

Southern Perfection

By Casey Peeler

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Prologue

Raegan

Grabbing my shiny black shoes, I try to buckle them but I can't. After trying three times, I start to cry. *Why do I have to wear this stupid dress and shoes anyway? I just want to play at the barn with Cole. That's what I always do when I come to Granddaddy's,* I think as the tears fall harder and I hear footsteps.

"Come here, Sunshine." Granddaddy says as he pulls me into his arms. I hug him as tight as I can. "I know this is tough, but you're a tough cookie. It's okay to be sad. I am too, but I need you to be on your best behavior today, okay?" Granddaddy says as he sits me on his knee to buckle my shoes.

Using the sleeve on my dress, I wipe my eyes and nod my head. He smiles at me. "I'm always a good girl, Granddaddy." I say proudly as we both stand and I weave my fingers in his rough hand. We make our way to his old truck and I slip getting inside with these stupid shoes. *Ouch! My knee hurts!* Granddaddy picks me up and checks my knee, then makes sure I get safely in my seat. When Granddaddy buckles me in, he gives me a quick kiss on the top of my head. "I love you, Granddaddy."

"I love you too, Sunshine. We're gonna get through this — me and you." I nod with a smile. He smiles back and we head to the church.

The ride to the church is short, but I keep wondering why Granddaddy said I needed to be good. I'm always good, but today I'm gonna try extra hard.

Standing at the front of the old wooden church, I am surprised by all the people. *Where are they coming from? Why are they all crying? It's my mama, daddy, and grandma, not theirs.* Every time I think the line is coming to an end, more people show up. Then I see Mrs. Talent, my teacher.

"Mrs. Talent! Mrs. Talent!" I say loudly, but Granddaddy takes my hand and gives it a little squeeze. *Oh no! That wasn't what I was supposed to do.*

Mrs. Talent bends down to me, places her hands on my arms, and begins to speak with her soft voice.

"Raegan, I'm so sorry about your parents and your grandma. The class misses you, but you take your time. Thumper, the bunny, really misses you too."

I begin to smile. I just love Thumper, and he loves me, especially when I bring him an extra treat from the farm.

She stands and looks at my granddaddy. Granddaddy doesn't talk a lot, but I can tell he's sad, too.

"Mr. Lowery, we are truly sorry for your loss. Please let the school know if there is any way we can help you or Raegan."

"Mrs. Talent, thank you for everything y'all have done thus far. Raegan and I will be okay. Might take some gettin' used to, but we'll be a'ight."

Finally, I can see the end of the line. *Yes! My feet hurt so bad!* I'm tired and want to sit on Granddaddy's porch and let my mama read to me while we swing. *Oh, wait. She*

can't. Thinking about her makes me sad. I miss her so much. *What am I going to do without her or daddy?*

As the church clears, the men in suits approach, telling us we can leave. *I'm glad because they are kinda scary.* Granddaddy picks me up, carries me to the truck, and buckles me in. *No falling this time.* The ride to the farm is quiet, except for some old music coming softly through the speakers. Granddaddy starts to sing and I try my best to act like I know the words, too.

As we turn onto the dirt road, I see my granddaddy's house, but there sure are a bunch of cars.

"Granddaddy, why are there a bunch of cars at your house?" I ask.

"Sunshine, the people from the church have brought food for us to eat. There will be a bunch of people here, but once they eat, they should go home." *Good!*

"Okay." I say. *Be good, Rae.* "Is Cole coming?" I ask.

"You bet." Granddaddy says as he gives my knee a soft pat. *Yay! I get to see my cousin Cole!*

Once the truck comes to a stop, I hop out and run to the porch. *Where is he?* I throw open the door and run into the living room to look around for Cole. *Oops! There sure are a bunch of people in here.* Granddaddy comes into the living room behind me, "Sunshine, he'll be here in a few minutes. Go change if you want while you wait for him."

I hurry up the steps and open my suitcase. I dig until I find my favorite shirt and shorts. I pull my dress over my head and it gets stuck on my shoulders. After a minute, I get it off and it falls onto the floor. *Man that was rough!* I pull on my clothes, slide on my boots, and grab my hat. *This is way better!*

When I get downstairs, I follow the sound of voices into the kitchen. I see Ms. Frances and a few other ladies from the church. They stop when they see me.

"Hey, Raegan!" She says too happily. "Just a few minutes and supper will be ready." *Honestly, I'm not hungry. I just want to go and play.*

"Okay. Thank you." I say and turn to see if Cole is here. I walk around and don't see him. *Hurry up, Cole!* I take a seat in my little rocking chair. I sit there like the good girl that I am. I swear I've been sitting for an hour when I hear Cole.

"Whatcha doin', Rae?" Cole says.

"Sitting and being a good girl."

He laughs. "Rae, you're always good. Come on, let's go play out back." I shake my head no. "Why not?" He says.

"Granddaddy said I had to be on my best behavior. I can't play."

Cole puts his hands in his pockets. "He didn't mean that you couldn't play. Come on." He says and pulls me by the hand. I shake my head no. "I promise, it's okay." *If Cole says it's okay, I guess it is?* I hop out of the rocker and we hurry out the front door.

Chapter One

Twelve Years Later

Raegan

Hurrying back into the house from my morning routine on the farm, I check the clock. *Crap*. Thirty minutes to get to school. I run to my room, throw on my cheerleading uniform, slap on my makeup, and pull my long, chocolate-colored hair into a high ponytail and attach a bow the size of Texas. I double check my Vera Bradley backpack and hustle downstairs to eat breakfast with Granddaddy.

Lying on the table are fresh scrambled farm eggs, sausage, and toast with homemade pear preserves.

“Raegan, do you want coffee or tea this mornin’?” Granddaddy asks as he pours his coffee that is black as tar.

“Coffee would be great!” I say, already eating.

He makes his way to the table in his Pointer overalls, paired with a short-sleeved t-shirt. He sets down my cup and takes his seat. This has been our morning routine since I can remember, well, minus the coffee.

“How were the chickens this mornin’?”

“Same as usual. They pecked the crap outta me!”

“Ah, they’re just showin’ their love to ya. Was Cole already down by the barn?”

“Yeah, he was.”

“I’ve got a lot to get done around here today, but I plan on going to the game tonight. You think you’ll be home after school?”

“Of course, aren’t I always? Do you care if I spend the night with Jordyn tonight?”

“I don’t see why not. You deserve a night off from the farm, and don’t worry about this afternoon. Cole and I will take care of it. It’s a big game tonight. Now, you better take that toast to go, or you’re gonna be late. I can’t have that!”

“Yes, sir.” Standing, I straighten my cheer skirt, and Granddaddy gives me *the look*.

“Hey, I didn’t pick the length,” I say as I toss up my hands.

“Well, make sure you walk close to the wall when you come down those stairs in the cross hall.”

I laugh. “I can’t believe we still call it that, too. Some things never change around Pleasant Hill.”

After dropping my plate into the sink, I kiss him on the forehead, pick up my backpack, and walk to my truck. It’s sticky hot in mid-September, so I crank up the air conditioner and the local country station. *Crap! Ten minutes!*

Putting the pedal to the metal, I make it to school with a few minutes to spare. Everyone is still in the parking lot, taking their time getting to class. I glance in the rearview mirror for any pieces of sausage floating around before walking into the building and heading straight for my locker.

Staring into my locker, I try to pull myself together for another day at Cleveland High. Thank goodness it's Friday. I'm exhausted. I just need to make it through the game tonight, and maybe I can catch a break.

As I grab my physics textbook, my thoughts are interrupted.

"Hey, Rae! Are you ready for the game tonight?" Jordyn says bubbly.

"Yeah, Jordyn, I am."

"Are you all right? You seem a little spacey."

"Yeah, I'm just tired. You know I had to get up with the chickens this mornin'."

"I'm so glad I don't live on a farm."

"Oh, and what do you call yourself, a 'city slicker'?" I ask with a laugh.

Pleasant Hill is exactly what the name implies, a pleasant place to live that's the size of a hill. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating just a little, but there are five thousand people in this town, tops. Most people live outside the city limits, produce their own means of food, and live like good old country folk.

When the bell rings for the end of first block, I make my way into the hall and notice Jace waiting for me. *Great! He can't take the hint. I know, the cheer captain and the quarterback are supposed to be together, but he's a true player. He only wants what he can't have. I have no time for him and his cocky-jock-self.*

"Hey, Raegan, I heard there's a party at the Phillips' farm tonight after the game. Are you goin'?" he asks.

"I'm not sure. I'm stayin' at Jordyn's tonight, so it's whatever she wants to do."

"Oh, y'all will be there," he says too confidently.

"What makes you so sure?"

He smirks and glances down the hallway to find Jordyn getting a little close to Ridge Parker.

I start to laugh and shake Jace off before heading to my next class. I'm so ready for a break, a weekend with my best friend, and just acting like a teenager instead of "Miss Perfect" all the time.

Emmett

"Hey, Jace, thanks for giving me a ride this mornin'. My truck should be fixed tomorrow."

"No problem," he says with a pat on the shoulder as I walk the halls of Cleveland High School for the first time. I can't believe I'm back in the town I never thought I'd

live in again. It's the size of a damn peanut. "I'll catch you at the game. I think Cole's gonna get me after school."

"I wish your ass would have moved here two months ago, but then, I might be on the bench." Jace laughs. *Still thinking he's better than everyone. Just like the last time I was in town.*

Ignoring him, I walk into the main office, meet with the counselor, and get my schedule— calculus, physics, weight training, and AP English. *You've got to be freakin' kiddin' me!* This schedule is no joke. I thought transferring would mean new classes, not the same ones I already had.

Shaking it off, I head down the hall and into calculus. I find a seat in the back after I introduce myself and prepare to barely pass. Who am I kidding? I'll pass, but I just want to be here, not actually have to try. The faster I can get out of this Podunk town the better, but it sure is better than living with my dad and his new wife.

When the teacher begins to speak, I realize I'm ahead of them, so I'll just listen and refresh my memory. Within minutes, my mind is wandering to the clock, the game tonight, and getting to see my stepbrother Cole. Jace is right; I should have moved here at the beginning of the summer, but I was too busy being stuck up my ex's ass.

With the sound of the bell, I make my way to physics. The hallways aren't near as crowded as my school in Georgia. Taking the schedule in my hands, I look at the room number and start to walk in that direction when I hear the sweetest and most familiar sound, but I can't place it.

Shaking it off, I round the corner to the hallway where the science rooms are located, and I hear the voice that goes with the laugh. *Who the hell is that?* Then, I see her dark hair pulled up with an ugly ass bow on her head and one short as hell uniform, talking to none other than Mr. Superstar, Jace McCoy. It takes all of two seconds for me to realize who is standing in front of me... Raegan Lowery.

Trying not to act like I see her, I make my way into the physics classroom without being noticed. Raegan Lowery is who every guy dreams about but can't have, Jace has told me this on our ride this morning. After hearing that voice, I just might have to change that.

The teacher asks me to sit up front and introduce myself to the class. *Damn, I hate being the not-so-new guy. They all know me. I've only been gone for a few years.* Once that is over, I take my seat, front and center, and get ready to learn about static electricity. The only thing I can think about is the jolt of electricity I felt when I saw her.

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