



Road Trip with Her Bodyguard

Author: *Haley Travis*

Category: Romance

Description: On the road, on the run, with a savagely gorgeous stranger who isn't following orders.

I'm kind of ashamed of being wealthy and sheltered. I mean, I didn't do anything to deserve it. My father happened to strike it rich with his tech company.

Suddenly Dad thinks I'm in danger, and sends me a bodyguard. I was expecting one of Dad's associates in an expensive suit. Not Dane, with his dark, shifting eyes, sexy sculpted shoulders, and inability to follow orders.

He thinks the safest plan is to drive across the country posing as a couple on a road trip. Pretending to be in love every time cameras are around is easy when every touch sends a rush of fire through my veins.

Dane knows what he does to me. He's going to keep me safe by keeping me in his arms.

Until I can't imagine being anywhere else.

Haley Travis books are always steamy & sweet feel good romances with happily ever afters.

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JORIE

I don't know the city, I'm surrounded by thousands of people, and I have no idea which way is north.

The streets of Nashville are packed with music lovers drifting between venues in search of their favorite bands. I got separated from Tara and Ashley twenty minutes ago when they darted into a dark bar, hoping to catch a glimpse of some podcaster they're in love with, who just posted an update from that location.

It's okay. I'm actually happy to be outside and get a few minutes of fresh air and peace.

The problem, though, is that I'm supposed to meet them at a place "one minute north", but that requires me knowing where I am. Pulling out my phone, I see I suddenly have a bunch of texts.

Tara: OMG, this band's singer must have a cold because he sounds awful and I guess Patrick and his podfolks have moved on already. Can't see them anywhere. We'll be out to meet you in a minute.

Dad: You're being picked up by a man named Dane. He's going to be your bodyguard. Do everything he says TO THE LETTER. You're being tracked.

Mom: I saw the photos of you and your friends. So cute! Your hotel looks lovely. But

honey, you need more eyeliner in a place like that to pop in those bright lights. Sorry your concert weekend is being cut short.

Unknown Number: Jorie, this is Dane. I'll be there in a few minutes. Please be ready to move.

Ashley: We're on the street now. Where are you?

Ashley: Ack, what kind of rich snob travels to a music fest by helicopter? LOL!

The roar of the engine can be felt before the chopper comes into view, heading for the top of an office tower. There's a name and logo on the side – Lowell.

Yep. That would be my ride. OMG.

“Jorie!”

I spin to see Tara and Ashley shouldering their way through the crowd, looking at the chopper as it lands.

Ashley makes a face. “Sorry, girl. I didn't know it was, you know...yours.”

“Notmine. Dad's.”

They exchange a look. They're familiar with my exasperated tone. Ever since my father became ridiculously wealthy through a series of hotel and tech deals, he's been flaunting it with fancy vehicles and other ostentatious displays like this one. It's been even worse since he started his own tech company last year. It's always about how things look...sorry, the “optics”...to the media, his associates, and whatever organizations he's trying to merge with these days.

Two weeks ago, he was ranting about one of his competitor's daughters being kidnapped a few years back. I vaguely recall it making the news, but not the details. Just that it was intense. And now Dad's acting weird, like he expects someone to come after me. Honestly, I think it's more that he didn't want me coming to this festival.

"Does your dad seriously expect you to leave right now?" Tara asks.

"Apparently. He sent some guy to pick me up. Like I'm just going to jump into a helicopter with?—"

"Jorie."

I spin toward the deep voice coming from right behind me. Then my heart feels like it's lost its place, stumbling through the beat like a drunk drummer.

My body flushes with warmth as I stare in disbelief. This guy is hot. More ripped than the singer of the last band we saw. Much more gorgeous than the breathtaking guitarist I was staring at four bands ago.

"I'm Dane." Dear God, he must be at least six foot three. His eyes are a dark, rich brown, glinting in the glow of the streetlights around us. His chiseled cheekbones and sharp jawline would photograph so well that I'm tempted to pull out my phone.

He steps closer, his gaze flitting around. "Your father sent me – he is concerned that people are after you in order to get to him. You posted photos just a few hours ago in that lilac t-shirt. Anyone could find your location, and you're far too easy to spot out here."

He reaches out to take my arm, but Ashley's hand darts out to stop him. "I don't think so, buddy."

He scowls, eyes still scanning the crowd as it flows past us. Then he leans forward to murmur in my ear, his warm breath sending prickles up my spine. “Your middle name is Clara. You don’t like it because you think it’s a little girl’s name. You still keep a purple stuffed bunny in your room. Your favorite sci-fi book is *The Rainbow Cadenza*, but you don’t tell anyone because there are dirty parts in it and you get embarrassed easily.”

There’s no doubt in my mind: he was sent by my parents. Apart from anything else, Mom is the only one who knows about the “questionable reads” shelf in my closet.

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“He’s legit. I guess I gotta go,” I tell my friends. After digging in my purse, I hand Tara my beer tickets and backstage pass for tonight’s headliner. “Please give these to anyone who can use them.”

Dane’s intensity softens as he looks at my friends. “Sorry about all this. Favor: could you two please keep posting on social media as if Jorie is with you for a bit longer?”

“For sure.” Tara squeezes my hand. “Stay safe, girl. Text us soon.”

“Yeah,” Ashley adds. “Let us know that you’re okay.”

“Sorry ladies, she’s going to be offline for several days. But I promise to keep her safe.” Dane’s tone is so firm that I automatically believe him.

His thick arm wraps around my waist and he hustles us to the office building a few blocks away. His shoulders are really tight. I wonder if he could use a massage. And more to the point, could I even control myself while I was doing it? I mean, I’m a professional, but...

We reach the office tower and Dane pulls a plastic shopping bag from his pocket. “Anything that could possibly be used to track you needs to go in the bag. Wallet, phone. Keys, too, if they have one of those tracker tags.”

My mind is spinning but I do as he asks. He pulls the SIM card out of my phone, wraps it in a thick cloth, then drops it in the bag as well. We walk into the building, and Dane heads straight for a young woman sitting on a bench in the lobby. She jumps to her feet, and I blink in surprise. She’s almost exactly my height and build,

with very similar hair. She's even wearing black jeans that look just like mine.

"You must be Katrina." Dane looks her over, then nods decisively. "Perfect. Let's go."

After the three of us step into an elevator, I ask, "Anyone want to tell me what's going on?"

"I need you to give Katrina that lilac top." His tone is a dark command that I would probably obey even if this wasn't some kind of...situation.

Katrina hands me a black t-shirt. "Quick. I'm going to pretend to be you and get into the helicopter."

Dane averts his eyes, indicating I'm to change right here. Everything seems so urgent that I simply do as I'm told, peeling off the shirt and handing it over, then pulling on the new one.

Wow. By the time Katrina pulls on my shirt and fluffs her hair, she definitely looks like me from a distance. The doors slide open, and Dane waves me to the back of the elevator.

He doesn't get out, simply motioning for Katrina to walk slowly toward the helicopter. There's another man there who helps her in. Dane scans the nearby rooftops, then, apparently satisfied, pushes the elevator button for the parking garage.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" I ask.

His eyes soften. "Not yet. But I promise you that you're safe with me, Jorie. I'll explain everything in a few minutes."

When the doors open, he swings an arm around me, then whispers in my ear. “Pretend you’re a little tipsy, and we’re a couple. Just go with it.”

A quick glance confirms that the parking garage is riddled with security cameras. I have no idea what we’re running from, but I’m too rattled from adrenaline to argue. I giggle behind my hand, then smack his chest. “Stop it. Just drive me home. We have to work in the morning!”

His arm tightens around me as he kisses the top of my hair. “That’s my responsible girl. Always thinking ahead.”

My body apparently doesn’t care that all this snuggling is fake. A warm glow spreads through me from being so close to him. With my face against the t-shirt stretched across his broad, firm chest, I breathe him in – woodsy and clean and oh-so-male.

There’s a split second once we pass the cameras that I swear his arm tightens around me, his lips drifting over the top of my hair. Like... Maybe he’s not just acting.

Dane walks toward the blandest car in the section – a plain dark gray sedan. I get in, and he pops the trunk. When he gets behind the wheel, the plastic bag is gone.

“I’ve got a signal blocking box in there.” He hands me gold-tinted sunglasses and a tacky yellow flowered headband. “A baseball cap is too cliché. Sweep your hair over your shoulder to the window side and pop that on. Then only look toward me as we drive, slouching down a bit. Got it?”

Hello? Keep my eyes on this magnificent man? “Got it.”

The streets are so crowded that it takes us a while to get out of the downtown area. It gives me plenty of time to study Dane’s gorgeous profile, strong frame, and notice the casual way he sits, as if he’s ready to drive for hours. Something about his thick,

hard muscles looking that relaxed is wildly sexy.

Once we turn onto the highway, Dane reaches over and pats my knee. “Okay, you can lose the hairband and glasses now.”

I sit up straighter, taking them off. “Can I ask where we’re going yet?”

“Saddleback.”

“Umm... I think I’m going to need more information than that.”

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When he chuckles, low and deep, the sound waves target me in very specific areas – namely, my lower belly and between my legs. It's as if the vibrations themselves are trying to unhinge my tentative grasp on this new reality.

His fingers drum on the steering wheel, then he shoots me a glance. Was he trying to be so seductive? Probably not. But it's hard to breathe when he's looking right at me.

“Your father told me to keep you safe, no matter what. My original instructions were to take you by helicopter to Georgia and then escort you to one of your mother's hotels, but airplanes can be tracked far too easily and there are thousands of cameras in big cities. So instead I'm taking you to a small town with no cameras that would never be on anyone's radar. You have no connections there. Anyone looking to find you will have zero leads.”

My lungs are not behaving. They feel tense as I try to draw air in.

“Breathe, Jorie. Nice and slow.” His palm is heavy on my knee as he squeezes gently. “I promise you, I'm going to keep you safe. We're going to have a fun road trip across a few states, then hang out in a cabin. Leave all the drama to your parents to deal with. We'll have some great food and soak up some podcasts and music on the drive, maybe go hiking when we get there. Sounds good?”

I try to speak, but nothing comes out. What could I possibly say?

“I realize it's not what you planned for this weekend, and I'm sorry about that. But does it sound like a plan you can handle with me?” he asks.

It feels like my world has been tipped upside down. I've lived in cities all my life. I don't know the ways of small towns. But they're a slice of the world that has always fascinated me. Real life, away from glitzy hotels and my mother's constant quest to make everything over the top glamorous.

Plus, road trips in the movies are always romantic. So much time spent together in close quarters. And now I have the chance to be very close with this stunning rugged man for who knows how long?

"Sure. I'm game."

2

DANE

Just drive, Dane. Stick to the plan.

Ignore the fact that the luscious angel-faced girl sitting beside me with the light brown eyes and perky tits is my perfect dream girl.

When I first saw her photos on social media, I was positive she was using filters or something to make her look like a model.

Nope. No filters. Dammit.

Even worse, she's sharp as a tack, and instantly followed directions to the letter. She also radiates an incredibly sweet energy – which makes me feel like a jackass for frightening her.

We drive in silence for about half an hour, Jorie apparently trying to calm herself down, and me trying not to look at her incredibly kissable lips.

Finally, Jorie asks, “So, did Dad hire you from some security company?”

She softens a little as I laugh. “No. That could easily be tracked. Apparently the people after you are tech folks.”

“So where did you come from?”

“My father and yours grew up in the same small town. They played baseball together. That’s why he trusts me, even though he has no direct connection to me whatsoever.”

Her soft eyes are glowing in the dim light. “Dad played baseball? In a small town?”

“Yeah. Most of his life is, as you know, absent from any of his online bios. But even if anyone did manage to find the town he grew up in, they wouldn’t find my dad.”

“Oh,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

“What? Oh! Nah, Ron is alive and well. He just hates technology. Doesn’t even have a cell phone,” Dane chuckles.

“Wow.”

“And don’t worry. We’ll pick up a burner phone for you tomorrow, so you can check maps and choose rest stops as we drive.”

She stares at the console in amazement. “You don’t have GPS?”

“Nope. But don’t worry, I know the way. You know how some people are super nostalgic for old American highway routes?”

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“Like Route 66?”

“Exactly. We’re taking Route 14. It was my dad’s favorite, and I’ve driven it many times from coast to coast.”

Jorie fiddles with the radio and finds a classic rock station. “This feels like good driving music, right?”

“Perfect.”

I check the next highway marker, then my watch. “It’s over an hour until our first stop. You can have a nap, if you like.”

“Thanks.” She turns slightly to the window, curling up a bit. The next time I glance over, her shoulder is shaking slightly. Crap.

I reach out and rest my palm on it, rubbing in slow circles. “I promise you’re safe, Jorie. We’re just going on a road trip for a few days, then we’ll get the all-clear, I’m positive. Honestly, your dad could well be overreacting.”

“But what if we don’t get the all-clear?” She looks back at me over her shoulder, her beautiful eyes huge and worried. “What if I really am being hunted by kidnappers? Those mega tech companies mean business.”

“Pfft. Let them hunt all they like. It’s a big country. They won’t find out you weren’t on that helicopter until morning. By then, we’ll be sipping coffee on our way to a fantastic lunch in a small town nobody’s ever heard of, where you have zero

connections. What are they going to do? Scan every single camera in every single town and city? By the time they get even the smallest glimpse of anyone that could possibly be you, we'll already be in a different place."

Jorie turns to face me, which unfortunately means I have to retract my hand. Her soft smile makes the center of my chest expand. "You're right. Thank you. I really appreciate this, Dane." Her eyes close, and she starts to drift off.

After a moment, I turn the music down slightly. Five minutes later, I lower it again.

By the time we get to Saddleback, Jorie is completely out. I put on a brown baseball cap and pull it low over my eyes, then park directly in front of the motel office so I can watch her while I check in.

Once I've moved the sedan closer to our room, I make my rough voice as soft as possible. "Jorie? Would you like to sleep in a bed instead of a car?"

Her eyes slowly flutter open, then she immediately jolts awake. She blinks rapidly but relaxes when she recognizes me, which warms my heart again. She looks past me to the parking sign out front. "Where are we?"

"A motel in Saddleback. We're going to get some sleep and then hit the road in the morning. I need you to wake up just enough to play the part of my giggly girlfriend for the security cameras. Okay?"

A slow yawn rolls through her, stretching the front of her black t-shirt and drawing far too much of my attention to her perfect rosebud lips. "Okay. I'm ready."

I walk around to open her door, taking her hand and giving her a twirl as soon as she's on her feet. Jorie collapses into fits of giggles, gripping my arm for support. "You're crazy!"

I grab her suitcase and my backpack from the trunk, then unlock our door. As soon as I pull her in and lock it again, I inspect the entire room. Too cheap for surveillance, and too bland for anything sketchy. Perfect.

I place her suitcase on the dresser next to the bed furthest from the door. “That’s your bed. I suggest hitting the hay as quickly as you can.”

“Thanks.” She looks around, frowning slightly at the faded scenic forest print on the wall. “Weird. I swear my dentist has that same picture.” Then she stares at her suitcase. “Wait. How did you...? That was in our hotel.”

I rummage through my backpack for some baggy shorts to sleep in. “Your friends posted a video tour of the room you were all staying in. The video began outside your suite door, so I got the number. I posed as a food delivery guy, then broke into your room to get your stuff. Not sure if I got everything, but at least you’ll have a few changes of clothes.”

She looks at me with an odd expression, then smiles sweetly. “Thank you. That was really thoughtful. Especially to grab my toothbrush and face wash.”

“Well, I had some time to kill while I was waiting for your dad’s helicopter and the lookalike that I hired from one of those task helper websites.”

Jorie shakes her head in disbelief, digging through her suitcase for pajamas. “She really did look like me from a distance.” Her head jerks up. “Wait. Was the lookalike your idea or Dad’s?”

“He said to keep you safe,” I say simply. I sit on the side of the bed, watching her eyes carefully. “His original plan, you could have been tracked. I’ll send him a message in the morning, letting him know you’re fine.”

Jorie's teeth sink into her bottom lip, sending my pulse racing. "He might freak out and insist on knowing exactly where I am. I'm sure in his eyes it's bad enough that I took off to a music festival without exactly asking first."

I'm pleased to notice that she smiles when I roll my eyes. "You're twenty-one. He needs to let you live. Also, it's his own business crap that got us into this mess. If he doesn't like my methods, he can, as my father used to say, go piss up a rope."

Jorie bursts into sparkling laughter that I feel deep in my soul. She's such a bright light in my otherwise bland life. I know this road trip is the safest thing for her right now, but I'm also genuinely excited for it. To get to know her. To spend quality time together.

She disappears into the bathroom for several minutes, then comes out wearing a pink t-shirt and baggy peach boy shorts. Her long, toned legs catch first my eye, then other body parts...as I imagine them wrapped around me...wondering how she would clutch me close, pricking me with her short nails if we...

Dammit, I have to stop thinking about things like that.

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She snuggles into bed, then whispers, “Thank you, Dane. I really do feel safe with you.”

“Good. How do you take your coffee?”

“Just a bit of cream. Or black...whatever...”

She’s already drifting off. My hand lurches, wanting to brush back her hair. Wanting to tuck the blankets around her tighter. Wanting to share her bed so I could keep her warm and safe in my arms all night.

I’m going to protect this precious angel. Not just from the men who might be chasing her: I get the sense that I need to put some serious space between Jorie and her father so she can take a close look at her life and decide what she wants to be.

I saw the flicker of excitement in her eyes when I mentioned a road trip. She wants to see more of the world, I can tell.

Well, I’m going to show her everything I can.

3

JORIE

The smell of coffee pulls me awake slowly. I sit up, blinking as I look around the room. Everything is beige. The cheap green nature print...seriously, I know I’ve seen it in my dentist’s waiting room too...isn’t really perking the place up very much.

I can hear the shower running in the bathroom. The memory of Dane looking so sexy while driving floods me with a fresh rush of desire. I've admired hot men before, but this feels...different. Like there's already some kind of connection growing between us. We're going to be in very close quarters for a few days – would pretending to be a couple perhaps strengthen that connection? Either way, it's going to be an interesting thrill.

A slow tumble of dream images washes over me: Dane tucking me under his arm and hurrying me down the street. His eyes meeting mine as he slowly leans in for a kiss. His fingers through mine as he playfully tugs me toward the bed.

Geez. It's probably bad to develop a huge crush on your bodyguard.

I quickly finger-comb my hair and take a few sips of coffee. Then I jump up, straighten the bed, and open my suitcase flat across it. Do I even have anything with me that is road trip-appropriate?

Just as I'm digging through everything, Dane comes out wearing nothing but a pair of faded blue jeans.

Oh. My.

My throat closes up, my gaze trailing around his chest, down to his chiseled abs and the lines over his hips that dip lower... I jerk when he catches me staring. A slight smirk plays across his lips, then he gives his head a shake, still toweling his hair dry.

"From the looks of your photos, you and your friends wear a lot of designer stuff." He flops on his messy bed. "Are those black boots you were wearing yesterday comfortable?"

"Yes. That's why I always wear them to concerts."

“Good. Let’s take a look at the rest.”

We pull out one pair of black jeans and a sundress that would work. The rest is all casually expensive.

“You’d be beautiful no matter what you were wearing,” he says matter-of-factly. “But we’re driving across the country. You need to blend in a bit better.”

My cheeks flush, both from his compliment and my ostentatious wardrobe. “I’m so sorry. Mom buys me a ton of clothes. She hates for me to be seen in public wearing anything that isn’t, as she puts it, elevated.”

“No problem. I understand weird parents.”

Dane stares at me, and for a second, I think he’s ogling my breasts – which, strangely, I don’t mind. Then he measures my t-shirt from seam to seam across the shoulders using his arm as a ruler. He repeats the motion across the bottom, then vertically. Lastly, he measures the length of my legs by noting where my waist lands on his lower hip.

“What’s your shoe size?”

“Seven.”

“Got it. Shower, pack, and be ready to go in half an hour.”

“Sure.”

“Do not open that door for anyone except me, not even if they say they’re a cop.”

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“Okay...”

After he leaves, the doorknob rattles when he double checks that it’s locked. I keep forgetting that I’m in danger.

As instructed, I’m ready to go when he returns. Dane empties a large plastic bag across my bed: four t-shirts, in blue, green, a pink floral pattern, and a marigold and black swirly sunshine-y print. There’s also three pairs of soft yoga pants, one each in black, gray, and blue, some cute teal sneakers, and a pair of socks covered in cartoon pizza slices.

“I couldn’t resist,” he chuckles.

It feels so easy to laugh with him. “Thank you. I really appreciate this.”

Dane turns his back, and I replace my silky designer top with the bright sunshine t-shirt. Then I roughly fold the new clothes and stuff them haphazardly in my suitcase. He surveys the room to be sure we haven’t forgotten anything, then scoops up my bag like it weighs nothing.

Shortly after we’re back on the highway, I see a sign for Route 14. “We were in one place for a while, so we’ll drive for about half an hour, then stop for breakfast,” he says. “Is that okay?”

“Sure. Where are we staying tonight?”

“Heartstone, Missouri.”

Obviously, I've never heard of it, but it sounds rather romantic – just as it feels romantic that Dane is caring for me so sweetly. Although I guess that's his job.

“What do you do for a living, anyway?” I ask. “When you're not bodyguarding, I mean.”

He flashes a cheeky grin that speeds up my pulse. “Oh, a little of this and a little of that.” When I raise an eyebrow, he chuckles deeply, then shrugs. “Sorry. Just wanted to sound mysteriousthere for a sec. I work for several different contractors in the area.”

“Like, building houses and stuff?”

“The opposite, actually. I tear out old kitchens, bathrooms, patios, whatever. Then I haul out the rubble to make the space clear for the renovation team. I've been a club bouncer and had more than my share of unofficial bodyguard jobs, but demolition is my main gig.”

Well, that certainly explains the shoulders. The thought of Dane's huge hard body all sweaty and dusty sends an unexpected shiver down my spine. “Is that like...your dream job?”

He turns off the highway and drives toward an old fifties-style diner just up the road. “Hmm. I like working for myself. The freedom to take a few weeks off in the height of summer, or a break whenever I need it. Take a road trip with my dad, or some old friends now and then.”

“Must be nice.” My low grumble slips out, surprising me.

“Really? You wanna swing a sledgehammer?”

“No.” I shake my head sadly. “The freedom to do whatever you want, though...”

Dane parks the car, then comes around to open my door, keeping hold of my hand as we walk inside. “Yeah, I get the impression that your folks are kind of...”

“Helicopter parents, even at my age? Yeah. Dad wants me to relocate – well, you saw what he did. Mom wants me to wear something? She just puts it in my room and harps at me until I do.” I slip into a vinyl booth with a sigh. “I guess I really don’t have a backbone.”

The conversation switches to movies that have scenes set in diners. I love how we talk about everything under the sun while devouring incredible breakfast sandwiches on the thickest seven-grain toast I’ve ever seen.

We’re skimming the menu again after polishing off our sandwiches, wondering if we have enough room to split a piece of pie, when I point to the list of side dishes. “Whataregrits, anyway? I’ve never been in this part of the country before.”

“You’ve never had grits?!” We turn to see our perky blonde waitress gaping at us. Her name tag reads ‘Patty’, and I get the impression she’s worked here for decades.

“Oh honey, you haven’t tried ’em until you’ve had ’em here. Hold on.” She dashes back to the kitchen, returning with a small side dish. “It’s just corn. I’ve already seasoned ’em with butter and pepper. Trust me.”

It frankly looks like mush, but she seems so excited that I dig in, taking a big spoonful. Then I nod slowly. “Hmm...okay...it’s kind of like...porridge. But brighter.” I smile up at Patty. “Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“Thank you. We’ll also split a piece of the apple caramel pie,” Dane adds.

Once she's gone he leans forward, a wide grin on his handsome face. "It's not just that you dug into those with gusto. You were fully prepared to enjoy them. Your default state is happy and agreeable." He grins. "Both of which are excellent qualities in a road tripper. Good job."

I feel strangely proud of myself. Like I've scored a point with him.

In a place like this, it's no surprise that the pie is stellar. We eat in appreciative silence for a few minutes, smiling and enjoying the moment. Then Dane reaches out a hand to me. A quick glance around confirms that he's not doing this for any cameras, because there aren't any. Oh boy. My fingers feel so good in his huge, warm hand.

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“What’s your dream, Jorie? A career, or a calling?”

“You’re going to laugh.”

His smoldering dark eyes lock on mine. “Unless it’s stand-up comedy or clown school, I promise I won’t.”

“I’d like to be a masseuse.” Dane simply nods, clearly expecting me to continue. “For injuries, there’s a physical therapist. If people want to pamper themselves, there are fancy spas. But what about the average person who works on a computer all day, and just needs to be stretched back into line once in a while?”

“Huh.” Dane nods slowly.

“I wish massages were as normal and accepted as haircuts,” I shrug. “I’d love to be the bright point in a regular person’s day. Take the knots out of their shoulders, help them relax. A super mellow soundtrack and a lavender candle. Erase some of the physical damage of their hard work. You know what I mean?”

His fingers tighten around mine, and our knees brush under the table. “You are...nothing like I expected,” he finally says quietly.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Good. Very good.” He releases my hand to sip his coffee. “Honestly? I expected a spoiled brat who would kick up a fuss because her plans were being ruined. A princess who wouldn’t wear anything but high heels and would take three hours to do

her makeup.”

I almost choke on my coffee. “Oh! You’ve met my mother.”

He laughs, his gaze wandering all over my body before settling back on my eyes. “But here you are, wearing that weirdly flattering t-shirt, happy to go with the flow...”

His fingers leave his coffee mug again to trail along my wrist, his thumb caressing my pulse point gently. “And now you appear to have extremely realistic life goals? I have to say, Jorie, you’ve impressed me.”

My stomach does a slow backflip. He’s not looking at me like his father’s friend’s daughter that he has to babysit for over the next several days.

He’s looking at me as if he feels this strange, sensual connection as well.

And again, I say: Ohhh. Myyy.

4

DANE

I couldn’t tell you when I’ve had a better breakfast. I think it’s mainly the company. Once we get chatting about music, movies, and – strangely – the best museum exhibits we’ve ever seen, the conversation simply flows.

Jorie has a unique perspective on many things, and her desire to learn is amazing. I wondered at first if the fact that she’s twenty-one and I’m thirty-three would be a problem, but she’s very well-read and well-educated. Grounded. She just happened to be born into an odd family. I know something about that myself.

We start driving west. About twenty minutes later she asks, “How far is Heartstone?”

“If I floored it and didn’t take breaks, just under nine hours. But we’re going to take our time and enjoy the day.”

She’s staring at me like I’m nuts. “Are you seriously okay driving that long?”

I chuckle. “Of course! I’m from a road trip family. We would always just pick somewhere bizarre and make a day of the trip itself. That’s the secret – you’re not driving to reach your destination as quickly as possible. The drive itself is the fun part.”

“Hmm.” She hesitates. “My father always has a driver, a private jet?—”

“A helicopter standing by?”

She laughs. “Well...yeah. He’s ridiculous.” Her face turns serious. “And it’s all for show. I swear, for every three dollars he makes, one is spent just demonstrating to everyone how rich he is.” I glance over as she shudders. “It’s so tacky it gives me the creeps.”

I ease up on the gas, giving a big rig more space to merge smoothly. “Yeah, I’ve read about your dad. Crazy tech this, companies merging and splitting and share prices that. Whatever. When it comes down to it, he must be up to something that’s a little off if assholes are threatening his family. And he’s so focused on his job that he needs to hire someone else to protect his daughter? That...doesn’t feel right.”

Wow. I look over, expecting to see Jorie wide-eyed and horrified. Instead, she’s laughing so hard she’s almost crying.

“I know I’m supposed to defend him,” she sputters, “but he’s beyond useless in the

real world. He doesn't even know how to put simple bookshelves together. His idea of helping was carrying the pieces up the stairs, then bringing me coffee and staying out of my way."

My hand darts out to squeeze hers. "I like that you're so practical."

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By the time we reach the state line, it's official: I'm already falling for this incredible girl. So I would never want to upset her, but it's also time to get down to business.

"Jorie, I hate to say this, but it's time to go over the rules, since we'll be passing through some larger towns." I turn off the highway, driving toward a small restaurant I've been to a dozen times.

"Let me guess." She smiles softly. "Always let you know where I am, avoid cameras, don't even think about going into the trunk for my phone, and try to blend in?"

"That's a great start, yes." I pull into the restaurant parking lot, turn off the car, then slide off my seatbelt so I can face her. "I don't want to say this because it's going to sound... asshole-y. But on the one in a million chance something does happen, and I bark a command at you, you need to obey immediately, okay?"

For the first time, there's a touch of real fear in her eyes. I hate it. "What kind of command?"

"Like...dive under a table. Lock yourself in a closet. Jump into the back seat and keep your head down."

I take her hand, threading our fingers together. "Honestly, I think that your father is being overdramatic. I doubt anyone is coming after you with any kind of seriousness or skill. But as your bodyguard, I have to be thorough."

She stares down at our entwined fingers. "My friend Alyssa was kidnapped last year. Her dad was into some really shady stuff, and crossed the wrong people."

My heart sinks. “Was she okay?”

Jorie’s bottom lip begins to wobble. I leap out of the car, coming around to her side to pull her out and into my arms. “Tell me what happened,” I murmur into her ear, pressing her entire body against mine. I need her to know I’m solid. Dedicated. A shield between her and any harm.

“Physically, she was all right. Just a couple of bruises on her wrists from the handcuffs they put her in. But she just...” A shiver runs through her. “It was like the light went out of her for a long time.”

“Where did they nab her?”

Her chin lifts, eyes meeting mine. “At college. Her parents told her to stay home that day but she went anyway, because there was a guy she liked and she was positive he was going to ask her out after class.”

“So she was precisely where they expected her to be.” I nod toward the restaurant. Through the huge glass window, I can see various farmers and townspeople. “Do you think any of these people care who you are? Or know who your father is?”

“No. You’re right.”

“Places like this might have a single security camera by the back door. But they don’t have a live feed that goes anywhere.” The heel of my palm gently rubs up and down her spine slowly. “You’re always photographed in beautiful hotels and at your friends’ lavish homes. If anyone is after you, that’s where they’re looking.”

“Thank you.”

“The only trouble is people taking photos constantly for social media. We just need to

avoid anyone like that in case we get in the background. If we do see someone, we have to act like a couple. It's a basic human instinct to give people privacy if they're being..."

There's a flash of realization in her eyes, followed by an adorable smirk. "Close?"

"Yes." My hand continues moving along her back, as the other drifts around to caress her hip gently. "So... If I have to do something like this, will you forgive me?"

She nods, her breath hitching. "If a camera is really nearby, how do we block our faces?"

A flash of heat runs through me. I don't think she's being coy.

"Well, the fastest way to block a woman's face is with your own." My hand darts up to brush her hair away, my thumb gently skimming along her cheekbone. My voice is a breathy whisper. "Should I show you right now...for practice?"

She's already nodding, stretching up toward me. As our lips meet, I'm flooded with an overwhelming sense of...lust, ofcourse. Just holding her like this is making me hard as a rock. But there's something else there that's deeply wholesome. Like coming home after a long trip.

The kiss deepens, her fingers gripping the shoulders of my t-shirt, her soft lips moving against mine tentatively. A deep shudder runs through me. It's obvious this is Jorie's first full body kiss. Which means...

No. I can't even think about that.

If I'm going to be this gorgeous, sexy woman's bodyguard, then I need to guard her completely – even from myself.

But how can I possibly resist her?

5

JORIE

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What an amazing day.

Dane was right – the drive was fantastic once I thought of it as the adventure itself.

We stopped at roadside diners for a couple of meals, and at several rest stops for coffee or snacks. There were two moments where Dane pulled me into his arms for a quick kiss before hustling me around a corner, or into the car.

Both kisses were fast and hot, and I felt them all the way down to my toes, but they weren't quite like the first one. That, I felt all the way down to my soul.

What is this strange connection I feel with him? It's way more than the smoking protector vibe he has going on, although that's part of it. He's a shining example of what I've always dreamed of.

Maybe I'm imagining it, but it feels...like Dane actually wants me. I'm not an obligation, but something special. Mind you, my life has been turned upside down, so there's a good chance I'm mistaken.

Staring out the window into the darkness, I hope I'm not reading more into the situation than is really there. No matter what happens, I'm going to make the most of this bizarre situation and intense connection.

"Hey," Dane says softly, turning off the highway. "You're a million miles away. Which is fine, but we're almost there."

I see the sign welcoming us to Heartstone. It seems like a sweet small town, like the

dozens of others we've passed today. "Have you been here before?"

"Yeah, several times. Sometimes to sleep, mostly to eat." The car slows, and he turns to me. "I know we just had dinner an hour and a half ago, but road trips make some people hungry. Would you like another snack before bed?"

"I'm stuffed, thank you."

"Okay. Just sleep, then."

He frowns as we drive up to a small inn, then parks in one of the few empty spaces right up front. "Weird. It's never this busy here."

His hand brushes my knee as he reaches into the glove compartment to pull out a cheap burner phone. Even that accidental touch sends a thrill through me. The closer we get, the more electrified I feel. It makes it even easier to wish this were a real road trip and we were a real couple without all of the stress, not total strangers.

"Let me guess, you didn't make a reservation, because that's trackable," I say.

"Exactly." He peers at the screen. "Hmm... Apparently, it's the annual Heartstone Blueberry Festival. The other decent hotel is hosting the judges. This must be overspill. One sec. I'll be back."

I love that he keeps watching me through the front window as he checks in. Having such a huge guy hovering over me really does make me feel completely safe.

Dane returns, then grabs the luggage before we go into a small but clean room. This time it's not the generic nature print that catches my eye. It's the solitary queen-size bed.

“This is the last room,” he explains apologetically. “I could sleep on the floor?—”

“No way,” I say firmly. “You just drove all day. You need a good night’s sleep. I won’t take up much room, I promise.”

His expression is interesting. I could swear he’s trying very hard not to allow a grin to overtake his slight smile. “Whatever you like.”

Half an hour later we’re settled in, and I slip into bed beside Dane. He’s sitting up, checking his cheap phone. “The weather should be great tomorrow.”

His grin sends prickles of warmth through me. Or is it just the heat from being so close to his naked chest, our bare legs nearly touching?

Dane sets the phone aside, then rolls his shoulders back a few times. “Damn. I’m used to moving all day when I’m working demo. Sitting still too much feels weird.”

“Want me to loosen up your neck?”

A soft smile plays across his lips. “Sure. That would be great, thanks.”

He turns his back to me, and I swallow hard, trying to ignore the huge expanse of muscled flesh in front of me. This shouldn’t feel so personal, I think as I turn, sitting cross-legged behind him.

My hands drag slowly along his shoulder blades, kneading his tight muscles. Then I work on each section of his back, listening carefully to his breathing so I know exactly whenever I hit a tight spot.

Once everything feels looser and his shoulders look to have dropped an inch, I drag my thumbs up the back of his neck on either side of his spine. His deep groan sounds

like more than atight spot releasing. It feels like we're getting very comfortable together.

A shiver chases up my spine. If I work my hands all over him, what will he?—

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“Yeah, right there,” Dane groans as I dig into the point where his neck meets the shoulder. “Damn, girl, you’re really good at this.”

“Thanks. I was very popular in the library during exam week.”

He chuckles. “I bet you were. I hope you charged top dollar.”

“Ha – no. People did bring me coffee and muffins, though.”

“Well, breakfast is on me tomorrow, that’s a guarantee.”

My hands stop moving for a split second, and he notices. “Is that okay?”

“Oh, sure.” I make fists, then push them slowly upward in slow, twisting motions. “I guess it just hit me again that you’re my bodyguard. As in, being paid to keep me from would-be criminals.”

Dane spins, catching my wrists and meeting my eyes. “Gorgeous, I would gladly keep you safe without the money. If your dad had simply called in a favor from my father, I wouldn’t have hesitated. But now...”

His palm lifts, cupping my cheek. “I... I don’t know what I’m supposed to say. You know this is more now. Right?”

My breath stops. The room around us is silent. Can he hear my heart racing? “More?” I finally manage to whisper.

“Yeah. More.” He tips my chin up with his finger. “I know we’ve been thrown together into a strange situation. You’re out here all alone with me, and I would never want you to feel trapped. But Jorie...” He lifts my hand, kissing the back of it gently. “Those kisses were not fake. This reaction we’re having to each other is not just pretend... Is it?”

It feels like my chest is blushing. “No. It’s not.”

“I guess the next question is, what do you want to do about it?”

I love that he’s leaving the ball entirely in my court, making sure I’m comfortable.

Except right now, I’m not. I’m the opposite. My throat is flushed and my pulse races as we face each other on the bed we’re going to be sleeping in together tonight. I’ve never felt so aroused. Every inch of my skin is dying to find out if he’s going to touch me. If he’s going to wrap those thick arms around me all night.

“Breathe, gorgeous,” he murmurs. “I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to make you so flustered.”

“I’m fine. Just... WhatdoI want? I don’t even know.”

“That’s okay. As long as I know that light in your eyes isn’t just for show, we’re all good.” Dane leans slightly closer. “How would you feel about a good night kiss?”

Words fail me. I simply nod and lean in. Our lips meet in a brief, flirtatious kiss. Then his arm stretches around me, pulling me in. I’m falling, sinking into him as the kiss takes on a life of its own. I move on instinct, my hands snaking around the back of his neck to pull him against me, my nipples tight through my thin shirt as they brush against his firm chest.

He slides us down, tucking us into bed while still kissing me. Our bodies move so easily, anticipating every movement, arms and legs working together to get our bodies settled until I'm nestled comfortably in his arms, my calf draped over his.

His palm drifts lazily around my shoulder, my arm, then comes to rest on my hip. Thick fingers squeeze for a second, then he chuckles while murmuring, "Mmm, this peachy little ass," against my lips. "Am I allowed to admire peaches during the blueberry festival? Your call."

My mouth opens wider as I laugh, and he takes full advantage, his tongue delving deeper until we're kissing feverishly. My hands grip the back of his hair. His rough fingers slip under my shirt to caress my back. His knee nudges my thighs apart.

The ripple of heat flowing through me becomes a deep wave, as his rough fingertips graze the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. Maybe he feels the way I shudder, because he breaks off our kiss. "Don't be nervous, Jorie. I just want to cuddle. That's all."

"I'm not nervous."

His eyebrows lift, then he breathes along my neck, just under my ear. "I felt you shiver, gorgeous. I need you to know I'm here to guard this sexy body. If that includes keeping my hands to myself, I promise I will."

Swallowing a moan, I can hardly breathe as his fingers slide higher, his lips kissing a trail along my collarbone.

"Should I stop?"

"No." The word bursts out more emphatically than I'd planned, leaving Dane chuckling.

“Good. Because I’ve been dying to touch you from the moment I set eyes on you, my gorgeous little angel.”

I love that he’s being both clear and sweet. That he can probably tell I’m completely inexperienced, but is polite enough to not mention it.

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“I think I’ll give you...hmm...three goodnight kisses, then we should go to sleep.”

I nod in agreement, and he turns off the light on the nightstand. There’s still a slight glow coming through a crack between the curtains, so I can still faintly make out his face.

“May I put those three kisses anywhere I want?”

“Yeah...” Even that single word is breathy.

He pulls my shirt down, then kisses the top of my breast, lazily moving his lips back and forth in a slow, meandering line, then up to my collarbone, finding a nook under my ear that makes me twitch. He already seems to know everywhere I’m sensitive. My body is completely under his control, which feels utterly perfect. Like I’ve been waiting for this moment for years.

“That was one.”

My god. If he’s counting that as a single kiss....

My hand reaches out to stroke his hair, but he’s already slid down the bed, taking the blankets with him. He pushes my shorts up my right thigh, then spreads my legs open. As I try not to gasp, he trails his finger around in a little circle. He’s barely three inches from my?—

“Oh!” I gasp, as his lips make contact with my sensitive inner thigh. He’s not just kissing, he’s sucking hard enough to leave a mark. I can scarcely breathe. Scarcely

think. Scarcely believe this is actually happening.

His lips slowly circle the love bite, sending chills and sparks through every pulse point.

I want to have sex with this man.

I don't care that I've barely known him for twenty-nine hours. I don't care that this is a strange situation. I really don't care that he's older. Sensing how much Dane wants me is kicking my desire out of dormancy and into overdrive, making me want to explore everything with him.

"That's two."

I want Dane to take me. To crawl on top of me and plunge deep inside. To rip my shorts off and... I moan with pleasure as he slides up, capturing my lips with his.

The kiss is pure fire – his arm underneath me, cradling my shoulders and the back of my head as our bodies writhe together, fighting for every single point of contact possible as we shift and move against each other. My right hand moves slowly down his naked chest, his side, then tentatively along the fabric of his boxers. At first I just caress his hip, then my hand falls lower, inching toward the hard thickness rubbing against my peach shorts.

My gasp makes him chuckle, and his hand slips up my shirt, thumb drifting gently against my peaked nipple. The kiss continues, both of us breathing roughly, touching and shifting, trying to stimulate the other as much as we can. My hand inches slightly lower, my fingertips barely brushing against the outline of his hard shaft.

He grabs my wrist, pulling it away and setting my hand firmly on his lower back. "That's three, baby." His forehead rests on mine, breathing hard, as if trying to pull

himself together.

After a moment, he lies down beside me, cuddling me in his arms and tucking the blankets around us. “Thanks, gorgeous. I wanted to give you a very thorough kiss. Something you’ll think about all night.”

“That’s guaranteed, yeah.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“You expect me to sleep after that?” I sputter.

“No,” he murmurs. “I expect you to decide where you want me to kiss you tomorrow night. I might need a list. I can be very forgetful when I’m distracted.”

I don’t know how he makes me laugh so hard while at the same time thrilling me to the core with his sensual teasing.

It takes a while, but eventually I drift off into a swirl of dreams...all of them about the amazing man I’m in bed with.

6

DANE

What the hell have I done?

And why am I powerless to stop myself from doing it again?

She’s intoxicating.

If Jorie wasn't interested in me, I would have no problem keeping a solid, professional line between us. Holding her hand while going into restaurants, and nothing more. Yet the way she looked at me... reached for me... cuddled against me all night long as if she never wanted to let go...

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She's mine. I feel it in my bones.

My father might freak out when he discovers I'm falling for his old friend's daughter. Not to mention what her dad is going to think. But I don't care.

My fingers tighten on the steering wheel as I glance to my right. Jorie is cheerfully setting up the burner phone I bought her so she can pick coffee shops and restaurants along the way. I wonder if she's as wound up as I am by those amazing good night kisses last night.

"Where are we headed today?" she asks.

"Basic Plaines, Kansas."

Jorie bursts out laughing. "Mom is horrified by the thought of anything basic. Nobody would ever look for me there."

I chuckle with her, then look over when she grows quiet. "What is it?"

She sighs. "Did Dad give any details about who might be after me?"

Dammit. I need to phrase this carefully. I don't want to frighten her.

"I got the information from my father, after his phone call with your dad. Basically, a certain deal is not going well. The last time the other corporation had someone messing with them, they –allegedly –kidnapped the daughter of the CEO to make him play ball."

I reach out to squeeze her knee. “But that was a week into negotiations. Your Dad got you off the grid immediately.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes roll. “Except he wanted me to go to a hotel that everyone knows Mom loves. It would be an obvious place to look for me.” This time her sigh has a slight growl. “Is it disrespectful to think your parents might not be very bright?”

“Hey, my lips are sealed. Everyone thinks my Dad is an idiot because he’s so anti-technology. I dare anyone to grill him on classic books, state history, or plumbing and electrical knowledge, though. He’s got a mind like a steel trap.”

“A steel trap that stays offline.”

“Exactly.”

The next time I glance over, Jorie is staring down at her hands. “Your father would probably think I’m a total flake. Not that I’ll ever meet him or anything, just...you know.”

I hate how uncomfortable she looks. “Gorgeous, it’s fine that you use social media. Please don’t think I’m anti-technology because my dad is. I’m just extremely careful with it in situations like this.”

When I reach for her hand, she grips mine tightly. “I keep thinking you’ll see me as...I don’t know. Some vain idiot who posted too many photos and put herself in danger as a result.”

“I just want you to be yourself, Jorie.” I squeeze her fingers again, then pat her knee as I place my hand back on the wheel. “Sorry. Big curve at the bottom of this hill. How about you choose a spot for breakfast?”

“Sure.”

One thing I’m discovering I really like about Jorie is the way she is so completely open to trying new things. Honestly, the girl is ready for anything.

She selects Kathy’s Diner, a place I’ve been to a few times which always makes me feel like I’ve time traveled thanks to the waitresses’ pink outfits and white aprons. It’s been around forever and is always busy enough that we won’t be noticeable.

We play up the couple angle when we arrive, me keeping my arm around her and nuzzling her neck as we find a booth near the back.

Jorie grins as she takes it all in. “I love seeing more of the world than an overly air conditioned five-star hotel.” Her gaze shifts to the servers dashing around behind the counter. “There are some hard-working women here who definitely need a massage.”

A woman bounces over, coffee pot in hand. “Mornin’, darlin’,” she says to Jorie, filling her cup. “How’s life treating you, sugar?” she asks me as she pours mine.

“Right now, everything is amazing,” I smile back.

“What brings you two to Heartstone today?” she asks.

“We’re just passing through,” I reply easily.

“Oh! Well if you’re on a road trip, you’ll want the Hearty Breakfast for Two. It’s a bit of everything. Fuel you right up.”

“I’m feeling hearty,” Jorie laughs, handing her back the menu. “Let’s do it.”

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Once we're alone, she leans in. "If Mom were here, she'd be asking about the oil content of everything, and if it was organic. My friends would be choosing based on what would photograph the best. Maybe I'm as basic as the plains we're headed to, but I just want a huge plate of home food."

"Good. Prepare to be dazzled."

Jorie's eyes widen at the lightning-quick speed at which the onslaught of incredible breakfast food arrives, taking up the entire table. As soon as the scent of sausages hits us, we dig right in.

Once I get the check, I sling an arm around Jorie, pulling her closer to me. "Well, you've been through a southern-ish enough place that you've tried grits. Today you've survived Kathy's infamous Hearty Breakfast for Two. How do you feel?"

Her soft brown eyes have that certain glow that I'm quickly becoming addicted to. "Amazing. And perfectly safe."

"Good."

Jorie suddenly bubbles with laughter. "I feel like I should be freaking out. Instead, I'm having the best time." Her expression changes when my posture stiffens. "What's wrong?"

My hand rubs her shoulder as two police officers walk into the restaurant. "Remember what I said about people ignoring couples who were being intimate?"

She nods and tucks her head into my shoulder. I wait until the officers settle into the booth closest to the door, then set money on the table. “I sincerely doubt your father has sent out a search warrant for you, since he knows you’re with me,” I murmur softly. “And those tech guys are probably still confused about how you disappeared. Still, we’re going to breeze out of here casually?—”

Yep. Those cops are definitely staring at us.

Jorie’s hand lands on my chest. “Definitely, before I fall into a food coma.”

Taking her hand, I chuckle as we stand and walk slowly toward the door. “...Yes, honey, because if you’re asleep, that means I get to pick the music all the way to your sister’s farm.”

She smirks, giving me a casual elbow as we pass the two uniforms. “No way. You have terrible taste.”

“Hey.”

Oh, shit.

My arm locks tightly around Jorie’s waist as we turn toward the officers with completely bland expressions. “Yes, officer?” I ask politely.

He points at Jorie, who has stiffened from head to toe. “Aren’t you the lead singer of Orange Lights Downtown?”

A shudder runs through her, then her hand flutters to her throat. “You think I look like Celeste Gilby? Oh my goodness – thank you! I wish!”

The second officer elbows the first. “Told you it wasn’t her.”

The first one shrugs. “Hey, if she had been, and I didn’t get an autograph for my daughter, I’d be in the doghouse forever.”

I lift my hand from Jorie’s waist in a half wave. “Have a good afternoon, officers.”

I can still feel the tension in Jorie’s body. She wants to bolt. “Relax,” I murmur as we saunter to the car. Once we’re safely in the car and heading for the highway, I flash her a grin. “Good job. I have to say, you’re an expert at staying mellow.”

Her eyes roll dramatically. “I’ve had to attend so many of Mom’s cocktail parties and Dad’s work functions that I just play the part of whatever people are expecting. Usually, my formula involves being sweet and friendly, then leaving as quickly as humanly possible.”

“You were amazing. Ready to behold the glory of Basic Plaines?”

She laughs, then reaches over to pat my arm. “I really appreciate how calm you always stay, Dane. If anyone else were my bodyguard, I would probably be having a series of panic attacks right now.”

While driving, I occasionally glance over to Jorie’s beautiful profile. How did I get so lucky? I’ve done a few bodyguard and security gigs before, but it was always for one night, and never very interesting. Certainly never with a breathtaking girl who makes me conjure up ideas like pure lust. Obsession. Forever.

With a long straight stretch of road ahead of us, and almost no traffic, I take my foot off the gas and reach out to caress her cheek with my thumb. “Honestly, I don’t know what kind of creeps your father deals with, but this isn’t just a favor from my dad anymore. You know that, right?”

She nods thoughtfully. “I think so.”

“Not good enough. I need you to know it through and through, gorgeous. I’m not letting anything happen to you. I’m taking you to a top-secret location. We can stay there as long as you like. Nobody in your family bossing you around. Just us. Good food, long walks in the forest...”

Her eyes light up. “For how long?”

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“For as long as you like.”

7

JORIE

Wow. I would have thought Dane would be eager to get back to his life. Who knows how much money he’s losing by not working. And he probably has friends, obligations, who knows what else. A real life.

He’s dropped all of that. For me.

A huge part of my mind is tied up in knots, wondering what will happen between us. Could this actually turn into a proper relationship? Logic would say that this is just a fling of convenience.

Still, a girl could do alotworse for her first romantic experience.

About an hour away from Basic Plaines, we switch so that I drive while Dane chooses a hotel. “There’s room at a place that looks nice and boring.” He studies the screen of his burner phone. “The last room is super tiny, though. Is that okay?”

My heart turns cartwheels to think we’ll be sharing a bed again.

“Of course. No problem.”

The hotel is both basic and plain, just like the town name suggests. The room is

definitely small: we practically trip over each other several times while getting ready to sleep.

This time when we slip into bed, Dane turns the light off right away. “I think I like feeling around for you in the dark,” he murmurs, as his palm slides from my cheek to caress my breast through my thin shirt. The security lights outside provide just enough of a glow to show his eyes dancing. “May I have three goodnight kisses again?”

“Yes.” Does he know yet I’m never going to say no to him?

My pulse is supercharged, knowing this incredible man is going to be my first. There’s no way this trip is going to end without that happening. Maybe that’s another thing that happens on road trips: inhibitions are lowered. Unfamiliar territory is explored.

I gasp as Dane slips off my shirt and buries his face in my cleavage. His breath is warm against my sensitive skin, making me tingle. His lips glide slowly, circling and exploring. His hands do the same, first across the underside of my breasts, then down my stomach to play with the edge of my shorts.

“I need to touch you while I kiss you. Say yes?”

A moan sticks in my throat before I can respond. “Yes.”

A buzz of electricity flows between us as his right hand slips inside my shorts and straight into my panties. My thighs automatically splay open, giving him access to everything he wants to touch.

My pulse is clamoring in my veins, even though he’s being so gentle. I gasp as his fingertips slowly weave their way over every inch of my pussy, leaving me twitching.

Dane's lips circle my nipple as the blunt, thick end of his finger drags slowly around my entrance, then up, bringing moisture with it to circle my clit. His shoulder tenses against my palm. "So wet for me," he groans, dipping in again before brushing around and across my button.

I've never felt so alive. My heartbeat hammers in my ears, my mouth falling open with a broken whine as my entire body begins to twitch.

"That's it, gorgeous." He switches to the other side, dragging his teeth across my nipple, then sucking it between his lips. It's not exactly pain, more a prickly sensation as he nibbles at my skin.

The palm of his hand rests against my pubic bone as he plays with me, making me realize how perfectly our bodies fit together. Another moan escapes me as I try to roll my hips toward him, trying to tell him without words that I want more. Want him.

"Easy, baby. Come for me. Let me feel you."

His chin lifts, and a deep shudder runs through me from the dark look in his eyes. It's not just lust, although there's plenty of that. It's a kind of possessiveness...connection...as if just touching me is fulfilling some deep-seated fantasy for him.

Every moment rolls on forever as I struggle to breathe evenly. My fingers spear the back of his hair as I pull his lips to mine. The pressure in my lower belly grows, burns, and tension ripples through my inner thighs.

"That's it," he growls against my mouth. "Give it to me, baby."

My broken cry is barely muffled by our kiss as my climax tears through me, shaking me, leaving me seeing orange clouds and his dark eyes, burning with intensity. It

shakes me for what feels like a full minute, then as I calm down, another deep shudder runs through me when Dane clutches me to his chest.

“You’re always beautiful,” he murmurs. “But baby, when you let go like that...so hot.”

Somehow, the idea that my reaction pleased him gives me just as much satisfaction as the incredible explosion that is still echoing through me, making my skin vibrate and tingle.

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Dane tucks the covers around us. “That was the first kiss.” His finger circles around my breasts. “And that was the second.” He points to my lips. “The third will have to be mellow, to send you to sleep.”

Our bodies settle together, as he gives me a kiss so tender, soft and deep that it nearly brings tears to my eyes.

This is real. It’s impossible, but it’s real.

I’m falling for Dane, and there is no possible way I can stop.

8

DANE

I’ve spent the night in Basic Plains before, but last night was anything but basic.

Feeling so close to Jorie was... Staring out at the endless highway stretching in front of us, I can’t even think how to put it into words. She’s like the first breath of fresh air after being underwater for years. The light I didn’t know I needed.

I glance over to see her gazing out the window, completely at peace.

She trusts me. That’s a gift I’ll cherish forever. Still, at some point we’ll have to return to the real world. She’ll want to go to school to pursue her dreams. I’ll have to go back to work. Gerald will expect his daughter to come home and have nothing to do with a guy like me.

I disguise my exasperated sigh by stretching my shoulders and shifting in my seat a little. When I was younger and Dad reminisced about “the good old days”, there would be warmth in his eyes when he mentioned Gerald. Now, there’s a hardness in his expression whenever his old friend comes up.

I definitely know that Jorie’s dad will not approve of me. At the same time, I suspect my own father may not be too keen on her, simply because she comes from a man who lives and breathes technology these days.

By early afternoon, we’ve had an incredible brunch, an amazing lunch, and are genuinely behaving like a couple on vacation.

When we stop to get gas, I pick up another cheap prepaid phone. “Would you mind driving for an hour? I need to get some food delivered.”

“Sure.”

Jorie is a great driver. By the time we get to the next rest stop, she’s helped me select groceries for a week’s worth of meals. “Are we going to pick it up somewhere?” she asks.

“No. I don’t want you to be seen in Rustic Junction at all. Everything’s being delivered.”

“Won’t wild animals get into it if it’s left sitting on your doorstep?”

I reach out to run my fingers through the back of her hair. “The grocery store manager has the code for the gate and knows where the front door key is hidden. They’ll put the meat and ice cream in the freezer.”

“Wow, you’ve thought of everything.” Jorie pulls smoothly off the highway toward a

rest stop.

“That’s me. And now it’s time to check in with your father, from a gas station that gives no indication which direction we’re going.”

Jorie turns to me, puzzled. “Hang on. You never told me how you got to Nashville so fast. You couldn’t have driven.”

“No. I flew, then used the money Gerald paid me to buy this car from a secondhand lot.”

A truck backfires and I automatically spin before I realize what the sound is, my back toward the noise as I crouch with Jorie in my arms.

“Sorry.” I straighten up, smoothing her hair. “That happens a lot out here.”

“The sound of gunfire?” Her bottom lip wobbles, and her delicate face is pale.

“That was a truck. Lots of old farm pickups way past their prime.”

She nods, still looking unsure as she leans against me.

“Let me text your father and see if we can get any information.”

Hey, this is D. Having a great time out on the road. Everything is good from our end. How about yours?

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I pump the gas, then move the car before we go into the station to grab some snacks and sodas. By the time we return, the texts are flooding in.

Gerald: Where the hell are you? Where's my daughter?

Gerald: This was NOT the plan. She was supposed to fly to Georgia.

Gerald: Her mother wants to talk to her right this second.

Gerald: How am I supposed to keep tabs on you when you don't do as you're fucking told?

Jorie leans in to read with me, then sighs. "Yeah, he hates it when people don't obey his instructions to the letter."

I caress her back gently. "I'm sorry. That must have been hard to deal with growing up."

She shrugs. "Pfft, we mostly ignored each other. He was never around anyway. He's only started paying attention to me now that I'm old enough to come out to events with them." She grins, making a gagging noise. "I feel he's showing me off and trying to introduce me to guys he'd like me to date."

My spine stiffens. "Have you ever been interested in any of them?"

"Nope." There's a dreamy glow in her eyes. "I guess I never knew what I was looking for...until recently."

It hits me again like another ton of bricks: her family is going to go ballistic when they discover we're together. Her father in particular is going to view it as me taking advantage of the situation.

"Jorie, maybe we should talk about..."

The phone pings yet again.

Gerald: I demand you respond to me right now. Tell me she's all right, and precisely where you are.

She is safe and happy. I'm not going to make any detailed comments through a device that could possibly be traced. You're tech savvy enough that you should appreciate that. Unless of course you are less concerned about keeping her safe than you say?

Holding out the phone, I wait until Jorie reads the message and nods her approval before I hit send.

Gerald: You ignorant piece of shit. Get her to Georgia immediately. I will take over personally.

If anyone has been tracking your phone, they will know where you are and where you want her to go. I'm sticking to your original instructions to keep her safe, and that means I am staying off the radar, and away from you. This phone will be dropped into a garbage can in 10 seconds. We will contact you again tomorrow with an update.

Once again, I wait for Jorie's approval before hitting send.

Instead of actually ditching the phone, I snap out the SIM card and put it in the signal

blocking box in the trunk with our other phones.

I want to see how he responds, but that will be at the next rest stop, away from Jorie. If her father is devolving into a complete asshole, I don't know how much of that she should see.

I need Jorie to stay calm and enjoy our trip. Especially when I'm about to take her to my own private paradise.

9

JORIE

My eyes have been completely opened.

If it weren't for Dane, this experience would have been a nightmare. If I'd gotten onto that helicopter, I'd be stuck in some ritzy hotel in Georgia with my parents with Mom shopping herself into oblivion and Dad going on about the importance of his latest upcoming merger or acquisition or whatever it is this time.

Instead, I've seen a ton of breathtaking scenery, tried new food and listened to new music, and learned about demolition. Asking Dane about his work is fascinating.

"People always think that demolition is just swinging a sledgehammer," he says, smoothly changing lanes so an eighteen-wheeler can pass us. I've noticed he sticks precisely to the speed limit and always gives the right of way to larger vehicles.

"But you do swing a sledgehammer all the time, right?"

"Quite often, yes. But only after I've checked the wall for electrical, plumbing, or anything else. I'm often wielding a crowbar too, if there's anything like paneling or

cabinets or wood trim. A lot of that can be salvaged and reused.”

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Dane looks over with a strange expression. “I hope you don’t mind the cabin we’re going to,” he says quietly. “It’s not fancy. There isn’t even a dishwasher.”

I hold up my hands, turning them to examine the backs, then the palms. “Well, would you look at that! Not broken. Perfectly capable of washing dishes.”

Dane chuckles, reaching over to squeeze my knee. I’ve noticed he’s been doing that more and more lately, which makes me wonder: this is the last long day of driving. What are we going to do when we’re holed up in a cabin with nowhere to go?

I definitely know what I want to do – fully explore this heat between us.

I slip on some sunglasses and scrunch down in my seat as we drive through Rustic Junction. Parts of the town look like something straight out of a movie set in the Old West. We pass one sign for kiddie horse rides, and another for an upcoming gun fight show.

At the edge of town, Dane turns onto a side road, then drives uphill for a bit. “Well... Here it is.”

The cabin is much larger than I expected. And newer. It’s...charming. Which, trust me, is not a word I’ve ever used about a building.

“Dad and I built this ten years ago, since the first one was falling apart,” he explains. “Grandpa and Dad built it decades ago. It’s the storage shed now.”

I get out of the car and stare open-mouthed at the beautiful wooden beam and brick

cottage with a porch that wraps around two sides of it.

Dane grabs the bags, and when we go inside, my jaw drops again. “It’s beautiful,” I sputter. Although the space is very simply furnished, everything is clean and comfortable. It’s the kind of place I could easily hunker down with tea and good books for at least a week.

The large room covers the kitchen, dining area, and living room. Two open doors reveal the relatively small bathroom and the lone bedroom. How long are we going to be stuck in this space together? No idea.

Honestly, I wouldn’t quite characterize it as “being stuck”. And yet...

I spin toward Dane. “I’m so sorry that you’re missing out on so much work because of this. I hope Dad is paying you well for just dropping everything and?—”

“Baby.” His thick arms wrap around me, pulling me closer than usual. “I don’t give a damn about the job anymore, or your father asking mine for a favor, or anything but keeping you safe. Okay?”

A deep shudder rolls through me as he strokes my back. “Okay. Thank you. I think it’s just beginning to hit me that this might’ve been a truly dangerous situation, not just my father overreacting.”

“Doesn’t matter.” His heart thumps under my ear, then his voice is even deeper as he speaks. “When it comes to you, I’m not taking any chances at all.” He chuckles, squeezing me gently. “That’s why I ordered frozen food for tonight. We don’t even have to cook.”

Dane heats up dinner while I learn where everything is in the kitchen and familiarize myself with the cabin. Well, he keeps calling it a cabin. To me, it’s more like a

cottage.

After dinner, I stare out the window across the valley as the mountain and forest grow dark. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, aren’t we?” I murmur.

“Yup.” Dane puts the last dish away, then takes my hands. “You saw the locked gate. There’s barbed wire perimeter fencing all the way around the property, and it’s a good twenty-two acres. Plus,” he chuckles, “Dad put up a few ‘Beware of Bears’ signs. I’m not sure if they’ve ever actually been spotted around here, but it’s a great deterrent.”

His expression becomes more serious as he walks us to the couch. Dane sits first, then pulls me so I’m sitting with my legs lying over his lap.

“Jorie.” His gruff voice is even lower than usual. “I know things are moving ridiculously fast between us. And I would never hold you to any decision you made today, but...” His deep eyes meet mine. “Would you consider staying a bit longer once this kidnapping threat stuff is over?”

My heart starts to sing. “Yes. For sure.”

He looks hesitant. “The thing is, my job and my house are about an hour east of here. I couldn’t be driving seventeen hours to Los Altos Hills that often...”

“I’d move here in a heartbeat, if that’s what you’re asking.” My fingers slip into the back of his hair. “I’ve been looking for apartments for a while. I was all set to move out last year, but then Mom guilt tripped me into staying a bit longer ‘for her sake’.”

“You said you wanted to be a masseuse. There are certainly plenty of people who could use a massage here in Colorado. With schools and universities everywhere, I bet you could find a good program somewhere within an hour of my house.” His

palm rubs slow circles around my back. “Which would obviously be our house as soon as you move in.”

I choke back a laugh. “Is it totally ridiculous that we’re thinking about stuff like this already?”

“Maybe. But do we care? I mean, you’re a wild woman now. You’ve sent a decoy onto a helicopter. You’ve been on a road trip with a stranger. You’ve fallen in love with grits.”

“I wouldn’t quite say that.” Time stops as I see something new in Dane’s gorgeous eyes. He’s falling in love with me as much as I’m falling in love with him.

It doesn’t matter that it’s only been a couple of days. Maybe it’s the thousands of miles and the endless restaurants and pit stops. Maybe it’s from sharing our life stories in rambling loops for days. I feel so close to him. Not just physically, although my heart is pounding a strange quirky rhythm from sitting so close to him that I’m breathing in his masculine scent.

I want him. He clearly wants me. We’re safe now. There’s absolutely no reason not to give into these feelings.

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“Hey.” Dane smiles. “You zoned out there for a second. You must be tired.”

“More that I just realized we can finally relax and take a breath, right?”

“For sure. No cameras, not on the grid, nobody can contact us.”

“And this time... I guess we’ll be sleeping in one bed on purpose?”

He tips my chin up with his finger. “If that’s what you want, gorgeous, then yes.”

“Yeah. I do.”

A loud giggle tumbles out of me as he scoops me into his arms, carrying me to the bedroom. When he lays me on the bed, it’s as if the air changes, and pure electricity begins surging through my veins.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs, bending down to kiss me. There is no denying the incredible heat between us, but somehow it feels like Dane is still holding back. Still cautious.

I grip the bottom of his t-shirt, pulling it up awkwardly until he’s forced to help me yank it off.

“Somebody’s pretty eager,” he says with a wink.

“I just want to see all of you. Is that so bad?”

“Not at all.” His charmingly handsome grin turns saucy, as he pulls off my shirt and bra at the same time. Then my pizza socks. Then my yoga pants.

I’m usually a pretty shy, quiet person. Maybe I should feel nervous or vulnerable, sprawled on his bed in nothing but light green cotton panties that are starting to become visibly damp. Instead, I feel powerful.

Okay, nervous too. But excited – all kinds of excited, as my nipples tighten when Dane stares at my nearly naked body.

“What if I gave you three goodnight kisses tonight?” I force myself to whisper.

10

DANE

My sweet girl is trying so hard to be bold. I’m enjoying it far more than I should.

I get the sense that Jorie’s in a strange mental space right now where she’s trying to assert herself and discover where she stands in the world. I’m honestly not sure whether I’m helping or hindering her progress, but I’m going to let this gorgeous girl be as forward as she likes.

I lean in for a kiss, but she stops me by grabbing my belt. “Everything off.”

“Hmm. I think I like you a bit bossy.”

“Good.”

Her big brown eyes are so warm and soft I could get lost in them. Yet my body is taking over and wants hers with a hunger I can’t hold back any longer. My belt and

jeans hit the floor with a clank.

Once I'm naked I pause, letting Jorie stare at me for a moment. Then I lie beside her, slipping an arm under her shoulders to pull our lips together. My other palm slides across her bare skin, coasting lightly around her breasts as her entire body quivers, her skin pale against mine as we move together.

I want this beautiful woman so badly. Not just today. Not just during this bizarre road trip. Forever.

My teeth pull at her bottom lip, nibbling playfully until she giggles. "Hey now, you stole that kiss. It doesn't count."

"Fair. What did you have in mind?"

There's a dash of wickedness in her smile and lighting up her eyes as her hand skims down my chest and across my stomach. It tightens from her touch.

I've been extremely hard countless times since we met, but now it actually feels like my cock is going to snap off if I don't get some relief. Her slender fingers gripping my shaft is the opposite of that, though – another prickle of fiery lust curls through my brain and my heart, spreading through my entire being.

"You can do anything you like to me," I whisper softly. "Or have me do anything to you. We don't have to do anything you're not ready?—"

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I pull in a sharp, jerky breath as Jorie's head lurches down, her lips closing firmly around the head of my cock. My fingers thread through the back of her hair, then I force myself to remain motionless.

As her fingers move slowly along my length, her mouth bobs up and down, capturing the first few inches. A groan rattles through me, which makes her eyes flash up to meet mine.

"So beautiful," I murmur, caressing the back of her neck. I'm aching to plunge deeper, every pull of her soft mouth sending fire through my veins, but I firmly squash down the urge to thrust between her lips.

She mumbles something, the vibrations teasing my skin just before she runs her tongue around the edge.

Damn. If she does that again, I'm going to fuck her mouth for real, which is no way for our first time to go down.

Her tongue darts around again, and Jorie begins to suck harder. My fingers tighten in her hair for a count of three, then she gasps when I flip her onto her back and yank off her panties.

"My turn for a kiss." I barely recognize the gravel tone in my voice. Spreading her silky thighs, I wait for her nod before leaning in, my breath warming her delicate pink skin. It's the prettiest little pussy I've ever seen in my life, and I take a full minute to simply stare. As my calloused fingertips start to brush slowly along every tender curve, I watch as she becomes flushed, her skin becoming pinker, shinier, as her inner

lips become wet.

“That’s...not a kiss,” she mutters between fluttering breaths.

“You’re right.”

The need to possess this beautiful young woman twists and burns through my soul, making me rougher than I normally would be. I flip her leg over my shoulder, then dive in, licking and sucking along her skin, finding every spot that makes her moisture drip onto my lips.

“Delicious,” I moan, thrusting my tongue deep as Jorie clutches my scalp, her back arching and sending her perfect rosy nipples pointing toward the ceiling.

She’s a vision. A goddess. And she’s all...

“Mine.”

I’m not even sure if she’s heard my throaty mumble until her eyes meet my own in a blaze of raw emotion. Then there’s a half nod, a stuttered gasp. My finger dives deep as my lips circle her swollen clit, licking and sucking until she bucks and writhes across the bed.

The “wholesome cabin” vibe flies out the window as her squeals and cries fill the air around us.

Her hips rock, moving frantically as my finger moves inside her faster. Rougher. I can’t be gentle, even though I know I should. She’s responding so strongly that I need to give her every single thing she obviously craves.

I adore that she wants me just as badly as I want her, her fingers tightening in my hair

as she squirms hard, grinding my mouth against her.

I can hear the exact point where her moans and sighs turn from excited to helpless. Her tight pussy clamps around my finger as her shoulders curl forward, her eyes meeting mine as her mouth falls open in a silent scream.

My God, she's perfect. Every single thing about this precious girl drives me wild.

I wait until she collapses back against the pillows before removing my finger and sucking it clean. "Delicious. Every inch of you, gorgeous."

Her eyes widen. "I still get two more kisses."

My heart swells. "Go ahead, baby."

Ever since I met her, Jorie has been nothing like I expected. Her unpredictability is one of her many charms. Right now, I'm waiting for her to lean in for a soulful good night kiss, while I try to calm down the rock-hard erection that's threatening to drain all the blood from my brain.

Instead, she leaps on top of me, straddling my hips and capturing my mouth with hers as she rubs her wet, open pussy all the way up and down my length.

"Dane." The way my name falls from her lips makes pre-come leak from the head of my cock as it nudges against her clit. "I've been on the pill for a year, but never needed to...I've never had this connection with anyone, and..."

"Do whatever you want with me, baby."

That seems to reassure her. She reaches between us, nudging the pulsing head of my cock between her inner lips. She's so wet. So ready. So excited. I can't rush this

moment, even though I'm dying to grab her and plunge deep.

"Take it easy," I murmur, stroking her hair, her back, her hips.

Jorie's eyes blaze. "Who's being bossy now?"

My palm taps the underside of her ass in a feather-light spank. "I just don't want you to hurt yourself. Be careful."

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Her hips swivel from side to side as she slowly works me in, about two inches. “Yeah, yeah,” she mutters, her eyes falling closed. “My bodyguard wants to guard my body.”

“Jorie. You’re fully aware this the last thing we should be?—”

Oh, daaamn.Can’t think. Can’t speak. Can barely breathe as her soft, snug pussy nudges down, down, gradually capturing my length.

Her hips began to rock as she carefully presses down further. Everything Jorie does is careful, I’ve come to realize. Partly because she’s been sheltered. Partly because she’s so eager to please everyone around her.

“Just do what feels good, baby. Don’t force it.”

Her palms land on my chest as she lifts up, squirming slightly. “I kind of...wantto force it. I need you deeper. It’s just going to take a minute.”

Her hips rock back and forth in small motions, trying to work me past a point of friction inside her.

“You want me to help, baby?”

Jorie’s already nodding. “Please. I just...need you.”

Her breathy sigh is the last thing I hear before I grasp her hip with one hand and dig my heels into the bed. Her beautiful eyes widen in surprise as I push deep, slowly

sinking all the way into her luscious pussy.

Her mouth falls open with a sputter. “Oh. Oh.Oh!”

Then she laughs, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She can’t catch her breath fully. “There’s just so much of you!”

I chuckle with her, moving, pushing, stroking deep. Even though my animalistic side is surging up as I claim my woman, Jorie’s giggles keep our energy light. She’s completelyunselfconscious as she leans back, experimenting with the angle, displaying her perfect tits in a way that makes my mouth water.

This is unbelievable. I’m just some guy who swings a sledgehammer and has a cozy life. How could I be so lucky to have this amazing goddess drop into my world, and end up riding my dick like a sexy little cowgirl?

She leans forward again for a kiss, and this time I grab her harder, thrusting up to meet her, grinding against her clit. I can tell when I hit the spot, because her mouth grows slack and her eyelashes flutter.

“You like that, baby?”

“Yeah. This is...yeah.”

My back arches just enough to brush my chest against her nipples lightly. “Yeah? You like being full of me? You like your hot little pussy being completely full of my cock?”

Her eyes blaze as she cries out, nodding and grinding, as lost in the moment as I am.

I thrust up to meet her as she rides me, both of us finding the rhythm perfectly. Her

fingernails prick my shoulders as she holds on, thighs tight around me. I can already feel her pussy squeezing me, ready to release. I lick my thumb, then work it between her legs, finding her button and rubbing quick and hard.

Jorie's mouth falls open again, but no sound comes out.

"You're the only woman I've ever brought here," I suddenly say. "The only woman I've ever considered building a life with. Just a few days, and I already know you're mine. We're meant to be, gorgeous. Please tell me you agree."

I'm not sure what word she's trying to say, but she's nodding.

I watch as she inhales a couple of ragged breaths, then grinds down, her pussy locking around my pulsing cock as she begins to shake from head to toe.

"That's my perfect, sexy girl...riding my cock until she comes so hard."

From the way her eyes blaze, it's clear she loves it when I talk dirty.

Her climax ripples on and on as I take the lead. With Jorie suddenly too weak to help, going boneless over me, my body takes over. Gripping her luscious round ass with both hands, I groan loudly, fucking up into her hard and fast until my cock twitches over and over, filling her with long, hot spurts. I've never come so hard in my life, draining myself into her still-twitching pussy.

Her eyes shine as she pants, nodding and grinning. My hands can't stop moving, caressing her back, gradually moving her to lie beside me.

I hurry to the bathroom, grabbing a warm wet washcloth to clean her up first, then me. She snuggles in my arms, then starts laughing. "How many kisses was that?"

“You’re so damn sexy that I lost count. Maybe just one more for now?”

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Our last good night kiss is gentle. Like a sunrise over a field of wildflowers, it just keeps blooming, but softly. Wow, this girl has me thinking in poetry.

As I listen to Jorie falling asleep in my arms, my heart thumps wildly from the comfortable pressure of her head against the side of my chest.

What a life it would be to keep this incredible woman with me. If everything really did turn out and she decided to move here so that we could live together.

If I thought I could possibly swing it, I would move to California for her in a heartbeat. But I have no connections there. No way to set up a business and earn a living.

I want Jorie to fulfil her dream of becoming a masseuse, of course, but it's harder than just taking a course. She'd have to find a job, or open her own place. That would take money, but I would happily help her rent a space. I would definitely send all the workmen I know her way to support her, although the thought of her hands on another man does make my stomach clench a little.

Maybe I could help her find a place in a neighborhood that's more female-centric. Plenty of office workers. Or maybe there's a dance school around. I could?—

Dammit.

Here I am planning Jorie's life without her, just like her family. Even though these are nothing more than sleepy ideas, a ripple of shame runs through me.

Jorie is going to have to figure out what she wants from life, and I will support her every step of the way. I've already derailed any short-term plans she had for this weekend.

We'll take it slowly. Recalibrate our lives to make them fit together.

I'm worried it might be a lot harder for her than for me, though.

11

JORIE

My gaze slides between the beautiful view of the forest to the coffeepot slowly filling in front of me.

It takes a while to get my brain going in the mornings at the best of times, and the past several days have been a whirlwind. Now that we're staying in one spot for a while, maybe I can finally return to my natural rhythms.

I wonder if the rhythm out here will be slower. Probably. It's so tranquil, with no traffic sounds. No neighbors slamming their car doors. Nothing but bird calls and the whisper of trees.

Which is why I jump when there's a strange hum, then a mechanical clicking and whirring sound coming from a small shelf between the dining and the living areas.

I look down to see a small beige-gray printer slowly spitting out pages. The thing must be at least twenty years old.

"What, you've never seen a fax machine before?" Dane comes out from the bedroom and pours us each a coffee.

“Oh! Is that what that is? No, I haven’t.”

He brings our mugs over, then pulls out papers, spreading them across the table. “My friend Jim lives on the other side of town. He must have passed by, seen a light on here, and assumed Dad was visiting. He likes to keep up with the news, so Jim faxes the important bits. Weather, local news, global headlines, the business section. Any articles he knows Dad would like.”

“Whoa. Your dad is that anti-technology?”

“He sure is. No internet, no cell phone, and only an older TV at his house.”

We sit down and skim the news together. It’s actually quite nice reading on paper instead of a screen, if a little weird.

“Shit,” Dane mutters under his breath. I catch his eye as his head shakes. “It’s too early in the morning for crap like this, but we should probably read it together.” He turns the page sideways so we can skim the article from the business section.

The Turcotte Group just acquired two companies very similar to my father’s, including Sethman – a company Dad himself was hoping to be acquired by.

“This means nobody is interested in Dad’s company,” I murmur, looking up at Dane. “So... Why would anybody be after me?”

“Excellent question.” Dane’s fingers drum heavily on the table for a solid minute. Then he stands up and marches out to the car. He returns and snaps a SIM card into one of the burner phones. I have a very bad feeling about things as I watch him dial a number.

“Hey, Dad.” Dane sets the phone between us, and I come closer to listen in.

“Dane, my boy! How’s that...work projectgoing?”

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“Oh, good, good. Listen, that old friend of yours I’ve been dealing with – is he the kind of guy to cheat at cards if something important was on the line?”

There’s a slight grumble. “Oh, hell yeah. He’s a sneaky bastard, that one. Wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. Always ready to cut a good man’s throat to get himself ahead even one inch. You know... We go so far back that over the years I’ve been brushing things under the rug, so to speak. But protecting his kid is important. Everything is going well, I hope?”

“Very well.” Dane reaches out to stroke my hair. “Better than I could ever imagine, to be honest. She’s wonderful.”

There’s a loud snort. “Watch it, boy. Keep your pecker in your pants and your hands to yourself. That’s a classy girl, so don’t be getting ideas about?—”

“She can hear you, Dad.”

The next snort is less frustration and more amusement. “Well, she’s probably eager to get back to her fancypants California life. She’d be bored to tears out here. So you two just behave yourselves, keep your heads down, and wait until Gerald gives the all-clear.”

“That’s the thing, though,” Dane says slowly. “Is there really an all-clear to be given if Gerald made the whole thing up?”

I blink at the torrent of curses suddenly barreling down the line. “Shit. Bastard’s done this before. Made up all kinds of hooey just to get his name in the news. Or to get

people talking about his company...whichever company he's pulling out of his ass these days. I swear, that man wouldn't know how to do an honest day's work if the fate of the entire world depended on it."

A flicker runs through Dane's eyes. Maybe he doesn't like that his father is insulting mine. "Thanks for the info, Dad. We'll be in touch."

"All righty. Stay outta the good whiskey."

Dane ends the call and rolls his eyes. "I don't care for his brand, anyway."

I appreciate that he's trying to keep things light. But it suddenly feels like rocks are weighing down my very soul.

"So... My father lied about this to get attention? Like a five-year-old?"

"Apparently so." Dane guides me back to the table and sits me down, pushing the coffee mug in front of me temptingly.

"What do we do?" I ask.

"Well..." He leans back and rubs his neck, thinking. "Dad doesn't allow any computers in his sacred country cabin, as you can imagine. But we could always visit Jim. We'll use his computer with a VPN. Totally safe."

I nod, sipping my coffee. It does nothing to fill the hollow feeling inside me.

"First, breakfast," Dane says. "Then we'll drive to Jim's and get this over with. Okay?"

My fingers wrap around his wrist. "Thank you. Really."

He simply nods, as if understanding I don't have the bandwidth right now to get into a heart-to-heart about how much I appreciate him protecting me. It's like we're beginning to communicate with just a glance.

The idea sends my stomach into a slow spiral. If we click this much already, could he really be the one?

"I know this is rough for you, baby. But don't worry, I'm going to take care of everything." He kisses the back of my hand, then his eyes light up with a wicked grin. "Will you forgive me if I get angry with your father?"

My eyes narrow. "Are you kidding? If he really lied about this, I want you to kick his ass."

12

DANE

I've known Jim for ages, from working on demolition and construction jobs together over the years. Since he just lives on the other side of town, we run into each other often enough.

He's not surprised when we appear on his doorstep, asking to use his computer and for a little privacy...although I do notice that Jim gives Jorie a quizzical look when she tiptoes in with my arm tucked around her. He sets us up at his dining room table, then goes down to his workroom in the basement.

"If you don't want to be here for this call, baby, you could take a walk around the back yard," I suggest.

Jorie shakes her head. "No way. I want to know what's going on." She hesitates. "But

maybe... Could I just listen, and not say anything?"

"Of course! But I'd like this to be a video call so I can watch his eyes."

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We shift her chair slightly, so she can watch the screen without being seen.

When the call connects, the video bobs and shifts. “Shit – hold on a sec, Eric,” Gerald mutters. We see a few flashes of what looks to be a hotel room, then a slice of brilliant blue sky. He settles onto a deck chair on a balcony, holding the phone low while crouching down a bit. “I told you not to call me until after a new deal is lined up. We got zero attention from that helicopter stunt. Next time we’ll be more public with?—”

“There’s not going to be a next time with Jorie.” My voice cuts through his distracted ramblings like a thunderbolt.

“Dane?” Gerald holds up the phone and stares at me in disbelief. “Dammit, I thought... never mind. The kidnapping alert is over. I need you to send her to Georgia. We’re going to have a family vacation before?—”

“Before the next time you fake a kidnapping threat?” The only thing that’s keeping me from shouting is Jorie’s calm presence beside me. I cannot believe he’s so casual while talking about manipulating his family.

“You had a very simple job to do, for which you were paid handsomely.” He probably thinks his cold glare is intimidating. It’s not. “You were supposed to go with her on the helicopter, then spend a week at one of our nicest hotels looking like her bodyguard. How could you screw up something so simple?”

“So, I messed up by acting like a real bodyguard and making sure Jorie was actually safe?”

“Yes, you did, as a matter of fact. Because I was depending on the publicity. Instead, my daughter simply dropped off the planet. How was that supposed to do me any good?”

“You created all this drama in a pathetic attempt to capture headlines?” I practically spit at him. “Maybe this is why nobody wants to do business with you. How the hell could you put your own daughter through this?”

He snorts. “Why do you care so much? You’re being paid well enough.”

“I was concerned for her safety. You said there was a kidnapping threat. How the hell was I supposed to take it?”

His eyes roll. “With a grain of fucking salt! Seriously, a guy in your shoes should just be thankful for the work. Keep your head down, do as you’re told, take the money.”

“While you spin tales that scare the hell out of your daughter? What kind of a man is that?”

“A man who has more money than you will ever?—”

“Stop thinking about money.” It’s not quite a full-blown yell, but Gerald jumps back in his chair at my furious and thunderous tone. “Any man who would frighten his own daughter like that is an ignorant piece of?—”

I stop myself, reaching out for Jorie’s hand. She squeezes it, and I force myself to take a slow breath.

To my shock, she leans into the frame. “Piece ofshit, I believe Dane was about to say. I completely agree. You’re fired as my father.”

Gerald's eyes are so filled with rage there may as well be flames shooting from them. He opens his mouth to speak, but I disconnect the call. I stand, pulling her into my arms. "I'm so sorry, baby."

She sighs heavily, snuggling against my chest and breathing me in, trying to calm herself down. "Well, the kidnapping stuff wasn't real, so I'm safe. That part is good." Her fingers press against my back. "Plus, honestly, I've never liked my father and now I can stop pretending to be polite. So that part's good, too."

"Yeah, calling him names like that is not exactly the politest." I force a chuckle, hoping to break the tension.

"No shit, Sherlock."

We hold each other for a while. I stroke her hair, and she seems to collect herself. But as we leave Jim's, there's another shift. Maybe she's still processing that exchange with her dad, or she's just exhausted from the road trip.

Maybe she realizes that she can't really cut off family just like that.

As much as I need Jorie to stay with me, I realize there's a chance she might go back to them. Everything between us happened unbelievably fast, and it would be logical for her to go back to the familiar.

No matter how much I love her, and how positive I am that we belong together.

13

JORIE

I'm quiet on the drive back to the cabin. Dane senses my mood, and puts on a mellow

indie rock station at a low volume.

We pass beautiful scenery, just like on our long drives when we were chatting and laughing, getting to know each other. I think back to all the random life stories that bubbled out of us whenever something we passed triggered a memory.

A lot of Dane's stories were about his work, his friends, and crazy mishaps that happened back when he was apprenticing. My stories centered on my one year of general arts in university, and being dragged around on my family's vacations. Mom always demanded that we "see the world", yet all we really saw were airports, fancy hotels and restaurants, and the occasional museum.

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I don't recall ever sampling the local cuisine, or having an in-depth discussion on the virtues of gas station snacks, or going to a music festival.

My parents don't really know how to live – not that I really do, either, but I'm pretty sure I know now how I don't want to live.

I sneak a sidelong glance at Dane. His rugged profile still makes my belly flutter. The man is seriously gorgeous. He's also incredibly calm, never once yelling at another driver or becoming frustrated at traffic. I love the way his hand drapes casually on the steering wheel: it's as if he could drive forever.

I wonder if he's so chill because he gets his aggression out with a sledgehammer? That feels a lot healthier than the weird angst about money and status that my parents and all their friends seem to have.

My own friends are like that too, now that I think about it. They chase bands and follow all kinds of "influencers" on social media because they don't have any goals of their own. Their families are even richer than mine, so they'll never have to work a day in their lives.

Me, I want purpose. A reason to get up in the morning, and to have a positive impact on the world.

My biggest fears right now are that Dane will judge me by my messed-up family, and that his dad will never approve of me. It's so strange: I feel I know him so well, but I'm still nervous to ask too many questions.

“Dane,” I ask softly, “Why did you take the job with my father if you’ve never met him? I mean, did you really owe him a favor on behalf of your dad?”

The deep chuckle that fills the car also fills me with a glimmer of hope. “Well, I’m well-schooled in the ways of being off grid, thanks to my psycho anti-tech dad. I thought I’d be better qualified than the average guy to hide you.”

I laugh with him. “You certainly are. I would never have thought of that trick with the decoy and the helicopter. That was brilliant.”

“Ha! I saw it in a movie,” he shrugs casually. Yet he’s smiling, as if pleased with himself.

When we get back to the cabin, we walk inside, then sit on the sofa in the living room, facing each other.

“Baby, you told off your father like a champ,” Dane says. “I’m so proud of you. So... Now that you have your entire life ahead of you, what do you want to do next?”

He looks at me expectantly, waiting for an answer. I know he doesn’t have any wild expectations. This wonderful man just wants me to be...whatever I want.

I can do anything.

This is a brand-new feeling. For a moment, I just breathe and allow it to wash over me.

“I think I’m going to lounge for a few days. Look up massage courses. Read. Take some walks in your beautiful forest. Would that be okay?”

“More than okay.”

“And then...maybe...well, you kind of mentioned we could perhaps?—”

“You’ll move in with me?” He whoops and grabs my hand as I laugh. “Oh, baby, I’ll make our home so perfect for you. Everything you could ever want. We can swing by Los Altos Hills sometime and pick up your things...”

“You’re not going to judge me by the insane actions of my family?”

“Never.” He chuckles. “You won’t judge me when you meet my dad, will you? He’s the proverbial weirdo mountain man, but he’s going to love you.”

Dane lifts my hand to his lips. “That said... I love you even more.”

I freeze. He’s totally serious, yet there’s a beautiful twinkle in his eyes. He’s excited and hopeful and... vulnerable? It’s as if my response will change his entire life. Mine, too.

I knew it was going to happen someday. It’s something I could feel in my bones. Yet this is so sudden and right and natural and...

“I love you, too.”

I gasp as he lifts me into the air and carries me to the bedroom. Dane hasn’t always behaved like a rough mountain man with me, but he does now, tearing my clothes off and practically hurling me onto the center of the bed.

I stare wide-eyed as his own clothes hit the floor and he lands on the bed between my legs. His eyebrow arches wickedly as he slowly shoves my thighs apart.

The second I nod, I gasp as his face dives between my thighs, licking and sucking at every inch of my skin as if he were starving. My fingers clench the blankets, trying to

hold onto reality as he devours me.

This is definitely no time for me to be worried about what others will think of me. Honestly, at this point I couldn't hold onto my restraint if I tried. Every cry, gasp and moan ripped from my throat sounds wild, feral.

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Dane clearly enjoys every savage sound I make, digging in until I'm sopping wet. I yelp as two of his thick fingers push inside, his lips humming and vibrating against my clit until my entire body arches off the bed.

It's so intimate, so hard and soft and sweet all at the same time, I can barely find my breath.

Dane wants me. Forever. I can feel it.

"I want you inside me," I manage to mutter.

His eyes blaze as he nods. He doesn't switch up his rhythm, fingers and tongue moving slightly faster with every ragged breath. Just when I think I couldn't possibly be more aroused, Dane's deep brown eyes smile, then he winks before adding a third finger, stretching me just enough that the pressure sends me catapulting over the edge. Tugging on his hair, I try to hold on to reality as I wail, shaking and fluttering as a wave of lust flows through me.

After a moment, he crawls up my body, kissing around my breasts as I feel his slight stubble. His heavy shaft lands on my hip, then slowly sinks to rub gently against my swollen, sensitive clit.

His thumb grazes my cheek as he stares down at me. "So beautiful. I don't deserve you in a million years, baby. But I swear I'm going to care for you forever."

The moment feels more important than if we were dressed up and standing in front of an officiant.

“I’m going to care for you as well.” My hands lightly massage the back of his neck and shoulder blades. “I’m going to make sure that you don’t get hurt. That you never come to bed aching and sore.”

He grins, a devilish gleam in his eye. “I want to make a dirty joke about leaving your tight, wet pussy aching and sore every single night, but maybe that’s not appropriate right now.”

We’re both grinning as his hard cock glides slowly into me.

And once again, I breathe in this brand-new sensation.

We belong together.

And this is forever.

14

DANE

I could lose myself in this gorgeous woman.

No – I’m finding myself in her. Finding my purpose. My true strength. My cunning, which I didn’t even know I had, frankly.

Jorie is the focus I’ve always been searching for. Now that I have her, every moment will be dedicated to her happiness.

Which, at the moment, includes her pleasure.

Her silky, tight pussy squeezes me perfectly as I nudge inside. Every gasp, every

breath from her rosebud lips feels like a triumph. My thoughts melt, becoming soft and abstract, like that painting at one of the hotels we stayed in on our trip.

I'm so hard I can feel it in my spine, yet I force myself to move gently, with long smooth strokes that make Jorie tremble. Her thighs lift and wrap around my hips, opening her more so I can plunge deeper.

The center of my chest burns as I stare down at my perfect girl. I must've done something good in this world if the universe has sent this breathtaking woman my way.

My heart hammers in an offbeat rhythm, like that funk station Jorie found between...where was it...yeah, Saddleback and Heartstone. I almost laugh when I realize every single thing is going to remind me of this epic road trip we took together. Every single mile along Route 14 is now precious – the highway where we fell in love.

Her hips rock up, meeting me stroke for stroke as I nudge even deeper. She's so slick, so tight, so soft. As I nuzzle her throat, her broken noises sound like a cross between a purr and a moan.

"Mine," I mutter, jaw clenched. "My beautiful girl. My entire future."

Her light brown eyes glow as she looks up at me. When I first met Jorie, she looked like a model. Now she's a real woman...my real woman...messy hair, flushed throat, lips slightly swollen from all our kisses.

She's so tight I can feel her inner muscles twitching, in time to the throbbing pulse of my shaft. Her fingernails prick the side of my hip, then rest on the back of my shoulder as she clings to me.

“So big,” Jorie breathes. “So thick and long. There’s just so much of you.”

“All the better to be your bodyguard, my dear.”

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She laughs with me, then moans again and I feel the flutter through her belly. It's beautiful, watching her body getting ready to come. Everything begins to twitch, then still, then tighten. The taste of her luscious pussy is still on my lips, and I can't stop myself from thrusting harder.

My thumb brushes her nipple, then I squeeze her breast gently, loving the way she arches her back to offer herself to me.

My arms scoop underneath, grabbing the back of her shoulders as I kneel up, pulling her onto me. One hand drops to her lusciously round ass as I lift and lower her, grinding against her clit.

Jorie's arms circle my shoulder as she squeaks, barely hanging on. "Wow," she breathes. "This is...I'm..."

"That's it. Just let it happen, baby. I can feel your hot little pussy squeezing my cock. It wants to come so hard, doesn't it?"

She's nodding, her cheek hitting my chest as I bounce her up and down. Then her chin lifts. "More?"

Every single muscle in my body tenses, forcing myself to hold back the climax that's already barreling down on me.

"More what? More cock?" I thrust a bit faster, harder. "Or more telling you what you've done to me? You've already completely changed me, baby. Turned me from a boring construction guy to a man with a mission to make you completely happy every

day of our lives. If that includes licking your precious pussy and fucking the hell out of you every single time you ask for it, you know I will drop everything to obey.”

“Yeah...” she breathes, her eyes half-lidded as she bounces up and down.

“I can tell you you’re about to come. Feel your tight little pussy getting wetter. Feel your hot little clit grinding against me. Feel your thighs wrapping around me so perfectly. Every time it’s so hot I rip my shirt off at work, I want the other guys to see your fingernail marks all over me. Want the world to know that I always give my sexy girl everything she needs.”

Every sharp upward thrust makes both of us exhale sharply, over and over, as we both reach the edge of the cliff.

I pull Jorie against me as tightly as I can, her taut nipples scraping against my chest in the same rhythm as her clit is grinding against the base of my shaft. She cries out, and I hear her voice break.

“That’s it. Come for me, baby. Let it all go. Let me hear you.”

I watch transfixed when her head falls back, her mouth falling open and letting out a rippling, moaning shriek. Then my own breath catches as her body grips me so tightly I can’t eventhrust for a moment. The second I can again, I start to come hard, squeezing her soft skin against my fingers as I empty my wet heat into her.

We’re both shaking and moaning, then finally our lips meet in an explosion that I feel all the way down to my soul.

Laying Jorie carefully on her back, I brush the hair out of her eyes.

They snap open. “I’m yours,” she whispers softly. “That means you’re mine, right?”

“Yes. All yours.”

I fix the blankets as we snuggle together, and my mind begins to race at how much there will be to do. What will my home need? How am I going to get everything done in time? How long is she going to want to stay here at the cabin to recover from that scare?

What about her father? Is he going to come after her again? Is he going to be an absolute prick to her?

As soon as I feel Jorie falling asleep, I turn it all off like a switch.

Everything else can wait. Nothing matters except the sweet, satisfied girl in my arms.

Jorie is safe. Jorie is happy.

And Jorie is mine.

15

JORIE

We went to bed in such a chaotic whirlwind of lust and confessions of love that neither of us thought to check that the curtains were closed.

Oops.

A slim beam of light filtering through the trees flutters across my pillow, waking me up slowly. After a few moments, I realize where I am: in Dane’s cabin. In his arms.

Completely, utterly, in love.

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Even though the threats my father lied about weren't real, Dane still did a fantastic job of keeping me safe and calm throughout this entire ordeal. The least I can do is make him breakfast.

By the time I'm wearing Dane's t-shirt and some old sweatpants I found in his drawer, with my hair tied up in a sloppy bun, I feel like an entirely new person. A free version of my true self.

Soon I'm chopping peppers and onions while the coffee pot does its thing. There's an old radio on the counter, which I turn to a classic jazz station.

I hear a door open and shut, but don't turn around since I'm slicing the very end of an onion.

"Shoot, I was going to serve you, but grab yourself a mug. I'm—"

Something prickles down the back of my neck. I spin, the knife still in my hand as I see an older man with thick gray hair and creased sun lines around his eyes.

Then there's nothing but tanned, naked skin as Dane steps in front of me. "Dad, you need to knock before you come in here."

"The hell are you talking about? It's my cabin, isn't it?"

Dane turns to face me, setting the knife gently on the counter, then putting an arm around me. "I'm so sorry if he scared you, baby. It's just my father, Ron. It's fine. You're safe."

Nodding slowly, I take a breath, then look up at him. “I’m okay. I didn’t even have time to get really scared, and then you were here.”

He gently kisses my forehead. “I’ll always be here. No matter what.”

On the other side of Dane’s solid body, I hear his father snort as he grabs a mug from the cupboard. He pours himself a coffee, then shuffles to the dining room table. “For Chrissake, put on a shirt, son. And let the poor girl breathe. It’s way too early for canoodling.”

In the time it takes Dane to zip to the bedroom and return while pulling on a navy t-shirt, his father has examined my entire soul simply by peering intently at me. Then he lets out a dark chuckle. “Hold up. You’re Jorie. Gerald’s girl.”

“Yes. It’s nice to meet you.”

He begins laughing hard, pitching forward as his hand slams on the table repeatedly. “I don’t know what’s better – that the two of you look like a couple of lovestruck kittens, or that Gerald is going to shit himself when he finds out.”

“He already knows,” Dane says. “We don’t care what he thinks.”

“He knows what, though? That you two are having a little...whatever? Or that you’re ass over applecart in love with the girl?” His thick wiry eyebrows go up significantly. “Don’t you think for a second that I can’t tell. You know how I can read people.”

Dane’s arm squeezes me snugly. “We’re not sure how much he knows. I don’t think we’ll exactly be on speaking terms for a while. That business about kidnappers being after Jorie was completely made up to create publicity for Gerald’s business.”

“I’m sorry that your-friend-slash-my-dad is a pile of crap,” I add softly.

Ron's hand thumps the table again. "That smug bastard. Thinks he's so high and mighty. Serves him right, now he'll be attached to one of us lowly townsfolk forever. That's going to stick in his craw until the end of time."

Dane looks at me, his eyes tight with concern. I just grin up at him, then say, "Ron, you're staying for breakfast, right? I'm making scrambled eggs with veggies."

"Sounds good."

He drums his fingers on the table for a moment as Dane pours himself a coffee and I busy myself with the food. A few minutes later, Ron turns to Dane. "I don't suppose you'd happen to have you got one of those...what do you call 'em...temporary phones around here, would you?"

Dane blinks in shock. "A burner cell phone? Yeah, I've got one in the trunk. Why?"

"I need it."

Dane throws on his boots and runs out to get it without another word, though he tosses his father an incredulous look.

Ron pins me with a glance. "Tell me, Jorie. Are you going back to Los Altos Hills and your life with those cockamamie parents of yours?"

"No. I'm going to look up massage and physiotherapy courses around Colorado." Dane comes back inside as I continue. "Your son invited me to move in with him."

Ron takes the phone from Dane's hand while nodding at me. "You actually want to work for a living?"

"Of course. I want to help people. Do something positive."

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“Good. Then I’m gonna do something positive too, right now.”

“Who are you calling?” Dane asks.

“Gerald’s home office voicemail,” Ron snorts, taking the phone out to the back porch while griping about how small the buttons are.

Dane shakes his head. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him use a cell phone. Ever.”

For the next few minutes, we are treated to a lengthy rant through the window. In between some colorful curses I’ve never heard before, I manage to make out a few fragments.

“Nice girl like that, and you scare her to pieces? I don’t know what happened that made you so wrong in the head...”

“...she’s now under the protection of me and my son. You or any of your idiot minions come within a hundred miles of us and I’ll kick your ass so far up...”

“...I know about all the skeletons in your closet, buddy. So when it comes time for these two to get hitched, if Jorie invites you, you are going to be on your best behavior and I will be watching you like a hawk.”

Dane sets the table while I cook. Ron’s tirade finally finishes, then there’s nothing but silence. Just as I’m bringing the plates over, he comes back inside, quietly handing the phone to Dane.

All the bluster has vanished as Ron rests a hand gently on my shoulder. “Welcome to the family, Jorie. That man will not be using you or bossing you around ever again.”

“Thank you. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

“Me too. Thanks, Dad.” We all sink into our seats, and Dane chuckles. “Not quite the bodyguard job I was expecting, but this has been one helluva ride.”

He holds out his hand to me, and I clasp his on the table.

Ron rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I’m leaving as soon as I fuel up, don’t worry. You crazy kids can have the place all to yourselves for about two weeks, then I’m coming back to fish for a few days.”

“That’s fine.” Dane’s thumb moves gently across my hand. “We’ll be moving Jorie into my place by then.”

“Good. Let me know what I can do to help.”

“Thanks,” Dane nods. “I can ask the demo team for extra hands if we need them, too.”

“I really don’t have that much stuff,” I stammer.

“Yeah, but we’ll need a dresser for you, some nicer furniture... Mine is getting a little tired-looking, and it’s mostly boring gray. It’ll be fun to make the place nicer.”

Every time I think my heart can’t grow any fuller, it expands a bit more.

Just last month, I was turning down diamond jewelry that Mom told me to wear and a new car that Dad wanted me to drive around, especially to his office.

Yet right this second is the first time I've ever felt truly rich.

Rich with a real home. Rich with a wonderful man. And rich with love, safety, and endless possibilities.

EPILOGUE

DANE

* Four Years Later *

Nobody was surprised when we eloped two years ago.

Jorie has resumed an email relationship with her mother, but she has never expressed any interest in speaking with her father.

She keeps up with some of her friends through video calls, and occasional short trips. Most of them have moved on, though. We've been making new friends when we drive through part of Route 14 every spring and fall, taking a week to see a big stretch of the country. Other than any view of my beautiful wife, the vista out the front windshield is always one of my favorites.

Plus, Jorie met some very nice people through her massage training program. She truly is talented and was hired straight out of school.

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I'm a few minutes early as I pull up in front of the red brick building where she works now.

This is the perfect place for Jorie: one side of the clinic is devoted to physiotherapy, for people with injuries. The otherside is for people with stressed muscles and overall tension who need a massage.

I was a bit worried when she started working here until she told me about the owner's strict policy that any men who come for a massage can only have a male masseur for the first ten treatments. After that, if everyone has a good feeling about them, they can be scheduled with one of the women.

I've also met the owner and he's agreed to keep an eye on any clients who book a treatment with my gorgeous wife.

Is it overkill? Hell yes. Do I care? Hell no.

I watch through the huge front window as she comes out to reception, then meet her at the front door, where she flies into my arms. My girl is still magnificent, but now she has dropped the model-perfect glamour. Her hair is tied up in a few loose bohemian braids with a flower clip and she wears breezy cotton and bamboo clothing, so she always feels free.

I help her into the truck, and as soon as I'm in as well she reaches over to grab my leg. "I know we were going to make burgers tonight, but?—"

"The Roadhouse?"

She laughs. “Yes, please.”

“Good thing I already made a reservation. It’s busy on Fridays.”

She laughs again, squeezing my knee. “Have I ever mentioned that you’re the best husband in the world?”

“Not in the past minute or two, but I’ll allow it. Have I ever mentioned that you’re the most beautiful, stunning, talented, and adorable wife in the world?”

She playfully bats my shoulder. “You’re just saying that so you can try to knock me up tonight.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Jorie pulls out her phone, thumbing through the fertility-tracking app she’s been using for the past three months. “According to this, we have a three-day window.”

“In that case, I guess we’re going to be ordering in food all weekend. Let’s cancel the reservation and just get takeout.”

Her eyes blaze as she nods. “Definitely. We should be professional and get right to work.”

“That’s my girl.”

We drive into the sunset toward The Roadhouse, picking up enough food for dinner as well as snacks all night. Then it’s off to our house that Jorie has turned into a comfortable home that vaguely resembles the cabin.

My heart fills with warmth, as it does hundreds of times every single day. My

amazing woman has given my life...life.

I've had many strange jobs in my life. The gig as Jorie's bodyguard was never supposed to be permanent.

I've never been so happy to be utterly, completely wrong.

Join us in June 2025 for steamy romances from some of your favorite romance short authors! This series is packed with secret billionaires, MC and mountain men, celebrities, and all the instalove to make your heart melt.

Love on Route 14

Want more hot bodyguards?

I'd never crossed a line with a client before, yet our chemistry was so scorching hot I couldn't resist her... Ashley was so sexy and innocent that my need to care for her took over.

Click for more... Her New Bodyguard: Jackson

If you're into hulking, grumpy mountain men, check out Rescued by the Surly Woodsman...

Sage

I line up my shot, zooming in as much as I can without distortion, then slowly walk closer.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:45 am

I scream as my foot slides out from under me and sideways into a jagged branch. The wood pierces right through my sneaker and into my skin, while I land on my butt, hard.

The warbler looks down at me, blinks, then flies away at top speed.

Ow ow freakin' OW.

At least my camera landed on my stomach instead of on the ground. I take a moment to catch my breath, my foot already throbbing with a sickening, stabbing pain. My butt and hip begin to ache.

The sun dips over the mountain, and the forest darkens as if someone had turned down a dimmer switch. And I haven't heard anyone else out here on the trails over the past hour or so.

Tears prick my eyes. Why couldn't this have happened this morning, when there were a ton of hikers around?

I pack away my camera safely, then take a deep breath and try to stand. Owwww. Seriously bad idea. Putting any weight on that foot makes the open wound rub against the torn canvas. Plus, it's so slippery right here that I might fall on my face next time.

"Hello?" I holler in the direction of the trail.

No answer. There is a huge boulder directly between me and the trail, and I can't

exactly shout straight through it. Still, I'll have to try.

I scream my head off for five minutes straight until my voice gives out and I start to sound like an old blues singer.

Then thunder rumbles in the distance, sending a shiver up my spine.

Was that a voice calling out? It was too faint to be sure. I call back, but my voice is blown out. Gathering up my things, I try to roll to the side, then bring myself to kneeling.

Some twigs snap right beside the boulder. I shrink back in shock.

Oh my... Is that a bear?

No. A gigantic man is lumbering toward me!

He's definitely a local mountain guy, wearing a green plaid flannel shirt, well worn jeans, and work boots. And his thick arms have definitely chopped down a few trees.

He's tall, dark and, frankly, grouchy looking, but there's something about him that radiates strength and confidence. He's obviously the kind of take-charge guy who will probably think I'm a pitiful mess.

As he comes closer, my mouth falls open in shock at the warmth and depth in his beautiful dark hazel eyes.

It doesn't matter that he's scowling as if I've just ruined his day.

He's gorgeous. No, not just gorgeous... He's panty-drenching sexy.

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Rescued by the Surly Woodsman