



Daddy's Heart (REAL DADDIES: Boone Brothers #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: What do you get when you combine a bullet in the butt, a grumpy mountain sheriff, and one stormy night trapped in a mountain cabin?

A Daddy who treats my curves like a religion and my heart like a jewel.

I moved back to Wildfire to start over.

A quiet job, a little house, and a chance to breathe for me and my son.

What I didn't expect was the town's sheriff to be six and a half feet of pure authority, carrying a wound he refuses to let anyone touch... except me.

Colt Boone is big, brooding, and all growl.

He makes rules I didn't ask for.

He lectures me about my shoes, stalks me through town, and calls me baby girl like it's a ring on my finger.

I thought I was the one with something to hide.

Turns out, the man whos been undoing me piece by piece?

He's been holding onto the biggest secret of all.

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One

Emery

“M ama, be careful in the mountains!”

My son’s voice crackles through the speaker, adorable like always. Legend is three years old and absolutely convinced he runs the world. Maybe he does. At least, mine .

“I will, baby,” I murmur, guiding my minivan up the final stretch of the winding dirt road. My stomach does a nervous little twist as I catch a glimpse of a log cabin through the pine branches in the distance. “You be good for Grandmama, okay?”

“I am good! Grandpop says I’m the goodest ever! ”

I smile, even though my palms are a little sweaty. “He’s right.”

“Emery, honey?” My grandmother’s voice cuts in. “Are you sure about this? Those mountains at night are dangerous, and who knows who that man is you’re going to see out there in the middle of nowhere.”

“I’m fine, Grandmama. Just a house call. Anyway, he’s the Sheriff, I’m pretty sure I’ll be safe. Gotta go. Love you all,” I say as I end the call.

Sheriff Colt Boone.

I mean, what kind of name is that? It sounds like a brand of whiskey or bar of soap

that smells like leather and flannel.

The man Logan described as grumpy as hell and built like a brick wall that half of the female Wildfire population would like to climb. And a respectable portion of the male population as well. The kind of man you don't want to meet in a dark alley unless you're trying to get ruined.

Which, apparently, I'm doing. Professionally, of course.

I park beside a massive black truck that looks like it could eat my van for breakfast. My fingers tremble a little as I check my reflection. My hair is barely hanging on in its messy bun, and my lips are dry. I swipe on Cherry Chapstick like it's armor and take a breath.

Just a trained medial assistant. Doing her job. No big deal.

Oh, did I mention? I'm here to check his wound. A bullet hole in his ass.

As I make the final approach to the sheriff's house, I'm comforted by the fact the cabin is honestly incredible.

Not like the Dutton's Yellowstone behemoth, but somehow better.

Small and neat with ferns filling the beds, and what looks like one of those tree trunks that's been carved with a chainsaw into a magnificent, artful grizzly bear.

Once I'm parked, engine off, I click open my door. Outside, it's one of those Wildfire nights that belong in a song or a book.

There's a coolness to the mountain breeze that blends magically with the waning heat of the late summer day.

The path leading to the front door is made of flagstone and gravel. I walk carefully, balancing my bag on my shoulder, my new pair of knock-off Tori Burch flats providing zero grip on the slightly uneven terrain.

When I look up to take in the front door of my destination, I note a sign nailed to a carved piece of wood above the porch.

“Beware of the Owner”

My jaw unhinges, wondering if I should turn tail and make haste back to civilization in my minivan when, I roll the ball of my foot on a loose rock. My arms fly outward but it’s no use. I’m tumbling, knees crashing down onto hard stone with an ‘oof’.

My palms scrape raw, and the bag on my shoulder lands with a thud three feet ahead of me.

“Shit,” I hiss, trying to catch my breath as a hot explosion of pain expands from my left kneecap.

With clenched teeth and squinted eyes, I push up on my hands, trying to right myself when I hear it.

The distinctive sound of heavy, cast-iron hinges squealing.

Followed by the thud, thud, thud of heavy footsteps on wooden steps.

Then, a low voice, rough as the gravel digging into my knees. “Jesus Christ.”

I barely lift my head before thick, grabby hands are around my waist.

I’m on my feet in about two seconds flat. He lifted me like I’m nothing and at two-

hundred eighteen pounds, nothing is not really how I would describe me.

I'm not ashamed of my body, but I know I'm no featherlight.

With a whooshing exhale, my feet connect to solid ground, but his hands are still on me.

Thumbs under my ribs. Heat burning through my scrubs.

My eyes trail up, and up, and my heart forgets how to beat.

Colt Boone is huge.

A mountain of a man with messy dark hair and a chest made of hard lines and thick muscle. His jaw clenches like it wants to snap steel in half. There's a scar on his neck that draws my eyes like a magnet.

And then there are his eyes.

They remind me of my son's favorite Blue Raspberry flavored Slurpee. Like a frozen Mediterranean tide pool.

And right now, they're locked on me like he's trying to memorize the shape of my soul.

He's not just gorgeous. He's so magnificent, it's hard to keep my eyes on him.

Like looking at the sun, I have to take him in in little bits, or I'll go blind.

"You drove up here alone, in that?" His voice is rough as his eyes dart to my car, Adam's apple moving as he swallows.

I blink, my heart slamming into my ribs. “It’s got all-wheel drive...” I swallow right with him, distractingly aware he still hasn’t let me go. “I’m your home care provider.”

His gaze drops to my feet, then slowly drags up my legs, lingering in places that make my thighs clench.

“Flats? Did you not know you were driving half way to heaven up the side of a mountain?” His thick brow furrows. “You could’ve broken your fuckin’ neck .”

My breath catches, a defensive anger making me blink. “But, I didn’t, did I?” I squirm out of his grip which makes his mouth tick into an infuriatingly sex frown. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to sue you for negligent path maintenance causing great bodily injury.”

He takes a long breath, his stupidly sexy chest expanding under the plaid flannel, then he sniffs and his eyes drop to where I’m favoring my left leg. “You’re fucking bleeding .”

He sounds absolutely furious about it.

“It’s just a scrape.” I glance down, thinking this must be how Nancy Kerigan felt after getting whacked with that metal police baton.

“You shouldn’t be scraped at all.” His jaw ticks as his hands finally drop away from my waist, though he doesn’t step back. If anything, he leans closer. “Little girl like you, you shouldn’t even be out here.”

Little?

I frown, suddenly defensive. Is he being an asshole right now? “I’m a medical

assistant from the agency assigned to you after your hospital stay. I came to take care of you.”

His nostrils flare like he doesn’t like that answer one bit. “You’re not takin’ care of me while you’re hurt.”

I swear smoke is starting to come out of his ears. I blink. Blink. Blink.

He leans in closer, so close I can feel his breath brush my lips.

“You showed up for me . You bled for me . You think I’m not going to make sure you are taken care of?

I shift back a half-step. His lips are so close I don’t trust myself not to lean in and kiss him, full tongue.

The way he says the part about being taken care of sounds dirty in the best sort of way and I swear the carved grizzly is taunting me from over his shoulder.

“I’m just here to clean your wound, not get a lecture on mountain safety. So, let’s just do that, shall we?”

His smile is pure sin and lethal .

His arms cross, and the movement pulls his flannel tight across shoulders that look like they were built to carry a girl like me straight into the woods and do the most debauched and wonderful things to her. His eyes stay fixed on my face, unblinking, like he’s logging points on a map for later.

He lowers a hand and scoops up my bag, spinning on the toe of his worn hiking boot and heading back toward the porch.

“Come. Or I’ll throw you over my shoulder and carry you.” He tosses me a look and little fingers of naughtiness drum down low, reminding me of how long it’s been since I had any sort of Sheriff Boone sort of action.

I stand there for a second, my knee getting warm and achy, like my suddenly awakened-from-years-of-slumber vagina.

My eyes solidly pinned on how his butt looks in those worn Levi’s, thinking I’ve just scratched the winning ticket because I’m gonna ask him to drop his drawers in the very near future.

“Come on, babygirl. We gotta look at that knee. And apparently,” He smirks like he’s reading my mind, “you’re gonna get an up close and personal look at my ass.”

He extends a hand as I get to the stairs and I bite back the wince as I bend my leg to take them one at a time. His jaw is set hard, a slight shake of his head, but his hand engulfs mine, warm and demanding, leading me across the worn wood planks of the porch and through the door.

Inside the cabin, it’s warmer than outside. Dark wood everywhere. Beautiful stained glass lamps that look shockingly like authentic Tiffany lamps. It adds a layer of surprising refinement to the rustic, minimally decorated masculine space.

The strong scent of coffee and maybe woodsmoke from a well-used iron stove in the kitchen tops off the classic mountain cabin vibe.

It’s lived-in but orderly. The kind of place that shouldn’t feel comforting but somehow does.

There are a few photos on the walls. A foursome of men in several that look similar to Sheriff Boone here, but each with their distinctive features, along with a small but

determined looking older woman who I can only assume is the mother to this mountain man-meat clan.

“Take a seat, let’s take care of that knee,” he releases my hand then drops my bag with a thud on a sturdy, square kitchen table with four matching chairs that looks gorgeously hand carved.

Then he marches off to the cupboards, tugging one open and pulling out a first aid kit.

When he turns back around, his brows draw tight. “I said, take a seat.”

“I’m fine. I’m here to take care of your wound, remember?”

“And I don’t need a nurse. Didn’t ask for one.”

“Medical assistant,” I mutter, unzipping my bag and digging inside. “And your doctor sent me. He said you’ve been ignoring follow-up care for two weeks.”

His jaw flexes. “Okay, here’s the deal. I take care of your knee, I’ll let you take care of my ass.”

I huff, but only because his protectiveness is starting to get under my skin. “Fine.”

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“Fine,” he echoes, pointing at the seat next to me, and reluctantly, but gladly, I sit, because my knee is honestly stinging like it took a shot from a bionic bumble bee. “Scrubs. Off.”

“Excuse me?” Heat explodes across my cheeks and down my chest.

“How am I going to get at that knee with those pants in the way?”

It takes me a moment. Then it dawns on me. “No.” I’m on my feet again. “Absolutely not. I’ll deal with the cut when I get home and—”

“Sit. The fuck. Down.” His voice sucks the rest of the argument from my throat .

My butt hits the chair again, my thumbs hook into the elastic waistband of my scrubs while I say a silent prayer that I don’t spontaneously combust and burn this nice little cabin to the ground with us inside.

“Good girl,” he rumbles as he lowers himself into a man crouch in front of me, eyes fixed between my legs as I wiggle my pants down just below my knees and press my thighs together, trying to hide the wet spot on the front of my practical beige panties.

And I swear his nostrils flare on a solid inhale, like he’s just caught the scent of breakfast in the morning.

He takes his time, cleaning the wound with a care I’d never have expected from a man like Colt. He grumbles a few times, muttering something about fucking gravel, and making plans to replace the whole path with the paving stones.

Then he's done, his jaw is set hard, nodding toward my pants gathered at the tops of my calves.

"You can pull those up." He slow glances upward, catching mine for an impossibly long pause before finishing with, "If you want."

What I want is to climb this man like he's got a tree fort filled with snacks at the top, but instead, I tug my lips into a tight smile and pull my dignity back up around my waist. He pushes back up, standing straight, stepping back to the kitchen as I exhale toward the ceiling.

He puts the first aid kit back, then immediately before I can fully recover, shrugs out of his flannel and tosses it aside.

Jesus, that chest. It's a freakin' religion.

A cult.

I'd drink that Kool-aid any day of the week and three times on Sunday. I don't have the strength nor the will to tell him he didn't have to take off his shirt.

His biceps are a study in perfect male anatomy. Bulging, but in that 'I've been chopping wood and carrying Oak trees since I was five' sort of way. And don't even get me started on his chest.

I note the scars. More than three, less than ten that I can see. One is distinctive. A burn. Deep, too, which darkens the moment as I push away the crackling memory of something I wish I could forget.

But there, among the wreckage of the scars, is a heart. Inked over his left pec with a ragged crack down the middle.

Did a woman inspire that? And why does that thought give me a pang of jealousy?

“Problem?” he asks as he closes the space between us.

He knows exactly what I’m looking at.

“No,” I lie, tugging on a pair of blue latex gloves with a snap, snap. “Where can you lay down?” I glance around the warm, masculine space. “Face down, I need to get to...the wound.”

He nods on a silent snort. “Right.”

He takes three long strides to a brown leather couch.

With his back to me, his arms bend, hands working in front of him, then God, he tugs down his jeans exposing plaid cotton boxers.

Lumberboxers I think because he may be the sheriff but every fantasy I’m entertaining has him swinging an ax and showing me all the ways he works with hard wood.

I’m zero chill as he stretches out on his stomach, long, masculine fingers hook into the elastic of the boxers and tug.

“You got enough room to work?” He turns his head, slowly blinking until I nod using all my willpower to keep my tongue inside my mouth. “Well, I’m waiting.”

“Right.” I stretch out my fingers in the latex gloves, grabbing the tape, scissors, gauze and bottle of saline. The bullet wound is on his right glute. Bandage peeling at the edges.

The skin around the wound is warm and solid and a little more toward red than I'd like but not bad just a little neglected.

His ass is like flexed steel, and I battle the urge to just take a handful of it and tuck it in my bag for later.

He tenses as I work some saline around the wound. It's healing, a clean exit, and I wonder what happened.

"When's the last time this was cleaned?"

Silence.

"Sheriff?"

"Couple days."

I pause. "Couple? That doesn't mean two, does it?"

"Hard to reach. You ever try bandaging your own ass?"

My lips twitch, but I focus on the dressing. "Can't say I have. If you have to take a bullet, the butt is a pretty safe place really. Considering. How'd it happen? Bad guy get you from behind?"

"Not exactly. Not unless I'm the bad guy shot his own ass."

"Your own ass? You shot yourself?"

"Long story."

“Well, maybe you can tell me sometime.” When I smooth down the last piece of tape, I sit back. “Done. Keep it clean and dry. Change the dressing every—”

He pushes up until he’s standing there. Towering. Shirtless. Staring at me with heat in his eyes and absolutely no shame about the fact my eyes are exactly at cock level.

And, when I say this Sheriff is packing heat, I mean nuclear fission temperatures.

I start packing up, hands shaking, stupid wetness soaking into my panties. “Just make sure you change the dressing daily . Otherwise, when you end up in the ER, don’t expect sympathy.”

“You done being pissy?” He tugs his jeans back up and my knees fold. His eyes stay laser focused on mine as he reaches into his pants, shamelessly adjusts himself, then works the button and zipper closed on a frustrated grunt.

I snap the kit shut, swallowing hard. “I’m not pissy. I’m professional. I’ll be back in three days.”

I head toward the door, trying not to limp, trying to keep my pride intact, when his voice stops me.

“You’ll be back tomorrow.”

I turn slowly. “Excuse me?”

“Tomorrow. Before dark.”

“I just told you—”

“And I’m telling you different.”

He steps closer. Too close. I have to tilt my chin up to look at him and that just makes me feel small after a lifetime of feeling like my body doesn't quite fit inside the lines people expect.

"You're coming back to check the wound. And you'll call me when you get home."

He's giving me whiplash. First, he doesn't need a nurse, then he's ordering me to come back to take care of him tomorrow.

"You don't even know me."

Something flickers in his face. "I know enough."

"That's ridiculous."

"You don't call, I'll drive down this mountain and come looking."

He's not kidding. I consider the possibility he's potentially psychotic. Because, his eyes are crazy.

Crazy gorgeous .

"Tomorrow," he repeats, rubbing the back of his neck which only makes his bicep pop out. "Before dark. And you call the minute you get home. What's the ETA to your place?"

I should tell him to mind his business but what comes out is, "Fine. Tomorrow and yes, I'll call. ETA is about 20 minutes."

His lips curve the slightest bit.

“Atta girl.”

I walk out fast, nearly stumble on the steps, and somehow manage to get back into my van without collapsing. He’s standing on his porch and oh God, he does that thing where enormous guys reach up and grab the top of the doorframe and just stretch and...watch you.

I count eight perfectly defined, abdominal squares before I swipe the back of my hand over my slack lips.

What sort of test is this, God? Because, Imma fail, I’ll tell you right now.

My hands are still shaking by the time I reach the main road. I should call Logan. I should tell him his patient is uncooperative and bossy and completely inappropriate and no way am I coming back to treat him.

Instead, I tap my phone screen and stare at the number he made me save. I make my way down the rest of the rugged mountain road, through town, pulling up to my house around eight o’clock, my heart still thumping and that twisting tension down low is begging for some self-care.

Not that I’ve ever had any real success in that department, but that’s an anti-climactic story for another day.

Snort.

I stare at the front door on the restored little cottage I painted Daffodil yellow the day I moved in. The house is quaint, as my grandmama said.

It’s more than enough for Legend and I to feel like it’s a home. The money my grandparents put in a trust for me has me free from a monthly payment, but working

is still necessary and a condition of me continuing to receive the quarterly disbursements from their living trust.

I'm lucky. I'm not rich, but I'm not poor. I've made mistakes, but I'm working on building a life that feels authentic and safe. For me and my son.

I cover my face with a hard exhale, then peek through my fingers. The phone is taunting me from the passenger seat.

I reach over. My finger hovers. Then taps.

It barely gets in half a ring before he answers.

"Emery. It's been twenty-four minutes."

Not 'hello' or 'what?'. My name and how long I've been driving.

He's a ten but...a bit of a psycho.

"I made it down safe," I force a weird cheerfulness into my voice as I roll my eyes at the gray fabric ceiling of the minivan.

"Good." A beat. "How's the knee feel?"

I glance at the dried blood on my scrubs. "Fine."

"Uh-huh." He doesn't sound convinced. "Take some Tylenol and ice it for thirty minutes before bed."

"I know how to treat a scrape."

“I know you do. Do it anyway.”

Silence stretches between us. Long enough for my pulse to start skipping again.

Then he speaks.

“See you tomorrow. Before dark.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“Good. Sweet dreams, baby girl.”

He clicks off I’m left sitting in the quiet of my very practical minivan with my pulse in my throat and the terrifying realization that I’m already looking forward to seeing him again.

I don’t know what tomorrow holds.

But I know one thing for sure.

I’m wearing different shoes.

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Two

Colt

I knew her the second I opened the door yesterday and saw her on the path.

Emery fucking Langston.

Four years older and softer in all the places that made a man ache. I hauled her out of a burning house once. Didn't think I'd ever see her again—not in front of me, not close enough to touch, not looking at me like I was just some wounded mountain hermit she had to patch up.

But there she was.

She didn't recognize me. She wouldn't. She'd been barely conscious back then, and I was in full gear, smoke thick enough to choke a god. But I never forgot the weight of her in my arms. Never forgot what it felt like to carry her out of hell.

Last night, after she'd gone, I tried to sleep. Yeah, fuck that. Not a chance I'm going to sleep again unless she's right there beside me. Not after getting a glimpse of her panties outlining what I know is going to be the world's most addictive fucking pussy.

I tried a cold shower like I was fifteen with a rebellious hard-on.

Didn't work. My dick was still half frozen when I started to beat off.

Three times in quick succession until my balls ached and my dick was raw, but warm again, and I still wasn't satisfied.

I don't know if I'll ever be satisfied again.

Four years ago, I told myself to move on. The feelings were different then. I just wanted to protect the girl I'd dragged to safety, not fuck her a dozen ways 'til Sunday. It took weeks, but somehow I tucked all thoughts of her in the back of my mind.

Now, all bets are off. I've spent the day staring at the fire. Should have shown up at work, should have grabbed my chainsaw and carved some wood to take my mind off things. But the only thing I'd want to carve right now is my name in her ass so she'll never forget who I am

My brother Cade showed up late afternoon with some shit about people been trying to get hold of the sheriff and nobody had heard from me.

Fuck that. My world just turned upside down, the job can wait a day.

Now she's here, and all I want to do is throw her over my shoulder and keep her.

She walks into my place like she owns the fucking mountain. Like she doesn't know she just woke something in me I can't put back to sleep. Like she doesn't know I'm already calculating how to keep her here. Mine. Whether she wants it or not.

"How's the knee?" I ask, tracking the slight wince when she steps wrong.

"Fine. Just a scrape."

"You clean it?"

"Yes."

"Bandaged it?"

"Obviously."

She's snippy. Fiery. Fuck, I like her.

Her fingers tremble as she snaps on the blue gloves. I feel them shaking a little as she inspects my ass wound, just enough to make my cock twitch.

She clears her throat, hesitating for a beat. "You have kids?"

I let out a short laugh, dark and low. "Hell no. Ain't cut out for half-hearted shit like that."

She blinks, maybe surprised by the sharpness in my tone.

Her mouth opens, but she doesn't say whatever she's thinking. I step closer, just enough to make her tilt her head back to keep looking at me. "Go on, baby. Say it. I can take it."

For a split second I think she's going to answer me, tell me something honest. Then she draws a sharp breath.

"Wound looks good," she says, snapping off her gloves. "You're healing."

"Could've told you that without the latex."

She rolls her eyes. "I have to get going."

I frown as I tug up my jeans. "Going where?"

"Dinner. With Logan and some of the crew. Karaoke after."

My blood runs hot. She's leaving. Of course she is, that's why her hair is curled, lips glossy. She came up here just to get me hard and then vanish.

"You're going out like that?"

"Like what?" she blinks, all innocent while her ass mocks me in those scrub pants, that scrub top doing nothing to hide how soft she is underneath. "I'm going to change first, obviously."

"Not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"You look like dessert."

She flushes. Starts gathering her things, but I'm not done.

"Emery."

She pauses, and I let my voice drop, a growl that lives in my chest.

I step in, real close. "You gonna sing tonight?"

"Maybe. Haven't in a while."

"I want to hear it."

She looks at me. Really looks. And there's something there. Hunger in her eyes. Doubt fighting desire. That first flicker of a girl about to give in. And she hates how much she wants to.

"You're not the only one who gets to give orders, Sheriff."

I grin.

She turns for the door. Stops. "Thanks for not being a total caveman today."

"Don't thank me. You have no idea what kind of man you're teasing, sweetheart. But you keep testing me, and I'll show you real fast."

She goes. I let her.

For now.

But the second she's out of sight, I grab my keys.

Because there's not a damn chance in hell I'm letting her sing for anyone else before she sings for me.

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Three

Colt

I park a block from the bar, kill the engine on my cruiser, and crack the window. She hasn't even made it inside yet, and I'm already keyed up like I ran ten miles uphill.

She steps out of Logan's car in that damn outfit. Baby blue tank top, denim skirt knee-length, thank God, and her hair is down.

My brain is on fire because everyone in that bar is about to see what should only be mine. She laughs at something one of her friends says, bounces once, her fucking tits jiggle and I damn near break the steering wheel in half.

I know she's not with Logan like that. Not his type. No woman is. I know. I fucking know. Still don't like him near her. If he so much as glances at her the wrong way, I'll remind him I don't need a badge to shoot him.

Outside my car, I nod to a couple locals that recognize me making my way to the back door where Murry Wetmore is standing, smoking a cigarette.

"Sheriff? Problem?" He's owned this place for a decade. Good guy. Runs a pretty clean operation.

"I hope not." I pause for a second, hands on the thick leather of my service belt, the cool steel of my sidearm pressing into my wrist. "Just gonna keep an eye on someone inside."

He scratches his forehead but waves me through the back door.

“Mi casa es su casa. Lemme know if you need anything.”

I give him another nod before I disappear inside, wind my way through the back hall then out into the main bar area, tucking into a shadowed corner in the back, watching.

The place is classic small-town chaos. String lights and off-key singing, sticky floors and overpoured drinks. I melt into the wall. She doesn't see me—but I see everything.

Room's pretty busy tonight. I spot my deputy sitting a few tables over, but he doesn't see me. Just as well, since he'd be asking questions about where I was all day, and that's a conversation I don't want to get into right now.

Her eyes scan the crowd. She's nervous. Excited. She's holding a drink she's not even sipping. When someone calls her name, she blushes and tries to play it off, but her feet are already moving.

She's gonna sing.

My chest tightens.

She steps up on that stage. Small. Brave. Gripping the mic like it might anchor her.

Then she opens her mouth, and the world tilts.

It's not polished. It's not rehearsed. But hell, it doesn't need to be. Her voice is raw honey—smooth, aching, and soaked in something I shouldn't hear in public. My hand clenches the edge of the table to keep myself from storming up there and throwing her over my shoulder.

Men are watching. I can feel their stares, their thoughts, and it makes something old and animal twist in my gut.

Then some asshole makes it worse.

"Big girl's got lungs, huh? Wonder what else she's got."

Quiet. But not quiet enough.

I'm already rising when she beats me to it.

She turns and launches her drink with perfect, furious aim. Ice and gin spray across the guy's chest. He lurches up, red and pissed.

"Watch it, bitch."

I move.

Logan's getting up, but I'm faster. One fist in the guy's collar, I shove him against the wall before he knows what hit him.

"Say it again," I growl. "I fuckin' dare you."

He puffs his chest like he wants to square up, and I meet him head-on. My forearm slams into his throat, pinning him to the wall hard enough to rattle the photos nailed behind him.

"You just disrespected a woman in front of a sheriff, you dumb bastard," I grit out, close enough he can smell the fury coming off me. "Want to see what happens next?"

He grunts, tries to shove me off—bad fucking idea. I yank his arm behind his back

and twist until he lets out a sharp yell. The room drops to a hush, everyone frozen like they're watching a live-action barroom brawl on pay-per-view.

"Still think you're tough? Keep talking. I'll cuff you and carry you out over my shoulder."

I jerk his wallet from his back pocket and toss it to my deputy, who's staring at me open-mouthed.

"Run him."

"Colt—" Emery's voice cuts through the haze. Tight. Breathing fast.

I look at her. She's flushed, shaking, still lit up from the stage.

"Out. Now."

She freezes, still breathing hard, her eyes flaring with defiance. I see the fire in her, the part that wants to push me, test how far she can go.

"Don't," I say, dropping the guy and leaving him to my deputy as I step toward her, my voice a warning wrapped in steel. "Don't make me arrest you too, baby girl. Because I won't be nice about it. I won't cuff you gently, and I sure as hell won't let you forget how it feels."

"Arrest me for what?" she demands, defiance flaring in her eyes, and goddamn it if that hint of the brat underneath doesn't make my cock swell.

"Assault," I say, glancing at the fucker giving my deputy a hard time, along with a buddy who's clearly had one glass too many.

Deputy Gerrard might not look like much, but they cause him any trouble they're going to find out real quick how well he handles a situation.

I turn back to Emery. "Can't go tossing drinks at people in my town, babygirl. "

That hits. She swallows hard. Her chin tips up like she's about to throw something back—then she catches my eyes again and thinks better of it. Turns on her heel and storms toward the door, hips swinging like a dare.

I cut my gaze to Logan. "Get her out of here. Take her home. Make sure she locks the damn door behind her."

He opens his mouth like he's going to argue, but I shut it with a look.

"Not a request. Don't let anyone near her."

He nods and takes off after her.

Smart girl. Smarter friend.

I don't follow. Not yet. Because if I move now, I'm dragging her out of here with my jacket over her ass and my hand around her throat.

And she's not ready for that.

Not yet.

I head over to my deputy, and the look in his eyes tells me it's going to be a long night.

Turns out both the asshole who mouthed off and his buddy have priors.

Parolees. Outstanding warrants. Real prize winners.

Which means I don't get to storm off into the night and track her down like I want to.

I have to haul them in, do the reports, babysit while they're booked.

Red tape and procedure. All of it feels like punishment for letting her walk away.

By the time I'm done, it's late. Real late.

I drive by her house on the way home. Lights out. Logan did his job. No sign of anyone else. I leave the engine running and get out.

I hoist the case of bottled water on my shoulder, two bags of protein bars and some other mountain safe supplies and walk to her minivan.

Not locked. Fucking girl has no self-preservation skills. Even here in Wildfire, she needs to be safe, but that lecture will come later.

I put the supplies in the back, but I can't walk away. I ease the hatch closed and walk around to the driver's door and open it as the crickets chirp like they are calling me out.

"Shut up," I growl, just holding her door open, fighting off the insanity that's going on in my head.

Don't do it, Colt Boone.

Too late, under the dead of night, my dick is out, hard as iron nails.

I reach over and pop a tissue from the box between her front seats, my heart about to

come through my chest wall, but it only takes three strokes before I'm gritting out her name between my teeth, spurting into the thin tissue, cleaning off my dick and putting my crazy ass cock away.

I fold up the tissue as small as possible on a sniff and a growl, set it on her seat, then grab my knife from the sheath on my hip, flip it open, and sorry baby, I jimmy it under the trim on the heating and cooling vent next to the steering wheel.

In thirty seconds, I've got it all back in place, the tissue hidden in the vent, turning the little plastic louvers so it will blow right at her face when she gets in tomorrow.

"I'll be with you whether you know it or not." I close the door. "Get used to my scent, baby, you'll be wearing it very soon."

Then I get back in my truck and pull away.

I wait until I'm halfway up the mountain before I text her.

Me: Daddy says you handled yourself tonight. But next time, you come to me first. No exceptions.

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Four

Emery

“ I still can’t believe you survived Sheriff Grumpypants without getting arrested,” Logan says, uncapping a blue pen for morning appointments. Green is for afternoon. Red is reserved for emergencies. The schedule for the next week is a color-coded masterpiece of passive aggression.

“He wasn’t that bad,” I lie, glancing into my medical bag for the third time even though I know it’s fully stocked.

Logan arches an eyebrow like I’ve insulted his intelligence and his skincare routine in one breath. “You’ve been humming Les Mis all afternoon and jumping every time your phone buzzes.”

I sigh. Busted.

I have been humming. And every notification has made my stomach twist, hoping it’s him. Colt. Even though I have no idea what I’d do if it actually were.

“So what’s the deal? Big, brooding, and built like a tank got you all twisted up?”

“He’s my patient, Logan.”

“And I’m a nun,” he says, clicking his red pen into place. “Spill.”

I open my mouth. Close it. How do I explain that Sheriff Colt Boone makes me feel seventeen again, like my body has betrayed me with nerves and heat and daydreams I have no business entertaining?

How do I admit that I've replayed our conversation about kids at least seventeen times, and every time it hits harder?

How do I tell my best friend that the nickname baby girl wrecked me in a way that should not be possible?

"He's just... intense."

"Intense how?" Logan leans in, voice going low and dangerous. "Serial killer intense or climb-you-like-a-tree intense?"

"Logan."

"I'm assessing the situation. Do I need to sign you up for Krav Maga or get you new lingerie?"

Heat rushes up my neck. "Neither. You're impossible."

"No. I'm correct. You've been alone too long, Em. You've been momming so hard you forgot you're also a woman. With hormones and crushes and needs."

I roll my eyes, but the truth hits harder than I want to admit. Because he's right. When's the last time I let myself want something just because it felt good? Not for Legend. Not because it made sense. Just because it was mine.

And now what I want is six and a half feet of solid man with steel eyes and rough hands that make me feel like the most fragile thing in the world. And the safest.

“It’s complicated,” I mumble.

“The best things usually are. I’m making coffee. You want one?”

“Yeah, just don’t forget this time.”

“One time, Emmy. Anyone would think I almost killed you.”

“You have no idea how bad my allergy is. If I have dairy, Logan…”

“I get it.” He holds his hands up in mock surrender. “I promise I will never again forget the oat milk.”

The front door creaks open without a knock, like the air knows exactly who’s coming.

Sheriff Colt Boone steps inside the clinic, full uniform, duty belt hanging heavy at his hips. The same man who flipped a heckler into a wall last night like it was nothing. The same man whose voice had the whole bar silent.

And the town? It hasn’t shut up since. Wildfire’s group chat is buzzing. Logan showed me three separate memes of Colt with the caption “The only Daddy I listen to.” One of them was from a PTA mom.

Colt looks at me like nothing’s changed.

“Hey,” I breathe.

He nods once. “You off soon?” He doesn’t wait for my answer, looks at Logan. “She’s done for the day, isn’t she?”

“Well, we were about to have coffee, actually. See, when you walked in we were just discussing her dairy allergy and—”

“She’s done for the day. I’ll make sure she gets coffee if she wants one.”

Logan shrugs. "I'm not taking any of that Daddy danger like I saw last night. Take her. Get her out of here. Just don't forget the vanilla oat milk, or you'll never hear the end of it."

Colt gives him a nod while I throw my hands up.

“Where's your bag?" Colt asks, already rooting around my desk. "I'm walking you home. Saw your van still in your driveway."

"Jesus."

My cheeks turn to fire as Logan stomps his feet on a manic guffaw, clapping like a maniac. “Be still my heart. A gentleman escort? Can I pick your wedding colors?”

“Logan,” I snap.

He’s laughing as he heads into the back, leaving me to Colt and his unreadable stare, my purse already on his shoulder.

"Doesn't match." I give him an irritated exhale.

"Don't care. You match me just fine. Come on, before my stupid radio goes off."

The walk is quiet. He doesn't touch me, but his presence is so heavy it feels like protection. A truck slows down beside us, the driver hollering something about leggings and ex-wives.

Colt doesn't flinch.

"Keep driving," he says, low and final. "Just my brother. One of them."

They peel away.

"Brothers?" I ask.

He grunts. "Unfortunately."

"He seems nice."

"They're not."

At my front steps, I fumble the keys. He catches them. Then his radio buzzes. He listens, jaw tightening.

"Domestic dispute. I have to go," he mutters, frustration radiating off him.

He grabs my chin gently, forcing my eyes to meet his.

"This is the last time I walk away without coming back the same night."

Then he's gone.

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Five

Colt

The call's a waste of time. I settle it in ten minutes and head straight for Mrs. Sherman's bakery. My dirty secret.

I don't know what she puts in her cupcakes, but there's a line out the door of the bakery every morning. A mix of tourists and locals practically salivating and trampling each other to get inside before she's sold out.

But, I have a secret. She saves one for me every day. Today, it's vanilla frosting over pink cherry flavored cake and a candied double cherry on top.

Fucking perfect. I take it, leaving her my usual twenty-dollar bill, which she tries to refuse, but inevitable gives in when I tell her if she won't take the twenty, I'm going to make her take a fifty.

Emery's lights are off when I pull up. I don't knock. I walk around the side of her house, reminding myself to make sure the locks on her windows work. She said she just moved back, and I know this place. It was Mrs. Bruner's place before she moved to Tacoma to be with her son.

It's a solid, cute little cottage just a few streets off from the center of town, safe, but I need her locked fucking down.

Around the back, a low light is on, I step on the soft grass closer to the window but

not so close I'd scare the shit out of her if she saw me.

There she is. The curtain is open just enough.

She's on her bed. Her body arched, her hand between her thighs. Wearing a t-shirt and nothing else. Her mouth open.

My brain goes off line. My cock is driving the train.

I'm at her back door, snort, okay the rear entry, okay, never mind. I turn the knob and the fucking door opens.

I make a mental note to chastise her for not locking the fucking door, especially when she's got her hand between her legs, but then doubling down on that making sure I get her a door lock I can control remotely. A whole security system for that matter.

I step inside. Breaking and entering, some might say.

I say, I had probable cause.

My pulse hammers in my temples as I make my way in silence until I'm standing in her fucking doorway.

She's making these tiny sounds. Part pleasure, part frustration.

I clear my throat.

"Holy shit!" She bounces back against the headboard in one convulsing motion.
"Colt! What are you—"

"Don't stop," I order, taking two steps forward. "Get that hand down on that pussy."

She stills, breathing hard.

“Don’t you dare stop, baby girl.”

“I just about had a heart attack.” She shakes her head, pulling at the quilt around her feet, but I reach out and jerk it down.

“You’re putting on a show? Then get to it. I bought my ticket, I want the full Monty, baby.”

“I—I can’t. Not with you watching.”

I put my hand on my sidearm. “Do it.”

Her eyes go round, but a hint of a smile quirks the corner of her mouth. She knows I’m not a danger to her, at least not in that way.

“Lay back down. Keep going.”

She shifts, moves again. Slower now.

I sit at the edge of her bed, place the cupcake box beside me.

“You better be fucking thinking of me.”

She nods.

“Good girl.”

Her fingers work beautifully. Her scent makes my balls feel like they’re full of lead.

But, something is off. She's tense, her face is tight.

"I—" she turns my way and there's a sadness in her eyes that makes my damn heart feel like it's breaking. "I—can't."

"What do you mean. You're doing pretty fucking great from where I'm sitting."

"No, it's... I try but I can't..." She blows out a long breath toward the ceiling, keeping her eyes averted. "Get there."

"Well, good thing I'm here." I set the little box down on the end of the bed, reaching up and taking my hat off, putting it on the floor. "You know the law enforcement motto. Protect and serve."

"Colt—"

"Uh-uh." I cover her hand with mine. "Daddy. I'm going to help. You lay back. Move your fingers, show me what feels good, I'll just...help things along."

She settles, her wet warmth tickling at the sides of my fingers where they mirror hers.

She works her clit, soft, then down, and back, down and back.

"It's..." She groans but not in an edge-of-pleasure sort of way. "Just forget it."

"No fucking way," I bark back, applying pressure to the backs of her fingers with my own. "Try this."

I guide her back to her hard little stubborn nub. "Eyes on me."

I work her fingers with mine, harder than she did, faster, then slower, watching her

body, feeling her shift and melt. Her lids flutter, once. Twice.

More pressure, more sounds of that glorious wetness, that fucking scent.

“Daddy thinks you’re the prettiest good girl he’s ever seen.”

More wetness.

Now we’re talking.

I mesh my fingers with hers now, so her silky wetness seeps between our digits as I stroke up and down, then work that clit like it needs.

Hard. Grinding it. “You like being on display for me, don’t you?”

She answers with a little chirp as she starts to move her fingers faster under mine. Finding that spot, that sensation.

“There we go. Put Daddy’s fingers where they feel good, baby. Don’t be ashamed. I love watching you.”

A moan. I keep her eyes on mine, my dick ready to snap in two, but I don’t stop. Don’t break our eye contact.

“Oh God.” She starts to twitch, fingers twined together, working a little, demanding circle.

“Right there? I’ll remember that special spot for next time. It will be Daddy’s lips down here, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? To know how that feels...”

That’s it.

Her orgasm hits. It's not a twisting, bucking, life changing cataclysmic one, but I'll take it. For now.

I open the box, swipe frosting onto my fingers, and press them to her lips.

She licks them clean, dazed.

"I brought you a cupcake," I say as her focus returns.

"From that bakery that's always sold out by the time I get there?"

I nod. "Don't worry, baby, I'll hook you up. I got connections in this town."

I stand up, lean over and kiss her temple.

"I could stay," I whisper. "But if I do, I won't stop. And you're worth waiting for."

All of that is true, but there's something else. I want her trust. I want her to realize her pussy is a masterpiece and I can't wait to hang my hat there for the rest of my life, so to speak, but she's so much more.

I want it all with this fucking girl, but I need her to understand that. Down to her marrow. I'm not here for a fuck, I'm here for a life. I'll know when she's ready. Until then, it's blue balls and frustration for this cowboy.

"Now, be a good girl and lock the fucking door behind me. I'll see you tomorrow."

"It's broken..." I hear her say, and my phone is already in my hand, calling in a favor.

"What's up, Sheriff?" Jimmy Burns the locksmith in town answers.

“I need the best digital, wifi, blue tooth whatever locks you got. Installed, first thing in the morning...”

“Sure, chief, you’re putting locks on the cabin?”

“No, somewhere else, I’ll text you the address.”

I leave. Because Daddies are patient.

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Six

Colt

I 've been watching her for three hours.

From my truck across from Logan's office, I've had a perfect line of sight. Watched her arrive this morning, pour coffee, add that oat milk she drinks. Watched her help Mrs. Patterson sort out her meds. Watched her laugh once, at something Logan said.

Now I'm tracking her afternoon rounds through binoculars. Totally normal sheriff behavior. Nothing psychotic about a little tactical observation of the woman you're planning to marry.

"Jesus Christ, Colt." A voice vibrates through the passenger window where my brother Cade's stupid smiling face is staring at me.

He taps on the passenger window. I'm so distracted, I didn't see his creeping ass sneaking up on me. I hit the button and roll the window down against my better judgment

"You stalking someone or casing the place?"

"Working," I grunt.

"That what we're calling it?" He slides into the passenger seat without asking. "The pretty nurse got you acting like a damn teenager."

“Medical assistant.”

“Right. That makes this completely rational.” He steals my binoculars and peers toward Wildfire Home Health. “Which one is she again?”

I snatch them back. “Get out of my truck.”

“You’re fully gone,” Cade says, kicking his boots up on my dash like he’s staying. “You bringing her to Sunday brunch, or just gonna lurk until she files a restraining order?”

“Get your fucking dirty ass boots off my dash.” I reach over and shove his legs down.

It’s my brother Beau’s turn to host Sunday brunch this week, but the image of Emery at the kitchen table nearly knocks the breath out of me.

I picture her next to me, smiling at my brothers, nodding along like she belongs.

And she does. She would. She belongs next to me for the rest of my life.

“Haven’t asked her yet.”

Cade raises a brow. “Haven’t asked or haven’t worked up the balls?”

I give him a look that he should know. Brothers understand when they are about to get a right hook to the chin. Cade just grins like a dumbass.

“My money’s on balls. Speaking of which, how’s your ass? You gonna be able to sit through waffles on one cheek, or you healed up enough for full-seated syrup and moose jerky consumption?”

“I’m going to shoot you next.”

“Hard to be scary when your last bullet wound was self-inflicted to the backside.” He checks his watch. “Storm’s coming in tonight. Big one. Wrap up your stakeout before it floods the damn road.”

An hour later, I’m in my office, zero chill and zero focus as fat raindrops start to hit the window behind my desk. I stare out at darkening clouds wondering where she is.

Cade was right, like he always is about these things. I swear my brother has some sort of sixth sense when it comes to the fucking weather.

After I kicked him out of my truck, I had a little fucking conversation with myself. Told myself that she was fine, that Logan is a good guy and I don’t need to watch her every second of every day.

Yeah, fucking bullshit. All I’ve done since I got back to the office is pace, the stack of paperwork piling up on my desk not getting any smaller.

My phone buzzes, and I snatch it up like it’s an Olympic sport, knowing who’s on the other end without having to glance at the screen as I hit accept and slam it to my ear.

“This is Colt.”

Her voice is soft. “I know you said I didn’t have to come up today, but the weather’s turning and I got an order from the doctor he wants the wound checked one more time. I thought I should do it sooner rather than later.”

Every logical part of me says I should tell her no. Stay home. Stay safe. Stay the hell away before I do something I can’t take back.

I have to tell her about the fire. Who I am. But the thought of seeing that look on her face I know will come when she realizes I'm the one that didn't save her best friend that night...

Fuck. I knock the side of my fist into my forehead, then swallow, staring at that damn flickering florescent light above my desk that still needs fixed.

This is not me. This is why I don't get attached. So fucking complicated.

"The roads are already getting slick," I choke out. "My ass is fine."

There's a beat of silence and I can almost see her cute smile, how she's rolling her eyes.

"I won't debate you on that." She says. "But..." She snickers.

"Emery—"

"I'm already driving. I just turned on Hogback Trail." She pauses for a beat. "Unless you are at the station? I could come there, I guess I should have asked..."

Of course she is. Of course she's driving up a mountain in the middle of a storm to take care of me.

No fucking way do I want her coming here to look at my butt. I'll never hear the end of it.

"Fine," I snap. "But keep me on speaker the whole drive. Non-negotiable."

"Colt, that's not necessary."

“Speakerphone, baby girl. Now.”

She sighs, and I hear the click. “Okay. So bossy.”

“Good. Talk to me while you drive.”

I bolt out of my office. Gertrude, the department’s eighty-year-old admin assistant, waves as I go by, not bothering to look up from her worn Harlequin novel with a bare-chested pirate on the cover and a woman with her tits basically falling out of her corset.

I push the button on the ignition, pulling out of my parking spot, maneuvering around slower traffic considering pulling out the single magnetic spinning light I have in my console and popping it on the roof of the truck.

Instead, I just ignore the speed limits, careful to get through town before I push the speedometer to ninety, only letting up when I see the flicker of her tail lights ahead.

Even the sight of her car makes my dick hard.

I pepper her with general questions and she asks me about being a Sheriff and my brothers. I ask about her family, she doesn’t give me much, but I pick up that her parents sound like assholes and that I need to meet her grandparents and thank them for helping her settle back in at Wildfire.

She doesn’t give up too much detail about what brought her back, but I let it go because truth is, I want to avoid any conversation that would force me to lie to her about who I am and what I already know.

Law enforcement allows you the privilege of doing some thorough background checks. She’s got some secrets of her own, but I want her to trust me enough to share

them, in her own time. Once she does, I'll know I'm doing something right for once.

"Colt? I think someone might be following me. There's been a truck behind me for a while."

"Yeah. I know."

Pause. "What do you mean, you know?"

"I mean it's me, baby girl."

"You're following me?"

"I'm escorting you. There's a difference."

"Like a good and proper stalker should."

"What? You think I'd let you drive up a mountain in a storm by yourself? Not happening."

"You could have just told me you were in town. I would have come to the station. I told you I would."

"I like seeing you in my house. Besides, too many eyes and wagging tongues at the station. One thing most people don't know about law enforcement, they love gossip almost as much as they love coffee."

The soft snicker that comes through the speaker squeezes around my heart.

"Now, just pay attention, I'll be right here."

By the time she pulls into my driveway, the rain's coming in sideways and the trees are bending like they're ready to snap. I'm out of my truck and on her before she even kills the engine.

She bolts for the steps, but she's soaked through before she even makes it halfway. I grab her around the waist and haul her under the overhang.

"Jesus, baby girl." She's trembling, jacket plastered to her body. "That got bad fast."

I drag her inside, grab a towel from the hook, and wrap it around her shoulders. She's shaking like a leaf, water dripping off her lashes. Her wet clothes cling to every soft curve, every inch of her that I've been trying so damn hard not to touch.

"You're not driving back down tonight." My dick clearly takes control, sick and tired of my cock blocking him from the one girl that's put him on high alert in years.

Her head jerks up. "What?"

"Look outside. The road'll be a washout within an hour."

She stares at the window like she's trying to find a reason to argue. Trees are bent horizontal. Rain's smacking the glass hard enough to rattle it.

"I can't stay here." She shakes her head, her hair falling out of that crazy bun on top of her head, framing the face I want to decorate with my cum.

"Why not?"

"I just... I don't have anything with me. No clothes, no—"

"I've got clothes. One bed, but I'll take the couch."

Her cheeks flush. “Colt—”

“Not a request, baby girl. You’re staying.”

Thunder crashes overhead, so loud she jumps.

“Hey.” I close the space between us, steadying her. “Just noise.”

“I know.” Her voice is soft. “Storms make me nervous.”

It’s more than that. I can see it in her eyes. In the way her arms are wrapped around herself, tight like she’s holding something in.

I don’t push.

“Come on. Let’s get you warm.”

I lead her to the couch and wrap her in about ten blankets then step over to stoke the fire. Outside, the storm whips up a frenzy matching the one she’s whipping up down in my crotch. Inside, she’s a soft bundle of limbs and wool, curled into my couch like she belongs there.

“Better?” I ask.

She nods, peeking out from under the blankets. “Thank you.”

Another solid clap of thunder cracks overhead, and she flinches again. This time, I don’t wait. I lower onto the couch next to her, tugging her into my chest, looping an arm across her middle, the other across her chest.

“I’ve got you,” I breathe with my lips near her ear. “You’re safe with Daddy.”

She sighs and sinks into me and the relief I feel in her body gives me a satisfaction I haven't felt in so long.

When's the last time I wanted to do this? Just sit here and let a woman feel safe just by being held, breathing the same air.

Never, if I'm being honest.

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There've been women, yeah. Not nearly as many as town gossip would like to think.

I'm known as the player of the Boone brothers and I never fought the title.

I didn't really earn it either, but one thing you learn growing up in small towns, people talk shit.

Mostly made-up shit just to pass the time.

Wildfire is no different.

"Colt?" Her voice is barely there.

"Yeah, baby girl?"

"What did you mean when you said I'm safe with Daddy?"

I go still.

Because answering means trying to figure it out for myself.

"It means I take care of everything," I push my mouth against her damp hair.

"You don't have to worry about a damn thing.

You get to be soft. You get to rest. Chase your dreams. Have fun.

Know that someone always, fucking always has your back.

And I'll protect you from everything. Even yourself, if I have to. "

She's quiet for a beat.

"That's... a lot."

"That's nothing, baby girl." I cup her face gently, brushing my thumb across her cheek.

"That's just the beginning. You're a fucking firecracker, babe, don't get me wrong, I want to do all those things for you, but I also want to do other things.

Pure filth and fucking fantasy, but I want to start here.

Where we are. I want you to trust me. I don't remember ever wanting that before. "

Her breath stutters. She twists her body, turning her face my way, plump pink lips falling apart.

"Colt..."

Jesus, the way she says my name like she needs something from me is all I need to break this stupid shackle I've been keeping around myself for so fucking long.

I manhandle her soft body until she's turned my way.

I kiss her.

It's lips on lips first. Soft and hard. Patient but urgent.

I'm giving her time to run. But she doesn't. She leans into me like she's been waiting, and the second her mouth opens, inviting me in, I lose any hope of pretending I can let her go.

Jesus, the sound she makes as my tongue slides between her lips rattles me down to the core. I deepen the kiss, tongues working in slow rhythm, swallowing every soft gasp and whimper.

She tastes like coffee and sweetness and everything I've ever wanted.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard. Her cheeks are flushed, lips glistening and plump, and she's looking at me like I hung the fucking moon.

"Bedroom," I growl against her mouth. "Now."

She doesn't argue. We practically run like two teenagers out of the little living room, me dragging her by the hand, blankets falling on the floor with her giggling and bouncing, making every fucking dirty dream I have already come true.

I lay her out on my bed with one swift lift and toss, tugging her hair out of the loose bun on her head and smoothing it across my pillow.

She's still in her damp clothes, and I can see her nipples hard against the thin fabric.

Every generous curve, every soft line of her body calls to something primal in me.

"Look at you," I tell her, running my hands down her sides, following every dip and swell. "So fucking beautiful. I'm gonna enjoy every inch."

She arches into my touch, and the movement makes her shirt ride up, exposing her soft belly that I want to mark with my teeth.

"Take this off for me, baby girl," I say, tugging at her shirt.

She sits up and pulls it over her head, and the sight of her in just that bra that is damn near an exact match of my eye color makes my vision go hazy.

She's got those full, mother earth sort of breasts spilling over pale blue lace, nipples poking through the fabric making me salivate.

The soft roll of her belly, the way her hips flare out, is like a teenage fever dream.

She's fucking gorgeous and even if she doesn't know it yet, she's all fucking mine.

"Christ. Perfect." I lean down and press my face between her breasts, breathing her in. "Look at these tits, baby girl. So many things I want to do right fucking here..." My hand spans across her stomach, fingers spreading wide. "I'm going to map every inch of you."

"There's a lot of inches. I hope you have time—" There's laughter in her voice, but it breaks off in a gasp when I take hold of her nipple through the lace.

I work my hands around her back, fingers working at the hooks of her bra, making me growl when they fight back.

"Been awhile since you unhooked a girl's bra?" She giggles into my shoulder, lifting her chest as I lick her cleavage.

"You busting my balls? You thought I was some smooth sailor, all expert fingers and gigolo moves?"

"Well, I don't think I'd want to bust your balls, that sounds painful, and you have enough issues going on down there right now."

“Brat.” I nip at the soft flesh, finally releasing the last little hook and tug that bad boy off, holding it up and pulling a strap tight on my index finger, my other hand drawing back the elastic, then sling-shotting it across the room.

“If I had my way, no more bras. I want to see those babies all loose and free.”

She laughs, and it makes my heart fucking sing as I look at her tits, Jesus, they are life giving, falling down her chest, curving slightly off to the sides.

“I’m not sure Wildfire is ready for me to go braless on Main Street.”

“Fuck Wildfire,” I mumble, my mouth full of one of her broad, wide nipples, my dick weeping in my boxers at the thought of how these tits will feel when I’m fucking them.

She's arching and gasping and making these little sounds that make me feel like a king.

"Please," she whispers, and I don't think she even knows what she's asking for.

But I do.

"Please what, baby girl? Use your words for Daddy."

"I... I don't know. I just need..."

"I know what you need." I work my way down her body, pressing kisses to her ribs, her belly, the sensitive spot just above her hip bone. "Daddy's going to take care of you."

When I reach the waistband of her leggings, I look up at her. "These come off too."

She lifts her hips, and I peel them down her legs along with her panties. And then she's naked in my bed, all soft curves and flushed skin, and I think I might actually die from wanting her.

I take a moment just to look. The generous swell of her hips, the soft thickness of her thighs, the way her breasts fall naturally against her chest. Every curve, every soft line, every inch of her lush body is absolute perfection.

"Fuck me," I breathe. "Look at you. All this softness, all these curves. You're a goddamn goddess, baby girl."

"Colt—"

"I'm fucking serious. Now, spread your legs for me. Let Daddy see what's his."

A flicker of hesitation. I press into her thighs, coaxing them apart.

The creamy flesh with a dance of curls at the top and the peek of her pink wetness steals my breath.

I've always been in control, or so I thought.

The fire reminded me of how fleeting that is.

Still, I held onto that belief, thinking if I could just control everything around me...

what? I'd be safe? I could keep everyone else safe?

I'm not sure, but looking at Emery now, open and so fucking beautiful, there is no more control. She's taken it from me.

“Once I taste this, no one else will.” I widen her legs, holding them steady, wanting to feel her tremble. “Understand?”

She nods, and the sight of her makes me groan. The soft thickness of her thighs framing her pussy, the way her belly curves above where I'm about to feast. Pure fucking perfection.

I lower my mouth to her, devouring the sweetness, inhaling the scent of her. I don't ease in—my tongue slides up the length of her, pressing against her clit, demanding a response.

Running my hands over the soft skin. These thick thighs, this perfect pussy...

“I could live between your legs.” I mumble against her wetness, breathing deep, wanting her down deep inside me forever.

Her hips buck off the bed as I slide the flat of my tongue up and down. I hold her down with one hand on her belly and feast on her like a man starved.

"That's it," I murmur against her. "Let Daddy hear you. Let me know how good I'm making you feel."

She tastes even better than I imagined. Sweet and musky and addictive. I could spend hours between her legs, making her fall apart with my mouth, listening to her gasp my name.

Her thighs clamp down, trying to close around my head. I hold them wide. “What is... oh, please, please. Keep going, Daddy.”

"Good girl," I growl, sucking her clit between my lips. "Come for Daddy. Give me everything.”

“I’ve never—” She stalls, “God, I’ve never—”

I stop, looking up, her eyes are half lidded, but there’s something there, in the lust, something she needs to say.

“Never what, baby. You can tell me anything, especially when I’m between your legs.”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“I’ve got your pussy juice on my face, you have your legs spread open for me lying on my bed where no other woman has ever been, you don’t need to be embarrassed about anything, spit it out or I won’t lick this pretty little pussy anymore until you tell me.”

My cock is hard as a steel spike and throbbing. I shift against the mattress, grinding down for some friction.

“What if I can’t...like, come. I told you the other day, that was my first orgasm.

I honestly think I’m broken, it’s so hard for me.

I just sort of gave up trying. I don’t want you to feel...

like it’s not fun for me or you’re not good at it if I don’t—” She twists her face, eyes shut then finishes, “Make me come.”

Jesus. This girl.

“Baby.” LICK. “You.” LICK. “Are.” LICK. “Delicious.”

I reach up and roll her nipple between my fingers.

“Stop trying to come. You’re thinking too fucking much.

In fact, I order you right fucking now, just lay there, don’t think, keep these legs open, and understand having my mouth on your pussy is about the closest to heaven I’ll ever get.

So, let me lick and suck and play down here like you’re my own personal pink, wet playground.

What happens, happens, my ego is not your problem. ”

My hand leaves her tit to circle her entrance, collecting the warmth, sliding fingers inside, stretching her tight. Her sex gives a soft squelch.

“Your cunt is happy, orgasm or not, soaking wet and begging for more of Daddy’s tongue.” I growl, licking the sensitive skin above her clit while my fingers pump in and out, nice and tight. “Didn’t even know your cunt could get so wet, did you?”

She answers with a warm gush, soaking my hand and my lips.

“Just let it feel good, baby. That’s all you need to do.”

I take my time. Soft, then harder, nipping, listening to her breathing, the way her body tenses then relaxes, she’s telling me everything I need to know, and my mouth is speaking her language.

When I feel the tension in her thighs melt away, I go hard.

It’s all clit now, I give it a hero’s effort, whipping my tongue around in circles, then

back and forth, up and down until it damn near gets a Charlie horse, but she's moving with me now, a hand slaps on top of my head, fingers tugging my hair.

She throws her arm over her face her little whimpering cries softening. "I... Colt—"

She doesn't need to finish. Her body tells me everything. Hips twisting, fingers clawing, her hole clenching around my fingers. Then her back arches, a sharp cry escaping her lips and all that warm sweetness floods my tongue.

Her orgasm is a revelation, and I lap at it while my balls tighten dangerously close to exploding. "Yes, little girl," I vibrate against her. "Call me Daddy when I'm licking your pussy."

"Daddy." She crumbles in a convulsion mixed with a sob. She's letting it all go, and I'm here for it. Fucking honored, if I'm being honest. My chest puffs up like she's just put the gold fucking medal around my neck.

"Such a good girl," I lick my way up her quivering belly. "So perfect for me."

Skin flushed, eyes glazed, hair spread across my pillow like my own personal porn channel.

"You're still dressed," she says, a little desperation in her eyes, reaching for my shirt with shaking hands.

I catch her wrists, pinning them above her head with one of mine. The sight of her spread out beneath me, naked and flushed and mine, makes something feral claw at my insides.

I'm never fucking letting her go. I already know I love this girl.

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Seven

Emery

"My turn," I whisper, reaching for his belt.

"Baby girl—"

"Please, Daddy. Let me touch you."

Something breaks in his expression, and he stands, letting me work his jeans open with trembling fingers. When I finally free him, he's thick and hard and absolutely perfect.

"Fuck," he breathes when I wrap my hand around him. "Just like that."

I stroke him slowly, learning what makes him groan, what makes his hips buck into my touch. When I lean forward and take him into my mouth, he nearly comes undone.

"Christ, your mouth," he growls, one hand tangling in my hair. "So good, baby girl. So fucking perfect."

I work him with my tongue and lips until he's panting my name.

"Jesus," he gasps, pulling me up for a deep kiss. "You're going to be the death of me."

“More,” I moan against his lips, the flavor of his precum on my breath as I feel his fingers twist into my hair, pushing me down to my knees. I open wide, and he thrusts between my lips.

My teeth scrape down his shaft as I swallow his colossal cock to the back of my throat. His thick head hits my tonsils, sparking a choke reflex I swallow into a wet gasp.

This dick’s a mountain I’m climbing blindfolded, a grueling hike with no trail map. Every inch is foreign terrain: veined, humid and hot as magma. My jaw trembles, but I grip harder with lips and fingers circling his girth, determined to conquer this beast before he breaks me.

His groans fuel my desperation. My fingers dig into his ass cheeks to steady myself, pulling him deeper while my tongue spirals around the crown. It’s so perfect being here like this, his sweat slicking my hands, his scent overwhelming my senses.

I’m a novice drowning in his expertise.

“Christ,” he rasps, fingers coiling in my hair like anchor chains. “Suck harder.”

I obey, teeth grazing sensitive nerves until he bucks against my throat.

His hips piston faster now, each thrust forcing me to brace or drown.

My pussy clenches with every plunge, juices soaking my thighs as I suck him raw, my free fingers finding their own way down between my legs, rubbing myself desperately in a search for relief.

“Look at you,” he growls, watching me through half-lidded eyes that blaze hotter than his flesh. “Fucking worshiping this cock like it’s your altar.”

His words fuel my greed. I take him deeper until stars burst behind my eyelids, knees buckling under the strain.

His cum floods my mouth. Thick and salty it spills from the corners of my lips as I swallow hard, not wanting to waste a drop.

His hips stutter against me as he grinds out every drop, filling my throat with primal heat.

When his knees finally start to buckle, he hauls me up by my waist, sweat-slicked bodies colliding. “Good girl,” he says, eyes tracing my face. “You swallowed it all.”

A defiant smirk plays on my lips as I swipe a drop from my chin, popping it into my mouth. “Is there more for dessert, Daddy?”

“Fuck,” he mutters, and I smile as he pulls me against him, settling my head on his chest, his hand absently stroking my hair. “Serious question, babygirl. I need an honest answer. Am I your first?”

I hesitate, just for a moment. But a serious question demands a serious answer. “No. I wish you were. I’ve made mistakes, and that’s one of them.”

He nods silently, and I know he wishes it was different. So do I. But I can’t change the past.

“I’m sorry.” I wish I knew what else I could say to make it right. “Do you hate me?”

“What? No, baby. How could I ever?” He continues stroking my hair, and it feels so good I never want it to end. “When was the last time you had sex?”

“Um... Prom night? The only time, not just the last time. I knew it was a mistake

before it was over, but it was too late to stop it.”

“If I’d been there, I would have stopped it.”

I smile. “I know you would have, Daddy. And I would have thanked you for it.” I breathe in his scent, all masculine and sweat-soaked, the flavor mixing with the lingering taste of his cum. “And you? When was the last time you had sex?”

“I’m not a monk,” he says, “I’ve had my moments. But not for five years, not since... Something bad happened, and I lost myself. The idea of chasing women never much appealed to me in the first place, and after that it soured that part of me.”

“What happened?”

He sighs. “Another time, baby. That story is for another time.”

“Do you want to keep going?”

“Are you kidding me? I want to fuck you right through that wall.” I giggle as he presses his lips to my head. “But tonight, I want...”

I turn my head up to meet his eyes as he hesitates, and I can’t believe this big, strong, wonderful man actually wants little crazy me in his life. “You want me to suck your dick again, Daddy?”

He chuckles. “Yes, but for right now can I just sleep with you next to me? Wrapped in my arms? I’ve never done that, just slept with a woman all night, held her and woken with her beside me.”

“Me neither,” I whisper, my heart fluttering. “A man, I mean. I’ve never slept in a bed with a man.”

“Then that’s settled.” He puts his lips to my head again, then steps away. “I’ll fetch oat milk and cookies. You settle yourself in bed.”

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Eight

Emery

I wake up wrapped in warmth and the scent of pine and man.

For a moment, I don't remember where I am. Then Colt's arm tightens around me, pulling me closer against his chest, and everything comes flooding back. The storm. His mouth on me. The way he made me fall apart while staying completely in control.

The way he called himself Daddy and made it sound like a promise.

I should be embarrassed. Instead, I feel claimed. Cherished. Like I've been marked in some fundamental way that has nothing to do with the physical and everything to do with the way he looked at me.

Like I belonged to him.

"Morning, baby girl."

His voice is rough with sleep, rumbling through his chest where my cheek is pressed. I tilt my head up to look at him, and those pale blue eyes are already focused on me with laser intensity.

"Hi," I whisper.

"Sleep okay?"

"Better than I have in months." Usually I wake up three or four times a night, but wrapped in Colt's arms, I slept like the dead.

"Good girl." He presses a kiss to the top of my head, his hand spanning my back. "You sore?"

A massive hand caresses down my side, ending up between my legs with a soft pat.

"Yes. Like a reminder, but not enough to need medical care."

His chest lifts with a low chuckle. "I'll have to try harder next time."

My turn to chuckle. "I don't think harder is your problem."

"Not with you around, babe." He kisses the top of my head. "Storm's over. But you're not going anywhere yet."

"I have clients today," I answer, making a little circle with my fingers on the broken heart tattoo.

"It's early. I'll make sure you get to town on time." His hand slides down my spine. "Right now, Daddy's going to feed you."

Feed me. Not cook breakfast or grab a bite. Feed me.

"I can make something," I offer.

"No." The word comes out firm. "You don't cook in my house, baby girl. That's my job."

Before I can argue, he's sliding out of bed and padding to the dresser. He pulls out a flannel shirt and tosses it to me.

"Put this on. Nothing underneath."

I slip into it, and it falls to mid-thigh, the sleeves hanging past my fingertips. The soft fabric brushes against my bare skin, and I catch him watching the way it drapes over my curves with hungry eyes.

In the kitchen, he moves with easy efficiency, wearing just a pair of those plaid lumberboxers, the outline of his hard cock keeping a smile permanently plastered on my face.

He starts to pull ingredients from the refrigerator. I perch on a stool at the counter, hyperaware of how the shirt rides up my thighs, watching his hands as he works, the smell of fresh coffee already assailing my nose as he grabs two cups.

Not mugs. Cups. Actual china cups.

"Coffee?" he asks, barely turning his head.

"Yes, but—" I'm about to tell him about my dairy allergy when he pulls the carton from the fridge. "You drink vanilla oat milk?"

"Nope. You do, though."

He pours the drinks and sets one in front of me, and I can't help the frown on my face.

"You know," I say, taking a sip of the coffee, "most people don't stock up on oat milk they don't even drink."

"Most people don't plan ahead."

"Is that what this is? Planning ahead?"

He looks up from the stove, something almost vulnerable in his expression. "Hoping ahead, maybe."

My chest tightens with something that feels dangerously close to love.

My phone buzzes on the counter, I note the time is 7:15 and I reach for it as Logan's name flashes on the screen.

"I should probably—"

But before I can finish, Colt's hand covers mine, plucking the phone away.

"Logan?" he asks, reading the screen.

"He's probably worried about the storm. I usually check in after a call in the evening."

Colt's thumb slides across the screen, tapping the speaker.

"Girl—" Logan's voice starts, but Colt cuts him off.

"Sheriff Boone here. She's busy. I'll be sure she's at work on time." He hangs up.

"No more calls from other men when you're in Daddy's house."

"That was rude."

"That was a rule." He sets the phone on the high shelf above the refrigerator, well out of my reach. "I don't like sharing your attention."

The red flag possessiveness should probably annoy me. Instead, it sends a round of warm wetness down into my already sore and battered pleasure zone.

"You can't just take my phone." I screw up my face as she shrugs.

"I can do whatever I want." He turns back to the stove, flipping eggs with practiced ease.

"You're in my house, wearing my shirt with nothing underneath, still tasting like me.

Your pussy took me like a champ last night.

You screamed my name like you wanted the entire population of Wildfire to know you were getting good and properly fucked by the town sheriff. Pretty sure that makes you mine."

"Colt," I blow out a raspberry, squeezing my legs together, "cavemen are out, you know. Women want a man that is considerate of their feelings, treats them with respect and as an equal."

"Yep. I agree. I'm not for everyone, but that doesn't matter. I'm for you. That's all that matters, now, eat." He slides a plate in front of me loaded with eggs, bacon, and toast cut into triangles. "All of it."

"My allergies—"

"Dairy free butter alternative. Pure olive oil. Any other allergies I should know about?"

"No." I shake my head.

“Good. Then do as Daddy says.”

I should argue. But the food smells amazing, and there’s something about his bossy but caring manner that hits me in a secret spot I didn’t now I had.

I want some of this. The way he takes away some of the choices, simplifies things, makes some of the noise in my head go quiet.

And there's something about the way he's watching me, like my eating matters to him personally, that makes me want to please him.

So I eat. And he watches every bite, chomping on toast, sipping his coffee, shirtless, nodding approval when I clean my plate.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and the praise makes my heart flutter and a warm comfort settle over me like a security blanket.

After breakfast, we settle on the couch. The storm has mostly passed, which means eventually I'll have to leave this warm bubble we've created.

The thought makes my chest ache.

"What are you thinking about?" Colt asks, pulling me into his lap. His hands settle on my hips, thumbs stroking the soft skin just under the hem of his shirt.

"Nothing important."

"Don't lie to me." His hand cups my face, thumb stroking across my cheek. "Tell Daddy what's bothering you."

"I don't want this to end," I admit.

"Who says it has to?"

"Reality? I have a job, a life—"

"You have a life here." His arms tighten around me. "With me."

"It's been two days, Colt."

"So?"

"So normal people don't make life decisions based on two days."

"Normal people don't feel like this." His hand slides into my hair, tilting my head back. "Normal people don't look at someone and know they're meant to be theirs."

My breath catches. "Is that what you think? That I'm meant to be yours?"

"I don't think it, baby girl. I know it."

Before I can respond, he's kissing me again, slow and deep and claiming. When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"I need to call Logan back," I say weakly.

"No."

"Colt—"

"He can wait." His mouth moves to my neck, finding that sensitive spot that makes me gasp. "Right now you're exactly where you need to be. Where Daddy wants you."

His hands slide under the flannel shirt, fingers tracing up my thighs, and I forget how to breathe.

"Spread your legs for me, baby girl."

I do, and he groans when he finds me already wet for him.

"Christ, look at you. So ready for Daddy." His fingers slide through my slickness, circling my clit with just enough pressure to make me whimper. "I'm going to make you come again. Right here on my couch, wearing nothing but my shirt."

"Colt, please—"

"Please what?" He slides one thick finger inside me, and my back arches off the couch. "Tell Daddy what you need."

"More," I gasp. "Please, more."

He adds another finger, stretching me, his thumb working my clit in slow circles that have me panting his name.

"That's it, baby girl. Let me hear you. Let me know how good Daddy makes you feel."

I'm already close, wound tight from his touch and the way he's looking at me like I'm everything he's ever wanted.

"Come for me," he growls, curling his fingers inside me. "Come all over Daddy's hand."

I shatter, crying out his name as pleasure crashes through me. He works me through

it, murmuring praise against my neck until I'm boneless and shaking in his arms.

"Such a good girl," he whispers, pressing soft kisses to my throat. "So perfect for me."

"I have to go," I moan.

"Actually," he growls, stepping between my thighs, "I think I'll have dessert first."

Before I can respond, he's pushing the shirt up and dropping to his knees. His tongue finds my still-sensitive clit, and I cry out, my hands fisting in his hair.

"Colt, I can't—I just—"

"You can." His voice is muffled against me, vibrating through my core. "Give Daddy another one, baby girl. I want to taste you again."

He works me with his mouth and fingers until I'm sobbing his name, coming apart on his kitchen counter while he holds my thighs open and devours me like a man starved.

When I finally come down, he's looking up at me with such hunger that it steals my breath.

Every touch sends sparks through me, and by the time we're done eating, I'm squirming against him.

But then, in the quiet moment after, reality starts creeping in.

What am I doing? I have a three-year-old son at home. I made myself a promise after Legend's father—no men, no relationships, not until Legend was older and could

understand. Not until I was sure someone wouldn't just walk away when things got complicated.

And Colt... God, when I asked about kids, he said "hell no" like the idea was repulsive. What kind of mother am I, getting involved with someone who clearly doesn't want children? Legend is my whole world. He has to come first.

But then Colt's hand trails up my spine, and his voice is soft against my ear. "What's going on in that head of yours, baby girl?"

I look up at him—this big, protective man who carried me up his steps in the rain, who makes me coffee exactly how I like it, who holds me like I'm precious. The same man who leaves emergency supplies in my car and insists on following me home.

"Just thinking," I whisper.

Maybe I misunderstood what he meant about kids. Maybe "hell no" meant not with anyone else, not no way ever. And maybe... maybe Legend needs this too. Needs to see what it looks like when a man takes care of someone. Needs a strong male figure who won't disappear.

Besides, this is just physical, right? Just this overwhelming need between us. It doesn't have to mean anything more.

"Needy little thing," he murmurs against my ear. "Can't get enough of Daddy, can you?"

And just like that, rational thought disappears under a wave of pure want.

Damn it, I'm a woman with needs. I haven't had sex in almost four years—not since Legend's father. Four years of being nothing but "Mama," of putting every desire on

the back burner, of telling myself I didn't need anyone.

But I do need this. Need him. My body is screaming for his touch, and I'm so tired of being responsible all the time. So tired of denying myself everything.

This doesn't have to be forever. It can just be... this. A fling. A few stolen moments where I get to be Emery instead of just Legend's mom. Where I get to feel wanted and desired and completely claimed.

My hormones have officially hijacked my brain, and for once in my life, I don't care.

"No," I admit breathlessly. "I can't."

"Good." His hand slides up my thigh, fingers finding me wet and ready again. "Because I'm nowhere near done with you."

This time he takes me right there in the kitchen chair, his fingers working magic while I ride his hand and fall apart in his arms over and over again until I'm sobbing with pleasure.

By the time we're finally sated, it's past eight in the morning and the storm has completely cleared. I'm thoroughly wrecked and wearing nothing but his flannel. My body feels like liquid, every nerve ending singing with satisfaction.

"I should go," I say reluctantly, checking the time on the phone he finally returns to me. "I have patients scheduled, and you probably need to get to the station."

"Probably," he agrees, but his hands don't stop their lazy exploration of my thighs. "Sheriff duties and all that."

"Colt—"

"I know." He sighs and finally pulls away. "Real world's calling."

Twenty minutes later, I'm dressed and walking to my car on shaky legs, hyperaware of the way he's watching me from his porch. When I slide behind the wheel, he's already heading to his truck.

"Where are you going?" I call out.

"Following you down. Storm like that, there could be washouts, trees across the road." He gives me a look like I should have known better than to ask. "You don't drive these mountain roads alone after weather like that."

Of course he's going to escort me. Again.

The drive down is careful and cautious, his headlights steady in my rearview mirror. True to his prediction, we have to navigate around two small rockslides and a fallen branch, but his truck easily pushes through what my car couldn't handle.

When we reach the main road, he pulls up beside me and rolls down his window.

"Call me when you get to the office," he says.

"You just watched me drive the dangerous part."

"Call me anyway." He leans out and motions me closer until he can kiss me through our windows, slow and possessive. "And baby girl? I'll pick you up at six. We're going back up tonight."

It's not a question.

I drive to work with his taste still on my lips and the absolute certainty that I'm

already in way over my head. But for the first time in years, I can't bring myself to care.

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Nine

Emery

"Y ou're glowing."

Logan's voice cuts through the cloud of lusty distraction that's been hovering over me since sunrise.

I'm knee-deep in the third reorganization of the supply closet, and I still haven't found inner peace or whatever the hell I'm looking for in these damn bandages.

Mostly, I keep seeing Colt's hands. His dick.

God, his dick was...gah, beautiful. Dangerous. Chef's kiss.

"I'm not glowing," I lie, like a liar who is absolutely glowing.

"Honey, you're practically radioactive. And you've been humming that Ed Sheeran song for half an hour."

Logan leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, smugness leaking from every pore.

"So. That storm. How'd it go?"

My neck starts heating like a stovetop. "It was fine. No problems."

"Mmmhmm. And where'd you weather said storm?"

“Logan—”

“Because your car? Not in your driveway when I did my definitely-not-creepy morning wellness check.”

“Wait, you drove by my house ?”

“Don’t change the subject, Emery Rose.” Full name. Oh, he’s serious now. “Where. Did. You. Sleep?”

He’s relentless, so I give him the partial truth. “Colt’s cabin. Roads were dangerous.”

“And?”

“And what?” My cheeks are basically infernos now.

“And did the grumpy, hotter than Hades’ left nut sheriff finally make his move?”

My silence is apparently a full confession, because Logan lights up like a kid on Christmas morning, if that kid was extremely nosy and emotionally invested in my sex life.

“Oh my God. He did. You slept with him. ”

I feel the blush spread over my cheeks before I can turn away to hide it, remembering how good it was to just sleep with a man for the first time in my life. And how Colt wanted just that. It honestly was perfection.

Logan slow claps with a full tooth smile. “Girl, you look like you got thoroughly ransacked and possibly eaten like a midnight snack. In the good way.”

“Logan!”

“What? I'm thrilled. About damn time someone reminded you you're a woman and not just Legend's mom.”

Cue stomach punch. Guilt crashes in like a wave.

I'd been so caught up in the Colt vortex of hands, dirty talk, and that scowl that somehow counts as foreplay, I'd let myself pretend the small, wonderful human I've been centering my life around is part of a parallel universe somewhere that will not collide with this one at some point.

“He doesn't want children,” I confess, the thrill of the past couple days suddenly feeling like a drunken Vegas weekend that needs some cold morning after perspective.

Logan's expression softens. “Did he say that?”

“I asked if he had any. He said, and I quote, ‘Hell no.’ That felt like a statement.”

“Or it's ‘hell no’ because he hasn't found the right person to have them with . Until now.”

I want to believe that. I really do. But the fear? It's like wearing emotional ankle weights.

“I should probably step back,” I say, the idea stomping on my heart like a roach to be crushed. “Before this gets too complicated. It's just fun, right? He probably won't even call, or if he does, call for the subtle...thanks for the fun but gotta run talk.”

“Emery Rose Langston.” Logan marches my way, grabbing the stupid gauze I've

been holding for five minutes out of my hand.

He throws it over my head, it bounces off the wall just under the CPR info graphic, then grips my shoulders with a soft shake.

“That man looks at you like he wants to put you in one of those baby papoose things and carry you around everywhere. You think you’re complicated? Have you met him?”

The door chimes go off before I can answer and relief slacks my muscles as Logan leaves me in the supply room.

A second later, I hear Mrs. Paterson, here to go over her husband’s bill even though her insurance pays for it all. She’s just lonely and girl, I get it.

Pretty sure lonely is what’s gotten me into this pickle myself.

I work my way out of the closet and into the main office. Mrs. Paterson is going over each line item with Logan, who throws me a quick eye roll before going back to explaining why there’s a fifty-dollar charge for a Q-tip on her itemized insurance bill.

Back behind my desk, I go over my light schedule for the day on my laptop, but concentration is nearly impossible. My eyes drift to the front windows, taking in the sunshine on Wildfire’s Main Street before my body goes stiff.

There’s Colt across the street. Talking to Rebecca Martinez.

She’s pretty. Blonde. Older than me, maybe, but with a figure like a Victoria’s Secret model.

She’s laughing at something he said, touching his arm like she owns real estate there,

and suddenly I'm one second away from dry-heaving into the candy bowl we keep by the front door.

"Emery..." I suddenly realize Logan is standing in front of me, following my gaze out the window.

"Oh," I whisper. "Sorry. I was distracted. I'll—"

"Come on, Emmy, that's Rebecca Martinez. The vet tech. Happily married to her high-school sweetheart. Three kids. About as likely to have an affair as a Scarlet Macaw. You know, they mate for life? I was watching this wildlife documentary on..."

But I can't hear him anymore. My brain has already filled in the worst-case scenario montage: Colt smiling, Colt touching, Colt finding someone normal . Someone child-free and drama-free and way too put-together to ever trip on a Lego at 2 a.m.

So maybe not pretty blonde Rebecca Martinez, but someone .

"I need some air," I croak and bolt out the back at the same time as my phone buzzes.

Colt : Did you eat since breakfast?

I feel like I have whiplash from the way my emotions are bouncing from one to another. A second ago, I was imagining seeing Colt with another woman. Having to watch them happy every day and know that he would never be mine.

And now my heart is fluttering over the words on my phone screen as I watch myself typing out a reply.

Me : Coffee counts, right?

Colt : No. Eat something. Now.

I stare at the screen, every fiber of my being wanting to call him, hear his voice, and do as he says. Until I have to blink away tears, the messages going blurry in my vision.

How can I ever possibly be enough for him? How can I ever measure up to the pretty girls who are going to tempt him away?

Why am I even thinking of this as a relationship, when for him it was probably just a bit of fun with the girl who happened to be there?

Colt : Answer me. Tell me what you're eating. And, just so you know, I had new locks installed at your house. No keys. Code is 11562.

Heat flares in my neck, my chest, other places. But I don't respond.

I should. A thank you would be the polite thing to do. But I don't.

One minute later, the phone is ringing. It's him of course, but I let it go to voicemail.

And when Logan locks up, I've decided what I need to do. I need to go cold turkey on everything to do with Colt Boone.

Three hours later, I'm scrubbing the already-sterile counters in my house like they insulted me when there's a pounding at the door. Not a knock. A declaration.

I already know it's him.

I debate hiding under the sink. But Colt? He'd just tear the door off the hinges and haul me out like a fireman saving his favorite possession.

When I open it, he's there.

Big. Beautiful. Pissed.

"Did I do something wrong?" His voice is low. Dangerous.

"What?"

"You ignored my texts. My calls. Talk to me. " He steps inside. I step back like he's made of TNT.

"I wasn't avoiding you—"

"Don't lie to me, baby girl." His eyes darken. "I don't like being lied to."

"I wasn't! I was just... busy."

"Too busy to send a one-word text?"

I wilt under the concern laced in his fury. And I know. It's now or never, I have to tell the truth and I have to know the truth.

"I..." I start, but his words sound so final in my mind. Hell, no . He doesn't want this, and no amount of Logan telling me otherwise is going to change that.

"What is it, baby?"

"Don't," I hiss, shaking my head and turning away. "Don't call me that. You're going to hate me and I—"

"Never." He pulls me back, turns me to face him. "You think I could ever hate you,

Emery? If you do, you don't know me at all. And I'm ready to change that. For the rest of my life, I'm going to prove to you that this is forever. No takebacks."

"I have a son," I gasp, ripping off the band-aid. "I have a son and his name's Legend, and he's my life. I can't change that. I wouldn't even if I could. So there, now you know, and you can—"

"I already knew," he says, taking my hand and drawing it to his face to kiss the backs of my fingers. "I've known since the beginning. I was waiting for you to trust me enough to tell me."

"How?" Tears prick my eyes as he shrugs. "When I asked about kids, you said 'no way'—"

"I meant no way had I ever wanted kids. That was true, before."

"He pulls me closer, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "No half-hearted bullshit from me. When I'm in, I'm in."

I was so damn glad I hadn't made babies with anyone else. Because all I could think about was making them with you. I'm the Sheriff, I pulled up your entire file the second you left my house that first day. "

The words break something open in my chest. Something that feels like hope.

"Wait. You want kids with me?"

"Baby girl, I want everything with you." His hand slides down to rest on my belly. "Everything. All I was waiting for was for you to be ready for the same, ready to trust me with your truths. All of them." He kisses me softly, just a brush of lips. "Are you on birth control?"

The question catches me off guard. "What?"

"Birth control. Are you on it?"

"Yes. Implant. Three years left." Heat floods my cheeks as his eyes turn dark.

"Tomorrow we're looking into how to fix that." Something predatory flickers in his expression. "Right now I'm going to fill you up anyway, see if we can't beat that failure percentage."

Before I can ask what he means, he's kissing me again. But this time it's not soft or gentle. This time it's claiming, possessive, full of barely leashed hunger.

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This time, I don't hesitate.

He undresses me as he drags and carries me through the house. Clothes discarded, flung away to be collected later. When I'm left in nothing but a soft bra and panties, spread out on my bed, he takes a step back and just looks at me.

"Fucking perfect," he breathes. "Every inch of you. All these gorgeous curves, this soft skin... made for me to worship."

Then he's stripping off his own clothes, and I get my first real look at him. All that muscle I felt through his shirts, the broad chest covered in dark hair, the tattoo over his heart. He's beautiful in a rough, masculine way that makes my mouth go dry.

And then I see the scar.

It's on his right glute, puckered and still slightly pink. The gunshot wound I've been treating, but seeing it in context makes it somehow more real.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore." He settles between my thighs, bracing himself on his forearms. "Nothing hurts when I'm with you."

The words make my chest tight with emotion. Then he's kissing me again, deep and thorough, and I stop thinking about anything except the weight of him on top of me.

"This body belongs to me," he says against my throat, his hand skimming down my

side. "Every soft inch of it."

"Yes, Daddy," I breathe.

"Good girl." His fingers stroke me through my panties, tracing my body like he wants to memorize every inch. "So responsive. So wet already. So perfect for me."

He works me with his hands until I'm gasping and squirming beneath him, right on the edge but not quite there.

"Please," I whisper. "Colt, please—"

"Please what, baby girl?"

"I need you. Inside me. Please."

"That's my good girl. Asking so pretty." He positions himself at my entrance, his head just barely pressing in. "You'll never doubt this again, will you? That you're mine?"

"Never," I promise.

"Good girl."

He licks his lips as he stares at me, and I know my panties are soaked through right now. I can smell my own need in the air even as he takes a deep inhale.

"Sweet Christ," he mutters, throat working hard enough to choke on my scent.

"No way this'll fit." He gestures at himself with a shaky hand, sweat dripping onto his chest. His cock stands tall below it, so thick it's almost frightening as he drags me

toward him by the ankles and growls.

“But it’s going to, baby. I’m sorry, but this dick is going inside that pussy one way or another. ”

I gasp when he yanks down my panties, tossing them carelessly aside. My heart hammers as he glares between his erection and my core like we’re both unsolvable riddles. “We’ll make it fit.”

“Damn right we will.” His voice cracks. He’s panting so hard his stomach quivers against me. “You better hold on.”

“I will,” I whisper, but when he spears a finger inside without warning, my breath stutters into a choked sob. His hips buck against my ass like he can’t control himself either.

When he spits on me, it’s without warning or apology, just a primal slick against my clit that makes my knees quiver.

“Spread,” he growls, wedging a knee between my thighs. “Or I’ll break you wider.” The threat hangs in the air as he grips my hips, spreading my folds with his thumbs until I’m trembling under him.

“It’s okay,” I lie when he hovers above me, half-mad determination etching lines into his face. His head brushes my opening, and I freeze, suddenly hyperaware of every inch that could follow it. “Daddy?”

He doesn’t look away from where we’re connected. “It’s okay, baby, Daddy’s right here,” he grits out. “Just let me in and it will feel so good.”

He drives forward, brute strength carving through my resistance in one brutal thrust.

My scream mangles against his shoulder, teeth digging into his flesh as my body protests.

I whimper into him as he moves, stretching me, feeling so good. It obliterates all memories of what came before, like this is my first time all over again, with him, my perfect man.

My Daddy.

“Breathe,” he rasps, pausing with his cock buried deep enough to make me see stars. “You’re gonna take all of it.” The vow tightens the knot in my belly as he eases another fraction inside. And another. Until I’m a panting mess beneath him, claws digging into his biceps to anchor myself.

“I didn’t think you’d be... this good,” I choke out when he finally stills, trembling over me like we’ve both been struck by lightning.

His laugh is raw and broken. “Me neither.” He kisses the salt of my tears away before catching my jaw between his thumb and forefinger to drag his mouth down my throat, hard enough to bruise, soft enough to melt into.

Then he’s moving again, each thrust an explosion of heat that jolts me against the seat.

“Take me,” I beg, arching up to meet him. “I need more.” His grip tightens on my waist like a vice as he goes deeper, faster until the bed groans beneath us and the world narrows to his hips slamming into mine.

“I’m gonna fill you,” he growls, nailing every spot inside that makes me gasp. “Over and fucking over.”

“I need to come. Daddy, please!” The plea spirals into a moan as his fingers bite my clit in time with his thrusts.

My climax erupts like a live wire, stealing my breath and leaving me trembling on the edge of his control.

“Daddy!” I scream again, his name ripped from my throat in desperate chunks until he stills above me, body going rigid before I feel the first pulse of hot cum spurt inside me.

“My babygirl,” he growls as our bodies pulse together. “Gonna breed you. Gonna put my baby right where it belongs. Fuck that implant, this body is all mine, to do what I want with.”

“All yours,” I murmur against his damp neck, tracing the pulse point that’s thrumming like a caged beast. “Only ever yours.”

One hand tightens in my hair while the other grips my hip like he’ll never let go again. And maybe he won’t. My fingers knead through his sweat-soaked chest hair, clutching him as if that could keep me anchored to this moment forever.

When I look up at him, I know he’s all I’ll ever need.

“Next time,” he promises between labored breaths, rolling us so I’m wrapped in his arms, his cock still deep inside me. “Next time I won’t go easy.”

“I’m done with easy,” I whisper before his lips claim mine, a promise sealed in heat and hunger.

Ten

Colt

The call hits at three a.m., yanking me out of the first real sleep I've had in... hell, maybe years. Not even kidding.

"Colt?" Cade's voice is sharp, serious. "We've got a situation. Mr. Henderson wandered off from Sunset Manor. Went missing around midnight. Staff just caught it."

Shit. I'm already halfway out of bed, reaching for my jeans with a serviceman's muscle memory.

Cade doesn't call unless he needs backup. The man knows these mountains better than anyone, and he can track a squirrel in a hurricane. If he's calling me, it's because this is bigger than a simple walk in the woods.

"Dementia?" I ask, tugging on my boots.

"Advanced. Family says he thinks he still lives up on Pine Ridge."

Christ. "That's fifteen miles," I mutter, already grabbing my badge and sidearm.

"Exactly. Could be a long night."

Beside me, Emery stirs, her voice still coated in sleep. "What's wrong?"

I lean over her, pressing a kiss to her warm forehead. She smells like sex and whispered promises, and suddenly leaving her feels like ripping my own skin off.

“Missing man. Elderly. Memory problems.”

Her fingers brush my forearm. “Do you need help?”

God, this woman. “I need you to stay here. Lock the door. Don’t open it for anyone.”

She blinks at me, still foggy. “How long will you be gone?”

“No idea. Few hours if we’re lucky. Longer if not.” I pause, brushing hair off her cheek. “Promise me, Emery.”

Her eyes lock with mine, steady and clear now. “I promise.”

Five Hours Later, we find him three miles into the woods, perched on a fallen tree, calling out for his wife like she’s just around the bend. Cade spots the trail instantly. Soft prints in the mud, branches broken low. The guy’s a bloodhound in boots.

He’s cold. Scared. Still wearing his nightshirt.

But alive.

By the time we get him to the ER and finish all the damn paperwork, the sun’s up, and I’ve got a tension headache pounding behind my eyes.

All I want— all I fucking want —is to see Emery. To press my face to her stomach, to smell her skin and let everything else fall away. To assure her I want her and everything that comes with her. Every. Fucking. Bag in her baggage.

But, I need a shower, a few hours to get my head straight about what's coming next for us. I check my phone and find a single text.

Emery : Let me know everything is okay with the elderly guy. And with you, Daddy.

Me : The elderly guy is fine. Cold and confused, but no harm done. How are you, Babygirl?

Emery : All good, Daddy, just missing you.

Me : Same, baby. I'll see you real soon.

Emery : Yes you will ;)

That makes me crack a rare smile. What I don't expect is to pull up to my cabin and see it flickering with soft candlelight.

Her little gray van in my driveway.

It makes me fucking hard seeing it. Like I'm coming home from work and she's there. Home before me.

Home.

What I really don't expect is to hear her voice floating out through the cracked window, singing something soft and low, reminding me of how she stood up for karaoke before her night was interrupted by that fucker with an attitude.

And through the glass?

She's in my shirt. Just my shirt. Bare legs. Hair down. Swaying slightly as she moves

around the kitchen like she belongs there.

My heart goes still.

Because she does. She does belong there.

She's done this for me. Set this up. Candles. Music. Herself—wrapped up like a goddamn fever dream in plaid and vulnerability.

No one has ever done anything like this for me.

I take a deep breath of pine forest as I stand on the precipice of what feels like the rest of my life, and then I take the few steps up to the cabin and walk right in. Because if this is forever, then I want all of it.

“Hey,” she says with a smile that slams into me like a semi. “So he's safe?”

“He's safe. Cold, confused, but safe.” I take a step forward, zeroing in on her like a man tracking his salvation. “What's all this?”

“I just...” She glances around the room, nerves fluttering beneath her confidence. “You always take care of everyone else. I thought maybe tonight... I could take care of you.”

It hits me like a punch straight to the ribs.

Because no one takes care of me.

Not since Mom died. Not since Dad checked out. Not since my brothers and I learned to carry the world on our backs with no one watching.

But here she is. Twenty-one. Single mom. Still trying to give when no one's ever really given to her.

"Baby girl," I groan, my dick already painful and ready.

She slides closer, tip toeing in bare feet until her fingers slip up to the buttons of my shirt. "Let me do this for you."

The first button unravels me.

I can't breathe.

"Daddy needs to relax after a long day."

She undoes the next one. Then the next. Her knuckles brush my chest, and I swear to God my knees almost give out.

"You're gonna do a good job relaxing me, baby." My chest is a war zone. Everything tight and hot and too damn full.

"I'm gonna try hard." Her voice slithers down into my bones as her hand puts an exclamation point on the word 'hard'.

"Daddy, this is big."

"Big dick for a big girl."

She blinks twice, then smiles realizing I'm not making fun of her sexy as fuck body.

This woman, wanting to give instead of just take. Wanting to worship me the way I worship her.

"Okay," I say quietly, covering her hands with mine and helping her push the shirt off my shoulders. "You want to relax me? You gonna do as you're told?"

A nod, a smile. "Yes and yes."

"Kneel." I punctuate the word with my hand on the top of her head pushing down. She's lit this fuse, and she's gonna get the full explosion whether she's ready or not.

Zero hesitation as I position her in front of me, those eyes looking up make me want to be everything she needs in the world.

"Good girl." I cup her face in my hands, thumbs stroking across her cheekbones, fighting for control. "Such a good girl for Daddy."

She leans into my touch, eyes fluttering closed. "I missed you today."

"I missed you too." I work the rest of my clothes off, hyperaware of the way she's watching every movement.

"Couldn't think about anything except getting back here and burying my cock so deep in your pussy you forget your own name.

Spent the whole damn day hard, thinking about how you taste, how tight you get around me when you come. "

Her breath hitches, and I can see the way my words affect her. The way her thighs press together, the way her pupils dilate with want.

"Been thinking about fucking your mouth too," I continue, my voice dropping lower. "About how pretty you look when you're gagging on my dick."

When I'm naked, she reaches for me, but I catch her wrists.

"Not yet," I say. "First, I want you to tell me what you've been thinking about all day."

Her cheeks go pink. "Colt—"

"Tell me, baby girl. What's been going through that pretty head of yours?"

"You," she whispers. "This. The way you make me feel."

"How do I make you feel?"

"Safe. Wanted. Like I matter."

"You do matter." I tilt her chin up, forcing her to meet my eyes. "You matter more than anything."

Then I'm guiding her mouth to me, and she opens for me like she was made for this. The wet heat of her tongue makes me groan, and when she takes me deeper, those perfect lips stretching around my cock, I nearly lose my fucking mind.

"Christ, baby girl. Look at you, sucking Daddy's cock like you're starving for it." I fist my hand in her hair, not forcing but guiding. "You love having your mouth full of me, don't you?"

She hums around me in response, and the vibration shoots straight to my balls. She's eager, desperate to please, and watching her work to take more of me is the hottest thing I've ever seen.

"That's it," I murmur, threading my fingers through her hair. "Just like that. Take your

time."

She does, exploring me with her tongue and lips like she's memorizing every inch. When she finally takes me deeper, humming around me, I have to fight not to lose control completely.

"Enough." I pull her off me before I can embarrass myself.

She scrambles to her feet and leads me to the bedroom, shedding my shirt along the way. By the time we reach the bed, she's naked and flushed and absolutely fucking perfect.

"How do you want me?" she asks.

"Turn around," I command, my voice rough with need. "Hands and knees, baby girl. I want to see that perfect ass while I fuck you."

She scrambles to obey, and the sight of her like this, on display for me, waiting for me to take her, makes my cock throb.

"Look at you," I growl, running my hands over the curves of her ass, the dip of her spine. "So fucking gorgeous. All mine to use however I want."

I position myself behind her and push inside in one hard thrust, making her cry out. This angle lets me go deeper, hit spots that make her shake and beg.

"That's it," I pant, gripping her hips as I set a brutal pace. "Take it all, baby girl. Take every inch of Daddy's cock."

This time is different from the first. Slower, deeper, more intense. I take my time, building her up and bringing her down, making her come twice before I finally let

myself follow.

Afterward, we're both wrecked. She's curled against my chest, breathing hard, and I'm running my fingers through her hair and trying to remember how to form words.

"That's my good girl," I murmur against the top of her head. "So fucking perfect for me."

"I love you," she whispers.

The words stop my heart. Because I love her too, so much it physically hurts, but I can't say it back. Not when she doesn't know who I really am. Not when there are still secrets between us.

"What's your dream, baby girl?" I ask instead, my fingers stroking through her hair. "What do you want most in this world?"

She's quiet for a moment. "You mean, besides Legend being safe and happy?"

"Besides that. What's your dream for you?"

"I used to want to sing," she admits softly. "Really sing, not just for fun. Maybe Nashville, or at least local venues. But that was before..."

"Before what?"

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"Before I grew up. Before I had responsibilities."

"Dreams don't have expiration dates, Emery."

She lifts her head to look at me. "They do when you're a single mom at eighteen."

"Not if the right person believes in you." I cup her face in my hand. "You have an incredible voice. You should be singing."

"I have too many responsibilities."

"Fuck that. You have me now, I'll carry your load..." I snort. "You'll be carrying mine too, every fucking day, but I meant—"

She lands a smack on my chest. "I know what you meant. I'm dripping with a reminder right now."

I take a handful of her tit and growl. "I meant, I'm your biggest champion, baby. You have a dream, a goal? I'm gonna get you there. I'm behind you."

"Like you were a minute ago?"

I give her my best pearl-clutching gasp, grabbing my throat, mock-aghast. "Everything's about sex with you, isn't it? You're just using me for my dick."

She considers that with a tight smile. "Well, not quite. Your dick, your mouth, fingers and whatever else I can rub myself on in Colt Boone-town."

“Good girl. I like you slutty for me. But, really, what would it take to make your dream happen?”

She's quiet for a long moment, and I can practically see her thinking. "Confidence, I guess. Experience. Maybe some lessons to get my voice stronger."

"We can make that happen."

"Colt, you don't understand. It's not just about the music. I have Legend to think about, and—"

"And he deserves a mother who chases her dreams," I say firmly. "He deserves to see that it's possible to want something and go after it."

Tears prick her eyes. "You really think I could do it?"

"Baby girl, I think you could do anything you set your mind to. And now I'm here, so, bonus."

She settles against me with a soft sigh, and I think she's asleep when she speaks again.

"I know you love me too. You don't have to say it yet."

Smart girl.

We fall asleep in each other's arms, and I don't ever want to be anywhere else.

The smoke is everywhere.

I can't see through it, can barely breathe through the mask that should be protecting

me but feels like it's suffocating me instead. The heat is overwhelming, pressing against me from all sides, and somewhere in the distance I can hear screaming.

"Help me!" The voice is young, terrified.

I stumble through the hallway, checking room after room, but they're all empty. Just smoke and fire and the terrible knowledge that I'm running out of time.

"Help me!"

The voice comes from somewhere to my left, and I change direction, following the sound. But every time I think I'm getting closer, it seems to move further away.

"I'm coming!" I shout. "Keep calling!"

But the voice is fading, and the smoke is getting thicker, and I know I'm too late. I'm always too late.

"Colt."

The voice is different now. Softer. Familiar.

"Colt, wake up."

I surface from sleep like a drowning man breaking water, gasping and disoriented. Emery is sitting beside me, her hand on my chest, her face creased with concern.

"You were having a nightmare," she says quietly.

I'm covered in sweat, my heart hammering against my ribs. The taste of smoke lingers in my mouth even though I know it's not real.

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not." She shifts closer, her touch gentle but insistent. "You were calling out, trying to help someone."

I go rigid. "You don't want to know about that."

"Yes, I do." Her hand moves to my face, thumb stroking across my cheek. "I want to know everything about you."

"Emery—"

"Please." Her voice is soft, pleading. "Let me help."

And maybe it's the way she's looking at me, or maybe it's the fact that I'm tired of carrying this weight alone, but I find myself wanting to tell her everything.

But I can't. Not yet. Not when we're finally here, finally together like this.

"Just job stuff," I say finally, my voice rough. "Side effects of the work. Some things you can't shake."

The guilt sits heavy in my chest. Four years of carrying the weight of failing to save her best friend, and she doesn't even know. Doesn't know that the girl in the photo on her side table is the reason I wake up in cold sweats.

"I understand," she says softly, and something in her voice tells me she does. "We all have things from the past that follow us around."

I want to ask what she means, but I don't. Can't. Because asking her questions means opening doors I'm not ready to walk through. Not tonight, when she's soft and warm

in my arms, when everything feels perfect.

"Yeah," I murmur instead, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "We do."

We lie there in the darkness, her holding me while I fight to get my breathing back under control. Eventually, the nightmare fades, replaced by the warmth of her body and the scent of her skin.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"For what?"

"For not running when you saw how fucked up I am."

"You're not fucked up." Her arms tighten around me. "You're human. You carry too much weight, but that doesn't make you broken."

I want to believe her. Want to think that maybe she's right, that maybe I don't have to carry this guilt forever.

"Sleep," she murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "I've got you."

For the first time in four years, I do.

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Eleven

Emery

"Well," Logan says, settling back at my kitchen table with his morning coffee and a satisfied smile, "you look thoroughly debauched."

I nearly choke on my own coffee. "Logan!"

"What? I'm just making an observation. Your hair is still messed up from someone's hands, you've got that glow that comes from excellent sex, and you arrived home at the same time I got here." He takes a delicate sip. "Elementary, my dear Watson."

Heat floods my cheeks. "And how do you know I didn't have to go to the store? I could have been all out of vanilla oat milk. And you're nosy."

"I'm observant. There's a difference. And you had no groceries." He leans forward, studying my face with those sharp eyes that miss nothing. "So. How was your evening with Sheriff Tall-Dark-and-Brooding?"

"It was..." I search for words that won't make me sound like a lovesick teenager. "Good. Really good."

"Good? That's it? Honey, you look like you got thoroughly claimed by an alpha male. I'm going to need more details than 'good.'"

Before I can respond, the front doorbell chimes. I frown, wondering if it's Colt, but

when I pull the door open there's a police officer standing there instead.

"Morning," he says, nodding to both of us. "I'm looking for Emery Langston."

My stomach drops. "That's me."

"Ma'am, I have some paperwork for you. From the state." He hands me an official-looking envelope. "Regarding your testimony in the Hendricks case."

The world tilts sideways.

Hendricks. As in Jenna Hendricks. As in the fire four years ago that changed everything.

"Thank you," I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

The officer nods and leaves, and I'm left staring at the envelope like it might burst into flames.

"Emery?" Logan's voice sounds far away. "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I..." I can't form words. Can't breathe. Because suddenly I'm fifteen again, standing outside a burning house and watching firefighters carry people out. Watching one particular firefighter—tall, broad-shouldered, moving with purpose even through the smoke. The one who saved me.

I wouldn't be standing here today if it wasn't for him.

Pulling open the envelope, I walk in a daze back to the kitchen table and flick through the papers. Details on the fire, on how it started, how it spread, who was involved...

"Oh my God," I breathe, nearly dropping the papers.

"What?" Logan is beside me now, his hand on my shoulder. "Talk to me."

"I told you about the fire? Four years ago. Jenna... My best friend." I look up at Logan, my eyes wide with realization. "It was him, Logan. Colt Boone was there. He was one of the firefighters."

His eyebrows draw together as he tries to peer over my shoulder at the report. "Are you sure?"

The papers are part of a subpoena to testify in the wrongful death lawsuit that Jenna's family filed against the property management company. The case has been dragging through the courts for years, but apparently, it's finally going to trial.

But it's the incident report attached to the legal documents that I hold up for him. The official fire department report that lists all the responding personnel.

Including one Colt Boone, firefighter, rescue team.

"Jesus," Logan breathes. "He was there. He actually was there."

I scan the report, my heart hammering. Three people rescued: Margaret Hendricks, age 43. Jenna Hendricks, age 15. Emery Langston, age 15.

Wait. That's not right.

I read it again, more carefully this time. Margaret and Jenna Hendricks rescued at 11:47 PM. Emery Langston rescued at 12:03 AM.

Jenna died at 12:15 AM when the second floor collapsed.

Which means...

"She went back in," I whisper. "After they got us out, Jenna went back in for her cat."

And Colt tried to save her.

The report is clinical, factual, but I can read between the lines. Firefighter Boone attempted rescue of victim who had re-entered the structure. Access blocked by structural collapse at 12:09 AM. Victim located deceased at 12:47 AM after fire suppression.

My phone buzzes. A text from Colt.

Colt : Good morning, baby girl. Did you get to work safely?

I stare at the message, my chest tight with a mixture of emotions I can't even name. He saved me. Four years ago, when I was just a scared teenager, Colt Boone carried me out of that burning house and gave me a second chance at life.

And he's been carrying the guilt of not saving Jenna ever since.

"You have to tell him," Logan says quietly.

"Tell him what?"

"That you know. That you remember. That you don't blame him for what happened to Jenna."

"But I don't remember," I admit. "Not really. Just flashes. Smoke and noise and someone lifting me up." I look at the report again. "I was unconscious when he carried me out. I never saw his face."

"But you know now."

"Yeah. I know now."

My phone buzzes again.

Colt : Everything okay? You haven't responded.

Then, a minute later:

Colt : I'm coming over.

"Shit," I breathe. "He's coming here. Well, to work. He thinks we're there..."

"Good," Logan says firmly. "You two need to talk about this."

I jump at the sound of a truck door slamming outside. Through the window, I can see Colt striding toward the office, his expression dark with concern.

"He looks worried," Logan observes.

Terrified is more like it. And when he pushes through the front door and sees my face, that terror turns to something sharper.

"What's wrong?" He's across the room in three strides, his hands on my face, checking me over like he's looking for injuries. "Baby girl, talk to me."

I can't find words. Can't do anything but stare at this man who saved my life and has been torturing himself with guilt ever since.

"Emery?" His voice is gentle now, concerned. "What happened?"

Wordlessly, I hold out the incident report.

He takes it, frowning, and I watch his face change as he reads. Watch the color drain from his cheeks, watch his jaw tighten, watch his hands start to shake.

"Fuck," he breathes.

"You saved me," I whisper.

He doesn't deny it. Just stands there holding that piece of paper like it weighs a thousand pounds.

"I tried to save her too," he says finally, his voice broken. "I tried, but I couldn't—"

"I know." I reach for him, but he steps back.

"You don't understand." His eyes are wild now, desperate. "I failed her. I failed her mother. I failed you. When I left her in there to die—"

"You didn't. The report says—"

"I don't care what the fucking report says!" The words explode out of him. "I was supposed to get everyone out. That was my job. And I failed."

"Colt—"

"You were fifteen." He's backing toward the door now, like he can't stand to be in the same room with me. "Fifteen years old, and I let your best friend die."

"It wasn't your fault—"

"Wasn't it?" He stops, his blue eyes burning with self-hatred. "You think this is some kind of cosmic joke? You think it's okay that I'm fucking the girl I saved while the girl I failed is dead in the ground?"

"Don't you dare."

"Don't I dare what? Tell the truth? Face reality?" He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Jesus Christ, Emery. What kind of sick fuck does this make me?"

"It makes you human," I say firmly, standing up. "It makes you someone who carries too much guilt and blames himself for things beyond his control."

"I'm done with this conversation." He turns toward the door.

"You let me fall for you while sitting on this?" The words come out sharp, cutting. "You knew who I was this whole time and said nothing?"

He freezes, his hand on the door handle. "That's different—"

"Is it? You think it's okay that you're fucking the girl you saved while keeping secrets about the girl who died?" I throw his own words back at him, and I can see them hit their mark.

"Emery—"

"I need air." I push past him, heading for the door, but his hand shoots out and grips my elbow.

"You don't walk away from me," he growls, his voice low and dangerous. "Not now. Not ever."

I try to pull away, but his grip tightens. "Let go of me."

"No." His pale eyes are burning with something wild and desperate. "You don't get to storm off just because this got complicated."

"Complicated?" I laugh. "You think this is just complicated? You saved my life and never told me. You've been carrying guilt about my best friend and never said a word. That's not complicated, Colt. That's lying."

Something dangerous flickers across his face. "I was protecting you."

"From what? The truth? My own feelings?" I jerk my arm free. "You don't get to decide what I can handle."

"Don't I?" He steps closer, crowding me against the wall. "You were fifteen, baby girl. A scared kid who watched her best friend die. You think I was going to dump that on you?"

"Yes! Because it's my life, my trauma, my choice!" The words come out louder than I intended, and I can see Logan watching us from across the room with wide eyes.

Colt's jaw tightens. "You're being dramatic."

"And you're being a coward."

The words hang between us, sharp and cutting. His eyes flash with something dangerous, and for a moment I think he might pin me to the wall and kiss me until I can't breathe.

"Tell me, Colt. When you look at me, what do you see? Do you see the woman you love, or do you see your failure?"

For a long moment, he doesn't answer. Just stares at me with those pale blue eyes full of pain and want and terrible, crushing guilt.

"I see both," he admits finally.

"Then maybe you're just trying to make up for your guilt by being with me." The words come out cruel, designed to hurt. "Maybe this whole thing is just you trying to ease your conscience."

His face goes white. "That's not—"

"Isn't it? The perfect way to make yourself feel better. Save the girl, fuck the girl, live happily ever after?" I'm being unfair, and I know it, but I can't seem to stop. "Very convenient."

"Emery, don't—"

"I need to think." I push past him toward the door. "I need to figure out if any of this was real."

I'm already out the door, half-running down Main Street with tears streaming down my face. Behind me, I can hear heavy footsteps and Colt's voice calling my name, but I don't stop.

"Emery! Stop running from me! Jesus Christ you're fast." Footfalls land hard and fast behind me. "I have a butt injury here. You want me to re-open my wound?"

He's joking but it stops me. Because that's exactly what he and I don't want to do. I slow my pace, my breathing fast and unsteady, not ready to turn around but comforted that his footsteps are matching mine.

“Turn around.” His voice is stern. “Babygirl—”

“No, you don’t get to Babygirl me right now, Colt Boone.” I keep walking, but don’t quicken my pace.

“Little brat.” Strong arms wrap around my waist from behind, lifting me clean off my feet. “Gotcha,” he growls in my ear.

“Put me down!” I struggle against his hold, but he’s already carrying me toward the small park at the end of the block.

“Not happening, baby girl. We’re finishing this.”

He carries me behind a cluster of oak trees that shield us from the street, then pins me back against the largest trunk. His hands bracket my head, his body caging me in.

“You done running?” he asks, his voice rough.

“Maybe I’m just getting started.”

“Like hell.” His thigh pushes between my legs, pressing against me through my thin leggings. “You want to know if this is real? Let me show you how real it is.”

“Colt—”

“You call me Daddy.” His mouth crashes down on mine, hungry and desperate and claiming. When I try to turn my head away, his hand fists in my hair, holding me still. “You remember my name, little girl, or I’ll have to remind you.”

“Daddy,” I whisper.

"You think this is guilt?" he pants against my lips, his thigh rocking against me. "You think I could fake this?"

I can feel how hard he is through his pants, can feel the way his whole body is trembling with need and barely controlled emotion.

"I think—" I start, but then his hand slides between us, cupping me through my leggings.

"You think too much," he growls, his fingers finding my clit through the fabric. "Feel instead."

I try to fight it, try to pull away. "Colt, what happened..."

"None of what I have with you is about guilt. You get that thought out of your head right now. Do I feel guilty? Yes, but that's my burden to bear, baby girl."

I shake my head, even as his finger traces my lips, flicks my clit, starts to make sparks fly through my body.

I'm so wet already, so ready for him, but he needs to know the truth.

"Jenna did what she did, and maybe it was right and maybe it was wrong, but it's not on you.

That guilt you're carrying is unfair. You said you wanted me to trust you before you and I do.

But, you have to trust me too. I get the Daddy thing, I really do, and trust me, I love it.

But we are still two equals. Trust one-hundred-percent is a two-way street if we are doing this. ”

“Is it?”

“Yes it is!” My knees are trembling, but I’m determined to get the truth out. “You want to take care of me, and I want that too, but sometimes Daddy you’re going to have to let your babygirl take care of you too. And this is one of those times.”

When he starts that maddening circular pressure, I forget how to form words. But I see something in his eyes. Something like an easing of the pain, something like a pressure being released.

"That's it," he murmurs, watching my face as I fall apart. "Let go for Daddy. Show me how real this is."

The orgasm hits me like lightning, making me cry out and cling to his shoulders. He works me through it, his mouth swallowing my gasps and moans.

When I finally come down, we're both breathing hard.

"Still think this is about guilt?" he asks, then gets that stupid sexy, cocky smile. “If I make you come every time I have a guilty feeling, is that okay? Because, I feel guilty every day when I eat one of Mrs. Sherman’s cupcakes.”

I look up into those pale blue eyes and see love.

"You're an idiot," I whisper.

"Yeah," he agrees, pressing his forehead against mine. "I am. But I'm your idiot."

"Damn right, you are." I cup his face in my hands. "And you're not getting rid of me that easily."

"Good," he says, kissing me again. "Because I'm never letting you go."

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Twelve

Emery

Two days later...

"Mama!"

Legend's voice cuts through the parking lot like a fire alarm made of pure joy. I don't even see him at first—I just feel him. That sound slices right through my chest, and suddenly my arms are bracing for the incoming blur of elbows and sticky hands.

Then he's on me, full throttle, all limbs and peanut-butter breath, and I'm laughing before I even think about it, spinning him around while he giggles like I've just rescued him from the moon.

"Hi, baby," I breathe into the crook of his neck. He smells like sunshine, dirt, and graham crackers—the full childhood trifecta. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too!" he says in one long exhale, already wriggling to be let down. "Grandpop let me feed the chickens—one of them pooped—and Grandmama let me make cookies by myself and I didn't even burn them! Then we watched movies with popcorn and I only spilled it twice!"

He stops to inhale and looks up at me, eyes bright. "Are we going home now?"

"We are."

I take his hand and turn toward my grandparents, who are standing by their car, watching us like they've just witnessed a Hallmark commercial come to life.

Grandmama's got that soft smile that means she's already planning a scrapbook page in her head, and Grandpop just nods like, yep, we kept him alive another weekend.

"Thanks for bringing him," I say, already bracing for the stories.

Grandmama pulls me into a hug that smells like cinnamon and fabric softener. "Our pleasure, sweetheart. He's just the best."

"Speak for yourself," Grandpop chimes in. "This one had me up at 5:45 asking for pancakes shaped like 'realistic police cruisers.' He's got standards, apparently."

Legend tugs on my hand. "Mama, can we play cops and robbers when we get home? I'll be the good guy again. You can be the sneaky robber."

"We'll see," I say, which is mom-code for yes, but please let me pee first .

And then—I hear it. That low, unmistakable growl of a truck engine behind me. My stomach tightens before I even turn.

Colt.

He pulls into the spot next to mine like something out of a country song—the kind that makes you roll your eyes but secretly hum along.

His black pickup is spotless (which makes me irrationally angry, because who has time to keep a truck that clean?), and he steps out like he's walking onto a damn movie set. Boots shining, uniform crisp, and that badge flashing just enough to say don't test me, son .

I told him my grandparents were dropping Legend off today. I just wasn't sure he'd actually show. It's one thing to say you're ready for a kid, another thing entirely to meet him in real life—with chicken poop stories and pancake demands.

“Sheriff Boone,” I say, trying to sound calm and not like I’m two seconds from breaking out in hives.

“Ma’am.” He nods, eyes landing on mine for a beat before they drop to the small human now glued to my leg.

"And you must be Legend."

Legend eyes him suspiciously, like he's checking for a hidden agenda. “Are you a real policeman?”

“I am.”

Colt squats down, making himself smaller, more human. Smart move. Three-year-olds are natural interrogators and will smell your fear.

“I’m Sheriff Colt. Your mama’s told me all about you.”

“She has?”

“Mmhmm. She said you’re the best there is at catching bad guys.”

Legend puffs up like a marshmallow in a microwave. “I am ! Want to see my police car?”

Before Colt can answer, Legend’s already halfway into his backpack, yanking out a tiny metal cruiser with one wheel missing.

Colt takes it with the seriousness of someone handling evidence from a crime scene.
“Nice car. Does it have sirens?”

“Nope, but I make them with my mouth . Wanna hear?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Legend does a full sound effects performance, complete with hand gestures and a dramatic crash at the end. Colt nods like he's just watched a TED Talk on toddler law enforcement.

“Very realistic. You might be overqualified.”

I’m watching all of this with my heart caught somewhere between my throat and my stomach. This is it—the moment of truth. If Colt balks now, if he pulls away, we’re done before we’ve even begun.

But he doesn’t. He leans in. He engages. He listens like my son’s siren sounds are top-tier.

“Legend,” I say gently, “this is Sheriff Colt. He’s... kind of Mama’s friend.”

Legend tilts his head. “Like a real friend or like a boyfriend friend?”

My cheeks ignite.

Colt grins, not missing a beat. “Boyfriend friend. That okay with you?”

Legend gives it about three seconds of grave deliberation. “Do you love my mama?”

“I do.”

“Are you gonna be nice to her?”

“Always.”

Legend nods like a little judge handing down a sentence. “Okay. But if you’re mean, I will arrest you.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Colt replies solemnly. “You got cuffs?”

“Nope. I use tape.”

“Smart man.”

Behind us, Grandmama’s practically melting. Grandpop just mutters, “Well, damn,” under his breath.

“Sheriff,” Grandmama calls sweetly, “we should all have dinner together. I make a mean apple pie for dessert.”

“That’s kind of you, ma’am.”

“Good, right now work for you? Follow us back to Emery’s place!”

“Wait, I thought... I don’t want to crash a family dinner.”

“Nonsense,” she says with a wave. “You’re Emery’s young man, which makes you family. Plus, I want the scoop on how y’all met. She hasn’t told us anything .”

Colt looks to me, and I nod. I don’t want to do this alone anymore.

“I’d be honored.”

Two hours later, I've laughed so hard my jaw hurts.

"So there I am, looking out at the grill as a black bear tries to get at our steaks. I have no idea where Beau's got to, he's supposed to be watching them, but I grab my rifle from by the back door.

" Colt shakes his head as he relates the story of how he got his butt injury, while Grandmama tries to hide her laughter behind her apron.

"Just at that moment, Beau appears from around the side of the house, shouting and screaming at the bear to get away, and scares the shit out of me—"

" Oooooo! " Legend giggles pointing at Colt. "You said a swear."

I give Colt a playful motherly look.

"Okay, sorry, he scares the bull-poop out of me. I turn, knock the butt of the rifle against the grill, reach out to grab it, burn the sh—, I mean burn my hand on the grill, the rifle goes flying, hits the deck, I duck, sticking my ass up in the air and bam. I take it right in the—"

"Butt cheek." I interrupt. "You do not have a filter yet Colt Boone."

Grandpop lets out a howl of laughter. "Right in the backside!"

Legend snorts and mutters, "Backside" in the kind of way that I know I'm going to have to drill it out of him before school.

"Just a good job it was only my 22," Colt says with a grin that finally has me snorting a laugh instead of warning him about ever doing something so stupid again.

Dinner is... chaos. Wonderful, loud, gravy-on-your-sleeve chaos.

Legend is narrating his entire weekend like it's a Netflix series, Grandpop is grilling Colt about his pension plan, and Grandmama is refilling everyone's tea like she's hosting a Baptist revival.

Colt? He rolls with it. He laughs at the chicken poop story.

He answers every one of Grandpop's questions without blinking.

He cuts up Legend's food without being asked.

At one point, he even wipes applesauce off Legend's chin and doesn't flinch when he gets some on his own shirt.

He accepts a second giant slice of Grandmama's apple pie.

But the thing that really undoes me? He remembers to refill my water glass. Twice.

When Legend finally starts rubbing his eyes and listing sideways in his chair, Colt stands and stretches.

"Come on, partner. Time for bed."

"Will you read me a story?"

"If your mama says it's okay."

I nod, mostly because my throat won't cooperate with words.

Twenty minutes later, Colt walks out of Legend's room, rubbing the back of his neck.

“He’s asleep. Kid could talk the paint off a barn.”

I laugh. “Three years of solo conversations. He’s making up for lost time.”

“I like it.” He pulls me into his arms. “I like him. He’s got your fire.”

“Thank you,” I murmur. “For not... running.”

“Baby girl,” he says, kissing my forehead, “I’m not just here for the highlight reel. I want the full damn movie. Bonus features and all.”

My grandparents have tactfully retreated to the guest room, giving us privacy. Colt settles on the couch and pulls me into his lap, and I curl against him with a contentment I've never felt before.

"So," I say, playing with the buttons on his shirt. "What happens now?"

"Now we figure out how to make this work. You and me and Legend."

"It won't be easy. He's not used to sharing me."

"Then we'll take it slow. Let him get used to the idea." Colt's hand strokes down my back. "But Emery? I'm not going anywhere. This isn't some temporary thing for me."

"Good," I say fiercely. "Because I love you, and I'm not letting you go."

He kisses the top of my head. "Speaking of which, I got a text from Jack earlier. The family wants to know if you're coming to Sunday brunch tomorrow."

My stomach flips. "Meeting your family? That's... big."

"They're going to love you. Both of you." He tips my chin up so I have to meet his eyes. "But if you're not ready—"

"I'm ready." And I am. Terrified, but ready. "What should I expect?"

"Chaos. Lots of food. My brothers being idiots. Questions about when we're getting married."

"My intentions?"

"Whether you're planning to stick around long enough to give them nieces and nephews."

Heat floods my cheeks. "Colt!"

"What? I already told them yes."

"You what?"

"Kidding." But the wicked grin on his face tells me he's not entirely kidding. "Mostly."

I swat at his chest, but I'm laughing. "You're terrible."

"You love me anyway."

"I do." I lean up and kiss him softly. "I really, really do."

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Thirteen

Emery

"Y ou ready for this?" Colt asks as we pull into Beau's driveway.

I glance over at him, then back at Legend, who's been in full-blown chatter mode since we left the house, listing every question he plans to ask Colt's brothers like he's prepping for a job interview.

I take a breath and exhale slowly. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Beau's house is exactly what I'd expect from a no-nonsense mechanic.

Solid, practical, with a garage big enough to house a tank and probably the tools to build one.

The place smells like bacon and coffee and something slightly greasy in a comforting, man-who-knows-his-way-around-an-engine sort of way.

Colt pushes open the front door without knocking. "We're here!" he calls out like we're stepping into a sitcom.

"About damn time!" comes a voice from the kitchen, gruff and already judging us for being three minutes late.

The house is buzzing. Voices overlapping, someone laughing, something sizzling on

the stove. It smells like a Sunday morning should.

We step into the kitchen, and my eyes immediately dart to the brothers. They're clearly cut from the same Boone cloth but styled in completely different patterns.

Jack, the oldest, is seated at the table with a gorgeous auburn-haired woman curled against his side like she's always belonged there. He's got that military stillness, not stiff, just deliberate, and when he smiles at us, it softens everything sharp about him.

"You must be Emery," he says, rising to shake my hand. "Jack. This is Delaney."

"Nice to finally meet you," Delaney adds warmly. "We've heard a lot about you."

I shoot Colt a sideways look. "Hopefully the flattering stuff."

Delaney grins. "Mostly. He did call you 'stubborn as hell,' but it was said affectionately."

That checks out.

Cade is leaning against the counter, looking like he just walked out of a flannel catalog. Messy hair, woodsmoke still clinging to his jacket. Next to him is a petite blonde with sharp eyes and a quick smile.

"Cade," he says, tipping his chin at me. "And this troublemaker is Marley."

"Hey!" Marley protests, smacking his arm. "I'm not the one who dragged you to that wedding with the ten-piece string quartet and gluten-free cake."

"Best mistake I ever made," Cade mutters, kissing her temple while she rolls her eyes.

And then there's Beau.

The biggest of the brothers, standing at the stove like he's running a diner during the breakfast rush, flipping pancakes with military precision. He's got grease under his nails and a scowl that seems permanent until he glances at Legend.

Then something shifts.

"And you must be the famous Legend," Beau says, voice like gravel dragged across a front porch.

Legend, who's been suspiciously quiet for a kid hopped up on apple juice and adrenaline, sidles closer to Beau.

"Are you a real mechanic?" he asks, eyes narrowing.

"I am," Beau answers.

"Do you fix police cars?"

"Sometimes."

Legend nods like this meets his approval. "Cool. I'm a deputy now." He points to the plastic badge stuck to his chest like it's proof of employment.

"I can see that," Beau says. "Very official."

Delaney leans toward me, voice low. "Beau says he's not great with kids, but he made pancakes shaped like police cars."

I glance at the plate Beau slides in front of Legend, and sure enough there are tiny

pancakes in the shape of cruisers, sirens and all. They're kind of ridiculous. And perfect.

Legend's eyes go huge. "These are the best pancakes ever!"

"Told you he'd love them," Jack mutters to Beau, who only grunts in reply, though I swear there's the ghost of a smirk tucked into his beard.

The next hour is loud, messy, and surprisingly effortless. The brothers talk like they're still teenagers, taking shots at each other over eggs and hash browns. Their partners roll their eyes in perfect harmony and pull me into the fold like I've always belonged.

Legend's in absolute heaven. Every time he opens his mouth, someone's listening, laughing, or handing him another slice of bacon.

Then Marley, cool as can be, drops a bomb between sips of orange juice.

"So... when's the wedding?"

I nearly inhale my coffee. "Wedding?"

Delaney jumps right in. "Come on. Look at the way he watches you. Look at how he is with your kid. That man's already planning the playlist."

"We just—"

But before I can raise any kind of objection, Colt is dropping to one knee, being handed a small box by my own son. Jesus, they were both in on this?

"Sorry, babygirl, but I can't let them beat me to the punch. I'd never hear the end of

it. Marry me, Emery Rose Langston.”

I frown. “There’s a reason it’s called popping the question . You’re supposed to ask, not tell me what to do.”

“Marry him, Mama!” Legend is jumping up and down with a big ridiculous grin on his face, and I can’t help myself. I’m smiling right along with him, because there’s nothing I want more.

I nod, tears starting to well in my eyes as my throat closes up, but I manage to croak out, “Yes. Please.”

Colt slips the ring on my finger before I even finish replying, like my answer was already written in the stars. And perhaps it was. The others erupt in cheers and hoots, but this moment is just for the three of us. Me, my son, and my Daddy.

“There’s something else,” Colt says, looking uncertain. “And you can say no if you want to, but it’s something just for you, babygirl.”

He pushes a slip of paper into my hand, and when I read it I’m still uncertain. “That’s this Thursday. But what’s Parker’s Room?”

“Parker’s a buddy who owes me a favor,” Beau chimes in, but it’s not helping solve the mystery, and I think Colt reads that on my face.

“It’s a recording studio, baby. And ignore the date, this one’s an open invitation. Whenever you’re ready, whenever you feel you want it, you just say the word and we’re there. You have a fantastic voice, and I want to support you.”

“This has all been so quick,” I mumble. “But it’s perfect.”

“Quick nothing,” Jack says with a grin. “When a Boone man knows, he knows. And our baby brother knows. ”

Colt lifts a brow. “Baby brother? I’m taller than two of you.”

“You’re still the baby,” Cade says, not missing a beat. “You cried when they took your pacifier.”

“I was two.”

“Still counts.”

After breakfast, the women migrate toward the kitchen with dishes while the brothers launch into a debate about football that I suspect could last until next Sunday. I find myself beside Beau at the sink, and for a moment, it’s quiet enough to speak without being overheard.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “For the pancakes. For all of it.”

He shrugs. “Family’s family.”

“He already loves you. Legend, I mean.”

Beau glances over at the living room, where Legend is now showing off his badge to Cade like he’s in charge of security. “Kid’s got sense,” he says simply. Then, after a beat: “You make Colt happy. Haven’t seen him like this... maybe ever.”

“He makes me happy, too.”

Beau turns toward me, still scrubbing a plate. “Good. ‘Cause if you hurt him, I’ll take it personal.”

I offer a smile that isn't fake. "Fair warning received."

"Good." He hands me a dish towel. "Dry faster. You're slow."

"Wow, now I really feel welcome."

Before he can respond, Legend's voice echoes from the living room.

"Mama! Look what Uncle Beau gave me!"

I turn to see Colt with Legend perched on his shoulders like a human backpack, his hands proudly gripping a small toy wrench.

I raise an eyebrow. "Uncle Beau?"

Beau shrugs. "Kid decided. What am I gonna do, argue with a deputy?"

As we're getting ready to head out, Legend makes his rounds like a tiny politician on the campaign trail, hugging everyone, thanking them for the pancakes, the juice, the badge compliments.

When he gets to Beau, he wraps his arms around the man's massive legs without hesitation.

"Thank you for the pancakes, Uncle Beau. And for my wrench."

Beau's face stays gruff, but his hand lands gently on the top of Legend's head. "You're welcome, kid."

"Will you teach me to fix cars someday?"

“If your mama says it’s okay.”

Legend turns to me with that look, the one that combines big eyes, soft voice, and emotional manipulation no adult is immune to.

“Can he, Mama?”

I sigh, already defeated. “We’ll see,” I say, which is universal mom-speak for yeah, eventually.

Legend’s in the backseat as we drive home, still chattering away. He’s now naming everyone in Colt’s family like he’s trying to memorize them for a school test. Colt’s driving with one hand on the wheel, the other resting on my thigh like he’s claiming me quietly, without needing to say a word.

“So,” I murmur, glancing at him. “That went well.”

“Told you they’d love you.”

“Love us,” I correct.

He nods. “Yeah. They do.”

“Your brother Beau—”

“Is a big softie under all that gruff,” Colt says. “Kid’s already got him wrapped around his finger. Hell, me too.”

“And Jack and Delaney—”

“Rock solid. She keeps him grounded.”

“Like Marley does with Cade?”

“Exactly,” he says, eyes on the road. “Like you do with me.”

That pulls something tight in my chest. “I love you.”

“I love you too, baby girl. Both of you.”

From the backseat, a small voice chimes in. “Are we gonna live with Daddy Colt now?”

Colt and I exchange a look. We haven’t had that conversation yet. Not out loud, anyway. But I guess if he’s at the proposal stage then he must be at the living together stage too.

“Would you want that?” I ask my son.

“Yes!” Legend says instantly. “Then we’d be a real family.”

Colt doesn’t even hesitate. “We are a real family, buddy. Doesn’t matter where we live.”

“But if we all lived together, it would be even better .”

I glance at Colt. He’s smiling slightly, already running the logistics in his head.

I reach back and squeeze Legend’s little foot. “We’ll figure it out.”

And we will.

It’s not if anymore.

It's just when.

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Fourteen

Emery

E pilogue – Two Years Later

"Mama, I can't find my bow tie!"

I glance up from the floor, where I'm mid-wrestle with two squirmy toddlers and a half-buttoned onesie that smells like fruit snacks and betrayal.

Legend's standing in the doorway to our bedroom, hands on his hips, dressed in his tiny sheriff's uniform like he's about to issue someone a ticket.

He looks almost perfect, except the bow tie, which has apparently vanished into the abyss that is our house.

"Top drawer of Daddy's dresser, baby. If it's not there, check under the pile of socks he pretends he's gonna fold."

Legend salutes and dashes off. At five years old, he's equal parts old soul and chaotic energy, and has fully committed to his dual identities as both Big Brother and Deputy Sheriff.

Tonight's the Wildfire Elementary Talent Show, and my boy's got his first solo.

He's been rehearsing for weeks, singing in the tub, the backyard, and once during a

full meltdown in the Target checkout line.

As for my own music career, well, things are about as perfect as they can be. I'd always had these songs I sang to myself, written down in notebooks and tinkered with from about the age of 12. They'd evolved over time, but I never thought anyone else would ever want to hear them.

Turns out, I was wrong.

The album I recorded with Colt's unexpected engagement gift sold enough to bring me a little bit of fame.

It's a folk album, and it's probably never going to make me rich, but it's brought me enough of a following that I now get invited to a few festivals.

I played three this summer, and it was such a buzz, but my heart isn't in touring or fame.

There are other things I want, things closer to home, and that's meant turning down more than I accept.

"Found it!" Legend calls a second later, triumphant.

I hear Colt's deep, familiar chuckle down the hall.

"Looking sharp, Deputy," Colt says, appearing in the doorway with Legend's hand in his. "You ready to show the whole town what you've got?"

"I'm ready, Daddy." Legend beams up at him, all dimples and pride. That title—Daddy—still makes my chest tight in the best way. Colt's been his father in every way that matters since day one, but it became official eighteen months ago at our

wedding. Legend didn't even flinch during the vows.

Colt, on the other hand, cried harder than I did. On our honeymoon in Nashville, he got the crack in his tattoo filled in with mine and Legend's names, leaving room for additional Boone's as they come along.

"Are Ruby and Mason coming too?" Legend asks, craning to peer over Colt's shoulder.

"They wouldn't miss it," Colt says. Then he looks at me and raises his brows. "Need backup?"

I gesture helplessly at Ruby, who has somehow gotten one shoe off and is attempting to chew it like a feral raccoon. Mason, in contrast, is sitting quietly on the floor, blissfully unaware of the chaos, chewing on a plastic spoon like it owes him money.

"Your daughter is a tornado," I say, eyeing Ruby as she throws the shoe and squeals.

Colt grins and swoops her up like it's nothing. "Gets it from her mama."

"Excuse me?" I say, trying not to laugh as he calmly slides the shoe back on Ruby's foot like a toddler-whisperer.

"There," he says, "crisis averted."

Twenty minutes later, we're squeezing into the chaos that is the Wildfire Elementary auditorium.

The place is packed, folding chairs crammed side-by-side, toddlers with juice boxes, grandparents with camcorders the size of small appliances.

Half the town's here, and the other half probably tried but couldn't find parking.

We slide into our reserved seats up front, the twins in our laps, the diaper bag stuffed under our feet like an overstuffed briefcase.

I spot Jack and Delaney in the third row. Emma is bouncing on Delaney's lap like she's mainlined pixie sticks, while their baby boy snoozes in Jack's arms with that slack-jawed baby serenity. Jack Jr. is nowhere to be seen, but I guess he's getting ready for his own part in the show.

A few rows behind them, Cade and Marley are snuggled together, Cade dead eyeing every other man in the room that even dares glance toward his wife.

And there's Beau, of all people, folded into a child-sized plastic chair like a bear trying to ride a tricycle.

His face is set in its usual I'd rather be working on an engine expression, but it's betrayed by the fact that he's wearing a shirt with a cartoon dinosaur and holding a juice pouch in one hand.

Sarah Mitchell, the local third-grade teacher he's been "casually seeing" for the past six months, is seated beside him with the kind of fond smile that says he acts tough, but he cried at that YouTube dog reunion video too.

"The whole crew showed up," I murmur to Colt.

"Wouldn't be anywhere else," he says, settling Ruby in his lap while I do my best to keep Mason from launching his sock into the row ahead of us. "It's Legend's big debut."

It reminds me for a second, that my own parents have still stayed away. Colt helped

me to call them when we got engaged, but they were short and curt. Didn't have any interest in hearing about Legend, or when the wedding would be.

Colt ended up giving them an earful, then hung up. Said, when they can learn to act like decent humans, they can come see him. Until then, no contact.

Sad, but my grandparents are still in my life. They're at their new place in Florida so they couldn't make the concert but we will be visiting soon. Legend's all in on Disneyworld and finding sharks teeth on the beach.

Life isn't perfect, but sometimes, it sure feels like it is.

The lights dim. My pulse kicks up.

Normally, I'd be backstage—clipboard in hand, headset on, wrangling kindergartners high on juice boxes and nerves.

It's not a full-time job, but it is my only one outside of my music career.

When I told Logan I was quitting, I might have expected him to be upset.

No such thing. He told me to chase my dreams and be happy, so long as I didn't disappear from his life completely.

I see him all the time, and I'm getting to know his new boyfriend too.

But tonight, I'm not the choir director. I'm just a mom in the front row, silently praying my kid doesn't forget the words or throw up from excitement.

The acts start rolling: alphabet songs, shaky recorder solos, an interpretive dance involving glitter wands and one very confused first-grader. Then—

“Next up, we have Legend Boone performing ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow.’”

The crowd claps. I stop breathing.

And then, there he is.

Tiny. Brave. All five years of him standing under the bright lights in that sheriff’s uniform, his little bow tie now perfectly askew.

He steps up to the mic like he’s done it a hundred times, adjusts it just a little too low, and then scans the audience until he finds us. His grin breaks across his face like sunshine, and I swear, in that moment, the whole auditorium tilts toward him.

He opens his mouth. And sings.

And God .

The voice that comes out of that small, serious face isn’t what anyone expects. It’s not babyish. It’s not forced. It’s clear, controlled, heartbreakingly earnest. A sound that makes the room hold its breath.

And makes his mama so proud she’s on cloud nine.

“Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high...”

Beside me, Colt goes completely still. I glance over and see his hands clenched together in his lap, his jaw working like he’s trying not to fall apart.

“There’s a land that I heard of, once in a lullaby...”

Legend doesn’t miss a note. His voice fills the space with something raw and simple

and true . He's not just singing, he's telling a story. And people are listening. Really listening.

I catch the tear before it fully falls down Colt's cheek, but I see the shimmer. And I see the pride. It's written all over him, this big, strong man is now absolutely losing it at a five-year-old in a clip-on tie.

Our little boy sings, and my husband cries, and I can't help myself. I'm sobbing too. I listen to every word, every line, and I know that I've made all the right decisions. I might not have wanted to bring a man into our lives, I might have promised myself that Legend would come first.

But the truth is he has. He does. Not just with me, but with Colt too.

And just like that, it's over.

The final note hangs like stardust, then the room erupts. Applause, cheers, whistles. Even a " That's my nephew! " from somewhere behind us.

Legend bows, face glowing, eyes scanning for us again. When he finds us, Colt's already on his feet, clapping hard, wiping his face with the back of his hand like it didn't just betray him in front of 300 people.

"That's my boy," he says, voice thick. "That's my son."

Around us, the whole Boone crew is on their feet. Even Beau, who looks suspiciously misty and mutters something about "allergies" when Sarah nudges him.

Legend practically flies off the stage and crashes into Colt's arms.

"Did you hear me, Daddy? Did I do good?"

Colt hugs him so tightly, I half-expect the bow tie to pop off again.

“You were perfect, buddy. Absolutely perfect.”

Legend turns to me, wide-eyed. “Mama, did you cry too?”

I nod, swiping at my cheeks. “Happy tears, baby. The very best kind.”

Two hours later we’re in Jack and Delaney’s driveway, shoving overnight bags and three car seats into the back of their SUV like we’re playing emotional Tetris.

“You’re sure this isn’t too much?” I ask Delaney for the third time.

She rolls her eyes, smiling. “Emma’s been begging for a sleepover with her cousins for weeks. And Jack’s already in pajamas and emotionally prepared.”

Jack snorts. “Speak for yourself. Ruby gave me the stink eye when I adjusted her seat. I think she’s planning a coup. But Colt gave me one of his tree carvings to guard the entrance to my mountain, so we’re all square.”

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“Colt’s been secretive about this night for weeks ,” Delaney says, buckling Mason into his seat with practiced speed. “You guys go. We’ve got this.”

Colt reappears behind me, hands sliding around my waist. “I’ll have that eagle sculpture done for you next week.” Jack nods.

“Awesome, brother. Thanks for fitting us in, I know you’re Mr. Big Shot now making those things for all the fancy pants ranches out in Montana or Telluride or wherever the fuck you’re shipping them.”

“Welcome, asshole.” Colt shakes his head as Jack flips him off, disappearing with Delany.

His little chainsaw carving as become quite the little business.

He got featured on the cover of Montana Monthly after someone bought one of his carved Grizzly bears that he had up for sale in town at one of the fairs.

Turns out, the guy that bought it was some big shot western and folk-art collector. After that, the orders started rolling in and Colt quadruples his prices. I love when he comes in covered in sawdust with that gleam in his eyes, dragging me outside to show me his newest creation.

“I’ve got one surprise left,” he murmurs. “And no, it doesn’t involve matching pajamas or bedtime stories.”

I smirk. “Is it wine and silence?”

“Better.”

“Better than wine and silence? That’s a bold claim, Boone.”

He grins. “Trust me?”

I lean back against him and sigh. “Always.”

We wave goodbye to the kids and the rest of the Boone circus, who are still wrangling diaper bags, snack wrappers, and a toddler who may or may not have taken her pants off.

Colt laces his fingers through mine and leads me to his truck.

Not the official sheriff’s vehicle, thank God, but his personal pickup.

It still smells like pine trees and motor oil and him.

“So,” I say, sliding into the passenger seat and giving him the side-eye. “You planning to murder me in the woods, or...?”

“You’ll see.” His grin is maddening.

He takes us out of town, onto those winding mountain roads I’ve grown to love, the kind that wrap around the ridges like ribbon and smell like earth and freedom. I assume we’re heading toward the cabin—our cabin—but instead he veers off down a gravel road I’ve never seen before.

“Colt...”

“Patience, baby girl.” He says it like he knows that’s the exact opposite of what I have.

After twenty minutes of silence and increasing suspicion, punctuated by one very suspicious deer that stared at us like it knew what was coming, he pulls off to the side of the road. There's nothing around us but trees, silence, and that soft hum that comes with being deep in the middle of nowhere.

I glance around, eyebrows raised. "Are we... broken down? Or is this a deliverance situation?"

Colt doesn't answer. Instead, he gets out, rounds the truck, and opens my door with exaggerated formality.

I squint at him, and that's when I see it.

He's put on his sheriff's hat, and something in his expression has shifted.

Gone is the playful dad-husband look, replaced by something darker.

Intent. Amused. Slightly dangerous in that take-me-to-church-and-confession kind of way.

"Ma'am," he says, voice gone full Sheriff Boone. "I'm gonna need you to step out of the vehicle."

Oh, we're doing this.

My pulse jumps a little, but my mouth curves into a smirk. "Officer, is there a problem?"

"That depends." He steps closer, that hat shadowing his eyes. "You been drinking tonight?"

"No, sir." My voice drops an octave without me meaning to.

“Then why were you weaving all over the road?”

I raise an eyebrow. “I wasn’t weaving. Maybe you need your eyes checked.”

“My eyes are fine.” He takes another step, close enough now that my back hits the side of the truck. “And so are you. Were you trying to get pulled over?”

“No, officer. I swear. Maybe I was a little distracted,” I whisper. And I’m definitely not breathing steadily anymore.

“Distracted?” His hand comes up to cup my face, thumb dragging slow and hot across my bottom lip.

“Yes, I have this ache. I can’t seem to make it go away.” I rub my lips together on a coy smile.

“You’re trouble.” He pinches my chin. “Show me how sorry you are for giving me trouble.”

“Whatever do you mean, officer?” I flutter my hands around my neck, batting my lashes.

“You know what the fuck I mean. You wanna play? Let’s play. Take off my fucking pants and apologize.”

His voice is gravel as he grabs my wrist, pushing my hands down to his pants. I work the button, then the zipper, and the denim drops in a heap, revealing boxer briefs stretched taut over an erection that makes my knees buckle.

He hooks a thumb under the straps of my dress, dragging them down my shoulders, then shoving the fabric to my belly, exposing my braless tits.

But, he's not done, he grabs the fabric with both hands at my hips and jerks it down, leaving me standing in the wide-open air in nothing but a white little thong with little embroidered cherries all over.

His gaze rakes up and down my body, and lands on my lips.

"Are we playing now?" I challenge, licking my lips and arching my back. He answers with a growl, unbuttoning his shirt and freeing himself from his boxers.

My fingers dig into the sides of his ribs as I pull him toward me. He steps free of his clothes around his feet, towering over me with a cock that even half-hard looks monumental.

"You like my panties? They're my 'get out of jail free' panties." My teasing dies on my lips as he grabs the scrap of material between my legs and tears it away.

A guttural sound escapes him, standing there all magnificent and perfect before he's crouched down, throwing one leg over his shoulder, my back slams against the side of the truck, the heat from his mouth ignites me when he buries his face into my core.

No teasing with this man, just that demanding tongue lapping up every drop.

"Christ." My back arches as he spears two fingers deep inside while swirling his thumb over my clit.

His free hand grips a hip possessively, holding me open to devour.

Every swipe of muscle, every flick of his wrist sends sparks igniting behind my ribs until I'm shuddering, right here out for God and everyone to see.

"Look at you," he groans, spreading me wider to feast again, dragging his teeth over my swollen flesh. "So ready to say you're sorry."

In one fevered motion, I'm spun around, my flesh dented by hard fingertips as my hips are tugged backwards, my hands slapped onto the side of the truck bed.

"Stay put, I'm going to do a cavity search."

Oh shit.

He doesn't waste time, hands pull me apart, then his thick head breaches me in one brutal push. We both groan as my eyes close, the breeze kicking up as if to say we need to cool off.

Slow thrusts start that send ripples through my center.

"You're so goddamn tight," he growls against my neck, biting my shoulder, making me hiss. My fingers grip the heated metal as I push back, meeting him thrust for thrust.

I squeeze, clamping down around his thickness when he pumps harder, pushing my hips forward with each brutal stroke, stretching me over his cock until it grazes something white-hot inside.

When I climax, it's a scream tearing free of me as his fingers clamp around my throat, holding me steady through waves of light and sound and pleasure so bone deep, I never want to come up for air.

His release spills into me seconds later, a low roar vibrating into the center of my back as he buries his face between my shoulder blades as we turn into a tangle of limbs and heaving breaths.

His pulls out only long enough to spin me around, dragging me by the hand to the driver's door.

He gets in, putting the seat back as far as it will go, then holding his still hard cock up.

“Get on. You don’t want a ticket, you gotta earn your way out. Make me come again. Show me what that wet, little pussy was born to do. Ride Daddy like the slutty good girl you are.”

Challenge accepted.

I mount him, shove one of my tits in his mouth and ride him like a drunk cowgirl.

This time it’s him shouting my name as our orgasms slam into each other with a crash of heat so bright it drowns out everything in my head except how much I love this man.

His hands know every curve now. They know exactly where to squeeze, what to undo, how to make me unravel like I’ve been waiting all day for this. Because I have .

“Been thinkin’ about this damned day,” he growls against my throat, “Watching you in that dress... knowing what I was gonna do the second I got you alone.”

“Colt—”

“That’s Sheriff Daddy Boone to you, baby girl.”

Well. Okay, then.

There’s something about the roleplay that sets everything on fire. Just fun layered over something deeper. Something honest.

He takes his time when he starts to move again and somewhere between gasping his

name into the mountain air and swearing I'll never skip cardio again, I remember why this man ruined me for anyone else.

Later, he's driven us naked down a dirty road onto his brother Cade's part of the mountain where there's an incredible stream with a little clearing surrounded by sky-high pines.

We're wrapped up in a thick quilt in the bed of his truck, the stars overhead so bright and close they feel fake. My head's on his chest, and he's stroking lazy circles over my back, like he doesn't want the moment to end any more than I do.

"Happy anniversary," he says, his voice half gravel, half butter.

"Best anniversary ever," I reply, kissing the warm skin of his chest. "Though I'm pretty sure at least three things we just did were illegal. On multiple levels."

"Good thing I know the sheriff," he says, all smug and no shame.

I huff a laugh, tilting my head up. "You're a menace."

"I try."

There's a pause. Just enough silence to let the air cool around us, to let it get soft again.

"I love you, you know that?"

He shifts so he's looking straight at me, his hand still resting over my spine like a grounding wire.

"I love you too, baby girl. More than I ever thought I had the capacity for."

“Even when I’m old and gray and I forget the lyrics to every song I’ve ever taught a kid?”

“Especially then. You’ll be sexy and sassy and still making up lyrics on the spot.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re biased.”

“I’m obsessed,” he corrects. Then he cups my cheek like he’s memorizing me all over again. “You gave me everything. A family. A home. A reason to believe happy endings weren’t just for other people.”

I press my forehead to his. “You saved me first. Not just physically. I didn’t even realize how lonely I was until you bandaged up my knee and made me call you when I got home.”

“We saved each other,” he rumbles. “Kicking and screaming, probably. But we did it.”

The forest rustles. Somewhere in the distance, a bird makes a sound like a broken squeaky toy. It’s not perfect. It’s real.

“Think Legend’s gonna be a singer?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“With a voice like that?” Colt’s arms tighten around me. “That boy could be anything he wants. Firefighter, astronaut, world-famous yodeler.”

I snort. “Just as long as he doesn’t want to be a YouTuber who reviews slime.”

“We’ll redirect him,” Colt says, dead serious. “Gently. But firmly.”

“We’ll be there no matter what, though. All of us. The whole insane, waffle-obsessed, boot-wearing, loud-mouthed Boone family.”

“Wouldn’t trade ’em for the world,” he says, brushing his lips across my hairline.

As we drive home into the night, windows down, the wind soft against my face, I think about how far we’ve come. From that first awkward fall on his pathway to a night spent making questionable decisions on a mountain road under the stars.

We didn’t stumble into this life.

We built it.

Brick by brick. Argument by argument. Kiss by kiss.

It’s not perfect. It’s messy and loud and sometimes exhausting as hell.

But it’s ours.

And it’s just getting started.