



Accidentally Kidnapping the Groom

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: When you open the door of your getaway van and find your boss inside, dressed for his wedding...

I needed to leave town in a hurry to escape the mobsters looking for my dad. How was I supposed to know that the van I stole belonged to the company catering my boss's wedding? Or that he was inside?

Now we're stuck in a remote cabin while a mountain blizzard rages outside. But inside, things are getting hot.

Because to claim his inheritance and save his bar, my boss must marry and have a baby ASAP. And he's decided my punishment for the kidnapping is to become his new wife and mother of his child.

Accidentally Kidnapping the Groom is a short and steamy instalove novella, starring an overprotective dominant bar owner and the woman-in-trouble he'll stop at nothing to claim and plant a baby inside.

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APRIL

I wipe down the polished pine bar for what must be the hundredth time tonight, more out of habit than necessity. The scent of the homemade vinegar and lemon polish that our cook Freda makes and swears is better than anything you can get in the store mingles with stale beer and the ghost of someone's overpriced cologne. Tuesday nights at Lola's are usually quiet, but tonight we're unusually busy.

The neon beer signs cast their perpetual green and blue glow across the room, painting everything in dusky twilight colors even though it's barely seven. Evening comes early during winter in this small mountain town. A few regulars are scattered around. Old Jim on his usual stool at the end of the bar, nursing his usual whiskey neat. A couple of students from the community college, sharing a pitcher of cheap draft beer. Some long-haulers grabbing dinner, before they head to the truck stop a few miles up the highway and bed down in their cabs for the night.

Iris approaches the bar, her order pad stuck in the front pocket of her black apron. She grew up in this town and has been working at Lola's for several years. I've been here only six months, but we've developed the friendship that comes from sharing too many late nights and crazy customer stories. Her red curly hair is fighting to escape its ponytail, and there's a slight smudge of mascara under her right eye.

"April," she says, leaning against the bar, "remind me why I thought waiting tables was better than finishing my degree?"

I grab a glass and start making her usual shift drink, cranberry juice with a splash of soda water. She says it's a miracle cocktail because the bubbles makes you feel full,

the water hydrates you, and the cranberries ward off UTIs. "Because you said if you had to read one more academic paper about post-modern feminist theory in Victorian literature, you were going to throw yourself into the river?"

She accepts the drink with a grateful nod. "Oh yeah, that's right. Though right now, table eight is making me reconsider my life choices. They've sent back their Mojitos because they're 'not authentic enough.' Like they've ever been to Cuba."

I glance over at table eight and see four women in what I would call teacher dresses. Modest and well fitted, but allowing for easy movement. The women are probably attending an educational training seminar hosted at the community college. "Well, in this next batch I'll add some extra authenticity, free of charge." I didn't make the women's first round of drinks. That was done by our other bartender, Liam, who's just finished his shift. And he makes a mean Mojito, so I'm not sure why the teacher ladies are complaining.

"Please," Iris rolls her eyes. "Maybe you can explain to them that mint leaves aren't supposed to look Instagram-perfect after they've been properly muddled."

While I prepare the Mojitos, a new customer slides onto a barstool. He's wearing a leather jacket and has that eager look that usually means he's going to attempt to impress me with his extensive knowledge of craft beer, despite that our most exotic offering is Stella Artois. Now that skiing season has started, our town gets a lot of people like this guy who think they can impress a local girl because they're "from the city."

Never mind that I'm not local and that I spent most of my life living in Chicago. But that's not something I share with people here, or anywhere.

"What can I get you?" I ask, not pausing in my Mojito preparation.

"What's good here?" He leans forward, and I catch a whiff of that same cologne that's been lingering in the air all evening.

"Everything," I reply with practiced cheerfulness. "But be more specific."

Iris snorts softly beside me, pretending to organize her receipt book. The leather jacket guy doesn't notice.

"I'm thinking something special," he says. "Something unique. You know, I have some drink-mixing experience."

I share a quick glance with Iris, who mouths "five minutes" behind his back. Our usual bet on how long it'll take before he mentions that he once took a mixology course.

"Our house Old Fashioned is popular," I suggest, knowing he'll dismiss it in favor of something more obscure.

"Nah, too basic. How about..." he pauses for effect, "a Sazerac?"

I nod, already reaching for the rye whiskey. It's always either a Sazerac or a Negroni with these guys. Behind him, Iris holds up three fingers, then points to her watch. We got three more minutes until the mixology course mention will happen.

While I prepare his drink, the students wave for another pitcher. I signal that I'll be right with them, handling three tasks at once with the fluid efficiency that becomes second nature after years behind a bar. My parents made good money, so I didn't have to work growing up. But my uncle Nathan owned a bar and a teenage girl can never have enough money. So I spent most of high school mixing drinks, well before I was old enough to drink them myself. And then when the bad thing happened, and I had to leave town, I was really glad for the skills I'd built while working for my

uncle. Being a bartender is the perfect job when you need to be paid in cash and might have to leave town quickly.

But I don't want to think about that because I really like Fir Hollows and its people. I want to stay here for quite a while, but that's not up to me.

I banish the distressing thoughts and concentrate on the Mojitos I'm making. The ice clicks against glass, liquor flows, mint leaves are muddled (authentically, thank you very much), and somewhere in the background, the jukebox switches from Fleetwood Mac to Tom Petty.

"You know," the leather jacket guy says, right on cue, "when I took that mixology course in San Francisco..."

Iris silently pumps her fist in victory, and I make a mental note that I owe her a coffee. She gathers up the Mojitos on her tray, each glass garnished with fresh mint and a lime wheel. "Try to contain your excitement about table eight's reaction," she whispers as she passes.

The leather jacket guy watches me make his Sazerac. Thankfully, he's not giving me tips on how to perfect it. "So," he says when I slide the glass across the bar to him and take his credit card to run up the sale, "what time do you finish your shift?"

Inwardly, I sigh, but paste a fake smile on my face. "It's a long one tonight."

"I don't mind waiting."

I shake my head. "I have a boyfriend." Technically, I'm not lying since I have friends, okay, I know people who are boys, well, men. And I hate that claiming to belong to another man is more a deterrent than just a simple "no." But I'm not up for the back and forth that happens when I simply decline. Why do men think that when

a woman says “no,” it’s the beginning of a negotiation?

“He’s a lucky man,” the leather jacket guy says. “What’s his name?”

I should say it’s none of his business, but my brain blurts out, “Jay.” Maybe because the owner of Lola’s is so often on my mind. Maybe because I’ve been lusting after him the entire time I’ve been working here. I shake my head at my foolishness. Luckily the guy has left with his Sazerac and is now approaching the teacher ladies, who giggle as he talks to them. Maybe he can educate them about what makes Mojitos authentic.

The night continues its slow dance. I serve drinks, make change, listen to snippets of conversations that blur together like watercolors. Old Jim orders another whiskey, and I pour it a little lighter than usual. He’s here often enough that I know when to ease him off. The students finally pack up their laptops, leaving behind a decent tip and a table scattered with beer-stained paper napkins covered in what looks like physics equations.

Around nine, there’s a brief rush when a van of skiers drives up and they all come inside. The bar fills with the sound of laughing, talking, and glasses clinking. Iris and I move in our practiced ballet. She gracefully wanders around the tables of the diners, giving me their drink orders. I navigate the narrow space behind the bar as I fill her orders and take the ones from the patrons sitting at the bar, as well as the tall tables just beyond it. Luckily, the patrons sitting there tonight are all locals and they don’t mind shouting their orders to me. I don’t have to go over to them in person.

Iris appears at the POS station section of the bar. “I need two gin and tonics, a vodka soda, and a guy at table nine wants to know if we have any Japanese whiskey.”

"We have Suntory Toki," I reply, already pulling glasses for the gin and tonics.

"We do?"

"No, but he seems like the type who won't know the difference if we give him Jameson and tell him it's a special reserve." And now I'm thinking about my boss again, because that is his full name. Jameson King. Known to everyone as Jay. My lady parts tingle, just thinking about him, and heat creeps up my neck and face.

Luckily, Iris doesn't notice. She just laughs, then quickly composes her face into professional pleasantness as she returns to her tables. The leather jacket guy leaves with one of the teacher ladies. At least someone was impressed by his mixology knowledge. I smirk.

A glass breaks somewhere in the back of the bar, followed by a smattering of applause. I grab the broom and dustpan from behind the bar, but Iris waves me off. "I got it," she says.

"Thanks," I say, turning back to make another round of drinks for the skiers. My feet ache, and I can feel a headache building behind my eyes, but there's still three hours until last call. I grab a glass of water for myself and take a quick sip, watching the ebb and flow of people around the bar.

The thing about being a bartender is that you're both participant and observer in the nightly theater of human interaction. You're part of everyone's evening but also separate from it, keeping one foot in their world and one in your own. You hear their stories, their jokes, their problems, but you're never fully drawn into their orbit. It's kind of lonely. But right now, when I can't afford to be close to anyone, it gives me enough of social interaction to not feel completely alone.

Iris returns from cleaning up the broken glass, sliding behind the bar to grab more napkins. "Table nine says the Japanese whiskey is excellent, by the way. He's had nothing quite like it."

I shake my head, smiling. "Did you tell him it's a rare batch?"

"Naturally. Limited edition, aged in cherry blossom barrels. He's ordering another."

We share a look of amused conspiracy, the kind that comes from years of dealing with pretentious customers together. The jukebox has moved on to Bruce Springsteen now, and old Jim is softly singing along, slightly off-key but with feeling.

I set up for last call, restocking glasses and checking inventory. The skiers prepare to depart, leaving behind empty glasses and crumpled napkins, the debris of celebration. A couple at the end of the bar are deep in conversation, their heads tilted together, fingers almost but not quite touching on the bar top. I deliberately avoid listening to their words as I wipe down nearby surfaces. Some moments deserve their privacy, even in a public space.

And couples make me feel lonely.

I refuse to examine my feelings beyond that. There's not time for introspection in my life right now. When you're on the run, you must focus on surviving and take the good moments when they come.

Tonight is one of those good moments. Working with Iris and sharing laughter.

I look around Lola's again. The door to the office in the back is open. In the doorway, Jay stands, watching me. His whiskey-colored eyes intense. I didn't know he was coming in tonight. For how long has he been watching me?

My hormones stand at rapt attention, setting all my lady parts a-tingle.

I shoot him a quick smile and then pretend I have to do something at the other end of the bar.

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JAY

I didn't mean to go to Lola's tonight, but I had to pick up some papers that my brother needs. For a couple of months, I've avoided going in whenever April's working. She's too much of a temptation. Even tonight, I vowed to just come in the back and grab the papers before anyone noticed I was here.

And yet, here I am.

Watching her like some stalker because a guy was hitting on her at the bar.

The usual Tuesday night regulars are thinning out and the party of skiers seems ready to leave. They're a merry bunch, but it looks like one of them is the designated driver. The guy tries to herd them out the door, with mixed results.

April's behind the bar, moving with that fluid grace that first caught my attention six months ago when she interviewed for the position. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a neat braid, and she's laughing at something Iris just said, her entire face lighting up in a way that makes my chest tight and my cock hard. Even this far away, her delectable curves are a temptation and my hands fist with the need to touch them.

I close my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. It doesn't help that she's exactly the kind of bartender Lola's needs, professional, quick-witted, great with customers. The regulars love her. The staff respects her, and she's never once called in sick or been late for a shift. In short, she's perfect.

Too perfect.

The sound of glasses breaking in the kitchen pulls me back to reality. I head over to investigate, grateful for the distraction. Marcus, our new dishwasher, is standing amid a scatter of broken wine glasses, looking mortified.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. King," he starts, but I wave it off.

I've given up on getting him to call me Jay, like the rest of the staff. "Don't worry. Breakage happens. Get the broom, clean it up carefully, and then let's make sure you adjust how you stack them." I help him clean up, showing him how to better organize the glassware.

It's easier to focus on these tangible problems, the simple physics of properly stored glasses and efficient kitchen workflow. For a few moments, I'm distracted from my carnal thoughts about the hot blonde behind the bar. She's my employee and off limits for more reasons than that, but someone needs to tell my dick that.

When I return to the main floor, April's handling a rush at the bar with typical efficiency. I should head out, but instead I watch how she makes each drink with precise movements. How she remembers every regular's preferred pour. How she makes each customer feel like they have her full attention while simultaneously keeping track of multiple orders.

"Jay?" She startles me as she shouts across the room. "The beer distributor left a message about the IPA delivery. Want me to handle it?"

"No, I've got it," I say, perhaps too quickly. "You've got your hands full out here." I retreat to my office, but leave the door open behind me. The beer distributor's message is a welcome distraction, numbers, logistics, the straightforward puzzle of inventory management.

I need to focus on all of that, but my thoughts are filled with April and I can't look

away from her. I glance out into the main area again and see her showing Iris how to make some complicated cocktail, her hands moving with confidence as she explains each step. They're both laughing again, and my dick gets harder.

I shake my head. If my brother and closest friend, Nick, found out that I'm turned on by only a woman's laugh, he'd fall over laughing himself.

I force myself to look at the paperwork on my desk. Now that I'm here and apparently can't tear myself away, I might as well get some work done. The liquor license needs renewal next month. The health inspection is coming up. The walk-in cooler's temperature has been fluctuating. These are the things I need to think about, the responsibilities that come with running this place.

I inherited Lola's from my grandmother. She built it up from scratch and worked here all her life. She was obsessed with Barry Manilow. His song Copacabana was her favorite. Nick owns half the place, but prefers to be a silent partner and focus on our other business. The one that nobody knows about. We both served in the army's Special Forces and after we finished our active duty, we returned home to Fir Hollows. But Uncle Sam still uses us for special missions, so we started a security company to keep that cash flow separate from the bar.

A knock on my door makes me look up. It's April again, and I sit straighter in my chair, maintaining the professional distance I've carefully cultivated.

"The couple at table seven wants to speak with the manager," she says. "They're complaining about their martinis being too strong."

I stand, grateful for a legitimate reason to step away from my thoughts. "I'll take care of it." I wait for her to walk away before I follow. Being close to her is a torture I don't think I can handle tonight. Everything feels extra raw. Mostly because of the arrangement Charlotte and I will have soon.

For reasons only known to her, my grandmother put a condition in the will that I have to be married by the time I'm thirty, and intending to have children within two years. If I don't, Lola's goes to the highest bidder in a sealed auction where nobody knows what the others bid. The lawyers only now told us about this, and I'm a month away from my thirtieth birthday.

Charlotte is an old childhood friend who's doing me a solid. She has her own reasons for wanting to be wed. We'll get married on Friday afternoon, but there will be no baby-making. Neither of us have those feelings for each other. This is the first step in avoiding the disaster of losing Lola's. Hopefully, we'll find a solution to the whole fucked up situation in the next two years. If that has to be an IVF baby, that works for me. I've always wanted kids and I'm not losing Lola's. It's all I have left of my grandmother. As bonkers as she apparently was, she raised me and Nick. That lucky bastard is spared from this lunatic situation by being younger than me by only five minutes.

But I have other problems to deal with tonight. Like unhappy customers at table seven, so I head their way.

The couple is exactly what I expected, the type who complain to get free drinks. I handle it with practiced ease, the familiar dance of customer service that's become second nature over the years. April watches from the bar, and when I catch her eye, she gives me a knowing look that says she's dealt with plenty of customers like this before.

That's another thing I admire about her, her ability to read people, to handle difficult situations with grace. It would be so easy to mistake our professional rapport for something more, to imagine that her competence and friendliness mean something they don't.

Sometimes I think I see a spark of attraction in her blue eyes, and as much as I've

wanted to act on it, I've been able to resist temptation. But something is pushing me over the edge tonight. The idea of her with someone else physically hurts me. Hence me going into full creepy stalker mode when I see a guy hitting on her. But April dating might be closer to reality than I want it to be.

Back in my office, I focus again on the schedule for the rest of the week. April's requested Friday afternoon and all of Saturday off. I know she's not asking for it to go to my wedding. None of the staff knows about that. We're keeping it a quiet ceremony with only my brother and one of Charlotte's friends as witnesses.

Iris and Liam have already agreed to work the double-shifts to cover for April being gone. And it's her first time asking for a weekend since she started. There's no reason for me to not approve the request.

And yet, there's a twist in my stomach when I wonder if she has a date. It's none of my business. But I can't let it go. Why does she need the night off? I have to know.

On the main floor, Iris and April are saying goodbye to the last stragglers and closing up the bar.

I walk up to the door and poke my head out. "April, can I see you before you leave?"

She throws me a surprised look, but nods. "Sure thing. We're just about finished. The kitchen has already left."

Iris shouts goodbye from the front door and April locks it behind her before she heads over to my office. "What's up?" She leans up against the door frame, her hands in her back pockets. The posture pushes her chest tight against the white t-shirt with Lola's logo that she's wearing. I fight against staring at her, but lose.

I have to clear my throat before I can talk. "I'm reviewing the schedule. You've

asked for the weekend off?"

She blinks a few times and takes a step into the room. "Is that a problem?" She moves her hands from her back pockets and pushes a strand of hair behind her ear while biting her lip. My cock is about to bust through my zipper. "I thought Liam and Iris said they could cover. Is that no longer the case?"

I feel like an asshole for making her worry, but the devil inside has to know if she's dating someone. It's none of my business and if she is, there's nothing I can do about it. Once Charlotte and I say "I do," I'm locked in until we dissolve our agreement. It might be a contract marriage for us, but to anyone else, it has to look real. We've agreed to not sleep with anyone else for as long as we're married. My hand is going to get a hell of a workout.

I force a smile on my face. "Yeah, no they're still okay with working double-shifts. I'm just wondering if there's anything going on. You haven't asked for a weekend off. Do you need help with anything?" I get up from behind the desk and stand in front of her. Taking her hand, I squeeze it. "I'm here if you need me."

She inhales quickly, and her hand jerks, but she returns my squeeze. "Thanks." Her voice has turned husky. "But I'm good. It's actually me helping someone. That's why I need the time." Our hands are doing a weird dance, the fingers wrapping around each other. Mesmerized, I'm watching them entwining.

April stares at them too. Her blue eyes meet mine and heat flares in them.

"Who are you helping?" I rasp out. If she says her boyfriend, I promise I will stop whatever this thing is that's happening between us right now. Okay, I promise I will try to stop this thing.

"My neighbors are moving to a retirement community in Florida. They need help

clearing out their mountain cabin.” She stares at my lips, licking her own.

I groan as my jeans grow even tighter. “April,” I groan.

“Yes?” she whispers, still staring at my lips.

“This will escalate quickly if you don’t stop thinking what you’re thinking right now.”

“What am I thinking?” She finally moves her gaze from my lips to my eyes. Which is even worse, because in them I see the same heat that I feel.

I pull her closer. “You’re thinking you want me to fuck you right here, right now.”

She bits her lip again. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m thinking.” Her head tilts to the side. “So will you?”

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APRIL

Claiming my mouth with his, Jay backs me up against the wall. I lace my fingers behind his neck to stay upright.

He pushes up my skirt above my waist and grips my ass, massaging the two halves with his powerful hands. One finger slips under my panties, lightly skims my asshole, and then teases my pussy lips.

“Good girl,” he growls against my mouth. “You’re already wet for me.”

I’ve been freaking ready for months. Flames lick my skin and scorching lava flows through my veins. I want more. Need more.

More skin-to-skin contact. More heat.

Jay trails kisses down my throat and then licks my collarbone. When he presses his cock against my heat, I know I’ll explode if I don’t get out of my clothes. I need him inside me. Now.

I release my grip on Jay’s neck and pull my T-shirt over my head. I try to slide off my boots, but I almost trip when they won’t cooperate.

Strong arms grip my elbows and steady me. “Slow down.” Jay chuckles against the skin of my collarbone. “I’ll help you,” he whispers before trailing his hot lips down my neck again. His breath teases my breasts, and my nipples tighten into hard buds.

I groan, pulling him closer.

“Patience,” he growls, but finally helps me get my boots off. He picks me up, carries me to his desk, and props me on top. The chilly surface against my ass hits me like a cold shower and pulls me out of my feverish trance of desire. I look up at Jay. “We need to think about this,” I say. “You’re my boss.”

He chuckles. “For once you notice. I wish you’d pay that much attention when I try to tell you and Iris what to do.”

“Maybe you’re not giving me the right orders.” I’m playing sassy, but on the inside my heart beats so fast I’m sure he can hear it. This is risky. Too risky.

But I can’t make myself stop. I’ve wanted him for so long.

“What kind of orders are the right kind?”

“The kind that I give.” I don’t know where this brazen woman comes from. But I like her.

He leans over me, sliding his arms up to my shoulders, his palms caressing my biceps on their way. “What would you order me to do?”

My breath won’t slow down. “I don’t know. I have to think about this.”

“You think too much.” A wry smile stretches his lips. “But ponder away. I’ll keep myself busy until you figure out your commands.”

His smile mesmerizes me, and so does the way his T-shirt clings to his muscular chest. I reach out and put my palm against his chest. I want this man with a desperation I’ve never felt before.

Jay's abdomen contracts, and he hisses at my touch. He captures my hand under his palm. "You can't touch me like that, Princess. Not if you want me to last."

I stare at our hands pressed together against the shirt. The steady beating of his heart drums under my fingers. He is so alive and such a perfect specimen of a man. I shouldn't indulge myself just because he has such a hot body. It is absolutely the wrong thing to do. I suck in a breath between my teeth.

"Did I hurt you?" Jay asks, releasing my hand. He crouches before me, his eyes searching my face. "Do you want to stop?"

"No," I whisper, lost in his whisky-colored eyes. They blaze with desire. That heat matches my lust, which keeps building despite my attempts to curb it. All these feelings are overwhelming.

I close my eyes and try to slow my breathing and tamp down the heat still blazing in my body. The warmth of Jay's hand on my knee makes me open my eyes again.

"Hey," he says. "Are you okay?"

The concern I see in his eyes nearly undoes me. This man, this sexy man, wants me physically but is also emotionally tuned in to me.

"I'm not good with too many emotions too quickly." The words blurt out before I can stop them.

He smiles. "You're in good company. Neither am I."

My fingertips itch to touch him. I reach out and stroke one silky dark strand of his hair and then move my hand to cup his cheek. "You're so beautiful," I murmur.

Jay grins, but the heat in his eyes flares up. “I think that’s my line.”

I lean forward to taste his lips but stop just shy of making contact, enjoying his breath mingling with mine for a moment. I move my hand down to the spot on his chest that I touched earlier. The fabric of the shirt feels deliciously coarse against my fingers, and I love how his heart beats against my skin.

His pupils widen, and a growl rumbles inside his chest.

I pause and close my eyes. In my mind, I recite all the reasons I shouldn’t continue to physically explore this wonderful man.

This hot, sexy man. This delicious mountain of hot muscle that I so badly want to climb.

I open my eyes. “Kiss me,” I whisper. For once in my life, I will stop thinking so much and just feel.

He hesitates, obviously not prepared for my words.

I pull on the fabric of his shirt and smile when he growls again. “Kiss me,” I repeat more firmly. “That is my first order.”

He leans forward and captures my mouth with his. “Good girl, you chose well.”

I set the pace of our kiss and pull him down with me as I recline on the desk. I moan as he presses his body against mine.

Jay lets go of my lips just long enough to shed his shirt. He looks down at me with a satisfied smile on his lips.

Heat flows to between my legs. The man makes me wet by just smiling.

He leans in to kiss me again. His clever hands make quick work of pulling off my panties and I'm completely bared to him.

The coolness of the air against my pussy contrasts exquisitely with the fervent kisses he trails along my neck and down to my collarbone. He pulls off my t-shirt and nuzzles my nipples through my bra.

My hips buck off the desk.

Jay pushes me back down with a chuckle and puts a hand on my thigh, anchoring me in place. I whimper when his mouth returns to pleasure my breasts.

He unbuttons his jeans and lingers on the zipper for an excruciating amount of time. "I've waited a long time for this." He finally pulls down the metal clasp and then leans back to pull off the jeans. He kneels down between my legs, his fiery gaze traveling down my body, and rests between my legs.

Some brazen part of me loves his heated gaze on my sex and I spread my legs wider.

He flicks his eyes up to mine, his gaze even hotter than before. "I'm going to enjoy tasting you, Princess."

As he continues to just stare at my pussy, I wriggle on the desk. I know my body carries more padding than what society deems beautiful. His scrutiny makes me nervous.

Reaching out my hand to him, I implore him without words to get closer and stop looking at me.

He stays on his knees, but looks up at me. “You’re so beautiful,” he says. His chest heaves as he takes a deep breath. “This is better than I had imagined.”

The heat in his gaze makes me feel powerful and desirable. I forget all about my body insecurities. “You’ve imagined us together?” I ask.

“You have no idea how often I’ve thought about this.”

Emboldened by his words and the fiery blaze in his eyes, I lean up on my elbows, aware of how the position pushes my chest out. “What exactly did you think about?” I challenge, nudging his leg with my foot.

“April.” He leans back and catches my foot in his hand. “I want to go slow, but I don’t know if I can.”

Something wild inside me responds to that heat. “I don’t want you to go slow,” I say in a hoarse voice.

Jay’s eyebrows shoot up. “Is that another order?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“What exactly do you want me to do?”

The brazen sex kitten that I apparently am with Jay appears again. “Eat my pussy.”

He lunges forward, his lips hot on my sex. He licks, no, he devours me and all I can do is fall back on the desk and try to hold on as a wave after wave of sensations hit my body.

Jay grips my hips and keeps me anchored while he pushes his mouth hard against my

core. His tongue laves my clit as he sucks me hard.

A wave of pleasure hits me and I scream out his name. I come so hard that white lights glimmer behind my eyelids.

Jay leans back and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His smile is one of male arrogance as he stands up and leans over me. “Did I execute your order to satisfaction?”

I sit up, cup the back of his neck, and kiss him deeply, tasting myself on his lips. I stroke the inside of his mouth with my tongue before capturing his lower lip between my teeth, lightly biting down. We’re both panting, and I can feel his neck muscles tense under the strain. I lean my forehead against his.

“That was adequate,” I say, still trying to catch my breath.

I feel his smile against my lips. “Only adequate? I will have to try harder for the next order then.” He leans back a little, his gaze on mine, one eyebrow cocked. “What is the next one?”

“Are you sure you can handle another one?” I allow some of the wild heat I feel inside to dance in my eyes.

“I’m ready for whatever you want.”

“Hold nothing back.” I nibble his collarbone and then kiss it to take the sting out of my bite. “I want all of you. All of your wild self.”

“And what would you have me do?”

I bite his earlobe. “Fuck me as hard as you can,” I say hoarsely.

He's on me so fast I barely catch a breath before he pushes me back and kisses me. He pushes up my bra and then plants one hand on the desk by my head. The other anchors my hip.

His lips suck my nipples to tight buds and then he softly nips them.

I almost come undone again and moan loudly as heat shoots from the tips of my breasts to my pussy. Liquid warmth fills my center. I twist slightly so I can get a hand on his boxer briefs. Massaging his cock through the cotton, I purr when I feel how rigid and wide it is.

He grabs my wrist and holds my hand still. "I won't last long if you continue that."

"I told you, I don't want to go slow."

Jay gives me a heated look before reaching for something in his back pocket. I bite his nipple that hovers over my mouth. He pulls back and kisses me lightly. "Careful with those teeth."

"Please tell me that's a condom," I say.

"As you wish." He holds up the foil package and smiles.

"Good." I reach down and pull off his jeans and boxer briefs. As his cock springs free, I smile. Finally.

I close my fingers around its delicious hardness.

Jay groans, his head falling back.

I lean into him, licking his neck. Using my free hand, I push until he's standing in

front of me.

When I lean over and put the tip of his cock in my mouth, he bucks and then grabs my hair, holding me still. “If you do that, this will get really wild, but only for a brief time.”

I laugh, surprised at how much joy there is in that sound. I tilt my head, looking up at his face. “Do you have an alternate suggestion?”

His eyes turn dark and predatory. “Let’s get back to what you ordered me to do.”

I lean back on the desk again while he covers himself with the condom.

He braces himself above me. Staring down at me, he smiles slowly before leaning down to kiss me.

I grip his shoulders, trying to pull him closer, but the infuriating man resists. I’m about to show him who’s really in charge when he whispers, “You’re mine now, Princess,” and enters me in one swift motion. Delicious friction enhances the sensation of him filling me to the fullest.

When he pulls out and thrusts again, the heat that’s been building between us overpowers my senses. I whimper in the back of my throat.

Waves of pleasure radiate out from my pussy and through my body. The intensity increases as I buck my hips, meeting Jay thrust for thrust.

He leans down and sucks a nipple into his mouth.

I open my legs wider, grab his ass, and push him deeper inside me.

When he captures the other nipple with his lips, I forget how to breathe.

The waves of pleasure flooding my body intensify even more. My entire world becomes this man. Here and now. In this room.

Jay pulls one of my legs over his hip and then raises it higher, strong fingers gripping my thigh with just the right pressure on the verge of pain but with so much pleasure.

As he thrusts into me, hitting exactly the right spot, a surge of ecstasy sweeps through my body. I scream out my release as the power of the intense pleasure overcomes me.

I feel Jay's chest rumble, and then he cries out as he climaxes.

A second swell of pleasure flows through me, and for one glorious moment, my entire body focuses on the man who collapses on top of me.

I savor his delicious weight.

I push my hair back, take a deep breath, and then exhale. Turning my head, I find Jay watching me, his eyes filled with an emotion that scares me with its intensity.

He blinks, and whatever he's feeling is gone. "Was that executed to your satisfaction?" he asks.

"Very." I smile at him.

"I have to dispose of..." He gestures toward his crotch.

"Sure, thank you." I yawn, suddenly exhausted.

He laughs out loud. "No, Princess. Thank you." He caresses my cheek, stands up and

goes into the attached bathroom, closing the door behind him.

The air feels chilly against my skin, and suddenly I'm weirded out about lying on Jay's desk, totally exposed. I get off the desk, quickly pull down my skirt, and adjust my bra. I grab my T-shirt from the floor and pull it on. The panties go in my pocket because they are too damp to wear.

Grabbing my socks and boots, I quickly exit the office, opening and closing the door behind me as quietly as I can. I don't even pause in the staff bathroom before I sneak out the back door and drive my brazen ass home.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:52 am

APRIL

I've managed to avoid Jay for the last two days. I don't know how to process all the feelings us hooking up brought. But now it's my last shift before I get a day and a half of reprieve while helping my neighbors clear out their cabin. Hopefully being away from Lola's—and Jay—will bring some clarity.

The Friday late-morning lull in the bar is one of my favorites. The air carries the scent of freshly squeezed citrus and the warm bread we serve with our lunch salads. It's a chilly day, but sunlight slants through the wide windows, painting golden patches on the scuffed wooden floors. The place is half full, mostly occupied by retirees nursing coffee, plus a few workers on lunch breaks. Easy-going chatter floats in the air, and the soft clinking of glasses fills the spaces in between.

I wipe down the bar, my body moving on autopilot. I enjoy the calm that comes with the day shift. It lacks the frenetic energy of the evening crowd, and the regulars who do stop by are friendly enough. After only six months, Lola's and Fir Hollows feel like home. Hopefully I haven't messed that up by sleeping with my boss. I love my job and the comforting predictability of my routine.

But all of that shatters the moment the door swings open, letting in a gust of cold winter air, and a ghost from my past.

My fingers tighten around the rag in my hand as my heart stutters. He's taller than I remember, broader too. His dark suit is crisp, expensive—far too out of place in a casual spot like Lola's. But it isn't just the suit or the way he carries himself that sends ice crawling down my spine.

It's the tattoo inked just beneath his collar, visible for only a second before it disappears under the fabric. A black snake coiled around a dagger.

Viktor Volkov. The brigadier, the lieutenant, of the Russian mobster Adrik Popov. Also known as the guy my dad worked for as an accountant. Until he stole a ledger so he could make a deal with the FBI and get immunity if he turned on the mob. Supposedly, our whole family would get witness protection, and my dad immunity, from prosecution. But that didn't work out so well.

Someone at the FBI was dirty and let Popov know where our safe house was. My mom and uncle Nathan were killed in a shootout and my dad took off. I haven't seen him for six years. Which is also how long I've been on the run.

I force myself to breathe. Maybe Viktor won't recognize me. Maybe he isn't even here for me. It's been six years, and I'm not the same girl who used to visit my dad at work. Back when I thought he just worked in a regular office. I've dyed my hair, changed my name.

I've been careful.

Always so careful.

At any hint of anyone Russian paying extra attention to me, I've skipped town and created a new identity all over again.

And yet, Viktor's gaze sweeps across the room and lands on me with chilling precision.

He knows.

I force my lips into a tight smile, though I can feel the panic rising beneath my skin.

"What can I get you?" I ask, keeping my voice steady.

Viktor slides onto a barstool, his movement slow, deliberate. "Rye whiskey. Neat."

I grab a bottle from the top shelf and pour a generous measure into a glass. The ice in my veins makes my fingertips tremble. I set the drink in front of him and pray he doesn't hear the slight hitch in my breath.

Viktor lifts the glass but doesn't drink. Instead, he studies me, his head tilting ever so slightly. "Didn't expect to see you here, Anna."

I flinch and then silently curse myself for doing so. But I couldn't help it.

It's the first time I've heard my real name spoken aloud in years. Memories of my mom and uncle surface and I have to blink back tears. I miss them so much. Dad and I were never close, but my mom and her brother were my whole life while growing up.

"You must have me confused with someone else," I say, feigning indifference. I grab a towel and begin wiping down the already-clean counter. Anything to give my hands something to do.

Viktor chuckles, but there's no warmth in it. "Nice try. But you and I both know that's not true."

My stomach twists. I need to get out of here. Now.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice quieter this time.

Viktor finally takes a sip of his whiskey, savoring the taste, before setting the glass down with a soft clink. "I think you already know."

I do. Of course I do. That fucking ledger.

The ledger that killed the two people I loved most in this world.

The ledger that is the only thing currently keeping me alive.

Viktor leans in, just enough to make me feel trapped. "I'll make this easy for you, Anna. Popov wants what's his. And if he can't get it, someone has to pay. He needs to maintain his reputation in the community. You understand what I'm saying?"

My stomach turns to lead. I understand perfectly.

I nod once, just enough to acknowledge the threat and force myself to move, to breathe. "I need to step into the back to grab something," I say, keeping my tone even.

Viktor doesn't stop me. He simply smiles, slow and knowing. "Go ahead. I'm not in a rush."

I turn and walk to the storeroom, careful not to seem too hurried. But the second I'm out of sight, I bolt out the back door, into the alley, my heart hammering against my ribs.

I need to leave. Right now.

I'm not naïve enough to believe Viktor will let me go easily. He's probably expecting me to run. But I've done this before. I've escaped before. I can do it again.

This is why I keep a go bag in my car. I can leave on a moment's notice.

My car is parked a block away. I force myself to walk, not run, even though every

instinct screams at me to move faster. If I draw attention, I'll lose what little head start I have.

I make it to my car, fumble with the keys, and yank the door open. The moment I slide into the driver's seat, I let out a shaky breath.

My hands finally stop shaking enough to where I only need one try to get the key into the ignition. I twist it, but nothing happens. The engine won't start.

I try again. Same result. All I hear is a ticking sound. Maybe my battery is dead?

Then, I see the note.

It's sitting right on my dashboard, a simple piece of paper folded in half. My breath catches as I reach for it with trembling fingers.

Inside, scrawled in neat, careful handwriting, are three words.

You Can't Run.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:52 am

JAY

It's the day of my wedding and my mood is fucking miserable. I'm so short-tempered that I'm taking out my irritation on my best man, who's also my brother. I've been snarling at him and picking arguments all morning. Finally, Nick told me to take a walk because even he couldn't stand my sorry ass. He said that if I didn't figure out my shit before Charlotte gets here, he'd punch me.

That made me finally stop and take a breath. Charlotte is doing me a big favor. Even if we both know this wedding isn't real, she deserves a happy day. Every bride should be happy at their wedding.

Maybe the groom too, but that's not possible for me. Now that I've tasted April and know what it's like to be buried balls-deep inside her, I don't know how I'm supposed to survive without experiencing that again.

And she left me. Fucking just snuck out the door while I disposed of the condom.

Even worse, she's been avoiding me. I've tried to text and call, but she's not returning either. I even went by Lola's, trying to talk to her, but she kept people around her constantly and had an excuse every time I tried to get her alone.

The weather is as miserable as I am, cold and gray. It's too chilly to be outside, so I'm hiding in the back of a catering van that's parked outside the wedding venue.

I sit in the back of the van, arms crossed, staring at the neatly stacked trays of food that will be served at someone else's reception. We're not having one.

Although, Nick is hosting a dinner at his house—probably catered, knowing his cooking abilities. The trays smell of garlic, herbs, and something sweet—maybe caramelized onions. It should make me hungry, but my stomach is a tangled knot. A tightening noose of dread.

I shouldn't be here. Not in the back of this van, and certainly not getting married in less than an hour. My phone buzzes with an incoming message from Nick. I turn off the display without reading it. I can't face him right now.

Charlotte is like a sister to both of us, but Nick has an extra sweet spot for her. If he knew I was sitting here, thinking about another woman when I'm about to get married to her, he'd kick my ass so hard I'd never be able to shit again.

Hell, I want to kick my own ass for being so stupid. I should never have touched April, but now that I have, that's all I want to do. Get my hands on her skin, again. And my lips on her mouth. And my cock deep inside her pussy.

I'm so fucking screwed. Because I'm in love with her.

April.

Her name is a bullet lodged in my chest, a wound that I only just realized was fatal. It had been so easy to push it aside, to pretend I didn't feel it, until now. Now that I've had her in my arms. Now that I know what I'm missing.

Now that I'm about to get married to someone else.

Leaning my head back against the metal side of the van, I let out a slow, unsteady breath. I shouldn't be thinking about her. I should be thinking about Charlotte. About the huge fucking favor she's doing me and how much I owe her for that. But all I can think about is how it felt to kiss April. How it felt to be inside her.

I run a hand through my hair, frustration bubbling up in my chest. Why did I let it get this far? Why did I keep telling myself that what I felt for April was just an attraction?

I shake my head. I could get out of this van, find April, tell her?—

The van lurches forward.

“What the—” I barely have time to react before the movement throws me backward. My shoulder slams into a metal shelf, and a tray of hors d’oeuvres crashes onto the floor beside me. Who the hell is driving?

I scramble to my feet, gripping the side of the van for balance, but the driver must have hit a speed bump or swerved because the next thing I know, my feet slip out from under me. My head smacks against something hard—a crate, maybe, or the side of the van—and a burst of pain explodes behind my eyes.

The world goes dark.

I don’t know how long I’m out, but when I come to, my head is throbbing, and I can’t move my arms. They’re tied to something and so are my legs. I try to open my eyes, but the pounding in my skull makes it impossible.

Panic claws at my chest as I try to assess the situation. Where the fuck am I? And more importantly, who the fuck has tied me up?

Think, Jay. Fucking think.

I push through the pain and force my eyes open.

April’s sitting across from me. Her blue eyes wide and filled with tears.

“What the fuck happend?” I croak.

She rushes to my side. “Oh my god. I’m so glad you woke up. I thought you were dead.”

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APRIL

The good news is that Jay is not dead.

The bad news is that I have somehow kidnapped my boss, and he's furious. Which I kind of expected, so that's why I tied him up. To make sure he'll listen to me.

I felt so relieved when I first noticed Jay's eyes flutter open, dazed and unfocused at first. His breathing was slow, shallow—then it sharpened. A jolt ran through him. His muscles went rigid as awareness slammed into his face like a brick wall.

An enraged brick wall.

And that's when I realized I should still be worried. I don't think Jay is in a frame of mind to listen.

He's wearing a tux, so I must have abducted him from someone's wedding. Which makes sense, since the van I borrowed was parked outside the small wedding chapel in town.

Maybe borrowed is playing loose with the truth. Okay, I stole it. But it was sitting there with the keys inside. If I wasn't so afraid of Viktor catching up with me, I'd never have taken it. I've never stolen a thing in my life. When your mom and uncle are gunned down in front of you because of your dad living a life of crime, you walk the straight and narrow path for the rest of your life. Or, maybe you fully embrace the criminal life to get revenge, but I'm just one girl. Taking on the Russian mob of Chicago was not an option. so, I ran and stayed away from crime.

Until now. Now I've committed a felony.

Jay tries to move, but the zip ties around his wrists keep him pinned to the chair. The sound of plastic grating against wood fills the room as he struggles against his bonds.

I found the zip ties in the back of the van.

After I found Jay, covered in food, and passed out. It was a pain to drag him into this cabin. Who knew someone in such great shape could weight that much?

"April," he growls, his voice thick with anger and confusion. "What the fuck is this?"

I flinch, my pulse thudding in my ears. I take a step back, my boot scraping against the floor.

"Jay, please," I say, forcing my voice to stay steady. "Just...just calm down."

His body jerks as he pulls harder against the zip ties. "I'm tied to a fucking chair, April! Untie me. Right now."

"I can't." The words taste bitter coming out.

His nostrils flare, his jaw tightening until I swear I hear his teeth grind. "You did this," he spits. "What the hell is wrong with you? Who are you working with?"

Guilt claws at my ribs. I shake my head. "I'm not working with anyone, but had to tie you up."

"You had to?" He lets out a short, humorless laugh, but there's nothing funny about the fury burning in his eyes. "Let me the fuck go."

If only it were that simple. I swallow hard, scanning the inside of the cabin. I lit the logs in the fireplace when I first got here. We're up in the mountains, in a remote area, and a winter storm is coming through. Luckily, the cabin is well stocked with food and firewood. This is my neighbors' vacation home. They told me where the key was, in case I got here before them. Which I did. But judging from how heavily the snow falls outside the window right now, I don't think they'll be making the drive until the storm passes.

"I need you to listen to me," I say, voice lower now, urgent. "I've put you in danger, but I didn't know you were in the back of the car."

He scoffs, shaking his head. "I don't give a shit about your games, April. I don't know what this is, but you need to?—"

"My dad stole something from the Russian mob," I blurt out. The words taste like gasoline on my tongue. "And they think I know where it is, so they're chasing me. They've been chasing me for six years. And now, because of me, they'll be after you, too."

His face goes blank for half a second before his expression hardens again. "What the fuck?"

I swallow back the rising panic clawing at my throat. "I know it sounds bonkers, but it's the truth."

His chest rises and falls with deep, measured breaths. "You should've told me," he says finally, voice still edged with anger. "I thought we were friends."

"Friends." The laughter bubbling up inside me is laced with hysteria. "I have had no real friends for six years. You are my boss and we fucked once, that's all."

His eyes lock onto mine, sharp as broken glass. “If that’s all, why did you sneak out and avoid me for days?”

I suck in a breath. “I panicked.” Sex with Jay unsettled me. I’m still processing the emotions it brought up. Okay, fine, I’ve suppressed all the emotions it brought up and am in denial about feeling anything for Jay. “I had bigger problems,” I say weakly.

He sighs. “April, just untie me. I have to call my brother and I have to call Charlotte. I was supposed to get married today.”

An icepick stabs my chest. “Married,” I whisper. “You fucked me silly on the desk in your office a few days before your wedding to another woman?”

Jay flinches. “When you say it like that, it sounds bad. But I can explain?—”

I lift my hand and shake my head. “Shut the fuck up.” The betrayal is so sharp, I lose my breath for a moment. I thought Jay was one of the good guys. I stagger to the couch across from the chair where I tied him up and sink into it.

Jay exhales slowly, shaking his head again. “Untie me, April.”

“I can’t,” I say, and this time my voice cracks. “Not yet.” I have to figure out what to do first, but his marriage news has blocked my brain.

“Goddamn it, April.” He yanks at the zip ties again, veins straining in his forearms. He looks like he’s about to break the damn chair.

“Who are you marrying?” I ask. “Why hasn’t anyone at Lola’s met your fiancée?” I’m pretty sure Liam or Iris would have told me if they knew Jay was about to get married. The two of them love gossip and are the opposite of discrete when they have tea to spill.

Jay stills. "I wasn't unfaithful," he says with a sigh. "It's a complicated situation." He barks out a dry laugh. "Not as complicated as being chased by the Russian mob, but still." He rattles the arms of the chair again. "Let's figure this out together and head back into town and sort everything out. Nick and I can help you. We can keep you safe."

"Nobody can keep me safe. They always find me." I look out the window. The wind has picked up and even though it's dark outside, I can see the snow hitting the glass. "I don't think anyone is going anywhere tonight though. We're definitely not getting off this mountain. But the good news is that nobody can reach us either."

The sound of plastic snapping flicks my gaze back to Jay. His hands are free and he's massaging his wrists. I cringe when I see the red welts that mar his skin. I did that.

I stand up, not sure if I should go toward him or run away. "How did you do that?"

He looks up at me and fishes a multi-tool out of his pocket. "I was in the Special Forces," he says calmly while he cuts the ties holding his legs to the chair.

"If you knew how to snap the twist ties, why didn't you do it earlier?"

"I wanted to see if you would untie me. I wasn't sure what kind of game you were running."

"It's not a game."

He stands up, but wobbles. I run over and prop him up before he falls. He shakes his legs out and then seems to be steady again. I let him go and take a step back.

Jay grabs my hand and pulls me toward him. He caresses my face. "Here's the plan," he says, looking deeply into my eyes. "I'm going to wash up and get all this food crap

off me. You are going to sit in front of the fire and warm up.”

“But—”

“And then we’ll talk.”

While Jay’s cleaning up, I go through the kitchen to see what kind of food there is. By the time he comes out of the bathroom, I’ve assembled a meal of clam chowder from cans and crackers. I even found a bottle of merlot and some stemmed glasses. I put it all on the low sofa table in front of the fire.

Jay pads over, wearing his tux pants and shirt. There’s still stains on both garments, but with evidence of him trying to wipe them off. His hair is wet, and he’s ditched his shoes, wearing only socks. “The shower is wonderful,” he says. “And this looks amazing. I’m so hungry.”

I take another gulp of wine. I poured myself a large measure as soon as I found the bottle. “Um. So we should talk then.” Even though I’m fortified by wine, I’m still nervous.

Jay pours himself a glass of wine and sits down on the blanket I’ve spread between the table and the fireplace. “Let me start,” he says. “I know I said I’m in a complicated situation, but I think my story will be a lot shorter than you explaining why the Russian mob is after you.”

I take another sip of wine. “Good point.” Also, I don’t think I could tell my story before knowing how screwing my brains out a few days before getting married isn’t cheating.

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JAY

While we eat, April listens patiently as I explain the situation with my inheritance and having to marry Charlotte. Or actually, being lucky enough that Charlotte is so good of a friend that she's willing to help me out.

"Do you believe me?" I end with, and hold my breath waiting for her answer. Her trust in me is more important than I thought.

She shrugs and avoids looking at me. "I mean, I just don't get what's in it for her?"

That's tricky. "Charlotte has her reasons for entering a platonic marriage, but it's not my story to tell."

April finally looks at me. "I haven't known you long, but I've never known you to lie."

The pressure in my chest eases. I smile at her and grab her hand. "I will never lie to you."

Her gaze searches my face for a moment, but then she nods. "Okay," she says. I believe you. "But what are you going to do now? You basically left your fiancée at the altar."

I cringe. Charlotte definitely didn't deserve that. "I called my brother while I was in the bathroom. He says the situation is handled." Actually, he shouted at me for several minutes before he let me know Charlotte was okay. The gist of his message

being that he's tired of cleaning up my crap and it's time for me to grow up. I'm not sure how he handled the situation. And it's weird when your younger brother tells you to become an adult. But I couldn't take anymore shouting. We'll figure it all out when I see him in person.

"You get cell service up here? My neighbors said they never do."

"So that's who owns this cabin?"

"Yeah, I was supposed to drive up with them after work today and clear out a bunch of personal stuff. After they move to Florida, they want to rent this out as an Airbnb." She fiddles with the stem of her wineglass. "But if you can call out, does that mean people can track you to this location?"

"No, Princess. Nobody can track my phone. It's not a regular cell phone. It has satellite capabilities, that's why I can get a signal here." I tell her about my brother and me doing contract work for the government and how that gives us access to technology not available to the public. Plus, my brother is a genius with communication devices and computers. He's written a few applications himself that Uncle Sam has bought. "And Nick has loaded the device with a ton of his tech gadgets that keep anyone from tracking it." I lean over and caress her cheek. "Your safe for right now." She leans into my hand and the sweet gesture squeezes my heart. I don't tell her that I've also asked Nick to dig into her background. If someone's hunting my girl, I want to know who they are and how to take them down. "Are you ready to tell me what's going on with you?"

She sighs. "First of all, my real name is not April." Her blue eyes are sad as she watches my reaction. I keep my face blank, but nod to get her to go on. And she does.

The story is so unbelievable, but nobody can make up the details she provides. My jaw clenches so hard I'm about to break a molar. She's been on the run, alone, for six

years. Her piece-of-shit father ran away to save his own ass and left an eighteen-year-old to deal with the Russian mob on her own.

When she tells me about yet another time when she left what she thought was a safe town in the middle of the night and reinvented herself, I can't take it anymore. I pull her to my side and put my arm around her. "You're not alone now. Nick and I will help you figure this out." She relaxes into me and it's like years of tension leave her body. "What should I call you? Do you prefer Anna?"

She's quiet for several beats before she answers. "No, I want to be April when I'm with you."

"Do you know where this ledger is?"

She pulls away from me and scrutinizes my face. "Why?"

"Because the fastest way to get you safe, is to hand that over to the authorities."

She laughs bitterly. "We tried that, remember. It didn't work out so well for my family."

I pull her into a hug. "I'm so sorry about your mom and uncle," I whisper into her hair. She lets out a little sob and grips my shirt. I stroke her hair and her breathing evens out again. "Nick and I have contacts we can use that would make sure only trustworthy people would be involved in your case."

"I know where it is." April whispers against my chest. "But it's the only thing keeping me alive right now. And I don't want people to know that I know."

"Don't tell me its location. That's your secret and your bargain chip." I feel her nod against my chest. "But Nick and I will figure out how to put the bad guys away and

keep you safe.”

She leans back a little and looks up at me. Her gorgeous blue eyes are damp and her nose is a little red. “You’d do that for me? I’m nobody important to you or Nick. You’ve only known me for half a year.”

“Princess, you’re everything to me. Have you not figured that out yet?”

Her eyes widen and her lips part. I can’t stand it any longer. My dick has been rock hard since I came out of the bathroom and saw her kneeling in front of the fire. I lift her chin with the edge of a knuckle and lean down to kiss her.

She grabs my collar and deepens the kiss. When we finally come apart, I whisper her name.

“Yes?” she answers.

“I still have to get married before I turn thirty.”

She bites her lip, and I have to clamp down the groan rising in my throat. “Is that a proposal?”

“It’s a command.” I smile, hoping she gets the reference back to when I fucked her in my office.

“Well, if you’re ordering me to marry you, I can’t really refuse, can I?” Laughter twinkles in her eyes.

“No, you cannot,” I answer, surprised over how the thought of marrying April feels so right.

“But you also have to have a baby before you turn thirty-two.”

The image of her swollen with my child fills my mind and I can't keep the groan inside me anymore. Touching her flat stomach, I swallow hard. “I want to breed you right now. I want to fill you up with my seed until you can't think of anything but me and the family we're going to create.”

“Okay,” she whispers, and I lower her down onto the blanket. The fireplace crackles behind her, bathing her beautiful face in warm light.

If I'm not inside her soon, I'm going to combust.

I pull her shirt over her head and get rid of the bra. Tonight I want to see her completely naked. April helps me get her skirt and socks off.

I pause and just stare at her. Her creamy skin glows in the firelight. “You're so fucking beautiful. And I'm so fucking lucky.”

“Get your clothes off so I can get lucky too,” she demands.

Together, we get rid of my stained clothes and then I'm finally skin-to-skin with my fiancée.

Okay, new fiancée.

But then, I have to sit back to get one more look at her naked body.

She's that fucking beautiful.

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APRIL

Jay's piercing, whisky-colored gaze travels from my feet to my head, lingering on my breasts.

My nipples tighten as appreciation shines in his eyes and a seductive smile plays on his lips. "You're so gorgeous and I love that me watching you turns you on."

I have to look away to hide the blush covering my cheeks. "Thank you." I hesitate, not sure of what to do next. Why am I feeling shy suddenly? It's not like we haven't done this before. But the proposal and the baby plans and all the emotional turmoil of telling him my story. It's a lot for one evening.

Jay notices my nerves and instead of taking me right then—which I kind of both want him to do and don't want him to do—he lies down beside me. "We're not in any hurry. We can continue to just talk." His smile turns smoldering.

Heat pools low in my belly and between my legs as I turn toward him. "I'm a little nervous about what we might talk about."

The blanket rustles as he shifts his position and trails his finger from my belly button and up between my breasts.

He leans in and I think he's going to kiss me, but instead, he goes cheek-to-cheek with me. "Then let's not talk." His breath caresses my ear, moving down my neck, where he peppers my skin with kisses.

A small sigh escapes my lips, but my nerves get the best of me. “Maybe we should rethink this,” I whisper. “Maybe we should sleep on the whole getting married and making babies thing. It’s a big decision.”

“Why?” His hand travels down the length of my arm and stops to rest just above my pubic hair. “Do you have second thoughts?” He punctuates the short sentence by lightly kissing my neck, just below my earlobe. “Tell me to stop if you do.”

My knees weaken, and I moan out loud. His hand on my stomach is warm and suddenly, I want nothing more in this world than to have his baby. “I don’t want you to stop,” I croak.

He laughs. The low, sexy sound vibrates through my body as he embraces me again. “I’m so glad,” he whispers against my hair. He smells like soap and, underneath that, a scent uniquely his, a mixture of cedar and citrus.

Sighing, I lean into his chest. He smells like home.

I tense. That’s not right.

I haven’t had a home in a long time and won’t until the mobsters get their ledger back.

Jay loosens his hold, but leans down to nibble my ear. “Stop thinking and just go with what your gut tells you.”

“I can’t,” I mutter. “My gut told me to steal the van. And look where that got us.” I force myself to break his hold, no matter how good his hands feel on my body.

He tilts up my face with the edge of a knuckle, forcing me to look at him. The pupils of his eyes are large, making them darker amber than usual. “Never feel bad about

wanting me, Princess.”

“I bet you say that to all the women who kidnap you.”

He smiles. “Luckily, that doesn’t happen too often.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It’s been a hard couple of days. I didn’t mean to mess up your life.”

He acknowledges that statement with a slight nod before grabbing my hand. “You haven’t messed up my life. You created a big wrinkle, maybe, but we can fix that.”

My breath hitches. “Okay.” But I’m scared because being with him feels more right than anything else I’ve known in my life.

“I understand if this situation makes you a little uncomfortable.” He holds on to my hand when I try to pull away. “It’s unconventional, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t perfect. You’re fucking perfect, April.”

I clear my throat. Coherent thoughts are hard right now.

He fingers a strand of my hair and tucks it behind my ear, turning the gesture into a caress by tracing the outside of my ear.

I tilt my head and rest my cheek in his palm.

He leans down, his breath hot against my lips. “Stop overthinking this,” he whispers and then claims my lips.

Liquid fire sizzles from my lips to my nipples. They pebble into hard knots.

I lean into the kiss. My body cares fuck about logic. My hormones are in charge and they care only about Jay being naked next to me, wanting to fill me up with his seed and breed me.

His firm body presses against mine.

I try to recall why this is a bad idea—something about not being good at separating sex and feelings—but my brain fogs over.

Just feel , a traitorous voice in the back of my mind whispers.

Jay grabs my hands and lifts them to clasp behind his head.

I moan his name.

“I know,” he growls against my mouth, but then leans back. My hands fall from his neck, and I trace a pattern on his ripped chest. His nipples harden beneath my fingers. He lifts my chin with his knuckle again. His gaze searches mine. “You belong to me.”

“I don’t belong to anyone.” I’m going for decisive, but my tone comes out wistful.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Princess. You were mine the moment I first saw you.”

His words make my pussy clench. They shouldn’t because they’re several decades out of date, but him wanting me turns me on. “I want you.” I grab his hips, pulling him toward me and grinding against him.

His erection pushes against my belly as he crushes me to his body. Finally, we’re skin against skin, again.

Mine’s on fire.

I need all of this man.

And I need him right now.

I hip-check him and press on his chest to roll him over on his back.

With a cheeky grin on his face, he resists briefly, but then falls back, grabbing my hands and pulling me on top.

I straddle him, but stay high on my knees, teasing him—and myself—by keeping my wet pussy from his hard cock.

He grabs my hips and pushes his erection against my core. “I’m putting a baby in you right now,” he growls.

Those are words that I never thought I’d find hot, but somehow I get even more turned on. I clasp his hands and push them over his head. Securing them both with one hand, I use the other to cradle his face as I lean in for a kiss.

He struggles against my hold, but not seriously enough to break free.

“I’m setting the pace this time,” I say against his mouth before nipping his lower lip.

A lazy smile spreads over Jay’s lips. “Sounds good to me.” He bucks his hips.

I release his face and press his lower body back down. “Not until I say so.”

His grin grows broader. With a wicked gleam in his eyes, he lifts his head and captures a nipple in his mouth. He grazes it with his teeth before biting down lightly.

Sparks shoot from where his mouth touches straight to my core. I can’t hold back

anymore.

I need him inside me.

Slowly, I lower myself, allowing only the tip of his shaft to feel my wetness.

He inhales sharply. “April,” he hisses and closes his eyes.

I smile. “Told you. I set the pace tonight.”

His back arches as I lower myself onto his shaft an inch. He’s thick, and my breath catches as I wait to adjust to his girth. Delicious friction between his cock and my pussy adds to the pleasure. A guttural moan escapes my throat.

Never before in my life have I made a sound like it.

Jay struggles against my grip on his wrists, but I hold on tight.

He opens his eyes. “I don’t like your rules anymore.”

“Too bad.” I flex my pussy around his cock.

His eyes glimmer mischievously. Briefly, his body relaxes, and then he twists his hips, trying to flip me over.

I lean forward and press down on his chest with my torso.

“I want to ride you while you put that baby inside me.” I flick my tongue against his nipple.

At his sharp intake of breath, I do it again and am rewarded with another growl.

I love that I can make him do that. “Now, where were we?” I grin.

He smiles back, but his voice is gravelly. “You’re riding me. And I’m putting a baby inside you.”

“That’s right,” I whisper, my voice now hoarse as well. I sit down, taking all of his length. Another loud moan escapes my lips when I fully sheath him.

Jay bucks his hips, forcing me to take him deeper.

Letting go of his wrists, I sit straight and ride him, setting a fast pace.

He grips my hips harder, slowing me down. One hand slides forward, his fingers tangling in my damp curls. Placing his thumb on my clit, he presses down hard.

Ripples of pleasure radiate through my body.

Tilting my head down, I watch as his hand works me. It’s the hottest thing I’ve seen, and the pressure builds inside me until I pant with the need for release.

White light explodes on the inside of my eyelids as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me. From somewhere far away, I hear Jay shouting my name and feel his release pulsing inside me.

I collapse against his chest, and an aftershock claims me, making me moan his name.

He chuckles, stroking my back in lazy circles.

“Shit, I must be heavy,” I mumble against his neck and roll off him.

“You’re perfect,” he says as he turns on his side and pulls my backside against him,

spooning me.

His hot breath tickles my neck, and cocooned in the warmth of his body, I drift off to sleep, vaguely aware of Jay pulling the covers on top of both of us. For the first time in forever, I feel not alone.

And safe.

In his arms is the safest I've ever felt.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:52 am

APRIL, 20 DAYS LATER

I stand before the wooden doors of the tiny chapel, my hands trembling slightly as I smooth down the front of my cream-colored dress. The fabric is soft beneath my fingertips—simple, elegant, perfect for this intimate winter wedding that Jay and I planned in just two weeks. Iris reaches over to adjust the small bouquet of white roses and pine sprigs in my hands, her breath visible in the crisp December air.

"Ready?" she whispers, her green eyes bright with emotion.

I nod, unable to find my voice for a moment. Behind these doors waits Jay, the man who came into my life like a warm breeze during the coldest of winter. The man who made me believe in second chances.

The ancient hinges creak as Iris pulls open the heavy wooden door. The chapel is exactly as I imagined it would be—warm light filtering through stained glass windows, casting jewel-toned shadows across the worn wooden pews.

But my eyes are drawn immediately to Jay, standing under an arch decorated with the same foliage as my bouquet. An older man and Jay's brother stand next to him. Dressed in another tuxedo, my husband-to-be is so handsome my heart hurts.

The tuxedo he wore when I kidnapped him never got clean again and secretly I'm happy about that. I don't want him to wear the outfit that was for another woman's wedding during our ceremony.

His hands are clasped in front, and when he turns to look at me, the love in his eyes

makes my heart skip a beat. The small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepen as he smiles, and I feel tears welling up already.

The older man, who is our officiant, nods to me kindly as I begin my walk down the short aisle. There's no wedding march playing, no elaborate decorations—just the sound of my footsteps on the ancient floorboards and the whisper of my dress. Candles flicker in wall sconces, their light dancing across the stone walls that have witnessed countless unions before ours.

As I walk, I think about how incredibly lucky I am to not only have met this man, but to have him fall in love with me. After years of having only myself to rely on, I now have a family of Jay and Nick.

And Iris.

I haven't told her about my trouble with the mob. What she doesn't know will protect her. But she's thrilled to be my bridesmaid and we've become closer during the last weeks.

Jay and Nick have come through for me on so many levels. Through their government connections, we've been able to hand over the ledger that my dad stole to trustworthy contacts. People who will make sure that Popov and his entire crew are put away for a very long time.

During the shootout that killed my mom and uncle, my dad was so intent on saving his own skin that he left the ledger behind. I found it in his gun safe when I grabbed what meager possessions I could from our house before I went on the run as an eighteen-year-old. And I hid it in a deposit box in a small bank in Colorado, under a name I've never used for anything but renting that box.

Now, reaching the altar, I hand my bouquet to Iris and turn to face Jay. He takes my

hands in his. His fingers are warm despite the chapel's chill. The officiant speaks, his voice gentle and measured, but I barely hear the words. I'm lost in Jay's eyes, in the slight tremor I feel in his hands that matches my own, in the overwhelming certainty that this is exactly where I'm meant to be.

When it's time for our vows, Jay speaks first. His voice is steady but full of emotion as he promises to be my partner, my support, my home. He talks about how we met when I came to interview for the bartender job.

"I didn't realize it then, but you carved out a place in my heart at that moment and I've carried you in there ever since. You were meant for me, April. And I'm so lucky that you found me."

My own vows come from deep in my heart, words I've thought about for these past two weeks but haven't written down. I tell him how he taught me to trust again, how his patience and kindness helped me tear down the walls I'd built around my heart. How his laughter has become my favorite sound in the world.

"I want to spend the rest of my life making you as happy as you've made me."

Iris sobs and wipes at her eyes. We all laugh, but everyone's eyes are a little misty at this point. Even Nick, who hasn't warmed up to me yet. He hasn't quite forgiven me for ruining Charlotte's wedding. I haven't met her yet. She's been out of the country for work, but should be back in time for Jay's birthday celebration.

The exchange of rings comes next. They are plain gold bands that we chose together. Jay's hands shake slightly as he slides the ring onto my finger, and I have to try twice before I get his ring past his knuckle. We both laugh softly, and the sound echoes in the quiet chapel.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the officiant says, and before he can finish

saying "You may kiss the bride," Jay's lips are on mine. His hands cup my face gently, and I can feel him smiling into the kiss. Behind us, Iris sniffs even more loudly, and Nick laughs, the sound reverberating off the chapel walls.

When we break apart, I look up into Jay's face—my husband's face—and see tears in his eyes that match my own. He brushes a tear from my cheek with his thumb, and I lean into his touch, overwhelmed by the love I feel for this man.

The signing of the marriage certificate feels surreal. The paper is official and stark against the ancient wooden table, but our signatures transform it into something magical. A legal proof of our promise to each other. Iris and Nick sign as witnesses, and then it's done.

We're married.

I've kept the name April, but now my last name is King. The FBI is working on making this identity as real as it possibly can be.

As we walk back down the aisle, hand in hand, snow falls outside the stained-glass windows. The sight makes me squeeze Jay's hand—snow now is our thing, our good luck charm. He squeezes back, and I know he's thinking the same thing.

In the chapel's small vestibule, Iris hugs me tightly, crying happy tears into my shoulder. Nick bear-hugs his brother, then turns to me with a warm smile. "Welcome to the family, officially," he says, pulling me into a hug as well. Maybe I'll be able to win him over eventually. He's a big part of Jay's life, so I want him to like me.

"Get your hands off my wife," Jay growls, and I'm not sure he's entirely joking.

Nick laughs again, but releases me.

The four of us step outside into the gentle snowfall, and I tilt my face up to feel the cold flakes on my skin. Jay wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me close against his side.

We take a few photos with Iris's phone—nothing formal, just snapshots of our happiness. The snow creates a perfect backdrop, falling softly around us as we smile and laugh. My favorite is one that Iris captures when neither of us is looking—Jay and I gazing at each other, snowflakes catching in our hair, lost in our own world.

Later that night, as Jay and I lie naked on a blanket in front of the fireplace at his house—our house—I rest my head on his chest and listen to his heartbeat. His chin rests on top of my head, and I feel him sigh contentedly.

"Happy?" he murmurs into my hair.

"Perfect," I reply, tightening my arms around him. "Absolutely perfect."

And it is.

As the snow continues to fall outside the windows, I close my eyes and breathe in this moment. The warmth of Jay's body against mine, the soft music playing in the background, the sound of the crackling fire.

This is the beginning of our story as husband and wife, and I can't wait to see where it leads.

I already know what one of our next steps will be.

Yesterday, Iris and I snuck away so I could take a blood test . In about nine months, our family will have an addition.

But I'm keeping that secret for a few more days.

Let's just say, I think Jay will like his thirtieth birthday present.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:52 am

The late afternoon sun sparkles on the lake like scattered diamonds, making this moment even more perfect. My daughter Lola toddles along the water's edge, her tiny feet leaving impressions in the damp sand that the gentle waves quickly erase. Her dark curls bounce with each determined step, and I hover close behind, ready to catch her if she stumbles. She's getting more confident on her feet every day, but I still can't shake the instinct to protect her from every tumble.

"Dada!" she squeals, pointing at a seagull that's landed nearby. Her whole face lights up with that pure, unfiltered joy. Happiness grows in my chest, echoing hers. I didn't know one man could be this blessed. I scoop her up, and she giggles as I lift her high above my head.