



Mountain Protector

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: The man my father sent to protect me is driving me crazy in all the wrong ways... and all the right ones.

Some psycho my dad testified against just escaped from prison.

I don't think I need protection.

But, of course, my dad sends a bodyguard to my house anyway.

Enter Clay Dover.

The first time he walks through my door, I can't decide if I want to kick him out or stare at him all day.

He's huge, intense, and follows me everywhere.

He's also hot. Like really hot.

I tell myself I'm annoyed. But the way my body heats when he's near tells a different story.

The tension between us is electric, and I've caught him staring at my lips more than once.

Now, I'm not just craving his protection. I'm craving him...

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ChapterOne

RUBY

“Damn, that looks good,” Marcus says, examining the fresh ink on his forearm. He twists his wrist to catch the light, the black lines of the geometric mountain range standing out stark against his tanned skin.

“Let me see yours again,” he says to Lainey, who’s perched on the edge of the tattoo chair beside him. My best friend extends her arm, showing off the delicate constellation pattern I just finished on her inner wrist.

“I’m obsessed with it,” she says, her eyes bright with excitement. “The way you incorporated the Aquarius stars but made them look like they’re flowing with the water? It’s perfect.”

“It really is,” Marcus agrees, gently taking her wrist to examine my work. “The detail is incredible.”

“Ruby, you’ve outdone yourself,” Lainey says, beaming at me. “The linework is so clean. I couldn’t have asked for better.”

I feel my cheeks warm at their praise as I finish wiping down Marcus’s tattoo with antiseptic.

“Thanks, guys. I’m really happy with how they both turned out.”

“Worth every penny,” Marcus reaches for his wallet. “What do we owe you?”

I wave him off. “Friends and family discount. Just leave a good tip in the jar if you want.”

Lainey’s eyes widen. “Ruby, no. We’re paying full price. This is your livelihood.”

“It’s on the house,” I peel off my gloves. “Consider it an early wedding present.”

Marcus raises an eyebrow. “You sure?”

“Positive. Just promise to let me do your anniversary tattoos next year.”

Lainey laughs and hops off the chair. “Deal. But we’re leaving a massive tip anyway.”

I watch as they gather their things, Lainey tucking herself against Marcus’s side despite the fact that he towers over her petite frame.

It still catches me off guard sometimes, seeing them together. They’ve only been dating for a few months. But with the way they look at each other—like they’ve been waiting their whole lives for this—it makes perfect sense why they’re already engaged.

The twenty-year age gap raised eyebrows around town, sure, but anyone who sees them together gets it immediately. And the fact that Lainey used to date Marcus’s son Axel years ago? Ancient history now, though it definitely complicated things when they first realized their feelings for each other.

I take a moment to breathe in the quiet of the shop. Fit Mountain Ink feels different when I’m the only one working here. Jess and Mike, the owners, trusted me to hold

down the fort while they're on a two-week anniversary trip to Hawaii. It's a vote of confidence I don't take lightly, especially since I've only been tattooing professionally for three years.

I glance over at Spike, my bearded dragon, lounging in his terrarium on the counter. I brought him in to keep me company during the slow periods.

"Just you and me now, buddy," I tell him, tapping gently on the glass. He blinks lazily at me, unimpressed.

My phone rings, and I see my dad's name flash across the screen. I consider letting it go to voicemail, but something tells me I should answer.

"Hey, Dad," I say, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"Ruby." His tone immediately sets me on edge. It's his lawyer voice, not his dad voice. "Where are you right now?"

"At the shop. Why?"

There's a pause, and I can practically see him pinching the bridge of his nose the way he does when he's stressed.

"There's been an incident. A prisoner escaped from Blackwater Prison last night."

My stomach drops. "Who?"

"Vincent Holloway."

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The name hits me like a splash of cold water.

Vincent Holloway. The financial fraudster my dad helped put away five years ago. The man who stood in court and promised to make my dad pay for his testimony.

“How did that happen?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

“Prison transfer. He had help on the outside. That’s not important right now. What matters is the threats he made against our family.”

“Dad, that was five years ago. He probably doesn’t even remember my name.”

“He had articles about you in his cell. Recent ones. The feature in Tattoo Weekly. He knows where your shop is.”

My stomach drops.

“I’ve already contacted Hunt Security,” he continues. “They’re sending a bodyguard to your apartment tomorrow morning.”

I sigh through my nose. “Dad, I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“This isn’t negotiable, Ruby. Holloway is dangerous. He lost everything because of my testimony. Men like that don’t forgive.”

“So I’m supposed to just let some stranger follow me around all day? Watch over my shoulder while I work? Sleep outside my bedroom door?”

“If that’s what it takes to keep you safe, yes.”

I rub my forehead and feel a headache blooming. “How long?”

“Until they recapture him. The head of Hunt Security assured me they’re sending their best man. The company specializes in high-risk protective services.”

“Fine,” I concede, though every independent bone in my body protests. “But I’m not changing my schedule for this.”

“You will do whatever is necessary to stay safe,” my dad says firmly. “This isn’t one of your rebellions, Ruby. This is your life.”

The call ends with tense goodbyes and promises to check in later. I stare at my phone for a moment, trying to process this new reality.

A bodyguard. Someone watching my every move. The absolute nightmare for someone who fought so hard for freedom.

When I return to the front, Lainey and Marcus are waiting, their expressions telling me they overheard enough.

“Everything okay?” Lainey asks.

“Not really. Some guy my dad testified against broke out of prison. Apparently, he’s holding a grudge.”

Marcus straightens, instantly alert. “What are you going to do?”

“According to my dad, I’m getting a bodyguard tomorrow morning. Some security specialist who’s supposed to shadow me until they catch this guy.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Marcus says. “These situations can turn dangerous quickly.”

Of course, he’d say that. Marcus works in private security himself, though more in the corporate sector than personal protection.

“It’s smart to have backup,” Lainey adds softly. “Even if just for peace of mind.”

“My peace of mind would come from not having a stranger invading my space and tracking my every move,” I counter. “I haven’t lived by someone else’s rules since I left home at eighteen, and I’m not starting now.”

Lainey takes my hand. “This isn’t about rules, Ruby. It’s about safety. Let the professionals do their job.”

I know they’re right, logically. But logic has little to do with the suffocating feeling that comes with someone else making decisions about my life.

“The security person will be at my apartment tomorrow morning,” I say, trying to sound more accepting than I feel. “I guess I’ll figure it out then.”

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“Call us if you need anything,” Lainey says, squeezing my hand. “Even if it’s just to vent.”

Marcus nods. “And if you don’t like whoever they send, I can recommend some people.”

“Thanks. I’ll be fine.” I straighten my shoulders and force a smile. “It’s probably overkill anyway. Holloway is likely halfway to Mexico by now.”

But as they leave, their matching tattoos and matching smiles making them look like they belong in a perfect little bubble, I can’t shake the feeling that my carefully constructed independence is about to be tested in ways I never anticipated.

I turn to Spike, who blinks slowly from his perch.

“Looks like we’re getting a roommate,” I tell him. “Try not to bite this one.”

* * *

The insistent knocking pulls me from a dream I can’t quite remember. I groan, rolling over to squint at my phone. 7:13 AM.

Who the hell is at my door this early?

Then it hits me—the bodyguard. Dad’s security solution to the Holloway problem.

I drag myself out of bed, not bothering to change out of my thin tank top and tiny

sleep shorts. If this security suit wants to drag me into my dad's paranoia at the crack of dawn, he can deal with my morning appearance.

"Coming," I call out. I stumble past the living room, nearly tripping over a stack of tattoo magazines I've been meaning to organize for months.

My apartment is what real estate agents would generously call "cozy." What it lacks in space it makes up for in personality. Every inch of wall is covered with artwork—some mine, some from artists I admire. Colorful tapestries hang over the worn sofa I rescued from the curb three years ago. Mismatched furniture crowds the small living area, each piece telling its own story of flea markets and thrift shops.

My drafting table sits by the window, stacked with sketches for upcoming tattoo appointments. Colored pencils spill from their container, bright against the dark wood. It's chaotic but it's mine.

"Morning, Spike," I mumble as I pass his terrarium. My bearded dragon looks at me with his usual judgment, his scaly head tilted as if asking why I'm awake at this ungodly hour.

"Don't start," I tell him. "This wasn't my idea."

The knocking comes again, more insistent this time.

"I said I'm coming!" I shout. I run a hand through my tangled hair.

It probably looks like a bird's nest right now. Whatever. The security guy will just have to deal. I unlock the door and pull it open, ready to establish boundaries with Mr. Security.

Instead, the words die in my throat.

I'm expecting a slick guy in a suit with an earpiece—a corporate drone who thinks babysitting a tattoo artist is beneath him.

But the man filling my doorway is nothing like I expected.

He's tall. Like really tall, with broad shoulders that stretch the limits of his dark gray Henley. No suit, no earpiece. Just worn jeans, sturdy boots, and the kind of build that comes from actual physical work, not just gym sessions.

His dark hair is shorter on the sides but longer on top, just messy enough to look like he ran his hand through it. A shadow of stubble covers his jaw, which could cut glass with its sharpness.

This guy isn't a bodyguard. He's a mountain wrapped in man form.

He leans one forearm against my doorframe, his gaze traveling down my body in a way that should feel invasive but somehow doesn't. When his eyes return to mine, there's something like approval there, quickly masked by professionalism.

"Um, hi?" I say nervously. "Can I help you?"

"Clay Dover, Hunt Security. Your father hired me." His voice is deep, with a slight rasp that speaks of early mornings and late nights.

I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly aware of how thin my tank top is and how his eyes noticed. "You're early."

"I'm on time. Seven AM, as arranged."

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“No one told me seven,” I argue, though it doesn’t really matter. I wouldn’t have gotten up early even if I’d known.

“Well, I’m here now.” His gaze moves past me, scanning what he can see of my apartment. “You going to invite me in?”

I don’t move. “I don’t need a bodyguard. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for years.”

“I’m sure you can, sweetheart.” He says it casually, like he’s been calling me that for years. “But Holloway isn’t some drunk customer getting handsy at last call. He’s dangerous.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart,” I snap, ignoring the little flip my stomach does at the endearment. “And I’m well aware of who Vincent Holloway is.”

Clay steps closer, and I have to fight the urge to step back. Not because I’m intimidated, but because his presence is overwhelming in the confined space of my doorway.

“Here’s how this works,” he says, voice lower now. “I stay with you. Where you go, I go. I sleep on your couch, I escort you to your shop, I watch the doors while you work. I check every room before you enter. I verify every person who approaches you. I do this until Holloway is back behind bars.”

“That’s insane. I have clients, I have a private life?—“

“Which you won’t have at all if Holloway gets to you.” His gaze is unwavering. “This isn’t negotiable, Ruby.”

The sound of my name in his mouth does something to me. Which is ridiculous. I’ve known this man for all of two minutes.

“My apartment is tiny,” I argue. “There’s barely room for me and Spike, let alone some six-foot-plus bodyguard.”

One eyebrow raises slightly. “Spike?”

On cue, there’s a scratching from behind me.

I turn to see Spike has somehow escaped his terrarium and is making his way across the living room floor toward the door.

“My bearded dragon,” I explain. “He’s an escape artist.”

Clay’s mouth twitches. “Looks like security is already an issue here.”

“Very funny.” I bend down to scoop up Spike, who settles onto my palm with his usual imperial attitude. “This is Spike. Spike, meet the intruder.”

Clay reaches out a finger, letting Spike inspect it.

To my surprise, Spike doesn’t hiss or bite like he usually does with strangers. Instead, he bobs his head slightly, the closest thing to approval I’ve ever seen from him.

“Traitor,” I mutter to Spike.

Clay’s eyes meet mine again. “Are you going to let me in, or should we continue

discussing your safety in a public hallway where anyone could be listening?”

ChapterTwo

CLAY

The moment Ruby opens her apartment door, something shifts inside me.

A primal, white-hot awareness I’ve never felt before. It’s like someone flipped a switch, turning on parts of me I didn’t know existed. I stand there for a half-second too long, taking her in. My job is to protect her, not want her.

But fuck, do I want her.

She steps back, pulling her tank top down where it’s ridden up, revealing a slash of pale stomach inked with delicate flowers. I force my eyes up and follow her into the apartment. The door clicks shut behind me, and I find myself in Ruby’s world.

It’s chaos.

Art supplies are scattered across every surface. Half-finished sketches pinned to walls. A blanket fort on the couch with a book facedown on the cushion. Mismatched furniture that somehow works together. The scent of coffee, paint, and something uniquely her.

I catalog everything, building a mental map. Security instincts, sure, but there’s something else driving me. I want to know her. All of her.

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“Sorry about the mess,” she says, moving a stack of books off a chair. “Wasn’t expecting company until later.”

“It’s fine.” I remain standing, scanning the room. Original tattoo designs cover one entire wall—intricate, dark, beautiful work. Nothing like the commercial flash I’ve seen in most shops. These tell stories. “These yours?”

“Yeah.” She tucks a strand of purple-streaked black hair behind her ear. “Do you need coffee? I need coffee.”

“Already had some.”

She pads to the kitchen, and I watch her move. She’s wearing tiny sleep shorts that barely cover her ass and that worn tank top. Her body is a canvas—tattoos swirling down her arms, across her shoulders, disappearing under fabric. I spot a large piece on her thigh—a wolf surrounded by night-blooming flowers.

When I look up, Ruby’s watching me, coffee mug in hand, head tilted. Something passes between us. Her lips part slightly, and heat pools low in my gut.

I’ve heard the stories about this town. People meeting and just knowing. Love at first sight. Always thought it was bullshit. Small-town fairy tales for bored locals. Now I get it. It’s not gentle. It’s not sweet. It’s fucking brutal, like being hit by lightning and wanting more.

Ruby breaks eye contact first.

“I should get dressed. We need to be at the shop in twenty.” She sets down her mug.
“Can you make sure Spike’s carrier is by the door? He comes with us.”

“Sure.”

She disappears down the hallway, and I exhale, not realizing I’d been holding my breath.

What the fuck is happening to me?

I’ve been a bodyguard for years. Had plenty of attractive clients. Never once felt this instant, overwhelming need to claim someone. To protect them, not because it’s my job, but because the thought of anything happening to her makes my blood run cold.

I find Spike’s carrier beneath a pile of sketchbooks and move it to the door. The little dragon watches me from his perch on a small rock under a heat lamp. His enclosure is immaculate. It’s the one organized space in this chaotic apartment.

“You’re the priority, huh?” I say to him.

Spike blinks at me, unimpressed.

I circle the living room, taking in more details. A photo of Ruby with an older couple, presumably the Morrisons, owners of Fit Mountain Ink where she works. A small collection of vintage lighters on a shelf. Medical textbooks mixed with art references. The more I see, the more I want to know.

“Checking for security threats or just nosy?”

I turn to find Ruby in the doorway, transformed.

Gone are the sleep shorts and tank, replaced by ripped black jeans and a fitted gray tank that shows off her tattooed arms. Combat boots. Hair pulled back in a messy bun that somehow looks deliberate. A small silver hoop glints in her nose.

“Both,” I admit, not bothering to hide that I was studying her belongings. “It’s my job to know your environment.”

“And what have you learned?”

“You’re an artist first, tattoo apprentice second. You like order in your work but not your living space. You take better care of your pet than yourself. And you don’t sleep enough.”

Her eyebrows rise. “All that from ten minutes in my apartment?”

“I’m observant.”

“Clearly.” She grabs a leather jacket from a hook. “So, Mr. Observant, any insights on how Holloway managed to escape from Blackwater?”

I move closer to her, not missing how her breathing changes when I enter her space.

“Not my job. My job is to keep you safe until the police figure it out.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

I reach past her to grab Spike’s carrier, my arm brushing hers. The contact is brief but electric. “By not leaving your side.”

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She swallows, her throat working. “That might get awkward in the bathroom.”

“I’m sure we can work something out.”

Ruby throws me a sharp look. “We need to establish some ground rules before we head to Fit Mountain Ink.”

I straighten, recognizing the shift in her tone. “I’m listening.”

“Nobody knows about this...” she waves her hand in the air between us, “...arrangement. And I want to keep it that way. As far as anyone at the shop is concerned, you’re a friend visiting from out of town. Not a bodyguard, not security, and definitely not someone my dad hired.”

I consider her request.

From a tactical perspective, announcing my purpose would potentially make her more of a target. From a personal perspective, I can understand her reluctance to admit she needs protection.

“That works,” I agree. “Friend from out of town.”

Ruby studies me for a moment, like she’s trying to decide if I’m being reasonable or if there’s a catch.

“Good. And stay out of the way when I’m working. No hovering.”

“I can be inconspicuous.” It’s what I’ve been trained for.

“With that body? Doubtful.”

The words slip out, and I catch a flash of color creeping up her neck as she busies herself with Spike’s carrier. I find myself fighting back a smile at her accidental compliment. I step forward, reaching for the carrier and bag of supplies.

“I’ve got it, sweetheart.”

She hesitates, then hands them over. “Fine. But remember?—”

“Friend from out of town,” I finish for her. “Not your personal security detail. Got it.”

As she grabs her keys and phone, I notice a small smile playing at the corner of her mouth. Progress.

“And just so we’re clear,” she says, pausing at the door, “I still think this whole thing is ridiculous. My dad is overreacting, as usual.”

I meet her eyes, letting some of my professional mask slip.

“Maybe. But until Holloway is recaptured it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Something in my tone must convey the seriousness, because she doesn’t argue further. Instead, she squares her shoulders and walks out the door, leaving me to follow with Spike in tow. For a brief moment, I find myself admiring more than just her professional independence.

Focus, Dover. This is a job, not a date.

I repeat this to myself as I follow her down the stairs and into the bright Wyoming morning. But even as I scan the street for potential threats, I can't shake the feeling that Ruby Wilson is going to be more than just another assignment.

* * *

Fit Mountain Inksits on a corner in downtown Cooper Heights, its brick facade gleaming in the morning light.

The place looks exactly like Ruby. I follow her through the glass door, taking in the exposed brick walls covered in framed artwork, the polished hardwood floors, the leather seating in the waiting area. My eyes catalog every entrance and exit, every potential threat point, every defensive position, but part of me is just admiring the space she inhabits.

"Home sweet home," Ruby says, flipping on lights that illuminate the interior even more. Sunlight pours through the large front windows, catching dust motes dancing in the air.

I set Spike's carrier on a counter near the reception desk. "The owners are on vacation?"

Ruby nods, moving behind the reception desk with practiced ease.

"Twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Two weeks in Hawaii." She shoots me a glance as she boots up the computer. "The Morrisons hardly ever take time off. I practically had to push them out the door."

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“They must really trust you.”

“I’ve been here for three years. And they know I’d rather die than let anything happen to this place.”

The words send an uncomfortable jolt through me. That’s exactly what I’m here to prevent.

While Ruby checks appointments on the computer, I do a walkthrough of the space, assessing security measures. The main area is open concept with several private tattooing stations. Glass display cases showcase jewelry and artwork. There’s a small kitchenette in the back, a storage room, a bathroom, and an office. Two exits—the front door and a back door leading to an alley. The windows are large, which isn’t ideal from a security standpoint, but gives clear visibility to the street.

“First client isn’t for another twenty minutes,” Ruby calls out. “I’m going to set up Spike in his spot.”

I watch as she takes the bearded dragon to a terrarium set up in a corner near one of the tattooing stations.

“Who’s coming in first?” I ask, leaning against the reception desk.

“Margaret Johnson. Seventy years old and getting her first tattoo.” Ruby’s face softens. “She’s been talking about it for months. A small butterfly on her wrist to celebrate her birthday.”

“Seventy-year-old rebel,” I say, and Ruby laughs.

“You’d be surprised how many older clients we get. It’s like once they hit a certain age, they stop giving a damn what anyone thinks.” She glances at me. “Something to look forward to in your golden years.”

“I’m thirty-five, not eighty.”

Ruby giggles. “So, in other words, practically ancient.”

I’m about to respond when the bell above the door chimes.

A slender woman with silver hair cut in a stylish bob enters, her posture straight and elegant. She’s dressed in a crisp blouse and slacks, looking more like she’s headed to a garden club meeting than a tattoo parlor.

“Margaret!” Ruby’s whole face lights up as she rushes from behind the counter to embrace the woman. “You’re early!”

“Couldn’t sleep a wink last night,” Margaret says, returning Ruby’s hug with equal enthusiasm. “Too excited.” Her sharp eyes move to me, curious but not wary.

“This is Clay,” Ruby says, gesturing to me. “He’s an old friend visiting from out of town.”

I step forward, offering my hand. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Margaret’s grip is surprisingly firm.

“Such manners. And so tall.” She looks between Ruby and me with an expression I can’t quite decipher before adding, “You found yourself a good one, dear.”

Ruby's cheeks flush. "It's not—we're not—he's just a friend."

Margaret winks at me. "If you say so."

I clear my throat. "I hear today's a big day. Seventieth birthday?"

"Indeed. Finally getting the courage to do what I've been dreaming about for decades." Margaret follows Ruby to her station, settling into the chair with a contented sigh. "My Harold always said I'd chicken out, but I'll show him. Even if he's not here to see it."

Ruby begins preparing her tools, organizing ink caps, laying out the stencil. I take a seat nearby, close enough to observe but far enough not to crowd them.

"How long has Harold been gone?" Ruby asks gently as she cleans Margaret's wrist.

"Five years this December." Margaret's voice is steady, tinged with nostalgia rather than fresh grief. "We had forty-three wonderful years together. Met right here in Cooper Heights, you know. At the Piney Creek Diner."

"Love at first sight?" Ruby asks, her tone suggesting she's heard this story before.

Margaret's eyes light up. "Absolutely. The moment he walked in, I knew. He was supposed to meet someone else. A blind date his sister had set up. But he took one look at me serving coffee, and that was that. Walked right up and said, 'I think I'm supposed to be meeting you.'"

I find myself leaning forward, drawn into her story.

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“His poor blind date was furious,” Margaret continues with a chuckle. “But when it’s right, it’s right. That’s the magic of this town, you know. Fit Mountain has a way of putting the right people in the right place at the right time.”

I catch Ruby’s eye briefly, and something electric passes between us before she returns her focus to applying the stencil.

“Harold proposed six weeks later,” Margaret says. “Everyone said we were crazy. Too fast, they said. How could we possibly know? But when you know, you know. It happens in an instant and changes everything.”

The words hang in the air, and I suddenly feel too warm in the sunlit shop.

“That’s how you ended up with the butterfly design?” I ask, desperate to focus on something other than the way Ruby’s hair falls across her cheek as she works.

Margaret nods.

“Harold always called me his butterfly. Said I brought color into his world.” She glances at the stencil now transferred to her wrist. “Perfect, Ruby. Just as I imagined.”

As Ruby begins the actual tattooing, Margaret barely flinches. Instead, she launches into more stories about Harold, about growing old together, about the life they built. All the while, I find myself watching Ruby’s face.

I’ve seen a lot of professionals at work in my time. Soldiers, security specialists, even

artists. But there's something about watching Ruby that hits differently. Pride, passion, and precision all wrapped up in a five-foot package of fire and talent.

When the tattoo is complete, Margaret examines her wrist with tears in her eyes.

"It's perfect," she whispers. "Harold would have loved it."

Ruby walks Margaret through aftercare instructions, though I sense they've had this conversation before in preparation for today. After Margaret pays, refusing Ruby's birthday discount offer, she hugs Ruby tightly.

"Thank you, dear. For making an old woman's dream come true."

As Margaret gathers her things to leave, she pauses in front of me.

"It was lovely meeting you, Clay. I hope you're enjoying our little town."

"Yes, ma'am. It's been... illuminating."

She pats my arm, her eyes twinkling. "Sometimes the things we aren't looking for are exactly what we need to find."

With that cryptic statement and a knowing smile, she's gone, the bell chiming as the door closes behind her.

"She's something else," I say, my voice sounding too loud in the quiet shop.

Ruby glances up, a small smile playing on her lips.

"Margaret's one of my favorites. Comes in at least once a month to talk about getting a tattoo. I never thought she'd actually go through with it."

“Guess turning seventy changes your perspective.”

“Or gives you courage.” Ruby straightens, suddenly aware of how close we’re standing. I can smell her shampoo again, something citrusy and clean. “Kind of amazing to think about, isn’t it? Loving someone for over forty years. Knowing from the first moment.”

I take a step closer to her.

“You believe in that? Love at first sight?”

She shrugs, but doesn’t step back.

“I don’t know. Haven’t experienced it myself. But Margaret and Harold, they were the real deal. And there are a lot of stories like theirs in Cooper Heights. People call it the ‘Fit Mountain Instalove Magic.’”

“So I’ve heard.”

Ruby tilts her head, studying me with an expression I can’t read.

Then suddenly, a loud crash from the back room shatters the moment.

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Adrenaline floods my system.

I spin toward the sound, positioning myself between Ruby and the potential threat.

“Stay here,” I command.

ChapterThree

RUBY

“Clay?” I call out.

No answer. Just the hum of the fluorescent lights and the tick of the vintage clock on the exposed brick wall.

My heart hammers against my ribs as I stare at the empty hallway where Clay disappeared moments ago.

I thought my dad was being ridiculous, hiring Clay as my personal bodyguard. But right now, with Clay out of sight and that sound still ringing in my ears, I’m grateful he’s here. The thought of facing this moment alone is something I don’t even want to think about.

I glance at my phone sitting on the counter, wondering if I should call for help. But who would I even call? The police? My dad? The mere thought of contacting him makes my stomach knot.

Fortunately, Clay emerges from the hallway a few seconds later, his broad shoulders filling the narrow space. His eyes immediately lock onto mine, and his face softens.

“Everything’s okay,” he says as he walks toward me. “Just a shelf that fell over in the storage room.”

Relief washes over me in a dizzying wave. I force a smile, trying to hide how freaked out I actually am.

“See? Told you nothing to worry about.”

Clay stops a few feet away, studying my face with those intense blue eyes that seem to see straight through my bullshit.

“You okay?” he asks.

I start rearranging the ink bottles on my counter, desperate to appear busy and unbothered.

“Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Clay takes another step forward. “You’re shaking.”

Am I shaking?

Before I can process it or object to it, his arms are around me, enveloping me in warmth and security. I stiffen for a half-second, my body’s automatic response to unexpected physical contact.

I’m not used to being touched like this. Not by clients who respect my professional boundaries, not by the few casual dates I’ve been on, and certainly not by a man my

dad hired.

But there's something about the solid wall of his chest against my cheek and the steady beat of his heart under my ear that melts my resistance. My body betrays me, relaxing into his embrace as if it's where I belong.

"It's okay," he murmurs, his voice rumbling through his chest and into mine. "I've got you."

This isn't me. I don't fall apart. I don't lean on others. I don't need protecting. Yet here I am, drawing strength from his embrace like it's oxygen.

"I'm sorry," I mumble against the soft fabric of his shirt. "I swear I'm not usually like this."

His hand strokes my hair, gentle despite its size.

"It's okay to be scared," he says. "There's no need to apologize."

I pull back slightly, needing to see his face. "I wasn't scared. I was just surprised."

The corner of his mouth twitches, not quite a smile but close. "Of course. My mistake."

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His arms are still around me, and I'm still not moving away. This close, I notice details I've been trying not to see. The faint scar that cuts through his left eyebrow, the dark stubble along his jaw that would feel rough under my fingertips, the way his blue eyes have flecks of gray near the pupils.

"This is weird," I say before I can stop myself.

"What is?"

"This." I make a vague gesture between us. "You working for my dad. Following me around. Now... this."

His arms loosen, giving me space without fully letting go.

"I don't work for your dad, Ruby. Hunt Security does. I work for them."

"Semantics."

"Details," he corrects. "Important ones."

I step back, and his arms fall away. The absence of his warmth is immediate, but I ignore it. "Still weird."

Clay watches me for a moment, then nods. "Fair enough. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm here to keep you safe."

"From falling shelves?"

“From whatever comes.”

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly chilled despite the shop’s steady temperature.

“Well, crisis averted. You can go back to... whatever it is you do when you’re not saving me from rogue furniture.”

Instead of moving away, he glances at his watch.

“It’s past noon. How about we get some lunch? I think we could both use a break.”

My first instinct is to refuse. To insist I’m fine, that I have work to do, clients to prepare for. But the thought of sitting alone in the shop with my jangled nerves makes my stomach clench.

“Okay,” I say, aiming for nonchalance. “But I pick the place.”

* * *

The walk to Piney Creek Diner takes less than five minutes, but it feels longer with Clay walking beside me. I’m hyperaware of his presence—the way he shortens his stride to match mine, how he positions himself between me and the street, the occasional brush of his arm against my shoulder that sends little sparks through my body.

“So this is the famous Piney Creek Diner,” Clay says as we approach the cheerful blue building with its vintage neon sign. “I’ve driven past it a few times but haven’t stopped in yet.”

“Best food in town,” I tell him as he holds the door open for me. The familiar scent of

coffee and homemade pie wraps around me like a hug. “And it’s owned by my best friend, so I’m completely biased.”

The lunch rush is in full swing, but there’s an empty booth in the corner.

I lead Clay through the maze of tables, nodding at the regulars who recognize me. I feel their curious glances at Clay, and I know the town gossip mill will be churning by dinner time. Small towns and their obsession with new faces. Especially when that face looks like it was carved by a sculptor with a thing for dangerous-looking men.

We slide into the booth, and I’m suddenly very aware of how small the table is, how our knees almost touch underneath. Clay’s presence seems to fill the entire space, making it hard to focus on anything else.

“Your friend’s place is nice,” he says, looking around at the retro décor and the black and white photos of the diner’s history that line the walls. “Has character.”

“Lainey inherited it from her dad after he passed away a few years ago,” I say, pride for my friend evident in my voice. “She’s kept all the charm but updated everything else. The place was practically falling apart when she took over.”

Clay’s eyes return to mine, and there’s something in them that makes my stomach flip.

I clear my throat. “How did a guy like you end up in a place like Cooper Heights?”

Clay grins. “A guy like me?”

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“You know what I mean.” I gesture vaguely at all of him—the military-precise haircut, the way he scanned the room when we entered, the scars that hint at a life far more dangerous than anything Cooper Heights could offer. “You’re not exactly small-town material.”

He picks up a menu, but his eyes stay on mine. “Maybe I got tired of big places with bigger problems.”

“So you just randomly picked our little dot on the map?”

“Not randomly.” He sets the menu down. “I did my research. Cooper Heights is pretty safe, has good proximity to nature, and...” he pauses, a hint of something softer crossing his face, “it reminded me of where I grew up.”

“Where was that?”

“Small town in Montana. Population even smaller than here.” His fingers tap lightly on the table. “My dad was the local sheriff. Mom taught at the elementary school.”

I try to picture a younger Clay, running through Montana wilderness, and the image comes surprisingly easily. “So you were a small-town boy before whatever turned you into...” I gesture at him again.

“Into what?” There’s amusement in his eyes now.

“Into whatever you are now.”

I'm not giving him the satisfaction of saying it out loud—that he looks like the human embodiment of danger and sex wrapped in a tactical package.

His smile widens slightly. “I was in the military. Ten years. Special forces for the last four.”

That explains the way he moves, the constant awareness, the scars I've been trying not to stare at—the one at his temple, another peeking from beneath his collar. I force myself to look at my menu instead of wondering where else his body might be marked.

“Special forces,” I repeat, finding myself leaning forward slightly. “I bet that wasn't quiet at all.”

“It had its moments.” His voice drops a notch, and something in his tone tells me those moments weren't the good kind. “But that's behind me now.”

“And now you're babysitting tattoo artists in small towns.” I can't keep the edge out of my voice. “Quite the career change.”

“I'm not babysitting you, Ruby. I'm protecting you.”

Before I can respond, a familiar voice interrupts us.

“Well, well, well. Ruby Tuesday bringing a man to my diner? Mark it on the calendar, folks.”

I look up to see Lainey standing beside our table. Her straight blonde hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and her blue eyes sparkle with mischief. She's wearing her usual uniform of jeans and a Piney Creek Diner t-shirt, and a pen is tucked behind her ear.

“Clay, this is Lainey, owner of this fine establishment and professional pain in my ass since third grade. Lainey, this is Clay. He’s working with me temporarily.”

Lainey’s eyebrows shoot up at “working with me,” and I know I’ll be getting twenty questions later.

“Nice to meet you, Clay. Any friend of Ruby’s is a friend of mine.” She gives him an appraising look that’s about as subtle as a neon sign. “What can I get you two today?”

Clay orders a burger and coffee, and I go for my usual grilled cheese and tomato soup. As Lainey walks away, she throws me a look over her shoulder that clearly says “we’ll talk later.”

“Friend since third grade, huh?” Clay asks once she’s gone. “That’s a long time.”

“She’s the closest thing to family I have here.”

“It’s good to have people like that. People who know the real you.”

“And who knows the real you, Clay?” I counter, desperate to shift focus back to him. “You’ve been in town, what, a month? Made any friends besides your gun collection?”

He laughs, a genuine sound that transforms his face. It makes him look younger, less guarded. Something flutters in my chest at the sight.

“I’m not much of a people person,” he admits. “But I’m getting to know a few folks. The guys at the gym. The barista at that coffee shop on Main who no longer looks terrified when I walk in.”

I giggle. “You do have a bit of a scary vibe going on.”

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He frowns. “Do I scare you, Ruby?”

Yes, but not in the way he means. He scares me because of how my body responds to him, how I can’t stop thinking about the feel of his arms around me earlier, how I wonder what his mouth would taste like.

“Please,” I scoff instead. “I’ve dealt with drunk bikers who want misspelled tattoos of their ex-girlfriends’ names. You’re a teddy bear in comparison.”

His smile turns predatory in a way that makes my pulse quicken. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Lainey returns with our drinks, her eyes darting between us with undisguised curiosity. “Food’ll be up in a few. You two need anything else?”

“We’re good,” I tell her, silently pleading for her to go away before she says something embarrassing.

She lingers anyway. “So, Clay, what brings you to our little town? Besides Ruby, of course.”

I glare at her, but she just grins.

“Change of pace,” Clay says smoothly. “After my last contract ended, I wanted somewhere quieter.”

“Well, you picked the right place for quiet,” Lainey says. “Though things have gotten

more interesting lately.” She gives me a pointed look that I steadfastly ignore.

When she finally leaves, I take a sip of my water, trying to cool the heat in my cheeks. “Sorry about her. Subtlety isn’t her strong suit.”

“I like her,” Clay says, surprising me. “She cares about you.”

“Yeah, well, someone has to.” I wince internally at how pathetic that sounds. “So, are you seeing anyone? In Piney Creek or... elsewhere?” The question comes out before I can stop it, and I immediately want to crawl under the table.

Clay’s eyes meet mine, steady and intense. “No. I’m not seeing anyone. Why?”

“Oh.” I fiddle with my straw wrapper. “I was just curious.”

“What about you?” he asks, his voice casual but his eyes anything but.

“No time,” I say with a shrug. “My job keeps me busy.”

“That’s the only reason?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What other reason would there be?”

“You tell me.”

My heart rate kicks up a notch. “Are you psychoanalyzing me now? Is that part of your protection services?”

“Just making conversation.” His tone is light, but his eyes are still studying me too closely.

Lainey saves me by arriving with our food. As she sets the plates down, she gives Clay a warm smile.

“Enjoy. Ruby’s been coming here for years, and she’s my toughest critic, so you’re in good hands.”

“I’m sure I am,” Clay says, his eyes never leaving mine.

The double meaning isn’t lost on me, and neither is the way my body responds to it—a slow, liquid heat that spreads from my core outward. I take a bite of my grilled cheese to have something to do besides stare at his mouth.

“So,” I say after swallowing, “ten years in the military. That’s a long time. What made you leave?”

Something flickers across his face. “It was time. You can only live on the edge for so long before it catches up to you.”

“And now you’re here, in the most boring town in America, babysitting me.” I dip my grilled cheese into the tomato soup. “Must be quite the letdown.”

Clay takes a bite of his burger, chews thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t say that.”

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“No?”

“No.” His eyes hold mine, and the intensity in them makes it hard to breathe.

“There’s nothing boring about you, Ruby.”

The way he says my name—like he’s tasting it—sends a shiver down my spine. I’m suddenly very aware of how close our hands are on the table, how easy it would be to reach out and touch him.

“You don’t know me,” I say, my voice softer than I intended.

“I’d like to.”

The simple honesty in his voice catches me off guard.

I look down at my food, unsure how to respond. This is dangerous territory. Clay isn’t just some guy I can have a fling with and move on. He works for my dad. Getting involved would complicate everything.

But ugh, the way he looks at me makes me want to complicate everything.

“Tell me more about Montana,” I say instead, steering us back to safer ground. “What was it like growing up there?”

Clay accepts the change of subject with grace, telling me about endless summers spent fishing and hiking, winters with snow piled higher than the front door, the small-town dynamics that aren’t so different from Cooper Heights. As he talks, I find

myself genuinely interested, picturing him as a boy with the same intense blue eyes but fewer shadows behind them.

I'm so caught up in his stories that I barely notice when Lainey drops off the check, giving me a thumbs-up behind Clay's back that makes me roll my eyes.

"We should head back," I say reluctantly, glancing at my watch. "I have a client at two."

Clay nods and reaches for the check before I can even think about grabbing it.

"I've got this," I insist, trying to snatch it from his hand.

He simply raises an eyebrow, holding the check just out of my reach. "Not happening."

"Clay, seriously. This is my town, my diner, my friend. I'm paying."

His expression doesn't change as he pulls out his wallet. "Consider it a thank you for putting up with me following you around all day."

"That's literally your job," I protest. "You don't thank someone for letting you do your job."

"Ruby," he says, his voice dropping to that low, serious tone that somehow makes my name sound different. "Let me get this one."

Something about the way he's looking at me makes further argument feel pointless. It's not about the money. It's about something else I can't quite name.

"Fine," I relent with an exaggerated sigh. "But I'm leaving the tip."

As we walk back to the shop, I'm acutely aware of the decreased distance between us. He walks closer now, our arms occasionally brushing, and each contact sends little sparks across my skin. The cool autumn air does nothing to calm the heat building inside me.

I steal glances at his profile—the strong jaw, the slight crook in his nose that suggests it's been broken at least once, the way his eyes constantly scan our surroundings. He's the most alert, present person I've ever met, and there's something incredibly attractive about that intensity.

“What?” he asks, catching me looking.

“Nothing,” I say quickly. “Just... thanks for lunch. It was nice to get out of the shop for a bit.”

His smile is small but genuine. “Anytime, sweetheart.”

The way he says my name shouldn't affect me this much. It's just a name, for God's sake. But in his mouth, it sounds like something precious.

Back at the shop, I check my appointment book while Clay does another perimeter check. My two o'clock client has texted to reschedule, which gives me unexpected free time.

“I need to grab some supplies from the storage room,” I tell Clay after checking my messages. “My afternoon client rescheduled.”

Clay nods, following me as I head toward the back of the shop. “I'll give you a hand.”

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The storage room is barely bigger than a closet, with shelves lining both walls and a single bulb hanging from the ceiling. When I flip the switch, everything is bathed in dim yellow light. The space feels impossibly smaller with Clay's frame filling the doorway behind me.

"I just need to grab some white ink from the top shelf," I explain, trying to ignore how my skin prickles with awareness of him standing so close. His presence seems to suck all the oxygen from the room.

I drag the ancient wooden ladder from the corner, positioning it beneath the shelf I need to reach. It wobbles ominously on the uneven concrete floor.

"Let me get that for you," Clay says, stepping forward.

"I've got it," I insist, already placing my foot on the bottom rung. "I do this all the time."

His frown deepens. "That ladder looks like a death trap."

"Yet I'm still alive," I quip, climbing higher. Each step creaks under my weight, but I'm focused on the black case of specialized inks just beyond my reach. "Almost there..."

I stretch up on my tiptoes, fingers just brushing the edge of the case. The ladder shifts beneath me, and suddenly I'm falling backward, a startled gasp escaping my lips as I brace for impact.

It never comes.

Instead, strong arms catch me mid-air. I find myself cradled against Clay's chest, my heart hammering wildly as I look up into his intense blue eyes.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice deeper than usual.

I can only nod, suddenly breathless. My arms have instinctively wrapped around his neck, and I'm acutely aware of every point where our bodies touch—his arms supporting my back and legs, my chest pressed against his, the warmth of his skin seeping through our clothes.

He doesn't set me down. We stay suspended in this moment, my breathing quickening as his eyes drop to my lips. The air between us feels electric, charged with something that's been building since the moment he walked into my shop.

"Clay," I whisper, not even sure what I'm asking for.

His grip tightens slightly. "Tell me to put you down," he says, his voice rough. "Tell me to step back."

I should. I know I should. But instead, I tighten my arms around his neck, my fingers sliding into the short hair at his nape. "I don't want you to."

Something flashes in his eyes.

He shifts me in his arms, pressing me against the wall, my feet still off the ground. The solid surface at my back and his firm body at my front create a delicious pressure that makes my breath catch.

And then his mouth is on mine, and everything else disappears.

The kiss is nothing like I expected. It's better, deeper, more consuming. His lips are firm but surprisingly soft, moving against mine with a confidence that makes my toes curl. I respond immediately, parting my lips as his tongue slides against mine. He tastes like coffee and something uniquely him, and I'm instantly addicted.

Clay presses closer, his body pinning mine to the wall as one hand moves to cradle my face. His thumb traces my cheekbone with surprising gentleness despite the intensity of his kiss. I arch into him, seeking more contact, more pressure, more of everything he's giving me.

He breaks the kiss to trail his lips down my neck, and I tilt my head to give him better access.

"Your skin," he murmurs against my throat, "I've been wondering if the ink makes it taste different."

The words send a shiver through me. "And does it?"

His tongue traces the colorful pattern on my neck. "Better than I imagined."

I gasp as his teeth graze a particularly sensitive spot below my ear. My hands slide under his shirt, desperate to feel his skin against mine. The muscles of his back flex under my touch, and he makes a low sound of approval that vibrates through me.

"Put me down," I whisper, and for a second, disappointment flashes in his eyes before I add, "I want to feel all of you."

He lowers me slowly, letting my body slide against his until my feet touch the ground. But he doesn't step back. Instead, he keeps me pinned between his body and the wall, one hand beside my head, the other at my waist.

“Better?” he asks, his voice rough with desire.

In answer, I pull his mouth back to mine, kissing him with all the pent-up attraction I’ve been fighting. His thigh slips between mine, creating pressure exactly where I need it, and I can’t help the soft moan that escapes me.

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The friction of his body against mine sends sparks shooting through me.

I can't help the way my body responds, pressing against his, seeking more contact. His hands slide down to grip my hips, guiding my movements against his thigh.

The pressure builds impossibly fast, a coiling tension that makes me tremble. I should be embarrassed by how desperately I'm moving against him, but I can't stop.

I'm fully clothed in the storage room of my tattoo shop, grinding against this man like a teenager, and I've never been more turned on in my life. The combination of his hard body, his skilled mouth, and the forbidden nature of what we're doing is intoxicating.

"I can feel how close you are," he says, his eyes locked on mine. "Don't hold back. I want to see you come apart."

That does it.

The pressure breaks, pleasure washing through me in waves as I cry out against his shoulder, my whole body trembling. Clay holds me through it, his hands steady on my hips, his lips pressing soft kisses to my temple as I come down from the high.

When I can finally breathe again, embarrassment floods through me.

I just came from dry humping my bodyguard against a wall. What am I, sixteen?

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, heat flooding my face. "That's not—I don't usually?—"

Clay's eyes are dark, his breathing as uneven as mine. "Don't apologize. That was the hottest thing I've ever seen."

I laugh shakily, pressing my forehead against his chest. "Ugh, this is so embarrassing."

"Baby, look at me." His fingers tilt my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

Before I can respond, the bell above the shop door chimes and reality crashes back in.

I have a business to run. Clay has a job to do. And whatever this is between us just got a whole lot more complicated.

"I should go."

Clay frowns. "Are you sure?"

I smooth my hair, straighten my clothes, and take a deep breath.

"I'm sure," I tell him. "We'll talk later."

Although I have no idea what I'll say when that time comes.

As I walk to the front of the shop, I can still feel the ghost of his hands on my body, the pressure of his mouth on mine. One thing is certain. Whatever happens next, there's no going back now.

ChapterFour

CLAY

My breathing finally steadies as I stare at the storage room wall, still feeling the ghost of Ruby's body against mine.

Fuck.

Fifteen years in special ops and security work, and I've never once crossed the line with a client. I flex my fingers, still warm from her skin, her taste lingering on my lips.

But Christ, the way she came apart for me... The sound of her whimpers echoes in my head. The memory of her small body trembling against mine sends another rush of heat through me.

I straighten my shirt and adjust myself in my pants.

This isn't me. I don't mix business with pleasure. I don't compromise security for a pretty face. But there's something about Ruby that bypasses all my usual safeguards. Something that makes me want to claim her, possess her, protect her.

The shop is quiet when I return, just the steady buzz of Ruby's tattoo machine as she works on a client's forearm. She doesn't look up, but the slight stiffening of her shoulders tells me she knows I'm there. I resume my position by the door, scanning the street outside through the large front windows of Fit Mountain Ink.

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The next few hours are torture.

Every time Ruby glances in my direction, a flush creeps up her neck, and I know she's thinking about what happened in that storage room. About my hands on her body. My mouth claiming hers. Her soft gasp when I touched her where she needed me most.

The final client of the day leaves just after six, sporting a fresh compass rose on his shoulder blade. Ruby locks the door behind him and flips the sign to CLOSED. The sudden quiet in the shop amplifies the tension between us.

"So," she says, her voice overly cheerful as she begins wiping down surfaces. "I guess that's it for today?"

"No," I say simply. "That's not it."

"What do you mean? It's after hours. Shop's closed."

"I'm not just here for the shop hours, Ruby. I'm here to protect you. Twenty-four seven."

She blinks. "That's not what my dad said. He just wanted security during business hours."

I move closer to her, my eyes never leaving hers.

"Your dad hired me to keep you safe. This isn't a nine-to-five threat."

She turns away and starts gathering her things. “I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time, Clay. I don’t need a babysitter to tuck me in at night.”

The sound of my name on her lips does something to me. Makes my resolve harden.

“I’m not asking, Ruby.” My voice drops lower. “Wherever you sleep tonight, I’ll be there too.”

She whirls around, eyes flashing. “Excuse me? You don’t get to decide that.”

“Actually, I do.” I close the distance between us, standing close enough to feel the heat radiating from her body. “Your father hired me because I’m the best at what I do. And what I do is keep people alive when someone wants them dead.”

Fear flickers across her face before she masks it with anger.

“That’s dramatic, don’t you think?”

“No, it’s reality.” I soften my tone but not my stance. “Look, you don’t have to like it. You just have to live through it. And for that to happen, I need to be where you are.”

Ruby stares up at me, her jaw set stubbornly. But I can see the calculation happening behind those brandy eyes. She’s smart enough to know that Holloway is dangerous. That her father wouldn’t have hired someone like me if he wasn’t seriously concerned.

“Fine,” she finally says.

Relief washes through me, though I don’t show it.

The truth is, this twenty-four-hour protection detail wasn’t part of her father’s

arrangement. It's mine. Born from something deeper than professional obligation. Something that took root the moment I first saw her, and has only grown stronger with every defiant glance, every stubborn word.

Something that makes me certain I won't be sleeping on any couch tonight.

* * *

I grip the steering wheel tighter as we pull away from Fit Mountain Ink, the memory of Ruby's body against mine in that storage room still burning through my veins. She sits beside me in my truck, close enough that I can smell the faint vanilla scent of her skin mixing with the ink and antiseptic from the shop. Too close. Not close enough.

I can't help stealing glances at her profile as I drive. the delicate curve of her jaw, the slight pout of her lips. The same lips that were parted and gasping against my mouth just hours ago.

Fuck. I need to get it together.

The drive to her apartment is mercifully short. But as we get out of the truck and approach her building, my instincts sharpen to a knife's edge.

Something's wrong.

I look around and that's when I see it. There's a window propped open on her floor. I did a perimeter check this morning before we left for the shop. That window was closed.

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My hand automatically moves to the small of my back where my Glock is holstered beneath my jacket. Ruby is chattering about Spike needing fresh crickets, oblivious to the danger signals screaming in my head.

I interrupt her mid-sentence, keeping my voice calm but firm. “Get back in the truck, baby.”

She stops talking and her eyes follow my gaze upward. “What is it?”

I step slightly in front of her, creating a barrier between her and the building entrance. “Your bathroom window is open.”

“Maybe I left it open this morning.”

“You didn’t.”

“How would you know?”

“I checked before we left.”

Ruby shifts Spike’s carrier in her arms. “You checked my windows?”

“I check everything. That’s my job.”

A flash of annoyance crosses her face, but it’s quickly replaced by concern as she looks back up at the window.

“You think someone’s in there?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I gesture toward the parking lot. “Go back to the truck and lock yourself in. I’ll clear the apartment.”

“What? No, I’m coming with you.”

I turn to face her fully, my expression leaving no room for argument.

“No. If someone broke into your place, they might still be there. Go wait in the truck.”

Something in my tone must get through to her. She hesitates, then nods, backing toward my truck with Spike’s carrier clutched to her chest.

“Five minutes. Then I’m coming in.”

“Stay in the truck until I come get you.” I wait until she’s safely locked inside before approaching the building.

I draw my weapon as soon as I’m in the stairwell, moving silently up to the third floor. Ruby’s apartment is at the end of the hall. I listen at the door for a moment. Nothing. Using the key she gave me this morning, I unlock it silently and push the door open, staying to the side.

Fuck.

The place is trashed.

Not the casual disarray of a burglar looking for valuables, but the methodical destruction of someone sending a message. Ruby’s belongings are scattered

everywhere. Books pulled from shelves and thrown across the room. Clothing dumped from drawers. Couch cushions slashed open. But it's the art that tells me this was personal. Ruby's sketches and paintings have been deliberately torn into pieces.

I clear each room, gun raised, checking closets and under furniture. The bathroom window is indeed open wider than it had been this morning, wet footprints leading from it across the tile floor. They came in through the bathroom, but almost certainly left through the front door. More convenient for carrying anything they took.

Once I'm sure the apartment is empty, I holster my weapon and head back downstairs. Ruby's face is pressed against the truck window, watching for me. I tap on the glass and she rolls down the window.

"Well?" she demands.

"Someone definitely broke in."

Her face pales. "How bad?"

"Bad enough that you can't stay there tonight."

"I need to see it." Ruby's jaw sets in that stubborn line I'm getting too familiar with.

"And I need to get some things if I'm staying somewhere else."

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I consider arguing, but she deserves to see what happened to her space.

“Alright. Five minutes to grab essentials. But after that, we’re leaving.”

Ruby steps over the threshold slowly, Spike’s carrier held protectively against her chest.

“Oh no,” she whispers, taking in the destruction.

“Don’t touch anything,” I warn as she steps toward a particularly large piece now lying in shreds. “There might be fingerprints.”

She nods numbly. “I need to get some clothes. And Spike’s things.”

“Grab what you need for a few days.”

I follow her closely as she picks her way through the wreckage to her bedroom.

When we’ve loaded everything into my truck, I place a hand on Ruby’s shoulder. She’s been quiet, too quiet.

“We need to go to my place,” I tell her.

“Why your place?”

I expect an argument. Some push-back against my directive. But she just nods, the fight temporarily drained from her.

“What about my car?”

“Leave it here. If they’ve been watching you, they might have placed a tracker on it.”
I guide her toward my truck. “We’ll come back for it when it’s safe.”

The drive to my cabin takes forty minutes, mostly on winding mountain roads that grow progressively narrower and less traveled. Ruby sits silently beside me, Spike’s carrier secured on her lap. Through the rearview mirror, I check repeatedly for any signs of being followed, but the roads are clear.

“You live all the way out here?” Ruby finally asks as we turn onto a gravel road that disappears into dense forest.

“I like my privacy.”

And the tactical advantages of a remote location with clear sight lines. My cabin sits on ten acres of wooded land, the nearest neighbor over a mile away.

The cabin comes into view as we round a final bend—a sturdy two-story structure of timber and stone. Not large, but solid. Defensible. Mine.

“It’s beautiful,” Ruby says softly as I park beside the covered porch.

I grab her duffel and Spike’s supplies while she carries the lizard’s carrier. The evening air is cooler up here in the mountains, carrying the scent of pine and approaching rain. I unlock the heavy front door and usher Ruby inside, flipping on lights as we enter.

The main room is open-concept with a stone fireplace, kitchen, and dining space beside large windows that in daylight would show the forest and mountains beyond. A staircase leads to the loft bedroom above. The décor is minimal but comfortable.

No clutter. Nothing unnecessary.

Ruby steps into my space, and something primal stirs in my chest. Her scent fills the air, that intoxicating mix of vanilla and ink that's been driving me crazy all day. Watching her move through my cabin, her fingers trailing along the back of my couch, sends me right back to that storage room. Those same delicate fingers gripping my shoulders as I pressed her against the wall, her body arching into mine.

My cock hardens at the memory.

Fuck. Does she remember it the same way? Is she thinking about it now, standing in my home, knowing we'll be alone here all night? The way she avoids meeting my eyes tells me everything I need to know.

"Make yourself at home," I tell her, setting her bag down, fighting to keep my voice steady. "I'll get a fire going."

She stands in the center of the room, still holding Spike's carrier, looking smaller than usual in the aftermath of the break-in.

"Where should I set up Spike?"

I point to a spot near the fireplace. "That area gets good warmth from the fire. There's an outlet nearby for his heat lamp."

While Ruby busies herself creating a temporary home for her lizard, I build a fire in the stone hearth, the familiar routine helping to calm the storm of desire and protectiveness raging through me. Once the flames are crackling, I move to the kitchen.

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“Hungry?” I ask, opening the refrigerator.

“I guess.” Ruby sounds distracted as she arranges Spike’s terrarium to her satisfaction. “I haven’t really thought about food.”

I pull out ingredients for a simple pasta dish. As I work, I watch Ruby finish setting up Spike’s home and release the small lizard into it. She smiles slightly as the creature immediately goes to bask under his heat lamp.

“He adapts quickly,” she says, turning toward me.

“Good survival instinct.” I slide a cutting board of chopped vegetables into a pan. “Not all creatures are so adaptable.”

Ruby moves to the island, taking a seat on one of the barstools.

“I’m sorry about earlier. At the apartment. I just... wasn’t expecting that.”

“No one expects their space to be violated like that.” The protective anger I’ve been suppressing flares again. “We’ll file a police report tomorrow. And I’ll have the security company I work with install better locks and cameras at your place.”

“You think I’ll be able to go back there?” She sounds doubtful.

I look up from the stove, meeting her eyes. “Eventually. When we deal with Holloway.”

“My dad didn’t tell me much about him. Just that he was an old business associate who held a grudge.”

“He’s more than that.” I pour wine into two glasses, sliding one toward her. “Vincent Holloway is a sociopath who blames your father for his downfall. Your father’s testimony put him away for fifteen years. He escaped three weeks ago.”

Ruby takes a long sip of wine. “And he’s coming after my dad through me.”

I nod, turning back to the stove. “It’s a common tactic. Hurt the people someone loves to cause maximum pain.”

“That’s why my dad hired you.”

I plate the pasta, adding freshly grated parmesan. “Your father is worried, Ruby. With good reason.”

I set our plates on the dining table, where the firelight casts a warm glow across the polished wood. Ruby takes the seat across from me, the flames reflecting in her eyes as she twirls pasta around her fork.

“So,” I say, watching her take her first bite. “Tell me about your family. Your father mentioned you two had a... complicated relationship.”

Ruby’s expression shifts, a slight hardening around her eyes. “That’s one way to put it.”

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

She takes another sip of wine, considering. “No, it’s fine. It’s not exactly a secret.” She sets her glass down. “My dad had my entire life planned out from the moment I

was born. Private schools, Ivy League education, law school, joining his firm. The Wilson family legacy.”

“But you had other ideas,” I prompt.

“I’ve always been artistic. Drawing, painting. It’s the only thing that ever made sense to me.” A small smile plays at her lips. “I majored in fine arts instead of pre-law. That was our first big fight.”

“I’m guessing it wasn’t the last.”

Ruby laughs, the sound warming something in my chest.

“Not even close. When I told them I was dropping out of college to apprentice at a tattoo shop, my dad threatened to cut me off completely.”

“And did he?”

“Not at first. He thought I’d ‘come to my senses’ after a few months of ‘playing artist.’” She makes air quotes with her fingers. “When he realized I was serious, that’s when the ultimatum came. Law school or no financial support.”

I watch her face as she speaks, the determination in her eyes, the slight lift of her chin. This woman chose her passion over security, her independence over her family’s wealth. The realization makes her even more attractive to me.

“So what did you do?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

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“I chose ink.” She says it simply, but I can hear the pride beneath the words. “Haven’t taken a dime from them since.”

“That couldn’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t. Me and Lainey lived on ramen for a year.” She shrugs. “Worth it, though.”

I lean back in my chair, studying her.

“Your father still cares about you. Enough to hire me when he thought you were in danger.”

“I know. In his own controlling way, he loves me.” Ruby sighs. “We talk occasionally. Holidays, birthdays. It’s civil now, but there’s always this undercurrent of disappointment from him.”

“He’s proud of you,” I say, surprising myself with the certainty in my voice. “He might not understand your choices, but he respects your determination.”

Ruby studies me across the table, her gaze more penetrating than I’m comfortable with.

“You’re not what I expected, Clay.”

The sound of my name on her lips sends heat through my veins.

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Some robotic security guy who’d just see the tattoos and make assumptions.”

“I try not to judge books by their covers.” I hold her gaze steadily. “You’re not what I expected either.”

Her eyebrow arches. “Oh? And what did you expect?”

I take a slow sip of wine, considering how much to reveal.

“Someone spoiled. Entitled. A rich man’s daughter playing at rebellion.”

Ruby’s eyes flash, but I continue before she can respond.

“Instead, I found a woman who walked away from privilege to build something of her own.” I lean forward, letting her see the admiration in my eyes. “Someone who creates beauty with her hands and stands her ground even when it costs her. That kind of strength is... rare.”

The firelight catches the flush spreading across her cheeks. She looks down at her plate, suddenly intensely interested in her pasta.

“You don’t know me that well,” she says quietly.

“I know enough. I know you’re stubborn. Independent to a fault.” I set my glass down. “I know you’re talented. I know you’re brave, even when you’re scared.”

I pause, watching her reaction carefully before continuing.

“And I know that whatever this is between us, it’s not just about me being hired to protect you.”

The air between us grows thick, charged with unspoken tension. Ruby's pupils dilate slightly, her breathing visibly changing. She opens her mouth to respond, then closes it again.

"Clay, I?—"

"You don't have to say anything," I interrupt gently. "I'm just being honest about where I stand."

She stares at me for a long moment, something vulnerable flickering across her face before her walls come back up.

"Where you stand is as my bodyguard," she finally says, but there's no conviction in her voice. "That's all this can be right now."

"Is that what you want?"

"What I want is complicated."

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“It doesn’t have to be.”

“Yes, it does.” She pushes her chair back abruptly and stands up. “My life is being threatened. My apartment was just violated. This isn’t the time to?—“

She cuts herself off and shakes her head.

“To what?” I press, needing to hear her say it.

Her eyes meet mine, defiant and vulnerable all at once. “To want things I shouldn’t.”

The confession hangs in the air between us, raw and honest.

Every instinct in my body screams to go to her, to close the distance, to show her exactly how much I want her too. But I force myself to remain still, giving her the space she needs.

“I should take a shower,” she says suddenly, breaking the tension. “It’s been a long day.”

I nod toward the hallway, not trusting myself to speak immediately. The image of Ruby naked in my shower threatens to shatter what remains of my self-control.

“Bathroom’s that way,” I finally manage. “First door on the right.”

ChapterFive

RUBY

Steam curls around me as I stand in Clay's bathroom, clutching a fluffy white towel to my chest. My skin still tingles from the hot shower, but it's nothing compared to how it burns whenever Clay looks at me.

I splash cold water on my face and stare at my reflection in the mirror.

What the hell am I doing here?

I've known this man for less than twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours that turned my life upside down—my apartment broken into, my safe space violated, and suddenly I'm whisked away to this mountain cabin with a man who makes my heart race with just a glance.

A man my father hired to protect me. A man I should absolutely not be thinking about the way I am right now.

I grip the edge of the sink, trying to steady myself.

That moment in the storage room of my shop keeps replaying in my mind. The heat of his body so close to mine, the intensity in his eyes, the way my breath caught when his fingers brushed against my skin. I'd felt an instant connection that defied logic, and it terrifies me.

I've spent years building my independence brick by brick. Left my family's expectations behind, built my tattoo business from nothing, created a life entirely on my own terms. And now here I am, feeling things for a virtual stranger that make me want to throw caution to the wind.

It's not that I don't date. I do. Sort of. Coffee meetups that never go anywhere.

Dinner dates that end with polite handshakes. My focus has always been my career, my art, my independence. I've never let anyone close enough to disrupt the life I've carefully constructed. Never given anyone the power to make decisions for me or tell me what to do.

And I've certainly never let anyone close enough to see me vulnerable, to touch me in ways that would make me lose control. That kind of intimacy has always seemed like a risk I couldn't afford to take.

But Clay... there's something about him that feels different. Dangerous. The way he looks at me makes me feel seen in a way that's both thrilling and terrifying.

I turn to my overnight bag, rifling through the clothes I threw together in a panic. My fingers pause over the sensible cotton pajama set I packed, then deliberately move past it. Instead, I pull out a pair of black sleep shorts that barely cover my ass and a white tank top that shows off the colorful tattoos running down my arms and decorating my collarbone.

As I slip into the revealing clothes, I study the phoenix tattoo on my shoulder in the mirror. It was my first major piece—the one I got the day I told my father I was dropping out of business school to pursue art. The vibrant reds and golds represent everything I've fought for: my independence, my right to make my own choices.

Including this one.

When I finally open the bathroom door, a rush of cooler air hits my bare legs. The cabin is dimly lit, mostly by the glow of the fireplace. Clay stands near it, arranging logs, his broad back to me.

He's changed into dark sweatpants and a fitted gray t-shirt that does nothing to hide the muscles underneath. I allow myself a moment to appreciate the view—the width

of his shoulders, the way the fabric stretches across his back, the confident way he moves.

He turns at the sound of the door, and his eyes widen slightly as they take in my appearance.

His gaze travels slowly from my face down to my legs, lingering on the colorful tattoos that peek out from under my shorts, then back up to my face. There's no mistaking the heat in his eyes.

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“Feel better?” he asks.

I step further into the room. “Much.”

He gestures to the TV mounted on the wall. “I thought we could watch a movie. Might help take our minds off everything that happened today.”

The suggestion is so unexpectedly... normal. Sweet, even. I blink in surprise.

“A movie?” I repeat, like I’ve never heard the concept before.

One corner of his mouth lifts in a half-smile that does crazy things to my insides. “Yeah, you know, moving pictures on a screen? Usually has a plot? Sometimes people even enjoy them.”

I laugh despite myself. “I’m familiar with the concept, smartass.”

His smile widens, and I catch myself staring at his mouth. “Good to know. I’ve got a streaming service, or there are some DVDs in that cabinet if you’d prefer.”

“Streaming is fine,” I say, moving toward the couch. As I sit down, I notice he’s already set out two glasses of water and a bowl of popcorn on the coffee table.

Clay sits beside me, leaving a respectable distance between us. He’s close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body, but not so close we’re touching. He picks up the remote, scrolling through options.

“Any preferences?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing scary. I’ve had enough real-life tension for one day.”

“Comedy it is.” He selects something I vaguely recognize, then settles back against the cushions.

Fifteen minutes into the movie, I realize I haven’t processed a single scene. The actors are just moving shapes on the screen while all my senses are tuned to the man sitting next to me.

“Cold?” Clay asks suddenly, his voice low and intimate in the dim room.

I’m not cold at all—if anything, I’m burning up—but I find myself nodding anyway.

“Come here,” he says, lifting his arm to create a space beside him.

I hesitate, knowing exactly what will happen if I move closer. “I’m fine right?”—“

“Ruby.” Just my name, but delivered like a command.

Something inside me responds to that tone, and I find myself sliding across the couch before I’ve even made the conscious decision. The smile that flickers across his face is pure male satisfaction. As if he’d won something. Which I suppose he had.

His arm settles around my shoulders, heavy and warm. I try to focus on the screen, on the actors’ voices, but all I can feel is his thumb making small circles against my shoulder. His breathing, steady and deep. The heat radiating from his body.

Ten minutes later, his hand drifts lower, fingers tracing patterns along my ribs. I keep my eyes fixed straight ahead, pretending I don’t notice. Pretending my skin isn’t

burning everywhere he touches. Pretending my breath isn't coming faster.

"You're not watching." Clay's voice is a rumble I can feel through his chest.

I swallow hard. "Neither are you."

"Hard to focus with you sitting there."

The admission sends a thrill through me. "Why's that?"

"You know why."

His hand moves from my ribs to my face, his thumb brushing across my lower lip. The simple touch sends electricity racing through me. I should pull away. I should maintain some distance, some control over whatever this is. Instead, I find myself leaning into his touch.

"Clay," I whisper, not even sure what I'm asking for.

He doesn't make me figure it out. In one fluid motion, he leans down and captures my lips with his.

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The kiss starts gentle, but that lasts only seconds. As soon as I respond, pressing closer and parting my lips, something in him breaks loose. His hand slides to the back of my neck, fingers tangling in my hair as he deepens the kiss. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, claiming, exploring, and I meet him with equal fervor.

Clay's other hand grips my hip, and suddenly I'm being moved, lifted onto his lap so I'm straddling him. The new position brings us flush against each other, and I can feel the hard outline of his cock pressing against me through our clothes. My body responds instinctively, rocking against him.

A deep groan rumbles through his chest.

"You have no idea what you do to me," he murmurs against my lips. "You're so sexy, baby."

His hands slide under my tank top, calloused palms against the sensitive skin of my back. The contrast between his gentle touch and the roughness of his hands sends shivers racing down my spine. When his thumbs brush the sides of my breasts, I gasp into his mouth, shocked by how sensitive I am to his touch.

"I've thought about this since the moment I saw you." His voice drops to a growl that makes my insides clench. "Standing in your shop, all fire and defiance. Wanted to see if you'd burn just as bright in my arms."

His words ignite something in me I didn't know existed—a primal need to be claimed, to be possessed. It should terrify me, this sudden surrender of control, but instead it feels like freedom.

“Show me,” I breathe against his lips, surprising myself with my boldness.

Something changes in his expression—a flash of something primal, possessive. His hands tighten on me, and when he kisses me again, it’s with a hunger that steals my breath. Gone is any pretense of the gentleman. This is pure, raw need.

His mouth leaves mine to trail hot kisses down my neck, finding a sensitive spot that makes me arch against him with a gasp. One of his hands slides up to cup my breast through my tank top, his thumb circling my nipple until it hardens beneath the thin fabric.

“This needs to go,” he says, his voice rough as he tugs at the hem of my top.

I reach down and pull the tank top over my head in one fluid motion, tossing it aside. The cool air hits my bare skin, and I fight the urge to cover myself. No one has ever seen me like this before, and the vulnerability of the moment makes my heart race.

Clay’s eyes darken as they take in my bare torso, the colorful tattoos that decorate my skin. “Christ, Ruby,” he breathes, his voice thick with desire. “You’re a fucking masterpiece.”

His reverence eases my nervousness. His hands cup my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples in a way that makes me whimper. The sensation is so intense, so new, that I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

“Don’t hold back,” he commands, his eyes locked on mine. “I want every sound. Every reaction. Everything you’ve been keeping to yourself.”

Then his mouth replaces one hand, hot and wet as he takes my nipple between his lips. The sensation shoots straight through me, a bolt of pleasure so intense it borders on pain. I cry out, unable to contain it, my back arching to press myself closer to his

mouth.

“That’s it,” he murmurs against my skin. “Give it to me. All of it.”

I’m lost in the sensations—his mouth on my breast, his hand kneading the other, the hardness of him pressing against me through our clothes. Every touch, every kiss is stoking a fire inside me that threatens to consume us both. My body is responding in ways I never knew it could, each new sensation more overwhelming than the last.

When his hands move to my hips, lifting me slightly so he can lay me down on the couch, I go willingly. He hovers over me, his powerful body caging mine, but I’ve never felt less trapped. His weight settles partially on me, one thigh between mine, creating delicious pressure exactly where I need it.

“Clay,” I gasp as he rocks against me, the friction sending sparks of pleasure through my body.

His response is to capture my mouth again, the kiss deep and consuming. His hand slides down my stomach to the waistband of my shorts, fingers teasing just beneath the elastic. When he pulls back to look at me, his eyes are dark with desire but questioning.

I nod, lifting my hips in silent permission, even as my heart hammers with a mixture of desire and nervousness. This is uncharted territory for me, and he seems to sense my hesitation.

“I’ll take care of you,” he says, his voice gentler now but no less intense. “Trust me.”

And I do. Despite every wall I’ve built, every defense I’ve constructed, I trust him in this moment.

His fingers dip lower, finding me wet and ready. The first touch draws a gasp from me, my hips jerking involuntarily. No one has ever touched me there before, and the sensation is overwhelming.

“So responsive,” he murmurs, his eyes watching my face as his fingers explore. “So perfect.”

His touch is confident, knowing exactly how to circle and press to make me gasp and arch beneath him. I’m shocked by how quickly my body responds, how easily he reads what I need before I even know myself.

“You’re mine tonight,” he says, his voice rough with desire as he watches me writhe beneath his touch. “Mine to pleasure. Mine to claim.”

His possessiveness should offend me—I belong to no one but myself—but in this moment, it only heightens my arousal. There’s something freeing about surrendering to him, about letting go of the control I cling to in every other aspect of my life.

When he slides one finger inside me, then two, curling them to hit a spot that makes me cry out, my body tenses with unfamiliar pleasure. The sensation is so intense, so new, that I clutch at his shoulders, unsure if I’m trying to pull him closer or push him away.

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“Stay with me,” he commands, his voice anchoring me as pleasure builds to almost unbearable levels. “I’ve got you. Let go.”

His thumb continues its relentless circles as his fingers move within me, and I can feel myself tightening around him. The pressure builds and builds, a coiling tension unlike anything I’ve experienced before.

“Clay,” I gasp, my hands clutching at his shoulders, his back, anywhere I can reach. My body trembles on the edge of something monumental. “I can’t—it’s too?—“

“You can,” he says, his voice brooking no argument. “Your body was made for this. Made for me.” His eyes lock with mine, intense and commanding. “Show me what I do to you, Ruby. Show me how I make you feel.”

The combination of his words and his touch pushes me over the edge. The orgasm crashes through me with an intensity that steals my breath, my body arching off the couch as waves of pleasure radiate outward from my core. I cry out his name, the sound torn from my throat as my body convulses around his fingers.

Clay doesn’t let up, working me through each pulse of pleasure until I’m trembling and oversensitive. Only then does he slow his movements, pressing soft kisses to my forehead, my cheeks, my lips as I struggle to catch my breath.

As I come down from the high, breathing hard, I open my eyes to find him watching me with an expression of male satisfaction mixed with something deeper, more tender. The intensity of what just happened hits me all at once—I’ve never been that vulnerable, that exposed with anyone before. Never let anyone see me lose control so

completely.

“You’re incredible,” he murmurs against my mouth. “So responsive. So perfect.”

I can feel him still hard against my thigh, his own need unmet. I reach between us, my hand finding him through his sweatpants, and he hisses through his teeth at the contact.

“My turn,” I whisper, squeezing gently, though I have only the vaguest idea of what to do next.

Clay catches my wrist, stilling my movement. His eyes are dark, intense as they meet mine. “Not here,” he says, his voice rough with restraint. “When I take you, it’ll be in my bed.”

The words send a fresh wave of heat through me. Moving to his bedroom feels significant—a deliberate choice rather than getting carried away in the moment. It also means more than what we’ve already done, and despite my inexperience, I know exactly what he’s suggesting.

“Is that an invitation?” I ask, my voice steadier than I feel.

Clay stands, pulling me up with him. Our bodies press together, the height difference between us more apparent as I have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. He’s still fully clothed, and I’m topless, but I feel no urge to cover myself.

“It’s more than an invitation,” he says, his eyes serious despite the desire darkening them. “It’s a promise.”

He bends down, his mouth capturing mine in a kiss that’s both tender and possessive. When he pulls back, his expression has transformed into something feral, hungry. He

scoops me up in his arms like I weigh nothing, and I let out a surprised laugh as he carries me toward the bedroom.

“I can walk, you know,” I say, though I make no move to get down.

“I know,” he replies, his voice a low rumble. “But I’ve dreamed of carrying you to my bed since the moment I saw you.”

ChapterSix

CLAY

I guide Ruby into my bedroom, my hand firm against the small of her back. The heat of her skin burns through her thin tank top, sending electricity straight to my core. My cabin’s dark except for the soft glow from the bedside lamp I flip on, casting her in amber light that makes her hair look like living flame.

She’s so fucking beautiful it hurts to look at her.

“Nice place,” she says, but her eyes aren’t on the room. They’re fixed on me, pupils dilated with the same hunger that’s been clawing at my insides since I first laid eyes on her.

I don’t respond with words. Can’t. My throat’s too tight with wanting her. Instead, I step closer, close enough to smell the light floral scent of her shampoo mixed with something uniquely her that makes my head swim.

Ruby’s fingers find the hem of my shirt, tugging lightly. “You’re overdressed.”

Her touch against the strip of skin above my jeans sends a jolt through me that nearly buckles my knees. I grab the back of my shirt and pull it off in one fluid motion,

watching her eyes widen as she takes in my bare chest. The way she looks at me—like she’s starving and I’m a feast—makes my blood run hot.

“I want to see all of you,” I tell her, my voice dropping to a graveled whisper that I barely recognize.

I hook my fingers into the waistband of her tiny shorts, seeking permission in her eyes. She answers by pressing closer to me, her hands splaying across my chest. Slowly, I slide the shorts down her legs, revealing more of her tattooed skin inch by inch. She steps out of them, standing before me in just her tank top and panties.

The ink on her body is vibrant and beautiful, curving around her thighs and calves in patterns that make my fingers itch to trace them. I help her pull the tank top over her head, and she stands nearly naked, the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Her breasts are small and perfect, her nipples hardening under my heated gaze.

Mine. The thought slams into me with startling clarity. She doesn’t know it yet, but she’s already mine.

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“Your turn,” she says, reaching for the button of my jeans.

I let her undress me, watching her face as she realizes the size difference between us. I’m a foot taller and twice as broad, and when my jeans hit the floor, her breath catches at the sight of my arousal straining against my boxer briefs.

“Clay...” she whispers, my name on her lips sounding like a prayer.

“Lie down,” I tell her, the words soft but unmistakably a command.

She complies without hesitation. Her red hair fans out across my pillow as she stretches out on the bed. I move toward her, lowering myself until my larger body covers her delicate frame. Her skin is hot against mine, her heartbeat a rapid flutter I can feel through her chest.

“You’re so sexy, baby,” I groan. “I can’t wait to taste all of you.”

I capture her mouth with mine, swallowing her soft gasp as I deepen the kiss.

She tastes like cinnamon and desire, and I’m already addicted. I break away to trail kisses down her throat, feeling her pulse jump beneath my lips. My tongue traces the outline of a phoenix tattoo on her shoulder, learning the topography of her body through touch. I move lower, exploring a delicate lotus flower on her ribcage, then a geometric pattern that snakes around her hip.

She squirms beneath me, her breath coming faster as I move down her body. When I reach an intricate mandala design on her inner thigh, I look up to meet her gaze.

“Tell me what you want, Ruby.”

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, her cheeks flushed with desire. “I want your mouth on me.”

The directness of her response makes my cock throb painfully. I press a kiss to her inner thigh, deliberately misunderstanding.

“Here?”

Her eyes flash with defiance and need. “You know where.”

I raise an eyebrow, enjoying the fire in her expression. I want to hear her say it. I need to hear the words from her lips.

“Where, exactly?” I press, my breath ghosting over her center.

“I want your mouth on my pussy. Now.” Her demand comes out breathless but commanding.

Fuck. The crude word from her perfect mouth nearly undoes me.

I part her with my tongue in one long stroke, and her entire body trembles in response. She tastes sweet and perfect, and the small sounds she makes drive me wild. I slide two fingers inside her while my tongue focuses on her clit.

She’s so tight around my fingers, her body gripping me like it never wants to let go. The thought that I might be the first to touch her like this sends a surge of possessive heat through me. I want to be the only one who ever makes her feel this way.

Her hands tangle in my hair, alternately pulling me closer and pushing me away as

the sensations intensify. I can feel her getting close, her thighs tensing on either side of my head.

“Stop fighting it,” I growl against her sensitive flesh. “Let go. I want to feel you come apart on my tongue.”

Her back arches off the bed as she crashes over the edge, my name a broken cry on her lips. I work her through it, easing back only when she tugs gently at my hair.

She looks dazed, her eyes heavy-lidded as she catches her breath. Then she beckons to me with one hand.

“Come here,” she says, and I move up between her thighs, positioning myself above her.

I shed my boxer briefs, watching her eyes widen as she takes in all of me. There’s a flicker of nervousness in her expression that confirms my suspicion—she hasn’t done this before. At least not much. The knowledge makes something primal roar to life inside me.

“I’ll go slow,” I promise, brushing her hair back from her flushed face. “But I need to be inside you. Need to feel you around me.”

She nods, her eyes never leaving mine as I reach into the nightstand for protection. Once I’m ready, I position myself at her entrance, the head of my cock pressing against her slick heat.

“Breathe,” I instruct, watching her face carefully as I push forward, just the tip breaching her tight entrance.

Her breath hitches, fingers digging into my shoulders. I pause, giving her time to

adjust.

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“More,” she whispers, lifting her hips slightly.

I push deeper, gritting my teeth against the almost painful pleasure of her body gripping mine. She’s so fucking tight, so perfect around me that it takes every ounce of control not to thrust all the way in.

“You feel incredible,” I murmur, watching her face for any sign of discomfort. “So tight. So perfect.”

A small whimper escapes her as I sink deeper. I freeze immediately.

“Too much?”

She shakes her head, her eyes dark with desire. “No. Don’t stop.”

I continue my slow advance until I’m fully seated inside her, our bodies completely joined. The sensation is overwhelming—not just physically, but something deeper, more profound than I’ve ever experienced.

“You’re mine now,” I whisper against her ear. “Do you understand? Mine.”

She shivers beneath me, her inner walls clenching around me in response. “Yes,” she breathes, the single word igniting something fierce in my chest.

I begin to move, setting a rhythm that’s gentle at first, watching her face as pleasure replaces any trace of discomfort. Her body opens for me, accepting me deeper with each thrust.

“That’s it,” I encourage as she begins to move with me, her hips rising to meet mine.
“Take what you need.”

Her inexperience is evident in the way she moves—slightly hesitant, learning as she goes—but there’s nothing hesitant about the sounds she makes or the way her body responds to mine. She was made for this.

Made for me.

I shift my angle slightly, hitting a spot that makes her gasp and arch beneath me.
“There?” I ask, though I already know the answer from the way her nails dig into my back.

“Yes,” she moans, her eyes fluttering closed. “Right there.”

I maintain the angle, driving into her with more force now that I know she can take it. The sight of her beneath me—flushed, panting, completely surrendered to the pleasure I’m giving her—is the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen.

“Open your eyes,” I command, needing to see her. “Look at me while I fuck you.”

Her eyes snap open, locking with mine. The connection is electric, intimate in a way that goes beyond our joined bodies. I can see everything in her eyes. Her pleasure, her surrender, her trust.

“You’re close,” I observe, feeling the telltale fluttering of her inner walls. “I can feel it. Your body’s trying to pull me deeper.”

She nods, biting her lower lip as her breathing quickens.

“Don’t hold back,” I tell her, increasing my pace. “Let me feel you come around my

cock.”

My words seem to push her closer to the edge. Her movements become more frantic, less coordinated as she chases her release.

“Clay,” she gasps, her voice breaking on my name. “I’m going to?—“

“Yes,” I growl, driving into her harder. “Come for me, Ruby. Now.”

She shatters beneath me, her body clenching around mine in rhythmic pulses as she cries out.

The sight of her coming undone, combined with the exquisite grip of her body, triggers my own release. I thrust deep one final time, groaning as pleasure tears through me with an intensity I’ve never experienced before.

For several moments, we remain locked together, both of us panting as the aftershocks ripple through our joined bodies. I’m careful not to crush her with my weight, but I can’t bring myself to pull away just yet. The connection between us feels too precious, too perfect to break.

Finally, I ease out of her, both of us gasping at the sensation. I dispose of the condom and return to find her watching me with heavy-lidded eyes, her body gloriously naked and flushed with satisfaction.

“Stay here,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll be right back.”

She makes a small sound of protest as I disentangle myself, but I need to take care of her. The urge to tend to her, to make sure she’s comfortable, is almost as powerful as the desire that consumed me minutes ago.

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I pad to the bathroom, running hot water into the tub. I add a capful of the pine-scented bath oil I sometimes use for sore muscles after training. The steam rises, filling the small bathroom with a woodsy scent that reminds me of the forest surrounding my cabin.

When I return to the bedroom, Ruby is exactly where I left her, looking thoroughly claimed and impossibly beautiful. Her hair is a tangled mess of fire against my pillows, her lips swollen from my kisses, her skin marked in places by my mouth and hands. The sight of her like this—in my bed, bearing the evidence of my passion—sends a fresh surge of possessiveness through me.

“Come on,” I say, lifting her into my arms. She weighs almost nothing, her small frame fitting perfectly against my chest. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She loops her arms around my neck, looking up at me with something like wonder. “You’re running me a bath?”

The surprise in her voice makes me wonder what kind of men she’s been with before. Men who didn’t take care of her afterward. Men who didn’t understand that claiming a woman like Ruby comes with responsibilities.

“Of course,” I answer simply, carrying her to the bathroom.

I set her down gently beside the tub, keeping a steadying hand on her waist as she tests the water with her toes.

“It’s hot,” she says, but she’s smiling.

“The way it should be.” I help her step in, watching as she sinks into the steaming water with a sigh of pleasure.

I kneel beside the tub, taking a washcloth and soaking it in the hot water. Gently, I begin to wash her, starting with her shoulders and working my way down her arms. Her eyes drift closed as I tend to her, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

“No one’s ever done this for me before,” she admits quietly.

The confession tightens something in my chest. “Their loss,” I tell her, meaning it. Taking care of Ruby like this feels like a privilege, not a chore.

I wash her back, careful around the areas where my fingers left marks on her delicate skin. Then her breasts, the cloth gliding over her nipples and making her breath catch. Down her stomach, between her legs where she’s still sensitive, making her gasp and shift in the water.

“Relax,” I murmur, keeping my touch gentle. “I’m just taking care of you.”

She opens her eyes, looking at me with an expression I can’t quite decipher. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

The question catches me off guard. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Ruby shrugs, water droplets sliding down her shoulders. “Most guys aren’t.”

I set the washcloth aside, cupping her face in my palm. “I’m not most guys.”

Her eyes search mine, looking for something—sincerity, maybe, or deception. I let her look, having nothing to hide. What I feel for Ruby may have started as raw desire,

but it's already evolved into something more complex, more powerful.

"No," she agrees finally. "You're definitely not."

I help her wash her hair, massaging her scalp with firm fingers until she's practically purring with contentment. When we're finished, I help her stand and wrap her in a large towel, drying her with the same care I used to bathe her.

"Your turn," she says, gesturing to the tub.

I shake my head. "I'll shower later. This was for you."

Ruby steps closer, still wrapped in the towel, and places her palm against my chest, right over my heart. "Thank you."

The simple words, spoken with such genuine gratitude, affect me more than they should. I cover her hand with mine, pressing it more firmly against my chest so she can feel my heartbeat.

"You don't need to thank me for taking care of what's mine," I tell her, the possessive words slipping out before I can stop them.

Instead of pulling away or looking offended, Ruby's eyes darken, her lips parting slightly. "Is that what I am? Yours?"

I should backtrack. Should apologize for being too intense, too possessive, too soon. But I can't bring myself to lie to her.

"Yes," I say simply. "If you want to be."

She studies me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then, slowly, she rises

on her tiptoes and presses her lips to mine in a kiss that's achingly tender.

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“I think I do,” she whispers against my mouth.

The admission sends a wave of satisfaction through me that’s different from the physical pleasure we shared earlier—deeper, more profound. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close, breathing in the clean scent of her damp hair.

“Let’s get you to bed,” I murmur, leading her back to the bedroom.

I find one of my t-shirts in a drawer and help her into it. The sight of her in my clothes, the hem hitting mid-thigh on her shorter frame, stirs something primal in me again. I pull on a pair of boxer briefs and join her in bed, pulling her against me so her back is pressed to my chest.

I press a kiss to the nape of her neck, inhaling the scent of her clean skin. “Sleep, then. I’ve got you.”

Ruby turns in my arms, facing me with those incredible eyes that seem to see right through me. “This wasn’t what I expected when my dad said he was sending protection.”

I chuckle, tucking a strand of damp hair behind her ear. “I’m guessing he didn’t expect this either.”

Her expression grows serious. “Do you regret it? Breaking the professional boundaries?”

“No,” I answer without hesitation. “I should, but I don’t. Not for a second.”

Relief flickers across her face. “Good. Me neither.”

I trace the curve of her cheek with my thumb, marveling at the softness of her skin. “We’ll figure it out, Ruby. The protection, Holloway, your father—all of it. But right now, in this moment, it’s just us.”

She nods, her eyelids growing heavy. “Just us,” she echoes, the words slurring slightly with exhaustion.

I pull her closer, arranging the blankets around us. Her breathing gradually deepens, her body relaxing completely against mine as sleep claims her. I stay awake a little longer, watching the peaceful rise and fall of her chest, memorizing the pattern of freckles across her nose, the exact shade of her hair against my sheets.

The fierce protectiveness I feel for her hasn’t diminished. If anything, it’s grown stronger, more resolute. Holloway, her father, the world—they’ll all have to go through me to get to her now.

As I drift toward sleep, Ruby tucked securely in my arms, one thought circles in my mind: Mine to protect. Mine to cherish.

Mine, period.

ChapterSeven

RUBY

Warmth. That’s the first thing I feel.

Warmth spreading through my body, drawing me from sleep into a hazy consciousness that feels better than any dream.

My eyes flutter open and I realize the warmth isn't just the blankets. It's Clay's mouth on my inner thigh as his hands part my legs with gentle insistence.

My breath catches as his tongue finds me, and any remaining fog of sleep vanishes in an instant. His eyes flick up to mine, dark with hunger, and the sight of him between my legs sends a shock wave of desire through me so strong I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

"Clay," I moan.

He doesn't answer with words. Instead, his tongue circles my clit, making my hips rise involuntarily from the bed. His large hands grip my thighs, holding me open to him as he tastes me with deliberate, maddening slowness.

I thread my fingers through his dark hair, not sure if I'm trying to pull him closer or push him away from the almost unbearable pleasure. He groans against me, the vibration sending ripples of sensation up my spine.

"Fuck, you taste good," he murmurs against my skin, his breath hot and teasing. "Been thinking about this all night."

Before I can respond, he slides one thick finger inside me while his tongue continues its relentless attention. My back arches off the bed as he curls his finger, finding that perfect spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

"Clay, please," I gasp, not even sure what I'm begging for.

He adds a second finger, stretching me deliciously as his mouth works magic. My thighs begin to tremble, heat building low in my belly, coiling tighter with each stroke of his tongue. I'm climbing higher, faster than I thought possible, my body responding to him like we've been lovers for years instead of hours.

When he sucks gently while pressing his fingers deeper, I shatter. The orgasm crashes through me in waves, my body clenching around his fingers as I cry out his name. He doesn't stop, drawing out every last tremor until I'm gasping, oversensitive and boneless against the sheets.

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Only then does he rise, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as he looks down at me with undisguised male satisfaction. His cock stands proud against his stomach, hard and ready.

“Morning, gorgeous,” he says, voice rough with desire.

I reach for him, wanting to feel him inside me, needing to complete this connection.

He moves over me, his muscled body caging mine as he settles between my thighs. The blunt head of his cock presses against my entrance, teasing but not entering.

I watch through heavy-lidded eyes as he positions himself at my entrance. His blue eyes lock on mine as he pushes slowly inside. The stretch is exquisite, my body still sensitive from his mouth but eager to take all of him.

“Fuck,” he groans as he bottoms out. “You feel incredible.”

I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, loving the weight of him above me.

He begins to move, setting a rhythm that has me climbing toward another peak almost immediately. His forearms bracket my head as he thrusts, his gaze never leaving mine, creating an intimacy that’s almost more overwhelming than the physical pleasure.

I run my hands down his back, feeling the play of muscles beneath smooth skin, tracing old scars I want to know the stories behind. He dips his head to capture my

mouth in a kiss that tastes of me, and something about that is so erotic I moan into his mouth.

His pace quickens, his control slipping as I tighten around him. One hand slides between us, his thumb finding my clit. The dual sensation pushes me over the edge again, my second orgasm even more intense than the first. I cry out, nails digging into his shoulders as pleasure pulses through me.

He follows moments later, his rhythm faltering as he drives deep one final time, his body tensing above me as he finds his release. The sound he makes—half groan, half my name—is something I want to hear again and again.

For several heartbeats, we stay joined, his forehead pressed against mine as we catch our breath. Then he kisses me softly, almost reverently, before carefully withdrawing and disposing of the condom.

When he returns to bed, he pulls me against his chest, his heartbeat strong beneath my ear. I expect him to drift back to sleep, or maybe suggest breakfast. What I don't expect is the way his arms tighten around me, or the serious tone in his voice when he finally speaks.

“That was...” he pauses, searching for words. “You’re something else, Ruby Wilson.”

I smile against his skin, oddly pleased by his loss for words. “You’re not so bad yourself, Dover.”

His chest rumbles with quiet laughter. “High praise from a woman who’s been keeping men at arm’s length for years.”

I prop myself up on one elbow to look at him, surprised. “How do you know that?”

“Background check,” he admits, not looking remotely apologetic. “Plus, it’s obvious in how you carry yourself. You don’t let people get close easily.”

I should be annoyed that he’s read me so accurately, but there’s something disarming about his directness.

“Part of the job description for a bodyguard? Psychoanalyzing your clients?”

“Just observation.” His fingers trace lazy patterns on my bare shoulder. “And you’re not just a client anymore.”

The simple statement hangs between us, loaded with implications neither of us seems ready to voice. What exactly am I to him now? What is he to me? Two days ago, he was an unwanted intrusion in my life. Now he’s... essential, somehow.

Before I can formulate a response, his phone buzzes on the nightstand. Clay sighs, pressing a kiss to my forehead before reaching for it.

“I should check that,” he says, glancing at the screen. “Could be about Holloway.”

I nod, secretly relieved for the interruption. Whatever’s happening between us is moving at warp speed, and I need a moment to catch my breath.

“I’ll make coffee,” he says, sliding out of bed and pulling on a pair of boxers. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I reply, admiring the view as he walks to the door.

Once he’s gone, I flop back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling as reality crashes back. I’m in Clay Dover’s bed. I’ve spent the night having mind-blowing sex with a man I barely know, while somewhere out there, a dangerous criminal is

looking for me.

I should be terrified. I should be planning my next move, figuring out how to protect myself. Instead, I'm lying here replaying the way Clay's mouth felt between my thighs, the way his eyes darkened when he came inside me.

What is happening to me?

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Whatever it is, I can't deny that last night was the best sex of my life. Not just physically, though that was spectacular, but emotionally too. There was a connection there I've never experienced before, a sense of being completely seen and accepted.

I slip out of bed, wrapping the sheet around me as I pad to the bathroom. My reflection in the mirror is startling—flushed cheeks, swollen lips, a hickey blooming just below my collarbone. I look thoroughly debauched, and the woman staring back at me is a stranger. I've never seen myself like this before.

After using the bathroom and rinsing my mouth with Clay's mouthwash, I steal his t-shirt from the hook on the door. It falls almost to my knees, smelling of laundry detergent and something distinctly him.

I follow the scent of coffee to the kitchen, where Clay stands at the counter, still in just his boxers, muscled back on full display as he pours coffee into two mugs. He's hung up the phone and seems lost in thought.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He turns, eyes traveling appreciatively over my borrowed shirt before meeting my gaze.

"Just a check-in from the office. They've got eyes on Holloway's known associates."

"Any leads?"

"Nothing concrete yet." He hands me a mug. "Cream's in the fridge if you want it."

I shake my head, taking the coffee black. The first sip scalds my tongue but wakes me up fully. Standing in Clay's kitchen, drinking coffee, wearing his shirt. It's all so domestic, so normal. The kind of normal I've never allowed myself to have.

"You hungry?" he asks, opening the fridge. "I can make eggs, bacon, toast. Not much else here, I'm afraid."

"Anything's fine," I say, leaning against the counter. "I should probably head to the shop soon though. I've got clients booked all day."

Clay stills, bacon package in hand. "The shop?"

"Fit Mountain Ink. Where I work? I need to open up."

He sets the package down, turning to face me with a frown. "Ruby, you can't go to work today."

"Yes, I can, and I will." I straighten up, clutching the coffee mug like a shield. "I have responsibilities. The Morrisons trusted me with their business while they're in Hawaii. People are counting on me."

"Holloway's men know where you live," Clay counters, voice low and serious. "That means that they know where you work too."

"So I'm just supposed to hide forever? Let this asshole dictate my life because my father testified against him years ago?" I set the mug down with more force than necessary. "That's not happening."

Clay runs a hand through his hair, frustration evident in every line of his body. "I'm trying to keep you safe."

“And I appreciate that. But I can’t stop living my life because some criminal has a grudge.”

“This isn’t just any criminal, Ruby. This man is dangerous, methodical. He waited years to get his revenge.”

“All the more reason not to let him win by cowering in fear.” I cross my arms, meeting his gaze steadily. “If I don’t show up today, I let down my clients, I let down the Morrisons, and I let Holloway control me without him having to lift a finger.”

Clay watches me with his jaw clenched for a long moment.

I can almost see the battle waging in his mind, the professional bodyguard versus the man who held me all night.

“I’m going,” I say softly. “With or without you.”

He sighs through his nose. “You’re stubborn as hell, you know that?”

“Part of my charm.” I place my hands on his shoulders, feeling the tension there. “I’ll be careful, I promise. And I’ll follow your security protocols. But I need to do this.”

Clay sighs, his hands coming to rest on my hips.

“Fine. But we do this my way. I check the place thoroughly before you open. You stay within my sight at all times. And if I say we leave, we leave. No arguments.”

I lean down to press a quick kiss to his lips, relief flooding through me. “Thank you for understanding.”

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His arms wrap around my waist and pulls me between his legs. “I don’t like it, but I get it. You’re not the type to hide.”

“No, I’m not.” I run my fingers through his hair. “Now, I need a shower before we go.”

A slow smile spreads across his face. “Need company?”

“Absolutely not,” I laugh, stepping out of his embrace. “If you join me, we’ll never make it to the shop on time.”

His answering chuckle follows me to the bathroom, warm and rich, making my heart flutter in a way that should be alarming but somehow just feels right.

* * *

Two hours later, I’m setting up my station at Fit Mountain Ink, arranging inks and checking my equipment while Clay completes his third sweep of the premises. He’s been thorough—checking windows, doors, the back alley, even the ventilation system. Now dressed in jeans and a dark henley that does nothing to hide his muscular build, he looks every inch the professional security expert.

“All clear,” he announces, returning to the main area. “But I want you to stay away from the front windows as much as possible.”

“Most of my work happens in the private rooms anyway,” I assure him, calibrating my tattoo machine. “My first client should be here in about fifteen minutes.”

Clay positions himself where he can see both me and the front door, his posture relaxed but alert. I can tell he's still not happy about this arrangement, but he's respecting my decision, and I appreciate that more than I can say.

The afternoon continues this way—me working, Clay watching, the constant undercurrent of tension beneath normal interactions. My 3:00 appointment, Mia, is getting a delicate constellation of stars across her shoulder blade, a tribute to her grandmother. Clay maintains his position by the wall, occasionally checking his phone with a frown.

“All done,” I tell Mia, applying a clear bandage over her fresh tattoo. “Keep this on for at least twenty-four hours, then follow the aftercare instructions I emailed you.”

“It's beautiful,” she says, admiring the work in a hand mirror. “Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure.” I smile, beginning to clean my station. “Clay will walk you to your car.”

Clay steps forward, all business. “Ready?”

Mia looks confused but doesn't argue as Clay escorts her outside. Through the front windows, I watch him scan the parking lot before opening her car door, waiting until she's safely inside before heading back.

When he returns, his expression has changed. There's a new tension in his shoulders, a focus in his eyes that wasn't there before.

“What's wrong?” I ask immediately.

Clay checks his phone again. “Just got a text from the office. They've picked up some chatter about Holloway's associates in this area.”

My stomach drops. “Here? Near the shop?”

“Nothing specific, but close enough that I want to do a perimeter check before your last appointment.” He checks his watch. “When are they due?”

“Four-thirty. About forty minutes.”

“I’m going to sweep the area, make sure everything’s clear. While I’m gone, I need you to follow some rules.”

“Okay.” My mouth goes dry.

“Stay away from the windows. Don’t open the door for anyone except me or your scheduled client—and verify it’s them before unlocking.” His voice is deadly serious. “If anything feels wrong text me immediately and lock yourself in the back office.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Fifteen minutes, max.”

I nod, trying to project confidence I don’t feel. “I’ll be fine.”

He studies my face, then presses a quick, hard kiss to my lips. “Fifteen minutes. Lock the door behind me.”

And then he’s gone, the bell chiming as the door closes.

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I'm about to lock it when I notice Spike's heat lamp flickering in his terrarium near the front window. Then the lamp goes out completely.

"Damn it," I mutter. I need to move him to the backup terrarium in the back room before I lock up. I carefully lift his enclosure, balancing it in my arms as I head toward the back office where I keep his spare setup.

It takes me a few minutes to get Spike settled with his working heat lamp. "There you go, buddy," I whisper, making sure he's comfortable before heading back to the front to lock the door as Clay instructed.

As I turn toward the front door to lock it, I freeze.

A tall man with close-cropped hair stands just inside the entrance, sunglasses hiding his eyes despite the dim studio lighting. Something about his posture makes my skin prickle. He must have slipped in while I was tending to Spike.

Unease crawls up my spine. "James Miller?" I ask.

His smile doesn't reach his eyes as he removes his sunglasses. "That's not my name. But Holloway sends his regards."

My blood turns to ice.

I back away, reaching for anything I can use as a weapon. The man advances slowly, like a predator confident his prey can't escape.

“Don’t make this difficult, sweetheart.” His voice is eerily calm. “Mr. Holloway just wants to have a conversation with you about your father.”

“My dad and I aren’t exactly close,” I reply, trying to keep my voice steady as I edge toward the back office where my phone is. “I’m not the leverage you think I am.”

A second man appears in the doorway behind him, larger and more menacing. “Car’s ready out back. Let’s go.”

My hand hands close around a pair of scissors on my workstation. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

The first man sighs. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Your choice.”

“I choose neither,” I say, and throw the scissors at the first man’s face with all my strength.

He dodges, but not completely. The blades catch his cheek, drawing a thin line of blood. His expression darkens from calm to furious in an instant.

He growls, lunging toward me. “Hard way it is, then.”

ChapterEight

CLAY

I frownas I circle the perimeter of Fit Mountain Ink for the third time. My instincts are humming, that familiar sixth sense that kept me alive through three combat tours.

The air feels charged, like the calm before a firefight.

As I circle around the back for my final check, my thoughts keep drifting back to Ruby. How her skin felt against mine this morning, how those three words had almost slipped out before I caught them.

When this protection detail ends and Holloway is back behind bars where he belongs, I'm telling her. No more holding back. No more pretending this is just physical attraction or professional concern. She needs to know that she's it for me. That I'm not walking away.

My phone vibrates with an update from my FBI contact. They're closing in on Holloway's location. Good. The sooner this threat is eliminated, the sooner Ruby can stop looking over her shoulder. The sooner we can start whatever comes next.

I complete my circuit around the building, I pause at the back entrance, and my hand freezes on the back door handle. It's unlocked.

Shit.

Instantly, my body shifts into combat mode as adrenaline floods my system.

I draw my weapon and enter the tattoo shop silently. The back hallway is clear, but I hear three male voices I don't recognize. I peer around the corner. Three men have Ruby backed against the front counter. And one of the men is Vincent Holloway. He's pressing a knife against Ruby's throat while his men ransack the shop.

Fuck.

"Your father will pay handsomely to get you back," Holloway sneers. "Though I might keep you a while first, just to teach him a lesson about consequences."

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Ruby's eyes meet mine over Holloway's shoulder. I see the flash of relief, quickly masked by fear. She's smart enough not to give away my position.

I move without hesitation. The first thug doesn't even know I'm there until my arm locks around his throat, cutting off his air supply. He struggles, clawing at my forearm, but I've already calculated the exact pressure needed. His consciousness fades within seconds, and I lower him to the floor without a sound.

The second man turns at the slight noise, reaching for his weapon. I don't give him the chance. My fist connects with his throat, crushing his windpipe. He staggers back, gasping, eyes wide with shock. I follow through with a vicious uppercut that snaps his head back. Blood sprays from his nose, splattering across the polished floor.

Holloway spins at the commotion, dragging Ruby with him as a human shield, the knife still at her throat.

"One more step and she bleeds," he snarls, backing toward the door.

I freeze, my hands raised slightly. "You're not walking out of here, Holloway."

His eyes narrow, recognition dawning.

"Hunt Security, right? James Wilson's hired muscle." He laughs, a cold sound that raises the hair on my neck. "You're too late. I've already won."

"Let her go," I say, my voice deadly calm. "This is between you and Wilson."

“She is between me and Wilson,” Holloway spits. “His precious daughter. His only weakness.”

Ruby’s eyes lock with mine, and I see something shift in them. Not fear—determination. She gives me the slightest nod, and I understand immediately what she’s planning.

“You won’t make it to the door,” I tell Holloway, drawing his attention fully to me. “There are police outside. FBI. Your escape route is cut off.”

It’s a lie, but it makes him glance toward the window.

That’s all Ruby needs.

She drives her elbow hard into Holloway’s ribs, simultaneously stomping down on his instep with all her weight. His grip loosens just enough for her to duck away from the knife.

I lunge forward the instant she moves, my fist connecting with Holloway’s jaw with bone-crushing force. He staggers backward, the knife slashing wildly through the air. I grab his wrist, twisting until the blade clatters to the floor.

Holloway fights back with the desperation of a cornered animal. He lands a solid punch to my ribs that would have dropped a lesser man. I absorb the blow, countering with a strike to his solar plexus that drives the air from his lungs.

“Ruby, get back!” I shout as Holloway and I crash into a display case, shattering glass across the floor.

She scrambles away, grabbing her phone from the counter. “I’m calling the police!”

Holloway roars in rage, lunging for her. I intercept him, driving my shoulder into his midsection and slamming him against the wall hard enough to crack the drywall. His head bounces off the surface with a sickening thud, but he's still fighting.

I block a wild punch, countering with a precise strike to his temple. His eyes roll back, knees buckling. I don't let him fall, instead pinning him against the wall with my forearm across his throat.

"It's over," I growl into his face. "You lost."

His eyes refocus, hatred burning in them. "This isn't over," he wheezes. "Not while I'm breathing."

"That can be arranged," I say, increasing the pressure on his windpipe.

"Clay." Ruby's voice cuts through the red haze of my rage. "The police are on their way."

I ease the pressure slightly, allowing Holloway to draw a ragged breath. "You're lucky she's here," I tell him quietly. "Otherwise we'd be having a very different conversation."

I spin him around roughly, forcing his arms behind his back. Zip ties from my pocket secure his wrists tightly enough to make him wince.

"Sit," I command, shoving him down against the wall. I do the same with his two unconscious men, securing them efficiently.

Only then do I turn to Ruby, my eyes scanning her for injuries. There's a thin red line on her throat where the knife pressed against her skin, and her hands are trembling, but she's standing tall.

“You okay?” I ask, crossing to her in three long strides.

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She nods, her eyes darting to Holloway. “He forced his way in.”

I pull her against my chest, one hand cradling the back of her head. “You’re safe now.”

She wraps her arms around my waist and I feel her trembling against me.

“That was quick thinking,” I murmur into her hair. “The elbow to the ribs.”

She gives a shaky laugh against my chest. “Self-defense class. Never thought I’d actually use it.”

My arms tighten around her. The thought of Holloway’s knife against her throat, of what could have happened if I’d been a minute later, makes me want to tear the world apart.

“Spike,” she suddenly gasps, pulling back. “He’s in the back room.”

“I’ll get him,” I say, reluctant to let her go but understanding her concern. “Stay where I can see you.”

She nods, moving to stand where she has a clear view of the back room door but is well away from Holloway and his men.

I find him in his travel terrarium in the office, seemingly unperturbed by the chaos. I carefully pick up the container, checking that the lid is secure before carrying it back out to Ruby.

“He’s fine,” I tell her, handing over the terrarium. “Not even stressed.”

Relief floods her face as she peers through the glass at her pet. “Thank goodness. I was worried they might have hurt him.”

“Looks like they didn’t make it back here,” I say, glancing around the office, which is untouched compared to the destruction in the main shop.

Sirens wail in the distance, growing louder. I straighten up, rolling my shoulders to release some of the tension.

“The police are almost here,” I tell her, extending my hand. She crosses to me without hesitation, fitting herself against my side, Spike’s terrarium clutched in her free hand. “Let me do most of the talking.”

She nods, her arm sliding around my waist. “Okay.”

The next two hours pass in a blur of police activity.

Officers secure the scene, paramedics treat the injured, and detectives take our statements. I keep Ruby tucked against my side throughout, refusing to let her out of my sight even when the female detective suggests she might want to speak privately. That suggestion earns the detective a firm refusal from Ruby, who grips my shirt tighter and declares she’s not going anywhere without me.

Holloway and his men are loaded into separate police cars, their injuries treated but my zip ties replaced with official handcuffs. I watch with grim satisfaction as Holloway is driven away, finally back in custody where he belongs. The FBI arrives shortly after, taking jurisdiction over the case and confirming that Holloway had escaped their surveillance just hours earlier. They’d been tracking him, but he’d managed to slip away long enough to come after Ruby.

Through it all, Ruby remains strong, answering questions clearly and concisely, never once breaking down despite the trauma she's experienced. She keeps Spike's terrarium close, occasionally checking on the lizard as if reassuring herself that at least one part of her world remains undamaged.

The shop door flies open, the bell jingling violently as Marcus and Lainey burst in, their faces tight with worry.

"Ruby!" Lainey rushes forward, stopping short when she sees the destruction—and Ruby tucked against my side. Her eyes widen, darting between us. "Are you okay? We saw the police cars and we came as fast as we could."

"I'm fine," Ruby says, straightening but not moving away from me. "Really."

Marcus surveys the scene, his expression darkening when he spots the blood on the floor. "What the hell happened?"

"Holloway," I explain briefly. "He came for Ruby himself. He didn't get her."

Lainey steps closer, her eyes fixed on the thin red line on Ruby's throat. "He hurt you."

"It's nothing," Ruby insists, unconsciously leaning back into me. "Clay got here before he could do any real damage."

Lainey's gaze shifts to me, assessing. Whatever she sees makes her nod slightly. "Thank you."

I nod back, a silent understanding passing between us. She cares about Ruby. So do I. That's all that matters right now.

“The shop,” Marcus says, looking around at the destruction. “Jesus, Ruby.”

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“It can be fixed,” Ruby says, her voice stronger now. “It’s just stuff.”

“You’re staying with us tonight,” Lainey declares, reaching for Ruby’s hand. “No arguments.”

Ruby hesitates, her fingers tightening on my shirt. “Actually...”

Lainey’s eyes narrow, darting between us again. Understanding dawns on her face. “Oh.”

“Clay’s place is secure,” Ruby explains, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “And Holloway’s back in custody, but we don’t know if there are more men out there.”

“She’ll be safe with me,” I add, my arm tightening slightly around her shoulders.

Lainey studies us for a long moment, then a slow smile spreads across her face. “I bet she will.”

Ruby’s blush deepens. “Lainey...”

“What?” Lainey’s smile turns innocent. “I didn’t say anything.”

Her eyes drop to the terrarium in Ruby’s hands. “Do you need me to take Spike for you?”

Ruby shakes her head, clutching the container closer. “No, he’s coming with us. Clay doesn’t mind.”

I nod in confirmation. “The lizard’s welcome. He’s part of the package.”

Marcus clears his throat, looking uncomfortable. “If you need anything, Ruby, just call. Day or night.”

“I will,” Ruby promises. “Thanks for coming to check on me.”

“Of course,” Lainey says, stepping forward to hug Ruby. As she does, she whispers something in Ruby’s ear that makes Ruby’s blush spread down her neck.

“Lainey!” Ruby hisses, but there’s a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Lainey just grins, unrepentant. “Call me tomorrow. With details.”

“We should let you finish up here,” Marcus says, taking Lainey’s arm. “Come on, babe.”

Lainey allows herself to be led away, but not before giving me a pointed look. “Take care of her.”

I nod, respecting her protectiveness. “Always.”

After they leave, Ruby lets out a long breath. “Sorry about that. Lainey can be...”

“Protective,” I finish for her. “Good. You should have people who care about you.”

She looks up at me, something vulnerable in her eyes. “Like you?”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Yeah, sweetheart. Like me. Ready to go?”

She nods, exhaustion evident in the slump of her shoulders. “Where are we going?”

“My place.” I pick up Spike’s terrarium with one hand, keeping my other arm around Ruby’s shoulders. “I’ll carry him to the truck.”.

We walk out to my truck, my arm around her shoulders. The evening air is cool against our skin. Ruby shivers slightly, and I pull her closer.

“Get in,” I say, opening the passenger door for her. “I’ll put Spike in the back seat.”

She slides into the seat while I carefully place the terrarium on the back seat, making sure it’s secure and won’t slide around during the drive. Then I circle around to the driver’s side, scanning the street as I go.

I start the engine and pull away from the curb, one hand on the wheel, the other reaching for Ruby’s. Her fingers intertwine with mine, small and delicate against my scarred knuckles.

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“Thank you,” she says quietly, staring out the window at the passing buildings. “For saving me. And Spike.”

“Don’t thank me for that,” I say, squeezing her hand gently. “Ever.”

She turns to look at me, her head tilted slightly. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not something you should have to thank me for.” I keep my eyes on the road, but I can feel her gaze on my profile. “Keeping you safe isn’t a favor, Ruby. It’s a necessity. Like breathing.”

Silence fills the car for a moment, broken only by the soft hum of the engine and an occasional rustle from Spike’s terrarium.

“Why?” she finally asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I glance at her, taking in the vulnerability in her eyes, the question written across her face. She knows the answer. She just needs to hear me say it.

“Because you’re mine,” I say simply, the words feeling right on my tongue. “Because the thought of anything happening to you makes me want to tear the world apart with my bare hands. Because from the moment I saw you, I knew you were it for me.”

Her breath catches, her fingers tightening around mine. “Clay...”

“I know it’s fast,” I continue, turning onto the road that leads to my cabin outside of town. “I know it doesn’t make sense. I know you like being independent. But

this—us—it's real, Ruby. And I'm not walking away when this is over."

She's quiet for so long that I wonder if I've pushed too hard, too fast. Then her thumb strokes across my knuckles, a gentle caress that sends electricity up my arm.

"I don't want you to walk away," she admits softly. "And that scares me."

Relief floods through me, so intense it's almost painful. "Why does it scare you?"

"Because I've never needed anyone before." She stares down at our joined hands. "I've spent my whole life proving I don't need anyone. And then you come along, and suddenly the thought of you not being there makes it hard to breathe."

I lift our joined hands to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "Needing someone doesn't make you weak, Ruby. It makes you human."

"Is that what this is?" she asks, her voice small. "Need?"

I pull the truck onto the gravel driveway that leads to my cabin, cutting the engine. The silence that falls is heavy with expectation. I turn to face her fully, taking both her hands in mine.

"This is more than need," I tell her, my voice rough with emotion I rarely allow myself to show. "This is want. This is choice. This is me looking at you and seeing everything I never knew I was missing. This is love."

Her eyes shine with unshed tears. "I love you too, Clay. And I don't know what to do with that"

"You don't have to do anything with it," I tell her, reaching up to cup her face in my hands. "Just let me love you back. Let me keep you safe. Let me be yours the way you're mine."

A tear spills over, tracking down her cheek. I catch it with my thumb, wiping it away gently. “I can do that,” she says, a small smile breaking through the tears.

I lean forward, pressing my forehead against hers. “Good. Because I’m not giving you up, Ruby Wilson. Not for anything or anyone.”

She closes the distance between us, her lips meeting mine in a kiss that feels like coming home. She tastes like coffee and something uniquely Ruby—something I already know I’ll never get enough of. My hands slide into her hair, holding her to me as I deepen the kiss, claiming her mouth the way I want to claim all of her.

When we break apart, she’s breathless, her lips swollen, her eyes dark with desire. “Take me inside,” she says, her voice husky. “Spike probably needs his heat lamp.”

I smile at her concern for her pet even in this moment. “I’ll get him set up first thing.”

I exit the truck and circle around to her door, opening it and lifting her into my arms in one smooth motion. She laughs, startled, her arms going around my neck.

“I can walk, you know,” she protests, but there’s no real objection in her tone.

“I know,” I say, carrying her up the steps to my cabin. “But I like having you in my arms.”

She rests her head against my shoulder, a soft sigh escaping her. “I like being there.”

“I’ll come back for Spike,” I promise as I push open the door and carry her across the threshold, kicking it closed behind us.

Tomorrow, there will be statements to give, a shop to rebuild, a future to plan. But tonight, in this moment, there’s just Ruby in my arms, safe and whole and mine.

And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel like I've found something worth protecting for reasons that have nothing to do with duty or obligation.

Just love. Fierce and possessive and undeniably real.

The End