiff cock, and I know I’m fucking done for this woman.

I want to lay her out on my bed and taste every inch of her skin. I fist my fingers in her hair, and my chest crushes her breasts.

“You want this?”

I pant.

“It’s not too late to say, No.”

I can’t even get the offer out before she’s rasping.

“Yes, I want this. I want you. Please.”

Her words spear us into action. We kiss and grope and strip out of our clothes the entire time we walk down the hall to my bedroom.

By the time we make it to the bed, Maggie’s shirt is gone and she’s working on the button on her shorts. I stop her with a hand.

“That’s my job,”

I growl, looking poignantly at her body.

I can see her entire body tremble under my gaze. Her nipples are so hard I can see thick peaks just begging to be nibbled through the cups of her bra. She stands with her hands at her sides, looking like she has absolutely no idea what to do.

I shuck off my jeans and socks, but leave on my boxer briefs. If I expose my cock just yet, the thrill will be over before it begins. Once my skin touches her, there’ll be no going back. And I want to take my time with this.

I close the space between us and lift her chin so our eyes meet, and I just look at her.

“You’re beautiful, Maggie,”

I say, picking up a lock of her hair between two fingers.

“I want to see every inch of you.”

She shivers harder this time, but her eyes never leave mine. I work the zipper down and pull the waistband away from her hips. Maggie’s got some curves to her, and I can’t wait to explore them all.

I shove her underwear down, exposing her trimmed mound. She gasps, a thrilling sound that's heavy with want. She clutches my bare shoulders as she steps out of the panties, and I toss them aside to look at her. Her hair spills over her shoulders as her cheeks flush.

I'm so goddamn hard as I take my time looking at her. She shivers and crosses her arms lightly over her chest. I lead her to the bed, and she takes a seat. I climb in the bed, laying on my side next to her. I ease the cup of her bra away from her breast, pushing the fabric down so her nipple peeks out. The rosy tip is dark, hard, and thick.

Just seeing it makes me want to bite down and suck deep, but I start slow, licking and flicking the tender skin with the tip of my tongue. She weaves her fingers through my hair and presses my head closer, but I want to take my time. I lift my head away from her breast, and she whimpers in displeasure, but she's quickly changing her tune as I lock my mouth on her other breast.

Her hips jerk and her hands grip my hair as I work my tongue in leisurely circles around the dark areola, stopping only to nip the erect tip between my teeth and suck it long and hard into my mouth.

I climb over her body, but instead of coming to the rest on the other side, I anchor my weight above her as I straddle her hips; I grind lightly against her, and she rolls her eyes back in her head and slams her lips shut.

Her breasts are full, and I cup one in my hand, feeding her nipple into my mouth and stuck the tip harder as I tweak the other with my fingers.

"You good?" I ask.

She slams her eyes open and grips the blankets between tight fingers.



“Don’t you dare freaking stop.”

I laugh and leave her perfect nipples pointing at the ceiling. I make quick work to unhook her bra from the back and remove the annoying piece of material.

I move to the end of the bed and kneel beside her. My fingers run up and down her thighs, kneading the muscles until her mouth falls open and little purrs of pleasure escape from between her lips. I spread her knees wide and settle between her legs.

The scent of her arousal makes my mouth water. I work my thumb in gentle circles, watching how she withers beneath me. Her thighs tense and her breaths are ragged as I work my fingers inside, little by little. She’s grinding her hips so hard, trying to draw me deeper inside that she’s practically slamming her body down on my fingers, but I want to be the one to bring her pleasure.

I don’t move my hand from her pussy, but use the other hand to lift the knee closest to me, a little higher. She follows my lead, bending her knees so her feet are on the mattress and letting her legs fall open. I lower my face to her inner thigh and lick and kiss her while I stroke her clit with increasing firm pressure.

Maggie

Rowan lowers his head between my thighs and licks a path through my lips. My back arches and I cry out in surprise. His chuckle vibrates against me as he continues to lap at the sensitive flesh between my thighs.

When he sucks my clit into his mouth, I nearly come off the bed. “Rowan,”

I gasp as my hands fist his hair. He growls against me and then spears my opening with his tongue. I whimper as the pleasure building inside me h me ready to explode.

I’m not innocent when it comes to sex, but I’ve never felt anything like this. My entire body is one knot of anticipation, waiting to unravel. Please,”

I beg.

“I need ... I need ...”

I don’t know what I need, but I need it from him.

He lifts his head and stares at me, his lips glistening with my juices.

“What do you need?”

He demands.

My cheeks heat at his demand, but I can’t deny him.

“Please, please, make me come,”

I whisper.

“Your wish is my command,”

he answers as he returns to licking and sucking my pussy. It doesn't take long before I'm teetering on the edge. Rowan slips a finger inside me. It feels so good, but I need more. I needed him. My breath is harsh in the quiet of the room as I rock in time with his rhythm. He adds a second finger, and I gasp as he stretches me open.

“I need to get you ready. So all you feel is pleasure, no pain,”

he tells me as he adds a third finger and my body stretches to accommodate him. He moves them in and out of me slowly as I adjust, and then picks up the pace until my orgasm hits me like a freight train. It slams into me so hard that I can't breathe. My entire body goes rigid, and I cry out as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me.

Rowan shoves upward, pinning my body down. He surrounds me as he settles himself between my thighs.

“You good?”

He asks as he stares down at me.

“Yeah,” I answer.

I watch as he reaches over into the nightstand next to his bed and pulls out a condom. He tears the package open with his teeth and rolls the latex over his dick. He grabs himself and positions his tip at my entrance, and then slowly pushes inside.

It burns as he stretches me open, but there is pleasure mixed in with the pain. With just an inch left to go, he slams his lips down on mine and thrusts forward, filling me completely. His tongue mimics the movement of his cock, and I wrap my arms around him and hold on.

It doesn't take long before I'm moaning into his mouth and rocking my hips in time with his movements. The pleasure is building back up at a rapid pace. This is so much better than I have ever experienced.

I moan and whimper as the pleasure increases, stronger than the last time. I'm right there, waiting for the rubber band to snap. As though he can read my mind, he lifts a hand from my hips and buries it between my thighs. He rubs my clit with his fingers, then pinches down on it. The sharp bite of pain pushes me over the edge, and I scream at his name as I come.

"Fuck,"

he growls as my pussy clenches around him.

"You feel so fucking good, Maggie."

He slams into me a few more times and roars as he finds his own release.

He leans down and kisses my shoulder lightly, and then pulls out of me to remove the condom. He ties it off and tosses into a garbage can beside the bed. Then he flops down on the bed beside me and drags me over until I am laying half on top of him.

His hand rakes through my hair, making the aftershocks of my climax last longer. As goose bumps raise on my neck from the feel of his fingers lightly scratching my scalp, my body is completely relaxed, melting into his side. I don't want to move. I want to stay here with him. But, I don't want to overstay my welcome.

“I think you broke me,”

I mutter against his chest.

“Same here, Maggie. Same here,”

he says with a chuckle.

I lean up on my elbow so I can see him and smile. He curls his lips into a satisfied smirk as he looks down at me. “Stay,”

he commands. It’s not a question and I’m fine with that. If he wants me here, then here is where I will be. I nod and he leans down to seal his command with a kiss.

He pushes up, and without a word, he gets out of bed. I watch the muscles of his firm ass flex as he walks into the bathroom. When he comes back, he is holding a wet cloth.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He steps up beside me and presses on my thigh. I quietly watch him as I open my thighs and he gently swipes the cloth over my core, cleaning up the traces of the mess I made.

When he’s done, he tosses the cloth into a laundry hamper and joins me in bed. He pulls me close, manhandling me until I am laying over him the way he wants. He pulls the covers over us and holds me tight.

“Sleep, Maggie. I got you,”

he tells me as he runs his fingers through my hair. My eyes close following his

command, his rhythmic breathing lulling me into slumber.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Rowan

It's been a month since we started the renovation on Maggie's home. Time has passed by in a blink of an eye. Her determination to learn about all the processes of the renovation have surprised me. She has torn out drywall, and hung new sheets when the studs were ready. She learned how to tape and mud drywall, and did a better job than some of the men on my crews.

She has painted walls and trim with the best of them. I spent an entire weekend teaching her how to lay hardwood flooring in the living room with Jodi's help.

Monday through Friday, she works with me and the crew as we work on the renovation. Thursday nights have become our official date night. Sometimes we hit up Gypsy's for dinner and trivia and some nights we stay in, wrapped around each other.

Saturdays are farmer's market and brunch at the diner with Jodi. Sunday afternoons are for walks and relaxing at the creek, just the three of us. Both my girls becoming head over heels for each other in our shared times together. Jodi knows Maggie is someone important to me. But I think Maggie is becoming important to Jodi as well. It feels good to have someone to be there with us.

Every day Maggie and I become closer, I find myself wanting her here with me all the time. Sharing the simple things in life with me. In the evenings watching TV with Jodi. The rushed morning as we scramble to get ready for the day.

"Rowan,"

my mother calls as she walks in through my front door.

“In the kitchen,”

I holler as I continue to season the steaks for dinner. I hear a rustle of bags and look over my shoulder and watch mom set them on the island. She must have a whole buggy’s worth of groceries.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, just a few things for tonight,”

she answers.

“A few? Looks like a lot. I told you this was a simple meal, Ma.”

I remember telling her this quite a few times, but clearly it went in one ear and out the other.

I’m having Maggie over for dinner with some of my family. It was going to be a small gathering, just Maggie, Jodi, my parents, and me. But somewhere along the line, it has grown to include Lauren, Dean, and their parents. Luckily, it isn’t everyone, and it helps that Lauren and Dean aren’t unfamiliar faces.

“I’m excited. Let me have this moment,”

she replies as she pulls things out of the bag.

“It’s just dinner, Ma. Not marriage,”

I mumble to myself as I wrap the plate with the steaks in tin foil. Placing them in the



fridge, I turn back around to find mom staring at me. “What?”

Her eyes are wide and she’s quiet. I’m starting to worry about her, but then she starts talking and I know that she’s fine.

“Do you think it could lead to that?”

Her question catches me off guard. I give her a look of confusion and she continues.

“Marriage. Do you think she could be the one?”

“Ma, it’s just dinner. Have I thought about a future with her? Yes. But it’s been a month. Let us build this relationship up and not rush anything. I haven’t even told her ‘I love you’ yet.”

“But you do?”

she asks, hopefulness in her voice.

“You won’t be the first to know,”

I tell her as I step around her and help empty the bags. Honestly, the first person I want to tell is Maggie. I feel it, but I’ve never said the words to a female who wasn’t family. Is it too soon? Does she feel the same? Or is it just lust?

Mom drops the subject when Jodi comes in from playing outside and we get to work. She has the making for a charcuterie board, so Jodi and I start on that, taking directions from her as she works on making pasta and potato salads to go with dinner.

Within a few hours, we have all the sides prepared and the dessert in the oven. I’ve cooked and prepped more today than I have in the last six months. Dad arrived forty-

five minutes ago with a cooler full of sodas, bottled waters, and beers. Everything is ready for my guests to arrive.

Dean arrives first with his parents, Uncle Steve and Aunt Alice, in tow. Lauren and Maggie pulling in right behind them. When I see Maggie step out of Lauren's SUV, I take a moment to soak her in.

She is so beautiful. Today she is in a yellow sundress, with thick straps that are tied around her neck. Her tan legs are on display again, but it's her cowboy boots that make my smile widen.

I remember the day she got them. She was so excited to show them off. She wore them to dinner and trivia that night and I couldn't wait to get her back to my place and have my way with her. I made her leave the boots on until we finished and were ready for bed. I may have also given her a foot rub the next morning that made me late to work.

She saunters up to me and I have to control my urge to pull her close and taste her lips. The kiss I want to give her is not appropriate for those around us, so I settle on a quick peck as I pull her to my side.

After quickly introducing my aunt and uncle, we all head inside. Maggie grips my hand as she steps over the threshold where my parents wait. Before I have a chance to introduce her to my parents, Jodi comes running into the room.

"Maggie,"

Jodi exclaims as she runs up to Maggie with her arms outstretched. Maggie releases my hand and bends down to catch Jodi. She wraps her in her arms and gives her a big squeeze.

“Jodi-bug,”

Maggie replies as she holds her close. When she releases Jodi, she stands back up and her hand instantly finds mine.

She looks calm on the outside, but I can see her fidget as my parents take her in. She’s nervous, but she has no reason to be.

“Ma, Dad, this is Maggie.”

I announce.

Dad walks up and holds his hand out.

“Nice to meet you, Maggie. Cowen DuPont, but everyone calls me Coe. And this is my wife Mia.”

Maggie shakes his hand with her free hand.

“Nice to meet you both.”

Mom steps up and engulfs Maggie in a hug.

“I’m so happy to meet you,”

she tells my woman. When mom pulls back, she wipes at her eyes, her happiness shining through.

“Okay, who’s ready to eat?”

I ask, ready for the evening to get started.

Everyone is on board, so I give Maggie a quick kiss on her forehead and go grab the steaks from the fridge. Lauren eases next to Maggie, giving her support as I step away. Dad, Dean and Uncle Steve head out to the patio and keep me company while I grill the meat.

I watch through the patio doors as Maggie helps the women place the food out on the island. When the steaks are done, I load them up and take them inside. Everyone loads up their plates and heads outside to the tables we have set up.

Conversation flows around us, everyone talking and laughing. I lean close to Maggie and whisper in her ear.

“You doing okay?”

She leans against me, her touch calming and welcome.

“I am. Your family is great.”

Before I can comment, Lauren pulls her into a different conversation. I watch Maggie for a moment. Her smile is big and her eyes shine with excitement. The nerves she had before seem to have evaporated as she settle in with everyone.

When I look around the table, everyone listens intently to Maggie and Lauren. Everyone but mom, she’s watching me with a smile. She mouths, ‘I like her’, and while I wasn’t waiting for her approval, I’m glad I have it.

The evening progresses with dessert, warm apple crisp with vanilla ice cream and coffee. As everyone starts to head out and go home, Maggie stands by my side as we say our goodbyes. When it’s just the three of us left, Maggie and I join Jodi on the couch for a kids’ movie before bed.

Jodi snuggles in between the two of us. Her head is resting in Maggie's lap and her feet in mine. I spend more time watching the two of them than I do the TV screen. Maggie runs her fingers through Jodi's hair, lulling her to sleep as the day's activities give way to her exhaustion.

She is out for the count halfway through the movie. I take Jodi to bed, covering her up with her blanket, and she never stirs in her slumber.

When I make it back to the living room, it's empty. I find Maggie in the kitchen tidying up from our evening.

"Leave it,"

I tell her as I make my way to her.

"It's time to take you to bed."

I lead her into my room, closing the door and engaging the lock. The last thing I need is for Jodi to walk in.

Maggie makes her way to my bed and opens the bag she brought over for tonight. She had left it in Lauren's SUV when they arrived, but Lauren went and grabbed it while the women were in the kitchen and otherwise occupied.

She grabs some clothes and heads into the master bath to change into her pajamas. I step into the walk-in closet and remove my clothes and pull on a pair of basketball shorts.

When she walks out, Maggie heads right to the bed. She pulls the covers back and then slides in. I flick the light switch on my way to her and climb in beside her, pulling her close.

“I had a good night,”

she tells me in the darkness.

“Me, too. Now, do you think you can be quiet?”

“I think I can,”

she retorts with quiet laughter.

And she keeps quiet as I take from her, and she takes from me. Her cries muffled in the pillow or my palm.

Maggie

I roll over in bed. Sunlight streams through Rowan's window and warms my face. I hear him moving around in his closet and he gets ready for the day.

Ever since his family dinner a few weeks ago, I have been staying at his house most nights. When we woke the next morning and found Jodi watching cartoons in the living room, everything felt right. There was no awkwardness about why I was coming out of her dad's room, or why I was still in my pajamas. It was almost as if was our new normal.

Rowan walks out of his closet, his chest still bare as he carries his shirt in his hands and heads towards me. He looks at me, the same way he always does. Like I hold his heart, that I'm the person he wants to see every morning and every evening. It's the same for me, too.

"I love you,"

I blurt out. And while it is the truth, I didn't intend to just reveal it like that.

Rowan pulls me in close. His lips on mine as he whispers.

"Say it again."

"I love you. And I love Jodi."

A huge smile graces his face as he repeats the words to me.

“I love you, Maggie.”

He steps back and says it again, loud enough to be heard throughout the entire house.

His hands frame my face as he leans in for a kiss, his tongue rubbing between my lips, but the pitter patter of feet running down the hall has us breaking apart.

“What are you yelling about, Daddy? Jodi asks as she climbs into the bed and leans against me.

“I was telling Maggie how much I love her,”. Rowan replies.

Jodi’s eyes get big, and she looks at me.

“I love you too, Maggie. “

“Oh, sweet girl. I love you too. You are the best,”

I tell her as I engulf her in a hug. Rowan comes and places his arms around both of us. At this moment, my heart is full for the man I love and his daughter.

Jodi starts bouncing in between our arms.

“Is it time, daddy? Is it time? “

Rowan backs away, looking at Jodi with confusion.

“Is it time? Time for what?”

“The parade,”



she deadpans.

“Yes, it’s time to get ready for the parade. Go get your clothes on, and we’ll be out in a moment.”

Jodi runs out of the room to get ready.

Rowan puts on his shirt and gives me a wink as he walks out to help his daughter. I get out of bed and gather my outfit for the day.

We’re headed to spend the day downtown for the Fourth of July activities. There’ll be a parade at eleven o’clock, and then everyone sets up on the courthouse lawn for a picnic. The afternoon will consist of games and different activities.

And later this evening, we’ll head down to an open field where everyone will set up and watch the fireworks that are presented by the fire department.

I quickly get dressed and head to the kitchen to pack what we will need for the picnic. Mia said we didn’t need to bring anything, but I refuse to show up empty-handed. so I offered to bring a broccoli salad and some cookies.

As we head into town, cars line the road further back than I would have imagined. It seems that everyone who lives in Paulding will be in attendance. Rowan drives up to the square and drops Jodi and I off while he heads to find the parking spot.

With the cooler in one hand and Jodi’s hand clutched in the other, we search to find Mia and Coe. We find our spot and there are already chairs waiting for us. After saying a quick hello and giving hugs, we wait for the festivities to start. Rowan joins about ten minutes later and we get comfortable as we wait.

While the square isn’t that large, I’m informed that the parade will make a loop

around the square twice to give everyone time to see everything.

The high school band plays off in the distance, and Jodi's excitement is clear as she bounces in her seat. While it's a small parade compared to what I've seen in the city. It's the hometown feel where everyone knows everybody that's different from the city.

As the band approaches, the music becomes louder; I watch Jodi and Rowan stand and walk towards the edge of the sidewalk. With her plastic bag ready, Jodi prepares to collect all the candy that will be tossed out.

There are floats for almost every business in the area. All the businesses in the square, different politicians, and different farms in the area. Everyone's showing off, showing up to take part.

After the parade finishes, Jodi and I walk over to the boutique to take a quick peek while Rowan and his dad set up the table. While we walk around, I see the cutest little sundress that would fit Jodi, and one that's in my size as well.

Jodi must see it too, because she runs over and says.

"Look, Maggie, we can be twins."

And I can't deny this little girl, so I make the purchase excited for when she and I can wear it together.

We return to the courtyard lawn and find our table full with Rowan's family. Lauren and Dean and their parents, his cousins, Chris and Thomas and their parents all gather around the table.

Lunch is a boisterous time. Families having conversations at their tables and others

walking around with plates of food and stopping to talk at other tables.

It's an entire community feel, and I know I made the right decision to move here. While the house was not what I initially pictured. It's helped me grow into the person I wanted to be. I've learned new things, and I found an amazing man that loves me, for me, and not for what my family can do for him.

I still talk to my mom at least once a week, but the calls are usually cold and one sided. Nothing like the calls I get here and there from Mia. Her calls are warm and she is interested in what I'm doing.

The afternoon melts into evening and we head to the field to watch the fireworks show.

BOOM.

The firecracker explodes into the sky, light flashing everywhere, and the faint sizzles and crackles as the sky returns to black.

I'm sitting on the ground in between Rowan's legs and leaning on him while Jodi does the same in front of me. Every time the boom sounds, both she and I jump, making Rowan chuckle behind me.

The fireworks show lasts for about 30 minutes. Everyone oohing over the display. After the grand finale, we stand and gather our blanket and head to the truck.

Rowan loads an exhausted Jodi in the back seat of the truck, while I climb in and lean my head against the window.

Today has been fun and exhausting. I'm ready to end the night wrapped in Rowan's arms.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:33 am*

Maggie

As summer rolled into fall, there were changes everywhere.

Leaves changed colors and drifted to the ground.

Changes in my personal life have been abundant as well.

In mid-August, Rowan surprised me with a weekend trip to Waco.

He had rented the Hillcrest Cabin for the weekend and spoiled me with shopping at Magnolia Market.

I have been obsessed with Joanna Gaines ever since I started the renovations, watching old videos where she and her husband renovated houses.

After a day of shopping and dinner out, we returned to the cabin to find little battery operated tea lights all over the cabin.

There were dozens of vases with fresh flowers staggered throughout as well.

When I turned to Rowan in surprise, he was down on one knee with a beautiful diamond ring pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

I immediately said yes before he could even ask the question.

We spent the rest of the evening wrapped around each other as we celebrated our

engagement.

When we returned home to Paulding, I let Rowan know I didn't want a long engagement.

I was ready to be his wife.

It may have seemed too soon for some, but when you know, you know.

Six weeks later, we had a small wedding in town.

All our guests were his family members, who would now be mine as well.

My parents were unable to attend since they were hosting a gala that month and couldn't get away.

In the end, it was fine. I had found my new family, and they were amazing.

The renovations on the house wrapped up at the beginning of October, and I expressed to Rowan that I wanted our first family holidays to happen there.

In a house that held his family memories for many generations.

I wanted the three of us to build our family memories there as well.

It didn't take too much arm twisting to get him to agree, and we were all moved into the house that month.

It may have been a late wedding gift, but I wanted him to have this house.

It was part of him, and he deserved to have it.

Both he and I put our blood, sweat, and tears into the renovation and I wanted t to stay in the family.

When I made this move six months ago, I never imagined this would be my life.

I am so proud of myself for putting my fears aside and taking a leap.

It has been the best decision of my life.

I meet the mad of my dreams, his amazing daughter that I loved as my own, and a whole extended family who had my back. I finally found where I belong.