

Once Upon a



BABY

JAY FIELDS

Once Upon a
BABY

Once Upon Series

Jay Fields

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To fate, for knowing what we need, even when we might disagree.

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Chapter One

Meadow

"Cheers to the girls' night out!" I yell, slamming my tequila without a flinch.

The fact that they're going down so easily should be a concern, but I can't be bothered. Tonight was very much needed. Wren, Daphne, and I have been so busy since opening the shop; we really needed a night to unwind. And as much as I love my daughter, I'm going to enjoy my night out while she's away at her brainiac summer camp, as Wren calls it. Every mom needs to let loose every now and then, and I'm no exception. Adding tequila to the mix might not have been the brightest of ideas, but Emerson is a force to be reckoned with and didn't take no for an answer.

"Ooh, I love this song! Let's go!" Emerson tugs Wren's hand and heads for the bar.

Daphne and Wren have been my soul sisters since the moment we met at a tattoo convention years ago, but we're now finally starting to live our dream together. *Once Upon a Tattoo* is our female-staffed tattoo shop that Wren opened in the small town of Sparrow Falls just a few months ago, and it's doing better than any of us could have imagined.

We've been working ourselves to the bone, hence the reason for our night out. We started out with dinner and shop talk, but quickly moved on to girl talk and fun, with the addition of the Wilson sisters—Emerson, Chayse, and Spencer—whom we became fast friends with upon our move to the small town. Adding them to our small group has been wonderful and made our girls' nights out a lot more interesting.

Turning towards the bar, I can't help but giggle as Maverick hoists a startled Wren onto the bar beside Emerson, who's strutting her stuff like it's her own personal stage. The girl's got moves, and it's not long before she has Wren dancing right along with her. Who knew all it takes to get Wren's wild side to show up is tequila and a pushy mechanic. It doesn't hurt that Brooks is sitting on one of the stools, watching, as Wren weaves a spell over him.

I catcall and holler as my friends seduce their men, loving every second of seeing Wren let loose. When Brooks and Axle, Emerson's husband, scoop the woman off the bar top, I let out a loud whistle and cheer along with the rest of the patrons. Wren's had a shit hand dealt to her. If there's anyone who deserves the hero and a happily-ever-after, it's her.

"I can't believe that just happened." Daphne's cheeks are flushed with embarrassment on behalf of our friend. She's always been the shy, wallflower type, so it's no surprise that she can't imagine being in Wren's shoes right now.

"Eh, that's basically a monthly occurrence for Emerson and Axle." Chayse rolls her eyes. "Even though they're happily married, they still love to push each other's buttons. Pretty sure it's their form of foreplay."

"I don't see anything wrong with that, as long as they are both okay with it." I shrug.

"Oh, they are. They really do love to poke at each other. They're worse than my kindergarteners half the time, I swear." Spencer smiles sweetly. "Speaking of which, I have a classroom that I still need to get ready for the school year, so I think I'm going to call it a night. Thanks so much for inviting us to join you. It was a wonderful time." She stands, Chayse following her lead, and hugs are given.

"I need to head out too. Time to relieve Cash's parents since he decided he needed to come babysit." She scowls across the bar at her husband, who smirks back at her. Seems like Axle and Emerson aren't the only ones who like to push buttons as foreplay.

I giggle.

"Are you ready to go?" Daphne turns to me.

"Umm, would you be upset if I said I wasn't? I'm just too wound up to go home right now. I think I might try and dance some of this energy off, or stay and make a new friend." I smirk as I wiggle my brows, which makes Daphne blush again.

"I can wait for you if you want." Daphne goes to pull out a book she brought, but I quickly object.

"It's fine, Daph. You can go home."

Relief floods her face, and I can't help but smile at how similar Daphne and River are in their introverted ways.

"I'll drop you off. Maverick can take you home when he's done if you want, Meadow," Spencer offers, which brings a smile to my face.

"That would be perfect. You sure he wouldn't mind?"

"Positive. But we can ask while I say goodbye."

"Yes, please." I hop up out of my chair and grab my purse as Spencer and Daphne get their stuff.

Daphne snags Wren's things since Brooks didn't give her a chance to get it before he carried her out of the bar.

When we make it to the bar, Maverick nods in my direction before giving Spencer the most indecent kiss I've ever witnessed in my life. I can't help but fan my face as I watch her melt into a puddle in front of my eyes.

It leaves me wondering if I've ever been kissed like that. I've had my fair share of sexual partners—some great, some not so great—but I don't know if I've ever had any that devoured me the way Maverick does Spencer. It's as if he can't fathom being away from her and simply doesn't give a fuck who sees his need for his wife.

Not only am I filled with energy, but now I'm realizing just how long it's been since I've been with anyone and how needy I am to have a man-made orgasm for the first time in forever. Maybe I'll have to change that tonight, although Maverick's got the protector vibe on lockdown, and I definitely don't think he'd let me leave with a hookup. None of that really matters if I don't have any prospects, and with this being a small town, my options aren't huge.

Scanning the bar, my eyes are immediately pulled to a man sitting on the opposite side of it. I can't make out much, other than the fact that he looks handsome from here and he's sitting all alone.

"Earth to Meadow," Daphne teases, used to losing me to my daydreams.

"Sorry! Are you heading out?"

"I am. Are you sure you want to stay?"

"I'm positive. Let Spencer drop you off at home, and I'll see you tomorrow. Love you, babe."

"Love you, Meadow. Let me know when you get home, 'kay?"

"Will do."

"So, what's your poison, pixie?" Maverick is leaning on the bar, waiting for my order.

"Hmm, I think I've had enough alcohol for the night. How about something bubbly, and fruity but not too sweet?"

"I can do that." He knocks on the bar then gets to work.

"I'm gonna be over there."

Maverick nods, to let me know he heard me, before going back to making my drink.

I make my way around the bar to the stranger sitting all alone. Technically, most in the bar are strangers to me since I've only been in town for a few months, but there's only one who has caught my eye tonight.

Even though it's been years since I lived on the compound with my family, there are still several things I love about growing up in the commune—my clothes being a major one. My style is very bohemian, a lot of my clothes hand made with natural or recycled materials, so my skirt is smooth as it caresses my legs and my crocheted top fits me like a glove, allowing me to forgo a bra. My skirt swishes around my legs, my sandals slapping on the smooth concrete floor as I make my way across the room to the empty chair that's calling my name.

Sitting down beside the handsome man, I finally get a good look at him and love what I see. I can tell he's the quintessential guy next door, with maybe a bit of a nerdy side. His blond hair hides under an MIT baseball hat, and he's got an open button-up shirt—showing off a gray undershirt—and jeans on. If I had to guess, I'd say he's younger than me but not by much. I can't tell how tall he is since he's sitting down, but I'm sure he's taller than me. What I notice right away is that he's got a sweet smile and kind eyes.

"Hi, I'm Meadow." I reach out my hand and smile as his slides into mine.

"Nice to meet you, Meadow. I'm Colton, but everyone calls me Colt."

"Well, aren't we a pair? Not sure if there's anything a colt loves more than his mama and a meadow." *Seriously, Dow? Mom jokes?*

Whether he genuinely finds me funny or he just doesn't want to make the situation awkward, I'm relieved when Colton starts to laugh.

"I can't say I know since I've never been around horses, but I can't imagine you're wrong."

"Oh, I love horses. We had the sweetest mare when I was younger. She was so gentle and such a great horse. I could ride her bareback and never have to worry about her throwing me."

"Did you grow up around here?" Colton seems genuinely curious, which makes me smile.

"No, I grew up a few hours from here. My childhood was unconventional, to say the least. I moved here recently to work with my best friend when she opened up her dream shop." Why I leave out the name of the tattoo shop, I'm not sure, but for some reason, I have the urge to keep things vague between us. "What about you?"

"I'm a transplant who just moved here for a job as well."

"Wow. What are the odds? It must be my lucky night to make a new friend," I tease as I lean in and place my hand on Colt's

knee.

He turns in his chair, legs spread so that my body is slotted between them.

"Somehow, I feel like I'm the lucky one, Meadow."

The next hour flies by as Colton and I laugh and share stories from our pasts. We touch and flirt to the point that I feel like I'm going to combust. I'm desperate, waiting for him to make a move, but something in my gut tells me he's too much of a gentleman for that to happen. When his beer is empty and he goes to order us another round, I inform him I've switched to non-alcoholic drinks, to make it even clearer that alcohol isn't clouding my judgment, but he still doesn't make a move.

The next time Maverick makes his way to our end of the bar, I take matters into my own hands. "Mav, two shots of tequila and the works."

Maverick cocks his brow at me but brings me the shots. I shoot mine down, then gesture for Colton to go but steal his lemon at the last second. He looks at me questioningly until I pop it into my mouth.

His eyes heat as he drinks his shot and moves towards the lemon still between my teeth. The moment his lips graze mine, I drop the lemon and lock my mouth to his. He hesitates for a second before threading his fingers in my hair. I whimper at the taste of him and the tequila. The kiss is everything I could have hoped for and then some.

When we finally pull apart, both panting as we try to catch our breaths, there's a fire burning in his eyes that matches the one in my core.

"Meet me in the bathroom in a minute," I whisper in his ear then nip it. I hop off my stool and head to the bathroom, where I check the stalls and make sure nobody is around. The bar is almost empty, so I don't worry that anyone will catch what I'm about to do, but honestly, I don't even care.

I'm leaning against the wall when the door slowly opens a few minutes later. Seeing Colton hesitantly peek in, I snatch him by the front of his shirt, pull him through the door, push him against it to close it, then lock it just to be safe.

"We need to be quick if we don't want Maverick to find us."

"He's the bartender, right?"

"Yep. He's my friend's husband, and I've heard he takes his big-brother role very seriously. He's tasked with taking me home tonight, which is why I didn't suggest leaving with you as a possibility."

"Meadow, we don't need to rush anything. We can—"

"Enough talking, and more kissing and touching. I'm aching for you, Colton."

"Holy shit," Colton mumbles in disbelief as I launch myself at him.

Our hands are all over and we're clumsy as fuck, but there's something so perfect about how imperfect being with Colton is. Don't get me wrong, I love my romance books, but I'm also grounded in reality and understand that a ripped giant is not the norm. If anything, I'm a sucker for the "dad bod" type and love that Colton is a little soft in the middle.

Dropping to my knees, I work the buttons of his blue jeans open as I stare up into his icy-blue eyes. I slide his jeans and boxers down, and am pleasantly surprised when I find his thick cock leaking and waiting for my lips. He's not overly big, but he's girthy and hard, and so ready for me to taste.

"Fuck, Meadow." He gasps as I slide down his length, taking him to the back of my throat. His hands thread into my wild curls as I set a fast pace.

I can tell he's trying to hold himself back, but that's not what I want. I want him as wild for me as I am for him. Pulling off his length, I pump him while I lean forward and flick the underside of his head. A bead of pre-cum leaks out, and I eagerly lap it up.

"Meadow, you need to stop before this is over too soon," Colton urges as he pulls me to my feet. He fuses our mouths and guides me towards the sink.

The counter runs the length of the wall and is the perfect height for Colton to sit me on and fuck me senseless. I gasp when his length bumps my center and almost forget the most important equation to this fun-filled night.

"Condom," I mumble in between kisses.

"Fuck. Right." He fumbles to get his wallet out of his jeans as I kiss his neck and stroke his throbbing length.

"Move your skirt, Meadow," he grits out, and I realize that the flowing skirt I love so much is more of a hindrance, so I try and get it out of the way. I can't help but laugh as I curse the damn thing while Colton curses the condom. Relief floods me when I finally bare my pussy to his now covered cock. I'm eager for him to stretch me like I haven't been stretched in what feels like forever.

Of course, Colton's a gentleman and eases into my center, but my need for him isn't having it. Lacing my legs around his back, I use them to help thrust my greedy pussy onto his hard length and cry out when he's fully seated in me.

"Christ, Meadow. You feel fucking amazing."

"Right back at ya, Colt, but I really need you to move."

"Hold on tight," he grits out as he grasps my legs under my knees and thrusts in hard.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and lean back as he hits that magic spot over and over. I've never had issues with coming during sex, but I'm seconds away from tumbling over the edge, which is fast even for me. My legs quake as my pleasure

tightens, building in my core. I'm so close to going off, but I need something more to get me there.

Meeting Colton's eyes, I see his desire matches my own. His need for my pleasure has me falling over the edge as a scream falls from my lips, which he quickly silences with his mouth. Colton's hips piston faster as his release follows mine and he fills the condom. Aftershocks rock my body as Colt's thrusts slow.

He leans his weight onto me as he catches his breath. "That was..."

"Fan-fucking-tastic," I finish for Colt with a sedated smile.

"It really was, Meadow. I—"

Knock, knock, knock.

"Fun's over, Meadow. Make sure you clean up my bathroom," Maverick hollers from the hallway.

Colton's face goes beat red as I smother my giggles with a hand. He slowly pulls out and takes care of the condom while I rearrange my underwear and skirt. Hopping off the counter, I grab a paper towel from the wall, wet it, then use some soap from the sink and wipe everything down. I'm sure Maverick was teasing, but I respect him and his establishment enough to clean up after myself.

"So, umm, I don't really ever do anything like this," Colton bumbles his words as he runs a hand through his hair. Him realizing his hat is missing is the cutest thing I've ever seen.

I see it lying on the floor under the sink, so I scoop it up as I make my way back towards him. "Me neither. Well, not for a long time, at least. Tonight was magical, though, and I don't regret it for a second. It was amazing to meet you, Colton." I place a barely there kiss against his lips then spin towards the door.

"Wait! Can I at least get your number?" He's anxious, but I can't tell if he genuinely wants my number or if it's the good guy in him shining through.

"Nope. I'm a firm believer that people enter and exit our lives when they're supposed to. If we're supposed to be more than our time together tonight, I'm confident we'll find our way back to each other."

Colton is startled as I blow him a kiss and float out the door.

Maverick is leaning against the patron side of the bar, my purse in his hand as if he's been waiting for me so we can leave. "Fun night?" He tries to keep a straight face, but the twitch of his lip lets me know he finds my walk of shame amusing.

Too bad I don't feel an ounce of shame about what went down between Colton and me. "The best night."

"Good. You ready to head home, Pixie?"

"Sure am, Beast."

With a chuckle and a shake of his head, Maverick guides me out of the bar.

River's room is empty when I get home, but I can't resist stopping in to look around. Somehow, my sweet little baby became a teen over the years and my mama heart doesn't know how to handle it. I should have several more years with her at home with me, but my girl's a bona fide genius and will be a senior in high school this year, although she's only fourteen. So, for now, I'll hold on to her innocence and the memories we've made, which will cover her walls for as long as we have them because who knows what the future has in store for us.

Chapter Two

Meadow

"Hello?"

I'm cleaning my station when Brooks hollers from the front of the shop. Popping my head out of the door, I see the sweet man walking towards me with a tray of drinks and a bag filled with something that smells delicious.

"Oh, Brooks. This is why you're my favorite human."

"Glad to have that title." He pauses to kiss my cheek before continuing towards the break room. "I figured you'd be in here keeping yourself busy before it's time to go get River, and I wanted to treat my girls. I know you've got a long drive."

I swoon where I'm standing and am glad the doorframe is there to prop me up. Brooks is one of the sweetest, most thoughtful men I've ever met. Not only is he perfect for Wren, but he's constantly going out of his way to show Daphne, River, and me that he cares for us and wants to build our relationships just as much as the one with Wren. It's why I've been on Team Brooks from the get-go.

Following him towards the breakroom, I help him dig out the food then shoot off a text to Daphne, letting her know there's breakfast down here. Grabbing a chair across from Brooks, I snag the drink and box of food with my name on it.

"Thanks so much for bringing breakfast. I forgot to eat this morning. I've got too much anxious energy coursing through me to sit still. I've already cleaned the house and tended to the garden, so I figured I'd head here to clean a bit before going to get River."

"Wren said the only time you were still yesterday was at yoga and while you had a client, so I figured this might be helpful."

"It absolutely is." I take a sip of my drink and hum my approval when the hot apple cider warms my belly. I know it's a little odd to be drinking it in summer, but it's my favorite, and I was so excited when I found out the local coffee shop has it year round.

"What time do you have to head out?" Brooks is digging into an egg scrambling when Daphne and Wren come in through the back door, with sleepy smiles, and join us.

"I need to leave in a few hours. River told me to pick her up at 2pm, but her counselor emailed and said they are doing an award ceremony I should be there for at 11am, followed by lunch, so I'm definitely not going to miss it."

"Oh, our girl won an award?" Wren perks up as she lovingly cups her chai latte.

"That's what I'm assuming. It's not surprising she didn't tell me, though. You know how she feels about being in the spotlight. My poor little introvert."

"Poor Riv. I feel her pain." Daphne sighs, and I know she does. Her parents—well, more so her mother—have used her as a puppet in her father's senate campaigns for years.

"I'm just curious to see what she won." I take a bite of my veggie omelet and moan as the flavors burst in my mouth. The diner might be small, but they know how to make a mean omelet.

"How's she feeling about high school? Did they figure out her schedule?"

"I think so. They weren't really sure what to do with her, to be honest. Their program is a lot smaller than the one back in the city, but I think they've come up with an option that will work for Riv. I'm more worried about her fitting in than anything. At least at her old school, she had a few friends. Here, she's going in completely blind, into the worst years of kids being assholes to anyone different."

"Aww, it will be okay, Dow. She's got us. I won't let any punk-ass teen push her around." Wren's protective side flares to life, making me smile as I think of her cornering the mean girls and scaring the shit out of them in all of her badass, tattooed glory.

"Easy, little minx. Does River even really need to do high school? Could she homeschool or, hell, test out of it and move

straight to college classes?"

"Technically, she could do either of those options, but she needs socialization with kids her age, even if she doesn't love it. Growing up on the commune left me stunted in so many ways. I was completely shell-shocked when I got the art scholarship for college. My only saving grace was having a higher IQ and being able to adapt."

"It's no wonder River is such a brainiac with a mama like you," Wren teases.

"What's your IQ, Meadow?" Brooks looks at me pensively, the professor in him shining through.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, not sure I want to admit my IQ. I wouldn't have even known if it weren't for my psych professor having us take an IQ test in college as an assignment. It explained why I was able to adapt well to new situations, learn new things quickly, and retain a lot of information, but it's not something I like to flaunt.

"When I did a test in college for one of my assignments for a class, it was 132."

"Holy shit." Brooks's eyes go wide as he stares back at me.

"That's really good, right?" Wren's looking back and forth between me and Brooks, trying to figure out what neither of us are saying.

"Yeah, Wren. That's basically one step below from being classified as a genius. It's no wonder River is so brilliant."

"Honestly, I'm not surprised. You're a fucking badass and know so much about everything. You could run an efficient homestead completely off the grid; you basically drew up all the plans for the remodel of this place. You're a fantastic artist and a phenomenal mother."

I blush at Wren's praise. I might be smarter than average, but I'm still just me. I don't want to be treated differently for my big brain and would rather people focus on my big heart, which is how I try to lead my life.

"I get why you would want River to stay in school, even if teenagers are assholes. Is she at least able to take any college courses ahead of schedule?" Brooks steers the conversation away from me, and I couldn't be more grateful.

"Yes, she's going to take all of the standard pre-requisite classes this year, along with taking senior-level AP classes. I'm still not sure it's going to be stimulating enough for her, but we'll find something else for her to do in the meantime if it isn't. Maybe get her into some chess competitions or something."

"That would be really cool. Alright, I need to head over and open the bookstore. Have you ladies thought about book club any more?" Brook stands to throw out his garbage as we all start talking at once.

The room fills with our laughter as Brooks raises his hands to quiet us. "Forget I asked. Just let me know what one you decide to go with and how many copies I need to order." Brooks hugs Daphne and me before kissing the life out of Wren, then heads over to the bookstore.

"I need to head home and get my car so I can go get our girl. Thanks for covering for me today."

"Of course. Be safe. Text us when you get there." Daphne hugs me.

"I will." I release her and move to Wren.

"Tell her how fucking proud of her we are."

"You've got it." I gather my garbage to throw it out.

"Oh, it's Sunday. What if we do dinner at *The Tavern* to celebrate whatever big award River has won?" Wren looks excited, but I need to rein her in a bit.

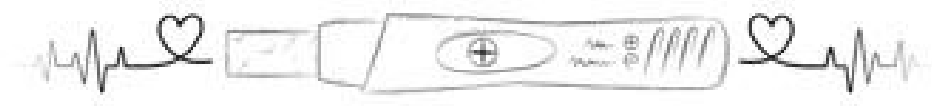
"Will it be just us? I don't want her to be overwhelmed."

"Yep. Well, and maybe Brooks and Lark. He said he might swing by today. Would that be okay?"

"Yeah, I think she'd be okay with the guys tagging along as well."

"Great. We'll see you there, then."

"Sounds good. Love you, wenches." I blow them a kiss over my shoulder and head out the back door.



I pull up to the tech camp two hours from Sparrow Falls and instantly feel out of place. My bright-colored floral skirt, a cropped-top tank without a bra, wild curly hair, and bangle bracelets covering my arms make me stand out like a sore thumb in this place. Not that the other parents look like tech people, but they definitely don't look like hippies like me.

Squaring my shoulders, I remind myself that being different is a good thing, and just because I might not look the part, it doesn't mean I'm not the best mom I can be for River. I'm dying to see my girl and can't wait to give her a big hug.

I follow the throng of parents through the community college to the auditorium, where the award ceremony is being held. Slipping through the doors, I find a seat relatively close to the front.

River is sitting a few rows in front of me, off to the side, talking quietly to a boy who looks a few years older than her.

Scanning the rest of the kids, I'm not surprised to see my girl is the youngest here. We've gotten used to that fact where Riv is concerned.

Pulling out my phone, I send her a quick text, letting her know I'm here and where I'm sitting. My mama heart melts when I see her bright smile when she reads my message, and her head whips around to find me in the crowd. Her wave is subdued, but that's just my girl's nature. My returning wave is as loud as can be and accompanied by an overdramatic kiss. She giggles as she rolls her eyes.

I notice the boy beside her looking at her curiously. When his eyes find mine and bug out of his head, I smile and send him a wave. That's a reaction we get quite a bit, especially since River and I look so different and I'm so young.

I got pregnant with River when I was a freshman in college. I might be smarter than most people around me, but my parents were extremely lax when it came to sex ed. They were very open about sex being very natural and nothing to be ashamed of, but they did not educate me about the consequences of having unprotected sex.

I was completely naïve when I started college and had no idea I should be using contraception or condoms. Come to find out, I was somewhat of a miracle baby for my parents. My mother has bad PCOS, which is why she only ever had me. They never used contraception or condoms, but due to her diagnosis, it was much harder for her to conceive. They didn't realize it was something they needed to educate me about until it was too late.

My college roommate was the one who thought I was pregnant. We went to the clinic together, and there I learned exactly how bad I'd messed up. Although, I've never viewed River as a mistake. How could a sweet baby ever be a mistake? Sure, my life was a lot more difficult raising a baby on my own, but I wouldn't trade a second to be where we're at right now.

I will say that River is well aware of how a baby is made and how to protect herself from an unplanned pregnancy. By being so smart, she's been exposed to people older than her for most of her life. Not only that, but my girl is fucking cute. She's hitting puberty and starting to transform from an adorable girl to a beautiful woman.

I want her to be well educated, and able to make safe decisions for herself and her future. Some people probably wouldn't agree with how open I am with her about sex or other topics, but it works for us.

"Thank you for joining us for the closing ceremony. We had a great time this year and have achieved some amazing things." The director continues to go on about the campers, and the experiments and projects they've completed over the summer camp. Several kids have earned awards, but River hasn't been called yet.

"Every summer, one student earns the coveted full-ride scholarship to MIT. It's very competitive and a huge leg up for any one of our campers." The director pauses her speech as my eyes search out River's.

Her head is down, and she's biting her lip. The boy beside her leans in and whispers something in her ear, making her blush. It's all the confirmation I need to know that my girl has outdone herself again by winning this amazing award.

"This year, our scholarship goes to our youngest yet one of the brightest campers who has ever joined our ranks. River Sterling, it is my honor to award you a full scholarship to MIT upon your high school graduation." The director beams at my daughter as she slowly stands and makes her way to the stage.

My mama heart couldn't be prouder, but I feel for my sweet little introvert, who must be about ready to die with a literal spotlight on her. Thankfully, the camp director hands her the award and lets her immediately return to her seat.

The rest of the ceremony wraps up quickly, and I couldn't be more grateful. Weaving through the crowd, I make my way to River and wrap her in a big hug. She's taller than me now, taking after her father in that regard, but not yet unwilling to hug me back.

"I am so unbelievably proud of you, River Fawn. Your brilliance never ceases to amaze me. How do you feel about it?"

"I'm still processing, to be honest. There are a lot of really smart kids here." She shrugs, always downplaying herself.

If there's one thing I'm grateful for in moving to Sparrow Falls, it's having Daphne and Wren to help bolster River's confidence. It's one thing if I tell her how awesome she is, but it hits completely different coming from them. Wren's "in your face, take no bullshit" is something River could really benefit from. Daphne's ability to roll with the punches while staying true to herself is something I greatly admire and know could be extremely helpful to River as she continues to navigate a world that is meant for someone much older than her.

"I think that's fair. Do you want to head over to the luncheon? I'd love to see the campus a little and hear more about your time here. Maybe meet some of your friends?"

"Yeah, we can do that. Although, I don't really have many people to introduce you to. You know how awkward I am, Mom."

"Oh, Fawn. You're not awkward at all. You just take a minute to warm up, is all. Come on, lead the way and tell me about the boy you were sitting with. He was cute."

"Mom, please don't..." River whines, which pulls a smile to my face. Good to know that even though she's a genius, she's still a surly teen underneath all of those smarts.

"I'm just saying. He was cute, and he seemed friendly."

"Ugh, fine. I'm only telling you this because I know you won't let it go. He is cute, and he's one of my only friends here, but I think he thinks of me as a little sister. In fact, he has a younger sister my age and said I remind him of her a lot. So, quit with the heart eyes, would ya?"

"Hmm, how old is he? And what's his name?"

"Mother." River gives me a side-eye glare that I choose to ignore.

"Well?"

"His name is Brantley, and he's seventeen. He's going to be a senior this year. He lives about a half an hour from Sparrow Falls."

"Oh, how exciting. So, he's not that much older than you. Your birthday is in two months, and you're more mature than me."

"Yes, that's definitely true," River deadpans, so I pinch her side to get her back. "Ouch!"

"Serves you right. Maybe he does like you but feels conflicted because you are the same age as his sister. But it's exciting that he's only a half an hour away. You know I'd be more than willing to drive you to meet him if you wanted to hang out.

River wraps her arm around my shoulder and squeezes me.

"Thanks, Mom. Even if you like to tease, you're the best."

"Damn straight! And don't you forget it!"

We both laugh as we make our way into the banquet hall.

To River's mortification, and my delight, Brantley waves us over to sit with him and his family. River is her normal shy, reserved self, but I'm impressed with how at ease Brantley makes my daughter. Before lunch is over, he's able to get her to join in on the conversation, and his parents and I have made tentative plans to get together before the school year starts.

It's always a bit nerve-racking when I meet new people, out of fear I'm going to be judged for being a young mother, but Brantley's parents are pleasant and excited about us living in Sparrow Falls. They are familiar with some of the hiking trails, and were thrilled when I invited them to join us for a hike and dinner.

"Alright, kid. Let's go get your stuff and head home. We should have enough time for you to decompress for a bit before heading to *The Tavern* for dinner. I hope you don't mind, but your aunties have missed you like crazy and wanted to celebrate you coming home."

"You guys are so dramatic. I wasn't gone that long."

"It might not have felt that way to you, but you're a vital part of our girl gang, and we miss you when you're not around. Besides, they're dying to know about your award. Are you going to keep them waiting?"

River smiles sweetly, knowing there's no way she could hold Wren off. Besides, she might be an introvert, but she really does love Daphne and Wren, and I know she missed them as much as they missed her. She texted them almost every day while she was gone, just like she did me.

"Fine. But please promise me it will just be dinner. No banners or cakes, or anything crazy."

"I promise. But there will be some excited cheering when they hear the good news. You know Wren." I widen my eyes, making us both giggle before falling silent as we drive back to Sparrow Falls.

As the silence fills the car, my mind races at the possibilities that lie ahead for my sweet girl and how the hell I can make them possible. She deserves the chance to attend MIT and do wonderful things with that big brain of hers, but the idea of her leaving me when she's still so young terrifies me. For the first time in a long time, we're in a place that finally feels like home. I'd hate to give it up, but for River, I just might have to.

Chapter Three

Colton

Leaning back in my chair, I look around my new office. School starts in a few days, and I finally have everything set up in a way that will be functional for me, but I hope it will be inviting for my students as well. I've been doing a lot of research on how to set up my space and found that having a minimalist approach works best.

I've got a few posters on the walls. One is of our school mascot, another is about applying for colleges or trade schools, and the last is a very informative yet fun “feelings” poster. My desk is pretty small and tucked back in the corner so that I can have a small table with comfortable chairs inviting more open discussions. My sister snagged me two swivel chairs at an estate sale, which are soft and easy to curl up in. She paired them with sequined pillows, which are good fidgets for the kids to hold while they sit. There's also a basket on the table, and my desk is filled with various fidgets. Having something else to focus on during the tough conversations is key, and I want to do everything I can to make those easier for my kids.

Knock, knock.

"Come in!"

"Oh, Colton. This looks great." Principal Marie Sanchez smiles as she takes in the room.

"Thanks. I had some help from my sister, but a lot of thought went into how I set everything up."

"It definitely shows. I think the students will love it."

"Thanks. That means a lot."

"Of course. Do you have a minute to meet a student? If not, it can wait, but she's stopping by and I'd love to introduce you to each other."

"Sure. What's her name and story?"

A wide smile fills Marie's face, making me even more.

"Her name is River Sterling, and she's a transfer student, so this is her first year in Sparrow Falls. She's fourteen and should technically be a freshman, but she's absolutely brilliant. She'll be taking all senior AP classes with us and also some gen-eds with the local community college. Her mother just informed me that she attended an elite science camp over the summer, where she won a full ride to MIT."

"Damn," I huff out, then wince. Swearing in front of my new boss probably isn't the best move. Relief floods me when Marie starts to laugh.

"That was pretty much my sentiment when I read her file and talked to her previous school. She's coming in to get her laptop, so that she can get acquainted with our system before school starts, although I'm sure it won't be an issue. I'd love for you to meet her and just let her know you're another resource for her, especially since you *will* be the one to handle a lot of her paperwork going forward."

"I'd love to meet her. I can already tell I'm not on her level of intelligence, but you know my background. I did move up a few grades, so I get what it's like being an outcast."

That's an understatement of epic proportions. I was relentlessly ridiculed in high school, by one guy in particular, for being smarter yet smaller than everyone else. It was hell, and had it not been for my older sister, it would've been unbearable. Thankfully, she had an awesome group of friends and boyfriend, who took me under their wings and made it a lot easier after they'd found out what was going on.

It's a huge reason why I became a guidance counselor instead of pursuing something in the field of biomedical engineering, like I had originally planned. I wanted to make prosthetics but decided I could better help kids like me if I pivoted and became a counselor. Besides, I still have the weekends to dabble in robotics and engineering, so my MIT degree isn't completely useless.

"Great. She should be here in about fifteen minutes. I'll bring her by once we're done."

"Sounds good. Is it just her, or will her parents be with her?"

"Just her. She's from a single-parent home. I think she mentioned her mother was working today."

"Hmm. Good to know." I grab a post-it and make a note.

"I see those wheels turning, but I think in this case, the two of them are extremely well adjusted. I'm sure you'll get to meet her mother at some point, but I wouldn't make any assumptions just yet where the two of them are concerned."

"Alright, I hear ya." I hold my hands up in surrender and know to a certain point that she's right, but it also doesn't hurt having as much information about my kids as I can to have the best picture of how I can help them.

I spend the next ten minutes going over River's file from her old school and am completely blown away by her. Her scores are off the charts, but it's the notes from her teachers about her community service and her humbleness that really stick out to me. I can only deduce that is in direct correlation to how her mother is raising her, which is even more impressive, knowing she's a single mother doing it on her own with a seriously gifted child. I'm just making some notes to add to her file when I hear voices in the hallway, so I clean up my mess and stand to greet Marie and River.

"River, I'd like you to meet Mr. Harding. He's also new to Sparrow Falls, like you, and will be working closely with you to coordinate your schedule with the community college and help you get acclimated. Are you okay if I let you two get acquainted?"

"Sure." River shrugs without making eye contact with either of us. Her posture is stiff as she plays with a row of bracelets on her wrists.

For some reason, she looks familiar to me, but I can't place her. Probably just another one of those things that's popular with teens, which is why it's sticking out to me.

River is tall and willowy for her age. She's got dark-blond hair that's braided neatly to the side. I haven't gotten a good look at her face, but she seems pretty for her age, which should hopefully help her fit in.

"Hi, River. It's nice to meet you. Why don't you come in and take a seat." I gesture to the chairs in the corner and take the one across from her.

Sitting patiently while I wait a kiddo out is something I learned early on, but that doesn't mean it gets any easier. Especially when I have a student as fascinating as River to talk to. Knowing about her science camp experience, I'm sure we could hold a very intellectual, extremely stimulating conversation, which I don't often get to do unless I'm talking to my old college buddies. But alas, I hold my tongue and wait her out.

"You went to MIT?" River's voice is barely a whisper as she hesitantly glances around the room.

"I did. I majored in biomechanical engineering but decided I'd rather become a guidance counselor instead of making prosthetics. I got my BA, then went back to school and got my degree, and here I am."

"Hmm." Her gaze narrows on me as she takes me in.

I sense I won't get any more words, so I barrel ahead. "I was a bit like you when I was in high school. Not nearly as brilliant, but I jumped a few grades and was able to get a full ride to MIT. It wasn't really a setback for me when I took on the second degree. I ended up graduating with peers who were actually my age."

"So, you're a genius too?"

River's question makes me laugh.

She pushes her wire-framed glasses up her nose as she studies me further.

"No, River. I'm what you'd consider highly gifted but definitely not genius level."

"Oh."

"But I do know what it's like being younger than everyone else in high school and the challenges it can present. I know it's going to be difficult for you, especially since you'll also be the new girl. Do you do any sports or extracurricular activities?"

"I'm not particularly coordinated. I do yoga with my mom and aunts, and we like to go hiking, but that's about it. I love robotics, chess, and computers. My aunt, Daphne, is trying to teach me how to paint, but I think my brain is too analytical for that."

"Hey, nothing wrong with at least giving it a shot. Like Ms. Sanchez said, I'm new here too, so I'm still learning about clubs and afterschool activities, but I'm totally down to start a robotics or chess club if that's something they don't have and you'd be interested in."

"Can I think about it?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay."

We fall into comfortable silence.

"Do you have any concerns about the school year?"

"Not particularly. I mean, girls are petty and mean, but I've dealt with that my whole life. I'll only be here a year, so if that's the case, I'll make do."

"They definitely can be, but I don't want you to just make do, River. You deserve to have fun and experience all the messy,

big life events that come with high school and being a teenager. I know you don't know me from Adam, but I am here to help if you need anything at all, okay?"

"Okay. I do appreciate it."

"Good. Are you all set for the first day?"

"Yes. Ms. Sanchez gave me my laptop and a tour of the school. I've got my locker and know my routes to my classes. I'll be fine."

"Perfect. I'll send your school email a quick message so you have my contact if you need anything, but my door is always open. Otherwise, enjoy your last few days of summer, okay?"

"Thank you. Bye, Mr. Harding." River stands and grabs her bag, then heads to the door. She waves and smiles as she makes her way outside, leaving me feeling like I've been punched in the gut.

Why her smile reminds me so much of Meadow in this instance, I have no idea, but it does. Meadow's been on my mind since the night she slipped through my fingers. I'd be lying if I said I haven't been searching for her every time I step foot outside of my apartment since that night. She said fate or the universe would make it happen if we were meant to be together, but I'm starting to feel like I've lost the chance to be with someone truly life-changing.

Ready to go home and wallow on my own, I shut down my laptop after sending a quick email to River, then pack up my bag.

Sparrow Falls isn't that big, so I'm able to walk the few blocks from the school to my townhouse on the outskirts of town. Along the way, I take in how peaceful Sparrow Falls truly is and how glad I am to be back in a small town.

My family grew up not far from here, and other than me, my siblings all decided to settle down there when they were done with college. My sisters are both quite a bit older than me and happily married, with kids of their own. I was a happy surprise, according to my mom, which is why I also get to be the fun uncle to my teenage nieces and nephews.

It sucked living out of state when I was at MIT and then at the University of Georgia to get my degrees. Don't get me wrong, I loved my time in college, but I missed my family. When I finally graduated with my master's and was ready to get a job as a student counselor, I took the first one I could in Pennsylvania. It got me three hours away from home and years of experience to be able to make the move to Sparrow Falls.

Being half an hour away means I'm able to make all the sporting events, birthdays, and I'll even be able to go see them before they head off to dances if I want to. I'm excited to be close but still far away enough to have a chance to build the kind of relationship and family my sisters have found.

When I round the corner to the cul-de-sac my townhouse sits on, I find my eighty-year-old neighbor out on her porch, rocking away and sipping on what I'm sure is a very alcoholic beverage. I made the mistake of joining her one night after I'd moved in and had to crawl back to my house when the evening was done. Her drinks were potent as hell, and they snuck up on you.

"Hi, Miss Ada. How are you today?"

"Hi, Colton. I'm doing mighty fine. You wanna join me for a spell?"

"You know what, I think I will. Let me head inside and change, and then I'll be right out."

"I'll go mix you a drink." She goes to stand, but I gesture for her to sit back down.

"No need. I got some new brews from *The Tavern* that I'm itching to try. I'll bring a couple over with me."

"Sounds good, sonny."

With a wave of my hand, I head up my front steps and enter my townhouse. It's nothing to write home about, but it's mine and I'm happy here. My sisters helped me decorate, and I have to admit it's way more homey and a lot less of a bachelor pad than my previous place.

My sister, who found the chairs for my office, also found furniture for the townhouse. She's a teacher who loves to go to estate sales over the summer and was able to find me everything I needed to upgrade at a steal. I was super grateful and more than willing to hand over the reins when it came to decorating.

I know I'm luckier than most to have the family that I do. Both of my parents are still alive, albeit getting up there in years. My sisters are wonderful and never let me feel excluded, even though there is the age gap. You'd think they'd hate having their brainiac younger brother constantly tagging along, but without them, I never would've survived being moved up to high school early.

Moving next door to Miss Ada was like winning the lottery and gaining a bonus grandma. More often than not, I find myself eating dinner with Ada or her crashing my place to "borrow" some sugar, only to end up conning me into making us both a meal or watching her favorite game shows. I never thought that, at twenty-nine, my best friend would be an octogenarian, but I can't say I'm mad about it.

Dressed in shorts and a cut-off shirt, I grab a couple of beers and head over to Miss Ada's.

"Took you long enough," she grumps, always giving me a hard time.

"I was barely gone for five minutes. I'm sure you got up to all sorts of trouble while I was gone."

"Don't you know it. Mr. Chan was out walking his dog in those short-shorts again. I may or may not have accidentally dropped something down the stairs for him to pick it up for me before he made it in front of the house."

I gasp dramatically as Ada cackles with glee. "Scandalous woman."

"Oh, hush. You know he loves it."

We both crack up because she's not wrong.

Mr. Chan is in his mid-seventies and a widower. He knows Miss Ada is pulling his chain, but I think he likes the ego boost from her checking him out. And to be honest, he looks a hell of a lot younger than he actually is. He might as well rock those short-shorts while he can.

"What are you going to do when he finally gets up the nerve to ask you out?"

"That's never going to happen. He might love my teasing and attention, but he'll never replace his Mrs. Chan. Although, I'd be fine with going out for a meal and conversation. It can't hurt to have more friends at my age. Lord knows mine are dropping like flies."

"Damn, Miss Ada. That's morbid to think about."

"The hell with being morbid. It's simply a fact once you reach my age. Enough about me. How was work today?"

"It was great. I finished setting up my office, and I got to meet one of my students. She's fucking brilliant." I wince at my swear word, but Ada just waves me off.

"That's great, Colt. What's her name? Would I know her family?"

"Probably not. She's a transplant like me. She just moved to Sparrow Falls. Her name is River Sterling. She's technically the age of a freshman, but she's legitimately a genius. She's taking all AP senior classes this year and also some through the community college. She attended an elite science camp this summer and won a full-ride scholarship to MIT. I think what's most impressive is that she seems really grounded, even though she's so highly intelligent."

"Hmm, so you two are kindred spirits," Ada muses, her eyes smiling up at me.

"Nah, she's way smarter than me. But I think me moving here when she's just starting out was kismet since I've been in her shoes. I might not be the best person to relate to a teenage girl, but I can sympathize with what it's like being the smartest person while being years younger than everyone else. If I can make sure her year is not only successful but also fun, then I'll know I did my job well."

"There's no doubt in my mind that you're going to be exactly what that girl, and the rest of the school, needs. You're a good boy, Colton. Sparrow Falls High is lucky to have you."

"Thanks, Miss Ada."

The rest of the night is spent in our usual fashion—razzing each other, eating dinner, and watching the evening turn to night on Ada's front porch. The rest of the weekend follows suit until Monday rolls around, signaling the first day of school and the wildest year of my life.

Chapter Four

Meadow

"Mom, let's go. We're going to be late for my first day if you don't hurry up!" River hollers from outside my room. Rolling my eyes, I snag my phone off my nightstand and squint to look at the time. *Shit*. Maybe I did oversleep a bit, but I've been so freaking exhausted lately. I've chalked it up to all the long days we were pulling when we first opened the shop, but we've been working the new schedule for weeks, so my late nights have been cut way back. I shouldn't be burned out anymore, but I just can't seem to get enough sleep anymore.

"I'm coming, Riv. Just give me a minute."

Shuffling to my bathroom, I grab a hair tie off the sink and attempt to tame my curls into a messy bun. I'd probably be better off braiding it, but I don't have enough time for that. Back in my room, I grab one of my favorite crochet crop tops and a flowy skirt, and tug them on, then rush out to find River.

"Whoa, Mom. You really wanna show that much cleavage on the first day?" River huffs, then immediately looks contrite as her face flushes with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. That sounded bitchy. I didn't mean anything by it other than you're..." She gestures to my chest, and I look down to see that I'm filling out this top way more than I normally do. "It's just more than what I remember it exposing, you know? People already think we're sisters. You know how high school guys can be?"

"No, you're right, babe. This is not the impression I would like to make. Give me a sec to go change. In fact, go wait in the car, and I'll be right out."

I race back to my room and find a gray *Once Upon a Tattoo* tee that will look fine with my skirt. I throw it on, over my crop top, and head out to the car. I don't have a scale in my house because I don't believe in obsessing over one's weight, but I also haven't really looked at myself in a mirror in a while. I must have gained some weight since the last time I wore this top.

"Sorry for cutting it so close." I give River a guilty smile. "Are you ready for your first day?"

"I suppose. I've got all the necessary paperwork and equipment, know where my classes and locker room are, and I met the guidance counselor, so I should be okay."

"Oh, you didn't tell me that. Are they nice?"

"Yeah, Mr. Harding seems legit. He told me a lot about himself, and he actually had a pretty similar experience in high school as me. I think he could be helpful."

"That's great to hear, Riv. You know you can always come to me or the girls if you need something as well."

"I know, Mom."

"Okay. I think I have an appointment when school gets out, but I'll see if one of the girls is around to come grab you. Or even Brooks or Ezra if you want."

"I'll just walk. It's supposed to be nice, and walking to the shop will only take me ten minutes."

"Okay. You have your phone, right?"

"Yes, Mom." I can tell she's getting annoyed with me by the tone of her voice.

"Sorry. I know you're more responsible than most adults, but it's my job to worry. Give me a break."

"I know."

We fall silent as I pull into the drop-off line for the school. It's mercilessly shorter than at River's previous school.

"Have a great day, Riv. I'm just a phone call away if you need anything."

"Thanks, Mom." She hops out, her head down as she walks into the school.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I make my way back home. Once I'm there, I shoot off a text to Wren and Daphne to ask if either of them would be willing to join me at yoga. I can almost guarantee Wren will. She's using yoga as part of her therapy after everything that went down between her and Brooks. Well, not even really between her and Brooks but rather herself and her

demons. I'm so damn proud of how much hard work she's put in already.

In my kitchen, I scrounge for something to eat while I wait to hear back from the girls. It's been a minute since I went shopping, so I add it to my list of things to do for the week. The bread hasn't gone completely stale yet, so I decide to make French toast since it's quick and will satisfy the sweet tooth that's been nagging me lately.

With my food and coffee in hand, I sit down at our little breakfast nook and dig in while I check if the girls have responded.

Wren: Ugh, it's too damn early for this, woman.

Daphne: Sure. Count me in. What time does it falskajhfds

Daphne: Start? Sorry about that last text. Ezra was, um, distracting me.

Meadow: Oh, get it girl! You've got plenty of time. It starts at 9:00 A.M.

Wren: I don't know if that will be enough time for those two, Dow. I know you've had to live in the land of quickies because of River, but they are insatiable for each other.

Daphne: Oh my god, Wren. Stahp!

The group text buzzes with a voice message from Daphne.

Ezra's voice sounds from my phone when I press play. "Ignore her, ladies. Wren's absolutely correct. I can't get enough of Daphne. I will do my best to hand her over to you for yoga, but for now, she's mine. I hope you have a wonderful day."

Meadow: **Gif of woman fanning her face*

Wren: Take care of our girl, Ez.

I'll see you there, Meadow.

Wren: *Gif of women smirking while slow clapping**

Meadow: Sounds good. Xoxo

God, I love these women and am so happy they've found amazing guys who love and respect them like the queens they are. I never thought I've missed out on having a partner, but with River leaving me soon, I'm wondering if I should've made dating more of a priority. I was so busy making sure I was taking care of her and providing her with the best life I could that I at times forgot I should be living my own.

Don't get me wrong, my life has been very fulfilled with my tattooing career, gardening, jewelry making, and making my clothing. I've always been able to sell my wares as a side hustle to earn a bit of extra cash and make sure River could never want for nothing, but it left little time for dating.

Sitting here, eating alone, I can't help but think of Colton.

He hasn't been far from my mind since our thrilling night at *The Tavern*. I'm starting to think I might have made a mistake in not giving him my phone number or taking his. I truly believe that if we are supposed to be more to each other, our paths will cross again. I was just hoping it would've happened by now. I know I didn't really make it any easier by giving him very vague details about my personal life, but at the time, it added to the magic of the night.

Lost in my thoughts, I realize I need to get a move on it if I don't want to be late for yoga. I quickly change, then pack a bag of clothes I can wear later at work. I can use the bathroom in Daphne and Wren's art studio to get ready for work after.

I'm pleasantly surprised when I make it to the yoga studio and find both Daphne and Wren there.

"Wasn't sure I'd see you," I tease Daphne as I give her a big squeeze.

Her cheeks flush red. "Ezra had to work today. He went in a little late." Her blush spreads, making Wren and me laugh.

"Morning, Wrenny." I squeeze her too.

"Morning, Dow. You doing okay?" She holds me at arm's length, giving me a once-over.

"Yeah, just a little tired. Not really sure what's going on."

"Hmm, will you go to the doctor if it keeps up?" Wren's brows are furrowed as she crosses her arms and stares me down,

knowing I'm not a huge fan of modern medicine.

"It's probably just a vitamin deficiency. You know it happens since I don't eat meat. I'm going to do some of my old tricks and try to get better sleep, but if that doesn't work, I'll consider seeing a doctor," I promise, and I mean it.

I don't want to be an added stressor to Wren's life. Losing her parents when she was only thirteen affected her immensely. If going to the doctor can bring her some peace of mind, I'd be willing to do it even though I'm not a huge fan. I'm sure that if I do some research, I'll be able to find a more holistic doctor in the area.

"Alright, class. Who's ready to flow?"

For the next hour, I lose myself to yoga and then feel ten times better than I did when I woke up this morning. I'm refreshed, and excited to get back to the shop and start our day.

We all head off to different apartments to get ready and meet back at the shop to open for the day. It's no surprise that Daphne and I beat Wren there. We're both a lot lower maintenance than she is.

Our first appointments funnel in, and it's off to the races. When River got home from camp, Wren officially offered her a position at the shop. We had to get her a worker's permit through the school, but she's been working a few hours here and there, and has already been a huge asset to our shop. She's got our schedule as efficient as it can be, and our social media is exploding. We're running like a well-oiled machine, and my mama heart couldn't be prouder of my girl.

Around lunch, Brooks pops in with food for all of us, which is perfect since I'm starving.

I instantly liked Brooks. His aura was so inviting, and we quickly bonded. I've been an only sibling my whole life, but with Brooks around, I finally know what it's like having a brother. He's the best, and I'm so happy for him and Wren. Well, now that I think about it, Lark adopted Daph and me as his own too, but we don't get to see him nearly as much as we'd like.

"Oh, have I told you two how damn happy I am that you've husbanded up?" I croon as I inhale the heavenly scent of my cheesy French onion soup.

Wren spits her drink across the table as Daphne's cheeks flush red. I ignore them as a moan spills from my lips, the flavorful soup stealing my entire attention.

"Umm, I wouldn't say we're husbanded up yet," Daphne mutters as she digs into her food.

"Eh, close enough. And, honestly, I'm not complaining. I couldn't have picked out better men for you."

"Thanks, Meadow. What about you? When are you going to find your Mr. Right and settle down?" Wren teases.

For a second, Colt flashes in my mind, but I quickly dismiss the thought. Unfortunately, not fast enough.

"Oh, who is he? Spill!" Wren throws her napkin at me.

"Nobody, really. Fate hasn't brought him back to me, so I'm starting to think it wasn't meant to be."

Daphne looks at me sympathetically as Wren groans and drops her forehead to the table.

"What?"

"I love you, Meadow, but please don't tell me you met a great guy but didn't exchange any information because you are leaving it up to fate or destiny, or the goddess above."

"What's so wrong with that, Wren? If we're meant to have more than that night we met, then we'll make our way back to each other."

"So, you did meet someone?" Daphne looks at me hopefully.

"Yes. His name is Colton, and I met him after Brooks' caveman carried Wren out and you went home after our girls' night out. He was sweet and fun to talk to. It was a lovely night, and I will absolutely see him again if that's where our paths lead."

"Fucking hell, Dow." Wren drops her head back to her shoulders dramatically. "I love you like crazy, girl, but I have no idea how you can leave something like that up to fate."

"Me neither, but I trust your judgment and I hope things work out how they're supposed to. You're an amazing woman who deserves everything good in this world." Daphne squeezes my hand, making my tears spill.

"Ugh, why am I always the crier of the bunch?" I whine as I dab at my eyes.

Daphne and Wren look a little startled at how hard I'm crying at their sweet words, but when I send them a watery smile, they both stand from their chairs and hug me.

"It's because you've always had the biggest feelings out of all of us and have known how to embrace them the most. We're used to the tears by now."

"Thanks for the hug. I'm fine. I promise."

They settle into their seats and dive back into our lunches.

"So, is Riv walking to the shop, or does she want one of us to grab her?"

"She said she would walk. You know how independent she is, and Sparrow Falls is so small. It's only a few blocks for her. Besides, I think it's bad enough being a freshman surrounded by seniors. She doesn't need the entire student body to know her mom's a MILF and that her aunts are bombshells. I think it's a bit of self-preservation on her part."

"Please, send those little ass wipes my way. I'd love to educate them on—"

"Umm, yeah. Let's keep Wren away from the teenagers. I think it's probably a good idea that she didn't want us to come pick her up." Daphne shakes her head at Wren in exasperation.

"Will you both keep an eye and ear out for her? I know we have great communication, but this year is a lot different, and I'm sure there are some things she would feel more comfortable talking about to you than me. Especially you, Daph, since you two are so similar."

"You know we've got her back." Wren's fierce protectiveness shines through and makes my eyes leak some more.

"My door is always open for her. You know that, but I'll make sure she does too." Daphne smiles sweetly.

"Thank you. I really appreciate it."

"Alright, our next appointments will be rolling in any minute. Someone holler when our girl gets here. I don't want to miss any details about her first day." Wren stands, dumps her garbage in the trash, then heads back to her station.

Daphne and I clean up and are quick to follow her.

I'm lost in a sketch when I hear feet shuffling behind me. Turning, I find River, shoulders sagging and head hanging. I jump from my chair and race over to her, wrapping my arms around her, relieved when she sinks into my embrace.

"Was it that bad?"

"Yes and no."

"Is it okay if we include Daph and Wren if they aren't busy? Or would you prefer me to pass on how your day went myself?" Taking a step back, I hold my girl at arm's length and take her in.

"They can join. I would actually feel better having Daphne here." She lets out a shaky breath.

"Okay. Head to the break room, and we'll be right back."

Hustling, I pop my head into Daphne's space and motion for her to follow me. She doesn't have a client, so it's not an issue. Wren, on the other hand, is mid-tattoo, but her client needs a break, so she's able to slip away for a few minutes.

"I don't know what happened, but I don't think it was a great first day. Our girl's waiting in the break room. Wren, please promise you'll keep the threats of violence to a minimum. Daph, she actually said she would feel better having you there. Just a heads-up."

"Alright, let's not keep her waiting." Daphne squares her shoulders and leads the way. Her confidence has grown so much since she started dating Ezra, and I couldn't be prouder of her.

We walk into the breakroom, where River is sitting at the table, typing away on her laptop. She still looks tense but not nearly as bad as when she first stepped into my station.

"Alright, Riv. We're all here. Lay it on us."

River slowly closes her laptop, puts it away, then starts picking at her fingernail polish. We all wait patiently, giving her a chance to find her words.

"Nothing really bad happened today, I promise. I just don't fit in. I'm the new girl, but not only am I the new girl, I'm also an oddity. None of the seniors really paid any attention to me because they all have established friendships and are planning on leaving at the end of the year, but then none of the freshmen paid me any mind either because we've never crossed paths.

"And you all know how damn awkward I am when I first meet someone. I'm not really great at reading social cues until I get to know them. I can't pick up on whether people are being sarcastic, dramatic, or if I need to be empathetic and caring. It was a long-ass day of being invisible by my peers and marveled at by my teachers. It was a really weird dichotomy that I just haven't figured out yet."

"I'm sorry, babe. That sounds rough but also like there's a ton of room for improvement." I try to be encouraging, but I'm not sure if it hits. My mama-bear feelings are hurting for my little girl.

"I can absolutely relate to what you're going through, Riv. I don't have a client right now. Would you maybe wanna head up to my studio with me for a bit? We can talk if you want. I can tell you about my horrid boarding school experience. Maybe give you a few tips on how to break through the awkwardness of first meeting people."

"Would that be okay, Wren? I'm technically on schedule for tonight."

"Yeah, Riv. That's fine. Besides, you make your own schedule with the understanding that you can change it whenever you need. We'll be fine." She squeezes River's hand. "As for school, don't sweat it. The teachers will get used to you being smarter than them, and the students will realize that although you're fucking brilliant, you're just another kid like them. It will get better. Promise."

"Thanks, Wren."

"No problem, babe. And if not, you just let Auntie Wren know, and I'll make an appearance at school. We'll get shit squared up real fucking quick."

"Oh, lord," Daphne mutters.

"How about no," I implore, but I can't be too annoyed with Wren when I see the first smile on River's face since she got here.

"Alright, I need to get back to my client. See you all later." Wren blows us kisses over her shoulder.

"And I need to get ready for my next client. You know where to find me if you need me. Got it?"

River nods as I lean over and kiss her head.

I head back to work, but I can't help but worry about River for the rest of the night and the days to come. She doesn't say much when I ask her how school is, but I have a feeling my girl is struggling, and I have no clue how to help. Hopefully, she

finds her stride soon, or I may have to call the school and see if there's anything more I can do, even though I hate the idea of going behind her back. For now, I'll wait and wish for better days.

Chapter Five

Colton

We're a few weeks into the school year, and I'm really loving Sparrow Falls High. I've only officially worked at one other school, but I had to do hours for my degree at several schools, and I have to say, Sparrow Falls High School is by far my favorite.

The sense of community is tangible. With the exception of a few teachers, I can tell the staff here really care about their students and want to see them succeed. It's great, and makes my job a hell of a lot easier when the teachers and admins are willing to work with me.

Speaking of admins, Marie Sanchez might be the coolest principal out there. She's in her mid-forties and has a very laid-back approach with the kids, but they also know she won't take any shit from them. She's fair, and uses their mistakes and bad judgment as teaching opportunities, giving the students a chance to better themselves rather than just doling out punishment.

Beyond my coworkers, who are quickly becoming my friends, and having an awesome boss, I love how many activities the school offers the kids. If there is a club or an intramural league the kids want but the school doesn't have, Marie has the students find a faculty member or volunteer parent willing to head it then present their case for why it would be beneficial at the monthly faculty meeting. As long as their presentation is well thought out and any costs for their program are considered and covered, the faculty is usually on board to back the students.

The school gives each student a chance to find their place and thrive, which is something I wish more schools did. I know it's easier since Sparrow Falls average class size is around a hundred students, but that doesn't mean that larger schools couldn't do what they're doing. I credit a lot of it to Marie Sanchez and the environment she's created here.

Football season is in full swing, which means homecoming is creeping up. It's been all the buzz around the school, and I've loved seeing the students get into it. One of the school fundraisers sends out carnations a few weeks before homecoming. Each flower is a dollar, and different colors have different meanings. It's disruptive as hell for the teachers, but the kids get a kick out of it, and it has raised a ton of money for the dance.

I've caught myself leaning against the door frame of my office during class change, just to see the excitement of the students leaving their rooms with flowers and running to show their friends. It's something so simple, but it brings them joy and life to the hallways.

It's the fourth period and the bell is about to ring, signaling the first round of lunch, which is always madness. Needing a break from reading over college essays for some of my seniors, I decide to stand in the hall to greet my kiddos. At first, they were wary of me, but I'm glad to say I've settled in, and they've started to trust me and my intention to help them in any way I can.

"Hey, Mr. H." One of the senior football players gives me a chin lift as he walks past, arm slung over his girlfriend's arm, her hands full of flowers.

All around, the kids are loud as they rush to lunch or the next class. Some show off their flowers while others lament about how they haven't gotten any, but there's still plenty of time in the week. In the midst of all the chaos, one student sticks out.

River Sterling has her head down, eyes avoiding contact with anyone around her. She slides between people, avoiding drawing any attention to herself, but honestly, it's almost as if she's invisible to them. Watching her navigate the crowded hallway without a single person seeing her breaks my fucking heart.

Before I can think about it, I'm calling out to her. "River!"

River startles, bumping into a group of guys she was walking past. I cringe as they turn, looking pissed. Much to my relief, they all seem understanding even though River appears mortified. She hurriedly makes her way over to me, cheeks red and chin tucked to her chest.

"Hi, Mr. Harding. Did you need something?" Her voice is barely over a whisper and hard to hear over the noise in the hall.

"Not really. I just saw you walking through the hall and wanted to say hello, see how you're settling in here. You haven't stopped by the office, so I assume classes are going well."

"Oh, yeah. My classes are fine."

"That's great. And you're able to keep up with the college courses?"

"Yeah. They're pretty basic. I covered most of the material for the gen-ed classes when I was ten. It's pretty boring, to be honest." A faint smile tries to fight through, but River quickly pulls it back.

"Ah, yeah. I do remember how menial they seemed, now that you mention it. Have you joined any of the clubs or activities? I have to admit I'm pretty impressed with what Sparrow Falls has to offer."

"No, I haven't. Nothing has really caught my interest. I work at my aunt's tattoo shop after school, so I don't have a ton of free time for clubs anyway. But, umm, I need to get to lunch, so can I..."

My brows furrow as worry floods me. Does she work there because she wants to, or are things tight at home so she feels like she needs to help out her mom? I wish I could ask, but I don't think she'd answer me honestly.

"Yeah. Enjoy your lunch."

River nods, then turns to leave.

"And River?"

She pauses, glancing over her shoulder at me.

"My door's always open."

"Thanks, Mr. H."

I watch her scurry down the hall as worry nags at the back of my mind. I'm still there when Marie startles me.

"Everything okay?"

"Hi, Ms. Sanchez. I think so. I was just talking to River Sterling. I don't think she's acclimating well."

"I've had the same worry." She nods towards my office. I gesture for her to go ahead, then follow her in and sit across from her at the table. "I'm also worried that she might be taking on more burdens than she needs to at home."

"How so? I've spoken to her mother on several occasions. I can't see her putting pressure on River in any way."

"Well, she mentioned not participating in any of the clubs because of having a job that takes up her free time. I was wondering if she feels a sense of obligation to work and help out her single mother, or if she actually likes helping at her aunt's tattoo shop."

"Ah, if I had to guess, I'd say it's the latter. I've seen River out with her mom and her friends. Those women are thick as thieves and dote on River. If anything, I'd say they're her safe space."

Relief floods me at Marie's assurance, but I'd still like to talk to her mother.

"That honestly makes me feel a hell of a lot better. I'm glad she has a support system at home. I just wish she had one here too."

"I don't blame you."

We sit in comfortable silence, both trying to come up with a solution to get River more engaged with her peers without forcing her into a situation she wouldn't be comfortable with.

"Do you think it would be helpful to meet with River's mother? I just remembered I set up a meeting with her at the end of the week to discuss her teaching a few alternative art classes."

"Really? It wouldn't hurt at this point if you think she would be willing to talk to me."

"I think she'd be more than willing. She seems like River comes first for her, always. I think she'd be glad to know someone else is looking out for her girl."

"Great. I'd love to meet her. I'd also like River here. I don't want her to think she's done anything wrong or that we're going behind her back. She's obviously intelligent enough to understand where we're coming from. I want to give her the power to make this year the best it can be and let her know we'll help her in any way we can."

"I think that's perfectly reasonable, and River should absolutely be included."

"Awesome. Can you email me when she'll be in so that I can make sure I add it to my calendar and pull River from class?"

"I'll do it as soon as I get back to my office."

"Thanks, Marie."

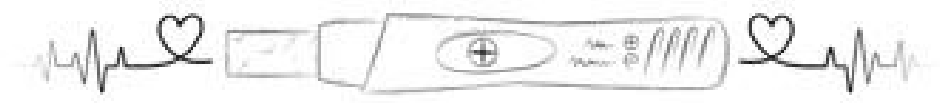
"No, thank you, Colton, for caring about these kids as much as I do."

I go back to my desk and dive back into the essays while waiting for Marie to email me. After re-reading the same sentence several times, I give up and decide to dig out my lunch. I'm just about to shut my computer down when the email finally comes through.

Looks like, come Friday afternoon, I'll finally have a better picture of who River is and where she comes from. Her mother has been a bit of an enigma since I met River, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious to meet the woman who has single-handedly raised such a well-rounded child. Especially one as gifted as River.

Gathering my lunch, I head to the break room to eat with my new friends. It's a good distraction, but no matter how good a

conversation we have, my mind can't help but stray to Friday and our meeting. This is going to be a long week.



"Hey, River. Sorry to pull you out of class." I stand from my chair the moment I see River waiting at the door.

"It's fine. I think you're probably saving Mr. Hart a headache."

I gesture towards the comfortable chairs in the corner. River comes in and drops her book bag to the floor. I try to stifle my smile when she curls her legs into the chair and starts playing with the sequins on the pillow my sister convinced me to buy.

"Why would you say that?" I question as I sit in the chair across from her.

River's lips twitch as she tucks a stray hair behind her ear. "I think he gets tired of me simplifying his lessons."

My brow goes up in question, which finally pulls a full smile from River. "It's AP physics, kid. You know it's supposed to be hard, right?"

"For sure. But the way he teaches it makes it impossible for his students. He adds extra steps and explanations to make himself look more knowledgeable when the class struggles and needs a simpler explanation. It's like he's on a power trip. There's a reason he's had to have a bell curve for years, and that's because he's a shit teacher."

"If you don't believe me, pull up our grades versus the previous years. I've been calling him out since the first day of class, and now he refuses to listen to me. So, one of the more outgoing girls in the class asked me to email her my notes, and she's been sending them to the rest of the class. It's been driving him nuts."

"I don't doubt you, River. You would have nothing to gain by upstaging your teacher. I'll definitely look into the grades. If the trends are true, I'll pop into class. I haven't told many of the teachers about my high school days, but you know that I'll be able to tell if he is doing this."

"And if that's the case, I will absolutely be going to Ms. Sanchez about it. We want you all to succeed and are not here to boost our own egos. I've noticed Mr. Hart is a fan of his, but I'm not here to boost it. I'm here to build all of yours."

"Thanks, Mr. H. So, why did you pull me out of class?"

I'm about to answer when there's a commotion in the hallway. I'm instantly stunned when the woman who has been plaguing my every thought steps through the door.

Meadow looks like fucking heaven, her riotous blonde curls hanging loosely down her back. A form-fitting t-shirt hugs her luscious breasts, leading down to another brightly colored flowing skirt. My breath stalls in my chest as my cock twitches in my pants.

The moment she steps into the room, every one of my nerves misfires as if there's an electric pulse pulling us together. I don't even realize I stood up until I'm a foot away from Meadow, my hand reaching up to caress her cheek. She's the most stunning sight, and for a moment, I forget where we're at. "Meadow."

"I think I'm going to be sick." Meadow's face goes pale as her hand flies up to cover her mouth, which snaps me out of my daze. Racing around my desk, I grab my trash can and rush back to Meadow's side, just in time for her to grab it from my hands and puke. I hold her hair and rub soothing circles across her back as I guide her towards the sturdy chair by the table.

I stay by her side, muttering comforting words, wishing there's more I could do to help her. It isn't until I see River reaching out, a water bottle in her hand, that everything comes crashing down around me.

Meadow is River's mom.

Holy. Fuck.

I rock back on my knees, my butt resting on my feet as I look back and forth between the two. Now that they're side by side, the similarities are hard to miss. I'm almost pissed that I didn't put two and two together until now, but Meadow barely gave me any information about herself, so how was I supposed to know?

"Mom, are you okay? What's going on?" River's starting to panic, which is the last thing we need right now.

"I'm fine, Riv. Well, not fine. I've felt like shit all day, but I think I just have a bug. I promise I'm okay."

"Okay, then why are you here?"

"Oh, Ms. Sanchez wants me to come teach some weaving and maybe pottery classes, and suggested I meet Mr. Harding while I was here. We didn't want you to think we were going behind your back, so she had him pull you from class to join us."

"So, this isn't some weird intervention where you're dying and thought my school counselor was the closest to a therapist, so you'd tell me here?"

"Not at all," I jump in, my need to reassure her overwhelming.

"Good. Do you think we could maybe reschedule since Mom is ill? And could you get me out of class for the rest of the day?"

"Of course. Do you need me to call someone to get you home? Actually, let me check with Ms. Sanchez to see if I can run you guys home real quick."

"No, Colt. I'm fine. Really." Meadow reaches out, grabbing my forearm, and it's as if her touch scorches me. "I honestly feel a lot better after that..." Meadow gestures towards the garbage can with a grimace.

"Will you at least let me know you've made it home alright?" I know I'm crossing so many lines, but I'm too fucking worried about Meadow to care.

Grabbing a pen and post-it off the table, I write my number down and shove it in Meadow's hand. River stands off to the side, her eyes narrowed as she glances back and forth between her mom and me, as if we're a puzzle for her to figure out.

"You really don't need to worry. I'll be fine, and we can reschedule this meeting for next week."

"I'm sure you will be, but I'll feel better knowing you both made it home safely. And then you have my number and can let me know what time works for you to come back in."

"Alright. What would you like me to do with this?" She holds the garbage can out to her side as she starts to look a little pale again.

"Here. I'll take care of it." I set it behind my desk, as far away from Meadow as I can in hopes it won't make her sick again. "Drive safely, okay?"

Meadow waves over her shoulder as she heads out the door while River grabs her bag from the comfy chair in the corner.

"I'm not sure how you and my mom know each other, or if I even want to know, but I'll make sure she texts you. She can be stubborn, but I'll let my aunts know she got sick and that she needs to take it easy."

"Thanks, River. She's lucky to have you. Don't hesitate to call if you ladies need anything, okay?" I reach for the pad of paper on the desk and scribble my number down again, then hold it out to River. "Just in case."

"Thanks, Mr. Harding."

"Anytime. Have a good weekend, River." I watch the young girl, wise beyond her years, leave my office, and then sink onto my desk chair only to be startled a few minutes later when Meadow texts me that they've made it home safely.

River's mom has been on my mind all week, but I never could've imagined she and Meadow were one and the same. All I can think about, as the rest of the day eases by, is that although Meadow was ill, I hope this second meeting will be enough for her to give us a fighting chance.

Chapter Six

River

Ugh, I really hate turning to Google for things like this. I'd normally ask my mother or aunts a very personal, female-related medical question, but it's actually about my mother, so Google is the only way to go. I know there are several reputable medical sites out there, but I really don't need a ton of confirmation for my suspicions.

"Earth to Riv... Are you still with me?"

"Sorry, Brant. I fell down a Google rabbit hole. I'm researching, and you know how much that can send me spiraling." I turn my attention back to my phone that's sitting in my ring light beside my bed while I work diligently on my laptop.

"I do. That's what drew me to you at camp. What are you working on?" He studies me as I debate whether or not to fill him in.

"Just a theory at the moment. I'll let you know if my hypothesis is correct. I'll actually need your advice if it is." I bite my lip, worried about being a good big sister and if going to MIT next year would be the smartest move with my mom about to have a baby. "Alright. I think I've found enough evidence for now. I need to get a hold of my aunts. Will you be around later if I need to talk?"

"For you, I'm always available, River." Brantley winks at me, making me blush.

Maybe Mom was right and he actually does see me as more than a kid, but I can't worry about that right now. I've got bigger issues to focus on.

"Thanks, Brantley. Bye."

"Bye, Riv."

I hang up, then pull my phone out of my ring light. Sitting back on my bed, I double-check the website and tick off each symptom on my fingers, which makes me further believe my suspicions. I clear my browser history then grab my phone.

River: So, you know how you both say you're always here if I need you? Well, I need you, and I need you now to say anything to my mom. Can you promise you won't until we talk?

Wren: Are you okay?

River: Yes, I'm fine. Promise. The issue isn't about me. But I need your advice and help on something.

Wren: Then your secret is safe with me. Can you swing by the shop? Daphne is here with a client right now, which is why she didn't respond, but she should be done in a few minutes.

Daphne: Just finished up. Her tattoo needs to breathe for a minute, then I can wrap it up and I'll be done for a bit.

River: Perfect. I'll be there in ten. Thanks, aunts.

Love you! <

Wren: Love you, punk.

Daphne: Love you, Riv.

Chapter Seven

Meadow

I still can't believe Colton is River's new guidance counselor and that I ended up getting sick when I saw him. I'm not one to embarrass easily, but I'm not sure I've ever been more mortified in my life. That was definitely not what I had in mind for when—if—I ran into Colt again.

I had been feeling off all morning, but I brushed it off. With River being back at school and me seeing people from all walks of life for work, it's not hard to pick up a random bug. I decided to push through and keep my meeting with Ms. Sanchez since I felt much better after I had eaten lunch, but the minute I saw Colton, my stomach flipped and not in a good way.

I got River and myself home safely, then passed out on the couch for a few hours. When I woke, River wasn't home. I found her note, in which she let me know she went to the shop to help with admin stuff and reschedule some appointments for me. I also had texts from Wren and Daphne, telling me to take the weekend off. Wren even threatened to pull the boss card out if I decided to be stubborn.

As much as I wanted to argue that I was fine to come in, my body was telling me a different story. I continued to get sick on and off all Saturday, in between my frequent naps. The only blessing was that I wasn't running a fever.

River stayed away most of the day, much to my relief. The last thing I need is for her to get whatever this is. I hate it when my girl's sick, and I would feel even worse if she was ill because of me.

It's Sunday morning, and I'm having a lazy start to my day. Coffee sounds heavenly, but I'm not sure if my stomach can handle it. I'm just deciding whether it's worth the effort to get out of bed to make some when River walks into my room and curls up beside me.

"How are you feeling?" Her brows are furrowed.

I hate that she's worried about me. Tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, I give her a reassuring smile. "I feel much better after resting the past few days."

"Really? Because, no offense, you look rough, Mom." River smirks as I over-dramatically gasp at her.

"Oh, how you wound me, daughter."

"Do you think you're up for brunch? Wren and Daphne want to check on you before opening for the day."

"I think brunch sounds wonderful, but, uh..." I can't remember the last time I went to the store, and I know I don't have any animal products other than eggs stashed for visits like this, so I'm not sure how good of a brunch spread I can pull off.

"Don't worry. I told them you haven't been to the store in ages, so we don't have any meat products here. Wren said they'd grab food from the diner on their way."

"Great. When are they coming?"

"In about half an hour, so you might want to work on that." River gestures towards my whole body as she rolls away from me, avoiding my hand when I try to swat her. A sweet giggle spills from her lips.

"Brat!" I call out as she hurries from my room.

Rolling out of bed, I have to brace myself as a bout of dizziness takes over. Maybe being laid up for two days and barely eating has left me weaker than I imagined. As carefully as I can, I make my way to my attached bathroom and hop into the shower, making quick work of it.

In no time at all, I'm dressed and impatiently waiting for my best friends to arrive. Even though I saw them a few days ago, it feels like ages. I don't know how we used to go without seeing each other for months on end.

Wren and Daphne are my soul sisters through and through. We might be opposites in every way, but that just makes us that much more perfect for each other. We respect our differences and celebrate them. I'm so grateful to have found them, and to have built our little family and watched it grow now that they've each found their partners.

For a minute, Colt flashes through my mind, but I brush the thought of him away when the front door bursts open.

"Hey, bitches!"

"Really, Wren?" I chide as Daphne rolls her eyes behind her, a soft smile on her face.

"Hi." River darts out from the hallway and grabs the drinks from Wren as we make our way to the kitchen.

It's loud as Wren and I greet each other. Daphne and River sit back to watch the show. We catch up on the shop, and I reassure them I'm feeling better as we dive into the delicious food from the diner. River is more reserved than usual, almost as if she's nervous, but I don't want to make her uncomfortable, so I make a mental note to check in with her after the girls leave.

Taking a bite of food, I can't fight the moan that spills from my lips. I'm ravenous after not eating much the past few days. It isn't until I notice them all staring at me that I feel self-conscious about my love affair with my meal.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Wren erupts, startling all of us.

"Wren—" Daphne looks nervous now, and I'm starting to wonder what is going on.

"Are we just going to act like she's not eating bacon and having the best orgasm of her life?" Wren gestures towards me.

Startled, I look down at my hand and blink several times at the piece of bacon I'm holding. When the hell did I pick that up, and why does it taste so fucking good? I haven't eaten meat in ... I can't even remember how long. I don't even know why I would've grabbed it.

I'm still staring at my food when River slides a box towards me across the table. Looking at it, then at her, my eyes go wide.

"Umm, River, do you need to tell me something? If you do, just know that whatever you say, I'll always support you."

With an exasperated sigh, River narrows her eyes as she pushes the *unopened* box closer to me. "I don't need to tell you anything. My virginity is firmly intact. You're pregnant, Mom. This is to confirm my hypothesis."

A panicked laugh spills from my lips. "Real funny. I think I would know if I were pregnant."

"One would think, but here we are." River raises her hand to cut me off, then starts counting her reasons on each finger. "You didn't have your period when I did, which isn't necessarily an issue, but along with everything else, it is. Your breasts have grown, you've been exhausted and sleeping more, you've been more emotional, you've been nauseous and vomiting, eating random things, and you're acting like that bacon is the best thing you ever put in your mouth when you would normally turn your nose up at it.

"If you still don't believe me, then take the test. If I'm wrong, which I'm not, then I'm sorry. But when I'm right, then we're all here to help. And we'll be here when you tell Mr. Harding."

"Wh— How?"

"Genius, remember?" River smirks as she points at herself.

"Hey, punk. You've been holding out on us. You didn't tell us you had an idea of who the baby daddy is." Wren crosses her arms as she stares River down.

"I suspected, but Mom just confirmed it." River's smug smile is irritating enough to distract me from the panic racing through me.

Now that she's thrown everything out there, I'm sure she's right and I *am* pregnant. But how could I have let this happen, *again*? At least, this time, I wasn't as completely reckless as when I conceived River. Although having sex when I was that close to my ovulation was stupid.

"Meadow, are you okay?" Daphne, who has been pretty silent up until this point, gently squeezes my hand to pull me from my spiral.

"Umm, I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. I'll be right back." I snatch the test off the table and head down the hall to my private bathroom to take it.

Doing some mental math, I figure that I'm probably close to three and a half months pregnant at this point. Running my hand over my belly, I turn to the side and take a better look at myself in the mirror. It might just be my eyes, but it almost looks like I have a bit of a baby bump already.

Taking a steadying breath, I snatch the box off the counter and open all three tests inside. I pee on each stick, put the lids on, wash my hands, and then open the bathroom door to find my best friends and daughter waiting anxiously in my room. Taking a step closer, Wren pulls me into her arms, where I'm quickly surrounded by Daphne and River.

"Whatever the test says, we've got this, okay?" Wren reassures.

"Hell yeah, we do. A baby!" Daphne gushes, her excitement filling me with joy and pushing my fears away.

"This baby is so lucky. They've got the best mom." River's sweet smile is my undoing.

I blubber as my family holds me together. I know what the tests will say, but having my sisters and daughter, I know this baby is going to be so loved.

A timer beeps from somewhere in our pile, making me laugh.

"What were you doing? Standing outside with your ear pressed against the door, listening to me?" I tease as Wren shuts off her alarm.

"Fuck yes, I was. Did you think I would miss the chance to see your reaction when you look at the results?"

Shaking my head, I turn towards the bathroom with them hot on my heels.

"Three? One wasn't good enough to confirm?" Wren teases.

"Well, scientifically speaking, it's always best to verify your results with multiple tests. I approve, Mom."

"Thanks, sweetie."

"Daph, can you record our reaction? Riv, I'd like you to look with me. The sticks are clean. I promise."

"Are you sure?" She looks hesitant but hopeful.

"Positive."

"Well, not yet, but we're about to find out."

I turn to sass Wren, but see she's already recording with one hand while the other holds Daphne's.

"Alright, Riv. On the count of three..." I reach for one of the pregnancy tests facing down and pass it to River, then grab one

for myself. "One, two, three!"

"Pregnant!" we both yell at the same time.

River's grin is huge as she launches herself at me. Happy tears spill down my face as the reality that I will be bringing another life into the world slams into me. Hugging River tightly, I laugh when Wren's tiny frame—then Daphne's long, willowy one—joins our hug.

"We're going to have a baby!" I exhale as we all dissolve into laughter and tears of joy.

"Now that we know, can we maybe finish our brunch? All of a sudden I'm ravenous." As if to prove a point, my stomach rumbles loudly, sending us all into another fit of laughter.

We head out to the table, where we dive back into our food.

"It's still weird as fuck to see you moaning over bacon," Wren muses.

"Tell me about it. The only time I ever get to eat it is when we go out or I'm with you guys," River whines.

"Which is all the time, brat, so quit acting like I deprive you." I stick my tongue out at her.

"So, are we gonna talk about the elephant in the room?" Wren waggles her eyebrows at me.

"Umm, if you're going to talk about sex with Mr. Harding, please let me know so I can go to my room. I really like him and want to be able to still look him in the eye after this."

"We will save those details for when you're not around. Promise." I squeeze River's hand.

"Thanks, Mom."

"Great. Glad we straightened that out. Now, who is he?"

"His name is Colton Harding, and he's the new guidance counselor at River's high school, which I promise I did not know at the time of our..." I look wide-eyed at Wren, who snickers, as I try to keep my promise to my daughter.

"I get it. I know you wouldn't intentionally hook up with my guidance counselor. Well, unless you were, like, in love with him or something, but judging by the way you freaked out when you saw him, it's obvious you didn't know."

"How did you not know?" Daphne questions, her eyes darting back and forth between River and me.

"Can we talk about this at the shop later today? I want to respect River's wishes and..."

"Say no more." Wren holds up her hand. "But don't think you're getting out of giving us the dirty details since you've obviously been holding out on us."

"So, River. How's school going?" Daphne changes the subject, making me eternally grateful for the way she tries to put River's needs first.

"It's fine. The material is pretty easy, and the teachers aren't bad. Well, minus Mr. Hart. I'm pretty sure he's a narcissist."

"River!"

"What, Mom? His teaching is atrocious. He's my AP physics teacher, and I swear he adds extra steps and overcomplicates things when he has to explain things over, just to make himself look smarter, or the class bombs tests."

"I felt bad after the first test, when I broke his bell curve and everyone failed it, so I started challenging him in class and showing simplified ways to learn what he was teaching. He was not a fan and stopped calling on me or letting me talk."

"What the fuck? Do I need to go show this pencil dick—"

"Wren!"

"No, it's fine, Mom. One of the nicer girls in the class asked if I could give her my notes then she emailed them to the rest of the class. I've been doing that every week since then, and the class aced the last test. He was pissed but tried not to show it. And that's why I think he's a narcissist."

"Eh, you might be right there, sweetheart. But I still think you should tell someone about it, just so you don't face any negative repercussions."

"I did. I told Mr. Harding. He's going to sit in on a few classes. Did you know he's like me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Child genius. He started high school early and graduated early, before heading off to MIT, where he got a degree in biomechanical engineering, but then he decided he could help more kids like us by becoming a guidance counselor. So, he went back to school for that."

"Anyway, he's going to pretend he's just trying to get a feel for his new school and teachers, to see if there's any way he can

help them by observing their classes, but really, he'll be able to see through Mr. Hart's bullshit and call him out for being a crappy teacher."

"Huh. Well, I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to talk to him about this and that you were able to come up with a solution."

"He's cool. If you were going to get knocked up by anyone, at least it's by someone who will understand me and not think I'm a freak." River's delivery is dry, like her humor, without a hint of a smile on her face, yet I know she's teasing me.

"River!" I admonish, but apparently, Wren finds this amusing as hell because she cackles beside me.

Even Daphne can't hold back her laughter. "I mean, she's got a point. As long as he's not a selfish prick, like River's sperm donor—"

"He wasn't a prick. We were just young, and he had a bright future in front of him," I defend.

"He was four years older than you and from a wealthy family. He could have at least made sure you were financially set before he ran for the hills." Wren glares me down as if challenging me to disagree.

"Maybe, but with money come stipulations that I didn't need or want. I think we managed just fine." My pride shines through as I cross my arms stubbornly, ready to go rounds with Wren.

"You did an amazing job, Meadow. Nobody would ever question that," Daphne assures, breaking the tension in the room.

"Anyway," River drawls, pulling all of our attention back to her. "Mr. Harding is going to be pumped for this. Don't ask me how I know because, for once, I don't have science to back it up. Just one of those gut feelings Mom's always going on about. Like, he's got a good aura or whatever."

"It's the best, to be honest. It's what drew me to him in the first place."

"Well, that's good, then." Daphne smiles encouragingly.

"So, when are you going to tell him?" Wren, always the busybody, nudges me.

"Today if he's available. If my estimations are right, I'm somewhere between three and four months pregnant. I need to get to a doctor as soon as possible, and I'd like for him to have the choice to experience this with me, seeing as the baby is also his."

"And this is why you're the best fucking mom and that baby is so lucky to be yours." Wren smiles with tears in her eyes.

We finish up the rest of our food and talk about how the future is going to change but how exciting it's going to be. Even though I didn't necessarily see myself having any more kids, I already love this little bean so damn much and can't wait to meet them. Here's to hoping Colton feels the same way when he comes over in a little bit.

Chapter Eight

Colton

I've been going out of my mind with worry over Meadow all weekend. I know she's a grown woman who can take care of herself, but something about her makes me want—no, need—to be able to take care of her. And not only her but River too. Something tells me that it's been the two of them against the world for far too long, and I fucking hate that.

Pacing my living room for the millionth time today, I about jump out of my skin when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

Meadow: Hey, Colt. I was wondering if you were free in a little bit and would like to come over and talk?

Fucking finally! I've picked up my phone to text or call her a thousand times this weekend, but I didn't want to be overbearing. Getting this message, I could die a happy man. Well, that's a bit of an exaggeration, but I'm glad she's finally putting me out of my misery.

Colton: Name the time and place and I'll be there.

Meadow: How about half an hour at my place?

116 Swallow Ln

Colton: Sounds good. I'll see you then.

Half an hour doesn't give me much time to get ready. Good thing for me, Sparrow Falls is small, and it's only about a ten-minute walk or a two-minute drive from my place to Meadow's. To think I've run past her home several times and never known it was her house is wild.

I make quick work of putting on nicer clothes before hopping into my car and heading to the greenhouse just outside of town. Knowing Meadow, I think she'd appreciate flowers she could plant instead of cut ones that she'd end up throwing out.

The worker is extremely helpful, guiding me to some beautiful peonies. I grab two, one for Meadow and one for River. I'm not trying to bribe River, but I also know how important she is to Meadow. Besides, even if she wasn't Meadow's daughter, I've got a soft spot for her. I instantly felt a kinship with River and have loved getting to know her better in the short time since we've met. I'm hoping that our relationship will continue to grow as long as Meadow is open to it.

It might have been presumptuous of me, but I talked to Ms. Sanchez about having a relationship with Meadow after our run-in on Friday afternoon, when she popped into my office to see how our meeting went. I didn't tell her about our complete background, for obvious reasons, but I did tell her that as long as Meadow was open to a relationship with me, I wholeheartedly planned on pursuing her. Marie reassured me there were no rules stating I couldn't date a parent. It would be impossible to enforce something like that in a town this small, but she told me to remember that I represented the school and to not enter any kind of endeavor lightly.

With her—albeit reluctant—blessing, all I was waiting for to move things along was a greenlight from Meadow. I wanted so badly to go to her and take care of her, but I see now that waiting her out was the best move I could have made.

Pulling up to the address Meadow gave me, I'm not at all surprised that this is her house. The landscaping is impressive,

with hundreds of flowers still in bloom. I can't name half of them, but they make her house look whimsical and magical. Add the weeping willow in the sideyard, with string lights on it, and I can only imagine how awesome it looks at night. The house itself is a cute bungalow, with a lot of wood accents and a cozy front porch. The two chairs and a porch swing look inviting, especially on a cool summer or fall evening after a long day of work.

I make my way up the stairs as I try to absorb every little detail I can. Before I can even knock on the door, Meadow is standing in the screen, smiling nervously at me.

"Hi, Colt."

"Hi, Meadow."

We stare at each other until Meadow shakes her head, opens the door, then gestures for me to come in.

Instead of her normal long and flowy skirts, she's got on wide-leg pants and another one of those handmade crocheted tops. Her hair is in an intricate braid, with strands weaving in and out in a pattern I can't follow, while her face is free of makeup. I've never seen a more stunning woman in my life.

As if she has some kind of magnetic pull on me, I step in close and slide my knuckles down her cheek. Her breath rushes out as her eyes flutter closed. Relief floods me, seeing how much I affect her, knowing I didn't build this all up in my head. Unable to resist myself, I lean down and place the barest of kisses on her parted lips.

It's like a switch flips in Meadow the moment our lips touch. Her hands clasp behind my neck as she takes over the kiss, plastering her body to mine. I groan as her tongue slips into my mouth, her taste flooding my senses. Walking her backwards into the living room, I pin her to the wall, then bend down to scoop her up. I wrap her legs around my waist, never breaking contact with her mouth.

My hands are everywhere as I try to get closer to her. Finally, I find a strap behind her neck and tug it, which spills her creamy tits into my waiting hands. I've never been this confident with a woman this fast, but something about Meadow breaks all of my walls down. Gliding my fingers over her chest, I play with her nipples until they're stiff between my fingertips. Kissing my way down her neck, I suck one into my mouth while Meadow grinds her hot center on my throbbing dick.

If I'm not careful, I'm going to come in my pants like a horny teenager. Before I really have to worry about blowing my load, Meadow throws her head back as she cries out. Her legs tense around my waist as her body convulses around me. I move back and forth between her exposed breasts, nipping, licking, and sucking as she rides out her orgasm until she pushes my head from her chest.

"Shit. That was not why I asked you to come over." She worries her bottom lip, making me want to bite it.

"It might not have been the reason, but I'm not mad at all about what just happened. But please, for all things holy, tell me River isn't here. I don't think I can face her after how loud you were just now or with my cock this hard." I thrust into her center to emphasize how much making her come turns me on.

Meadow smiles contently at me, her breast still hanging out, as she plays with the hair at the nape of my neck as if we have all the time in the world. I suppose it feels that way to her since she's sated.

"River is at *Once Upon a Tattoo* so that we could talk, which we really need to do." She winces, the blissed-out expression from a minute ago fading and being replaced with worry.

"Hey, whatever you need to say to me, it will be alright."

"How do you know that?" She won't look at me as she tucks her chest away, but I can hear the worry in her voice.

"Meadow." I guide her eyes to my face. "I'm not sure, but I feel it in my bones. I'm not gonna lie; I thought you were a bit off your rocker that night when you wouldn't give me your number and said to leave it up to fate, but now I know we would've found our way back to each other one way or another. This pull between us feels magnetic. Like even if we tried to fight it, we couldn't."

"You feel it too?" The hope in her eyes has a smile spreading across my face.

"I do."

"Okay." She blows out a steadying breath before releasing her legs and sliding down my body, but she grabs my hand so that we don't lose our connection. "Umm, I really do have something important to talk to you about. Do you want to sit in here or go outside? Do you need anything to drink?"

"In here's fine. Come on." I tug her towards the couch as I fight the worry building in my chest. I sit down and resist the urge to pull her into my lap.

Meadow sits beside me, her body turned to me as she worries that bottom lip again.

Using my thumb, I pull it from her teeth. "Meadow, you're starting to worry me. You said you were okay, but if you're sick or need my help somehow, just tell me. I know we barely know each other, but I will do whatever I can to help you."

"No, I'm not sick. I-I'm pregnant."

Holy. Shit.

"You're pregnant?" I whisper as my hand reaches out to caress her belly, and sure enough, there's a small bump there that I definitely don't remember from our brief night together.

Meadow is shorter, soft, and curvy, but her stomach was flat the last time we were together. It was strong as hell too. I

remember her telling me about being a certified yoga instructor and talking about the importance of core strength, and then demonstrating that she was strong as hell even though she had a layer of fluff—her term, not mine. The definition is still there, but there's absolutely a distinct roundness to her lower abdomen that wasn't there before.

"And it's mine?" I try to keep the hope from my voice and the smile from my face, but judging from the tears in her eyes and a smile of her own, I've failed miserably.

"Yes, it's your—"

I don't even wait for her to finish talking before I grab her by the waist, pull her onto my lap, and slam my mouth on hers. Tears cascade down her cheeks as I kiss her, and I can only hope they're tears of joy for the life we've created.

Pulling back to stare into her eyes, I don't try to hide my smile anymore. "I know we hardly know each other and a baby definitely will complicate things, but I'm not even remotely mad about this, Meadow. I don't know what this means for us, or what you want to do, but I want our baby and would prefer to raise it together with you. Not as co-parents, though. I know we have a lot to figure out, but I promise I will be by your side through it all."

"Are you sure? I know you're a great person, Colt, but a baby is a lot of work. We really don't know each other at all. What if I end up driving you nuts with my hippie-dippy BS, as River so kindly calls it? I can be *a lot* to handle. I think we should try to get to know each other before we worry about an *us* if that's okay?"

No, that's not fucking okay. I want Meadow, damn it. I want Meadow and River, and I really fucking want our baby. But I also understand where she's coming from. Hell, probably more than most. I'm the logical guy who makes informed decisions. I don't jump in feet first, based off of emotions, a feeling, or my gut. But when it comes to Meadow Sterling, I want to do just that.

Blowing out a breath, I try to find the calm that I rely on every day for my job. "If that's what you want, then I'll have to be okay with it. But can I ask you not to completely write us off just yet? You're all I've thought about since you walked out of my life that night. I've looked for you everywhere I've gone since then, hoping you'd come back to me, like you said we would if fate let it be. So, will you at least keep an open mind?"

"Yeah, Colt, I will."

"Thank you, Dow. Can I ask some questions?"

"Of course. I have a few of my own."

"Alright, you go first." I readjust her so that she's sitting beside me again, even though I fucking hate it.

Thankfully, she keeps hold of my hand. "You did use a condom that night, right?"

A flush fills my face, then I feel all the blood drain. *Shit. This all is my fault.* I fucked up, and because of it, we're going to have a baby. Although, I can't really say I'm upset about that, but I hate that I took that choice from Meadow.

Running a hand down my face, I swallow, then square my shoulders to tell Meadow the truth. "Yes, I used a condom, but, umm, in my haste to be in you and not keep you waiting, I started to put it on the wrong way. You are hands down the most stunning woman I have ever seen in my life. I was struggling to get the condom on, distracted that you really wanted me, when I realized I had it on inside out. In my lust-addled brain, I took it off, flipped it, and we picked up where we left off, you none the wiser what a putz I was. If I had to hypothesize, I'd say that my pre-ejaculate was on the condom that then entered you when we had sex.

"This is all my fault. I'm so fucking sorry, Meadow. I hope you can forgive me someday."

"You're already forgiven, Colt. Shit happens. I had River when I was seventeen because I was ill-informed about sex-ed. We're having this sweet little bean because their daddy was so infatuated with their mommy that he made a mistake. Mistakes happen. It's how you handle the fallout that matters, and so far, you're handling this beautifully."

Tears fill my eyes, not only because Meadow is a fucking saint for forgiving me but due to her calling me "daddy". I am going to be someone's daddy, and hearing it for the first time is kind of blowing my mind.

My hand reaches out and rubs Meadow's belly as the tears fall freely down my face. "Say it again," I rasp out.

"You're forgiven, Colton."

"No, the other part."

"What other... Oh, their daddy."

Key the floodgates. I couldn't stop them if I wanted to.

Fucking hell.

Meadow gave me the greatest gift without even realizing what it would mean to me. I've always felt a bit alone, never quite fitting in anywhere, but that all changed the moment I met Meadow. Not only with our baby but with how at ease she makes me feel and how much I already adore River.

"When did you find out? How did you find out? Have you been to the doctor yet?"

"I found out today. River actually figured it out and staged a whole intervention this morning with Wren and Daphne. Those are my best friends and also the women I work with at Once Upon a Tattoo. Wren recorded my reaction when I checked the test. If you let me get up, I can go get my phone. And since I just found out today, I haven't been to the doctor yet."

"I'd love to see the video, but can you just stay here with me for a bit? I'm not ready to break our bubble."

"Of course. I have to call the midwife tomorrow to set up an appointment, but I would love for you to be involved however little or much you'd like."

"I want to be there for it all. Every appointment. Count me in, okay?"

"Great." Meadow beams at me, the relief over me wanting to be involved evident on her face.

"Okay, shifting gears, but is River's dad in the picture? She's fucking brilliant, Dow, and I honest to God love our conversations and getting to know her. I would like to be able to continue to do that, especially outside of work now, with the baby on the way. That said, I don't want her—or him—to feel like I'm trying to step into shoes that aren't mine to fill, if you know what I mean. At least, not at this point in time."

"He's not around. He signed over his rights as soon as she was born, and I haven't seen him since then. He thought it was cool to bag the hot, weird hippie girl who grew up in a commune, until he realized I didn't have much of a sex-ed and wound up pregnant because I didn't know what he meant when he asked if I was covered and if he could go without."

"What a fucking prick. He's an idiot, but his loss is my gain. You Sterling women are amazing."

"So, where do we go from here?"

"Well, can I take you and River out to dinner tonight? Just as friends until you say otherwise. But I'd like to get to know the mother of my baby and their big sister a little better. I'd like to be around as much as you girls are willing to have me or until you get sick of me, if that's okay?"

"That sounds perfect to me."

"Great. What do you say about walking to the shop to ask River how she feels about having dinner at *The Tavern* with us, and then maybe we can come back here and watch a movie or something?"

"Honestly, that sounds like the best night, Colt."

"Good. Go get ready. I'll wait here."

Meadow jumps up from the couch, and it takes everything in me not to follow her. Now that I have a minute in her space, my eyes are bouncing all over the place as I take everything in. Not a single piece of furniture matches, yet it all feels like they were made for each other. I hope that, although neither of us planned for this, we can mesh our lives together as perfectly as Meadow's mismatched living room.

Chapter Nine

Meadow

Walking to the shop with Colt by my side should have me filled with anxiety, but knowing we've found our way back to each other has a sense of peace flowing through me. We make small talk for a bit, but we are also comfortable in the silence we share. It isn't until we're walking down Main Street that the reality of introducing him to the girls sets in, along with my nerves.

"Okay, so I should probably warn you that you're about to walk into the lion's den." I nervously play with the rings on my hand as I avoid Colton's eyes.

"Meadow..."

I finally stop my fidgeting when his hand gently pries mine apart and links our fingers together. I suck in a breath as he raises them to his lips and gently kisses the back of my hand. A shaky breath escapes me as Colton sweetly smiles down at me.

"I'd be a little worried if I walked into those doors and was welcomed with open arms. These are your best friends—who are like your sisters—and your daughter, and I'm the guy who knocked you up. I know I'm going to have a lot to prove, but I'm up for the challenge."

Staring into Colton's eyes, I can tell how sincere he is. With a deep, centering breath, I push open the front door of the shop and smile when I see my girl sitting at the front counter.

"Hello, my sweet daughter."

River puts down the book she's reading, and looks up at Colton and me with a critical eye. "Hi, Mom and Mr. Harding." Her brows furrow.

"You can call me Colton or Colt if we're outside of school. Or if you want to stick with Mr. Harding, that's fine too. Whatever you're comfortable with."

"Hmm, I think I like Colt. No offense, but I'd like to differentiate your two roles in my life."

"None taken. And whatever you need to do to feel comfortable, I'm okay with." He turns to me as if he made a mistake, before rushing ahead. "I mean, as long as you and your mom are okay with it."

"I'm fine with that, Colt. You two have your own relationship outside of ours. I want it to be as natural as it was before this bomb dropped." I run my hand over my small baby bump.

"So, what *is* your relationship? Are you two dating, or?" Leave it to my girl not to hold back her curious nature.

"Well, I—" Colt's bumbling and blush are adorable, but I can't let him suffer for long.

"Yes, we are." I know I told Colt we need to take things slow and get to know each other, but I don't see why we can't do that while we're together.

The smile that spreads on Colton's face is worth me springing this on him. He tugs me close to his side, letting go of my hand so that he can put his arm around me, then places a gentle kiss on my forehead. I can't stop my sigh as I sink into his embrace.

"Hmm, you might be more like your mother than you realize, punk. I think that gut of yours might be right." Wren's voice sounds cynical even though I can tell she's being sincere and complimenting River.

I look up to see Colt smiling down at me.

"Ready to introduce me to your friends, Dow?"

Nodding, I turn towards Wren and tug Colton over to meet her.

"Wren, this is Colton. Colton, this is Wren, one of my best friends and the owner of this shop."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Wren. Meadow spoke highly of you, your business, and your work ethic when we first met."

"Did she, now? Funny, since today was the first day she ever mentioned you." Wren releases Colton's handshake and crosses her arms, one brow raised as she gives him shit.

"Wren..."

"Well, it is. It's not my fault you kept your interlude hush hush."

"Oh my god, Wren. Leave them alone." Daphne blushes on my behalf as she hip-checks Wren on her way from the hallway into the lobby.

"Hi, I'm Colton. You must be Daphne. It's a pleasure to meet you." He reaches out a hand, not even giving me a chance to make the introduction this time.

"Hi, Colton. So nice to meet you as well."

"So, what brings you two in? I honestly didn't expect to see you." Wren wiggles her eyebrows at us, which makes Daphne and Colton blush, me groan, and River mimic puking.

"Child, I love you, but please don't make that noise," I beg as my stomach rolls.

"Sorry, Mom."

"Are you okay? Can I get you something? Do you need to sit down? Have you been getting sick often?" Colton has me turned towards him as he assesses me from head to toe.

"Calm down, Colt. I'm fine. I don't need anything right now. I've been super nauseous, but I've only thrown up a handful of times, so I suppose I'm lucky. Although, hearing my lovely daughter mimic the sound is not helping me." I mock glare at River, who throws her hands up in surrender.

"I said I was sorry."

"I know. I'm just teasing. Colt and I were actually coming to see if we could steal River to go get some food at *The Tavern* if we aren't too busy here and she's up for it."

"I mean, you know I won't turn down food, especially Mav's."

"I'm cool with it. You know the brainiac had all of my admin shit done in the first fifteen minutes she was here and the schedule squared away for the week, so it's not like she really has to do anything other than answer the phone or wait on walk-ins. Besides, we close in a little bit, so it's not like we'll have much foot traffic anyways." Wren shrugs.

"Great. You ready to go now, sweets?"

"Sure."

"It was nice meeting you both. I'd love to get to know you and for you to know me better. Maybe we can do dinner sometime? If you have significant others, they could join us."

"Fuck yeah. Brooks will love having another intellectual around." Wren raises a fist to bump Colton's while Daphne backhands her.

"Hey, what about Ezra? He's no slouch," Daph defends.

"Honestly, he's probably got the prof in the brains department," River teases, knowing she can bait Wren.

"Hey, punk. Just because you two speak your weird techy language does not mean Ezra is smarter than Brooks."

"Alright, kids. We can fight about this later," I dive in or else River and Wren will keep going rounds.

Who would've known that, even though River hasn't had any siblings up to this point, she'd still learn how to fight like she does with her pseudo aunt, who acts more like a teenager than she does half the time. It should drive me nuts, but I love that Wren can bring out the kid in River and make her act her age. Half the time, I think she does it on purpose just to make sure River remembers that she *is* still a kid.

We say goodbye again, hug a million more times, then finally head out of the shop and down the street to *The Tavern* to get some grub. Not only is the beer delicious, but Maverick is a genius with food and has tons of vegetarian options available. He even makes his own veggie burgers that are to die for and sells them to me so I can make them at home. Although, if this pregnancy is anything like the one with River, and breakfast was any inclination, I don't know if I will be sticking to my vegetarian diet.

Making our way into the bar, we find a table off to the side and settle in. Our server comes over, and gets us started with some drinks and appetizers, while we decide what we want for our meals.

"I've only eaten here a handful of times, but it's always blown my mind. What are your favorites?" Colton looks at us expectantly.

"I love anything Maverick makes. I'm really not a picky eater at all. I usually get some kind of meat while we're here since Mom's a vegetarian. She'll buy it for at home for me, but I know she hates the way it smells and hates cooking it, so I usually stick to eating it when we go out or at school."

"That's super considerate of you, River. So, I'm assuming you've had their burgers?"

"Oh, yeah. Maverick did one over the summer that had some kind of Cajun seasoning, with a creamy goat cheese and homemade hot pepper jelly that was to die for. Add in his homemade potato chips and ranch, and I would've been happy to eat here every day."

"That does sound really good. I wonder if it's still on the menu," Colt muses as he flips through his menu, searching for the burgers.

"It's probably up on the chalkboard if it is. These have what Mav offers year round, but then he does seasonal menus that are

displayed throughout the bar." I point to a large chalkboard behind the bar, where Mav puts his latest creations.

"How the hell did I miss that the last time I was in?" Colt flares his eyes, making me wonder if this "last time" was when he was here with me.

"Maverick also has a really good veggie burger that Mom usually gets. He spoils her and lets her buy the patties to take home and make them."

"Hey, perks of being friends with him and working on his ink." I wink at my daughter.

"That's pretty cool. I'm sure you have a lot of interesting stories from your years of being a tattoo artist. Is that what you've always done?"

"That's what I've done to pay the bills since I learned about tattooing and started my apprenticeship in college."

"Mom's a master crafter. She can pretty much make anything. She made all of our jewelry. And I don't just mean stringing beads on the wire. She handmakes the beads with clay and glass. She also makes a ton of our clothes, grows most of our food, and makes all of our soaps. I've been trying to get her to open an online shop for years, to sell her wares, but she hasn't taken the plunge yet."

"You made all of these?" Colton's voice sounds amazed as he plays with the beads on my bangle.

"Yep. It wasn't hard. I've been doing it since I was little. Everyone had a job on the commune when I was growing up. I have always helped in the garden since I have a green thumb, but my mom also saw early on that I was a creative. She introduced me to all sorts of media and encouraged me to explore art. I used a lot of my skills to sell trinkets and whatnot at vendor fairs and craft shows."

"That's really impressive, Meadow." Colton smiles as he continues to examine my arm full of bracelets.

"That's not even the half of it. An art professor saw her stuff at one of the shows and paid for her to go to a very exclusive art camp one summer, where she won a full-ride scholarship to attend the Maryland Institute of Art." River proudly beams at me.

"Wow. That's a very prestigious art school and a very impressive accomplishment. I'm curious, how did you like those classes versus coming from the commune, where I'm assuming you were homeschooled?"

"Yes, I was homeschooled. The only classes that were truly overwhelming for me were the gen eds that all schools require. There were so many students in those classes, and it was so regimented. My first year was a struggle in terms of acclimating, not to mention that I was younger than most of the students and very different from them."

"You were younger?"

"Mom's not quite as smart as us, but she's pretty close."

"River, nobody is as smart as you," I admonish, but she can't be deterred.

"She took 28 credits in the first semester of her freshman year, to prove that not only did she belong but she could handle the course load. She had to have special permission to take that many classes, but the dean was willing to test her abilities to see if they matched her standardized test scores. She passed that semester with a 4.0 GPA, even with finding out she was pregnant with me."

"Damn, Dow. That's insane." Colton stares at me wide eyed as I try to hide my embarrassment.

I've never loved being in the spotlight for my brain. Sure, it's great being smart, and able to know how to manage money and be a responsible adult, but I value kindness and being a good person over how smart a person is. It's why I try to instill so many of my beliefs in River. Her big brain is amazing, and I know she's going to do wonderful things someday; I just hope she uses it for the good of many instead of the good of a few.

I'm about to shift the conversation when I'm saved by the waitress delivering our food.

"I've got two of your orders, and Maverick's coming with the third. When he found out it was for you, young lady, he took over and said he has something special for you." The waitress winks at River, who blushes furiously.

My girl is a little foodie and isn't afraid to try anything. When the big bad biker, Maverick, found this out, he spent an entire evening picking her brain about what she liked and what she would love to try. He was putty in my daughter's hands, and now, I'm pretty sure my girl's got a crush on the man who loves nothing more than spoiling her with his culinary excellence.

Colton and I both got burgers. He got the one River was telling him about while I got a rise & shine veggie burger with bacon on the side. I'm just about to take a bite of my burger, but I can't help but stare at Colton's. Why my body craves meat while I'm pregnant is beyond me, but I'm really regretting my veggie burger.

Eyeing me staring at his burger, Colt pulls my plate to him. He cuts both our burgers in half, adds bacon to the veggie burger, gives me half of his and takes half of mine, then slides my plate back. Picking up my veggie burger, he takes a big bite then sends me a wink.

With teary eyes—because why wouldn't I cry when the man is sweet and gives me the food he was so excited for?—I pick up the half of the burger Colton gave me and take a huge bite. The flavors hit my tongue, and instead of being repulsed like I normally would be, a moan falls from my lips.

"Holy shit. Why is this so good?" I mumble through a mouthful of food, right as Maverick makes it to the table with River's plate.

Staring at me as I devour a burger that is not the veggie one he always makes me, Maverick raises a brow at me in question.

Grabbing a napkin off the table, I wipe the grease from my mouth as I swallow my bite.

"I'm sure this is very strange to you, but when I'm pregnant, I can't seem to get enough." I hold the burger up and shrug.

Maverick's eyes go wide as I inhale another bite. It's hard not to laugh as his eyes bounce from the burger, to my stomach and back, before they finally settle on Colton. He crosses his arms and glares. In this moment, I get what the Wilson sisters mean about Maverick and his role as the protector.

"Maverick Sanders, do not look at Colton like that. This baby may not have been planned, but he is a good man and is going to do right by all three of us," I huff out, snapping Maverick's attention back towards me.

"Fucking hell." He runs a hand down his face as River and I laugh, and Colton relaxes beside me. "You better treat them both like the queens they are, you hear?" Maverick nods to me and River as he stares down Colton.

"Don't worry. I will. I know what a gift Meadow and River are, and I'm so fucking excited about this baby. They're safe with me. I promise."

"Good. Keep it that way," Maverick grumbles as he storms off.

"So, what are the chances that we'll make it through the whole meal without one of the Wilson sisters showing up?" I tease as I look at River.

"I'd say it's very likely all three will be here before we finish," River states matter-of-factly.

"Umm, who are the Wilson sisters again?"

"They're our friends. Maverick is married to Spencer, the oldest. Then there's Chayse, who is married to Cash, and last is Emerson, who is hell-on-wheels and married to Axle. They're all pretty badass in their own respect, and they welcomed Wren, Daph, Riv, and me with open arms when we moved here."

"Hmm, I'm excited to meet them."

"You say that now, but when they descend—along with my aunt Wren—chaos usually ensues. They're wild." River's eyes widen.

I laugh, knowing how rowdy our group can be, especially for my little introvert. "I mean, she's not wrong, but Riv's also an introvert at heart. Usually, she and Daph seek solace in the corner while the rest of us let loose. If we hurry up and eat, we might be able to sneak out before they get here and head home to watch a movie or something. Would that be okay with you, Riv?"

"Sure. Maybe I can show Colt my robotics project from camp."

"Is that the one that won you the scholarship?" Colton's eyes light up.

"The one and the same."

"I'm game. Eat up. I can't wait to see it." Colt shovels a bite into his mouth, making River and me laugh.

If he were any other man, I'd think he was just trying to put on a show for River. But as we continue to eat, I watch her light up as he asks her questions about the project and him smile as she gets animated about a subject she loves.

Before tonight, if someone had asked me if I was happy with my life, my answer would have been yes. But sitting here, seeing my daughter warm up to the father of my baby, I know now that there was something—or rather someone—missing for a while. I'm not sure what our future is going to look like, but if it's nights like this, I can't wait to experience all the many more to come.

Chapter Ten

Colton

It's been a week since I found out Meadow is pregnant, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around everything. We were successfully able to sneak out of *The Tavern* before anyone interrupted the rest of our dinner, then went back to Meadow's, where River showed me her project and we watched a movie. I earned some major brownie points when I was able to recite several lines of *The Princess Bride*, thanks to my sisters.

I've spent every night since then with the Sterling girls, getting to know them better and learning how I can fit into their lives. What I've figured out is that they are both extremely self-sufficient and don't know how to handle my help very well. They aren't mean or rude about it, but it's almost like they forget I'm around and can be an active member of their team. It's frustrating as fuck at times, but I know we all need a little more time to get used to things.

While my evenings have been flying by, the days have been dragging.

It's finally Friday, which I'm grateful for. Not only do Meadow and I have the first appointment for the baby this afternoon, but I am also going to be shadowing Mr. Hart's class today. He's been trying to dodge me, but Ms. Sanchez made sure he couldn't get out of me sitting in on his AP physics class today.

Grabbing a notebook, pen, and my tablet, I make my way to the second floor, where all the science classes are held. It's slow going wading through the students that just let out of class, but I don't mind getting to interact with them on their turf.

I finally make it to the room and find a very hostile Mr. Hart ignoring me as I wait by the door for the rest of the students to file in, so I can figure out where he'd like me to sit.

"Hey, Mr. Harding."

"Hi, River. How's your day going?"

"Better now," she says with a glint of mischief in her eyes.

"I'd have to agree with you there."

"Are you going with my mom to the appointment this afternoon?"

"I wouldn't miss it." I smile, my excitement shining through.

River has been equally excited about the baby, which makes me relieved. It wouldn't be unreasonable for her to be upset about her mom having another child, especially with someone who works at her school, but she's been so supportive and involved. She really is unlike any teenager I've met.

"Are you going to be around tonight to hear how it goes?"

"Umm..." She bites her lips as her cheeks flush. "I don't think so. My friend, Brantley, is coming to visit tonight. I think we're going to go for a hike and to *The Tavern* for dinner."

"Brantley... Does he go to school here?"

"No, he lives about half an hour away. I met him at camp this summer."

"Is his last na—"

"Alright, class. Let's get settled down. As you can see, Mr. Harding is going to sit in on our class today. Apparently, he likes to take a hands-on approach at his job and is going to be observing us." The disdain dripping from his voice is apparent to everyone in the room, but I choose to ignore it.

"Hi, all. Don't mind me. I just like to get a feel of the classes and teachers, in case you all need help, so I can make sure I can assist you to the best of my ability. Just ignore me."

"You can sit back at one of the lab tables." Mr. Hart nods towards the back of the room.

I make my way there and settle in for the lecture. The AP classes are block scheduled, so they are the length of two regular classes, which gives me more time to observe Mr. Hart. The lecture starts out alright, but it's not long until I see what River

means about Mr. Hart overcomplicating his lesson plans. I've only made it about an hour into the class, and I already know I've seen enough.

His teaching style is ineffective at best. It's no wonder his kids bomb his classes. I did some digging, like River had suggested, and found all of his prior test scores to be lacking, but then there was a huge difference after she'd shared her notes for the most recent test. Once I brought that information to Ms. Sanchez, it provided the push I needed for Mr. Hart to let me into his classroom.

Catching movement in the corner of my eye, I turn to see River looking at me. She widens her eyes before rolling them. Unfortunately, Mr. Hart catches our exchange.

"Miss Sterling, is there something you'd like to add?" I can tell Mr. Hart thinks he caught River messing around, but the gleam in her eyes before she turns back to Mr. Hart has me a bit terrified for him.

"On which point? That you're grossly overcomplicating entropy, or that your explanation is inaccurate?"

"I can assure you that it is not inaccurate." Hart glares at River, who smirks back at him.

I wish there was some way I could whip out my phone, and record this for Meadow and the girls to see. River is one of the most respectful kids I've ever met. She's also usually on the reserved side around people who aren't in her inner circle, but right now, there's a fire shining in her that is spectacular. Remembering I have my tablet, I prop it open and start recording, but make sure it's muted so Mr. Hart doesn't realize what I'm doing—not that he'd notice since he's too busy trying to intimidate River, which is starting to piss me off.

"Would you like me to not only simplify your lesson but also explain to you where you're incorrect? It would be my pleasure." River smiles sweetly, but it's anything but innocent.

"By all means. I'll be glad to show you the error of your ways when you're done."

Covering my own smile, I sit back and watch River school this tool-bag. As soon as Hart started his lesson, I could see that River called it right in that he's a pompous ass. I wasn't paying attention to the lecture before he caught her, but now that she pointed out his calculations are incorrect, I can see where he fucked it up.

River is now at the front of the class, giving a full-blown lecture. Her classmates are furiously taking notes as she beautifully explains entropy and shows step by step how to properly equate the entropy of a gas. You could hear a pin drop when she gets to the part where Hart miscalculated the equation, and River explains his mistake and why it's an easy one to make. When she's done, she hands the dry-erase marker back to him before heading back to her seat.

I shoot River a wink when she looks my way, feeling proud as fuck of her. Hart is standing at the front of the room, fuming as he looks over River's breakdown of his equation but unable to dispute that he fucked it up and she did it accurately.

Stopping my recording, I tuck my tablet away before Hart realizes I had it out and recorded the entire interaction.

The rest of the lecture is painful as fuck to endure. Hart is huffy and making even less sense than he was before River took him down a peg. He's so distracted that he ends up giving the class the last half hour to start their homework while he works on grading papers for another class. I know everyone's human and makes mistakes, but I'm itching to get my hands on more of his lesson plans to see how else he's fucking up.

When class is over, I gather my things and make my way to the front of the room. "Thanks for letting me sit in. I think I'll be able to better assist your students moving forward."

"I'm sure you loved that, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come off it. Your little pet proving me wrong. It was a simple mistake that anyone could make."

Raising my hands, I look as innocent as possible. "No judgement from me, but I don't think talking about River—or any student—like that is acceptable. You fucked it up and called her out to prove you wrong. If you don't want her to put you in your place, don't challenge her. She's smarter than any of us could ever dream of being.

"Hell, if you were smart, you'd ask her for her input. Her mind is brilliant, and she has a knack for making the complicated seem simple. She could be an asset to you rather than the target you keep trying to paint her as. Leave her alone, Hart," I growl out as I take a step back, not realizing how close we got.

I've never been one to want to punch first and talk later, but I'd love nothing more than to knock this dickhead out. Feeling a tug on my sleeve, I turn to find an anxious River waiting a few steps behind me.

"Hey, Riv. Which way you heading?"

"Lunch." She's quiet, the anxiety of my confrontation with Hart weighing heavily on her.

"Care if I walk with you? I'm starving."

She shrugs, so I gesture for her to head down the hall and follow her.

"I'm sorry, Co— Mr. Harding. I didn't mean to cause any drama for you."

Stopping River, I turn her to face me. "River, you have nothing to apologize for. You were completely right about Mr. Hart. He's a pompous ass and should not be teaching. And you know you're not my 'pet', or anything dirty, like he implied. You're fucking brilliant, Riv."

River smirks at me swearing in school as she looks around to see if anyone is paying attention.

"Oh, and I got you schooling the ass that recorded on my tablet so you can show your mom and aunts. I have a feeling Wren is going to be extremely proud of you."

"No way! Can you send it to me?"

"Sure, I'll email it to you after lunch."

"Thanks, Mr. Harding."

We've made it to the cafeteria and are about to head our separate ways when I remember her mentioning a Brantley earlier.

"Hey, is Brantley's last name Cole?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

With a laugh, I run my hand through my hair. "Educated guess. He's my nephew."

"Seriously?!"

"As a heart attack. Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

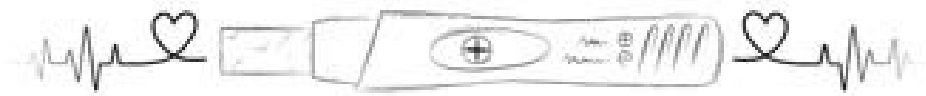
"Don't mention I'm the baby's father. He's coming into town tomorrow, with his family, my other sister and her family, and my parents. Meadow was supposed to tell you tonight that we're all going to have dinner at *The Tavern* so I can tell them."

"Umm..." River bites her lip as she fidgets with her bracelet, just like her mama. "Well, I told him my mom was pregnant and that it was to someone who worked at my school, but I didn't tell him your name. But you know he's pretty smart, so I wouldn't be surprised if he figured it out and just didn't want to say anything until he saw me."

"It's fine, Riv. Just ask him to keep it quiet until tomorrow for me, and tell him his uncle owes him."

"Will do." She smiles then heads off to grab food while I grab a salad.

I meet with Principal Sanchez after lunch and go over how Hart's class went. I'm even more glad I recorded his fit with River when Sanchez asks to see it. She doesn't want to make any moves as of yet but states this will be helpful when the time is right. She's pissed when I tell her about River being my "pet" and says that it will be addressed immediately.



Before I know it, It's time to leave to meet Meadow at her appointment. The drive to the doctor's office feels like it takes forever, when it's in fact only a few minutes. I pull in and sigh with relief when I see Meadow waiting for me by the stairs. I park my car, then jog across the parking lot to scoop Meadow up into my arms. The kiss I lay on her lips is indecent for public, but I can't resist her.

"Well, hello to you." She smiles, her voice still breathy from my kiss.

"Sorry, I just couldn't resist you. I love River, but there's no way I can kiss you like that in front of her."

"Ha ha," Meadow's melodic laughter rings out. "I'm sure she appreciates that. You know, we can have alone time any time we want."

"I know, but I also love hanging out with her. It's only when I want my hands on you that I struggle, which is quite often if I'm being honest. You're irresistible, especially the more you show with our little nugget."

"Aww, you say the sweetest things to me, Colt. Come on. Let's go meet our baby."

We make our way into the office, where Meadow checks in. She's busy filling out paperwork while we wait for them to call her name. She leaves a good chunk blank because she's unsure when her last missed period was since her cycle is irregular. Being the nerd that I am, I researched pregnancy and any information on it I could get my hands on so that I could be prepared when the time for her appointments came.

"Meadow," the nurse calls her name, and we both follow her into a room in the back.

They get Meadow's weight and pass her a cup to pee in before directing her to the bathroom. I wait for her outside, then follow Meadow and the nurse to the room to wait for the doctor, who is running about fifteen minutes behind. The nurse advises Meadow to get undressed from the waist down before leaving us flushed and alone in the room.

"Do you want me to turn around, or..."

"It's nothing you haven't seen before." She smiles devilishly as she drops her skirt and slides her lace panties down her legs.

My cock instantly gets hard as my pulse races, and when my eyes find Meadow, the need in hers about sends me to my knees.

"Dow, quit looking at me like that, baby."

"I'm sorry. I can't help it. Did you know that a side effect of pregnancy can be horniness?"

"Meadow," I growl out a warning as she rubs her thighs together.

"Please, Colt. I need you."

"Fucking hell. You need to be quiet and this needs to be quick. Sit down and put your legs in the stirrups."

"Yes, sir," she sasses but does as I say.

Dropping to my knees, I spread her open with my thumbs and find her glistening and swollen. She wasn't kidding about needing me. Not wanting her to be aching, I lean forward and lick her up through her slit to her clit, then suck it into my mouth.

"Oh, shit." She moans too loudly.

"Quiet, Dow. Or I'll have to stop."

Nodding, she covers her mouth with her hands as I dive back in.

I don't take my time but rather dive in like I'm starving. I lap and suck her as my fingers thrust into her hot heat. Within minutes, Meadow's walls flutter and her hot center grips my fingers. She's dripping down my hand. With one final suck to her clit, Meadow tips over the edge. Her legs shake as her orgasm rips through her body. I slow my thrusts and sit back to watch the bliss spread across her face.

"Fucking hell, Meadow. I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful." Leaning closer, I lick every drop of her release. I can smell her on me, and I'm sure the room smells of sex, but I don't care as long as my girl's feeling better.

Sitting back on my knees, I push myself to stand, then make my way to the sink to wash my hands and face. I've just finished and made my way over to sit in the chair off to the side, by Meadow, when there's a knock at the door.

"Come in," Meadow calls, her face and chest still flushed from her release.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Avery, and I'll be one of your physicians for your pregnancy. There are two others who work out of our office that you'll meet throughout your pregnancy." Dr. Avery is a petite blonde in her mid-forties, with kind eyes and a nice smile.

"Hi, I'm Meadow, and this is Colt. It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you both. So, it says here you're unsure of how far along you are. Is that correct?"

"Umm, yes. I think I'm around four months, but my cycle has always been sporadic, so it's hard to pin down."

"No worries. We can do an ultrasound today and take some measurements. Do you want to know the sex of the baby or are interested in any genetic testing?"

Meadow looks at me, her brows furrowed.

"I'm fine either way, Dow. You know my brain is analytical, and I love having any and all the information I can get, but if those aren't things you're interested in, then I'm okay not knowing."

"Do we have time to talk more about the tests?" she asks as she worries her lip.

"Of course. And if you have any concerns, I can talk you through those."

"Okay, great."

"So, I'm going to do an internal exam real quick. We'll grab the doppler to hear the heartbeat, and then I'll get you guys upstairs to get that ultrasound. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." I can't hide my excitement.

Meadow looks embarrassed as hell as Dr. Avery does her internal examination, but luckily for my girl, she's a professional and doesn't mention anything that'd give away what we got up to before she came in.

"Alright, Dad. You ready to hear the heartbeat?" Dr. Avery smiles at me as she squeezes blue goo onto Meadow's stomach.

There's some static, then the best sound I've ever heard in my life. Our baby's heart is strong as it beats fast and steadily. Tears flood my eyes as my hand grips Meadow's tighter. Looking down, I see tears rolling down her face too.

"That's our baby," I whisper as I lean down and lay my forehead on Meadow's.

"It sure is."

"And they sound as healthy as can be. Ready to go see them for the first time?" Dr. Avery smiles sweetly as we both nod in the affirmative.

Meadow gets dressed, then we head up to the ultrasound. The entire experience is surreal to me. We find out Meadow is eighteen weeks along and that we can find out the sex of the baby. We don't look but have the tech put it in an envelope, so that River can be the one to tell us if she decides she wants to find out, since Meadow and I are divided.

Heading back to Meadow's house, I'm excited for my family to come to town tomorrow. I know they are going to be shocked but even more excited to add another little one to our family.

River is out when we get to the house, so Meadow and I take full advantage of having some alone time. We order food and curl up on the couch to watch a show. When River gets home, she joins us.

It's almost midnight when I finally shut off the TV. I've got both of my girls on either side of me, and I've never felt more content in my life. I know tomorrow is going to be a big day, but it can only get better from here.

Chapter Eleven

Meadow

"Oh my goddess, I'm going to puke."

"Real puke or metaphorical puke?" River takes a step away from me in the kitchen.

"Honestly, it could go either way. Why did I think it would be a good idea to meet Colt's entire family today?"

"Because you wanted to get it over in one go." Leave it to my girl to pull her punches.

"Right. That seemed like the right idea when Colton brought up meeting his family, but now I'm second-guessing that. What if they don't like me? What if they think I tried to trap him? Not everyone loves babies. What if—"

"*Mom!*" River yells, startling me from my spiral. "They are going to love you, and if they don't like babies, then they're monsters." River hugs me, and at times like these, my annoyance that she's bigger than me fades as her arms wrap tighter around me.

"Thanks, Riv. I needed that hug."

"No problem. I have some information that might make things a little easier on you."

"You do? Is Colt sharing secrets?"

"Nope, but Brantley did."

"Brantley? What does he have to do with this?"

"He's Colton's nephew. Colt and I figured it out the other day at school, when I told him I wouldn't be home last night because I was meeting Brantley to hang out for a bit. When I said he lived half an hour away, Colt made the connection. So, at least you know that you'll get along with one of his sisters."

"Wow, what a small world."

"Right?"

"That is a huge relief. I really liked Jackie. She was super friendly, and I was really looking forward to having them come here for a hike and hang out for a day. Everything with school starting and the baby kind of put that on the backburner, but I'm excited to see her today."

"Good. So, your freakout is over?"

"For now. Thank you, River Fawn. I don't think I could handle this without you. You know you're the best, right?" I give her another squeeze.

"You'd be fine. Besides, there's no way Colton would let them be assholes to you."

"River!"

"What? It's true. And I'm almost fifteen, so don't even start about the swearing. Really, it should be expected with Wren as my aunt."

River's sass has me laughing, knowing she's not wrong. Wren swears like a sailor and doesn't care who's around when she does it. If swearing is the worst I have to worry about with River, I'll take it.

"Alright, I think I'm ready. Wanna walk since it's not that far?"

"Sure." River shrugs, then heads to the front door.

We make it out into the sunny day, and I take a minute to inhale a steadying breath. Fall is starting to descend on Sparrow Falls, and I can't wait. The surrounding area is beautiful, but with all the leaves changing, it's sure to be stunning.

"So, did anyone ask you to homecoming?"

"No. I'm still the weird new girl at school. I don't really know any of the guys my age, and the seniors hardly even notice me. It's fine, though. I don't know if I want to go."

"I'm sorry, Riv. You don't need a date to have fun. What about Brantley?"

River nibbles her lip as she thinks about my question.

Looking more closely at my not-so-little girl, I realize River put more effort into her look today. She's wearing one of the skirts I made her and paired it with a band tee from Wren. It's the perfect blend of boho and punk, and she looks fucking adorable. She's got on light makeup, and her hair has a few intricate braids in it, showing off her beautiful bone structure. I'd love to tell her how gorgeous she looks, but I don't want to fluster her before we get to dinner.

"I don't know why Brantley would want to come to my dance. He has his own to attend."

"That might be true, but it doesn't mean he wouldn't come to yours. Well, unless it's the same weekend. Do you know when his is?"

"It's the weekend after mine." She worries her lip some more.

"Well, it might not hurt to ask, right?"

"I suppose. It's next weekend, and I don't have a dress."

"Pssh, you know that's not an issue. You're too tall for any of my stuff, but I could whip up something for you this week, or I'm sure Daphne has a million dresses in her closet from all of the fundraisers her hag of a mother makes her attend."

"Mom." River laughs, unused to hearing me talk badly about a person, but Daphne's mother is *the worst*. "Daphne's dresses might be a little too much for me."

"I doubt that. Up until the last event she went to with Ezra, all of her dresses were very beautiful but reserved. I'm sure she would have something that could work for you."

"Maybe I'll text her. If she doesn't, you really think you can make me one by next week?"

"Of course I can. Whatever you want to do, we'll make it work."

"Thanks, Mom." River throws her arm over my shoulder and squeezes me, then we leave.

We fall silent as we make it to Main Street, both lost in our heads, fighting our own anxieties. When we make it to *The Tavern*, Brantley and his family are climbing out of their car. He jogs over to River and scoops her up in a hug, which pulls a giggle from her. I try to hide my knowing smirk, but Jackie's eyes meet mine; she's got the same look on her face. I think it's only a matter of time before these two get out of their way to experience their own little romance.

"What a surprise! How are you?" Jackie takes a step closer and wraps me in her arms.

I return the hug, and all of the tension leaves me as I take a step back. I'm startled when a pair of arms lands on my middle until Colt's cologne hits my nose, which instantly relaxes me into him.

"Hi, baby brother. How do you two know each other?"

"I'd ask you the same thing, but River and I made the connection yesterday. I met Meadow a few months ago."

"Okay..." Jackie scrutinizes us, which makes me realize that Colt has his hands on my small baby bump, rubbing it.

"Come on. Mom texted that she's already inside with Stacie. We can do introductions in there so we're not doing it a million times."

"Alright," Jackie agrees, but I can tell she's got her suspicions and there's no way we are making it long without telling everyone our news.

It's still early, so the restaurant isn't busy, which is nice. Not that I'm hiding my pregnancy, but I'd rather not have a huge crowd if this goes poorly.

We make our way over to a table to the side, where an older couple sits with a younger couple and a few kids. Everyone stands, and there are hugs and handshakes as all the introductions are made. Colt's family is lovely and welcoming. Hopefully, they'll still feel that way after our news.

We've all ordered drinks and appetizers when Jackie finally turns to Colt and gives him the look only big sisters can. "Spill it, Colton."

"What do you mean, sis?" To his credit, Colt tries to play coy, but he fails miserably.

"I mean spill the tea. Meadow, are you pregnant?" She turns her gaze on me, making me squirm in my seat as gasps go around the table. Jackie's so focused on me that I can't pull my eyes away to see if they are excited or angry.

"Umm, well..." I know I need to rip off the band aid, but I'm so fucking nervous.

"She is. We're going to have a baby." Colt beams proudly then leans down and places a chaste kiss on my lips as cheers erupt around the table.

The next thing I know, Colton and I are in the middle of a group hug with his sisters and their mother. All of my anxiety and fear melt away as they embrace us and excitedly talk over one another.

"Alright, back up. You're smothering her." Colt pretends to push his sisters away.

Everyone makes their way back to their seats as they all talk over each other. I glance at River, who rolls her eyes then smiles. Brantley has his arm across the back of her chair and tugs her hair after catching our exchange. Her cheeks go pink as he smiles sweetly at her.

"I told you they would be excited," he tells her, catching his mom's attention.

"You little shit! You knew and you didn't tell me!"

"Geeze, Mom. I knew her mom was pregnant but didn't find out until last night that Uncle Colt was the dad. I wasn't about to

spill that surprise when it was theirs to make."

"Ugh, I hate when you logic me." Jackie sticks her tongue out at her son before smiling at him.

I knew I liked her, but today has solidified that for me.

"Okay, I need all the details," Stacie, beside Jackie, gushes. "How long have you two been together? How far along are you?"

When can you find out what you're having?"

"Whoa, sis. This is not an interrogation."

"Oh, shut it, Colton. I'm not interrogating the poor woman. I'm just excited! It's been years since we've had a baby in the family."

"It's fine, Colt. I'm eighteen weeks. We had an ultrasound yesterday, and got to see the baby and hear their heartbeat." I grab the ultrasound pictures from my bag and pass them around the table. "We have an envelope with the gender in it, but Colton and I can't decide if we want to find out or not, so we're leaving that decision up to River."

"What? You guys didn't tell me that."

"Well, your mom was passed out when you got home last night, and I didn't want to tell you without her. You were both practically comatose when I got you up to head to bed, so I figured we'd surprise you today." Colton smiles at my daughter, making my heart melt.

"Hmm, can I think about it? If I do decide to find out, I'd like to find a creative way to do it for you guys. Will you help me?" She turns to Brantley, who nods enthusiastically.

"That sounds like a great plan." I beam at her, loving that she found a safe space in Brantley.

"Alright, so how did you all meet?" Jackie waves her fork between the two of us.

"We actually met here. I was out with my friends for a girls' night out. They all went home, but I wasn't ready yet. Then I saw Colton across the bar and knew he was the reason I felt the pull to stay. My friend's husband owns the place, so he was watching out for me and dropping me off at home that night."

"So, you hit it off right off the bat?" Stacie asks in between bites of her food.

"We did..." I trail off, not sure how to explain we were initially just a hot hook-up and my weird kumbaya outlook on life.

"Meadow enthralled me from the moment she sat down. She's different than anyone I've ever met. When she left that night, she told me that fate would bring us back together if we were meant to be. I think fate gave us the best damn present we could ever get."

"Colton!" I can't believe he basically just told his family we hooked up the first night we met.

"TMI, Mr. H," River chimes in, diffusing my embarrassment and bringing laughter to all the adults and teens at the table as I bury my face in Colt's chest.

"It's okay, honey. We're a very open family and know Colton's not a choir boy." Colt's dad winks at me across the table.

I'm just about to defend Colt when there's a commotion behind me. Turning in my seat, I see Wren, Brooks, Daphne, and Ezra walking up to our table.

"What are you all doing here?"

"Well, my dear Meadow, we figured it was only fair that we got to meet Colton as your family since you're meeting his today," Wren teases from under Brooks's arm.

Jumping from my chair, I pull her out of Brooks's grasp and into my arms. "What about the shop?"

"Neither of us has appointments until later, so we put a sign on the door and posted on our Instagram page. We have the answering machine and can get back to anyone who calls. It will be fine."

"Thank you for coming." My voice wobbles as tears fall down my cheeks. Damn hormones.

"Enough of the waterworks. I have a reputation to uphold, and you know I can't stand to see you cry." Wren wipes the tears from my cheeks.

Colton stands behind me and pulls me into his arms. I burrow into his side, and his lips brush my forehead as he introduces himself to Ezra and Brooks, and thanks them all for coming. We make quick work of pulling up another table to ours as my found family joins us and introductions are made.

"Okay, I need all the details. This dynamic seems interesting." Stacie waves her finger between Wren, Daphne, and me.

"We all bonded a few years ago at a tattoo convention. Women tattoo artists are growing, but we're definitely still in the minority. Wren was hesitant at first. I'm a lot to handle, especially for our gothic grumpy queen. Daphne was quiet, but after catching me reading a romance in between clients, she opened up.

"We spent the rest of that night in my hotel room, drinking cheap wine and discussing our favorite romance books. Our friendship grew from there. We were all from different areas, but we'd make time to get together as much as we could. When Wren told us she found the perfect shop, Daphne and I jumped at the chance to make our dream of working together happen, and here we are."

"I love that so much. Also, what book are you reading right now? I have a million on my TBR, but I'm never opposed to adding more," Jackie gushes.

The rest of the meal is chaotic but fantastic at the same time. Colt hits it off with Brooks and Ezra right away, which brings

me so much comfort. It would be hard if they didn't get along since the guys are such huge parts of my girls' lives. I absolutely adore Colton's sisters and am excited to continue getting to know them.

With a full belly and a roller coaster of emotions, my exhaustion is starting to hit me. I don't even realize I've dozed off on Colt until he gently wakes me to tell me it's time to go home.

"Oh, shoot. Why didn't you wake me?" I scowl at him.

"Because you looked like you could use the rest. You were only out for a few minutes. They understand." He nods towards his sisters, who nod in agreement.

"Growing semen demons is hard work."

"For fuck's sake, Stacie. Really?" Colt groans as we all laugh.

"That's a great one. I need to remember it." Wren leans over to high-five her.

"I'd say everyone is welcome to come back to my house for a little bit, but I need a nap after all the excitement and delicious food. My schedule is a little wonky at the shop, but I'd love to get together again soon if possible."

"Absolutely. We'll get your number from Colt and set something up. Besides, I have a feeling we'll be in Sparrow Falls quite a bit." Jackie nods to the corner where the music machine is. Brantley and River are laughing as they fight to enter the next song.

"Is he going to homecoming?"

"Actually, he told me he wanted to invite River." Her excited smile has my own filling my face.

"Perfect. I was trying to convince her to ask him to hers next weekend. Maybe if he asks first, she will have the courage to ask him. I think she would have a great time with him."

"He can stay with me at my apartment that night so you don't have to worry about him getting home," Colton chimes in.

"That sounds perfect. And River can stay with us. She and Meredith have been talking, so I'm sure she wouldn't mind if River crashed in her room with her. And you won't have to worry about Brantley crossing any lines. He knows consent is important."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that. Becoming a teen mom because of the lack of knowledge of my own body and reproductive system has made me probably too open with River about any and all things sex. She knows how to protect herself but also agrees that she's not ready for that yet, and she will come to me once she is so we can discuss birth control."

"I wish more parents were as open as you two are. I think the girls coming to me for help once they find out they're expecting is one of the hardest parts of my job." Colton sighs.

"I can only imagine. My parents were supportive, but I was away at college when I found out, so I was pretty much on my own. I had a wonderful nurse at our school's clinic, who took me under her wing, and helped me get assistance and everything I needed to care for River while staying in school. I don't know how I would've done it without her."

"You would've figured it out, Dow. I know you would. You're an amazing mother." Colton leans in, cupping my face, and kisses me softly.

"Who knew our little brother could be so swoony?" Stacie stage-whispers to Jackie.

"He's the best." I sigh, a dopey smile on my face.

"Alright. Time to get my girls home. Riv, you ready?" Colt calls out to my daughter, who comes back to the table, Brantley hot on her heels.

"Mom, would it be okay if Brantley stays for a bit? We want to go hike one of the trails."

"That's fine with me if it's alright with his parents."

"We won't be home later to pick you up. You'll have to come home. Sorry, kiddo."

"Brant can stay at my place tonight. Hell, he's practically as big as me now. He can borrow my clothes," Colton chimes in and instantly becomes the hero to the teens, who were previously pouting.

"Fine. We can touch base tomorrow about getting him home."

"Sounds good." Colt smiles at the kids beaming at him.

It takes a few minutes to say goodbye to everyone, but eventually, we make our way out of the restaurant. Colton guides me to his truck, and I sigh with relief. My house isn't far, but I don't have the energy to walk home right now. The kids pile in the back and talk quietly as we head back to my house.

Today went better than I could've imagined. I adore Colton's family and am beyond thrilled that they all got along so well with Daphne and Wren. One day, I'd love for them to meet my folks, but it's damn near impossible to get them to leave the commune, so having the approval of my found family means the world to me. Any doubts I had about making a real go at this with Colton have been obliterated, leaving me full of excitement about what's yet to come.

Chapter Twelve

Colton

Meadow and River meeting my family couldn't have gone any better. I had zero doubts that my family would be anything but supportive and thrilled about the baby, but I hadn't expected my sisters to hit it off with Meadow so well. It was a surprise to find out that Jackie and Meadow had already met, but it made sense with Brantley and River both going to the same science camp.

We made it back to Meadow's house, where she instantly crashed. I let Brantley take my truck, and had him and River promise to text me the location for their hike, just to be safe, before they headed out on the trail. Once I knew the kids were okay, I curled up with Meadow and caught up on some sleep.

We only woke up when the kids got back from their hike, demanding to be fed. Hanging out with River, Brant, and Meadow was one of the most fun nights I've had in a long time. Brantley and I weren't ready to call it a night, but when River and Meadow both started nodding off during the movie, I knew it was time to head out.

"How wild is it that we both met the Sterling women and yet had no idea?" I turn to Brantley, who's deep in thought, as we drive back to his house late Sunday evening.

"It is pretty wild. They're hard to resist. Well, at least River is." His cheeks flush red.

I nod in acknowledgment so he doesn't feel too embarrassed. "You're not wrong there. It's like Meadow has this pull over me that draws me in. It's been like that since I first laid eyes on her. And for a man as logical and analytical as me, it's such an intoxicating feeling."

"Yes, that's exactly how it is with River. She's fucking brilliant, Uncle Colt. Her brain amazes me, but then the fact that she's so humble and kind, and not pretentious like most of the people we went to camp with, draws me in."

"It doesn't hurt that she's beautiful."

"Uncle Colton..." Brantley groans at me.

"What? She is. She's a very beautiful girl. Just like her mom."

"She's stunning and doesn't even realize it. It's effortless, which makes her that much hotter. I..."

"What's up?"

"It's not weird that I'm a few years older than her? I mean, she's the same age as my little sister. That doesn't make me a creep, does it?"

"Hell no. You're not that much older than River. And, to be honest, she's probably more mature than most adults I know. I might be biased because of her mom, but I've gotten to know River and can honestly say she's one of my favorite people. Finding out she's Meadow's daughter was like the icing on the cake for me. We bonded early, and I really have enjoyed getting to know her and building a relationship with her."

"She really likes you. She said you make her feel normal, which doesn't happen often."

I rub the ache in my chest at hearing those words. "So, did you ask her to homecoming?"

"I did, and she asked me to hers." Brantley's smile is so bright it could light up the night sky.

"That's great. I'm sure you'll have a great time."

"I'm excited to introduce her to my friends. I think she's nervous about going to her dance, though."

"You going with her will be good. I don't think River knows that some of the kids genuinely like her and would be friends with her if she just let them in."

"I can see that. She doesn't always pick up on social cues and is too up in her head, worrying about being different."

The rest of the ride, we talk about Brantley's classes and where he wants to go to school. He's applied to MIT, and I can't help thinking how much River would benefit from Brantley there if she does decide to attend next year. I know Meadow's a bit

worried about River being so young and so far away.

When I get back to Sparrow Falls, I have a message from Meadow, inviting me to spend the night. I can't help the excitement that rushes through me at the prospect of holding her all night. After a quick stop at home, I head back to my girls, and find not only them but Wren and Daphne over as well.

"Well, hello ladies. How's everyone doing?"

"Hey, stud." Wren winks, earning a smack from Meadow, who comes over and gives me a hug and a kiss.

"The girls came over to help River decide what she wants to wear to homecoming. Daphne brought a few dresses for her to try on. If none of those fit, we're all going to brainstorm a design that I can whip up this week."

"Sounds like fun. Have you all eaten yet?"

"Nope. We got too excited about River's first dance."

"Alright. Let me take care of it. You want me to cook or order something?"

"Hmm, you think you could make us some breakfast food? I should have everything here, even bacon." Meadow blushes, embarrassed that her biggest craving is meat when it would normally repulse her.

"I can handle that."

"Do either of you have a preference on how you like your eggs?"

"I'm fine with whatever." Daphne smiles.

"She's lying," Wren pipes up as she glares at Daphne. "Daphne loves scrambled with cheese. I'm down with that, and so are Riv and Meadow."

"I can manage that." I give Meadow another kiss before heading towards the kitchen to work on dinner.

I love that Meadow's house has an open-floor plan. The only thing separating the kitchen from the living room is a large island with a bar top, so I'm able to watch as the women *ooh* and *ahh* over River and the dresses she's trying on. It's fascinating as hell to observe their dynamics, and I'm glad that Meadow and River have Daphne and Wren in their lives. Their bond is evident and something to be cherished.

Even though I have two older sisters, I'm clueless when it comes to fashion, but listening to the women go on about the dresses River comes out to show is amusing. I'm starting to learn that while Wren is brazen and speaks her mind, she isn't unkind, especially where River is concerned. She'll tell Riv if a dress isn't working but in a way that doesn't put her down. Daphne is quiet and only speaks up when she feels it's important. Then you have Meadow, who hasn't stopped crying and keeps blaming it on the baby. The entire ordeal is comical, to say the least.

"Alright, ladies. Food is ready."

I decided to make a hash since all the girls seem to love scrambled eggs. I diced up an onion and potatoes, and fried them with the bacon, then added a ton of eggs and even more cheese. It smells delicious, if I do say so myself, but hopefully the girls will agree.

"Oh, this looks fucking awesome. Thanks, Colt." Wren hip-checks me out of the way so she can plop a large helping on a plate. I'm about to protest when Wren shoos Daphne into a chair and sets the plate in front of her.

Everyone grabs food and drinks, and snags a seat at the island or stands in the kitchen while we dig in.

"So, did you figure out a dress for the dance?" I turn my attention to River.

"I think so. Well, I have one that I'm going to wear to Brantley's dance, but I think I'm going to have Mom make one for my dance."

"You sure that won't be too much for you to do this week?" Concern floods me as Meadow waves me off.

"Are you kidding? You've seen her wardrobe, right? The woman is a goddess with a sewing machine. Making Riv a dress will be a sinch," Wren reassures me as Meadow beams at her friend.

"I have zero doubt in her capabilities. I just want to make sure she's not pushing herself too hard. She's got a very important job right now, and if there's a way that I, or you ladies, can make her life easier, I'd like to do that for her."

"Wow, and I thought Ezra was swoony," Daphne mutters, making all the girls giggle.

"What?" I furrow my brows in confusion.

"Nothing, babe. You're just surrounded by avid romance readers who love their book boyfriends. Those two found their own, and it seems I was lucky enough to find mine."

"What's a book boyfriend?" I feel like I've heard my sisters use this term, but I wasn't really paying attention to their conversation, so I have no idea what they're talking about.

"You, stud muffin." Wren wiggles her brows at me.

"A book boyfriend is a leading male character in the romance books Mom and her friends read. There are several different types, but essentially, they are the goals all women who read romance hold when looking for a male partner," River informs me.

"Okay..."

"You're kind, considerate, and put Meadow and River first. You're questioning if she's taking on too much and don't want her to overdo it, which means you have no problem stepping up to take care of her and help. That's classic book boyfriend

material." Daphne's cheeks flush by the time she's done talking, but I smile encouragingly at her. I hope she's someday comfortable enough around me to talk freely.

"Now, that I can understand. Thank you for that explanation, Daphne. But I don't think being considerate and putting my partner first should be that big of a stretch."

"You would think it would be common sense, but not all men feel that way."

"Well, I'm glad you've both found your book boyfriends, then. You're good people, from what I can tell, and deserve to be treated like the queens you are."

"Yeah, he's good." Wren smirks at Meadow. "On that note, I think it's time for us to head out. It's getting late, and I'm missing Brooks. He should be done at the bookstore by the time we get back. If you need any more help with the whole book boyfriend thing, stop by to see him. He's got a wealth of knowledge." Wren winks suggestively, making me blush.

Maybe I *will* need to make a pit stop at *Lost in the Pages* soon. I like Brooks, and it wouldn't hurt to get to know him a little better with our girls being so close.

Daphne and Wren insist on cleaning up the kitchen since I cooked, then head out for the night. It's almost 9pm by the time they leave, and I can tell Meadow is exhausted. River disappeared a while ago, so I don't feel guilty steering Meadow down the hall to her bedroom.

"Come on, Dow." I guide her to her bed and help her strip her clothes. Dropping to my knees, I slide her long skirt down her legs and stare at her bump, which seems to have popped overnight. Leaning in, I place kisses all over her stomach. "Hey, nugget. This is your daddy. I just want to let you know I love you so much. You are so lucky. You've got the best mama, sister, and aunts, who can't wait to meet you." I kiss her stomach one more time before looking up into Meadow's eyes, which are now filled with lust.

She licks her lips as she runs her fingers through my hair. "Watching you love on our baby, even though they aren't here yet, is hot as hell, Colt." Meadow all but purrs as she rubs her legs together.

I can smell her arousal from where I'm sitting. It's heady and has my head falling back on my shoulders as a moan falls from my lips. Scooting closer, I slide Meadow's underwear down her legs until she's standing in front of me gloriously bare. Leaning in, I inhale her scent, which sends a shudder through her. With my hands on her thighs, I guide her legs apart to grant myself access to her glistening pussy. My tongue darts out, parting her as it runs up her center then circles her clit.

Meadow's legs wobble with the first swipe of my tongue. Not wanting her to get hurt, I push her waist until she's sitting on the bed, propped up on her elbows. I place one leg over my shoulder, kiss my way from her knee up to her inner thigh, then repeat with the other leg.

By the time I get settled between her legs, Meadow is a whimpering, needy mess, mumbling incoherent words. Needing to put her out of her misery, I attack her as if I'm starving, making her cry out.

"Shh, Dow. You don't want River to hear us."

"I-it's sooo good."

"I know, baby, but you need to be quiet."

I laugh when Meadow grabs a pillow and shoves it over her face. Her hands whip out wildly until she finds my head and guides it back to her dripping slit. I slide my tongue through her folds, thrusting it in as far as I can, as my thumb strums her clit. Feeling her walls flutter, I replace my tongue with my fingers and suck her clit into my mouth, sending Meadow over the edge. I continue to work my girl until she's boneless beneath me and shoving the pillow off her face.

"How are you so good at that?"

"Because it's you, and I love pleasing you."

"Good. Then get naked and give me your cock. I need you to fill me." Fire flares in her eyes as I make quick work of my clothes.

Scooting Meadow up the bed until her head reaches the pillow, I notch my straining dick at her entrance. "Are you sure, Dow?"

"Colton Harding, if you don't fuck me right this minute, I will make you watch me use one of my battery-operated boyfriends to get the job done."

I arch my brows in surprise but don't dare hesitate another second to slide into her warmth. Meadow feels fucking incredible.

"Yes, yes, yes," She chants as I start to thrust faster, her wet pussy making it easy.

"Fucking hell. I'm not going to last long."

"Me neither. So. Close," Meadow whimpers as I lift her hips, which allows me even deeper inside her.

Grabbing her leg under her knee, I hike it up on my hip and make Meadow cry out. I'm so close to coming, but I don't want to get there without her. Leaning forward, I suck Meadow's nipple into my mouth. Rolling it between my tongue sets off Meadow's orgasm. Her walls clamp around my cock, tipping me over the edge as I pump my cum into her while still sucking her nipple.

"Ooh, enough, Colt." She gently pushes my head away as aftershocks rock her body.

"Too much?"

"I'm just a little sensitive." She smiles sweetly up at me.

"Sorry, Dow."

"It's okay. Oh no!" Meadow cries out as her head whips down to look at her chest.

My hand is still wrapped around her breast, and it's only now that I'm noticing it's damp. Meadow's nipples are slowly leaking. Meadow looks mortified, but as I feel my cock try to attempt a round two, I can't deny how sexy seeing the changes in her body is. She tries to cover her chest, but I stop her.

"This is so embarrassing." She buries her face in the pillow.

"No, it's not. It's sexy as hell, Meadow."

"You can't possibly think that." She's still avoiding me, so I guide her face to look at mine.

To my shock, I can feel myself hardening again. Apparently, Meadow does too if her gasp is any indication.

Fully erect, I slowly thrust in and out. Meadow's eyes widen as I continue at a languid pace, never tearing my eyes from hers.

"Do you still doubt me? You are fucking stunning, Meadow, and so is your body. Seeing it change before my eyes as you grow our baby is the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Don't for one second doubt how fucking beautiful you are to me, okay?"

Meadow nods in agreement, but that's not enough.

"I need your words, Dow. Tell me you understand that I think you're breathtakingly beautiful."

"I understand." She sighs as I pick up my pace.

"Good." I flip us over so that Meadow is straddling me as I lean against her headboard. "Now, ride my cock while I play with these exquisite tits." I grasp her breasts as I roll her nipples with my fingers.

"Oh my goddess." Meadow moans as she throws her head back.

Her back is arched as she plants her arms on my thighs and starts rocking. I keep my attention on her breasts as her thrusts speed up. She's driving me fucking crazy with her movements and noises. I'm shocked when my second orgasm builds.

"Need you to get there, Meadow."

"Touch me."

"I am, baby. Be more specific."

"M-my clit."

My hand leaves her breast and trails down her stomach to her clit. I gather some wetness from between us and start circling her bundle of nerves, which makes her walls flutter around me.

"Yes, Colt. Just like that."

I'm so close, but I'm trying to hold on for Meadow. Needing to get her there, I work her clit faster and finally let go as her orgasm hits. Meadow falls into my arms as we both feel the euphoria of another mind-blowing shared orgasm.

I gently move her hair off her sweaty forehead and kiss her. Meadow hums contently in my arms as we sit in her bed, still connected.

"Come on, Dow. Let's get cleaned up and head to bed. River and I have an early morning tomorrow. You can sleep in if you want, and I can take her to school."

"Oh, you keep talking dirty like that, and we might never make it to bed," she teases.

"What, dangling sleep is all I need to turn you on now?"

"It definitely doesn't hurt." She smiles sleepily at me.

Holding her carefully, I stand from the bed and carry Meadow to the bathroom. Our shower is spent with me making sure Meadow doesn't pass out while standing. I try to convince her to let me dry her hair, but I can tell my girl is completely wrecked and needs to sleep more than anything else.

Crawling into bed with Meadow is like a dream come true. I wasn't actively looking for her, but she's filled my life with so much joy and purpose that I can't imagine it without her and River.

With Meadow tucked in close, my eyes can't fight the sleep any longer. When I wake in the morning, tangled in Meadow, the peace I felt the night before carries me through my day, making it one of the best I've had in as long as I can remember.

Chapter Thirteen

Meadow

Not only was I busy, but River and Colton had a full week as well. Colt headed preparations for the dance, busy creating decorations and overseeing everything there, and somehow managed to convince River to help him. When I couldn't hide my surprise at the mention of her joining, she said Colton had made a valid point—that even though she already has a full ride to MIT, it would look good on college applications if she chose a different path.

With everything going on, I've barely seen either of my two favorite people this week, and it was starting to wear on me. I was so relieved when Colton picked me up from the shop last night, with takeout waiting in his truck for us to take home. River was there, and we enjoyed the first meal together this week, albeit at almost 11pm, but it was still nice to spend some time together before we all crashed.

It's Saturday morning, and Colt and River left me with breakfast in bed at an ungodly hour to go do some finishing touches at the gym. I'm just finishing up a delish omelet when my phone buzzes on the bed beside me.

Wren: Hey, babe. I've got some bad news. Your client finally got back, and said they aren't able to reschedule and aren't willing for Daph or I to take the appointment.

Meadow: Ugh, well that sucks, but I'm not surprised. I'm not sure what to tell River, though.

Wren: My schedule is pretty light this afternoon and so is Daphne's. Do you think she'd be down with getting ready in the studio? That way, you can pop up when you have a minute so you're not completely missing out.

Meadow: That's a brilliant idea. I'm sure River will be down. She's at the school, helping Colton finish up the decorations, but I'll double check with her when she gets home. I need to do my own finishing touches on her dress before I head in.

Wren: Keep me in the loop so I know if/what I need to bring with me to the shop.

Meadow: Will do. Love you.

Wren: Love you too, bitch!

I was really hoping to be able to reschedule today's appointment, but I understand my client not wanting to. She's one of my regulars, and we're finishing up her sleeve that we've been working on for a few years. I've got her on the schedule for six hours today, but we're so damn close to being done that I wanted to make sure I finished it up for her if I could, if she was able to sit.

Knowing Wren and Daphne can step in and be there for River when I can't is a huge relief for me. I'm still sad that I can't fully participate in getting her ready for her first dance, but with being in the studio above the shop, I'll be able to pop up there on pee breaks since lord knows I have to do that about every hour now.

Sipping my tea, I enjoy my last few restful minutes as I go over my mental checklist for the day. First up, finishing River's dress. It's almost done; I just need to finish sewing a few more flowers on the overlay.

River decided to go with a black satin dress, with a shimmery gossamer overlay that I hand-sewed colorful flowers all over. The neckline is a sweetheart with off-the-shoulder long sleeves, which are made of gossamer, and puff out then come to a cuff at the wrist, making the material sparkle as she moves. The body of the dress is a fit and flare that stops just above her knees. We added extra fabric under the skirt to add fullness and body. It fits River's lithe frame beautifully, and the shimmer in the gossamer brings out the golden flecks in her eyes.

The fabrics alone would've been beautiful, but when we talked about adding the embroidered flowers, River's eyes lit up. She shot the idea down for fear of me not having enough time, but I knew I needed to make it happen for my girl. The dress needed that little bit of funky flare that is all River.

Rolling out of bed rather ungracefully, I'm reminded that I need to prioritize getting back into my yoga practice. I love the little shop here in town, but I haven't been in ages with how crazy my life has been. Not only is my body missing it but my mind is too. I'm not used to all the chaos that has been my life as of late. I don't know when the last time I've gone this long without grounding myself was, which needs to change ASAP.

Heading towards the kitchen, I find River's dress right where I left it. We found the most exquisite thread at the craft store in town. The colors are vibrant and have metallic hints to them that match the shimmer in the overlay fabric perfectly. I'm almost done adding the details, but I was too tired last night to get it done, and my hands hurt too much to make the final push.

Getting right to work, I'm immediately lost in my task, and once again reminded of how I've been neglecting myself and my needs. This little nugget isn't even here yet, but I've let the whirlwind of finding out about the baby and starting a relationship with Colton, along with River's first—and final— year of high school, take over. I love creating things with my hands, and it's been too long since I've done that.

I finish up River's dress and sit back to admire my hard work. My girl is going to be stunning next to Brantley tonight, and I'm so damn glad she gets to experience this milestone. As brilliant and grown up as River is, she's also a teenager with a crush on a boy. She deserves to have a magical night.

I know the opportunity for her to go to MIT is huge, but I'm terrified of her being that far from me. When I first found out, I figured I'd just move with her. That's not an option with the baby and Colt. I would never take them away from him, and I couldn't ask him to move when he's just now close to his family again. Feeling the panic creeping in, I take a few calming breaths to center myself. Today is not the day to be worrying about our future. We have plenty of time to make the big decisions and figure out what will work best for all of us.

Feeling reassured, I pack up all of my sewing gear, then hang up River's dress and get ready for work.

It's a chilly fall day, so I decide to drive to work. River and Colt still aren't home by the time I leave, so I text her to let her know I have her dress and to just meet me at the shop whenever she's done.

Wren already has the studio open and music pumping through the speakers when I walk through the back door. "Hey, Mama. How are you feeling?" Wren pops out of her station, scaring me half to death.

"Whoa!" I almost drop River's dress as I bobble my bag and water bottle.

"Sorry." Wren smirks, letting me know she's really not.

"I'm tired but good."

"Here, let me help." Wren grabs the garment bag that contains River's dress and heads towards the back of the shop.

I drop my bag and water bottle off at my station then follow her.

"Fucking hell, Meadow. This is stunning! Why does Daph pay an obnoxious amount of money on those drab dresses when you can make masterpieces like this?"

"Aww, thanks, Wrenny. Probably because until Ezra insisted on paying for dresses that she actually likes, her mom bought all of her dresses, and just told Daphne what to wear and when to show up."

"Hmm, you've got a point there. Fuck her. I'm so glad Daphne doesn't have to deal with her anymore."

"You and me both."

"I'm serious, Meadow. This dress is amazing. And the fact that you made it in under a week is mind-blowing. I can't wait to see River in it. Colt's poor nephew isn't gonna know what hit him."

"I can't wait for her to see it finished. I tried to get it done last night, but I was whooped. Colton insisted I head to bed and finish it this morning once he found out it wouldn't take me long to get it done. I just had to finish up the embroidery work."

"Where is River?"

"She's at the school with Colton, finishing setting up for the dance. I honestly thought they'd be done by now. I texted them both to let them know I was heading into work and that I have her dress, so I'm sure we'll be seeing them soon."

"Nice. I'm excited to help her get ready."

"Just remember that you're doing River's makeup and not to go too wild." I shoot Wren a warning glare, needing to keep her in check.

"Easy, mama bear. I know it's River and wouldn't dream of doing anything except what I think she'd like."

"Sorry, I'm just a little grouchy that I couldn't reschedule this appointment. I want to be upstairs with you all, getting ready together."

"I know, but you'll be close and can pop up on your breaks to check in."

"My logical brain knows this, but my hormonal brain doesn't like that rationale." I pout, making Wren laugh.

The front doorbell goes off, so I head out to see who is here. The customer I have blocked in for most of the day is early, but that doesn't surprise me.

I take her back to my station, where we catch up while I get everything ready to start tattooing. We instantly bonded when she came in and told me she wanted a sleeve entirely dedicated to books. It's been a magical endeavor, and I've loved working on this piece.

About an hour in, I finish up the shading I'm working on and turn to see River at the door, Colt's arm slung around her shoulder.

"Hey, you two. Are you all done at the school?"

"Hey, Mom. Yeah, we finished a while ago. Colt and I went to his office because he needed to grab something, and then we got into a heated game of chess and kind of lost track of time."

"That sounds like a great morning. So, who won?"

River's smirk lets me know the answer before either of them gets a chance.

"Babe, is that even a serious question?" Colton huffs, making River and I let loose the laughs we were holding in.

"In his defense, he put up one of the best fights I've had in a long time. He's even better than Ezra."

"Oh, that's high praise, Colton."

"Your family is beautiful."

I startle, forgetting Jessa is sitting here, watching our exchange.

"Thank you, Jessa. How rude of me! That's Colton, my partner."

Colton waves a hand at Jessa.

"Do you remember River? It's probably been a minute since you've seen her."

"I do. It's nice to see you again, River. Did I hear something about a dance?"

"Yes, it's homecoming tonight."

"Oh, that's fun, and now I understand why you wanted to reschedule, Meadow. I'm so sorry we couldn't make something work." Jessa worries her lip.

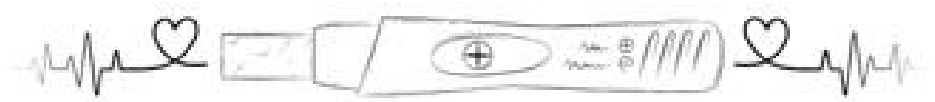
"It's okay. The girls are going to help River get ready in the apartment upstairs, so as long as you don't mind, I figured I'd pop up and check in on my pee breaks." I point at my belly, indicating the need for said pee breaks.

"I don't mind at all."

"River and I went to the diner for lunch. I grabbed you some food and left it in the breakroom for whenever you get a break. Jessa, if you need anything, I can grab something for you as well," Colt adds as his cheeks flush from not thinking about offering any food to Jessa.

"I'm fine. I've got snacks in my bag, but thank you for offering. That's really kind of you."

"Alright. We'll get out of your hair." Colton walks over and gives me a chaste kiss before heading out of the shop to let me get back to work.



River walks out of the front door of the shop into the soft fall sun.

"Oh my goddess!" I cry.

She looks absolutely breathtaking and far older than her almost fifteen years. Wren did an amazing job on her makeup, highlighting her natural beauty while giving her eyes a funky, fun look. Her hair is in one of her signature intricate-braid styles but made softer by the voluminous curls Daphne added.

And her dress... It's perfection, if I do say so myself. It fits her like a glove and looks absolutely amazing on her. The subtle shimmer catches in the sun as she walks around the sidewalk, anxiously waiting for Brantley and his family to arrive.

Colton slings his arm around my shoulders as he pulls me into his side. I catch him running his hand over his heart, which makes mine skip a beat. I glance up, and tears spill over my lids when I see Colton's eyes glistening. He's such a softy when it comes to River that I can't help but melt into a puddle.

"You did so fucking good, Dow." His voice is gruff as he looks down at me.

I lean up on my tip toes, my lips finding his. What was meant to be a sweet kiss quickly turns heated. What can I say? I find

Colton irresistible on any given day, but seeing him emotional over my baby girl really does things to me.

"Ow, ow!" Someone—probably Wren—yells, breaking us apart.

"Brantley's here. Do I look okay?" River asks anxiously at my side.

"You're perfect, baby."

"You look so beautiful, River. You're gonna knock poor Brantley on his ass when he sees you."

"It's not like that, Colt."

"I wouldn't be so sure, kid." Colton nods towards Brantley.

River whips around to find him standing slack-jawed, a bouquet of wildflowers in his hand.

"River, you— I mean— W-wow," Brantley stammers as he stares at my girl.

My hand shoots to my mouth to hide my giggle, but Wren's snort rings loud around our circle, breaking the tension.

"I mean, you look beautiful. These are for you." He thrusts the flowers to River, who's blushing furiously.

"Thank you."

Jackie walks over, and we greet each other then confirm the plans for the night. The kids share quiet, sweet words then take a million pictures. I have to stay at the shop, so Colton takes them to eat at *The Tavern* before driving them to the dance he's chaperoning.

As much as I wish I could be there with Colt, I'm loving the pictures and videos he's able to sneak me throughout the night. River looks like she's having a blast, not only dancing with Brantley but with a few other girls from her school. It makes my mama heart happy.

When the night is over, I head back home to find Colt and the kids lounging on the couch. They've got pizza, popcorn, and a movie queued up, ready to go. I change into my comfy clothes then find my spot beside Colton on the couch. I don't make it the whole way through the movie, but I'm not mad about it.

If all of my nights could end like this, I would be extremely content.

Chapter Fourteen

Colton

"Colton! Open this damn door!"

"Shit," I mumble from the kitchen as I race towards the front door.

Ripping the door open, I'm greeted with a scowling Miss Ada laden with casserole dishes and covered plates. Reaching for two of the dishes, I free one of her arms and usher her into my townhouse.

"Damn, Miss Ada. I told you that you could bring a dish, not make half the meal." I set the dishes in the kitchen as she follows and sets the rest of the food she brought.

"Oh, hush you. I'm finally getting to meet your girls. I couldn't risk you flopping Thanksgiving dinner and ruining their first impression of me, now, could I?"

"Ruthless!" I grab my heart and stumble back into the fridge as if she shot me.

"Oh, quit being dramatic. We have shit to do to make sure this place is in tip-top shape for when the ladies get here. Start uncovering those dishes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Colton Harding, you knock off this attitude right now. I don't know what's gotten into you, but you're not too old for me to go get a switch and tan your hide." Ada glares as she wags a finger my way.

I swear I try to keep in my laughter, but when I see her lips twitch, there's no holding it back. We both dissolve into a giggle fit, and that's how Meadow and River find us.

"Well, I'm not sure what brought this on"—Meadow waves her hand in our direction—"but this is my kind of party."

"Oh, dear," Ada titters. "We're not even close to being ready for you two. Damn it, Colton." Ada swats my arm as she huffs, which only renews my laughter.

"Miss Ada, I'd like you to meet Meadow and River. Meadow and River, please meet my best friend, Miss Ada."

"Quit with that nonsense, Colt," Ada tries to scold me, but her smile can't be stopped as she makes her way across the kitchen to Meadow and River. "It's lovely to meet you both. Colton speaks so highly of you two. It's the only thing that saves him from abandoning an old lady."

"Hey!" I protest.

"Well, that, and he brings me the good booze." Ada wiggles her brows.

"Oh, he's a good egg, for sure, and very thoughtful. I have a feeling you and I are going to be great friends, Miss Ada."

"Enough of that 'Miss Ada' bullshit. I've been telling him to knock it off since he moved in, but he just won't listen."

"It's out of respect, and you know it. Now, are you done busting my balls for a bit so that we can get dinner on the table?"

"I suppose so. What do you have there in your hands, sweet girl?"

"I made Mom's killer peach cobbler recipe. The peaches are from the tree in our yard. Mom's an amazing horticulturist," River boasts proudly.

"That's very impressive. Being able to grow your own food is something of a lost art. I always had a small garden when I could tend to it. There's nothing better than fresh, organic produce."

"You've got that right. Can I help with anything?"

"No, you're our guest. You and Riv can go sit at the table."

"Okay." Meadow turns to the small dining room, but I snag her arm and pull her to me.

Placing a chaste kiss on her lips, I savor her taste as I wrap her in my arms, then drop to my knees and kiss her belly. "Hey, peanut. How's my baby today?" I rub my hands over Meadow's obvious bump and smile when I feel the baby kick.

The first time I was able to feel our baby, I cried silent tears of joy. I've never imagined the rollercoaster of emotions I feel

as I watch Meadow's body change with our growing baby, but it's one of the wildest things I've ever experienced in my life.

"They're doing great."

"Still feeling good?"

"Yes, Colt. I haven't felt ill in weeks, and my energy levels are back to normal. The girls and I went to yoga this morning, and finding my flow felt like heaven. It's wonderful to practice again."

"Good."

"So, y'all still don't know what you're having?"

"Nope. River doesn't either. She hasn't looked because she hasn't found an idea of how she'd like to tell us yet."

"She's got more willpower than I do. I don't know how anyone waits anymore, with all the knowledge at your fingertips. It's a whole new ball game from when people were having babies back in my day."

"I think I handle it better than Colt, but that's the hippie in me. He's a planner, so I'm sure it's killing him a bit." Meadow smiles sweetly at me.

"I'm not gonna lie; at first it was driving me insane, but now I'm good with it. Our baby's gender is unimportant in the grand scheme of things. We know he or she is healthy and hitting all the milestones in their scans, and the genetic tests came back clear, so that's all that matters. Whether they are a boy or a girl, we're still gonna love them like crazy."

"Exactly." Meadow melts into my arms as she hums contently.

I kiss Meadow's forehead then shoo her to the dining room with River. Ada and I get the turkey and all the fixings into the dining room, and all of us eagerly load up our plates. I offered to make a vegetarian substitute for Meadow, but my girl is still craving meat and was okay with having turkey, as long as I promised to get a free-range, organic turkey. I figured that was an easy enough compromise for her to enjoy her meal.

"So, what are your plans for the little one once they arrive? Are you going to be looking into daycare?"

"I'll take them to work with me until Colton gets off work and then comes to pick them up. Perks of my boss being my best friend is that she's cool with me bringing the nugget with me. Between the three of us, our baby is going to be spoiled rotten during the day."

"That's good. If you ever need any help, I'd love to watch them for you." Miss Ada smiles at Meadow, who gets teary eyed.

"Oh, we'd love that. Thank you so much."

"I'll be able to help out too," River pipes up.

"What do you mean, Riv? You'll be away at school..." Meadow trails off.

River shoots me a nervous look, so I give her an encouraging nod.

"I don't think I'm going to go to MIT next year."

"But—" Meadow starts, but River holds up a hand, stopping her.

"Will you please just listen for a minute?"

"Of course," Meadow agrees as she glances in my direction.

I give her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Colt helped me get in contact with the director of the science camp at school the other week. She sent us all the information for the scholarship and gave us a contact at MIT. We called them together and talked about my options. Normally, a student who would be receiving the scholarship would be a junior or senior and therefore the scholarship would go into effect relatively quickly.

"When we explained my reservations about being away from my family at only fifteen, they were extremely understanding. They understand that while I am extremely intelligent and mature, I am also still a teenager. I wouldn't be able to live in a dorm as a minor and would have to have a host family. The idea of living with people I've never met is not something I'm comfortable with.

"MIT reassured me that they will not hold this against me, and are willing to hold my scholarship for me until I am of age and ready to commit to a degree at their school. They told me they were more than willing to help make any recommendations or connections to schools closer to us that would align with their values and curriculum.

"So, Colton and I have been narrowing down that list, and I've found two schools that I'm really excited about looking into. One of them is about an hour away from here, and the other is about forty-five minutes away. Both are easy enough commutes that I would only have to do a few days a week if I make my schedule work out, and I can take the rest of my classes online."

"Wow, you two have been busy." Meadow blows out a breath as she leans into me.

"We have. We weren't trying to keep anything from you. Promise. River came to me as her guidance counselor, and in that capacity, I helped her to the best of my ability. I told her it would stay between us until she was ready to broach the topic with you."

"I needed all the information and a plan first, Mom. Please don't be upset."

"Riv, I'm not upset at all. I'm elated if I'm being honest. I've been doing rounds in my head, trying to figure out how we were going to swing MIT next year because there was no way in hell you were going to go on your own, and I really didn't want to tell you that you'd have to put your life on hold until we could figure out the best solution for all of us.

"So, when are we going to see these schools?"

"Well, I figured we could go over Christmas break. That will give me time to block out your schedule at work."

"Sounds good to me."

"Now that we've got that cleared up, Colton, when are you leaving me to move in with the girls?"

My drink goes flying out of my mouth as I sputter and cough. Meadow tries to stifle her giggle as she gently pats my back.

"Miss Ada, that is not appropriate to ask right now," I scold, which makes her roll her eyes, and River joins her mother in laughter.

"I'm glad you all find this fucking amusing," I huff as I throw my hands in the air in exasperation.

"Oh, dear, it's extremely amusing."

"Well, can you please let it go? That's not something Meadow and I have talked about yet, and it's definitely not going to happen here at Thanksgiving."

"Alright, keep your britches on." Ada digs back into her food.

The rest of the evening goes pretty much the same—great conversation, with Ada busting my balls. Much to my dismay, River and Meadow join her every chance they get. My heart is full and happy seeing my girls get along with Ada so well. She's such a huge part of my life that it would've been awful if they didn't all get along.

We all stuff ourselves so full, with the extra dishes that Ada made on top of everything I cooked, that we're unable to eat Meadow's dessert and decide to take a stroll around the block to make room.

"Who the hell came up with this plan?" Ada grouches as she shrugs on her coat.

"That would be the crazy pregnant lady," River murmurs.

"Hey, brat. You know this is one of my favorite traditions."

"I know, Mom, but that doesn't mean I will stop complaining about it."

"Well, maybe next year, you'll remember this and not eat as much."

"Eh, fat chance. I have a feeling that with Colton around, we'll always have a real turkey for Thanksgiving. There's no way I won't be binging as much as I can get of it."

"Riv, you know I would've made you turkey in the past." Meadow looks hurt as she turns to River.

"I know. Don't get all worked up. It would've been ridiculous to make an entire turkey just for me. Besides, you know I always order it when we go out to eat close to the holiday. I get my fix."

"Good."

We leisurely make our way around the block. Ada has the girls in stitches with her gossip about all of our neighbors and her inappropriate jokes about the single men her age. It's the perfect way to spend Thanksgiving. Tomorrow, we'll head to my parents, which will be chaotic, before joining Wren, Brooks, Daphne, Ezra, and the Wilson sisters and their partners for a Friendsgiving at *The Tavern*.

"I'm gonna stop at the house to fix a drink, and then I'll be over. Do you want one, Colt?"

"Nah, I think I'll fill up on the cobbler. We'll get you a plate. Just come on in when you're done."

"Will do."

I guide the girls into the house and start gathering everything to dish out the cobbler River made while she pulls it out of the oven, where she had it reheating. It smells like heaven, and I can't wait to dive in.

"River, if this tastes half as good as it smells, I might be requesting you make this for my birthday instead of having cake next year."

"I think I can manage that." She smiles proudly up at me.

Meadow leans against the counter as she watches River and me move about the kitchen as if we've done this a million times before. Sure, being with Meadow is as easy as breathing, but having that ease with River was the best surprise.

"I've got some vanilla ice cream in the freezer if you wanna grab it?" I ask Meadow, who nods.

"Oh, you're definitely gonna want this for your birthday if you're going to add ice cream to it," River confidently brags as I put twice as large a portion in my bowl as I did for the women.

"I have no doubt about that, Riv."

"Hot damn, something smells good in here," Ada hollers from the hallway.

River grabs two bowls, and I grab the other then head towards the living room, where Meadow and Ada are sitting.

"My lady." I hand Meadow a bowl before sitting down beside her on the couch.

The first bite explodes in my mouth. The warm peaches with the cold, melting ice cream make me moan. The butter crust melts in my mouth, adding the perfect texture with the peaches and the ice cream. I'm so absorbed in my food that I don't even realize the women are all tittering around me until I feel Meadow's body shaking beside me.

"What's so funny?" I mumble through a mouthful, which makes them lose it.

"You and that cobbler. I think you might love it more than me with all the sounds and the mumbled words of love you're throwing its way."

"I was not talking to my food," I defend as my cheeks flush.

"Oh, you most certainly were, Colt." Ada smirks at me.

"Whatever. That's just a compliment to River and how amazing her cobbler is. And I'll absolutely be cashing in on having you make this for my birthday, kid."

"Sounds good." She smiles at me then is quickly distracted by her phone.

"That's still weird to me," Meadow mutters.

"What?" I garble through a mouthful.

"Her being on the phone like that. Acting like a giddy teenager." Meadow smiles dreamily.

"Ah, must be talking to Brantley."

"That would be my guess. He's a really good kid, Colt."

"He is. Jackie did great with him. He fucking adores River and was not dissuaded when I gave him a stern talking to about River and respecting her, and consent being the most important lesson he can learn in his life."

"You didn't." Meadow gasps.

"Of fucking course I did. Why wouldn't I?"

"Umm, maybe because he's your nephew and you *know* he's a good kid."

"Sure, but it's also because he *is* my nephew, and she's just as important to me, that I'm going to hold him to even higher standards than I would any other kid their age."

"Oh, Colton." Meadow's eyes are glassy as she leans in and kisses me.

I try to pull away, but Meadow deepens the kiss, forgetting that we're not the only ones in the room. Meadow whimpers, and it isn't until a throat clears that she pulls away.

"On that note, I think it's time for me to head home." Miss Ada heads towards the kitchen, where we can hear her banging around.

Looking around the room, I realize River's gone. "Sorry, I got a little carried away."

"Not your fault, Colt. I was the one who deepened the kiss. It's just that—"

"What, Dow?"

"It's always been me and River against the world. Sure, we've had my parents' support from afar, and we've had Wren and Daphne over the past few years, but she's never had a father figure in her life. Seeing the way you love her, and want to protect her and see her do well... I just couldn't ask for anyone better, Colton. I love you."

"Oh, Meadow. I love you too. And I love River, so much. You are my girls, and I'm so fucking happy that you're both in my life. Even if we weren't together, I think I would've been drawn to River. She's fucking brilliant, and anyone would be a fool not to see it."

Leaning in, I brush away the tears rolling down Meadow's face before I kiss her softly. I want to deepen the kiss and show her just how much I love her, but now is not the time. Pulling back, I smile at her then stand. Reaching down, I offer her my hand and pull her to her feet, then go find Ada and River. They're in the spare room playing chess, and not to my surprise, Ada's talking shit.

"Now, why the hell would you make a bonehead move like that?" she chides as River smirks at her.

Studying the board, I can see how River is setting her up. It absolutely looks like a stupid move, but in only a handful of turns, River will have Ada right where she wants her. Leaning against the door, I watch it all play out and join in with Meadow's applause when River wins the match.

"Well, damn. You're a shark, River!" Ada exclaims, making the glint in River's eyes flare.

"Not a shark, Miss Ada. You asked if I was any good, and I told you I could hold my own."

"Well, I thought that, with a remark like that, you meant you did alright."

"Oh, she does alright. She kicks my ass on the regular, and you're a fool for thinking you had a chance. You know how smart River is and how she's wiped the floor with me in chess."

"I thought you were just being a doting dad."

Warmth floods my chest at Ada's words.

Meadow's eyes are glassy. River rolls hers before giving me and her mom a sweet smile.

"Alright, why don't I walk you ladies out. We have a long day tomorrow." Not that I want them to leave, but Meadow needs her rest.

"Sounds good."

Ada and River head down the hall, and I go to follow them but am stopped by Meadow.

"Why don't you pack a bag and join us? I'll sleep better if you're there."

"You've got it, babe." I lean down and peck her lips, then head to my room to pack a bag while thinking about Ada's question from earlier.

Logically, it makes sense for me to move in with Meadow and River. Meadow has a three-bedroom house. There would be a room for the baby, and River wouldn't be uprooting her life, but Meadow hasn't mentioned it yet, and I don't want to pressure her. She knows I'm all in.

The desire to not have to pack a bag and be able to call their house my home grows with every passing day. We need to make it through tomorrow's festivities, and then I'll make it a point to bring it up to Meadow.

Chapter Fifteen

Meadow

"Surprise!"

The roar of people yelling as we walk into *The Tavern* has me stumbling back into Colton.

It's the Friday after Thanksgiving, and the place is packed. At Daphne's surprise wedding—yes, *surprise* wedding—we all thought it would be a great idea to have an epic Friendsgiving together. Maverick and Spencer graciously offered to cook and host it at *The Tavern*, but there are way more people here than I expected. I figured it would be my group and the Wilson sisters, but it looks like Ezra's sister is here, along with Brooks's brothers, which I don't even know how is possible with their current work schedules as professional athletes.

Colton's entire family is standing in the corner, and I'm realizing there are several more faces I recognize the more I look around. Scanning the room, I'm flabbergasted when I see my parents here. A few of the friends I grew up with on the commune are here, along with what looks like colleagues from Colton's school. I'm so confused as my parents rush towards us.

"W-what is going on, and why did everyone yell 'surprise' when we walked in?" I stammer as I look up at Colton.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Dow." His brows are pinched as he surveys our surroundings.

Brantley is striding across the room, looking pleased as punch, but it isn't until I hear River's giggle that I give my daughter, my best "spill the beans" mom look I can muster, which of course only makes her triumphant smile spread.

"What did you do, daughter?"

"I finally figured out what I wanted to do for your gender reveal. When I mentioned it to Brantley, he thought Thanksgiving would be the perfect opportunity since he knew we had Friendsgiving planned and a lot of people get this Friday off. We came up with a tentative plan, and when I shared it with Wren and Daphne, it grew into this." River gestures towards the room.

"So, this is our gender reveal?" Colton looks around, taking everyone in.

"Gender reveal, diaper party, and baby shower. I know how much Mom would hate everyone making a fuss over her for a baby shower, but I also know we need everything for the squirt, so I figured why not kill three birds with one stone. This way, you can share the limelight while everyone can be so excited about finding out the gender that they won't care if we do the typical shower stuff.

"Plus, I found some cool ideas online that I think you'll love. Instead of cards, everyone brought a book with a note for the baby, so there wouldn't be any waste, and they also brought the gifts unwrapped so that's not contaminating landfills and you don't have to unwrap everything in front of everyone."

"Wow, Riv. I—"

"And before you start on the diapers, it's not a diaper party in the traditional sense. The commune folk, mainly, are covering that aspect since they're the ones who know the ins and outs of the best practices for cloth diapering. Gigi and the crew covered most of it, but she told me which were good brands to put on your registry."

"Damn, River. I'm really impressed. Not that I'm surprised because this is absolutely something you're capable of. Just impressed with how you thought of everything and were able to pull it off, but even more so keep it a secret. Good job, kid."

River blushes under Colton's praise and shrinks into Brantley's embrace a little more.

My mama heart melts seeing my baby with her first boyfriend. She finally broke down the other night and told me that Brantley officially asked her out at homecoming, but she was too anxious and needed time to process before she told me. I was so excited for her and loved that she indulged my need to freak out a bit, and gush and talk boys. Of course, we followed it up with the safe-sex talk, but of course River is way more prepared and equipped to handle that situation than I ever was. She also promised to talk to me if and when she and Brantley decide to make their relationship more physical.

"So, what do we do first?" I turn to my daughter, who is trying to regain her composure after Colton's compliment.

"Go mingle. We aren't going to do any traditional games other than the baby game."

"The baby game?" Colt looks confused, which makes me smile.

"Here, Uncle Colt. Pin that on your shirt." Brantley hands him a baby bottle pin. "If you say 'baby' and someone hears you, they can steal your pin. If you hear someone else say it, you get to take their pin. The person with the most pins at the end of the evening wins a prize."

"That seems easy enough." He shrugs as he takes the pin and attaches it to his shirt.

"You'd be surprised," I tease. "How do you feel about meeting my parents and some of the people I grew up with?"

"I'd love nothing more. Lead the way."

The next hour is spent making our way around the room. At first, I feel uncomfortable as the center of attention and a little disappointed that we aren't having our Friendsgiving, but after getting to see some people from home that I haven't seen in years, my melancholy quickly fades. It's amazing how many people showed up to support us and celebrate this new life we're bringing into the world.

Colt handles meeting my parents better than I could have expected, but after the initial shock of how different they are, I'm reminded how brilliantly smart my parents are. They were both professors who ended up leaving academia to live a more holistic life. One where they had me later in life and embraced their journey of being older parents.

They might be different, but they don't lack intelligence, and easily fall into conversation with Colton and River about sustainable living, which makes me proud to be their daughter. When we introduce the two families, the acceptance and welcoming of each other's differences let me know that we will have no issues raising this baby together with love and support.

Our friends are loud and rowdy, just the way I like them. We get a chance to sit down, and join them for food and drinks—beer for Colt and a delicious mocktail Mav whipped up for me. Our table is loud as hell as we talk over each other, tease, and have a genuinely good time, made even wilder by the baby game.

I'd like to say the men are the ones who have taken this game to the extreme, but Chayse, Wren, and Emerson are here, and they're just as competitive. Watching them gloat and brag when someone slips up and says the word, and they all fight over who caught it first, is extremely entertaining. They've been entertaining us for the last fifteen minutes when River and Brantley snag Colton and me to let us know it's time to reveal the gender of the baby.

"Everyone, if you could please quiet down and gather around the stage, I'd appreciate it." River calls over our rowdy crew from the small stage off to the side of the bar.

Everyone climbs from their seats and makes their way over to the area, waiting impatiently while River and Brantley set up a table, along with a chalkboard with a "girl vs. boy" tally count on it.

"So, we figured since Colt and Mom left this up to me, it was only fair to do something brainy for the reveal. Mom doesn't brag much about being brainy, but she can hold her own when Colt and I get going.

"Anyway, Brant and I have a little experiment for you today. What we have here is copper (II) chloride reacting with sodium hydroxide. Because sodium hydroxide has phenolphthalein added, the excess will result in a pink or blue color, depending on whether there is more copper (II) chloride or sodium hydroxide."

"Hey, punk. English please!" Wren hollers, making the crowd laugh and River roll her eyes.

"Fine, Wrenny. I'm going to pour this"—River holds up a beaker—"into this." She holds up another beaker. "Depending on which element is present will determine what color this beaker turns. Pink for a girl and blue for a boy."

"Oh, well, why the hell didn't you just say that in the first place?" Wren teases as River narrows her eyes at her.

"That's enough, little minx. Please proceed, River." Brooks smiles up at my girl.

"Thanks, Brooks. Okay, so it looks like the majority of the group thinks the squirt is going to be a boy. How about you and Colt?"

"I'm Team Girl," Colt proudly calls out.

"I'd have to agree with Colt."

"Did you do some weird hippie test that lets you know ahead of time? That's chea—" Wren's cut off as Brooks covers her mouth and throws her over his shoulder.

"Someone call us when they're done," he yells over his shoulder as he heads towards the bathrooms with a squirming Wren in his arms.

"Anyway..." Brantley tries to get the reveal back on track, and River exasperatedly laughs.

"You ready?" She looks at us.

Colton is standing behind me, his arms wrapped around my shoulders and his chin resting on my head. I nod as he says yes, and we both hold our breath.

River smiles sweetly at Brantley before they pour their liquids into the beaker. Pink swirls fill the glass as cheers erupt around the room.

"It's a girl!" River yells as I dissolve into tears and Colton spins me in his arms to kiss me.

"Thank you so much, Dow." He's breathless as he pulls away.

"For what?" I stare up into his glassy eyes.

"For making me the happiest man alive. For not only giving me this baby girl but sharing that amazing one up on that stage. Just ... thank you so fucking much, baby." And then he kisses the bejesus out of me, right there in front of all of our family and friends, who cheer and whistle.

River races over to us, and Colton is quick to pull her into our arms. "That was perfect, Riv. Absolutely brilliant," he gushes.

"Thanks, Colt. Brantley and I talked about building a robot and coding it, but we thought it might be overkill. People like robots but not like we do. And I figured seeing the chemical reaction would be more aesthetically pleasing."

"It was perfect, Fawn."

The next few minutes are spent with everyone congratulating us, until my feet start aching and Colton guides me back to the table. Spencer, the goddess that she is, went all out on desserts. There are mini cheesecakes, cupcakes, cookies, mini tarts, pastries, and even little hand pies. Colton piles a plate high for me while Daphne guides me over to the table full of gifts.

"We're not going to sit and make you go through everything, but there are a few special gifts that some of us wanted to give you if that's alright."

"Of course that's alright, Daph. We didn't expect any of this, so we are grateful for everything that's here, but especially for any that you deem special. If it's special to you, it will be special to us."

I let Daphne help me get settled, with my snacks and a drink, at the table nearest to the gifts while she grabs something off the stack. Wren is back and bitching up a storm, but quiets when she sees what Daphne is doing. She makes her way over to us along with River, the Wilson sisters, my mom, and a few friends from the commune.

"So, it's not quite finished yet, but that's because I wasn't sure of her name. Once you guys pick one out, I can add it." Daphne's cheeks flush as she holds a canvas close to her chest.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ezra wink at her, which makes her shoulders relax and her smile grow more confident. There's something different about Daphne since her wedding, and if I had my wish, it would be that I'm not the only one adding to our ragtag family.

"Anyway, here you go."

I gasp as Daphne turns the canvas around. It's a painting of the most whimsical meadow I've ever seen in my life. The way she painted the lighting has given it an ethereal feel, but that's not what has tears pooling in my eyes. In the middle of the meadow, standing tall amongst the wildflowers, is a beautiful horse.

"I know his name isn't actually Colt, but this is my take on the two of you. Meadow and Colt..." She trails off as she bites her lip.

Jumping from my chair, I pull Daphne into a crushing hug. She might be way taller than me, but that doesn't stop me from embracing her with all I've got.

"It's perfect, Daphne. Colt, come here," I holler and smile when he makes his way across the bar.

"What's up, Dow?" He shoots a look at my teary eyes then back at Daphne.

"Daphne just gave me the most magnificent painting, and I couldn't wait to show it to you." I turn it around.

His eyes widen, and one of his hands flies to his mouth while the other caresses the painting. "Holy shit, Daphne. This is stunning."

"Thank you."

"Alright, enough of the mushy stuff. It's my turn." Wren hip-checks Daphne.

"Really, Wren?"

"Really. By the way, yay Team Girl!" she squeals as she does a little shimmy.

"So, my present isn't here, but I can show you a picture."

"Okay..." I hesitate. You never know what Wren can get up to.

Pulling out her phone, Wren flips it around and shows me a wall with a beautiful mural on it. After looking more closely, I gasp when I realize it's the spare room in my house.

"What? Wh— How did you do this?"

"River helped get it cleared out so Brooks and I could go paint. The walls have a neutral gray, and I started the mural yesterday. Good thing our girl is good with a paint brush and this one was willing to pitch in." Wren points to Daphne. "I couldn't have gotten this far without their help. I still have a ways to go, but I think it looks pretty fucking good so far."

"It looks amazing, Wren," I gush.

"I'm baffled that you got all that done in basically a day." Colt's eyes flit from the phone to Wren.

"I can't wait to finish it up for you."

The next hour is spent with my closest family and friends sharing their thoughtful gifts and tips with Colton and me. I never could have imagined having a shower like this, but it is absolutely perfect. Looking at the tables filled with baby supplies, I know that we will want for nothing for our little nugget. Not only do we have the essentials, but we've also been gifted some pretty amazing one-of-a-kind gifts, like the hand-crafted crib that Cash and Reid built us, the quilt from Spencer, and so many amazing clothes from my family and friends from the commune.

It's a good thing Colton drove today, and that Ezra and Brooks don't mind helping us get everything home, because we'd never be able to make it in one trip in my little electric car. Once we get everything crammed into her room and I finally stop crying after looking at her mural, Colt guides me to the couch, where we spend the rest of the evening.

"How did we get so lucky?" I muse.

"I have no idea, but I am so unbelievably thankful every day for the life I get to share with you and River, and the new life we created. I wouldn't want to do this with anyone else, Meadow. I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too, Colt."

Curled up on the couch with Colt, I truly am grateful to the goddess above for sending me this man. This pregnancy could've been a completely different story had he not been the amazing man that he is, and I am beyond relieved to have him by my side.

I can't wait to talk to River about having him move in with us. I know it might seem soon, but we are having a baby together, and I don't want him anywhere but here with us. He's an integral part of our family now, and I know she misses him about as much as I do when he's not here. Hopefully, he's ready for this next step because I know having him here with us is exactly what my little family needs.

Chapter Sixteen

Colton

"Mmm." I wake from a dream where Meadow's sweet mouth was wrapped around my cock, only to find her sucking me while playing with her perfect pussy, and I quickly realize I'm no longer dreaming.

"Fuuuck, Dow. You feel so good. Your wet mouth takes my dick so well, baby."

"Nr-gh." Her garbled reply has me twitching in her mouth, closer to release than I'd like to be.

I'm not even sure how she's able to suck my cock with her growing belly, but fuck me is she doing too good of a job. Her hand wrapped around my cock matches the strokes of her mouth while the other rolls my balls then tugs, making me fist the sheets and bite my lip to prevent from yelling out. The last thing I want to do is traumatize River by hearing Meadow go down on me, but Meadow is making it damn near impossible to stay quiet.

Feeling my impending orgasm coming, I thread my fingers in Meadow's hair and pull her off me. "As much as I love coming down your throat, I want this sweet pussy strangling my dick when I explode," I grit out as my fingers find her soaking-wet center and thrust inside.

"Yes, Colton. Please, fuck me. I-I need you." She whimpers as my fingers slowly move through her hot heat and my thumb barely caresses her clit.

"As you wish."

Lifting Meadow so she's straddling my waist, I line up my cock, and the moment she feels me at her entrance, she slams her hips down on my throbbing length, almost sending me over the edge. Gripping her hips, I hold her there as I take a second to get myself under control and give her time to adjust.

"Fucking let me move, Colt," she growls in frustration. Meadow growling is like an angry Tink from *Peter Pan*—simply adorable.

"Hold on, Dow. This is going to be quick and dirty."

"Thank the goddess ab—" Her words cut off on a gasp as I lift her up then slam her back down on me.

Using my legs for leverage, I grip Meadow's hips tightly as I set an unrelenting pace. She's completely naked on top of me. Her gorgeous tits leaking from being turned on don't even phase her anymore, but fucking hell does it push me closer to the edge. So does her belly, round with our child. I never would've thought I had a breeding or a pregnant woman kink, but the more Meadow's body shows the life she's growing, the more my need for her grows.

Her blonde hair is riotous around her face, which is gleaming with a light sheen of sweat, her cheeks rosy. Meadow's head drops back as she silently screams, her orgasm ripping through her and milking my own from my body. I pump into her a few more times before she collapses on my chest.

We're both breathing heavily as we come down from our highs, content to stay wrapped in each other's arms. I grow soft, slipping out of her warm center. Our combined cum leaks onto my leg and the bed, creating a mess. It's hot as hell, and if I had my way, we'd stay here all day until we were both as filthy as these sheets are about to be.

"Mmm, merry Christmas, Colt," Meadow mumbles into my neck as she leaves open-mouthed kisses until she reaches my lips.

"Merry Christmas, Meadow. That might have been the best Christmas present I've ever received." I smile at her while she rolls her eyes at me.

"That wasn't your Christmas present, Colt. That was just because I can't seem to get enough of you."

"Hey, you won't hear me complain. I'll gladly take waking up to your mouth wrapped around me, rather than to my alarm, any day of the week."

"I bet you would." Meadow smirks at me.

"Let's go get cleaned up so we can get breakfast going before River wakes up."

"Sounds good."

I can't help but laugh at Meadow as she rolls off of me and struggles to get into a seated position. She's really starting to round out in the middle, but seeing an ungraceful Meadow is what really gets me. She's so light on her feet when she walks that it seems she's almost floating, so seeing her struggle to sit up is amusing as hell.

"Har har, *real* funny. I'd like to see you tote around a watermelon with my frame and how graceful you'd be."

"Oh, Dow. I have zero doubts that I would be a miserable cow and wouldn't even come close to handling pregnancy with the grace that you do. You're absolutely fucking stunning. It's just slightly amusing to see you not be as graceful as you usually are." I pinch my fingers in front of me, which earns me a pillow to the face. "Brat."

"Only because you make me one." Meadow sticks her tongue out at me as she heads towards the bathroom. "Are you coming?"

"Of course."

Leaning over to the nightstand, I snag my phone to check the time and find a million notifications. Most of them are texts from my family, everyone wishing each other a merry Christmas. I shoot one back in the group message, and reply to Ada and a few of my colleagues from school.

By the time I make it to the bathroom, the room is steamy and smells like heaven. Meadow makes her own soaps and shampoos that not only smell fantastic, but they work better than any store-bought I've ever used. I'm addicted to the scent and chuckle under my breath when my dick starts to perk up. Sliding into the shower behind her, I wrap my arms around her back and rub them over her stomach, smiling when our little girl kicks my hand.

"Mmm, that feels so good, but you need to put that thing away. We don't have time to play again," Meadow warns.

My dick is now at full mast and poking her in the back as I kiss and nip her neck. "Are you sure about that? We could be quick," I hum in her ear as my finger strums her clit and my teeth tease her earlobe.

"Damn it, Colton. You have to be quick."

"Fuck yes. I will. Hold onto the railing," I command as I line my cock up with her dripping cunt. Thank fuck for the older couple who lived in the house before Meadow bought it. These handrails in the shower have made fucking her in here a hell of a lot easier.

"Yes, Colt."

"Play with your clit. Or your tits. Whatever you need to do to get there. Just be quiet."

"Mmm, y-yes. Right there, Colton. Feels. So. Good."

Meadow's leaning forward, one hand gripping the handrail while the other plays with her clit, as I slam into her from behind. I don't love that I can't see her face or her luscious tits, but her wet pussy is gripping me so tight that it doesn't matter. Feeling her walls start to flutter around my aching cock, I bend my knees more and angle my cock to hit even deeper in her, making her cry out.

"Quiet!" I hiss as I smack her ass, which is apparently too much for Meadow.

Her orgasm rips through her, making her legs give out, but I am able to wrap my arms around her before she can go down. Still buried inside her, it only takes me a few more strokes before my own orgasm is filling her hot center and making my legs weak.

"How does it keep getting better?" I mutter as I kiss her neck.

"I have no idea, but I'm definitely not complaining. Although, we really need to get a move on it. We have a busy day today." She pretends to be annoyed, but her sated smile gives her away.

"We do, but nobody will mind if we're late for anything. Did you get your hair washed yet?"

"I did. I just need to put some conditioner in, and then I'm done."

"I'll do it. Hand it over."

Meadow passes me her bar of conditioner, and I get to work lathering it on her long strands. It's a little tedious to use the bar, but it works really well and Meadow makes it herself. I'm not gonna complain that it takes a little longer than a normal shower. After rinsing her hair, I wash and condition my own while Meadow cleans both of our bodies. My dick tries to make a valiant effort for a round three but fails, which Meadow finds amusing. We quickly dry off and get dressed, then head to the kitchen.

"What are we making for breakfast today?"

"Well, I have my homemade cinnamon rolls all ready to go in the oven, along with a casserole that also needs to be baked. I figured that if I meal-prepped everything yesterday, it would make our lives loads easier today."

"You're brilliant, Dow." I lean in and kiss her soundly. I only pull away when I hear a throat clear behind me.

"Morning, River." I beam at her, excited to celebrate my first Christmas with both of them.

"Morning, Colt. Do you have the chai out?" River still seems half asleep.

"Not yet, but I can make you one. I wasn't sure if you'd want cold or hot today."

"Hmm, iced please."

"You got it."

"Morning, sweetie. You can go open your stocking while you wait for us if you want." Meadow smiles at River as she places the casserole in the oven beside the cinnamon rolls.

"Morning, Mom. I will. I'm gonna call Brantley real quick."

Rolling my eyes, I tease River, "Kid, we're gonna see him in a few hours."

"I know, but I miss him," River mumbles as her cheeks flush.

"I'm just teasing you, Riv. I totally understand where you're coming from. Tell him we said hi, okay?" I send her a reassuring smile and am glad when she shoots one back at me then heads into the living room.

"You're good for her, ya know?"

"Ya think?" I avoid making eye contact with Meadow as I make River's iced chai. I also make one for Meadow, only hers is half chai, half decaf chai.

"I know. You tease her but not in a way that puts her down. You also reassure her and make sure she's embracing being fifteen, not acting like she's thirty because of that big old brain of hers. You're exactly what the both of us needed without us knowing we needed you."

"Damn, Meadow. You can't get me teary eyed first thing in the day. There's still a lot of Christmas to get through."

"Yeah, yeah. I think you'll survive, big guy. Now, come on. We have gifts to open."

I follow Meadow into the living room, where River is still talking to Brantley on FaceTime. I say hi as I give her her drink then sit down on the floor beside the tree and start handing out gifts. I might have gone a little overboard for both of them, but what can I say? I'm super fucking excited about our first Christmas together and all the ones to come after.

We take turns, opening each gift, which I love. When I grew up, it was a free-for-all and nobody knew what the others got because of it. Not only that, but it was almost impossible to say thank you or truly appreciate the gifts being given when everything was so chaotic. I wonder if we can implement this when we go to my folks later today.

"Wow, Meadow. This sweater is amazing. How is it even this soft?" I can't stop rubbing my hands across the sweater Meadow crocheted for me.

"It's super finely wound alpaca fur. I had my mom send it to me. It's from one of the alpacas at the commune. Not only is it ridiculously soft but it is also insanely warm," she boasts proudly.

Leaning over, I give her a quick kiss to show just how grateful I am.

I'm surprised to see how many gifts the girls got me and even more so how well they know me. All of my gifts are perfect and things I would've picked out for myself. Meadow made me several different handmade gifts, ranging from the sweater to a homemade lotion that smells amazing and feels even better. River got me a kickass chess set and books I've been dying to add to my collection.

As happy as I am with my gifts, I'm even more pleased that my girls love what I give them. Meadow loves the thrifted glass jars my sister was able to find for me at an estate sale. They look like they're antiques, and they're going to be perfect for her lotions and soaps. River loves the robotics kit and the laptop I got her. Both are the latest state-of-the-art tech, and I know she's going to be building some badass robots with them.

I'm sitting back, enjoying my coffee and a cinnamon roll, when I catch Meadow giving River a little nod. From behind the loveseat, River pulls out a small box and hands it to me.

"What's this?"

"It's your last present from me and Mom."

Tearing the paper off, I open the lid to find a key, along with what looks to be a clay keychain in the shape of a home that's a mini replica of Meadow's house.

"Is this..."

"It's a key to the house." Meadow has tears rolling down her face.

"Mom and I want you to move in with us." River smiles at me hopefully, which is my tipping point.

Launching from my spot on the couch, I pull River to me, and grab Meadow and tuck her in under my other arm. Tears spill down my face as I hold my girls on the floor, surrounded by wrapping paper and presents.

"I would love nothing more than to move in with you."

"That's really good since everyone will be here in about half an hour to help us get started." River grins devilishly at me.

"What? What are you talking about? It's Christmas."

"It is, and your family's present to you is helping us get you moved into my house. Your parents rented a U-Haul for the day and a storage unit near their house for whatever won't fit into mine. We can decide which furniture we want in here and then store the rest until we know what we want to do with it. Everyone else's gift is helping us do the heavy lifting since I'm in no condition to help."

"Wow. I can't believe this." I lean my back against the couch, and look back and forth between River and Meadow, who are smiling proudly at each other. I've been dying to take this next step and be here with them, but I didn't want to pressure Meadow. Everything in our relationship has moved so fast that I wasn't sure if we would get here before our baby girl did.

"I can't thank you both enough for welcoming me into your home. I love you, and you've made me the happiest man today."

My voice cracks as I lose the battle to keep my tears in.

Meadow throws herself at me as her own tears spill down her face. River is more reserved than either of us, which is no surprise to me, but I can feel her love pouring from her into me as she wraps her arms around me and her mom.

"Alright. Enough of this mushy shit. We have about fifteen minutes to get ourselves together before everyone is here and it's time to head over to your place. Colt, there are boxes out in the garage that I brought home from the shop. They're broken down so they were easier for me to carry. Can you grab those while I go pee for the millionth time this morning and get into something a little more appropriate for moving?"

"Dow, like you said, you aren't going to lift a finger. What you are wearing looks fine." I help her off the floor. She's got on one of her flowy skirts that still fits, thanks to the elastic waist, and one of my long-sleeved shirts.

"Eh, might be fine to you, but not to me. Go do what you're told while I get ready." She gives me a fierce look before floating back towards her room. Well, I guess it's our room now.

Turning to River, I raise my eyebrows in a question, like "Did that just happen?", which makes her laugh.

"You heard the lady. Go do what you're told." Riv makes a shooing motion then bursts into laughter.

Wrapping my arm around her shoulder, I give her a squeeze. "You're sure you're good with me moving in? I know how selfless you two can be when it comes to each other. I don't want you to do this because you think it's what's best for your mom and me."

"I'm positive, Colt. You make her happy, but you make *me* happy too. You're really good at reminding me I'm a kid, without flat-out telling me to be a kid, yet you still talk to me like we're equals. You support me just as much, if not more, than my mom does. I love having you here and so will my baby sister whenever she arrives. We don't just *want* you, Colt. We *need* you, and it's been a long-ass time since the Sterling women needed anyone like we do you."

Fucking hell. Cue the damn tears again. Pulling her into a tight hug, I kiss the top of River's head before letting her go. "Thanks, kid. I needed to hear that as much as I needed to make sure you were on board."

"Good. Now, let's go before you get to see Mom's scary side."

We get busy doing what Meadow tasked us with.

The rest of the day is a whirlwind, spent with my family and our friends, as Meadow and I combine our worlds. It doesn't take long to figure out what furniture we're moving in and where we're going to put everything, and like the space before, nothing matches but everything fits as if meant to be together—just like Meadow and me.

Chapter Seventeen

Meadow

After we got Colton moved in, we headed back to his empty townhouse and had a feast with our entire crew. It was the best potluck, with everyone sprawled out wherever they could find a seat as laughter and chatter filled the now empty townhouse. The only bittersweet part of the evening was after everyone left and Colton was walking Ada home, but the sassy senior told him to knock off his melancholy and that it would take a hell of a lot more than him moving a few blocks away to get rid of her.

It's now the end of January, and Colton has fit into our lives seamlessly these past few weeks. It's crazy how effortlessly he's melded with River and me, and how it feels like he's always been a part of our lives. Don't get me wrong, River and I managed fine without him here, but life has been so much fuller with him with us every day.

Today, I'm taking Riv and Brantley on a tour of one of the colleges she found with Colton when they were looking into options other than MIT a few months ago. We tried to set up a day over her break, but the college was closed and encouraged us to come when classes were in full swing so that we could get the full experience. Colton wanted to come with us, but he's needed at the school for their career week.

"Are you sure you're okay with driving in this weather? It's a mess out there." Colt's brows are furrowed as he comes in from shoveling and cleaning off the car, with Brantley hot on his heels.

"We'll manage. I have lived in this area my whole life, you know."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I won't worry about you. You've got precious cargo with you." Colt's hands caress my belly as he leans in kisses me then bends down to kiss my bump.

"Aww, thanks for thinking I'm precious, Uncle Colt."

"Not who I was thinking of, punk, but you are precious." Colt wraps his arm around Brantley's shoulder and puts him in a headlock.

The two wrestle back and forth for a minute, as River and I watch on, amused at their antics. Brantley stayed the night so he could go on the campus tour with us. While he got accepted to MIT, the college we're going to today is willing to provide a better scholarship than MIT offered him. He also likes the idea of being closer to his family and his girlfriend.

Colt, being the protective papa bear that he already is, slept out on the couch while Brantley slept on an air mattress last night. I told him it wasn't necessary and that even if he did sneak into River's room, I was confident they wouldn't disrespect us by crossing any lines. Colt's face got beat red when I mentioned it, and he said he wasn't taking any chances with River's virtue, which promptly made me lose it in a fit of laughter.

I know River and Brantley having sex is something he doesn't want to think about, but I'm more realistic when it comes to the kids and what it's like with your first love. River doesn't always feel comfortable talking to me about sex, but she does feel comfortable talking to Wren and Daphne, and understands that they will tell me if they have any reason to.

The last appointment I had with my OB-GYN for the baby, I made River tag along. It was very informative for her and a way to ease her into taking charge of her own sexual health. We left the appointment with River making one for herself, to get her first exam and talk about contraception, even though she assured me she wasn't ready yet but wanted to be prepared if the time came when she was.

When we got home and told Colt how the appointment went, and about the responsible decision River made, he buried his face in his hands as he mumbled something about how he was going to handle being a dad to two girls. Of course, my mama heart couldn't handle him claiming River as his girl, which made me sob uncontrollably and startled Colt, who let out a relieved laugh when I finally told him why I was crying.

"I really wish I could be there with you all today," Colt grumbles as we head to the kitchen to make breakfast.

"Me too, but what you're helping with at the school is important. Wren and Daphne are really excited to participate, and so are Brooks and Ezra for that matter. Thanks for including my family." I wrap my arms around Colt's back and give him a squeeze.

"Of course." He kisses my head, then goes back to flipping pancakes. "It was a no-brainer to ask them. They are all very successful business owners, with unique businesses that thrive in our small town. Well, I suppose Ezra and Daph's aren't here, per se, but you know what I mean."

"Wren's pumped to talk about the shop. Daphne is terrified, but I think she's having Camilla come with her, so she'll be fine. Her foundation is amazing and so needed. I wish she'd believe in herself as much as we do."

"I think she does, Dow. She just needs the confidence to flaunt it like Wren."

"What are you doing at the school?" Brantley asks as he piles food onto two plates. I can't fight the smile when he takes one over to River at the table, who's lost to her laptop.

"It's a week-long event focused on what happens once you leave high school. The first couple of days, we have local businesses and professionals come in and talk to the students about their businesses, jobs, and the education they need to be successful. Then, at the end of the week, we get as many colleges and tech programs as we can to come in and try to match the students with the right fit."

"Wow, that's awesome. I know what I want to do after high school, but I have friends who are still up in the air. Something like that would be really helpful, I think. It would show them something they might not have thought of and give them the tools to go after it."

"That's the entire goal of this event." Colton points his fork at Brantley. "Ms. Sanchez started it, but I jumped in to help any way I can with this because I believe in what she's trying to do wholeheartedly. Every kid deserves to have the future they want. If we can help guide them and figure out the financial aspect to make it possible, I want to do that for them."

"That's really cool." Brantley smiles at Colton.

The rest of breakfast is spent discussing what the kids are looking forward to seeing at the college and what questions they have for the tour guide. Of course, River has a list, which doesn't surprise any of us. What is shocking is that I have a list of my own. I'm really hoping she likes this school and it will be a good fit, but I also want to make sure it fits all of our needs.

"Okay, I need to get going, and you all need to get on the road so you aren't late. Are we still meeting everyone at *The Tavern* tonight to let them know how the visit goes?" Colt gathers our plates as he heads to the sink.

"Yep, otherwise Wren will drive me insane until I give her all of the details, and I can ask for Brooks's take on things." River gathers her notebook in the bag she's taking with us today.

"Alright. Be safe and text me when you get there. I love you all." Colt pulls me into his arms and kisses me indecently for present company, only stopping when River groans and Brantley whistles. "Can't wait to see you tonight and hear all about it." With one last kiss, he grabs his bag then heads for the front door.

"Someone come help me up so I can go pee, and we can hit the road."

Brantley rushes over and gently helps me out of the chair.

I could do it on my own, but it doesn't hurt to have a little help. I'm officially in my third trimester now, and my belly can definitely confirm that. I don't remember being this big with River, but my OB-GYN assures me that it's normal to feel larger with a second pregnancy. I'm also not a teenager this time around, so I'm not as fit as I was then.

Once I've done my business and River has helped me get my boots on, the three of us make our way out to the car and to the college. Colt wasn't lying that the roads were shit, but we make it on time. I let him know we're safe, then shut down my phone and give our guide my undivided attention.

The day is magical and flies by before I know it. I'm not sure if this is the tour every student gets when they come to visit the campus, but it was wonderful. We started our day out by meeting the dean, then talking to the head of the financial aid department. They were extremely thorough and were even able to video call Jackie in since she was unable to take the whole day off to come with us.

Once we got the financial aid squared away, we were paired with a student majoring in computer engineering. We went to a few of their classes with them, which was the highlight for River and Brantley. My girl's big brain was devouring the knowledge at her fingertips, and I knew she would thrive here. The classes were relatively small, the largest having only twenty-five students.

In between classes, we used our voucher to eat at one of the several cafeterias on campus. The variety of options was pretty impressive, and the kids seemed to be really enjoying themselves. We also toured the library, the hub which held different events and had other dining options, and we went to the science and computer labs.

The college recently received a huge donation, which revamped the dorms. While there were still some older dorms with the traditional setup, most of the newer dorms were suites with different arrangements, from having your own room with a small bathroom and kitchenette to sharing a full living—kitchen and dining room with separate rooms for accommodating up to four students.

"So, do you have any more questions for us?" The dean of the university sits across from us in the lush chairs in her office.

I look over at River, who smiles. "No, ma'am. Everything we were wondering has been answered."

"That's wonderful to hear. And you enjoyed your tour?" She looks hopefully at River and Brantley.

"Very much so. It was extremely informative and eye-opening to what our day-to-day might be like if we decide to come here." Brantley smiles from his seat as he squeezes River's hand.

"Thank you so much for how thorough you've been today. We really appreciate it, especially me. I know how brilliant River is and never want to hold her back, but she also is young. I think your school could be a really great fit for both of us."

"I'm really glad to hear that. You have my information if you have any more questions or concerns. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us."

We stand and shake the dean's hand, then head out towards the parking lot. I'm quiet as I listen to River and Brantley talk excitedly about all the possibilities this school holds for them. I know we still have one more on our list to visit, but it's smack dab in the middle of a large city, and I don't think River and I are really comfortable with that.

"Why don't you two get in the car while I clean it off." Brantley uses the sleeve of his coat to brush off my door and help me in, then does the same for River.

"That boy you've got there sure is a good egg."

"Mom..." River's cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"What? He is," I tease. "So, what do you think?"

"Honestly, I love it, but I don't think I want to live here just yet. Maybe after I get through my first year or two, but not right off the bat."

"That's reasonable. I'm sure Wren won't mind me rearranging my schedule to make it work."

"Yeah, and I'll have my license midway through the first semester. I can start driving after that. Plus, I can take as many courses as possible online, so hopefully I only have to drive to campus one day a week."

"That would definitely be ideal."

"What would be ideal?" Brantley clambers into the backseat behind me.

"If Riv only had to make the commute to the campus one day a week."

"Oh, for sure. If we set up our schedules the right way, we could make it so we're here the same day and carpool."

"You don't want to live on campus?" I glance at him in the rearview mirror.

"Eh, not particularly. I don't really care about sharing a room with a bunch of guys I don't know, and that seems like a huge expense when I could commute from home and save a ton of money."

"That's very pragmatic of you."

"It's not a big deal. Mom and Dad are willing to help me with college, but I'd rather not be in a load of debt when I'm done with school. If I skip out on living on campus and having a meal plan, that will save us a lot of money, and the aid along with the scholarship they are offering me will basically cover my schooling. It would be stupid not to commute."

We're slowly making our way back to Sparrow Falls when the weather takes a turn for the worst. The mountains we live in are gorgeous and great for hiking, but the winters are rough, and today is no exception.

"Man, I didn't know it was supposed to be this bad today," River worries beside me.

"I knew they were calling for snow, but it's always worse up here in the mountains. We just need to go slow and take our time," I try to reassure River, but it's starting to get dark and the conditions are near whiteout.

"I'll text Uncle Colt, and let him know we're going to be a little late, so he doesn't worry."

"Thanks, Brantley."

We're barely crawling as we make our way down the mountain pass and can hardly see the car in front of us, but my car is handling the road pretty well all things considered. We're only about fifteen minutes from home, but I won't be able to relax until we're on Main Street heading to *The Tavern* to meet our family and friends.

"This is wild. There are weather alerts all over our area. Apparently, the two storm fronts converged and combined to make one large storm that stalled out in the mountains, which is why it's so crazy," Brantley lets us know as our phones continue to buzz.

"That would explain why we're driving through this shitshow," I huff out.

"Good thing we're close to being home."

"From your lips to the goddess above. The need to pee is getting *really* uncomfortable," I grumble, bringing some levity to a very tense situation.

"Want me to text Wren and have her clear a path to the bathroom for when we arrive?" River teases from her seat.

"You know, that might not be a bad idea if it takes us much longer to—"

My words are cut off as headlights flash in the rearview mirror and a horn blares. Glancing up, I see a tractor trailer barreling for us with no place for us to go. There's a bend in the road ahead of us and a rocky cliff to our left.

"Hold on!" I yell as I try to move the car off to the side of the road, but it's no use.

The truck slams into the rear, shoving us forward before bouncing along the driver's side, until the car slams into the rock face in front of us, pinning the passenger side to the cliff face. We're boxed in on all sides, with no way to get out.

"I-is everyone o-okay?" My heart is racing, my hands shaking as I stammer, while something warm rolls down my face. Reaching up, I pull my hand away and see blood, but I can't think of that when I still need to check on River and Brantley.

"River? Brantley? Are you okay? Answer me!" I sob.

"I-I'm okay. Fuck, my leg is stuck, Meadow. It r-really fucking hurts." Brantley's pain bleeds into his voice, and I wish I could get to him, but the airbag and steering wheel along with my big belly have me trapped.

"Riv, sweetheart, are you okay?" I swipe the blood from my face and look over.

River is staring at me wide-eyed.

Thank fuck. She must be in shock, but she's okay.

"We're all going to be okay, you hear me? Do either of you have your phone? Mine was sitting in the cupholder, but I don't know where it went."

"Mine was in my hand. I—" I hear Brantley struggling in the back seat before he lets out a pained cry. "I'm sorry, Meadow. I can't reach it."

"That's okay, honey. River, do you have your phone?"

She's still staring at me, unblinking.

"Riv, baby. I need you to listen to me." Brantley's voice is gentle, but it seems to break through River's haze as her head turns in his direction. "Do you have your phone?"

River looks down in her lap and lifts up her phone.

"Good job, baby. Can you call 9-1-1?"

"9-1-1?"

"Yeah, Riv. Or give me the phone, and I'll call," Brantley encourages.

River hands him the phone, and Brantley makes the call. He has it on speaker, and I'm relieved to hear that the emergency services are already on their way.

Finally taking everything in, I realize my entire body hurts, but I'm uncomfortable and cold because I must've peed during the accident. Stupid pregnancy bladder. My hands caress my belly, and that's when I realize it's rock hard and that my back is killing me. Reaching between my legs, I gasp when I pull my hand away and see blood.

"Meadow, are you okay?" Brantley's arm grabs my shoulder—the only way he can provide comfort.

"I-I don't know. I think I'm in labor... The baby—"

The cold and pain are the last thing I remember before passing out and waking up in the hospital.

Chapter Eighteen

Colton

Brantley: Roads are shit. We're close but we're probably going to be a little late.

Colton: Thanks for letting me know. See you soon

I blow out a breath as I set my phone on the table, my already high anxiety skyrocketing.

"What's up?" Wren plops down beside me.

"Brantley texted that they're going to be late because of the snow storm."

"That doesn't surprise me. The roads were hell getting back from my meeting in the city earlier. Where are they coming from?" Ezra looks at me sympathetically from across the table.

Rubbing a hand through my hair, I try to calm my racing heart. "They're coming through the mountains from the opposite direction."

"I'm sure they'll be okay. Meadow's going to be extra careful since she has the kids. Just try to relax," Daphne reassures me.

I'm about to thank her when the door opens and Jackie walks in. I make my way across the room to my sister and wrap her in a hug.

"Where are Meadow and the kids? I figured they'd beat me here since it took me twice as long with all the snow."

"Brantley texted me that they were going to be late. I guess the snow through the mountains is even worse than it is here."

Jackie starts biting her nail, which I know she only does when she's really worried.

"Come on. Let's go get a drink and wait for them at the table. Brantley said they were close, so I'm sure they'll be walking through the door any minute." I guide Jackie to the table, where our friends all stand to hug her hello.

Everyone talks about their days and catches up since we've seen each other last, but I can barely pay attention. Any time the door opens, my eyes are pulled to it in hopes that my girls and nephew are the ones about to step through.

"You need to relax, baby brother. You're starting to make *me* jumpy," Jackie mutters beside me.

Checking my phone for the millionth time, my heart rate spikes when I see it's been over half an hour since Brantley texted me. I've sent him a few texts, asking for an update, but I haven't gotten a response. I tried River as well, but no luck there. Logically, I know that if they are in the mountains, they might not have the best service, but my gut is telling me something is wrong.

"I'm sorry, but they should've been here by now." I try to keep the panic out of my voice, but Jackie sees right through it.

Maverick brings a round of drinks to the table and overhears our conversation. "You guys okay?" he asks quietly enough not to draw attention from the others.

"We're waiting for Meadow to get here with the kids. They're coming back from a college visit and should've been here by now."

Maverick looks at me sympathetically.

"I'm probably overreacting, but I'm fucking worried."

"Give me a minute to send out a few texts. Perks of being the town bartender—I've made a lot of friends. If there's anything going on, I'll find out and let you know." Maverick claps my shoulder, giving me a little bit of relief.

"Thanks, Mav. I really appreciate it."

Maverick's barely made it back to the bar when the door flies open and Axle comes striding in. He makes his way over to his brother-in-law, and the two share a hushed conversation. I don't know why my eyes are drawn to them, but when Maverick's

head snaps in my direction, my heart sinks to my stomach. Reaching for Jackie's hand, I squeeze it.

"What's wrong?" Her tone is worried, but I can't pull my stare from the pained look on Maverick's face.

"I don't know, but my gut is telling me it's not good. Hold on..." I go to stand, but Maverick's already around the bar and on his way to me, Axle hot on his heels.

"I'm really sorry to be the one to tell you this, Colt, but there was an accident up in the mountains. A tractor trailer lost control, and right now, we're pretty sure the girls and Brantley are pinned between the truck and the mountain. Emerson is en route to help tow the truck out of the way to get to them, but nobody's had eyes on them yet."

"Oh my god," Jackie cries by my side.

Reaching over, I pull my sister into my arms as she sobs into my chest.

"So, nobody's talked to them?" I look between Axle and Maverick, and wait impatiently.

"I'm not sure. Em got the call for the tow. I was doing a parts run, and she called me once she got to the scene. They won't give her any information other than that there are three people in the car—two teenagers and one pregnant woman—and that they need her to get the tractor trailer out of the way to get to them. I'm sorry I don't have more information." The look on Axle's face is one of complete anguish.

"I-It's okay. Thank you for coming and letting us know that much. What the fuck do we do now?"

"I'll make a call to my friend on the police force. I'm not sure he's working, but he'll be able to tell us where you all need to go. Just give me a minute, okay?" Maverick squeezes my shoulder then steps away.

"I'm gonna go up the mountain with the other wrecker to see if I can help Emerson. She might already have the truck out and your girls free, but I figure it can't hurt to go help."

I grab Axle in a backbreaking hug. "Thank you so much. Please be careful." My tears break free as I let him go.

Axle nods and then heads out the door.

Turning towards the table, I see the devastation on everyone's faces. Daphne is silently crying on Ezra's shoulder while Wren looks completely wrecked in Brooks's arms. Jackie's crying on the phone to her husband, I assume, but I can barely understand her, so I'm sure he's in a panic right now.

Sitting down beside my sister, I cradle her to my chest and pull the phone from her hand. "Hey, it's Colt."

"What the fuck is going on? All I could understand from Jackie was something about a crash and Brantley, but she's too incoherent right now. Please tell me what's going on, Colt. I'm going out of my mind here."

"Honestly, I don't know much yet. All I do know is that there was an accident in the mountains, and it involved Meadow and the kids. Our friends own a garage here, and they got called to come help tow a tractor trailer that has Meadow's car pinned between it and the mountain. Apparently, the emergency teams can't get to them because of the truck, so they called her in to move it."

"What the fuck? Why weren't we notified?"

"I don't know. Probably because they haven't been able to get to them yet? Reception up there is hit or miss, and they wouldn't give Emerson much information because she's not family. I have a friend here who knows someone on the police force. He's working to get us information right now."

"I'm coming to you. I'll call your parents and let them know."

"Just hang tight for now. I have no idea if any of them have any injuries. Our hospital here in Sparrow Falls is good, but if they need a larger trauma center, you're closer where you're at."

"Fuck! I can't just fucking sit here while my son is trapped." His voice breaks, making my own pain flare.

"I know, but there's nothing we can do right now, and you'd just be putting yourself in danger being out in this mess. I've got Jackie, and I promise I'll keep you updated as soon as I hear any news."

"Okay. Take care of my girl, Colt." I hear his tears as his breath hitches and he hangs up the phone.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt but I've got news. My buddy is on the scene, and they have made contact with them. Brantley and River are alert, but Meadow is unconscious. River told them she's got a pretty nasty head wound, so that's probably why. Emerson has almost got the tractor far enough from the car for the EMTs to get in, along with the firefighters to get them out.

"He told me that since Meadow's pregnant, they're going to bypass Sparrow Falls Hospital and take them straight to the city. We don't have a NICU, and just in case there's anything wrong with the baby, they want to be prepared. They'll take the kids there as well so that everyone's together."

Standing from my chair, with Jackie still tucked to my side, I wrap my free arm around Maverick. "Thank you so much, Maverick. Seriously... I—"

"Don't even worry about it, man. Just make sure you get your ass *safely* to that hospital, and let us know how everyone is doing and if there's any way we can help, alright?"

"I will." I nod as tears roll down my face.

"I'll drive. My car is probably best suited for this kind of weather," Ezra offers as everyone stands from the table and starts to put on their coats.

"Thanks, Ez. I don't think I could get us there safely if I tried right now."

"No problem. That's what family is for."

"Come on, sis. We can call Mom and Dad, and Stacie, from the car."

She nods as I help her into her jacket and guide her to the car.

It's normally anywhere from a thirty-five to forty-five-minute drive to the nearest large city from Sparrow Falls, but the drive today takes us closer to an hour and a half. Ezra is a champ at navigating the treacherous highways and keeping his cool while the rest of us are far from calm. I try to not let my mind drift to a worst-case scenario, but my fear for my girls is all-consuming right now.

"Tell me they're going to be okay, Colton."

"They'll be okay, sis. Brantley is strong and in his prime. He might be banged up, but he's going to be okay."

"And the girls?" she whispers.

"I've got to believe that all of my girls will be good. I don't think I could survive in a world where they aren't, so I'm not letting that be an option." I squeeze Jackie's hand, and she squeezes mine back.

"Hey, guys, we're almost there. I'll pull up to the emergency entrance to let you out and then go park. We'll meet you in there in a minute."

"Thanks, Ezra."

My leg bounces as I wait for Ezra to make his way around the hospital and put the SUV into park. I want to race through the doors, but I remind myself to wait for Jackie and help her out of the car then head inside. Our entire family is there, and I happily pass her off to her husband as I make my way to the receptionist.

"Hello, I'm looking for my family. They were in a car accident, and I was told they were being brought here."

"Names?" The elderly receptionist smiles at me.

"Meadow and River Sterling."

"And you are?"

"Colton Harding. I'm Meadow's partner."

"Yes, they arrived about fifteen minutes ago. The young girl, River, is still down here while her mother was sent to our OB floor."

"Are they okay? Who should I see first? Is our baby okay?"

"Give me one second, sir." She tries reassuring me, but the panic that I'm so close to my girls yet so far away is starting to take over.

I need to see them both, but I need to know who needs me more this minute. I want to check on Meadow and our baby girl, but I can only imagine how terrified River is right now, all alone. And I can't forget Brantley.

"What about Brantley Cole? He's my nephew."

"He's in stable condition. His father was back to see him, and I believe he's getting X-rays right now." She smiles.

"Mr. Harding." A woman in dark blue scrubs in front of the doors to the emergency department calls my name.

I swiftly make my way to her.

"I'm going to take you to River, and then someone will take you to Meadow."

"Is she okay? Is our baby girl okay?"

The nurse stops outside of a room and looks at me head on. "Meadow was unconscious when she got here, but she has a nasty head wound, so that's not surprising. Your baby was in distress. Meadow was hemorrhaging when she made it to us. The OB-GYN on call examined her and determined that she had a partial placental abruption. Do you know what that means?"

My body sinks back to the wall as my hands cover my face. "It means her placenta tore from her uterus, or partially, I guess?"

"Yes. Now, I'm not an L&D nurse, so I'm unsure of what her plan of care is, but I do know they took her to the labor and delivery floor. If the OB-GYN can get the bleeding under control and your baby's vitals stabilize, then I'd assume they would let Meadow continue the pregnancy like normal. But with her being in her third trimester, if the doctors think that either of them are in harm, I wouldn't be alarmed if they do an emergency C-section."

"Fuck. I need to go to her." I start to push off the wall and look for the nearest elevator when the nurse grabs my arm.

"You do, and you will. I promise. But you need to get to her first." She nods towards River's door. "The last thing she saw was her pregnant mother with blood pouring from her head and bleeding from her womb, unconscious and being driven away in an ambulance. From the little she's talked about, I can tell she's not a typical teenager."

"No, she's not. She's fucking brilliant." I smile weakly.

"I can see that, which means she has been a worried mess since she got here. I think it would do her some good seeing you. Other than her mom, baby sister, and boyfriend, you've been her biggest concern."

Blowing out a breath and shaking out my hands, I try to calm myself down so I can go see River, and reassure her that we are all going to be alright and make it through this.

"What am I walking into, as far as River's injuries?"

"She was extremely lucky. She's got a lot of bumps and bruises, a cut on her forehead that needed a few stitches, and a broken arm. We're monitoring her for concussion protocol, but the doctors don't think she has one as of now."

"Thank fuck." I sigh as I run a hand down my face.

"Honestly, you can probably sign her out as her guardian to go see her mom when the doctors give her the all-clear."

"That's good to know. Her aunts are in the waiting room and can sit with her while I go to Meadow if we have any wait."

"Sounds good. You can head on in."

I nod my thanks, take one more fortifying breath, then push into River's room.

"Colton," she cries from her bed as she tries to push herself up to get to me.

Rushing across the room, I scoop her into my arms as tears flood my face. I hold River as she sobs until neither of us can cry another tear. Pulling her back, I gently brush her cheeks then place a soft kiss on her forehead near her stitches.

"I'm so fucking happy you're okay, kid."

"I was so scared, Colton. The truck came out of nowhere, and the next thing I knew, Brantley was asking for my phone to call 9-1-1 and Mom had blood pouring from her head. Then she said she thought the baby was coming and passed out. Brantley kept talking to the operator on the phone and held my hand while we waited for the rescue people to get us. I don't know how long it actually took, but it felt like forever."

"Aww, River. That sounds absolutely horrible. I'm so sorry you had to go through that. But you guys are okay, and that's all that matters."

"Where's Mom? How is she? How's my sister? And Brantley?"

"Your mom is okay, as far as I know. She was taken to the labor and delivery floor because your sister was in distress. Your mom has a partial placental abruption and a pretty bad head wound, but that's all I know. I needed to come check on you before I went to see her. As far as Brantley, he's awake and okay, and they were taking him to get X-rays when I got here."

"He might need surgery, Colt. I saw his leg, and it was pretty bad. It's definitely broken." River has a new trail of tears streaming down her face.

"It's a good thing he's a strong, fit kid. He'll make a full recovery. I have no doubts about it." I squeeze her hand as I try to reassure her.

"Can you go find out about Mom? I have my phone. I'll be okay. You can text me."

"Yeah, I will, but I'm not leaving you alone, kiddo. Your aunts are here, and so are Ezra and Brooks. Who do you want me to send back to sit with you?"

"Can they all come back? I don't think I can choose, and I honestly don't think Wren could handle being back here without Brooks right now."

God, her concern for her aunt, even though she's the one who's been through the most traumatic day of her life, shows just how amazing of a kid River is.

Giving her a smile and a hug, I stand from the bed to go check with the nurse. "I'm sure it's against the rules, but I have a feeling they'll make an exception for you."

"Thanks, Colt. Go find Mom and let me know she's okay."

"I will. Love you, Riv."

"Love you too, Colt."

Making my way out to the nurses' station, I find the one who brought me back to see River.

"How's our girl doing?" She smiles up at me.

"She's hanging in there. Demanding I go get an update on her mom. Is there any way her aunts and their husbands can all come back and sit with her while I'm with her mom?"

"How many are we talking?" She eyes me suspiciously.

"Two aunts, so four people total. But I promise you'll want one to have her husband to keep her under control. Otherwise, she can be a little hard to handle, especially in a situation like this."

"Yeah, that should be fine. Nobody says much when we bend the rules for minors. Go grab them, and then I'll take you to your partner."

I head out to the waiting room, where I find a pacing Wren and the others sitting anxiously.

"It's about fucking time. What took you so long?"

"Easy, little minx." Brooks stands behind Wren and pulls her into his arms.

"I needed to get a handle on the situation. River is down here and has mostly bumps and bruises, and a broken wrist that still needs to be set. Meadow was taken to the labor and delivery floor for a partial placental abruption. If they can manage the blood loss, she will continue with her pregnancy, but if not, they'll do an emergency C-section. Can you all go sit with Riv so I can go be with Meadow?"

"Of course." Daphne steps up, surprising everyone but Ezra, who smiles proudly at her. "Take us to her."

I lead them back to River and stay long enough to make sure she's content, then head to find the nurse. I pass Brantley's room, and see his leg immobilized and Jackie fussing over him. I should stop and check on them, but my need to be with Meadow wins out.

"Can you tell me how to get to labor and delivery, please?" I ask the nurse who has become a bit of a lifeline for me.

"I'll do you one even better and take you myself. We can get an update, and if you have any questions, I can help you understand what's going on."

"Thank you. I really appreciate it."

The ride to the third floor is silent as the worst-case scenarios flash through my head: Meadow bleeding out, losing her but the baby making it, the baby being deprived of oxygen for too long and not making it, losing both of them...

"Hey, I don't know how I know, but they're going to be okay. I have a gut feeling, and I've learned to trust my gut over the years of working in the ER." The nurse squeezes my arm, which surprisingly relaxes me. "Come on. Let's go find out about your girls." She makes her way to the nurses' station, where she has a hushed conversation, then turns towards me with a beaming smile on her face. "Follow me, please."

I stumble down the hallway to a room and stop just outside the door, when I hear the most beautiful sound—a sweet baby crying.

"Why don't you go see your girls?" She gestures towards the open door to the dark room.

I stumble in and find a startling-pale Meadow in a hospital bed, trying to get the tiniest baby I've ever seen to nurse. She's talking sweetly to her as the baby cries in search of her food. I take two steps, then sink to my knees when I reach her bed as sobs rack my body, and I startle Meadow.

"Oh, Colton..." Her tears stream down her face as she caresses my head while my hand reaches out to hold her cheek and the other cups our sweet little girl's.

"I-I thought I lost you. All of my girls. I-I didn't know how I was supposed to live a life without any of you."

"Good thing you won't ever have to know." She smiles sweetly as I turn my face and kiss her palm. "Do you want to meet your daughter?"

"More than anything." Standing, I lean down and kiss Meadow, then our baby's head, before sitting on the bed beside her and holding my arms out.

Meadow places our little girl in my arms, and she instantly calms.

"Hi, sweet girl. I didn't plan on meeting you yet, but I am so happy to. I love you so much, sweetheart."

"She loves you too." Meadow smiles.

"What's her name?" I look at Meadow expectantly. We kicked around a few ideas, but we also talked about waiting until she was born and meeting her to finally decide.

"How do you feel about Briar Dove?"

"I think it's perfect. Welcome to the world, Briar Dove."

Chapter Nineteen

Meadow

Waking up in the hospital, with doctors and nurses surrounding me as they take me to an operating room, was not on my bingo card for the day, but holding my sweet girl in my arms is better than I could have imagined. Seeing her daddy stare at her adoringly as he tells her how much he loves her somehow tops that.

I never had this moment when River was born. Sure, I got all the new-baby feels of loving up on my girl, but I never got to see the other person who created her melt at her fingertips. I never had the pleasure of sharing this love with someone else and then knowing exactly how amazing this love I feel right now feels.

"Your sister is going to be so excited to meet you, Briar. She sent me on a mission to come make sure you and your mama were doing well. Imagine how jealous she's going to be when she finds out I got all this snuggle time," Colt croons to our girl as I rest in the bed.

His chest is bare so that he can make skin-to-skin contact with Briar, which is so beneficial for new babies, especially since she's a preemie. Thankfully, she's doing pretty great on her own, all things considered. We have to monitor her body temperature, she has a feeding tube for now, and she has oxygen at the ready, but her lungs have been doing pretty well on her own.

"Speaking of your sister, Wren just texted me that the doctor came and set her wrist, and she's got the all-clear to be released. What do you say I go get our girl?" The smile Colt sends my way is blinding.

"I think that sounds like heaven. I need both of my girls in one place."

"You know the rest of the crew is going to be coming with her, right?"

"I know, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Okay, but you need your rest, Dow. Your body's been through hell. You need time to recover." Colt looks at me sternly.

"I know, and I will. I feel a lot better after the transfusion."

"That's good, but please tell me if you need a break, and I'll kick everyone out."

"I will, Colt. Now give me our baby and go get our girl."

"Yes, ma'am." Colt stands from his chair and carefully carries Briar over to me. He gently kisses her head then leans down and kisses me. Grabbing his shirt, he throws it on then makes his way towards the door. "I love you, Meadow. You've made me the happiest man in the world today, even if you did take twenty years off my life."

"I love you too, Colt. Now, go get River!"

"Alright, alright! I'm going." He holds his hands up in surrender as he heads out the door.

"Your daddy is a handful, little miss Briar." I snuggle her up to my face and smile as she makes her little baby noises.

"How are we doing in here?" My nurse peeks her head into the room only minutes later.

"I'm great. I have my sweet girl, and my guy just went downstairs to spring our other daughter, so I really couldn't be better."

"Aww, that's great to hear. I just need to get some vitals for the both of you, and then I'll be out of your hair."

I sit patiently while the nurse does her work and answer her questions to the best of my ability. Even though Briar has a feeding tube, they are still encouraging me to try and nurse her. Being a preemie, she doesn't quite get the whole latching thing, but even having her try has helped my milk come in and will continue to help in the days to come. Tomorrow, we will meet with a lactation consultant, and I'm honestly really excited about that meeting.

Briar and I are just starting to doze off when I hear a commotion outside the door. "I think your big sister and aunties are here, little Dove."

I'm surprised by how gently the door opens, but the surprise fades when I see Colton holding everyone back. He nods to River, who ducks around him and sprints to my bed. We're both sobbing as we embrace and talk over each other. I only calm

when Colt's strong arms encircle both of us.

"Oh my goddess, Mom. She's perfect." River's smile is teary as her finger runs down her little sister's cheek. "What's her name?"

"You didn't tell her?" I turn to Colt.

"No, I wanted to wait for you." He leans in and kisses me sweetly.

Sitting up in bed a little more, I lean forward and place Briar in River's waiting arms. Colt has his hand under River's broken wrist, adding additional support and making my heart swoon.

"River, meet Briar Dove. Briar Dove, meet your big sister, River Fawn."

"Hi, Briar. I love you so much already. It's pretty wild."

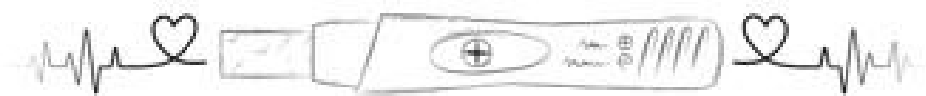
"Fucking hell!" Wren wails as she starts to sob, startling us all.

Brooks laughs as he scoops her into his arms. "Sorry, guys. It's been a rollercoaster of a day for her." He leans down and kisses Wren's head.

"Quit hanging out in the doorway and come meet your niece." I wave them all over, and our quiet room gets a heck of a lot louder.

My head hurts and I'm exhausted, but I wouldn't miss this moment for anything. Colton tolerates the chaos for about half an hour before he reminds everyone that River and I have had a traumatic day and we need our rest. I don't know how he pulled it off, but Ezra managed to get an extra bed in here for River, and Colton is going to sleep on the recliner beside us.

The gang heads out for the night but promises to return tomorrow with everything we will need for the next few days.



It's been two weeks since the accident and Briar was born, and we're finally getting to go home from the hospital. Briar has done amazingly, given her circumstances, and we've actually been in the hospital this long because of me. I lost so much blood and ended up having a really nasty concussion which, coupled with a newborn, has made my recovery hell. Both of our doctors felt more comfortable keeping us in the hospital for a while to make sure we had all the care and help we might need.

River and Colt have been making the commute from the hospital to Sparrow Falls every day for the past week, which has not been ideal. Turns out, we're all going to need a bit of therapy to deal with the trauma caused by the accident. Brantley's leg was severely broken and required surgery, but he was released a week ago with the hopes of making a full recovery.

Watching him with Briar has been so damn sweet. To say he's a smitten kitten would be an understatement. Apparently, the men in Colton's family are just suckers for baby girls. His mom and dad have visited us daily and have been a huge help once Colt went home so River could go back to school. They helped fill the void of missing my man.

Wren and Daphne, along with the Wilson sisters, and their spouses have also been here as much as they could. At one point, my doctor even threatened to ban everyone but Colton and River, so that I could get the rest my brain so desperately needed, but I told them my mental health needed them here more than my brain needed the break, and thankfully, they understood.

"How are my girls? Ready to go home?"

"We are more than ready."

"Good. Cause I'm ready to have you there with me, and so is Riv."

The nurses are sweet as they bid us farewell, but I'm glad to be on my way home. The drive is way more pleasant now that there's no freak blizzard, and the ease I feel when we hit Main Street in Sparrow Falls is palpable.

When we get to the house, Colton has me stay in the truck while he takes Briar inside to River, then comes out to get me. It's a slow walk inside, but Colton is as patient as always. As soon as I cross the threshold, tears spill out of my eyes.

"Hey, are you okay?" he whispers softly to me.

"I'm more than okay. I'm so damn happy to be home."

"Thank fuck. You think I can make it a little better?"

"Better? How can it get better than this?" I turn to him.

Colton smirks at River as he motions her to come over to us. She's standing beside him, with Briar in her arms and a blazing smile on her face, as Colton drops to one knee. I gasp in shock as my tears start flowing in earnest and my hand covers my mouth, my other being held by Colt.

"Meadow Sterling, I didn't know that I needed you, but I'm so damn glad fate decided this path for us. You girls have made me the happiest man in the world, and the only way you could make it better is if you'd be my wife. Will you marry me?" Lifting his hand, he holds an emerald princess cut ring.

"Yes!" I scream as I fling myself at Colton, slamming my mouth onto his.

He grunts as he catches us and deepens the kiss while River cheers beside us as she raises one of Briar's hands in the air.

I thought my life was happy and complete with River until two pink lines completely rocked my world in the best possible way. Now, I know that with Colton and Briar, my family is complete.

Epilogue

Meadow- A few months Later

Wow, where to begin? A lot has happened in the last few months, the most surprising thing being that my best friends were keeping *huge* secrets from me. Turns out I wasn't the only pregnant tattoo artist at Once Upon a Tattoo, and our little family grew by three!

Daphne and Ezra found out they were expecting shortly after they tied the knot, but due to her endometriosis, her pregnancy was considered high risk. They kept their pregnancy with their sweet boy pretty quiet until Daphne was far into their second trimester. It was actually River who figured it out, when she caught Ezra rubbing Daphne's belly at our house one night after we brought Briar home. The pair spilled the beans and apologized for keeping the secret. They were just being cautious and didn't want to draw attention from us after everything we'd gone through.

Much to everyone's surprise, Wren burst into tears before pulling up her oversized sweater and showing off her rather round baby bump. To say we were shocked is an understatement. Wren explained that while she was extremely excited to be having a baby girl with Brooks, her pregnancy had brought about some very unexpected trauma responses from her past. She didn't want to keep her pregnancy or her baby from us, but she was struggling with being pregnant, with the fear of losing her baby and the joy of becoming a mother. She had been working with her therapist to manage her emotions, anxiety, and panic, and was working towards telling us before the accident happened and set her back. To say there wasn't a dry eye at our house that night would be an understatement.

With all of us popping out babies, things at the shop have changed a bit. Lark officially moved to Sparrow Falls and filled the fourth station permanently. He manages most of the day-to-day stuff at the shop while River helps him with all of the admin stuff. With Briar being the oldest and a rockstar of a baby, I've started to work more hours, but Daphne and Wren are still part-time.

River and Brantley both made a full recovery, although Brantley required quite a bit of physical therapy. He had to have multiple surgeries and missed out on a lot of his senior year. Luckily, he is a brilliant student, and it didn't deter his college possibilities. Before we left the hospital, one of the doctors gave us an excellent therapist that has worked with all of us together, and individually, to process the trauma we'd gone through. I thank the goddess above every day that these kiddos are as well-adjusted as they are and that they have handled everything so well.

As far as Colton and I go, we couldn't be better. We waited only long enough for the snow to thaw and the flowers to bloom before having a small, intimate ceremony in our backyard, surrounded by our closest family and friends. River helped me make my wedding dress, and matching dresses for her and Briar that were dreamy and ethereal. Colton enlisted the guys to turn the backyard into a fairy dreamland. The entire day was enchanting.

Today is River's high school graduation, and I couldn't be more excited. All of our family and friends are here to support our girl, but I can't wait for the moment she walks across the stage. Colton is up on stage with the faculty and will have the honor of giving our girl her diploma, which will be even more special.

"Do you have the camera set up?" I ask Brooks as they start calling the students up to get their diplomas.

"Yep, I have this one recording, and Principal Sanchez let me put one up on stage."

"Perfect. Thanks, Brooks."

"Our next student has been a pleasure to have with us this year. River, can you please come to the stage?"

We all clap as River makes her way to the stage. "Her dad is our wonderful guidance counselor, Colton Harding. Would you please come do the honors, Colton?"

Colton wipes the tears from his face over being called River's dad.

"As the principal of Sparrow Falls High, it's my greatest honor to recognize our valedictorian, River Harding."

We all cheer as River makes her way to Colt, who looks absolutely gobsmacked.

River stops to hug Principal Sanchez, then takes the last few steps to Colton and falls into his waiting arms. The two cry as he whispers in her ear. When she pulls her head back, her smile could brighten the cloudiest day as she nods and shows him not only her diploma but the adoption papers awaiting his signature. He hugs her again, then hands River her diploma before grabbing her hand and thrusting it into the air.

Our entire group cheers, tears in our eyes. I don't know what our future holds, other than a lot more laughter, tears, and so much joy. As long as I have all of these wonderful people in my life and we're all together, I have no doubt our future holds nothing but happiness.

Also By Jay Fields

The Wilson Sisters of Sparrow Falls

Rescue Renovations

<https://books2read.com/u/4AorZe>

Brewing Brilliance

<https://books2read.com/u/4EgiVe>

Magnetic Mechanics

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Spinoff of the Wilson Sisters of Sparrow Falls

Forever Falling

<https://books2read.com/u/bpdxvl>

Once Upon Series of Sparrow Falls

Once Upon a Tattoo

<https://books2read.com/u/3GLg0n>

Once Upon a Contract

<https://books2read.com/u/br25GW>

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To my amazing kiddos, I love you three goons with all that I am.

And last, but not least, I need to thank my husband who lost many nights to me being absorbed by this story. He's been so supportive and understanding throughout this entire process. Thanks, LOML.

About the Author

Hi All,
I'm Jay. I've been an avid reader for years but finally decided to give writing a chance. I had so much fun bringing this book to life and can't wait to add more to this series.

So, a little about me. I'm a mama to three kickass kiddos, work full time, and have been with my husband for twelve years. I work in a predominately male field, so my jokes borderline on those of a pre-teen boy, and I may or may not swear like a sailor. Sorry, not sorry!

I love sports. I loved playing anything I could when I was younger, but basketball was hands down my favorite. I don't play much now, but I still love watching all sorts of sports and supporting the local teams. I've been a coach for girls' basketball on and off for years and am a total sideline coach when it's not my team playing. To say I'm competitive is a bit of an understatement. Hopefully one of my kids will decide to play, and I'll be able to coach them some day!

Harry Potter will always hold a special spot in my heart. It fostered a love for reading at a young age that grew into a love for romances in my adult life. I love the promise of a HEA and all the many different tropes to get lost in, which also makes writing romance one of the best stress relievers for me. It's amazing creating a world full of characters that you can lose yourself in.

So, I hope you loved Meadow and Colton as much as I did and are willing to hang around to see what I have in store next. If you loved them and would be so kind to help me out, please leave a review!

