



Cowboy Dragon's Rose (Motley Crewd Shifters #5)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: He's running out of time. Only she can save him.

Zeke Gordon has a problem—one that could set the world ablaze.

His Dragon's Rose, the magical tattoo binding him to his fated mate, is wilting. If he doesn't find her soon, his beast will lose control, and nothing will stand in the way of his fire.

Spring is the busiest season on the Motley Crewd Ranch, but work isn't enough to distract Zeke—or his restless Dragon. Everyone around him has found their mate, yet his remains a mystery. With time slipping away, all he can do is fight to hold on.

Then she arrives.

Casey Reynolds never wanted to ask for help, but when her corrupt boss threatens her, she has nowhere else to turn—except to an old friend at the ranch. She wasn't expecting six and a half feet of muscle and smoldering intensity to stop her in her tracks.

Zeke knows she's the one. But can he convince Casey to take a chance before it's too late?

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The fire inside me used to be steady.

Fierce. Mine.

Now it flickers.

On good days, it simmers beneath the surface like a waiting storm.

On bad ones, it sputters so low I wonder if it's gone entirely.

Dragons aren't meant to feel cold.

But I do.

I feel it in my bones, in the way my breath fogs the mirror in the morning, in the brittle edges of my control when I shift.

And every time I glance down at the Rose inked into my chest— my Dragon's Rose —and see the magic draining from it, I feel that cold like a knife behind the ribs.

It's dying.

And so am I.

All because I haven't found my fated mate. Haven't claimed her.

Well, some of that is true. Some of it isn't quite so cut and dry.

Everyone else on this godsdamned ranch has found their person.

Their one. Their mate.

Not me. Not really.

I'd made peace with it.

Or something close enough.

Figured I'd go out quiet.

Maybe save someone else before I went feral and burned the whole damn place down.

Then she walked in during another fucking Motley Crewd wedding.

It was just another round of slow music, glowing fairy lights, syrupy speeches, and over-starched shirts that made me want to slit my own throat.

Then she was there. Casey.

All curves and honey-colored eyes and that voice— low, warm, amused.

She offered me her hand like I was the only one in the room. Called me out of my head and into hers with a simple, “Do you dance?”

I touched her, and everything inside me roared. Literally.

Es meus.

She's mine.

Not in the possessive, controlling way.

In the sacred, ancient way.

The Fates carved her from starlight and wildfire and dropped her into my world at the exact moment my fire began to die.

And now I know why.

She's my Rose.

The mate I thought I'd never meet. The one meant to anchor me, soothe me, save me.

And I walked away.

Because I had to.

Because the second she touched me, I knew she didn't know what I was.

Didn't know about Shifters.

Or Dragons.

Or the kind of hunger that comes when your soul finally finds the other half it's been clawing the earth to reach.

She looked at me like a woman intrigued by a man.

Not like a woman who'd just been fate-stitched to a fire-breathing myth.

So I danced with her. I let myself taste that moment.

And then I walked off the dance floor and out of her orbit like it hadn't shattered me.

But the damage was done.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her. The way she laughed. The way her skin felt under my palm. The way my Dragon quieted the instant she smiled.

I should stay away.

But I can feel myself unraveling.

My fire's dwindling.

And now that I've met her? Now that I've touched her?

My Dragon won't be soothed by anything less than everything.

She doesn't know it yet.

But I'm hers.

And whether I burn for her, with her, or because of her— time is running out.

And I'm not sure I have the strength to resist the pull much longer.

Because when the Rose finally withers away, when my fire goes out or flares too wild to contain, I'll be gone too.

Either in flames or in madness.

Unless she accepts me. Which, I mean, would you believe me if I said I was a monster who needed to claim you to live?

Fuck.

I think I'm all out of faith.

For the first time in my life, I find myself staring death in the face with no other recourse other than to simply accept it.

What else is there for me to do?

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I wait for the school bell to signal the end of another long, grueling day.

You know the type. One of those filled with runny noses, dramatic tears, and more than one suspicious puddle.

Today, it was throw-up in the library and a scraped elbow during recess that required not just a bandage but three glittery stickers and two grape lollipops to settle the storm.

The last bell finally shrieks its goodbye, and I exhale, slumping back against my squeaky chair in the nurse's office.

My feet ache.

My back twinges.

But at least the day is over.

I don't hate the job.

Honestly, it's not so far off from what I thought I'd be doing with my life.

Nursing kids through schoolyard catastrophes isn't glamorous, but it's meaningful in its own tiny way.

Comforting them, listening to their stories— even the ones about monster cats and lunchroom betrayal —it matters.

Still, when I think about the four years of med school, my parents helped pay for, and the endless overnight shifts at Mercy Hospital during my residency— the hours I pushed myself to the edge trying to prove I belonged there —I want to scream.

Or cry.

Or maybe both.

But I don't.

I never do.

How could I?

How can I sit here and feel sorry for myself when everything that happened— every single damn detour that's led me here —is entirely my fault?

“Stupid, Casey,” I mutter under my breath as I gather my things, shoving notebooks, a half-eaten protein bar, and my work tablet into the oversized canvas tote I use as a purse.

The light spring jacket I wore this morning snags on the chair's armrest, and I yank it free with more force than necessary.

“You could've had it all,” I continue.

I'd been on my way. I mean, hello, I was almost a doctor .

No, I didn't envision myself as some future famous neurosurgeon, but I really did want to help people.

Isn't that why most people chose medicine?

My parents are both scholars. Very busy academic types.

They love me, don't get me wrong, but they aren't overly emotional.

Still, I imagine they were glad when I took myself and all my drama far away from their home.

I really shouldn't complain.

At least I had a soft place to land with my Gramps, after all the hullabaloo of getting out of town when things got terrible.

He's in the local senior home now, and his memory is going. But I love that old man dearly, and I visit him every week like clockwork.

I miss Mom and Dad, but contact has to be minimal for now. That's what the lawyers told me. And it's okay. Really, I just want them safe.

How did my life get so twisted?

At least there is some good news. I mean, the school year is winding down.

Just two more weeks of sticky fingers and Band-Aids, and then I've got the summer to figure out my next move.

Or at least pretend I'm figuring something out while I drink coffee on my tiny balcony and watch Netflix in pajama pants.

But this weekend? This weekend, I actually have plans.

The unofficial start of summer is here, and I've been invited to something that doesn't involve boxed wine and my cat judging me from the windowsill.

Avery— one of the only friends I've managed to make in this sleepy corner of New Jersey —used to work with me.

That is, before she went and married an actual cowboy.

Yeah. A cowboy. In New Jersey. And he's hot.

I didn't believe her either until he showed up and she left this place.

We stay in touch, and I rib her about being married to the Marlboro man. She responds by sending me the silliest messages just to make me laugh.

Even voice notes where he calls her darlin' , like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Her wedding was a few months ago, and it was incredible. I never had such a great time, and I thought maybe it was the start of something, maybe a new romance, for me.

That is to say, I met someone that night. Someone who I thought might be the one .

But he never contacted me after. Suffice it to say it was rather disappointing. Like most of my attempts at romance.

At least he didn't get me mixed up in some criminal enterprise and force me to run from my home.

Geez, the bar is low from my point of view, huh?

Anyway, she invited me out to the ranch where she lives now— the Motley Crewd, which is apparently some kind of working ranch/family commune/run-by-hot-men situation —and I said yes before she even finished the sentence.

I mean, maybe Zeke will be there, but likely he won't be hanging around Avery's house.

I imagine he's just some player with more women than he knows what to do with. Guy who looks like that? Yeah. Definitely.

And honestly, I'm not worried. I mean, I'm not in his league. I doubt very much he'll even remember me.

But a weekend with food, music, games, and the christening of a brand-new in-ground pool built by the owner for the whole staff and their families? Count me in.

I don't even own a swimsuit that fits right anymore, but I don't care.

For one weekend, I get to leave the town, the school, the memories, and the guilt behind.

I get to pretend I'm not an ex medical student turned school nurse with no plan and no place that really feels like home on the run from her psychotic ex.

Maybe I'll swim.

Maybe I'll have a drink.

Maybe I'll dance barefoot in the grass under fairy lights with strangers who don't know a damn thing about me.

Hell, maybe I'll finally breathe.

That's the plan, anyway.

And I'm holding onto it like it's the only thing keeping me from unraveling.

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“A re you serious right now?” I snarl, glaring at Dante like he’s just asked me to donate a kidney. Or worse— go into town during tourist season .

“Look, I’d go,” he says, already distracted, eyes glued to the tree line, “but Avery’s got that morning sickness bad, and Rosie Posie won’t change out of her fur. Come on, man. Do me a solid?”

Sure enough, his cub— currently in full fuzzy-wuzzy Grizzly mode —is sauntering toward the woods like she owns the damn forest.

Which, to be fair, she kinda does.

I grit my teeth.

“This couldn’t have been, I don’t know, planned better ?”

Dante ignores that, starts stripping down, boots off and shirt flung on the porch like we don’t have rules about public Shifting. Though, in his defense, this is the ranch. Everyone here is in the know.

“Her name’s Casey. She was at the wedding,” he says like I don’t fucking know who he means. “You’re picking her up from Av’s old place. Don’t make it weird.”

“Why? She your cousin or something?” I ask, just to fuck with him. “Look, Yogi, if this is a setup?”

“It’s not some fucking set up, asshole. And just for the record, I wouldn’t attempt to

set your ornery ass up with my worst fucking enemy, you grouchy bastard. Casey is just a friend. Avery's friend . So be nice."

I grunt. Like being nice has ever worked out for me.

Besides, I know exactly who Casey is. In fact, I've been beating the shit out of myself just to stay away.

I'm no good for her.

She's human. Soft. Fragile.

I'm a goddamn monster. Literally.

How can I take a chance my Dragon won't hurt her if I try to pursue a human woman?

No. It's not worth the risk, which is why I put the female firmly out of my mind right after that night.

"Emmet or Kian couldn't go?" I try one last time, clinging to the hope that someone else could be sacrificed to the traffic gods.

Dante shoots me a look. "If they could, I wouldn't be asking you, Zeke . Shit—Rosie! Hold on, Princess, Daddy's coming!"

He's already halfway through Shifting as he lunges toward the woods, pants around his ankles and the faintest snap of magic in the air.

Fur explodes across his skin, muscles popping, bones reshaping with brutal crunches.

It'd be impressive if it weren't so damn disturbing .

Because now I've got the image of Dante's massive Grizzly ass wedged into a pair of tighty-whities stuck in my brain like a trauma memory.

"Fuck's sake," I mutter, grabbing the keys to my truck. "I better get a steak dinner and a bottle of whiskey for this."

I climb into the cab, but the second I turn on the ignition, my Dragon stirs.

Not with heat or rage, but with something strange.

Off-balance. Restless.

He hums under my skin, low and uneasy, like he senses something I don't.

Like he's already sniffing the air for something important .

I scowl.

"No. Don't start."

He growls back.

Yeah, I'm losing it. Talking to myself. Talking to my Dragon like he's a separate damn person, which, I guess, in a way, he is.

But lately he's been testy. Agitated. Like he's starving for something and doesn't know what.

I know what he craves, what he needs.

My Rose .

But that ain't happening.

The Fates must fucking hate me because the only person who even tempted me to believe I might even have a mate is a damn human.

I growl my frustration and shake my head, forcing my angry beast back.

The quicker both sides of my dual nature come to grips with it, the better.

I shove the gear into drive and pull onto the road, the gravel crunching beneath the tires.

It's a long drive into town.

Long enough for me to stew in my own misery and rehearse how much I'm going to hate this.

Because it's a holiday fucking weekend.

Because the ranch is crawling with lovebirds and mates and happy-ever-afters I can't stand to watch anymore.

Because my Dragon's Rose is almost gone, and every hour that passes tightens the noose around my ribs just a little more.

And now I'm supposed to play chauffeur to some random woman who doesn't even know how to drive out here?

Great.

Perfect.

Exactly how I wanted to spend my Saturday.

Grumpy, flammable, and babysitting some lost city girl with no idea she's landed herself in the middle of a Shifter ranch full of hormonal mates and magical livestock.

But the weirdest part? No matter how I tell myself the pretty female from the wedding is not mine, the closer I get to Avery's old place, the louder my Dragon gets.

Like something's calling him.

She's calling to him.

And for the first time in a long while, he sounds hopeful .

Town is full of folks trying to head down the shore for the weekend, so streets are crowded, and everyone is losing their patience and their minds as the traffic slows to a crawl.

Finally, I arrive.

I'm barely out of the truck when the front door swings open and she steps out.

Dark blonde hair.

Big brown eyes flecked with gold.

Curves that make my Dragon sit up and take notice—fast.

She's wearing jeans that hug her hips like a second skin, a soft-looking T-shirt with a

loaded hot dog printed on the front and the words “I like my wieners loaded” scrawled across her impressive chest.

I fight my smile and pretend like that isn’t the most outrageously funny thing I’ve seen all day.

Goddamn, she is even prettier than I remember.

She’s dragging a massive rolling suitcase behind her that hits every damn porch step on the way down like it’s challenging me to a duel.

And the second I lock eyes with her, the world shifts.

The heat in my chest punches to life.

My Dragon damn near tears through my skin, snarling mine-mine-mine like a lunatic, and I actually stumble a step backward.

No. Fucking. Way.

I might be able to admit right now that yes, my Dragon was right the first time we met. But I’m still not gonna do anything about it.

Her eyes narrow as she takes me in, chest heaving slightly from the effort of hauling that giant bag.

“Oh, um, hi. You’re Zeke,” she says, and squirms with what I assume is discomfort.

I don’t answer.

I can’t.

Because this time I know it's not some fluke. Not some trick created by wedding ambiance and moonlight.

It really is her.

My mate.

My rose.

The Dragon's Rose on my chest burns against my skin.

It all happens so fast I snarl with the wonderful welcome pain of it.

"You alright there?" Casey asks, her brown eyes wide and curious.

I don't respond.

She arches a brow and tilts her head, voice dry.

"Okay, strong silent type. That's cute. But if you plan on brooding the whole drive, can you at least help me get this thing in the truck?"

I blink.

"That's your suitcase?" I ask.

"No, it's my mobile panic room. Yes, it's my suitcase."

She hauls it toward me and practically dares me not to help.

I grunt, grabbing the handle and lifting it like it weighs nothing—because it doesn't

weigh a goddamn thing.

I'm a Dragon Shifter, not a noodle-armed farm boy.

She watches me toss it into the truck bed and makes a little hmm noise.

“Nice. You didn’t even throw out your back. Promising.”

I stare at her.

“You always this mouthy?”

Her lips curve.

“Only when I’m nervous. Or annoyed. Or breathing.”

I make the mistake of looking too long—at the way her lips tug into that crooked little smile, at the way the sun hits her hair and turns it golden, at the tiny silver scar on her chin that I suddenly need to know the story behind.

“You done staring?” she asks sweetly.

“No.”

Her eyes widen, and her mouth opens, then closes again. For one second, she’s caught off guard.

Yay me. I win.

Until she tosses her tote bag into the cab and climbs in like she owns the truck.

“Let’s go, cowboy. If I’m gonna get murdered, I’d rather it be before lunchtime.”

I climb in beside her, heart thundering like hooves on dry earth. I should say something smooth.

Something cool.

Instead, I blurt out, “You smell good.”

She turns, blinking. “Okay. Weird opener, but thanks.”

“I didn’t mean—” I drag a hand down my face, growling under my breath.

My Dragon is practically purring, rubbing up against my ribs like a damn cat.

She’s chatting like we never met, and I wonder for a second if she doesn’t remember me.

It stings. And I can feel my lips pull down in a frown.

“Didn’t mean what?” she prompts.

“Forget it.”

She grins and buckles her seatbelt.

“No can do, buckeroo. Besides, you’re kinda hot when you’re awkward.”

“I’m not awkward.”

“That’s what makes it hot.”

I start the truck, muttering a curse under my breath, and slam it into reverse.

She's got no idea what she just stepped into.

But damn if I'm not already burning for more.

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O kay.

Three seconds in the company of the stupid hot cowboy and I'm suddenly auditioning to be the next Marvel snark queen.

So, no, I wasn't expecting Zeke to pick me up. And, yes, my foolish heart started pounding the second I spied him.

But where are these one-liners even coming from?

What the heck is wrong with me?

Sigh. Do I even need to answer that?

Let's take stock.

I'm a chubby almost-doctor pretending to be a school nurse while hiding from my unhinged ex-boyfriend, who just so happens to be a literal gangster with mafia ties and a warped sense of ownership when it comes to me .

So, yeah. I'm in absolutely zero position to be swooning over the man who just pulled up in a growly black pickup like he walked straight out of my favorite enemies-to-lovers Pinterest board.

And yet.

There he is.

Zeke Gordon.

All six-foot-forever of glowering, brooding cowboy gorgeousness.

Still, just as unfairly hot as the night we danced.

Still giving off touch me and perish energy that makes my thighs clench, and my sanity evaporate.

He's standing right there, leaning against the truck, arms crossed over his broad chest like he's guarding the last piece of chocolate cake on Earth.

I peek at him through my eyelashes, heart thudding against my ribs like it's trying to stage a prison break.

Breathe, Casey. Breathe.

We danced at Avery's wedding. Just one dance. One magical, heart-shaking, knee-weakening moment .

And then he never called.

Never came by.

Never anythinged .

Which should've been a giant red flag.

But instead of moving on like a rational adult, I've been mentally writing our love story in a three-act structure and imagining what our adorable future children would look like.

God, what is wrong with me?

Avery said Max Leeds— the owner of the Motley Crewd Ranch —gave every employee a stake in the place and their own cabin.

Zeke works there.

Which means he lives there.

Which means this whole weekend, I'll be sleeping just a few acres away from the human embodiment of my unresolved sexual tension.

Cool. Fine. No problem.

Except for the fact that I don't actually know anything about him.

What if he's taken?

What if he's married?

Oh God.

What if he's got, like, five kids and a wife who bakes cupcakes and raises rescue chickens and I'm just the idiot who flirted with someone's literal husband in front of the entire town?

My palms are sweating.

My chest feels tight.

The walls inside the truck's cabin feel like they're shrinking, and I actually feel like I

have to have to sit down on the edge of my seat and put my head between my knees.

I don't. But I feel like I need to.

Panic attack. Awesome.

This is fine. It's all fine. Totally normal to hyperventilate over a hot cowboy who danced with you, rearranging your outlook on life with the force of a small natural disaster and then ghosted like a myth.

"Just breathe," I mutter to myself.

He cocks his head.

Shit. Did he hear me?

I pull myself together the best I can, straighten my shirt, fluff my curls, and I wait for— something .

Then it happens.

Something flares in his gaze.

Something hot and sharp and entirely not helpful.

"You ready?" he asks, voice low and gruff and unfairly sex-on-a-stick .

I nod mutely and step closer, with my tote bag slung over my shoulder like it's not loaded with nervous breakdowns and unresolved sexual tension.

As I climb into the truck, one thought loops over and over in my head:

If he's married, I'm faking my death and starting over in Idaho.

"Um, so, I don't know if you remember me from Avery and Dante's wedding, but I'm Casey Reynolds," I start, giving him a smile that feels a little too forced.

"I know who you are," he cuts in, eyes straight ahead, voice low and rough like honey drizzled over gravel.

Okay.

Rude.

"Alright, Mr. Personality. Well, I forgot your name. So?" I lie, with the kind of confidence I do not feel.

Why did I say that?

I know his name. I remember it too well, actually—like it was tattooed on my brain the second he strutted into the room, all tall and broody with that cowboy-meets-underwear-model vibe.

This isn't even my style. I'm not a liar.

I'm the one who brings labeled Tupperware to potlucks and says sorry when other people bump into me .

But apparently my survival instinct in the face of ridiculous male hotness is sarcasm and deception. Neat.

Maybe it's because he's so perfectly irritating.

Like, how dare he look like that and not even have the decency to be mildly awkward about it?

No, he's just there, existing . Unfazed, unreadable, probably judging me with those glacier-blue eyes.

"Gordon," he says, pausing like he's giving me a chance to apologize or swoon or both. "Zeke Gordon."

Of course. Even his name is hot.

Zeke.

The name sounds like it belongs to a man who chops wood shirtless just for the therapy of it.

Okay, so that bit is done. But wait, I am still not out of the woods.

"And your wife is?"

He flicks his gaze from the road to me, one brow arched in amusement.

"Nonexistent. Is that your way of subtly asking if I'm involved with someone?"

"Well, I mean, it wasn't subtle," I mutter, already wondering how fast I can fling myself out of this truck and into oncoming traffic.

He smirks. Actually smirks.

Like the left side of his mouth curves just a little, and my entire brain short-circuits.

“Okay. How about you?” he asks, casual as can be. “Husband? Boyfriend? Stalker I need to worry about?”

My heart does a full-body lurch.

Stalker. Yikes.

“No husband. No boyfriend,” I say quickly, keeping my voice breezy even though my stomach is doing backflips. “Definitely not.”

He nods like it’s no big deal. Like my face didn’t just go white as a sheet. But it’s too close to the truth. Too real.

Michael D’Angelo isn’t just a stalker. He’s a snake in designer suits with dead eyes and dangerous friends.

I was in Dry Creek to lie low until the Feds had their case together.

Not to get involved with some hot cowboy.

Not to do this.

Whatever this is.

Because, let’s be honest, this man— this moody-eyed cowboy —is not just sexy. He’s dangerous.

Not in the mobster-will-bury-you sense.

But in the destroy-your-emotional-stability-and-make-you-question-all-your-life-choices sense.

And also, probably, he's a really good time in bed.

Which, let's face it, I kinda suck at.

We don't match. This whole flirting thing is dumb. And it won't go anywhere.

I mean, I'm like five foot four inches tall at best.

He's gotta be six foot four.

"Six foot five and a half," he says without looking over, like he can hear me thinking.

I nearly choke on my own tongue. "What the hell. How much of that did I say out loud?"

He chuckles—a low rumble that makes my thighs clench in appreciation.

"Sure is a lot of traffic," I blurt, desperate to redirect.

He hums. "Are you changing the subject, Petals?"

"Petals?" I echo, frowning.

"Your skin," he says, voice even lower now. "Smooth as a rose petal."

Is he blushing?

Oh my fuck, he is.

This man is stupid attractive.

More so than I remembered.

Like break-the-universe handsome.

Tanned skin, strong jaw, sharp cheekbones, a mouth made for sin, and eyes so blue they're flirting with violet.

Add in the chin-length waves I want to thread my fingers through while screaming thank you, universe and—wait.

“It's like if Henry Cavill and Bad Bunny had a baby,” I whisper, then immediately slap my hand over my mouth. “Shit.”

“What the fuck is a Bad Bunny?”

“Shit,” I say again. “How much of that did I say out loud?”

Zeke glances at me, amused. “Something about me being Superman's lovechild with some fucking rodent.”

“Bad Bunny,” I mumble. “He's a rapper. From Puerto Rico. Not a cartoon. Very hot. Lots of swagger. Grammy winner. Cultural icon.”

“You speak Spanish?”

“No, but some things transcend language barriers,” I sigh.

His chuckle slides under my skin and settles somewhere low in my belly. I swear I could melt right here in the passenger seat.

But then it hits me.

Like a bucket of ice water straight to the face.

This is bad.

Because I can see it now, clear as day.

The danger sign in my head flashing a big, screaming red WARNING .

I came here to stay hidden. To keep my head down. To be safe.

Not to crush on a cowboy with a growly voice and eyes like storms.

Not to want.

Not to hope.

And definitely not to start wondering what it'd feel like to have those rough hands on my skin while he whispers my name like a promise.

Nope.

Nope, nope, nope.

Too bad my body didn't get the memo.

He takes a sharp turn, and I almost slide right out of the seat. I gasp audibly. Zeke's hand shoots out and steadies me.

"Easy, Petals. I got you."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I whisper.

He cocks his head and growls deep in his throat.

“Don’t be afraid. I promise not to bite unless you ask me to.”

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The second the truck crunches over the gravel drive, my Dragon starts pacing in my chest like a caged animal about to taste freedom.

The main house comes into view, rising up at the end of the gravel drive like a sentinel watching over the land.

Bigger than most people expect, it's got this rugged, weathered charm to it. A long wraparound porch, aged cedar siding, roof patched in places from storms past, it might look a little country, but damn if it isn't sturdy.

Proud, even.

Like it knows it's survived and doesn't need to prove a damn thing.

Max made some upgrades here and there. Installed better insulation, got a new roof, added a second-story balcony for Penny to read on when the weather's nice—but nothing that took away from the soul of the place.

Just made it stronger. That's kind of his thing.

Max Leeds, Alpha of our Motley Crewd. One of the few men I'd willingly follow into a fight. The guy's a Jersey Devil.

Yeah, those Jersey Devils.

I didn't even know they were real until I met him. Thought they were a local cryptid myth people used to scare tourists.

Then he showed up.

Now he's mated to Penny, sweet as pie but tough as nails, and they've got a pair of twins, Melissa and Matthew , who shift between Devil and human with the kind of chaos only magical babies can pull off.

They're growing at twice the rate of human offspring. Which means twice the mischief in half the time.

If I had a dollar for every time those two somehow managed to magic a couple of Jed's prized goats into their nursery? I could buy myself a second ranch.

And that's not even the half of it.

Dante? Grizzly Bear Shifter. Rosie too. That's his and Avery's first cub, and yeah, she prefers to stay fuzzy these days.

Avery's expecting another, and judging by the size of that baby bump, the new kid might come out already Shifting.

Kian's a Bull Shifter. The big, bodacious bovine is recently mated, and surprisingly into sourdough starters. Don't ask.

Emmet? That guy's part Hellhound, part Wolf Shifter. Walks around like a nightmare waiting to happen.

But the minute Jezebel, his mate , walks into a room, he's nothing but a puppy with murder in his eyes for anyone who so much as looks at her wrong.

Jezebel is a Psychic Medium with a side gig in Necromancy. She's still figuring that part out. Let's just say the chickens won't go near her.

Then there's Jedediah.

Old man came with the property. Prairie Dog Shifter. Sleeps in dirt, talks to goats, swears up and down the land's got a heartbeat.

Actually, he might be right about that.

He's got this way with the animals, especially the goats.

Dolly's Dairy Products, his pride and joy, is single-handedly putting us on the local map with award-winning cheeses and probiotic yogurts that actually don't taste like death.

Everyone's got their place. Their role. Their person.

The ranch may be chaotic as hell on paper, but somehow it all works.

It's a patchwork quilt of the supernatural and the strange, stitched together with stubbornness and just enough loyalty to keep it from unraveling.

And then there's me.

Zeke Gordon.

Lone Dragon.

A ticking time bomb with a withering Rose tattooed over my heart and a fire in my chest that's fading more every day.

I've tried to fit in. Tried to make this place feel like more than just a place to wait out my final burnout.

But the truth is, it's hard to put down roots when you're living on borrowed time.

With my Rose doomed to remain unblooming , I'd accepted it.

My mate wasn't coming.

And when a Dragon's Rose dies, so does the Dragon.

I thought I'd made peace with it.

Figured I'd go out helping the ranch, making sure the others had their happy endings.

But then this happened. I mean, this, like as in right now.

It's her.

Casey.

Sharp-tongued.

Soft around the edges.

Laugh like whiskey and honey.

And the second I saw her again— really saw her —my fire flared like it remembered what it was for. All my hesitations and denials turned to ash.

I should be cautious. Guarded.

But something dangerous is blooming beneath my ribs, fast and reckless.

Hope.

Hope for a future I stopped believing in a long time ago.

And gods help me, I want to believe in it again.

I try to keep my chill in place as I continue down the road until we start to pass the cabins taken by the other Crew members.

Dante's is second to last. After Emmet's and Kian's. Before mine.

But I can see it from here.

My cabin. Home.

Usually the sight settles me.

Not today.

Because she's in my passenger seat.

Casey.

And instead of bringing her straight to my cabin like I want to, I have to force myself to slow in front of the fucking Grizzly Bear's house.

My body has been on high alert since the moment she opened that damn door and looked at me like she didn't know she was mine.

I throw the truck into park, cutting the engine. I'm stupidly angry that I have to stop at Dante and Avery's place instead of bringing her right to mine.

“We’re here.”

She blinks out the window, eyebrows rising as she takes in the ranch.

“Wow. Okay. This is so not what I pictured when Avery said ranch. I thought more, I don’t know, like more cows and tractors. Less Yellowstone vibes.”

I grunt, fighting the twitch of my lips. I want to smile. I want to do a lot of things.

But I can’t.

I’m barely holding it together.

She unbuckles her seatbelt, and the sound snaps through me like a whip.

Every tiny thing she does— the way her fingers fidget on the buckle, the curve of her neck, the scent of wildflowers and spring rain clinging to her skin —it’s all too much.

“Let me get your bag,” I manage to say, slipping out of the truck like I’m not seconds from dragging her into the nearest barn and marking her like a damn beast.

Control, Zeke.

Keep your shit together.

I round the back and yank her suitcase free from the truck bed.

She’s already hopping down, sneakers hitting the dirt with a little bounce.

The way her rounded hips move when she straightens?

Fuck. Yeah. My Dragon growls.

“Thanks,” she says, brushing her hands down her jeans and walking around to take the handle from me.

I don't let go.

She grabs it, our fingers brushing— bare skin to bare skin —and the world tilts.

White-hot heat explodes from that point of contact and rips through my chest. My knees damn near buckle.

She gasps, wide-eyed. “What was that? Like static electricity?”

“No,” I say hoarsely, voice thick and low. “That was something else.”

It's not the whole truth, but it's not a lie, either.

The Dragon inside me roars.

Mate. Ours. Touch her again.

I take a step back.

I have to.

Because if I don't, I'll pull her against me and kiss the breath from her mouth, the kind of kiss that claims, that marks, that says mine in every language that's ever existed.

Es meus .

My Dragon grumbles the words in the language of my kind.

Fuck. She really is the one.

Her eyes are on me, chest rising and falling fast.

She felt it. I know she did. Even though she doesn't know what it even is.

"Okay," she says finally, like she's trying to convince herself it meant nothing. "So, that wasn't weird at all."

"Not weird," I rasp. "Just destiny."

She blinks. "Come again?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Come on. I'll carry this to your room."

Because if I stand here another second, I'll forget myself and the tiny little fact that she has no idea who or what I am.

I'll forget she's human.

Hell, I'll forget everything except the fire in my blood screaming for her.

She trails behind me, quiet for once, and I swear the air between us is thick enough to cut with a knife.

One touch.

That's all it took.

And now there's no going back for either of us.

Es meus.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I am such a nerd. The opposite of whatever you would call a cool person.

In other words, I have exactly zero chill.

Zeke— tall, growly, stupidly hot Zeke —is currently carrying my suitcase like it's made of feathers, muscles rippling beneath his shirt, while I trail behind him like some sweatier, more confused version of Cinderella arriving late to a pool party.

He doesn't talk much.

Just glances over his shoulder occasionally to make sure I haven't face-planted on the graveled walkway that leads to the stairs outside Avery's home.

His expression is all hard lines and broody intensity, but I swear there's a twitch of amusement in his jaw every time I trip over the tiny pebbles like a newborn giraffe.

We round the porch, and I spot a small figure barreling toward us.

A tiny, furry blur of energy with teeth, curls, and zero fear.

Rosie.

Avery's daughter. Only she is butt ass naked.

"Hi, Casey! I missed you. Mommy said you were coming for a visit!"

"Hi there, Rosie Posie," I reply and grin at her childish innocence.

“Uncle Zeke!” she shrieks, already bored with me and launching herself into his leg with all the force of a rogue wrecking ball.

Zeke grunts but doesn’t budge an inch, just pats the top of her head like she’s a wild animal only marginally tamed.

“Hey, fuzzball,” he teases, and something about seeing him all playful like that makes my ovaries stand up and take notice.

Two seconds pass as I try not to freak out about that, when Rosie turns those big brown eyes on me. She squints, tilts her head, then grins like a little street urchin plotting trouble in a Charles Dickens book.

“Mommy! Daddy! Casey’s here and she’s Uncle Zeke’s girl!” she shouts, then innocently blinks up at me again.

Like it’s a totally normal thing to assume.

Me and Zeke. Together.

Never mind that Zeke and I are complete strangers.

My brain short-circuits.

Zeke goes still.

Like statue still.

Like don’t-move-or-you’ll-scare-it-away still.

“Uh, Rosie, that’s not it—” I squeak.

“What’s not it, Aunt Casey? Doesn’t Uncle Zeke like you?”

I don’t know how to answer her. My gaze flashes to Uncle Zeke’s mesmerizing purple stare, but he’s just grinning at me like the Cheshire cat.

His look says it all.

And I swear I could kick him for it. Only Rosie is still talking a mile a minute, and I don’t think I should resort to physical violence in her presence.

“Daddy always says he likes Mommy, and he’s always doing nice things for her,” the child states with one hundred percent certainty.

“Oh no! Was Uncle Zeke mean to you?” she asks, completely horrified, and Zeke’s eyebrows go sky high before he flicks his gaze to mine.

Panic races up my spine. I want to comfort her and reassure him all at the same time, and fuck me, but I don’t even know what the heck is going on.

How is this even my life?

“I—what? I mean—no. Of course, not. But I’m not his, um , girl?

I’m a woman. Not that it matters. Not that I am his.

I mean—I’m not anyone’s. Not that I wouldn’t be. I mean, if I were, like, someone’s.

But I’m just not, um, his . I mean, I am a girl, um , woman.

A woman-girl, but I—I,” I stutter and shrug.

Fuck me.

What the hell am I even saying?

Abort. Abort mission.

Zeke just stares at me, his expression unreadable except for the way his jaw clenches like he's holding back that sexy little growl thing he keeps doing, or perhaps a laugh.

Maybe both.

"Right," I mutter, cheeks on actual fire.

Rosie giggles, completely unfazed.

"Aunt Casey's pretty, right, Uncle Zeke?" she asks Zeke, and skips off with the kind of chaotic grace some children just seem to be born with.

"She sure is, Rosie Posie," Zeke murmurs.

My heart is trying to punch its way out of my chest.

"Wow, so that was weird. Um, I mean, she's adorable," I say weakly.

"She can be a bit of a hurricane," Zeke replies, voice a little rougher now. "But yeah. Adorable."

I catch him looking at me then. Really looking.

Eyes trailing from my face down to my chest, then back up with a snap like he's pissed at himself for doing it.

His nostrils flare, and for a second, I swear I feel heat pulse in the air between us.

“Um, where do you suppose Avery is?” I mutter to myself.

“The door’s open,” he says suddenly, grabbing the suitcase again and hauling it up the steps like it weighs nothing.

I follow him inside, trying not to hyperventilate or imagine him pressing me against one of these sturdy walls and saying something completely illegal with that voice.

Before I step through the front door, I have to pass Zeke. He doesn’t move. Just stands solid and strong, like a freaking pine tree, making me brush against him as I maneuver.

I suck in a breath as I do just that and am immediately hit with the scent of something sweet and warm—like cinnamon rolls and applewood smoke had a baby and scented the air on purpose.

I clear my throat. I don’t know what that scent is, but it’s freaking amazing.

“Wow,” I whisper as I cross the threshold.

Avery’s home is simply lovely.

Rustic but cozy, with wide plank floors, worn-in leather furniture, and a giant stone fireplace that looks like it was built by hand, probably by a man with arms the size of my entire torso, which pretty much describes Dante.

“Casey!” a voice calls out.

Avery barrels around the corner, all sunshine and belly bump, glowing like the fully

human version of a Hallmark movie finale.

Lucky beyotch.

She pulls me into a hug before I can even say her name, and I let out a surprised laugh, my tote bag thunking awkwardly against my hip.

“Oh my God, it’s so good to see you!” she says, pulling back to give me a once-over. “You look great!”

“I look like roadkill,” I reply with a huff. “But thanks. And you look like a radiant fertility goddess. It’s honestly a little rude.”

She laughs. “That’s just the hormones. And maple syrup. I had three waffles this morning.”

Behind her, a huge, tall guy with tousled dark hair and warm brown eyes leans casually against the wall, his arms crossed over a faded T-shirt that reads I Grill Therefore I Am .

“Dante,” she says, turning to him with a smile. “You remember Casey?”

“Hey,” he says, pushing off the wall and waving his frying pan-sized hand in the air. “Good to meet you again. Glad you made it.”

I bite my bottom lip, trying not to be intimidated by the sheer man-size of everyone on this ranch.

What are they feeding them out here?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The four of us are just standing there, Rosie having run off to put on some clothes at her mother's behest. As for me?

Well, I'm nervous.

And when I am nervous, I resort to snark.

"Thanks for sending the human forklift to pick me up," I say, tilting my chin toward Zeke, who's lingering by the door like he's guarding it from intruders or bad vibes.

Dante huffs a laugh, his eyes cutting to Zeke. That look is sharp, but amused.

"Yeah. Talked your ear off, did he?"

"Total blabbermouth."

"Ha! Well, uh, Rosie says you two got along well?" Avery asks, and she's nodding her head like a weirdo.

Dante snorts.

Zeke grunts.

I blink between the three of them.

"Does he always stand like that?" I dip my head towards Zeke.

“Like what?” Dante asks innocently.

“Like he’s considering whether to carry my luggage or throw me over his shoulder and disappear me somewhere in the woods like one of those campy 1980s horror flicks?”

Avery snorts. “Yeah, actually, that’s pretty on brand for Zeke.”

“He is standing right there, ladies,” Dante gently scolds us, but his eyes reflect the laughter he’s keeping bottled up inside.

And Zeke? Well, Zeke shifts his weight and says absolutely nothing, just keeps watching me like I’m a riddle he hasn’t decided whether to solve or set on fire.

“You’re right. Apologies, Zeke. I’m sure you’re not all serial killery at all. Uh, thanks for the ride,” I say, and wait for a response.

Still nothing.

Avery is grinning so wide now, I’m surprised her face doesn’t hurt. And as for Dante? Well, now he’s looking at Zeke like he knows something.

Something I very much don’t know.

But whatever it is, he doesn’t say a word.

“Come on, Casey,” Avery says, slipping an arm around my shoulders. “I’ll show you your room. You’ve got the best view on the property. And we’ve got dinner at six. Don’t worry, I already warned the guys to wear shirts.”

“Pity,” I mutter.

Behind me, I swear I hear Zeke choke .

Just a little.

With his attention momentarily diverted, I snag my suitcase and follow Avery down the hall.

The guest bedroom is sunlit and cozy, with faded floral curtains, a massive antique dresser, and a view of the back pasture that honestly makes me want to write poetry.

Or at least drink wine while pretending I write poetry.

I open my suitcase and start pulling out clothes, mumbling to myself like a lunatic as I try to sort them by practical ranch wear and emergency sexy options .

I wish I had way more of the second one. But, oh well.

I'd have to make do with cotton laced practicality.

Behind me, I can feel it.

That weird itch on the back of my neck.

The sense of being watched.

I turn.

Nothing.

But I swear I see a shadow shift just beyond the hallway.

I wait a beat, then I smirk to myself.

OMG. Is he seriously lurking?

Yes. He is. The sexy cowboy is totally standing in the hall.

Like he's lying in wait for me.

And somehow, that's hot.

"Just unpacking," I call out casually, loud enough for lurking ears to hear. "Nothing scandalous. Unless you count this bra, which, honestly, I don't. It's cotton. Not sexy."

Silence.

Then, faintly— so faint I almost miss it—I hear it.

A growl.

Low. Rumbly. Male.

My knees nearly give out.

Yup. I'm in trouble.

Big, beautiful, growly trouble.

I didn't know real men could make that sound. Thought it was only a booktok thing.

I suck in a deep breath. The bedroom is sunlit and peaceful, and I should feel the same.

But I don't.

I'm standing in front of my half-unpacked suitcase, holding a bra in one hand and a tank top in the other, trying to focus on something— anything —besides the fact that the sexiest man I've ever met in real life just hauled my fluffy ass to my friend's house, flirting one second and growling the next,

Did I imagine it, or did Zeke stare at me like he wanted to devour me for a second or two?

I mean, we barely spoke. I don't even think he said my name.

Well, except for Petals.

God , he called me Petals.

I flop the bra onto the bed and sigh.

“Get it together, Casey,” I mumble. “You're not here to fall in love with a cowboy. You're here to lie low, not fall into some romcom book plot.”

But my body isn't listening.

It's still humming from the time our fingers brushed.

From the way his voice wrapped around me like heat lightning.

From the growl I definitely didn't imagine when I mentioned my plain cotton bra.

I'm standing there, fanning myself, when the door swings all the way open— hard .

I spin, startled.

“Crap on a cracker! Don’t you people knock?—”

And then I see him.

Zeke.

In the doorway, shoulders tense, chest heaving like he just ran a marathon, jaw locked like he’s trying to fight something off.

His eyes are locked on me.

And I swear, the temperature in the room spikes .

“Zeke?” I whisper, heart thudding.

He doesn’t speak.

Doesn’t move.

Just stares .

Then, in two strides, he’s across the room.

His hand cups the back of my neck, warm, calloused, and heavy.

Like he’s claiming me or something with that purposeful touch.

And then he kisses me.

Slams his mouth onto mine with a growl so low and primal it sends a shockwave through my bones.

I freeze for half a second. Just long enough to register the heat, the possessive edge, the way his lips move like he's memorizing every shape of me.

Then I kiss him back.

It's not cute.

It's not gentle.

It's—it's fire .

Pressure.

A collision of heat and want and something I can't name yet, but I feel it down to my marrow.

And just when I start to melt into it, to lose myself completely in the taste of him, it happens.

His eyes open.

And they're glowing .

Not metaphorically.

Not poetically.

Actually glowing.

A vivid violet, shimmering like some sort of ethereal wildfire.

I gasp.

He jerks back.

I stumble, catching myself on the edge of the bed, heart racing and lips swollen.

“What the hell—” I start, but he’s already turning away.

“Sorry,” he rasps, voice thick. “I shouldn’t have?—”

“Wait! Zeke?”

But he’s gone.

Out the door, down the hall, footsteps heavy, like he’s trying to outrun something.

I collapse onto the bed, staring at the ceiling, still tasting him on my lips.

My heart’s racing, my skin’s flushed, and my brain?

Not okay.

“What the actual fuck just happened?” I whisper, touching my lips.

And for the first time in a long time, I’m not just scared of my past catching up to me.

I’m scared I’m going crazy.

Or worse.

That something weird is going on.

Something not even med school could've prepared me for.

Did that really happen?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The scent of hay and horses calms most people.

For me, it's second only to when I'm in my scales and flying high above the world.

Maybe I should Shift?

No.

Grrrr.

Fuck no.

My Dragon's focused on one thing only and I don't dare give the creature my skin when all he's thinking about is claiming a certain curvy goddess who's currently taking up all the available space in my brain.

So, I try to work through it instead.

The barn's warm, the afternoon sun filtering through the slats, casting golden stripes across the dusty air.

I move slowly through the center aisle, checking on each of the horses, letting my hand trail across their flanks as I go. They snort and nuzzle toward me— some affectionate, some impatient—but none are skittish.

They never are.

Not with me.

Even the high-strung gelding Dante named Cretin, swearing the thing is half feral, leans into my palm like I've got some kind of tranquilizer running through my fingertips.

My Dragon's energy runs hot and wild, but animals don't fear it.

They recognize it.

Respect it.

And in moments like this— when I'm too human, too raw, too close to falling off the edge of my own instincts —they soothe me as much as I do them.

I murmur softly to the roan in stall four, letting the brush slide gently along her side.

“Easy, girl. You're alright.”

She whinnies low, and I feel my Dragon settle just a little beneath my skin.

But not much.

Not really.

Not when she's here. On the ranch. Close, but still so far.

Casey.

Es meus.

Too soft.

Too sweet.

Too human.

And yet every inch of me— bone, blood, fire —wants her.

The kiss shouldn't have happened.

One touch, one taste, and I lost control like some fresh-shifted teen with his first heat.

I saw her eyes go wide.

Felt her lips part.

Tasted her sweetness on my tongue.

And then that damn look when she glimpsed what I am—what lurks beneath my skin.

She doesn't know.

I know she doesn't.

Not about Shifters. Not about fated mates. Not about Dragons.

She's an innocent.

Too good for my world.

Too soft and pure.

But still, I need her.

How the fuck am I supposed to woo a woman like that? Who doesn't even know monsters are real, let alone that she's soul-bound to one?

I run a hand through my hair, gripping the back of my neck until it hurts.

"Zeke," a voice calls from the barn entrance.

I don't have to look. I know that voice.

Max.

Alpha of our crew. Jersey Devil. Mate and new father.

Love-struck lucky bastard.

He strolls in like he owns the place— which, technically, he does—but his presence is never heavy.

Not with us. Not with me.

Just steady. Watching. Measuring.

The man has glowing red eyes and if he had a mind to do so, he could unleash claws that could gut a cow, and magic that could turn even my hair gray, but right now, he's radiating domestic bliss like an Instagram influencer who just discovered puppy yoga and lemon-scented candles.

He leans against a stall post, arms crossed.

“You’re brooding.”

“I’m thinking,” I counter.

“Thinking broodingly, then,” he amends, grinning.

I grunt.

He lets the silence settle for a moment, then pushes off the post and steps up beside me.

He reaches into the feed bucket, pulls out a sugar cube, and offers it to the roan, who takes it with a snort of gratitude.

“Dante texted. So, the girl?”

I stiffen.

“Don’t start.”

“Too late. You kissed her.”

Max grins like the bastard I’m starting to think he is. And suddenly I wonder if Devils taste good barbecued.

“Yeah, well, she was looking at me like I was about to eat her.”

“And were you?” He wags his eyebrows up and down.

“Dammit, Max.”

I'm stuck between moaning at the image of devouring a sweet, curvy Casey, and wanting to roar because I'm not doing that right fucking now.

Max knows it, too. The prick. He just chuckles softly.

"Look, Zeke, you kissed her. She's still here. That's something."

"She doesn't know what I am. She won't understand how I feel. Neither do you! I feel fucking?—"

"Out of control? Instantly obsessed? Like you'll go crazy if you don't get your hands on her right now?"

Fuck. So maybe he does get it.

"Zeke, if she's really your fated mate, she'll understand."

I shake my head.

"Max, Casey's a human. She doesn't have any idea what this world really is. What I am. She probably thinks I'm having a seizure when I growl and I swear she was gonna ask if I was wearing colored contacts cause of my goddamn Dragon eyes."

Max sobers, his expression going quiet.

"I won't lie to you. Nothing is guaranteed in this life, bro. You're right. She might run. But," he says and leans forward conspiratorially, "she might not."

He pauses and I'm waiting for him to finish like he's my last fucking hope.

And really? Maybe he is.

“Love’s a risk, man. It’s scary. Unpredictable. Undeniable. And it will tear your heart right out of your fucking chest. But I can tell you from personal experience, it’s totally fucking worth it.”

“It hurts,” I whisper, like a total fucking pussy.

“If it didn’t hurt, they wouldn’t call it falling, man. Aren’t you old enough to know that?”

I glance at him, brow raised.

“With all due respect, fuck you, Alpha,” I say, but I’m grinning.

He barks back a laugh and slaps my back. Hard.

Fucker.

“You know you sounded like a greeting card just now.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a new dad. I’ve been watching my mate sleep with one of the twins draped across her chest like a cat and the other making cutesy little goo sounds beside them. So, I’m allowed to be soft.”

My jaw clenches.

Envy sneaks up on me like the asshole he is.

Suddenly, I want that image for myself.

Casey asleep warm and snug in our bed.

Our babies. Perfect. Precious. Napping beside her.

Home. Family. Mine. Es meus.

Fuck. Me.

“You think I don’t know what this is doing to you?” he asks, voice low. “I feel it. Your Dragon’s shaking the earth beneath us.”

“She’s it,” I whisper. “I know it. Every part of me does. But I can’t shove this life down her throat. I won’t.”

“Then don’t,” he says. “Give her time. Show her the good in you. The fire and the quiet. Let her choose you, Zeke.”

I look away. “What if she doesn’t? It’ll kill me, Max.”

Max claps a hand to my shoulder, grip firm.

“If she doesn’t, then at least you’ll know you gave her the truth. You didn’t run. You didn’t hide. And you didn’t let fear decide for you.”

His words settle in deep, heavy as stone and just as grounding.

I nod once, slow. “Thanks.”

He steps back, heading for the exit.

“Oh, and Zeke?”

“Yeah?”

“She did kiss you back. Don’t forget that part.”

Then he’s gone.

And I’m left with a stall full of horses and a fire in my chest that refuses to go out.

The sound of Jed herding the goats up to the dairy barn reaches me from outside, and if I close my eyes, I can pick up the snort of Kian’s Bull as he gives Rosie Posie a ride around the pen.

This place? The Motley Crewd Ranch? It’s pure fucking magic.

I’m honored to be here with these men and women— once-upon-a-time last-chancers who found their fated mates and get to live out their happily-ever-afters.

But I’m not like them.

I’m fire and destruction.

Chaos and terror.

Didn’t I prove that when I burned our neighbor’s barn after what they did to Arliss? When I devoured those fucking Bears who came for Dante?

What would a sweet-smelling woman with petal-soft skin, eyes like warm firelight, and a heart so pure it fucking radiates heat want with a wretch like me?

But even as I’m trying to convince myself I’m not enough good for her, my Dragon’s stance on the subject is immovable.

Casey Reynolds is mine.

Es meus.

And I'm not sure there's anything in the world strong enough to stop me from claiming her.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The sun is dipping low behind the trees, casting everything in this golden, buttery light that makes the entire ranch look like a country song music video.

Not the sad breakup kind.

One of the fun ones.

The kind with beers, dogs, and people who actually like each other.

It's weird because I'm a Jersey girl through and through and country music isn't usually our thing here.

But there's always that odd breakthrough song. Add that to that one awesome vacation I took to Texas in college, and I have to tell you, I am a fan.

Anyway, smoke drifts lazily from the double grill out on Avery and Dante's new stone patio.

They really outdid themselves.

Built it themselves, too, though let's be real, she probably supervised while he Hulk-smashed his way through the dirt and carried slabs of stone like he was building a fortress.

The smell of grilled meat is basically a religious experience right now.

Chicken, ribs, sausages, burgers—I don't even eat red meat that often, but I'm

contemplating proposing to whoever's responsible for that smoky, spicy, mouthwatering scent.

Which is why I'm currently carrying two giant containers— macaroni salad in one hand, coleslaw in the other —over to the massive picnic table that's already half-filled with people and side dishes and drinks.

Rosie is running through the yard, wearing clothes this time. She's playing with a couple of kids— goats, not children .

The sight is something else. Still, it's sweet, innocent, and homey, and I-I kind of like it.

Adults are lounging with beers and red solo cups, and someone is playing country rock from a speaker that's been duct-taped to a porch post.

It's chaotic.

It's loud.

It's borderline magical.

I'm filled with a sense of longing. I mean, it's been so long since I felt anything like this.

Camaraderie. Kinship. Family.

I set the bowls down, arrange the serving spoons like I'm on a cooking show, and then turn back toward the house.

"Napkins," I mutter to myself. "Get the napkins before someone wipes barbecue

sauce on their jeans and blames me.”

I slip back inside, grateful for the moment of quiet—until the kitchen door swings open behind me and in walks Zeke.

Carrying a plate.

Of brownies.

My eyes narrow.

“Are those brownies ?”

“Cinnamon cayenne brownies.”

He looks almost guilty.

“Seriously?”

He shrugs those massive shoulders, making all my girly bits perk up.

“Yeah.”

“So, you can bake?”

He sets the plate on the counter and shrugs. “Sure. I like it. I mean, sometimes. Since Penny had the twins, she’s not baking as much and we all developed a taste for chocolate. It was self-defense.”

“You always over-explain yourself?” I tease.

“Well, now I’m not sure I should answer that.”

I step closer, eyeing the glossy top layer of the brownies, the faint hint of spice in the air. “So, you really made these?”

“Guess I’m just full of surprises.”

“Oh, I bet you are,” I murmur, grabbing a napkin and pretending to dab sweat off my forehead. “Seriously. Cayenne and cinnamon? Are they spicy spicy? Or just a little warm?”

He shrugs again, but there’s a spark in his eyes now. “You’ll have to find out for yourself.”

I blink at him, my lips twitching. “Are you flirting with me using baked goods?”

“Maybe.”

Goddamn. This man is sex on legs. His voice is deep and rumble and his crazy indigo eyes are following me, sparkling like he’s got a secret he can’t wait to share.

I raise an eyebrow.

“You tellin’ me you want me to put something hot in my mouth?”

He goes very still.

Then, slow and rough, “I want you to see if you can handle it, Petals.”

Oh no.

Oh yes.

I step even closer, toe-to-toe now, looking up at him like I'm not about to self-combust in the flirty maxi-dress I put on just for dinner.

It's got spaghetti straps and an elastic bodice that hugs my boobs just right. The rest of the thin fabric sort of drapes my body in a way that should be modest, but there are long slits cut strategically up the sides and, in the back and front, revealing glimpses of my legs when I walk.

His chest seems to rumble, and I want to high five myself when I spy him checking out a bit of thigh peeking through the side.

"Zeke Gordon, is this your idea of foreplay?"

He leans in a hair's breadth, voice like smoke and sin. "Would you run if it was?"

My breath catches.

"No," I whisper.

A beat passes.

My heart is pounding.

Then a kid shrieks outside, someone yells about the corn getting too charred, and the moment breaks like a soap bubble.

I blink and take a hasty step back.

"Right. Napkins. Getting the napkins."

He chuckles low in his chest and picks up a brownie.

“Better save room for dessert, Petals.”

I grab the napkins and flee from the kitchen, face flaming and pulse racing.

Oh my God. Can you die from too much angst?

If so, then I’m gonna die on this ranch.

And it’s going to be his fault.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Dinner was a rambunctious affair.

Smoke, laughter, beer, and way too many people talking over each other while pretending they weren't trying to one-up Max's grilling skills.

Spoiler alert: no one beats the Jersey Devil's steak rub.

I can't say I have a lot of experience with big family barbecues.

Not the real kind.

You know, the kind with kids running half-feral, music playing through a duct-taped speaker, and couples slipping off into the shadows for just a minute that lasts two hours.

But I didn't hate it.

Didn't hate the way everyone seemed to fit, like some messy puzzle that still made sense even with a few corners scorched or bent.

Didn't hate watching Casey laugh over a plate of food like she wasn't carrying the weight of something heavy and dangerous behind her eyes.

Didn't hate sitting next to her, feeling the heat of her thigh brush mine every now and then as if the universe was daring me to lean just a little closer.

And then there was Kian.

Bastard made us play a round of corn hole after dessert, claiming we needed to move or die .

Bullshit.

Pun intended.

That bovine bastard just wanted an excuse to meddle.

Had a shit-eating grin plastered across his face the whole damn time—especially when he announced, with the enthusiasm of a man who's been newly laid and can't stop playing matchmaker, that we'd be doing boy-girl teams.

Naturally, I got paired with Casey.

Naturally, I didn't complain.

And naturally, he got beaned in the face with a well-aimed bag about ten minutes in.

Which I definitely didn't throw out of spite.

It was strategy.

Precision.

Possibly divine intervention.

Either way, he spent the rest of the night with a frozen bag of peas on his forehead and a smile that told me he knew exactly what he was doing.

Fucker.

Seems like the Bull Shifter thinks everyone should be paired off now that he's all happy and mated, walking around with that smug glow like the world finally got it right.

If only it were that easy.

If only finding your person— your mate —was something that ended in a game, a laugh, and a barbecue kiss goodnight.

But it isn't.

Not for me, anyway.

Because I've found her.

She's right here.

Sitting under the fading light of day in a sundress that's driving me half-mad.

Laughing at Arliss's jokes, licking barbecue sauce from her thumb with zero awareness of what it's doing to me.

And she doesn't know what I am.

She doesn't know what we are.

Doesn't know that every second I spend near her, my fire flares a little brighter.

That every word she tosses my way is another thread tying me to her.

That my Dragon— once dying, fading —is thriving in her presence and whispering

one thing on repeat.

Es meus.

But fate's a cruel thing.

It doesn't come with instructions.

And it sure as hell doesn't guarantee a happy ending.

So yeah, I played the game. Ate the ribs. Let Kian run his mouth. Let her brush against me under the table while pretending I wasn't coming undone.

Because even if I don't deserve her, even if I can't have her for keeps, I can still steal these moments.

Pretend I'm just a man.

Pretend she's just a woman.

And pretend the fire between us isn't already burning out of control.

The fire pit crackles low, the last of the flames licking at half-burned logs like it's not ready to say goodnight either.

Everyone else is gone now.

Max and Penny were the first to retreat, her soft laugh echoing as he scooped up one sleepy twin in each arm like they were the most precious things in the world.

Dante followed, muttering something about his girls and hoisting Avery into his arms

like a man who still can't believe his luck. Even with all her grumbling and swatting at him, the pregnant female melted into him like it was second nature.

Kian and Arliss went next, Rosie tucked under one arm, snoring softly, her little curls tangled and her bear plush clutched tight. They'd drop the cub off with Dante on the way to their own cabin.

Emmet and Jez had vanished a few minutes ago, whispering and smiling in that way that made it impossible not to see the darkness they'd both crawled through to reach each other.

Jed lingered longer, strumming his guitar low and slow, the notes settling in the bones like a memory.

Then he packed it up, called to his beloved goats— Dolly Lou, Dolly Mae, and Dolly Beth —and wandered off into the night like he was born of it.

Now, it's just me left.

Me and her.

Casey sits across the fire, hugging her knees, rocking gently back and forth on the edge of a worn blanket.

The last of the s'mores long gone.

Her lips are still sticky-sweet with chocolate and marshmallow and something that's been undoing me all night.

That goddamn sundress is riding up her thighs, the firelight dancing over her skin like it knows what I'm thinking.

What I'm barely keeping myself from doing.

She brushes a strand of hair from her face, unaware— or pretending to be —that I've been watching her through half-lidded eyes for the last hour.

Like I'm starved.

And she's every goddamn course.

My zipper's tight. Too tight.

Been that way since she licked frosting from her finger after dessert and laughed at one of Kian's awful dad jokes.

My Dragon's prowling under my skin, low and lazy now.

No longer agitated.

No longer patient either.

She glances up at me, her smile soft. Her voice even softer.

"I should probably put the fire out."

"No."

She tilts her head. "No?"

"There's no way that fire's going out."

She doesn't know what I'm really talking about.

She can't know.

But still, there's recognition in her amber eyes as she gazes at me.

Casey stills, her eyes locking on mine.

"Zeke," she whispers into the night and fuck me, but it sounds like a prayer.

A plea maybe.

I'm not sure.

All I know is my name on her lips is enough to make me shift forward, slow and deliberate.

She doesn't move.

Not away.

Not toward.

She just stays put and watches me, wide-eyed.

The reflection of the flames catches in the gold-brown of her irises like they were made to glow.

"I tried," I say roughly. "Tried to stay away. Thought I could keep things simple. But there's nothing simple about you, Casey."

Her breath hitches.

I reach for her, one hand threading into her hair as I close the last of the space between us.

“And if I don’t kiss you right now, I swear I’m gonna lose my fucking mind.”

She swallows, and I move.

I kiss her.

And it’s not gentle.

It’s not soft.

It’s teeth and tongue and heat and hunger.

It’s a growl deep in my chest as her lips part and her hands fist in my shirt like she needs something to hold on to.

She tastes like fire and sweetness.

Like danger and salvation.

Like every goddamn dream I didn’t let myself have.

She gasps into my mouth when I pull her into my lap, her thighs straddling me like they belong there.

I grip her hips, guiding her down, letting her feel exactly what she’s doing to me.

Her moan? Fuck.

It rips straight through me, waking up every inch of my Dragon.

The kiss deepens. Darkens.

My tongue claims hers, slow and possessive.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling just enough to make me groan.

When I finally tear my mouth from hers, I press my forehead to hers, both of us breathing like we've run miles.

Her voice is barely a whisper.

“What is this?”

Her hands clench over my heart and fuck, it's like she's dug beneath my skin and is holding the thing in her hands.

But isn't she, though?

“This,” I murmur, brushing my lips across her jaw, her neck, the shell of her ear. “Is something I can't fight anymore.”

And then I kiss her again.

And again.

And again.

Until the fire's the least dangerous thing burning between us.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I came to the Motley Crewd Ranch hoping to shake some of the loneliness that's been clinging to me like a second skin.

I told myself it was just a weekend away.

A break.

A chance to breathe.

To not look over my shoulder.

To pretend, for just a little while, that I wasn't a woman with a past that could still find her if she stood still too long.

But deep down? I was aching for something more.

Avery's been amazing. She's the kind of friend who doesn't pry, but always shows up exactly when you need her.

And the other women— Penny, Jezebel, Arliss —they welcomed me like I belonged here from the second I stepped onto the place.

They're smart, funny, strong as hell. They are also completely head-over-heels, fairy-tale in love.

And not the performative, Instagram-filter kind of love.

I mean real love.

Deep. Soul-level.

The kind that wraps around you like a safety net and never lets go.

It's beautiful. And honestly? A little intimidating.

Each couple feels like their own little world.

Like a perfect island where no one else exists.

You can feel it in their glances, the brush of a hand, the way the men look at their women like they're the center of gravity itself.

I've never seen anything like it.

And it makes me realize— painfully, sharply —how long it's been since I've let someone look at me like I matter.

Of course, there's one of them who isn't paired off.

Like me.

Zeke Gordon.

And maybe it's wishful thinking, or just the fantasy of a girl desperate to feel something, anything, but I feel his eyes on me when he thinks I'm not looking.

Oh, there's been some playful banter and stolen kisses. And try as I might to ignore it, he's just too—too big to pretend he doesn't exist.

He's got this presence to him.

Larger than life.

And I can't say I'm immune to it.

He's magnetic. Heavy in the air. When he walks into a space, everything shifts.

Like the room knows he's here before anyone else does.

I've never seen a man like him.

Not in real life.

Honestly, Zeke Gordon could make a fortune modeling.

He's got this rugged cowboy meets Viking god look.

All intense eyes and dark waves of hair you want to get lost in.

But something tells me that world isn't for him.

Too staged. Too fake.

Zeke's real. Raw edges and dangerous fire.

And even though I hardly know him, I feel him.

When he's close, my skin prickles.

When he speaks, all of me listens.

And when he kisses me— God, when he kisses me —I swear something inside me cracks wide open.

Is it stupid that I feel possessive?

That I want him to look only at me, touch only me?

I hardly know him. And still, I don't want to go to bed right now.

I don't want to go inside. Don't want to turn away from him.

I'm not particularly superstitious, but it's like the night is doing something to me.

Stars erupt across the navy sky, and it's magical. All of it is.

The soft firelight.

The laughter fading into embers.

The moon above us, so bright and unbothered.

It's like the whole world softened its edges just enough to let me dream again.

And now, I can't help but wonder if I've been foolish.

Foolish to run from every feeling that wasn't fear.

Foolish to build walls so high I forgot how to climb out.

Foolish to think love was something I wasn't built for.

Because here, in this strange, beautiful place— an honest to God working New Jersey ranch —with this man, I don't feel foolish anymore.

I feel awake.

And maybe it's not so foolish to want something real.

Maybe it's brave.

Maybe it's time.

The fire crackles low, casting flickering light over the patio stones, but the heat in my chest has nothing to do with the flames.

It's him.

Zeke.

Still and watching, like a storm waiting for the right moment to break. His eyes are on me— have been on me —and every second that passes feels like a tether pulling tighter, a current building between us.

I should be afraid.

I've spent months living in fear.

Running. Hiding. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

My life has been one long string of caution tape and whispered warnings.

But not here.

Not now.

Here, sitting beside this fire, with Zeke looking at me like I'm the only thing he's ever wanted, I don't feel afraid or alone.

I feel wanted.

I feel alive.

He shifts forward, muscles taut beneath that worn cotton shirt, eyes like twin storms.

Wild and hungry.

But behind the hunger, I see something else.

Something deeper. Something real.

He doesn't reach for me.

Not yet.

It's like he's giving me a choice.

And God, it's been so long since someone let me choose.

My chest aches. My throat tightens.

I hear echoes of my ex in the back of my mind. Cold and calculating. The things he used to say when I flinched from his touch or wore a dress that showed too much skin.

“You’re not sexy. You’re convenient.”

“You’re lucky I want you at all.”

“You think any man wants a body like that?”

But Zeke’s gaze trails over me like a promise.

Like every inch of me is sacred.

Like he’s already memorized the landscape of my body in a dream.

“What is this?” I whisper, afraid to break the spell.

“This,” he replies, brushing his plump lips across my neck, kissing my ear, making me shiver. “Is something I can’t fight anymore.”

Holy. Shit.

“Come here,” he says, voice low and dark, gravel and silk. “Need you, Casey. I want you so damn bad.”

I press my body to his, closing the minimal space between us. My breath catches when his arms wrap around me, and then he just lifts me up.

Like I weigh nothing.

Like I belong right there.

And maybe I do.

He carries me across the yard, through the shadows, into a cabin I assume is his.

It smells good inside.

Masculine.

Just like him.

Wood and leather and fire and warmth.

The door shuts behind us with a heavy click, and my heart gallops like it finally remembers how to run free.

He sets me down in the center of the room, but he doesn't let go.

His hands stay on my waist, large and steady, thumbs pressing into the soft curve of my hips like he needs to feel me there.

"You're fucking gorgeous, Casey," he growls. "Every inch. Every curve. Every dimple. And tonight, I'm not stopping until you believe it, too."

Heat flares down my spine.

I don't know what to do with the words he's saying. I only know my whole life, I've waited for someone to talk to me like that.

Only, this is even better than I imagined.

"I—" I start, but he silences me with a kiss.

It's not sweet.

It's not tentative.

It's all heat and desperation and the kind of hunger that makes a woman forget who she used to be.

His mouth claims mine, demanding and reverent all at once, and I melt into him because there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

When he peels my dress off my body, I brace myself for a flinch. For shame. But it doesn't come.

Because Zeke looks at me like I'm divine.

Like he's been starving, and I'm the only thing that can feed him.

And when his mouth finds my neck, my shoulder, the swell of my breast— when his hands map every inch of me with a worshipful hunger—I do exactly as he promised I would.

I believe him.

I believe I'm beautiful.

I believe I'm wanted.

And when he lays me down and shows me how it feels to be touched like I matter, I let go.

Of my fear.

Of the past.

Of every single lie I've ever been told about my body and my worth.

And in his arms, with his voice whispering how good I taste, how soft I feel, how right this is—he makes me believe I was made for this.

For him.

For this.

And for one perfect, breathless, moaning, melting night—I swear, I see heaven.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

She's soft beneath me.

Warm.

Wet.

Willing.

And mine.

The air between us crackles—hotter than fire, thicker than smoke.

I press my lips to her skin like I've been dying of thirst, hungry and empty for centuries, and only she can satisfy the ache.

And maybe that's the truth.

Maybe I have been waiting lifetimes to taste her. To have her.

And now she's here, moaning beneath my mouth as I worship every inch of her with lips and tongue and hands that shake from the effort of not losing control.

My Dragon is pacing in the back of my mind, molten and wild.

Watching.

Growling.

Wanting.

He sees her just as I do—glowing, perfect, threaded with power she doesn't even know she has.

He whispers to me to take. To mark. To claim.

But I don't.

Not yet.

Not without her knowing what it means.

Still, I can't stop the way I devour her.

She's honey and fire and heaven on my tongue.

Her thighs tremble around my shoulders, hands fisting in my hair as I press my lips down her ripe flesh.

“Zeke!”

“Shhh. I got you, Petals. Got what you need. First, I'm gonna taste you.”

I slide down, pressing my tongue into her belly button before wedging my shoulders between her creamy, thick thighs.

She smells so fucking delicious.

Like sweet honey, sex, and need.

She smells like mine.

I spread her glistening folds and press my lips to hers, pushing my tongue deeper inside her needy pussy.

Fucking. Perfection.

This woman is going to kill me.

I do it again, slower this time, hungrier for her.

She's so wet for me.

Her ready submission is my fucking undoing, and I go at her like a wild man.

I can't help myself. Eating her out is all I want to do. Making her come on my tongue is my top fucking priority. And she's close. I fucking know it.

Her cries curl down my spine like lightning and I don't stop until she's arching, breaking, coming undone on my mouth like a prayer answered.

And it truly is the answer to one of my prayers.

My name on her lips is a growl, a gasp, a benediction.

And still— it's not enough.

I want more from her. So much more.

My cock aches to be inside her, and I know if I don't move now, I'll come on the sheets like a green ass virgin.

I move fast. I rise above her, watching her flushed face, the sheen of sweat on her skin, the dazed hunger in her eyes.

“I need to feel you,” I rasp.

She nods, reaching for me, guiding me in with hands that shake but never falter.

I don’t even think about slowing down.

And when I sink into her— slow, deep, complete —I see stars.

Casey’s amber eyes go wide and she gasps in response to my invasion.

She’s tight. So fucking tight. But she’s wet from coming on my tongue, so I slide into her with little resistance.

I groan.

She feels so good.

And my Dragon roars.

Better than good, she is perfect. Made for me.

Her walls flutter around me, wet and welcoming, and I have to bite down on my own wrist to keep from saying the words my soul is already screaming.

Es meus. Mine. Mate.

Because I can’t. Not yet. Not until she knows.

I'm not in the right headspace for confessions. Instead, I move.

Long, slow strokes that make her whimper and writhe beneath me.

But this is so much more than sex.

Every thrust is a vow.

Every kiss is a brand.

I worship her with my body because it's the only language I am capable of right now, and Casey, well, she answers with her own sweetness—her throaty cries, trembling thighs, and whispered yeses.

This woman is magic.

She must be.

She strips me bare without even trying.

And when she shatters again— wrapped around me, clutching me like I'm the only solid thing in her world —I follow her straight into oblivion.

Into the fire.

Into us.

By the time I can breathe again, I know one thing for sure. I didn't have to bite her to claim her.

Casey is mine.

It's just a matter of time before she understands it, too.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Doing the walk of shame at the ass crack of dawn is never a good time.

But doing it across a ranch— with the distinct scent of sex, wood smoke, and six-foot-five inch cowboy still clinging to your skin —while birds chirp aggressively like they know?

That’s a whole new level of mortifying.

To make matters worse, I’m pretty sure a loose cow saw me tiptoeing out of Zeke’s cabin and just face-planted.

Like, stunned into bovine collapse.

Just keeled right over.

I blinked at it. It blinked at me.

Then it made a sad little moo and wandered off like it wanted no part in my bad decisions.

Or maybe it couldn’t wait to tell the other cows over in the dairy or something?

Whatever.

But also relatable.

“Should I call someone?” I muttered to myself, hugging Zeke’s oversized flannel

tighter around my body. “Wake Dante up? Is this a cow-related emergency?”

Because honestly? I’m not altogether sure a cow should be just wandering around the place.

Oh well.

That could wait until after I got a shower.

I needed soap.

Possibly holy water.

And underwear. Let’s not forget the fact that I had none.

Just my dress and Zeke’s flannel.

No bra. No panties. Which is not a vibe I’m emotionally prepared to rock first thing in the morning while walking into Avery’s house like a hungover Disney villain.

I didn’t even have more than two beers.

Biting my lip, I slip through Avery and Dante’s front door as quietly as possible, padding toward the guest bathroom like a ninja in borrowed lumberjack couture.

The water pressure was glorious.

The soap smelled like honey and sage. And for about five whole minutes, I forgot that maybe this could get weird.

I mean, I just slept with a man whose eyes literally glowed, who made me feel things

that would probably make a nun combust, and he was kinda sorta my friend's hubby's friend.

Geezus. Someone get me a family tree to fill in, quick!

But so what? It didn't matter whose friend he was.

Last night was just a moment out of time.

No big deal.

Not like Zeke would want to announce it to the world that we spent all night boinking at his place.

I was stressing for no reason.

Of course, the second I stepped out of the bathroom— clean, damp, wrapped in a towel and armed with the idea that I could slink back to my room unnoticed —everyone was there, just waiting.

Avery. Penny. Jezebel. Arliss.

All perched around the kitchen island with coffee mugs in hand, cute little robes— seriously, where could I get one —and matching smirks.

“Oh good, Sleeping Beauty's awake,” Avery chirped.

“Actually, she looks well rested for someone who didn't get much sleep last night,” Jez drawled, taking a pointed sip of her mug.

“I'd even say she's glowing ,” Penny added helpfully.

Arliss arched a brow. “And walking like a woman who’s finally found religion.”

I froze, mid-step, hair dripping onto the hardwood floor, the second towel I have draped around me slipping just slightly off one shoulder.

“I— what ,” I stutter, “Oh, um , good morning?”

“Oh, honey,” Penny said with a grin. “From the looks of it, it’s a great morning.”

My face is flaming.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Right,” Avery deadpanned. “Because you definitely didn’t sneak out of Zeke’s cabin at sunrise wearing only last night’s regrets and a flannel that’s clearly three sizes too big.”

“It was not a flannel,” I muttered, clutching that and the other clothes I wore back to Avery’s place a little bit tighter. “It’s a security blanket with buttons.”

It started slowly then. A snicker. A chortle . But it was literally seconds before they all started howling with laughter.

I was just about to make a run for it— straight back to the shower where I could hide forever —when the front door slammed open with a bang that made the coffee mugs rattle.

Zeke.

Hair a little wild.

Shirt half-buttoned.

Jeans slung low on his hips.

Eyes dark, stormy, and laser focused as they scanned the room like he expected me to vanish.

“Casey?” His voice was a growl.

Low. Rough. Possessive.

All four women stopped laughing.

So did I.

He spotted me— wet hair, towel, flushed face —and let out a breath like he’d been holding it since I left.

“You weren’t in my bed,” he said, stalking toward me. “I woke up, and you were gone.”

“I—I needed a shower,” I stammered, heart thudding as he reached me.

His hand cupped my jaw, tilting my face up.

“I have a shower. In my cabin.”

“OH, um, but?—”

“You disappeared on me, Petals.”

“I just went for soap.”

“I don’t care why you leave—if the car alarm is going off. Or you need to use the phone. Or if the fucking President of the United States is demanding to speak to you. You leave my bed, you wake me up. Period.”

Someone made a choked noise behind us.

Probably Arliss.

Or Jez.

Or all of them.

But I barely heard them.

Because—holy fucking shit.

Zeke just read me his version of the riot act, and I swear to fuck my pussy is dripping in response.

He knows it too. I can tell by the way his eyelids drop to half mast.

Next thing, he’s leaning down, kissing me like we’re all alone.

Like the whole world has gone quiet just for us.

Slow and deep and filthy with promise.

By the time he pulls back, I’m breathless and boneless and half-melted into his chest.

“Okay,” I breathe the word.

“Good.”

Then he glares over his shoulder at the rest of the kitchen. “Y’all can stop staring now.”

Avery cleared her throat. “Too late. That imprint’s burned into my soul.”

Penny fanned herself. “I think I need a mimosa.”

“Goddamn cowboys,” Jez muttered, grinning. “Y’all come with a warning label?”

Zeke just grins and tucks me closer to his side, growling low in my ear, “You’re not going anywhere, Petals. Not ever again.”

And maybe I should be embarrassed.

But mostly?

I just want him to take me right back to that bed.

Then I remember— the cow.

“Hey, I think a cow was wandering around outside when I, um, left your cabin,” I whisper, trying to sound casual as I address the group.

Some of the guys walk in right on cue, boots thudding, shirts slightly rumpled like they also didn’t get much sleep— but definitely not for the same reason.

Kian, I think, is the one who nearly chokes on the sip of coffee he swiped from

Arliss.

“A cow?” he coughs, eyes wide.

Arliss bursts out laughing. “Oh my God.”

The rest of them follow, chuckling into their mugs, trading glances that I can’t quite decipher but know— know —are absolutely about me.

“What?” I ask, frowning as I turn to Kian, hoping for some kind of clue.

“Was that not a thing? Do cows not roam here or?—?”

But I don’t get a straight answer.

Because Zeke is suddenly there, at my side.

Close enough that I feel the tension radiating off him like heat.

He’s not laughing.

He’s not even smiling.

He’s glowering at the room, jaw clenched, arms crossed, and his whole body radiates one very loud, very clear message.

Mine .

And only then do I realize— I’m still in a towel.

A towel.

A freaking fluffy towel, and nothing else.

His hand comes to my lower back, nudging me gently but firmly toward the hall.

Not a word.

Just pressure.

Direction.

Intensity.

And inside me, something old stirs. Something I don't like to look at too closely. That voice that always waits just under the surface.

You're too much.

Not enough.

You're embarrassing him.

You're a mess.

I start to pull away, embarrassment flaring hot and sharp.

But Zeke stops me with a hand on my chin, tilting my face up to meet his.

His expression softens— but just barely .

The fire in his eyes still burns, and his voice is low, steady, rough like gravel coated in honey.

“Just so there is no misunderstanding,” he says, “I’m not pushing you to get dressed for any other reason than because I fucking love your body.”

I blink.

“You’re so goddamned perfect, Casey. Every fucking inch of you is designed to bring a man to his knees,” he continues, like it’s the most obvious fact in the universe. “But that’s the thing. I am the only man for that particular job.”

My breath catches.

“And I’m a possessive prick,” he adds, and before I can speak, he leans in and steals a kiss.

It’s quick, but hard enough to leave me stunned, dizzy, hungry for more.

I’m still catching up when he turns me around, gently, but firmly, and points me down the hall like I might actually remember how legs work.

“Go on and get dressed, Petals,” he murmurs, his hands warm on my hips.

And then he leans in, breath grazing my ear, voice a velvet promise.

“Put on something comfortable, and I’ll make us a picnic basket so I can take you riding with me.”

I swallow.

Hard.

And yeah. I am a total sucker for that idea.

Something about the way he says it— like riding could mean a dozen different things and every one of them ends with me forgetting what sadness feels like —has me nodding before I even realize it.

“Okay,” I whisper.

Because maybe I’ve been tired of running for a long time.

And maybe this is where I stop.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

“Dude? You cook?” Kian barges into my cabin like he owns the place, strutting through the front door without so much as a knock.

Like he’s got the fucking key.

Which he doesn’t.

I don’t hesitate.

I launch the knife I’m holding straight at his face.

It whistles past his ear and lodges in the doorframe with a satisfying thunk.

He yelps and ducks— barely in time.

“Fuck, man!” he hollers. “I already shaved today, fuck you very much!”

He marches over, yanking the knife from the wall and— seriously?

He wipes it off on my dishtowel like he’s doing me a favor.

“Wash it before you use it again,” he mutters, setting it on the counter like he’s the one being annoyed.

Then he snags a tomato slice from my cutting board.

I snarl, low and dangerous.

A puff of smoke curls from my nostrils before I can stop it.

Kian freezes, the slice halfway to his mouth.

“Okay, so no sharing,” he says, placing it back down slowly, hands up like he’s just negotiated a hostage exchange.

I finish wrapping the food I prepped.

Simple stuff.

Cold fried chicken.

Some pasta salad I remembered Casey saying she liked from last night’s meal.

Fresh tomatoes with basil and an extra virgin olive oil drizzle.

Nothing fancy, but it’s hers. Meant for her .

I don’t know what the hell is happening to me, but the urge to feed her, take care of her, give her things— it’s swallowing me whole.

It’s not just instinct.

It’s need.

My Dragon’s pacing inside me like a feral thing, claws scraping bone. He wants her fed, touched, marked, mated.

“Why are you here?” I growl, grabbing drinks from the fridge, tossing them into the soft cooler like it’s a shield between me and whatever conversation he’s dragging me

toward.

Kian shrugs like this is normal. Like I'm normal.

"Just checking on you."

"Bullshit."

"Is that a cow joke, bro? Cause I had enough of those from your girl this morning," he mumbles.

I roll my eyes. Then I snort. He's right. That was his fucking Bull wandering around that Casey spied when she left my cabin.

I don't like that she left, but it's fucking hilarious she kept calling Kian's animal a cow.

Snort.

The bovine in question hops up onto the counter like he's not a huge ass Shifter and one wrong move from getting tossed out the window.

"So, you and Casey, huh?"

I pause. My jaw clenches.

"Me and Casey what?"

"Easy, bro." He holds up both hands. "I mean, it's good news, right?"

I zipper the cooler shut, making way more noise than necessary.

My breath shudders out, and I feel it.

Heat pulsing right behind my ribs. My rose burning as it stretches, trying desperately to bloom.

My Dragon isn't just agitated.

He's desperate.

Find her. Bite her. Mate her. Before it's too late.

But I can't.

Not like this.

Not when she doesn't even know what I am.

Not when she thinks I'm just a man and not the fire-wielding monster clawing at the inside of his own skin.

I press my hands flat to the counter, bracing against the weight pressing down on me.

"I haven't claimed her," I mutter.

Kian blinks. "Wait—what? You haven't?"

"No."

"Why the hell not?!"

I shoot him a glare, and for once, he backs off. Just a little.

“I’m older than all of you,” I say quietly. “Not just by a decade. I’ll be a hundred and thirty-two next spring.”

He goes still.

“I came from a different time. A different place.” My voice roughens.

“We weren’t like this. My old Clan was hard and cold, Kian.

This here? What we’ve built on the Motley Crewd Ranch?

The way we care for each other, the way you and Emmet, Dante, and Max treat your mates?

It’s fucking alien to me. I didn’t have that growing up. ”

“Neither did I. So what?”

“So, it was bad,” I whisper, afraid to bring attention to the past.

“How bad, man? What did you have?”

I laugh. Bitter. Cold.

“Secrecy. Greed. Infighting. My Clan warred among themselves over gold and power while our women were locked away—hoarded like property, bred until there were no more. Until the magic started to rot.”

Kian says nothing. Just listens.

“I swore I’d never become that. Never take what wasn’t freely given. Never repeat

their mistakes.”

He tilts his head. “So you think claiming Casey is what ? Stealing?”

“I think it’s damning her,” I rasp. “Binding her to me before she even knows what I am? That’s a sin where I come from.”

Kian leans forward, face uncharacteristically serious.

“Zeke, I ain’t gonna lie. That sounds fucked up. But,” he says, hopping down and walking towards me, “you’re not your past. You’re not your Clan. You’re not that darkness.”

He rests a hand on my shoulder, firm and grounding.

“You said your old people rotted from the inside out. You think that’s what’ll happen to you if you don’t claim her?”

I look at him, and I don’t have to say it.

He already knows.

“Then don’t let the fear win,” he says. “Casey’s not your cage. She’s your salvation. All our mates are.”

My throat tightens.

“She makes you better. I’ve seen it. Hell, she makes you smile, which I didn’t know was physically possible.”

I huff.

“It hurts.”

He grins. “Yeah, I bet. See, that’s your soul stretching. You’ll get used to it.”

My phone buzzes, and I nearly leap for it.

It’s a text.

But I don’t care who is buzzing me. I have something else to do today.

Picnic ride with Casey.

I stare at the back door like it holds the rest of my future.

Maybe it does.

“Go to her,” Kian says, slapping my shoulder one last time before heading for the door. “And maybe don’t throw knives at the next guy who shows up to say hi.”

“I make no promises.”

But my heart’s already racing.

Because whatever I am— Dragon, monster, relic —I know this much, I have to tell her the truth.

I have to tell Casey what she is to me.

And if she says yes, I’m never letting her go.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The sun's still climbing, warm and golden through the kitchen windows, but it's not the heat that's got my palms sweating.

It's him.

Zeke.

I see him through the glass, waiting out near the fence line with a horse already saddled and the full attention of the morning around him.

It's like nature pauses for him—birds quiet, wind softer.

Just him and that steady, magnetic stillness.

I already called the home where Gramps is situated and was told he's having a good day. He's resting well and perfectly pleasant, which was good considering his recent dementia diagnosis.

That bastard of an illness was heartbreaking, but Gramps is still strong, and I promise myself I'll visit him soon.

I'm seconds from walking out the door when Avery slides in beside me, a cup of herbal tea in one hand, the other resting on her swollen belly, and that all-knowing glint in her eye.

She doesn't say anything at first. Just takes a sip and glances out the window too, her voice casual when she finally speaks.

“This place gets under your skin, doesn’t it?”

I nod, swallowing the lump forming in my throat.

“It feels like something I didn’t know I was missing.”

Avery smiles, but it’s laced with something deeper. Something heavier.

“It’s not just the ranch,” she says. “It’s them.”

I glance at her, unsure.

“The men,” she clarifies gently.

“They’re not like most. They’re rough around the edges, sure, and gods know they growl more than they talk, but they love hard. Deep. For life.”

Something stirs in my chest. I look back out the window, where Zeke strokes the horse’s neck with those big, calloused hands.

“He’s intense, Av, but this isn’t love. I mean, we just met,” I murmur, but whether I’m trying to convince her or me is anyone’s guess.

Avery chuckles. “Agree to disagree about that. But intense is one way to put it. Zeke’s special. He’s seen more. Lost more. But he’s a good man. The best kind, really, if you’re brave enough to let him in.”

I wrap my arms around myself, needing the comfort.

Avery touches my elbow, grounding me.

“You’re welcome here, Casey. Always. But be careful.”

I blink. “Of what?”

She hesitates. Then, with a smile that’s more tender than teasing, she says, “Once you fall for one of these cowboys, nothing else will ever compare.”

And I know— somehow, I know —she’s not just talking about boots and bonfires.

She’s talking about something bigger.

Wilder.

Something that changes you.

I take a breath, heart thudding, and nod once.

Then I step outside, toward the man waiting like he’s already felt me coming.

Birds fly overhead, and critters scurry in the woods behind the cabin, but everything seems to stop to look at Zeke.

As if nature itself were seeking his approval.

Suddenly, I realize I’m one of them too.

There’s just something about him that feels like, well , like magic. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before, and I think I like it.

In fact, I know I do.

The second I step outside, I realize I've made a tactical error.

I thought I was ready.

But nope. I was so not ready.

Because Zeke Gordon is standing beside the biggest horse I've ever seen—and somehow, the man looks even bigger.

Broad shoulders wrapped in a soft black T-shirt, those muscular forearms flexing as he tightens a saddle strap. The reins rest loose in one hand like they belong there.

His hair is tied back in a low, lazy knot behind his head, the ends barely brushing the collar of his shirt, and his jaw flexes just slightly as he checks the cinch.

I have the sudden urge to fan myself with my own dignity.

He looks up as I approach.

His eyes are that stormy indigo-blue again. The color is so unique, it's like something out of a dream.

Like calm water with danger lurking just under the surface.

Zeke's gaze is focused. Hungry. On me.

"Hey," I say, trying to sound breezy. "Nice day for a ride. If I knew how to ride that is."

He doesn't answer right away.

He just lets his gaze roam down my body, then back up slowly.

When he finally speaks, it's low and rough and way too effective.

"I got you, Petals. You're safe with me."

Strong as he is, I'm not quite sure I believe him.

I swallow hard.

"Is this your horse?"

He nods. "Name's Trouble."

"Of course it is."

He smirks, then gestures me closer. "Come on. This one is Peanut. I'll help you up."

I pause. "Fair warning, I haven't ridden anything bigger than a yoga ball since my days in summer camp."

"You'll be fine," he says, stepping close, "Besides we both know that ain't true."

My eyes practically fall out of my head as I catch his meaning.

He is closer now. Way too close.

Before I can offer a rebuttal or rethink this whole thing, his hands are at my waist.

His grip is firm, warm, steady, and in the next breath, he lifts me onto the saddle like I weigh nothing.

“Whoa,” I laugh breathlessly, wobbling for balance.

“Relax,” he murmurs, adjusting the stirrups. “I’ve got you.”

It’s not the words, it’s the way he says them that makes me want to swoon.

Like it’s a promise.

His gaze is unwavering and just like that, I do as he says.

I relax. I settle into the saddle, watching as he swings up onto his horse, Trouble, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

He doesn’t even have to look to find his balance. He just moves with an easy, predatory grace that makes my insides melt.

We start riding. Well. I’m mostly just hanging on.

Zeke is patient. Sweet. Tender.

We go slow at first, following a wide dirt trail that winds around the edge of the property, where the fence line meets the trees.

“You’re doing good, Petals,” he murmurs, and his subtle praise warms me to my toes.

I smile and breathe deep.

The air smells like wildflowers and summer grass.

Birds call overhead.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear cows. Probably judging me.

For a while, we just ride in silence.

But it's not awkward.

It's peaceful.

Zeke rides beside me, one hand loosely holding the reins, the other resting on his thigh.

Every now and then, he glances over— just a flick of his eyes —but each time, I feel it like a touch.

Eventually, I can't take it anymore.

“So, you do this often?” I ask.

He grunts.

“Ride? Every day. I work on a ranch,” he says, canting his head as he looks at me curiously.

“Yeah, but you're not working today, are you?” I ask, casting a glance his way as our horses walk side by side.

Zeke looks over at me, a slow grin curving his mouth in a way that makes my stomach flutter. “No. I guess I'm not.”

“So...” I smile, shifting in the saddle, trying to play it cool. “What are you thinking about right now?”

His grin fades— just a little .

His jaw tightens, the muscle flexing beneath the stubble, and for a second, I think he won't answer.

Then his voice drops, low and rough, like he's pulling the words from some place deep.

“Right now? I'm trying to remember why I ever thought it was smart to keep my distance from you.”

Oh.

Oh damn.

I stare straight ahead, trying to remember how to breathe, my heart doing its best impression of a hummingbird trapped in my chest.

“That so?” I ask, pretending to be casual, like my hands aren't slick with sweat and every nerve ending in my body isn't on high alert.

“Yeah,” he says, voice dipping into something deeper, darker. “You don't make it easy.”

“Good.”

The word slips out before I can second-guess it. And it hangs there between us like an open door I just stepped through.

He chuckles, quiet and warm and just a little dangerous. It slides over my skin like smoke and makes me want to lean into him.

I shift again, trying to calm the riot in my chest. “This place is beautiful,” I say, more to ground myself than anything.

“That it is,” he agrees, the corners of his mouth still curled.

“You know, I had no idea New Jersey had big ranches like this.”

“Oh, there are a few,” he says. “This is probably more farm than ranch, technically. But with the dairy and the animals and everything else we’ve got going on, it fits.”

“It’s peaceful,” I murmur.

“It is,” he agrees. “Most days. Others it’s a riot of noise and one catastrophe followed by another.”

“Yeah, but you love it,” I say, and note the glitter in his eyes.

He doesn’t answer, but that’s okay.

There’s this lull. But it isn’t awkward.

Just quiet. Comfortable.

I glance over again, watching the way he rides.

Confident, easy, like he was born to straddle a saddle.

He belongs here.

In this world. In this moment.

“What made you want to do this kind of thing?” I ask. “Ranch life, I mean.”

He thinks about it for a beat, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

“Like my space,” he says at last. “Like working with the animals. They don’t talk much. Don’t lie. It’s a good fit for me.”

His words are simple, but they hit somewhere deep.

“And you?” he asks, flicking those steel-blue eyes to mine. “Always wanted to be a school nurse?”

I laugh, but it’s hollow. “Oh. Um, not—not really,” I say, the truth clawing at the back of my throat.

I don’t offer more.

And Zeke— intuitive, impossibly sexy, alarmingly perceptive Zeke —doesn’t push.

He just nods like he gets it.

Like he understands what it’s like to live with a truth you’re not ready to speak aloud.

For the first time in what feels like years, I don’t feel like I’m scrambling to prove myself. I don’t feel like I have to fight to be heard or twist myself into a more palatable version of me.

I feel wanted.

Safe.

Seen.

And as the wind brushes my skin and the sun warms my back, I realize something that makes my throat go tight.

Falling for this cowboy?

It's not a question.

It's not a risk.

It's already done.

And I am so screwed.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

C asey's breathing is shallow.

Not panicked—but close.

I try to make myself smaller. To not overwhelm her with my obsession.

But I am so fucking aware of her.

It's not even subtle. It's full-body, soul-deep obsession.

Every flutter of her impossibly long eyelashes? I track it like the predator I am.

Every soft sigh that escapes those full, kiss-bruised lips? It brands itself into my brain like scripture.

The way her body moves— lush, confident, utterly unaware of just how badly it wrecks me —is driving me out of my goddamn mind.

My dick is in a perpetual state of hard as fuck.

She's wearing capris today.

That stretchy kind of material that hugs her hips and thighs like it was custom-molded just for her.

Like it worships her curves the way I want to. The way I plan to.

And the top? Some flimsy little tee that clings to her tits like it knows it's playing with fire.

Every step her mount takes, they bounce.

And every bounce? Is a personal test of my fucking self-control.

I'm rock-hard just watching her sitting atop that horse, crossing the dusty trail like she was born to do it. And suddenly I can see us both here, every weekend, going for a morning ride and fuck, I want that.

One second she's smiling at something private, the next she's tucking a strand of hair behind her ear with this quiet, distracted little frown—and I swear to every god that ever breathed fire, I feel it.

Every expression. Every flicker of thought across her face.

She doesn't know what she does to me.

Earlier— when she was wrapped in nothing but that towel, wet from the shower and glowing like something out of a fever dream —she looked at me like she thought I didn't want her.

Like I was put off .

Fuck, no. That wasn't it.

I was possessed .

I didn't want anyone else seeing what should only ever belong to me. That softness, those curves, her warmth— that's mine .

She doesn't know it yet. Doesn't know what it means to awaken a Dragon, to belong to one.

To be treasured like fire in the cold.

But I'll show her.

I'll show her how goddamn beautiful she is. How no one else can ever compare.

Because she's not just sexy— she's sacred.

Es meus.

And this ache in my chest, the one that won't go away unless I'm touching her, kissing her, claiming her?

It's only getting stronger.

Her fingers clutch the reins like she's expecting the gentle horse I saddled for her to take off at a dead sprint, which honestly, Peanut wouldn't do if I paid him in sugar cubes and moonshine.

Still. She's tense.

I ride slow, keeping my own mount close beside hers, every part of me tuned to her energy.

The little squeaks she makes when the horse shifts under her? I hear every single one.

The way she shifts in the saddle, trying to look casual while clearly bracing for death? It's adorable.

And also— yeah —turns me on more than it probably should.

“You’re doing fine,” I murmur, keeping my voice low and steady. “Peanut’s trained. He’s easy. Gentle.”

She glances at me, eyes wide. “Easy for you to say. You look like you were born on a horse.”

“Not quite.”

“So, where’d you learn? I’m guessing you’re not originally from New Jersey.”

I smile. “Good guess.”

She raises a brow. “Let me guess. Texas?”

I snort. “Nope.”

“Montana?”

“Colder.”

“Wyoming?”

“Keep going.”

“Okay, I give up. Where are you from?”

My smile fades slightly. Not because I don’t want to tell her, but because how do I tell her?

How do I explain that I've never belonged to any one place?

That I was born into fire and exile and clawed my way across decades, trying not to become the kind of monster I saw in my own bloodline?

"Everywhere," I finally say. "I've moved around a lot. Stayed long enough to learn a few things. Ride. Build. Fix what's broken. And then, moved on."

She studies me. "Sounds lonely."

I shrug. "It was."

I don't add that it still is. That even with the Motley Crewd and their chaos and loyalty, I still feel like I'm one wrong move from being on the outside again.

She doesn't push, but I can feel her watching me, sensing the gap in what I'm giving her.

Smart girl .

I like that about her.

We ride for another ten minutes in easy silence until I spot the old oak tree near the south pasture—the one with the split trunk and perfect dappled shade.

I guide her toward it and swing down first, holding Peanut's reins as I reach up to help her dismount.

A couple of ducks are wandering out of the small creek that runs behind the ranch.

Technically, it's on Max's property, and sometimes I go swimming in it.

But not right now.

Now is for other things.

“Dismount,” I say, hands reaching out towards her.

She hesitates. “I don’t think I can do that without falling on my face.”

My lips quirk, but I fight my grin.

“Then fall on me.”

I slide my hands up her hips to her waist, then I lift her down.

The moment her body presses against mine, the air thickens.

Her breath catches.

My hands linger.

I let them.

Then, I step back and grab the cooler I packed with our food.

We settle under the tree, sitting on a blanket I keep in my saddlebag. The picnic cooler sits between us, and Casey folds her hands on her lap and bites her bottom lip.

So damn cute.

I carefully unpack the sandwiches and salads, some fruit and a couple of brownies I hid at my place just in case my girl had a sweet tooth, which she totally does.

She teases me about baking brownies, and my heart skips a beat. I can't help it, I love her sass.

“What kind of rough, broody cowboy makes brownies from scratch?” she asks, when we finish the savory foods, and she takes a big bite of gooey chocolate goodness.

“Are you trying to seduce me with baked goods?”

“Is it working?”

She pauses. Smirks. “Maybe.”

The laughter fades for a beat. Her gaze drops to my mouth, then back up. We're both still, both quiet, both waiting.

And then she leans forward just a little— just enough.

I meet her halfway.

The kiss is slow.

Sweet .

And then it's not.

It's hungry. Dirty. And I want more.

I shift closer, my hand sliding into her hair, tilting her head back as my mouth deepens the kiss.

Her fingers curl into my shirt, her soft gasp sending heat flooding through me.

My Dragon stirs, starving for her.

Es meus , my beast growls. Claim her.

Not yet.

I pull back, barely. “Casey?—”

Her lips are swollen.

Her eyes are glassy.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me if you need me to stop.”

She searches my face for a long moment, then shakes her head.

“Don’t stop, Zeke. Please don’t stop.”

I kiss her again, hard this time. Once. Twice.

Then a sharp voice cuts through the field.

“HEY LOVEBIRDS!”

We both jolt.

Casey blinks, turning toward the sound. I groan, recognizing Kian’s grinning menace from a hundred yards away.

“POOL TIME!” he shouts. “EVERYONE’S WAITING!”

Casey covers her face. “Oh my god.”

I stand, dragging a hand through my hair, trying not to punch air.

“Sorry,” she says, cheeks red. “I guess we should?—”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Let’s go before he comes back and starts throwing things.”

She snorts.

I help her back onto the horse, and as we ride toward the main house, I swear I can still taste her on my tongue.

And it’s not nearly enough.

But I can be a patient hunter. Especially when my prey is so damn delicious.

The rose over my heart pulses and heats, and I press my hand to it as I watch her move ahead of me.

Casey is more than prey to me.

So much more.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I can't believe I just went for a ride on a horse with a cowboy in New Jersey.

What the what now? How is this even my life?

I bite my lip and watch Zeke move his powerful body with an effortless grace I could never match.

“Um, I have to change, but I'll meet you by the pool, okay?”

Zeke nods, he is acting like he's distracted with checking the tack on the last horse, but I know he is listening.

I take a moment to simply stare as he brushes his hand over the animal's flank like it's a living treasure.

Of course he does that.

Of course, he's good with animals.

Gentle with his hands when he wants to be.

Those same big, rough palms that were on me just hours ago. The ones he used to make me see stars.

God. Focus, Casey.

I make my way across the grass, back to Avery's, feeling the heat of the day soaked

into my skin— and something else simmering deeper.

Zeke Gordon is a living, breathing contradiction.

This broody cowboy with smirky one-liners and the most gorgeous pair of eyes I've ever seen has cracked something wide open in me.

And I like it.

I really like it.

Too much.

Inside the guest room, I peel off my dusty riding clothes, tossing them into the corner, and reach for the bag I packed like this was just any other weekend trip.

Like this wasn't a runaway moment.

Like I wasn't hiding from a life I don't even know how to go back to.

Because that's the thing.

I do have to go back.

Eventually.

My testimony against my ex, Michael— God, I can barely think his name —could be called any day.

And once it's over, well, then what?

Back to being a not-quite-doctor with no hospital willing to take me?

Back to a town where everybody whispers behind their coffee cups?

Back to a life I barely had the energy to hold together even before everything fell apart?

What am I even doing here?

I came to the Motley Crewd Ranch to breathe.

To forget for a while.

I didn't come here to get tangled up in the arms— and mouth and eyes and rough-as-sin voice —of a man like Zeke.

And it shouldn't be this serious. It definitely shouldn't be this fast.

But damn it, I already feel the hook in my chest.

Every time he looks at me, like I'm more than a fling, more than just a passing crush or pretty face— like I'm his —it makes something inside me ache.

Can I really make long-term plans with a cowboy?

Can I see myself staying here, growing roots, turning this hot summer escape into something permanent ?

I don't know.

I only know how I feel when I'm near him— safe, desired, precious .

And maybe that's the most dangerous part of all.

Because once you feel like that?

How do you go back to anything less?

This place? It feels like magic. Or maybe that's just him.

All I really know is I like how I feel when I'm with Zeke, and I'm not ready to end it just yet.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Sixteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds.

That's how long since I saw her last and each fucking tick of the clock is like a gong blasting inside of me.

Everyone is in their bathing suits, and I swear Kian has a pair of floaties on his arms that are about to pop and a thick white stripe of zinc oxide down his nose like some crazy real life version of Larry the Lobster.

Finally, she steps out into the sun like it's nothing .

Like the entire fucking world isn't about to tilt off its axis because of one woman in a tight white tee and a cherry-red bikini underneath.

I stop breathing.

Casey's smiling— laughing, even —as Arliss splashes her, and Rosie squeals from somewhere behind the huge inflatable penguin Dante got her.

But all I see is her .

Kian cannonballs into the pool and splashes everyone within ten feet of where he jumped.

And that shirt Petals is wearing?

Well, now it's plastered to her like a second skin.

Translucent, teasing every curve, every line.

The top of her bikini is cut low enough to damn near give me a stroke.

The fabric strains across the swell of her breasts, and her nipples— sweet Mother of Mercy —are hard and peaked under the fabric.

She twists to wring out her ponytail, and I almost groan.

She doesn't even know.

She doesn't know she's got every single part of me snarling and snapping for a taste.

"Zeke," Max says near my shoulder, like he's just materialized from thin air. "Close your mouth or catch a bug."

I growl, low and threatening.

He laughs.

Laughs .

The smug bastard.

"You're fine," he says, patting my shoulder like I'm the one who needs reassurance. "Just don't shift in the pool. You'll break the foundation, and the chlorine will get into the crops."

I ignore him. I have bigger problems.

Like the fact that my mate— my Rose —is wet, radiant, and bouncing toward the

diving board like a sun-kissed goddess with no idea she's this close to being devoured .

“My turn! Cannonball!” Casey shouts.

She rips off the wet t-shirt.

I have one moment to come to grips with her in that fucking two-piece that should be illegal before she launches herself into the air.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

She is so hot.

The splash she makes is huge.

Rosie screams in delight. Penny claps. Everyone is all smiles.

But me? I'm dying.

Because when she surfaces, soaked, laughing, cheeks pink and lips parted—her eyes land on mine.

And fuck , she knows .

Something shifts in her expression.

Her smile softens, her eyes flicker over me in my tank top and swim trunks, and her breath catches.

I feel it like a brand to my skin.

And I'm moving before I can stop myself.

Into the pool.

Across the water.

Hands closing around her waist and dragging her to me like she's already mine.

Because she is .

“Hey—” she starts, but I cut her off with my mouth.

It's not gentle.

It's not sweet.

It's everything I've been holding back since the second she danced with me under those fairy lights.

She melts into me instantly, her legs wrapping around my waist like instinct, her hands fisting in my wet hair as I press her to the wall and kiss her until neither of us can breathe.

The world fades.

The laughter. The splashing. The teasing shouts from the sidelines.

It all disappears.

Because this woman? This wild, curvy, sun-soaked miracle in my arms?

She's my beginning.

She's the end of every nightmare I've ever survived.

And one day very, very soon.

She's going to carry my mark.

But for right now, I need to cool it. We have an audience, and every one of those fuckers has supernatural senses.

I don't need them scenting my arousal. Or hers.

Grrr.

So instead of doing what I want to do— fuck her senseless —I turn our embrace into a little friendly pool play.

Sun's blazing. Water's cool. And my soon-to-be-mate?

She's a menace.

Casey lets out a laugh that makes my entire fucking soul hum as she smacks a volleyball someone tosses our way clean across the pool— and straight into Kian's idiot face.

If I didn't love her already, I sure would now.

The ball bounces off his forehead with a splat.

“Damn it! Who did that?” Kian barks, flailing dramatically as water splashes around

him.

“Oops!” she calls, grinning like the sweetest little devil I’ve ever seen. “My bad! I was aiming for your chest.”

“You missed by a mile!”

Arliss is cracking up beside him, clearly not sorry. “Maybe your chest is migrating, Babe.”

I can’t help the low rumble of laughter that rolls out of me. “You good, man?”

Kian glares. “You wanna test how good I am, bro?”

“You sure you’re not still dizzy?” I grin, bumping the ball lazily with one hand. “We wouldn’t want you passing out from a splash.”

Casey snorts, and I swear the sound makes my damn heart flutter. She’s leaning against my shoulder now, her bikini top clinging to her like a second skin, her curves slick and perfect beneath the water.

I hook an arm around her waist and pull her close, kissing her temple.

“You having fun, Petals?”

“I just assaulted your friend with a volleyball. But yeah, this is the most fun I’ve had all year.”

“Hell yeah,” I say, eyes glowing as I nuzzle her cheek. “You’re lethal and adorable.”

She giggles and we get back into formation, ready to play again.

The next serve is wild—Arliss launches it like her life depends on it. I jump, block it, and slap it back with a satisfying splash.

Casey whoops beside me. “We are crushing it!”

“One game,” Kian mutters from across the net.

“Still a win,” I say with a shrug.

“Rematch!” he shouts, paddling toward Arliss, who immediately scrambles up onto his shoulders for some chaotic team boost.

The ball goes flying, we all dive, and somehow we all end up in a tangled, laughing mess underwater.

When I surface, Casey’s already swimming over to me, wiping water from her eyes. I grab her and lift her up effortlessly, settling her against my chest.

“You okay?” I murmur.

She nods, beaming. “I forgot how good this feels.”

“What, pool volleyball?”

“No. Being with people who make me feel happy.”

I tighten my arms around her. I don’t know why, but suddenly I’m mad as fuck.

Maybe it’s the idea of her being unhappy. Or the way her voice got so small when she said it.

Either way? Totally unacceptable.

Casey should always feel joy.

I can do that.

Bring her smiles. Make her glow.

Behind us, Kian lets out a yelp as Arliss dunks him again.

I chuckle, resting my chin on Casey's head as we float together, wrapped in sun, water, and the sound of our crew being loud, messy, and perfect.

Yeah. This is what life's all about.

And I don't even blink this time when my Dragon grumbles inside my mind.

Es meus .

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The sun hangs low, lazy and golden, like it's in no rush to leave this perfect day behind.

Most of the Crew are stretched out like satisfied cats— some floating in the pool, some lounging on deck chairs, bellies full and smiles soft .

There's a contentment in the air that feels heavy in the best way. Like gravity has loosened its grip, just a little, and everyone's just existing in peace.

I'm curled up in one of the oversized loungers, damp towel wrapped around me, the last of the sun-drenched breeze skimming over my arms.

Someone passes around a bowl of grapes and melon, and there's a tray of empty sandwich plates nearby.

I think I saw Rosie sneak off with the last brownie, which seems like a fair trade for how adorable she is.

The chatter is soft, distant.

Then the women start to move—first Avery, stretching with a groan and patting her bump like it's a sleepy roommate.

Jez follows her, muttering something about needing lemon for the next batch of iced tea.

Penny rises last, brushing off her shorts.

“You coming?” she asks me.

I nod and slide to my feet, padding barefoot across the warm stone.

Zeke’s back in the water, arms draped on the edge, head tipped back toward the sky— and yet I feel him watching me.

That silent heat, the way his gaze makes my skin tighten and my pulse skip.

I like it.

Too much.

He winks and I feel my blush burn my cheeks, but I don’t wink back. I’m too giggly to make it look cool like he does.

I duck into the house after the girls, following the sounds of clinking glass and the scent of cut citrus.

Jez is already pouring sugar into the tea pitcher like she’s trying to summon the South, and Avery’s cutting strawberries.

I grab a knife and start in on the peaches.

Penny’s quiet for a second, then glances over her shoulder at me.

“So,” she says casually. “You and Zeke. Getting kinda serious, huh?”

I pause, peach juice slick on my fingers. I don’t look at her right away.

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “I mean, it’s Memorial Day Weekend. Summer fun,

and all that stuff.”

“Is that right?” she asks, but I can tell she doesn’t believe me.

Hell. I don’t even believe me.

“I mean, we’re both consenting adults. And with the way you’re all blissfully paired up, it’s practically contagious once you get on the ranch. Or maybe it’s just the climate.”

Penny doesn’t interrupt.

And I know I’m talking too much, but I can’t help it.

“I like him. A lot. He’s, I mean, Zeke is different,” I continue.

“He is that. So, do you think you two are gonna make a go of it?” she asks a little too casually.

“Well, I mean, I’m not from here. I don’t even know if I’m staying.”

“What do you mean, Cas?” Avery asks.

“Nothing,” I shrug, knowing I can’t give it away. My safety depends on my secrecy, but I hate it all the same.

“I have obligations. Stuff I can’t walk away from, even if I wanted to.”

Penny nods, slow and patient. Avery frowns and the other ladies continue with what they are doing, but I know they’re listening, too.

It's not unwelcome. In fact, quite the opposite.

Maybe it's because I haven't had girlfriends in a long time. But whatever the reason, I really feel a camaraderie with these women.

But I'm not dumb. I understand that Zeke is one of them. And I wish for a moment that I could just throw caution to the wind and say yeah, I'm in this for the long haul.

But how can I do that when I don't even know what tomorrow will bring? If I'll ever be free of the far-reaching grip of the D'Angelo family?

I won't tell them about that. I can't. And I wouldn't want to put any of them in danger, either.

That was my burden to bear. But maybe I could ease their concerns a little bit.

"Look guys, I know you care about Zeke, and the fact is this is really new. All of this."

"Cas, we care about you too," Avery says and warmth spreads through me even if she doesn't mean it the same way they all do for Zeke.

"I appreciate that. All I can say is the way he makes me feel, it's not something I'm used to. But I also don't want to hurt him, Penny. That's not my intention at all."

I finally meet her eyes. I have to admit, I don't know her well, but she feels like the leader here. She is kind and gracious, tough as nails, too.

Sure, we've met a few times, but I want her to like me. I really do.

"I've been through enough to know life doesn't hand out guarantees. For all I know,

Zeke doesn't see me as anything more than some weekend fun."

I shrug, even though the idea of that being true sends a pang of hurt through me.

Penny dries her hands on a dish towel and leans against the counter. Her expression is thoughtful, not judging, not even particularly surprised.

"You might be wrong about some of that," she says gently.

I blink. "About what?"

"The no guarantees part. And the Zeke sees you as a weekend of fun part."

She smiles, just a little. And for some reason, I feel hope bubbling to life inside of me.

"You know, Cas, sometimes life surprises you. And other times, love does."

Before I can answer, there's a low whistle from outside—Dante calling for his wife.

Avery laughs and hollers back that she's on her way.

I reach for the tea pitcher, trying not to tremble under the weight of Penny's words.

Because maybe, just maybe, she's right.

And maybe the thing I've been running from for longer than these few months, for my whole life really, isn't danger or heartbreak.

Maybe it's the terrifying, impossible hope that something real could last.

Something real with a man like Zeke Gordon.

Something real right here.

Something real that even I can't get wrong.

The women file out of the kitchen one by one, their laughter echoing down the hall and out onto the stone patio where the rest of the Crew waits.

Did I mention I love that they call themselves that—a Crew?

Anyway, I'm the last one left behind, standing in a quiet that hums too loud inside my head.

Just me, a pitcher of peach iced tea, and the gnawing ache in my chest that refuses to be ignored.

I don't know what I'm doing.

That's the honest truth.

This— him —was never part of the plan.

Zeke Gordon, with his smoldering eyes and ranch-forged body and the way he looks at me like he already memorized how I taste, how I sound when I fall apart.

I keep telling myself this can't last, that it's temporary.

A distraction.

A fleeting reprieve from a life that's waiting to crash down on me the second I leave

this ranch.

But my heart isn't listening.

My body definitely isn't listening.

And right now, I'm not even sure I want it to.

I take a deep breath, about to move— about to do something, anything —when I feel it.

That shift in the air.

A low thrum that curls down my spine and makes my breath catch.

Then— his voice.

“Need any help, Petals?”

The words are simple, but the way he says them?

Like he's speaking straight to the part of me that still believes in magic.

His growly tone slides through me, lighting every nerve with awareness.

I turn, and there he is.

Zeke.

Big. Broad. Barefoot.

A little damp from the pool, his shirt long gone, droplets clinging to the hard lines of his chest like they're blessed to be there. Trailing over that hauntingly beautiful piece of ink tattooed over his heart.

It's beautiful work. Just like him.

And he's watching me.

Not politely. Not subtly.

He's watching me like I'm his last meal.

Without giving myself a second to second-guess it, I move.

One step forward is all it takes to close the distance— and then I'm pressing into him, my palms flat against warm, sun-kissed skin that flexes under my touch.

He's so solid, so real, and everything inside me softens and tightens at once.

Zeke growls. An honest-to-God, deep-in-his-chest growl that feels like it shakes the air around us.

His hands land on my waist, firm and possessive, like he needs to hold me or he might combust.

I tilt my face up toward his, breath shaky.

"I'm not trying to be impulsive," I whisper. "But I don't want to pretend anymore."

His eyes darken, the purple hue flickering like candlelight behind blue flame.

“You don’t have to pretend, Petals. Not with me.”

Then his mouth is on mine.

And everything else falls away.

The kiss is hard and hungry, but there’s worship in it too.

A kind of desperate reverence, like he’s memorizing my taste.

His tongue brushes mine and I moan, shameless and soft, curling my fingers into his back.

When we break apart, I’m breathless, dizzy.

Floating.

“Dinner isn’t for a while,” I manage, voice thin with need.

“Is that so?” His voice is like smoke and sex and heat.

“Uh huh.”

He cocks his head. “You asking me something, Petals?”

“I was wondering if maybe you wanted to spend some time alone. With me.”

His gaze rakes over me, full of barely restrained hunger.

I feel like prey and treasure all at once.

Wanted. Claimed. Desired so fiercely I tremble.

“Is that what you want?” he asks, like he needs to hear me say it.

“Yes, Zeke. I want to spend some time alone with you.”

His grin is feral. “Then let’s not waste another damn second.”

And just like that, the last of my defenses crumbles.

Because I know— I know —this man will ruin me for anyone else.

And I’m about to let him.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I 've heard stories my whole life about what it feels like when a Dragon meets his mate.

The fire.

The ache.

The sheer need to be with her, skin to skin, soul to soul.

But nothing— absolutely nothing —prepared me for her .

For Casey.

She's not just beautiful.

She's mine .

And now that I've had a taste of her kiss, now that she's looked up at me with those golden-brown eyes full of invitation and heat, I can't hold back.

I won't.

When she tells me she wants to spend time alone with me, the words hit harder than they should.

Because it's not just about sex.

Not just about sating a physical need.

It's about being chosen .

And the woman I've waited a hundred years for just looked at me like I'm the one she can't resist.

Yeah. That's fuel on a fire that was already burning out of control.

We make it through the trees with sunlight glinting off the ranch in warm gold. I want to savor this— her hand in mine, her soft giggle when I tug her closer —but the beast inside me is pushing at the edges.

And when we reach the porch of my cabin, I can't resist anymore.

I spin, caging her between me and the door. Her back hits the wood with a soft thud, and I brace my arms on either side of her head.

“One last chance to change your mind,” I rasp, my voice already thick with everything I want to do to her.

Casey looks up at me, eyes bright and brave. “Not a chance.”

That's all it takes.

I crush my mouth to hers, kissing her like I've been starved for centuries— and in a way, I have.

She melts into me, fingers digging into my shoulders as I lift her up. Her legs wrap around my waist on instinct, and I carry her inside without ever breaking the kiss.

We stumble through the door, laughter and gasps between kisses, my hands roaming every soft, tempting curve.

I need to feel her beneath me. I need to hear my name fall from her lips again and again.

I carry her to my bedroom, lay her down on my bed like she's the most precious thing I've ever held— because she is .

“Oh God, Zeke,” she whispers, breathless, as I slide my hands under her shirt, peeling it away inch by inch. “You make me feel?—”

“What, Petals?” I ask, voice low and rough, thick with awe and lust. “Tell me.”

Her fingers curl into the bedsheets, her body already trembling under my hands.

“So good,” she breathes. Just two little words, but they rock me.

And gods help me, I vow right then and there— she will never feel anything less again.

I kiss my way down her body, slow and reverent, like she's my prayer and my salvation all wrapped into one delicious, maddening package. Every soft inch of her is sacred.

Every sound she makes, a hymn I've waited my entire life to hear.

Her cherry-red bikini slips from her hips like melted sugar, revealing skin so warm and soft I forget how to breathe.

And then I kneel.

Not just for the view— though that alone is enough to bring a lesser man to his knees —but because this is it.

The moment. The reason I've been burning from the inside out.

My Dragon coils in the shadows of my soul, watching her through my eyes with barely leashed reverence.

“Please,” she whispers, her voice cracked open with want.

Her thighs part like petals blooming at dusk, her eyes locked to mine like she's seeing the man and the monster and accepting both. Even though I know that's not possible.

“Do you know how fucking beautiful you are?” I rasp, my voice unsteady, the truth of her beauty leaving me undone.

She shakes her head.

That lip catches between her teeth, and I groan.

Fuck .

That lip. That mouth. I swear, everything about her turns me inside out.

“You got me wild for you, Petals. So sweet. So goddamn perfect. You make me forget who I am.”

My fingers brush her thighs, my thumbs tracing reverent circles as I lean in, brushing a kiss just above the place she aches most.

She gasps. I smirk.

“I want to taste you again,” I growl, “but if I do, I won’t last.”

She shudders, whimpering my name like a prayer.

I rise over her, my weight pressing her into the mattress, our skin hot and slick.

Her hands slide over my back, her thighs wrapping around my waist like they were made to hold me.

“Zeke. Need you.”

The sound of her saying my name like that— needy, breathless, reverent —breaks the last of my restraint.

Our eyes lock. I reach for the invisible thread that’s been burning beneath my skin ever since I met her.

I grip my cock, loving the way her gaze flicks to that hard and ready part of me and I stroke myself twice.

“Zeke,” she whimpers, and I inch closer, sliding my dick through her sopping wet folds.

“You’re so wet for me, aren’t you? You want this? Want me to fill you? Make you come?”

“Y-yes. God, yes.”

The growl I’ve been biting back spills from me then. I can’t contain it any more than I can contain what’s about to happen.

“Good girl. Now open those legs for me, Petals, and hold on,” I growl as I plow into her fast and rough.

I freeze, allowing her to adjust to my size and girth.

Fuck. She’s so tight. Perfect. Hot and wet.

Her pussy squeezes my cock just right, making me see stars.

The sounds of our heavy breathing fill the air-conditioned room, but we’re working up a sweat, just running on instinct and heat and need.

Her softness cradles me. I am hypnotized by it. A fucking addict for it, as I touch, rub, and drop plucking kisses on every inch of her beautiful skin.

“Nothing ever felt like this,” she whispers, like it’s a secret.

And I know how she feels.

“That’s because you and me are meant to be, Casey,” I confess.

“W-what do you mean?”

“You’re mine. Tell me.”

She gasps, her breath is shaky.

Our hearts are pounding a tattoo that sounds a whole fucking lot like the drums of war from days of old.

“Mine, Casey. Now, tell me I can keep you. I need you to say it.”

“Y-you can keep me. Zeke. You can have all of me. Anything you want,” she whispers.

And then I let go.

I let her see it.

My eyes flash violet.

Not just a trick of the light— this is my Dragon .

It’s my power, bleeding through. The air thickens with heat.

My skin shimmers with faint iridescence.

The low rumble in my chest? Not human.

Casey blinks, startled. Her breath catches in her throat, her lips parted in awe.

The light from my eyes flickers violet and gold, casting shadows over the room like a living flame.

She sees it— feels it —and doesn’t run.

Doesn’t scream.

Doesn’t doubt.

“What’s happening?” she whispers.

My throat works around the words, thick with fire and longing.

“You woke the Dragon, Petals,” I rasp. “And he’s claiming what’s his.”

A flash of uncertainty flickers in her gaze, but it melts beneath the heat building between us. I touch her cheek, my thumb tracing the line of her jaw, and she leans into it.

She trusts me.

That’s all I need.

I start to move, slow at first, every inch of me sliding into her, and the room shifts—tilts —flares.

My control splinters as her heat envelopes me, as our souls brush in that other place— the one hidden just beyond sight.

And everything heightens.

Every gasp from her lips sounds like thunder in my ears.

Every clench of her body feels like fire dragging down my spine.

The taste of her skin is richer, sweeter, like fruit ripened under a hundred suns.

It’s communion.

Her hands dig into my shoulders, anchoring us as we rock together.

Her thighs wrap tighter around my waist, her back arching like a bow, lips parted in a silent cry.

My Dragon roars inside me

But I keep him leashed— barely .

This is ours, not just his.

Pleasure spirals between us, ricocheting like lightning from her into me, and back again.

We're a closed circuit now.

A storm contained in flesh and flame and stardust.

Every movement, every thrust, draws us closer to something ancient— something permanent.

Her eyes lock on mine, wide and shimmering.

“Zeke, I’m gonna come!”

That’s it.

The sound of her voice cracks something wide open in my chest, and I fall forward, bracing on one arm while the other cradles her neck.

“I’ve got you, Petals,” I whisper. “That’s it. Come for me. I got you and I’m never letting go.”

She moans, body trembling beneath me as I drive deeper, faster, chasing that one impossible moment when everything will converge— pleasure, magic, destiny.

And when it hits us, it's not quiet.

It's cataclysmic.

She shatters around me, crying out my name, and I follow with a roar that's not quite human.

Fire bursts behind my eyes.

Her scent sears itself into my memory.

I bend my head, fangs descended, and I bite the place where her neck and shoulders meet.

Her blood hits my palette, sliding down my throat like the sweet nectar it is.

My soul stitches to hers, thread by blazing thread.

And the Dragon?

He roars.

Because we are home now.

Because she is ours.

Forever.

"I'm yours. Body. Soul. Fire and flame. I've waited my whole damn life for you."

My voice breaks at the end.

It's not just desire anymore—it's everything.

And she sees it.

I know she does.

“W-what happened?” she asks eons later.

“I marked you,” I whisper, forehead pressed to hers. “Not just with my body. With my fire. With my soul. You're my mate, Casey. My Dragon's rose.”

“I don't understand. How is this real? How are you real?”

Her lips tremble. But her hands are steady as they rise to cup my face, her thumbs brushing beneath my eyes.

I let him out a little bit then. My beast. He is so eager to greet our mate.

And Casey? She doesn't flinch from the Dragon. She leans in.

“Oh, Zeke,” she says. “I see him!”

And just like that, the last tether holding me together snaps.

I kiss her.

So fucking grateful and humbled.

I'm not careful.

My kiss is claiming. It's raw. Possessive. Reverent.

It's forever.

My fire curls around us both and my cock hardens still inside her.

I can't stop if I try.

I move my hips, driving into her, sealing our bond with the blessing of the Fates themselves.

She is mine.

And I am hers.

"Es meus," I growl as her pussy clenches.

I follow my sweet mate, falling with her into sweet oblivion. And for the first time in my very long life, I feel content.

I feel whole.

All because of her.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Mind-blowing magical sex notwithstanding, waking up from my post-coital nap to a feeling of intense, searing pain on my chest isn't exactly fun.

Like, not at all.

"OW!" I shout, bolting upright in the bed like I've just been branded.

The pain is white-hot, blooming beneath my left collarbone and radiating outward like fire on my skin.

"Casey?" Zeke's voice is immediate, panicked.

He's up and next to me in an instant, crouching beside the bed like some kind of half-naked cowboy superhero. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Burns," I groan, clutching my chest. "It burns! I feel like someone pressed a curling iron to my boob!"

He winces, visibly trying not to laugh, and then his expression changes.

Grows serious.

Reverent.

"Let me see, Petals," he murmurs, gently peeling my trembling hand away.

And there it is.

On my skin, still glowing faintly, is a mark.

Not a bruise.

Not a rash.

A mark— etched in swirling lines of ember and ash, shaped like a rose unfurling in fire.

“What the hell?” My breath stutters.

Zeke doesn’t answer. He just stares. First at me, then at his own chest.

He grimaces and I can’t believe what I’m seeing.

I follow his gaze and see his tattoo. It’s glowing, too.

The thorny rose ink over his heart pulses in tandem with mine. And it—it’s growing.

Blooming.

And I mean, wow, it is so beautiful.

“Hey, your tattoo?—”

“It’s not really a tattoo,” he says, voice low and careful.

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“It’s my Dragon’s Rose. And now, uh, you have one, too.”

I can't think. Can't breathe.

I mean, it's one thing to get caught up in the whole "hey, I'm a Dragon" thing during sex.

In the heat of the moment— with hormones high, skin flushed, and his mouth doing unspeakably talented things —it felt fine .

Even hot.

Like, of course, the man who could kiss me into another dimension might also be a mythical creature. That tracks.

But now? In the cold light of after ?

When I'm staring at a glowing rose mark on my chest that wasn't there yesterday?

I feel kind of crazy.

Like, legit might need a CAT scan kind of crazy.

Because how else do you process the fact that your weekend rebound is not only a cowboy with the body of a Greek statue and the stamina of a marathon runner, but also apparently a fire-breathing apex predator who imprinted on you like some sort of magical soul mate?

No. Nope. Absolutely not.

This is not how normal people's summer break stories begin.

"So, let me get this straight," I begin, trying not to freak the fuck out.

Oops. Too late.

“You gave me a magical tramp stamp over my heart?”

He lets out a surprised bark of laughter.

“No! I mean, well, not exactly. It’s more like a mating mark. A soul bond.”

“Oh my God.” I feel faint. “You soul-bonded me during sex?”

“I— we —we didn’t know it would trigger that now,” he stammers, reaching for me. “It only happens when the bond is real. When the match is truly fated. It’s sacred, Petals. You and me? We’re destiny.”

I don’t even register the tenderness in his voice.

I’m up and off the bed in a flash, wrapping the sheet around myself like a shield.

“You’re telling me this, this not tattoo that burned into my chest means I’m what? Like your property or something?!”

“No! Not my property. My mate,” he says, his perfectly arched eyebrows raised high and I’m starting to hate how perfectly gorgeous he is.

“Mate? Like some kind of mystical supernatural WIFE?!”

Zeke stands, fully naked, fully massive, and fully not helping my brain settle.

“Yes. And no. It’s more than that. You’re my fated mate. This rose means you share in my fire now. My life. My strength.”

“Your fire?! YOUR LIFE?! What does that mean?”

Okay. Cue the total fucking freak out.

“Look, sit down, we’ll talk?—”

I shake my head cause first, he’s naked. If I get near him. I am jumping on him, which means no talking will happen.

When did I become such a horn dog?

“Um, part of the residual effect of early mating. We’re gonna wanna stay in bed for a bit,” he says with a cocky grin.

Bastard.

“Oh no. Nope. Absolutely not. We need to talk, not boink like bunnies,” I mumble, stumbling toward the bathroom.

“Bunnies? Casey! Wait a second,” he tries again.

And I know I’m being unreasonable, but can you blame me? Plus, I can’t stop it now if I tried.

Once I spiral, it’s typically best to wait it out.

“Nope. Not gonna happen. This is obviously a psychotic break. I’m hallucinating. That was just really good sex, and I had a spicy dream after reading those paranormal romance books Avery loaned me.”

“What books? Come on, Petals. Just hang on?—”

But I'm already slamming the door shut and twisting the lock, heart jack hammering in my chest.

This isn't happening.

This isn't happening.

I stare at myself in the mirror.

The glowing rose mark is fading to a silvery outline now, still warm but no longer searing.

My skin doesn't look damaged.

It actually looks kind of beautiful ?

NOPE.

I don't know how long I'm sitting there, but a knock at the bathroom door jerks me out of my spiral.

"Casey? It's Avery. Open up, honey."

I press my forehead to the cool tile and groan.

"No."

"Zeke's not here."

"He's not?" I ask, and for some reason my heart hurts at that news.

“Don’t panic. He stepped out with Dante for a minute. He’s just trying to give you some space,” she says.

“Fine. But I am going to kill you for not warning me that your ranch is some kind of supernatural Love Island.”

Behind her, I hear Jez and Arliss giggling.

“Look,” Avery says gently, like I’m some kind of spooked animal, “I know this is a lot. I freaked out too. We all did, at first. But you’re not alone. We’re here. And believe it or not? This thing with Zeke? It’s real. And it’s good.”

Her voice is calm and steady, like a balm I didn’t know I needed. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping to stop the flood of feelings surging up from somewhere deep inside me.

My heart’s still racing. There’s a sheen of sweat on the back of my neck, and my fingers twitch like I’m one bad thought away from bolting.

But underneath all that panic, underneath the fear that I’ve somehow stepped straight into the plot of a supernatural soap opera, there’s something else.

Something quieter.

Something dangerously close to hope.

Something I don’t want to name yet.

Something I can’t name yet.

Because if I call it love and I’m wrong?

If this isn't what I think it is?

It would break me.

But even still—it feels like the start of something.

Not just new. Everything.

I take a deep breath, stand on legs that feel like Jell-O, and slowly open the bathroom door.

There they are— Avery, Jezebel, Penny, and Arliss —all standing in the bedroom where Zeke recently rocked my entire world.

Their eyes are so full of sympathy and this terrifying, wonderful thing called understanding.

And for the first time in a very, very long time, I'm not running.

I'm facing it.

No, I didn't believe in fairytales before I came to the Motley Crewd Ranch.

I've always thought those kinds of stories were mostly dark and scary underneath the glitter and gowns.

And maybe they are.

But maybe that's the point.

Maybe the beauty only matters because of the dark.

I want to believe. In the magic. In this place.

And in him.

Because every time I've visited, I've felt something strange and ancient in the bones of this land.

Something powerful. Sacred, even.

I used to think it was the air. The quiet. The wildness of it.

But now I'm starting to think it's not the land at all.

It's them.

These women.

These men.

This found family that doesn't just let you in— they pull you in.

And once you're in, you're one of them.

Looking at the four women in front of me, each of them so different, but so perfect for this place and each other. Somehow, this is exactly what I need.

And I realize something else.

I came here to hide. To get away. To escape from my past.

That's all true.

But I think I found something else instead.

I think I found home.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Two days.

Well, technically, forty-nine hours and twenty-three minutes since Avery told me Casey left for town.

Not that I'm counting like some lovesick teenager or anything.

Okay, fine. I'm completely fucking counting.

Because the second she walked out of my life, my world turned gray.

My Dragon— usually a fierce, dominant force of supernature —curled up inside my chest like a dying ember, mourning her absence with every beat of my heart.

He's quiet now, but watchful. Hopeful.

Because she texted.

And that has to mean something, right?

At first, I lost my damn mind.

Punched a tree so hard it split.

Torched half a cornfield.

Took Max using his Alpha voice to drag me out of the spiral.

Even then, it was Dante sitting on my chest in full Bear form that finally made me yield.

Furry Grizzly fucker.

“She needs time, Zeke. You owe her that!” Max had barked, glaring at me like I was some rabid mutt.

They were right.

I claimed her without explaining.

I let my instincts lead.

Let the need consume me.

And Casey, hell— she’s a human . A normal.

No clue what she stepped into.

I gave her fire and wings when she was still walking on solid ground.

I called her several times. Left a message.

She didn’t pick up. Didn’t call back.

But then, yesterday, she texted me.

Petals

Can we talk? Maybe have dinner tomorrow? Take it slow?

Take it slow.

My Dragon had snarled at the word, wanting to throw fire at the idea of delay.

But me? I held on to that tiny line of hope like a lifeline.

Because she still wanted to talk.

That had to mean she didn't hate me.

Wasn't rejecting my claim.

So now I'm parked outside her school like a damn stalker.

Only a few more minutes until her shift ends.

My palms are sweating, which is ridiculous, considering I can walk through fire without blinking.

She steps out.

And fuck me— she's beautiful.

Hair tied back, soft curls escaping, her curves hugged by the cutest little pair of scrubs she's wearing.

Are those cartoon dragons on them? Fuck. Yes. They are.

My heart pounds.

She's radiant in a way that slams right into my chest.

She sees me, smiles— a small, nervous thing —and walks over.

“Hey,” she says.

I nod. Can’t trust my voice just yet. I feel her uncertainty and don’t want to scare her off again.

“So, are you good with grabbing dinner with me? Something low-key?” she offers, eyes searching mine.

I open my mouth to agree, ready to say anything that’ll keep her here, when an admin assistant steps out from behind the door.

“Miss Reynolds? You just got an urgent message,” she calls, holding a folded note.

Casey frowns and takes it. As she reads, the color drains from her face.

My spine snaps straight. “What is it?”

She doesn’t answer at first. Just stares at the words on the page like they’re written in blood.

“Casey?” My voice is hoarse now, low and sharp. My Dragon stirs, coiling with tension beneath my skin.

She looks up at me, eyes wide and scared.

“It’s from the prosecutor. They moved up the trial. I have to testify in three days.”

The breath punches from my lungs.

I don't know what she is talking about, but she is scared. And I don't like that.

Shit.

"I don't understand," she whispers as I lead her to my truck and tuck her inside.

"Talk to me, Petals," I plead as I take the driver's seat.

"The past was supposed to stay buried for a little longer. We were supposed to have more time. What if he finds me?"

Anger rages through me at whoever is hunting my mate. But I slap a leash on it and wait for her to continue.

"You're safe, Casey. I got you," I tell her.

And I do. She is so fucking safe with me. Maybe she doesn't understand that. But I plan on showing her.

One thing I know, I won't lose her. Not to some fucking nameless asshole. Never.

And Gods forbid some fucker tries to take her from me. Cause if they do?

I'm not sure anyone will survive it.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I like to think I'm an independent woman who can stand on her own two feet.

Hell, I've had to be.

But let's face it—I can't even go two days without having to run or be rescued

Here I go again.

After I got the message from the prosecuting attorney about the D'Angelo trial's new date— moved up with barely any notice —I almost lost it.

But Zeke is here, and he grounds me.

Like an anchor.

It's too fast and too much, but I feel better with him. Safe. Protected.

I asked if he could drive me home so I could grab some stuff.

We both agreed I shouldn't be alone.

And now, sitting in the passenger seat of his truck, my heart slamming against my ribs like a prisoner trying to break free, I'm glad he insisted on coming.

Zeke's been quiet the whole ride, his presence steady and grounding.

It calms something in me. And I almost feel like maybe there's hope.

I want to check on my parents. I mean, we were never very close, but still.

They should be notified. Only, I'm not sure if I should do that.

Before I can totally lose my shit, though, something else happens to turn my world upside down.

We pull up in front of Avery's old two-family house, where I'm currently renting one of the units, and my breath catches in my throat.

The door.

The goddamn door is hanging off its hinges.

From where I sit, I can see inside— it's a wreck .

Papers are scattered, drawers overturned, my favorite throw pillow ripped open like someone gutted it in a rage.

"I locked that door," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the rush of blood in my ears.

Beside me, Zeke goes still. Then, sharp and commanding, he says, "Stay in the truck. Don't move."

I flinch—not because I think he'll hurt me, but because the tone in his voice is terrifyingly final.

My eyes dart to him as he opens the door and steps out.

He's not just a man right now. He's something more. And for the first time, I know

what he is.

I can feel it.

Every step he takes radiates power, wrath barely caged in skin.

The mark on my chest— the one he called the Dragon's Rose —heats like someone lit a candle beneath my skin.

I slap my hand over it, instinctively.

It doesn't burn.

It pulses.

Like it's reminding me he's close.

That I'm not alone.

That he's mine. And I'm his.

The moment is terrifying.

But it's also strangely comforting.

And it's that comfort that threatens to undo me.

When he returns, minutes later, his jaw is clenched tight and his eyes gleam with something fierce. Something I don't have a name for.

But I know without asking that he's already assessed every point of entry, already

burned the memory of every possible threat into his mind.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, voice shaking as we head back to the ranch. “I didn’t mean to bring danger to your door. I should’ve?—”

“Stop.” His voice cuts through the apology before I can finish.

I turn to look at him, startled.

He sighs, then reaches across the seat to take my hand.

“You didn’t bring trouble, Casey. Trouble found you. Big difference.”

“I’m still sorry, Zeke. Maybe I should just go. Catch a bus or?—”

“No!” he barks, cutting me off so fast I blink.

His face softens instantly. “Shit. Sorry. I’m not trying to be a dick, Petals. But you’re my mate. Stay with me. Please.”

His voice cracks at the end, and damn if my heart doesn’t do a full somersault.

“Look, if you really wanna go somewhere, fine. But we go together. Just know—there’s nowhere on this planet safer than the ranch.

Not even close. We’ve got a Jersey Devil, three pissed-off Grizzlies, and a goat whisperer named Jed on standby.

You’re basically in the supernatural version of Fort Knox. ”

I laugh, even as my throat tightens. “I don’t want to go anywhere else. I want to be

with you. Oh, my God! Gramps. I should call to make sure he's okay."

I fumble with my phone and make the call, speaking with the on-call nurse about taking extra security measures, which she assures me they will.

Zeke is patient. He waits for me to finish.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. He's fine. Um, Zeke?"

"Casey, I don't want to rush you, but I mean it. I don't want you to go."

"Actually—"

I shake my head, but the words won't stay down. "I'm pretty sure I'm in love with you, Zeke. So trust me, there is nowhere else I'd rather be."

"You're in love with me?" He says it like he can't believe it.

Like he doesn't want to even dare.

Warmth blossoms inside of me. Joy and happiness like nothing I've ever experienced, too, and all because it's true.

I love him.

And I have to make sure he knows. I've just never been good at keeping secrets. Not even my own.

"Yeah. I mean, I know it's crazy, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about you

ever since Avery and Dante's wedding.

Even when I thought you hated me, I thought about you.

And now, well, being away from you the last two days has been awful.

So, if it isn't love I don't know what to call this. ”

I gesture between us, wiping at the tears flowing down my cheeks. I don't know if they're happy tears or not. It's just too much emotion to contain, I guess.

“Okay, that was a lot. Now, give me a second to catch up,” he says, and chooses his words before opening his mouth.

“First, I never hated you. I never will. It's not even possible. I was just trying to save you from what I am.”

“You mean your Dragon. Why?” I ask, curious.

“Cause I'm a monster,” he says, and his voice gets growly at the end.

“Bullshit.”

I won't even consider his words.

“What?” he asks, eyebrows raised.

“I don't care what you've done, Zeke Gordon, or what you can turn into, but you are no monster. I've met monsters. They're cold. Hard. And they don't care about anyone. Everything I know about you is the opposite.”

He takes a moment, and I watch his throat work as he swallows a bit of emotion. And I swear, I fall in love with him a little bit more.

“Okay. Second, you asked what else do you call this thing between us? Well, I call it fate, Petals. But just for the record, I’m in love with you, too.”

He looks at me as he says it, and those crazy purple eyes of his glow with his beast. I notice for the first time the vertical slit to his pupils and my heart constricts.

This man.

He really is magic. And even better?

He gets me.

He really gets me.

I know I’m in so much trouble with him. But it’s the good kind.

“Oh, also, for the record, I kinda eat bad guys for breakfast.” His gaze flicks back to mine for a brief second. “Literally.”

That makes me laugh. Or maybe sob.

It comes out as a weird, broken sound that catches in my throat.

“I never wanted to drag you into my mess.”

“I’m already in it, Petals,” he says gently. “And I’m not going anywhere. You call the shots. We can go as slow or as fast as you want. But you and me? We’re the real deal, Petals. You’re mine. And I’m not letting anyone hurt what’s mine.”

What's mine.

It shouldn't feel good to be claimed like that.

But with him it does.

It feels like the first time someone's ever stood between me and the storm without expecting anything in return.

And I don't feel weak or stupid or crazy for wanting him.

I just feel wanted .

Needed.

Safe.

Loved.

Zeke isn't anything like my ex.

He doesn't want to control me—he just wants to protect me.

Cherish me.

And looking back through my memories at the shadows of all the wreckage I left behind, I suddenly want what he's offering me more than anything.

Maybe I don't have it all figured out.

But I know one thing for certain.

I'm done running.

“Okay,” I say, exhaling slowly, “we go to the ranch, and uh... I guess I call a moving company?”

Zeke glances at me, one brow lifting like I just suggested summoning a demon to help us load boxes.

“A moving company?”

“Well, yeah.” I shrug. “How else am I gonna get my stuff to the cabin?”

For a second, he just stares. Then he grins— wide and a little too pleased with himself .

It does dangerous things to my insides.

Then the grin fades. Replaced by a tight frown.

His fingers curl around the steering wheel like he's trying not to break it in half.

“Actually, uh, I think we'll just buy you new stuff. That cool?”

My stomach flips. “Oh. Did they, uh, did they ruin it all?”

He nods once, jaw clenched hard.

“Yeah. I looked in every room when I checked the place. Those pieces of shit trashed everything. I'm so sorry, Casey. I should've kept you from this?—”

“Don't be silly. I didn't even know you then.”

I lick my lips and try not to think about my ruined books, my half-burned couch, the pillow I cried into when I first left home.

None of it was expensive.

None of it was fancy.

But it was mine.

“Still,” he begins.

“No. Look, it’s definitely not your fault, okay?” I murmur. “Besides, I wasn’t really attached to any of it. I mean, stuff is just stuff, right? We can start again. Together. If you want. I mean—” I glance down at my lap, suddenly unsure. “Only if you want.”

There’s a beat of silence.

Then his big, calloused hand wraps around mine, warm and firm and steady. He squeezes like he’s anchoring me in place.

“Oh, I want, Petals. I want you . With me. For good. Got it?”

My heart thunders in my chest, cheeks heating under the weight of those words.

I nod. “Yeah. I got it. Me, too.”

And for the first time in a long time, I really, really believe I’m right where I belong.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I t's been decades since I felt like this.

But I remember it well—this burning, bloodthirsty need to rain down violence like a fucking god of war.

Fuck yes, I feel it now. I sense it trying to take over.

Every breath I take feels like a struggle not to unleash my Dragon.

The beast inside me is snarling, clawing at the edges of my skin, demanding I shift, take to the skies, and hunt down the son of a bitch who dared come after my mate.

My Casey.

But I can't. Not yet.

Because sitting next to me is the most beautiful woman I've ever known, and she doesn't need to see what I'm capable of.

Not now.

She's already been through hell. What she needs is comfort. Safety.

Me, not burning half of Dry Creek to ash.

So, I press the rage down.

It's not easy.

My body's tense, my grip on the wheel too tight, and my teeth ache from how hard I'm clenching my jaw.

I want to comfort her.

I want to protect her.

And gods help me, I want to avenge her.

But right now, what I want most is to keep her feeling safe. With me.

And for the first time in longer than I care to admit, I feel pride swelling in my chest like a storm— because she chose me . She loves me.

Of all the many marvels in the universe, I swear I'll never cease to wonder about that one simple fact.

This precious woman loves me. Me.

She could've run. She could've hidden. But instead, she's here. In my truck. Holding her chin high despite everything.

No, I don't know the details yet, and I'm eager to hear them. But that's next on our agenda.

First, I need to get us to Max's place.

The Alpha of our Motley Crew deserves a heads-up, especially if danger followed Casey here.

This is our turf. Our home. And I won't let anything threaten the people under our roof.

And Casey? She's mine. That makes her family now.

I don't know for sure if I'm asking for too much from the Crew, but I'm about to find out, I guess.

It doesn't matter because for her, I'd give up anything. Everything. Even the peace I found on the ranch. But I'm really hoping I won't have to.

Casey is quiet for a beat before asking, "So explain again what Max is to you?"

It's a simple question, but I'm grateful for it. I need the distraction. Something to keep my Dragon's teeth from snapping in my skull.

"Well, you know I'm a Dragon Shifter?—"

Her head turns sharply. "Oh! So, are the others all Dragon Shifters too?"

I bark out a laugh. "Fuck no. They wish."

I throw her a playful glare, just to watch her eyes light up.

And damn, it works. That sweet little giggle? It hits me dead center in the chest, unclenching something that's been locked tight inside me since the moment I saw her place had been trashed.

"Max is a Jersey Devil," I explain. "Dante shifts into a Grizzly Bear. Emmet's a Demon Wolf—part Hellhound, actually. And that cow you saw strutting around by our cabin the other day?" I flick a glance toward her and smirk. "That was Kian in

Bull form.”

She goes quiet then. No follow-up questions. No wide-eyed disbelief. Just quiet .

I glance over, wondering if I scared her. Dropped too many supernatural truth bombs at once.

But she doesn't look scared. She doesn't even look confused.

She looks— fuck . She looks happy.

Her big brown eyes shimmer, soft and wide and filled with something I don't think I deserve.

“What?” I ask. “What did I say wrong?”

“You didn't,” she whispers. Her voice is like wind through leaves. “You said our cabin .”

I nearly slam on the brakes right then and there.

“Shit,” I breathe, reaching over to squeeze her thigh. Her skin's warm under my touch, and it grounds me.

“It might seem fast, Casey. I know it does. But to me, it is ours. I want it to be. You and me, Petals. From now on. Got it?”

She takes a breath, eyes locked on mine like she's trying to read my soul.

“I want that, too.”

And just like that, the fire in my chest starts churning brighter.

Hell, it fucking roars inside me, bursting to get out. The rose on my skin pulses and sizzles. And I can feel my scales flexing beneath my skin.

But this time? It's not fury that's moving me so.

It's love.

I lift her hand to my lips, her fingers trembling slightly in mine.

I press a kiss there— slow, reverent —a soft touch on sweet skin that's already been claimed in ways she hasn't even begun to understand.

Her breath hitches, but she doesn't pull away.

No. She leans in, trusts me, lets me hold her like she's precious.

She is .

Then I step on the gas, the truck roaring to life beneath us as we head back toward the ranch. Toward safety. Toward home .

And I know— as surely as I know my own goddamn name, carved into stone and fire and old magic —that I'd move heaven and earth for this woman.

No hesitation. No restraint.

I'd burn the world down if it meant keeping her safe.

I'd walk through hell barefoot and bleeding just to see her smile.

Casey isn't just mine in body.

She has the fealty of the Dragon now—every last ancient, snarling, fire-breathing piece of him.

And that? That means something.

It means no one touches her without going through me first.

It means no one threatens her without feeling the heat of my wrath.

It means if one more shadow from her past so much as looks her way— gods help them.

Because I won't.

I won't stop.

I won't ask questions.

I will just end them.

She's under my protection now. My mark lives on her skin, my soul sings in her presence, and whatever life throws at us, we face together.

She won't ever face it alone.

Not ever again.

Casey has me.

All of me.

And if anyone is dumb enough to try to take this woman from my side—I just got one thing to say.

I fucking dare you.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The rest of the drive to Max's house is quiet, but not tense. Not anymore.

Zeke keeps one hand on the wheel and the other curled around mine.

Like he needs the contact.

Like he's afraid I'll disappear if he lets go.

I don't plan on going anywhere. Not now.

When we pull up the gravel path to the main ranch house, my mouth drops open. I've seen it from a distance before, but now it feels different.

Like coming home.

The place is gorgeous.

Sprawling, freshly painted, with a massive wraparound porch and flower boxes overflowing with blooms.

It's like something out of a cowboy Hallmark movie—except this one has Dragons and magic and other things I never knew existed.

It's amazing, knowing about this secret supernatural world that's always seemed to live alongside the human one I grew up in.

I mean, sure, I love a good fantasy movie or a fairytale retelling as much as the next

girl, but I never thought I'd be living one.

I have to say— I don't hate it.

I watch my man walk around the front of his truck to my side after his murmured, "Wait there."

Shivers race up and down my spine. Goosebumps appear on my arms.

The way he takes care of me? How big and strong and utterly masculine he is?

It just takes me to places I never knew existed.

See, Zeke isn't chauvinistic. He isn't about false machismo or misogyny.

He's a born caretaker.

Well, for me, anyway.

And I love that about him.

Hell, I love everything about him.

My heart squeezes inside my chest as Zeke helps me out of the truck like it's second nature.

He holds my hand as we walk up the path to the front porch. And the second we step through the big wooden front door, I know something's brewing.

I thought we were here to tell Max what's going on and to ask for sanctuary, but it appears to be a full house.

I mean, they're all here.

Every single one of them.

Avery and Dante. Penny and Max. Jezebel and Emmet.

Arliss and Kian. Even Jed, looking grumpy but holding a plate of cookies like he baked them himself—he didn't, from the way Avery is glaring at him, my guess is he stole them from one of the pregnant women and is now feeding them to one of his Dollies.

I sniff and grin, wiping at the single tear sliding down my cheek.

The air smells like cinnamon and fresh linen.

Laughter hums in the background.

The kids are all tucked away in the nursery, and Mrs. O'Hare waves from down the hall as she herds two toddlers into a play pen like a damn magician.

On the table, in the living room, are even more plates of cookies and pitchers of herbal tea and lemonade.

There's not a single raised eyebrow, not one look of judgment.

Just support.

Warmth.

Family.

It's amazing.

But it's almost too much.

My throat tightens, and I blink fast, but more tears come anyway.

"Hey there! Casey? Are you okay?" Penny asks, her expression going from welcoming to concerned in the span of a heartbeat.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly, brushing at my cheeks. "I just. I've never expected all of you."

"What? You mean no one's ever wrangled a posse to take out the fuckers hunting you down before?" Arliss asks, and for some reason, the pretty woman is grinning.

"No worries, Cas. That's old hat here," Jezebel says, a wide grin on her face as Emmet nuzzles her neck.

Avery steps forward first and wraps me in a hug.

"We've all had our trials, honey," she assures me. "But let me be the first to say welcome to the Crew, Casey!"

Penny joins her. Then Jez. Then Arliss.

Suddenly I'm surrounded, enveloped in the soft scent of sugar cookies and good intentions.

"I know I'm not one of you," I whisper, "not really. But I'll keep your secrets. I swear. Because you're important to Zeke. And he's," I begin and look toward him, my heart doing that fluttery, ridiculous thing it always does around him. "He's

important to me.”

“You’re already one of us,” Jez says firmly, dabbing at her eyes.

“Yeah,” Arliss snuffles. “You just made it official.”

“I—I want that,” I admit. “I want to belong here. To belong with all of you. If you’ll have me.”

Max stands then, tall and commanding, but there’s a smile tugging at his scarred face as he walks over and claps a hand on Zeke’s shoulder.

“There’s nowhere else you belong,” Max says. “You and Zeke. You’re both part of the Crew. And we protect our own.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, and I mean it so damn much.

“Now, how about you both sit down and tell us what we’re up against,” Max commands.

Zeke’s jaw clenches, and his eyes gleam with emotion as he pulls me into his arms, tucking me close like I’m the most precious thing in his world.

And maybe to him, well , maybe I am.

“Okay, I’ll start at the beginning.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The room goes quiet.

Not the awkward kind.

This is a silence born of respect.

Of protection.

Of the unspoken promise that every person sitting here will go to war for the woman currently pouring her soul out in the center of Max's living room.

Casey.

My mate.

She's sitting on the edge of the big armchair Penny insisted she take, hands clasped tight in her lap, knuckles white.

But her voice doesn't shake. Not once.

“I met Michael D'Angelo when I was doing my ER rotation during the last leg of my residency. I wasn't even supposed to be there that day. I took a shift for someone else.”

I feel my Dragon rise under my skin, already seething.

Just hearing that bastard's name sends heat through my blood.

“He was a patient. Nothing major. Some bruised ribs and a busted hand. Said he got jumped outside a club. That kind of thing happens more than you think, so no one really questioned it.”

She's looking at her hands, her voice even but distant.

“He sent me food a few times. Uber Eats. Nice stuff. Lobster rolls. Italian food from this really good place. It's not unheard of for patients to thank their doctors like that. I didn't think much of it.”

You were just being kind. Professional. I want to snarl the words, to make sure she knows this is not on her, but I hold my tongue.

This is her story to tell.

“Then he started calling. Leaving notes with the delivery guys. He asked me out. More than once. I said no at first, but he was persistent. And charming. And he didn't seem to care that I worked crazy hours. He made me feel seen.”

My fists clench. Max notices, but he doesn't say a word.

“I went on a few dates. He was nice. Never pushy. Always dressed well. Had manners. But then, things started to change.”

She swallows, and I can see the weight of the memory pressing on her chest.

“One night, he picked me up for dinner, but halfway through, he got a phone call. Said it was an emergency. We got in the car, and I thought he was taking me back to the hospital. But instead, we drove across the city to some rundown warehouse.”

My Dragon growls low in my chest. Max puts a warning hand on my shoulder,

reminding me not to explode.

“Inside, there were men. Bleeding. One of them had been shot. Michael told me to help him. I said I needed to get to a hospital, but he pulled a gun. Pointed it at me. Told me I had everything I needed in my bag. And if the man died, so would I.”

Gasps echo from the women.

Even Emmet swears under his breath.

Casey’s voice falters now, but she pushes through it.

“I stopped the bleeding. Got the bullet out. Somehow. I let him drive me home. He kissed my cheek and left me at the door. God, I cried so hard that night, and I didn’t get any sleep that night.

The next day, I turned in my resignation and left the program.

I went home, packed up, and told my parents what happened. ”

She looks up, eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“They insisted I go to the authorities. So, I filed a report. Talked to the police. Then the Feds. They told me I had to testify against him or face charges myself. So, I agreed. I had no choice, really. The D’Angelo crime family is apparently well-known, but stupid me didn’t recognize the name.

They hurt so many people. He has hurt so many people.

And now he’s found me. I don’t know how, but he knows I’m here.

And he'll do anything to stop me from going to that trial. ”

The silence that follows her confession is thick. Electric.

Max stands slowly, arms crossed over his chest. “Don’t worry, Casey. We’re going to make sure he regrets hunting you here. You’re Crew now, and we protect Crew.”

Kian snorts. “Regrets it so hard he forgets his own name.”

“I never wanted to bring this trouble here. I’m so sorry,” she whispers, and it breaks my heart.

Avery crosses the room and takes Casey’s hand. “You’re not alone. We don’t let our own get hurt.”

I step forward then, unable to hold back anymore.

I kneel in front of her and take her hands in mine.

“You did nothing wrong. Hear me? And you’re not going anywhere. We protect what’s ours here, and you, Petals, you’re mine.”

She lets out a slow breath. And for the first time since she started speaking, she smiles.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I don't realize how tense I've been until the moment Max said the words, "You're Crew now, and we protect Crew."

Something inside me just lets go.

I'm not alone anymore.

Every single person on the Motley Crewd Ranch knows the truth now— about Michael, about what he did to me, what he still wants from me —and not one of them flinched.

Not when I told them how I had to sew up a bullet wound at gunpoint, not when I admitted I'd run with nothing but my phone and my wallet.

No judgement. No fear.

Just support. Immediate. Fierce. Uncompromising.

And then there's Zeke.

Always Zeke.

His hand never leaves mine as we say our goodbyes, as Max claps him on the back and tells him to keep me close. He keeps it there still even as Penny and the other women all hug me tight and promise to help me make a fresh start.

When we're finally alone, Zeke loads me into his truck again and takes me— not to a

safe house or someone else's place—but home.

His cabin.

Our cabin.

“You're home now, Petals,” he says as we pull into the gravel drive. “You're safe. And I don't just mean because I'd go full Dragon and torch anyone who looked at you sideways.”

I smile, because I believe him.

He parks and cuts the engine, then leans toward me.

“For your peace of mind, I thought I'd explain we've got a full Draco Fortis system.

It's a magical and technological security system unlike any other, and we have it set up, protecting every inch of this place.

The security feeds go directly to a cloud that every member of the Crew has access to.

Plus, most of us have supernatural senses.

If a mouse farts near this property line, we'll know. ”

That earns a laugh out of me, and it feels good to laugh.

He walks me to the door like I'm precious cargo, one big hand at the small of my back.

Inside, everything smells like smoked cedar and citrus and him.

Warm. Clean. Safe.

And then I realize I'm crying. Just a few silent tears.

Zeke notices immediately. "Casey?" His voice is gentle but urgent. "You okay?"

I nod, my bottom lip trembling.

"I just, I'm used to being independent. It's how my parents raised me. I mean, they care, but they had me when they were older and they both had active careers, so I was like a latchkey kid, you know? Always taking care of myself. But now, well, I've never felt this before."

"Never felt what, Petals?"

"Never felt like I had a partner. Like there was someone looking out for me. You've given me so much, Zeke. How can I repay you?"

Something flares in his eyes.

Possessive and proud.

Like I've just handed him the universe and told him he could keep it.

"You never have to repay me, Mate. It's my honor and my privilege to do so. Knowing how you've had to do it alone, realizing you're so brave and strong that just makes it even more so. Now, will you let me take care of you, Petals?"

Heat rushes through my veins. Awareness sizzles between us and I nod my head

because, yes, I really do.

I want Zeke to take care of me. He's the only man I've ever trusted enough to do just that.

And I'm aware of how crazy it sounds. How impulsive and mad.

It's too fast by society's standards.

But not for us.

For us, the timing is perfect.

"Come here," he murmurs.

He leads me into the bedroom, where the low afternoon light casts a golden haze across the room.

He doesn't say a word as he starts to undress me, slowly, reverently, like he's unwrapping something holy.

There's no rush in his touch.

Just worship. Admiration. Devotion.

Every time his fingertips brush my skin, I feel lighter.

"So fucking soft, Petals."

He bends his head, leaving plucking kisses across my shoulders and chest.

I'm breathing so heavily it's a wonder I don't pass out.

His purple eyes hold mine as he unzips his jeans and shrugs out of his clothes.

Holy. Shit.

I've seen him nude before, but each time it's like the first time.

Zeke is what all those old bodice-ripper romance novels mean when they say the hero is physically devastating .

I mean, the man is built like a god.

Tall and wide, his body is made of ropes of corded muscle honed by years of hard work and acres of skin bronzed by the sun.

My gaze drops to his revealed Adonis belt, and I swear, my pussy clenches in response to the sharp lines, pointing the way to his gloriously thick, long cock.

Like an invitation I knew I would never ever refuse.

When we're both bare, he takes my hand and leads me into the bathroom.

The water is already running, warm and steamy.

He steps in behind me, pulling me into the spray and then into his arms.

There, under the water, he holds me against his warm, hard body and I shiver in response.

Zeke kisses me everywhere he can reach, unhurriedly and with so much care it brings

tears to my eyes.

My shoulders. My collarbone. The curve of my cheek.

It's not about urgency tonight.

It's about us.

The way his hands glide over my back, massaging away the fear.

The way his lips find mine in the steam and silence.

The way his voice rumbles low and close to my ear.

"I've got you, Petals. Every part of you. Always."

His words wrap around me like silk, warm and reverent, making my heart stutter and my breath catch.

And in that moment, something inside me shifts.

I want to give him something in return.

Not just my body, but a promise.

A worship.

A kind of devotion.

So I drop to my knees.

Zeke stiffens, his chest rising and falling like he's been winded.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his voice rough as gravel.

I glance up at him through damp lashes, offering him a smile that I hope says everything I'm feeling.

“You know exactly what I'm doing.”

His eyes darken, glowing faintly, beautifully, as his hands curl at his sides in an effort to hold himself back.

But I don't worry about it too much as I focus on my prize. Zeke's growl fills the entire shower stall as I reach for his dick.

Impressive isn't a word I'd typically use for this part of any man's anatomy, but his damn well is.

In fact, his cock is downright beautiful.

I position myself between his muscular legs, my breath catching as I get my first real look at him.

He is thick, long, and uncut—gorgeous in a way that feels raw and real, almost too intimate to stare at for long.

But I can't look away.

The foreskin hugs the thick, mushroomed head, just barely, and when I wrap my fingers around him, it moves with a silky glide that makes him suck in a breath.

When I touch him, he groans— low and deep and impossibly sexy —and I feel it like a current across my skin.

There's strength in that sound but also surrender.

He is letting me lead.

Letting me learn him.

And gods, does he make it easy to want everything.

Power fills me. A strength I never knew I had. Even on my knees, I feel it.

It's a womanly right if ever there was one, and I lean forward to wrap my lips around him for the first time.

Zeke's thighs tense beneath my palms, and I feel the power in them—the restraint.

He is holding still for me, just barely.

I let my lips brush over him, slow and reverent, tasting the heat of his skin, feeling how sensitive he was as I tease along the ridge.

His hands fist by his sides, and the low, guttural sound he makes sends a thrill straight through me.

I take my time, learning what he likes, how he moves, how his body responds when I curl my tongue just right or suck gently.

Then I bob my head, taking him as deep as I can until he isn't saying words anymore, just my name, whispering it over and over like a prayer.

“Casey. Fuck, I’m gonna come.”

I take his hand, putting it on the back of my head, holding it there as I continue to suck and moan around his dick.

“CASEY!” Zeke’s roar rattles the shower door. Literally.

It should have freaked me out, but I’m so lost to the sensation and taste of swallowing his release I barely notice.

I barely have time to breathe before he’s lifting me up and carrying me to bed.

We’re both dripping wet, but Zeke doesn’t care. He just sits with me on his lap and slams his lips to mine.

Then he lays down, pulling me with him until I realize what he’s about to do.

“I can’t! Zeke, I’ll crush you,” I say, half embarrassed, and the other half so turned on I know the moisture between my thighs has nothing to do with the shower and everything to do with him.

He laughs, that deep, possessive growl in his throat sending a shiver through me.

“Need to feel you come, Petals. On my tongue. Now be a good girl and sit on my face so I can fuck you proper,” he growls the words, sounding more beast than man.

There’s no teasing in his eyes now.

Just hunger and heat and something that looks very much like love.

So I let go.

I straddle him, trembling, heart pounding in my ears.

I'm helpless to do anything but obey. If this is what being mated to a Dragon means, then I am in.

Oh boy, am I in.

His growl pulses through me as I position myself with my thighs on either side of his head, then I lower my hips and groan as his big hands cup my ass, holding me in place.

And when he shows me just how deeply he means it— how much he really wants me with his lips, his tongue, and even his teeth —my entire body trembles and I fall even harder.

His tongue traces every inch of me like he's memorizing the shape of my soul, and my entire world tilts.

Zeke's growls and groans reverberate through me like thunder rolling through the hollow of my chest, echoing in places I didn't even know existed.

I cry out, the sound torn from somewhere deep and sacred.

So much more than just pleasure.

It's devotion.

It's need.

It's love.

My body arches, writhes, reaching for more even as I come apart in his hands, on his mouth, under the weight of his reverence.

My fingers knot in his damp hair, clinging like he's the only thing tethering me to this plane— and maybe he is.

Because I can't hold anything back.

Not my voice.

Not my heart.

Not even my soul.

Because they're already his.

Everything I have, everything I am—it all belongs to him now. And I don't want it back.

Zeke rises from beneath me with a look in his eyes that scorches me— raw, wild, and completely unguarded .

As if he's seeing me, all of me, and choosing me again and again.

Then he flips us— fluid, effortless strength —and covers my body with his own.

The moment he presses inside me, slow and deep and infinitely right, my breath catches.

And then I hear it.

A voice, not Zeke's exactly, but somehow still his.

Deeper. Older.

It vibrates in my bones, a rumble through my blood.

Es meus.

The words bloom like fire inside my skull.

You're mine.

My whole body lights up with them, every nerve ending flaring like a meteor shower.
It's more than just sensation.

It's claiming, branding, a binding of something soul-deep and eternal.

Zeke's pace falters for a second, his eyes widening as he feels it, too.

The connection.

The magic.

The Dragon.

My hands cup his face, thumbs brushing his cheekbones as I whisper through a smile that feels far too big for my face, "You're mine, too. All mine."

He groans again— this one broken, reverent —and then we're flying.

Not literally, but it feels like it.

Like our bodies are just along for the ride while something bigger than us— our bond, our fate —takes hold and soars.

When we finally come down from that place, panting, tangled, and trembling in each other's arms, I realize something with a clarity that leaves me breathless.

This isn't the end of something reckless.

It's the beginning of everything.

And there is no place on earth I'd rather be.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I don't like this.

I haven't liked it since she kissed my cheek this morning, promised she'd be careful, and walked into that damn school like it was just another Wednesday.

Like her psychotic ex isn't out there somewhere plotting gods-know-what.

Like she isn't carrying my fucking soul in that beautiful, fragile human body.

But Casey insisted she needed to work today.

Tie up loose ends.

Finish charts for the kids who rely on her for meds.

Leave things better than she found them, because that's the kind of woman she is.

And I admire the hell out of that— her grace, her strength.

Just like I admire the fact that my woman is practically a damn doctor.

We haven't talked in detail yet about what she wants next, career-wise, but it doesn't matter. Whatever Casey decides, I'm one hundred percent behind her.

If she wants to pick back up where she left off before that bastard hijacked her life, then that's what she'll do. No question.

Hell, I already have some of Max's contacts quietly checking with Barren County Memorial Hospital to see if there are open spots for her to finish up her internship.

It's only twenty minutes from the ranch. Just off Route 80. And you better believe I'll be there to drive her back and forth every damn day, if that's what it takes.

Because yeah, I want my mate safe and protected at all times.

This might be the twenty-first century, but I'm an old-fashioned Dragon like that. Sue me.

Still, admiration doesn't quiet the storm inside me.

Not when my Dragon's pacing in the shadows of my mind, low growls vibrating through our shared core.

Not when every inch of my instincts—sharpened over decades of battle, survival, and blood—are screaming that something is off.

I'm in the horse pen, brushing down Peanut, our steadiest, gentlest gelding. The same one I saddled for Casey during our first ride together.

That memory alone should calm me. Her laughter in the wind. Her thighs snug against the saddle. Her nervous smile turning radiant when she realized she could trust me, and the horse.

But my focus is shot to hell.

Every time I blink, I see her.

Casey.

My Petals.

That wide, genuine smile. Her soft brown eyes that hold galaxies.

The Dragon's Rose now etched into her skin, glowing faintly against the swell of her breast whenever we touch.

Just like mine.

It pulses with her heartbeat. With mine. They're more than just symbols. They're the marks of our matebond.

Living proof of our connection.

And gods, the way mine tingles when I kiss her? When I touch her?

I'll have to ask her if she feels it, too.

That surge of heat. The thread that pulls taut between us anytime we're apart.

This morning, when I dropped her off at school, I kissed her goodbye and something inside me howled.

My Dragon didn't like it. Not one damn bit.

I had the strongest urge to slam the truck door shut, throw the gear in reverse, and drive off with her tucked beside me where she belongs.

I didn't, of course. Because she's got pride, a good heart, and she wanted to finish what she started.

But now?

Now, I'm regretting the hell out of letting her out of my sight.

A strange ripple travels up my spine. My breath stills. The brush in my hand falters. Peanut shifts beneath me, sensing my tension, and whinnies softly.

My Rose—it burns.

Not in pain. Not like before. But like a flare going up in the middle of the night sky.

And just like that, my blood goes cold.

Something's wrong.

Jed's chuckling as one of the goats tries to eat his shoelaces. "You're gonna yank the whole damn boot off, Dolly Lou, and then what? You gonna learn how to drive the truck next?"

I grunt, distracted.

Kian is moving the herd of dairy cows to the south pasture, and Dante is working on the tractor with Emmet in the old barn.

I don't know where Max is. Probably at his house with his babies, and I can't say I blame him.

He's been putting in a lot of time in the wee hours of the morning while they sleep just so he can be a hands-on kind of dad.

Must be nice.

I didn't have a father to teach me shit growing up, so I genuinely appreciate his efforts.

Knowing his grandmother's terms on the property, how he has to do sixty percent of the work himself, or he has to pay huge fines to the Leeds' estate through his lawyer, only makes me respect him more.

I've always had to work hard.

Sure, I have a treasure horde like most Dragons. But I hardly ever touch it.

I wonder now if I should mention that to Casey.

Does she care about material things? Does money even matter to her?

All things I plan to find out.

It's while my mind is wandering, thinking about everything and nothing, that it hits me again.

Harder this time.

A pulse of heat, sharp and jarring, runs down my spine like a bolt of lightning.

My Dragon stills, then growls.

Not playful.

Not teasing.

But lethal.

Something's wrong.

My head snaps up. I can't explain it, but I know. My mate. My Casey. She's in danger.

"Fuck," I growl, tossing the brush aside. I don't say a word to Jed.

I scale the fence like it's nothing and bolt for my truck, already thumbing my phone.

Max answers on the first ring. "Zeke?"

"She's in trouble," I bite out. "Casey. I don't know how, but something's wrong. I feel it."

There's no hesitation.

"I'm on my way. Sending Kian, Dante, and Emmet, too. Get her out, Zeke. Now."

I don't bother answering.

My truck's tires screech as I tear down the gravel road, gravel flying in my wake.

My hands are locked on the wheel.

My Dragon's roaring in my mind.

And my heart?

It's already with her.

Hold on, Petals. I'm coming.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The nurse's office is currently empty except for me and the rhythmic ticking of the old wall clock and the gentle hum of the window fan.

Principal Jefferson was quite cordial when I explained I was going to need a substitute nurse to fill in for me, as I'd been called home to serve as a witness in a criminal trial.

She even wished me well, and I've spent all morning organizing the student medication files and stacking them neatly in a locked cabinet for my replacement.

It's a small thing, but I feel accomplished. Being a school nurse was never my goal, but it wasn't all bad.

At any rate, I feel like I'm moving in the right direction now.

Like I'm closing a door on one part of my life and maybe getting ready to open another.

I still don't know what the future holds for me in terms of my career. If I even want to be a doctor anymore. It's something to think about and to talk with Zeke about.

The idea of having someone to share my thoughts with. To confess my doubts and insecurities to, and also my hopes and dreams.

It's more than I ever saw for myself and I am so grateful to have him in my life.

A lot of men might be threatened by a smart, career-oriented woman. But not Zeke.

Something tells me that Dragon would only ever support any decision I make.

And isn't that amazing?

He has all this innate power, and instead of using it to bully or cower me, he uses it to lift me up.

And he called himself a monster. Ha! Zeke isn't a monster. Far from it.

He's—well, he's everything I ever wanted in a partner, in a mate.

I am so in love with that man, I can hardly believe it.

Checking the clock on the wall, I sigh as I realize three more hours till he comes to pick me up for the day.

A soft knock taps at the door before the admin assistant peeks in with an apologetic smile.

“Hey, Casey. So sorry to bother you, but Mrs. Fuller had to leave early for a dentist emergency. Think you could cover fourth grade recess duty just this last time? The kids are already out there, and I'm running short. ”

“Sure,” I say, standing and stretching. “Honestly, I could use some fresh air.”

She beams. “You're a lifesaver. Just grab a safety vest and whistle from the bin by the side door.”

Two minutes later, I'm stepping out onto the back playground, the sun warm on my shoulders, birds chirping in the trees.

The students are scattered across the yard, their voices carrying on the breeze. It's almost peaceful.

The fourth graders are fully immersed in a chaotic game of soccer, and I smile as I slip on the bright orange vest and wander over to the edge of the field to play side ref.

This.

This right here is why I didn't want to leave without notice. These kids matter.

"Watch the ball, Amber!" one of the girls yells, just as it smacks into her shin.

She lets out a howl, but it's laughter, not pain.

I laugh too. The simple joy of it settles over me, like a warm hug.

And then, someone screams.

It's shrill. Panicked.

Not the kind that ends in giggles.

I pivot sharply, adrenaline spiking as I scan the field.

One of the boys, Jake, is pointing past the soccer goal. "Ms. Casey! There's a man! He's in the woods!"

I take off toward the edge of the field, my heart hammering as the kids cluster behind me.

"Everyone, head back inside right now! Get the principal," I call out, my voice steady

even as ice coils in my gut.

The back of the yard dips into a narrow tree line that borders the old trail—technically outside the school perimeter, but close enough to be seen.

And sure enough, someone's there.

A tall figure emerges from the shadows of the trees like a nightmare conjured from the darkest, most twisted corners of my mind.

Michael.

And he's not alone.

He's gripping Teresa by the neck.

Little Teresa, one of the sweetest girls in the fourth grade. Her brown eyes are wide with panic, her tiny chest heaving too fast.

She has asthma— a bad case made worse by the blossoming flowers and trees —and she's already wheezing.

No. No, no, no!

My pulse explodes, fury and fear rocketing through me in equal measure.

Michael's wearing a crisp black jacket like he's dressed for brunch, not an ambush. Sunglasses hide his eyes, but I don't need to see them.

I know what lives behind that smile—the one that never reached his eyes even when we were together.

That smirk used to charm nurses and bartenders. Now it just makes bile rise in my throat.

“Hello, Case,” he drawls, like he didn’t ruin my life.

Like we’re bumping into each other at a grocery store and not standing on a playground with a child in danger.

My mouth goes dry.

“What the hell are you doing here? Let her go!”

He chuckles low in his throat.

“Changed your number. Left town. You made yourself real hard to find. But me and the little princess are getting along fine. Ain’t we, doll?”

Teresa whimpers. Her lips are turning pale.

“You bastard.” My voice cracks. “Let. Her. Go. This is school property. You need to leave. Right now.”

I cast a quick look behind me. Some of the kids are still huddled near the field, eyes huge. One of them’s blowing a whistle over and over.

Help. Someone’s calling for help.

But it won’t come fast enough.

Michael takes another step forward, pulling Teresa with him like she’s a shield.

“I’ll let her go. In exchange for you.”

His tone turns syrupy-sweet, threatening.

“We need to talk. But you’ve been playing house with your pet cowboy, so I figured I’d pay a little visit.”

I grit my teeth. I don’t want anything to do with this man. But if it is between me and an innocent child, then I’ll go. There is no other choice.

“Okay. Let her go. And I’ll come with you. Just—don’t talk about him.”

Michael’s smile turns feral.

“Still got that spark,” he murmurs. “Too bad you used it to burn down everything I gave you.”

“You didn’t give me anything but fear. You’re a parasite. A coward.”

The smile vanishes.

And then he shoves Teresa to the ground.

“Teresa! GO! NOW!” I scream.

The little girl scrambles to her feet and takes off running, gasping for air. Relief floods me, but it’s short-lived.

Michael lunges and grabs me by the vest, his fist smashing into my face with a sickening crack.

Stars explode behind my eyes.

“You bitch,” he snarls, yanking me forward by the hair. “Thought you could run to the cops? Hide in some hick town like I wouldn’t find you?”

I taste blood. My knees buckle.

“What did you expect?” I gasp, dizzy. “A thank-you card?”

“I expected obedience,” he hisses in my ear. “You’re mine, Casey. You don’t leave me.”

I claw at his face, kicking wildly, but he’s stronger than I remember. Like I’m driven by rage and fire fiercer than whatever hellhole he’s crawled out of.

The kids are screaming.

There’s a flurry of motion in the distance.

A whistle, again. A woman shouting.

The kids are safe, and I’m temporarily relieved.

Then—the Dragon’s Rose on my chest explodes with heat.

It burns. Not like fire, but like a beacon.

Like my soul crying out.

I know what this means.

Zeke feels it.

He has to feel it.

Somewhere, he feels me.

My pain. My fear.

And he's coming. I know it as surely as I know my own name.

"What the fuck?" Michael hisses, looking down at the glowing mark over my heart visible now, since he's tugged my clothing all askew.

Before I can answer, he slaps me again, harder. My head snaps back, the world tilting.

Then he throws me over his shoulder like a sack of laundry, grunting as he carries me into the woods.

"Fucking fat bitch," he snarls as he stalks toward a black sedan half-hidden beneath the trees. "Should've killed you when I had the chance."

He tosses me into the back seat and my head bounces off something hard.

Stars explode behind my eyes, and I wonder how many knocks it's going to take before I'm concussed.

I try to scramble, to kick, but he's already tearing duct tape from a roll and binding my hands and feet.

One final slap across my mouth with a strip to keep me quiet.

“Duck your head,” he growls, slamming the door. “Stay down, or the next thing you’ll get is a fucking bullet.”

I nod. Not only because I believe him, but because I don’t have a choice.

And as the engine roars to life, and he peels off down the dirt trail, I close my eyes and think of Zeke.

Of the feel of his lips on my skin.

How good it feels when his arms wrap around me.

The way he says, “I’ve got you, Petals. Always.”

Because Michael thinks he’s unstoppable.

But he has no idea what’s coming.

He has no idea what it means to steal a Dragon’s mate.

And I know with everything inside me that Zeke is coming for me.

Because he said he always will. And I know— I know —he’ll burn the world down to bring me home.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I 'm teetering on the edge of the precipice between losing my self-control and keeping my skin.

This isn't a good thing.

If I let that happen? If I allow myself to shatter? Then the Dragon will take over and the world will be lost.

That's not a boast.

It's a fact.

The monster inside me? Let's just say he's the stuff the legends all talk about.

Every Dragon has power.

A special elemental sort of magic that he weaves with his very breath.

Mine? Well, let's just say there is a reason wild beasts heed my commands.

Even now, the wildlife around me can sense my mood.

The birds take to the skies and everything from the largest deer to the tiniest chipmunk scurries away.

All of them fearing what the Dragon will do in his anger, in his need for vengeance.

But outweighing that need is something even more imminent. Saving her.

Bringing her back.

Knowing my Casey is in danger?

Not good.

Not fucking good at all.

And it isn't a sound that alerted me.

Not a sight either.

Just a knowing.

The moment it happens, I feel it.

The matebond flares white-hot across my chest like someone set a goddamn brand to it.

Casey.

My Dragon rears in my mind, roaring so loud I almost swerve off the road.

"Easy," Max says from his seat next to me.

I'm not sure how he made it so quickly across the ranch, but he was already in my truck when I got there, eyes glowing red with his Devil.

"She's in trouble."

“Where is she?” Max barks, sharp and immediate.

“School.”

The word scrapes out of my throat like gravel.

My voice isn’t human at all anymore.

It’s rough and fraying at the edges, distorted by the barely leashed fury of my Dragon.

I’m trying not to shift right here behind the wheel. Every muscle trembles with restraint.

My vision keeps flickering purple-gold at the edges.

We tear down the road, the sky darkening by the second.

Ominous clouds roll in above us like an invading army.

Thunder grumbles, low and threatening. A warning.

And then lightning explodes in a blinding flash that splits the horizon as we come over the hill and see the school.

It’s chaos.

The lot is jammed with police cruisers, sirens flashing, red and blue bouncing off every wet surface.

Parents are screaming. Some are crying, clutching their kids like life rafts in a storm.

Others are pounding on the locked front doors, demanding answers.

Children file out, their faces pale, tear streaked. Teachers herd them into tight groups.

“What happened?” Max demands, leaping out as I roll to a stop near a cluster of adults.

“A maniac!” a woman gasps, mascara running down her cheeks. “He came out of the trees and grabbed one of the kids. Then he took the nurse! Dragged her off the field! The whole school’s in lockdown now.”

“He had a gun,” another parent says. “That poor nurse! He just grabbed her and ran! They’re saying it was targeted!”

“I see. Good luck to you,” Max says calmly, the Alpha power in his voice calming the group for a heartbeat.

I don’t speak.

I can’t.

Because the moment I hear nurse , I know.

He has her.

Michael fucking D’Angelo has my mate.

I shove the truck back in gear and drive around the back of the school, where the forest meets the playing field.

It’s quieter here.

No flashing lights.

Just the hush before the storm turns violent.

But I don't give a fuck about rain and thunder. The real storm is already inside me.

And it just took a turn for the worse.

"He's got her, Max," I growl, slamming the heel of my hand against the steering wheel.

My claws rip through the leather.

"The fucker's driving away with her."

Lightning crashes above us again, closer this time. The air pressure shifts. A crack of thunder follows hard on its heels, loud enough to shake the windows.

"We're going to get her back," Max says, planting a hand on my shoulder. "Now concentrate. Where is he taking her, Zeke? Use the bond."

I grit my teeth, closing my eyes for half a second and reaching for the tether inside me.

Our matebond.

It thrums like a live wire, pulling eastward. My chest burns where the Dragon's Rose mark is etched into my skin.

"East," I say hoarsely. "He's heading east."

Max nods. “Then he’s on Route 80. Trying to get out of state before the alert hits the highways.”

Another clap of thunder.

I look up.

The clouds split like wounded flesh overhead. Rain pours down in sheets, cold and stinging. Wind lashes through the trees, tearing leaves loose in a frenzy.

Like nature itself is mirroring the chaos in my chest.

My Dragon’s done waiting.

I throw open the door, the storm instantly soaking me to the bone, and I turn toward Max.

“I can’t wait for traffic. He’s moving too fast.”

Max meets my gaze and nods once as another truck pulls up behind us with the rest of the Crew.

“Do what you have to do. We’ll follow,” he says.

I nod right before I change. My beast rips out of me faster than I can blink.

I cloak my form before the full shift takes hold.

It’s an enchantment older than time itself, woven into my bloodline and passed down from the first fire-breathing beasts to ever grace the sky.

Dragons are different.

Older. Wilder. Made of storm and stone and the raw bones of the earth.

We don't just shift.

We become.

In a burst of searing light and curling smoke, my body surges upward and outward, bones stretching, skin splitting open in a blaze of golden fire as I give in to the ancient magic that lives beneath my skin.

My roar echoes like a god's war cry through the thunder-laced sky.

Then I stand— on all fours now —massive and mythic.

My Dragon body hums with power, every scale gleaming like forged metal in hues of deep eggplant and lavender, iridescent in the storm light.

Jagged golden spines erupt from my spine, glowing faintly like molten ore. My claws are long and curved, made for rending flesh and slicing through steel.

Wings stretch high above me, spanning thirty feet easy, the membranes glittering with arcane runes that shift and shimmer with living magic—protection, power, purpose.

They were branded into my kind at the dawn of existence.

They cannot be seen unless you are meant to see them.

And right now? The sky sees everything.

The storm bends around me. The wind sings my name.

Lightning flares and the earth itself responds, as if every animal and blade of grass is momentarily aware of the ancient being taking flight above it.

Because Dragons aren't just predators.

We are nature's last defense.

The sentinels of balance.

The keepers of forgotten oaths.

And right now, I'm compelled to honor the strongest vow my kind can ever make.

To protect my mate.

There is a reason that every age of humankind, every civilization that's walked this earth, has feared Dragons.

See, when we move, the whole world feels it.

The forest beneath me grows silent.

Birds stop mid-flight.

Deer freeze in the trees.

Even the insects hush.

Not out of fear. But reverence.

Humans might have forgotten their magic, but there are some parts of them that still know.

It's why the cacophony of noise coming from the school seems to have stilled.

But I'm not thinking about them. I'm only thinking about her.

I flap my wings once, the motion booming like a thunderclap, and rise into the darkening sky. The rain cannot touch me.

My magic burns it away before it lands.

Cloaked in arcane shimmer, invisible to human eyes, I soar past the clouds and chase the pull of the bond between me and my mate.

The Dragon's Rose on my chest glows, and I feel her fear like a blade under my scales.

Casey is in danger.

And I am coming.

The ancient earth magic pulses in my blood, guiding me, anchoring me to her.

There's no force on this plane— or any other —that can stop me now.

She's mine.

My wings work hard, scattering the rain, scales gleaming like wet stone, power coursing through me with every breath.

I roar.

And then I launch myself higher into the storm-filled sky, chasing the bond, chasing my heart.

Casey's out there. And I'm going to bring her home.

The skies part for me like they know better.

Wind howls in my ears as I circle the tree line at the back of the elementary school. Tracing the memory of her movements in the shadows left behind.

My vision sharpens, and then I see it.

The path they took. Where he was parked. The road he drove her down.

I push myself faster, moving over the highway.

I don't have to know what kind of car he's driving to find them. But when I do find it, I send an image through my bonds to my Alpha and hope he is keen enough to see it.

There are too many other drivers for me to safely land and extract her, so I bide my time and I follow.

I follow her.

Anger consumes me at the idea of her being hauled like a goddamn sack of potatoes in the back of this piece of shit's car.

My roar shakes the sky.

My supernaturally enhanced vision catches the fucker—Michael D’Angelo—as he glances up through the windshield.

It’s just once. But it’s long enough for me to see his face.

The face of the motherfucker who dared lay a hand on what’s mine.

The Dragon demands vengeance.

Fire. Blood. Destruction.

But not here. Not yet.

I follow them as he takes another exit, cursing the bastard as he drives for another hour before pulling into an abandoned lot.

It’s some old industrial park.

I can feel Max and the others closing in. It’s just a matter of time before they’re here.

But I’m done waiting.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

The car jerks to a stop, tires grinding against gravel as we pull into a cracked and overgrown parking lot at the edge of what looks like a long-abandoned industrial park.

Weeds shoot through the asphalt.

A broken streetlamp leans precariously overhead.

There's no one here.

No one to see. No one to help.

Michael kills the engine and turns to look at me in the rearview mirror, his eyes cold, soulless.

I can't believe I ever thought this man harmless. Or attractive.

It seems so wrong now that I've met Zeke. Now that I know what a real man is—even if he can turn into a Dragon.

Zeke is so much more than that. He's my whole heart. He is the first and only man to really show me what love is.

God, I really don't want this to be the end.

If I have any regrets at all, it's on the time I wasted before seizing the day and telling him how much I love him.

I'm sorry we didn't have more time, Zeke.

I want to rage at the whole world for the unfairness of it all. But I won't do that in front of this asshole.

He doesn't get to see me scared. He doesn't get to make me cry.

Not anymore.

Not ever again.

"Well," Michael says smoothly, like this is just another business transaction. "Looks like we're finally gonna have that heart-to-heart, Case."

My heart pounds against my ribs like a trapped bird. My wrists burn from the duct tape.

My head aches from all the knocks I took, and I taste blood.

But I keep my chin up.

Michael slides out of the car and comes around to the back, opening the rear door with a creak.

The rain is still falling. Fat drops smack the roof in uneven intervals.

Somewhere in the distance, thunder grumbles.

"I have to say, sweetheart," he says as he yanks me out of the car and props me against the hood like a broken doll, "I'm a little disappointed. I gave you everything. Wined and dined you. Hell, I was even willing to marry you before I fucked you. But

you went and messed it all up.”

He crouches beside me, tugging the duct tape from my ankles with sharp jerks.

“You repay me by running to the feds like a disloyal little bitch.”

I don’t answer. I can’t— not with the duct tape still over my mouth—but even if I could, I wouldn’t.

He smiles, cruel and oily.

“Got nothing to say? Oh, right. Let’s fix that.”

With a flourish, he rips the tape from my mouth. I gasp, the sting immediate and sharp.

“They tried tailing me, you know. But I got away from them. Snuck out behind their backs,” he says conversationally, stepping back.

“They think they’re smart, the Feds. Had me tailed in Philly. Switched cars in a parking garage, drove out the side exit. Been trailing you for days, Case. Would’ve grabbed you sooner, but your cowboy’s got a damn fortress out there.”

His jaw ticks.

“Should’ve killed you back at the warehouse after you patched up old Tony. But nah, this is better. I want you to feel it. I want you to know exactly who you fucked with.”

His fingers twitch toward his coat pocket, and I know what’s coming.

A knife. Or maybe a gun. Something final.

Something moves behind him and I—I laugh. It’s a sharp, surprised bark of laughter.

But I don’t even try to stop it or the next one.

It bubbles out of me, wild and unexpected.

Michael’s eyes narrow. “What the fuck’s funny?”

I glance past his shoulder. And there— there —is the reason I’m fucking overjoyed.

The sky above us cracks open with lightning, revealing the monstrous silhouette of a winged beast descending through the storm.

He’s beautiful. Terrifying.

Zeke .

His massive Dragon form lands with a thunderous boom, wings spread wide like an avenging god.

Raindrops hiss and sizzle against his glowing lavender-gold scales.

Power rolls off him in waves— ancient, wild, and otherworldly.

His eyes burn with that deep violet hue I know so well, locked on me.

And on Michael.

My heart floods with a single, overwhelming truth.

I’m not alone.

Michael turns slowly, confusion furrowing his brow.

“What? I don’t see nothing!”

I meet his gaze, defiant and unflinching.

“I’m laughing,” I say, my voice hoarse but steady, “because you’re about to die, and you don’t even know it.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

I have to admit, the second I landed, a small part of me worried.

Not for myself.

For her.

And not because of him. But rather, because of what I was about to do to him.

Casey. My sweet, brave, human mate.

What would she think of me like this?

In my true form, ancient and terrifying, more beast than man.

Would she be afraid?

Would she run?

But then I see her.

Bruised. Bloodied. Bound.

And the doubt burns away like dry kindling.

There are no ifs, ands, or buts about what needs to happen next.

My magic pulses outward in a blast of gold and violet energy, ripping the last of the

cloaking glamour from my Dragon's body.

I flicker into view with a snarl that rumbles from the depths of my chest and shakes the ground beneath me.

The piece of shit holding my mate stumbles backward like he's seen the devil himself.

Spoiler alert: He has.

His knife clatters to the asphalt, his eyes going wide, jaw slack with terror.

“Wh—what the fuck?”

I huff a breath, long and deliberate, and thick gray smoke coils from my nostrils like a promise.

The smell of his fear hits me instantly.

Sharp, sour, and unfiltered.

Good.

I want him afraid.

Because I'm not here to talk. I'm not here to negotiate.

I'm here to end him.

My claws scrape the pavement as I take a step forward, each talon sparking against the concrete.

Gold-tipped wings flare wide, casting my shadow like a blanket over the entire lot.

My teeth—serrated and made to shred—flash as I open my jaws, and a low growl builds into something guttural. Primordial.

He tries to scramble back toward the car, slipping on the wet pavement, shoes skidding uselessly as the first fat drops of a fresh storm hit the ground.

Too late.

My Dragon is in control now.

Lethal. Righteous. Pissed.

You don't hurt a Dragon's mate and walk away.

You definitely don't touch what's mine and live to tell the story.

This isn't vengeance.

This is law.

My chest glows, gold cracks of heat building beneath my scales, and I let out a warning roar that makes the very air ripple.

It shakes the trees. Rattles the buildings. Shudders the earth.

Run , I think to him. Make it fun.

But he doesn't. He freezes.

And that's the last mistake he ever makes.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Something they don't always tell you in med school— but I learned during a forensic pathology rotation —is that to reduce a human body to ash, you need a flame that burns at around sixteen hundred degrees. And even then, it takes hours.

But Dragons?

Yeah. They don't follow the rules.

The second Zeke's massive jaw opens and I hear it— that little click like a lighter being struck —my legs move without hesitation.

I step away from the car. Away from him.

Michael.

The man who stalked me, kidnapped me, terrorized me. The one who tore apart my dreams and thought he owned my body, my future, my fucking life.

But he doesn't anymore.

He never will again.

Because I have a Dragon now.

And as I move behind my big, terrifying, beautiful mate— scales glowing in different shades of purple to the lightest that glitters like molten lavender and gold in the storm light —I don't feel one single sliver of guilt.

Not one goddamn tear for the piece of filth about to get incinerated.

My heart is pounding, but it's not fear.

It's adrenaline.

It's awe.

It's something primal and raw and right.

Zeke growls low, and I swear the ground trembles. The wind picks up. The sky opens above us with a thunderous boom like the universe itself is giving permission.

Lightning streaks overhead.

And then— roooooaaaarrrrr.

The blast of fire is blinding.

Hot. Pure. White-gold and furious as it engulfs the car and the monster who haunted my every nightmare.

It's not a scream that leaves Michael's mouth— he doesn't have time for one.

Just a flash of stunned disbelief.

Then silence.

Fire.

And ash.

Just like that.

Poof!

Gone.

The flames dissipate into the air, rising with the last breath of a life that never deserved to be lived the way he chose to live it.

All that's left is a scorch mark on the asphalt.

And me, standing barefoot in the rain, chest heaving, eyes wide.

Zeke turns his massive head toward me, eyes glowing like twin amethysts, smoke still curling from his nostrils.

And I smile.

I'm not afraid of him.

I never could be.

Because this Dragon— this fierce, ancient, magnificent creature —is mine.

He loves me. Protects me.

And tonight, he saved me.

Again.

As he crouches low, ready to shift, I cross to him, resting my palm against his scaly

snout.

His heat radiates against my skin, and I swear I feel his heart beating beneath the scales and magic and fire.

“Thank you,” I whisper, voice cracking. “My Dragon.”

He lets out a low rumble, not quite a purr but something close, and then the shift begins—smoke and shimmer wrapping around him until Zeke, my Zeke, stands before me in all his naked, glorious, muscled glory.

He pulls me into his arms without a word, burying his face in my neck like he needs the reassurance this time.

“I’m okay,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around him. “We’re okay now.”

When Max’s truck finally pulls into the lot with a screech, Zeke just lifts me off the ground and walks us toward it, never letting go.

I rest my head against his shoulder, the rain soaking us both.

We don’t look back.

We’re going home.

To our cabin.

To our forever.

Because monsters like Michael don’t get to be part of our story.

Not anymore.

Never again.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Getting my mate home is the only thing that matters.

It's paramount. Vital. Everything.

But gods help me, riding in the backseat with the whole fucking Crew stuffed into my truck is almost enough to test even my legendary patience.

Thank fuck I drive a beast.

Extended cab, third-row seating, the whole nine.

Still, I've got Dante and Kian wedged back there like two overgrown toddlers in a timeout, and the grumbling is nonstop.

"I can't believe you didn't eat him," Kian mutters for the third time.

I roll my eyes. "I don't eat junk food."

"Um, I'm glad he didn't," Emmet pipes up from the front, sounding both nervous and relieved.

"I missed everything," Dante gripes. "You couldn't wait five more minutes to flambé the bastard?"

"Oh, sorry," I snap, tone dripping with sarcasm. "Next time my mate is kidnapped, I'll send out an Evite and make sure it's more convenient for everyone's fucking schedule."

They all laugh.

Assholes.

But all their chatter? Their jokes, their griping, their noise?

It all fades the second Casey shifts against me, her cheek nuzzling my bare chest like she belongs there.

Because she does.

I wrap my arms around her, tightening my grip.

She's got one of my extra sweatshirts on, oversized and soft, and I'm glad I remember to keep spare clothes in the back.

Not just for me anymore. For her.

Always for her.

Besides, I wouldn't want to sit here with my boner flapping around in my lap the whole ride home just 'cause my woman can't help brushing up against me and lighting my Dragon on fire.

But what can I say?

I'm always hard for her.

"You okay?" I murmur, my lips grazing the top of her head, words meant only for her ears.

“Better than okay,” she whispers back, and damn if that warmth doesn’t flood through my chest like wildfire.

Her hand creeps up from my abs, her fingertips brushing higher and higher until she rests her palm over my Dragon’s Rose.

My mark. Our bond.

I rumble, deep and low, my beast purring beneath her touch.

“That’s yours,” I tell her. “All of it. Always.”

She smiles softly and nestles in deeper, her breath warm against my skin.

That’s when Max, bless his perfectly timed interruptions, turns in his seat and starts in.

“Hey, Zeke, don’t forget next week’s rodeo. You’re up.”

“Oh hell yeah,” Kian shouts from the back. “Zeke’s turn to ride! I’m putting fifty bucks on him eating dirt again.”

Casey’s head pops up. “Wait—what? You’re riding in the rodeo?”

Max grins. “Every other month. And the whole Crew participates. For publicity. It helps spread the word about our ranch especially with the summer harvest and Dolly’s Dairy Products hitting national supermarket chains.”

“We can’t win all the time because folks would get suspicious, being Shifters and all. So, we like to bet amongst ourselves how long we’ll last,” Dante adds.

“Spoiler: not long,” Kian shouts like the overgrown infant he is.

“Except for Zeke,” Emmet says, clapping me on the shoulder. “He actually wins more than most on account of his Dragon taming even the gnarliest bronc.”

Casey turns those big brown eyes on me, pure mischief in them now. “Are you gonna win me something?”

I shrug one shoulder and grin. “If you want me to, I’ll bring home a ribbon and a gold buckle just for you, Petals.”

“Damn straight you will,” she says, her smile brilliant.

Laughter erupts in the cab again, and this time, I don’t mind the noise. Not even a little.

Because my mate is in my arms.

She’s safe.

She’s smiling.

And we’re going home.

To our life.

Together.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

A day has passed, and we haven't left the bedroom to do more than shower or eat.

I am so not complaining.

The call from the prosecutor came an hour ago.

Michael D'Angelo is officially missing. Disappeared from the grid. The trial has been postponed. No timeline. No explanation.

Just gone.

Zeke didn't say a word when I hung up.

He didn't have to.

He just pulled me into his arms and let me exhale for the first time in what felt like forever.

Now, we're back in our bed, the quiet hum of crickets outside, and a sweet summer breeze filters in through the open windows.

My world is safe again. More than that— it's full .

It's ours.

"I know it's awful to say," I murmur as I trace a lazy pattern over Zeke's chest, "but the world is a better place without that man in it."

“You won’t hear any argument from me,” he rumbles, his voice a velvet growl, low and rich against my ear. “Some monsters deserve to vanish.”

I nod, shifting to look up at him. His golden eyes are soft now, the storm inside him calmed.

He’s beautiful, my Dragon. Fierce and solid and wholly mine.

“I’ve been thinking,” I start, my voice barely above a whisper.

He brushes his fingers along my jaw. “About what, Petals?”

“About my career. I don’t know if I want to go back to exactly what I was doing. But I do miss helping people. I might want to finish. Become a doctor. Ease back into it.”

For a moment, he doesn’t say anything. Just studies me with that soul-deep intensity of his. Then he smiles.

The kind of smile that makes me feel like I’m the only woman in the universe.

“Whatever you want, we’ll make it happen. If you want to finish, I’ll drive you to the hospital every damn day. Wait in the parking lot with snacks. Build a nap nest in the truck bed. You name it.”

I laugh, burying my face in his chest. “A nap nest?”

He chuckles. “Don’t knock it till you try it. I make a killer pillow fort.”

Warmth blooms inside me—stronger than before.

Not just lust. Not just gratitude. But love.

So much of it I can barely breathe around it.

I rise up on my elbow, brushing my lips over his.

“I love you, Zeke.”

His breath catches.

And then he flips us gently, like I weigh nothing. Like I’m his whole world.

“I love you more, Petals. And I’m going to show you just how much.”

His kiss is slow, reverent. He tastes me like I’m the last thing he’ll ever need.

His hands explore my body like it’s sacred ground.

I’m always so ready for him. From the second he touches me, it’s like a spark of electricity zips through my body.

I whimper and moan at his ministrations. Especially when he kisses and licks his way down my body, stopping to pay homage to my sensitive nipples.

“I fucking love how wet you are for me, Petals. So soft. So plush,” he growls before licking into my needy sex.

I swear, the man is always starved for me, and I am so there for it.

He makes me feel beautiful, wanted, loved.

I told my folks I met someone, that I’m involved and they politely wished me good luck.

Not big on romance, my parents. But it's a start and someday I hope they'll get to meet him.

But right now I can't think about that because he's plunging his thick fingers into my sheath, lapping at my clit and making me quiver as he sends me spiraling into passionate oblivion.

"Zeke! Need you," I moan and tug on his hair, and my sexy mate grins as he crawls up my body, spreading my thighs farther apart with his big hands.

"I got you, Petals. Hold on to me," he growls and when he sinks inside me, it's perfect.

Neither gentle nor frenzied.

It's somewhere in between. It's Zeke knowing exactly how I need him.

He moves with care and command, every stroke a promise.

My body arches into him, finding that perfect rhythm, and I feel everything.

The relief of safety. The ache of healing. The overwhelming rush of being wanted this much.

His cock pulses inside me as he angles his hips and strokes along that hidden spot inside.

Stars explode behind my eyes, and sooner than I mean to, I start to come.

"Look at me, Petals. Let me see what I do to you," he growls, and my gaze locks onto his.

“That’s it. Give it to me. Mine. Wanna fly right into the sun with you, Mate,” he grunts, and I swear, as he starts to fill me with hot ropes of his cum, I come even harder.

After who knows how long, Zeke slides out of me and grabs a warm washcloth from the bathroom.

He cleans me up, and gets into bed, tucking me into his side.

This man. He’s everything. So goddamn perfect.

The firelight paints golden patterns on his skin, casting shadows over the lines of his face.

His eyes glow, not just with Dragon magic, but something even older— devotion .

He bends his head.

“Mine,” he whispers against my mouth.

“All yours,” I breathe.

This time when he pulls me on top of him and I raise my hips enough for him to slide inside me, we both sigh.

It’s like relief fills me every time we’re joined.

Like this is exactly how we are supposed to be.

And when I fall apart above him, my name on his lips, I release a sob of joy and trust, because for once, I don’t have to be independent. I don’t have to hide.

I just get to feel.

After, he gathers me close, our bodies tangled in warmth and love and something stronger than either of us.

“Still thinking about work?” he asks drowsily, his lips at my temple.

“Still thinking about that nap nest,” I tease.

He grins into my hair. “Told you. Five-star Dragon service, Petals. It’s all yours now. Es meus. ”

“Mmm. Yours. And you’re mine, Fire Boy.”

“Fire Boy?” he asks.

“Don’t like it? How about Hot Stuff?”

“Mate,” he growls and nips my ear playfully.

I smile, feeling light and carefree for the first time— like ever.

“I love you, Petals,” he whispers.

“I love you, too.”

As I drift off in his arms, I know one thing for sure: whatever comes next, we’ll face it together because of him, and me? We’re fated.

He’s my Dragon and I’m his Rose.

And neither of us is alone now. We have our Crew. Our home. And each other.

Always.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:10 pm

Dust spins in lazy circles in the warm summer air, kicked up by boots and hooves and the lingering buzz of the crowd. The Motley Crewd Rodeo has officially wrapped, and the stadium's still pulsing with energy, but all I see are my people.

My Crew.

Emmet's got Jezebel tucked under his arm like a football, grinning like the damn fool he is while she mock-scolds him about "needing to wash off before she kisses that scruffy face."

He nuzzles her neck anyway, and she squeals, swatting him with her hat.

Love looks real good on that growly Wolf.

He's turned into a helluva Beta, too. And now that his woman has control over her special abilities, well, things have been all roses and sunshine with those two.

Avery is tucked beneath Dante's massive arm, both of them watching their Rosie Posie—who's napping with a cowboy hat over her face in a mini camping chair like she's been working cattle all day.

Dante's still got a smear of mud down his cheek, but Avery doesn't seem to mind as she stands on tiptoe and whispers something in his ear that makes him turn beet red.

The Grizzly's gone soft for his mate, and everyone knows it.

Kian's on hay bale patrol, helping Arliss wrangle the little whirlwind of a kid (the

baby goat kind) she's grown attached to.

Seems like she's always coming up with a new goat cheese recipe and earning us more awards for our Dolly's Dairy Products line every day, that is, when she's not chasing chickens around the ranch like that's a rodeo event all its own.

Who knows? Maybe it should be.

Seeing those two always makes me grin, though. Arl's laughing, cheeks pink, curls bouncing as she calls out.

"Come on, catch that chicken and I'll let you ride my Bull!"

"No horns this time, remember?"

Kian just chuckles and mutters, "No promises," before scooping up both his mate and the chicken before scampering off to the trailer.

Zeke is striding back from the arena like he owns the world— and maybe he does.

I swear, sometimes I can see his purple Dragon scales shimmer faintly underneath his skin, especially in the setting sun. I read somewhere that those things are visible only to those of us who know what to look for, which explains that.

But that's not important because in his arms?

Casey.

The woman who turned that scowling beast into a love-struck, fire-breathing teddy bear of a Dragon.

She's smiling up at him like he put the stars in the sky, and I swear, I've never seen

my brother look so peaceful. So whole.

Then there's me.

Max Leeds. Jersey Devil. Alpha. Father of twins and the very lucky husband of a woman who still takes my breath away.

Penny's bent over the double stroller right now, brushing her fingers over one sleeping baby's cheek.

Her sundress dances in the breeze, and my heart swells so damn full I think it might burst.

I come up behind her, wrap my arms around her waist, and press a kiss to the curve of her neck.

"Look what we did," I murmur.

She smiles without turning. "Built something good."

"The best."

We did the impossible.

We made a home out of chaos.

We made a family out of misfits.

And somewhere between the first quarter moon and all the angst between crying and kisses, we built a life so good it makes my chest ache.

Of course, right then, a herd of goats bearing the Motley Crewd brand pick that exact

moment to charge through the concession area, head butting a lemonade stand and nailing me right in the ass as they sprint past.

“Jed!” I shout, staggering forward while Penny wheezes with laughter.

“I said I was working on training them!” Jed hollers from the bleachers, clearly not moving at all.

The Crew erupts in laughter.

My babies are still asleep.

The sky is streaked with pink and gold.

My heart is whole.

This is it.

This is everything.

“Alright. Pack it up. Let’s get home, everyone!”

Penny grins and I swear, I love her a little more with each passing moment.

Before I go, I want to leave you with this one thing I learned over the past couple of years since I came to Barren County.

Sometimes family is who you’re born to. Other times, it’s the ones you find. Born in fire. Found in the earth.

But see, it’s the ones who ride beside you when the world gets wild—the ones who earn your respect with their blood, sweat, tears, and unshakeable loyalty.

That's your Crew.

That's your home.

And if you haven't found yours yet?

Well, just stop on by, and we'll see what we can do.

Because, you know, you're always welcome at the Motley Crewd Ranch.

Until next time.

T he end.

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