



# Longing for the Ranger (Shadow Mountain Forest Rangers #2)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She's just trying to keep husband's memory alive for her kids. He's there when she needs help the most.

Izzy:

Being a single mom to twins, whose precocious nature gets them into trouble more often than not, isn't easy. It's all I can do to make it through each day, but I want to give them memories they would've made with their dad. Which is how I end up on a catastrophe of a camping trip being rescued by a rugged forest ranger. He brings alive feelings I haven't felt for many years. I worry about history repeating itself, but when real disaster strikes, he proves he is what we all need.

Longing for the Ranger is a steamy, single mom, curvy woman, protective mountain man, found family, small town short romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Izzy

Giggles from my seven-year-old twins as they help me pack the car have my heart singing with happiness. Hearing them will always be the best part of my day, and I appreciate every second of them. Especially since they were absent for too long just a few short years ago.

This trip is about creating the memories we should've been having all along, but got waylaid by tragedy. I'm on a mission to remedy the situation now. My children will have the memories they would've if life hadn't torn their world apart at such a young age.

I mentally shake my head, refusing to let my thoughts head in that direction. If I let myself go down that road right now, it will be impossible to make this trip into what I want it to be, memories that will help them feel closer to their dad.

"Mom, you packed everything to make s'mores, right?" Jake asks. "Tommy says that's the best part of camping is making gooey s'mores."

Luke chimes in, "and you got worms to use for bait for fishing right? I can't wait to stick 'em in the guts with the hook."

"Yeah! I can't wait!" Jake makes a gushing noise and mimics hooking a worm.

Stifling the urge to shudder at the thought of having to stick the worms on the hook, I swallow to keep from gagging. I am not looking forward to it. But it's something their dad would've done with them, so I will make sure they get to experience it.

Sighing, I continue to shuffle totes and bags around in the quest to fit everything in the car. “Yes, I packed s’mores supplies and worms.”

“I can’t wait to go fishing. I’m going to catch the biggest fish ever. Then we can eat it for dinner.” Luke spreads his hands wide, showing just how big of a fish he thinks he is going to catch.

Hopefully, I can figure out how to make the fishing poles work. I watched several YouTube videos in preparation and it didn’t look too hard, so I’m keeping my fingers crossed.

“I’m going to get you, Matey!”

“No way! The treasure is mine!”

There’s a crack behind me. Speaking of fishing poles, I don’t have to look to know what is happening. “You two stop that this minute before you break those poles and then there will be no fishing.”

I knew when I found out we were having twins I would have my hands full, but at times it seems these two are hell bent on making sure I don’t get a moment’s rest. You never realize how many things can be used as swords until you’re around little boys for five minutes.

Grabbing the poles, I stow them safely in the car, out of reach. “Why don’t you two go back into the house and go to the bathroom? I’m almost done, and it will be time to go soon.”

A few minutes later I stand back, wiping the back of my hand across my forehead with a smile at finally having crammed in everything. What a relief. I head into the house to do a last check to ensure everything is off and locked up.

As soon as I open the door, I hear grunts. Rushing to the living room, I wince as Jake launches off the back of the couch.

“Pile drive!” He yells flying through the air, narrowly missing the edge of the coffee table before crashing into his brother.

“Guys, come on. No wrestling in the house and no jumping on the furniture. You know better.” Yet another thing I’ve learned from having boys, wrestling matches happen frequently.

“Did you both go to the bathroom?” They nod their heads.

“Okay, I’m going to make sure everything is off and locked up, then we’ll hit the road. ”

Jake frowns. “Why would we hit the road? Won’t that hurt?”

A chuckle falls from me at his confusion. “It’s just a saying. It means we will get going. Why don’t you two go load up in the car? You can watch an episode of Camp Cretaceous on your tablets while I lock up.” I don’t even get to finish my sentence before they are out the door.

Shaking my head, I walk through our two-story house, making sure windows are shut and locked and lights turned off. Of course, the light in the bathroom is still on and the water trickling because boys. I’ve almost completed my walk through when I stop in my tracks with a groan.

There, on the floor next to the refrigerator, is the blue cooler of food, packed and ready to go but not in the car with the rest of the supplies.

Heaving a heavy sigh, I lug the heavy blue plastic container out to the car before

starting the game of Tetris in the back over again. Finally, after another twenty minutes and stashing a couple of duffel bags in the front passenger seat, I get it all to fit.

There is probably more stuff than we'll ever need, but I would rather be over-prepared for this adventure than not. Hopefully, I have everything to make some lasting memories for the boys.

At last I climb into the car and get the show on the road. Backing out of the driveway onto our quiet street on the outskirts of Coyote Creek, I wave at our neighbor, Mrs. Janson, who is weeding her prized flower beds.

I let the boys continue to watch their tablets as we make the forty-five minute drive to Elk Grove Campground where we're staying.

Probably not the mom of the year move, but I don't plan on them using the devices much while we are there.

I just want to have them for backup when I need them to chill for a bit.

I don't know what I would do without them when I need a few moments to myself and some quiet from all the noise those two make.

The drive flies by and we arrive at the campground before I know it. It's quite pretty with sites situated around the oval drive circling the grove. You can just see the lake through the trees and a creek flows past one side. The pit toilets have me cringing, but they are better than nothing.

Following the ten mile per hour speed limit, I watch the site numbers for the one I booked online weeks ago in preparation for this trip. When the small wooden sign indicates we are at site twenty-three, I pull into the parking spot in front of it.

The boys bail out immediately, running to the creek flowing gently past the clearing with a picnic table and fire pit.

I scramble out, yelling after them. “Stay out of the water, you two. We need to unpack and set up.” Chuckling when I hear their groans from the car. “You can play in the water as soon as we get everything situated. Now get over here and help.”

Walking to the back of my little red SUV, I pop open the back and begin unloading the supplies I spent so much time fitting in.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Shawn

Taking a swig of coffee, I read through my list of assigned tasks for the day. My lip curls when I see I'm on campground check duty. Not my favorite. Dealing with complaints from campers as we make our rounds is a pain in the ass.

At least I'm assigned with Rylan Sempers.

He doesn't seem to mind dealing with the campers and gets a kick out of the shit they come up with.

It never ceases to amaze me how ill-prepared people can be when they come camping or the things they think we can control.

Like we can keep all the bugs away and pull out all the poison ivy in the area.

My eyes roll thinking about actual complaints I've had to deal with in the past. But it's all part of a job I love, so I have to take the bad with the good, and mostly it's good.

Being a forest ranger and getting paid to spend my time tramping around in the woods' rocks. It's never dull, that is for sure.

"Hey Shawn, how's it going?" My eyes jerk up, brows furrowed to see Boone Jennings standing there.

"Uh fine. On campground duty, so could be better. What are you doing here? I

thought you were off on vacation on your way to pack up Laura.”

He nods, “I am. I just stopped to grab my jacket I forgot yesterday.”

“Ahh gotcha.”

“Is she ready for her dissertation defense?” Rylan asks walking up with a travel mug in his hand.

Boone grins. “She’s nervous as hell, but I’m positive she’s going to kill it. I can’t wait for her to be done and get her moved back here. I’m stoked to have her living with me and to work with her every day.”

“Crazy how George transferred leaving the position open just as she is finishing up with her PhD.” I shake my head at the coincidence.

“I’ve come to believe things work out the way they should.

It was meant to be, just like me finding her was.

She agrees she would go through all the turmoil again to end up here with me.

At this point in my life, I had figured I would always be a bachelor and then there she was.

Life has a funny way of working out sometimes.

" He shrugs before tipping his head toward the door.

"I better head out and let you guys get out there. See you in a couple of weeks.”



“Tell Laura good luck.” I call to his retreating form.

He raises his hand in acknowledgment.

Rylan grins at me. “Ready to get going.”

Huffing, I shove back from my desk. “Yeah, yeah, let’s get it over with. At least I get the weekend off after this.”

We load the supplies we will need for restocking bathrooms before we head out in the green forest ranger pickup to make our rounds.

Rylan keeps quiet behind the wheel as we drive.

He seems to be lost in thought this morning and I don’t mind at all, enjoying soaking in the quiet before we get to the campgrounds.

My mind wonders, watching the pines streak by in a blur of green as we roll down the road.

Those thoughts soon turn to Boone and how life has worked out for him.

Like me, he’s in his late thirties with no kids and never been married.

Now he has Laura and I’m positive a ring and a kid or two are in his immediate future.

I always thought I was content with the life I was carving out.

Never having to worry about anyone else.

Living free and easy, but watching the two of them together makes me wonder if there might be something more.

The few relationships I've had didn't work out, but maybe I just haven't yet found the person I was meant to like Boone said.

Rylan swings into the Blue Spruce Campground, grinning at me. "Campers or bathrooms?" Leaving me the choice of what to deal with.

"Bathrooms," I grumble before opening my door and climbing out. Fortunately, they aren't in terrible shape. Propping the doors open, I do a quick hose down and then replace the toilet paper.

Rylan finishes his rounds and we're off to the next campground. Things go fairly smoothly as we take turns cleaning and dealing with campers. There are no major complaints except for the couple who actually complained about not seeing any bears in the campground, as if that was a bad thing.

I would've told 'em to leave their food out if they wanted to see bears.

Rylan, on the other hand, handled it more diplomatically, telling them they were lucky bears had not made an appearance and why.

These are the people who should not be allowed to leave civilization.

They are also the ones we will end up getting called out for search and rescue because they go hiking unprepared and get hurt or lost.

Oh well. It's job security, I suppose, just not my favorite part of the job. We get to our last stop at the Elk Grove Campground by late afternoon. It's my turn to do rounds and check in with campers, so I head off around the loop of sites.

I check tents and vehicles against the list we have registered, looking for anything happening which shouldn't be as I go.

Most camps are vacant this time of day as people are out recreating, hiking, fishing, swimming or exploring the area.

I'm allayed there's nothing to be concerned about with each site.

Until I get to the last site, number twenty-three tucked back next to the creek.

There's no holding in my groan at the collapsed tent and scattered food and garbage littering the campsite. It appears no one is around.

Concerned, I study the ground around the blue plastic tote knocked on its side. I'm appeased by the small tracks of raccoons I find instead of the large prints of bears I was worried about.

A gasp has my gaze jerking up to see a woman with auburn curls piled on top of her head.

A pink tank top hugs a generous rack and denim shorts showcase curves for days.

Two younger boys stand next to her as they stare at the destruction of the camp.

She is holding a couple of fishing poles, each with a significant bird's nest of fishing line.

The boys look downtrodden, but the woman looks about ready to have the biggest meltdown. Her moss green eyes are huge, welling with tears as she bites down on her plump bottom lip, shoulders sagging as if they hold the weight of the world.

The lecture I was preparing to dish out dies right then and there as my heart studders in my chest.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Izzy

Rooted in place, the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth as I bite down on my bottom lip in an attempt to keep the tears at bay. It's a completely futile endeavor as a fat, salty droplet rolls down my cheek.

I rush to brush it away with the back of my hand before Jake and Luke can see. I've already disappointed them with the disaster that was fishing. Now it looks like we might not even get to spend a night here.

So much for the fun filled memories of a camping trip like they would have gotten with their dad. All my planning and effort for naught.

"It would seem you've had some visitors while you were fishing."

A deep husky voice rolls over me as my eyes swing from the calamity that is our campsite.

My breath catches at the light brown-haired ranger standing with his hands on his hips.

His thick muscles straining the tan and green fabric of his uniform.

I'm transfixed as one meaty hand comes to rub the thick scruff on his sharp jaw.

"This is why we recommend putting all food in the bear boxes there," he nods towards a large metal box with carabiners clipped through two latches.

A heavy sigh falls from me. “The kids were impatient after it took much longer than I expected to get the tent set up. I thought it would be okay while we fished for a bit before finishing setting up camp.”

“We didn’t even get to catch any fish,” Luke pouts.

My eyes fall closed with shame as I feel my cheeks heat when Jake adds, “Mom’s not very good at this.”

“Well, it takes some time to figure it all out.” He chuckles at the candor of the kids.

“Uh oh, looks like there’s some trouble at this site.” Another ranger unnecessarily announces as he strolls up.

Another deep chuckle comes from the first ranger. The second one looks at him, eyes wide with surprise.

“I’m Shawn and this is Rylan.” The first ranger announces, nodding his head towards the second. “How about I help you get this cleaned up, and Rylan can help the kids work on those poles for you?”

The ranger we now know as Rylan, brows pinch, as if confused. “Ah yeah, sure. Boys, let’s take a look at those poles.”

He reaches to take them from me, snapping me out of the trance I’m in, still staring at the disaster that is our campsite. “Um, well, if it’s not too much trouble. I’m Izzy. This is Jake and Luke.”

Poles in hand, he leads the kids over to the picnic table and efficiently begins clearing the mess I made of both poles. I can hear him telling the kids about the first time he ever caught a fish.

Following Shawn over to the tent, I swallow the lump in my throat before I heave another sigh.

“Maybe we should just take it all down and go home. This is not the trip I had imagined it would be. All the videos I watched and the preparations I did to get ready for it have been useless. Nothing is going right. There’s no way the kids are going to remember this being anything but a disaster.

I just wanted to help keep David’s memory alive for them, but all I’m doing is ruining it at this point.

” My hand rubs across my chest as if that can ease the ache there, while the verbal diarrhea spews from my mouth in an explanation this poor man certainly never asked to hear.

He pauses where he is examining the tent, his attention turning to me. “Not much experience camping?”

My arms cross my chest defensively as I scoff, “Isn’t it obvious? My husband was the outdoorsman. The boys would have done this dozens of times by now if he were still alive. I just wanted to give them memories that would help them feel closer to him.”

His hazel eyes soften in understanding instead of the pity I have come to expect, which throws me.

“It’s admirable you would do something so out of your comfort zone to help them feel closer to him. My uncle was the person who did that for me.”

I inhale sharply at his admission. The understanding now makes sense. “You were lucky you had someone who filled that hole for you.”

He nods, his lips tipping up, “I absolutely was. He is the reason I’m the reasonably well-adjusted guy I am today.”

“Unfortunately, my boys are not as lucky. They just have me.”

“Hey, they are lucky to have you. Look at what you’re doing for them. You’re helping them make memories even if it’s not all you imagined it would be. They’ll remember this and one day you will all laugh about it. Those are some of the best memories.”

I consider his words. “I suppose, maybe. But still, it’s not the same.”

“Sadly, it never will be. We can only do the best we can with what we have. And I’d say you’re doing your best. I’ll tell you what though, if you want I have the day off tomorrow. I could come back and help you take them fishing.”

My head is shaking before he finishes. “I couldn’t ask you to do that and on your day off.”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering. It would be my pleasure. Fishing is something I enjoy and I would be happy to share the experience with you and the boys. Something tells me you could use a break in life and I’m happy to help.”

My lips roll into my mouth as I study him.

He seems completely sincere. It would be nice to have some help and for the boys to maybe have some success fishing.

It’s just that accepting help, especially from a stranger, goes against everything in me.

But this is for the boys, and Shawn is being so nice.



Like right now, he is fixing the tent, leaving me to my warring thoughts without hesitation. No pressure at all.

Finally, after several minutes of contemplation, I nod. “Alright. If you’re sure you don’t mind. It would be great to have some help. I really appreciate the offer.”

The smile he gives me has tingles shooting through me I haven’t felt in a long time. Crap on a cracker, the man is good looking, but when he smiles with just a hint of a dimple and crinkles around his eyes, he’s a heartthrob.

I can only wonder, what have I gotten myself into now?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Shawn

Dropping the tailgate of my truck, I double pat the metal surface. “Missy, load up.”

The three-year-old yellow lab leaps into the bed of the truck as if she has wings. There’re times I’m not so sure she doesn’t. I’ve never seen a dog fly through the air as effortlessly as she does.

It’s been a year and a half since I found her abandoned at a trailhead. People can be real assholes, leaving a domesticated dog to fend for its self in the wild. I’m sure they couldn’t handle her excitable personality.

The plan had been to take her to the animal shelter, but after having her follow me around the rest of the day, I couldn’t do it.

I hated the thought of leaving her at home alone when I was working though.

It turns out my neighbor works from home and has a golden retriever.

She lets Missy come over to play while I’m gone. It has worked out great.

I probably should’ve asked Izzy if it was okay that I bring her fishing too, but it slipped my mind. Hopefully, she’ll be a fun surprise for the boys. She’s good with kids and loves the water. I think they’ll get a kick out of her.

Opening the backdoor of the truck I load my fishing pole and tackle just in case I need spares for fishing with the boys today. I want everything to go well, not just for

the boy's sakes, but Izzy as well.

My heart skipped a beat or two in my chest when she explained what she was trying to do for her kids.

I can understand better than most what they are going through.

My dad died in a car accident when I was a few years older than them.

My mom's brother, my Uncle Roy, didn't hesitate to step in and take me camping and fishing every chance he got.

It seems Izzy doesn't have anyone to help her like my mom did. I admire the shit out of her for trying to do it herself when she was clearly out of her element. It was why I was offering to take them all fishing before I could consider what I was doing.

Rylan didn't stop giving me shit about it all the way back to the office. It is completely out of character for me, but it was something I felt drawn to do. Offering a helping hand to the single mom, like Uncle Roy did for mine.

It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact the woman could stop traffic with her soft, thick curves and pouty lips, or that I itched to pull those curls from the pile on top of her head and see how far down they fall.

Nope, didn't notice any of that at all, but my dick certainly sat up and took note.

Shifting in my seat at the direction my thoughts have gone. I search through the radio stations to find something to take my mind off of the sexy single mom who needs help, not a pounding.

Settling on a classic rock station, the corner of my mouth tips up when Missy barks at

dogs we pass alongside the road.

When I pull up to the campsite, Izzy's playing frisbee with the boys or at least attempting to, it doesn't look to be going well. No one can get the thing to fly further than a few feet.

The poor woman just cannot catch a break. I can't help but admire her tenacity in continuing to try doing things with her boys, even if she is not adept at them.

I hope she knows how lucky those boys are to have her, though, even if things don't go as she wants. One day they will be thankful for all she is doing, when they realize how much she went out of her way for them.

Missy barks exuberantly, bouncing in the bed as I climb out of the rig. I grin ruffling her scruff, knowing she's dying to play catch with the frisbee and boys.

The boys come running up and jump around me, just as excited as Missy.

"You have a dog!" One of them, Jake maybe, yells. I need to figure out how to tell them apart.

"Can we play with her?" The other yells just as loud.

Pursing my lips to the side, I pretend to think hard about the question. "I don't know. We'll have to ask your mom. Have you ever been around dogs before?"

"Our friend Tommy has a dog, but it's little and doesn't like to play. Can we play with the dog, mom? Please?" The first boy asks sugary sweet, batting his puppy dog eyes, lip sticking out a mile.

Geez, how does the woman ever say no to that? I would give the kid my wallet if he

looked at me and asked like that.

“I thought you guys wanted to go fishing?” Izzy looks from Missy to me. “Is she good with kids?”

Nodding my head, I confirm, “Missy’s great with kids. I wouldn’t have brought her otherwise. I know I probably should’ve asked, but didn’t think about it yesterday when I made the offer. She can stay in the truck if it’s a problem. I just don’t like leaving her home by herself if I don’t have to.”

“No, it’s fine. As you can tell, the boys would love to play with her.”

As soon as the tailgate drops, Missy leaps down in between the boys. Her whole body wiggles as they dive on top of her, giving her pats and hugs. I swear the dog smiles at the attention. Seems as if they are a match made in heaven.

The soft smile stretching across Izzy’s face as she watches has me struggling to catch my breath. The love of a mother for her kids plain as day, but it also softens the ever present tension etched on her face, leaving a glowing presence threatening to bring me to my knees.

“She really is good with kids, huh? I wish I had the bandwidth to get them a dog, but between the two of them, I have my hands more than full already.” She reveals with a sigh.

“Well, they’re more than welcome to play with Missy any time. She loves the attention.” I offer without hesitation. I would do anything to see not only the smiles of the boys, but their mother as well.

Her startled eyes jerk to mine, brows pinched. “That’s very generous of you, but I have to ask, why are you doing all of this?”

My shoulder rises and falls. “Like I told you yesterday, I was lucky enough to have someone help fill the hole left after my dad passed. Being a single guy leaves me with quite a bit of free time.” I tip my head towards the boys.

“Seeing their smiles and happiness when I know what they’re going through makes it worth my time.

” Swinging my gaze to hold hers, I lay it on the line.

“I know the struggles my mom went through as a single mother with just me and help from her brother. I see how hard you are working to create memories and happy times for your kids. You’re an amazing mom and deserve help and support.

It’s within my power to do that. Besides, there are way worse ways to spend my days.  
”

She blinks briskly before shaking her head, eyes going back to the boys and Missy, who are now rolling around on the ground together.

“Your mom must be so proud of the little boy she raised into such an amazing man. I’m shocked a good-looking, compassionate guy like you hasn’t been snapped up long ago. ”

My chest swells at her words and I feel them all the way to the very marrow of my bones. “Maybe the right woman just hadn’t come along yet.” I mutter too softly for her to hear.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Izzy

We watch the boys play with Missy for another few minutes before Shawn reminds them why he came today. “Are you two ready to go fishing now?”

They immediately scramble up from where they are rolling on the ground, getting licked by the large yellow dog. Yelling, “Yeah!” at the top of their lungs.

I shake my head at the decibel level of my children, glad we’re not indoors for once.

“Are you guys up for a bit of a hike? I know a great fishing hole where the fish jump right onto your hook, but it’s a bit of a walk to get there.” Shawn asks.

Luke’s eyes are wide as he gasps, “Really?!”

“Absolutely!” Shawn winks at me, causing a flutter in my belly I haven’t felt in years. “What do you say?”

“Yay! Let’s go!” Jake yells.

Shawn holds my gaze, waiting for confirmation the boys can handle a hike. “Just how far is it?” I ask.

“Just about a mile. I’m positive these two tornados can handle it.”

“Okay then. Let me just grab my pack and some drinks and snacks for them.” Going to the tent, I grab my purple daypack.

I toss in a small first aid kit, sunscreen, wet wipes and a small towel before going to the bear box and adding snacks, juice boxes and waters.

Satisfied I have everything to keep the boys from having meltdowns, I zip the pack and shrug into the straps.

When I turn, Shawn is waiting patiently with his own pack and the boy's fishing poles plus another. "Oh, I can carry those."

His head shakes before he gives me another wink. "No worries. I got 'em."

My lips curl in as I feel my cheeks heat and the flutter in my belly returns. Gha, what is wrong with me? I'm a thirty-four-year-old woman with two kids. My days of getting twitterpated have long since passed.

Besides, this gorgeous man is here for my kids, not to remind my lady bits of what they have been missing for the last few years.

He leads us toward a trail at the edge of the campground, not far from our site. As we amble down the trail, the boys pepper Shawn with question after question. The patience he shows answering them all has my chest swelling.

These two can be a lot, but he doesn't hesitate to stop and show them things along the trail, never once getting frustrated by the amount of time it's taking us to get to the fishing spot.

After a forty minutes stroll, he steers us off the trail through the trees. A dozen yards later, we are on the bank of the creek. It runs by sedately with large pools flanking a shallow rocky area.

"Alright, time to catch some fish," Shawn announces, dropping his pack. He



efficiently rigs up the boy's poles in less time than it would have taken me to get one of them done.

Then he gathers the boys at the creek's edge, upstream from where Missy is happily splashing in the shallows of the water.

I watch in fascination as he puts the pole in Luke's hand. His much larger one engulfs my son's as he shows him how to work the pole.

"Hold it like this with your finger on the string here to hold it in place. Flip this bar here, called the bail. Take it behind you like this and then fling it forward like so, letting go of the string." He instructs Luke holding onto the pole with him until the hook lands out in the water a dozen yards from where they stand.

"Look 'it Mom! He didn't even get it tangled up or caught in any trees like you did." The awe in Jake's voice has me not even minding he's basically saying I'm a failure.

"I see. That was pretty neat. Think you can do that too?"

"Sure he can. Here you go, bud." Shawn plucks up the other pole and goes through the same instructions with Jake on how to cast.

My heart sings at the giggles and shouts from the boys as they continue to cast and reel in their lines while I sit nearby on a rock, watching them.

I feel a little guilty for not being the one to help them, but last time was such a disaster, and I don't want to mess up how well they are doing with Shawn.

I have to admit, it's awfully nice to sit back and enjoy the outing for once instead of stressing about doing everything right and failing. Having someone to help carry the load is a luxury I had almost forgotten about.

Watching Shawn with the boys has my heart aching for something else that will never be. Their dad will never get to have these experiences with them. But looking on the bright side, at least they are getting to do this.

My mind is spinning with all the competing emotions banging around in me, swinging from one extreme to the next.

A squeal from Jake has me jumping up.

“I got a fish! I got a fish!”

“Good job. Reel it in nice and slow. Don’t let it get away.

” Shawn chuckles as he stands beside him, helping.

He grabs the line when it gets close. Holding up a fish only about four inches long.

“Well, he’s not quite a keeper, but you win for being the first to catch one.

Let’s take a picture real quick, then we’ll put ‘em back in the water to get bigger for next time.”

I whip out my phone to snap a photo of Jake holding up the fish on the line. Then take one with him and Luke. “Okay, now one with you, Shawn.” I gesture from him to the boys.

He kneels down next to Jake. Once I get a photo of the three of them, he gets up and walks to me, taking my phone. “Now let’s get one with you.”

“Oh okay, thank you.” I stand with the boys and we all smile like we haven’t for a long time. It feels good.

He helps Jake get more bait on his line and cast out again. The boys argue about who is going to catch more fish.

“I think your mom is going to catch the most.” Shawn announces, which causes me to frown.

“But I’m not fishing.” I protest.

“Now you are. It’s your turn now. Can’t let them out fish you.”

“Girls can’t fish.” Jake rolls his eyes.

“Especially mom. She’s bad at it.” Luke agrees.

Shawn shakes his head, amusement glinting in his eyes. “Girls can absolutely fish. She just needs some help, like you had.” Those hazel orbs meet mine in a challenge. “Now you can’t back down, gotta prove them wrong. Come on, I’ll help you.”

Sighing, not really wanting to do this, but feel the need to prove to us all that I can if I really wanted to. Besides, I really shouldn’t pass up the opportunity to learn. “Okay.”

Walking over to Shawn, he shows me how to bait the hook. Then, just like he did with the kids, he hands me the pole, showing me where to place my hands.

It’s all I can do to focus on his instructions as his arms wrap around me, showing me what to do. My belly quivers as his hard body brushes up against mine. His woodsy, masculine scent fills my nose, causing my eyes to flutter.

His left hand comes to my hip as we cast the line into the water together, but when it lands successfully, he doesn’t step back.

Instead stands right where he is, body so close to mine I can feel the heat of it through the fabric of our clothes.

The warmth radiating from his hand still on my hip is enough to burn me.

A squeal from Luke breaks the tenuous moment. Shawn steps away to help him with the fish he's caught. I feel the loss of his innocent embrace much more profoundly than is rational.

Shoving the unexpected feelings aside, I join the boys to cheer for Luke's catch and take photos of him with it. Focusing back on what is important, the boys and not my long dormant libido suddenly making its self known.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Shawn

The crack of pool balls smacking together fills the air, along with the country music playing softly in the background. The bitter icy liquid of my beer hits the spot as I take a long swallow. It's just what I need after the hell of a week I've had. I'm beyond relieved it's finally over.

Rylan groans as he sits next to me. "You know I usually love my job and consider myself a lucky son of a bitch to get paid for being outside, but the shit from this week is almost enough to have me reconsidering my life choices."

I grunt in agreement. "Dealing with literal shit sure puts a damper on things."

We had a major backup in the restrooms at the Spruce Run Campground after some asshole kids clogged all the toilets with tp. If that wasn't enough, they also decided we need to redecorate and graffitied the whole place. Of course, it was mostly profanity, so we quickly had to clean it up as well.

Linc, the owner of the Coyote Creek Bar and Grill, stops in front of Rylan on the other side of the bar from us. "Same for you?"

Rylan nods his head. "Yep and keep 'em coming."

Linc chuckles, smirking, "Shawn mentioned your shitty week."

My phone dings with a text notification. The conversation fades into the background while they continue to trade war stories as I open the text.

Would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow night as a thank you for helping with the boys? I've been told I make a pretty great lasagna. You can bring Missy so she can play with the boys and doesn't have to be home alone.

There's no containing the grin overtaking my face as I read it. My heart races with anticipation as my fingers fly over the keys to answer.

There's no way I can turn down a homecooked meal. Sounds amazing. Can I bring anything?

Just yourself and Missy. Have a favorite beer?

I enjoy Rocky Mountain Ale, but you don't have to get it just for me. I appreciate the thought, though.

It's the least I can do for what you have done for us. The boys haven't stopped talking about the fish they caught. You have no idea how much what you did for us meant to them.

I told you I was happy to. I had a great time with you all, as well.

Well, I'm glad we weren't too much torture for you. Dinner will be ready at 6:30.

Already looking forward to it.

We are too. See you then.

Laughter draws my attention as I set my phone down.

"Man, she must be something to have you texting like a thirteen-year-old girl." Dominic Martin says from the other side of Rylan.

Milo Wilson, sitting next to him, chuckles, “Yeah, I know that grin. Someone’s going to get lucky.”

The two are hotshot firefighters who we work with when we get forest fires.

“You should’ve seen how many times he checked his phone this last week.” Rylan mutters.

I shake my head. “It’s not like that. Just helping out a single mom with her boys.”

Milo’s eyes narrow. “Wait, are you talking about Izzy Thacker? Are you the ranger who took her and the boys fishing?”

My lips turn down as my eyebrows furrow. “How do you know about that?”

Dom smirks. “Chelsey and Syd have been talking about it. They work with Izzy at the school. She was over with the boys this week so they could play with the girls. You seem to have made quite the impression on all three of them. Did she invite you over for dinner?”

“She did,” I nod.

Dom’s eyes narrow this time. “I take it you’re going then.”

“Was planning on it. I already told her I would. Why?”

He sighs. “It’s just she’s been through a lot and from what I heard from the girls, this is a big step for her.

She’s got kids, and that’s a whole different ball game.

You need to be clear where your head is at and what your intentions are.

It's not fair to her or the kids to be jerked around.

You've spent time with the boys, so they're already involved.

This is an instant family. Just be sure you are ready for that if you proceed. ”

My knee jerk reaction is to tell him to fuck off, but I process what he is saying for a moment before responding. I have to appreciate the fact he is looking out for her. He also knows what he is talking about, having been a single father himself before marrying Chelsey.

“You're right, it is different. I know because I was raised by a single mom.

I was lucky enough to have an uncle step in to help her when she needed it.

So I understand a little of what she is going through.

She is doing an amazing job, but needs help and won't ask for it. The boys are great, but can be a handful. I never imagined the instant family situation, but after spending time with them it feels right, like something clicked into place. They fill a hole I didn't even realize was there.

I would be happy to spend time with them even if I wasn't attracted to Izzy. ”

He nods, “Fair enough. I'm happy for all of you then.”

Thankfully, the conversation turns to the latest fire they had been working, and my budding relationship is no longer the center of conversation.



I'm thankful for his concern for Izzy, that she has people supporting her. It also makes me realize just how deep in this with her I already am. How quickly she and those little boys worked their way under my skin, completely changing how I see my life.

I thought I was happy with the freedom I have with no one relying on me, but now each day I come home to a much too quiet house and wish for noise and laughter to be filling it.

I can only hope this invitation is an indication she is feeling something for me as well and not just the thank you dinner she says it is.

There's only one way to find out and I hope laying it on the line so early on doesn't send her running for the hills.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Izzy

They say silence is golden, unless you are a parent. Then silence means you need to move your ass and find out what fresh hell your children are currently getting into. My boys are certainly not the exception to this rule.

As I slide the lasagna, painstakingly made to perfection in hopes to impress a man who has invaded my every spare thought, out of the oven and pop in the french bread slathered in my special butter garlic spread, I realize the boys have been far too quiet while they are supposed to be cleaning their bedroom and playroom.

I hustle up the stairs where their rooms are located. There are two bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. We put the boys in one room together and used the second for their playroom. I suppose one day they will want their own rooms and we will turn the playroom back into a bedroom.

Half way up the stairs, a splash cuts through the silence. I groan because the sound is coming from the playroom, not the bathroom. There shouldn't be anything splashing in there.

“What are you two doing?” I demand to know, in such a hurry to find out I don't notice the puddles of water on the wood floor in the hall. My feet slide out from under me, a scream tearing from my throat as I flail before landing with a thud flat on my back.

The wind knocked out of me, I stay still as I struggle to catch my breath. Footsteps pound up the stairs.

“What’s wrong?!” Shawn appears, looking frantic. He starts to kneel beside me. “Are you okay?”

“Careful, there’s water everywhere,” I caution.

His head shakes. “It’ll dry. Are you hurt?” He’s on his knees beside me as his calloused hands run over my body as if looking for injuries, but leave a blazing trail of goosebumps in their wake.

My pussy pulses at the contact as my nipples tighten. I inhale sharply.

“Does it hurt there?” His hand returns to my hip where it had just passed.

It’s then I realize my dress rode up when I fell and my satin purple panties are now on display. My cheeks flame as I scramble to get up, covering myself. “I’m fine. Just got the wind knocked out of me.”

“Easy,” he murmurs, his rough hands coming to steady me as he helps me up. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I heave a sigh. “Just a bruised ego.”

“What is going on here?”

“I was just about to find out. The boys were being too quiet and when I came up here to check on them, I heard splashing from the playroom. In my rush to get to them, I didn’t see the water on the floor and slipped.”

I lead the way to the playroom, which has been suspiciously quiet, groaning in dismay at what we discover.

The boys have emptied the large plastic tote which held their toys and filled it with water.

I assume they made the mess in the hall from carrying the water back and forth.

There are several plastic toys floating in the water.

The boys refuse to make eye contact, holding their fishing poles behind their backs as if that will hide them.

“What on earth do you two think you are doing?”

“We wanted to practice fishing.” Luke pouts.

Shawn chuckles beside me.

The buzzing of the oven timer comes from the kitchen, pulling another groan from me.

“Go. I’ll help the boys clean up their mess.” He tips his head towards the door.

“I’ll be right back to take care of this.” I call over my shoulder as I scurry to the stairs.

“Don’t worry, just don’t let whatever smells so amazing burn and I’ll be happy.” He yells after me.

I manage to pull the garlic bread out just before it’s beyond the point of no return. Leaning on the counter, head hanging down, I blow out a breath of relief and take a moment to gather my wits. I should’ve known tonight would not go smoothly.

I'm stunned Shawn didn't take one look at the mess that is my life and immediately walk right back out the door. Instead, he's upstairs cleaning. Speaking of, I better get back up there. Sighing, I trudge back up the stairs.

Astonishment fills me as I reach the top.

The water in the hall is cleaned up already.

In the playroom the tub of water has been emptied and dried, and once again holds the pile of toys which had been scattered on the floor.

The boys are using towels to wipe up the last remaining water on the floor.

Thankfully, there is no carpet up here or else it would've been even worse.

"What do you boys say to your mom?" Shawn's question draws my attention to where he is on his hands and knees across the room, sopping up the water there with several towels.

"Sorry. We won't do that again." The boys answer in tandem, still refusing eye contact.

My eyebrows shoot up in bewilderment. You could knock me over with a feather at this point. Normally it would've taken me forever to clean this up and apologies never come this easily from these two.

"Well, I would appreciate that. Thank you for cleaning it up, though. Next time ask. I would've helped you set something up in the backyard."

"Or have her call me and I'll help you, okay? Now let your mom check to make sure you got it all. Get your towels and you can show me where the washing machine is so

we can get them clean.”

There’s no missing the look of adoration the boys give Shawn as they jump to do his bidding. My jaw hangs slack as I look on in amazement. Shawn winks at me as they file out of the room, arms full of towels.

There is no mistaking how attractive the man is on looks alone but how he handled this mess and the boys has me thinking things I shouldn’t.

Specifically, I’m ready to roll over and spread my legs so he can put a baby in me, because damn if the man doesn’t have the daddy roll down pat.

It makes him even sexier, if that were possible and has my ovaries aching.

My breath catches at the thought of his massive hands gently cradling a baby.

Shaking my head, I finally pull myself out of the stupor I’m in and check for wet spots. I must be losing my mind because the last thing I need is another child, especially a baby. Finding everything dry and clean, I head down to the kitchen to finish getting dinner ready.

Striding into the kitchen, the rhythmic sound of the washing machine comes from the nearby laundry room. Movement out the window over the sink catches my eye. Upon closer inspection, I stop in my tracks at the view of Shawn and the boys throwing a ball for Missy in the backyard.

It’s surreal how this man has stepped into our family as if he’s been here all along.

Tears threaten from the overwhelming warring feelings I have for him.

He fits perfectly, but it also reminds me of how much we miss David and for all that

he is missing out on.

There is also guilt for the attraction to Shawn.

I know David wouldn't want me to be alone, but moving on isn't as easy as it seems. There's also the lingering fear of history repeating its self.

Blowing out a cleansing breath, I open the cupboard and take out plates to set the table.

The tears finally break free when there on the table I find flowers and two small tackle boxes.

My defenses against this man are rapidly waning.

Hope filling in the cracks in my heart that maybe he can help glue it back together again.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Shawn

The squeals and laughter of the boys as they play with Missy have a grin splitting my face. These two are quite the handful, but are they ever a kick in the pants. It was all I could do to contain my laughter at their fishing practice.

Poor Izzy's exasperation was palpable. To her credit, she didn't lose her shit with the kids like many parents would. Though this seems to be their typical behavior so she is used to their antics.

Hearing her scream as I was about to knock on the door startled the shit out of me. All I could think about was getting to her. When I saw her lying on the floor, I thought for sure something was broken.

Once she assured me she was okay, and I realized what I was actually looking at and touching, my heart raced for an entirely different reason.

Not only was her skin silky smooth beneath my palms, but her lower half was almost completely exposed.

Covered only by a scant scrap of satin, which her lush round hips and thick thighs strained to its breaking point.

My dick tightened uncomfortably in my jeans.

The urge to bury my face there almost overrode the last good sense I had.



My pants once again become disturbingly tight at the direction my thoughts have taken. Completely inappropriate, given I'm playing with the boys.

Izzy opens the sliding glass door just then, calling out, "dinner's ready."

Telling Missy to stay, I follow the thundering footsteps of the boys. It's nice the backyard is fenced and Missy can chill out here while we eat.

The boys are at the sink washing their hands and I wait my turn behind them.

As we gather around the dining table set with four place settings, Izzy murmurs, "Thank you for the flowers. They are beautiful. You shouldn't have, and you certainly shouldn't have gotten the tackle boxes."

"I wanted to and I will leave it up to you as to when the boys can have the boxes, especially after their shenanigans earlier." I throw my best stink eye at the boys, who are busy looking anywhere but at us.

"Now I'm starving. If this tastes half as good as it smells, you're never going to get rid of me. "

I'm only half kidding about the last part. Cooking is not one of my talents and homemade meals like this are few and far between for me. I fucking love the way Izzy's cheeks turn an enticing shade of pink in response to my declaration.

We tuck into the meal and a groan rumbles from me at just how good the food is.

I wink at Izzy when I catch her watching me from beneath her lashes, a ghost of a smile on her lips.

She shifts in her chair, cheeks now bright red at the gesture.

I can't help but wonder what's going on in that beautiful head of hers.

The boys plow through their meals and I'm not far behind them. As soon as they are done, they beg to play with Missy more.

"We should clean up for your mom since she spent what I'm sure is a lot of time making this for us."

"Oh no, you already helped so much with the mess upstairs. Please, you're our guest. It's fine. I clean as I go, so there really isn't much to do. There's beer in the fridge for you if you'd like one as well. Sorry, I didn't remember to offer before now."

"Well, if you're sure. I'd love a beer while we play some more."

The boys take turns throwing the ball for Missy while I drink my beer and watch from the patio in one of the chairs clustered there. Izzy, true to her word, joins me less than ten minutes later with a glass of wine.

The domesticity of the situation is not lost on me.

I can't help but think about what it would be like to come home to this every night.

The laughter and commotion is so different from the sedate life I have been leading, it leaves me feeling like I have been missing out.

I thought I enjoyed the quiet but am finding the chaos unexpectedly filling me.

The boys finally start slowing down, and Izzy calls an end to the fun. "Time to get ready for bed."

"But mom we're not tired," Luke protests even as a yawn cracks his jaw.

“Sorry buster, it’s that time. Why don’t you two take a quick shower and then we’ll do a story.”

“Can Shawn read us a story?” Jake asks, hands clasps as if in prayer under his chin.

“And Missy too?” Luke adds.

“Oh well, he might need to get going.” She hedges.

“I would be happy to read you a story, but first that shower.”

They take off like a couple of shots with no further complaints.

Izzy’s eyes meet mine. “Thank you so much for everything.”

Unable to resist, I tuck an errant lock of hair behind her ear. I revel in her shiver as the backs of my fingers graze her neck. “Of course. Like I said, I’m happy to. I was just thinking, you all are making me realize just how sad and empty my life has been.”

“Well, you’re reminding me what it’s like to not only have a partner, but be seen as something other than a mother.” Her green eyes widen, cheeks turn pink yet again, and her lips roll in as she shakes her head. “I, I don’t mean...”

My hands cup her cheeks. “I hope you do mean that. I don’t want to pressure you or overstep and this is probably going to send you screaming and running in the opposite direction, but I think I found something I didn’t even know I’ve been missing all these years.

You’re not only an amazing mother but a beautiful and generous woman who any man would be lucky to get to call his and support.

Those boys are the icing on the cake. They remind me so much of myself when I was younger.

I felt an instant affinity with them. I know they are your first priority as they should be and I want to assure you whatever happens between us will not affect the relationship I have with them.

” A single tear trails down her cheek and I swipe it away with the pad of my thumb.

“How are you so perfect? You do and say exactly the right thing without even having to be told. I’m surprised you haven’t been the one who’s running and screaming in the other direction, but you take everything in stride.”

I grunt, “Not perfect in the least, as I’m sure you’ll learn. All I ask is you give me the same patience you give the boys when I do mess up because I’m a man and we tend to do that.”

“That I can promise.”

Her smile is blinding as I finally give in to the desire she has ignited inside me. She inhales sharply as our lips meet, then melts into me as the rest of the world disappears. Blood rushes in my ears while my heart thunders in my chest.

I become light-headed as I explore all that is Izzy. She tastes like the tart wine she just drank. Her vanilla scent swirls in the air around us. Soft, creamy skin glides beneath my rough fingertips. I’m lost in this woman, senses on overload with every delectable piece of her.

Her arms encircle my neck, fingers tangling in the short hairs at the back of my head. My left hand entangles in her auburn tresses as I angle her head to deepen the kiss. A moan falls from her while our tongues twine together. The sound shoots straight to

my dick.

She whimpers, her eyes fluttering open when I pull my mouth from hers. I would love nothing more than to take this further, but right now is not the time. My thumb sweeps her swollen bottom lip as our breaths come in pants.

“As much as I hate to stop this, I’m sure we’re going to be interrupted at any moment and if not, we really should check on them.”

“See perfect.” She whispers with a shake of her head.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Izzy

Witnessing Shawn, sandwiched between Jake and Luke as he reads to them, continues to fill in those cracks in my heart. I no longer have any defenses against this man. He strode into our lives, instantly filling the empty space like he has been here all along.

I haven't dated since David passed. Never felt the need or urge to, being overwhelmed with taking care of the boys and making sure their needs were met. What's happening with Shawn can't really be considered dating, more like creating an instant family.

I should be concerned about what this means for the boys.

No one knows more than me just how fragile life can be.

Shawn can promise all he wants that he's not going anywhere, but sometimes the decision is out of our hands.

Even as the thought runs through my mind throwing up a huge caution sign, watching him at this moment do voices, making the boys giggle has me ignoring it.

We survived losing someone we love once and it might hurt even worse the second time, but it's not something I can shelter them from. It is a part of life, unfortunately, as they have learned at such a young age. I can only hope this time will be different.

As the story goes on, their eyes droop, and before Shawn reaches the end, they are

fast asleep. He gently eases Jake to lie in his twin bed we are sitting on. Then he slips his beefy arms around Luke before standing and carrying him to the other twin bed on the opposite wall.

I hustle to pull back the sheets and blue comforter with dinosaurs.

He gently sets Luke on the bed and I pull the covers over his small body, tucking him in before pressing a kiss to his temple.

We move to the other bed and repeat the process with Jake.

Then quietly make our way out of the room, flipping off the lights and leaving the door cracked.

Shawn stops at the bottom of the stairs, glancing to where Missy has made herself at home, lying on the rug by the sliding door. He sighs, bringing his gaze back to me. “I should probably head home.”

“Is that what you really want?” I ask hesitantly, almost positive he wants to stay as much as I want him to.

His laugh is mirthless. His eyes meet mine, and there is no hiding the hunger in them. “I don’t know if you’re ready to hear what I really want.”

My heart quickens, and a throbbing pulses through my core. “What if I am?” I whisper.

His nostrils flair, eyes searching mine.

“Are you sure? Because what I really want is to shove you up against the nearest wall and lose myself in those soft, lush curves until we’re both wrung dry.

I want to bury my face in that sweet pussy of yours until you're hoarse from screaming my name, falling apart in my arms, and drowning me in your juices.

I want you, a sobbing, writhing mess, coming on my cock, squeezing it like a vice while I fill you with my cum. ”

My breaths come in pants, my nipples tighten to hard points. A whimper falling from me as I feel the juices he just described dribble down my inner thighs. “Oh God, yes!”

Grabbing his hand, I spin on unsteady legs, leading him to my bedroom.

Never before have I felt like I could come from words alone.

He sent me from mere longing to an all-consuming lust, throwing want right out the window and replacing it with an overwhelming need to be devoured by this man right this minute.

The urgency to have him inside me, pounding me into oblivion, is stronger than obtaining my next breath.

As soon as we cross the threshold into my bedroom, he's shutting the door and flipping the lock. The next thing I know, my purple sun dress is gone and there's nothing but a few scraps of satin covering me from Shawn's ravenous gaze as he greedily drinks his fill.

There's a moment of apprehension when my mind realizes he is the first man to see me like this since David and having babies. I have always been thick and only increased in size after having the boys. But before I can spiral about him seeing all of me, his hands and lips are everywhere at once.



I'm swept up in the feel of his rough hands against my skin. His surprisingly soft lips glide over my body as the friction from the scruff on his jaw leaves a delicious tingle in its wake. All I can do is feel as all rational thought flees my mind.

Kisses pepper my neck and collarbones as my bra vanishes.

His lips wrap around a distended nipple with a sucking pull shooting straight to my already pulsing core.

My hands find purchase on his broad shoulders to steady myself.

When they meet fabric, it hits me I'm all but naked and he is still fully clothed.

I pull at his shirt in an attempt to remove the garment from his thick torso.

He rears back to jerk it off for me. I whimper at the loss of his mouth at my breast, but as soon as his shirt is gone he descends to the other one.

He toys with the peaked bud while my hands are now free to roam the hard planes of his chest. When he bites down on my nipple, my fingers fist into the coarse hair there and we both moan.

Taking me in a searing kiss, he shuffles me backward to the bed. His hands nimbly divest me of my panties before easing me onto the bed. Trailing open mouth kisses down my body he lands between my spread thighs which he pushes wider.

My eyes roll back, hands clutching the blue floral comforter beneath me as he swipes his tongue through my already drenched folds.

He has worked me into such a frenzy it takes only a few swirls around my swollen clit before stars burst behind my eyes.

I bite my lip to keep from crying out as I fly through nirvana, suspended in bliss.

Gasping for breath, lying limp with trembling limbs, I gradually become aware of his eyes on me. A flush runs over me at his feral, satisfied grin. “You ready for more?”

My eyes widen on a moan as I realize he has dropped his pants and is stroking his hard length from root to tip. A full body shudder runs through me. My core flutters at the sight, aching to be filled even though I just came so hard I saw stars.

“Yes,” I manage to croak.

“Thank fuck,” comes his reply as he rips open a condom, sliding it on.

Then he throws my legs on his shoulders before slamming into me in one thrust. My eyes fall closed and I whimper at how full I am after being empty for so long. They pop back open when he pinches a nipple.

“Eyes on me,” he commands before he begins thrusting in and out.

In no time flat, another orgasm builds. I can’t catch my breath as my inner walls clamp down.

“Fuck, you feel amazing. Squeezing me so tight, like a good girl.” He holds my gaze as he grits his teeth.

His words have a gush of juices releasing.

“Fuck yeah. Need you to get there.” He reaches between us and pinches my clit.

Biting down on my already abused lip to hold in the keening wail threatening, I fall over the edge, tremors rushing through my limbs. Floating in an abyss, I watch as his

face pinches tight after a few more thrusts.

His forehead drops to mine as he slams home one last time. After several moments, he eases my legs off his shoulders onto the bed.

“You good?” he asks quietly.

My head shakes. “Nowhere near close.”

His brows pinch as his lips turn down. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“God no, but you did ruin me.”

A satisfied smile breaks across his face. “Glad I’m not the only one.”

He slips off the bed, removing the condom before disposing of it in the attached bathroom.

I’m already half asleep as he drags the sheets from under me and climbs into the bed.

Wrapping his arm around me, he pulls the covers over us.

A contentment I haven’t felt in years settles into me as I drift off.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Shawn

“Hey you two, french toast is ready.” I holler up the stairs to Luke and Jake. I can’t help but grin at their cheers as they thunder down the stairs.

Izzy’s out for breakfast with friends, a luxury she hasn’t had for quite some time. I’m happy to give that to her and get to spend some one on one time with the boys.

I never realized how lonely my life was until it was filled with chaos in the best of ways.

Izzy and the boys have brought light and laughter to my life.

Now I can’t wait to finish work each day to see them, whereas before I lived to work.

I still love my job, but getting to spend time with them is now the best part of my day.

The boys don’t realize it, but I’m practically living at their house. I hate having to sneak out before they get up, but agree with Izzy it’s probably best to ease them into things. On my days off, we pretend I have arrived early for breakfast, so I get to spend the mornings with them.

It means no sleeping in, but getting to wake up with Izzy snuggled into my side more than makes up for it. Especially when we have enough time for me to ravage her before I leave or the boys get up. Thankfully, they are not super early risers.

School is going to be starting soon so our schedules will not match up for a while. It's

depressing to think about not having my off days with them. When Izzy gets back, we're going to head out for a few nights of camping before all that changes.

After breakfast, we pack up all the supplies gathered so we are ready to go when Izzy gets home.

A grin splits my face when I realize I just referred to this place as home.

It couldn't be more true, feeling more like home than anywhere else I have ever been.

But it's not the structure that makes it feel that way, it's the people who live here. Anywhere they are is home for me now.

Izzy's eyes light up when she sees we are all ready to leave when she gets back. "This is a nice surprise. Much nicer than last time. It took me forever to get everything packed in the car."

"No worries, I've got you." I reply with a wink.

"You certainly do," she murmurs, nibbling on her bottom lip.

"Hey now, don't be starting anything we can't be finishing right now." My glare and frown hold no heat.

The little minx giggles, smirking. "Sorry, not sorry."

"Boys, time to go." I yell, needing to remove myself from temptation.

We make it to Pine Creek campground and get everything set up just before lunch. I'm disappointed to be sleeping in my own tent but am bolstered by the fact it won't be long before the separation is no longer necessary.

The boys scarf down their lunch of sandwiches and chips Izzy made while they helped me set up the tents. I promised to take them fishing after and they can't wait.

We actually have success and catch a couple of keepers we can have for dinner. The hike back is filled with exploration and questions, as every outing with the boys usually is. It's fun to teach them about the things that interest them and impart wisdom of safely recreating in the outdoors.

"Shawn, what kind of berries are these? Are these good ones to eat?" Jake points to a bush with small, bluish purple berries just off the trail.

I'm happy he asked if they are good to eat. We had an incident last time when they almost ate baneberries which are toxic and had to talk about asking for permission and knowing which are okay to eat.

"Those are huckleberries. They are good to eat and super yummy, especially in muffins and pancakes. Go ahead and try some. It's too bad we don't have anything to put some in or we could pick them and have them in our pancakes in the morning. Maybe tomorrow we can come back and pick some."

"Oooh, these are soo good." Luke announces, lips and fingers turning purple as he eats his fill.

"Alright that's probably enough. You want to save room to eat this fish you guys caught." Izzy warns them after letting them graze for several minutes.

"Oh yeah, I can't wait to eat our fish. I bet it's going to be so yummy." Jake says as we continue the hike back to the campground, berries quickly forgotten.

The next morning I'm woken up not by the sounds of the boys as I expect, but Izzy's frantic voice.

“Luke! Jake! Where are you guys?”

I quickly climb out of my sleeping bag and tent, Missy on my heels. “What’s going on?”

“I just woke up and the boys aren’t in our tent.”

Scanning the area, I don’t see any sign of either of them.

My pulse picks up at the thought of something happening to them, but I take a deep breath, knowing Izzy needs me to keep calm right now.

“Maybe they just went to the bathroom. Let’s check there and around the campground. I’m sure they couldn’t have gone far.”

My attempt to keep positive quickly wanes as we come up empty with each place we check. After walking the entire campground, calling their names, and checking with other campers who are up, we still have not found them.

“Shawn, they’re not here!” The agony in Izzy’s voice is almost more than I can take.

“We will find them.” I strive to reassure her with more conviction than I feel at the moment. “I’m going to call the ranger station and get more people out here to help look for them. I promise it’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that.” Her voice cracks, eyes welling with tears.

Pulling her to me, I rub her back. “We have to stay positive. Spiraling isn’t going to help right now.”

I’ve never been more thankful to have cell service than I am at this moment. Every

available ranger is on their way now to help with the search.

“I really don’t want to leave you like this, but I want to go check the trail to the fishing hole. Maybe they went there.”

“I’ll go with you.” She pleads.

“Someone needs to meet the other rangers when they get here and you should stay here just in case they come back on their own.” When she finally nods, I squeeze her tight with relief. It kills me to leave her, but I can’t wait around when I could be looking for them.

“Bring back my boys.” She whispers.

“Promise. Missy come.” I grab my pack and hustle to the trail.

I holler the boy’s names periodically but don’t hear any response.

Each passing minute has fear lodging itself deeper.

This is a terror unlike anything I have been through before.

My chest aches with all the what ifs, but in reality, there’s only one acceptable outcome for this situation.

If I can’t keep my promise to Izzy, there will be no coming back from this for her, because there is no doubt at all this will kill her.

She will not survive another loss, especially one of this magnitude.

Shoving down the devastating thoughts and worst-case scenario, I focus on the here



and now. When Missy whines as we pass a fork in the trail, I pause. The left trail takes us to the fishing hole we were at yesterday. The right heads further into the back country.

I'm torn with indecision. I don't see any signs the boys went to the right, but it's a well-traveled trail.

"Jake! Luke!" I yell, hoping to hear something but get nothing in response.

When Missy takes off down the right trail, the decision is taken out of my hands. I run after her, attempting to keep her in sight. A half mile later she leaves the trail tunneling her way through underbrush I can't make it through.

"Jake! Luke!" I yell, frustrated as I look for a way through the brush.

I see an animal trail a couple of yards up and work my way through the worst of it. I hear Missy's bark and veer to the right, following the sound. As I get closer, I almost collapse with relief when I hear the boys.

"Missy, you found us. Good girl."

"Jake! Luke! Are you guys okay?"

"Shawn! We're over here."

I plow through the brush to get to them, not even noticing branches slapping my face and tearing at my clothes.

When they finally come into sight and I see they're okay, I can finally fully breathe again.

They run to me as I drop to my knees, squeezing them tight.

The dread I may lose everything when I just found it finally lifts.

“Are you guys okay?” Leaning back, I look closer at each of them to assure myself there are no injuries to either one.

Luke nods. “We’re okay. We wanted to pick huckleberries so mom could put them in our pancakes this morning, but we went the wrong way and got turned around.”

“We remembered you said to stay where you are when you get lost, so that’s what we did. Are we in trouble?” Jake’s lip quivers.

I huff out a breath. “Well, I’m happy you guys remembered what to do, but you should never go anywhere without telling us first. Your mom and I were very worried. In fact, we need to get back so she can see you’re okay.”

We pick our way back to the trail and hustle back to the campground. I call Izzy as soon as there is service, letting her know I found them and will be back soon. Her cry of relief about doing me in.

She meets us part way up the trail, tears streaming as she hugs the boys. Her eyes meet mine. “Thank you for keeping your promise.”

“And I always will.” I vow to them all, knowing I’ll do everything in my power to never let them down. There is no question they are now mine to keep and protect forever more.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Izzy

The pile of lumber in the backyard is gradually growing smaller.

The playset for the boys is almost finished.

I watch out the kitchen window as I do the dishes.

Shawn and Rylan let the boys help them assemble the structure, which had started out as a simple swing set and has grown a life of its own.

The monstrosity now has monkey bars, a slide, and not one but two above ground forts.

Shawn won't tell me how much it's costing, insisting they are saving so much doing it themselves.

I should put a stop to it seeing how the boys will probably lose interest in it in a year or so, but seeing them all working on it together has my heart melting.

He'll never replace David and doesn't even try, but he is an amazing bonus dad.

He often gathers the boys and then asks to see pictures and hear stories about the man who left us far too soon, getting to know him the only way he can.

The boys love hearing the stories and getting to remember their father.

I can't believe a few short months ago I was trying to do it all and barely keeping my head above water. I thought for sure that first camping trip was going to be the end of me, but then a rugged, handsome ranger changed everything for me again, only this time for the better.

When I glance up, Rylan and the boys are headed around the house. Shawn comes inside through the sliding glass door.

"Hey beautiful. We realized we forgot about a climbing wall, so we're headed to the hardware store to get more supplies."

My head shakes as I laugh. "Of course you did."

His hands hit my hips as he pulls me to him before thoroughly kissing me. "Want to come with us? We're stopping by Darcie's for a midmorning pick me up."

"Hmm," I tap my chin, pretending to think about it like I might actually turn that down. "I suppose a coffee would hit the spot."

"Tease," he swats my behind before pulling me with him out the front door.

The boys talk excitedly about their climbing wall and what treat they are going to pick at Darcie's Drip, the local coffee shop. I smirk, knowing they'll talk Shawn into more than they should have.

Shawn parks and we climb out. The boys are arguing about which muffin to get when the door of the shop swings open.

A woman with short blond hair who looks way too dressed up for Coyote Creek stops in the doorway, her hazel eyes widening when she sees us.

Rylan blinks several times, as if he's not sure what he's seeing.

"Hi Rylan," she says softly, finally stepping through to the sidewalk.

"Harper. Didn't know you were visiting." He responds after clearing his throat.

She chews her bottom lip. "Actually, I'm back for good. I'm a partner at a law office here now. Just heading back to work. I'm sure I'll see you around."

She nods to us before striding down the sidewalk, Rylan's eyes glued forlornly to her ass until she turns the corner. As soon as she's out of sight, he shoves the door of the coffee shop open and disappears inside without a word.

I bring my gaze to Shawn, who just shakes his head before ushering the boys in after him.

Find out how Shawn proposes with the boys in this bonus scene [here](#) .

Read Dominic and Chelsey's story in [Sparkling for the Firefighter](#) and Boone and Laura's story in [Pining for the Ranger](#) [here](#) . You will also find Rylan and Harper's story there soon in [Wild for the Ranger](#).

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

Shawn

The bell on the door of Darcie's Drip jingles as I open it for Jake and Luke. As always, they are debating which muffins they will get so seriously you would think they are attempting to solve world peace. These two never fail to crack me up.